

NOTES ON A DECADE OF URBAN DESIGN IN BARCELONA

On presenting the following reflections I do not intend to make a historical evaluation of the meaning of our important tradition in the field of architecture, urbanism and design, or of the clearly internationalist vocation of our culture in this field.

Barcelona's primacy in the field of design is unquestionable and this fact is evidenced by the creation and prestige of the Technical Schools, which have a very significant level of cultural interchange compared to other study areas within our university. In this field the interchange that takes place is equal to that of other international realities as a consequence of the systematic, passionate and highly professional work of our specialists.

It is also true that in the city of Barcelona the reaction during the years of dictatorship introduced an assertive concept of urbanism, given the notable absences and delays in investments on equipment and urban improvement, which created a permanent critical attitude, an extraordinarily positive element that serves to avoid certain mistakes and ambiguities. In other words, it is absolutely necessary to express the need for dialogue in order to achieve good formulation and solution of urban design problems.

During the beginnings of democracy the repressed social demands highly asserted during the past decade are expressed and thanks to the potentiation of a local democratic government, political as well as economical potentiation, we begin to understand the meaningful politics that start the process of positive transformation in our city. What has come to be known as «monumentalizing the outskirts» was nothing more, and nothing less, than a way of returning to the areas and territories of the city where an explosion of savage urbanism had taken place without the least bit of urban dignity. It was nothing less, therefore, than an act of historical justice but also, clearly, a desire to establish priorities. Because the expression «monumentalizing the outskirts» clearly means dedicating the same effort, intelligence and economic investment that we would devote to any other important public work within the city, thus breaking the absurd dichotomy by which the center or downtown area of the city had to be more powerful, more significant and therefore have more dignity than the outskirts.

With this mentality, the discussion of the specialists around the subject of new urban design was encouraged. The Administration itself promoted a department of Urban Projects, which meant that action had to be encouraged from the City Hall itself, with a clear and directive spirit in the more positive sense of the expression. The passion for urbanistic transformation leads to the search for new materials, new points of view, the cooperation of design architects and the introduction of sculpture integrated into the urban landscape.

It is not my duty, and I believe no one else's either, to make a critical and detailed analysis of the period. We lack

the historical perspective to evaluate all the consequences of the real and extraordinary effort that was carried out. But I do believe we can underline that this process of intensification of public interest for everything concerned with urbanism means a first rate qualitative step ahead has been taken which activates a series of professional and specialist sectors of the population. Learning in relation to the new urban materials, the successes and mistakes made in their selection, the new reflection around the problems of maintenance in a large densely populated city, submitted like the rest to important problems of aggression and the small contradiction that arises between the urban improvement of a territory and the evergrowing and permanently unsatisfied demand of the population, are all elements of great interest during this period.

Often, the more modest the actions, the more they create an apparent sense of stability, and when the urban actions are strong and have an impacting and contrasting presence within the immediate surroundings, they create a synergic positive effect on the whole area, on the one hand, but also imply new social demands that claim the same level of quality that they have been able to see, touch and enjoy.

I sincerely believe that during these first five years of the eighties decade the effort carried out by the city of Barcelona has been clearly acknowledged, more so in the international forums than by what I would qualify as the healthy and traditional hipercritical attitude of the inhabitants of Barcelona.

At the time of the Olympic nomination, the city of Barcelona was in an optimum situation to confront the incredible challenge that it was faced with. There was a task that had been done previously, a clear mentalization and the serious intention of transforming the city. The intense experience lived during the previous years insofar as connecting with wide sectors of professionals who actively took part in the educational improvement of urban design, was a very important asset to start with. The pace was set in Barcelona for the taste for quality and the popular demand of it.

In spite of entailing certain subjective criticism, the phase of assigning works to foreigners was a clear, brave and decided option which offered more guarantees that the result obtained would be better. Barcelona, therefore, had made an extraordinarily interesting logistic and psychological preparation in order to give the challenge it was faced with a dynamic and positive outlet for the transformation of the city.

In relation to urbanistic planning and decision-making, a clear advance took place and big decisions could be made; there were even a few initiatives previously taken that were of fundamental importance to stimulate the necessary drive in order to attain the objectives we had set for ourselves.

Everything from tearing down the train barriers, very important strategically for the maritime façade or sea front area, to the beginning of the expropriation of the Olympic Village area, many things had already been thought about, planned and some were even already started.

The great decision that the city of Barcelona had to make in relation to the olympic event was whether it should be fully integrated within the city with the cooperation of a series of subsites, or whether the repercussion of the Games on the city should be made with a greater emphasis on strategic locations around the outskirts of the municipal limits of Barcelona.

Barcelona chose to make the Olympic Games a movement of urban vertebration, compacting and recovery of urban nuclei, transformation of the sea façade and improvement of many important vertebrating parts of the city at large. In other words, the Olympic Games at the service of the urbanistic transformation of the city itself, rather than the Olympic Games as a specific reason for activating only certain parts of the territory in the hope that in the future these areas would become a part of the urban dynamics itself.

