

On the Work of Beth Galí  
**España Invertebrada Revisited**

The edge of Barcelona. Llobregat. Behind the brow of Montjuïc. The sun is at its zenith. After a long search through the baking hot outskirts of Barcelona, we reach the goal of our journey: Fossar de la Pedrera, an old quarry where Franco had a group of Catalan anarchists machine-gunned in 1939. As well as being a mass grave and a memorial, the spot is now a park. We lie on an immaculately trimmed lawn, surrounded by a ridge of hills, recovering in the shade. The grass is lush and deliciously soft, and the coolness is sheer luxury. Not far away, two youths are flying kites. One of them climbs to the top of the hill and lets his kite soar to an immense height. Now and then groups of foreign tourists pass by. They are clearly not here to honour the dead, but to enjoy this lovely park with its distinctive atmosphere, which was designed by Beth Galí.

The tranquillity is suddenly and rudely broken. A helmet-clad police officer on a motorbike comes growling and bouncing up the path. His heavy, off-the-road machine surmounts the carefully placed obstacles with ease. He takes the final steps up to the lawn with a flamboyant leap. Turning off his engine, he beckons to us. He points to our camera. Didn't we know it was forbidden to photograph graves? Had we no respect for the dead? He is satisfied with our explanation that we are not photographing the tombstones but the park itself, a jewel of landscape architecture. We congratulate him on his working surroundings. Gratiified, he takes off again, the rumble of his machine echoing long around the quarry walls.

Now the sun has moved on too. We leave the oasis. Walking along the ridge we find ourselves in an ill-defined outlying district spread out along the harbour. Our bus will stop here in twenty minutes. Suddenly, we are involved with the police again. Who are we, our passports please, what are we doing here. As they talk to us, a group of youths

emerges from the shadows of a deserted warehouse and start making their way towards us. The officers get back in their car and drive off. Surely they must have seen this ominous-looking gang. In the park, the strong arm had been there to point out our errors; here, where we really need it, it is powerless. We are alone in the underworld. Moments later we peer into the barrel of a revolver. The youths, five of them, are testing our nerves. We hear their questions, but from their nature it is clear we need to play the innocent tourist. We do not understand a word, we know nothing and are just looking for nice places to visit. One of the boys slaps his dog and forces his snout in our direction. We try to explain how we think the grass of the Fossar de la Pedrera must be good for football. They have heard of our compatriots and football stars Johan Cruyff and Ronald Koeman, haven't they? We haul a few architecture magazines out of our bag to distract their attention. It works! Gradually the mood becomes more relaxed. The youths thumb through the magazines and visibly inflate on recognising pictures of Galí's designs. The dog, confused by its master's obvious teasing, starts looking more playful than murderous. The pistol disappears into a pocket. They begin to understand that we have come to visit their world. It is as though we were two of them. Of course they will not rob us. We made it. Thank you, Beth Galí!

**Design as a Strategy of the Left**

The following morning we visit the office of the city councillor for culture, Oriol Bohigas. He dismisses our account of yesterday's adventures with the laconic remark that there is always a chance of running into *marginales* in the outskirts of town. It's just the kind of thing they do, he says, relighting his cigar. Later in our conversation, he admits that



Montjuïc Cemetery, new access and new design of north façade, Barcelona, 1992



*Et in Arcadia Ego*

The treatment of the natural limits, left more or less untouched in the Beth Galí's Fossar de la Pedrera, transfers the issue of border on a different level: the limit we project becomes that between life and death, present and past. The strong physical quality of the surrounding rock cliffs gives this sacred place a special intimacy, while at the same time allowing a direct and exclusive contact with the sky. If the empty lawn is to be seen as a reflection of the sky above, then it also can be

interpreted as infinite. It is only thanks to the absence of any architectural intervention on the vertical walls of the quarry, that the abstraction of the horizontal plane of the lawn can be achieved: the eye perceives a physical boundary which gives no temporal clues as the mountain was there since time immemorial. The very presence of the enclosure hints at the presence of something beyond.

