



▲ The old neighbourhoods of warehouses and water towers are just about wholly erased in some parts of Poblenou.

A visit to any of the 'art factories' evokes the romantic image of the bohemian artist struggling away in a decrepit space chock full of clutter and eccentric contraptions, and bubbling over with creative energy. "The open lay-out of the industrial halls, with creative people from diverse disciplines sharing the same space has provided for an extremely fruitful work environment," explained Marco Norris, an Italian painter and web designer who works in the La Escocesa, at Carrer Pere IV, 345.

Now, less than a decade since they first moved into La Escocesa, the artists find that their inexpensive studio space and collective experiment has fallen victim to the combination of rising property values and the 22@ plan, designed to convert the industrial sector of Poblenou into a high-tech, 'knowledge-based' economic zone.

The building's owner, Renta Corporación, has negotiated the departure of each of the complex's different associations. Norris, like many of the building's residents including the *avant-garde* La Cónica/Lacónica theatre company, admitted that Renta's offers were "fair". But, he added, "We felt that we had our hands tied, only having month-to-month rental contracts and fearing that we would be kicked out at the end of the month with nothing." Norris tentatively plans to look for a smaller space in another neighbourhood, but others like the La Cónica/Lacónica troupe—residing in Poblenou since the company's founding in 1995—have said they will have to look for reasonably priced places outside of the city.

When asked about the future use of the rehabilitated building, Teresa Lloret, a Renta Corporación spokesperson, said, "It was a deteriorated building that we needed to fix up. Since it is a joint-project with the Ajuntament, [Renta Corporación] will follow all the instructions of city hall with the building and setting it up for public and private services. Part of the building will be for private residential use."

She said that the artists currently in residence were "a grain of sand in the overall large-scale transformation of Poblenou and Barcelona. The building was a dead zone, and the surrounding area poor and depressing. We will help recover the building for the neighbourhood and now everything will be raised to a much better level."

Public opinion about the complex and constantly evolving 22@ urban renewal plan, which La Escocesa's rehabilitation forms part of, are as numerous as the neighbourhood's chimney stacks. A sizeable contingent of people remain suspicious as to what a "much better level" means to current residents. For many it sounds like gentrification. "It is an attempt to standardise and homogenise the neighbourhood to fit Barcelona's high-tech design image," argued Poblenou resident and cultural critic, Alex Brahim.

While recognising that the future use of the public facilities of La Escocesa is still "undefined," López Corduente affirmed that "they would continue to contemplate facilities for artists in the building" and pointed out that "the artist production, centre, Hangar, in Can Ricart, would remain, and another contiguous hall will be destined for similar use after its rehabilitation." The end result being that loss of art spaces would only be temporary.

For life-long Poblenou resident and owner of the recently-opened NIU art exhibition space, Sergi Bueno Navarro, even the temporary loss of the artist studios and workshops amounts to a terrible mistake on the part of the Ajuntament. "The artists can't wait around two years. They will disperse out into the periphery or out of Barcelona. The Ajuntament has missed a golden chance to catalyse and create an artistic community with a real international projection, but now they will just lose them."

For now, we can only hope that their former spaces don't follow the path of Soho and eventually end up as trendy shoe stores. ■

*Poblenou is
known as
Catalunya's
Manchester...*