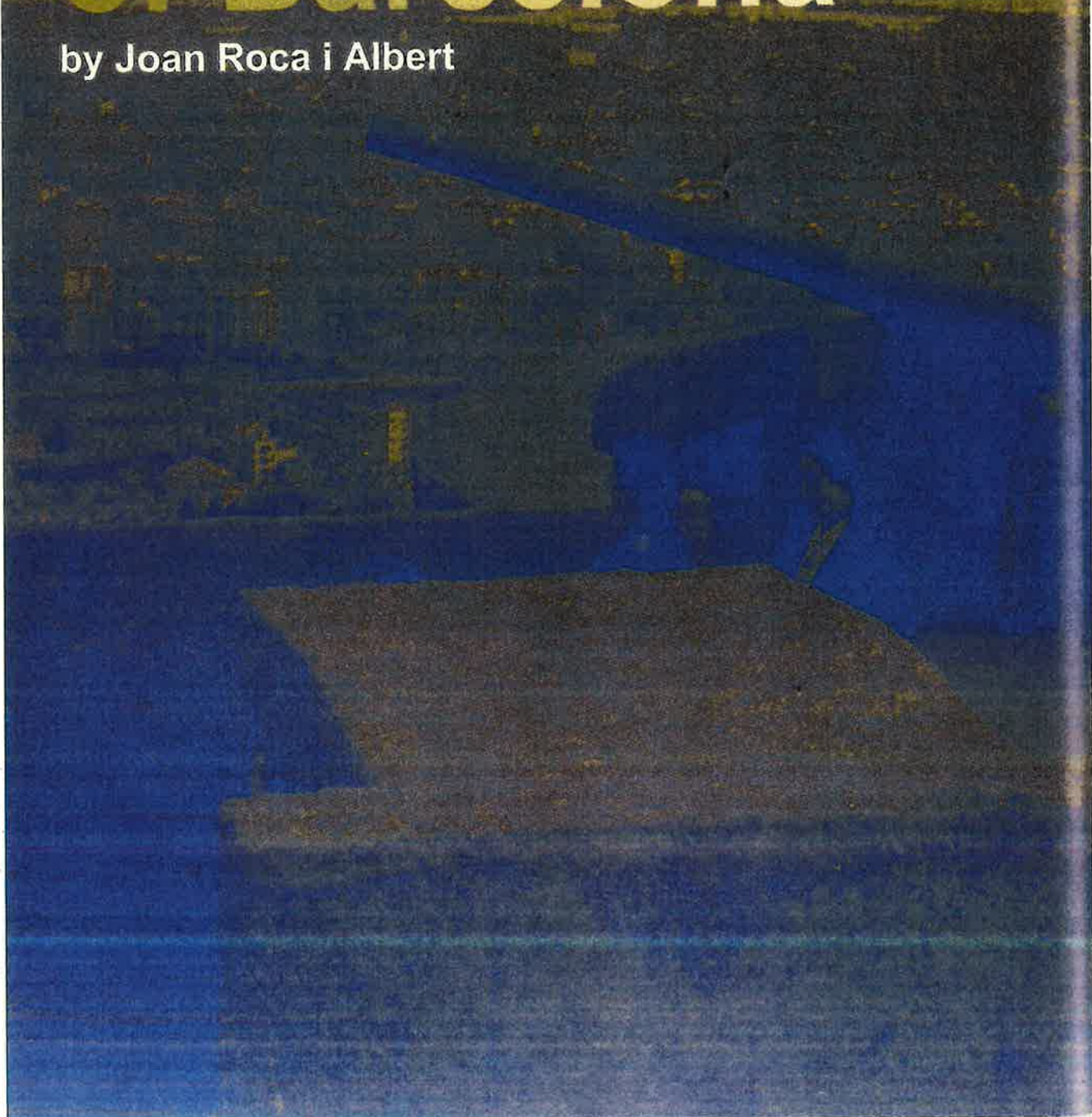
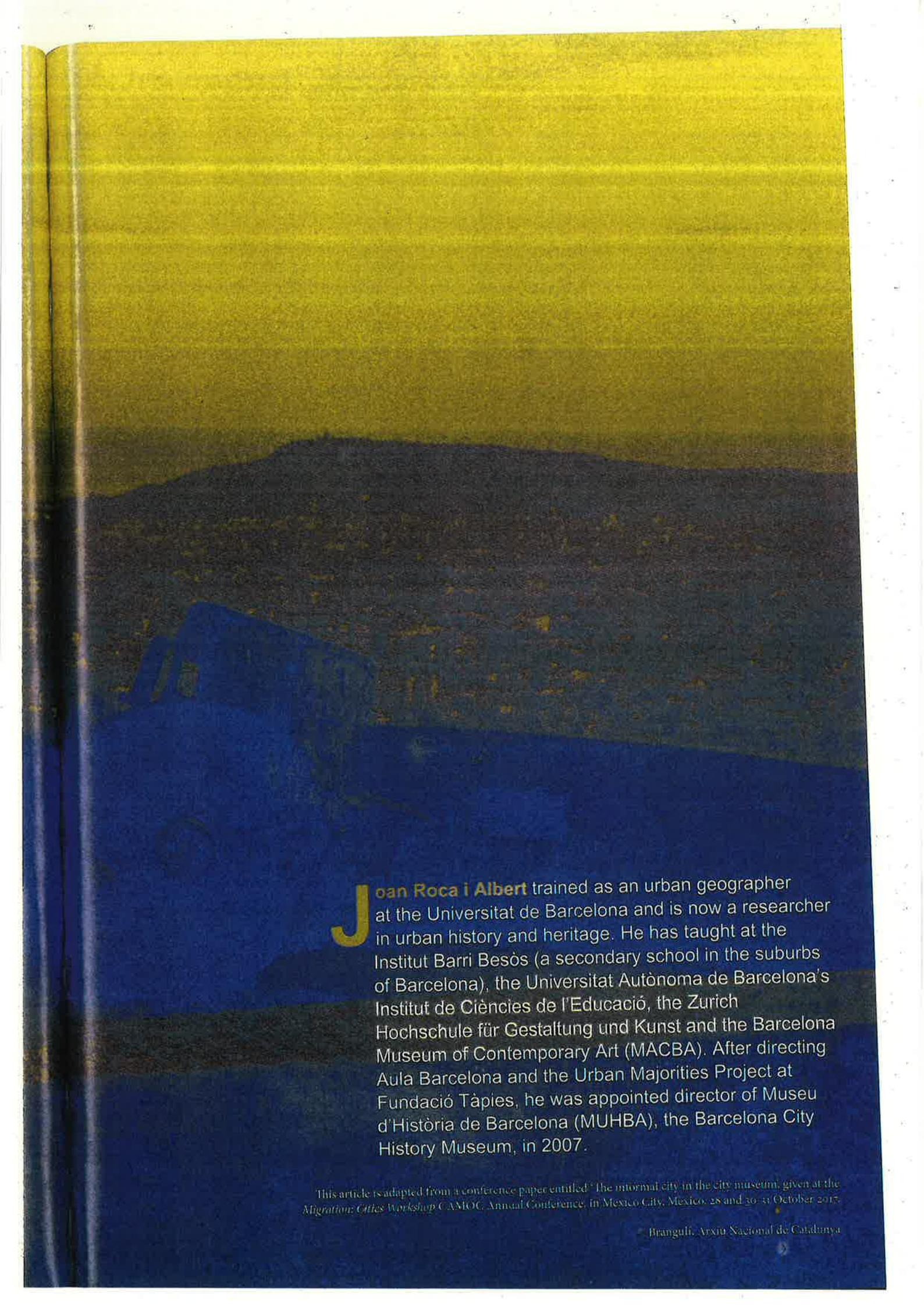


