

Dynamics of urban transformation in the practical rhetoric on the fourth meeting of AACC *Comboi a la Fresca*¹

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Abstract

While it is true that the temporal proximity prevents definitive appreciations, we can confirm that in 2008 emerged an emancipatory politics on a global scale that had its turning point in 2011. This emergence involved, in the field of urban design, an intensification in the relationship between architects, sociologists, artists, and the neighbours among themselves, as well as the incorporation of collaborative and assembly practices coming from grassroots movements in urban regeneration processes, as a response to the exacerbation of the crisis of neoliberal capitalism applied to the management of the city.

This article will exemplify this *modus operandi* within the city in the practice developed by *Comboi to Fresca*, the meeting held by the international network *Arquitecturas Colectivas* in Valencia in 2011. The starting point is how the emancipatory micropolitics that took place in Valencia did not fall into oblivion –as the product of a state of reverie– but articulated instead a dynamics of subjective urban transformation built on a foundational questioning of their own practices, and in opposition to the local *modus operandi* developed in Valencia.

Keywords: Arquitecturas Colectivas, performative architecture, Comboi a la Fresca, Outsite, pragmatism.

As has been often said in recent years (Zizek, 2013), in the period 2008 - 2011 there was a boom of social movements on a planetary scale. The anti-globalization movements that had emerged in the first decade of the 21st century had their maximum expression in 2011 with different manifestations like Occupy Wall Street, the Arab spring, or 15-M in Spain (De Araujo *et al.*, 2013; Harvey, 2013)². However, some authors emphasize that, as anti-globalization movements lost their capacity for dialogue –as well as their geographical spaces in cities– they also lost momentum (Zizek, 2013:23; Harvey, 2013).

In this context, at the end of 2010, the organization of a citizen's meeting in Valencia, *Comboi a la Fresca*³, began to put into action the concept of urban intervention as a political practice. With the aim of weaving networks and enlivening the city, *Comboi* had a double purpose: on one side, it was a project that brought together various multidisciplinary collectives in a space for reflection on the phenomena of transformation that characterize today's contemporary metropolis, and on the other, a platform to construct a communication space between citizens, technicians and social movements, connected with small projects of action research that were already present in the city⁴. *Comboi* carried out local and ephemeral urban interventions, while creating new spaces under very different perspectives like appropriations, empowerment, and subversion.

The closeness in time of these events hinders an accurate assessment (Hobsbawm, 1994), but the question still remains to what extent the micropolitics carried out by *Comboi* triggered a dynamic of urban transformation, in the light of their actual practices. In this paper we will see how *Comboi*, despite sharing with the social movements of 2011 a utopian sense of generalized renewal, will emphasize its pragmatic sense in the territory by the urgency of urban reinvention in a city like Valencia. Temporality, dissolved authorship, the lack of dogmatism and the withdrawal from strategy, were the keys upon which emancipatory dynamics were built in opposition to the local political practice.

Taking the pulse of the corpse

Comboi displayed a dynamic that is alien to the figure of the activist as an individual hero and that of the city as an object. Our starting point was the concept of metropolis as the current framework in which changes follow one another, opening the possibility to implement a governance that will constitute the actual framework for *the common institutions* (Prieto del Campo, 2009).

The 2008 crisis settled a spirit of widespread dissatisfaction. The urban landscape in Valencia needed to operate a shift in its practices in order to deal with the policies, aimed at the production of spectacle that had been conducted by government agencies in this regard. Both from assembly movements as well as from cultural institutions, a critical and emancipatory thinking appeared in relation to the construction of the city –and it began to spread gradually. In 2011, in coincidence with the social riots around the world, both from the Spanish cultural ecosystem and from international epicentres such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York⁵, various exhibitions are curated that show the direct involvement of the architecture with the economy or with politics, and the importance of the urban practices that we have named *micropolitics of urgency*. The severe impact of the economic crisis on the suburbs of the whole of the United States forced to rethink the designs of suburban landscapes, in “Foreclosed: MoMA Takes on Suburbia” (2011-12)⁶, while “Small Scale, Big Change: New Architectures of Social Engagement” (2011)⁷ presented projects from the five continents that provided an architecture based on narratives of use for communities considered as marginalized in relation to the predominant cultural pattern. In our country, that same year in the Palace Cibeles Madrid Centre housed the exhibition “Post-it City. Occasional Urbanities”⁸, previously exhibited at the CCCB of Barcelona from March 13 to May 25, 2008. The exhibition showed non-regulated applications and temporary occupations of public spaces for commercial, recreational activities and sex in fifty cities from around the world.

