Waterfronts of Art Technologies of Information, Interactivity and Public Art

Fernando Álvarez
Universitat de Barcelona

The place for *Public Art* is obviously (?) *Public Space*[1]. This affirmation, contained in the very definition of P.A.[2], may appear to be unnecessary; however, it takes on relevance when it becomes impossible to ignore the fatigue and consequent saturation of public spaces, especially in urban areas. The limits of the territories occupied by cities are, in most cases, the very factors which made those particular geographic locations ideal as the sites of inhabited centres: they were easy to defend, had fertile land and/or abundant natural resources and good land, river or sea communications, etc. In the cases where this has occurred, the conditioning of the structure of the city to the morphology of the physical space it occupies has been much more evident, and port cities are perhaps the most representative cases when addressing the question of recovering P.S. (Public Space) in areas which are run-down or partially or completely unusable for their original purpose[3].

Port areas have been traditionally marginalized from city life for social and labour reasons and have been brought back into the urban framework through rehabilitation programmes, which are currently some of the most ambitious and innovative projects for the creation of areas of commercial activity, urban centres, improved quality of life in adjoining neighbourhoods[4], what are known as Urban Coasts (Waterfronts, Urban Seas, Seafronts, Cités de l'eau, Cities on Water, Città d'acqua, etc.).
Dublin and the *Temple Bar Properties Project*; London and its *Docklands*; and Barcelona with its *Port Vell* are

some[5] of the cities which have started or have finished large-scale projects. These projects have a number of points in common in terms of the solutions applied:

- specific weight of the artistic/architectural components
- interdisciplinary strategies and connections
- effect of the projects on the quality of life
- concern about the preservation of the cultural and environmental heritage
- incorporation (including experimentation) of the latest technological innovations

These points in common are not coincidental if we consider the *Plans for Local and Regional Development*[6] of the different Administrations involved, which have been following the guidelines agreed on by the European Union[7] with regard to priority projects and recommendations for economic development and the improvement of the quality of life. Barcelona[8] is a clear example of this point. The *Strategic Plan 2000*[9], a local development project, involves a number of aspects designed to promote the economic development of the city within the overall plans of European macroregions, the final purpose of which is qualitative and quantitative social progress on both the economic and environmental level[10]. In the specific case of Barcelona, one of the points having a direct relationship with Public Art[11] is the promotion of tourism and trade by improving what is currently on offer, not only in terms of business opportunities, but also with regard to the city's cultural offerings. In this sense, the offerings generated

by the Port of Barcelona[12] are focussed on two main areas: the *Logistics Activities Zone*[13] and the *Port Vell*.

The *Port Vell* is one of the most ambitious urban projects in all of Europe. It covers an area of approximately 55 ha[14], creating a pleasure and commercial centre with extensive areas for strolling and recreation, an underwater aquarium, a multi-screen cinema complex, an *Omnimax* cinema, a shopping centre, a business centre associated with the *World Trade Center Association* chain, a walkway which is an extension of the popular *Ramblas*, the remodelling of the passenger sea terminal, the extension and improvement of the infrastructure of the marina, the remodelling of the fish exchange, three underground parking garages and a sports centre for the Barceloneta neighbourhood[15].

This project, currently in the development phase[16], should not only be included in what is called Public Art because it fits into the policies of local development and the recovery of public spaces; nor because of the aesthetic, artistic and architectural value of works which are as charismatic and popular in the city as the *Moll de la Fusta*[17] and the *Rambla de Mar*[18]; nor because of the fact that these areas contain more than eighteen sculptures/monuments, including the Columbus monument; nor because of the recovery of the concept of the project as conceived in the Renaissance. No; it should not be included for only one of these reasons, but for all of them taken together, which forces us to immediately redefine the term Public Art.

public art

During the development of one of the projects begun in the *Intermedia-TSIT Lab* at the University of Barcelona[19]— one of the preliminary tasks of which was to create a complete data base[20] which includes the public sculptures in Barcelona—as the data obtained from different sources[21] was entered and studied, it became evident that, if it were continued in the same way, the DB would be nothing more than a mere inventory of "fixtures", a catalogue of sculptures with a minimum chronological listing and a number of formal specifications. It was not enough to add more historical data or aesthetic evaluations and bibliographic references. From our perspective it was necessary to abandon the classification system used until that time by those interested in public art[22] from the point of view of sculpture, because it mixed different criteria to somehow be able to include those objects considered to be "public sculptures". A functional classification could include in the same level a group labelled according to the morphology of the object or to create a macrogroup of *Urban Fixtures* which indiscriminately includes rubbish bins, traffic lights and street lamps, but which, curiously, does not include objects created by the architect Gaudí, which brought us into aesthetic evaluations at the same time. Independently of the fact that most of the authors took for granted that P.A. was being defined as the cataloguing and classification took place, the stance was maintained of limiting the scope of P.A. to the mere object, to the *work of art* placed in the public thoroughfare, with the

minimum amount of extra-artistic listings necessary for comprehension.

