



Diego Pérez-García

Estudiante de Doctorado, Escola Tècnica Superior d'Arquitectura de Barcelona
Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya -
Universidad San Sebastián, Concepción, Chile
buzonarquitectura@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-8947-2953>

INHABITING THE WINDOW. THE SQUARE AS A ROOM IN BARCELONA

HABITAR LA VENTANA.
LA PLAZA COMO HABITACIÓN
EN BARCELONA

HABITAR A JANELA. A PRAÇA COMO QUARTO EM
BARCELONA



Figure 0. Squares of Vila de Gràcia, an archipelago of interiors. Source: Preparation by the Author.

RESUMEN

Las pequeñas plazas de barrio de Barcelona, tienen un papel determinante en la construcción del hábitat urbano de la ciudad. Su escala modesta y claridad espacial permite leerlas como habitaciones a cielo abierto, en cuyo interior se desarrollan incontables rutinas cotidianas. Utilizando el dibujo como herramienta de análisis, el presente artículo se centra en las fachadas que rodean estas plazas, para mostrar la importancia de la ventana más allá de lo funcional o morfológico. El texto muestra que, este elemento determina aspectos formales y significativos con el que se identifican sus habitantes. Al habitar la ventana, la plaza se nutre de las casas que la rodean, diluyendo los límites entre lo público y lo privado. Mediante la representación gráfica, se reconoce el valor de las ventanas y balconeras que, construyen un escenario sencillo y modesto donde la domesticidad compartida del espacio interior de la plaza, contribuye a la identidad social y formal de la ciudad de Barcelona.

Palabras clave: plazas, hábitat, morfología urbana, dibujo arquitectónico, Barcelona

ABSTRACT

The small neighborhood squares of Barcelona play a crucial role in shaping the city's urban habitat. Their modest scale and spatial clarity allow them to be seen as open-air rooms where countless daily routines unfold. Using drawing as an analytical tool, this article focuses on the facades surrounding these squares to illustrate the importance of the window beyond its functional or morphological aspects. The text shows that this element determines formal and meaningful aspects that resonate with their inhabitants. By inhabiting the window, the square draws nourishment from its surrounding houses, blurring the boundaries between public and private. Through graphic representation, the value of windows and balconies is recognized, building a simple and modest stage where the shared domesticity of the square's interior contributes to Barcelona's social and formal identity.

Keywords: squares, habitat, urban morphology, architectural drawing, Barcelona.

RESUMO

As pequenas praças de bairro de Barcelona desempenham um papel decisivo na construção do habitat urbano da cidade. Sua escala modesta e clareza espacial permitem que elas sejam lidas como salas ao ar livre nas quais ocorrem inúmeras rotinas diárias. Usando o desenho como ferramenta de análise, este artigo se concentra nas fachadas que circundam essas praças para mostrar a importância da janela além do funcional ou morfológico. O texto mostra que esse elemento determina aspectos formais e significativos com os quais os moradores se identificam. Ao habitar a janela, a praça é nutrida pelas casas que a cercam, diluindo os limites entre o público e o privado. Por meio da representação gráfica, o valor das janelas e sacadas é reconhecido, construindo um cenário simples e modesto em que a domesticidade compartilhada do espaço interior da praça contribui para a identidade social e formal da cidade de Barcelona.

Palavras-chave: praças, habitat, morfologia urbana, desenho arquitetônico, Barcelona.

From the window: actors and spectators

A tomb has no windows. The window shows that one lives there; life is impossible without light and air. The window is the eye of the room towards the street. On the facade of the building, we distinguish the rooms by counting the windows. The window is a place. (Monteys, 2014, p.132)

Looking out of the window involves not only observing but also being observed. These reciprocal looks play a fundamental role in the construction of public space, where we are, at the same time, actors and spectators. Seeing and being seen allow mutual recognition, connecting others with us. Only in this way can we build a common habitat with which we identify ourselves. In the words of Hannah Arendt: "The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves" (2016, p.60).

This is precisely what happens in the modest and straightforward neighborhood squares scattered throughout the urban fabric of Barcelona. Through this visual recognition among the inhabitants, the public dimension of the square is integrated with the private life that appears on the facades of the houses that make up the perimeter. Halfway between a small square and a large room, these urban enclosures embody that communal room that Louis Kahn (2003, p.255) expected from the street. By approaching the square as a room, it is proposed that we understand the square as the main interior space of Barcelona. Defined by the houses surrounding it, the square is a work of architecture based on other architectures, and as such, it can configure the physical dimension and the mental image of the interior space it contains.

In this sense, the window is an element that establishes relationships that go beyond the strictly pragmatic in terms of light or ventilation. In addition to eye contact, they can reveal times, habits, and sensory experiences that contribute to the domestication of public space. Not surprisingly, Kahn (2003, p.253) recognized the window as the most critical element of any room. In the case of these squares, the windows and balconies benefit the house and, more importantly, qualify the interior space of the square. Just as the house's rooms look at the square, this, in its condition of room, looks inside the rooms surrounding it. For this reason, the facades of the square's perimeter are, at the same time, the stage and the box of an everyday theater that takes place inside this urban enclosure.

