

Barcelona and the Paradox of the Baroque

By Jorge Luis Marzo¹

Translation by Mara Goldwyn

Catalan historiography constructed, even from its very beginnings, the idea that Catalunya was not Baroque; that is, Baroque is something not very "proper" to Catalunya. The 17th and 18th centuries represent the dark Baroque age, in contrast with a magnificent Medieval and Renaissance era, during which the kingdom of Catalunya and Aragón played an important international role in a large part of the Mediterranean. The interpretation suggests that Catalunya was Baroque despite itself; a reading that, from the 19th century on – when it is decided that all negative content about Baroque should be struck from the record in order to transform it into a consciously commercial and urban logo – makes implicit that any reflection on such content or Baroque itself will be schizophrenic and paradoxical. Right up to this day.

Though the (always Late-) Baroque style was present in buildings, embellishments and paintings, it however did not have an official environment in which to expand and legitimate itself, nor urban spaces in which to extend its setup (although in Tortosa, Girona, and other cities there were important Baroque features). The Baroque style was especially evident in rural churches, but as a result of the occupation of principle Catalan plazas – particularly by the Bourbon crown of Castile – principal architectonic realizations were castles and military forts, like the castle of Montjuic or the military Citadel in Barcelona.

Public Baroque buildings hardly existed: The Gothic ones were already present and there was little necessity for new ones. At the same time, there was more money in the private sphere than in the public for building, so Baroque programs were more subject to family representation than to the strictly political. Also, there was not an excess of capital circulating that could be put towards undertaking the creation of new buildings, so scarce resources were put towards the creation of tableaus rather than the building of buildings. What's more, Barcelona rather quickly adopted the Neoclassical style to define political and commercial buildings in the city. The restrained tradition of Catalan Gothic and Renaissance (see, for example, Santa María del Mar or the Palau de la Generalitat) was no longer very inclined toward ornamental flourishes, considered cliché amidst the progressive awareness of what Catalunya's "national art" should be.

Barcelona entered into the 19th century with the same dimensions that it had in the 14th. The disappearance of the walls – which had turned against the city ever since the Castilian military occupation of 1714 – became a pressing priority for an impatient and internationalist bourgeoisie hoping to develop the enormous financial capital it had created. The Catalan capital

¹ Jorge Luis Marzo is an independent curator and private researcher.

had not been able to realize itself as the great European city that it had aspired to be during five centuries. First, resigned to its notion of "*Plaza fuerte*" (fortified enclosure), well laid out within its limits; later, from 1714 on, subject to Madrid's political, military and administrative control.

What happens to the mid-19th century Barcelona is similar to what occurs in Protestant countries after the religious wars at the end of the 17th: Liberated from military constrictions and free of social tensions, the new bourgeois classes were able to let loose a kind of representation – Baroque – despised for its association with the occupier. In the northern countries, the Neoclassical style was rapidly associated with political and mercantile buildings, while Rococó, with its accent on Baroque ornamentation, was given free rein so as to usher in feelings of liberation and pleasure after all the privations that had been suffered. After the confusion of the 17th and 18th centuries, and once Cerdà's rationalist *ensanche*² had taken form, Barcelona would adopt this same philosophy, curiously reaping from a long tradition of Baroque urban design by using a grid layout, which had garnered such success in the large American colonial cities. The "brand new" reticule offered the possibility to create determined points of view that accented the monumentality of the city. At the same time, Cerdà's rational organization (let us not forget, imposed by Madrid over other more Baroque projects that the bourgeois Catalan nobility was driving) was an obligatory modern justification of the country's traditional "spiritual sobriety", upon which, now more openly, the naturalist and decorative frenzy of Noucentisme and Modernisme spread.

In the imaginary of the most ennobled bourgeoisie, Barcelona's *ensanche* was the opportunity to set loose the Baroque city that Barcelona longed for and had been denied. All of the city's great architects, in an implicit and explicit way, participated in this perception: Domenec i Muntaner, Puig i Cadafalch, Gaudí. Barcelona hurried to buy Baroque paintings to fill its collections, which remain today, as can be seen in the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya (MNAC). Leading this wave were personages such as Francesc Cambó, a prominent figure of Catalan politics at the time (from his vantage point in City Hall, his position as stock holder in nascent energy companies, and from his fluid relations with Madrid elites during the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera), who would boost the Universal Exposition of 1929, with the urbanization of Montjuic Mountain, instead of the proposal to construct it in what is now the zone of the Fòrum.

