

La Molinera





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Name of the interviewee
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Who are you and what's your relation to the social collective La Molinera (Spanish for 'The Miller Woman'), and this social Center?

Isabel: I'm Isabel Rodríguez, and I'm a member of La Molinera.

Jorge: I'm Jorge Lebrero, and like all of us here I'm a member of La Molinera.

Where are we? What kind of neighborhood are we in?

Isabel: We're in Valladolid, a city in the north of the Spanish state, more or less two and a half hours in car from Madrid, to help understand the distance. Right now, we're in the La Molinera social center, which is situated by the old ruins of a five-star hotel, and connects three neighborhoods, curiously enough. It connects La Victoria, which has a big industrial history and is known because it passes through the Castilla canal, and then two others that are predominantly residential, Huerta del Rey, and San Nicolás.

Jorge: Valladolid has had an image of being a gray, conservative city; it has a sad reputation. We consider it a Castilian city with important social movements regarding local unions and social movements in general and this project is going to create a different expression of Valladolid, the more open, tolerant, progressive Valladolid that we want it to become.

**Do you consider yourselves a "social collective"?
Can you explain what this means?**

Isabel: Within the frame of social structuring, La Molinera as a social collective is, well, it's an expression of organization and common action. It's a space of alternative social reconfiguration away from the mindsets of power struggles and capitalist accumulation. We understand that when we talk about social collectives, we're necessarily talking about the construction of a collective intelligence throughout a horizontal social structure, through exercising our own autonomy, liberty, self-governance, and above all through the practice of support and solidarity which is the guiding axis of all our actions.

You're a social collective that decided to occupy an abandoned hotel and open a social center for the Valladolid locals. Can you explain to us what kind of social center you're imagining? Why is this social center necessary in Valladolid?

Jorge: I believe that what this project is looking for above all is to recover a space that was never exactly public, but that was eventually privatized and has been brought to a state of serious ruin. As far as the history of the building goes, for the last 160 years it's been a flour factory, and in

the last fifteen years it went through a reorganization due to organizational plans for urban zoning, which was modified in an irregular way. All of this brought the head of urban planning of León de la Riva to the courts, in fact the trial started on September 18, 2018. The head of urban planning transformed an industrial zone into a zone for residential and hotel use in a fraudulent way. This means that the factory was going to be converted into a 5 star hotel, the only 5 star hotel in the city of Valladolid, in a neighborhood enclave that didn't ask for it, and it's not what the city needs, but they're doing this through the Feder funds (European Regional Development Fund, abbreviated from its Spanish initials). They're public funds from the European Union to correct inequalities between different regions of the EU. Castilla is a depressed town in population decline, it's aging, it's been deindustrialized, and here they waste the public money from Feder in a 5-star hotel. We think it's terrible that this is what they tried to do. First of all, this hotel was abandoned in 2017, and within a year and a half of being abandoned, it's already a place for drug trafficking, and a place where people come in to steal junk and anything that you can sell. This is one of potential conflicts that the locals see as problematic. When we come here, it's to write a new chapter of dignity in the history of this 160-year-old building, which is also very culturally interesting, and put it to the service of critical projects, projects of solidarity, projects of self-management, projects of social mobilization, of learning, of culture, of leisure, etc. Bringing life back to the skeleton that this building had faded into.

How did this building go from being a flour factory to a 5 star hotel?

Jorge: The factory operated for 150 years. In 2003, the general plans for urban zoning changed, and allowed for a different use of what had traditionally been the factory.

The social collective La Molinera was born before the social center we're in. Can you talk about how the collective was started?

Isabel: The collective was born as a conceptual project before it we manifested it concretely, but I think we definitely considered it a social center once we'd figured out that process of occupation and taking the space and started in on it, like with the meetings that we're having. But as a project in itself, it started at least six or seven months before; it's something that we had been pondering for some time. We did an analysis of the city's reality, and we identified a series of needs and problems, and one problem was this space. Really it was a problem for the neighborhoods and everyone. This was a space where there had been a problem of drugs and destroying the building, for example, they burned one floor. So, neither the city council nor any institution was going to take on that responsibility, because it's private property and they weren't going to mess with it. So, from the position of the popular movement, we've taken charge of the problem.

Who belongs to this collective?

Jorge: We're a nucleus of people who knew each other before, from different social movements: the movement for public resources, the union movement, etc. We have a certain ideological affinity, you just naturally group up, and we're a group of people who are working in other spaces and we talked about whether a self-managed social space could exist in Valladolid like it does in many other cities, and that's when we decided to start this project. As my colleague said, La Molinera was born when we decided that this would be that space.

Why the name “La Molinera” (“The Miller Woman’ in English) for the Center?

Jorge: Before, this was called the La Perla flour factory (“The Pearl” in English) and we took the name La Molinera from the more feminist character; that’s the tradition of the workers movement, the movement for food sovereignty, which this place has made space for. This space was also important in the movement called the bread riots, which was a major influence in the mid 19th century in north Castilla. It’s a way to overcome the place’s incarnation as a five star hotel and recover its incarnation as what the La Perla flour factory was, and recover the historical memory of the building and the working class, because hundreds of people passed through here.

Thinking of the process of how the building was occupied, can you explain how and why it was occupied?

