

## Binibeca Vell. Interpreting tradition

Jaime J. Ferrer Forés<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain, [jaime.jose.ferrer@upc.edu](mailto:jaime.jose.ferrer@upc.edu)

**Topic:** T1.2. Urban studies of vernacular architecture

### Abstract

*Following the visual and volumetric bases extracted from the traditional Mediterranean architecture, Francisco Juan Barba Corsini (1916-2008) and Antoni Sintes Mercadal (1921-1981) designed Binibeca Vell (1964-1972) a respectful complex with the environment and the constructive traditions. The integration in the site, the built forms, the materials used and the urban structure reflect the organization of a traditional village. The research aims to analyze the architectural features, the reinterpretation of vernacular elements and the local traditional construction crafts involved in the complex and the details, symbolism and aesthetics. Binibeca consists of 165 townhouses, shopping center, hotel, social club, church and a small marina, all arranged in the form of a fishing village. The urban structure, the different typologies and the construction process is considered an alternative to the block of apartments of tourist promotion, reinterpreting a model of traditional settlement. The initial proposal was to recreate a traditional fishing village that would inspire the work of intellectuals, painters and writers. Barba Corsini stated that he had felt closer to the way a fisherman builds than to an architect: "I have met Alvar Aalto on several occasions and I came to understand the superiority of the beauty of a wall made by a fisherman or a farmer compared to that of a specialist technician" (Barba Corsini, 2005). With the reinterpretation of an architecture of the past, Binibeca Vell recovers the autochthonous values of the Mediterranean coast. The resonance between topography and architecture, the harmony with the constructive traditions, the plasticity of organic integration and the picturesqueness of the access route characterize Binibeca, which incorporates the adjective "Vell" to the toponym to distinguish itself from new constructions.*

**Keywords:** Barba Corsini; Antoni Sintes Mercadal; vernacular; Menorca.

### 1. Introduction

In the sixties, when tourism was beginning to emerge on the island of Menorca, a group of promoters from Maó, Arcadi Orfila, Rafel Sintes, Francisco Caules and Vicente Amer, approached the Binibèquer Vell marina area and were amazed at the beautiful place in front of to the islets of Binisafüller. In 1963 they founded the company Ordenación Binibeca Vell and proposed the construction of single-family houses in the Menorcan style to attract the attention of artists and intellec-

tuals. The architect Pedro Luis Mercadal developed the plan for the general urbanization of Binibèquer Vell.

On the south coast of Sant Lluís, a small urbanization of Alcalar had been built, with the first tourist hotel on the island. In Punta Prima another summer resort was also beginning to be built. Josep Pla writes in the *Guide to Mallorca, Menorca and Ibiza* (Pla, 1950) that "Cala de Alcalar is at the moment the largest tourist creation on the island of Menorca and deserves

special attention – an indication of what will become the southern coast of Menorca in the tourist future. That farmhouse created, so to speak, by spontaneous generation, constitutes today an urban complex in full growth, beautiful and pleasant (Pla, 1950). In Alcafar, the collaboration between the Catalan architect Francisco Javier Barba Corsini and the Menorcan surveyor Antoni Sintes Mercadal began, who a few years earlier had collaborated in his Barcelona office. In 1961, they built a set of bungalows with modern lines in Alcafar and in 1962 they built “Sa Tanca” with vernacular echoes, a leisure club in San Lluís. In S'Algar they develop the urbanization subdivision project and propose the idea of building a fishing village that will be rejected by the promoters.

As one of the promoters points out, Francisco Caules Sintes in *Es Diari* (08/02/2011): “in 1970, when seeing his idea rejected in S'Algar, he convinced us to make a kind of fishing village in the cove formerly called Bini Bini on the maps and is known as “es Caló d'en Fust”. The promoters of Binibèquer Vell will accept the idea of Antoni Sintes Mercadal to build a fishing village and will have the architect Francisco J. Barba Corsini. The complex, which takes the form of a fishing village, is made up of 165 semi-detached houses, a shopping centre, a hotel, a social club, a church and a small marina. This project is proposed as an alternative to the routine tourist apartment block and adopts the popular Mediterranean architecture of the Balearic Islands as a reference to build a traditional complex in the urban structure, typologies and construction process. Barba Corsini and Antoni Sintes Mercadal, combine the vernacular patterns of traditional construction and the autochthonous values of the peoples of the Mediterranean coast to build this complex in dialogue with the territory.

