



Hidden Squares – an international perspective on public spaces in Madrid

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About the Madrid visit

The European Partnership LOCAL SQUARES met for a second face-to-face meeting in February 2013 in the Spanish Capital Madrid. The purpose of the meeting was to get to know local initiatives active in the field of reactivation of abandoned spaces, to learn about the process of appropriation, regeneration and maintenance of these spaces and to get to know some of the methods of work of the local partners. The partnership also organized an open event bringing together about 50 practitioners of the local community of Madrid under the question: “How can participation in public spaces support the future of our communities?” and contributed actively to build up public furniture for the Solar de Lavapies.

During this internal meeting, LOCAL SQUARES visited three different places in the district of Lavapies, each telling a different story about

nowadays urban realities. From abandoned places, full of rubbish and ruins, these places have been transformed into spaces made by and for the community: initiated by a group of citizens of the neighbourhood in the case of the urban gardening and community space of “Esta es una Plaza”, by architects collectives such as basurama in the case of “Campo de la Cebada” and by one of the most recent citizens movements in Spain such as M15, in the case of the “Solar de Lavapies”. One would think that places made by and for the public are public – but these are not in terms of visibility and not in terms of easy access: all of them are hidden behind a wall. And still, they seem to fulfill functions and needs that “classical” public places fail nowadays. This journal collects impressions of a discovery which asks to take a closer look at those places and their special qualities.



EDITORIAL

We would like to display the authenticity and diversity of the participating partners in the Leonardo da Vinci Partnership Local Squares. Therefore the articles are not edited.

The first article *Doors and Locks* (Giulia Molinengo) invites the reader to a journey through anonymous doors of the centre of Madrid, that hide spaces in which citizens' creativity and initiative finds their own expression. Doors also blur boundaries between what is legal and what is illegal, what is public and what is private, who is the owner of the space. Niels Koldewijn is challenging these questions in his analysis *Co-ownership and Co-occupation of semi-public Spaces*. Bas Kools continues raising questions about *public space borders* – followed by a broader collection of *questions* that have been gathered during the visits of Madrid's hidden squares.

In *Urban Creativity was simmering* Cristina Braschi will concretely give insights about the driving forces and actors of those three spots. Sarah Oßwald examines in *Notes of Madrid* differences between German and Spanish temporary use projects and asks for new terms to describe new shapes of public spaces. *Public Spaces in Madrid discovered by Strangers* (Lena Hummel) is a collection of thoughts based on a brainstorming session, in which the project partners discussed public spaces, stakeholder participation and local change processes by explicitly focusing on the groups multinational context.

Change processes demand vision and action to get started. Two topics that are addressed by the reflection how to shift *From Urban Waste to Urban Taste* (Lukas Weiss) and *The Impact and Importance of a Critical Mass*, written by Tito Loria.

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DOORS and LOCKS – Walking in and out of the grey zones of Madrid

Giulia Molinengo

There are doors in Madrid that are not easy to open. But once you opened one, it is not easy to close it again behind you.

These doors are usually quite anonymous in the city. You can easily pass by while going to have your first cortado of the day without noticing them. In order to discover them, you need another daily rhythm than the one we are usually used to. Running from one place to the other one, always in a hurry and looking forward to the end of the day in order to finally rest.

In the last years, some citizens of Madrid started to walk more slowly. To look closer on all the uncovered resources their city has. And suddenly, those doors grab their attention. These doors are usually quite anonymous, independently from their sizes, big gates or small and innocuous doors. What they have in common is usually a lock, that communicates you quite clearly that this is not either your property or a public space, simply because you can't have access to it. The lock tells you "you can't enter", easy message.

But then the curiosity is stronger than that lock. Maybe you find a way to climb up the wall that separates you from what there is behind, maybe you can even see what it inside is from some fissure in the wall without making any particular effort. Or, even easier, maybe you are one of those neighbours whose balcony is facing everyday that abandoned space since years, sometimes decades.

Looking beyond the door: imagining potential spaces in transformation

Once you've had a look at what is behind that door, it is not easy to forget that door and walk further. You see at the same time an abandoned place and, in your mind, a potential place in fieri. And that's the moment in which your mind starts running, overcoming those mental barriers that shape your everyday life actions in

terms of what you can and cannot do in the public spaces of the city. In Madrid you can, for example, have a beer by sitting in one of the terraces of a café facing a beautiful square, but you can't drink the same beer by sitting with friends in the same plaza on one of the rare steps that it still offers. 300€ fine is the risk you might want to run into, if you do that. Other mental barrier: you can't go beyond a wall if what is behind it is not yours.

