

Are Cities Creative?

The fact is that, seen from an orbiting satellite, all cities are beautiful. Textured cities, 'die-cast' cities, bombed cities or abandoned cities: they are like ink blots, like tattoos in the territory. Spaces without conflicts, in which all that can be perceived are the geological traces that the different levels of historical events have successively impressed.

But what city are we referring to when we talk about creative cities? The city that explains itself by its contents? The city represented by its citizens? Or in the city as a container: that is, the planned, designed and constructed city.

The zoom function on Google Earth is the ideal tool for getting in close and exploring in detail the different ways of looking at the city. In other words, this is a tool that provides direct contact with the sequence of Barcelona's urban events: from the distant overview of the kind that appeals to military strategists to the tightly focused close-up of the new sociologies and, above all, the recent anthropological vision of the city. Four quick zooms can thus show us the four fundamental moments of Barcelona's urban history, with the accent firmly on the present moment.

The first aerial photos of Barcelona, from a height of 10.000 feet, were taken on the military reconnaissance flights that preceded the bombing of the city during the Spanish Civil War; aerial views whose purpose was not to help reconstruct the city but to pave the way for its destruction. In other words, the city planned to be destroyed and rebuilt, in effect without allowing any time for the creation of memory, so that the destruction might come to seem not the horrific climax of a collective aberration but, so to speak, the first stage in the more or less efficient reconstruction of the city.

With a simple click on Google Earth we jump to the scale that was most to the liking of the men who governed the city during the 40 years after the Civil War. In other words, this is the city seen from above, in the low-definition panorama of the bird's-eye view, as if it were an aerial perspective, because in the aerial view individuals and their sense of place are distanced to the point of becoming invisible. This invisibility obliterates the details, the people, their comings and goings and their desires, whereas photographs taken at ground level were unable to contribute to what the politicians of those years wanted to sell the population: the Great Barcelona born out of nothing. Ground-level photographs would have shown only a landscape devoid of all urban value, incapable of generating any predisposition of place.

With the wave of inward migration of the 1950s the city grew as a spate of isolated estates, swallowing up the great reserves of omission and absence and forming a diffuse periphery of neglected suburbs segregated from the city proper.

With another click on the zoom the image is magnified and takes us to the first restoration of democracy in Spain and a Socialist City Council in Barcelona ready to fight and win the battle to reconstruct a city that until recently had been in the hands of unscrupulous mayors.

The screen shows streets, squares, avenues and parks — that is, the urban space, the remodelling of which gave shape to what was almost universally referred to in the 1980s as the Barcelona Model: in other words, the design and reconstruction of the public spaces *versus* the urban plan as the instrument of the city's growth and improvement.

If we zoom again the image takes us back to the scale of an aerial perspective. This is the Barcelona of the 1990s and 2000s, when the city once again asks to be read from the air. This is the moment of the great transport infrastructures, the Olympic areas, the Universal Forum of Cultures: it is worth recalling that however successful or otherwise it may have been in terms of contents, the Forum situated Barcelona, for the second time, at the cutting edge in the matter of radical urban transformations. The new area of the Forum marks a small revolution, as far as innovation is concerned, in the absorption of major operational infrastructures — sewage treatment plant, waste incinerator and power generation — into high-amenity urban spaces.

Finally, in order to capture the contemporary Barcelona, heir to the Universal Forum of Cultures 2004, we click once more on the Google Earth zoom back out the image pans out again, taking us back to ground level. The image expands and the form of the city blurs. The urban spaces of the 1980s vanish and the great urban planning operations of the 1990s and 2000s disappear from the screen to make way for what gives the city its intangible quality; in other words, all that is fortuitous in the completed city, in which the citizens are the principal players, the protagonists. Because beyond the more or less well-resolved public spaces of the spectacular architectures and the museological culture the city is a compact mass, like an impenetrable fog, which we move around in and inhabit as we please. Because the city is chaos: it is, in spite of everything, vandalism, pollution, rave, revolt. In short, it is the setting for creativity.

