



# The university crisis fifty years ago: The urbanization of the Bellaterra Campus of the Autonomous University of Barcelona

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**Summary.** The economic growth experienced by western countries after World War II led to the increase in birth rates and as a result, the number of young people with the possibility of university studies also increased. The higher number of university students trained in both sciences and humanities, added to the disappointment arising from the foreign affairs politics of some of these countries (mainly the United States), favored a change in social values that rocked the established regimes. The confrontation between the new social conceptions defended by the university community and governments in Europe and the United States were made clearly visible in the riots against the Vietnam War, in the United States, and the so-called “French May” in Europe. Result of all this was the beginning of the change of thinking universities as engines of social change and, consequently, a change in the universities. In Spain, then dominated by the regime of General Franco, the change came a little later and culminated in a plan of new universities that gave rise to the creation, among others, of the Autonomous University of Barcelona. [**Contrib Sci** 11:1-6 (2015)]

## Introduction

Twenty years after the end of World War II, economic development generated by urban and industrial reconstruction and the Marshall Plan (the European Recovery Program) allowed that, at the end of the four years of its application, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of some countries reached the same level as before the war. In Germany, the recovery was due to monetary (the implementation of the Deutsche

Mark) and social democratic measures developed by liberals (Ludwig Erhard, chancellor from 1963 to 1966 and father of the “German miracle”), that led to a considerable increase in the economic power of the middle and working classes. The result of the application of the so-called social market economy (*Soziale Marktwirtschaft*) was that a large number of young people had access to university studies. This number was greatly increased by demography, the phenomenon commonly referred to as the “baby boom”, the notable increase in

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the birth rate and the consequent demographic recovery that occurs naturally as a reaction to crises or wars. In developed countries the increase in the birth rate reached 22% compared to the previous period, while in developing countries rose to 40%. In France, for example, the number of students enrolled rose from 76,385 for the academic year of 1940–41 to 363,000 during the year 1964–65, an increase of 475%.

## The student's situation in the United States

This improvement of social classes, along with the women's liberation movement, sexual liberation, the emergence of new lysergic drugs and new and youth movements (*hippies*), generated changes in the postulates of Marxism in the advanced capitalist societies. Herbert Marcuse synthesized that change into the image of the new "one-dimensional man" [1]. The Vietnam War (1959–1975), the first event of war with television coverage, had a huge destabilizing effect on the university environment and created an explosive situation on college campuses in the USA. The situation became worse by the system of forced recruitment undertaken with a brazen classist component. The "Vietnam syndrome" led to a dramatic increase of pacifist movements in the USA, which was fueled, in turn, by the hippie movement. Universities in the US were the scenery of demonstrations against the USA involvement in a war that was never declared and which, for that reason, according to many was unjustified. The coincidence of this situation and the period of greatest prosperity gave to youth the needed safety and possibilities that explain why a profound change in habits was happening.

## The "French May"

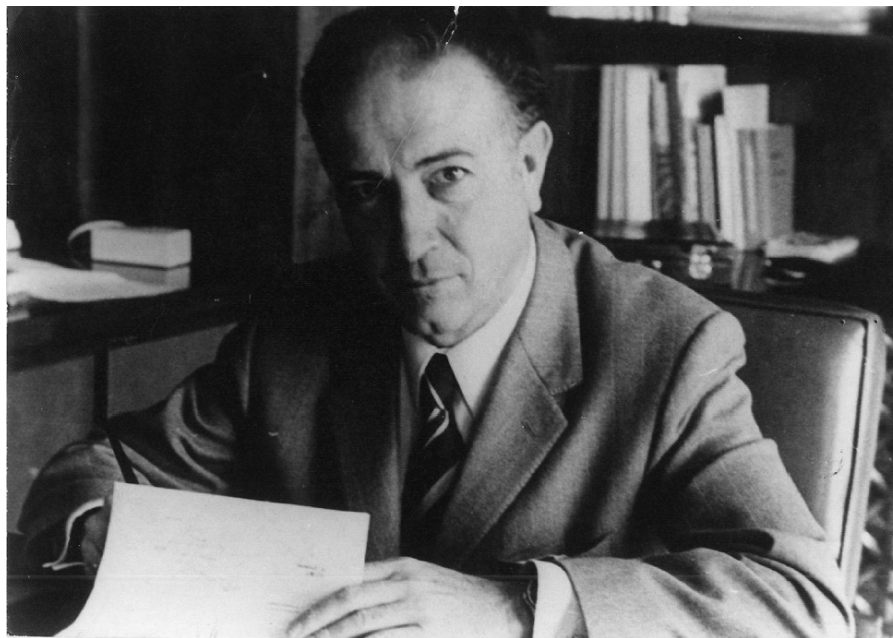
The values crisis erupted in Europe in 1968 with the events of May in Paris. The trigger was the location of the new university in Nanterre, Paris X, next to a slum of 14,000 shanties and to the facilities of the Regie Renault. The general strike, followed by nine million workers throughout the country, questioned the Fifth Republic presidentialism and forced General de Gaulle to seek refuge for a few days in Baden-Baden with General Massu. Mao's Cultural Revolution in China, the war in the departments of Algeria, Oran and Constantine, and the anti-imperialist revolution of Fidel Castro in Cuba were the pretexts of an ideological movement that expressed under slogans such as "imagination to power" or "forbidden to forbid".

