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# The Case of “Hard” Squares in Barcelona

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A large number of “hard” squares, or plazas, were constructed in Barcelona, Spain, between 1980 and 1984, just after the political upheavals following the death of General Franco. The socialist party in power in the City Hall claimed that the squares represented the beginning of a new democratic urban policy. It is true that Barcelona lacked public open spaces after forty years of Franco’s dictatorship. The old regime was not interested in having open urban spaces in popular neighborhoods, since people could stage demonstrations in them. With the change of urban policies, Oriol Bohigas, the architect-in-chief in the City Hall, spoke of a new monumentality in the suburbs of Barcelona, designed to dignify the city and increase public life in the open urban spaces.

In spite of the immediate and persuasive publicity emanating from the city government, which heralded the “modern quality” of these new squares, the first reaction of many users was rejection. Now, several years later, the controversy has quieted down for many reasons, including financial problems, changes in the City Hall and, most of all, the race for the Olympic Games to be held in Barcelona in 1992.

The reasons people cited for disliking the squares were that they lacked spatial

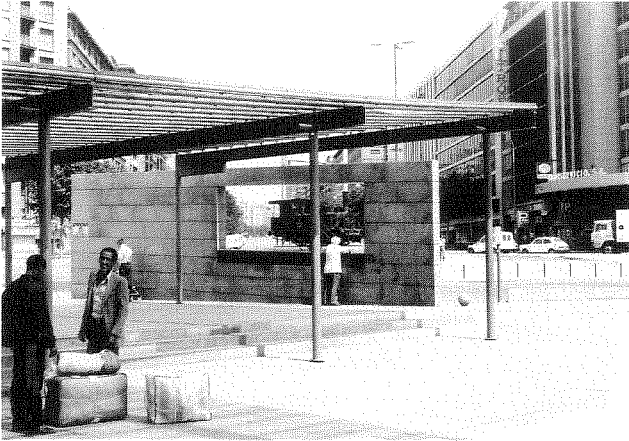
quality and proper comfort due to the absence of trees, green areas, and “soft” surfaces for children. Immediately those who made these criticisms were charged with conservatism. Their concerns were countered with the idea that democracy in Spain needs a “modern” image, so long repressed by General Franco’s censorship.

The City Hall of Barcelona funded a study on the impact of these hard squares on public opinion.<sup>1</sup> One girl about sixteen years of age said, “This square needs some trees to give some intimacy.” Referring to the concrete walls between the people and the cars, a nineteen-year-old boy said, “The edges of this square are badly designed. Instead of a barrier of stone they should have put a row of plants or other soft limit.” People do not like these concrete barriers, which do not isolate from noise and view but produce a sensation of claustrophobia and artificiality. Architects argue that these walls define open public space. Citizens argue that the buildings define the public space, not the low walls.

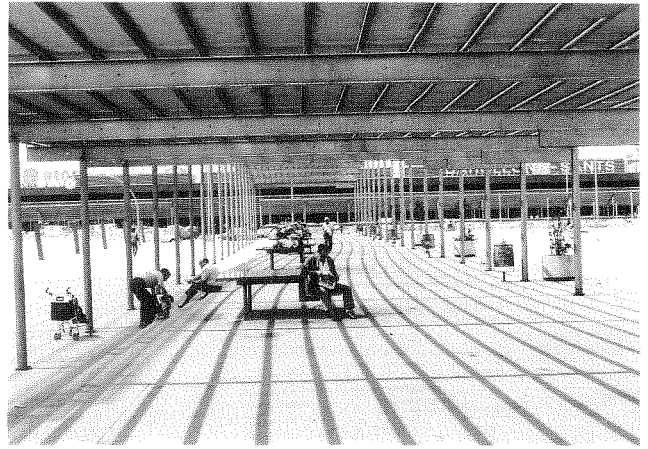
Most of the users agreed that the Plaza dels Països Catalans, or “Plaza de Sans,” a new square above the new central rail station in Barcelona, is the square with the best design. At the same time, however, they were very angry about the lack of



