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# A Cultural Approach to City Building

Stan Majoor

## Lessons from Forum Barcelona

Amsterdam-Zuidas is still struggling to give a cultural turn to a predominantly business-oriented urban development. The Forum project in Barcelona is an example of a completely different approach. Here the organization of an internationally-oriented cultural mega-event in the spring and summer of 2004 was one of the initial central pillars of a massive urban development scheme. The results were ambivalent however. On the one hand the cultural event helped to speed up the realization of different essential infrastructure projects for the area and added to the momentum for the transformation of a much wider part of Barcelona. It also created a lot of attention and visitors and resulted in additional regional, national and European subsidies for the transformation of the area. However, at the same time the physical result in the form of a large experimentally designed area is still difficult to appreciate three years after the event, while the cultural approach was criticized as being too politicized and eventually unable to create real and meaningful connections with wider groups in society. For the Zuidas, still aiming to define the role of culture in its transformation, it is interesting to briefly review the story of Forum due to the central and integrative role this aspect had right from the outset. However it is not a straightforward 'best practice' and it teaches us in particular that if these large-scale transformations become socially disconnected, they will fail in the long term.

Barcelona is the city with probably one of Europe's most studied, discussed and praised strategies of urban interventions in the previous three decades.<sup>1</sup> Its strategies of urban transformation have certainly been interpreted as good practice by many visiting foreign politicians. The city's recent urban transformation took place in a very dynamic political, economic and social era after Spain's transition towards democracy at the end of the nineteen-seventies. Culture played an essential role in Barcelona's urban transformation in different ways. In the famous revitalization plans for the older, densely built neighbourhoods special attention was given to the creation of public spaces, the addition of places for local cultural institutions and the restoration of buildings with an important cultural function like indoor markets.<sup>2</sup> The Catalan identity was long suppressed during the Franco years and it could blossom again in these spaces, where old festivities were reintroduced. An extensive scheme of public arts was part of every neighbourhood transformation. At the same time a lot of emphasis was put on the restoration of buildings by some of Barcelona's most famous representatives of Catalan Art Nouveau-Jugendstil movement (Modernisme Catala): Gaudí, Puig i Cadafalch and Domenech i Montaner. Additionally, some important new museums were realized to further promote the cultural dimension of Barcelona's transformation, both for the residents and for the outside visitor. During this phase of transformation social groups were extremely active and successful in advocating the preferences of the public and influencing the plans.<sup>3</sup> But the city witnessed an even more fundamental change due to the building programme for the 1992 Olympic Games. The games were not only used to create some world-class sporting facilities in the city. Their strategic goal was much more important. They created the momentum for political and financial investments from higher levels of government to much better use one of Barcelona's still secret assets: the Mediterranean

coastline. Till then it had been hidden behind a barrier of infrastructure and mainly used for harbour and other industrial uses.<sup>4</sup> However, in less than a decade harbour activities were moved, most infrastructure was buried and water quality was improved. New beaches, public spaces, housing areas, marinas and complete entertainment and shopping districts were realized. Barcelona and its steadily growing influx of tourists hungrily conquered the coastline as the new fashionable spot to be: a beach culture was born.

After the Olympics there was some time to reflect. Although the social, economic and physical changes had been large, Barcelona's transformation was certainly not 'finished'. However, it seemed necessary to redefine the goals and strategies of the city's development in a changing era in which competition between cities became a prominent issue. Barcelona city council responded with a whole series of strategic projects. The goal was to improve Barcelona's position in the advanced service economy, which was identified as a structural weakness of the city's economy.<sup>5</sup> It was in this context that the Forum project was initiated, as an attempt to repeat the Olympic success.<sup>6</sup>

### 1. The Three Goals of the Forum Project

The Forum transformation would be connected to a large public event in the spring and summer of 2004 which would mark the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the Universal Expo of 1929. This reference was more than symbolic. Just as the 1929 Expo gave Barcelona new public buildings and spaces around the Plaça d'Espanya and the slopes of the Montjuïc, the 2004 event was expected to function as a catalyst for the urban development of the city in a new timeframe.<sup>7</sup> The Forum site was planned in a dilapidated industrial area in the eastern section of the city, from where it was expected to eventually reinforce a much larger ensemble of projects. The location for this new prestigious project was extremely challenging: the site was occupied by a huge coal power plant, an incinerator and an exceptionally smelly wastewater treatment plant. To the east the area was bordered by the heavily polluted river Besòs, while on the north it adjoined two of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Spain – La Mina and La Catalana. When analyzing Forum it is therefore important to make a distinction between the three sets of goals of the Forum project. It was (1) a physical regeneration project, (2) an (inter)national and local cultural event and (3) a project of major environmental investments.<sup>8</sup>

