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Together we make the neighbourhood

Citizen spatial appropriation strategy response in the context of the covid-19 crisis. Case of Madrid self-managed community spaces

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Abstract

A network of various self-managed community spaces played a crucial role in the citizen-led response to the social crisis during the first months of the COVID-19 crisis in the most vulnerable neighbourhoods in the periphery of Madrid. Nevertheless, such community spaces are under a precarious situation due to recurrent threats of closure from different administrations. It is therefore crucial to make visible the importance posed by such spaces in the construction of more resilient, equitable, and caring neighbourhoods. To that end, we propose the definition of a theoretical model of *critical placemaking* to understand how such grassroots practices are underlaid by a collective project of neighbourhood. The research fills the gap within different theories of placemaking, social innovation, and urban commons to establish a model based on the three axes: community, space, and political project. The study draws from the notions of relational place and civic engagement, together with models of space appropriation and social innovation theory. The theoretical model is contrasted with the qualitative research of the cases of social centres La *Villana de Vallekas* and *Eko de Carabanchel*. The results suggest an emergent city model at the neighbourhood scale of proximity self-managed citizen-led infrastructure that configures a resilient network against systemic and external threats.

Résumé

Un réseau de divers espaces communautaires autogérés dans les quartiers les plus vulnérables de la périphérie de Madrid a joué un rôle crucial dans la réponse citoyenne à la crise sociale durant les premiers mois de la crise du COVID-19. Néanmoins, ces espaces communautaires sont dans une situation précaire en raison des menaces récurrentes de fermeture de la part de différentes administrations. Il est donc primordial de rendre visible l'importance que représentent ces espaces dans la construction de quartiers plus résilients, équitables et solidaires. À cette fin, nous proposons la définition d'un modèle théorique de *Place-making critique* pour comprendre comment de telles pratiques populaires sont sous-tendues par un projet collectif de quartier. La recherche comble le vide entre les différentes théories de place-making, d'innovation sociale et des biens communs urbains pour établir un modèle basé sur trois axes : communauté, espace et projet politique. L'étude s'appuie sur les notions de lieu relationnel

et d'engagement civique, ainsi que sur les modèles d'appropriation de l'espace et sur la théorie de l'innovation sociale. Le modèle théorique est confronté à la recherche qualitative des cas des centres sociaux *La Villana de Vallekas* et *Eko de Carabanchel*. Les résultats suggèrent un modèle émergent de ville à l'échelle de quartier d'une infrastructure de proximité autogérée par les citoyens, qui configure un réseau résilient contre les menaces systémiques et externes.

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Juan Arana

Critical placemaking

During the months of the health crises in 2020, many self-managed spaces such as social centres and community gardens have served as support for neighbourhood initiatives to assist residents in vulnerable situations in the most deprived areas of the city. These spaces are of a collective nature but differ from those defined by the market or the public sector. Rather, they are the product of free practices for the citizens. It is in this sense that they can be considered collective spaces of appropriation. They are often seen as support for alternative ways of life, community making, or some participatory form of urban leisure. However, most critically, together with their political and spatial context, they articulate a project of neighbourhood, a claim to the city at the local scale. A community garden in an abandoned car park full of cars, a leftover space that is occupied or given to the neighbours as a social centre, a marginal green area used as an open-air cinema: these are all small-scale initiatives that go easily unnoticed but nevertheless offer the chance to explore how community participation responds to local needs and serves as a basis for innovative projects. In the early months of the pandemic in 2020, many of these spaces served as the foundation for networks of mutual aid, storing and delivering food donations, hosting community projects to provide the necessities detected in the neighbourhood. We believe that such actions are an example of placemaking in a political sense.

There is a construction of neighbourhood through these practices, a concept of a place that does not necessarily correspond with urban design projects or administrative policies but rather with the creation of value in a territory through political action. It is the mobilisation of resources from the community that builds the neighbourhood as a form of resistance against

the threats vulnerable urban areas are prone to. Vulnerable urban areas throughout the city are characterised by different levels of deprivation. They represent the periphery in its various forms, immanent to the urban society (Merrifield 2014). Threatened vulnerable urban environments become the focus of value creation through citizen appropriation. These actions, relatively small, marginal, and precarious, reveal a proposition of resilient environments in the neighbourhood scale: a city of proximity relations and self-managed spaces, open, small-sized and of minimal formality. Facing the threats confronted by vulnerable urban areas, community appropriation of collective spaces is part of a community response to various problems such as abandonment, stigmatisation or lack of meeting spaces and urban life. We argue that proper use of collective spaces offers a physical support for a shared project for the neighbourhood. An idea of place is built through informal practices and the creation of prototypes. In them, ideas are tested for meeting spaces, infrastructure, networks, or group actions. Neighbours' initiatives produce environments that promote resilience through the strengthening of proximity networks and physical structures for participation. The construction of these places offers models for proximity facilities; spaces of open use that respond to community necessities. These practices are the base to develop proposals and actions at the city or in the neighbourhood scale. On the other hand, they also have a spatial impact in the context, as they react to urban degradation situations, creating value and protecting common resources to be used by the community.

Juntos hacemos barrio

The focus of this text is to analyse the role that collective spaces self-managed by neighbourhood movements play in deprived areas of the city in the face of such threats as the crisis in our cities during the months of the first lockdown, due to the COVID-19 sanitary situation. We believe that collective spatial appropriation constitutes a creation of value in their urban environment, a production of place that can be understood as building a neighbourhood proposal. The potential of such spatial practices is to foster social innovation and support citizen proposals which often lack recognition from the administration and other formal frameworks. It is therefore necessary to conceive models that give visibility to the opportunities these dynamics generate towards the consecution of an equitable city model.

