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Contemporary engagements within corridors of the past: Temporal Elasticity, Graffiti and the Materiality of St Rock Street, Barcelona

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Abstract

In a medieval Barcelonan side street, urine, rubbish and a bewildering array of graphic imagery splatters the narrowing walls between two major thoroughfares. A contemporary conflict between residents, unknown artists and others is played out using banners, bottles, stickers, posters, stencils, spray paint and bodily substances. In this shadowy liminality, local and global debates are superimposed upon substructures constructed from disease, prostitution and the Saint of the Plague. The continuing urban struggle constitutes temporal statements of dirt and purity, violence and humour, dominance and resistance, death and salvation. Like the renovated facades masking the crumbling remains of structures long neglected, the local council's literal whitewashing of the art is a temporal cover-up of a discursive symptom stretching from deeply embedded preconditions. However, from his niche in the angular bend of the short side street bearing three names, the statue of St Rock remains unblinkingly staring, raised above the contestations expressed below him.

Keywords

archaeological attitude, contestation, graffiti, materiality, pollution, temporality

Situated in the medieval Gothic quarter of Barcelona, a narrow alleyway connects two busy thoroughfares while paralleling the always crowded Ramblas Avenue. Most people stroll by, entirely unaware or simply uninterested by the modest sign announcing, Carrer d'en Roca (Mr Roca Street). For those who do choose to leave the crowded thoroughfare, they may traverse a street just 172 m long and scarcely 3 m wide. In stark contrast to the bright main roads, the narrows of this alley are illuminated only dimly: a shadowy, unwelcoming atmosphere gives way to a sharp angle approximately half way along the street, providing a space slightly wider than before. At this midpoint nook, a small chapel or shrine appears in the angle, about 3 m high on the south-east-facing wall above a second sign stating Sant Roc (Saint Rock). Within the chapel niche, muted lighting glows from behind a statue looking down upon those rare walkers passing by (Figure 1). It is here, and in the moment of passing through, that St Rock Street comes into being. Moving on, the street narrows once more, the corners again become obscured in the dark, before it re-emerges into the busy foot traffic at the end of what a third and final signpost reads Calle de Roca[1].

[1] Note: Even though this street has three names, we choose to use St Rock Street in our title since the statue of St Rock (the Saint of the Plague) was placed in its mid-point as a consequence of the dynamics of the street's temporal and material history. This is the subject of this article. However, we often utilize the more conventional names En Roca Street, Roca Street or similar variants in the bulk of our discussion since these are the designations for the street that appears in documentary sources.

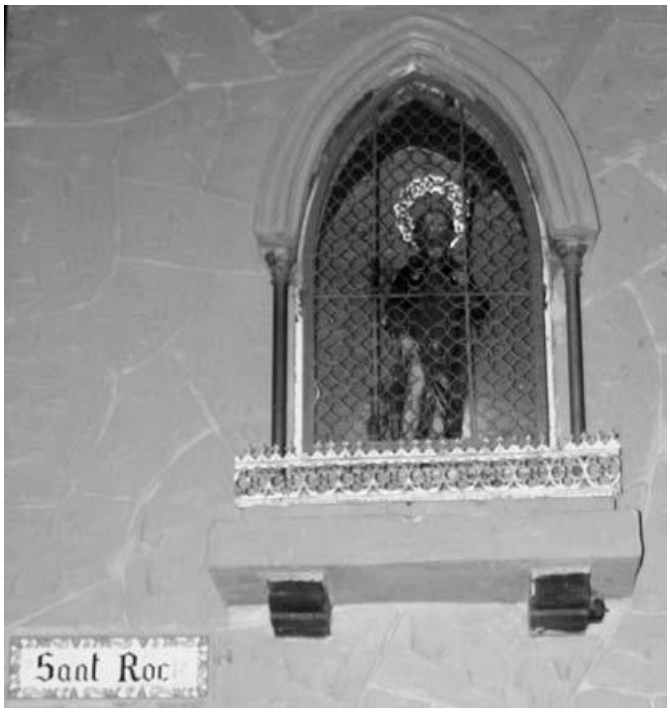

Figure 1. Statue of St Rock in his niche.

