

Barcelona's Rec Comtal: the multiple lives of a millenary water infrastructure

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Abstract

The Rec Comtal is a canal that provided water to Barcelona for a thousand years, until it was disconnected from the water supply network in the late 20th century. Nevertheless, a small part of it continued to carry water, and remained inconspicuously active through informal uses (recreational and agricultural). The rediscovery of the canal in the 21st Century, initially in the form of archaeological remains, has made this hydraulic infrastructure newly visible and increasingly present in the social and political life of the city. It has been reconceptualized as a future "green infrastructure", reclaimed as part of the historical memory of some neighbourhoods, and activated as a political ally in the resistance against certain urban developments. This article explores the multiple ways in which the Rec has resurfaced in the last two decades. It then zooms into an area - between Can San Joan and Vallbona - which was renovated following grassroots mobilizations, which anticipates the redesign of the Rec as a new green infrastructure for the city, and where this vision has produced friction with existing recreational uses such as bathing, now deemed inappropriate. Drawing from the anthropology of infrastructures literature we conceptualize the Rec as an infrastructure capable of channelling things other than water, including imaginaries, affect, promises, desires and moral behaviours.

Keywords: heritage, infrastructure, urban planning, neighbourhood activism

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Introduction

For more than a thousand years, the Rec Comtal (the “Count’s canal”, henceforth the Rec) has provided water, in different ways and for different uses, to the city of Barcelona and its outskirts. It feeds from the phreatic waters of the River Besòs, to the north of the city, and proceeds southbound towards the old city and the Mediterranean. In another sense, though, it is an infrastructure without a clear beginning or end, for it was built around the 10th century following the paths of the much older Roman aqueduct and a Moorish channel,, and has continued to be used after it was officially replaced by newer infrastructures during the 20th century. Archaeologists are still discovering its history; local activists writing its future. Today, the Rec is a patchy, discontinuous infrastructure: some fragments still carry water, but most of it does not; a few sections have been integrated into archaeological sites, while most of them remain hidden beneath the city’s streets; neighbours, activists and historians vindicate the social memory of the canal in some areas, while in others it has been thoroughly forgotten. Its 14,5 km-long path is a complex sequence of presences and absences – punctuated by informal uses, landscaping interventions, unrealised plans, neighbourhood campaigns, archaeological sites, and myriad subtle traces.

In this article we analyse the Rec as a hydraulic infrastructure that carries much more than water; one through which imaginaries, affect, promises, desires and moral behaviours also circulate. Drawing from recent anthropological work on infrastructures, we conceive this multiplicity as an ongoing – and fractious – process of articulation. As Appel, Anand and Gupta put it: “Rather than being a singular thing, infrastructure is instead an articulation of materialities with institutional actors, legal regimes, policies, and knowledge practices that is constantly in formation across space and time” (2018, p. 12). This relational, socio-materially oriented perspective has been key to the expansion and refinement of the analysis of infrastructures (cf. Star, 1999). Far from mere technical systems that facilitate the circulation of people, things or ideas, infrastructures are considered complex socio-material entanglements of discourse, technologies, everyday practices, forms of expertise, affect, promises, etc. In addition to examining questions of access, rights, governance and inequality through the study of infrastructures (Graham & McFarlane, 2014; Guy et al., 2010), anthropologists have also taken an interest in their aesthetics and poetics (Larkin, 2013), complex temporalities (Gupta, 2018; Harvey, 2018) and sensory dimensions (Wagner, 2013).

Hydraulic infrastructures in particular have attracted detailed analysis bringing together questions of rights, (bio)power, property and materiality (see Ballesteró, 2019; Krause, 2021 for two recent overviews of this literature). Our work draws from socio-material perspectives such as Schnitzler’s (2008) analysis of the role prepaid water meters in the cultivation of neoliberal moralities and subjectivities in post-Apartheid South Africa and Anand’s concept of “hydraulic citizenship” (2017), which he coined to refer to the ways in which citizenship demands are mediated and circulate through water infrastructures in Mumbai. In addition, our case study speaks to recent discussions that point at the tension between the re-commoning of urban hydraulic infrastructures (Bianchi, 2023; Geagea et al., 2024; Varo et al., 2023) and the enclosure, commodification and financialization of water (Muehlebach, 2023; Loftus et al., 2024).