There are places in the heart of Madrid in which this jump beyond that wall, across that door already happened, more or less recently. Esta es una Plaza, Campo de la Cebada, el Solar de Lavapies are some of these examples. Each place had its own pioneers and initiators: young people of the 15M movement, architects collectives such as basurama, or groups of neighbours. "In the moment in which you break the lock, in the moment in which you enter that door for the first time, a sense of illegality is running in your head", says one woman of the Solar de Lavapies. "But then, once you're inside the space and you look around, everything you are doing suddenly seems normal. We didn't enter this space hiding us in the dark of the night with a small group of people. We entered it at 12 o'clock daytime, and after a while people from Lavapies, families from the neighbourhood, started to look inside, walked through that door and joined us".

Crossing the door: discovering a new time dimension of the city

From abandoned places, full of rubbish and ruins, these places have been transformed into spaces made by and for the community. When you enter the space of Esta es una Plaza, also in the district of Lavapies, you get the feeling of being able to do what each human being has been dreaming to do at least once in her life: you cross that door, and you enter in a different time. You leave hectic times behind you, and you enter in a slower time and less crowded, more green and coloured space, in which every corner tells you a different

story. You can find a container, laboratory of ideas for giving a new life to abandoned bicycles in the city and for building instruments such as cajons. You find an amphitheatre, whose floor is made out of all the bricks that were found in the ground when people started the gardening activities. You find a trash container that, if opened, can magically transform itself into a cooking station, created by an Italian group of designers who visited the place. 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 often ask us what they can do", says Luis, "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!".

Looking inside and outside of the door: blurred boundaries between city spaces

The door is now finally opened in these places. So opened that it would be quite impossible for the municipality of Madrid to try to close it again, without risking to create a high discontent inside the neighbourhood. Probably slowly this is not its main priority anymore. Also the police show up here very seldom, almost never. From being initially illegal occupied places, these spaces have been slowly shifting into a grey zone between what is legal and what is illegal, what is public and what is private. These spaces have been filling what at the moment is an important gap that the government cannot fulfil. They are becoming places to restore the need of neighbourhood relationships against the anonymity of public spaces in Madrid, nowadays less and less citizens-oriented and more and more consumer-oriented. Slowly some of them are also assuming a character of mutual support, in which resources, personal connections and knowledge of another citizen are shared and put at disposal of the others. These spaces also guarantee social security in the neighbourhood: a community that is well connected within itself

and can partly rely on its own means is like a collective eye watching out and caring for the collective space which is the neighbourhood. Something the police cannot guarantee. In this exact moment, the line between illegal and legal becomes blurred. Is it illegal to enter and occupy an abandoned space, with the aim of creating a space that has finally the goal of contributing to the collective well-being?

Also, the grey zone is created by its semi-public space character that each of these places assume, when every evening some member of the core group working actively in the space crosses the same door she entered in the morning, and locks it again. The door is closed again, and someone else will take care of re-opening it again the day afterwards. This action answers to a great variety of reasons, which try to tackle several needs coming from different actors of the city. You might want to guarantee the quietness needed by the neighbours living in the surrounding of the place in the night hours. You might want to maintain the character of security of the space and try to avoid it to become a hidden and protected space for drug dealing activities. Adding to that, all these community spaces have a wall that separates them from the street. And none of them has seriously considered so far the option of tearing it down. Campo de la Cebada has recently made some porthole in the tinplate fences surrounding the space: As invitation for people passing by to have a look at what is happening inside. *Esta es una Plaza* relies on some natural holes in the wall for fulfilling the curiosity of some slow-walker. Still, the walls stay on and protect the commitment and the care people are putting in this collective action. The wall is somehow also the first small obstacle and, at the same time, the first trigger that each visitor coming in for the first time needs to overcome by himself, in order to access to these oasis. There are doors to enter, and each one is invited to find his personal way to do it. Somehow the wall is also there to remind people that spaces are asking for care and that a personal relationship with the space is needed, in order to keep it alive and develop it further. Not 100% public, not private anymore, these community spaces suggest a new dimension for the relationship between citizens and their city,

where collective care, personal commitment, protection and relationship are at the core of their existence.

