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Urban Mediations and Collective Architecture: Zuloark and the Case of Campo de Cebada, Madrid

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Abstract: Between 1996 and 2006, Spain saw the emergence of several architectural collectives whose practices challenged both the disciplinary models and the organizational structures that had accompanied the urban growth of the early years following the arrival of democracy in 1975. As this paper will argue, these groups – Recetas Urbanas, Zuloark, and Basurama, among others – acted as laboratories for testing alternative approaches to addressing the various crises that coincided with the arrival of the 21st century and that questioned the dominant models of city-making. Based on the role played by Zuloark in the open public design space of Campo de Cebada, this research delves into the notion of mediation as a means to decenter the architectural object, orienting the practice of architecture toward new alliances with other agents (e.g., public administrations, civil society, citizen movements, etc.). We will show how these mediation processes mobilize »minor knowledges« (Braidotti 2019), unfolding from »intra-actions« (Barad 2007) that form »recursive communities« (Kelty 2008). These in turn promote, build, and care for city fragments with ecological, participatory, and more sensitive principles, thereby opening the possibility for other urban futures.

Keywords: Mediation; Minor Architecture; Intra-Action; Recursive Public; Zuloark.

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Introduction. Collective Practices in the Midst of Real Estate, Political, and Ecological Crises.

Between 1996 and 2006, Spain saw the emergence of several architectural collectives whose practices challenged both the disciplinary models and the organizational structures that had accompanied the urban growth of the early years following the arrival of democracy in 1975. At that time, Madrid and Seville acted as urban laboratories, being the most active contexts for this type of practice. In Seville, the work of Santiago Cirugeda from 1996 could be seen as a form of hacking, using scaffolding, debris containers, and ephemeral architectures to challenge the administrative frameworks associated with land use, as well as construction and social regulations, fostering citizen empowerment and learning through open-source manuals. In Madrid, three different groups of students from the ETSAM[1], dissatisfied with the lack of cultural and political energy, set up their practices by approaching urbanism through political critique and participation (Laboratorio Urbano 2001–2012), or creating spaces between architecture, territory, thought, and sustainability through workshops, lectures, urban actions, and exhibitions, bridging the gap separating academia and the street (Basurama, 2001–until present; Zuloark, 2001–until present). Our hypothesis is that their emergence can be interpreted as a response to the multiple crises that characterized this period (climate, real estate, professional, and academic). By embracing practices in which mediation processes displaced the centrality of the architectural object and questioned the project itself as the only device for accessing reality, they revealed and helped make possible unprecedented professional alternatives that affected both the ways of making architecture and its material results.

The Spanish case is mirrored in other parts of Europe, where collective practices in architecture experienced a resurgence in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Awan/Schneider/Till 2011; Donat-Cattin 2022; Espinosa Pérez 2024: 34–35), with cases such as Esterni (Milan, 1995), Bruit du Frigo (Bordeaux, 1997), Superuse (Netherlands, 1998), Raumlabor (Berlin, 1999), Coloco (Paris, 1999), Atelier d'Architecture Autogèree (Paris, 2002) or Exyzt (Paris, 2002). While many of these groups began as testing grounds for alternative modes of internal organization, some of them had achieved a certain professional –

1 Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid (Spain's oldest state school of architecture). Universidad Politécnica de Madrid.

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economic – autonomy by the time the dominant city-building methods collapsed with the Great Recession of 2007/2008, caused by the bursting of subprime mortgages in the United States of America and its subsequent effects in Europe, and Spain in particular.[2] The conditions shared by these collectives are: Horizontal organization, medium scale of usually four to a dozen members with a flexible composition – members can join or leave easily, especially during the initial stages – and self-imposed disciplinary agendas aligned with political stances aimed at protecting the commons by questioning certain neoliberal and consumerist city models (Espinosa Pérez 2024: 98, 166, 224). To better understand the scope of the transformations introduced in Spain by an architectural and urban practice linked to collaboration, commons, and free culture, we will use Zuloark and their work in/with Campo de Cebada, Madrid, as a case study. This project interweaves topics brought forward by Santiago Cirugeda, namely city, self-construction, and loopholes in building regulations, with those of Basurama with action, play, materiality, and waste, Staddle3 (Barcelona, 1998–until present) or Todo por la Praxis (Madrid, 2008–until present) with activism, manuals, and free culture. This case will help us reveal which of their specific practices have helped drive changes in both the models for professional organization and the role of the architect. The methodology for this research has consisted in an ethnographic practice that has accompanied and lived this process. The authors were part of these processes[3] and have carried out interviews

