

## **The politics of architecture in Barcelona**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the nature of architectural policy in contemporary Barcelona, by considering the recent development of iconic buildings such as the Torre Agbar and Fòrum 2004 site by international architects. It is argued that the urban policy pursued in the development of these areas will potentially undermine the city's long-cherished commitment to public space and urban context, and actually represents a retreat from the earlier years of the democratic city council's urban policy.

### **Introduction**

How did things get this way? How did global culture evolve so that one trend-setting building could reverse the economics trends of a flagging conurbation? That question would take us far from architecture into the greater orbits of political power, the world art market, the celebrity system, and branding (Jencks 2005: 21).

The creation of the Bilbao Guggenheim by an unlikely combination of a

separatist-leaning regional government, a Manhattan modern art institution, and a deconstructivist California architect has raised a number of issues surrounding the apparent power of built icons in recreating cities. Ironically, it was the success of Barcelona in commissioning high profile structures by internationally famed designers that spurred the Basque regional government to consent to the Guggenheim's demand for a leading edge building to house their art collection. Now, it seems, the geographical nature of architectural fashion and epistemic communities (Olds 2001) has seen the Catalan city return to prominence for international architecture, but has also raised questions about the role of design in an increasingly controversial set of urban policies pursued by successive PSC-controlled councils.

In 1994, Llätzer Moix published *La Ciudad de los Arquitectos*, a narrative about the centrality of architectural interventions in Barcelona's comprehensive urban regeneration. He traces the positive attitude of the city's mayors, Serra and Maragall, through the 1980s and 1990s, and highlights the emergence of a talented class of architects who were given their chance by a city council committed to architectural modernism. He also discusses the city's major projects, from the waterfront skyscraper Hotel Arts (designed by the US mega-firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill), to the landmark communications towers of Foster and Calatrava, to the MACBA (designed by the 'boutique' firm of Richard Meier), which nestled at the heart of the Ciutat Vella. The council's commitment to these interventions – a pairing of highly reputed, internationally respected international architects with an encouragement of local firms – was symptomatic of an aim of designing the city's civil society back into existence, a kind of 'designer socialism' (McNeill 1999, ch.6).

Much has changed in the city since the publication of Moix's account. A range of new buildings by noted foreign architects have been built or are in the process of construction: Jean Nouvel's Torre Agbar at Gloriès; Toyo Ito's convention centre for Zona Franca; the complete refit of the Arenes bull-ring by Richard Rogers Partnership (RRP) as – again – a convention centre; Herzog and de Meuron's striking Fòrum building; the development of several high-rise hotels, including one by Dominique Perrault; David Chipperfield's Ciutat de la Justícia in L'Hospitalet; a range of commercial towers by Isozaki, Ricard Bofill (who is based in France), and RRP; Robert Stern's Diagonal Mar shopping centre; and a slew of urban design initiatives by Zaha Hadid, Foreign Office Architects, and MVRDV. Of course, as I discuss elsewhere, it is a peculiarity of architectural practice that many of the works which emerge from a firm's office are given authorship to the individual lead architect (McNeill 2005). However, it is clear that just as Barcelona's city council and commercial elites remains committed to international design solutions, so there is a growing sense in which the 'star' architect and their self-consciously metaphorical 'iconic' buildings are beginning to lose their lustre. Critics of Barcelona's urban policy have made

this point very clearly, but it has echoes in cities around the world, from the transformation of the River Thames to the ‘coast of icon’, to those clients who ask Frank Gehry – canonised for his Bilbao Guggenheim design – to “do ‘Frank Gehry buildings’”(Jencks 2005: 9).

In this paper, I briefly review some key issues emerging from recent critiques on the role of architecture in urban renewal. I begin by outlining how recent debates over the iconic building have a relevance for Barcelona, focusing on the city’s latest addition to the genre, the Torre Agbar. Secondly, I consider the use of ‘signature architects’ as a means of legitimatise controversial development decisions, exploring the Fòrum 2004 / Diagonal Mar megaproject.

