



Madrid Urban Stewardship (MUS). A platform between citizens and public administration for the collective management of public space

ISABEL OCHOA SOTO, Licenciada en Ciencias Ambientales, Doctoranda en Universidad Autónoma De Madrid

MIGUEL GÓMEZ VILLARINO, Arquitecto Ms., Doctorando en Universidad Politécnica De Madrid

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid y Universidad Católica de Temuco, Chile

Abstract

The recent crisis revealed certain failures in the way to plan and manage the public spaces of the cities. In addition to the excesses that a too vertical, "technical", and guided by essentially economic expectations planning has revealed in many Spanish cities, the same cities have been constructed during this time, in contrast to how they were historically built on the past, as a reality designed from planning and technique, but practically without any intervention of its citizens.

The crisis context however has been positive to enliven the critical spirit among the population, promoting that various groups and associations demand a more active role in shaping their vital environment and, in particular, in the design and use of public space. The paper presents the project "Madrid Urban Stewardship" (MUS), as a part of this global trend. MUS is an initiative of a group of technicians that pretend to give a formal runway, -via digital and web platforms, and conclusion of meetings between the parts- to the proposals and demands of the associations of citizens for developing several activities of public interest over vacant or unused urban spaces.

Urban Stewardship intends therefore to serve as a meeting point between the demands of citizens, on one hand, and the potential of the urban environment that Public Administration has not been able to develop yet, on the other.

Keywords: urban stewardship, sustainable planning, collective mapping, temporary projects, citizen empowerment

Context and problem

The current crisis situation has revealed certain failures in the previous urban planning model; two remarkable of these failures are the problems of many municipalities for the maintenance of public spaces, gardens etc., as well as a great disconnection between citizenship in respect to the construction of their living environment in the cities (MUÑOZ, F. 2008).

In those current urban dynamics, vacant spaces are a permanent reality: even though they periodically change their status, it remains a constant significant proportion of them in urban areas, particularly in the outskirts of the cities (BELLET S., 2013). In addition, there are certain activities and unmet aspirations in an increasingly static citizenship, requiring spaces and favorable circumstances for its realization. For example, pedestrian areas, bicycle services, playgrounds for children and third age, urban agriculture, cultural and group activities etc. (MORÁN N., 2009).

Both aspects constitute together an opportunity for the renewal of our cities. But it is necessary to formalize concrete proposals which involve citizens, as real active agents in the construction and management of public space, and vacant places related to the public space of the cities.

In this context it is precisely that many civic groups, architects etc. have retaken with intensity a more spontaneous, collective and even temporary way of act in the neighbourhoods and empty urban places, activity that in fact is part of a long tradition of collaborative urban management proposals. Some of the most significant in recent times are the proposals of “autobarrios” by Basurama collective for Villaverde, Madrid; or the Plan of urban local developing of the municipality of El Haltillo, Caracas, Venezuela, called "From urban planning policy to communication planning" (LÓPEZ, 2012).

Urban Stewardship, the project presented in this article, pretends to serve, in the same direction, as a technical link between the population and their aspirations, and the spaces and heritage under public administration control, necessary to carry them out. Therefore, it seeks to give that small but essential step that makes the proposals of the citizenship real and feasible, and that guarantees the demands of legality, fairness and security of the city councils.

What Urban Stewardship is, an how it was born

Madrid urban stewardship is an initiative that intends to involve the population in the conformation of the public space. It aims to assemble a network of ideas and proposals that will become projects of intervention through a technical process (OCHOA y GÓMEZ, 2013).





Fig. 1. Main issues of Urban Stewardship

Urban Stewardship project is promoted by a group of geography, architecture and environmental-sciences professionals.

It came out when the situation of crisis was identified as an area of opportunities, in which the collaboration and agreements, as well as a real, physical, participation of involved individuals, are what really promotes a more committed and sustainable city, that can even save on resources. The idea of custody agreements, in turn, comes largely from the concept, already with a long-travel, of land stewardship (PRIORE, 2004).

Madrid Urban Stewardship, as has been said, essentially works over two components: first, urban wilderness, close-to-infrastructure vacant urban spaces, abandoned heritage; and second, activities demanded by the population of the cities.

Methods

What the process is

First, the objective is to generate an intersection between available spaces and popular demanded activities, estimating the most suitable activity for each space. Therefore the technical process relates spaces with activities through the generation of proposals such as urban gardens, parks, temporary events, bike use services, routes, heritage and degraded-spaces recovery.