Living the grey zones as a way to step into the next level of collaboration with the administration

There are doors in Madrid that are not easy to open. But once you opened one, it is not easy to close it again behind you. Somehow, by passing through these doors, we are slowly entering in a new dimension of living collectively 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 put in practice citizens' needs and by suggesting themselves as learning fields of experimentation for the collective living together. These community spaces claim this grey zone, this space in-between, as a room for re-thinking together the either/or conditions that are put on

the plate in vain in order to try to answer to the challenges of a system that has never transformed itself so fast before. They celebrate and walk the unknown together, without suggesting one kind of answer. With these examples, we are shifting to a different quality of dialogue with the government, in which instead of simply protesting against what has been done by the state, the citizens start slowly owning collectively pieces of cities, by then showing them on their hands to the city council as alternative proposal of how to administrate what is common. However, these grey zones are still in a precarious stage in which the administration, because of fear or feeling of lack of control, is still in the position of deciding whether they have the right to exist or not. How can both citizens and government shift instead to the next level of collaboration, and learn together out of the experiences of these colourful grey areas?



Impressions of CAMPO DE LA CEBADA, one of the visited hidden spots



Co-ownership and Co-occupation of Semi-public Spaces

Niels Koldewijn

Madrid. A city that is one of those places of Europe where the crisis is hitting the streets and effecting everybody on every level. This is where financial pressure plays out in day-to-day life and within the context of our interest, it plays out in semi-public space.

One of the most intriguing point in the visit of the Learning Partnership Local Squares was a continuously returning questions around ownership and semi-public space. We visited several squares on the first day of our visits and discovered a wide range of places that were re-created from a starting point of occupation, community-ownership, government-citizen relationship, but also fully top-down government decided urban planning.

Surely inspiring and vibrant where the places that held a core of connectivity to people taking ownership and co-creating the space, hands on. These included three spaces and what seemed striking was that these three places where re-invented to go from private owned plots to semi-public community space. And somehow the semi-public part to it seemed to work quite well.

Semi-public in this perspective meant that the spaces were open in certain moments of the day and that some people had the key to open and close. In a seemingly loose structure nobody seemed to own the spaces really, leadership was fluent, flexible and not permanent, but what was permanent was care for the space, energy of life and a lot of people. There are three elements that are key-learning points to me here. Ownership, relationship and urgency. In terms of ownership it's interesting to me is to see that apparently if you give a key to a group of people and even if you open up everyday (so it seems to be almost public), people treat it different. With more respect and with more care. People are invited to contribute and do so. These places go from private, to occupied, to lively places, to semi-public places, to almost public places. The

difference at the end is that there's a key-holder, a closing time and a culture of respect, guarded by a group of inhabitants.

Would it work if there was no key and it would just be open for people to enter the whole day? comparing with examples in Holland, I don't think so. Or actually, seeing the other public squares it seems there's also less care because it's completely open and its ownership lies with a completely anonymous, not so respected government.

In terms of relationships, that was the key factor. Relationships of trust and giving space for creativity to emerge from relationships was the key to all the semi-public vibrant places that we visited. Interesting is to see the transition of the collaboration with municipalities. They flow slowly from careless to interested. We didn't meet government officials, but heard stories of them slowly showing interest, starting from a point of surprise. That is happening in more places, we see that happen in Holland as well, municipalities seeing that traditional ways of top-down relationships and deciding for others what's good for them or not has reached its limits. It's too expensive, too unused by the inhabitants and there's too much damage done by people who don't feel the ownership over the space.

With even in northern Europe funds drying up people are occupying small plots of unused land and build small creative hotspots of life. My next dream would be to see that these principles are applied to places where there is money involved, where it does concern public space. Why can't the local hookers, the police and residents co-create their squares together?

And last but not least we were meeting the world of occupation. Something that was a good tradition in Amsterdam if it comes down to empty buildings. The type of private – semi-public spaces are rare in our city and therefore occupying a plot in the middle of the city is hardly heard of. And the tradition of occupying empty buildings (kraken in Dutch) has been banned to be illegal and has been regulated into a grey-area

of allowing to use empty space temporarily. Of the three mentioned places one or two have or had been occupied and 'taken back' as land for the people by active citizens. And quite likely in these harsh economic times more of these actions will be taken to create places of meeting, where fruits and vegetables can be grown and mutual support can be found in community.

There's a whole world of thoughts behind the choice to occupy, but one element that I think is surely highly valuable is that people do it in order to bring back life, creativity and abundance to those places. They occupy because they care, they occupy because they want to create and they occupy because they can't be expected to wait for years for a government to assign a piece of land because the system will never allow it, which leads to empty, ugly, unused plots of land.