## The university crisis in the mid-1960s in Spain

The constitution of the Democratic Student Union of the University of Barcelona (UB) (*Sindicat Democràtic d'Estudiants de la Universitat de Barcelona, SDEUB*) in 1966 [2] and the Democratic Student Union of the University of Madrid (*SDEUM*) one year after, were supported by several intellectuals, teachers and professors, and showed the failure of the ideological and cultural regime. Dissidence was expected in the working class but never in the middle and upper classes from which most of the students came at the time. The crisis of the official falangist students' union (*Sindicato de Estudiantes Universitarios, SEU*), created in the early 1940's just after the far right won the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), developed in the late 1950's first in Madrid (1957) and later in other university cities, mainly in Barcelona. General Franco's regime acted violently, and did so by applying repressive measures such as sanctions, expulsions of both students and professors, arrests, torture, closure of schools and even universities. To prevent the Spring of 1969 in Barcelona becoming the continuation of the "French May" (under the fear that when Paris sneezes, Europe gets a cold), Franco's government in Madrid declared on 24 January 1969, after the students' assault of the rectorate of the UB (17 January, 1969), the "state of exception." In this way the government had exceptional measures of repression to prevent a new "May" in Spain. Simultaneously, a plan of new universities already had been engaged nine months earlier, with the creation of three "autonomous" universities, those of Madrid, Barcelona and Bilbao. In the case of Barcelona, the endeavor was commissioned to the Education Minister's brother, Vincenç Villar Palasí (Valencia, 1920–Arenys de Munt, Barcelona, 1974), full professor ("catedràtic") of biochemistry at the Faculty of Pharmacy of the UB, and deputy mayor for the Barcelona City Council, which directed the Commission that would constitute the new university and manage its implementation (July 1968) (Fig. 1).

## Location, land acquisition and planning

The fact that Villar chaired the executive committee of the Planning Commission of Barcelona, explains why he asked Albert Serratosa (1927–2015), deputy director of that agency, and me, at the time inspector of planning services, for a judgment on where to locate the new large equipment. We were also asked for the land acquisition procedures and for



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Fig. 1. Vincenç Villar Palasí (Valencia, 1920–Arenys de Munt, Barcelona, 1974)

the plan of arrangement study, and all this, moreover, in the shortest time. For Villar (and, I guess, especially for his brother the Minister) time was critical. He reported to the promoting commission, which met every Thursday at the headquarters of the regime's central organization for research in Spain, the National Council for Scientific Research (Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, CSIC) in Egiptíques Street (Barcelona), chaired by Villar and with economist Antoni Serra Ramoneda acting as secretary. That commission quickly reached the needed agreements to set up the new university, both in its physical and educational aspects.

Although it has been written that the location in the town of Cerdanyola del Vallès (about 25 km from the city of Barcelona) was due to the desire of dispersing students and to reduce the protests against the regime of Franco, this is not true. To look for a 220-ha free place to install the new facility inside a premier metropolitan territorial axis, and with an established public transport network that would give good levels of access to the area, was not easy, mainly considering how the central administration used to treat Catalonia in infrastructures.

