

Forthcoming in *Ethnos*, Special Issue on ‘Obstructions’ edited by Rane Willerslev, Lotte Meinert & George Marcus

Ethnography: a prototype

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Abstract

The article describes a long-term collaboration with a variety of free culture activists in Madrid: digital artists, software developers and guerrilla architectural collectives. Coming of age as Spain walked into the abyss of the economic crisis, we describe how we re-functioned our ethnographic project into a ‘prototype’. We borrow the notion of prototype from free culture activism: a socio-technical design characterised by the openness of its underlying technical and structural sources, including for example access to its code, its technical and design specifications, and documentary and archival registries. These ethnographic prototypes functioned as boundary objects and zones of infrastructural enablement that allowed us to argue with our collaborators *about* the city at the same time as we argued *through* the city. Providing a symmetrical counterpoint to the actions of free culture hackers elsewhere in the city, our anthropological prototypes were both a cultural signature of the radical praxis taking place in Madrid today *and* its expressive infrastructure.

Keywords: collaboration; prototypes; ethnography; free culture; Madrid; infrastructure.

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The ethics and methodologies of fieldwork should become “transparent” to the creativity being studied. We should subordinate their assumptions and preconceptions to the inventiveness of the “subject peoples,” *so as not to pre-empt their creativity within our own invention*

Roy Wagner, *The invention of culture*, p. 111

On July 6 2013, a curatorial and artistic project known as *La galería de Magdalena* (Magdalen’s Gallery, MG) took out to the streets at the heart of Madrid’s old historic quarter. On a construction metal shutter that runs for some ten metres down one of the city’s narrowest and busiest streets, MG pinned a collection of forty five take-away hamburger boxes, each filled with a set of miniature drawings and a variety of stickers

with printed slogans on them (such as ‘we could do with some green areas around here’, ‘this children’s playground is too small for me’ or ‘an urban community garden would suit this vacant lot’). A note inside each box described them as ‘kits for the critique of public space’. Passers-by and spectators were invited to pick up and take away the kits for their own use – they were ‘urban gifts’, as MG brands their original form of public space interventions and exhibitions (see Figures 1a, b c).

By giving away such objects, MG was hoping to activate what they refer to as a form of ‘psychomagic and therapeutic micro-urbanism’. The objects that MG design, make and/or curate for their street exhibitions are meant to help liberate hidden material and sympathetic energies in the city. They take residence in the urban landscape as minor compositions that provoke, excite and surprise passers-by, who are thus drawn to interact with spaces, materials and locations otherwise neglected or abandoned. In the practice of MG, the city is host to undercurrents of social vibrancies and material powers that may be artfully and carefully stirred or tapped into to have them release and liberate cathartic energies. This helps explain also MG’s interest in working at vacant and derelict sites, as well as their use of, as they put it, non-invasive or ‘acupunctural’ techniques:

Our work does not impose itself upon the city. We feel there is no need to build or create something *ex novo*. There is plenty to go around already! Which is why we employ fixtures and supportive mechanisms or double-sided tape. Our exhibitions sneak into other people’s constructions, not to undermine them, but to enhance them. We appear and disappear, in an attempt to show that there is no reason why things ‘in construction’ may not be beautiful too. We take pleasure in inhabiting that which is unfinished, turning it into an opportunity for social exchange.

In a wonderful turn of phrase MG speak more amply of their practice as ‘*regalar es curativo*’, gifting is curative / curatorial, by which they mean that the liberation of the city as a material gift is both an art in the healing *and* re-collection of the urban condition.



Figure 1a. ‘Taking critique out for a walk’, an urban gift exhibition by La galería de Magdalena (Madrid, July 6 2013). Photograph by XXX.



Figure 1b. 'Taking critique out for a walk', an urban gift exhibition by La galería de Magdalena (Madrid, July 6 2013). Photograph by XXX.



Figure 1c. Kit for the critique of public space, La galería de Magdalena. Photograph by
XXX

There is of course a long tradition of guerrilla urban art that MG's candid interventions in public space explicitly stage a dialogue with and interpolate; for example, the famous psychogeographic *dérives* of the Situationists, which were meant to electrify and awaken the city from the slumbering rhythms of the capitalist time-machine (Wark 2008), or more recent experiments in 'participatory art' where the 'public' is provoked into existence through drives of fetishism that hope to prove there can be desire and affection outside the arcades of commodity and exchange value (Bishop 2012).

However, MG's urban gifts quietly displace some of the assumptions underpinning these traditions of political and critical awakening. Their installations are expressly conceived and positioned as 'copyleft' artwork. They are, in an idiom that has become an emblem of the free culture movement worldwide, 'free' urban gifts, where 'free' stands for both 'gratis' (at no price) and for 'freedom', in particular freedom from the restrictions of intellectual property law (such that people are allowed to copy, edit and distribute all artwork). Copyleft artwork is imagined here as something rather different from, say, guerrilla 'participatory art', because its power to activate and excite the public sphere lies not just in the performance of engagement, in the ritual staging of interaction as a political gesture, but in its material afterlife, its proliferating legacy, as people are invited to take these objects away with them, to have them hang in their homes, to gift them to their friends, or simply to photograph them and share the images and their stories in art blogs, Twitter or Facebook forums. Thus understood, copyleft public artwork produces a disjuncture of the places, material traces and forms of engagement that traditionally cling together in images of radical urban praxis.