As we elaborate on further below, however, the Rec is no longer a fully functioning infrastructure, which complicates its analysis. Following Carse & Kneas (2019), incomplete (or in this case partly abandoned) infrastructures feature a complex temporality, having detached themselves from both their old uses and their past futures. Indeed, the Rec is a nominally obsolete infrastructure that in recent years has resurfaced in multiple ways, including as an image of the past, coded in the official language of heritage and put to work in the context of plans of urban revitalisation; as a space embedded in the everyday life and memory of certain neighbourhoods and defended as a form of “living heritage”; and as a body of water providing the possibility of unsanctioned recreational and agricultural uses. The question of visibility is therefore central to the Rec’s recent revival. It is not, as the classic literature argued, that it became visible the moment it failed (Star, 1999); rather, an infrastructure that remained literally under the surface for decades has gained increasing visibility at a time when it offered a useful platform for both official plans and grassroots campaigns. This renewed visibility has generated friction, particularly between informal, unsanctioned uses that depend on direct access to water, and heritage-oriented perspectives (both institutional and

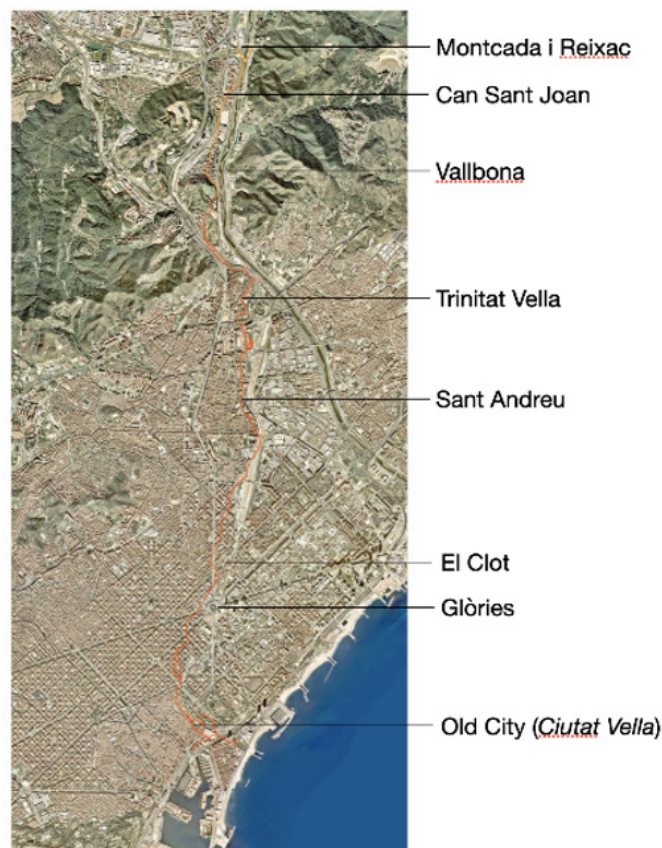
grassroots) interested in the Rec's preservation and integration into neighbourhood improvement plans.

Our argument in this article is that the rediscovery of the Rec produced, in the first instance, a proliferation of imaginings of the canal's role in the city. The Rec became entangled with, and channelled, a range of grassroots campaigns and municipal plans, some of which we describe below. Over time, however, this proliferation started to converge around a newly built consensus that redefined the Rec as a future "green infrastructure": a carefully landscaped route through the city for pedestrians and cyclists. This reconfiguration has contributed to the canal's renewed centrality in the social life of certain neighbourhoods, while also becoming a regulatory device that demarcates the line between acceptable, "civil" uses, and those that are not.

In order to unpack this argument, we will proceed in two stages: the first part traces the Rec's fragmented presence in the city, its complex history, truncated futures and recent resurfacings through an itinerary reconstructing the Rec's path (see Figure 1). The walking tour, we posit, is a particularly appropriate methodological strategy (Mason et al., 2023) when it comes to engaging with the Rec's material remains and its presence/absence in the city. In the second half of the article, we zoom into a particular section of the Rec, between Can Sant Joan and Vallbona, where we can observe in more detail the nuances and tensions associated with the canal's increased public presence. We conclude that rather than a conflict as such, this part of the Rec is witnessing a negotiation between differing approaches to the meaning and possibilities of the canal as a body of water and a public space.

Ethnographic fieldwork in the form of on-site observations, interviews with local stakeholders, participation in public activities and archival documentation was conducted by the authors in 2023-24, funded by a small grant by the Catalan Institute of Anthropology. Iván Ramírez-Osorio carried out additional research as part of his ongoing PhD project. The article also draws from fieldwork conducted by Roger Sansi with Andrea Corachán in 2016-17, also supported by the Catalan Institute of Anthropology.

Figure 1. The Rec's path (in red), from Montcada i Reixac to the Mediterranean



The Rec Comtal: 14,5km and a thousand years of urban history

Fifteen minutes by foot from Montcada Bifurcació rail station, just outside Barcelona's northern municipal limits, tucked under a bridge and sandwiched between rail tracks, there lies the "beginning" of the Rec Comtal. A placid water flow emerges from a semi-circular arch, fenced and locked (see Figure 2). Above it, a chiselled inscription informs us that the "Mine House" (*Casa de la Mina*) was built in 1778, when following a severe drought, new tunnels were dug in order to increase the Rec's flow by extending its reach into the phreatic waters of the River Besòs. By then, the canal was some 800 years old and unable to meet an increasing demand for water. The Rec had been built by the Counts of Barcelona, lords of the region, with the intention of providing water to the mills – and later on irrigation water to the vast orchards – that surrounded the city. And indeed, a vital agrarian and pre-industrial economy developed over the course of the canal during the middle ages, including paper mills, cotton mills, hemp and vegetable fields, blanket makers, tanners and cordmakers. Those who used the Rec's water did so in exchange of a licence fee paid to the Earldom of Barcelona, first, and the Crown of Aragon from the 12th century onwards (March, 2016).

