



Històric Dossier

El Besòs i el Maresme
Barcelona

1. INTRODUCTION

Origin of the 'El Besòs i el Maresme' neighborhood

Located at the end of Barcelona closest to Sant Adrià de Besòs, the El Besòs i el Maresme neighborhood was born in a space then known as the Bosquet de Sant Martí, a tilled territory that would be transformed, at the end of the fifties, to respond to the demand for housing derived from the newly arrived population, mostly from the south of Spain.



Figure 1: Boundaries of the El Besòs i el Maresme neighborhood
Source: Neighborhood Plan of El Besòs i el Maresme - 2021-2024

Initially, two housing estates were built separated by the current Rambla de Prim (old Horta stream): on the west side, the Maresme estate was built on a long terrace of land in 1956, made up of isolated blocks of considerable height; and three years later, next to the east, the Sudoeste del Besòs estate was born, with high-rise residential blocks and semi-detached single-family houses.



Figures 2-3: Photographs of the origin of the neighborhood

<https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/santmarti/es/el-distrito-y-sus-barrios/el-besos-i-el-maresme/historia-del-besos-i-el-maresme>

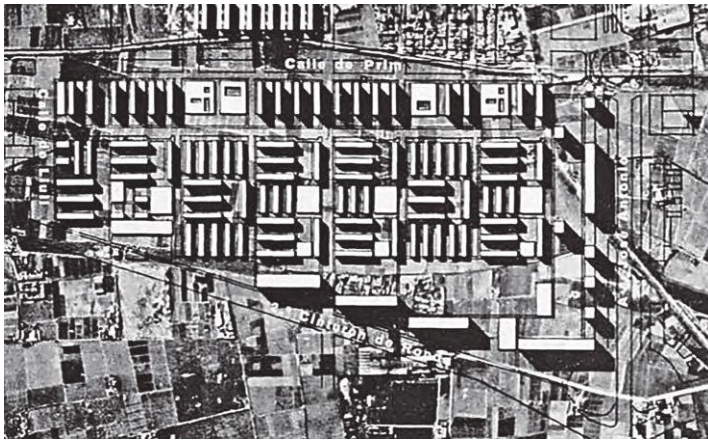


Figure 4: Photomontage of the original Partial Plan



Figure 5: The neighborhood in the 80s, on the left, the separation and the lack of urbanization that Rambla de Prim still represented.



Figure 6: Blocks in the Sudoeste del Besòs estate



Figure 7: Block and semi-detached houses in the Sudoeste del Besòs estate

Source Fig.4-7: 'Una mirada reflexiva al desarrollo urbano del polígono Sudoeste del Besòs', Miguel Guerra Mirón

The construction of these housing estates occurs at a time of profound legal and institutional changes in the state management of housing construction, which were intended to respond to the deficit derived, above all, from internal immigration. They were built under the figure of the Partial Plan for the Levante Norte area, and while the Maresme estate was privately promoted, the Sudoeste del Besòs estate was promoted by the Municipal Housing Board, within the framework of the Social Emergency Plan promulgated as a result of the Social Urgency Law of 1957. At that time, Barcelona began to show urban planning problems linked to the high density of the center and the consequent problems of circulation and habitability. Thus, although there was still a lot of Eixample unbuilt, it was decided to occupy the perimeter of the municipal area, in such a way that El Besòs i el Maresme was born precisely in the administrative limits of the city. It is also interesting to explain that the wedge where this new neighborhood is proposed was in the Cerdà Plan (1859) and in the Jaussely Plan (1903) within the area planned for a large city park in contact with the Besòs River.

The construction of both estates ended at the end of the sixties. However, at that time, the urban repercussions of the actions and the integration of the new urban fabric with the city remained in the background, since importance was given mainly to the number of houses to be built. Thus, residential construction was not accompanied by the urbanization of public spaces or by a provision of services and equipment that gave an adequate response to the needs of the newly arrived population. In addition, the low cost of the intervention and the limited construction time condition the quality of the buildings, so that, later, structural deficiencies would also arise in the homes. It is also worth mentioning that the organization of the urban fabric established a separation between commercial and residential activity, typical of rationalist thought.

