

Two libraries in Barcelona: Impressions and Reflections

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A group of students is sat near the entrance stairs of a building, looking inwards towards a reading room. Some other students walk over a glass bridge over the access to the lobby. Yet another group stares outwards through a glazed façade, where the skyline of the city appears to be almost *touchable*. We are leaning over a handrail a bit further up, looking towards the street where everyday life continues. The students – from Cardiff – are in Barcelona to study its architecture and they've come to a place that truly provides an opportunity to empathize with this city's life: we are at one of the main crossroads of the ancient *Vila de Gracia*, a place marked by a unique tempo and character. The design of this exceptional *mirador* is the work of the architect Josep Llinas – though he was only commissioned to create a library, the Vila de Gracia Library.

It is not the first time that Llinas creates “an inverted swindle”¹. Much more than just a library, his response to the site resolves brilliantly – with intelligence and sensitivity – an important corner, giving way to new visual relationships and startling dialogues. Some years ago Oriol Bohigas commented on one of Llinas' projects (Housing Development on Calle del Carme):

“The project is adapted to the meticulous scale of its neighbourhood (...) By creating a series of small breaks at ground level it opens up the urban space without taking away from the strength of the street's formal unity. By incorporating small collective uses and opening new perspectives, the project creates interferences between urban space and architecture. The multiple angles of the project transform the pavement – so expressionless and flat – into a place where more stable encounters may happen. In short, this architecture radically transforms its surrounding urban space without losing any of its identifying values”².

The case of the library deals with a different use and context, but both projects are forced to cope with corners in tight urban locations characterised by high density. At Calle del Carme it was possible to widen the street by slimming the actual built form, whilst at the Gracia library the conditions suggested the creation of a threshold on the corner that precedes the main entrance. Here the verticality of the corner allows new perspectives and visual connections between indoor and outdoor spaces (I will expand on this further down). The two strategies are different, but the results are the same: generous public spaces for casual meetings and encounters. This quality is especially significant for the library as meeting place for city-dwellers, starting point of new dialogues and fleeting site of sudden civic synergies. An expanded threshold at the junction of Torrent de l'Olla and Travessera de Gracia becomes – in a rather unexpected way – essential to a building that aspires to be the key civic reference of its district.

Llinas achieves this within a tough context by pushing the actual potential of the site to its limit. Typical of the Gracia district are sites with no more than 200 square metres and a width of just 8 metres – the library's site is no exception. The location of a 1,300 square metre programme is not easy under these conditions. A simple layering the activities will result in at least 6 stories (6!). The initial sketches of the early design stages must have been utterly underwhelming given the unfeasibility of establishing relationships between different levels of the building. Add to this the impossibility of providing the reading rooms with a public character, the difficulties of resolving appropriately the vertical circulation, and fire regulations that prevent the main staircase from being anything but a shaft – at first glance, a compelling design must have seemed unattainable.

Functional zoning determined the location of the lobby and the magazine lounge at ground level, the kid's library on the first floor, the general reading rooms on 2nd and 3rd floors and the private working

¹ The idea of an “inverted swindle” in architecture comes from the Spanish architect Alejandro de la Sota, who referred to the ability of some architects to provide more in a project, where less is expected.

² Bohigas, O. “Arquitectura a Ciutat Vella”. In: *Del dubte a la revolució. Epistolari públic*. Barcelona: Edicions 62, S.A., 1998. P. 57-60. ISBN 84-297-4493-2.

rooms alongside admin areas in the 4th floor. A large study lounge was placed in the basement with the multifunctional room which can be used as a small lecture room or exhibition space.

Once the underlying functional and form-related conditions were in place, Llinas prepared himself to “tenaciously dispossess” the project’s architecture and unwrap its narrative as if peeling off the successive layers of an onion³. Under this premise, he unveiled an arsenal of tactics, some of which he had used in previous projects.

To begin with, the building is separated from the adjoining party walls, providing lower and basement levels with natural light. A sky-light illuminates the kid’s library whilst subtly bathing one of the walls in the magazine lounge, creating a backdrop to the activities on ground level.