Inescapable to the eye is the graffiti profusely applied at intervals along the walls of this street bearing three names. Trash, urine, and other detritus reflecting 'impure' or unsavoury behaviour are most conspicuous in the mid-alley kink, inhabited by the statue of St Rock. There is a marked contrast between the main thoroughfares, relatively clean of graffiti and rubbish, and the sprawling examples of painted and other statements in the confines of the alleyway. Ferrell's argument that graffiti in the North American city of Denver 'constitutes a form of anarchist resistance to political and economic authority' (1993: 187) provides one explanation for the placement of such 'anti-social' materiality adjacent yet separated from mainstream population corridors. Similar to Ferrell, more recent studies have examined the social, artistic and political context for the making of graffiti (for instance Bowen, 1999; Halsey and Young, 2006; Kan, 2001; Peteet, 1996; Phillips, 2002; Rahn, 2002; Ross et al., 2001). Fewer studies have taken into account graffiti as material culture (for instance Rivière, 2005), while it is even rarer for research to adopt an explicitly archaeological approach in considering deeper urban temporalities influencing the actions of modern inhabitants such as graffiti makers (for a time perspective, see McCormick and Jarman's [2005] look at life-histories of urban murals in Belfast). In an environment constituted wholly of material culture, graffiti – like other examples of archaeological materiality – quite literally 'draws upon the past' (cf. Robinson, 2006). Even as the constructed environment provides the material preconditions for urban behaviours, the contemporary inhabitants may be unaware of that past. It is in this sense that contemporary engagements occur within and are influenced by the corridors of the past, but not necessarily from conscious preunderstandings. Rather, the past may be influential in subtle and often unappreciated ways. Different materialities have different scales, in degrees of endurance and influence. Overlapping through time, different forms of material culture stretch through portions of urban history. This temporal elasticity enables past material culture to play roles in the present at particular places. It is because of this interplay between time and space-and-material culture that this is fundamentally an archaeological issue. Since the past may

exert influences in ways beyond people's awareness, rather than take an ethnographic approach, we adopt what we term an 'archaeological attitude' to explicate ongoing material engagements within contemporary social interactions occurring in the specific space of St Rock Street. It is a space where past conceptions of purity are reflected in present contestations. Through this study of the material and social history of a single alleyway in Barcelona, we show how the past subtly but tenaciously exerts influence within contemporary engagements.

A historiography of the impure: 'bad life' people of en roca street

Ferrell (1993: 7–10) has traced the roots of modern graffiti to the hip-hop sub-culture scene of the mid-1970s, starting in New York before proliferating internationally (see Chalfant and Prigoff, 1987). The graffiti sprawled on the walls of St Rock Street is a contemporary example of the growth of this modern form of urban graphic imagery. However, we examine the art here not from an international perspective, but rather as an in situ process. This is not to deny the global influences at work – indeed, we will discuss how some of the art directly addresses discourses on nationalism and globalism – but in environments with deeply situated histories such as the city of Barcelona, the localized 'city as theatre' (see O'Keeffe and Yamin, 2006: 91–5) is seen as the primary setting for discourses in modernity to play out. As an exemplar of a performative space, the corridor of St Rock Street is a stage where graphic displays are mapped. This modern example of urban graphic imagery led us to investigate its urban genesis and growth documented graphically in medieval and later maps (see de Beaulieu, 1698). Documentation suggests this area's urban shape was already developed by the end of the 13th century (Busquets and Pastor, 2005: 122), while the first appearance of the name 'Carrer d'en Roca' is found in medieval documents dating to the 14th century (Borau, 2003: 197; Batlle and Vinyoles, 2002: 116). Importantly, Tarradell et al. (1985: 43) suggest Barcelona's gothic urban form has not suffered significant changes from medieval times.

At this early stage, the street was set in the poorest neighbourhood of Barcelona, mainly occupied by people of lower social status (Borau, 2003: 174). It also appears that from the beginning the street was associated with 'impure' behaviour such as prostitution. During the 14th and 15th centuries prostitution was regarded as a necessary evil. Prostitutes were confined to public institutionalized brothels. Here, we can see that tensions concerning cultural concepts of dirt and purity (Douglas, 1966) were early on associated with the street. Those brothels were located within a closed and isolated neighbourhood in the suburbs of Barcelona city (Vinyoles, 1985: 122; Batlle, 1988: 438). This spatial segregation of the 'impure' is also documented in many other European cities of this period (the city of Florence being a good example in Brackett, 1993: 296). Documents indicate that there was a strong spatial division between the morally accepted behaviours and those socially sanctioned in medieval times. Written records reflect the authorities' efforts to limit the spatial presence of prostitution outside the proper institutional brothels and prevent the expansion of prostitution through the city. In this sense, 15th-century edicts were continuously pronounced to keep prostitutes away from 'En Roca Street' surroundings (Vinyoles, 1976: 57). Numerous examples show that, despite the authorities' attempts, prostitution tended to expand beyond the

'appropriate' places (see Vinyoles, 1985). Antiprostitution rhetoric was stated in one of Catalonia's constitutions dictated by Pere III, while one of St Vicent Ferrer's sermons advocated that 'particular brothels must be located in the cities' corners and never in the cities' centres' and called for laws to prevent prostitutes' presence out of the brothels 'under threat of flogging' (translated from Vinyoles, 1985: 122).

