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Skateboarding as an intervention: Temporary appropriation and identity in central Barcelona

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Abstract

The *Plaza de los Ángeles*, colloquially called MACBA Square, is today an international reference for street skateboarding. As a public space of civic qualities inserted into a high complexity area, its temporal appropriation has motivated contrary reactions by the local community. Considering that the square already consolidated its identity based on that intervention, what concerns us is to analyze the role of the square space configuration in its temporary appropriation, and the spatial transformations generated by persistence of this practice over time.

Keywords: Skateboarding, public space, temporary appropriation, identity, Barcelona.

Introduction

It is Friday 4pm. The Brazilian, Marcelo and the German, Manfred, together with many skaters from the whole world, slide their skateboards over the extended pavements of the Plaza de los Ángeles. Together with them, more than twenty young practice acrobatic maneuvers taking advantage of the gaps and all kinds of obstacles. Much more people shares of this same space: girls with scooters; an old man and a child playing with a ball; several cyclists who cross it;

tourist who take pictures in front of the extensive white façade of the museum; people who rapidly pass, and other people who stops to rest watching the skateboarders movements.

After forty minutes appear a couple of municipal guards. Many of the young do not realize, they are not 'locals' and do not know the current civic rules. The more attentive ones warn the group and by dispersing they avoid that the guards confiscate their skateboards. Some resident charges Marcelo and Manfred, while protesting the police delay. An opportunist takes advantage of the confusion to steal the purse of a young lady who is dating distracted. Soon the police go away; the boys go back to their activities, with more people and much more animated. However several neighbors return to complain the constant invasion of the square.

Situations like that occur every day at the Plaza de los Ángeles, internationally known as the MACBA Square, reference for skateboarders from the whole world and, today, reason of controversy in the media and stress between users and residents. It is a very singular public space in a complex urban area, whose appropriation has motivated types of reactions as described.

It is, especially, an exemplar situation of the public space temporary appropriation, which brings out issues such as diversity, multiculturalism, vitality, conflict, contest, reconquest, exclusion, among many other contemporary themes presents in the metropolis space, *locus* of the expression of plurality, either European or Latin-American, rich or poor.

Reflections about the appropriation

The public space appropriation mechanisms in the contemporary cities, according to Peran (2008, p. 178), reply to two different dynamics that, although not excluding, do not share the same problem. On the one hand, there are practices of survival, and in another, those of dispute for the space. In the first case, we could find many Brazilian examples, our well-known everyday. However, it is the second case that will be approached in this article, because it is more appropriated to the reality of city of Barcelona, context of this work.

The Barcelona case is emblematic because it is a city currently submitted to a progressive policy of urban control. This phenomenon is pointed out by Delgado (2007), one of its fiercest critics of this phenomenon. He refers to the excessively projectual impulse that, when designing the whole city, masks the purpose of filtering complexity, encoding the space and reducing the urban stress. Thus, the current analysis is intended to recognize that the apology to spontaneous appropriations have a close relationship with the super-organized and opulent societies, and with the necessity of developing antagonistic practice, when not literally free (Peran, 2008, p. 177).

Treating spontaneous appropriation of public space means to look at the subversive expressions, against the regulation, the urban control and the planning. Ramoneda (2008, p. 176) highlights that these appropriation forms are elements of inconstancy generated by the

own city, normally to the margin of the logics of power and production, and that express new forms of conflict and resistance. However, they should also be understood as indicative signs of possible ways of transformation, since they are expressions of the vivacity of city.

But what means to appropriate?

According to Delgado (2008, p. 192), the public space, as a space for all, could not be an object of ownership, but of appropriation. To appropriate means to recognize as proper, in the sense of appropriated, able to, or suitable to something. Borden (2001), on the other hand, believes that the appropriation is not the simple reuse of a space, but the creative rework of this time-space. The everyday appropriation process of a built space therefore implies some derealization of this space, its creative transformation, and therein resides the essence of collective life in the urban environment. It is defined not only by the opposition between groups, but by a constant stress among spatiality built and opened to the use, and to the rhetorical deconstruction of this space, made for the benefit of the differenced lifestyles expression (Augoyard, 1979, p. 101), and sometimes conflicting. Thus, all indicates that we are facing a transformer fact, of a temporary intervention that results is the injection of vitality in the streets, reacting against the controlled, disciplined and exclusionary city.

In the universe of imaginable spontaneous appropriations, interest us here to work about the street skateboarding in Barcelona. Fundamentally, the choice is due to the trace of contemporaneity of this intervention, nomad, that emerged recently as an overflow of the skateboarding practice in 'institutionalized' spaces, and that features in the city a new speed, produces space, time and social posture (Borden, 2001).