2 The emergence of these collectives in Spain is closely tied to the spread of neoliberal policies promoted by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, US President Ronald Reagan, and later, Prime Minister of Spain José Maria Aznar (1996–2004), challenging the sustainability of this model of progress based on unlimited resource consumption. In Spain, this crisis overlapped with two key transformations: The liberalization of professional services (Omnibus Law, 2009), which weakened professional associations and deregulated the field; and the Bologna-driven restructuring of architectural education, which broke with traditional models without offering clear alternatives. At the same time, the environmental crisis placed new responsibilities on architecture, calling for more ethical, supportive, and sustainable practices. Although initially not central, this concern aligned with the collectives' approaches and gained critical support. The 1998 Land Law and the real estate boom (1997–2008) intensified urban growth and changed the organization of studios, while digitalization and school proliferation brought young, low-cost labor into increasingly precarious work environments.

3 Espinosa was a co-founder of the PKMN collective (2006–2016) and collaborated with Zuloark and Basurama on several projects.

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with relevant actors, collected participant observations, and lived embodied experiences between 2011 and 2023.

Along the way, we will observe how the notion of mediation appears as a fundamental condition of a spatial practice that enables a design process that is situated, negotiated (Schneider in: Bader et al. 2022: 160), and inclusive of multiple participants. Mediation implies a contemporary architectural competence, amidst design, management, participation, and sociotechnical enrollment,[4] and is fundamental in understanding the transformative potential and scope of these types of practices in a society who had only escaped four decades of repressive dictatorship 25 years earlier. These practices, engaged in an activism committed to its present, designed more fair and equitable futures that moved away from the status quo, still centered on modernist obsessions with growth, resource consumption, exclusionary rationality, or technical solutions as a paradigm of intervention (Espinosa Pérez 2024: 118). In particular, we will focus on how these mediation processes mobilized what Rosi Braidotti (2019) characterizes as »minor or nomadic knowledge.« A kind of knowledge that cannot be detached from bodies and histories, or appropriated by disciplines. We will also see how the notion of »intra-actions« deployed by Karen Barad (2007) is useful for assessing the effectiveness of this knowledge. Particularly within practices of social cohesion, which are also practices of design that make up what Christopher Kelty (2008: 3) called »recursive public,« in this case, those that guard, promote, build, and care for fragments of the city from ecological, participatory principles that are more sensitive to a planet in crisis.

Zuloark: The Building is Not the Battlefield

Zuloark emerged in 2001 in Madrid (ETSAM and CEU architecture schools),[5] as a collective of architecture students eager to approach their career with a playful, proactive, and collaborative attitude:

4 This notion of mediation transcends the genealogies linked to art (Fontdevila 2018) or media studies (Galloway/Thacker/Wark 2014).

5 Although most of Zuloark's members began studying architecture at the private CEU university in Madrid in 1998, they continued and completed their studies at the ETSAM (Madrid School of Architecture) in 2001, giving rise to the collective.

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> »The origin of Zulo lies in realizing from the beginning that in school, projects are completed faster with more classmates compared to doing them alone. And in architecture, where you have long-haul projects […], doing it with people freed you from your prejudices a bit and you could do it more freely, learning more, having more fun. […] What brought it all together was leisure and productivity, which meant getting things done but having a good time« (Manuel Pascual and Aurora G. Adalid. Interview conducted by Enrique Espinosa in 2011).[6]

Initially, the group was a loose and growing network of more than twenty people, until it stabilized around about six people in 2009, and twelve in 2025. In 2004, Zuloark won their first competition of national relevance and in 2006 they began a process of professionalization that accelerated in 2009 with their presence as assistant directors for the Spanish Biennial of Architecture and Urbanism.[7] In 2010, they started a line of spatial practices driven by the Inteligencias Colectivas initiative and their participation, with the Gran Vía Gran Obra project, in the 2010 La Noche en Blanco event (fig. 1). These projects involved experiments in public space using open-source logics based on collaborative self-construction and circular economy principles. These initial transversal interests and their convergence in public space, along with a sophisticated mode of participating in civic processes, situated between activism, technical advice, and the weaving and maintenance of peer networks, was put into practice in a more elaborate manner between 2011 and 2017 in Campo de Cebada, a plot of land located in the La Latina

6 The quotes in this article are excerpts from interviews conducted by Enrique Espinosa between 2011 and 2023.

7 »In 2007–2008, we started finishing our degree and began to professionalize. During that time, there were debates and splits… and there was a debate about whether to maintain the structure of Zuloark as an amateur project, or whether to professionalize it. That transition coincided with the crisis. At the beginning, we entered competitions in a more conventional way […]. But starting in 2008, we refocused our practice without losing those aspects of authorship, of how we structure ourselves, of openness, and flexibility… Those transitions are soft. In 2014–2015, a third phase began, in which we tried to make the structure more caring. Manu said at the beginning that there was this ›you sign as Zuloark and you have common resources, a meeting place, and a group that gives you security‹. […] Our effort since then has been to consolidate that… So there are three phases: the student–activist phase, the beginning of professionalization, and this third phase that allows us to work together.« (Juan Chacón and Manuel Pascual. Zuloark, 2021)

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1.
Installation on Gran Vía, Madrid, 2010 (left), and its second life in El Gallinero slum (rigth). Photograph by Zuloark.