The best proposals become drafts with an estimated budget, from which funding will be seek from sources such as the town councils, private foundations, or well, if possible, they will be self-constructed.

How is it involved

In two main ways: online, through a web platform, in which the citizen provides images, description, and location of his proposal, or on-site in the neighborhoods, through formal meetings, with both associations or individuals.

In addition, a mobile application is being developed, with the intention of allow the introduction of information on hand of own workers and citizens, and the consultation of these data by the citizens or the Administration responsible of planning (CUMapp).

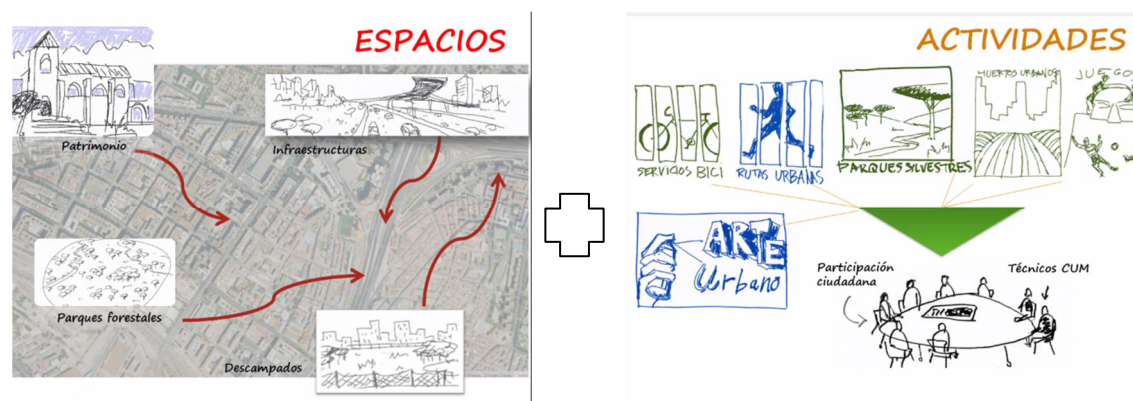


Fig 2. “Spaces plus activities”, the two main elements to work with in the project

How this could benefit to the Councils and citizenship

Giving them facilities to regenerate the urban environment through participation, and relieving maintenance costs, as well as providing an operational urban viewer as a tool in real time. An objective too is to make the citizens responsible of the care of their environment, and to allow them to participate and have a more responsible and creative way on the construction of urban space.

Get to work, 1: urban stewardship in Villaverde, Madrid. (References¹)

With the support of the Think Big Foundation for youth entrepreneurship, the project was launched during 2013 in two locations in the city of Madrid: the districts of Villaverde and Tetuán. In the first case, the location was the neighborhood of Los Rosales, Villaverde, in the South of the city. Processes followed to date were the next ones:

Social mapping of the district

The process began with the identification of social associations in the district and its location on a map, as well as their contact details. An inventory of public or underutilized assets was made too during this phase.

¹ To see the references to background work and planning context to which the proposal is associated to, see paragraph: References, at the end.

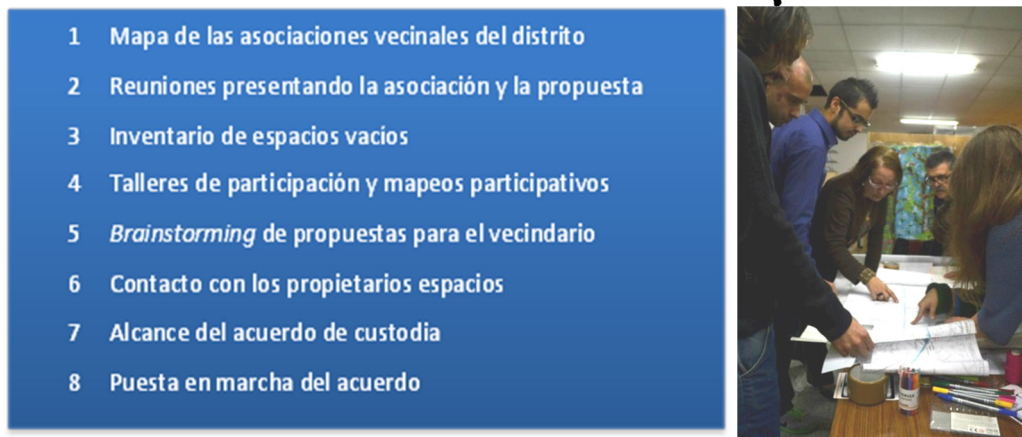


Fig 3. A list with the different phases of the work in Villaverde

Meetings presenting the association and initiative

Calls and visits to the different groups and relevant stakeholders came next, presenting the initiative and exposing the objectives and the role of the citizens to the main involved stakeholders.

