

# Alternative Villages

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Today's world cities, especially the most cosmopolitan and jumbled ones, are seeing arise an increasingly common phenomenon among us: the emergence of social groups that are willing to get out of widespread socio-economic schemes (aroused on the capitalist-occidental world) to organize themselves in alternative sub-urban and rural locations (as in the case of the eco-villages) and thereby establish their own social and political schemes (and in many cases even economic) with specific characteristics, as a gesture towards nature and a rejection to technical processes of food production and other basic consumption commodities.

In the sixties of last century this was featured by the so-called *hippies* and, leaving aside any ideological question, it is necessary to recognize in them that seed sown in what we now know as communities of permaculture, agro-ecology, neo-ruralization, urban garden, cooperative farm, etc.

The maturity of some of the current anti-system positions, supported on solid critical arguments by recognized late 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers such as Michael Albert, Robin Hahnel, Murray Bookchin, Stéphane Hessel and José Luis Sampedro, has served as basis so that these settlements enhance and grow both in number and in size with unusual speed, thanks also to the particularly complex time of economic crisis, particularly in Spain. But the economic crisis has meant only the final push, since initiatives of search for credible and consistent life forms have been growing since years ago, from other crises, although more silent, that have ended up being deeper and more lasting. These are crisis of values, of social coexistence and with nature, crisis of community coherence, of mind, of solidarity, etc.

In Spain, a trend to establish some of these settlements is to reach old abandoned towns and, occasionally, industrial colonies also disused. Townships that once had life of their own and a stable social organization, by modest that it was. The resulting mixture between those spaces with patina and a dead life wear and the new uses of communities starving for activities and intense and meaningful relationships is sometimes admirable and always very respectable. To mention only some Spanish cases, there are the towns of Matavenero, Valdepiélagos, Aineto, Ibort, Salentinos, Can Masdeu, etc. The present work will address as study case the town of Calafou, in the Cabrera of Anoia, province of Barcelona (fig. 1).

Arnau is a resident here. He came almost two years ago with his cousin and they currently rent a flat together and they think to buy it next year. He works most of the time in the place, but two days a week he leaves to Manresa, where he has a part time job as a waiter. Part of the tour we did in Calafou was through the guidance of Arnau, who told us the interesting story of the place. The operation of this site began in the 12th century as a flour mill, which became very active and populated since the early 19th century and mid-20th century. The colony occupies an area of about three hectares of industrial land qualification (and also with recognition of the already built housing). The urbanized part of the land corresponds to about 8,000 m<sup>2</sup>, representing 26% of it. The rest is partitioned between the river bed, bank's fields and forest, paths and courtyards within the enclosure.

Calafou takes its name from the house built by Juan Vivero and Dolores Marçal towards the end of the 19th century, when part of their inheritance of a flour mill plus the paper and textile factory of Castellet (documented since the 12th century) became their own, who installed an own thread factory and home.

At the beginning of 20th century and until 1955 it was converted into the Marçal textile colony, whose factory was built attached to the old paper mill of Vallbona, which seems that may correspond to the built in 1794 (as a replacement for the flour and a linen mill destroyed in a 1740 flood) and that in the middle of the 19th century changed ownership. It was the only textile colony of l'Anoia region. On its last period of activity it was in operation until 1975, time that industrial activity had gone down, until its total closure.

