

The implementation of the 15-minute city model in Barcelona and the decline of the city's nightlife industry

La implementación del “modelo de ciudad de 15 minutos” en Barcelona y el declive de su industria de la vida nocturna

*Jordi Nofre**
*Álvaro Mazorra***
*Manuel García-Ruiz****

ABSTRACT

Through data extraction from different data sources, collation of urban public policies, auto-ethnography and exploratory netnography, this article reveals how the implementation of the 15-minute city model in Barcelona (Spain) – one of the flagship cities for the 15-minute city model in Europe – parallels the decline of the city's nightlife industry over the past decade, despite the fact that access to culture and leisure is a fundamental pillar of the 15-minute city model. The article ends up by arguing that the implementation of the 15-minute city model in Barcelona could also be seen as enacting a cultural and moral agenda for the promotion of “good leisure”, and, by extension, the “good citizen” in the 15-minute city Barcelona.
KEY WORDS: nightlife; night-time leisure; 15-minute city; superblocks; sustainability; Barcelona.

* FCT-Tenure Principal Investigator CICS. Nova Research Chair in Tourism, Leisure and Urban Dynamics Interdisciplinary Centre of Social Sciences Faculty of Social and Human Sciences NOVA University Lisbon. E-mail: <jnofre@fcsh.unl.pt>. ORCID: <0000-0002-7367-1337>.

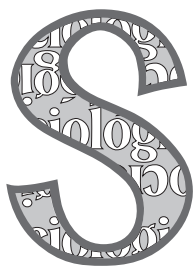
** Assistant Lecturer Department of Sociology III Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED). E-mail: <amazorra@poli.uned.es>. ORCID: <0000-0001-6166-2030>.

*** Associate Researcher Centro de Investigação e Estudos de Sociologia Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL). E-mail: <urbiteit@gmail.com>. ORCID: <0000-0003-2141-2525>.

RESUMEN

A partir de la recopilación de datos en diferentes fuentes, la recuperación y selección de datos acerca de políticas públicas urbanas, la autoetnografía y la netnografía exploratoria, este artículo muestra cómo la implementación del “modelo de ciudad de 15 minutos” en Barcelona (España) —una de las ciudades insignia del modelo en Europa— corre simultánea con el declive de la industria de la vida nocturna en la ciudad durante la última década, a pesar del hecho de que el acceso a la cultura y al entretenimiento es un pilar fundamental del “modelo de ciudad de 15 minutos”. En el artículo se argumenta que la implementación de este modelo en Barcelona puede también analizarse como la instauración de una agenda moral y cultural para el impulso del “buen entretenimiento”, y por extensión del “buen ciudadano”, en la “Barcelona de 15 minutos”.

PALABRAS CLAVE: vida nocturna, entretenimiento nocturno, ciudad de 15 minutos, supermanzanas, sostenibilidad, Barcelona.



1. INTRODUCTION

Increasingly over the last few years, academic literature and news media have pointed out a decline in the nightlife industry in many European cities with traditionally vibrant cultural scenes (e.g., *The Economist*, 2016; Bottà and Petrilli, 2023; Nofre, Martins, García-Ruiz and Teixeira Costa, 2023; Assiter, 2024; Davies, 2024). A close reading of this literature allows us to identify some prevalent causes involved in the decline of nightlife across the continent. These causes can be grouped into five major categories: (i) substantial changes in the social practices and cultural consumption of Generation Z (compared with previous generations); (ii) high inflation and upward trends in national and local taxation systems in Europe, nega-

tively impacting the financial sustainability of nightlife businesses; (iii) rising property and rental prices (iv); reinforcement of conservative, securitarian and moralistic views about nightlife, especially at the local level, resulting in increasingly restrictive licensing policies for nightlife activities; and (v) the impact of extractive tourism on the nightlife industry (Pahissa, 2014; Azcárate, 2020), leading to the closure of venues as a consequence of the expansion of hotels and short-term rentals in central urban areas (e.g., Nofre, Martins, Garcia-Ruiz, and Teixeira Costa, 2023; Tomasella, 2023; O'Sullivan, 2024).

Barcelona is a case of specific interest due, on the one hand, to its status as a leading European city in the implementation of the 15-minute city model and, on the other hand, to the position of its nightlife industry as a central element of its tourist attractiveness regardless of the reduction of the number of nightlives venues over the past years (Pareja and Oliveres, 2024). Interestingly and despite the absence of available databases from Barcelona City Council, blogs managed by local historians (amateurs and academics) detail the existence of a much denser and more vibrant nightlife network in the 1990s than exists nowadays.¹ A reading of the content of these blogs as well as a memory ethnography (Haripriya, 2020) of the first author allow to affirm that, in almost all neighborhoods of the city, there were pubs with live music; “daytime bars” that became “late-night bars”, serving beer and spirits, frequented by patrons alone or in company; small discotheques; bingo halls; salsa dance halls – see Llano-Camacho (2015) for a comprehensive doctoral thesis on salsa music nights in 1980s Barcelona); after hours venues that opened at 7:00 a.m. and closed after lunchtime; and brothels, which have largely disappeared. Nowadays, however, a journey on foot from the heart of the Catalan capital to any of the neighborhoods of the city, after 2:00 a.m. on a Friday or Saturday night, is marked by the absence of economic and social activity on the streets. In other words, *nocturnal desertedness* characterizes the nightscape of the second largest city in Spain, which is one of the most heavily touristed cities in Southern Europe,

ranked 21st in the *InterNations 2024 Expat City Ranking* and the continent's flagship city for the 15-minute city model.² This comparison between the nocturnal landscape of Barcelona in the 1990s and the 'nocturnal desertedness' of the Catalan capital today leads to the presentation of a question that emerges as the starting point for the research presented here: What are the causes of the decline of Barcelona's nightlife industry, particularly over the last decade?

