'Take Part in the Community Vegetable Garden!':
Community Appropriation and Management of Urban Public Space[1]

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This article is based on the ongoing fieldwork that I started in 2013 on the claims made by a group of local people on the state and quality of 'public space' in relation to a plot located in a small plaza of a very central neighbourhood of Madrid. The plot belongs to the City Council and cannot be built on. After repeated complaints about its abandoned state, local people calling themselves 'neighbours' decided to look after it. One of them started a Blog narrating the progress of this urban garden project and initiated the process of obtaining a 'temporary cession of the plot' and of getting the City Hall to legalise the project. In little over a year, these 'neighbours' deployed a broad range of digital technologies, making of this initiative also a political, hyper-connected and continually monitored project. In cases like this, the agents use information and communications technologies (ICTs) in functional and sometimes remedial ways in order to shape, express, manage and publicize citizens' activities and claims. These digital tools are significant in relational networks that make it possible to understand citizens' initiatives promoting ways to manage urban public space that are 'alternative' to formal political and administrative management. It is also a collective way of making the city not only 'smart' but also 'sentient'. This ethnographic case helps us to understand the significance of new technologies in current neighbourhood management of urban public space.
Keywords: Madrid, ICTs, citizen participation, technological and political appropriation of public space.

The 'Sentient' Perspective: Expectations in an Ethnography of Technological Imageries of Madrid[2]

In the summer of 2013 I was completing a fieldwork that I started in 2011 on technological imageries of Madrid; particularly, on the production and significance of public space and the means and meanings of citizens' participation in processes of urban change. Two key imageries had emerged in my ethnography, the 'smart city' and the 'sentient city'.[3] They were part of a larger imagery, the so-called 'creative cities and cities of knowledge' built on a prolonged process of industrialisation and commercialisation of culture and legitimised by discourses derived from the 'theory of the creative knowledge class' (Florida 2002). According to these narratives, concentrating 'knowledge' and 'creation' with 'technological innovation' and 'entrepreneurship' is key to the post-industrial regeneration of cities and economic growth (Yudice 2002). On the one hand, the imagery of the 'Smart City' that emerged was linked to the competitive and promotional actions of local governments and of private enterprises in so-called strategic urban sectors; that is, 'energy', 'mobility', 'buildings', 'cultural production and commercialisation' and 'governance'. The city unfolded as a collection of invisible, yet 'efficient' technological infrastructures designed by experts

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[3] Imageries are based on representations; 'they structure social experience and engender both behaviours and real images' (Ledrut 1987: 84). Imageries create acting images, image-guides and images that carry out processes; they do not only represent material or subjective realities.

and deployed to 'solve', 'order' and 'control' the urban environment in an automated fashion with the aim of offering an 'optimised' experience. On the other hand, the 'sentient city' grew as counterpoint to the 'smart city'. In general terms, it contradicts the apparent ability of the technological city to feel, foresee and act in an 'objective', thus 'optimal and efficient' manner through processing real-time data flows from micro-sensors and through monitoring and identification devices placed in space, in objects and on bodies. Based on the adjective 'sentient' (linked to 'sensitivity' in its Latin root),[4] the subjectivity of perception is defended by highlighting that the human and non-human instances that produce, interpret and use data flows (including software algorithms and action devices) respond to political decisions, subjective values, legal codes and power relations (Thrift and French 2002). The critical content on this imagery has been furthered by several social and technological analyses that tackle the way in which a technologically-mediated city is conceived, designed and produced.

In the case of Madrid, my ethnography showed that the imagery of the 'sentient city' was rooted in political claims linked to the *15-M Indignados* movement. This movement has demanded more direct and informed citizen participation in the production and management of the city's resources and opposed the local government's urban planning and development strategies based on the privatisation and deregulation of analogue and digital infrastructures, services and 'cultural' and public spaces that were being deployed in line with national and European 'economic recovery' policies.[5] In doing so, this movement has also brought together tales of disillusionment and the search for new employment prospects among a significant number of young (and not so young) professionals from the cultural sector and from the sectors of technological innovation, arts, architecture and public social services. This has occurred in the context of an economic crisis in which the annual unemployment rate amounts to 18.75 per cent (2014),[6] subsidies for culture and technological innovation have been severely cut and the breakdown of the construction sector has left several projects unfinished.

The imagery of Madrid as a 'sentient city' is thus produced from within and also deployed across a new scenario that includes workshops, seminars and conferences calling for citizens' participation and reflection on what should be considered to be 'urban commons' (from urban public space to infrastructure, including 'knowledge', 'creativity' and 'affection'); but also the recovery through self-management of underused plots of land or of spaces such as Tabacalera, Montamarta, Patio Maravillas, ¡Esto es Una Plaza! and El Campo de la Cebada and the establishment of an endless list of websites Blogs and digital platforms which promote these experiences. Given the social impact of these actions, the collectives that engage in them are becoming involved in mediations among the administration, private companies and citizen claims. Some, like Medialab Prado or El Matadero de Madrid, have

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[4] I follow Shepard's (2011) conceptualization of the 'sentient city' and other theoretical developments in this line.

[5] See, for instance, the requirements established by Smart Cities to obtain such funds and private investments.