Therefore, the squares addressed here could be defined as minor squares instead of the traditional Spanish Main Squares. Instead of

the institutional buildings or the uniform and controlled composition typical of the Main Squares (Rincon García, 2008, pp. 157-178), these small squares of Barcelona are surrounded by different houses. They are the ones that define their domestic condition. The fieldwork is done inside the square, redrawing the facades to reconstruct the perimeter graphically. The square is approached from the surrounding constructions through the representation of these interior settings. It is precisely in these walls, where the windows and balconies are an inhabited place, that articulates dualities such as public-private, individual-collective, and house-city, and that, mistakenly, are usually considered as separate.

Unfolded boxes: a method for thinking with drawing

In methodological terms, collecting information to prepare the representations used several sources of information. The first and most important is fieldwork: staying in the square. The facades are measured, inventoried, and drawn for hours, taking notes of elements and observing the dynamics inside this room. In other words, the main input is the experience of the square itself. Inhabiting them allowed getting to know their daily dynamics and, as it will be seen later, to access the perimeter rooms surrounding it. Thus, the city, the public space of Barcelona, is an incredible archive. Along with the cartographic surveys, the information is contrasted and complemented with traditional graphic and documentary archives, such as municipal and historical archives, as well as photographs and planimetry available in libraries and digital records. Similarly, remaining inside these spaces has generated small ties with their inhabitants, allowing access to their windows and improvised conversations. When writing this article, the research considers about fifty squares scattered around the different neighborhoods of Barcelona.

The research understands and represents the square as an unfolded interior. Thus, the representation acts as a tool for observation and spatial analysis, and from there, reflections emerge. The drawings show the morphology, defined by the pattern of windows that emerges from the facades, and that, thanks to the topological relationships they establish, configure the square as an interior room, usable as such. In the systematic approach of the drawings and the accumulation of cases that, for reasons of space, only some are presented allows for establishing similarities and differences that evidence the formal logic of these open-air rooms. In this way, the collection of figures directly shows what the text cannot say with the same clarity.

As if they were open boxes and extended on the paper's two-dimensional surface, the vertical planes of the facade walls fall directly on their position on the floor plan (Figure 1). In this way, the

