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Debate

El Born, Barcelona: you are about to visit 8,000 square meters of public archaeology on action

by Laia Colomer (laia.colomer@lnu.se)

In September 2018, the 24th Annual Meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists will be held in Barcelona. The Welcome Reception will be offered at the El Born Centre for Culture and Memory, an archaeological site of 8,000 sq. metres portraying the late mediaeval and early modern city of Barcelona, as well as a heritage site. It is introduced by the centre itself as ‘a space created by the city to encourage and promote the memory of local and national events, as well as those affecting communities around the world’. Since being discovered in 2000, El Born (in its Catalan form, or simply Born) has become one of the most emblematic and contentious archaeological sites in Barcelona. Moreover, it is also one of the most uncharted public archaeology controversies in Europe, and well worth knowing. One of the issues that has extensively resonated is the patriotic or nationalistic dimension that occurred during its opening in 2013, happening alongside the Catalan independence process (2010-2017) which transformed El Born into ‘Ground Zero of the Catalans’, as defined by its director at that time.

Figure 1: El Born Cultural and Memorial Centre, main façade © Marta Torrents

El Born was created and developed as a heritage project during this significant decade within the recent history of Catalonia, and more than any other cultural facility in Barcelona has undoubtedly been affected by the political movements and ideological discourses of the time. It is the best urban archaeological representation of the September 11, 1714 defeat, which is today commemorated as the National Day in Catalonia. But El Born is more than only an example of the politics of nationalism in Catalonia. The project was initially defined and then subject to the cultural policies of the so-called ‘Barcelona model’, a model followed by many cities when aiming to link urban renovation with cultural policies. This model strongly marked the way El Born was managed, and its identity as a site
open to the public. Here I aim to provide to the reader – hopefully an attendee of EAA Barcelona 2018 – with a rich and multi-perspective vision of El Born as an example of public archaeology today. Through that, the reader will be able to identify applicable public archaeology issues, such as the relation between the archaeology and historiography of modern Europe, the lack of an European vision of national heritage discourses, the position of archaeology in relation to urban development practices, issues on community heritage in gentrified neighbourhoods, the role of archaeological heritage in contemporary cultural policies, and the politics of identity and the heritage of national minority groups in today’s Europe.

The archaeological site

El Born is one of the biggest and best-preserved European archaeological sites from the early modern period situated in an urban context and open to the public. By the late 17th century, Barcelona had consolidated a decisive economic transformation of its region towards a proto-capitalist system of production. It was a prosperous, diverse, economically dynamic and connected city, thanks to thriving trade with immediate surroundings and the rest of the world. Barcelona seemed to be a diverse society in its cultural origins and in social status, keen on imported exotic products (especially tobacco and chocolate), and happy to perform many religious street events and festivities. The urban pattern was a mixture of a trade guild-based structure side by side with the emergence of new forms of production and commerce, and within this fabric civil authorities rubbed shoulders with religious powers and people of high social status.

El Born is a good testimony of this urban fabric. Big changes, however, were caused by the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714), in which much of Europe fought for political control of the continent and consequently of trade with overseas colonies, pitting the supporters of the Austrian Habsburg dynasty (Austria, England, Portugal and Catalonia) against those of the Bourbons (France and Spain/Castile). The final stage of this conflict was decided in Catalonia, with a siege in Barcelona that lasted two years. The besieging troops broke into the city precisely through the Born area. The end of the war and the victory of the Bourbon troops led, among other things, to the physical disappearance of much of the Born area to build a citadel there. The military complex was complemented by a surrounding area free from buildings, or Esplanade, which was created by demolishing a part of the Ribera neighbourhood – what is known today as the Born neighbourhood. In urban terms this meant the demolition of over 1,200 houses and the disappearance of 42 streets, and the eviction of 20 % of the population of Barcelona to other parts of the city or else outside it. El Born has unearthed just 5 % of what was lost to the Ribera neighbourhood in 1717, but enough to understand the city dynamics at that time: 63 houses, 10 streets, the end of the water channel (known as the Rec Comtal) and a bridge, plus a large numbers of sewers. Part of the area excavated includes workshops and industrial establishments (tanners, furriers, dyers, weavers and others), taverns, shops and public gaming establishments. Other areas excavated include the houses of rich merchants, diplomats, and humble residents (fishers, artisans, local sellers etc).