As such, this article does not intend to provide a contemporary history of nightlife in Barcelona but rather focuses on the negative impact of the 15-minute city model on the fabric of the city's nightlife in those neighborhoods that have undergone profound urban transformation under this new paradigm of urban planning and development. Over the last ten years, Barcelona City Council has firmly implemented principles of urban design and planning based upon the 15-minute city model, predominantly through the creation of "superblocks" – pedestrianized areas without traffic (e.g., Anguelovski, Honey-Rosés and Marquet, 2023; Nieuwenhuijsen *et al.*, 2024) – along with other measures of tactical urbanism to prioritize the public use of streets (Balicka *et al.*, 2021; Nello-Deakin, 2022, 2024). The implementation of both superblocks and tactical urbanism in Barcelona has had evident positive effects, primarily in the reduction of air and noise pollution at neighborhood level, as well as in the increase of green public space (e.g., Nieuwenhuijsen, 2021; Cash-Gibson, Bretones Diaz, Marquet Sardà and Benach, 2024). Significantly, however, the urban transformation of Barcelona has also meant the emergence of "green gentrification" in neighborhoods transformed under the principles of the 15-minute city (e.g., García-Lamarca, Connolly and Anguelovski, 2020; Anguelovski, Honey-Rosés and Marquet, 2023). More importantly for the purposes of this study, there is also a parallel between the decline of the nightlife industry and the expansion of the 15-minute city model in Barcelona over the last decade. However, before presenting the ana-

lytical study proposed in this article, it is necessary to first provide a summary overview of the origins and expansion of the implementation of the 15-minute city model in Barcelona, as the next sections shows.

2. A SHORT OVERVIEW ON THE TRANSITION TOWARDS A 15-MINUTE BARCELONA

Since the second half of the last decade, the ‘15-minute city’ concept has spread as the new paradigm of urban design and planning in many cities worldwide, especially in response to the escalating impacts of climate change as well as in the wake of the social and health restrictions imposed by governments in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Allam *et al.*, 2022; Moreno, 2024; Vlahov and Kurth, 2024). However, while the concept of the ‘15-minute city’ may seem novel, it is not. Its fundamental principles are based on the concept of the ‘neighborhood unit’ concept, which was originally developed by the Chicago School of urban studies since the earliest decades of the twentieth century (e.g., Rohe and Gates, 1985; Rutheiser, 1997; Johnson, 2022; Brody, 2013).

According to municipal leaders and academics from around the world in favor of the implementation of this new urban design and planning paradigm, the 15-minute city takes the neighborhood as the spatial unit in which most residents can carry out their daily needs and activities within 15 minutes by walking or by biking, including their work, (daytime) leisure and cultural activities and accessing essential basic services (e.g. health and social care services) (Bocca, 2021; Guzman *et al.*, 2021; Moreno *et al.*, 2021; Pozoukidou and Chatziyianaki, 2021; Moreno, 2024). However, literature related to the 15-minute city has almost solely focused attention on the role of new forms of urban transport during daytime hours (e.g., Papas, Basbas and Campisi, 2023; Poorthuis and Zook, 2023), the improvement of the urban environmental conditions

at neighborhood level (e.g., Allam *et al.*, 2022; Murgante, Patimisco and Annunziata, 2024) as well as of residents' health (e.g., Allam *et al.*, 2022; Zhang *et al.*, 2023). Meanwhile, what could be termed the 'nocturnal 15-minute city' (i.e., the economic organization of the 15-min city *after dark*, the distribution of nighttime cultural, leisure, health and communitarian facilities and infrastructures in the neighborhoods of the 15-minute city, the management of public transportation at night and its adaptation to the new urban planning paradigm based on the 15-minute city, etc.) has still not received attention from the academic community, nor from the governmental sphere, nor from private actors, nor from the local communities – with the exception of Nofre (2024).

In Europe, the rapid expansion of the new urban planning and design paradigm based on the 15-minute city has had Barcelona (Spain) as the flagship city of this new urban planning paradigm in the continent. One of the major consequences of the implementation of the 15-minute city model in Barcelona has been the profound urban transformation of the city through the upgrading of public space, the redefinition of the city's functions and, consequently, the expansion of pedestrianized and green areas at the neighborhood level (e.g., Anguelovski, Honey-Rosés and Marquet, 2023; Vich, Gómez-Varo and Marquet, 2023). This "greening" of the city echoes part of the original proposal for the design of Barcelona's urban expansion by civil engineer Ildefons Cerdà, over a century and a half ago, in 1859. Many decades later, the 1931-1938 *Macià Plan*, which was conceived by the Catalan rationalist architect Josep Lluís Sert and the French architect Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris (also known as Le Corbusier), envisaged the creation of a residential area in Barcelona comprised of residential units measuring 400 x 400 meters (i.e., equivalent to nine blocks in the Eixample district) (Tarragó, 1972). These areas were designed to be closed to motorized traffic, with community facilities and leisure areas structured through green space located within the residential units. This plan was

recovered in 1987 by Salvador Rueda, at that time a technician at Barcelona City Council, and later the director of the Urban Ecology Agency of Barcelona during the period 2000-2020. As early as the 1990s, the 1998 Barcelona Mobility Deal was conceived for the reduction of CO₂ emissions through traffic by calming motorized traffic in central areas of the city as well as by promoting non-polluting vehicles for the reduction of air and noise pollution. In subsequent years, these proposals were consolidated into specific public policies in the areas of mobility, biodiversity and citizen participation. For example, it is worthy to be mentioned – among others – the 2012-2022 Citizen Commitment for Sustainability, the 2020 Green and Biodiversity Plan of Barcelona, the 2013-2018 and 2019-2024 Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans, the 2015-2018 Barcelona's Air Quality Improvement Plan, the 2016-2019 and 2020-2023 Municipal Action Plans, and the 2030 Barcelona Superblock Program –see a brilliant thematic review on this latter plan in Muzzini and Torres (2023).

