

Why do Barcelona and Catalonia need a tenant association?

Thousands of evictions have taken place in Barcelona since 2009, when the economic crisis hit Spain very hard. The mortgages and foreclosures have been a nightmare for thousands of people in Spain. Today, still, between 8 and 10 households are evicted every day in Barcelona alone. However, over the 90% of these evictions result from the lack of capacity to pay the rent. Our housing problems have therefore moved from mortgages to rents.

Even if Spain has been, ever since the Franco era, a society consisting of mainly homeowners, it is not that easy to afford to buy a home today. About 30% of the population of Barcelona rent their homes, but most of them do not choose this alternative voluntarily because the rental market is expensive and insecure.

Rents in Barcelona have increased by 11% between 2013 and 2016. Also, the rental law, modified in 2013 after the banks' request, protects the landlord and weakens the position of the tenant. Spain's three years' lease contracts, plus one year, are absolutely unfair for the tenant, as rents can be raised without limit every time the lease-term ends.

Other imbalances between owners and tenants are that the landlord can claim the flat with only one month's prior notice, and you can be evicted if you miss only one month's rent. This law was originally designed to make the rental market more attractive for investors, thinking that if owners could evict more easily, they would more likely let their house or flat, and the stock would increase and the rents would go down, etc. Nevertheless, the consequence has been almost the opposite.

Three main phenomena can be added to explain the situation today in Barcelona.

Firstly, the massive tourism industry. Over 8.3 million people visited Barcelona in 2015, a city with 1.6 million inhabitants. People living in the most central areas complain about the transformation of their neighbourhoods, and of the increases of the prices and rents. The impact that Airbnb, hostels and hotels have

on housing is evident: People make more money in letting a room or a flat on a daily or weekly basis than letting a flat to someone on regular basis, for one or two years.

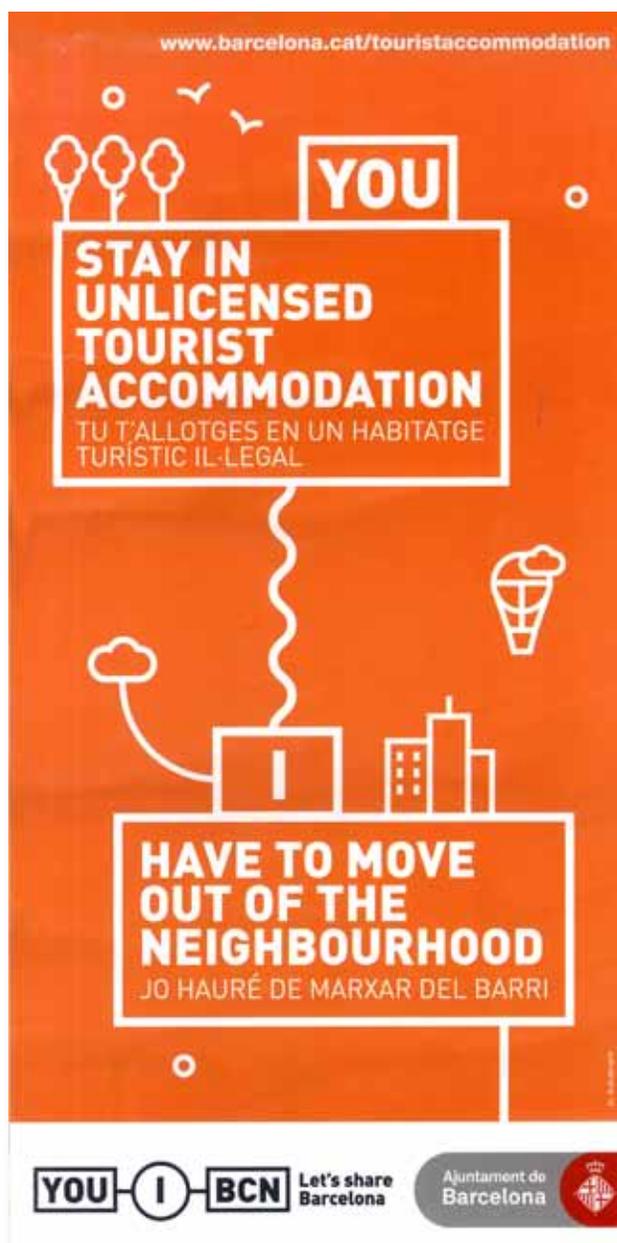
Secondly, gentrification is also affecting many areas of Barcelona. Some low-income neighbourhoods are getting fashionable, so they are attracting wealthy people, both from the city and other European countries. Expensive restaurants and hipster boutiques are increasing prices, and also the rents.

Thirdly, the way people speculate and invest is changing too. During the boom, the best investment option was to buy and then sell housing. Today, investors start speculating in the rental market. Investment funds and big enterprises called SOCIMIs, which do not even pay taxes, are buying buildings, evicting the tenants and letting for a higher price.

All in all, unaffordable rents, unemployment and low wages, together contribute to a desperate housing situation. The minimum wage is 647 Euros per month, while the average rents in Barcelona are about 750 Euros.

In this context, it is clear that we need a strong tenant organisation, able to denounce the vulnerability of tenants, and to claim for a more protective rental law and a stabilization of housing costs. The Observatori DESC is a human rights centre focused on the right to housing. DESC has always believed that tenant participation is the key. DESC has organized meetings with housing and neighbourhood entities, and also with tenants who have problems with their rent or landlord. The aim of these meetings is to build a tenant association, step by step.

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City of Barcelona asks tourist not to stay in unregistered accommodation, in an attempt to counteract gentrification.