

MASS TOURISM, PUBLIC SPACE, AND THE REGULATION OF STREET PERFORMANCE IN BARCELONA



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*This project has received funding from the
European Union's Horizon 2020 research and
innovation programme under grant
agreement No 870691*

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January, 2023

Abstract

This case study centers on the evolution of Barcelona's approach to regulating street performance since the early 1990s, with a focus on the regulation of 'living statues. During the 1990s and early 2000s, living statues were embraced as part of the cultural patrimony of Barcelona's Ramblas, an emblematic promenade in the center of the city, and featured in municipal brochures marketing the area to visitors. City authorities made a point of reserving areas for them to perform, even as other types of buskers were progressively evicted from public space. More recently, however, the city has significantly limited statues' numeric presence, placed a growing array of constraints on their performances, and relegated them to the outer limits of the promenade. The push for a measure of regulation was actually initiated by living statues themselves due to dynamics of conflict resulting from excessive congestion and competition for space. Once the regulatory process was set in motion, however, it evolved in an increasingly restrictive manner that drove many of the highest-quality performers off the street and into other artistic sectors, diminishing the quality of urban space and street performance in the city. The findings of this case study illustrate the complexities and potential unintended consequences of regulating public artistic activities in spaces of mass tourism, even when undertaken at the behest of those subject to the regulations in question.

Keywords: public space, street performance, symbolic boundaries, urban policy, tourism

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Introduction

Buskers, or street performers, add an element of surprise, spontaneity, and interpersonal engagement to urban life. Their presence in popular city squares and thoroughfares affects the character of public spaces and the experiences of those passing through them. While most municipalities permit certain forms of busking, the regulation of street performance has become more stringent in cities across the globe.

The status of buskers and their freedom to station themselves in public space depend critically on whether their presence is perceived as a desirable or undesirable element of urban life by relevant authorities. This case study centers on the evolution of Barcelona's approach to regulating street performance since the early 1990s, with a focus on the regulation of 'living statues'. During the 1990s and early 2000s, living statues were embraced as part of the cultural patrimony of Barcelona's Ramblas, an iconic promenade in the center of the city, and featured in municipal brochures marketing the area to visitors. City authorities made a point of reserving areas for them to perform, even as other types of buskers were progressively evicted.

More recently, however, the city has significantly limited statues' numeric presence, placed a growing array of constraints on their performances, and relegated them to the outer limits of the promenade. The push for a measure of regulation was actually initiated by living statues themselves due to dynamics of conflict resulting from excessive congestion and competition for space. Once the regulatory process was set in motion, however, it evolved in a progressively restrictive manner that drove many of the highest-quality performers off the street and into other artistic sectors. This case highlights how although mass tourism yields opportunities for new forms of culture in public life, it also generates pressure for regulation and control that limit the freedom and creativity of culture producers. It also shows how grassroots mobilization to influence local policies regulating the presence of culture in public space may have unintended consequences that run counter to the interests and visions of those they originally aim to protect.

Methodology

The findings from this case study are based on a review of media reports and policy documents related to street performance in Barcelona during the 2000s and 2010s, as well as semi-structured interviews with former and current living statues and other street performers in the city.

Mass tourism and the emergence of Barcelona's 'statue scene'

Barcelona's 'statue scene' materialized around the time of the 1992 Olympics, which played a major role in the Catalan capital's emergence as a global city. Between 1990 and 2015, overnight stays in Barcelona's hotels increased from 3.8 million to over 17 million, and the city has progressively become one of Europe's largest tourist destinations (Observatori del Turisme a Barcelona, 2015). The tremendous rise in tourism following the Olympics generated massive increases in the flow of people through Barcelona's public spaces, especially those located in the city center. This, along with Barcelona's Mediterranean climate, created ideal conditions for living statues to flourish, and the Old Quarter's statue scene quickly became one of the most vibrant in Europe.

The Old Quarter's main promenade, the Ramblas, which runs from Plaça Catalunya down to the port, was thoroughly transformed in the aftermath of the Olympics. While small vendors and artisans had had a presence on the Ramblas prior to the Olympics, the emergence of mass tourism during the 1990s attracted an influx of buskers eager to experience an up-and-coming global city and to take advantage of the opportunities it offered for street performance.

Barcelona's openness to buskers grew out of a longer tradition of accommodating theater troops, street photographers, and other types of performers and vendors on the Ramblas and other public spaces. Openness to busking was also facilitated by broader projects of urban renewal that prioritized the rejuvenation of public spaces in the city following Spain's democratic transition in the late 1970s. By promoting lively and creative public spaces, planners hoped to foster a more vibrant and participatory democratic culture after decades of authoritarian rule.