The origins of the Superblocks program can be traced back to the urban regeneration of the Vila de Gràcia neighborhood – located at the lower side of Gràcia District, in the central area of the city – in 2003. This first program mainly involved the renewal of children's playgrounds, along with traffic calming measures, and the pedestrianization of streets in the historic center of the neighborhood, which lies in the central area of the city. Similar urban space upgrade models were imported to other Spanish cities, such as Vitoria-Gasteiz, in northern Spain) in 2008. Its success in the capital of the Basque Country led to Barcelona City Council to further promote the implementation of new superblocks in other areas of the Catalan capital located beyond the district of Gràcia through the deployment of the 2016-2019 Superblock program. This was accompanied by the *Let's fill the streets with life: The implementation of superblocks in Barcelona* program (*Omplim de vida el carrer: la implantació de les Superilles a Barcelona*, in original), launched in May 2016 by the Barcelona City Council's

Commission of Ecology, Urbanism and Mobility. The main objective of the *Let's fill the streets with life* program was to bring social interaction back to the city's streets by transforming public spaces for better individual and public health, by redesigning the streets for everyday leisure purposes at both the individual and collective level as well as by centering public space in a strategy towards a greener city in the short- and mid-term. Interestingly, the *fill the streets with life* program was based on so-called *ecosystemic urbanism* (Rueda, 2019), which was a new conceptual model for urban design and planning. According to Rueda, the city should be reorganized in 400 x 400 meter *urban cells*, whereby; (i) through the implementation of tactical urban planning, street crossings would become small pedestrianized squares, with greenery and children's games on the sidewalk; and, (ii) the circulation of motorized vehicles would be restricted to essential services, home delivery, distribution of low-tonnage goods, with restrictions on residents' private vehicles according to their CO₂ emissions.

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, Barcelona City Council approved the expansion of superblocks across the city by approving the 2030 *Barcelona Superblock Plan* (*Pla Barcelona Superilla*, 2030, in original) (see Figure 2 below). This plan contains the guiding principles contained in the 2022 report *Regenerating Barcelona: Urban model and public space* (*Regenerant Barcelona: Model urbà i espai públic*, 2022, in original) published by the Urban Model Commission of the Barcelona City Council. This report argues that the urban regeneration of the city should be carried out through "the recovery of space for citizens, enhancing the daily uses of public roads, favoring connectivity between neighborhoods by walking, with healthier and more sustainable means of transport (bicycle, scooter ...) or with collective public transport for longer distances" (2022: 7). However, it is surprising to note the absence in this report of any proposal to revitalize the urban productive fabric at the city level in the light of the city's pro-

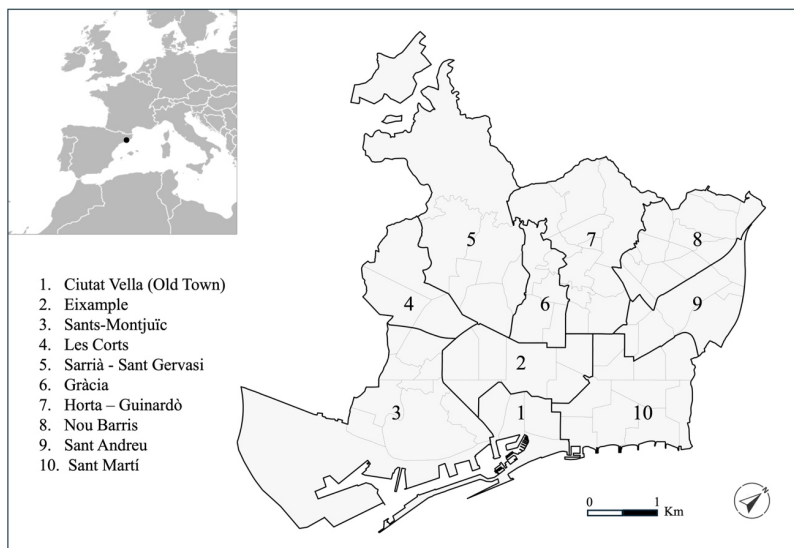
found transformation into a 15-minute city. In this sense, the report does only refer to the promotion of the so-called blue economy in the city's former Olympic Harbor, the development of a biomedical research hub in the wealthy western part of the city, and the development of urban land for mixed uses (residential, green spaces, clean industry, knowledge economy) in a former industrial zone located in the northern part of the city (see Figure 3).⁴ The report does not contemplate a single word about the role of the tourism industry in the city, which, with 30 million tourists visiting in 2023, accounts for 14% of local GDP and employs more than 150,000 people living in Barcelona.⁵ Furthermore, The omission of the tourism industry in this report is repeated in the case of nightlife. This is particularly astonishing when it is considered that the city council has recently echoed Resonance Consultancy's ranking of the city in its list of *The World's Best Cities 2024*, due to a number of factors including the city's proximity to the sea and mountains, its iconic architectural monuments, good climate, popular neighborhoods, and vibrant nightlife.⁶ However, the inclusion of the adjective "vibrant" the inclusion of the term "vibrant" in the case of Barcelona's nightlife does not correspond to reality. That is why the second part of this article examines the extent to which the implementation of the 15-minute city model has had direct or indirect implications for the viability of nightlife venues throughout the city over the last decade.

