

*Barcelona through the Lens of the Perceiver:  
A Photographic Essay of a Multidimensional City*

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**Abstract:** This essay, through the means of photography, is an exploration of the face of Barcelona in the current time. Reference is made to historical photographers of Barcelona, alongside contemporary photographic artists and includes my own representation of Barcelona in photographic image.

**Key words:** Barcelona, historical photography, architectural photography contemporary photography

Initially my intention for this project had been to photograph the decaying industrial zones of the city. Around the very well looked-after touristic zones of Barcelona is a decaying industrial heritage from which Catalonia, using its unenviable geographic credentials, became one of the most industrially prolific and correspondingly wealthy in all of Spain, an attribute which still by economic nature fuels its desire for independence from the rest of Spain. (The Catalan coast still houses virtually all of Spain's German industrial business, something that cannot be overlooked in the context of European Union economic politics)

My project was related to creating photographs depicting such romanticised industrial pasts. On past visits to Barcelona and surrounds I had been inspired by these decaying industrial relics that to some extent mimic the overlying trends in art-deco/nouveau and modernist architecture. However, I soon realised that in terms of research and creative outcome there was more to be explored. Thence I became concerned with depicting new development zones in the city and to draw parallels between use of space in old city and new developments.

Inspired by modern plazas and buildings in new zones of Barcelona such as El Prat de Llobregat, I had always wondered if these spaces would become, over the next 200 years, revered like the old spaces of Barcelona, enjoyed by locals and visited by hoards

of tourists. Viewing these spaces brings up an interesting conundrum that on one hand seemed to suggest that they are designed for the use of people. There are wide walkways, park benches arranged for sitting and talking as in many Spanish parks and squares, avenues of trees and banks of rolling grass, all surrounded by tower blocks. But, there are rarely people! At least not in the sense that one thinks of when bringing to mind El Gòtic, the gothic area of the city, or the small squares in El Born or indeed Las Ramblas.

Upon arriving in Barcelona I began by researching local places and photographers. About this time I came to the realisation that the project was sounding very geographical and town planning based and as such out of step with being a visual art project. To this end I moved to realign the project with a pure art aesthetic with a touch of record keeping for the future. Henceforth my research efforts focused on developing a study of photography over time, a study of photography in Barcelona and a study of Photography and Architecture.

Initially whilst still obsessed with architecture I decided to find out who designed one of my favourite Barcelona buildings, ESTAB or Universitat de Barcelona School of Architecture. This was Catalan architect José Antonio Coderch. Reading about him provided interesting insight, as he was also a keen photographer. However, according to the account of his daughter, his own passion for film and image was superseded by his desire to allow and aid his photographer friend Fransec Catala Roca to photograph his buildings, suggesting certain aesthetically pleasing angles. Whilst looking at Catala Roca's photos I came across an image that conjures up a connection between historicity, cityscape and performance in a way I was potentially hoping to emulate. The image shows a Flamenco dancer surrounded by family, dancing on waste ground overlooking the city, the three chimneys in the background.

Thus the image acts as a document recording an era of Andalucian immigration into Catalonia as well as showing the limits to development and the landmarks and skyline of the time. The three chimneys are still visible in the Barcelona skyline though now surrounded on all sides, and the immigrant's Flamenco dance so well integrated into the city's life you would hardly realise it was not part of a local culture.

Being resident in the city, my research of historical and revered photography in Barcelona took leaps and bounds. On my previous visit here there was a very good retrospective of Joan Colom's work. He had worked for many years as a street photographer, in a similar way to the more famous Parisian, Henri Cartier-Bresson, capturing clandestinely many a moment in the everyday life of Barcelona, again giving insight not only into the history of fashions but the ways people use the public space.

This time it was the turn of Xavier Miserachs, an overlapping contemporary of the former, famous for publishing a book simply entitled *Black and White*, documenting Catalan daily life. The photos allow one to be immersed in the era in which they were taken with chaotic street life inhabited by donkeys, handcarts and helmet-less scooter riders.

