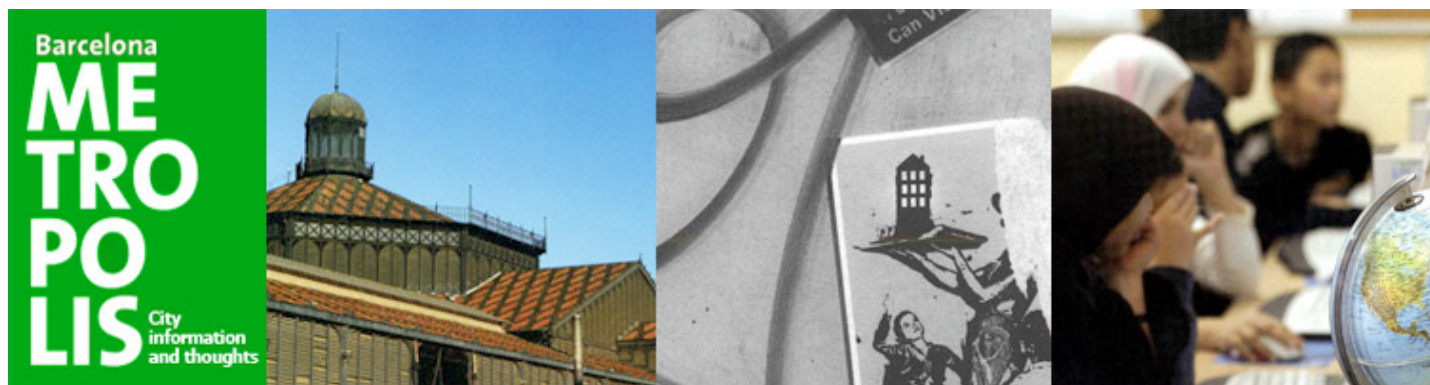
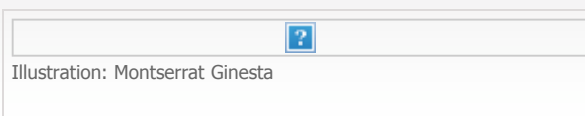


Català | Castellano | **English**

A City and Its Packaging

Text **Nick Rider** Journalist

In Exeter, a modest city in the west of England, there is now, as well as the Norman Cathedral, a very stylish modern design hotel. A monolithic former eye hospital from 1901 has been transformed into a series of chic rooms and spaces, with a carefully composed palette of pale and vivid colours. Beyond the surprise of seeing so much international 'design culture' in an English provincial city, another is its name: *Hotel Barcelona*. Asked why it's so called, the receptionist laughs. "There's no connection... The owner just liked the associations it gave...". For after all, what better label is there to suggest the peak of contemporary sophistication in one word?



And so the extraordinarily successful *Brand Barcelona* now wanders the world alone, as a global trademark of refined urban life, advanced design and Mediterranean hedonism. However, from what one hears nowadays, the omnipresence of their creation can leave many of Barcelona's own citizens feeling disorientated, sometimes alienated.

It can have the same effect on outsiders. Personally, and forgive the romanticism, I fell in love with Barcelona in the days when the Brand was just taking its first steps. Lewis Mumford wrote that one purpose of urban life was 'the intensification of experience'. By this standard, Barcelona was ideal. It was remarkably compact, laid out like a giant theatre below Tibidabo and Montjuïc. Within this space, Barcelona was not predictable, or homogenized. An essential part of its character was that it had been an industrial city, hard and dry rather than conventionally sophisticated. There was a hard-to-fathom relationship between its pleasures and the Catalan cult of seriousness. It always struck me as finely absurd that in a city where people talked so much about their *feina*, the view on summer nights was long dominated by the bright lights of two funfairs, on Tibidabo and Montjuïc. It was a contradictory, multi-layered place, not easy to pin down in a few simple phrases.

The emergence, in the early 80s, of *Brand Barcelona* took most people I knew by surprise. The Maragall Ajuntament covered the city in bright banners with that slogan *Barcelona més que mai*. "More than ever" - what does that mean? But it soon worked its way into our consciousness. Like all the best propaganda it appealed to the senses not the brain, and had a powerful, subtle impact while being spectacularly empty of meaning.