Montjuic turned into, on the one hand, the very astute representation of a city that wanted to internationalize itself, while on the other it configured a new axis with the industrialized neighborhood of Sants and the outlet to the south. But, on top of that: If the Exposition of 1888 had eradicated the old army Citadel and had returned control of urban symbols to the people of

² The *Ensanche*- or *Eixample* in Catalán -designed by the Catalán architect Ildefons Cerdà and constructed in the 19th and early 20th centuries, literally means "extension," and is the district in Barcelona between the old city (Ciutat Vella) and what were once surrounding towns. (*Trans. Note*)

Barcelona, the newly configured mountain erased the ominous presence of the military castle from the urban imaginary and legitimized the efforts of the city's bourgeoisie in maintaining the political and nationalist pulse of the affair, even though this was the commercialization of Spanish-ness, which was indeed what it ended up being.

The urbanization of Montjuic gave the highest profile to the western face of the mountain, emphasizing the character of the only facade open to the city. The Baroque intention was clear in every element. Finally, a "national" palace presided over the city, which unfurled at its feet.

The dome, almost theatrically connected to the facade, like Francesco Borromini's Santa Agnese church, was crowned by a beam of nine light projections into the sky that could be seen from any point in the city.

It cannot be but a bit strange that, in this scenario, it was military features (light beams into the sky) that were applied to make people forget the mountain's military past. On the other hand, new applications in hydraulic technology carried out by Carlos Buigas configured a spectacular central fountain – in an intermezzo in the path – in which the plays of water, light, color and music achieved a scenic paroxysm that would have delighted Roman architects of the 17th and 18th centuries.

For it's not by chance that Baroque Rome was so present in the whole ensemble. The fountain that presides over Plaza Espanya, by the architect Jujol, is dedicated to the "national" rivers, in the same way the sculptural ensembles in the Piazza Navona are. The short open, oval colonnade that opens the scene to the viewer – next to the two enormous Venetian towers – are intended to recall Saint Peter's in the Vatican, like two arms that embrace the visitor–citizen and accompany him into the interior.

The ensemble of fountains and small pools, then, gradually spread throughout the Exposition paths in the form of organic waterfalls, which in their day were surrounded by rows of obelisk of light. Parallel to that, the external walls of the Exposition palaces were all decorated with sgraffito Solomonic columns. But, most importantly, Barcelona constructed Montjuic and Plaza Espanya with the same spirit in which 17th century Rome defined its physiognomy: As a way to captivate the pilgrim. If, in Rome, the spirit of Trent defined the urban scenario, in 1929 Barcelona attempted to embrace the commercial and touristic pilgrim.

However, it is interesting to observe that while Barcelona was bit by bit acquiring a clear profile of Baroque influences in the way it orchestrated its modern identity and layout, the Catalan Baroque patrimony was disappearing. Around 75% of the country's Baroque constructions succumbed in a period of time highlighted by three key dates: In 1835, with the abandonments and subsequent looting provoked by the liberal

Desamortización,³; in 1909, during the Anarchist anti-clerical fury of the *Setmana Tragica*⁴; and in the Civil War, between 1936–1939. If enlightened Barcelona recognized in Baroque a great boost for nationalist reconstruction, at the same time working class and iconoclastic Barcelona and Catalunya almost always identified the Baroque legacy with an intolerable weight that should have disappeared in the fire.

The desire to grant itself symbols codified by the Romantic and pre-Vanguard imaginary evident in the great cities of the moment (Paris, London, Berlin, Vienna), made Barcelona employ the Baroque mentality to resolve problems and questions that had not been well-digested with time. For example, the aforementioned theme of monumentality. Barcelona, crammed into its walls, had not been able to generate great monumental symbols to represent Catalan political and economical impulses. What's more, Catalunya itself didn't even have a real capital. Over time cities like Madrid and Seville had acquired the label of landmarks in the Spanish imaginary, while up into the 20th century Barcelona has suffered a prolonged financial and political inferiority with respect to the the majority of 19th century governments. The aforementioned 1929 Expo was in part boycotted by powerful economic and political circles in Madrid when they pushed for the celebration of a parallel Spanish–American Exposition at the very same time. Barcelona needed to become a city with monuments, plazas and enclosures that were unique but at the same time mirrored global currents dictated by the principal European cities of the moment.

