
A Public Realm Toolkit

The Public Space Guide for planning, designing and managing

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This paper evaluates different methods for defining strategies towards public space based, on the one hand, on the analysis of physical and functional spaces and, on the other hand, with a transversal vision that encompasses planning, design and management. From a critical analysis of the application on two case studies that have tested different models are distinguished propose improvements and recommendations for future strategic projects.

KEYWORDS: Public space, urban design, public realm strategy, planning, management

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1. Working on public space

The growing interest on issues related to the public space is evident. And not only from the point of view of experts, but what's more relevant: the interest showed by citizens on taking part in urban transformations, as well as the consequent politicians' aim to enrolle them in urban processes.

In short, the number of actors who play an important role in envisioning public spaces in the years to come, has positively increased. So it is asking for a useful tool which incorporate human dimension and expertise in multicriteria decision making.

1.1 The human dimension

So far, it seemed that the public space was designed exclusively for technicians, together with the local authorities. Gradually, however, the human dimension is changing from being a passive element, filling holes between buildings to define how it should be. Not just by citizen desires, but also by their own actions and movements, as an indissoluble part of the process.

We believe in incorporating this vision in our daily practice, so we take it as a starting point.

Our presence, our walks, and our activities are drawing the public space, as well as forms we design as architects. And even more, our demands for hanging out, socializing, delighting the passing scene – working-class urban residents¹– or for a quiet street as a gateway to our homes – as a middle and upper class gentrifiers-. have to be a key issue.

1.2 Decisions making on public space

In response to these new emerging demands, the local authority have taken consciousness of the importance of having quality urban environments. Even more, they are aware of the financial and administrative difficulties to manage complexity of public spaces with efficiency and efficacy.

Facing up these new dimensions, it's a proper question to ask for the mechanisms available in order to achieve quality public spaces, and specifically, which are the criteria which processes of decision making had to be based on.

In daily practice at the Catalan nation, public space is worked by local authority, basing on rules and regulations from different levels of government and managed by sectorial plans, regarding to mobility, accessibility, policy uses, etc.

Generally, local authority, from its managerial role, addresses these subjects on public space only from the standpoint of urban design. But mostly it lacks an overall vision that also embraces functional aspects, as a holistic approach that would positively impact on its quality.

In the same way, economical criteria use to gain a big weight in the decision making, instead of a multi-criteria data – such as social, environmental, or sustainability - that should help to get more balanced results, in terms of groups of citizen taking profit from them.

From our point of view, it is increasingly obvious the need to complete and justify decisions regarding the arrangement and regulation of public spaces as follows:

- On the one hand, in order to avoid the homogenisation of urban places, it is necessary to find mechanisms to capture the identity of the site, tools hitting its character and, of course, a quality urban design that reflects the city image envisioned by all stakeholders.
- On the other hand, we appeal for a comprehensive view in planning all aspects that have something to do with public realm, for solving the need of anticipate its future management, and, of course, for getting an urban design as a suitable answer to all planning and management issues, as well as to citizen desires and needs.

Overall, it lacks a global toolkit that draw an approach about how our public space should be and work; a transversal strategy that would take into account all issues affecting its functional and physical configuration, and would provide with arguments, coming from different interests: citizen, workers, dealers, etc.

2. A useful toolkit for envisioning public space

With this aim of achieving a quality public space - in terms of being inclusive, accessible, contextualized, mixed, sustainable, nice, secure and efficient - from a global perspective, URBANING, a consulting urban agency, has developed a working document based on a methodology adapted to the needs explained on the firsts chapter.

This new guide it's supposed to help local authorities to define crossed approaches about the question of public space, current evaluation tools and providing real proposals for implementation.

Specifically, this document should pursue following objectives:

- How to define the character of public space through analyses of the existing place, referred either to an specific site, an area in the city, a whole municipality or even a region. In this sense, work scale will determine the proper methodology, tools needed and also it will draw a social map, which will help experts to identify the actors of the process.
- Which strategies should be taken into account, not just linked with urban design, but also envisioning planning documents which help to embrace all issues influencing, direct or not, the behaviour of a public realm, and also envisioning a sustainable management of the area, not just based on maintenance and environmentally aspects, but economical, social, and human resources, as well.

Especially on the proposals, this document should put the accent on solving or improving those problematic aspects identified by any of the actors, even though it would entail underlying those no needed for this site.

In this sense, the flexibility of the methodology and the content of the document as well, should be an inherent goal of the process. Above all, this guide has to be a useful tool – technical and theoretical - for all of those stakeholders with the power of making decisions regarding to public space. In this sense, it should contain best practices, rather than determining a final picture about how the place should look like.

