The Smartphone Camera and Radical Urban Imaginaries in the (Post-)Pandemic City: The Patio 108 Initiative

Samuel Fernández-Pichel

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Patio 108 is a collaborative platform in which, over a period of four months (from mid-September 2020 to mid-January 2021), the inhabitants of Seville (Andalusia, Spain) were invited to share their opinions, memories, and wishes about the city in the form of video-testimonies.[1] Coordinated by the European Cultural Foundation and framed within the Erasmus+ project *Mediactivism* about emerging narratives on the right to the city, the initiative was presented as an opportunity to create new urban imaginaries "outside" of municipal policies and dominant local media discourses, and in the context of the (post-) pandemic city.[2] The platform's participation protocol was based on constructing a cartography (a "spoken" and affective map) of geo-tagged, user-generated testimonies – short video pieces recorded with cell phones in multiple, mainly peripheral spaces of the city – according to a set of urban-related categories.[3]

This paper follows the methodological principles of action research to reflect on the experience of Patio 108 from my dual role both as subject-participant and as researcher-activist in the design and execution of the platform.[4] My discussion will deal, firstly, with reviewing the theoretical models informing the creation and development of Patio 108. Secondly, I will provide some evaluative insights on the social agency and emancipatory potential, as well as the "limits" of participation, associated with the production and circulation of urban imaginaries based on recordings made by engaged citizens-users of smartphones and related mobile media technologies. In my report, I will be drawing on the concept of the city as "interface" to assess the performative and "techno-utopian"/"hacking"

dimensions attached to phone camera footage in relation to current revisions and updates on

the ethos and praxis of the right to the city.[5]
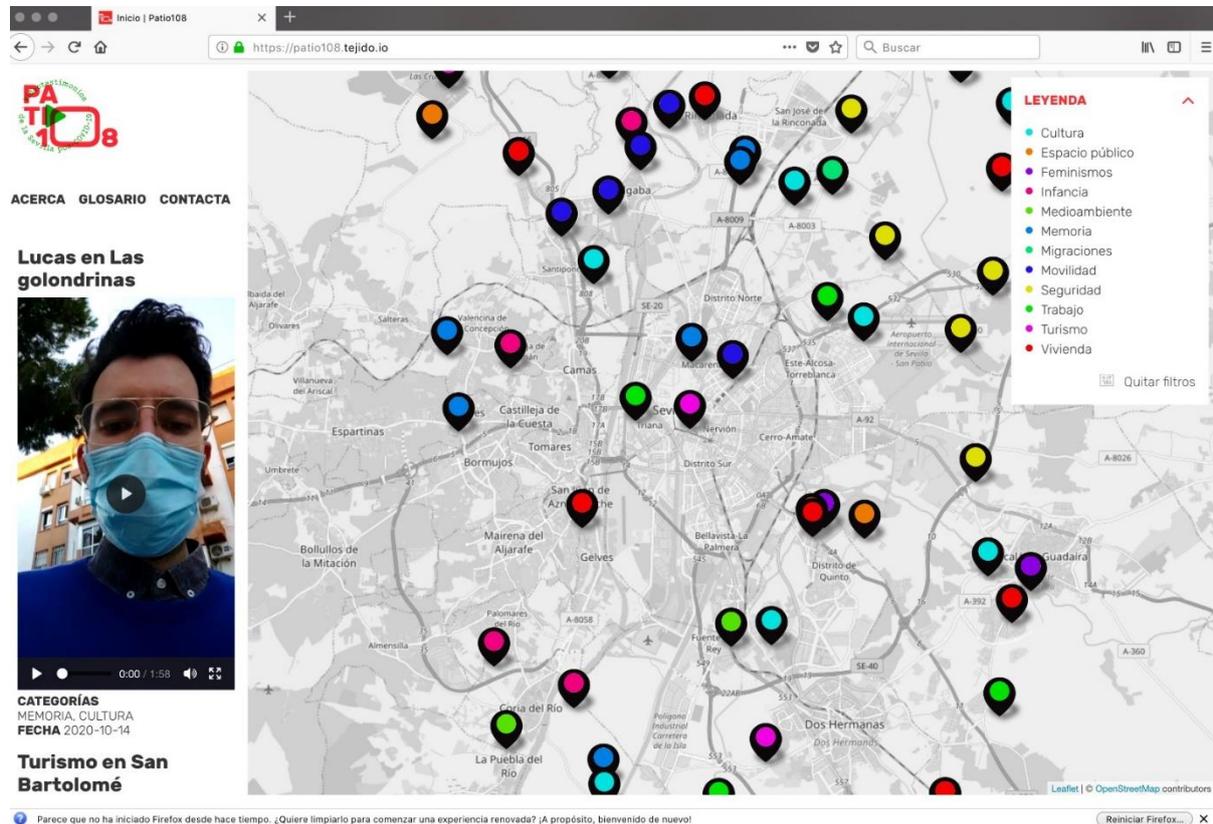

Figure 1: The Patio 108 platform. (Source: author).