It is in the 16th century (Various unknown authors, 1907: 606) that we first find En Roca Street directly associated with pollutive and antisocial behaviours. In this document there is an edict prohibiting the establishment of hostels, restaurants, bars or any other place where food or drink could be obtained due to the presence in Roca street of 'bad life' people.

This evidence indicates that the area around this side street connecting more public avenues was embroiled from very early times in discursive conflicts between the mainstream establishment and those antithetical to it. Then, as in the centuries to come, people transgressed socially sanctioned spaces, creating opportunities for conflict.

In the 18th century, linked to the plagues ravaging the city of Barcelona, a chapel dedicated to 'Sant Roc' was constructed in the nook. St Roc is the saint to which prayers concerning plague and disease are addressed. Most probably, this chapel was created in order to counteract the potentially pollutive actions (see Douglas, 1965) happening at this spot: certainly it reiterates an embedded sense of malignancy in the confines of the street. The placing of a statue to the Saint of the Plague reflects an attempt to socialize the disease associated with an area already infamous for anti-mainstream behaviour.

Even in more recent times, with the statue of St Rock looking down at the street's mid-point, the street continues to be filled with references to antisocial activity. During the 1970s 'En Roca Street' remained related to prostitution (Casadesus, 2005; Formosa, 1997). Contemporary street neighbours have made public their discontent through a popular Barcelona newspaper (Colomé, 2005). They were unhappy about the use of the street as an open brothel, upset that prostitutes were getting their clients in the adjacent Ramblas. The neighbours were quoted in the news as being tired of finding used condoms at their doors. They also protested the use of the street as a urinal, and the constant presence of graffiti along the street walls. These traces of material substances, most of them non-hygienic ones, are antagonizing the residents on a daily basis. Such everyday conflicts reveal En Roca Street's contested nature. The long tradition of illegal prostitution in this street is reflected in the setting of the back door of Barcelona's Erotic Museum in En Roca Street. However, prostitution is just one aspect of the street's hidden history: as the neighbours openly acknowledge, the area is currently well known to 'dope fiends,' graffiti painters and 'night enjoyers'.

The constructed environment

The physical characteristics of En Roca Street in many respects provide the spatial preconditions for such pollutive behaviours. Those characteristics can be divided into two main

factors: the street's situation and its shape. Medieval En Roca Street's location between two of the city gates and just in front of the gothic city walls (Figure 2) is an important characteristic in regard to the understanding of its relationship with antisocial behaviours. Referring to the medieval walls of Barcelona, Duran states (1972: 479) that their proximity facilitates 'residual spaces' that were usually employed as open brothels. During the Middle Ages, city gates were points of commerce and hot spots for illegal prostitution. These were places where prostitutes could meet their clients and take them to their rooms, located in more private places but not far from the gates – En Roca Street was situated in such proximity.

In the second half of the 18th century Barcelona's population increased, but the city did not expand beyond its walls, putting stress upon the available space in the ever constricting old city. To compensate, many medieval dwellings were replaced by taller buildings, in an effort to maximize vertical space (Carrer, 1951: 177; Fabre and Huertas, 1977: 153). These urban changes affected most of En Roca Street dwellings, however, as many buildings were altered – some being entirely replaced and others made taller – the original gothic shape of the street as a corridor with its nook was not modified. Even though largely rebuilt, in plan, the street shape shows no structural modifications in 17th-century and later maps consulted.

However, such vertical urban adjustments were not enough to deal with the continuing population growth in old Barcelona city. The scarcity of space continued to be a serious problem to increasing populations. One of the most important consequences of this overcrowding was the development of bad sanitary conditions in the old city – it has been demonstrated that Barcelona was particularly punished by epidemics (Fabre and Huertas, 1977: 156). Just as the form of the street persisted, the pervasive environmental situation sustained a type of ever-present malignancy affecting successive generations. And so it was that in the reconstruction stage of the 18th century the chapel to the Saint of the Plague was created. Thus, the placement of a chapel to St Rock can be further understood as an attempt to address the ongoing festering unsanitary conditions.