Monumentality is always defined by immensity and magnificence. Barcelona, in the middle of the 19th century, was by no means magnificent. It was certainly a dynamic city, with a grand cathedral but without a facade, and with some great official Neoclassical buildings that could only be seen from the sea. The Baroque monumental solution, timidly initiated in the 1880 Expo but consolidated in 1929, had an end in itself: To make Barcelona something "grand", and as much as possible, "the grandest." This is how the *ensanche* projects, many of Gaudí's works, the international Exposition, the planning of the Montjuic facade and many other actions must be understood. One of the characters in Eduardo Mendoza's novel *City of Marvels* said: "Every two hours the spout and the fountains lining each side of the central path of the Exposition use as much water as was consumed in all of Barcelona in a full day, the Marques said. When and where have you ever seen something so grand? he asked."

Puig i Cadafalch would be the great inventor of the public works program at Montjuic and of the conception of the city itself as monument. The figure of this great architect represents especially well Barcelona bourgeois society's

³ Desentailment: the governmental seizure of ecclesiastical properties and lands (*Trans. note*)

⁴ Bloody Week: violent confrontations throughout Catalunya between working classes and the army in response to the calling-up of reserve troops by Prime Minister Antonio Maura to be sent to Morocco for renewed colonial activity there. (*Trans. note*)

impulse towards the Baroque transformation of a city that was desired to be modern and "global." Puig i Cadafalch's ideal city was a monumental one, where opulence is manifest in splendid representative elements that speak pompously of economic triumph. Puig conceived the city as an immense festival that therefore required "grand stanzas." Towards 1905, he began to leave aside medievalism to begin to compose with Baroque resources – such as plateresque and manueline ornamentation – in order to achieve preciousness and wealth. During his Baroque stage, the so-called "yellow age" – which as Cirici pointed out had much to do with a great "imperialist" vigor⁵– Verdaguier's mentality no longer dominated, but rather that of the great ideologue of the new Barcelona, Cambó: Baroque monumentalism, courtly, sumptuary, bombastic and arbitrary.

That desire for monumentality nevertheless remained permanently fixed in the imaginary of those who were successively responsible for the city urbanistically: It certainly did not end in 1929. The 1992 Olympics called for an updating of Barcelona's urban elite classes' dormant will: the "*no va més*" (the cutting edge) after the long impasse of Francoism. The enormous urbanization of the coastal zone in order to construct the Olympic Village; the construction of sensational cultural infrastructure such as grand museums, auditoriums and theaters; and most recently the colossal space of the Fòrum de les Cultures 2004; respond to a continued exercise of providing the city with monumental references situating it among the "Baroque" cities of the world. Official promotional material created for the Fòrum building imitates, with surprising analogies, the bombastic language that was used in the great baroque cities of the 17th and 18th century (Rome, Mexico City or Madrid, to give three well known examples): "the grandest plaza", "the largest urbanistic operation in Europe", "the biggest photovoltaic plaque" or the "greatest spectacle in the world".

The architecture of the Fòrum, in a space separated from the conventional city, liberated from the cumbersome social and historic ties of both the medieval and *ensanche* parts of the city, and far from the "peripheral" suburban realities of Poble Nou and el Besós, is absolute evidence of the urban image exactly as the imaginary of Barcelona power conceives it. We could point out a wide variety of examples within the Fòrum, but we will settle for ones whose obviousness and magnitude make them emblematic; we are talking about the steps that connect the new commercial port and the Fòrum esplanade.

On entering, the massive dimensions make one wonder: What are the true reasons for this? What is its utility of such a scenario? Because it seems just that: a scenario, constructed to magnify the will of power. The steps of the Fòrum, organized in clearly scenographic and perspectivist segments, take us back to the Spanish Steps of Rome, or the Cathedral of Girona, but with one enormous difference. While these were responses to urban

⁵ Alexandre Cirici, "La arquitectura de Puig i Cadafalch", Cuadernos de Arquitectura, no. 63, Colegio Oficial de Arquitectos de Catalunya, 1966, pp.49-52

organizational and accessibility problems, the stairway at the Fòrum is a space unto itself, without any relation to its surroundings: It is a monument per se, a (pathetic) reflection of urbanism blind to real problems and surrendered completely to the business of the logotype.

Barcelona has made the anti-Baroque a national banner, favoring a structural sobriety and rationality to which all decoration must submit. But, in the meanwhile, it has found in many Baroque premises a fitting resource for making itself into one more "step" in the complicated and competitive procession of postmodern cities.

