

Barcelona, public spaces for all

This is a story we can start explaining from either end. We can begin from what is general and then get into what is specific, or we can start from the specifics that concern the needs of the handicapped and then get into the needs of the population in general and their relation with the city they live in. We will in either case come to the same conclusions as both ends relate and cannot be taken into account properly unless we consider them both.

I will therefore take the first approach, as this reflects the process the city of Barcelona went through, when willing to create friendlier public spaces for all her citizens and, as a result of that, a more welcoming city with a higher quality of life for everybody, including the citizens with special needs.

As most European cities, Barcelona is a city of cities. A city made of different urban fabrics that reflect the way she has grown along the time and her capacity to incorporate existing territories. As a consequence of that, it is a city whose parts have different needs but share the necessity of a common approach that allows for proper reading of the whole.

This story starts in the early 1980's, when, after decades of decay and little concern about the public realm, the newly elected authorities had to respond to the citizen's demands and prove that they could built a better environment for her inhabitants. Intervening in the public spaces of the city was seen as a way not only to improve them, but start a process that should go beyond them and renew the whole city.

Cars had taken most of the available public space and pedestrians were a rarity about which nobody cared. Regaining public areas for pedestrians was therefore a must, and, from small "plazas" in historical areas to highly representative public spaces, traffic got limited, new parking areas created and pedestrian zones increased.

Continuity was a motto. The newly created public spaces should not be isolated elements targeting to their immediate neighbours. They should become part of a whole that would allow for fluidity, in order that their benefits for the city would go beyond their limits and have a real impact in the urban fabric. The reason was double: on one side, that would give a more powerful image to the whole city and, on the other side; this would create the necessary critics mass for the public investment in the public spaces to have a real economic impact in the private domain. As a consequence of this approach, the private sector would be integrated into the process and contribute to the development of bigger, more complex, transformations.

The waterfront of the city got soon incorporated to this process, in such a way that its transformation brought a full new image to the city, creating the biggest and most powerful public space it has; a public space that has largely contributed to an economical revamping of Barcelona and created a new tourist industry that was not part of the city's industry not so many years ago.

Streets and avenues got also incorporated to the process. While squares and green areas have traditionally been considered public spaces, streets and avenues are often considered mere traffic corridors that channel vehicular connexions within the city.

They constitute however, the main pedestrian corridors as well. Therefore the way they were organised could make a major contribution to making the public spaces a consistent network.

The big infrastructures that had to intersect some parts of the city were particularly relevant. Some of them had been built in the previous years and were already separating the parts of the city at each side. Some others had remained unfinished and left big gaps impeding urban continuity. In both cases they were been seen as an opportunity to be transformed into new focal points that could gather a series of activities around new public spaces instead of being breaking points with traffic intersecting the existing city.

In other parts of the city, when dealing with avenues that had a reasonable degree of consolidation, establishing the right proportion between the surfaces devoted to pedestrians and the surface devoted to car traffic was one of the main initial steps. Other decisions had to follow: what kind of spaces would pedestrians have there? How should the pedestrian connections through traffic be made? And this led to defining some of the key elements that, from that moment on, constitute the main contribution to integrating people with mobility problems into the public realm of the city of Barcelona.

The small ramp for cars to get into their parking spaces within the buildings was one of them, as it was going to avoid the “waiving” sidewalks that were so common and that created so many difficulties to people walking.

The small ramp for pedestrians became even more important, as it has constituted the new universal solution within the city for pedestrian’s street crossing. This is an element that not only provides for a solution to the persons with special needs, but clearly identifies those key points in the city where pedestrians and cars have to confront each other.

The solution for handicapped persons came therefore together with a solution that was meant for the city in general. Only when wishing to improve the overall quality of the city’s public spaces and make them friendlier for the citizens to use, the right solution came out. What constituted a good solution for the handicapped constituted as well a good solution for all the inhabitants of Barcelona. Handicapped were not treated as special citizens that needed a solution for their own. And that was undoubtedly the correct approach towards integration.