Designing the *Patio*: Background and Theoretical Foundations

From its inception, Patio 108 was conceived by the members of the Seville Lab as a

"city hack" and a call to civic engagement.[6] The attempt to start a (platform-based, mobile

media-induced) conversation about the city was meant to symbolically open up the very roots

of its political culture, especially in the face of current and highly problematic urban

transformations and inadequate municipal policies (the impact of which has only been

aggravated locally due to the COVID-19 pandemic).[7] As Dutch digital media scholars de

Waal and de Lange have noted, "recently 'hacking' has been used to refer to creative

practices and ideals of city making", covering several dimensions, from a renewed sense of

Figure 2: The Seville Right to the City Lab at work during the early summer of 2020. (Source: Patio 108 Lab)

Figure 3: The Seville Lab meets with software developers for final trials of the Patio 108 platform. (Source: Patio 108 Lab).

citizenship and democratic governance for cities in the network era to a specific approach to action research.[8] All of these dimensions did apply theoretically to the Patio 108 initiative, but what were the specific propositions for the effective implementation of a "city hack" of this kind?

After careful deliberation that transpired as the project was taking shape, we came to identify at least four main strands, three of which are simultaneously essential features and preconditions for the fulfilment of the fourth, namely the right to the (digital) city in a Lefebvrian sense.

1. The first derives from the vision of *the city as an interface*, which, drawing on Georg Simmel's urban sociology and the theory of the urban imaginaries, envisions the city not (just) as a built environment, but as a set of relations, communicative spaces and social representations.[9] In the 21st century, the traditional public spheres of the city have been contested, if not replaced, by digital mediaspheres, bringing to the fore the need to (re)assess the way technologies alter urbanity and our networked commonalities as citizens. In this regard, Patio 108 aspired to achieve the status of an ephemeral virtual agora.

2. Intimately linked to this, the question arises about *the role of urban media*, understood here as "technologies that in one way or another can influence the experience of a physical location".[10] In their dual affordance – both as "experience markers" and "territory devices" – urban media implicitly make us participants in an ongoing process of renegotiation of our expectations about what exactly is the "public" in the public space/public sphere. This process is inseparable from ideologies and, eventually, leads to the "crucial evaluative question for mobile media applications in the field of urban governance". As Kurt Iveson poses it, this question is "[w]hat is the vision of the good citizen and the good city that they

[these apps] seek to enact?"[11] In the context of the Patio 108 initiative, the smartphone camera plays the central role and becomes a tool for mobilisation and organisation in the city.

3. The third strand addresses *the role of citizens as "active instigators of change"*.[12] The way we envisioned potential empowered citizens-users of the Patio 108 platform overtly defied the happy-go-lucky, market-friendly attitude of an ever-expanding community of social media "influencers". Instead, we appealed to citizens' affective mediations inspired by a nomadic, playful and socially committed standpoint following in the footsteps of Larissa Hjorth and Sarah Pink's "digital wayfarer" as the producer of camera phone footage as critical urban cartographies and the initiator of emplaced/performative – and also politically engaged – visualities.[13] Ideally, these emerging visualities would be infused with the appeal for (slow and caring) urban temporalities other than the ones based on instant monetisation and self-exposure as self-exploitation (i.e., the very core of the turbo-capitalistic views on digital media).