Alessandra Dini

Wandering about on a land that we love is a liberating experience. The grasping and releasing of lush terrain, revelling in physical powers at their heights of play with the ground below, probing here and there with our footprints as we please, unfettered by instincts or mechanisms, brings on a primal freedom known only to man. The earthen passage carries us back to our origins, to the beginnings of the human adventure, renewing an urge to explore that can be traced to paleolithic times, even to hominid ventures out of the trees, as well as to the earliest gropings of infancy. The passage also gives rise to an exquisite mutation of being. Through

fleeting moves people learn about and release their innermost selves by the simplest of means, expressing hidden traits about who they potentially are, from the many available, giving momentary form to their latent identity. And most urgently, every surge onward in space and time calls the body itself back to life, as impassioned flesh and bone, a figure struggling to be free of itself and burst out of its frame in a wave of being, resurrecting one's very existence in the world.

Henry Plummer



Parc del Migdia, Barcelona, 1992

given the chance he would domesticate the rougher inhabitants by offering them all a well-furnished plaza. By treating public space as though it were a bourgeois living room, he hopes to soothe the threats of social conflict by the beneficence of public design. Earlier that week, during our local investigations of Galí's work, we had seen how that worked. Parc Joan Miró, designed by Beth Galí and others, has a pool with a Miró sculpture standing large as life in the middle; and there we encountered a couple of derelicts bathing in the fresh running water, art within grasp. Clearly, as far as they were concerned the park was an excellent public facility. At this commodious address, the internal strife of a rapidly modernising city can be smoothed over. Bathing is unofficially tolerated.

Barcelona has won worldwide admiration for this approach. Since the death of Franco, public space has been rehabilitated at countless locations in the city centre. After socialists gained control of local government, they started a programme of rehabilitating the city's social connective tissue. Their success can best be measured in terms of the enthusiastic use that is made of the new city squares. There was no longer the money, the ideology or, above all, the élan for all-out radical plans. The city sought its salvation in a moderate remedial policy, which eventually resulted in a striking visual rejuvenation. Barcelona has become a typical example of a successful transformation on the basis of modest expectations. The self-disillusionment of the Left as a social system has paradoxically produced a wonderful metamorphosis. But does that apply to the *whole* of Barcelona? Have the problems really been solved? Not for the kids in the harbour, certainly. And nearly not for us . . .

The city authorities are well aware that the job is not yet finished. This is why visual improvement is continuing all around the outskirts. Beth Galí is involved again. She has already received international attention for her graveyard design of 1986, mentioned above. But her Parc del Migdia and Sot del Migdia, on the other side of Montjuïc,



are at least as ambitious. There, she has restyled a complete landscape in accordance with the well-proved design method we met in her earlier projects.

In the Migdia project, Galí unwittingly reveals the limitations of Barcelona's environmental policies. We can see how the continued, self-satisfied administration of an ideologically disillusioned but socially highly successful Left has resulted in a practically religious faith in the persuasiveness of design. Design was once a means to achieving the impossible, the rebirth of Barcelona. The world gaped at Barcelona's feats in this area. But is that enough to secure the future of a city?

#### From *Memento Mori* to Picnic Site

Montjuïc used to be regarded as a holy mount, as the *Alter Barcelona*, as the negative of the city – literally so, because it was the location of the quarry that supplied the stone to build the city. It was also the place of the dead, and a place where city dwellers could go for a breath of fresh air. These alternative functions vanished when the world exhibition and the Olympic Games came to the mountain. Not even Galí's Parc del Migdia and Sot del Migdia could restore the old tranquillity. It is no longer an alternative for the city, but an extension of a certain kind of urbanity into the landscape. Galí called the chief route through her plan a *Rambla*, referring to the famous promenade below in the city. It is not nature that is 'designed' here, but the city using the means of nature.

Beth Galí demonstrates a perfect control of her craft in these plans. With consummate skill, she transforms fifteen years of Barcelona urban design experience into a marvelous rural *mise-en-scène*. Using the means at her disposal – shadows, paving, greenery etcetera – she traces the sweeping lines of her designs in the earth. Her manipulation of *chiaroscuro* is masterly. Like other celebrities in her field such as Dimitris Pikionis and Georges Descombes, she transfers ostensibly isolated signs from an

On this day I enjoy observing the spectacle of the ground bathing in the calm, wintry light. There are petrified formations fashioned by divine forces, fractured boulders, stones; the dust born of the fertile soil, as infinite in number as the stars.

