

**The Poblenou Superblock:**  
**Rights, Responsibilities and Exclusions**

**FHS Geography**

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## **Abstract**

Barcelona's superblocks are an urban planning initiative aiming to re-orient the city around people rather than cars. This dissertation aims to investigate the extent to which the superblock in Poblenou, Barcelona, is conducive to urban citizenship. The superblock is examined through the three lenses of this concept, namely the 'rights to the city' enabled, the responsibilities expected, and the exclusions entailed. The analysis is based on 14 days of fieldwork undertaken in July 2019, comprising 15 pre-arranged interviews, 60 unarranged interviews and 32 hours of participant observation. It is argued that the superblock does – albeit unevenly – reinvigorate this part of the city for some residents, especially young families and members of the Superblock Neighbourhood Association. Yet de facto membership to the superblock citizenry requires more than physical presence in the space; it extends to perceived responsibilities of embracing the project for the collective wellbeing of contemporary society and future generations. Finally, it is demonstrated how the ability of residents to access and exercise these rights and responsibilities is highly differentiated, mediated by gentrification, homelessness and insecure legal citizenship status. Ultimately, it is argued that the superblock can produce different, more sustainable ways of living in a more habitable city, but despite its claims to social justice, it simultaneously continues to (re)produce socio-spatial exclusions.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Barcelona's superblocks are urban planning initiatives that seek to change how public space is shared, used and valued by reconfiguring car-dominated mobility in the city (BCNecologia, 2019; Gomez-Moriana, 2016; Roberts, 2019a; 2019c; 2019d; 2019e). The overarching purpose is to produce citizen-oriented public spaces (Bausells, 2016b; Stoycheva, 2016; Eckerson, 2018), enabling 'a different way of [urban] living' (Roberts, 2019a: n.p.). This is therefore an ideal case to contribute to academic examinations of attempts to heighten urban citizenship and activate the 'right to the city' (e.g. Hintjens and Kurian, 2019; Angelucci, 2019).

Promoted by Salvador Rueda<sup>1</sup> and BCNecologia<sup>2</sup>, the project reworks the iconic 19<sup>th</sup> century Cerdà Plan (Bausells, 2016a; Pallares-Barbera *et al.*, 2011). It has been in the pipeline since 1987 when Rueda was asked by the City Council to put together a vision of Barcelona based on superblocks. In 1993, concerns over unacceptable noise levels led to the first superblock being implemented in the neighbourhood of Born, followed by two more in the neighbourhood of Gracia in 2005 (Hu, 2016; BCNecologia, 2012). In September 2016, after the municipal approval of the 2015-2018 Urban Mobility Plan, a pilot superblock was established in Poblenou (see Figure 1). This neighbourhood is a former fishing village and the previous industrial hub of the city. More recently, several other superblocks have been introduced, including one around the market in Sant Antoni (Bravo, 2017).

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<sup>1</sup> Salvador Rueda is known, both in policy circles and among residents, as 'The Father of the Superblocks'.

<sup>2</sup> BCNecologia – the Urban Ecology Agency of Barcelona – is a public consortium, founded by Salvador Rueda, that advises Barcelona City Council on matters related to sustainable urban planning (BCNecologia, 2019).



Figure 1: Location of the superblock in Poblenou, Barcelona.  
Source: Roberts, 2019c

Underlying the superblock concept is 'a change in city model' (Barcelona City Council, 2016: 15), based on grids of 3x3 blocks ('manzanas') (see Figure 2). Through traffic is limited to the exterior streets, with interior streets largely off limits to motor vehicles and street parking (BCNecologia, 2012). These internal streets aim to prioritise pedestrians and neighbourhood life, promoting more diverse rights in public space (BCNecologia, 2018; Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2016). Despite its predecessors, this is a pilot project to experiment with how superblocks can be implemented beyond Barcelona's historic districts. The plan is to implement 500 superblocks across the entire city (Rueda, 2016), although the timeline for this vision is unclear.

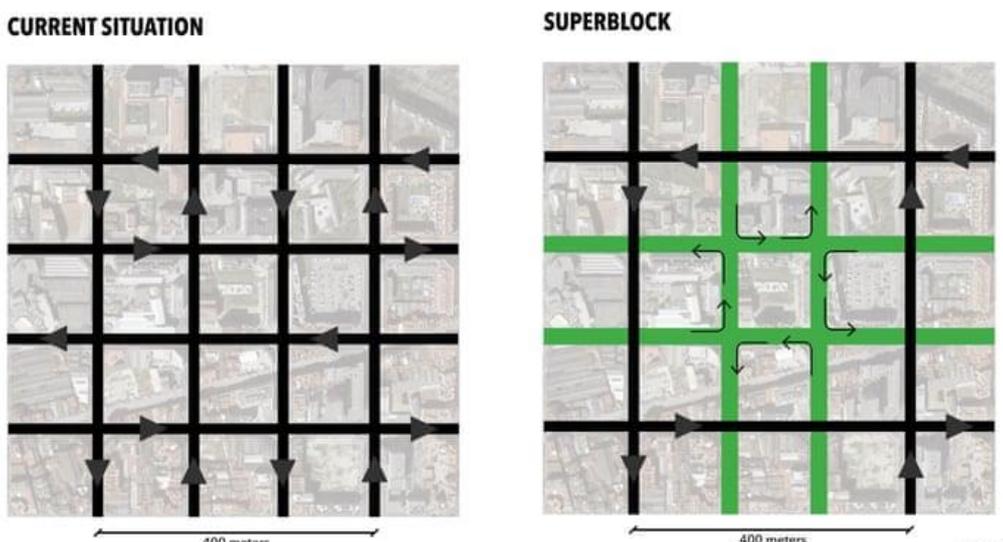


Figure 2: Schematic showing how the superblock model modifies the existing grid network in Barcelona.  
Source: Bausells, 2016b

The superblock project aims to make the city more just<sup>3</sup> and more sustainable<sup>4</sup> by prioritising people rather than cars (Barcelona City Council, 2016; BCNecologia, 2019). Car dominance in cities (Rueda and Urry, 2014; Sheller and Urry, 2000) means that most streets are oriented around motor vehicles. In contrast, the superblocks endeavour to ‘revers[e] the distribution of public space, giving priority to the citizen’ (Barcelona City Council, 2016: 15) (see Figure 3). The ultimate aim is ‘to make Barcelona a city for living in’ (*ibid.*: 2), producing more genuine ‘citizen spaces’ (BCNecologia, 2018: 2) in which inhabitants can claim a mobility-based, but not bounded, ‘right to the city’.



Figure 3: Visual showing how superblocks redistribute public space between cars (‘autos’) and pedestrians (‘peatones’).  
Source: Ricciardelli, 2017

From the widely used conception of sustainability outlined in the Brundtland Report (1987) comes a disproportionate focus on environmental and economic aspects (Vallance *et al.*, 2011; Yiftachel and Hedgcock, 1993: 139; Miani, 2015; Uitermark and Nicholls, 2017). Tensions between economic development and social justice in urban planning (e.g. Miani, 2015; Winkler, 2012) have often led to the relative neglect of social dimensions (e.g. Farmer, 2011; Grengs, 2005). Yet the superblocks reflect growing desires for ‘a planning oriented towards social needs’ (Lefebvre, 2010: 178). This resonates with more recent research in

<sup>3</sup> 18% of internal trips in Barcelona are taken by car, yet over 70% of public space is dedicated to this mode of transport (Roberts, 2019e).

<sup>4</sup> For example, air pollution is an acute concern in Barcelona (e.g. Ricciardelli, 2017; Burgen, 2019), causing 3,500 premature deaths per year (Rueda, 2016).

urban geography that increasingly prioritises social justice, wellbeing and equity (e.g. Hintjens and Kurian, 2019; Anguelovski *et al.*, 2020; Hamnett, 2019; Cocola-Gant, 2019). This fuels interest in the ‘right to the city’ (Lefebvre, 2010) given its overtly social orientation, although there is still a tendency to overlook the social responsibilities and exclusions entailed.

The challenges the superblocks aim to tackle, from noise pollution (Foraster, 2019) to the lack of social interactions in cities, are present in many contemporary cities across the global North and South (e.g. Park *et al.*, 2018; Ghose *et al.*, 2005). These issues have stimulated the introduction of diverse projects aiming to make cities more habitable; enhancing the habitability of public space is one of the four key aims of the superblocks (see Table 1). Habitable space is defined by policymakers as ‘the capacity of a specific street or square to host life’ (Barcelona City Council, 2016: 27). Critical engagement with this aim, its aspirations and limitations, provides the focus for this study.

Table 1: The four aims of the superblocks; the goal of making public spaces more habitable (Aim 1) is the focus of this dissertation.

Source: Barcelona City Council, 2016: 24-26

<b>Aim 1:</b>	<b>‘Improving the habitability of public spaces’ (p. 24)</b>
Aim 2:	‘Moving towards more sustainable mobility’ (p. 25)
Aim 3:	‘Increasing and improving urban greenery and biodiversity’ (p. 25)
Aim 4:	‘Promoting public participation and joint responsibility’ (p. 26)

The superblocks reflect the simultaneously academic and policy-relevant dimensions of the ‘right to the city’ (Lefebvre, 2010: 64), drawing attention to ‘possibilities’ (*ibid.*: 63) for more just social life in cities. Yet the normative and normalised social responsibilities associated with such ‘possibilities’ (*ibid.*) also need to be considered, as well as the ways in which some people are excluded from this ‘renewed right to *urban life*’ (*ibid.*: 158, original emphasis).