### 1.1. Context

The Binibeca Vell project aims to enhance the landscape enclave of Caló d'en Fust. Binibeca Vell is located in the south of the island of Menorca, in

Caló d'en Fust, belonging to the municipality of Sant Lluís. The complex is located on the Canutells farm and the land, of little agricultural value, is characterized by a gentle slope to the edge of the cove. A natural cave was used as a recreation space for the families of the village.

The project arises from the analysis of traditional settlements and the vindication of the wisdom of vernacular constructions. From these they extract the principles that indicate in the project documentation “the non-destruction of the landscape; the harmonic unity with the site; the adequacy and use of geographical features; define the character of the landscape rather than level or deform” (Ruiz Millet, 2002: 210).

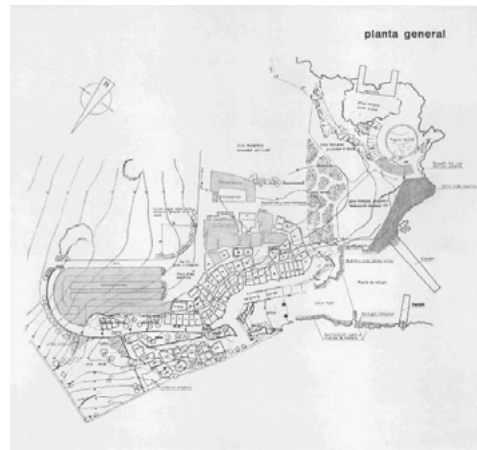


Fig. 1. Binibeca Vell Masterplan, (Source: Barba & Sintes, 1972, pp. 4-8).

This reinterpretation of a fishing village is developed around a roadstead that generates a natural port. In continuity with the traditional coastal settlements of the island, the implementation of the complex is adapted to the topography and the pre-existing conditions of the site. For Barba Corsini and Antoni Sintes, “This is an essay in which an attempt is made to get a concentrated group of apartments to adopt the form of a town, with all its peculiar characteristics (...)” (Barba & Sintes, 1972, pp. 4-8 ). The bottom of the roadstead, Caló d'en Fust, is used as a beach and next to it, preserving the natural character of the place and with limited interventions

on the rocks, a jetty with a ramp for boats is built. The existing stream is preserved as a green area that structures the urbanization and the two bridges give continuity to the streets of the complex, which is located on a higher level. The layout starts from the understanding of the site and its topography. The layout is not imposed abstractly on the territory. The organization of the streets responds to the topographic variation of the terrain and its layout is parallel to the topographic curves. This adaptation to the topography allows to adjust the scale of the building. As they write, this is the "only adequate way to do it, because any other system based on large earthworks would make the final result enormously more expensive, apart from the fact that the natural character that was wanted to be given to the whole from the beginning would have been very easily lost" (Barba & Sintes, 1972, pp. 4-8). The difference in height of each of the roads establishes the staggering of the complex on the steep slope of the site and ensures that the apartments get privileged views over each other.

The two protective breakwaters of the Caló d'en Fust port designed in the project will not be built. The construction of a small slipway for boats and a natural pool flanked by a pavilion was also proposed in the rocky formation that juts out into the sea.

## 2. Urban structure

The general volumetry evokes a fishing village and was studied, after developing the schemes in plan using a clay model. The landscape and the topography modeled the organization of the complex. As they point out: "the architecture of the complex has been the result of adaptation to the irregularities of the terrain and the needs of the occupants of the apartments" (Barba & Sintes, 1972, pp. 4-8). The two rows of houses follow the alignment of the layout of the pedestrian street that structures the complex. Transversely passages are arranged that modulate the scale of the building and structure the urbanization. The car park is located on the perimeter of

the urbanization and thus minimizes its influence on the complex. The layout of the streets is not subject to vehicle traffic and thus does not affect either the scale of the whole or the ground floors of the houses.