This article offers an ethnographic account of the work that a number of free culture (*Cultura Libre*) activists have been carrying out in Madrid over the past five years. It develops an argument about the relation between free culture and the city. The free culture movement has to this day been analysed as a digital public sphere and digital rights movement. It is a movement for a free Internet whose conception of freedom has been animated by, and explained in terms of, what the Internet can do for the free exchange and circulation of information. We wish to essay here a somewhat alternative account of free culture activism, one where the practice of free culture takes root in and is shaped by the urban condition. The case of MG's copyleft street exhibitions offers a point of entry into our field site: a cohort of young urban actors whose work is oriented towards a political praxis of urban liberation, where the 'open-sourcing' of the city as both material and social form remains the great and audacious task ahead. In the mind of these young activists, this project of liberation is unequivocally inspired in the history and philosophy of F/OS software, which provides a beacon and often a benchmark too. But in its transposition to the urban realm the dictums and tools of F/OS software often prove insufficient and unaccommodating, and demand imaginative extensions and reinventions.

Thus, the article reports on the type of work that characterises free culture activism when its object of intervention is the material landscape, social relations and political governance of the city. We will pay particular attention to three features which most free culture collectives emphasize as central to their practice: (i) the archival technologies and documentary legacies that enable access to free cultural works; (ii) the materiality of openness, and; (iii) the pedagogy of liberation through which activists strive to elicit 'freedom' as a social and cultural form.

But we wish to develop also a second, accompanying argument about the type of ethnography that is necessary to produce such an account. We have been carrying out fieldwork among free culture activists in Madrid for the past five years (2009 to-date), following them indoors into hacklabs, architectural schools or meetings with local municipalities, and outdoors into occupations, popular neighbourhood assemblies or auto-construction workshops. We have been lucky enough to be able to spend five years of full immersion in our field site. But this has come at a certain epistemic price – more appropriately, an epistemic investment – which has had a material effect in our ethnography: its re-functioning or redesign into a ‘prototype’. We borrow the notion of prototype from the practice of free culture activists themselves. As we deploy it here, the notion of an ethnographic prototype attempts to capture the ecology of infrastructural processes through which the relations between research problems, questions and answers shift and on occasions double-back on each other. It points to a form of ethnography that takes its own changing infrastructure as its object of inquiry. In this sense, we may speak of prototypes as boundary objects or zones of infrastructural enablement, where objectives, objects, and obstacles are integrated as part of the hardware of research. They source – open source – the research project. Specifically, in our ethnography, this took the shape of an *infrastructure of apprenticeships*: the experience and design of an ethnographic field where what gets foregrounded is not just the zone of problematization through which relations grope for and try to get a handle on the contours of an emerging situation, nor the equipment that becomes second-skin to such an epistemic region (Rabinow et al. 2008), but a form of ethnography that becomes aware of its own material needs as a culture of mutual learning. We may think of such an infrastructure as an ‘enabling obstruction’, to build on the concept developed by Willerslev, Marcus and Meinert in their Introduction to

this special issue. Although the rest of this article is dedicated to fleshing-out this notion of an ethnographic prototype, it is necessary at this point to explain why prototyping figures centrally in the conceptual vocabulary of free culture activists in Madrid.

A prototype is a socio-technical design characterised by the ‘openness’ of its underlying technical and structural sources, including for example access to its code, its technical and design specifications, and documentary and archival registries; therefore, one whose designs remain open for others to read, edit, copy and distribute freely (Corsín Jiménez 2014). F/OS software is the case par excellence of a prototype; that is, a programme or technology whose source code is open for anyone to contribute to and improve it, that remains non-proprietary, and, importantly, that is built also around a community of users and designers for whom the software provides the infrastructure of collaboration. Free software, in other words, encapsulates and expresses an argument about political and digital liberties, but it also, as Chris Kelty has poignantly observed, provides the infrastructure through which such arguments can be made: it functions thus as a ‘recursive public’, where communities of free culture activists ‘self-ground’ or infrastructure themselves into the political project they claim an interest in (Kelty 2008).