4. Rounding off this synthesis of areas of increased politicisation, we adopted *an approach to the right to the city that explicitly reclaims Lefebvre's formulations* from the 1960s and 1970s to match them with some contemporary evolutions of urban theory in the digital era.[14] For Lefebvre, the city is mediation and *oeuvre* ("the Work"): the result of the revolutionary initiative of citizens who appropriate spaces and transform them beyond any (mild) reformist agenda (like the one supported, at least nominally, by Seville's current municipal government). As the French thinker stresses, the right to the city is eventually the right to a meaningful urban life in which play, culture, sex, desire, and the multiple significations of individual and shared experiences find their particular – but mutable, never fixed – expressions. Thus, a "people-centric" radical discourse of self-management and collective

shaping of the city as a lived space could be restored, in opposition to the solutionist agenda of the technologically enhanced reveries of urban planners. In the words of Irina Anastasiu, "[t]he smart city seen through a Lefebvrian lens could serve as a deconstruction of the smart city, where technology and information is used and produced by its residents as a tool to exert their right to the city and/or is the product of these rights having been exercised".[15] This form of "participatory city-making" enables the upsurge of instituting urban imaginaries in which, following Harvey's advice, technology becomes one of the central constituents in the process of re-planning cities performed by heterogeneous civic collectivities.[16]

The Patio 108 initiative, in short, advocated for an overtly political and affective usage of urban media as a tool and gateway to collect, visualize, store, share and comment on a plethora of citizens' perceptions and subjectivities that fell outside of the formal and essentially euphemistic framework of local institutional "participation". The subsequent conversation that was expected to follow the sharing of citizens' video-testimonies would then materialise the intended "city hack"; the "hack" being, in this sense, but "a model to think through [...] an alternative imaginary".[17]

Learning from the *Patio*: Critical Overview of Outcomes

The Patio 108 platform gathered fifty plus videos (mostly smartphone camera footage, but also videos recorded with tablets and laptops) over three months. Some of these pieces were edited cuts of interviews with individuals ("godmothers/godfathers") who agreed to support the project, contributing their views on specific categories to encourage weekly discussions on social media. Other actions that were meant to reinforce the visibility of the platform included a poster campaign and a virtual workshop open to the citizens of the 108 barrios and eleven districts of Seville. Many other activities were cancelled due to the

impossibility of meeting COVID-19 restrictions, i.e., physical workshops in neighbourhood associations, and the Patio 108 "travelling city *videoautomat*", that was intended to offer a pedagogy of the project and promote video-making on the spot. The self-reflexive process that accompanied the implementation and evolution of the platform, and its immediate aftermath, leaves, at least, two main areas for further consideration and future action and re-planning.
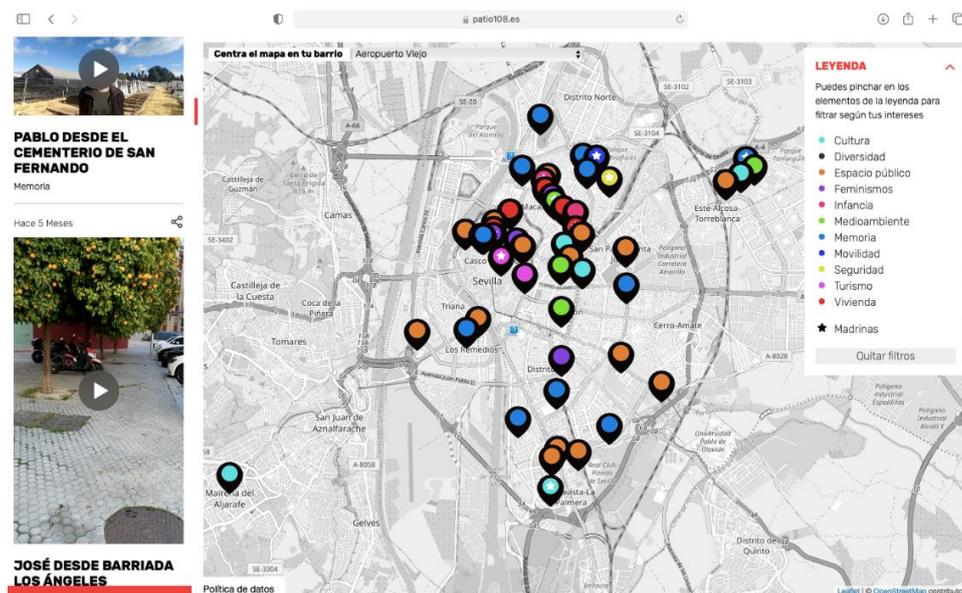

