

Last June the "Barcelona model" received what has been considered as its "most important international recognition to date": the award of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA). This marked the first time the award was given to a city, thus applauding its recent transformation as an urban and political model, and encouraging those responsible for that transformation to push forward with their plans for the future.

Barcelona finds itself immersed in a macro-strategy that revolves around the emblematic date of the year 2004:

- Barcelona will host a new universal event based on debates, congresses, theme exhibitions and a World Arts Festival. The first Universal Forum of Cultures will be held in Barcelona taking advantage of the city's network of cultural and civic facilities. The Forum's main events will take place by the sea and along the river Besòs on a newly built site resulting from the rezoning of this area. This new area will constitute an "eco-park" as a model of urban sustainability and will accommodate the main Forum's events related to the Festival of the Arts and the Cultural Exhibitions. In 2004, all voices, languages, religions, all the cultures of the world will come together to talk about cultural diversity, the conditions of peace and the sustainable city.*

In fact the Forum 2004 consists of the radical transformation of the Sant Adrià del Besòs – La Mina area, and the celebration of an ambitious multi-cultural event which sanctions this transformation with the ethical and cultural stamp of approval of the fashionable global-village concept. This is multiculturalism *à la Benetton*, a formal cosmopolitanism, a postcard-style technological modernisation in which citizen participation is nothing more than mere fiction. The aim is to hide the specific economic, urban and real estate operations in the shadows of the protective umbrella of generic cultural legitimacy.

The "2004 strategy" is, however, included as an integral part of a much broader "strategic plan" linked to the excellent economic and political dividends that have been tendered since Barcelona's nomination for the 1992 Olympic Games. A "strategic plan" that directs Barcelona's transformation from "a post-industrial context to the knowledge and information city" (Joan Clos, mayor of Barcelona, *dixit*), fundamentally through an economic development articulated by continuing real estate investment, promoting tourism and developing the culture industry.

And so this Mega-Barcelona aspires to become the gateway to Southern Europe, and home to the headquarters of transnational corporations. It is extending its tentacles through new urbanisation projects that usurp the small, surrounding villages. Barcelona's one-time neighbourhoods are being absorbed into the city's centre, and the small towns that were once on the outskirts of the city are filling in as the lost neighbourhoods. These same projects will see the entire Sant Adrià del Besòs – La Mina area, working-class neighbourhoods, reduced to a ghetto. What is even worse is that Barcelona is becoming a model for other cities, as is clearly demonstrated by the following quote from an article that appeared in *The Observer* (10/05/99): "Barcelona is to set the style for the regeneration of 10 cities in Britain. Each of the target cities, yet to be selected, will be encouraged to sell themselves as exciting and stylish places to live and work, mirroring the success of Catalan urban regeneration". In fact, both current and future urban projects will transform Barcelona into a chic city for a privileged elite, at the expense of the poor and marginal inhabitants. This is a city that has been urbanised under the banner of major international events and trade fairs; a process that alienates the citizens and their very real social needs. It would seem that theme-parkisation" is the most profitable way to set the foundation for urban renewal...

For the past year, a group of people involved with the sphere of culture, who are critical of general working conditions and of the model of hegemonic cultural practice dominant in Barcelona have gathered together. Committed to left-wing political projects, we have tried to open a space for reflection and discussion, and have worked towards outlining a proposal for a new form of counter-hegemonic cultural practice. The idea is also to offer a critique of the Administration's official "iconography".

We are convinced of the importance of opening channels for dialogue, to create ongoing spaces for discussion, criticism and debate, and to revitalise direct action and political dissent. We want to generate a grassroots organisation that provides opportunities for participatory interventions that reflect local realities in a critical and supportive way. As an integral part of our group agenda, we are contacting other groups and individuals who are working on alternatives, as a means by which to challenge the status quo. We are also documenting the symbolic events taking place in the city, as well as the claims of the community, to serve as the cornerstone for ongoing direct action (urban insurgency) that will reveal the underlying strategies of the system, and at least tarnish their "immaculate consensus".

We know that we are not alone in employing these tactics, and we know that the viability of this work does not depend on whether we can articulate a coherent alternative model. What is more important is to successfully generate a space for other groups and individuals on our same wavelength, who share our same concerns and unease, regardless of whether they pertain to social circles other than our own. We must open up channels of communication that will enable us to spread counter-hegemonic ideas based on local experience. At the moment, this meeting space, which would allow critical voices

to be heard, is non-existent. Therefore, creating this space is perhaps one of our most urgent challenges.

The Barcelona City Council is using a patchwork approach to building the city's image, which comprises elements of the social-communist "enlightened despotism" version of the progressive tradition, as well as bourgeois ideals, local tradition, and provincial pride; more museums and more theatres than Paris, twin towers like those in New York, etc. It is a representational mechanism that constructs a visible image of our community that is essentially one of complacency and self-satisfaction.

Our group proposes as a primary objective to reveal the mechanisms that forward the construction of this strategic image, and develop forms of critical access to the image the city gives of itself. From this perspective, we may have more questions than answers at the moment: are we in a position to uncover, in the hegemonic and institutional discourse, the authoritative ideological control mechanisms within the symbolic constructions which the system uses to represent itself? How can we ensure that an alternative counter-hegemonic critique does not burn itself out in the effort to deconstruct, simply by accusation and exposure, the very process of *production of meaning* we wish to denounce? How, and to what degree, can we construct a participatory meeting space for alternative voices and criticisms of people who see the city in a different light, who might challenge the institutionally generated view? How and when will we be able to create other images of our community, of its symbolic complexity and its hybrid, plural realities? How do we oppose the power and voracity of the hegemonic construction of a collective *imaginarium* that on the one hand portrays a childish space in which a consensus without tensions reigns, but on the other, discreetly condemns to invisibility all that which must not be seen; those faces that do not fit the image the city has of itself when glancing in the mirror? In short, how do we avoid a merely token dissidence?

These are some of the challenges we face, and perhaps also some of the paradoxes and the limitations. *Mais nous sommes embarqués...*

The project that we are presenting stems from the sum of these concerns. What we are aiming to do, tentatively and hesitantly, in a necessarily provisional way, is to confront the images generated by the administration and to expose, by looking closely at the cracks in those images, some of their most glaring contradictions: the utopian paradise of the virtual city as a mask for speculation and real estate development; the contempt for any truly participatory citizenship; the rhetoric of multiculturalism and the transformation of the "Other" into a mere image, empty of content, and the international portrayal of "thematic Barcelona" as an exportable political model.

Made in Barcelona. But where is Barcelona?