

Facing the Great Recession in Deprived Urban Areas: How Civic Capacity Contributes to Neighborhood Resilience

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Research suggests that some communities are more resilient than others in the face of the same external stress. Both the local effects of and local responses to the 2008 financial collapse and economic recession have been geographically variegated. Drawing upon two case studies in the Metropolitan Region of Barcelona (Spain), this paper aims to understand why some historically deprived neighborhoods are proving more resilient than others in facing the effects of the Great Recession. We conclude that neighborhood resilience, strongly influenced by the pre-crash context and by socially produced conditions of vulnerability, operates in each community according to at least three context-specific and interdependent factors: built environment, social capital, and civic capacity. We focus on civic capacity—understood as neighborhood ability to mobilize different sectors of the community to act in a coordinated fashion around matters of community-wide importance—and demonstrate that it is a significant resource contributing to neighborhood resilience.

INTRODUCTION

Irrespective of their global origin and dimensions, challenges and crises such as global environmental change or the 2008 financial crash produce local effects that impact on geographically specific places and communities, and affect specific social groups. Indeed, the local consequences of global crises such as youth unemployment, housing evictions, floods, physical and economic damages, poverty, inequality growth, and so on, are manifested differently across places. Several studies have reported these variations, not only among different countries, but also among cities and neighborhoods (Blanco and Cruz 2014; Blanco and Leon 2013; Martin 2010). There is also evidence that in many places citizens are self-organizing to develop new solutions to collective problems that governments are not solving due to austerity politics. Yet we do not know enough about how global crises hit local communities, as well as about the variegated

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ways in which local communities respond to the effects of these crises (Parés et al. 2014; Van Zandt et al. 2012). Nevertheless, since both local effects and local responses are geographically diverse, we could state that, as suggested by Zautra et al. (2008), some communities seem to be more resilient than others, despite facing the same external stress.

In this paper, we focus on how two different Spanish neighborhoods are coping with the effects of the 2008 economic recession. Spain has been one of the countries where the effects of the Great Recession have been most severe. For example, the unemployment rate has risen from 7.9 percent (June 2007) to 26.9 percent (March 2013)¹ and foreclosures have grown up from 1.43 foreclosures per 1,000 properties in 2007 to 4.57 in 2013, peaking at 5.18 in 2010.² However, these negative consequences have not been equally distributed geographically. As noted by several authors (Albertos and Sánchez 2014), the economic crisis has had important spatial effects in Spain, as well as in the Metropolitan Region of Barcelona (Nel-lo and Donat 2014). The recession has aggravated social problems in disadvantaged urban areas, intensifying the dynamics of urban segregation. It seems that the social and environmental characteristics of some disenfranchised neighborhoods have produced important “neighborhood effects” (Atkinson and Kintrea 2001; Sampson et al. 2002), leading these urban areas to a spiral of degradation (Lupton and Power 2002) and intensifying the problems relating to the crisis to a greater extent than in others. On the other hand, the Spanish case is especially particular on how the real estate bubble—before the financial crash—determined the effects of the economic recession. The bubble multiplied the indebtedness of low- and middle-income families through easy access to mortgages. As we will see, this process produced population churn and demographic change in some urban areas, while the poorest social groups—segregated in specific disenfranchised neighborhoods—became extremely vulnerable after the bubble burst. Most of these vulnerable social groups concentrated in these urban areas were external immigrants who arrived in Spain during the bubble, mainly from North Africa, South-East Asia, and Latin America.

In this context, we aim to understand how two historically deprived neighborhoods, with many features in common, end up being hit by the same crisis to significantly different degrees. More concretely, we will focus on social resilience in these two neighborhoods by analyzing some specific local effects of the recession (unemployment, foreign population rise, and foreclosures) and identifying socially innovative responses for coping with crisis impacts. Our main argument is that civic capacity, understood as neighborhood ability to mobilize different sectors of the community to act in coordinated fashion around matters of community-wide importance (Stone 2001), is a key community resource contributing to explain these differences.

The article develops the argument as follows. After introducing neighborhood resilience through a geographical lens, we set out an analytical framework outlining those structural neighborhood features that may explain why some places respond better than others to external stresses. We focus on three neighborhood assets: the characteristics of the built environment, social capital, and civic capacity. After that, we explain our methodological approach and the fieldwork carried out. Next, we analyze our two case studies separately. Finally, we conclude the paper with a comparative analysis, revealing how different assets—historically and geographically conceived—explain why one of these neighborhoods (Bellvitge) is confronting the crisis in a more successful and effective way than the other (Ciutat Meridiana).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: A GEOGRAPHICAL APPROACH ON RESILIENCE

Over the last decade the notion of “resilience,” which was originally developed in ecology (Holling 1973), has been adopted by social science. The term has become increasingly prominent in several disciplines, including those that use a community or neighborhood approach (Norris et al. 2008; Sherrieb et al. 2010; Van Zandt et al. 2012; Zautra et al. 2008). The concept is also being used in urban studies literature and urban politics discourses (Goldstein et al. 2015; Gonzalez and Oosterlynck 2014; Wagenaar and Wilkinson 2015). As Raco and Street note (2011), in the wake of the global financial crisis resilience is being promoted by academics, professionals, and policymakers as a vehicle for the economic and social revival of places.

Resilience refers to the capacity that a system (or a place) has to cope with a disturbance such as external stresses, shocks, or crises. Hence, original ecological resilience was measured by the magnitude of disturbance that a system could tolerate and persist (Carpenter et al. 2001). Thus, resilient systems and places are defined in contrast to vulnerable ones, where external disturbances cause irreparable and irreversible damage (Raco and Street 2011).