### **The iconic structures: Torre Agbar and the Branding of Barcelona**

A specter is haunting the global village – the specter of the iconic building. In the last ten years a new type of architecture has emerged. Driven by social forces, the demand for instant fame and economic growth, the expressive landmark has challenged the previous tradition of the architectural monument. (Jencks 2005: 7)

26 September, 2005 saw the inauguration of the Torre Agbar, Barcelona’s most recent expression of its obsession with high level architectural gestures. Designed by the renowned French architect Jean Nouvel, its promoters proclaim it as ‘la obra de arte de la nueva Barcelona’ (<http://www.torreagbar.com/home.asp>). Standing 144 metres high, with 33 floors, the façade of the building is coated with bris-soleil, using 40 different colours of tile. It dispenses with the high modernist notion of the skyscraper as a geometrical form, and its elliptical shape means it has a lot in common with the Swiss Re building, which has a similar presence on the skyline of London ([www.emporis.com](http://www.emporis.com)). The comparison is notable, as it may be read as a similar exercise by the local state in proclaiming its modernity to the world. For Josep Maria Montaner, “esta gruesa y gigantesca columna culminada por una cúpula corona una Barcelona cada vez más globalizada y anónima, genérica y cosmopolita” (2005). At night, the tower illuminates the city skyline through its 4500 façade lights, with the surface bathed in yellow, blue, pink and red ([www.emporis.com](http://www.emporis.com)).

The rise of the iconic building – captured in such singular statements as Frank Lloyd Wright’s Guggenheim in Manhattan, and Utzon’s Sydney Opera House, has been carried to new extremes. After Gehry’s Bilbao Guggenheim singularly re-invented the museum, we even see essentially private enterprises becoming civic statements. We have the hotel as icon, as in the sail-like Burj al-arab in Dubai; we have the department store as icon, in the case of the ‘blobby’ Selfridges in Birmingham. These statements provide a ‘signifier’ for Dubai and Birmingham, two places seeking to reorient themselves

within the attention of the world. But what makes an iconic building? Jencks (2005) defines the hallmarks of an icon as including “the reduction to a striking image, a prime site, and a riot of visual connotations” (p.185). It will also benefit from visibility from different angles and perspectives, as well as providing a metaphorical statement (the sail, the pinecone, the fish).

Of course, what architectural icons *mean* is very differentiated between taste-makers (other architects and critics), citizens who may have to look at or use the buildings every day, year after year, and – and this is perhaps the real target audience of the icon, of course – visiting tourists and business people who may consume a little bit of the city experience as part of a time-limited trip. As Quim Monzó has commented:

*El tiempo dirá con qué nombre popular conocerán finalmente a los barceloneses a la torre Agbar...De momento, los que más circulan son los conocidos “el supositorio”, “el vibrador”, y “el obús”, pero los tres pueden pasar al olvido en cuanto la gente integre este edificio en sus vidas, como algunos lo hemos integrado ya incluso en fase de construcción. (Monzó 2003).*

This point is elaborated more generally by Jencks, who summarises the ‘crimes’ of self-consciously iconic design as being ‘self-cancelling’ as icons attempt to upstage each other, as disrespectful to urban context, excessively expensive, and – the greatest crime of all? – as reducing architecture to mere surface decoration, and the architect to confectioner.

The danger identified by critics such as Montaner (2005), Jencks(2005), and Sudjic(2005), is that in their desire to capture an increasingly fickle public and rapid cycles of architectural fashion, the architect seeks the most obvious, first order metaphorical statement that s/he can muster. In a similar way, the architectural star system is such that Barcelona – one of the first foreign cities to give Frank Gehry a commission (his Fish sculpture in the Olympic Village) – is now desperately sought out to return to the city what Bilbao may have stolen:

*El Ayuntamiento de Barcelona quería un gehry, como Bilbao, y lo tendrá en el triángulo ferroviario de la Sagrera. Será uno de los edificios más caros y espectaculares que se han construido en la ciudad, una torre de 145 metros de altura y 34 plantas con fachadas que, como es marca en el arquitecto canadiense, avanzan y retroceden en planos quebrados, como fuelles desiguales de un acordeón, recubiertas según los casos con cristal o con brillantes placas de aluminio. Incluso tiene ya un sobrenombre, la novia, en alusión a la “cola” de placas solares que recubrirá el edificio bajo adyacente a la gran torre, que acogerá un “museo de la movilidad” que explicará la evolución del transporte. (Serra 2005).*

I noted, through Jencks, the pressure placed on Gehry to 'do' a Gehry, and it seems that in this latest incarnation, he is also unable to escape from the global museum economy that is associated with such iconic architectural statements. And in a city that has a council obsessed with its external linkages and territorial *genius loci*, the fusion of investment capital with high design is a central plank of its urban policy.