Starting in the 1980s, processes of requalification and integration in the city based on the improvement of urbanization and construction were launched. In addition to urbanizing the Rambla de Prim, which may be the key pedestrian connection point with the city, an exhaustive analysis of the housing stock was carried out. In 1995, the replacement of the buildings affected by aluminosis began through the neighborhood redevelopment program signed by the Ministry of Public Works, the Generalitat de Catalunya and the Barcelona City Council. Since then, there have been different stages of rehabilitation of farms, based on successive agreements signed between administrations, and which have resulted in the construction of new homes (some of which have been subsidized housing), the rehabilitation of homes with structural pathologies and the installation of elevators in some farms.

Parallel to the process of improving the housing stock, the neighborhood underwent a major transformation with the 2004 Forum of Cultures, a city project that generated controversial opinions both due to its development and its impact on the territory and its residents. In 2016, near the Forum, the Diagonal-Besòs Campus of the Polytechnic University of Catalonia also came into operation, specifically at the intersection of the streets of Sant Ramon de Penyafort and Eduard Maristany, between Barcelona and Sant Adrià de Besòs. However, the process of transformation of this coastal area, which followed the regeneration derived from the 1992 Olympic Games, has not reached El Besòs i el Maresme, unlike its neighbor, Poblenou, with which each time presents a greater contrast, despite the social and cultural ties they shared in the past.

2. THE HOUSING ESTATES

An itinerary through Besòs

The housing estates of the second half of the last century have left an unmistakable landscape in Barcelona. It could not be otherwise if we consider the size of the elements, their peripheral location—in spaces that, at that time, were still virgin and surrounded by fields—and the visual impact of the blocks and towers—a type of building that little had been experienced in Barcelona at that time. The construction of the housing estates meant, therefore, the sudden appearance of new neighborhoods, different from those that had been forming on the outskirts of Barcelona since the 19th century.



Figure 8: Aerial view of the Verneda estate, 1953-1955



Figure 9: Blocks of the third phase of the Sant Martí estate, 1984



Figure 10: Newly built blocks in the La Pau estate, 1963-1966



Figure 11: Dwellings in Diagonal Mar, 1988

This appearance immediately led to a dialectical battle between the new and old components. In contrast, the new housing estates not only contrasted physically with the existing city, but also welcomed new residents —very often the result of immigration— with their own characteristics, which differed from the more established, more traditional and older population of the old nineteenth-century urban fabrics. However, the latter were also due to experience a strong urban densification and an important social transformation shortly.

The great expansion area of Barcelona in the 1950s and 1960s that we analyzed, and officially named the Levante zone (as opposed to the Poniente zone foreseen by the 1953 Regional Plan at the top of the Diagonal), was a “urban back”, separated from the Eixample by the railways, where cultivated fields alternated with the old dye factories, and accessible only by the old path of La Verneda —or by Calle Pedro IV, the old Carretera de Francia. Calle de Guipúzcoa had to be opened in 1957 so that it would be well communicated with the center and create an urban support axis. From that date, the housing estates quickly occupied all the spaces around the new road and beyond.

