

Urban experiences: EMBT. Gas Natural's building, Santa Caterina market and Diagonal-Mar park.

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Abstract

*The tourist route, a mass phenomenon, is a guided, partial tour (induced by someone else). The guides define what should be visited. Yet strolling the streets and discovering requires time. We are at the end of the post-capitalist period; the situationalists' *dérive*, getting lost to find a new interpretation of the city are behind us. The city is planned to be visited out of our civilisation's need to turn itself into a spectacle.*

This paper explores the relationship between the image of the city and the architecture, to determine what concept of city is implicit – through the architect's eye – on the project. We based this on a study of three projects of Miralles-Tagliabue, in Barcelona, analysing the city and its transformation through the different experiences.

Keywords: Miralles-Tagliabue, three urban experiences.

Urban experiences: EMBT. Gas Natural's building, Santa Caterina market and Diagonal-Mar park.

Barcelona has lately become a Mediterranean city of remarkable tourist appeal and the high degree of quality of his architecture and urban spaces is in great part responsible for this.

Among the various well known cultural trails through different parts of the city we can find a good number of architectural jewels – old, remodeled or recently build- as well as newly recovered public and green areas such as the new sea shore line or the recently restored neighborhoods in the heart of the old districts.

Walking those narrow streets through the old quarters, sharing everyday life with the locals, is today one of the most interesting and pleasant activities that foreign visitors can do.

Barcelona, therefore, is now facing the challenge of an urgent and most necessary transformation of its old city center to improve its living and urban standards, without losing the charming quality that history and time has conferred on this zone; keeping that liveliness, character and special atmosphere that both native and tourist appreciate so much.

In the projects that follow we will see how the town has improved its power of attraction by means of gaining new designed unique pieces of architecture, parks and public spaces and developing new design and specific project strategies for each site, to successfully deal with the complex and delicate matter of the old city center updating and restore. A most special care for the public and the people historical memory is the clue that allows to renew while preserving – or even improving- the attraction and best qualities of our urban scene.

“...To the extent that the inhabitant of (post) modern city is no longer a subject apart from his or her performances, the border between self and city has become fluid (...) the city as experience by a subject which is itself the product of urban experience, a de-centred subject which can neither fully identify with nor fully dissociate from the things which constitute the city”¹

One of the architects who has demonstrated great sensitivity in the establishing of relationships with a site's surroundings, in his dealing of existing trails, urban tracks, the successful inclusion of contextual data and footprints of a place, would be Enric Miralles. His plans are likened to tourist guides: they reflect and highlight landmarks, buildings, squares and existent trails. In this text, we will examine the procedures of three interventions to reorganize three emblematic quarters of Barcelona and see how those transformed the city, in order to find out their implicit concept of the city. These are works which have respected footprints, guidelines, cultural, social, physical and historical preexistences and which have improved the urban landscape in a time that demands restructuration as union to ecological and environmental requirements.

In the sites and neighborhoods where he intervenes, the context is perceived like an accumulation of diverse and complex elements, all of them important and revealing.

“It is considered that superposition of historical tracks are fundamental to understand the dynamics and configuration of the present day city, so an essential and preliminary document taking form, which is necessary for the project evolution as well.”²

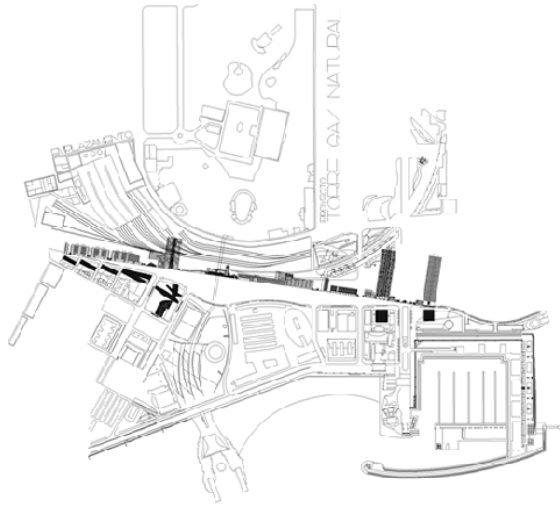
All cases succeed at heightening the touristic attractiveness of the sites in their very distinct fashions. The market, for instance, stands at the heart of Casco Antiguo (Old District) and, with its lively offer of activity, its popularity as well as public access is very much a place that lends itself to be experienced and enjoyed from within.

