

# Terrain vague post crisis : exploring the thresholds of Barcelona

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# TERRAIN VAGUE POST-CRISIS

## EXPLORING THE THRESHOLDS OF BARCELONA

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Yasmine Sinno



At first glance, limitations and urbanity may seem contradictory, yet the recent developments in Europe have proven the link to carry much more potential than mere urban sprawl and suburban development. The largest impact witnessed in Europe in the last decade is the rise of the economic crisis and its toll on the socio-economic development of various countries, let alone the development of the urban fabric. Promising stories of the late 20th century such as post-Olympics Barcelona witnessed a quasi-total collapse of their utopian dreams. One could argue that the most visible manifestation of the crisis can be seen on the outskirts borders of cities. Many massive construction sites suddenly halted, turned into uncannily deserted landscapes, surrounded by ghost cities that were left abandoned by former inhabitants but never injected with formerly promised programs. These spaces, along with sites of post-industrial wastelands, became the fascination of artists and architects. Many sought to catch their essence, intervene on or label them: 'edge land', 'terrains vagues', 'derelict thresholds', and so forth. The interest hereby is to take on the socio-economic aspects of these spaces and see how theory and interventions attributed to such spaces gained new significance with the staging of the economic crisis. The attributed case studies are the construction sites on the outskirts of Barcelona and its annexed peripheral cities in northern Spain. The questions are threefold: What are the repercussions of the economic crisis on urban developments? How do the new 'terrains vagues' affect the transforming role of the architect? And last, how these transformations are moving towards the creation of a new utopia: architecture activism and alternative space appropriations?

After the iconic figure of post-industrial wastelands and of infinitely repetitive peripheral residential blocks, a new imagery on the periphery is at hand: the disastrous construction of speculative real estate. Ghost cities and abusive urbanization of large swatches of territory are meticulously depicted and annotated in Julia Schulz-Dornburg's recent publication, 'Ruinas Modernas'<sup>1</sup>. The monograph is essential to grasp and visualize the scope of the post-crisis urban scar. It displays a photographic inventory of the massive scale projects of speculative real estate in the Catalan and other Spanish regions: abandoned half-constructed sites, deserted leisure enclaves or residential complexes inland and on the Spanish coasts. From Espui in Lleida, to San Mateo de Gallego and La Muela close to Zaragoza and L'Aldea in Tarragona, all these sites were estimated to host much larger numbers of inhabitants than the surrounding cities. Most were planned in the first half of the



fig. a  
Las Dehesas de San Mateo de Gallego, March 2011  
© Schulz-Dornburg, *Ruinas Modernas*, p.130

last decade, partially constructed around 2005, then abandoned around 2009. The visuals are impressive and disturbing, portraits of graveyards of promised opportunities. Some did not go beyond excavation stages, while others represent post-apocalyptic scenarios with almost finished projects that never served. The dimensions of these devastating landscapes seem equivalent to those of a war or a natural disaster; these ghost cities even exceed by far the scale of adjacent cities.

The overall image that comes out of these new derelict sites presents an urban mapping of the successive economic crises that Spain has undergone in the last decade. The actual financial crisis is in fact a sum of several crises. In short, a sector crisis born in the United States became a global economic recession that damaged mainly the most leveraged banks and, in turn, the most indebted countries. A debt crisis followed a widespread economic crisis, hitting, in particular, Europe. The peripheral countries were severely affected. Since 2009, unemployment in Spain jumped from its natural long-term trend figure up to 20%. Meanwhile, fueled by a quest for austerity, excess of leverage and lack of growth proved to be lethal to the banking sector. Years after the 2008 Lehman Brothers default in the US, Spain has been forced to recapitalize banks, to

shut down some and to merger others. These consecutive crises, the worst since 1929, have changed the shape of cities. In Spain, many couples left their homes, went back to their parents' households, and sold secondary ones, while holiday-houses were left unsold. As a consequence, new buildings are empty and projects abandoned. In most cases, the city has to reinvent itself. Yet one should not forget that the economic crisis is in some measure an illusion and its consequences are partially due to the general belief in this illusion: hesitation and skepticism is overwhelming the financial and private sector, a situation is treated as utter fact. The outcome is a self-fulfilling prophecy that renders the understanding of the current economic situation almost impossible, let alone acting and intervening within it.