The thing I learned from these photographers and also from one of my previous photo projects using a 1940s camera is that they were using shorter focal length lenses to get

a wider angle of view. This gives a more classic perspective based composition, something I find missing in more recent photographs. (It was time for me to find a new lens with which to view the city!)

An example of this more modern style is the work of another Xavier currently also on show at the MACBA art gallery, Xavier Ribas. Growing up as a resident of Poble Nou on the outskirts of Barcelona, Ribas documented the changes as the city grew to engulf the surrounding towns, turning them into suburbs of the whole. One of his more famous works is “Domingos”, a photo series depicting the Sunday activities of Barcelona peoples created in the late 80’s-early 90’s. Historical aspects of city life at that time, not so commonly expounded upon in the universally portrayed image of Barcelona, are measured and reported. For instance the use of waste ground, something less common today, as the urban planning of recent years, following on from implementation of ideas based on Cerda’s 1860’s city plans, and its following derivations, for public spaces within the fabric of the city.

I am also lucky to have seen several other exhibitions covering the topic of urban imagery, particularly Jordi Bernado’s ‘Ciudades Museos Mujeres Medusas’ at Galeria SENDA and Nassouh Zaghloleh’s ‘Un Jour Ordinaire Dans Syrie’ at L&B galleria in Poble Nou, both chance discoveries made possible by researching in situ.

Jordi Bernado is semi-well-known in the canon of modern Spanish photographers, with several publications and sponsorship from major sources to document the Spanish urban and rural landscape as it is today. The current work contains images of the cityscape reflected in the glass of iconic modern buildings. Galeria Senda’s exhibition notes<sup>i</sup> talk of the reflections in his photographs creating “a dialogue of meta-language that invites a semiotic process of exploration” and how “Traditional documentary photography offers a genuine and evident representation,” but goes on to say “However, the moment when Bernardo chooses what he wants to portray and the way he wants to capture it, photography becomes a reinvention beyond pure representation”.

Nassouh Zaghloleh is also well-known, being the pre-eminent photographer in his country, and holding PhD level positions at several universities there and abroad, unfortunately however, at present unable to return. The pictures focus on the simple and quiet streets of Damascus in 2006. For this current exhibition Zaghloleh had been commissioned to return home to these very places so as to document a comparison of change. However, due to the current political climate and ensuing bombardment he is denied access to travel there. The curation of the exhibition included a slide show, projecting blank white light, to highlight not only this loss but also the importance of the documentative role of photography.

To me these last two references have helped define and focus my desire to create photographic images that, on the one hand act as substantive documents to record the cityscape of Barcelona now and frame memories for the future, whilst on the other expressing an artistic statement that intrigues and stimulates a response in the viewer, capturing a moment beyond pure representation.

Having returned from Barcelona and moved into a phase of analysing the work I have prepared during this expedition with a view to presenting it as a set of creative works, several new perceptions have come to light.

My first realisation is the quality of the photographs that I have found most striking is the way in which as small representations of parts of the city they are abstract. Not just in the way they are abstracted from the whole but also in the way the composition of the images, by focusing on small details, creates a sense of intrigue as to what lies beyond the frame.

This realisation was heightened when I came across a journal article on the well-respected but little known artist Ron Nagle. Ron Nagle is known mostly for his work in ceramic as an abstract expressionist. In his own words, he describes his small pieces as “little worlds you can stick your head in.”<sup>ii</sup> Justin Paton, the author of the article, goes on to say that, “having accepted the invitation, we must face the fact that seeing something does not necessarily mean understanding it.” And that the works “dance between permanence and fragility.” For me, my photographs also exhibit these qualities, providing a glimpse of the city as it stands now, not alluding to any permanent state.

For instance, in the close up image of a motorway bridge over the Llobregat river it is not my intention to showcase a piece of civil engineering but to examine the pattern made by the repetition of forms and the effects of weathering, denudation and human interaction on the material surface.