# The Informal City in the Museum of Barcelona

by Joan Roca i Albert







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Brangulí, Arxiu Nacional de Catalunya



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hanty towns have been common to most major immigration cities around the world, such as Paris, New York, São Paulo, Mexico City, Mumbai and Seoul. Yet, this crucial theme in global urban history remains poorly represented in most city museums, with the focus generally being limited to urban poverty. This has contributed to overlook the fact that people living in shanty towns have played an important role in the development of urban economies.

The different types of self-build housing, from ephemeral shanties to long-term and stable informal urbanism, have been a general phenomenon in contemporary times, from marginal urban growing in many European and North American cities at the beginning of the 20th century to our global world (Davis 2006). Today, many of these sites form a permanent part of the urban landscape in cities across Latin America, Asia and Africa, where the phenomenon has been extensively studied (Canel et al. 1990; Roca i Albert 1997; Torres Tovar 2009; Gissi and Soto 2009; Rockefeller Foundation 2013). The debate about all kinds of informal urbanism and the 'right to the city' has been particularly intense in Latin America, most notably in Brazil, with highly organised neighbourhoods and social initiatives, where the issue has become a question of governance (Perroni and David 2009; Saule 1999). The informal city can no longer be considered a separate reality from the formal city: shanty towns, for example, are an essential component of global urban histories. At a time when the formal city has still not been integrated with areas of informal growth, the communication boom enables a cosmopolitanism of the disinherited (see Bourdieu 1993). City museums cannot fail to be interested in such phenomena. The present article describes Museu d'Història de Barcelona's (MUHBA) recent efforts to include in its institutional narrative the settlement of Turó de la Rovira, which was active from the 1940s to the 1990s. The project is among the museum's recent attempts to include previously omitted portions of the city's history (Roca i Albert 2018).

