

# **A new possible urban imagination**

MSc Essay. MSc City Design & Social Science, LSE, December 2014

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**Infrastructures of Caring Citizenship**  
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## A new possible urban imagination

*"[...] one of the most urgent problems in planning and architectural theory today is the need to develop a different social imagination – one that is not modernist but that nevertheless reinvents modernism's activist commitments to the invention of society and the construction of the state" (Holston, "Spaces of Insurgent Citizenship").*

Never before cities have presented a panorama of crisis such as the one we are experienced today in most parts of the globe. Their unstoppable growth in conjunction with the crisis of financial capitalism has given rise to an unstable social and political scenario that is disrupting the established knowledge, practices and values. The context in which planning and architecture discourses and products have been developed in the last years does not exist anymore. We are now navigating throughout a time of indeterminacy and extraordinary complexity in which an important phenomenon is happening: the change in the way we look at things.

Understanding that crises are temporary and that they do have a function, as the scientific philosopher Thomas Kuhn contends, helps to apprehend them. The architect Izaskun Chinchilla, following Kuhn, asserts that innovation is the only solution to the crisis. In the process of getting over it, there is a moment before the production of *inventions*, that is, before the revolution and the acceptance of new theoretical explanations, when different manners of observing reality prompt *discoveries*, innovations that still need to be endorsed. In order to validate the changes of paradigms, scientists must re-educate their perception and transform the conceptual world they are referring to. They have to create new narratives and theories to test which ones best represent and contribute to the production of knowledge and, in doing so, crystalize the revolution. To perform this task scientists use aesthetics as a criterion of validation or discrimination (Chinchilla, 2013). In an analogous reflection, the philosopher and activist Fernández-Savater explains in his text *Política literal y política literaria* (Fernández-Savater, 2012), that at any time that practices of emancipation emerge and question in a radical manner the ways society is organized, new words to define reality and ourselves spring. The potential of fictions, metaphors and stories is essential to foster a new social imagination capable of creating a new noun or collective character that does not exist in the prevailing power structures and does challenge them. The new collective character

creates a different space of subjectivation where the previous perceptions, languages and behaviours are displaced and transformed. It disrupts the reality of classifications and identities. “The collective character of the political fiction produces new reality because it redefines the map of the possible: it does not only modify what it is possible to see, do, feel and think about the reality, but also *who* can do it”. For the philosopher “fiction is the potential of humanization by excellence” (Fernández-Savater, 2012).

In line with these claims, the anthropologist Holston also asserts the need to develop a different social imagination in planning and architecture in order to construct the future of our cities (Holston, 2008). But how can we know that we are not proceeding as Le Corbusier and modernist architects did in 1940? If we are for a revolution, how can we avoid falling again into an ideal model out of context? In the anthropologist’s words: “What kind of intervention in the city could construct a sense of emergence without imposing a teleology that disembodies the present in favour of a utopian difference?” (Holston, 2008). To address these questions Holston vindicates the realm of the *ethnographic present* as opposed to the utopian futures. “The necessity of having to use what exists to achieve what is imagined” (Holston, 2008), that is, to seek the chances for change in the existing social conditions. He defines *spaces of insurgent citizenship* as those that interrupt entrenched stories by introducing new identities and practices in cities. Those capable of creating different sources of citizenship rights and defend their legitimacy.

Being personally sympathetic to Holston’s propositions, however, I would like to ask: is the disruption that these spaces of insurgent citizenships trigger, radical enough to construct a truly new social imagination? Can new paradigms and values be envisioned and achieved relying exclusively on the *ethnographic present*, that is, on empirical data? Is a notion of contextualized revolution capable of creating a new global order? In this paper, I argue that cities are now living at a time prior to replacement of models akin to the moments of change of scientific paradigms explained by Kuhn and Chinchilla, where there already exists a strong social substrate favourable to try out a radical overturn and open the horizon of the social imagination to a new socio-political constituent process. In this situation of rupture and re-education, as Fernández-Savater and Holston contend, the human capacity for narrative is key for the change.

In this essay I will position Holston’s premises for developing a future world’s imagination in dialogue with Chinchilla and Fernández-Savater propositions. To perform this endeavour I will base my observations on an ethnographic study of El Patio Maravillas, a social centre in Madrid, Spain, in danger of eviction. I will focus

on the current potential of social centres to foster new imaginaries and in doing so, I hope to glimpse some of the conditions that constitute the signs of contemporary transformations in cities, take the claim for innovation beyond the recognised realms of planning and architecture and pose some questions about widespread change.