### Research Aim

**To investigate the extent to which the Poblenou superblock is conducive to urban citizenship.**

### Research Questions

- 1. How do 'right[s] to the city' play out in the Poblenou superblock?**
- 2. What responsibilities are associated with these 'right[s] to the city'?**
- 3. Who are excluded from exercising these rights?**

Chapter 2 sets out the academic literature – predominantly in urban geography – on the 'right to the city', the nature of urban citizenship and exclusions. Chapter 3 outlines methodology. The discussion in Chapter 4 explores how the Poblenou superblock resonates with the primary components of urban citizenship: rights, responsibilities and exclusions. Chapter 5 draws conclusions.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

While citizenship is conventionally focused at the scale of the nation state (Marston and Mitchell, 2004), many commentators argue that it is being '*rescaled... reterritorialised... [and] reoriented*' around the urban (e.g. Purcell, 2003: 566, original emphasis; Smith and Hetherington, 2013). Urban citizenship is central to the superblock project, which aims to allow residents and pedestrians 'to become citizens' (Rueda, 2016: n.p.) rather than reifying 'the rhythm of the road' (Sheller and Urry, 2000: 745).

By applying the lens of urban citizenship to the residents of the Poblenou superblock, this literature review will examine work on the 'right to the city' and associated – but often under-explored – responsibilities and exclusions.

### 2.1: The 'Right to the City'

Sustainable urban design (Mulliner and Maliene, 2011) – meeting the needs of current and future generations (Brundtland Report, 1987) – 'promotes certain kinds of 'rights to the city'' (Middleton, 2018: 308). In compact cities like Barcelona, it is imperative to have space that is not dominated by traffic (Griffiths and Grenyer, 2013). This aligns with analyses of urban rhythms (e.g. Lefebvre, 2004; Amin and Thrift, 2002), which involve how, where, when and why residents move in the city (echoing Lorimer, 2010), linked to how the city is organised. These rhythms directly affect residents' everyday experiences of, and access to rights in, the city (Smith and Hetherington, 2013). Speed is often deemed economically desirable (Jaffe, 2012; Harvey, 2012) in the 'fast city' (Amin, 2006: 1020). Yet this can be detrimental to urban habitability and liveability (Hamraie, 2018: 87), as is evident in how car-oriented living strongly contributes to the 'polluting, unhealthy... alienating' tropes of cities (Amin, 2006: 1009; Stavrides, 2013; Urry and Rueda, 2014). It is therefore widely deemed essential to have 'lungs of social respite' in cities (Amin, 2006: 1020) that allow people to 'stop, relax, interact and enjoy their surroundings' (Mulliner and Maliene, 2011: 147-8).

The 'right to the city' is intrinsically linked to urban citizenship (e.g. Purcell, 2003). The original impetus of the 'right to the city' is rooted in desires for 'urban revolution' (Lefebvre, 2010: 179), extending the long history of cities as sites for radical politics (Harvey, 2012). This

political motivation echoes the context of its conception, namely the global crises and unrest of 1968, which sparked diverse claims to the city (Lefebvre in Marcuse, 2009: 185).

Yet the 'right to the city' is far from singular or straightforward. Instead, its value and appeal, academically and politically, stem from its multiplicity. The 'right to the city' is necessarily plural (Lefebvre, 2010), encompassing diverse rights (Amin and Thrift, 2002: 153) that ultimately stem from 'a transformed and renewed right to *urban life*' (Lefebvre, 2010: 158, original emphasis). Desires to reclaim and participate in the city (Purcell, 2002) reflect the socially-oriented, empowering impulses of the 'right to the city'. This draws on aspirations for urban transformation, in part through challenging dominant (but not fixed) urban rhythms (Smith and Hetherington, 2013). The ultimate aim is to reform the lives of urban citizens (Harvey, 2008), making the 'right to the city' simultaneously a theoretical concept and a political ideal, with central principles of social justice and liberty.

This hints at the visionary dimensions of the 'right to the city' ideal; it represents rights to 'the existing... [and] a future city' (Marcuse, 2009: 193). As a practical policy device, the primary aim of the 'right to the city' is to achieve 'large scale and enduring social change' (Marcuse, 2009: 185). This demonstrates its collective nature (Purcell, 2002; Harvey, 2008; Garda and Carlos, 2017), based on the 'interests... of the *whole* society' (Lefebvre, 2010: 158, emphasis added). These all-encompassing ambitions highlight the need for creativity and innovation, with the 'right to the city' ultimately representing an '*[e]xperimental utopia*' (Lefebvre, 2010: 151, original emphasis).

The 'right to the city' is firmly rooted in shared public space (Mitchell, 2003; Amin and Thrift, 2002), which is understood as liberating space for all to enjoy. As such, it is intrinsic to the realisation of urban citizenship (Rueda in BCNecologia, 2015). The ideals of public space are centred on the 'urban dweller' (Lefebvre, 2010: 98; McFarlane, 2011b) or 'urban inhabitant' (Purcell, 2002: 102; Pierce and Martin, 2015)<sup>5</sup>. Everyday practises that involve spending time in public space produce episodes of relative stillness (Cresswell, 2010), meaning that the city can be conceived 'as a dwelling process' (McFarlane, 2011b: 649). These

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<sup>5</sup> Conceptions of the 'urban dweller' and the 'urban inhabitant' are used tautologically in this study, referring to people who live in the city and its public spaces. In Spanish, the word "habitante" is used to refer to 'inhabitant', 'dweller' and 'resident' alike.

context-dependent assemblages, prolific in the city, are dynamic and contingent upon who dwells in a particular place, and how (*ibid.*).

To dwell in the city – ‘habitar la ciudad’ (Garda and Carlos, 2017)<sup>6</sup> – is about more than simply being present in public space. It extends to how space can be used and the rights that can be exercised within it, with implications for people’s sense of belonging and experiences in the city (*ibid.*). This demonstrates how ‘dwelling is an ethos’ based on principles of ‘care’, ‘protection’, ‘rooting’ and ‘meeting’ (*ibid.*: 19), each of which are promoted by ‘relational place-making’ (Pierce and Martin, 2015). The realisation of these principles helps to constitute the ‘good city’ (Amin, 2006). This somewhat elusive concept strikes the heart of the ‘right to the city’, bringing together visions of a habitable city and a desirable life for city dwellers. This foregrounds the ideal city envisioned by residents and planners in Barcelona, informing the constitution of urban citizenship in the superblock.

Interpersonal interactions between urban dwellers in public spaces are widely conceived as central to urban liveability (Du Toit *et al.*, 2007; Dines *et al.*, 2006); this regards the ability of people to thrive and enjoy life in the city, encompassing social, environmental, economic and political factors (e.g. Hamraie, 2018). Liveable space requires ‘vibrant civic life’ (Friedmann, 2000: 467), producing (new) groups (Vigneswaran *et al.*, 2017) of people, belonging and identity. This conflicts with the experiences of ‘car-dwellers’ (Lefebvre, 1991: 312-313 in Sheller and Urry, 2000) due to the individualised, isolated nature of automobility (Bresnihan and Byrne, 2015). Car dominance in cities is widely seen to produce deserted, deactivated public spaces (e.g. Sheller and Urry, 2000). In contrast, at least in theory, collective inhabitation promotes ‘relatedness’ between residents and a ‘re-enchantment’ with ‘everyday urban life’ (Amin, 2006: 1009), helping to ground the ‘right to the city’.

When cars are not central to life, people can dwell in public space in more diverse ways such as playing games and eating together. In this context, the ‘right to the city’ represents desires for urban activation, ‘enliven[ing]’ the city (Hamraie, 2018: 87) to transform spaces into people-focused places (Gehl, 2011). ‘[R]ehumanis[ing] the city machine’ (Stavrides, 2013: 34) is the underlying intention of the superblocks, as shown by the

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<sup>6</sup> While there may be nuances in the practical uses of “habitar” in Spanish, its use by Garda and Carlos (2017) closely aligns with Anglophone understandings of ‘dwelling’.

slogan: “[l]et’s fill the streets with life” (Barcelona City Council, 2016). The superblocks aim to realise the ‘right to the city’ through proactive, community-oriented changes that ‘defamiliaris[e]’ and ‘refamiliaris[e]’ space in the (car-dominated) city (Crawford, 2011b, n.p. in Iveson, 2013: 943). This demonstrates how both policy-led urban developments and more personal, intimate, ‘micro-spatial urban practises’ (Iveson, 2013: 941) are essential for the success of such initiatives, depicting the interdependence of scale.

Yet there are significant gaps in the existing literature on the ‘right to the city’. This includes the lack of contextual grounding and nuancing of the concept (e.g. Purcell, 2013). While the theoretical emphasis of much literature on the ‘right to the city’ is undeniably important, this has often been at the expense of empirical elaborations (Purcell, 2002). Authors often write in general, ambiguous terms, as evident in conceptualisations of the ‘right to the city’ as the right ‘to live in the city in a *certain way*’ (Lefebvre, 1968 in Amin and Thrift, 2002: 142, emphasis added). This is likewise exposed by the under-specified uses of public space associated with the ‘right to the city’ (e.g. Mitchell, 2003). Applying the concept to a specific context should, for example, improve understandings of what ‘dwelling’ in the city entails and signifies to people in practise.

