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# The Evolution of the “Barcelona Model”: Identity and Urban Regeneration

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**Abstract**

The quality of the major urban undertakings that have been carried out in Barcelona since the 1980's have resulted in innovative and successful changes, transforming the city into a model for urban intervention, to such an extent that the concept of the "Barcelona model" started being regarded as an example of urban development to follow, leading to the implementation of similar urban planning and economic regeneration models in other cities.

Although, in principle, the citizens were at the heart of the project, together with their demands, needs, rights and spaces, in the years immediately after the Olympic Games (1992), this urban planning model suffered a major distortion.

The decision that resulted in a checkmate to the "model" and, therefore, to a change in direction, came up in 1997 with the approval of the Plan designed by the Hines group for Diagonal Mar. (Montaner, Álvarez, & Muix, 2012: 15) Years later, it was consolidated with the organization of the *Fórum Universal de las Culturas* (2004), at a time when the Catalan city accepted a globalized urban planning rationale, offering the best locations in the city for sale and overshadowing the architectural virtuosity that had allowed it to preserve its own identity until that point.

With this paper we intend to reflect on the urban management model that has been developed in the city of Barcelona since the 1980's until the present day. That model, as a consequence of a globalized economy, has resulted in different processes which have standardized the new urban interventions carried out in the city, often led by international studios that tend to generate spaces with no identity.



### **The Evolution of the “Barcelona Model”: Identity and Urban Regeneration.**

An analysis of the urban transformation occurred in Barcelona over the last three decades allows us to realize that the various processes focused on the “restructuring” of some of its areas were mainly the result of the impetus provided by major international events (Olympic Games 1992, *Forum Universal de las Culturas 2004*), promoted by the *Ajuntament* and used as instruments for the regeneration of the city and its image.

The ambition shown by Barcelona while seeking to become a worldwide recognized “trademark”, by means of its unrelenting reinvention, ended up involving primarily architects from the so-called international “star system”.

Among the problem areas associated with this debate, the Barcelona model seems to raise two main questions:

How much of the “Catalonian character” has Barcelona managed to preserve in the structures designed to become the tangible signs of its development?

Have its identifying elements remained simply as symbols of the glorious past of a city that is now solely looking towards and searching for “global models”?

In a recent interview, during the 2015 Universal Exhibition in Milan, the Swiss architect Mario Motta said:

*[...]Oggi anche l'architetto è cittadino del mondo. Si confronta con tutto il mondo e subisce le influenze delle notizie, dei fatti globali e ne viene condizionato quotidianamente. L'architettura risente di questa attitudine perché, dai primordi, è un'attività legata a luogo che è sempre un unicum, uno spazio fisico, un sito dove l'architettura entra a far parte della storia propria di quel luogo e non del mondo intero. Da qui la contraddizione dell'architettura contemporanea che assorbe i modelli globali ma parla e si esprime in una realtà sociale e culturale legata a un luogo in cui viene costruita. (D'Ambrosi, 2015)*

There can be no denying that the transformation of the city involves the transvaluation of its social components, creating a more fragmented reality whose overall picture is rather easily put together: a large share of the residents have already accepted to become mere “city users”; others do not adjust to the aforementioned model and demand an urban planning policy that is sensitive to society; another category is composed of immigrants of the most varied origins who claim their own right to be given more public, cultural and symbolic space; finally the tourists, of course, daily residents who consume the city as if it were a theme park.

In this respect, the geographer David Harvey gave his opinion in 2005, based on a detailed analysis of the urban model of Barcelona, a city that, according to him, is now dedicated to the privatization of the signs of its identity:

*El seu irresistible atractiu deixa una empremta de mercantilització multinacional cada vegada més homogeneïtzadora. Les últimes fases d'urbanització de la zona portuària semblen exactament iguals a qualssevol altres del món occidental. La increïble congestió del trànsit provoca pressions a favor de construir bulevards que travessen determinades zones de la part antiga de la ciutat. Les grans botigues multinacionals substitueixen les botigues locals. La renovació d'antics barris obrers provoca el desplaçament d'antigues poblacions residencials i destrueix el teixit urbà anterior. I Barcelona perd algunes de les seves marques de distinció. Fins i tot es produeixen símptomes gens subtils de disneyficació. Aquesta contradicció està marcada per alguns interrogants: Quina memòria col·lectiva se celebra a Barcelona? La dels anarquistes, com els icarians, que van exercir un important paper en la història de Barcelona? La dels republicans que van combatre amb tanta feresa contra Franco? La dels nacionalistes catalans, la dels immigrants andalusos, o la d'un antic aliat de Franco com Samaranch? Quina estètica és la que de debò compta? La dels tremendament vigorosos arquitectes de Barcelona, com Bohigas? Per què acceptar qualsevol tipus de disneyficació?. (Harvey & Smith, 2005: 49)*

