Special Issue Combining Safety
and Equity in the Post-Covid City:
New Trends between Local Policies
and Bottom-Up Practices

# FUORI LUOGO

Journal of Sociology of Territory,
Tourism, Technology

*Guest editors*

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**Summary**

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What is a city? This is the question

Sofia Galeas Ortiz, Oscar Mascarilla Miró, Montse Crespi Vallbona[1]
# Unmasking the Effects of Airbnb in Barcelona[2]

## Introduction

According to UN-Habitat, by 2035, most of the world's population will live in metropolitan areas. This will further intensify the need for affordable housing. A home is not only a basic right but also a key factor for social cohesion, as it generates a sense of belonging and fosters cultural recognition (Hernández *et al*., 2007; Lebrusán Murillo, 2019). Spain has recently experienced growth in numbers of both landlords and tenants (Future Policy Lab, 2023), which suggests polarisation in the real estate system, in which the proportion of people who are not owners of their homes is increasing along with the proportion of people who own more than one property and are making a profit by renting them. Hence, the right to housing is also being affected by the right to private property. In consequence, the right to live in decent housing is in conflict with the ability of private owners to sell or rent their homes for profit, and tourism is a relevant factor in this. The city of Barcelona is no exception to these patterns. The purpose of this article is to look at buildings that are used for both residential and tourism purposes, in order to observe the extent to which they turn ordinary everyday places into a kind of theme park.

Therefore, the main purpose of this research is to explore the coexisting interests in the historic and touristified centre of Barcelona, where the aim should be to preserve the sense of belonging and attachment to the place among local and immigrants, and even among tourists. This entails analysis of the effects of the increasing number of homestays[3] (or tourist housing) in this area of Barcelona (i.e. Ciutat Vella), including its gentrification processes, immigration density, protests by social movements, political reactions, and maintenance of heritage and community spirit.

After reviewing the scientific literature on housing problems and touristification, we describe the major expansion in the advertising on the Airbnb website of homestays in Barcelona. We then consider the community spirit and very essence of the neighbourhood that residents yearn for and which tourists actively seek in order to feel immersed in the local culture and daily life.

Methodologically, the secondary data was gathered from the Government of Catalonia and Barcelona City Council, and also from the InsideAirbnb website. The Datasets Catalogue, in CSV and SHP formats, Open Data BCN, (Barcelona City Council's open data service) was processed and filtered using GIS programs, in this case Arcgis (Esri). The primary data was collected from 15 in-depth interviews with local residents, leaders of social movements, real estate agents and political representatives. Fitting both sets of interests is the challenge faced by mature and sustainable destinations and, therefore, by tourism policy in smart destinations. Will this be the case with Barcelona?

## 1. State of the art

It has been suggested that an effective measure to reduce the effects of the crisis of accessible, affordable housing and concentration of rented properties as opposed to home ownership could be the regulation of rental fees (Lebrusán, 2019). The recent popularity in Europe of such policy has its supporters and detractors in academia. Many have associated it with fewer and poorer quality houses being available for rent (Sims, 2007), because in a market economy, regulated

prices do not always have positive effects. However, other studies have shown that controlled rent can prevent certain types of population from being forced out of their neighbourhoods (Diamond et al., 2019) without causing a collapse in the supply of rented properties (Jofre-Monseny, 2023).

In Spain, the measures approved in the recent State Act on the Right to Housing (BOE, Boletín Oficial del Estado, May 2023) establish a legal framework for any Autonomous Communities that wish to implement temporary rent control by declaring "stressed areas". This law "freezes" the price of homes that have been rented in the last five years and subjects rental fees to a reference index in the case of dwellings belonging to major property owners that were not being rented before. However, as seasonal contracts (for less than 11 months) are exempt from control, there is a loophole that owners can exploit in order to circumvent the regulation of rent. Regarding fiscal matters, tax discounts for tenants and a higher tax on the rent of second or unoccupied homes have been proposed. Councils have also established a surcharge on property tax for unoccupied homes and second homes, which together with the increase in public housing stock would make more homes available for rent. Normalisation of public intermediation on rented properties has also been proposed, which would raise people's trust in landlords and make tenants feel more secure, as well as new mechanisms to balance the changing needs of households with the existing housing stock.

In recent decades, public policies have favoured the right to speculate with housing over the right to live in it, the so-called commodification and consequently financialisation of housing (as mortgaged home ownership drove financial markets). Both processes encouraged home ownership, disinvestment in public and subsidised housing, as well as an increase in speculation. This is where tourism also came onto the scene, whereupon the use of new technologies to advertise homestays on peer-to-peer accommodation platforms led to a sharp increase in tourist short-term rentals (Cócola-Gant, 2018). This touristification process, a phenomenon dubbed "airbnbification" by Richards (2016), stems from the revaluation of property and the rise in purchase and/or rental prices, and can lead to residents being forced out of their neighbourhoods, which become invaded by tourists.

Consequently, the prevailing perception in Spain is that the increasing demand for rented housing has outstripped the growth in supply. Combined with the residual role of council housing, this has led to a persistent lack of affordable residences being available for rent, especially in urban areas. Approximately 76% of rent-paying low-income households spend 40% or more of their disposable income on their homes (Future Policy Lab, 2023). And in 2020, according to the same report by the Future Policy Lab (2023), home ownership rates fell in all age groups, but especially among younger households. Only 27% of under 28 people own their main home, and the home ownership rate among over 48 people is just 75%.

This crisis of accessible, affordable housing is especially striking in Spain, but the same thing is happening elsewhere in Europe. According to the Housing Anywhere International Rent Index report (2023), published by Europe's largest home rental market, in 2022 the EU member states witnessed an average year-on-year increase of 14.3% in rent. This crisis has raised concerns about the notion of housing precariousness, which Clair *et al.* (2019) define as the state of uncertainty that increases the real or perceived probability of someone suffering an adverse event, caused (at least partly) by their relation with the provider of their home, or its physical qualities, affordability, security, or lack of access to essential services. All this is aggravated due to the population being increasingly concentrated in urban areas, where the demand for housing is often higher than the supply. There are various reasons for this concentration, including employment (skilled immigrants, digital nomads, expatriates), education (academic tourism) and both private and corporate tourism.

Regarding the changes caused by tourism, local governments originally strove to create tourist resources and infrastructures (Hall, 2009; Colomb, 2012), but later started implementing measures to limit the growth of tourism and to prevent residential neighbourhoods from being transformed into tourist areas. For example, Barcelona approved the Special Urban Plan for

Tourist Accommodation (PEUAT) in 2021[4], which establishes areas where the supply of tourist accommodation can increase (i.e. the least congested ones), areas where it should stay the same and areas where it needs to be reduced. This plan responded to the need to make the city's tourist accommodation compatible with a sustainable urban model. However, limiting licences for tourist apartments and the closure of illegal accommodation has not detracted from the residents' real concern: the increase in the price of housing, both for purchase and for rent (López-Gay, 2018). By a process of *silent expulsion* (López-Villanueva and Crespi-Vallbona, 2023), the touristic interest and general demand (skilled immigrants, digital nomads, expatriates, academic travellers) in certain areas of the city has raised the housing price, thus displacing the people who cannot afford to stay. Hence, housing policies should focus on expanding social housing, with the clear objective of spatially distributing it to encourage mixed neighbourhoods and discourage segregation, ghettoisation and gentrification.