Image 1. Pont Sobre Llobregat. Jonathan Beresford.

Again, in my photograph of the Telefonica building at the Forum, it is not of interest to me to depict the building as a piece of architecture, but more to show the interplay of planes with the next-door building, Museu Blau, the perpendicular stalactites of one

with the horizontal hulk of the other. Two opposing slices of light and dark, framing a small fragment of the cityscape and its people.



Image 2. Telefónica i Museu Blau. Jonathan Beresford.

Further in the depiction of a man leaning against a stainless steel corrugated iron fence reflecting the evening sky, the depiction of city life is not so important as the abstract nature of the image created by the intense lines of perspective, which seem to emanate from the man as much as they draw our eye toward them.



Image 3. La Posta de Sol d'Hivern. Jonathan Beresford.

Another image of the Porta Fira hotel building, a round red skyscraper, shows it abstracted by the concrete masses of neighbouring buildings, service entrances and skylights, the ovoid voids framing the building's rotund beehive nature.

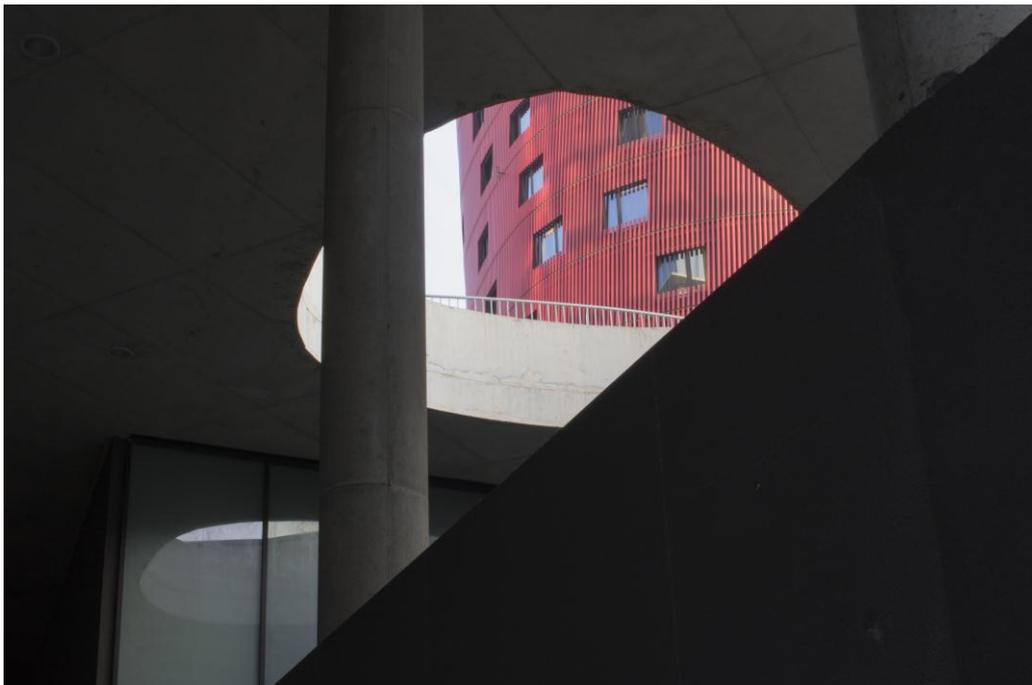


Image 4. Porta Fira. Jonathan Beresford

The same building appears in another image, not framed this time by surrealist holes but by blocks of blue and yellow of surrounding buildings and taxis. Reminiscent of the colour palate of one of Barcelona's more famous artists Joan Miro, the image highlights the enduring quality of the artist's choice of colours or perhaps his perspicacity in choosing to use those that represent best the characteristics of the region.



