

Regenerating Barcelona: re-inhabiting the city and reusing its buildings

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ABSTRACT: This communication is about the capacity that historical architectures have for housing new activities which are distinct to the original ones, maintaining their structural characteristics; while at the same time allowing, thanks to the diversity of uses, a greater public accessibility to these entities. Barcelona possesses a few paradigmatic examples that demonstrate the regenerative potential of these strategies: historical complexes converted into tree-lined passageways, cloisters used as arched squares, the interior area of residential blocks transformed into parks or markets used as transit zones. The need to come upon the right selection of activities that these old buildings currently in disuse have to accommodate, maximizing a more porous relationship with the city, are necessary tactics in order to keep them standing and at the same time regenerate the indispensable bonds between architecture and urban space, offering in this manner new spheres of social relationship which contribute to their good functioning.

1 INTRODUCTION

Barcelona has certain paradigmatic cases of historical complexes that have transformed their uses over time and have become a part of the public space. Complexes of greater or smaller dimension that originally housed hospitals, convents, factories, palaces, military headquarters or charity entities, have abandoned their specialization, evolving towards a diversity of uses. The new functions that have colonized various parts of the enclosure have been claiming a greater public accessibility to the premises, thus in this manner generating a more fluid relationship with the city.

The majority of these complexes have a privileged urban location and continue conserving the original character of their architecture. Moreover, the potential of their representativeness maintained over centuries resides in the fact that today the citizens identify them with the name given to their primitive functions, *Hospital of the Santa Creu* (and not *Library of Catalonia*); "*Drassanes*", which means *Shipyards*, (and not *Maritime Museum*); *Old Convent of Sant Agustí* (and not *Sant Agustí Civic Centre*) or *House of Charity* (and not the *Contemporary Culture Centre of Barcelona*).

The success of the social functions of a great part of these cases lies in the symbiosis with the citizens' common memory and the representative character of these 'ancient' architectures. The pride demonstrated by civil society facing the fact that one is now able to transit enclaves practically inaccessible during centuries, which in addition show the survival of the original architectural character of its buildings, is fulminant in facilitating their connectivity to the city and the consequent activation of its more immediate environment.

2 ADAPTABILITY

One of the factors contributing to the survival of the formal and structural character of the architectural complexes that have been opened up to the city is that the adaptation of the functions to the existing architectures has been more important than adapting the buildings to their new uses. Because one of the main strategies to consider when introducing new functions into old buildings is choosing the right activities that they will house. If these activities involve structural, morphological, environmental or materials of great change, then the selected functions are not adequate.

All these buildings were constructed in response to specific needs. And yet, despite the expiration of these needs, the buildings have been able to survive. The history of some of them shows us that they have changed their use over time, not just once but several times, without modifying their space. It is noted that during the long period of time in which these buildings have been standing, in periods of war many of them took up military functions, becoming headquarters, hospitals or ammunition stores. This is the case of the aforementioned *Drassanes*, which became a *Maritime Museum* in 1936; or the *Ciutadella headquarter*, which was transformed, thanks to the Universal Exhibition of 1888, into a park, Parliament, and later on, the Museum of Modern Art, finally to recover once more its parliamentary activities in 1980; or the *Water Deposit* in the same park, which in 1999 became the Library of the Pompeu Fabra University.

In addition to military functions, many have been reused several times and have simultaneously housed highly diverse activities. The structural and spatial characteristics of these complexes allow such versatility. Some architectural complexes are formed by potent volumes held up over large structural spans supported by pillars, thus generating an isotropic spatial perception. This layout contributes to allowing its extension or aggregating different types of volumes to it. This is the case of the *Drassanes*, whose majestic interior space is the result of adding naves covered with pitched roofs supported by large semi-circular arches on thick stone pillars. This apparent linearity is blurred by the presence of another set of arches, which are also semi-circular, placed perpendicular to the direction of the naves and in a diaphragmatic manner, transversely reinforcing the entire structure. Maintaining the same building system since the thirteenth century in which its construction began, until the eighteenth century when the last extension was carried out, underlines the functional, structural and constructive rationality of the spatial layout which has survived to this day.

