

# RE-USING OUTDATED INFRASTRUCTURE: THE CASE OF GUADALMEDINA RIVERBED

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In this paper we present an urban process that will foster the benefits of an outdated infrastructure through public use, which works as a catalyst for economic revitalization. Guadalmedina River, in Málaga (Spain) is a dried river that splits the city in two parts. Architects drew up plans to recover this area as a public space. Politicians convened hearings. Editorialists wrote impassioned commentaries. But everything they planned was too costly and nothing happened for decades.

The open model of Guadalmedina public use as presented in this proposal is an example of new forms of urban intervention in a context characterized by difficulties in making major interventions involving heavy investment efforts. It belongs to the orbit of the new trends in planning intervention based on the creation of new spaces of social opportunity, high impact, high effectiveness and low budgets. It involves the mobilization of underutilized resources of the city, in this case the Guadalmedina and all its area of influence, urban intelligence and opportunities to generate new resources for economic development and social enjoyment.

The activation of these resources as multiplier effects doesn't only imply a physical renewal, but also, the generation of new activities to invigorate the local economy and civil society.

The integration of urban projects in the local economy is positive in every possible way: it generates opportunities for launching new activities to encourage local trade, new tourist attraction activities and the reuse of existing capabilities in the city.

The Guadalmedina strategy I propose is based on the following propositions. (i) Do not wait any longer to enjoy the city. (ii) Maintain, facilitate and enhance existing uses. (iii) Without building in the riverbed. (iv) Bring the city close to the river. (v) Neighbourhood implication. (vi) Join sea, mountain and city. (vii) Retrieve the Alameda (Main Street crossing the Guadalmedina) as the urban lounge. (viii) Foster citizens' identity with the Guadalmedina. (ix) Work downstream.

## FRAMEWORK

The modern methods for urban planning have got us used to formulating urban issues in the future tense. The contemporary approach, of a rationalist nature, still dreams of the ideal finished city. This entelechy puts the need for control before order, as it has met in the accuracy of design a fictitious solution to problems. Thus, in most cases, our cities' definitions are based on free-handedly scribbled future statements.

In the current urban scenario, this model is opposed to that of the focus on the urban built environment. The economic crisis – which ought not to be considered as a temporary accident –

## 2 La estrategia. Mar, Ciudad, Monte



**Proceso Guadalupe Medina**  
 La ciudad a favor de la corriente  
 Concurso de ideas sobre la integración urbana del río Guadalupe Medina, Málaga.

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Figure 3-11 ProcesoGuadalupe Medina. Entry to the ideas competition. Source: Ramon Marrades/NAIDER.

has confirmed the fact that we need to promptly deal with a series of debates that were once open. They point to the need to give preference to the present moment over the promise of the future by stimulating the exploitation of existing resources, the promptness of response and the value of citizens. There is a need to bring our viewpoint on urban building back to basics: to tend to daily needs, to give space to the new agents that play a part in the urban process and to coordinate every participant's efforts. This philosophy represents a revision of the previous model leaning on three legs: use of the city, urban design and governance.

For starters, we should claim the use of the city as the most powerful tool for citizen participation. The trend of basing urban spaces on design has forced potential uses out of our city plans and projects, and has therefore affected our urban attitude, inhibiting our individual capacity to conquer, make happen, build and enhance our habitats. In the Urban Built Environment the use of the city represents the main tool when it comes to conquering spaces providing them with meaning and value.

In the second place, the focus on the Urban Built Environment considers design as a service and not an imposition. The condition for design is that it embraces individuality within the socializing framework. In this way of thinking, it is a good idea to pick up again the idea formulated consisting of making design contingent on use, and suggesting the possibility of opening up spaces with little treatment, subjecting them to the citizens use and solidifying the resulting situation. It is not about denying the role of design, but about transferring its hegemonic prominence to the importance of humanizing our cities.

Finally, governance will safeguard the sustainability of any urban project. To that end, it should be approached from the exploitation of resources, the relations of synergy and the coordination of tasks. The final challenge will consist on reviewing the traditional instruments for urban planning, regarding the value of the process –complementary to that of the results– and recognizing, supporting and stimulating those practices of urban innovation born outside the mind-set of planning and committed to the citizens.

In this paper we describe a proposal presented to a public contest concerning the recovery of the Guadalmedina riverbed in Málaga. We were part of a multidisciplinary team (economists, lawyers, architects and designers) leadby Iñaki Barredo (from NAIDER, a consultancy company based in Bilbao, Spain).

The case of Guadalmedina riverbed in Málaga (Spain) represents a paradigmatic example of the most common mistake in urban planning which concerns the gap between drawing plans and accomplishing them. In essence Guadalmedina is a dried riverbed that splits up the city in two parts. Among the several plans presented along the last decades, the local government opted to cover the riverbed and build a great avenue there; but it was too costly and nothing was constructed.

Nowadays, when local governments are facing a deep economic crisis, those projects are merely unrealizable, and innovative ideas are needed to provide temporary (and maybe permanent) solutions that allow people to enjoy their cities.

When preparing a proposal as the Guadalmedina process, the first step was exploring the most innovative urban experiences that faced similar conditions. The recovering of outdated infrastructure through public use acting as a catalyst for economic revitalization is not a very common situation, if we scale examples similar to the Guadalmedina.

The Promenade Plantée (Paris, 1993) was an old longitudinal railroad recovered as a city park. This model was followed in the High Line Park (New York, 2009) and the proposed

Bloomington Line (Chicago, 2012). These projects take as example the recovery of the Turia Riverbed in Valencia (Spain). The distinguishing feature of the High Line Park in New York is the public-private partnership in its management and financing, since it is an area publicly owned but privately run where the recovery was largely financed with private capital.