3. OBJECTIVES

Based on mixed method research, this article demonstrates how implementation of the 15-minute city model in Barcelona (Spain) has a remarkable parallel with the decline of the nightlife industry in the city over the past decade (2014-2024), especially in non-central areas of the city. Following a detailed presentation of the methods and materials used for the pur-

pose of this research, this article includes a brief explanation of the development and implementation of the 15-minute city model in Barcelona. After that, the article presents empirical data on the decline of Barcelona's nightlife industry over the last decade. In turn, the article focuses on two case studies: (i) the case of Consell de Cent superblock; and, (ii) the case of the Poblenou superblock and "Triángulo Golfo". The final part of this article proposes the introduction of the nightlife industry into the current Barcelona's 15-minute urban planning model towards achieving a socially inclusive and culturally vibrant city. The article ends up by arguing that the implementation of the 15-minute city model in Barcelona could also be seen as enacting an otherwise-concealed cultural and moral agenda for the promotion of "good leisure" (as opposed to nightlife, with its connotations of vice, immorality and sin), and, by extension, the "good citizen" (as opposed to the hedonistic, nocturnal citizen).

Figure 1.
LOCATION OF BARCELONA AND CURRENT ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISION
OF THE CITY AT THE DISTRICT LEVEL



Source: Authors, from ArcGIS Online.

4. METHODS AND MATERIALS

For the contextualization of the urban evolution of Barcelona during the last years we compiled the range of urban public policies, strategies and actions carried out by the municipal government during the last two decades with the aim of describing the origins and the development of the urban planning model in Barcelona based on the 15-minute city paradigm. This information was triangulated with existing academic literature on the 15-min city to assess Barcelona's role as a flagship city at the global level in the development and implementation of this new urban planning paradigm. On the other hand, the study of the evolution of the nightlife industry over time with disaggregated data has been an enormous challenge for this research. Spain's Directorate of Land Registry, for example, contains data on the evolution of the number of hospitality, cultural, and commercial venues in Barcelona (2014-2024), but does not contain disaggregated information by type of licensing. To obtain this data, the first author tried to access the (supposedly public) City Hall's database on the number, location and typology of nightlife venues in the city, but it was impossible to obtain such information. In the face of this institutional impenetrability, we opted to cross-check data from the census of ground floors devoted to economic activities (*Cens de locals en planta baixa destinats a activitat econòmica de la ciutat de Barcelona*, 2024, in original; GLPBAE hereinafter)³. However, the architecture of the database does not allow the construction of an automated selection function for nightlife venues, since the category 'license' is very poorly disaggregated, adding further problems for the statistical analysis of the above-mentioned nightlife venues' census.

For example, the census of economic activities located on ground floors of buildings in the city of Barcelona available for the years 2014, 2016, 2019 and 2022, presents a too-broad category, termed "Bars with performances / Bars with

live music / Pubs / and Discotheques". This aggregated category makes a detailed analysis of the city's nightlife industry and its evolution over time, by license type, impossible, given that the 2024 data are disaggregated according to specific types of licensing. In addition, the existence of serious errors, such as labelling a SandwiChez restaurant franchise under the category "Bars with performances / Bars with live music / Pubs / and Discotheques" (one of many similar errors detected), made it impossible to homogenize and systematize the georeferenced statistical information contained in GLPBAE for the specific period defined for the purposes of this research. In September 2024, however, the city council published another specific georeferenced database, *Music and nightlife venues in the city of Barcelona (Espais de música i copes a la ciutat de Barcelona*, in original), with disaggregated data by license type. However, this georeferenced database only shows a "current picture" of the city's nightlife industry without including data from previous years. Moreover, this georeferenced database also contains some slight inaccuracies. For example, more than 80% of the entries are doubled or tripled (an issue that was easily solved manually). There is also an inexplicable absence of some of the city's largest clubs (e.g., Sala Apolo, Sala Luz de Gas) as well as of some smaller underground nightclubs (e.g., Laut). In addition, this database contains entries related to nightlife venues that closed years ago. Surprisingly, however, the cartographic view of the *Music and nightlife venues in the city of Barcelona* database automatically resolves most of the errors detected in the matrix database.

With the aim of solving the errors found in the original database, we proceeded to manually cross-check (i) data contained in this geo-referenced database, (ii) data derived from the first author's *memory ethnography* (Fabian, 2010; Haripriya, 2020) on nightlife in Barcelona (1990s-2010s), and (iii) data obtained from netnography (e.g., Kozinets and Gretzel, 2024; Proietti, 2024) conducted by extracting qualitative

information from blogs managed by local historians (both amateur and academic) on the history of nightlife in Barcelona in the 2010s. Such a data cross-check allowed us to obtain a clean version of the original database. This clean version was also cross-checked with data relating to the evolution of Barcelona's nightlife industry from 2000 to 2023 obtained by two Spanish journalists after an arduous administrative process that resulted in the filing of a lawsuit with the Transparency Office of the Barcelona City Council (Pareja and Oliveres, 2024). Data obtained by both journalists are almost coincident with our clean version of the original database despite the existence of some minor divergences between the clean version of our database and the journalists' database. These minor divergences are focused on the specific case of few small bars operating beyond their licensing, especially in some of Barcelona's suburban working-class neighborhoods. These minor divergences are not significant to our analysis and have therefore not affected the findings presented in this article.

Our research was also informed by several prior studies on the current situation of Barcelona's nightlife. However, data contained in these studies are either too generic or contain significant gaps in relation to the statistical and geographic analysis presented. Specifically, the *Study on live music venues in Barcelona (Estudi dels espais de música en viu a Barcelona*, 2018, in original), published by the Barcelona City Council, assesses live music venues in the city, but does not refer to either pubs or nightclubs. Meanwhile, the *2023 Diagnosis of the nightlife industry and the hospitality industry in Barcelona (Diagnosi del sector de l'oci i restauració nocturna a la ciutat de Barcelona*, 2023, in original), published by the Barcelona City Council in collaboration with the Catalan Federation of Nightlife Venues, offers only an overall picture of Barcelona's nightlife industry by 2023. However, this diagnosis does neither show a detailed disaggregation of the data contained in the document nor present reliable

data on the evolution of Barcelona's nightlife industry over time. Therefore, while we are aware of the existence of these documents, the quality of the data contained therein has prevented us from using them for the purposes of this article. Finally, we conducted an exploratory netnography (Fenton and Parry, 2022) of the X/Twitter account owned by "S.O.S. Triángulo Golfo Neighbors' Association", which reflects the suppression of much of the nightlife of El Parc i La Llacuna del Poblenou neighborhood. Last but not least, a short statement on legal and ethical issues: our research has not led to the potential violation of national or European regulations on the protection of personal data.

