Activism as a Collective Cultural Praxis: Challenging the Barcelona Urban Model

Perla Zusman

Institute of Geography, University of Buenos Aires, Argentina
Email: perlazusman@yahoo.es

Introduction

What place does political and epistemological analysis occupy in Latin American and Spanish geographies? Why are activist practices in those contexts not the subject of academic debate on geographical praxis in those countries? Can this differentiated conception of activism and the academy be useful for rethinking the relationship between academy and activism in Anglo-American terms? This chapter seeks to answer these questions.

In Latin American and Spanish contexts plural critical geographies started to evolve in the 1980s. However, despite engagements with critical theory, political and epistemological concerns occupy little space in geographical work currently produced in Latin America and Spain.\(^2\) I suspect that the lack of critical praxis, and its associated social

---

\(^1\) © Perla Zusman, 2004.

\(^2\) It must be pointed out that the possibility of a crossover between perspectives both theoretical and political comes from my own career. The fact that I was trained as a geographer in Argentina in the democratic transition period has aroused in certain members of my generation, affected both by the political and cultural repression and the Malvinas/Falkland War, a non-conformist attitude and a mistrust of everything given. That has led us to look for spaces for participation and an approach to critical knowledges. The critical geography that evolved in Brazil was a mirror and source of knowledge. Doing my master’s degree at the University of Sao Paolo (Brazil) enabled me, on the one hand, to go deeper into that approach. On the other, it helped me to find interpretative ideas from different contexts such as England or France and find new meanings for them in the light of the ways of looking in Argentina and Brazil. Lastly, doctorate and post-doctorate studies at the Department of Geography of the Autonomous University of Barcelona (Spain) helped me to build bridges between the knowledge acquired before and the critical geographies, postcolonial
commitment, is strongly related to a vision in which activism is seen as outside of the academic sphere.

In this chapter, I use the tension between the academy and activism in Anglo-American geography to rethink geographical praxis in Barcelona. Rather than conceive of the relationship between activist and academia as a politically-grounded form of academically-led empirical investigation, I argue that the relationship should evolve out of a commitment to question political, social and economic conditions through a recognition that the production of knowledge, and alternative political practice, is a collective, horizontal process. I illustrate this argument through a critical reading of the processes of urban transformation that can be observed in Barcelona today, highlighting that the arguments I make are not the result of any kind of empirical research work, but rather represent collective knowledge produced through the experiences of collective activism. This is not to say that this collective activism did not involve academic activity. Indeed, in some circumstances the need to enrich political practice with theoretical instruments led to engagements with academic literatures. Here, academic activity became a tool for activist practice.

To provide substance to the argument made I provide an account of my experiences of collective activism as a member of the cultural group madeinbarcelona and Ribera del Besòs Forum. Both groups question the speculative processes that are shaping the city of Barcelona and the type of representations the City Council uses to legitimise that speculation. Moreover, I demonstrate how activism is defining alternative forms of producing the city (in both material and representational terms) and of doing politics. Through this discussion, I will outline the role of the academy as just one source of institutional know-how and resources that are used by those taking part in social movements and as a medium through which critical knowledge produced collectively within activism can be disseminated.

**Geography and activism: between Anglo-American, Latin American and Spanish realities**

Since the 1990s one of the central concerns of Anglo-American human geography has been the recovery of the radical perspective developed in the 1970s, as critical geographers have become interested in the production of knowledge sensitive to the processes of social oppression and exclusion. However, such critical geographies and the relations between the production of geographical knowledge and the capacity to transform society have been central to Latin American and Spanish geography for over twenty years. Such geographies were developed in response to the democratic transition in those countries at that time. In tandem with political renovation there was a process of

geographies or new Anglo-American cultural geographies which have influenced practices in this Department. Moreover, my participation in the madeinbarcelona group was an apprenticeship in the sense of understanding the role of culture in breaking the logic of current town-planning policy in Europe.