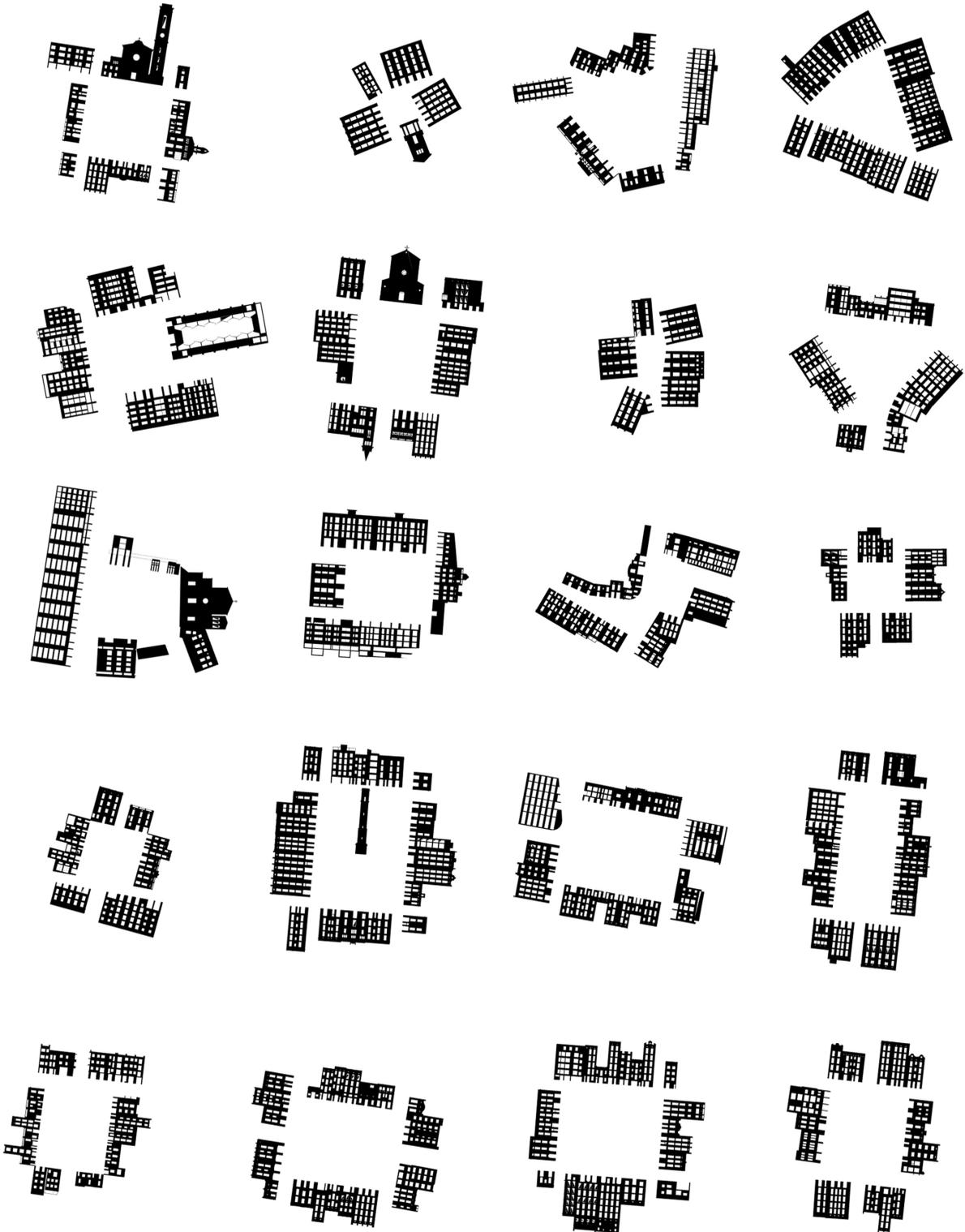


Figure 1. Interiors of Squares in Barcelona displayed as boxes.
Source: Preparation by the Author.

representation translates the three-dimensionality of the architectural object the square constitutes into a two-dimensional form that shows, in unison, both the interior space and the formal aspects that configure it. The elementary quality of the representations provides an accurate clarity that visually synthesizes the original shape of each square. This almost childish precision is precisely its primary value because, as Paul Klee recognized, the child draws as he thinks (Geist, 1950, p.191).

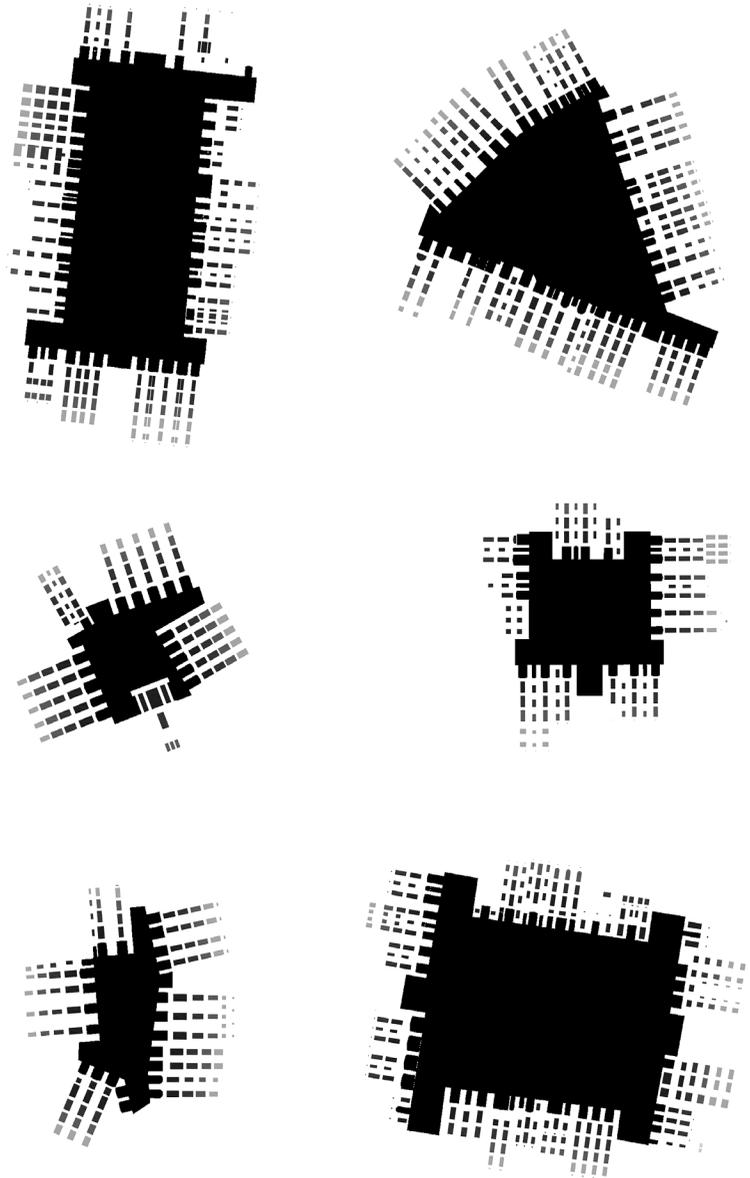
In the same sense, the research made separately by Laura Jacobus (1988) and Robin Evans (1989) on the interior drawings of 18th-century English architecture should be mentioned. In their respective articles, both recognize that these unfolded interiors represent not only architecture but, more importantly, a way of thinking about it. As both recognize well from their particular points of view, these drawings acknowledge the independence of the room compared to the system containing it. In this way, attention is focused on the internal relationships established by the surfaces that make up the enclosure. Similarly, when drawing the square from its interior, it is recognized as an autonomous piece within the urban fabric, and just as with the decorated walls of the English rooms, attention is paid to the constructions that enclose it, expressed in the facade walls of the perimeter.

However, unlike these English interiors, the drawings presented here are deliberately detached from the circumstantial design of the surface to underline the importance of the openings within the facades' plane. Similar to the representations of the Gestalt studies (Arnheim, 1954), the facade planes are uniformed by a continuous solid, as if it were perforated paper, thus forming a formally unified and recognizable piece. Nourished by this elementality, the representation makes explicit topological aspects of the shape of the square's interior space.

