

BARRICADES AND MARQUEES. EPHEMERAL URBAN PLANNING IN 20TH CENTURY BARCELONA

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MAIN TEXT

BARRICADES

In his *Das Passagen-Werk* (Passages), Benjamin (2007) says that in Haussmann's planned urbanisation of Paris in 1852, the 1848 barricades were a true urban liberation, its transformation into a real public space; nevertheless an ephemeral urban development, the reverberations of accumulated injustices to expressively bring forth another city, the offended city. To build the barricades, the builders were capable of using what the most immediate surroundings were able to offer (see definition of bricoleur by Levi-Strauss, 1994: 36-38). In order to urgently and immediately resolve the need to alter the disciplinary line of the street, they used materials and objects created for other purposes, everything at hand that they might use. They even used trams: they unhooked

the horses, turned them over and raised a flag on the mast (Benjamin, 2007: 151). As Baudelaire evokes in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, perfectly aligned cobblestones suddenly and magically rose up as fortresses lifting to the heights. Furniture too, guarded goods idealised in domestic interiors, violently piled up and displayed between cobblestones and tram carriages; the prostitutes came out of the houses to work on the streets in a feeling of profaned, shameless intimacy that belonged to the private realm, to the land of feelings, there exposed in the middle of the street.

Against this, Haussmann's the urban ideal was the views in perspective of long series of streets built on the ancient labyrinth of mediaeval Paris, a revolutionary cauldron difficult to control. The new width of the streets had to hinder the building of barricades and make it easier for troops to places of conflict faster, but the revolutionaries once more learnt to raise barricades (in February 1871). During the Commune, the barricades played a

very important role and were capable of completely closing off the boulevard and suddenly interrupting its splendid perspectives. This time the National Guard came out in service of the community and directed the fortification of the city. Barricades of cobblestones were built up to 3 m high with holes for the use of artillery and for evacuation, turning the city of wide, monumental streets into a large battlefield.

With Napoleon III, the incipient city of modernisation, full of possibilities, had been immediately devoured by the disciplinary city of the bourgeoisie (Gamarra, 2008: 10). In the same way as that comfortable, simple, habitable and functional domicile that appeared in Chardin's paintings or filled the pages of *Julie ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* by Rousseau, published in 1761, the 19th century advanced towards the inside of Balzac's *Cousin Pons*, subverted and controverted into a work of art. A hundred years later, the most appropriate term to describe the declaration of bourgeois homes would be *bric-à-brac*. The construction of a private identity would be the guarantee of all denomination exercised in favour of destructive progress.

Along with the landscapes, panoramas and universal displays, the different areas of Benjamin's city bring in the bourgeois domestic interiors, the streets and the barricades. Decoration would help to constitute the civic, moral and artistic ideology of the Paris of the Second Empire in these interiors, refuges for art and works of art in

themselves. Meanwhile, in the street, as described by Buck-Morss (1995: 106-109), schools and hospitals, museums and national monuments were built under Haussmann's view, light and air were brought to the city, but the social antagonisms were only concealed and not eliminated. The uniform facades outlined in large boulevards stretching to the horizon were intended to submit the fragmented city in a coherent appearance.

Haussmann, the demolishing artist, covered the streets under construction with canvases and revealed them as inaugurated monuments when they were finished. In the streets suddenly freed from order by the barricades, the initial point was not the appearance of the right material, but rather, as we said before, the fact of finding a fast, immediate solution; a solution related to invention, based on self-construction, on the rules of chance and the search for objects that might be accumulated, used and intertwined unpredictably. A kind of parasitic urbanism that made use of the very urban elements used to organise the city and its people. In López Sánchez's (1993: 236-241), study of the 1909 uprisings in Barcelona, the barricades slowed the accelerated mobility that the capital's urban development had imposed. Just as in Paris, the revolutionary constructions provisionally covered the gaps opened by the urban reformation of the city, denying their existence. This was street urban development, in the street itself. These were actions which, along Lefebvre's lines (1972), might be said to have revealed the

extraordinary potential of the ordinary when it manages to break with repetition, obsession and fear.