3 I subscribe to Jacques Rancière’s concept of politics. For this politologist politics is an activity with a rationality of its own: disagreement with the distribution of parts of common property. The natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who do not have a part. From that perspective, disagreement and litigation predominate over consensus (Rancière 1996).
institutional replacement of both subjects and themes within disciplinary and professional geography.

The Brazilian geographer William Vesentini (undated, 1) considers that there were two sources that spread the term critical geography in the contexts mentioned: the transfer of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School to the disciplinary field and the use of that term by Yves Lacoste in his book La Géographie, çà sert d’abord à faire la guerre and in the magazine Hérodote, in both the French and Italian versions. In Spain, for example, at Barcelona University, the magazine Geocrítica appeared and, at Barcelona Autonomous University, the publication Documents d’Anàlisi Geogràfica was produced. Those journals mainly published epistemological and empirically based texts, many of which were guided by a social, transforming perspective that broke with the Vidalian regionalist approach that had been hegemonic in the discipline in Spain until then (García Ramón and Nogué 1984).

In Brazil, critical geography referred to a developing strand of work that included Marxist, phenomenological and existentialist geographers. Geographers from Brazil and Argentina held two critical geography meetings: one in Sao Paolo (1989) and another in Buenos Aires (1991). At those congresses some of the political and thematic interests of Brazilian and Argentinean geography in the 1980s were expounded (e.g. exploitation of natural resources, urban and transport revenues, critical readings of geographical thought, and poverty, among others).

As we can see, the critical geographies that evolved in Spain, Argentina and Brazil were already pluralistic in nature, though that pluralism of perspectives can be differentiated from the kind we can observe today in Anglo-American geography. In the latter, the diversity of theoretical points of view is combined with the diversity of subjects dealt with (anti-racist geographies, geographies of the disadvantaged, feminist geographies, Marxist geographies, postmodern geographies, poststructuralist geographies, postcolonial geographies and queer geographies4) to create a highly plural theoretical and empirical landscape.

Conversely, particularly in Latin America, the harshest effects of neoliberal policies are making themselves felt and this has led to the production of particular kinds of critical geography, a questioning of political and economic models, and a search for political alternatives in the face of a collapsing party system and new kinds of political demonstrations (piqueteros, human rights movements, landless movements). However, so far those political transformations have not given rise to academic analyses that focus on the mutual involvement of society and geography, of the academy and politics.

By contrast, in the Anglo-American sphere we do find discussion about the relation between geography and activism, a debate launched partly by Nicholas Blomley (1994, 1995) and Adam Tickell (1995) in the pages of Environment and Planning when they observed a gap between the academic sphere and the political sphere. Articles published in journals such as Society and Space, Antipode or Area link that separation to the effects of the transfer of the rules of the neoliberal economy to the universities. Associated with the writing of a ‘new contract’ between university and state mediated by

---

4 It is Noel Castree (2000, 956) who considers that Anglo-American critical geography focuses on those subjects and perspectives today.
the participation of companies (Demerit 2000), the authors observe a process of increasing job insecurity and the establishment of market-oriented research priorities.

Blomley (1994) writes in that context that the absence of discussion about geography and activism in the universities reveals either a lack of political involvement by academics or an interest in keeping the two separate. The connection between them would raise problems of self-validation, institutional dilemmas (status as well-paid professionals in movements that are more proletarian), and political or intellectual subjectivity (what is the role of the academic supposed to be?). Following the model proposed by Cornell West, Blomley reviews different kinds of activism from the kind to be found in the academy, aimed at producing – to use Foucault’s terms – ‘regimes of truth’, to the kind that try to form critical intellectual communities. The latter would be the direction taken by proposals that pay attention to the educational sphere as a space for the construction of critical knowledges or protest against the mercantilisation of universities. Blomley also analyses hierarchical and horizontal activist movements outside the university. Whilst in the first kind, the academic plays a leading part in the struggle to create meanings, or ‘to tell power the truth’, in the second, the best of intellectual life is fused with the best of the forces organised to reach a greater degree of democracy and freedom outside the academy. That would be the context for Routledge’s (1996) suggestion of creating a third space that could break down the boundaries between activism and the academy and which constantly leads us to think about our social situation, our position within the discipline, the physical location of our research and our political perspective.