When resilience concerns social entities (individuals, organizations, or communities) we use the term “social resilience” to describe the abilities or capacities of these social entities to absorb, cope with, and adjust to different kinds of threats, crises or changes (Keck and Sakdapolrak 2013). Although the social approach to resilience has been largely used during the last decade, to the best of our knowledge few of these studies have used a geographical approach (MacKinnon and Derickson 2013). We will therefore explain what we understand for a geographical approach on resilience.

Conceptualizing resilience through a geographical lens implies that places—understood as social environments—can possess or develop abilities and capacities to adapt to and cope with external disturbances such as an economic recession, a natural disaster, or scarcity of resources. More concretely, in this paper we will use “the neighborhood” as a geographical unit of analysis. According to Martin (2003: 732), place as a territorially bounded residential district embodies the concept of neighborhood. We do not understand neighborhood as an externally defined administrative district within an urban area. We conceive the neighborhood as a socio-spatial unit with meaning and functionality for those living and interacting in a certain area. Although neighborhood and community are not synonymous, Logan and Molotch (1987) identify some connection between these two concepts. Neighborhoods are spatial units within an urban area but, at the same time, they encompass a variety of interactions and exchanges. These form a complex set of social and economic relations that give shape to a “community” (Martin 2003).

Regarding neighborhood resilience, the basic idea is that neighborhoods, understood as social spaces that link people of different age, gender, or class in one place, are constituted by a repertoire of structural features that may enable or constrain not only the social and individual development of their residents and activities, as the “area effects” literature has already shown (Atkinson and Kintrea 2001), but also their capacity to face external impacts. Hence, a resilient neighborhood, in contrast to a vulnerable one, possesses assets that allow it to adapt to or cope with some external disturbances in a more “successful” way.

Several scholars have proposed different ways to operationalize and measure social resilience, but the question of which capacities make a neighborhood more resilient is far from being settled yet. Keck and Sakdapolrak (2013: 10) suggest that social resilience can be analyzed by means of three kinds of capacities: coping capacities (reactive and absorptive measures of how people cope with and overcome immediate threats by the means of those resources that are directly available), adaptive capacities (proactive or preventive measures that people employ to learn from past experiences, anticipate future risks, and adjust their livelihoods accordingly), and transformative capacities (people's ability to access assets and assistance from the wider socio-political arena to participate in decision-making processes, and to craft institutions that both improve their individual welfare and foster societal robustness toward future crises). In addition, Lorenz (2013) uses the concept of "participative capacity," understood as the ability to self-organize and use adaptive and coping capacities. We will come back to this concept later.

In a different way, Norris et al. (2008) highlight a set of adaptive capacities clustered in four primary sets of networked resources: economic development (level and diversity of economic resources, equity of resource distribution), social capital (received social support, perceived social support, social embeddedness, organizational linkages and cooperation, citizen participation and leadership, sense of community, attachment to place), information and communication (narratives, responsible media, skills and infrastructure, trusted sources of information), and community competence (community action, critical reflection and problem solving skills, flexibility and creativity, collective efficacy and empowerment, political partnerships). On the basis of this framework, Sherrieb et al. (2010) developed a community resilience model measuring the sets of adaptive capacities for economic development and social capital at county level in Mississippi, United States.

We argue that in a geographical conception of neighborhood resilience physical and social neighborhood features should be taken into account to understand why some places respond better than others to external shocks. Thus, we propose an integrated approach (Voss 2008) that considers environmental, social, and institutional factors in a path- and context-dependent way. Despite the established tradition within urban studies of explaining social and political phenomena through socioenvironmental features of places, this approach has been rarely applied in a comprehensive way to analyze social resilience at neighborhood level.

Hence, taking into account that resilience analysis must be adjusted to the nature of disturbances and stresses faced (Díez Medrano 2014), and drawing upon the complex disturbances analyzed in this article (social and economic local changes derived from the 2008 global economic recession), we maintain that a geographical neighborhood resilience approach should consider the following set of assets, all of which are determined by the historical and geographical context of each place:

- (1) **Built environment:** The built environment, such as neighborhood urban morphology and the housing property regime, the neighborhood facilities and amenities derived from higher or lower public investment, or even the neighborhood location in the city, are some of the features that could facilitate or hinder neighborhood capacities to cope with external disturbances.
- (2) **Social capital:** Social relationships among residents that allow individuals access to resources possessed by others (social capital as individual resource); or features of

social organization, social activism, and civic engagement such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit (social capital as collective resource) are both neighborhood resources that can be used to cope with crisis effects.

- (3) **Civic capacity:** Finally, neighborhood ability to coordinate action by different sectors of the community (governmental and nongovernmental) around a matter of community-wide importance should also be understood as a neighborhood resource that could definitely contribute not only to the emergence of local responses to external disturbances but also to their success or failure.

Because we understand that resilience is configured by path-dependent capacities and abilities, we argue that all these assets should be analyzed using a historical and geographical lens. In the following sections we explain each of these three assets.

BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Even though the relationship between the built environment and society has been studied by different disciplines including Human Geography, Urban Sociology, or Architecture, its conception as an asset for social resilience has basically been developed by those studies of resilience for natural disasters (Bosher 2008; Haigh and Amaratunga 2010) that are mostly focused on the technical aspects of the built environment. From our point of view, there are two main issues that should be introduced in a comprehensive neighborhood resilience approach: urban morphology and neighborhood location.

Urban morphology is the study of city forms, understood as the forms of the urban fabric, its organization, and its development (Levy 1999). We could distinguish between internalist approaches, which consider urban form as a relatively independent system; and externalist approaches, in which urban form stands as a dependent variable, as the end product of processes driven by political, historical, and geographical determinants (Gauthier and Gilliland 2006). Whilst acknowledging that urban form is a result of these external processes, in this article we will use an internalist approach, since we are interested in the effects that urban morphology, in its broader sense—urban density, type of buildings and streets, organization of the space, housing property regime, and so on—can have as an asset for social resilience. Thus, as sustained by Castex et al. (1980) more than two decades ago, the built environment could be considered as an object that has its own consistency and resilience.