Some appropriation dimensions

In a brief theoretical approach before the case exposition, we would like to recover some authors who work with the problem of spontaneous appropriation, emphasizing some dimensions of this practice that may contribute for a multi-faceted vision of the phenomenon and propose advances in the research about the theme.

-the spontaneous, the small and the particular

Crawford (2005) manes as 'everyday urbanism' the several activities or 'attitudes' before the city that celebrate the everyday richness and vitality, taking advantage of the potentiality and encouraging the use of spaces in an alternative and empirically way. The everyday urbanism is a 'way of life' in the physical domain of the routine public activities, the 'everyday space', space subjected to appropriation and transformation by the user in a way that better fits the everyday life needs, leading to a re-familiarization.

Under its viewpoint, the city is formed in most by the everyday urbanism than the formal design and official plans, being these not planned activities, spontaneous, a type of

architecture in the way they give form to the urban spaces (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett¹). Adds that does not exist a universal 'everyday urbanism', but a multiplicity of answers for specific times and places. This trace brings up the **spontaneous, small** and **particular** dimensions contained in the temporary appropriations.

-the subversive and the active

La Varra (2001) was the first author to coin the term 'Post-it City'. It equals to the temporary net of functional structures that occupies the interstices of the urban fabric and promotes the temporary writing of the public spaces outside the conventional channels. These temporary ways of space occupation reveal subjective abilities in the task of regaining it against the institutional pressure to which it is submitted, making appropriation a sensor of the latent urban quality.

Due to the spontaneity with which spread in space, that 'occasional cities' are seen as resistance forms to normalization of the behavioral patterns, to the spectacle and consumerism of the opulent city, bringing up the subversive dimension of the temporary appropriation. We call subversive at the extent it challenges the current rules, making us to question where does it intended to guide us.

Moreover the subversive dimension, as a space conquest tactic, appropriation reveals its active dimension, its capacity of discovering potentialities, of recovering places or even of 'poeticizing' at the urban space. The appropriation has this capacity of putting the space 'in action', in movement. We added, so, the **subversion** and the **activation** as two more dimensions of the temporary appropriation.

We open a parenthesis here. These two forms of appropriation presented, either in the direction of re-familiarization [everyday urbanism] or as space conquest tactic [occasional city], work with the idea of informal, of improvisation and marginality. However it is observed a subtle contradiction at the Post-It proposals. According to La Varra (2008), the occasional behaviors leave no trace [so as not leaves post-it blocks]. But, as potential activators or as space conquest tactics; **would be correct affirming they do not leave traces?** That is the point on which the central argumentation of this work is based: **the temporary leaves marks**, and, in this interim, interest either material or immaterial marks. Kronenburg (2008, p. 183) would say that 'the non-official utilization of determined spaces draws attention to the their value and guide to investments and more formalized improvements'. Despite being temporary, there are evidences that these appropriations can motivate more permanent transformations.

Looking forward, apart from changes that may emerge from the transgressive postures, we reflect if would have in the spontaneous appropriation any transformation intention. What interests here is the appropriation in which is suspected the existence of this intention, even

¹ In: Chase, J. Crawford, M. and Kaliski, J., 1999. *Everyday Urbanism*. New York: The Monacelli Press.

unconscious, that can emerge in some original way of 'using' the city. In an atmosphere of indifference and routine, the critical action would work as a revitalizing element (Gausa, 2001), characterized by the willingness to interact, activate, produce, express, move and relate, stirring the spaces and the inertias through 'happenings' or 'events'. Nothing more proper to this universe than the playful impulse of the skateboarding.

-the participative

About the **participative** dimension, Temel (2006) argues that uses and temporary occupations are currently seen as potentializing tools, revealing new possibilities for the urban spaces.² By being in the edge of the planning, they act as society self-observers, exploring niches and often presenting themselves as alternatives, power and form of movement for the revitalization of residual and idle areas, inclusive with elastic potential allowing a continuous doing and undoing. He highlights, in this context, the participative character of the spontaneous appropriations, the possibility to put into practice a base planning, motivated by the attitude of 'do-it-yourself'.

In that way, it is possible to relate the skateboarding to the appropriation dimensions as follows:

Spontaneous	Made by any skateboarder without prior organization / individual and collective expression
Small	Occupies city fragments, interstices, marginal areas / opposed to the big event
Particular	Specific to determined context attractive to the skateboarder
Subversive	Breaks the preestablished rules / uses the city in an alternative way
Active	Reconquests places / moves the public space creatively
Participative	Discovers potential places 'from the bottom to the top'

-the relational

Finally, to defend the relational dimension of the spontaneous appropriation, we refer to Sabaté, Frenchman and Schuster (2004). The authors used the term 'event places' to analyze the relation between events and places along the time. They defend the existence of a symbiotic relationship between both of that, arguing that memorable events leave marks on the places and shapes the spaces, gradually transforming the city. Focusing in the spontaneous appropriation case and in the skateboarding particularities, we want to prove the existence of this **relational** dimension between 'intervention' and 'local', in this case between the skateboarding and the MACBA Square. Through the case study below, it is proposed **to**

² Debate occurred at the symposium *tempo.rar: Temporare Nutzungen im Stadtraum*, in Vienna – May 2003.

reflect about the matter of the square configuration at its temporal appropriation by that “urban folk”, and at the same time about the transformations derived of the persistence of this activity in the time.