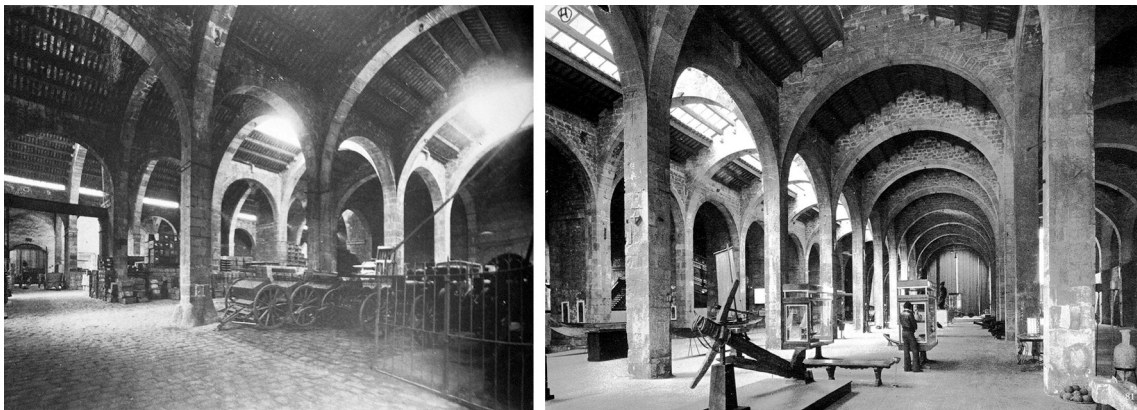


Figure 1. Drassanes of Barcelona: military and museum functions.

Other premises such as the *Hospital of the Santa Creu* and the *House of Charity* have similar unidirectional naves arranged around courtyards or cloisters. The sum of these structures and corresponding open spaces, create complexes formed by concatenated organisms in which open air spaces and transitional ones are as important as the closed volumes. In the case of the *Hospital of the Santa Creu*, work began in 1401 by building two-storey-high naves of a single-aisle around a rectangular cloister, following the medieval typological model. The lower nave is resolved by cross vaulting and the upper one, with diaphragmatic arches and a gable roof. This

clear organizational system has allowed, over time, the extension of the enclosure and the annexation of other volumes until completing the complex in the mid-eighteenth century. In the case of the *House of Charity*, two-aisle naves of up to four floors constituted since the late eighteenth century the diverse parts of a great enclosure of which the structures around one of the main courtyards, the 'Pati de les Dones', has survived intact despite having hosted diverse functions and having also changed its use.



Figure 2. Hospital of Barcelona: medic and library functions.

The force of these large containing structures of ample spaces, as a rule generally built with quality materials; endure any distribution or smaller inner partition, thus allowing their relatively simple recovery. They are architectures of great clarity and neutrality, versatile and polyvalent, consenting without traumas segmentations or extensions. A finding which asserts that the more neutral the space and the clearer and more homogeneous the structure, the greater its ability to accommodate different programmes without losing its attributions.

Rafael Moneo endorses these observations by stating that the buildings that stand the test of time are those which permit their adaptation to strongly changing realities without losing their morphological identity. "The life of buildings" is manifested by the permanence of their most formal characteristic features. They also acquire autonomy once constructed, dissociated from the authorship of the architect. The key lies in the principles established within the construction of the building. If they are clearly defined, if they result to be sufficiently solid, the building can absorb transformations, changes and distortions, while remaining fundamentally what it was, maintaining its origins and remaining constant throughout the passage of time, despite different interventions.

Given this reality we have to question whether it makes sense to continue talking about 'programme' in architecture. These examples demonstrate that if the buildings have a sufficiently clear structural order, it is the activities that adapt to them, and not vice versa. Therefore, what sense is there in saying that form should follow function? Are we not before the fact that it is the functions that have adapted to the existing forms? Moreover, many of these cases explain that these buildings have not only known one change of use, but different ones; therefore, they have had the ability to contain activities of very different natures without losing their attributes.

3 CONNECTIVITY

The new activities introduced in a fragmented manner within the distinct parts of these complexes do not usually occupy the whole of the spaces. Their presence and importance in the enclosure is not the one that their primal functions had in their origin. This allows greater permeability, especially on ground floors, in arcaded or open spaces such as courtyards, cloisters, gardens or interior passages, giving way to new opportunities of connectivity and collectivity.

The availability of these recovered capillary spaces gives rise to the establishment of alternative urban routes, facilitating pedestrian pathways that oxygenate the promenade, thus avoiding an obligated walk along the perimeter roads polluted by traffic. A paradigmatic case is that of the *Hospital of the Santa Creu*, which currently houses the Library of Catalonia, the Massana School, the District Library and other municipal offices and exhibition centres. The enclosure is accessed via a pedestrian walkway from *Carmen Street*, and under a wide covered section from *Hospital Street*. This has allowed this open interior formed by a string of paved courtyards and gardens that connect two of the main streets perpendicular to the *Rambla de les Flors* to be converted into a sort of oasis in the Raval district. The lateral wings of the original cloisters function as covered walkways and places to relax, complementing the central fountain and vegetation; and the majestic staircases that lead to the current Library of Catalonia, punctually turn into privileged seats from which to contemplate the historic complex.