By engaging with specific spaces and the more immersed, affective, everyday perspectives of urban inhabitants (e.g. McFarlane and Silver, 2017; Amin and Thrift, 2002; de Certeau, 1984), there is scope to extend the existing theory on the ‘right to the city’ (e.g. Marcuse, 2014). Without this grounding, the abstract literature can be critiqued as a kind of academic ‘god trick’ (Haraway, 1988). These insights cannot be generalised (Baxter and Eyles, 1997), which further problematises the universalising, often grandiose, claims made regarding the ‘right to the city’ (e.g. Lefebvre, 2010). This should provide more concrete understandings of how ‘urban inhabitation’ (Purcell, 2002) relates to the habitability of space (Barcelona City Council, 2016). What’s more, the ‘right to the city’ is predominantly employed at a city-wide scale, but the superblock framework – with 500 to be eventually implemented across Barcelona (BCNecologia, 2019) – indicates that these rights could be enabled more effectively at a more localised sub-city scale.

Part of specifying the ‘right to the city’ involves elaborating the specific rights promoted. There is potential to explore socio-environmental rights through the superblock,

including the right to urban health. Much existing literature focuses on how this right is promoted in 'pure' spaces (Cronon, 1996) like urban parks (e.g. Mulliner and Maliene, 2011; Alcock *et al.*, 2014; Anguelovski *et al.*, 2020)<sup>7</sup>. Yet this overlooks the potential of more ordinary streets to strengthen urban health and liveability (Kondo *et al.*, 2018; Hamraie, 2018). The importance of habitable streets is alluded to by studies highlighting the value of 'surrounding greenness' (Triguero-Mas *et al.*, 2015: 35) in the 'living environment' (Maas *et al.*, 2005: 14), or lifeworld (Ingold, 2000), of urban inhabitants.

The importance of outdoor living and public space in Mediterranean cities and for the Spanish way of life (Garda and Carlos, 2017; Lefebvre, 2010: 236) makes these socio-environmental considerations especially pertinent. This context can therefore help to flesh out the 'neglected temporalities' (Amin and Thrift, 2002: 17; Smith and Hetherington, 2013) of the 'right to the city', allowing an exploration of more mundane, socially diffuse enactments of the 'right to the city'. In this case, such rights are accessed by subverting the structuring power (Foucault and Gordon, 1980) of car-oriented cities (Sheller and Urry, 2000: 744), reflecting how different disciplinary apparatuses produce different kinds of urban spaces (Legg, 2007).

## 2.2: Urban Citizenship and Responsibilities

Much of the existing (urban) citizenship literature focuses on rights, overlooking the diverse responsibilities also expected and undertaken by citizens (e.g. Goodwin, 2014; Marston and Mitchell, 2004). This links to the nature of urban citizenship: traditionally, citizenship is rooted in de jure definitions (*ibid.*), namely the legal ties between citizens and a given national territory. But in cities, citizenship tends to be more closely aligned to de facto practises (Hintjens and Kurian, 2019) enacted at sub-city scales (Millstein, 2017). This presents urban citizenship as a 'performative act' (Lepofsky and Fraser, 2003: 127; Hintjens and Kurian, 2019), as is advocated by Barcelona's current leading party, 'Barcelona en Comú' (Eizaguirre *et al.*, 2017).

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<sup>7</sup> The connections between green space and healthy, happy bodies is widely documented (e.g. Schwanen and Wang, 2014; Triguero-Mas *et al.*, 2015; Griffiths and Grenyer, 2013; Maas *et al.*, 2005).

This encourages a more balanced consideration of the criteria required to become a *good* citizen in the 'good city' (Amin, 2006). The superblocks aim to produce (superblock) citizens, identities and communities, creating 'imagined communit[ies]' (Anderson, 1991) of 'cities within the city' (Iveson, 2013: 942). But what duties are superblock residents expected to perform? Are those who fail to embrace the superblock model excluded from the good urban citizenry? This indicates how the superblock may produce 'insiders' and 'outsiders' in social as well as spatial terms (e.g. Cresswell, 1996), with these more affective dimensions (e.g. Askins, 2016) helping to unpack what it actually means to be a superblock citizen.

This raises important questions regarding 'what (civil) principles' (Lefebvre, 2010: 239) underpin urban citizenship. This echoes Lefebvre's insistence that urban inhabitants have the responsibility to demand and defend their rights to the city (*ibid.*: 158). The 'right to the city' relies on urban reinvigoration at the neighbourhood scale (Friedmann, 2016), which requires the participation of residents. This has interesting connections to how the superblocks, and urban citizenship itself, are assemblages of interconnected scales (Legg, 2009) and spaces. These expectations, echoing the soft disciplinary power of 'green self-governance' (Mattijssen *et al.*, 2018), are crucial to the effectiveness of the initiative. This interdependence translates to the responsibilities of urban/superblock citizens, depicting how residents are key drivers of 'urban revolution' (Lefebvre, 2010: 179).

Lastly, a significant gap in the urban citizenship literature is the perspectives of urban citizens. This may, for example, provide a better understanding of whether the disciplinary power of the superblock is embraced or deemed to undermine existing citizenship rights, highlighting the need to avoid romanticising the superblocks.

### 2.3: Exclusions from Urban Citizenship

Urban citizenship is tightly bound to inequalities given the uneven extent to which citizenship is granted and citizen rights can be exercised (e.g. Sibley, 1995). The exclusionary dimensions of citizenship are often filtered by the intersectional positionality of individuals (Haraway, 1988; Valentine, 2007). Feminist critiques have highlighted that citizenship, both as status and membership (Staeheli, 2011), is often presented in terms of universal rights,

which conflict with the much more selective legal and practical exercise of such rights (e.g. Marston and Mitchell, 2004). As such, it would be productive to explore how the ‘rights to the city’ promoted by the superblock are differentially experienced and not uniformly embraced. This links to the multiplicity of urban rhythms and the uneven nature of residents’ relations to these rhythms (Amin and Thrift, 2002).

This unevenness provides scope to explore conflicting views about which specific rights should be prioritised for, and by, urban dwellers. This may emanate from incompatible conceptions of what constitutes the – highly subjective and value-laden (Marcuse, 2009) – ‘good city’ (Amin, 2006), and in turn the ‘good citizen’. This links to problematisations of the ‘right to the city’ that question ‘whose right, what right, and to what city?’ (Marcuse, 2009: 185). This is especially pertinent in light of the growing emphasis on social equity in urban development, recognising that not everyone has equal rights or equal access to these rights (e.g. Angelucci, 2019).

Existing literature has explored how urban citizenship relies on the ‘capacity to move’ (Cresswell, 2009: 110), but movement is not a straightforward or singular experience (Cresswell and Merriman, 2011). This is especially the case with more permanent movements, such as (green) gentrification-induced displacement (e.g. Cocola-Gant, 2019; Quastel, 2009; Angelovski *et al.*, 2018; Wolch *et al.*, 2014)<sup>8</sup>. These exclusionary processes occur when part of the city is made more attractive or habitable, for example by reducing traffic flow, leading to higher property prices. This may make it unviable for some existing residents to continue living in the area, (re)producing socio-spatial inequalities (Klaue, 2018). Analyses of initiatives like the superblocks therefore display the entwinement of rights to private and public spaces, amplifying the ‘right to the city’. While urban development empowers some residents, others are left ‘dreaming the ordinary’ (Staheli *et al.*, 2012); the right to more habitable public space depends on prerequisite rights to housing and ‘to be present in the city’ (Squire, 2011: 298).

The exclusionary nature of space and society (Sibley, 1995) is particularly stark for ‘non-citizens’ (Marston and Mitchell, 2004), further complicating the ‘right to the city’ by raising questions about who counts as a citizen. ‘Non-citizens’ live at the margins of society, such as homeless people. In legal terms, this group also includes undocumented migrants and

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<sup>8</sup> Given the salience of this topic, it is a surprisingly under-researched area (e.g. Bryson, 2013).

asylum seekers (e.g. Lewis *et al.*, 2015). These precarious positions foster highly differentiated access to rights – de jure and de facto alike – in the city. This raises important questions about which lives are deemed desirable (Hamraie, 2018: 87) and for whom space is made more habitable. This likewise presents scope to address uncertainties in the ‘right to the city’ literature, including the extent to which having more life in the street genuinely heightens ‘community cohesion’ (Middleton, 2018: 298).

These complexities reveal implicit bordering (Staeheli *et al.*, 2012) in the city. This generates multiple socio-spatial boundaries of who counts as an ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’, going far beyond the physical 3x3 superblock grid; these diverse social boundaries are rendered starker by initiatives like the superblocks. This somewhat undermines the rights-oriented claims of such projects, while simultaneously raising questions about the (differential) responsibilities of (superblock) citizens to one another. Who do people feel an obligation towards, and how (if at all) are these responsibilities practised? This ultimately draws attention to who is excluded from the new spatialisations of citizenship produced by the superblocks, with implications for who is more able to activate and access the ‘right to the city’.