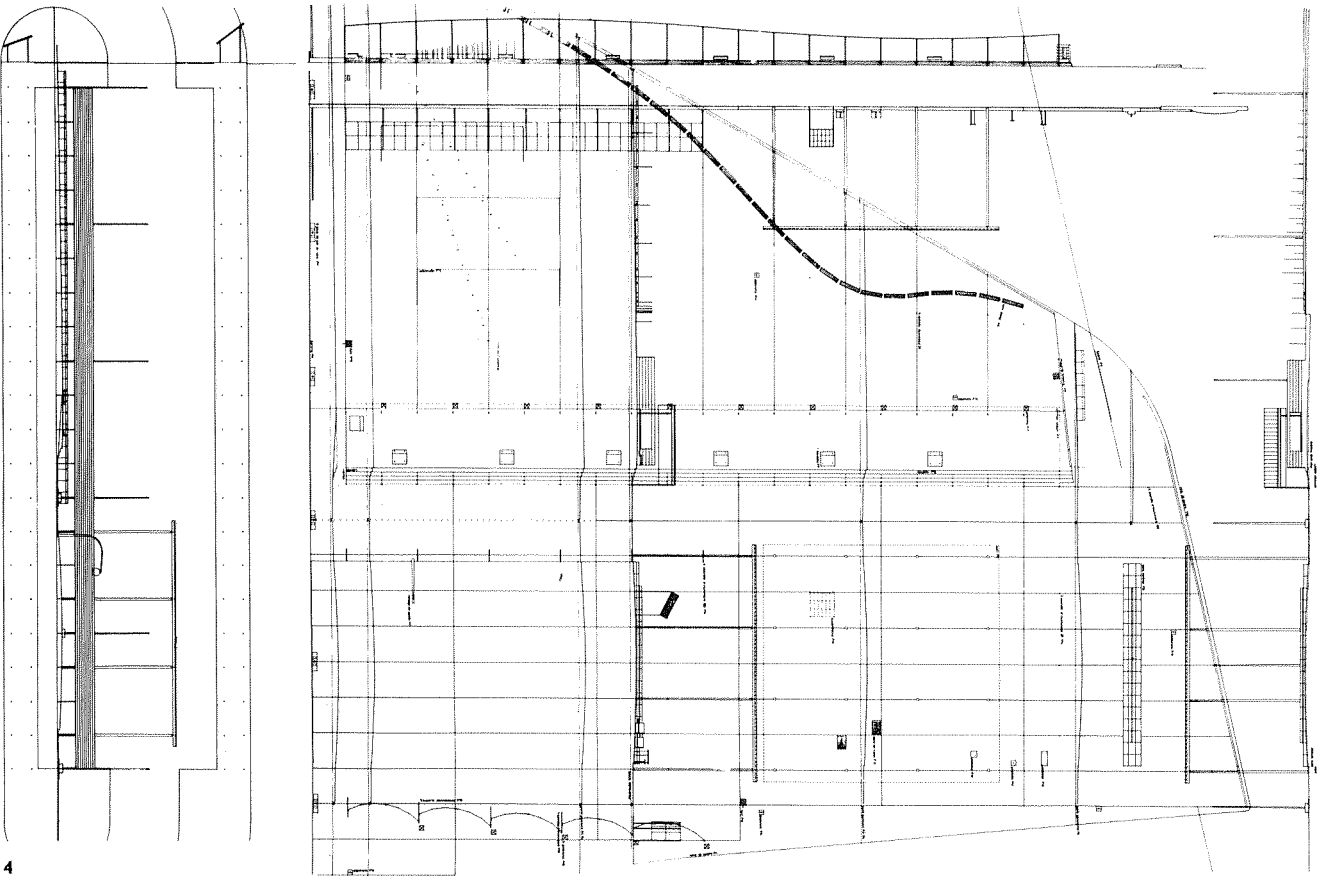
**I Plaza de Sans, “hard” bench and elevated shadow roof**



