

Territories: Contemporary European Landscape Design



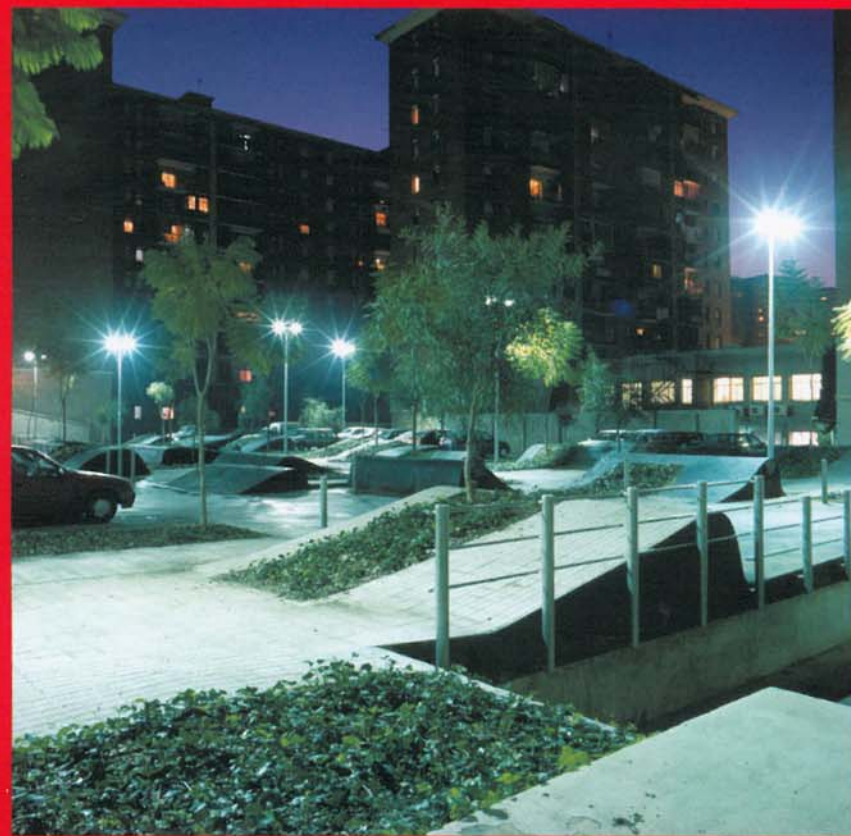
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ACTIVATING LAYERS: SOME NOTES ON LANDSCAPE IN BARCELONA

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Rethinking the city through its public space is a

concept that reflects the “urban laboratory” nature of Barcelona in the 1980s. During this period, the work of young, mainly Catalan architects, proffered an alternative aesthetic vocabulary that was quickly converted into a series of rapidly evolving models.

In the euphoria of democratic change,¹ many ultimately problematic public spaces (central voids, obsolete infrastructures, internal limits, unworkable topographies) were conceived, most often by extrapolating design methods from architecture. Vegetation was used in the same way as other materials. Yet although a kind of “good practice” emerged relating to urban infrastructure, and knowledge and more apposite use of vegetation increased, budgets decreased and social demands were progressively less reflected in the programs. Over the last twenty-five years, this transformation has turned Barcelona into an example of collective production of urban spaces that is still in progress today.

A View from the Inside

This essay should not be taken as an attempt to develop a comprehensive reading on the recent experience of the development of public space in Barcelona. Instead, our decidedly idiosyncratic look would rather raise questions than affirm our position on both constant and changing issues concerning public space. One exception to this “inside view,” however, would be that of a sense of a recent landscape momentum.

What Is This Landscape Momentum?

The word “landscape” recently experienced an unqualified expansion—on occasion, a metonymic abuse.² Although some claim that we are confronted with nothing more than a linguistic shift, we have witnessed a definite cultural impact as illustrated by exhibitions,³ specialized publications, and new academic programs.⁴ The political framework of the European Community, which affects local governments, has come to reflect this shift, albeit more slowly. This is demonstrated by the inclusion in the bureaucratic vocabulary of landscape as a cultural notion, rather than that of environment, where the latter term has been dominant and has had much influence on planning policies.

The relevance of ecology and sustainability and their social acceptance as conservation and planning precepts encourage the progressive integration of a new vocabulary in design language; yet this new vocabulary—ecology, sustainability, natural processes—still operates at a superficial level, despite claims that it influences strategies or pro-

FAR LEFT: Verneda District Parking Lot, Barcelona. Carlos Sanfeliu, Bernat Martorell and Lluís Lamich. [Photo: Bellmunt and Goula]
LEFT: Plaça d'Islandia, Barcelona. Andreu Arriola and Carman Fiol. [Photo: Bellmunt and Goula]

vides another layer of validity for projects. This new cultural orientation toward landscape can also be observed in an expansion of the field of projects to tourist and “natural” areas.