The revolt of the uprising proletariat, initially disaggregated, would expand and occupy the city without a uniform code (López Sánchez, 1993: 236), and in a certain way the barricades, those collectively built architectures, would be one of its crystallisations. A moral and not merely material effect, Engels would say, which opened an opportunity for a new kind of transgressor urban development based on the community, on the Commune. A class frontier that, in the words of Blanchot (an author we have rediscovered thanks to *La Comunidad Inconfesable* excellently published by Valentín Roma), affirmed the break with power, the radical notion of power. An urban development of strength, of the social, of the political that opposed the urban development of power, of the State, of politics (Delgado, 2010: 139).

With the barricades, the space was freed and their builders gave up their jobs as demonstrators to become combatants (Blanchot, 2009: 39), combating the society whose values, truths, ideals and privileges were foreign to them. A rejection that put forth another possible future. Horta (2001: 133) claimed the heroism of the anarchists of Barcelona who in July 1855 carried a banner of future modernity down the Rambla: "Association or death". Horta reminds us that these men and women were not occasional

activists, these were people who suffered to survive, who struggled to overcome the condition of one humanity on behalf of another, an unrealised modernity, free of all alienation and submission.

MARQUEES

Marquees were temporary constructions raised mainly in towns on the Catalan coast between the end of the 19th century and the middle of the 20th. These were large, taught structures (of around 24m x 36m), in which the sails that formed the roofs were suspended from the hanging cables connected to tall wooden antennas. In this sense, the *envelat* (marquee) worked structurally in a completely different manner to all western constructive tradition, based on falling compression loads.

Their origin combines two contemporary phenomena. First of all, it seems that the *envelats* were intended to replace the former convents which, following the confiscations of 1835, were used as places for dancing. As the convents were demolished or took on a new stable use, the passion for dancing in late 19th-century Barcelona found an ideal place in these ephemeral constructions. They occupied open lands, vegetable gardens, squares, beaches and any place in the outskirts of fully growing towns (as can be seen in paintings such as *R. Casas Ball de tarda*, 1896; or *J. Torres Gracia, L'envelat*, 1917). They were used to transform urban public space normally controlled by power into

a place for the people, an appropriation that was the very essence of the festive act.

Alternatively, the envelats are given a marine origin, an evolution of the fairs and celebrations held when the ships came back to the Catalan coast from the Americas, and were made with the materials from the ships themselves. This idea is backed by the large amount of elements and marine terminology used in the envelats, in which the materials and techniques are those used in building the ships themselves (images by Soldevila).

Furthermore, in the long century in which the envelat was used, it became a fundamental element of local festivals used to hold events, concerts and above all dances. They became the true display of a town's inhabitants at one of the few times in the year when the arrival of foreigners or summer goers might be expected... This gives the envelat a mythical image backed by the novelty and magic of their construction and the functions inside.

Generally, the texts that deal with the envelat recognise in them the fruit of the wisdom and ancestral tradition of the people. Domènech i Muntaner (1886) relates these constructions to "Alexander the Great's famous tent" or "the Roman sailboats", or that "their plan was born on the shores of the Mediterranean". In one of his glosses that were the true arbiters of the taste of Catalan modernity, D'Ors (1907) recognises the envelat as "always an epic work, the creation of the multitude". Similarly, Gaziel (1963) considers the envelat the "fruit of race (...) a magical, airy, cool lounge raised and dropped in one night" the perfect palace

for the "children of democracy". Even in the first technical text dealing with these constructions, Cirici i Pellicer (1972) detects a "phase of collective work in the villages of the Maresme" in the origin of the envelat, which gave rise to the definitive form.

