

City Examples

Barcelona: City of Parks

Introduction

Countries and cities released from years of political repression invariably exhibit a sense of regeneration even if the practical effects take some time to develop. Barcelona is no exception, but it has the additional advantage of being the regional capital of the most independent and individual region in Spain, with an international standing for its distinctive cultural traditions. A lack of finance did not limit the imagination of the new administration's Public Works department, among whose first tasks in 1980 was to 'open up' the city as part of its revival. Bohagis, the spirited Director of the programme, launched a phased programme of new pocket parks and small plazas, concentrating on derelict spaces and the hidden historic areas of the city. The Spanish tradition of 'placas' provided an important cultural context for a long-term plan which developed organically into a master plan for the whole city. Artists were seen as an essential component of the new design teams charged with assessing and developing the city's public spaces in consultation with residents. By 1991, some 200 parks had been created or were planned, and 50 sculptures had, or were about to be, commissioned. The 1992 Barcelona Olympics only boosted a process which was already well-established.

Creative planning

The Ajuntament—Barcelona's City Council—was concerned to create a lively city which valued social and cultural traditions rooted in neighbourhood identity. Rather than release all land for commerce or housing, the Ajuntament prioritised local community needs and, in one of its most imaginative ideas, granted temporary order uses on land for parks. These 'temporary' orders may last as long as 50 years, but in allowing parks to be built they prevent dereliction in the city, while preserving future building land should the city's housing needs expand. The Ajuntament also purchases land especially for parks. This concept of 'temporary' allows collaborating artists and architects a great deal of freedom. Even given the Catalan predilection for the surreal, absurd and brightly coloured, many works may not have been designed in such quirky or humorous ways had they been commissioned as 'permanent' works. The Ajuntament also has a healthy attitude towards historical sites and are not afraid to mix the old with the new in the creation of living communities or inspirational city-sites. So, for example, the Tapies Foundation, housed in a 15th century building is now topped by an extraordinary sculptural 'cloud' of light filaments which float above the rooftop and light the site at night. It is not easy to imagine a British planning authority approving such an innovative combination.

The art of many functions

Since designers, planners and community leaders work in teams with artists their aim is not simply to place a work of fine art in a square and hope that its 'enhances' the space, but to exploit art's social value alongside its aesthetic function. A constant theme is 'greenery and water', with its obvious healing connotations. In many places the idea has been expressed literally with new lakes, fountains, well-planted walkways and covered plazas. The Parc Crueta dell Coll, at the city's farthest point from the sea, is a lido carved from an old quarry. Sculptures by the American artist Ellsworth Kelly form a dramatic gateway to the park, and a huge hanging crab-like sculpture by Catalan artist Eduardo Chillida makes an extraordinary centre-piece over the lake. The Parc de l'Esacio del Nord is a huge expanse where disused railway buildings are being converted into a new cultural centre in a landscape which is itself an environmental sculpture by American artist Beverley Pepper. Trees planted in a whirlpool patterns, and hillocks for children to skate and cycle on are decorated with ceramics in a tribute to Gaudi and Miro.

The choice of artist has balanced the international and the local. By 1991, 29 Spanish, 16 Catalan and 15 foreign artists had been involved in the city spaces programme.

Other parks run down the centre of roads, breaking up streams of traffic and creating canopied walkways. Most interlock through a system of 'greenways', always accessible to cyclists and pedestrians. Among the most exciting of these offers views of Calatrava's sculptural new road bridge. Most of the parks have some element of play as central to their design. This might take the form of 'play sculpture' for children—always brightly coloured and attractive—but the sculpture might include, or simply be, a wall for the hand-ball games so beloved by the Spanish, or mounds and decorated hills for roller skates and bicycle races. Each park is designed according to the distinctive character of the neighbourhood and the interaction between the locale and the design has been paramount. Internationally renowned artists like Richard Serra (not otherwise known for his interest in community-based art), have agreed to work 'in-residence' in the neighbourhood to discuss, consult and develop what is right for the space. It is notable that there is no hierarchy of city spaces, so that minor artists may well be given major city centre sites, just as artists with world

reputations may be allocated less prestigious neighbourhood sites. What is important is that the whole city is linked with parks and sculpture—quality is not zoned!

Barcelona has the largest public art programme of any city in Europe, and whilst addressing Catalan pride by commissioning local artists, it has successfully bolstered its international prominence by its clever patronage of the 'great names' in contemporary modern sculpture too. As a result, Barcelona has secured the atmosphere of an international capital, while retaining its distinct regional identity.

Key issues

Imaginative planning processes dependent on teams of design professionals working with artists and architects, and flexible planning agreements, led to innovative schemes and interesting parks. The focus on community life as a key objective combined with interlinking the neighbourhoods, each with its distinct identity, has produced a city which feels good to be in and is easy to get around. The impact of traffic (which is bad) is mitigated by well canopied and well-greened walkways down the centre of roads and a by great deal of imaginative planting. Above all the regional culture, with its emphasis on a distinctive architectural and sculptural tradition are upheld and developed by a consistent policy in which art and architecture are given significance in the transformation of the city. Investment in the programme amounted to about \$50M by 1991.