

Barcelona 2004 A “Redeemed *Flâneur’s*” Report

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The places that we have known belong now only to the little world of space on which we map them for our convenience. . . . remembrance of a particular form is but regret for a particular moment; and houses, road, avenues are as fugitive, alas, as the years.

Marcel Proust. *Remembrance of things past. Swann’s way*
(*À la recherché du temps perdu. Du côté de chez Swann*)

ABSTRACT. The main objective of this report is to introduce (not to develop) three main approaches to study Barcelona and provide in each one potential research directions. The first one is the historic structural-functional approach that describes the city based on its history and current facts and theories. The second one is the hermeneutical approach that presents the city as a *locus* of signs or as a text to read and interpret. Finally, the third approach is the “redeemed *flâneur’s*” approach. This report suggests a way to redeem the nineteenth century figure of the *flâneur’s* approach to city life from a perspective that is neither structural-functionalist nor reduced to hermeneutic analysis. The image of the “redeemed *flâneur*” is not the passive city-observer, but the city-reader that also becomes an author, an active participant in the production of meaning. The “redeemed *flâneur*” approach is a relatively unexplored option to study the city. This report illustrates the ‘redeemed *flâneur’s*’ viewpoint with four prominent features of city life using information of ‘semiotic’ or ‘anthropological’ significance, rather than ‘hard’ data. The first example refers to lessons from different cities to stress the importance of action learning. It tells us that, if we want to have an intellectual view of the city, we need to cultivate a state of alertness before arriving at a city because we do not know what references we are going to have. The second example shows that non-tourist journeys through the city uncover the Latin culture centered on and nurtured in public spaces. The classical Shakespearean self-centered question becomes irrelevant for a culture where individual attention flows inevitably toward someone else. The Latin answer to the “To be or not to be” question is “Who cares! What really matters is ‘How does s/he smile?’ ‘Is s/he happy?’ ‘What does s/he like?’ Here, “s/he” may be a friend, relative or somebody in a public place. The public spaces of the city are designed to meet, talk, and think with others, not to avoid them. All *plazas* and *paseos* are to be in company or to create it. The third example tells us there are urban elements (places, buildings, trees, benches, sculptures) that, regardless of their aesthetic value, become “existential references,” “historical landmarks,” “collective *post its* or reminders” of who we are or were at a certain time and space. A city-reader easily identifies these “catalyzers of collective memories” in the mass media and interacting with people. Sometimes they become specific references to walks in the city, as shown in the first example. The fourth example is a reminder that is it the person, not the activity, that really matters in the Greco Latin culture. It is easy to fall into the “fallacy of attribute” that reduces the individual to h/er/is function, nationality, or day of the week we meet h/er/im, forgetting that s/he first is a person: a soul, a human being. This lesson is embedded in the culture and is taught by any unexpected person in the Greco Latin city.

Finally, this report leaves an open invitation to: (i) enhance the “redeemed *flâneur’s*” approach, (ii) evaluate it in different urban environments (malls, bars, universities), and (iii) combine it with the structural-functionalist approach (since the hermeneutic approach is already embedded in it), including social class relations.

I. Introduction

When we visit a city, we see it and experience it in different ways. A long time ago Hippolyte-Adolphe Taine (1828-1893) wrote in his *Philosophy of Art* that there are travelers (tourists) who get blisters but not ideas. Taine suggested, given the appropriate role of surprise, to always have an idea to contrast with the information, experiences, and stories we gather in our travels. Following Taine and based on the principle of “seeing so much as the best way of seeing nothing,” this report discards the tourist’s approach. The tourist’s over-emphasis on the visual characteristics of the city often results in a kind of detached definition of meaning and comprehension.

Once the tourist’s perspective is discarded, the main objective in this report is to present three main approaches to study Barcelona and provide in each one of them potential research directions. The first one is the historic structural-functional approach that describes the city based on its history and current facts and theories. The second one is the hermeneutical approach that presents the city as a *locus* of signs or as a text to read and interpret. Finally, the third approach is the “redeemed *flâneur*’s” approach. The *flâneur*, is a nineteenth century ‘gentleman’, a ‘haughty bourgeois’, who aimlessly wanders and loses himself in the city, stands back from the crowd, and observes. I call it “redeemed” because I reinstall the *flâneur* as an actor and author of the city-text he reads. The “redeemed *flâneur*” is not necessarily a bourgeois but someone doing what the nineteenth century *flâneur* did, especially in his pre-1850 form. In this sense, the “redeemed *flâneur*’s” is not limited to read the city as the hermeneutical approach suggests, because s/he plays and creates the arguments while wandering up and down the

streets.¹ The “redeemed *flâneur*’s” approach complements the hermeneutical perspective. Both approaches, in turn, are compatible with the historic structural framework.