The reference scale for practices as those here analysed is not abstract territory but the specific urban surroundings the stakeholders identify as their own; the neighbourhood as a concrete place, a space shaped by social relations, a spatial practice in continuous construction and localised political action. Thus, the initiative of spatial appropriation cannot be understood in isolation from its context. It appears as a form of resistance against the formal production of space, against the devaluation or enclosure of public space, or as a need for participation and expression. In this context, the concept of critical placemaking transcends design (Toolis 2017; Wesener et al. 2020). It does not only refer to the achievement of active urban physical spaces with a margin for participation. Creating a place here means to establish through action a political focus on a territory (Healey 2018). It refers to the action of making and producing a collective place for the use of the neighbours. Fifty years ago, in the times when the neighbourhood associations were born under political prosecution in Madrid, there was a very meaningful slogan that later became a common place in grassroot activism: *Juntos hacemos barrio*, together we make the neighbourhood.

Spaces of appropriation have been studied through different approaches. The literature combines practices and research that do not always present clear connections between them. It is not necessarily a recent topic either. It can be argued that spontaneous appropriation and self-managed environments precede the city. Nevertheless, the interest for alternative upturned ways to contest State or market domination is rather linked to critical urban theory and the post-industrial city (Caciagli and Milan 2021). In the last decades, the concept of community-led spaces that operate in the margins in opposition to a dominant capitalist-driven urban space, has undergone different phases. One approach is the concept of urban enclaves of resistance that confront the socio-political system and the space of domination. In this way the space occupied temporally by either social movements or everyday life is considered the seed for a revolutionary public space alternative to the hegemonic. The references to this vision are the first occupied social centres, demonstrations, or mega concerts (Hall 2014). The primary approach is the framing of narratives that study urban activism as a production of an insurgent space reacting against the growing privatisation and the loss of public space (Crawford 1995; Fraser 1990; Mitchell 1995). Such approach can be found in anarchist models as the temporary autonomous zones (Bey 2004). The second approach is represented by the emergence of concepts such as

tactical urbanism, guerrilla urbanism, or in-between uses in the decade of 2000 and indirectly linked to the 2008 crisis. This results in the emergence of abundant practices and the publication of ephemeral and participative projects (Lydon and Garcia 2015; Oswalt, Overmeyer, and Misselwitz 2013). As opposed to the notion of autonomous spaces, isolated from the system, these tactics tend to subvert the dominant urban space from the bottom up (Ardill and Lemes de Oliveira 2018; Franck and Stevens 2006; Hou 2010; Petcou and Petrescu 2008). In third place, the last ten years have been marked by the events of 2011; the Arab Spring, Tahir Square, 15M and other movements/festivals. In this time, the concept of urban commons has become widely used after new readings on Ostrom´s work (Foster and Iaione 2016) in connection with various urban commons movements and following *The Right to the city* revisited by David Harvey (2012). The studies on urban commons include a very wide scope of practices and theories framed within the theory of the commons although referring to the urban context. The notion of urban commons denominates as much social as physical resources, including collective spaces of appropriation such as community gardens or social centres. This text dwindles between the later approach and other concept models such as those of placemaking and social innovation.

In urban design, most research on spaces of citizen appropriation has been looked at as a phenomenon by itself, rather than an organic part of their local context, disconnected from politics and local power struggles. Sometimes they are treated as politically autonomous environments and others as situations to extract value from, and integrate them in the system, i.e., new forms of public space, cultural or alternative leisure, or physical support for a certain way of life. Despite the interest in citizen appropriation as an alternative production of urban space, few studies integrate such projects in the scale of the neighbourhood considering at the same time the spatial aspects and the political project. We can identify three visions from different disciplines that approach the space of appropriation in direct relation to the context: placemaking, urban commons, and social innovation. The approach to public space from placemaking theory deals with urban design from the aspects of process, place, and community (Silberger et al. 2013). Nevertheless, it fails to deal with the specific political grounds for the action. In the second place, the theory of the urban commons has bridged the gap between previous radical narratives of politically autonomous realms. This tradition has had tangible results in the constitution of legal frameworks and ground-

breaking regulations in cities as Bologna, Naples, or Barcelona (Foster and Iaione 2016). Such models tend to deal essentially with the legal and social nature of the action, leaving aside the spatial aspects. Lastly, research on social innovation at the local scale in some projects, such as SINGOCOM, emphasised the neighbourhood as the support for innovation in front of local necessities as social exclusion (Moulaert, González, and Martinelli 2010). To this purpose, they use the concept of social innovation coming from grass-roots initiatives that confront problems and socio-economic threats. This method identifies the civic projects with the neighbourhood environment, although it does not analyse their specific spatial structure.

The three axes model

We suggest an approach to urban practices, the object of this study, at the neighbourhood scale, considering both spatial and political aspects (Gómez Nieto 2015). For this purpose, a concept model of analysis is defined from the study of different existing models: the model of appropriation, by Vidal and Pol (2005), the model of relational structure by Patsi Healey (2006), and the model of social innovation at the local scale developed by Moulaert et al. (2010). The analysis model is articulated around three axes: space, community, and political project. The political vector complements the two first aspects of community and space that traditionally define the framework of public space studies from urban design. The process by which the collective spaces of appropriation produce a neighbourhood proposal is analysed with this model as a process of placemaking. The study focuses on the social and spatial transformations in the urban context implied by the appropriation of collective spaces by the community. We focus on the periphery of Madrid and the vulnerable urban areas that suffered the biggest impact of the COVID-19 crisis. What proposals can be extracted from these urban practices in relation to a project for the neighbourhood? The question does not refer to conventional planning designs or policies but rather to the implied city model latent in the initiatives.

Conceptual framework for critical placemaking

In order to develop the concept model to address the research question, we review the origin and meaning of spatial appropriation as proposed by Lefebvre and others. After that, we review different frameworks of placemaking

to finally synthesise a model for critical placemaking. This model of placemaking functions by combining aspects of different theoretical constructions that can be applied to the initiative of collective spatial appropriation. We will use this model to analyse the processes of participation in the collective space and how these interact with the spatial context and community processes in the production of place at the neighbourhood scale. The main reviewed sources are the following:

1. The framework provided by Vidal and Pol´s appropriation model of environmental psychology, in which the focus is placed on different phases of the process of space production from the point of view of the subject (Vidal and Pol 2005).