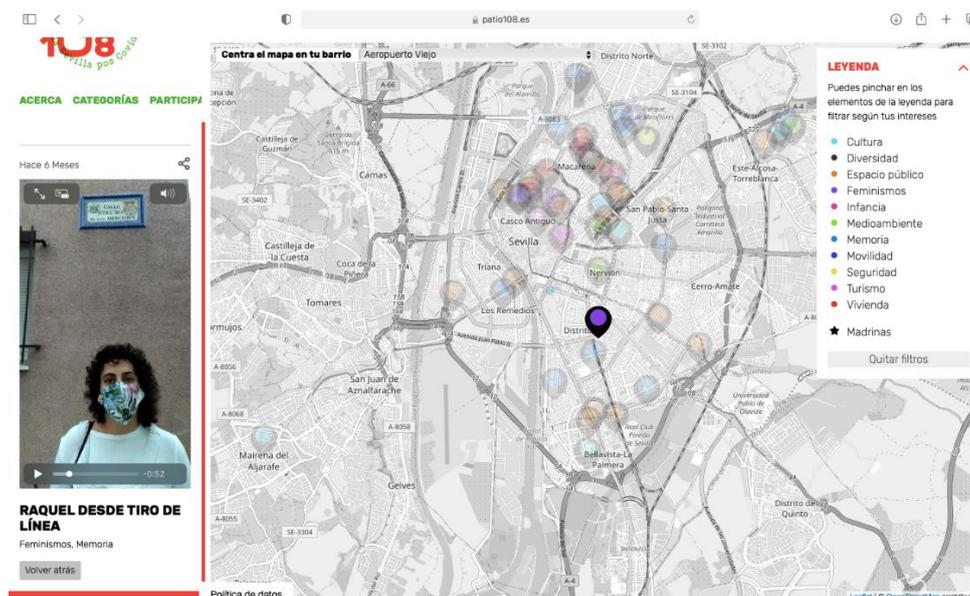Figure 4: Sample of videos produced by citizens-users of the Patio 108 platform. (Source: author).

Figure 5: The platform allowed citizens-users to geo-tag and categorise (to "situate") their video-testimonies. (Source: author).

The first major challenge relates to the "limits" of participation faced by projects like Patio 108. The platform failed, at least in quantitative terms, to reach urban public spheres beyond the borders of the "native" community (i.e.: activists, acquaintances, and friends, etc.) of its creators and developers. In that sense, it remained highly *parochial*, even when numerous informal requests, comments and overall positive input on the platform were shared via social media and messaging services (but did not result in the eventual production of videos).[18] By opting potentially for a wide community of user-empowered citizens (the whole population of Seville, and not just specific constituencies), the Patio 108 platform served as another testing ground to assess the multimodal and sometimes even "competitive" nature of participation in the digital era. As Barney et al. have stressed, participation is nowadays experienced in the form of subjective interpellation (both "environmental" and "normative") to the extent of becoming a "condition".[19] Besides issues of digital privacy and trust, or interpretations focused on the "desublimation" of politics and political participation, the Patio 108 example may well serve as a reminder about the tension between uninterrupted demands for more selective and targeted forms of participation.

The synergies and disruptions across the online-offline continuum add another level of intricacy to the scrutiny of participation. This is something we perceived the moment the aforementioned poster campaign led to an increase in the number of exchanges and communications around the project. Old-school analogue tactics proved apt to meet one of our primary goals (i.e.: to extend the discussion about city planning to the urban periphery of Seville). As indicated above, the uncommon circumstances of the pandemic frustrated the arrangement of a series of actions aiming at strengthening the bond between the platform and the citizens from those non-central areas of the city. As a consequence, the lesson remains that the political usage of phone camera footage (and related urban media) should not be taken for granted. Rather, it demands a sustainable pedagogical effort on the part of