Small secondary stairs are scattered about helping to avoid “cul de sac” spaces and giving character to the different areas of the building. Double heights are successfully inserted as a strategy to connect the second and third levels, as well as the third and fourth levels. These double heights are located next to the general reading rooms. Llinas proposes a delicious miniature spiral staircase with a broken geometry that provides a unique vantage point outwards. Walking up the stairs with the Cardiff students, in silence as in a religious procession, one has a sudden view of the street, and one’s presence in the city is re-affirmed. Visitors can literally feel the tone of the street as they revolve around a space that hovers beyond the façade and the border of the site. Once again, city meets architecture.

Another double height staircase connects the basement with the ground level. Its façade is glazed and it runs parallel to the street, in such a way that those using it are visible from the pavement (once again!). This setup enables those in the basement to perceive the street – at the very least they can sense its presence. This space is notably qualified by the semi-circular bench in the magazine lounge which defines its upper border, as well as a skylight and the foundations of an ancient structure which have not been removed. Whether these historic masses remained on site by virtue of the architect or an external requirement, they remind visitors of the site’s distant past.

A similar operation is performed at a smaller scale at the other side of the building over the main staircase to the basement. The manoeuvre rescues the space from becoming a bleak and forbidding cavity, successfully distributing the light coming from an opening with nearly squared proportions.

The brief did not specify a kid’s library with visual or spatial connections to other spaces. But Llinas did not hesitate in providing a solution with more than just 4 walls and a ceiling. In order to open visual relationships (once again in relation to the city) he included a cylindrical prism at the end of the space hovering over the pavement. He located here an area for ‘performative’ reading of stories for children, and provided a horizontal window in such a way that kids can feel as if they are part of the movement in the street below them. In turn, those in the cylinder become part of the visual landscape of pedestrians outside. The presence of library users in the public realm (one of the client’s requirements) is here interpreted and skilfully materialised.

But the most radical of all the operations carried out by the architect is (in my eyes) the hollowing of the corner, which connects up to 4 different levels. It may be possible to imagine the quality of the resulting space from plans, sections and axonometric drawings, but to really understand its complexity it is necessary to visit the atrium in person. In a gesture that defines the identity of the corner, the space provides – in first instance – a place of shelter and a sitting area for those arriving in the library. Visitors then have a first glimpse of what they will encounter upstairs in the form of a

³ Llinas writes: “I’m interested especially in architecture as a practice focussed on the primary conditions of a building (use, construction, etc), where the architect is limited (by choice) to tenaciously dispossess the architecture, as if peeling off the successive layers of an onion made out of complicit similarities and masks. Such an architect proceeds with this un-ending and tedious procedure only because he hopes to discover, at the very end of the process, the true identity of the project”. LLINÁS, J. “Respuesta a una solicitud”. In: *Saques de esquina*. [Girona]: Demarcació de Girona, col.legi d’Arquitectes de Catalunya – Editorial Pre-Textos, 2002. P. 33-34. ISBN 84-8191-465-7.

double height space – the lobby. Ascending toward the upper levels, one discovers a rainstorm of what seems to be ancient graphic characters. It later is explained (in the walls of the staircase) that these are letters of early Mediterranean alphabets. The corner embodies a confluence of street clatter, individual memories and cultures – the richness of diversity. Inside, users of the library will convert different understandings into knowledge. This massive hollow space with its soup of ancient letters seems to be referring to this.

When we reach the second floor we re-discover the double height cavity from a new perspective, in a bird's-eye view from within the silence of the library. A glazed pathway over the huge void leads us towards a staircase connecting to the third floor. The glazed passage is an exceptional podium to witness the movement outside – a rare location to read, contemplate and connect with the city at the same time. This is where our group has paused to contemplate the surroundings. This is where I first understand in its full dimension the relationship between this library, the city and the essence of each one of them (*urbs* and *civitas*).

