

Cultivating the Square: Trash, Recycling, and the Cultural Ecology of Post-Crisis Madrid

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Although the encampments of 15-M in Madrid in the early summer of 2011 might have been merely one skirmish in the ongoing war over who controls the city, the activities of the *indignados* in the Puerta del Sol spatially embodied a set of radically new political possibilities. In our contribution to the volume, *Ethics of Life: Contemporary Iberian Debates*, we examine two of these spaces in contemporary Madrid: *Ésta es una plaza* and the *Campo de Cebada*. The activities at these two locations in the city center demonstrate how urban space continues to be of great political importance in the shifting patterns of socio-spatial organization that have blossomed in the wake of the economic crisis. More specifically, we argue that the 2008 economic crisis in Spain, coupled with the aggressive privatization of public space, has not only produced highly visible reactions, such as the 15-M movement, but also resulted in a proliferation of small-scale grassroots endeavors that work toward creating new ways of living, moving, and theorizing the city. The emergence of these new cultural forms not only reflect upon, respond to, and shape urban politics, but these community-based projects also emphasize what can be called a ‘new ecology of urban space,’ both individually and collectively.

The notion of ecology being used here should not be confused with what is typically considered Urban Ecology, a sub-discipline of Ecology that focuses on the biological processes of the urban by studying the presence of non-human habitats within urban environments (e.g. peregrine falcons in New York City); nor is this working concept of an ‘ecology of urban space’ reducible to Cultural Ecology, a field dedicated to studying how human culture responds to and adapts to its physical geography and climate (i.e. habitat). Rather, in an attempt to rework our understandings of both ecology and the urban, this essay looks at some recent directions in Urban Studies that question Urban/Nature binaries and encourage us to think of the city as an *ecosystem* of cultural, political, and material relationships.

Underpinning our approach to this new understanding of cultural ecology has been the work of Spanish architects Iñaki Ábalos and Juan Herreros and philosopher José Luis Pardo. These scholars began to write about urban ecology before the crisis of 2008, and their work has only become more relevant in recent years. While the architects and the philosopher differ in their disciplinary approach, what they have in common is a concern with the spatial reordering of discarded, abandoned, or otherwise unused city spaces. All three argue that significant cultural renovation is occurring in places that financial capital seems to have ‘refused’—a term that refers to a ‘refusal’ to invest both private and public resources, but also to the notion of city space itself as ‘refuse’ or trash. Both Ábalos and Herreros’s concept of recycling urban space through architecture (*Áreas de impunidad*) and Pardo’s theory of a culture of trash (*Nunca fue tan hermosa la basura*) propose new ways of thinking about urban responsibility and citizenship that rely on a fundamentally un-modern understanding of the relationship between nature and the built environment. These concepts not only offer compelling ways to understand some of the grassroots initiatives being organized by urban collectives throughout Madrid, but they also question a number of basic assumptions about what defines a city. In this sense, these writers are directly engaged with recent directions in urban theory, like Neil Brenner’s recent work in which he ponders whether or not we live in an “Urban Age” at all.

The formerly vacant city spaces discussed in our essay exemplify what Ábalos and Herreros have described as “latent gardens”—spaces in the city where re-purposing of that which has been “refuse-d” might generate new kinds of “public space and an architecture reflecting new possibilities” (“Una nueva naturalidad” 25). They are examples of participatory urbanism that function like pioneer plants taking hold in a devastated landscape, spreading their roots, and reconstituting the cultural ecosystem of the city by envisioning and using urban space in new ways. These approaches can be called ‘ecological’ not because they protect some fetishized concept of Nature, but rather because they cultivate connections and relationships and offer a deeper, richer, more heterogeneous definition of what it means to produce urban space. They are also ecological in a more conventional sense because their efforts rely on actual urban gardens, the repurposing of recycled materials, and a culturally-aware approach to city-space that, we contend, responds to Pardo’s entreaty to stop experiencing ‘trash’ as waste and “make a *new urban landscape* out of it” (“Nunca fue tan hermosa la basura” 170). Pardo encourages us to think of vacant lots, abandoned sites for commercial centers, or underused indoor marketplaces as potential sites for new urban landscapes. These places that the neoliberal city has not yet been fully able to weave into the network of global capital, or that have been set loose from this network since the collapse of the Spanish economy in

2008, are precisely where particularly creative urban projects are taking place. Therefore, we suggest that these ‘spaces of refuse’—in both senses of the word—have been reclaimed and renegotiated in ways that question some of our most basic assumptions about the (post)modern city and how it works.

Part of our inquiry into the evolving concept of the urban to reflect new economic and ecological realities in Madrid forces us to pay attention not only to the places and spaces that have been produced by the consumer city, but also to investigate the ways in which urban space is discarded, left derelict, and then recycled in *lugares basuras* (places of trash) or *no lugares* (non-places), as Pardo would call them (*Nunca fue tan hermosa la basura*). This approach is somewhat paradoxical since it seems to simultaneously treat urban space as object/product to be discarded, while also accepting the theoretical position espoused by urban theorists like Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, and Neil Brenner that the urban is not a product, but a process. To understand the urban landscape as a socio-spatial process whose derelict spaces (which are non-productive in the capitalist sense) form an integral part of the overall whole of the urban environment is to treat urban space like an ecologist might treat a forest that has been clear cut or devastated by fire. The forest does not stop being a forest because there are stumps or charred logs; rather it enters into a new stage of forest succession. Different plants begin to grow, downed trees become a micro-habitat for grubs, small plants and mammals, and slowly the process of being a forest continues. In a period characterized by radical changes in demographic trends, the failure of the neoliberal state to deal with the economic crisis, changes in the global division of labor, cracks in globalization’s myth of the mobility of people and goods, the increasing division of classes by gentrification, and last but certainly not least, the impending ecological threats to our current understanding of the city, urban theorists and activists in Spain and elsewhere are working towards new solutions to the city’s current problems and, in the process, they are redefining what the city is and what it can be.

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