In the 1990s, planning in Barcelona took on a metropolitan dimension, and most of the public space developed was related to new voids and site opportunities derived from regional infrastructures. The Collserola mountain range was converted into perhaps the most important metropolitan park, while operations to connect and develop a system of green areas within the metropolis (*anella verda*) and the recovery of the two city rivers—Llobregat and Besòs—are still taking place.

More specifically, there has been an important change in the location of projects. If public space in the 1980s emerged from the interior peripheries, or *terrain vagues*, in the post-Olympic period, interstitial sites were located at the edges of the ever-growing city, where their agricultural origin could still be perceived. This change in location affects typologies of intervention, the limits of the spaces, and their designs. Could we suggest then a shift in the paradigm during the 1990s, or a change in design arguments?

From Urban Ground to Dialogues with Environmental Paradigms

In the 1990s, a promising cultural exchange occurred, instigated by the interest of practitioners who saw in landscape a field for exploring new ways of making. This provided hybrid references, sophisticated attitudes that were fed by new imagery but that still insisted on acknowledging local conditions.⁵ This apparent shift can be viewed under the premise of continuity: that of topography, both as surface and section, and as perception and materiality. The issue of topography is fundamental and often appears as the determiner of value. Humble surfaces,⁶ before being converted to “sublime” voids through art, are an essential material in all projects. In the following examples, an attempt will be made to classify a selection of Barcelonan projects according to their relationship to topography

The Urban Plaza

Voids within the consolidated peripheries of the metropolis are a constant in the development of public space. A series of works emerged in Barcelona, starting in the 1980s with Soller Square, by Andreu Arriola, J.Ll. Delgado, J.M. Julià, and C. Ribas, using the designed elements as the principal project argument. Plaça d'Islandia and Park Central de Nou Barris, by Andreu Arriola and Carmen Fiol, follow the tradition of 1980s, yet are more evolved, using striking gestures. Here there was probably excessive confidence in providing meaning to the massive industrial periphery through a process of “monumentalization,” where explorations in contemporary art and urban theory would guarantee lively public surroundings.



ABOVE: Park Central de Nou Barris. Barcelona, Andreu Arriola and Carmen Fiol. [Photo: J. Disponzio]

Walking and Marking

City landmarks generate a series of works where the idea of climbing, of walking (probably the most fundamental way to be in the landscape), is related to the materialization of tracings, to making the action visible. The Walkways at Castelldefels Castle, by José Antonio Martínez Lapeña, Elias Torres and Miguel Usandizaga, perhaps best illustrate this attitude, where the designed element, while interpreting the power of place, is equally opposed to it. Poetry derives from the juxtaposition of the artisanal sensibility of detail and the site itself, qualities that are also found in the La Granja staircase in Toledo by the same office, and similarly in Beth Galí's projects, such as the Montjuic hill escalators, as well as in the Sot de Migdia Park on the same mound, although these projects are less intense compared with the dramatic access to her Fossar de la Pedrera.

The Issue of the Ground

Architects of the pre-Olympic period had to invent a new context for their projects⁸ given the lack of valuable references in the immediate surroundings of the sites in question. More recently, many authors,⁹ noted that the primary role of the ground could be understood as a revisionist attitude to the postmodern practice of understanding context. Such thought is expressed in Olga Tarrasó and Jordi Henrich's Barcelona seafront and Tarrasó's General Moragues Square, projects which display a tactile minimalism of plastic operations (expressed in exquisite relief of petrified edges, smooth slopes, ramps, detailed staircases). As such, they are two of the more interesting design examples of the intersection between movement and tactility.



ABOVE: Park Central de Nou Barris. Barcelona, Andreu Arriola and Carmen Fiol. [Photo: J. Disponzio]

Microtopography, Decomposition, and Flexibility: The New Picturesque

The assimilation of the representational dimension of open space design is commonplace. In the early 1990s, another version of the development of the ground emerged: a support of composition whose direct reference has usually been modern art, especially geometric abstraction. Julio González Plaza in Poble Nou Park, by Jordi Bellmunt, Xavier Andreu, and Anna Zahonero, is an attempt to return to the essence of a sophisticated contemporary picturesque manner, where a horizontal surface is reconstructed according to pictorial references that derive from a renovated imagery. In the most interesting examples, this composition—initially conceived as a two-dimensional image, best appreciated as a “view from above”—unfolds to form a multilayered structure, providing complex internal views.

In the same sense, the ground as a composition is again present in the Torrent Ballester Park, by Antonio Frediani. A decomposition of an initial drawing, coming into contact with concrete conditions, results in a pattern of fragmentation. This manner of design proliferated during the 1990s and can be seen in several projects designed and constructed by the park services of metropolitan Barcelona.