organisers to materialise the complex assemblage of (physical and non-physical) actors, relations, and symbolic practices that must necessarily shape any meaningful execution of the right to the city in the 21st century.
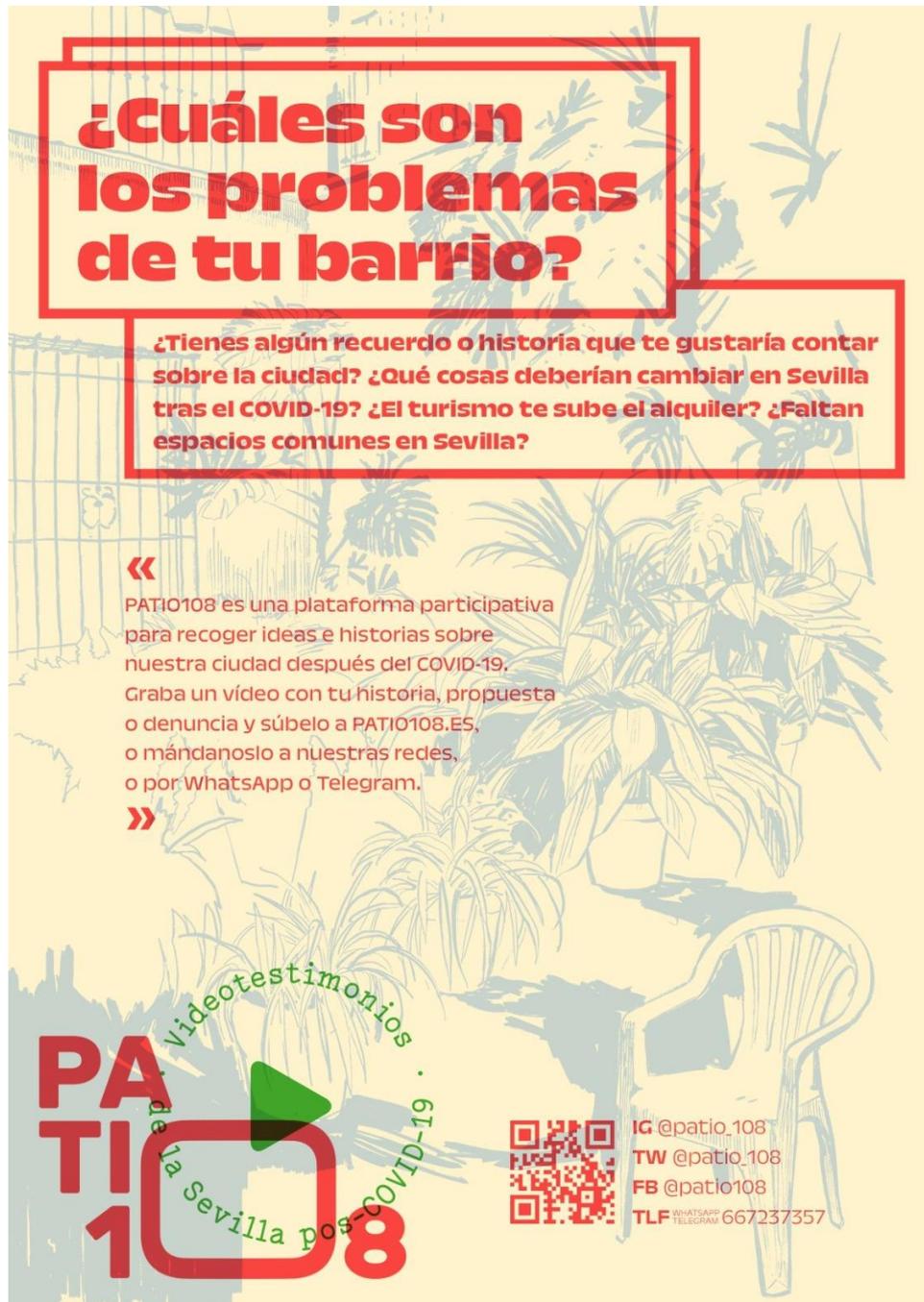

Figure 6: Poster campaign to promote the Patio 108 initiative. The poster was designed by local artists and illustrators Ricardo Barquín and JLR. (Source: Patio 108 Lab).

Figure 7: Patio 108: Poster campaign. (Source: Patio 108 Lab).

Figure 8: Patio 108: Poster campaign. (Patio 108 Lab).

The project framework in which the initiative was developed also determined some of its outcomes. On the positive side, Patio 108 relied on a technological infrastructure that allowed easy replication between local contexts or different locations. In this respect, the design as a whole aspires to introduce a valuable tool for a network of potential "mediactivists" in Europe and/or elsewhere. Even when the combination of platform plus mobile devices would work without much variation in an array of settings, attention should be paid locally and culturally to the configuration of tags or urban topics (i.e.: some categories would not be so relevant in some contexts, or others should be added).

