

# The museum project of the Cases Barates: An actor in the semantic space of the Barcelona housing conflict

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BY: Eleni Ananiadou and Elisabeth Miche

## ABSTRACT

The Barcelona Museum of History has hosted, since 2023, a project dedicated to the history of housing in Barcelona during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For this purpose, a group of *cheap houses* (*cases barates*) in the working-class neighborhood Bon Pastor, built in 1929 as part of a social housing public program, were converted into museum space. The group of houses will survive the urban renovation project of the Municipality, which involves substituting the 784 original single-plane houses with apartment buildings. The current relevance and scale of the housing conflict in Barcelona inevitably pose a discursive challenge for the museum, whose declared aim is to explicate aspects of the city. The museum avoids taking a stance on controversial issues; nevertheless, the act of enunciation itself makes it an actor in the conflict. How is language neutralized to serve this contradiction? This paper proposes a study of the language of the museum through the perspective of argumentative semantics and, more specifically, the theoretical framework developed by Marion Carel and Alfredo Lescano. Drawing from the problematics of New Museology, we analyze how the museum positions itself as an actor in the housing conflict and identify aspects of the *Real* of the conflict – concepts that are naturalized by the museum as a state institution. To do this, a corpus of texts from the museum exhibition is studied, focusing on their argumentative content and the formal aspects of the enunciation.

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## 1. Introduction

Taking curation as a meaning-making practice, we acknowledge it as an interpretative process that constitutes a specific way of reading, approaching, and understanding the curated subject. Through the exhibition's text, it is possible to interrogate the curatorial choices regarding stance-taking, how a museum positions itself in relation to its subject matter, as well as the relationship established with other social actors or the enunciative position from which it speaks. In the light of New Museology, both the role of the museum and its relationship with the community have been questioned: the museum has revised its traditional role and practices, transforming itself from an institution with the authority to set the terms of the *Real*, to a social instrument (Brulon Soares 2015). As the social role of museums is becoming discursively hegemonic, we are interested in how museums negotiate their relations with the communities and their position regarding social controversies and issues that constitute open social disputes.

In this perspective, we suggest applying a non-referential linguistic theory to analyze the discourse of the Cases Barates museum project, also called the Barcelona Housing Museum. This allows for a focus on the textual interplay of actions and actors. Argumentative semantics consider language as inherently argumentative, defining speaking as a language act of arguing (Carel 2023: 177). Rejecting the notion of informativity, the current study aims to move beyond the idea of neutrality, focusing, instead, on the argumentative activity within the text as a discursive intervention to an ongoing social conflict. Approaching the museological text in this manner, we do not look for the intentions or causes of linguistic choices but aim to map the world created within the text through content and enunciation, both constituents of the argumentative act. From a linguistic point of view, the interest lies in how language is neutralized to reconcile the contradictions between the premises of objectivity and social intervention.

## 2. The context of the study

### 2.1. The context of the museum

In 2023, the Barcelona History Museum (MUHBA) inaugurated a project dedicated to the history of housing in Barcelona during the twentieth century. To this end, a group of 'cheap houses' (*cases barates* in Catalan) in the working-class neighborhood of Bon Pastor were converted into museum space. The block of houses that was musealized will survive the urban renovation project of the Municipality that involves substituting the 784 original single-plane houses with apartment buildings.

The Bon Pastor neighborhood is located on the northern border of the Barcelona municipality. The Cases Barates housing estate, originally named “Milans del Bosch,”<sup>1</sup> was built in 1929 as part of a public social housing program, together with three more groups of houses of the same typology located in different areas in the city’s surroundings, in response to the housing shortage of the time. Around the year 2000, the City Council decided to demolish these houses and replace them with residential buildings, progressively reallocating the tenants to the new constructions. This decision was not devoid of conflict, as there was a debate about the conditions of reallocation (rise in rent prices, promotion of property status), but also because part of the group of tenants rejected the urbanistic plan, claiming, instead, their right to remain in the houses. Some of them were evicted by court order (Portelli 2015). The City Council had to carry out an expropriation process before building the museum; although the property was municipal, the tenants had lifetime contracts that were broken.

MUHBA integrates Cases Barates in a broader narrative about the city, developed around the heritage sites of different chronological periods that the museum manages in Barcelona. The museum approaches the contemporary metropolis through its periphery. Cases Barates are part of the Besòs museum axis, which comprises four heritage sites in the eastern suburbs, dedicated to different aspects of urban life, including the metropolis’s expansion (Roca i Albert 2019). In this way, the museum opts for a narrative that speaks about urban majorities in their ordinary dimension, making popular elements part of the city’s heritage and organizing a reading of housing policies alongside the neighborhood’s trajectory.