Both tourists and residents want neighbourhoods to maintain their everyday mood. They are places to which the community becomes attached, where their lives are played out and a source of well-being (Barañano-Cid, 2021; López-Villanueva & Crespi-Vallbona, 2023). Sense of place, by definition, is the emotional relations between people and their environment, and indicates how meaningful it is for a person or community and how it contributes to their sense of well-being (DeMiglio & Williams, 2008). These spaces and buildings (whether or not they are considered heritage) and their associated customs are parts of the local identity (Crespi-Vallbona & Richards, 2007) and modern-day tourists tend to actively seek these everyday experiences, and look to immerse themselves in the local community (Füller & Michel, 2014; Gravari-Basbas & Delaplace, 2015). What has been dubbed "off-the-beaten-track" (Maitland & Newman, 2008) or "new urban" (Füller & Michel, 2014) tourism has been fostered by Airbnb (Freytag & Bauder, 2018; Ioannides *et al*., 2018), which offers the chance to feel closer to the local population's day-to-day life and more immersed in the neighbourhood (Maitland & Newman, 2008). As Stors (2020) points out, the pairing of new urban tourists with home-sharing trends are current drivers of urban transformation, place-making and image construction from the bottom.

However, this is not without controversy. Airbnb was originally conceived as a means to provide ordinary people with new ways to make money by renting rooms in their homes, which also promoted a more inclusive tourism (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). Kadi, Plank and Seidl (2019) studied the impact of Airbnb in Vienna, finding that it is less concentrated in the centre and is more spread throughout the city. Hence, this platform (and others, such as Homeaway, 9Flats and Housetrip) might be viewed to be promoting inclusive and socially sustainable tourism. Unfortunately, the reality is that mass, invasive and unwanted tourism (Pimentel de Oliveira, 2020) has, from the first decade of the twenty-first century, given rise to a multitude of movements that criticise the negative effects on cities. The essence of so-called *tourismophobia* (Huete & Mantecón, 2018; Mansilla, 2018; Milano *et al*., 2018) is the claim that it has driven up the cost of both owning and renting homes, and has caused changes to residential dynamics, the commercial fabric, neighbourhood relations (Gil & Sequera 2018; Crespi-Vallbona & Mascarilla-Miró, 2018) and the use of public space (Luque *et al*., 2019; López-Villanueva & Crespi-Vallbona, 2021). Protest movements have also decried how little say the general public has in what is happening (Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2008) and are arguing that they too have a right to the city (Crespi-Vallbona & López-Villanueva, 2023). The most intense tourism activities still tend to be concentrated in central neighbourhoods, with profound effects on local housing market, the cost of rent and residential displacement (Cócola-Gant, 2016; Gutiérrez *et al*., 2017).

Tourist policy tends to declare certain destinations to be of special interest. But the challenge is to strike the right balance between the interests of residents and tourists. Governance models need to plan new areas for both sets of people (Ioannides & Petridou, 2016). Innovative solutions are required to maintain the character, authenticity and community spirit of neighbourhoods

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4    The PEUAT, the first of which was approved in 2017 and the second in 2022, guarantees the rights of residents and regulates tourist accommodation through zoning. This includes Zone 1, the declining zone (in Ciutat Vella, part of the Eixample, Poblenou, Vila Olímpica, Poble Sec, Hostafrancs and Sant Antoni) in which new accommodation facilities cannot be opened and no new licenses for tourist apartments can be issued.

in the form of regulations in response to the complex dichotomy of tourism development and real inclusiveness, offsetting the negative effects of the home sharing and ensuring that the benefits are rightfully distributed among the whole resident community (Morales-Pérez *et al*., 2020; Crespi-Vallbona & Domínguez-Pérez, 2021). This is especially important given that many cities lack efficient urban policy instruments to tackle the spatial displacement and gentrification processes caused by the rapid expansion of informal tourist accommodation due to online platforms such as Airbnb (e.g. Gutiérrez *et al*., 2017; Lee, 2016; Schäfer & Braun, 2016).

## 2. Barcelona: the case of Ciutat Vella

This article uses a descriptive but critical approach to the main purpose of considering Airbnb apartments in the historic and touristified centre of Barcelona, and how they might have contributed to the lack of residential housing and excess of tourist accommodation. It also proposes ways to preserve not just the local and immigrant population's sense of belonging and attachment to the place, but also the one of tourists themselves. It focuses on the central and highly touristic district of Ciutat Vella (Map 1), exploring aspects as gentrification, immigration density, social movements, political reactions, heritage and community spirit.

Barcelona is a Mediterranean city that is compacted into a relatively small geographic area. It has 10 districts and 73 neighbourhoods. The oldest and most central one is called Ciutat Vella (Old City) and is made up of four neighbourhoods: Raval, Barri Gòtic (Gothic Quarter), La Barceloneta, and Sant Pere, Santa Caterina i La Ribera. El Raval grew around the medieval walls, although there were probably previous settlements in that area. The Gothic Quarter is the oldest part of the city, largely corresponding with the ancient Roman settlement of Barcino. La Barceloneta was almost uninhabited until the mid-eighteenth century, when fishermen began to settle along the seafront. Sant Pere, Santa Caterina i La Ribera was the city's financial hub between the thirteenth and the fifteenth century. Rich merchants built grand palaces as the ones that still stand in Carrer Montcada.

Map 1. Ciutat Vella and its 4 neighbourhoods: El Raval, Barri Gòtic, La Barcelona, and Sant Pere, Santa Caterina i La Ribera
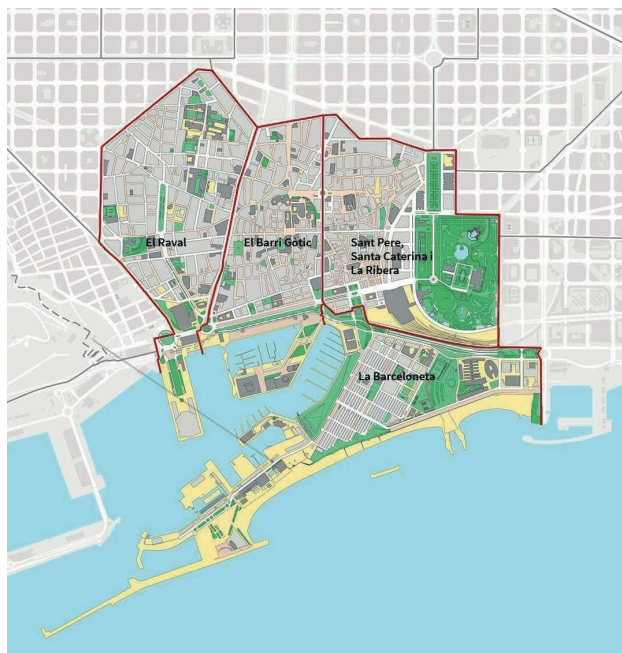