Jorge: Well, before, this was a private factory. I mean, it’s not that it went from being a public building to passing into private hands, but even so, we do believe that a flour factory that generates employment for hundreds of workers and carries the symbolism it carried, that’s a far cry from a luxury hotel. I say this with complete respect, of course, for the workers here, who were left without their salaries covered when the owner left, he didn’t lay them off, and they all should have been indemnified. So the fact that building’s changed for the worse, towards a model that we consider unsustainable and that we don’t want in the city, is evident, but it’s true that this was private property, and it continues to be that, and what we’ve found is that it’s in a state of abandon.

Isabel: Before anything else, you have to have a well-organized plan, because if not, it’s a chaos, and you’re really very exposed. Anyone who starts a process of this caliber in the Spanish state knows that they can prosecute you, so it’s important to have a good plan. To begin, we did surveillance of the space, noting the time and watching if there were people lurking around, if there were a lot of entrances and exits. Then we established a list of needed materials, people, and shifts, and then we get to the action. From there, the key thing is that everyone knows the responsibility that they have, and what might happen, because as it’s private property, we’re violating that right, and that’s persecuted up to a point.

Jorge: Yes, I believe that as Isabel said, you have to establish an action plan. Regarding the *why*, I believe that the key thing is to think about what needs the city has, and how this space is going to serve them. We were clear on the fact that we didn’t want this to be a housing solution but rather a space for various distinctive projects. So, you look at the city’s needs and look for what could be the best project to carry out in this space to meet them. It’s important to mention that before we came, the space itself was a problem for the city in the condition it was in, first because it was historic heritage that was being abused, and second because it was a source of problems for the neighborhoods, etc. And regarding the occupation, when we entered we came to resolve a problem, not to generate more problems, and it’s true that we came to question the current cultural, social, and economic model, but we didn’t come to create problems for the neighbors. In fact, they’ve really appreciated having young people here to maintain the space so that it doesn’t get more run down.

With the occupation, we also want to establish a debate about the limits of private property. This isn’t an absolute right, nor is it conceived of as such constitutionally, but there’s a social interest in private property. We believe that there has been a flagrant abuse of the property in this place, because if someone does to a

cultural good what the owner did to this property, if they let it break down the way this place was breaking down, we believe that you have to say, *enough*. State institutions could have appropriated it, if they were brave enough and they'd dared, I suppose that's a difficult process, but the people at the grassroots level can exercise that right too, we can recover a public good of the city for the neighborhood. This building was emblematic of Valladolid, and in the face of inaction on behalf of the owners and institutions, the grassroots movement recovered it.

Can they evict you at any moment? Did you seek legal advice beforehand?

Isabel: No, that's another thing that needs to be explained; in order to carry out an eviction, there has to be an order or a complaint filed by the owner, which in this case there isn't, nor is there likely to be. If the police came in to throw us out, it would be an illegal eviction, and it wouldn't be allowed to proceed if we took it to a judge. We would be absolved. In the case that there were that complaint, the important thing would be to not resist the police force, and above all to remain calm. It's a process; if there's a complaint, we accept responsibility and look for another space to occupy or another path to take.

Jorge: As far as legal advice, we have to be up to date and aware of what can happen on a legal level. We believe that we should face our situation and reclaim the legitimacy of this issue, and I believe that the majority of the city understands it that way.

Where's the owner of the hotel?

Isabel: No one really knows, he's run away. In the beginning, when he fled, we thought he went to the community, but no one knows anything about it. He's summoned to court for the salaries he still owes to the workers. He also owes money to the administration and to many people. He has other hotels around the city, but he's not going to show his face. He left and he left all the debt here.

How has your relationship been with the Valladolid City Council?

Jorge: In a word, I'd say cordial. That is, it's been the kind of cordial treatment that would have been unthinkable with the government team of León de la Riva. We don't think it's that they support the occupation; rather, on a legal level, logically, they're not going to get their hands into the issue. Another thing is, as we said before, this was already a problem before, and we haven't come to aggravate the problem, we've come to generate a solution and an impetus that, as we see it, no progressive municipal government should view as a problem in principle. So, what there has been is a series of friendly meetings with different councilpeople to explain directly what the project is, and a request for concrete technical things which, well, they often can't commit to. For example, some graffiti has appeared on the building's facade, and we'd like to paint over it, and the town cleaning service can't take on responsibility for it, because they say that that depends on the ministry of culture, as it's a cultural good, and they can't tell the cleaning service to cover the graffiti, even though they want to. We pointed out the necessity of painting that so that the space has a nice aesthetic aspect, but the institution says that, although they'd also like to be able to cover it, they can't shirk their duty or break the law to do that.

Isabel: The relationship of the council with the institutions, it isn't bad but it's also not the best possible, it's true. We would have liked it to be more like other cities, for

example, in Italy and Germany, where the social centers are so common that councils already recognize them as legitimate and normal. For example, in the city of Naples, the council changed the statutes surrounding social centers, in fact, they created new ones and denominated the centers common goods, and in that way they established them as something legitimate, something that is right, but that they can't interfere with.

In this case, the council says, "This belongs to the popular movement, to the people who are managing it, and we don't have anything more to say, we'll let you continue." In Valladolid at the moment, we haven't been met with any opposition, but neither are they leaving us alone in that sense. We don't like that when we try to fix the facade that they've painted us, the moment we put up the masking tape, the police have to come and report it. That would be unthinkable in other cities. It's not the worst situation, because it's not a constant repression, but neither is it the best situation it could be.

