BARCELONA: TOWARDS A NEW URBAN PLANNING APPROACH*  

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In public urban spaces, squares, streets, and gardens constitute the backbone of any city, and not only of the Mediterranean one.

During the initial phase of Barcelona’s urban transformation, immediately after the proclamation of democracy, there was a great deal of confidence in the positive effects of new public spaces. More than one hundred and forty urban spaces were designed over the seven-year period (1981–1988), which clearly contributed to an intense renovation of Barcelona’s urban landscape, as well as to the revitalization of its urban identity.

Those urban projects, almost all of which were at a small scale, had a transforming effect beyond their immediate environment, in that they formed part of a broader urban project. This model of urban transformation, in which large-scale changes and substantial objectives are obtained on the basis of numerous small and individual strategically situated interventions, has been labeled ‘Urban Acupuncture’. More than 140 urban public spaces have been designed and built during these seven years, and not only that Barcelona changed its urban landscape, but it reinforced its identity and became an international laboratory for urban design.

These new squares had to be both structural and significant: besides resolving functional and programmatic shortcomings, they had to establish symbols of the new era. In order to guarantee this dual structural prerequisite, the new projects were designed as whole entities by interdisciplinary teams made up of civil engineers, architects, and artists, who did not confine themselves to merely decorating, but rather to safeguard the universal character of the new squares.

Even though the transformation of urban spaces was highly efficient, new urban projects and infrastructural interventions on a larger scale were needed. In addition to complying with sporting requirements, the Barcelona 92 Olympic Project was the catalyst for a larger scale urban project, one that was able to stimulate a global urban transformation on the basis of three principal considerations:

An infrastructural operation that involved the construction of ring roads (40km), and the setting up of a new telecommunications system such as two towers and a new telephone and fiber-optics network.

An operation for improving the run-down of peripheral zones. The four Olympic areas (Montjuïc, Diagonal, Vall d’Hebron, Olympic Village), all connected by the ring roads, were not located in the centre of the city, but in the unfinished outlying areas of the low urban quality.

A change in orientation for the growth and development of the city. With the projects in the Plaça de les Glòries and the road infrastructure, the way was paved for future development toward the North-East, while traditionally it had always been towards the West. In this sense, the most socially conspicuous action of the Olympic project was to locate the Olympic Village next to the sea.

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which revamped the entire seafront. In a parallel way to the Olympic transformation Barcelona had designed a new policy to improve the "historical central area" too.

The urban effects of the Olympic project did not end with the Olympic Games in 1992. On the contrary, Barcelona's international positioning as a result of the event's success, the construction of substantial cultural infrastructures (Catalonian Museum of Art, Auditorium, National Theatre, Contemporary Art Museum, etc.) and the restructuring of the historic commercial port into an urban space resulted in Barcelona's transformation into a first-rank tourist destination.

Before the 1990s, Barcelona had already begun to feel the effects of the crisis and of the industrial relocation. Even though this new tourism activity has been improving the economic situation, it has still been necessary to restructure the entire productive geography of the city from an industrial economy to a neo-tertiary one. From the perspective of urban development, the new urban projects, aimed at tertiarization, are focused, in a highly different way, on the deltas of the rivers Llobregat and Besòs.

**PROJECTS UNDERWAY**

On the Llobregat delta (SW) we find the large-scale transport and logistics operations (airport, port, logistical zone, and the Zona Franca Consortium), and closer to the centre, the new 'Barcelona Exhibition Area', where we find strong tertiary and residential developments, such as the Plaça Europa, the Legal City, Can Batlló, the new Marina district, Portal de la Fira, the 38 district, etc.

On the Besòs delta (NE), the main element is the 22@BCN district. This is a 200 ha area that is earmarked to be the nucleus of a new tertiary technological district through the transformation of obsolete 19th century industrial buildings. The new district is structured in three different clusters towards the city: the Plaça de les Glòries in relation to the Eixample, the Fòrum Area which completes the new seafront, and the intermodal Sagrera station, on the basis of the new European, high-speed rail network.