Many cities have their standard images: Paris the City of Light, New York the City that Never Sleeps. The peculiarity of Barcelona was that it acquired its new image through a concerted campaign. Public authorities acted as sponsors and hubs, commissioning major projects, but also rode on the back of all kinds of energies that emerged in those years, from the boom in design bars to newly adventurous chefs. Citizens were invited to participate, to identify with the newly cleaned-up Barcelona of ambition, style and primary colours. Selected aspects of the old Barcelona - like a newly-polished presentation of *modernisme* - and others that were completely new - the beach - were shaken together in the elusive yet seductive cocktail that would be *Brand Barcelona*. This new brand image was to be inclusive, so the project invited in everyone from the comic artists of the *Víboras* to Juan Antonio Samaranch.

In contrast, the new image was selective in its avoidance of conflictive elements that might suggest cracks in *Brand Barcelona's* sun-tanned face. Barcelona had been a rebellious, unsettled city, and was - a fact now ignored - the largest city in Europe to have undergone a serious attempt at social revolution within living memory. I know that a revolutionary upheaval, especially a defeated one, leaves deep wounds and few desires to repeat the experience. But, Barcelona's anarchism and other radical movements represented an outpouring of energy and imagination by the city's people, and were as much a part of its creativity as *modernista* glass. The newly-branded city, however, would give them minimal attention, except in a few exhibitions or the names of minor squares.

Barcelona's cycle of constant projects sustained its momentum at least up until the Fòrum of 2004, an event based on the premise that by then Barcelona had become so important that whatever it did the world would automatically consider it a marvel. Official voices regularly suggested Barcelona had the key to all the problems of the post-industrial city.

In the early 1990s I moved from studying anarchism to writing travel guides. It might seem naïve, but I didn't see myself as part of the promotion of Barcelona as a brand. The idea was more that a group of writers, outsiders but with a close knowledge of the city, would help travellers make discoveries rather than just negotiate clichés. *Brand Barcelona* initially seemed just a curiosity, like any ad campaign, but soon became unavoidable, an obligatory point of reference that you had at least to react to whenever writing about Barcelona. Supposedly an expression of the city, it reduced its realities to a few images and sensations that became increasingly inflexible with time, a jealous set of new clichés that demanded that you see Barcelona only through the prism of its new, brittle coolness.

It is in no way my intention to sneer at the extraordinary transformations carried out through the 'Barcelona Model': it represented a comprehensive programme of action that was not afraid to be extraordinarily ambitious, which is why it so fascinated and intimidated city authorities in other countries. The problem was when *project-ism* became an addiction, international self-promotion became its own justification, and lines became ever more blurred between civic renewal and the model's role as a commercial operation.

Another problem was that Barcelona's grand project was for long intolerant of criticism or even questioning, especially from foreign observers, revealing a classic psychological combination of arrogance underlain by neurotic insecurity. City representatives could react to even gentle questions that diverged from official optimism - on, for example, the value of Barcelona's drive to attract the cruise ship business - with suspicion or even hostility. It was virtually inadmissible to notice flaws in the ideal city, such as the mediocrity of much of its second-line new architecture, or the strong scent of authoritarianism about the Barcelona project, from the first days when neighbourhood groups who asked for green spaces instead of concrete-and-metal were given lectures on their ignorance of modern architecture, to the eradication of the Montjuïc funfair just because it was *cutre*.

The Barcelona Model had huge social ambitions - first of all, that of rejuvenating an old city while keeping existing communities in place - but failed to foresee the sheer scale of the success of *Brand Barcelona*. Here it may seem the peak of hypocrisy for any guidebook writer to complain that huge numbers of people visit the place they wrote about. I can only say: guilty. Everyone failed to foresee the everyday effects of Barcelona's immensely fashionable *cachet*, in the soaring price of housing, speculation, or the seizure of its once so-individual shops by corporate chains.

Does Barcelona still want its brand? *Project-itis* has run out of energy and purpose, but the Brand still draws in visitors, even though Barcelona may no longer know what to do with them all. As I said earlier, though, *Brand Barcelona* now has its own life and can go off on adventures of its own, as one shiny global product among many. Barcelona itself, meanwhile, could let it go, be a bit less neurotic, give up all self-promotion for at least five years, and think of other things, such as how to be genuinely inclusive rather than simply creating the impression of being so, or treating those aspects of the city shunned by the Brand with less contempt. To do otherwise would be to believe everything you see in advertising. And only idiots do that.

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