



palgrave▶pivot

The Meaningful City

Reading Barcelona's Urban Landscape

James Douet

palgrave
macmillan

The Meaningful City

James Douet

The Meaningful City

Reading Barcelona's Urban Landscape

palgrave
macmillan

James Douet
Barcelona, Spain

ISBN 978-981-96-6754-3 ISBN 978-981-96-6755-0 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-96-6755-0>

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd. 2025

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Cover credit: Pattern © Melisa Hasan

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd.

The registered company address is: 152 Beach Road, #21-01/04 Gateway East, Singapore 189721, Singapore

If disposing of this product, please recycle the paper.

For Rosa, Mei, and Elia

Preface

The urban landscape of a very old city like Barcelona is more than an assemblage of buildings, streets, squares and monuments, and more even than an urban narrative, constructed by architects, planners, sculptors, and their clients for the benefit of citizens and visitors. Contemporary understanding views the built environment as being semiotic, made up of signs and symbols that we read in a way analogous to that of reading a text.

The metaphor of the landscape as text has opened illuminating avenues to investigating how cities are constructed and understood. Authorship is multiple, writing and re-writing being realised over centuries, as older versions are corrected, edited, written and overwritten, erased, and deleted. Writing the text of the landscape in this sense is obviously deliberate, building could hardly be otherwise, but it is also unintentional, including unquestioned assumptions about the way that society is or should be organised embedded within it.

Unlike reading a text, however, reading landscapes is both a conscious and an unconscious process, one we undertake as we pass each day through the city: 'If landscapes are texts which are read, interpreted

according to an ingrained cultural framework of interpretation, if they are often read “inattentively” at a practical or nondiscursive level, then they may be inculcating their readers with a set of notions about how the society is organised: and the readers may be largely unaware of this’.¹ But they would be better informed, and perhaps more appreciative of their surroundings, if they were helped to be aware.

The academic frame for this book is critical urban studies, a field that interrogates urban areas to better understand how urban processes affect different social groups, often highlighting power structures and social inequalities. The present enquiry into the constructed landscape of Barcelona starts at the beginning of the eighteenth century, when the Catalan capital was forcefully re-shaped by its new Spanish ruler. It extends through the dawning of self-aware initiatives in the nineteenth century to consciously write a positive city narrative, up to the high-powered projects of multiple authors today who try to use the semiotic landscape to promote their political, economic, or social agendas. It is not a comprehensive historical account, examining instead periods and projects that have had an especially notable effect on the form and meanings of the contemporary city. An original investigation, the following nine chapters trace chronologically how the semiotic landscape of a well-known global city has been written over 300 years, uncovering the codes, signs, and unquestioned assumptions that structure the urban text.

Barcelona, Spain

James Douet

Note

1. Duncan, J., & Duncan, N. (1988). (Re)reading the landscape. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 6, 123.

Acknowledgements

The idea for this book came out of conversations with Montse Gasol. Familiarity with the history of Barcelona and the interpretation of its landscapes is thanks to teaching courses for many years on Barcelona as a global city at CEA Capa Education Abroad, which Anthony Gristwood developed as a way of reading the built environment. Family and friends who kindly commented on sections of the text include my father, Alec Douet, Torquil McNeilage, Oliver Sutton, and Sian Edwards-Evans.

Note on Names

English translations rather than the Spanish and Catalan originals are used for the names of people, but place names are given in Catalan as they are used in Barcelona. So, Philip V and Columbus rather than Felipe or Felip and Colón or Colom, but the Eixample, Ciutat Vella, and Barri Gòtic instead of the Extension, Old City, or Gothic Quarter.

Contents

1	Reading the Urban Landscape	1
2	From Militarised to Industrialised	19
3	A Self-Conscious City	35
4	Landscapes of Urban Theatre	55
5	What Is the Sagrada Familia?	75
6	A Democratic City	91
7	The Global City	115
8	The Sustainable City	143
9	Conclusions	159
	Index	171

About the Author

James Douet is a historic buildings consultant specialising in industrial heritage, and has worked with various conservation agencies including ICOMOS and TICCIH. He teaches architectural and urban history in Barcelona, and is the author of books on industrial heritage, the architecture of steam, military barracks, water supply, and the industrial chimney.

