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Barcelona progrès: a successful experiment in communicating town planning

Josep A. Acebillo

Nowadays our many cities are suffering the effects of de-industrialisation. Since the eighteenth century the socio-economic engine of urban development has been the industrial revolution and when manufacturing activity changes location or declines a structural change is imposed on urban systems. Being based on the requirements of industrialisation, the built urban fabric and infrastructure do not adapt spontaneously to the needs of the new economy, causing the city to slide into crisis and making urban transformation an absolute necessity. Preconceived solutions cannot be applied to transformations of such intensity. A new metropolitan culture needs to be developed, capable of sustaining our present socio-economic evolution in territorial terms. In order to describe this process the term 'remapping' denotes a concept which is not a mere revision of the city map but which must reflect a profound programmed morphological transformation: from economy to architecture. After industrial growth usefully guided by expansion plans a new phase of re-conversion and re-use is coming, which can only be approached through projects.

Urban projects for the transformations

On the one hand, at the time of writing the city project of Barcelona is based on targeted neighbourhood redevelopment operations in which over 25 years' worth of accumulated experience is being applied, and on the

other hand, a new town planning strategy involving reorganisation. These are large-scale transformations capable of creating the spatial scenario guaranteeing the city's future competitiveness, or in other words, its economic prosperity and social vibrancy.

The idea of exhibiting this project, which envelops the whole city, was the starting point for the *Barcelona in progress* exhibition presented at Forum 2004, and which has continued permanently as a place communicating the project. Initially the particularly technical nature of planning materials presented some difficulty and so the need to bring it closer and make it comprehensible to the wider public arose. Making a three dimensional relief model was a demanding work, involving simplifying plans, using rendering and videos in order to illustrate more than 100 projects along a section of about 100 metre. But finally the exhibition of all the town planning project types, reawakened collective interest, and brought a great many people into the Forum building. The visitors, whether citizens of Barcelona or foreigners, attempt to read the plans as one tries to arrange a group portrait so that the last detail provides them with an idea of how their daily environment will change.

Redrawing the city

In 1980 the quality of public space constituted the basic reference point in the urban-planning efforts of Barcelona. Right from the early developments of gardens, squares and streets, that reference-point has been constantly present for almost 25 years and has marked the city out from others in the world. In this way, the city has come to be recognised as an authentic laboratory for urban design. This way of doing things

remains constant in the new transformation strategies for the city but going beyond the domestic and insular scale of the early years. As such, the new parks of the Seafronts, Ciutadella, Diagonal, the Forum 2004, the heights of Montjuïc and the restructuring of the Tres Turons and Collserola park currently comprise a strategic green space structure which will improve the quality of public space in Barcelona considerably. This quality is also evident in the new transformation currently underway, which are concentrated at the two extremes of the city; to be exact, in the areas surrounding the two rivers. Let us bear in mind that the Barcelona seafront, from the river Llobregat to the river Besòs, stretches some 14 km and is divided in two parts of almost equal dimensions, although used for different purposes, by the new estuary of the port. In this way the southwest littoral, between port Vell and the Llobregat, will be the location for large-scale industry (*zona franca*), the large-scale areas dedicated to logistic activities (ZAL, Mercabarna) and the large-scale transport infrastructures of people and goods (industrial Port and Airport) to the current two runways and one terminal building of the airport a third runway and additional terminal building will be added. This extension, together with the high-speed-train link, will provide the airport with the sufficient characteristics and critical mass to become an intercontinental hub with substantially extended connections with the rest of the world. Its links with the metro and commuter rail network will also allow the airport to act as a dynamo and resource centre of the economic and metropolitan space. New urban projects are marked out for the inland area corresponding to this part of the southwest littoral,

