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Public spaces and museums: the case of Barcelona

Spazi pubblici e musei: il caso di Barcellona

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ABSTRACT AND KEYWORDS

Public spaces and museums

The French Revolution marked a turning point in the conception of museums and public space, identifying museums as custodians of culture accessible to all and public space as a strategic element to reinforce collective identity. However, it is since the post-war period that museums have taken on a crucial role in urban planning, evolving from mere exhibition spaces to strategic elements in urban regeneration. Through innovative projects, museums not only enrich public spaces but also act as drivers for the development of museum clusters, positively impacting urban infrastructure and social fabric. This approach is particularly evident in the 'Barcelona Model', which represents a virtuous example of cultural urban regeneration. Barcelona demonstrates how museums can act as catalysts for sustainable urban regeneration, enhancing the quality of public spaces and promoting social cohesion through well-designed and integrated museum clusters. Such a contribution aims to explore and analyze the conditions necessary for achieving quality public spaces, illustrating how versatile design choices can be adapted to various contexts, generating tangible responses and improving the integration between public space and cultural environment.

Keywords: making place, museums, Barcelona, cultural public spaces

Spazi pubblici e musei

La Rivoluzione Francese ha segnato un punto di svolta nella concezione del museo e dello spazio pubblico, definendo i musei come custodi della cultura accessibile a tutti e lo spazio pubblico come elemento strategico per rafforzare l'identità collettiva. Tuttavia, è dal dopoguerra che i musei hanno assunto un ruolo strategico nella pianificazione urbana, trasformandosi da semplici spazi espositivi a elementi centrali nella rigenerazione urbana. Attraverso progetti innovativi, i musei non solo arricchiscono gli spazi pubblici ma fungono anche da propulsori per lo sviluppo di cluster museali, influenzando positivamente l'infrastruttura urbana e il tessuto sociale. Questo approccio è particolarmente evidente nel "Modello Barcellona", un esempio virtuoso di rigenerazione urbana culturale. Barcellona dimostra come i musei possano agire da catalizzatori per una rigenerazione urbana sostenibile, migliorando la qualità degli spazi pubblici e promuovendo coesione sociale attraverso cluster museali ben progettati e integrati. Tale contributo mira ad esplorare ed analizzare le condizioni necessarie per realizzare spazi pubblici di qualità, dimostrando come scelte progettuali versatili possano essere adattate a diversi contesti, generando risposte tangibili e migliorando l'integrazione tra spazio pubblico e ambiente culturale.

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Parole chiave: making place, musei, Barcellona, spazi pubblici culturali

1. Introduction

Since the 21-th Century, museums have increasingly assumed a central role in urban planning, emerging as crucial instruments in the construction of the modern post-revolutionary nation-state. This transformation has seen museums evolve from mere exhibition spaces to strategic elements in urban regeneration, contributing to the shaping and enhancement of contemporary urban landscapes. Today, museums occupy both symbolic and physical positions in the centers of major global cities, defining and integrating into the urban fabric.

Urban transformation processes that leverage culture as a driver of change often initiate the recovery and conversion of decommissioned industrial areas, a trend particularly evident towards the end of the 20-th Century (Zukin, 1996).

These processes, sometimes initiated by spontaneous public space management by local actors, gradually integrate into broader projects that impact on the public space but also the economy, infrastructure, and social character of the affected areas (Smith, 1996). In this context, public space assumes a privileged role, becoming a symbol of a virtuous society capable of generating positive systemic effects using culture as a catalyst.

Museums, now characterized by a wide range of activities and services to welcome and entertain visitors, have become vital centers in the modern city (Guarini, 2023). Influenced by the cultural industry and media, museums have been transformed into ‘topological accumulators’, serving as aggregation points that seek a balance between their role as urban monuments and their function as spaces for artistic representation (Purini, 2008).

To understand how a museum or a network of museums can initiate an urban regeneration process and create high-quality public spaces, this study is divided into two main parts. The first part of the contribute, comprising Chapters 2 and 3, examines the relationship between the museum and the city within urban regeneration processes. This analysis begins with the etymology and history of the museum, tracing its transformation from an exclusive, elitist institution to an accessible public space. It concludes by discussing exemplary cases where these processes have yielded positive outcomes.

The second part, consisting of chapters 4 and 5, explores the cultural urban regeneration of Barcelona. Chapter 4 describes the evolution of the *Modelo Barcelona*, launched in the 1980s, which integrated cultural clusters as key players in urban regeneration, making Barcelona a global example of how culture can stimulate urban development and social cohesion (Monclús, 2003). With its 22 major museums, the city has consolidated its role as a cultural hub, contributing significantly to the local GDP and generating a substantial increase in cultural tourism, that between 1990 and 2015, cultural tourism increased by 110% (Mirò, 2018).

Chapter 5 shifts the focus to the impact that four key museums in Barcelona—MACBA, CCMB, Disseny Hub, and Can Framis—have had on urban regeneration processes. It explores how these museums have become central elements in the planning and development of neighborhoods such as Ciutat Vella and Poblenou, where innovative and well-integrated designs contribute to enhancing the quality of public spaces and promoting social cohesion.

Through the reconstruction of transformation dynamics and the analysis of design practices, this research aims to demonstrate how versatile design choices can be adapted to various contexts, improving the integration between public space and the cultural environment. The goal is to provide a clear and structured understanding of the necessary conditions for creating high-quality public spaces, through a linear

planning pathway that can serve as a model for future urban regenerations.

Furthermore, this study seeks to emphasize the importance of integrated planning that considers both the aesthetic and functional aspects of public spaces, as well as the social and cultural dimensions that contribute to their success. The ability of museums to serve as attractions and social cohesion points can be seen as an opportunity for cities to develop strong and sustainable cultural identities, creating environments that reflect and respond to community needs. Barcelona's experience in transforming urban challenges into cultural opportunities provides valuable lessons for other cities aiming to leverage culture as a means of urban and social improvement.

2. Origins and evolution of the museum concept

"The museum is a paradigm of the postmodern city and a symbol of the exhibition culture we live in. Its conception is based on three main aspects: museological, architectural, and urbanistic, meaning its collection, building, and location" (Nikolić, 2012). To fully understand this definition of the museum provided by the architect and urban planner Mila Nikolić, it is necessary to examine some key points in the history of the museum, highlighting concepts that, when related to each other, will shed light on the reasons that, in the 21-th century, have changed the idea and perception of the museum itself, transforming it into a container with functions far beyond the merely exhibitionist.

2.1 The origins of the museum

The concept and real structure of a museum were developed between the 16th and 18th centuries, although the modern term 'museum' originates from the Hellenistic period with the 'Mouséion' erected in Alexandria, Egypt by Ptolemy I, a building dedicated to the Muses, the daughters of Zeus (Maehler, 2017).

This building was not a museum in the modern sense, nor did it exhibit or preserve objects, but it functioned as a library and cultural center for scholars and intellectuals of the Hellenistic world.

