



CASE STUDY

Barcelona | 22@

New Lease of Life

Once a dilapidated industrial ghost town, the Poblenou neighbourhood in Barcelona was refurbished and revitalised in the 1990s to become a vibrant, mixed-use district with a special focus on knowledge- and tech-based industries.

The Challenge

Poblenou, an extensive neighbourhood in Barcelona, Spain, was once dubbed the “Manchester of Catalonia” for its bustling oil, cotton and textile industries in the 19th century.

When de-industrialisation hit Spain, however, as with much of Europe, Poblenou fell into rapid disrepair. By the late 1980s, it was a sprawling ghost town of vacant factories and polluted, slum-like waterfront.

Poblenou’s fortunes changed when Barcelona was selected to host the 1992 Summer Olympics. The need to build an Olympic Village for athletes led the city to develop an area adjacent to Poblenou, which was then dotted with rundown factories and warehouses.

After the Olympic Games ended, the new neighbourhood, La Vila Olímpica, continued to attract people and businesses to become a vibrant residential neighbourhood.

The transformational success spurred the local government to do the same for Poblenou. Led by its then mayors Pasqual Maragall (1982–1997) and Joan Clos (1997–2006), the Barcelona City Council sought to expand its city limits and bring new life to the city through urban, economic and social revitalisation. The goals were to create a mixed-use area that combined affordable housing, business premises, community facilities, cultural spaces and green areas; as well as a new space for innovation in energy, ICT, media, MedTech and design economic clusters.



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An abandoned factory in Poblenou.





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The Solution

As a result of infrastructural upgrades for the Olympic Games, Poble Nou was now situated near high speed trains at La Sagrera —a new urban centre around Plaça de les Glòries, the city’s largest roundabout—and the newly reconstructed beach and waterfront. With the planned tram and metro lines, Poble Nou would become the best-connected neighbourhood in Barcelona.

Rather than bowing to considerable pressure from the real estate sector to rezone the dilapidated district for residential purposes, the Barcelona City Council chose instead to envision Poble Nou for multiple functions.

After two years of intensive debate, an “urban acupuncture” approach was chosen. In 2000, two parcels of land within the neighbourhood, with a total size of 1.98 km², were designated as 22@Barcelona districts. Sites within this area were allowed to rezone from “22a”, which denotes industrial zoning, to “22@”, which allows redevelopment of sites to office or commercial spaces with a gross floor ratio of up to 3.0, predicated on developers setting aside 30% of floor space for public space, green areas and social housing equally. The focus was to create spaces for the strategic concentration of intensive knowledge-based activities.

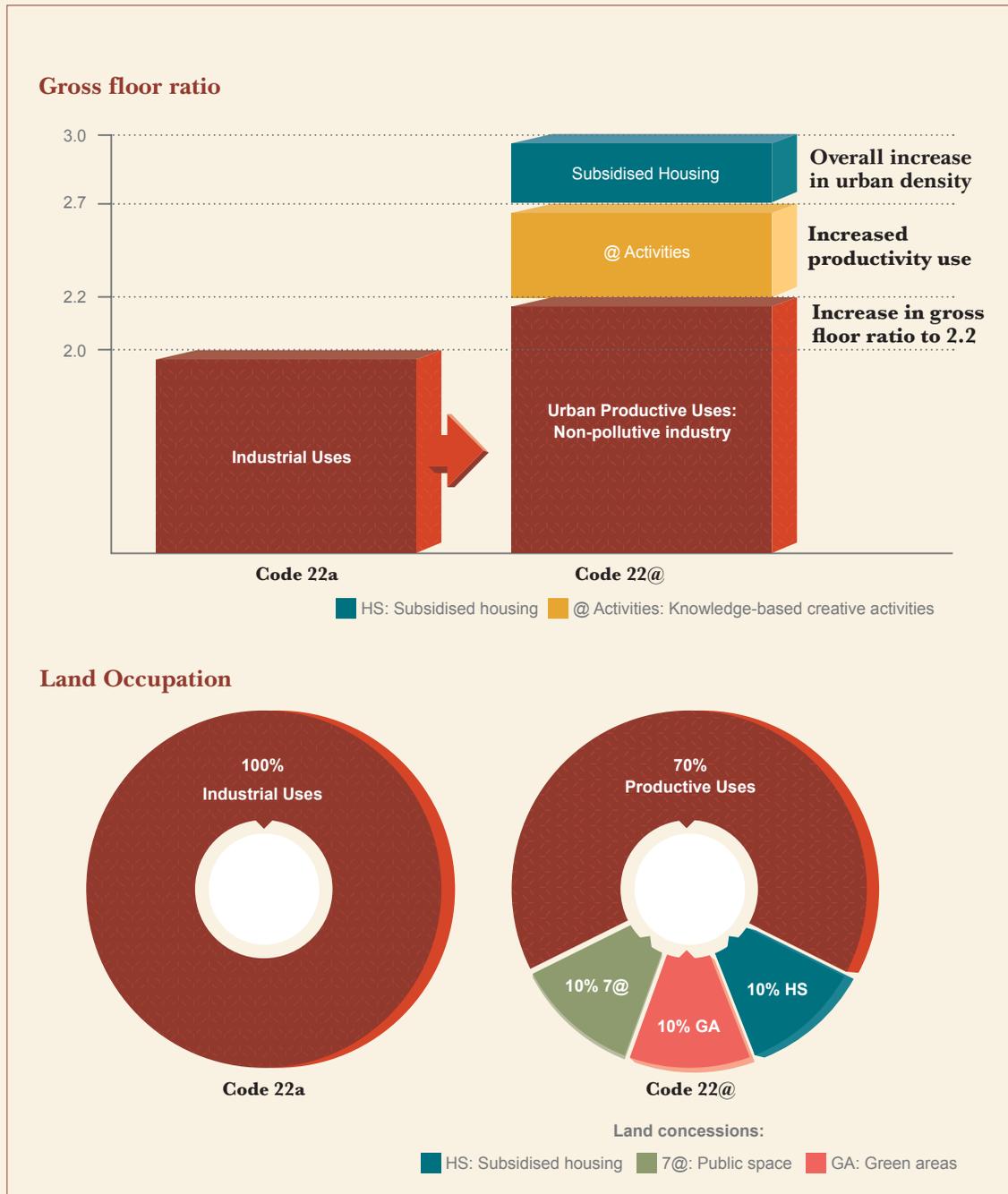
01 Enhanced connectivity allows the beach to be easily accessible to the people at Poble Nou.