The first of them is that, thanks to the explicit figure-background relationship of the representations, we see how similar but not identical openings define a kind of pattern that unifies the perimeter. This simple pattern alternates the openings of one building to another, giving continuity not only to the facades on the same plane but also to all those surrounding the square. Accentuated by the modest dimensions of the plane, the proximity of the facades, and the geometric similarity of the openings, form a pattern that provides uniformity and compactness to the interior shape of the square. Thanks to this geometric similarity of the mostly vertical windows, a regular pattern prevails despite the visible differences in the buildings' profiles and heights.

The vertical proportion inevitably evokes the human figure that inhabits it. Through these windows and balconies, the upright silhouette

Figure 2. Window patterns inside the Plaça de la Revolució, Plaça George Orwell, Plaça de la Verònica, Plaça del Raspall, Plaça del Regomir, and Plaça de Rovira. Source: Preparation by the Author.



of the inhabitants appears from time to time on different balconies of the squares. Unlike the perfectly designed and controlled patterns of the “street-corridor” that Le Corbusier criticized (1963), the squares of Barcelona enjoy a certain irregularity that is nothing more than the imprint of a gradual building process, away from the significant urban planning interventions of places like Paris or London. In this way, the accident and the historical processes typical of any city are incorporated into the square’s formal richness (Figure 2).

Finally, seen as a set of isolated pieces, the facades show that these simple compositional elements somehow end up defining a common language of the city of Barcelona (Figure 3). This similarity between the facades, either by constructive or compositional factors, contributes to a certain morphological identity that relates the squares to each other and