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neighborhood, the abandonment of which can be seen as one of the urban collapses of the 2008 crisis.

For urban anthropologists Alberto Corsín and Adolfo Estalella (Corsín 2014, 2017; Corsín/Estalella 2016, 2023), activism associated with free culture in Spain – and they refer often to Zuloark and Basurama as two important cases – intersects three agendas around the concept of »freedom«: The philosophy of liberty associated with the hacker ethos of free software, the libertarian aspirations of autonomous movements, and the right-to-the-city demands of grassroots struggles. At this intersection, these scholars propose the concept of »Free/Libre Urbanism,« which envisions a city model at odds with liberal urbanism and top-down institutional planning. It is within this framework that Zuloark and similar collectives operate, challenging disciplinary expectations about what architecture can be or do.

It is important to note that many of these architectural collectives and networks understand their own studios as spaces for self-training, complementing the shortcomings of architecture schools' academic curriculum regarding internal management skills and action in the real city. One of the concepts coined by developmental psychologist L.S. Vygotsky, the »zone of proximal development« (Vygotsky 1934), proposes learning contexts as spaces in which one does not know how to do something, but in which one is able to learn how to do it with help. Zones of proximal development in which learning occurs through the interactions among its members and with the outside world; a learning that we could define as P2P because it does not occur through a deductive »teacher–student« method, but rather through amateurism, interaction, and the search for help among peers. Cases such as Basurama and Zuloark came together and became active during their time at university, and they represent communities whose ways of doing things involve creative and hacker methodologies that encourage group learning and peer recognition (Himanen 2001: 51). The Zuloark collective itself has been explicitly using the notions of »zone of proximal development« since 2002, and its members consider »Zulo« to be »the master's degree I could never have afforded.«[8] This way of organizing the collective, from its earliest logistical experiments, has entailed highly committed communication and solidarity protocols, not without risks. In fact, in that first shared apartment in 2004 in Atocha, it was already established that any professional work carried out by Zuloark must entail a return of 20% of the income to the shared structure:

8 Planeta Beta, Radio Círculo Program, Capítulo 1, Zuloark, February 26, 2009.

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> »The horizontal structure has always existed in Zulo. Is it horizontal? No, actually, if you look at it closely, there are many variations. We call it ›fluid hierarchies‹ […] We felt very comfortable being reflected in what was happening in the 15M movement or what was happening in La Cebada. It's not so much that we assimilated those structures, but rather that we shared the way of structuring and organizing ourselves, ways in which we felt seen […].« (Manuel Pascual. Zuloark. Interview conducted in 2021 by Enrique Espinosa).

Within these collectives, the roles of the members rotate. Although members of the collective may recognize certain strengths or unique skills in one another, there is no rigid assignment of tasks and certainly no stratification throughout the different phases of each project. In horizontal, collaborative structures, defining work protocols involves more than just establishing dynamics, rhythms, methodologies, or decision-making guidelines: Between the »hardware« (the team structure and its governance) and production, there is a layer of »software« or sensitive tools that expand and enable better organization, communication, and task completion among team members (fig. 2).

Zuloark has implemented various tools, ranging from internal communications to work organization and information flow, archiving, etc. But above all, they have established three synchronization protocols that involve an important relational dimension. The first is the division of infrastructural tasks, i.e. the underlying design processes, into three areas (governance, economy, and communication), where team members take responsibility and organize autonomously, booking an inter-area meeting (govecom) once a month. The second is »the Tuesday meeting,« systematized since 2015 and limited to one-hour, which allows for organizing project developments, any associated human resources, and calendars.

> »How are decisions made? At Tuesday meetings, we've probably voted twice in ten years. So, in reality, decisions aren't made; they're inhabited and settled, as Amador says. That's the key. The same thing happened at La Cebada. It sounds like a cliché, but it's true, I assure you. Tuesday meetings are for getting together, seeing each other, and raising concerns if someone is involved in a project that isn't profitable but ends up being done anyway… It's more about being there.« (Manuel Pascual. Zuloark. Interview conducted in 2021 by Enrique Espinosa).