02 Code 22@ resulted in an overall increase in urban density, while ensuring the provision of subsidised housing, green areas and public space through land concessions.

Through this, the city leveraged private redevelopment to create a district that not only facilitated job growth, but attracted people from all socio-economic backgrounds.

The 22@Barcelona plan's central goal was to provide 3.2 million m² of office space, calculated to be the critical mass needed to

attract new economic activity and compete on a global scale. Concurrently, the City Council projected the development of 4,000 new subsidised housing units, preserving 4,614 pre-existing housing units, creating 114,000 m² of new green spaces and creating space for a further 145,000 m² of community facilities.





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To support the redevelopment, two innovative planning tools were introduced. A Special Infrastructure Plan for Poblenou enabled private finance mechanisms for the redevelopment of power, telecommunications and waste infrastructure; the “Modification of the Special Plan for Historical/Artistic Architectural Heritage” of the city, approved in 2006, allowed the reinforcement and preservation of 146 elements with industrial heritage or historical value. These included alleyways, industrial smokestacks, residential buildings and others. The effort ensured that the historical identity of the city was respected and maintained, for the enjoyment of existing and future residents.

To attract new businesses, the city created Barcelona Activa—a local development agency—to facilitate commercial establishment. It was thus the landing site for budding entrepreneurs and seasoned companies, based on a “Business One Door” policy, which eased set up in the area.

01 An old factory that was converted into a nursery.

02 The public spaces in Poblenou at the 22@ district are well used by both young and old.



“The city leveraged private redevelopment to create a district that not only facilitated job growth, but attracted people from all socio-economic backgrounds.”



The Outcome

Today, soaring red-bricked chimney stacks are juxtaposed against gleaming glass and steel buildings, while residents and commuters alike relax in the public squares and new green spaces. A few steps away from the cluster of five universities, 1,600 new subsidised housing complexes have been developed, known to be among the most attractive in Barcelona. Within a 10-min walk, a senior citizens' centre and childcare facilities ensure that the space is enjoyed not only by students, but by all ages. Three art factories, repurposed from municipal-owned spaces, have been established to encourage artistic creation and research, advancing Barcelona's vision of being a cultural centre. 22@Barcelona is also home to incubators or "business factories", contributing to more than 8,000 businesses that provide jobs to 93,000 workers. Public spaces and local businesses thrive day and night.

Between 2007 and 2015, more than 300 delegations per year arrived to learn from the 22@Barcelona innovation district. Its concept has been replicated in Colombia's Medellín (MedellínNovation District), Tunja (Technological Innovation District) and Montreal in Canada (Quartier de l'Innovation).

The City Council continues to review its policies, particularly as the attractiveness of the 22@ district has led to higher housing prices and gentrification.

In 2016, Barcelona City Council introduced the Barcelona Right to Housing Plan (2016–2025), to address and reverse the trend of residential exclusion across the city. Measures include strengthening the mechanisms for detecting fraudulent uses of public housing, banning new tourism establishments in certain high tourist zones, preparing a Barcelona Rent Index, renovating existing dilapidated stock and purchasing flats by right of first refusal.

In Poble Nou and its wider borough of Sant Martí, which has shown higher than average income disparity, the city has prioritised beefing up its mediation plans to prevent housing evictions and expand the public housing stock.

22@Barcelona's mix of uses, promotion of entrepreneurship, prioritisation of public transport and inclusion of affordable housing have created a vibrant new city centre. Its success has led to the expansion of the model to other areas, such as the Sarrià-Sant Gervasi District. Keeping it inclusionary for all will continue to be a challenge, but with the right foundation that highlights the need for integrating social and economic values, 22@ will continue to be an example for future inclusionary development. ○

01 Delegates being shown around the Fundació Vila Casas art museum, formerly a textile factory.

02 Rambla del Poblenou, a pedestrian street popular with both locals and tourists.





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