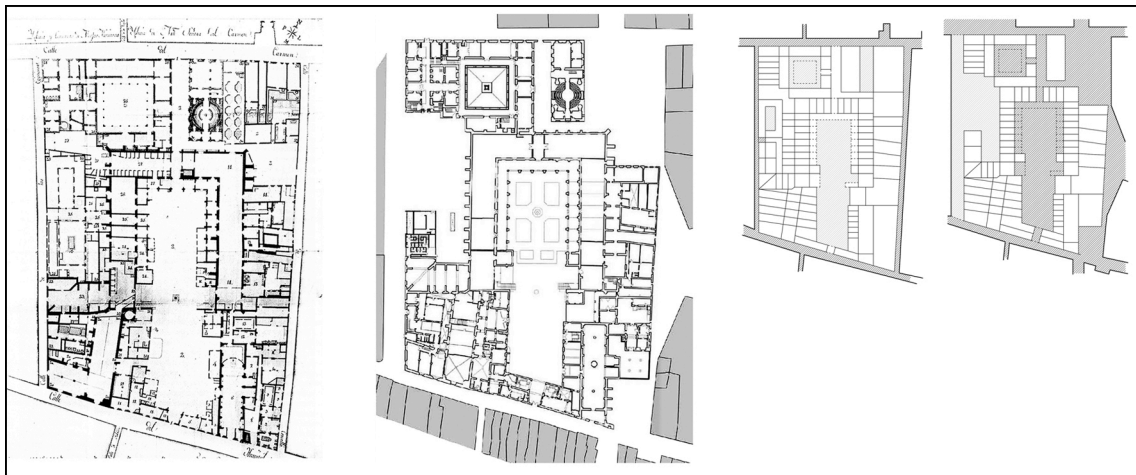


Figure 3. Hospital of Barcelona: medic and library functions. Past private vs. current public space.

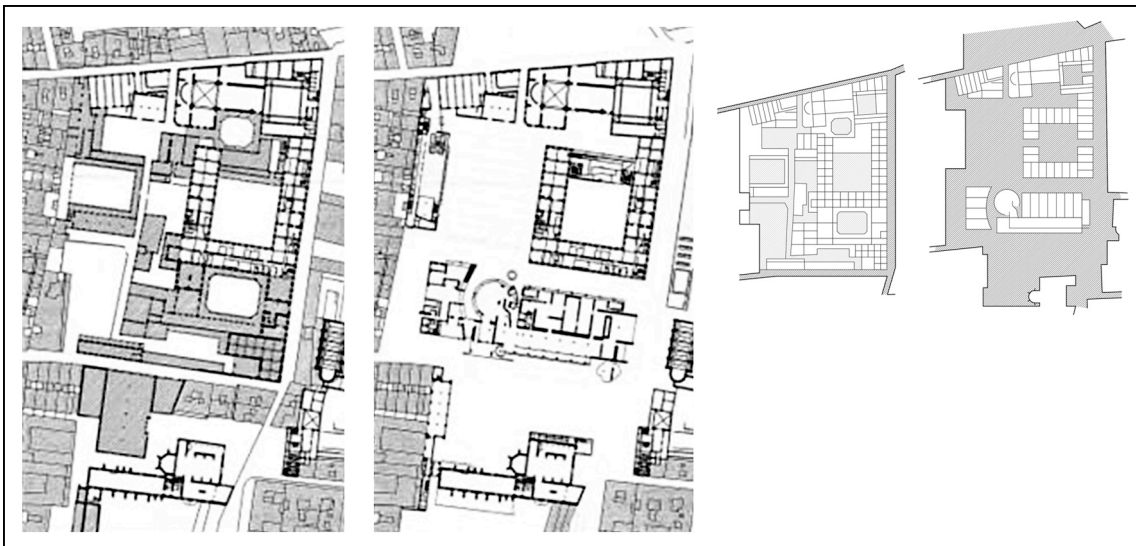


Figure 4. House of Charity: charity and cultural functions. Past private vs. current public space.