The Skateboarding at the MACBA Square

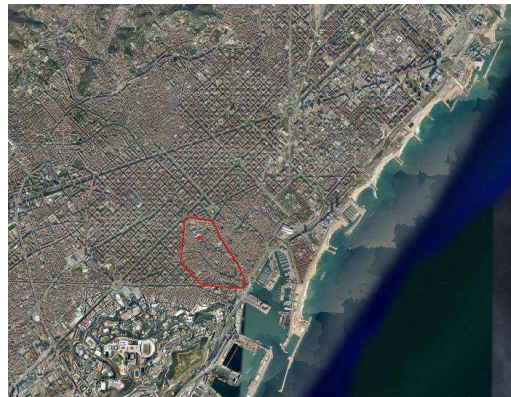
As a way to introduce the case study, we indicate below some general aspects of appropriation.

[A] Impulse: Temporary appropriation through the skating practice.

[B] Intention: Totally spontaneous appropriation, without other objective but the own individual and collective expression. Experience the city and interact with its spaces.

[C] Agents: Skateboarders group without prior organization, resident and passersby.

[D] Period: appropriation with no time or regular duration; according to police presence.

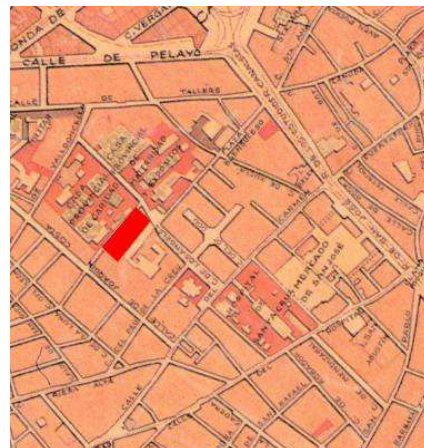


The Raval neighborhood in Barcelona and its approximation – Source: Google Earth

The construction of the square

The origin of the *Plaza de los Ángeles*, located at the *Raval*, dates from the 19th century. Garriga and Roca present it, in their survey of 1862, as a simple dilatation from the encounter

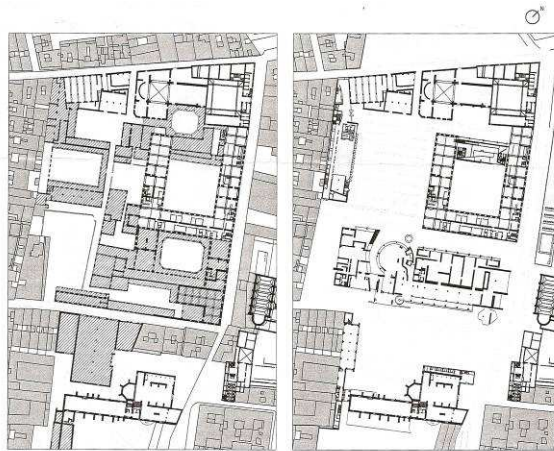
of two streets, *Ángeles* and *Elisabets*, with modest size and trapezoidal shape, facing the *Convento de los Ángeles* chapel. The Cerdá plan affects the area with the proposal for enlargement of some streets like *Fernadina* and *Elisabets*, and in the Pere García Faria (1891) plan, some buildings of the *calle dels Àngels*, near square, disappears, changing slightly its former configuration. Later, the Martorell (1929) survey shows its consecutive enlargement.



The area in 1862, 1891 and 1929 –
Source García Espuche and
Guàrdia Bassols, 1994

In the 20th century the square kept its original configuration, until in the 80's, on occasion of the Special Plan of Raval's Interior Renovation, when it is expanded by demolishing many buildings which occult the Convent, making the square to conform the front of the *Casa de la*

*Caritat*³ building. In 1993 is finally elaborated a project that will give its actual shape: a wide platform to emphasize the Contemporary Art Museum of Barcelona opened in 1995. The project involves the partial demolition of the *Casa de Caritat* and other buildings around it as well.



Demolished buildings in the area and Museum Project

Source Cabrera and Massanés, 2007

This case study will focus in some relevant aspects of this space that allow us to understand the reason of its attractive for the skateboarders and visitors. Referring to categories as **insertion in the city, size, typology, architecture** and **support plan**. The wish is to realize the main physical qualities of the place.

