

Research paper:

The changing social economy of the Ecosistema ISO, San Isidro, Carabanchel, Madrid, Spain. An example of social and urban transformation.

A joint interview to María Tolmos and Carlos Jiménez, two active members of the ecosystem of the neighborhood of San Isidro in Carabanchel.

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1) What is Carabanchel Creative District? In which stage is the Ecosistema ISO project?

Ecosistema ISO project is a result of different social realities converging at the same time in the San Isidro neighborhood in Madrid:

- 1- **Artistic and creative fabric:** spontaneous and organic appearance of one of the most important centers of creative industries in Madrid, located in the peripheral area of the city. We have mapped over 100 designers, 200 plastic artists, 4000 musicians and many other cultural agents currently working or living in the area.
- 2- **Architectural legacy:** this creative center emerges in an industrial area (first such area to be projected in the city of Madrid in the late 40s) in the proximity of the urban center. The pressure for residential space and its economic viability accelerates the disappearance of old factories and workshops, unique containers for new generative social dynamics that are replaced with sterile, self-contained condominiums.
- 3- **Social issues:** San Isidro neighborhood, part of Carabanchel district, is the ninth most underprivileged among 131 Madrid's neighborhoods and its social environment is very heterogenous, fragmented and unstructured, with low income per capita, damaged infrastructure and very low civil and social participation and implication.
- 4- **Urgency for change:** there is a need to accelerate 2030 Agenda and, specifically, its sustainable development goal 11 (On Sustainable Cities and Communities). Strategies on sustainable urban transformation point toward local or neighborhood actions, such as ours, so piloting project in this direction is crucial.

As all these realities were occurring at the same time, there was an opportunity to start with the pilot project, conceived as a laboratory of sustainable urban transformation in a very limited, enclosed and socially depressed territory. The creative and artistic community would be the engine that would speed up social innovation and progress by co-designing strategies and urban transformation initiatives.

Ecosistema ISO started in 2019 with support of local neighborhood associations and other social and cultural agents. During this time the project was redefined and shaped, many local actions were carried out, different transversal projects on urban transformation were designed and the dialogue and meetings with the local government and the city council took place.

2) To what extent could culture be a sort of social transformation engine for the different communities in San Isidro? Who benefits from it? How do you promote social interactions among the different collectives living in this neighborhood?

The creative community located in this industrial area (Polígono ISO) is a very diverse, prepared, and motivated group, ready to start working on transversal projects and strategies that would integrate different realities in the neighborhood, from a social, economic, or ecological perspective. The objective is to reach all the collectives and local actors, to intertwine them and make them participate in this newly born ecosystem.

Ecosistema ISO is a tool that helps neighbors, businesses and educational centers connect with the rest of the creative and artistic community in the area so they can together perform projects on a very diverse set of subjects: Memory, food and gastronomy, equality, inclusion, entertainment, education, health, sustainability, culture, music, public space and aesthetics, among many others.

3) What is your working methodology to generate joint projects and promote a feeling of belonging to this neighborhood? How would you use more efficiently your existing resources, knowledge, and ability to enhance the use of public space?

In this first stage of the project, a small but solid group of local actors and collaborators was formed. The main purpose of this group is to intervene with the local and national administrations and to design initial pilot projects.

Later stages of the projects will consist of implementation of the approved ideas and the adhesion of new members to create a flexible workforces specialized in different areas.

The transformation of the public space is the target of many of the actions as we understand it as a melting pot where stronger feelings of belonging and social cohesion can take place.

This type of projects requires time and resources. We are currently trying to establish alliances with a very diverse group of agents, collectives, consultants and public entities and administrations to make it happen.

4) What kind of initiatives are you trying to implement regarding environmental sustainability? What are the biggest challenges that you are encountering?

Transforming a depressed, underprivileged, and contaminated neighborhood into a socially, economically, and ecologically sustainable ecosystem is the main purpose of this project. Environmental sustainability is fundamental to this idea, and it is present in all our initiatives as its transformative capacity affects all other aspects of the project.

Urban renaturalization, recycling, environmental sensitivity, water usage, energy, food systems and universal healthcare are subjects that are touched upon as participative processes for the whole community through arts and culture.

PIXELATA is a project about recycling and civil participation through arts and design. It took place in 2020 and it was financed by Instituto Europeo de Diseño (IED) within its program “Carabanchel Creativa”. The project consisted of a huge, pixelated mural done entirely of used cans that was placed on a façade in the neighborhood. Neighbors’ response and feedback was very positive, especially for those who participated in the collections of cans. It demonstrated that arts have the capacity to change garbage into beauty and it confirms that these sorts of projects have a strong transformative power as they create community and ecosystems.