Image 5. Porta Fira 2. Jonathan Beresford

Two images show the effects of the play of light in creating abstract image. Both taken in upstairs spaces of modern buildings, the light is strong and unfiltered as it is at ground level in a built-up area. In the University Hospital building at Hospital Bellvitge the light casts strong diagonal shadows across the rhythmic pattern of lockers whilst it is also bounced from the polished floor to create opposing rays of light across the same surface. A bench of a design found widely in parks and public spaces across Barcelona with its angles reminiscent of a utilitarian 'Barcelona Chair' a la Mies Van de Rohe, designer of the first truly modern building in Barcelona, sits in sharp contrast, reflected in the polished floor and chrome skirting boards.



Image 6. Cadira i Armari. Jonathan Beresford.I

The second image, from the CCCB museum and gallery, again reminiscent of Mies Van de Rohe's pavilion with its marbled surfaces and glass partitions, shows similar reflective and refractive effects of light. The hand of a dancer can be seen to one side, partly referencing the work of Francesca Woodman, but also the work of Barcelona-based performance and dance artist Georgina Espinosa, who experiments with the least amount of movement that can be called dance, in order to create dance in outdoor spaces where it would otherwise be prohibited. The interplay of light, building and human form creates an abstracted moment from the life of the city.

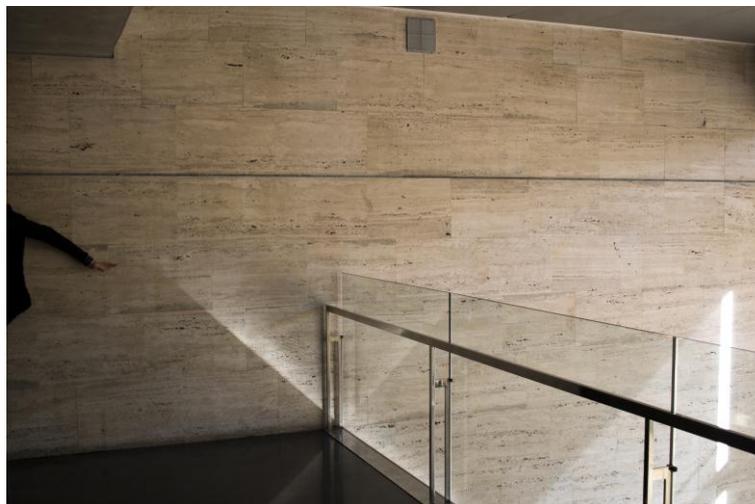


Image 7. La Dansa de les Ombres al CCCB Jonathan Beresford.

One of my favourite images, of the University Hospital Bellvitge, shows the building framed by electricity pylons and intensive market garden horticulture on the flood plain of the Llobregat River. The planes of the built-up environment once again clash with the flat plane of the land in a dramatic counterplay of pattern and surface texture. Once again the “dance between permanence and fragility” is highlighted, this time in a very real way with the ever-changing expanse of horticulture against the solidity of state infrastructure.



Image 8. Hospital de Bellvitge. Jonathan Beresford.

This juxtaposition is shown again in the images of the Can Batlló industrial area. This once mighty mill responsible for perpetuating the wealth of one of the city's wealthiest families and employing many, having fallen into disrepair is now reclaimed with city allotment gardens and artisan ateliers. The seeming strength of brick and stone is shown as fragile against the permanence of peoples need to grow fresh food.



Image 9. Can Batlló Jardins Urbans. Jonathan Beresford

In exploring this avenue of thought about the photographic image and its abstraction and creation of something other than a direct representation, I have come across the work of several other photographers of interest. One of the forerunners of this type of photography is Aaron Siskind, an American working from the late 1930's through to the 1990's. He is acknowledged to have identified with the abstract expressionists of 1940's New York. He is said "to emphasize the modernist concern with the flatness of the picture plane, but intensified his approach to picture making—with close-up framing, as well as emphasis on texture, line, and visual rhymes—creating abstract images of the real world."<sup>iii</sup> Siskind became very successful in his career and eventually became the head teacher of photography at the American Bauhaus, following in the footsteps of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, one of the first artists to use photographic means to produce non-pictorial images and an early influence on my own photographic work.

