



**Patrick Faigenbaum
and Joan Roca**

BARCELONA, BESÒS VIEW

The outcome of collaboration between a photographer and a geographer, this project undertaken between 1999 and 2007 looks at the last major transformation of Barcelona, which focused on the city's eastern waterfront, after the 1992 Olympic Games and the 2004 Universal Forum of Cultures. It is also an attempt to produce an 'urban portrait' from a peripheral perspective.

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[LA VIRREINA]
CENTRE
DE LA IMATGE

Ajuntament de
Barcelona



Avinguda Diagonal under construction, 2005

The Parisian photographer Patrick Faigenbaum arrived in Barcelona in early January 1999. The critic Jean-François Chevrier had commissioned him to take some photographs to illustrate a lecture on the topic of Barcelona, in which Joan Roca, a geographer and historian from Barcelona, would be intervening. At that time, Joan Roca was a schoolteacher at Institut Barri Besòs and also the main facilitator of the Forum de la Ribera del Besòs, a space within the school where people could come together and discuss a variety of issues. This commission was part of a series of talks on cities, organised by Fondation pour l'Architecture, in Brussels. Chevrier had also asked Joan Roca to tell the photographer exactly what pictures were needed for that lecture.

During the first trip, Faigenbaum used colour transparencies and took photographs by following Roca's instructions as closely to the letter as possible. At that time, the work lacked a title and a detailed programme, and was carried out quickly over a few days. The 4 × 4-cm format—smaller than the usual medium—was used for a practical reason: it allowed the pictures to be mounted in standard slide frames and to be shown using a 35-mm projector. From the outset, the photography was strictly functional and instrumental.

On 27 January, Roca and Faigenbaum used slides to present the work at the “Des territoires” seminar promoted by Chevrier from the École Nationale Supérieure de Beaux-Arts (ENSBA) in Paris. Alongside Chevrier, they held the public session the following day in Brussels. The debate was an eye-opener for

the participants, mainly due to the unexpected and productive convergence of trajectories as diverse as those of Roca, Chevrier and Faigenbaum. Despite their different backgrounds, they had common questions. The debate put forward reasons for the interest in, and the continuity of, the project: it gave Roca the opportunity to experiment with aspects relating to the representation of the city from the perspective of his studies on the social inclusion models within a context of accelerated real estate transformation and questioning of social policies, and to do so by opening up a dialogue with other cities; it enabled Chevrier to further his historical research into photography and the city, within a context of analysis of the status of the “document” on the one hand, and into the collaborative and experimental practices that his seminar fostered on the other; and, for Faigenbaum, a photographer who described himself as a portraitist, it provided a broader field in which to develop his line of work based on the idea of “urban portraits” that he had started in Prague and Bremen several years earlier.

Something that had begun by chance was beginning to take the shape of a project. The aim was to depict an urban transformation process affecting the eastern seafront of the city, and not just a specific neighbourhood or community. The photograph-taking process gradually adopted a methodology based on journeys that Roca and Faigenbaum did on foot, and on discussions around the pictures taken. Faigenbaum found himself engaged in a work programme established by Roca, based on his work of

the historic trajectory of contemporary Barcelona and, in particular, the history of neighbourhoods along the coast. That vision also took into account the needs expressed by the different associations or bodies that met at the Fòrum de la Ribera del Besòs. All of that happened at a unique juncture, that is to say, around the urban transformation after the Olympic Games of 1992 to the Besòs, with the commercial and luxury residential complex of Diagonal Mar, with operations driven following the 2004 Universal Forum of Cultures and in the neighbourhoods of La Catalana, leaving aside La Mina, as well as the interventions linked to the opening of arterial road called La Diagonal by Poblenou to the sea and 22@ project, the aim of which was to transform the industrial neighbourhood of Poblenou into a district of new technologies and cultural industries. Together, those operations led to the emergence of a large, middle and upper-class zone of new centrality right in the heart of an area whose historic trajectory since the 19th century had been the exact opposite: a working-class industrial zone. In that context, Faigenbaum and Roca's project opened up the possibility of creating a unique document of a historic process that had to be questioned and depicted.