Inventory of vacant spaces

Development of a digital mapping of the vacant spaces. This effort required a technical process supported by GIS digital tools, combined with a detailed field work.



Fig. 4. Mapping the district. Los Rosales, Villaverde

Workshops and participatory mapping

It was the most important part: two sessions of two hours each, the first aimed to the elaboration of a common map of the neighborhood. The results have led to differentiated landscapes units, supported in most of the cases in the roads that constitute the main barriers, and to identify the different episodes of urbanization, manifested in the sets of blocks in which these urban landscape units are grouped.



Fig. 5. Mapping the district. Los Rosales, Villaverde

Brainstorming of proposals for the neighborhood.

All the analysis carried out through the mapping was an intermediate step toward the real goal: “what can we do, as neighbors, to improve our neighborhood?” This question eliminated many of the problems identified and focused attention to those whose solution depended not on the public administration but on the own neighbors.

Contact with the owners of the spaces.

At this point the project stands currently, in the absence of a strong-enough neighborhood movement to move forward with the projects. A series of external-to-the-project phenomena have hindered the continuity of it. So the focus gets now on continuing working in the network of contacts within the district and the rest of the city.

Get to work 2: Urban Stewardship in Tetuan, Madrid

The development of the project in the District of Almenara in Tetuan, Madrid, has followed similar ways as the one of Villaverde. The associations were identified through a digital mapping, but in this case a special emphasis -given by the configuration of the neighborhood's strong transition between old buildings and new urban projects, leaving many empty lots- was given to the identification of urban gaps and to a series of citizen movements that already were taking place in a very active neighborhood, popular but especially aware with its environment, respect to what is usual in the rest of the districts of the city.

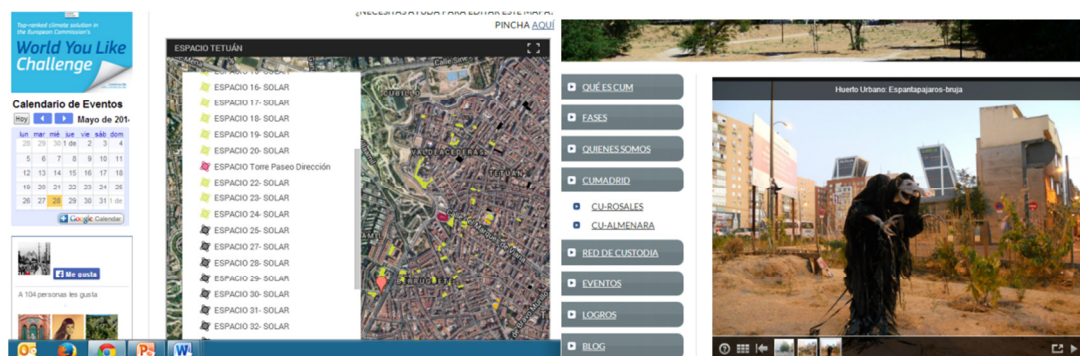


Fig.6. Interactive map of the project in Almenara, Tetuán district, Madrid.

In this sense, Urban Stewardship has joined the collective initiative "Tetuan Urban Landscape", together with some associations and groups, that altogether seek the formulation of proposals for temporary activities involving the residents, on several empty lots in the district.

Get to work 3: MUS application for mobiles: CU Mapp

Within the “Build” phase of the “Think Big” program, as a selected project, Urban Stewardship is currently developing a project for a mobile application. CU Mapp in essence consists in an interactive application of mapping that allows the user to know urban proposals from its surroundings, and at the same time to be a shareholder through his personal contribution, generating thus an interactive map collectively built between all users of the application.

