



DOORS AND LOCKS IN MADRID – ENTERING NEW CITIZENSHIP SPACES

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Giulia Molinengo works as a facilitator for Local Squares, and is passionate about facilitating groups in becoming more aware of their own resources. Her work has consisted especially in supporting organisations in establishing cross-disciplinary and cross-national networks of practitioners based on the principles of self-organisation, resources exchange and peer-learning. She has previously worked for the British Council in Rome, Citizens for Europe e.V. in both Berlin and Copenhagen, the Bertelsmann Stiftung in Barcelona and the Charles Leopold Mayer Foundation in Paris. She has an MA in Intercultural Conflict Management.

Nowadays urban spaces present a unique mirror of how citizenship is shifting toward new models. Urban citizenship is indeed overcoming the rigid set of rules, rights and duties granted to each citizen. It is helping to initiate an awakening of the city, where citizens revive and take care of public spaces on their own initiative and transform them to meet their needs. By doing so, the citizen becomes owner and maker of the space in which he lives and moves away from a passive consumer attitude.

This is what is happening in Madrid. There are doors in this city that are not easy to open. However once you have opened one, it is not easy to close it behind you.

These doors are usually hidden. You can easily pass one by on the way to your work without even noticing it. Over the past few years, however, those doors grabbed the attention of some slow-walkers of Madrid, who took the time to have a look at what was hiding behind these doors. What they all have in common is usually a lock, which separates the spaces behind the wall from the rest of the city. Spaces frozen by the crisis, sometimes belonging to private owners, sometimes to a penniless public administration. The lock communicates a simple message to passers-by: “you can’t enter – this is not yours.”

But eventually curiosity about what is hidden becomes stronger than the lock. In Madrid and many other cities in Europe, citizens are beginning to venture into the world behind the door and what they do in these previously locked spaces has become an important new expression of urban citizenship.

LOOKING BEYOND THE DOOR: IMAGINING POTENTIAL SPACES FOR TRANSFORMATION

Once you have seen what is behind that door, it is not easy to forget. You see at the same time an abandoned place and, in your mind, a place full of potential. Your mind starts racing, overcoming the mental barriers that shape your everyday life as city user.

“In the moment in which you break the lock, in which you enter that door for the first time, a sense of illegality is running in your head”, says one of the initiators of the *Solar de Lavapiés* project in Madrid. Here, and other places like *Esta es una Plaza*, *Campo de la Cebada*, *el Solar de Lavapiés*, the leap over the wall has already happened. These spaces are the seeds of a new sense of citizenship, just

starting to emerge. Each place had its own pioneers and initiators: young people of the *15M movement*, architects' collectives such as *basurama* and groups of neighbours.

It is difficult to make the leap. "But then," as the same initiator from *Solar de Lavapies* says, "once you're inside the space and you look around, everything you are doing suddenly seems normal and makes sense. We didn't enter this space hiding us in the dark of the night with a small group of people. We entered it at midday, and after a while people from Lavapies, families from the neighbourhood, started to look inside, walked through that door and joined us."

ELSEWHERE IN OC

"Basurama: an architectural collective"

This issue

page 122

CROSSING THE DOOR: DISCOVERING A NEW DIMENSION OF THE CITY

From abandoned and frozen spots full of rubbish and ruins, these places have been transformed into spaces made by and for the community. These community spaces suggest a dimension of citizenship where collective care, personal commitment, protection and relationship are at the core of their existence. When you enter the *Esta es una Plaza*, also in the district of Lavapies, you get the feeling of being able to do what each human being has dreamed of doing at least once in their lives: when you cross that doorway, you enter a different time. This one is less hectic times from your normal routine, slower and less crowded. It is a greener and more colourful space, in which every corner tells you a different story. There is a container full of tools to revive abandoned bicycles in the city. The space includes an amphitheatre, whose floor is made out of the bricks that littered the ground when people started gardening activities. In the corner stands a trash container that, if opened, magically transforms into a cooking station created by a visiting group of Italian designers. You find a hidden library in the wall that separates *Esta es una Plaza* from the street.

"People who enter this space for the first time ask us what they can do", says Luis, an actor and early wall-climber, "and we actually struggle in answering this question. You need to discover yourself what you want to do, what are the resources you can share with others, what are your passions. We are so used to a world that tells you what you should do, that it is not easy to switch to an attitude of just doing something, trusting that then you will discover what you really want to do!"

LIVING COLLECTIVELY IN THE CITY: A NEW EMERGING FORM OF CITIZENSHIP

Places like *Esta es una Plaza* challenge the classical idea of citizenship framed into a set of rights, duties and laws. Their conquest provocatively invites us to get to the essence of what it really means to be a citizen. Is it illegal to enter and occupy an abandoned space in order to create a space that contributes to community well-being?