Unlike most cultural and technological works prototypes do not hide their technical or design specifications behind the ‘black boxes’ of intellectual property and patent law (Biagioli, Jaszi, and Woodmansee 2011). On the contrary, much effort is spent having designs always and everywhere ‘white boxed’. MG’s copyleft public artworks offer one example and we shall see some other examples of urban prototypes shortly. Our concern at this point, however, is to note how our close work with free culture activists over such an extended period of time doubled some of the techno-political infrastructures that shape the movement back onto our ethnographic project itself. The street art exhibition by MG with which we opened this article provides one

such example. The exhibition brought to a close a series of itinerant seminars that the authors of this article convened over three months in a variety of open air spaces in Madrid. The seminars took place in plazas, streets and community spaces across the city throughout the spring of 2013. Under the rubric, ‘Taking critique out for a walk’ (*Sacar la crítica a paseo*), the series offered us an infrastructure and environment with which to interpellate *in their own terms* a variety of free culture collectives with whom we had been working.¹ Neither ‘ours’ (the anthropologists) nor ‘theirs’ (free culture activists), the seminars offered us a common scenography and infrastructure from where to explore and study the affordances of urban space as an open-source environment. Along with other such prototypes to which we shall be referring, the seminars were not a field site proper, nor they were simply a device or a method (Candea 2013). They certainly worked and performed in all those registers, but they were also something different: a zone of infrastructural enablement that allowed us to talk with our collaborators *about* the city at the same time as we talked *through* the city, echoing the recursive function that characterises open-source projects.

The article, in sum, develops a double argument: a theoretical argument about the relation between free culture and the city, and a methodological argument about the challenges that working with open-source communities poses to ethnographic practice. Let us start with free culture.

Free culture and the city

The global free culture movement saw the light in the late 1990s in response to widespread corporate efforts to extend patent protection and copyright enforcement of cultural works (Lessig 2004). Inspired originally by the copyleft licenses of F/OS software, it quickly developed into a broader movement whose loosely shared identity

was shaped by a belief in the democratizing potential of technology, the defence of the digital commons, the wealth of networks, or the culture of sharing and remixing (see for example Benkler 2006; Lessig 2008). The movement's most emblematic causes over the past ten years include the defence of net neutrality and peer-to-peer sharing, and the call for copyright protection from proprietorial enclosure of cultural works through the use of copyleft or creative commons licenses.

The free culture movement has therefore been widely represented in academia and the media as a movement about net activism – activism whose domain of vindication and expression is the Internet. There have been few attempts to situate free culture activism in domains of practice that extend beyond, even when actively engaging with, the digital realm. In the Spanish context, the coming of age of the free culture movement garnered a certain attention on the part of scholars because of its convergence with the kaleidoscope of social protest that animated the *indignados* movement (locally known as the May 15, 15M movement) (Morell 2012; Postill 2014). In the context of the uprisings, free culture activists became vocal supporters of, and on occasion spokespersons for well-known *indignados*' claims, such as the calls for political transparency and the denunciation of widespread corruption among the political class. Notwithstanding, most accounts of the role of the free culture movement in the shaping of new modalities of social protest – in Spain and elsewhere – characterise free culture activism as fundamentally concerned with the defence or promotion of digital rights. The interest remains narrowly circumscribed to the digital as an amplifier or enabler of political action. We remain relatively in the dark when it comes to understanding how free culture takes residence as a wider cultural practice, for example, when it is urban hope, rather than code, that is tinkered and experimented with.

We began fieldwork among free culture activists in January 2009. We had negotiated access to Medialab-Prado, a digital arts and citizen laboratory part of the Department of Culture at Madrid's City Hall. Medialab is arguably Spain's most reputed hacklab and social innovation centre. The lab opened its doors in 2000 as a digital arts centre but over the following decade became increasingly interested in the wider socio-cultural dynamics of digital relations. It became a hotbed for people with all manner of digital interests: from F/OS software developers to digital and visual artists, from academics with an interest in digital methods and social networks to architects curious about parlance of smart urbanism, as well as a cohort of citizen initiatives with an interest in the novel possibilities of digital tools. Most of the lab's users are highly educated people (with university degrees in the arts, computer science or architecture, for example; quite a few of them with postdoctoral qualifications too), in their 20s and 30s, and not infrequently members of larger artistic or activist collectives.

That it was a contemporary arts centre that hosted Spain's largest community of free culture activists is worth underscoring. In the US, the movement first gained traction amongst critical legal scholars (e.g. Lawrence Lessig, James Boyle) and software engineers and infrastructure developers (e.g. Richard Stallman). As noted above, the free culture movement took issue with the reduction of novel technological-cum-digital liberties onto the regulatory and legal frameworks of the pre-digital age. Free culture activists were therefore people essentially interested in 'coding freedom', as Gabriella Coleman has put it (2012): tinkering with technical machines whilst simultaneously aspiring to reformat the legal framework of their actions. At Medialab-Prado, however, the interests of free culture activists took a somewhat different direction. Perhaps inflected by its location at an arts centre, 'free culture' became not

only an arena of technical-cum-legal exploration but a much more ample research inquiry into the relationship between freedom and digital relations at large.