Thanks to these exhibitions, it was recalled how urban practices also produce ephemeral ideas and concepts that can respond to an expanded notion of mobility within contemporary society. Mobility is not just a physical issue, but also a social, political, economic, or psychological one. In this new context, ephemeral interventions will be, for Pedro Gadanho -head of the Department of Architecture and Design at the MOMA- a critical response to the slow pace of identity transformations in the current city⁹. In this particular sense, Gadanho introduces the term *performance architecture*, an architecture closer to the term *performance* as an artistic manifestation that to the meaning of technical and economic efficiency resulting from its literal translation. The

performative action in this architecture becomes a radical social gesture that goes far beyond the production of an aesthetic object. Architectural interventions related to the notion of performance, often combine an artistic *modus operandi* with a deep sense of social responsibility that connects with a pragmatist and North-American way to face the city challenges from the edges of the legality (Rajchman, 2010). This is the way of doing of collectives as REBAR, which operates between San Francisco and New York¹⁰.

The *Outsite* field

Even if many of the *Comboi* practices had been developing in a more or less visible form in Valencia, a confluence of cultural agents and opportunity was necessary to muster enough synergies to channel the preparation of the meeting [Picture 1]. The meetings of *Arquitecturas Colectivas*¹¹ have been held in different cities in Spain since 2007. The fourth meeting, held in Valencia, reinvented the methodology that would guide the whole process and would determine its content, encouraged by the social mobilizations that took place that same year. Instead of occupying the territory only as a space of encounter, the city became the space of intervention and collaboration, articulating a network of various visiting collectives with local agents. The meeting materialized in various types of actions organized in a week, spread across different areas of the city and structured thematically around three axes: participation, sensitive itineraries, and creation of spaces.



Picture 1: Main entrance to the main meeting point that Comboi established in Valencia, Solar Corona. Photo courtesy of the author, Mijo Miquel, 2011.

The aim of the participation axis was to socialize and further develop skills to deal with issues such as homelessness, expropriation of the spaces, the non-visualization of conflicts and interests and, ultimately, the dehumanization of the polis. Therefore, both the legal workshop, focused on the management and protocol of disused spaces, as the *urban masoveria* workshop, focussed on legal ways of territorial transformation¹², providing technical expertise and legal instruments that would

increase the possibilities of action in urban planning, both in space and in time. As a consequence and a result of these legal workshops, five guidelines were written to share simple resources and basic information on the steps to be followed, depending on the type of project to be developed: one guide would handle protocols for the activation of lots, buildings and roofs; another guide would work on legal forms for collectives and groups; another would deal with forms of transfer of powers or public and private property; and a last guide would address the basic legality (licenses, permits, insurances).

On the other hand, both the itineraries and the creation of spaces were directed to the promotion of the right to use the space by means of collective constructions in the social space, rendering visible processes of gentrification and exclusion. Of the seven planned itineraries, a first itinerary was developed in Russafa - *From the historical Russafa to the intercultural district*- where the inhabitants of the district made a guided tour through the streets of Russafa, telling about its transformation from its founding as a municipality integrated into the city, to the current situation of lack of resources for sporting or social purposes and centre of different migratory processes and different voices. The second itinerary -*Working memory and industrial heritage*- took place in the neighborhood of Patraix. There, a series of interventions were celebrated to add value to its heritage and the working class memory linked to it, with the help of neighbourhood associations.