We can start talking about true collections with the birth of the *Wunderkammer* (chambers of wonders), a German term from the 16th century used to denote a room designated for collecting rare or bizarre specimens of natural history or artifacts. These collections were precursors to museums, containing mysterious objects unknown to the public, primarily used for teaching and universal scientific inquiry, reflecting the human desire to collect valuable objects to confer prestige on those who had the opportunity to display them. The phenomenon of Wunderkammer began in the 1500s and developed throughout the 1600s, drawing on Baroque grandeur and continuing into the 1700s, fueled by the Enlightenment's love for scientific curiosities. In a certain sense, the Wunderkammer represents the first stage of the museum concept's development, combining the interest in the 'marvelous' with the need for systematic knowledge, although lacking the organization and method that define modern museums. An example of a Wunderkammer is that created by Ferrante Imperato, a pharmacist and naturalist, who set up a personal chamber of wonders in his private residence in Naples, displaying animals, plants, and minerals collected personally, purchased or exchanged with other scholars (Del Riccio, 2017). In the 18th century, the Enlightenment marked a radical change in human thought: it became common for gentlemen and ladies to undertake long journeys abroad for the purpose of knowledge, the so-called 'Grand Tour'. During this period, young

people explored politics, culture, art, and antiquities of European countries, visiting famous collections and increasing the awareness of these collections' importance for education and knowledge.

The major event marking the beginning of the political dimension of public space and the birth of the public museum was the French Revolution, with the idea that all men, regardless of class or status, had the right to admire the masterpieces of art. The Revolution marked a radical and violent upheaval in social, political, and cultural aspects, signalling a break between the modern and contemporary ages. The main immediate consequences were the abolition of absolute monarchy, the proclamation of the republic, and the issuance of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. It is at this moment that the three dimensions – public space, public museum, and public within the museum – move in the same direction, closely connecting with each other.

Figure 1. Parisian Triptych: Boulevard, Axe Historique, and Louvre



Source: Boulevard (Brancaccio, n.d.); Axe historique, (Pline, 2007); Louvre Museum.

Françoise Choay, a historian and theorist of French architecture and urban planning, writes in 1992 in *l'allégorie du patrimoine* a text in which the author explores the

meaning and evolution of the concept of 'patrimony' in Western culture starting from the great transfer of property during the Revolution. The Constituent Assembly of 1789 transferred the properties of the clergy, emigrated aristocrats, and the crown to the nation, initiating an unprecedented historical period, which Choay describes as *heritage*, linking these assets to the idea of a collective heritage of the people, encompassing preservation, inventory, and cataloguing. (Choay, 1992). The revolutionaries' great work was the transfer of property from the clergy and crown to the nation: the nation's heritage became *res publica*, or property of the people. In the post-revolutionary phase, the Louvre transformed, becoming a place for social gatherings as well as observing exhibited heritage. During the week, it was a place for artists and study, while on weekends, it became a public space for visiting exhibitions, marking a completely new dimension of the museum (Figure 1). With the French Revolution and the rise of the public museum, there was a shift from the mysterious nature of the Wunderkammer, with the museum becoming a space dedicated to education and social progress.

George Bataille, a French avant-garde writer and philosopher of the 1930s, provides historical documentation on the dichotomy between those who view the museum as a mere container of artworks and those who see it as a dynamic place. In 1929, Bataille founded the magazine *Documents* with Carl Einstein and Georges Henri Rivière. In an article titled *Musée*, Bataille explained the new dimension of the museum: According to George Bataille, the museum's rooms and art objects are merely a container, with the true content being the visitors, who distinguish the museum from a private collection. He compares the museum to the lung of a great city, where the crowd flows in like blood every Sunday and emerges purified and refreshed. The paintings are inert surfaces, but it is within the crowd that vital dynamics occur, as interpreted and described by critics. (Bataille, 1929). Bataille clears away complex arguments regarding the relationship between content and container. For him, the museum and the exhibited works represent a single entity, with the real content being the public.

2.2 The postmodern museum: space and interaction

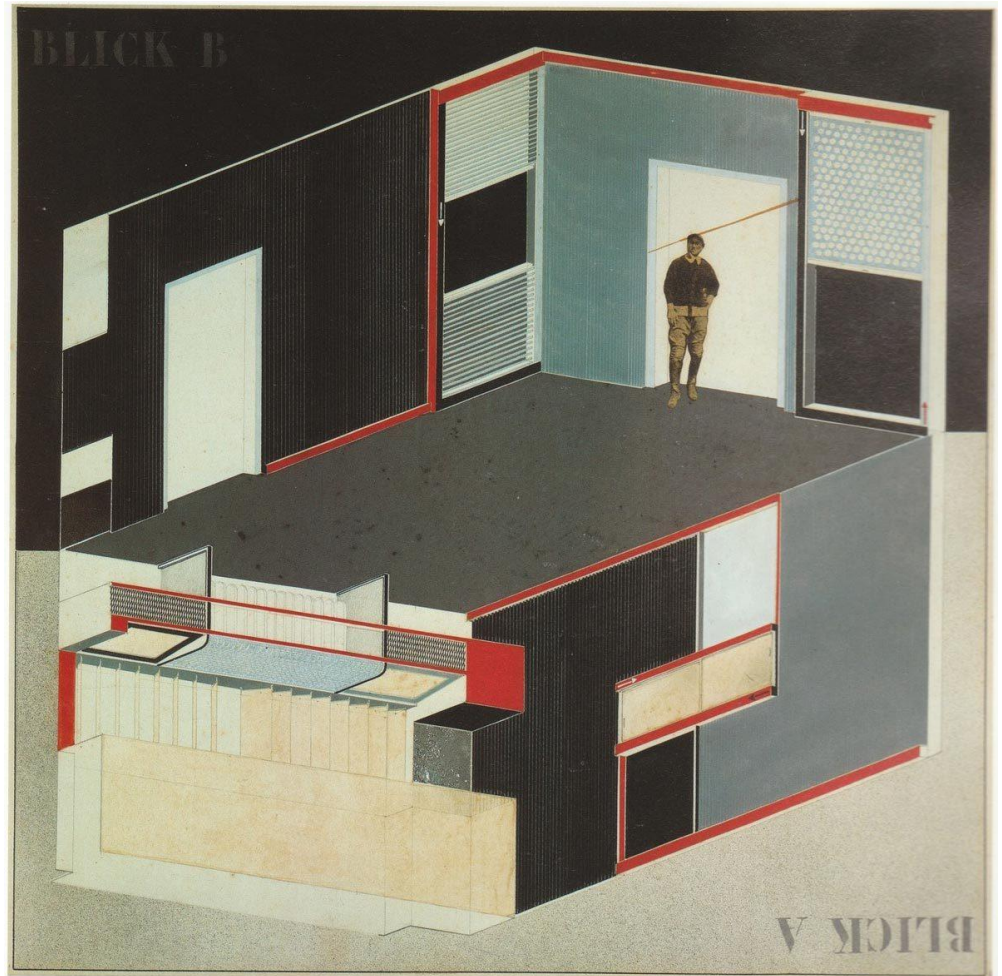
The debate over the public dimension of museums centers on the principle of free access. A museum is deemed truly public if it is open to everyone without restrictions or fees. However, the concept of public access has evolved over time. In Italy, after the establishment of the Republic, Ruggero Bonghi, who was Minister of Public Administration from 1874 to 1876, introduced an entrance fee for museums, galleries, and monuments in 1875. This policy aimed to provide financial autonomy to these institutions but diverged from the original humanitarian ideals that characterized 18th-century museums.

