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“We are the forerunners in Southern Europe”: Experimenting with Business Improvement Districts in Greater Barcelona

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses the experimentation with Business Improvement Districts in Greater Barcelona to examine its relational re-making in a rather over-looked Southern-Mediterranean urban, socio-spatial and political-institutional context. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and institutional archives, it offers three intellectual contributions to urban policy mobilities studies. First, the paper argues that the territorial adaptation, mediation and translation of urban entrepreneurial policies hinges upon the differential and inherited nature of welfare regimes, state-market constellations and existing political infrastructures. Second, the paper outlines that policymakers have followed open-ended and multilateral learning approaches through space and time, in which some policy features were (re-)learned, circulated and modified to fit more centralized regimes. Third, and finally, it sketches out the role of government-funded pilot programs as instances through which policies are showcased, experimented and ultimately constituted before and after their institutionalization in specific socio-legal and socio-spatial contexts.

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Introduction

On the evening of the 9 August 1992, the Southern European city of Barcelona and its wider region were lauded as the epitome of “good practice” when Juan Antonio Samaranch, the then President of the International Olympic Committee, announced that the city had staged “the best Olympic Games in history” (quoted in *El País*, 10 August 1992, p. 1). In addition to sizeable international media coverage over the two-week event, Barcelona was portrayed as a model of successful regeneration from which other cities could learn (Gold & Gold, 2017).

In light of such plaudits, the 1992 Summer Olympic Games hosts became a reference point for prospective cities and regions aspiring to promote themselves globally (Lauer-mann, 2022; Silvestre & Jajamovich, 2021). For example, French, German and Italian

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policymakers visited the venues of the 1992 Olympic Games (González, 2010). Ditto Manchester officials preparing their 1996 and 2000 Olympic Games and the 2002 Commonwealth Games bids (Cook & Ward, 2011). Similarly, policymakers from Rio de Janeiro hired Catalan consultants to support the city's bid for the 2016 Olympic Games. More recently, Barcelona has also become internationally known for remaking its urban and transport planning strategy through a “superblock model” currently spreading throughout the transatlantic and intra-European policymaking worlds (Eggimann, 2022; Hu, 2016).

These are four amongst many examples. Global-urban policymaking shows no signs of abating. Within this environment, cities often appear as cities from which others learn or cities that learn from others. That is certainly how the academic literature on urban policy mobilities has tended to categorize cities, often implicitly. However, there are some examples of cities and regions that both look to learn from elsewhere while also being somewhere from where others look to learn. Barcelona seems to be just such an example. While the focus has tended to be on those who have learned from Barcelona, receiving less attention has been the work done by Catalan policymakers in learning from others.

This paper focuses on this rather over-looked aspect of global-urban policymaking by examining how local and regional policymakers from Barcelona have traveled, looked at and learned from other urban repeated instances. Particularly, this paper draws on a much-lauded economic development policy – Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) – to discuss its embedding for the very first time in a Southern European socio-spatial and political-institutional setting where Mediterranean welfare arrangements are at work (Ward, 2007). BIDs – or *Àreas de Promoció Econòmica Urbana* (APEUs) in Greater Barcelona – are geographically-bounded areas in which business occupiers compulsorily fund a set of additional services, such as cleaning, marketing, and safety/security, to revitalize their shopping district. Moreover, it is argued that BIDs are examples of forms of entrepreneurial statecraft (Silva et al., 2022). Taking stock of intellectual debates from North America, Western and Nordic Europe, Barcelona and its region illuminate how more centralized welfare regimes and state-market geometries influence the territorial making of contemporary public policies (Kusevski et al., 2023; Richner & Olesen, 2019). In doing so, our central argument is that theorizing from a Southern-Mediterranean context provides a useful framework to rethink some scalar assumptions present in urban policy mobilities studies. We argue that inter-scalar intertwining remains an essential feature of contemporary public policymaking, particularly when neo-liberal policies-from-elsewhere arrive at more centralized, corporatist politico-institutional and socio-spatial arrangements.

This paper builds upon a set of relatively well-established methodological approaches to trace the relational and territorial making of contemporary urban policies (Cochrane & Ward, 2012; McCann & Ward, 2012a; Peck & Theodore, 2012; Wood, 2015a). It draws on 18 semi-structured interviews with public and private stakeholders who have been involved in discussions over the potential introduction of BIDs in and around the city of Barcelona. These include regional policymakers, BIDs' executive directors, local authorities' officials, “middling” technocrats and policy consultants. Completing these interviews, the paper draws upon secondary data in the form of BID documents, consultancy presentations, local/regional policy briefs and newspaper articles.

We structure the paper as follows. It begins by outlining the main conceptual and empirical premises upon which urban policy mobilities research draws and emerging critical contributions that call for the need to attune to different urban settings. The paper then introduces and discusses its methodology. Following this, and drawing on the example of Barcelona and its region, it explores the local and regional context behind the emergence of BIDs before detailing their relationally learned and territorially produced nature within a Southern-Mediterranean European context. The paper concludes by reflecting on its wider theoretical implications for urban policy mobilities studies.

Reframing urban policy mobilities research: taking stock and emerging debates

Over the last decade, there has been an intellectual renaissance in examining the circulation of inter-urban policies across a range of different policy fields. While studying policy circulation is clearly not a recent academic project (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996; Walker, 1969), its recent geographical revivalism, termed urban policy mobilities studies, has been particularly generative in understanding the trans-urban nature of contemporary policymaking processes and capturing novel geographies of policy learning and exchange (Baker & Temenos, 2015; Haupt, 2023; Temenos & McCann, 2013). Shedding light on a set of long-established political science-led policy diffusion and policy transfer foundations, the urban policy mobilities literature has outlined the drawbacks surrounding these earlier works (Baker & Temenos, 2015; Brenner & Schmid, 2015; McCann & Ward, 2013; Peck, 2011). In these earlier studies, particular scalar assumptions have over-emphasized the “rational” circulation of policies within and between national scales, while underestimating the importance of other scales and inter-scalar connections in policy circulation. Such an approach neglects the “politics of learning”, that is how policies are socially and politically learned and eventually mobilized, and the extent to which they are mutually constituted and reshaped through movement.

The renaissance of this critical policy research agenda in the field of urban geography has emphasized the processes, practices and socio-material resources through which policies “are made mobile, making them seem appropriate and transferable, and the processes through which policies are re-made as they move across space” (Cook et al., 2014, p. 807). After early work on economic development and harm reduction policies (Cook, 2008; McCann, 2008; Ward, 2007), urban policy mobilities scholars have expanded their focus over the last decade from creativity and smart cities (Prince, 2010; Rugkhaman, 2021) to climate resilience and adaptation (Côté-Roy & Moser, 2022; Haupt, 2021) and bus rapid transport (Montero, 2020; Wood, 2014, 2015a, 2015b). While this set of studies illustrates the rolling conversation (Peck, 2011) around the circulation of urban policy models, it also shares several common theoretical orientations. Within the field of urban policy mobilities, cities have become relevant institutional arenas to showcase that policy learning and adoption processes often involve inter-referencing manoeuvres that bring cities into relational proximity (Jacobs, 2012; McFarlane, 2011; Ward, 2010). This perspective posits that cities are now privileged arenas for policymaking processes and suggests that “the national scale and the national states are no longer primary agents in the production of policies and places” (Temenos & McCann, 2013, p. 347). This set of studies has argued for a relational