Barcelona suffers, along with 17th century Rome, from an open-space complex. The popes of 17th century Rome adopted a series of legal stipulations that made the creation of false facades to cover plots or to unite buildings separated by open spaces obligatory. The idea that even one space is not consistent with the Baroque city's uni-vocality, that anything could possibly become insignificant, or that anything could represent something different from that which is conceived for the use of power, does not fit in the urban institutional universe. In the language of Barcelona's City Hall, open spaces are defined as spaces that must be eradicated, and all of it is justified with the necessary coherence of an ostensibly more integrative model, but which rather obscures the chimera of a culture of facades that guides the citizen-tourist through the principle obelisk-emblems of the city.

Checa and Moran (1982) defined Roman Baroque space in the following way: "More than anything else, [Baroque space] tries to create a *transitable space* in which pilgrims who are unfamiliar with the city can orient themselves. The solution was to create grand, straight streets, that required costly leveling work, but that would permit an easy passage, and would let a group of pilgrims contemplate themselves as a spectacle in movement while simultaneously favoring the alienation of the individual in the crowds of the great collective ceremonies; and which would, finally, permit one to contemplate the next station of that urban pilgrimage from afar with vertical landmarks in a fundamentally horizontal street system."⁶

Baroque urbanism stood out because it was the first kind to design the city as a whole. It is interesting to read Josep Aragay, an influential artist, writer and editor in Moderniste and Noucentiste Catalunya, when in 1920 he spoke of the urban ideal: "Artists should be the ideal builders of the city, and they must feel enthusiasm in the depths of their souls for this duty. Because the city is a primary work of art that begins with the very layout of the streets and plazas ending in the decoration of the facades of every one of its buildings, and continues embellishing within them all their rooms and halls. The city is a primary work of art in which all mediums, from architecture to the last trade, collaborate to make it into a monument to the Race."⁷ The

⁶ Fernando Checa and José Miguel Morán, *El Barroco*, Istmo, Madrid, 1982, p.266

⁷ Josep Aragay, "El nacionalisme de l'art", 1920; in Abel Figueres, Joan Cusidó (eds.) *El nacionalisme de l'art (De Domènec i Montaner a Aragay)*, Llibres de l'Index-Neopàtria, Barcelona 2004, p. 91

Baroque city: A well-oiled scheme for structural programs and dramatic scripts, happily legitimized in the individual subjectivity of the visitor, with its ultimate end being the commercial expression of propaganda. Barcelona became Baroque because it was in its interest. It was first able to invent an alternative model, like the *ensanche*, which would put an end to the inconveniences of seeing (a then overly discredited) Baroque. Afterwards, in the first third of the 20th century, it discovered that Baroque "sells."

But Barcelona couldn't sell Baroque since it didn't have it (and didn't really want it). The idea was to create its own modernism: one that would make allusions both to urbanism and to the Baroque "amalgam", but which would depict them in a contemporary way. The epitome of this would be Mies' 1929 German Pavilion. Mies would realize brilliantly – with glass, travertine and marble – all of Baroque's contradictions. But he would do so while using all the tools of a militant – and also institutionalized – avant-garde. Barcelona's German Pavilion is a monument to politics' new Baroque order: publicity. Mies knew it. Barcelona knew it too, and it waited 57 years to remake the disappeared pavilion in 1986. Mies' work represented an excellent referent for a "monumental" city that presented itself as modern, but with the appeal of offering what is "proper" to cities whose principle selling point is their own image.

Baroque demands big cities, with lots of people and lots of money. Barcelona is not a big city, but it over-compensates with the premise of grand urban scenarios – parades, concerts, stadiums, parks, museums and stores that respond to well-tailored commercial and urbanistic legislation. All size extra-large. Barcelona doesn't have a lot of people, which is why importing people is its primordial objective. It doesn't have much space, either. But it does have money. This is the paradox of the city and the backdrop in which it evolves: With a population of a little less than two million, and with an always eroding economy, it has the formidable ability to promote its own dreams, chimera, panacea. Certainly Barcelona is one of the few European cities that has been able to invent itself as a *transitable space*, finding in Baroque, more often than it might think, solutions to questions of a historical, political and cultural order. And the whole world still loves it. As if Baroque were just that, a logo, to camouflage from us the truth that the entire cover-up is still Baroque.