### The city of developers

*[D]evelopers and real estate interests, in their wildest dreams, could not have come up with such an intellectually credible screen for their activities, an intellectually and academically respectable and viable means of diverting attention away from the toughest issues in land development and the building process toward trivial matters of surface* (Ghirardo 1991: 15).

In the early years of the democratically elected post-Francoist city councils in Barcelona, there was a close relationship between the architectural lobby in the city and the commissioning of architectural works (Moix 1994). The usually small-scale interventions in the city, notwithstanding the large installations of the Olympics, were seen as a model for architectural and design collaborations by cities worldwide. Even if some critics of the council charged the minimalist 'hard' squares of the likes of Plaça dels Països Catalans as being part of an 'enlightened despotism', few would doubt the integrity with which public spaces were treated in the city council (McNeill 1999, ch.6).

Of course, changing attitudes to architecture in Barcelona have parallels with a changing attitude to the city's urban policy. A range of critical accounts (Capel 2005, Delgado 2005, Ecologistes en Acció de Catalunya 2004, Unió Temporal d'Escribes 2004) has criticised the direction of the city's urban policy in a number of ways. Lurking within most of these accounts is a sensation that – as elsewhere in the world – foreign architects are being employed less as a recognition of their contribution to civic culture and public space, and more as a means of branding both the city and lucrative, often controversial, large scale property development schemes.

The most controversial scheme in recent years has been the redevelopment of the Diagonal east of the major traffic interchange of Glòries. Here, while the council has sought to retain the existing morphology of the Eixample grid, there is widespread dissatisfaction with the rationalisation of free market within the city's housing policy. As mayor Joan Clos has argued:

Why does Barcelona want to repeat the custom of carrying out projects that unite us in order to drive the city forward? Because it is a good idea for us. Because the city is becoming too small for us; land is limited, but there are still places that have to be improved, and we know we have to do into this

in many ways and in greater depth. After the 1992 success, we've seen that the airport has become too small for us, and to the east, there is a big urban void that had to be recuperated (and this is why we are putting on the 2004 Forum). However, we are not proposing any Olympic Games nor a World's Fair, but rather a new event, with a new format, for an international meeting. And this is why the idea of the Forum of Cultures came into being. It means that we can talk, experience and enjoy a celebration, a meeting among cultures for 141 days (Clos 2004).

This statement summarises the feeling of many that Barcelona is now no different from any major city, its airport expansion and investment in business tourism (with high-rise hotels and convention centres) accompanied by high-cost, free market housing in a city with an already overheated property market. Such apologists as Richard Rogers, author of the 'gentrifier's charter' that is the UK Government-sponsored Urban Task Force Report (Lees 2003), would see little contradiction in the inclusion of new luxury flats *as long as they increased urban density* and – theoretically – reduced car use. Rogers has eulogised the Barcelona model in this regard:

*Maragall [mayor 1982-1997] has created an atmosphere in which the private sector is willing to conform to popular public leadership, because developers can both see the overall benefit of the long-term improvement of the city and recognise the importance of the public interest* (Rogers 1997: 20).

Yet this ignores the fact that Diagonal Mar has introduced 20,000 new car parking spaces into the city (Barba 2003), or that – in the case of the Torre Agbar – Jean Nouvel's 'dematerialising' tower discretely hides the gross vertical stacking of 4400 windows, 30,000 cubic metres of concrete, 80 kilometres of water piping, 600 kilometres of cabling, and so on (Ecologistes en Acció de Catalunya 2004: 25).

In the event, the redevelopment of Diagonal Mar is one that has infuriated many in the city, and its shortcomings have been well-documented. As the city council's director of plans and projects noted:

*Creo que Diagonal Mar fue un error urbanístico hecho de buena fe. Sé los motivos por los que se pretendió un modelo urbano tan ajeno a Barcelona, que no aporta nada y además entró en crisis en la década de 1950. Se pensaba que en Poblenou había mucha densidad de edificación y que si se concentraba la zona edificada en grandes torres se podría ceder espacio verde a la ciudad. Pese a ello, y ésta es mi opinión personal, sigo pensando que fue un error por el brutal contraste de escala que provocan estas torres y edificios esparcidos en un espacio libre que queda aprisionado por lo edificado.* (Joaquim Español in Serra 2003).

