



“THE GLOBALISATION PROCESS DEMANDS THE LOCAL LEVEL A GREAT REQUEST THAT IS RADICALISING DEMOCRACY”.

Interviewed by María Solares.

# THE LOCAL LEVEL REQUIRES A RADICAL FORM OF DEMOCRACY

Conversation with:  
the team of  
Raons Públiques

**RAONS PÚBLIQUES IS AN URBANISM COOPERATIVE** based in Barcelona that seeks an alternative model of city-building that involves citizens through participation. We interviewed Carlos López, one of its architects, who reflects on urbanism through experience, and Raons Públiques’s work.

**What comes to mind when you hear ‘back to local’? Do you agree there is a growing trend to work at more local levels?**

The concept of a return to local is more a consequence than a trend. Since the globalization process started, we have been observing three clear situations: the expansion of the liberal economy, new technologies that have provoked a change in the way we communicate and keep ourselves informed, and global democracy.

This creates interdependence among different countries. If there is an external force, as in this case, there will inevitably be a requirement from populations to vindicate their specificity. Especially because public policies, in a global frame, have to be more efficient with the person who is further away from the centre. That is why I believe, the local level, more

than a trend, goes hand in hand with globalisation.

The whole process that involves ‘local’ requires a significant administrative reform. Hence, concepts such as decentralisation and regionalisation require a reform of the State.

The globalisation process demands a great deal from the local level that is radicalising democracy. You can do very little without participatory processes that support the local complex reality, without approaches and spaces to make it visible or without management systems that develop it. The big consequence of all this is the commitment to participatory democracy, not as a democratic ideal but as something the system needs.

Raons Públiques’ added value in this area is quite specific. We try to develop approaches for this participatory democracy to be feasible and useful. We research and propose tools, methodologies and working methods that can be doable.

**In your opinion, how has the role of cities and neighbourhoods evolved in global governance issues? Do they have an increased importance in regards to government?**

The approach of Raons Públiques to-

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...wards urbanism goes hand in hand with governance. We believe there has to be a transition from a local government that is bureaucratic, administrative, hierarchic, to a governance system that is more cooperative and in which the public administration, the private sector and the population get together to manage.

Raons Públiques approaches urbanism from that point of view. Every urban project that impacts city development should combine three types of stakeholders: technicians, neighbours and authorities. The relationship between technicians and neighbours is the development of a methodological approach of the participatory process, and the relationship between neighbours and administration is manifest in politic demands. In the end, all this requires two things: a management and mediation system of these three participants, and a methodology that makes the concept of participation feasible.

The local level requires a radical form of democracy that goes from being a mere ideal to becoming a necessity in order to manage this multi-level system. To accomplish this, it is necessary that participatory democracy translates into participatory

mechanisms. Institutions capable of managing this processes must be developed, as well as regulatory frameworks to make them viable. Besides that, the management has to be organic to adapt to the changes and the complexity involved in this sort of process.

In the case of Barcelona, at the participatory level, a law for the urban sector exists in which each urban project is required to submit a plan. This has helped the city move forward on the participatory level. Although the town hall's participation consists only in complying with the rules of information and transparency. What is missing are processes that encourage citizen participation, that open the deliberation processes, and consequently, more complex participatory processes. That is trying to be done in Barcelona.

At the local governance level there is an interesting structure. It is possible to find out what is going on in the city if one wishes to. City councils, district councils, neighbourhood councils and monitoring committees are open with participatory processes for people to talk about the projects. That structure informs, but does not encourage participation. It complies with the participation laws, but does not work in

encouraging and linking participatory processes to the community. There is no participation if there is no community, if there are no policies to promote gathering spaces, places where neighbours can prepare their participation.

The community-level management still has to be improved. In terms of structures and participatory spaces, the town hall is promoting co-working spaces or driving groups. A few years ago, Raons Públiques took part in an urban competition to plan the mountain-city relationship. When we proposed the methodology, we introduced the concept of driving groups, which refers to institutions that make the participation processes viable. The concept driving group created a governance space in which the key actors of the neighbourhood, politicians and technicians had to be represented. It was a roundtable where a variety of actors got together for two main tasks: monitoring and co-designing the process. Like this you do not only invite neighbours to participate, they also have to engage and manage.

A few years later, the administration has implemented this concept in various projects. Now, in a project in Gràcia in which Raons Públiques is involved, it has created a very inter-

Raons Públiques is an urban cooperative based in Barcelona.



esting group that comprises the platform ‘Gràcia cap a on vas?’. There is a political representative and we are the technicians. It is a work group where this triangle I was talking about before tries to make things happen.

#### **What do you do at Raons Públiques, and how do you think your work helps to create better cities?**

Raons Públiques is an urban planning cooperative. The main goal is to bring the concept of cities to people, and we do it from the educational dimension, from the participatory field and from physical spaces, norms or urban plans that improve people’s lives. This, which is probably not something so new, has its value in trying to tackle the complexity of urbanism while being immersed in the neighbourhood’s dynamic.

At the research level we have two initiatives: participation and presence in the streets. In other words, we open spaces to establish relationships with the neighbours. We do a participatory diagnosis including people, not with the intention of gathering information, but to open reflection and implication processes.

On the other hand, there is the data analysis side, observations of the public

space, interviews and sociograms. The idea behind all that is to use research and action to tackle the processes of citizen participation. The following three pillars are always mixed: pedagogical, participatory and constructive.