The third itinerary -*popular gymkhana*- was a gymkhana in the historic centre, expanding the domestic space to the public street, through intergenerational games, held with the help of Amaltea, an association working with children at risk of exclusion. The fourth itinerary -*A desire named tram*- was defined as a playful, creative, and reflective urban journey through the boundaries of the district of Natzaret, as a way to make visible the physical isolation and the low accessibility to which it is subjected. The fifth itinerary -*Comboi to the convoy*- consisted on the occupation, for 3 hours, of the lines 3 and 5 of the Valencian metro, through a call to partake in a collective breakfast where everyone who shared the wagons was invited –as a continuation of the monthly activity of the collective *Breakfast with Pedestrians*, who used to plan collective breakfast in different public spaces of the city of Valencia. The sixth one - *Music in space*- put into practice the idea of the occupation of spaces with sound, with the Valencian musical tradition, proposing experimental sound interventions in Viriato de Velluters square. The last itinerary -*Let's go to Cabanyal*- proposed a tour guided by the Cabanyal inhabitants, to learn about its history, its peculiar allotment, popular modernism and the proposal of the extension of an avenue, explaining the problems of the current situation of the district and the possibilities of transformation to integrate it in 21st century Valencia, associating it with the closure of the meeting in the old slaughterhouse of this neighbourhood, restored collaboratively during the process.

Finally, the axis of creation of spaces materialized in interventions in the Solar Corona, conditioning it as the meeting site by building a geodesic dome; in addition, interventions in dividing walls were carried out, having them painted by different international artists (Escif, Ericailcane, and Blu); the screening of films on the site of the old Princess Theatre, reclaimed by neighbours for the construction of cultural neighbour facilities; as well as the occupation of disused roofs as collective spaces.

Aside from the specific actions, it is necessary to characterize some specific elements present in the meeting: the *Comboi* experience shows how, from the practice, it was possible to develop tools to produce successive empowerments: physical empowerment through the creation of spaces for the commons, economic, through the various proposals to elaborate legal protocols and job opportunities, and political empowerment through participation to carry out different processes of self-management and assembly (Miquel, 2013). In the three cases, we are speaking of certain foundational practices which, by means of self-training in different fields, open up a path for transformation that allows for a wider margin of reaction and self-determination. *Comboi* was consolidated as a platform of urban intervention with limited temporality; however, it later took new forms, such as the CIV or the actions of the *Solar Corona*, as part of this emancipatory strategy alternative to local politics¹³.

Since the *Comboi*, different platforms attempted to facilitate the creation of other relationship spaces. Thus, by necessity, arose the concept of *Outsite* (Miquel, 2013), as an intermediate space of being. The *Outsite* is a created space that is defined by its condition of being permanently alien, by its outsider status, incarnated in a site, that is, specific of a place, but alien to any discipline. It is a workspace that does not correspond either to urbanism, architecture, art, or sociology, but that exceeds them all, leaving aside the constructed frameworks of knowledge and placing those persons involved in the process in the common role of the ignorant. Despite this, it is a fully local space, although it doesn't belong to a particular category or to a specific discipline or locatable practice; not even to a single authorship. Moreover, the work on its own territory is a differential *modus operandi* with respect to other similar groups operating primarily under the logic of the assignment.

In short, we should highlight the fact that the *Comboi* practices developed in the territory of the *Outsite*, working with micropolitics that structure projects imbricated in the problems of the present, without the will to conquer absolute truths. It is characterized by limited temporality, dissolved authorship, the lack of dogmatism and the relinquishing of strategy –but all of them are visible under concrete and pragmatic actions.

