

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE CITY OF BARCELONA

1716-1977

The War of Succession (1705-1714) finished adversely for Catalonia. This meant politically the loss of its constitution and in Barcelona one of its material consequences was the demolition of a working-class area, «el Barrio de Ribera» in order to build a military fortress, «La Ciudadela» which together with the Castle of Montjuïc and other new fortresses completed the military encirclement of the city. Converted in this way into a military stronghold, its growth from this time on was confined to the area within the medieval city walls. The exception to this was the working-class district of «Barceloneta», planned by military engineers to compensate for the lack of housing brought about by the demolition of «el Barrio de Ribera», which was the only building allowed outside the city walls.

1716-1727. Construction of the Ciudadela.

1753. Beginning of work on the Barceloneta.

An economic revival began in Barcelona at the end of the 18th century: «La Real Cédula de Carlos III» (Royal Warrant) had opened up trade with America for the Catalonians, and a year later the cotton industry was employing more than 18,000 workers. Until this time the small increase in the population of the city had been absorbed by increasing the density of building with the consequent increase in the height of the buildings and the using up of all the available land. But now a new solution had to be found for the city and attention was centred on the development of the «Raval» where many religious orders had set up their convents.

With the partial demolition of the already unnecessary inside medieval wall (1735) a reorganization of «La Rambla» was planned. New streets following the medieval way, were to be built thus completing the street plan of the Raval. This project begun by military authorities and drawn up by military engineers was to be spoilt later on when it was put into effect by private enterprise. But nevertheless, it had been shown that it was possible to draw up an articulate and unitary plan for the city which overcame the functional and visual limitations of the Medieval city. The results would be shown by the uniformity of the facades, the opening up of the first parts of the new streets according to the original plan and the development of new types of building: factories and blocks of flats which still had to co-exist with the building of the last mansions for the aristocracy. These developments, together with others of an altruistic or hygienic nature which would give Barcelona the characteristics of a middle-class city, would not be finished until the second half of the following century.

1772-1807. Reorganization of the Rambla.

1763. Conde del Asalto Street opened.

1790-92. Marqués de Barbará Street opened.

It was not until the first part of the 19th century that the Constitutional City Council (1820-1823) undertook an urban reorganization which would give the city a new look. The base of this scheme was the construction of a straight road which, crossing the

1824. Opening of Fernando Street. medieval city, would join «La Rambla» to the «Jardín del General». The result was the opening of Fernando, St. Jaume I and Princesa Street which together with Hospital Street, in the Raval, joined the Ciudadela with Montjuïc. The dependence of the cemeteries on the religious orders was overcome by the construction of a general cemetery. This meant that the old cemeteries which were in the city disappeared and most of this land could be incorporated into the city thus forming small squares in front of the churches. Other changes on the Port side brought about the destruction of the old «Portal del Mar» and the beginnings of the «Plaça del Palau» (Palace Square) of which only the fountain and some buildings such as «La Llotja, La Aduana, and the houses «d'En Xifré» were completed and are still visible today.
1819. Opening of the «Old Cemetery».
1825. Palace Square.
1848. Royal Square.
1858. Demolition of «Palau Menor».
1848. Inauguration of first railway line Barcelona-Mataró.
1858. Demolition of city walls.
1860. Plan Cerdà for the Ensanche.
- In 1835 a revolutionary period began in the history of Barcelona one of whose acts, the burning of the majority of the Barcelona convents, allowed the city to recover the spaces occupied by them. These were used for new public squares such as the «Plaza Real», «Plaza Medicacelli» and «Plaza San José (La Boquería)» used as a market, or for public buildings such as «el Teatro del Liceo». Together with these public works, others of a private nature such as the demolition of the «Palau Menor» and the «Palau de la Reina» (Queen's Palau) with the subsequent redevelopment, contributed to the remodelling of a city whose population had grown so much that it could not be contained within the city walls. The fact that it was still a military stronghold prohibited development within a large belt outside the walls and consequently during the 19th century new urban areas grew up beyond this military belt. These were based on old roads or villages such as Gracia, Sarrià, les Corts, Sant Andreu, Hostafranchs, San Gervasio, etc. The nearest of which, Gracia, gave rise to the building of a wide avenue, «el Paseo de Gracia» along which there were all kinds of popular entertainments, including circuses, dance-halls and cafés.
- As a result of the constant pressure of the inhabitants of the city, who had tried to demolish «La Ciudadela» on several occasions, from 1854 onwards Barcelona ceased to be considered as a military stronghold and so the city walls could be demolished. From this time on the aims of the Barcelona Council were centred on organizing and controlling the growth of the city, to which end a Pilot Plan had already been made of «el Ensanche» in 1846.
- In February 1859 the central government of Madrid issued a Royal Order for «A study of the Ensanche and the Reform of the City of Barcelona» to be prepared by the Civil Engineer, Ildefons Cerdà. This caused a great deal of protest at different levels throughout the city and two months later the Council organized a competition which was allowed by the Government only to compare the winning project with that of Cerdà which had already been approved in Madrid in June. The Competition was won by Antoni Rovira i Trias, the municipal architect but in 1860 when the Government had studied the report of the «Junta Consultiva de Caminos», it ratified the Plan drawn up by Cerdà. The plan known since as the Pla Cerdà covered the whole area of the city including the nearest villages and joined them together by a square network of streets.
- The Building of «el Eixample (Ensanche)», which was very slow and at the beginning caused protest, reflected changes in organization and construction as well as the changes in architectural taste which had taken place during the previous 100 years. The majority of the first buildings, up to 1877, when the first architects graduated from the recently

