

Urban space: both formal and informal

Iago Carro

Hello, everyone! My name is Iago Carro and I'm a member of Ergosfera, which is a working group founded in 2006 that focuses on urban research and urban planning practice. We freely share all the materials we produce on our website.

To give you a little bit of an idea, A Coruña, which is the city where we live and which we have worked on most, is a Galician urban area that is big and globalised enough to allow for the study of almost any contemporary urban phenomena, whilst also being small and unique enough to allow for analysis and understanding of essentially all the current and historic processes that shape urban conditions today.

I would like to thank Eneas and Kristine for their invitation to share some ideas on *Post-Pandemic Cities*. I have decided to talk about our position from the angle of two projects we have conducted since the start of this crisis, which I also think capture quite well the work we do. One on nursing homes in the A Coruña metropolitan area and another on some of the spaces most able to host informal uses in the city.

To give a little bit of context to start with, it must be said that the pandemic began with two weeks of complete crisis, basically due to the perception that our work was useless. And thinking things like what is the point of what we do if we are not "essential" at such a delicate time when it is needed by society? I don't know, personally those were some tough days for me because of what all of us were going through and also because of, for the first time in 14 years, the feeling that what we were doing was being called into question.

After that fortnight, the start of the pandemic also meant we could set it all aside. Or rather, be set aside by all the active projects that were brought to a halt by the crisis. So, after that initial paralysis we were able to think about responding to immediate concerns and, in April 2020, we decided to begin a study of a typology which is widely overlooked by society and architecture and urban planning yet was suddenly in the news everyday: nursing homes.



A project stemming directly from the situation we were in. We could all see how in the COVID-19 crisis nursing homes became a topic of public debate overnight because of the huge blow they suffered during those first months of the pandemic. That is how a situation that previously had gone largely unnoticed by most of the population, quickly found its way into people's conversations and onto the political agenda.

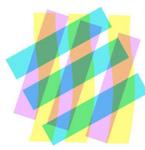
Not only because of the perception of fragility in facing an exceptional situation (which is surely more linked to the issues in staffing and in infrastructure, technical, and human resources which had been reported for quite some time without too much public impact), but also because it more widely shed light on their material conditions: for many of us it was the first time we had seen so many buildings of that type and we were able to start to notice urban patterns and problems by simply watching the news.

From a critical angle, analysis focused mainly on the ownership and running of nursing homes. In other words, on the extensive privatisation process at all levels of this public service. Yet, a certain debate also arose on the model of nursing homes itself, on the type of places they are with regards to the essential needs, not solely physiological or care requirements, of the people who reside in them.

Starting from these analyses, this project aimed to provide useful knowledge in order to examine the model of nursing homes that has been developed in recent decades: as a material and urbanistic fact on the ground and as a home and daily place of work or visitation for many people.

A study from an urban planning perspective of nursing homes in relation to the city and the land, in other words, on the consequences on the life of the users that stem from very basic aspects such as the location, urban conditions, and architectural form of these nursing homes.

For example, we asked questions such as where are they located and how are they distributed across the area, what is the development of the surrounding area like and what services do they have in the immediate area to see if their often distant location from sites of urban activity and nearby services made sense or to analyse how historic cases were displaced from city centres to the outskirts. We also asked what their contact with the urban structure and the areas where they are located is like or how open their perimeters are to see how they interact with their surrounding environment (whether their perimeters and entrance areas are places designed around urban planning and human needs or whether they are rather more like a hospital model or even almost militarised). And also, what are the existing typologies in terms of size, or what



other types of activities take place in the same space, to see how their size affects all these material and urban planning issues, but also other more theoretical areas such as their nature as a total institution.

Finally, the project consists of maps, graphics, tables, and a collection of multiple documentary sources on the thirty-three nursing homes identified in the A Coruña metropolitan area.

And our aim with this work was to carry out an assessment that would allow us to put together a series of recommendations and technical standards to lay out possible ways to improve existing nursing homes: both in their immediate urban settings, often lacking any type of development or service nearby, and in their own free spaces and perimeters that come into contact with the outside world. And also, to set out desirable urban conditions for any future nursing homes to be built: the characteristics of an appropriate setting and the urban planning and architectural needs in terms of location, environment, development, mobility, and provision of nearby services that they should have.

On the other hand and moving on to the second project, after those first months of the pandemic and with some ideas in place about what had happened, we believed there was another urgent need to tackle that question on how to design better cities: getting back to the previous programme exactly where it was left on 14 March 2020, which was, amongst other things, research into the origins and urban planning status of spaces and informal uses in the city.