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The third one is the »Zulocongress,« a face-to-face meeting held during the last week of January, which serves both to review the previous year and plan Zuloark's future agenda and work conditions, as well as to celebrate together with the collective's close affective-professional community. These meetings have been key in implementing horizontal organization and self-care strategies, such as extending the workday, vacations, or enhancing the value of certain non-productive jobs (Espinosa Pérez 2024: 85). It is important to note that it is akin to free culture conferences. For anthropologist Gabriella Coleman, these conferences, or »cons« in the hacker communities, are not mere gatherings to optimize the functioning of a community of practice, or even to learn new technical-productive matters. Rather, they are »rituals of confirmation, liberation, celebration, and reenchantment« (Coleman 2013: 48) in which to recognize oneself as a community and value the qualities of one's social and productive life.

We can also look at these collectives and their work tools as labor experiments where, despite the initial precariousness, the work models developed often helped overcome some of the most complicated effects of the crisis in the sector. These cooperative structures have created working conditions that, although by no means highly salaried, have qualitative benefits such as more flexibility, an ethical backbone, or proportionality across the team members' salaries. Thus, the extractivism inherent in any corporate structure aligned with neoliberal capitalism is challenged by increasingly self-aware ways of working, where inspiring terms such as »care« or »good living« are more and more central to the internal debates and decision-making processes. Another revealing aspect is all the analogies that arise between these groups of architects and certain communities linked to free software and culture, characterized by horizontality, open codes and sources, or the sophisticated construction of communication and design tools, which these groups of architects »modulate« (Kelty 2008: 2, 12, 16, 245), explicitly or implicitly.

On Different Notions of Mediation: Campo de Cebada

On September 12, 2010, the streets of Madrid were being cleaned up after the end of La Noche en Blanco event. A few days earlier, in Plaza de Cebada, the French collective Exyzt had built an ephemeral pool with wooden slats and a plastic sheet, in memory of the municipal pool that once occupied the site. This pool, demolished in 2009 by the City Council in order to rebuild it, had

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2.
Collaborative work session for internal organization at the Zulocongress, Berlin 2015. © Zuloark.

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left an urban void, and the new intervention, which included a new facility to be designed by the winning architects of a 2007–2008 competition, had been suspended due to the economic crisis, yet it had also been met with certain public opposition. The exceptional nature of the temporary opening of the building site for the cultural events of La Noche en Blanco triggered debates about the fates of these kinds of plots, an opportunity seized by local architect groups such as Basurama, Zuloark, and Todo por la Praxis, in collaboration with local residents and the Regional Federation of Neighborhood Associations of Madrid (FRAVM). This experience, as well as some other precedents,[9] provided the legal and organizational basis for the community that emerged from the former La Latina pool to present a project to the City Council to claim the use of the land. Thus, on January 21, 2011, the use agreement was signed, and on May 15, Campo de Cebada opened its doors to the public as a public square.

Campo de Cebada was one of the nodes in a network of initiatives that were deployed over 2011, and which, through a series of projects, activated multiple urban concepts aligned with the political sensibilities in the air during and after the 15M movement,[10] e.g. urban commons, neighborhood assemblies, public squares, citizen participation, or environmental awareness. Zuloark was a very active participant in all forums. Furthermore, their infrastructure supported this kind of »non-productive« work and understood it as labor hours even though it was not mediated by a contract with any public or private entity. Zuloark members did not only coordinate and participate in workshops to build urban infrastructure such as dry toilets, bleachers, planters, and benches. They also participated in the weekly assembly, drafted projects with the community members to obtain public subsidies, and mediated between the administration, the local associations,

9 It should be noted that, in parallel, between 2008 and 2010, a complex urban process had taken place in the nearby neighborhood of Lavapiés, with the Esta es una Plaza project and its associated organization, which constituted a precedent for the transfer of municipal land for community management and use.

10 The 15M movement in Madrid is a phenomenon derived from the Arab Spring of 2010 and connected to the Occupy movement that swept the world in 2011. It began on May 15, 2011, with a large national demonstration driven by the crisis, austerity policies, and generational despair, and it triggered various encampments in squares such as the Acampada de la Puerta del Sol in the center of Madrid.

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and other stakeholders in order to activate the Campo de Cebada space itself.[11] This was highly relevant as it created a middle ground between activist and professional practice. Moreover, participation in this network allowed Zuloark to cement three key pillars for its own future: Firstly, expanding the collective's learning, acquiring tools and contacts that would allow them to understand urban practices that mediate between administration, public space, and citizenship; secondly, forging a dense network of peer agents; lastly, these sophisticated support and guidance projects would eventually crystallize into professional work.