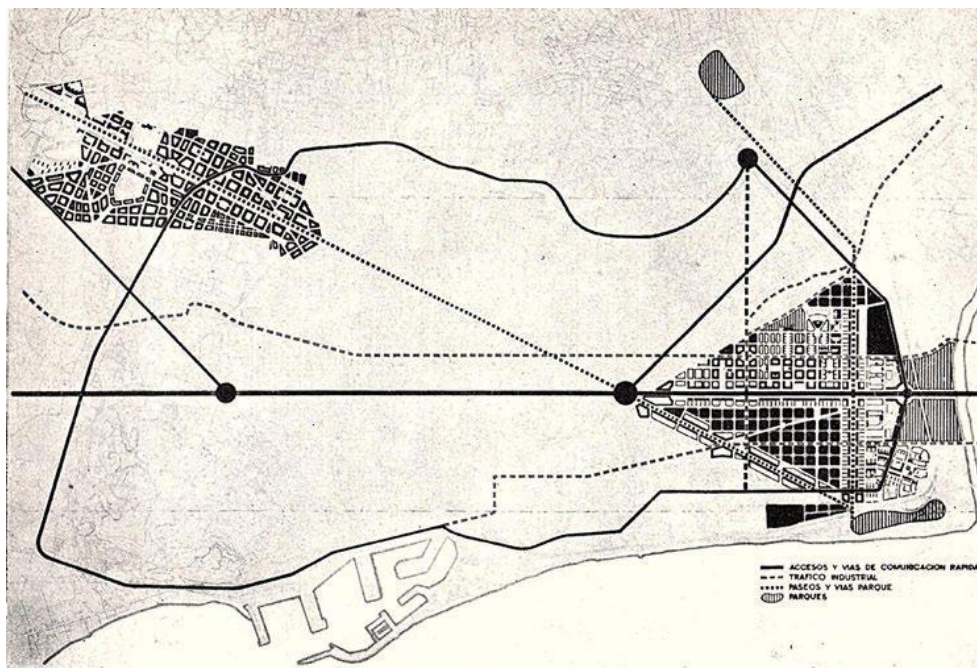


Figure 12: Diagram of the two main intervention areas (Ponent and Levant), and detail of the general land management of the Levant area.

Source: La ciutat dels polígons. Un itinerari pel Besòs. MUHBA Collection Room Notebooks (32)

The partial plan for the Levante area, approved in 1955, later materialized into two independent partial plans: the northern Levante area and the southern Levante area, divided by the extension of the Gran Via (the future Mataró motorway). The northern zone concentrated the majority of the housing estates, and configured a large residential sector on the axis of Calle de Guipúzcoa, while the southern zone grouped the industries that existed, with a reorganization of the industrial sectors, but also structured two Main axes: the extension of the Diagonal and that of the Rambla de Prim —on the axis of the Riera de Horta—, a space where the Besòs and La Mina housing estates were later built.

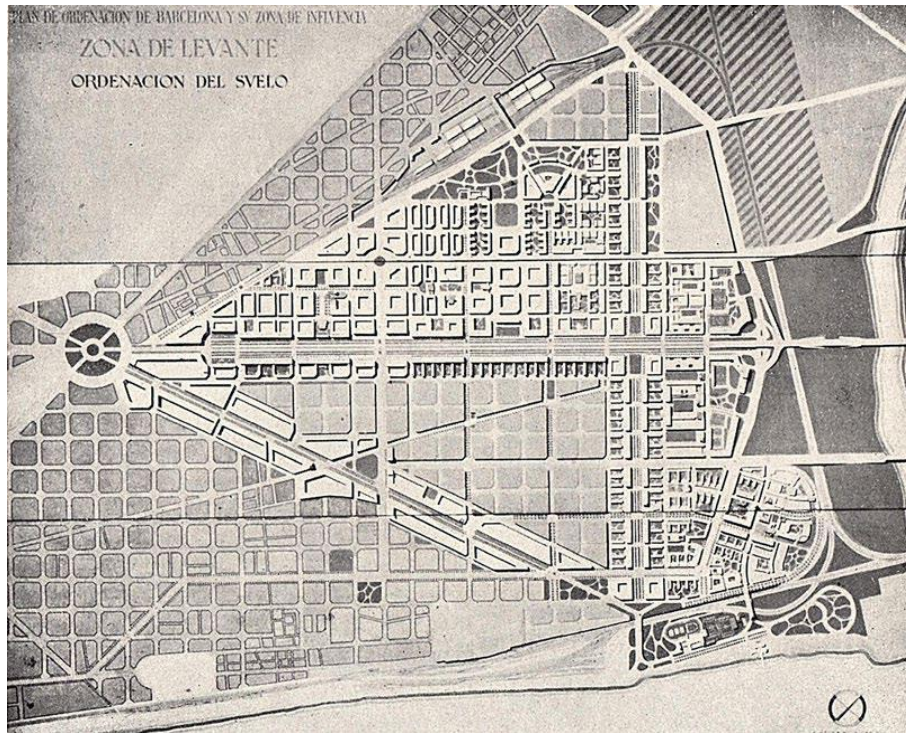


Figure 13: Image of the Partial Planning Plan for the Levante area, north and south sector, 1955
 Source: La ciutat dels polígons. Un itinerari pel Besòs. MUHBA Collection Room Notebooks (32)

The new estates that were included in this area totaled more than 25,000 homes: a revealing sample of what was the development operation of the moment: the investment of capital accumulated during the postwar period in the real estate sector, with a first push from the public sector. , meant the beginning of the generalization of home ownership, with profound effects on society and the subsequent history of the city.