While the shape of the street has remained constant, the street's relation to modern Barcelona has seen substantial changes; nevertheless, some of its previous attributes stretch into its contemporary context. Due to the modern development of the city, the street is now located in a very central place; in this sense, it can be seen now as an isolated space within the city core. The historic nature of the old city, together with its proximity to the sea, has transformed it into one of the most attractive quarters in Barcelona. The street now is sought after by those looking for a flat to rent or buy. The old city is likewise a bustling centre for vivacious leisure activities. A great number of pubs, restaurants, shops and public open-air performances (mimes, concerts, theatre and so on) are set in the old city creating an excellent environment for parties, nightclubbing and urban activity. However, the same 'impure' or antithetical activities continue to occur within En Roca Street for similar reasons. The street's closeness to the Ramblas, with its constant flux of tourists, facilitates both the prostitutes and their clientele, while the consequences of nightclubbing activities lead to litter, urinary use, late-night noise and graffiti drawing on the walls. In short, despite changes, the location continues to prompt societal conflict. In the contemporary situation, this conflict is now between those who reside on the street and those who use it temporarily for leisure or other less savoury purposes.

Shape, view, and hidden locations

As we have already mentioned, the distinct shape of En Roca Street is an important factor when considering the urban activities developed within it. The shape of the typical medieval street in Barcelona is a narrow, winding alley: En Roca Street is unusual in its sharp angle approximately half way along it. This angle breaks the street's straightness into two different spaces giving the street an unusual 'thunder-bolt' shape (bottom left inset, Figure 2). It also creates a wider area (or a central nook), allowing more room there than in other portions of the alley. This nook creates a sense of space in the otherwise narrow corridor, facilitating pauses and momentary lingering. However, the most important consequence of such an angle is not only the creation of a nook, but that this core space avoids visual connection between the street entrances at either end. This characteristic undoubtedly has influenced the development of hidden 'antisocial' activities throughout its history. This relationship within narrow and winding alleys and antisocial behaviours was commented upon in the 18th century when a proposal was made for broadening and straightening Trentaclaus Street, a Gothic-quarter alley close to En Roca Street. Trentaclaus Street similarly housed illegal prostitution during the 14th and 15th century (Carrer, 1951: 173; Vinyoles, 1985: 123) and such proposals were attempts to encourage walkers to pass through while making it more difficult for anti-social behaviour to take place by exposing those spaces to view.

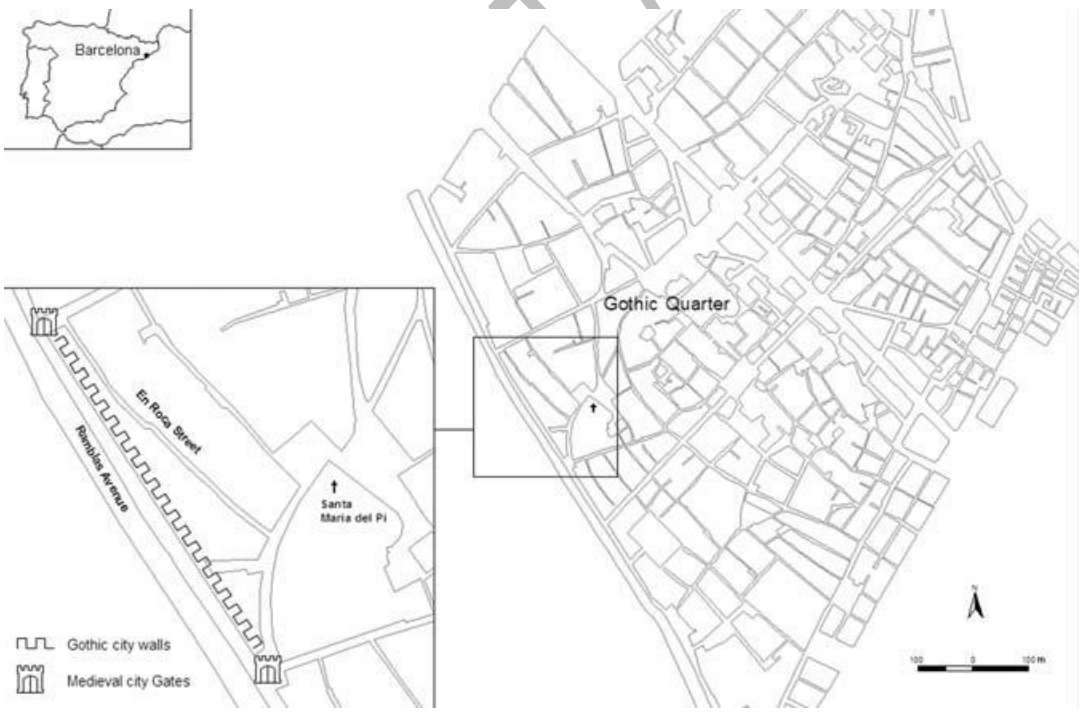

Figure 2. Location of St Rock (En Roca) Street

Viewshed analyses were carried out to show visibility patterns from both ends of En Roca Street. As illustrated in Figure 3, the only point with no direct visibility from each street inlet is the central nook. This space is precisely where the densest concentration of material culture linked with anti-social behaviours is located (rubbish, urine, graffiti, used condoms and so on).