Source: Barcelona City Council

In terms of methodology, the results are based on qualitative and quantitative data by: a) 15 semi-structured interviews with residents, leaders of social movements, real estate agents which manage the housings listed on Airbnb platform, and political representatives involved in the transformation of these areas; b) observation by visiting the neighbourhoods; c) secondary data obtained from official records of registered tourist accommodation and number of international visitors (*Turisme de Barcelona* reports, which is the local destination management of Barcelona City Council),  the InsideAirBnb website (which gives updated information of listed apartments in the Airbnb platform), Incasol (which provides data about the development of land for economic activities, for residential use and the promotion of protected housing of *Generalitat de Catalunya*, the Government of Catalonia), reports about the concerns of Barcelona residents (*Percepció del Turisme a Barcelona*, Barometer Reports) and the Municipal Register of Inhabitants (Statistics of Barcelona City Council). The open data available from these institutions in CSV and SHP formats (specifically the share of holiday rentals with respect to residential rentals) is processed and analysed using geographical information systems, in particular ArcGIS (which is maintained by Esri). Furthermore, data from Idealista (Real Estate Agency that provides housing rental and purchase prices in Barcelona) were analysed.

The heat maps is useful to show relative densities of point entities or numerical values depending on the zoom level and the extent of the map. For our study, there are identified the locations of the tourist units by means of a shape file layer in the ArcGis software, and the District delimitation (in this case the limits of the city of Barcelona, with the tool called Kernel Density); then, this graphical representation allows to visualize the concentration of points in space. Furthermore, to obtain the Table 4, a debugging of the original base of the AirBnb platform is performed, using the two aforementioned layers (the first, the delimitation of neighbourhoods and districts in Barcelona in polygons, and the second is the layer of the tourist locations in points). Once the locations of the Airbnb points are distributed in the polygons of each neighbourhood, a summary table is made to show that Raval, Barri Gótic, Barceloneta and Sant Pere contain the most Airbnb housing.

The study was carried out between October 2022 and September 2023. Qualitative methods are also useful to understand how the residents of a tourist destination feel, to understand their social context, and to interpret their opinions (Denzin & Licoln, 1994, 2003; Jennings, 2010). Participants to the interviews were selected through quota and snowball sampling. Quota is a non-probability technique to collect data from population subgroups (Coleman & Multon, 2019), in this case from the presidents of the contacted social movements: *Xarxa Veïnal Ciutat Vella* (Neighborhood Network Ciutat Vella), *l'Òstia*, *Barceloneta diu Prou* (Barceloneta says Enough) and the real state agencies. Snowball sampling enabled the researcher to access informants using contacts provided by other informants (Noy, 2008). These recommendations were obtained from FAVB *Federació d'Associacions de Veïns i Veïnes de Barcelona* (Barcelona Federation of Neighbours Associations).

Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse and report the most relevant aspects of research questions, which inquired about the participants' opinions of tourism in Barcelona, specifically in their neighbourhoods, its impact and the effect on their lives. In the discussion section, we interpret these opinions on the expansion of tourism and the related changes.


## 3. Results and discussion

Barcelona was chosen as a single case study because it has experienced rapid growth in tourism, especially in the last twenty years. It has become a major tourism hub and attracts even more visitors than the state capital, Madrid (Figure 1). The numbers show the rise not only of leisure travellers but also of corporate tourism. Indeed, since 2018, Barcelona has been consolidated as the fourth destination in the world for business meetings and events (ICCA, International Congress and Convention Association, 2023).

Figure 1. Most visited cities in Europe. International Tourism (2005-2022)
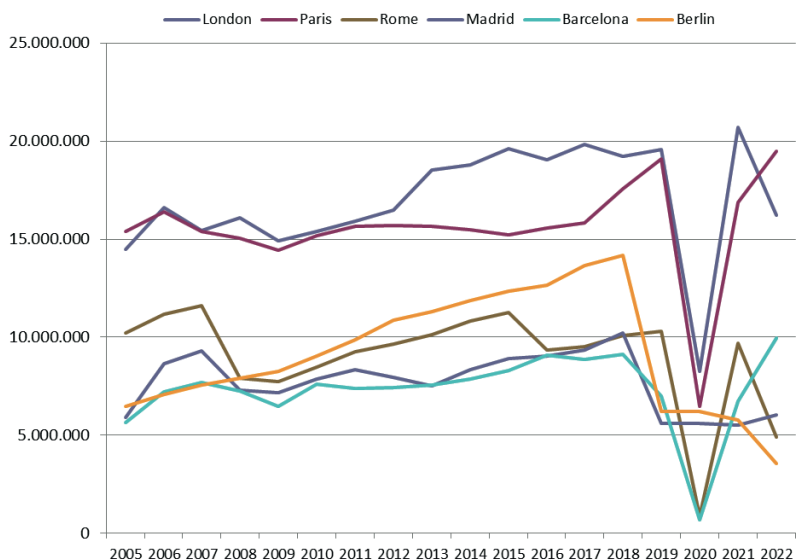


Source: Own elaboration from Tourism Statistic Reports (Turisme de Barcelona)

This gradual increase in tourism flows has been accompanied by an increase in regulated accommodation, the traditional hotel industry, as well as the emergence of homestay apartments. In Barcelona, the system of VUT licences (*vivienda de uso turístico*, "homes used for tourism"), or HUT as they are known in Catalan, was introduced in 2012[1] in response to the rise of mass tourism, the aim being to regulate the use of homes for other than residential. Figure 2 reports the evolution of tourism in the city and the increase in associated accommodation.

Figure 2. Evolution of tourism, hotel accommodation and homestays in Barcelona (1990-2022)
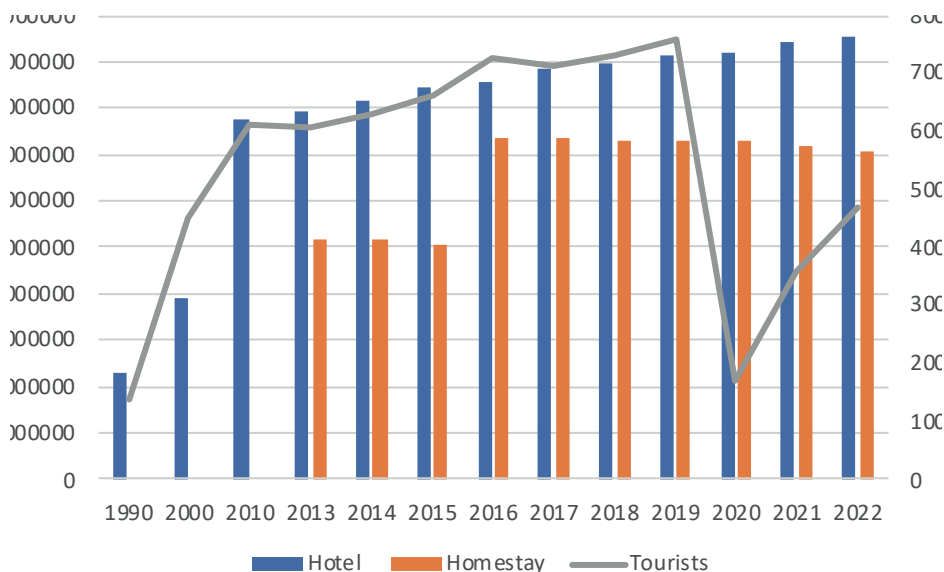


Source: Authors' elaboration from Tourism Statistic Reports (Turisme de Barcelona)

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1    Decree of Generalitat de Catalunya 159/2012, November 20, on tourist accommodation and dwellings for tourist use.