Among the elements configuring the urban fabric and its organization, the neighborhood endowment of amenities and facilities is important for social resilience. Green areas, public libraries, civic centers, health and education facilities, and other forms of public investment materialized in the built environment could have a significant effect in terms of neighborhood resilience. These urban amenities and facilities usually provide social services and social cohesion. At the same time most of them are relational spaces where neighborhood identities and a sense of belonging could be constructed. In other words, a good endowment of amenities and facilities makes a neighborhood more attractive for their neighbors, meaning that residents will want to stay in their neighborhood rather than leave it.

On the other hand, the neighborhood's position in the city is another important aspect for neighborhood development and, therefore, for neighborhood resilience too. Several studies show how peripheral neighborhoods tend to be more vulnerable and have more difficulties to overcome their social problems (Fleury et al. 2008; Parés et al. 2014). At the same time, other specific issues related to the neighborhood location, such as isolation, urban barriers, slopes, or rugged terrains, are also relevant to vulnerability and resilience.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

Research shows that social capital at the neighborhood level can determine the ability that one neighborhood has to produce novel responses or to engage with participatory processes in an effective way (Parés et al. 2012). This can be really significant to strengthen neighborhood resilience. However, in the literature there are different understandings about what social capital and the different effects that different forms of social capital can produce. In this paper we distinguish among collective and individual forms of social capital (Kapucu 2011) on one hand, and between bonding and bridging social capital on the other hand (Woolcock 2001).

Following Putman, the denser social organization networks are, the higher the chances that the members of a given community will cooperate for the common good (Putnam 1993). Therefore, according to this perspective, and in spite of strong criticisms (DeFilippis 2001), we can predict that in those areas with a higher associational density, shared rules, and trust among the stakeholders, social cooperation will prosper and public policies will tend to be more effective and legitimized, resulting in more resilient neighborhoods.

From this approach, social capital is understood as a collective resource and asset that communities may or may not have depending on their capacity to organize at collective level, through social organizations, stakeholders, and networks. However, we maintain that this is not the only relevant level to understand how neighborhood resilience works.

First, we hold that we must also look at individual relations. Relationships of trust among individuals can reinforce some forms of collective social capital and, at the same time, can also produce new and effective responses against crisis effects, making neighborhoods more resilient. In fact, individual mistrust or unpeaceful coexistence between neighbors can easily produce the opposite effects. In this vein, social capital at the neighborhood level can be understood as those relationships that allow individuals access to resources possessed by others (Bourdieu 1985) or those changing relations among people that facilitate action (Coleman 1988).

Second, the literature has stressed there is no single variety of social capital; indeed, certain forms of social capital might even negatively affect the democratic quality of citizen participation by fostering clientelism or community segmentation (Forrest and Kearns 2001). In order to conduct a more refined analysis of how social capital operates in spatial matters, Woolcock (2001) distinguishes between three different kinds of social capital: bonding, based on dense networks with a system of shared rules and beliefs; bridging, which is generated in heterogeneous networks with primarily weak ties (Granovetter 1973); and linking, which takes place in networks that link stakeholders with different levels of status and power, fostering access to formal institutions. In this vein, as well as social capital, forms of cooperation and collaboration among different sectors, especially

between governmental and non-governmental stakeholders, can be of great importance. The concept of “civic capacity” incorporates this and, at the same time, recognizes the significance of social capital. Next, we briefly introduce this concept and its relation to social capital.

CIVIC CAPACITY

In 1993 a team of political scientists led by Clarence Stone launched a study entitled “Civic capacity and urban education” analyzing why cities differ substantially in their ability to mobilize around education. Drawing upon 11 case studies at city level they explained the varying abilities of cities to foster educational reforms using the concept “civic capacity,” regarding *“the extent to which different sectors of the community—business, parents, educators, state and local officeholders, non-profits, and others— act in concert around a matter of community-wide import”* (Stone 2001: 596).

From this understanding, civic capacity involves mobilization (bringing different sectors together), but also problem solving (developing a shared plan of action). Hence, civic capacity is about mobilizing various segments of the community in order to solve a common problem, often bypassing “normal politics” (Hill et al. 2000). Therefore, bringing a locality’s civic capacity into play implies a problem-solving approach (Briggs 2008) that goes beyond routine government action and highlights the linkages between civil society and the local state (Stone 2006). Thus civic capacity is about cooperation between different community sectors, organizations, and individuals. It is a measure of the ability of a community to address problems involving multiple sectors and including both governmental and nongovernmental actors. By means of linking governmental and non-governmental actors, civic capacity can be used as a resource to give voice to the unheard, to the vulnerable that often have no voice. Applied to resilience theories civic capacity can be understood as a participative capacity (Voss 2008).

According to Stone, the label “civic” refers to *“actions built around the idea of furthering the well-being of the whole community, not just that of a particular segment or group”* (Stone 2006). More frequently, however, scholars use “civic” less ambitiously, in reference to an effective engagement with the public realm (Williams et al. 2002). This clarification is important because different commentators use the term “civic capacity” in many different ways: Some of them use it concerning the level of voting in a specific locality; others the level of volunteering or the density of nonprofit organizations in a community, while others use it as a synonym of social capital.