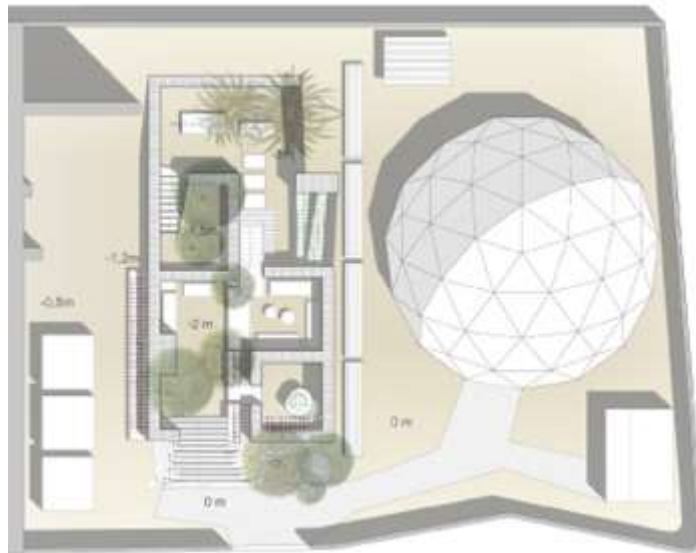
Creation of a space of common alienness

Instead of using a conventional model of knowledge sharing, we tried to get out of the inevitable pre-positioning and, chose to work with our respective ignorances. This position enabled the generation of autonomous areas of recognition in the field of the *Outsite*. The generation of the fundamental proposal in the planning of the *Comboi* was to provoke a creative process encouraged by a certain chaos, and to facilitate the appropriation of knowledge by any participant, beyond the limits set by different academic fields.

In addition, in our work in the various workshops of the *Comboi*, we questioned established and accepted concepts in the contemporary city. Aiming to *give a new meaning* to language, we tried to identify the protocols of hardening that have contributed to consolidate the agreements on which contemporary politics are based, rethinking terms such as planning, housing, family, or property. In these workshops we therefore started from the *Latourian*¹⁴ premise that believes modernization policies,

far from being neutral and aseptic processes, are hardening protocols designed and specialized in the use of opaque and unambiguous terms (Latour, 1992).

The dynamics privileged by the meetings would seek to give a new meaning to socially and normatively hyper-constructed concepts such as housing. For example, in the *Workshop of Urban Masoveria*, housing was treated as a highly technical and opaque process that behaves like a 'black box'¹⁵, leaving little room to other meanings of the domestic that differ from the two room apartment bought for a family life. The implementation of the *Urban Masoveria* contract sought other forms of access to housing, while facilitating solutions to the obsolescence of the housing stock in our cities. The model intended to promote the rehabilitation and care of homes in disuse in exchange for their usage, thus reinterpreting the concept of barter and unlinking the housing universe from the mercantilist universe. The workshop resulted in a legal guide, under constant review, which included landscape spaces of exchange rarely seen, as in the case of underground, aerial, or unregulated spaces (roofs, shelters, plots). [Picture 2]



Picture 2: Solar Corona is still today programming activities with various kind of local associations. For further information please check: <http://solarcorona.wordpress.com/> Photo courtesy of the author, Inés G. Clariana, 2011

This desacralization of knowledge that led to a collective construction of cognitive capital in various workshops would be the reconstitution of the agora, enabling the Outside space as a catalyst of enough power and enough ignorance to provoke these changes.

Dissolved authorship

Comboi micropolitics question the regime of power by positioning the anonymity and the opening of the network in the centre of the dynamics, as strategies for the recognition of the intermittent and the collective. The idea was to generate a culture of the *commons*¹⁶ through the creation of a platform of *extradisciplinary* collectives, transforming biopower into biopolitics (Amuchástegui, 2011). That is, a passage from subject and behaviour modelling institutions to taking an active stance towards the institutions, thus activating the city through the use of strategies based on interests

unrelated to capitalism. It was intended to work from a non-mercantilist and collaborative operating context: not talking to the neighbours but building the projects with them. There was no separation therefore between the subject of action and the object of transformation, through a logic of membership or exclusion –but we worked precisely with what is not appropriable. It was intended to exercise a flexible, ephemeral, structure of blurred hierarchies that manifested all throughout the active life of the *Comboi*. Pascal Nicolas Le-Strat¹⁷ had the opportunity to visit Valencia and work with the *Comboi*, and he referred to the experience as a beautiful exercise in contributory democracy, emphasizing the great distance between participation in something and feeling that you are a part of it.

Limited temporality

Comboi a la fresca was conceived as a temporary alliance. For everyone, both the generation of the community and its interruption were equally important, privileging dissolution as a generator engine to renew links. In this regard, the time factor was basic, to avoid the empowerment of some actors in relation to others, that permanence might entail. The *Comboi* dynamics intrinsically rejected any permanent organizational logic that might be related to the abuses of power already suffered in the city of Valencia. [Picture 3] This transitory spirit eased the political pressure within the dynamics of groups, but also the financial pressure. The only plan at that time was dissolution, a logic that allowed eschewing these power dynamics more freely.