Fig. 2. Binibeca Vell urban structure, (Source: Barba & Sintes, 1972, pp. 4-8).

In the upper part of the complex, evoking the structure of a fishing village, the square is established, where the church and common services are located —supermarket, shops and restaurants— and a residence-hotel building. The church is an open space that acts as a chapel that, like a porch, connects the square with the adjacent streets. The lookout tower of the bell tower stands out over the roofs and constitutes a visual landmark of the complex.

### 2.1. Typologies

After drafting the urban project for the complex, the first two houses were built. Subsequently, on the ground, Antoni Sintes Mercadal drew each of the houses taking into account the topography and the needs of the residents. Each house is a different project that adjusts to the particularities of the site and the relationship in the complex. Thus, the houses are unique, both in their layout and program.

The house is built on behalf of the residents and is developed on two levels. On the ground floor there is, in addition to the access and a study, a

free space for the shelter of a boat, which will be progressively transformed with the extension of the house itself or in an independent apartment. The first floor houses the reduced program of the kitchen, dining room-living room with one or two bedrooms, bathroom and terrace.

The modern spatial organization of open spaces is enriched by the variation of levels in the interior that segregates the rooms. Intermediate spaces, terraces and porches underline the relationship between inside and outside and expand the domestic space to the outside. The masonry furniture and popular decorations intensify the traditional atmosphere (Barba Corsini, 1969, pp. 43-45).

As in traditional construction, the complex is developed in successive phases. First of all the stone bridge over the stream and the beach and the jetty with the ramp were built. The narrow streets were urbanized and the plots put up for sale were delimited with the plan of the house to be built. The first house was Casa Candi and the last ones to be built were towards the end of 1970. The main square, the church, the promenade were built in the first phase. Later and until completing the entire town, it grew towards the area located on the other side of the stream. In 1965, the Residencia Bini Vell functions as a hostel and by 1966 many houses had been completed. In the press, the construction of this authentic Menorcan town stands out "in the face of so much vulgar and characterless architecture that is being built, the realization of this original holiday town is worthy of admiration and praise, which has a Mediterranean flavor and Menorcan atmosphere that everybody who visit admires. In 1967, the publicity for the complex in *La Vanguardia Española* emphasized the traditional nature of the complex: "Binibeca Vell fishermen's shelter. Get a fisherman's lodge." To encourage neighborhood coexistence in the complex, the promotional campaign was aimed at national buyers, most of them Catalans, and shortly after going on sale, the promotion had been sold out. Binibèquer Vell consti-

tutes a new tourist attraction and will be the image of numerous postcards until it becomes one of the main identifying symbols of the island of Menorca.



Fig. 3. Binibeca Vell advertisement published at *La Vanguardia Española*, 7/11/1967.

### 3. Construction and tradition

Barba Corsini and Antoni Sintes Mercadal draw their most objective lesson from the vernacular heritage: "the environment of the town has been taken care of with real attention, with a general white and continuous plastic, but edged, according to the character of the island" (Barba & Sintes, 1972, pp. 4-8). In Binibèquer Vell they adopt the character of the vernacular, in the identity of the forms and in the wisdom of traditional construction. The construction is "simple and economical, thanks to the use of the country's natural materials" (Barba & Sintes, 1972, pp. 4-8) and is materialized with load-bearing brick walls with plaster "finishing it with a broom", arches as support for large openings, sloping whitewashed Arabic tile roofs, ceramic tile pavements, dark varnished pine wood carpentry and vitrified ceramic in kitchens and bathrooms. In the construction of the houses they use traditional techniques that contribute to the material unity of the complex and to harmony with the island territory. Variations of the same elements contribute to the diversity of the whole. As Barba Corsini and Antoni Sintes Mercadal point out, "its forms are the result of the different layout of the land, and its plasticity is the result of a very direct work on the work, since, given its variety, a very close control was essential for the realization of even the smallest

details” (Barba & Sintes, 1972, pp. 4-8). During the execution of the work, the quantity surveyor, Antoni Sintes Mercadal, lived in the complex and meticulously supervised the construction of the complex.