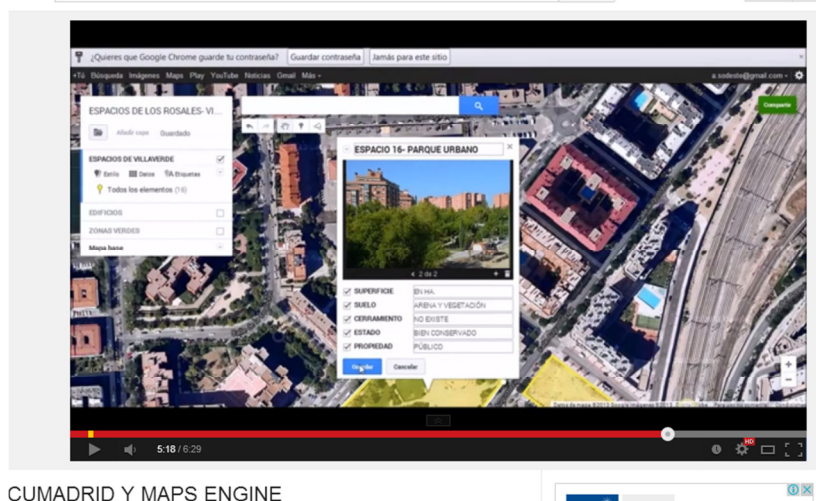


Fig. 7. Screen capture of CU Mapp

The objective is the creation of an urban observatory that collects on interactive maps the activities and projects of the neighborhoods, so that any person or professional can have real-time information from those, of great value for planners and an opportunity to report and interact with neighborhoods.

Get to work 4: Laboratory of urban projects

In parallel, urban stewardship professionals have been developing several projects related to main MUS urban issues of action, which can be considered as pilot projects for future proposals.

The genesis of the projects is related to past works or proposals presented to promoters, associations or councils, as initiatives of the members of Urban Stewardship that are currently in process or just didn't go forward at their time.

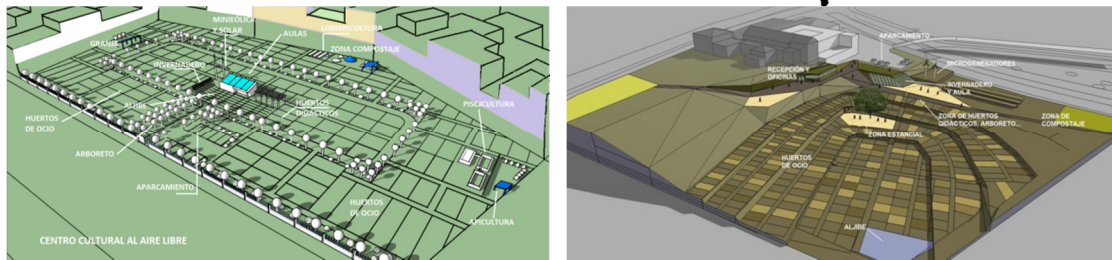


Fig. 8. "Cultural center in the open air", and urban and leisure gardens in Fuencarral, Madrid

Some of these projects are: a "cultural center in the open air", in which the concept of culture extends to the works of agriculture, urban gardening, renewable energies or self-management of resources and waste. The proposal of "temporary gardens" to occupy vacancy urban spaces, in which a low impact and maintenance gardening it's promoted, using the flora of the place itself. And a project of a space for urban orchards, developed for public administration in the Fuencarral district, in Madrid. These projects are handled as a background available to be applied in the future.



Fig. 9. "Temporary gardens", developed for Madrid Think Tank

Conclusions. (Results and outcomes)

Urban Stewardship is part of a current trend of several groups and initiatives that pretend a more participatory and "alive" city. For this purpose it is necessary to develop new channels for the generation of the city, that do not exclusively depend on administration and its too "technical" planning -for example reflected in the recent urban developments in Spain: oversized, cold, "closed", with a few intervention of the citizens in their construction.

Urban Stewardship aims therefore, ultimately, to "revive" these public spaces, through an active, not merely instrumental, public participation.

In a year and a half of life, MUS has developed a series of activities leading to this object on several fronts:



- Development of methodological work in two neighbourhoods of Madrid, leading to the formalization of proposals and achievement of custody agreements. They both are in the try to complete this latest phase.
- Development of a mobile phone application that aims to gather information relating to neighbourhoods, for individuals and public administrations use (CUMapp).
- Development of pilot projects, and collaboration in collective mapping with other associations and groups of architects.
- Disclosure through publications, conferences, and participation in tenders. Urban Stewardship has been finalist of the competitions “The world you like” and “E-clic”, both promoted by the European Union. As well as is currently a proposed finalist of Think Big contest, by the Fundación Telefónica.

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