

PROJECTING AND BUILDING 'LA GRANDE PLACE'

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ABSTRACT

Every place, no matter how small it is, wants and should have its '*grande place*'. El Morell, a town located in the middle of a countryside planted with hazelnut trees, peach trees and next to a huge oil refinery, could not be an exception. The industry brought vitality to the town and has mutated its skin to grow on the surface and the quality of its buildings and public spaces. The largest and most central public space was and is a square, *L'Era del Castell* (Castle threshing floor); its name denotes the agricultural origin of the space and the town.

From the end of the eighteenth century, the Castle became a Palace, governing the town and the fields planted with vines and cereals, opened to the south and to the expansion. Meanwhile, the Church, built at the same time, opened to the north looking for the old parishioners. The Square took time to build and its renovation has also taken time. We inherited a space fragmented into two large (and barely accessible) levels, arranged between the Castle-Palace (already converted into Town Hall) and the new Rambla (Spanish term for a broad street, with similar meaning as Esplanade or Promenade) that organized the growth on the way to the railway station.

The space was quite small, as all the urban centre is, and it had to be at the same time container of multiple uses and a representative space for the city. The topography played in our favour. Using a vertical drop of six meters we managed to fit a large hall accessible from the Rambla, suitable for a thousand uses since it has no main vocation, and above it a flat open square, with barely any paving or planting, understood as a basement of the castle-palace. In the space of one square we had managed to fit two.

It is a project carried out in many phases, but it is already assembled and the quality of its spaces, both exterior and interior, is now perfectly perceptible. It has been a very intense exercise of

reflection on the forms and qualities of a central space, symbolic and utilitarian at the same time. About the '*grande place*' of a small city.

KEYWORDS: El Morell, square, covered square, hall, grande place

INTRODUCTION

At first, the squares were only crossroads or temple courts. In Greece they are *agoras*, in Rome, sacred forums and profane temples. Then, some of them, will be centres of compass for precise geometries that seem to want to tense –like in a spider web– the roads of the world. Sometimes, the squares have been cut in the dense city, like perfect voids. It does not matter if they are markets, city entrances or urban centres: they condense the representation, the cult, the government, the commerce, the party and the best of the collective life. We like those that have clear forms but not too perfect, with figures that are not the result of a single decision or a single trace and that are always in transformation: those that admit and generate the formal and social changes constantly demanded by urban lifestyle.

The history of the world, of the city, of each house, has left in the square indelible marks and, however, it continues to wait for the most noble or the newest building, the glory of the illustrious citizen or the next party. Meanwhile, it is admired by fleeting travelers. Whoever is in the square perceives that he is in the transcendent urban place. Their trees and porches –we often find them– give shade to those who stop there. It is crossed by all, in all directions and at all times. And the shop windows of its stores –there are many– reflect the novelties or the attentive look of those who –worried or nervous– wait.

Named *circus*, *grande*, *main*, *mayor*, *major*, *mercadal*, *plaza de armas*, *square* o *zoco*, the great squares of Arlon, Bossòst, Ciudad Rodrigo, Chihuahua, Ghardaia, Hartenstein, Itea, Linz, Mons, Nový Bydžov, Poperinghe, Orihuela del Tremedal, San Antonio, Sassenage, Sain-Laurent du Pont, Saint-Symphorien, Saint Quentin, Tourcoing, Veracruz, Ypres, o Zsolna do not have their own name, because for each city they are its '*grande place*'; as Maria Rubert (2007) writes: «No square, no city». And as a theatre stage for urban life, they have good images and lots of postcards. Also, our minimal city, El Morell, considered itself entitled to dispose of its '*grande place*'; and why not?



Figure 1: Montoliu's Cattle-Palace around 1900 (up left), the site near 1970 (down left and aerial view).