Several of the statues we interviewed reminisced about the freedom and creativity that characterized Barcelona during the 1990s and early 2000s. The Ramblas and other public spaces in Barcelona's city center were full of creativity, and were broadly accessible and inclusive of different types of people, whether they be ordinary citizens, tourists, buskers, small vendors, artisans, and during certain hours, prostitutes. Moreover, the presence of law enforcement was more limited than at present.

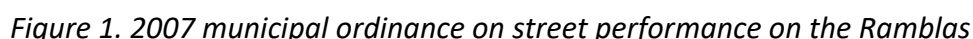
Competition and grassroots mobilization

While this state of affairs had many positive aspects and contributed to Barcelona's reputation as an entertaining and creative city, it proved unsustainable. Pickpocketing and other forms of petty crime became rampant. Ordinary citizens frequented the Ramblas less and less to avoid the terrible congestion, and the promenade became a space occupied mainly by visitors. Poor-quality establishments catering exclusively to tourists gradually replaced traditional shops, cafes, and restaurants.

Although the buskers we interviewed lauded the freedom that once existed, they also spoke of how such freedom became problematic as the Ramblas and other public spaces became overrun by conflictive 'pseudo-statues' who did not respect implicit conventions regarding the shared use of public space. As a consequence of intensified conflict with those

The spokesman and primary organizer of the association, who had been performing as a statue since 2004, explained to us that competition between statues had become excessive and, at times, led to violent confrontations. Although no formal requirements were established for joining the association, there was an implicit understanding among organizers regarding who belonged and who did not. This understanding was based on a combination of artistic and ethical considerations, such as whether the individuals in question complied with the conventions of 'static art' and whether they respected informal rules regarding the shared use of public space (i.e. not monopolizing certain places and not interfering with others' performances). Some of the main gripes with the proliferation of pseudo-statues were that they undermined the conditions that made truly artistic performances possible and damaged the general image of authentic statues, pushing them further toward the 'undesirable' end of the urban desirability continuum.

As congestion and conflict on the Ramblas worsened, the Old Quarter District decided to develop an ordinance aimed at exerting a measure of control over busking. The ordinance, which was created in 2007, designated certain areas of the Ramblas for busking and reserved the 'prime real estate' for living statues. Living statues were defined as persons who 'imitate the modality of figurative sculptures' and perform statically. The ordinance explicitly excluded from this definition individuals whose costumes were not artisanal. While most spaces along the upper parts of the Ramblas that were designated for busking were reserved for statues, other performers were largely relegated to the 'Rambla de Santa Mònica', a section at the bottom of the Ramblas where the elements are harshest and the conditions for earning donations most difficult (Figure 1). The police were authorized to remove buskers who did not comply with the ordinance.



Although urban planners saw the large quantity and haphazard distribution of buskers on the Ramblas as an obstacle to its reordering, they were also cognizant of how buskers – and especially statues – were one of the promenade’s main attractions. Although most statues were themselves foreigners, they had become an established part of the image and tradition of the Ramblas, in large part because the Ramblas was one of the first European settings to have such a lively statue scene. In 2003, the city went so far as to commission a German artist to write a book about living statues in Barcelona (Figure 2).