I stoop and pick up a stone. I caress it with my eyes, with my fingers: it is a piece of grey limestone. Fire moulded its divine shape, water sculpted it and endowed it with this fine integument of clay that has alternating bands of white and ferruginous reddish yellow. I turn it around in my hands. I study the harmony of its contours. I delight in the way indentations and protuberances, light and

shadow balance each other on its surface. I rejoice in the way the universal laws are embodied and fulfilled in this stone - the laws which would have remained unknown to us if, as Goethe said, an innate sense of beauty had not revealed them to the poet and the artist.

In truth, it occurs to me, O Stone, that ever since the incandescent mass of this planet was torn away from the sun and set spinning around it like a ring of fire, eventually condensing into our earth, the place you happened to occupy within its vast expanse was in no way accidental: the harmony of the Whole, which determined the inclination of

our planet's axis, also apportioned this particular place to you as your home, as the generator of your supremely spiritual form in an atmosphere and light that are spiritually attuned to you. The dance of your atoms, governed by Number, shapes your constituent parts according to the Law of your Individuality. You thus enact the twofold law of Universal and Individual Harmony. I feel you growing, expanding in my imagination. Your lateral surfaces turn into hill slopes, ridges, and noble precipices. Your hollows become caverns where water silently trickles from the cracks in the rose-coloured rock. Stone, you compose the lineaments of the

landscape. You are the landscape. (...) All the forces of nature converge and work together to produce this particular conformation: the refined air, the bright light, the colour of the sky, the clouds perched high above the mountain peaks, the stones scattered about the temple's stylobate, and the bits of grass growing in the cracks. O earth, you reduce everything to yourself as the measure of all things. You are truly the modulus which penetrates all things.

Dimitri Pikionis

iconographical plane onto a phenomenological one. The observer's experience is supremely activated by these places. Nature is the ink – or, rather, the B6 pencil – she uses to sketch the background for a carefree life. All kinds of natural elements, including different kinds of wood and inorganic materials, scents, shadows and shafts of light, form the colours of her palette. Natural materials and light are deployed in an almost typographical way, resulting in a park as a form of graphic art. Edges, canopies, pergolas, areas of glass and bandstands are scattered with feigned nonchalance, betraying an exceptional subtlety. Every distinct function of surface, route and point receives its own formal treatment in the design. Galí plays with scale, repetitions, interruptions, lines and profiles. The cross-section determines the landscape. She does not work from above, placing an oppressive grid over the terrain, but microscopically examines every ridge, convexity, prospect and soil variation. She works at ground level, taking a worm's eye view. Even the gravestones of the Fossar demarcate a horizon in the landscape. The view is from below – the viewpoint of the dead, we are tempted to say. Here, time stands still.

There is something else morbid about this place. For in spite of – or perhaps even because of – the refinement contained in this landscape, it is all too clean, too finished.

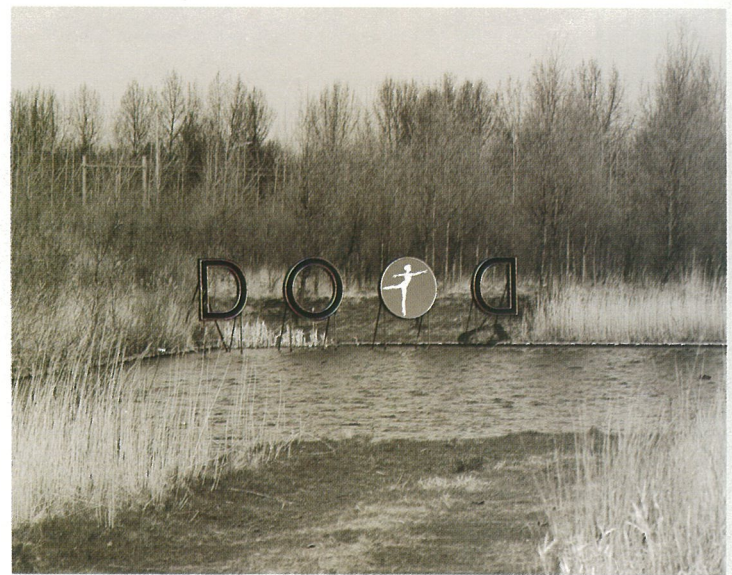


Fossar de la Pedrera, Barcelona, 1986

Designer talent is so omnipresent that there is hardly any room left for spontaneity in social behaviour, conducted as it is along the prescribed routes and interrupted only by the equally obligatory belvederes. Meeting is fostered only by moments of visual awe: all you can say is 'Beautiful, isn't it?' In this place one can fly kites, seek cool repose, stroll. Taking it easy is the ultimate good. The Parc del Migdia is a paradise of civilised behaviour, an extension out to the periphery of the zones where *marginales* are tolerated. The leftist policy of small scale interventions and improving examples is inflated here into a full-blown paradigm.