Jorge: To clarify, what the council has said is, "This is a private property, we can't interfere." So the normal police policy will continue to be applied, and if they pass by and you're doing something sanctioned, and they'll stop you and report it. In that sense they don't interfere. What I believe is an important thing we've done is to have established this debate in the city and political institution. Here, there's an abandoned space, and what happens if a group of people occupy it so that it's no longer abandoned? We discuss the limits of private property, and if this is positive or negative for the society and the neighbors. I believe that in that sense the council has taken a step in making certain qualifications, when they've considered that this had a positive energy, and that it was an interesting question for the city. Already, this ideological debate is cropping up and evolving in a timely way.

What concrete plans do you have for this social center?

Isabel: Well, we've established a short, mid, and long-term plan. For medium and short term, for now, it's about setting it up and making it habitable. because this has been in a deplorable condition, we couldn't even breathe in many zones because there were organic residues from a year and a half ago. Just to make this space habitable is ending up being a big job. In longer term plans, we have a series of political objectives and social objectives. The fundamental objective is for the people to get involved. As *La Molinera*, as a collective, we won't be able to do anything if in the future, people don't come and bring their proposals to collaborate. We see Social Centers as extremely active realities because literally hundreds of people pass by every week to do their things. The principal thing is to understand that in Social Centers like *La Molinera*, activity, responsibility and administration is all collective, everything is collective, so when people come, they organize themselves from grassroots; there are entities they get involved in, and starting there is when they feel like part of the project. Our objective is to get close to the people in the neighborhoods so that they have contact with the political and so that they internalize certain things. I believe that, for example, as far as youth, many people right now only dedicate themselves to drinking around town, or making themselves completely disconnected from reality, and by putting on certain workshops like a movie showing, we believe that we can give them political responsibility, not putting on a conventional movie but one that will really make that *click* happen, make that impulse in your mind so that you start questioning things. We believe that praxis is when you're really learning. In this path, we're kind of going to weave networks around this space and its

neighbors, so that this will become a meeting point for activism, for saying, *well, here we're going to do projects with people who already know what activism is, and are going to create something for the common good*, the kind of place where people are brought together in a way they wouldn't be if we hadn't created it.

Jorge: Yes, we're coming to reclaim the role and the pride of activism. We believe that during a series of years, political affiliation or social activism has been really devalued, because the media has said that it was no good for anything, it was nonsense, better to do things through institution-established pathways, so we're coming to reclaim at the "do it yourself" so for this space, that's also what we want. We always bring up the example that we don't want to be a civic center, with all due respect to civic centers, I say that because the Social Center isn't a place where people go as users or clients or benefactors of something but rather a space where we say, "You've proposed that we host a bread-making workshop—" for example "—so get involved with that. Let's find a space, let's get the material we need, let's see how we can make this possible, etc." What we want is for people to come, get involved, know us, and take on responsibility for their own proposal and we can carry it forward together and learn together what you have to teach, and how we can support you in this. It's about reclaiming what it really means to create a social web in which all the people contribute.

What's the difference between a social center and a civic center?

Jorge: Well, I understand that as they're thought of, civic centers are a bunch of services, but here we don't want to offer services. We believe that that's not just a semantic issue, it's a fundamental one. It's clear that there should exist a network of civic centers and other types of institutions that offer and satisfy the common needs of the neighbors on a more sterile level, but it's also true that we're lacking critical spaces to generate a social model in which people get involved, participate, and become protagonists of change and transformation.

For many of the collectives I've talked with, the 15M activist movement signified a moment of reorganization, (re)invention, and strengthening. What has this moment meant for La Molinera?

Isabel: We recognize and admire the 15M movement. From that moment -- which I believe is a historical reference point for social activism -- from that moment, there surfaced a ton of initiatives for social movements, collectives, centers, absolutely everything. In our case, as a diverse group, there are people that have lived that moment firsthand as well as people who, like me, consider themselves children of 15M. I believe that we collect all that tradition from that moment, when the people rose up to oppose what was [i.e. the social, economic, and political situation of the time]. That's the reality we're bringing to the city, that is, we've made the city reconsider the legality and legitimacy of this; it's repositioning itself in respect to this. And it's a moment for us to rethink and re-organize ourselves. I believe that movements like 15M have inspired new forms of social organization, and we gather them up and from there re-adjust all that. There's nothing new now, but what there is, if you change a few things and such, is that it's really brought us to new forms of social structure and of activism.

Jorge: Yes, well I, as I'm a little older than my colleague, I lived through it in person, at the plazas, and of course it was a very interesting experience above all for people like me who had been affiliated with organizations and such even

before it. It's true that many organizations and political or social agents didn't really know how to situate themselves in the movement, and others even saw it with a certain contempt, because they thought, *"I've been fighting in my union, organization, or whatever, for ages, and these things you're saying that like they're enlightening everyone, we were saying them thirty years ago."* So there was a lot of confusion in what was the organization of the traditional popular movement, but it was very positive in the moment to be able to extend what was being said in all the little collectives that were already practicing resistance throughout wider sections of the population. In 15M they said things like, "They call it democracy and that's not what it is," and these collectives said, "We were shouting this in anti-fascist protests twenty five years ago, when there were four of us." Well, now we've popularized it and the people are understanding and being receptive to a message that maybe before was just from a very small group. Apart from the issue of 15M and how it's transformed us, it's interesting to consider things like the massive feminist mobilizations of recent times. Let's say it's like the feminist 15M, with a fundamental transformative capacity. Just as we're talking about 15M, we have to talk about 2017 and 2018 as the peak of the feminist movement. And another series of movements from which we learned a lot are the democratic movement for Catalan independence, which is important to help us understand the limits of the right to decide and of democracy as it's laid out; or movements like "Surround Congress" ("Rodea el Congreso" in the original Spanish) or large social mobilizations, and above all politicians with the kind of ideological responsibility that we've seen since 15M. We're inheriting all of this, and learning from all of it.