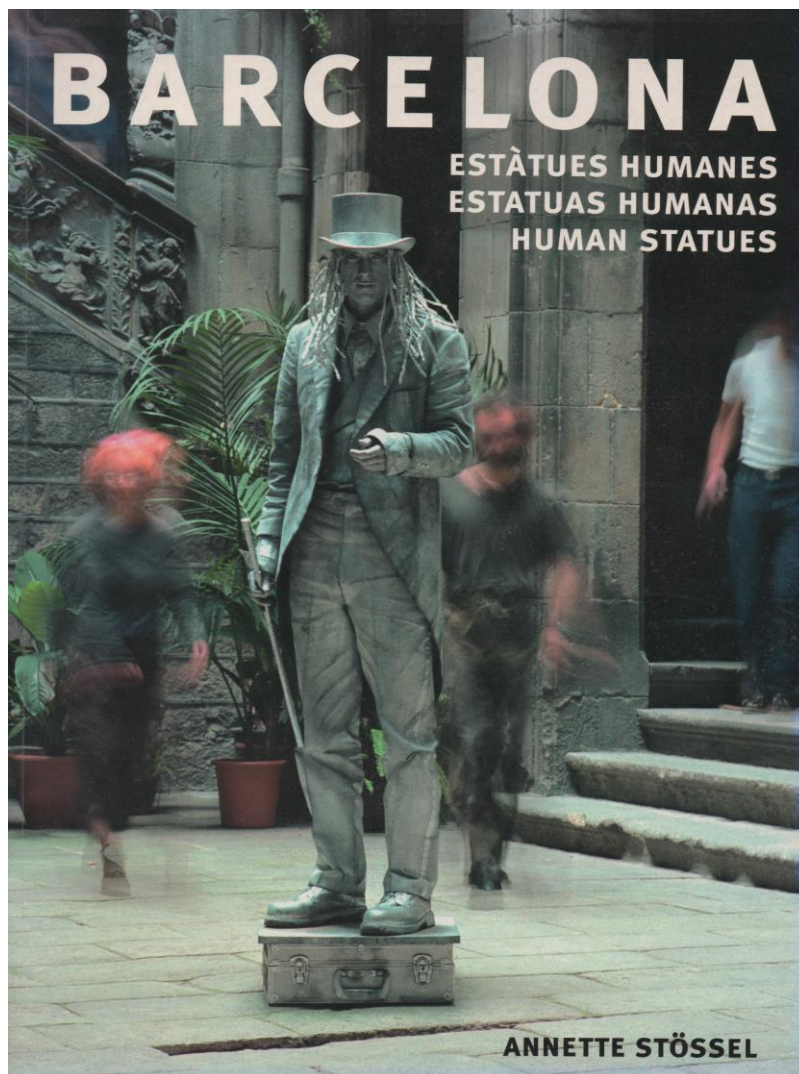


Figure 2. Cover of a book on living statues commissioned by Barcelona’s city government

The city’s embrace of statues as part of the Ramblas’ local tradition is also evident in its city branding initiatives. City planners involved in ‘Pla Cor’, an ambitious initiative to remodel the Ramblas, included images of several of the most well-known statues in flyers designed to promote the promenade to tourists and other visitors (Image 3). The perceived utility of statues for the image of the Ramblas promoted by the city is crucial for explaining

why they were permitted to remain on the promenade despite the general crackdown on other types of persons and activities.

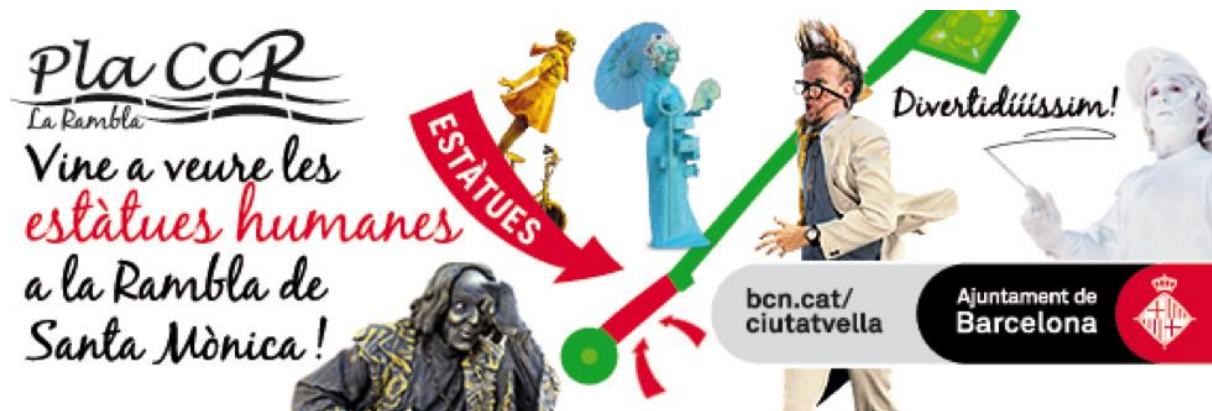


Figure 3. 'Pla Cor' flyer promoting the Ramblas

While the initial ordinance on street performance altered the spatial positioning of statues and other buskers, conflicts between performers and problems linked to overcrowding persisted. Toward the end of 2010, district authorities established a more formal regulation that dealt exclusively with statues. Restrictions were placed on the size of the spaces statues could occupy and the hours they could perform. Statues were also obliged to participate in a competitive casting to obtain official licenses. While the licensing requirement limited statues' freedom to perform, it also served to protect them by giving them a legal basis for defending their right to station themselves in public space. A similar licensing regime had previously been established for portrait artists and street painters.

