

WHAT DO WE DO IN THE MEANTIME? FOR AN ADAPTIVE URBANISM

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Via [Javier Burón, Res Publica](#) asked me for a contribution to the series of articles they are publishing on different views of the crisis and possible solutions. This is the [text](#) that I wrote, which collects some of the ideas that are taking shape on the blog around the concept of adaptive cities.

The process of **territorial expansion** that we have experienced in the last two decades and particularly in the years prior to the economic crisis is one of the elements that best contextualizes not only the causes of this crisis but also the important effects it has. From the perspective of public policies for territorial planning, urban planning and, in general, local public management, the territorial and urban dimension is, today, an important unknown in the policies to get out of the crisis.

The way in which local politics has been understood and the **role of urban development projects** have left a complex map of underutilized infrastructures, of facilities without possible use due to the financial inability to even keep them open, of failed housing developments, half-developed spaces, etc. A diagnosis, unfortunately, that we have only been able to understand when it was too late. Getting out of the crisis implies responding to these public resources that have become a patrimonial slab for public and private managers and a liability that weighs down recovery capacity.

Getting out of the crisis necessarily implies abandoning **hardware thinking** once and for all regarding land management and urban development. This hardware thinking has prioritized the construction of infrastructures as the only and inexorable path to economic development. And well we know that this economic development was a giant with feet of clay. Freight ports, marinas, high-speed train stations, contemporary art centers... have been the permanent promise to bring prosperity, a prosperity that left as it came.

The crisis, much to our regret, is going to imply changing this perspective. Surely, it will not be by conviction and the building temptation will continue waiting for its opportunity. But little space will be left. Faced with this development model that has only thought of large projects as a way of building a city, we need a much more intelligent strategy. A **adaptive strategy** that, at least while we manage to get out of the crisis, it can rescue this liability and turn it into a public asset for the revitalization of collective life in cities and the expansion of software intelligence.

The state of **permanent paralysis** and **generalized cuts** in which municipal policies are, can thus become a trigger for a way of focusing local public policies, and especially in which has to do with the **built space**, in which intervention tactics and much more open ways of looking at problems are promoted, as opposed to the exhausted model of hierarchical, centralized and institutional planning of the city that in this phase of crisis is going to need imaginative and flexible formulas of management.

In this sense, the crisis is going to precipitate (in fact, it is already doing so) the emergence of **new types of intervention projects and activation of urban capacities** that until now had little place in local public policies. These are projects that, in many cases, in the era of expansive urbanism and large urban projects hardly had an echo or were directly considered as **outsiders against the current**. However, at that time and in conditions of little institutional support, the groups and organizations that promoted them have been able to prove their social value as dynamizers of urban life. And, now that the crisis prevents the formulation of large hierarchical intervention projects, they appear more visible as the best catalog to continue reactivating life in cities from a

logic of "**good, beautiful and cheap**". This last expression does not try to diminish their value but, precisely, to highlight the value of these projects. These are actions capable of generating great impacts in the key of social revitalization at a very low cost and a significant high.

In the last two decades, for example, if I'm not mistaken, all the provincial capitals in Spain with the exception of one have built their own **contemporary art center** following the pattern of the Guggenheim in Bilbao, waiting for the same effect and without understanding that the transformation went far beyond a mere container. They are children of a time when the simple thing -after all, there was financing available-, to dream of putting the city on the map with the excuse of art and tourism, was to use iconic architecture as an argument. Reality has meant that many of these projects have failed, both as solid artistic proposals and also as instruments for promoting the city. Today these facilities have difficulties to maintain their programming, they are under-used or closed due to lack of financing. With this they bury all the investment made and the multiplier effect that they promised.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=R97tAYUUSgE

From an adaptive approach, today they are **liabilities** that the crisis has left behind and the goal must be to turn them into **public assets**. And for that you need to change your mentality. It is a logic equally applicable to other resources: infrastructures, equipment, public spaces, empty commercial premises, new urban developments, unused plots, roofs on homes and public buildings, etc. What do we do with all this? How can we make the most of them so as not to have to continue consuming territory or justifying new unfeasible projects in these times?

Management of the "**meanwhile**" is needed. It is difficult at this point to know when we will be able to get out of the crisis, but we do know that it will take time, and we also have doubts that things will go back to the way they were before. From the perspective of the territory and urban policies, it is difficult for the practices that were a common denominator in recent years to return. I hope they never come back. But in the meantime, the urban policy agenda still needs to have solutions to offer. That "meanwhile" is what we can provide content through new types of initiatives and a new way of understanding the city.

Let's think about the **commercial premises**. They are, without a doubt, one of the most visible effects of the crisis, both in city centers and in the peripheries. Businesses that have not been able to withstand the crisis and have been forced to close, leaving a network of physical resources available without activity in each town or city. To deal with this problem, there are many examples in other cities around the world that show how to give transitory uses to these premises, convert them into social resources for community, artistic, commercial uses, etc.

The same happens with **empty lots**, lots whose owners are no longer in a position to build or develop and which represent enormous inefficiency in terms of land consumption. There are flexible formulas to activate these spaces with minimal interventions that are capable of generating effects in the form of community appropriation, reactivation of social life, etc. From sports uses to community gardens, these spaces require imagination to be able to mediate between all the interests at stake, with a more open and horizontal logic.

The crisis has also prevented, in many cases, the urbanization or renovation of **industrial spaces**, large pills in the urban fabric that in recent years have been released with the great renovation project urban on a large scale, normally in spaces for port or industrial uses. What to do with it? Allow it to continue without a new use until it is possible to get a large investment to renew it? Can't we do anything in the meantime at a low cost? Or think of alternative uses?

Another effect of the crisis is that projects of **large commercial spaces** on the outskirts of cities, another common feature of the urban economy in recent decades. We have the option of leaving them closed. We have the option to shoot them down. Do we have more options? Can't we reconvert their uses and take advantage of the fact that they are already built to open them again

as assets?

For all these questions, the expansive, hierarchical and formalist urbanism model provides extreme and definitive solutions: tear down, close, close, prevent, etc., from a vision of the urban agenda in which the great definitive project dominates. From this point of view, the way out of the crisis necessarily involves adopting flexible and open formulas for the management of urban space, which do not prevent or limit the maximum use of all public resources. It will be time for imagination, because the era of show architecture and large urban developments is over. Throughout these years, enormous experience and knowledge has been accumulated on how to approach more useful, creative and participatory intervention tactics in the city. It is a matter of wanting to look at cities with different eyes.

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- [*Adaptive urbanism. It's time for meanwhile*](#)
- [*Notes on adaptive urbanism for EQUlciuDAD 2011*](#)
- [*Post-crisis adaptive urbanism. Urban gardens*](#)
- [*Post-crisis adaptive urbanism. Empty lots as urban solar farms*](#)
- [*The time of non-expansive urbanism*](#)
- [*It was fun until the money ran out*](#)
- [*Urban reconversion. From mall to university center*](#)
- [*Meanwhile. Recover inactive commercial markets for community uses*](#)
- [*The health of shopping centers: what will remain after the crisis?*](#)

On this subject, one of the latest references that looks good is the book [**The Temporary City**](#). The video included in the post serves as a presentation of the book, focused on the case of the United Kingdom.

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