Building Barcelona: A Second Renaissance has a narrower aim. Rowe takes stock of the past few decades of Barcelona’s urban transformations, assessing several phases of architectural works undertaken publicly and privately to improve Barcelona’s civic life and its economic prospects. After an introductory chapter lucidly summarizing historical events and major urban developments from the mid-nineteenth century through the postwar years under Franco’s dictatorship, Rowe scrutinizes three major programs of development, one per chapter: first, the design of disparate urban spaces, including the neighborhood parks mentioned above; second, the hosting of the 1992 Olympic Games and subsequent use of the Olympic venues; and third, the facilities constructed for and around Fórum 2004, east of the Vila Olimpica. These unillustrated chapters and a final one speculative on future urban issues the city will confront are separated by short sections of black-and-white photographs that are an essay in themselves. Some photographs are historical, but most are contemporary images of the city at street level and supply a needed visual impression of the spaces that Rowe describes.

Rowe argues that the processes evident in the urban and architectural projects of the late twentieth century are demonstrative of a “unique cultural modus operandi” sustained in Barcelona from the period of modernization at the beginning of the century. He identifies characteristic activities such as the contrived experimental visions of the city (as in the exhibitions), the interrelation of political and architectural actors (sometimes as one person), and a capacity for producing a collective sense of urgent opportunity. Grand plans such as the Eixample or the Plan Macià of the 1930s are echoed in the urban resuscitations performed after Franco’s death or in the far-sighted preparations for the Olympics. What makes Rowe’s argument more convincing than a simple formulation of history as repetition is his grasp of the collaborative and multidisciplinary nature of most of these projects. He gives no special emphasis to the figure of the architect, and he dispassionately describes the architectural projects not in terms of form or image but with regard to their effects and consequences.

The characters here are not the architects or the buildings but the organizational structures that finance and carry out such urban projects. Rowe evaluates societats anònimes, public or semipublic companies created by the government for the specific purpose of realizing a particular project and dissolved upon its completion, which he finds effective for the type of urban development in Barcelona. He sees them as the historical descendents of private stock companies formed to similar purpose in the preceding century. In the late 1970s, city authorities decided to pursue projects rather than plans—in other words, small realizable projects rather than comprehensive, abstract regional plans. Considering this strategy as well as the use of societats anònimes, Rowe extrapolates the influence of a general cultural attitude upon urban form. The 1992 Olympic Games, which Rowe assesses as a process of urbanism, no longer stand as a singular historical event but as one in a chain of manifestations of the modus operandi unique to Barcelona.

To support this interpretation, Rowe repeatedly refers to the local attitude known to Catalans as seny, a mix of industriousness, common sense, inveniveness, and making-do that Rowe regards as a kind of farsighted pragmatism. While cultural attitudes surely shape, and are in turn shaped by, urban form, such a general attribution prompts evidentiary challenges. It amounts to a shorthand explanation, similar to the “weight of history,” for the cumbersome and intricate processes of Barcelona’s urban evolution. Many events and actions are recounted in these two books without sufficient explanation of unsuccessful propositions. Both books, for example, refer to the potency of Catalan nationalism and describe the political oppositions—between traditionalist conservatism and international progressivism and between republicanism and fascism—that profoundly influenced Barcelona’s history. But they do not often reveal the specific points of opposition or engagement around which any particular instance of urban modernization revolved. They do not describe the motivations or the arguments that were marshaled, ineffectively but deliberately, against projects or plans. In short, there is little in these accounts of the ideas and intentions that failed to be culturally persuasive.

More broadly the two books can be positively valued as providing a concise idea of the city. Neither book delves deeply enough into events to serve the specialized historian, yet both are too detailed to serve as generalist accounts. Together, though, they provide assessments of considerable breadth and arguments of significant weight. To the extent that these accounts move past the cataloging of artistic movements as the expression of cultural forces and toward an understanding of legislation, policy, and finance as cultural modes in and of them themselves, they will reinforce Barcelona’s claim on the modern imaginary—not by rehearsing its formal contributions but by providing a glimpse of the conceptual bases behind them.  