In a city like Barcelona, this is not possible.
The redefinition of Public Art is not clear and limited. At present, P.A. is the interrelationship of a number of factors which come together in a public area[23]; but the most important thing is that these factors are not inherent to Art, but are elements of the city itself, so that Public Art[24] is not splashes of Art in public spaces, but part of something more complex, as is the urban setting[25].

Thus, to continue with our Data Base, we can see that a study of this type should more logically use a GIS[26], with different levels of information and relationships between its objects[27], including not only objects traditionally considered to be *Public Art*, but also the active and passive elements of the urban environment.

This re-placement, if not redefinition, of P.A. in the context of the city, would make the fact much more explicit that the concept of Public Art has more to do with Public Space that with the artistic objects placed in these spaces[28]. The case of Port Vell[29] is a clear example of how a public space can be organized with interdisciplinary solutions in the framework of an overall project, converting each of the elements[30] in a significant part of the whole[31]. These activities are generally well accepted and assimilated by the people of the city when they see that they have more space for public use, unlike what hap-

pens in many cases when monuments/sculptures are *inserted* in the public thoroughfare using criteria which is not transparent and not in keeping with P.A.

When speaking of interdisciplinary solutions, we should make an effort to go beyond the simple[32] acceptance of elements of urban fixtures or other objects which are traditionally not included in P.A. That is, if we accept that, because of its design, the physical medium of an informative traffic sign is part of P.A.[33], why can't we consider the underlying technological system of these signs to be part of P.A. as well, based on the city as a complex whole?[34] Can't traffic restriction and access control[35] devices be considered temporary urban *Artistic Installations*? Doesn't an engineer or traffic control technician work at the same level as an artist or a sculptor?[36]

the public state of the art... or the state of public art

Although the relationship between Waterfronts as a specification of public space is clear in the context of local development programmes and P.A., why is there an insistence on the technological factor—specifically on new data technologies and interactive systems?[37]
In December 1993, the European Union passed the *White Book for Growth, Competitiveness and Employment*, highlighting the need for adapting to the new *Information Society*. In the same report, the new technologies to be im-

plemented for building the groundwork of this emerging society were clearly indicated: the *Integrated Services Digital Network* (ISDN), wideband infrastructure (ATM), the *Global System of Mobile Communications* (GSM), geographic coverage by satellite and new *Basic Services*[38]. The implementation of this technology should not be an end in itself, but should lead to direct applications in our society. In this sense, the report stipulated ten priorities:

- home-based computer links
- distance learning
- Network of Universities and research centres
- computerized services for small businesses
- motorway traffic management
- air traffic control
- health care networks
- electronic bidding
- trans-European network of public administrations
- urban information highways

These ten points have a direct connection in one way or another with the guidelines for local and regional development mentioned above. This connection is not surprising given that the technological element was already present in the basic outline of these strategies and because their aims were identical.

Thus, given the components

- Local Development
- Public Art
- New Technologies

and the intricate relationship already mentioned, especially considering P.A. and N.T., is the connection between both elements possible, above and beyond incidental intersections, or are they parallel lines? Must we investigate the simple generation of objects/products or move toward integration in a specific context?

Besides the most obvious manifestations[39], which are the result of new business opportunities and the accessibility of new media and their potential, the connection between the elements indicated in the area of local development and the public space will tend to be more complex and subtle as their integration increases, with P.A. being the most favoured as its scope of activity expands. In this symbiotic relationship, it is easy to imagine mutually beneficial forms of collaboration, of which I would draw attention to four key points of agreement with the foregoing, while avoiding the product/object-as-an-end-in-itself and reevaluating the *project*.

These points are:

- integration of data systems, referential elements and the urban make-up
- consideration of *cyberspace*, virtual reality and urban and interurban communication high ways as public space
- more importance placed on joint strategies than

self-sufficient projects
• self-critical reflections on
overgenerous evaluations and excess
with regard to P.A. and N.T.

With regard to the integration of data systems, referential elements and the urban make-up, not only the formal aspects are included in the solution of volumetric and visual problems, which can be structural or related to interface, or the demarcational/referential/organizational function in its context, but also the implicit derived sublevel in the use of electronic urban guides, in-route navigation systems, leisure programs, etc., which represent an effort in the P.A./City connection.

Besides the literature from the fields of fiction[40] and *rigorous* study[41], it is important to see how the second point can relate to the first, both on the technical and psychological levels, raising serious questions on ubiquity, interac-tionism and conduct[42]. On another level, we could begin to speculate on the organization and *exploitation* of cyberspace, with the curious observation that space terminology is easily being adopted to describe and identify non-existent spaces which are actually made up of servers, linking nodes, physical connections, satellites and all types of programs.