[6] http://www.madrid.org/baco_web/html/web/AccionVisualizarSerie.icm (accessed 15 September 2015).

become involved in the public sphere for the cultural management and dissemination spaces; others run small offices specialising in cultural, urban and technological mediation and consulting services. These developments are traversed in myriad ways by a technological grammar inspired by the development of *free culture* and *open-source code*, from multidisciplinary ways of working and producing knowledge that follow a '*hacker's* logic' to interventions in the public space inspired to so-called *open-sourced networked urbanism* deployed through 'open source logic' and 'prototyping' (Haque and Fuller 2009, Corsin and Estalella 2013).

'Hi. We're Sarah and Tomás. Like you, we're neighbours here and we want to improve this space for the community'

Immersed in the techno-political 'sentience' emanating from a city in a state of continuous questioning, I was walking in a small public square in my neighbourhood in a central area of Madrid when I thought that it was strange to see there a half-broken, tumbling wire fence around a barren plot of land. This plot was located in an area near the city centre and was therefore surrounded by public and private urban interventions aimed at promoting the city centre as a tourist attraction linked to the cultural industry (museums, theatres, music, food, trade and recreational activities). Moreover, the plot was located in the District of Arganzuela, an area that for the past 10 years has undergone intense transformation as a result of redirecting the M30 motorway underground, refurbishing the former Madrid abattoir (*Matadero de Madrid*) and turning it into a large public cultural centre and construction projects awarded to private enterprises for building shopping centres on public land. In response to this top-down urban intervention, local opposition was increasing. In the nearby Central District, an intense and diverse political activism originating in the *15-M Indignados* movements has produced high-impact squatting initiatives such as Tabacalera, as well as interventions by young architects and artists who together with neighbours have recovered abandoned plots of land such as the abovementioned Campo de la Cebada and ¡Esto es una Plaza!. Traditional neighbourhood association movements such as *Asociación de Vecinos Nudo Sur* are very active, as are the movement called *Asamblea Popular Arganzuela* and *La Traba*, the squatters' social centre linked to anarchist movements.

It was only a matter of time, I thought, before the plot of land that set me pondering would become, like many others, a space for confrontations between different stakeholders. Thus, I waited for such an event to take place in order to construct from the start an ethnography of the processes of reclamation and reinvention of public space that were taking place across the city and understand the significance of information and communications technologies (ICTs) in the attendant networks. On returning from holidays at the end of August 2013, I found that three people aged around 25, a lady aged around 65 and a group of children were clearing the plot. The space was still limited by the wire fence. However, a coloured ribbon ran around the perimeter and a poster on every side read:

> 'Hi. We're Sarah and Tomás. Like you, we're neighbours here and we want to
> improve this space for the community. We're clearing this plot on Tuesdays and

Thursdays starting at 18:00. For more information, you can call this number: XXXX, or write an email to solarpasilloverde@gmail.com'

In this simple note I found three key aspects that led me to consider this event as the beginning of the techno-political process that I wanted to study. This encouraged me to construct an ethnography of this case through participant observation and direct involvement. Firstly, the poster included a personal presentation: Sarah and Tomás explained what they were doing using the word 'neighbours', which encompasses both traditional and emerging urban values and practices of conviviality. On the one hand, this word is linked to the sociability and affection traditionally attributed in Spain to the working class neighbourhood as a shared living space. On the other hand, it resonates with the social and political 15-M movements. These relational concepts were re-appropriated by those movements and, as pointed out by Corsin and Estalella, were 'squatted' and linked to claims on the public space as being *commons* (2013: 122). Secondly, this poster introduced a main characteristic of citizen participation in the digital age based on the concept of 'voice', which entails a process of personal intervention whereby social agents provide information about themselves and the circumstances in which they act, at the same time involving others in their call and thus generating a 'community' of interests or of affected parties. The third important element of this poster was the *ordinary* action of opening up an email account whose addressee was solarpasilloverde@gmail.com. This action conferred to the plot an identity with affective potentialities (Stewart 2007) for collective action;[7] this autonomous occupation of the medium also produced a message which could lead to collective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). The name of the email account located the plot in the neighbourhood. At the same time, the categories *'solar'* (plot) and *'verde'* (green) drew attention to a set of neighbourhood demands that had been made over the past 25 years regarding the green areas and facilities under pressure from urban development; specifically, the Rail Green Belt Action Plan contained in the review of the 1985 General Urban Plan (Madrid Council 1997) and the Directing Plan to restore the Manzanares River (Madrid Council 2010).

These three aspects were also significant to understand the success of Sarah and Tomás' call and the way in which events later unfolded, in fact as a techno-political appropriation of a public space. Within a week of opening the gmail account, Sarah and Tomás proposed to open a Blog in order to record the clearing work that was being carried out and anything else happening in the plot. The Blog provided a material and durable environment where an appropriation of public space that was both analogue and digital was recorded. It did so through a personal journal that described the everyday work carried out by 'us', 'the neighbours'; photos and some text contributed to make it last. Participants in the clean-up of the plot warmly received the Blog. However, for the first two months the Blog was maintained only by Sarah, an American aged 24 who was trained in Global Studies and Art and had moved to Spain to start a new life with her boyfriend Tomás, of the same age. Tomás was trained in video and photography and his family had lived in the neighbourhood for a

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[7] Stewart suggests that affection relates to the 'animated inhabitation of things' (2007: 16), making up an 'animate circuit that conducts force and maps connections, routes, and disjunctures' (2007: 3).

long time, running a space for stage arts. So, the expression 'we, the neighbours' started to take shape in the Blog under Sarah's personal voice expressed in broken Spanish and with great excitement not only for the occupation process but also for meeting new people in the neighbourhood.

