My winter trip to Barcelona was incredibly eye opening and exciting. Having been on an organized tour of Barcelona three years ago, I came into the city with preconceived notions of what I will see. As I eagerly ventured into a city I thought would be familiar, I realized that traveling on one’s own terms vastly enriches the experience of a place. I was not bound to anyone’s schedule and I was free to roam around small alleys like a local. I started my 10-day stay in Barcelona strolling the streets, deliberately getting lost to discover small shops, hidden ghettos and tucked-in museums in a labyrinth of Art Nouveau and gothic architecture. When Jose, a homeless travel tour guide, took me on a private tour of Barri Gòtic, I saw a space saturated with both history and contemporary social issues. As we walked through the cobblestone roads and narrow streets, Jose injects his personal stories to the history of each stop. The tour, if I can call it that, did not feel like one. It was more like strolling around a new city with an old friend. Jose brought me to places that were personally memorable to him. There is the soup kitchen run by nuns where they can “fill their bellies at 10 am” to get them through the day. Five blocks away, there was another kitchen ran by a German priest, where the homeless would flock during Thursdays – the day when nuns, and by extension the homeless, fast. This area was a ghetto, mostly filled with immigrants and prostitutes. Jose warns me, “El Raval is known to be a place where people go to get killed”. He exaggerated. While it seemed a hub of petty crime, the place was full of life. Jose leads me to a church where he narrates the role of the poor in its construction. Most tours highlight valiant leaders and important aristocrats, often overlooking the poor majority invaluable to the creation of their cities. I could sense Jose’s pride as he told me about the poor’s role in building the church, as if taking ownership of a space that has displaced him. While we were at the church, he recounts how one rainy night, he was seeking refuge in the entrance where the priest eventually took him in for a meal and offered him a bed. For me, this story was not a call for sympathy but a gesture of appreciation and pride. Our last stop of the day was el Mercat de la Boqueria. Jose quips, “if it isn’t sold here, that thing does not exist”. The market, packed with tourists and locals alike, was colorful and vibrant.

I schedule a coffee chat with Jose where we talked about the homelessness issue in Barcelona. He begins by talking to me about his own path to homelessness. As people departed from reading print media, the publication company where he worked as an English translator closed down. He was left jobless at the height of the Spanish financial crisis and was unable to pay for the high apartment rates in a cosmopolitan city. He jumped from shelter to shelter. He agreed with the shelter’s system of “kicking out the homeless at 10 am so that they can look for a job”. Jose and I walk to a library where everyone has 40 hours of Internet access a week. He says he uses this to find work and this is how he was able to find a job as a walking tour guide for the Hidden City Tour. He laments, “most homeless use this time to play games on the computer. It’s like they don’t want to get out of their situation. We receive 400 euros a month from the government, which is not enough. But the homeless have become [complacent] of their situation. Some of them are 50 years old but I don’t think age should matter. The 20 year olds use the money to buy drugs, it’s really a shame”. Jose admits that it was a struggle to transcend the sense of worthlessness brought about by unemployment but he highlights the value of faith and hard work. “You have to pick yourself up; having this job gives me a sense of purpose and makes me feel like I belong in this community”.

The Hidden City Tour was educational and inspiring. It seems like a practical and adaptable model that can be used to raise awareness on homelessness in various geographic locations. While it is not a direct response to the problem (providing permanent shelter), it addresses the more pressing need for the homeless’ social inclusion. I would like to thank the JLS committee who made this trip possible. My experience in Barcelona reminded me that I should never be complacent in what I learn inside lecture halls; the real value of education is how we use it to better the life of anyone, however small our effect might be.
My tour guide Jose in front of Catedral de Barcelona
A small square where the homeless gather at night to sleep
The soup kitchen where the homeless flock during Thursdays
The streets of El Raval
The side entry of the church where Jose sought refuge from the rain
Jose admits that it is difficult to look at fancy bakeshops especially when you have nothing to eat
A homeless man, with his belongings in a grocery cart, against this meaningful street art
A homeless man “lives” along the busy streets of Barcelona
Gaudi architecture
El Mercat de la Boqueria, the last stop of the Hidden City Tour