

**ASSEMBLING NEIGHBORS: THE CITY AS HARDWARE, METHOD, AND
“A VERY MESSY KIND OF ARCHIVE”**

Forthcoming (2014), Common Knowledge, Vol 20, No. 1

Alberto Corsín Jiménez and Adolfo Estalella

. . . The city has been such a difficult object of study, for the city constitutes a very messy kind of archive.

—*Vyjayanthi Rao*¹

Neighborhood is a word that has come to sound like a valentine.

—*Jane Jacobs*²

On May 15, 2011 a group gathered at Puerta del Sol in Madrid, the city’s central and most famous square. They had attended a public demonstration some hours previously which had taken over the city streets in protest over the political management of the economic crisis. Some decided to spend the night in the open air. Within hours, the gathering developed into an encampment, whose Twitter hashtag (#acampadasol) would in the course of the following months become an emblem for a new form of political and urban innovation: the “assembly movement” (*movimiento asambleario*), widely known as 15M, would in time inspire the global Occupy movement. Upon taking residence in the plaza, the campers quickly called for and

organized themselves into three assemblies: an “Infrastructures Taskforce” in charge of looking for boxes in which to spend the night; a “Communications Group,” which anticipated the possible media impact of the encampment and improvised a training course for “spokespersons”; and a “Food Commission” in charge of collecting food from nearby bars and restaurants. The internal organization of every commission assumed an assembly-format.

Over the following weeks, the camp and the assembly-format developed jointly. The plaza became the birthplace for a diversity of commissions: on education, gender, communications and Internet, legal issues, politics, and economics. Perhaps the commission that drew most attention was the “Respect Commission,” whose task was to ensure that discussions and negotiations within the camp were carried out in a spirit of cordiality and consensus. The various commissions parceled out the plaza’s space, wired it with electricity and Internet connections—even a television channel—and established working areas with reception desks, tables, chairs, and libraries. There was also a nursery, which provoked candid responses as local residents drew attention to the lack of public nurseries in their neighborhoods. People began referring to the encampment as a “city in miniature” and noticed that its political landscape was shaped by an unfolding structure of assembly formats.

A week into the original Sol occupation, a “Neighborhoods Commission” drafted a document known as the “Methodology for Assemblies.” It responded to a plan already underway to take the assembly format to Madrid’s neighborhood hinterland. The web domain madrid.tomalosbarrios.net (“Madrid takes over the neighborhoods”) was quickly registered and used to coordinate the spread of the assembly movement. The document recommended protocols and procedures for occupying the city’s public spaces, remarked on the tools necessary to set up an

assembly infrastructure and offered advice on ways to make the encounter of strangers more hospitable and convivial. On May 28, the first of such “popular assemblies” were called in plazas and open spaces across the city. Even today there are over one hundred established assemblies in neighborhoods across Madrid.



Figure 1. Neighborhood assemblies were first held on May 28, 2011. Close to one thousand people attended Lavapiés first assembly. Photo: Daniel Bobadilla

The words *vecino* and *barrio* (neighbor and neighborhood) have over the past couple of years acquired a new political and social valence in Spain and especially in Madrid. The social form of the assembly is inscribing the city with a revitalized practice of neighborly politics. In this context, assemblies prefigure or set the prototype for a social method and an infrastructure for dealing with, even reinventing, classical urban *topoi*, such as negotiations over relationships with strangers, the making of public spaces, and an understanding of the urban condition as a fuzzy

territorial or fuzzy deterritorialized form. Assembling mobilizes a method and a set of devices that help elicit the kinds of relationships and people (neighbors) through which the city, “as an artifact and generator of knowledge, comes to be understood.”³ In this sense, the fuzz and mess of the assembly—the difficulties that participants have at putting together, let alone understanding, the object of the assembly as an urban form—stimulates valuable insights into present-day discussions of the city as an object of political claims and rights. Moreover, the practice of assembling neighbors—of convoking a neighborhood assembly, and of bringing and holding a disparity of relations together in the political and social figure of “the neighbor”—addresses wider issues about the possible forms that an urban commons may assume in the neoliberal metropolis.

The following account is based on an ethnography of Madrid’s mobilizations, and in particular on intensive fieldwork across a number of assembly sites and relationships in the districts of Lavapiés, Prosperidad, and Puerta del Sol. The ethnography is ongoing.

Method

Early on in #acampadasol, the assembly format was construed by those attending as an urban political object. Thus, the draft of the “Methodology for Assemblies”⁴ document was described as an extension of “the assembling method, the recuperation of public space, and critical thought” to the larger hinterland of neighborhoods.⁵ The *method* of the assembly was from its inception conceived as an *organon* of social, political, and critical work. “Methodology for Assemblies” includes a sociology of roles, a praxis for conviviality, and a spatial and cultural layout. The document recommends that all assemblies be facilitated by “a moderator,

a secretary in charge of taking minutes, someone responsible for taking turns for questions, and a group facilitating the production of consensus.” There is also a role singled out for “interpreters,” whose function is to translate speeches or questions into sign-language for the deaf. The document further describes a distinct kind of sign-language to be used by all for promoting conviviality within the assembly. Thus, approval of a proposal or a comment is to be signaled by raising and waving one’s hands. Indicating to a speaker that he or she is talking in circles and not contributing to the discussion is signaled by a motion of circling hands.



Figure 2. Early on a ‘Methodology for assemblies’ described, among other things, a sign-language for the deaf, which became standard protocol across the assembly movement. Photo: Julio Albarrán.

