

# Between Omnipotence and Aluminosis

## A Conversation with Oriol Bohigas

Oriol Bohigas, architect, writer, city-planner, politician, catalyst. There can be few cities that bear the stamp of the personality of their head of city planning to such an extent as Barcelona. Bohigas is famous for the splendour of his unobtrusive gestures, interventions in miniature (an unexpected little plaza, a beautiful piece of pavement, etcetera) to improve a neighbourhood, taking a single street block as an example of what can be done. He is not someone you associate with totalising or one-dimensional megaprojects, but rather with subjective and provisional statements whose aim is not to change the world radically but slightly.

During the eighties Bohigas worked on a massive rehabilitation project with the aim of restoring the old city after all the years of neglect under Franco. In his architectural approach it was not the overall plan but the object and the detail that were important. A strategy of 'seeding' was pursued that resulted in a series of unforgettable and exemplary sites that help heighten the citizen's sense of responsibility and make the city far more attractive for tourists. With this acupunctural approach to city planning Bohigas has helped Barcelona to join the select club of metropolises that are sufficiently interesting for capital to put down roots. He has been supported in this by the marvellous way in which the building industry is organised in Spain. The involvement of government in both the work of construction and in architectural education and the guild-like structure of the building trade, assisted by a building standards commission that has been an ideal mediator – all these factors have meant that Barcelona has so far been able to resist the anonymous activities of property developers and speculators. As a result its little squares have been transformed into islands of social life in a dynamic city model.

In the meantime Bohigas has become an important purveyor of culture in the new Spain. He has been appointed city councillor with special responsibility for cultural affairs; in this capacity he works on a programme for propagating culture and for opening a number of important cultural facilities that Barcelona has sorely needed for a long time. Now that the Olympic Games are over and Barcelona is less in the limelight, the prospects for culture look good and Bohigas is determined to strike again in his own inimitable fashion. Bohigas' cultural supremacy, however, is not entirely uncontested. On visiting a number of his projects to collect material for this interview, we heard that many of the actual residents were blaming Bohigas for the exceptionally poor state of the buildings. *Aluminosis*, a chemical reaction of aluminium on concrete is resulting in a gradual disintegration of the material. The residents live in the poorest areas of the city. They are fed up with Bohigas' prestige projects; all they want is proper living conditions. Like so many other architects of the fifties Bohigas could hardly have foreseen this development; his fame however makes him an easy target and he is personally held responsible for what is happening. *Bohigas, Oriol y Ayuntamiento que esperais que se hundan os cimientos*. Aluminosis. No administrator is all-powerful. Even someone like Bohigas can't do everything.

In a metropolis the misery of the inhabitants is the misery of anonymous people. The city has no time for them; the city can't wait. The pressure of outside capital is increasing and other demands than liveability make themselves felt. If Barcelona is not to lose its appeal, it will have to embark on a new sort of investment and devise still more ambitious plans in response to the increasingly powerful forces that are gaining control of the city. Instead of a policy for new buildings what is called for is a structural development plan. It is hard results that are needed, not a provisional policy.

Culture under Bohigas' direction will also have to take this expansion of scale into account. One result of the Olympic Games is that the infrastructure has largely been prepared; if all the publicity around Barcelona is to continue, the advantages that have already been booked will have to be subjected to proper management. This means bringing cultural provisions up to the required level. A city can only attract attention if there is a guarantee of a whole range of cultural activities.

While endorsing the mayor of Barcelona's plans for expansion, Bohigas himself owes his reputation to a purely architectural piecemeal approach to urban renewal. There's no point having grand schemes for a city when there isn't any genuine city life. If you take that as your starting point and encourage the creation of beautiful sites scattered throughout the city, this vision will be realised automatically. Bohigas' first consideration was not what was dictated by the pressure of events, but what was *feasible* in the given circumstances. So far, so good. What's more, until recently Barcelona seemed too small for a generalised urban





Oriol Bohigas i Guardiola

strategy, and Cerda's plan had already given it a solid frame. Now however it is the turn of the outskirts. The nineties will be crucial and choices will have to be made in response to phenomena far greater than any discussion about specific local sites. The provisional policy has been a success; now the time has come to stand up for values, certainly in the case of culture. Will the man who is famous for his pragmatic organisational skills also be able to meet this new challenge?