The analysis of the case study will be broken into three main sections, namely *A Civic Infrastructure*, *Disobedient Object(s)* and *An Insurgent Cities-Network*, that can be understood as either different scales of observation or three scopes of intervention of El Patio Maravillas.

### **A Civic Infrastructure**

El Patio Maravillas is an *Okupied* Self-managed Social Centre (OSSC from this point forward) located in Malasaña, a neighbourhood in the centre district of Madrid. It has been active since 2010 in Calle Pez, where it was settled in a privately-owned building after it was evicted from its previous headquarters. El Patio Maravillas has been recently sued and forewarned of an imminent eviction on behalf of Madrid Council, who has alleged that the building is in a state of precariousness and insecurity. In response, the centre has claimed a public building in the same neighbourhood, suitable for the cultural and political activities that are carried out on it.

Today, social centres in occupied buildings run on a self-managed basis, are gaining a more heterogeneous social support as the cultural and aid network of the city is being gradually spoiled by the government and private corporations. They have been nurtured by many activists stemming from the *15M Movement*, also known as *Indignados*, and this fact has also contributed to create a renewed social image. However, drawing on some interviews and field notes, this collective image is far from being clear and unique. Depending on the agents; the people who organise and manage the centres, those who participate in them as users, the neighbours or the council, the spectrum of manners that OSSC are referred to, goes from places of experimentation, political fight and action, places that create community and self-employment and places for cultural activities to a risk for the logic of economic growth of the city. As the researcher and activist Miguel Ángel Martínez states, “the dominant media image is still loaded with lots of stereotypes, prejudices, lies and omissions” (Cabrera, 2014). Taking these different perspectives into consideration, what we can assert is that this collective image is permanently in suspension at the mercy of great social tensions.

El Patio Maravillas is self-defined as “a common space, a self-managed multi-use centre, a space for the people to meet and take care of each other, a different space for leisure in the city, a home, an infrastructure for the citizenship organised”. It is the last definition what interests me the most. This space of low entropy, with a great capacity of evolution, that has emerged in the city as a consequence of the abandonment of properties, has been converted by citizens into a *civic infrastructure*, that is, a material support that allows the emergence of stories, (eco)systems, situations and processes in the city.

Taking this notion of civic infrastructure in relation with the spaces for insurgent citizenship described by Holston, what follows is a presentation of the way this infrastructure is arranged, governed and managed, oriented to define what type of insurgency is there, by whom and to whom is directed and, in terms of Chinchilla, what discoveries and inventions are produced in this OSSC.

As mentioned before, el Patio Maravillas is based on a building owned by the private real estate company *Nivel 29* that had been abandoned for eight years before it was taken over in 2010. *Calle Pez* is a current popular street of Malasaña that in the last decade has evolved from a mainly residential area on an old-rental basis to one of the most requested neighbourhoods by young people, who have established new independent business related to arts, design and gastronomy. As an already known consequence, rents have risen extraordinarily. El Patio was settled in a five-storey building with an interior courtyard that, although it was rebuilt, resembles the popular housing typologies in Madrid in XVIII century. Each level of the building embraces different functions and many of the rooms are used for several purposes during the week. Tens of people go daily to El Patio to participate in free activities that there are held. The place is now the headquarters for more than thirty collectives. The following drawings are an inventory of spaces and uses in a particular moment of the day in the form of sections that can also be read as a political manifesto.