All of these interpretations are based on the clean, effective character of the envelat, on the temporary nature and agility of its constructive elements stressed by their marine origin. Without a doubt, spaces of such a size produced by ropes, sails and masts, in complete opposition to the stones, bricks and cast iron shaping the bourgeois city, would be facts that galvanise the almost mythical interpretation of these constructions.

Something similar happens inside, with a declaration that stresses the conception of a fantastic, ideal, timeless construction. In the time before the First World War, the envelat was decorated in a similar manner to the bourgeois domestic space, with all of the connotations of fleeing from the urban and the ideal refuge that these interiors possessed. Rusiñol places a 1915 farce in an envelat, in which "curtains, mirrors, cardboard caryatids and all typical materials" are combined with scenes full of Neptunes, Nereids and Nymphs. These produced "an atmosphere that was rather vitiated, (where) jewels and verses shone more clearly. And also dancing" (D'Ors 1907). Later due to the diffuse influence of European artistic avant-garde, the envelat was decorated with geometric motifs, plain colours and indirect light, and turned into a state of fantasy.

The building of the envelats or marquees therefore brings together the idea of tradition, race and wisdom and the conception of an ideal, magic space. This interpretation of the Mediterranean culture as classical, as organised is typical of the *rappel a l'ordre* put forward by the French right wing and which was immediately taken on by Catalan conservatism. What's more, when D'Ors talks about "the big wheels of the barricades and those which violated the burials in 1909" in one of the glosses that would form part of his book *La Ben plantada* (1913), he refers to them as "African", and recognises the will of barbarity and disorder in their attitude.

Because the barricades are built with the waste of the bourgeois city and their construction is the result of more or less orderly supply. As said, street furniture such as cobblestones, drainage grills or rails, or maybe trams, beds, furniture... In the case of Barcelona, the best-known photograph from the Civil War is a barricade formed by a stack of dead horses. In other examples, such as the two pictures by Brangulí, the direct relationship is shown between the destruction of the city and the construction of a barricade. Here it seems almost possible to trace the lifting of each of the cobblestones and its placement on the barricade.

For while the envelat always aspires to be a fictional place, the barricade is never released from the reality that can be traced in each of its components. The photographs preserved of each of these constructions reaffirm this idea. In the case of the envelats, the images

bear witness to the function for which they were designed. Spaces full of people sitting, dining or dancing, in which the individual is reduced to anonymity by the clear social function of the envelat.

The clue on the difference between barricades and envelats is in the essence of the design methodology. Although the envelat was really the result of an organized and professional business, it is understood as something ideal and fantastic in its origin and construction. But the envelat had always a real use, its function was absolutely suitable and precise, we might say "bourgeois". In the barricades, on the other hand, most of the images are of its construction or presentation, with warrior-like individuals proudly presenting their work. Most of the "real" images of the barricades in action are no more than staging just before or after the actual battle. In this sense, the barricade was the fruit of real elements, but was in fact the condensation of an ideal, as seen by the poet Joan Maragall, the only intellectual who tried to understand the roots of popular uprising in Barcelona on 1909.

Let us end with a classic history of an ideal, that quotes the depth of this difference on design method. The barricades, initially built with barrels in the documented uprisings of the 14th century, were an element that were raised time and time again in the 19th and 20th centuries in Paris, Petrograd, Barcelona, etc. Today we see them throughout the world in the form of burning tyres or cars and urban buses turned across the street. The submission to bourgeois power in 1848 met

with the resistance of the barricades and even the smile of Tocqueville's maid. Negri (2006: 234) tells this short tale in a journal by the French author. In June 1848, the Tocqueville family was sitting in their beautiful apartment in the 7th arrondissement and cannon fire was heard against the uprising working class. A maid was serving the table. Everyone sitting there was worried. The maid was smiling. They immediately dismissed her. According to Negri, the smile contained a recognised element of resistance, strength against power. How might this resistance against the New Europe be expressed today, Negri asks.

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