

Postcode Politics

I've lived most of my time here in Gracia, well Gracia Nova for the purists... It's a wonderful *barrio* to start your new life in when moving to a new city. Its streets aren't as imposing and impressive as Eixample or as hectic and engulfing as those of Ciutat Vella. It has a pleasant pace of life with a strong sense of community where kids and families dominate the myriad of squares, running between the now familiar sight of yellow spray paint. It suited me perfectly as a suburban Londoner who is used to being able to find everything in your borough; Gracia is so perfect many rarely leave.

Working with private students, I have spent the majority of my 5 years here turning right when I reach the intersection between Travessera de Gracia and Via Augusta, marching along, crossing the Ronda del General Mitre, pushing further up to El Putxet and finally on until Av. Tibidabo. Up down, up down, munching a Turris snack on the way, and occasionally making the odd drop below Diagonal, but only to visit an attic in the Eixample. I have a disproportionate amount of contact with Upper Diagonal and am wary to conflate their views with the local population more generally. To be honest I'm treated largely with indifference and that works out just fine. I don't feel particularly *guiri* when I'm around them, I know I don't belong there but it's fine because I'm cast as dwelling below the diagonal line and that stops them from bothering with further judgement.

Students in company classes tend not to come from this part of the city, unless they're the CEO and they wouldn't be taking group classes, imagine! They're usually living in Les Corts, Guinardo, Horta, Gracia, or some are in the Beltway towns of St Joan Despi or Cornellà. The latter were always at pains to tell me that they are from Barcelona and are in fact Catalan and they only moved out there to buy a house. I didn't realise all these codes add up, but now know it's due to a higher proportion of second generation Andalusian or other Spanish immigrants in these Beltway towns, and so they have to identify themselves as local to others by stating 'X' amount of generations. A habit quite unique to Barcelona and one which seems to create a hell of a lot of identity anxiety. I've spoken of my own in this column but I do chuckle at locals themselves desperately trying to signal their continued belonging despite them having changed postcode. Young professionals live at home with their parents, or move into their first flat with their partner in the same *barrio* as their parents, or a few of the cool kids move to Poblenou, Gracia, Sant Antoni or El Born mingling with resident *guiris*.

The city centre provokes an interesting reaction from locals, at the same time proud of its character and rich history whilst also completely avoiding it for 6 months at a time. This isn't London city centre which is basically inaccessible for residents who live in Zones 3-6. Almost every bloody transport route in Barcelona has to pass through Catalunya or Passeig de Gracia. I've discovered that acceptable reasons to visit the centre are nice Sunday morning walks around El Born, which is a common activity for non centre-dwellers, or maybe an exhibition or sight seeing activity in Gothico, although that's a bit more complicated. Proud of the city centre but not that attached to it. It's understandable and I don't mean to be dismissive of the fact that your own city centre can feel like an attraction park for temporary visitors. Like I've said before, London was lost long ago and I admire Barcelona's fire to resist the mundanity of mass tourism.

Now take note of all the *barrios* I haven't mentioned, those that don't cross our consciousness such as Sants or Clot, or those that provoke scorn and distaste like Sant Marti and Raval. The city is a touch segregated but I guess where isn't? A thing that worries me about Barcelona is that the opinions on the *barrios* are informed often by the assumptions placed on the majority population that lives there. The 'good' neighbourhoods held in high esteem for living or leisure, are ones that happen to have high proportions of locals (I mean Catalans really); the overlooked tend to have less of this demographic.

During the pandemic, where it seems everyone is quitting jobs, losing jobs, starting businesses, moving in, breaking up and getting married, I decided to move to the centre of Barcelona, to El Raval. Until now I had actually resisted moving there. Well aware of the shame associated with these predominantly *guiri* areas I had also internalised a snobbishness to living in the centre with the touuuurists. I would mark a difference between me and my 'silly' *guiri* mates who had overpaid to live in a flat in Raval. I would cringe at them and pride myself on my insider knowledge not to have made such a faux pas while I proudly announced that my apartment is very near Passeig Sant Joan to knowing nods of approval.

We found a new place and were incredibly excited; it was massive and cheap and we had a project and a new space to shelter from the rest of the uncertainty of this pandemic. Did I go around and shout it from the rooftops though? Nope, because I knew the reactions. And when we did, the reaction would range from a wrinkled nose, to outright complaints of irresponsibility. Much of the horror, which I believe was just a matter of taste and disgust, would morph into an overstated worry for my safety and how safe would I feel in my own area. I'm a woman, I don't feel safe in any area, duh!

I would protest at times when some would paternalistically warn me of the dangers and patronise me for my apparent immaturity in moving to such an area. I would say that the only time I have ever been followed home and had to physically fight a man from my door was in Gracia. I've already been robbed in person in Hortafrancs, and I'm a 30 year old woman who has taken night transport for the majority of her life. Of course none of that matters as they continue to state the particularly extreme dangers of Raval. I was sure it was 'dangerous', but so are many places and I have also clearly factored that into my move so thanks.

What became evident is that people can look at you differently when you say you're moving there and then later when you live there. There is a bit of anger in the air, I think at the feelings of disgust that rise, it's like I've made it difficult for them to accept me again. Is it betrayal? I see that it causes an unpleasant reaction; they didn't expect me to wilfully choose Raval, especially as I'm not supposed to be a 'typical *guiri*'. I was on 'their side' and now I've just seemingly purposefully mocked that. Do I not understand the supremacy of Gracia at all costs? I am exaggerating of course, but when you see the same expression cloud people's faces you start to ask where that comes from, what is provoking this?

I'll never forget the day we took a taxi down to our new apartment, packed with the last of our belongings, the driver was aware we were moving since we had lamp shades tucked

under our arms. He was a chatty bloke and couldn't stop himself from sharing how crazy we were to leave my superior location on Sant Joan to live "*cons los guiris!!!*". It was so funny to me as it was the first time I had ever felt in-group membership in Barcelona by being distinguished from '*los guiris*' in his horror. He was so obviously shocked that I had been so lucky to live where I did and was leaving the Catalan bastion in the North to go and live...down there!