In 1999, the journal *Administrative Theory and Praxis* published a symposium edited by Henry Kass entitled “Community Capacity, Social Trust and Public Administration” as a result of a faculty research project on civic capacity funded by Portland State University (Morgan and Shinn 1999). This group defined civic capacity as *“the ability of communities to respond to events in ways that are self-consciously directed at shaping a common future”* (Shinn 1999: 103). Like much research on civic capacity, their work departed from the more common term “social capital” (Jun 1999). For these authors the term “civic capacity” includes but goes beyond social capital. Instead it is extended to the social requirements for successful democratic governance (Shinn 1999). According to these authors, unlike social capital, civic capacity (1) is the product of conscious chosen strategies and (2) enhances community capacity for self-governance. Civic capacity, thus, is not only a matter of trust,

norms, and networks but also of citizenship skills and knowledge required for different kinds of political processes (Morgan and Shinn 1999). In this vein, Stone also argued that while microlevel social capital described by Putnam (1993) is the unconscious by-product of everyday interactions, civic capacity is the conscious creation of actors seeking to solve collective problems (Stone 2001).

Recognizing that civic capacity could be achieved through different routes and materialized in different shapes (Judd 2006), most of the literature on civic capacity conceptualizes it as an asset representing a collection of community resources such as civic engagement, social capital, the ability to engage governmental and nongovernmental stakeholders, relationships, as well as individual and collective values, knowledge, and skills.

Thus, to be materialized, civic capacity requires going some steps further than civic engagement or social capital. Civic engagement, following Putnam (1995), is shown in behaviors and practices such as voter turnout, reading the newspaper, participation in such public forums as PTAs, and in private organizations as choral societies and bowling leagues. As Hyman (2002) notes, to be qualified as civic engagement, behaviors neither have to involve others, be organized in any particular way, nor be directed at any particular action, goal, or outcome. Instead, the term social capital defines an asset representing actionable resources that are contained in, and accessible through, a system of relationships. Among these resources, depending on the authors, we could find relationships that allow individuals access to resources possessed by others (Bourdieu 1985), changing relations among people that facilitate action (Coleman 1988), or features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit (Putnam 1995). Just as social capital presumes and depends on individual civic engagement as a vehicle for building relationships (Hyman 2002), civic capacity needs social capital to be effectively materialized. Nevertheless, social capital and civic engagement are necessary but not sufficient for the development of civic capacity. A self-conscious engagement of governmental and nongovernmental actors, coordinating them to act in concert to solve collective problems, is the key element that distinguishes civic capacity from civic engagement and social capital.

METHODS

Our analysis compares two neighborhood cases—Bellvitge and Ciutat Meridiana (Table 1)—both in the Metropolitan Region of Barcelona, an area with 4.7 million

TABLE 1. Case Study Figures

Year	Ciutat Meridiana		Bellvitge	
	Pre-crisis	Post-crisis	Pre-crisis	Post-crisis
Total population	10,007	10,874	26,599	25,178
Foreign population rate	5%	36%	3%	14%
Unemployment rate	5%	19%	6%	11%

Source: Population and housing Census 2001 and 2011. Instituto Nacional de Estadística. Unemployment rate: Percentage of registered unemployed population among active population (16–64 years old), 2001 and 2012.

inhabitants in Catalonia.³ These two neighborhoods are located in two adjacent municipalities (Bellvitge is in L'Hospitalet de Llobregat and Ciutat Meridiana is in Barcelona) and they have had different governments, as well as different public administration path-dependencies. These two case studies are a selected subset of six case studies developed by the research project "Neighborhoods and Crisis," carried out at the Autonomous University of Barcelona in 2013, that analyzes how disenfranchised urban areas have been hit by and are responding to the recession.

The case study methodology is suitable both for analyzing multidimensional and holistic processes in which multiple factors are involved, and for studying current phenomena that require the consideration of contextual elements for full comprehension (Yin 2003). Furthermore, qualitative information and contextual elements are crucial to deepen our understanding of why some neighborhoods are more resilient than others.

In order to facilitate the comparison, we have chosen two neighborhoods with important historical and geographical similarities that also differ on the kind of built environment, social capital, and civic capacity present. Our analysis considers how these two communities reacted to the economic recession and how the recession has impacted upon both neighborhoods (Table 1). Our research design is that of a multiple case study with a holistic single-unit of analysis (the neighborhood) that uses a theoretical replication, i.e., predicting contrasting results for anticipatable reasons (Yin 2003).

Both neighborhoods analyzed in this paper have similar contextual features: Both are low-income peripheral neighborhoods of the Barcelona urban region. They were both developed in the 1960s, mainly through the construction of residential flats, and originally occupied by new residents coming from southern Spanish regions. Both have a strong history of social mobilization in advocacy of urban services. Although both neighborhoods are socially active, they differ on built environment, social capital, and civic capacity features.

The same data collection techniques were applied in both cases. First, public documents and reports were analyzed, including specific policy documents, former research carried out in each area, and statistical sociodemographic and socioeconomic figures. Second, several direct observations were carried out to gather information on the features of the built environment and to get an impression of the kinds of people that use public spaces. Third, 17 in-depth interviews were conducted (eight in Ciutat Meridiana and nine in Bellvitge). In each case, four different kinds of neighborhood stakeholders were interviewed: social activists, elected representatives, public officials, and practitioners.

Through this fieldwork four analytical dimensions have been analyzed in both neighborhoods following a historical approach according to the following operationalization:

- (1) **Crisis effects and emerging responses:** Even though we were interested in the effect of the economic recession in each neighborhood in general, we focused on unemployment rate, housing evictions, and foreign population rate (Table 1). Unemployment and evictions are two of the main impacts of the recession in Spain. Foreign population was chosen because it is a vulnerable social group that was specifically affected by urban segregation caused by the real estate bubble in Spain. During the bubble, the foreign population of Spain multiplied. This group had access to low interest rate mortgages and bought their households in usually disenfranchised urban areas where housing prices were lower (Nel-lo and Donat 2014). The foreign

population is also especially impacted by unemployment and evictions. Finally, we also identified postrecession responses to social exclusion (Hills et al. 2002), especially those which are socially innovative (Moulaert et al. 2013).

