

# THE TRANSFORMATION OF BARCELONA



MONTJUÏC AREA



THE OLYMPIC VILLAGE

THANKS TO THE GAMES, THE FOUR GREAT OLYMPIC AREAS ARE THE RESULT OF THE GREAT URBAN ADVENTURE BY WHICH BARCELONA, SUCCESSFULLY OVERCOMING DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE CENTRE AND THE PERIPHERY, WILL BECOME A CITY OPEN TO THE SEA.

JOSEP MARTORELL ARCHITECT

**T**he 1992 Olympic Games have provided both the excuse and the incentive which have led Barcelona on her adventure of the greatest urban transformation this century. In the twenties, the 1929 International Exhibition started the conquest of the mountain of Montjuïc by the people of Barcelona and the subsequent reclassification of some of the surrounding areas. Under the Franco régime, the mayor of Barcelona, Porcioles, allowed uncontrolled growth in the development interests of the private sector, without an overall view of the city or any intention on the part of the City Council of setting town-planning guidelines in the public interest.

It was not until the arrival of democracy that, with the first democratic City Council presided by the socialists, action has started on the city, with priority given to the interests of the commu-

nity over and above perfectly legitimate private interests. Action by the City Council, whose original protagonists were the team made up of Narcís Serra, mayor, and Oriol Bohigas, in charge of town-planning, was based on the current Outline Plan (whose principal artificer was Joan Antoni Solans) and started interventions using the project as a far more efficient tool than the plan. (In this, Barcelona, in the eighties, anticipated the academic/political debate which has arisen throughout Europe on the most suitable urbanistic methods for the transformation of a city). In the eighties, the problem in the Barcelona that Porcioles left us was not one of expansion but of reconstruction. The urban fabric of the municipal territory was fully occupied, but badly occupied and with obvious shortcomings of many types: in articulating thoroughfares, facilities and service networks.

Narcís Serra and Oriol Bohigas started a policy of strategic local interventions in projects in public spaces, with the objective of beginning, by a process of osmosis, the reclassification of the surrounding urban fabrics to allow an increase in the quality of the community's life. A decade later, these interventions make it clear that, despite variations in the quality of the corresponding projects –out of more than a hundred and fifty some are very good while others are no more than discreet–, the transformation of the neighbouring urban fabric has been successful and the urban quality of the whole area has improved. This experience in the early years encouraged a change in scale from local interventions to others on a larger scale, to operations that would allow the transformation of a run-down district or unfavoured areas. It was also necessary to think of finding the politico-





THE OLYMPIC PORT

© ELOI BONJOCH

economic mechanisms that would allow this change. Narcís Serra intuitively guessed the path that Pasqual Maragall has since confirmed and followed with determination until reaching the objective. The path taken was none other than that of applying for Barcelona to host the 1992 Olympic Games. On 17 October 1986 Barcelona was nominated as the seat of the Olympics and the way remained open. Without this, there would not have been the money from the different administrations to confront an important urban transformation—in quantity and in modern criteria—in the short term, nor would it have been possible to encourage the city to hold on for six years with the inconvenience of being an almost permanent construction site. Maragall is the person who has created and maintained this faith in the future. (It is worth seeing the stubbornness with which the people of Barcelona spend their Sundays wandering around the building work, curious, critical and admiring, defying fences and prohibitions).

The great urban transformation Barcelona is undergoing is located mainly in what have been called the four Olympic areas: Avinguda Diagonal, Vall d'Hebron, Montjuïc and Nova Icària. These four areas are undergoing a profound transformation of the urban fabric, but this transformed fabric would not survive if it could not be sustained by a

proper road network. This adaptation of Barcelona's communications network to today's needs—as far as it is possible for a nineteenth century city to resist the overwhelming invasion of the motor car—, with the construction of two large ringroads, one along the coast and one inland, surrounding the city and linking it to all the exits and entrances, is another of the city's great urban operations carried out with the excuse of 1992.