During its six years of existence, Campo de Cebada was a laboratory for collective citizen practices where a range of different experiences were tried and tested, for example construction (workshops for furniture making), environmental awareness (creation of a community garden, and manufacturing with recycled materials), culture (music and fanzine festivals, conferences, singer-songwriter sessions, and theater), and citizen mediation (weekly assemblies, agreements, and alliances between neighbors).

Campo de Cebada became a crucial experience for other projects like Autobarrios (Basurama, 2013), although it cannot be explained without the prior trajectory of the architecture collectives involved, which, beyond activism, free culture, and the commons, is marked by experiences with self-construction and DIY (Corsín/Estalella 2023) (figs. 3 and 4). This set of interests, often composed of non-academic knowledge, expands as a disciplinary field and agenda where other pedagogies and learning spaces are tested (Corsín/Estalella 2016). These include modes of construction that dissent from those of the real estate market, such as open and modular practices (Kelty 2008), in which construction manuals and management guides coexist with protocols for enrolling and transmitting knowledge, similar to the communities around free software described by Kelty, and spaces of affection, participation, and citizen engagement that challenge, as minor architectures (Stoner 2012), top-down models of city planning and materialization.

11 »There was always a desire to make reproductive tasks something that was done together […]. The leap that occurred when we set that fee meant, for example, that those of us who participated in the Campo de Cebada project were surely the only agents in all of Cebada who were being paid for carrying out that project, because Zulo supported us. I mean, the hours we spent in La Cebada were hours of work in Zulo […]. And that was supported because the structure had already said that here we all earn the same and move forward.« (Manuel Pascual. Zuloark, 2021)

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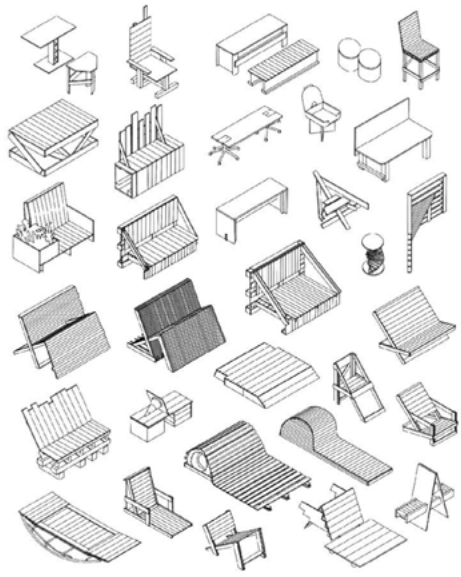
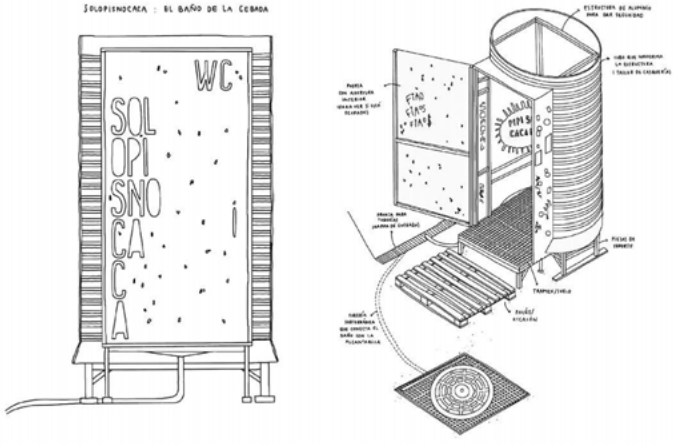


3.
Catalog of open-source chairs built in the Campo de Cebada workshops. © Anna Salom (Zuloark).



4.
Scheme of the W.C. »Solopisnocaca.« (»Pee yes, poop no«), designed by Zuloark. Cebada Field Design Manual. © Anna Salom (Zuloark).

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Overall, Campo de Cebada represents an example – in a real city – of a shift in architects' interest from the design of architectural objects to the design of mediation processes[12] As a result of this, and due to the inclusion of a much more heterogeneous range of agents and the so-called »minor knowledges« (Braidotti 2019), there is an emergence of objects of difficult affiliation as well as other types of socio-material assemblages. In summary, three types of mediation are evident in Zuloark's work for, in, and with Campo de Cebada:

First, the Campo de Cebada is a space of material mediation that unites a basic materiality (wood, steel rods, tubes, screws, and basic tools) and an immediacy that escapes the usual lengthy process times of management and construction. Additionally, the materials that make up, are recovered, drilled, or screwed in Cebada are residues of diverse origin and therefore require easily accessible tools and knowledge. Due to their »immediacy,« these materials are treated as opportunities, but they are also useful in driving citizen mediation processes. We could say that their presence is as recognizable as a popular song, inviting the activation of citizen co-design and co-production processes. These experiments transcend the notion of object – furniture or public space – or ecological awareness – through the recovery of discarded material – to become spaces of socialization and building city and citizenship. In this sense, designing and building could be seen as mediation practices, where the results are less important than the debates and the invitation for citizens to participate in the process (fig. 5).