In this regard, the *El ciclo urbano: siempre vida útil* work (The urban cycle: permanent useful life, in English), which is basically a text and a diagram, is part of one of our ongoing projects called *Degradación-Exterioridad-Emergencia* (Degradation-Externality-Emergency, in English), in which we have studied spaces and informal uses in the contemporary city for years and their role as true urban resources that in some way broaden the possible ways the city can be used.

If on other occasions we have studied the use of infrastructure spaces, specifically the spaces below bridges and viaducts, or graffiti and street art as a form of urban communication, or outlying spaces next to main roads, or waste ground as one of the basic typologies in the city, on this occasion the study is focused on understanding how the urban cycle of every plot includes many phases considered unimportant because they do not admit formal uses but which, precisely for that reason, tend to become the site of informal uses.



Let's think about any piece of land that becomes part of a city (a typical plot). At that moment when it becomes part of a city, it enters into a continuous cycle of construction, use, disuse, and dereliction which can take place in many ways and timeframes. An often overlooked yet fundamental issue is that all its phases can be stopped at any time and for several reasons (for example, breach of planning laws, a business going bust, or a death).

If this happens and the phase which stops or becomes chronic is one of those phases without a formal use that then becomes entrenched for an indeterminate period of time (which is often the case if we think about yards, building sites, abandoned or derelict buildings in any of our cities), what comes about are other types of urban spaces which it may be time to start to approach a little more seriously and with a little bit more scientific ambition.

To begin with, recognising that words which are often completely appropriate descriptions of them, such as empty, unfinished, abandoned, ugly, degraded, or useless, are actually only highly specific analytical perspectives and are also unable to account for the complexity of their real nature or the lives they support.

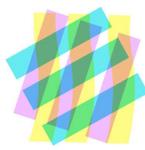
Let's imagine this process, in a plot of urban land over its lifespan. A possible cycle of building, of phases that could be stopped at any time, may be as follows:

We would start with a status of free space or undeveloped land. In this case, if this state is paralysed, we can all think of activities carried out on yards or waste land: from allotments, gardens, or self-managed leisure spaces to play areas, car parks, and even large shanty towns.

From this state we would move on to the building phases, which could be split into three separate and individual periods: first, the interesting typography, which is when there is a build-up of land and materials or excavation. This reminds us of natural-artificial lakes and the rich ecosystems generated within them but also of the land where we played on building sites next to our house as children.

Later on in the works would be the phase of the structural frame (for which there are also multiple examples of use, from cruising sites and raves to the memories of childhood play in abandoned building sites where climbing up the slab stairway was a real adventure).

And lastly we have the semi-finished building state, which after the last real estate crisis we saw multiple examples of these types of buildings, which were in legal limbo, being occupied and squatted.



After these last phases, come the intermediary states of habitation (which is when they are inhabited by their users prior to the completion of the construction work, sometimes formally and often informally, at least in administrative terms).

After the building works is the state of normality or the climax from the point of view of architectural project (which is the only legitimate phase in the eyes of the profession: when the building is completely finished and inhabited by its users).

And from this point onwards, the processes of subsequent change stemming from their use appear (the alterations and changes made by the inhabitants of the building which, although they may often not have technical approval, still rank as completely formal uses).

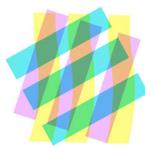
The next possible phases would now be abandonment (of which there are examples the world over of residential takeovers and self-managed social centres and there are also stories all over the world of child, teenage, and youthful adventures in newly abandoned houses or industrial buildings).

After abandonment is the derelict phase, which also has an extremely high capacity for informal uses tied to leisure, precarious housing, or illegal activities. After dereliction, we would once again come to the phase of free space or undeveloped land. The whole process starts again, but this time there is another layer of memory over this specific fragment of human-used land.

The fundamental question guiding this work and the others linked to the *Degradation-Externality-Emergency* project is: how do the urban planning conditions in those periods before the informal uses of the city appear come about and what are they? And I'd like to stress that this obsession with the informal is also a certain way of putting into practice "public participation", even if it is a way that has a different scale or methodology.

Because by observing and studying what people do without mediation, in other words, without a development whose material form represents what can or cannot be done, it is possible to learn a great deal about urban needs and the limits of the formal world which we continuously help to build as technical experts.