II. Methodological note

While thinking about a topic, by a process hard to describe, we get “good ideas” that must be written if we do not want to forget them. Our survival mechanism classifies or discards these “good ideas.” As Claude Lévy- Strauss put it (1991, vii): “My memory is a self-destructive thief. It suppresses elements of my personal and professional life as I go, and later on I can’t reconstruct the facts.” Remembering everything is as bad as remembering nothing. We cannot navigate in our lives without this filtering out process. Remembering everything is like “A torment equivalent to that of eternal daylight—a kind of epilepsy of identity. Autism, madness. No more absence from oneself, no more distance from others” (Baudrillard 1996, 53). In our minds or notebooks, we gather all sort of information in unarticulated and fragmented ways. We have to organize them in order to create ideas, experiences or desires we want to share with others. Usually we articulate our information in different ways to create different versions (*Rashomon* effect). We play different games with the same cards. A specific story or analysis is just one of the many alternatives to combine our information, to mix our cards.

When I want to start a project, I pull a packet of notes out of their pigeonhole and deal them out like a deck of cards. This kind of operation, where chance plays a role, helps me revive my failing memory. (Lévy- Strauss 1991, viii)

¹ The redeemed *flâneur* is close to the *flâneur* before 1850. At the end of the nineteen-century, the *flâneur* became an ‘ecstatic’ *homme des foules*, an undifferentiated and anonymous mass, a pure-spectator figure. The *flâneur* must not be confused with *le badaud*, who ‘ne pense pas’ because is passive and affective. The redeemed *flâneur* (or simply the *flâneur* before 1850) is active, ‘I’ observateur en action’: “[He] stands apart from the city even as he appears to ‘fuse’ with it; he interprets each of its component parts in isolation in order, subsequently, to attain to an intellectual understanding of the whole as a complex system of meaning (Burton 1994, 1).

In order to transform our experience into lessons of life we must be able to break, dislocate, or unhinge them so we can remember only parts, irrespective of their original relationship with the whole. In the case of a tour or travel we can unhinge it, so to speak, physically, reducing it to a series of excerpts. In the Summer of 2004, I collected a lot of information about Barcelona from different realms (European, national, regional and local), and disciplines (economics, demography, architecture). This writing is just one of the many way to combine my data. The city reality that remains in my memory is not continuous but made of pieces fitted together. I will try to reassemble Barcelona’s shredded images as in a jigsaw puzzle. To do it, I will try to use not only my intelligent memory but all my senses, all the body: “I think the healthy thing for man...is to think with his whole body...But I think that when thoughts come from the brain alone...they come and go without ever being *created*, without leaving any trace” (Mallarmé 1956, 95-96). I will especially use information of ‘semiotic’ or ‘anthropological’ relevance, rather than ‘hard’ data. I expect to succeed in this stubborn ambition to organize all things in one framework.

III. A city view from Park Güell. Questions for the historic-structural approach²

The city is a great book of time and history with diverse meaning for different readers. Barcelona, the product of many periods and consisting of so many parts that it seems to require catalogue treatment, seems not to be a single subject at all but a rich collection, yet the piecemeal bits are so much part of the same spirit that it makes a great unity in variety. The view of Barcelona from Park Güell is an impressive introduction to that

² I model a previous description on Baltimore (Harvey 2001, 128).

book and conveys a powerful image of what the city is about. But we have to learn to read all the signs of the landscape.

Certain things stand out in Barcelona. *El Barcino*, the original medieval city, immediately signals (by the way the cathedral and upper class houses dominate) that religion and aristocracy were the chief sources of power. As you look down on the city from Park Güell, the “Big Penis” building, still under construction in the Summer of 2004, stands out in the midst of all other structures at the *Plaça de les Glòries*. It is a shockingly phallic declaration of economic power.³ The Forum 2004 building, a Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron triangular design, proclaims the recycling of materials. It is neither centrally located nor conspicuous enough to suggest it has more than a marginal role to play in determining the city’s fate. The densely packed working-class row houses can be seen when you look across *Barceloneta* or *El Raval*.

The other image that stands out is that of water, which formed Barcelona’s commercial lifeline to the world and the nexus for much of its manufacturing industry. Signs of these connections abound in the *22@project*. It is easy to imagine that the Inner Harbor, down *Montjuic*, was once the city’s main port of entry.

Possible research directions. Though the view from Park Güell tells us much about the city, it cannot tell us how what we see came into being. How was Barcelona built? What process decided that it should be a tourist Mecca and an industrial city? Why do the buildings look the way they do, and what traditions do the monuments imply? What do the narrow streets in *El Barcino* or the wide pedestrian streets of *La Rambla* or *Paseo de*

³ As a part of the Forum 2004 project, the city invested 3.6 million dollars in urban infrastructure: demolition of old houses and factories, and modernization of plants for water treatment, incineration and electricity (Riding 2004).

Gracia tell us? There is no a definitive way to answer these questions. The historic perspective tells us that it is not possible to read the built environment until we become familiar with the local culture and social structure. The interpretative process begins well before viewing the city, and takes place, for example, when decisions are made as to *what* and *how* the visual tour is to be taken. The next step is to walk the streets with a body of theories to test hypotheses and a photographic camera to register details. In this perspective, interpretation of any visual data requires a theoretical framework. This framework provides logic for sorting, organizing, indexing, and categorizing large amounts of (visual) data. However, we cannot know what really happened until we go to the archives, the history of the settlement, and the old maps of the city. Until we assemble the evidence, with some contradictory elements, we will fail to explain how a city’s life became as it actually is right now (Kostof 1992).