Otto Neurath’s Museum of Housing and City Planning (Gesellschafts-und-Wirtschafts Museum), established in Vienna in 1923, may serve as a historical reference for a museological approach to housing. Neurath, an economist and social scientist, was involved in city planning, having been responsible for managing the settlements that emerged on the outskirts of Vienna during World War I. He devised a solution that preserved elements of the existing “communal economy” of these settlements (Hochhäusl 2011). This approach was considerably different from the policies implemented in Barcelona at the time, which were oriented towards eradicating informal settlements.

Neurath envisioned the museum as a tool for educating workers about social facts, aiming to make them more aware of the world they lived in. He understood statistical thinking as essential in revealing the nature of the modern city and the social fate of its inhabitants, regardless of their educational background. He developed a system of picture statistics, the Vienna Method or Isotype, which visualized social and economic

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<sup>1</sup> Joaquin Milans del Bosch was the civil governor of Barcelona (1924-1929) during the Primo de Rivera dictatorship.

data using simple symbols, and organized outdoor exhibitions to reach out to the public (Charles and Giraud 2018). Curation for Neurath had an emancipatory goal, which would be achieved by making workers aware of their condition.

In today's context, curatorial activism encompasses initiatives that question social hierarchies, such as white male privilege, and advocates for social change. Curatorial activism underscores the importance of exposing power dynamics as socially and institutionally manifested within museums (Reilly 2019). From this perspective, museums are seen as ideological battlegrounds that reinforce dominant narratives and perpetuate social inequalities. Thus, curatorial practice becomes a militant form of social advocacy, actively engaging in de-colonial, ecological, and social justice struggles.

Nevertheless, within the broader museological discourse, museums' role in society and curatorship's political horizon remains a subject of ongoing debate. The social function of museums has emerged as a dominant narrative in professional discussions, as evidenced by the topics raised in the ICOM forums for the new museum definition, reported by Brown and Mairesse (2018). There is, however, no clear consensus on what this role should entail. Should museums actively engage with the social issues they address and take social responsibility, or should they serve as mediators, facilitating dialogue between different community groups? Van Oost (2022) elaborates on the responses given by museums in the Flanders region of Belgium, which are rather hesitant about the perspective of becoming "activist institutions" and instead propose to act as "agonist spaces," meaning public venues for debate and exchange of the different views on societal issues. "At the heart of these debates is the question of whether museums should adopt a stance or keep themselves at a distance," Van Oost argues (59). We seek to go one step further and question the possibility of a neutral space that does not condition the dialogue toward one direction or the other.

Community involvement is, in any case, considered essential for museums to fulfill their social function, whether that function is fostering critical thinking, raising awareness, promoting community participation in decision-making (Girault and Orellana 2020), integrating new subjects into the museum's narratives (Navajas Corral 2022), or supporting counter-hegemonic struggles (Brulon Soares 2022). The central question remains how the specific imperatives of each museum shape its stance, this time in relation to the community, and how they define the museum as an institution that may act for the benefit of others, collaborate with others, or advocate its own position.

In the case of the Cases Barates, the museum aims to "explain the city," as stated in the physical and online exhibition (Museu d'història de Barcelona 2023), suggesting an approach that treats the city as an autonomous object of knowledge. By claiming to "explain," the museum positions itself as a neutral entity that can draw an account of urban reality rather than an actor participating in city construction. In

a study on European City Museums, published by MUHBA the same year as the museum's opening, its director, Joan Roca, explicitly distances the museum from "the most burning issues of the day" (Roca i Albert 2023: 124). He argues that engaging with contentious political issues could jeopardize the institution's stability and credibility, potentially losing trust among citizens and groups not aligned with the museum's perspective. Roca concludes that "the proposal of putting the city museum at the heart of living disputes of current times is not a prudent one" (125).

However, is it possible to avoid political engagement when dealing with contemporary housing history in a city that currently suffers from a housing crisis? Housing is considered one of the burning issues of the day, and speaking about housing positions the museums inside the conflict zone as actors that take a stand through their argumentative activity. The following sections will provide the context of these assumptions.

## 2.2. Housing as a social emergency

According to data from the General Council of the Judiciary for the 2008-2012 period, collected by the Observatori DESC and the Platform of People Affected by Mortgages (PAH) of Barcelona (2013), the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008 led to 415,117 foreclosure proceedings and some 244,278 evictions throughout the state. It is estimated that 90.5% of foreclosures in Barcelona affected primary residences.