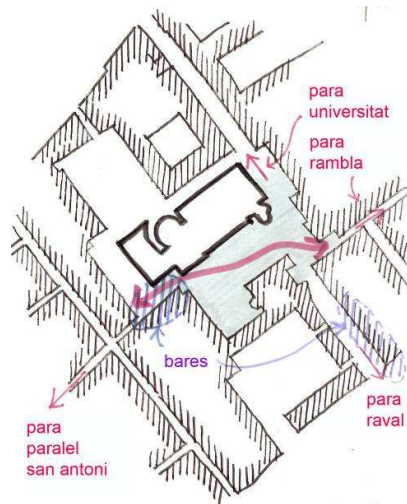
[A] Insertion in the city⁴

The square is located in a surrounding with a rich heritage, and hosts well several activities. In parallel to its refurbishment, the *Convento de los Ángeles* was adapted and the *Casa de Caritat* housed the Contemporary Culture Center of Barcelona, at the same time that residential and commercial uses concentrate on *Ferlandina*, *Joaquín Costa* and *Elisabets* streets. Over the years many cultural uses consolidate in restored buildings, as the already mentioned CCCB and the *Fomento de las Artes y del Diseño* [FAD], which occupies the former convent, and are also built new buildings as the *Facultad de Ciencias de la Información* and the *Universidad de Barcelona* [UB] ones, completing the *Montalegre* street facade.

It is a complex area that concentrates predominantly cultural and institutional uses, though inserted in an ancient residential and commercial zone. It was in the last years that the area acquired a remarkable commercial character with the arrival of immigrants and the proliferation of a multicultural commerce, and the increment of the nightlife due to the opening of several bars and restaurants.

³ The "Del Liceo al Seminario" study proposes in 1986 the reordering of the *Casa de Caritat* area and the *Illa Misericordia*, linking historical buildings, new equipments and public spaces, including the *Plaza de los Angeles* extent.

⁴ All the photos and analysis sketches are of the author.



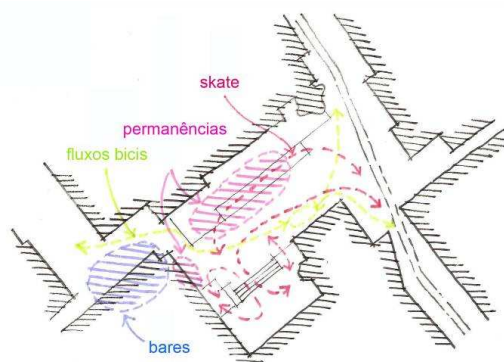
Sketch of the square urban insertion
Source: Author.

[B] Size

At *Raval* we find other squares built in the last fifteen years that form a public space sequence with various uses. But the MACBA's, a rectangle about 100 x 50 m, is the most and better connected to all of these, which confers some hierarchy over the others.



Comparison of the MACBA square with the others of the Raval – Mounting: Author.



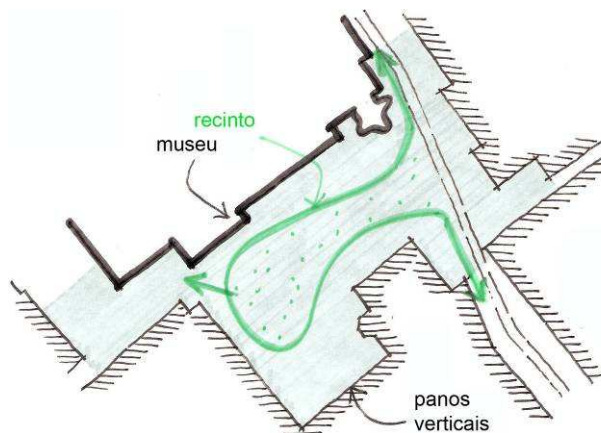
Reading of the square flows and permanencies. – Source: Author.

[C] Typology

The first feature that draws attention is the magnitude of its practically horizontal plan, delimited by broad vertical surfaces. This seen to be the main project objective: to conform a unitary and uniform space which enhance the monumentality of the museum. The square conforms, thus, as a large public space set by buildings of miscellaneous features, integrating permanencies both of buildings or open spaces, with considerable size volumes and strong contrast in its appearances, articulation that gives complexity, but also a marked spatial readability (Martí, 2003, p. 11).



Contrast horizontality of the plan with verticality of the surrounding – Source: Author.