The document moreover describes the method for delineating assembly space, which is meant to distinguish between “moderating space” and the assembly proper. A “rectangular-perimeter marks out the former with chalk or color-tape on the floor,

simulating a stage.” The moderating space is occupied by whoever is speaking at any time. This person is flanked by the interpreters and the rest of the facilitating team. Spokespersons for each of the assembly’s various commissions await their turn on one side of the moderating space. The other side is occupied by the team in charge of taking questions. The latter are to be located “as far away as possible from the team of secretaries, who are in charge of taking minutes, and who shall be close enough to the moderating space to request a repetition, a synthesis, or a copy of a document presented to the assembly.” The minutes of every assembly meeting are to be recorded by secretaries. Minutes should include the day’s agenda, a record of the various reports received, proposals made, discussions had, and any consensus reached. The minutes are also to mention proposals or recommendations to be taken to Madrid’s Popular Assembly (*Asamblea Popular de Madrid*), which is the name under which all of the city’s neighborhood assemblies meet. The final version of the minutes is sent to the assembly’s communications team, which then posts it on the assembly’s website.⁶ Much is made of the public and open availability of minutes over the Internet. Throughout, the methodological guide stresses the importance of keeping a “relax and respectful atmosphere.” A variety of supplementary texts suggest techniques and advice for doing so. For example, “when someone who is known to be sensible and positive finds herself constrained and incapable of reason, we embrace her and tell her: ‘dear friend, we know what you are capable of. . . .’” In the same spirit, new members are to be greeted so they will not feel like strangers; poetry or other texts should be read aloud to enrich and enliven the affective character of the assembly meeting; and occasionally the gathering should end with a game.



Figure 3. The camp and the assembly format developed jointly. Camp assemblies such as this one later travelled out to the neighborhoods. Photo: Jisakiel.

The assembly format thus cultivates an aesthetics that is both therapeutic and ludic. In Coslada, for example, one of the attendees, a professional clown, regularly performs in the assembly space to break up and cheer up the long hours of meetings. People are encouraged to attend dressed in fancy costumes, as part of an attempt to draw in parents who might be roaming the plaza with their children. In Lavapiés and Dos de Mayo, children's assemblies (*chiqui-asambleas*) are organized for the young to discuss issues that are of concern to them while their parents attend their own assembly without having to worry about parenting. Children's assemblies themselves, however, also produce recommendations worthy of reporting to the general neighborhood assembly. Some assemblies organize parallel activities, such as barter markets and workshops, or they open or close with a meal at which the attendees share the food they have brought. Because the assembly format structures both the assembly itself and the hospitality in public spaces, the two overlap, blur, and become difficult to distinguish.

Central to the discursive production of hospitality in the assembly space is the notion of consensus. It has been widely recognized that a defining characteristic of the 15M movement is the importance given by it to consensus as an expectation of the decision-making process. To the definition of *consensus* as general agreement or concord in opinion, sometimes expressed unanimously by a collective, the production of consensus in Madrid's popular assemblies has added a methodological nuance. Consensus is defined in that context as a nonquantitative operation: decisions are not *voted on* in the assembly space; they are reached by a consensus that is meant to be the outcome of dialogue and debate, rather than of individual opinions held without modification. A "Rapid Guide for Assembly Facilitation" (*Guía rápida de dinámica asamblearia*) offers a technique or protocol for the "production of consensus":⁷

After the presentation of a motion or proposal, the moderator asks: "Any arguments strongly against the proposal?" Should there be any, a turn for questions and debate is opened: THREE arguments for and THREE arguments against the positions discussed. Having had an opportunity for debate, the moderator turns to the Assembly and puts the question back to it, inviting the Assembly to pronounce itself for or against the proposal using sign-language. If there is still no consensus, the moderator will allow 3–5 minutes of debate within the Assembly, such that smaller groups may be formed to discuss the matter internally. Following this, a new round of interventions is opened, where groups may put forward their new proposals for consensus. Failing this, two paths are opened: (i) if the proposal was originally made by a commission or working group, it shall be taken back to its

constituency so that it can be properly reformulated; (ii) if the proposal was originally made by an individual, it is recommended that he or she take it to an appropriate commission or working group, where it will be discussed internally so that a first degree of consensus is reached at that level. In both cases, once properly reformulated, the proposals may be brought back to the Assembly to be discussed anew.

As this description intimates, reaching consensus takes time, but the assembly movement rejoices in its unhurried temporality, and indeed its slow pacing is often singled out as the movement's defining characteristic. The assembly is *not* a decision-making forum. Assemblies, as a number of participants have told us, are “not operative or practical structures.” Their ultimate aim is not to make decisions but to build consensus. The “Rapid Guide” puts the point somewhat differently: “the Assembly's membership is its very *raison d'être*. They [the members] are [both] its principle and ultimate objective.” One of the most famous 15M slogans responds to this experience of political *longue durée*: “We proceed slowly because we aim highly” (*vamos lento porque vamos lejos*).

Although there is general agreement that the deliberate temporality of the assembly is among its greatest virtues, many attendees in practice dread the time it often takes to build consensus. Some proposals expected to provoke controversy are postponed or deferred for a future assembly to which “experts” will be invited to help make better-informed decisions. Moreover, some methodological texts make a distinction between “urgent” or “unpostponable” consensus and more routine agreements. Whether a matter under dispute is unpostponable or not is decided on the spot by the assembly. If a protocol for urgent consensus is proposed, first “visual

criteria” are employed to determine whether to proceed accordingly: the protocol is to be applied “so long as a visible 1/5 of the assembly does not oppose it.” Two teams of five people each, one team for and one against the original proposal, must agree on this visual count. If no agreement is forthcoming, a formal counting of votes is required.