The architect has found solutions such as voids, double-height hollows, and multiple secondary staircases in an effective attempt to deal with a restrictive site and a brief packed with constraints. In short, significant spatial constraints and an apparent deficit of square metres have propelled the project forward and the architect has – apparently – stood back (Llinas always does so) to let the architecture happen on its own, as if naked. In this sense, this truly is a 'dispossessed' architecture⁴.

A lattice of small vertical apertures defined by metallic profiles in the façade reduces (to the naked eye) the scale of the building and grounds it in its context. The hovering volumes compensate the area subtracted by internal voids. Stucco and timber elements complete an awe-inspiring façade with an almost 'symphonic' sense of *tempo* in the city (perhaps these elements are like instruments being tuned⁵?). What may at first glance come across as a frivolous gesture assumes now its true identity as a decisive step towards a design of internal principles and a rigorous response to challenging requirements.

These internal mechanisms are born from Llinas' will to generate welcoming spaces with "a friendly and atmospheric attention to others. Just as passengers on a bus: in silence, without any of discourse or communication – providing each other with company"⁶. His architecture can always be counted on to protect and give comfort to those using it.

Two days later we are in a seating area hovering over a public passage in the *Eixample* district. The *Eixample* is, in fact, below us and around us, in the form of multiple facades that look like theatre backdrops. To one side we have a street and to the other the internal courtyard of a densely built block. We happen to be in the presence of books in this evocative space. City views, books and extracts from the sky help to consolidate a place that is, in fact, similar to the Gracia Library: a combination of built city and culture ideal for thoughtfulness and contemplation.

⁴ Juan Antonio Cortes describes the architectural mechanisms by which Llinas proceeds to "dispossess the architecture" in "A Permanent Sacrifice". Many of these mechanisms are used to resolve the composition of the Gracia Library (de-compose, shatter, stagger, subtract, rupture of profiles, obliteration of frontage, etc). (CORTÉS, J.A. "Una permanente renuncia". *El Croquis* (2005), n. 128. ISSN 0212-5633).

⁵ In "Day and Night" Llinas refers to one of his projects in the following terms: "The result I'm looking for is closer to the sound of a symphonic orchestra tuning before a concert than to actual music". (LLINÁS, J. "Día y noche". En *Josep Llinás*. Madrid: Tanais Ediciones, s.a., 1997. P. 12-15. ISBN 84-496-0022-7)

⁶ Ibidem.

Given its size and privileged location, this seating area is in fact the principle space of another library. Carmen Pigem – from architectural practice RCR – is about to tell us (in a gentle voice) her practice's design intentions for the project, the Sant Antoni-Joan Oliver Library.

As in Gracia, the brief established a series of constraints that forced the architects to take a forceful approach. The building – elegant and rich in nuances as all RCR's projects – has been conceived with clarity and distinctiveness. I feel compelled to look at these two libraries as corresponding efforts in spite of their fundamental differences in tectonics and formal tactics. In first place, challenging briefs seem to have triggered immoderate approaches in both cases. In second place, each one of these libraries plays with the visitor's perception by formulating interior spaces intensely related to the city.

The original brief – a competition – asked to fit three separate programmes (a library, a housing development for pensioners and a garden) on a site formerly occupied by industrial spaces. In a sensible move the project locates the pensioners' areas with a garden for children in a courtyard framed by the library. The use of the library and its outward looking façade provide a robust public presence for the development.

The project was always intended as a 'bridge-building', or a 'door-building', connecting the public realm with an internal courtyard at the centre of the city block. This type of solution is becoming increasingly common in the *Eixample* district – the original concept for these courtyards by Idelfons Cerda has been revived over the last 20 years in an important effort to recuperate them as green public patios. A connection to these civic voids is usually achieved by an opening at ground level which punctuates the continuity of the outer facades. The Eixample's urban paradigm (113m X 113m blocks with chamfered corners at 45 ° and streets that run 20 m in width) defines a vast extension of Barcelona's inner city. The recuperation of these inner voids is now critical if this highly densified part of town intends to have a green agenda and incorporate trees and vegetation.