This illustrates the complexity of urban citizenship and the need for specific empirical grounding, especially given political efforts to claim the coveted “Barcelona model” (e.g. Roberts, 2019b; Klause, 2018), which includes the superblocks. Such political motivations make it even more important to critically engage with how the space is differently experienced, potentially exposing efforts to ‘commodify’ (Iveson, 2013: 955) the superblock ‘within the existing city of inequality’ (*ibid.*). As such, the four aims of the superblock (Table 1) may be produced for, and accessed by, residents unevenly depending on the security of their citizenship status; the rights and responsibilities of the superblock are unlikely to be straightforwardly accessed, or even prioritised, by ‘non-citizens’ (Marston and Mitchell, 2004).

These inequalities, based on conflicting rights and different degrees of precarity, highlight the need to analyse how (current) residence within a defined space does not necessarily secure (urban) citizenship (Goodwin, 2014). Some people are excluded and ejected from the space while others are unable to exercise the full range of citizen rights on

offer. This undermines the singular references to 'citizens' so prolific in grey literature on the topic. This lack of differentiation is also pervasive in the conceptual literature, with visions of 'universal citizenship rights' underpinning Lefebvre's 'good city' (Lefebvre, 1968 in Amin and Thrift, 2002: 142). This raises fundamental questions regarding which 'urban inhabitant[s]' (Purcell, 2002: 102) count as urban citizens, as well as who is allowed to continue inhabiting the city/superblock: urban initiatives do not 'enliven' (Hamraie, 2018: 87) the city in the same way – or even at all – for everyone.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **3.1: Overview**

This research is based on interviews (pre-arranged and unarranged) and participant observation conducted over a 14 day fieldwork period in July 2019. The qualitative approach employed aligned with the focus on speaking to people with intimate, first-hand experiences of the Poblenou superblock and its often conflicting links to urban citizenship. The prioritisation of these grounded perspectives was partly motivated by an important gap in much of the grey literature, namely the voices of residents.

The fieldwork focused on the two main squares and adjoining streets in the superblock. Besides making the project more feasible, this decision was based on the policy definition of habitable space as ‘the capacity of a *specific* street or square to host life’ (Barcelona City Council, 2016: 27, emphasis added); the project does not claim to make space more habitable to the same extent on every street.

### **3.2: Interviews**

In accordance with widespread support of the usefulness of semi-structured interviews (e.g. Cope, 2010), I found this method productive for gaining in-depth insights from superblock residents and those directly involved in the initiative. 15 pre-arranged, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants including the President of the Poblenou Superblock Neighbourhood Association. Participants were principally recruited by contacting the authors of, and interviewees quoted in, news articles and blog posts about the superblock. These interviews fostered a ‘dialogical’ (England, 1994: 80) production of knowledge; each lasted between 20 and 80 minutes, all were audio recorded and all but two were conducted in Spanish. All but three of these pre-arranged interviews took place within the Poblenou superblock; the exceptions included a phone call with a City Council representative.

Yet requests to participate in the study were not responded to by formal groups against the superblock, introducing positive bias into the pre-arranged interviews. Despite

multiple requests, I never gained a response from the Anti-Superblock Platform. Likewise, David Guti (who created a petition demanding the removal of the superblock) responded only to state that he is now “completely disconnected from the issue of the superblock”. This had implications for how I understood the superblock and was heightened by many participants routinely promoting the superblock with researchers and journalists.

A further 60 interviews were unarranged and conducted with people present in the superblock, most of whom were residents. These unarranged interviews helped to counter some of the positive bias expressed above, providing a wider variety of views. Each lasted between 5 and 80 minutes, involving a mixture of individual and group conversations. This technique also helped to overcome interpretative challenges arising from the complexity of participants’ positionalities (Haraway, 1988) by increasing the perspectives to compare and analyse<sup>9</sup>. This breadth likewise strengthened the rigour of my Spanish-English translations, with confidence growing when numerous participants explained concepts like ‘habitar’ (‘to dwell’) in similar ways.

While interviews were conducted throughout the day, most took place between 17:00 and 20:00; I was informed by several pre-arranged interviewees that this was the time most residents used the superblock. The ability to easily coincide with residents’ everyday routines provided more organic insights into how – and at what rhythms – the space is ordinarily used, without inconveniencing participants. Moreover, the importance of place to the interviews was reinforced when participants articulated concepts like habitable space through current practises, often simply stating “it’s this” and gesturing to what was around them.

These chance encounters created ‘new spaces of insight’ (Smith, 1996: 163) that balanced more rose-tinted portrayals of the superblock. This provided a platform for unexpected views to arise, as with an interview with an older man sitting on a bench in the early evening (P38). Given his use of the space I expected him to strongly support the superblock, but instead he expressed passionate opposition, perceiving it as the product of naïve young politicians. Hence, the combined use of pre-arranged and more spontaneous

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<sup>9</sup> These challenges arose from the multiple factors influencing participants’ views. For example, one interviewee was a superblock resident, cycling activist and City Council employee.

interviews helped to corroborate and contrast perspectives, extending subsequent interviews and enabling the views of advocates to be challenged by the views of discontented residents.

However, an analytical limitation of unarranged interviews was the lack of audio recording. After an informal interviewee became nervous after I started to record our conversation, I decided against doing this for later interviews since I wanted participants to feel relaxed and to maintain as natural a setting as possible for them. However, this meant that I relied on note-taking immediately after the interviews, making this evidence reliant on short quotations, my paraphrasing and memory. This heightened the power of myself as the researcher and raised the risk of misinterpretation and possible bias (England, 1994), in turn relying on my integrity, honesty and commitment to the ethical conduct of research (Baxter and Eyles, 1997; Hay, 2010).

Furthermore, despite the greater variety of perspectives gained through both sets of interviews, the research does not claim to speak for all of the 1,500 residents living in the Poblenou superblock (BCNecologia, 2019). This reflects the inherent partiality of all geographical knowledges (Haraway, 1988; Rose, 1997), depending in this case on who was (not) present in the space and (un)willing to participate in the research.

### 3.3: Participant Observation

32 hours were dedicated to participant observation in the superblock, principally generating fieldnotes and also photographs and audio recordings (following Laurier, 2010). All those who were interviewed were also observed, but not all those who were observed were interviewed due to situational impediments (such as people leaving the superblock) and the high number of people observed. The notes included who was using the space and how, drawing on the impetus of 'rhythmanalysis' to consider 'times... moods... [and] atmospheres' (Lefebvre, 2010: 229). Informally participating in the space, for example by reading a book on a bench, helped to restrict the potential impacts of my presence on residents' practises. This enabled intimate insights into the everyday ways in which people dwell in the superblock, although this is specific to the summer context of the fieldwork.

The use of participant observation was also important given the potential “research fatigue” of superblock residents (Triguero-Mas, 2019). More fundamentally, by reaffirming or challenging ideas that arose during interviews, participant observation helped to counter the epistemological oversights induced by positive biases, in turn avoiding a romanticisation of the superblock. For example, my observations fed into interview questions about the homeless people in the superblock. This opened discussions and accessed perspectives that might otherwise have been silent in the research.

### 3.4: Analysis

While there are risks that I misinterpreted the views of participants (conveyed largely in Spanish), this was avoided by asking for clarification if needed. Coding was used to analyse all the qualitative data collected (Cope, 2010; Limb and Dwyer, 2001), providing closer insights on the everyday realities – and complexities – of the superblock. The translations made during transcription of audio recordings ultimately became a methodological strength, providing a highly intimate – albeit labour-intensive – familiarity with the interview transcripts.

The coding process followed Straus’ (1987) framework of first and second level codes, with the former including keywords such as “comfortable”, “proud” and “calm” and the latter extending to themes such as dwelling, activation and social justice. It was especially helpful to compare codes across the two sets of interviews and observational notes, providing scope to analyse patterns and divergences (Jackson, 2011). Verbal nuances were also analysed, such as tone and absences (*ibid.*); the latter included the lack of consideration from interviewees of how inhabitants of ‘Casa Àfrica’ (a group of African asylum seekers and undocumented migrants who inhabited an unoccupied building in the superblock) differently experience the space.

### 3.5: Positionality and Ethics

Written or verbal consent was attained for all interviews. Although some pre-arranged interviewees were happy to be named in the study, for consistency all participants have been

allocated numbers; the pre-arranged interviewees are P1 to P15, and the unarranged interviewees are P16 to P75<sup>10</sup>.

The intersubjective nature of knowledge production (Limb and Dwyer, 2001) has implications for my research; my positioning in Poblenou as a female, British geographer has needed reflexive consideration (Rose, 1993; 1997). For example, at times I felt that some participants wanted to portray a particular, sustainability-conscious version of themselves. This potentially skewed some conversations, yet most participants seemed very open and candid. My positionality also became an advantage since many were curious about the research and my foreignness, which encouraged small talk and led to more in-depth discussions about the superbloc. This demonstrates the significance of personality to research (Moser, 2008) and also allowed me to ask for elaboration on terms central to the research and/or with somewhat ambiguous translations into English, such as “habitar la ciudad”.

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<sup>10</sup> The exception is Salvador Rueda (P15) who is named in this research given his public status and central importance for promoting the superblocs. Rueda supported and consented to this decision.