and territorial sensitivity to examine policy circulation and implementation as processes that are simultaneously mediated by inter-urban comparison and embedded in particular politico-institutional and socio-spatial contexts (Baker & Temenos, 2015; McCann & Ward, 2013). Such a relational-territorial approach suggests that mobility and mutation are simultaneous processes, as policies are variegated apparatuses that are constituted and reconstituted across different contexts (McCann & Ward, 2012b; Peck, 2011). However, not all policies seem to have received the same attention. Perhaps unsurprisingly, urban policy mobilities studies have focused on examining the movement of neo-liberal policy ideas between places institutionally embedded in similar political infrastructures and ideological stocks, often situated in the Anglophone world (Cook et al., 2014; McFarlane, 2011; Robinson, 2015, 2022). While the empirical focus has been neo-liberal urban policies, there is a critique that such studies have overlooked the complexities of re-embedding these policies in different politico-institutional contexts with (more) centralized welfare regimes and state-market geometries (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Gunko et al., 2022; Kusevski et al., 2023; Richner & Olesen, 2019). These theoretical orientations illuminate that urban policy mobilities have neglected important socio-legal and socio-spatial aspects offered by legal geographies scholarship in understanding policy circulation and adoption (Delaney, 2014, 2016; Gillespie, 2016), thus ignoring the inter-scalar conditioning of policymaking processes, particularly in instances of state and legal verticality. While neo-liberalism underpins many of the contemporary mobile policies over the last decades, urban policy mobilities studies have witnessed a methodological and analytical “presentist” outlook on how urban policies are learned and circulated (Jacobs, 2012; McFarlane, 2011). More recent contributions have, however, acknowledged that policy learning and adoption are sticky and history-laden processes made of multiple, often gradual, temporalities (Baker & McCann, 2020; Ward, 2018). As Wood (2015b, p. 571) remarked, “policy implementation remains cumbersome because policy is inherently political, involving people and personalities as well as regulations and restrictions, and therefore it takes time to localize it”. Interestingly, this quote further argues that a critical analysis of policy learning and adoption should take into account the power-laden processes and politics inherent to policymaking processes. However, urban policy mobilities studies have until recently focused on examining (parts of) policies that have worked and been successfully mobilized (Clarke, 2012; Jacobs, 2012; Lovell, 2019; McCann & Ward, 2015). To overcome this theoretical and empirical bias, some studies have turned to relational dualisms, such as those of “presence/absence” and “success/failure”, as ontological fundamentals to provide a more nuanced and generative understanding of the politics of policy circulation and adoption (Bok, 2020; Mittal & Shah, 2022). Finally, urban policy mobilities studies have placed their attention on policies that rely on official and institutionalized policymaking processes (Lovell, 2019; McCann & Ward, 2015). In doing so, they have more or less deliberately avoided generative conceptual, methodological and analytical synergies with science and technology studies and literature on governance through experimentation. These fields suggest that particular socio-technical policy features are rolled out through experiments to generate tacit knowledge on how urban policies should be enacted and reworked *before* their institutional re-embedding across different spatialities and temporalities (Bulkeley et al., 2018; Bulkeley & Castán-Broto, 2014; Nciri & Levenda, 2020).

Taking stock of the above arguments, this paper offers several insights into the field of urban policy mobilities. At the outset, theorizing from Southern-Mediterranean Europe

provides an (extra)ordinary context to complement entrenched assumptions on the circulation of policy futures across variegated welfare and state-market regimes. In particular, while contemporary policy circulation remains intertwined with the neo-liberal stock, we argue that different welfare regimes (the Mediterranean as opposed to neo-liberal welfare regimes) and their ontological practicalities shape the scale and nature of urban policy mobilities. This takes the form of both the places policymakers choose (not) to learn from and, of course, in the territorial adaptation, mediation and translation of urban policies. These issues point out the need to rethink some of the scalar assumptions embedded in urban policy mobilities studies. Whilst this set of studies has clearly overlooked the national scale as an ontologically necessary arena for contemporary policymaking, we advocate here that inter-scalar intertwining remains a central feature in the making of policy futures, particularly in more centralized political-institutional arrangements. In light of this, and building upon recent work on legal geographies, this paper stands as an invitation to policy mobilities scholars to delve into the socio-legal and socio-spatial aspects of contemporary policymaking as productive lines of discussion to understand how neo-liberal policies are crafted and re-embedded in socio-spatial and political-institutional contexts with different rules, regulations and multiple scales of action. This paper also provides further evidence of the constitution and re-constitution of policies through multiple, sometimes overlapping, spatialities and non-linear temporalities. Echoing recent studies that have called for non-linear and ephemeral approaches to policymaking processes, we make the case that those involved in the making of policy futures may learn from particular sites in a given moment and then sideline or silence those places and their associated policy features. Silencing, excluding or immobilizing particular policy features that were previously learned should not be read as tales of policy failure but rather as inherent components of policymaking manoeuvres, re-embedding processes and continuous reinvention of policy futures. Finally, we advance that urban policy mobilities studies should draw on science and technology studies to explore the instrumental role of policy pilot programs as situated test beds through which (parts of) policies are showcased, experimented and eventually made mobile and translated into new contexts. As we will see, introducing pilot programs, both before and after policy institutionalization, seems particularly important for excavating the embodied experiences and practices through which policies are learned, negotiated and re-embedded in particular contexts.

Methodology

Urban policy mobilities studies have used a range of qualitative methods to examine the making of policies through connections and networks, near and far, and at points in between (Cochrane & Ward, 2012; McCann & Ward, 2012a; Peck & Theodore, 2012; Wood, 2015a). Essentially, these studies have attempted to “follow the policies” and “study through” the mundane sites and situations as strategies to trace how policies are rendered comparable, learned and then implemented by policymakers. This paper draws on multi-lateral learning processes, from the US to English and German cities, in which local and regional stakeholders from the Barcelona region learned about BIDs. In shedding light on a complex inter-urban policy learning phenomena across variegated political-institutional and socio-spatial landscapes, it examines the remaking of urban policy mechanisms and their inaugural experimentation in a Southern-