Additionally – and on a less positive note – the projects' paradigm may present problems in relation to schedules and deadlines, since the timing of project-based interventions greatly differs from that of social movements and grassroots initiatives.[20] As a matter of fact, the very sustainability of some projects – and their ability to bring about systemic changes – is at stake when their goals are far-reaching and demand more than *ad hoc* or time-limited allocation of material and human resources. Plenty of citizens (in Seville and in many other places) will certainly keep on using their phone cameras and urban media appliances in affectively invested and politically committed ways that directly address the conditions under which they are or want to be governed (or even, and hopefully, the conditions for their self-governance). What remains to be seen is whether or not future initiatives like Patio 108 will succeed in connecting specific technological affordances (phone cameras, online platforms, GPS systems, etc.) to citizens' critical imagination.

To my mind, what is needed is the displacement of participation from its current "pre-coded" position within the strictures of consumer culture and the neoliberal management of politics to embrace the "ethics (and poetics) of care".[21] If, as Brian Creech puts it, "[b]y looking at the smartphone camera as an apparatus embedded in broader relations of power, observers may begin to understand visual truth as a political act", this very same act may be reinforced by the awareness about our mutual dependency and vulnerability.[22] Caring, then, translates into the production of "slow media", in which the digital wayfarers' gestures are embedded into both the materiality and the evolving symbolisms of city environments. Therefore, would we, people be willing to turn our mobile phones and (urban) self-mediations into (post)revolutionary weapons of mass affection? If the answer is "yes", then the ensuing techno-culture may well be the road to reconstruct the real sociality (that has been lost) in the city.

Notes

1. https://patio108.es. The platform used open source software developed by Alfonso Sánchez Uzábal (Montera 34 collective) and Ale González (t/ejido cooperative). The name of the project recalls the symbolism of traditional Andalusian patios (i.e.: internal courtyards /collective living spaces).

2. https://mediactivism.eu. Partners of the project are Kurziv (Croatia), Les tetes de l'art (France), Krytyka Polityczna (Poland), Fanzingo (Sweden), and ZEMOS98 (Spain). The latter, a cooperative of cultural managers/artists, hosted Seville's Right to the City Lab, which comprised seven members: Clara García and Lucas Tello (from ZEMOS98), Ana Álvarez, Santiago Martínez-Pais, Bernardino Sañudo and Enrique Suárez (from Jartura collective), and myself.

3. The final selection and description of categories, or "tags" – a total of eleven ("housing", "mobility", "city memories", "tourism", etc.) – was heavily inspired by the current trajectories of feminist urbanism. See Leslie Kern *Feminist City. Claiming Space in a Man-made World* (London and New York: Verso, 2020) and Col-lectiu Punt 6, *Urbanismo feminista. Por una transformación radical de los espacios de vida* (Barcelona: Virus, 2019).

4. For an introduction to action research, see, for instance, Hilary Bradbury, ed., *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research* (3rd edition) (London: Sage, 2015); and Stephen Kemmis, Robin McTaggart and Rhonda Nixon, *The Action Research Planner* (Singapore: Springer, 2014). At this point, I would like to stress that all the reflections contained in this report originated through collective praxis; I am only collecting and systematising here what was already present in Patio 108 as a community effort.

5. Martijn de Waal, *The City as Interface: How New Media Are Changing the City* (Rotterdam: nai010 publishers, 2013); Ingrid Guardiola, *El ojo y la navaja. Un ensayo sobre el mundo como interfaz* (Barcelona: Arcadia, 2019), 189-218; Geert Lovink, *Sad by Design. On Platform Nihilism* (London: Pluto Press, 2019).

6. The establishment of the Lab was preceded by a set of events –including a *HackCamp* taking place in Seville in October 2019–, which allowed plenty of formal and informal exchanges on the topic of the right to the city among a community of European activists, researchers, journalists, urbanists, etc. This prepared the ground for the tasks later carried out by the Seville Lab: from data gathering (via social media polls and participant observation), reviewing of documents and of urban (digital) art interventions, to keeping detailed information on meetings in the shape of notebooks and diaries. See the outcomes of the HackCamp on ZEMOS98, *The City is Ours* (Seville: ZEMOS98, 2020), accessed April 15, 2021, https://archive.org/details/the-city-is-ours-open-paper-ONLINE/mode/2up?view=theater&ui=embed