### Forum as a Physical Regeneration Project

The long term strategic goal of the project was to urbanize an industrial area that was seriously blighted yet occupied a strategic coastal location. Forum was expected to become an area for visitors and tourists, with large public spaces, a marina and a bathing area. It would also contribute to the socio-economic regeneration of this part of the city with some key buildings, most importantly a new technological university campus and a huge convention centre with adjacent hotels. It was expected that the massive investment in public space and infrastructure would help alleviate the problems of surrounding disadvantaged neighbourhoods by improving their accessibility and the general image of the area. The adjacent Diagonal Mar area was being developed at the same time as a new mixed use residential and shopping area (see table 1). Together, these two projects were a small though strategic part of a revitalization and urbanization scheme for a much wider ring of projects on the eastern side of Barcelona. The most important was the 22@ project, aiming to redevelop the old industrial area of Poblenou into a vibrant mixed district with clean industries and an emphasis on the knowledge-based economy.<sup>9</sup>

I In the neighbouring poor housing areas of La Mina and La Catalana another 2,477 housing units will be built as part of the revitalization plans for these areas.

II In Forum and Diagonal Mar 2315 hotel beds will be realized, mostly in the higher segments. Just outside the project area, along the coast, another 641 hotel beds have already been realized in recent years Ajuntament de Barcelona, La reforma urbanística del Besòs (Barcelona: Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2006), p. 109.

III A large part of the offices in the Forum area are buildings for the university campus Source: M. Tersol, 'La transformación del litoral de Barcelona en el area Fórum', in: Ingenieria y Territorio, vol. 67, 2004, pp. 54-63.

#### Forum as a Cultural Event

The Universal Forum of Cultures, to be organized in the area in the spring and summer of 2004, was expected to underline the city's international leadership in culture and to mobilize awareness and enthusiasm for the urban transformation. However, it also had a clear economic rationale. The prestigious cultural event had to result in political priority and money from other levels of government to finance the costly public investments that were expected to be beneficial to Barcelona's longterm economic growth.

#### Forum as a Project of Major Environmental Investments

The three installations in the area were crucial to the city. All three used outdated technologies and created a lot of air and water pollution. The open sewage treatment plant caused terrible odours in the area most of the time. Since it was extremely costly to move these installations to other parts of the city, it had been decided in an early stage to keep them in place, modernize them and integrate them in the urbanization strategy for the area. By making this operation an integral aspect of the Forum project, the city council hoped to secure additional outside funding for these operations – which had to be finished before the Forum cultural event – and to give the whole transformation an ecological label.

The three different goals of the project were also reflected in the way the project was organized. One organization was responsible for the urban transformation and the environmental aspects, the Consorci del Besòs, while a different organization, the Forum Consortium, was initiated to organize the cultural event.

#### 2. Universal Forum of Cultures

Due to the specificity of the cultural dimension in Forum we dig a little bit deeper into this aspect now. It was eventually decided that the three main themes of the Universal Forum of Culture would be (1) sustainable development, (2) conditions for peace, and (3) dialogue of cultures. The Forum Consortium was governed by the three most important public financiers of the Forum transformation, the Barcelona city council ruled by the Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya, the regional government of Catalonia with the conservative Convergència i Unió in the majority and central government controlled by the right wing Partido Popular. These three were supported by UNESCO, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization. The event had a total budget of 318 million euros.

The event was scheduled for a period of almost five months in the spring and summer of 2004, but its preparation phase in the years before the Forum was almost as important. It was expected by the initiators that Forum could work as an 'Olympic Games for culture' and that instrumental connections could be realized with social and civic groups.<sup>10</sup> This is an interesting thought, because most comparative research on large-scale development projects shows that the connection of these initiatives with citizens' and cultural groups is a weakness.<sup>11</sup> In the case of Forum many cultural and neighbourhood groups were invited to participate in the preparation of the event. The plan was to generate an open dialogue on its main themes rather than pushing forward with the realization of spectacular shows and festivals. However, the objective to create a successful connection to different parts of the population and to realize a form of civic pride failed almost completely at the end. The reasons seem to be in a combination of specific circumstances related to this particular event and a wider unease about the way large-scale development projects are conceived, planned and executed in many cities.