Are you thinking about the sustainability of the center as a self-managed space?

Isabel: Exactly. We aren't thinking of receiving any subsidies or help on behalf of the institutions or any other company. We plan to maintain ourselves based on product sales or the activities themselves; as a self-managed center, we don't look to turn a profit, nor for anyone here to benefit financially from their involvement. We believe that we have a certain autonomy, and that in that sense we can be economically autonomous. It's a social center and it's going to require a lot of resources and people to finance us, but we believe that through donations and people who understand that and decide to volunteer for us, we'll keep afloat and moving forward.

Jorge: The project won't stop being critical of the current economic model, and in that sense, it's important to establish new relationships that aren't strictly monetary. It's true that we need money to do everything, to restore the space we need to invest a lot of money in buying material and in this sense, there are a lot of donations we rely on and there are people who want to collaborate in some way, but of course we don't just want financial collaboration. For example, here there was a bunch of furniture that was falling apart, and there were people who offered to restore them, participating through that. There are a lot of forms of collaboration that don't strictly have to do with money. There are a lot of people who have knowledge of how to repair roofs, or who know what methods and instruments we need, so they come here and teach us, they participate in and develop our process. So yes, we choose self-management, as many other places do. We believe that institutional money is for other things, that is, the people's tax money must be used principally to cover necessities. We firmly believe in the public sphere, but this is a self-managed space that's a third way of doing things; it's neither public nor private, in a sense it's a way to be critical and promote another kind of economic model.

In an interview, I read that you talk about this social center emphasizing the collective sphere¹ in the face of capitalistic individualism. What does La Molinera understand by “the social sphere,” “the common sphere,” “the collective sphere,” and “the public sphere”?

Isabel: I'd say that a common good is a good that's not private property, nor public property exactly, because it's not controlled by the state. In that sense, I believe when we talk about social centers, including La Molinera, we're talking about one of those common goods. So when we refer to the common sphere, we're also referring to projects of this style. This is because people on the inside manage it themselves, and there's no private or institutional property. In that sense, social centers are like a public amenity. When we talk about those things, we're also making reference to countercultural elements because the dominant capitalist system is a system based in competition and individualism, a system that generates inequality and makes us consider the work we do and everything that comes from that as something foreign, something that we aren't inherently tied to as human beings. When we emphasize the glory of the collective sphere, the social sphere, we're talking about the roots inherent to human beings as individuals and as a species. From a more anthropological and philosophical standpoint, a human being is *homo faber*, an animal that works, capitalism and this economic system sells us this idea that that kind of activity and everything we generate with it should be thought of in mercantile terms. We say no, that human beings transformed our reality from nature as social beings, and we work as a community. So when we're talking about the social sphere, the common sphere, and the public sphere, we're talking about these things that we think are private, but they really aren't. In the press release, we said, “La Molinera is just as much ours as yours,” and that's kind of the essence; that the people start to think that what they get from the fruit of their work is theirs. In the situation we're currently in, the public sphere is crucial, and this project kind of responds to that.

Jorge: The only thing I would add is to also appeal, because we're in Castilla, to the sense of the *comuneros* (a term referring to the citizens who revolted against the rule of Charles I in 1520) which for us is a historical tradition, and there's a thread of continuity between the *comuneros* of the sixteenth century and our thought, which in the end is the defense of common over individual interests. In this sense, we understand that the way out of the problems we complain about today is through the common sphere; that is, a collective solution, looking for these meeting points that generate social benefit for the community and for the common good of all mortals, and not look for individual competitive solutions to these kinds of problems.

We're talking about a project that's about weaving a network together with the people of the neighborhood, and their necessities. Could you explain how you've established these relationships and this communication?

Jorge: I think we're fortunate in that we're locals of Valladolid. We know some of these neighborhoods really well, we know their specific needs, and this lets us carry out specific actions accordingly.

Isabel: What we've done since opening is organize meetings with the Associations,

¹ Here, as in all instances I refer to a certain 'sphere,' the original Spanish uses phrasing translating literally to “the [adjective]” (“the collective” or “the public” or “the common” as the case may be) and meaning “the goods, resources, systems, and services which are collective/public/common, etc.”

because we understand that if this is a project that's trying to weave a network among the neighborhoods and connect neighbors, who better than them to be the first to come visit the space? What we did was contact different associations, we invited them over, we gave them a tour of the space, sharing its history and the plans we have here, and how they can get involved and lend a hand. The representatives told us that from the start they saw it as a good kind of work, a project that they see functioning, addressing a problem that they'd been experiencing, and they haven't brought up any problem since then, no one's come to complain.

Jorge: Of course, neighborhood associations, up until now, have functioned kind of like agents with whom we can talk more directly. The first meeting that we had, as my colleague said, was with the associations themselves, because we believed that it was important, and our feeling has been good. Beyond these Associations, many locals have passed through. There are some really interesting anecdotes of people who worked here when it was a flour factory, including a woman who had worked here who gave birth in this room. It's like the most beautiful thing that we've encountered, and right here the woman started crying from the memories, that was really beautiful. The truth is that the feeling between neighbors about what's being done here is currently really positive. And what you asked us at the beginning, about if we'd consulted the neighbors before entering, well, because of how occupation works, you can't do that too much.