founded Barcelona School of Architects, were designed by Mestres D'Obres who until 1829 were under the «Gremio de Albañiles y Canteros de Barcelona» whose formation dated from 1327.

Although they were limited to private buildings, some of the Mestres de Obras did important work. An example of this the conversion of the Ciudadela into a public park which was planned and directed by Josep Fontseré.

1872. The begin of the Park of the Ciudadela.

The beginnings of iron technology also resulted in some remarkable building during this period — principally market places, which after some initial archaeological copying would become part of the architectural vocabulary of Barcelona in the last part of the 19th century. Here also we find Fontseré, who designed one of these markets, the «Born» and the buildings adjacent to it as well as the work done in the park until Elies Rogent took technical charge of the «Exposition Universal» which was going to be held there.

1874. Building of the Born Market.

The Universal Exhibition of 1888 gave an opportunity for remodelling the area of the Ciudadela and of incorporating it into the «Ensanche», and also allowed the introduction of Art Nouveau. Catalonia, which had begun its revival under the double spiritual and economic motivation of the Renaissance, found in Art Nouveau the way to a national architecture which contrasted with the imperial style of the period. This aim to define its own particular and artistic progressive expression stemmed from the time when the Central Government had refused to recognize Catalonia as a nation. Medieval crafts were reintroduced such as the use of bricks whose texture and flexibility of application reached a very high technical level and spread to other countries. The export of the «volta Catalana» to the U.S.A. by Guastavino is an example of this success. To this must be added a clear wish to create new forms which, although they were similar to the European experiences of Art Nouveau, were different because it was surprisingly widespread and popular and also wed a great complexity of style. Art Nouveau shouldn't be thought of as a single movement but as the result of different and isolated tendencies which can be generally reduced to two separate styles, that of Antoni Gaudí and of Lluís Domènech i Montaner.

1888. Universal Exhibition of Barcelona.

Between 1897 and 1903 the municipal authorities of the surrounding towns gradually came under the control of the City of Barcelona. These towns with their industry and workers created a suburban belt around the city which impeded the extension of the «Eixample». With the idea of breaking this belt and providing more room for development a competition was held in 1903 to solve the problem of communication between the city and the surrounding towns and villages. This competition was won by the French architect Jaussely but his academic and ambitious plan was never put into action as it was considered to be too idealistic. In its place 14 years later, the council approved the «Plan de Enlaces», which in fact was nothing more than a simplified version and partial adaptation of Jaussely's plan.

1897-1903. Incorporation of the surrounding town with Barcelona Council.

1917. Plan for link roads between Barcelona and surrounding towns.

In 1888, Angel Baixeras had produced a project for the reform of the city of Barcelona which was a development of Cerdà's proposal in the «Pla Cerdà». This was not approved until 9 years later but the Vía Layetana, the only link road of the three proposed in the «Pla Baixeras», was not completed until 1908. This road which gave direct communication between the Eixample and the Port, was lined with office buildings, many of which were «Noucentiste» and some with and unmistakable resemblance to the Chicago School.

1908. Vía Layetana.

1913. Decree of the proclamation of La Mancomunitat.

The concept of «Noucentism» was created by Eugeni D'Ors at the same time as the constitution of the Govern de la Mancomunitat and with the recovery of a certain institutional autonomy with which Catalanian nationalism evolved from revolutionary acts to the necessity for the normalization of the country with European culture. This explains the abandoning of medieval tradition and the substitution of renaissance classicism which was the first step in the creation of European styles. But in spite of its clear classical tendencies Noucentism did not generate a definite national style but resulted in diverse tendencies from popular Baroque and various renaissance styles to a stylistic simplification which could in some cases be considered as the first step in a formal rationalist compromise.