Judging from this, visibility arises as a key factor when regarding the occurrence of potentially pollutive material culture in urban contexts. This may explain the location of St Roc chapel at precisely this spot, the central point where prostitution, diseases and other pollutive activities are concentrated within En Roca Street. The image of the saint – with the signs of the plague infecting his leg – does not just ward off plague with its presence, nor only act as a guardian, but is a reminder of what could happen to those people conducting unsanctioned behaviours in this spot. This 'moral' causal relationship between sex and plague was widely held as seen in medieval and later documentation (see as an example de Tarena, 1507).

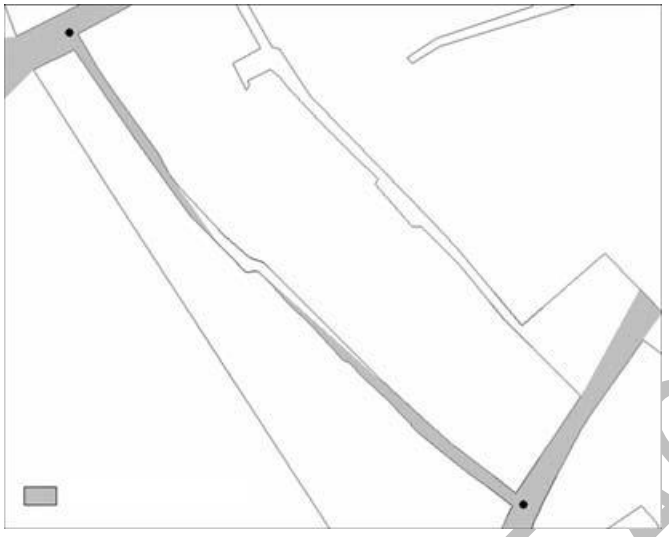

Figure 3. Viewshed analysis of St Rock (En Roca) Street.

The lack of visibility may also be an important factor in explaining the lack of visitors. During the tenure of our observations, we found that people rarely ventured into the dark of the alley: it seems people tend not to pass through a street they cannot see very far into. The combination of the absence of pedestrians, its visual isolation, and its central location makes this space an ideal environment for the practice of socially sanctioned activities.

This factor is further illustrated by the type of graffiti and its distribution along the alley. Areas closest to the inlets, corresponding to the highest visibility patterns from outside the street, have markings that can be made rapidly, particularly 'tags' (monochrome markings, usually stylized signatures) or preprepared stickers (convenient and quickly applied to surfaces). Travelling further into the street, 'throw-ups' (bi-chrome compositions, again typically elaborated signatures) and stencils begin to become more numerous. And then, once in the nook area, 'pieces' (polychrome compositions) are positioned in the region of lowest intervisibility. To make these illegal, multi-colour pieces requires the greatest amount of uninterrupted time; it is in the nook area – the darkest area of the street – where graffiti artists can work unseen for the longest periods of time.

Micro-temporalities of urban space and 'pollutive' acts

Just as we can see how micro dynamics of time, linked to physical space are important to contemporary graffiti artists, the same was true in earlier times. We have so far charted the effect of the constructed environment throughout the deeper time scale of centuries. The constricted space facilitated long-term continuity of behaviours standing in opposition to the norms of mainstream Barcelona. Nevertheless, when viewed in shorter time frames, such activities were prescribed a physical space and specific time by mainstream society. Historical documentation shows spatial and temporal prescription for 'impure' activities. During Easter season in medieval times, Barcelona's prostitutes were retained in a convent to avoid any pollutive contact with 'honourable' citizens (Vinyoles, 1985: 125–6). Similar to St Rock interjected into and looking down from above the space of impure behaviour, the convent provided a temporary space of purity to where the prostitutes were removed. Like the location of St Rock, they were literally placed out of sight, cloistered from mainstream public view. Both proper and improper activities were associated with certain places and certain times in the city (for another example see Brackett, 1993: 177): the interjection of sacred holidays such as Easter created a time-space when the status quo between the pure and impure was no longer tolerated.

Narrowing the temporal focus even further, the daily change from diurnal to nocturnal phases marks one time categorization within which certain activities could be undertaken. Bells were first installed in Barcelona institutional buildings in the 14th century; from this moment onwards time was not just measured but imposed as a clear symbol of authority to control temporal aspects of daily life (Batlle, 1988: 404). Following Lukis (2005, 2006) we can see how time and space are linked within systems of authority, and, as two aspects of the same phenomenon, are key when considering the ongoing creation of places (Darvill, 1997; Ingold, 1993). From the first half of the 14th century the sound of the bell called 'seny del lladre' (bell of the thief) audibly marked the official beginning of the night, with the closing of the city's gates and the withdrawal of the Barcelona honourable citizens from the street into their houses (Batlle, 1988: 405; Vinyoles, 1985: 122). Nightfall, darkness and the obscuring of vision, where associated with urban illegal activities, played out at differing scales of time, linked to space, were renewed every evening throughout the medieval period.