So there's a strong dynamic between occupation, ownership and (new) relationships.

It's like a cycle of elements that influence each other and it depends on the local situation where the energy starts. Sometimes you decide to occupy together from a new sense of relationship, sometimes you feel ownership, occupy and by doing you build new relationships and probably there are more dynamics to discover within these three elements.

Considering these elements and the total experience the most important thing I learned was: co-creation leads to ownership, which leads to care for a space. Semi-public space leads to ownership, which leads to care for a space. Care for space creates an environment where you can totally feel at home and that was the biggest inspiration, to kinda feel like coming home. To see that the values of the Oasis were expressed over a longevity in time creates a "real Oasis" which was very visible in Esta es una plaza and Campo de le Cebada. It was like coming home for me.

Public Space Borders

Bas Kools

What is public and where should it stop. What is private and where do borders of ownership and the understanding and working of public space become visible. Taking and giving responsibility, claiming, blaming growing, constructing and valuing of public space are states of a process that we are all part of, the constant transformation of the way you feel in a space in the changing seasons and the passing terms of the different local leaders that control the formal processes around public space. What is public space, and what is the role of participatory processes in this space. can it help to clarify the borders and the roles, can it create clarity, involvement and responsibility?

Who participates, where is the border within a group of people that want to be involved or not? Borders of public space and the processes that create public space, public space as a process with borders. A border being the definition of a public space setting the rules setting the context, showing what is in and what is not. Not visible but understandable, it is not written but you can feel it. A public space, is the space between a broad variety of Borders, some more vague than others but all contributing to the communal understanding of what it is, this thing we call public space.

How much privacy
do public spaces need?



How much security
do public spaces need?

What are the common needs of the
communities we live in?





How shall decision making processes be organized?

Shall we ask for funds or shall we start with our own resources?



Who initiates a community based urban project? Who is the community?

Urban Creativity was simmering - an insider perspective

Cristina Braschi

Now that I think about the last Local Squares meeting in Madrid, I realize that between Basurama, Esta es una Plaza and me (a bit), we have managed to show the others a good part of the Spanish collective's panorama.

Last years in Spain, architects had discussed so much about architecture collectives, comparing them with similar ones all over Europe, like Raumlabor, Atelier d'Architecture Autogérée, Exyzt, esterni. But meetings like Arquitecturas Colectivas - created to debate around different methods of intervention in public/abandoned/forgotten/disputed spaces - have arrived to the conclusion that what happens in Spain it's no accident. The claims of those groups are strongly linked with turnaround political, economical and cultural issues, setting the difference with other collectives in Europe where those contexts are different. That's why explaining what we were about to visit each day during the meeting to Germans, Dutch's, and Austrians was no easy task.

Although the 2008 crisis has played an important role in the growth of artistic collectives as work opportunity for young architecture studios, well before the crisis, several groups claimed other ways of fostering city living, more in line with citizen's desires. Recetas urbanas and Basurama encouraged people, since the 2000s, to recycle roofs, urban gaps, or waste, to overcome the lack of places to play, gather or just to promote other ways of non-commercial use of public space. So, many claims of these groups start with a social undertone, as a reply to the lack of proposals for social interactions coming from the municipality.

This is exactly what we tried to explain during the Local Squares meeting in Madrid: that even if the crisis was taken as an opportunity to express urban creativity, this kind of activity existed already, responding to necessities of citizens and/or market needs. For instance, Esta es una plaza started during a workshop for

"urban interventions", organized by Urbanacción together with esterni from Milan. Interventions from other groups in Europe were taken as an example, to apply them to the context of Madrid, which lacks of pocket parks close to people. Working with neighbours, they managed to create a green space, with an orchard, a theatre, hamacs and petanque. The project was supposed to stay for a week, and after destruction by the municipality (which was a bad surprise), neighbours transformed the place making it become an example of multi-agent negotiation and self management.

Alberto Nanclares, from Basurama, tailored us a tour through the squares in Madrid which were renewed, but without almost any green area, shadow, or playground. The spread of squares "not to sit in" (plazas que no están para sentarse en Madrid) explains in fact initiatives like Esta es una plaza, where neighbors only wanted to do by themselves what Municipality does not carry out, either because of lack of money, or because they don't want to maintain those kind of place (which they would have to clean, control, or water the plants). Facing the lack of public equipments (understanding squares as equipments) to be appropriated, people practice the DIY.