At this point we enter the universe of clichés. When Galí wishes to mark the transition to the graveyard, she does so by making a gateway like a house of cards. What a coincidence, life is like a house of cards too! Then, right along the length of the necropolis, she extends a semi-transparent screen, making the zone behind it into a realm of shadows. What an original idea! Design surpasses itself to become an analogue of the literary. Even the experience-heightening technique that has garnered such worldwide praise in the Barcelona method appears to lead all too easily here to little representational jokes. When we also consider the exceptionally fine lawns, we get the impression of a cloak of charity being drawn over death and the history (and hence also the future) of life in Barcelona. The cloak is ambiguous by definition. The *memento mori* has become a picnic site. Come and visit the dead, but not for purposes of contemplation. Death is not a part of life but of life-style. Even death is covered up by the social democratic politics of conciliation. Everything is brought down to a profane, mundane level, like an endless funeral tea.

In the park, every path has been laid out to encourage pauses and thus the enjoyment of the varied landscapes and the variety of materials. There is a repeated emphasis on experiencing the landscape as a whole (*the belvederes*) or a special physical detail



Ludger Gerdes, 'Dood' (Death), Floriade Park, Zoetermeer, 1992

(e.g. a subtle step). On the other hand, social encounter is something which is not allowed for in the programme. Just as strolling is something from which chance has been eliminated here, we are not expected to see one another as anything more than items in the pastoral decor. The urban park is here rather like a private garden. You come to rest, and for that purpose the park is perfect. However, it has thereby lost the character of an open-air theatre. Perambulation is revered as a Sunday fetish. (Admittedly, a free Sunday afternoon was never the right moment for a revolution). This park is a social democratic variant of the English romantic garden, with the

In the refreshing delights of light-footed walking, we replenish the very core of human potency. We make ourselves real and alive through learning that the body by which we exist in the world is itself fully real and alive, that it is substantially there yet ever changing and becoming, a tangle of mind and flesh in control of itself. The long, lilting gait brings to awareness a visceral and muscular presence, its creative faculties beautifully concentrated on the evolving floor, a graceful body pulsing with power, my body. Going

forth on a walk also brings out the underlying motives of a self; a secret power at work which is just below awareness yet flickering with impulses, in short, *myself*, my psyche and my soul. Through its spontaneous acts while strolling and idling, the 'I' wells up and appears, expressing itself in marvellous kinetic deeds, and takes charge of its own immediate destiny.

Henry Plummer

But how is one to bring to mind all these spirits? The spirits of the hours, the years, and of every single day? The days of summer and spring, the halcyon days of winter and autumn? The days when the wind blows from the north or the south, the east or the west? For these are the spirits that will enable us to witness the passion and the transformation of Form and Space within the principles of Time.

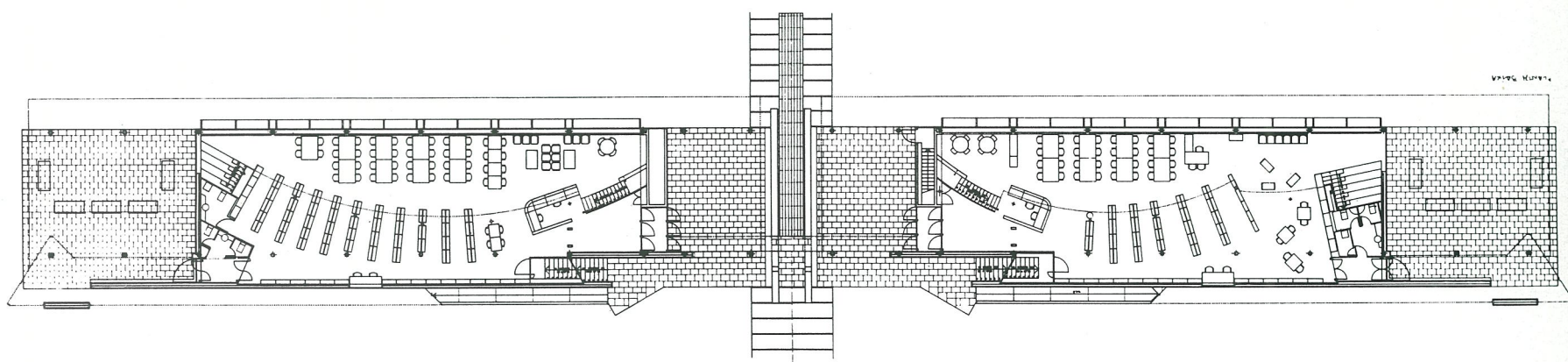
This sentimental journal is by no means complete. Does it matter? Is it not enough if the