5. THE NIGHTLIFE INDUSTRY IN BARCELONA IN TIMES OF URBAN ECOLOGICAL TRANSITION

The nightlife industry in Barcelona is currently concentrated in five spatial clusters (representing less than 10% of the city's territory), namely Old Downtown District (zone 1); the western area of the former industrial neighborhood of El Parc i la Llacuna del Poblenou in the Sant Martí District (zone 2); the Gaixample area in the Eixample District (zone 3); the lower part of the Galvany neighborhood in the Sarrià-Sant Gervasi District (zone 4); and the Vila de Gràcia neighborhood in the lower part of the Gràcia District (zone 5) (see Figure 2 below). The average density of nightlife venues across the city is approximately one venue per square kilometer. This value is much higher in the southwestern sector of the Eixample District, reflecting its proximity to the city center. However, the average value (approximately one venue per square kilometer) is reduced to a minimum in the rest of the city, except for the five clusters mentioned above (see zone 2 in Figure 2).

Table 1.
EVOLUTION OF THE NUMBER OF NIGHTLIFE VENUES IN BARCELONA
DURING THE PERIOD 2015-2023, BY LICENSE TYPOLOGY

	2015	2020	var.15/20 (%)	2023	var.20/23 (%)	var.15/23 (%)
Dance Halls	25	23	-8,00	17	-26,09	-32,00
Others	35	32	-8,57	25	-21.87	-28,57
Night Clubs	78	63	-19,23	52	-17.46	-33,33
Party rooms	107	96	-10,28	68	-29.17	-36,45
Bars *	187	167	-10,70	142	-14.97	-24,06

Source: Author, from manual cross-checking of OpenDataBCN (2024), Spain’s General Directorate of Land Registry (2024), and Pareja and Oliveres (2024).

The diminished presence or even non-existence of night-life venues in large non-central areas of the city as shown in Figure 2 can be explained by the institutionally-led strategies of social and moral sanitization of Barcelona’s working-class neighborhoods carried out by both the Barcelona City Council and the Catalan regional government since the mid-1980s (Nofre, 2010). Conservative and Catholic moralistic policies have persistently positioned nightlife as synonymous with vice, sin and immorality, as Nofre (2014) extensively demonstrates. It is not by chance that the last license for the opening of a new nightclub in the entire city was issued in 2012 (for Bling Bling Club, Tuset street 8-10, at the affluent Sarrià-Sant Gervasi District). At the time of writing, no other nightclub license has been approved since 2012 despite the central role of nightlife in tourism attraction strategies carried out by both public and private stakeholders since the celebration of the Olympic Games in 1992. In fact, nightclub licenses,

unlike those for any other economic activity in the city, expire if there is no replacement of activity within two years. This highly restrictive policy has not been modified at the time of writing. The refusal of the city council to authorize new licenses together with the non-renewal of current licenses and the reduction of the operating hours of existing establishments constitute key institutional strategies to reduce the size of the nightlife industry across the city. At the same time, the implementation of the 15-minute city model continues at a faster pace than prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Precisely, the next section examines the potential relationship between the decline of the city's nightlife industry and the expansion of the new urban planning paradigm of the 15-minute city. For this purpose, two specific case studies will be considered: (i) Consell de Cent superblock, and (ii) the Poblenou superblock and the so-called "Triángulo Golfo" (or "Scoundrel Triangle").

5.1. THE CASE OF CONSELL DE CENT STREET SUPERBLOCK

The city council's criminalizing approach to the city's nightlife is reflected in the 2023 *Land Use Plan of the Eixample District* (*Pla especial de regulació de les activitats de pública concurrència, comerços alimentaris i altres activitats del districte de l'Eixample*, 2023, in original; *PER-Eixample* hereafter), approved on 3 February 2023. Significantly, the Eixample District (see Figure 3) constitutes the key area of development in the 2030 *Barcelona Superblock Plan* (*Pla Superilla Barcelona 2030*, in original).

Figure 3.

TOP LEFT: MAP OF IMPLEMENTATION OF RESTRICTIVE MEASURES ON NIGHTLIFE ACTIVITIES IN THE DISTRICT OF L' EIXAMPLE.
 BOTTOM LEFT: THE COINCIDENCE BETWEEN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE 15-MINUTE CITY MODEL IN THE CENTRAL AREA OF BARCELONA AND CITY COUNCIL-LED ACTIONS TO REDUCE OPENING HOURS OF NIGHTLIFE VENUES. TOP RIGHT: PANORAMIC VIEW OF CONSELL DE CENT STREET IN FRONT OF WHICH THE OLD DISCOTHEQUE TRAUMA WAS LOCATED.
 BOTTOM RIGHT: FORMER TRAUMA NIGHTCLUB, TODAY HARMONY RESIDENCES OFFICE FOR SEASONAL RENTALS OF LUXURY APARTMENTS



Note: Dark blue areas show special restrictive measures. Light blue areas show less severe restrictions.

Source: Top left: *Land Use Plan of the Eixample District* (2023). Bottom left: *2030 Barcelona Superblock Plan*, modified by author. Top right and bottom right: Author, 28 February 2025.