The contemporary personae of en roca street

In the contemporary setting of modern Barcelona, En Roca Street's physical space can be understood as the combination of different places created by different people at different times according to their needs and context. In this sense different social actors are sharing the same physical space of the street, but not entirely at the same time. In one respect, the street exists as an axis mundi in its core position in the most ancient part of the city – an origin and centre from which newer places have been created. People live in flats on the street: these neighbours can enjoy a central place with wide transport options and close proximity to events in the city core. Drinkers look for a place where they can enjoy their party lifestyle and Barcelona's Gothic quarter is an area full of pubs, bars and discos. Graffiti painters enjoy their own distinguished art gallery open to the public at any time close to high-traffic, transited

areas. Prostitutes, as in earlier times, can get their clients from the crowded Ramblas Avenue while doing their business within an enclosed place where they cannot easily be surprised. Another group, the typical dispassionate pedestrians, is an apparently passive audience who use the street as a transitory place. In short, we have identified four categories of people with vested interest in the use of the street:

1. neighbours – permanent inhabitants of the place
2. graffiti makers – those who leave messages in pen, paint, stencils, and stickers
3. night enjoyers – night clubbers and other partiers who enter the street late, leaving marks/scents in urine and party detritus
4. prostitutes and their clientele – using the street at night, some may have private residences.

While the physical space is shared, each group's use of the space has a unique time frame, with only occasional overlap. Neighbours use the physical street space when passing to reach their houses, or when leaving them. Graffiti painters enter at night when neighbours are sleeping or more quickly during daytime when the residents are away working. Night enjoyers come to drink in the street, particularly at weekend nights. Prostitutes use the street during very short periods, also mainly at night but when no other group is occupying the space. Of course, these categories are not always mutually exclusive, but importantly, we have been able to identify these social personae through their material traces left in the confines of the narrow street. Further, it can be seen that these different categories of people all share a space, but not without contention. Each group maintains its own interpretation of how space should be inhabited, engaging differently in the exploitation of the space – they use different media as signs to direct their displeasure towards the others.

Contemporary material contestations

There is an open conflict between these groups, a conflict that is amenable to analysis because it is developed in the physical, structured by street walls, doors, windows, pavement and so on. At first glance, the sprawling graffiti, the trash in the corners and the urine stains promote an impression of an uncared for place. However, in actuality, the converse is true – the graffiti, the trash, and the urine are all statements of and about concern for the place itself. There appears to be no substantial faceto-face contact between neighbours, graffiti painters or night enjoyers; contact occurs through the signals of materials and substances. More to the point, each group's conceptions and ideas about the use of the place are inseparable from those material signals, since they are the catalyst for the conflict. This conflict is grafted onto the architectural background of the street where these ideas of place are given expression. Material traces (see Figure 4) are therefore at the very heart of this engagement; traces are expressions (painting, pissings, rubbish, banners, stickers and so on), traces are the very problem (for the neighbours, making the place impure), and traces are the vehicle for commenting on the problem (discourse between the differing personae).

These material arguments are subsets of a progression discourse of conflict becoming the tangible background of the street, a graphic battlefield open to personal expressions of all kinds reflecting individual and group images of how the space should be used and understood.

