

## **The Footnote, the Chair and the City: Some Thoughts on Catalan Design**

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[Ref.: Narotzky, V. 'The Footnote, the Chair and the City' in Case 1, Architectures of discourse, Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2001]

### INTRO

In the same way that the wireframe chair hovers as a punctuation mark over the Fundació Tàpies, crowning the building with all its playful iconic power, so it would seem that, during the 1980s, design floated over the city as a mystical incantation exhaled by Barcelona's cultural breath. It entered the renewed spaces of public sociability, the bars, restaurants, cafés and nightclubs, leaving its unmistakable trace as much in the furnishings as in the conversations. It touched the exhibition spaces, the exhibition policies and the exhibition topics. It was in shop windows, on TV. In the press. It even got into many homes. It finally came to rest on the city's streets, on pavements and park benches, lampposts, water fountains and tree gratings. Those of us who lived in Barcelona then know that story. By now, many who weren't there at the time know it as well. It is not the story I want to tell.

What I would like to do is to pull that wire chair down from its metallic cloud into the buildings' exhibition space and into this paper-thin space of the written word. I would like to turn that totemic sculpture back into a chair, any chair, and use it as a guiding theme to thread together some thoughts on Catalan design [in the 1980s]. That will be one of my 'guides', caught from the site of the exhibition: the restored building's emblem, the foundation's mark, art, sign, design and object. If one wants to talk about design, one could have a worse guide than a chair.

The curatorial proposal that binds together the various interventions in 'Architectures of Discourse' provides me with a second thread. Underpinning this exhibition is the relationship between the holdings in the foundation's library and the interventions on the gallery floor. From the written discourse as it is contained within the pages of the periodical publications stored, on open access, on the wooden shelves of the old Montaner i Simon publishing house, to a mediated interpretation of meanings, critical approaches and spatial narratives. In taking the foundation's extensive collection of periodicals as a source of inspiration, I have chosen to explore process rather than content.

## THE FOOTNOTE SECTION

The way in which the scholarly discourse is constructed has changed over time, as have changed the formal constraints of its delivery. In the case of the historians' craft, the appearance of the footnote has been one of the turning points that illustrated both its progressive professionalisation from the 17c onwards and its increasing transformation from "an eloquent narrative into a critical discipline"<sup>1</sup>.

The footnote is often no more—and no less— than a scholar's proof, listing a source and therefore legitimizing the research. It can also be many other things, from a subtle stab in the back of a colleague to a playful excursion into a parallel narrative, relevant but not necessary. Consequently, it offers space for a variety of styles, activities and contents. In the same way that a good setting enhances the beauty of a precious stone, footnotes can give depth to an argument, enlighten the reader on significant details, bring richness or relief to a dry analysis. But above all, they provide a means to trace ideas as they expand and develop through the work of various authors. By following up on a reference or checking the cited sources, one reconstructs a train of thought and accesses a body of work that might be the building block for further intellectual exploration. Across the globe, we are all playing *join the dots*, making our texts "not monologues, but conversations"<sup>2</sup>.

It is this quality of the footnote that I want to play around with, its humble role in the expansion of knowledge, in the layering of theoretical constructs and the accumulation of data. It is an essential underpinning of modern history's distinctive narrative architecture, its architecture of discourse. But it is not only the powerful structural role that footnotes, annotations and marginalia play in the elaboration of thought that makes them so fascinating. These markings and notes are often, by their very nature, small. Short of space, compressed, piled up at the bottom of the page or relegated to the end of a chapter. Their font is tiny, the spacing compact, the calling number in the body of the text easy to miss. And yet Bachelard has warned us about miniature being one of the refuges of greatness, of how 'the minuscule, a narrow gate, opens up an entire world. The details of a thing can be the sign of a new world which, like all worlds, contains the attributes of greatness.'<sup>3</sup>

[how it works in exhib.]

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote* London: Faber and Faber 1997 p24

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote* London: Faber and Faber 1997 p234

<sup>3</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Boston: Beacon Press 1994 [1958] p155

In working with chairs and footnotes I have no intention of being too strict, of staying close to the rules of the academic game. In this written piece, in fact, I perversely intend to keep footnotes to a minimum. I am interested in reproducing the process of knowledge reconstruction allowed by the footnote in the physical spaces of the exhibition, calling from one venue to another, and within them from physical reality to intellectual discourse. For the purpose of the exhibition, the notion of the footnote as a process for generating meaning is one I am prepared to stretch in very unscientific ways.

