

Public Space in the Image of Barcelona in Post-Dictatorship Period

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Abstract—By collapse of dictatorship of Franco, Spain and as an autonomous community, Catalonia has started a process of reestablishment in politics, economy and culture which also reflected in urban development of Barcelona. As from 1980s, the city was regenerated around a series of projects, eventually becoming one of the most outstanding, cosmopolitan places worldwide. Public space was one of the fundamentals of the new urban design approach and important events as 1992 Olympic Games and 2004 Universal Forum of Cultures were instrumental in the creation of more spaces in order to make a contribution to collective life in Barcelona. Thus, this paper aims to define the notion of public space in the image of the city, and afterwards, to explain the urban transformation of Barcelona in post-dictatorship period, briefly mentioning some projects and urban actors, as architect-urbanist Oriol Bohigas who had a significant role in urban regeneration of the city.

Index Terms—Barcelona, contemporary history, public space, urbanism, urban history.

I. INTRODUCTION

Barcelona is a very important city that provides an excellent case study of many of the major themes of urban development, especially within the context of its contemporary history, as from 1980s, when dictatorship of Franco collapsed. In Spain, a political reconstruction has begun which meant for Catalonia, the re-establishment of Catalan parliament and the relationship between central government and regional autonomous communities. With a metropolitan vision, Barcelona achieved to act as a cultural, political, economic and intellectual core of Catalonia [1] eventually becoming an outstanding, cosmopolitan city.

Open space or public space, with purposes of open air activities, enjoying a contact with nature or urban environment and surrounding architecture, understanding the city as a place of collective life and a monument to be preserved, being a mirror of collective history, has been a fundamental issue in Barcelona's urban development, eventually maintaining a strong identity and image. By considering urban diversity and homogeneity, urban innovation with attention to urban fabric of historical buildings, by redefining the relations between urban planning and action [2], public space of Barcelona succeeded in developing a remarkable urban quality.

The form of a public space is important as it defines the political contents of a city, reflecting its past and present, and

the future of a city always has its roots in its past. Therefore, public space, as in urban transformation of Barcelona, is regenerated by politics and economy as well as architects, urbanists, designers, artists, media, newspapers, tradition and culture of the society.

The image of the city of Barcelona can be examined within the context of public space since it has been one of the main components of its urban development especially as from 1980s, by contribution of important urban actors as mayor Pasqual Maragall, who admits that “youngsters shouldn't grow up in a meaningless landscape” and urbanist-architect Oriol Bohigas, basing his urban projects around the principle that public space is “the city”. Today, the city simply could be called as “alive” with numerous inhabitants taking advantage of leisure activities, festivals, street parties, celebrations throughout all seasons and all hours of the day in public space which is a fundamental element in Barcelonian way of living.

Thus my aim here is threefold: First, to consider the importance of the concept of “public space” in the image of the city, second to explain the urban transformation of Barcelona in 80s and after, especially focusing on the regeneration of its public space, and third, refer to significant role of Oriol Bohigas as an urban actor of this period of urban renaissance and regeneration in the city of Barcelona.

II. PUBLIC SPACE IN THE IMAGE OF THE CITY

The city as a living organism, is a developing, changing, enlarging, reshaping and a regenerating structure. Urban or public space, as a vital component of this structure, is a product interpreted by the perception of humankind under various circumstances.

The notion of “public space” can be considered as an enclosed area used by community such as a park, a garden, an urban landscape or a square in which people are directly involved by social actions. In spite of being used in a more animated and temporary way, urban connectors as streets, axes and promenades can be also included in this notion. Francis defines it as “the common ground where civility and our collective sense of what may be called 'publicness' are developed and expressed.” [3] as it is one of the prominent elements in a cultural system through which public communicates, experiences and explores. It serves as an icon, a meaningful component that reflects the identity of the society as well as being the most powerful visual connection between land, buildings and human.

There are multiple dimensions of public space: It is a social relationship, a product to be used and consumed by tourism and leisure activities as meeting, strolling or formal gatherings, festivals and celebrations. It serves as a tool of

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thought and action, along with being a means of control, domination, power [4]. It is a vehicle that expresses social tensions and consequently, works of architects and urban developers turns into a space of social vehemence. In democratic political systems, civil society can make use of public space for purposes of expression whereas in undemocratic regimes, the state gains a practical and symbolic control over society by preventing civil mobilization [5] even though it is a constitutional right. As an example, like many authoritarian regimes, during dictatorship of Franco in Spain, in 1940s and later, activities in public space, even a conversation between more than three people was prohibited.