Henry James, in his 1877 work 'Italian Hour', reflected on this change, describing how visitors had to pay an entrance fee at small turnstiles manned by uniformed attendants, while Italian art was stored in grand, mausoleum-like rooms: "*at the entrance of these buildings are small turnstiles where men in uniform sit, to whom the visitor must pay an entrance fee of 10 pence. Inside, in vaulted and frescoed rooms, Italian art lies buried like in a thousand mausoleums*" (James, 1909).

In 1923, Alexander Dörner, an art historian, became the youngest director of the Landes Museum in Hannover. Influenced by the aesthetic theories of Alois Riegl, Dörner reorganized the museum with contemporary art exhibitions, collaborating with figures such as Erwin Panofsky, Walter Gropius, Kurt Schwitters, and El Lissitzky, pushing his vision beyond his initial goals (Rusk, 1959). He envisioned the museum as a 'living organism', where art was an integral part of human vision,

allowing visitors to experience art as a reflection of different historical perspectives. El Lissitzky's 'Cabinet of Abstraction' (1927), commissioned by Dörner, embodied this dynamic museum concept (Figure 2). After fleeing Nazi Germany in 1935, Dörner adapted his concept of *Lebenmuseum* in the United States, incorporating new scientific and philosophical insights, as detailed in his 1964 essay *The Overcoming of Art* (Dörner, 1964). His ideas also influenced Giulio Carlo Argan in Italy, shaping the perception of the museum as a vital social and educational institution (Morello, 1997). Argan emphasized that the museum should no longer be seen merely as a place for conservation, accumulation, and exhibition but as a relational space fostering engagement, dialogue, and broader participation, addressing the evolving needs of contemporary society (Ferrari, 2004).

Figure 2. "El Lissitzky's "Cabinet of Abstraction". 1927



Source: socks-studio.com/2015/08/29/el-lissitzkys-cabinet-of-abstraction/

In the wake of the socio-political movements of those years, during the last thirty years of the 20th century, numerous museums were commissioned based on the principle that the design should harmonize with the territory and the public. Mies van der Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie, opened in Berlin in 1968, is a key example of mid-20th century museum architecture. Designed to offer West Berlin a new venue for 20th-century art, this building was the first project in the urban redevelopment of the area near Tiergarten park and Potsdamer Strasse, later known as Kulturforum. From the ground floor, visitors immediately perceive the surrounding urban space, which merges with the museum's exhibition area. This

design initiated a trend where museums are no longer just containers for collections but become interactive works that engage with their contents, visitors, and surrounding environment.

Following the 1968 movements and the creation of the Neue Nationalgalerie, Georges Pompidou announced the competition in 1969 to establish the *Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou* (Beaubourg). His vision was to create a public space that would foster interaction between the visual arts and the city, transforming public culture. Designed by Piano and Rogers, the Centre stood out for its innovative use of space, visible mechanical systems, and integration of technology, challenging traditional architectural norms. The decision to expose these systems on the exterior in addition to defying convention, turned them into prominent features of the museum's façade, blurring the lines between form and function. The Centre was described as 'the Anti-Monument in motion' embodying a space that promoted community and accessibility, making the museum part of the urban landscape.

This concept, much like iconic landmarks, reflects not only the quality of space and public activities arising from the city-museum synergy but also the historical layering of the area, the monumentality of its works, and the triumph of the city as a palimpsest (Corboz, 1983).

3. The museum of 21-th century

In its rapid development over the past three decades, the museum has come to symbolize the industrialization of culture and the culturalization of social life, economy, and urban planning. It has replaced industry in the postmodern city while gradually adopting industrial spatial behaviors, clustering, and networking with other museums.

In this social change, the urban dimension of the museum takes on primary importance. The aspect of the museum project appears as the city's entrance into the museum and, at the same time, the museum's exit toward the city, in a single project that fully involves the space, capable of generating cohesion, identity, and form for entire parts of the city. Today, architecture moves away from the modern and postmodern illusion of being omniscient and authoritative, and instead embraces the multidisciplinary sensitivity needed to understand the diverse realities of the territory.

In 2019, ICOM (International Council of Museums) introduced a new, more inclusive definition of museums. It defines museums as "democratic, inclusive, and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the past and future. By recognizing and addressing present-day conflicts and challenges, they hold artifacts and specimens in trust for society, preserve diverse memories for future generations, and ensure equal rights and access to heritage for all people. Museums are non-profit. They are participatory and transparent, working in active partnership with various communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance the understanding of the world, with the aim of contributing to human dignity, social justice, global equality, and planetary well-being." This manifesto sheds new light on the museum's mission of preserving and conserving cultural heritage, while defining universal criteria for museum design, management, and organization. It also aims to develop a global museum community through institutional or individual memberships, contribute to research and debate on museological issues, and align international conventions on cultural heritage through the work of national and international committees. This new definition of museums by ICOM opens up a

broader dialogue about the evolving role of cultural institutions in addressing major contemporary challenges. These include climate change, environmental degradation, colonial legacies, and the effects of globalization, alongside persistent issues such as inequality, social injustice, racism, and sexism (United Nations, 2015). As society increasingly demands equal rights and access to culture, expectations around cultural democracy and participation rise. This necessitates a rethinking of the relationship between museums and communities, encouraging the adoption of a new relational approach that fosters collaboration, shared responsibility, and co-creation (Landi, 2019). Through this lens, museums can act as agents of change, bridging cultural divides and fostering inclusive dialogue.

3.1 *The 21-th Century Museum as a tool for urban regeneration*

One of the most prominent and celebrated examples of urban regeneration through cultural infrastructure is the post-industrial transformation of Bilbao, epitomized by the Guggenheim Museum designed by Frank Gehry and inaugurated in 1997. While the museum itself has become an iconic symbol, the regeneration extends far beyond its walls, integrating public spaces into a cohesive urban strategy. The surrounding area, enriched by the *Parque República de Abando* and other interventions along the *Nervion* river, represents a hybridization of the museum and public space, fostering interaction between cultural landmarks and everyday life. Strategically situated, the museum serves as the focal point of a cultural triangle connecting the Museum of Fine Arts, the university, and the old town hall, blending seamlessly with the traditional urban fabric while offering new spatial opportunities for both residents and visitors. This deliberate merging of public and cultural spaces highlights the transformative power of architecture in reshaping urban landscapes.

In Italy, a similar strategy was implemented in the Flaminio district of Rome with the construction of Renzo Piano's *Auditorium Parco della Musica* and, subsequently, Zaha Hadid's MAXXI - National Museum of 21st Century Arts. These projects were designed to enhance cultural initiatives and create a cultural cluster enriched by new public spaces. The success of this approach is evident in the large number of people who queue in front of the MAXXI even before the museum opens, eager to access and enjoy the public spaces (Versaci et al. 2017).

Forty years after Beaubourg and twenty years after Bilbao, museums have shifted from their elitist origins to become central elements of urban and cultural revitalization, influencing cities' economic, social, and spatial dynamics.

The *MuseumsQuartier* (MQ) in Vienna (2001) exemplifies this transformation, particularly through its hybridization of museum spaces and public life. Repurposing the former imperial stables, the MQ integrates a dynamic mix of cultural venues, including the Leopold Museum and MUMOK (Ortner & Ortner), with expansive open courtyards designed for public use. These shared spaces dissolve boundaries between art and daily life, inviting community engagement and fostering interaction within a vibrant urban setting. As Kunst (2015) observes, this interplay between cultural institutions and public space has established the MQ as both a significant cultural landmark and a thriving social arena, demonstrating how museums can redefine the role of public space in the urban fabric (Figure 3).