In order to answer properly to those questions, and to assess the validity of this methodology designed by URBANING team, it has been rehearsed two pilot tests in the context of Catalonia:

- The first pilot test took place in the historic centre of Igualada, a medium size town, located western from Barcelona. It was commissioned and promoted by Barcelona Provincial Council, altogether with the local authorities.
- The second one was rehearsed in Las Ramblas in Barcelona, was sponsored by the Old Town District of the City of Barcelona, as a part of an Action Plan for La Ramblas, known as "Pla Cor". It was developed into two different phases: the preliminary studies, which laid the foundations of the Action Plan – and the public consultation carried out with the aim of setting the scope and goals of the project.

As a consequence, we will conclude this article identifying the challenges provided by those experiences, and also some failures detected.; we should be able to set a new starting point from where we could improve new approaches.

In short, it will be proposed a theoretical - practical thinking about how we deal with the public realm, as architects or urban planners, together with local authorities, in order to achieve a toolkit to get a quality life within cities.

3. The case of Igualada

It was chosen the historic centre of Igualada, a city located western from Barcelona. Specifically, it's a historic urban fabric with a rich public space which had been carefully treated by officials working on public space issues over the past 20 years. This area of 150 hectares, besides, includes a textile industrial colony, dating from the early last century. This site is currently unused and immersed in an interesting revaluation process led, on one hand by locals, who drive annual public actions, and on the other hand, by the city council, who tried to anticipate future strategies by designing the Master Plan for the whole city.

Altogether, this place contains special features which had to be put in value by identifying features as a part of the built heritage, physical and mental, of the city.

3.1 The involvement

Through the initiative of Urbaning team, commissioned by a supra municipal body referred to Barcelona's Council (Diputació de Barcelona), it was given the opportunity to develop a Public Realm Strategy, in order to evaluate the suitability of working public spaces in a global and crossed way.

The aim was encouraging the municipality into the process, in order to reach a good consensus for the document that should be coming from a three way dialogue: URBANING team, city council and Diputació de Barcelona, monitoring the content quality and the satisfaction of both parts.

3.2 The approach

3.2.1 Work scale

Consequently, as an extensive area, the work scale required a methodology that encompasses a more general problem, based on three areas: analysis, diagnosis and proposals; focused on planning, design and management, as subjects to work on.

3.2.2 Methodology

In this case, the council of Igualada was asking for strengthen the standpoint of **design**. It was very clear that the goal was generating a working local tool, which could give recommendations when intervening in public space. That is why it was so relevant, in this specific case, to emphasize the guidelines for urban places to be designed. Planning and management role in a second place, as a Master Plan was into the approval proceedings, and supposed to solve all these issues.

Under these premises, we propose to design a document which could work as a tool for the council to get a powerful image of the public spaces of the area, not just projecting an homogeneous character, but emphasizing the values of each part, having always in mind the belonging to the whole, in terms of urban fabric and human collective.

3.3 The model

From an initial assessment, the **first part of the strategy** did an exhaustive analyse of planning, design and management, and highlighted design issues.

The **second part of the strategy** made a diagnosis of the starting point that had been analysed. Facing the disjunctive of whether to try to standardize the guidelines, in order to give some kind of continuity to urban design in the centre, or diversify them. This fact led us to conclude establishing different categories in defining performance criteria, as follows:

- Morphologically, urban areas were classified into different categories depending on urban fabric.
- Functionally, key axis crossing the area, belonging to different street hierarchies were identified as well.
- And as urban icons, those places that had an special meaning for locals, were noted and also treated as separate special areas.

Finally, **the third part**, regarding the guidelines, was worked in three stages:

- First of all, we performed an inventory, together with local technicians working for the municipality, of paving, street furniture, etc.. that had been being used successfully in the city so far. The result was a sort of an open catalogue, dynamic enough to replace those obsolete items or incorporate, with time, new ones.

- Secondly, we propose the working document to be a best practice guide, rather than a compendium of strict design rules. In this sense, we defined the minimum accessibility rules, coming from an state law - those regarding to distances among urban furniture -; all in all addressed, specifically, for people with other capacities.
- And from them on, we propose, in order to manage properly all recommendations that had been given:
 - Improvements to be done in several aspects, - such as urban furniture arrangement, uses of ground floors, or paving criteria - depending on if it was an specific urban fabric, or an axis or a singular place.
 - We dispose a table which will help the user of the guide to choose which urban element should be selected to be settled in the public space they were working on, as shown in the figure below.