The relation between user and space designed for collective use is constructed through visual, physical and symbolic access. For instance, a square, designed as an outdoor public room to enhance the surrounding architecture, is perceived through emotions and memories attached to that space. As Bohr says: "Isn't it strange how Kronberg Castle changes as soon as one imagines that Hamlet lived here?.. Suddenly the walls and ramparts speak a quite different language.." [6]. Moreover, the sense of belonging to a city is constructed from individual and collective experiences in public spaces which forms an individual and collective memory, strengthening perception of public life and the culture of living together. Civic participation in the production of an urban image through production of social place also creates a sense of belonging, social solidarity, civic pride and loyalty to that place [7]. In Barcelona, based on the frequent usage of public space -as a tradition common to Mediterranean countries- and its integration into social and urban life (Fig. 1), the inhabitants are constantly in touch with their city and its monuments which also create a sense of common property and consciousness to respect and protect the values of it.



Fig. 1. Traditional Catalan dance, *sardana*, which is a symbol of Catalan unity and pride, in one of the most emblematic squares of Barcelona, *Avinguda de la Catedral*.

The city is made of different, strongly attached elements that should be in harmony to create a compact, strong urban identity, because even though the image of the city constantly evolves, its identity remains. Thus, as an invariant component, public space must be planned carefully in detail and meaningfully to contribute this identity by considering the city has a language of its own. Besides, if a public space must be an authentic space, the most important criteria has to be defining its role in urban structure as public space is more than a solution of a problem or a simple introduction of green to the city.

Within the urban fabric, urban landscapes, parks, gardens, collective open areas, squares make a major contribution to the image of the city by giving physical and social continuity to urban character. Barcelona is formed on this basis of urban continuity as *Parc de la Ciutadella* and *Montjuïc* act as connections between the coast and inner parts of the city whereas belt of sub-urban parks as *Park Güell* and *Parc del Guinardó* provides the continuity in inland suburbs of the city. Without the contribution of urban open areas, the city would have been a set of buildings connected with ever-lengthening roads. Similarly, design approach of Ildefons Cerdà in *Eixample*, with large square blocks (*manzana*) with open garden space in the middle (*pati*), was based on urban continuity and collective usage as these inner gardens were accessible from the street.

The formation of urban fabric in relation with public spaces and green areas shouldn't be understood as filling the gaps in the city in order to create a continuous urban character. Conversely, it means that urban morphology is formed by the landscape features so that the city should be designed on the basis of its public spaces and urban landscape. In other words, public spaces as urban landscapes, parks, gardens, squares should be taken as the main focus on urban development and city growth since they are the definitive elements of the city's language.

III. URBAN TRANSFORMATION OF CONTEMPORARY BARCELONA

Throughout its history, Barcelona has gone through different stages of urban transformation. Starting from Cerdà's plan for a new expansion of the city in the mid 19th century, *Eixample*, the urban fabric of the city transformed by political, economical or cultural changes as Universal Exposition in 1888 (*Exposició Universal de Barcelona*), International Exposition in 1929 (*Exposició Internacional de Barcelona*), the strong wave of immigration during 1920s, Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and dictatorship of Francisco Franco from 1939 until 1975. In Post-Franco period, with the transition to democracy and recovery of the City Council (*Ajuntament*) in 1979, the city has experienced a profound process of urban renewal, followed by the 1992 Olympic Games (*Jocs Olímpics de la XXV Olimpíada*) and 2004 Universal Forum of Cultures (*Fòrum Universal de les Cultures*), revealing the image of today's Barcelona which has become an outstanding brand at international level.