List of Figures

Fig. 1.1	The matching towers of Barcelona's Vila Olímpica, looking from the sea towards the Collserola hills (Author)	2
Fig. 1.2	Can Batlló textile mill, built out in the fields of Sants from 1880, generated the private wealth to commission Antoni Gaudí to design the Casa Batlló (see Fig. 3.2). It is now a community space (Author)	10
Fig. 1.3	The Medieval skyline (c.1535) was dominated by church towers and the city walls (Georg Braun; Frans Hogenberg, Wikimedia Commons)	14
Fig. 2.1	The officers' quarters of the Ciutadella, home to the Spanish military engineers who reordered Barcelona after 1714, is now the democratic parliament of Catalunya (Author)	22
Fig. 2.2	The street plan of Barceloneta denotes both military order and the rational philosophy of the Enlightenment (Vunav V)	24
Fig. 2.3	The ruins of the medieval city beneath the Born market, now a museum (Author)	32
Fig. 3.1	Cerdà's Eixample: an urban plan to encourage equality and public health (Alexey Komissarov)	39

Fig. 3.2	Contrasting semiotic systems on Casa Amatller and Casa Batlló. Gaudí's <i>trencadis</i> , a collage mosaic made from recycled ceramic pieces, is itself interpreted as symbolising rebirth and renewal (AXP Photography)	50
Fig. 3.3	The impassive heads of the chimney cowls on the roof of the Casa Milá (Flickr: Chris)	51
Fig. 4.1	The Casa de Canonges, the <i>Casa Catalana</i> archetype with two <i>finestra coronilla</i> openings on the first floor, aimed to create an 'authentic medieval atmosphere' (Flickr: Traveling Otter)	60
Fig. 4.2	The Pont Del Bisbe is the most photographed building in the Barri Gòtic, with its theatrical suggestions of Venice, the orient and night-time assignations (AXP Photography)	63
Fig. 4.3	The monumental symmetry of the 1929 exhibition park, viewed from Plaça d'Espanya, aimed to give Barcelona the connotations of global cities like Paris, Washington, and Rome (Creative Commons: Jorge Franganillo)	67
Fig. 5.1	The densely-packed Nativity façade. Gaudí prioritised the construction of this narrative before the rest of the church (Author)	79
Fig. 5.2	A citizen of the 'ciutat de les bombes', as Barcelona was named in the 1880s, being tempted by the devil (Author)	80
Fig. 5.3	The vast expanse of stained glass combines with the hard surfaces in the nave to produce what many find the most meaningful experience of the building (Author)	84
Fig. 6.1	Canyelles, cheaply built <i>poligons d'habitatge</i> erected on the periphery of the city in the 1970s (Flickr: Joan ggk)	94
Fig. 6.2	One of the new public spaces opened by the <i>esponjament</i> of an entire block, now the Rambla de Raval (Creative Commons: Enric)	101
Fig. 6.3	The construction of the Olympic stadium in 1929 and its renovation in 1989 enclose the six decades of dictatorship in Spain (Author)	108

Fig. 7.1	The Mercat de Santa Caterina, the outside walls of the 1850s market, on top of the foundations of the medieval monastery and overlaid by the 2005 cover. Compare with the former Born market in Fig. 2.3 (ximateix!)	119
Fig. 7.2	Diagonal Mar, the Miami of Barcelona (Daniel Franganillo)	121
Fig. 7.3	A foreign land? The Parc del Fòrum concealing the waste treatment facility, the photovoltaic pergola, the Fòrum Auditorium and Convention Centre beyond, with Diagonal Mar in the distance (Creative Commons: Amadalvarez)	124
Fig. 7.4	A landscape of innovation, the dHub design museum and Torre Glòries (formerly Agbar), encouraging knowledge spillover (Creative Commons: Josep Bracons)	131
Fig. 7.5	The Hotel Vela, a sign to cruise ship passengers that they are arriving in Barcelona (Flickr: Joan Campderrós-i-Canas)	137
Fig. 8.1	Rendering of the remodelled Camp Nou and its surroundings, democracy, and transparency written into a football stadium (FC Barcelona)	149
Fig. 8.2	Cerdà redux: a new garden 'square' created by the <i>superil·la</i> avenue of Consell de Cent (Author)	153
Fig. 9.1	Columbus and his supporting cast, still inculcating respect for nineteenth-century European values (Author)	163
Fig. 9.2	A patriarchal, male-dominated landscape? Torre Glòries from Carrer Casp (Pexels: Ali Shahin)	166
Fig. 9.3	Four of the elements in this Barcelona skyline were commissioned by the elected council, the Ajuntament. The rest were by real estate operators, a catholic foundation, private industrialists, and the port authority consortium, including the Catalan and Spanish governments (Author)	168



1

Reading the Urban Landscape

Abstract Urban landscapes are composed of signs and symbols which are written into their buildings, monuments, and streetscapes, which we read, consciously and unconsciously, as we pass through the city. Over the last three centuries different groups have ‘written’ this semiotic landscape in Barcelona, starting after the Spanish siege in 1714, and continuing up to the present day. Theories of semiotics and architectural syntax suggest ways in which this communication operates, and the academic framework of critical urban studies offers a way to interpret the city, so as to understand how this process is used by different social groups, who has written the city, and to with what purpose.