The awkward prescriptions that make up the protocol for urgent consensus capture well the political complexity of the assembly as a neighborly urban form. After a month of occupying Puerta del Sol, and once the assembly movement had successfully spread across Madrid’s neighborhoods, the pressure to dismantle #acampadasol mounted. The local authorities had already attempted to evict the campers on a couple of occasions, and there were rumors and threats that more violent incursions might follow. There was also concern that, when its political purchase was most at stake, popular sympathy for the movement was declining. Some felt that the iconicity of a central encampment drew attention away from neighborhood assemblies, which were becoming increasingly successful. Faced with such demands, the assembly at #acampadasol persistently failed to reach consensus on the convenience and timing of the camp’s dismantling. The arguments for and against were many and complex, but it was the spatial qualities of the encampment as an urban public object—“a city in miniature”—that many campers thought had been its greatest political innovation, and they thus resisted its disintegration. As a forum where strangers wove out of discussion of their mutual affairs a web of neighborly ties, the camp, the assembly format, and the process of consensus-building had together reenvisioned *urban life as method* and had produced a means of making life in the city convivial. The insistence on conviviality helps explain the awkwardness of the protocol for urgent consensus. Even if resorting to slightly clumsy representational

techniques is a result, the endurance of the assembly format is understood to be the paramount concern of all its individual members. .



Figure 4. A general view of Sol's encampment. The photograph was taken on May 20, 2011, two days before Spain's municipal and regional elections. The decision by the electoral board calling for the camp's dismantling provoked a massive overflow of the plaza. Photo: Julio Albarrán

Assembling

Assembling is hard work; it is also hardware. An "Infrastructures Commission" takes responsibility for keeping and maintaining the materials and equipment necessary for use in the assembly. Objects and devices such as audio systems, megaphones, long cable extensions, or, simply, writing paper and marking pens, have become infrastructural equipment crucial for an assembly's happening.

Making one's voice heard in an open space is an issue that all assemblies have had to resolve. The use of a megaphone has often proved unsatisfactory, for the sound

is directed at an angle and therefore tends not to encompass the whole arc of participants surrounding the moderators' stage. It has therefore become customary for assemblies to ask bars or cafes in the vicinity of a plaza to plug assembly audio systems into their electrical sockets. Doing so has also made necessary the purchase of extensions to electrical cables (or sometimes the use of handmade extensions), capable in some cases of traversing a fifty-meter distance between the assembly space and an electrical socket.



Figure 5. Do-it-yourself politics whilst installing solar cells overnight at Sol's encampment. Photo: Julio Albarrán.

The storing of these materials is moreover problematic. In Lavapiés, for example, the equipment is kept at La Tabacalera, an old tobacco factory that in February 2010 was occupied, with the authorities' approval, and turned into an experimental "social squatting center" (*centro social autogestionado*). In Prosperidad, the equipment is stored at one of the local neighbors' associations (*asociación de vecinos*). These relations are not exempt from trouble; negotiating access is often a

fraught process. La Tabacalera, for instance, is the latest reincarnation of one of Madrid's most famous squatter movements. Their radical political agenda has been cultivated over years of social mobilization, and there is concern that, although it is praised by many, the assembly will simply "import" a cultural and political practice cultivated elsewhere. Some local neighborhood associations, on the other hand, are known to have strong ties to the communist party. For these and other reasons, many assembly-goers repudiate the links to established organizations. "The assembly," one hears them say, "is an autonomous entity, representative of no one, and represented by no one." At a meeting in Prosperidad, someone observed that what ought to characterize the assembly format is that it is not "housed": "We do not, we should not have a place that we can go to, that can house us. We need to reassemble and reinvent ourselves at every meeting." "The assembly is a *topos*," one of us overheard a participant say at a meeting in the Puerta del Sol assembly, meaning presumably that it is a formula, belonging nowhere in particular, as much as it is a spatial form, and that its defining trait is its openness (to the city at large).

In Lavapiés, the assembly meets on a weekly basis, alternately at the Parque del Casino and the Plaza de Cabestreros. In Prosperidad, it meets every two weeks at a plaza of the same name. The space of an assembly's meeting has been a matter of dispute, at one time or another, in almost all cases. The Plaza de Prosperidad is an open-air space at the heart of the neighborhood, next to the local market and the subway station. The plaza is, as an attendee of the first assembly put it, "*the point of passage*" (*lugar de paso*) for the neighborhood. On a Saturday morning, it is where people bump into each other when going to the market or bakery, while waiting for a bus or an acquaintance at the metro exit, or on their way to have an *aperitivo* at a local bar. But the plaza is a dry, cemented space, with few if any trees and therefore no

shadows and hardly any breeze. During the first three weeks of assembly meetings in May 2011, it was intensely debated whether the plaza was the most suitable place to hold the gatherings. People were concerned that the lack of trees and shade would make the plaza unbearably hot during the summer months. Some suggested that the assembly ought to be relocated to the nearby Parque de Berlin, where esplanades of grass and tall trees would make meetings more tolerable and even pleasurable. In the end, it was decided that the assembly would stay in the plaza, for it was agreed that the plaza complied with the infrastructural, social, and political requirements that the visibility of the assembly as a piece of urban hardware demanded.