However, most of the experiences on which those Anglo-American analyses are based spring, in fact, from the research processes themselves and not from any prior political commitment or engagement. In general, activism seems to emerge from fieldwork. The fieldwork often reveals social injustices, which leads the researcher to become involved in the movements under study. According to the authors, in the activist sphere the academic brings his/her experience of participation in earlier political movements or as an intellectual. He/she also acts as a catalyst, student or mediator, playing different parts at different times (Routledge 1996, 410-411).

If, as we have seen, the discussion begins with an interest in stimulating geographers’ activism, in fact it leads to the epistemological problems involved in taking the results of activist practice to the academy. Articles interested in these themes analyse the tensions that arise in terms of power/knowledge, of the relation between interviewer and interviewee, and issues of representation and displacement (Katz 1994). The central figure of the analysis is the academic, the author of those texts. The activist movement in which he/she took part usually plays a secondary role. It is difficult to recognise the collective nature of the information constructed. Moreover, the analysis bears no relation to collective political practice, sometimes presented as full of ‘energy’ and ‘excitement’, ‘not totally planned’ and ‘spontaneous’ (Routledge 1996, 406), unlike the supposedly rational and unemotional character of intellectual production.

To sum up, the activist experience itself acts as an element that allows the intellectual to increase his/her legitimacy in academic circles, an instrument of distinction within the academic sphere. In that context, activism becomes an element which, rather than serving to spread privileged information in sectors which do not possess it and contribute to their demands feeds academic production.
From that context, we might wonder why the engagement of academics in landless movements, in anti-globalisation events, in the struggles of immigrants (Segrelles 1998, 11) in Spain or Latin America do not result in publications like the ones we find in Anglo-American contexts; why Spanish and Latin American geographies do not conceptualise spaces of activism as places for fieldwork. One answer might be to consider them instead as spheres where fundamental political commitments come into play, regardless of training or academic activity, leading to the idea that making activism the starting point for our social practice might make it possible to pick out aspects of the relation between politics and the academy different from the ones that are discussed when the experience of activism is subsumed in academic activity.

Urban transformations in Barcelona at the start of the 21st century

When the Olympic Games were held in Barcelona in 1992 the city made its entrance onto the European and international stage. The nomination to host the sports event in 1986 was the prerequisite for enlightened managers of the city to carry out a whole set of town planning and cultural reforms that had been planned since 1980 (Moix 1994). Both the town planning reforms and the Olympic Games had the full support of a population that had been mobilised since the return of democracy to the country. That support was channelled through neighbourhood associations, who kept up a fluid dialogue with the local government, and the people of the city who offered themselves as volunteers. Among the town planning transformations associated with the preparations for the event was the conversion of water front lands from industrial activity to residential, recreational and services uses (García Ramón and Albet 2000; Balibrea 2001).

From the successful conclusion of the Games, and into the late 1990s, the City Council decided to continue with the urban development operation of advancing along the seafront. The idea was to make areas of the city which had previously been on the periphery more central. However, the path taken by the mayor’s office has been to restrict its activities to smoothing the way for investments by private capital, which means that the renovation process has become one of big business.

In this new situation, a new cultural initiative has provided the justification for moving this urban transformation process ahead. This is the organisation of the Universal Forum of Cultures planned for 2004. The event was initially designed as a set of debates, congresses, thematic exhibitions and an arts festival (http://www.barcelona2004.org/esp). This old-style, universal exhibition is based on three slogans: peace, multiculturality and sustainable development.5 The cultural event and the slogans associated with it aim to attract international organisations (to get funding), multinational corporations (so that they commit to the urban renovation project) and the residents of Barcelona (to obtain consensus and legitimacy).

