

A vision of San Diego's future

Barcelona serves as model of innovative urban design

By Larry Herzog

This month marks the beginning of InSite 97, *New Projects in Public Spaces* by Artists of the Americas, a three-month international exhibition and celebration of art and public space in the San Diego-Tijuana region. This may be an appropriate moment to rethink the design of our public spaces.

San Diegans spend large portions of their daily lives in the private spaces of their cars, offices and homes, or in the electronic orbits of cyberspace. On any given day, it is possible to go from one's home to the office and back home, without having contact with other people. Most of our public encounters end up taking place in the supermarket, the shopping mall or the fitness club. Some of us even chose to live in gated communities.

We have become a very privatized city. There may be some costs associated with this. In the city of Frankfurt, Germany, an affluent banking and industrial metropolis, a few years ago the local government hired a team of photographers to study the redesign of the railroad station.

The photographers shot over 60,000 photos in and around the train station. One result was the discovery of a large, hidden population of isolated and lonely people who came to find company in the crowds around the train station. No one had ever noticed these people because they kept moving — like travelers. But they were really simply looking for a public place to meet and see other people.

Such a population may or may not exist in San Diego, but most psychiatrists will tell you that one of the main reasons people are depressed in southern California is loneliness.

There is a way to respond to the increasing privatization of our lives. It lies in the kind of city forms we create, in the spaces we design for pedestrians and in the way we create public places that work for our citizens. One model for this kind of thinking lies eight thousand miles away in Barcelona, Spain, a city which at first glance might seem to have little in common with San Diego.

Barcelona is, to be sure, a much older metropolis, with roots in the Roman empire, a city of Gothic churches, medieval streets and Renaissance plazas. And, of course, it is known to have harbored many a creative genius, from Picasso to Dalí to Gaudí.

Yet Barcelona and San Diego have much in common. Both are ports cast in spectacular settings of mountains and hills spilling down to the sea. Both are "frontier" cities, lying on or near a major international border (Spain-France; U.S.-Mexico). Both are booming metropolitan areas with similar populations (between 2.5 and 3.0 million inhabitants). Both cities, despite

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their excellent ports and physical settings have had to battle another competing city (Madrid and Los Angeles respectively) to succeed economically.

In fact, both Barcelona and San Diego are cities whose physical setting offers an incredible opportunity to design people friendly environments that enhance the quality of life of citizens, while creating increasing economic opportunities. The benign climate, the hills, the ocean breezes offer the basic elements of pedestrian friendly, lively outdoor public spaces.

Barcelona, in the last 20 years, has undergone a dramatic face lift. Most people associate the transformation of Barcelona with the 1992 Summer Olympics, but, in fact, the city has been reshaping itself since the late 1970's, shortly after the dictator Franco died.

At the time of his death in 1976, Barcelona was a city in disarray. Freeways choked the downtown with traffic, while block after block of high rise tower apartments splattered the placeless suburban landscape. The Gothic quarter and other historic districts were falling apart, and the waterfront was badly deteriorated, cluttered with abandoned factories and warehouses, and totally cut off from the rest of the city.

A city planner told me that one day he drove his car down to the Mediterranean sea near the old port; when he got out to survey the scene, he was forced to flee back to his car, followed by a gang of large gray rats.

Twenty years later, Barcelona is celebrated as the most innovatively designed city in the world. The architecture critic Deyan Sudjic, writing in London's *The Guardian* has said of Barcelona that "it is the only truly great success in large scale urban design since the second World War."

When Barcelona emerged from the post-Franco era, civic leaders were determined to redefine priorities. A central plank in the new regime was to make design one of the engines of the city's overall transformation.

The thinking was that by designing great places for people to meet and circulate the city would improve the quality of life of its citizens, and enhance its competitiveness in the global economy.

A coalition of politicians, high officials, and investors, along with architects, planners and academics realized that Barcelona's attraction to businesses and global consumers (including tourists) lay in its image. Its image began with the natural environment, but was refined and given substance by architecture and urban form.

So, the leaders decided, what better way to uplift the city's image than to improve and beautify the places where people mingle and gather. The city embarked on a campaign to create new and spectacular public places, as well as redesign older ones.

In a little more than a decade,



Mix of old and new: La Catedral Gótica rises above the skyline of Barcelona, Spain. After undergoing a dramatic face lift in the last 20 years, Barcelona is celebrated as the most innovatively designed city in the world.



Lively outdoor spaces: A street performer works along the wide, tree-shaded promenade that stretches from the heart of Barcelona to the waterfront. The city's design provides great places for people to meet and circulate.

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public monies were used to build some 160 major projects, including new promenades, gardens, parks, plazas, playgrounds, public monuments and other gathering places. A former slaughterhouse was recycled into a magnificent park, embellished by one of the last great sculptures of Catalan artist Joan Miró.

Factories and quarries were transformed into neighborhood parks and community centers. Artists, sculptors and architects were brought in to create colorful works of public art throughout the city.

The results have been immediate and spectacular. Tourism in

Barcelona is booming. It is now one of Europe's top convention cities. Transnational business is relocating here, especially, but not exclusively, companies in the design fields — furniture, clothing, graphic design.

When asked by a journalist what is responsible for Barcelona's resurgence, the current mayor, referring to the strategy of thinking about city spaces and public places, recently replied in one word: "urbanism." I cannot remember any of San Diego's recent mayors using the term

"urbanism" to describe their vision of the city's future.

What, in fact, has San Diego been doing in the last twenty years? We shut down our city planning department. The top urban design expert in that department was recently compelled to resign. The waterfront is threatened by more high-rise hotels. Downtown, with all its potential, remains a polyglot of isolated and disconnected spaces — Gaslamp, Seaport Village, India St., etc.

What innovative or visionary design projects do we have to show for the Republican Convention or

the expansion of the stadium and convention center?

The success of Barcelona or San Diego lies in the energies devoted to creating great public places — from the waterfront and downtown business districts to the neighborhoods lying in the hills.

A best selling book that recently hit the shelves in Barcelona is titled "La Ciudad de Los Arquitectos (The City of Architects)." In it the author, a Catalan journalist who writes for *La Vanguardia*, chronicles the fabulous transformation of his city at the end of the 20th century. He argues that "urbanism" was more than a fancy word used in universities; it was an environmental and economic strategy that helped make the city more competitive in the global economy.

He concludes by noting that: "A painting, a play or a book make a powerful impression, but only for a few moments. A building, on the other hand, can condition our existence; it may stay with us for a long time. . . . A building remains and gives character to a community."

There is no shortage of interest in putting up more buildings in San Diego. But the spaces between the buildings, and the way the buildings fit together — in short, the city's design — represent an incredible opportunity for catapulting our region into the next century.

We may need to rethink how what we build affects both our quality of life, and our image in the global economy. We can begin by learning from the example of cities like Barcelona.