Starting in 2005 Medialab-Prado set in motion an original research programme that overhauled its previous agenda as a digital arts centre. The lab dropped its mission as an exhibition centre and reconceptualised itself as a workshop instead. Three times a year it convened ‘prototyping’ workshops where people were invited over a two-week period to develop prototypes responding to theme-specific calls. The calls invoked loosely the social dimensions of technology, e.g. Magic and Technology, Technologies of Laughter, Aesthetics and Data, but otherwise left open to participants what to work on, which tools to use or how to band themselves into groups. There were only two rules to be followed: (i) whatever its stage of definition, whether finished or, most commonly, still work-in-process, all prototypes would have to carry free licenses by the end of the workshop, and; (ii) central to the work of all groups had to be the process of documenting and archiving every step in the development of their prototypes. Moreover, the documents thus produced and curated had to be ‘open’, that is, publicly available for consultation, copying, editing and circulation.

Over the years the lab’s concern with the production of prototypes and the archiving of project documentation have become centrepieces of the ‘culture of “free culture”’ in Madrid (and arguably Spain at large). Free culture has become the dedicated project of those who take upon themselves the task of opening material processes, and generate and share the corresponding documentation about them. We have already seen one example of this conception of free culture in the work of MG, for whom the opening of material process goes in fact all the way down to the mobilisation of sympathetic energies and therapeutic relations between objects, people and the surrounding urban environment.

Another example of how the material affordances of objects are worked at being opened through processes of documentation is provided by the work of the guerrilla architectural platform Inteligencias Colectivas (IC, Collective Intelligences, www.inteligenciascolectivas.org). The platform provides an umbrella operation for a variety of auto-constructive and grassroots architectural collectives working in Spain today. The project for setting-up the platform first saw the light in 2007 when a group of young architects decided to convene an educational workshop aimed at documenting do-it-yourself, retrofitted, community-driven architectural designs and adaptations from the world over. The workshops are convened to draw attention to the architectural intelligences behind mundane objects and technologies, making them visible but also, importantly, cataloguing and diagrammatizing them, laying out the technical specificities and sociological dimensions of their designs (Corsín Jiménez, Estalella, and Zoohaus Collective 2014). Open-sourcing the city, for IC, is not just a technical operation, a matter of cracking open the ‘black-box’ of how technologies are assembled. It is also a pedagogical one too, which requires awakening to the presence and effects of a hitherto marginalized materiality: objects and devices and repairs that ‘source’ the city.

At an IC workshop attendants are trained in exploring and perambulating the city’s residual landscapes and wastelands, treasuring the inventive capacities of urban ecologies that are more often than not ridden by crisis and dereliction. Students are taught to develop and nurture an attentiveness towards unusual forms and materialities, a particular sensibility that seizes on the ways in which objects, technologies and landscapes fold and camouflage into each other; an attentiveness, in other words, towards the vibrations of matter, its inclinations and proclivities, its environmental affordances. Attendants are also trained in ‘evolutionizing’ these intelligences, as

members of IC like to put it, finding ways to extrapolate and extend their technological and architectural capacities: Could the fixtures made to a bicycle-turned-‘tetracycle’ in a marketplace in Chile (Figures 2a and b) be put to a similar use in Spain? Could they be used to enhance a motorcycle rather than a bicycle? In getting ready for evolutionizing such intelligences students must learn to look out for the carrying-over capacities of material interfaces – by looking at how materials vibrate or mimitize with an environment – as well as learn to carry these vibratory qualities over to novel territories and contexts. Students must therefore develop a form of systems-thinking that is at once analogical and digital, at once capable of imagining resonances, extensions and analogies with technological appliances elsewhere *and* figuring out how to render them legible, how to digitize and graph them so as to enable their travelling.



Figure 2a. Photograph of a ‘tetracycle’. Photograph by Inteligencias Colectivas



Figure 2b. Photograph of a 'tetracycle'. Photograph by Inteligencias Colectivas

In this guise, some intelligences require a multi-layered combination of iconographic techniques to be rendered fully legible, such as the use of photographs, architectural sketches, even video recordings, where the internal functioning of their components are properly explained (see Figure 3). The nature of the media formats, files and languages employed to describe an intelligence's internal pedagogics are also open to scrutiny and debate, for example, regarding the use of Autocad, a proprietary and very expensive software widely used by architects to produce 3D designs which in this form, however, restricts the circulation of designs to those with access to the technology. Open-sourcing the intelligence further requires paying attention to the social context and relations wherein the artefact or device first emerged, and at this stage it is not unusual for members of IC to engage in para-ethnographic fieldwork, interviewing the artefact's creators, providing information on their social background, their personal histories and motivations, the history of the artefacts themselves, their various versions, iterations, even their local 'evolutions', etc.

