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Bishop Miquel Pontich's Ninety Steps.

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This text is about a very large stair in a small city, and if glorification occupies the center of the architectural enterprise, this stair sits squarely in this glorious center.

Public stairs are common in cities that are built along steep river banks or on mountainsides. In Gerona, which is situated on the river Onyar in the province of Cataluna north of Barcelona, there are four public stairs that are named in the official tour guide: Escalles de la Pera, Escalles de Sant Domenec, the Escalles at the Pujada del Seminari and the Bishop's steps. The Bishop's steps are not like the other public stairs, even though they are built from the same rock, with similar balustrades and topped with identical classical spheres. In fact, the Bishop's steps are not only not like other public stairs in Gerona, but in the region and in Barcelona.

Purportedly, Bishop Friar Miquel Pontich had the ninety steps built in the Placa de la Catedral between 1685 and 1699. The Catedral is itself one of those unexpected religious assemblies that the modern traveller cannot quite match with his own map of geopolitical understanding, since there is no relationship between the minor importance of the modern Gerona and the size, complexity and splendor of the Catedral. Yet this state of apparent discrepancy between architectural and

sociopolitical importance fits neatly with the Bishop's steps.

The Catedral was many centuries in its building and the ninety steps were only one of many fragments added at different times that make up the current scene of the church and two plazas: the upper Placa dels Apostols, and the lower Placa de la Catedral—the seat of the steps.

The ninety steps are divided into three sections, each consisting of thirty steps, a landing and surrounding balustrades, occasionally topped by a perfect sphere set on a pedestal. The entire stair ascends some 60 feet to the entry of the cathedral with its main door, eight niches, two balconies, and a giant rose window built in 1733 by Pere Costa. Behind this facade lies the Great Nave, which reaches 70 feet across, making it the widest nave in Europe. Yet all this splendor, size, and spatial power fades somewhat in light of the ninety steps.

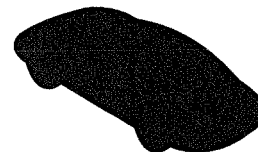
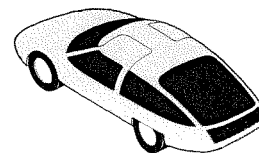
We have visited Gerona twice. The first time stumbling accidentally and very briefly on the steps, we did not quite believe our eyes. Afterwards, we commented on the curious encounter and promised to return. The second time we rushed with anticipation back across the river, and through the narrow streets to confront the stairs: breaking through the perimeter of the *placa*, it was no longer

disbelief but size-shock, scale-disorientation, and bulk & magnitude-collision that stunned us. For a moment we were children in the company of a giant.

Restored to proper size we thought: the shock had to do with the juxtaposition of their **giant** size and their simple, **rational** design—thirty steps of roughly eight inches each, a landing, an additional 20 feet of steps, a landing, and the final stretch of steps. Somehow, this heterogeneous combination of unusual size and common design arrested the natural flow of the stair—it was as if getting to the Catedral was less important than the stair itself. Through this sudden change of size, the solidity and inherent predicability of the type-object with its implicit internal balance between parts and characteristics had been ruptured.

Further, the extraordinary size is apparent not only because of the level difference between the *placa* and the Catedral, but also because the stair fills the entire square, leaving space only for narrow streets and a narrow strip of its original footprint. Gargantuan, the stair has become so large that just like Yeats' dancer and his dance, the stair cannot be separated from the square. Like a new alloy, the stair-square has muscled a new place for itself in the urban taxonomy.

However, this new urban



presence can only incidentally be apprehended through reasoning—primarily, it is felt in the gut like the way our organs are pulled by gravity in a fast-moving elevator ascending towards the thirtieth floor of a skyscraper. No loss of symbolic importance of architecture can take this most fundamental experience of presence away from us. When the good Bishop slipped the giant stair into the Placa de la Catedral, he dropped a large rock in our experiential stomach. Not even the ear-shattering noise from a blue car struggling up the narrow street towards the Placa Apostols and the stars beyond manage to displace the weight of the steps.

There is, of course, a conspiracy against such ineffable experiences in modern culture since they fall through the Cartesian net. Curiously enough, these gastronomic forms of architectural experience are for all of us, regardless of class or creed, provided of course that we are willing to go to Gerona instead of Paris or Barcelona.

For us, the stairs show clearly that by changing only one parameter in the type-object complex, common stairs can surreptitiously, on the wings of blue cars, slip into the stratosphere of architectural glory.