You've talked about the tradition of the community members from Castilla as a guiding model of the collective. Are there other models that you've had in mind as you generate the project?

Isabel: I don't think we've thought of any specific names in particular, but we do keep in mind as guiding examples all those people, not only in Valladolid but in every city, that have given their lives to activism and really fought with blood, sweat and tears, literally, to impel change because they understood that this system isn't viable long term, and they tried to make a change. Our role models are all those people who are activists and who stay on the front lines without worrying about the repercussions that many suffer. They're role models for us. Now, as far as social centers, we do have a few examples. In the Spanish state there are a few with whom we've established contact, and then I've looked at a few in Rome and Berlin that are already part of the everyday reality.

Jorge: There's one interesting thing about the hotel that seemed interesting enough to recover, which is that each of the rooms and common spaces have the name of an enlightenment-age figure. This hotel was decorated in the theme of the eighteenth century; you have to understand that it's a building that was built over the Canal of Castillas, which is a fundamental work of hydraulic engineering from the 18th and 19th century. What they did was recover this history and give each room the name of a historical figure related with this era. What we want to do is baptize each of the rooms and the mezzanine with the name of a social warrior from Valladolid, an activist who's a role model for us. It's a way to pay homage to the historical figures of Valladolid from whom we've learned something. From García Quintana, who was mayor of Valladolid and who was shot in 36, to Doris Vengas, who passed away recently, or Avelino Mata, a union member of the CGT who also passed away recently and who stood out in the battle to defend public education, or Beatrice bernal, who was the first woman in the sixteenth century who wrote a book in Castilian to be edited and published. Well, these names still aren't certain but they're what's occurred to us as a way of recovering a history that we want to pay homage to because it's an inspiration.

Based on what you've been explaining, we're talking about a collective meeting point for transforming society while we learn and unlearn. Do you consider yourselves a part of the movement of informal neighborhood education?

Isabel: In a certain way, I believe we could -- I don't know if as educators because I don't believe that this is a relationship of an intellectual authority teaching someone who doesn't know, but I do consider this a center of constant learning. For example, regarding the issue of the center's name, we considered using "Self-Managed Occupied Social Center," but in the end we didn't see it as relevant because where we embrace those particular countercultural elements is in the practice, through the grassroots organization of *La Molinera*.

In a certain way, it's not just the people who are learning from the dynamics that we're creating in the city; we're also being nourished by the wisdom of the people who come here to collaborate. In that sense, I don't believe we're educators, but if we're creating a network of education that goes beyond what we're offered in a biased education that doesn't compel people to question what's established, in that sense we're creating a network.

Jorge: I believe, additionally, that participating in these kinds of projects not just in ours but in any self-respecting social center means participating in a process of continual, accelerated learning. Here, in a few weeks we've learned about everything: talking to the press, using a drill, cleaning, participating in assembly, etc. You learn many things, and this without having put into motion the specific projects, because we're just getting started. When we put on a workshop for professional training to learn how to use a circular saw or a drill, we'll learn a lot more. I believe that overall, the centers are spaces of learning and social transformation. We're transforming and generating new societies and new models of relationships while we learn and unlearn how to do it, because we're built through a series of issues that come almost by default and that we need to recover from.

Thinking of your personal experience, what are the major unresolved issues of the current formal educational model?

Isabel: I'm a public school student, in fact I'm a minor. I'm starting my second year of *bachillerato* [high school-equivalent starting at age 16] in the field of social sciences, and my experience being in a public school is the reality that you see. For me, the educational system is like a chain of production. They factory-produce products with the same characteristics, and they have to be trimmed according to a series of measurements. If you're not in line with those measurements and you're not an identical product, they're simply going to offer you a path that leaves the educational track, or you simply fail and are useless to them. Therefore, I believe that when you asked us the question about co-education, it's kind of about leaving that model. You don't have to think in commercial terms because you should never think of education in commercial terms, that's kind of my experience. While you go along this path and you go through a series of competitions which aren't really competitions in the end, you're going to triumph in a manner of speaking, but failing in school doesn't mean that you're a failure, it's just because you're not following their lines. Here in Spain, there's a lot of stigma surrounding the people who do professional training yet in reality, they're getting an education that's much more practical than the university education; that is to say, they're teaching them to do a job. What I experience in the institute is that it seems like everyone has to pursue a high-education career, and that's not

the case, in fact there's a lot of people who simply can't do that because of the cost. It's only an obstacle course for the students, especially if we're students and activists or students and workers, that's even worse because you can't juggle everything.

Jorge: Well, I'm a historian and I'm almost done, I have a few months left for my doctoral thesis. I'm in the writing phase and I've gotten the support of one of the FPU grants the Ministry gives, and this has meant that I've had some teaching experience in the university. I'm not very proud of the university because I understand that since the Bologna Plan the educational model that we have isn't letting us do marvels, we'd prefer to teach in other ways, but you have to adapt yourself to what's there. So, we would have liked to do other things within History, because you can experiment and support different viewpoints through reading different sources, but it's been an experience in which we haven't been able to innovate or bring up other issues.

As far as being a political project, what kind of politics are we talking about?