4. The case of Las Ramblas de Barcelona

Speaking of the Rambla is only talking about a more or less important streets of Barcelona, is the communion part of the city's history forged through their citizens. Activities carried out, the historical context, heterogeneous environment and a complex metabolism make this place unique in the city.

And it is, precisely, this complexity that has led to generate various tensions throughout history is present along the promenade and needed to be solved from a global perspective.

4.1 The involvement

As a request of the Barcelona's Old Town Project Manager Team, URBANING was asked to design an approach to the case of Las Ramblas, in order to improve the coexistence of any kind of users attending, specially, to its diversity. Altogether, it happened to be a big challenge for our team to make a deep thinking about how to manage a complex public space like that.

Along with this assignment, City Council was planning to start with a future ambitious action program known as "Pla Cor" that, as a planning document guiding all those actions needed, from the managerial ones, to design urban landscape issues.

4.2 The approach

4.2.1 Work scale

The character of the Rambla is strongly marked by its context: Old Town district. La Rambla is the main connector of two historic neighbourhoods of Barcelona, Raval and Gothic, and one of the gateways to the sea.

In this sense, on the one hand we were treating with a place where a wide range of issues were converging, amplified by its intensity of use. And on the other hand, the work scale was reduced, by city council requirements, as framed to the length and width of the promenade, although, as explained, its influence was spreading much further.

4.2.2 Methodology

At first, the proposal made by the government was about to collect information and data regarding to La Rambla, put it together establishing valid criteria to be classified, and conclude with what was supposed to be the first milestone for "Pla Cor".

From this point on, URBANING team proposed a public realm strategy pointed a final goal: getting this urban place back for the citizens of Barcelona.

Basically, the aim of the strategy was helping Old Town District Manager Team to get a clear picture of all all those issues regarding to La Rambla, which could have any influence in the construction of its public realm, physical and functional; from the most simple one, as choosing a bulb to change in a lamp, to the most complex one as rethink its cross section. And also helping them to coordinate all those actions needed to be implemented, bearing in mind the "Pla Cor".

Finally, it is important to emphasized that, in this case, the most important area of work was regarding to planning. Design issues, although had been analyzed in detail in the working document, will not be highlighted on the proposals. It is obvious its relevant role when arranging public space, but in this case. planning and managerial strategies had to be considered in a very first place.

4.3 The model

In this case, the project was conducted on two stages:

- The preliminary studies
- The public consultation

4.3.1 Preliminary studies

First of all, we outlined a concept map to draw a starting point picture. It was built as a shelf formed by as many drawers as issues to be addressed, and fill it with content.

This framework was divided into six fields, associated to six working streams (axis). In turn, every one of these axis were divided into subgroups as follows:

- Transport : Mobility axis: Public Transport and Private Transport
- People: Social axis: Social Groups and Social Actions
- Activities: Activities axis: foreseen and unforeseen uses
- Physical and natural environment: Axis Morphology: content and continent
- Culture and leisure: Knowledge Axis: Information and Entertainment
- Governance axis: Priority Management: Administrative Management and Mediation

And similarly, every one of those subgroups were containing a list of topics to be studied in detail separated.

Secondly, we divided the document in three sections, with a pedagogical vocation, foreseeing the future public consultation:

- Introduction: describing the whole understanding of a public realm, and the working document intention of being a useful tool helping the “makers” of public space, such as users, technicians, politicians, etc.
- Analyze: where each one of the six axis were studied in detail, taking the topics as the base of the preliminary studies.
- Diagnose: it was structured, in turn, in two parts. The first one pointed the values, challenges and common problems of La Ramba. Whilst the second one was conclude as a SWOT analysis of each axis.

And finally, together with politicians involved in the process, we draw the goals needed to be reached by the “Pla Cor”, establishing a direct correspondence between the SWOT and every one of the topics listed for each field.

4.3.2 Public consultation

This process was not designed by we, the URBNAING team, but by the City Council Project Manager. That is why we will not explained it in detail on this paper, as we were invited just presenting the Preliminary studies.

Although, we consider important to highlight this process and outline how did it work, in the sense that the involvement of collectives invited was very much significant for the guidelines that will be defined in the “Pla Cor” to come.

5. Critical analyse

The overall assessment of the first two pilot experiences implementing strategies to work towards the public space, has been very encouraging in several respects:

- **From our URBANING team perspective**, it has been a challenge being able to apply a holistic conception of public space, in a working document which has the vocation to serve all those actors involved in urban places, basically governments, and citizens.
- **From the standpoint of government**, professionals involved so far agree on the need for such a tool capable of defining a powerful image of the city, and also, on the need to work it in a sort of roadmap which guides best practices.
- **From the citizen point of view**, these guides are a unique opportunity to define a strategy to get a quote of influence on the decision making in public space.