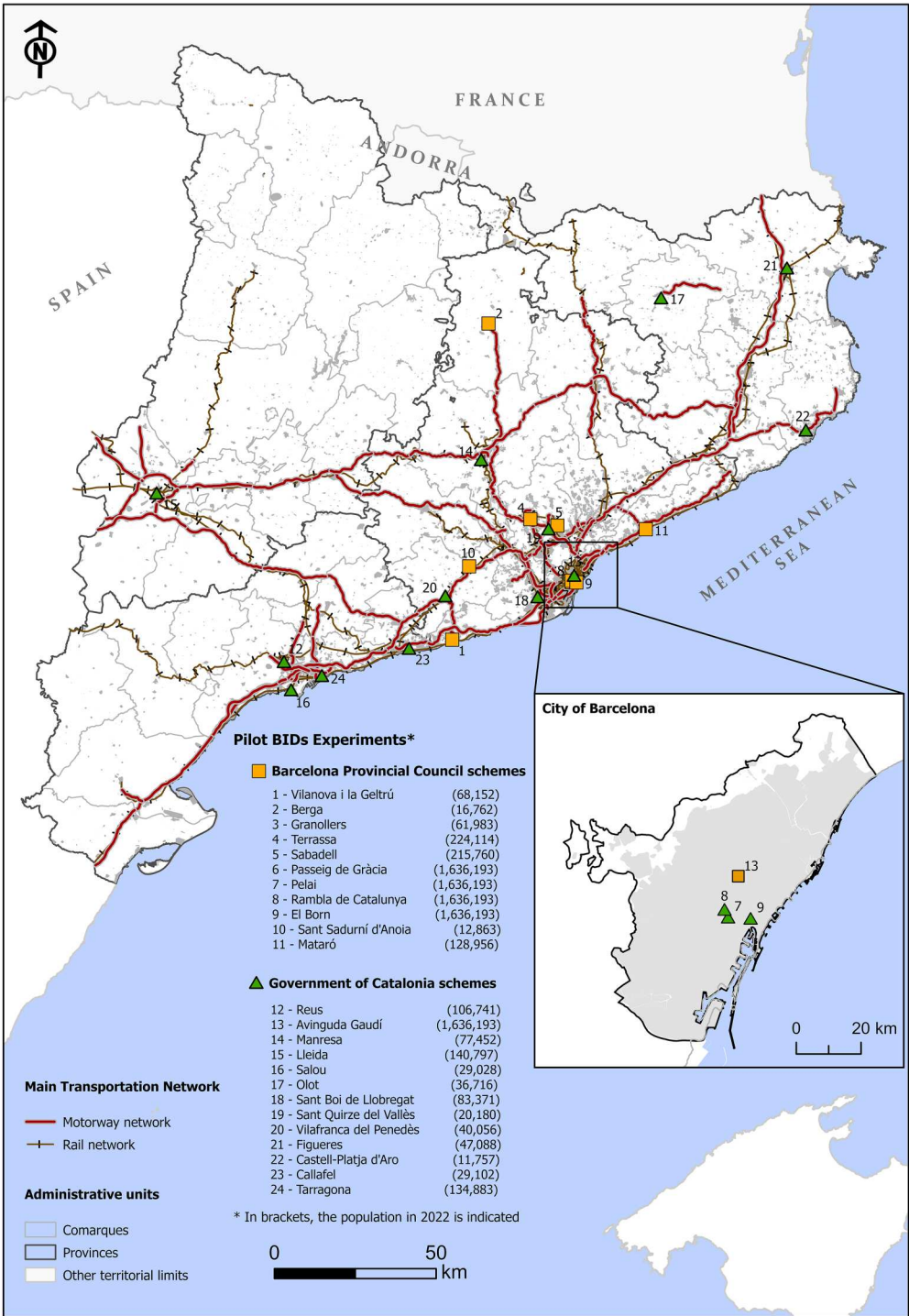


Figure 1. Funded retail-oriented BID pilot schemes in Greater Barcelona. Source: Own elaboration.

Table 1. Summary of interviews conducted.

Interview (as in the text)	Institutional position	Location	Date
1	Local authority officer	Vilanova i la Geltrú, Spain	July 2022
2	Executive at the local businesspeople association	Berguedà, Spain	July 2022
3	Executive at the <i>Generalitat</i> of Catalonia (retail sector)	Barcelona, Spain	July 2022
4	Former director at the <i>Generalitat</i> of Catalonia (retail sector). Local authority officer (City Council)	Barcelona, Spain	July 2022
5	Executive at the local businesspeople association	Vic, Spain	July 2022
6	Former executive at the College of Economics of Catalonia (retail sector)	Barcelona, Spain	May 2022
7	Executive at the Barcelona Provincial Council (Retail services department)	Barcelona, Spain	June 2022
8	BID think-tank and consultant. Executive at the College of Economics of Catalonia (retail sector)	Barcelona, Spain	July 2022
9	Local authority officer	Granollers, Spain	July 2022
10	Executive at the local businesspeople association (public-private partnership)	Terrassa, Spain	July 2022
11	BID think-tank and consultant. Executive at Barcelona Comerç	Sabadell, Spain	September 2022
12	Professor at the University of Girona. BID think-tank and consultant	Girona, Spain	September 2022
13	BID think-tank and consultant	Liverpool, UK	October 2022
14	Executive at the local businesspeople association	Reus, Spain	October 2022
15	Professor of Marketing at University of Basque Country	Vitoria, Spain	November 2022
16	Local authority officer	Vilafranca del Penedès	May 2023
17	Director of AGECU (Spanish Association for the Management of Urban Centers)	Valencia and Barcelona, Spain	April and June 2023
18	Professor at the University of Barcelona	Barcelona, Spain	June 2023

Mediterranean European context through two government-funded pilot programs (CCAM, 2022; DIBA, 2022) (Figure 1).

To address the aims of the paper, we conducted 18 semi-structured interviews with actors involved in the regional and local making of BIDs in Greater Barcelona (Table 1). Semi-structured interviews have been used as a standard method within policy mobilities to capture the “politics of learning” in which policy actors are involved. As Peck and Theodore (2012, p. 26) suggested, they “provide opportunities to excavate the social and political context of decision-making”. In particular, interviewees whom this study draws upon have access to a range of resources, are embedded in social or professional policymaking communities and are socially and politically recognized as “elites” (Woods, 1998). Finally, and perhaps surprisingly, we decided to interview policy actors at regional and local scales. As will be discussed, it was mainly through the exchange activities carried out by regional policymakers (*Generalitat de Catalunya*, henceforth *Generalitat*) that the BID “model” was then circulated across Greater Barcelona. This points out the differential nature and scale of policymaking processes as the intra-urban exchange of policies across Greater Barcelona has been traditionally rescaled from the local-urban level to the regional state, comfortably led by the city of Barcelona (Frago, 2020).

Given the above arguments, this study identified a range of complementary and overlapping sets of regional and local actors. These are located in both private and public sectors and are involved in small and large ways in the circulation and experimentation of BIDs in Barcelona and beyond. Echoing McCann’s (2008) work, we might think of these groups as constituting a set of informational infrastructures. These ranged from

regional and local policymakers, such as elected politicians, government officials and “middling” technocrats, and business elites, involving executive figures of business associations and relevant public-private coalitions, to global policy consultants and experts that have legitimized and facilitated the rolling out of successful “global” policy imaginaries. Interviews centered on exploring the “local” context for the emergence of the BID policy; the exchange practices through which regional and local policymakers learned about the BID policy; the territorial translation of the BID policy to a Southern-Mediterranean context; and the development of different BID pilot schemes and their local priorities. Complementing these interviews, we drew upon a range of secondary materials, including BID documents, consultancy presentations, local/regional policy briefs and newspaper articles.

Collapsed places: restructuring retail systems and town center management in Greater Barcelona

The last few decades have not been kind to several North American and Western European cities (Burt, 2010; Wilson & Wouters, 2003). Barcelona and its region are no exception. Over the last four decades, they have witnessed disruptive changes in their political economies. Such switches date back to Spain’s accession to the European Union in 1986 when many towns and cities started to undergo striking retail competition following the emergence of multiple national and international retail corporations. Unsurprisingly, since the 1980s and 1990s, many urban shopping districts have failed to secure their share of the spatial division of consumption, following the mushrooming of retail and leisure-oriented formats in out-of-town locations (Carreras et al., 2021). Even today, “consumer flight” towards suburban destinations shows no signs of abating. For instance, in the province of Barcelona, consumers increasingly rely on large retail outlets outside their neighborhood to purchase essential non-food products, clothing and household equipment (DIBA, 2019). Therefore, intertwining have been corporate strategies and their actual “creative” unfolding with the socioeconomic decline of traditional shopping districts. Shopfronts have thus become boarded up. While such voices of decline are not exclusive to Greater Barcelona, they have echoed both in arenas once praised for their shopping vibrancy, such as Manresa, Terrassa and Vilafranca del Penedès, and in places excluded from regional and touristic dynamics, including Berga and Reus (Frago, 2011):