perusal thus far helps to make manifest the principle which I believe Nature wishes to teach us: that nothing exists independently of the Universal Harmony? All things interpenetrate, affect and change one another. In Order to apprehend one thing we must conceive of it through the intermediary of all others.

Dimitri Pikionis

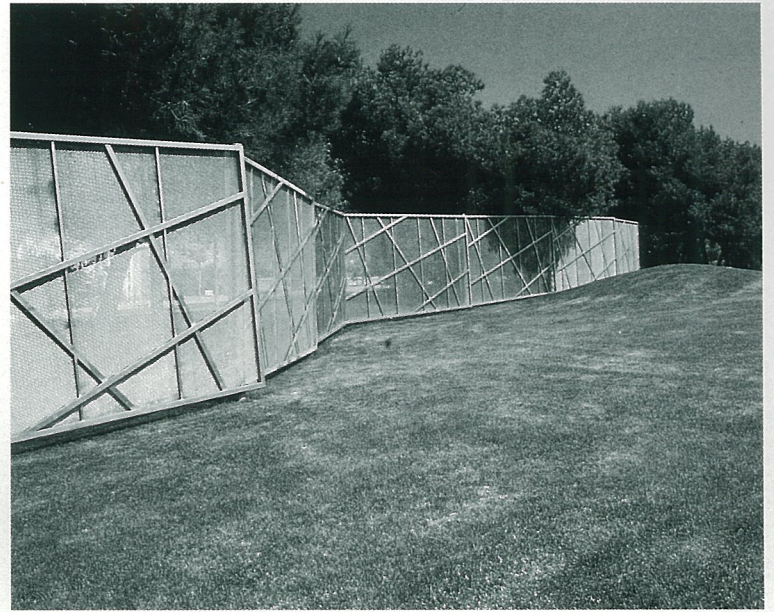


Library Joan Miro, Barcelona, 1990





Fossar de la Pedrera, Barcelona, 1986



Parc del Migdia, Barcelona, 1992

emphasis no longer on the sublime experience, the simulated Chaos, but on the relaxing ramble. You will not find a speaker's corner in this park. And thus it accords with a tradition of comfortable apathy that has emerged in Spain since the definitive extirpation of the Franco legacy. However, all this is hopelessly insufficient for someone who has been privileged to stare down the barrel of a gun while walking down by the harbour. No doubt this applies to the owner of the weapon, as well.

Barcelona's programme of parks and plazas, of which this park is such an excellent example, concentrates entirely on promoting the existence of nice places to be in. Congeniality and direct solutions to concrete problems are primary. What characterises these locations is their strongly pacifying character. The designers have discovered that it is perfectly possible to achieve this end by taking an extremely sophisticated, tactilist approach. Urban problems prove manageable by means of a strictly autonomous, principally tectonic approach to the craft. The citizen must be brought into close, even haptic, contact with his city. But when that happens, the citizen no longer functions as such, but as the anthropological unit 'human being' who is presumed to have a uniform level of need for material identification with his environment. In a metropolitan environment the tactile experience is generally so strongly repressed that people are only too happy to agree with efforts to rehabilitate it. Nobody resists. Nobody wishes to be specific here, let alone angry. The daily need passes for a long-term goal. As a result, public space no longer forms part of the public ambience but has become a consumable commodity, drained of every political nuance. *Mañana* is the message. And is that so surprising? Even death has been banished from this life. Nothing may be allowed to remind us of the time when death was at the service of life. The heroes lie beneath the green sod, and thereby, unwittingly, this life has been placed at the service of death. Consciousness of the social situation has been downgraded to a topo-

graphical palliative. The senses are stimulated in order to dull the prick of moral awareness. A subtle game is played with pastuality and material boundaries, to save us having to think about the social boundaries. This totally depoliticised design is, however, far from value-free. It signifies the cultural condition that has overtaken many metropolises: the formal mitigation of stresses that are material in origin. Form, reinforced here by an architect of unimpeachable talent, acts as a distraction from the failure to solve social discords.