Later German artist and photographer Gottfried Jager, working from the late 1960's onward has produced again more abstract works that use a technique of generative photography. These images often made without lenses and with repeated exposures typify a modern rendering of the early work of Man Ray and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. Jager continued his practice into the digital era.

Another photographic artist I have looked into is Marco Breur. His work dispenses with the camera altogether and uses simply various photosensitive papers which are mechanically affected in order to create exquisite and unique images. The works are different from mine that still contain a pictorial source and expression, but are nonetheless interesting to contemplate in relation to my work and future directions.

My second realisation is best summed up by the writing of Kate Ravenswood and Heather Werne in their piece entitled 'Caldera; narrative excursions-The art of critical practice; an exhibition of ideas-a leap out of faith'<sup>iv</sup>. In the process of creating these images I have made "a map in which the familiar known world is disrupted, and the customary locations are displaced into a set of new negotiations with the map as a whole." I have, as they quote Jose Rabas in his 'Allegories of the Atlas' "explore(d) what lies beyond the maps... the gaps between here and there; the sense of there being these 'blind spots' in the map ... which have not (been) accounted for". In saying this I am recognising in my own work the portrayal of elements of a city rarely shown, especially outside of the city. Elements not of Gaudi, Picasso et al, as commonly perceived, but depictions of the city as it lives and evolves now.

I am presenting pictures that show new parts of the city. Sometimes these spaces are strangely unoccupied by people, such as the ornate concrete benches sitting below a pedestrian ramp adjacent to an empty palm lined avenue in the Forum.

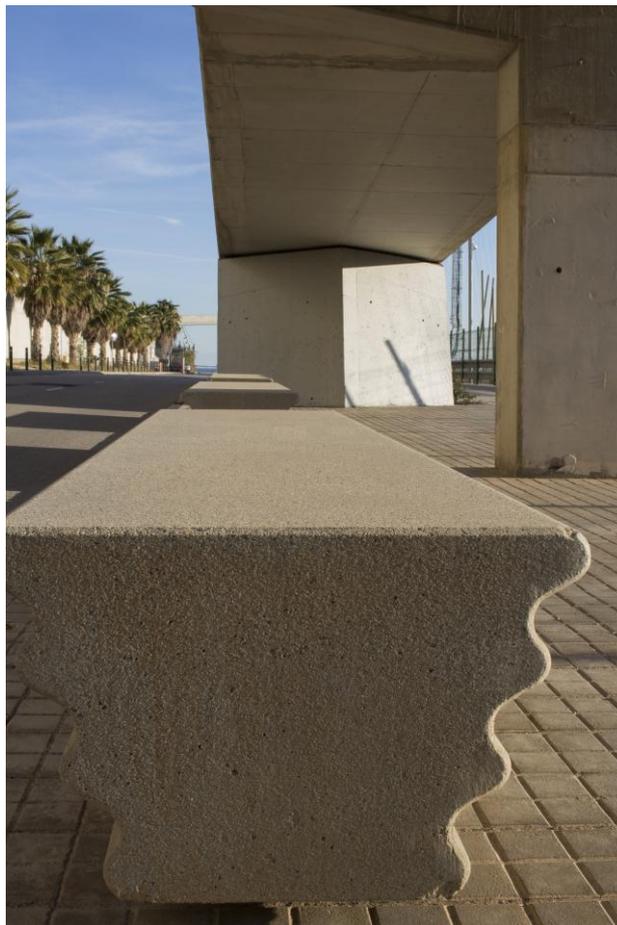


Image 10. Bancs de Pedra en el Fòrum. Jonathan Beresford.

Other times it is the tribal mark making of graffiti on a glass window creating a shadow to compliment the reflection of a brutalist skyscraper apartment block.