*You are the councillor responsible for culture in the socialist-run city government of Barcelona.*

*What according to you is the direction the left is currently taking in Barcelona?*

The left in Europe is not the left as we have known it. That's also the case with Barcelona. It is true that we have a left-wing coalition here between the Socialists and the Communists, but in practice our administration is social democratic. In that respect it strongly resembles the situation of the Italian and French Socialists: the government is nominally left-wing. That doesn't mean that there aren't distinct differences between the *gauchisme* that is in power here and the centrist-right wing approach. In my field for instance this can be seen in what matters get special attention. The left is interested in public space, the infrastructure, the problem of the neighbourhoods and the fate of the outskirts of the city. The left is also very sympathetic towards the public character of the institutions. The right on the other hand is primarily concerned with marketing the city, with culture and the status of the institutions.

*You are 'left-wing' and at the same time you are responsible for culture. What contribution can you make in that capacity?*

There are only a few things that I can do. In the first place I spend a lot of time trying to explain to a great many people how economically important culture is. A flourishing culture has an impact on other areas of policy and can help solve problems there too. In the second place my task is to round off or improve the enormous public works of the last few years. In recent years the city has concentrated mainly on new squares and parks and that sort of thing, while cultural provisions have lagged behind. Take for instance our great National Museum. This museum has been closed for a long time due to a major renovation that is being carried out by the architect, Gae Aulenti. One of the most important museums in the world, with an unrivalled collection of medieval art is quite simply closed! The same is true of many other museums.



Another case in point is the opera, which is also a quite unique building. It is urgently due for restoration to meet with present-day requirements. And we need a new concert hall and a new city theatre. These are urgent priorities. To get it all off the ground it is of great importance that the social relevance of architecture be appreciated by everybody. That might sound simple, but it isn't. During recent years we have had any number of spectacular cultural events – festivities, festivals, open air theatre, but that doesn't mean that the number of people who go to the new cultural institutions has in fact increased. This brings me to my third important task, which is the democratising of culture. This is maybe the most left-wing aspect of my policy. It is important to build a new concert auditorium; more important still is that there is an orchestra good enough to play there. But the most important thing of all is that there actually is an audience. Call it cultural reeducation. That has to begin in the schools and that means that we have to collaborate with various departments, in particular that of education. Then the government of Catalonia and the central government will also have to be roped in, because the municipal administration can't do everything alone.

*There are quite a lot of different parties involved. Isn't it hard to see that they all work together effectively?*

It's true that it isn't easy to have an overview of the different cultural bodies that operate in a single city. Madrid, Catalonia and Barcelona all have their own officials. At this moment I don't know which body is responsible for what. In Barcelona this is particularly ill-defined, because the indecisiveness and opposition of central government have meant that the city has traditionally run a great many things by itself. I could give many examples of cultural autonomy being thrust on us. Schools, museums, cultural centres, all these organisations are paid for by Barcelona. This has to come to an end, but not in such a way that Barcelona loses its own character.

*So you're going to need a lot of money, especially since you've announced that the emphasis is going to be on culture now that the Olympic Games are over. How do you propose to set about fund-raising?*

First of all, it is much better to draft plans and put forward programmes even though there isn't yet any money for them, rather than do nothing because we don't have the means. The money will only come if we have projects. Up until 1992 we spent a lot of money on urban and infrastructural facilities. There are enough sports stadiums now and enough traffic problems have been sorted out. It's now time to siphon off some of that money into the cultural sector. After the urban explosion it is now time for a cultural explosion. My theory and that of the mayor is that for the next four years culture will be centre-stage.