The journal entitled *Des territoires en revue* had begun to be published in May 1999, the function of which was to document the "Des territoires" seminar's activities and the debate process that would culminate in an exhibition of the same name. In April 2000, the journal's front page and central section were given over to *Barcelone vue du Besòs* (Barcelona, Besòs

View), which included a selection of photographs, a text written by Joan Roca outlining the urban history of contemporary Barcelona and of the working-class industrial neighbourhoods along the coast, from Poblenou to El Besòs. Also published was a short text by Faigenbaum, in which he highlighted the continuity of the method that he had used for the work on Bremen, although he noted that, in the case of Barcelona, Roca had established a precise plan for its implementation. “Joan had a daily work plan that we both tried to follow and it was like a script. My position was that of a cinematographic operator, to whom the scriptwriter and director left some margin for interpretation. That margin was enough for me, and its interest was in knowing how to make the most of the script’s constraints. Deep down, I have always been resistant to both the fragment and the map. Following a set path and an informed account was fine for me.”

In May 2000, the Fòrum de la Ribera del Besòs published the statement entitled *Per un pla alternatiu de la Ribera entre la Ciutadella i el Besòs. Manifest de les entitats i dels ciutadans i ciutadanes que es reuneixen al Fòrum de la Ribera del Besòs* (For an alternative plan for the waterfront between the neighbourhood of La Ciutadella and the Besòs River. A statement by the citizens who meet at Fòrum de la Ribera del Besòs). The statement compiled the demands of those citizens living in the neighbourhoods affected by the urban development process of not only the 22@ and Diagonal Mar operations, but also the one on the right bank of the Besòs River in Sant Adrià, including the

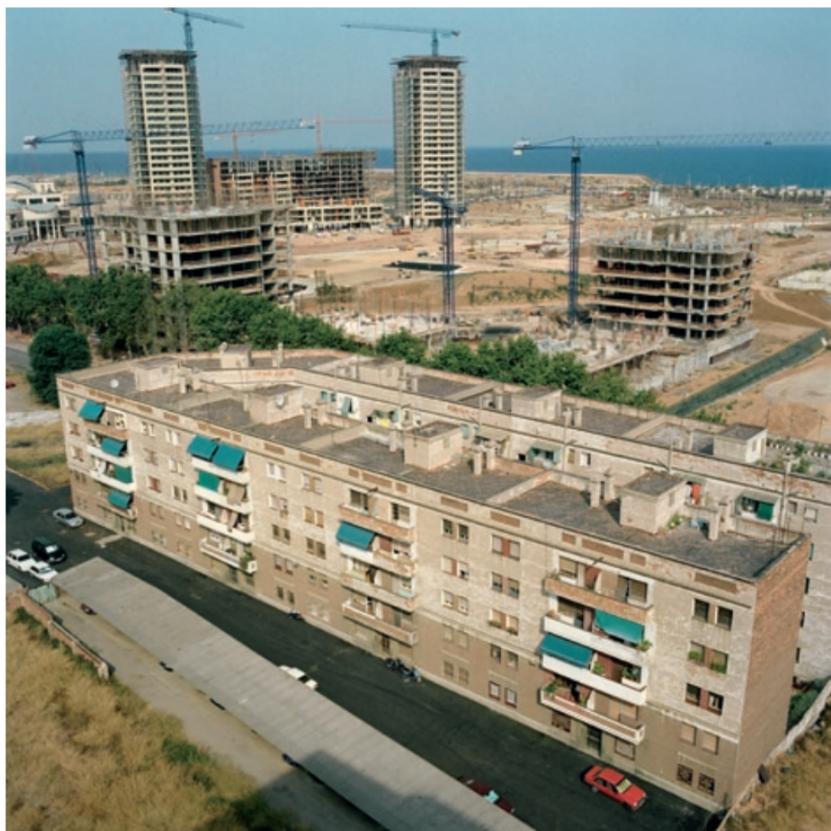


Esperanza Martínez, Institut Barri Besòs, 1999





La Escocesa, a former textile mill in Poblenou, May 2002
The entrance ramp to the Besòs weekly market, 2002



Macosa housing plus tower blocks going up
on the new Diagonal Mar, 2001

Universal Forum of Cultures project. Implicitly, it represented a criticism of the event, which was understood as a symptom of some of the municipal policies that gave priority to the promotion of the “Barcelona brand” rather than to social needs and which, as in La Mina neighbourhood, were largely neglected. The main picture was that of a young pupil at Institut Barri Besòs wearing a blue sweater. Her gaze into the camera was a call to account for the viewer and for the ingrained “heroic” stereotypes about the peripheral neighbourhoods.