On a parallel note, the Spanish contemporary theoretical stage has not proven easier to decipher. In a conference held at CCCB Barcelona on March 2013, cleverly entitled 'En Comú' (i.e. 'in common' in Catalan), Zygmunt Bauman held a lecture on the present state of education.<sup>2</sup> He declared that acquiring knowledge is becoming increasingly uncertain due to the excess of information. Quoting Eriksen, he stated: «Information society offers cascades of decontextualized signs more or less randomly connected to each other; when





fig. b  
 El Mirador del Ebro in L'Aldea, Tarragona, December 2011  
 © Schulz-Dornburg, *Ruinas Modernas*, p.58

growing amounts of information are distributed at growing speed it becomes increasingly difficult to create narratives, order, developmental sentences. The fragments threaten to become hegemonic. This has consequences for the ways we relate to knowledge and lifestyle in a wide sense<sup>3</sup>. The decontextualization of knowledge, as he puts it, results in a feeling of disorientation rather than enlightenment, and our greatest challenge becomes coping with this disorientation. The hypothesis, set in this paper, is that this decontextualization and consequent disorientation has spilled over on the physical realm. The floods of decontextualized inputs, in absence of proper control and regulations, have left a great sense of disorientation towards the urban context. City limits became spaces seen in blurred vision, and this unhealthy gap between public awareness and real estate investment has bred monsters. Moreover, fluctuations in prices have affected the lifespan of buildings. The outcome, as Julia Schulz-Dornburg denotes, is a «contradiction between instability and durability of architecture»<sup>4</sup>. This disorientation therefore has given investing Spanish families a great deal of freedom that was evidently usurped. Las Dehesas de San Mateo de Gallego serves as an example: an over-scaled construction of a residential complex, initiated around 2006, with the prospect of serving potential 9000

users while the municipality of San Mateo de Gallego incorporated merely 3137 inhabitants. As, three years later, the glitch in the demand-offer equation became evident, the site was abandoned and 38 units were left partially constructed.

Nevertheless, the quantifiable quality of the present Catalan scenario could prove to be inherent of a positive aspect. The urban physicality is clearly tangible, unlike other aspects of the bursting economic bubble. Intervention and reappropriation become possible alternatives for reactions. Similarly, the crisis situation in Spain has shown one positive outcome: it led to a growing public awareness. The social effect of a housing boom then burst, and the increase in total unemployment, in particular youth unemployment (up more than 40% in 2012), lead to broad social demonstrations. Until recently, the Catalan region had become near-sighted through the gained confidence in the promises of democracy, a propitious European Union and social welfare. This forced awareness in the last decade could be proven utilitarian. One of the most prominent Catalan thinkers who initiated an alternative urban perception was the architect and theoretician Ignasi de Solà-Morales who described derelict spaces and first coined the well-known term 'terrain vague'. Morales' thought became a prime legacy for current architects to reexamine

their cities, peripheries and echoing thresholds. Francesc Muñoz who followed and later taught the 'Metropolis' master program with Morales, conducted major research on notions of in-between spaces, while Giulia Fiocca, also a 'Metropolis' graduate, returned to Rome to join interventions on frontiers with the 'Stalker' collective. In fact, the theses conducted in the 'Metropolis' program exemplify current shifts in the urban Catalan context. Increased interest is observed towards in-between and derelict spaces; ephemeral interventions and peripheral scenarios are presented as antidotes to the market-driven stream. Moreover, various publications and conferences held in CCCB, COAC and other institutions present a new spectrum of notions such as 'the common', 'the adaptable city', 'urbanization'<sup>5</sup> or 'participated utopianism'. In the conference '(In)visible Cities' held in Barcelona, Stuart McDonald raises the question of «how to create genuine commonplace rather than just icons driven by ephemeral demands of the market». He then concludes by stating: «The modernist city could not vote because of the grand utopianism of 20th century laid in the hands of technocratic elite architects and planners [...] Perhaps one should strive for a more participated utopianism fed by global demand for imagination and creativity, we should learn from consumerism and apply the lessons of innovation to public space.»<sup>6</sup>

In this fashion, at the core of the urban economy-driven crisis lies a shifting role of the architect. The trigger is twofold: first an evident lack of client-based commissioning, and second the undeniable presence of these post-crisis 'terrains vagues' and the increased interest in them. With an increasing number of unemployed architects and the increasing scale of derelict space, Spain is witnessing the rise, among other notions, of 'the architect activist'. Particularly in Barcelona, many contemporary initiatives call for alternative modes of urban interventions. In May 2013 an open call was launched by IDensitat in Barcelona; in their overture, they state: «The proven inability of governments to restrain the current crisis causes the implementation of specific policies based on cutbacks, which tends to redefine society as a regional technology business. If this business is based on high degree of competitiveness and solely virtual connectivity, the relationship between culture, society and regionality ends up crippled.» To countermand, their call is set for «proposals for imaginative interventions for the use of public space in the future beyond a post-crisis scenario».<sup>7</sup>