In our opinion, we cannot avoid the paradox in the quote, we don't know if it's apocryphal or real, from Henry Ford which said: "If I'd asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses". Although this quote is always used to attack participatory policies, something similar can happen in cities and there are already many examples in which it can be seen that public participation is limited to what can be collectively imagined according to many factors,



not all of them are to do with people, but are rather media or political in nature. That is why the distance created by experiencing and studying those places (whilst still caught in the cliché of the anthropologist in the Amazon) does not prevent it being a tremendous opportunity to observe how we humans behave in civilised conditions which are either of a different nature or less controlled.

To sum up a little, these two projects are also quite representative of the wider interests of our work:

- On the one hand, the nursing homes project is an attempt to respond to immediate concerns and also the modern question of the formal and the public.
 - And, on the other hand, the urban cycle project is a further stage in the research into contemporary urban spaces, in a return to our previous programme, to tackle the postmodern question of the informal, the communal, the independent, and the shared.
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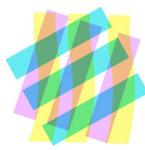
And at this point, I would like to share a reflection on the issue of independent research.

To give an overview of the current situation in research, these two projects accurately demonstrate what it means today to conduct research activity in practical terms, at least outside institutions and academia, where job insecurity is the norm.

Of course, in our case research is sustained by our privileged personal circumstances of not needing to pay rent or look after a family member and having a family network that allows us to take the risk of playing at researching, and at that specific moment of the pandemic, even applying for the State support that was granted to those of us who met a series of requirements (but wasn't to many of the people who needed it more but didn't meet the requirements).

As is often the case, the truth is that neither of these two works have secured more funding than what has been raised from talks and participating in courses.

The issue is that in the second case that was to be expected, as research on these topics of informality, independence, and the communes really only has an audience in the cultural,



academic, or artistic sectors. And during the pandemic they were not very active, in addition to the fact that in normal times they are not fields that are that able to fund complex research.

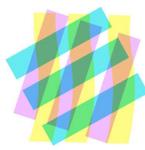
But in the other work, we really did think that for the first time there had been an alignment of our interests and a socially agreed upon need. In other words, nursing homes were such an alien and unknown topic for us but were also on the news every day so much that we finally thought we had found a subject for which funding might amount to something more than help staving off job insecurity.

Even so, this project has only managed to raise 800 euros from three talks. It is also noteworthy that the two which exclusively covered this topic were conducted outside of the area of study and Galicia (in Navarre and in the Basque Country). In other words, we obviously applied for funding from public authorities, foundations, and other institutions to continue the project, but for whatever reason none of them were interested in supporting it. We must have done something wrong or we still haven't found the right way or we didn't meet the requirements or whatever it was and that's that. We simply think that it's good to talk about it.

On the other hand, these aren't the only difficulties for independent research. One could also mention the lack of flexibility in participating in university projects, or the inexistence and even removal of public calls for applications from Town Halls and other institutions, or the impossibility of scraping by on publishing research or it being published in the media, or the added difficulty of the commitment to open research and making it freely available to society as a core principle, as in our case.

These issues make it increasingly difficult to keep on carrying out research and which for us, in my case at least and as I mentioned, mean that this work is only sustained by privilege. Because most people aren't in the same situation and not all of us are going to be in *Forensic Architecture* making a living conducting urban planning research in the world of art or culture. The fact of the matter is that, in my personal experience, the most brilliant and capable people in our generation are not in research simply because they did not have the same resources or because they had extra-academic ways of thinking and didn't jump through institutional or market hoops.

Lastly, I would like to make a vague comment on the possible lines of work for thinking about the *post-pandemic city*, which gives its name to this series of podcasts.



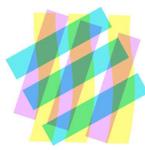
It is true that this crisis has meant many cities have increased their public spaces and are coming round to evening out that unfair balance between vehicles and pedestrians, for example. But the truth is that the measures that have been driven through were already the consensus prior to the pandemic. And equally, in the private realm, we already also knew we wanted bigger, more flexible, sunnier houses with a balcony or a garden. The issue was that we were able to make up for that with public spaces and that is perhaps why it was not such an important topic of debate for society as it was after the eye-opener that was lockdown.

The summary of this situation is that after this crisis, for us, the lines of investigation on making better cities seem to still be exactly the same as before: very direct and generic and which, to simplify, we could call, on the one hand, urban planning for survival and, on the other, urban planning for better living.

The survival one we are all very clear on: it's, obviously, about the ecological and environmental issue of being able to continue to maintain life on Earth as the number one priority of any relevant urban planning activity (just like the nursing home project, this is an immediate concern). Here is where the question of sustainability comes in, and does so from the perspective of the *Capitalocene* and human rights as well.