Second, this experience involves an affective or »soft« mediation (Espinosa Pérez 2024: 127) between the particular people with whom Zuloark operates, in their dual role as architects and neighbors. An example that illustrates this well is one presented by Alberto Corsín (2017) through the words of Manuel Pascual, a member of Zuloark, as well as part of the assembly and the active community of Campo de Cebada. He described the coexistence protocol with Don Antonio, a neighbor whose balcony overlooks the square. Manuel explained how, when the sound of amplified equipment was too loud during an event, Antonio called Manuel directly to have the volume turned down in Campo de Cebada.

12 This change is gradual and happens both through ephemeral and urban experiences such as those by Santiago Cirugeda (1996–2002) or the aforementioned Esta es una Plaza (2008–), other ephemeral ones developed in protected contexts such as festivals and biennials, such as the Basurama festivals (2001–2006) or the French Pavilion by Exyzt at the Venice Biennale in 2006, and even more sophisticated experiences such as the one initiated by Raumlabor at the Floating University in Berlin (2018–until present).

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5.
Campo de Cebada. Furniture workshop reusing wood from formwork from the CICC, Madrid 2012. © Manuel Domínguez (Zuloark).

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Finally, Zuloark's work is part of and catalyzes a network mediation, where municipal technicians, neighbors, politicians, activists, and architects, along with other entities such as assemblies, open-source manuals, celebrations, or urban gardens, become a recursive community (Kelty 2008) that makes and cares for the city.[13] This issue is relevant, as it enables the scaling or transfer to the public administration of certain protocols and generalizable learnings from this specific experience. An example that shows this potential for transfer and modulation is the Operación Herminio project (2014–until present), also by Zuloark, that began with the chance discovery of an unexpected public resource: A conversation between the group and the janitor of a municipal warehouse revealed the existence of a surplus amount of 24 x 4 x 200 cm wooden planks from deteriorated benches from the city streets. This resource, linked with the concept of urban mining, was first used as a material in the design of a prototype for an ephemeral municipal pavilion and ended up giving rise to a protocol for the transfer of construction materials for self-managed citizen projects. It involved different areas and technicians of the municipal administration, as well as different associations and neighbors, and it allowed the construction of urban furniture in Campo de Cebada, and subsequently equip and build infrastructures on plots across the whole municipal allotment network in Madrid.

Discussion: Urban Mediations

Through the case of Campo de Cebada, one can see how the outcomes of the events that took place were not previously described through that special device we call a »project.« Instead, the relational dimension unfolded by the practice itself brought about unforeseen encounters, alliances, and

13 »Free software consists of a set of practices for the cooperative and distributed creation of source code, which is then disseminated openly and freely through an astute and unusual use of copyright legislation […]. Since 1998, the practices and ideas of free software have expanded into new vital and creative spheres: from software to music and film, from there to science, engineering and education […]' (and here we could add, ›and to the city,‹ as an extra ›modulation‹). […] A recursive public is a public that is vitally involved in the material and practical conservation and modification of the technical, legal, practical and conceptual means of its own existence as a public; it is a collective independent of other forms of power constituted and capable of addressing existing forms of power through the production of truly existing alternatives.« Chris Kelty in Two Bits (2008).

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possibilities. While these potentials were inherent in each participant, they required specific dynamics and kinds of participation to be realized. This is one of the most shared characteristics of the work of all these collectives, and one that shifts the importance of the project to that of mediation processes. The extent to which these processes are able to integrate more and more urgent issues, as well as involve more communities and activate more negotiation processes, will determine how successful the mediation is. Karen Barad's research on the notion of »intra-actions« (Barad 2007) helps us understand the creative potential that arises from the »during« and the kind of creativity inherent in the relational. Barad (2023) challenges the traditional notion of interaction, which assumes that the entities coming into relation exist independently, fully formed, prior to the modes, ethics, and politics that articulate their encounters. This view treats entities as pre-existing and only later entering into relation (Barad 2023: 11). For her, the entities that participate in encounters do not necessarily preexist as such, but rather are completed in intra-actions that only exist within the phenomena (ibid.: 11). This has enormous implications for design practices, as it shifts their centrality from the participants of an encounter or its final outcome to that »intra« (in-between) that separates them and is no longer an unproductive moment, but precisely the event that creates the participants themselves in the process, introducing divergences into their itineraries and opening up possible futures for each of them. It is through the hands and screwdrivers of the participants in Campo de Cebada that a choreography of actions unfolds, which does not conclude with the assembly or even with the beers and celebrations that follow. We would say that the notion of »intra-action« allows us to approach design practices as highly complex processes of »becoming« and as processes of mediation between entities that are co-produced precisely from these practices of being together »through« design. It should also be noted that, obviously, these futures are not infinite. The range of possibilities opened up through mediation is crossed by the agendas, skills, and orientations of each collective and the particularities of each project, hence the differences between them. In the case of Zuloark, we could say that its main goal is oriented towards a complex, participatory, and soft – *»blandengue«* (Pascual 2025: 98) – way of city-making.