**Figura 1. Torre Agbar - Plaça de les Glòries Catalanes, Barcelona**



@Pietro Viscomi 2008

### **Barcelona between preservation and modernization: the virtuous process of regeneration of public spaces in the 20th century.**

In the second half of the 19th century, in Catalonia, the search for elements of the local architectural tradition was aimed, as stated in the text *En busca d'una arquitectura nacional* by Lluís Domènech i Montaner, at the theoretical definition of a Catalanian national architecture (Domènech i Montaner, 1878:153); on the other hand, experimentation was limited to the issue of residential typology within the scope of the new urban design introduced by *Plan Cerdà*. So, while, on the one hand, the search for a “national style” did not lead to the definition of stylistic rules that had to be complied with, on the other hand, experimentation produced a series of architectural experiments that, in different ways and shapes, contributed renovate the Catalanian architecture. The result was an aesthetic whose poetic value lied in the capacity of the architectural works to combine functional aspects with formal aspects, which symbolically expressed reflections on the relationship between Man and nature, life and death, public space and public sphere; these peculiarities characterize a style that, in those years, spread across the entire Iberian peninsula, but was mainly recognised in Catalonia: the Modernist architecture.

Antoni Gaudí, Lluís Domènech i Montaner and Josep Puig i Cadafalch were the architects who designed those which are currently regarded as the most representative works of Barcelona's modernist architecture. In a block on *Passeig de Gràcia*, known as *Manzana de la discordia*, we find three different interpretations, namely Casa Batllò, Casa Lleó Morera and Casa Amatller, respectively.

The aforementioned architects worked in an atmosphere of cultural fervour, introduced by the “political *catalanisme*”, a fully-fledged cultural driving force for the promotion of the candidacy of Barcelona for the 1888 Universal Exhibition, the first major event held in the city a few decades after the approval of *Plan Cerdà*.

In 1929 Barcelona hosted the international event for the second time and, on that occasion, the Expo became a showcase of the city's avant-garde aspirations, an instrument of propaganda for asserting a new image of progress and modernity, *una ciutat moderna, con rasgos de “capitalidad”* (Monclús & Monclús Fraga, 2006 : 48), in short, it was an opportunity to design the Barcelona of the future.

In a subsequent period, we need to consider *Plan Macià* (1934), an interesting urban planning proposal which reflects the rationalist experiment that had brought Catalonia closer to Le Corbusier. The *Plan*, created by the Swiss-French architect together with the Gacpac group, was proposed to the President of the *Generalitat* of Catalonia during a visit the former made in March 1932 (to prepare the IV CIAM congress), and Le Corbusier himself stated:

*Expuse mis tesis, mi admiración por la ciudad de Barcelona – lugar geográfico obligado de una capital y esplendor natural conjugados – la intensidad de esta ciudad, la juventud de espíritu de sus gobernantes, permitan todas las esperanzas: en fin, un punto viviente de la tierra, donde los tiempos modernos encontraron asilo. (Le Corbusier citado por Torres y Tarragó, 1980: 68)*

The development of the proposal led to a detachment from the doctrine and the words of its mentor (Alvarez, 2010:175), and the author of that partial transformation was J.L.Sert, who also raised several doubts regarding the feasibility of *Plan Macià*, as an expert on both Le Corbusier's works and his Utopias, but also aware of the internal and economic problems of the *Generalitat de Catalunya* (Alvarez, 2010:176). Those problems, together with a strong political disagreement (Tarragó Cid, 1972: 35-36) and the outbreak of the civil war (Pujol i Estragués, 1997: 96) hindered the implementation of the *Plan*.