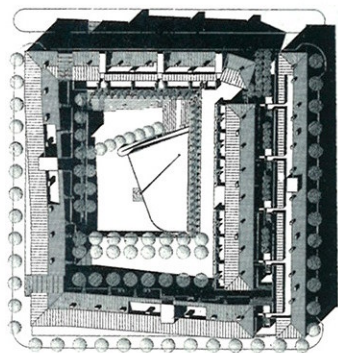
*In this connection Pasqual Maragall, the mayor, made an odd statement. He said: 'The day we bring Barcelona up to date with other cities I'm sure things will get better, but if we don't strive to achieve minimal conditions of infrastructure, people won't follow us, however much we preach'. And on the same occasion he said: 'What now is clearly needed is involvement of architects with general systems and I think in these and a few other places a more abstract view of the city will be much more important'. There would seem to be a sort of conflict here with your policy because your plans point to a great concreteness, while he is arguing for more attention to planning. Is there a conflict between your policy in the area of culture and Maragall's plans for the city?*

No, because the fact that I occupy this office in the municipal department of cultural affairs means that I am completely in agreement with the mayor. The situation is like this: in recent years we have attempted to regain control over the city primarily through activity on the architectural front. We had the money and this enabled us to cope with the problem of city-planning. City-wide strategies weren't appropriate at the time. Our policy is an example for the whole of Europe; we have shown that an architectural approach can produce exceptional results. Of course I am exaggerating how it worked in practice because special solutions for specific sites would not have been enough if they hadn't been backed up by a general vision of the city. The result is that there are at least a number of new sites in the city that really belong to the people. Now we've reached the stage where we need to have a policy for the city as a whole; this means we will have to formulate our plans much more abstractly, because our aims are more complex. This isn't any alternative to what we did in the past but a direct consequence of it. My plans for culture are a good example. From a special approach to a specific site to a more general vision of how the city functions as a whole. I said that culture will be given priority, but I did not mean that the architectural approach to the city will be superseded; rather the gains we have already made in that area will have to be expanded into a general policy. The mayor's statement also means something else, something that has to do with the physical state of the city. I mean that the policy that has been pursued to date was mainly concerned with the city centre. In that area however the population is declining, while in the periphery it is growing. If we want, as a metropolis, to develop a strong relation with the cities in the region and if we don't want the outskirts to



Oriol Bohigas and Josep Martorell, housing project, Barcelona, 1959





Josep Martorell / Oriol Bohigas / David Mackay, Mollet City Block, Barcelona, 1987

*What is the role of culture in all this?*

get lost in chaotic developments, a broader vision of urban renewal is needed. That's why the next four years have to be dedicated to cultural projects and to the metropolitan planning that Maragall was talking about, in order to keep pace with the enormous process of modernisation of Barcelona that itself is part of a much larger context.

I want to do roughly the same thing with culture as I did earlier with my city planning schemes. On the whole I don't believe in Utopian projects. I am someone who likes to start with whatever is most urgent. As I just said, my main aim now is to set up a number of cultural facilities and to work for a democratisation of culture. Only when we have completed these projects can we begin to think in terms of a cultural policy. With my city projects of the eighties it was the same. First of all a number of sites had to be created in the city, before we could talk about city planning. In matters like this it makes no sense to proceed from a general plan to the details. It has to work the other way round.

*An outsider might think there was a clash between the aim of developing a general vision of the city as a large-scale organism and at the same time continuing the tradition you have described of starting with the details. Is there a conflict there?*

No. The Olympic Games have brought about a whole new situation in our city. The result has been a breakneck expansion, even though our policy of taking a specific approach to each project remains unchanged. But now we have to start thinking of the future of the city as a whole: Barcelona has to consolidate the fame and position it has won. Within five or six years we will have to have implemented all the infrastructural advances in the areas of public services and culture. Our view is different from that of the former left. We see the future as being a constant process of change in the present and in present conditions.