2. To analyse the place produced by citizen appropriation which rely on two different models from the literature on placemaking: on the one hand, the approach of urban design of public space, and on the other hand, the approach of the place from relational planning, proposed amongst others by Patsy Healey (Healey 2018). To the purpose of this study, this model conveys a more dynamic idea of place, assimilating it to the neighbourhood scale.

3. Finally, the concept of social innovation in the context of the neighbourhood helps us focusing the production of place towards the creation of value in its environment (Moulaert, González, and Martinelli 2010).

Places of appropriation

According to Lefebvre, appropriation is part of the right of the city and is defined in opposition to property (Lefebvre 1991). The difference between both refers not only to use value versus exchange value, but appropriation is also an action, a moment that encompasses perception, acquisition of knowledge, social processes, images, and spatial practices (Chombart de Lauwe 1979). The open city, the appropriated city, is an action and social practice rather than an object or an institution. Thus, an opposition is established by Lefebvre between the concept of appropriation versus the formal use. Formal amenities and infrastructure are arranged, programmed, and designed for consumption while appropriation is political (Lefebvre 1991). It is "the basic act of transformation by the citizen and it is essential since it is opposed to the passive use by the user of public space" (Vidal and Pol 2005).

The appropriation of a space is at the same time the use and production of space: "living, playing or working in a given space or place, expressing human needs that in their continuous satisfaction lead to and at the same time are supported by the appropriation resulting from these spaces and places" (Proshansky 1976). Appropriation is analysed by Tomeu Vidal and Enric Pol as a double movement (1996): on the one hand, it requires transformative action, on the other it produces a symbolic identification. In other words, the space is actively produced; the actor intervenes directly in the production of that space. Spontaneously, in a public space, the park or the street are transformed and subverted by assigning them functions different from those they are designed for. Symbolic identification is a consequence of the action; the subject symbolically appropriates the space with which he establishes a feeling of belonging that can be more or less transitory. It is therefore the actions that provide the space for meaning. The individual and social meaning of a space is marked by the experience of it. The action on the environment produces traces, signs, and marks. According to the Lefebvrian definition of the space of representation, it is superimposed on the physical space through the symbolic use of objects (Lefebvre 1991). Vidal and Pol define three components of action: daily actions, actions oriented towards the place, and actions around projects for the future of the place. This last component is what we find critical in terms of political placemaking.

Neighbourhood production as a process of political placemaking

The idea of appropriation invites us to consider the city as a space produced by the action of its inhabitants and the everyday life, rather than by processes, techniques or agents working in an abstract and homogeneous space. The intention is not so much to define an opposition between two different models of production of the city but rather the framing of an approach that allows for an analysis of the space of appropriation within its own parameters. How can the concepts of local and community process be defined without falling into reactionary and mystifying premodern concepts? What is the meaning of placemaking in a dynamic urban context where notions of place are difficult to grasp? Patsi Healey´s contribution is useful here. In her model, qualities of place are achieved through the political construction of focus on a certain environment. "The meaning of 'community' and of 'place' mobilised in a particular situation therefore cannot be taken for granted. Rather it is some kind of socio-political achievement" (Healey 2018).

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If the essence of place for Heidegger (2015) was fixed to transcendent qualities, here it is viewed rather of a political nature. If place is formed by a multiplicity of layers, flows, and different meanings, its construction depends on the negotiation through governance, communication and interpretation of its collective meaning (Graham and Healey 1999). The production of value and qualities of place are created through its care and the fostering of relational exchanges amongst the different layers.

> Places are not coherent material entities, but are drawn to attention from the assemblages produced by the intersection of multiple webs of relations with diverse spatial and temporal reach. Publics and political communities are cultivated through such processes of attention forming (Healey 2018).

Social and environmentalist movements in the 1960´s resulted in significant changes of urban policies, fostering quality urban spaces and a rich civil society with politically active communities. What Healey enquires is whether this can be achieved again. In this particular relational approach we find a relation between civic engagement and places of quality. Within the relational framework of study, spatial planning is conceived in relation to the multiple networks and flows of information. Civic engagement acquires a central position to produce knowledge and the empowerment of communities to form spatial qualities (Healey 2018). A concept of social intelligence emerges as the result of citizen activity and the development of community capacity to recognise and confront threats and changes. Citizen engagement is understood as a way to open up political opportunities, diversify stakeholders and learn from the action.

> The challenge is to expand practical, open-minded deliberations rather than restricting them, to encourage diverse citizens' voices rather than stifling them, and to direct resources to basic needs rather than to reduce private gains. This type of approach uses civic engagement to open up real political opportunities, learning from action not only about what works but also about what matters (Albrechts and Balducci 2013).

Adding to this aspect of social intelligence through civic engagement, Hernández Aja (2003) contends that the function of participation space as opposed to the space of the state is to bring out the necessities detected by the community. Thus, grassroots action-based processes generate the necessary knowl-

edge to produce change. Struggle and reflexion around local space, its quality, and its necessities bring together the political participation of citizens in their community. Locally focused action is a way to build knowledge and ability to diagnose necessities and get organised in order to determine what matters and what needs to be taken care of. According to Healey, it is this political action that produces a public value (2008, 383–94). There are two ways in which mobilisation and struggle around place qualitative characteristics can generate public value: first, the public formed through mobilisation, the community sensibilised to work on place care and improvement; second, the promotion of action in the form of goods, services, policies, and spatial quality.