IV. The hermeneutic approach

The concern of the hermeneutic approach is how a specific text is read here and now. The word “text” as well as the word “textile” comes from the Latin *texere* that means web or woven fabric. In the hermeneutic approach, the city is a web, a piece of woven fabric: a text. The text of our daily lives is inscribed in the city and in the house, in the spaces we inhabit. But all these inscriptions are overlaid with later changes, partially obscured and altered. An author provides a brief and precise description of the hermeneutic approach to the city:

Hermeneutics deals with clarifying the meaning of a text, and by extension the meaning of any human action, product, or expression that can be treated as a text. Texts include Supreme Court decisions, the legislative history of a bill, By extension, a ceremony is a kind of spoken and acted text, a drama; a culture is in part a set of rules and examples for how to live, and its acting out is a larger

drama; a building or a city means (symbolizes) the life that is and has been lived in it. Thus the discipline of architecture deals with the construction of meanings. . . . People experience the meanings, the ongoing shared life, when they use the buildings or walk down the street. David Harvey refers to “the semiotic of the city”. . . . “We have to learn to read the social and physical signs and codes of the urban milieu—to understand the signals of status and power as written into physical landscapes, for example—in order to survive”. . . .

Nontexts—ceremonies, cultures, cities, dreams—require still different techniques. These actions and buildings have not been constructed with the deliberate intention of communicating a message. . . . A cathedral or a ritual—a bridegroom breaking a wineglass with his foot—expresses some attitude toward something. The attitude and its object are symbolized, not verbalized, and the meanings of the symbols are more or less understood by participants [the outsider requires a hermeneutic effort]. (Diesing 1991, 105-106)

Symbols are not waiting to be read in any order.

Symbols occur in sets and. . . the meaning of particular symbols is to be found in the contrast with other symbols rather than in the symbol as such, so that individual symbols have layers of meanings that depend upon what is being contrasted with what. (Rapoport 1982, 188)

The specific context or frame provides meaning to those who share the same situation. Meaning of contrasted symbols cannot exist outside of their context of use. The context may dramatically alter the way in which a symbol fits into a referential category. Thus, the context is not an empty space to be ‘filled in’ but is part of the meaning expressed within it. Therefore, the meaning shared by a group of actors/authors cannot be located outside of the social process in context. Some postmodernists argue that signs have ‘killed’ reality. They increasingly have become detached from the real referents and build on each other (Denhardt 2004, 166). According to an outstanding postmodernist:

We live in a world where the highest function of the sign is to make reality disappear and, at the same time, to mask that disappearance.

.....

The perfect crime is that of an unconditional realization of the world by the actualization of all data, the transformation of all our acts and all events into pure information: in short, the final solution, the resolution of the world ahead of time by the cloning of reality and the extermination of the real by its double. (Baudrillard 1996, 5 and 25)

Possible research directions. The hermeneutic approach may be extended to consider the city-reader into a city-author. This is an inevitable step in any intelligent observer:

We are apt to confuse our sensations, our opinion, our judgment, with what we experience, so that we do not remain long in the passive attitude of the observer [the detached city-reader], but soon go on to make reflections; and upon these no greater weight can be placed than may be more or less justified by the nature and quality of our individual intellects. (Goethe 1798, 252, square brackets added)

Since the “redeemed *flaneur’s*” approach is an amplification of the “reader to author” perspective, all related possible research directions for the “redeemed *flaneur’s*” perspective also count for the hermeneutic approach.

V. The “redeemed *flaneur’s*” approach

Who or what is the “redeemed *flâneur*”? *Flânerie* is to wander aimlessly, in search of momentary distractions, open be active involvement, preserving an intellectual attitude (Burton 1994, 1). Literature says that the *flâneur*, a nineteenth century social type in Paris and other European cities, roamed aimlessly through the city, observing the urban spectacle with endless curiosity for witnessing the ordinary scenes of city life (the fashions in dresses and adornment, the buildings, the shops, the books, the novelties and attractions). One author concludes:

It is clear that the *flâneur* can be seen as a model of the sociologist as he/she tries to read the cityscape and to decipher it and interpret its meaning. In effect the *flâneur* transforms the city into a space of reading, an object of investigation and interpretation, in other words into a text. Through the eyes of the *flâneur* the city becomes a locus of signs—the semiotic city. (Frisby 1981)

The *flâneur*, especially after 1850, has no overarching vision of the city. *Ergo*, h/er/is reading is momentary, invariably fragmentary, and so never gets to survey the totality. S/he registers partial images s/he reads in a state of distraction.