Other buskers, by contrast, found themselves with few protections during a period in which the policing of the Ramblas and other areas of the Old Quarter was intensifying. Although the regulation explicitly recognized street performance as a 'cultural' activity of value to the city, its exclusive focus on statues meant that other forms of busking were, in effect, treated as glorified forms of begging. The advantages bestowed upon statues reflected the city's perception that they were more integral to the Ramblas' image and tradition than other buskers. The failure of non-statue performers to mobilize collectively and form an association of their own additionally contributed to their weakness vis-à-vis regulatory agencies.

With regard to the regulations concerning living statues, the district established a series of criteria for evaluating the quality of statues and determining which performers merited the limited number of spots available on the Ramblas. These criteria fell into three main categories: 1) participation in courses or workshops in performance, dramatic, or plastic art; 2) experience acting or performing in theater productions; and 3) participation in statue competitions or expositions. Proposals were rated on a point system by a committee composed of civil servants working for the district and a representative of a civic association. Notably absent from the committee were individuals with experience in the arts, reflecting

the city's perception that artistic expertise was unnecessary for evaluating the quality of statues. A subsequent regulation passed in 2012, however, adjusted the composition of the committee to include representatives of artistic organizations as well. The requirement that ended up restricting access to licenses most in practice was legal residency, which was included as a pre-requisite for participation in the casting. Irregular migrants and traveling performers were therefore excluded from the applicant pool.

While some of the statues I interviewed felt the 2010 regulation was reasonable, others asserted that it was unduly restrictive and undermined key artistic elements of their performances. Along these lines, Stephan, a Canadian who began performing during the early 2000s, stated in an interview:

Like all good city councils or governments, whenever people suggest things that they should do, they always misinterpret it. So, for example, I used to work on top of a lamppost or use urban furniture – benches and stuff... A lot of things we could do before regulations became impossible afterward. It's a shame, because when I used the lamppost... for me it was really great because I didn't need to carry a stool or pedestal. I'd just use the lamppost and would completely integrate myself with the lamppost. And that was cool artistically. And so from one day to another, I couldn't do it anymore. And then they started to impose schedules and spots, so for me, it wasn't as interesting... The first year they imposed permits, I got it. I sent in my CV and photos and proof that I won prizes and shit, and I did it for less than a year and said, 'Fuck it. I'm not going to do this anymore'. And that's when I quit the street. (Astor, 2019).

Prior to 'quitting the street', Stephan had been one of the Ramblas' most celebrated and innovative statues. His exit highlights the potential for regulatory measures to erode, rather than enhance, the quality of busking.

From limited to draconian restrictions

In May of 2011, the Catalan Socialist Party lost Barcelona's municipal elections to the more conservative Convergence and Union Party (CiU). The new administration had a more draconian approach to regulating urban space, and buskers found themselves positioned further and further toward the 'undesirable' end of the desirability continuum. With the exception of musicians, buskers were confined to a progressively narrower range of urban spaces, essentially the Ramblas and a few other places in the Old Quarter. In May of 2012, a new regulation was approved that limited statues to the Rambla de Santa Mònica, the lower section of the Ramblas that previously had been designated for other performers. Other buskers were banned altogether from the Ramblas and became subject to increased vigilance by police elsewhere in the Old Quarter.

The performers we spoke with were highly critical of the 2012 regulation, especially with respect to its specifications regarding their spatial positioning. Some complained that performing in such an open space generated harsher exposure to the elements. Others drew attention to how their clustering at the end of the Ramblas made their performances less lucrative, as many passersby mistakenly presumed that all statues were part of a single company, or that the activity had been organized and funded by the city. Some also

complained that the arrangement complicated relations between performers, as they were now forced to compete side by side and sometimes unintentionally interfere with one another's performances.

With regard to the regulation's influence on the artistic elements of performance, some lamented that the spatial concentration of statues has totally eviscerated the element of spontaneity and surprise so crucial to the audience experience. Edwin, a Mexican who performed as a statue for eight years on the Ramblas before calling it quits, stated that the most gratifying experience of performing had been 'the surprise that it generated for the spectator who wasn't really expecting to encounter [a statue] on their way'. In his view, this has been lost with the new regulation.

The performers we interviewed were also critical of the residency requirement. They highlighted the importance of mobility as a source of innovation in street performance. Many had busked as statues and participated in artistic festivals in diverse cities within and beyond Europe. Their observations of, and interactions with, other statues often served as inspiration for their artistic imagination. By limiting the presence of itinerant performers, licenses that require stable residency have the effect of inhibiting artistic exposition, interchange, and innovation.