- (2) **Built environment:** We focused on urban morphology (urban fabric, housing, public space, urban facilities and amenities resulting from public investment, etc.), but also on geographical position (isolation, urban barriers, topography, etc.).
- (3) **Social capital:** We analyzed the sociodemographic profile (heterogeneous or homogeneous), individual relations in terms of trust and solidarity, and social activism (density of social organizations and its relationships in terms of bonding or bridging social capital).
- (4) **Civic capacity:** We analyzed, on one hand, if and how different sectors of the community have organized to solve neighborhood collective problems (for instance through community programs, social initiatives engaging public institutions, or public investment carried out by social organizations) and, on the other hand, the nature of the relationship among governmental and nongovernmental stakeholders (collaboration or conflict, trust or mistrust, etc.).

CIUTAT MERIDIANA

Located in the district of Nou Barris, Ciutat Meridiana is one of the Barcelona's suburbs built in the early 1960s to house the new population coming from different Spanish rural areas including Andalusia, Extremadura, Aragon, or Navarra. Its original population came to the city in extremely precarious conditions, living in shacks, sublet rooms, barns, and caves. In this context, a new private housing development was planned to accommodate 15,000 people (the neighborhood has lost population in recent years and currently has about 10,000 inhabitants). Ciutat Meridiana is physically isolated from the rest of the city, with poor connectivity and located in difficult geographical terrain made up of steep slopes, unstable soil, and with high levels of humidity.

“The hill is a border, a clear fracture between Ciutat Meridiana and the rest of the city There is not a sense of being from Barcelona.”

(Public official)

“This is a neighborhood made with a really complex urbanism, made with bad intention! This is urbanism for poor people.”

(Public official)

Ciutat Meridiana has always been a working class neighborhood. Its residents have historically been organized and have struggled to improve their living conditions, which has generated a strong sense of belonging.

“All that we have is the result of our struggle. We have achieved all that!”

(Social activist)

Although several improvements have been achieved over time, the neighborhood has failed to overcome its stigmatization. As a result, Ciutat Meridiana has undergone a continuous process of demographic change, as families who were able to improve their socioeconomic status left and new low-income residents from other areas, regions, or

countries took their place. Consequently, Ciutat Meridiana has remained as a vulnerable and segregated urban area, clustering the poorest population of the city.

CRISIS EFFECTS AND EMERGING RESPONSES

Ciutat Meridiana is the neighborhood of Barcelona in which the effects of the crisis have been most severe. Contemporarily Ciutat Meridiana is the poorest neighborhood in the city and is also the neighborhood that has suffered most foreclosures and rent evictions. It is also one of the neighborhoods with the highest unemployment rate. 19 percent of the population of working age is unemployed; almost double the level of unemployment in Barcelona (10.2 percent). To explain these figures and to fully understand how the crisis has hit Ciutat Meridiana we must go back to the effects of the real estate bubble in this area.

During the bubble housing prices rose up dramatically in Ciutat Meridiana, and many families sold their homes and moved to other parts of the Metropolitan Region of Barcelona. Despite the price increases, Ciutat Meridiana remained a neighborhood where housing prices were significantly lower than the rest of the city. Consequently, these homes were mostly bought between 2001 and 2007 by low-income migrants from non-EU countries that aspired to become homeowners. Through informal networks new arrivals were encouraged to buy property and/or to rent rooms to service mortgages (Palomera 2014). Thus, due to the real estate bubble the foreign population in the neighborhood grew from 5 percent to 36 percent in 2012. During these years several real estate enterprises and credit services were established in Ciutat Meridiana, making a substantial contribution to the spike in financially precarious home purchases that took place in Ciutat Meridiana during that period. These extremely vulnerable foreign residents, who made a great effort to buy their homes, are the ones who have been most affected by unemployment and precariousness during the recession. As a result, many of these families have been unable to cope with their mortgages, leading to a proliferation of foreclosures in the area. In turn, the sharp depreciation of the houses in the neighborhood after the burst has left many of these families indebted for the rest of their lives, as they are unable to pay the mortgages taken during the boom.

Ciutat Meridiana has historically had a strong tradition of social activism combining capacity for autonomous organization with strong capacity to contest public institutions. However, our respondents reported that the social fabric had gradually weakened during the 1980s and the 1990s as a result of a combination of factors including the aging of active members in community organizations, the lack of generational replacement, and the accumulation of a feeling of participation fatigue generated by a perception that mobilization efforts were not generating significant outcomes. This situation got worse during the years of the housing bubble, both as a result of the demographic changes explained above and as a consequence of individualistic attitudes fueled by the housing bubble:

“It was a period of unbridled consumerism, of rugged individualism.”

(Social activist)

Just before the recession social fabric had been considerably eroded and social organizations had lost many of their activists. Nevertheless, as a reaction to the effects of the

crisis, some innovative and self-organized social initiatives, such as mobilizations against evictions, a food bank that developed from the occupation of a public facility, and a set of solidarity initiatives to deal with pressing problems such as food poverty, have recently emerged. These are still quite fragmented initiatives, but they have given shape to an expanding arena of social innovation in the neighborhood. Most of these initiatives aim simultaneously to solve collective problems, such as poverty or evictions, and to protest against austerity policies and public sector cuts.

Even though the neighborhood has witnessed several social and public initiatives aiming to face the effects of the crisis, they are not highly coordinated. In fact, we found a lack of coordination among the different services provided by the public sector in the area, in education, health, and security, for example. According to our interviewees, the Neighborhood Council, the only space where governmental and non-governmental actors can coordinate their action, is not being useful in this respect. The failure of a Community Development Plan under the coordination of the Neighborhood Association is another example of how difficult it is to coordinate the actions of different stakeholders in Ciutat Meridiana. Moreover, the relationship between the City Council and the main neighborhood organizations is conflictive and characterized by mistrust.

“Institutional participatory mechanisms in Nou Barris are obsolete, they are not operative and they do not implement policies.”