Another of the great urban transformations in the field of infrastructure is the improvement of the city's network of sewers, which it has at last been possible to build—as has been thought necessary since the end of last century—and from now on, having spectacularly increased the capacity of the stormdrains, the endemic inundations of Poblenou every time the autumn storms fell on Barcelona will be avoided.

The four Olympic areas are located in border areas between the formalized city and the urbanistic chaos of the periphery, in places where the city's unchecked growth has left ugly scars; places where the differences are not only in the urban fabric, but also in the social fabric. These urban transformation operations, then, as a result of the characteristics of the areas chosen, are capable of driving the transformation undertaken out to the surrounding area by osmosis. With these improvements,

the wounds can be stitched up, the scars can be removed and the immediate environment improved. These are strategic operations.

The Vall d'Hebron was a large gap in the city where things were supposed to happen, because it had for a long time been earmarked as the site of the inland, or second, ringroad, and it was a sort of hollow, a valley, amongst the hills above Gràcia and Collserola. It had always been a hole, without any recognizable shape, an open sore, ever since the city started to climb the southern slopes of those hills of Gràcia and drop down the northern side, and residential or council estates were placed perched below the Carretera de les Aigües. The Olympic area of the Vall d'Hebron has been conceived as a large sports park with its gardens and open-air spaces and its indoor installations, and completed with an important housing project. This has allowed a new project for the inland ringroad, with an urban approach, connecting it via a road network and the la Rovira tunnel to Guineueta, Horta and Gràcia. This valley has allowed the successful establishment of fast, transversal communication which does not isolate, but which, because of its urban design taking into account the surrounding fabric, links the districts on either side of it, those at the foot of Collserola and those on the northern slopes of the hills







THE OLYMPIC PORT

© ELOI BONJOCH

of El Carmel. The argument of the large-scale sports facilities with an immediate programme fitted to the 1992 Olympic Games has been successful for tying the city together and establishing a decent-sized green area.

The top of Avinguda Diagonal is another Olympic area. The choice is a good one, because for some time now it has been full of sports installations belonging to private clubs (Barcelona, Polo, Laietà, Turó, etc.) and the University, and was also an important entrance to and exit from Barcelona for the rest of Catalonia and the Spanish capital, but all a bit of a shambles because no-one had ever planned anything other than the line of a high-capacity main street that already formed part of Ildefons Cerdà's excellent 1859 plan. Apart from this, there was no town-planning project for the surrounding



THE OLYMPIC PORT

means of a coherent communications network and a rational system of urban relation between buildings and open-air spaces, which will turn this mosaic of different pieces, until now lumped together any old way, into the orderly sidewalks of the most representative entrance to Barcelona.

Montjuïc, obviously, had to be the Olympic area par excellence. It had had a stadium since 1929. The park planned by Forestier on the occasion of the 1929 International Exhibition had started to develop the mountain but the work had stopped half way. Now was the right moment to complete it. The reformation of the stadium, complemented by the other important Olympic sports installations – the great esplanade, the Sant Jordi palace, the Picornell swimming baths – and the conquest, with the park, of the whole of the mountain, make

© COOB'92, S.A.





THE OLYMPIC STADIUM

Montjuïc into a great park, at once sporting and cultural. Cultural because it will all be presided over by the Palau Nacional, cleverly restored as the National Museum of Art of Catalonia (MNAC). And access from the Plaça d'Espanya will be guaranteed by a series of elevators. This new conquest of Montjuïc, as well as giving new life to the whole mountain, will make it possible to eliminate the scars at its foot between a mountain which has been inefficiently occupied and urban fabrics that would be lost when it was redeveloped. This was the objective of this operation: to make the mountain of Montjuïc, with its museums, its sports facilities and its park, a useful part of Barcelona.