*Ten years ago there was a sort of natural connection between the poverty of the city and this concrete architectural approach to urban renewal. At that time any more ambitious idea was unthinkable. Now you are operating in a situation where you have to provide cultural facilities for a city that has become more wealthy. You may want to do that in the same specific pragmatic way; the old natural connection is no longer available, however. If I understand Maragall's words correctly, he wants a greater degree of predictability for investors, because he wants to attract companies to use Barcelona as a base for their operations; rehabilitating the old neighbourhoods is no longer a priority. The question is whether this predictability is possible, if you continue to employ the specific and detailed approach.*

The call for predictability is in itself a means to persuade potential investors to believe that it is happening. It is more that a call like that generates confidence, than that we can say for certain what we are going to experience at some time in the future. Let's be frank about it, if you want to start four or five large-scale



projects, then you know in advance that you will only really have the money for two of them. I don't believe in dreams. There is never any shortage of problems, but they must not be allowed to dominate the situation so that we no longer do anything at all. Right now there is no coherence; everybody does what he feels like. At the level of citywide culture standards of coherence will have to be created, because once the physical basis for the culture has been laid, then it's a matter of the content and quality of the things we manage to promote.

*We'd imagine it was pretty difficult to promote the democratisation of culture while still trying to influence the ideological content of that culture.*

So far that's not been a problem because we've succeeded in making a virtue of necessity; we are so far short of anything like an adequate situation that we've had to put all our energy into catching up instead of wasting time in discussions of content that don't lead anywhere. To take an example, we need music schools for every neighbourhood, plus the equipment they require. If we were to do nothing but bother about quantities, we could still believe we were doing the right thing.

*So we will never know whether you will have the content to justify building these cultural establishments. But surely you'll need to see some quality first? For instance if you think back to the Olympic Games, presumably you have an opinion about that spectacle which has got in the way of any number of your plans?*



Helio Piñón and Albert Viaplana, Plaça dels Països Catalans, Barcelona, 1983



Jaume Bach and Gabriel Mora, Plaça Virreina, Barcelona, 1985

I was totally against the Games and I think it was an absolute disaster for the culture of Barcelona. I think that it was a mistake of the first order to try and give Barcelona which is a monoculture a place among the great powers. We behave as though culture is flourishing in Barcelona but the opposite is the case. I think that in the long term the city will benefit far more from an easily accessible museum with an unrivalled collection, than it does from short-lasting spectacles. Events like that don't lead to anything that lasts unless you have the cultural conditions in the form of schools, theatres and cultural centres to guarantee a good aftermath. I am not against spectacles as such, but before you know it it's all over and you're back to square one. In the end the city benefits most from an increased participation in culture.

*Ten years ago you could fall back on a strong consensus between city administrators, architects and city planners. That was because you all had the same goal of achieving an adequate level of urban renewal; and it was only a matter of reaching an agreement about the strategies to follow. If you want to do the same for culture, however, a consensus like that will of course be much harder to achieve, because culture cannot be so easily reduced to a specific goal. What's more you seem determined not to establish any priorities of content. How do you think you're going to escape conflicts of opinion?*

It certainly will be a great deal more difficult, for two reasons. The first is that it is much easier to bring urban planning and urban design in line with each other. Whether it is a case of the spatial organisation of neighbourhoods or the improvement of social conditions, the means and ends are more or less the same. In cultural affairs none of this is so straightforward; on top of that, I'm by no means familiar with all the areas involved.