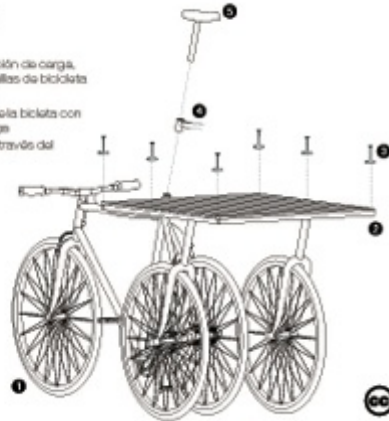
ic **Inteligencia colectiva**
[chile]
TETRA CLETA



EL PAN OJITO Proyecto realizado por **El Ferchito** en **Medeandro Madrid** Consultado por **Man López Murua**

Esquema General

- 1 Bicicleta tipo
- 2 Estructura de sujeción de carga, soldada a dos horquillas de bicicleta
- 3 Tornillo de estado
- 4 Casquillo de unión de la bicicleta con la estructura de carga
- 5 Clara del sistema a través del sillín de la bicicleta



ic **Inteligencia colectiva**
[chile]
TETRA CLETA

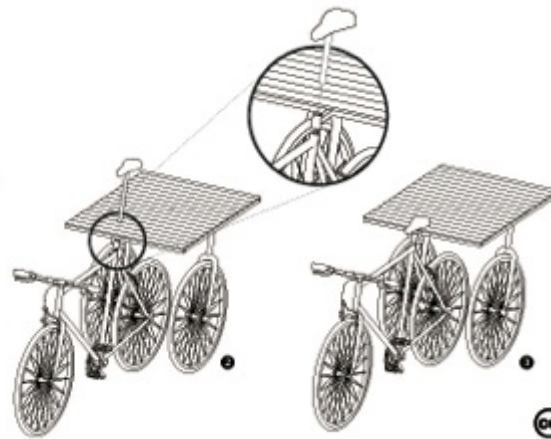


Esquema General

- 1 Construcción del bastidor a medida, y colocación de tubo frontal
- 2 Unión del bastidor metálico con dos horquillas delanteras de bicicleta
- 3 Colocación de soportes metálicos o de madera que cubran el bastidor

ic **Inteligencia colectiva**
[chile]
TETRA CLETA

- Acople a la bicicleta**
- 1 Pieza de carga montada
 - 2 Unión de la pieza de carga a través del tubo del sillín de la bicicleta
 - 3 Tetracleta completa



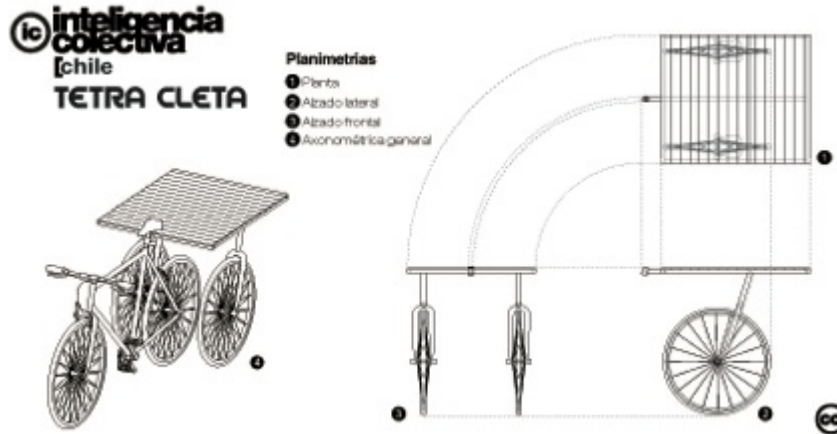


Figure 3. Technical drawings of a ‘tetracycle’ by Inteligencias Colectivas

More than many and less than one

Truth be told, most of the prototypes developed by free culture collectives that we have come across have been short lived. For whilst their philosophy of design defines them indeed as ‘things-that-are-not-quite-objects-yet’ (Corsín Jiménez 2014, 383), in honesty it is not always the structural open-endedness of their design philosophy that keeps them in a ‘beta’ state, but the fact that activists’ economic precariousness and uncertainty forces them to move on to seek funding and projects elsewhere. The migratory economy of activists, however, rarely kills the process of *prototyping*. The free culture collectives with whom we have been working will regularly take processes developed for one prototype and extend and apply them to new scenarios and projects. They may leave objects and devices behind but almost always take the lessons learned from past prototypes and use them to re-configure the problems they have at hand. But also, crucially, they take the archives that hold the documentary legacy for each prototype and use them as support for the design of a new prototype. This is of course what ‘open source’ means in free culture: making the sources of design available for future uses.

It also means that archives become the infra-ontologies of prototyping. The archive is the place that every prototyping project keeps referring back to, for every ramification or extension of a prototype needs to leave testimony of its design changes in the archival registry. Whilst a prototype grows and changes and multiplies into many versions of itself (more than many), the archive never reaches closure proper, it is always less than itself (less than one), for it must remain permanently open to receive new updates and edits to existing registries. We may think thus of the process of prototyping as enacting a figure of complexity that is at once ‘more than many and less than one’ (Corsín Jiménez 2014).