From the 1950's onwards, due to the need to meet the growing housing demand in a short period of time, there was a process of uncontrolled urban growth. It is a period in which Spain experienced a strong economic development that set Barcelona as a target for internal and international migration. In that context, an emerging group of architects, Grupo R – integrating Bohigas, Coderch, Valls, Martorell, Gili, Sostres, among others – laid the foundations for a radical cultural renovation that invested in architectural production and in the architectural profession itself. However, it was after the death of Francisco Franco, in 1975, that the concept of urban design started having a visible expression. Indeed, the new democratic Constitution was approved three years later and the local autonomies started to gradually assert themselves. Therefore, Barcelona's public authorities, with the *Ajuntament* at the forefront, together with the *Generalitat de Catalunya*, inaugurated an era of flourishing architectural and urban planning activity in order to provide the city with the public spaces that had been disregarded during the years of the great urban expansion.

In 1979, the first democratically-elected mayor, Narcis Serra, had to deal with the difficult task of transforming an urban reality that, in some cases, was particularly challenging in what regarded both the urban planning and the social aspects. The foundation that could underpin this transformation was the General Metropolitan Plan (PGM), approved three years earlier, when the process of transition from the Francoist regime to democracy was in full swing, given the need to correct the “urban irrationality” of the preceding decades.

The programs focused on a new sensitivity towards antiquity gave a greater weight to the historical factor, turning to the recovery of the *Ciutat Vella*, through the implementation of projects to regenerate degraded areas. From a purely technical point of view, the works carried out during these years reflected a design methodology based on placing architecture,

landscape, sculpture and urban furniture at the same hierarchical level. Therefore, the task of urban regeneration was not entrusted only to architecture, but to all the arts commonly known as applied arts, in order to achieve, drawing on Modernism, a disciplinary merger. The first major work of this period was the extension of the ETSAB (Barcelona School of Architecture) in 1978, designed by the architect Josep Antoni Corderch, who had the merit of contributing, from the 1950's onwards, to a greater extent than his colleagues, to increase the architectural quality of Barcelona.

Then we get to the early 1980's. The first significant public interventions in this period were the opening of major spaces such as *Plaza de los Países Catalanes*, *Parque de la España industrial*, and *Parque de la Creueta del Coll*. Those projects were mainly focused on creating a concept of public space different from the traditional one, based on an interaction between sculptures, urban furniture, architectural and landscape elements, which gave rise to different spaces with an extremely harmonious, all-encompassing unity.

However, the last works of the decade were already a prelude to one of the most important urban and architectural transformations in the history of Barcelona: the urban renovation program for the 1992 Olympic Games.

### **The Barcelona model**

The Olympic project began in far-off 1980, when Narcís Serra and Joan Antoni Samaranch, the then newly-appointed president of the IOC, addressed the issue for the first time (Moragas i Spà & Botella, 2002: 21), both determined to accept the challenge despite the opposition of the majority of the public authorities and the representatives of the Spanish sports institutions, which disliked the idea. Barcelona was emerging from a period of transition during which the priority had certainly not been the city itself, but rather the political commitment to build a solid democracy and assert the Catalanian autonomy. At that time, Barcelona had a metropolitan area with more than three million inhabitants, was the capital of one of the most popular tourist regions in Europe and the most developed Spanish community from the industrial and economic point of view. With this potential, it is hardly surprising that Pasqual Maragall, the then mayor of the city, when asked what the main objectives of the olympic project were, invariably replied: *Posar la ciutat en el mapa!* The mayor was talking about the maps of the major international tourist routes, alluding to the fact that the Catalanian capital should recover the position in the global context which it had enjoyed at other times in history (Truñó, 2002:77).

Thus, since the beginning, the idea was to take advantage of the Olympic Games as a driving force for modernization and for urban, social and economic development (Truñó, 2002:79). To this end, the Olympics were used to catalyse the huge investments

that the city needed to pursue the renovation of many of its districts and to improve its cultural and leisure infrastructures, from the tourist and fashion industries to the museum systems and networks. A redefinition of the image of Barcelona based on a strong visual identity, intended to turn it into a worldwide recognized “trademark”, into an avant-guard, cosmopolitan city. This image would be designed in a context that where old and new, tradition and contemporary creation could coexist on a daily basis.