One thing that strikes from the visit is that people from the Local Squares network were surprised and maybe frightened of the presence of Police and CCTV. They asked: What do they control? What kind of uses do they avoid? What kind of user of the public space do they fight? I was only able to explain the case of public breakfasts like Desayunos en la Luna where policeman use to pass by, to ask what we were selling, or to control if we were not "too many" (what's the point of being "too many in public space"? Can't we if the square is big enough for sharing it?).

The Campo de Cebada is more like the kind of collective emerged because of the crisis. The void created after the demolition of the Sports hall la Latina, remained without a project (because of the dreaded crisis), raising the opportunity to be

occupied temporarily by Basurama. A socio-cultural, evolutionary project was born to become an example of self management responding to the lack of proposals from the Municipality for noncommercial leisure.

By experiencing and discussing I believe we found a way to show a good panel representing

the context of Madrid (not that different from other places in Spain), and the processes created by the three principal agents: public administration, mediators (collectives, associations ...) and citizens in the negotiation for the coproduction of public spaces.

Notes of Madrid - an outsider perspective

Sarah Oßwald

Do strawberry trees really exist? I had never heard about a strawberry tree before. The Madrid city coat of arms actually shows a bear supported on a strawberry tree. This paradise plant also grows at Esta es una plaza – one of three common squares we have been. The madroño became my symbol for informal activities on squares (see picture p.16).

Certainly I don't have answers for all of these questions raised before. But – apparently these informal locations are very vibrant, diverse, unique, dynamic, flexible, authentic and open for any kind of interaction but business. They convey identity and don't need any long-term planning and leadership, interactions are very process-orientated, the design looks unscripted and many elements are reused. Visitors get inspired and a different view of public squares. These locations empower people to do something they wouldn't do somewhere else, to explore something new and different and they support people in their autonomy. The sites are very multifunctional; the most popular uses are in the field of sports, culture, gardening, chilling, meeting, cooking, and just any kind of leisure activity. The plazas are copies of the users' likes. They are hosted by people of the neighborhood for themselves and everybody who wants to join. They are the epitome of collaborative and alternative work: People meet up to do something together. To put it briefly: high social outcome with little financial effort. They open up new courses of action for urban planning and at the same time make a lasting contribution to

urban transformation. The crisis works as a motor for this kind of creative occupation in the city of Madrid. The crisis causes voids – room for counter-models of ordinary public squares.

A difference to long lasting second hand spaces in Germany is the non-commercial orientation. Legalized temporary uses usually pay a rent, so the users have to found at least a small business on the site. We also visited a commercial temporary use in Madrid: Tabacalera – a former cigarette factory. One part is converted in an exhibition space – professionally managed. The other part gives room for concerts, flea markets, events etc. We were told that the group has got internal conflicts that are serious threats to the whole project. Maybe commercial projects are an even more difficult adventure for the internal cohesion.

We discovered these internal plazas have no umbrella term. In Germany we call them Zwischennutzung (temporary use or interim use), but these terms highlight the limited duration of the use. They reduce the activity to a use in a time gap and omit the numerous qualities that cause these activities. But to name the phenomenon is very important to show the value of these squares. Other terms are second hand space, former abandoned place, ex-void, vacant site or brownfield etc. The terms common or internal square underline the social orientation. Basically these squares work like our trip: full of inspiration, a networking platform with many activities.

Public Spaces discovered by Strangers

- a collective Brainstorming

collected by Lena Hummel

Madrid, Thursday February 14th. We – the partner organizations of the project LOCAL SQUARES – spent one entire day cycling through the inner part of Madrid, visiting classical public spaces places like Puerta del Sol, Plaza de la Luna, Plaza Callao and as well more community driven spots like Esta es una Plaza, Solar de Lavapies or Campo de la Cebada.

What we found, was a great diversity in terms of size, shape, character, appearance, ownership, interaction, commitment and legality. The final exchange about differences of Madrid's public spaces in comparison to what we know and experience in our home countries was powerful - and asks for being continued.

What makes community driven spaces so particular?

We experienced Campo de la Cebada Esta es una Plaza and Solar de Lavapies very relaxed but still lively. In contrary to official public spaces those ones appear more colorful, green, aesthetic, beautiful, inviting, presenting a subcultural and private atmosphere. Communities and Neighborhoods need spaces where people can rest, exchange, chat, stay, get active and contribute. The con-commercial character allows private / community use of spaces and invites to other forms of interaction and personal relationship. And it seems that citizens are in particular looking forward to have space where they can go to without necessarily consuming. We concluded by defining a new category for those public spaces: Community spaces open to public / public use. What other terms can explain this character best: Semi-public spaces? Partly-autonomous spaces? Community spaces? Occupied spaces? Interim-use spaces? Self-organized spaces?

