
The Ponent neighbourhoods of Tarragona

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The phenomenon of immigration in Tarragona began around the 1960s, as it did almost throughout Catalonia. At that time, entire families moved from inland Spain to large industrial cities like Bilbao, Barcelona and Madrid. In Tarragona, shanties began to emerge along the Francolí River. Most of these families were the first residents to move into the neighbourhoods of Torreforta and Bonavista after their economic situation improved. They bought small plots of land and helped each other build their homes on Sundays and public holidays. And thus, the first residential nuclei in the city's Ponent neighbourhoods were established.

With the industrial boom, the establishment of the Empetrol refinery – today Repsol – and the first industries – Asesa, IQA, Monsanto, Tabacalera, Loste, BIC, the Seindensticker shirt factory, ALENA and the port – attracted families seeking a better economic situation and opportunities. It is interesting that some families have mentioned that they were forced by the Franco regime (in power at that time) to leave their villages, sometimes without even knowing why. All this new industry also led to the emergence of a host of small workshops and retailers providing auxiliary industries and services. This, in turn, promoted apprenticeships in the trades. Today, some residents claim having worked in the same trade their entire lives, having begun as apprentices and retired as official tradesmen.

The need for labour was so high that in order to house workers, companies created residential areas or housing nuclei. This is how Parc Riu Clar neighbourhood was created, with homes built by ASESÀ, Enher and the Reus air base, popularly known as “aviation blocks”, as well as the area with homes from IQA and Hispánica in Torreforta. Other initiatives – like La Sindical flats in Torreforta, the Caixa d'Estalvis buildings in La Granja and homes built by private enterprises like RODAL S.A. in La Floresta – managed to meet the housing needs of the people who were

flocking to the city of Tarragona. Obviously, the public administration could not miss out on the construction boom and jumped on the bandwagon to promote the development of Riu Clar and later in Campclar, built by ADIGSA. All of this was happening haphazardly, in a scattered fashion, with everyone building their own flats or houses with no thought for urban planning, facilities or mobility.

These factors led neighbourhood movements to hatch in different areas. The residents of Torreforta demanded facilities and forced the authorities to make the first concessions: on the one hand, the promotion of the Universitat Laboral to meet the demand for specialised workers in industry and of trade schools; on the other hand, the creation of schools – Gual Villalbí, the temporary buildings in Parc Riu Clar and the ad-hoc Àngels school, which operated out of the ground-floor retail in La Granja.

The creation of Torreforta parish and, more importantly, the arrival of the Jesuits led to the creation of organised groups and the promotion of activities, fostering a sense of neighbourhood identity. We must acknowledge figures like Xammar, Sisco, Agustí and Father Juan and their efforts to promote social movements. The Jesuits were also more highly educated than the rest of the population, where there were high illiteracy rates.

The needs became apparent and more organisations were formed. The first neighbourhood associations were also set up in Torreforta, Bonavista, La Floresta, La Granja, Parc de Riu Clar and Riu Clar with the participation of leaders like Carrasco, Javier Elias, Martín Bravo, Àngel Juárez, Elena Regidor, Xammar, Agustí and Barroso. Basic needs like road surfacing, public lighting, drinking water, medical services and nursery schools began to be met thanks to large-scale mobilisation. A neighbourhood candidacy was even formed (*Candidatura per la Participació Veïnal*), securing two councillors in Tarragona City Council in 1979.

Public administrations joined in with initiatives, although they were never well managed. *Esperança* neighbourhood was created, initially called the “absorption settlement”, signalling the eradication of shantytowns in Tarragona and prompting a major social inclusion project for disadvantaged groups, although it was shut down suddenly by authoritarian decree. In the late 1970s, Campclar – a large social housing estate – was set up. It was designed on the basis of sound urban planning criteria. There was no need to stint on space; it had wide streets, plenty of parking and spacious courtyards in each apartment building for a garden or open space for the residents. Unlike those built by private enterprise, the flats here were not small.