The relationship between ‘urban culture’ and the ‘urbanistic culture’ is a relationship that has been in bad shape for a long time now.

By ‘urban culture’ I mean here everything that happens in cities — that is, the whole range of different ways of living in urbanized spaces — and by ‘urbanistic culture’ I mean that which politically plans and structures the urban territory.

And it is precisely this ignorance of one another that occasions most social disruption in cities of a certain size and density.

Urbanistic processes today have become a kind of dictatorial fiat, the principal agents of which are from the private sector. The space of the global city is, first and foremost, a strictly economic space, with the city itself being transformed into a space on the scale of the international market. This is a context into which the city of Barcelona has been fully absorbed in the last few years: one of the chief challenges facing those who govern it today is, necessarily, how to derive local benefits from the presence of this kind of fly-by-night nomadic capital, which alights with very little warning and without the slightest concern for the city as such. High-profile urbanistic operations and big pieces of architecture by international big names are moved as in a game of chess, without a second thought for what is local, intangible, unexpected and changing in Barcelona. And it is precisely in the random turn of events that politicians, planners and architects are made most aware of their not knowing how to calibrate the dialogue between the strictly urbanistic discourse and the rules and non-rules of contemporary urban culture.

Barcelona today is part of one of the great corridors of European migration, and at the same time is one of the world’s principal tourist destinations. At the intersection of these two very unequal flows there is the city as a space of encounters, continually changing and always unpredictable. On the one hand, an ever more opulent tourism, and on the other, an immigration that is poorer by the day; the two together, like the two sides of the same coin, are inevitably and temporally bound up with this great phenomenon that we call the city.

Over and above the inescapable sense of the exhaustion of the model, a city that has gone from having nothing to having everything cannot go on thinking exclusively in terms of planning and architecture.

We need to find and explore new scenarios for creativity. We can no longer go on thinking — more than that, we can not remain locked in the belief —

that only the choicest parts of the city in terms of container will attract sectors capable of stimulating creativity.

We have seen how in the first years of democracy, the nineteen eighties, Barcelona invented a new way of urbanizing the city through the architectural design of its public spaces — a system that was subsequently adopted by many European cities. A year or two later, with the Olympic Games, Barcelona showed that these could be organized in a different way and that the city can evolve and grow in response to the needs of an event of this kind. For the third time, Barcelona was imaginative in showing the world how the great infrastructure that a big city generates — power stations, water treatment plants, incinerators and so on, which no city wants in its back yard — can live in harmony with the city if we succeed in integrating them with the urban space. This is the case of the Forum and the recovery of the seafront.

But behind all these examples of urban innovation there is always a person or a group of people who must possess, in essence, a creative spirit. If we want our cities to be creative, then, first of all, the politicians that govern them have to be creative. To put it another way, if we want our cities to generate innovative contents, then, first of all, their mayors must be innovative.

Let us now look at the present state of Barcelona in terms of creativity. I confess that I had never felt able to capture the exact significance and impact of our professions and, in general, of the activities that engender and spur on innovation until I was elected president of FAD (Promotion of Arts and Design). These last four years have given me the opportunity to work out where we are and where we are going.

In this regard, between 2005 and 2009 FAD launched five main lines of work that have given rise to a series of projects for identifying and channelling best practices and excellence in the professions it exists to foster, the main focus being on innovation as a driving force of creativity.

- 1 — Promotion of R + D + i: Mater and Experimental District
- 2 — Creation of nodes: Networks of Opinion and Terminal B
- 3 — Nurseries of talent: The Incubator
- 4 — Activation of analysis and reflection: Design Observatory
- 5 — Internationalization: The City to City Prize

Let me say a few words about the Design Observatory, a permanent space for reflection and debate that seeks to promote awareness of the points of intersection where design impinges most on the activity of businesses and

the public sector and the experience of users.