Isabel: I believe that in that sense we're different from other social movements which have emerged here in the Spanish state because we don't take part in the defensive political activism that seems to motivate other movements where they're combatting some specific injustice or inequality. Here, I believe that the political act we're carrying out is a more offensive [ie proactive] or transformative one. Instead of simply putting patches on things, defending ourselves from the blows that we receive, we're opening breaches in the general system. For us, from my point of view, we've said "There's a problem here," and we've acted against the problem, but after solving the problem of the degradation of the space and the loss of tradition etc., we've said that beyond solving that problem and resisting all that, we're going to give this space a path forward, a future usefulness. I would talk about transformative political action, where we contribute something positive, not just always resist the negative. We could have been a perpetual occupation, but that's not what happened because we're occupying with the spirit of opening up, not closing off.

Jorge: Yes, fundamentally it's a generative political act, not of raising a grievance. It's clear that resistance is fundamental, there have been attacks on all kinds of public sectors, and in that sense a dynamic of resistance is generated like the movements² to defend the public sphere or like 15M, as a space for saying, we can't do this anymore, you're crushing us. But it's true that to deconstruct, you also have to construct, and have alternative projects that suggest things for practical life and solutions that the people see as viable and responsible. So I believe that right now we're in the process of generating spaces for direct confrontation to propose new models and new solutions. We feel as if the 78th regiment is ending and we have to overcome it. We see that there's an unprecedented institutional, territorial, economic and social crisis, and this is the moment to decide to transform. In that sense, it's up to us to support the dismissal process. If the 78th regiment is ending, we have to finish knocking it down, we have to shake it until it falls to find a way out and generate something positive for the working class in general and for the popular masses. Something that can substitute what there currently is in a way that's essentially progressive.

² The term used here, 'Mareas' translates literally to 'tide' or 'wave,' and refers to the movements focusing specifically on issues like housing, water rights, public health, etc., that arose from the 15M movement

How do you organize your operation through assembly? How has that experience been?

Isabel: Well from the first moment we've shaped ourselves as an assembly, but we understand that in that aspect if there isn't good management or good internal organization, it's very easy for everyone to abandon it. For example, we took the form of an open assembly, which means that administration and responsibility is collective, but when it comes time to incorporate people into the meeting, although it's in an open form, we believe there has to be a sieve so that those who come add to our group rather than diminish it. It's normal for conflicts to arise among us because it's part of what assembly is, and you have to understand that there have to be guidelines. In *La Molinera*, there are some guidelines for coexistence that everyone has to respect and if they're violated, not regarding the project but between the members, maybe it's better if you disconnect yourself from *La Molinera*. On a personal level, we don't understand the capitalist system because it pits us against each other, but we do believe that we have to learn certain things from it. It seems to me that many of the strategic plans that companies have, if we adapt them to social projects, they can lead to better results. I think that in that sense, we've also gotten over our fear and are trying to apply all these things, without thinking in commercial terms; no one's going to make a profit here. But for example, we're a brand, in the end we're marketing tools and we have to be considering how we inspire loyalty in the neighborhood and we should continue adapting little things like these in the meetings.

Jorge: We also see the importance of generating a healthy environment for those of us on the inside of the organization. Those of us who initiated the project more or less were clear on what we wanted, because we were coming from working on it in a series of meetings, and so we just refined what needed refining, and as some of us come from a long activist tradition, we know what happens: in truth, many things destroy themselves from the inside. You don't need the police to come to evict you or fine you or whatever, many times internal tensions can end up weakening and tearing down the project. So we established the assembly as a guiding nucleus of everything this project is, in order to avoid it weakening itself or going against what we wanted in the beginning. In that sense, as my colleague said, it's about incorporating people who can keep contributing, and who we can tell aren't going to bring up problems that those of us who started the project have already worked through. We are interested in the seeds of projects that can grow around this space. If someone's going to come here to make some of these rooms a public library or cafeteria or some kind of workshop, they'll have the freedom to manage that project, more or less independently, as long as they fulfill the conduct guidelines. Someone from the assembly will sponsor the project and will be the link between the nuclear sector and that workshop or activity in particular. As far as the assembly itself, we have standard practices for how to incorporate someone or how to make decisions and, in the case of having to expel someone, how to do that, etc. to protect the project. We're putting too much of ourselves into this project to let it be brought down by that kind of issue.

Do you make decisions through consensus, or through voting?

Jorge: I wouldn't say consensus, and I think that's something that we've learned through 15M. Historically, we've looked for wide consensus, but you can't always get to a consensus. So, we believe that we have to take decisions with a wide support from the assembly. There's a desire for consensus, but if we can't reach it, logically, we have to give up and keep moving forward and making decisions.

What, for you, are the keys to the healthy function of the collective?

Isabel: I think the first thing, when it comes time to work collectively, is taking care of personal relationships. What my colleague said earlier, in order to carry out good work anywhere, not just her, there has to be a healthy environment. It doesn't mean that we have to be best friends, but at least have a healthy relationship where we can work and where there are mutual ties of respect. In a certain way, it's normal for us to debate certain things because someone has one opinion and someone else has another, so the goal is to reach a wide consensus, not 100%. That's kind of what we try to do. In the end, it's effective just because we work at it. I think that through activist work, in the end, we're all people that have gone through the same thing, who live with the same inequalities, who've had the police draw up a charge sheet for you or open a file on you, and we've all had those experiences that end up creating a community network among us, and I think that's fundamental.