Who owns it?

All the partners have been impressed by the high level of commitment and the power of

ownership in the self-organized public spaces. There are a lot of people active and engaged. Why? Because of the warm weather and a cultural of being outside? Because of lack of green spaces in Madrid? Because of being against the municipality and now being proud of a self-managed space?

Another point, that was mentioned: the spaces are hosted by people and so they can become participative and inviting. And limits (like walls in Campo de la Cebada or Esta es una Plaza) support the hosting character and create ownership. (*)

Our Spanish Partners got (once more) aware of the treasure that they hold in their hands by hosting spaces like Esta es una Plaza. They added that the key for the success is commitment: you need an idea to commit to and to engage in the project. And you need leaders that motivate at the beginning and then slowly shift the responsibility to the users. The spaces need continuously common experiences of people to keep the level of activation. One partner mentioned that there is a strong feeling belonging to a common good, but concluded critically that the group of activist is not as diverse as society is. Maybe with new ideas, new people can get involved?

What about official public spaces?

The first impression was that public squares in Madrid appear lively and full of people – not only at day but as well at night time. Those squares are made to pass through or to consume. We lived the top-down planning perspective with (grey) mainstream architecture and stated, as shown during the cycling tour, that the citizens' needs are not met (like no benches to sit and rest). But still there was one observation that the public spaces seem being less sanitized than in other European capitals, so rules seem to be easily broken. Some more questions popped up:

- "I noticed (real) public spaces that there is lots of mess and pie smell. How does it come that

people don't care of their own living environment?"

- "Does the presence of the police in public square make the people feel more secure? I am not used to so for me it was the opposite: I felt guilty looking for something going wrong."

Interaction with local authorities

We – presenting ourselves a wide diversity in terms of type of actors – tried to understand the interaction and relation between local authorities, such as the municipality and government, and the citizens. In the description of urban planning culture our Spanish partner stressed the fact that "the public authorities are not doing things for citizens, because they focus on commercial and economic use. Citizens on the other side do not respect the common interests".

We concluded that the ambivalent character of the municipality of being present and invisible opens blindspots. Those neglected, vacant spaces that are not totally controlled by the local authorities can allow people to get active and can serve as a basis for community organizing. One partner wrote this learning as "playing in the municipalities' blindspots".

So there is a continuous flow of being with and against the municipality / government e.g. in claiming land for common use. How can then be the collaboration with the government? And a question connected to it rises up: Is the municipality the one who should provide (and maintain) the space for citizens? Or are the communities responsible for that? If yes, how can the municipality support this process?

How does the crisis influence active citizenship?

Coming from other European countries that are not so much affected by the economic and financial crisis, we have been surprised to see as well a positive impact of it: the crisis worked as a motor for creative occupation in the city of Madrid. Only the failing of the system of local authorities makes action possible: Blindspots finding it! What is the reason for it and are there other conditions supporting active citizenship and co-creation of the city?



Internal Sessions

During each face-to-face meeting the project partners are dedicating time for sharing, exchanging and collective harvesting of the visited projects.

From Urban Waste to Urban Taste

Lukas Weiß

It must have been the up beating moment for this place, when in 2008 LA CASA ENCENDIDA organized a workshop about the temporal reuse of urban wastelands in Madrid. As a result of this workshop, in cooperation with the Milanese cultural organization ESTERNI and in cooperation with the neighbours as well as in consultation with the municipality of Madrid this place got a new look – and of course more than just a material reconfiguration. As a result of the collaboration of LA CASA ENCENDIDA, ESTERNI, neighbours and engaged people - ESTA ES UNA PLAZA (EUP) was born. Today EUP is more than just an urban garden; it seems to be something like an informal cultural centre under the open sky for the neighbourhood in Lavapíes. This place and all the activities that take place there are the result of the very divers talents of the people who engage there. Theatre workshops, cooking and eating together as well as taking care of vegetal patches and a bike repair shop are just a few catchwords that represent what's going on in EUP. As Marc Augé described in 1992 the theory of non-places, places with a lack of identity and history, EUP seems to be the complete opposite of it. Today we can find lot of places in the urban areas which could be described as deficit-based non-places, such as shopping malls, that pretend to combine both, the functions of consumption and recreation. Even more the economic and social system of today is more or less based on deficit; I dare to say as a result of a still unreflected socio-political development driven by untamed economic forces. But in regard to a profound social change driven by a lack of meaning, what a holistic development could be, I claim, that we need places in our neighbourhoods where people can experience abundance and appreciation of their own being in the absence of a deficit based environment. I can't really say what it is, but there are places out there, like ESTA ES UNA PLAZA, which got something very special. It feels right to be there and you feel a little bit more connected to what some people would call