Three weeks later, approximately 15 people had joined the work group that met every week on the plot. Meanwhile, through the gmail account, requests to take part grew fast into a list of 25 participants. It was difficult to organise work in the space. Although Sarah and Tomás had started the initiative, no one claimed to be in charge and there was no predefined project for the space. Thus, when people turned up and asked what they could do to help, the answer was usually: 'we simply turn up and do whatever we consider to be necessary to improve this place.' Once the space was cleared of weeds, litter and rubble, people started expressing a feeling of 'unease' and 'not knowing what to do to move forward'. On 22 August, Sarah wrote in the Blog:

> 'After working for an hour today, Bruno suggested that we should hold a meeting to talk about our future plans for the project. Saying, "Hey, we're cleaning a space. Get raking!" is easy. Having a group of 15 people agree to what should be done with a space filled with possibilities is a different matter altogether'.

'Consensus! What a beautiful word': Founding a 'Community' and 'Opening' a Public Space.

The first assembly held on the plot on 22 August was attended by 15 people aged between 24 and 65. All described themselves as 'neighbours', inhabitants of a 'neighbourhood' that extended beyond the closest perimeter of the square. There were no architects, urban designers, activists experienced in the practice of squatting or any other agents linked to the abovementioned interventions and developments. We were a heterogeneous group in terms of age and profession that represented the most politically-active side of the neighbourhood's social fabric. There were young liberal professionals who did not have steady employment and lived with their parents. There were not-so-young liberal professionals who, despite their employment instability, wanted to have children and had relocated from the city centre to this district because it was less busy, somewhat cheaper and with more schools and parks. There were also senior citizens who had lived in the area for over 17 years and in the past had taken part in neighbourhood demands for the improvement of the local infrastructures.

The first topic of discussion was the need to 'reach an agreement' on how to use the space. This was decided in only 10 minutes. The activities that would be carried out were drawn up and it was decided that the project would be publicised in order to increase participation. For the majority the space should be kept 'open', 'for community use'; for them it was a 'public space', 'part of the plaza and the neighbourhood's history'. Several participants described it as an 'urban community garden'; as 'a place to recover neighbourly engagement', 'hold children's activities', 'live music' and 'workshops', and 'learn about urban ecology and agriculture'. After a single round taking turns to speak, the space was defined as a 'self-managed urban community garden', a 'space for neighbourhood meetings'

and 'cultural and ecological activities'. It was also agreed that any of these activities should be organised by those who proposed them, inasmuch as any participants in the assembly wanted to be 'organiser or representative of anything'. Several times, the younger crowd used expressions such as: 'Like in ¡Esto es una Plaza!' or 'Like the Campo de la Cebada', adding 'but without as many massive activities as in El Campo de la Cebada, which is a racket' or 'without any of those trendy design things; they're cool but I want to think of things for myself with the neighbours, here'. The re-appropriation of these models of intervention in the urban public space (and their production) suggested that they were used as strong 'prototypes' for organising an occupied public space. However, they were also questioned and contrasted with the explicitly shared idea of an 'autonomous' process that would follow its own pace: 'the garden that us neighbours do of our own accord'. This project was linked with subjective and affective experiences such as, 'my grandfather's garden in Jaen' or 'my garden in Arganda'.[8]

To the people in the assembly it seemed important to take the process of self-management of the space slowly, at a pace allowed by their personal life and without a pre-established programme;[9] it would be set only by events and expectations arising in the production process itself which, as I understood, was basically considered to be an act of neighbourly sociability, learning and collective work, an *oeuvre* (Lefebvre 1996 [1967]). Thus, a political claim on the right to inhabitation, appropriation and participation took shape; a 'right of use', rather than a 'right of exchange', that was consistent with the treatment of space as a resource in urban neo-liberal policies (Vasudevan 2014: 5).

The next point of discussion, linked to the new definition of the space, was to think of a new name for the plot. Tomás pointed out that 'it's no longer a simple plot of land, so I propose that we think of a new name for what we are creating'. The assembly agreed to open a 'public' participation process until the following meeting, using the mailing list and the Blog and talking with people who visited the garden. After the assembly, a notice board was set up. On it, a piece of paper read, 'Take part in the community vegetable garden!' (see n.1).