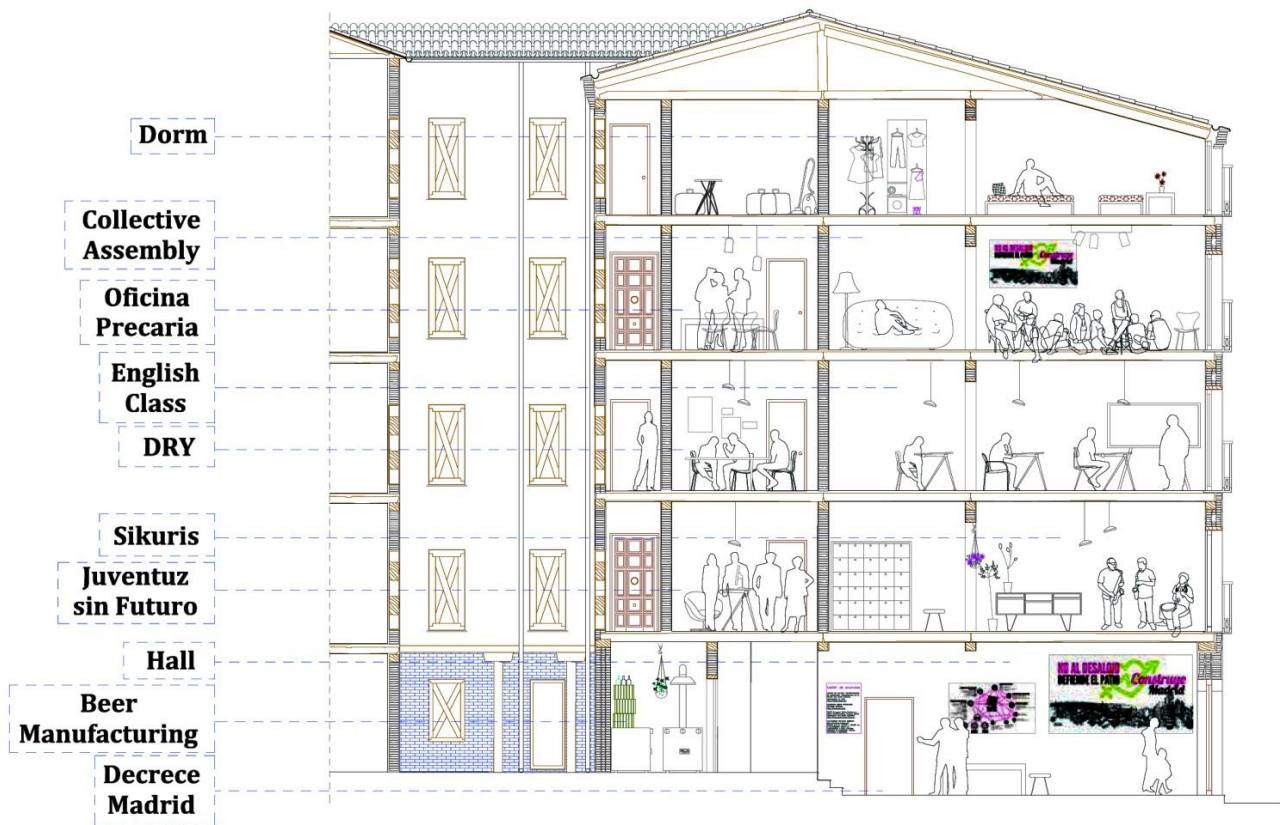
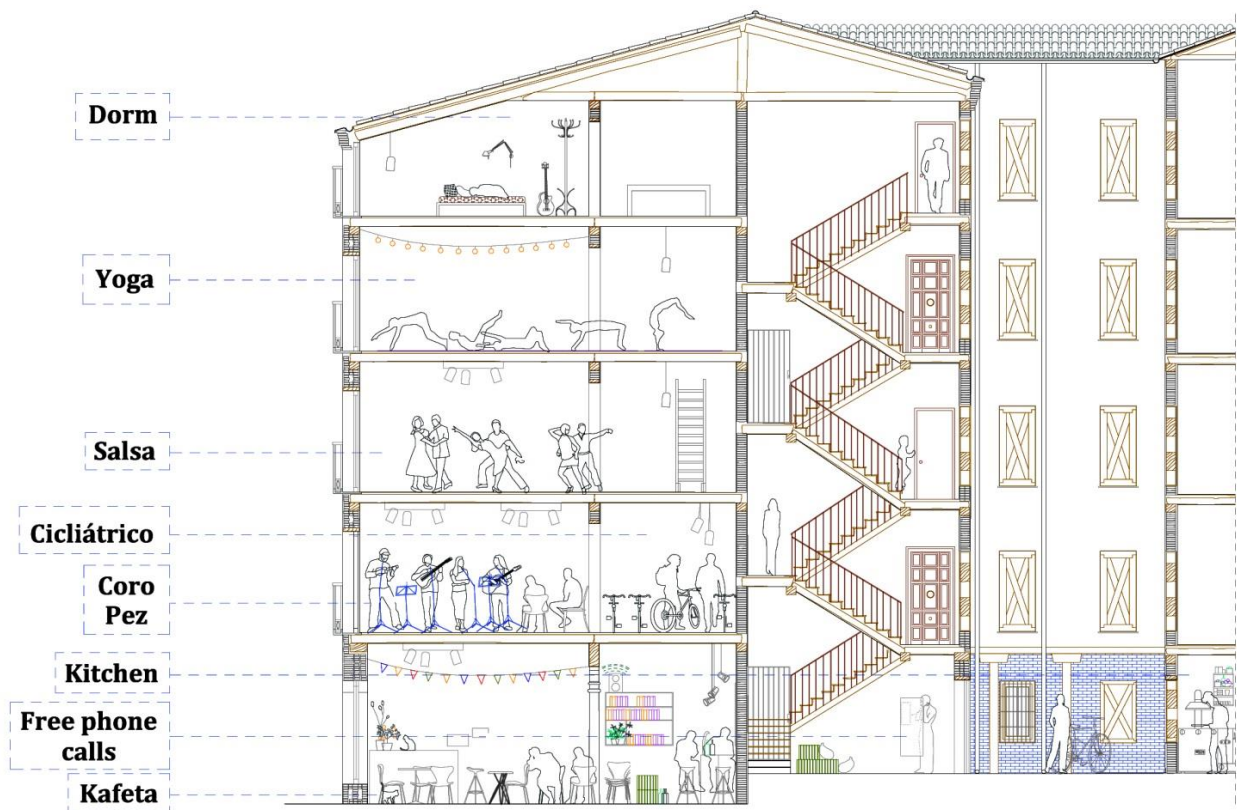