It is true that when it was planned, the B-30 (the metropolitan axis forming the backbone of the metropolitan system) has not yet been built, and that the agreement for the Tibidabo's tunnels with the "Autopistas y Túneles Barcelona, SA" (TABASA; currently, Tabasa Infrastructure and Mobility Services, SA) company, had not yet been reached; it

would place in November 1969. Neither had construction of the highway to Sabadell started, nor other highways planned around Barcelona, but these projects were drafted and well known. In addition to having the Bellaterra train station, pertaining to the Sabadell and Terrassa railway, we had Cerdanyola station of the Papiol-Mollet railway branch, which is adjacent to the university campus, and we wanted to connect that station to the Sabadell railway at the Riviere (currently Moreda Riviere Trefilerías, SA) facilities' surroundings. That demand was never approved by the Administration (only on 23 June, 2011, that railway started to be usable for passengers) and transportation had to be done with old and unsuitable buses from Cerdanyola train station.

Acquiring the land was facilitated by an earlier acquisition of 29 ha made by the planning commission to the castle of Sant Marçal, at the entrance of Can Domènech, Can Miró, and the Moranta valleys. That allowed us to determine, by mutual agreement, the price of expropriation of the remaining lands (Fig. 2). The good price for that purchase was due to the loss suffered by the owner as a result of his investment in the Tuca rail station, in Vielha (Aran Valley, north of Catalonia) and the rumors of the future location of a filling station of the highway on their lands. We needed an advance of funds from Sabadell financial institutions to purchase the land for the first phase, the large valley (96 ha), before the Ministry transferred to us the right amount. It should be pointed out that, among the criteria that we considered for their location,





**Fig. 2.** (A) Aerial views of the intended area for the installation of the campus of the UAB in 1965, before the railway by-pass of Papiol-Mollet, and (B) at present, year 2015.

was the desire to preserve from urbanization a large valley whose great values, both in landscape and environmental, were threatened due to its location, close to the residential Can Serraperera (Cerdanyola del Vallès).

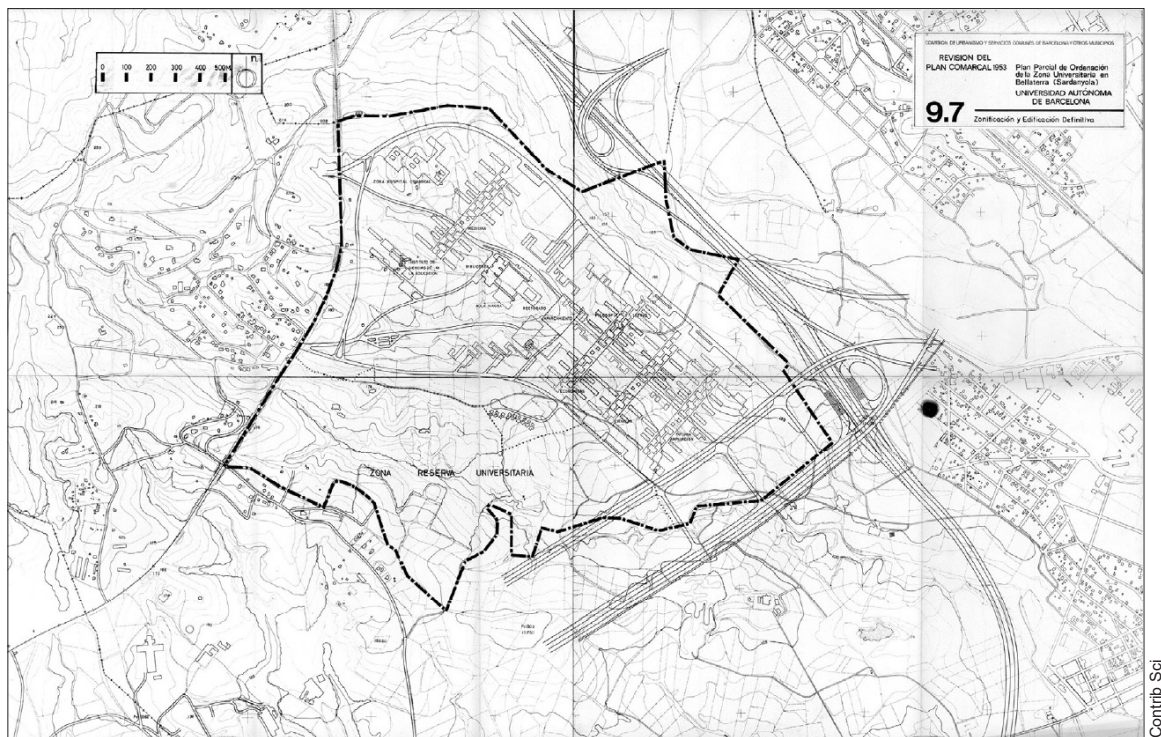
### The guidelines of the new model of university