Amidst this situation, public administration's response to these facts in a preventive or corrective manner is questioned, and housing is considered a social emergency. Catalonia's ombudsman (Síndic de Greuges de Catalunya 2023) claims that the right to housing has to be a reality and asserts that "[t]he main difficulty in guaranteeing the right to housing is the high price of private market housing and the lack of sufficient housing stock for social policies."<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, in municipal terms, at the Barcelona Housing and Rehabilitation Forum, Carme Trilla, the president of the Metropolitan Housing Observatory of Barcelona, recounted a growing "widening gap between what citizens can pay for rent and their market price" (Peiró 2019: 12) since from 2000 to 2018 rental and purchase prices in Barcelona have increased in a way that is disproportionate to the household income available per inhabitant.

The housing conflict, as detailed in these reports, involves excluding a significant segment of the population from a fundamental human right: the right to decent housing. This exclusion not only deprives individuals of safe and adequate living conditions but also highlights broader social and economic inequalities at the societal level, reflecting a systemic failure to ensure that all citizens have access to dignified living spaces.

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<sup>2</sup> The translation of Catalan, Spanish and French citations into English was made by the authors of this text.



As readers of a text that addresses access to housing and public housing policies, the authors of this paper aim to interpret the account that the text draws concerning the nature of the housing conflict. To do this, the authors adhere to a linguistic tradition that goes beyond the description of a situation or a state-of-things to reach the activity taking place within discourse.

### 2.3. A linguistic approach to the museum's position in the conflict

The theoretical tradition of argumentative semantics, inaugurated by Jean Claude Anscombe and Oswald Ducrot, provides a non-referential model of linguistic analysis and, therefore, questions the notion of informativity of language. It posits that using language entails presenting facts in one way or another and not representing them as they are in the world. The theoretical assumption behind this approach is that meaning does not exist independently of language but is constructed in and with it. In other words, reasoning, even when it appears as informative, is inherently argumentative (Carel 2021b).

Adopting a linguistic lens allows for the analysis of the choices made in text curation and a response to specific questions about the museum as an actor in the housing conflict in an effort to draw the blind spot around which the text develops. Spatial or visual languages, key domains of semiotics in curating and museum studies, are also essential elements of the museum's discourse but are not part of this analysis as they fall beyond the scope of this article and its research questions.

The linguistic analysis under this theory aims to describe the sense of an utterance. Ducrot and Carel (2014) defined both the content of the utterance and how content is introduced in discourse as constituent elements of the enunciation that operate in conjunction and cannot be treated separately. They both participate in meaning-making performed by the discursive entity of the locutor. This is why the locutor's stance when expressing content is not a secondary question but a fundamental element of the sense of the utterance and, globally, of that of the text.

The analytical tools used for the present analysis were developed within this theoretical framework, by Marion Carel (2011; 2023) and Alfredo Lescano (2023). Carel provides an analytical schema for both semantic and enunciative analysis, allowing us to address how the museum stands in the housing conflict and how its discourse is put to work. With the Semantic Blocks Theory (TBS thereafter),<sup>3</sup> Carel (2011) radicalizes the approach of Anscombe and Ducrot, adopting the position that "there is no informative indication in the language" (Carel 2023: 26). It advances the hypothesis that even

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<sup>3</sup> The authors of this paper employ the abbreviations of the French name of the theories, as they are commonly used: Théorie des Blocs Sémantiques – TBS, and Théorie Argumentative de la Polyphonie – TAP.

the meaning of words is argumentative, because it is created from how words and the argumentative periods are linked to each other. Notions dependent on the informative character of language, such as representation, explanatory, or neutral discourse, are therefore also interpreted under the argumentative perspective. TBS provides the tools to analyze these conjunctions and the argumentative content they convey, organizing the relations between the meaning of words in semantic blocks (Carel 2023: 39).

The Argumentative Theory of Polyphony (TAP thereafter) is considered a branch of TBS (Carel 2023: 272), which describes linguistic enunciation or how content is placed in discourse. More specifically, it traces how the locutor places the content in discourse, the reasons for their saying, the consequences and the way they use language to act over an interlocutor. TAP does not accept that discourse can reveal either the psychological background of the speaker or the veracity of a saying; it focuses on describing the discursive activity as this takes place inside the text. Just like in a painting, content may appear in discourse, in a first or secondary plane, or it may be excluded, defining the textual function of the content. At the same time, the locutor may declare themselves more or less engaged with their saying, which is described as a mode of the apparition of the content (Carel 2021a). These are the two central notions brought forward by TAP and integrated into a homogeneous analytical schema with the TBS, using paraphrases and enchainings; argumentative in the case of TBS, and enunciative for TAP.