In accordance with this expression of will, in addition to the services required to host the event, the *Ajuntament* of Barcelona, under the coordination of Oriol Bohigas, promoted an impressive number of urban interventions, implementing a thorough process of “urban acupuncture” which included 146 new representative structures and public spaces, homogenously distributed across the existing urban fabric and aimed mainly at the revitalisation of entire areas (Bocquet, De Pieri, & Infusino, 2006: 118). The city was involved in the audacious challenge through the construction of buildings designed by world-renowned architects. Many of the architects who participated in the renovation of the city were Spanish, but the programmatically cosmopolitan spirit that drove the project favoured heterogeneity (Illas, 2012:147) and, consequently, in only five years, a number of works were commissioned to a conspicuous group of architects from the international “star system” - Santiago Calatrava (Bac de Roda Bridge), Gae Aulenti (renovation of the MNAC), Vittorio Gregotti (collaboration in the renovation and extension of the Lluís Companys Olympic Stadium), Arata Isozaki (San Jordi Pavillion), Norman Foster (Collserola Telecommunications Tower), Richard Meier (MACBA), Rafael Moneo (Municipal Auditorium), Alvaro Siza (Meteorological Center in the Olympic Village), in addition to private commissions to SOM and Frank O. Gehry (Hotel Art and Fish sculpture). To all these architectural works we should add a long list of commissions to sculptors, aimed at providing many public spaces with major contemporary art works. In that regard, Maria Ángeles Layuno Rosas argues that after 1975, and particularly with the new Spanish Constitution, there was a greater autonomy when it came to making decisions at the local level, which favoured the development of the cultural industries via the construction of new modern buildings (Cámara, 2007: 217).

*Uno de los factores claves para comprender el ímpetu de estos proyectos culturales consiste en algunos casos en la redefinición de la imagen de la ciudad como un asunto de prestigio político y de estrategia económica. Los efectos económicos se centran en atraer las inversiones mediante la introducción de un museo, con lo cual se ejerce una influencia en la regeneración física y económica de un área o una ciudad. (Layuno Rosas, 2002: 13)*

However, the lack of funds that followed the investments for the Olympic Games determined a considerable reduction in the number of interventions aimed at developing the city. The post-Olympic Barcelona witnessed a sort of “crisis” of the old “architectural firm”, which resulted in the division (or even in the complete disappearance) of many architectural studios that were the protagonists of the city’s architectural and urban planning scene. This happened both due to a decreasing number of public commissions and due to an overall loss of enthusiasm.

### **The disjointed shapes of the post-Olympic Barcelona**

The stagnation witnessed after 1992 was only interrupted in the first years of the new millenium when there was a new initiative in which Barcelona could invest to get back in the game: the *Forum Universal de las Culturas 2004*. A world-renowned event, accompanied by a major urban planning operation, characterized by a heterogeneous set of projects to be developed in an area of more than 75 hectares (*el recinto del Fórum*) at the border between the municipalities of Barcellona and Sant Adrià de Besós (UNESCO, 1997: 8), in the North-East area of the city. One of the main objectives was to carry out actions to regenerate the existing districts and integrate a wide range of spaces for urban use, by means of the construction of new infrastructures, namely in *Parque de Sant Andreu*, *Parque de Diagonal Mar* and *Can Zam*, areas adjacent to the *recinto del Fórum*.

The reference model for the city changed substantially; the “Barcelona of the Forum” came across as something completely different from the Olympic Barcelona, and the Catalanian city accepted a globalized, or rather globalizing, form of planning, which was the most direct consequence of the organization of the *Forum Universal de las Culturas*. The interventions and the urban planning rationale were no longer inspired by a strategic decision that placed urban balance and the citizens together with their needs at the heart of the project, and thus:

[...] *Especialmente en el área del Fòrum 2004 y en la Plaça de les Glòries, es un urbanismo parcial y fragmentario, hecho mucho más de objetos autónomos firmados por arquitectos globales ... Se trata de un urbanismo opaco, que no se negocia abiertamente, que no sale a la luz pública hasta que todo está decidido. Mientras tanto, este urbanismo difuso, fragmentario e inacabado ex profesamente, continuamente va variando la definición de sus piezas sin ninguna razón que se pueda explicar.* (Montaner Martorell & Muxí Martínez, 2002: 263-264)

This new situation results from the fact that, in the “Barcelona of the Forum”, it is the private initiative that controls the real estate market and encourages the consolidation of a dispersed urban fabric, without a global vision for the city; the space is focused on an autistic shape, built ex-novo, without tradition, which is even confusing and chaotic. The architect Juli Capella, former president of the FAD (*Foment de les Arts Decoratives*) in a non-distant 2007, said:

*[...] Amb el Fòrum.. hi ha hagut una baixada de qualitat en els encàrrecs. Diuen que Diagonal Mar és la Manhattan de Barcelona... Tant de bo! És un lloc on les torres ‘suren’ i no funcionen com a conjunt, on hi ha jardins tancats sense carrers ni comerços. Quant al pla urbanístic del Fòrum, és evident que no ha acabat de funcionar. (Fontova, 2008: 15).*

