

ECPA Urban Planning Initiative

Case Study: 22@ Barcelona Innovation District

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This post is the second in a series of four entries that focuses on initiatives encouraging innovation through sustainable urban design.

Before creating the 22@District, the Ajuntament de Barcelona, a society of the Barcelona City Council, asked a question: What measures can be taken to improve and increase the interactions between the international community and the local firms and institutions in Barcelona? The answers would eventually become the 22@District. In 2000, 22@District began as a government initiative to transform the dilapidated historic cotton district of Sant Martí into a booming knowledge center. The Poblenou neighborhood in Sant Martí was ripe for redevelopment, with 200 hectares of privately owned land (approximately 250 city blocks) in close proximity to the city center. By 2010, the innovation district already had 114,000 m² of new green space and 7,000 companies, businesses and shops, half of which moved to the district after 2000. The district has experienced a 23% increase in residents and now has 90,000 employees working there (22 ARROBA BCN). Today, the 22@District serves as a model of innovative urban design and planning for cities around the world.



Torre Agbar marks the physical and spiritual gate to the innovation district and serves as a catalyst for urban transformation. (Photo Credit: Ondřej Zvaček, CC 3.0)

This innovative regeneration project has created new employment, housing and live-work spaces through five knowledge-intensive clusters: Information and Computer Technology (ICT), Media, Bio-Medical, Energy, and Design. The 22@District brings together the international and local communities through both formal and informal networks to quicken the pace of innovation and to further accelerate the knowledge sharing process on the ground and internationally. The district is founded on the recognition that international and local human capital existing in the same city is not sufficient for economic growth. To maximize the potential of knowledge sharing, the 22@District created means for the overflow of knowledge to be captured. Research shows that in order for a city to actually benefit from the highly educated and well trained members of a community, it must “pro-actively engage both local and new international communities” (Leon, 237). Before the creation of the 22@District, Barcelona’s international community lacked a certain level of engagement with the city. Though many individuals and firms from around the world were located in Barcelona, few were truly integrated into Barcelona’s society and professional realm. Thus the district has sought to overcome the challenges presented from the tradition of international firms and businesspersons using Barcelona as merely a “stopping point” on their path to advancement.

The five clusters within the district are not only placed strategically near each other, but near the city center as well. The proximity of the clusters to each other fosters

interaction among them and the proximity of the clusters to the city center creates opportunities for results to be shared on a larger scale. productivity. The 22@ District seeks development on many

levels, with an emphasis on renewal: the project's objectives are "urban renewal, economic renewal and social renewal" (22 ARROBA BCN). The 22@District has become the mechanism through which a well educated international community can realize their full potential and combine their efforts to maximize

The creators of the 22@ District consciously designed the district to not only attract and aggregate international businesses, but to create an appealing and exciting place to live. Plans aimed to create 4,000,000 m² of office, commercial, and research spaces and bring new life to 35 km of streets. Within this, 220,000 m² was dedicated for new public facilities and green spaces as well as residential development including social housing. The project intended to keep 4,614 dwellings in the area and create 4,000 new state-subsidized housing units (22 ARROBA BCN). Internationally-renowned architects were invited to create a compelling skyline of landmark buildings along the renovated monumental boulevard, Avinguda Diagonal, which acts as the urban spine of the district. Fantastical new public spaces, such as the Parc Diagonal Mar and Parque Central de Poblenou serve as outdoor "playgrounds" and provide spaces to congregate. French architect Jean Nouvel's Torre Agbar marks the physical and spiritual gate to the innovation district, a "starting point for the connection between the Diagonal and the seaside" and "catalyst" for urban transformation (Unlike Media). The Edificio Forum, designed by Swiss firm Herzog & de Mueron, seeks to connect the grand avenue to the coastline, designed as a horizontal plane to facilitate lateral interaction between civic functions, office space, and restaurants. The Media ITC boasts 23,000 meters of floor space carved out of "fluorescent cubes" that collect sunlight and glow in the night. Created to be a forum and gathering place, the building seeks to serve "as a manifesto of Spain's new technology and architecture, forging constructive innovations" (Unlike Media).

The district facilitates economic innovation by connecting "technologically advanced companies universities and training centers, and research centers" and creating spaces for the interaction and collaboration of these companies to increase productivity (22 ARROBA BCN). The 22@ Staying in Company program employs university students from within the district at 22@ companies, to retain their talent and knowledge. The cluster model allows firms to work in conjunction with each other, encouraging sustainability in their business and the district itself. This business model spurs economic growth by bringing together companies that can work in tandem to be the most productive, and through their close proximity, increase innovation altogether. In 2008, the tangible economic progression of the district was analyzed by the Institut d'Economia de Barcelona and the University of Barcelona. Since 1996, the productive structure in the services industry in Poblenou has steadily increased. In the period before the 22@District was created (1959-2000), there were about 2,000 companies and about 42,000 employees in the Poblenou neighborhood. Since the 22@ District's creation in 2000, in 2007 there were already about 1,000 new companies installed or in the installation process and about 31,000 new employees: astounding economic growth in such a short period of time (Sabata and Marsal).

The 22@District fosters social interactions through the professional spaces designated in the district. The 22@Network is composed of companies and institutions within the district that have innovation and knowledge as key components to their business models. This network currently has 66 members and continues to inspire more companies to consider innovation and knowledge as vitally important to the success of their company. The district also hosts the monthly 22@ Update Breakfast to bring together professionals to exchange ideas and experiences regarding innovation. This event provides a formal venue for the exchange of knowledge within the district and fosters networking on all levels. Since 2009, the 22@ Urban Cluster Day symposium has brought together 700 executives and representatives from companies within the 22@District to serve as "a reference for discussions about the model of Urban Clusters in the Knowledge Economy [and] as a meeting point the work of clusters that make up the 22@Barcelona" (22 ARROBA BCN). To generate a sense of community, the 22@Volunteer program allows members of the 22@Network to help others through volunteer work such as Spanish or Catalan tutoring for newcomers. This not only provides neighborhood associations with support but in doing so, creates a larger interconnected community. The 22@District provides many social opportunities for citizens in the community in addition to the professional opportunities. These projects include: Virtual Memory in Elderly, Net Multimedia classrooms, Computer recycling, Education Project, 22@CreaTalent and Family Network. Most all of these programs in some way reuse the resources available within the district to maximize productivity in a sustainable way.

The 22@ Barcelona innovation district might at first seem like a typical urban regeneration project: a city seeks to redevelop a former industrial hub that has fallen into poverty and disrepair after decades of neglect and disinvestment. But a team of researchers from Design London calls attention to a facet of this district that makes it unique and successful. In 2007, the researchers studied the development of the district and highlighted the explicit intention to integrate all of its parts. While each of the industry clusters are segregated into distinct areas containing residential areas and amenities, they are unified by centralized heating and air-conditioning, electricity distribution, waste disposal, telecommunications infrastructure, and smart traffic management systems (Leon, 238). The proximity of the areas within the innovation district ensures their cohesiveness. But most importantly, public spaces and transportation infrastructure link the district to the city center, a short two kilometers away.

References

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