Introduction

1) Aims

It is always difficult to tackle the theme of popular architecture, particularly within the confines of a deliberately limited guide and even more so when dealing with a territory such as Girona, which possesses such a rich popular architectural heritage.

Aware that any selection can involuntarily lead to a folklorization or mythification of the chosen buildings, it is the author's intention that this work should be understood as a broad study of an architectonic and cultural phenomenon which, in turn, should be seen as a developing process rather than a set of formal results.

The work sets out to examine, basically, the way in which communities respond to given geographical and economic circumstances in terms of vernacular architecture, and to examine processes of formalization rooted in the social and economic structures of the country.

We can see, however, that vernacular architecture, based on an accumulation of experiences, development of models and a gradual purification of forms realized using traditional materials and techniques, has been checked in its development. The abnormal cultural conditions which have evolved over the years and the present-day innovations in construction media, transport and, above all, cultural communication, have left popular architecture in an unenviable position half-way between evolution and annihilation.

Be that as it may, this guide does not set out to pinpoint «masterpieces» —this would be the task of a similar work studying formal architecture— but rather to focus on the architectural and cultural phenomenon through an examination of its own generative process, since the solution to the problem of survival lies in the process rather than in the singularity.

This work proposes to offer the reader a range of buildings, from the oldest to the most modern and from the most modest to the most complex; urban complexes generated by community needs, and superimposed, spontaneous and «collage» architecture. The purpose is to give as exact a vision as possible of the evolutive process and to offer an alternative image of popular architecture in opposition to the usual aseptic restorations or interventions of an excessively «folkloric» kind.

2) The scope of the guide

Owing to the ambiguity of the term «popular» when applied to architecture, it is necessary here to set down a few explanatory notes in order to define the criteria used in the selection of examples for this guide.

The term «popular architecture» implies, rather than the anonymity of its creator, the preponderance of use and construction over the act of formal creation; that is to say: it is based on design processes which have been continued through time and which, though they by no means exclude acts of formalization, are limited to variations on and around already established models.

From rural dwellings, the fruit of a century-old evolutive process, to «naïve» structures and «bricolage» architecture, an almost limitless panorama of architectural forms opens before the eyes of the observer, each one of which doubtlessly contributes towards an understanding of the phenomenon as a whole.

For the purposes of this guide the following structures have been chosen:

1) Artificial structures which modify the landscape according to a specific function, be it to do with agriculture, livestock or mines, etc. These include, plots of tillable land (1), terraces, walls, fences, stone benches, bridges (2), ramps, stairways, fountains and other elements of a similar nature.

2) Minimal traditional architecture. This includes structures of small
    dimensions and of temporal use directly linked to land-cultivation,
    fishing or the rearing of livestock. The «barraques de vinya» (vinyard
    cabins), «botigues» (boat-sheds), and «corrals aïllats» (separate livestock
    enclosures) are all examples. These structures have remained in harmony
    with their surroundings, despite the transcourse of time, and offer
    the researcher vital information regarding the origins of many
    construction processes.
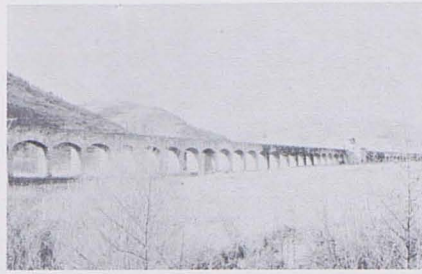
Barraca de vinya in the Alt Empordà

3) The architecture of traditional dwellings is, without doubt, the most
    important and the most complex. Based on the hypothesis that there
    are architectural features peculiar to each zone, this guide will attempt
    to show examples of each characteristic type. We find homesteads
    from the tenth century up until the present day; the majority correspond
    to the period between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries.
    The architecture of dwellings, whether detatched or built on to
    neighbouring structures, has to be seen in terms of two simultaneous
    processes in time: the persistence and evolution of traditional construction
    techniques and the «borrowing» of elements from formal architecture
    or other vernacular architectures (see photos A and B).
    These incidences function on two levels: they either substitute
    architectonic elements existing previously or are added to new structures.
    It is worth noting that whereas in formal architecture constructional
    errors are corrected in the planning stage, in popular architecture errors
    are ironed out over long periods of practice.
    The guide deals, basically, with those elements which could be considered
    prototypes of the architecture in different zones, and attempts, though
    not always successfully, to avoid pinpointing architectural singularities.

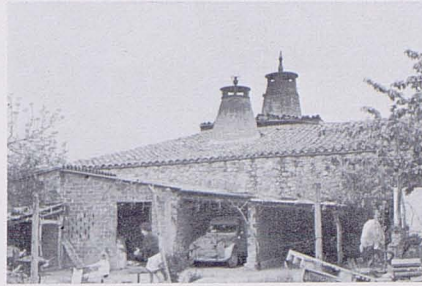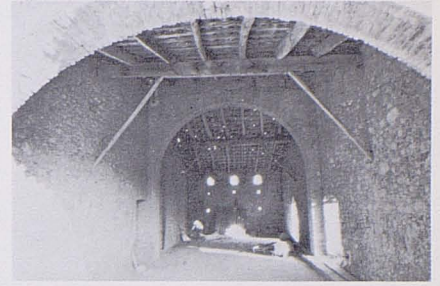Traditional houses in La Vajol

Complex of houses - Beget

A

B

18

4) Specialized traditional architecture, that is: buildings whose purpose is
non-residential but which are constructed using the same techniques
as for dwellings and whose form is dictated by use. These structures
include barns, mille, potteries, etc.