## Chapter 4: Discussion

Following the three components of urban citizenship outlined in the Literature Review, the discussion will first focus on the rights enabled by the superblock, which are based on access to habitable, community-oriented space in the city. Next, the relatively neglected responsibilities associated with these rights will be explored, including the responsibilities to embrace the changes for collective society and future generations. Finally, the exclusions (re)produced by the superblock will be analysed through the differentiated – and differentiating – experiences of those affected by gentrification, homeless people, and undocumented migrants.

### 4.1: Residents' Rights

While many participants defined citizens simply as people who live in the city (P12; P9; P7; P5), many also linked this concept to a series of simultaneously individual and collective rights (e.g. P13) to “not just move but to live in, enjoy [and] share” (P6) the city. Fundamentally, most participants felt that the superblock helps to realise the right to habitable space, namely ‘the capacity of a specific street or square to host life’ (Barcelona City Council, 2016: 27). Enticing people to the streets was widely seen to require “less pollution and fewer cars” (P14; P51), making the space “friendlier” (P9) and more “comfortable” (P2) (echoing Marquet and Miralles-Guasch, 2015). This contrasts the tendency of cities to relegate people to sidewalks, which are “side, side, side, always putting you *aside*” (P1). P2 and P10 asserted that before, unregulated parking rendered the space a de facto car park. Yet participants believed that the superblock challenges this hierarchy of city use(r)s, making space much more habitable for people (P39), as shown in Figure 4.



Figure 4: Collection of field photos showing some of the ways in which residents used space in the superblock, including joint dinners, water balloon fights and birthday parties.  
Source: Author's Own

These changes illustrate the notion of “tomar la calle” (‘to claim the street’ or ‘to take to the street’), described by P9 as “taking a bit of the spirit of a park and putting it here”. This complicates the spatiality of the city by diffusing recreational spaces and peripheralising automobility. For many participants, this has ‘enlivened’ the city (Hamraie, 2018: 87), depicting how the superblock can “win back public space” (P2) from cars (P3). The superblock therefore grounds the social justice impetus of the ‘right to the city’, promoting a ‘renewed right to *urban life*’ (Lefebvre, 2010: 158, original emphasis). This indicates some success in the production of more habitable ‘citizen spaces’ (BCNecologia, 2018: 2), helping ‘to make Barcelona a city for living in’ (Barcelona City Council, 2016: 2) rather than a place to merely exist.

Participants often felt that habitable space had to be “home-y” (P4). Conventional imaginative geographies of the home connote ease and security (Sibley, 1995: 93); when expanded from private to public space, this materialises Rueda’s conception of public space as the “house of everyone” (P15). This echoes other research showing how public space, such as squares, can ‘empower the idea of good life and urban happiness’ (Lima, 2014: 77). This homeliness was particularly evident in outdoor, inter-family dinners in the superblock, with

numerous taking place each evening of my fieldwork. People would bring homemade food down to the picnic benches, along with tablecloths, board games, cards and balls. This depicts how human needs and rights include that of play (Lefebvre, 2010: 147), depicting the principles of ‘meeting’ and ‘rooting’ intrinsic to dwelling (Garda and Carlos, 2017: 19). These group gatherings were based on shared contributions and collective dwelling, often expanding as passers-by joined in. This depicts the ‘meetingness’ (Urry, 2012: 24) of the space, starkly contrasting the situation before the superblock when it was “passable, but not habitable” (P6).

The heightened ability of residents to socialise at ground level mobilises the concept of ‘horizontality’ (e.g. Bonfantini, 2019) in the superblock. “Greater participation in the street” (P7) depicts how boundaries of comfort and belonging have been extended outwards from private, inside space to public, outside space. This was considered essential by many participants to counter the isolating verticality associated with living in flats, which are the predominant housing type in the superblock. Such solitary existences cause ‘mental and social misery’ (Lefebvre, 2010: 128), but the superblock creates ‘possibilities’ (*ibid.*: 63) to make the city “a place to enjoy living in” (P7) and so to realise the ‘right to the city’. As such, for many, the superblock has become a “catalyst” (P5) for broader “social changes” (P6), reinvigorating life in the streets.

These changes were elaborated by informal interviewees, who explained how the Poblenou superblock has changed the spatiality of “habitar” (‘to dwell’), which was consistently described as spending time in the streets like they would in a village, greeting people and relaxing together outside. P23 explained how before the superblock, you could only “habitar el pueblo” (‘dwell in the village’). This hints at the different rhythms and pace of life that village-based dynamics are perceived to enable (Lefebvre, 2004). To many, this represents nostalgic desires (Massey, 1994b) for a ‘better way of life’ (Marcuse, 2014: 6) that can be emulated in the city through the superblock. This reflects the longstanding idealisation of village and rural life in many European contexts (Knox and Pinch, 2006: 152; Le Corbusier in Rabaça, 2016); the capacity to dwell in the city was deemed “super-important, because without it [the city] depersonalises you” (P5). Similarly, according to several participants, the notion of “tomar la calle” did not exist here before the superblock, yet the initiative has “empower[ed] citizens... to make the streets their own” (P5). As such, the right to dwell in

public space is tied to the right to personal identity and a sense of self in the city (Lefebvre, 2010: 173), connecting to the emancipatory, humanising impulses of the 'right to the city' concept.

In extension to this, the superblock activates the right to slow down and "tak[e] a breath" (P14) in the city. Participants emphasised the need for "equilibriums" (P15), with current urban conditions being too fast-paced, relentless and car-oriented (P4). This alludes to the abrasive impacts of the econocentric 'fast city' (Amin, 2006: 1020), linking to predominantly negative conceptual perceptions of life in Western cities (Knox and Pinch, 2006: 151; Chile *et al.*, 2014; Sally, 1997). This echoes Lefebvre's views on the bleak, gruelling life of urban inhabitants (Lefebvre, 2010: 159). Yet by altering both the spatiality and temporality of residents' lives, the superblock was widely seen to produce a "slow mindset" (P4) that, on the whole, my research participants looked and claimed to be enjoying. The superblock therefore provides a framework for 'what city' (Marcuse, 2009: 185) residents are demanding the right to inhabit.

Echoing the plurality of the 'right to the city' (Lefebvre, 2010), the superblock promotes "the right to health" (P3) in a polluted city (P7; P39). Most participants had a holistic understanding of health, including air quality but extending to "the rights to public space, to walk and to play" (P3). In Barcelona, life takes place in the streets, "it's part of our flow" (P4). This shows how the potential for slower urban rhythms and collective dwelling in public space is highly valued in the Mediterranean context, signalling the suitability of the superblocks to Barcelona(ns). For example, P5 spoke about how the superblock promotes a "healthy life... healthy in the sense of more friendships" (P5), a change that relies on 'fill[ing] the streets with life' (Barcelona City Council, 2016). For these residents, the respite provided by the superblock makes this part of Barcelona much more habitable.

These benefits were expressed especially strongly by wheelchair users (e.g. P56), elderly residents (e.g. P45) and young families (e.g. P5). Participants in the latter group described how they spend all afternoon, every afternoon together in the superblock. There is a habitual consistency to these rhythms, as with the group of teenage boys who met on the same picnic bench to play cards every evening of my fieldwork. These rhythms are especially prevalent in the warm summer months (P10), when residents often have their dinner in the

superblock at 21:00 or later. This reflects understandings of dwelling based on repeated, everyday practises and encounters (Harvey, 1996).

Alongside the right to enjoy habitable space in the superblock is the right to interact with people in the street. While “people are used to being strangers” in cities (P6), the importance of informal, interpersonal connections was strongly conveyed by participants. The shared experiences of the superblock have enabled friendships to form (e.g. between P30 and P31), which have also developed through the Superblock Neighbourhood Association, ‘Col·lectiu Superilla Poblenou’. It was asserted that this produces “social nexuses” (P13) in an otherwise ‘alienating’ city (Amin, 2006: 1009), in turn promoting “a collective way of being” (P13). This was seen to enable a higher quality and more socially sustainable life (Vallance *et al.*, 2011) less accessible elsewhere in the city (P13; P7).

Yet the Poblenou superblock is far from flawless. Interviewees’ complaints included the uneven habitability of space within the superblock, which was seen to have created a core/periphery dynamic. “The bad side of the superblock” (P1) hosted streets often described as “dead”. This depicts new boundaries of comfort and care within the superblock, establishing how ‘dead public spaces’ (Freund, 1993: 119) are not exclusively associated with car-dominance in cities<sup>11</sup>. This is especially pertinent since the improved habitability of part of the superblock makes the “dead[ness]” (P1) elsewhere even starker, echoing assertions that planning ‘immediately divides up’ (Lefebvre, 2010: 99). This demonstrates the multi-scalar unevenness of the ‘right to the city’ since the superblock is not uniformly ‘enlivened’ (Hamraie, 2018: 87). This undermines the espoused cohesiveness of this ‘new urban cell’ (Rueda, 2016: n.p.), meaning that a version of the ‘good city’ (Amin, 2006) and the ‘good urban life’ has only been partially produced by the superblock.