But the construction of Montcada's Mine House did not only respond to an increase in the demand for water; it also marked an important shift in the canal's clientele. In 1701, Barcelona's municipality had negotiated with the highest representative of the Crown of Aragon (the *Batlle General de Catalunya*), the construction of a bifurcation further downstream with the aim of creating a new line of supply into the old town (the *fibla del Clot*). It was the first time that the Rec's water was incorporated into the municipal network and intended for human consumption. It travelled directly from El Clot to Canaletas Fountain, at the top of the famous La Rambla promenade. The bifurcation had two important effects: it connected the water drunk in the city with its agrarian and industrial uses further upstream, and entangled the City Council with the other users. This explains why Barcelona's municipality was among the parties that co-financed the Mine House and the construction of a new distribution point (*reixador*) within it, where agreements over water entitlements could be mechanically implemented. At that point in time, Barcelona's City Council received a third of the water, while the remaining two thirds were for land and mill owners.¹

Figure 2. The Mine House in Montcada, 2024



Photograph by Isaac Marrero-Guillamón.

¹ The City Council's allocation was later on redirected through a new underground channel (the Montcada Aqueduct), in 1826, precisely to disentangle it from its uses upstream and attempt to provide clean and safe water directly into the old city. But its success was limited: its flow was never big and steady enough to satisfy the demand of a city in expansion, and furthermore it was precisely its water that spread typhus in 1914 (Guàrdia 2011).

The Mine House is currently a restored heritage building; the panels on site introduce us to the history of the canal and its key importance in Barcelona's development. They also mention that there was "constant conflict" over the Rec's water rights; conflicts that only increased during the 19th century, when the *desamortización* (a long and complex process of expropriation of land and properties held by the Church and the Crown) meant that the ownership and management of the Rec changed hands (see Capel, 1999). The Royal Estate was forced to cede control to a new entity, the Owner's Society (*Sociedad de Propietarios*), formed by Barcelona's City Council, farmland and industry owners, and the Royal Estate (now considered a party among others). This private-public structure was imbued with internal conflicts from the outset, and also faced a water demand that was increasing and shifting beyond the Rec's reach and capacities (Guàrdia et al., 2014). Barcelona's sustained population growth, the expansion of new industries, and the requirements of a new urban masterplan (*l'Eixample*) transformed the city's hydraulic needs, and indeed contributed to the arrival of several private water companies from the 1860s onwards. Over the course of the following decades these enterprises built their own infrastructures to meet Barcelona's demand, creating in the process a capitalist market for water (Martín Pascual, 1999). Among these companies, one was particularly successful: the Sociedad General de Aguas de Barcelona (SGAB). Originally funded by Belgian and French capital, it eventually absorbed all its competitors and has since 1896 been the city's main water supplier (nowadays, it controls 70% of Aigües de Barcelona, the public-private corporation that manages the entire water cycle in the metropolitan area).

SGAB's success partly explains why the Rec, which was not part of the newer private network and did not succeed as a public-private enterprise either, gradually fell into oblivion. The Owner's Society's slow decline culminated in its dissolution in 1987, leaving in a limbo – unmanaged and neither private nor public – the water that continued to come out of the Mine House, and which was still accessible at certain points within the first three kilometres of the canal. Within this stretch, the Rec has become a *de facto* common resource: without an owner and sustaining a range of unsanctioned and self-managed uses. In Can San Joan, an area we will return to below, people call it the "river" and many bathe and play in it during the summer months. One of the most frequented spots is known as the "little beach" (*la platgeta*) and barbecues, baptisms and other social gatherings often take place there.

The Rec's de-commodified water has also sustained agricultural uses. In Vallbona, south of the "little beach", the Rec feeds the biggest remaining plot of agrarian land in the city of Barcelona: La Ponderosa. Covering approximately six hectares of land, seasonal fruits and vegetables are grown using traditional flood irrigation methods – including tomatoes, beans, figs, lettuces, carrots, peppers, chards, cauliflower, potatoes, onions. And if this wasn't remarkable enough, next to La Ponderosa there is a stretch of the canal approximately 300 metres-long which feeds a multitude of small, makeshift allotments built on a sliver of land adjacent to the highway. Infrastructural ingenuity abounds, including DIY plumbing, bridges and doors, as well as all kinds of reused materials to shape and organise the plots (see Figure 3). Older men seem to be their main users. One of the authors, Iván Ramírez-Osorio, spoke to some of them, who explained that although they were technically squatters, land "titles" are indeed sold and bought the old-fashioned way, with a verbal agreement and a handshake. This stretch is also the last section of the canal still carrying water, before the latter is channelled back into the River Besòs. From there onwards, the material presence of the Rec becomes a lot more intermittent.

Figure 3. The makeshift orchards of Vallbona



Photograph by Isaac Marrero-Guillamón.