Figure 1. Sections of the building of El Patio Maravillas. By the author of this paper.

The versatile and temporary layout of the parts of this civic infrastructure fosters the emergency of unplanned outcomes and elements that at the same time can serve as infrastructural components for other stories in a process in permanent motion.

This movement, transversal to all the dimensions of the centre, is conceived as a necessary condition for its identity. According to Fernández-Savater, the politic identity is a space that is invented. "It is a *non-identitarian* identity, open, unfinished, in continuous construction". "It is a space of anybody instead of an owned space." (Fernández-Savater, 2012). This conception explains its disconcerting fight against identity crystallization. Pablo, one of the activists who has been engaged with El Patio in the last for years, says: "Should we stop to reinvent ourselves, we would die". He explains how conscious they are of the risk of making the OSSC a short of ghetto, completely identifiable, which stops interpellating anyone. The inclusive vocation of the centre is always present in all the activities, from the assemblies to the services offered in the *kafeta*. In this sense and referring to Holston, El Patio Maravillas can be inscribed as a space for insurgent citizenship, as it openness and indeterminacy succeed to incorporate the unexpected and the conflict intrinsic to social life.

In the following lines I am going to explain why El Patio Maravillas can be in fact called a *civic* infrastructure, by means of its form of organization and management.

The centre is run on a self-managed basis, that means that the people who *inhabit* this space are the ones in charge of activating, maintaining and constructing it daily. It also means that it works horizontally. There are two different assemblies: one that gathers all the collectives that participate in El Patio, and other that attempts to articulate the OSSC as a political agent. They are open to anybody and represent the two sides of El Patio: management and politics.

The *assembly of collectives* addresses management matters such as maintenance of the space, development of activities, timetables, shifts and inner organization. For its part, the *political or general assembly* tackles issues beyond the building itself. Themes of discussion are the external political spaces in which El Patio participates, issues of defence, communication campaigns, internal political affairs or the political circumstances in the city. This last part is completed by a political work, currently divided in three axes, which represent the political proposes of the centre: Democracy and Constituent Process, Social and Solidary Economy and Occupation of Spaces.

The daily life is organised by a *Coordination Team* that uses both, internal channels in which the assemblies are convened, the agenda is outlined and the minutes of

each assembly are transferred, and external means of communication. In an analogous manner, collectives are divided into internal, which carry out permanent activities and are engaged with the maintenance and defence of the space, and external, which organize punctual activities and provide visibility to the OSSC. Besides, there are some projects of self-employment and a library and editorial cooperative called *TESLA*. The centre is self-financed by means of the *kafeta*, a bar where beer produced in the building is sold and where anybody participating in El patio must work in different shifts. Figure 2 is a map of the organizational structure of the centre.