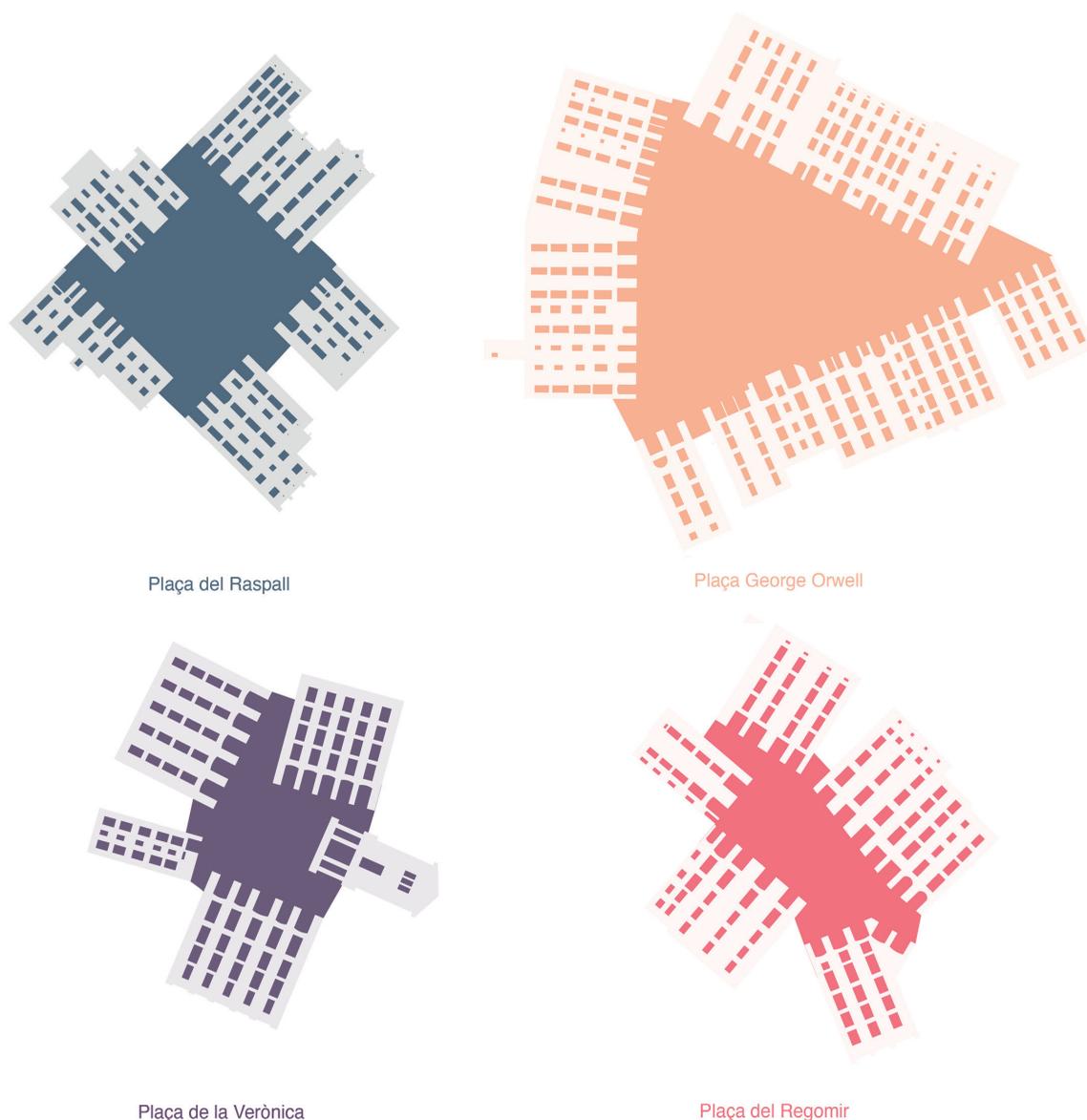


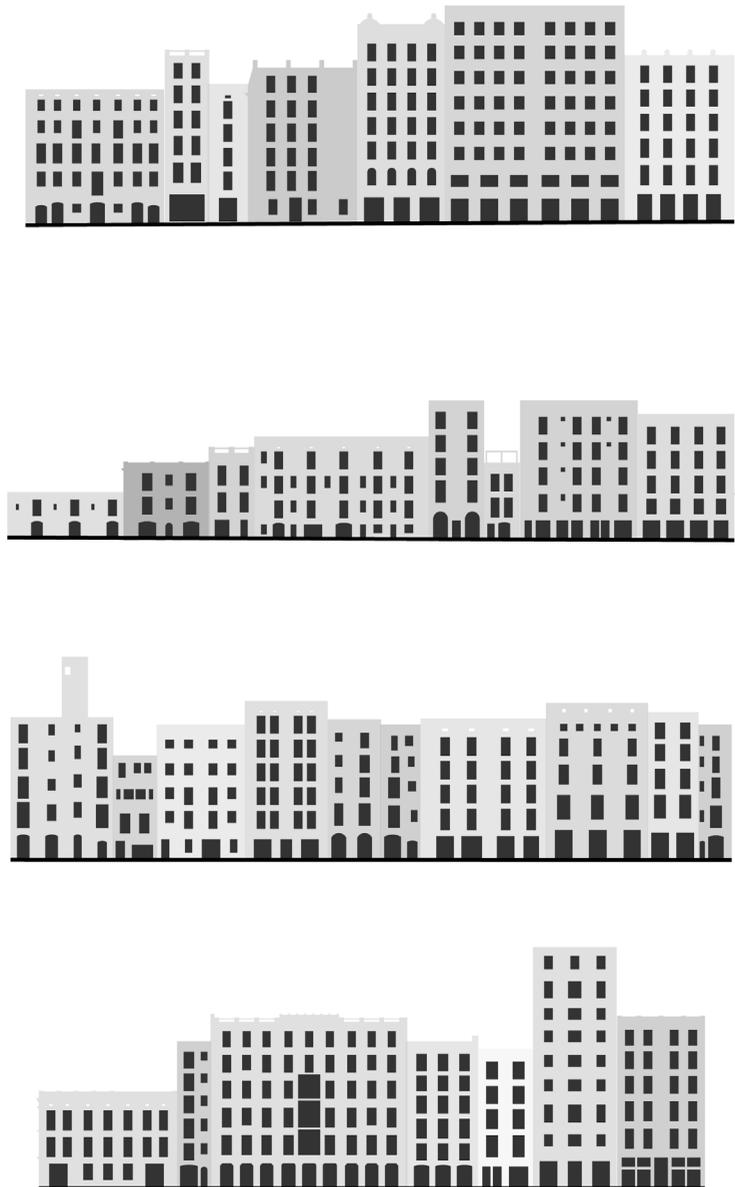
Figure 3. Comparison of vertical window patterns in four squares in Barcelona. Source: Preparation by the Author.

the city. Thus, for example, squares with different layouts, such as Plaça del Regomir, Plaça del Raspall, and Plaça George Orwell (Figure 4), share a common morphology where their perimeters, cohesive by the pattern of openings, clearly define the interior space they contain. Somehow, this almost handmade construction, expressed in the patterns of the buildings' windows and profiles, manages to incorporate the individuality and identity of each construction without losing the sense of collectivity that integrates it into the urban fabric of Barcelona.

A room made of rooms

From the city, the window is the visible imprint of the room. Therefore, in addition to the formal and compositional definition that they give to the facades and the limits of the square, it must be recognized that there is a

Figure 4. Common language of Barcelona's facades. Source: Preparation by the Author.



habitable interior behind each of these openings. In this way, the square is not only configured by the walls that delimit it but also qualified by the rooms behind them. According to Kahn (2003), the walls donated to the public space also provide its rooms. That is why, when we see the regular opening pattern surrounding the square, we are confirming a sequence of rooms that confine the inner space of the square. In other words, if the square is defined by its windows and these are the footprint of the rooms, the square is a room made of rooms.