Picture 3: The architectural structure of Solar Corona showed the temporality of the actions. Picture courtesy of the author, Carolina Mateo, 2011.

Relinquishing strategy

Instead of looking for a unified theory or a common vocabulary, associations and collectives of artists and architects shared their discomfort and instability –a territory emerging from their attitude of voluntary resignation to any known strategy that could link them with the established institutional networks. The city of Valencia has traditionally been taken as a territory of political struggle in which to measure the power of each party¹⁸. That is why maintaining a neutral position in the urban interventions was almost impossible. However, working in-between different parties allowed the *Comboi* to stand in the territory of the *Outsite*, a space legitimized to dialogue with both power and counter-power.

The real strategy was to shift the basic and necessary topics to carry out such an event, in order to place the contingent topics in the arena of the possible, as many of the dynamics that happened around *Comboi* were anecdotal and hazardous. In this space of contingency and possibility, architects and artists looked for regulatory and opportunistic gaps when seeking funding or requesting permissions. These practices took place in the boundaries of the legal and political system, and fitted out new urban and civic practices.

The perpetuity of mutant communities

The Fourth Annual Meeting of AACC, *Comboi a la Fresca*, could be ascribed to the social movements that emerged in 2011; along this paper, we have seen how *Comboi* acted under a pragmatic and mutant logic –built up by opposition to the rigid and institutional logic– that the city of Valencia demanded.

The uniqueness of many of the movements that occurred in 2011 would be linked precisely to the process of osmosis that transpired from the dynamics intrinsic to the existing civil social movements to the rest of the citizenship. Specifically during *Comboi*, architects and artists were –in addition to the neighbourhood associations and the general public– the primary beneficiaries of such permeability. It allowed them to shift technician dynamics –to which these two fields of knowledge tend, especially in the field of architecture– towards processes for the benefit of the citizenship. *Comboi* undoubtedly tried to break the self-referential model of art and architecture, working from the *Outsite* scenario and the practices known as ‘performance architecture’ by Pedro Gadanho, when combined an artistic *modus operandi* – pragmatic, in a way– with a deep sense of social responsibility. Its lack of reproduction of existing strategies provided a continuous critical review, and was manifested through aspects such as non-linear processes in terms of time, representativeness, and knowledge transfer, approaches from which the whole process was built up.

At the same time, even though the main work topic was the city seen from an eminently political perspective, unused and abandoned urban spaces constituted model and symbolic spaces for the process of community building. From a continual review and a critical approach to our way of acting, our local practices attempt to introduce these changes and independent mind-sets, appointing ourselves as valid interlocutors with the public bodies. Our intention is to generate processes of agency-

creation in these abandoned urban spaces that can later be transferred to the various constituent assemblies that carry on with these processes through an autonomous practices. The *Comboi*, in relation to the description of the commons regime and the processes of reuse of disused spaces, opened discussions on:

1. New ways of generating synergies at city level
2. Contributing to pro-commons practices through ideas, methodologies, and new ways of acting (*masovería*, participatory processes, etc.)
3. Adding value to suburban neighbourhoods
4. Working from a non-mercantilist and collaborative base (not talking to neighbours but building with them)
5. Horizontality in the proposals, which involves negotiations on equal terms with public institutions (egalitarian and instituting capabilities)

In addition to the local links established, the *Comboi* has meant that 10 to 12 collectives from Valencia were also activated in the state-wide network of AACC –thus becoming an important national node and operating, without being fully aware, on pragmatist dynamics. We consider the work at the AACC to be medium-term; it's not just a network to open a call for two day-long meeting. The network has such a big potential so, without forgetting the problems of specific collectives, it works at different paces, speeding up during the annual meetings and becoming more reflective and slowing down in a long-term perspective. Therefore, we consider that, even within a fairly small range of involvement, the urban dynamics that emerged during *Comboi* have endured thanks to their insistence in the nomad structure of the network itself, and thanks to the precariousness of their ties, reflecting the *inappropriable* and mutant composition of the contemporary city and the potential associated to *other ways of doing*.

Notes

¹ This paper has been done in collaboration with the Network Arquitecturas Colectivas and our Universities.