For the making of the especial plan, I asked to hire two architects who helped me to do so because, in addition to reporting the pending files every morning, I was responsible, during the afternoon, along with Manuel de Solà-Morales (1939–2012), for managing the works for the delayed revision of the Barcelona regional plan of 1953. Lluís Millet i Serra and Juan Antonio Paez were the architects who worked with me on the subject, a subject heavily discussed at that time due to the proposals carried out in many countries to face the university overflow. The projects below were considered as potential models:

- Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada. 485 ha, 12 km from the center, 18,000 students.
- University of Bochum, Germany. 540 ha, 5 km from the center, 10,000 students.
- Philipps University in Marburg, Germany. 250 ha, 3 km from the center, 10,000 students.
- University of York, UK. 72 ha, 2 km from the center, 3,000 students.

- University of Bath, UK. 76 ha, 4 km from the center, 5,000 students.
- University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK. 66 ha, 3 km from the center, 3,000 students.
- Tougaloo College, Jackson, Mississippi, USA. 200 ha, 12 km from the center, 2,500 students.
- University of Dublin, Ireland. 114 ha, 4.5 km from the center, 4,728 students.
- University of Odense, Denmark. 475 ha, 2 km from the center, 6,000 students.
- Frei University of Berlin, Germany. 12 ha, 12 km from the center, 3,600 students.
- University of Stockholm, Sweden. 15 ha, 4.5 km from the center, 20,000 students.
- Scarborough College, Toronto, Canada. 80 ha, 36 km from the center, 12,000 students.

Talking about a new campus might seem, at first glance, a mistake, because it was going to incorporate an Anglo-Saxon model of university when we wanted the Latin or Central Europe model. But the objective of integration within the so-called directional center as a qualifying element of the peripheral suburban Barcelona (which we felt at the time a key objective for requalification and to serve the rest of the metropolitan system and Catalonia as a whole) explained that we could not rely on an urban model where we did not have it, or where the established one would not allowed us to give the adequate support because the low level of urbanization and marginal uses around Barcelona. The growth of municipi-



**Fig. 3.** Revision of the Barcelona regional plan of 1953. Final building and area distribution.

palties in the metropolitan area in the 1960's was miserable. The university would be a key catalyst to attract other economic activities around it, and that was the centerpiece of the adopted decision.

Therefore, the campus model, besides allowing us to get an appropriate provision of land, also allowed us to place it within the required model of decentralization and self-sufficiency. Therefore, and to counter it, the drafted plan incorporated a central promenade for pedestrians with shops and services both personal and cultural, as well as student residences that the Spanish government did not include in the executed project. Unlike what was subsequently done, with Sert residence first and, on the pretext of the Olympics held in Barcelona, with homes in Can Domènech valley, these dorms were originally not segregated (Figs. 3 and 4).

From the educational point of view, the wanted model was not that of disaggregated schools, understood as independent units with no contact between them, but a university based on superimposed departmental structures. A second component to consider was the structural change represented by moving from an elite university to a mass university, not only because of the dimensional aspects of buildings and their components, but also due to the kind of professionals we will train. The structure of the university had to allow

permeability with outdoor experiences, foster the symbiosis between the centers of scientific and applied research and the industrial network. All this led to a scheme that ordering classrooms, workshops, laboratories and research centers (the later on the axis of the ridge road to allow them greater organizational independence) throughout the various levels of both ridges of the valley had to allow maximum flexibility in allocating the designed open spaces.