(District Councilor)

“We have never had a good relationship with the city council; neither with this nor the former administration. The District Councilor is incapable, incompetent! She doesn’t represent us, almost nobody votes for her party in this district.”

(Social activist)

This lack of civic capacity and the hostility between neighborhood organizations and the City Council act as an important constraint upon the ability that the aforementioned social innovation can have to face the crisis effectively.

UNDERSTANDING CIUTAT MERIDIANA’S VULNERABILITY

Thus, the recession has had a devastating impact on Ciutat Meridiana, which remains extremely vulnerable. How do we explain this tendency to segregation and low resilience? Have neighborhood social capital and civic capacity contributed to this dynamic or not? The explanatory factors are multiple and complex, but we identify at least three main issues.

First, we cannot ignore that the built environment and the socio-urban neighborhood features (social composition, isolation, rugged terrain, etc.) are deeply unfavorable. They impose an adversity that it is very hard for residents to deal with. Second, Ciutat Meridiana is a clear example of increased vulnerability through insufficient public investment. Although the neighborhood has undergone significant improvements, including elevators and escalators, new facilities, and a subway, respondents agree that there are still significant shortages: Some key facilities are lacking, there are few public spaces, and the neighborhood is beset by failure in some services. The widespread perception among residents is that they are victims of public and private disinvestment. Finally, despite being a neighborhood with a strong history of social struggles and having fostered a large

number of community initiatives (also in response to the effects of the current crisis), there is no culture of collaboration among community organizations and between governmental and nongovernmental stakeholders. This last point, which we conceptualize as a lack of civic capacity, not only limited opportunities for neighborhood development before the crisis but is also greatly constraining the effectiveness of the contemporary mobilizations.

Regarding social capital, in Ciutat Meridiana we found multiple examples of solidarity, through which residents help each other to face the effects of the crisis. This solidarity has also been self-organized through new and established social organizations that link high levels of individual social capital to new forms of organizational social capital. Some examples of this spontaneous and self-organized solidarity include retired neighbors taking care of children while their parents are at work, a clothing reuse project led by a church, a self-organized food bank, and residents cofunding school lunches and other school services.

In terms of collective social capital, Ciutat Meridiana presents a heterogeneous and fragmented network composed by two worlds establishing some weak ties among them: three big neighborhood organizations on one hand and several external, sectoral, or very local organizations on the other hand. The first are established organizations with aging activists.

“There are few social organizations in our neighborhood and there is always the same people there There is not a generational shift.”

(Community worker)

Although a bonding form of social capital has traditionally characterized these organizations, this has changed during the last years as they have started to work with the immigrant population. As argued above, because of population churn and demographic change, the neighborhood has become extremely diverse and fragmented in social terms. This social composition reinforces the tendency toward a bridging model of social capital and, at the same time, implies a big challenge in terms of organizational social capital. The sudden increase of foreign population and the loss of autochthonous residents have weakened social ties. Indeed, some racial conflict has emerged.

“(Old) residents deal really badly with new immigration. There is a huge racism! They feel they have built the neighborhood . . . and now immigrants arrive and undermine all the hard work they have been doing for long time.”

(Public official)

Nevertheless, these conflicts remain latent; the work done by several social organizations and by the City Council to hold back these attitudes and to foster a peaceful coexistence is keeping these social conflicts under control.

BELLVITGE

Bellvitge is a neighborhood with 26,000 inhabitants located in l’Hospitalet de Llobregat, a municipality in the urban periphery of Barcelona. A real estate company created the neighborhood in 1964 in order to accommodate the large influx of working-class people coming from other Spanish regions, mainly Andalucía. The neighborhood was planned

as several multifamily housing blocks and included minimal facilities and amenities. As a consequence, neighbors came together to make demands of the local government to install adequate livability services and amenities. These initial victories of collective action gave residents within Bellvitge a strong sense of pride. During the 1970s two social organizations within the neighborhood were strongly mobilized, demanding amenities and services such as schools, kindergartens, a market, and a health center. Another important victory was won against plans to increase the residential density of the area. Neighbors organized against overcrowding, using the slogan “no more blocks.” They managed to stop the construction of 19 apartment blocks and gained new public spaces. Since then there was a steady increase in the number of facilities and amenities. Bellvitge has become a well-endowed neighborhood; its population has remained more or less constant whilst the number of facilities, public spaces, and services has steadily increased. Because of a combination of this collective action and a significant amount of public investment over the past 30 years, Bellvitge is today a place with a high-perceived quality of life. This is understood by members of the community to be the result of many years of demand making, and the responsiveness of the local state.

“Bellvitge is today what its people decided it should be. It is the neighborhood we have wanted it to be.”

(Public official)

CRISIS EFFECTS AND EMERGING RESPONSES

Our respondents argued that Bellvitge has not been severely hit by the recession, and this is backed by official statistics showing that the impact of the crisis has been less acute than in other neighborhoods of the city. For example, the level of unemployment stands at 11 percent, compared to the city average of 18 percent. Two aspects of the neighborhood’s socio-demographic profile explain this. First, despite the fact that the average age of the population is 44 years old, the percentage of retired people is very high—25.2 percent of residents are over 65 years old. The population is significantly older than in other parts of the city. Second, the percentage of foreign population is relatively low, 14 percent compared to the citywide 23.19 percent. The neighborhood has neither been extremely affected by foreclosures nor eviction processes, as it is essentially a neighborhood made up of homeowners who purchased their homes between the 1960s and 1970s. There was a relatively low level of mortgaged property when the crisis began.

Despite the relatively positive picture painted by the statistics cited above, our interviews show problems that are not measured by the figures. Many older families in Bellvitge are burdened with the problems of their relatives: They have taken on more responsibility for caring for grandchildren, they provide financial assistance to their family members who have lost employment or work in precarious conditions, and/or they share their homes with relatives suffering the consequences of the recession.