Significantly, no proposal was made at the time to disseminate or publicize the process offline through a campaign that would reach beyond the plot. Two weeks later, the ideas that had been expressed online and which Sarah, Tomás and I had collected during work meetings were discussed in a new assembly and voted on, as there was no consensus. The vegetable garden was named *La Revoltosa del Pasillo Verde* (The Mischievous/Rebellious One of the Green Belt). This denomination kept the words *Pasillo Verde* (and its aforementioned connotations) and in classic Madrid style included a *castizo* twist pointing to a modern sense of dissent and neighbourly opposition: *La Revoltosa* referred to the title of a *zarzuela*,[10] whose storyline follows a tale of love and jealousy that takes place in a *corrala*[11] at the end of the 19th Century. Therefore, the chosen denomination met the Madrid character of the

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[8] Arganda is a town near Madrid.

[9] In time, this concept would consolidate in practice.

[10] A *zarzuela* is a traditional operetta based in Madrid.

[11] A *corrala* is a traditional Madrid building; a dwelling with flats around a central courtyard.

neighbourhood also referring to the small *corrala* that stood on this plot of land.[12] Finally, *La Revoltosa* is a feminine word that refers to the beautiful protagonist of this *zarzuela*, a single woman who is desired in vain by many men. This tied in with the 'spirit' of the project, which was defined as 'self-managed', 'non-conformist', 'rebellious' and 'independent' from political parties, professional guilds and other collectives with an explicit history of squatting and self-management, for which there was, nonetheless, some sympathy.

However, in this phase of the project — defined as 'open', 'collective' and 'inclusive' — the words 'community' and 'neighbourhood' remained linked to those who essentially took part in the assembly and in the online community. A significant proportion of those who were intended to participate actively in the production of this public space — called 'neighbours' — was absent. The elderly, 'marginal people who spent most of their days and nights in Plaza de Peñuelas' and 'traditional middle-class families' were not there. This absence was unforeseen by the organizers; they were not expert activists but had some experience in online information networks of interest groups involved in civil and political action. They had taken for granted that every 'neighbour' would be aware of the online call, expecting it to have power of 'fast', 'widespread' dissemination beyond the sphere of personal relations. That this was not the case would have significant long-term consequences; in regard, firstly, to participation and to the legitimacy of the space in the social fabric and, secondly, to the concepts of 'community' and 'neighbour' on which the process of appropriation and management of this public space was based.

'*La Revoltosa*' On the Go: A 'Wonderful Chaos' that was Digitally Organised . . . and Disorganised

The assemblies that followed the first one tackled how to organise work avoiding what a 43 year-old woman described as 'a wonderful but unproductive chaos of people coming and going without really knowing what to do, how, or why'. A design for the space was agreed in a new assembly on 12 September. Sarah had written down the ideas that had been put forward and approved by consensus. The result included a perimeter of edible fruit bushes that limited the space without closing it; a central space for meetings and common activities with furniture built from recycled materials; raised terraces where to stir and fertilise the soil for planting vegetables, while land on the perimeter was allowed to recover; an area for aromatic herbs; and two compost bins. Álvaro, a 25 year old engineer, added the garden's measurements to the floor plan and defined the space to be allocated to each area. A friend of Álvaro prepared a 3D design aesthetically similar to the life simulation video game *Sims*, which we uploaded to the Blog and disseminated via email asking for suggestions for improvement. The development of the various spaces was done through the organisation of 'work groups' according to each person's 'skills', 'spare time' and 'interest in learning' the activities proposed. A majority decision was reached without 'leaders' or 'work group coordinators'. Some suggested that work should be truly collective. Others said they did not have spare time

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[12] The *corrala* was expropriated and torn down but in over 10 years no official decision has been made on how to use the land.

to become involved in regularly organised tasks. In general, it was difficult to coordinate the working hours of the participants and members moved from one group to another or became part of several groups at once, thus becoming involved in different tasks and learning processes. This prevented prolonged or strong leadership from arising.

During the first two assemblies, technological applications were agreed upon which would help to coordinate the activities of the work groups, comment on them or make suggestions. They were, a WhatsApp chat, a space for 'collective work and document archive' on Google Drive and a page and group on Facebook. As these applications were well known and widely used, it was agreed that they would help to produce, disseminate and subject to criticism the garden's activities, and to encourage greater participation. Two proposals were kept on hold that concerned the use of free software in line with the principles of 'openness' and 'horizontality' marking the process of space appropriation and dissemination of the initiative. From the start, it was emphasized that the administration and management of the apps should be public and shared and should reflect the different points of view, expectations and levels of involvement that came together in appropriating this plot of land — a 'public space' — and managing it as *commons*. While the unification of profile names under the label *Huerto La Revoltosa del Pasillo Verde* had been agreed, none of the logos or images that had been produced over time had been considered to be the sole representative of the project to the wider public. Passwords to the different apps were available to anyone who requests them on condition of carrying out 'responsible work' and being 'respectful' of the decisions that were agreed; in practice, however, holding the password was equated to ownership of the spade, the rake, the two hoes and the watering tools. These indispensable gardening tools were in the hands of the more stable group that participated regularly in the assemblies, cleaned up and tended to the garden. In turn, ownership of these objects (passwords and tools) contributed to establish this group as the main 'code programmer' of the garden in a technological-political sense; as the people, that is, who produced the garden's form and regulations (Latour 2005b).