Gas Natural's building

Gas Natural's site is at the heart of the seaside quarter, between the areas of Barceloneta and Villa Olímpica (Olympic Village), a particular portion of the city which has undergone great level of transformation since before 1992, time of the stripping of the railroad area and a coastal rehabilitation. Immediate contact with the fast lane of Ronda Litoral, neighbouring the Barceloneta area and closeness to the seaside suppose the inheritance of a unique set of conditions from the city of Barcelona. As an office building, observers mostly see its exterior. The powerful ledge edges a strong image while it links to its surroundings and the building's skin echoes that of the others in the area. In 1999, Gas Natural convoked the contest for the construction of its new building. Six teams of architects of renowned prestige were invited to propose a design which would serve a double function: housing of offices and representation of the energy company. Miralles and Tagliabue's project, the one that was chosen, was the single one not to propose a conventional tower but a complex volumetric design. One which, as a result of study, succeeded to be, at once, in touch with the company's desired corporate image, in dialogue with its immediate surroundings and with the larger significance of the city. (Fig. 1)

¹ PATTON, P. (1995) “Imaginary Cities: Images of Postmodernity” en *Postmodern cities and spaces*. Oxford: Blackwell. Pags. 112-121.

² LAHUERTA, J.J y Tagliabue, B. (1996) “Enric Miralles, Obras y Proyectos”. Madrid, Documentos de Arquitectura. Sociedad Editorial Electa España. Pag. 235



ENRIC MIRALLES/ BENEDETTA TAGLIABUE
 ARQUITECTE/ ASSOCIAT/

Fig. 1

Its success in encompassing all these different ratios of significance can now partly be seen in the fact that the building is regarded as a landmark of urban scale when seen from the perspective of El Saló de Víctor Pradera, prolongation of Paseo San Juan's avenue. When approaching the building for a closer view, however, one begins to make out new, different volumes – including a rehabilitation one – which, in their scale, disposition and morphology, are in fact responding to the typology of the area of la Barceloneta and to the building's perception from the fast lane of Ronda Litoral, which it faces. The large cantilevered body is set in parallel with the apartment blocks also facing the lane; however, unlike these, it affords the possibility to completely walk through and forges visual links with the landscape it inhabits. (Fig. 2)



Fig. 2

The deliberately imperfect surface of glass on the face of the building instructs the vibration of light into a particularly rich and allusive reflection, which can be seen all the way from the pier of Barcelona, most remarkably when it's seemingly set ablaze during sunset. The offices inside have equally been built with the user's relationship to the seaside and pier area in mind: transparency extends from the pavement to the ceiling of all interior spaces and the façade skin, keeping users in

close touch with external views, and just as well, the stretching, long areas of the floor plan ensure that all who work there can do it under natural light at all times and in proximity to the views. (Fig. 3 y 4)



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Santa Caterina market

In the neighborhood of Santa Caterina, Miralles-Tagliabue projected the re-designing of the old market and came up with a modification of the plan that, up until that point, accommodated the forecasted prolongation of Avenue Cambó, set to advance as a rectilinear opening, devastating every old building in its way, without regard for their design, type or disposition. The new proposal, by contrast, devises an attentive subtraction of buildings' pieces that results in an opening that winds its way through the neighborhood sinuously, in the manner of the old streets and in organic understanding. It respects, as well, the site's grain of construction and reveals, as it trails, old architectures which shall be restored and completed in the new intervention.

Miralles-Tagliabue, authors of the master-plan, coordinated with the three groups of architects (Arañó/Ensenyat/Tarrida, Bravo/Contepomi and Fuses/Viader) who had won the contests for the housing projects, venues and public spaces included in the plan to re-design the same area. This union went to turn into an exhaustive revision of the initial plan, which, in its process, revealed keys for major improvements of the area, surpassing the expectations that had been expressed at the PERI (the former Master Plan). As the design work progressed, new connections to old roads appeared, as well as a new square, substantial volumetric changes, a finer approach to façades of existent buildings, the possibility to preserve additional architectural elements to the ones previously planned, etc.

The project to re-design the area (PERI) had to be modified in order to accommodate the direction of so significant updates. In doing so, the usual process of management was inverted and also laid proof that, in cases like this, a great capacity of possible alternatives to the usual town planning sequence exists and is to be found within the project itself. This will be the case when dealing with such areas of high complexity, density of significance and historic content. That much is stated as vital by Oriol Bohigas, architect and critic who talks about the problematic of remodeling this particular area, who also points that the three architects' teams have succeeded to recompose a fragment of the old, historical city centre - a most touristic part of town, without any concessions to stylistic mimicry but not without successfully keeping the type of spaces and volumes created under a morphologic continuity that eventuates in an appropriate continuation and update of the site's deep history.