5.1.1 Working in progress

More specifically, the processes led by our working team us to conclude as follows:

- **Regarding to the involvement** of the stakeholders in the process, it has been essential working together with local authorities, as the aim of the guide is to be part of their daily work toolkit.
- In the case of Igualada, was very enriching commitment of a supra municipal body as Diputació de Barcelona, mediating on confronted interests of experts and locals.
- In the case of La Rambla, also, was very useful to create a Management Team for "Pla Cor", to lead the process of developing the working document and conducting citizen involvement.

Regarding to the approach designed for each case, it has become very clear that there are no unique formulas structuring the working document, in the sense that it clearly depends on:

- Work scale, defined as the degree of detail of the analysis, diagnosis or proposals.
- Needs expressed by local managers, towards the public space, which forced the document to focus on planning, design or management, respectively.

Regarding to the applied model, the extension of the area analyzed in Igualada forced, rightly, to make a general analysis of the field, and the clear intention of the council to get a best practice design document for new public spaces led us to focus specially on design.

By contrast, for La Rambla we decided to work by thematic axis, due to its complexity, as well as a more detailed work scale, and to base proposals on planning and management.

5.1.2 Promoting its values and addressing its weakness

In relation to involvement, from our point of view it would be necessary, firstly, to involve the citizenship, in order to get a clearer idea of how they make public space work, and which are their aspirations and priorities.

In both cases, public consultation has been underplayed and just in Rambla's process some sessions took place in order to validate the goals drawn by politicians together with the experts.

And secondly, it has been very interesting to have a supra-municipal body, as a mediator.

In analyzing the aspects, we highlight the importance of some issues, which ought to be worked deeply in future approaches:

- An analysis of pedestrian mobility and a careful analysis of the uses of the ground floor (not the zoning planning), to understand how they influence each other.
- And an environmental assessment based on comfort levels that should be analyzed as follows:
 - Accessibility levels for people with different abilities
 - Sound Levels
 - Lighting Levels
 - Feeling of insecurity
 - And the green in the cities, as a definitive indicator for quality in urban places.

Finally, in relation to proposals we propose to strengthen the following issues:

- On the one hand, the role of the concept of sustainability, as a crossed approach to planning strategies (visions of comprehensive recycling in cities, etc.), urban design (eco-design, introduction of energy alternatives to the operation of urban elements, etc.) as well as management tools available to local authorities (regulations, licenses, etc.).
- On the other hand, the introduction of information technology (IT) or the Internet of things, and their implementation on issues related to the management, planning and designing a quality urban open space network.

6. Notes

¹ ZEIGER, Mimi. *The interventionist's Toolkit*
<http://places.designobserver.com/feature/the-interventionists-toolkit/24308/>
[consulted in June, 2012].

7. Biography

Oriol Martori is a Landscape Architect since 2003 with qualifications in urban and regional studies and planning management. His professional experience has been developed both nationally and internationally, especially in the UK where he coordinated projects and urban planning, including master plans, the improvement of public space in historical centers, residential developments, urban regeneration and writing strategies from both the city area socio - economic and environmental. In the present, he co-manages URBANING dedicated to strategic planning, urban management and urban design. He coordinates projects about urban design and strategies the environment and public space.

Pere Mogas is an architect, graduated in the UPC (Technical School of Architecture of the Vallès) in 1983, with specialization in Urban Planning and Management. He started with his own office in 1984 and since then he has been being collaborating with several professionals from other disciplines, such urban law, sociology and engineers, in the area of Barcelona. He has also collaborated with the municipality of Sabadell in developing Sabadell Ripoll River Planning, Project Management in Urban Design works, Review of General Master Plan Sabadell. It's important to mention his collaboration with the Provincial Council in Local Housing Plans for several municipalities and many other local authorities, like Barcelona City Council, and private stakeholders. Since 2009, he co-manages URBANING, focused on the executive and strategic planning, and also urban management issues.

Mireia Peris is an architect graduated in the UPV (Universidad Politécnica de Valencia) in 2005. Her professional experience has seesaws between the practice as an architect and as an urban planner, both nationally and in specific collaborations in Germany. Throughout her academic training, she carried out a research in urban landscape framed on her doctoral work, carried out at present. She has been part of different research groups on urban and regional dynamics, and has participated in several congresses and training courses, always framed on the scope of planning territorial policies. He has recently collaborated with a public institute from the Catalan Government on developing urban plans. Since 2009, she co-manages URBANING team, focused on the strategic vision of urban plans and research issues on public space.