

BUILDING NEW PERSPECTIVES

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“We are architects, not social workers - we bring about space solutions.” This provocative statement, made in one of the urbanxchanger meetings in Berlin, lingered in my mind for a while and led to my questioning around how this open project-experiment took place in Mexico. Was the most important part of the work carried out in Mexico City the physical modification of the dome per se? The richness of what was an intense and multi-layered process, in fact pointed out contributions that, in different ways, went beyond the actual spatial intervention.

Miravalle is a place where many community-based architectural interventions have already taken place, and building new facilities has been a way to keep community engagement alive. As such, the community representatives asked the urbanxchanger team to work

with them to balance the strengths and the challenges of what they had achieved thus far. The apparently simple actions carried out at the very beginning of our local workshop - walking, talking and leaving space for the locals to present and explain their most insignificant problems - in fact revealed a whole set of needs not visible at first.

That request - that moment - laid the basis for a contribution that had to do with space, but that was not only about buildings or providing infrastructure. Rather, the dialogue created the framework for a larger understanding of autonomy, wellness and citizenship, through the recognition of local resources, existing achievements and the inclusion of a metropolitan perspective, to foresee Miravalle’s role in the challenges faced by the entire city.

“I know it is hard to believe, but we hadn’t realized what we had on our back [doorstep] until the team of urban practitioners came and pointed out the potential of the volcano. Suddenly the volcano appeared to us in all its greatness and as a water provider.” That statement, given by a Miravalle representative while explaining the contributions of the project, summarizes the enthusiasm felt by local residents while looking at the forgotten or previously undiscovered landscape of the volcano, during a presentation by the urban practitioners - a moment when they shared with the community what they saw, and one that felt like a significant turning point.

This new, jointly-constructed perspective became even more important when other challenges emerged during the process of carrying out the rainwater harvesting intervention at the dome (see project description Mexico City). In a city where 60% of the construction is done by the informal sector, much of it actually self-built, architects are seen as a luxury and not as professionals that provide spatial solutions. As a result, even if it turned out that the details of the proposed design were not fully embraced by the community representatives, it became clear that the broader perspective and the multi-scalar approach brought about by this experience was, in

itself, a substantial contribution. Moreover, the fact that, of the many prevalent issues, the team had chosen to work with the subject of water supply and flooding - topics that connect local problems with metropolitan challenges - also positioned the community differently, as a key actor within the city to which it belongs.

The many hours of talks and discussions and the strategy of not only presenting a design project but actually first sharing with the community how the teams read and understood things, enriched the collective sense of citizenship and created the opportunity to actually build a perspective that could work as a “spatial intervention compass” for other future projects besides the dome. This broader perspective, clearly rooted in an understanding of space, resources and infrastructure, is not something that a social worker could have brought. For the scope of this project, this change of perspective presented a very powerful achievement.

Translating this new perspective into specific interventions was however a more troublesome process during which the various stakeholders didn’t fully find common ground. This was partly due to the time and budget constraints of the project, but also

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because there seemed to be a gap in the understanding of what design is for (luxury or need?) and a level of confusion with regards to agency: who (the community or the team?) would lead this collaborative process of actually transforming the dome into a water-harvesting device.

The community was responsible for liaising with other funding partners (the Mexican Agency of International Cooperation and the Uruguayan Agency of Cooperation for Development) and community representatives would also directly manage the construction workers and materials as they had done with other projects. They understood the design drawings as sketches of a general idea with exchangeable details, whereas the team of urban practitioners saw the framework as a comprehensive plan that involved an aesthetic proposal for socially reactivating a space and a strategy for avoiding the negative side effects of construction that had resulted from other recent interventions in Miravalle.

At a certain point, it was a difficult realization that the dome project risked leaving everyone unsatisfied. In addition, it generated concerns regarding the community's respective compromise with the different sponsors. It had clearly stopped being regarded as

an experiment and, as such, become a project that was expected to yield results outside the community for the other local and international funding Agencies. However one of the great virtues of both the community representatives and the urban practitioners was their capacity to express with honesty and respect their positions at critical points in the process, and move forward together.

This experience revealed the complexity of a truly collaborative project that aims to tackle real issues. To start with such an open brief was both suggestive and challenging because it gave participants the freedom to explore multiple new opportunities, but also generated difficulty in managing the outcomes of these explorations. Despite the difficulties, the project demonstrated that working on local issues and with available resources, but with a metropolitan perspective and in collaboration with the community, can be as important as – if not more important than – generating conventionally outstanding designs. This proved to be the case in a city that will continue to change and grow without urban professionals but not necessarily without their influence.

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