With regard to the third point, the cost of the necessary investment and the need to have a preliminary project with an overall vision of the operation, among other things,

are some of the aspects which will be imposed by the need to unify activities in joint strategies which will clearly define the goals to be undertaken, given that all initiative in other terms will run the serious risk of failure. This means that without eliminating isolated projects, the people responsible for a part or a complete project will finally have to commit themselves and to get involved in all the levels[43] of the work.

The final key point is the synthesis of the previous three, which generates a critical reflection[44] on the use and real needs of P.A. and/or N.T. The case of the *Port Vell* is once again a clear example of putting global criteria before the temptation of populating an area with sculptures/monuments, multimedia audiovisual shows, interactive information points, vending machines and other gadgets.

public art?

Aware that many questions have been left unanswered, would it be possible to state that at present Public Art is nothing more than a bunch of questions[45] outlining various elements?

notes

[1] Public Space, whether indoor or outdoor, urban or rural, permanent or temporary, real or virtual, etc.

[2] P.A. is Public Art.

[3] Unusable and insufficiently prepared for three reasons:
* changes in the characteristics of ships, which need larger and more specialized docks for loading and discharging.
* changes in the logistics chain of intermodal transport, a concept linked to containerized cargo, making it possible to create new areas which are ideal for activities that generate added value.
* old ports are physically limited when it comes to adapting to the needs of the above points and too near the urban fabric for certain port activities.

[4] Without losing sight of the maritime nature of the area.

[5] Boston, Montreal, San Francisco, Baltimore, New York, Hong Kong, Dakar, Bordeaux, Belfast, Marseilles, Bilbao, Santander, Ghent, Rotterdam, Plymouth, Cardiff, etc. are some others.

[6] Obviously also common.

[7] Whether because of legal regulations or to apply for financial aid for E.U. priority projects.

[8] To use the city where this seminar is being held as an example.

[9] *Pla Estratègic Econòmic i Social Barcelona 2000*; Ajuntament de Barcelona, 1990.

[10] Making use of resources, pollution and waste elimination.

[11] Another point is the management and improvement of public transport and roads. We will examine this relationship below.

[12] One of the organizations signing/collaborating with the Strategic Plan 2000.

[13] The Logistics Activities Zone, *LAZ,* is an area where logistics operators (importers/exporters) can perform activities which generate added value on the goods handled, making it possible to reduce delivery times and customs procedures and to concentrate services, etc. It also has facilities for multimodal transport links for optimum connections by sea, rail, air and road. Although the Port Vell is the project which has most to do with Public Art, it is necessary to mention the LAZ because of the overall context and joint strategies to benefit the urban environment, quality of life, etc.

[14] Including Moll Nou, Moll de Balears i Pescadors, Moll del Rellotge, Plaça de Mar, Passeig Joan de Borbó, Moll de la Barceloneta, Moll del Dipòsit, Moll d'Espanya, Moll Bosch i Alsina and Moll de Barcelona.

[15] For a complete list of the activities in the Port Vell of Barcelona, see *El Vigía-Barcelona desde el Puerto*, Barcelona 1992.

[16] In the summer of 1995, 80% will be completed and open to the public.

[17] Officially called the *Moll Bosch i Alsina*.

[18] ...despite having been inaugurated only five months ago.

[19] The research unit I am attached to.

[20] Created by E. Cofiné under the direction of Dr. A. Remesar.

[21] Mainly from the office of the Barcelona City Council.

[22] García Martín, Manuel; Barili, Renato; et al.

[23] see the Port Vell example.

[24] The repetition of the term "Public Art" is not gratuitous. In a gallery or in any other non-public space, there are other influencing factors. It is important to separate P.A. from artistic circles, which have little to do with P.A.

[25] A city with its own urban shape, which is determined by the organization of its space and the elements it is comprised of. These elements fall into two categories: active and passive elements. The active elements are the different networks which guarantee the city's operation;

networks which do not define the objects they are comprised of, since they are functional systems which can share components with other networks at the same time. There are four networks we could differentiate: information network, mobility network, services network and connection network. The passive elements are non-connective elements which can form part of a network or subnetwork, but which usually do not.

26 Computer-based *Geographic Information System*.

27 This vry text should be in a similar medium, organized in the form of an interactive hypertext.

28 I know; this is not a new concept. From the classical cities to the present day this relationship has been maintained; however, a good number of contemporary artists and sculptors seem to have forgotten it. Perhaps it would be a good idea to debate and clarify concepts such as the image of the Sculptor, the concept of the Project and the validity of some pedagogic pro-

grammes in artistic training.