How to study an object that is more than many and less than one? Where to start from, if there is no site that encompasses it, not even multiple sites, for prototypes are design processes that may not be emplaced anywhere in particular, nor do they have a permanent infrastructure? And how to study a prototyping community, a free culture collective, if its sense of ‘freedom’ means that anyone can join and contribute to a project, if there are no boundaries to the community, because ‘boundaries’ are precisely what its practices strive to interrogate and open? Where do the entry and exit points of a prototyping project lie? (Mosse 2006)

These questions have haunted our fieldwork for the past five years. Sometimes we would sidestep them thinking that we were simply carrying out an ethnography of design, where our design communities happened to be guerrilla architectural collectives and urban artists who, incidentally, used free culture and open-source tools in their practice. At other times, we would persuade ourselves that we were carrying out work with urban social movements, whose use of digital tools, design practices and spatial sensibilities were assembling novel political formations. Whilst these are of course all valid angles from where to read our work, there is a sense, however, in which they fail

to foreground the issue that is at the heart of how the people we work with think of their practices, namely, their self-designation as free culture collectives. As noted, in Spain *cultura libre* is not just a social movement calling for the mutual liberation of law and technique in the digital age. Rather, it invokes a much larger problematization about how freedom takes residence and is shaped by a particular material and social environment. It is certainly a movement about the materiality of law in the digital age, and the limitations and coercions that certain proprietary formations impose on social relations. But it is also a movement about the nature of objects and spaces and designs, and about relations of sympathy and mutuality, between people, and between people and their material surroundings. It is therefore almost impossible to carry out a study of free culture – to keep a fieldwork diary, to blog and post and contribute to open archives, to join digital forums and online debates, to attend occupations and participate in street art exhibitions – that does not itself join the sources of the open-source movement. One can hardly study free culture prototypes without becoming a prototype for free culture oneself.

Let us offer here a couple of examples of the shape this has taken during the course of our ethnography. One event in particular deserves mention, for its pedagogic and experimental vocation, and the way it looped back into our research. This was a fortnightly meeting that took place throughout 2011-2012 at a variety of open air locations in Madrid. Known as #edumeet (Twitter hashtag) and convened every second Thursday via the eponymous social network, the gathering brought together an eclectic mix of architects, educators, designers and artists with an interest in the future of education in the digital age, and in particular its relation to the material environment of the city. The spirit of the encounters radiated provocation and curiosity. People spoke about, and exchanged references on, do-it-yourself approaches to education, such as the

edupunk movement (Furness 2012) or the ‘hacking the academy’ project that Daniel Cohen and Tom Scheinfeldt were curating live on the internet at that very moment in time (Cohen and Scheinfeldt 2013). The meetings were also spontaneous and intensive affairs. There was no agenda, nor indeed an expectation of attendance. Some meetings were attended by only a handful of people, who would then take the conversation indoors to a nearby bar, whilst others drew in crowds of over thirty people. Importantly, the conversations further blossomed into intense digital affairs, with people reporting them on blogs or Twitter and email exchanges, or keeping an archive of the debates on online collaborative documents.

Although there was frequent talk and mentioning of new digital tools, most conversations centred in fact on the nature of learning in the modern city, and how to turn the city into a learnable environment for others. There was parlance not only of specific technologies of education but of the city as an educational technology *tout court*. There was a shared feeling of dissatisfaction among these young activists with the education they had received, the highly impersonal and yet elitist terms in which they had been taught, but also, importantly, the sensorial, architectural and material forms they had been trained to populate the city with. Meetings would often rehearse various strategies and provocations aimed at countering such educational legacies: how to awaken the city from years of pedagogical slumber?, how to endow the city with agency, with the capacity to move people?, how turn architecture into a tactile and responsive environment, how to source the materials for opening (open-sourcing) the very architecture of education? Common to all such reflections was the idea of ‘autonomy’, in particular the type of spaces wherein autonomy seemed to flourish, from social squat centres to urban community gardens or occupied derelict sites. Here and elsewhere, they would observe, one could witness a liberation of pedagogy, from the

strictures of institutional education, as well as from the material formats and aesthetics trapped therein. There was a sense in which the urban condition, if properly aligned and formatted, lent itself like no other environment to the forms of de-schooling that Ivan Illich had imagined for radical autonomous learning (Illich 1979). The places where the city came closer to eliciting itself as a pedagogical experience were the places, these young free culture activists seemed to be suggesting, where people had organized themselves into autonomous projects.

Although today #edumeet has run out of steam, its influence in urban affairs in Madrid has been lasting and far-reaching, to the extent that the country's most prestigious architectural journal, *Arquitectura Viva*, included an entry on #edumeet in a special issue edited in 2012 on emerging architectural collectives (edumeet 2012). At #edumeet the academy had often been the subject of trenchant critique and polemics. Discussions about the relationship between learning and the city were occasionally mediated through critiques of the university and the obsolescence of academic knowledge. Our own identity as anthropologists was caught up in that very triangle, when some people commented with sarcasm but also with genuine interest the role of our ethnography as a method of learning between-and-between the city and the academy. We therefore felt directly interpellated by some of these comments and denunciations, and wondered what it would be like if we were to have the gatherings re-functioned from the point of view of our ethnography. That is, to study #edumeet not as the object of our ethnography but as its enabling infrastructure. We decided thus to launch our own ethnographic version of #edumeet. This entailed a partial overhaul and re-formatting of our project. We wished to join in in the process of prototyping public space and debate that #edumeet had first launched. We brought to that process our own tools, which included some of the conventions and genres of academic exchange. But