encompassing the new setting of Gran Via-Plaça Cerda-Passeig de la Zona Franca-Amadeo Torner. Developments such as the extension of the Montjuïc 2 trade, fairs site, the Ciutat Judicial (the new complex of law courts), Plaça Europa and the transformation of the Can Batllò site, will transform this area into a new residential centre and centre of economic activity within the territories on the Barcelona-L'Hospitalet boundary. During the second half of the 20th century, Barcelona has grown basically westwards whereas the eastern areas of Barcelona were forgotten about and became increasingly obsolete. Now, Barcelona has turned its development eastwards, with a clear commitment to rebalancing the city established on the basis of the transformation and recycling of old industrial area, thus completing the process of recovery for civic use of the 7 kilometres of littoral stretching between the new port estuary and the River Besòs. This transformation eastwards of Barcelona, in the districts of Sant Martí and Sant Andreu is supported by three key elements: Gloriès, Sagrera and the Forum 2004. Together they define a triangle which must become the metropolitan reference of the new economy. Between Plaça de les Glòries and the setting of the Forum 2004, a new Diagonal avenue traverses the old fields of Poblenou neighbourhood, which until 150 years ago were crop fields and which in the middle of the 19th century were turned into industrial areas with the appearance of large industrial buildings and chimneys. Now, those industrial constructions are being turned into buildings geared to housing the activities of the new economy, thus producing

urban images which make up the new socio-economic landscape. This new technological district of Barcelona 22@ will encompass more than 3 million sqm dedicated to economic activity and a significant amount of new housing. Plaça de las Glories in its new setting, must guarantee continuity between the 22@ district and the Eixample and Ciutat Vella. Defined by a set of spaces encompassing leisure and culture, administrative and economic activity, along with road and transport infrastructures, it will generate a huge park of 16 hectares. Another large lineal park, covering double the area of Ciutadella Park, constructed over the railway, is the central urban element of the new Sagrera. In this setting 8,000 dwellings, offices and facilities will be built as well as the new station. With four subterranean floors, it will become a metropolitan reference point, configuring itself as a great centre of mobility and activity. Its intermodal character will facilitate the linkage of regional, commuter and high-speed-train services, two metro lines (L4 and L9), a bus station and the corresponding parking space. In the 2,5 km of coastline down to the River Besòs, the most important urban project of the city has been developed constituting the culmination of the transformation of the seafront, the first stage of which was Vila Olímpica. This Forum area, which because it had been so forgotten about and housed so many infrastructures was considered the junk room of the city, has been transformed and brought into line with the central city without abandoning the maintaining there of infrastructures of great strategic scope. This complex of infrastructures already

includes a new water treatment of large quantities of waste with less incineration. A new system of electricity production, of greater output and less pollution, along with the burying underground of all the electricity lines stretching along the course of the river to the Nus de la Trinitat. The centralized heat and cold production, the pneumatic recovery of waste and the complex of photovoltaic panels are further components of this restructuring of infrastructures, which is inseparable from and forms part of the same transformation strategy which finds its civic complement in the creation of new public spaces. The Diagonal avenue finally finds its way to the sea by means of a large square which doubles up as the roof of the water treatment plant and which serves as an area of distribution facilitating access to a new seafront in a setting of beaches, parks and singular public spaces. This city-building effort, as well as public space, needed to be rounded off by the putting in place of activities complementary to the housing present in the area. This is the motive behind the construction of the International Convention Centre of Barcelona, which together with the Forum, is the economic motor behind the establishments of new public and private enterprises throughout the area. The urban reforms, aware of their surroundings, establish a relationship between the new public space of the seafront and the residential areas of the Mina. The new university campus (between the Ronda ring road and Carrer de Taulat), together with the new residential complex, comprise a sequence of spaces which, shaped by the new Rambla de la Mina, will contribute to the regeneration of this

neighbourhood. All this effort to rebalance the city eastwards, including the regeneration of the course of the River Besos, takes in several municipalities and has been conceived from a perspective of essential continuity in the design and management of the services and infrastructures of the urban spread, along with the coordination of the urban planning and infrastructure policies of the municipalities which are encompassed by it. This perspective is clearly conscious of the role which the Barcelona's metropolitan area (Region 1) has to play in the new territorial organisation of Catalonia. In Catalonia, the status of Barcelona as capital cannot be allowed to result in a blind concentration of installations and facilities. Barcelona must be the first political and urban reference to place its spaces, installations, facilities and the city as a whole at the service of each and every Catalan. It must also be a first-class reference on the world stage.