For a practice as purposive and focused on the built object as architecture, these considerations surrounding mediation as a process of urban intervention help us understand the importance of the encounter and the »during« that occur in the practice of architecture. This emphasis on the mediating

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dimension of architectural practice invites us to reconsider the political and ethical dimension of architecture, in contrast to the modernist paradigm, while offering dissident avenues of action with which to expand the spectrum and format of the transformative practices that build cities and citizenship. These avenues of action demand the participation of other types of expert knowledge from outside academia, much more widely distributed and not yet captured by the normative logic of academic practice. These lines of flight – where environmental awareness, inclusivity, autonomy, participation, and lesser knowledges are interwoven with design and technique – enable an overflow of architecture as both a construction project and a built object. In future research, this mediating dimension of architectural practices could be complemented with other perspectives to help us »imagine« its full potential, such as that proposed by Isabelle Stengers and her notion of an »ecology of practices« (Stengers 2005).

It is essential to recognize a certain recursive seed in this mediating condition. The particular experience of Campo de Cebada transcends the notion of temporal and spatial limits that every canonical architectural project implies. In this case, the emotional relationships, construction techniques, and the participation of certain agents go beyond the case study itself to become modulated and distributed in a network and ecology of practices that still survive in Madrid, and in which Zuloark continues to participate today.[14] We previously mentioned Operación Herminio, which was also relevant for the consolidation of the Madrid Network of Community Urban Gardens[15], a popular initiative that emerged informally and illegally in the early 2000s, yet which was not recognized, legalized, or articulated by the City Council itself until 2015 through legal regulations such as land use transfer agreements.[16] This appreciation of Campo de Cebada as a seedling of

14 Other experiences after Campo de Cebada that connect with the multimodal condition (Dattatreyan/Marrero-Guillamón 2019) of these spatial practices are Ciudad Escuela or Ciudad Huerto (Corsín/Estalella 2016), situated learning experiences where urban management, construction, Los Madriles (Madrid map of common resources), and care skills are developed, or Sendas Ocultas (Hidden Paths) (2020–present).

15 There are currently 62 municipal community gardens, of about 500, including gardens associated with schools and other municipal infrastructure.

16 Zuloark was one of the key agents in municipal regulation of the transfer of use of community urban gardens, through multiple working groups with the public administration and collaborating with civic entities such as the FRAVM and the Madrid Garden Network.

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6.
Campo de Cebada. Aerial view, 2014. © Manuel Domínguez (Zuloark).

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multiple urban futures reflects the survival, relevance, and multiple futures of the case addressed here (fig. 6).

Conclusions: What Assertions and Futures Can We Share?

Collective architectural practices emerged in Spain 25 years ago as a response to a very specific context of altered rules through which the discipline had become relevant to the nation's neoliberal growth policies of the 1990s. After all these years and after experiences such as Campo de Cebada, we have some pertinent questions: What do these practices empower us to do, and what futures do they open up? To what extent are the decentering of the object as the final product of architecture and architecture-as-mediation approaches viable alternatives to modernist architectural practices?

The research suggests that mediation was never an »a priori« in the work of Zuloark and other architectural collectives, but, on the contrary, it was an empirical methodology that gradually yielded results. In the interviews conducted, the effectiveness of the program or the form gradually shifted to the effectiveness of the negotiations with the agents involved and with the members of the communities. It is in this sense that the battlefield of the building gave way to a battlefield that is always open and produced collectively. This is a change of perspective with major repercussions on professional practices and on the tools of architecture. However, it should be noted that this type of change requires a high level of commitment and involvement on the part of the institutions, the positive assumption of certain levels of uncertainty, as well as an availability of time, which is not always the case. For this reason, this type of practice also requires lasting and stable alliances that guarantee the viability of these mediations over time.[17]

17 A full article would be needed to analyze in depth how these practices have evolved, how they operate now, and what their prospects are. Regarding the concept of mediation, we find it relevant to recognize that many members of these groups have been involved in other practices related to civic design or academia, sometimes leaving these groups and sometimes combining their work: for example, one member of Zuloark and another from Basurama work at a social innovation NGO (Demsoc); four members of Zuloark have worked or are working in academia; two members of Basurama have been part of the municipal administration in Madrid; and Santiago Cirugeda not only designs but also coordinates a construction company that promotes collaborative self-construction for social and solidarity economy organizations.