#### From Dissension to Diversion

José Ortega y Gasset wrote, in 1921, a famous essay called *España Invertebrada*, in which he accused his country of moral spinelessness. Spain was an impotent, incompetent also-ran. This image is still applicable, albeit in a slightly different sense. The triumph of topographical tectonics appears to have banished both the formulation of a political will and the programmatic and environmental articulation of such a will into a definitive background role. The retreat into phenomenology 'brackets' every criticism. As a design strategy, it begins from its materials and seeks the integrity of things. It is thus capable of constituting a relevant critique of the indifference of the metropolis. But after a while one gets the impression that the search for integrity is not only a necessary condition for critical resistance, but also a sufficient condition. At that point, the Heideggerian critique of civilisation starts sounding merely good-humoured. Things that should have been mute start babbling away again. The *España Invertebrada* of today is a bastion of the stylistic faith. The outward tactility no longer has anything to do with that resistance that some hoped to see in it, in their search for an answer to cultural globalisation. This is not an architecture of dissension but of diversion.

The innocent yearning to free oneself through motion cannot find happiness in a vacuum, however, but requires an environment open to physical involvement. Ambling moves can only be energised by a ground overflowing with qualities. The body's powers evolved in a gravitational matrix of trees and earth, continue to be roused and activated by the most robust qualities of terrain, and depend upon corners and edges of ground as a living material to be brought into motions and converted to expressive gestures. These faceted corners and edges are the stuff of our freedom on

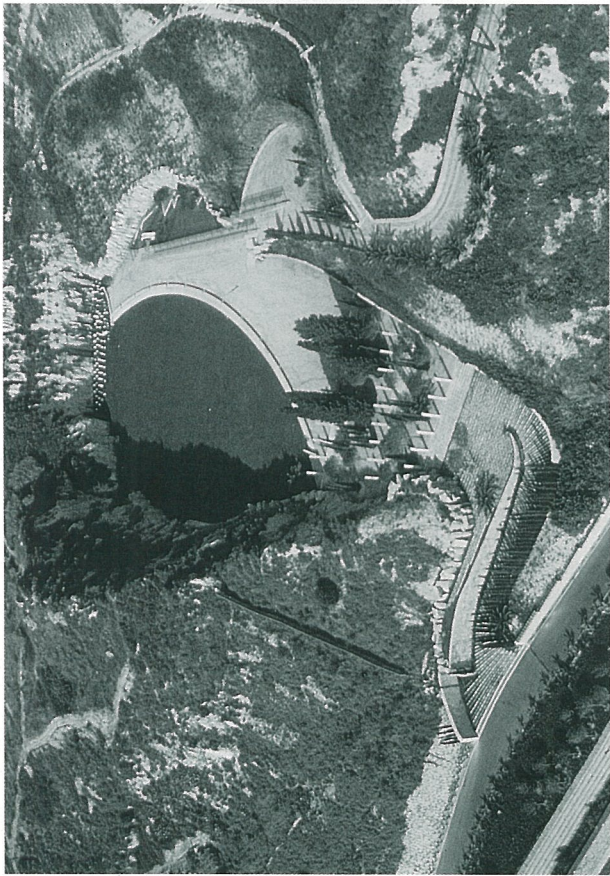
foot, the choice of footings and contours out of which we can freely arrange our journeys. Their amplitude determines whether a landscape is at all worthy of our longing and pursuit. We draw upon the available topography as a source and catalyst of bodily ventures, as a mine of latent acts which we can prospect alone in our search for the self, in our strivings to conjure up an existence in the world, and fulfil the dormant life of our own body.