From this point of view, the definition of four olympic areas allows for objectives which no one can miss from the perspective of design. In the first place, to finish the mountain of Montjuïc, one of the most densely packed areas in the world insofar as cultural, recreational, sports and theatre facilities are concerned; its complete accessibility will be a reality once it is linked to the urban subway lines; thanks to the work carried out for the olympics, the Olympic Ring will turn into one of the most attractive elements of the whole olympic project, as far as design is concerned.

I would prefer not to make specific descriptions of emblematic actions so as not to make the mistake of being too topical or making false estimations. What is really substantially important is the fact of completely urbanizing a territory which contains such a diverse and significant variety of superior quality facilities.

The urbanistic transformation entailed by the seafront area of the city allows us to recover one of the city's singularities: the improvement of beaches, the passeig Marítim, an underground Cinturó Litoral (Seafront Belt), the Port Vell and the Olympic Port, all of which have gained in quality and size. The choice that was made, and is at present being developed, has allowed to situate a strategic part of the city at the very center of a process of active transformation both in public and private investment, and the interest and taste for architecture and design has reached extremely high levels.

The Vall d'Hebron area shows the discreet and positive process of transformation of an area with clearly disordered urbanization which, thanks to urbanistic actions, can be very positively recovered for the city. The resoluteness with which some of the design formulations are put forth in this area will probably serve as an element of intellectual stimulation for specialists in the field.

If we try to synthesize in order to point out the most significant institutional acts and attitudes that have given way to the greatest public investment ever to have taken place in the history of the city, we will note that six key elements have made a major contribution to this event.

In the first place, a political attitude of the most noble kind on the part of the city Mayor, Pasqual Maragall, in order to take as much advantage as possible and in all directions of the historical opportunity that Barcelona has in being nominated for hosting the Olympic Games. Nothing has been granted to us freely and we know that the city has undergone positive changes whenever the situations and opportunities have justified it.

This ambitiously expressed attitude was part of the desire to defend a qualitative transformation of the city and it was not limited to strictly incremental or enlarging acts that might run the risk of falling into the category of vulgarities.

Secondly, the creation of the COOB (Barcelona Olympic Organizing Committee) itself, with a clear desire to achieve

economic equilibrium, forces a series of imaginative solutions in order to obtain funds, with the positive outcome of obtaining benefits materialized in the form of facilities.

Almost 40.000 million pesetas worth of sports facilities and anexes situated inside the city of Barcelona and in other olympic subsites reflect the material benefits of the Games themselves. Some of the facilities in the subsites themselves, insofar as being large multisports facilities, are more relevant than any of the sports stadiums existing in Barcelona before the Olympic Games. This implies a demand of very high quality in all projects, an important participation of architects, engineers and designers, and an extraordinary effort given that this development takes place during a period of two or three years. From the organization of the Olympic Games Barcelona did not expect to obtain an economic benefit, but rather searched for an equilibrium in which the benefit was materialized in the form of very singular works in which design was one of the fundamental characteristics.

Thirdly, and for the first time, the city of Barcelona obtains a great deal of institutional cooperation especially in the establishment of the olympic holding between the State and the City Hall, which allows a catalogue selection of the works more directly or indirectly linked to the Games and a series of very important works of infrastructure.

It must be said that in actual pesetas, the investment effort in the city is the greatest in its history. If we consider the amount in pesetas, the investment made during the last four or five years is equivalent to that made during the past forty years in the city of Barcelona.

A city afflicted during the Civil War and dulled during the postwar years, in which a period of recovery only begins to take place at the end of the fifties. This fact is of great importance because it allows for the relaunching of forgotten projects and their updating, seen from the point of view of a more contemporary mentality and with design concepts that are more adequate to present day needs.

For the first time it can be said that public investment, over 350.000 million pesetas, is obtained thanks to the important collaboration at State level, a very significant collaboration on the part of the Barcelona City Hall, as well as the collaboration of the autonomous Government.

A fourth aspect that should be pointed out is the consolidation of the seafront area, site of a new and structured Olympic Village in the centre of a territory with a very strong personality and a clearly declining industrial zone. A seafront on which an Olympic Port can finally be situated, becoming the most important sports port in the whole of the Mediterranean. A sea façade that has implied the construction of an important network of sewers and a series of political decisions that had never been taken before in this country in order to clear the coast area. A seafront that means the recovery of beaches in the most important movement of this sort ever to occur in this city and along the whole Mediterranean coast.

The seafront politics no doubt allows to carry out works of an interdisciplinary nature in which architects, road engineers, industrial engineers and large construction corporations are faced with first rate challenges. This extraordinarily complex interdisciplinary task is often carried out in a most positive way and from the perspective of design politics, I sincerely believe that the results obtained are extraordinary. We have never fallen into the trap of design for design itself,

but rather tend to think first of the future functionality and the fact that we are constructing a significant part of the new city.