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## Hidden histories of urban development

MUHBA is dedicated to representing the city of Barcelona and its citizens. It conducts research in the fields of urban history and heritage with a view to promoting cultural citizenship and belonging. Its programming includes a wide range of exhibition projects, open research and public seminars, the publication of books, urban guides and films, as well as tours organised in different heritage spaces throughout Barcelona (Roca i Albert 2009; 2017). The aim is to break down barriers between different sources of knowledge as much as possible, and in a participatory way that includes all city inhabitants and visitors.

In its efforts to become a mirror and gateway to the city, MUHBA is currently redeveloping the Casa Padellàs site, located in the museum headquarter in Plaça del Rei, a focal meeting point which is deeply embedded in the history of Barcelona. The site is expected to bridge and connect all of the museum's heritage and interpretation sites in an attempt to weave in a plural, exploratory fashion all the narratives and resources distributed around the Catalan capital (Fig. 1).

The aim is for MUHBA to become a veritable reader's guide to the city, providing a service to people of all ages and backgrounds, residents and visitors alike. Following a brief overview of the history of Barcelona's shanty towns and their development, the present article describes how the Turó de la Rovira project was realised and included as an integral part of Barcelona's urban history. Such initiatives, as argued here, help to dispel a false dichotomy between Barcelona's mainstream, or legitimate history, and contested or marginalised historical narratives.

### Informal urbanisation within Barcelona

As in other cities at the turn of the 20th century like Paris, Madrid and Rome, shanty towns in Barcelona began to form against the backdrop of rural exodus. Shanty houses, known in Barcelona as *barraques*, were first built by migrants seeking temporary accommodation, yet their traces would remain in the city until the early 1990s (Carnino, Casasayas, Díaz, et al. 2011).

The earlier period of fast informal urban growth, in the first decades of the 20th century, saw Barcelona's shanty towns, also known as *Barracòpolis* (Mira 1923-1924), spring up on the city's sea front and the Mount Montjuïc area, as well as on empty lots in the *Eixample* (the grid of the New City) and some peripheral zones (Fig. 2). After the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), which saw the advent of Franco's fascist regime, migration also took place for political reasons in the 1940s, with people fleeing from extreme poverty and repression; while the flow of people coming to the city became massive when industrial growth recovered in the following decade.



Fig. 1. Residents of 'Els Canons' raising a shanty house in Turó de la Rovira, Barcelona, around 1955. © Custodia Moreno Archive



Fig. 2. A decommissioned cannon from the anti-aircraft battery after the end of the Civil War in 1939.  
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Fig. 3. Demonstration organised by El Carmel Residents' Association to demand flats in the same neighbourhood, as the protestors descended the steps to the Raimon Casellas shanties, 1976. © Pere Monés Archive

As in other Mediterranean cities, housing development could not keep pace with the massive arrival of migrants seeking employment (Bohigas 1963). The migrant population that came to Barcelona from the mountain areas of Catalonia and from all over Spain found themselves faced with a dramatic housing shortage, despite the over-occupation of flats and the widespread sub-letting of rooms and *pensions*. From the 1950s onwards, *barraques* grew in parallel with the emergence of another type of self-build housing in the metropolitan suburbs, intended as more permanent dwellings improved over time. These houses could not always be easily distinguished from the *barraques*, however, their long-term impact has been different. Their legal status varied, according to whether the land upon which houses were built was purchased, leased or occupied, and such self-build housing neighbourhoods were established with the hope of making them permanent, as was eventually the case for most. These neighbourhood, for the most part, developed outside the limits of the municipality of Barcelona, in the peripheries of the metropolitan area, and became popularly known as *Corees* ('Koreas'), since they began to spread during the Korean War (see Roca i Albert and Meseguer 1994; Busquets 1999).

Shanty towns were the main type of informal housing, especially in the municipality of Barcelona. It is estimated that up to seven per cent of the population lived in *barraques* at the beginning of the 1960s, representing around 100,000 inhabitants (Carnicer et al. 2012). These precarious urban settlements, however, were not a 'burden on the city', as often described. Rather, the shanty town dwellers played a significant role in the post-war economic recovery of the city, as low cost work force. They survived on low wages and were deprived of all social services (Roca i Albert 2010).

After years of fighting to get a dwelling, a large proportion of the shanty town residents moved to housing estates built in the 1960s and 1970s during the Francoist technocratic so-called *desarrollo* (development), a strategy aimed at promoting growth without democracy. However, they had to face enormous shortcomings in town planning in the new housing estates, and found themselves without adequate services. As a result, they took advantage of their associated past in the shanties to create new residents' associations, which demanded better living conditions and which, nowadays, are acknowledged as representative bodies of their neighbourhoods.