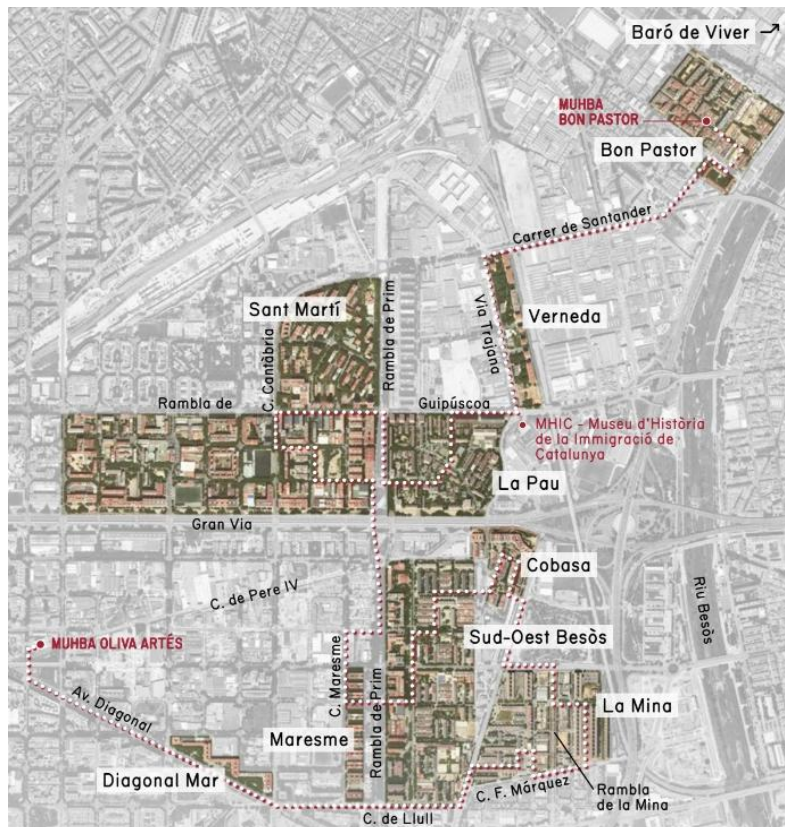


Figure 14: Itinerary through the most representative estates of the Levante area
 Source: La ciutat dels polígons. Un itinerari pel Besòs. MUHBA Collection Room Notebooks (32)

3. HOUSING ESTATES WITHIN THE STRATEGIC SITE



Figure 15: Semi-aerial photo of the European 2023 Strategic Site
Source: Barcelona City Council

3.1 Sudoeste del Besòs

CONSTRUCTION: 1959-1965

PROMOTER: Municipal Housing Board

AREA: 34.5 ha

HOMES: 4,823

The incipient political opening from the 1959 Stabilization Plan had an obvious repercussion in Barcelona, especially in the world of culture, but it also affected its architecture and urban planning (with the 1957 International Urban Planning Congress and the cultural activity of the College of architects). The Municipal Housing Board organized visits to several European countries and tried to recover the ideas of the Modern Movement and the action of the GATCPAC, which had been interrupted by the Civil War. The promotion, around 1960, of the Montbau and Sudoest del Besòs industrial estates is inscribed within this framework, commissioned by the team of then young architects Subias, Giráldez and López Iñigo, representatives of a new way of doing things.

The Sudoeste del Besòs estate was projected with the aim of linking up with the streets of Pla Cerdà, still half-open in the Poblenou sector, based on a module that combined buildings of various types -towers, linear blocks and aligned single-family houses - with small squares and which integrated the different facilities. The densest strip, with commercial ground floors, was located along the Horta stream, which would later become the Rambla de Prim. It was an approach, together with the Montbau industrial estate, that contrasted quite a bit with what the State had out at once.