Lescano (2023) builds upon the achievements of argumentative semantics to set the basis for the semantic theory of social conflicts. This theory studies how social processes shape what can be said at a particular moment as actors intervene in the conflict's semantic space, an antagonistic discursive construction in constant transformation. The actors' discursive operations transform this space by mobilizing certain concepts or semantic schemas. The statements of each actor are not studied as individual points of view but as operations that produce and reproduce these schemas. The schemas, as different classes of utterance, express available possibilities of statements and are described as: "a strictly semantic entity, capable of being concretized by multiple statements in the most diverse forms" (Lescano 2024: 20).

In a simplified manner, a conflict is semantically read as an antagonism of different positions that appear and interact in the public space through the interventions of the different actors. It is worth noting that this theory also denies the possibility of a neutral utterance and supports, instead, that the mode of intervention of each actor characterizes the actor as a producer of a specific type of discourse. To analyze these interventions, Camus and Lescano (2021) establish, in the first place, the notion of a *program* as a semantic schema linked to a possibility of action. In the second place, they analyze the *operations* that place the programs into the discourse, seizing, attacking, or naturalizing them.

The present study is particularly interested in identifying programs naturalized by the museum's discourse. Naturalization refers to statements of the type *a is b*, where a programme is extracted from the zone of divergence and is presented instead as an indisputable fact, as a truth that is not part of the controversy. This type of operation contributes to the evolution of a conflict in a way that promotes the availability of the position it conveys. For example, talking about wind energy as green and sustainable reinforces the position that wind farms play a role in reducing greenhouse gases. This is described as the *stabilization* of an intervention mode: producing a specific statement renders an associated program more accessible in the public sphere (Lescano 2024: 28).

Furthermore, Lescano theorizes on the *Real of the State* when referring to the programs that state institutions naturalize. He proposes "to observe in detail, in the sphere of specific positions, the distribution of the Real carried out by the State" as a way of analyzing the relations of discursive domination in conflicts where the "State is the arbiter" (2017: 88), as it is the case of housing, in Spain. It should be clarified that the museum is an institution of the Municipality of Barcelona and does not directly depend on the state of Spain. It is only under the frame of Althusser's (1974) ideological state apparatus that its discourse is regarded as part of the *Real of the State* and not under a pragmatic administrative category.

### 3. Analysis and results

#### 3.1. Enunciation and participation

As museum literature and practice emphasize approaches that encompass the institution's social responsibility and its potential to be an agent of change (Brown and Mairresse 2018), the participation of the communities in the museum processes is considered pivotal, and it was, in fact, included in the new definition of the museum, by ICOM. The participative turn was articulated by museological approaches of the last fifteen years – a reference point being the 1972 Santiago Round Table – that advocated for museums integrated within their communities and even projected an emancipatory vision (Brulon Soares 2022). Today, different modalities of participation are developed, mainly in the social museology framework, creating what seems to be a discursive polyphony:

For more than half a century now, however, museums have ceased to be spaces solely dedicated to the discourse and opinions of experts and intellectuals. Other voices have been added to the dialectics and practices of action, management and participation in these social and cultural entities.<sup>4</sup> (Navajas Corral 2022)

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<sup>4</sup> The translation from the original in French is ours.



At the same time, questions about the scope of the participation are also posed. Girault (2022: 5) draws attention to the ambiguity of the term ‘participation’ and highlights the need to distinguish between actual community participation and their instrumentalization. He recalls Mairesse’s point about power relations within institutions that shape how participation is signified in each case. To approach this question from a linguistic perspective, we use notions Ducrot developed in the polyphony theory, aiming to describe the enunciative instance of the Museum of Cases Barates and how it is discursively put in place.

Ducrot challenged the “unicity of the speaking subject” (1984: 175) or the idea that an utterance has a sole author. Instead, he introduced a distinction between the *speaking subject*, the speaker in the world, who chooses the words, and the *locutor*, a discursive entity responsible for the enunciation. The literary equivalent of this is Genette’s distinction between an author and a narrator of a work. This conception has set the framework for the analysis of the superposition of several voices in the utterance, as indicated by its enunciation. TAP adopted this schema but substituted what was previously described as ‘point of view,’ through the notion of the *enunciator*, with that of *enunciative modes*. The *conceived, found, or received* modes describe in TAP how the content is introduced in discourse and the level of engagement of the locutor (Carel 2023: 221).