7. The lack of visitors due to travel restrictions worldwide during the pandemic has dramatically marked the local economy of Seville. This is a city in which the number of vacation rentals witnessed an increase of 2.300 per cent in less than five years; figures that seem to be closely attuned to deputy mayor Antonio Muñoz's statement about Seville being now managed as an all-encompassing "tourism system" involving parks, gardens, monuments, transportation, etc. See Antonio Morente, "El número de pisos turísticos en Sevilla se dispara un 2.300 % en menos de cinco años", *Eldiario.es*, April 3, 2021, accessed

April 15, 2021, https://www.eldiario.es/andalucia/sevilla/numero-pisos-turisticos-sevilla-dispara-2-300-cinco-anos_1_7372458.html;

María José Guzmán, "No sobran turistas, faltan argumentos para gestionar este aumento de visitas", *Diario de Sevilla*, January 19, 2020, accessed April 15, 2021 https://www.diariodesevilla.es/sevilla/antonio-munoz-delegado-turismo-Sevilla-no-sobran-turistas-faltan-argumentos-gestionar-aumento-visitas_0_1429357232.html

8. Martijn de Waal and Michiel de Lange, "Introduction – The Hacker, the City and their Institutions: From Grassroots Urbanism to Systemic Change", in *The Hackable City. Digital Media and Collaborative City Making in the Network Society*, edited by Michiel de Lange and Martijn de Waal (Singapore: Springer, 2019), 2.

9. See Armando Silva, *Imaginarios urbanos: hacia la construcción de un urbanismo ciudadano. Metodología* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2004);

Néstor García Canclini, *Imaginarios urbanos* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2007); Christoph Lindner and Miriam Meissner, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Urban Imaginaries* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019).

10. Martijn de Waal, *The City as Interface*, "Introduction", paragraph 6 (Kindle). For a comprehensive approach to urban media, see also Zlatan Krajina and Deborah Stevenson, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Urban Media and Communication* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020).

11. Kurt Iveson, "Mobile Media and the Strategies or Urban Citizenship: Control, Responsibilization, Politicization", in *From Social Butterfly to Engaged Citizen: Urban Informatics, Social Media, Ubiquitous Computing, and Mobile Technology to Support Citizen Engagement*, eds. Marcus Foth, Laura Forlano, Christine Satchell, and Martin Gibbs (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011), 56.

12. Marcus Foth, Martin Brynskov, and Timo Ojala, "Preface", in *Citizen's Right to the Digital City. Urban Interfaces, Activism, and Placemaking*, eds. Marcus Foth, Martin Brynskov and Timo Ojala (Singapore: Springer, 2015), vi.

13. Larissa Hjorth, "Narratives of Ambient Play: Camera Phone Practices in Urban Cartographies", in *Citizen's Right to the Digital City,* 23-35; Larissa Hjorth and Sarah Pink, "New Visualities and the Digital Wayfarer: Reconceptualizing Camera Phone Photography and Locative Media", *Mobile Media & Communication* 2(1) (2013): 40-57.

14. Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 100-103, 147-159.

15. Irina Anastasiu, "Unpacking the Smart City Through the Lens of the Right to the City: A Taxonomy as a Way Forward in Participatory City-Making", in *The Hackable City*, 243.

16. David Harvey, "The Right to the City", *New Left Review* 53 (2008): 23.

17. Martijn de Waal and Michiel de Lange, "Introduction – The Hacker, the City and their Institutions: From Grassroots Urbanism to Systemic Change", in *The Hackable City,* 6.

18. On the dichotomy between "parochial" and "public" spheres, see Martijn de Waal, *The City as Interface*, "Introduction – Parochial and Public Domains" (Kindle).

19. Darin Barney, Gabriella Coleman, Christine Ross, Jonathan Sterne, and Tamar Tembeck, "The Participatory Condition: An Introduction", in *The Participatory Condition in the Digital Age*, eds. Darin Barney, Gabriella Coleman, Christine Ross, Jonathan Sterne, and Tamar Tembeck (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), vii.

20. Jorge Carrión, *Lo viral* (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2020), 61. As noted by Carrión, projects are key concepts for today's education and organizational cultures.

21. Sergio Martínez Luna, *Cultural visual. La pregunta por la imagen* (Vitoria-Gasteiz: San Soleil Ediciones, 2019), 154-162.

22. Brian Creech. "The Smartphone Camera and the Material Politics of Visibility", *ICP* (International Center of Photography), May 14, 2015, Accessed April 15, 2021 https://www.icp.org/perspective/the-smartphone-camera-and-the-material-politics-of-visibility

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