The following sections situate these developments to shed light on this particular aspect of Barcelona's history: informal urban growth and shanty towns. The museum had an interdisciplinary research programme, intensive contacts with former shanty dwellers, an exhibition in the city centre, publishes books and guides and organises urban tours, which were tested before the intervention in Turó de la Rovira as a new heritage site.

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## The El Carmel shanty towns

The El Carmel shanty towns, located in the Els Tres Turons hills, began to develop in the 1940s post-war period around the occupation of an abandoned Republican anti-aircraft battery, where first families settled in disused military facilities of the Els Canons (*Los Cañones, The Cannons*) neighbourhood (Fig. 3). The shanties in El Carmel continued to grow until the early 1970s, with migrants principally arriving from southern Spain (Fabre and Huertas 1976).

Of the 600 shanty houses in the El Carmel area, 110 were in the Els Canons neighbourhood, with an estimated population of around 600 people (Carnicer et al. 2012). Els Canons remained inhabited until 1990, becoming one of the last remaining shanty occupations prior to the Barcelona 1992 Olympic Games. Through the *Associació de Veïns del Carmel* (El Carmel Resident's Association), most of the inhabitants of Els Canons had decided not to leave before receiving guarantee that they would be resettled together in nearby accommodation, a demand that other shanty towns had been refused in the past.<sup>1</sup>



Fig. 4. A class at the adult education centre. Els Canons, Turó de la Rovira, 1980. © Paco González; Paco González Archive

### The fight for the city and the right to the city

In El Carmel, the resistance against unsatisfactory rehousing proposals was more successful than in previous cases, partly because the residents there had gradually improved conditions in the shanty towns, making them somewhat better living places. These were tiny houses, but neatly organised like an Andalusian village, and the residents succeeded in obtaining meagre but effective improvements, such as a stairway up the hill, fountains and drainage (Fig. 4).

At first, the inhabitants feared a visit from the municipal officer for the Shanty Town Repression Service, along with orders for the demolition of any new homes. However, as the years went by, and thanks to creation of the El Carmel Residents' Association, modelled on similar organisations in other neighbourhoods, the people living there established channels of communication with the city council in the early years after the restoration of democracy, when Pasqual Maragall was mayor of Barcelona. One symbol of all this was the adult education centre that opened in Els Canons. Accordingly, a satisfactory rehousing proposal gradually took shape, one to which many of the former shanty town dwellers, who still live in the area, contributed to the negotiations (Fig. 5).

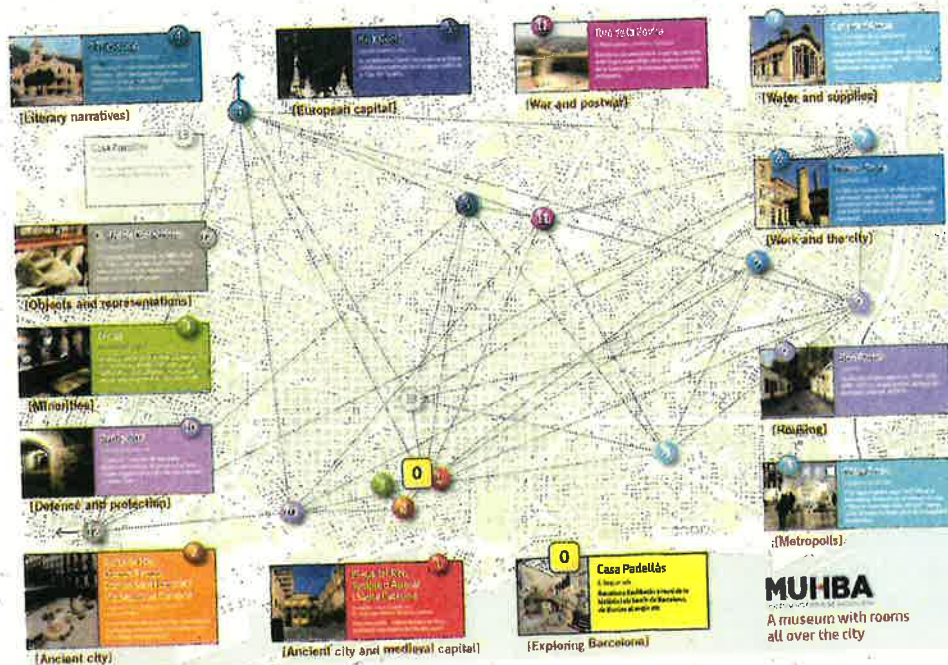


Fig. 5. Turó de la Rovira (Number 11) and other MUHBA heritage sites in 2018. © MUHBA





Fig. 6. Turó de la Rovira Archaeological Park, with the remains of shanties from the 1940s-1970s embedded in the remnants of the 1937 anti-aircraft battery. © MUHBA Archive