In extension, the ability of superblock residents to exercise these rights is not uniform, which became apparent when participants explained how “some people don’t know how to participate” (P3). This includes people living alone and older people who, it was asserted, tend to “live a bit in their own world” (P9) and “fear change” (P5). This demonstrates how the ideal of dwelling in public space is unevenly exercised, despite Salvador Rueda being adamant that

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<sup>11</sup> However, since habitability itself is defined in a spatially bounded way as ‘the capacity of a *specific* street or square to host life’ (Barcelona City Council, 2016: 27, emphasis added), this unevenness does not necessarily cancel out the rights gained in the core of the superblock.

the superblock “benefits everyone” (P9). In contrast to those feeling alienated by the superblock, the heightened freedoms enjoyed by many children were abundantly clear; they “love to roam freely... and play more comfortably” (P3). Many participants were parents themselves, so the implications of the superblock for families were routinely prioritised. For example, “from where I live on the 11<sup>th</sup> floor, I can hear my kids playing in the street... it’s not the sense that you’re in a big city” (P1). By making private and public space seem more proximate, the superblock has enabled an extended, loosened spatiality of family life, although such contentment was not expressed by all participants.

Each of these (partially) reinvigorated rights represent re-engagements with the city, ‘refamiliarising’ (Crawford, 2011b: n.p. in Iveson, 2013: 943) its potential uses. This depicts how the superblock can make space more habitable, leading to ‘a transformed and renewed right to *urban life*’ (Lefebvre, 2010: 158, original emphasis) for certain residents.

#### 4.2: Residents’ Responsibilities

Alongside heightened and rejuvenated ‘rights to the city’ (Lefebvre, 2010), some participants described an entwined sense of responsibility. Emblematic of this is the work of ‘Col·lectiu Superilla Poblenou’, the Superblock Neighbourhood Association. The Association formed in 2016 to protect and improve the superblock (P13), incited by the initial, “fierce” anti-superblock campaign (P3). Volunteers proactively endeavour to ‘enliven’ (Hamraie, 2018: 87) the superblock, organising community events such as outdoor cinema nights (P3). This establishes how controversies can be ‘generative political events’ (Whatmore, 2009: 587). Participants asserted that with the Association, the superblock “has produced a community that did not exist before” (P6); members see themselves as “the defenders” (P13) of the space and its capacity to ‘host life’ (Barcelona City Council, 2016: 27). The Association enacts urban citizenship in diverse ways (Hintjens and Kurian, 2019), which resonates with the implicit responsibility of marginalised groups (in this case, residents who do not prioritise car use) to claim their rights to the city (Lefebvre, 2010: 163).

This aligns to the political, activist ethos of ‘right to the city’ (Lefebvre, 2010; Marcuse, 2014; Purcell, 2002) since they have so readily “taken the initiative” (P5). The empowerment

derived from members “feeling more attached to the public space” (P1) means that by “fighting for it... we feel the public space as *part of ourselves*” (P1; P68). This renewed connection to the city has been similarly noted, in relation to urban citizenship, in other European contexts (e.g. Angelucci, 2019). These perceptions depict an internalised responsibility to protect the superblock, fusing rights and responsibilities. This is reinforced by members being de facto ‘spokespeople’ (Latour, 2009: 64) for the superblock, wanting “to explain and cast light onto it, to discuss and *defend* it” (P3). This heightens the status of Association members as urban citizens, defined as “those who make the city” (P15; Lefebvre, 2010) in both practical and discursive terms.

The Association also attempts to regulate the space, for example discouraging vehicles from speeding by placing posters in the tree pots (P13). This depicts spatially diffuse means of societal disciplining (Foucault and Gordon, 1980), with this group wanting “to teach others that this space has some rules” (P9). This demonstrates how some uses of the superblock are deemed more desirable than others, with residents needing to abide by de facto “rules of co-habitation” (P2; P10). More broadly, these community-oriented regulatory practises represent a form of ‘green self-governance’ (Mattijsen *et al.*, 2018) and superblock subjectification (Foucault and Gordon, 1980), which are essential for the success of the project<sup>12</sup>.

Alongside the Association are more informal efforts to look after the superblock and those within it. This helps to flesh out Rueda’s overly simplistic comment that it is the “responsibility of residents to be good citizens. Nothing more.” (P15). This mobilises understandings of citizenship as membership (Staeheli, 2011); membership to the superblock community seems to implicitly require community actions like tying a dropped scarf to a bench, not leaving litter on the picnic tables (P4) and watering the communal tree pots. These illustrate how residents “try to do [their] bit” (P7), even though some participants may have exaggerated their good deeds, wanting to convey a particular version of themselves tied to an understanding of public space as “space we *should* look after” (P14).

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<sup>12</sup> This reflects broader neoliberal shifts in emphasis from top-down to more socially dispersed governance (e.g. Bridge and Perreault, 2009). While beyond the scope of this dissertation, this area is ripe for further research.

Many participants extended these responsibilities to securing a habitable city for future generations: “we cannot just think about ourselves; we have to think about the younger ones” (P9). Part of this intergenerational responsibility has been endowed onto young people themselves (P9). Many (parents) hoped that by growing up in the superblock, their children will “see the city in a different way and continue defending it” (P3). It was hoped that in the future, the superblock will not be viewed as disruptive but as integral to the ‘good urban life’ and the ‘good city’ (Amin, 2006). It was widely believed that growing up in the superblock will engrain more sustainable, community-oriented norms into children (P2; P3; P9), subjectifying ‘good (superblock) citizens’. These young people are both “empowered... [and] taught to be responsible” (P5), entwining the collective rights and responsibilities of the superblock. This demonstrates hope in the learning capacities of cities (McFarlane, 2011a) and (young) urban citizens, encapsulating how the ‘right to the city’ encompasses rights to both ‘the existing... [and] a future city’ (Marcuse, 2009: 193).

The term ‘superblock’ has become part of the lexicon of many young residents. It has become “a unit of reference” (P5) that orients their lives (P1), as when children shouted “let’s play ball in the superblock!”. This depicts the naturalisation of this ‘common place-frame’ (Pierce *et al.*, 2011: 54), which was echoed when P56 described his upbringing inside one of the original superblocks in Gracia. He recollected strong memories of people coming down to the streets to play dominos or cards, to share food and catch up with neighbours; this was believed to parallel the contemporary experiences of children in the Poblenou superblock. This reflects how dwelling is affirmed by sedimented practises and memories (Harvey, 1996), encouraging ‘new life’ (Lefebvre, 2010: 162) in the more habitable space of the superblock.

Enacting responsibilities to present and future generations relies on residents embracing the superblock; participants widely assumed that with time, residents will accept the changes. For example, participants recounted how initial critics now come down to relax in the superblock. But participants likewise acknowledged that dissipating this “collective consciousness” (P6) may prove challenging given the extent to which automobility has been entrenched as an almost sacred right. This was starkly presented when people who do not even drive protested against the superblock and its perceived threats to the right to drive. In contrast, many participants conceived rights – and responsibilities – in the city on a collective basis, asserting that “your rights exist until they undermine the rights of others” (P5). This

normative, relational urban ethics was conveyed most explicitly by two wheelchair users (P5 and P56). This conception of urban citizenship, meshing rights and responsibilities, is advocated by the superblock (BCNecologia, 2019) and echoes the social justice concerns of the 'right to the city' (Purcell, 2002).

So, there is a sense that all residents have responsibilities to engage with the superblock and the production of more habitable space (e.g. P39). This resonates with conceptions of the 'right to the city' as an 'urban revolution' (Lefebvre, 2010: 179) at all scales: "ultimately, we are not going to change anything if we do not change ourselves" (P6). Such changes range from shifting transport practises (P1; P14; P6) to "applauding and supporting" the superblock (P6). This displays personal and collective responsibilities to adapt, outlining the interconnectedness of the 'good city' (Amin, 2006), the 'good urban life', and the 'good citizen'.

Yet the superblock does not have the same appeal to everyone; some people are excluded from membership to the superblock citizenry (Staeheli, 2011). This echoes research indicating that post-car mobility does not necessarily enhance the sense of community for all residents (e.g. Wickham, 2006). These resistances and dissatisfactions were clearly depicted by the "no superilla" posters, as shown in Figure 5. These illustrate "human resistance to abandoning the car" (P6) and losing its dominance over space (P56). These persistent efforts "to get rid of [the superblock]" (P10) illustrate the divisiveness of urban planning (Lefebvre, 2010: 99).



Figure 5: Several "no superilla" posters remain both inside and on the perimetral streets of the superblock, hanging from balconies and placed in the windows of car-related businesses.

Source: Author's Own

Many participants perceived such resistance as absurd, self-centred and even irrational (e.g. P13; P47, P48, P68), notably distanced from the “extremely *normal... sensible* people” of the Neighbourhood Association, as described by the President (P13). Such opposition was seen to undermine ‘the conditions for social participation’ (Smith, 1989: 153) in the superblock, with these ‘outsider’ residents seeing their de facto membership (Staeheli, 2011) undermined. This exposes social boundaries in the superblock, with responsibilities representing ‘customs or prescriptions’ (Lefebvre, 2010: 157) that “*normal*” (P13) residents are expected to perform. This raises questions about who is seen to exist ‘beyond the bounds of normal society’ (Knox and Pinch, 2006: 84), showing how even (purportedly) sustainable initiatives can exacerbate existing, and create new, boundaries of inclusion in the city. This exposes the production of ‘normal and normalising’ social spaces (Lefebvre, 2010: 99), presenting a hierarchisation of citizen rights within the superblock. This depicts how bordering (Staeheli *et al.*, 2012) takes places in multi-scalar ways besides a binary between those inside/outside the physical superblock cell.