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Note


Duanfang Lu  
Remaking Chinese Urban Form: Modernity, Scarcity and Space, 1949–2005  

The study of architecture and urban planning produced in China since the founding of the People’s Republic in
The new spatial and social configurations. Socialism from the 1950s through the pervasive organizational unit of Chinese as elements of urban planning, citizens of the PRC. In their manifestation only now beginning to lose its impor-

of production for which one works,” is work unit (danwei) was perhaps the most
dominant urban inquiry focuses on the development of the work unit under Mao, tracing the reinterpretation of the neighbor-
hood-unit ideal through the use of the “microdistrict,” based on the Soviet
time, the work unit was a political and economic modernization. The allocation
of resources for consumption, including housing, was considered wasteful. Lu
masterfully outlines how, under these conditions of scarcity, work units were able to get away with “illegal construc-
tion” (building outside of the sanctions of the planning bureau) for housing and community buildings such as nurseries. In the actual new construction, important factors were the soft budget of the work unit (whose losses would eventually be covered by the centralized government), the hoarding of materials by work units to be used in construction beyond what had been approved, and a secondary market between work units in which materials could be bartered. At the same time, the work unit was a political and economic institution that allowed flexibility and fostered the creation of neighborhoods.

This urban outcome was in contrast to the experience with rural communes,
the subject of the fifth chapter, “Modernity as Utopia: Planning the People’s Commune, 1958–1960.” Energized by the reorganization of society in the urban settings of the work unit during the implementation of the first Five-Year Plan, Chinese state planners and architects began to propose the transformation of peasant life in the countryside from dispersed vernacular construction to modern dwellings in larger, more concentrated settlements. Lu outlines how dreams of the plenty that socialist modernity would bring to the countryside, in contrast to traditional life, were promoted to the peasantry. She then discusses some commune plans and their relationship to other forms of socialist neighborhood planning, pointing out that commune plans were carried out on a scale closer to that of regional planning. The attempts of the central government under the Great Leap Forward to move rural production from the realm of agriculture to that of industry, combined with several agricultural disasters, ultimately led to the disastrous famine between 1959 and 1961. This demoralized the central government, which in turn suspended urban planning practices; as a result, the dream of these rural communes was never realized to any large extent.

The sixth and seventh chapters come under the section title of “Shifting Boundaries.” Chapter six, “The Latency of Tradition: On the Vicissitudes of Walls,” is a meditation on the cyclical appearance and destruction of the wall as an archetype in Chinese urban planning. Couched in terms of Freud’s concept of “latency,” Lu quickly summarizes the history of walls in traditional China before discussing the destruction of Beijing’s city walls in the early years of the PRC. Her Beijing-centered point of view unfortunately tends to omit much about the debate over walls during the republican era. In their push toward urban reform, cities elsewhere in China had already destroyed their walls well before 1949, which she does not mention. Lu points out that as Beijing’s city walls were being dismantled, work units were busily erecting new walls. Initially, planners considered this practice wasteful because it was considered nonproductive construction. Concerns about security and tensions with the peasants who lived on or near the site of the new construction fostered the practice of work units finding various legal or illegal ways of building walls. The desire of some work units to take advantage of the uncertain state of property rights in the early years of the PRC also led to wall construction as a means of claiming real estate. Lu concludes the chapter with a discussion of walls in contemporary China and the resistance of work units to the central government’s desire to open their social buildings to public use and traffic. She also notes the emulation of the work-unit wall by emerging gated private developments.

In chapter seven, “The New Frontier: Urban Space and Everyday Practice in the Reform Era,” Lu discusses her field work in Beijing, where she lived in a work unit and interviewed people confronting the changes that reform has brought about in the urban spaces they occupy. The primary issues she found to be of concern were the loss of work-unit social space to private development and the penetration into work-unit space by perceived “others,” usually migrant workers from the countryside who are in many ways the key element of Chinese economic production. In the short “Epilogue,” Lu contemplates how her themes of modernity, scarcity, and space continue to unfold in China.

Overall, Lu’s discussion of the architectural and social history of the work unit is a major contribution to Chinese architectural history. Unfortunately, the book’s black-and-white illustrations are at times illegible, and its high cost may well be prohibitive for many Chinese university libraries and independent scholars. Her insertion of eclectic bits of critical theory in introductory quotes by an assortment of thinkers, including Walter Benjamin, Leo Tolstoy, David Harvey, Sigmund Freud, and Henri Lefebvre, at times seems irrelevant to the topic. These are minor points, however. The reader may freely skip to the first subheading in most chapters and get to the crux of Lu’s historical arguments without losing much of the important history that she has assembled. It must be emphasized that this history would otherwise be out of reach for the “visible foreigner” in China, as non-Chinese scholars would almost certainly be barred from many of the relevant archives and spaces discussed in this important new book.

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