Aranda, Pigem and Vilalta (directors at RCR Architects) embrace radically the strategy of the "building as a bridge" – or "building as door". They propose two solid bands separated by a light band that performs as the main entrance to the courtyard at the centre of the block. From the street one can see the internal facades of the buildings onto the courtyard, the vegetation, and the sky. Two glazed volumes – containing the main reading rooms – are suspended within the space as a transparent presence producing innumerable reflections. The spatial stratification⁷ is marked by the silhouettes of readers and library visitors who suddenly become part of the cityscape. Achieving an analogous effect to that of the Gracia Library, here public realm (defining component of city character) intermingles with culture and books (defining constituents of civil identity) as two sides of one same coin. *Urbs and civitas*, once again.

In addition to the essential challenges of resolving a "bridge building", RCR had to add the difficulty of inserting an architectural object in a consolidated urban context. The fact of dealing with a densely built metropolitan context was a new kind of hurdle in their design process as most of their projects are born from a direct dialogue with locations privileged with verdant natural surroundings. It's as if their proposed objects had a need for openness in order to breath – as if they required nature around them in order to be clothed. This relationship with nature occurs in most of their houses, all located within the dense forests of the constituency of Garrotxa. Here, abundant rain all year round and copious amounts of forestry produce a charcoal-coloured light in which hills and country gleam in countless shades of green. This is where RCR is accustomed to insert its pure, abstract, sharply defined objects of powerful materiality. This is where the practice distils and synthesis matter – object and nature.

⁷ This filtering mechanism along with other strategies mentioned in this text are analysed by Juan Antonio Cortés in "The Attributes of Nature". *Los Atributos de la Naturaleza*. CORTÉS, J.A. "Los Atributos de la Naturaleza". *El Croquis* (2007), n. 138. ISSN 0212-5633.

Within the artificial cityscape the object/nature duality is broken. RCR resorts to openness (voids) to define the line of thought that drives the designs for the library. To my view, the library is born out of producing an exception to its built surroundings: The library is a *void* within the dense built continuity of the *Eixample*. It is within the void that one can experience the most interesting *moments* – or where spaces become true locations of privilege for users.

The lightness of the central band in the overall scheme is by no means a random choice. Much rather, it is at the core of the project, and it is where RCR locates the main reading rooms, the key seating areas and the children's rooms. The two solid bands flanking this central axis of light exist as a background, or rather, as a series of *backdrops* that define a *stage* for the emptiness⁸. In this sense, the solid bands are secondary within the narrative of the project – they are what remains after producing the void. This becomes even more evident if one contemplates a scaled model of the project: the solid bands are the result of subtracting a volume with the size and typology of a typical *Eixample* building.

The cavity is the stage where all relevant events take place: the main reading rooms, the access to the library, the connecting threshold with the surrounding city. Visitors discover slowly the interior gardens as they make their way through the threshold, which is defined by the suspended volumes not only spatially, but almost *gravitationally*, as if their pendant weight kept the void's tautness. By definition a threshold welcomes/protects those who go through it whilst prefiguring a situation of transition and change⁹. This is where the entrance to the library occurs. This is where the magazines section becomes a showcase of the library in direct dialogue with the public realm. This is where one can access the library, exit the building and meet with others. This is where we've met with the group of students. This is where we shall say goodbye.

In my view the "building as a door" is configured mainly through the staging of the void. In similar fashion to the programme distribution at the Gracia Library, the magazines section is on the ground floor, the children's section is on the first floor, the main reading rooms are in the upper floors and the multi-functional rooms (lecture room / study room) along with the exhibitions room are on the basement. The only difference is the location of the admin/office spaces, which are on the basement in this case.

In the preliminary concept design, the two solid bands were to be packed with books and contained all vertical circulations (lifts, stairs, emergency exit shafts, M&E shafts, etc) in order to liberate the suspended volumes within the void. In the built design, this concept is fine-tuned so that double and triple height spaces lighten the fullness of the solid bands and provide visual connections between the different levels/circulations. In parallel, their solidity is regulated by the tectonic definition of the façade – vertical metallic bands that enable a degree of transparency and interior/exterior views.