Figure 3 shows the coincidence between traffic-calming measures and the greening of public spaces in the Eixample District, and those areas affected by (i) new restrictions on the operating hours of bars, restaurants, pubs and nightclubs; (ii) the suspension of new licenses for these kinds of businesses; and (iii) new strategies to “limit [the number of] bars, restaurants,

nightclubs and grocery stores” (*PER-Eixample*, 2023) to reduce noise pollution during nighttime hours. Crucially, the reduction of operating hours to be applied to both new and existing nightlife venues diminishes the financial viability of these businesses, since the economic activity of Barcelona’s nightlife typically begins at 11:30 p.m., in contrast with other geographic contexts such as cities in the UK, for example, where “evening and night-time economy” can be said to commence after 5:00 p.m.

While the severe lockdown of nightlife businesses for 22 months in response to the coronavirus pandemic had a strong impact on the financial-economic balance of the industry, employers in the sector declare that the impact of pandemic-related measures alone do not account for the crisis in the industry, citing also longer-standing factors, including “urban planning, the crisis [the Great Recession of 2008-2014] and unaffordable rents” (Castán, 2022). The fact that owners of nightlife venues mention urban planning is a very significant factor.

Table 2.
COMPARATIVE TABLE OF NIGHTLIFE VENUES
(LATE-NIGHT BARS*, PUBS, COCKTAIL BARS AND NIGHTCLUBS)
AT CONSELL DE CENT STREET IN 2014 (LEFT) AND 2024 (RIGHT)

Type of licensing	Name	Building no.	Type of licensing	Name	Building no.
Late night bar	Bar Lenny	161	Cocktail bar	Plata Cocktail Bar	233
Late night bar	Bar Isa Mar	175	Discotheques	Discooteca The Roxy Blue Bar	294
Pub	Ambarito	193	Pub	Bar Musical Bare Nostrum	384
Late night bar	Apunts Bar	217	Pub	Bar musical The Good Feeling	319
Cocktail bar	Plata Bar	233	Pub	Pub Ambarito	193
Late night bar	Bar Marcelino 2000	236	Night club	Club Red 58	280
Cocktail bar	Dicksy	247	Pub	Dmen's Gay Bar	257
Late night bar	Dietrich Cafe	253			
Late night bar	Atame	257			
Cocktail bar	The Ground Bar By Axel	267			
Cocktail bar	Lexis	269			
Cocktail bar	Mind The Gap Restaurant Coc	273			
Late night bar	Up	280			
Cocktail bar	Panam 75	281			
Night club	Trauma	288			
Night club	The Roxy Blue Barcelona	294			
Cocktail bar	Bare Nostrum	384			
Late night bar	El Demonio Alegre	420			

Source: Author, from manual cross-checking of OpenDataBCN (2024), Spain’s General Directorate of Land Registry (2024), and Pareja and Oliveres (2024).

Table 2 compares the number of nightlife venues (bars, cocktail lounges, pubs, music venues and nightclubs) between 2014 and 2024 in Consell de Cent Street by type of licensing. Table 2 clearly shows that four years after the imple-

mentation of the 15-minute city model in Consell de Cent Street (about three miles in length), the number of nightlife venues fell from 18 in 2014 to just seven in 2024. The question to answer, then, is to what extent each factor mentioned in the previous paragraph (i.e., the impact of the pandemic, the new urban planning paradigm, the impact of the 2008-2014 recession, and the steep increase in rental prices of commercial premises) has directly negatively impacted the nightlife industry—not only in the case of Consell de Cent Street, but also in the rest of the city. While discerning the influence of each factor at city level would be impossible without an extensive ethnography consisting of in-depth interviews with venue owners and managers, the data presented in this section show parallels with the following case study, which will provide the basis for the discussion of findings in the final part of the article.

5.2. *THE CASE OF THE POBLENOU SUPERBLOCK AND “TRIÁNGULO GOLFO”*

The Poblenou superblock was inaugurated in 2016, at the impetus of the municipal government led by environmental activist Ada Colau, with the launch of the *Let's fill the streets with life: The implementation of superblocks in Barcelona* program. Located at the western part of the Sant Martí District and bounded by Badajoz, Pallars, de la Llacuna, and Tànger streets, the implementation of this superblock was the outcome of a combination of tactical urbanism and the structural transformation of public space. However, unlike the case study presented in the previous section, there was no significant nightlife fabric in the area interior to the Poblenou superblock prior to its implementation.

Nevertheless, just 200 meters or so to the southwest is the main nightlife cluster not only of the neighborhood but of the city itself. This cluster, which is popularly known as “Marina”, began to spread across this small area of the western part of the Sant Martí District following the inauguration of

Sala Zeleste (now Sala Razzmatazz) at 122 Almogàvers Street in 1986, since this historical live music venue of the city was previously located at Argenteria Street in the old town district, between 1973 and 1986. In fact, there was only one music bar in the area until the opening of the new Sala Zeleste in Poblenou, namely Bar Ceferino, which has been since the early 1980s and still is a meeting point for local rockers and rockabilies. In the 1990s, and in the wake of the 1992 summer Olympic Games in Barcelona, the area knew a very significant growth in the number of nightlife venues, mainly music bars and nightclubs such as Bóveda, B.Good, Mephisto, Merlín, Be Good, Dixi 724, Garatge Club, Pepe Bar, Señor Lobo, D9, Q3, BB+, Hijos de Caín, among many others. Interestingly, many of these venues are still operating in the area, although some have changed their name and style (e.g., Pepe Bar, a haunt for fans of rock and metal in the 1990s-2000s is now Sidonie, a meeting place for fans of alternative, indie pop music).

The significance of the Poblenou superblock as a case study relies on the direct and indirect negative impact of the expansion of the 15-minute city model on the neighborhood's nightlife industry. In this sense, urban planning based on the 15-minute city paradigm resulted in the demolition of Merlín Discotheque, which was an iconic nightclub in the city. Located at 142 Avila Street, the venue opened on 15 May 1992. Both the façade and interior of the building were designed as a reproduction of a small castle. Over its 30-year history, Merlín constituted a leisure space for intergenerational and inter-class gatherings due to an eclectic musical line-up reflecting a variety of styles from different periods (e.g., rock, reggaeton, pop, etc.).

