

Can Vies: from resistance to reconstruction

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An attempted eviction, a week of resistance and an experience of reconstruction are the latest news from Can Vies, an autonomous social centre in the neighborhood of Sants, in Barcelona. Behind these events we find 17 years of history in this squatted space, and also the history of a self managed neighborhood, of supportive neighbours and of cities and villages which see in Can Vies a model for another way of creating community.

Can Vies is in the neighborhood of Sants, a traditionally working class area with strong roots in social movements, which resisted the process of “sanitation” which is so common now in a city oriented towards a clean public image for foreign capital and tourism.

Can Vies was squatted on the 10 of May 1997, in the context of a vertiginous rise in housing prices, in the midst of the building boom, housing speculation and the aftermath of the Olympic games, which marked a period of re structuring the city according to the interests of the great businesses and the urban policies which have become known as “Barcelona trademark”. Can Vies was born, together with other squats and social centers, as a counterpoint to this process, denouncing speculation and responding to a lack of space for social, political and cultural spaces.

During its 17 years it has hosted many political, cultural and social groups, it has served as an educational space for young people and has provided a place for people of all generation to feel at home and consider this as their place in the neighbourhood.

During all this time, Can Vies has been the seed and hub of new projects which have allowed the expansion of the model of cooperation within and without the neighbourhood. From here has taken form a network of groups which come under the neighbourhood’s council (a council of the people not of the official government), and who are trying to respond in a self organized manner to the different needs of the local people.

A week of struggle and solidarity

On Monday 26 of May, Barcelona city council, the biggest share holder in the Metropolitan

Transport group and owner of the building, was trying to put an end to Can Vies, in the same way it has done with so many other centers, through the use of force, after years of legal pressure in a long winded process of negotiation which the people of Can Vies describe as a farce, in which the city council has repeatedly come short of its commitments, has not answered many questions and has lied on many issues, like the one of committing to halt the eviction.

All the same, the police vans and excavators found themselves in the middle of popular rejection. This eviction meant more than simply “cleaning up” a building, it was an attack to a way of creating community out of cooperation and solidarity. Can Vies counts on the support of more than 200 groups which are part of the neighbourhood’s platform, as well as individuals from all around. The next day it became evident.

The defense of Can Vies awakened the solidarity of many neighbourhoods and villages, not just in Barcelona but in all the Catalan Countries and all over Spain. In one day there were more than 400 demonstrations of support which shows the power of social fabric which was woven during all the years.

The defense of Can Vies turned in to a week of street struggle with space for all: from the communal dinners to the demonstrations, with the iconic image of the excavator which had demolished part of the building, lying burned on the ground.

It was a long time since we saw something similar here in Barcelona, such a clear and strong response to an attack towards a self organized space. Can Vies was the fuel which started off the fire, which brought the general discontent to the street, which questioned the model of the city the cuts to social services and the arrogance of institutional power.

The repression also was hard, on the level of injured people, some of them serious, tens of people detained and 2 people imprisoned (now already freed), and all that is to come in this month with new arrests. Solidarity though is also on the rise, with every arrest met by new demonstrations and expressions of support.

A shared project in self organization

Saturday 24th May was another nodal point for reflexion in the history of Can Vies. We started rebuilding. Hundreds of people came to help take away the debris and bring them to the gate of the Council of Sants-Montjuïc, in a symbolic action which reminded the Council that from these ruins we would rebuild Can Vies, out of our own work and resources.

Starting from then on, a whole popular mechanism came in to action: open meetings, with great participation from the neighbourhood, to determine the function of the new space, working groups, the work days in the heat, and the micro financing campaign through Verkami to get the funds needed to carry on with the project and to face the legal costs.

Work is underway: We have cleared the ruins, we have created a space to hold meetings and other activities, and we have secured the part of the building which is waiting to be restored. The crowdfunding campaign has met its mark of 70.000 euros, 30.000 of which will go towards supporting the legal costs 67 people who have been arrested.

Re building Can Vies is more than just rebuilding a physical space, it means to strengthen and develop a model of neighbourhood which is self organized and self managed, it means to open new alliances, to include more people, arms and ideas to the project. It is a collective project where everyone counts, through which we want to extend and consolidate the life of the neighbourhood.

From the experience of resistance and reconstruction we can draw a few reflexion: on the one hand, we have witnessed the power of solidarity and the ability to defend a social model which is counter acting the current dominant system, institutional and capitalist, on the other, we have come to value the mechanisms and resources of social movements which have enabled the networking and the response to shared needs.

In these days the “effect Can Vies” has gone from anger to mobilization to the building of alternatives #ReconstruïmCanVies andl #EstenemAutogestió. Rebuilding Can Vies means rebuilding community, so that the people of the neighbourhood can decide what kind of neighbourhood they want and how they want to get there.