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A Chilean-born French national who practices in Barcelona, architect Carmen Santana argues for an approach to urban planning based on continual interaction between buildings and their environment. This concept makes public space the starting-point for every project.

# Open city

**“i**t’s the location that dictates the best urban architecture.” It is all too easy to neglect this principle grounded in common sense, but Carmen Santana has made it her credo. For the co-founder of the Archikubik agency, purpose always determines form. In other words, it is more important for a building to be useful than beautiful, and it must blend naturally with its environment, as if it’s always been there. The Barcelona-based Franco-Chilean architect developed these ideas through observing changes in society, particularly the impact of new technologies on territories. “Our mobility and our relationship to public space have changed, because new technologies enable us to do everything remotely, without leaving home, and because cities are designed for automobiles and not for citizens,” she explains. We have become obsessed with “territory”, and we need to adapt to new ways of living, communicating and getting on with each other.

## “Urban acupuncture”

To counter the globalization that dehumanizes the city and destroys opportunities for people to meet, Archikubik goes about things the opposite way: start local and weave the urban fabric from public space in such a way as to favor social cohesion. “We think about every project on three scales – human, urban and metropolitan – in order to construct ‘relational buildings’ which interact with cities and increase contact points between residents,” remarks Santana. This approach is illustrated by the regeneration of the Carnot-Vérolot district in the town of Ivry-sur-Seine, near Paris, a mixed program developed with Cogedim and Ville et Vie including social housing, public amenities, service sector premises and shops, as well as a square, a road and an alley. The architects identified the challenge as connecting the rest of the town with this heterogeneous territory, bordered to the north by a large housing development and to the south by a suburban residential district, without creating too ...

Light boxes placed on the balconies of apartment blocks in Ampolla, Spain.





### CARMEN SANTANA

Born in Chile in 1961, Carmen Santana came to France in 1973 with her parents, who were political refugees. After graduating from the Toulouse School of Architecture in 1987, she worked in Paris for seven years before moving to Barcelona in 1993. Three years later, along with two Catalan partners, Marc Chalamanch and Miquel Lacasta, she founded Archikubik, an architectural firm focusing on a better understanding of the complexity of the city and its territories, and @kubik, a multi-disciplinary space in Barcelona intended for independent professionals and very small businesses. She holds two Masters degrees (in “Corporate space and the architecture of workplaces” and “Large scale: the architecture of new surroundings”) and specializes in urban ecology and sustainable development. She teaches at the Elisava School of Design, and coordinates a Masters program in “Urban environment and sustainable development: cities in the information age” at ETSAB (the Barcelona School of Architecture).

... abrupt a break. Their method was to carry out a detailed analysis of the earlier layout of the area to work out its original thrust. Everything was carefully considered: the quality of the urban road network, the height and orientation of existing buildings, the location of parks and gardens, hard landscaped areas and unconstructed land, and building lines. “Our study of the vestiges of the urban landscape enabled us to respect the suburban spirit of the district while making the population of the neighborhood denser in order to conserve natural unbuilt-on areas and put in ‘urban windows’, such as a street, a garden or an alley connecting this neighborhood to others.” Santana likens this approach to “urban acupuncture” because it re-injects new energy into the urban fabric.

### Permeable public and private spaces

Other examples of these “enlivening details” are the light boxes placed on the balconies of three apartment blocks in Ampolla, 30 kilometers from Tarragona in Spain. “In recent years, this 3,000-inhabitant fishing village has experienced a lot of uncontrolled real estate development. In an urban fringe area, between the railroad and the motorway, the three buildings are located in an unrelieved urban environment. So we embellished the public space by using the private space of the balconies.” The effect is spectacular: when night has fallen, the illuminated balustrades light up the esplanade, which the inhabitants have renamed “the square of shining balconies”.

“I don’t believe in decorative architecture. The elements of a building always have to serve a useful purpose and help make public and private spaces permeable,” adds Santana. An example is the long facade of the Jesús Maria school in Barcelona, a mosaic of frames which alternates transparent windows with solar panels and storage areas on the

inside. As the optimal solution for ensuring that building structures have the right technical properties, Carmen Santana has made concrete her material of choice. “Because it’s an intelligent material, which has successfully adapted and responded to the morphological needs of a changing society, it enables one to seek social implications going beyond form. It occupies a fundamental place in contemporary architecture, and at Archikubik, it’s in our genes.”

Working in countries as diverse as France, Qatar and Mexico, the three architects must ensure they do not spread themselves too thin. They favor human-scale projects, which they use as laboratories to test out new solutions that can then be transposed to larger-scale projects. “I try to have a craftsman-like approach to my work and avoid preconceptions. This means being able to inspect production from start to finish and working with developers who are willing to play the game.” A strategy that has clearly paid off, judging by the number of requests that Archikubik receives, especially in France. Already a partner of Cogedim, the firm is involved in the Ivry Confluences project with Sadev 94 and the Brémond group, as well as a social housing development in the 13th arrondissement of Paris, under the auspices of Semapa, a Parisian public-private development company. Urban regeneration operations like these are now established as one of Archikubik’s specialties. ■

*This residential hotel in Barcelona, Spain, was designed by Archikubik as a “relational building”.*

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## EXPLORING A WORLD ON THE MOVE

### AN EXAMPLE OF A “RELATIONAL BUILDING” IN BARCELONA

Located where an old historic quarter and a 50-meter-wide avenue meet, this 10-storey residential hotel exemplifies the concept of a “relational building”. The initial plan envisaged a 70-meter-long building stretching along the avenue, creating a break between the two neighborhoods. The Archikubik team recommended setting back the building to provide a public space at ground-floor level in the form of a small garden, as well as a pedestrian walkway that joins the avenue to the old neighborhood. At first-floor level, the building stands on piers which create a communal terrace for residents, “a shared private space”. A second stone-built volume consisting of three duplex apartments makes a better transition with the residential fabric of the historic quarter. This project is a good illustration of Archikubik’s three-dimensional approach: on a metropolitan scale, the tower, which is close to a central station, has become a landmark; on an urban scale, it “knits” two quarters together; and on a human scale, it provides both indoor and outdoor meeting spaces for people. ■