If we start with the Universal Forum of Cultures it is clear that in the initial phase there was just too much uncertainty about the direction of the event. As something that had never been organized before, many were unsure what its meaning was. Although this could be a perfect start for a more organic approach to the

organization, in the case of Forum it resulted mainly in inertia. The themes of diversity, peace and sustainability were very broad, lacking content and a clear purpose, leading many people to believe that the whole event was just a 'trick' by the relatively poor Barcelona city council to get higher government funding for the urban transformation, rather than a serious attempt to involve people or create a fundamental debate or event about its themes.<sup>12</sup>

However, during the build up to the invasion of Iraq in the spring of 2003, the lethargy of the broader public concerning Forum quickly disappeared, though certainly not in the way the initiators hoped. The credibility of the event was at stake when the invasion was supported by the ruling Partido Popular. Although one of themes of Forum was 'conditions for peace', the result was that the Forum Consortium could not speak against this invasion due to the political character of its governing board, which included Partido Popular politicians. This resulted in much anger since most Barcelonense supported the social democrats who objected to the invasion. The polemic debates that followed negatively influenced the preparatory stages of the event: 'how can you organize an event about peace when your country is in a war?' angry protesters asked.<sup>13</sup> One of the results was that Barcelona's influential federation of neighbourhood organizations, the Federació d'Associacions de Veïns i Veïnes de Barcelona (FAVB), which had been the first to appreciate the project, eventually decided to become a strong opponent and set up the Assemblea de Resistències al Forum 2004. The reasons for rejecting Forum were not only related to the war issue but also included the expected property speculation caused by the project in neighbouring poor housing areas and the strong business sponsorship of the event by companies that did not comply with the values of the Forum in their daily practices.<sup>14</sup>

So while the urban transformation was moving ahead full swing to create the site for the 2004 event, the preparatory stage of the event resulted in the opposite of the expected enthusiasm and support. The organizing Forum Consortium had to move forward however, and finally a cultural event was organized with much more emphasis on large exhibitions and shows, and hardly any on participatory events and critical debates. The convention centre was used for two large exhibitions: 'Cities, Corners' (on urban development), and 'Voices' (on the value of the diversity of languages in the world). Two other big exhibitions were 'The warriors of Xi'an' (Chinese funerary art) and 'Inhabiting the world' (about sustainable development). The Forum building hosted a large exposition about the urban development of Barcelona – a typical example of the way the city is very strong in building its own legacy. This building was also used for the Forum dialogues in which prominent politicians and intellectuals expressed their views on the Forum's themes. A part of the Esplanade, the largest open space in the area, was used for a market where different international organizations were present (although many cancelled their participation). Two amphitheatres were regularly used for outdoor shows. Around the harbour – which was used for different spectacles as well – was a concentration of restaurants. Tickets for the event were 23 euros a day. In total the event was visited by around three million people, 7.5% of them from abroad. Critics argued that Barcelona's Forum eventually only presented a popular commodification of culture, with no lasting intellectual or cultural value.<sup>15</sup> However, the concept of a 'Universal Forum of Cultures' continues in the fall of 2007 in Monterrey, Mexico, with a similar event of congresses, shows and exhibitions.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. Decontextualizing the Critical Reactions

The critical reactions to the Universal Forum of Cultures were not only related to its preparatory processes and the final event itself, and certainly not limited to its alleged cultural dimension. They were much wider and have to be understood as an expression of a critical discourse on the development of cities and the particular role of large-scale development projects in this process.<sup>17</sup> Although Barcelona has created a image of itself and in many respects has been very successful in its social, economic and physical transformation, there is also a growing critical opposition to its development. The drift towards businessfriendly planning and large public private partnerships that are responsible for large 'flagship' developments in the city, without much citizen influence, has been especially criticized favourable.<sup>18</sup> In Barcelona, as in other places, there seems to be a growing contrast between the glamorous development of these kinds of places and the persistent and rising inequalities between groups of people, the increased difficulty of finding affordable housing for large groups in

the city, and problems with immigration.