The space chosen for the installation of the material infrastructure is on the seafront in the area on the borders of the municipalities of Barcelona and Sant Adrià del...
Besòs, known as El Besòs. In recent years, high class, American-style housing, international hotels and shopping centres have been built in the area. Recently the construction directly connected with the Universal Forum of Cultures has also begun.

Until now the Besòs area was mostly occupied by immigrants and the children of immigrants. That population from the south of Spain came to Barcelona in the 1960s to join in the industrial activities that had developed historically in the area. Between the 1960s and 1970s, to meet the residential needs of the immigrant population the local government built and promoted the building of housing units with precarious materials whose deterioration is easy to see today. The areas most affected by the deterioration are the districts known as La Mina and La Mina Nueva. To the degradation of the buildings can be added the economic and social tension of the inhabitants, who find it difficult to become part of society or find jobs in the city.

The process of urban renovation will open up a border between different social sectors: the inhabitants who are already settled in the area and the ones who will occupy the new housing units. Indeed, many of the inhabitants settled in the urban reform zone argue that those interventions will, first of all, affect the existing social tissue, since the plans take no account, for example, of the need to build housing at prices which the residents’ children can afford. Second, the urban transformations will have a direct impact on existing forms of economic production, such as industry. Third, the projects under way sideline requirements in terms of cultural amenities for the districts (language, schools, music, the arts, libraries, theatres).

In short, the process of urban renovation is following the tendencies of the global economy. In this context there is an attempt to make Barcelona a competitive city internationally. The main interlocutors of the politicians who govern the city are companies with local or multinational capital. There is little contact between the city town planning authorities and the neighbourhood associations, which aggravates the degree of conflict between the City Council and the residents (Marshall 2002).

Nevertheless, the local government uses representational policies to try and avoid such conflict and legitimise its actions. Through images, speeches and cartographies of the urban projects under way, it is trying, on the one hand, to socialise certain images of Barcelona, its inhabitants and the situation of the city on the world stage. On the other, it is aiming to legitimise the policies being carried out through the creation of imagined communities. In other words, it is trying to make subjects living in different parts of the city, differentiated from the point of view of class, gender and ethnicity, commune with the political project of Barcelona.

For example, the Besòs area continues to be the object of a number of representational projects which aim to integrate it into the centre. And so, with the start of the works to open up the area to private capital, the image of Barcelona as an unfinished

---

6 It must be pointed out that the urban transformations associated with making Barcelona competitive are related to other projects. Among them we might mention the renovation of the port, the airport extension, the opening of six large American-style shopping centres and the layout of the high speed train line. They also include the reclassification of land in the old industrial district of Barcelona (Poblenou), next to the Besòs, to convert it into an area for offices and high technology centres.
city was spread. The opening of Avenida Diagonal as far as the administrative boundary of Barcelona with the Sant Adrià district was promoted with the rhetoric that ‘Diagonal reaches the sea’ (see Image 1). Likewise, virtual images on a single scale with the sets of buildings, hotels and the works connected with the Universal Forum of Cultures have been a constant in the whole urban reform process (see Image 2).

Recently a campaign has been launched which, according to the person who designed it, seeks to ‘arouse expectation when there is no more than a set of works at a barely embryonic stage’ (La Vanguardia 2002). The basis of this advertising policy are metaphors such as: ‘The cranes will be palm trees’, ‘The workers will be children’ and ‘The rubble will be beaches’. This representation policy sets out to eliminate the everyday conflicts, which sometimes surface in the local media, and, most of all, in the public debating forums of the neighbourhood associations. For example, silencing the questioning of the rhetoric of multiculturalism associated with the Universal Forum of Cultures by certain intellectuals who find a discrepancy between the proposal for dialogue between cultures promoted here and the current restrictive immigration policy (Image 3).

