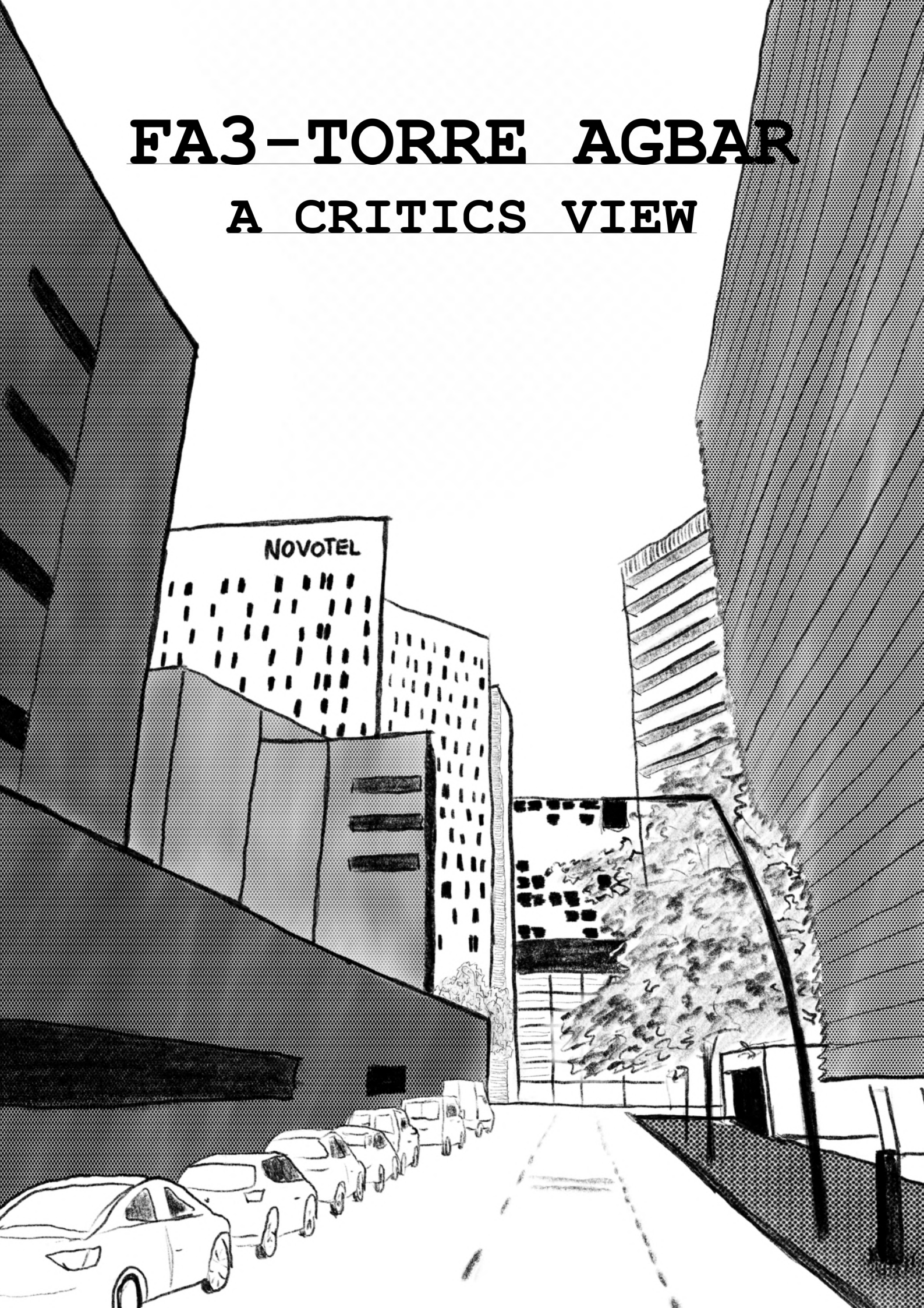


# FA3-TORRE AGBAR

## A CRITICS VIEW



# Who was Ian Nairn?

Ian Nairn was a British architectural critic whose career spanned the post-war context of 1950-1980's Britain. What defines his "style" is open to personal interpretation but, here, I have defined these four characteristics:

- (1) Nairn's journey to fame took off when his book "Outrage" was published in 1955. In this book he criticised the post-war developments as being routine, monotonous destroyers of the uniqueness found around Britain, leading to a warning that "the end of Southampton will look like the beginning of Carlisle; the parts in between will look like the end of Carlisle or the beginning of Southampton"<sup>i</sup>. "Subtopia" was the word he used to describe this, defining it as "the annihilation of the site, the steamrolling of all individuality of place to one uniform and mediocre pattern."<sup>ii</sup> To document this Subtopia he focussed on the clutter – wires, lampposts, adverts, things in the middle of fields – that diluted the visual characteristics of a place.
- (2) To fight against Subtopia, he vehemently argued for the soul of a place or building to be protected. For example, when an emporium in Northampton was threatened with demolition, Nairn's reaction was "change the scheme, you know, what is more important, a living bit of Northampton, or just one scheme?... If they do pull this place down, it will be a diabolical shame."<sup>iii</sup>.
- (3) In terms of his presentational style, Nairn used coloured half-pages, series' of photographs that contrasted the good, the bad, and the Subtopian beside text and large, whole-page, charcoal drawings that demonstrated a Subtopian street scene. This later point I have tried to recreate in my sketch on the front cover. With his writing style, he wanted to bring buildings to life. Buildings in Paris are described as "an orgy of stonework"<sup>iv</sup>, or on London's Highgate Cemetery "nothing seems real but death at its greyest and clammiest. The cemetery closes well before dark, and a good job too"<sup>v</sup>. These examples show how well Nairn could make you feel as if you were with him, analysing the building as if it were alive.
- (4) Finally, throughout most of his writing, Nairn wanted to engage the average person in taking an active role in preserving their local heritage and fighting against Subtopian developments. The emotive, almost angry way Outrage was written was designed to shock the complaisant citizen into action<sup>vi</sup>. This was followed up with a manifesto for the average citizen, in order that they could become part of the solution to defending their local heritage.

# Torre Agbar: A symbol of Subtopia?

Shooting out of the ground, the bullet shaped Torre Agbar pierces the Barcelona skyline, drawing the viewers eye up to the clear, blue sea of sky. Perhaps this is appropriate, considering the tower was originally designed for Agbar Group, the company in charge of providing the city with water. But, to British visitors, the first thing they will notice is the buildings doppelganger resemblance to London's Gherkin. The difference, however, between Torre Agbar and the Gherkin is its local context. Unlike London, where the Gherkin sits amongst a sea of glass cubes, spires, and rectangles, Torre Agbar dominates the surrounding low-rise developments.

Its shimmering glass façade, which Ateliers Jean Nouvel state is designed to represent water, further elevates the tower's visual impact. The coloured surface, broken up by small square windows, creates an interesting effect, like that of a chameleon, breaking up the shape of the tower and creating a colourful LED light-show as the daylight fades. Similarly, this façade creates a pixelated effect, a clear nod towards its geographical location amongst the developing 22@ technology district.

However, this material palette stands in sharp contrast to the neutral tones of the stone of the majority of the buildings in Barcelona. Whilst this is not necessarily a bad thing, I would argue that Torre Agbar is too out of place in Barcelona. When imagining a typical building in Barcelona, I'm sure the average person would pick out features such as courtyards, neutral tones, red roofs and stone buildings, not a large glass tower. As such, it could also be argued that Torre Agbar dilutes the uniqueness of Barcelona. By standing in such contrast to its context, Torre Agbar almost says that the features that make Barcelona unique are not important. Likewise, as a large glass tower, Torre Agbar could be found anywhere on the planet. Would it look out of place in London, New York or Shanghai? Probably not. As such, it is not a building that celebrates and personifies the uniqueness of Barcelona.

This is also interesting in terms of the fact that it goes against the socio-political context of Barcelona. Barcelona, and the wider Catalan region, has been a hotbed of nationalism and independence movements for a long-time. It is a place with a clear identity. How then does a building that could be found anywhere fit in, especially when that building is so dominating?

I would argue that it doesn't. It echoes back to Ian Nairn's warning of towns and cities losing their individuality as they become "Subtopias", defined as "the annihilation of the difference by attempting to make one type of scenery standard for town, suburb, countryside and wild"<sup>vii</sup>. This incorporation of the standard glass corporate tower in Barcelona feels Subtopian; it does nothing to "maintain and intensify the difference between places"<sup>viii</sup>.

Perhaps the wider @22 technology district development can be considered Subtopian. The historic industrial buildings that once made up the Poblenou District area were bulldozed down in an effort to "modernise" the area for the Barcelona Olympics<sup>ix</sup>. These factories and warehouses carried the DNA of the area and with their demolition perhaps the spirit of the place was lost. Perhaps preserving and incorporating these buildings would have led to a development that holds onto the essence of its context, rather than one that could be found in any major city. This destruction of Poblenou's heritage is a key indicator of Subtopia, destroying the uniqueness and individuality of place. Perhaps Torre Agbar is just another symptom of this Subtopian development in Barcelona.

I am willing to concede that my dislike of Torre Agbar may be down to personal taste, but there are clearly issues with the design of the building. It has been sold two times in just three years as its impracticality has driven out tenants<sup>x</sup>. Dirty, small windows do not allow for views of the city and fail to block out the dazzling sunlight. The donut shaped floorplan (with services in the middle) blocks colleagues views of each other, interrupting the workflow of the buildings users. These issues have led to its newest owners having to pledge to spend another £13 million to refurbish the building to try and turn it into something functional<sup>xi</sup>. As such, not only does this building look terribly out of place in Barcelona, but it fails to meet the needs of its inhabitants resulting in yet more energy and resources being ploughed into a building that perhaps should never have been built in the first place.