The relational approach to place gives us a vision in which the essentialist Heideggerian place and the monumental memory have been dislocated. Collective actions to provide basic goods for vulnerable families or to prevent the eviction of a family in a neighbourhood in Madrid, resonate with multiple layers and meanings, international flows of people and capital, everyday life, and political engagement. This entanglement, this assemblage, constitutes the neighbourhood as a production of place. Yet, what we find missing in this model is the physical nature of the streets and squares, the memories associated to specific corners or meeting places. How can we bring together the relational approach and other urban space-based approaches to placemaking? Cresswell (2014) points out the following basic dimensions of place: reiterative spatial practice, inclusion, performativity, and dynamism. According to this definition, place is not permanent, but it rather exists through everyday practices. Physical space acts as a scene inhabited by the rhythms and dynamism of urban life. John Friedman, drawing from these aspects and from Jane Jacobs' reading of the place as a social neighbourhood life, defines a new set of characteristics of place for the case of urban developments in Taiwan and China. The author adds to the definition of place spatial qualities related to planning: "the place must be small, inhabited, and come to be cherished or valued by its resident population for all that it represents or means to them" (Friedmann 2010). The scale aspect refers to pedestrian criteria and place identity; it helps us frame multi-layered relational place into the built context. The second requisite of the place as inhabited reminds us of Lefebvre's opposition between habitat and to inhabit, where the first one is the abstract technical condition of life and human existence in its surroundings (Lefebvre 1991). In third place, community engagement in care and value,

relates to the environmental psychology concept of place attachment, linked to appropriation (Tuan 1975). The identification with space through action and symbolic transformation makes it into a place, resulting in the subject's affirmation and ultimately in life quality.

Irving Altman and Setha Low (1992) proposed a model of place attachment triangulating across diverse parameters of different origins: physical space, affections, type of subject, social relations, and time. All of these relate to the model to the appropriation of space. Significantly, Friedmann adds yet another aspect to the definition of place: the necessity of centres. The author conceives meeting and reunion spaces that condense the idea of place:

> If the whole idea of place is of an environment conducive to sociality or, which is as much the same thing, civility, then communication amongst people who are known to each other, whether repetitive and patterned or purposeful, is at the top of this process (2010).

Thus, collective space becomes again a critical part of the process of placemaking. The self-managed social centres in the periphery of Madrid work as collective spaces that bring together the struggles, the co-production of knowledge and community resistance against exterior threats. After distancing ourselves from placemaking for the sake of it and recovering the concepts of civic engagement and social intelligence in the relational multilayered space, we find again the built collective space as a catalyst for the myriad of layers and flows of the relational place. We contend that this collective space is related to the citizen appropriation practices in a model of neighbourhood production understood as a process of critical placemaking. How can we build a theoretical model of critical placemaking that encompasses citizen action towards the co-production of a collective neighbourhood proposal?

Concept model

The concept model is articulated on a synthesis of different models from the previously analysed literature. The critical placemaking model is defined combining aspects from different theoretical constructions applied to the collective space of appropriation. Following the research question, we will use this model to analyse the processes of participation on collective spaces and how they interact with the spatial context and the community processes of

placemaking in the neighbourhood scale. Drawing from the appropriation model proposed by Vidal and Pol from the environmental psychology (2005), the focus is placed on the different phases of the production process by the community. To analyse the production of place through citizen appropriation we refer to two models of placemaking: on the one hand the placemaking theory based in built environments (Silberger et al. 2013), on the other hand the relational approach to place as proposed amongst others by Patsy Healey, conceiving place as a dynamic entity in a neighbourhood scale (2006). These approaches to placemaking overlap with urban commons theory even when the latter focuses on the legal and social nature of common resources as alternative forms of institutions, their mobilisation, and maintenance.

The first approach to placemaking corresponds to a long tradition in urban design. Drawing from the work of Project for Public Space, an extensive literature on placemaking evolves connected to the design of public space. It often focuses on the generation of tools to frame successful urban design with citizen participation and to establish bridges between theory and praxis. It is critical in this emergent body of study the relation between the built space and the community process from conception to programming (Madden 2001 ; Silberger et al. 2013). The placemaking concept fostered by PPS makes a relevant claim to engage communities from the beginning in the design of public space. Even if prioritising upturn process, this approach is essentially focused on design practice. As such, the political claims behind the practices are often not the priority. The struggles and goals, the answer to threats to the community coming from the market or administration planning policies, all these elements remain hidden. The community process is often perceived as a basic material used by the placemaker where the main goal is to produce vibrant places. This approach changes when applied to citizen appropriation processes. The translation to community gardens and collective appropriation spaces of principles that were originally conceived for public space, brings into this notion of place other aspects that belong to the political process. Karge poses a synthesis of PPS´ placemaking principles applied to community gardens in which the political project is synthesised as a vision (Karge 2018 ; Wesener et al. 2020). This approach, nevertheless, still draws on the design qualities of public design and it is difficult to relate to the complexity of the urban context on the neighbourhood scale. We find in relational planning other models that place politics and civic engagement at the centre of the placemaking process.

The second approach to placemaking is found within relational planning theory. Actors Network Theory (Latour 2005) is introduced in urban studies through the concept of assemblage. In its more descriptive application to the built environment, the term conveys a vision of the urban realm as a conglomerate of networks both infrastructural and natural, and of stakeholders both human and non-human, who compose in an unlimited way a space, a place, or a neighbourhood (Brenner, Madden, and Wachsmuth 2012). Drawing from a position close to this concept, Patsy Healey´s theoretical framework establishes civic engagement as a catalyst for place. Places are thus understood as precarious assemblages of social networks, physical support, economics, technology, information, memories and values. Place is not anymore a coherent and limited unity. It becomes the primary focus through an essentially political process of civic engagement and value creation (Healey 2018). The author analyses also the way a grassroots process emerges and interacts with the flows of different resources in its environment. Using Giddens formulation of structure and agency (2011), Healey develops an analysis model of governance processes and the construction of institutions, understood as "the ensemble of norms, rules and practices which structure action in social contexts" (Healey 2006). Community linked innovations promoted by those actors operating within the framework of the power structures, go through different levels of power of an institutionalisation process: from the episode level of a singular mobilisation, through the level of processes instauration to the level of accepted cultural norms and values. This process is transversal to three flows of resources: material resources, authority, or regulation resources and lastly, the flow of ideas, the power to generate new imaginations and shape identities and values (Healey 2006). Healey´s model of how agency processes transform planning, holds as key idea the production of value through civic engagement and the place as an urban ensemble in a dynamic model; focusing on policies rather than on the spatial neighbourhood proposal but coincident to some extent with the study of this research. From these models, we establish the three-dimensional model of critical placemaking: communities and space configure the socio-spatial base from which emerges the third vector of the political project. These three aspects outline the production of the idea of neighbourhood based on localised action and care.