In Lavapiés, the weekly assembly meeting is signaled by a giant piece of yellow cloth with the words “Lavapiés Popular Assembly” written on it. The cloth hangs near the entrance to the park where the meeting takes place, although some people have complained that it is not visible enough. There is concern, it seems, that passersby do not recognize the gathering as a “popular assembly.” In Prosperidad, part of the debate around the assembly’s location was focused on its “visibility”; it was thought that the plaza was more visible than the park. A participant put it eloquently at the time: “We cannot afford to become part of the urban equipment (*mobiliario urbano*). There are many reasons why we are here; but we are here to be seen also.” The naming of the assembly and its iconic quality thus testify to its own very particular status as a boundary object—as a form of political hardware (“urban equipment”) that must somehow both stand out from and blur back into the cityscape. As such, the assembly has something to teach us about the nature and limits of blur: sometimes an object must stand out in order to be recognized as part of an undifferentiated mass.



Figure 6. The camp's and the assemblies' material landscape testify to their qualities as political hardware. Photo: Julio Albarrán.

Even when a consensus has been reached over the location of an assembly's happening, the space of the assembly format remains fragile and provisional. In Lavapiés, for example, at one of the assembly's first meetings, participants discovered that the plaza of the Parque del Casino was already occupied by a *batucada* (a large ensemble of percussionists). The assembly had to improvise a location for an alternative meeting place. On another occasion, a woman interrupted Sol's assembly, desperately calling out that she had just been assaulted. A number of people came to her aid, while others left amid the confusion and fear. Furthermore, rain and bad weather generally are a persistent threat to all assemblies, and there is none that has not, at some point or another, discussed alternative locations for the winter months.

The assembly format is under constant pressure of these kinds—pressure on its political and material qualities, its spatial and temporal registers. The assembly as an urban form is precariously but productively fuzzy, inchoate, porous, in constant metamorphosis. The assembly format recruits a variety of local actors, not always

consistent with one another. On the one hand, plazas and other public spaces are “wired”: inscribed with devices and do-it-yourself circuitries that enable a novel but manifestly temporary, mode of urban encounter.⁸ There are also political and autonomous collectives making their presence felt in the assembly through different kinds of formats, channels, and capacities. On the other hand, local shops and bars, far less transient than these groups of people and sorts of hardware, make their presence felt as well. The assembly’s porousness and openness is a source of frailty and instability but also novelty, and some of the novel forms that emerge develop longer-term features and functions. One feature that appears to be solidifying is the meeting agenda. All meetings follow a roughly similar format. First, the team in charge of facilitating the meeting is introduced. In Lavapiés, the “Facilitation Commission” meets the evening prior to an assembly meeting. Commission members go over the day’s agenda and sometimes rehearse and practice techniques of facilitation. Such routines are important, for at least two reasons. On the one hand, the assembly proscribes permanent roles for individuals: volunteers must rotate in their performance of various assembly roles. People new to a role, therefore, often require a little training before going live in front of an audience. Second, rehearsing the day’s agenda helps the team anticipate controversial topics. The rehearsal offers a venue for sharing experiences of conflict management and resolution, so that the assembly can retain its identity as a neighborly forum

On September 17, 2011, for example, the Lavapiés assembly was discussing a “Housing Manifesto” that included criticism of “greedy landlords.”⁹ A woman stood up and interrupted the reading of the manifesto. She identified herself as a landlord and pointed out that, since not all landlords are the same, it was unwise to generalize. A voice was heard demanding that she shut up and request a turn to make comments.

The woman indeed shut up. But when the reader of the manifesto had finished going through the text, she approached, took him aside, and questioned him. Her doing so distracted the reader from questions and comments that members of the assembly were now addressing to him. The team of moderators felt at a loss, uncertain how to respond. One of the facilitators told the woman that her observations ought really to be addressed to the assembly at large and not simply to the reader. The issues debated in an assembly are or should become a matter of concern to all: the assembly's method of hospitality and inclusion warrants that issues of concern to one individual should be "assembled into" matters of concern for the neighborhood at large. People are "assembled into" neighbors around shared concerns, even if they hold antagonistic or actually conflicting positions.

The "Housing Manifesto" itself provoked disparate reactions. Some people observed that the text was hardly different from one presented a week previously. The "Housing Group" (an established working group within the assembly) was encouraged to submit a new version once it had taken on board the objections raised by assembly members and had found ways to express the nuances desired. The "Housing Group" also had to take into account some quite specific concerns that members had raised. For instance, the manifesto made a demand for a 25 percent reduction in rents. This level of specificity troubled a number of participants, who suggested that no quantitative claims be made. The manifesto also called for a general strike in the autumn, which again was a sentiment unequally shared across the assembly. A group of about six people spontaneously decided to work together on the spot, redrafting the text for immediate reconsideration by the assembly. The group turned aside and dedicated itself intensely to the task and produced a text in time for the assembly to reach consensus on it later that same morning. Some outsiders might

say that the final wording was a blur—fuzzier, in any case, than the wording that had satisfied some participants but not the whole assembly. Yet the assembly regarded the final document as the result not of obfuscation but, rather, of meeting the concerns of every participant equally. Not inconceivably, that is what the verb *to blur* always means when used derogatorily in a social context. It may be an insult paid by majoritarians to devotees of consensus.