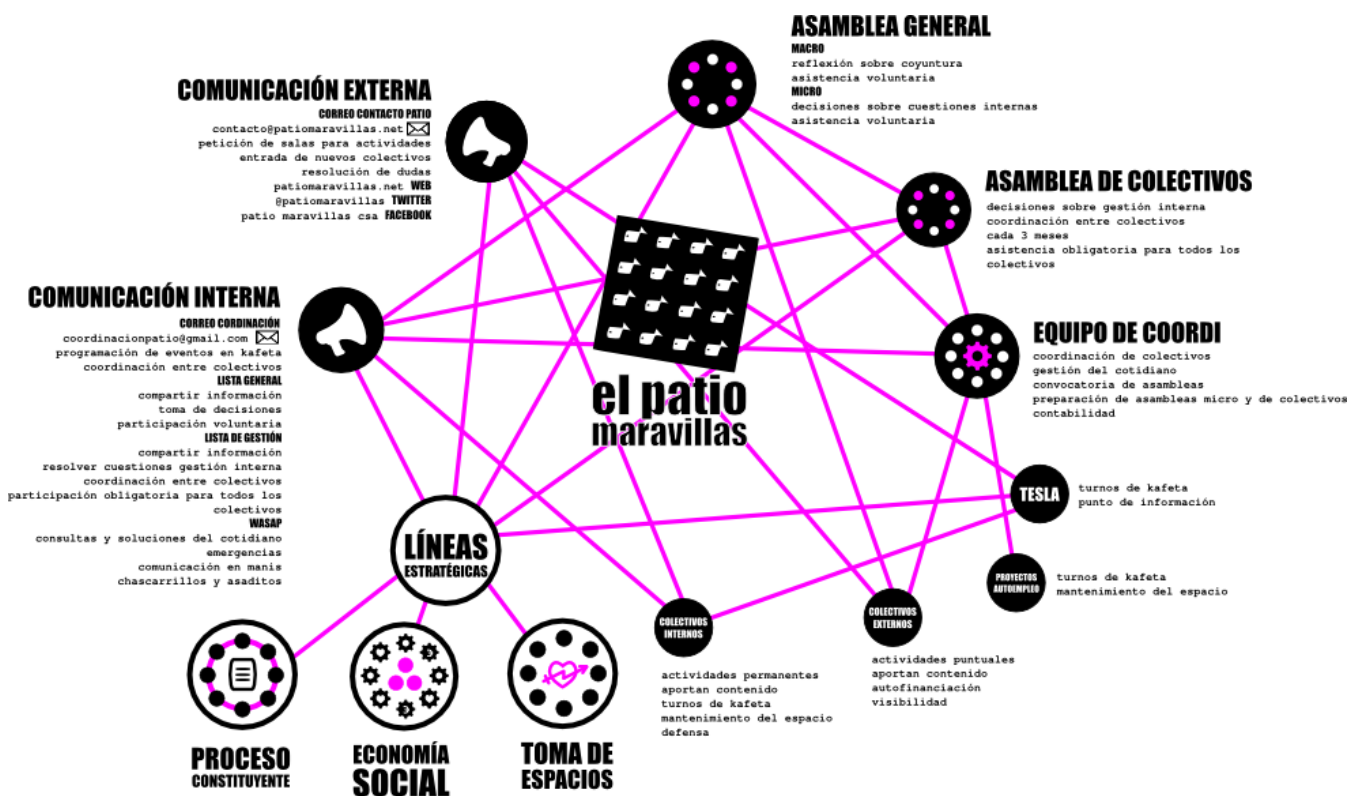


Figure 2. Diagram of organization of El Patio Maravillas. By El Patio Maravillas.

As El Patio asserts, the centre is a space to discover oneself within a group, a place to construct democracy and alternative politics. With this purposes, it has focused on action rather than on identity. Sara, who is a member of *Juventud sin Futuro*, explains that El Patio flees itself in order to become an infrastructure serving a citizenship and a new democracy that is currently being constructed on the streets. It is an infrastructure of insurgency and rebellion against the constituted powers that invents and introduces constant renewed identities, aesthetics and practices into the city disrupting the existing ones.



## Disobedient Object(s)

Disobedience has been one of the main strategies of El Patio Maravillas in order to take action against the council and its associated companies of private developers. Insurgence has been conceived as the unique mechanism of public disruption for a political subject that has been pushed aside the institutional political realm. From the outset, El Patio has produced and used a range of object-based tactics in order to succeed. Looking at some of these *disobedient objects* may help to better understand the micro-politics of the everyday and different forms of agency that the centre has undertaken. Furthermore, they may reveal some aesthetic and productive premises strongly enough to construct new models of intention, as Chinchilla explains in her text. They may be capable of prompting new discourses and images in order to defend the new paradigms.