The village was born as a feudal settlement around the Castle built in the late twelfth century on a slight promontory by Berenguer de Prats, Lord of El Morell. In the eighteenth century, when its population quadrupled between 1718 and 1787 coinciding with the agricultural expansion of the so-called *Camp de Tarragona* (Tarragona's countryside), the primitive inhabited nucleus spilled down the hillside, extending even new streets to the plain –interestingly, all with the names of saints: *Sant Plàcid* or *Sant Rafael*, to give a couple of examples–. We find the architectural materialization of this prosperity in the construction of a new Church, as well as in the renovation of the Castle; this last, dated around 1778, consisted in transforming it into a building with a character more palatial than defensive, with a garden to the north that would coincide with the situation of the original fortification, and also with new ownership: now belongs to the Montoliu dynasty (Valldosera & Granell, 1994).

Since then, Church and Castle share the top of the promontory on which sits the nucleus of the municipality, with houses –always humble– alienated along streets that descend towards fields, once planted with vines and cereals. Two buildings that were and are the landmarks of the new urban configuration, but both –Church and Castle– maintain a very special relationship –we could call it a 'non-dialogue'– that allows each one to assign itself a public space. Thus, the Church opens its doors to the north, to the small square that takes its name, searching for the roots of the primitive settlement. The Castle,

on the other hand, proposes its best façade open to the south, to the fields of cultivation and to the *Era del Castell* (Castle threshing floor); the latter will be converted, after 200 years, into the new square that occupies us.

Montoliu's Palace-Castle became a municipal property in 1979 with the first democratic City Council (the dictator Francisco Franco dies in 1975, the first democratic parliament was constituted in 1977 and in 1979 it was time for town councils). Already in the mid-80s, the ground floor housed some civic activities: the collective '*L'Embruix*' (the spell) (Granell & Granell, 2009) built there the fantastic objects and animals to be used in festive parades.

The mixture of unusual forms, colour and light in a space with great historical and architectural value, which the democratic community had recovered from outdated aristocracy, moved us suddenly to the best places in Italy. It was an unforgettable sight, since then we are bewitched by the Village and its Castle. It may seem inadequate to include personal subjective sensations in a scientific text, but we believe that in this case they have an undeniable testimonial value: they were the basis of the personal and professional endeavour that has boost –in many cases irrationally– the different projects developed for almost 35 years, first transforming the Castle to house the Town Hall and, later, with the construction of the '*grand place*' and the multi-purpose hall that we present here.

The restoration of the Castle-Palace was long and arduous. It lasted six years, being executed in five phases funded by three different administrations, with the consequent projects and contracts. But we managed to bring the collective effort to a successful conclusion: The Castle-Town Hall opened its doors at the beginning of 1994.

The building that from 1778 replaced the original fortification had a rectangular plan of 16 x 19 meters, with the long axis in north-south direction, with two floors raised on a basement. In 1794, recently completed, it was decided to extend it towards the garden, adding a new bay that respected the width of the plan but lengthened it 7.5 meters to the north, completing the compact volume that has survived to this day. The ground floor was intended for productive uses, while the main floor was articulated along the longitudinal axis, with the main room and bedrooms peeking, through magnificent balconies, to the main façade –to the south– while the day spaces –dining room, chapel and kitchen– opened to the north, towards the leafy garden planted with exotic American species, which when the property passed to the

municipality had the appearance of a minimum botanical garden grown and neglected.

The roof of the volume raised in 1778 was (and is) hipped, while that one of the 1794 addition is gabled. These roofs explain the history of the house, and protect a splendid space that originally served for drying fruits and now it is the archive of the Town Hall, also housing the staircase that goes up to the lantern that crowns the hipped roof and serves as a viewpoint. The sgraffito with carnivalesque motifs of the main facades and part of the interior wall paintings were recovered. The restoration required difficult decisions, but in general it was possible to recuperate much of the rich original decorative language of the spaces thanks to the quality of its constructive elements –it seemed that Palladio was not far away–. All this without giving up integrating architectural elements proposed with contemporary composition keys, in order to achieve the comfort required by the new administrative and representative use, in an effort to balance between new and old.

The railway –the line of direct trains between Madrid and Barcelona– arrived at El Morell in 1884. In correspondence, the town built a wide and straight Rambla to the door of the new station (Yxart, 1946) along which the new public facilities (schools, libraries and cultural centres) were built, as well as the best houses and businesses. Our town already has a Rambla, but it does not have a square yet. Remember: «No square, no city».