our exercise aimed also at being faithful to #edumeeet. It was not our intention to copy or inhabit its format, nor did we intend to parasite on it. Ours, rather, was an attempt to elicit our ethnographic knowledge of free culture collectives in Madrid and foreground it as part and parcel of #edumeeet's own infrastructure. In other words, we wished to elucidate the cultural infrastructure enabling our ethnography (if at all) to be part of a larger free culture prototype for urban liberation. What, in sum, would it mean to inhabit ethnographically a form 'more than many and less than one'? Building on this view of the city as a self-eliciting material pedagogy, we gave our series the title, 'Taking Critique out for a Walk' (*Sacar la crítica a paseo*) and organized six seminars at different locations in the city, including an art centre, a neighbourhood self-managed space, an urban community garden, Medialab-Prado, and the street exhibition by MG with which we opened this text. We invited the users of each space to a conversation with well-known free culture urban activists and academics, and provided a thematic trigger for each conversation.

Apprenticeships

What did we accomplish with our seminar series, if anything? Was there indeed a sense in which the series succeeded at 'prototyping' itself into the free culture movement? At one level the series was indeed a success, insofar as we persuaded into participating everyone whom we approached, and we were also successful in holding the seminars at the locations of our choice, pulling in a local audience. On the other hand this was perhaps to be predicted, for five years into our fieldwork we had become trusted partners of most of the collectives and people we invited to the series.

In retrospect, we must admit that the exercise failed in its attempt to fork out a new version of the urban prototypes assayed by free culture collectives in Madrid. This

much was gently pointed out to us by some friends, who noted that the project, although amusing and valuable, made it obvious that ‘it is always the same people in the same spaces’. Here they were giving voice to a particular concern, about the difficulties that certain forms of critique encounter in travelling beyond circumscribed locales and circuits in Madrid. In this light, our effort at ‘taking critique out for a walk’ was not read so much as an explication of how critique inhabits specific spatial and material forms, as yet another superposition of the same people onto the same spaces.

However, there was an insight that was valuable in this coming to terms with the failure of our project. Our intention had been to foreground the critical perception of the city as a self-eliciting pedagogical form. But, as our friends pointed out, it remained unclear what exactly was being ‘liberated’ in this guise, through this exercise in ethnographic elicitation. If it was a methodological insight about the prototyping of ethnography, whilst probably valuable for anthropologists, it was less so for the free culture movement. On the other hand, if it was an insight about how the city learns, it remained ambiguous and to all purposes *undocumented* how these sources of apprenticeships could be made available to others.

The observation came as a revelation to both our free culture friends and ourselves. We had long been discussing what was entailed in making cultural forms – material and immaterial – free. And our discussions centred, in proper free culture guise, on the liberation of technical and design specifications, and occasionally, in a more philosophical vein, on the liberation, too, of social and relational energies, not unlike, for example, how MG sought to liberate the cathartic energies of urban materials. A notion of liberation, then, that took the interface between the material and the social as its point of exploration. But it was suddenly made obvious to us that there was perhaps another way of holding the material and the social accountable to the

process of liberation. We realised then that a thread running through most free culture projects in the city, from Inteligencias Colectivas to #edumeeet or indeed our own ‘Taking Critique out for a Walk’, was the notion of the city as an infrastructure of apprenticeships. These were all projects that struggled to interrogate the educational dimensions of the city as a material form, to explore how learning acquired a specific urban outline. But in this guise, it also became clear to us at that point in our conversations that free culture activism had largely failed to incorporate ‘learning’ as one of the sources to ‘open-source’ in the city. For it was one thing to promote learning in the city, or indeed, to imagine the city as a learning environment *tout court*, but it was quite another thing to liberate all such pedagogical practices as open-source processes. What would the city look like, we ventured thus to imagine, as an open-source infrastructure of apprenticeships?

This insight opened up a new avenue of action and research for our free culture friends and ourselves. We sat down with a number of them and wondered what would it take to design an infrastructure where every new free culture project that took place in the city left a pedagogical register of its intervention, therefore leaving a legacy that both enriched, widened and elicited the underlying infrastructure. Using Mozilla’s Open Badges technology² we designed and developed a digital platform that enabled free culture projects (in Madrid and elsewhere) to design ‘urban stories’ about their own forms of apprenticeship, and in this sense to document and open the ‘sources’ of their own technical, legal, pedagogical, associative and political needs and capacities. We gave our project the name of *Ciudad Escuela* (<http://ciudad-escuela.org/>) and associated with a number of community projects in Madrid. The challenge was straightforward: could such a platform help communities carry out their work better?, could it play a role in legitimising their practices vis-à-vis local authorities or neighbouring communities?,