Archiving

The speed with which the “Housing Group” produced a new version of its manifesto contrasts with the more typically *longue durée* of the assembly format, at least as described in assembly handbooks dealing with methodology (“we proceed slowly because we aim highly”). The relationship between the texts and the actual procedures is fuzzy. It appears to be less contradictory than perhaps supplementary, and Tony Crook’s term “textual person” may help to illuminate it. The term, he writes in a very different context, is meant “to characterize both the person-like relationships of texts, and the textual-like relationships of anthropological persons.”¹⁰ As an aesthetic artifact, a text is the composite outcome of disparate relational engagements. The text has a social efficacy that responds to and anticipates a world of relationships:

Recognition and currency for these objects—*the capacity to animate analytic and social relations in others*—is governed by exhibiting this aesthetic form. . . . The textual person is composed through combining distinct relations: although data/theory, spoken/unspoken, originality/analytic precedence, and literal/figurative are kept scrupulously separate, they are also combined according to kinship-like strictures. (218, emphasis in the original)

Texts are assembled and disassembled through the relationships that they themselves engender. The assembly format, as we have seen, is—in the methodological documents and guides, minutes, and reports that it produces—a textual corporate person. The assembly is as much produced by these documents as it has itself been productive of those and will be productive of more. The rush to produce a new version of the “Housing Manifesto” may show the extent to which a textual artifact can stand for the very life of a form. Although much is made in texts of the assembly’s long-term agenda, about the importance of its unhurried production of consensus, in practice there is an urgency about at least one facet of assembly practice: the constant reinscription of its living political presence through the production of documentary objects.

The documentary form that best exemplifies the assembly’s nature as a textual person is its minutes (*actas*). Minute-taking is widely acknowledged to be the most important of these assemblies’ activities. At a meeting in Sol, for example, a group of people brought forward a motion for convoking a national referendum. The group presented a document that explained its arguments and sought the assembly’s endorsement. A number of people aired their concerns. Some were uncertain as to the document’s origin: who drafted it? Where do you meet? Where do you publish your minutes? The group remained silent, which prompted a robust exchange of accusations. A few voices suggested that the group belonged to an extreme right-wing party. A young man took the microphone. He held the document distributed by the group in one hand. He then pointed to its first page, which displayed a 15M logo. “You shouldn’t come here,” he said, “to wave around a document as if it had been produced by the movement. Nor should you come here and use this space to publicize

a meeting that hasn't actually been approved by the assembly.” A member of the group proposing the motion asked belligerently whether the young man worked “for the 15M’s police force,” while other participants pointed out that they had come merely as individuals to make a public announcement.

This exchange vividly captures some of the tensions that function to negotiate the insides and outsides of the assembly format. These were brought into the open, in this particular case, by a documentary object: the motion for a national referendum. The textual artifact mobilized questions about the proposing group’s authority, its representativeness, and its larger social engagement in and with the assembly format. A number of voices insisted on finding out more about the group. Over and over, they asked about the minutes of the group’s meetings: “Where do you publish your minutes? Where should we look to find out more about the nature of your meetings?” The group responded elusively. A group member said that they met weekly at a cafeteria and had a blog where they uploaded their minutes. The response was hardly satisfactory, and the assembly reacted with suspicion. Another group member added that they had worked with the assembly’s legal commission and that the lack of minutes was characteristic of all of that commission’s projects. A member of the legal commission then jumped up to observe that consensus over such a motion had never obtained within the group and that the lack of published minutes was no recommendation for the proposal to be elevated for consideration at the assembly level. The moderator finally ruled that “the methodological guide clearly states that all minutes must be sent to the Communications Commission, which shall then proceed to publish them on the Internet.” In other words: in the absence of an archival record and adherence to a recognized methodology, there can be no politics.

In an important recent article (from which we have drawn the subtitle for our essay) Vyjayanthi Rao has offered the concept of the “city as archive” as an aid to thinking through the complexity of the urban condition. The archive stands for the living memory of its urban experience.¹¹ It is through its archival deposits and infrastructures that a city faintly apprehends its own processes of understanding. The archive tenuously anchors the experience, and helps moor the memory, of the incessant vicissitudes and exchanges that otherwise would be lost in the city’s intricacies:

rather than highlight the archive’s capacity to accurately represent a past, [I suggest] we use the notion of archive as a way of navigating the voids of the present, as a practice of intervening into and reading the urban fabrics created by these voids, not for reading the urban fabric as a quilt or a palimpsest of historical forms preserved within the archive. . . . The city-as-archive . . . serves as a methodological intervention into the re-creation of everyday relations. . . . The city-as-archive works as a tool, re-fashioning our relation to the future.¹²

While Rao finds in the archive a powerful conceptual analogy for the contemporary urban condition, participants in Madrid’s assembly movement have instead deployed the inscriptive and documentary practices of archiving as technologies of hospitality. The archive is both a methodology *and a method* of urban life. It is both a kind of documentation and a praxis that elicits new forms of relationship among strangers. The archive is an instrument that functions both to stabilize the neighborhood commons and define the terms of recruitment into and membership of it.

The textual person, then, inscribes the assembly format in a circuit of documentary and archival practices that stretches out of the assembly space and in so doing publicizes and questions the terms of its internal democracy. “Who wrote this manifesto?” and “Where do you publish your minutes?” are questions that redescribe the spatial politics of the assembly format as textual politics. Thus, the relation that the assembly format claims to establish with the neighborhood is recontextualized across texts, inscriptions, and networks that may challenge and blur its spatial circumscription. The city and the neighborhood disappear as spatial objects and reappear as archival ones. In the process of assembling neighbors, the assembly format reinscribes the city in a novel archival landscape.



Figure 7. The textual and archival city: assemblies have produced novel and creative documentary practices, such as the watercolors of well-known artist, Enrique Flores, a regular member of the Lavapiés assembly. Author: Enrique Flores.