Digital development was considered to be an inherent part of the garden. It was almost expected to grow automatically, as if it were to update itself according to what was happening in the physical garden, with no human interaction (such as, uploading photos, writing posts, sharing information, organising contacts and so on). In fact, at the time of writing no specific work group had been set up for coordinating and organising the production of the digital garden. Furthermore, the mere existence of the digital garden was expected to work as an 'objective'; permanently monitoring what took place in the garden, automatically generating a sense of 'transparency' and 'openness' that would attract the active participation of online and offline 'neighbours' and legitimising taking over the plot. In practice, this was not the case. The mutual accommodation between technology and people and the complex learning process led to a feeling of unease, constraint and frustration, which is worth describing briefly.

During the garden's initial stages, the Google account containing the mailing list *Huerto La Revoltosa* became the main tool for coordinating the activities, disseminating the information and launching suggestions to be discussed in the fortnightly assemblies. Over the first four months, the list increased to 65 members (currently, it includes 98 people).

Addresses were added as the online and offline requests arrived. In the first year no system was used to store contacts and no distinction was made between regular participants, online supporters and contacts established to seek advice, information, materials and documents or to advance in the aforementioned aims.[13] As no one sorted out the correspondence,[14] flows became long and confusing; general information was mixed with private information and with comments on unregulated practices. Moderation became a joint and ongoing learning task, leading also to some self-censorship. All this interference has led participants to say that 'this mail is a drag' and 'we need to use it only when necessary'. In September 2014, two lists were made, one including 40 regular participants and another including all contacts. However, activity decreased significantly and many occasional participants of the garden complained they no longer receive information.

The problems with the mailing list were not reproduced in the work and archival space opened with Google Drive. In this case, the problem was that participating in a digital environment was considered to be a task 'necessary' but 'tedious'. Many were also unfamiliar with this medium, which was seen as a 'space for bureaucracy'. Work in this sphere was carried out by a maximum of eight people. They wrote a document drawing inspiration from documents shared publicly on the websites of associations involved in negotiating with the administration with the aim of regulating the occupation of plots of land. As only a few people had contributed to this effort, the document was eventually shared with the general mailing list, asking for amendments and suggestions.

Moreover, once the clearing work done during the first month was over, the Blog was no longer updated, not even weekly. The comments section in the Blog depended on the posts published. However, as many 'work groups' did not use this space to communicate their work, it never really became a place for communication among those participating in the garden and visitors. Also the hyperlinks to other, related Blogs were underused. Therefore, the power of the Blog to generate a 'recursive' audience (Kelty 2008) contributing suggestions and modifications to the garden in real time remained limited. Half of the participants stated that they did not know anything about Wordpress and/or had never published in a Blog. Those who did know claimed to prioritise what they called 'manual activities' and 'fast and easy' communication. Also in this case, only eight people participated sporadically uploading minutes, describing the work carried out in the garden with photos and text, advertising activities and publishing some on the space and its history. Blogging was, however, key to updating how the plot was to be considered a lived and living space. The large use of photographs was especially relevant, bringing out the plot of land's past through old images of the plaza and the neighbourhood, highlighting the work that was being carried out and putting a face to those taking part in transforming the plot. This not only added veracity to the occupation as a neighbourhood initiative; it also contributed to creating a sense of authenticity and reliability.

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[13] These contacts included town council staff, neighbourhood associations, consumer groups, squatters' collectives and other gardens.

[14] Labels or headings could have been used to categorize it according to the topics.

The WhatsApp chat that was started after the second assembly with eight people and that currently brings together 20 people was the technology that most actively contributed to the social and technical production of the garden and to the community of participants. The chat brings together texts, photos and voice recordings. Those who have 'a wander in the garden' use the chat to communicate what they have done there and 'upload' their impressions on cleanliness, the humidity of the soil and the state of the plants, as well as novelties regarding neighbours participating in the project, the search for and the recycling of materials and Police activity. These comments form the basis for coordinating collective tasks and offer points of discussion at the assemblies which are then communicated to the mailing list or recorded as issues to be 'thought and talked about' in a future Blog post. As a result, as some of the participants put it, the chat has been the 'garden's hard core'; it is the main place for decision-making and organisation and, ultimately, the main artefact inscribing the longest-lasting and most cohesive form of 'us'. The WhatsApp chat has also become what someone called a *patio de vecinas* (communal backyard); a place for care and affection where we talk about holidays or apologise explaining our personal setbacks for missing our daily commitments. It is also the place where we talk about politics and arrange to attend cultural, political or leisure events, not always together, not always as *La Revoltosa* or as 'neighbours', but also as 'friends'. In this sense the chat reproduces the practices and relations linked to the popular expression *vecinos* (neighbours) and *vecinaje* (neighbouring), people who are close and affectively involved and who take care of each other and of their shared living space.

When it was started, the website www.facebook.com/www.HuertoLaRevoltosa (accessed 15 September 2015) failed to achieve its aim of communicating 'efficiently'. It was supposed to alleviate both the difficulties encountered with the email and the Blog and those of a barely-inclusive 'us' on WhatsApp. Three weeks after it opened, we realised that if someone wanted to publish as *Huerto La Revoltosa* they had to be an administrator; moreover, we also realised that the commenting system was as rigid as the Blog's; that we could not add or be added by 'friends'; that we could not participate in Facebook groups and that only the administrators' 'friends' were becoming 'fans' (without their knowledge). Of course, a Facebook page is not a profile. What we were explicitly asking of Facebook was to 'contact neighbours in the area' and other collectives on a personal basis, so that we could add them and they could add us as 'friends'. Reacting to what we considered to be a mistake, we did not start a profile but decided to open a Facebook group. This was also seen as a failure, as most participants found it difficult to be included in the group; only the people who were already 'friends' with the administrators were included, so the emails sent to invite people to join were ineffective.