My idea of “redeemed *flâneur*” corrects the fragmentary and distracted reading of the city. Even more, s/he not only reads the city, buy also *creates* knowledge interacting with people in the urban context. The image of the “redeemed *flâneur*” is not a marginal or isolated figure passively observing the urban spectacle. The “redeemed *flâneur*” is not the urban voyeur of the late nineteenth century or the sign-reading sociologist. S/he is not limited to marginally observe or to read from afar what is already in the city text. S/he is a deliberate (not distracted), actively participating actor and author of the urban spectacle. Thus, the “redeemed *flâneur*” is a city-reader that also becomes an author, an active participant in the production of meaning.⁴

Having this idea in mind,⁵ in the Summer of 2004 I deliberately approached Barcelona as a “redeemed *flâneur*” (I should also say as a “redeemed tourist”). It means I did not try to ‘discover’ structural determinants or the embedded social rationality (historic-structural approach). I had no interest in consuming the city image marketed to the world (tourist’s approach), but on how to read and learn it when I walked up and down the streets. Every day I incorporated diverse urban images into my mental dictionary from which I daily drew trips and modified actions and plans when unexpected situations arose or my insatiable interests changed.

⁴ The idea of linking *theoria* and *praxis* is already present in Hobbes (“of persons, authors, and things personated,” in his *Leviathan*), Goethe (*Propyläen*), and Marx:

A Marxian approach. . . stresses the *production*, rather than the passive receipt of knowledge—the involvement of the act of inquiry in shaping, as well as, in discovering, knowledge. . . reality is not merely what “is” but what we make it (Heilbroner 1981, 31, italics in the original).

⁵ My original thought was to take Derrida’s idea of subjectil in two directions (Derrida 1998): the first one was to consider the city visitor as a subjectil, a subject-projectile acting and producing meaning with other subject-projectiles. The second option was to consider the subjectil as a physical or social texture. The physical texture “betrays” the subject’s action (*i.e.*, a piece of marble natural characteristics modify the artist’s original idea). The social texture restricts, oppresses, or consumes, as in Giacometti’s sculptures, the subjects. I realize I could take elements from both versions of subjectil by introducing the idea of “the redeemed *flâneur*.”

It is clear that my aim is not to find the historical structural determinants of the city and it is not restricted to the meaning of the city-text as in the postmodernist analysis of the hermeneutical type (which tries to interpret the text in terms of the truth believed to be hidden therein). The “the redeemed *flâneur’s*” approach, as presented here, is close to the *sensemaking* perspective in organization theory or to “action by recommendation” in information architecture.

The *sensemaking* perspective tells us, paraphrasing Sophocles in *Minos*, that ‘to those who act not, knowledge is not available and fortune is not ally’. “Enactment,” to do something, is the key term:

[It] is used to preserve the central point that when people act, they bring events and structures into existence and set them in motion. People who act in organizations often produce structures, constraints, and opportunities that were not there before they took action. (Weick 2001, 225)

In the *sensemaking* approach to the city, before we act, we do not know what references we are going to consider. They emerge as we begin to move around. Events glisten only at the moment one acts; they appear to be read. It does not matter what reference you take, to be wrong is inevitable but exciting because uncovers alternatives not previously considered. Nothing is wrong with being wrong because learning, especially in complex and rapidly changing situations, is trial and error. You discover the unanticipated effects of your actions and adjust them to those unexpected events. You have to maintain a diagnostic mindset on an ever-changing reality. In this case, “the learning agent must be willing and able to use himself as an informational instrument” (Schön 1973, 236). This way of navigating the city is also close to the idea of “action by recommendation” in information architecture:

Learning the meaning of visual information is a major attraction for visits to European cities [like Barcelona] which have only changed gradually over hundreds of years. Undirected wandering in such cities allows the visitor to accept *recommendations* offered by different visual environments and to discover the results of such acceptance. It is thus possible to learn the "visual language" of the new city. For example, one may learn how to find places by observing and following trends in the visual environment. This is true to a much lesser degree in North American cities, where in many cases rapid redevelopment has destroyed the context for visual information over wide areas. (Coward and Salingaros, italics added)

It is easy to orient oneself in small and traditional cities, but in cities of more complex and pluralistic societies, one necessarily requires a high level of redundancy. For example, in a sprawled U. S. city

As one moves toward the (or a) center, one would generally expect greater traffic density, greater difficulty in parking, more traffic lights, narrower streets, more shops, more signs (neon and so on), higher levels of activity, older buildings, run-down areas, tall buildings, and so on. . . .

.....
Clearly, the more complex and culturally pluralist the setting, the greater the required redundancy to produce sufficiently clear cues, particularly since many people are the “outsiders.” (Rapoport 1982, 149-150)

This sensemaking or “action by recommendation” approach does not discard the historical-structural approach or other procedures to gather data. Sometimes it is not possible to get all knowledge at a glance, but requires a secondary action of knowledge or of reflection.

The following four examples relate to Barcelona’s case of study illustrate “the redeemed *flâneur’s*” approach.

1. Experiences in some other cities applied to Barcelona.

Purpose: to refer to lessons form different cities to stress the importance of action learning. It tells us that, if we want to have an intellectual view of the city, we need to cultivate a state of alertness because, before arriving at a city, we do not know what references we are going to have.

We often navigate through a city by asking questions of people we meet on the street. They provide the information we request using arbitrary references. In Naples, for example,

Looking for a street name he [the observer] finds it unreadable, partly papered over, partly scratched off, with old names underneath showing through. There are no house numbers, a final impossibility—it is the least informative place he has ever been. The observer sees no signs or posters, almost no words—has entered a preliterate world, community so natural and complete no one need be notified of anything, where *his path leads from one informant to the next, each of whom can fill in only part of the way. . . . Streets are the living space. . . . Usually we are engulfed like this by anonymous conglomerations where no marker’s personality stands out, effects which some cities instinctively avoid as others seek them.* (Harbison 1977, 55, italics added)

The Naples’ observer is lucky because s/he can partially get information to go from one point to another. But what about a city where you cannot read anything and it has a different way of organizing its life? This is the case of Tokyo for a western tourist.