The great relief model of Barcelona river to river
In this attempt to explain the metropolitan transformation of Barcelona which forms the central focus of the exhibition, it is vital to overcome a limitation: represent and communicate the territorial impact of the projects under construction in a comprehensible form. A dozen years ago an agency for town planning development and infrastructure was created in Barcelona in order to develop the post-Olympic city's main transformation projects. Not by chance was the agency called Barcelona Regional, which produced an initial document with the purpose of defining this new scale of territorial intervention. Generally known as the *Barcelona Riu a Riu Plan* (Barcelona River

to River Plan), it can be defined as a much wider territorial vision than that embraced by the city's strict administrative limits. The first step in defining the minimum territorial scope, with the purpose of both explaining and validating the projects being managed, was precisely this initial Plan. The *Barcelona in Progress* exhibition is a qualitative jump in the same direction transforming this obviously two-dimensional plan into a large relief model of the city, that is, into a suggestive three-dimensional object. This change, apparently of little importance, opens a whole range of opportunities as yet largely unexplored, resulting in it becoming a powerful investigative and urban planning instrument. Relief models are such familiar tools in the fields of architecture and town planning that they have become indispensable to the long-term verification of the planning process involved. Transferring this experience to the wider public helps the citizen to participate in the process of validating the planned transformation. Here what is relevant is not the detail of each project but rather the opportunity to understand the size and localisation of the interventions on a comprehensible scale, starting from a notable reference point of observation and moreover being able to relate the transformation expected to the rest of the consolidated city. Furthermore, the value of the relief model lies in its own physicality and size, although this is not perceived at first glance in its actual 200 m2 length. Observing it is no ordinary experience engendering a feeling of indifference: the model is a strong magnet and attracts lingering looks from visitors. In fact, one might think that making a relief model of this type

might even possess something of the archaic and have been superseded given the general use of alternative models such as virtual reality. This is already so much the norm that when the virtual becomes real we are not able to recognise how innovative it is. On the other hand, the idea of making a large three-dimensional model stems from a very simple fact: the perception of the physical model is a direct action lacking both filters and artificial symbolism. Being positioned right in the middle of the Forum building's three corners, the relief model offers at least three different points from which it can be observed, both in regard to its height and its arrangement. So the city can be viewed as if one were approaching it from the sea, a view which is rarely seen and only from a plane landing at the Prat airport or from a cruise liner mooring in the port. A step away is a bird's eye view towards the sea from Collserola that is so much more realistic than the view from Tibidabo or the telecommunications tower. Viewing the relief model provides an immediate understanding of the city's structure. The original city's compactness and the preeminence of sections of the city wall, the Cartesian irregularity of the Ensanche which encloses the historical city centre and unravels into the much more dispersed and disordered fabric of the rest of the city. So the dense and compact city is perceived at a distance from the amalgamated anonymous urban landscape and serves both as a reference point in reality and as a scale model of reality. A more complex second reading of the relief model is stimulated by coloured lights being projected onto the relief model to highlight the planning strategies, specifically lighting

operational axes, nodes, areas, and networks, and simultaneously accompanied by a video which presents real and virtual images of the transformation project. Consequently, the relief model contains the intentions of the original plan and has very dynamical and pedagogic effects which turn its perception into the exhibition's masterly lesson. A brief and schematic course running from the past to the present and on into the future moving through urban time and containing all of Barcelona's forthcoming projects.