A neighbourhood is a specific process of production of place. It is shaped by social relations, a spatial practice in continuous construction and a localised

political action. We recognise in this process the interaction of the three dimensions in the model:

- **Community**. There is no premodern community that can be identified in the neighbourhood as an autochthonous, existential political subject. On the contrary, any reference to community must be understood as a loose assemblage of actors. Urban commons are often questioned by the administration asking how to choose which community should have the right to access and manage common resources. Why should the administration prioritise one specific group´s claims over a certain resource? Nevertheless, this approach presumes a passive relation of people and the city; a relation mediated by the State or the market. The community involved in the political production of place is a community of action. As put by Merrifield (2014), space in this century will not be divided in private versus public, but rather in passive versus active. The production of a complex local space that can be considered a neighbourhood, requires spaces of active relations, a space of production and engagement rather than the dull backdrop of passive planned public space supposed to hold civic values in itself.

- **Space**. Strangely enough, urban environment at the neighbourhood scale is easily understood when dealing with urban commons. We are used to consider social necessities of a community, social innovation and the legal or political frameworks. However, the physical context is usually approached only through close pictures of community gardens, urban art, or community refurbished interiors, while the neighbourhood scale is left out as untouched by the community project, specially if the action is not mediated by the planning authorities. It is necessary to look at the urban commons as a proposal of a different urban environment; a very specific proposal of how urban facilities should be designed and how uses in the city can be reconfigured. If we consider the potential of community-led initiatives at the local level for social innovation, we should also see them as meaningful physical proposals for the design of spatial responses to the threats on vulnerable neighbourhoods.

- **Political Project**. Critical placemaking considers the neighbourhood as a political action. Taking further the dimensions of community and space established in the literature of placemaking (Silberger et al.

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2013), an axis of political project is added. Creating a place here involves a political focus on a socio-spatial territory (Healey et al. 2008). The bottom-up/upturn production of neighbourhood appears as a form of resistance against formal production of space, against the devaluation or enclosure of public space, or as a need for participation and expression. This dimension implies the existence of a vision, a proposal related to specific conflicts or necessities. In this way it transcends the often-existing notion of placemaking in urban design as unrelated to the power relations in the context. The political project allows us to connect the bodies of work from the theory of placemaking in the realm of urban design and the theories of urban commons and social innovation. At the same time, it highlights an aspect specific to collective spaces of appropriation where dynamics of participation overlap with urban space and processes of placemaking. The model allows us to understand the production of place as a process that is at the same time community building, space transformation and political action. This conjunction is found in the approaches to place from the bigger scale but not so much from the microscale and the discipline of urban design (Pierce, Martin, and Murphy 2011).

Methodology

The case study is undertaken as instrumental to the apprehension of the citizen production of collective spaces dynamics. The selected case territories are neighbourhoods in Madrid's periphery with high indexes of urban vulnerability. Within them, the two studied cases correspond to social self-managed centres of different nature which had a significant role during the first months of the pandemic lockdown organising the citizen response to the crisis in their neighbourhood context.

Qualitative and participatory research methods are used to determine social and spatial characteristics of the analysed cases. The social centre *la Villana de Vallecas* is a small active hub of community actions and bar located in the district of Puente de Vallecas, in Madrid. Not only was the centre used for the neighbours' solidarity pantry initiative during the lockdown, it also hosted debates around the health crisis and a social rights office to advise neighbours. *La Eko de Carabanchel* is one of the main enclaves of a very active movement of occupied social centres in Madrid. Both districts are

amongst the most hardly hit by the pandemic in the city, both in numbers and in economic and social impact.

Emergency, March 2020

In March of 2020, as the first lockdown was declared in Spain, fear and isolation triggered a multitude of spontaneous community responses. People in Madrid used social media to gather around newly formed locally based groups. Anonymous people were reaching out to offer help, deliver groceries, medicines, or assist vulnerable neighbours; these groups were, in the beginning, struggling to get organised amongst receding public services and confusing cries for help. Existing fragmented social networks started organising the volunteers in the most vulnerable peripheric urban contexts and getting them in touch with people who were asking for help. This first phase lasted a few weeks. Protocols were laid out to safely aid isolated vulnerable people. But soon it became clear the social crisis was wider. There was a significant increase of families applying to social services for food and basic needs. The pandemic highlighted the informal economy workers who lost their income. Social services were overwhelmed and derived people to the community networks who were then organising a way to respond through volunteers and donations.

The initiatives took the form of solidarity pantries organised by the communities at the neighbourhood scale. With donations from neighbours and local shops, small groups of volunteers gathered food and basic goods and delivered them to those who needed it. Space and infrastructure were required to store and organise the food delivery. Many of these spaces were self-managed or occupied social centres that remained closed at the time due to sanitary restrictions. The spaces themselves and the social networks existing around them were part of the basic safety networks implemented by citizen initiatives years ago. The scale of action was roughly that of the administrative neighbourhoods. Many of such citizen facilities were put in place throughout the city, working within each district as a network. Neighbourhood networks acted in collaboration with the social services that were on the brink of collapse. Social workers would send to the solidarity pantries people and families who could not be assisted by the administration. Many of these initiatives are still active more than a year later.