1923-30. Dictatorship of Primo de Rivera.

Noucentism showed the range of its various facets at the International Exhibition of 1929. This exhibition was the result of a project initiated by the Catalanian electrical companies in 1913. But the first World War, and the Dictatorship of Primo de Rivera a few years later, changed substantially the original idea developed by the architect, politician and historian Josep Puig i Cadafalch when it was carried out by Pere Domènech.

1926. Building of Underground.

With the Exhibition, the development of the greater part of Montjuïc begun by Forrestier was finished, as also was the «Plaza de España» which became a focal point in the city, and encouraged further development in the area. It is significant that the most interesting architectural examples produced by the Exhibition were the «Pueblo Español» and the Pabellon Aleman by Mies van der Rohe. The latter- a milestone in the Modernist Movement-was opened a few weeks after an exhibition of end of studies projects in Galerias Dalmau which introduced the young catalonian architects who, inspired by the international rationalization of the European vanguard, later formed the G.A.T.C.P.A.C. (*) (Group of artists and technicians Catalonians for the progress of contemporary architecture) whose publication was the magazine A.C. (Documents of Contemporary Activity) of which 25 numbers were published between 1931 and 1937.

1929. International Exhibition of Barcelona.

1931. Proclamation of the Second Republic.
1932. Government of the «Generalitat»
Statute of autonomy

The Proclamation of the Republic and the Creation of the «Govern de la Generalitat» produced favourable conditions for the development of this new style of architecture and mainly due to the support of the Social Democràtic Party (Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya) and of the Anarchist Union Party (C.N.T.) the group was given several official commissions including the «Casa Bloc» the «Dispensario Antituberculoso» and a plan for the urban redevelopment of Barcelona which was known as the «Pla Macià» (1933) and was designed with the collaboration of Le Corbusier.

1936-39. Civil War.

The radical political changes caused by the Civil War meant the dissolution of the group before it could put into action the idealism of Le Corbusier by means of direct intervention in the building sector, through the recently created Architects Union of Catalonia. The principal promoters of the G.A.T.C.P.A.C. were lost in the Civil War. Josep Lluís Sert went into exile in the U.S.A. and Josep Torres Clavé the «politician» died at the front fighting as a Republican officer.

(*) The founders of the G.A.T.C.P.A.C. were J. Ll. Sert, M. Subiño, C. Alzamora, G. Rodriguez Arias, R. Churruga, J. Torres Clavé, P. Armengou and S. Yllescas and later J. B. Subirana, R. Duran Reynals, J. Mestres Fossas, F. Fàbregas and R. Ribas Seva.

At the end of the Civil War a long period of repression and shortage began. During this period the New Regime formed oligarchical structures which, substituting the republican structures ensured its survival with the economic recovery of the country. Catalanian architecture, separated from its recent rationalist experiences turned back to folk and academic classicism, with which the bourgeoisie identified itself, and which followed the line which had had its great moment in the International Exhibition of 1929. The same idea of a «Noucentist» city prevailed during the first post war years during which urban development was carried out only partially and on spasmodically isolated occasions.

An example of this is the «Plan for Generalísimo Franco Avenue (before Diagonal) and the surrounding area».

1939-1975. Dictatorship of General Franco.

1946. Plan for the Diagonal.

The crash of the 'forties was reflected in the almost total lack of building activity except for a little in the upper districts and some building in the centre of the city which was composed mainly of banks. The latter incorporated classical elements in their design which were later copied in blocks of flats. At the same time shanty towns were growing up around Barcelonà where the immigrant workers lived.

The slight political relaxation which occurred in the fifties with the idea of overcoming the international isolation in which the country found itself, produced a certain economic recovery. This was reflected in increased building activity. The simultaneous cultural freedom produced an interchange of ideas between the Barcelona architects and the rest of Europe with the accent on Town Planning. The latter concept replaced the «Noucentista» ideas and culminated in the «Plan Comarcal de Barcelona» (Pla Soteras). This plan gave more importance to economic and sociological considerations than to urban design: it was the answer to the problems of overcrowding in the suburban nuclei and to the tendency of the working class population and industry to centre on an outer ring of towns such as Badalona-Montcada, Santa Coloma, etc., which left a large vacant belt around the city. This belt, because of the lack of an infrastructure, was very difficult to develop.