Jorge: The people who started the project, we knew each other before, so you already know who you're playing with. And I think that's important because you'll do anything for your buddies, you'll go to prison if that's what it takes, or you'll pay fines because you know that there's going to be a group of people who support you and have your back. So, you have that mutual trust. What happens when you incorporate new people that you maybe don't know? Well, that trust has to be built and remade from the start. This is something, also, that you have to take care of on a daily basis because people, this is a natural tendency, they drift apart or together as problems occur and experiences accumulate. So I think this is a continuous work. And, like she said, this mindfulness is a fundamental issue. There's no use saying that this is a space where you won't tolerate macho attitudes or you're not going to tolerate disrespect; these things happen and you have to figure out how to minimize them, how to handle them and correct them. So that's an important job that fortunately, people who are activists and who have experience with assemblyism³, they already have experience working on this a little, although there's always a lot to learn and new situations keep appearing that you've never faced before. So we call on our collective responsibility and on the importance of the project, and we have to focus on the common good right now, which is how to keep moving forward.

From this experience, what would you recommend to a collective that's thinking of opening a social center?

Isabel: I think that a recommendation for all potential social centers is that they come up with a series of objectives in the initial process. I think that the first thing is to have goals in different areas that you want to complete, and from there, always establish a system for reflection and control because a lot of times we make mistakes in forgetting to revise these initial goals. I recommend that the whole project is clear on what the objectives are, which can be modified of course, because needs change and political issues do too. And from there, to create a strategic plan and a plan for reflection in order to see where you've fallen short, what things you've managed, what things you haven't, and how things are going to get better, those are reflections that should be being made constantly.

³ *Asamblearismo* in Spanish; neologism meaning the practice and philosophy of using whole-organization meetings or assemblies as the central method of planning, organizing, and making decisions

Jorge: We're a recently born collective, so we aren't here to be an example of many practical things, especially for social centers, where others have been functioning for decades. There have been many different models of occupation, and we're not going to get into the legitimacy of all that because in principal we support them as critical models. Our experience has been really good with them whenever we've tried to get the topic of occupation and social center projects into mainstream conception. There is a general hostility at first from a lot of the population because they have a mistaken concept of how these self-managed spaces operate and a lot of times the occupation movement hasn't done much to erase that stigma. For us, what's been good is being able to work here, to kind of put a face to the occupation, and to do a press conference to say that this is what we've come to do, and we're normal neighbors, and in our protocols of coexistence it says that it's crucial not to bother the neighbors or degrade the neighborhood, and to be careful about impacting traffic or using drugs because that ties into a larger discussion about how we've come to respect the building which in our case is a cultural good, etc. You have to project an image, not just as a tactical decision but you have to believe it yourself. As we say, we came here to contribute something to society and to the public, etc. So I don't come here to hide from the neighbors. I come here to show up and talk with the neighbors and explain the *why* behind this process and talk to them about whatever they want to talk about. So, I understand that if I have an attitude of not wanting to talk with them or of trying to hide away, or like what I'm doing is clandestine for legal reasons, they're not going to understand. The legality of this is what it is, and we'll face the legal consequences of this if there are any. At the moment, it seems like everything's going well, but for us the important thing for right now is to keep showing our faces and saying, "Whatever happens, we're here, and we're activists." I think the experience of having acted like this has been really good.

How does this collective think about incorporating the diversity of neighbors' abilities, knowledges, realities?

Isabel: For now, I think the majority of us are from Valladolid or the surrounding area, but as our assemblies are open, that doesn't mean that tomorrow there won't be someone with a different reality or who came from a different city further away, or from a different country. The reality is, we're a diverse group just in terms of generational span; there are young students, 17 and 18 years old, there are working people, and within all that variety there are also different realities. I think that the act of kind of forming ourselves in this way, as a diverse group, is what really enriches us. Next, I'd love for more people to come tomorrow with different realities and from whom we can keep learning.

Jorge: One of the principle challenges that projects have, not just our project but the entire popular movement in general, is how to incorporate what we'll call the *migrant collective*. This happens because they have really different realities to the problems we have -- those of us firmly established here, often natives of this place, and many times we don't know what it's like to come someplace as a stranger. For example, the anti-fascist collectives do an anti-racist activity, a little soccer world cup in a neighborhood with a large immigrant and second-generation immigrant community, but the immigrants don't come, and you think, *why didn't they come?* Well, because you don't know what needs these people might have, and those who advocate for these needs have to be them and not us. So I want to take advantage of this interview to open this space to the needs that these people may have and invite them to participate. Some of the proposals that have come to us, for example, are Castilian

[ie Spanish language] workshops for people who've arrived recently and don't know the language well. So that's a form of working on this issue, although they have many problems and a wide variety of them, and it's important to keep looking for how we can help them through these problems and support the needs of those communities.

Have you thought of working collaboratively with other social centers?

Isabel: I think that we're open to working with other collectives; at the same time, we want to create a collaborative network among the neighbors themselves. For example, in Valladolid there are other social centers, maybe not occupied ones, that also do a lot of work and do other kinds of activities, and I think it's interesting that in a certain way, we diversify ourselves according to the requests that there are. In the end, it's like I said, the guiding axis of all our actions is solidarity and support with the neighbors and with other centers. I don't know if there exists a network of us per se, maybe this project could explore that, but you have to understand that this isn't an oligopoly, it's not about competing but rather cooperating. For example, in Nash's game theory, they talked a little about the dilemma of what's better, if I say you're the guilty one and I end up benefiting, or if we cooperate and the punishment is decreased⁴, well that's kind of the theory that we need to practice not only in Valladolid but rather in all of Spain. In the end, we're all experiencing very similar circumstances, practically equal, and it's a way of learning about the errors that can be made and the needs that can emerge because this center isn't the same. It's situated between three neighborhoods, one of which is right in the center of the other side of the city, which has different needs, and you have to approach them in a different way.