Forum gives a warning about the results of very closed introvert policy circles in which plans are conceived and developed. The public consortium that had to realize most of the Forum before the 2004 event had to move extremely quickly. Its closed style of governance was enhanced by the lack of existing users and inhabitants in the area and a planning culture in which architects have a very powerful position.<sup>19</sup> In this context the Forum event area became a playground for experimental architecture, both in public spaces and in buildings. The Esplanade, advertised as the second biggest square in the world, is the physical backbone of the area. Two landmark buildings were realized in Forum. The 120,000 m<sup>2</sup> Convention Centre by Barcelona architect Josep Mateo and the 70,000 m<sup>2</sup> Forum building by Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron from Switzerland. The triangular shaped Forum building is especially eye-catching. It seems to float, giving it a rather untouchable mystic feel. The large convention centre is completely internally organized as well. Next to the Forum event area, Diagonal Mar was developed quickly around the turn of the century. In this case the city council was so happy that a private party was finally investing in this dilapidated part of the city that it gave them almost absolute freedom regarding the programme and design of the site. Diagonal Mar is being developed with high-rise luxury condominiums in a semi-public park, a large shopping mall, some office buildings and several hotels. Although it is a commercial success, it is generally disliked by Barcelonese due to its 'American style' physical appearance that forms the antithesis of the compact Mediterranean city.

Both projects can be interpreted as examples of situations where one actor was capable of intervening very independently, without facing public or civic scrutiny. The results are spaces that are difficult to read and comprehend. Some critics see its virtue as '... departure from the careful "good taste" that has often limited the aesthetic ambition of Barcelona design, and an opening towards rougher, freer, more lucid and expressive forms that organize and focus the urban territory'.<sup>20</sup> However, three years after the Forum event has finished, the reality is that the area is only used once in a while for large concerts. Outside these moments it has a really deserted feel. The marina in the meantime has been privatized and fenced off while the landmark Forum building has hardly been used. The lack of urban functions in the area and the poor design result in a dominant feel of emptiness and an enduring post-event depression. Although Barcelona was successful in realizing the physical aspects of the project – the environmental benefits are especially impressive it is safe to conclude that it has failed to create a publicly appreciated and used urban area till now. The Forum cultural event was instrumental in aligning the investment priorities of three levels of government and triggering some private investment as well, but it hardly added value for the transformation and even created a lot of negative publicity that remains associated with the development. Before, during and after the event the cultural value was extremely limited.

The results are forcing Barcelona to rethink its strategies for urban development and the role of culture in it in particular. The city still has many cultural trump cards in its hand. However, it seems to have difficulty in adapting to a situation where general consensus on the direction of the city's urban development is fading away. It is interesting to explore what role culture can play in this context and to explore a new consensus on the direction and programme of urban transformations in its future development.

#### 4. Lessons for the Zuidas?

What can the Zuidas, currently exploring its cultural dimensions, learn from Barcelona?<sup>21</sup> Barcelona taught us that using culture as a pillar for a large-scale transformation can certainly be very beneficial to achieving higher level political priority, short-term (inter)national exposure and, although this largely failed, a potential discourse that gives meaning to the development. The Zuidas would love to borrow these three aspects, since these are weaknesses the project has been struggling with for the last decade.<sup>22</sup> However, it is very questionable whether Barcelona's cultural approach is the one to follow for the Zuidas. What Barcelona did was try to copy the Olympic Games event formula with culture as a substitute for sports. It was therefore not culture that was the central strategy; it was the mass 'happening' that would draw people to the new area to be entertained.

Although the initial intentions were different, culture was finally reduced to a form of content, a catchy theme of this event, commodified in popular shows and mass exhibitions. In our opinion there are three lessons.

The first is related to the event-based strategy, set aside if the theme is culture, sports or something else. Although such a strategy can surely reinforce the focus on the urban transformation and can also be instrumental from a political or economic perspective, the post-event gap is always waiting. In Forum there are now extremely large public areas in desperate search of a use. This is something the Zuidas should definitely not want. If it should want large public events, it should always think about carefully embedding these kinds of initiatives in the current or future urban fabric, or give them a more enduring nature.