In order to follow the Rec's path, now invisible, by foot, we must walk south, past a petrol station, along an access road and under a bridge, until we reach the Water House of Trinitat Vella (*Casa de l'Aigua de Trinitat Vella*), designed by Pere Falqués i Urpí in an art deco style and built in 1917. Once a commanding set of buildings overlooking the rural outskirts of the city, they are now dwarfed and split into two by a twelve-lane elevated highway. Still, they have been thoroughly restored by the municipality and are now part of the Barcelona History Museum (MUHBA) – transformed into a heritage site whose aim is to explain the “battle” for water provision in Barcelona. The Water House, we are told, represented an important attempt to incorporate the Rec's water into a modern, comprehensive public hydraulic infrastructure – a project, however, that was ultimately unsuccessful in the face of private capital's economic and political power (March, 2015). The panels and the tours that are regularly organised indeed dwell on the failure to construct a public water provision system in Barcelona. They mention several moments at which such a system could have been achieved – including during the progressive mayorship of Barcelona en Comú (2015-23), when the city council tried to “deprivatize” and “remunicipalize” (McDonald & Swyngedouw, 2019) water services, but faced a fierce legal battle with SCAB's current owners, AGBAR, which in the end prevailed (March et al., 2019)

Following Sansi's (2018) previous work, it is useful, before continuing heading south, to distinguish between those neighbourhoods where the Rec was buried underground during the second half of the 20th century and its memory is very much present in the form of grassroots organisations and activities, and those where the Rec disappeared much earlier and it exists mostly in the form of archaeological remains. Trinitat Vella falls squarely within the former category. Here, the Commission for the Research and Dissemination of Local Memory (an amateur group despite the name) regularly hosts walking tours in collaboration with the neighbourhood's Civic Centre. These guided tours are designed to revitalise the collective memory of the Rec: aided by pictures showing a wide range of recreational uses of the canal until it was buried underground in the 1970s, these tours become spaces where anecdotes and knowledge about the Rec circulate (see Figure 4). We have attended several of these tours, and heard, for instance, first person stories of learning to swim and dive in the canal. Despite its near-total disappearance from the neighbourhood's urban fabric (apart from the Water House, only some names allude to its former presence), it is apparent that the Rec has retained a certain vitality in the domain of memory. These walking tours allow private memories to become public, and even shape them into heritage-related demands.

Figure 4. Image of young bathers in Trinitat Vella in the 1970s, held against its actual location during a guided tour led by the Commission for Local Memory, 2024



Photograph by Isaac Marrero-Guillamón.

The Commission for Local Memory, for instance, promotes the idea of uncovering the Rec as part of a new public park, an act of restitution after the many “aggressions” that the canal suffered during the construction of the network of highways that surround the neighbourhood. This is but one of the demands included in a Manifesto written by a larger group of organisations based around Barcelona’s northern periphery, fighting for “keeping the Rec’s memory alive”.² For them, the Rec is a political and affective device connecting different urban issues: its restoration is conceived as a way to simultaneously address historical demands such as the burying underground of the railways that bisect these neighbourhoods, making public realm improvements, and supporting existing public history/memory projects. These demands directly speak to the history of the city’s peripheries, which developed outside the city’s masterplan, often in a makeshift fashion and disconnected from public services and institutions.

In these neighbourhoods, historical memory has been central to grassroots campaigns involving the Rec. Rather than a matter of material, archaeological remains (as we will see below), it is the experiences, memories and practices associated with the Rec that these campaigns work with. In Sant Andreu, where the canal remained in the open until the 1960s, the association Centre d’Estudis Ignasi Iglesias³ has been very active in the defence and promotion of the Rec. Already in possession of an important historical archive, in 2015 they officially launched a campaign to build the Rec Comtal Centre of Interpretation in the neighbourhood. The centre would be a research and dissemination institution sited in a group of currently abandoned houses adjacent to the canal’s path, a section of which would also be restored and made into a landscaping feature. The proposal was an important part of the exhibition *Past, present and future of Rec Comtal*, which they curated in 2018 and may be considered the first attempt at creating a comprehensive, grassroots narrative of the heritage value of the Rec – as well as a vision for its future relevance (Centre d’Estudis Ignasi Iglésias, 2018). The role of oral history was particularly relevant within in; it provided a bridge between the memory

² <https://reccomtal.wordpress.com/2024/04/17/el-rec-comtal-continua-amenacat-una-proposta-daccions-per-protegir-lo-abril-2024/>

³ <https://centreestudisignasiiglesias.blogspot.com/>

of a not so distant past, when the Rec still structured the productive and leisurely life of the area, and current urban demands in which the Rec acts as a catalyst for the improvement of public spaces; nostalgic memories and future visions both circulated via the Rec. Similarly, further south, in El Clot neighbourhood, a local heritage group located the canal bed, still featuring the original trees, on a small cul-de-sac called Meridional street, and advocates for its transformation into “a public garden and a space of memory”.⁴