These examples open to numerous reflections on the role of museums as central instruments of urban and cultural revitalisation. On the one hand, a positive scenario sees these cultural institutions consolidating their role as engines of urban transformation, capable of generating economic growth, social cohesion and widespread cultural enrichment. In this scenario, museums could do much more than attract tourists; they could play a key role in urban regeneration by improving the

quality of public spaces and amenities. By becoming focal points for communities, they would implement accessible and multifunctional environments catering to diverse needs, thereby strengthening the connection between their cultural function and the urban environment. On the other hand, there is a significant risk of overtourism, commodification, and the banalization of art. In this negative scenario, the expansion of museums might prioritize attracting visitors over preserving cultural value, turning museums into superficial cultural consumption sites. This could result in museums becoming isolated and elitist enclaves, disconnected from the social and cultural dynamics of their surrounding environment.

Figure 3. “MuseumsQuartier” Vienna.



Source: <https://www.lumine.at/en/kultur/mqprojekteneu/>

In this sense, the Saadiyat Island project in Abu Dhabi is a large tourism-oriented cultural development, covering 2.43 km² and costing about USD 27 billion. The island includes the construction of new museum complexes and international partnerships, such as the Louvre Abu Dhabi, which involved a naming fee of USD 525 million and USD 747 million for art loans and exhibitions, in order to fuel cultural tourism in the UAE (Thompson, 2022).

Ultimately, the future of museums as instruments of urban regeneration depends on their capacity to harmonize innovation and tourism appeal with their enduring cultural mission and societal obligations.

Effective museums will prioritize fostering inclusive environments that invite engagement across diverse community groups, ensuring that their role extends beyond economic catalysts to genuine cultural facilitators. By embedding themselves within the urban fabric, they can transform into vibrant spaces that nurture both local identity and global dialogue.

The success of this approach will determine whether museums evolve into dynamic platforms for cultural exchange or risk being reduced to symbols of commodified cultural tourism.

4. The Barcelona Model

Barcelona stands as an exemplary case of the modern nation-state's evolution,

particularly in the post-revolutionary era. Following the War of Spanish in the 18th century, Barcelona underwent a period of repression, first under the Bourbon rule following the War of Succession, and later with the suppression of Catalan traditions under Francisco Franco's regime in the 20th century. However, the city began to transform radically in the mid-19th century with the introduction of the Pla Cerdà, which initiated an urban expansion project aimed at solving overcrowding and poor living conditions.

4.1 Barcelona's evolution: from the Pla Cerdà to the 21st Century

In the 1970s, with the end of Franco's regime and the rise of democracy, Barcelona experienced a remarkable political, urban, and social transformation that fundamentally changed its physical and cultural landscape.

During the 19th century, social tensions and poor living conditions, exacerbated by the Carlist Wars, led to the need for an urban plan to address the city's overcrowding. Ildefons Cerdà was commissioned to design the city's expansion, creating the famous plan that envisioned wide streets, green spaces, and better distribution of land. Despite difficulties in integrating with the old city, his plan marked the beginning of modern urban planning in Barcelona.

At the same time, the city also experienced a period of great cultural fervor, culminating in the Catalan Modernist movement.

Great architects like Antoni Gaudí and Lluís Domènech i Montaner designed iconic buildings such as the *Sagrada Família* and the *Palau de la Música Catalana*. The Universal Expositions of 1888 and 1929 were pivotal moments in Barcelona's urban and cultural evolution, consolidating its role as a center of architectural and cultural innovation.

The significance of these transformations lies as much in the new buildings as in the creation of unprecedented public spaces that reflect the city's growth. Urban issues in Barcelona gained increasing importance from the mid-1970s, particularly with the introduction of the 1976 *Pla General Metropolità*.

This plan, emerging after the end of Franco's dictatorship, was influenced by European models, especially the Italian plans by Detti for Florence and Samonà for Rome. Its goals were to alleviate traffic congestion and expand green spaces through the recovery of industrial land.

The post-Franco social and political climate, along with progressive civic groups, helped regulate urban density and prioritize public spaces and services, halting the city's urban decay (Scarnato, 2015). These goals were championed by the PSC (Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya) under the leadership of then-mayor Pasqual Maragall (Mayor of Barcelona from 1982 to 1997 and President of the *Generalitat de Catalunya* from 2003 to 2006), reaching their zenith during the preparations for the 1992 Olympics and extending until the early 21st century with the Forum of Cultures organized by Joan Clos, Maragall's successor.

The awarding of the 1986 Olympic Games led to the creation of the *Institut Municipal per a la Promoció Urbanística i els Jocs Olímpics* to manage the construction sites, together with public companies such as Vila Olímpica S.A. and other mixed capital companies. This gave rise to the *Modelo Barcelona*, a financial management model that guaranteed the timely completion of projects and the recovery of investments in a sustainable timeframe.

With the awarding of the 1992 Olympic Games and the arrival of prominent architects, Barcelona witnessed the realization of Maragall's vision of architecture as a reflection of municipal governance. This period, marked by significant architectural projects, became a moment of intense civic engagement and intellectual

investment, producing what Bohigas termed 'new Catalan architecture'. This transformation was more than just the physical construction of buildings, it was the shaping of a cultural identity through urban spaces. In 1986, two years after winning the Pritzker Prize, Richard Meier was entrusted with the task of designing a brand-new museum of contemporary art, the MACBA (Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona).

Meier's approach emphasized the growing role of museums in transforming public spaces into cultural hubs, making the museum a symbol of Barcelona's shift toward a cosmopolitan cultural scene.

Similarly, the reconstruction of the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion in Montjuïc (1986) reinforced the city's blend of tradition and modernity. This symbolic gesture reinforced Barcelona's identity as a crossroads between tradition and modernity, becoming a reference point for other architectural initiatives and promoting discussion on the importance of modern and contemporary architecture in the definition of urban space, emphasized its importance as a reference point for contemporary architecture and urban space.

The industrial district of Poblenou was identified as the site of the Olympic village and port. The project of the area saw the removal of the old railway in favour of a new relationship with the waterfront, which had never directly entered the city's transformation policies since the Pla Cerdà.

The village was built to host the event's athletes, while the Olympic harbour, with its Platja de la Mar Bella, located between the beaches of Barceloneta and Nova Icària, a residential district for the wealthy classes, a stone's throw from the sea brutally razed to make room for the leisure and catering area, considered a true flagship for the 'new Barcelona'. Nova Icaria was not supposed to be subject to strict zoning, but to integrate a functional and mixed system, complete with public spaces and shopping streets, as well as offices.

In 1994, two years after the great success of the Olympics, the CCCB (Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona), designed by Helio Piñón and Albert Vilaplana, was inaugurated in the complex northern area of the Raval.

In a short time, the CCCB became the city's most active multidisciplinary centre, with a series of exhibitions focusing on urbanism and architecture that helped both to regenerate a fragile neighbourhood such as the Raval by attracting tourist flows, and to increase residents' interest in urban quality.

Delayed with respect to the schedule that wanted it inaugurated in time for the Olympics, in 1995 the MACBA was inaugurated, which together with the CCCB generated the Raval museum cluster (Figure 4).