On the occasion of the statement and with the support of the local federation of residents’ associations known as Federació d’Associacions de Veïns de Barcelona (FAVB), the Fòrum de la Ribera del Besòs called a press conference, which was reported in the print media. The press highlighted the innovative nature of the communicative methods used by that citizens’ protest: “Neighbourhood protests are getting more sophisticated”, was the news headline in one newspaper, which seemed to reflect a broader context of generalised transformation of the classic forms of social protest in Barcelona. The use of new technologies, and the appropriation and spinning of institutional propaganda marked a characteristic turn in how public visibility was given to the social conflict, which very quickly distinguished the new anti-capitalist or, at that time, “anti-globalisation” social movements. The scope of that turn became broader in 2000 and 2001, with the campaigns against the World Bank summit in June 2001.

In October 2001, the *Des territoires* exhibition was opened at the ENSBA. Some of the photographs from *Barcelone vue du Besòs* were shown there, though Faigenbaum also presented others taken in Paris. That show concluded a stage of the seminar that Chevrier had facilitated, and the publication of the journal *Des territoires en revue* came to end. The very last issue of it was a document or catalogue of the exhibition, and included a double page on *Barcelone vue du Besòs*. It was within that context that Roca and Faigenbaum intervened for a second time at the seminar. In that session, a debate was held on the role of portraits in the work and, in particular, on the proximity or distance of the images in relation to the subjects, an issue that had already been raised with regards to the emblematic image of the ramp at the Besòs market, to the collective dimension of the work, and to how the pictures formalised a collective subject, as represented in several different ways by the Institut Barri Besòs, the pupils and the Fòrum de la Ribera del Besòs, among others. Joan Roca concluded the debate by defending the idea that a “middle distance” was better suited to enabling a satisfactory analysis of the phenomena of urban mutation and the production of a different image of the city than the one offered by institutional publicity and propaganda.

After the initial trips in January and December 1999, Faigenbaum returned to Barcelona in May 2000, June and July 2001, and May and July 2002. Although he came back to Barcelona to take photographs in 2004 and again in 2005, 2007 and 2008,

the seminal nucleus of *Barcelona, Besòs View* could perhaps be situated in the period between January 1999 and autumn 2004. After the *Des territoires* exhibition in 2001, Faigenbaum held another show at his gallery in Paris, the Galerie de France, in autumn 2002. The exhibition was the first and, indeed, the last monographic exhibition of that work.

In 2004, shortly after the Universal Forum of Cultures was on, *Barcelona, Besòs View* was presented as a project in progress at the exhibition entitled *How do we want to be governed?* organised by MACBA and held at different venues around the Poblenou and Besòs area in response to the Forum operation. Throughout that process, the photographs were circulated in an unusual way within the artistic milieu and in conventional and activist media.

In 2006, MACBA launched a photographic project about Barcelona, which gave rise to the exhibition entitled *Universal Archive* that was presented in late 2008. As one of the artists invited to take part, Faigenbaum was commissioned to take portraits of the local elites. The commission meant that Faigenbaum had to travel to Barcelona again, and fairly regularly, between February 2007 and October 2008. Although those trips were organised mainly for the MACBA project, Faigenbaum returned to the Besòs area to photograph what Joan Roca considered issues that had yet to be completed. They were the last photographs of the project, and included the 2005 conflict of the Can Ricart factory, which, at that time, capitalised on the citizen debate about historical legacy and the city's productive model. The later images

show a new lightness. In addition, they are organised into small sequences or groups, and no longer as single or synthetic pictures.

It is difficult to establish an end for the project. Rather, there seems to be an evolving process which Roca and Faigenbaum see changing situations. *Barcelona, Besòs View* has been an unfinished (and unfinishable) idea, since it was more of an instrument and new working method that provided a complex and useful analysis, for contribute to transformation a public imaginary. As an art project, somehow it is something additional, a retrospective construction, and that makes it hard to measure in terms of the usual critical variables. Instead, it is a document *sui generis* of Barcelona's urban transformation in the beginnings of the 21st century and after the Olympic Games, whose function was to accompany a cycle of political and institutional experimentation.

Barcelona, Besòs View is a project developed in cooperation
with the Museu d'Història de Barcelona (MUHBA)

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