Daniel Freixas and Vicenç Miranda, Parc del Clot, Barcelona, 1986

185

Luis Peña and Francesc Rius, Parc de l'Espanya Industrial, Barcelona, 1985





The thing that makes it so much more complicated is that the people who work in the cultural sector are often difficult characters. Most of them haven't been educated at a university where they would have developed the notion of checking their ideas against the facts as a sort of reflex. In fact they are often downright crazy. If you aren't crazy you'll never become a good actor or artist. But the problem is that it is not possible to have a serious discussion with them about cultural policies. In the field of culture everyone is such a monomaniac, so totally self-involved, that you really need other, more impartial people to take the decisions in this sector. In fact the only weapon you have with them is your own power of persuasion. That and, of course, the budget, but that's not my decision. What I mean is, I know what my programme is, but I'm less clear about what my possibilities are.

*Won't the Olympic Games work to your advantage in the long run as far as your budget is concerned?*

That's certainly a possibility. Barcelona will be a more comfortable city to live in with a better infrastructure. Moreover the rest of the world is beginning to notice that after forty years of stagnation the city has got a completely new image. It is already something that people have actually heard of Barcelona.

*We don't only want to talk about policy matters, but also about your views on architecture and urban development. As a sort of bridge between our discussion on culture and the question of urbanism, we'd like to ask you how you'd define the public domain.*



Still from closing ceremony Olympic Games 1992, with mayor Pasqual Maragall

It is in its public space, its open spaces that the city really comes alive, not in its architectural volumes or its private spaces. This means that the designing of the public space, the squares, streets, parks is actually much more important for the city than the architecture. It is in the public spaces that one can actually have some impact on the city. That's why my policies for the city have always been policies for the outdoors. From the designer's point of view this means a reversal of traditional planning. Now we have to have some idea of what is likely to be going on outside, before we get down to actually building any buildings. Throughout history there has never in fact been any discussion of a genuinely public space. No matter whether it was the *haute bourgeoisie* or the aristocracy, the monarchy or the church, their activities have certainly created a public domain but only by a sort of superimposition; all these activities were in fact intended as private matters. In the twentieth century the public has had this space as it were dumped on it. When we design something new now however we have to ask straightaway what its social purpose is. This produces an impasse that is reinforced by the power of these historically charged places. While we are obliged to treat a square or a street as having a social function, what impresses the public is successful examples in the public domain and these are almost always monumental. I mean that we are landed with a monumental vocabulary for the public space that was in fact appropriate to the private. We have to aim for a social space without there being any tradition for it. We will have to find a middle road between the public space that is for everybody's use and the collective memory in which the old masterpieces still prevail.



We will have to create spaces that still manage to convey a representative picture of the collective identity while being ideal for everyday social activity. Representation and collective use, that's what it's all about.

You have to get your identity from it and be able to play football there.

*In the context of a recent music festival, a large orchestra gave a concert in the cathedral square. The orchestra played a series of musical arrangements of the greatest hits. All of this was subtly lit by enormous spotlights that seemed to set the cathedral ablaze. Above all this was a white dove that circled round the spires searching in vain for a place to rest. What did we see then? A concert of popular music transformed the square into a meeting place. The illuminated cathedral provided the monumental representation that you just described. Is this the marriage of opposites that you have in mind?*

You can't always play Mozart, that's the problem with festivities like that. Still, I do think the cathedral square is a good example of what I mean. It is used for all kinds of social occasions and at the same time it has managed to preserve its sacred character.

*We had the idea, to paraphrase Ortega y Gasset perversely, that what was involved there was a Rebelión de las Plazas. These squares with their representative character get a sort of independence that hardly has anything to do with their history any more. Squares are sold as design. What you are offering isn't an experience of the city but a stage.*

That's not always true. With the Escorxador, the former slaughterhouse, for instance, the situation is completely different. In one part people can play games, in another it is green; further on there is an area for performances, but it is also possible just to stroll around. The thing is always to have a double appeal. You want to do more than just pass the time pleasantly and watch what's going on; it's also a part of your life.