Below, I am going to focus on a campaign carried out by El Patio involving music, performances and self-made objects in order to prevent the eviction ordered by the council. The aim is to provide an insight of the type of insurgency beyond it and disclose the aesthetic configurations that represent the social structure of the people involved. In doing so, questions about its potential to transform collective awareness and win new rights will arise.

Last September, El Patio Maravillas launched a campaign with the noun *#AlertaPatio* in which they announced a series of actions to make their protest against the council and their claim supporting occupation visible. The campaign, still ongoing, represents the political line of work of a strategy complemented by a legal procedure, which was also started. As the *patieros* (the way they like to refer to themselves) assert, what they want is to demand to the council “the compliance of its obligation: to recognise the labour of El Patio and let us be”. The council is seen as a corrupt agent that is cutting down the cultural budgets at the same time that is selling public housing and common assets of the city to private companies. For this reason, they contend, “it is normal that the council is not willing to tolerate a project that fights against urban speculation and gives life to abandoned spaces assigned for speculation”.

One of the main mottos is “Nos quieren en soledad, nos tendrán en común” (they want us in solitude, they are going to have us in common). The activist Adriá Rodríguez de Alòs-Moner produced a video-documentary with this same title that opened the campaign. Drawing on interviews of some *patieros* and from an inside position, the video explains the current organization of the centre as well as the political approaches that are produced about local democracy and the so-called right

to the city. It also shows the interior of the building with its different spaces and rooms, the furniture, the paintings, banners and books, and it records some of the activities carried out in them. The video gave way to an imaginative call directed to people that use El Patio yet they did not belong to the coordination team, to explain in a self-made video what would be for them a day without Patio (*#UndíasinPatio*). These collective narratives, following Fernández-Savater, are material forces that need to be opened as common places. They create a new *we*, displacing established and exclusive identities and shaping a collective subject in perpetual re-naming.

The most visible action of the campaign took the form of a popular lunch followed by a crowded party. It was carried out in the open plot near the building where an orchard and a garden have been settled. The party counted on life-music, a gazpacho contest, paella, Argentinian empanadas and a chess tournament. Big banners with slogans as “Defiende El Patio, construye Madrid” (Defend El Patio, construct Madrid), or “No al desalojo” (Stop eviction) were deployed on the party-walls of the space. The same sentences could be seen on the t-shirts of many of the people present. Through a megaphone, which was repeatedly passed from hand to hand, messages informing about the situation of the centre, forthcoming planned actions and subversive and humorous shouts calling for common action were delivered.



Figure 3. Banner for the #AlertaPatio Campaign. By El Patio Maravillas.

The last action I want to mention is the *okupation* of the hall of the Municipal Headquarters of Centre District until they got a meeting with the city councillor. This

meeting with the council had been insistently requested by legal route, yet any answer was obtained. The purpose of the meeting was to find a solution fine for all the parts and that would guarantee the continuity of El Patio. A numerous group of activists got into the hall of the building and they deployed their banner: “Defiende Patio, construye Madrid”. They told to the security men that they just wanted a meeting and again with a megaphone one of them started to denounce the situation faced by the social centre. Due to the lack of response, the *patieros* started to perform some of the activities carried out in the centre. They first danced salsa following the teacher. Then, they begun a class of yoga. Ramón, who was involved in the action, told me: “There were some of the horrible things we do at El Patio”. The performance succeeded and a date with the city councillor was confirmed.

These actions and the artefacts involved may be simple in means, but powerful in goals and impact. However, the following questions arise nearly automatically. Are these objects and actions likely to achieve widespread change? How can they prevent the appropriation of its cultural innovations by governments and private businesses? Although these are difficult question to answer in this paper, I would argue that a *disobedient object* such us El Patio Maravillas, establishes new ways of seeing the world from a bottom-up perspective. It creates new fictions and stories told from below. Through these insurgent strategies, El Patio develops a renewed activist social imagination and its demand of legitimacy. In its exertion of counter-power, refusals, insubordinations and claim of new liberties, it opens the imagination and creativity within a sector of population that is revolting, crafty, provocative and in motion, acting as an engine for the production of new culture and politics.

### **An Insurgent Cities-Network**

Madrid became in 2000 a global city. Since then the metropolis has grown disorderly and excessively. This great growth was based on the real-state cycle and on the insertion of the city into the international financial flows as a financial plaza, services centre and business and tourism attractor. In those years, municipal policies were characterized by agreements between the local political class and the corporate agents: landlords, real-state agencies, constructors and bankers. Their success within a logic of economic growth has legitimated this type of neoliberal-governance. Nevertheless, the irruption of the financial and economic crisis at both levels, international and national, has triggered a strong process of delegitimization

of institutional politics expressed by means of big social mobilizations and a growing socio-political awareness.