The second, the better living one, tackles what has also been discussed for some time: the "right to housing and the city", design which "puts people first", "public participation", "those in care", "urban communes", "universal accessibility", "fitness for human habitation", "urban density and mixedness", "critical, collective, and tactical urban planning", and a long list of other concepts that are vital to life and which we dedicate a part of our work to. And which we believe in, provided that we manage to keep them up-to-date, and, especially, provided that we manage to avoid the inertia of transforming them into catch-all concepts devoid of meaning. And this is why we like, or rather it's our acid test, to always be aware of the maxim from Rubén Martínez, which actually serves to assess all these concepts, when he says, "there is no participation with redistribution of power".

Making a city for "survival" and for "better living" are two fundamental areas of work and let's say that's where the nursing home project is based, but there is another question which, for us, is of the utmost relevance from an urban planning perspective. A currently very nebulous topic about which we have more questions than answers, but which is related to all this matter of



spaces and informal uses and to continuing to think about the human side and even also about protecting ourselves from ourselves as humans.

This other big issue is the problem of the power of control of humans over other humans, which has undoubtedly sharpened in many areas with the crisis, especially in technology. It has been a growing issue in recent decades but we still think that there is a long way to go before it is identified as a problem by society.

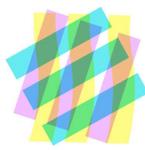
The State and the market have ever more technical and legal tools to plan out and control all living space. In complex societies we are as clear on the need for social organisation as we are on the need for freedoms, self-government, and non-controlled communities in other fields of life. And space is simply another of those fundamental fields.

Whilst the control and automation of the city marches on (often under slogans such as “humanisation”, the “Smart City”, and those types of concepts), we are certain that in a rich city order and disorder, public and shared, private and self-governed, formal and informal should all have their place. What is the balance between these in general terms? Well, that will be a topic for debate or distinction between neighbourhoods, cities, and cultures, but, as Manuel de Sola-Morales said, what we are clear on in this regard is that “the contemporary city is not becoming uglier every day, it grows richer every day”.

We are talking about a presently unresolvable issue on which, as we said, there is not a clear answer on what to do with these spaces or whether they can be created or preserved or whatever the case may be.

One final example may help understand the need to address the problem of dialogue or, rather more frequently, conflict between those two questions we are so clear on (as we mentioned, urban planning for survival and urban planning for better living) and this other third question which we are still unable to formulate or define accurately.

In recent months, we have been working on another piece of research into the oil pipeline in A Coruña, which is basically a strip of undeveloped land, 15 metres wide on average and 5.5 kilometres long, which skirts and crosses the city to connect the refinery with the oil terminal. Under this protected strip run the pipes carrying the crude and refined products between both sites.



The context is that there is increasingly greater public knowledge of this infrastructure and a greater desire to close it in order to recover the space and create a large green corridor surrounding the city centre, a truly spectacular place. The issue is that, currently, this space, which is in principle empty yet accessible, has other valuable characteristics and features in urban planning terms.

During the analysis of the informal uses of this space and its surroundings, amongst many wonderful cases (such as urban grazing lands, structures of all sizes for colonies of cats, or a shed built by retirees so as to have somewhere to go during the day), one of the places that we found most striking was a simple place for young people to meet up in the middle of a small thickly wooded area in some ADIF, the local railway company, land (the classic strip of land adjacent to railway tracks).

A small space, completely blocked from sight, at the end of a not very accessible path between the trees, comprising a stolen bench, taken from some other location in the city, and various pallets heaped one on top of the other on one side to make a table to finish off the space. In that space we found a couple of teenagers lying back on the bench with their feet up on the table watching something together on their mobile phone. In other words, the cabin in the forest near the village where you could meet up with your friends or boyfriend or girlfriend which many people our age still remember. But in the city in 2021.

Well, there is obviously public interest in turning that oil pipeline into a green corridor where people can go for walks and improve the city both from a social and environmental point of view. There is absolutely no doubt about that. But we believe that definition of public interest does not resolve a contradiction which has been highlighted in philosophy and other humanities for centuries. In our opinion, that humble meeting place, for a teenage couple, self-built among the trees, contains the history of the whole world.

And we already know that there will be no habitable planet without citizens and birds. And in that green corridor there will be citizens and birds. But it will be unlikely to remain a place where we can come across a situation that so neatly encapsulates who we are. What is the level of public interest in the possibility of that magic moment happening?

And on that question, we shall end. We'll be back with the next episode of *Post-Pandemic Cities*.
Bye!