Northernmost Barcelona? A critique of mediterranean public design in Northern Europe

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ABSTRACT: Barcelona has been a great source of inspiration for Dutch public designers in the last 20 years. This development was supported by other processes of lifestyles and climate becoming increasingly “mediterranean” as well. The contemporary Barcelonese design style for urban public spaces has reflected in recent urban and landscape design in The Netherlands. Typically that style encompasses the creation of public spaces as “urban interiors”, open voids bounded by buildings, ample use of man-made materials and hard surfaces, as well as specially designed street furniture. But a range of problems can be stated in the Dutch places designed according to Barcelonese examples concerning thermal comfort, spatial perception and performance of building materials. This Barcelonese design style coming from a mediterranean climate zone needs to be re-examined against the background of the Dutch temperate climate.

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1. INTRODUCTION: PROCESSES OF “MEDITERRANIZATION”

Several interacting developments in urban life can be circumscribed by “mediterranization”. They concern climate change, different uses of public space and the shaping of public places in The Netherlands.

Firstly global warming has clearly shown its impact in recent years with rises in temperature being enforced by an increasing heat island effect in the continuously growing agglomerations in The Netherlands [1,2]. Altogether this is leading towards a perception that our climate becomes more “mediterranean”. Temperature rise in the last 15 years has certainly enabled an extended outdoor life in temperate zones of Europe.

Secondly the use of urban public place has changed from functions mostly related to traffic, parking and movement towards a more intense use, including longer sojourn in public areas. It has been supported by the temperature rises that actually enable a longer enjoyment of outdoor seasons in Central and Northern Europe. This development of an enhanced summer outdoor life has for instance manifested itself in an increasing number of festivals in urban public places and an enormous increase of outdoor cafes and restaurants in Dutch cities during the last 15 years [3].

These trends generate an initial atmosphere of the “mediterranean” [4]. They get translated into thematization in various fields such as interior, architectural and eventually public space design.

Thirdly, these above mentioned developments coupled with the rise of a distinct design tradition in Barcelona have lead to a broad application of Barcelonese style inspired design of the built environment and especially of public spaces in The
Netherlands, creating the imagery of “Northernmost Barcelona”.

2. BARCELONA-STYLE “IMPORTED” TO THE NETHERLANDS

Barcelona has been of great inspiration for designers of various kinds, but especially for landscape architects and public designers in the last 20 years. This owes its existence to a strong movement of urban renewal taking place since the 1980ies and the Olympic Games in 1992 in Barcelona that enhanced the emergence of a particular style. This very articulate design-style was soon copied in many other places. Especially in The Netherlands designers were attracted by the strong architectural expression and visual qualities of the Barcelonese designs [5]. After a long period of designing in a utilitarian, modest way Dutch public designers felt the urge to develop into a more expressive and artistic direction, so the rise of a new style fell on fertile grounds.

Figure 3: southern atmosphere in Den Bosch’s city centre, NL designed by Beth Gali, Barcelona

Next to that the instant visual quality of architecturally designed Barceloneseque public space design is a good export product in recent times of “esthetization” of the public sphere [4]. It has become very fashionable for Dutch commissioners of public place projects like local politicians and eldersmen to make excursions to Barcelona. Inspired by their impressions they quickly implemented similar projects back home in The Netherlands [6]. For them having the “Barcelona instant good looks” built in public space was a good way of scoring votes within the Dutch local election period of 4 years.

Dutch designers took over many stylistic means or municipalities even had Barcelona based architects designing public spaces. This happened with the Spuiplein in Den Haag and Kop van Zuid, Rotterdam (both Joan Busquets) or the inner city renewal in Den Bosch and Zuidelijk Maasover, Rotterdam (both Beth Gali). Other places have been clearly inspired by Barcelona- examples such as the refurbishment of Groningen city centre (Mecanoo architects) [7], the “Schouwburgplein” in Rotterdam (West8) [8], “Canadaplein” in Alkmaar (Sant en Co landscape architects, designed by the author herself) and many others.