The streets of this city have no names. There is of course a written address, but it has only a postal value, it refers to a plan. . . . knowledge of which is accessible to the postman, not to the visitor: the largest city in the world is practically unclassified, the spaces which compose it in detail are unnamed. . . . Tokyo reminds us that the rational is merely one system among others. . . .

One can figure out the address by a (written or printed) schema of orientation, a kind of geographical summary which situates the domicile *starting from a known landmark*; a train station, for instance.

You must orient yourself in it not by book, by address, but by walking, by sight, by habit, by experience; here every discovery is intense and fragile, it can be repeated or recovered only by memory of the trace it has left in you: to visit a place for the first time is thereby to begin to write it: the address not been written, it must establish its own writing. (Barthes 1982, 35-36, italics added)

While we are in movement, while we walk the city streets, we gather fragmented information with arbitrary references to create our own universe: “*We create our universe of references. It does not matter which one you take as long as they work: The landmark is entirely prosaic*” (Barthes 1982, 38, italics added). Tokyo is a city that, although you

do not understand anything, you arrive at the place you want. A written address only has a postal value; it does not mean anything to the visitor. On the other hand, there are cities, like Guanajuato, Mexico, with its system of tunnels, where you can read everything and still become easily lost. In Guanajuato, like in Tokyo, city references are in minutes, neighborhoods, districts or areas. Before arriving in Barcelona, I did not know what references I was going to consider to orient myself in the city. After all, as Emerson wrote in his essay *History*, “No-man can antedate his experience, or guess what faculty or feeling a new object shall unlock, any more than he can draw today the face of a person whom he shall see tomorrow for the first time.”

While visiting a city, because we do not know what references we are going to have, we need to cultivate a state of alertness and train ourselves to observe sharply. This attitude plays a central role both for gathering information and applying it to our advantage.

2. Barcelona. Do Cervantes and Shakespeare get along?

Purpose. To show that non-tourist journeys through the city discover the Latin culture centered on and nurtured in public spaces. The classical Shakespearean self-centered question becomes irrelevant for a culture where the individual attention flows in the direction of others. The Latin answer to the “To be or not to be” question is “Who cares! What really matters is ‘How does s/he smile?’ ‘Is s/he happy?’ ‘What does s/he like?’ Here, “s/he” may be a friend, relative or somebody in a public place. The public spaces of the city are designed to meet, talk, and think with others, not to avoid them. All *plazas* and *paseos* are to be in company or to create it.

Unlike Guanajuato or Tokyo, Barcelona is easy to read and navigate. As any Greco Latin city, it is designed to meet people. I made many journeys through the city, in all sorts of directions, avoiding the most important or heavily touristed streets. At the end, I had an idea of Barcelona; I was able to find my own perspective closer to that of one living in

the city. Riding a bus and walking the city streets in this way, I concluded that, for the Latin culture, Shakespeare’s “To be or not to be” is an illegitimate question. In the Latin culture, the question is not focused solely on the individual, but flows in the direction of others. Any individual event, something the Anglo-Saxon culture usually forgets, happens in the presence or context of other people. The relevant question in the Latin culture is not the Shakespearean “To be or not to be,” but “How does s/he smile?” “Is s/he happy?” “What does s/he like?” Barcelona, as any Greco-Latin city, is a place to meet, talk, and think with others. It was designed to perform these functions and keep them alive. In the Latin culture, people’s attitudes of hope, fear, joy, or despair is what really matters. Cervantes and Shakespeare do not match. To Shakespeare’s question, “To be or not to be?” the Greco Latin inhabitant answers: Who cares! What really matters is “How is s/he?” “Does s/he remember me?” “What is s/he thinking about”? All *paseos* and *plazas* are designed to meet people, to be in company or to create it. The Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset put it in this way:

A city, at least in the European sense, is not a house or an agglomeration of them. In Athens and Rome, houses [having different designs] are a mere pretext: the essential organ of the city is the plaza, the agora or forum. The city creation is a plaza construction. It is erroneous to attribute the city origin to the same instinct and same needs behind the house building. The city is born from an opposite instinct to the domestic one.