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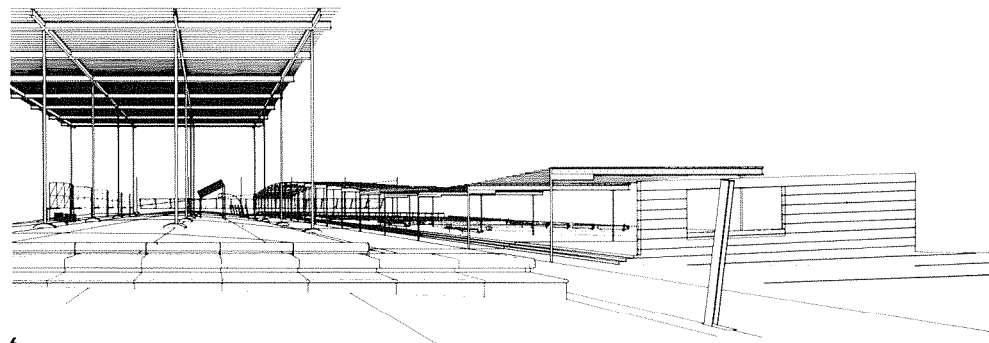
greenery and sandboxes for children and the location of benches in a very windy and noisy area. They were angry because they did not want to accept that either one is “modern” and does not feel comfortable in the square or one is “regressive,” acting against the socialist party (progressive and modern left wing) by wanting a more traditional but usable square.

The design of the “Plaza de la Mercé,” a new square built in the old section of Barcelona, has been much more successful for users, who strongly needed open spaces. They like the monumentality and the division of the space into two quality areas: an open “hard” area and a more intimate, shadowed area. They still think that playing soccer should not be the main use of the open area, as it is now. They ask for public uses, such as parties, exhibits, and theater, which are more appropriate for the hard surface.

“Plaza Real,” a reconstructed square, has produced very different and contrasting opinions. More than half of the users claim that the square has lost its “Classical-Romantic” character, which was created by a mixture of neoclassic and colonial-romantic styles and elements and enhanced by luxurious greenery. Many of these users have abandoned romantic walks around the area and are using other spaces in the

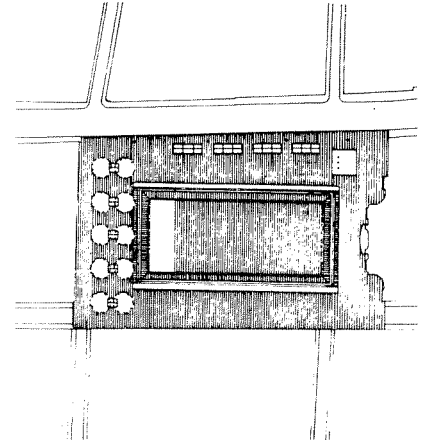
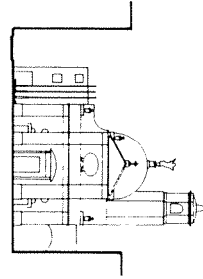
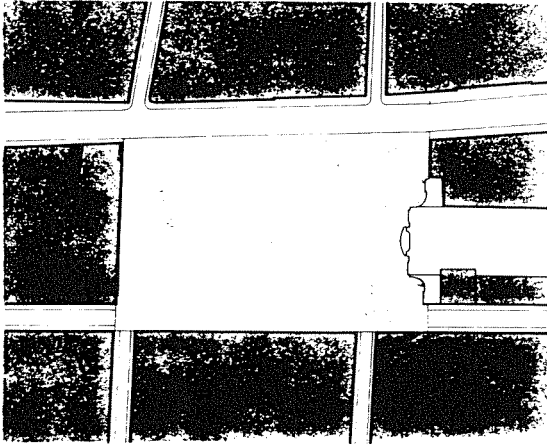
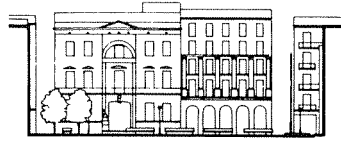