The Olympic Village expresses a first rate challenge in itself and opens the doors to impressive future interrogations; it has allowed us, thanks to the design tradition of the city of Barcelona, to award the FAD prizes of the past few years to different areas of the Village itself, overcoming one of the great traditional problems of commissioning the large constructions that imply an important transformation of the city.

Due to all this, the orientation has always been under the logic of a single concept from the perspective of the urbanistic project, with a respect for difference and different formal components, and at the same time a unity that would integrate it fully and clearly vertebrate it within the network of the city itself.

A fifth element, especially significant for the transformation of mobility within and around the city, is the network of freeway belts. We all remember urban belts as an element of rupture and violence, a devertebration of the urban reality of our city. Both the unfinished I Cinturó and the large avenues of access to the city had meant the radical and traumatic rupture of traditional neighbourhoods within our city. The idea of considering this network of belts with the incorporation of modern sign technology and minimizing the cost of their irruption in the city allows us, for the first time, to see them as elements of qualitative improvement of the city. The 60% of underground construction of the II Cinturó in the area of Nou Barris is a good example of this. For the first time in the city we see an only vertical surface that starts off as a public road and ends up as a facility on the top level.

The Cinturó Litoral (Seafront Belt), which flows underground and is even partly covered in some areas, offers great possibilities which allow a very significant vertebration of the whole road network of Poble Nou area, which used to be the most ignored and less developed part of the Eixample zone of the city. The experience of these belts allows for first rate design solutions of great importance for the future because it links real and important city problems, the problem of making the roads transitable, with operative and formal solutions in order to make the implantation and functionality of these structures attractive, and even for the construction of services galleries for establishing significant public services. It is a civilized and correct way of going about the problem of urbanism in the field of public services, in which there is often the brutal irruptions of high tension cables or other such constructions.

A large amount of intangible acts are being carried out in our city thanks to the new technologies, and the perspectives of design are more and more integrated in the field of technological complexity instead of remaining as isolated factors. From the interaction of this reality undoubtedly spring extraordinarily positive synergies for the future of our country.

A sixth aspect which I consider especially interesting is the fact that the great process of urbanistic transformation of our city has taken place at the same time as the great cultural infrastructures that were still pending in the city of Barcelona. Approximately 50% of the great effort invested in constructions linked to the Olympic Games is that represented by the great cultural effort that remains to be made in the capital of Catalonia. From this point of view, we have advanced with positive coordination at all three administrative levels in or-

der to carry out these political objectives; we have had the cooperation of first rate international architects of renowned competence and doubtless attraction whose expertise is positive for those around them, both in relation to working methods as well as the results of the operations carried out.

The complexity of the subjects undertaken in some cases means important novelties in our country that introduce a whole new load of symbolic as well as real elements which, no doubt, are helping to produce what we could call the qualitative step ahead of the technicians, specialists and news spreaders of our city.

Apart from these three systems that I have mentioned due to their importance or degree of significance, we find a few other new aspects that would explain the important impulse of our city as an innovating experience throughout the world.

In the first place, the fact that a level of positive conditioning through political orientations, specific aspects in the world of construction, has allowed for a very significant change to take place. Let's imagine for a moment what the traditional constructors of our country were doing twenty years ago, and closing our eyes, let us observe the new constructions that have been carried out. There is, therefore, a preoccupation with the level of the projects presented on the part of the private promoters. In a euphemistic manner, the private promoters often understand that it is important, from the point of view of their promotion as well as from the perspective of the general interests of the city, that the works carried out be positive and reliable from the point of view of the projects.

It is also good to remember that there's been an important experimentation movement taking place in the city in relation to small objects which have, for the first time, been considered as urban furnishings and begun to appear increasingly, confirming what could be regarded as common and everyday aesthetic good taste. Slowly we are overcoming the obstacles of «bad taste» and replacing them with approaches that consider urban furniture from the point of view of simplicity, functionality and interest in relation to design. These aspects have also acquired great strength and importance during the past four years in the city of Barcelona. These elements often do not have formal, let's say, spectacularity but are slowly penetrating the collective aesthetic consciousness of the people and normalizing that which a city needs in order to become operative with a minimum of good taste.

And finally, I believe that it is also good to stress the incidence and importance of a series of urban projects of an intermediate dimension that have had great significance within the urban network. These include connections in areas which previously presented separating barriers, singular works carried out in squares, parks and city gardens, future connections and long urban courses outlined for the future in places where it seemed difficult to imagine that civilized routes could be designed; all these are part of a new theory that defends the attitudes of pedestrians, onlookers, visitors, urban poets, and all those who truly love the skin and core of the city.

I believe that these analytical and, at least, thought-provoking considerations, allow us to partly explain the great qualitative step ahead taken by the city of Barcelona in the field of design.