A house is built to live in it; a city is created to leave the house and meet others also leaving their houses. . . . the Semite, who ignores the city life, weights the virtue of hospitality, that is the art of receiving other people in our house. On the other hand, the essential virtue of the city is the *urbanitas*, the urbanity; that is the art of behaving outside the house, onto the street. The creative impulse of the Greco Latin city was not the house, nor the market or the *zoco*, nor the defense, nor the temple; it simply was a genial appetite for [intelligent] conversation. . . it is not random that the most prestigious word in Greece was the word “word”, the *logos*, to speak. The supreme science they discovered was called “dialectics”, that means conversation. . . . (Ortega y Gasset 1966, own translation)

El Ensanchamiento de Barcelona, following the Cerdá’s urban plan beyond *El Barcino*—the typical Medieval city with narrow defensive streets—, is designed to meet people. *La Rambla* and *Paseo de Gracia* are the best examples. Several times, while walking on *La Rambla*, I tried to imagine how Barcelona’s life was in times of Antonio Gaudí and Eusebio Güell, two outstanding Spanish men who lived at the dawn of the twentieth century. I kept this curiosity in mind until months later I found a travel report by Justo Sierra (1848-1912), a Mexican intellectual and diplomat. He first describes *La Rambla* as a wide avenue surrounded by magnificent buildings and with a special design for vehicles, pedestrians, and diverse trees:

Se entra, bajando por el camino que traíamos, al barrio fresco y cada vez más elegante de Gracia y al Ensanche, la parte más bella de la flamante Barcelona. . . . La Rambla, el lecho del exhausto riachuelo que lamía la muralla de la antiquísima Barcelona de los romanos, los godos, los francos y que hoy desecado, terraplenado, y acotado por magníficos edificios y sembrado de plátanos rumorosos. . . .[es] una faja para peones [*sic*, peatones?] en el centro, refrescada por doble hilera de árboles de gran sombra; de uno y otro lado las vías para coches, vagones y caballos que van o vienen, según el lado en que estén de la calzada, que interrumpida a trechos, deja libre a los vehículos la comunicación de la una a la otra vía, y pegadas a las casas las amplias aceras arboladas también. Pues esta Rambla en el Ensanche se dilata y amplía magníficamente, se duplican las hileras de plátanos. (Sierra 2000, 173)

Sierra also provides information on Antonio Gaudí’s lofty reputation as an artist and architect.⁶ Sierra offers details on Gaudí’s artistic craft, and describes his exceptional style and creativity in his *Holy Family*:

Los amigos. . . .nos condujeron a donde está construyendo el gran arquitecto Gaudí su basílica La Sacra Familia que se ido pagando por medio de una subscripción pública. El terreno está muy bien escogido y la inmensa fábrica se eleva ya a la altura de las cúpulas. . . .Gaudí construye a su fantasía, como quiere,

⁶Antonio Gaudí (1852-1926), Spanish *art nouveau* architect **best known for a building he did not begin and never finished**: the (still uncompleted) Cathedral of the Holy Family (*Sagrada Familia*) in Barcelona. Humberto Eco refers to Gaudí’s architecture as a stroke of genius “with a repertoire of stock formulas used wholesale” (Eco 1984, 449)

sin planos, con simples diseños parciales; su designio lo conocen sus discípulos; a ellos legará el remate de su obra. Esa obra es un pensamiento, claro está, porque es un símbolo perpetuo. No hay nada que esté puesto por la simple belleza de la línea, de la forma; forma y línea interpretan la idea del autor del soberbio poema de piedra que tenemos a la vista; pero esa idea es la llama de un sentimiento que no es de este siglo, que no es de este mundo: es hija de la fe pura, espontánea, cándida, infantil y absoluta de “un primitivo”, de un artista, cómo diremos? Diremos artista integral, que lo mismo es arquitecto que escultor, que ebanista, que decorador, que herrero; todo lo inventa él, todo lo ejecuta, todo lo forja y en todo es nuevo, nada de lo que él hace, exceptuando lo que constituye la substancia misma de la obra obligada por el rito a condiciones determinadas, nada se ha visto en otra parte. . . .

Este hombre es una maravilla en nuestro siglo. . . . Por desgracia no le conocí.

.....

Y como el autor necesita para su obra algunos millares de estatuas y los escultores cobran muy caro, . . . emplea un procedimiento sencillísimo para obtener moldes perfectos sobre el objeto vivo, planta, animal, hombre; obteniendo el molde, vacía en él su yeso. . . . y luego lo traduce en bronce o mármol a su gusto; ya esto es obra de artesanos. (Sierra 2000, 174)

The reference to *La Rambla* and Gaudí is incomplete if Eusebio Güell is not in the picture. Sierra portrays Eusebio Güell’s personality, describes his house (the Güell’s Palace) and family lifestyle:

La casa del señor Güell es una casa de fantasía, pero es una fantasía de Gaudí; otra sinfonía de hierro y piedra [here Sierra includes a description of the building]; pero admiramos más los sonidos de un órgano de hecho especialmente para aquel edificio y movido por electricidad. Lo tocaba la señorita de Güell con tal dulzura, que parecía ella misma transformada en notas; de repente, allá en lo más alto de la cúpula, resonó un coro de niños, un coro celeste; conmovidos y asombrados alzamos la vista, nada había. Era una de las voces del órgano, se llamaba “voz del cielo” y era, a fe, era la voz de los ángeles.