Another good example is the old complex of the *House of Charity*, also in the Raval district of Barcelona. In it old buildings coexist, such as the one occupied by the Centre of Contemporary Culture of Barcelona (CCCB) or the old theatre converted into a multipurpose venue room, and the late twentieth century buildings, such as the Contemporary Art Museum of Barcelona (MACBA) and the Faculty of Information Sciences at the Ramon Llull University. The interior of the complex can be accessed on foot from *Montealegre Street*, *Angels Square* or *Valldonzella*

Street. Covered walkways, doorways or passages between buildings are the mechanisms that connect the programmes of the various institutions with the two large interior open spaces: the courtyard of the *Dones* and the garden of *Joan Corominas*.

The transiting of these recovered 'public' spaces is closely linked to the accompanying buildings, making it impossible to understand, perceive or visit them without the architectural values that make them possible. Their material, scale, environmental or heritage quality are determined by the arrangement of the buildings that surround them and contribute to their structure. Buildings and public space act together, rather than independently, interlacing their functions in mutual benefit or exchanging activities with associated schemes.

Outdoor cinema in the *Courtyard of the Dones of the CCCB*, Summer concerts in the courtyard of the *Hospital of the Santa Creu*, festivities related to the Chocolate Museum in the old cloister of *Sant Agustí* or children's activities in the *Llimona Courtyard* are some examples of the community recreational activities that take possession of the environment, using the surrounding architecture as a privileged backdrop for their representation. Ephemeral functions and reversible events, which reinvent these enclosures through the mere fact of just taking advantage of them for public use, their nature approaching more that of the agora, -or meeting place- to that of a confined precinct or something untouchable or sacred.

The complexity of the city is reflected in the historical availability of these areas: coexistence of uses and ages, nature and artifice, or the past and present which form part of its attributes. Urban intelligence lies in cultivating the culture of the use of these disused buildings in order to amortize them satisfactorily for their own good, as well as also improving the conditions of their immediate surroundings. The architectural and urban heritage thus become community settings by creating a number of complementary relationships that convert these complexes into neighbourhood catalysts, cross linking the various scales of action in the city..

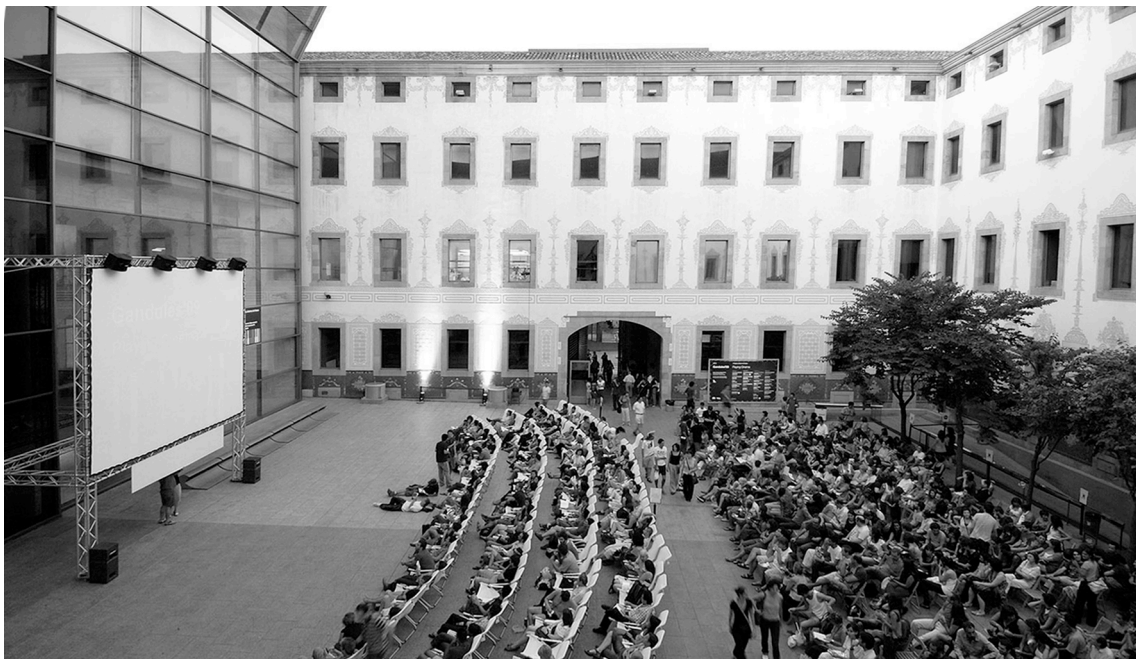


Figure 5. Outdoor cinema in the *Courtyard of the Dones of the CCCB*.