One should note that, while this advocated standpoint is being promoted in the Catalan architectural and art domains, one could find assimilations with other circles and interventions, such as the work of Raumlabor from Berlin, or the Amsterdam



call for ideas 'Activating Urban Voids' by Wonderland. Even at ETH Zurich, a symposium was held in May 2013 entitled 'Utopia's Return' in which keynote speakers Ute Bauer and Pedro Gadanho advocated current utopian visions based on urban ephemeral, often small-scale interventions by those whose work lies in between disciplines.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, considering the Catalan context, these tendencies in urban visions take on regional aspects. Since 1992, albeit apparent growth in construction in the post-Olympic period in Barcelona, architectural thought had witnessed a slow yield towards stagnation, despite exceptions. The present eco-political transformations have retriggered the need for innovative approaches to counteract them. Barcelona became a particularly rich field of experimentation due to its inherent urban history. Since Cerdà, arguably the father of urbanism, the expansions of the city have been fiercely orchestrated; Catalan mayor's speeches were consistently urban conscious. Their present measures of austerity and restraint have finally pushed breaks on the preceded hasty construction while indirectly raising public awareness towards the importance of the urban realm in political and socio-economic interplays.

Awareness thus becomes a key factor. Being conscious of one's actions and responsibilities are the vanguard tools to reshape the urban fabric. Intervention, perception and reception become intimately linked with raising awareness, consciousness and participation. Quoting the IDensitat call for proposals: «We are therefore at a time of transformation in the relationship between open spaces and the social fabric, between locations and networks; of transformation also in the way in which the creativity resulting from collaborative processes may influence the form of building cities around people. At a time when cooperative methodologies may be put to the test, methodologies which transfer knowledge or skills while sharing different ways of considering the 'locus'.» We return henceforth to the notion of education and the transfer of knowledge and responsibility. As Zygmunt Bauman advocated in relation to education in the CCCB conference 'El Comú', contemporary urban thought should occupy itself with the cultivation of two major skills: on the one hand the ability of readjusting one's course and adaptively adhering to a constant rapidly changing environment, and on the other hand the dexterity of creating informal open cooperations that expand our horizon beyond our disciplinary limitations and traditional processes of creation. Only then would we, architects, be able to accept our shifting roles as coordinators, activists or awareness promoters rather than our stereotyped role as masterminds and decision-makers.

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- 2 Bauman, Zygmunt: 'L'educació' [Conference], in 'En Comú' [Conference series], Barcelona: CCCB Arxiu, March 2013. Available at: '[http://www.cccb.org/ca/video-debats\\_en\\_com\\_educaci\\_zygmunt\\_bauman\\_vo\\_en-43358](http://www.cccb.org/ca/video-debats_en_com_educaci_zygmunt_bauman_vo_en-43358)', on March 2013.
- 3 Eriksen, Thomas Hylland: 'Tyranny of the Moment. Fast and Slow Time in the Information Age.', London: Pluto Press, 2001, p. 112.
- 4 Schulz-Dornburg, Julia: 'Arte y Arquitectura: nuevas afinidades.' Barcelona: G.Gili, 2000, p. 13.
- 5 Muñoz, Francesc: 'Urbanalización. Paisajes comunes, lugares globales.' Barcelona: G.Gili, 2008.
- 6 McDonald, Stuart: '(In)visible Cities. Spaces of risk, spaces of citizenship' [Conference series], Barcelona: CCCB, July 2003.
- 7 IDensitat: Dispositifs Post open call: 'Urban Spaces - Social Fabric - Voids. Creative interventions in public space in a post-crisis context.', Available at: '[http://idensitat.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=817:dispositivos-post-&catid=129:idbarrio-barcelonaeng&Itemid=200](http://idensitat.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=817:dispositivos-post-&catid=129:idbarrio-barcelonaeng&Itemid=200)', May 2013.
- 8 Gadanho, Pedro; Bauer, Ute Meta et al.: 'Utopia's Return? Borderlines, Agency and Transformation in Global Art and Architecture' [Conference series], Zurich: ETH gta, May 2013.

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architect and researcher, followed a bachelor program in architecture at the American University of Beirut (2003–2008), a master program in architecture and landscape at the politecnico di Milano (2008–2011), a specialization diploma (DPEA) in architecture and philosophy at the ENSA Paris La Villette (2009–2010). In 2006, she undertook as freelance architect a project in Tripoli, Lebanon, for a hotel and restaurant complex. In 2009, she worked in Milano with the firm Teknoarch on the winning project of the House of Arts and Culture of Beirut. She is currently undertaking her doctoral research at the Institute for History and Theory of Architecture (gta) at ETH Zurich under Prof. Philip Ursprung.