The Observatory is a platform for research into and dissemination of the innovative and transformative effects of design in Catalonia.

We know what design is, but we are not quite sure where it is or where it may be heading, what are its parameters in the country as a whole and its economic impact or the role it plays in business and in education. The Design Observatory can let us know where we are in everything that relates the designer with the world of business, the public sector and society.

Our creative sphere is very diverse, and in just a few years the number of people employed in the creative professions has tripled. For a variety of reasons, many people from other countries have moved to the principal urban areas of Catalonia, especially in the province of Barcelona — lured, perhaps, by the good quality of life in our city, but, above all, spurred on by the curiosity that so much of what took place in Barcelona in the eighties and nineties aroused around the world.

We have gone from around 1,500 designers to 4,000 — and at the present moment 4,500. A sizable majority have enrolled in the virtual FAD via the Terminal B website, which amounts to a new X-ray of the current situation, and many of them have already gained their place in the ranks of what we call excellence.

But why a Design Observatory? Today's creators have opportunities that go far beyond the design of a table, a chair, a poster, an artefact, an object: in other words, beyond the design of consumer goods. More and more, designers now think in terms of creating services, spaces, ways of working — helping companies carry out projects that transcend the tangible and objectual. This means that the designer today has to have a very different perception from the perceptions of just a few years ago. Manuel Castells explains this very well in *The Informational City*, when he talks about the flow space in which real infrastructures interact with virtual infrastructures, where material networks coexist with networks of communication.

It is in this new space that we find the design challenges of the future — a space in which young people have already started to work and move with relative ease. These new spaces of intersection need to be explored in order to monitor what changes are taking place and how these profound transformations will affect professional practice.

If we take a quick look at the history of design and begin at the beginning, we see at once that the nineteen fifties, sixties and seventies were the years

of object design, of consumer goods that were not readily available on the market: tables, chairs, lights, cars, etcetera... That was what we recognized as design. In the eighties the idea of design began to unravel: from seeing themselves as producers of objects, inventors of artefacts, designers — thanks to computers and the new technologies — moved on into the realm of interactivity.

Today, at the start of the twenty-first century, we find ourselves immersed in processes in which experimentation is a key value. Why do we want to experiment? Because we know that if we are to innovate we must first experiment. That is what the new profile of our professional world shows us. Knowing how to arrive at conclusions, what methodologies to apply, what new materials and technologies to use will enable us to achieve our real objectives: objectives rather than simply objects. And that is the purpose of the Design Observatory.

What does an Observatory do? In the first place, it investigates and reveals how design affects human experience in general. It is only from a real understanding of this experience that we can start to think and to design the future. And what are the objectives? On the one hand, to explore and map the new spaces of design and their challenges, from the evolution of the objects that make up our environment to the design of service flows; and on the other, to determine the value of design and its contribution to society and to the economy, and to emphasize its social role — to articulate and offer a critical appraisal of its activities and its fundamental processes and their management; and, finally, to become a platform of research and an acknowledged centre of reference. Only when we have done this will we begin to know where we are going.

But what about the rest of Europe? Where is this new cultural economy? How can we quantify the cultural economy of knowledge, not to mention the almost intangible emotional economy? And what factors make a city creative? Why does a particular area become creative, as Barcelona has done at certain times? What are the necessary conditions that allow a city to become a breeding ground for a creativity that is floating, at times nomadic, and at other times fixed and permanent?