The high-rise apartment and hotel developments which characterise Diagonal Mar, along with its suburban 'edge city' shopping mall, have provoked a degree of consternation in a city which has had such a carefully detailed urban policy through the 1980s and 1990s. In fairness, it can be said the city council have levered significant public spaces from the development, such as EMBT's park and the refurbishment of many of the 'dirty' functions so characteristic of this section of the city. However, the fear remains that once again, in an extension of the process instigated by the Olympic Village (which Manuel Vázquez Montalbán in 1992 perceptively identified as a gentrification 'bridgehead'), the eastern section of Barcelona will remain forever off-limits to those of merely average income. Furthermore, this process has been legitimised by the sophisticated use of architecture:

*No és cap secret i molt menys per al màrqueting urbà, que per ella mateixa l'arquitectura ja és equiparable a qualsevol mitjà de comunicació des del punt de vista semiòtic. Així doncs, es va triar en primer lloc 'la imatge d'una ciutat 'revitalitzada', per a la qual es va utilitzar la construcció (en sentit físic), com a símbol (per exemple, 'Barcelona posa't guapa'), presentant la frenètica activitat constructora com un process quasi natural, sense actors concrets, i com alguna cosa inevitable lligada al 'progrés' (Pedraforca 2004, p.85).*

In the art of making the controversial 'inevitable', and of the fusion of discourses of modernity with those of 'progress', it is clear that the influx of foreign architects to Barcelona is one that has a parallel with that of China (Lubell 2005). Just as cities from Shanghai to Guangzhou have been inundated with foreign architects, so Spain has seen numerous high profile interventions from Zaha Hadid (four projects), David Chipperfield (six), Herzog and de Meuron (eight), Rem Koolhaas (two) and Frank Gehry. This has been partially fuelled by European Union subsidy, and – as with China – it may be assumed that the public sector construction boom in Spain is to be a temporary affair. As Lubell (2005) continues, there have been criticisms from within the Spanish architectural profession that too many of the new commissions are excessively frivolous. (Such a complaint is heard in many countries – Italian architects recently signed a petition complaining about the influx of foreign architects into Italy). Just as China seeks worldwide legitimacy, so – perhaps – Barcelona seeks desperately to retain the lustre that it had in the early 1990s.

## Conclusion

There can never have been a moment when quite so much high-visibility architecture has been designed by so few people. Sometimes it seems as if

there are just thirty architects in the world... Taken together, they make up the group that provides the names that come up again and again when another sadly deluded city finds itself labouring under the mistaken impression that it is going to trump the Bilbao Guggenheim with an art gallery that looks like a train crash, or a flying saucer, or a hotel in the form of a twenty-storey-high meteorite. You see them in New York and in Tokyo, and they are, with just two exceptions, all men; they are on the plane to Guadalajara and Seattle, in Amsterdam, and all over Barcelona of course (Sudjic 2005).

Deyan Sudjic's biting satire of a globalised architectural world dominated by clients desperate to gain an icon and unsure about their own taste ("Commission one and you can be confident that nobody is going to laugh at you", p.297) means that the creative architects who have gained celebrity reputations have too much work, or labour under too much expectation, to be able to provide a work of originality and integrity. Frank Gehry reports that clients tell him "that's not a Gehry design". Interestingly, one of Sudjic's targets is Santiago Calatrava, an architect whose early reputation was partially established with two significant projects in Barcelona, and who draws much of his inspiration from Gaudí.

What may also be noted is the export of the 'idea' of Barcelona. Just as the Bilbao Guggenheim has been actively consumed by policy-makers and civic boosters around the world, so there has been both an explicit export of the 'Barcelona model', and a more superficial take-up of the main planks of the city's regeneration. Its popularity among urban leaders across Europe rested partly on the idea that cities can act as an 'earth' for global processes, that footloose property investors can be perhaps embedded in the city and subordinate to an overall public strategy which redistributes surplus from exchange values to a public good (Castells 1994). The danger, of course, is that in the search for continued external validation of its redevelopment policy and place image, the sense of scale, originality, and urban context that characterised the earlier years of the 'Barcelona model' will be lost.

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