1953. Plan for Greater Barcelona.

The occupation of these areas began in the 'sixties because of the housing estate policy of the administration. The housing problem had become very serious by that time reducing the vast urban problems to a simple lack housing which became the centre of urban and social action. Official intervention was demonstrated by prestige urban development such as the above mentioned plan for the Diagonal, the subject of massive concentration owing to the International Eucharistic Congress. This Congress gave its name to a building operation of houses based on public charity and attempting to alleviate the lack of dwellings which had resulted in Barcelona owing to the earlier immigration of workers.

1952. Eucharistic Congress.

During this period renewed enthusiasm in architecture was shown by a group of architects under the name of «Group R» (*), that wanted to promote architecture that was linked to the G.A.T.C.P.A.C. and to the popular architectural traditions and the new organic tendencies that were growing in Europe and which overcame the confusion,

(*) The «Group R» was created in 1951 and the founders were the architects O. Bohigas, J. A. Coderch, J. Gili, J. M. Martorell, A. Moragas Gallissà, J. Pratmarsó, J. M. Sostres and M. Valls. Coderch and Valls leaved it in 1953 and the Group is increased with J. A. Balcells, F. Bassó, G. Giráldez and M. Ribas Piera. In 1957 with P. Monguió and F. Vayreda.

isolation and futility of the country's architecture. In the 'sixties, the state began an economic revival which allowed the country to evolve towards neocapitalism according to the «Plan de Estabilización» (1957), the result of which was greatly helped by the massive arrival of tourism. The construction boom which followed in the tourist areas as well as in the interior where it was encouraged by the increased buying power of the middle classes — pushed the construction industry to its limit in all sectors. As a result the loss of the high quality craftsmanship in Catalonian architecture caused a pseudo-industrialization of building which showed itself in the adoption of the «International style».

To counteract this obvious degradation of architecture the Realist style appeared. This was influenced by the vanguard of contemporary Italian architecture and raised doubts about the validity of the International style. It suggested the continuity and modernization of the traditional methods of construction as a starting point for an architectural design inspired by a critical revision of historic and popular architecture. Thus the first works appeared combining traditional methods of construction and materials with echoes of earlier styles and a careful revivalist design displacing the International theory. These are low key works with no great technological advances and of very simple design. But because of their abundance a possible School of Barcelona was talked about at the end of the decade (1968) to include a wide spread of Barcelona architects in spite of their many ideological differences.

1962. Plan of access and arterial roads.

The development of a third industrial and residential belt (which enveloped the «Plan Comarcal» of 1953) began at the end of the 'sixties. This was based on the new road development and principally on the new motorways. The idea of a Metropolitan Area began at this time as a planning unit which would allow planning control of Barcelona, thus avoiding any further degradation of the urban image which had taken place up to then, and allowing a balanced development.

1965. Plan for Metropolitan of Barcelona.

Although the Metropolitan Area Plan was a solution to the problem of a Town Plan and the necessity for a new urban conscience, it could not be hoped that the plan, faced with overcrowding and traffic congestion, could overcome the administrative and political difficulties. Also the increasing pressure from land speculators the city who subjected to piecemeal changes based almost exclusively on the problem of traffic. The Avenue García Morato was begun, an underground car parking policy was introduced and the 1st and 2nd Ring Roads were opened. The roads have broken and distorted the urban structure, the old city centre, and the small districts that for half a century formed the perimeter of the city.

1975. Death of the General Franco

The new collective conscience of the great urban problems of Barcelona as well increasing public pressure since the decline of the Franco government have brought about the recent approval of the Plan Comarcal which although it has yet to be completed and its consequences cannot be foreseen, can be considered as a summary of Barcelona's problems.

1975. Review of 1953 Plan.

In the last three years, the building industry has also felt the impact of the increasing concentration of capital with the consequent increase in the scale of operations and the importing of new techniques such as prefabrication. Architecture produced on a large scale becomes more and more a consumer item and the designs are interpreted by the

promoters for the tastes of the average consumer. Only the large buildings such as the offices of the large companies try to reconcile investment with appearance. In previous decades these buildings were designed as monuments, now they are display units for the builders and technologists.

The result of this is that the 19th century shape of Barcelona is being replaced by the new image created by the growth of these buildings in the town centre as well as the one-off buildings of twenty-three storeys. The most imaginative architecture is more and more separated from large scale production. This means that architecture takes an intellectual attitude of independence that rests on the autonomy of the form which is the conceptual base of the majority of its proposals which is a long way from the moral and ethical considerations of previous generations.

1977. Restitution of the Generalitat «provisional»

Josep Emili Hernández-Cros
Gabriel Mora
Xavier Poulana