

Catalan Calling

*As a hub of art and design, and a paradigm of good urban planning, Barcelona could teach Hong Kong a thing or two about liveability, writes **Christopher DeWolf***



ENCANTS BARCELONA
FIRA DE BELLCAIRE



WHEN HONG KONG-BASED architect Francesco Rossini thinks back to his time in Barcelona, he remembers the details: Antonio Gaudí's textured, hexagonal paving stones; the broad, leafy streets of the Eixample district; and the rubbish bins. "Barcelona's trash bin is quite famous," says Rossini with a grin.

He's not being cheeky. There are colour-coded waste bins on every block of Barcelona, which makes it easy for residents to separate and recycle their rubbish. Some are even

connected to pneumatic tubes that suck the waste into underground sorting facilities. It's just one of the ways Barcelona has found itself in the vanguard of urban design, something that has attracted the attention of municipal leaders around the world—including those in Hong Kong.

"Barcelona is about the total embracing of art, design and city planning together to create a good place for living," says Edmund Lee, chairman of the Hong Kong Design Centre, which organises the annual Business of Design Week conference; this year's event

is being held from November 30 to December 5. The organisers partner with a different country every year for the expo, bringing in dozens of designers to share their insights and experiences, but this time around the focus has been narrowed down to one city: Barcelona.

"We have about 20 speakers from Barcelona and they're spread across architecture, urban planning, the branding experience, fashion, communications, culture and so forth," says Lee. "This year, we even invited artists to participate. In Barcelona, their sense of design is very inclusive."

It's a tradition that goes back a long way. In the early 19th century, Barcelona was one of the most squalid, overcrowded cities in Europe; Castilian kings had long prohibited growth outside its ancient city walls, partly because they saw Barcelona's Catalan-speaking population as a threat to their rule. When the walls were finally torn down in the 1850s, a visionary urban planner named Ildefons Cerdà proposed a new model of development based on a grid pattern of streets. Each block would have interior gardens and chamfered edges, which improved ventilation and created civic gathering spaces.

While many of the most innovative aspects of Cerdà's plan were abandoned—the landowning elite vetoed an initiative to build workers' housing throughout the district—it laid the groundwork for a city that prides itself on high-quality urban living. And while many of the visionary's lessons were forgotten in the 20th century—especially under the regime of dictator Francisco Franco, who famously despised Barcelona—they were revived with the birth of Spanish democracy in the late 1970s.

"After Franco died, there was new life—and Barcelona was especially lucky," says Rossini, who studied architecture in the city before moving to Hong Kong. Civic leaders used the city's successful bid for the 1992 Olympics to open up its waterfront to the public, while urban planner Oriol Bohigas called for a plan to "clean up the centre and monumentalise the periphery." Under his guidance, the city opened new beaches on the waterfront, installed new plazas and public art in impoverished neighbourhoods, and buried noisy expressways that had been rammed through densely built neighbourhoods. "Barcelona, *posa't guapa*" was the city's official Catalan-language slogan—"Barcelona, make yourself beautiful."

The changes have continued in recent years. Streets once dominated by cars and scooters are now filled with more space for

pedestrians, while bicycle infrastructure has been quickly ramped up, with protected bike lanes and a public bike-share system with 420 stations. It has been such a remarkable transformation that the Danish-Canadian urban cycling guru Mikael Colville-Andersen called Barcelona "a city that puts a thousand other cities to shame" for its progressive transport policies.

And that's not all. Barcelona is now positioning itself as a "smart city," with wired urban services to help the city government analyse demand and better coordinate its responses. The traffic light system knows when emergency vehicles are en route and ensures they have nothing but green lights all the way to their destination. The city's bus routes have been completely reorganised into 28 horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines that offer faster and more frequent service. A new irrigation system in public parks detects how much water is needed and where, reducing waste. And all the information collected by each of these schemes is available to anyone through the city's Open Data portal.

"We want to position ourselves as a laboratory city—an urban lab," says Mario Rubert, promotion director for the Barcelona City Council. At the Business of Design Week, he'll be discussing Barcelona's transformation into the most economically vibrant city in Spain. "Only 50 years ago, Barcelona was known as the Catalan Manchester—and last year it was nominated as the innovation capital of Europe," he says. "I will try to illustrate how design has helped it do that."