In sum, the regulatory measures that statues themselves initially advocated have compromised the conditions that many view as critical to the physical comfort, financial viability, and artistic quality of their performances. Some performers expressed a degree of optimism that the election of the progressive mayor, Ada Colau, in 2015 might lead to their re-positioning on the continuum of urban desirability and the creation of more liberal regulations. Their hopes, however, have thus far been dashed. In the spring of 2018, Colau's administration proposed a new regulation for statues that left the 2012 regulation largely intact. Statues remained confined to the lower section of the Ramblas, and stringent spatial and temporal restrictions on their performances were kept in place. The new regulation also reduced the number of licenses granted from 30 to 24 and maintained the legal residence requirement (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2018).

Several statues dressed in full costume protested at the city council meeting where the new regulation was debated, claiming that it treated them as 'itinerant vendors' rather than 'artists' (Congostrina, 2018). Representatives of the left-wing Popular Unity Candidacy party (CUP) criticized Colau's administration for ignoring input from performers themselves in designing the new regulation and declared the regulation 'racist' due to the residency requirement's exclusion of immigrants. Other parties criticized the regulation for failing to afford statues the same rights as musicians (Agencia EFE, 2018). Despite such opposition, the regulation was passed with support from the conservative Popular Party and the Catalan European Democratic Party (PDeCAT).

Conclusion

Embedded within the preceding analysis of Barcelona's regulation of busking lies a larger story about the challenges involved in preserving 'open-minded' public spaces as such when they become sites of mass tourism (cf. Walzer, 1986). The Ramblas once included a

heterogeneous mix of local residents, tourists, itinerant vendors, street performers, and small commercial establishments. Popular cafes and markets made the promenade an important site of gathering and socialization for ordinary citizens. Living statues and other buskers contributed to the creativity and vibrancy of the Ramblas with their performances and facilitated shared public experiences and interactions. With the emergence of mass tourism, however, the Ramblas has become increasingly 'single-minded' and oriented primarily toward tourism and associated practices of consumption. Traditional cafes have been replaced by fast food joints and kitschy tourist restaurants. Tacky souvenir shops and international clothing chains dominate the commercial landscape. Many of the buskers who were once a staple of the Ramblas have been banished, as have most itinerant vendors and other collectives deemed 'undesirable'.

The growing array of restrictions on the range of persons and activities permitted on the Ramblas is not particularly surprising per se, given the pressures to ensure security and circulation in the context of mass tourism and rising concerns about terrorism and crime. These pressures in and of themselves, however, do not explain the specific way in which this increased regulation played out—i.e. why the city continued to permit the presence of living statues on the Ramblas despite evicting other types of buskers, and how living statues themselves participated in this course of events. In order to explain these dynamics, it is necessary to consider processes that mitigate the conversion of open-minded public spaces into single-minded public spaces amid the pressures of mass tourism and the proliferation of neoliberal urban governance models (Astor, 2019).

Our analysis suggests that living statues were permitted to remain on the Ramblas despite the expulsion of other types of buskers because they could be framed as part of the promenade's local tradition and were assimilated within city branding campaigns that marketed the Ramblas as a lively, exciting, and artsy public space. Their status, however, is highly tenuous as city branding strategies are subject to change. Should their presence cease to fit with the image of the Ramblas Barcelona endeavors to project in the future, they will likely join the ranks of banished buskers and other 'undesirables' who have been deemed inadmissible.

There is some evidence suggesting that Barcelona is taking strides to evade the conversion of the Ramblas into a single-minded space oriented exclusively toward tourism. It recently allotted 37 million Euros for a project called 'Km-Zero' with the aim of remodeling the Ramblas so as to make it a more appealing space for ordinary residents. Km-Zero's director, Itziar González, has used the phrase 'Slow Ramblas' to describe the project's objective of creating a more relaxed and less chaotic atmosphere. A core goal is to recover and preserve the promenade's historical essence and patrimony, thus 'returning' it to the citizenry.

The findings of this case study also have implications for understanding the efficacy and limits of grassroots mobilization to influence urban regulatory practices. While living statues exercised their own agency in pushing for the city to clamp down on pseudo-statues and to impose limits on the uses of public space, the regulatory framework that ended up being designed and implemented became increasingly restrictive over time to the point

where many of the most acclaimed statues elected to seek their fortunes elsewhere, diminishing the quality of urban space and street performance in the city (Astor, 2019). More generally, this case study illustrates how the regulation of public space and the classifications of distinct groups who station themselves in public places result from negotiations and struggles among myriad actors with distinct visions of public space and the manner in which it should be managed. These visions are themselves shaped by different perspectives on local history, urban identity, and social justice, as well as implicit and explicit biases, pragmatic concerns, and material interests.

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