The implantation, in 1971, on the flat and fertile soils on the banks of the neighbouring Francolí River, of an astonishing oil refinery –the only one in Catalonia and, together with those of Cádiz, Cartagena and A Coruña, one of the main ones in Spain– left our villa without its clean skies and a good part of its famous peach crops, but added urban complexity and new resources for the territory and the municipality.

Conquered the Montoliu's Castle-Palace –which became community house since 1994–, the municipality marked a new challenge: to get its '*grande place*' that would change its rank, having, if possible, a good cultural facility that would dialogue with the Castle-Palace –on the top of the promontory of the original village nucleus– and the Cultural Centre –on the Rambla that had arrived with the Railway to articulate the urban expansion of the municipality towards the south–. The primitive '*Era del Castell*' (Castle threshing floor) had already been converted into public space but did not have any of the attributes of a good square due to the difficulties derived from its shape and topography. Its destiny seemed headed towards deterioration.

OBJECTIVE

After such a long prologue –we believe that justifiably, but sorry if we have allowed ourselves to be carried away by enthusiasm–, all those involved, society and their representatives, were aware about the next objective: to imagine and build in the urban centre, between the Castle and the Rambla, in a space without definite shape flanked by humble facades and two superimposed levels, finally, its '*grande place*'.

METHODOLOGY

The chronicle of this process and its results will be explained based on the graphic material that illustrates the text: images, diagrams, models, sketches and plans generated during the journey; a path sometimes hesitant and, always, extremely complex and long. The chronicle will also refer to some eventual achievements, surprising and fortunately interesting.

RESULTS: THE SQUARE

The first plans were very ambitious. It was proposed an underground parking, re-urbanizing and changing the section of the whole Rambla, extending its paving to the Church square; it was even planned to reach the *Plaça de la Font* (fountain square) –a space next to the wall of the Castell garden and the medieval door, at the opposite end of the main body of the building–. In this first version of the project, the Square was arranged on two levels. The superior gave the main access to the new Hall, built on the old Parochial Hall site. The lower one coincided with the Rambla, and also allowed access to the new Hall, so that the projects for this new equipment were mutating and growing in complexity. In contrast, the old Parochial Hall, built in 1932 and back then still standing but no longer in use, was accessible only laterally from the intermediate level of the Square, a situation that finally caused its deterioration and definitive replacement.

But the speculation on the form, capacity and meaning of the new urban equipment was suddenly truncated: the right decision to reform and expand another neighbouring existing auditorium –annexed to the Cultural Centre of the Rambla, just ahead– left the square apparently without building and arguments. It was not so.



Figure 2: Project around 2002. Virtual views of the Square and the Rambla with the new Hall proposed.

End of the first phase

The old Parochial Hall was finally demolished. Once emptied the space that occupied, allowing also to integrate into the intervention two vacant lots of municipal ownership that were behind, we find new strategies to project the square. They were two. The first one, to achieve a clear, direct and clearly accessible path –with a slope of less than 6%– between the Castle and the Cultural Centre. The second, to propose a main level of use with the largest possible surface, connected to the path mentioned in the previous point; a plane suitable for all civic and urban uses: The Square.



Figure 3: 2014, demolition of the old Parochial Hall.

End of the second phase

The special geology of the soil came into our aid when the Parochial Hall was demolished. Indeed, the expansive clays that form the soil of the promontory on which the urban nucleus is located forced an expensive stabilization of the generated void, by means of a retaining wall arranged by gigantic piles –85 cm of diameter and 14 meters of depth– in order to protect the neighbouring buildings in Sant Plàcid street and the square itself. The gift was to obtain a new room in

the basement of the Square, with a greater capacity than the old Parochial Hall; was configured, therefore, a space located in the best urban position imaginable and that would be the perfect complement to the recently inaugurated Cultural Centre Theatre.



Figure 4: Retaining wall constructed by piles and early stages of the new Hall.