urban sustainability. Moreover, there is a proof that engagement makes happy. Especially the findings of recent neurobiological research on participation and engagement (Joachim Bauer: Prinzip Menschlichkeit, 2006) show, that cooperation and resonance produce second messengers in our brains which are essential for our health and mood. Therefore basis for a holistic wellbeing is not egoism and competition but interpersonal relationships, appreciation, affection and everything else that refers to social capital and abundant and resilient communities. In conclusion I dare to say, that ESTA ES UNA PLAZA is something like a laboratory for this kind of paradigm and stands for a multitude of initiatives around the world, that create places of abundance.

It feels good to be there, but I can't really say what it is, good vibes are probably not enough to describe it, but sometimes a feeling means more, than thousands of words of scientific descriptions.



A Critical Mass

Tito Loria

The second Local Squares meeting, taking place in Madrid in February 2013, started off with one full day of visits to local projects, including *Esta es una Plaza*, Solar de Lavapiés and Campo de Cebada, and a tour of the city center guided by Alberto of Basurama. The spaces we visited were all relatively close to each other, and the hosts of the meeting arranged for everyone in the group to have a bicycle and be able to move around free from the constraints of public transport but faster than if we were on foot.

A big part of the day was spent on the road between visits, and throughout the entire day I felt reminded of Critical Mass, the monthly bicycle ride started in San Francisco in the early 1990s that spread out to many different cities around the entire world.

Celebrated regularly in cities as diverse as Buenos Aires and London, Rome and Melbourne, Critical Mass is a hardly-organised get-together of cyclists who ride around a city, spontaneously choosing their route. Its name suggests that roads are safe for cyclists only if a sufficient amount of them is present to turn them into a dominant factor in urban traffic. The success and sympathy that this form of demonstration (which many argue isn't a demonstration in the first place) has enjoyed along the years lies in the paradox that, while effectively clogging up streets and making it impossible for cars to use them normally, the single participants of Critical Mass are simply making use of the road, which, as cyclists, they're fully entitled to. Hence, there is something of an ongoing debate both within Critical Mass and in the wider public (sometimes including local authorities) concerning the extent to which this concept of an anarchistic bike ride actually represents a subversion of normal traffic. Either way, many participants experience it as a sort of carnival, a celebration of a temporary overthrow of the usual power balance, a moment in which the routinely stressed out, endangered, struggling cyclists come together in an extraordinary gathering to

become the main actor on the road.

And this idea of carnival is something that can help read some of the situations and dynamics currently taking place in Madrid. At different levels and on different scales, we have witnessed traces of an ongoing friction between different actors over the use and significance of public spaces in the center of the city. The commercialisation and privatisation of public spaces has been adopted as a strategy to generate revenue and manage public order by municipalities pretty much everywhere, and Madrid may not be an exception, but it is home to an array of responses that, ranging from seminal to trivial, all testify of a society that is determined to fully inhabit the urban space instead of being reduced to its spectator and consumer: from the camp at Puerta del Sol in 2011, the epicenter of the Spanish movement of the Indignadxs and one major inspiration for the global Occupy movement, to the occupation of abandoned plots of land by community activists, to the controversial practice of the "botellón", the urban space of Madrid abounds with these little carnivals, spaces that are reclaimed by independent, self-organised groups of people to suspend, more or less temporarily, the order of things dictated by institutional policies, economic interests, and maybe a prudently conservative attitude that likes to call itself "common sense".

Today, there is no way to talk about Spain without mentioning the crisis: but many of the people we met in Madrid mentioned seeing the "crisis as an opportunity", and how the strain that the state is sustaining is also opening up spaces for the citizens to re-think their basic forms of aggregation. One activist from the Solar de Lavapiés for instance mentioned how their plot had been occupied since August (i.e. for circa six months) and they hadn't had any contact to the owner, i.e. the local council, because, as she said, "they probably haven't noticed yet". Several activists from *Esta es una Plaza* also mentioned that when they started their project in 2008, before the crisis reached its peak, the city council

seemed to have no interest at all in keeping a contact to them; as the cuts started to be felt, the collective running the Plaza increasingly became more of a legitimate partner to negotiate with, organising a space in the neighbourhood that could cater for the needs that the institutions were not able to cover anymore.