[B]ig supermarket chains, such as *Carrefour* and *Mercadona*, have burdened everything. It’s very difficult to find a supermarket that’s not part of a national or international chain (Interview #2, Berga)

We’ve recently noticed that Inditex has decided to move all its stores to a shopping center in Tarragona. Thus, Reus has lost its Inditex presence. This can become a problem in the short term (Interview #14, Reus)

In some cases, city and federal governments have also fueled retail suburbanization. Shrinking tax bases meant that local governments were struggling to effectively manage urban spaces and deliver statutory services (Mallett, 1994). In addition to spikes in inflation between the mid-1970s and 1990s, rooted in severe de-industrialization processes across Greater Barcelona, signs of deterioration became more prominent

when a financial assistance program was outlined for Spain in 2012 to sort out a rapidly increasing public debt, grounded in government deficits (EC, 2012). Part of the remedy to address such pressures was the centrally-prescribed reinvention of the local state as a strategic partner to react to the consequences of the global financial crisis (Thompson, 2020). Unsurprisingly, such entrepreneurial restructuring of the local state meant that city governments were struggling to sustain their planned investments and turning to a cadre of place-based coalitions to induce economic development:

We're in distress! Berga's one of the most indebted cities in Spain. In 2012, it had €22 million in debt (...) The city's now intervened by the state. What's happened over the last 10 years? The city's debt has been reduced from €22 to €6 million. How do you reduce public debt? Clearly by stopping to invest (Interview #2, Berga)

Confronted with the above shocks, business communities have relied on collective initiatives to counteract voices of decline. Forming self-governing business associations was an opening, yet narrow, move towards this agenda. In the 1990s and 2000s, policymakers from Barcelona encouraged long-established businesspeople associations to create strategic partnerships with the public sector to address urban decline (Frechoso-Remiro & Villarejo-Galende, 2011). This idea resembles the Town Center Management (TCM) experiences that flourished in the UK in the 1980s and 1990s, in which local governments and business associations co-financed promotional activities to revitalize shopping districts. Therefore, the making of TCM-like partnerships, known as *Centros Comerciales a Cielo Abierto* (CCCAAs), also found fertile ground in Barcelona and its immediate surroundings, particularly in Terrassa and Granollers (Coca-Stefaniak et al., 2005, 2009), as an attempt to aid the praised “Catalan business model”.

However, although the share of shops affiliated with business associations has been increasing (in the city of Barcelona it increased from 25% in 2006 to 43% in 2012 and from 33% in 2013 to 39% in 2019), the tribulations they, along with TCM-like structures, face stemming from their “voluntary” structure continue to persist (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2019; Cook, 2008; Ward & Cook, 2017). For instance, these structures have historically been governed by a limited set of independent retailers in which retail chains are underrepresented. Similarly, there has been a lack of professional town center managers, which undermines the strategic and operational impact of any place management structure. Perhaps more critical is the core funding mechanisms and their apparent ineffectiveness. In this instance, their voluntary mechanisms turned into an issue of “free-riding”. At the same time, both place management structures have drawn upon public funding resources. Unsurprisingly, the entrepreneurial restructuring of the local state meant that government resources to support business-led structures almost halved between 2010 and 2018 (Interview #3 and #8, Barcelona). Lastly, these structures have been built on a narrow budget scale that limits the performance of place-activation initiatives. As one interviewee argues:

Our [association's] budget has been reduced massively because the *Generalitat* is giving us very little (...) as well as the [Barcelona] Provincial Council. The City Council has been giving us the same amount of money for 10 years and we don't raise the [membership] fees because we're afraid of losing our members! Thus, we were running with €400,000–

€500,000 whereas now we do it with €160,000–€170,000. What can you achieve with this?
(Interview #10, Terrassa)

While these episodes have undoubtedly caused stagnation or decline across many shopping districts over the last few decades, much of the recent arguments have centered on the implications of the Great Recession and COVID-19 (Carreras et al., 2021; Frago, 2021). Echoing these challenges, interviews show that large-scale transformation of retailscape and a shift towards e-commerce has engendered a “retail apocalypse” in numerous town centers. Replicating the narratives of other places, we have witnessed extensive store closures or downsizing, particularly across well-known technology and fashion brands. Although fashion retailers such as Inditex have recently decided to close part of their department stores, its knock-on effects have also shaken the confidence of multiple independent retailers across Greater Barcelona (Interview #9, Granollers; Interview #14, Reus). In the face of the above shocks, there are signs that pedestrians are moving away from traditional shopping districts. For instance, footfall counters in Terrassa indicate a loss of 1,600 pedestrians/day while in Vic they fell by one-quarter between 2019 and 2022.

The extent of the shadow cast over towns and cities by the Great Recession and COVID-19 over the last years also illuminates how real estate and financial markets have affected the existing brick-and-mortar retailscape. In broad terms, cities and towns in Greater Barcelona have been experiencing speculative real estate investments used by some influential businesses and landowners to manipulate supply/demand conditions and maximize their profit margins. Perhaps surprisingly, such an approach to real estate investment and its consequences have shown no signs of abating since the COVID-19 lockdowns, although we have seen a downturn in the “business appetite” for inner-city places:

[Having retail chains] is positive for attracting people (...) Yet, this is what now creates negative effects like the increase in commercial property prices because they can pay what others can't. There's a process of speculation caused by property owners who prefer to rent [premises] to a chain rather than an independent (Interview #9, Granollers)

This practice has become the norm among small and large landowners. While the former seeks to capitalize on the exchange value of their properties, the latter, now comprising reorganized banking consortia, have not shown interest in renting or selling their prime-located branches (Zurita, 2014). Empty properties have thus become singular financial assets based on their anticipated future streams. Similarly, Real Estate Investment Trusts have also become financial instruments used to renovate rundown retail premises in Greater Barcelona (Tapp, 2019). However, in the case of a symbiosis between commercial activity and property ownership, there seems to exist a lack of modernization of existing shopping premises. On one hand, retailers have little expectation of maximizing their businesses' profit margins and thus tend to avoid making unsustainable investments. On the other, not modernizing shopping premises is also a response to the absence of inter-generational continuity among family-owned businesses thanks to the poor social status of the retail sector. Both reasons provide a fertile ground for the ballooning of low-value-added retail premises across Greater Barcelona, often managed by immigrants and low-end “entrepreneurs” who aim to capitalize on unemployment situations:

[R]etail isn't a respected sector. One of the most relevant problems that businesses often face is generation change or finding people, particularly young people, who want to work in retail. This situation is sometimes causing even well-established shops (...) end up closing (Interview #3, Barcelona)

While mirroring what we have witnessed in other North American and Western European cities, they draw together a set of unkind symptoms that have pervaded Catalan's towns and city centers, which have only grown worse in recent years. For instance, between 2017 and 2021, the number of retail premises shrank by 10% and the commercial surface fell by a quarter. Facing these circumstances, regional and local policymakers along with business elites concurred that Barcelona and its wider urban region would need to try something different to reactivate its "business climate". That was when, and perhaps surprisingly, such Southern-Mediterranean European policymakers decided to scan a range of advanced Western cities and neo-liberal regimes where BIDs were comfortably thriving.

"We are the forerunners in Southern Europe": the making of a Mediterranean Business Improvement District "model"?

