DESIGNING CITIES OF THE WORLD 2020-21
ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN STUDIO 1

POLITECNICO DI MILANO SEDE DI PIACENZA

THE SITE

Barcelona is a rectangular plane sloping gently down to the Mediterranean Sea at its southeast border. On the opposite northwest border the Collserola hill range protects it from the north winds. On both sides two rivers flank the area.
On the sea border a hill falling steeply down into the water completes an advantageous topography, especially in military terms. The Roman conquerors choose this place to found a “supply station” on their way to inner Iberia. A busy little town developed, attached to the sea and with a fertile agricultural hinterland.
By time it became commercial, as its central position within the West Mediterranean Sea converted it in a trade centre for agricultural and craft products. In the middle age it was prosperous, but the “discovery” of America shifted trade to the Atlantic. For strategic reasons Barcelona was not allowed to extend beyond its tight city walls. Only the little villages along the northwest border of the farmland grew slowly.
1850 an already pretty industrialized Barcelona trapped in its walls and nearly bursting, finally got permission to tear the walls down and urbanize the land between the city and the surrounding villages. This is the origin of the iconic grid. Cerdà’s “ Plano del Ensanche de Barcelona” was going to cover a surface nine times the existing one, which can be seen as a proper town foundation.
The last important town extension happened in the 60ies-70ies of last century, as an emergency response to the intense flow of immigrants from inner/agricultural Spain to industrial Catalunya. Whole neighbourhoods emerged close to the mentioned borders: the two rivers and the northwest hill range.
The western part of this upper border previously had been occupied by the main religious congregations to establish their school complexes there. Hospitals, sport complexes, a military barracks and town facilities, mingled with residential, fill the last stripe between the dense town tissue and the sudden slope.
The 92’ Olympic Games left us a ring highway following this edge between the gentle sloping Barcelona plane and the steep slope of the hills. Some of the Ronda ring-highway knots cut into the growing slope, creating banks and terraces.
The site we are going to work on has these features: close to the Ronda highway, partially detached by a topographic jump, with several platforms before the hillside starts to slope steeply.
At that point the general masterplan of Barcelona foresees the entrance of a tunnel crossing the hill range; therefore the site isn’t still urbanized. As the tunnel project is and will be on ice for decades (if it is not definitively abandoned), it is time to propose an adequate growing pattern that helps to connect the nearby town fragments.
The northern or hillside fringe of the ring road close to the site mainly hosts facilities and unplanned “garden city”: tissues that are pretty diverse not only in scale.
Topography is determining for the whole area and in consequence for the project.
Public space is the soul of a town, forges its character.
Shall the project extend and link existing tissues or superimpose a new one? In which way are domestic and public structures combinable?
How can we obtain horizontal spaces on a slope? Shall we remove or provide soil? Or shall we take advantage of the existing platforms?
How can public space -in covid19 times and after- contribute to “proper” social interaction? How can we deal with alive building materials like vegetation? What role does sustainability, resilience, and economy play?
This is only a little sample of a large amount of questions that will arise.