The way in which the technologies described until now have been part of the dynamics of our communication, relationships, organisation and production as a group of neighbours and as a community, became critical when on 29 October 2013 our garden was abruptly dismantled by order of the Council's Department of Urban Planning.

'*La Revoltosa* Evicted, Resists!!': 'Harvesting' and 'Sowing' in a Virtual Garden

'29/10/13 11:54:48: Sarah: Guys! A neighbour just called to tell me there are policemen taking away the garden materials right now'.

This was the first alarm, posted on WhatsApp. Sarah immediately called Álvaro, who lived across the square, asking him to go to the garden. However, Álvaro was not at home; from his laptop at the University, he informed people in the general contact list. Less than a minute later, he copied and pasted the alerting message to the Facebook group and then shared the link to the Facebook post in an email, without a subject, aimed at the general mailing list. Later, he stated: 'I didn't really think much about it. I was overwhelmed and wanted everyone to know what was happening'. His actions made it possible for the news to reach those who were not in the Facebook group but were in the mailing list (the chaotic, unfiltered list). At that time, *Huerto La Revoltosa* did not have a Twitter account (it would be opened three days later.) However, the individual and collective agent who received the online alert, started to tweet the news and, within hours, the hashtag #huertolarevoltosaevicted acquired relevance. While a small crowd remained connected and alert, only a small group of four people witnessed events on the ground, trying to save plants, tools and other objects and taking pictures and videoing what was happening. They tried to narrate the story live through WhatsApp, Facebook and emails. At 15.45, while the Council staff were still in the garden, I published a report on the Blog including text and photos and unifying the information on what had happened. I wrote in the first person plural and used information and statements from online conversations. My fieldwork diary reads, 'I've written my first feature on the Blog alone. I tried to write according to the often-repeated idea that "the garden is each and all of us neighbours"'. In the coming days, those preliminary accounts and pictures drafted, consulted and shared online would be essential to setting up collective actions.

During the day, several people suggested and agreed through different channels to end the day with an 'emergency assembly' on what was once again a plot of land with the aim of 'organising ourselves' and as an 'act of protest and resistance'. At 7 p.m. only eight people gathered by the parked earth-diggers. Standing in a circle, we reflected on what had taken place. Low attendance was attributed to the fact that the dismantling had taken place, perhaps on purpose, during a long bank holiday weekend. However, there was also a general feeling of disappointment that Elena put into words saying, 'I have the feeling of not having really connected with the neighbours who have lived in the area all their lives'. In spite of this disappointment, most seemed to agree that the garden was the object and driver of participation in the neighbourhood; therefore, the only way to garner greater local support and legitimise a new attempt of creating a space 'for community use' out of that plot was to focus on 'keeping the memory of the garden alive' and connect with the demands made by other gardens in the ongoing negotiation process aimed at legalising urban gardens. During this meeting, it was agreed that in future assemblies, the opinions expressed through the mailing list and the Facebook page should also be considered alongside those of the people physically present. On that first day there were already 20 decisive proposals, including engaging in symbolic acts of protest, such as sowing small gardens across the neighbourhood; writing a

press release; starting a change.org petition; occupying the plot and rebuilding the garden with the help offered by the Urban Gardens Network; and establishing ourselves as a neighbourhood association and demanding temporary cession of the land. Having considered all these proposals, a majority agreed on 'continuing the struggle' as a 'community garden' and that action could follow two non-exclusive paths. First, the space could be re-occupied through carrying out activities on the plot that would remind people of the existence of a garden; this action would culminate in establishing a new garden. Second, the administration could be asked to allow us 'to temporarily use it as a community urban garden'. This implied turning *Huerto La Revoltosa del Pasillo Verde* into a neighbourhood association that would formally submit a project to the Town Council and becoming more actively involved in forums where the legalisation of urban gardens was publicly discussed and defended; among them, there were the Meetings of the Garden Network and other meetings taking place in the *Matadero de Madrid Cultural Centre* and *MediaLab Prado* under the name The Citizens' Table. In those meetings, since 2012, different associations, collectives and professionals including City Council politicians and staff, had discussed what was described as 'citizen participation in managing what is public'.[15]

Following the assembly held on the night when the garden was forcibly dismantled, Bruno designed and sent via the mailing list a poster to be disseminated online. It included three pictures of the garden; one of the plot in its original state of decay, one of people sowing and watering the garden and one of the diggers tearing everything down. The three captions read: 'a plot of land abandoned for years', 'is turned by the neighbours into a garden' and 'the Town Council tears it down by way of thanks'. That night, Armando and I wrote press releases which we shared through the mailing list the next day to be agreed upon prior to publication. The two texts were merged into a single press release. People agreed to disseminate it massively in their public profiles and in private correspondence, involving friends and relatives, the media and so on. We signed the press release as 'The neighbours who promoted and have been supporting *Huerto La Revoltosa*'. In what was our most direct statement ever, we wrote, 'We reassert our commitment to the vision and mission of *La Revoltosa*: the creation of urban community gardens where there are abandoned plots of land. We will continue working to achieve the temporary cession of the plot and to bring life back to *Huerto La Revoltosa* organised as a neighbourhood association'. This note ended by raising the possibility of lodging formal complaints through the website of the Town Council and included the link for people to do so.