Keywords Semiotics · Urban landscape · Critical urban studies · Barthes · Vila Olímpica

The two tall towers that face the Mediterranean a few hundred metres back from the seashore are a good place to start a consideration of how to interpret or decode the meanings of the landscapes surrounding us in the city of Barcelona. The objective facts are these: the one on the right is an office block designed by Spanish architects and has been



Fig. 1.1 The matching towers of Barcelona's Vila Olímpica, looking from the sea towards the Collserola hills (Author)

the corporate headquarters of an international insurance company since it opened in 1992, just after Barcelona hosted the summer Olympic Games, while the tower to the left is a five-star hotel built by a global American architectural firm and was inaugurated in 1994 (Fig. 1.1).

Could more be read into this familiar ensemble? The literature theorist Roland Barthes suggested what would be required if one wanted to 'sketch a semiotics of the city'. In an essay called 'Semiology and urbanism', he calculated that it would need 'a semiologist (a specialist in signs), a historian, a geographer, an urbanist, an architect, and probably a psychoanalyst'.¹

The historian might look beyond the towers to the slender brick chimney, just visible among the trees, that was part of the Can Folch distillery in 1887. Until the 1980s, this neighbourhood was known as Sant Martí de Provençals and had for over a hundred years been the main industrial district of Barcelona, nicknamed the Manchester of Spain, with factories, flour mills, warehouses, and foundries embedded among the railway yards and cheap housing of the families who worked there. After these workplaces closed with the de-industrialisation of Barcelona's economy in the 1970s, the whole area was cleared and replaced with

apartment blocks for the Olympic village, but the solitary chimney was kept as a token reminder of its industrial past.²

To an urban geographer the chimney is a fragment of a relict landscape. This is a term borrowed from physical geographers, who use it to characterise surviving geomorphological features formed under previous climatic or ecological conditions, ones that no longer determine the environment. As remnants of formerly active processes, they offer windows into recognising the forces that formed the earth's surface in the past. Similarly, relict urban landscape features, like the distillery chimney, provide us with clues to understand the previous technical, social, or economic conditions that once shaped the city.³

Locally, the Can Folch chimney is regarded as a symbol of the disregard paid to the district's working class history when it was redeveloped by the city council. For a geographer from critical urban studies, both the surviving chimney and the two enormous towers which dwarf it are clear indicators of how mainstream urban planning processes prioritise economic growth and investment returns over social inclusion, sustainability or social justice in determining the built environment.⁴

The psychoanalyst could detect contrasting ways in which different people understand the towers. For local residents, they are a strong component in the *genius loci* of the neighbourhood, the 'spirit of the place' that they feel living in their shadow.⁵ For visitors to the city, they are one of the half-dozen outlines that make up the touristic skyline (see Fig. 9.3), part of what they expect to see when they come to Barcelona. These are thoughtfully confected urban landscapes which are intended to be visually 'consumed' by visitors, in what sociologists call 'the tourist gaze'.⁶ As for people who may be making location decisions about Barcelona, to start a business, take up a new job, or choose a place in which to invest, the towers are part of the Barcelona brand, helping to identify it as a global destination.⁷

A semiologist could have a more contentious opinion of what they mean. If Barcelona simply wanted additional hotel space and an office block, there are simpler building types that could have been built, and in less expensive locations: they were evidently intended to say something particular about the city and this stretch of its shoreline. Skyscrapers are distinctive landmarks, traditionally associated with capitalist, high-value

business activities in North American cities, and accordingly sometimes interpreted in other countries as agents of cultural colonialism. In the twenty-first century they became favoured symbols of emerging or aspiring global cities in Asia and the Middle East, their shapes often breaking with the rectilinear modernist skyscraper orthodoxy to incorporate memorable profiles or locally relevant motifs in a search for singularity. Paired skyscrapers like these are not common, although there are two in Madrid that lean towards each other and are known as the Puertas de Europa. The placing and spacing of the pair in Barcelona, although they have never had a collective name, does suggest a gateway or entrance.⁸

The verticality of the skyscraper is also replete with gender connotations, a popular anatomical association with the phallus making skyscrapers a familiar symbol of masculinity. Verticality also has religious associations, evident in the clustered spires of the Sagrada Família, framed distantly in the gap between the towers, which we will examine in Chapter 5. While gendered readings of the urban landscape have proved problematical to pin down, the towers and spires of Barcelona contribute to the impression of a patriarchal urban landscape, dominated by the verticality of capitalist and catholic constructions. Perhaps significantly, the central spire of the church is the height limit for tall buildings in the contemporary city.⁹

The two towers may also make a slender claim to being early pieces of 'iconic' architecture. Dating from the 1990s, this overused and ill-defined term (we will propose a clearer definition in a later chapter) is popularly linked with the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, another old Spanish industrial town that pioneered spectacular architecture to catalyse the phase change from industrial decay to post-industrial prosperity and global fame.¹⁰ During a period in which the Sagrada Família has come increasingly to be used as the international symbol or stand-in for Barcelona, they could moreover be read as an attempt to substitute a secular, capitalist metonym in place of the complex spiritual and historical meanings associated with Gaudí's great church. That is certainly implied by the choice of the arch-modernist architects of corporate skyscrapers, Chicago's Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM), to design the Hotel Arts.