The first element that drew me to the footnote was the possibility it offered to engage playfully with the idea of scale, while keeping the chair as a leitmotiv, a discursive theme. On the one hand, in the modernist spectrum of design that famously goes from the spoon to the city, the chair would appear to be nearest the smaller end of the scale. And yet, as with the modest footnote, it can open up to reveal an entire world: the object 'chair' is arguably one of the most heavily charged with meaning in the world of three-dimensional design. It has come to be a powerful paradigm for a certain approach to design that has been central to the understanding of the practice in Catalonia, one that encapsulates notions of authorship, social class, high culture, national identity, or 'good' taste, to name but a few. [But more on this later.](#)

On the other hand I was led by the physical context of the spaces I am working with, Fundació Tàpies and Vinçon, both of which, in their own way and for different reasons, have chosen the chair (indeed, the same type of chair!) as signs of identity. (illustrate). It thus seems logical to follow this lead and play along with object, scale and place, in search of meaning. As the site of the 'big chair' and spatial core of the exhibition, the Fundació Tàpies hosts the main themes, displaying in bold strokes the concepts to be opened up critically. The exhibition as an expressive mode is one with particular strengths and limitations. On the downside, it is poorly suited to discursive presentations. It is easier to be spectacular than analytical, easier to make a point than to argue it through. This is where the model of the footnote, emblematic of the scholarly construction of meaning, helps establish the links between the statement and the analysis. From the Fundació Tàpies, the intervention jumps out into Vinçon, using that space as a three-dimensional footnote, an environment that will be itself annotated to illustrate and develop an interlocking vision of Barcelona's relationship to a particular aspect of material culture.

This themed topography of linkages extending into the urban space is particularly significant in the case of Barcelona. Here, the new symbolic economy that grew out of the city's regeneration during the 1980s is intimately bound to a local geography of design and architectural intervention, of socially controlled visual statements about

certain definitions of nationhood and modernity, a pre-selected collective memory, a policed cultural tradition. [\[expand? Become more Barcelona-specific? See Harvey notes: 'guardians of definitions'. Also add any useful unpublished bit on geo of cons?\]](#) [The importance and role of the public urban setting is not one I want to develop here.](#) But it is crucial to note that the city, its social and cultural geography, have been one of the most important vehicles for the crystallisation of ideas that are inherent to the meanings of design in Catalonia. This is why [I have wanted](#) this intervention to have a geographical component, an element of physical displacement within the city. Moreover, the two sites represent symbiotic aspects of design. In the museum space, we tend to find design and its outcomes presented as 'art', or in any case as institutionalised cultural production, seamlessly integrated into what Sharon Zukin has called the Artistic Mode of Production that has become the economic lifeblood of the contemporary metropolis.<sup>4</sup> In the retail space, design becomes part of the somewhat old-fashioned process that generates commodities and objects for consumption, physical goods to be found in the shop. These two spaces and their associated modes of production and consumption feed off each other, reinforcing cultural practices and commercial exchange values.

Finally, there are reasons to believe that in this fiercely consumerist 21<sup>st</sup> century, and however paradoxical it may seem in a global economy increasingly independent from manufacturing as its driving force, design has finally moved from a footnote to the body of the text. Historiographically, one can follow this process from the early 1980s in the growing literature on material culture, and many areas of history, economics, sociology or ethnography have joined design history in their common fascination with consumption and the world of goods. In our consumerist world design is seeping into every crevice of daily life, of economic flow. There is now an imperialism of design, an expansionist occupation of the texture of the everyday and the spaces of contemporary mediatic culture, where 'the aesthetic and the utilitarian are not only conflated but subsumed in the commercial, and ... everything –not only architectural projects and art exhibitions but everything from jeans to genes—is regarded as so much design'<sup>5</sup>. As design shifts from being a critical annotation of physical reality (a preferred shaping and processing of matter) to being a universal tool that brings to life the spectacular dictates of the culture industry, most of its products, be they brands, software, websites, pop groups or pharmaceuticals, are not really objects at

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<sup>4</sup> Sharon Zukin, "How to create a Culture Capital: Reflections on Urban Markets and Places" in Iwona Blazwick (ed.) *Century City. Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis* London: Tate, 2001