El señor Güell, además de ser un sabio, es un artista y un gran benéfico industrial, nos hizo al día siguiente los honores en su fábrica de panas. No habíamos visto nada mejor organizado, ni productos iguales a éstos; el terciopelo de algodón del señor Güell parece terciopelo legítimo, y alguno de sus principales obreros, todos le respetan y quieren, ha inventado la manera de recortar con una línea de fuego el pelo de la pana para emparejarlo, lo que es sencillamente admirable. (Sierra, 2000, 174)

Sierra’s diplomatic function facilitated his access to Güell’s social and economic life. He admirably describes *La Rambla* as a central place to meet people, and presents

Güell and Gaudí as two personalities of the time. About a century later, we can visit the same places and see not only how the Greco Latin instinct of meeting people is preserved in *La Rambla*, but also how new elements (such as those buildings and stories associated with Gaudí and Güell) are added to the urban spectacle.

3. Historical and cultural “post it”

Purpose. To suggest that there are urban elements (places, buildings, trees, benches, sculptures) that, regardless of their aesthetic value, become “existential references,” “historical landmarks,” “collective *post its* or reminders” of who we are or were in a certain time and space. A city-reader easily identifies these “catalyzers of collective memories” in the mass media and through interacting with people. Sometimes they become specific references to walks in the city, as shown in the first example.

In our travel to Barcelona, we stopped in Paris, the focus of the following section. The main ideas can be translated to fit Barcelona or any other city.

There are places in some cities assumed to be mythical areas and catalyzers of collective memories (Eco 1984, 446-447). The imagination, combined with some historical data, plays a far more significant role than the place itself. When we climb the Eiffel Tower or visit La Bastille we are not just in a built structure or a place in the world but in landmarks of universal history. Each of these landmarks is a “cultural *post it*,” a reminder. The Eiffel Tower represents the image of France and La Bastille *place*, although nothing is left of the original building, reminds us of the force of democratic ideas. Each city has its own landmarks or points of cultural orientation and social identity. They are also, as mentioned above, *post its*, reminders, or mnemonic devices of culminant social efforts and life styles. In a TV interview with Sebastián, the Mexican artist with both marine and urban sculptures, the interviewer asked him how he felt when his city artwork was cover with graffiti. Surprisingly he showed no concern. Graffiti on

his urban sculptures, he said, plays the same function as saline water and marine vegetation on his sculptures in the sea. The social environment (including smog and graffiti) adds a socio-temporal great patina, an unsuspected meaning to the artwork. In any city we live in, we give meaning to places, a sort of “existential patina,” regardless of their aesthetic value. Even when a place, building, tree or bench is destroyed or modified, it still is our “post it,” a reminder of who we were at some point in time. When the place that is modified or destroyed is a collective symbol, the hysteria is also collective. Such is the case of the Twin Towers in New York. Similarly, in Paris,

The [Eiffel] Tower is climbed as a signifier of France so that upon reaching the first or second level, one gets a bird’s eye view of French quintessence, Paris. From this position, the viewer can see the environs of Paris and because of the force of the cultural signifiers, he or she is aware that the building, people, parks, traffic and river they are seeing connote ‘*Frenchness*’. In other words, we do not simply see a city but rather we see strongly connotative signs (Fuery and Fuery, 2003, 92).

The Eiffel Tower is simultaneously two things: a man-made object of metal we can climb and a man-made abstract construction out of cultural discourse and propaganda providing an image of *Frenchness* to the world. A city-reader easily identifies these “catalyzers of collective memories” in the mass media and from interacting with people. Sometimes they become specific references to walks in the city, as shown in the first example.

4. Manolo’s restaurant and the “fallacy of attribute”

Purpose. To present a reminder that it is the person, not the activity, that really matters in the Greco Latin culture. It is easy to fall into the “fallacy of attribute” that reduces the individual to h/er/is function, nationality, or day of the week we meet h/er/im, forgetting that s/he first is a person: a soul, a human being. This lesson is embedded in the culture and is taught by any unexpected person in the Greco Latin city.

Manolo is a frustrated singer who, in order to survive in Barcelona, runs a restaurant. Although sometimes he reveals his frustration, he uses his artistic sensitivity to make you feel comfortable. He has no theories of any kind and the Football Eurocup was his most important topic of discussion during the summer. I developed an addiction to his kindness, and cuisine. I stopped in his restaurant almost every night. I remember him talking about a painting hanging on the wall of his restaurant. It was not a work art but he kept it because of his personal tie with the painter. I do not remember what he said, but I associated his conversation with Ortega y Gasset’s insight on the “fallacy of attribute.” When people say that a man is a painter, they keep “painter” and forget the man. We may say that a man is a painter, but it is better to say that the painter is a man. Painting is just a way of being a man. Ortega y Gasset’s point is that the activity we choose is just one among other different ways of being a man or a woman. The “fallacy of attribute” reduces the individual to h/er/is function, nationality, or day of the week we meet h/er/im, forgetting that s/he first is a person: a soul, a human being. I did not tell anything of this to Manolo, but thanked him for reminding me that the “fallacy of attribute” is a constant element of the human condition, regardless of time and space. I learned than any unexpected person in the Greco Latin city is a qualified authority to teach us cultural lessons. The speaker, most of the times unaware of his own culture, delivers an untended lesson to a receiver prepared to find it meaningful.