The filtering façade (an array of vertical bands, metallic or glazed) is a device previously used by RCR in a variety of cases and ranges. They seem to be a practice interested in indexing the endless expressive possibilities of materials (particularly steel) and studying materials as if interrogating them in order to obtain answers for their projects. In the Library, the main staircase ascends discretely behind the steel frontage. After dawn, the staircase appears de-lined though un-drawn behind the steel components.

⁸ In "Test for an architectural exam", RCR provide their own answers to a series of questions. For example: "Is *silence musical*? Yes! *Are voids built*? No, they are staged. First you identify the void, then you articulate it". Later, in the same text: "*To empty or to surround*? The sculptural/architectural space needs both terms to make space evident. Space becomes perceivable when it's defined just as colours become visible only when they are under light". *Croquis* [Madrid] (2003), n. 115/116 [III]. ISSN 0212-5633.

⁹ In the same text (*Test for an architectural exam*) RCR explain: "*Where does it happen*? It's always in between. *In between what*? In the threshold between things, in between opposites, in between dualities, in between complementary things".

As we contemplate the project from the seating area and Carme Pigem explains the project, some students fix their gaze on the Eixample facades, or just stare into the vastness. Before us, towards the street, we can see cornices, friezes, balconies, a motif in the stucco patterns, the steal balustrades or the plantain branches. As we ascend towards the top of the seating area, we discover a bird's-eye view of the internal garden. Here, the Eixample surroundings reveal their more intimate self: the drying laundry, the open blinds, the signal antennas, the A.C. boxes, and a series of enormous galleries with bicycles, gas cylinders and sun loungers. The street and the internal courtyards of the Eixample are two opposite worlds and the library sits right in between them as a threshold. A threshold/seating-area with views onto both worlds, interior and exterior¹⁰: opposite (complimentary) directionalities. These are the worlds perceived by those in the library as they pause their reading and lift their gaze from their books. The dialogue between writers and readers unfolds with the city as a backdrop. One's perception of the library is permeated by it's surrounding cityscape – just as the RCR houses in the Garrotxa countryside are permeated by their surrounding landscapes. Visitors can now re-affirm their presence in the city – Barcelona¹¹. I feel captured again by the sense that it has been a wise decision to visit these projects with the students in order to enable an understanding of the city and its architecture.

As we leave I can't avoid considering the clear differences in the work of Llinas and RCR – their different use of spatial language, their dissimilar conceptions of architecture, and their disparate use of formal devices. It seems easy to view them as antagonistic efforts. But such a view is clearly short-sighted: each one of these projects enables a sense of place and becomes indispensable in configuring the character of its surroundings (and the city) as a result of a radical and clear response to a brief for a public building. Sites and programmes with tough constraints propelled the projects forward (as opposed to limiting them) by challenging the design teams to produce a high quality architectural response – a challenge to which the teams responded with a wealth of profound, intelligent and sensible arguments.

The group of students visiting from Wales linger in the threshold and continue chatting for several minutes. It's raining outside – luckily we are all covered by the building. People start saying their good-byes as the sunset dawns upon us. The library glows – it's light bathes the surrounding public realm as if it were a lamp. See you later; in Catalan we say “a reveure”.

¹⁰ In “The Attributes of Nature”, Juan Antonio Cortes mentions the idea of “architecture as a frame” that can outline and enclose views onto a given landscape. He elaborates this idea into the concept of a double frame: “Many RCR buildings are defined by a double frame: one house, for example, opens up onto two diametrically opposed views so that there is a fluid sense of space that runs through the house. This enables an exterior-interior-exterior continuity. This kind of building is not an obstacle in the landscape, but much rather a device for the circulation of air, light and views”. This concept of the “double frame” is fully applicable to their Library.

¹¹ In “Test for an architectural exam” (as quoted above) RCR explain: “*Is anything permissible in a Non-Place?* No. One has to try to make it a Place. *And in a Place?* No. One has to understand it profoundly in order to bring out it's best features. *In regards to Place, would you prefer to conquer or to be conquered?* Neither. One should seek a dialogue amongst equals in order to find a new solid unity”.