In this place, given its manufacturing past and under conditions of little suitable land for crops is not feasible to rely on mostly agriculture, as it is the case of some other recovered settlements. In this process these new residents found the need to open a wide range of activities where, and facing each new applicant asking for host, what is mainly offered is a place where to develop the capabilities that each one brings with him. Thus, to date there are a diversity of workspaces, such as production of fireplaces; sustainable personal and domestic hygiene products; fertilizers and soil stabilizers; marmalades, conserves and vegetable drinks; electronics, documentation, "fanzines" and mechatronics; automotive workshop, which as it offers traditional service also carries out research on "*vegetablizing*" engines and reducing their consumption by hydrogen produced by the water electrolysis. There is also a serigraphy workshop working with t-shirts, patches, labels and prints; a computer lab for the generation and transfer of knowledge related to topics such as: development of free software, networks management, diffusion of the use of open source software and network security practices; a laboratory for creation of secure cyber systems. There is also an interdisciplinary laboratory of bio-electro-chemical experimentation which, among other areas of research, by now provides LED lighting and appliance repair; and the Phone Liberation Network (PLN), which is a private telephone network and which is open to the world community. Also remains the furniture manufacturing that was already part of this complex since before the arrival of the current occupants and a space with machinery for metalworking, wood, plastic and textile, which comprises a collective of auto occupation project and offers a plan of uses for the CIC<sup>1</sup> members and individuals outside of Calafou wishing to use this machinery. Besides all these, there is also a collective that organizes events and conferences.

Arnau says that someone in Calafou coined the following definition: "*an initiative of transition that allows to build a way of life where neither the Bank nor the State are necessary... This project is an alternative economic model based on the use of a social currency of physical and virtual character... a legal form of cooperative structure and a domestic market of producers and consumers using (that) social currency to carry out exchanges of products and services*". With this in mind, the community has ventured to generate not only a concept of life, work, coexistence, brotherhood, cooperation, etc. but also a physical environment specific and consistent with the activities and the

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<sup>1</sup> Cooperativa Integral Catalana: Initiative in transition to the social transformation from below, through self-management, self-organization and networking.

needs of these new settlers. It is this last part which means interest for me to analyze within the present study.

In a pamphlet I found on the dining room table is the interview that *integrAstur* made to Eloi Serra some time ago. The interviewee declares: Calafou "is a self-organized space that includes everything from work areas and common spaces for conducting meetings and various activities, to decent housing. All of them are accessible at fair prices, significantly lower than market prices, and intended to allow the self-management of the project/site. Since its inception, they have attempted to develop a system based on a network of cooperatives, individual projects and housing within a collectivized space. This seeks to facilitate the sharing of ideas, goods and resources to promote synergies in a natural way. It is, ultimately, a place for social, political and technological innovation based on self-reliance and cooperation. A project where the productive economies are at the service of people allowing their needs in terms of access to resources and tools are not obstacles to the realization of their creative potentials."<sup>2</sup>

So, Calafou is defined as an eco-industrial post-capitalist colony. As Arnau said, it used to be a textile factory where the workers lived. There were houses, dining bar, a school and a church and has been abandoned for almost 50 years. Now, thanks to the CIC's advice its new occupants are buying the space (28,000m<sup>2</sup>) and reconstructing it. Calafou is a technological project where they want to develop open source and code technologies and machinery, foster workshops and give alternative ways to capitalism. In many senses, Calafou is a place to learn trades, skills, and knowledge and share interests with people.

One of the most interesting parts in Arnau's narrative is his description of the physical environment, this already historic place which they have gradually been transforming to bring it to their needs and their desires. The ensemble is composed of various areas that emerged there with time (fig. 2). The original factory was a production gallery, a building of offices and support areas, a chapel, an area of tools, a trash area and a house where there was installed a power generator moved by the passage of water through a derivation of the Anoaia river within the property. In this first phase workers lived in the upper part of the gallery where there were bedrooms, bathrooms and a dining room. In a second phase there were added a second gallery for finished product warehouse, a housing unit for workers and a small house to accommodate the plant manager with his family. Then, at a later stage were added another gallery of production, this time with offices and raw materials as well as tools and garbage areas, as well as also an extension of the manager's home to give lodging to other administration employees. Finally, and after a long time, there was added a building never came to completion. It is a building (today known as Red House) that would be dedicated to new offices, meeting rooms and exhibition hall. The difference of construction system and materials used in this latter (phase four) is notorious since its construction dates from already the second half of the last century (fig. 3).

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<sup>2</sup> Eloi Serra, member of the Calafou project and CIC. Part of the interview conducted by *integrAstur*, Cooperativa Integral Asturiana, e.c.