General Metropolitan Plan (PGM), with influences from Italian planning of 1960s, passed in 1976 and allowed a future improvement to urban quality of Barcelona by reserving empty areas for schools, housing and public space. Ensuring urban requalification through public space, it was one of the first attempts for planning program of 1980s, by contributions of mayor Narcís Serra followed by mayor Pasqual Maragall, with a background in urban economics and urbanist-architect Oriol Bohigas as director of urban planning. Bohigas was the man behind the idea of urban rehabilitation for gaps and disused areas in order to be converted into parks and squares. Therefore, parks with internal position as *Parc de l'Escorxador* (Fig. 2) and *Parc de l'Espanya Industrial*, squares as *Plaça dels Països Catalans*, *Plaça de la Palmera*,

gardens of former private estates that were given a public use as *Ca n'Altimira*, urban axes as *Avinguda Gaudi*, *Carrer Tarragona*, and large-scale parks as *Parc de la Vall d'Hebron* constructed for Olympic Games were among the projects realized until 1992. Moreover, special Interior Reform Plans (PERI) were prepared for providing the reuse of existing spaces as well as creation of new spaces in neighborhoods [8]. One of the projects realized in this period was the recuperation of inner gardens of *Eixample* in order to create public spaces in a very dense zone of the city and to propose some solutions to the problem of collective use of inner gardens just as Cerdà proposed [9]. The need for open spaces within a dense urban fabric was solved by relatively quick, pragmatic and inexpensive projects distributed throughout the city.



Fig. 2. *Dona i Ocell* sculpture by Joan Miró in *Parc de l'Escorxador*.

The dictatorship of Franco was a dark period, but nevertheless created a strong civil awareness which was demonstrated in strong neighborhood movements and commitment of much of intellectuals, artists and professionals. It was the basis of a socialism, with Barcelona City Council (*Ajuntament de Barcelona*) mostly consisting of socialist party [10] PSC (*Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya*) founded in 1978. Elected as mayor in 1982, by the help of his political and professional formation, Maragall succeeded in building networks of association and trust with politicians, planners and the private sector and finally, selection of Barcelona for 1992 Olympics (Fig. 3) provided him a highly mediated performance space. By rebuilding or redesigning urban public space, creation of cleansed, post-industrial beaches of the new waterfront and contribution of new projects designed by international architects as Norman Foster, Richard Meier, Arata Izosaki and Santiago Calatrava, Barcelona has made a remarkable leap to be “a centre of a euroregion of 15 million inhabitants, and that aspires to be the gateway to southern Europe and one of the European cultural capital.” as Maragall says [11].



Fig. 3. Maquette of *Montjuïc* with new projects including Olympic venues.

Olympics was internationalization of the city and the Olympic Village (*Vila Olímpica*) in *Poblenou* neighborhood designed by Oriol Bohigas, Josep Martorell, David Mackay and Albert Puigdomènech became a prime referent in the process of urban transformation. Based on elements of local urban design, as constructing street grids as in *Eixample* and joining inner part with coastal line through a system of green spaces, new parks and promenades, this project reformulated the relation between the city and water which has always existed during its historical formulation and provided global identification to the neighborhood [12]. *Parc de Carles I*, *Parc de Les Cascades* and *Parc de la Nova Icària* are some of public spaces constructed with motivation of Olympic Games, providing this part of the city large-scale green areas with installation of contemporary art works.

Situated on southwest of the city, *Montjuïc* hill, which already had a large-scale urbanization process for 1929 International Exposition, was selected as a venue for Olympic Games and numerous sports venues were built. Consequently, the hill became an outstanding public space with many parks, gardens, sports facilities, Olympic sites, cultural attractions, museums like The National Museum of Art of Catalonia (*Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya*) and Joan Miró Foundation (*Fundació Joan Miró*), and remarkable architectural works as *Palau Sant Jordi* by Arata Izosaki, and the telecommunications tower designed by Santiago Calatrava.

Urban politics of the period has been to project the city as from public space which has been the fundamental issue of urban strategy with respect to “construct” in “constructed”. Olympic Games has been most instrumental event in Barcelona’s contemporary history, inspiring a reconstructive urbanism and redefinition of architecture and image of the city. It made a contribution in regenerating the collective imaginary of inhabitants. Post-Olympics period addressed the city environment, improvements in infrastructure, the creation of a high-tech business centre in *Poblenou* -which consisted of old, abandoned factory buildings- and consequently, organization of 2004 Universal Forum of Cultures (*Fòrum Universal de les Cultures*) which has brought a second leap to development, economy, internationalization and urban transformation of the city by creation of a new flexible, open space: *Parc del Fòrum*. As Joan Clos, then mayor of Barcelona, admits:

“*The Universal Forum of Cultures, an event to be held for the first time in Barcelona, focuses on reflection and experience centering on three core themes whose bearing on our future cannot be overstated: the process of building peace, sustainable development and respect for cultural diversity. The Forum is a new kind of international event that brings together people rather than states. Its central aim is to provide a platform for global civil society to make itself heard and a framework for reflection, dialogue, experience, festivity, and celebration of all the arts*” [13].