Licenced guesthouses tend to attract customers by advertising on dedicated websites. However, they operate alongside non-licenced homestays, with Airbnb having been present in Barcelona since 2008, as well as homes that rent out individual rooms, for which no special licence is required. This has led to a huge number of houses "disappearing" from the residential market and being used by tourists instead, as shown in Map 2. In the city centre, Ciutat Vella is the most exposed district to this concentration of tourist accommodation to the detriment of residential properties. According to the *Memòria de Sostenibilitat Turística* (Tourism Sustainability Report, Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2016), more than 70% of the hotel supply and seven out of ten of the most visited sights in Barcelona were concentrated in Ciutat Vella. This is a recurrent phenomenon in many popular tourist cities due to the concentration of the main amenities and tourist attractions in such areas.

Map 2. Heat map of tourist flats listed on the Airbnb platform (2022)
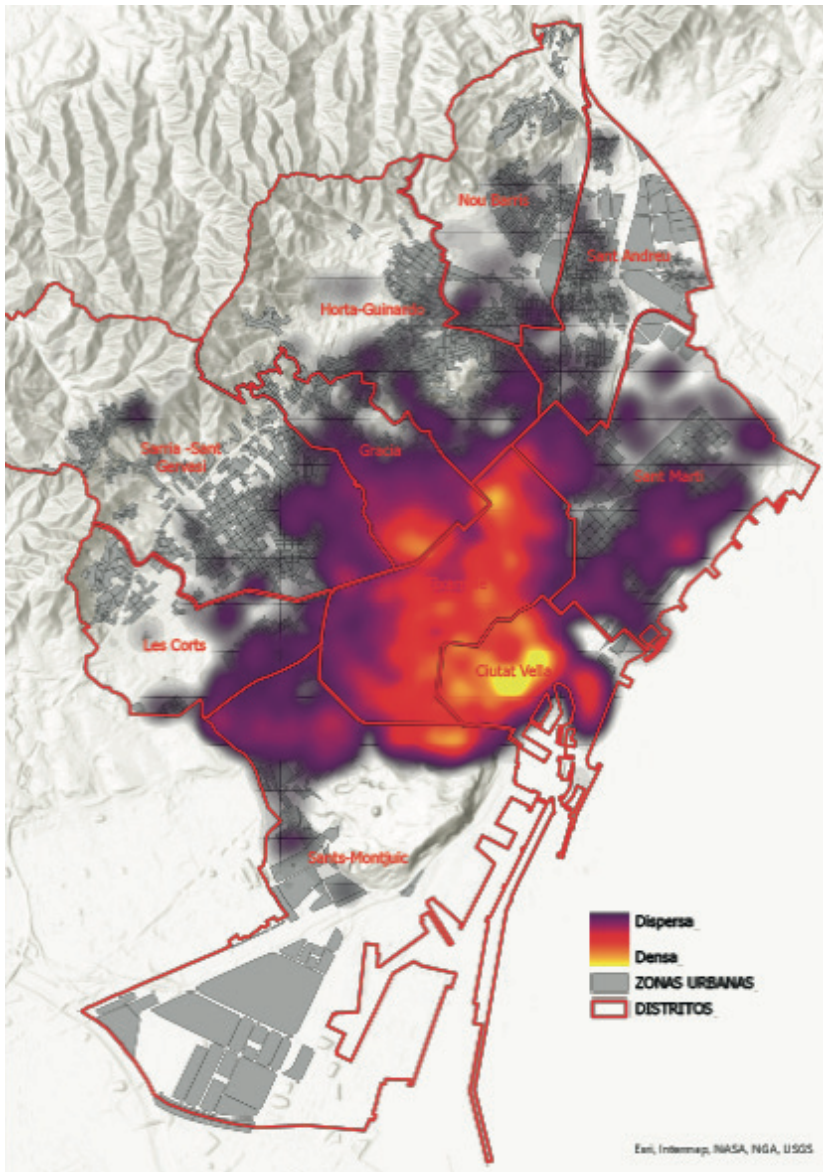


Source: Authors' elaboration based on data from Inside Airbnb.

This expansion of tourist dwellings coexists with the modern-day tourists' desire to become immersed in the local culture and daily life, and the residents' demands for their right to remain in the neighbourhood, for its community spirit to be retained, and for greater participation in the fair distribution of the positive financial effects of tourism. As shown in Figure 3, the local population is considerably concerned about the effects of mass tourism on the city. In the Ciutat Vella and Eixample districts, pressure and overcrowding are much higher than in the rest of Barcelona, and carrying capacity has been exceeded (Sharpley, 2021).

Figure 3. Evolution of residents' support for/rejection of tourism in Barcelona (2012-2022)
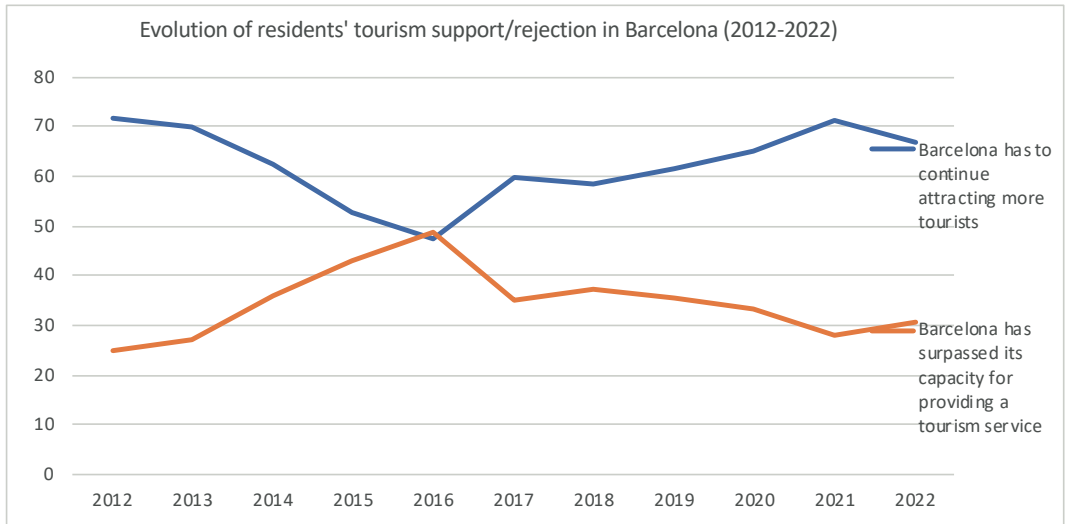


Source: Authors' elaboration from *Percepció del turisme a Barcelona* (Barometer reports), Barcelona City Council

However, since this opposition to tourism peaked in 2016, numbers have begun to drop, with the people of Barcelona becoming more concerned about the lack of residential housing (Table 1), which forces residents out of their neighbourhoods as they cannot afford to pay "tourist-oriented" prices (Millar, 2017; Campbell, 2017; Ortega, 2019; Crespi-Vallbona & Domínguez Pérez, 2021).