In *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Richard Florida has written a superb study of the positional advantages of cities possessing this effervescence. He concludes that there are three fundamental factors that must be fostered: these are innovation, mainly from the public sector; human capital, and — most interesting of all — tolerance. In other words: talent, technology, and tolerance. The three Ts. Talent through the training of people, with

education as a key to the quality of what we do in the future, and technology because it *is* the future: promoting these things, promoting innovation is something that a city must do if it is to attract the floating human capital of those who practice scientific and cultural nomadism. And tolerance because only in accepting other cultures, in accepting people from other cultures can the sharing of knowledge be made far more effective and far more profound — and this is what has been and is happening, on a relatively small scale, in Barcelona. The fact that designers from around the world have set up shop here has prompted many Catalan designers to sit up and put their skates on. The emergence of a worldwide designers network of this kind is what enhances quality in the construction of the quinary sector, which is coming to be recognized as very much dedicated to culture and the creation of talent and regarded as the basis of an increasingly important new economy.

The ICE European Creativity Index compares cities with reference to these three parameters: innovation, human capital and tolerance — let's say talent, tolerance and technology. Denmark, Britain and the Netherlands top the list, while the Barcelona metropolitan region figures as a candidate to lead the industry. Some published sources in Barcelona go even further — perhaps too optimistically — and say that the quinary sector accounts for 20% of GDP. It is true that the Barcelona metropolitan area is a hub of new companies, the place where there are most firms dedicated to innovation. Another source says that 60% of new jobs are created — or were created! — in the quinary sector. But what is most often mentioned is the impact on competitiveness. We know that this sector has the capacity — especially in times of crisis — to mitigate the de-industrialization of a country and the relocation of major corporations. This is a growing sector, therefore, capable of regenerating economic activity.

From these same parameters, let's look at what is happening in Britain, Holland and Denmark. In Britain, the Design Council is demonstrating that design can play a vital role in strengthening the economy and, above all, in benefiting society. What are the findings? The figures show that for every £100 it invests in design, a company's turnover increases by £225. That three out of every [...] firms with a declared commitment to design have found that their competitiveness and their turnover have benefited substantially as a result, and that Britain's 185,000 designers generate an annual turnover of £11.6, which is not to be sniffed at. This study was commissioned by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown. Brown took a very clear-sighted look at the creative sector, and evidently the conclusion was and is that it makes a very significant contribution to the economy as a whole.

In the Netherlands the conclusions are even clearer. The Dutch compared the wealth generated by the creative sector with other sectors of the economy, and found that it equals what the country spends on oil each year. In other words, every euro the Netherlands spends on oil is offset by a euro earned by the design sector. In fact, the sum in question is also equivalent to that spent on the air transport industry: 2.6 million euros.

Clearly, it is of great importance for us to have accurate facts and figures if we are to gauge what impact the quinary sector, and design in particular, has on the Catalan economy and society, and especially on Barcelona and its metropolitan area.

In concluding, I would like to mention one of the projects developed by FAD in response to some of the current needs and demands — as we saw in the Observatory — of the different professional and business sectors. I am referring to Mater, which is one expression of FAD's commitment to stimulating our creative talents by keeping them fully informed about new materials, new technologies and new industries. In other words, new materials are taken here as the conduit for the evolution that must inevitably take place in our professions.

The Mater project is perhaps the one that most clearly embodies what we have been proposing over the last four years here at FAD: the need to introduce people to a new approach to design, to overcome the handicap that still today too often restricts design to consumer goods.

We launched the project with the exhibition *Mater in progress. New Materials, New Industry*, which set out to display and disseminate innovation and technological development in materials by focusing on real cases in which they have been applied by companies, professionals, universities and technology centres in Spain.

The latest phase of the project is the setting up of *Mater. Centre de materials*, a materials centre that reflects and responds to the growing importance of new materials in the development of today's society. Mater's mission is to serve companies, professionals, technology centres and academic institutions.

To accomplish this, Mater provides the necessary information and consultancy on materials and their associated technologies in order to help implement projects of an innovative nature: a very important aspect of Mater is the sharing of knowledge and technology between the different

sectors involved in the new industries. The Mater materials centre, which was inaugurated in the FAD building in November 2008, is conceived as a space of research, outreach, information and activism in relation to materials — and in particular, to all those materials that have something new to offer. In other words, the promotion of excellence in design.

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