On 31 October, Bruno wrote to the mailing list:

'Have you seen that Anonymous Spain has shared the pictures of the garden and that almost one thousand people have shared them? There's a big debate going on, on their Facebook page'.

On 1 November, BT wrote on WhatsApp:

> '01/11/13, 11:41:39. I don't know if you've thought about this, but there's a
> stretch of wall from the old "*corrala*" that is still standing. If it's painted white
> and a simple message sprayed in black (I think I have some), it would be quite
> eye-catching ;-)'.

That night, a small group met at the plot and wrote in children's handwriting: *La Revoltosa*. Nothing else. More than the occupation of the plot ever had, the dismantling of the garden had turned this project into a public and political issue. Around its carcass, its absence strongly objectivised its presence and its existence. The picture of the graffiti was shared across the media and for a while was the header image for the Blog, the profile image of the Facebook group and the WhatsApp group chat. Between 1st and 7th November, the dismantling of the garden was mentioned in several national and local newspapers, on the radio and on television.

In a new assembly held on 7 November, an agreement was reached to 'make the most of media exposure' and start a petition on change.org to collect signatures in support of the claim, 'We don't want abandoned public plots of land but gardens that are cared for by the neighbours'. However, several participants again pointed out that we had failed to 'reach the area's neighbours', that there was a 'clear lack of information on the streets' and that 'according to rumours heard from old people out for a walk', the dismantling of the garden had also been a response to complaints made by at least three neighbours living in a tower block near the garden. It was therefore agreed to set up information desks in order to explain 'the community urban garden project', receive suggestions and collect signatures. This would happen over one week, with morning and evening shifts. Posters and signing sheets would be left in the local businesses and schools and leaflets with a brief history of the garden and the relevant online addresses would be posted in mailboxes in the area. It would also be possible to sign the petition online. The change.org petition obtained 1,430 signatures in less than one month. 300 signatures were collected at the information desks together with several proposals and written complaints about the garden. Thus, we met those who did not support the garden. They were mainly middle-class neighbours aged 40 and over with traditional conservative values who wished this to be a quiet residential area in the city centre. Their main concerns were that the plot, and by extension the plaza, would become a noisy space with night parties and crowded activities, or that it would become established as a place for radical left-wing activities that would prevent the Town Council from improving or expanding the facilities in the neighbourhood.

After this, the garden lived on, though not as a space for growing vegetables. It continued its existence as an online space. A collaborative work was carried out to formalise a project written by six hands and delivered in four different formats to four different departments of the Madrid City Council. A request was also made for the temporary cession of the land. *Huerto La Revoltosa* remained as a public online space. It was a place to hold public assemblies and conversations, to exchange information among people who called themselves 'gardeners', '*revoltosos*' (mischievous, rebellious) and 'neighbours' but also with

silent passers-by and occasional visitors who shared news on the legalisation process of gardens and on ecological and political events. Furthermore, the online *Huerto La Revoltosa* began to be treated as the garden itself; 'virtual watering shifts' were organised fortnightly which involved checking the email account and publishing the contents. Thus, *Huerto La Revoltosa* began calling assemblies, parties, meals on the plot and meetings with the district's neighbours associations. It also narrated the administrative journey aimed at obtaining the cession of the plot and offered information on the history of the space via Blog posts. But *Huerto La Revoltosa* also existed 'as a self-managed community garden of neighbours' participating in the meetings of the Madrid Urban Garden Network on the latter's website and was included in the Wikimap of urban gardens in Madrid. Moreover it was mentioned in eco-friendly publications and conferences that discussed the growth of urban gardens in Madrid, in the meetings of architects and urban planners debating citizen initiatives aimed at appropriating public spaces, in the meetings of the District Council where we were supported or condemned and in meetings where the Plan to regulate urban community gardens in Madrid was discussed. This Plan was finally approved in the summer of 2014. *Huerto La Revoltosa* was not among the 17 gardens that were legalised.

In short, between October 2013, when it was dismantled, and February 2014 the garden lived a virtual existence, updated in a variety of ways, both analogue and digital. This virtual existence made *Huerto La Revoltosa* no less real (Lévy 1999: 11).