² David Harvey explained how, between 2008 y 2011, social movements rescued the sense of utopia as a necessary reaction to the suffering caused by the technocratic conditions imposed on the countries that had been most affected by the financial crisis. These peaceful movements had a dense diversity that went through the borders of gender and age, while all participants shared the condition of precariousness. They became visible by occupying public spaces, organizing opened calls to many other anonymous citizens, through social networks, transcending territorial boundaries and enhancing synergies on the web. From a political point of view, they were creative movements characterized by a claim for a radical democratization of all urban processes.

³ Meeting of collectives and citizens mainly promoted by architects, sociologists and artists along with independent agents that took place from 18th to 24th July 2011 in Valencia. Its website was an important reference: [http:// comboialafresca.arquitecturascolectivas.net/](http://comboialafresca.arquitecturascolectivas.net/)

⁴ The neighbourhoods directly involved in the summons (Patraix, Velluters, El Carmen, Russafa, Nazareth and Cabanyal) all responded to a pattern of previous conflict with the administration.

⁵ It should be remembered that the first regular world exhibition space dedicated to architecture and design was established in 1932 at the Museum of Modern Art, NY (MOMA). Since its creation, the collection has been built up on the recognition that architecture and design are allied and interdependent arts.

⁶ For further information please check:
http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2011/11/02/foreclosed-moma-takes-on-suburbia

⁷ Organized by Andrés Lepik, curator, and Margot Weller, curator assistant, at the Department of Architecture and Design. For further information please check:
<http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2010/smallscalebigchange/>

⁸ It was done in collaboration of the Arts Area of the City Council of Madrid, the Centre of Contemporary Culture of Barcelona (CCCB) and Spanish Cultural Action (AC / E).

⁹ The notion of 'performance architecture' is fed directly from the tradition of performance art as a practice that began in the 1970s and which escapes from the canons of the autonomous and auto referential work of art, focusing on the body, the context and the principle of action.

¹⁰ Please check the recent debates that are coming up in the architecture field around pragmatism –a current that permeates current urban practices, such as the ones described in this paper.

¹¹ The Arquitecturas Colectivas network is an open network of people and groups interested in the participatory development of the urban environment through collaborative processes, information exchange and the implementation of joint projects. This network has a self-managed annual event that takes place every year in a different city, in which concepts such as art and architecture are used as a resource for thinking and debating about participatory urban management development.
<http://arquitecturascolectivas.net/>

¹² The workshop *Masoveria Urbana* worked on theoretical and practical alternative strategies to access to a domestic space, in the borders of the hegemonic model. One of the actions proposed in the workshop was to create an exchange platform to connect unused spaces with potential tenants. The idea behind was to exchange small

retrofitting actions carried out by tenants in unused spaces, in exchange for the use of those spaces, without the intermediation of money. The workshop was led by La Panadería, Sostre Civic and Encajes Urbanos in collaboration with Josep Soler and Carolina Mateo. For further information, please check:

URL: <http://comboialafresca.arquitecturascolectivas.net/?p=868>

¹³ CIV: Coordinadora de Iniciativas Vecinales is a group composed of many of the collectives that launched Comboi. <http://www.laciv.org/>

Solar Corona: It is the neuralgic centre of Comboi and has been active until today. For further information please check: <http://solarcorona.wordpress.com/>

¹⁴ The term Latourian means from Bruno Latour.

¹⁵ The term blackboxing comes from the Actor Network Theory. It promotes the importance of political practices frequent in everyday life environments, where a great biopolitical resistance becomes possible (ANT is the acronym in English, in Spanish it is called TAR: Teoría Actor-Red).

¹⁶ Concept reworked by the American Elinor Ostrom. It relates to common goods, and shouldn't be confused with to the public goods (goods of the state).

¹⁷ For further information please check: <http://www.le-commun.fr/>

¹⁸ The cycles of gentrification and the transformation of the built environments through the raising of high-impact, spectacular and Pharaonic complexes, that aimed to include the city of Valencia among the top international tourist routes, have produced a polarization between the different parties of government and citizens. These practices, in some cases, reflect more than fifteen years of struggles over city management.

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