

By [Jake Fleisher](#)

A recent Blink project brought me to Barcelona, where in-between site visits and interviewing people, I did what I usually do in new lands: document the local, quotidian products. As a product designer and user researcher, I'm fascinated by local variations of the highly evolved, yet simple, products we see, use, or benefit from every day. Domestic and international differences are often subtle reflections of local custom, resources, culture and sensibilities. In the past, I've turned my attention and camera lens to public transportation tickets, light switches, and hotel windows. On this trip, I was inspired by sewer covers.

Yeah, sewer covers. Or more accurately, utility covers: those substantial chunks of metal whose sheer weight keeps them safely in place, too heavy for the uncommitted vandal to bother lifting. In addition to their obvious function (access and prevention of access) they also provide a canvas for information (what's underneath), branding (city services), and design (beautify the harsh urban environment!). As a gearhead, machine nut, and lover of metal-forming processes, I was excited to see the Catalan variations and decided to record a few.

I found an amazing variety—even covers of the same size for the same utility were different in the different city neighborhoods: *El Poblenou* differed from *Gracia* and neither were similar to the lids in *La Clota*. Behind all variations, domestic or international, there's a story and a reason. I love the stories behind the things.

Many times it's a question of materials: iron foundries aren't everywhere and the raw materials needed to feed them are costly to transport. Sometimes it's process expertise — like being really good at making borosilicate glass, carbon fiber layups, or electroluminescent panels — that drives location-specific sourcing. The combination of resources, needs, and local "taste" result in variations from one place to another. Discovering what drives these variations gives me perspective in my work to define new product forms and interactions.

Here are seven pictures of utility covers that I encountered in Barcelona. Do you track or examine other everyday products? Do tell!

Agua Potable I

Waves of drinking water

Agua Potable II

Drops of drinking water (?)

Gas Natural

Lovely graphic treatment lends itself to legibility from all compass points

Small cover + long name = contractions

Small cover + long name = contractions

Drinking water, plain and simple

Drinking water, plain and simple

Traffic control: I get it!

Traffic control: I get it!

I'm stumped on this one: it names the maker of the cover, but not what's underneath.

Barcelona

*Jake does strategy work at Blink. In his spare time he's a gearhead, hack musician, and fan of nighttime bike rides.*