As we leave El Clot and enter the modern city grid (l'Eixample), the presence of the Rec becomes much more tenuous. Here, the canal has been gone for over a century and its resurfacing has taken place mostly in the domain of archaeology – often by surprise, during unrelated construction works. In most of these instances, the remains have been catalogued and documented, but not restored. One important exception, however, was the site that arguably kickstarted the Rec's public revival: El Born Market (see Figure 5). In 2001, during the restoration of this impressive iron-cast building (initially with the intention of transforming it into a library), a huge, perfectly-maintained fossil of the 18th century city featuring the Rec was discovered underneath it. This part of the city had been demolished between 1716-18 as a direct consequence of the Succession War in Spain, when Catalonia had sided with the Habsburgs, the losing side, and as a result was brutally punished by Philip V, the first Bourbon king of Spain. Apart from dissolving all local and regional sovereign institutions (including the Crown of Aragon, owners of the Rec), Barcelona was to be controlled by a newly built Citadel, whose construction also required the clearance of the surrounding area, a buffer zone called “the esplanade”. It took some 150 years for the restrictions to be lifted and the area re-urbanized, with the Ciutatella Park and El Born Market as new central elements.

Following the discovery, a thorough archaeological excavation was commissioned, and after tense negotiations the library project was abandoned, and the market building transformed into a heritage site: El Born Centre of Culture and Memory. The Rec features prominently within it, defined as the lifeline of a whole series of urban activities (textile and leather workshops, butchers and string makers) – as well as an all-important (open) sewer. The Rec's archaeological treatment at the Mercat del Born was key in its reincarnation as heritage. It was here and then that the canal became part of the official history of the city and started to carry images and notions of the past – most notably, at this site, the remembrance of a city once destroyed by the Spanish Crown.

Figure 5. El Born Market, featuring the Rec, 2024



Photograph by Isaac Marrero-Guillamón.

⁴ El Jardí de la Sèquia Comtal del Clot: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/998752703503075/>

In the years that followed, other fragments were excavated, studies published and exhibitions commissioned. A richer historical picture of the Rec started to emerge, attracting in the process an audience beyond experts. And as its popularity grew, so did its capacity to get entangled in other urban matters and affects. We can see this, for example, during the construction of the Hotel Rec (2014-18) in the old city, very close to El Born Market. The 99-room hotel was proposed on a site originally designated for social housing, directly above the remains of the canal. Opposition to it brought together neighbourhood groups against “tourist saturation” (which fought against the construction of another hotel) with heritage activists (which opposed the destruction of the archaeological remains on site). Here, the Rec channelled an original activist alliance bringing together these two groups and capable of mounting a vigorous campaign, including a legal case⁵. Even though the construction of the hotel eventually went ahead and the traces of the canal were reduced to the hotel's name and a mention on its website, an important precedent had been set. A different image of the Rec started to circulate, as a collective patrimony threatened by greedy developers and an uncaring municipality.

With this (abridged) itinerary following the path of the Rec, we have attempted to provide a sense of the multiple ways in which the canal has resurfaced in recent times. We have seen how it has been rediscovered as an archaeological finding, activated as a political ally in grassroots campaigns, or defended as a valuable neighbourhood memory. In the rest of the article, we will explore the tension between the canal's multiple entanglements and an increasingly dominant consensus around it as a “green infrastructure”. In order to address these frictions in more detail, we will zoom into the area between Can San Joan and Vallbona, already introduced above, where we have focused our ethnographic research.

Negotiating the moralities and materialities of public space

In 2011, José Luis Conejero, president of the Can San Joan Neighbours' Association, appeared on a national newscast denouncing that the section of the Rec that passed through the neighbourhood was in a deplorable state, completely unkept and full of garbage. The canal, he explained, was an important local pathway, the main connection between the neighbourhoods of Vallbona and Can Sant Joan, and the city councils of both Montcada i Reixac and Barcelona were ignoring their responsibility to maintain it. Three years later, the situation had deteriorated even further. In a short video⁶ jointly filmed and distributed by the Neighbours' Association and the Association of Active Women of Vallbona, the Rec is described as a “landfill” and the area's status as “the periphery of the periphery” uttered repeatedly. The video shows the difficulty of using the narrow pedestrian pathway along the canal with a wheelchair or pushchair, and points at the dangers associated to the absence of barriers separating it from the train tracks⁷. The pathway was then known as the “Junkies' Way”, clearly pointing at other uses and sources of perceived danger as well (Alcántara, Anaranda & Morales, 2019).

These neighbourhood groups launched a series of activist actions in the form of collective bathing, water balloon battles and picnics which took place systematically until in 2016 the municipalities of Montcada i Reixac and Barcelona agreed to renovate this section of the Rec. They adjudicated the project to Carles Enrich Studio, which was, at the time, in the final stages of development of a much larger commission: The Rec Comtal Masterplan (*Pla Director del Rec Comtal*). In many ways, the Studio's work in Can San Joan and Vallbona anticipates the main concepts behind the Masterplan, which was not passed until 2023 and has, as of early 2025, not been implemented yet.