Possible research directions. Previous examples illustrate the ‘redeemed *flâneur’s* point of view’ using information of ‘semiotic’ or ‘anthropological’ relevance, rather than ‘hard’ data. There are several research directions: (i) to tune up the ‘redeemed *flâneur’s*’ approach extending current literature on hermeneutics and importing ideas from other

fields (*i.e.*, “learning by recommendation” from information architecture, “sensemaking” or the “reflective practitioner” from organization theory), (ii) to include more examples from different realms such as the private (home), the intermediate (coffee shops or restaurants) and public (the streets and plazas), and (iii) to address the analysis to the class structure context.

VI. Concluding remarks

This report suggests ways to redeem the nineteenth century *flâneur’s* approach to city life from a perspective that is neither structural-functionalist nor reduced to the hermeneutic analysis. The image of the “redeemed *flâneur*” is not the passive city-observer, but the city-reader who also becomes an author, an active participant in the production of meaning. The “redeemed *flâneur*” approach is a relatively unexplored option to study the city. Burton (1994), in his study of patterns of daily life in Paris 1815-1851 (including dressing, eating and drinking habits, and so on), provides useful guidelines to this proposal. The “redeemed *flâneur*” approach associates all sorts of information and ideas in daily experiences for sensemaking in specific contexts or general situations. This report illustrates the ‘redeemed *flâneur’s* viewpoint’ with four prominent features of city life using ‘semiotic’ or ‘anthropological’ information, rather than ‘hard’ data. Experiences from other cities, Cervantes and Shakespeare, historical “post it,” and Manolo’s restaurant are just four of cases in my notebook (*i.e.*, eating style and sex, natural selection portfolio and lovers meeting, solitude in the winter time). These examples show that Barcelona is:

- A friendly city, easy to navigate. However, it is an interesting case of study for those who want to cultivate a state of alertness and train themselves to observe

- sharply. This attitude plays a central role for both gathering information and applying it to culturally understand the city.
- A city designed to meet people, to be in company or to create it. The public spaces of the city are designed to meet, talk, and think with others, not to avoid them. The classical “To be or not to be” is an illegitimate question in a culture centered on people who care about people. I was not aware of this until I thought about Barcelona from afar. While visiting Tossa del Mar, a small town in La Costa Brava, I asked an old woman how the local life was during the winter. “It is chilling. Nobody is on the streets. All doors are closed. It is so silent that from inside you hear the wind sweeping the leaves and the cats fighting on the roofs.” Her brutal honesty impressed me so much that I still keep the image of the lonely streets and the people locked in their houses, counting each euro, waiting for the next summer. Suddenly, I imagined Barcelona with its empty streets. This imaginary emptiness revealed the function of its public spaces: to leave the house and meet people. It was always there but I was so absorbed by the public spectacle (fashion, coffee shops, restaurants, museums) that I did not think about it before.
 - A city with historical landmarks operating as “*post its*” of universal culture: *La Sagrada Familia*, *Pedrerà*, *Palacio Güell* and many other constructions associated with Gaudí. It also has other designs of urban identity such as museums (the whole city itself is a museum) , *Rambla* or *Paseo de Gracia*, to mention some of them. The city-reader easily identifies these “catalyzers of collective memories” and specific references to walks in the city.

- A representative city of Latin culture where the person comes before h/is/er activity. It prevents us from falling into the “fallacy of attribute” that reduces the individual to h/is/er function, nationality, or day of the week we meet h/er/im.

The ‘redeemed *flâneur’s* viewpoint’ in this report shows that in social analysis there is information we do not know in advance, but that we receive or read only in the midst of action. In many cases this information cannot be read in advance simply because it does not exist yet; we create it with our actions and the actions of others. Or it existed but now it has changed, or it exists but requires an action to emerge and to be re-integrated to the substantive knowledge we have in our heads. By this continuous exercise of reading, we adjust our behavior as we perform our acts.

As a methodological device, the “redeemed *flâneur’s*” approach has equivalent versions in different fields of study: (i) it is the Baconian aimless reading to become acquainted with the object of study, as Darwin describes it in his *Memoirs*, (ii) it is the grouping criteria of experiences generated by a certain *mood of being*, to be received and understood in a certain *methodological mode*. As an example, we can put together all events generated by a certain *mood of being*, say walking and experiencing the city (the *polis*, to use the recently rediscovered word in organization theory), and leave them to randomly flow and get mixed together as in a garbage can. Because of the randomness of the process, anything is possible in the “garbage can”: some problems are solved by chance, solutions are proposed for inexistent problems, choices are made without solving a problem, or some problems are never solved. This is the “garbage can” model, a variation of the “the governmental politics model” of organizations, and (iii) it is the instinct or attitude of intellectual alertness, rather than knowledge, that the critical thinker

or the “reflective practitioner” has to cultivate. Weick (2001) suggested this perspective for sensemaking, and Argyris and Schön, in all their works after 1971, have suggested it for organizational learning.

Finally, this report offers a triple invitation: first, to enhance the “redeemed *flâneur’s*” approach extending current literature on hermeneutics and including concepts from diverse fields such as information architecture and organization theory; second, to evaluate it in different urban environments (malls, bars, universities); and third, to combine it with the structural-functionalist approach (the hermeneutic approach is already embedded in it). As an example, topics studied may include social class relations.

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