La Revoltosa del Pasillo Verde formally became a neighbours association on paper. The update that followed did not result from the vain attempts to achieve a temporary cession of the plot. On the contrary, it resulted from a new slow occupation of the plot that aimed to start a new stage in keeping with the pace of its participants' daily lives and their personal wishes and desires. In its reappearance as a garden, *La Revoltosa del Pasillo Verde* has gradually moved away from the frantic 'aggregation logic' of social media practiced when it existed only virtually (Juris 2012),. It has resumed an online/offline activity based on a closer 'connective logic' (Juris 2012) maintaining and intensifying contacts with specific agents that are mainly located in the District and are considered to be 'more akin' and 'useful'. This connective practice has been carried out in accordance with a wish, often stated in informal conversations and in the assemblies, of not imposing organisational paces or production processes that belong to environments and agents that have 'different motivations'. Ana, a 45-years-old language teacher, expressed this position clearly during a work meeting attended by three people. As I complained about the low level of participation; she said, 'well... the thing is... none of us have a professional dedication to or expectation of the garden, we come here because we feel like it. Sometimes it feels like certain drifts set the pace; an ambition of doing things, of being everywhere; it doesn't need to be like that, right?'

La Revoltosa reawakened at a pace consistent with being interpreted as something 'from the neighbourhood' and it was continuously monitored through active listening, a position made necessary by its previous dismantling. With this in mind, for instance, the production is done by compact work shifts in order to avoid the feeling of a space in a continuous state of 'work-in-progress'. A more homogenous outlook has lessened the feeling of precariousness and ephemeral infrastructure. However, *La Revoltosa* continues to reflect the reality of being

somewhat amateurish, built with scarce resources by several hands through 'copy/pasting' prototypical objects from here and there.

Conclusions

The blooming of urban gardens in Madrid is acquiring significant visibility and impact, bringing about relevant changes in the relations between the administration and civil society. Urban gardens are part of the political and associative artefacts or political assemblies (Latour 2005b) that bring together new and old citizens' claims for participating in the management of urban resources, rekindling traditional figures such as 'neighbour' and 'community'. Technological and digital mediations appear as a practically banal fact. However, they are important in these processes, configuring what I have called the imagery of a 'sentient' city. They play a role in the way in which we conceive the city, in the different forms of appropriation of and claims on the public space and their legitimacy, and even in associative local dynamics.

The relationship between technologies and humans can be better understood as a 'shared agency' (Latour 2005a), which is not without complexity, contradictions and unwanted effects. In their actions, human agents attach spurious meanings to ICTs and make use of them in ways for which they have not necessarily been designed. In turn, through their design and functioning, ICTs establish dynamics, logic and relations that are unexpected by humans. In this regard I have highlighted three key processes. On the one hand, I have discussed how traditional relationships such as 'community' and 'neighbourhood' are produced remedially (Bolter and Grusin 2000) through the analogue and digital process of appropriating a plot of land and producing *Huerto La Revoltosa*. They act as coordinates of a concern that is both affective and political about what is public and common; of what, located in the lived space of the 'neighbourhood', confers the right of use and management. Thus, they legitimise appropriation of the public space as urban commons, reinventing and updating the community urban values of coexistence, implication and care which belong to the idealised past of neighbourhoods of the city which, as in the case presented here, are undergoing processes of gentrification. On the other hand, I have pointed out how the 'connective logic of networking' (belonging to mailing lists and Blogs) and the 'aggregation logic of social media' such as Facebook and Twitter (Juris 2012) have had significant effects on the remedial practices of the categories 'community' and 'neighbour'. Using the Blog and the email was at the heart of people's starting a process of collective identification, producing a sense of involvement as a 'community' and representing themselves as 'us, the neighbours', to themselves and to others. It has encouraged those who were most involved in the project to start building ties and connections with similar movements, organisations, groups and so on. As a consequence, the garden and the neighbourhood have become visible in the digital sphere of civil and political activity. It has also strengthened the demand for the open circulation of information and the practice of collaboration via decentralised (and not necessarily localised) coordination. Use of Facebook (and, later, of Twitter and of the change.org app) has fostered the coming together of actors as individuals and has been decisive at specific times; in particular at key moments of confrontation and negotiations with

the Town Council, when dissemination was necessary to gaining legitimacy and perpetuating the garden and to gathering a visible mass support that transcended the physical and strictly local space. However, the agents' expectation that digital technologies and applications would expand and maintain the active participation of the district's inhabitants was never met. Instead, these technologies have contributed to consolidate an extended online 'community' mainly based on political affinity, a community that is engaged yet dispersed across many different online and offline civil and political initiatives and that has engaged in little or no direct participation in the physical tasks carried out in the garden. They have also contributed to consolidate a 'community' that is actively involved with the garden but snugly closed in itself, giving rise to networks of online and offline emotion, affection and care as it maintains the garden.

As the fieldwork on which this article is based is ongoing, I continue to combine the roles of anthropologist and neighbour-activist. So far, I have been active in the physical and digital production of the urban community garden, while engaging in participant observation, in-depth interviews and online ethnographic follow-up. I have kept a militant stance in several contexts of discussion and decision-making without hiding my role as an anthropologist who is researching the process in which we are immersed. This has enabled me to learn various skills — especially online skills and the use of social media from a community activism perspective — in a process that I have shared with a variety of agents who for the most part are not expert activists; they are geeks, hackers, online journalists and other tech-minded citizens. For me, this has not only formed the basis for a reflective exploration of what it means to use ICTs in such settings; it has also been, as pointed out by Hine (2000: 70): 'a way of developing a richer understanding of the practices on which both production and use of artefacts in a Network is based'.

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