The texts we used for the enunciative analysis are displayed in the museum’s reception area, as part of a panel dedicated to the making of the museum, its guiding vision, and implementation. To provide the reader with a context, while the museum was created, the last stages of the residents’ relocation process were still underway, which meant that there were still cheap houses in the neighborhood, and some were also inhabited. The museum involved locals in the compilation of sources, the creation of the collection (archive material and objects, included), and in the architectural restitution plan. The Bon Pastor Residents’ Association is nowadays entitled to manage part of the facility.

The panel has the following title:

### (1) THE CASES BARATES MUSEUM PROJECT

The enunciation of this content is done through an enunciative instance that Carel (2011: 300–301) describes with the example of *Gislebertus hoc fecit*.<sup>5</sup> Engraved by Gislebertus, the sculptor himself, in the center of the tympanum of the Cathedral of Autun, the enunciation represents the signature of the author of the work. Written in the third person, it indicates that the speaking subject, that is, the author of the work and the signature, is different from the locutor. The utterance masks the narrator’s identity,

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<sup>5</sup> Translation from Latin: “This is a work of Gislebertus.”

creating an effect of objectivity and impartial narration around the glorification of Gislebertus. Similarly, the enunciation of the museum project indicates the existence of a discursive instance different from that of the speaking subject; it is not the museum team that is presenting the museum project but *the museum* as a separate, discursive entity, paying respect to the museum project.

The present study argues that this enunciative instance makes the institution linguistically self-existent and independent of the speaking subject. People involved can be part of the institution, though the institution does not speak on their behalf; it is discursively detached from the speaking subject. The third person constructs the notion of the museum as an institution, putting in place a discursive apparatus. From here on, when the activity of the locutor is described, reference is made to this instance, to the producer of the museum institution.

The first paragraph of the panel, titled “A shared project,” further enlightens the enunciative and argumentative construction of this instance in relation to the community.

(2) The first steps toward the museum project Cases Barates were taken in 2010 on the initiative of the Bon Pastor Residents’ Association and with the backing of the Sant Andreu district. It was finally secured through the cooperation with Muhba, which is part of the ICUB (Institut de Cultura de Barcelona). After a decade of preparatory work, the Neighbourhood Plan made it possible to open the new museum site. The whole process, from the historical research to building the collection and the work on the houses, has been a joint effort between Muhba, residents’ associations, universities and other institutions. The groundwork was also laid for the shared management of the facility.

The utterances that signify the relation of MUHBA with the residents and which are interesting to analyze are: [The first steps toward the museum project Cases Barates were taken in 2010 on the initiative of the Bon Pastor Residents’ Association], [It was finally secured through the cooperation with MUHBA] and [The whole process has been a joint effort between MUHBA, residents’ associations, universities and other institutions]. The three of them are introduced in the discourse through an enunciative modality that Benveniste described as “historical enunciation,” where he identified that “[n]o one speaks here; events seem to narrate themselves” (1966: 241). TAP does not accept that the locutor can disappear but rather involves this concept in the mode of content that is introduced in the found mode; the locutor appears to find the content in the words without intervening when it appears (Carel 2023: 207). To make the way content appears in discourse explicit, TAP uses enunciative enchaining, which offers indications of the utterance’s background, as follows:

(2a) I saw how the museum project was developed, so I know that the first steps were taken in 2010 on the initiative of the Bon Pastor Residents' Association

The other two utterances can be paraphrased in the same way since their content is interpreted as facts of the world and registered in the discourse by the locutor. The locutor declares to know these facts and not to actively engage in a saying or an argument of their own (Carel 2021a: 356). Again, this study aims not to assess the truthfulness of the utterance but rather to make a point on the stance of the museum's saying. The enunciative mode evidences a locutor that is disengaged, under a tone of observation (*I see, therefore I know*), when introducing a series of facts: the project was an initiative of the Residents' Association, MUHBA cooperated, and the research, collection and architectural intervention was a joint effort.

The facts conveyed by the three utterances comprise their foreground argumentative content: the museum's intervention followed the popular initiative, bringing it into practice through a collaborative process. Argumentative paraphrasis allows one to retrieve other aspects of the relation between the museum and the residents, placed in the background, just as in the case of the second utterance which evokes the following:

(2b) There was a risk that the initiative was not going to prosper, therefore, MUHBA got involved

(2c) The initiative of the Bon Pastor Residents' Association was good, therefore, it had to be secured.