For their part, the neighbourhood associations believe that the Universal Forum of Cultures is merely being used to justify property speculation, whilst also revealing the

---

7 A landmark avenue that crosses the whole of Barcelona, included in the Plan designed by Ildefons Cerdà for the extension to the city towards the end of the 19th century.

8 Here the declaration of the IX Anthropology Congress held in Barcelona in September 2002 is illustrative. It says: ‘In a context marked by institutional laws and practices that systematise and generalise injustice, brutality and exploitation towards immigrants, we are concerned that Barcelona is preparing a top level exaltation of cultures as a political theme and media spectacle’ (El País, 8 September 2002).
government’s lack of interest in resolving the requirements of the inhabitants of Barcelona in terms of public amenities and housing. And so a critical reading of the Barcelona urban development project reveals the fissures in an idea that seeks to use cultural strategies to cloak the drive to turn the city into an economically competitive centre, to the detriment of the quality of life of its inhabitants.

Image 2. Virtual image in the scale chosen by the local planning to socialise the representation of Barcelona’s urban transformation processes.

In search of new ways of doing politics and destabilising the model of the city: the Ribera del Besòs Forum and madeinbarcelona

The town planning and representation policy of the City Council decides who has the right to use the city. However, and crucially, having the right to use Barcelona does not mean taking part in its construction. The subjects selected can only consume what the local government offers them. In that way leadership is handed over to the middle- and upper middle-class inhabitants who live in the centre, multinational companies and tourists. Tourists are the recipients of the conversion of the buildings by the Modernist architects (Gaudí, Domènech i Montaner, among others) into theme parks.

---

9 For that reason the Federation of Barcelona Neighbourhood Associations has withdrawn its support for the event (El País, 6 and 7 November 2002).
However, there is a sector of the population that is being left out: the residents of the areas most affected by the urban transformations, whose historic memory and everyday life are being wiped from the city. The rebirth of the neighbourhood movement seeks to demand a more democratic Barcelona which takes account of the needs of its inhabitants and includes their participation in decision-making.

The Ribera del Besòs Forum was established in 1992 in a state school (Instituto del Besòs). It consists of fifty different kinds of organisations: neighbourhood associations, cultural centres, schools and parishes, among others. They are all located in the area between Ciutadella and the Besòs. From the outset, the central concerns of the Ribera del Besòs Forum were state education and town planning.

The Ribera del Besòs Forum has defined itself as an ‘ideas market’ which meets on the first Monday of the month at the education centre where it was launched. Those taking part in the meetings include local residents, technicians, intellectuals and artists who live in the area or other parts of the city. They report, exchange points of view or agree on plans of action, both in the district and the city as a whole (Roca and Faigenbaum 2000). There are no hierarchies in this Forum. Everyone taking part expresses their points of view from their professional, intellectual or political training and their everyday experience.

That dynamic has made it possible to pool knowledge produced horizontally, differentiated from the official discourses. For example, they have managed to socialise

---

10 Until the urban reforms connected with the Olympic Games, the Ciutadella Park separated Barcelona from the suburbs. That definition would take in the Poblenou industrial renovation area and the residential zone connected with the organisation of the Universal Forum of Cultures.
the idea that the whole shoreline should be conceived of as a single zone with the process of urban transformation affecting that whole. That has made it possible to draw up an alternative plan to the changes proposed by the City Council. Among other aspects, the plan demands obligatory reinvestment of the surplus value generated by the town planning projects in the area, the construction of public amenities and social housing. Moreover it asks for the preservation of non-polluting industries as a source of work for the inhabitants of the area. It also insists on the defence of public spaces, state schools and the opening of a public debate about the Universal Forum of Cultures and its town planning impact. The plan, presented to the press in July 2000, acted as a starting point for generating support for the demands of different associations in the area for new visions, different from those proposed.

