On a recent visit to an exhibition of a new area plan, I was struck with a feeling that there was something missing. That information on how we value, record, interact with, and inhabit our physical and social landscapes was somehow absent. Our richly multidimensional world was somehow imprisoned in ‘zones’. Like the globe, our imagination had been flattened, and neatly folded.

‘HiCat’ is a project with a vision - for that matter multiple visions. It is a multidisciplinary collaboration that documents, evaluates and imagines both existing and future conditions for Catalonia. As one of Spain’s most vibrant ‘devolved’ regions it has a land area of 31,895km² (double that of Northern Ireland) and a population of 6.5 million people. Between the mountains to the North and the long coastal region to the South, the majority of Catalonians live in a relatively small area (six times the typical density of the Netherlands) of about 2,500km².

If the American term ‘smart growth’ has dominated urban thinking over the last decade, then ‘HiCat’ offers an alternative: ‘advanced prospecting’, as a way to “…interrogate... territory in order to bring out its capacities and latencies”. The Government of Catalonia, the Metropolis architecture group and LaAC (Institute of advanced architecture of Catalonia) have come together with a variety of economists, planners, sociologists, artists and government agencies to facilitate this study, “…we have to learn to relearn, to know how to rid ourselves of those concepts of ingrained intellectualty, of ideological rigidity or moral presumptions which hamper our ability to understand the new social rules developing around us”. With an admirable optimism ‘HiCat’ opens up new thinking and discussion on the questions, issues and dependencies facing the region of Catalonia.

This two-volume book (held together by magnets) is supported and financed by the Catalan government and compiles the material of a public exhibition and research project. There is a wealth of information including diagrams, statistics, maps, charts, photographs, essays and ideas that go in search of new ways to renew and innovate Catalonia’s continuing evolution.

The book is thematically split in two: ‘State(s) of Reference’ (Vol 1) and ‘Multilayered Strategies’ (Vol 2). The first volume has several introductory essays that debate the aspirations and aims of the overall project. This is followed by over 120 pages of statistical information and comparisons with other similar countries, regions and states. The second volume - and the larger of…
At almost 900 pages there is a lot to absorb in this book. Evocative, colourful, full of ideas there is much that is inspiring not least the strong political will to move Catalonia forward with a vision.

The book ends with a 'double decalogue': a compact conclusion written across bold yellow pages. It proclaims: "...define diversity... generate mingling... prepare the future... foster uninhibited visions..." and makes "...a Hybrid Catalonia... a Networked Catalonia... a Glocal Catalonia... an Innovative Catalonia..."

"HiCat" is a 'prospector's compendium' of ideas. It is sent like an evocative postcard from Catalonia to awaken our imagination, and asks us to look beyond the limits of our own dull planning zones.

Paul Clarke

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