La Villana de Vallecas

Puente de Vallecas is one of the districts with higher vulnerability indexes in Madrid. It has a long tradition of community struggle and neighbour associations. *Somos Tribu Vallekas* is the neighbourhood solidarity network that coordinated the different spaces of the district. The network has been awarded the 2020 European Citizen´s Price by the European Parliament for its importance at the social level to help the most vulnerable. The network *Somos Tribu Vallekas* was born during the first week of lockdown to assist neighbours in a vulnerable situation. Soon the network had grown beyond expectations. The coalition of social actors includes the neighbours' associations in the district, the Madrid Federation of Neighbours´ Associations, various social centres, groups of local activists and local shops who collaborated with food donations. A solidarity pantry was opened by the community in each neighbourhood of the district. Again, it was the self-managed spaces that gave physical and social support to the initiative: the youth social centre *La Atalaya*, the social centre *La Brecha*, the cultural association *La Horizontal* and the social centre *La Villana de Vallekas*. One of them is located in an occupied building and expects eviction, another one is a theatre and others like *La Villana de Vallekas* are self-managed social centres that pay rent as private actors. *La Villana* was established six years ago. Its philosophy is based on social syndicalism, spreading its range of actions to housing, education, and healthcare. The centre was born as a political and entrepreneurial project. As such, it was launched through the ethical financial cooperative *Coop57*. It is financed through member subscriptions, small fees for the activities and a bar in the ground floor that serves as an informal gathering space and hosts small events. The centre aids neighbours through a social rights office, one of whose main activities is carried out by the local anti-eviction group. There is a strong movement focused on the housing crisis. The evictions have continued during the pandemic. Through the network, large groups of people are summoned to stop the police without violence and prevent the families from being evicted. At the social centre they insist the way it functions is different from facilities run by the administration or the market. The purpose is not to offer a service to passive users or consumers but to get them actively involved in the struggle. The solidarity pantry existed in the centre before the pandemic, but in the months of confinement it grew to aid the increasing number of people. The bar in the centre offered menus for under €3. The struggle to include the principles of the agroecolog-

ical movement was also undertaken by the activists. Producers of ecological products were contacted and included in the action. The pantry managed to include 50% of agroecological products. This experience contrasts with food supplied to vulnerable families by the administration during the pandemic. Once the sanitary restrictions allowed it, people that came looking for help were incorporated to the core organising group through the assembly.

ESLA Eko. Despensa solidaria de Carabanchel

Many citizen solidarity networks were created during the social urban movements of 2011. At its peak, the 15M movement in Madrid moved from its original location in Puerta del Sol camp to the public spaces of the neighbourhood. In vulnerable urban areas like the District of Carabanchel an alliance occurred between these new mobilised collectives and traditional urban activism like neighbours´ associations and squatters´ groups. These groups converged around a weekly meeting in the public spaces of the district called *Asamblea Popular de Carabanchel*. From this node, diverse working groups were created. Amongst them, *Red de Derechos Sociales* (Social Rights Network) strives to give assistance to vulnerable neighbours. Crucially, this type of groups were conceived as self-organisation of citizens, rather than charity organisations. It soon became obvious that this assemblage needed open, self-managed, flexible space to operate. With the help of local squatter groups, a big unused industrial building was occupied. The Liberated Self-Managed Sociocultural Space *Eko de Carabanchel* (*ESLA Eko*) is since 2011 one of the bastions of the Occupied Social Centres movement in Madrid. Ten years after its occupation, *Eko* is a key piece of the network formed by different projects and spaces within an urban context of transformation. The ideology of the space lists a series of principles of political resistance and governance. They refer to the centre as a space of struggle for feminism and structural changes in the economic system. At the same time, a principle of horizontality, mutual care, and support is promoted, which defines the nature of the common pool of resources and the way to regulate it through the community. The pool of resources comprehends both the space and the means of production or nonmaterial resources; the principle of horizontality refers not only to the process in which decisions are taken, but also to the principle of mutual care. In the activist tradition of squatted social centres, *Eko* is a political actor who actively participates in society within initiatives such as the March 8 feminist demonstrations; but at the same time, it is an

autonomous area (Bey 2004) within which alternative policies are put into practice. It is thus presented as a social prototype in which the relationships amongst people, the environment, space, or work are not mediated by the capitalist system. Alternative practices include economy, participation, and ecology; the building is now self-efficient in both water and electricity. The solidarity pantry of Carabanchel located at the *Eko* Centre, comes way back before the pandemic. It was born from the social rights network working group after the events of 2011. The group collaborated with a handful of local shops to gather donations. However, in 2020, during the first three months of the lockdown, people assisted by the informal organisation went from seven families to one hundred and sixty; there was a network of more than fifty shops within five hundred meters from the social centre that collaborated with the pantry. Today the pantry keeps assisting families once a week with a food basket and a hygiene pack. The products are gathered from a network of partner local shops and from donations. A group of volunteers formed mainly by women gather every week in an assembly where decisions are taken, and the group is organised.

Institutional relations

The relation of these initiatives with the institutional framework has been conflictive and ambiguous. While the official speeches stressed the generosity and solidarity of individual actions, the neighbour initiatives denounced the scarcity of administrative mechanisms to cope with the social crisis. Self-managed spaces had to take on the responsibility to assist neighbours with basic needs in the absence of an official response from the administration. They never intended to become a substitute for the municipality and they did not see themselves as charity organisations but rather as a form of resistance through self-organisation. In the third week of the lockdown, the City Council launched the campaign of neighbour solidarity *Madrid sale al balcón*, interpreted by some as co-opting the community initiatives. An ambiguous situation was generated where the administration did not openly support nor recognise the specific actions taken by these communities, although social services were referring people to them. More than a year after the first lockdown, the solidarity pantries are still actively attending families. The award by the European Parliament to the network *Somos Tribu Vallekas* signifies an official recognition to the innovation potential of community action. Nevertheless, many of these self-managed spaces are at the same time

under the threat of an aggressive campaign against what is perceived by the administration as squatters. The network of self-managed spaces of Madrid (*REMA*) was created in 2019 to respond to the closures promoted by the local administration and has been trying to make visible the work done by these spaces.