In July 2002, an event concerning the urban transformation in the Besòs area was held, sponsored by the Barcelona and Sant Adrià Councils and the organising body of the Universal Forum of Cultures, at the Instituto del Besòs. In this way, speeches and projects drafted in the political sphere reached the inhabitants of the periphery, the people who were directly affected by the town planning transformations. At first, for the politicians, that event must have been envisaged as a space for the construction of legitimisation and consensus. However, it ended up showing the social distance between the world of urban politics and the images of the city derived from it, and the everyday life of the inhabitants. They saw in the reforms that affected their districts the construction of a ‘Disney World’ style city. The possibility of negotiation was limited by distortion (Rancière 1995, 9) derived from a different understanding of reality. If the politicians and the local population used a formally common language, words like ‘quality of life’ or ‘modernity’ acquired different meanings for each of them.

At the time of writing, the Ribera del Besòs Forum is drafting a set of proposals tending towards the establishment of public cultural amenities which will break with the speculative model. For example, on a plot of land which the City Council wants to hand over for the construction of an international hotel, the construction of a media library is being promoted. The amenity is planned to be a local and metropolitan infrastructure. The space would be presented as a place for production and access to local and international information. At the same time, it would serve as a specialised documentation centre on the historic participation of the people of Barcelona (immigrants, workers, women) in the construction of the city.11

It should also be pointed out that the activism of the members of Ribera del Besòs Forum is not confined to the monthly meetings, but includes submitting allegations to the Council, drafting alternative plans for districts, residents’ meetings and even demonstrations in the streets. Many of the members also take part in the debates about the model for the city. They are usually held in universities, museums and other public and private institutions. In those participations the members of Ribera del Besòs Forum usually combine a critical political perspective which guides their own interpretations of reality with the experience and knowledge that has emerged from the meetings held at the Instituto del Besòs.

11 Since the date of submission of this paper to the date of publication the Ribera del Besòs Forum has undertaken other campaigns. One of them was related with the conservation of industrial heritage of the area. A debate around this topic was held on 30 March 2003.
Madeinbarcelona is one of the entities that make up the Ribera del Besòs Forum. Its participation is based on the group’s interest in spreading a critical image of the Barcelona town planning project. Since its beginnings in 1998, madeinbarcelona has consisted of people linked to the world of culture (philosophers, artists, social scientists) who are critical of the hegemonic cultural practice model in force in the city and committed to the renovation of the left-wing political project. The members of madeinbarcelona (I’m one of them) have tried to open up a space for analysis, discussion and work with the aim of drafting a proposal for a new counterhegemonic cultural practice model. Within that broader context, we have mounted criticism of the official iconography generated by the Administration (madeinbarcelona, 1999).

So far, our work has followed four guidelines:

a) We have tried to document all the symbolic events that take place in Barcelona and which are structuring the image of the city. Although that image may have little to do with the physical, social and town planning reality, it is contributing to the implementation of the transformations taking place in those fields. As a result, we have decided to make explicit the mechanisms that intervene in the structuring of the ‘Barcelona image’ and prepare forms of critical assessment to that representation. The analyses put forward in Barcelona at the Start of the 21st Century are part of some of the results obtained from the task undertaken along those lines and two documents drafted by the group.

b) We have already seen that the population of the peripheral districts is missing from the official representations created around the image of the city. Our incorporation in the Ribera del Besòs Forum has allowed us to take part in preparing the inhabitants’ own strategies of distinction as a vehicle for making them visible in the city. We have taken part in the discussion and collective editing of a leaflet to publicise the Ribera del Besòs Forum Alternative Plan through an ascetic language in tune with, but also destabilising of, the kind used by the local administration. The leaflet presents a teenage student at the Instituto del Besòs, photographed by Patrick Faigenbaum, in combination with images of housing in La Mina district. This is a way of demanding a space for the future generations in this part of the city that stretches from Ciudadela to El Besòs (Image 4).

c) At the last few meetings we have also played an active role in drafting the plan for the media library project. As we have seen, it aims to break with the speculative dynamic and is based on the conception that knowledge technology can be at the service of all the people of Barcelona. We should stress that, within Ribera del Besòs Forum, madeinbarcelona occupies a similar place to any of the other member entities, so our participation is subject to the rhythms marked by the Forum and the activities to be organised. Like other members of the Ribera del Besòs Forum, we move on other scales and in other institutions to provide and publicise critical interpretations of the way in which the process of urban renovation in the city is being carried out and publicised.