could it provide a means for communities to learn about their own practices, thereby becoming more robust and sustainable? Take the example of urban community gardens: Would it make sense for Madrid's Network of Urban Community Gardens to design one or various 'urban stories' about different aspects of their practice?; for example, about the grassroots skills, resources, tools or abilities assiduously employed or mobilized at a garden site? And if so, what design and pedagogical routes should they take in explicating and standardising all such tacit urban knowledge? In the case of Madrid's Network of Community Gardens this demanded on the part of the Network convening a series of workshops to better understand the diversity of material, media and social relations shaping gardening experiences across the city. An outcome of such a process has been the production of documentary materials on the registers, formats and resources shaping the cultural experiences and material pedagogies of community gardening.³ Thus, by inviting communities to get a hold on their urban predicament in pedagogical terms, *Ciudad Escuela* offers a source of liberation – an open source – of specific urban skills and learning capacities, whilst liberating (in the sense of expanding) the experience of cityness at large.

Conclusion

Collaboration has become a standard of sorts in much contemporary ethnographic practice (Konrad 2012). As Douglas Holmes and George Marcus have put it, the classic scene of fieldwork engagement today ought perhaps to be 're-functioned' as an experimental collaborative space, where the critical consciousness, narratives and sensibilities of fieldworkers and informants interlace and enmesh in shared soundings and explorations, shaping our interlocution as mutual 'epistemic partners' (Holmes and Marcus 2012, 129). The challenges we face today are such that 'we must relearn our

method from our subjects as epistemic partners, from a careful assessment of how they engage our world and our time intellectually... We want this [ethnographic] subject to perform a deferred intellectual operation for us' (Holmes and Marcus 2012, 129).

Elsewhere Marcus has suggested that in exploring ways through which such forms of deferral may become pedagogically and politically functional, anthropology ought to experiment with registers other than those of discourse and writing, in closer alliance with what he calls "third spaces," archives, studios, labs, "para-sites" and the like' (Marcus 2012, 430).

In this article we have offered an account of the design and development of one such experimental third space. Following the conventions of the free culture activists with whom we work in Madrid we have called this space a 'prototype'. Prototypes are infrastructures that take their own opening and disclosure – as material, technical and socio-political forms – as their object of action and inquiry. We have described the importance that free culture activists in Madrid place on the material liberation of learning, and provided some examples of the efforts they have gone into producing archival and pedagogical technologies for this purpose. We have also described how our ethnography came to inhabit this open-sourcing of the city as an infrastructure of apprenticeships.

In their introduction to a recent collection on *Inventive Methods*, Celia Lury and Nina Wakeford build on Paul Rabinow's notion of 'adjacency' (Rabinow 2008, 40-41) to suggest that inventive methods are those that grope into the empirically adjacent in order to provoke the social into happening. To hold the adjacent in view is to occupy an intellectual position that is neither too distant, nor too close: 'Neither the overdrive of the intellectual nor the authoritative precision of the specific. Rather: a space of problems. Of questions', as Rabinow puts it (2008, 39).

Adjacency captures in a spatial trope the moment and experience of indeterminacy and open-endedness that prototyping would seem to capture in a techno-infrastructural register. It is this intuition that has encouraged us to speak more ambitiously of prototyping as a possible design of the ethnographic contemporary – and of our own project as an ethnographic prototype. This is not unlike how Lury and Wakeford themselves read the affordances of inventive methods: ‘inventive methods’, they say, ‘are ways to introduce answerability into a problem.’ (Lury and Wakeford 2012, 3) They are ‘inventive’, therefore, not because they introduce an element of novelty into our understanding of the social but because they succeed at transforming the environment and infrastructures of the empirical into/as problem.

The ethnographic prototype works no doubt as such a problematizing infrastructure. However, let us to bring our text to a close with a minor if complementary variation on the issue of adjacency and invention as method. For both Rabinow and Lucy and Wakeford, the problem of method in the social sciences is as much an aesthetic as an epistemic and ontological one: method is a form of inhabiting the plural and partial relations that constitute worlds. It indexes the vacillations and uncertainty, and at any rate the temporariness with which one can speak of taking residence in such worlds. Yet there is an orientation in this tentative sounding of method as a form of worlding that appears underrepresented, namely, its department as ‘trajectories of apprenticeship’ (Pignarre and Stengers 2011). There is a subtle yet we believe important difference between the arrangement of *method as problematization* and the arrangement of *method as apprenticeship*. We have tried to make this difference visible in this article by describing how it was thrust upon us by our free culture friends as a provocative terrain of engagement and liberation: what would method look like, they asked us, if its aim was not just to trace and chart the cartographies of shifting

problematizations, but if it were to provide an infrastructure, too, for the ways in which apprenticeships are liberated? What would ethnography look like as a prototype of one such infrastructure of apprenticeships?

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Notes

¹ The seminar series ran from April-July 2013. More information on the series is available at <http://www.prototyping.es/la-critica-a-paseo>

² See <http://openbadges.org/>

³ The Network finally used *Ciudad Escuela's* open source code to convene and design its own open source urban gardening system of apprenticeships. See <http://ciudad-huerto.org/#top>