What is truly fascinating is the creativity and spontaneity of current residents to adapt to these existing sites and, at the same time, to change very ingeniously those spaces that have gradually been doing theirs.

This is how in the original buildings (from phase one) are now concentrated the main collective and social activities (fig. 4). There are the kitchen, along with the dining room and living room. In gallery One there are the Social Center (community center), which acts as a place of festivals and meetings (mingle zone) area. In this there are also organized conferences; it is the radio set for the community, the *infopoint*, and the "free store", which is a display of second-hand clothing available to anyone who wants to take something. In the attached chapel there has not been done any reparation work yet, except a little clean as its structural state is very poor and it is dangerous to be inside there. In the small outbuilding there is the workshop to manufacture fireplaces from adobe, with principles based on ancestral designs and that work very well in the places where they have installed them. So much so, that some have already been produced for interested people who have installed them in their own homes. On the second floor of this gallery is the collective project of auto machinery occupation, which includes equipment for working metal, wood, plastics and textiles. In addition, there is store area for the finished product of the furniture and wooden toys factory. At the Red House, which is the most recent building of all spaces, some rooms have been set up to host visitors. However, much remains to be done on it, since it has never been finished at all and the lack of windows and waterproofing makes it very uncomfortable, especially in winter. All these spaces surround the main courtyard of the ensemble. This courtyard is where assemblies are held (fig. 5) and the main social community activities are organized. Although originally this place was used as parking lot, soon they realized the need to take out all motor vehicles, placing the definitive parking lot before crossing the river while coming to the property (fig. 6), thus winning that important space for the aforementioned purposes.

The remaining workshops and work areas are located in surrounding areas to the gallery Three: the *Hacklab*, which is the computer lab where they recycle as many used parts as they can and develop different kinds of software; *Lorea*, which is the cybernetic systems insurance laboratory; *PLN*, which is the network private and open telephony via internet; the *noi of the sucre*, which is the automotive machine shop; *Muntagner*, that is the printing workshop; *Circe*, which is the workshop for making soaps and cosmetics. The gallery itself is not being used because its cover disappeared in a fire, along with the gallery Two, and that made these two buildings places of danger by the deterioration that have suffered since then. *Pechblenda* is a laboratory of bio-electro-chemical studies, and it is the only that, by now, is in the gallery Two annex quarters. Outside these spaces there is a prized courtyard which is used as a multipurpose outdoor workshop space. It is, of course, a place that also fosters much comradeship by residents sharing activities (fig. 4).

The old housing unit that once lodged the factory workers and their families is now the place of dwelling for Calafou residents. They lease their apartment at reasonable prices, as also have buying option, and occupy and condition them according to their needs. On its back side, which is where the access, it is located a patio where all its inhabitants match and over time it has become an important place for casual gatherings and meetings, and where occasionally take place some

celebrations and evening events. Near there are also poultry houses, which provide enough eggs to the community and even to sell surpluses to the neighboring village of Vallbona d'Anoia.

The organic orchard is located next to the waterway which crosses the property. There, in addition to the cultivation of different varieties of plant products, is a corral where geese eggs are obtained while they are nurtured also for their eventually flesh consumption. Next to these facilities a reed structure on Teepee shape and covered with hops keeps surplus and organic waste to be processed into compost. In addition, between the orchard and the Chapel is the original courtyard of the latter (the atrium), a place that is occasionally also used for group meetings, especially with a more serious and ceremonial purpose.

Additionally to the aforementioned outdoor areas is the clean point, which is the place where there are the different waste containers for, starting from there, being separated and redistributed or processed according to their nature. This place is of collective interest, and is located between the gallery One and its surrounding areas (fig. 4).

It is recognizable that all the arrangements for reconstruction and rehabilitation works have been through self-building and own funding. Destinations of each one of the areas that make up the site have been agreed through proposals and balloting, and all the adaptations have been conducted by a Buildings & Grounds committee and also approved on Assembly sessions. In addition, an open-ideas competition for the burned roofs reconstruction of galleries Two and Three has been launched. There are not results known to date. The whole water line has been mended, from elevated tanks on top of the plot until the lower points, which are the organic orchard areas. Some installations of ecological character have been also implemented, as it is the case of a dry sanitary, recycling of grey-water for irrigation, and some nascent attempts at bio-construction, such as the reed-and-hops Teepee.