In January 2023, the managers of Merlín were informed that the owner of the property (an investment fund whose name could not be disclosed) had agreed to Barcelona City Council's development of new rental housing with only 10% of this real estate development reserved for social housing

– despite local legislation requires 30%. The non-renewal of tenancy automatically led to the cessation of the license. Crucially, since 2023, the city council’s authorization of new licenses for nightlife-related activities in this area of the Sant Martí District have been suspended (see Figure 4). At the time of writing, the plot of land is still empty; the Merlin discotheque has been demolished, and the residential units remain without being built up at the time of writing (see Figure 4).

Figure 4.

TOP LEFT: MAP OF THE AREA AFFECTED BY THE SUSPENSION OF NEW LICENSES FOR ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES RELATED TO NIGHTLIFE IN THE WESTERN PART OF THE SANT MARTÍ DISTRICT. TOP RIGHT: PROJECT FOR THE PUBLIC SPACE UPGRADING AND SOCIOECONOMIC REINVIGORATION OF THE 22@ TECH DISTRICT. IMAGE ON THE RIGHT: FORMER MERLÍN NIGHTCLUB PLOT AS OF MARCH 2025. BOTTOM LEFT: CURRENT STATE OF THE LOT WHERE THE MERLÍN DISCOTHEQUE WAS LOCATED. RIGHT BOTTOM: SOUTHERN CORNER OF “SCOUNDREL TRIANGLE”



Source: Top left: Sant Martí District Land Use Plan, modified by the author (2025). Top right: “22@ més inclusiu i sostenible” [“Towards a more inclusive, productive and sustainable 22@”], Barcelona City Council press release, 30 September 2020, modified by the author. Bottom left and bottom right: Author, 28 February 2025.

The Merlín Discotheque was a casualty of urban restructuring and the public space upgrade of the entire neighborhood of El Parc i La Llacuna del Poblenou. Both processes were profoundly linked to the transformation of this formerly suburban industrial area into the city's new 22@ Tech District. The origin of this tech district dates back to 2000, when Barcelona City Council approved a plan to transform 200 hectares of industrial land into an innovative business district focused on the strategic concentration of knowledge-intensive activities and ITC companies. However, the failure of this operation – mainly due to the impact of the Great Recession 2008-2014 in the purchase and leasing office market – meant that the city council shifted its strategy to attract new middle and upper-middle class residents to the area (e.g., Sánchez-Aguilera and González-Pérez, 2021; Pradillo-Caimari, Aleu-Barnadas, Balinhas and Di Masso, 2025).

Significantly, the Basic Statistical Area no. 208 – which coincides with the 22@ Tech District – presents an increase of 124.87% in its resident population between 2010 and 2024 (from 3,028 to 6,809 residents, respectively, according to data from the Continuous Resident Census of the Barcelona City Council).⁷ Furthermore, the Basic Statistical Area no. 208, which also contains most of the current resident population of the El Parc i La Llacuna del Poblenou neighborhood, is indeed a nightlife spot bounded by Àlaba Street (84-102, 75-89), Pere IV Street (37-77B, 34-76), Zamora Street (69-105, 66-90), and Almogàvers Street (107-139, 100-134). This nightlife area (see Zone 2 in Figure 6), measuring 0.038 square kilometers, is a source of tension between neighbors, partygoers and venue owners.

In the mid-2010s, some of the residents of this gentrified neighborhood created the S.O.S. Triángulo Golfo neighbors' association in response to noise from hundreds of young people partying in the middle of the street before entering large nightclubs in the area (e.g., Sala Razzmatazz). This area, which is still known popularly as "Scoundrel Triangle" (*Triángulo Golfo*, in original), is located roughly 300 meters

south of the former Merlín nightclub (see Figure 4 above). The main demands of the S.O.S. Triángulo Golfo neighbors' association have been for the suspension of licenses for new nightlife businesses, for a severe limitation of the operating hours of existing establishments (night bars, discotheques and 24/7 grocery stores), and for forceful police action against people drinking and chatting loudly in the middle of the street. Initially approved by Barcelona City Council on 20 December 2024, the *Sant Martí District Land Use Plan (Pla especial urbanístic d'ordenació de les activitats de pública concurrència, comerços i alimentaris i altres activitats del districte de Sant Martí, 2024*, in original) converts the neighbors' demands into on-the-ground action towards the pacification of "Triángulo Golfo" as well as of the rest of the 22@ Tech District during nighttime hours.

Nevertheless and importantly, It is worth noting here the legitimacy of the residents' protests against (i) crowds of people drinking and chatting loudly in the street at night, and (ii) live music events held in insufficiently soundproofed venues. In fact, and importantly, numerous studies have shown the negative impacts of noise exposure on the physical and mental health of residents in areas with a high degree of nightlife activity (e.g., Muzet, 2007; Halperin, 2014; Iannace, Trematera and Lombardi, 2021).

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS:

IS THE 15-MINUTE CITY MODEL DESTROYING BARCELONA'S NIGHTLIFE INDUSTRY?

Our findings reveal the real impact (direct and indirect) of the 15-minute city model on the fabric of Barcelona's nightlife at both local and city level. Therefore, the main objective of our discussion is to reflect on the reasons why the 15-minute city model – and, more specifically, the ecosystemic urbanism currently underlying recent Barcelona's urban transformations

– continues to criminalize and/or to constrain the nightlife industry in the city. Our findings suggest that the implementation of the 15-minute city model in Barcelona is focused on leveraging urban planning towards a significant reduction in the city's nightlife. In this sense, the limitations on operating hours, the suspension of new licenses, the demolition of nightlife venues, and the use of police force to prevent the gathering of individuals drinking and socializing loudly in the street entails a *de facto reconstruction* of intergenerational sociability associated with nightlife. Thus, the 15-minute city model in Barcelona can be seen as an iteration of an otherwise-hidden cultural and moral agenda fostering so-called “the good leisure” (and, therefore, “the good citizen”) and criminalizing “deviant leisure” (and, therefore, “the deviant citizen”) in Delgado's (2024) terminology.