Table 1. Concerns (%) among the population of Barcelona (2013-2022)

| Concern | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Access to housing | 0.3 | 0.5 | 1 | 3.4 | 4.8 | 12.1 | 6.5 | 7.4 | 5.6 | 7.6 |
| Tourism | 0.5 | 4.5 | 3.8 | 11 | 7.1 | 5.2 | 3.6 | 1.9 | 3 | 2.9 |

Source: Authors' elaboration from *Percepció del turisme a Barcelona* (Barometer reports), Barcelona City Council

Hence, the challenge faced by mature destinations and tourism policy lies in accommodating the interests of all sides. Barcelona's appeal resides in its historical and cultural centre, but there is major overspill into its other neighbourhoods too (Crespi-Vallbona & Galeas, 2023). Airbnb is one of the most popular holiday rental platforms and the one that most reflects this remarkable growth (Map 3). For this reason, this research is especially interested in exploring Airbnb listed properties in the touristified centre of Barcelona in order to point out the real state of housing for tourists and residents.

Map 3. Homestays listed on the Airbnb platform concentrated in Ciutat Vella, 2022.
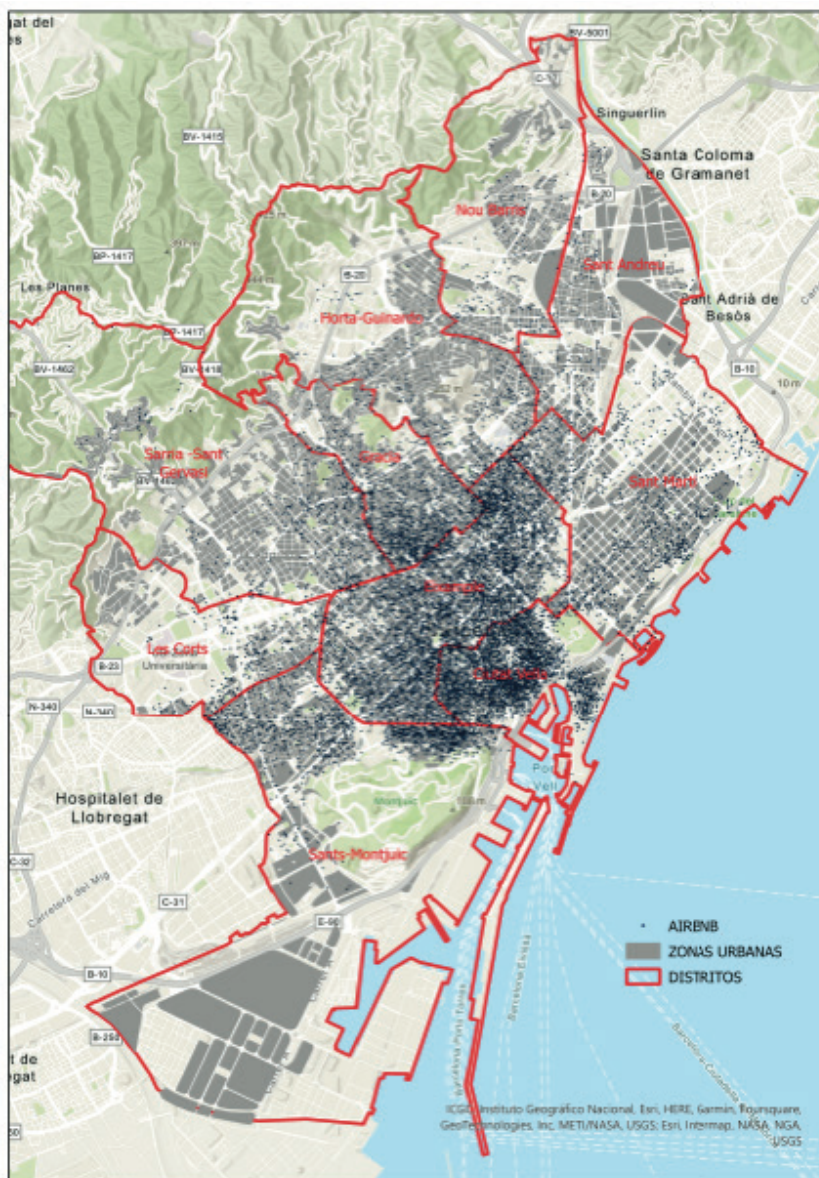


Source: Authors' elaboration based on data from Inside Airbnb.

The results show that there is a considerable irregularity among homestays. Despite the introduction of the PEUAT system, control of licences is neither strict nor sufficient. If we analyse the total number of apartments listed on Airbnb in Ciutat Vella as of December 2022 (3,552), we observe that only 15.7% are licenced for tourism activity. Likewise, of the total listings, 7.7% are ads for hotel rooms (which have a hotel licence but advertise on the platform to boost their market share). The rest (76.6%) are apartments that are also advertised on the platform, but do not have a licence (40.3%) or are exempt as they are rented rooms in residential houses (36.2%). These non-licenced rental units include six boats, three in Barceloneta and three in the Gothic Quarter. Figure 4 illustrates this data for Ciutat Vella, broken down by neighbourhoods.