---

12 The last document is linked to our participation in the Arquitecturas del Discurso project held at Fundación Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, from 19 September to 11 November 2001 and directed by Ute Meta Bauer.
d) We are trying to get in touch with other groups and people who, in fields other than ours, share our concerns. In that way we seek to construct a confluence which makes the critical voices heard and to contact groups who are working to constitute alternative political options.

**Understanding the activism-academy relation from activism**

I began this chapter by arguing that in the Latin American and Spanish contexts the relation between activism and the academy in geography was a concern to be found in many texts from the 1980s. However, that interest would seem to have waned in recent years. Awareness of the emergence of social movements in those contexts led me to investigate the differences in conception of the practice of activism in the Anglo-American sphere and the kind now to be found in Spain, Argentina or Brazil. In theory it would seem...
that it is a social and political concern that leads intellectuals in those countries to take part in grassroots movements. On the other hand, many of the works we find in the Anglo-American sphere present the fieldwork of an investigation as a ‘rite of passage’ to the practice of activism. This behaviour carries out important consequences both in the academy sphere and the activist one. Theories, concepts and categories conceptualized by academics as relevant for activism perhaps are very distant from urgencies raised by activist practices. The idea of activism conceived in the academy is probably quite different from the one that emerges from the practice of one’s own activism. Questions therefore remain concerning whether postcolonial studies or new cultural geographies are useful for the development and interventions of social movements (by the way, a category that comes from academy)?

In contrast, taking activism in madeinbarcelona and the Ribera del Besòs Forum as a starting point for my analysis has enabled me to suggest that the knowledge produced about the city of Barcelona through participatory practices is not individual; on the contrary, it is collective and horizontal in nature. All members of the Ribera del Besòs Forum express their background and their everyday experience both in their and in other parts of the city; projects and public interventions are assumed as collective practices, collective responsibilities as it will mean collective benefit. Within this context, intellectuals or researchers have no special knowledge, no special functions. They are equal members as other people that take part in the Ribera del Besòs Forum.

Collective and horizontal practices can be considered to represent a kind of empowerment that makes it possible to destabilise the knowledge generated both materially and representationally by the City Council. It makes explicit the role of culture in the justification of a set of speculative economic ventures and the possibility, from activism, of proposing cultural interventions that try to make visible, and defend, the role of the inhabitants in the construction of the city project. The production of critical urban knowledge goes hand in hand with a political practice which is also collective. That practice includes the drafting of alternative plans, the organisation of neighbourhood meetings and demonstrations, negotiation with the City Council and participation in public debates that take place in different institutional spheres. That is a way of contributing to constructing a proposal for the city which is accessible to everyone who lives in it.

Incorporating experiences and analyses of that kind into the field of the discussion of geography and activism seems to be a necessary focal point in the field of critical geographies. Making activism the starting point for analysis makes it possible to incorporate knowledge produced in different temporal and spatial contexts into the academic sphere, in political and production of knowledge circumstances where a different intersubjectivity from the one that usually feeds academic practice takes precedence. Perhaps it will mean incorporating a different manner of facing both teaching and researching urban subjects, where political praxis conceived as a collective, horizontal way of thinking/acting in the city could be privileged over practices that reproduce the way of understanding/learning what is going on in urban places.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Abel Albet, Anna Clua, Noemí Cohen and Maria Dolors García Ramón for the comments which showed me once again the richness of discussion and critical exchange.

References


Madeinbarcelona (1999). Document drafted on the occasion of the award of the RIBA prize to the city of Barcelona.