3. TYPICAL FEATURES OF “BARCELONA-STYLE PUBLIC SPACES”

In Spain the design of the urban realm has been conceived differently from Northern European countries. It has been a task for architects, not for landscape architects or urbanists. That is rooted in a long tradition of architects dominating the fields of spatial design (which is only slowly changing). This reflects in a typical architectural approach for the shaping of space, the use of man-made materials and outdoor furniture and little attention to natural environment and materials [7].

3.1 “urban interiors” or: “the voids”

Public space in Barcelona very often is, as in most mediterranean cities, built as an urban interior, as a “room” bounded by buildings. In Northern and Central Europe this is not so much the case in vernacular open space. More open spatial boundaries and extensive use of plants as for instance in the Dutch “brink”- squares is common in this geographical area. Anyway with the rise of urbanism as a discipline and Camillo Sitte in his book about the basics of good urban form clearly describing this Southern tradition of shaping urban space this has become the new formal canon for architects. Hence public spaces increasingly form cleared areas in the urban fabric with the spaces often dominated by the facades of the surrounding buildings. In Barcelona this is strengthened by the minimalist architectural tradition of the Barcelona school, especially through the influence of Oriol Bohigas. It gets reflected in Barcelona public space by a very austere spatial setup and sparse use of features [9]. This approach in forming urban space has also broadly been applied in recent Dutch urbanism. As a result many public spaces are now conceived as a “void”, an idea broadly celebrated by famous Dutch architects and landscape architects like Rem Koolhaas (OMA) [10] and Adriaan Geuze (West8).

3.2 “placas duras”

The use of materials in many typical Barcelona squares is architectural like stone, glass and metal. Plants and connection to natural contexts play a
minor role. That has also lead to the newly formed term “placas duras”, meaning “the hard places”, amongst Barcelona inhabitants. Even in Barcelona where the tradition of building public spaces with man-made materials has always been strong some severe criticism arose amongst the users of these “placas duras”. They pleaded for more “soft spaces” dominated by plants [11]. But for shaping space with plants the necessary expertise of landscape architects was unavailable. Additionally the slow growth of trees made them less attractive for creating instant good looks.

3.3 “elementos urbanos”
An extensive use of specially designed refined street furniture gives the public places an instant appeal, tactile quality and elegance. [12]. Materials used often are soft wood, concrete, special ceramic tiles, metal and others that express the lightness of the Mediterranean.

This trend in special public furniture design originating in Barcelona has now found many followers abroad and especially in The Netherlands, where street furniture designers and constructors have seen an unprecedented boom. Even special trade fairs have evolved for this branch and every city working on public space can now choose from a broad range of prefabricated public furniture.

4. PROBLEMS THROUGH BARCELONA-DESIGN IN THE NETHERLANDS
Related to the three main features of Barcelonesque designs a range of problems arises:

4.1 “urban interiors” or: “the voids”
The squares conceived as cleared, empty voids show several problems, firstly in terms of spatial perception, that people feel uneasy and “agoraphobic” in these wide open spaces and secondly in terms of thermal comfort. The large open squares are an effective wind catchment area, so problems with draught arise quite quickly. When the square is surrounded by taller buildings additional problems with downwash and turbulences arise.

A typical example for this sort of problems is the square “Canadaplein” in Alkmaar, NL that was designed by the author herself in the year 2000 in collaboration with Sant en Co landscape architects. The square was designed as an open void which later got appropriated by an outdoor café—“terrasje”. After one summer season there were complaints about thermal comfort, esp. draught in the outdoor café. As a conclusion the local authority asked the author to design a special windscreen to protect the “terrasje”. This screen was covering one third of the outdoor café area. This still appeared to be insufficient wind protection, so three years later the complete “terrasje” got surrounded with the wind screen. Eventually all these additions have lead to a complete disruption of the initial spatial design concept.