Community project

In the case of citizen networks´ response to the social crisis at the neighbourhood scale, we can observe how these constellations of actors are being created around existing nodes of activism. These new configurations strive towards an idea of neighbourhood based in relations of mutual aid. In the absence of a formal answer to the cries of help during the first weeks of lockdown, different groups rapidly established ways to communicate and organise. In the case of the District of Puente de Vallecas, the network *Vallekas Somos Tribu* connected calls for help with groups of volunteers. The existence of the network was crucial for a rapid assessment of the situation at the local scale, but the strength of these social links was no coincidence. It rested on a significant tradition of urban activism in the neighbourhood. Similarly, the reaction in Carabanchel District as in many others, was channelled through informal institutions created by activists during the last decade in response to the 2008 financial crisis. During the health crisis, urban commons based collective spaces as *La Villana* and *Eko* social centres, served as a support for different networks of actors at the neighbourhood level. As seen above, the value here is generated by citizen engagement. Place is thus defined by a set of actors and resources that gather around a vision of the neighbourhood: how it should be, what the priorities are, how it should confront threats. From a territorial perspective, this commitment is also one of resistance against vectors of inequality of the city centre versus the periphery; a vindication of the neighbourhood as a collective space, precisely where it is most scarce. Hence, the action on urban space takes a defensive form and the right to the city is reflected as a confrontation between two forms of city production: the centrifugal and centripetal city of domination and the market versus the neighbourhood city, self-built and earned through social struggle.

Spatial project

We observe how the reaction to the crisis finds physical support in a series of existing facilities dispersed through the urban fabric. The self-managed social centres, a community theatre, spaces related to neighbours´ associations: this spatial network takes the form of a neighbourhood infrastructure that can give physical spatial support to collective efforts. This infrastructure holds certain characteristics that set it apart from formal facilities planned by the administration:

- **Proximity infrastructure**. The four solidarity pantries of the Vallecas network are located within a 500 meters distance of each other and each of them is linked to one neighbourhood. Both in the case of Vallecas and Carabanchel, the volunteers work closely with local shops and business functioning on the basis of pedestrian proximity. Anarchist architect Colin Ward stressed the importance of self-management at the small scale. Ward advocated for the creation of small self-managed urban infrastructures that provided the community with informal workshops or small open facilities for children. These production spaces where the community can share infrastructures, tools or knowledge are a powerful vision of civic infrastructure at the scale of the neighbourhood. They are conceived as community resources beyond mere leisure or work. These are collective spaces that can be used to produce, to learn or to develop a local economy. He defends self-management as a way to achieve capacity building. In his concept of spontaneous organisation, activities and institutions will be developed by a collective to confront common necessities. A small group of people without guidance from superior instances will develop with their own means an ordered and functional system (Ward 1988, 41). This situation is precisely what the sanitary crisis triggered. *La Villana* Centre has an area of less than two hundred square meters. The areas used to organise the storage and delivery have the minimum necessary area and the core management groups are also limited to less than a dozen people.

- **Weak formality**. We use this term in relation to certain characteristics of informality found in appropriation spaces. Under a certain approach (Meijer and Ernste 2019) small, non-planned and self-managed transformations can be considered as planning practices. In the space of appropriation, subjects, land, and function are all to some degree

indeterminate in relation to their formal framework. Of the cases here studied, *Eko* is located in an occupied property in a legally precarious situation while *La Villana* is in a building rented by the collective. In the second case, the undefinition is not so much related to the administrative framework but rather to the activity. As most urban commons, the centre is not a facility run by the administration nor does it operate as a business. These are spaces and processes that occur within a formal context they relate to and often depend on, maintaining at the same time a level of autonomy at a certain scale. After threats to cut its water supply, the social centre *Eko* has managed to produce its own electricity from solar panels and gather rainwater enough for its necessities. Collective space of appropriation shares the essentially unstable nature of the commons (Hernández Aja 2003). As opposed to the public sector or the market, direct participation and the space of social movements are supported by ephemeral social and physical structures. Their open and dynamic nature produces temporary organisations in constant threat from both external and internal dynamics. This has been seen as a weakness of unstable citizen institutions, but this frail quality is necessary to promote principles of horizontality and offer a grassroot diagnosis of necessity. The commons have a frail basis, built on collective will articulated outside of the formal framework (Hernández Aja 2003). Again, this aspect has become clear during the citizen response to the early moments of the social crisis caused by the COVID-19 and the lockdown. Informal collectives of citizens were more capable than public institutions to assess the situation and act accordingly.

- **Openness**. Frank and Stevens (2006) coined the term *loose space* to refer to a set of characteristics and activities in the urban space. The concept is based on a form of flexibility found in certain spaces. It does not refer to planned urban realms that may have been designed to foster various activities or other flexible design strategy. Loose space is rather an absence of spatial determinations that allows for spontaneous appropriations or disobedience through unplanned uses. A similar concept of openness and non-determination can be found as a requisite for social innovation. Ezio Manzini highlights this quality for those projects that produce city (2018). Openness is here defined as what allows for and supports unexpected activities. The author defines this idea within

a planning strategy opposed to traditional planning; based on the design of small, fast, and flexible interventions: ephemeral prototypes of spaces or policies that can serve as support for social innovation. Advocating for disperse systems, he defines these spatial qualities in the S.L.O.C. strategy: small, local, open, and connected. This concept resonates with Ward´s principles of the anarchist organisation: voluntary, functional, temporal, and small. Such an idea of small self-managed collective spaces is also found amongst Christopher Alexander patterns in the form of unfinished spaces for meeting and neighbourhood scale facilities; workshops, schools and venues in a "subtle balance of being defined and yet not too defined, so that any activity which is natural to the neighbourhood at any given time can develop freely and yet has something to start from" (Alexander 1977, 174). The collective spaces constituted by the social centres in the present case provided the necessary openness to organise the solidarity pantries with the minimum spatial or normative restrictions. Premises with easy ground floor accessibility were necessary for the storage and delivery of the goods; meeting space to host assemblies and autonomy from formal administration facilities. This experience hints towards the importance of such open facilities in the neighbourhood scale.