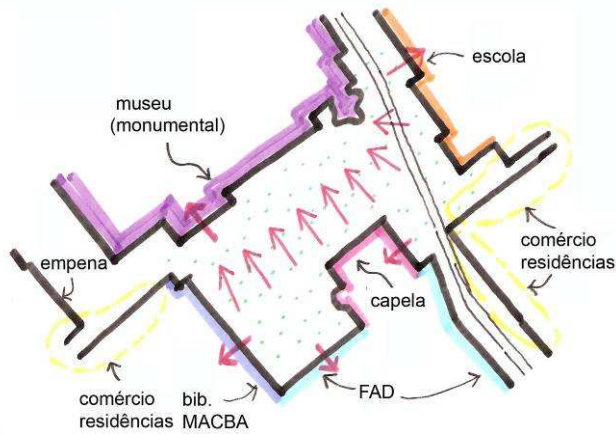
Typology of the 'closed' square – Source: Author.

[D] Architecture

The square surroundings results of the combination of few big size edifications, which facilitates its perception. The museum impressively rises over the square occupying its entire length, which seems to justify the project intent of creating the square as its complement, assuming the architectonic singularity of the museum and giving it a monumental symbolism. The logic adopted in the square's project, as part of an intervention strategy on the old town of Barcelona, supposes to trust in the work on the vertical plans [new constructions or restored buildings] for the qualification of the less occupied central space (Martí, 2003, p. 11).



Monumental character of the museum – Source: Author.



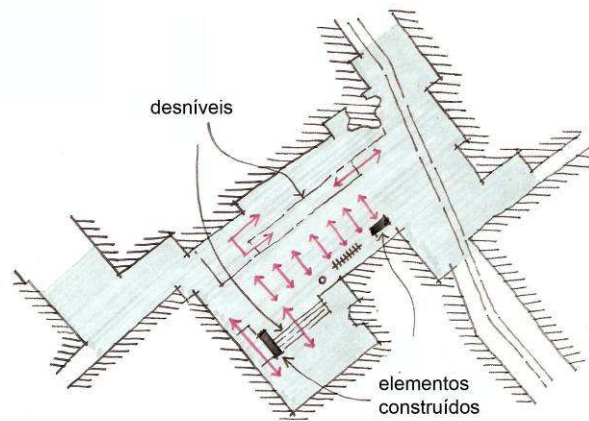
Architectonic surrounding – Source: Author.

[E] Support plan

The horizontal plan that accommodates activities is a continuous space, marked with few built elements, which endows it with uniformity and fluidity. The different plans form a whole connected and clean, qualities that give an open character and facilitate its capacity for adaptation.



Continuous horizontal plan – Source: Author.



Space flow – Source: Author.

Skateboarders and neighbors: an announced conflict

As occurred in other cities, in Barcelona from the 80's the skateboarding overflowed the specialized spaces, where someone imagine that it should be confined, and invaded all the urban space (Borden, 2001, p. 176). As ephemeral activity, it appropriates different fields in cities of the whole world, sometimes just in short periods. And although it constitutes on a much globalized practice, some spaces seem to be especially attractive. The MACBA Square is one of these priority destinations, maybe one of the most important and representative of the whole world.⁵

But, while the square gains supporters, the neighbors protest the 'invasion' of that space. They have already repeatedly alerted the police, made complaints and even constituted an association for defending from the intromission of an activity that they consider prejudicial, gaining the prohibition of the skateboarding practice at the place.

All of this raises some issues relative to the attraction of the place.

What makes it so unique?

Exist in Barcelona several spaces better equipped, with specific facilities for skateboarders.

Why are not so attractive?

Why does the square, thought of as a public platform designed to enhance the museum, followed this fate?

Other questions have to do with the social relations that skateboarding implies.

Why this practice disturbs the neighbors?

How do the other collectives react?

⁵ Numerous web pages proclaim its attractive and incite it to be known and used. A few hours there allow us to distinguish the presence of the skateboarders coming from all sides of the world to share their love.

Finally, other questions have been related with the character and the vitality of this space.

In what other ways is it used?

How do we organize the activities and sub-fields?

What consequences has the activity for the space and for the whole neighborhood?

We will risk a first interpretative hypothesis: **the physical characteristics of space focus in its destiny, but, a lot more of some less tangible elements, as its atmosphere** [mix of tissues, ancient and contemporary buildings, patina of time, complexity, spatial surrounding], **or the fact of being a non-appropriated space in search of identity. This seems to have facilitated the place to turn into a living space, unlike squares of similar shapes and projectual logics.**

After considering the origin and conformation of the square, we will analyze the skateboarding characteristics in order to evaluate the interests and transformations that relate space and event.

The skateboarding at the MACBA Square

Barcelona has already obtained international widespread recognition among the skateboarding practitioners. Large part of the city, fundamentally the new streets, is considered 'skatable' by having broad surfaces, horizontal and with no obstacle [or with small and attractive obstacles]. All of it favored the apparition of skaters in different parts of the city.