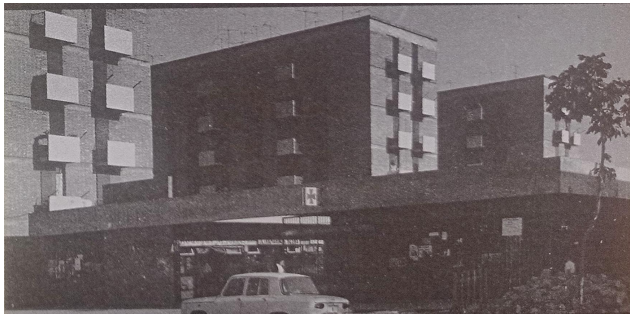


Figure 16: Blocks type A, 6th project phase



Figure 18: Blocks of the first phase of the estate, 1962



Figure 17: Mayor Josep Maria de Porcioles, accompanied by other authorities, visits the estate, 1960

Sources: Fig. 16 - De les cases barates als grans polígons, El Patronat Municipal de l'Habitatge de Barcelona entre 1929 i 1979 / Fig. 17-18: La ciutat dels polígons. Un itinerari pel Besòs. MUHBA Collection Room Notebooks (32)

Despite the fact that the initial urban project was interesting, the deficient construction and the deficiencies in the urbanization of streets and squares have accompanied the estate almost from the beginning. Although urbanization has progressed sufficiently —with pavements, landscaping and lighting—, construction defects, especially the appearance of aluminosis in the structures, have not ceased to constitute a source of conflicts and claims, today in the process of being redirected by Barcelona City Council through Pla de Barris. The process of inspection, diagnosis and current programming of repairs and improvements could be rounded off, however, with some more upscale urban actions.



Figure 19: The Rambla de Prim before being urbanized, seen from Carrer de Pere IV, 1980s



Figure 20: Protest by residents of the Sudoeeste del Besòs neighborhood over housing conditions, 1976-1977

Fuente Fig.19-20: La ciutat dels polígons. Un itinerari pel Besòs. MUHBA Collection Room Notebooks (32)

3.2 Maresme

CONSTRUCTION: 1958-1960

DEVELOPER: Private

AREA: 4.5 ha

HOMES: 960

The Maresme housing estate, a private initiative and contemporary with the Sudoeste del Besòs estate, actually consists of a total of eleven double-bayed blocks eight stories high, which are lined up like dominoes between the Rambla de Prim and Calle del Maresme, from which it takes its name. The promotion did not include free spaces or equipment and was limited to building the blocks, with the minimum urbanization necessary. The double bay, as a mechanism to intensify its density, prevents cross ventilation of the houses. It is a group of houses built in the shadow of the Sudoeste del Besòs, which has also benefited greatly from its proximity to the Rambla de Prim.



Figure 21: Semi-aerial photography of the Maresme housing estate



Figure 22: Maresme Blocks, 2022

Source: Google 3D y StreetView

3.3 Cobasa

CONSTRUCTION: 1963-1964

DEVELOPER: Private

AREA: 13.0 ha

HOMES: 2,100

The Cobasa housing estate, also a private initiative, which will appear somewhat later than the previous ones, in 1963, concentrates more than 2,000 homes in a relatively small space. It constitutes an appendix to the Southwest Besòs industrial estate, which extends to Gran Vía (today the motorway), and ends up outlining the road junction with a twelve-story, double-bay building, which has a replica on the other side of the motorway. The polygon is projected adopting the guideline of the Sant Ramon de Peñafort roundabout, which conflicts with that of the Sudoeste del Besòs, and leaves some poorly resolved intermediate spaces. The urbanization of both squares, with the Besòs Cultural Center and the trees, largely save the public space. Crossing the street, we find the sports center, the soccer field and the Besòs park.



Figure 23: Block of the estate, 2022



Figure 24: Semi-aerial photo of the Cobasa housing estate

Source: Barcelona City Council and Google 3D

3.4 La Mina

CONSTRUCTION: 1969-1973

PROMOTER: Municipal Housing Board

AREA: 17.1 ha

HOMES: 3,345

La Mina, in the municipality of Sant Adrià de Besòs, is a representative estate of the large operations of the 1970s, where the large housing blocks did not quite define urban spaces on the appropriate scale and where, due to the urban situation more isolated or complicated, the difficulties of urban and social integration are more noticeable. The fact that the Ronda del Litoral and the railway occupy more than half of the perimeter, and that the remaining space is occupied by the Besòs Park and the Ronda de San Ramón de Peñafort — a road devoid of character and with practically no urban façade —, define a fairly closed enclosure, a situation that has contributed to the complex social problems that, at different times and degrees, the polygon has endured.