These rooms qualify the interior space of the square and not vice versa. The presence of the house, through the windows that surround the enclosure, is one that, little by little, is taming the square. Thus, a

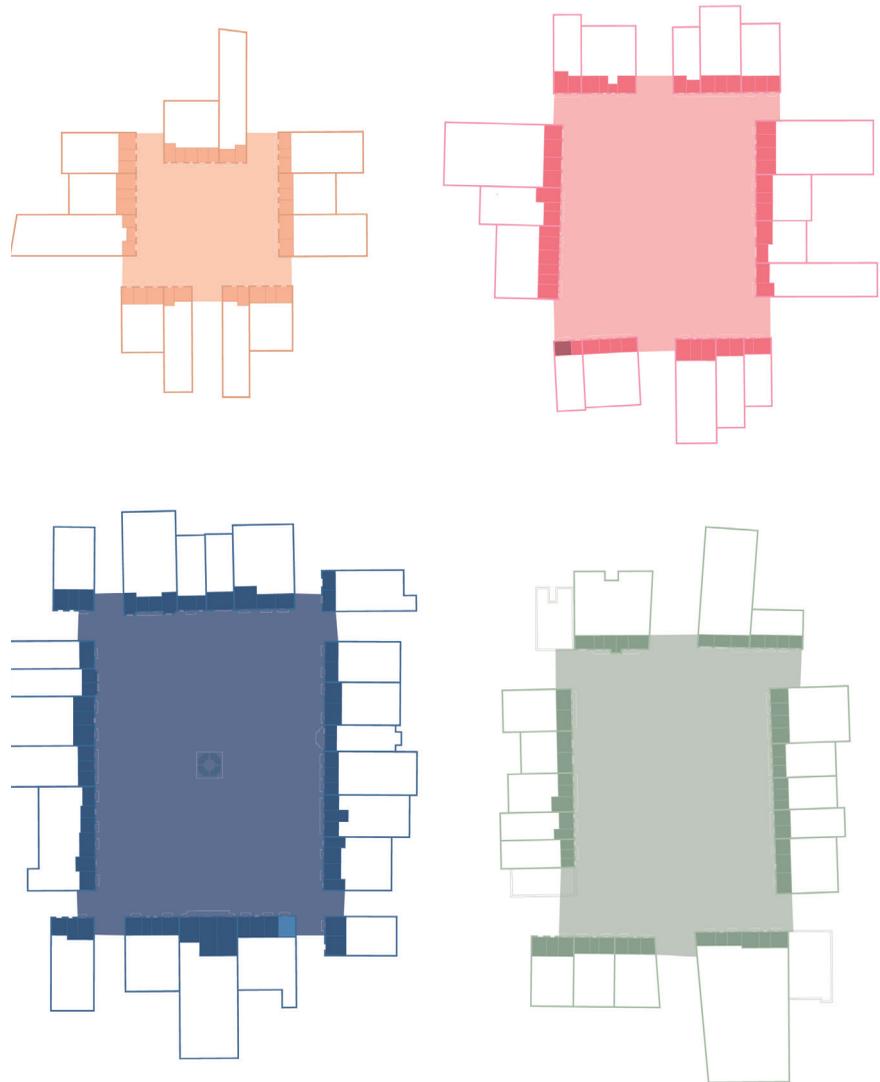
good square is not determined so much by the current urban design but by the relationship that it can establish between the buildings that surround it and its interior space. Therefore, if the rooms surrounding the square look into it from the other side, the square looks into each room's interiors. Hence, the domestic condition of these small neighborhood squares, because from the square, the glimpses of private space give an account of the daily dynamics of the houses: the inhabitants who peer out to look or smoke a solitary cigarette; the clothes hanging out that expose the most intimate of our closets; the plants that grow or die slowly according to the care they receive; barking of the pets clamoring for their daily walk through the square, are just some traces of the habits that are taming the interior space of the square.

The compactness of the square's shape and the partitioning between party walls in most Barcelona neighborhoods give greater importance to the window facing the square. In addition, except for the simple interior ventilation patios, these constructions are not directly related. As Van der Laan (1983) acknowledges, "The peripheral juxtaposition of houses enclosing the square does not allow direct communication between them" (p.167). In this way, the square is the first shared space of the houses surrounding it. According to the same author (1983), it is because of the peripheral arrangement of the houses around the square that also becomes "the first interior space at an urban level" (p.167).