Mentioning the conceptual binomials “good citizen / good leisure” and “deviant citizen / deviant leisure” is not superfluous. The institutional moralistic (and moralizing) conservative view on nightlife by the Barcelona City Council –as well as by the Catalan regional government – goes back a long way. Nofre (2010, 2014, 2015) examines how both the city council and the regional government have developed a whole set of actions aimed at the social and moral sanitation of Barcelona's nightlife especially since the 1992 Olympic Games – a key chronotope for positioning Barcelona within the map of global tourism flows. An example¹ of this institutionally-led social and moral sanitation of Barcelona's nightlife is the 1998 Barcelona Good Night Program (*Programa Barcelona Bona Nit*, in original). This program advocated for promoting nighttime youth cultural activities such as “(...) *studying, playing sports, visiting museums and exhibitions, participating in sociocultural activities, cycling, participating in a language exchange group (...)*” in order to “*bring a sense*

¹ For a comprehensive analysis on the social and moral sanitation of Barcelona's nightlife over the last two decades of the twentieth century, please see Nofre (2014).

of normality to youth nightlife" (Barcelona Bonanit, 1998: 1). Yes, esteemed reader, you read well: *normality*. Is it "abnormal" to go out to bars and clubs with friends?

Almost two decades and half later, very significant representatives of the (supposedly) left-wing and environmentalist municipal government led by Mayor Ada Colau (2015-2023) continued to consider dancing until dawn as abnormal element of moral deviance of the good citizen. In a radio interview on 17 July 2021, after being asked about the future of the city's nightlife, Albert Batlle (Deputy Mayor for Public Security) responded that it made no sense for Barcelona to have social or economic activity after 3:00 a.m., stating that "nightlife should close at 1:00 a.m." (*RAC1*, 17 July 2021). In accordance with this, Jordi Rabassa (Councilor of Ada Colau's political party in the city council) posted on X/Twitter, on 16 September 2022: "the Maritime Front of Barcelona is saturated with nightlife". For Rabassa, four nightclubs (Opium, Shoko, Pachá, CarpeDiem) and four pubs (P41, IceBarcelona, Oda, The Coconut) within a 1.2-kilometer stretch constituted a saturation of nightlife in the city's beachfront area. In this light, Rabassa's statement and Batlle's proposal can be seen to reflect a punitive, criminalizing discourse on nightlife as synonymous with vice, sin and immorality. Interestingly, the semiotic (and semantic) background of both Batlle and Rabassa discourse is similar to the vision on nightlife that all Barcelona's autocratic and/or fascist civil governors had until the restoration of democracy in 1978 (Villar, 1996).

Be that as it may, the lack of planning for the nocturnal 15-minute city puts at risk the role of Barcelona's nightlife industry as (i) a central element of the city's tourism marketing strategies (*Observatori del Turisme a Barcelona*, 2024), (ii) one of the most important contexts for emerging urban (and suburban) music scenes (e.g., Camacho, 2008; Castilla, 2015), and (iii) one of the city's main assets for the social and cultural life of many local people—not only young peo-

ple, but also adults and elderly people in their sixties and seventies. It is worth noting that recent literature has highlighted the importance of nightlife in achieving more socially inclusive, culturally vibrant, and environmentally sustainable local communities (Collins and Cooper, 2017; Brennan, Collinson, Connelly and Lawrence, 2019; de Vries, 2023).

To date, however, the cohesive and innovative role of the nightlife industry is excluded from any local urban agenda in Europe (Nofre and Garcia-Ruiz, 2023). The decline of Barcelona's nightlife in relation to the implementation of the 15-minute city model would confirm the argument made by Khavarian-Garmsir, Sharifi, and Sadeghi (2023), who argued that 15-minute city model fails to consider the needs of different social groups with regard to access to cultural venues at the neighborhood level. Interestingly, a growing number of scholars have empirically demonstrated that nightlife plays a key role in facilitating integration, social cohesion, inclusion, community-building and socio-emotional wellbeing in European cities (e.g., Campkin and Marshall, 2018; Mecca, 2019; Krammer and Wittmann, 2023; Nofre, 2023; Thurnell-Read, 2024). The integration of the nightlife industry into the city's urban planning towards a socially inclusive and culturally vibrant 15-minute city thus emerges as necessary and urgent. The institutional refusal to address this reflects an evasion of one of the great challenges facing the present and future of our cities: the design of the *nocturnal* 15-minute city.

7. ENDNOTES

1. The two main blogs consulted were: Barcelonamemory and Barcelofilia – Inventory of a Vanished City.
2. See full report at: <<https://www.internations.org/expat-insider/2024/best-cities-for-expats-40486>>.
3. Please see: <<https://opendata-ajuntament.barcelona.cat/data/es/dataset/cens-locals-planta-baixa-act-economica>>.

4. According to the European Commission, blue economy refers to all sectoral and cross-sectoral economic activities based on or related to the oceans, seas and coasts. For further information, please see: <https://blue-economy-observatory.ec.europa.eu/eu-blue-economy-sectors_en>.
5. Data retrieved from: <<https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/economiatreball/es/que-hacemos/turismo-y-promocion-de-la-ciudad/turismo>>.
6. For further information, please see: <<https://www.barcelona.cat/internationalwelcome/en/noticias/barcelona-ranked-the-eighth-best-city-in-the-world-1328626>>.
7. Due to Law 12/1989, of 9 May 1989, on the Public Statistical Function, and Organic Law 3/2018, of 5 December 2018, on the Protection of Personal Data and Guarantee of Digital Rights, only population data by sex at the basic statistical area level are public.

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