GEOMETRIC GEMS From left: Gaudí's magnificent Sagrada Família sits amid the grid of streets envisioned by Ildefons Cerdà; this piece of public art, *Homage to Barceloneta* by sculptor Rebecca Horn, was commissioned for the 1992 Olympics





REVOLUCIÓN EN ROJO From left: Hotel Porta Fira, designed by Toyo Ito and Fermín Vázquez; the city has 420 bike-sharing stations; Pompeu Fabra University reinterprets its post-industrial locale

It hasn't been an entirely harmonious transition. Barcelona has experienced a surge of gentrification and tourism, making the city increasingly unaffordable for its residents. About nine million people visited this year, up from seven million just a couple of years ago. "Being a citizen in Barcelona makes you feel that most of your taxes are used to prepare the city for the tourists, short-term visitors, to enjoy it as much as possible—and to finance all sorts of marketing campaigns to keep on attracting more tourists," wrote local architect Alberto Altés in 2012.

That situation may change following the election this year of a new mayor, Ada Colau. She's a veteran political activist who has vowed to fight the growing inequality, in part by curbing the growth of tourism. The Hong Kong Design Centre's Lee says he can understand the sentiment, given Hong Kong's own struggles with the impact of tourism. "Speaking with the new government team in Barcelona, we both share the same societal values," he says. "Design is part of the culture. It's citizen-driven; it's something that has to benefit society and the well-being of people."

That message resonates with Fermín Vázquez, a well-established Barcelona architect who recently revamped the Mercat del Encants, a long-standing flea market near the edge of the Eixample. He'll be

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IMAGES: DAVID CARDELÚS (HOTEL PORTA FIRA AND POMPEU FABRA UNIVERSITY)

speaking about the project in his talk during the Business of Design Week. "It was just a spontaneous market with a very informal presence, just stalls sitting there on the street," he says. "It had been like that for a century. It's second-hand goods, mainly—it's an incredible recycling resource for the city."

The area around the market was slated for redevelopment, so the council cast around for ideas on what to do with it. "It was meant to be a very important space and Encants was like the wrong guest," says Vázquez. "They've been there for a century now; they don't want to go away. So why don't we provide them with the dignity, importance and meaningful image deserved by something that has been there for a long time?"

Vázquez designed a sweeping open-air structure that sheltered the market while giving it a more contemporary image. "The canopy has an obvious practical benefit, it protects you from the sun and the rain, but the main reason was to provide this market with some volume, some physical presence," he says. "You can feel its presence from a distance. It attracts you into it." The market reopened in 2014 and by most accounts it has been a success, drawing a larger and more diverse base of customers than before.

The project wouldn't have been possible if Barcelona's government didn't recognise the importance of well-designed public space, says Vázquez. And the reason it does, he explains, is because citizens themselves are design-savvy. "People in the government are aware that citizens judge their urban policies. They follow them with interest," he says.

Simply put, Barcelona's people know their stuff when it comes to design—and as a result they expect more from their leaders. "This consciousness is very apparent in the expectations and ambitions of the people we work with on projects there," says Bjorn Fjeldahl, the co-founder of Hong Kong-based design agency Eight Partnership, which is currently working on a Hong Kong-financed project that will revamp Estel Place, a 1970s-era tower designed by acclaimed modern architect Francesc Mitjans.

Barcelona seems to have an insatiable appetite for adventurous design. Hotel Porta Fira, designed by Pritzker winner Toyo Ito in collaboration with Vasquez, is an undulating red tower that appears to dance around the staid skyscrapers that surround it. The Communication Campus of Pompeu Fabra University, by RQP Arquitectura, playfully reinterprets its industrial surroundings. All of this builds on the heritage of Antoni Gaudí, whose modernist works are scattered

throughout Barcelona, including his magnum opus, the Sagrada Família, still under construction after 133 years.

Rossini says the situation in Barcelona stands in sharp contrast to that in Hong Kong, where decisions on civic space are made behind closed doors and only the biggest projects are subject to public scrutiny. One of his favourite initiatives in Barcelona is the Racons Públics, a monthly competition that invites the public to submit ideas on how to transform leftover urban spaces. It's a chance for people to think critically about design and an opportunity for the government to harvest innovative ways to revamp the city. "This is totally missing in Hong Kong," says Rossini.

Rather than wait for things to change, though, Rossini is planning to do something about it. This year, he launched a project that will bring a series of small boxes to busy public spaces around the city. The idea is that the public will arrange the boxes as they wish, using them as seats, tables or something else. If it's successful, it might bring a touch of Barcelona to the streets of Hong Kong. ☪

Business of Design Week runs until December 5 at various locations in Hong Kong. bodw.com