Maragall emphasised the importance of Meier's work, stating that although the museum had no collection when it opened, it still represented a fundamental contribution to the neighbourhood. MACBA symbolised urban renewal, with the new regenerating the old, intellectual creativity prevailing over *canalla* spontaneity, becoming a cultural icon capable of counteracting social marginalisation. Barcelona's post-Olympic transformation positioned architecture as a key driver of urban value.

In *La Ciudad de los Arquitectos*, Llatzer Moix traces how prominent architects, drawn to the city by its regeneration, reshaped its cultural and spatial identity, turning architecture into a symbol of modernity and urban progress.

This marked a shift where the name of the architect became synonymous with the city's renewal.

Figure 4. Inauguration of MACBA.

Source: MACBA archive - fundaciomacba.es/en/foundation/

4.2 Barcelona at the beginning of the 21st Century

The @22 project, promoted in the 2000s by the then mayor Joan Clos, envisaged the transformation of 198 hectares of industrial land in the Poblenou neighbourhood into an innovative productive district. Launched in 2000 with an investment of 180 million euros to develop a smart city infrastructure, the project is still ongoing. However, it has already generated a real estate potential valued at 12 billion euros, created 56,000 jobs between 2000 and 2010, and facilitated the establishment of 4,500 new businesses.

In this sense, in early 2000, the Diagonal Mar project was born in the context of the 2004 Forum of Cultures, an international event designed to promote intercultural dialogue, peace and sustainability. Clos saw in the Forum a unique opportunity to revitalise a marginal area of the city and, at the same time, redefine the urban identity of Barcelona on a global level.

Clos's idea was to use the event to carry out a large-scale urban regeneration operation that would extend Avinguda Diagonal, starting from the ambitious project for Plaça de les Glòries Catalanes, to the sea, transforming an industrial and degraded area on the edge of the Poblenou district into a new cultural and recreational center. The Forum of Cultures was intended to be a catalyst for the creation of an innovative public space that would combine new cultural, residential and commercial infrastructures. The extension of the Diagonal and the construction of the large esplanade of the Forum, designed as an open hand reaching out to the sea by architects Martínez Lapeña and Elías Torres, symbolized the opening of Barcelona to new possibilities for development and social integration. This space, superimposed on industrial structures such as the wastewater treatment plant, was designed to demonstrate the principle of sustainability promoted by the Forum. The Museum of Natural Sciences, designed by Herzog & de Meuron, was one of the key elements of this urban regeneration. Strategically located on the new esplanade, the museum is an attempt to reconnect the city to the sea by inserting a cultural artefact into an area previously considered marginal and degraded. Joan Clos aimed to create a new cultural and social space in Barcelona that would attract both tourists and

residents, contributing to a better distribution of space and opportunities within the city. However, despite the ambition of the project, the results were partial. The Forum area, while benefiting from new infrastructure and housing, failed to become a true center of urban life, often remaining in the shadow of more central areas of Barcelona. The museum instead, although architecturally significant, did not attract a steady flow of visitors and mainly served as a venue for specific events. Joan Clos's goal of developing an integrated, sustainable, and culturally relevant public space, while achieving some results, did not fully resolve the challenges related to social inclusion and the daily vibrancy of the area, highlighting difficulties that Barcelona had not encountered in the previous decade in transforming a marginal area into a vibrant and inclusive urban centre.

In recent years, Barcelona has reinforced its role as an innovative hub for the development of hybrid public spaces that blend art, culture, and everyday life. Museum clusters have transformed into dynamic places of interaction, where the lines between cultural institutions and daily activities are increasingly blurred, enriching the urban environment with deeper meaning.

However, expanding this hybridization model has introduced several challenges. While museums have contributed to the revitalization of districts such as El Raval and Poblenou, infusing cultural energy that attracts both tourists and investors, the rising pressure from tourism has raised concerns about the long-term social and economic sustainability of such projects.

The neighborhoods around these cultural spaces, although benefiting from increased activity, are undergoing gentrification, marked by escalating property prices and the risk of displacing long-standing residents. Moreover, the continuous evolution of these spaces highlights the delicate balance between ensuring access to culture for the broader public and mitigating the risk of transforming museums into mere tourist attractions.

Despite these challenges, recent projects show Barcelona's ongoing effort to maintain a connection between the cultural and social aspects of these spaces. Museums are seen not just as sites for art production but as venues where the community can engage, reflect, and play an active role in the urban fabric.

5. Four museums in Barcelona: case studies of urban regeneration

Building on the previous discussion, this chapter will focus on four museums located in two pivotal neighborhoods that have shaped the urban and social fabric of Barcelona: Ciutat Vella and Poblenou. The former was central to the city's most notable physical and social transformations during the Olympic period, while the latter is at the core of the @22 project, an ongoing large-scale transformation aimed at turning the area into an eco-cultural hub.

These museums have played a significant role in both enhancing Barcelona's cultural heritage and redefining public spaces, merging art, culture, and everyday life. As cultural containers, these museums have contributed to the regeneration of the urban landscape, emphasizing the importance of high-quality public spaces that foster social interaction. The architectural design of these museums, often integrated into their surroundings, promotes an experiential interaction between the public and the urban environment. Through this integration, the museums facilitate an ongoing hybridization of spaces, blurring traditional boundaries between cultural institutions and the public sphere. They have become platforms for social interaction, where cultural experiences extend beyond the museum walls, enriching public life.

The four museums analyzed in this chapter (MACBA and CCCB cluster, CCMB,

Disseny Huband Can Framis) have been chosen for their distinct contributions to the urban and social development of their respective neighborhoods. Each of these institutions exemplifies the evolving relationship between cultural infrastructure and the public realm in Barcelona, embodying the hybridization of art and everyday life, and enhancing the quality of public space in both Ciutat Vella and Poblenou.

5.1 MACBA / CCCB

The MACBA and the CCCB represents the cultural heart of the Raval. Both emerged as successes of the post-Franco urban regeneration, transforming one of the city's most degraded areas into a vibrant cultural, social, and tourist hub. The MACBA is an emblematic example of how contemporary architecture can be integrated into a historical context, contributing to creating a prestigious exhibition space but also to socially and urbanistically transforming an entire neighborhood.

The museums in these areas are designed to host exhibitions and cultural events, as well as to extend their influence throughout the urban fabric. The adjacent public spaces, such as *Plaça dels Àngels*, *Plaça de Joan Coromines*, and the courtyard of the CCCB, are places where the boundary between public space and museum becomes blurred, creating a continuous dialogue between art, everyday life, and community.

Plaça dels Àngels and *Plaça de Joan Coromines* represent high-quality public spaces where the museum's influence extends outward, involving the city in a continuous flow of interactions among various social groups. For example, *Plaça dels Àngels* transforms into an informal meeting space, a gathering point for young people, students, skaters, families with children, residents walking their dogs, and tourists admiring the architecture. *Plaça de Joan Coromines*, while more intimate, serves a similar function as a transit and resting area for a variety of people, with its easy accessibility allowing anyone to enjoy the urban context in a relaxed manner.

This museum cluster is not just a place for exhibitions but has become a reference point that helps strengthen social cohesion and break down the barriers between art, community, and the city. It promotes an urban regeneration model that not only enhances the quality of public spaces but also fosters greater accessibility, supporting long-term urban livability and sustainability.

