

# Tough Love

PLAZA PIUS XII, FLORES PRATS, BARCELONA



BLOODED IN the studio of Catalan architect Enric Miralles, Ricardo Flores and Eva Prats are building a reputation as quirky, crafty designers. On our visit to Flores Prats' latest project, a child-friendly piazza, Flores begins by buying a couple of lollipops. "I like this type best," he says, handing me one, "because of the surprising chewing gum centre".

A drive down Gran Via De Les Corts Catalanes reveals Barcelona rarely seen by tourists. Gran Via accelerates north through the city and across the border into France, morphing from downtown street to major highway as picturesque Barcelona gives way to the massive raw scale of the motor city.

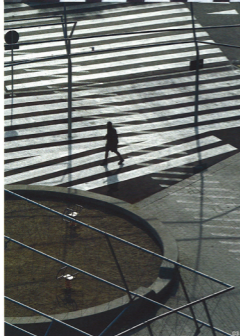
Plaza Pius XII is located on the urban fringe, where Gran Via slips beyond city limits. The forecourt of a typical 1960s apartment building in a working-class area is not exactly standard architect territory. Barely a stray bullet away, the infamous La Mina neighbourhood is home to

the very poor, drug dealers, gangs and gypsies. The 2004 Barcelona Forum, an exposition park designed by international glamour architects, is also located nearby. However the urban regeneration which was intended to follow the Forum, has yet to eventuate here. Prior to Flores Prats' intervention, junkies would shoot up in the dark and forbidding space in front of the apartment block.

The first move for Flores and Prats was to relocate the small street bordering the block. Formerly the street ran directly along the building's façade, creating a barrier between building and forecourt. The isolated forecourt in turn attracted drug addicts and pushers. The architects have banished the street to the block's perimeter, binding forecourt to building front. Now children can play outside their homes unimpeded by traffic (or thugs), and ground-floor cafés have extended their chairs and tables into the public domain.

For an example of what locals can usually expect from their public spaces, Flores takes me to see a courtyard a block away. It is early evening, and residents gather after work on a few benches arranged around a drab grey kiosk. There's barely a tree to be seen. Meanwhile, back in Flores Prats' piazza, kids play happily on swings, see-saws, slides, or scuff around a football while parents chat happily at nearby café tables.

Constructed in advance of the architects' involvement, a wide flat pedestrian bridge traverses Gran Via. Flores Prats has attempted to humanise this strangely unarticulated urban fragment by extending the bridge's red blumen surface, like a strip of red carpet, into their site. Rows of dark red prune trees accompany the crossing, a visual link which guides kids across the bridge from school to home. Red tubular railings and red hula hoops circling around tree trunks complement the lively colour scheme.



01 A Barcelona rarely seen by tourists 02-03 Zebra-stripes playfully overlap 04 Trees provide a visual link guiding children between school and home 05 Forecourt focal point, a rocket-roofed kiosk 06 Fargalet will be covered in vines



>> With its spiral rocket roof, the maroon-painted kiosk is the forecourt's focal point. Like a gingerbread house or a sticky bun, the kiosk attracts people – especially young people. Children hover on balconies above, waiting for the flaps of the simply constructed sheet-metal kiosk to open. A former neighbourhood tough is employed to run the kiosk while keeping a watchful eye over the area. Observing Flores and the kiosk vendor chatting like old mates, it becomes clear that the architects have a personal and ongoing involvement in their project.

Apart from combating social ills, the other challenge faced by Flores Prats in this city-edge border zone was the daunting presence of the unbroken horizon. A bare steel pergola – which will eventually be populated by vines – mediates between the vertical mass of the apartment building and the motor-scale outlook. Flores says the pergola “zigzags like soldiers crossing a battlefield” to give vitality to the previously inert space. The end of the pergola turns the block corner in an inviting gesture, then turns again to connect with the trajectory of a red metal hood of one of several underground car-park exits.

The architects' playful touch is everywhere. Even zebra crossings have been affected, their stripes crossing and overlapping. Stock-standard Barcelona paving tiles are rearranged into eye-catching configurations. Ordinary park benches and rails accentuate pavement patterns while the pergola stations overhead. Either side of the paved thoroughfare, fine gravel delineates informal play areas. The overall composition demonstrates the architects' process – acquired in Miralles' studio – of tracing and retracing the main lines which define the site. The architects have fashioned a rich public space using the cheapest of components. The expense is mental, rather than material.

David Neustels