The semantic content expressed by the aspects [risk THEREFORE action] (2b) and [doing x is good THEREFORE do X] (2c) convey the forces behind the museum's intervention. The museum project is motivated by an underlying risk of failure of a good initiative. In the case of (2b), there is a lexical presupposition linked to the meaning of the word 'secured,' while in presupposition (2c), the [initiative was good] is co-signified in the background, and even if implied, it participates in the meaning of the utterance (Carel 2021a: 354). In both cases, the museum introduces a disinterested dimension of its intervention in the discourse since it accepts them, even without directly declaring that it responds to a moral need rather than an institutional agenda.

Summarizing what has been seen so far, the museum is constituted as a discursive entity responsible for enunciation, an instance different from the speaking subject. As a locutor, the museum stays in the shade when paying homage to the museum project but, at the same time, is established as an institution. In this framework, the museum's cooperation with the residents and their joint efforts in the museum-making process is actualized.

Regarding the argument presented here, the museum appears to have established a cooperative relationship with the residents, motivated by the residents' initiative and the need to secure it. Community participation reaches beyond the domains of the collection, research, and intervention to become a driving force of the project, which provides legitimacy to the museum endeavor in terms of contemporary museological principles. Nevertheless, there is dissonance between the argumentative and the enunciative planes since the plurality of actors that appear involved are absorbed by the institutional enunciative instance.

### 3.2. The museum's semantic intervention

Since the current analysis is limited to the museum's intervention and does not include the programs promoted by other actors in the housing conflict, such as the government, the real estate market, or the tenants' unions, some semantic aspects will be briefly identified in the pertinent literature. The previously cited statements of the Catalan Ombudsman and the Metropolitan Observatory of Housing of Barcelona coincide in their diagnosis; they both name disproportionately high market prices as the main barrier to broad access to housing and housing rights. This indicates an antagonistic relation between the notion of the 'market' and 'right,' as to the conditions determining access to housing. The market poses an imperative of an economic nature, while the right to housing is one of a legal nature with an ethical background.

This semantic antagonism is reflected in the term 'financialization of housing,' used by the United Nations to refer to the dominance of financial markets in the housing sector and the treatment of housing as a vehicle for investment rather than social good. It is considered a factor that creates wealth inequality and exclusion on a global scale (Farha 2017). In the Spanish context, the exclusion of the population from housing access is also considered to be a consequence of a model that is based on the primacy of the right to do business over that of enjoying adequate housing (Rodríguez Alonso & Espinoza Pino 2017: 15). This program can be rooted back to the Franco era when private construction was used as a means of activating the post-war economy, thus subordinating housing needs to those of economic development and investment, something that still characterizes the Spanish real estate model. The above is summarized in the famous 1959 slogan of the then Minister of Housing, José Luis Arrese: "We do not want a Spain of proletarians but of proprietors."

Returning to the museum text, fragments that refer to the conditions of access in the different historical periods established by the exhibition have been analyzed to identify the program they express and, therefore, the class of utterance they evoke. In addition, attention was drawn to parts that seem to offer a broader perspective of the conflict in terms of its emergence and future.

The analysis is based on the methodological tools provided by the TBS and the TAP. The theoretical principle is that any utterance can be paraphrased by argumentative chainings, which consist of two sentences linked with normative connectors, like ‘therefore’ or similar, or transgressive ones, such as ‘however’ or similar. These chainings are associated with argumentative aspects that represent the semantic schemas of the programmes mentioned above. It is the meaning of the constitutive word of the utterance that provides the argumentative aspect and guides the paraphrasis. To analyze the way programs are introduced into the discourse – what was previously named operations – the enunciative modes are once again used; these indicate whether a program is seized, attacked, or naturalized.

The following text excerpts belong to the exhibition “Housing the majority. Barcelona, 1860-2010.” The title of the section from which each fragment was taken is cited in parenthesis, and the corresponding chronological frame was added in brackets when this is not made explicit in the cited text. The choice of the excerpts was guided by the need to answer the question: What has conditioned housing access different historical moments?<sup>6</sup>

(3) The period after the outbreak of the First World War triggered a prolonged housing crisis. [...] Secondly, the sharp rises in rents against a background of high inflation led to an upsurge in evictions and the major rent strike of 1931. (The great housing crisis: dynamics and conflicts 1915-1953)

(4) Subsidised rental housing was more easily accessible for the middle and affluent classes than for less well-off people, mostly migrants, who had to borrow<sup>7</sup> to buy their property. Contrary to expectations, however, this did not deter the people living in these neighbourhoods. (Low-income outskirts are pioneers in home ownership [1960-1980])

(5) At the same time, the general increase in land values entails the gradual expulsion of the weakest economic sectors. Thus, land values became an insurmountable barrier for increasing swathes of the population, albeit with a delayed impact due to high home ownership rates. (Land prices and changes in social topography [1993-2017])

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<sup>6</sup> Placing more emphasis on the recent period, including two excerpts from the 1979-2011 exhibition section and none from the 1860-1915 one, was opted for because of the proximity to the current conflict.