End of the third phase

A continuous inclination ramp joins the level of the Rambla with that one of the Square, which forms a plane of negligible slope (1%) and, despite being located at a lower level than the main access of Castle-Town Hall, appears to be its base. Consequently, the new Hall, which can be understood as a Covered Square, is also linked to the Square by the route of the ramp, as well as by the stairs, grandstands and driveway generated in the transition between the different levels of the section of the public space.

All our efforts were concentrated in this direction: to generate a clear and safe route to link the two squares. One would be open and soft (the floor of decomposed granite and the stairs and ramp of tan granite), free of ornament and suitable for all uses. The other would be an interior space with the minimal comfort needed for multiple activities (market, forum, public meeting), but without artifice that specialize or limit it: definitely, a Covered Square. The Square had been doubled – we were looking for one and we had found two– and the town could be considered a city, minimal but city.



Figure 5: Concrete beams of the new hall supporting the new square (the roof of the hall).



Figure 6: The roof of the new Hall (the new square).



Figure 7: Site plan and axonometric view of the new Hall structure.

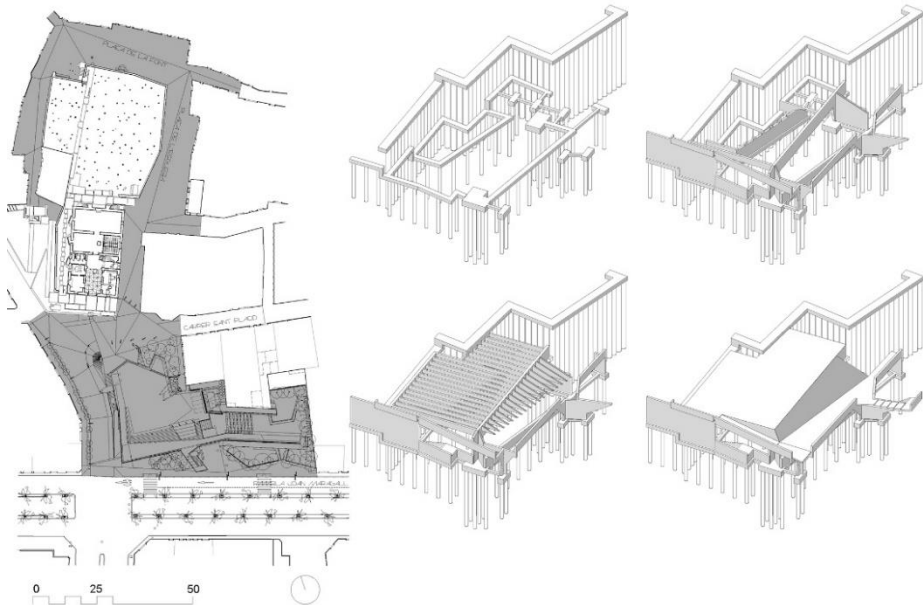


Figure 8: (next page): Model of the intervention.

CONCLUSION

We are still immersed in the process. The roof of the new Hall – the central area of the new Square– is built and finished, and the capacity of the public spaces generated can already be seen. The Castell also has a basement of decomposed granite pavement on which to settle visually; but there are no fountains, lights, and all the plantations, and the development works of the immediate surroundings are not completed. Is a surmountable process: although the Square has not been inaugurated, it has already been opened and used, welcoming the first civic activities.

We do not expect our public spaces to be considered exemplary, we only wish that the set of four squares of the new city –Font (fountain), Església (Church), Era del Castell (Castle threshing floor) and Sala (Hall)– to be scenarios of the best and most varied urban activity. If so, the graphic chronicle of the events will give us the true images of 'les grandes places.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research of this paper is financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities (CHORA project. CSO2017-

82411-P) and AEI/FEDER, UE and by the Department of Research and Universities of the Catalan Government (2017SGR22). The works and projects presented here have been done with the collaboration of Francesc Català, Sílvia González, Cristina Gurí, Víctor Lacheta, Alfred Lerga, Daniel Muñoz, Andreu Pont, Josep Lluís Serven, Manel Solé.

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