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Within the practice analyzed, we recognize surprising learnings that involve knowledge beyond the disciplinary, in a similar vein to that used by concerned feminist climate thinkers such as Barad, Stengers or Braidotti. This is what happens, for example, when we focus on the relevance of conversation as a way of convening and mobilizing shared matters of interest, more than architectural practice itself promotes. This presence undoubtedly slows down and hinders certain types of productive efficiency in favor of other forms of effectiveness, as we have seen. In this path to »minorness,« one can call on many different authors and concepts, such as Erin Manning's »minor gesture« (Manning 2016) or Donna Haraway's »sympoiesis« (Haraway 2016). Yet the results of the kind of mediations that conversations produce are not easily grasped, since we cannot relate to the magnitude of the problems that climate change or the real estate crises introduced through formulas based on the problem–solution equation, but rather through a progressive change of attitude, oriented towards a better being with the problem, as Haraway invites us to do, as a way of keeping up with the times.

Collectives such as Zuloark have developed sophisticated routines to keep the conversation alive, continuing to change together. For this, the construction of care protocols and internal organization takes on particular significance. This relational and interpersonal dimension inherent to any practice of mediation explains the vocation of many of these collectives for teaching or caring for labor conditions. What types of organizations for architectural production can weave together futures, care, learning, and collaboration? This research emphasizes the importance of these case studies, organized based on ethics more attuned to the types of problems emerging from the consideration of a planet in crisis. These collectives, in different ways, challenge the logics of capitalist extractivism.[18]

On the other hand, this research also reveals the de facto incorporation of environmental awareness into the agenda of collective practices, which seems to happen gradually, diversely, and without any turning back. Notions such as »circularity« first appear as the material need to work with what is available,

18 For example, new projects are evaluated and agreed upon to ensure that ethical principles and the collective's position prevail over profit-making; regarding working conditions, salary differences between more experienced and younger members are moderate, following the principles of cooperative models, while equal rights and participation in decision-making are fundamental.

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with what is free, as Santiago Cirugeda describes.[19] However, gradually, the practice of collectives such as Basurama or Zuloark incorporates this feature through sophisticated protocols that involve public administrations, local communities, and other agents. These interdisciplinary transfers involve multiple moments of friction with academia and institutions, but they represent a determined commitment to addressing the planetary repercussions of urbanization processes. At least one uncomfortable question remains to be investigated: *How can this environmental awareness be scaled?*

Some of the clearest repercussions of this type of shift at the core of architectural practices, as we inherited them from the 20th century, can be found in the educational field. We would say that, as a whole, collective architectural practices have consolidated some special lines of pedagogical research in architecture schools, forced today to be sensitive and strategic in the face of the paradigm shifts brought about by digitalization, the real estate crisis, and climate change. These then transfer to the office certain concerns, such as the object not being the only possible result of the processes in which architecture intervenes, horizontality in decision-making processes, cooperativism as an alternative to conventional office organization, the critique of the problem–solution equation, the increasing focus on processes or the ethical implications of architecture as a practice.

Finally, we recognize that the collection of these practices forms a network, a community, and a recursive public that creates, reproduces, and nurtures a way of making an open, inclusive, participatory, and collaborative city, which gradually consolidates and grows. This is made possible thanks to the mediating nature of these collective practices: It is from the ability to speak different languages and enlist various participants that this network of practices becomes recursive and gains agency to change the city and the spatial protocols and practices that govern its renewal.

19 »It may be hacking, [but] I'm much more interested in the alternative use of things. And now that we are so involved in the circular economy: We have been moving materials for twenty-two years. Before, we did it because of precariousness. Before, we used materials that were lying around in municipal warehouses, in junkyards, or in construction sites that were thrown away… We started using them because we didn't have a damn thing. Now there is an ecological, energetic, sustainable vision. But twenty-two years ago, I hadn't even heard of sustainability. […] We did things with the tools we had. And we continue doing them. We have moved more than two million euros in materials. Everything is appraised, listed, and everything.« Santiago Cirugeda. Urban Recipes (Espinosa Pérez/Sánchez-Laulhé 2025: 150)

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