## Uncovering Turó de la Rovira

The former shanties of Els Canons, located at the top of Turó de la Rovira, were included in MUHBA's 2008 strategic plan, marking an important step in ensuring that all kinds of urban development be included as part of Barcelona's urban heritage. The project came as a response to an initiative by the *Associació de Veïns i Veïnes de Can Baró* (Can Baró Residents' Association) in 2007, which organised an international work camp for young people to participate in the excavation of the Turó de la Rovira anti-aircraft battery, which was covered by shanty town debris (Ramos Ruiz 2018).<sup>2</sup> The archaeological dig made it possible to uncover the remains of the shanty structures, including floors and the bases of walls. It was decided by the museum to safeguard these traces of the neighbourhood's history as a shanty town. MUHBA's proposal elicited mixed reactions and even disapproval among town planning authorities, who feared it would constitute an inappropriate celebration of urban precarity. The project was nevertheless approved.

What emerged from the excavations were the remains of a significant chapter of Barcelona's 20th century urban history. Until this project, the memory of the disappeared city's shanty towns had been preserved exclusively through oral, written and graphic testimonies. Turó de la Rovira provided a unique opportunity to reveal the material and physical remains of informal settlements' history, offering great potential for new forms of social representation.

Having been excavated by the archaeologists with the same methods and care than the nearby Iberian settlement, the unveiling of the remains allowed shanty towns to take their rightful place in the history of Barcelona. The geometric regularities of Els Canons shanty structures illustrated the technical skill of those who built the neighbourhood. The surfaces of the floors, made of reused and superbly organised old tiles, along with the remains of drains and other pipes, attest to a desire to make the neighbourhood and the interior of the homes as pleasant as possible.

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### Building new narratives

**R**econstructing and reaffirming Turó de la Rovira's historical and social significance required extensive research in addition to a series of carefully selected exhibitions designed to gradually give shape to the city's informal past. In 2008, MUHBA organised *Barraques, la ciutat informal* at Casa Padellàs, the museum headquarters in the heart of the old town. This three-part exhibition explored the origins of the shanty town phenomenon in the first 30 years of the 20th century, the consolidation of shanty towns in Barcelona, from the 1940s to the early 1970s, and finally, the marginalised shanty towns of the 1980s, mostly with vulnerable segments of the population, such as Gypsies (Tatjer and Larrea 2010). The exhibition attracted visitors from all backgrounds, including politicians of every stripe. This confirmed that the museum was a bridge between different groups of the Barcelona population. While the museum worked to transform Turó de la Rovira into a permanent heritage site, a number of citizen initiatives and projects looking at the history and memory of shanty towns also emerged.<sup>3</sup>

### Restoring the anti-aircraft battery and shanties

**T**he first stage of the Turó de la Rovira project was carried out in 2010–2011. Focus was placed on the external spaces, which entailed considerable methodological research on how to safeguard the traces of the shanties as they were placed over the battery. The architectural project opted for a minimalist and non-invasive intervention that preserved the remains of the shanty town, which occupied the greater portion of the battery.<sup>4</sup> As this was one of rare occasions a shanty town wall had been transformed into cultural heritage and included as part of an archaeological site, it was necessary to find the same kind of bricks to repair a section that had collapsed. Moreover, in the case of the battery platforms, the fact that the floors of the old shanties were conserved intact enabled a dual interpretation of the site including narratives both around the defence of Barcelona against fascist air raids during the Spanish Civil War and the struggle for recovering in post-war Barcelona (Fig. 6).

**T**he second stage of the project was launched, this time dedicated to the interior spaces. This proved a delicate subject due to the eternal dilemma of whether to safeguard every stage of human occupation at the site and how to go about restoring the areas of the site where cleaning and consolidation were necessary.

**E**stablishing best practices when bridging a heritage associated with warfare with the heritage associated with shanty towns proved a real challenge, but not so different from the challenge to restore the stratified witnesses of other periods, such as the remnants, from different centuries altogether, of the Roman city *Barcino*—another MUHBA site. The need for intervention at Turó de la Rovira led research at the museum to focus on preventive conservation and restoration, with input from restorers, archaeologists, architects and the UPC (Polytechnic University of Catalonia) Master's Degree course in the Restoration of Monuments.<sup>5</sup> It was not an easy challenge: conservation was necessary, and it was essential to enable effective interpretation of the results.

**I**n the case of the Officers' Pavilion, for example, the emphasis in the interior was on its organisation in wartime, while the exterior conserves the appearance and doors and windows of the original Andalusian-style whitewashed house from the time it served as the local adult literacy school. Similar care was taken at the intervention in the Troops' Pavilion and the Command Post. Future campaigns will be needed to restore the tunnels that connect the gun platforms and their service areas, the ammunition magazine and another sector of the shanties.