Jorge: Well, there's this fairly solid movement of occupied social centers throughout the state, and yes, there is a certain amount of coordination among them. I, for example, was just in Vitoria last week and they have a *Gaztetxe*, or social center, that's been around for 30 years and we were able to talk to one of the people who's worked there and they said that they want to host a meeting of social centers to share experiences and so on. Of course, each of the social centers is its own world and it responds to the specific needs of its town, and it owes a lot to the people who started the project. So, I think our philosophy, like that of other centers, is to learn everything that we can, find our own rhythm, and meet the needs and particular context of Valladolid.

What does growth mean for La Molinera?

Isabel: I always think that it's like a plant. The first thing is to put down roots, and then once you have roots, the roots expand and you start taking initiative in certain directions, you start forming yourself. When the stem starts, there's already a solid underlying layer. Then a social center or any other social activism effort in the state can come from those roots, it can start to take on its own path and once time has passed, even if the climate isn't the best, all these fruits and flowers will emerge from the foundation of those solid roots. So for *La Molinera* to grow, it's key for us to be expanding. That is to say, as we've repeated throughout the interview, we've opened discussions, we've contacted people, people have come to us, we've addressed a lot of proposals and we have more on the table. This is kind of the moment of sending up a stem, we're starting to have more strong roots and now is the moment to take off, so to speak, and shortly it will start to flourish and that's when we'll realize that we've been making history for a while.

4 Here, Isabel is referring to the thought experiment *The Prisoner's Dilemma*

Jorge: That's a really good metaphor, I buy it. Here at *La Molinera* yesterday there was the first meeting with people from the cultural sphere. Fifty or so people came, first to learn about the space and then to have a meeting where they could discuss what the city's needs were on a cultural and artistic level, and how this space could contribute something in that area. It's clear that this isn't a lottery where people come and say, "I need this room for this one movie I'm making," but you can kind of pick up on those feelings and see how the space could be transformed. That's what it means to grow. Growing for us has been putting up papers on the door when we did our opening day so that people would visit the space and fill it with tons of proposals and things that could be done in this space. This hasn't just stayed as part of the initial initiative of this group of people who started here, but rather the people are already recognizing that they can go, they can suggest things, they can do specific things and that's what it means to grow inside this space. And outside, as she said, it's about opening the discussion about the limits of the legality and legitimacy of property law, and contributing to the social discussion and suggesting things that no one had managed to suggest with such concrete results. We do have a ton of experience and a lot of people working on various things, but we think that with these actions we've broken through media silence when we proposed them, and we think it's a really good sign that the city is talking about these issues.

Keeping in mind the atmosphere of political discontent and instability in which we live, can you tell us how you maintain hope as an engine motivating La Molinera?

Isabel: I think that that very atmosphere of discontent, of seeing that every day people are more passive and distant from reality is what motivates us to consider ourselves, to varying degrees, activists. If the circumstances here were different and people were super active, well, obviously, the motivation would then be to keep it going. As there's an atmosphere of constant passivity, what we want to do is attack that and say, this is our time to be here and we have to continue because we'll make up for everything with initiatives and activist efforts. I remember the first time I was in Villalar de los Comuneros and one girl said to me, "For me, activism is like my family," and then I was thinking about it at home, and I realized that it's true, in the end it's like life itself. There's a climate that isn't favorable to us, that presents us with obstacles, but this is the moment, it's really the moment. You don't just form part of a vital project because you have a philosophy of life that's contrary to the dominant one, but rather it makes you see your peers in the same situation as you and say, "There's a problem that should really be solved." That's kind of the engine of all activism, that there's a solution and ways to look for alternatives and keep fighting, even if you hit a thousand barriers.

Jorge: Continuing with this simile of the engine, which is really interesting to me. I think that for this project, we have to give it gasoline, it's an engine that constantly needs projects that will make people hopeful. Here in the city, the reception has been really good on behalf of the more activist people, they were kind of amazed by the project because this had been abandoned for a year and a half. It's a very emblematic space and when the people saw that someone had taken the initiative to enter, they've received us very well and these are the kinds of issues that impel many people given to being cyclothymic, where sometimes they give it their all, and then after two years with little progress they get tired suddenly and go home and lose motivation. But it's true that the popular movement goes through cycles of high involvement in social struggles and moments when it seems like everything has to come from the institutions and we can go home and rest. So, the people who have come here, luckily we're the kind of people who reclaim the role of activism, often

people who have already fought in a thousand other movements and have taken it as a way of life; that is, you know that you're going to die fighting, protesting, creating new spaces and challenging things. That's the good thing, that the fact that the root of the project is entrenched in activism means that the project isn't going to languish, essentially. It will go through difficult times, but here there are people who say, "It's going to be a priority to keep this moving forward and within a year, even if we're tired, if we keep going, we're going to keep getting things done." Reclaiming that it's not just a question of hope, but of people taking on the protagonist role in everyday activism; if we don't do it, the political system will do it for us, often opposite of what we'd want, so we have to get involved and move forward.

