

4_Estanislau Roca, Miquel Martí. Barcelona: a glimpse into its contemporary urban transformation

In the eighties, as Head of Urban Planning of Barcelona City Council, upon the restoration of democracy and having, as director, effected an unprecedented reshuffle at the Barcelona School of Architecture, Oriol Bohigas brought about a Copernican shift in designing and understanding public space in the city of Barcelona. That Urbanism took the form of remodeling, the shift from plan to project, the revitalization of neighborhoods and a different conception of urbanity (related, according to Manuel de Solà-Morales to the concepts of permeability, sensibility and respect). This episode marked an important chapter in the history of urbanism in our city. According to Bohigas, Barcelona had to be regenerated at the initiative of the Administration, either directly or driving to collective purposes and benefits private investments.

Furthermore, he championed very different projects from simple street layouts and argued in favor of integrated projects that each addresses specific problems and triggered off a dynamic of its own within the existing possibilities. It was the idea of the return of the street, the square and urban gardens that were shaped by architecture. Such architecture of the city found an agitator in the contributions of the Urban Design and Regional Planning Department of the Barcelona School of Architecture.

In this new context, architects came to the fore of municipal public works, and Barcelona gradually improved, reaching the highest levels in urban design.

The public space policy

During the last three decades, this policy of public space improvement has been consolidated as one of the pillars of the city project, maintained and updated by successive municipal governments. It has changed the city qualitatively, doubling its green spaces, and transforming the network of streets and squares in lively civic places. The high quality public space has become an essential part of the everyday life and experience of the citizens of Barcelona, as well as a brand for the city, one of the aspects appealing to the great number of visitors increasing every year.

In the eighties, the public space redesign was focused in existing opportunities (for instance the transformation of obsolete industrial lands bought by the municipality during the seventies into new small urban parks, like Parc de l'Escorxador, Parc de l'Espanya Industrial, Parc del Clot o Parc de la Pegaso) and singular projects (either squares or streets) aimed to strengthen the local identity at the level of the neighborhoods (from Via Júlia to plaça dels Països Catalans). The construction of new urban parks depending on land opportunities has continued until nowadays with such examples as Parc de Diagonal Mar, Parc Central de Nou Barris o Parc Central del Poblenou.

In the nineties, street redesign became the core of the public space transformation. First, the city realized that in a Mediterranean compact urban context, streets are not only spaces for

flows and movements but they become the most important civic places. Second, the relation between spaces, the creation of a network of public spaces, appeared to be more important than the redesign of singular spaces in themselves. Third, the construction of the Ring Roads for the Olympics in 1992 enabled the reduction of transit in the inner streets of city and their transformation in order to increase the space for pedestrians.

Since then, the redesign of streets has included main avenues as well as the extensive redesign of whole neighborhood areas of the city. The public space policies evolved from punctual interventions, to linear and extensive designs. It is a continuous and ongoing process which has been fostered by the paradigm of sustainable mobility. The reintroduction of the tramway, the extension of the network of bicycle lanes or the reorganization of bus lines show the synergies between mobility strategies and street improvements. If the redesign of Diagonal Avenue (still under debate) emerges as paradigm of the transformation of main axes, the proposal to create superblocks all over the city (within which the streets could be highly pedestrianised) is the last trend in extensive street redesign.

Since the years 2000, another paradigm is fertilizing the public space policy in Barcelona. Is the paradigm of ecological sustainability, stressing the importance of green spaces, and particularly, green connections between urban spaces and large open metropolitan spaces. The opening of the city towards the sea with the waterfront renewal has been an outstanding contribution to this relation between the city and its geographical spaces, but nowadays the challenge is to strengthen the links with the surrounding rivers, hills and mountains.

The Besòs River, the one which flows next to Barcelona, has already started a process to be transformed both in a rich ecological and civic corridor. If the isolated mountain of Montjuïc has been colonized for more than a century by gardens and collective facilities, the mountain range of Collserola has become in the last decades a highly appreciated destination for outdoor activities. The hills within the city are also been transformed into appealing parks with such interventions as the viewpoint and open-air heritage museum in the Turó de la Rovira.

But besides the projects that transform these open spaces into places where ecological and civic values are balanced, the matter is to improve the accessibility from the network of urban public spaces, mainly the proximity pedestrian accesses supported by collective transit systems. In that sense, the recent proposals for the Gates to Collserola explore the construction of small scale itineraries to both introduce people to the mountains and nature into the city. At the same time, some main green corridors are considered to link hills, rivers and sea through the city. One of the most important will be the new Green Diagonal (expected to be built in the next years), the linear park that following the railway corridor of la Sagrera will link the Besòs River, with Plaça de les Glòries and Parc de la Ciutadella, the oldest park in the city near to the waterfront.

Adding new paradigms over the years (the traditional idea of a network of civic places, the paradigm of sustainable mobility, the concern for ecology), the public space policy in Barcelona is lively and strong after three decades of being implemented and currently it contributes to the metropolitan fitting of the central city.

A laboratory of urban projects

If Barcelona has been a forerunner and international reference of contemporary public space policies, another pillar of the transformation of the city has been the concept of urban project. In the conception of the Department of Urbanism of the Architecture School of Barcelona inspired by the thought of Manuel de Solà-Morales, urban projects are intermediate scale urban designs involving intensity of activity, mix of uses and a rich architectural relation between buildings and open space. Since the eighties, Barcelona has become a truly laboratory for such urban projects.