5 <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/barcelona/20141003/nueva-protesta-en-ciutat-vella-contra-el-hotel-proyectado-en-el-rec-comtal-3573277>

6 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OXwpWn8XsH0>

7 As of 2023, 172 people had been killed by trains in this area. See: <https://laveu.cat/actualitat/societat/una-persona-mor-atropel-lada-a-lalcada-de-la-casa-de-la-mina/>

The Studio's key idea is that the Rec ought to become a “green infrastructure”; in order to achieve so, their intervention is structured around two sets of actions: first, the “renaturalization” of the canal's ecosystem, mainly by introducing vegetation that attracts certain fauna in order to “improve the quality of surface water and aquifers, reduce the negative effects of rainfall, increase drainage and soil quality, regulate urban microclimates and generate climatic shelters” (Corredera, 2023). Secondly, two new bridge-like light structures were built with the intention of providing “biodiversity viewpoints”. The skilful combination of these two elements inaugurated a *scopic* relationship with the Rec *as a landscape*: it created both a new image and a new perspective on it⁸. Put differently, the renovation of the canal amplified the Rec's visual qualities, which were then framed by the viewing platforms (Figure 6). But rather than a work of restoration or “renaturalization”, as the Studio called it (which implies a return to a previous condition) we would define it instead as a work of invention – the creation of an entirely new ecosystem for the Rec, artificial, managed and landscaped.

Figure 6. Environmental restoration of the Rec Comtal area by Carles Enrich



Photograph by Adrià Goula.

In addition, the widening and refurbishment of the pathway made walking and cycling alongside the canal not only accessible, but pleasurable. In this regard, we can see a clear anticipation of the Masterplan's aim to transform the Rec into a new green corridor connecting the different neighbourhoods it transverses – a slow route designed to be *enjoyed* and to foster walking and cycling. The Rec is redefined as a novel “high quality” public space in the city; a pastoral river bank of sorts which doubles as a functional transport axis.

Ironically, the neighbourhood protests that triggered the intervention had relied on the leisurely dimensions of the Rec's water, yet hand in hand with the renewal came different devices designed to prevent direct access to it. Signs forbidding playing and swimming in the water were installed, accompanied by the threat of fines to those who did not comply. The redesign and landscaping of the space also made bathing and diving in the Rec difficult in some sections; both the architecture and the vegetation were used to clearly demarcate the intended uses.

⁸ The project has received important praise in the architecture and landscaping sector: it was a finalist in the 16th BEAU Awards (Bienal Española de Arquitectura y Urbanismo), and selected for the 2023 CSCAE Architecture Awards and the Architectural Heritage Intervention European Award.

Still, non-sanctioned uses have persisted. Over the course of our research we have documented humans and animals bathing, recreational fishing, baptisms, and cardboard collectors that used the canal to wet their material in order to increase its weight (and hence its price). During the summer, the “little beach” is used as such practically every day, directly opposite a (defaced) sign forbidding swimming in the canal. Young people even found a way to repurpose one of the viewing platforms – precisely designed to prevent access to the water – as a springboard of sorts (they also commented that the corrugated iron doesn't feel nice to the touch when barefoot). In the summer of 2024, someone took three plastic chairs to the canal and they became a shared infrastructure allowing users to sit *in* the water (Figure 7). When not in use, they were hidden in the vegetation, available only to those in the know. These practices feature in a participatory art project dedicated to the social life of this part of the Rec, Transductores' Water Memories (*Memòries de l'aigua*). The project was commissioned in the context of the European Art Biennial Manifesta 15, and resulted in a publication, an exhibition, public events and visual and sound pieces.⁹ The latter, done in collaboration with the art collective Lo Relacional, are particularly relevant for the purposes of this article, as they include the first-person testimonies of many users of the space, clips in which they speak about their everyday relationship with the canal, past and present.¹⁰ Echoing our own research, recreational and productive uses overlap in the resulting narrative: among others, women discuss doing laundry in the canal in their youth; men talk about learning to swim and fishing in the canal; adolescents describe enjoying the space in the quiet of the night; children jump into the water; the cleaning of the canal is described in detail by one of workers in charge of it; farmers describe how they use and channel the Rec's water in their orchards. Some of these uses are now forbidden, which brings to the surface the tension between the Rec's use value and its intended transformation into a new, orderly, green infrastructure. But rather than a simple people vs the state confrontation, the situation may be more productively understood in terms of friction and negotiation.

Figure 7. Infrastructural retrofitting in the canal, summer of 2024



Photograph by Andrea Corachán and Desiré Rodrigo.