*But the main aim is to create an atmosphere. When the board of Quaderns asks a number of photographers to take photos of bygone Barcelona, they all come up with poetic vistas. It continues to be extremely difficult for a designer or an administrator or a photographer to say something real about the programme that actually has some relevance for the lives of the citizens themselves. Do you think that as an administrator you will be able to accomplish anything on the programmatic level?*

I think that a good design for a public space always originates in a good programme, and that the reverse is also true that a good programme can originate in a good design. You will always have to work your programme out in advance, just as you do in architecture. But the best designs in the history of architecture are those where design and programme developed in tandem. I aim for that in my work too. The programme of course is the point of departure. But the reality of the programme only begins to emerge once one has begun to work on the design. A designer does not know what the users will be able to do with a given space before he really starts designing it. There is no such thing as a linear succession of programme and design either in architecture or in urban design or in planning. I think the design is the programme. The design is just the way you give concrete form to both programme and function. Form and function are precisely the same.

*That's true, of course, but form is not the only instrument you have. There is also the question of the organisation of the space, of the spatial arrangements that you make. That has everything to do with your social commitment. Take the Plaza de Gracia by Bach and Mora. There is hardly any question of form there; what you do have are minimal means that in an almost natural way have a positive influence on social behaviour.*

People should realise that this is also a result of the design. The programme means nothing beforehand. You can have a parking problem, but that doesn't mean you have a programme. For far too long people have been reluctant to think and talk about the city in terms of form. That's the fundamental problem, as I see it. A slight shift in the form of your public space or in the architecture, and life itself is changed. There are squares whose layout justifies the programme and others that don't. ***I've found out that everything boils down to design: the programme, the collective aspirations, communality, all these things can only get off the ground if the design is there. We should discuss form, not what people call content; Form is content.***

*If form is so important for you, do you still believe that it can still have an open structure? The way you talk about it, design would seem automatically to mean design that has already been carried out. The form of the squares in Barcelona is more or less without exception one that makes it pleasant to spend time in them. But what does a form like this have to offer to the angry masses? Your designs are mainly about creating a good atmosphere...*



Designing definitely doesn't mean that all elements have to receive the same amount of attention; that would be superdesign. By design I mean the way that you give the form a structure; it is perfectly possible to do this while still making sure that you remain flexible for possible future activities. For a new neighbourhood, for instance, that might mean we'd make a general assessment of the scheduling and the allocation of space; then we'd ask a couple of architects to fill that in. After they have come up with a more complete breakdown you can call in a host of other architects to design details. In this process however the discussion about formal aspects remains intact. A functional discussion would be much too simplistic; you can't just delegate the process to any one person. For the Olympic Games, of course, we knew that we would need a certain number of hotels, flats, offices, sports facilities and things like that. The real problem however is how to give actual form to that programme. Life does not depend on what functions there are but on the choice of priorities with the functions: how do people cross the street, are the houses right for a square or do they belong to a street front, how is the landscape organised? The choice you make with questions like that can change life.

*The fact that you pay such attention to social usefulness implies a desire for social reconciliation. The image one has of the many successful squares in Barcelona is one of children at play, and old people chatting to each other, people who are enjoying the sun or else the shadow of a well placed tree. All in all, the aim is to achieve a harmonious environment. The open design we are talking about doesn't relate to any*



How to keep up the city? Oriol Bohigas / Josep Martorell / David Mackay, Parc de la Crueta del Coll, Barcelona, 1987



*flexibility vis-à-vis the future, but to possible alternative uses in the present. If you had a different ideological attitude you might just as easily have come up with a confrontational space, in other words, a space that wouldn't put conflict in the straightjacket of a conformist form. Don't you think that architects ought to be able to make designs for both sorts, for both the hard and the soft kind of public space?*

I believe that Barcelona needs harmonious spaces. I'm not against the other variety but we don't need them so much here. But I do admit that the form that a space has gives structure to social life. One example is the famed Plaza Real, a neo-Classical square that was a considerable problem neighbourhood in the seventies. When I was director of the City Planning Department we turned it into a pedestrian precinct. We also thought we were doing a good thing by making a genuine living room in the city with the use of concentric benches. Now, listen to this! **The square as a living room has become such an enormous success that it is mainly used by marginals. Every day they do things there we'd rather not have to see.**