Henry Plummer

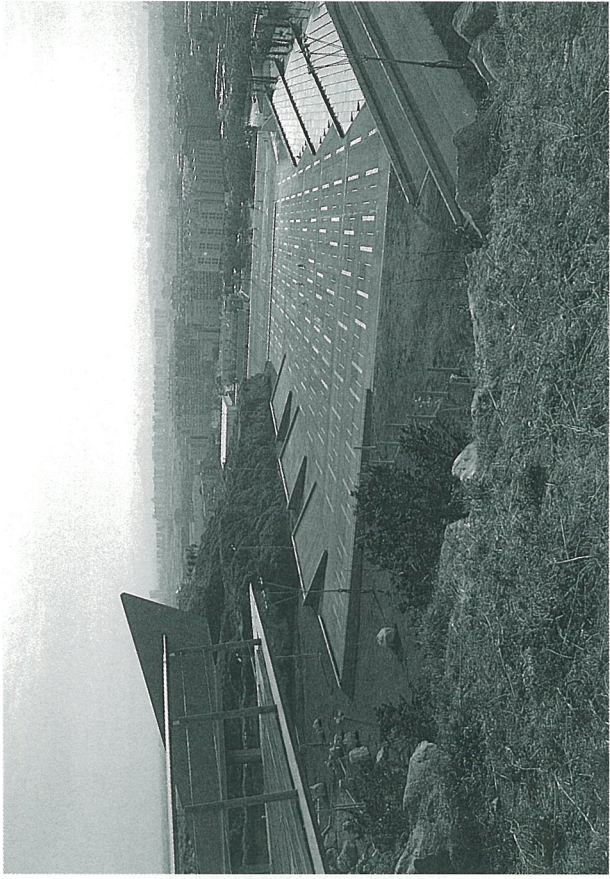
I'm searching for an architecture of 'unreasonableness'. An architecture which would like to be present where no one expects it any more. (...) I have tried to achieve an architecture which would jolt its context, 'scrape' the excessive 'ordinariness' of a situation, impose a shift in what is seen as all too obvious, in the norm of 'it has always been like that'. I would like my architecture to act as a device for revealing forces which are - or have become - imperceptible, for generating a feeling of oddness, the source of a different attention, a different vision, a different cognition, a different emotion.