An initial phase of transforming the city through urban projects culminated with the remodeling of Barcelona to host the 1992 Olympics. In the mideighties, under the Direction of Joan Busquets, the municipal services elaborated two plans which set the structural basis of the city project: the Road Plan and the New Centralities Plan. They helped to drive the huge investments of the Olympics not only to make possible the event, but to ensure a lasting urban development.

The Road Plan improved the connectivity of the street network, strengthened the idea of civic streets where cars and pedestrians should be balanced and planned the construction of an integrated expressway, the Ring Road. The Ring Road of Barcelona, the main investment related to the Olympics, changed completely the mobility in the city: it improved the accessibility to until then peripheral areas, increased and distributed the accessibility to the inner central areas and it reduced the traffic pressure in them. But above all, thanks to the collaboration between architects and engineers, the Ring Road is a master piece of the integration of an expressway with its urban surroundings. Instead of creating urban scars within the city, the Ring Road design was very sensitive to the existing urban fabric and, in many sections, it weaved neighborhoods and created new urban façades. The Ronda de Dalt, at the foot of Collserola range, is a great example of the complementary design of an uncovered segregated way at the underground level and the streets completing the urban layout at the city level. The Ronda del Litoral, following the same principles, made possible the opening of Barcelona towards the sea started in the mid eighties by the construction of el Moll de la Fusta along the façade of the Old Town.

In turn, the New Centralities Plan selected some strategic places with high accessibility in order to develop a multicenter city. The two Olympic Villages (one linked to the Ronda del Litoral and the new waterfront, the other one linked to the new developments along the Ronda de Dalt) and the Olympic areas of sport facilities were located in order to create new centers and revitalize entire areas of the city through urban projects.

After the Olympics, a second wave of renovation was launched. So large and ambitious that after 25 years, it is still ongoing. This second wave involves the regeneration of the eastern part of the city following three main urban axes linked one two each other in two strategic urban hubs.

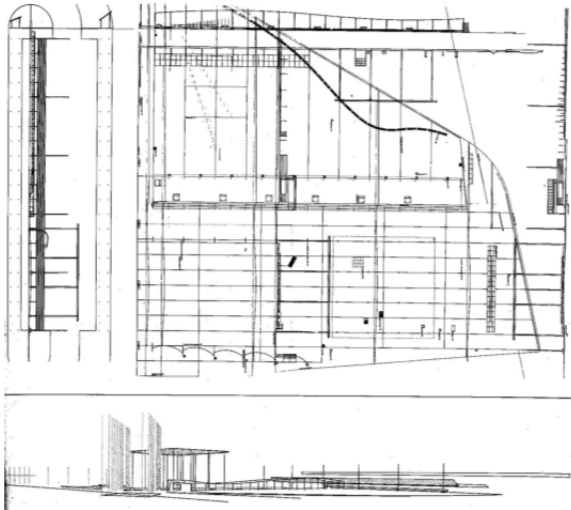
The first axis is the waterfront itself. Since 1992 and from the Olympic Village, the stretch of beaches, parks, promenades and urban facades facing the sea has been extended eastwards until the end of the municipality at the mouth of the Besòs river.

The second axis is the extension of the Diagonal Avenue until the sea across the old industrial district of Barcelona. At the crossing of the two axes, the site for the Forum of Cultures in 2004 marked the completion both of the waterfront and the Diagonal.

The new Diagonal has become the backbone of the 22@ district, the major urban regeneration process undertaken by the city. Providing high quality network of infrastructures and offering bonuses for economic activities related to new technologies, the idea is to renew the urban tissue by keeping a rich mix of residential and clean industries uses and typologies. The transformation of the 22@ is developed through a patchwork of urban projects. The audiovisual campus, behind Glòries square, is a good example of this effort to interrelate uses (companies, universities, cultural centers) and forms (new architectural landmarks with the rehabilitation of the rich industrial heritage of the area). In Glòries square (the center of Barcelona imagined by Cerdà in the XIX century and designed at the beginning of this XXI century), the Diagonal Avenue meets the third axis driving the eastern transformation of Barcelona: the Green Diagonal. Taking advantage of the arrival of the high speed train, the railway corridor of la Sagrera is going to be converted in a linear park connecting the center of the city with the Besòs River, improving the relations between neighborhoods and supporting an array of new centers along it (the most important of which would be around the new railway station of la Sagrera). If the extension of Diagonal Avenue has become the backbone of the 22@ district, the railway corridor is expected to foster the transformation of another industrial area of the city, the one located in Sant Andreu district. From the beginning, the underlying approach to the transformation of the city has been strategic, or one of urban acupuncture, with each plan or project seeking to bring added value to the simple urban intervention. Consequently, Barcelona today boasts a whole array of projects that offer excellent lessons in public space and urban design. Experiences that currently are being updated in order to extend the regeneration process to the metropolitan level. A new chapter in the always open ended evolution of the city.



The design of the Paisos Catalans square (Piñón, Viaplana, 1983) became a symbol of the singular public space projects launched in the eighties



Details of the project



The network of green corridors considered by the municipality of Barcelona for the near future



The 1992 Olympics consolidated the opening of the city towards the sea



The Forum 2004 area culminates both Barcelona's waterfront and the extension of Diagonal Avenue, key interventions in the regeneration of the eastern part of the city