### Practising multi-site museology

#### The park and the museum

**T**he spectacular views that the Turó de la Rovira hill commands over Barcelona have contributed to making it an attractive spot for locals and tourists. MUHBA now collaborates with local organisations devoted to maintaining the site, including the Horta-Guinardó District Authority, the Parks and Gardens services and the local police. In this context MUHBA is considered by its collaborators a solution to Turó de la Rovira's problems (for instance, during its opening hours the museum contributes in preventing social unrest in the area), although, in more general terms, recognition of the role of city museums in urban planning policy (and not just cultural policy) is still an unresolved matter, and not only in Barcelona.

**A**s for the interior spaces, once restored they were meant to provide both a local and global picture of two situations of 20th century urban developments: war and air-raid bombing on the one hand, and the informal city on the other. It was necessary to enable interpretation of the archaeological structure of the anti-aircraft battery and the shanty town, both together and separately, as they are conceptually less distant from each other in a war and post-war context than might have seemed at first. Both sites pay testimony to the losers of the civil war and the capacity for resilience in extreme conditions, of a modern urban society subjected to bombing and growth amid post-war repression and poverty.



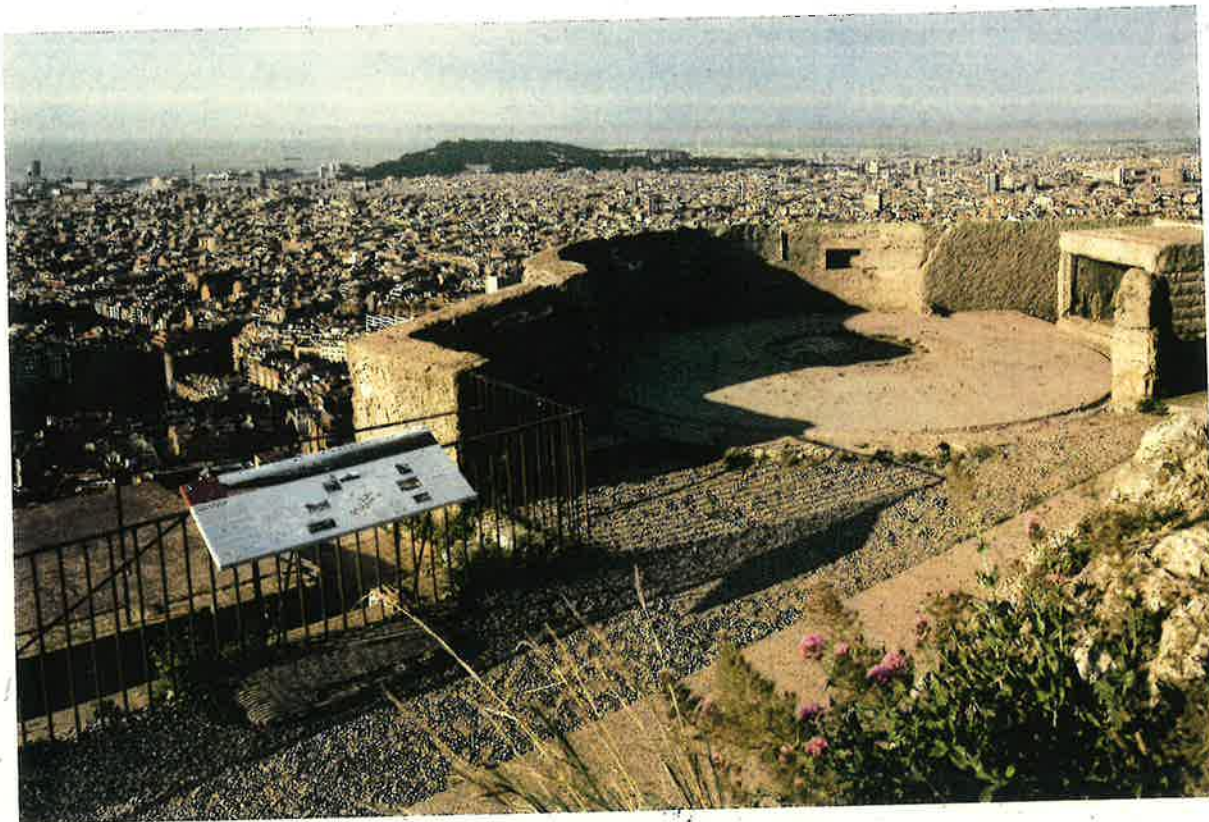


Fig. 7. Outdoor explanatory panel at Turó de la Rovira Archaeological Park. © MUHBA Archive.