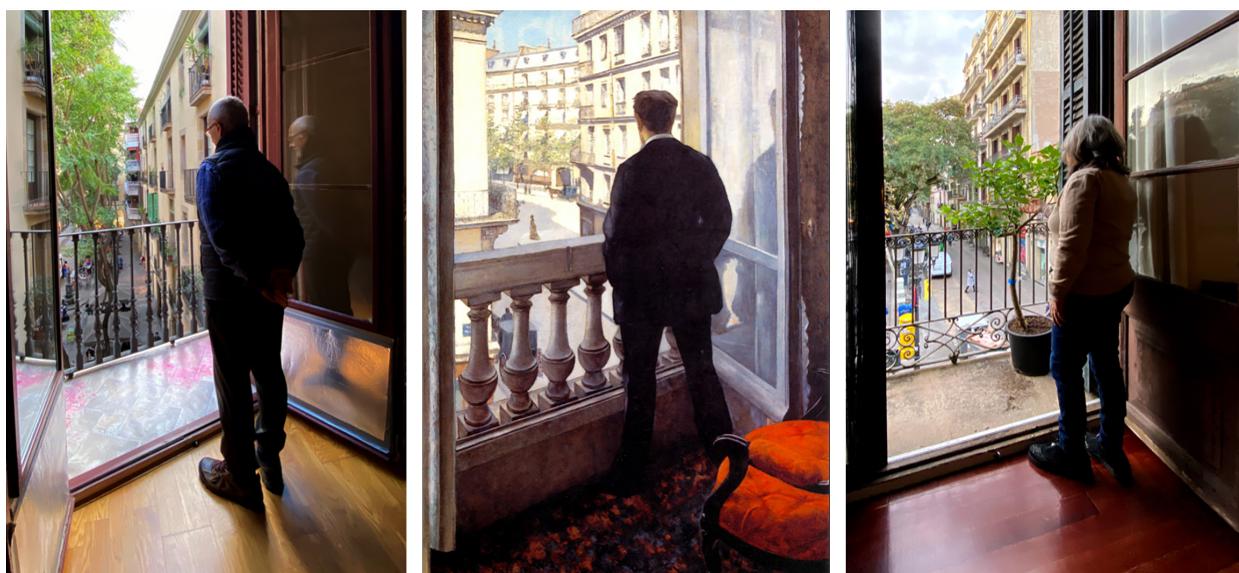
This interior condition of these modest squares is decisive in constructing the mental image of the space they contain. This situation allows looking at them as if they were rooms. As Sitte (1945) pointed out, "The essential thing about both the room and the square is the quality of the enclosed space" (p.20). This quality depends directly on the constructions that enclose this space and determine its qualities and potential uses. Therefore, surrounded by houses and rooms, these squares in Barcelona act perfectly as the main and shared rooms of the houses and, by extension, of the neighborhood that contains them.

As can be seen in the drawings (Figure 5), thanks to the arrangement indicated above, the rooms form an almost continuous ring around the square enclosure. As happens in Plaça del Diamant, Plaça de la Vila de Gràcia, Plaça Rovira i Trias, or the small Plaça del Raspall, the continuous sequence of enclosures is a regular crown where the public and private dimensions intersect. It is precisely this first crown that qualifies the interior space of the square and not vice versa. Being surrounded mainly by houses and not essential buildings, the interiors of these squares should be recognized as an extension and complement of the house's space. Inside the square is space for ordinary day-to-day events and those extraordinary events.

Figure 5. The first crown of rooms in Plaça del Raspall, Plaça del Diamant, Plaça de la Vila de Gràcia. and Plaça de Rovira i Trias. Source: Preparation by the Author.



This interior condition of the square contrasts clearly with that of the block yards of the Eixample district of Barcelona. With few exceptions driven by recent urban reforms, most of these yards have ended up almost entirely densified by the ground floor constructions, eliminating the possibilities of collective use. Unlike the square, the galleries and places of services surround the block-based square. In geometric terms, the irregularity of the aplomb in the facade planes destroys the continuity of the wall surface that the facades facing the street have. Also, the condition of controlled and, in some cases, non-existent accessibility to these spaces is decisive, unlike the free transit that sustains the square. The yards should be understood as an outdoor space inside the almost monolithic and regular blocks of the consolidated blocks of the Eixample district. On the contrary, the square is an interior space outside the architecture that built it, while the density of the urban fabric of Barcelona's neighborhoods accentuates this interior condition because we only see most of these squares when we are already inside them.



Looking between interiors: the window as a place and a testimony.

As in any room, the role of the window is fundamental. In the case of these Barcelona squares, through these windows and balconies, there is a double reciprocal and bi-directional relationship that is decisive for the domestic condition of this open-air room. Square and room, in their condition of interiors, look at each other, blurring the boundaries between the public and the private. In this way, the window allows looking between two interiors that intertwine the house and city in a single continuous habitat, as Van Eyck (2021) expected.

On the one hand, inside the house, the rooms surrounding the square directly behind the facade walls benefit from light, lighting, and views. This makes them the best room in the house, and therefore, the main daily routines are usually displayed in it. In this sense, contemporary social and economic dynamics, such as the breakdown of the traditional family unit, shared flats, or remote work, are becoming visible in these rooms that, in the past, were almost exclusively defined as the house's living room.

Similar to the painting, *Jeune homme à sa fenêtre* by Gustave Caillebotte from 1875 (Gleis, 2019), inhabitants such as Marisol in the Plaça de la Vila de Gràcia or Juan in the Plaça del Bonsuccès, standing at their windows, contemplate the theater of inner life of Barcelona, which is contained in the square (Figure 6). These records, the fruits of the research fieldwork, prove that the room facing the square is the privileged room of the house. Even these balconies, where the roles of actor and spectator are happily confused, the aroma of coffee shops in the morning, the bustle of children playing, or the regular bells of churches and clock towers sneak into the house, giving an account of the habits and times of the city.

Figure 6. Similar to Gustave Caillebotte's painting, Marisol and Juan inhabit the window as actors and spectators of the Plaça de la Vila de Gràcia and Plaça del Bonsuccès respectively. Source: Preparation by the Author.

On the other side, inside the square, these rooms and the routines that appear in them are the ones that, in some way, tame the square. Sitting in places like Plaça del Prim or Plaça del Raspall is enough to see that the window is more than a strictly visual relationship. From the interiors of the houses, the sounds of dishes, conversations, and laughter sharing a meal, whose smells we can perfectly recognize, it is seen that the window can articulate all kinds of sensory relationships. This is a sample of the bodily experience that means the human habitat that becomes present inside the square, blurring the boundaries where the space of the house begins and ends.