If climate data had been available before the design process started this development could have been prevented. The design concept would have been much more adapted to the local climate circumstances. In this sense the case of “Canadaplein” has been an important trigger for the author’s further research on improvement of thermal comfort in public spaces.

4.2 “placas duras”
The “placas duras”, the “hard places” with their hard materials in ground surfaces and facades combined with a sparse use of vegetation also show specific problems in terms of thermal comfort. The hard and mostly rather smooth materials in facades and surfaces bring about a faster flow of wind in the open places. This problem has for instance been reported by G. Confurius [13] for the Schouwburgplein in Rotterdam. When the colours of the surfaces of a “placas duras” place are quite bright or reflective often additional disturbance by glare arises.

The lack of trees in the “hard places” results in poor shading conditions. Only with the shadows cast by surrounding buildings users have little choice to find a spot to rest or to select a route. So in many cases these spaces do not serve the very basic physical human need for thermal comfort.

A good example of a Dutch “hard place” place is the Spuiplein in Den Haag, NL (designed by Joan Busquets, Barcelona). It shows the typical “placas duras”-problems with a resulting underuse. The
The author had the chance to observe its poor use and wind problems over a period of 5 years and recently the local municipality has formulated these problems as well. They have become an issue in their “improvement plan Spuiplein”. The author will cooperate on this project through climate-responsive design research.

4.3 “elementos urbanos”

Related to the use of urban furniture another problem can be stated. The design of street furniture inspired by Barcelona can be seen in many examples in The Netherlands. In the last 10 years many urban refurbishment projects have been equipped with newly designed elements. This time-span is sufficient to state the mistakes that have been made with copying the light and elegant mediterranean style and materials of street furniture to The Netherlands with its special climate.

Many materials used in the warm and dry Mediterranean have proven to be unsuitable because they rot much quicker in the wet and much cooler Dutch climate. That goes specifically for materials such as light wood, certain types of concrete, terracotta, ceramic tiles, etc. As a result of the stronger climate influence by wind and wet weather much of the “mediterranean” urban furniture is not usable again after a short time. The effects show quickly, often after five years already: wooden seats are splintered, concrete is full of algae, tiles are cracking, etc. Thus places show functional problems in the usability of furniture, but moreso they look quite neglected after that very brief time and keep people from using the places.

CONCLUSION

As stated previously all three problems lead to an underuse of the respective public places. Often as a further consequence problems with safety and social control arise in this kind of public spaces making them even less attractive.

That is a lost chance, because cities need the reinvigoration of urban life and revitalisation of central urban districts. Leaving public places in an underused state is a waste of space in the city centres and harms the function of public spaces as the “showcases” of a centre in an ever growing competition between cities.

Hence it is of vital importance to provide attractive places that meet basic needs of comfort and safety in the central areas.

Having observed different types and features of “Northernmost Barcelona” public places in The Netherlands with their evolving problems one can conclude that this is not the appropriate way to design public places. Dutch designers should not copy one-to-one from other climate zones just because of instant visual qualities [14].

A different approach in urban design that takes local climate issues into consideration has to be developed. That includes a range of steps that have to be taken next:

1. More research in The Netherlands has to be conducted for micro (and meso-) climate-related issues in urban spaces, a field which up to now has been rather neglected in the Dutch context.
2. Derived from further research create design-guidelines for climate-conscious public places in present and future Dutch climate.
3. Rectify mistakes that have been made in “Northernmost Barcelona” public spaces or other similar spaces with poor thermal comfort
4. Adapt public spaces to future climate that in the longer run will become more extreme with greater peaks in precipitation, wind and heatwaves [1]

The author has started to focus on the first two steps through her PhD research project within Wageningen University in collaboration with Kassel University on public places and microclimate in Dutch public spaces.

REFERENCES