29 And most other similar waterfront projects.

30 Buildings, pavements, lighting, signage, monumental sculptures, etc.
31 And doing away with aesthetic and even ergonomic analysis.

32 Simple and not at all new: Various Authors, *Entorno al entorno: Barcelona*, 1985.

33 For example, the gantry signs designed by the engineer Calatrava, installed on Diagonal Avenue in Barcelona.

34 In Barcelona there are eight different systems for citizens based on new data system technologies relating to urban mobility: a Cultural Information System, Information on the Occupancy of Area Parking Garages, Indicators of the reversibility of lanes on incoming/outgoing roads, a Variable Road Information System, an Interactive Information System of the Industrial Estate of the Zona Franca in Barcelona, the Vereda Information and

Management System; an intelligent Traffic Lighting System and an Information System on city bus lines.

35 *Poble Sec Experience* within the framework of the *Gaudí Project* inside the *Polis Programme*. Barcelona 1992.

36 Perhaps this is going too far. It could be understood to mean that any element placed in or related to Public Space is Public Art; or that the scope of activity of the *artist* is being limited. This is not my intention.

37 Interactivity. See Remesar, A., *Interactivos, Instrucciones de Uso* and Manzini, Ezio, *Artefactos. Hacia una nueva ecología*.

38 *E-mail* and data transfer.

39 During the *First International Symposium on the Comic* held in 1985 at the Fine Arts Department of the University of Barcelona, Dr. A. Remesar and J.M. Padulles presented the paper *La historieta en la era del chip* (The Comic in the Age of the Chip), which discussed the extent of the use of computers in the world of comics,

highlighting two key aspects which led to the creation of the project *ArtCom* and the formalization of the research team of the Laboratory of Treatment and Synthesis of Image and Text.

"... we believe that the future of the use of computers in the field of comics will not be limited to the development of the expressive quality of figurative aspects, an element which is somewhat foreseeable, but rather, that research into the comic-computer relationship will lead to other advances, fundamentally in two directions:
a. the complete creation of the story
b. new forms of distribution of the finished products..."

Since then, although the areas of activity of this research group have been expanded and technological development in the field of computers calls for constant revision of the outlined resources, the validity of both points has been clearly demonstrated through both the projects executed and the research tasks necessary for these projects. Such was the anticipation that what is now

called the *Multimedia* market is nothing more than a label for a set of tools and conglomerate materials under a single data processing unit which makes the following possible:
a. the complete creation of the story
b. new forms of distribution of the finished product.

[40] The already excessively cited *Neuromancer* by W. Gibson, *Tron* by Walt Disney Productions, etc.

[41] Rheingold, Howard, *The Virtual Community* and Taylor & Saarinen, *Imagologies*.

[42] Various Authors, *Entorno al entorno*.

[43] not only the creative levels

[44] As has occurred throughout history with any medium and technology; e.g., writing, the printing press, the television, videogames, etc.

[45] And is it necessary to provide an answer to them?

references

AA.VV;
El Vigía.Barcelona desde el Puerto. PEVSA. Barcelona, 1992 / D.L: B-26403-92

AA.VV;
Europa y la Sociedad Global de la Información. Informe de la Comisión Europea. Corfú, Junio 1994

AA.VV;
Plan Estratégico económico y Social Barcelona 2000. Ajuntament de Barcelona. Barcelona, 1990 /

Alemany, Joan;
El Puerto de Barcelona. Historia y actualidad. L'Aveç, S.A. Barcelona, 1984

Manzini, Ezio;
Artefactos. Hacia una nueva ecología del ambiente artificial. Celeste Ediciones y Experimenta Ediciones de Diseño. Madrid, 1993

McLuhan, Marshall & Powers, Bruce R;
La Aldea Global. El Mamífero Parlante (Serie Mayor), Editorial Gedisa, S.A. Barcelona, 1993

Postman, Neil;
Tecnòpoli. Ed. Llibres de l'Índex Barcelona 1994 / ISBN 84-87561-20-0

Remesar, Antonio;
• *Interactivos: instrucciones de uso*. Barcelona Media, S.A. Barcelona, 1993
• *Memòria del Projecte Art-Com*. Dept. de Estructura de la Imagen y del Entorno de la Universitat de Barcelona. Barcelona, 1986

Remesar, Antonio & Padulles, J.M;
La Historieta en la Era del Chip en Actas del 1er Simposium Internacional sobre la Historieta. Facultad de Bellas Artes, Universidad de Barcelona Barcelona, 1985

Rheingold, Howard;
The Virtual Comunity. Homesteading on the electronic frontier. Addison Wesley. Reading, 1993

Taylor, Mark & Saarinen, Esa;
Imagologies. Media Philosophy. Ed. Routledge. London, 1994