“Most of the families are really supportive and many young couples live on the pension of their grandparents.”

(Social activist)

These effects are less detectable and quantifiable because they remain within the “private sphere.” Moreover, the intensity and time span of these effects seem to have increased.

“Before the recession people came to food banks for short periods of time. When they improved their situation they didn’t come back. Now most of the people entering the food bank do not leave.”

(Social activist)

Although the crisis has clearly had a lesser impact in Bellvitge than in Ciutat Meridiana, it has also had some significant effects. In response to these, multiple initiatives have emerged at the family and individual levels. The existing social infrastructure, the ability of the city council to avoid cuts in public services, and the collaboration between stakeholders have also softened the consequences of the crisis in Bellvitge. Some of these responses are socially innovative, such as a group of women exchanging clothes for their children, a social organization supplying breakfast for children, and an education program engaging young and unemployed residents. Most of these initiatives engage several social organizations and are supported by the city council. These dense networks, the result of the last 30 years of collaboration and negotiation between citizens and the municipality, are indicative of a high degree of civic capacity in Bellvitge. This is in stark contrast with Ciutat Meridiana, with its conflictive and hostile relationship between social organizations and the city council. However, these initiatives are of a pragmatic and problem solving nature, which cohere with a philanthropic approach to social action that maintains, rather than challenges, the status quo (Marcy 2015).

UNDERSTANDING BELLVITGE’S RESILIENCE

By and large, Bellvitge can be considered a resilient neighborhood. Comparing this case study with Ciutat Meridiana, the first question that we should answer is why Bellvitge was not equally hit by the real estate boom and why it did not undergo the same degree of “population churn.” Several factors help us understand the dynamics that occurred in Bellvitge.

First, the built environment is characterized by quite favorable urban and geographical conditions: The neighborhood was built in a plain area, is less isolated, and is well connected by roads and public transport with the city center of l’Hospitalet and Barcelona. Second, Bellvitge’s people have a huge sense of belonging. As a result, Bellvitge’s neighbors did not leave during the boom, avoiding the replacement process that took place in other more deprived urban areas.

“Bellvitge’s residents are really loyal to their neighborhood. They stayed here, in their neighborhood, being all together!”

(Public official)

In terms of social capital, Bellvitge is a very socially active neighborhood, with one strong neighborhood association that has historically led multiple campaigns for neighborhood improvements. This neighborhood association has developed dense networks with other social organizations and has fostered a system of rules and beliefs shared by almost all the active citizens within the neighborhood. Indeed, our analysis of

cooperation between stakeholders shows on one hand a strong relationship between the City Council at the district level and the historical neighborhood association. On the other hand, charity organizations also appear to show a consolidated relationship with local public institutions. Overall we can detect a triangle of cooperation among city council (mostly at a district level), the traditional and historic neighborhood organization as well as charitable organizations.

This network of social organizations remained cohesive until 2013, when some of the new urban activisms (Walliser 2013) that emerged with the crisis—15M, “Iaioflutas” or La PAH—led to some splits in the social fabric of the neighborhood. Basically, they accuse the former neighborhood organizations of relying too heavily on public administration grants and hampering a generational shift in their leadership.

Bellvitge is a socially homogeneous neighborhood, which favors the development of the kind of bonding social capital we have mentioned before. This is connected to the type of individual relations that we found in the neighborhood. Historically, relationships among neighbors in Bellvitge have been based on trust and solidarity. As the neighborhood has not undergone significant demographic change, these patterns of relationship have remained constant over time. Simultaneously, this is not a neighborhood with problems of coexistence between different communities, basically because it is a socially homogeneous community, with low levels of foreign population.

Bellvitge is a good example of a community with high civic capacity. The above mentioned bonding social capital, built from an active social infrastructure, has historically managed to collaborate with public institutions to address collective problems of the neighborhood. The neighborhood’s social organizations have combined agonistic tactics with negotiation and have built stable dynamics of collaboration and dialogue with state institutions.

“After the ‘no more blocks’ movement we stopped conflictual struggle and we started to combine negotiation and social pressure.”

(District Councilor)

“We constantly talk to neighborhood associations. They know what the neighborhood needs.”

(Public official)

The combination of an organized civil society and a responsive city council resulted in significant neighborhood improvements before the crisis. Evidence of this collaborative relationship can be found in the multiple investments made by the city council in response to demands from local civic organizations as well as in several forms of partnership between state and nonstate actors. For instance, in Bellvitge we found numerous initiatives of social solidarity that formally cooperate with social services. This history of collaboration between nonstate and state actors, combined with the strong activism of the first and the high investment carried out by the latter, is crucial to explain the transformation that this neighborhood underwent before the crisis. As a result, Bellvitge faced the crisis from a position of stability.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

As we have seen, Bellvitge has become a resilient neighborhood where the effects of the recession have been pretty moderate, while Ciutat Meridiana is nowadays a vulnerable

TABLE 2. Case Study Comparison

	Ciutat Meridiana	Bellvitge
Built environment	Peripheral neighborhood Physical isolation Rugged terrain Disinvestment in facilities and amenities	Peripheral neighborhood High degree of connectivity Flat land Good endowment of facilities/amenities
Social capital	Solidarity Fragmented social fabric Strong social activism	Solidarity Social cohesion Strong social activism
Civic capacity	Low Mistrust and conflict Low capacity for coordination	High Collaboration and dialogue High capacity for coordination

Source: own elaboration.

neighborhood that has been devastated by the recession (Table 1). Thus, while in Ciutat Meridiana the unemployment rate has increased 14 points (from 5 percent to 19 percent), in Bellvitge the rise has been only 5 points (from 6 percent to 11 percent). In a similar way, the foreign population has multiplied by 7.2 in Ciutat Meridiana (from 5 percent to 36 percent) while in Bellvitge have been multiplied by 4.6 (from 3 percent to 14 percent).