⁹ <https://transductores.info/properties/memorias-del-agua-proceso-comunitario-y-ecosocial-de-manifesta-15/>

¹⁰ <https://soundcloud.com/user-662012440>

The transformation of the canal between Can San Joan and Vallbona was accompanied by a grassroots community project involving many of the local activists that had previously fought for the “dignification” of the canal. Called the Rec Moves (*El Rec es Mou*), since 2017 it organizes activities aiming to foster relations between neighbours and the newly built space. They have hosted, among other events, bicycle rides, movie nights, arts and crafts workshops aimed at children, public talks, and gardening sessions. They have promoted what they call the “living heritage” of the Rec, meaning memories and practices still embodied in the people of the neighbourhood, such as the women that did the laundry in the canal until not so long ago. The idea of “living heritage” establishes an explicit contrast to more widespread understandings of heritage as a “thing of past”, linked for example to archaeological remains. In this sense, it may be understood as a particular form of heritage “from below”, as described by Robertson (2016; see also de Cesari 2010; Peutz 2018): a grassroots appropriation of the logic and language of heritage to mobilize the defence of certain cultural practices. In the case of the Rec, it is an appropriation that makes perfect sense, considering how the canal has been rediscovered and celebrated mainly as heritage.

The Rec Moves’ remit could be defined as pedagogical: they work towards shifting the perception of the Rec, as well as its uses. They have promoted the canal as a public meeting space for the neighbourhood, and also as an environment to relax and rest and enjoy “nature”. Direct contact with the canal’s water, however, is not sanctioned. Despite having been an essential part of the neighbourhood’s relationship to the canal – and of the protests that led to its renewal – bathing and diving are discouraged by the Rec Moves, which, following the authorities’ criteria, conceives them as improper and even hazardous (according to the Catalan Water Agency, the Rec’s water is not safe for swimming). In this regard, the Rec Moves has contributed to bringing the uses of the canal in line with a hegemonic understanding of the right way to behave in public spaces. The legal and moral demarcation between appropriate and inappropriate uses has sometimes, in informal interactions, been transferred to the communities perceived to be associated with them, such as South American migrants and Roma people – a gesture that not only extends the stigma they already carry, but externalizes the “problem” of so-called antisocial behaviour. The direct, sensorial enjoyment of the Rec’s water, which offers a rare opportunity for cooling down in the open during the scorching heat of the summer, is coded as a marginal practice in need of correcting, associated with the past and/or with foreign/minority groups.

But this is not to say that the Rec Moves is merely the community arm of the municipality. Despite being funded by the latter through a consortium (*Consorci del Besòs*), it is important to underline that their community organizing and promotion of the Rec, its memory and heritage, has brought them into friction with the local authorities. For instance, the Rec Moves is part of a wider alliance between local organizations concerned with the Rec called the Community Table (*Taula comunitària del Rec Comtal*) which exercises constant monitoring of the canal and has insisted on the need of implicating local organizations in all decision-making processes. Following the approval of the Masterplan, they launched a manifesto called “The Rec is still under threat”¹¹ where they pointed out their concerns associated with the future of the Rec and demanded, among other things, the protection of La Ponderosa agricultural fields; a community-led management structure (as opposed to private) for any recreational and educational activities around the Rec; the restoration of the canal in Trinitat Vella, as part of a new park; the construction of the Rec’s Centre of Interpretation in Sant Andreu; and the burying underground of the railroads that surround Barcelona’s northern neighbourhoods. These demands not only pointed beyond the Masterplan; more importantly they vindicated a particular kind of participatory management of the Rec, in which community organizations play a key role well beyond their official mandate as designated interlocutors. Clearly, established community organisations and local authorities do not always see eye to eye, in the same way that there isn’t a single, homogeneous “community” operating in Can San Joan-Vallbona. Delving, as we have, into some of the frictions associated with the Rec’s “revitalization” paints a more complex picture.

¹¹ <https://reccomtal.wordpress.com/2024/04/17/el-rec-comtal-continua-amenacat-una-proposta-daccions-per-protegir-lo-abril-2024/>

The Rec Comtal and the politics of urban renewal in Barcelona

The Rec's renovation – specifically the section between Can San Joan and Vallbona – offers a useful viewpoint into some of the dynamics associated with the ongoing recuperation of this millenary hydraulic infrastructure. As a new “green infrastructure”, the Rec is characterised by careful landscaping: plants, animals, water, pathways and bridges create a new way of relating to the canal. Pedestrian and bicycle movement is facilitated; and areas of relaxation and contemplation established. The resulting public space has been approvingly defined by community organizations as “dignified”, and in many ways, its existence is the result of these neighbourhood groups' prolonged struggle. But this transformation also involved a concomitant delimitation of im/proper uses with the potential to deepen existing prejudices against certain groups. These frictions are quite different from the discussions that surrounded the canal's previous rehabilitation in the domain of architectural and archaeological heritage, when the main aim was to make the Rec and its history known and visible.