The Turó de la Rovira heritage site, which constitutes a singular example of a demolished shanty town excavated by the archaeologists and converted into a museum, brings new light into how history and memory converge, since many of the former shanty residents are still alive. They are living memories of a global history of the humble, and of marginalised sectors of society, which have significantly contributed to accelerating urban growth. This is why the restoration of the archaeologically excavated spaces was accompanied by newly created narratives ensuring that visitors and members of the Barcelona communities not only came to understand the site in historical terms but also as a place where the points of view of inhabitants, local visitors and tourists about former shanty life intertwine. To ensure this experience, the Carmel and Can Baró residents' associations support the museum programme, with the aim of eventually organising highly personal visits to the site in which the historical background narrated by the museum is presented alongside the oral memories of former residents (Fig. 7).

#### The Officers' Pavilion

Before the intervention began, it was believed that the inside of the Pavilion held no traces of its past. However, restoration work revealed sets of paintings and even graffiti from the war and post-war periods. Visitors follow signage that guides them through the arrangement and operation of the Pavilion during the war (dining-room, dormitories of the officers and the captain, kitchen and latrine). The visit reveals traces of two shanty houses as well as those of a local adult literacy school set up after Spain's return to democracy. The Pavilion showcases the two worlds that existed on the hill: 1) the construction of the anti-craft battery in 1937 as part of the Barcelona defence system in 1938-39, along with the everyday life of the soldiers; the latter illustrated by facsimiles of plans and documents, photographs and oral sources; and 2) Els Canons shanties and its residents struggle for better living conditions, with the focus placed on the adult literacy school occupying the Pavilion in the 1980s through photographs and videos of families; the school was a particular source of pride for the older female residents who were the keenest to learn (Fig. 8).

#### The Troops' Pavilion

The Pavilion was used as a dormitory for soldiers on duty and adjoined a gun platform and two latrines, all with clearly visible signs of later use as living quarters over a period of more than four decades. In this space, which centres around an installation designed by Xavier Irigoyen, visitors shift from the local narrative of the Officers' Pavilion to the broader narrative through the exhibition *Barcelona at the Limit: From War in the Air to Living in Shanties*.

The right-hand side of the exhibition illustrates the impact of military strategies to attack rear-guard cities from the air, from the first bombardments of colonies in North Africa by Europeans to the bomb dropped on Hiroshima in the World War II. This discourse makes it easier to understand Barcelona's interest during the Spanish Civil War for the fascist Italian air force, supported by German and Francoist planes, as a testing ground for this strategy between 1937 and 1939, and the role that the hill played within Republican Barcelona's air and anti-air raid defence system. In an austere but effective museum display, several objects were also installed. The urban history guide *Defensa/BCN*, produced both as an interactive feature installed on the premises and a leaflet, allows visitors to take home plans and basic concepts in the form of a printed document.





Fig. 8. The museography inside the Officers' Pavilion, 2015. © MUHBA Archive

The left-hand side of the exhibition presents the informal city around the world, from the late 19th century to the present, from Paris and New York to Brasilia and Seoul. Within this global setting, Barcelona's shanty towns are contextualised and their developments presented until the early 1990s. The focus then shifts to the El Carmel neighbourhood and a small exhibition case contains documents by hygienist doctors, as well as a first edition of the novel that immortalised El Carmel neighbourhood, *Últimas tardes con Teresa*, by Juan Marsé. This part of the exhibition includes the interactive *Barraques/BCN*, whose contents are also included in a printed guide that enables visitors to take basic informative material away with them if they wish.

The multi-scale approach, from the hill to the world and vice versa, is used to illustrate a long history that spans more than a century, with the aim to suggest multiple interpretations. Visitors are left to reach their own conclusions. And, from the evidence gathered so far, the fact that the site focuses on both the war and the post-war period, both the anti-aircraft battery and the shanty town, all at once, is far from being disorienting; rather, it helps to create a stimulating environment for visitors who, if they wish, may continue their tour by inspecting the Command Post at the top of the hill.

#### The Command Post

The officer responsible for operational decisions was stationed at the highest point on the anti-aircraft battery site, in a small room with access from the roof where the theodolite stood—the roof today partly covered by the reddish floor of a former shanty. The restoration of the inner room is still incomplete, due to the fact that new walls were discovered behind the first walls. Technological information on the remote sensing systems has been installed, with particular emphasis on the invention and refinement in Barcelona of the *fonolocalitzador*, an acoustic locator: a forerunner of radar used to detect vibrations in the sky and predict the approach of aircrafts from the sea a few minutes before they arrived.

At the rear of this little room, rounding off our tour of the site, visitors can see the video *Barcelona in 360°*, which enables them to situate the different elements in space and time over the two-thousand-year history of Barcelona, as seen from Turó de la Rovira, establishing links with the museum's other heritage sites in the city.<sup>6</sup> The video also enriches the experience of those who only visit Turó de la Rovira in order to enjoy the views and are not especially interested in the city's survival in war and post-war conditions, giving them a glimpse of the city's long history.

The fact that the site focuses on both the war and the post-war period, both the anti-aircraft battery and the shanty town, helps to create a stimulating environment for visitors.



