

Banyoles: a city between water and stone

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Founded in 2000 in Barcelona by Josep Miàs. Silvia Brandi joined the studio in 2006 and is partner since 2011. Works of the studio: Banyoles Old Town refurbishment, Girona; New Market in Barceloneta, Barcelona; Pyrenees Golf Clubhouse, Girona; Herta Frankel Puppet Theatre in Tibidabo; Amusement Park, Barcelona; Annexa-Joan Puigbert School in Girona; iGuzzini Illuminazione España S.A. Headquarters in Barcelona; Plug and Play Building, Barcelona; Housing building in Torre Baró, Barcelona; Pedestrian Bridge in Palafolls, Barcelona; Health Centre in Arenys de Munt, Barcelona; Residential quarter in Florence, Italy; Residential quarter in Catania, Italy.

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Abstract

The medieval town of Banyoles, in Catalonia, grew beside a large natural lake. Due to topographic reasons, in its early years, the original settlement suffered frequent flooding and in order to control the lake waters, in the ninth century monks started building a system of drainage canals, known as *recs*, excavating them out of the lacustrine travertine plate beneath the town, made by the same material.

The *recs* crossed the town and provided water to irrigate backyards and public laundries. Later, the water was also used in the town's emerging textile industries.

Over the years, as public laundries and industries dependant on water died out, the *recs* gradually lost their original functions and they were relegated to service as a sewer system. One by one, the *recs* were covered.

The paving project restores circulation of people and water through the old town, returning the itineraries they originally occupied.

The project includes updating the utility lines, running underground, and pedestrianizing most of the quarter. But, it also exploits the unique feature represented in these drainage canals to rediscover the medieval settlement built into the limestone.



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The town of Banyoles, capital of the district of Pla de l'Estany in Catalonia, is located between the Pyrenees and the Costa Brava.

An outstanding feature of the area, which is of karstic origin, is the large natural lake formed in the Quaternary period, at the centre of a geological fault, due to the tectonic movements that gave birth to the Pyrenees. Topographically, the elevation of the lake is higher than that of the town itself, which lies on a limestone plate bordering the east bank. Due to this difference in elevation, in its early years the original settlement suffered frequent flooding and in order to control the lake waters, in the ninth century the Benedictine monks of the Monastery of Sant Esteve started building a system of drainage canals, known as *recs*, excavating them out of the lacustrine travertine plate beneath the town.



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Out of this same travertine they dug usable underground spaces and the foundations of the first permanent settlement, which grew around the monastery.

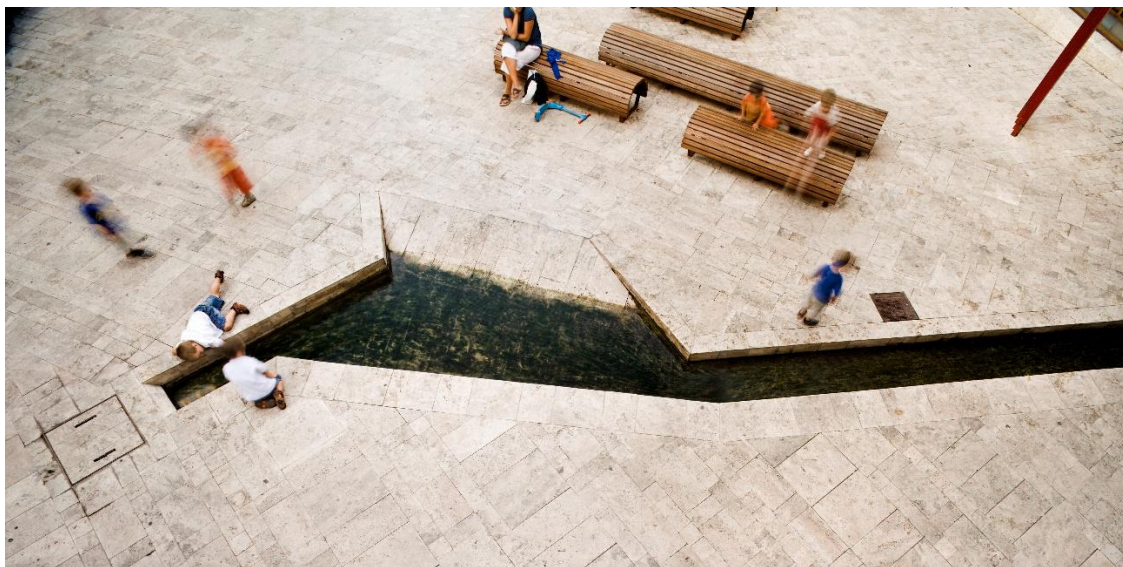
In the twelfth century the stone from these excavations was skilfully cut and used to construct the civil and religious buildings, the arcades around the squares and to pave the streets of the new town. The *recs*—of which remain Rec d'en Teixidor, Rec de Ca N'Hort, Rec de la Figuera d'en Xo, Rec Major and Rec de Guèmol—run from the southeast bank of lake through the old town and branch out into irrigation canals before emptying into the River Terri.