A bad decision was made at the call for tenders, resulting in embezzlements. What city leaders had viewed as idyllic later turned into a nightmare. The neighbourhood was conducive to people looking for a flat without the commitment to pay for it. Construction halted, the gardens were abandoned, the surrounding empty space turned into dumpsites and rat turf... People felt uncomfortable. Many left the neighbourhood. They were embarrassed to say that they lived in Campclar. The press unfailingly reported on any criminal acts that occurred or were perpetrated by residents of the neighbourhood, which became notorious.

Neighbourhood associations like Casal l'Amic fought to combat this situation. The sports and cultural organisations that cropped up in the neighbourhood, as well as private initiatives, poured all their effort into improving the situation. Some residents felt uncomfortable and ignored or simply left the neighbourhood. They were the pessimists, who felt they had a different social status. Others took a different tack and felt the neighbourhood was theirs, so they fought from the inside to transform it, to create a climate of peaceful coexistence and solidarity. They were the optimists, who fought the elements and institutions.

Social welfare took over the reins, but became a bottomless pit of resource malfeasance of the kind no neighbourhood had ever seen. They were never able to manage these resources properly. Community plans, social projects and a succession of technicians, coordinated by an ineffective Administration, failed to yield the desired outcomes.

Social movements were strong and had a great deal of power to get people to join their causes. Not only were they concerned with quality of life near the homes, they were also calling for overall improvements. Price increases or healthcare services were the reasons behind many protests. At one of these events at La Granja primary care facility, the Catalan Mossos police force came out heavily against the residents who were asking for improvements to healthcare, resulting in several residents being wounded as they were chased out, with several arrests made.

All this potential was unsettling the political class. The Administration itself initiated processes and implemented policies to try to dismantle these movements, for instance by creating new parallel movements and attracting their leaders into political parties. The number of residents' associations in the same neighbourhood doubled, and new ones were set up for other sectors. "Masos particulars" were established: community facilities such as retirement homes or sporting organisations with managements specifically appointed to align with what was dictated by the political party in power at the local administration. This move was largely successful.

Today the organisations are in the process of adapting to new challenges brought about by the new social landscape in our neighbourhoods. The goal is to influence the policies implemented in our local area and our neighbourhoods and to ensure that the policies and actions meet the needs of the people living there, not the party's interests, following the logics of "They vote for me here or they don't". We are obliged to ensure we deliver on residents' interests. Today, now that the urban planning problems and lack of facilities have been overcome, we aim to guarantee the quality achieved in the welfare state, healthcare services and education, ensuring that people who need care receive it, while preventing social fragmentation or exclusion.

The outlying zones of this city, as with the majority of cities, tend to be where people from elsewhere congregate. Integration and conflict-resolution mediation measures fall short. We residents have lost control of the streets, we do our work in premises and community centres, if there is one, and we only hesitantly protest issues that would have created an open battlefield in the past (healthcare, price increases, company closures, public transport shortcomings). We ourselves speak out against the arrival of immigrants. Multiculturalism is viewed not as a source

of richness but as a problem. In the Ponent neighbourhoods, there is a changing reality that has sparked doubt and fear among people rather than creating opportunities. The population is increasing while the services remain stuck as they are; consequently, they end up becoming insufficient and overwhelmed. This is where the first difficulties arise between residents or when it comes to peaceful coexistence, with all the clichés we know too well. The student-teacher ratio at schools has risen dramatically. For example, the ratio at CEIP Mediterrani is twice what it was four years ago, and CEIP Mare de Déu dels Àngels has reached full capacity.

The population that arrived to form the workforce in the 1970s has aged, and this makes access within older homes harder as many of them are not adapted and also have no lift. There are few resources for the elderly. Ponent is an evolving zone which, just like most of society, is facing both difficulties and opportunities. Its unemployment, absenteeism and school drop-out rates are higher than in other areas in the city, and it is easy to point out specific areas where the figures speak for themselves.

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