



BEYOND THE GRASSY KNOLL



TRADITIONALLY RELATIONS BETWEEN ARCHITECTS AND LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS ARE PEPPERED WITH DISAGREEMENTS. NOT LEAST OF THESE IS THE ARGUMENT WHICH PIVOTS AROUND THE OBJECT-FIELD RELATIONSHIP, MADE FAMOUS BY ROSALIND KRAUSS. HERE **JULIAN RAXWORTHY** EXAMINES BARCELONA AS A CASE-STUDY – SPECIFICALLY THE PROJECTS OF EDUARD BRU, WHICH FOCUS AS MUCH ON THE FIELD AS THE OBJECT UPON IT.



TOP: VIEWS OF THE PARC DE LA VALL D'HEBRON. ABOVE AND LEFT: DETAILS OF THE ESCOLA TÈCNICA SUPERIOR D'ARQUITECTURA DE BARCELONA SOUTH CAMPUS PROJECT

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BARCELONA'S urban design concepts and projects is now widely appreciated, particularly since it provided a model for Sydney of what an Olympic Games might precipitate in a city. In the leadup to the 1992 games various public spaces were developed, representing the most systematic consideration of designing city landscapes since Baron Haussmann's strategies in 19th-century Paris.

Interestingly, while the approach to the city was eminently strategic in planning terms and comprehensive in infrastructural provision, design realisations of sites were lead by individual designers with different formal

languages and concerns, who rode the wave of political independence from a long-term dictatorship. This approach is in contrast to many cities, notably Melbourne, where a universal urban treatment was sought to provide a singular and authoritarian vision for the city. The city of Barcelona's approach was more interested in acting as a patron to its children's innovation.

Many of these projects involved creating a cocktail of development including the provision of major infrastructure and general improvement. This often comprised a civic program such as a library, transport infrastructure, and a civic space, with an

artwork in it. These public spaces have become contemporary benchmarks for landscape architects and urban designers. They show how strategic planning measures can result in quality design-based landscape projects. For the discipline of landscape architecture, this had long been a conundrum: the reconciliation of traditionally antithetical interests of statistical planning versus artful, calculated designs. Pointedly, the practitioners creating these projects were architects, whose arrogance subsumed all other disciplines, but thereby allowed a holistic consideration of the design implications of everything. Their projects were fascinating in how as they attempted to >>



ABOVE AND BELOW: DETAILS OF THE ESCOLA TÈCNICA SUPERIOR D'ARQUITECTURA DE BARCELONA SOUTH CAMPUS PROJECT



GRANOLLERS MEDIEVAL SITE

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>> consider every aspect of the landscape problem 'from scratch'; in the same situation, landscape architects would have eliminated every 'unconventional' innovation. Conversely, these projects coincided with the rise of an architectural interest in 'typology', which provided a historical connectivity and source for this trend to embrace notions of the plaza and the street. Whether consciously thought of in these terms or driven by a lack of buildings, these architectural excursions into landscape provide an interesting way to consider the design outcomes of the Barcelona project.

Spanish architect Eduard Bru discusses his perceived relationship of design projects to strategic objectives in his essay "Questions of City" (from *Three On The Site*), which reveals his fascination (like many practitioners of this period) with the relationship between object and field, as elaborated by art historian Rosalind Krauss. Debate about this relationship has continued to develop and is now recognised as a more general discussion that regards topology as both surface and logic. And the relationship is well delineated: architecture readily associates itself with the production of autonomous objects, while landscape architects see that as problematic,

because the landscape becomes simply a bland surface upon which buildings 'do their thing'. This subordination of landscape to the object was precisely the dichotomy the Barcelonan projects seemed to overturn, and this explains some of their attraction. The landscape is a space and consideration of its own, which continues in spite of any architectural adjacencies; the same cannot be said of the architecture.