If during the day the house looks out of the window, during the night the square looks inside the house. It is no longer a question of the wise play of volumes under light proposed by Le Corbusier (1977, p.16) but of the random play of light under volumes. When the sun disappears, the facades are unified in a continuum, only glimmers of artificial light peeking out from the interiors and transforming the windows into small shop windows. Like many paintings by Edward Hopper (1942), solitary characters are seen eating or engrossed in their computers. Thus, the perimeter of the square is also an observatory of the house.

For this reason, in the squares, in addition to the recognition of others, in the public dimension, one recognizes oneself in the countless images of domestic life that peer out of the windows. Identified with those fleeting but familiar scenes, the square builds a sense of belonging. Through these fragments of our routines, visible in the lives of others, the physical form of the square and, by extension, of the city is building the mental image of a room that we recognize as our own. Thus, the house looks at the inside of the square, and the square looks at the inside of the house.

Inhabiting the window: taming the square.

The representations included here show that the window, in addition to being a compositional element, formally and architecturally defines the square, establishing relationships beyond the strictly visual. In addition, the set of displays shows specific formal patterns typical of Barcelona's facades, offering a new reading of the city.

Through these openings, a series of daily routines are visible, both of the square and of the house and, therefore, public and private. So, in these rooms, the inhabitants are settling the daily habits that build a recognizable habitat as such. The permanence and repetition of the routines build the domestic dimension of the square.

This record, which has not existed until now, means a revaluation of these spaces, both in their morphological condition and ability to constitute a quality community space with which the inhabitants



identify. This sense of appreciation and attachment gives these modest neighborhood squares a fundamental role in shaping the social and cultural dimension of the city of Barcelona.

Seen as a whole, both on a neighborhood and city scale, these authentic open-air rooms account for non-strictly planned nuclei that serve as a referential map within the urban fabric. A unique example is the Vila de Gràcia neighborhood. Each square is recognizable as an autonomous piece (Figure 7). Its spatial, cohesive, and autonomous form should be recognized as a domestic

Figure 7. Squares of Vila de Gràcia, an archipelago of interiors. Source: Preparation by the Author.

interior on an urban scale. Thus, the fragmentary origin of the ancient town (Serra Riera, 1995) is evident in its squares as a whole. The ambiguity and functional indeterminacy of these interior spaces, evidenced by the deliberate absence of representations, give them the potential to be occupied in the most diverse ways. This shows that it is not so much the current urban design (furniture, pavements, trees, or any other almost decorative element) that qualifies the public space, but instead, it is the architecture that builds it.

As described, the formal, visual, and perceptual relationships established in the perimeter's windows and balconies allow the square to be able to build, like any room that prides itself on such, the physical and mental dimension of the space it contains. Beyond the functional or pragmatic of everyday uses, the square establishes significant, semantic, historical, and political relationships that allow and promote the development of the most banal habits. By inhabiting the window, we are taming the square through our daily experience. According to Van Eyck (2021), these squares are "a handful of real places for real people and things" (p.70). Precisely, there lies the almost poetic beauty of these places that can construct such a common scenario, caught between so much theory and paradigmatic works that we have forgotten to see.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

Arendt, H. (2016). *La condición humana*. Paidós

Arnheim, R. (1954). *Arte y percepción visual*. Alianza Editorial

Evans, R. (2005). *Traducciones*. Editorial Pre-Textos.

Geist, H. (1950). Paul Klee und die Welt des Kindes. *Das Werk: Architektur und Kunst*, 37, 148-165.

Gleis, R. (2019). *Gustave Caillebotte: The Painter Patron of the Impressionists*. Hirmer-Verlag.

Jacobus, L. (1988). On 'Whether A Man Could See before Him and behind Him Both at Once': *The Role of Drawing in the Design of Interior Space In England*. *Architectural History*, 31, 148-165.

Kahn, L. (2003). *The Room, the Street, and Human Agreement*. En R. Twombly (Ed.), *Louis Kahn Essential Texts*, p. 252-260. Norton & Company

Le Corbusier. (1963). *Manière de penser l'urbanisme*. Gunthier:

Le Corbusier. (1977). *Hacia una arquitectura*. Ediciones Apóstrofe

Monteys, X. (2014). *La habitación. Más allá de la sala de estar*. Editorial Gustavo Gili

Rincón García, W. (2008). ¿Existe Una Plaza Real a la Española? En Figueira de Faria (eEd.), *Praças Reais: Passada, Presente e Futuro* (pp. 157-178). Livros Horizonte.

Sitte, C. (1945). *The Art of Building Cities*. Reinhold Publishing Corporation.

Serra Riera, E. (1992). Geometria i projecte del sòl als orígens de la Barcelona moderna: la vila de Gràcia.
Edicions UPC.

Van der Laan, H. (1983). *The Architectonic Space*. E. J. Brill.

Van Eyck, A. (2021). *El niño, la ciudad y el artista*. Fundación Arquia