The skateboarding, as spontaneous activity, usually explore determined physical space, discovering different possibilities from those for which the space was created (Borden, 2001, p. 29). Apart of the original idea, what is the first thing that comes to our mind when we think about the MACBA Square? For all of that who minimally knows it, almost certainly would be the presence of the skateboarders. In fact the square, that naturally was not designed to settle this practice, was discovered and appropriated by this specific group.

According to the leading scholars, the arrival of the skateboarders to a new space use to be followed by its appropriation and contribution to conform a particular identity (Borden, 2001, p. 53). In the absence of previous identity, this space use to be temporarily re-formalized through the uses that accommodate, starting to express new meanings from the individuals or groups that appropriates it (Crawford, 1999, p. 28).

We understand for identity a series of characteristics by which a place is recognizable, in other words, its specificity or differences in relation to other places. In the case of MACBA Square we can admit that its identity is given by the presence of skateboarders. This finding comes from

the general identification that the activity has with this space, culminating in the public reactions of the neighborhood in favor of a territory that looks like 'their'.⁶

The appropriation of the area dates from 1995. In that time the square – recently built – had no use and was an empty and dangerous space. However, it became to be intensely used by local skateboarders, when skateboarding in Barcelona was not yet a 'fashion'. In parallel, there was, aside, a large empty area, later occupied by the University of Barcelona, where some local skateboarders used to practice. From the year 2000, with the arrival of people from elsewhere, the square turned into what it is today.

Many interviewed skateboarders confessed they became aware of the square from movies that circulate on the web, and that its world relevance led them to travel to meet it. One of the biggest attractive seems to be the possibility of knowing skateboarders from different origins and change experience and impressions with them.

The square is today a "appropriated" space by practitioners from the whole world. We fell into the temptation of attributing on an exclusive character this powerful attraction – its "skatable" qualities – to the fact of having extensive horizontal surfaces, including quite suggestive obstacles. But, in Barcelona this qualities are not exclusive of this space. Many others recent places also have such attributes, typical of a "minimalist" design stage. On the other hand, seems to exist in the Square other characteristics that may have had a more decisive role in the appropriation.

The interviews with skateboarders reveal other attributes that contribute to conform a clear identity: its typology of "closed" square, without much contact with the streets, its contemporary and clean aspect, its "hard" and empty surface [open to unpredictable uses], or even its origin perceived as marginal. Somehow it is believed that this place had been "discovered" and converted today in a international landmark. Let us focus on that attraction capacity.

About the attraction of the places to the skateboarders

A first aspect that could focus on its attraction would be the broad granite surface, flat and without obstacles. However, in many other squares with similar characteristics, as, for example, the squares of Gracia, there are no skateboarders. Lets think that the urban activity of skating is a way to experiment the city and its architecture, and that it uses different elements as "jumpable" objects (Borden, 2001, p. 265). The MACBA Square has some of practitioners preferred elements, like ramps and stairs, such as other seductive gaps in the pavement. But these elements are also found in other public spaces of the city.

⁶ The use-local identification in this case is so deep that is not necessary, for instance, using interviews or other methods of research, since either the 'fame' of the space or the conflicts with the neighborhood are widely documented on the internet or in Barcelonan media.

Certainly there must be other qualities not so evident that make this place singular among the skateboarders. To discover it, we interviewed the square users and recognized a range of reasons for such success. Let us try discovering where lies its attractive following the same patterns used to analyze it before.

[A] Insertion in the city

From the areas appropriated by skateboarders, the most popular are the central squares: MACBA, *Universidad* and *Tres Chimeneas*. As skaters do not like isolation, a location next to flows is an attractive factor. The central and connected disposition of MACBA Square enables intense contact with the passersby, specificity emphasized by skateboarders as a base of its huge popularity.

[B] Size

The space dimension is a key feature. A space of big dimensions [about five thousand squared meters] enables a bigger variety and coexistence of activities with no big interferences. It allows the realization of stunts without affecting other activities developed in the square.

[C] Typology

Other attractive characteristic of the square is the permeability. Although it looks closed, it is directly linked to important pedestrian pathways, so the skateboarders can escape with the skateboard in many directions. Other relevant characteristic is the absence of automobiles, the square configuration as a place for pedestrians. At the squares of Gracia this seems to be one of the reasons of non-appropriation, since they are surrounded by streets where cars circulate.

[D] Architecture

A less commented observation reminds us the presence of the museum. As the practice of skating can also have an artistic [and subversive] connotation, in some occasions it is produced an unconscious interaction with the contemporary art museum. The non-existence of directed linked habitation with the square, of cultural and institutional profile, also contributes for the activity, again differentiating of the cited squares of Gracia.

[E] Support plan

Finally, the aspect that seems most relevance is the repeated mention to the spatial simplicity. A "clean, with a few elements" surface invites to the skating. Regarding to "jumpable" elements, the specificity of the square is that the seats, steps and sills delineate "pictures" in the "space" of the skateboarders enabling several tracks. Ramps and stairs link different levels, and have proper height to the basic stunts. Also were mentioned the area's polyvalence, where is possible to make various moves. It offers a lot of possibilities including, when tired of practice, to sit down and rest.