The location for the rectorate and direction centers was keyed to the divisor point of the Can Miró and La Moranta valleys. So was the location of the civic square, built as the deck of a parking facility at this fulcrum of the planning. The only differences between the partial plan approved and the final urbanism were that, regarding the geological report of the plan, the proposed building structure, equal to the finally built, was asymmetric with respect to the valley to avoid the problems generated by some sloped layers of clay superimposed on some layers of gravel on the right bank of the valley. The project, commissioned by the builder company Huarte to Xavier Subias (1926–2013), winner of the ministerial contest, did not take into account these findings and planned a symmetrical occupation of the valley along the pedestrian promenade. This mistake forced a halt to the construction of buildings on the right edge to prevent the highlighted struc-



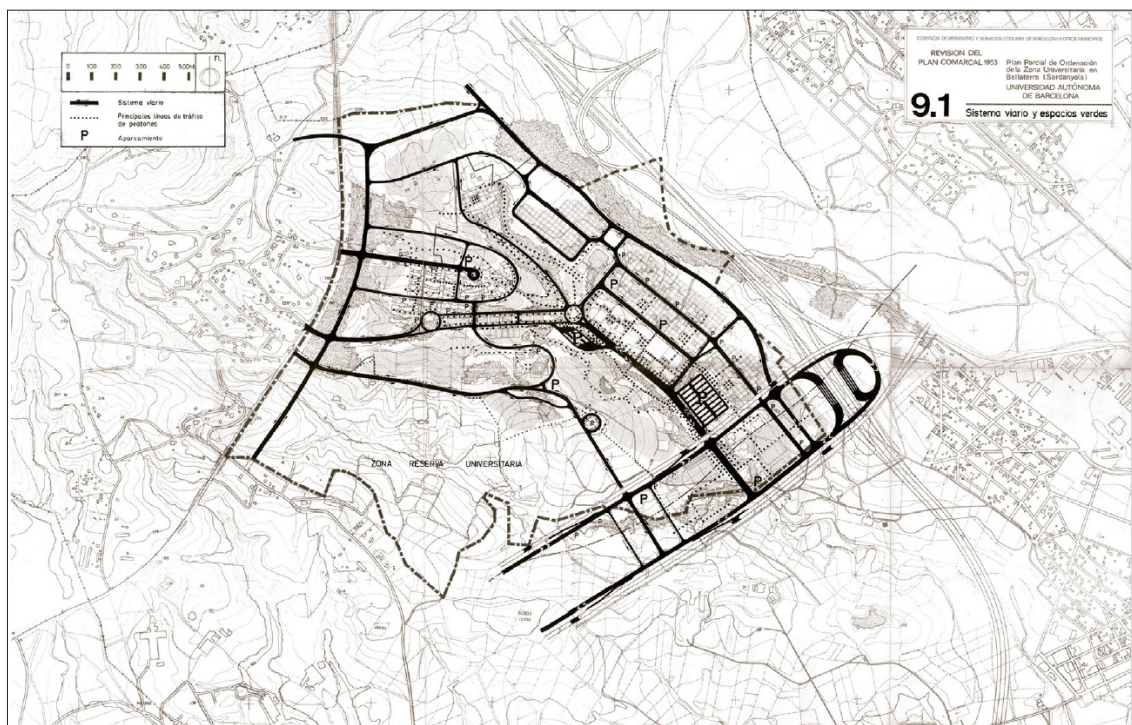


Fig. 4. Revision of the Barcelona regional plan of 1953. Road network and green areas.

tural problems. Everything was going in such a hurry! In any case, the new schools were ready for the 1971–72 academic year, and lectures started in the Bellaterra Campus in early October 1971, at least at the Faculties of Sciences and Humanities.

Franco's regime, however, did not put the required resources to start an institution of that size and metropolitan status. Villar had the wisdom to surround himself with qualified people, or at least people quite different from those who populated the classic university, giving entry to people who had been evicted from other places or working outside Catalonia because they had no place to go and could not teach here, e.g., Enric Casassas (1920–2000), Antoni Serra Ramoneda, Joaquim Molas (1930–2015), Jordi Nadal, Josep Laporte (1922–2005), Heribert Barrera (1917–2011), and so on. But the special status reached by the UAB was going down (strike of the construction company in February 1972) since the cessation of his brother as Minister and the designation as Education Minister of the “exotic” Julio Rodríguez (1928–1979) in June 1973, professor of Geology at the University of Madrid. A month later, Villar resigned as Rector of the university and passed away the following year from pancreatic cancer. The creator of the UAB avoided suffering those turbulent days of

the start and, as Josep Laporte (1922–2005) said, politically defeated, died fulminated as in a Greek tragedy.

Today the UAB has about 30,000 undergraduate and 4,000 graduate students. It is one of the best universities in Spain, and has a good position in the ranking of the most advanced European universities. ■

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**Competing interests.** None declared.

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