These projects, of a clearly tertiary vocation, must assure the socio-economic viability of the city; however, if they are to be fully compatible with our urban identity, they must pay special attention to certain key issues:

- The increase in requirements for mobility by way of two types of actions; namely, the rationalization of public spaces based on a controlled parking system, and the extension of our metro, which will be doubled over the coming five years.

- The reuse of our industrial heritage for the new tertiary economy, setting a good balance between the maintenance of our historical identity and the architectural innovation of the new projects.

- The use of new building typologies that are capable of successfully combining hybrid programs on the same project, as well as a positive reflection on the conditions that the tower constructions in Barcelona have.

- The construction of new districts (one next to Sagrera and the other in Zona Franca) in order to significantly increase the amount of affordable housing.

**NEW STRATEGIC THINKING: PROVIDING AFFORDABLE HOUSING**

In the era of globalisation, the application of new technology to infrastructure ought to produce changes in urban planning culture and be based upon a transition from an industrial economy to a neo-tertiary one.

FIRE parameters (Finance, Insurance, Real State, and Enterprise) are necessary but insufficient conditions for fostering change and producing urban planning policies that are both economically and socially sustainable.
All developed cities suffer from widely similar environmental and socio-economic problems. The challenge lies in coming up with solutions that are tailored to each context rather than just trotting out generic solutions that tend to undermine each city’s potential and special character.

Contemporary urban planning needs a new ideological boost that is based on: (1) a more complex vision of cities as open systems; (2) a review of urban concentration that allows “critical mass” to be attained (urban densities need to be high enough to support multiple functions); (3) a new approach to urban planning capable of evaluating both material and intangible flows and exchanges.

This new urban planning needs to pay particular attention to housing, public urban spaces, and access. These concepts need to be re-invented and considered as key elements in any new approach.

Public housing, promoted by social-democratic societies in the first half of the 20th Century, wrought great changes in the urban fabric. However, after the Second World War, housing gradually became a “good” subject to market forces instead of a “right”. This trend has weakened urban planning because it has deprived it from one of its most important pillars. It has also led to grave social imbalances – young people and immigrants now find it almost impossible to buy a place of their own.

In large cities, soaring house prices are pushing out thousands of key workers to the suburb, which in turn threatens city-centre functions. Housing is the best yarn for weaving the urban fabric and producing cities worth living in.

New morphological, typological, and technological solutions need to be sought and implemented to meet the challenges posed by longer life expectancy, smaller families, and new lifestyles (many of which have been spawned by the ICT revolution, distance-working and the “home office” are prime examples). In this respect, most of the housing projects undertaken over the last few years have failed to serve either the broader public interest or to take the wider urban context into account.

Massive house-building programmes, even where they produce high-quality dwellings, do not in themselves constitute a new approach to planning. What is required is urban public space that is complex and properly planned, capable of incorporating new inter-cultural flows, and which facilitates new forms of communication and collective expression.

Public housing and spaces are the main argument for re-considering urban planning in today’s fast-changing world. Any new approach must ensure that city-dwellers enjoy non-discriminatory access (both physical and to opportunities in general). Failure to provide such access will undoubtedly spawn future social conflicts.

It might do some of our architecture faculties a power of good if they were to scrap some of their projects for contemporary art museums (and the like) and take a long, hard look at public housing. I firmly believe that the European combination of public housing – urban spaces – accessibility is the only way to prevent social disintegration and urban blight.

This shared, deep-seated conviction lies behind our plans to build a hundred thousand new houses in Barcelona (fig.2). The plans are part of a series of urban schemes based on a cluster approach.

THE BARCELONA EXPERIENCE:
PRIME QUALITY OF PUBLIC SPACE

For the past 25 years, Barcelona has gained recognition as an authentic urban design laboratory in its urban-planning efforts.