Fig. 4. Binibeca Vell and the vernacular construction, (Source: Barba & Sintes, 1972, pp. 4-8).

His direct work on the site and the team of local masons from Ferreries, with extensive experience in the island's traditional construction techniques, contributed to giving the complex a more human dimension. In Binibèquer Vell, Barba Corsini and Antoni Sintes Mercadal approach the formal reasons of the vernacular to access its objective and impersonal lesson.

They extract from tradition the local materials, the scale and fragmentation of the domestic, the symbolic character nature of the facilities and the civic dimension of the urban structure that gives identity to the complex, generating the construction of a traditional and characteristic environment that fosters the community and the interaction of the inhabitants. The town in dialogue with the territory, is organized around a community of owners that promotes a sense of belonging to the community and watches over the community and contributes to the preservation and care of the whole.

#### 4. Interpretation and reception

Binibèquer Vell finds in vernacular construction the means to interpret and adapt architecture to the environment. Inspired by traditional Menorcan constructions and combining local materials with popular construction wisdom, they build this complex rooted in Mediterranean culture and which had a notable impact on the media since its construction (Cisquella, 1974, pp. 9-11). In *La Vanguardia Española* of August 28, 1970, they echo the visit of the Minister of Information and Tourism in Menorca, Alfredo Sánchez Bella: “In the Binibeca urbanization, the curious fishing village, with its original as unequal constructions and their narrow and winding pathways, to the point of feeling the desire to reward it and point it out as a model”. In the *La Vanguardia Española* on September 10, it was stated that the minister found the pattern of “the adaptation of constructions to the landscape, of the exaltation of the autochthonous.” The Binibèquer Vell urbanization was very successful as a holiday village and received the award for tourist merit in 1972.

Binibèquer Vell became a tourist symbol in the local and international media and served as a reference for other projects. In *The New York Times* of July 12, 1970, Patrick Raleigh makes a complete review of Binibeca pointing out the keys to the reinterpretation of the Mediterranean material tradition and of a primitive habitat in harmony with the environment: “like a pile of sugar cubes, the village of Binibeca huddles above a cove sheltering a mini-sand beach on the rocky south coast of this, the most northerly of the Balearic Islands. Tile roofs top ping a folk-art jumble of irregular houses leaning against each other and boats, nets and lobster pots scattered in front of massive boathouse doors recall old fishing villages on small harbors all around the Mediterranean. On close inspection, though, Binibeca's dazzling, even whiteness and unweathered wood reveal that this was never a Greek or Roman colony, nor even place from which Menorcan fishermen set sail. Only four years ago, in fact, there was not a



single building at this cove. Although on the backs of postcards its called a pueblo pescador (fishermen's village), Binibeca is really a singular example of *urbanización*, a pre-planned town for an undeveloped site, designed either for warm-weather residency or as a hotel facility for tourists. Hundreds of these developments are going up all along Spain's 2,050 miles of island and mainland coast, some tastefully worked into their settings, but too many done with an eye to maximum exploitation and quick return."

On the international impact of the project and also for the criticism that had received Barba Corsini states: "*The New York Times* dedicated two entire pages to the town I made in Menorca. [...] It is an intervention that has been highly criticized, but people have great affection for it, they respect it a lot, and every year everything is painted white" (Barba Corsini, 2006, p. 61). In 2007, he stated: "the town we built, Binibeca, was an invention of the sixties. But it looks like a real place, because it delves into the popular. At the time it did not have good reviews because it was not modern. They called me a folklorist. And I wasn't looking for folklore" (Zabalbeascoa, 2007).

## 5. Conclusion

Binibèquer Vell adopts as a fundamental reference the traditional Mediterranean construction and the vindication of popular culture. The rhythmic aggregations of the houses, with the additive logic of domestic volumes and the planimetric fragmentation of the typologies, is expressed with the roughness of the walls and the craftsmanship that materializes and represents the domain of tradition. The Mediterranean poetics of this lyrical white utopia is the testimony of a vernacular yearning that vindicates, with the fragmentation of what has been built, the specificity and sense of place.