The last but not least important Olympic area is the new district of Nova Icària, or the Olympic Village –as you



THE OLYMPIC RING

like. The transformation here has been of an obsolete industrial and urbanistically run-down district located in Poble Nou, right beside the Parc de la Ciutadella, into a new piece of city –a district with housing, shops, offices, facilities– open to the sea and successfully integrated into the rest of the city. In spite of its central position, the former industrial district had become totally isolated,

because the railway lines coming from the Estació de França and leading, on the coastal side, towards the Maresme, and on the city side towards the Plaça de les Glòries, had made it inaccessible. Having eliminated the coastal line and covered the other one over, the area is now accessible and central. The recovery of Cerdà's communications network makes it permeable and its beaches have been returned to it thanks to the protective work along the coast. The excuse of establishing the Olympic athletes' residence there for the fortnight of the Olympic Games and the week of the Paralympics has allowed this vast transformation of the eastern sea coast –80,000,000,000 pesetas invested in infrastructures and 110,000,000,000 pesetas invested in building work–, which will become the first new maritime district of the Medi-







RESIDENCE OF THE PRESS, VALL D'HEBRON



THE OLYMPIC VILLAGE

terranean city Barcelona is, except for the Barceloneta district created *manu militari* in the mid-eighteenth century. Obviously, from a short-term viewpoint, it would have been simpler to build an Olympic Village in an empty space on the outskirts of the city, but the daring of putting it where it is, right in the middle of Poblenou, has made it possible to tackle the recovery of a sea front for the city –with its metropolitan scope– that would otherwise have taken years and years (and who knows if it would ever have been made reality).

As well as representing the transformation of four specific areas of the city capable of regenerating the surrounding fabric and healing the existing wounds, Barcelona's four Olympic areas are located, as Oriol Bohigas says, at the four corners of an imaginary square, each of whose sides marks another sector of the profound transformation of the city. This makes the effect of osmotic influence even stronger.

Between the Vall d'Hebron and the Avinguda Diagonal, at the foot of the Collserola range, the Ronda de Muntanya (second ringroad) with all the lateral links inland and towards the sea, establishes a line of metropolitan and, at the same time, urban communications (from Avinguda Meridiana to Sarrià), around which the urban fabrics that

flank them are tied in, providing access to the metropolitan park of Collserola for the whole city.

From Avinguda Diagonal to Montjuïc there is a line of urban centres: the Diagonal commercial centre, the Estació de Sants with its hotel, the Espanya Industrial and Escorxador parks, the business centre of the Carrer Tarragona, the new layout of the Plaça d'Espanya, with another large hotel, and the Passeig de Maria Cristina leading to the new installations of the National Museum of Art of Catalonia in the Palau Nacional.

From Montjuïc to Nova Icària the sea front from El Morrot to Poble Nou has been renewed. Its landmarks are: the Ronda de Mar (coastal ringroad), covered over as far as the Moll de la Fusta and again beyond the Olympic Port at the bottom of the Passeig de Carles I, the renewal of the Old Port with a large square at the confluence with the Avinguda Paral·lel, the enlargement of the beaches of Barceloneta, the new Olympic port, the beaches of the Olympic Village and the recuperation of the whole of the sea front as far as the Riera d'Horta, with the Poble Nou seafront and the lineal parks behind it, between the sea and the city.

From Nova Icària to the Vall d'Hebron, we can say that the Passeig de Carles I, which is the seaward continuation of

the Carrer de la Marina, is the Eixample street linking the top of the city with the new sea front. But at the same time it's an itinerary of citizens' activities from the sea to the Vall d'Hebron, passing through the Estació del Nord, now restored as sports facilities and a park, the cultural implantations of the Archive of the Crown of Aragon, the Barcelona Music Hall and the National Theatre of Catalonia, all in the vicinity of the Plaça de les Glòries –for the first time since Ildefons Cerdà conceived it, treated not as a residual space hastily thrown up by the not very urban thoroughfares, but replanned as an urban interchange holding together everything around it.

The four Olympic areas, with the transformations they imply and those that take place along the four sides of the virtual square that unites them, are the result of this great urban adventure of rebuilding the Barcelona of 1992 to put it at the service of the people of Barcelona and so that in future we shall all be able to enjoy a city open to the sea, in which the differences between centre and periphery will have disappeared, as much as possible, thanks to the permeability the new road network has allowed and the reclassification of the urban and social fabrics by means of the strategic operations of the four Olympic areas. ■