Bru himself has made landscape his central consideration, establishing a landscape architecture program at the Escola Tècnica Superior d'Arquitectura de Barcelona (ETSAB) and investigating the landscape in his own practice. His Parc de la Vall d'Hebron of 1989 seemed to be the archetype of this type of project, providing a major infrastructural service, including rail, freeways and interchanges, tunnels, recreation facilities and open space, together with significant housing. This response to the brief then became the interface and connection to which individual elements (designed by separate consultants such as Pinos and Miralles and Raphael Moneo) linked. Physically, the site was a hillside in a suburban enclave. It attracted coverage in *Quaderns* at the time, and was represented as

a unique synthesis of design and strategy (in fact one whole issue of *Quaderns* was dedicated to the project, and described it in macro terms as a strategic moment on the road to Paris, right through to a detailed study of surfaces and furniture). The Parc's intention mirrored that of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture; namely, the creation of a surface for colonisation, a programmatic container, a parterre. Formally, it dealt with the landscape as a diagram, allocating contrasting materials to differing functions, and then articulating their junction in detail terms. The steep topography of Vall d'Hebron meant that the design focused on devices to change levels, particularly ramps, which further emphasised functional facilitation. Many of the finishes are overtly industrial, with a predominant astro-turf surface rendered in hot primary colours. The diagram is 'filled out' with a vaguely biomorphic form.

When visited, the site maintains its legibility, but the materials seem to have aged in a way that could not be foreseen, like sand sheeting over faded plastic grass and rusted, graffitied steel panels. Despite this apparent disrepair, plant material (reeds in particular) has gone crazy, giving the site an archaeological feel. It is in fact a ruin, one of many projects created for



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a political event that cannot be maintained and was not designed to be. The performance has finished. The 'architectural excursion' has turned into a *Survivor*-like endeavour: somewhere, someone forgot that landscapes change and grow over time in a totally different manner to buildings. They are active participants in the landscape process, not necessarily by choice. Despite the lack of intention, the rustication gives an interesting inflection to the industrial aesthetic which became a wasteland in two years.

A later project of Bru's, completed in 1995, the South Campus of ETSAB, further illuminates the object-field argument. Located in an elongated court between two college buildings, the design comprises a huge surface of pristine bitumen (though for how long?), with a series of highly detailed points containing various functions, such as seating, barbeques and stairways to a lower parking level. These fragments resemble kidney beans and are reminiscent of landscape architect Roberto Burle-Marx, as well as his architectural contemporary, Oscar Niemeyer. Each piece receives material and detail attention, becoming an object of desire, with finely worked stone edges and light steel

structures. This project seems simple, but is canny and judiciously aware of distributing the budget to places where it will matter and make a difference. That said, if one now perceives of the field as a continuous surface, the elevation of these moments would seem like an attempt at relocating them to an object-like status. This allows the rules of architectural composition to wreak their inevitable aesthetic course: the fetishisation of construction. The object-field dichotomy is revealed: a surface is defined by the points that make it up, as opposed to its inherent qualities, and thus the Barcelonan projects are objects in a strategic field. The dichotomy remains, but the project is nonetheless refined and funky.

Bru's fetish with details, and the over-articulation of elements such as furniture that is common to many recent projects in Barcelona, are well illustrated in the Parc de la Vall d'Hebron and ETSAB. This fascination is also revealed in his 1999 project for Granollers, a small medieval Spanish town. Here, the town centre is colonised by a new, pristine surface comprised of sawn stone – reminiscent of bluestone – of two different unit sizes. These paving types carefully interact with a central

drain to give the street an undulating trajectory. The subtlety of the paving treatment defers to the building facade, thereby providing a benchmark for viewing and 'museumifying' the city's history. Such stone pavement works have created a consistent motif in cities, whether in Barcelona, Paris or Melbourne.

The urban projects of Barcelona's '92 Olympic Games went further than other projects of the 20th century (perhaps excluding the postwar Californian garden) to seriously experiment with and refine urban and landscape detailing. Because of Barcelona's simultaneous interest in strategic planning mechanisms, these experiments have become the ultimate source for urban designers – the 'tech note' being a system of specifications that could guarantee the physical quality of urban infrastructure, regardless of author. While becoming serially boring, this system has given cities a much-needed increase in a baseline character which is particularly noticeable in Melbourne and Sydney's George Street.

Eduard Bru will be an international speaker at the July 2001 MESH conference, organised by Landscape Architecture at RMIT, in Melbourne. Enquiries: MESH@rmit.edu.au