<sup>7</sup> The word “endeudar” used in the Spanish version would rather be translated as “get into debt”.



(6) Rising unemployment meant mortgage defaults and a dramatic upsurge in evictions which brought the housing issue back to the forefront of the political agenda. (The housing issue is back in the forefront of the political agenda [2008-2012])

All four cases seem to convey a concept like *if there is no economic solvency, then housing access is denied* associated with the normative schema [NEG solvency THEREFORE NEG access]. To reach this conclusion, the highlighted utterances have been paraphrased as follows:

(3') Rent prices increased, therefore, there were evictions.

(4') Less well-off people could not access housing with their economic resources therefore, they had to get into debt.

(5') The land value increased, therefore, the weakest were expelled.

(6') Economic contracts were not fulfilled, therefore, people were evicted.

None of these paraphrases reflects the meaning of a constitutive word in the utterance or its broader context. This means that the utterance cannot be paraphrased, and its aspect cannot be identified based on a constitutive word, as was previously promised to do. Technically, the sense of the utterance is not decoded based on the instructions given to the readers by the meaning of a word present in the text because this word is absent. This is again linked to what Carel (2019) describes as “argumentative interpretation.” In this case, one must take the reverse direction and identify the words themselves based on a doxal argumentative aspect.

It could be said that (3), for example, expresses the aspect [higher prices THEREFORE evictions], but this would not derive from the meaning of either of the words *price* or *eviction*. Therefore, the aspect [NEG solvency THEREFORE NEG access] is preferable, as it concretizes the lack of access. It expresses the meaning of the word *exclusion*.

All the above utterances are interpreted as denoting processes of exclusion, which are concretized under different terms each time. The lack of solvency is concretized in (3), as households that did not pay the rent at the beginning of the century, while in (6), at the threshold of the twenty-first century, families were faced with mortgage payments. Accordingly, (4) and (6) describe different ways of housing inaccessibility. During the sixties and seventies, the poor did not have direct access to rent or property unless they got into debt, while at the turn of the century, again, the poor had no alternative but to be displaced.

As for the enunciation, it is argued that these contents are naturalized by an operation that fits Benveniste's 'historical enunciation' and Carel's found mode very well because they are presented under a historicizing tone, as in the following example.

(3'') Based on the historical research I conducted, I know that sharp rises in rents against a background of high inflation led to an upsurge in evictions.

Therefore, it can also be argued that the museum's semantic intervention naturalizes housing exclusion based on a program whereby access is regulated by economic criteria. The predominance of a market imperative is expressed as a matter of fact, as a common ground that does not need to be questioned, and it is in this sense that the museum's intervention contributes to the stabilization of the dominant program: access to housing is conveyed as an economic matter.

As a program naturalized by an institution, attached to the state apparatus, and following Althusser's (1974) theorization, the regulation of housing access by economic criteria can also be viewed as part of the Real of the State. This entails that this program forms part of the overall rationale of housing policies as a constituent assumption, an axiom for the reasoning of the state's interventions.

Nevertheless, in the framework of the Real of the State discourse, the opposite concept, [NEG solvency ALTHOUGH NEG exclusion], is possible when it occurs within the framework of the state action, with the notion of *social housing*. This entails that even if there is a lack of economic resources, there is no exclusion from housing, an idea that is part of a program of equity in access. Nevertheless, framed as social, equitable conditions are the basis of housing policy, but they do not apply outside of them. Housing, therefore, is a right insofar as the administration protects it, but it does not exist outside its competence because it does not guarantee it. It becomes a notion dependent on state intervention, without validity outside of it.

Further elements that frame the housing problem can be found in the exhibition's opening and end. At the first and the last exhibition panels, one can read as follows:

(7) Finding somewhere to live has been a constant challenge for most people in the contemporary city. (Exhibition opening)

(8) No response can overlook historic legacies and patterns; solutions need to be found with sustained action over time and without expecting immediate or entirely predictable effects. (Exhibition closing)

In (7), the word *constant* is a constitutive word, it provides meaning to the utterance, while in (8), one needs to interpret what is expressed argumentatively:

(7<sup>`</sup>) Finding somewhere to live is a constant problem in the contemporary city, therefore the problem is not new. Attached to the aspect: constant THEREFORE NEG new.