**Figura 2. Hotel W Barcelona, Barcelona. @ Pietro Viscomi 2008.**



Furthermore, in parallel to the works for the *Fórum Universal de las Culturas 2004*, in 2000 the *Ajuntament* approved *Plan 22@Barcelona*, which is configured as an urban regeneration project, based on the transformation of an area of 200 hectares, with a

predominantly industrial nature, in the center of Barcelona. It is a response to the need to recover the economic and social dynamism of *Poblenou*, in order to turn it into a scientific, technological and cultural “platform”, whose production facilities coexist with private residences, as well as with research, training and technology transmission centers,

[...] *El projecte 22@Barcelona contribueix a resoldre els dèficits històrics del barri i estableix un model urbà compacte, divers i sostenible, que permet obtenir una ciutat més cohesionada, equilibrada i amb més força econòmica.* (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2008: 3)

However, this issue gives rise to objections among numerous scholars and urban planners, and indeed among the population itself, which feels deprived of the historical roots of an industrial past which was the sustenance of district until a few decades ago, and alien in an urban context that is completely changed and that it no longer recognises as its own.

Authors such as Josep Maria Montaner, Jorge Ribalt, Maria Rubert de Ventós, Juli Capella, consider that the Catalan institutions, with the *Ajuntament* of Barcelona at the forefront, have committed the error of being superficial while considering these issues, creating an ever increasing gap between the citizens and the Administration. Juli Capella’s advice in this regard is all but negligible:

*Barcelona ha d'arriscar-se i fer-se una certa autocrítica per renèixer de les seves cendres. No és vergonyós reconèixer els errors, ni creure que l'orgull de Barcelona és immaculat. On jo crec que el model hauria d'haver evolucionat és cap a la participació. No pot ser que a la Barcelona del segle XXI decideixin primer els privats, després l'Ajuntament, i els veïns, res. El 'model Barcelona' era genuí i ara és internacionalista, amb fórmules estàndard. Hauria, però, de ser més participatiu, perquè l'urbanisme ha de fer-se mitjançant el diàleg i no pas a dit. El nou model s'hauria de fer amb participació i diàleg amb la gent, amb tots els agents implicats. Només així faran seves les propostes col·lectives.* (Fontova, 2008: 18).

From the point of view of dialogue and popular participation, the projects for Forum 2004 and *22@Barcelona* have many similarities: the *Forum Universal de las Culturas 2004* has been considered a failure at the cultural level and, above all, at the political level (Mazza, 2012: 55); what draws our attention is the bizarre nature of the design of the whole area, the extremely high concentration of services from the tertiary sector and extra-luxury hotels: a real estate operation based on image and marketing, the expression of a city that was focused exclusively on the dynamics of globalization. On the other hand, as regards

22@Barcelona, those who took control of its management were not concerned with citizen participation and, therefore, the urban renovation and regeneration project became the ideal ground to test, resorting to the most famous names in the world of architecture, the greatness of the companies and private investors in general, which believed in this program, eager to achieve a high level of international fame, naturally using Barcelona as a showcase open to the world.

*Ciudad Condal* has a very long list of completed, under construction or soon to be completed projects, whose protagonists range from the American real estate management firm Hines to Richard Rogers Partnership, from Jean Nouvel to Arata Isozaki, from Perrault and David Chipperfield to Herzog & de Meuron, Zaha Hadid, Frank O. Gehry and Toyo Ito, all from the international “star system”. In that respect, Borja emphasizes how this architecture is damaging Barcelona’s identity:

*[...]Las arquitecturas urbanas pueden ser ciudadanas o “urbanicidas”. Los grandes equipamientos, las infraestructuras de comunicaciones, los nuevos proyectos urbanos, que todavía en la actualidad están regidos por el mercantilismo, el miedo, la ostentación y las modas o se realizan en nombre de la rentabilidad y los prejuicios sobre la demanda, fracturan el tejido urbano y segregan poblaciones y actividades, imponen comportamientos de usuarios o clientes y favorecen el anonimato y la anomia social. (Borja, 2005:48)*

Its isolated blocks, which are often located along the streets of 22@ or *Diagonal Mar* and the Forum area, do not create collective spaces, but “voids” used as parking spaces or private areas; they do not create any sort of urban fabric, but ruptures or discontinuities that do not favour social life, but rather anonymity.

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