Figure 25: Semi-aerial photograph of the La Mina estate



Figure 26: Children playing football in La Mina, 1986

Source Fig.25-26: Google 3D y 'La ciutat dels polígons. Un itinerari pel Besòs. MUHBA Collection Room Notebooks (32)'

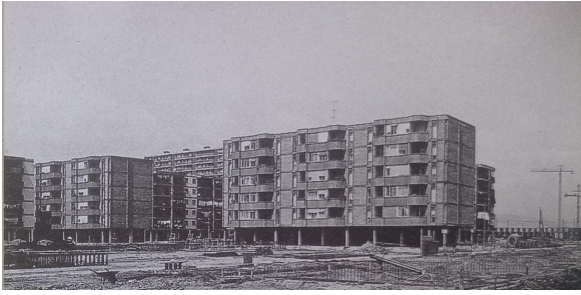


Figure 27: Blocks 21, La Mina



Figure 28: Blocks B, La Mina



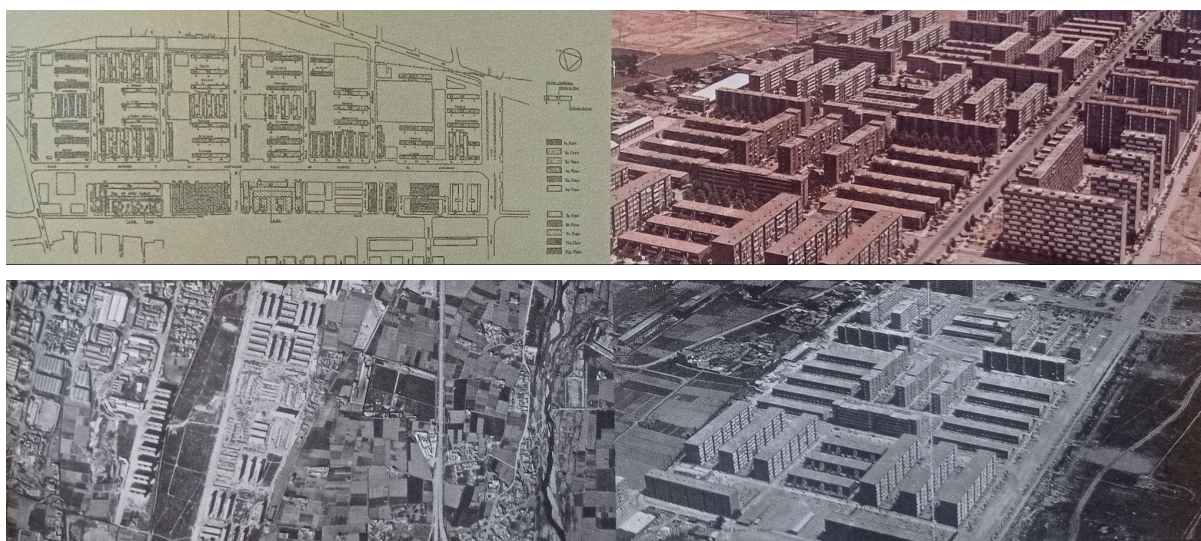
Figure 29: Blocks of the polygon, 2022

Sources Fig. 27-28: De les cases barates als grans poligons, El Patronat Municipal de l'Habitatge de Barcelona entre 1929 i 1979 /
Fig. 29: Barcelona City Council

There have been several urban initiatives that have tried to improve the situation of La Mina. The special plan approved in 2007, which led to the opening of the Rambla de la Mina, which crosses the industrial estate from the Besòs park to the Fòrum 2004 area, with the aim of reproducing the success of the Rambla de Prim, has had a positive effect; however, it lacks the density of population, commercial and urban activity of the Rambla de Prim. The construction of the Diagonal-Besòs university campus, on the southern edge of the industrial estate, is another success, which should attenuate the barrier function that the Ronda del Litoral and reinforce its continuity to the Forum through the final roundabout of San Ramón de Peñafort and the pass under the Ronda.