<sup>5</sup> Hal Foster, "Hey, that's me", *London Review of Books* 5 April 2001

all. Indeed, noting how the minute personalisation of mass-produced goods for niche markets and the endless transformation of digital media has inflated the role of design “to the point where it can no longer be considered a secondary industry”, Hal Foster has recently wondered whether “we should speak of a ‘political economy of design’.”<sup>6</sup>

#### THE CHAIR SECTION

Long before design became ubiquitous and immaterial, however, three-dimensional objects were one of its main incarnations. I mentioned earlier that the chair was a useful piece to refer to in trying to trace some of the themes that often run through design practice and perceptions. Indeed, many of the themes that appear when one looks at chairs are endemic of certain cultural constructs of the meaning, value and scope of design that were prevalent in the 1980s and still hold strong today. They are concepts that appear with particular emphasis in the cultural universe of furniture design, and therefore are precipitated in the chair, as the epitome of that practice and probably the most fetishised object of all design production.

One of the ideas more strongly embodied by the chair as an object of design is that of authorship. Bearing in its whole essence the personal mark of its designer, the power of his (for it is generally a man) creative spirit, the aesthetic expression of the object represents its author’s psyche. In a 1987 article for *Domus* Mario Bellini commented on the resurgence of chair design amongst architects, noting how this “ultra-sensitive, interpretative probe” helps us “better understand the whole personality of an architect, disclosing his richness and even his risks”.<sup>7</sup> *Prima inter pares*, the designer chair escapes the proletarian anonymity of mass production by having a known ancestry, and actively referring back to its author is one of its main cultural functions. Indeed it is as the creation of architect/designers that this object has reached its highest status as a cultural icon, to the point that it gave rise from the mid-sixties to a whole new industry, that of the ‘design classics’. From that to Vitra’s scaled-down reproductions of chairs there is but a step, but a momentous one. For it is one thing to manufacture once more the actual ‘historic’ object, even if it is with all the reverent fastidiousness that one would reserve for the restoration of an Old Master’s altarpiece, and another to produce a miniature version whose only function is to be a fetish of design value and a representation of the designer’s creative will. Alessandro Mendini highlighted a similar process in his introduction to Juli Capella

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<sup>6</sup> Hal Foster, “Hey, that’s me”, *London Review of Books* 5 April 2001

<sup>7</sup> Mario Bellini, “Architects’ Chairs” *Domus* 683, May 1987

and Quim Larrea's *Diseño de Arquitectos en los 80*: "In reality, [the works of these architects] are not objects, but simple architectural transferences, paraphrases, metaphors".<sup>8</sup>

The 1980s were particularly sensitive to the architect/chair/design/art combination, expressing that fascination not only in actual industrial output, but more significantly in the realm of strict cultural production, through books and exhibitions.<sup>9</sup> It is not surprising that the chair has often been approached by fine artists, intrigued by the power of furniture to embrace a multiplicity of meanings, to balance precariously between the emotional and the material: what Dubuffet pinpointed as "the very particular point (point of the mind I mean) where an equivocation between the imaginary and the real arises, that point between the domain of evocations and that of objects".<sup>10</sup> There is something about furniture that makes it hover tantalisingly between the worlds of art, architecture and design, all of which aspire to the sublime, some more successfully than others, but all of them earnestly. Design's efforts to sublimate itself were matched by the artworld's fascination with the chair as iconic object. Consequently that object was ideally positioned to legitimise design's relation to fine art and therefore to the lofty realm of high cultural production.

The simple idea of "chairness", powerfully represented in *Nuvol i Cadira* by a wire squiggle, seems close to the wishful essentialism of the vernacular and the archetype; a chair that is just a chair. Regardless of whether that can ever exist, design exalts –or perverts—chairs into being tokens: of art, national identity, modernity, fashion, good taste or high technology.

These currents of meaning were particularly strong in Catalan design in the 1980s, not only because of the historical and political context that led to certain ideas being expressed, but also because of the special position that furniture had in local design production. The first reason for its preponderance was linked to the production infrastructure, which precluded serious industrial manufacturing and generally left designers with little option other than editing. With a few duly praised exceptions, locally produced objects in the 60s and 70s that self-consciously belonged to the world of design were mostly furniture items. These pieces were also charged with

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<sup>8</sup> Juli Capella and Quim Larrea *Diseño de Arquitectos en los 80*, Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1987.