Some other attributes, like having an illuminated area at night, contribute to the persistence of the activity. A last singularity of the appropriation, according to many of those interviewed, is

the possibility of mixing experienced and novice skaters. The square enables a sharing among different levels of skateboarders, but also the coexistence with a lot of other urban practices, emphasizing the democratic dimension of space and its non-colonization by a single activity, allowing further the development of social relationships among different users.

The perspective of other users

As every area susceptible to the emergence of conflict, the Square enables the development of several relationships among different groups of people. Usually when the conflicting activities respect a space division, tacit or not, the coexistence gets equilibrated and the intense use of the space enriches it. On the contrary, when the capacity of several groups to accommodate their activities and share a space is not sufficient to manage the conflicts, the spatial equilibrium is broken.

The analysis of relations between event and space at the Square is realized, apparently, in a delicate moment of instability on the social agreements to share it. The neighbors complain openly on the current use of the square based on two arguments: first, they consider that skating prevents the good use of the space by local community, mainly children and the elderly. Moreover, the considerable noise made disrupts the silence and tranquility of a so particular place.

The skateboarders accept that their activity wears and, in some cases, dirties the space. As every broad activity, it attracts all kinds of users, from the more respectful to the "wildest" ones. Moreover, admit that skateboarding, while appropriating of almost all urban elements available, contribute to this wear.

The older residents do not like that the square had changed to what it is today. On the other hand, for the younger, more prone to socialization, the skating environment looks more attractive. And yet, the coexistence between skateboarders, tourists and regular users seem to be very pacific, with no big apparent conflicts or even with a appreciable inter-relationship, if we observe the plenty of people that accommodate daily in the gaps to observe the activity. To them skateboarding is a real spectacle, as it is in a similar sense, to see all sorts of character passing by the *Rambla*. A similar seduction happens to the kids. What is noticed, far from the rejection, are friendly gestures. Finally, the regular pedestrian which only use the square as a route no usually pay attention to the activities, on the contrary, seem to try to escape of the habitual route of the skateboarders as a way of avoiding possible impacts.

Other conflicts observed affect the bicycles, maybe they are who most disturb, on that case, the skateboarders themselves. The conflict usually appears when they jump the gaps as the bicycles pass. On this conflict nobody comes to an agreement, since both believe to have the preference.

The shopkeepers interviewed recognized the increase of frequency in the area and, as a consequence, the increase in security. For them, the activity does not bring any bother. To the representatives of the museum, what really matters to them is keeping free the upper platform access, representing no severe problem the activity at the lower part. However, other voices would not say the same thing. For many, the activity can disturb more the museum than the own neighbors.

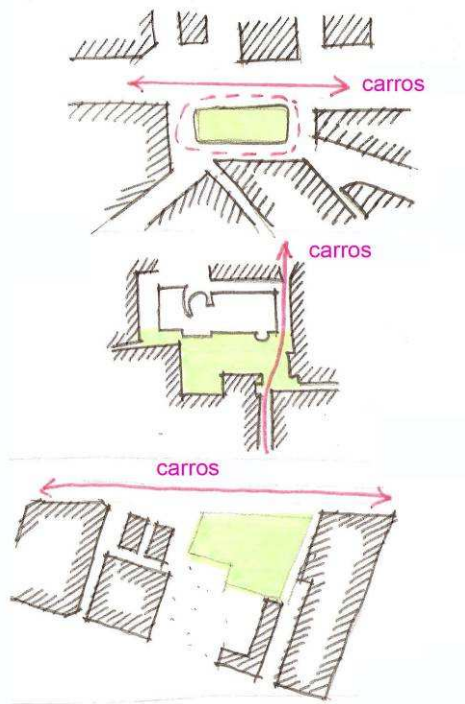
Summarizing: the area is not free of conflicts. According to the skateboarders themselves, the conflicts frequency occur, but never seriously, and they believe that is perfect manageable. On the other hand, the residents complain to the City Hall since they don't want to live with conflicts. The police frequently patrol, but because they do not stay the whole day, they are not effective on enforcing regulations. The museum vigilant, who intend to the law application, try to suppress the practice, but with no success. Unconcerned, tourists and users keep enjoying the vitality and intense urban experience the square provides.

Good part of the place's vitality comes from the skateboarding practice. Other people use it, which means not to be a colonized place but an area able to receive several activities. However, most of the people that uses it relates in one way or another with the practice.⁷ The uses of the square and its surrounding have to do with the cultural equipments and with the original residential character of the *Raval*. Thus, besides the skateboarding, which does not follow predetermined times or dates, can be observed the development of many others activities, both permanent and ephemeral.