5.2 CCM Born

Staying in the Ciutat Vella, one of the most emblematic examples of urban design that has brought about significant physical and social change in the district is the transformation of the former Born fruit and vegetable market, now home to the Centre de Cultura i Memòria de Barcelona (Born CCM). The building, inaugurated in 2013, has a history dating back to 1714, when the district was devastated by the War of Succession. Renovated several times, the former Born market was finally turned into a museum after the discovery of the remains of the ancient houses of La Ribera during excavation work in 2001. This discovery was decisive in defining the future of the building, directing the debate towards the conservation of the archaeological site rather than the construction of a provincial library, as initially planned.

A key feature of the Born CCM transformation was the redesign of the surrounding public space. The intervention, carried out by Vora Arquitectura, removed vehicular traffic and parking along *Carrer del Comerç*, creating a large pedestrian zone. This approach not only improved air quality and reduced noise pollution but also significantly increased the area's attractiveness. The public space was designed as

an integrated extension of the museum, with pavements replicating the urban layout of the 18th century, creating a physical and visual link between the past and the present. This public space is not just a transit area but a place for meetings, reflection, and cultural activities, further enhancing Born CCM as a ‘nucleus of collective memory’.

Plaça Comercial and *Passeig del Born* have become gathering points for residents, tourists, and visitors, where people meet, interact, and participate in various social activities. The open layout of the pedestrian area hosts public events and spontaneous gatherings, fostering a diverse use of space that contributes to its dynamic social and cultural character. Meanwhile, the promenade and the edges of the square have become vibrant spots for cafes and nightlife venues. The transformation of the public space around the Born CCM goes beyond simply creating a square or pedestrian area. It exemplifies how urban planning and architecture can directly impact social cohesion and urban life quality, creating spaces that promote inclusion and long-term sustainability. The intervention has reinforced the cultural and historical identity of the district, transforming it from a marginal area into a key reference point for the local community and beyond.

5.3 Disseny HUB

If the first two museums examined fall within the Ciutat Vella district and therefore see their conception confronted with issues that, as we have observed in the previous chapters, are closely linked to the reform of the historical city and the problematic relationship with the architectural heritage; the Disseny Hub and the Can Framis Museum, see their birth linked respectively to Plaça de les Glòries Catalanes and to the northern area of the Poblenou district.

Between the 1960s and 1980s, the Glòries square was the subject of numerous urban interventions to manage congestion between pedestrian, vehicular and railway routes, but without solving the traffic problems, which became increasingly intense. With the approach of the Olympics, two viaducts were built that accentuated the congestion and made the square a problematic junction.

It was only in the early 2000s, with the @22 Barcelona plan, that a significant redevelopment began, aimed at transforming the area into a modern productive and residential district.

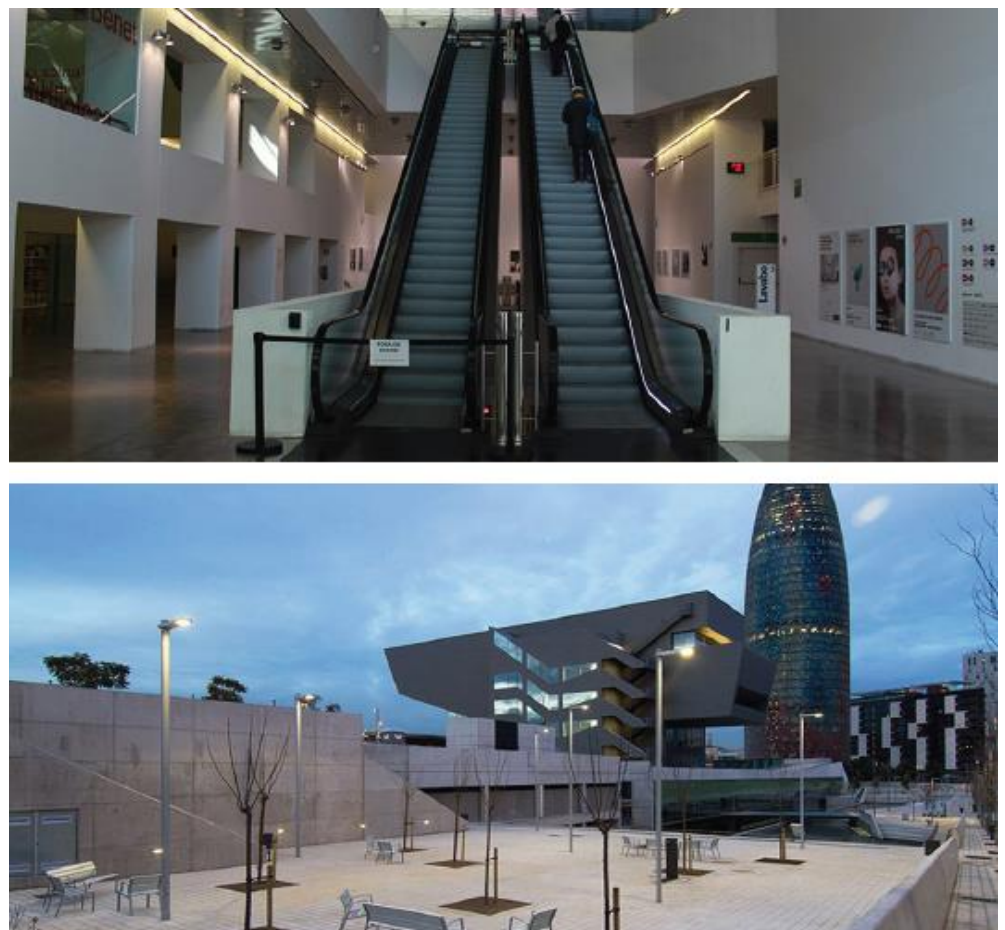
In 2007, the *Compromís per Glòries* initiative launched a comprehensive transformation of Plaça de les Glòries Catalanes, aiming to create a large public space. Key measures included removing the existing ring road, establishing a park to reduce traffic and increase green areas, burying Gran Via, and building multifunctional public facilities. The *Canòpia Urbana* project, designed by architect Ana Coello de Llobet and UTE Agence Ter in 2013, introduced a ‘green diagonal’ that linked the square with surrounding parks, enhancing the urban ecosystem. This intervention represented a significant step toward a more sustainable and interconnected city. Among the new developments, in addition to the Museu Disseny, were the National Theatre of Catalonia (designed by Ricardo Bofill), Torre Glòries (by Jean Nouvel), and Mercat dels Encants (designed by b720 Arquitectos). These projects, together with others, helped to transform the area into a cultural and social hub of great importance to the city. The Disseny Hub, completed between 2008 and 2013, is a key element of this transformation. Designed by studio MBM (Martorell, Bohigas, Mackay), the multifunctional structure integrates exhibition spaces, offices, laboratories, a library, an auditorium and a cafeteria, and serves as a hub for innovation and research in design, promoting collaboration between public and private institutions in the field of design. The Disseny Hub was conceived as a

transitional space connecting the Clot and Poblenou districts of Barcelona.

The museum represents a sophisticated and integrated interpretation of modern urban architecture, designed to meet the needs of the transforming Plaça de les Glòries Catalanes. The exterior features a terraced area and two large water basins, creating a dramatic effect and serving as a transition between the square and the museum. The escalators, located at the entrance and along the main path, facilitate access and integrate the museum into the urban fabric (Figure 5).