- The neighbours – They want a nice clean street: a good reflection of their high social status. The location of the street makes it a very expensive place to buy a flat. Inhabitants try to force politicians to get involved in the struggle for nice streets. Neighbours' protests arise against graffiti artists and noisy drinkers but they also react against each other and their own neighbour's use of the place. Banners emerge as officious signs (see Hermer and Hunt, 1996) from within the buildings, strung across the alley and draped from balconies safely raised, like the statue of St Rock, above the reach of those below. They proclaim their disgust with the unsanctioned activity at their doorsteps. Banners are not fixed in place, they can be removed easily, but coming from the residents they undoubtedly reflect what they see as a legitimate signalling of their own rights to inhabit the street and decide its use. Of course, in newspaper advertisements, they make no reference to this contestation: the adverts project the neighbours' image of what St Rock Street should be, denying what it actually is.
- Graffiti painters – Their use of the street is most often restricted to night when neighbours are sleeping and there are no people in the streets who might interrupt their craft. Their activities are not legal and they have to be careful in assuring they are not going to be discovered. The graffiti painters respond to the neighbours' banners and ownership claims, using their graphic skills to convey sarcasm, along with a certain sense of superiority in pointing out the hypocrisy of the claim that graffiti is dirty while the neighbours dump trash into the street. But graffiti makers are also concerned with other discourses: comments are made on the war on terror, globalism, plus national, local and street politics. While their actions are legitimized and gain force because they stand in contradistinction to mainstream authority (Dennant, 1997), they nevertheless must conform to their own internal rules and codes or bear the brunt of criticism from within their own ranks (see Ferrell, 1993).
- Night enjoyers – Their activities in the street are primarily restricted to weekend nights, and constitute the least cohesive or direct voice in the mix. Bottles, cans and pissings are traces of their use of the place. A certain swagger is transmitted, along with disrespect for both the neighbours' and graffiti artists' more substantial claims of spatial authority. It is important to regard noise here because it is a way that weekend drinkers signal their own presence and is one of the most serious conflict sources between neighbours and drinkers. This conflict is reflected by neighbours' angry banners and 'no urinating' stickers – the drinkers counter, sarcastically using the stickers as targets for pissing. The graffiti artists are quick to comment: they alter stickers to make their own statements (see Figures 4a and 4h).

As there is little or no physical contact between those different groups, their appropriation of the space is bound to specific times and daily rhythms through the conjunction/separation of space, time and people. The material culture left in the space is a major cause of conflict between the different people occupying different street-time. Figures 4b (a used condom), 4c (urine stain), and 4d (party detritus) all show the typical traces that night enjoyers and

prostitutes' clients can leave as a mark of their street use. In a sense, material culture can be seen to trespass out from its own time frame (for instance, the night-time moment of making a 'piece', a work of art by graffiti artists, see Figure 4e) by entering into another group's time (in the daytime, the 'piece' becomes a defacement in residents' eyes). Of course, conflict arises.

Material culture then becomes consciously employed to explicitly leave 'time messages' that will reach other groups in their own street-time. Figure 4 shows the ways in which material culture is used to engage and criticize other groups' conception of place. Figure 4f shows how neighbours' rubbish is placed to partially cover a graffiti panel. Banners and stickers (Figures 4g and 4h) are left by the neighbours, reproaching night enjoyers' attitudes. In the same way graffiti painters make known their annoyance with night enjoyers' use of the space, mocking their partymaking (Figure 4i). Graffiti artists and night enjoyers both criticize a neoNazi's swastika, the first with circle-slash negation, the second with urine (Figure 4c). The neighbours' appeal with a banner for governmental help reflects their claim to mainstream status and legitimized authority for the imposition of their idea of what En Roca Street should be (Figure 4j). Graffiti painters respond against this mainstream claim (Figure 4a): their expressions do not appeal to the government since doing so would be to undermine their antithetical position, effectively disempowering themselves.

Here, we can see how material culture signifies multiple claims over space; it shows the way in which a particular space has been used by different groups, in this case mutually intolerant of each other: consequently, the streets' physical frame – constructed and influenced by a much deeper history – is used to sustain the different groups' claims over the space. The material culture and physical frame of En Roca Street thus exemplify Marshall McLuhan's (1969: 29) famous statement 'the medium is the message'.

Figure 4a. Material culture in St Rock (En Roca) Street. a 'Rich people are eating the neighbourhood'.

Figure 4b. Discarded condom.

Figure 4c. Swastika first negated with a circle-slash, next defaced with urine.

Figure 4d. Party detritus.

Figure 5. Graffiti artist's 'piece'.

Figure 6. Rubbish sacks placed by neighbours to try and cover up graffiti.

Figure 7. Neighbours' banner against night-enjoyers' noise.

Figure 8. Anti-urinating sticker placed by neighbours.

Discussion

Despite the architectural changes through the last 700 years, the street has essentially retained its 14th century shape: thus through its temporal tenacity, the street continues to influence the way people live and move about the Gothic quarter. Just as the form of the street persists, the pervasive environmental situation sustained a long-lived sense of malignancy affecting successive generations. And so it was that in the reconstruction stage of the 18th century the chapel to the Saint of the Plague was created. As St Rock is associated with the cure of infectious diseases (Carrer, 1951: 227; Duran, 1972: 467–9), particularly plagues, the placement of a chapel of St Rock can be understood as an attempt to address the ongoing festering unsanitary conditions.