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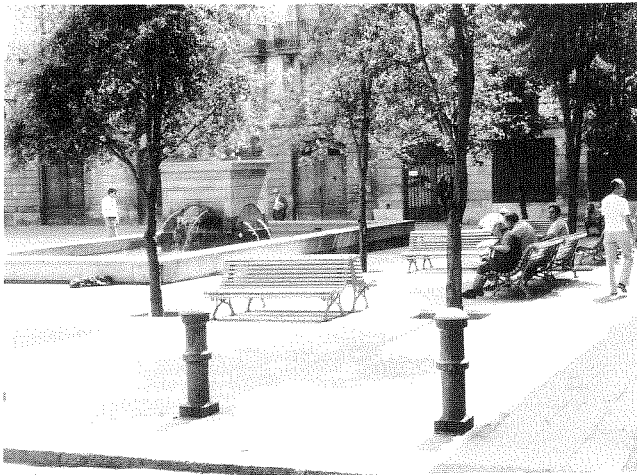


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- 2 Plaza de Sans, urban window as the end of the long shadow area
- 3 Plaza de Sans, shadow area with a futuristic effect
- 4 Plaza de Sans, plan, sections, and elevations
- 5 Plaza de Sans, unoccupied wooden benches
- 6 Plaza de Sans, perspective view



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- 7 **Plaza de la Mercé**, plans, sections, and perspective view
- 8 **Plaza de la Mercé**, trees, benches, and fountain
- 9 **Plaza de la Mercé**, adjacent church

city. However, the Plaza now has new users, who feel that more clarity and visual order have been obtained with the new design.

The socialist party in power in City Hall since 1978 resisted public opinion, which produced a lack of communication among users, designers, and politicians. Oriol Bohigas argued again and again in the newspapers that the architects he designated for the projects were among the most prestigious in town. He stated that the “modern” quality of the squares was preferable to picturesque pastiches and postmodern eclectic attitudes. The opinion of the opponents was characterized as “regressive” and “ignorant.” Bohigas said, “It is very well known that good art [and modern art is good art] has never been popular.” Bohigas added, “I believe that everything has changed because we have now a socialist view of the city, or better, we have a ‘social’ view of the city.” He also said, “This discussion about ‘hard’ or ‘soft’ squares shows a strange lack of culture in our country. The ‘Plaza de Sans’ is the most important urbanistic event of our day.”

Finally, one of the arguments made by the architects in favor of hard squares was that they are cheaper to maintain than the greenery and trees. In three years, the hard surfaces have decayed very quickly and now require considerable reconstruction.



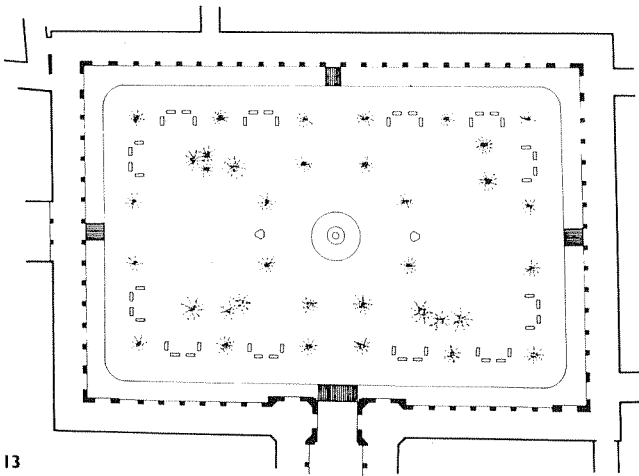
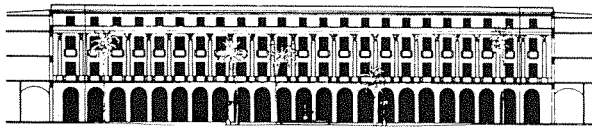
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10 Plaza Real, around 1900