<sup>9</sup> I promised few footnotes. Just to submit some proof to honour the craft, however, I will mention the Whitney Museum's exhibition of "Furniture by American Architects" (New York 1982), the Museum Boymans van Beuningen's "Furniture as Art" exhibition (Rotterdam 1988) and closer to base, Juli Capella and Quim Larrea's *Diseño de Arquitectos en los 80*, published by Gustavo Gili in Barcelona, 1987.

strong class connotations, as for many years their system of provision was critically restricted, and both their creators, distributors and consumers belonged to the professional bourgeoisie.<sup>11</sup> In any case, the slow emergence of a mainstream awareness for contemporary design was strongly linked to that particular range of goods. Moreover, when local design finally hit the streets of Barcelona in the 1980s, it was to be found mainly in the furnishings of “designer bars”. These were the main public outlets for the myriad chairs, tables, bar stools and lamps that were to furnish democratic civic life. Through them the city, design and furniture were seamlessly bound in the public imagination.

But if the pieces held, it was also due to the way in which the international design community put them together. The very Catalan concern with Europe's gaze is part of the region's diligent pursuit of modernity; Barcelona's sudden ascent to a place of honour in the pages of *Domus*, *Abitare* and *Blueprint* was greeted as the culmination of a century's longing for recognition. Being both the main product and the principal export of the Barcelona 'design boom', furniture was the key to the international markets. For a few years, it put Barcelona on the map as the new Mecca of design, in the wake of a stream of reviews in the specialized journals which paid their respects to the dynamism and panache of the local production.<sup>12</sup> The international press thus ratified the pivotal position of modern furniture in the reconstruction of Barcelona's cultural identity.

Even though it is difficult to talk about a consensual spirit of national identity in a region where almost half the population is of immigrant origin<sup>13</sup>, the general mood of the 1980s in Catalonia is easier to describe, if only because very few voices had the courage to express dissent in the midst of an overwhelming and outspoken nation-building fervour<sup>14</sup>. If the political framework was bound to the realities and pragmatic acceptance of regionalism, the discourse of identity surrounding it was definitely that

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<sup>10</sup> Jean Dubuffet quoted in *Jean Dubuffet: A Retrospective* introduction by Margit Rowell, New York, The Solomon Guggenheim Museum, 1970, p.29

<sup>11</sup> Viviana Narotzky "A Different and New Refinement" *Journal of Design History* 13:3, September 2000

<sup>12</sup> *Blueprint* Dec 1985, Nov 1988, Feb, Apr and July 1992, *Design* Jan 1988 and Feb 1991, *Interni* Sep 1989, *Intramuros* 'Spécial Espagne', Mai/Juin 1992, and *Domus* n° 669 Feb 1986, amongst others, all had special 'Barcelona' or 'Spanish Design' reports in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

<sup>13</sup> HOOPER, JOHN, *The New Spaniards*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995, p415.

<sup>14</sup> A notable and only recent exception is Arcadi Espada, *Contra Catalunya*, Barcelona: Flor del Viento Ediciones, 1997. The book was published simultaneously in Catalan and Castilian, and the first editions were sold out in just one month. It is a candid but irritated journalistic recollection of life under Catalanism: 'They were building a nation... some historical imperative... was telling them "we are". [...] One can stop being Spanish whenever one wishes, but for the time being it is impossible to stop being Catalan.' p43.

of nationalism, and it permeated everyday life, an inescapable and ongoing cultural debate. It can even be argued that no area of culture –not to mention politics—, no single cultural event has existed, or been allowed to exist, outside those parameters.

It is in that sense that one can talk about design as part of that process, for although it might not have overtly adopted a nationalist formal vocabulary, it was used as a marker of local identity, and could not fail to become instrumental in a context so deeply saturated with these issues.