Fig. 5

According to Bohigas: “ It is not only an example of a very well resolved project but of an important methodological experience... departing from a generic urban project, three teams of architects have elaborated concrete projects, offering each one their personal creative participation... Barcelona hosts a number of examples of this method, but up until now in more formal and easily digestible structures: transformations on the grid of L’Eixample, Olympic Village, reforms in the neighborhood of Raval which come from the project Del Liceo al Seminario, etc. But the issue of Sta. Caterina is more complex - more open, less regulated – and therefore even more promising in sight of the result.”³

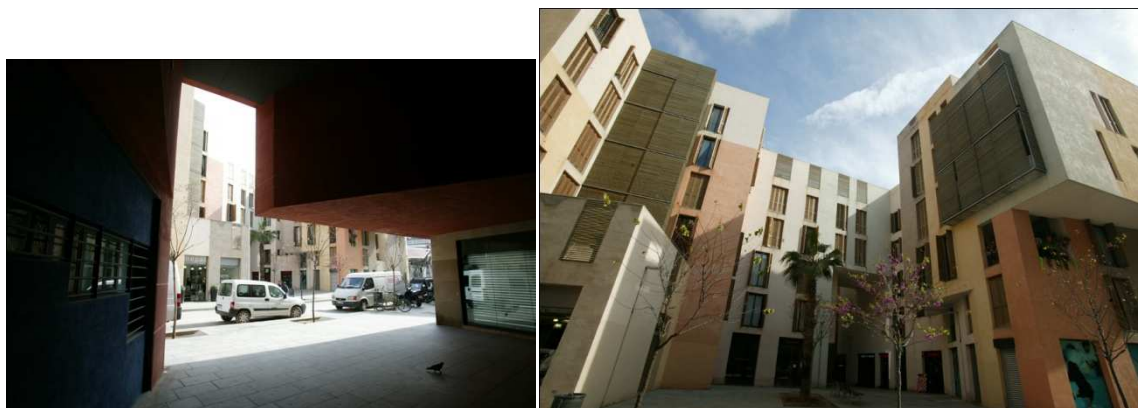


Fig. 6

It is in the footprints of this location, in the presence of historical heritage therein, in the culture, in the squares of the old city and the intricate design of old winding streets, that the most important weight of this project lies. The project descends to the area, adapts to its complexity and devises a physical and historical path that goes to end at the gates of the market. This is a method that has been at use in previous projects, like the Scottish Parliament. There, too, the stress fell on attaining a close understanding and interaction with the surrounding and significant natural area that didn’t fail to encompass the cultural depth and value of the historical centre. (Fig. 5)

³ BOHIGAS, Oriol. (3 de marzo de 2004) “Icono y Contexto en Santa Caterina”. El País. Catalunya.



Fig. 7

The place that will be called “Plaza de Santa Caterina”, would be a part of a historical trail that begins in Santa Maria Church, would arrive to the city’s Cathedral all the way through Moncada street, Marcús Chapel, Giralt el Pellicer street, the market and the Plaza of Santa Caterina and the Avenue Cambó.

“The same fragmentary mechanism can be recognized in the works of the Scottish Parliament and the Market of Santa Caterina. Not just in the façade’s mosaic, the skylights, in the Parliament’s sessions room and the bare structure, the roof’s surfaces or the carpentries of the Market, but in each of its spaces and constructive elements and the very identity of the buildings. The attractive and careful graphic expression in the floor plans – that the reader will be able to profusely explore in this monograph- may also be understood from the same point of view. But, above all, if one analyses the amount of architectonic dedication by each unit of space, one shall easily understand the kindness and proximity of the project’s decisions in respect to the viewer, evident in both designs. We could say they are both warm, familiar, almost domestic buildings.”⁴

We can see Miralles’ use of allegorical imagery where material items take the place of ideas. In Santa Caterina this concept shines in the colorful ceramics roofing the market, echoing the colors of the fruit and the vegetables which are sold there within in the diverse stalls. (Fig. 6 y 7)

⁴ COLL-BARREU, Joan / EMBT. (2006) “EMBT Miralles-Tagliabue”. Fragmento y continuidad en el Parlamento de Escocia y el Mercado de Santa Catalina. Ed. T6, Pamplona, España.

