

Chapter 2

Cerdà/Barcelona/Eixample: 1855–2017 ... A Work in Progress

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ABSTRACT

Barcelona's Eixample presently covers an area of 3x9 km. It contains 800 blocks, with their corresponding chamfered corners—and 20,000 totally built lots. It gives shelter to 300,000 inhabitants and an equal number of jobs. Furthermore, it is an immense forest of 50,000 trees—most of them planted along its 250 km of streets. It coincides almost exactly with the proposal conceived in 1859 by Ildefonso Cerdà, which today is still consolidating the city's most dynamic limits. What is the reason for the success of this plan? Perhaps the flexibility of a just norm over 150 years has helped identify Barcelona, as well as granting it the reputation as a well-planned and rational city. This is the most prominent value of the Cerdà Plan. Its ability of permanency in assuming changes of use, ordinances, an increase of its building potential, a succession of styles, construction processes, and ways of life mean practical success of a theoretical project, a view shared by experts and citizens.

INTRODUCTION

Today, the Eixample of Barcelona covers an area of 37 km² (3x9km.). It is composed of 800 blocks, each with their corresponding chamfers and 20,000 lots, all of which built. It gives shelter to 300,000 inhabitants and provides an equal number of jobs. In addition, it has an immense forest of 50,000 trees, the majority planted along a total street length of approximately 250 kms. The layout coincides, almost exactly, with the proposal conceived in 1859 by Ildefonso Cerdà, which today, after more

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than 150 years, is still consolidating the city's most dynamic limits. What is the reason for the success of this Plan?

The idea of mesh and grid are very ancient. They are the basis of the foundations of classical cities, medieval fortifications as well as the foundations of American colonization. This idea has been fervently recovered in order to organize the growth beyond city walls of a number of Mediterranean cities. Hence, it is extension not new city that must establish a fruitful relationship with the ancient by reforming and expanding. This is the case of Barcelona and the primary merit of the Plan. Information about the territory produced by the previous topographical survey comes together in a reflection about the existing city, especially questioned from the social point of view. This leads to the geometry of the city establishing the geometry of the project.

On the other hand, its socialist-realist condition does not prevent the author from imagining or proposing his Plan as an instrument for the development of urban capitalism: land without limits and rental housing, both effective mechanisms for residential construction. However, the largest blocks (113x113 m.) allow for the accommodation of all uses, such as industrial, monumental, residential and above all, mixed use. This results in an enormous variety of forms, styles, uses and processes in time that coexist and enrich the clarity of the original fabric. This is the most valuable aspect of the Cerdà Plan. The street layout of 20 m. (10 m. of road and 5+5 of sidewalk) every 133 m. establishes the fabric. As well, there are a number of street layouts of 30 m. and 5 of 50 m., which are used as the axes of the territorial relationship. This mesh will be the support for the buildings and is so clear and powerful that it can be adapted to other plans: The Pla d' Enllaços of 1905 and the Pla Macià of 1934, precisely reinforce the sense of the original Eixample.

THE TOPOGRAPHIC PLAN

The Topographic Plan of the surroundings of Barcelona was the base of the Eixample. The Plan was commissioned to Cerdà on the 23rd of December of 1854 by the civil governor Ciril Franquet, a progressive much like his predecessor, Pascual Madoz¹. The elaboration of the Topographic Plan² was an arduous but very fast endeavour, which permitted Cerdà to present it in November of 1855. In order to achieve this, he used 25 "colles d' anivelladors (levelling teams)". The survey was drawn at a scale of 1/5000 and encompassed 20 times the dimension of the walled city. It had contour lines every meter, that is to say, giving it a very remarkable precision in the details. It was deployed in 36 quarters (9x4) and laid out the city and the territory horizontally in reference to the sea. Let us observe what the territorial base of the new idea of city was, what it contained and how it was organized.

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