There are important differences between the product semantics of nationalism in *modernisme* and *noucentisme*, and in 1980s design. The *modernista* architects of the turn of the century did their best to turn Barcelona's *Eixample* into a baroque manifesto of brickwork, ceramics, iron and stone. *Noucentisme*, with a more restrained vocabulary, was keen to convey its own version of Mediterranean classicism and the strength of the roots attaching the Catalan essence to the ancestral soil. The designers and architects of the transition rarely, if at all, incorporated into their work such literal and self-conscious references. It is true that the precedent of the Modern Movement, whose directives and priorities related to design practice precluded any recourse to extensive detailing or ornamentation, made it difficult for them to expose specific signs of local identity. But then by the early eighties they could also choose to adopt the more generous tenets of postmodernity, which would have legitimized a playful menagerie of dragons, dragon-slayers, madonnas and other icons of local myth. However, whereas Catalanism at its beginnings sought to validate its historical lineage and to compile its own local iconography, the nationalism of the 1980s was in turn very much concerned with the construction, development and expression of an image of the nation, both for internal and for external consumption. In that sense, it became less important to popularize specific formal icons than to convey more general ideas such as technological competence, Mediterranean creativity or modernity, as suggested by the institutional campaigns run by the Generalitat through the 1980s. Accordingly, the objects designed during those years generally shunned all references to the vernacular. Rather than compiling a recurrent and distinctive formal vocabulary, Catalan designers combined a variety of resources in what looked like a personal and occasionally ironic expression of character. The coincidence of the political transition to democracy in Spain with the dissemination of postmodern theories in architecture and design had certainly very much to do with this 'pick and mix' approach. But even though there were instances of direct quotation in the Barcelonese designs of the eighties, they must sometimes be read with circumspection. And whether or not the goods themselves

displayed allegiance to the flag, what ultimately made them become a crucial component of local identity was as much context as content.

The limitations of product semantics in revealing the full extent of the feedback between a society and its things, and the need for careful contextualization.

Often the very search for national characteristics in consumer goods can be the cause, rather than the effect, of the designers' attitude towards their work. In an article on Rei Kawakubo's early 1980s 'Comme des Garçons' collections, Lise Skov develops a critique of the ways in which fashion garments have had national identity thrust upon them.<sup>15</sup>

Thus a discourse of national identity, which generally draws on pre-established cultural stereotypes, can be arbitrarily constructed 'from the outside' around certain products, reflecting the context in which they are created and consumed rather than their intrinsic formal or 'essential' qualities. Such was often the case with the international media's reception of Catalan design, but with two particularities. First, that the stereotypes used by the international press to look for national characteristics in the objects reviewed were related to their idea of 'Spanishness' and thereby often inaccurate when applied to Catalonia. Second, that this foreign search for a national identity coincided in time with the region's own obsessive concern with the reconstruction of its political and cultural identity.

Skov also notes that in the world of fashion --and the same could be said generally of those commodities that are especially subject to fashion trends-- 'designers of whatever nationality more or less consciously address their design, not to national communities, but to certain enclaves of taste'<sup>16</sup> which tend to transcend national boundaries. Moreover, postmodern readings of contemporary culture have outlined the cross-pollination and transnational nature of global trends, as well as the shifting borders between high and low culture. They represent a real challenge to essentialist approaches that look for the 'pure' expression of a national zeitgeist, and try to describe the local as the result of a closed-circuit flow of information. Some clearly global 'postmodern' qualities of 1980s Catalan design such as its eclecticism (as in the work of Oscar Tusquets), its recourse to mass culture (Mariscal's use of comics imagery) and popular culture (Samsó's references to bullfighting), were all at some point interpreted (not necessarily incorrectly, but certainly with excessive naivete) as

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<sup>15</sup> SKOV, Lise, 'Fashion Trends, *Japonisme* and Postmodernism, Or "What is so Japanese about 'Comme des Garçons?'", *Theory, Culture & Society*, 13(3):129-151, London: Sage, 1996. p141.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p137.

the earnestly sought-after Spanishness of local design.<sup>17</sup> However much Samsó professed a sincere liking for the *corrida*, his two pieces mentioned above should also be understood as a pun intended for gullible 'design tourists',

If there was a search for identity, it was for a regional identity, and iconic Spanish myths such as bullfighting were useful more as part of a dialectical approach to otherness than as an integral part of the Catalan self. Unlike what had been the case at the turn of the century with *modernisme*, and especially during the 1910s with *noucentisme*, there were no programmatic statements on the necessity of developing a recognizable regional style. There was no theoretical debate over the use of vernacular typologies or local craft techniques, no call for designers to express the essence of their *catalanitat* through lamps, tables, buildings or street benches. But nevertheless, they did. Art historian and critic Robert Hughes captured the unspoken kinship between the two main cultural undercurrents of 1980s Barcelona:

'Design consciousness pervades the city, in an irritated ecstasy of angular, spiky, spotted, jerry-built, post-Memphis, sub-Miroesque mannerism. Designer ashtrays, designer pencils, designer kitchen gear, designer food ... Even children appear to have been designed... They, too, will grow up to be designers, as their remote ancestors were encouraged to be Catalan secessionists.'<sup>18</sup>

It might be difficult to pinpoint the specific Catalan characteristics of Barcelona design, but certainly easier to argue that modern design had become **the national style**. As the director of a gallery in Washington D.C., that in 1997 held an exhibition of 20th century Catalan design, put it to the press: it had become the 'registered trademark of Catalan culture'.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, the full extent of the relationship between design, political and urban identity in Barcelona, and its impact on local culture and self-perception, is only truly apparent when one turns to the city itself as a privileged space of interaction between the citizens and the built environment. It is ultimately the subtler texture of this daily encounter with public spaces and apparently neutral objects that seals the implicit pact between material culture and ideology [gramsci].

## THE CITY

<sup>17</sup> HART, Claudia, 'International Design. Barcelona', *I.D.*, 31(3):58-61, May-June 1984; REDHEAD, David, 'Spain gets serious', *Blueprint*, N° 86:31-34, April 1992

<sup>18</sup> HUGHES, Robert, *Barcelona*, New York: Vintage Books, 1993

<sup>19</sup> 'Washington exhibe una selecció del disseny barcelonés del segle XX', *La Vanguardia*, 21 February 1997

<sup>21</sup> BERMAN, Marshall, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, New York: Penguin, 1988.

Viviana Narotzky 16/4/01 20:00

**Deleted:** [In his study of what he terms **banal nationalism**, Michael Billig suggests that 'national identity in established nations is remembered because it is embedded in routines of life, which constantly remind, or "flag", nationhood'<sup>20</sup> That these routines have come to be particularly **enmeshed** with design is one of the defining characteristics of Catalan identity]

It is hard now to imagine Barcelona as it was in the mid-1970s, a dense, dirty industrial city trapped between the mountain and the sea. The Art Nouveau buildings clad in multicoloured pieces of 'trencadís' tilework now glitter under the sun, once again a study in outspoken bourgeois self-confidence. Soft pastel yellow and green façades enhance the ornamental sgraffito that livens up most of the *Eixample*, balconies are full of flowers and the ancient stone of the massive mediaeval palaces in the old city has lost its oppressive coating of grime. During the 1980s, countless small *plazas* were rebuilt, opening up breathing spaces throughout the labyrinth of gothic streets on either side of the *Rambles*. Larger parks now punctuate the periphery of the city, and together with the new seaside promenades, pedestrian avenues, clean beaches, and the public paths laid out across the Collserola hills, they have led Barcelona's citizens to the year-long enjoyment of their public spaces. And everywhere a new generation of street benches, lamps, fountains, ponds, information points, bus stops, bollards, bins and kiosks encouraged people to get out there and walk, sit, drink and talk.

If I have indulged in this prospectus-like eulogy of public life in Barcelona, it is only because public, outdoors life is at the very core of the everyday experience of a Mediterranean city. In Barcelona through the eighties street life took on a new meaning: once mostly restricted to the individual use of the myriad cafés and bars that laced the urban network, it had turned into an institutionally backed exercise in collective citizenship. And the built environment, in its progressive transformation, pulled along with it the people who lived there: 'the modernization of the city at once inspire[d] and enforce[d] the modernization of its citizens' souls.'<sup>21</sup>

In the historical context of the transition from dictatorship to democracy in Catalonia, and especially in the pre-olympic euphoria of the late 1980s, 'design' became much more than a professional practice or a fashionable trend. In the hands of an intelligentsia who was in the process of leaving behind years of political and cultural opposition to the regime and of establishing itself as the new ruling class, it became a powerful ideological tool that was efficiently used to construct the spirit of the new city. Modern design was to be Barcelona's safeconduct to a brighter future, the cornerstone of its identity, the magic word that would unite all its citizens around a common project of renewal. By relying on a holy trinity of design, high culture and the idea of modernity, the upper-middle and professional classes operated a profound transformation of the image and character of the city of Barcelona, occupying places

of institutional power and redesigning it to their own image in a fury of enlightened despotism.