Territorialization and deterritorialization

The territorial and spatial dimensions of the assembly format have been the subject of numerous discussions in most assemblies. When the call for organizing neighborhood assemblies was first issued in May 2011, the people of Chamartín (a district of

northern Madrid) showed up at two assemblies, in Prosperidad and Hispanoamerica, which had been separately convoked by groups of neighbors who did not know of each other's existence. Over the following days, each assembly discussed the advantages of merging with the other. The assembly of Prosperidad drew in more people, and the local plaza seemed to offer a better infrastructural and social space: there were nearby bars that could offer access to electrical current, and the plaza itself was an open space that could be easily occupied. Thus, for a few days, Prosperidad became the point of assembly for the district of Chamartín. It seemed as if the territorialization of the neighborhood around the plaza had already made a sufficiently weighty political case for the assembly to meet there.

Soon enough, however, the case for the plaza began to lose weight. At Hispanoamerica, a group had already set up a website with their own neighborhood domain. A number of incipient working groups (on politics, education, economics, and so forth) had also set up their own email distribution lists and Google groups. The prospect of having to integrate or abandon these tools in favor of those initiated by the assembly of Prosperidad was unappealing. Hardly a week into the whole process, then, Hispanoamerica reclaimed its autonomy as a popular assembly. This episode is indicative of the territorialization and deterritorialization of the assembly format. Assemblies come into being as topological artifacts. There are a variety of factors that contribute to such topological immanence; to begin with, the politics of digital networking. As the present example illustrates, digital communications have been crucial in the articulation of the assembly movement. Digital relations have traversed and inflected street mobilizations. That the original encampment at Puerta del Sol is known as #acampadasol, a Twitter hashtag, is a testament to that importance.¹³

Another important aspect of the topological territorialization and deterritorialization of assemblies is the heightened concern that one encounters there with scale and scale-shifting interventions. The case of the *chiqui-asamblea* (children's assembly, but *chiqui* also means "small") is a poignant example. The children's proposals were incorporated into the assembly's minutes:

Children ask for a play center; for the right not to wear uniforms in public schools; for getting people to throw away cigarette buds to the rubbish; for public toilets, so we are not forced to pee in public; to be kind to one another; to have dog shit cleaned up; and for more flowers in the streets. They say they do not like churches because one cannot play in them. They like to play with neighbors. They further ask for a local swimming pool and a football pitch with grass.¹⁴

The assembly agreed to "discuss some of these proposals in future assemblies" and to "make posters [concerned] with some of these issues and distribute them in the neighborhood." Children's issues are "small" (*chiqui*) issues, but they matter too. In both writing and speaking, there is continuous insistence that "little things matter," although this commitment leads assemblies to ask vexing questions about the "sizes" of various political actions. The resources that assemblies can mobilize are scarce, so there are ongoing discussions about how best to deploy them. Discussion, for example, of the importance of making assemblies visible and iconic has exposed some disparate assumptions not only about the aesthetics and location but also about the size of the political. The suggestion made at the Lavapiés assembly to have a large yellow cloth identifying the location for passersby and the neighborhood at large,

although it was welcomed, led to discussion of who would take responsibility for finding a location for the poster. A few voices suggested the “Information Commission,” but it was quickly pointed out that the commission was understaffed and overworked. Someone suggested that, instead neighbors with apartments facing the plaza be asked to hang the poster from their balconies. A balcony location was iconic enough, but some did not want to *delegate out* this or any political intervention. There was said to be a danger that the balconies would in time “naturalize” the assembly’s political visibility: the poster would be absorbed into the neighborhood’s landscape.

Hence a new proposal was made for “small situated direct actions”: assembly-goers would walk around the neighborhood advertising a meeting sometime prior to its happening. Still another proposal came from a participant recalling how, in the early days of the movement, the assembly had had an “information point” in the plaza. The information point had been very successful at stabilizing the assembly’s iconic and political visibility. Perhaps, it was remarked, it was no coincidence that attendance had started to decline once the information point was dismantled. The trouble with the information point, someone else noted, was that it had overworked those who staffed it: “We need to find a way to publicize the assembly that does not tax its members. That was the idea behind the poster: to liberate otherwise scant human resources from taxing activities.”

The question of the scale of political action is nowhere seen as clearly as in assemblies held in some of the villages surrounding the capital. In the assembly at Hoyo de Manzanares, considerable caution was exercised in the use of sign-language to, for instance, alert a member that she has been speaking too long. In such small villages, we were told, relationships between participants are often inflected by

kinship or friendship ties. “I have been approached by quite a few people at the village supermarket,” an informant told us, “eager to express their support to me in person but who felt that, if spotted at the assembly,” would be “liable” to bring “shame to their families.”

Between the village structure and the urban plaza, the assembly format seems to have carved out for itself a fragile yet productive space of hospitality at the level of the *barrio*. Of course, it is this capacity to shift scales that, from the beginning, lends political agency to the assembly format: from an information point to a balcony or a poster or direct action, the assembly has the capacity to transform its political practices and political imagination. It recruits as many new objects, places, and actors as it deems necessary, even if doing so blurs its own internal configuration as a political body and occasionally threatens it with dissolution. If back in May 2011, the movement’s intensity and vibrancy led to the bifurcation of some assemblies (those of Prosperidad and Hispanoamerica, for instance), there have been proposals more recently for assemblies to coordinate political action and even for neighboring assemblies to unite. Perhaps the least fuzzy example of the tensions that traverse and in many ways constitute the assembly format is the debate around the purpose and remit of Sol’s General Assembly. The debate, as we shall see, pushed conceptualization of the assembly format up toward a quite specific level of abstraction.