Arnau ends his relate telling us his personal projects, his dreams. He doesn't see himself here in ten years, but he assures he will live with great intensity his time remaining here since this experience is being of great learning and community development. He also mentioned his intention to establish soon a social currency system which already exists in other places, where even his cousin helped to implement. He says "life has value when it is you who adds it..."

This way, the occupation of this historic-industrial space by a united group of fighters, starving for nutrient activities and intense and meaningful relationships, is proving to be the realization of a utopia, the formation of a settlement where there is social and quasi-economic self-sufficiency, what has occasioned the recycling of this interesting place on a site according to the needs and uses of this respectable collective. As a result there are those assorted spaces that today make up the ensemble and that have been described.

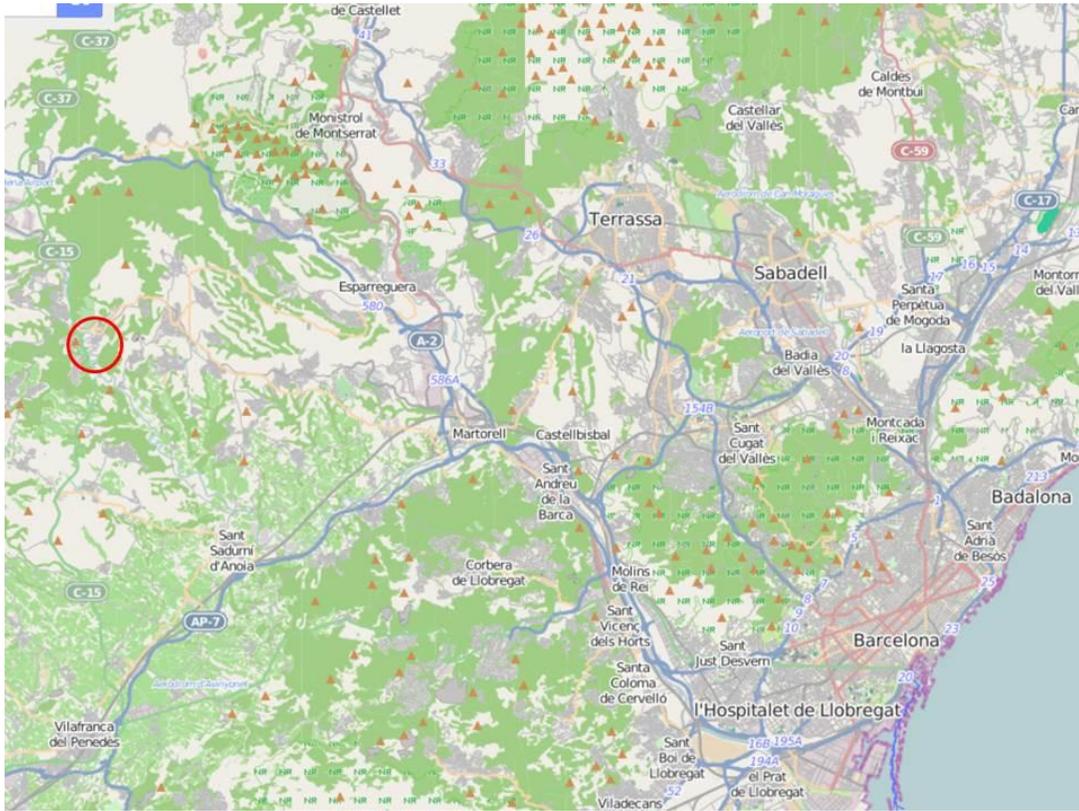


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

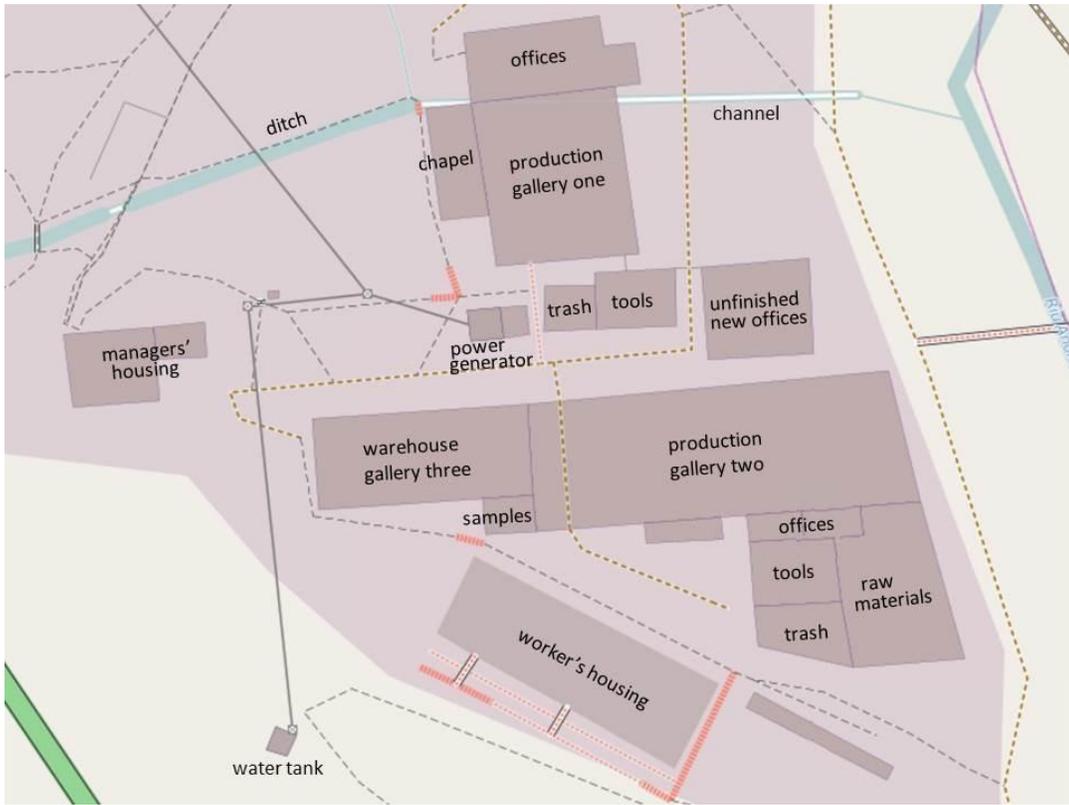


Fig. 3

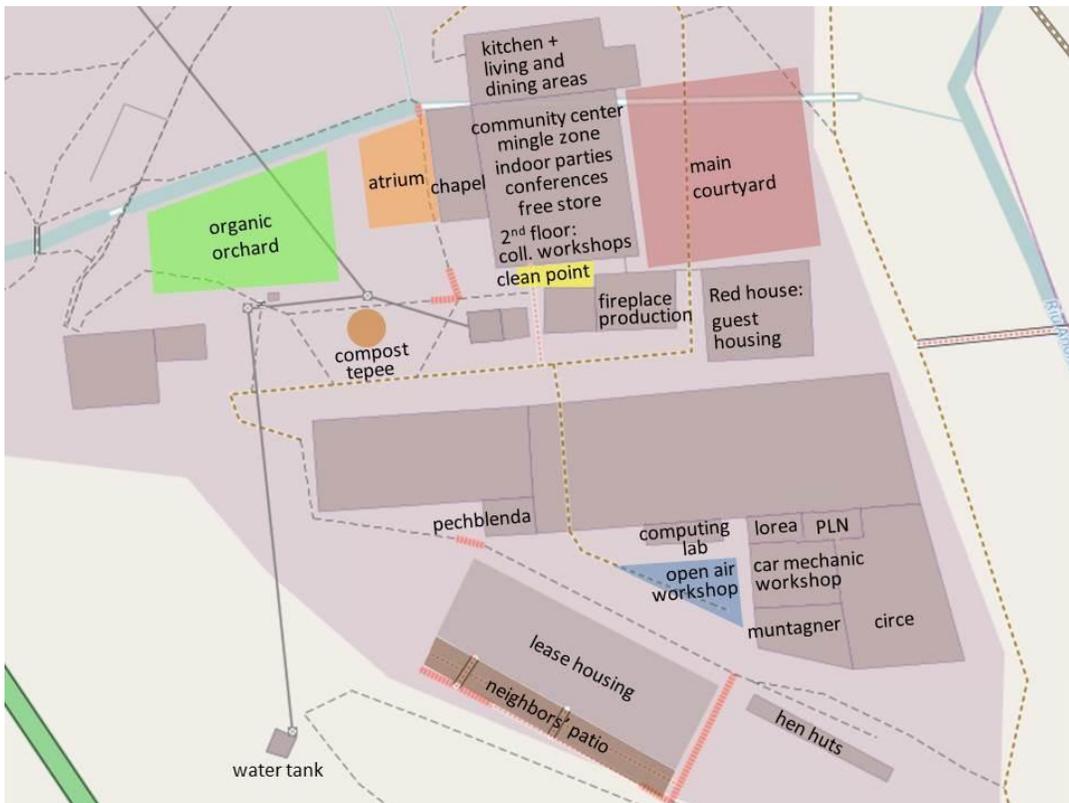


Fig. 4



Fig.5

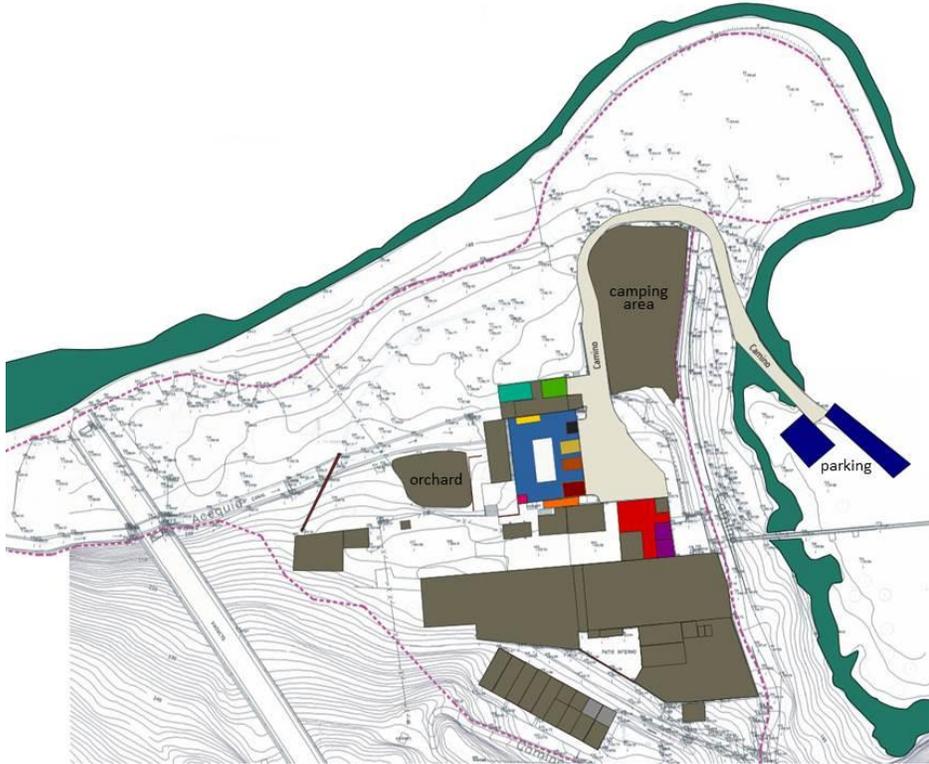


Fig. 6