Image 11. Brutalista, Grafit, Reflexió. Jonathan Beresford.

Or the meeting of a riverside nature path with the viaduct like span of a motorway bridge, framing a view of faraway mountains.



Image 12. Pont de l'autopista. Jonathan Beresford.

And yes, returning to one of my original themes of research, my photographs at times show the people of the city using and enjoying the urban spaces: the baroque-like balcony gallery of the MACBA with guests looking down upon the festivities of its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration ...



Image 13. MACBA 20 Aniversari. Jonathan Beresford.

...the men deep in conversation on a park bench and the women practising hula hooping whilst the C21 climate rally commences around them...



Image 2. Deep in Conversation/Embrancat en una conversa. Jonathan Beresford.



Image 35. Lliçó d'hula hoop. Jonathan Beresford.

... and last but not least the photographer whose self-portrait is doubly captured in shadow and reflection as he photographs a reflective glass motorway sound barrier!

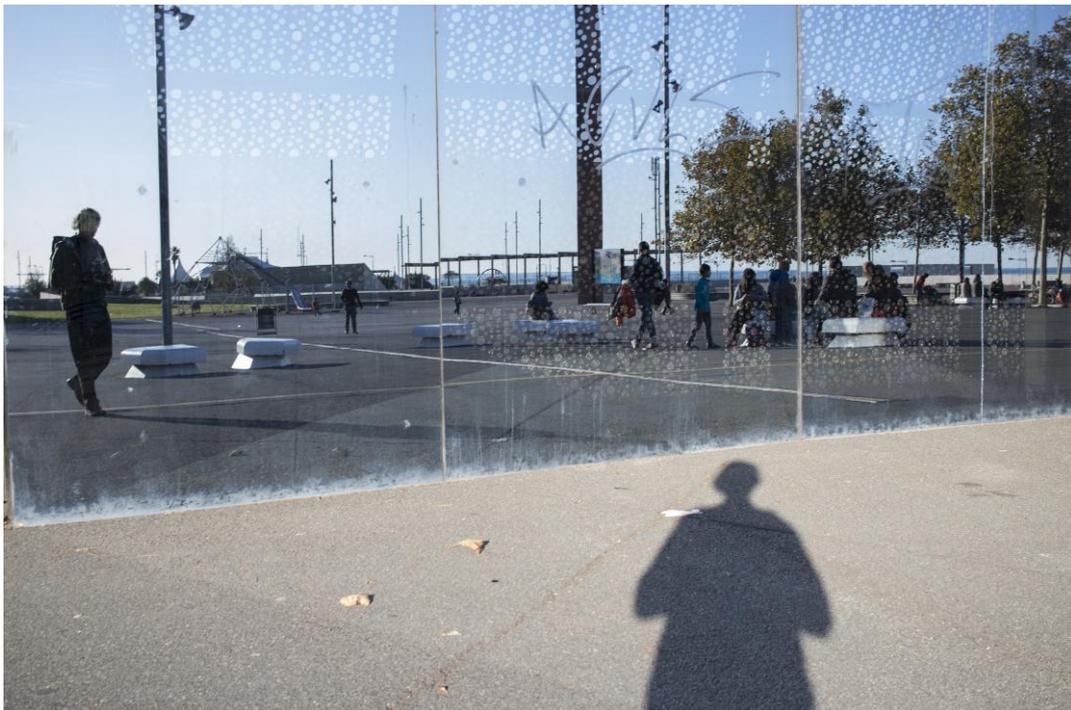


Image 16. Autoretrat. Jonathan Beresford.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>i</sup> Bernado, Jordi (2015). "Ciudades Museos Mujeres Medusas, Exhibition Catalogue Notes". *Galeria SENDA*, Barcelona.
- <sup>ii</sup> Paton, J. (2015) "Ron Nagle's small good things, *Art Monthly Australia*, (281), p. 51-55.
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