Given this extraordinary context prone to change, I would like to remark a statement made by Holston in his text *Insurgent Citizenship in an Era of Global Urban Peripheries* (Holston, 2009). There, the anthropologist contends that even though the nation-building projects have tried to displace the role of the cities as generators of social identity, “cities remain the strategic arena for the development of citizenship”. “Formal membership in the nation-state is increasingly neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for substantive citizenship”. Taking Holston’s argument as possible, I would like to bring the case of El Patio Maravillas and its network of connections with other OSSC to glimpse how these incubators of culture and politics imagine the future of our cities and attempt to subvert the nation-building logic into a city-building order.

In 2012 a group of OSSC decided to start working together in specific matters. They wanted to expand the perception that social centres create neighbourhood to the assertion that they also create city. “Can we create a city that becomes an ecosystem of communal cooperation?” was the question that was posed in their first meeting. To answer it, they first gathered a range of collective ideas and images about the OSSC in relation to the city. As they assert, OSSC are seen as infrastructures that generate community providing mutual support, places for experimentation and transformation of the system where is possible to put into practice alternative local politics and spaces aside the institutions that promote self-management and different modes of consumption and communication in the city.

The OSSC Network, as an initiative that explores new ways of dialogue and exchange, has been growing from its very beginning. In this time, they have shared different technical expertise to settle new infrastructures like systems of electrical solar panels, lighting fixtures, composters, devices to collect and use rainwater, multi-use mobile containers, children playgrounds or gardens and orchards. They have also activated a service of *ecologic-self consumption*, through which they exchange local fruits and vegetables grown locally and home-made products. But above all, the main endeavour of the OSSC Network has been the mutual support among the different social centres in their struggle against the institutions and their demands of eviction. They have elaborated a manual with techniques of legal defence gathering different experiences and actions as a transferable document of reciprocal support and they have helped each other to make their claims for *okupation* visible a socially legitimated.

The following *googlemap* registers the location of social centres in Madrid which are connected in a certain way.