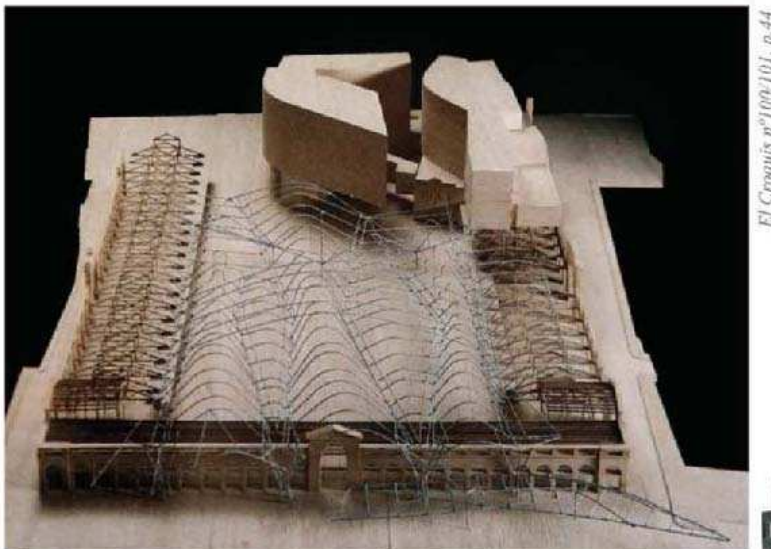


Fig. 8



Fig. 9

The old walls of the market's perimeter accept the continuative act by which the new structure incorporates and extends them, just as the market shares its space with the ruins of an old convent. This answers to ideas of inclusion of elements both present and past, in favor of cultural awareness and the possibility of re-evaluation and dialogue - a concept known as "present continuous". (Fig. 8)



Mercado de Santa Caterina. Maqueta de estudio

Fig. 10

"The intervention tries to mix and merge with the original structure. Both aims are accomplished via the realization of a new roof, which wraps itself around the structure and extends it beyond the perimeter of the construction."⁵

⁵ MASSAD, F. y GUERREIRO, A. (8 de febrero de 2005) "La inconclusa arquitectura del sentimiento". Arquitectos, periódico mensual de textos de arquitectura.

Diagonal Mar Park

In Diagonal Mar Park, 1997-2002, a difficult project set for the residual space between private blocks, the design will emerge out of the patterns of existent road networks and older railroad tracks. In addition, it proposes to connect itself to the nearby beach area, in a move to attain union with that close and accessible open space, the beach, which –besides- happens to be the only one big enough for the scale of the vast metropolitan area of Barcelona. (Fig. 9)

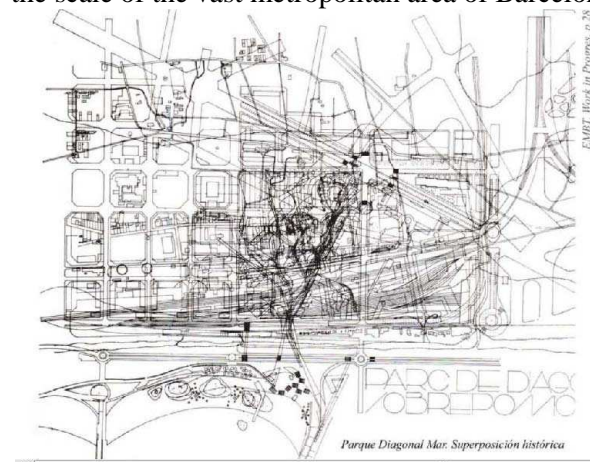


Fig. 11

Its design favours an interaction with the city. It is organised by following a series of paths, which similar to the branches of a tree, spread out in all directions. (Fig. 10 y 11)