The first ones are related to the balconies of bars, always occupied and from where it is possible to observe the square activities. The ephemerals are distributed in many ways at different edges of the square. The higher field in front of the museum is a kind of amphitheater, where usually small groups observe the skateboarders, talking or waiting some date. Others, usually related to skateboarding, crowd near to the library, observing or waiting to step in. Occasionally dances are also celebrated in the square: groups of people usually put music in the lower and more reserved part.

The passersby flow is very intense, since the square is very permeable and channels a lot of routes. Moreover, it is the spot for removal and return of the bicycles public system, which has a lot of movement on this area, not to mention the tourist attracted by the unique cultural equipments.

⁷ According to the counting made in the research, the use in connection with the skating represents 80% of total users.



Uses and conflicts of the square – Source:
Author.

About other 'skatable' spaces of Barcelona

Somebody could think that Barcelona is not adequate to the skateboarding practice due to the scarcity of public spaces and to the incompatibility of the *Ensanche* tile sidewalks. But if we observe with attention, we will see that many recent interventions create usable areas for the practice on many points of the city.

Besides the space where spontaneous appropriation is produced, the city offers some equipped places to this practice. However, we should know to distinguish two modalities of differentiated publics and practices. The "street" skateboarding practitioners enjoy the feeling of freedom, the dynamic and unpredictability of the streets, and refuse to stay inside a space delimited and designed to receive them. On the other hand, the equipped places usually attract children and older skateboarders, which did not graduate in the "street" skateboarding modality and prefer practicing with no conflicts. By this reason, we shall not dwell on the analysis of parks with incorporate ramps or 'manufactured' spaces as skateparks.⁸

After the MACBA Square, the skateboarding usually explores the squares of *Tres Chimeneas* and *Universidad*, or the Forum area. These three are also very popular. But why not so much?

Using the same criteria of analysis, we can verify that none of the three squares have similar typological characteristics. The *Tres Chimeneas* square is too much isolated of the flows, while the Forum area is very heterogenic and empty. The scale of each other spaces is more comparable and, accordingly, is not relevant to answer our question. The presence of the

⁸ Among the places equipped to the skateboarding practice in the city, many interviewed highlighted the ones located in *Mar Bella* and in the *Ronda de Dalt*.

architecture at the *Universidad* square does not facilitate establishing a so direct relationship because the public space is surrounded by automobiles, distancing the buildings and preventing the contact. At the *Tres Chimeneas* seems that architecture does not have much respect to the square design, being very disconnected from the buildings. At the Forum, the monumental architecture and the spaces for contemporary design may be elements of attraction. Finally, in respect of the support plan, either the *Universidad* square as the *Tres Chimeneas* have similar characteristics to the MACBA, being clear platforms that allow easy movements, but in the Forum case, we believe the high inclination of the platform does not seem so attractive.

We concluded that perhaps the only space that meets all of those features of attraction for the skateboarding is the MACBA Square, being the most searched space and recognized by the practitioners of this sport, in Barcelona, and maybe at the whole world.

Final considerations

The skateboarding as creative and active work of its practitioners, emerging, unpredictable and spontaneous attitude, show us different types of relationships between users and space. Thus, the MACBA Square is today very different of how it was designed at the beginning. Soon after its inauguration, many people doubted that it could be a live and dynamic place. Critics were elaborated on the project and, in particular, to the presence of the museum. But many of those who condemned the operation before admit that today the square has a considerable vitality.

The MACBA Square project is part of a series of interventions at public spaces in Barcelona from the 80's, which created a internationally known model of urban design. Previously, the space was projected with the intention of providing an identity to a particular place with a remarkable effort of formalization. Today is widely admitted that the identity emerges with the very use of space, this being often the support able to accommodate different possibilities (Martí, 2005, p. 122). A neutral and undefined support facilitates or even encourages the triggering of temporal uses and unpredictable activities further than more designed or "archtectorized" spaces. Given this conceptual shift, we can say that the support of the MACBA Square, which shares particular traces with other contemporary squares of Barcelona, is ideal to the triggering of this practice.

There is another interesting factor in relation to the neutral character of the support. To the extent it does not predetermine uses or activities, it gives versatility to the space. This feature allows it to change repeatedly, forming with it a major tool in urban vitality. Moreover, through the support indeterminacy arises the possibility of designing coexistence in space. In the analyzed example, the support proved to be adaptable to very diverse applications.

In fact the civic 'ordinance' and the police repression are some contradiction, since they represent the attempt to control its natural dynamics based on the own characteristics of space. Because it is very difficult to suppress all the spontaneous and unexpected appropriations to which the urban space is subjected by their own users, the unpredictable colonization that constantly affects, and that forms a natural area of freedom (Delgado, 2007).

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