

The [In]visible: The City of Signs

What do we see when we look at a city? The things themselves, or the signs that name them? Can light, which allows us to see, also hide what it illuminates? The course places itself on that uncomfortable threshold, where *looking* is not the same as *seeing* and where the obvious can become the most effective form of concealment.

The 2027 edition of Llum BCN takes *the [in]visible* as its theme: there is a spectrum of light that human beings cannot see. The brackets separate two ideas that should not be confused. The *invisible* is what cannot be seen: air, sound, temperature, memory, the relationships that sustain a place. The *in-visible*, by contrast, is what remains inside the visible without our noticing it, what we look at every day and no longer see.

When Dalí was asked what he would save from the Prado if it caught fire, he answered: the air in *Las Meninas*. Velázquez paints something invisible, and that air is precisely what draws the viewer into the painting. Art and architecture are the tools that make the invisible visible.

Italo Calvino builds *Invisible Cities* from the accounts that Marco Polo gives to Kublai Khan, arranged in eleven series¹. One of them, *Cities and Signs*, describes cities where the traveler finds not things but figures that point to other things (Calvino, 1972/1974). This is the specific approach of the course.

The City of Signs: reading the city at night

Every city is a text. Roland Barthes argued that the city is a discourse, and that this discourse is a true language: the city speaks to those who inhabit it². Kevin Lynch measured urban quality by *legibility* (Lynch, 1960), and Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour learned in Las Vegas that the sign could prevail over form: the building as a *decorated shed*, valued for the billboard that announces what it is (Venturi et al., 1972).

Yet a perfectly legible city may also be a city that refuses to be known. When every façade, every sign, and every object refers to something else, visitors stop thinking: they repeat the discourse the city dictates and leave without knowing what lies beneath so many signs. The in-visible is not behind the signs; it is drowned by them.

Night changes this relationship. After dark, the city is reduced to its luminous signs: storefront signs, traffic lights, screens, lit windows. Artificial light selects what must be read and abandons the rest to shadow. Too much light dazzles and flattens, just as too many signs do; shadow, on the other hand, reveals (Tanizaki, 1933/1977). Light is therefore an ambivalent material: it can be one more sign in the noise of the city, or the instrument that suspends that noise and lets what it hides appear. That ambivalence is the field of work of the course.

¹The eleven series are: cities and memory, desire, signs, thin cities, trading cities, cities and eyes, names, the dead, the sky, continuous cities, and hidden cities.

²Barthes delivered "Semiology and the Urban" as a lecture in Naples in 1967; it is collected in *The Semiotic Challenge* (1988).



Walter De Maria, *The Lightning Field*, 1977, New Mexico. Four hundred steel poles: a field of signs that only the light of lightning completes.

The site: the plaza of L'Auditori

Our site is the plaza of L'Auditori de Barcelona, designed by Rafael Moneo and opened in 1999, on the edge of Poblenou, next to Plaça de les Glòries. In a district that is a palimpsest of signs (chimneys without smoke, the names of vanished factories, converted warehouses, the signage of the 22@ technology district), L'Auditori is an almost silent building. It barely announces itself: its form and its place in the order of the city are enough to tell us what it is. The plaza is therefore an ideal setting for asking what light can add to, or take away from, a place that speaks without signs.

The assignment

Students will design and build an ephemeral light installation for Llum BCN 2027, which takes place from February 5 to 7, 2027. Each proposal builds *another invisible city*: a city of signs, laid over the real city at night, that either makes it legible in a new way or suspends its discourse so that what it hides can appear. For three nights, that city will be home to the visitors of Llum Barcelona.

P.1 Marco Polo's laboratory

The process follows five premises. Visit the site, by day and by night. Sense and interpret it in a travel notebook of drawings and notes. Understand it, by explaining that notebook to Kublai Khan. Imagine, moving from the notebook to the reality of the project. And make light the author of the project.

P.2 Kublai Khan's orders

The city must have its own name, either taken from the book or invented. It is built on a single idea, because one decisive action is better than many incoherent ones. Light is the protagonist. The project must respond to the scale of the site, transform it, move people, and be memorable.

P.3 Three ways of working with signs

We propose three positions, which may be combined:

- **Read.** Reveal the signs the site already contains and that are no longer seen, whether physical, historical, or social.
- **Overwrite.** Add signs that divert the usual reading and force us to look again.
- **Erase.** Switch off, veil, or suspend existing signs so that what their excess concealed can appear. This is the most radical form of the in-visible.

P.4 Festival constraints

The festival evaluates neighborhood identity, transformative capacity, originality, the use of light as a language rather than a technique, interaction with the public, and efficient use of resources. Projects must stay within the assigned power and budget, use no lasers, withstand rain and wind, and plan for installation (three days maximum), dismantling, and waste.

Faculty

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Schedule

C1. Site visits

- Technical visits to the plaza of L'Auditori by day and by night, October 2026.

C2. Submissions

1. Travel notebook. Drawings and notes from the day and night visits. [date]
2. Preliminary project. November 6, 2026.
 - a. Concept, the city's name, and first diagrams of the installation and the lighting.
 - b. Completed production form.
3. Presentation and review with the artistic and production teams. November 10 and 18, 2026 (in person).
4. Communication form. November 25, 2026.
5. Final project. December 2, 2026.
 - a. Two vertical DIN A2 panels with all graphic and written information: the city's name, understanding of the site, concept (a single idea), scale, materials and their purpose, role of light, construction, and dismantling.
 - b. Final production form.
6. Installation and festival. Dress rehearsal on February 4, 2027; festival from February 5 to 7, 7 p.m. to midnight (Sunday until 11 p.m.; schedule to be confirmed); Young Talent Awards on February 7; dismantling.

Panels may be written in Catalan, Spanish, or English. Each file must not exceed 10 MB, with images at 300 dpi, and must be named *School-name-city-name-01.pdf* and *-02.pdf*.

References

- Barthes, R. (1988). Semiology and the urban. In *The semiotic challenge* (R. Howard, Trans.). Hill and Wang. (Original work published 1985)
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- Lynch, K. (1960). *The image of the city*. MIT Press.
- Pallasmaa, J. (2005). *The eyes of the skin: Architecture and the senses*. Wiley-Academy.
- Tanizaki, J. (1977). *In praise of shadows* (T. J. Harper & E. G. Seidensticker, Trans.). Leete's Island Books. (Original work published 1933)
- Venturi, R., Scott Brown, D., & Izenour, S. (1972). *Learning from Las Vegas*. MIT Press.
- Zumthor, P. (2006). *Atmospheres: Architectural environments, surrounding objects*. Birkhäuser.