Of late, an increase in the number of projects taking this direction can largely be accredited to a young generation of designers who find their design arguments in abstract art and images related to computers. The development of the Verneda district parking lot by Carlos Sanfeliu, Bernat Martorell, and Lluís Lamich, or at least the way it is represented, could be viewed through this lens: a frozen image of the intersection of flexible layers, a process of erasing parts of each constantly changing layer—as if the idea of cars' movement could be recognized in the plan.



ABOVE: Poble Nou Park, Barcelona. Manuel Ruisánchez and Xavier Vendrell. [Photo: Ruisánchez and Vendrell]

Integrating Processes as Design Tools

Yet it seems that in some projects, the ground is being converted into a deep cross-section.¹⁰ This emerging way of ‘ground making’ profoundly questions the memory of the site and operates at three levels: how to bring nature into the city, how to overcome the prospective dimension of ecological determinism and, finally, how to propose a landscape whose image until now has not been considered valuable.

Both the Poble Nou Park (Manuel Ruisánchez and Xavier Vendrell) and Park de la Font Santa (Ruisánchez with M. Colominas, agronomist) represent this new attitude, where emphasis on natural processes is translated into design arguments. A wider and deeper interpretation of the sense of place is developed by simply including less valued moments of the site's “non-history,” while enriching the narrative of landscape through an act of healing.

What are the consequences of this attitude? Does this mean that we are slowly accepting less sublime images? Will we in the near future be more open to appreciating what is, in the end, an everyday, non-photogenic Mediterranean landscape? Can value, collective memory, and sustainability coexist in these kinds of created environments, which are designed without a fixed image? These created environments follow the given conditions of geography and climate as they change the identity (experiential image) of the parks, while avoiding the search for a framed scene as they aspire to wider control not just of form but also of management.

From the recuperation of place and architecture of territory, we now turn to a recent, although well extended loan, “landscape,” reconsidered through the perspective of contemporary art, ecology, and the idea of “Mediterranean-ness,” as envisioned in rural landscapes, con-

structed topographies, and non-spectacular, but ecologically significant, woods and forests.

Landscape is a notion that through the centuries and local traditions has incorporated a multiplicity of representational sediments as sites and images, as well as bodily registered experience and memory, and thus perception. It is a cultural image and a way of making; it often sounds contradictory because it contains both change and the desire to resist and endure.¹¹

Recent hermeneutic contaminations of landscape in moments of occasionally excessive cultural pluralism should be interpreted as a further necessarily “activated layer” that expands in time and place our field of knowledge and activity.

NOTES

- ¹Post-Franco Spain.
- ²The word landscape as a conceptual frame possesses a wide range of connotations, depending on disciplinary or social points of view. In the design field, however, we can observe an intense metaphorical or simply metonymic use, especially by young architects, who employ the notion of landscape since it offers a wider representational frame of reference.
- ³Many exhibitions use the word landscape in their titles to imply a wider spectrum of readings. The European Biennial on Landscape examines Europe in an attempt to illustrate distinct moments in the development of open space under the lens of landscape.
- ⁴New landscape programs have appeared in Southern Europe, in regions where no tradition existed.
- ⁵The role of the masters program in landscape architecture at Barcelona as a permanent laboratory of exploration of new situations should be emphasized here, especially as it provided the necessary frame for debate and experiment.
- ⁶Joaquín Arraújo, a Spanish writer, reminds us of the common root in the Latin *humus* (derived from Greek) that links the word ground in Latin with human (*humanos*) and humble (*humilde*). “Las raíces de la tierra,” *El País* (24 June 2001).
- ⁷Translation of the term *monumentalización* applied by Oriol Bohigas to explain operations of improvement and their design arguments in the dense industrial peripheries of the city in the 1980s.
- ⁸In his article, “The *Genius Loci* Is No Longer Among Us,” Eduard Bru suggests that those who intervene in the contemporary metropolis probably have to invent again and again the spirit of the place. Eduard Bru, *Three on the Site* (Barcelona: Actar, 1997). First published in *Quaderns* 186.
- ⁹Rosa Barba, among others, claimed the relevance of the ground in a specific way. Her Ph.D. dissertation (*L'abstracció del territori*, 1987) revised Vittorio Gregotti's ideas on the significance of traces, and underlined the relevance of the ground as the support of the geometries of intervention—urban, rural, etc. She understood that meaning—mainly referring to Mediterranean landscapes—comes out of the tension produced by occupation and its forms superimposed on the resisting ground.
- ¹⁰For example, the project of Riera Canyadó by Maria Isabel Bannasar, for the parks services of the Mancomunitat de Municipis (municipal governments), Barcelona.
- ¹¹See the writings of Rosa Barba, Ignasi de Solà-Morales, J.B. Jackson, Michel Corajoud, Meto Vroom, James Corner, Gary Hilderbrand, and Elizabeth Meyer, among many others.

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