The process resonates with Barcelona's recent urban history in various ways. Firstly, the intimacy, if not indistinction, between processes of spatial renovation and moral reform, as seen in the city's long tradition of highly designed and regulated public space interventions (Delgado, 2007). As already mentioned, the reconditioning of the canal and the creation of a functional and enjoyable environment came accompanied by a moral discourse regarding the right ways of using and caring for the space. Through pedagogic (as well as legislative) devices, activities dependent on the direct and recreational access to the canal's water were coded as something akin to “matter out of place” (Douglas, 2003), i.e. practices that contravene the established order and are classified as uncivil, unsafe, or unhealthy. Hence the construction of a new public space can also be said to be the construction of a new “civic order” – one that breaks with the informality of the past and brings the Rec in line with the city's dominant moral code. The latter has relied heavily, since the mid-2000s, on the idea of “civility” (*civisme*) (Galdon-Clavell, 2016). According to its ideologues, the peaceful cohabitation of the city's heterogeneous population requires respecting a shared code of behaviour and practicing an ethics of self-responsibility (which must nonetheless be policed and enforced). City bylaws introduced in 2005 established a detailed range of rules and regulations (and associated punitive measures), including the criminalization of sex work, pan handling, street vending, skateboarding, graffiti, alcohol consumption, being topless in public spaces other than the beach, littering, and even playing with a ball outside designated areas (Mata-Codesal, 2021). For some, “civility” amounts to a thinly veiled ideology designed to justify, in the name of the common good, the imposition of a bourgeois conception of urban space (Delgado, 2007).

The language of civility certainly underpins some of the frictions described above between im/proper uses of the Rec. Both the local authorities and community organizations have pushed forward a vision of an active yet obedient citizenship, observant of their rights and obligations – a vision quietly challenged by the people who in the summer months jump in the canal to cool down or to have a go at fishing, claiming their right to public space on their own terms. These actions resist being relegated to an image of the past and of scarcity (as is often the case in official materials) and instead affirm themselves in the everyday life of the canal. Indeed, they can be said to project a different set of future possibilities for the canal as a space of leisure and recreation, connected to a more sensorial approach to public infrastructures. Which is not to say that there is a conflict as such; rather, we would argue that the Rec (and the “little beach” in particular) has become a stage of negotiation between different ways of relating to this body of urban water – still called “the river” by many in the area.

Secondly, the renewal of the Rec points at a recurring theme in the critical literature about urban planning in Barcelona: the uneasy relationship between the city council and neighbourhood associations (Andreu, 2008). The latter have often been antagonistic to the municipality, and responsible for challenging and transforming urban plans. At the same time, they are implicated in local government in multiple ways: as official mechanisms of representation, through public funding, as well as through their involvement and participation in the management of certain spaces and infrastructures. The Rec Moves is a case in point: born out of grassroots movements that had pressured the municipalities into taking action in the canal, funded by a public body and currently responsible for the cultural “activation” of the restored section of the canal, which includes educating people into the appropriate ways of using it.

Thirdly and finally, the transformation of the Rec into a “green infrastructure” may be understood in relation to the selective incorporation of historical heritage into urban renewal plans, a feature of Barcelona’s urbanism since the early days of the so-called “Barcelona Model” (see Balibrea, 2001; Blakeley, 2005; Capel, 2007; Degen & García, 2012; Monclús, 2003 for a critical examination in terms of governance, not addressed here). Starting in the 1980s, the city council developed a series of urban regeneration plans that did not only produce new urban spaces and infrastructures, but strived to create a new city image as well. Old factories, for instance, were demolished, but their chimneys were preserved as iconic markers of an industrial past. The remains of what had often been neglected and abandoned were resuscitated as images of historical heritage and objects of aesthetic appreciation (Capel, 1999). This aestheticization and iconification of heritage has been analysed as a form of instrumentalization, in as much as its goal has less to do with an appreciation of historical artefacts than with the successful transformation (and often commodification) or a given space’s image (Ganau, 2008). While the interventions already conducted and planned for the Rec would seem to go beyond its mere aestheticization, there is certainly a preoccupation with generating a new image of the Rec: an enjoyable, useful and civil path through the city.

Conclusion

The Rec is certainly a peculiar infrastructure. Largely devoid of its original function, half-forgotten for decades, it has nonetheless resurfaced in myriad ways in the recent past. The canal has become part of multiple grassroots campaigns for urban improvements and in defence of historical memory. It has been conceptualized by local authorities as a green infrastructure for the future. It is still a common resource feeding informal uses. In Can San Joan and Vallbona, the Rec has been central to the struggle for “dignified” public spaces and better infrastructures – questions that have particularly affected these neighbourhoods, which originally developed outside of the city’s planning regulations, often in a make-shift fashion and disconnected from public services and institutions. The recent redevelopment of the Rec responds to many of these demands, although it has also brought with it a new regulation of uses which excludes some of the everyday activities that have been central to their relationship with the canal, and that indeed were a key part of the grassroots mobilization that triggered its renewal.

We have shown how the Rec is not merely a hydraulic infrastructure, but rather a socio-material artifact entangled with urban history, memory, politics and of course water. It is also multiple, for it manifests itself, simultaneously, as a heritage object, a green infrastructure, a renovated public space and a common resource of sorts. Based on our ethnographic fieldwork, we have come to see it as a site of friction between sanctioned and unsanctioned uses, as a site where the moral and legal demarcation between proper and improper uses is being negotiated.

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