The meaning of the word 'constant' includes the dimension of something that is now new, since it denotes a condition that excludes change. It is in this sense that the problem of *finding somewhere to live* is naturalized as something inherent in the contemporary city and, therefore, detached from a specific geographical context, such as the city of Barcelona, and a specific period of the contemporary era. Housing is challenging in contemporary cities, and so it is in Barcelona. The exhibition opens by announcing that, even though describing the conditions that shape a problem in Barcelona, it does not describe a unique phenomenon, and this makes the emergence of the problem a secondary question.

(8<sup>`</sup>) Solutions need to be found, although with action over time. Attached to the aspect: do x ALTHOUGH NEG do x now

(8<sup>``</sup>) Actions need to be sustained over time, although without expecting immediate or predictable effects. Attached to the aspect: do x ALTHOUGH NEG judge x now

The closing utterance defers the resolution of the problem and the evaluation of its effects to a future time. It acknowledges the necessity of finding a solution while asserting that any housing policy response is historically conditioned and must be assessed in the long term. This approach somehow manages the reader's expectations regarding the potential impact of the authorities' actions, establishing a timeframe for policy evaluation that extends beyond the present. It suggests a historical perspective that is not immediately accessible to the museum visitor.

The following questions arise: should this be interpreted as a call for patience and trust in housing policies? What kind of expectations is it prudent to have regarding the resolution of a problem that appears to be intrinsic to the contemporary city? The public authorities, which are established as the main political subject responsible for *Housing the majority*, are therefore given a historical time frame for the final evaluation of their policy, and the public is discouraged from reaching political conclusions and taking action in the present time.

## Conclusion

As the social function of the museums is gaining strength in the museological debates, the authors of this paper consider the study of how it is materialized in the museum practice necessary, specifically in relation to the participation of the community and the position adopted by museums in social conflicts they engage with. These aspects were explored, and the museum was characterized as an actor in the housing conflict by examining the text of the Housing Museum of Barcelona through the lens of argumentative semantics. Text curation guides the reader – the museum visitor – towards a specific view of reality through argumentation. It does so even when it only aims to explain.

Following the imperatives of contemporary museology, the participation of the residents' association becomes a constituent part of the Museum of the Cases Barates since the museum is presented as a cooperative project that was developed upon a popular initiative. Nevertheless, the different voices that are part of the museum project are absorbed by an institutional enunciative instance, which discursively creates the museum. An account of the power relations that may be present in the project was not encountered, though a paradox was detected: the popular initiative is responsible for the creation of the museum in the argumentative plane, and the museum as a locutor is responsible for the appearance of the popular initiative in the text, with the attribution of its role, in the enunciative plane. This paradox indicates an unbalance between the notions of community and museum.

Regarding the stance of the museum, the argumentative activity of the museum-locutor in the exhibition dedicated to the history of housing policies and the conditions of housing access, provides evidence that even if the museum claims not to touch upon burning issues, it is inevitably positioned in the semantic space of the conflict. As an actor in the housing conflict, the museum project of Cases Barates works towards stabilizing a dominant concept, namely that economic criteria prevail over housing access, and naturalizing programs that express the meaning of housing exclusion. The way in which the framework of the housing policies is set does not foster a radical questioning of the way authorities may actively participate in the creation of housing inequalities but instead sets the basis for an apologetic discourse.

Thus, language is neutralized in an argumentative level by assuming, without explicitly declaring, a dominant discursive frame and outcasting the opposite position from the text. The adopted position is constituted as the Real, and what remains outside constitutes noise. On an enunciative level, a self-constituted institution is assigned the legitimacy of a recognized social actor, presenting its intervention as a benevolent act of popular demand. These aspects are part of what text curation is called to define.

In conclusion, while museums aspire to be spaces for dialogue and offer multiple perspectives, the possibility of neutrality or apolitical mediation is questioned, given the argumentative nature of language. For this reason, we consider museums' social role to be intertwined with their political position. Finally, we argue that community agency must accompany community participation in both enunciative and argumentative terms. Without this, there is a risk of falling into instrumentalization, which ultimately undermines any emancipatory objectives.

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**AUTHOR**

**Elena Ananiadou** Ph.D. candidate, Department of Translation and Language Sciences, Pompeu Fabra University, Spain.

**AUTHOR**

**Elisabeth Miche** Lecturer, Department of Translation and Language Sciences, Pompeu Fabra University, Spain.