Figure 4. Homestays listed on the Airbnb platform concentrated in Ciutat Vella, 2022.
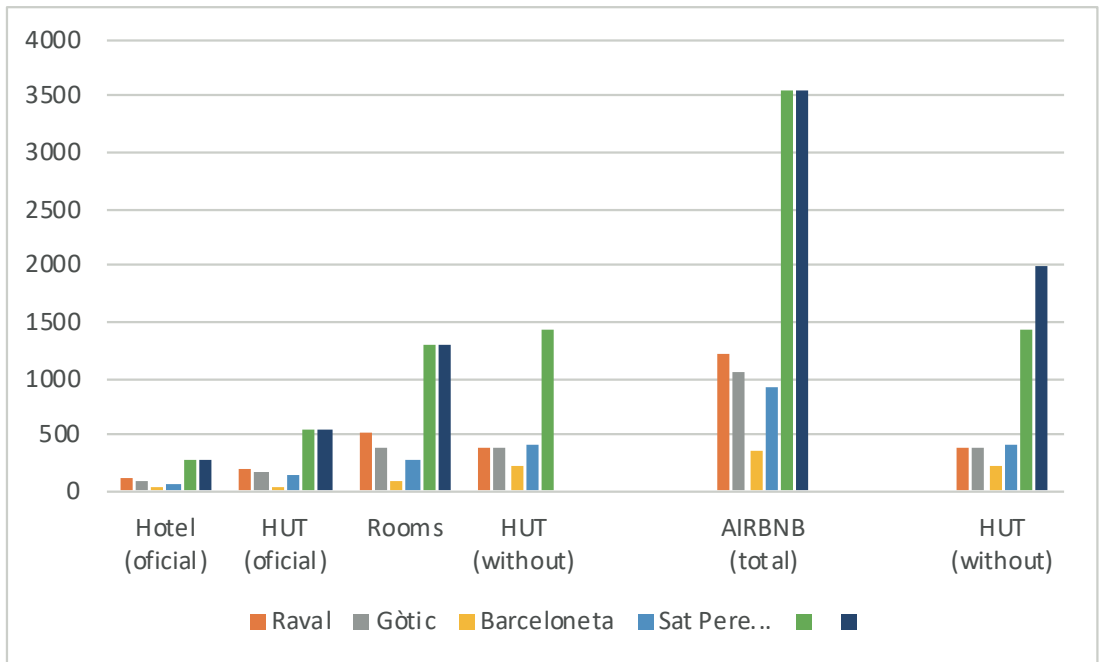
Source: Own elaboration based on data from Inside Airbnb.

We can see that the neighbourhood with the most illegal non-licenced accommodation is Sant Pere, Santa Caterina i La Ribera. The neighbourhood with the most rooms for rent is El Raval, which is also the one with the largest number of legalised housing available for rental by tourists. Counting all the establishments that are advertised on Airbnb, the following is observed (Table 2). A priori, the Airbnb platform should only include ads for tourist housing, but as we can see, there are also other types of accommodation such as hotels, youth hostels, student residences, guesthouses and tourist apartments. Specifically, in the Barri Gòtic and the Raval, only 62% and 70% respectively of the ads on Airbnb are tourist housing. The rest are other conventional accommodation. In La Barceloneta, 90% are homestays, and in Sant Pere, Santa Caterina i La Ribera 85%.

Table 2. Number of Barcelona establishments listed in Airbnb, 2022

| Neighbourhood | Hotels | Youth Hostels | Student residences | Guest houses | Apartments | Homestays (with or without licence) | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| El Raval | 50 | 2 | 4 | 32 | 1 | 211 | 300 |
| Barri Gòtic | 62 | 4 | 1 | 47 | 1 | 192 | 307 |
| La Barceloneta | 4 | 2 | 1 | - | - | 63 | 70 |
| Sant Pere, Santa Caterina i La Ribera | 22 | 1 | 2 | 10 | - | 203 | 237 |

Source: Authors' elaboration based on data from Inside Airbnb.

Considering the number of places available for accommodation that are advertised on Airbnb, the following is observed (Table 3): in El Raval the 11,59% of beds belong to homestays, the 10,9% in the Barri Gòtic, the 6% in La Barceloneta and the 9% in Sant Pere Santa Caterina i La

Ribera. Consequently, the majority of beds in these neighborhoods do not come from tourist housing but from conventional lodging (hotels, youth hostels, student residences, guesthouses and tourist apartments).

Table 3. Number of places available in Barcelona listed in Airbnb, 2022

| Neighborhood | Hotels | Youth hostels | Student residences | Guest houses | Apartments | Homestays (with or without licence) | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| El Raval | 7,470 | 277 | 581 | 1,204 | 170 | 1,273 | 10,975 |
| Barri Gòtic | 7,131 | 485 | 19 | 1,303 | 69 | 1,102 | 10,109 |
| La Barceloneta | 2,503 | 275 | 182 | - | - | 190 | 3,150 |
| Sant Pere, Santa Caterina i La Ribera | 2,511 | 132 | 107 | 203 | - | 710 | 3,663 |

Source: Authors' elaboration based on data from Inside Airbnb.

On the other side, most of the entire homes that are advertised for rent have room for four people. However, in Barceloneta, where there is an abundance of tiny apartments of about 33 sqms, known as *quarts de casa*, most homestays only have room for two people.

There is also very clear polarisation of ownership of homestays. From the data it can be deduced that 32% of both national and international advertisers are renting more than ten homes, even in different neighbourhoods. It can also be gleaned that these are mostly managed through a real estate agency, which also creates work for other companies, such as the cleaning ones.

The concentration of registrations for Airbnb is better observed if we calculate the density, based on urban land area, that is, discounting green areas, roads, industries and any non-residential uses (tourism density: registrations / urban area). This calculation gives a clearer idea of the neighbourhood where tourist accommodation has had the highest impact on local residents. Table 4 shows, once again, that Sant Pere, Santa Caterina i la Ribera is the neighbourhood with the highest density of registrations in the urban area.

Table 4. Tourism density, 2022

| Neighbourhood | Airbnb registrations | N. blocks | Urban area (ha) | Density (registrations/area) | Registrations per block |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| el Raval | 1,216 | 136 | 52.01 | 23.38 | 9 |
| el Barri Gòtic | 1,047 | 116 | 36.17 | 28.95 | 9 |
| la Barceloneta | 356 | 118 | 27.51 | 12.94 | 3 |
| Sant Pere, Santa Caterina i la Ribera | 933 | 143 | 31.65 | 29.48 | 7 |
| total | 3,552 | 513 | 147.34 | | |
| Average | | | | 24.11 | 7 |

Source: Authors' elaboration based on data from Inside Airbnb and Open Data Ajuntament de Barcelona

Meanwhile, it has been observed that the population of Barcelona has fluctuated in recent years, although it remains fairly stable at 1,639,981 (2022). Ciutat Vella is home to 6.49% of the total population, mainly in El Raval (Figure 5). As we can see, however, all these neighbourhoods have been losing population with the exception of the Gothic Quarter.