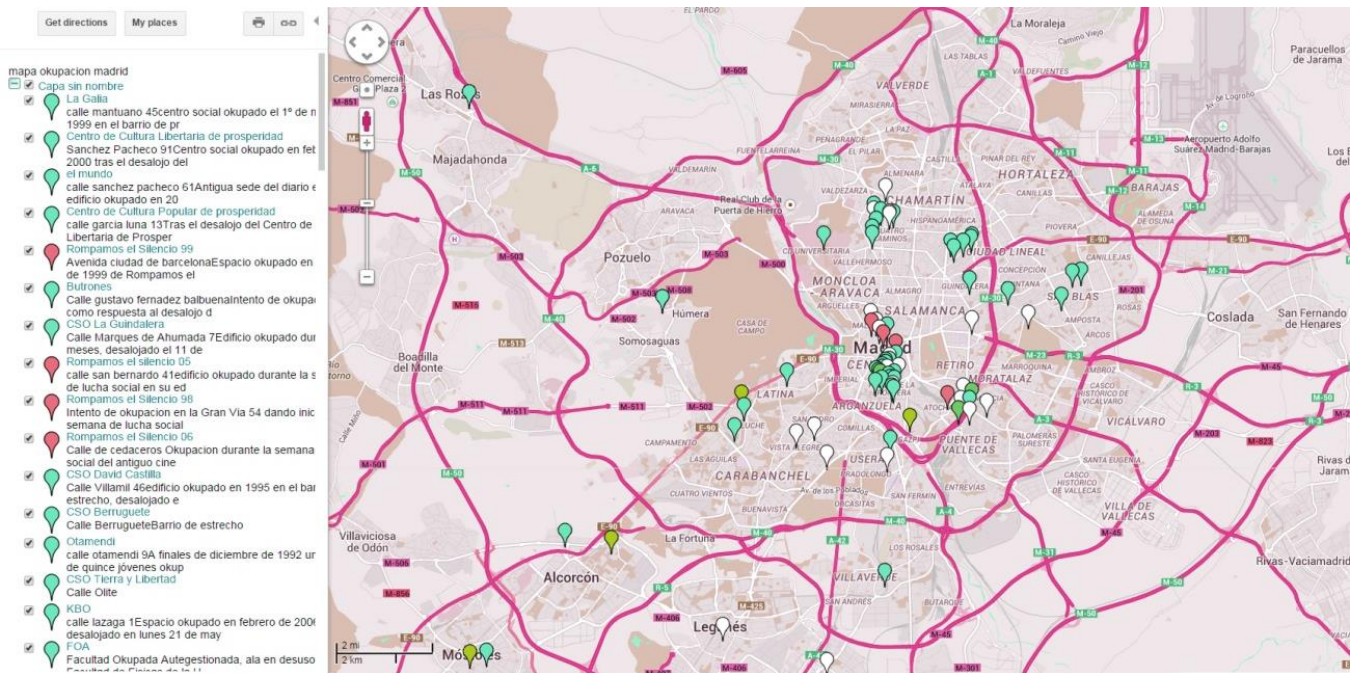


Figure 4. Map of okupacion in Madrid. By *agitamadrid*, *agenda digital de movimientos*.

The main means in which the OSSC Network rests are Internet and the social media. Undeniably, these means themselves question any direct equivalence between community and urban territory. Thus, the idea of a network within the boundaries of the city was soon thrown into crisis by the group. As explained in the work by Observatorio Metropolitano, *La Apuesta Municipalista* (Observatorio Metropolitano, 2014), territory as a relational and affective support has been substituted by voluntary communities of interest. Then, how far can the scope of this network reach? Does this *decentralizer* network really involve territorial autonomy and social democracy? In what extent does it really replace the institutional order and does not reinforce its structures? Although lacking concise answers, in what these people clearly agree is the need to overcome the condition of self-sufficient and isolated entities articulating themselves as insurgent and disobedient collective subjects against the constituent authorities, who keep pushing them aside.

Given the current geography, where the relations between the global and the local are being re-drawn and competition between regions and nations is the order of the day in order to gain the favour of the transnational financial capitals, is it possible to envisage a new territorial order that incorporates new constellations of actors in the production and signification of space? What networks of communities in cities have

proved, even still fragilly, is to have the tools to set in motion an exercise of political imagination able to articulate itself in the form of institutional disobedience and democratization.

### **A new possible urban imagination**

In search of a new possible urban imagination emerging from an *ethnographic present* as Hoslton claims, this essay has explored the current social arena that represents citizenship initiatives such us *Okupied* Self-sufficient Social Centres, in particular, El Patio Maravillas in Madrid. Through a lens prone to change, I have argued that the current panorama of urban crisis has set in motion a great range of new actors willing to participate in the construction of the urban futures. The strong processes of delegitimation of the established powers, the high levels of social mobilization and the increasing number of vibrant citizenship projects in cities are signs of the ongoing contemporary urban transformations. My aim has been to draw the attention to El Patio Maravillas, as an instance capable of generating new social and political imaginations, new *literary politics*, in terms of Fernández-Savater.

As a *civic infrastructure*, El Patio acts as a material support driving new innovations and narratives in search of legitimacy, new *discoveries* and *inventions* based on renewed aesthetical principles as Chinchilla would say. It is an infrastructure of *insurgent citizenship* that focuses mainly on actions and *materialities* rather than identity and, in doing so, it disrupts the power and symbolic axis *left-right* and replaces it with a *bottom-up* axis. As a *disobedient object*, El Patio challenges the way people look at each other creating new stories from below. In its material exertion of counter-power and claim of new liberties, it acts as an incubator of new cultural and political artefacts, exceeding the realms of institutional culture, architecture, design and planning. Finally, as a component of *an insurgent cities-network*, this OSSC organized in network is attempting to gain the capacity to articulate a new territorial order of truly social democracy.

Can we envisage, in Holston's words, a *complementary antagonism* between *these insurgent forms of the social* and the established institutions? (Holston, 2008). I would say no. The political proposal of the *projects of insurgent citizenship* relies on disobedience and its articulation as a counter-institutional movement that maintains a permanent state of agitation. This premise negates the possible alliance with institutional entities, which by definition fight to remain stable and unchangeable.

Would El Patio Maravillas and the OSSC be able to prompt a widespread change? It is too daring to affirm so. Their potential in this particular moment of history rests on their capacity to disrupt and change the ways we look at things. As it has been asserted, this condition is indispensable to overcome the crisis. Their tireless and non-conformist vocation of innovation opens the horizon of the social imagination to a new possible urban scenario.



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