4. THE URBAN DEVELOPMENT MODEL OF THE SUDOESTE DEL BESÒS ESTATE

The original Partial Plan had a very clear configuration, whose internal organizational structure has survived to this day, and proposed a correct response to the conditions of the moment, with an idea of a "self-sufficient" neighborhood with respect to the city, proposed with great economy of means. , and a very careful idea of union between the neighborhood and a limit of the Ensanche not yet built but with a well-defined geometry. The land was located between the Gran Vía de les Corts Catalanes, the second Beltway, the Rambla del Prim and Calle Lluïl. The Plan contemplates a central nucleus of lower buildings and more modest houses, with a model that tries a variety and typological richness, mixing six-story buildings with others of two floors, and reserving a space in each interior superblock for educational or commercial facilities.



Figures 30-31: Occupation Plan for the housing estate drawn up in 1959, executed in 2 Stages and 12 phases
Source: De les cases barates als grans poligons, El Patronat Municipal de l'Habitatge de Barcelona entre 1929 i 1979

This internal configuration was the heart of this plan which, conditioned as it was by low budgets and the necessary speed of action, emphasized the game of solids and voids as an aesthetic guideline, becoming the pride of the council and the city. for embodying the principles of the Modern Movement. In fact, when the "First Housing Talks in the Mediterranean" were organized in Barcelona in 1961, sponsored by the Ministry of Housing, a visit to the first phase of the Polígono del Sudoeste del Besòs was included in the program, where the Catalan authorities showed with satisfaction at what they perceived to be the best thing the council had done. But the visitors reacted scandalized when they saw the large lots where schools, markets and social facilities should be empty.

The edges were proposed as a protective frame. We can observe two very clear situations: the large blocks towards the Cinturón de Ronda, made up of large fourteen-story housing units that were intended to build the image of the entrance to the city, and the eight-story blocks towards the Rambla de Prim, in contact with the city, which are located perpendicularly and reserve large plinths for commercial uses. This first approach, despite a well-planned geometric configuration, suffers from a real connection with the city: it was not until the 1990s that the Rambla de Prim was developed satisfactorily, which should have been the most well-kept pedestrian connection between the neighborhood and the city. , and which until then housed the towers and high voltage cables and had poor urbanization. The urbanization of this Rambla, added to other internal operations aimed at establishing benchmark urban spaces (such as the one generated by removing a six-story block to create Plaza Juliana Morell), have notably improved the neighborhood.

On the other hand, transportation to the city was also quite deficient until well into democracy. In addition, the lack of attractive facilities for the city, (for which there was no longer space in the center) that would have meant a greater life for the industrial estate, has just established the lack of interest of the complex in the context of the city. The difference in the edges of the original proposal and the current configuration of the neighborhood can be explained by the ambiguous situation that occurs when part of the original Industrial Park is located outside the limits of Barcelona. Despite the numerous changes and the adaptation process undergone by the neighborhood, its internal spatial structure has endured to this day, especially the effective internal planning, which maintains the original concepts and values of the neighborhood, and allows a good tour and reading of the same to the pedestrian.