We are slowly shifting into a citizenship that asks its citizens to be awake, to keep their eyes open on the city, to look for alternative resources at a time in which the *res publica* can no longer provide them alone. Citizens become aware of their needs and actively look for an answer to them. Within this mindset, city users are seen as co-creators of the city.

Currently, such community spaces have been filling an important gap that the government cannot fulfil. They are becoming places to restore needed neighbourhood relationships against the anonymity of public spaces in Madrid, which have become less citizen-oriented and more consumer-oriented. Slowly some of these new spaces are also assuming a character of mutual support, in which resources, personal connections and knowledge are shared. These spaces also provide security in the neighbourhood: a community that is well connected can rely on its own means of policing the collective space in their neighbourhood, something that the police alone cannot guarantee.

The boundaries around these city oases underline the conscious choice of citizens between the consumerist behaviours set up outside of their walls and new emerging forms of collective life inside. Moreover, these boundaries assume a second function. The degree of access to these spaces seems to run parallel to the way citizens can access the benefits of these emerging forms of citizenship.

These places cannot be simply labelled as public spaces. They have a semi-public character, determined by a wall that separates them from the street. And none of them has seriously considered tearing that wall down in order to make it 100% public. *Campo de la Cebada* recently made a porthole in the tin-plate fences surrounding the space, as an invitation for people passing by to see what is happening inside. *Esta es una Plaza* relies on natural holes in the wall to fulfil the curiosity of passersby. Still, the walls stay and protect the commitment and care people are putting in the collective action of

revitalization. The wall is somehow both the first small obstacle and, at the same time, the first trigger that each visitor entering for the first time needs to overcome in order to access these oases. There are doors to enter and each is invited to find a personal way to do so. In these semi-public spaces, there is no external authority to determine access to these spaces. It is up to the citizen to find the wall and decide how she wants to spend the rest of her day – inside or outside that community space.

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The degree of access to these spaces also corresponds to the degree of commitment and engagement the individual citizen invests in caring for it. The lock still exists but its keys are now in the hands of the members of the core group working actively in the space. Every evening, one member closes the same door that has been opened in the morning and locks it again. In this sense, the degree of access to this space is determined by the degree of responsibility that each user invests in these spaces. It could be argued that we are shifting into a re-privatisation of spaces based on engagement rather than economics: you have a higher access to the space if you involve yourself in its care and development. At the same time, having the key implies a higher level of responsibility towards the well-being of the surrounding community. Closing the door at night aims at meeting the needs of different inhabitants in the city. It can guarantee the quiet needed by neighbours living near the place at night. It can provide security from damage or destructive activities like drug-dealing. The single citizen takes responsibility for the space he cares about and, at the same time, accepts the responsibilities that this implies.

THE NEXT STEP: COLLABORATION WITH THE ADMINISTRATION

There are doors in Madrid that are not easy to open. But once you have opened one, it is not easy to close it again behind you. It would be a hard job for the Madrid authorities to try to close it again without risking resistance from the community. This is probably not their main priority anymore. After the initial attempts to tear

down what had been illegally initiated, the municipality seems to be silently accepting the presence of citizens' initiatives within these spaces, at least for now. Formerly illegally occupied places are slowly shifting into grey zones between legal and illegal, public and private.

Somehow, by passing through these doors, we are slowly entering in a new dimension of collective living in the city. *Esta es una Plaza* and the other spaces in Madrid blur dichotomies, by giving room to the collective creative brain of the city and by providing space to meet citizens' needs for community and by creating spaces for experimentation and living together. These community spaces claim this grey zone, this space in-between, as a room for re-thinking together the either/or conditions of a legal and political system that has lost its connection with its citizens and their daily needs. They celebrate and walk the unknown together, without suggesting one kind of answer. With these examples, we are shifting to a different kind of relationship with the government, in which instead of simply protesting against what has been done by the state, citizens actively make the change they want to see by collectively taking over neglected spaces and showing the city council community work as an alternative way to govern the commons.

However, these grey zones are still in a precarious stage in which the local administration, because of fears of losing control, can still decide whether they have the right to exist. How can both citizens and government shift to the next level of collaboration and learn together from the experiences of these colourful grey areas? This is the next door for cities to unlock.

This article has been written within the framework of "LOCAL SQUARES", an EU-funded learning partnership (Leonardo da Vinci Programme) training participation experts in Europe. The two-year project (2012-2014) brings together seven organisations from five different countries (Spain, Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, and Austria), working together and exchanging on strategies to involve a greater diversity of people and communities in the management of public spaces. In February 2013, LOCAL SQUARES was in Madrid, hosted by the local partner basurama, with the purpose of getting to know local initiatives active in the field of reactivation of public spaces. The partnership also contributed actively to build up public furniture for the Solar de Lavapies and organised an open event for the local community of Madrid under the question: "How can participation in public spaces support the future of our communities?"