4 INCLUSION

This inclusive way of proceeding is at odds with some operations that have been undertaken in Barcelona. Hygienist operations, clearly positivistic, in order to improve the conditions of very dense and degraded areas which have drawn out straight lines to open avenues, boulevards or streets with generous widths. Barcelona has significant examples of this throughout its history:

the *Ferran* and *Princesa* Streets, the *Via Laietana* and the *Cathedral Avenue*, or the recent openings of the *Rambla del Raval* and *Pou de la Figuera* Street (popularly known as 'Hole of Shame').

However, in order to oxygenate certain zones of the city there are alternatives to the mere hygienist opening of straight lines. With the aforementioned examples it is demonstrated that some architectures may be subject, in the words of Richard Sennett, to a 'dynamic repair' that include them in the urban space, at the same time that they are destined for the public use of the citizens. These 'mending' operations contain the architectural, landscape and human scale, they are adaptable and reversible like platforms where activities can take place both inside and outside, representing operations without complexes of modern aestheticisms which are inclusive for the fact that they gather constructive elements of different eras, thus advocating the culture of 're-use'.

Far from the open linearity as the result of Baroque Urbanism and its adaptation to modernity, some areas of the city can admit 'closed architectural effects': *geschlossenes Architecturbild*, in the words of Camillo Sitte. This Austrian architect of the second half of the nineteenth century speaks of a more binding concatenation between facilities and urban enclaves through the generation of beauty and rhythm. By means of displaced axis, curving streets, surprising discoveries, guarded steps, the presence of vegetation or the incorporation of water, spatial effects are produced in the urban fabric, which provide privacy thanks to their relative enclosure. Concepts, which are not too distant to the definition, stated by Louis I. Kahn in 1971, used to describe the street as a 'community room' whose 'roof is the sky'.

Is this not precisely what some of these Barcelona enclosures offer? Is it not also what could be offered by others which are shut down, underutilized, or about to be knocked down nowadays?

Architecture, via these enclaves is not limited to be defined as 'the art of building' that serves a determined programme, but transcends the established and demonstrates the power of its versatility. The architectural discipline finds another meaning in this functional questioning of spaces, demonstrating that the collective and community life within, between and outside buildings continues to evolve, adapting to and colonizing the city.

This leads to a reflection over the complex reuse of cities, especially regarding the renovation policy of 'old' buildings. If the aim is for them to become part of the city's heritage, new uses and functions must necessarily be linked to the public space of the adjacent streets and squares, by extending in this manner the regeneration to the rest of the urban sector and, incidentally, the whole of the city.

If we look at the general plan of Barcelona, we see that the situation of these enclosures is quite homogeneous. These pores, holes or lungs which may appear as green spots within the grey asphalt, should continue to be contaminated by architecture; they must continue living through the decades or centuries of history that keep them standing, awaiting that present day uses add on to the old ones and waiting for future uses to join the present ones, serving in a permanent and fluid manner the interests of the city and society's use, contributing to coexistence and allowing to enjoy common history.

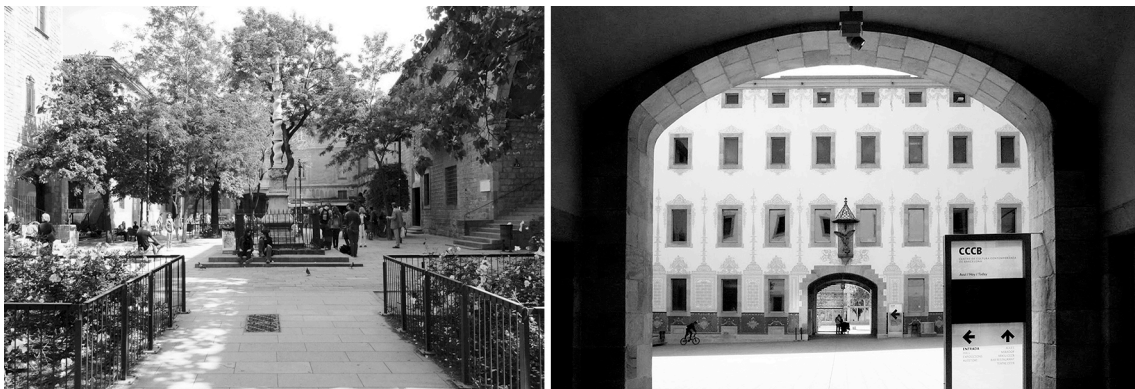


Figure 6. Public passages through Hospital and Charity House complexes.

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