The site also provides a highly graphic illustration of the destruction involved in creating the esplanade: all the buildings are levelled to the same height, cut off at ca. 1.5/2 metres above ground floor level. Because of the planned nature of the destruction of the neighbourhood, most valuable construction features – lintels, decorative features, grilles, doors and so on – as well as domestic equipment still in use, do not appear in the archaeological record: residents carried off all the valuable materials to rebuild their houses and their lives elsewhere. Nevertheless, thousands of objects have been recovered and studied, and some of them are today on display in the permanent exhibition at Born CCM. In parallel to the archaeological site, Barcelona has large county archives preserving the detailed and extensive administrative and legal documentation dating back to mediaeval times. This has made it possible to compare all the archaeological remains and the thousands of artefacts unearthed with documentary sources. Combining both sources, El Born is one of the finest historically documented early modern archaeological site in Europe. The War of the Spanish Succession is a complicated matter and still lacks a multidisciplinary understanding of all the
international issues and national circumstances involved. Today, it includes archives in Austria, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and Portugal, with documents written in several languages. Interpreting the events of 1714 and its material culture only in Catalan terms risks losing all references to its European significance, in terms of picturing daily life in modern times and as part of the political formation of today’s nation-states, because the Barcelona defeat finally concluded what the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht established for Europe and the Americas.

From the 19th century onwards, Barcelona began a process of modernising the mediaeval streets of the city, which culminated with the construction of the Eixample district. One of the basic foundations of this process was the demolition of the citadel (1841), which became a large, open public park, the redevelopment of the Esplanade into a neighbourhood, and the construction of the Born market (1878), which served as the city’s wholesale fruit and vegetable market until 1971. All these changes had an enormous impact on the old esplanade’s subsoil, except for the market itself, due to its light structure (its foundation is made of columns only 60 cm deep). In 1971, Barcelona’s city council planned to demolish the old Born market and redevelop the area into a car park. However, several campaigns were launched in 1977 by residents to prevent this, aiming instead to transform the old market into a space for public use.

![Figure 2: Three urban and historical moments of modern and contemporary Barcelona.](image)

This was without a doubt the greatest victory of grass-root movements over post-Francoist town planning policies. The first democratically-elected city council (1979) bowed to public demands to preserve the market, and the first architectural restoration work was carried out in 1981, though not to convert it into a centre for popular culture. The market hall remained empty until 1997, when Barcelona city council decided, together with the Catalan government and the Spanish Ministry of Culture, to make it the home of the provincial library. This required renovating and adapting the old market building and constructing three underground levels, and therefore a phase of rescue archaeology began (2001–2002). A public debate on the cohabitation, or not, of both cultural infrastructures began. Barcelona city council finally decided to conserve the whole site in situ and to move the library to another location. After a long decade of architectural rehabilitation and archaeological preservation works, the former Born market once more opened its doors in 2013, this time transformed into a cultural centre with the remains of the city of 1714 restored and open to the public.

**Stones, Books and Flags**

When the decision was taken in 1997 to house Barcelona’s long-requested provincial library in the market, the first architecture project proposed both substantial architectural changes to the original (scheduled) market building, and the complete removal of the archaeological site. Accordingly,
extensive rescue excavations were undertaken, and this presupposed acknowledgement of the value of the site as a heritage place. This turned the architectural intervention into heated discussion around the question of whether there was an institutional interest in installing a library there while undervaluing archaeological heritage. In fact, the 1990s and 2000s were a time marked by the last phase of the so-called ‘Barcelona model’, that transformed Barcelona from a dull post-Francoist provincial place into a vivid cosmopolitan city, a process that gained highest momentum around the 1992 Olympic Games, but had evolved after into a model for city place-branding, urban speculation, and socially unsustainable cultural tourism.

In this context of creative culture as a successful recipe for urban renovation, the city authorities mostly view archaeology as both a disruptive factor for the city’s progress and as a cultural asset more connected with traditional views of culture (like museums) than with the use of culture as a means of social inclusivity and creativity. Professional parties had undertaken valued initiatives for the enhancement of archaeology in site museums, but were unable to creatively align the archaeological heritage with the city’s cultural policies. The arguments over the preservation or otherwise of El Born were an example of these perceptions.