Georges Descombes

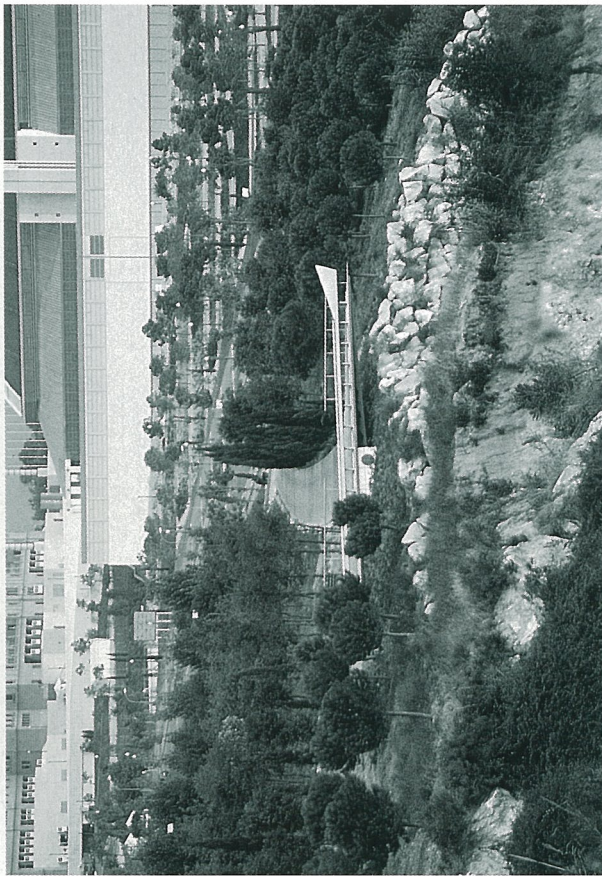
*Et in Arcadia Ego*



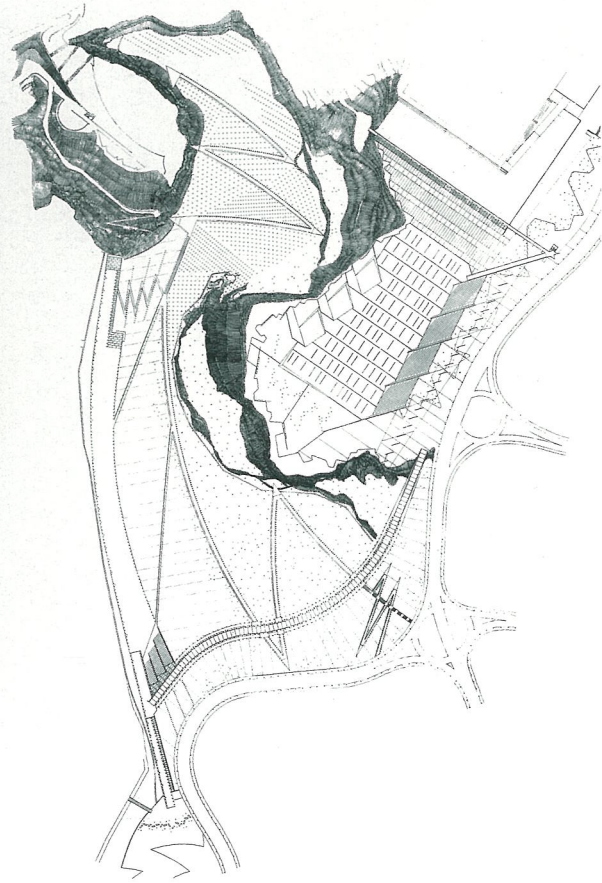
Fossar de la Pedrera (memorial)



Sot del Migdia (open air auditorium)



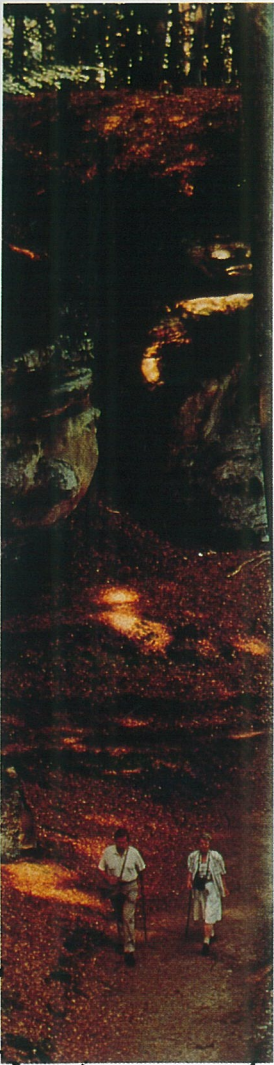
Parc del Migdia (belvedere)



The Fossar was originally a stone quarry with a common grave of people who fell victim to the Franco regime; now it is a memorial. The design of this space grows from within, to reach its natural borders without interfering with them. Thus it acquires an abstract lack of dimension that allows us to go beyond its limits: the limit we project becomes that between life and death, present and past.

If the Fossar de la Pedrera is the transformation of a natural place into a sacred precinct, the auditorium of the Sot del Migdia is its secular counterpart. As in the Fossar de la Pedrera, the project nestles in the natural landscape which contains and defines its space, but whereas in the Fossar the only direct contact with the outside is through the sky, in the Sot the view of the whole city confronts the empty space and becomes the auditorium's backdrop. The effect plays on our subconscious memory of theatres whose space is delimited by a backdrop, which may create the illusion of depth but which we know to be only a thin plane. The city, seen in this context, loses all materiality and the limit of the auditorium flips back and forth between being infinite and two-dimensional. Being a space which is occupied in its entirety, the point of contact with the vertical walls of the mountain

becomes particularly delicate. While in the Fossar the absence of construction on the far side of the 'sacred' lawn allows it to extend indefinitely, here, where the space had to have a limit, we encounter three sloping elements which contain the auditorium as theatre boxes. These platforms perform the transition from the built landscape to the natural one, at the same time counterbalancing the concrete bleachers on the theatre side. Thus, the central space is perceived as an intentional, rather than casual, depression in the landscape. Along the perimeter, the mountains become spectators, at the same time marking the border with the Migdia Park which extends along their side at a higher level, filling the landscape between the Fossar, the wall of the cemetery, and the auditorium. Seen from the park, the auditorium with its patterns of coloured asphalt becomes another piece of landscape and a logical continuation of the park itself. With its irregular shape and large scale, the park is organised and understood through the paths zigzagging its entire surface: whenever they reach a limit, they pierce it with a sharp, wedge-shaped balcony which seems to throw the visitor towards the city, seen in the distance. The aggressiveness of these balconies succeeds in stretching the virtual space of the park over the whole city. *Berth Galí*



Claudia Kölgen and Michael Gibbs, photographic work from 'Innocence and Experience', installation, 1992