Over 29,000 m² of the space has been allocated to green areas and public spaces, featuring a light and sound installation by David Torrents, where the people activate the LED lighting pattern on the pavement of the adjacent square through their voices. The Disseny Hub has transformed its surrounding area from a marginal and transit zone into a vibrant cultural and social center. Thanks to strategic interventions and a successful landscape design, the Hub has become a focal point for cultural and social activities. The square in front has evolved into a dynamic space for events and gatherings, where locals, tourists, and professionals interact with the museum's exterior, often crossing through it or utilizing the surrounding areas that offer a variety of functions. This continuous flow of people generates a lively atmosphere, creating a seamless connection between the museum and its urban context.

Figure 5. The urban infrastructure of Disseny Hub.



Source: photos by the author

5.4 Can Framis

To fully understand the value of the intervention on Can Framis, it is essential to

consider the vast transformation taking place in the Poblenou district through the @22 project. This vision is realised through the application of integrated urban policies, which aim to pursue social and cultural objectives through the creation of public facilities, green spaces, the protection of the industrial architectural heritage and the promotion of sustainable building.

In the late 19-th century, Poblenou emerged as the centre of Catalan industry, earning the nickname ‘Catalan Manchester’. During the first half of the 20-th century, the district consolidated its industrial and working-class identity, seeing a significant increase in population and also becoming an important residential area. However, in the second half of the 20-th century, a steady process of deindustrialisation left large tracts of land unused.

The most significant change occurred during the Olympic period, when the district underwent a profound transformation, culminating in the construction of the Olympic harbour and village. Beginning in the early 2000s, the Ajuntament of Barcelona launched the @22 project, which envisaged the reconversion of 200 hectares of industrial land in Poblenou into a productive district focused on technological innovation, preserving some of the city’s most important industrial complexes as architectural heritage.

In this context of urban regeneration, Can Framis, located north of Poblenou and next to Pompeu Fabra University, is a significant example of industrial heritage valorisation. The museum, promoted by the Vila Casas Foundation, is housed in a disused industrial complex belonging to the Framis family, and its transformation, completed in 2008 by the BAAS architecture studio led by Jordi Badia, represents a delicate balance between conservation and architectural innovation. The project recovered two existing industrial buildings, connecting them by means of a new volume, erected to replace a badly damaged building. This intervention allowed the creation of a central courtyard, paved with stones recovered from the original factory, which serves as a transitional space and houses a sculpture by Jaume Plensa, symbolising the intersection of historical memory and contemporaneity. The restoration has retained many original architectural elements, including arches, windows and exposed brickwork, giving continuity to the building’s historical narrative. The new concrete structure, built on three floors and positioned 1.5 metres below street level, dialogues with the pre-existing buildings, creating an architectural language based on contrasts that celebrates the coexistence of past and present. The conservative treatment of the original buildings integrates with the modernity of the intervention, generating a material and formal stratification that results in an architectural collage, where the signs of time blend harmoniously with the new surfaces.

One of the most distinctive aspects of the project is the management of the difference in elevation with respect to the road, a feature linked to an urban planning phase prior to the Pla Cerdà. This element allowed the creation of a perimeter garden, conceived as a natural barrier able to hide the road traffic, isolating the complex from the urban environment.

The garden, designed by Martí Franch’s EMF Landscape Architecture studio, constitutes a true urban oasis. Although placed in the heart of the city, it presents itself as a space for quietness and reflection. The landscape, conceived as ‘wild’, is characterised by dense vegetation of white poplars, oaks and a sea of ivy, transforming the entire block into an urban forest where nature predominates over the artificial. The route through the garden, marked by winding paths, evokes the feeling of a landscape that precedes the architecture itself, with points of interest such as the old industrial chimney recalling the site’s manufacturing past. The

entrance to the museum, characterised by the use of wooden dunes, accentuates the gradual transition from the urban context to a more secluded and contemplative environment, amplifying the perception of an isolated space protected from the hubbub of the city. The architectural and landscape design of Can Framis is distinguished by the attention devoted to sustainability and environmental integration. The adoption of passive solutions inspired by traditional architecture, together with the use of environmentally friendly materials, reflects a responsible design approach aimed at ensuring a perfect symbiosis between nature and architecture.

6. Reflections on the construction of public space in Barcelona

The case studies analyzed illustrate how culture can act as a driving force for urban regeneration, fostering the creation of open, accessible, and multifunctional spaces that mirror the diversity and complexity of contemporary society. The MACBA, for instance, belongs to that category of projects that focus on landmark architecture designed by renowned firms, aiming to generate new economic and social circuits. In contrast, the CCM Born draws on the historical memory of the city and the heritage of 18th-century architecture, restoring dignity to an area and neighborhood that had become prone to petty crime. The regeneration initiatives in Poblenou, on the other hand, leverage the city's industrial heritage from the 18th century, with the avant-garde redevelopment of *Plaça de les Glòries Catalanes* serving as an entrance to the cultural district.

The Disseny HUB and the Can Framis, both metaphorically for its cultural resonance and physically for its form, functions as a gateway to this innovative district.

The four Barcelona museums previously analyzed exhibit particular characteristics that can be observed on multiple scales, from the neighborhood where they are located to their immediate surroundings.

These characteristics are extracted and graphically represented below (Figure 6), with the aim of composing an inventory of formal choices that have proven to be among the most refined strategies. The poster in image 6 visually represents the complex relationship between museums and public spaces in Barcelona. It illustrates the influence museums have on the surrounding urban fabric and how their public spaces integrate with the city.

In the case of MACBA and CCCB, located in the northern part of the Raval district, the analysis focuses on public spaces such as squares, courtyards and corridors, which create a network of meeting points.

For example, *Plaça de Terenci Moix* hosts youth activities such as basketball, while *Plaça de Joan Coromines* highlights the presence of the CCCB theatre and the back of the MACBA. *Plaça dels Àngels* serves as the hub of the public space, while the *Patio de les Dones*, occasionally open for events, further enriches the cultural function of the complex.

The blue lines illustrate the spatial connections between these public spaces, while the red lines mark the pedestrian route through the museum, promoting continuity between the different urban environments.

