Madrid's citizen laboratories – a response to the Spanish economic crisis and the invention of "tactical urbanism" or "precarious urbanism"?

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MADRID'S CITIZEN LABORATORIES. A RESPONSE TO THE SPANISH ECONOMIC CRISIS AND THE INVENTION OF « TACTICAL URBANISM » OR « PRECARIOUS URBANISM » ?

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In response to the economic crisis that has affected Spain since 2008, Madrid has become the epicentre of major political, urban and social transformations. In addition to the citizen protests born out of the anti-austerity movement and the rise of a new political party Podemos ("we can"), Madrid's laboratorios ciudadanos ("citizen laboratories") have been undergoing marked growth.

Emergence and growth of the citizen laboratories

In Madrid, the economic crisis left a large number of public spaces vacant. These were originally intended to house major cultural, sporting or shopping facilities. Citizens and collectives, who were in many cases highly qualified, operating in the areas of the sharing economy, the digital economy, urban ecology or social urbanism gradually took over these unoccupied areas. Examples include collectives such as Ecosistema Urbano, Basurama, Todo por la Praxis, Paisaje Transversal, which have laid the foundations for a new type of urbanism based on collaborative urban management, citizen participation and the systematic integration of the artistic and cultural dimensions. This so-called "open source" urbanism ("de código abierto") also relies to a considerable degree on the development of digital tools that have the capacity to foster citizen expression and the co-production of projects (Tato, Vallejo, 2012).

The vacant spaces in question have been transformed into zones for trying out new socioeconomic models and urban management approaches based on sharing, citizen participation and the co-production of public spaces and services. Some twenty citizen laboratories have been created in this way: La Tabacalera, Esta es una plaza, Patio Maravillas, Media Lab Prado, El Campo de la Cebada, Utopic_US, etc. Each citizen laboratory is specialised in a specific field such as agriculture and urban ecology, social and cultural integration, collaborative art or the digital economy. For example, the laboratories are actively involved in setting up community gardens that are self-managed by "citizen gardeners". The best known, "Esta es una Plaza" ("This is a place"), was set

up by a group of students, young workers and residents on land in the Lavapiés district that had been vacant for thirty years. The group began by obtaining a temporary right to manage the space from the municipality and then promoted a system of self-management which allows each citizen to contribute freely to its operation while obtaining infrastructure and socio-cultural activities in return. Other citizen laboratories are active in the field of social and cultural integration. One example is Campo de la Cebada. This laboratory is located in the centre of Madrid, near the Plaza Mayor, in a space of approximately 5,000 m2. Since 2011, the Campo de la Cebada has been involved in a large number of projects in the social sphere (service exchange systems), artistic sphere (street art, photography, poetry and theatre workshops), sporting sphere (creating basketball pitches or play areas) and cultural sphere (organising open air music and cinema festivals). The Campo de la Cebada also provides an opportunity to set up community gardens and co-build street furniture. The benches, terraces and basketball goals were all created by collectives made up of architects, residents and engineers. The latter used the Madrid Fab Labs open access tools and licences to build modular street furniture entirely from recycled materials. A dome has recently been constructed using a sum of over €6,000 that was collected on the Goteo.org crowdfunding platform. It should be stressed that the activities at Campo de La Cebada are self-managed by means of regular meetings which bring together all the district's collectives (residents, shopkeepers, associations, etc.).

"Tactical urbanism" or "precarious urbanism"?

Several writers consider the phenomenon of citizen laboratories to be a form of "tactical "urbanism (Revista Papers, 2014; Such, 2015). This takes place in unoccupied urban spaces, aside from urban planning policies. It is a bottom-up process, and is integrated within the sociocultural structures of Madrid's districts. It is a question of "operating with" existing organised groups rather than "thinking in their place". Tactical urbanism finds collective co-produced solutions to meet social needs, particularly with regard to allowing residents to access the city, its public spaces, services, resources, and social, cultural and sporting activities. The collectives in the citizen labs do not restrict their activities to promoting equal access to resources, urban spaces or greater participation. They wish to play an active role in transforming the districts and creating not only social, educational and cultural life but public space, street furniture and other urban infrastructure. Tactical urbanism not only demands a right to the city, but also to its infrastructure (Corsín, 2014).

However, "tactical urbanism" nevertheless raises a number of questions. First, how sustainable are the citizen labs in view of their dependency on decision-makers (land owners and local authorities) and the extreme precariousness of their economic model. They operate essentially on the basis of gifts, exchanges and reciprocity and to a lesser extent from crowdfunding and subsidies. Another issue is the exploitation of the citizen laboratories by public institutions. These laboratories provide a response to serious socio-economic situations and a way of compensating for a shortage of grants, public funding and public spaces. They provide services and perform tasks that have traditionally been part of the role of local authorities. One last doubt relates to the ability of the citizen laboratories to function at a larger scale and fashion a city. A project for a city cannot be born out of the summing of experiences that are isolated, ephemeral and based on a frequently utopian model of self-management and general participation. This "precarious urbanism" (Marrades, 2014) therefore raises a number of issues, but it opens up real possibilities for rethinking urban policies in response to an economy that is in crisis and undergoing profound change.