*You give a good example of the problematic aspect of the notion of harmonious design we were referring to. The idea of the square as a living room came about during the wave of social criticism at the end of the eighteenth century. Names such as Ferdinand Tönnies and Camillo Sitte come to mind. It was based on a notion of community current among the middle classes who were horrified by the anonymous abstract*



monumentality that was being imposed on the big cities in Europe. Instead they opted for the harmony of a fully fledged class society. This culturalist view of society as one large family is of course no longer acceptable in a multicultural society. The emergence of marginal groups has landed you with quite a bill to pay for this anachronism.

But of course you use the model of society as one large family because you hope that at a given moment it will actually also come about. It is also difficult to give the public a space that really suggests the problems of the city. You could hardly expect people to enjoy something like that. That is why we don't give people the space of existing society but the space of the society that we aspire towards. If we manage to teach people to accept marginal people in these places, then we're well on the way to bettering their situation. They're much better off there than in the isolated places in the city where they used to hang around until now. This process of improvement is a gradual one; if it means that these people become visible it can be easier to help them. The drawback however is that other people start avoiding the square just because of the marginals. It is a complicated problem and not one that can be formulated simply in terms of urban development. Primarily it is a social question and I am not a sociologist. The sociologists will also have to say where they stand.

You are a politician, however...

As a politician I think that the city should have as civilised a form as possible so that society itself becomes as civilised as possible. We can't go on wandering around in a city chaos if we set any store by a degree of social order. After forty years without collectivity having any meaning it is high time the city had a programme for creating an order like this. ***The city, in my view, is an excellent scenario for civilising the population.***

What do you propose to do with the periphery, then? The periphery is currently virtually impossible to organise, let alone transform into a civilised order.

That is a problem. When I first took office as head of the City Planning Department (1980) we coined the slogan: 'Let's create more amenities in the city and more monuments on the outskirts'. The periphery is in fact not part of the city at all. It is the suburbs, not the *urbs*. Unlike the centre it doesn't have any cultural identity. It also doesn't have any centralised structure. It often doesn't have a single metropolitan network; there are no monuments there, no visual hierarchy. We wanted to remedy all that, once more with public spaces. It was a matter of creating the feeling of the centre. Making monuments, designing large open spaces that would make one think of those in the city centre. That's what we did in the Via Julia, for instance. It was a hideous space, in fact it was more a sort of empty patch with buildings on all sides. We designed a promenade and put up three pieces of monumental modern sculpture. The place really has acquired a character. It has become a focus for all kinds of social contact.

In 1952 a competition was held in London for a monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner. A huge number of artists took part. A furious debate ensued about what abstract art meant, because it was suddenly clear that the forms of Modernism did not permit any glorification of the collective. Abstraction might well be appropriate for a personal statement, but it offered no comfort to anyone looking for a communal meaning. Has that also been your experience as a patron of works of art?

Yes, definitely. My own preference is for monuments that have a historical signification. If a monument commemorates a person or an event, it can have much more collective meaning than when the form alone is monumental. Unfortunately we live in an age where paying homage to heroes in this way is no longer something that people do. Urban renewal therefore also cannot exploit it as a focus.

You yourself of course are part of this tendency. As a city councillor you are at the centre of this process of the increasing abstraction of power. In the meantime with Chillida's superb sculpture in the swimming bath of the Crueta del Coll you have at any rate shown that monumentalism has other possibilities. Apparently one can appeal to human beings' capacity for feeling awe by a much more direct route than historical iconography. The only thing that's a pity is that the pool that should reflect Chillida's primal knot is now dry.

Yes, we've been really fortunate in having the money to pay for the rehabilitation of so many city sites over the past decade. But we will be even more lucky if we can pay for the upkeep of all these sites. A monument is important, but its upkeep is much more important.