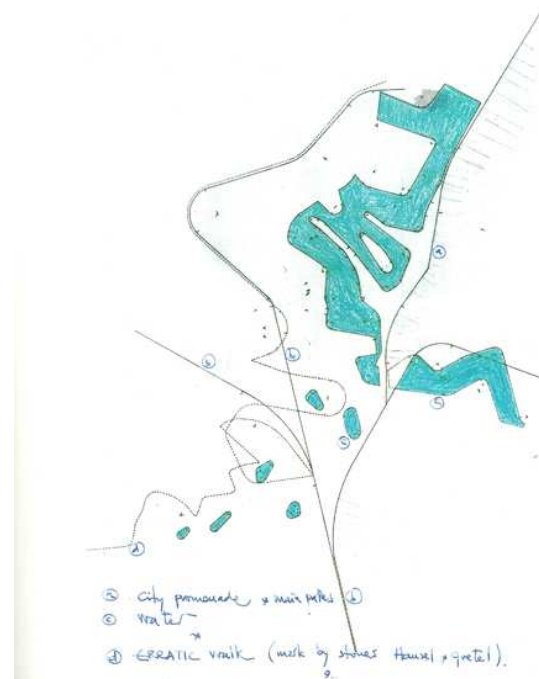


Fig. 12

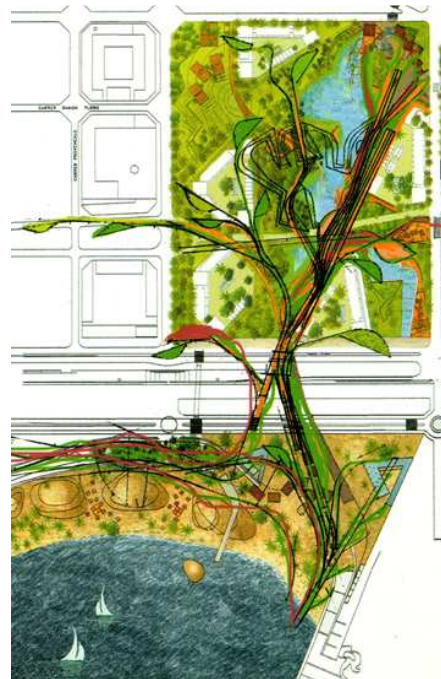


Fig. 13

The park rises in the beach and bifurcates in two axis as the main branches of a tree, each one forming more branches. The first is a rambla where the people flow; the other one is the life of the man. These two axis generate seven spaces:

a.-Branch of the plaza: a walking lane where park visitors from the central area flow to the sea and Paseo Marítimo.

b.-Branch of the man childhood and playground: life of man begins here at his childhood, a playground which is characterized by a small basin and some play-devices for the younger.

c.-Taulat street: the park comes to pause at this street, wherefrom astonishing views of the new Diagonal Mar neighborhood can be seen.

d.-A meandering walkway above the lake, and the lake underneath in surprising forms.

e.-The Magic Mountain: man goes on forward in evolution to his pre-adolescence. Playground with sinuous toboggans in a big green mountain.

f.-The Lake: a wide water basin with steel meandering sculptures, spitting steamed water all around.

g.- The Plaza: a place where neighbors meet and the intersection of the park and Diagonal Avenue.

Miralles creates his own repertoire of artificial nature. Elements such as pergolas, benches, metal and vibrant structures that, with the ever changing play of light and shadow, serve to enrich and enliven the spaces of the park. Elements that the architect calls “lungo mare”, for their sinuous forms.

Conclusions

The Gas Natural tower is an exemplary site specific project. Is an answer to the requirements of its location and fits perfectly in the Barceloneta neighborhood while becoming a unique visual reference when perceived from the nearby ring-road.

In Santa Caterina, the old Market is transformed in a new architectural landmark without losing connection with the people historical memory. A new avenue, public space, public housing, commercial and remodeling of the street grid around has increased the options for the inhabitants and visitors walking through the zone. New constructions merge into the old ones becoming a new unit. The old dark and narrow lanes get more light in and the place is now brighter –and safer- without losing its charm. The new volumes form bridges that allow the discovering of new spots, trails and squares through the old quarters when walking all the way down the nearby harbor.

In Diagonal Mar Park, though the idea of connecting new gardens to the biggest green area of the town –the seashore- could not be realized, an original green space resulted which deserves a visit. It serves both the nearby neighborhood and the city as it is - as the other examples we have mentioned above- a landmark in itself.

The case of the Market, Diagonal Mar Park, Port Vell and the prolongation of Cambó Avenue are all examples of successful interventions in historical areas of the city. These are areas which maintain and increase the city’s greatest touristic attraction. When dealing with those, interventions must manage to respect the quality and maintain the magnitude of their historic elements, without falling into the extreme that is conservationism, which would benumb the location and turn it – as it occurs all too frequently– into a dead and lamentable pantomime of itself. A transformation must most importantly recognize and prioritize to maintain the elements contributing to the location’s vitality and flux of activity. It is only caring for those that will grant the survival of its charismatic strength, life and touristic attractiveness and not close in on the possibility of its cultural and social progress.

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