What finally turned the archaeology of El Born into a recognized heritage site was certainly the scale of the site and its magnificent state of preservation, but also its historical and symbolic/political values. El Born also reshaped the city policy discussion on cultural management when the debate about its preservation moved from the political and professional spheres into the local newspapers, turning the issue of the preservation of the archaeological remains of El Born into a matter for public debate. During 2000–2002, the press played a key role in this political and public debate by publishing opinion pieces by intellectuals, architects, historians and politicians; the hundreds of letters to the editor sent by ordinary citizens also played a role. Here, all the voices and opinions were portrayed in a debate that was focused interestingly (and surprisingly) not on urban redevelopment vs. archaeological heritage, but on whether the city should care for an archaeological site or a public library (‘stones vs. books’). An analysis of this debate is a healthy measure of public perceptions on the role (or its lack) of archaeological heritage in contemporary Barcelona, with positions ranging from social interest, cultural necessities, historical relevance, patriotic discourses, urban policy dictates, cultural tourism interests, and conservative heritage arguments.

During the phase of public debate about the future of El Born, a document produced by local leading archaeologists, historians, architects and museum experts proposed a particular way of presenting the finds by creating a new kind of cultural centre. This was the project idea that the city council accepted. It conceived the site on the basis of both its symbolic nature and cultural dimension. In symbolic terms, the new heritage place was aimed to act as a monument and memorial to all urban populations who suffer wars. This cosmopolitan discourse was directly linked to the intention of the Barcelona city council at that time to stop El Born from being turned into a mausoleum to glorify the victims of the 1714 defeat. The cultural dimension came across with the idea of defining the site to be open to the public as a multi-purpose centre for cultural activities. Hence the first name “El Born Cultural Centre” (El Born CC). In fact, the Barcelona city council has explicitly defined museums in Barcelona as a service rather that a social or cultural product in itself, maintained by the local authorities to foster other local cultural entrepreneur activities, mainly tourism, or creative events (i.e. performing arts, conferences and meetings, crafts). El Born CC was to be defined accordingly, and transformed the archaeological remains into the setting (the backdrop) for other cultural and intellectual activities seen as more relevant to the cultural development of Barcelona.

In the middle of implementing the Born project, the 2011 municipal elections moved the administration of the city council into the hands of a centre-right party professing Catalan nationalist ideas. Its effects were soon visible in the Born project: a new director brought a new museum discourse aiming to turn the future centre into a space devoted to the Catalan patriotic epic of 1714. The symbolic nature of the site quickly became the setting of Catalan nationalism and pro-independence feeling, and this was immediately implemented through changes in the opening
temporary exhibition, more patriotic elements in the interpretation of the site, a pole 17.14 metres high with a Catalan flag installed in front of the centre, and the opening of the El Born CC in September 2013 to coincide with the beginning of the institutional commemorations of the Tercentenary of the defeat of September 11, 1714.

The political turn of Barcelona’s city council happened to occur at the right moment to transform the archaeological site of El Born into an emblematic historical place for the existing nationalistic discourses in Catalonia. However, four years later the 2015 municipal elections brought another change with the victory of a new left-wing political party, which rejects both Catalan and Spanish nationalism discourses. Consequently, El Born saw another ideological turnaround: a new direction, and this time a new name. El Born Centre for Culture and Memory ceased to be devoted to the historical memory of the War of the Spanish Succession, and became a commemoration place for the people and groups who fought for democratic freedom in the course of the 20th century. In this new framework of local contemporary history, the archaeology of 1714 remained again in the background: the accidental theatrical setting for other memories and other historical facts also linking to political repression in Barcelona, but actively ignoring the early modern past that made it an archaeological heritage site.

**Final considerations**

The importance of El Born lies primarily in the fact that the archaeological remains are unique in Europe in the way they illustrate the history of a city between the 16th and 18th century. However, the process of turning the old market into a cultural centre including a site museum is also of special relevance to current debates on public archaeology in European cities. It is basically about the role of archaeology and archaeological heritage in the social, economic, and cultural development of city branding strategies, urban regeneration interventions, and tourism activities in post-industrial cities touched by managerial liberal models. The cultural policy and ideological debate surrounding this model is something that as professionals we might need to participate in, if we think that archaeology and archaeological heritage have a critical social role in today’s society. Worth thinking about while enjoying your visit to Born CCM and participating in the EAA Barcelona 2018!

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* This text is a short new edited version of a comprehensive article “Stones, Books and Flags: El Born and the Role of Archaeological Heritage under the Barcelona Model”, recently submitted (January 2018).