Fig. 3. Project of covering the rails at the Sants district. Barcelona Regional. 2005

Fig. 4. The Fórum, a major brown field transformation. Barcelona Regional. 1998-2003
Since the 80s, quality of urban space has been the touchstone for the transformation of the city, beginning with the creation of gardens, squares and streets. A current example of these subtle but powerful interventions that create public space of a high quality without a major transformation of the urban fabric layout is the intervention in the Sants District designed by Barcelona Regional and currently underway. (Fig. 3)

The scar left by the rail lines that harshly divide the Sants district will be covered over with a park that acts as a connection between otherwise two separate urban fabrics. The goal is to keep most of the rail lines while creating a high-quality urban space. Accessibility of the entire district will be improved and the arrival of the high speed train to the Sants station will make it a strong city hub.

An example of a project that goes far beyond the domestic scale in Barcelona is the transformation of the Fórum area where the Universal Forum of Cultures 2004 was held. The Forum area was a major brown-field and contained many service facilities for the city such as a major sewage plant. It was transformed without relocating its facilities, by updating them through state of the art technology.

On the 2.5 km of coastline towards north to the Besòs River, “Fórum”, the most important urban project of the city was developed to complete the transformation of the seashore, and its first stage was the Villa Olímpica.

Diagonal Avenue finally reaches the sea by way of a large esplanade which covers infrastructures and facilities.

The new Rambla de la Mina district shapes the construction of the all-new International Convention Center, university campus, and residential complex which will contribute to the regeneration and improvement of this formerly at-risk neighbourhood. Beaches, parks and singular public spaces have thus been created.

PROJECTS UNDER WAY: STRONG NEW HOUSING EMPHASIS

Following is a capture of the current stage of the projects with a strong housing component that are on the working tables of our interdisciplinary teams and that are catalysts of Barcelona’s new urban geography. These projects are: A) the ongoing transformation of the 22@ district, B) the Gran Vía –Zona Franca new cluster, and C) the district boosted by the new Sagrera high speed train station.

A) 22@ - Glòries (fig. 5)

The old industrial fabric of the Poblenou district is being renovated and transformed by the 22@ Plan. Old industrial constructions are being turned into buildings geared to housing the activities of the new economy. This new technological district will encompass more than 4 million m2 of economic activity and 40,000 housing units.

The Plaça de les Glòries takes up a new central position that contrasts with the perception of this spot as a frontier between the consolidated Eixample and the industrial periphery of the city. Designed as a 16 hectares park, it will act...
as a hinge between the 22@ district and the Eixample and Ciutat Vella.

**B) Gran Via – Zona Franca (fig. 6)**

The southwest littoral of the city, stretching between the old port and the Llobregat River, encompasses the principal industrial and logistical zone of Barcelona and will become one of the main residential clusters for the city as stated above.

In addition to the port, the proximity to the airport of this area—which will act as an intercontinental hub on completion of its expansion and the new high-speed-train link—gives it strong potential to galvanize the economy of the metropolitan region.

Major urban projects are under way, including the new trade-fair site, the Ciutat Judicial (complex of legal institutions), the Plaça de Europa and the transformation of the Can Batlló site, and the development of the Marina district with over 10,000 housing units.

**C) Sagrera (fig.7)**

The Sagrera project creates a new urban centrality for Barcelona triggered by an innovative high speed train station layered on four different levels acting as an intermodal transport node. The station will not only become an important component of the whole public transport system but will also act as a catalyst for a new urban geography.

The buildings, housings, offices and hotels will constitute the largest tertiary cluster of the city. There will also be a large shopping center (over 120,000 m2) and offices (600,000 m2).

A linear park of over 3.5 km in length will serve as a spine for the 8,500 dwellings built on brown-field sites and will link two parts of the city historically separated from each other.

*Barcelona Regional. 2000-2006*