The second lesson from Barcelona is that a specific focus on culture as a major pillar of development can also get very tricky. An essential part of culture is the inherent struggle about interpretations, styles and good taste. Forum teaches us that when culture links up with heated political themes, it can get easily out of control and result in the whole development project having negative connotations for the public.

Thirdly, the cultural approach in Barcelona was eventually almost completely disconnected from the urban transformation. Seen purely from a cultural perspective this is not a problem. However, it strongly diminishes the capacity of culture in any form to add value to the transformation. The Universal Forum of Cultures was a generic cultural event which could have been held anywhere. It was only successful in supporting the physical makeover of the area in a political and economic sense and did not add any cultural value to it.

In the Zuidas it is therefore important to be restrictive with both the 'large event' and 'generic cultural approach' strategy of Barcelona. Obviously, due to its location and appearance, the Zuidas can be the ideal place to exhibit modern art and more experimental forms of art. However, if the aim is to connect culture to the development of the area, it seems relevant to complement this with an approach to give the whole urban transformation of the area a more cultural dimension. This can be done by letting the cultural programme revolve more strongly around themes like 'construction/change', 'modern architecture', 'flows of money, goods, people and ideas' or 'green buildings'. These are themes that are related to the current or emerging culture of the Zuidas as a distinctive place in Amsterdam. This gives a basis to link them to (the interests of) its current and future inhabitants and users. Although it is outside the scope of this article to develop this line of reasoning into a full cultural agenda for the Zuidas, it is our conviction that, with these kinds of themes, culture has a much better chance to become a characteristic yet more natural aspect of the transformation. It can be potentially much better aligned with the peculiarities of this space in transition than when much more general cultural themes such as 'diversity' or 'peace' are addressed. This can also help to deal with a more fundamental problem that we pointed out in the previous section: the latest generation of large-scale urban development projects like the Zuidas is initiated to serve very abstract strategic goals. Enhancing the 'competitive position' of a city is the most essential example.

The problem is that these goals – relevant as they might be – are quite far removed from the direct short-term needs of most citizens. Adopting an approach like the one we suggest can contribute to a more piecemeal, organic and essentially more human style of development when these global strategic goals are enlightened and enriched with a more cultural interpretation of physical and social change. It is in this respect that Barcelona has failed this time to set international standards. Maybe the Zuidas can pick up the gauntlet?

#### Notes

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2. Joan Busquets, *Barcelona; the Urban Evolution of a Compact City* (Rovereto; Nicolodi editore, 2005).
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Power', in: Marshall (ed.), op. cit., pp. 47-64 (see note 1).

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7. Josep Acebillo, 'Una nueva geografía urbana. Las cinco ideas programáticas del proyecto del Fórum', in: *Arquitectura Viva*, vol. 94-95, 2004, pp. 44-53.

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13. E. Fernandez and M. Andreu, 'Preguntes i crítiques al Forum', in: *La Veu del Carrer*, vol. 84, 2004, p. 4.

14. Luzón and Vila, op. cit. (see note 6).

15. Fernandez and Andreu, op. cit. (see note 13).

16. See [www.monterreyforum2007.org](http://www.monterreyforum2007.org)

17. Stan Majoor, 'Paradox van grote projecten', in: *Rooilijn*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2005, pp. 57-63.

18. Mari Balibrea, 'Urbanism, Culture and the Postindustrial city: Challenging the "Barcelona Model"', in: Marshall (ed.), op. cit., pp. 205-224 (see note 1).

19. Ibidem.

20. D. Cohn, 'Magma diagonal, la collision geológica de la ciudad con el mar', in: *Arquitectura Viva*, vol. 94-95, 2004, pp. 40-43.

21. Interestingly enough, Amsterdam was once interested in hosting one of the future Forum events, expected to be held once every three years now, and ordered a consultancy firm to investigate the possibilities.

22. Willem Salet and Stan Majoor, 'Reshaping Urbanity in the Amsterdam Region', in: Salet and Majoor (eds.), Amsterdam Zuidas. European Space (Rotterdam; 010 Publishers, 2005), pp. 19-40.

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Stan Majoor works at the Amsterdam Institute for Metropolitan and International Development Studies of the Universiteit van Amsterdam. Currently he is a visiting assistant professor at the Centre of Urban Planning and Environmental Management – CUPEM, University of Hong Kong.

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