This irrigation system was Banyoles' first infrastructure and often corresponds with still-existing boundaries between plots of land.

Originally, the *recs* provided water to irrigate kitchen gardens belonging to houses, for domestic use and for public laundries. Later, the water was also used as a source of power for machinery in the town's emerging textile and agricultural industries. The *recs* became the focal point of social and economic life in the old quarter.

Over the years, as the kitchen gardens and public laundries fell into disuse, the *recs* gradually lost their original functions. Likewise, the industries dependant on them for power died out, and the network of canals was relegated to service as a sewer system.

One by one the *recs* were covered over until they disappeared from the cityscape and life of Banyoles.



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Banyoles Old Town Refurbishment

The project to transform the old town of the city of Banyoles includes updating the utility lines, running all of them underground, and pedestrianizing most of the quarter. But, it

also exploits the unique feature represented in these drainage canals to rediscover the medieval settlement built into the limestone. Water once again becomes a central character in the life of the city. In this project we seek to exhaust the possibilities of these materials, water and stone.

The scope of intervention is limited to the new pedestrian area and conforms to the town of medieval layout and architecture.

In addition to its architecture, a noteworthy feature of Banyoles is its succession of open spaces, small squares, in the otherwise compact medieval town.



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Due to the presence of these spaces — Plaça dels Turers, Plaça Major, Plaça dels Estudis, Plaça de la Font, Plaça del Teatre — the layout of the old town undergoes a sequence of compression/decompression.

The squares are named after the buildings for which they serve as a sort of entrance space or open-air foyer. And these spaces bounded by façades, pavement, arcades and singular elements may be seen as open-pit excavations in the travertine.

The first intervention is to strip away the existing pavement to expose the historical substrate of the town, uncovering the remains of buildings, tombs, objects and old canals.

The aim is to render these vestiges visible within the redevelopment project.

And the *recs* are reincorporated into the streets, uncovered discontinuously in order to avoid disrupting the normal functioning of the town, while establishing a coherent discourse throughout the area.

The project restores circulation of people and water through the old town of Banyoles, returning the itineraries they originally occupied.

This dialogue with the city is not only topographical, but also visual and audible.

Water is the element that lends continuity to the old town. And the travertine pavement occupies, in the manner of Roman pavement, the streets and squares, describing the natural topography and including in its make-up the water in the subsoil and the channels dug out of it.

The pavement is treated as if the stone itself were a liquid; vibrant like a cascade on the slopes and still on the flats. There remaining, as if in a museum of time, traces of debris: trunk-benches, undulating silhouettes, random fragments of ruins...

The pavement is now sculpted, even eroded, by the groundwater, in the form of canals and troughs along which the water runs.

The old town will now become a sequence of paths in which the inhabitants would have the possibility to enjoy the historical center and its 12th Century architecture. From now on, the pedestrian will always be accompanied by the presence of water...



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Plaça Major

The Rec Major, one of the main drainage canals from the lake, crosses the centre of Banyoles, entering Plaça Major by way of Passatge dels Abeuradors. Along the way, the *rec* forks, one branch originally bringing water to the kitchen gardens in this part of the town and the other providing power for industry. The pavement at this point is surgically opened to make this division in the canal visible and to reveal the stone section of the Rec Major with the original travertine vault.

Except in the central area of granite gravel and trees, the geometrically regular space of Plaça Major is covered in stone pavers, highlighting the medieval architecture of the square, with arcades around the perimeter and irregular arches, which gives the space the feeling of being a single stone construction.

Plaça dels Estudis

A branch of the Rec Major passes through Plaça Servites to Plaça dels Estudis. At this entrance to the plaza the visible section of the *rec* is used to define this new space which we propose as the foyer for the new Darder Museum. The existing trees are preserved and provide a rationale for placing benches. The stone pavement slopes upward to create the entrance ramp to the new museum, which stands above the level of the square. In the manner of a carpet, we bring the square to the museum. And we relocate the fountain nearer to the *rec*, such that it drains into the canal and visually demarcates the new square.

Plaça de la Font

The branch of the Rec Major is channelled along the base of the buildings in the narrow street Carrer Paraireria, and reappears in front of the façade of the Archaeological Museum, former town hall, passing beside the existing fountain. The pavement highlights

this nineteenth-century travertine fountain, which replaces its seventeenth-century predecessor from which the square got its name. The fountain is the only element, aside from trees, occupying this space. Rainwater is collected in troughs cut into the ground, which takes on the appearance of an additional façade.

Plaça del Teatre

A branch of the Rec de la Figuera d'en Xo runs down Carrer de l'Església from the church of Santa Maria. In this square, space formerly occupied by a theatre, the topographic treatment of the ground leaves the *rec* visible in a path that marks out a quieter area at the centre of the square. These new forms for the water incorporate the existing fountain at a point where the canal widens and the pavement of the square slopes down to form the bed of the *rec*.

The *rec* appears discontinuously, along the façades, running as far as the public laundry at the far end of Plaça del Teatre, in a smaller square at the entrance to the Monastery.



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