On 18 December 2020, roughly 135 deputies of the Parliament of Catalonia convened for a plenary session. That day, BID regulations received significant support, with 119 out of 135 delegates voting in favor. The supporters included Catalan nationalist parties (*Junts per Catalunya*), Catalan leftist parties (*Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*), the Spanish center-left (*Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya*), and the Spanish left-wing parties (*Catalunya en Comú Podem*). The only parties not in favor were the Spanish nationalist right-wing party *Partit Popular*, which abstained, and *Ciutadans* and the left-wing to far-left pro-Catalan independence party (*Candidatura d'Unitat Popular*), which voted against. The detractors had varied reasons for their opposition. For example, the *Candidatura d'Unitat Popular* viewed BIDs as a quintessential neo-liberal policy that required opposition, especially due to the potential privatization of public spaces they might entail. Conversely, both *Partit Popular* and *Ciutadans* opposed BID regulations as a means to hinder the government of the *Generalitat*, which, at the time, was led by pro-independence parties, despite being economically aligned with the BID regulations. Interestingly, however, the territorialization of BIDs across Greater Barcelona has been locally path-dependent. For instance, while in the city of Barcelona, which was under the left-wing *Barcelona en Comú* government in coalition with *Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya*, BIDs and other public-private partnerships were not considered, in smaller cities like Berga, BIDs were seen as a "policy mecca" for local economic development, including, and perhaps surprisingly, by *Candidatura d'Unitat Popular*-led government.

What stands out, however, is that the approval of BID regulations marked the culmination of nearly two decades of negotiations. Behind-the-scenes rumors surrounding BIDs had started to circulate among local and regional policymakers in the late 1990s (Figure 2). Apparently, during a "downtime" at a retail congress, Tamyko Ysa – then a PhD student in Political Science and Administration in Barcelona – shared some ideas that emerged out of her comparative research on town center management models in the UK and the US: TCMs and BIDs, respectively (Ysa, 2000). Around 10 delegates



Figure 2. Summary timeline of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs): A multi-scalar approach. Source: Own elaboration.

from Bilbao, Valencia and, interestingly, Terrassa heard about some BID narratives and soon became convinced of their merits.

At that moment, Terrassa Centre, one of the most vigorous TCMs in Greater Barcelona, was involved in a wider €4.7 million public-led revitalization program. That program, to which businesses contributed 23%, comprised the pedestrianization of more than 12,000 meters of streets and 24,000 square meters of plazas, and the upgrading

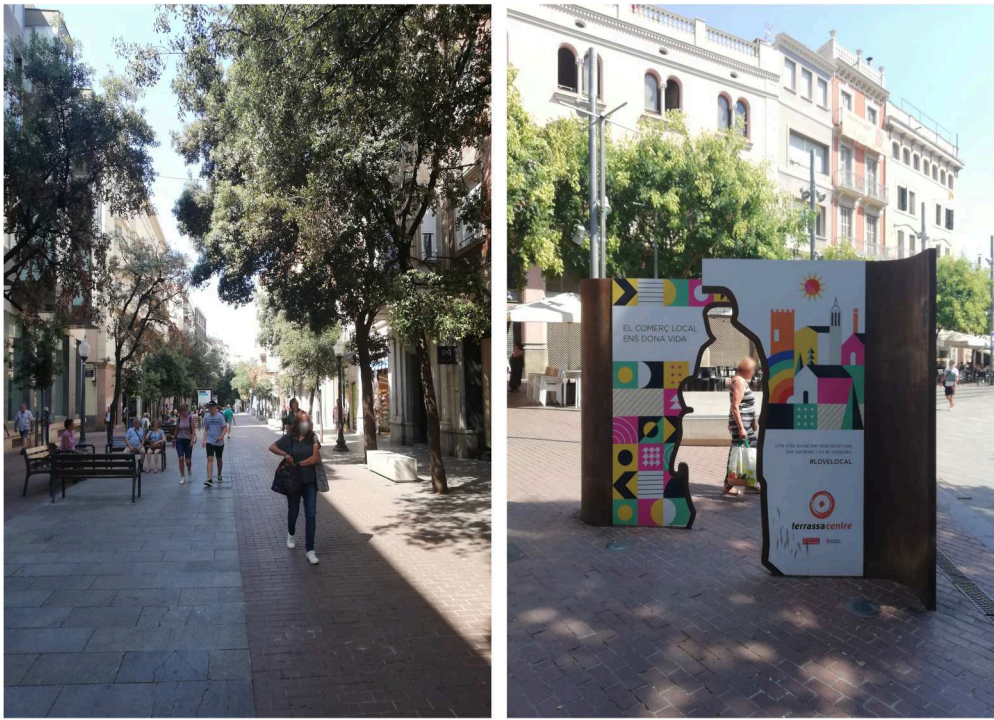


Figure 3. Carrer Major pedestrianized (Terrassa, Barcelona). Source: Diogo Gaspar Silva.

of retail structures (Figure 3). Unsurprisingly, Terrassa soon became an eminent walkable and family-friendly place to live, visit and consume in: Property values grew by over 400% and visitor numbers by 30% (Terrassa Centre, 2009). Despite the outcomes, some stakeholders realized that preserving the revitalization initiative would be financially unfeasible because of the existing TCM voluntary-based funding mechanisms. On hearing this hopeless news, from the late 1990s onwards, María Costa – trade councillor of Terrassa City Council and President of Terrassa Centre – drew on the BID international narratives she had heard at the congress to persuade both Barcelona Provincial Council and *Generalitat* to institutionalize BIDs (*Diari de Terrassa*, 12 June 2012). Assembled in a matter of weeks was a technical group based at the Federation of Municipalities of Catalonia in which Terrassa was represented. It included, among others, members of the then-formed Spanish Association for the Management of Urban Centers (AGECU), which has since then encouraged the rollout of BIDs across Spanish autonomous communities (Villarejo-Galende, 2014). The remit of this technical group was to understand what BIDs were, how they evolved worldwide and, more notably, how the “model” could be translated into Greater Barcelona.

From New York, Philadelphia and Washington to Barcelona: when policy knowledge is left behind

Fact-finding trips and other policy tourism initiatives have since the early 2000s become generative instruments through which Catalan delegations of policymakers and business

elites learned about the BID “model” (González, 2010). As usual, these journeys would act as sites of encounter where delegates would, first-hand, listen to authoritative testimonies, learn and experience the work of the BIDs up-close and ultimately inform and legitimize policymaking decisions back home (Baker & McGuirk, 2019; Temenos & McCann, 2013). While policymakers and business elites from Greater Barcelona had visited some BIDs in Canada, planes with two dozen motivated individuals from the City Council of Terrassa, Terrassa Centre and *Generalitat* landed more often in the US cities of New York, Philadelphia and Washington. These reference points, as in many other transatlantic journeys, were strategically chosen based on their operational triumphs, established networks and long-standing experience (Cook, 2008; Michel & Stein, 2015; Ward, 2007; Ward & Cook, 2017):

We went to Philadelphia because we had a reference that there was one [BID] that worked quite well. Also, it’s more or less the model we were looking for because the neighbors were involved (...) By going to Philadelphia, we also visited Washington, a BID in the center, and, in New York, we visited two or three BIDs. We were welcomed by local councils and BID executives (Interview #10, Terrassa)

Both formal and informal face-to-face interactions certainly influenced how tour delegates reported their inferences. The US evidence stunned some business elites, for example. US BIDs were patrolling their areas with uniformed individuals, deterring crime, planting potted flowers, mechanically cleaning the streets, and even supporting the homeless! To disseminate these narratives and educate regional and local stakeholders about the domestic futures of BIDs, some officials decided to assemble bits of images, maps and texts produced elsewhere and circulate them in many presentations and meetings (Terrassa Centre, 2009). However, despite their constructive reverberations, high-up policymakers realized on their return to Barcelona that US BIDs were not a suitable repertoire to the existing “Catalan business model”. Apparently, the ideological, politico-institutional and socio-spatial infrastructures and regimes for US BIDs were different from those in Barcelona, where more centralized power geometries endure. Unsurprisingly, some aspects of the BID policy did not travel:

We noted (...) that the example of New York doesn’t fit us (...) In New York, existing BIDs are focused on a single company or two companies. So, they aren’t multi-companies, because most of the buildings (...) are owned by a single person (Interview #4, Barcelona)

[W]e come from a very associative society and (...) in New York there aren’t as many associations. Thus, saying “If we all work together, we will be doing things better” (...) works really well. Here there are many associations, small ones, and often operating near each other, that claim “I don’t want to work with him/her ...” (...) It’s very difficult because of the existing stale associationism! (Interview #10, Terrassa)

[P]eople aren’t used to seeing the public and private sectors working together. I mean, businesses, associations and retail entities usually have a close relationship with their City Council, but [the practice of] working together (...) is not very widespread (Interview #3, Barcelona)

These arguments were repeated by several regional and local stakeholders. They provide a useful framework to recognize that policies should be reassembled and reshaped to suit particular contexts (Baker & Temenos, 2015; McCann & Ward, 2013; Peck, 2011; Temenos & McCann, 2013). The first quote is indicative of the contrasting property

ownership regimes between US and Mediterranean cities. In particular, it suggests that the US BIDs are not operating in a context where there is a strong patrimonial/ownership culture that translates into the reproduction of small-scale, sometimes informal, and fragmented retail properties. The second quote is indicative of the risks of introducing a neo-liberal policy-from-elsewhere in settings where fragile trajectories of private-private collaboration exist. Despite the modest associationism index in Greater Barcelona, there are some business associations whose areas sometimes overlap, which generates imbroglios that are difficult to dismantle. One illustrative example comes from Granollers where five business associations co-exist in its center, yet only one seems to be supporting the BID. The final quotation outlines how dissimilar state-market geometries may halt policy re-embedding. Southern-Mediterranean European businesses often see the local state as the most relevant stakeholder in urban politics, thus relying on it for the management of urban spaces. Therefore, delegates who traveled to the US realized that BIDs as bottom-up and private-led structures were flourishing because of the “hollowing out” of the state. Barcelona policymakers promptly concluded that this US BID feature would not work in their cities. Hence, they were forced to redraw their learning routes and turn their attention to BIDs settled in English and German cities.

From London and beyond to Barcelona and from Hamburg to Barcelona: when policy knowledge is translated

From the mid-2000s onwards there was a wide set of conversations concerning the introduction of BIDs in the UK. These conversations gained transnational attention following the approval of BID regulations and the onset of two government-funded pilot programs: The “Circle Initiative” in London and the Association of Town Center Management scheme in some English and Welsh locations (Cook, 2008; Ward & Cook, 2017). Both schemes, their re-embedding mechanisms and good practices would rapidly become important references. For instance, regional and local stakeholders from Barcelona and beyond knew overtly that place-based initiatives scattered across their town centers were a replica of the English TCM schemes. At the same time, delegates were particularly keen on understanding how English public-sector officials, as opposed to the US, were encouraging BID formation through pilot schemes, a policy feature originally borrowed from Canada that then became an example of “central government-articulated localism”.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, study tours took place to some English BIDs that were still in their infancy. However, and drawing upon the “lessons learned” from the US, stakeholders from Terrassa together with officials at *Generalitat* decided that English “core cities” would not be the single ones leading the learning process, partly because that would not allow an adequate comparison with the urban and retail structure in their territories. As one BID consultant who participated in these study tours states:

[T]hey didn’t want a big city (...) As Terrassa is a medium-sized city, they wanted an example that wasn’t a large city (...) They were pushing for a legal framework in Catalonia and Terrassa wanted a BID. I think selecting Leeds was really “Let’s look for someone who’s not in a big city such as London or Manchester” (Interview #8, Barcelona)

It was under these shrewd circumstances that a study tour to Leeds brought together officials from Terrassa City Council along with businesses from Terrassa Centre and

Barcelona policymakers in 2006. Replicating earlier initiatives, these stakeholders met with local government representatives and BID executives. The tour and its meetings functioned as “hands-on” learning experiences in which BID directors exposed the foreign delegation to a variety of tangible achievements and governance essentials (Baker & McGuirk, 2019; Montero, 2016; Wood, 2014). The discussed topics ranged from BID formation to border drawing and from BIDs services to, most importantly, their funding. Although instructive, the study tour reproduced some of the politico-institutional and socio-spatial outcomes already detected in the US:

[H]e [Leeds BID manager] was surprised (...) When he found out that most of the delegation of 15 or 20 people only owned one store, at most two, he couldn't believe it. When we told him that's common in Catalonia and Spain, he was puzzled (Interview #8, Barcelona)

Those involved in the making of the BID policy in Terrassa and Barcelona have also scanned some English “core cities” over the last few decades, such as London and Liverpool. Such exchange initiatives aimed to enable translational delegates to learn functional aspects from the London BIDs. While London has always been home to numerous BIDs, it seems that Mediterranean officials decided to turn their attention to two BIDs (Camden Town and Waterloo) located in less bourgeois and affluent neighborhoods (Interview #10, Terrassa). Once again, these areas were showcased as being more “familiar” to the Mediterranean context: independent-owned businesses and smaller operating budgets. Following multiple bilateral visits and conversations over the last decade, these two BIDs and their representatives were almost exclusively reported back and presented as explicit functional references that would live in the “mental mappings” of many stakeholders. In fact, it was English BIDs, and not their US equivalents, that were promoted to different audiences (policymakers, government officials and business leaders) as natural inducers of economic development throughout several face-to-face and virtual meetings organized, for example, by the Barcelona Provincial Council and *Barcelona Oberta*, interestingly before their legal institutionalization. Of course, in these exchange initiatives, the rationale was tailored to praise BIDs as successful, focused and, particularly, flexible structures to address local issues (Mallett, 1994; Silva et al., 2022). Focusing on the last feature, assembled and rendered mobile were clear-cut references to their services along with the range of places that had BIDs. In this sense, Liverpool, where a Spanish-speaking person worked for the city's BIDs, caught the eyes of many regional and local stakeholders:

[W]e used to annually organize “*Semana del Comerç*” where the main stakeholders of the [retail] sector (...) would attend (...) [W]e dedicated one of the days talking about BIDs. We invited Hasanul Hoque, Director of the Camden Town BID, and Natalie Raben, representative of the Waterloo BID, to come (Interview #3, Barcelona)

I was there with one hundred people to hear about the experiences from Liverpool. Later, I had some contact with him [Liverpool speaker] (...) I stayed in touch with him, we got to write to each other on LinkedIn, but we didn't manage to plan a study tour (Interview #1, Vilanova i la Geltrú)

In facilitating iterative and reflexive learning approaches and generating local interest in BIDs, speakers draw upon their professional-based experience on how BIDs had already

been successful elsewhere. In doing so, more or less formal policy tourism initiatives and channels are seen as generative sites and situations through which tacit knowledge is shared and controversial information is verified (Baker & McGuirk, 2019; Montero, 2016; Wood, 2014). Collectively, they provide an opportunity to lubricate codified policy knowledge, legitimize policymaking solutions and reflect upon the potential and controversial hurdles to emulating them. As one of the interviewees states:

[Businesses] want to understand who pays. They want to know what kind of services can be delivered. When I explain the Liverpool ‘model’, I want to show that BIDs are flexible. I also offer them concrete solutions to our problems (...) And a very important theme that they *always* get stuck is “What’s going to happen to my business association and board of directors?” (Interview #13, Liverpool)