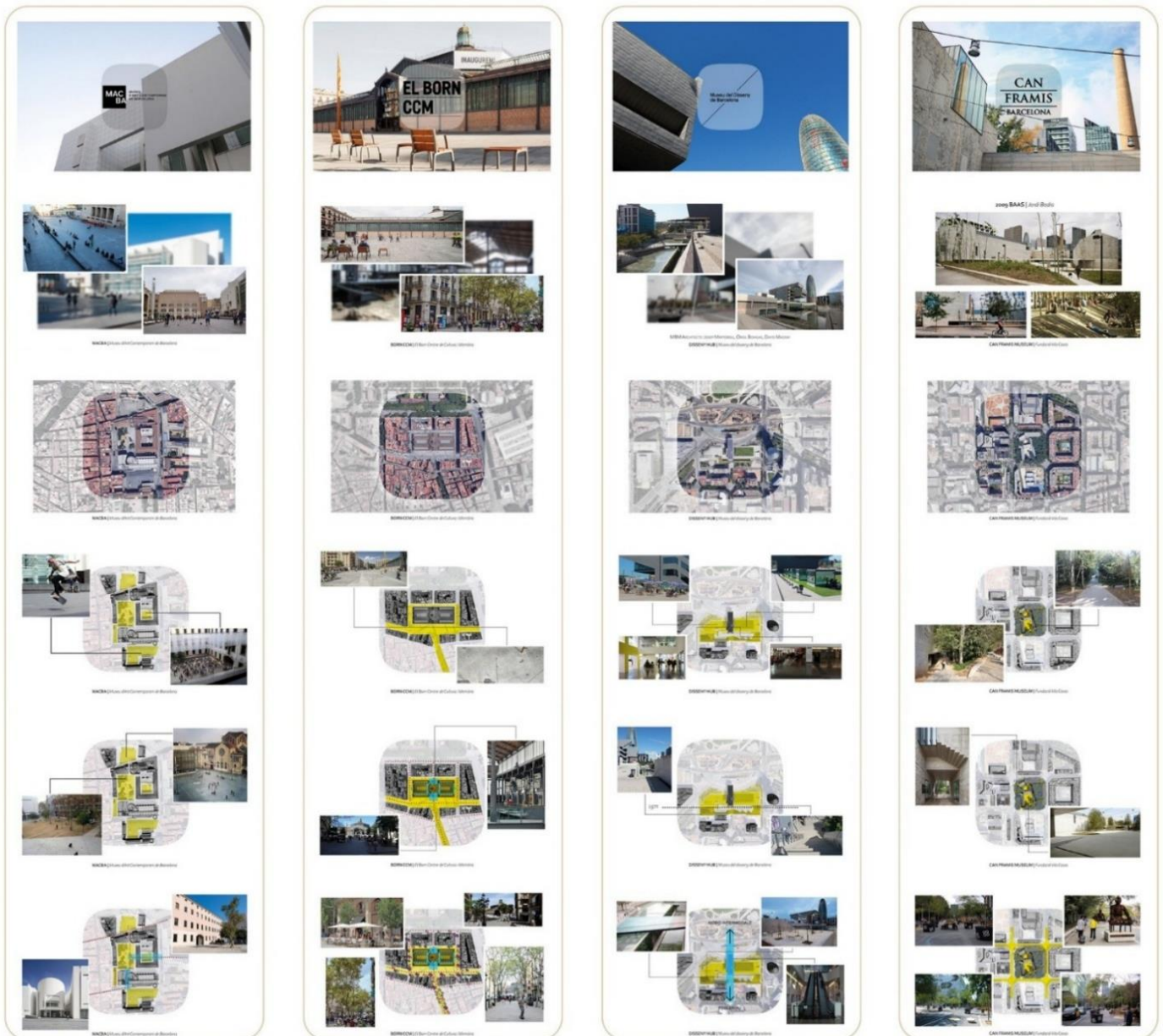
Continuing in the La Ribera district, the BORN CCM is another example of how a museum can transform the surrounding area.

The new square, recreated following the 18th century street plan, emphasises the desire to connect the present with the past. Blue lines trace the paths accessible through the openings of the CCM, perfectly aligned with the level of the square, while the commercial and cultural activities developed around the museum have

contributed to the tourist and cultural renaissance of the neighbourhood, now revitalised. The Disseny Hub, located in the 'urban canopy' project at Plaça de les Glòries Catalanes, offers a new perspective on public spaces.

The image highlights the creation of public areas on the external sides of the museum, while the 15-metre height difference between the square and the area behind it is resolved by internal escalators and external ramps.

Figure 6. Exploring Public Space and Museums



Source: photos by the author

This ensures a fluid connection between the Poblenou district and the square, reinforcing the role of the Disseny Hub as a strategic urban infrastructure.

Finally, Can Framis, located in the new production district of Poblenou, represents a dialogue between past and present. The inner courtyard of the museum, located between the new structure and the restored former factory, is highlighted as a transitional space, while the surrounding streets, renovated through the *superillas* project, transform the area into a more liveable and accessible urban environment.

This approach redefines the relationship between the museum and the city, emphasising the fusion of nature and urbanity.

7. Conclusion

Barcelona's experience demonstrates how museums can become drivers of urban regeneration, contributing both to the enhancement of cultural heritage and to improving quality of life while constructing a new urban identity. However, for this to be effective, museums must be fully integrated into the urban fabric, operating in synergy with local communities and promoting collective participation.

Barcelona's model, with its successes and challenges, represents a valuable reference for other cities aiming to use culture as a tool for urban regeneration, but it is also the result of unique socio-political conditions that enabled significant transformations in the 1980s and the early 21st century. After more than 25 years, Barcelona's model has reached its limit. The crisis of this model is due to several factors, including the need to progressively rethink the social-democratic city model developed in Europe starting in the 1920s.

Barcelona's early urban development model centered on large-scale events, collaboration between public and private initiatives, and the pivotal role of urban planning experts (Montaner Martorell et al., 2012). Over time, this approach revealed its limitations. The heavy reliance on prestigious projects and high-profile events led to saturation, diminishing the model's effectiveness and producing significant economic and social challenges. The dominance of private interests undermined public authorities' ability to address broader urban needs, accelerating gentrification and eroding the unique character of historic neighborhoods.

Nonetheless, Barcelona's experience offers valuable lessons on the potential of hybridizing public spaces and museum clusters as a strategy for urban regeneration. The MACBA and CCCB exemplify this integration. Situated in the heart of the Raval district, they have transformed their surroundings into vibrant public spaces where diverse groups converge. The plaza adjacent to the MACBA has evolved into a dynamic urban setting that fosters informal social interaction, engaging local residents, visitors, and creatives alike. Similarly, the CCCB's interdisciplinary initiatives have enhanced the cultural landscape, promoting continuous dialogue between the museum and its community.

In the Poblenou district, the Disseny Hub and Can Framis Museum illustrate a more intimate approach to public space integration. The Disseny Hub revitalizes a formerly underutilized area, merging design innovation with public engagement in Plaça de les Glòries. Can Framis, set within a repurposed industrial complex, offers tranquil courtyards and gardens that extend the museum's reach, inviting both museumgoers and locals to experience the space in a contemplative manner. These examples demonstrate how the fusion of cultural institutions and public spaces can enhance the urban fabric by creating environments that promote inclusivity, social cohesion, and diverse forms of engagement.

This hybridization enriches the urban landscape, positioning museums as agents of social innovation and public engagement rather than isolated cultural assets. The challenge moving forward lies in maintaining a balance between economic growth and the preservation of local identity. Prioritizing the enhancement of public spaces and ensuring inclusive access will be essential. Through careful management that respects this equilibrium, museums will continue to play a pivotal role in fostering urban regeneration, contributing to a more cohesive and resilient urban environment. In this framework, the blending of public and museum spaces assumes particular

significance. Museums, once perceived as autonomous cultural entities, are increasingly merging with their surrounding public spaces, fostering an environment that is both open and engaging. This evolving relationship dissolves traditional distinctions between public and private domains, encouraging new forms of social interaction and engagement. No longer confined to contemplation within enclosed walls, museums now function as dynamic components of the urban landscape, offering spaces for community building, shared experiences, and cultural interaction.

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Originality

The author declares that this manuscript is original, has not been published before and is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere, in English or any other language. The manuscript has been read and approved by all named authors and there are no other persons who satisfied the criteria for authorship but are not listed. The author also declares to have obtained the permission to reproduce in this manuscript any text, illustrations, charts, tables, photographs, or other material from previously published sources (journals, books, websites, etc).

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