The complex is also a social construction that supports the coexistence of the community and the sense of belonging and has determined a recent interest of the neighbors to obtain the declaration of a degree of patrimonial protection of the complex. The formal beauty of the traditional center makes it the biggest tourist attraction on the south coast of Sant Lluís and one of the best-known and most photographed images of Menorca. The Binibèquer Vell project provided Menorca with an alternative model to high-density tourist buildings, little rooted in the territory and traditional construction culture. Barba Corsini stated that "the island of Menorca was saved by towns like Binibeca, where houses were made that respected the volume of what was built and the building traditions of the island. Ibiza, on the other hand, is destroyed". Barba Corsini affirmed that he had felt closer to a fisherman's way of building than to that of an architect: "I was with Alvar Aalto on several occasions and came to understand the superiority of the beauty of a wall made by a fisherman or a farmer compared to that of a specialist technician" (Barba Corsini, 2005, p. 134). The fisherman or the farmer build objective and impersonal works. Antoni Sintes Mercadal, without an architect's education, and Barba Corsini resort to the ancestral wisdom of vernacular construction, in short, to the tradition of architecture. Adolf Loos summed it up in his writing published in the *Architektur* magazine in 1910: "How is it that every architect, whether good or bad, spoils the landscape of the lake? The peasant does not. Neither does the engineer, with his train tracks along the shore or with his boats that trace deep furrows on the clear surface of the lake. They create differently." The concern of Barba Corsini and Antoni Sintes Mercadal not to destroy the landscape leads them to recover in Binibèquer Vell the formal values that remain in traditional architecture.

In dialogue with the territory, the Binibèquer Vell tourist complex recovers the autochthonous values of the villages of the Mediterranean coast. The town of Binibèquer Vell evokes traditional Minorcan architecture, in the so-called *Casolan houses* such as Torret, but also alludes to other Mediterranean island territories (Vidal Bendito, 1978, p. 227). Being as natural as it is artificial, as archaic as it is contemporary, the town of Binibèquer Vell continues to be one of the main identifying symbols of the island of Menorca.

### Acknowledgment

This work was supported by Institut Menorquí d'Estudis (IME) [grant 2021-2022].

### References

- Barba Corsini. F.J. (1969). “El apartamento en la urbanización: poblado de pescadores, en Binibeca vell, Menorca”, *Nuevo Ambiente*, 9. pp. 43-55.
- Barba Corsini F.J., Sintés Mercadal A. (1972). “Poblado de pescadores para vacaciones”, *Informes de la Construcción*, 246. pp. 3-8.
- Barba Corsini F. J. [et al.] (2005). Francisco J. Barba Corsini. *Visions*, 4, pp. 1-22.
- Barba Corsini F. J (2005). Referencias bibliográficas. *Quaderns*, 245 pp. 132-140.
- Barba Corsini F. J. [et al.] (2006) *Francisco J. Barba Corsini arquitectura: función y emoción*. Pamplona. Universidad de Navarra. Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura. pp. 68.
- Cisquella G., “Binibeca o el urbanismo privilegiado”, *Mobelart* (Barcelona), 23, november (1974) pp. 9-11.
- Pla, J. (1950). *Guía de Mallorca, Menorca e Ibiza*. Barcelona. Destino.
- Raleigh P. (1970) Instant ‘Fishing Village’ A New Trend in Resorts. *The New York Times*, p. 314.
- Ruiz Millet J. (2002) *Barba Corsini Arquitectura 1953-1994*. Barcelona. Galeria H2O. pp. 269.
- Vidal Bendito, T. (1978). La casa rural i l’arquitectura tradicional menorquina. *Revista Catalana de Geografia*, 2. pp. 223-228.
- Zabalbeascoa A. (2007). Entrevista F. J. Barba Corsini. “Hay que suprimir las teorías para empezar a pensar”. *El País*, 19 de mayo de 2007.