When #acampadasol was dismantled and the assembly movement took itself off to the neighborhoods, Sol’s General Assembly remained in place as a symbolic capital. Across Madrid, then, neighborhood assemblies replicated Sol’s structure and organizational apparatus. It quickly became obvious, however, that one thing Sol was not prepared to do was act as a communications hub for the rising number of

neighborhood assemblies. Thus, a new assembly was constituted under the overarching name of Madrid's Popular Assembly. The MPA is a nominal figure. It has no membership and no meeting place. It is simply the organizational space where the spokespersons (the term "representative" is expressly disavowed) of all neighborhood assemblies meet, report on initiatives and proposals, and coordinate supra-neighborhood actions across the city. The MPA is not, however, a decision-making or -initiating body. It has no political competence of its own. We might dub it the Assemblies' Exchange.

The relationship between the MPA and Sol's General Assembly has excited numerous polemics and debates over the past months. There is, for example, growing scorn in some neighborhoods over Sol's symbolic status. As it turns out, Sol is the only assembly that it is not accountable to a neighborhood. There is no Sol *barrio*, as there is one for Prosperidad or Lavapiés. As the original offspring of #acampadasol, Sol's General Assembly has no political or administrative unit to which it reports. . Yet it has become commonplace for the mainstream media to report on decisions taken at Sol's General Assembly as exemplary of "what the assembly movement is up to," despite the strenuous investment by assemblies everywhere to make plain that they are representative of no one and represented by no one—that assemblies are "symbols that stand for themselves"¹⁵.

Sol's outshining of neighborhood assemblies has provoked a backlash that calls for merging the MPA and Sol's General Assembly. If there is slack in political decision-making at the MPA, on the one hand, and overrepresentativeness at the SGA, on the other, then there is scope, it is argued, to have the two converge into a unified central assembly. This argument, which has been widely voiced in terms of "territorialization," is that Sol's surplus of symbolic capital has been accrued at the

expense of territorial legitimation. Since Sol is not a *barrio* assembly, there is no territorial unit to which the assembly could belong. Its politics are “ungrounded,” “out of touch” with neighborhood dynamics. On the other hand, the MPA lacks the institutional mandate to envision and sanction a proper territorialization of political initiatives. As a spokesperson put it, “the MPA is a hearing [*audiencia*] of neighborhood concerns. Neighborhoods stretch themselves outward to the MPA, and then they stop. The MPA puts a stop to *how far the neighborhood project can go*. The movement is thus falling short of itself [*quedarnos en los barrios es escaso*].” This frustration at what the MPA can and cannot do has led a number of assemblies to propose both a change in structure and a change in name. As for the change in structure, there have been proposals to open the MPA to “sector-based assemblies.” To this day the MPA is a place of exchange for the other assemblies’ spokespersons, a forum where “we bring together and exchange assemblies’ minutes.” But, as one participant put it, “this is what an announcements board would do. We can use a website for this kind of work. There is no point in having an assembly for this.” The proposal to change the MPA’s structure, then, is aimed at awakening the MPA from its political slumber. The idea was to have sector-based assemblies that would coordinate political programs and agendas, such as those of the various Housing, Politics, or Unemployment Groups that were working separately in a number of neighborhood assemblies. The proposal, however, was energetically contested on the basis that, as an eloquent opponent put it,

We do not know the territorial weight of such groups. Where are these “sector-based” groups located? How many people make them up? What

are their whereabouts? What problems do they deal with? What is their weight in the territory? Such groups should really be working *for* their assemblies. Take the Housing Groups. They are the ones gathering local information about repossessions, about the needs of people. What use is there in them reporting to a distant assembly? We need them here—their knowledge is useful *here*.

As for the change in name, a proposal to substitute “Coordinating Platform” (*Coordinadora*) for the MPA name met with considerable opposition. Those in favor of the change of name are adamant about the MPA’s misuse of the term “assembly.” The MPA is not an assembly, they insist; it is not a space where people come with proposals, seeking to build consensus around them. Thus, at an assembly meeting in Lavapiés a number of people expressed serious concern that the MPA had no “sovereignty”: there was no constituency to which it responded. Those against the change of name, on the other hand, hold that the MPA’s design is to *become* an assembly. Their hope is that the MPA will eventually become the “assembly of assemblies.” If in its present incarnation the MPA is an obstacle to the neighborhoods’ self-realization, as some people in the movement hold, the hope is that the MPA will come to assume the form of a meta-assembly. If the MPA took such a form, the neighborhood, through its basis in sheer topology, would at last achieve a conceptual status of its own as a political form,.

Conclusion: What Is a Neighbor?

“We need to think,” Edmund Leach wrote in 1961, “of the relationships which link children to their parents and the parents to one another, as constituting a

‘neighborhood system’—a topological space.”¹⁶ When Leach wrote these words, he was trying to solve the riddle of kinship structural and classificatory systems, which he famously thought did little but produce “highly suspect categories” out of “butterfly collecting activity.”¹⁷ He offered in its place the concept of topology, whereby the fluency and elasticity of relationships could perhaps be grasped by analogy to a “neighborhood system.” Of course, he left his notion of neighborhood undefined, perhaps hoping that, someday, someone would take his idea seriously and pursue it further.