So while architects and planners are trained to see empty spaces in the city as a malfunction or even a disfunction in the urban fabric, these initiatives in Madrid are really showing us another way of looking at them, which has cleverly been reinterpreted by Basurama with their work at the Campo de Cebada. Started as a one-off project that was only supposed to stay for a few nights, the Campo has been curated to become an open space for the neighborhood to use for all types of initiatives. As Manu of Basurama commented, their purpose in that project is to eventually disappear and have the project run itself, which, at least from a superficial impression,

they seem to be quite near to accomplishing. Back to Critical Mass, there is in a way a parallel between its logic and that of this movement in Madrid, which is maybe the idea that things can be changed by taking some minor aspect to its final consequence rather than confronting the system in a frontal collision. The results may only become visible over a long period, and while on one hand no urban bike ride ever gained enough momentum to transform that carnivalesque event into a permanent state, there is no doubt that the western world has become a friendlier place for cyclists in the last 20 years, thanks to the many actors, including Critical Mass, who promoted urban cycling in a myriad of different ways.

We are yet to see if the social and urban movements in Madrid will gather a "critical mass" to be able to have a wider impact on the city life; in the meantime, it is an exciting thought that some of the things that are just beginning to take shape may well be a core aspect of urban life in 20 years' time.



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About Local Squares Partnership

An intercultural learning approach and strategy bringing together synergies and knowledge on public

“LOCAL SQUARES: training and connecting participation experts in Europe” is a EU funded Leonardo da Vinci Partnership Programme. It lasts two-years (2012-14) and brings together seven organisations from five different countries (Spain, Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, Austria), working together and exchanging on strategies to involve a greater diversity of people and communities in the management of public spaces. The main idea is to create an arena of practitioners coming from the field of urban action research ([Université Catholique de Louvain](#)), participatory urban planning ([PlanSinn GmbH](#), Vienna), public space architecture ([basurama](#), Madrid), theatre in public spaces ([Inca Deutschland e.V.](#), Berlin), user-centred design ([Local Intelligence](#), Twello), community building and process facilitation ([Stitching Elos](#), Amsterdam) and design of participatory processes ([Interactive Workshop of Europe GbR](#)).

One of the assumptions behind this project is that, in order to work on a sustainable and inclusive way on the future shape of public spaces, it is fundamental to gain awareness on the diversity of the actors who are active in the field, to better connect synergies among the different actors that are already active in the field, by acknowledging their different roles in the field and by trying to combine methods and perspectives. In other words, learning from each other. LOCAL SQUARES is at the same time a learning approach and a strategy. By developing and testing this learning approach inside the partnership among these organisations, LOCAL SQUARES wants to recreate a small size arena of collaboration among different actors and to find ways to bring this strategy outside of its circle as well, in order to promote a co-learning and co-acting culture.

Within its first months of life, the partnership started to experiment with some working principles

that could guide its learning process. One of these principles consists of “first acting, and then reflecting”. The LOCAL SQUARES arena has indeed an itinerant character: each partner hosts along the two years a meeting of the whole partnership in its own context, usually attended by a core group of 15-20 practitioners. During its stay, the partnership immerses itself in the local field and in a local challenge the local host is working on. Walking through the space, getting to know the local actors and the city context, engaging in simple prototypes by pulling together the approaches, methods and strategies of each partner is the first step. On the basis of this experience, the participants gather again in their own square (sometimes physical, sometimes virtual), and reflect on what happened, exchange learnings and provide feedback to the partner involved at that specific local level.

Among the expected results, LOCAL SQUARES aims at benefiting of its focused visits in the European cities involved in the project (Berlin, Madrid, Vienna, Amsterdam, Brussels and Twello) in order to map and offer a panoramic of participation processes in public spaces in different national context, by highlighting common patterns and identifying specific ways of coping with the national structures; it aims at keeping track of how the constantly evolving concept of public space serves the idea of fostering relationships and encouraging collective ownership inside the city. Moreover, the partnership wants to explore the potentialities of this multi-stakeholder collaboration and document its learning process.

This Journal is a collection of (non-edited) articles that have been posted on a blog right after the Madrid Meeting that took place in February 2013.



Lifelong Learning Programme



Local Squares Partnership

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