Forum Building (*Edifici Fòrum*) designed by Herzog & de Meuron [14] is being used as a natural science museum today, known as *Museu de Ciències Naturals* or *Museu Blau* providing an iconic public space in north-eastern sector of Barcelona.

IV. ORIOL BOHIGAS AS AN URBAN ACTOR

Designated as Director of Planning of City Council of Barcelona between 1980-84, Oriol Bohigas was one of the key figures of urbanization in 80s and 90s and he projected urban policies of major works (Fig. 4) that allowed Barcelona to host the Olympic Games. Apart from his numerous architectural works since 1950s, he has been thinking, writing, designing and planning on urbanism and on the image of the city, especially focusing on public space as he considers that the city is the conjunction of its public spaces and public space is the city. Therefore, it has to resolve the questions of “legibility” and “identity” since it is tied up with the physical and social identity of its wider setting. Besides its architectural quality, public space must be meaningful, easily readable and comprehensible in order to be accepted and understood by society [15].

According to Bohigas, an identifiable city fragment must have an intelligent form or a point of identification like a monument. Therefore, the slogan “sanitize the centre, monumentalize the periphery” (*higienitzar el centre, monumentalitzar la periferia*) was formulated to create an authentic urban culture in every urban environment [16] and this approach quickly responded to the demands of inhabitants by the creation of almost 200 squares and parks [17] in order to provide quality, dignity and sufficient infrastructures and services to neighborhoods in the city. He wanted to avoid the urban policy of dislocating the original neighborhoods for substitution of low income sectors with upper class residential areas or reconstructing these zones in order to serve for tourist attractions, which is briefly called “gentrification”. So, as he explains, methods and specific instruments of urbanism of City Council was based on directly acting in public space with an intention of making it an equipment of quality and converting it into a focus of generation of spontaneous transformations in degraded neighborhoods, so that the public space would act as an exemplary spot, as a motor of regeneration of environment under the initiative of the users themselves [18] because he considers public space must be totally collective without private landowners.



Fig. 4. A plan from *Vila Olímpica* project designed by Bohigas, Martorell, Mackay and Puigdomènech.

More than an architect, urbanist, writer, Bohigas is an intellectual and he has never been far from politics. In his own memories, he mentions that he found himself directly or indirectly in Anti-Francoist battles unlike some of his colleagues who were in touch with dictator’s regime. Nevertheless, he is not into “Catalanism” as he apparently supports an international, global vision when he criticizes

nationalism for being “anti-cultural”, with a tendency against the culture in terms of social and intellectual progression as it is based on claiming own tradition. As he states, despite the appearance of modernity and liberty, the “kitsch” is the final consequence of conservatism of a sector of nationalist ideology [19].

V. CONCLUSION

In July 1999, Barcelona received an international prize, Royal Gold Medal for architecture awarded annually by the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA). For the first time the prize was given to a city, for its transformation as an urban and a politic model [20]. Obviously, this prize was a result of the approach that has specified public space as a focal point to improve quality and social dignity with a of Barcelona as an aggregation of different districts rather than a general system of functions. After the reconstruction of four obsolete or marginalized zones for Olympics, creation of numerous public spaces, rehabilitation of neighborhoods, by contribution of open visions of urban actors like Oriol Bohigas, this award was one of the prestigious outcomes of large-scale urban transformation of the city.

As seen from its contemporary history, in constantly changing urban anthropology, within terms of the image and identity of the city, natural, aesthetic, environmental, hygienic, psychological, social and cultural values, Barcelona has become one of the prominent cities in the world by the quality of life it provides to its habitants. Due to the urban development approach in which the importance of public space is never underestimated, Barcelona has created a remarkable urban quality where inhabitants whether in the centre or closer to sub-urban areas, are able to benefit from inner parks, squares, urban landscapes or natural reserves which are carefully maintained and conserved. Thus, it should be always remembered that, in order to achieve economic, social, cultural development, with adequate attention, financial resources and design processes should be considered for public spaces, as already have been done to create today’s image of Barcelona.

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