- **Network**. Different projects within the same urban area with a certain degree of coordination can complement each other defining a proposal in the territory at the scale of the neighbourhood. *Somos Tribu Vallekas* defines in their website a map of public resources, including assistance for basic needs such as clothes, food, or health. The spatial network is configured by the coordinated pantries and local shops. In the context of the social centre *Eko* in Carabanchel, there are various initiatives of ephemeral uses. The centre is coordinated with a community garden and a self managed space of production (*Nodo de Autogestión de Carabanchel*). These are all located within a 500 meter radius. The community garden serves as an infrastructure for informal meetings and children care. It holds open air events and informal gatherings after assembly meetings in the *Eko*. *Nodo de Autogestión* gives a formal framework to the occupied *Eko* building while the social centre gives diffusion to the products of the *Nodo*: carpentry, bread, handcrafts, and brewery. This small ecosystem integrates a complex constellation of stakeholders, collectives, and mutual aid initiatives. A vision of a

local infrastructure for participation and neighbourhood construction emanates from these initiatives.

Conclusion

We have reviewed critical theory models of production of place focusing on the process of citizen-driven production of collective spaces, the concept of appropriation being the trigger to dwindle into how local place is produced from the grassroots movements and how a proposal of neighbourhood transcends from citizen initiatives as those carried out by informal networks of neighbours during the early part of the lockdown due to the pandemic situation in Madrid in the spring of 2020. The study of different bodies of literature on placemaking theory allows us to hint towards the construction of a model of critical placemaking which addresses both the civic engagement that drives the idea of neighbourhood and the spatial characteristics that emerge from the process. Drawing mainly from Healey and other authors' relational approach to place as well as Vidal and Pol´s environmental psychology appropriation model and urban visions of self-management such as anarchist Colin Wards' theory, we propose a three axes model of critical placemaking. This model rests on the two conventional dimensions of bottom-up/upturn co-creation of collective space, community, and space, adding as third vector the political vision or proposal. In urban design and planning, the community is often taken for granted even when participation protocols are implemented. It would seem the community is another neutral, raw material which the placemaker must work with to produce what is often referred to as vibrant spaces. Without a political framework as origin and goal of the action, the production of place for the sake of it is an empty signifier ripe for gentrification processes.

The study of the cases within the model of critical placemaking outlines an emergent project of neighbourhood production we can learn from. We structure the findings in the three axes of the model: community project, political project, and spatial project.

From the point of view of the community processes, the study shows how the studied citizen initiatives generated a complex network of stakeholders. The neighbours´ actions to organise a response to the social crisis were structured around activist nodes that had been initiated ten years before as a self-managed answer to the dramatic effects of the 2008 crisis. There were groups

that had been assisting neighbours in occupational and housing problems, cultural projects, existing solidarity pantries that managed food donations for vulnerable families. When the lockdown started, spontaneous groups of volunteers coalesced around these groups. Thus, the study suggests an underlying idea of mutual aid networks as a significant characteristic of the neighbourhood conceived as a system of defence against exterior threats.

As a political project, these results emphasise citizen engagement as the focus of a production of place at the neighbourhood scale. We can extract the following principles for the political dimension of neighbourhood construction: vision and resistance. Vision of the neighbourhood refers to the construction of knowledge, whether implicit or explicit, of what the priorities are. It also implies an opportunity for action (Hernández Aja 2003), the trigger that makes different actors and ideas come together around a specific local issue. Resistance refers to the dimension of the periphery versus the centre. The strive for resilience and defence against a dominant system that undermines public space and abandons vulnerable urban areas under crisis situations.

The spatial dimension of the neighbourhood project comprehends an urban vision of community-led urban structure. The action fosters the consolidation of a self-managed infrastructure network. For the studied cases, this infrastructure is shown in the network of solidarity pantries established through the vulnerable areas during the lockdown.

In the study, we identified the following four aspects of this neighbourhood structure: proximity, weak formality, openness, and network. The functioning of the network is based on proximity. Donations, delivery and management of pantries depend on short distances that are also critical for the everyday life sphere of children and elderly care. Restricted movement regulations implemented during this period make especially important this shrinkage of the city into more sustainable, accessible units. Secondly, the informal bottom-up/upturn organisation of both spaces and social groups allowed for a greater ability to rapidly react to the crisis in contrast to the overwhelmed public institutions. In relation to that, the openness and undefinition of uses and activities in the physical spaces made it possible to habilitate buildings and small rooms of all sorts for the required purpose to hold meetings and even host lecture series once the lockdown ceased, to collectively understand the situation.

The results of this study suggest the emergence of a city model at the neighbourhood scale from the initiatives of citizen appropriation of collective space. This model rests on a small scale, community driven infrastructure able to diagnose local problems and prototype proposals and organise a response to crisis. Place is thus defined by a set of actors and resources that gather around a vision of the neighbourhood: how it should be, what are the priorities, how it should face threats. From a territorial perspective, this commitment is also one of resistance against vectors of inequality; a vindication of the neighbourhood as a collective space, precisely where it is most scarce. Hence, the action on urban space takes a defensive form and the right to the city emerges as a confrontation between two forms of city production: the dominant city of both administration and the market versus the city of neighbourhoods, self-built and earned by its inhabitants through decades of social struggle.

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