The challenge to implement projects like Pixelata in a district unfamiliar to interventions of this kind has many positive aspects and it is very effective for social cohesion, regardless of the level of the environmental consciousness of the neighborhood, which was very low in our case.

5) What advantages and disadvantages are you encountering while working with local public authorities on the Ecosistema ISO and its initiatives? To what extent should the means of governance change?

Two years after we started negotiating different initiatives and projects with the local government and the city council, we have come to two contradictory conclusions.

On one hand we have received countless visits from high-ranking local officials, their assistants, and their teams. All the visitors would conclude that Ecosistema ISO is a high opportunity and high interest project that should evolve into a laboratory for urban transformation for the city of Madrid.

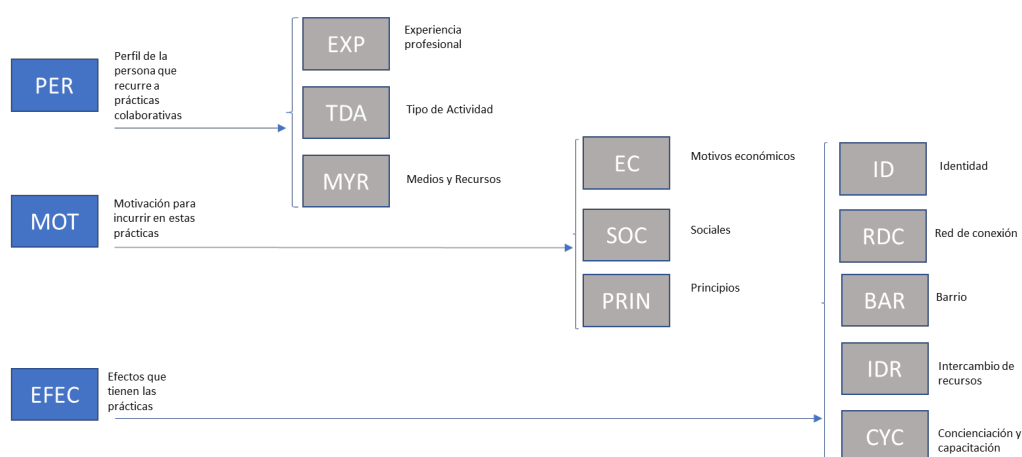
This dialogue with the local officials and the local government was beneficial for us as we obtained contacts that provide first-hand information about subsidies, other municipal projects, or approval processes for different activities and so on. Nonetheless, city council's different departments have a very hard time understanding transversal projects that require collaboration between different areas so all our proposals and ideas that were elaborated and budgeted have so far been rejected or not treated as rigorously as we would have liked. Local governments need to evolve into more flexible structures as social change and urban transformation require transversal multi-departmental actions.

6) What mechanisms do you use to evaluate and follow up the project? What kind of indicators (qualitative and quantitative) would you use?

In this initial stage, we have been able to conclude only a couple of projects with limited reach, so the evaluation has been superficial and qualitative, consisting mainly of verbal feedback provided by neighbors and visitors, that was always very positive.

As the project evolves, we will pursue a more solid evaluation of our actions, both qualitative and quantitative, on different indicators.

The main mechanism of qualitative research will measure our impact in the area, considering these 3 key performance indicators: Situation and context, perspective, strategies:



Source: María Tolmos

Legend:

PER – Situation and context.

MOT - Perspectives

EFEC – Strategies

PER will enable us to identify the context where collaborative projects are formed. MOT will enable us to identify the causes or ways of thinking that result in collaborative projects and practices. EFEC will enable us to determine different methods and technics used to measure the impact of these practices. EFEC is especially important because it enables us to amplify the magnitude and the complexity of the investigation.

7) What is the degree of digitalization used in the project? It would be of great interest to know how the use of these new digital instruments would be in the neighborhood's improvement.

In a project that relies on the interconnectedness and transformation like Ecosistema ISO, it is fundamental to create a digital platform for participation, access to information, analysis, and such, that

would be accessible to all the parties, neighbors, and agents. A platform would constantly be updated, and it would connect the project with other local, national, and international entities.

This digital ecosystem would act as a tool for activation of local economies, and it could highlight different environmental parameters as it would link all existing projects.

We developed a digital marketing plan that is still not executed, and its main value proposes a space of creation where different actors get connected and acquainted, finding inspiration and talent. It is a place of connection where alliances and synergies are established that generate social, economic, and ecological gain.