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Forum of the Colonia (Tarragona)

‘A cel obert’ by Pep Escoda

Things happen under the open sky: a cat meows, Assumpta is hanging her washing out on the balcony as a sparrow takes flight. On the top floor Josep is making a model of the ship Mallorquina with a knife worn down by so much sharpening. The butane gas lorry is making its regular Thursday rounds. A bicycle goes past and a little boy in short trousers is flying a paper plane. Another boy stands on tiptoe trying to reach the window parapet to see what’s happening in the courtyard.

Don’t shout, there are clothes hanging out!

Pep Escoda

The Dialogue

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It all began when Pep Escoda discovered a paper plane among the historical ruins of the Forum of the Colonia; and a little boy flying it. This was the starting point that led the photographer to construct a visual dialogue with the stones of this archaeological complex, an interpretation from the present that contains points of irony and surrealism.

Although the information panels for visitors have been updated, the Forum still preserves the signposting from 1968, the year in which it was opened to the public. Taking this fact and the little boy flying the paper plane into account, Pep Escoda has created an audiovisual that reconstructs the lost signs. The itinerary he has set out superimposes past and present, reality and fiction, and does not only refer to Tarraco, but also establishes bridges between the Roman city, the Franco period and our most immediate history.

There is, moreover, an element that has been present throughout the creative process and one that is decisive in his proposal to us: a memory that has been with him since he was little. It is that his grandparents lived in one of the houses that surround the archaeological site and for them this exceptional scene was part of their daily lives. For him there can be no doubt that at this point in the city the solemnity of the past conserved by the institution converges with the practicality of the domestic tasks carried out by the residents overlooking this grand inner courtyard, a coincidence that makes us question the construction of history “in capital letters” and the importance of those “little” histories.

Rosa Comes

The Creators

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Pep Escoda. Tarragona, 1958

Born in Santa Tecla Hospital weighing five kilos, which have been added to over the years. In his schooldays he wasn't a great success at exams. Son of a seafaring family, he was formed and forged on the Mediterranean, working on a light-fishing boat. At the age of eighteen he enlisted in the Spanish Navy; in summer, dressed in white, and in winter, in blue, he discovered fashion. Later he studied painting at the Tarragona Provincial Government School of Art and Design (EADT) under the master Josep Icart. A self-taught photographer, in 1990 he opened a studio in Tarragona. Traveller, nomad and thief of pictures, he has worked for the best international publishers, publishing approximately 150 books between individual and collective works. His Mediterranean spirit makes him continue to learn every day with the taste of salt and the sea.

Marta Richardson. Tarragona, 1993

A Tarragonina from the Part Baixa (Lower Part), she studied at the EADT.

When she was little she wanted to be a singer, an astronaut and a superheroine. Unfortunately, neither her vocal cords, nor her mathematical skills, nor her superpowers were up to the task. She discovered photography looking at the covers of the LPs and magazines that lay around the house. She borrowed her first camera from her mother and discovered that photography made it possible to give visibility to things that cannot be explained in words. You can often find her on her bicycle or ranging the streets of the lower part of Tarragona dressed as Spiderman, looking for somebody to photograph. Over time she has grown, but, as her grandfather says, she'll never grow up.

Abelardo Castellet. Tarragona 1971 dC

A bipedal primate of the hominid family with a tranquil, unsocial nature who has managed to live from photography, without great difficulty, for the past twenty years.

The Place

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The Forum of the Colonia was the nerve centre of Tarraco. The city's main roads led to it and it was the focus of all public activity and therefore a meeting point for the local elites. It was also the home of the local administration. It was, in short, the heart of social and political life in the colonia.

This historical site was opened to the public in 1968, some years after Serra Vilaró had super-

vised its archaeological excavation. It contains multiple interesting elements from Tarraco: sculptural, architectural and town planning details that tell us much about the practices of the time and the idiosyncrasy of this most important meeting place in the city. The area we can see today has remained raised above the surrounding streets, showing us how different the original topography of Tarraco was to that of today.

Archaeologists have discovered an original square built in the Republican period and presided over by a temple dedicated to the Capitoline Triad —Jupiter, Juno and Minerva— that may have been surrounded by porticos. Alterations were made to the square in the time of Augustus, when the theatre was built. Finally, in the Tiberian period, a new public square was built adjoining the earlier one, but on a higher level. This new forum was presided over by a judicial basilica with three naves, a curia in its interior and a series of small rooms on each side.

The excavations also revealed what we now know was Tarraco's auguraculum, a small sacred area orientated according to the cardinal points and used to carry out the city's foundational rites. From here the founding magistrate and an augur would have observed the signs given by Jupiter, particularly the flight of certain types of bird, as Romulus had done when he founded Rome. The auguraculum was taken as the starting point for laying out both Tarraco's housing grids and the plots of land in its territory.