In this article, we have offered an ethnographic instance of how participants in the popular assembly movement in Madrid are redefining their sense of ownership over the urban commons as a “neighborhood system—a topological space.” The neighborhood emerges in this context as an infrastructural and methodological event: the assembling of neighbors as both a public form and a sociological figure. On the one hand, the assembly format requires a strenuous investment in the material, textual, and archival production of “assembling” as an urban spatial object. The assembly defines itself as a particular kind of object—a piece of urban hardware that warrants its own temporal and spatial continuity by means of other objects, devices, and technologies that participants in the assembly mobilize. On the other hand, the process of assembling in itself produces a novel sense of urban neighborliness. Neighbors are “assembled into” being social and political subjects through the process of assembling. What we have offered here, then, is an ethnographic argument about how the popular assemblies’ movement is reimagining citizenship in terms of an archival, an infrastructural, and a methodical practice of urban conviviality. The assembly format reimagines the city as archive, as hardware, and as method. While each of these figurations, on its own, has a kind of clarity, the relationships among the

three are, at least on the surface, oxymoronic and therefore fuzzy. There are a number of suggestive corollaries to this ethnographic discovery, which we shall do no more than allude to in the present context.

There has recently been a burgeoning of interest in the “right to the city” as an idiom through which to reclaim the urban situation as a commons. Thus, for David Harvey the right to the city should be embodied in the “democratic management” of the forms of “surplus absorption” that cities generate: “Since the urban process is a major channel of surplus use, establishing democratic management over its urban deployment constitutes the right to the city.”¹⁸ As Kafui Attoh has noted, however, the right to the city is “a *fuzzy* concept,” for it remains unclear whether the democratic management of surpluses entails the “right” type of urban right, or whether democratic management should aim instead for, say, socioeconomic justice or the realization of a civil liberty.¹⁹ We have described here in some detail the social construction of a discourse of rights in Madrid’s popular assemblies. Rights are entangled with persons, spaces, technologies, and infrastructures. Rights are always fuzzy concepts, for the reason that they are always fuzzy assemblages. Hence the building of consensus within each of the assemblies demanded a complex management of methodological roles and temporal registers, as well as management of hospitality, empathy, and practices of care. Consensus, however fragile and conjectural, is hard work to achieve, but once it is achieved it becomes hardware—and in every case of consensus it is a hard-won exemplar of the “labor of urbanization.”²⁰

The ethnographic material we have presented suggests that much of this labor is invested in the practice of neighborliness or urban hospitality as manifested infrastructurally. The neighbor emerges in the material and documentary process of

constructing entitlements to any new urban commons. We hasten to add that the neighbor we refer to is *not* of the intimate kind famously defined by Jane Jacobs,²¹ Nor are we thinking of the “new urbanism” type of neighbor famously criticized by David Harvey.²² Our *ethnographic* neighbor is not a figure for some new urban identity, but rather a relational and topological subject. We are intrigued by this notion of the neighbor as an emerging *topos* (again using the term proposed by one of our informants), and believe that it offers a suggestive new point of departure for critical urban studies. Here is a view of the city in which however fuzzy its self-conception as archive, hardware, and method, becomes knowable as a social relationship; namely, the practice of neighboring.

Notes

¹ Vyjayanthi Rao, “Embracing Urbanism: The City as Archive,” *New Literary History* 40 (2009): 371, doi:10.1353/nlh.0.0085.

² Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1972), 122.

³ Adam Reed, “‘Blog This’: Surfing the Metropolis and the Method of London,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14 (2008): 392, doi:10.1111/j.1467–9655.2008.00508.x.

⁴ We shall note only every first reference to the online documents that the various assemblies have made publicly available on the Internet. Toma los barrios, “Metodología asamblearia.” madrid.tomalosbarrios.net/metodologia-asamblearia/ (accessed October 10, 2011).

⁵ Toma los barrios, “¿Qué es la Comisión de Barrios?”

-
- ⁶ Toma los barrios, “Asamblea Popular de Lavapiés,” lavapies.tomalosbarrios.net/category/actas (accessed December 1, 2011).
- ⁷ #Acampadasol, “Guía rápida para la dinamización de asambleas populares.”
- ⁸ For an object-oriented politics, see Noortje Marres and Javier Lezaun, “Materials and Devices of the Public: An Introduction,” *Economy and Society* (2011): 1–21 .
- ⁹ Vivienda y desahucios de Lavapiés, “Bando alquiler. 17/9,” n-1.cc/pg/file/read/761216/bado-alquiler-1709 (accessed December 1, 2011).
- ¹⁰ Tony Crook, *Anthropological Knowledge, Secrecy, and Bolivip, Papua New Guinea: Exchanging Skin* (London: British Academy/Oxford University Press, 2007), 218.
- ¹¹ Rao, “Embracing Urbanism,” 371–83.
- ¹² Rao, “Embracing Urbanism,” 381–82.
- ¹³ For a tentative history of the events leading up to #acampadasol, including an account of the importance of digital relationships, see Alberto Corsín Jiménez and Adolfo Estalella, “#spanishrevolution,” *Anthropology Today* 27, no. 4 (2011): 19–23, doi:10.1111/j.1467–8322.2011.00818.x.
- ¹⁴ Toma los barrios, Asamblea Popular de Lavapiés, Acta de la chiqui-asamblea 01/10/2011,” lavapies.tomalosbarrios.net/2011/10/05/acta-de-la-chiqui-asamblea-01102011/ (accessed October 10, 2011).
- ¹⁵ Roy Wagner, *Symbols that Stand for Themselves* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).
- ¹⁶ Edmund R. Leach, *Rethinking Anthropology* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 26.
- ¹⁷ Leach, *Rethinking Anthropology*, 26.
- ¹⁸ David Harvey, “The Right to the City,” *New Left Review* 53 (2008): 37.
- ¹⁹ Attoh, “What Kind of Right Is the Right to the City?,” 678.

²⁰ David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 159.

²¹ Jacobs, *Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

²² Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, 169–73.