While there has clearly been a history of “following” the experiences of some English BIDs, Barcelonese regional policymakers have recently rearranged and extended their policymaking mappings. Apparently, while AGECEU had attempted to lobby political parties countrywide and the *Generalitat* to draft BID regulations, policymakers were skeptical and repeatedly stated, “[T]his [BID mandatory levy] cannot be done in the existing legal framework” (Interview #11, Sabadell). On hearing this reasoning, AGECEU decided to establish contractual arrangements with two policy consultants who were commissioned to produce a comparative report on the most suitable tax rating mechanisms to translate BIDs into a new context (Villarejo-Galende & Pardo, 2017). The resulting technical recommendations referred to some German cities as an instrumental background:

When I realized that Germany and particularly Hamburg had regulated BIDs (...) and they were working, I thought, (...) “If they managed to regulate (...) the BID mandatory levy, we can also do it” because, in Germany, the “tributes” have a constitutional regulation and legal concept similar to ours (Interview #12, Girona)

In addition to the discussions around the nature of the funding regime, policy consultants provided a host of three other reasons to legitimize their focus on the experiences taking place in Hamburg. In addition to apparent commonalities between the urban structure in Germany and Greater Barcelona, policy consultants also found a political juxtaposition around the administrative organization of territories, as regional governments have devolved powers. Similarly, policy consultants witnessed a set of parallels around the role of public and private sectors in urban governance (Michel & Stein, 2015; Stein et al., 2017). Focusing on this last issue, consultants argued that, although US and to some extent English BIDs tend to subsidize their patrolling teams in public space, private sector involvement in urban politics is much more limited in Germany and Spain, since centralized federal and local welfare states are in place.

It was understood that the technical knowledge produced by policy consultants influenced political decisions around BID futures in Greater Barcelona. In particular, after the release of consultant-made reports, some officials from the *Generalitat* decided to embark on fact-finding visits to Hamburg. Whilst their content remains nebulous, these exchange activities seem to have focused on a range of socio-technical conversations covering legal and political issues intertwined with BIDs instead of their strictly operational side. For instance, not only were the business communities not invited to visit Hamburg, but also the high-ranking officials only met with

the City Council, the Chamber of Commerce, which was at the forefront of translating BIDs into Germany, and the Department of Urban Development and Housing, which was managing them in Hamburg (Interview #8, Barcelona). Nonetheless, although only regional stakeholders had visited BIDs in Hamburg, local stakeholders also learned from its experience which was put into conversation with that of London in many learning initiatives, including those organized by the Barcelona Provincial Council.

While many of these conversations placed great faith in BIDs as catalysts to reactivate many localities, there was clear awareness among those involved in translating BIDs that they would have to work differently in a Southern-Mediterranean context. Unsurprisingly, their re-embedding in Greater Barcelona has attuned to inherited political-institutional regimes, state-market power geometries and multi-level socio-cultural relations. This process reveals the intricate ways in which the BID policy has been “first-territorialized” in Southern Europe.

The rollout of BIDs in this context has placed a strong emphasis on regional state-led agencies. In particular, the range of transnational learning initiatives was limited to a few delegates from Terrassa and Barcelona, with local stakeholders from other cities and town centers largely detached from official intra-urban exchange programs. Government agencies then selected, produced and circulated BID material, ranging from social-technical advisory bureaus and “best practices” conferences to knowledge repositories and *how-to* guides. State-sponsored pilot programs were also introduced, with the first taking place in two different neighborhoods in the city of Barcelona (*Born* and *Sant Andreu*) in 2017. While showcasing the plasticity of the BID “model” in two different shopping districts, these experiments were introduced and presented as a means to socially and politically legitimize the BID “model” and generated tacit knowledge on how it could be reworked and regulated in specific socio-technical and politico-institutional arrangements in Greater Barcelona, particularly in the city of Barcelona (Pardo, 2017). Since then, two additional government-funded pilot programs have been created (Figure 1). Not surprisingly, both schemes are examples of government-articulated localism that aim to encourage the rollout of the BID “model” through financial and technical support.

Building on the former, the legal re-embedding of BIDs had implications for the nature and scale of stakeholders who could make BID proposals. For instance, local authorities became BID promoters, a feature that deviates from the US BIDs program and clashes with their private-led essence, revealing that the public sector remains an influential actor in urban politics, particularly in centralized welfare regimes where private sector involvement tends to be sparse. Unsurprisingly, this led to emerging resistance among some retailers to paying the BID levy, arguing that local authorities should provide statutory services. Additionally, the share of endorsement requested to set up a BID, in case the initiative emerges from the private sector, was set at 25% (in England this criterion does not apply and in Hamburg 15% of the affected ratepayers within the BID area, by number and property value) to enhance collective action among affected businesses, given the limited associationism index and cooperation amongst private stakeholders in Greater Barcelona.

A final fundamental difference in the BID “model” in Greater Barcelona relates to the eligible levy-payers and voters. While in the US and Germany, it is the property owners

who vote and pay the BID levy, Greater Barcelona follows initial English regulations as all non-domestic ratepayers vote and pay, including vacant premises. However, a successful vote depends on three conditions specific to the Southern-Mediterranean context: more than 50% of the affected ratepayers within the BID area must vote (a feature set to legitimize the democratic accountability of the BID “model” and its mandatory levy, and encourage stakeholder participation), more than 50% of the votes cast must be in favor by number *and* cadastral surface. Nevertheless, at the time of writing, the central government of Spain seems to be unfolding basic regulations that will prevail over BID regulations in Greater Barcelona for statutory reasons. These may include amendments to BID proposers (local authorities would not be allowed to propose a BID), affected ratepayers (vacant premises would be exempt) and, notably, an increase in the share of “Yes” votes required for a BID to succeed.

Conclusion

Since hosting the 1992 Olympic Games, Barcelona has become a prominent reference point or model for policymakers around the world. More recently, however, it has been policymakers from Greater Barcelona who have actively traveled the world to reinvent their policy futures. This paper has used the example of BIDs as a mobile economic development policy to examine their transatlantic and intra-European journeys and re-embedding pathways in a Southern-Mediterranean European context. It has explored the engendering of BIDs as a “transferable” policy, examined how they were multilaterally learned through more or less constructive relations with other cities over time and discussed the contingent processes through which they were grounded in an unheard-off Mediterranean context. This paper thus provides a more nuanced understanding of how the studying of mobile policies emerging in underrepresented, perhaps surprising, locations, where different socio-spatial and political-institutional arrangements prevail, can generate productive insights to showcase the incompleteness of some analytical frameworks. This leaves us with three contributions to the field of urban policy mobilities studies.