At the pedagogical level we approach community intervention. We develop companion work with the collectives using the space, in which we are present. When I say companion, I mean getting to know each other, opening gathering spaces, participating in them, identifying and establishing relationships; things that we believe are missed in the more institutionalised processes.

At the building level, we go straight to the point. But we also work with values such as self-building. We use collective design techniques, always with the idea of engaging people in mind.

The services we offer and that have been consolidated are on one side, community revitalisation processes in schools and on the other, participatory processes for use plans. We also offer participatory processes for construction or reforms.

#### **What are the main challenges you see in modern cities today?**

We find ourselves immersed in post-modern cities and a capitalist and

services economy. Consequently, cities have become a marketing product, because they need to attract investment. In this context, the society tends to be focused on the individual. The contradiction between the longing for community and the dynamics of cities today is not resolved.

Many times this contradiction is not well administered, and you bump into problems while working at projects. You go to the neighbourhood to do a participatory project and you find yourself in a fragmented area, with a diversity that is not well approached, in which relationships and conflicts are not well managed. Usually there is a lot of turnover in the city, we don’t even know who is our neighbour. In such circumstances, looking for participation is complicated. That is why one of the main challenges is establishing strategies that favour gathering spaces, areas where people can interact, before talking about participation. These concepts that address the immigration topics are questionable. It would be important to start looking into the social cohesion as an opportunity to find identity, objectives and common points. Again we are talking about community.



The team of Raons Publiques working at their main office in Poble Sec

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**Is Barcelona a victim of design? Has modernity overtaken social cohesion? What can be done about it?**

Barcelona, as all service and post-modernist cities do, depends on the capital that it is able to attract. We cannot understand today's cities without investment models, because that is how they grow, by introducing private capital.

This is not consistent with the policies and intentions of building a community, with social cohesion or with the parameters in which we speak at Habitat and other international forums. It is interesting, but it clashes with the keys of globalisation I was talking about before. At least with two of them: with the neoliberal model that prevails globally and with new technologies.

We must also take into account that Barcelona has undergone a process that turned it from a model into a brand. In the post-democratic Barcelona, when the city joined the Olympics competition and before it was chosen, interesting participatory processes were happening, with a prominent role by associations, grassroots movements, and the involvement of some enlightened architects that were working at the town hall at the time. They performed interventions, and a lot of

facilities were built. It was a city that had the conditions to become a community. With the big investments and big projects, it became a scenario to attract money. It became a brand.

It would be good to recover that period of Barcelona in which the urban sector supported micro-interventions to work with community issues, a situation in which processes are more profitable than the design of the spaces themselves. It will be very difficult to address that in a mega-project. A more local urbanism will help in Barcelona.

On the other hand, neighbourhoods having such a leading role in the city that they can help to revert what's beyond our control. If neighbourhoods start to become relevant, if they open themselves to work more at the micro level, interesting proposals could be made to the administration. In other words, I'm talking about a micro-local governance, because even at a local government level the city is very limited.

**What's needed to create social cohesion policies with immigrant communities?**

The cohesion plan in Barcelona relies on three things: immigration matters (control, records, resident permits, bor-

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ders, etc.), equality to ensure immigrants have the same rights and services, and, finally, integration and rooting.

These concepts that address the immigration topics are questionable. It would be important to start looking into the social cohesion as an opportunity to find identity, objectives and common points. Again we are talking about community. If the process focuses on empowerment and equity, these lines will change, and that is what's needed. If the concept changes, the strategies change. The battle of groups such as Raons Públiques is precisely there, in the words 'participatory,' 'democracy,' 'cohesion,' 'governance.' These are such wide and ambiguous concepts that, whoever wins the battle will see his work reflected on strategies and policies.

**How would you define a human city? Describe your model.**

A human city is that in which the reference, the scale, comes from the people. This would result in closer public spaces, avoiding mega-constructions, supporting micro-interventions and empowering neighbourhoods as city communities. When I talk about micro-intervention, mean not only projects, but also governance. There are

proposals for cooperative neighbourhoods, sustainable neighbourhoods, eco-neighbourhoods. We should give some coherence to these concepts, otherwise we will end up with a confusing collage of ideas.

At the architectural and urban levels, the facilities and services should be more targeted to people. While at the strategic level, we talk about an organic dimension that makes the city comparable to the human body. When something happens on a cellular level, our body has the capacity to send the necessary information to the nervous system to repair it. At the urban management level, a system should be established by which if something is happening on a small street, there could be a participatory process and effective decision-making that is transmitted to management entities and that is concretised in the intervention of the public space. It is about imagining a city that works as small cells that send information.

Another big principle of human cities is participation, and all I have already said about it. On a technical level, there is also a continual process of diagnosis process, that allows the city to be constantly examining itself critically.

**Finally, in 2016 global leaders will meet during Habitat III to define the new urban agenda for the next 20 years. What would you say to these leaders so that they take into account life in local neighbourhoods and cities?**

Rather than saying to these leaders how we would like cities and housing to be, I would propose mechanisms and methodologies, management models to achieve these good intentions. These proposals are the work of Raons Públiques: all the democratic ideals we propose, the participatory approaches we use, the management systems and the key community dimension in participatory processes. For me, the crux would be how to solve the contradiction between human city models and the existing economic models.

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