11 Plaza Real, new, modern character



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- 12 Plaza Real, rehabilitated facades
- 13 Plaza Real, plan and section
- 14 Plaza Real, before (top) and after (bottom) renewal

This controversy is, in my opinion, a good example of what happens in architecture when communication between users, designers, and politicians is broken. Some questions should have been discussed: Is it true that modern architecture has never been popular? What about the “abstract” quality of good “modern” design in contrast with “tradition” and previous experience? I would like to analyze very briefly some of these questions.

I. A. Richards wrote in 1924:

The world of poetry—concrete or abstract—has in no sense any different reality from the rest of the world and it has no special laws and no other-worldly particularities. It is made up of experiences of exactly the same kinds as those that come to us in other ways. Every poem, however, is a strictly limited piece of experience, a piece which breaks up more or less easily if alien elements intrude. It is more highly and delicately organized than ordinary experiences of the street. It is fragile. Further it is communicable. It may be experienced by very different minds with only slight variations. It differs from many other similar experiences in this very communicability. For these reasons when we experience it, we must preserve it from contamination. For

these reasons we establish a severance between the poem and what is not to be the poem in our experience. But this is not a severance between unlike things but between different systems of the same activity. This severance of the poetic experience is merely a freeing of it from extraneous ingredients. The “myth” of poetization of experience is due in part to talking about poetry and not about the concrete experience which are poems.

Richards’s explanation clarifies the relations between “modern” and “postmodern” trends in architecture and tradition. These hard squares create a new experience in Barcelona, but they do not create a new world out of nothing.

Modernity has never been opposed to functionality. On the contrary, it has always sought to transform previous experience through new forms, materials, and aesthetics. It has only rejected aprioristic styles. In this sense the Plaza de Sans is a good example. It shows an original design in the way opened by Russian Constructivism, Dada movements, and German Expressionism fifty years ago. However, it was unnecessary to overlook accommodations for the real needs of the users.

Modern architecture disappeared when aesthetics

became a stale redesign of the innovations of the modern avant-gardes and not a fresh expression of a new way of looking to the past and to the future. J. L. Sert, the internationally known Catalan architect, who was dean of the School of Architecture at Harvard University for several years, wrote in 1934 in Barcelona:

. . . against the dominant desire in the last century of finding one original style and the objective and intellectual orientation in the most advanced architecture today, there exists day by day a broader abyss. This theoretical and intellectual research, a basic law in modern art, is the basis for a new theory in architecture. It was necessary to translate, as in mathematics, the pure mechanistic laws of modern architecture into clear principles thanks to these cold ideas. Once these universal bases are conceived we can think about their plastic appearance, translation into architecture of the complexity of the human spirit. However, this concern with emotions has nothing to do with old and arbitrary complications. Emotions should be filtered through knowledge. Architects have to be in tune with their time, they need inspiration to escape from recent academicisms, like horizontal windows, iron tubes etc. . . .<sup>3</sup>

The last words are especially important. Hard squares wanted to be modern, but for the most part they have only been cloaked in “modern” style. They have not transformed previous experience; they have escaped from it.

The case of hard squares is closed. The city government of Barcelona wants to forget about the affair and to prepare for the possibility of the Olympic Games in 1992. The hard squares of Barcelona, however, have left their mark on the city and on the minds of the people.

#### NOTES

- 1 J. Muntanola, *Places Velles i Places Noves* (Barcelona, 1985).
- 2 I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London, 1924).
- 3 *AC Magazine*. Barcelona, 1931.