Firstly, this paper has advanced a generative understanding of contemporary policy-making through the lens of Southern-Mediterranean European cities, taking of emerging critiques in urban policy mobilities that call for a thicker dialogue between urban repeated instances (Cook et al., 2014; Mittal & Shah, 2022; Montero, 2020; Robinson, 2015, 2022). By focusing on the complex socio-spatial and political-institutional Southern-Mediterranean context, it extends and challenges existing theorizations about the differential trajectories of neo-liberal policy futures (Brenner & Schmid, 2015). The paper has used the territorialization of BIDs in Barcelona to illustrate the abnormalities in urban policymaking, highlighting that the rollout of entrepreneurial policies like BIDs is not linear but hinges upon the differential nature of welfare regimes, state-market constellations and politico-institutional infrastructures. This further extends recent urban policy mobilities studies that have argued for a more nuanced examination of the trans-urban trajectories of entrepreneurial policy futures in more centralized welfare regimes (Gunko et al., 2022; Kusevski et al., 2023; Richner & Olesen, 2019). In this instance, while a shift towards market principles in policymaking seems obvious, the strong presence of the state in welfare provision and economic

development policies remains a central aspect of urban policymaking in Southern-Mediterranean countries. Here, as we have discussed, de-regulation and privatization of urban policy futures remain limited to a certain extent. As one interviewee remarked: “As we are the forerunners [in introducing BIDs] in Southern Europe, it poses us troubles and the risk of starting from scratch. While in other countries you can always have a closer reference, here our reference points are far-off”. Indeed, in the case of BIDs in Greater Barcelona, we have seen that the slower adoption of BIDs was due to entrenched state-centric mechanisms that hinder businesses’ involvement in urban politics, on which much of the BID essence rests. For these reasons, Barcelonese policymakers decided not to mobilize the US bottom-up BID “model”. Additionally, the central role of regional government agencies (Barcelona Provincial Council and *Generalitat*) in the top-down implementation of BIDs across Greater Barcelona, with exceptions like Terrassa, further stretches out the complex inter-scalar dynamics at play.

Taking stock of these insights, we thus argue that urban policy mobilities studies, which have widely prioritized cities over regional or national scales, should offer a more nuanced understanding of the interconnected nature of policymaking across different scales (Jacobs, 2012; McCann & Ward, 2013; Temenos & McCann, 2013; Ward, 2010). Advancing this framework seems particularly fruitful when examining the making of contemporary urban futures in more centralized welfare regimes, where particular state-market geometries turn the adoption and translation of entrepreneurial policies less straightforward (Gunko et al., 2022; Kusevski et al., 2023; Richner & Olesen, 2019). Through the case of BIDs in Greater Barcelona, we have seen that policy learning and adoption largely followed a top-down approach, influenced by insights from policymakers and business leaders in Barcelona and Terrassa. Additionally, we have also shown that prospective national government regulations may supersede other levels, thus reshaping how policies are established in Greater Barcelona and beyond. These examples clearly demonstrate the need to critically engage with the socio-legal and socio-spatial perspectives from legal geographies as a means to enrich our understanding of the complexities of political-institutional contexts, their inter-scalar dependency and power dynamics in which policies move and arrive (Delaney, 2016; Gillespie, 2016). Rather than simplistically thinking of cities as crucial arenas in contemporary policymaking, we argue that the particularities of how policies arrive at different welfare regimes, particularly in sites and situations where the national and regional scales still influence the making of local-urban policies, should not misread the influence of socio-legal aspects in the relational and territorial making of policy futures across different urban contexts. In turn, these possible connections offer several opportunities for further academic research on urban policy mobilities. How, for instance, do existing regulatory frameworks and legal constraints shape local, regional and national policy futures? Do different cities have varying and interconnected governance structures and institutional arrangements? If so, how do more centralized contexts influence the territorial embedding of entrepreneurial policies? How do socio-cultural norms within different welfare regimes influence urban policymaking processes? Are particular redistributive perspectives across different welfare regimes shaping how policies are socially and legally legitimized and territorialized? For example, is regulating and collecting a mandatory BID levy, or private sector involvement in urban governance, equally socially acceptable and legally feasible

across different welfare regimes? If not, what policy features might need to be adapted or reinvented?

Secondly, this paper has provided further evidence that “mobility” and “immobility” are relationally constituted, and that policies do not ever move completely formed between places. More often than not, some of their technical aspects do not work in another context and require policymakers to look elsewhere. Drawing upon recent debates (Baker & McCann, 2020; Bok, 2020; McCann & Ward, 2015; Mittal & Shah, 2022; Ward, 2018), this paper has outlined that “immobility” is an inherent component of policymaking maneuvers. Rather than seeing it as a tale of policy failure, it claims that policy features that are deliberately made immobile are natural reverberations of re-embedding processes and ultimately generate policy knowledge (Lovell, 2019; Robinson, 2015). In our case study, the US bottom-up BID “model” did not suit the politico-institutional and socio-spatial regimes in Greater Barcelona and, thus, did not travel. Maturity levels of public-private coalitions and property ownership in the US cities seemed to differ greatly from their Southern-Mediterranean peers. Surprisingly, “immobility” did not lead to the abandonment of the BID policy; instead, it provided an impetus for its reinvention through more comparable urban spatialities found in England and Germany in different temporalities (Wood, 2015a; Ward, 2018). Therefore, those involved in policymaking processes have followed non-linear learning approaches, which are sensitive to the sticky and history-laden nature of policy circulation. This paper makes the case that urban policy mobilities studies should embrace a more nuanced approach to excavate the multitude of sites and tempos through which policies are (re-)learned, circulated and modified. The case of BIDs in Greater Barcelona illustrates this. Initial attempts to adopt the US model were “unsuccessful”, leading policymakers to look to England in the mid-2000s. Later, their arrival to Greater Barcelona was built upon a fertile politico-institutional ground generated through comparisons with German cities. While BIDs originally emerged in the 1970s, their arrival in Southern-Mediterranean Europe took place half a century later, in a dissimilar context grappling with unique challenges, such as real estate conjecture, COVID-19 and, more recently, the Russo-Ukrainian War. This historical and relational understanding has shown how policies adapt and evolve across different contexts and temporalities.

Finally, this paper has nourished the subtle-yet-prolific dialogue between policy mobilities and governance through experimentation literatures. Widening a small number of previous works (Lovell, 2019; Nciri & Levenda, 2020), it has specifically sketched that government-funded pilot programs are fundamental instances through which policies can be unraveled, experimented and eventually made mobile and re-worked *before* and *after* their legal institutionalization in new contexts. Through the case of BIDs, it was outlined that the introduction of two pilot schemes in 2017 in the city of Barcelona was utilized as a policy legitimization tool amongst policymakers and as precursors to generate socio-technical knowledge on how to regulate BIDs in Greater Barcelona. Moreover, the “actually-existing” government-funded pilot BID schemes in selected towns and cities illuminate that both schemes aim to encourage the rollout of the BID “model” by showcasing on-the-ground “best practices” that would serve as references-capes across Greater Barcelona and perhaps other Southern-Mediterranean politico-institutional and socio-spatial contexts. It is at the intersection of our case study and the broader role of local pilot schemes in the adaptation, mediation and translation of

urban policy concepts that further research on urban policy mobilities can emerge. For instance, by drawing on insights from science and technology studies, we can conceptualize local pilot schemes as policy demonstrators in real-world settings. Indeed, like technological demonstrators, these policy pilot schemes act as a “proof of concept-from-elsewhere”, socially and politically showcasing and promoting particular policies as transferable and effective. Research on urban policy mobilities should delve into the embodied experiences and practices through which certain aspects of policies are either selected or silenced and how local stakeholders involved in these experimentation processes buy-in for a particular policy concept. Pilot schemes provide a crucial laboratory for this exploration, as they often emerge as learning arenas where policies-from-elsewhere are locally tested and translated. Following the development and implementation of urban pilot schemes is thus particularly important for examining how specific features of policies are learned, negotiated and adapted to arrive at particular socio-legal and socio-spatial contexts, both before and after their formal institutionalization, as the case of Greater Barcelona has illustrated. These schemes not only demonstrate the potential feasibility of new urban policy futures in a localized context but also facilitate the territorial translation to other urban repeated instances.

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Research ethics and consent

Informed consent was provided verbally.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, LF, upon reasonable request.

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