To explain why one of the neighborhoods has been more affected by the recession, we must analyze their respective prerecession historical-geographical contexts. Although both neighborhoods have important historical similarities, the uneven effects of the crisis in these two cases are clearly determined by the different impact that the real estate bubble had in each neighborhood: While Bellvitge managed to keep its original neighbors, Ciutat Meridiana underwent a dramatic process of demographic change. Certainly, these different histories could be explained by the evolution of housing prices in Ciutat Meridiana, and by the fact that most of the mortgages in Bellvitge had been paid off by 2008. However, there are other important factors that should be taken into account to understand why Ciutat Meridiana has not overcome its stigmatization and vulnerability, while Bellvitge has succeed keeping its original population and improving its quality of life (Table 2).

First, even though both are peripheral neighborhoods, we found several differences related with the built environment—such as physical isolation, terrain, or urban investment/disinvestment—that have fostered Bellvitge’s resilience and have aggravated Ciutat Meridiana’s vulnerability.

Second, we have seen how social capital, as a collective resource, is really relevant to understand how both neighborhoods, starting from high levels of social activism and organized in terms of bonding social capital, have achieved significant improvements through multiple historical struggles. However, while in Bellvitge levels of social activism have remained high over the past few decades, Ciutat Meridiana’s community-based organizations have gradually weakened during the same period, particularly during the years of the housing bubble. The strength of intergroup relations in Bellvitge stands in stark contrast with the fragmentation of the social fabric in Ciutat Meridiana.

Thirdly, even though in both neighborhoods we can identify many instances of social mobilization and horizontal solidarity between residents to cope with the effects of the crisis, the patterns of collaboration between the state and the community continue to be sharply different in these two areas. In Bellvitge, state and nonstate actors have historically cooperated, promoting significant levels of public investment and improving quality of life in the neighborhood. In Ciutat Meridiana, instead, we have observed that the relationship between neighborhood organizations and the city council has historically been based on conflict, mistrust, and hostility.

Our study points to the need for a deeper analysis of whether and how these three kinds of factors are related to each other. From our point of view a plausible hypothesis is that virtuous or vicious cycles can feed from these three elements: The good conditions of the built environment favor a sense of community pride and belonging that facilitate social capital, which in turn is fueled by the perception that community engagement has real and tangible outcomes in the quality of the built (and social) environment of the area; in contrast, the perception of physical marginalization prevents the development of a feeling of community belonging, weakening social ties and imposing barriers upon cooperation between the state and community, which in turn generates a weaker intervention of public institutions in the area. This leads to a sense of participation fatigue amongst residents who do not experience tangible results from their participation.

Another aspect that would be interesting to study in more depth is the possible side-effects of strong social capital and civic capacity. From the comparison of our case studies we propose that strong (bonding) social capital and civic capacity in Bellvitge might have resulted in less capacity for integrating emerging social realities and for providing innovative and transformative responses to the current crisis. In Ciutat Meridiana, on the other hand, the emergent bridging social capital and lower public investment has resulted in innovative and self-managed local responses to deal with the effects of the crisis.

CONCLUSIONS

Drawing upon two case studies in the Metropolitan Region of Barcelona (Spain), this paper has demonstrated how the dynamics of social exclusion and the degree of vulnerability of these urban areas have to be understood as part of a complex historical and geographical process that started before the 2008 economic recession. To sum up, on one hand we must highlight the uneven impact of the real-estate bubble on each of these urban areas. This determined their sociodemographic composition before and after the 2008 crash. On the other hand, we must take into account how, given a very similar situation in the 1970s, these urban areas evolved following different paths, leading to variable degrees of resilience in face of the economic recession that began in 2008. In this vein, civic capacity, as well as public investment resulting, in part, from it, emerges as a significant asset to understand the degree of preparedness within each place to face the crisis effects.

Although there is evidence that local social capital is important for community resilience, much of the literature links the availability of social networks and local organizations to its capacity to act after an external shock or disaster (Browning et al. 2006; Magis 2010; Norris et al. 2008; Sherrieb et al. 2010). Nevertheless, our cases suggest that

neighborhood resilience is strongly influenced by precrash contexts (Wickes et al. 2015) and by socially produced conditions of vulnerability (Browning et al. 2006).

Resilience is context-dependent and has to be explained through complex and dialectical relationships among the different factors discussed in this paper. However, civic capacity appears as a novel and significant explanatory variable in our study, even if it is not the only neighborhood asset that explains differences in resilience between our cases.

There are two observations arising from our comparison that merit further research. First, our study suggests that built environment, social capital, and civic capacity are interrelated. Greater understanding of these complex interrelationships would allow us to foresee a more robust analytical model of community resilience with more significant policy relevance. Second, our study suggests that factors such as a strong presence of public administrations, strong bonding social capital, and strong civic capacity can, in combination, hinder the development of radical forms of social innovation (Marcy 2015). This, in turn, could weaken the mid-term capacity of social action to provide innovative solutions to new social problems. In consonance with these findings, the concept of resourcefulness suggested by MacKinnon and Derickson (2013) could provide an alternative approach for community groups to foster.

This period of severe crisis highlights that public spending and investment cannot be considered the sole factors that explain the wellbeing of communities. In this paper we have explored how other factors linked to the socio-spatial characteristics of communities can contribute to their capacity to cope with the social effects of austerity. This line of research, in our view, does not only represent a key field of research in urban studies, but it can also generate new insights of great relevance for urban policymaking.

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Notes

¹Economically Active Population Survey. Instituto Nacional de Estadística.

²Consejo General del Poder Judicial.

³Spain is divided in to 17 regional administrative and political units (Comunidades Autonomas) and Catalonia is one of them. Each “Comunidad Autonoma” has its own regional government and Parliament.

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