Figure 5. Trend of population in Barcelona (2018-2022)
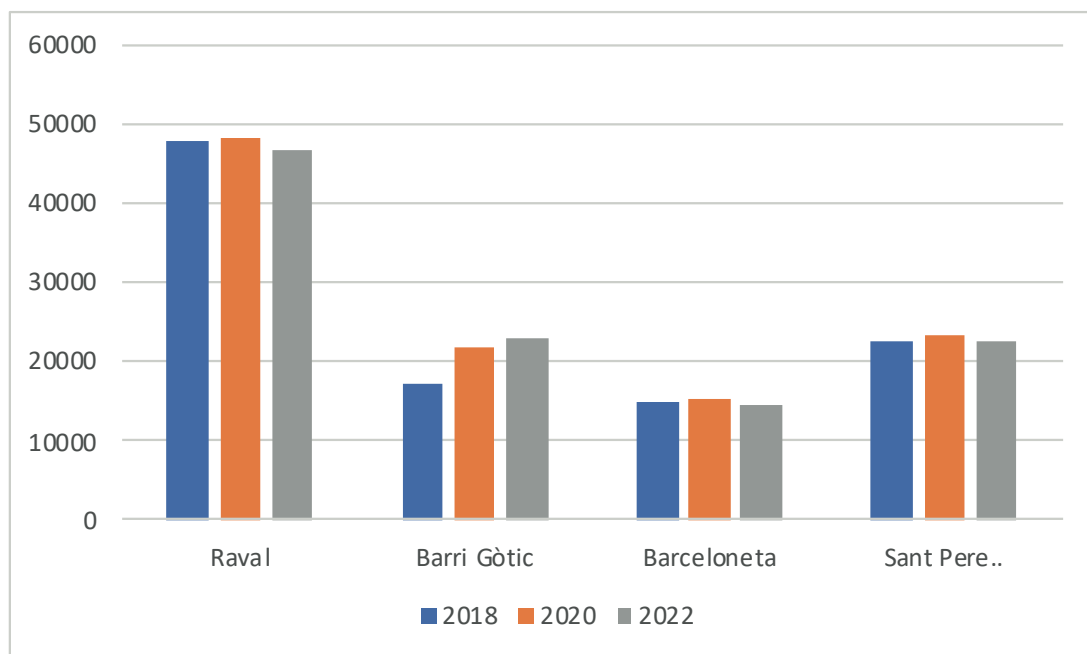


Source: Authors' elaboration based on data from *Població i Demografia*
(Population and Demographics, Barcelona City Council)

This same neighbourhood, El Raval, traditionally tends to have the most foreign residents, although it was overtaken in 2022 by the Gothic Quarter (Table 5). El Raval's immigrant community includes a prominent presence of Pakistanis and Moroccans.

Table 5. Evolution of the nationality of the population of the neighbourhoods of Ciutat Vella, 2018-2022)

| Year | 2022 | | | 2020 | | | 2018 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Spanish | Foreign | Total | Spanish | Foreign | Total | Spanish | Foreign | Total |
| Neighborhood | % | % | (N) | % | % | (N) | % | % | (N) |
| Raval | 48.1 | 51.9 | 46,520 | 47.0 | 53.0 | 48,263 | 49.9 | 51.1 | 47,605 |
| Barri Gòric | 36.2 | 63.8 | 22,748 | 38.1 | 61.9 | 21,715 | 49.9 | 51.1 | 17,035 |
| Barceloneta | 59.1 | 40.9 | 14,342 | 59.5 | 40.5 | 15,112 | 64.0 | 36.0 | 14,893 |
| Sant Pere, Santa Caterina i la Ribera | 53.8 | 46.2 | 22,418 | 53.4 | 46.6 | 23,241 | 57.5 | 42.5 | 22,605 |

Source: Authors' elaboration on data from *Població i Demografia*
(Population and Demographics, Barcelona City Council)

As for the evolution of the cost of home rental and buying in Ciutat Vella with respect to the city as a whole, prices are constantly higher in this district, whether properties are bought or rented, as shown in Figures 6a and 6b.

Figure 6a. Price trends for purchasing a house €/sqms in Ciutat Vella and Barcelona (2009-2023)
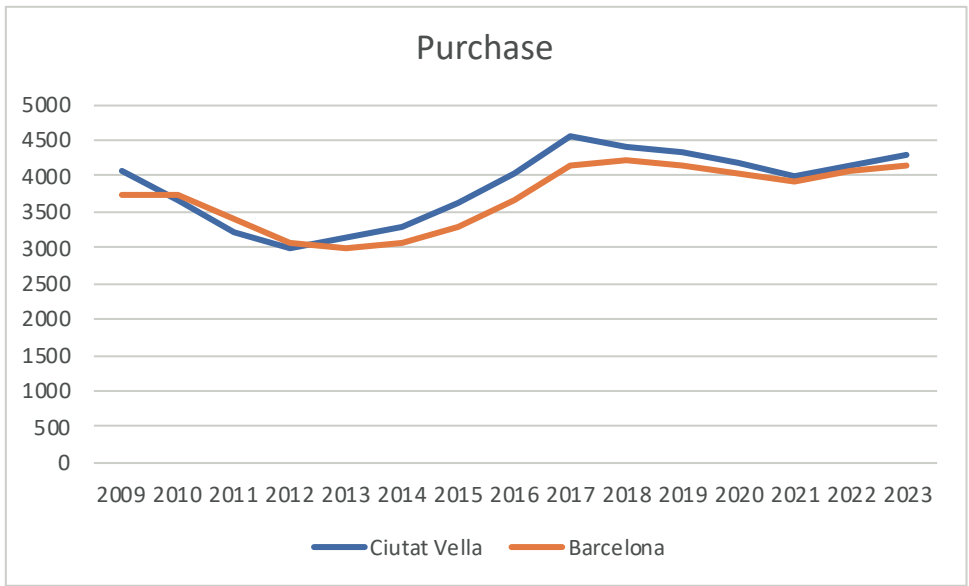


Source: Own elaboration on data from *Evolución del precio de la vivienda en venta en Barcelona* (Evolution of the price of housing for sale in Barcelona, Idealista)

Figure 6b. Price trends of renting a house €/sqms in Ciutat Vella and Barcelona (2009-2023)
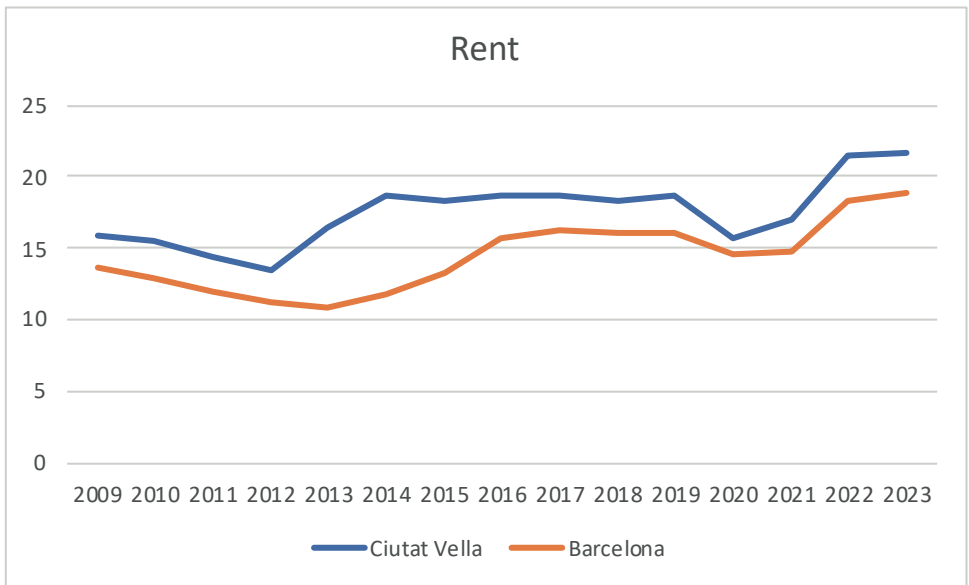