Since 2010, MUHBA's work on the history of shanty towns has gone hand-in-hand with the activities of the Civic Commission for the Recovery of the Memory of the Shanty Town Neighbourhoods of Barcelona, which proposed the installation of highly visible plaques on the sites of the old shanty towns.<sup>7</sup> The latest of such plaques was installed at Turó de la Rovira, in 2017. The museum's presence at Turó de la Rovira not only enables the institution to add several exceptional heritage sites to its urban exhibition spaces, capable of supporting narratives that are key to understanding the 20th century, but also forms the basis of a permanent link with the system of associations. Strengthened by the progress achieved, the museum continues its research into other forms of informal housing and the establishment and history of the great housing estates in the periphery of the city in the 1960s and 1970s. These new studies include one currently in progress on the transfer of the shanty town phenomenon to the great housing estates. Thus, the urban narrative of the 20th century gradually takes shape. The informal city has been converted into a substantial part of a narrative revolving around the city's twentieth century history.

In short, the presence of the informal city at MUHBA has encouraged the institution to pay increased attention, within its overall discourse, to the history of the contemporary city as a whole, a history that is closely bound up with migration. This phenomenon allows us to suggest a more global description of Barcelona, generating a richer and better informed impression of the importance of migration and the development of migrant housings in urban society, thus legitimising the inclusion of the shanty town dwellers into Barcelona's mainstream cultural and social history.

#### NOTES

1 In the 1960s, the shanty town dwellers of Montjuïc, the mountain overlooking the sea in Barcelona, had also fought for the same aim, going so far as to form cooperatives to build their new housing, but the Francoist authorities refused to hear their appeal, and that particular struggle ended in defeat.

2 The initiative was made possible by Horta-Guinardó District Authority, Agència del Carmel (Carmel Agency) and Barcelona City History Museum, with excavation work carried out by scouts from Fundació Josep Carol and personnel from Àtics archaeological services.

3 2009 saw the release of *Barraques. L'altra Ciutat* (Shanties. The Other City), a documentary by Alonso Carnicer and Sara Grimal produced by Televisió de Catalunya. A new version was later made under the title *Barraques. La Ciutat oblidada* (Shanties. The Forgotten City). In 2010, MUHBA published the book *Barraques. La Barcelona informal del segle XX* (Shanties. The Informal Barcelona of the Twentieth Century), edited by Mercè Tatjer and Cristina Larrea, including the specific research done by the Museum and the results from the exhibition; the Catalan and Spanish versions of the book continue to enjoy great success, and an English translation will shortly be published. In 2011, the Museum published *Barraques/BCN*, a brief urban history guide, and the following year

the Government of Catalonia agreed, with the Pas a Pas group, the publication of *Barraquisme: la ciutat (im)possible* (Shanty Towns: the (Im)possible City), a book by Xavi Camino, Óscar Casasayas, Pilar Díaz, Maximiliano Díaz, Cristina Larrea, Flora Muñoz and Mercè Tatjer. More publications and exhibitions have followed in recent years, including a photographic show organised in 2016 by the Civic Commission for the Recovery of the Memory of the Shanty Town Neighbourhoods of Barcelona, *50 anys de l'enderroc del barri del Somorrostro* (Fifty Years After the Demolition of the Somorrostro Neighbourhood), and the exhibition *Els barris de barraques a Montjuïc, Sants i Les Corts* (The Shanty Towns of Montjuïc, Sants and Les Corts), organised in 2017 by the Centre d'Estudis Montjuïc (Montjuïc Study Centre) and curated by Oriol Granados.

4 Jordi Romero Associats and Imma Jansana were commissioned to design the site. The project was a realisation of a cooperation between MUHBA, the Agència del Carmel, attached to the Town Planning Department, and Horta-Guinardó District Authority. The intervention was awarded the 2012 European Prize for Urban Public Space, and the restoration initiative generated additional innovative proposals which were integrated into the project. See also the documentary *La intervenció invisible* (*The Invisible Intervention*), Barcelona: 15-L. Films, by Carlota Coloma and Adrià Lahuerta

5 Jordi Ramos, Fernando Álvarez Prozorovich, Oriol Hostench and Antoni Vilanova all made important contributions.

6 Film with script, maps and documentation by Manel Guàrdia, Oriol Hostench and the 300,000 km/s team.

7 The Comissió Ciutadana per a la Recuperació de la Memòria dels Barris de Barraques de Barcelona (Civic Commission for the Recovery of the Memory of the Shanty Town Neighbourhoods of Barcelona) is formed by Mercè Tatjer, Alonso Carnicer, Sara Grimal, Jordi Giró, Custodia Moreno, Oriol Granados, Rafel Usero, Francesc Banús, Julia Aceituno and José Molina and advised by Jaume Fabre and the Pas a Pas group.



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