Pottery - Breda

Anglès forge

5) Decorative elements superimposed on existing dwellings (C); these
elements, though in the main recent, nevertheless follow the same logic
as the strictly constructional processes and, consequently, are an
important contribution towards an understanding of the phenomenon
as a whole (D).

Mas - Vilopriu C
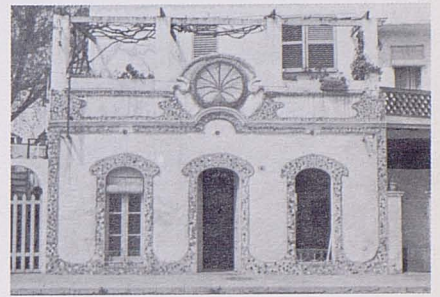
House - Palamós D

Formal or historical architecture, whether dating from ancient civilizations
or more recent times, has, for obvious reasons of discipline, been excluded
from this guide, granted that many processes and results could be included
within the framework outlined above. Consequently, fortifications, churches,
convents, castles and seigniorial mansions, etc. have been omitted except
in those cases where the intervention of popular architecture has radically
altered the original structures, endowing them with an entirely new personality
or purpose.
Contemporary popular architectural processes which are merely modern
imitations of traditional models, spontaneous («naïve») constructions using
conventional materials, «bricolage» architecture or spontaneous urban
architecture which does not use traditional materials but, rather, waste
materials from industry (metal sheets, tin cans, etc.) and which can be
studied only strictly within its own context, have similarly been omitted from
this work.
A few examples of the work of anonymous master-builders of the last
century have been included. On the other hand, contemporary urban architecture
has been omitted; granted that to a certain extent one could speak here
of popular architectural processes, a rigorous analysis would lead to a
detection of series of models rather than an abstraction of types.

The subject of the «masia» (manor-farmhouse) deserves special attention
as it is a characteristic element of popular architecture. The «mas» or «masia»
represents, beyond its purely architectural structure, a patrimonial use of
land and organization of production which, symbolized by the farmhouse
itself, provide the principal image of rural Catalonia.

This juridical, territorial and architectural element reappears constantly throughout the guide principally because it focuses attention on Catalunya Vella (Old Catalonia), the region in which the «masia» is most widely distributed.
It would be pertinent here to remark that this work does not attempt to enter into the subject of the great, traditional Catalan «pairalies» (manor houses) since these have already been amply covered by Camps i Arboix, nor does it attempt to establish classifications, as the architect Danés does in his highly important study of Vall del Bac, of Castellar and Vall de Bianya. Its intention is simply to pinpoint architectural types in each geographical context.

Another important inclusion in the guide is an examination of building-arrangement and grouping, without which no study of popular architecture would be complete. In an attempt to illustrate this idea, the following elements have been included:

a) Small rural agglomerations which illustrate the way in which individual buildings are grouped -normally around a church or seigniorial mansion (Vall de Bianya) or, more rarely, along a road or river (Vila-sacra).

Vila-sacra

b) Towns and villages. These are included when they present a unified image or are of particular interest by virtue of their urban texture in relation to the landscape (D). With regard to a few, urban plans have been included to give the reader a better idea of the processes of growth or to suggest possible itineraries.
The medieval origin of many urban nuclei within the scope of the guide and the retention over the centuries of the same scheme make the transitional zones, arising as a result of the disappearance of fortifications, particularly interesting. Ullastret (E) is an example of this phenomenon.
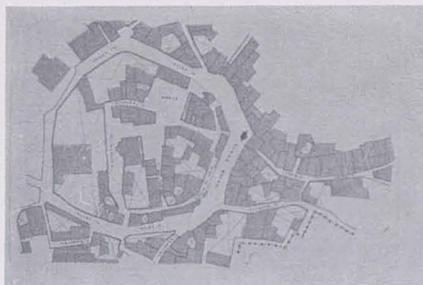
D   Old quarter - Ullastret   E

c) Urban areas of particular interest: both those constructed according to a pre-concieved plan as well as areas generated spontaneously (F), and (G). There are streets or squares which are of far greater interest than their surrounding structures. Elements such as trees, pavements and stairways have a highly important role to perform in this context, and can contribute as much to the overall urban effect as the buildings themselves. The main square of Madremanya (H) is an example of this.

F

G

Madremanya H

d) Sectors of the urban network, buildings along a street or around a square, which by repetition of types or by virtue of a homogeneity of texture endow the area with an image all its own (I), (J).

I

J

3) The geographical setting

This guide has attempted, in the first place, to remain faithful to the territorial divisions of the area under study since historical regions, except in small transitional zones, carry with them certain territorial and human links which are reflected in popular architecture.
The initial analysis of types has, however, led to the establishment of a system of zonal divisions, whose purpose is to clarify the geographical layout in terms of architectural themes. (Index 1).
Municipal organization is looked upon as subsidiary to this since architectural processes depend not upon administrative entities but rather upon systems of communication.
The arrangement of illustrations and plans throughout the guide follows an implicit geographical order which allows the visitor to organize his itinerary easily.
The zonal maps show the areas in which each architectural type is found, in relation to its geo-historical context.
Finally, ease of access to the works has also been a determining factor in their selection for inclusion in this guide.