Source: Own elaboration on data from E*volución del precio de la vivienda en alquiler en Barcelona* (Evolution of housing rental prices in Barcelona, Idealista)

The interviewees' comments help to understand the reasons why residents are abandoning these neighbourhoods, especially La Raval and Barceloneta. It is partly due to the characteristics of the dwellings, the lack of public spaces and commercial changes. The buildings in which these houses are located are mainly more than eighty years old, and they do not have lifts (to get

up a minimum of four floors). Older people struggle to climb so many stairs, especially when they have heavy shopping bags to carry, so they either choose to spend their lives shut indoors and hardly ever leave the house, or otherwise move out of what are usually rented homes. The same situation has been found by other studies of other neighbourhoods of Barcelona, which have less tourism but where the apartment blocks have similar characteristics (López-Villanueva & Crespi-Vallbona, 2023). Meanwhile, young couples starting a new life and planning to have children tend not to choose these neighbourhoods either, due to the lack of private parking on the property itself and the structure of the houses (usually narrow, with little ventilation or natural daylight). This is especially the case in Barceloneta, where 80% of the houses are *quarts de casa* of between just 26 and 35 sqms. They are also put off by the lack of green, public spaces in which to socialise with other people. Couples who prefer to live in the centre tend to be those who do not intend to start a family and who prioritise cultural life and leisure facilities over spacious housing. Long-term foreign students who come to the city to further their education (masters and postgraduates) also tend to opt for these apartments. As the real estate agencies themselves tell us, they basically offer such clients these options because they are the best possible tenants. They are young and fit (they do not mind if there is no lift), enjoy living in the cultural and leisure centre of the city, have no need for private transport and generally are not interested in staying for any more than eleven months. Hence, many rooms are rented to this kind of person.

Additionally, the touristification of these neighbourhoods, and in some cases the concentration of immigrant population, has led to many changes in terms of trade. Very few traditional local businesses have survived (Lapeira Portús, 2023). Residents complain about the disappearance of butchers' shops selling pork, grocery stores, and the pastry shops where they would go on Sundays to buy the typical cake to take to family gatherings. Although some of these stores have closed due to the lack of generational replacement, the disappearance of local drugstores, haberdasheries and other local businesses has certainly had an impact on everyday life, with these spaces being converted into bars and restaurants (many of them managed by the Chinese population) or 24/7 grocery stores (mainly run by Pakistanis).


## Conclusions

Cities are attracting more and more people, companies and investments, bringing together a temporary and permanent population that includes holiday, business and academic tourists, expatriate workers and digital nomads, lifelong residents, young people from elsewhere in the region and immigrants seeking new learning and professional opportunities in urban centres. Cities can be killed by their own success, and major challenges can arise regarding coexistence and access to housing. This is also very much the case in Barcelona.

The results of this this show the variables and actions that should be considered in future public policies and strategies in Barcelona in order to mitigate the negative effects of tourism and strike the right balance between the needs of visitors and residents alike.

Tourism undoubtedly means neighbourhood changes, and especially those in historic centres, which are particularly coveted by visitors, who often pay little heed to cultural aspects and are merely interested in experiencing the traditional atmosphere of these and similar neighbourhoods and make few other demands.

Undoubtedly, residents are the ones who most perceive the structural changes. They yearn to go back to their traditional daily lives. Hence, sustainable, responsible management is the key. This involves analysing the data (as this study has done), and being transparent when reporting political action. The results show that there is major irregularity in the homestay market, and the insufficient efforts by PEUAT to control it by issuing licences need to be applied more strictly. Many unlicensed homes are still being advertised on Airbnb, as well as regulated accommodation in hotels, among others. This gives the impression that there are more homestays than there really are. They are actually widely concentrated among a small number of owners of ten or more properties.

Different measures could be proposed to mediate this tension over housing. Like in other countries (such as Canada, the Netherlands and New Zealand), it might be interesting to prevent non-residents from buying property, thus limiting foreign real estate speculation, as well as investment funds. This promotes glocal business and it should be accompanied by the non-provision of gold or residence visas for foreigners to invest. The difficulty lies in the need for consensus between different administrative departments in terms of their functionality and regions of influence.

Homestays could be taxed more, which would encourage owners to rent their properties for residential use. Also, the law protects tenants more than owners and this discourages from renting homes for residential use. So, legal support could be given to long-term landlords when their tenants do not pay the rent, so they can quickly recover their homes or receive governmental aid.

The local population is also calling for older buildings to be rehabilitated and adapted to modern needs. They avoid living in these neighbourhoods due to the lack of elevators, ventilation, natural light and parking for private vehicles. They are also put off by the lack of decent public spaces for socialising and of pavements to walk on.

Revaluations of these buildings and public spaces would cause housing prices to rise once again, the cost of which may well be assumed by temporary rentals such as academic tourism. Therefore, tax incentives to rent properties for residential use will be decisive. In whatever case, the restoration of the historical and tourist centres will lead to local differentiation, with history and heritage playing an essential role.

There is also a need to protect the traditional and local trade sector. Social and financial life in these neighbourhoods has much to do with the shopkeepers who raise the shutters of their stores every morning to meet the community's needs. Without their presence and spirit, the sense of attachment to the neighbourhood disappears. Likewise, there is a strong insistence among the local population on the need to preserve and rehabilitate the buildings that have a prominent historical value for local cultural identity.

In short, cities are changing and so are their uses. People's needs and habits are also being transformed. The regeneration and rebranding of these neighbourhoods (Anholth, 2010) imply an identity-building process based on adaptation to the new era and on appreciation of the collective identities of these spaces, to create an image that identifies individuals (both residents and tourists) with the place, thereby generating a comparative and competitive advantage (Camprubí, 2009; de San Eugenio Vela, 2013). Thus, the image and reputation projected by these neighbourhoods both to the internal and external public should capture not only residents and companies, but also talent, corporate investment, infrastructure and tourists (Fernández-Calvià, 2011). For this reason, it is extremely important to recover heritage, traditional commerce and shared space. Such a branding strategy should showcase the pride of place, sense of belonging and quality of life that the residents feel. If not, places become degraded and stigmatised.

Brave measures are needed to generate virtuous circles and depart from demagogy. Meanwhile, policies on the use of housing will always be ineffective in saturated cities like Barcelona where land is in such short supply. The best housing policy in cases like these is to invest in a fast, efficient suburban train network, as this will make it easier for people to live on the city outskirts, where they would have a much wider range of affordable residential options. This entails the need to redefine the concept of the city beyond the merely administrative one. Functional cities to which people can commute in less than one hour should be the key strategic goal.

Another option would be to decongest the city so that residents have no need to travel to the city centre for administrative or work reasons, which could be replaced with online transactions and remote working. Furthermore, the transformation of people's habits and needs also entails the mixing of land use, whereby new residential areas could include spaces and homes designed for remote working or for co-living, which would generate homogeneity between residential uses and commercial and administrative ones.

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