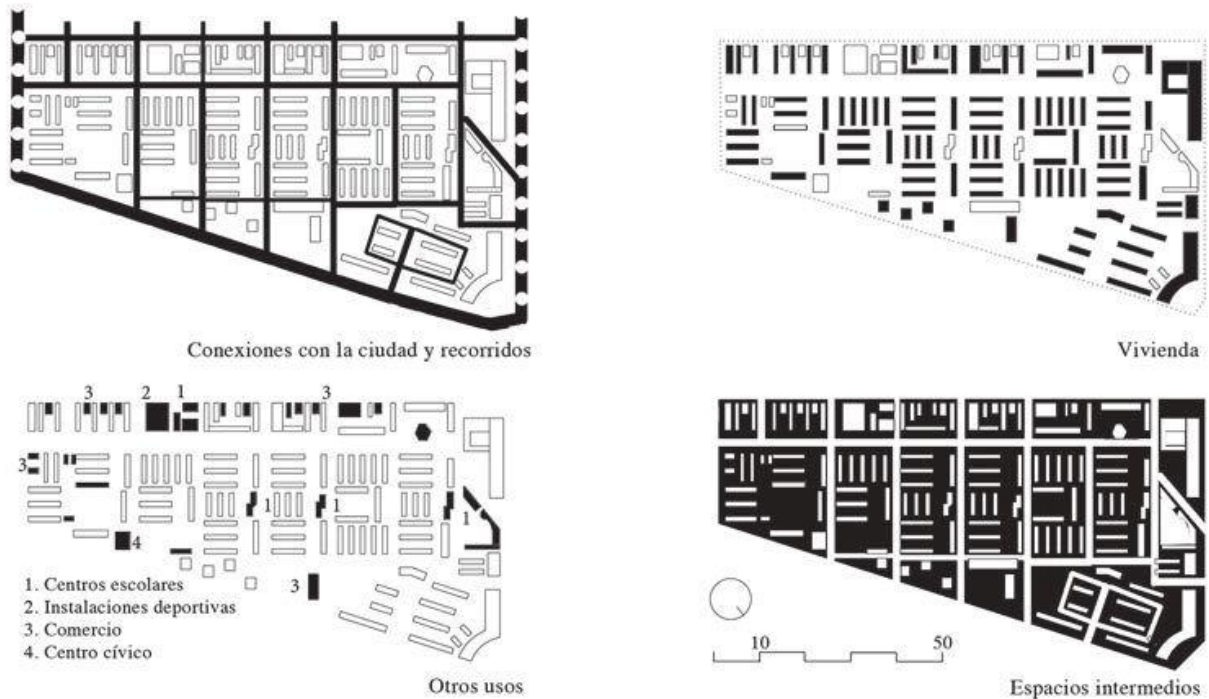


Figure 32: Diagrams of connections, uses and intermediate spaces.

Source: 'Una mirada reflexiva al desarrollo urbano del polígono Sudoeste del Besòs', Miguel Guerra Mirón

Despite having been considered as a single volumetric intervention, the reality and pace of execution of the housing estate was very different and some parts of it (specifically the north corner and the entire façade towards Ramón Penyafort street) were completely reconsidered, being built with a higher housing density and with a volume outside the order of the complex.

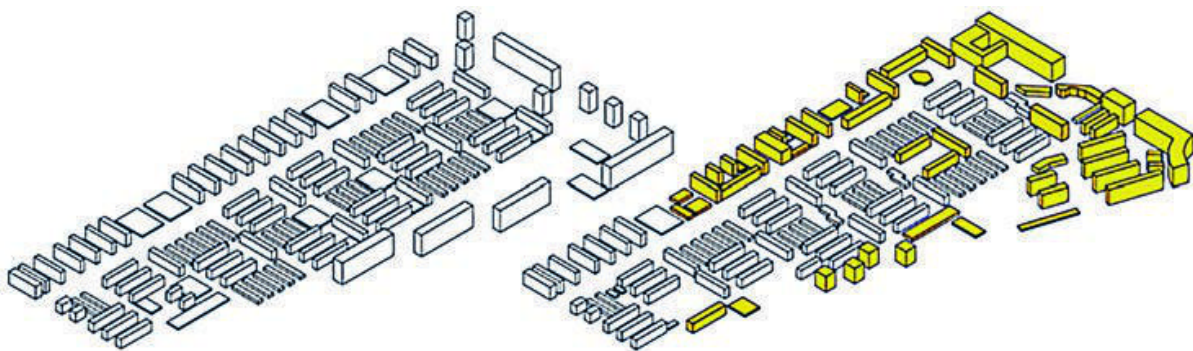


Figure 33: Original partial plan versus actual urbanization of the estate

Source: 'Una mirada reflexiva al desarrollo urbano del polígono Sudoeste del Besòs', Miguel Guerra Mirón

It is very interesting to carefully observe the internal fabric of the neighborhood. The drafters of the original Plan entrust the success of the intervention precisely to the articulation and dimensions of the spaces between the buildings, but it is precisely at this point, particularly in the deficiencies in the design of the intermediate spaces and in the public-private gradation, where we also find the great deficiencies of the whole. In the photographs of the first executed phases of the complex, we can observe the use of small hedges and the arrangement of a few trees, but we do not read the possibility of using these large surfaces between the blocks. Óscar Tusquets criticizes the excessive monotony, which creates “depersonalized free spaces devoid of any atmosphere” and lacks squares or semi-enclosed spaces. The lack of hierarchy or sense of belonging generated by this same configuration causes the intermediate spaces to deteriorate rapidly, which is worrying given that these places become much more relevant in an open layout such as the polygon than in an area of the city with less percentage of public spaces.



Figures 34-39: Photographs of patios/spaces between blocks
Source: Barcelona City Council