So, the superblocks have produced ‘citizen spaces’ (BCNecologia, 2018: 2) in which residents (differentially) exercise rights and responsibilities, both of which are focused on making the space more habitable. This promotes a sense of belonging to a more socially

oriented part of the city, especially for young families and members of the Neighbourhood Association, grounded in principles of justice and co-habitation. But individuals who do not feel attached to, or responsible for, the superblock become outsiders to its vision of a 'renewed right to *urban life*' (Lefebvre, 2010: 158, original emphasis). This means that the superblock exposes, and produces, socio-spatial boundaries of inclusion/exclusion and (dis)belonging in the city, reflecting the exclusionary nature of space (Sibley, 1995). In this way, the '[f]eelings of belonging and ownership' (Knox and Pinch, 2006: 90) experienced by some 'insiders' (Cresswell, 1996) more acutely contrast the relative alienation of 'irresponsible' others. This depicts how the superblock has *not* made space more habitable in a socially, let alone spatially, uniform way.

#### 4.3: Exclusions

Besides those who do not embrace the shift in city model induced by the superblock, there are more complex and deep-rooted exclusions to consider. These "grey areas' of partial inclusion and exclusion' (Hintjens and Kurian, 2019: 71; Jonas *et al.*, 2015) conflict with desires for genuine social inclusion in cities (Amin *et al.*, 2000). Many participants insisted that "everyone within the city are citizens, everyone" (P5), but this is highly problematic when the extent to which an individual counts as a citizen – both among residents and in legal terms – is unpacked.

In contrast to the liberal, equalising assumptions embedded in much urban planning (e.g. Winkler, 2012), "citizens" are not uniform. In light of this 'utopian dreaming' (Fitting, 2002: 69), it is important to consider how the superblock is experienced differentially depending on the power(lessness) of specific individuals (Massey, 1994a; Byrne, 2012). This resonates with the fundamental questions of the 'right to the city': 'whose right, what right, and to what city?' (Marcuse, 2009: 195). This is highly pertinent in terms of how gentrification, homelessness and undocumented status affect experiences of the superblock.

Gentrification is a major issue in Barcelona (e.g. Roberts, 2019b), particularly affecting long-term, younger, older and more vulnerable residents (P2)<sup>13</sup>. All the residents I spoke with conveyed, often very emotively, that these city-wide socio-economic changes are causing house prices to rise to increasingly unaffordable levels (e.g. P14). Participants repeatedly feared that without sufficient regulations, “hipsters” (P3) will “take over the neighbourhood” (P7) and make it “like a theme park” (P3). Despite problematic aspects of these stereotypes, this raises important questions about for whom space in the superblock is made more habitable; more marginalised residents potentially end up further excluded from the ‘right to the city’ in both social and spatial terms (Sibley, 1995). This resonates with the socio-spatial exclusivity of gated communities (e.g. Pow, 2007; le Goix and Vesselinov, 2015). Such ‘urban enclave[s]’ are based on ‘specific rules and rhythms of use’ (Stavrides, 2013: 34), asserting the interdependence of rights to private and public spaces.

The key risk is that gentrification filters the right to inhabitation (Purcell, 2002) by economic power (e.g. Farmer, 2011: 1154). This exacerbates the precarity of poorer, long-term residents by forcing this group ‘out of place’ (Cresswell, 1996). If expelled, these residents can be considered socio-economic ‘non-citizens’ (Marston and Mitchell, 2004) since they have been denied the right to affordable, long-term housing. Eroding these rights simultaneously excludes residents from the more habitable ‘citizen spaces’ in the superblock (BCNecologia, 2018: 2), undermining their status as urban citizens. This resonates with recurring concerns in critical urban geography over initiatives producing spaces ‘of privilege, exclusion and control’ (Anguelovski *et al.*, 2020: n.p.; Watt, 2013; Waitt and Knobel, 2018). This ‘dystopian drift’ (Schwember and Urabayan, 2018: 1) depicts the – perhaps inevitable – social justice failures of urban planning, which can be critiqued as ‘[e]xperimental utopia’ (Lefebvre, 2010: 151, original emphasis) rather than grounded realities.

The displacement and peripheralization of poorer residents undermine the extent to which the Poblenou superblock realises the ‘right to the city’ since this is *not* ‘a simple visiting right’ (Lefebvre, 2010: 158); “forcing people to go elsewhere isn’t the right to the city” (P2). Many participants asserted that the ‘right to the city’ is rendered obsolete if it cannot be

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<sup>13</sup> Gentrification pressures in the area include the growth of new media and technology industries (Ferragut, 2013), as shown by 22@ (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2006), and the rise of tourism in Poblenou (Roberts, 2019b).

exercised by existing residents (P56), making the space socially unsustainable (Yiftachel and Hedgcock, 1993: 140). Such exclusions undercut the principle of ‘rooting’ (Garda and Carlos, 2017: 19) associated with dwelling, with residents instead being *uprooted* from the neighbourhood in which many families have lived for generations. This casts doubt over the ‘landscapes of utopia’ (Anguelovski *et al.*, 2018: 417) presented in superblock discourses, indicating that inclusion and exclusion are two sides of the same coin. The risk of gentrification undermines the de facto right of existing residents to be ‘urban dweller[s]’ (Lefebvre, 1991 in Purcell, 2002) in the superblock.

Yet all the participants maintained that while the project may heighten gentrification pressures, these “existed before the superblock” (P14). This reinforces the plurality of the ‘right to the city’ (Lefebvre, 2010), whereby certain components – such as the right to habitable public space – cannot be disentangled from the rights to affordable and secure private space. This exposes some of the shortfalls of the superblock; the project can be considered *part* of the solution, but it is not an all-encompassing magic bullet that ‘cures’ all urban injustices.

A second group with very different access to the rights provided by the superblock are homeless people. During the evenings of my fieldwork I noticed several homeless people creating beds for themselves on the picnic benches. Given their day-time transience, it may seem problematic to conceive homeless people as residents of the superblock, but their consistent night-time presence makes this an important group to consider. This was echoed by other residents (with more secure homes), especially since these homeless people were “here before the superblock” (P9). Most participants considered this group to be closely aligned to the superblock community and often expressed profound sadness about their precarious situation.

The rhythms of homeless people in the superblock – most “just sleep here” (P14) – establish an exclusionary ‘time-space routinisation’ (Knox and Pinch, 2006: 196). This demonstrates how “habitar la ciudad” (‘to dwell in the city’) needs to be specified in terms of *who* dwells, *how*, *where* and *when*. These separated, ‘cyclical... prescribed’ rhythms (Lefebvre, 2010: 221, 151, original emphasis) reveal that homeless people do not exercise the right to ‘inhabit... [and] participat[e]’ (Lefebvre, 2010: 173-4) in the superblock during the day. This

links to the holistic understandings of the 'right to the city' conveyed by many participants, including the right to live in "a healthy, safe city" with "access to housing" (P2). Homeless people are therefore denied the 'right to the city' on multiple fronts, and their experiences highlight the need to avoid romanticising the notion of dwelling in public space (Ingold, 2000; Cloke and Jones, 2001).

These de facto exclusions exemplify the 'relativity... [and] plurality of rhythms' (Lefebvre, 2010: 230). Multiple rhythms and (often unstated) codes of use overlay the same space, exposing the limits of to whom the 'right to the city' is extended. This undermines the habitability of the superblock, paralleling the exclusionary nature of the village idyll (e.g. Kinsman, 1995) idealised by many participants. The precarity of an individual mediates how space in the superblock is used and what rights can be exercised within it, producing a spectrum of experiences. This underscores the need to differentiate singular uses of the term 'citizen', with homeless people displaying qualities of de facto 'non-citizens' (Marston and Mitchell, 2004). This socio-spatial exclusion may be intensified by the heightened sense of community enjoyed by *some* residents in the superblock; homeless people are largely excluded from this right to 'intimate conviviality' (Lefebvre, 2010: 235), pointing towards an incomplete and uneven realisation of the 'right to the city'.

Finally, the group that was perhaps most excluded from rights in the superblock were the residents of 'Casa Àfrica'. 'Casa Àfrica' is a group of African asylum seekers and undocumented migrants who took shelter in an unoccupied building inside the superblock (Illa, 2019). According to P56, these people live in inhumane conditions and could occasionally be seen looking through bins or walking through the superblock with a trolley of scavenged items. They were not greeted by other people in the street and certainly did not dwell in the superblock in the relaxed ways of other residents with more secure legal citizenship status, reflecting the highly differentiated nature of urban rhythms (Amin and Thrift, 2002). These contrasts undermine the principles of 'care' and 'protection' of other residents (Garda and Carlos, 2017: 19), depicting the social unevenness of dwelling in the city.