The association of St Rock Street and 'seedier' aspects of urban existence certainly can be identified as a continuing trend into the mid-20th century, with ongoing narratives of

prostitution, sex, and drug consumption. It is tempting to argue that this attribute of dirtiness – from plague, disease and prostitution – has for a very long time clung to the street, contributing to practices unsanctioned by those who consider themselves the mainstream occupants of the city. The street today, in its modern construct with a tattoo parlour, the erotic museum backdoor, graffiti, banners and messages of all sorts, shows the fluidity of self-construction; but they are, as in the past, self-constructions antithetical to dominant social norms.

And so it is that a tension arises in the juxtaposition of the sanctioned and the unsanctioned, that which is clean and that which is dirty. In a true Mary Douglas (1966) fashion, graffiti itself is considered dirty, pollutive, even dangerous, through its lack of social sanctioning, and its marring of clean surfaces. Douglas' argument (1965: 201) that the 'dangers and punishments attached to pollution act simply as means of enforcing conformity', actually empowers those who engage in 'pollutive' acts within this urban context. It is the idea of dirtiness that has become the focal issue for current contestations being played out in the narrow alleyway; dirtiness is the vehicle and the weapon of choice, used by the many combatants involved.

Conceptions of space are central in the creation and maintenance of, not just social roles of the mainstream and the anarchic, but individual personality. Out of this ongoing contestation, an experimental space had come into operation in the confrontation of ideas and styles, and occasionally, out of this experimentation, identity emerges. De Diego (2000: 16) has defined graffiti as a symbolic appropriation of space and, at the same time an identity mechanism. However, identity, sense of self, and personality are not just a one-way relation. As the hip-hop movement was a factor in the spread of graffiti on a global scale, localized influences disseminate through the city at the level of habitus. Just as the artist's identity is modified through experimenting on the street walls, the street is simultaneously shaped by this use through the superimposition of new meanings and ideas. One artist, named 'Rocket', has modified the St Rock sign to represent his own name, while in turn adopting the sign's font in other tags across the city. Here, we can witness the melding of place identity and personal identity.

As a 'crime of style' (Ferrell, 1993), graffiti's association with the unsanctioned attracts the attention of authority. During our documentation of the street, a literal whitewashing of the walls by the local council obliterated the paintings, marks and stickers. It is interesting to note that in Barcelona, alterations of historic buildings usually involve a complete gutting of the interior framework, with only the external facade being preserved. The ethic of conservation is, quite literally, superficial and so is the officious attempt to cleanse St Rock of its dirtiness. In the dark space at its midpoint, the texture of St Rock Street continues to attract markings, on its walls, along cracks in the fabric of buildings, door knobs, window frames – all are reappropriated by the graffiti artists. The discourse continues, almost with renewed vigour in the opportunity proffered by the 'clean slate' the city council periodically offers.

Conclusion

Material culture has been used to sustain each group's claims over the space of this street bearing three names. This space has very different meanings to these different groups. Much of this materiality is closely associated to the activities performed, being essential to the group's self-identification and internal cohesion. In this regard, material culture reflects each group's specific urban expression. Consequently, it can also be employed as a means of implicit and explicit claims over a contested space. Furthermore, physical spaces should also be regarded as forms of materiality since they can be transformed to adapt to social meanings, a fact particularly appropriate to the urban environment constituted almost wholly of material culture.

Research in St Rock Street shows that understanding the appropriation of space and its links to multiple temporalities enables the interpretation of how social relations have been developed throughout the past. In this way the concept of social time becomes not just a frame to analyse social actions, but part of the conceptualization of spaces used, created and manipulated by people to sustain and impose their perceptions. In addition, these social actions create the historical and material preconditions that endure through time, influencing subsequent actions by stretching across multiple time-scales. Here, and in large part because of its multi-temporality, we agree with Peteet's (1996: 155) and Halsey and Young's (2006) view of graffiti as more than simply signifying or reflecting those social actions, but as actively intervening within and 'affecting' contested social relations.

Of course, St Rock Street is not the only place exhibiting graffiti and local conflict. Other corridors within Barcelona involving isolated cores, central positions and aspects associated with dirtiness exhibit similar manifestations. All of them illustrate a confrontation between diverse conceptions of space by means of material traces. The exploitation of space is influenced by differences in the shape and positions of street architecture – itself an artifice of the past. The material remains are in actuality the archaeological correlates of both actors and actions, no matter how distant in the past or near to the present. In contemporary temporal terms, it is the relationship between the actors' presence opposed to their absence that enables this discourse to take shape. The character of a place has to be always evaluated in a determinate time frame regarding different social actors. Those social actors will create and recreate their sense of self and community (painters, neighbours and so on) framed by their use of space, which in turn will change the personality of the place and its significance. By recognizing the elasticity of temporal significances stretching from deep contingent time scales to contemporary daily tempi, the preconditions formulating the setting for modern conflicts and their material traces within such urban corridors can be understood in archaeological terms.

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