The nature of this hegemonic process, because it was nevertheless honestly concerned with the welfare and 'education' of the popular classes, can be described as intrinsically modern. Not only because after five decades of political isolation and urban decay modernity (or even just modernisation) was a primary goal, but also because its driving force was the unquestioning faith in 'good taste', 'good design', and the improvement of society through the beneficial influence of high culture.

When Oriol Bohigas praised the work of designers Miquel Milà and Carles Riera as representing 'a new avantgarde, that which maintains the ethical principles of social service and a discreet education of taste and comfort'<sup>22</sup> he was positioning himself – and them—as the direct inheritor of the modernist architects of GATCPAC, who defended in 1936 'the triumph of rationalism in our profession and a general and severe depuration of the architecture of our time, for we are convinced that it is the best way to serve the cultural formation of the people.'<sup>23</sup>

In 1998 Joan Clos was invited by the London School of Economics to talk about Barcelona as a model of urban regeneration and development. After stressing the importance of the political and economic context of the Spanish transition, he mentioned the strength of a vision that sought to leave behind the industrial drabness of the last half century and open Barcelona to the sea, recovering its architectural heritage and building for the future. Most importantly, he said, it had all been done in good taste: 'Doing things in an aesthetic way is a political value, a public value... To take care of design is a proof of ethical will.'<sup>24</sup>

However, many of the architect-led projects that transformed the city were initially received with popular reluctance, and the local press noted that 'the designers' taste often clashed with that of the citizens of Barcelona'.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, the City Council's Co-ordinator for Projects and Urban Works, Rafael de Cáceres, was adamant: 'Neighbourhood appeals are positive and necessary...[but] the responsibility for the city's urban design cannot be delegated, it must be the experts' task.'<sup>26</sup> One cannot doubt that the expert town planners in 1980s Barcelona were quite clear about what they wanted, and as David Harvey has noted, 'The issue of

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<sup>22</sup> BOHIGAS; Oriol *El present des del futur. Epistolari public (1994-1995)* Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1996. p189

<sup>23</sup> AC, nº 23-24, Año VI, 1936.

<sup>24</sup> CLOS, Joan, 'Barcelona, a Model for the Millennium', conference, London School of Economics, 5 February 1998.

<sup>25</sup> RICART, Marta, 'Obras que no siempre son amores', *La Vanguardia*, Barcelona: 26.01.92

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in RICART, Marta, 'Obras que no siempre son amores', *La Vanguardia*, Barcelona: 26.01.92

how to create what kind of place becomes imperative for economic as well as political survival'<sup>27</sup>.

Barcelona is now a celebrated model of urban regeneration. It is also one of the most strikingly successful exercises in urban marketability: it has rebuilt itself as a highly distinctive city, even though the commodification of its cultural and aesthetic meanings is rapidly getting close to pure commercialisation. Constructed through discursive claims that established the accepted parameters of what this 'place' was made of (what memories, histories, traditions, heroes, shapes, objects), it rose like a Phoenix from the ashes of late Francoism.

In its broadest sense, design played a crucial role in that process, not only in the evolution of Barcelona's physical landscape but also in the definition of its social and cultural identity. The agents of change appropriated the value of this newly created collective symbolic capital by being the guardians of the definitions of what was good, and was not. They rooted those definitions within the realm of high-culture and bourgeois taste, which had evolved locally according to specific parameters of modernity. These were efficiently used to construct the spirit of a new era, pulling together the loose strands of diverse and often discordant visions into a highly marketable and desirable product.

Yet the undeniable success of the result does not deny Manuel Castells' words:

'The basic dimension in urban change is the conflictive debate between social classes and historical actors over the meaning of urban, the significance of spatial forms in the social structure, and the content, hierarchy, and destiny of cities in relationship to the entire social structure.'<sup>28</sup>

Ultimately, the resistance of certain sectors of society to Barcelona's transformation into what has aptly been described as 'the city of architects' suggests that there might have been other models, if there had been other agents.

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<sup>27</sup> HARVEY, David, 'From space to place and back again' in Jon Bird et.al. **Mapping the Futures**, London: Routledge 1993

<sup>28</sup> CASTELLS, Manuel, ???, 1983:302. Is quoted in WILLIAMS, Peter, 'Class constitution through spatial reconstruction?' IN Smith & Williams (eds.) **Gentrification of the City**, Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1986.