The exclusion of this group from the superblock became even more apparent when, during my fieldwork, a fire took place in the building occupied by 'Casa Àfrica' (Cortadellas, 2019). Besides causing minor injuries, the incident led to the group being evicted and having

to search for an alternative dwelling (*ibid.*). This group is therefore even less able to access the rights enabled by the superblock, excluding them further from the ‘good urban life’ of the initiative. Several participants even suggested that a different group of migrants living next door started the fire, intending to displace ‘Casa Àfrica’. Whether or not this was the case, residents repeatedly displayed less concern for the expulsion of these undocumented migrants and asylum seekers compared with their active interventions to stop long-term residents being evicted. Similarly, while P14 was highly indignant about the implications of gentrification and the situation of homeless people in the superblock, when asked about the fire she responded that “I don’t have any idea. I don’t know... *I’m not interested*”. This strikingly depicts how many residents conceived their responsibilities in the superblock as socially bounded to those deemed ‘in place’ (Cresswell, 1996) as urban citizens, intensifying the disbelonging of excluded groups.

This illustrates different degrees of exclusion for those considered to more or less belong to the superblock. This is reinforced by all participants referring to the residents of ‘Casa Àfrica’ solely as “undocumented migrants” rather than asylum seekers. In line with research on the significance of such categorisations (Sajjad, 2018; Varvin, 2017; Blinder and Allen, 2014; Allen *et al.*, 2017), this conflation casts further light on the differentiated degrees of exclusion from the superblock. Echoing the connotations of illegality and Otherness connected to the category of “undocumented migrants” (Ahmed, 2004), members of ‘Casa Àfrica’ were seen as less legitimate claimants of the reinvigorated ‘rights to the city’ provided by the superblock. This retrenches the social boundaries of urban citizenship and its selective nature (Hintjens and Kurian, 2019; Anderson, 2012), mediated by perceived ‘hierarchi[es of] ‘worthiness’” (Sajjad, 2018: 40) to the rights and responsibilities of the superblock.

This resonates with doubts over whether social justice is ‘a realistic policy aim’ (Miani, 2015: 181) of urban planning, or whether social complexities lead to inevitable shortfalls; many assert that ‘only imperfect strategies’ to tackle social injustices exist (Uitermark and Nicholls, 2017: 32). This makes claims that the superblocks straightforwardly produce more habitable space (BCNecologia, 2018) all the more dubious. The socio-spatial exclusion of ‘Casa Àfrica’ also highlights how the Poblenou superblock may be complicit in further polarising ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ in the city. The inhabitants of ‘Casa Àfrica’ are excluded from membership (Staeheli, 2011) at multiple, mutually reinforcing scales, from the Spanish nation

state to the superblock and the unoccupied building within it (echoing Knox and Pinch, 2005: 93). As racial outsiders and largely excluded from legal citizenship, this group are acutely precarious 'non-citizens' (Marston and Mitchell, 2004) in the superblock.

This differing sense of responsibility was likewise exposed by participants not knowing where this group had moved to; this disconnect counters the sense of togetherness more typically communicated. Similarly, when I mentioned 'Casa Àfrica' during a phone interview with a City Council representative (P12), he consulted with colleagues and returned to repeatedly assert that they do not know *anything* about this matter, and that any such issue is entirely separate from the superblock. Although most interviewees conveyed more concern and a desire for this group to live in safe and humane conditions, these neglects nonetheless expose a hierarchy of citizens: the rights of some 'urban inhabitants' (Purcell, 2002: 102) are valued above, and defended far more, than others. This means that these asylum seekers and undocumented migrants have a much more precarious and restricted access to the 'right to the city' in the superblock, both in legal and de facto terms.

Each of these exclusions indicate that marginalised groups – those affected by gentrification, homeless people and members of 'Casa Àfrica' alike – are '*not [seen as] part of any ideal city*' (Schwember and Urabayen, 2018: 1, original emphasis). This reinforces existing social boundaries while re-spatialising divisions within and around the superblock grid. Despite the espoused social agenda of the project, this represents the production of 'new injustices and silencings' (Uitermark and Nicholls, 2017: 32). What's more, within the superblock, other residents have access to superior rights but extend responsibilities to these more marginal groups differentially, depending on who is considered a more straightforward superblock citizen. This ultimately makes assertions that the superblock produces more habitable 'citizen spaces' (BCNecologia, 2018: 2) far more complex and problematic than may be initially assumed.

## Chapter 5: Conclusions

This dissertation has set out to examine the extent to which the Poblenou superblock is conducive to urban citizenship in relation to rights, responsibilities and exclusions. It has argued that, for many residents, the Poblenou superblock has considerably heightened access to, and provided more intimate experiences of, urban citizenship. The superblock has provided a platform for these residents, especially young families, to claim the rights to interact and dwell in more habitable space in the city. These rights often draw on perceived ideals of village life through collective and interactive dwelling and the slower, calmer rhythms it promotes. This empirical grounding helps to address the abstract nature and lack of contextual specificity in much existing literature on the 'right to the city'. For example, this research supports the usefulness of conceptual prisms such as urban rhythms and dwelling for understanding how far the 'right to the city' is realised for different groups. This presents opportunities for further research on the superblocks in Poblenou and beyond, as well as other urban sustainability initiatives.

Besides exploring the specific rights to the city enabled in this context (Lefebvre, 2010; Marcuse, 2009), the discussion has also considered the responsibilities that residents are expected to perform to belong to the superblock citizenry. These duties are related to (perceived) responsibilities for residents to embrace the changes, particularly as a way to secure the 'good urban life' for collective society and future generations. These responsibilities extend what it means to be a 'good citizen' and are performed to different extents by, and towards, different residents. For example, members of 'Col·lectiu Superilla Poblenou' have internalised an exemplar superblock subjectivity by being both 'enliven[ed]' by (Hamraie, 2018: 87), and proactive in 'enliven[ing]' (*ibid.*), the superblock.

Yet the rights promoted, and responsibilities expected, in the superblock are highly uneven. This is spatially evident in the internal differences to habitability within the superblock. It is likewise manifest socially since the components of urban citizenship are not accessible to the same extent, if at all, for all inhabitants. Residents experiencing gentrification, homeless people and members of 'Casa Àfrica' are routinely, albeit differently, excluded from the superblock, indicating that it is not as holistic or emancipatory as many

claims suggest. There is therefore significant potential – and need – for further research on the differentiated impacts of urban projects striving for social justice.

While estimates suggest 700 premature deaths per year could be prevented through the pollution reductions expected from the city-wide superblock vision (Mueller *et al.*, 2019), this dissertation underlines that the project does not necessarily secure the lives of those living in more marginal, precarious circumstances. This establishes the importance of nuancing claims to social justice rather than disseminating rose-tinted generalisations, which can obscure the reproduction of the very inequalities targeted. As such, the superblock does not achieve its first aim of producing more habitable space in a straightforward or unproblematic way. While echoing the recent desires for more socially progressive urban planning (e.g. Uitermark and Nicholls, 2017), it cannot escape reproducing social inequalities, as has been found in other places (e.g. Schwanen *et al.*, 2015). This reaffirms the complexity and limitations of even socially-oriented urban sustainability initiatives, especially in relation to the interdependence of rights to (habitable) public and private spaces.

The failure to achieve the plurality of the ‘right to the city’ undermines the extent to which the superblock in Poblenou promotes urban citizenship. This is especially pertinent in relation to the interconnectedness of rights; the rights to housing and citizenship can be seen as prerequisites for accessing a broader ‘right to the city’. The exclusions outlined unveil the inability of the superblock to embrace everyone. This underpins the imperative of unpacking what is meant by (urban) citizenship and who is included in generalising references to “everybody”: ‘urban inhabitant[s]’ (Purcell, 2002: 102) are differentiated rather than homogeneous actors. This raises questions regarding the social implications of ‘*experimental utopia*’ (Lefebvre, 2010: 151, original emphasis) like the superblocks, especially since inequalities are so deeply embedded in contemporary society and cities. This casts doubt over the extent to which the imagined ‘ideal city’ (*ibid.*: 160) of the ‘right to the city’ can be realised.

So, ‘what city’ (Marcuse, 2009: 185) is the superblock aspiring to produce? At the core, it is striving for a more socially just, people-oriented, healthy and habitable city. This goal is clearly ambitious, but such boldness is imperative if meaningful changes towards more sustainable, liveable cities are to be made. The superblock ultimately strives towards the

'good urban life', even though more efforts are needed to support precarious residents. The superblocks should therefore be seen as *part* of wider changes: we are "already starting late, very late" (P6) and "there is so much that has to be done" (P3). But at least change is happening, and these changes – in city planning and residents' attitudes alike – inspire hope that "in 40 or 50 years, this *will* be the norm in Barcelona" (P9). Such conviction displays determination for a different city, a 'better' city, to be produced.

While this dissertation has attempted to cast light on these themes, there remains significant scope for further research. This includes further evaluation of the superblock project itself, comparing different superblocks in Barcelona and conducting research over longer time spans. This should help to inform the continuing implementation of superblocks in Barcelona and beyond. What is also needed is closer, more focused research on how marginal groups experience efforts to make space more habitable through distinct rhythms and codes of use. This feeds into the need to continue placing greater emphasis on social justice and equity in urban development planning, both in practise and in academia. Ultimately, this work should aim to explore how projects like the superblocks can most effectively function *without* producing new socio-spatial exclusions or boundaries of (dis)belonging in the city.

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