

CONNECTING CITIES, CONNECTING
CITIZENS: TOWARDS A SHARED
SUSTAINABILITY

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Connecting cities, connecting citizens: Towards a shared sustainability

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Behind the Façade. Comparing Three Building Traditions: London, Lisbon, Barcelona



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BEHIND THE FAÇADE. COMPARING THREE BUILDING TRADITIONS: LONDON, LISBON, BARCELONA

ABSTRACT

The careful observation of three building traditions, which were developed in parallel in three European cities (London, Lisbon and Barcelona), may enable the creation of new narratives about the city and its history. Instead of a description of the architecture based on art movements, the text proposes an approach to what lies behind the façade. At the start of the industrialisation process of the eighteenth century, three events (the Great Fire of London, the Lisbon earthquake and the early and unexpected industrialisation of Barcelona) forced a change in the construction systems used for houses in these cities. This comparative approach may open up a fascinating narrative world on the society of that time that could be of use to city museums that are interested in the construction of European identity.

Key words: Urban history, architectural history, construction history, cities' identity, industrialisation



Introduction

What is behind the façade? This is a question that Peter L. Berger (1963: 29–38) asked in another context, that of sociology. This short text will explain why this question is also relevant when a city museum tries to describe the architecture of its city. How may new narratives on the city and its history be proposed? This article will attempt at an answer by comparing the building traditions of London, Lisbon and Barcelona. Actually, the proposal does no more than examine in depth the opportunities provided by the room “Connecting Cities: Europe and networked museums” of the exhibition *Barcelona Flashback* that Joan Roca prepared for the museum he directs and that focused on the role played by cities in the construction of the European identity (*Barcelona Declaration*, 2013).¹

Behind the similarities: London, Lisbon and Barcelona

At first glance, a terrace house in Regent’s Park in London, a tenement house in the Baixa neighbourhood in Lisbon and the Porxos d’en Xifré building in Barcelona look remarkably alike. They have façades with very regular fenestration, which uses French windows on a large scale. If the names of the cities were not given, their origin would have been hard to identify. The general composition is also very similar. However, behind the similarities lies a wide range of construction systems. Construction presents a resistance to change that is greater than one might have imagined, and, in this respect, comparative history is very useful to recall events that transformed the way houses are built in different cities.

It could be illuminating to focus on three events that ushered a dramatic change in the way of building: the Great Fire of London of 1666, which completely destroyed the City (Field, 2017), the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 that devastated the Baixa, the lower part of the city (França, 1987; Araújo et al., 2007) and the early industrialisation of Barcelona in the late eighteenth century, in which a dense city was constrained by city walls that could not be demolished (Garcia Espuche and Guàrdia, 1993; Guàrdia, 1995). Behind the façade, the fear of another fire in London can be found, warded off by the setting up of regulations that tried to achieve a fire-proof construction; the terror of earthquakes in Lisbon, which would be countered by an innovative anti-seismic structure; and the eagerness to profit from speculation in industrial Barcelona, which consolidated a system to cut costs by making everything thinner, including the flat roof.

The following recipe was then used: in its regulations, London imposed the replacement of wood with brick or stone; naturally, brick triumphed as it was cheaper (Hobhouse and Saunders, 1989; Cox, 1997). Enlightened Lisbon established, through its military engineers, a braced three-dimensional wooden frame, called the *gaiola pombalina* (França, 1989; Mascarenhas, 2009), and in Barcelona, the logic of capital led the master builders to replace stone with brick and to introduce the techniques of Catalan vaulting in new buildings for rental housing, called *casa d’escaleta* (Arranz, 1985; Rosell, 1996a, 1996b). London built with thick walls of brick and the party wall emerged above the gable roof with the aim of isolating fire. Lisbon standardised the construction system and also used thick walls to prevent fires. None of these precautions are found in the tenement



*How can another fire as devastating as that of London be avoided?*²

¹ *Barcelona Flashback*, Museu d’Història de Barcelona (MUHBA, 10 October 2019 – 31 December 2021). <https://youtu.be/7lnPjExfdW8>

² Source: Rolle, 1667.



How can another earthquake such as that of Lisbon be withstood? Building in Rua Augusta, 82-84, Lisbon. © Ramon Graus, 1992.



How can ever cheaper dwellings be produced for Barcelona in its rapidly advancing process of industrialisation?³

houses of Barcelona: instead of a thick wall, a thin wall of only 15 centimetres was chosen (Graus, 2018).

Going back to the three façades described, none of them reveal what is inside. The stucco always hides the material that makes up the wall. This was the elegance proclaimed by classicism, the art movement that predominated in the long cycle from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century. However, it would be a mistake to associate this style with the construction system in each of our three cities. Their building tradition must be explained from the perspective of *longue durée*. The great resistance to change in construction has already been mentioned. Styles passed and the wall remained the same. This is true whether the style was the facing brick of Bedford Square, before Robert Adam and John Nash made white stucco fashionable in London, or it was the nineteenth-century fashion of covering Portuguese façades with tin-glazed ceramic tiles, or even whether it was the wide variety of façades with *sgraffito* in Barcelona (Graus and Rosell, 2009).

The invariability of the wall

Perhaps it does not seem particularly relevant to consider the external walls of a building. But, remember how Émile Zola, in *La Curée* (1872/2004), starkly showed how Paris was influenced by the real estate business. Studying architecture with all its complexity would help to improve knowledge of society, its mechanisms of relation and production, in a combined exercise of social history and urban history. This could also be considered an exercise in cultural history. This approach offers a new interpretation of the architecture of these cities and poses the following question about their genuine identity: what is it that explains the inner forces that make the city? One common answer is the variability of the façade, as a matter of personal or collective taste; however, a fresh approach can be the invariability of the wall.

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³ Source: Rosell, 1996a, p. 300.



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⁴ Graus, R., Navas, T. (2021). Modern icons of the "calculated risk": Candela and Torroja in international key (1936-1973). In: Pizza, A., & Granell, E. (Ed.). *Crossing frontiers: International networks of Spanish architecture (1939-1975)*. Barcelona: Iniciativa Digital Politècnica. 78-94.