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The Value of Nature in the City

Article by Lidia Ucher
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The experience of lockdowns across European cities has driven home the importance of access to green space to health and quality of life. In Spain, the political renewal seen in many towns after the municipal elections of 2015 helped push public space and biodiversity up the local agenda. Today, rewilded rivers in Madrid or Errenteria in the Basque country are examples of how investment and imagination can transform urban environments for the better.

The quality of life in cities has constantly been under strain in recent decades. Sources of physical, social, and environmental health in towns gradually disappeared as years of development saw concrete and asphalt dominate built urban landscapes. The experience of the pandemic both exacerbated and exposed this trend.

Today, about 55 per cent of the more than 7.5 billion people who inhabit this planet live in urban areas. If this proportion seems small, by 2050, urbanites are expected to account for over two-thirds of the world population – 6.2 billion people. This projection places doubt on the capacity of cities to face important challenges from pandemics to climate change – a concern expressed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in its Human Development Report, and by Sustainable Development Goal 11 which aims to make cities and human settlements "inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable."

However, there is no shortage of ideas to solve the great challenge of making cities healthier places to live. The pandemic has provided cities with an incentive to take on projects with nature at the centre and focus on local needs. It has done so by confronting us with the unsustainability of city life as well as our own vulnerability. As environmental economist Antxon Olabe, now a member of the Spanish vice president's cabinet and minister for ecological transition, stated in the middle of the first lockdown, the "virus has been a huge slap in the face from the planet: we are biological and vulnerable beings. A real lesson of humility that invites us to work on reconnecting with our closest ecosystems."

Lockdowns designed with big cities in mind may have left streets deserted and the elderly isolated, but this period has seen cycling lanes and neighbourhood parks used like never before. In this respect, municipalities that previously invested in rewilding initiatives are now reaping their rewards. In Spain, these initiatives were spearheaded by municipalities run by political forces that first came to power in the years after 2015 and that emerged out of citizens' movements and local organising.

Reshaping the local

"Jack, the collapse is not going to happen. Not here." The French Minister of Ecology Sofia Desmarest sent this message to her former partner in the fight against climate change from the set of his primetime television show *L'effondrement* (The Collapse). Right before leaving the set, Jack calls on an applauding audience to create community networks and hubs, connect with neighbours, establish links with local businesses, and have a clear idea of who to turn to if you need help.

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This call matches a common direction taken in Spanish politics. It is the key message of the many networks of cooperation and solidarity that have formed over the past decade. In Spain, the campaigns that won in the so-called "councils of change" local elections of 2015, appealed directly to emotions: "Cities move us: they generate anger, surprise, happiness, etc. And we can turn those emotions into entrepreneurial actions." "It is impressive to see how much citizens can do when they are convinced of their strength and want to use it to make things better," said Manuela Carmena, who was mayor of Madrid until 2019, after winning the May 2015 elections.

These confluences of political messaging during the 2015 municipal elections generated processes of listening and active participation from the people, and brought local corporations closer to the environmental and citizens' movements who had been demanding action on sustainability and biodiversity for decades. These alliances, sometimes with green councillors, had a much stronger environmental component than the traditional parties. With Covid-19, in Spain as elsewhere, the value of local sustainability and biodiversity initiatives for quality of life in the city pursued by these movements has been highlighted only further.

Landscapes for health

One such example is to be found in northern Spain. Errenteria is a town in the autonomous region of the Basque Country. In 2015, the left-wing, independence party EH-Bildu won the local elections and went on to form a government with Errenteria Irabaziz (a coalition of social movements and Podemos), Izquierda Unida, and the Green party Equo. As a result, the municipal government team finally included a green councillor.

In 2016, the municipality decided to team up with nature to create "landscapes for health" in the singular convergence between the river Oiartzun river and the sea. It began implementing a Landscape Action Plan with the view to rolling out 47 measures and improvement works by 2025. This rewilding initiative has become a place of solace during lockdowns. The river that cuts through Errenteria is now fully walkable, the route accompanied by panels explaining the natural heritage of the area. The Oiartzun river is a veritable natural "highway", as its passes through Errenteria, Lezo and Pasaia, Atlantic salmon travel 5000 kilometres to spawn here.

Walking through the parks of Fanderia, the Paseo de Iztieta, or the bio-health park Gabierrota near Errenteria, one can forget that you are in the heart of the city, even though a century-old paper factory, which still produces 1000 tons of newsprints per day, is just over 500 meters away. The bioengineering of this environment allows you to walk down the river on logs felled as steps, cool off in its water, watch the Atlantic salmon jump upstream, and the ducks and moorhens run upstream in what looks like a race against the bikes that circulate on both sides of the river. It is the perfect place to exercise or rest on the wooden benches in the shade of the lush forest that you enter as soon as you step off the ramp from the street.

Municipalities that previously invested in rewilding initiatives are now reaping their rewards.

Madrid is also reaping the rewards of a similar initiative. In 2016, Inés Sabanés, now a member of parliament,

moved on a proposal from Ecologistas en Acción to re-naturalise the Manzanares river which passes through the city. The initiative saw the restoration of beauty to the channel, the construction of bicycle and pedestrian paths, as well as handrails and information panels. As Madrid continues to battle the Covid-19 pandemic, these restorations are allowing residents simple pleasures such as walking or cycling by the river. Thanks to the commitment acquired by the new local government team, this initiative will continue. They plan to conclude the project with the dissemination of ecological itineraries in schools located near Madrid Río.

A Europe-wide trend

Similar initiatives are to be found in many European cities. Lousada is a densely populated Portuguese village in the district of Porto. With a landscape degraded by intensive agricultural practices and serious environmental problems – water pollution, fires, loss of biodiversity to name a few – the city looked to environmental education, starting with preschools.

In 2016, the city council in collaboration with the BioLiving Association, and with the support of the University of Aveiro, launched the project BioLousada. In three years, more than 40 000 native trees were planted, more than 20 hectares of degraded land restored with the help of more than 4500 volunteers. More than 20 wildlife ponds were created with the participation of another 600 neighbours, and rivers continue to be restored thanks to more than 200 volunteers. With the full participation of local residents, what was degraded waste ground was thus restored to be a healthy natural environment for residents to access and enjoy.

Further afield, the Polish city of Ostrów Wielkopolski is an example to municipalities looking to build healthy and resilient cities. Like Errenteria, it is a signatory of the Basque Declaration of productive, sustainable and resilient municipalities. 23 per cent of the population of Ostrów is over 60 years old. To provide the community with preventive healthcare, culture, sport and education, as well as to encourage active community participation, the city has built public housing in the city centre, near bus stops, the market, local shops, cultural spaces and the medical amenities.

The French photographer Robert Doisneau used to say that he did not photograph life as “it is, but life as I would like it to be.” As the pandemic continues to disrupt normal life, it has also revealed the value of access to nature, public space and community services, particularly for dense urban areas. So why not take this moment to exercise our public right to build cities in which we would like to live? The experience of many European cities shows what can be achieved on the local level in a short space of time with the support of communities. This success, during lockdowns especially, has given public services and access to nature back their relevance for Europe’s cities.

Lidia Ucher is a journalist, blogger and activist focused on international cooperation and the Third Sector of Social Action. She is author of the blog Comunicación para el Desarrollo and creator and promoter of the Comunicambio network. She has facilitated, participated, reported, and organised several local, European, and international meetings and forums the past 15 years.

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