The most similar experience to Guadalmedina is, as I mentioned, the river park of the Turia in Valencia, so we ask the opinion of Ricard Pérez Casado, who was the political head of two towns closely related to their rivers. He was mayor of Valencia between 1979 and 1988 and the EU administrator in Mostar (Bosnia and Herzegovina) in 1996. His task in Mostar was focused on facilitating direct democratic elections and the reconstruction of the city. In Valencia he laid the foundations that have transformed it in a more liveable and recognizable city. During his tenure in Valencia, the old Turia riverbed -dried after being deviated in order to prevent flooding- was recovered as a public space (now it is a city park of 110HA, the largest urban park in Spain and also the most visited).

In his opinion 'the Guadalmedina has to be understood as a virtue rather than a threat, taking advantage of its role as the backbone of the city.' It is important to value the items on its margins as 'starting points for the recovery process', in order for it to become irreversible, although 'the first thing is cleaning, and then performing micro-interventions'. The urban action should also serve to 'improve the mobility system' prioritizing non-motorized modes and to let 'the public appropriate the project; only if they're able to, the project will be successful'. Finally, he found it was necessary to create a management tool, a discussion forum to voice the aspirations of the people, which should be participatory, but professionally directed. That was our starting point.

## **THE PROJECT**

We were inspired as well by temporary solutions that allow the immediate enjoyment of the 'hidden' parts of the city. One of the main examples in Europe is the case of Tempelhof Airport, which was recovered as a public park by only opening its doors and planning the transformation in a gradual way, which means that construction processes do not interrupt enjoyment and public use.

We understand that the Guadalmedina does not represent an urban problem for the city of Malaga, neither a hydraulic problem. The Guadalmedina can be understood as a scar, primarily social in nature, which could and should be closed, bringing the city closer to the river, and focusing on joining both margins. Our recommendation of public appropriation of the riverbed addresses the immediate use of an obsolete infrastructure. The bed, dried most of the year, must be given back to the citizens, without altering the hydraulic conditions thereof, allowing safe water floods when they occur.

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### **Why should we recover the Guadalmedina?**

It is a unique chance because of the opportunities offered in terms of mobility and open spaces (housing and land markets cannot provide anything similar), because Guadalmedina is an infrastructure per se, since it is a territorial connector that can work without major reforms and will also work in favour of public benefit. The recovering project, paid with public money and regulated by a public entity, offers enormous potential benefit. Enjoying Malaga from the riverbed means a unique linear experience, and it entails a strengthening of community relations through the use of public space.

In addition, an enhancement of Guadalmedina's environment must result in the alignment

of interests of different stakeholders (public sector, citizens and enterprises) and act as a catalyst in an economic development process serving to attract new residents, entrepreneurs and tourists.

### **Recommendations on the use**

The process should allow continued, strong, attractive, economically productive and socially constructive community use, and therefore become a driver for improvement of the socio-economic environment.

First, citizens should enjoy a maximization of open space. Open space, which is safe and healthy, which respects nature and specificities at neighbourhood level. It would mean the empowerment of the right to fresh air, and the support of commercial, industrial and artistic existing uses. For entrepreneurs the initiative should mean new opportunities for development.

On the other hand, including a strategy that fosters mobility shifts to non-motorized transport will have positive effects on local businesses, beneficiaries of increased interactions between citizens. It should also serve to mitigate the associated costs of private transportation (congestion, accidents and pollution).

For the city and public administration, our proposal is characterized by flexibility and scalability of urban renewal. All planning must be designed for implementation in phases, so as to allow an immediate use. It also seeks an increase in income in terms of taxes and fees related to new offices, commercial and residential spaces. But mostly seeks at the enhancement of existing uses. Management models, participation and new governance should be effective tools for reaching consensus and private sector involvement.

We propose a continuous schedule of activities with a realistic economic program to encourage private advocacy and programming for public uses, including local crafts, food markets and artistic and commercial opportunities.

### **Design recommendations**

Our main indication is to be consistent with the urban reality of Malaga, carrying out a renewal process that remains sensitive to local conditions. The Guadalmedina is a single body through the built environment. Therefore, the public space must be understood so that the enjoyment can be experienced as a continuum. At the same time, without assuming a contradiction with the uniqueness of Guadalmedina, citizens must be able to enjoy a variety of environments in the length of a singular linear space. The view, the density of the built environment and the landscape design will vary in line with current conditions (use, type of construction, etc.). Access points, which represent natural start and end points; the entrances and bridges are the fundamental elements of the interaction with the Guadalmedina and therefore must be suitable for all citizens, eliminating, wherever possible, barriers in terms of accessibility. The interior of the riverbed should be a pedestrian corridor. The native spontaneous vegetation must be enhanced as well, the 'weed' may be more relevant than artificial decontextualized vegetation.

In conclusion, the primary identity of Guadalmedina must be that of a public open space that serves the mobility and interconnectivity, recreation and contemplation, further enhancing the commercial use in its immediate environment. It should encourage the use of space and should help create a safe environment, in addition to serving as a catalyst for economic development.

### **Recommendations regarding the intervention strategy**

The Guadalmedina has become the major current urban concern of Malaga. For different reasons,

the project has stalled in every option that has been referred throughout time. The opening of a competition of ideas that does not set conditions or a given solution would be a good option to turn off the controversy and inaction.

From this need to create conditions to facilitate consensus on Guadalmedina, the intervention strategy embodied in this proposal seeks to provide a framework for a stable and open intervention, through successive stages and generating adapted responses and an active management.

## **Propositions**

Guadalmedina Process is an urban strategy based on the following propositions:

- 1 *Do not wait any longer to enjoy the city.* The basis of the project is the immediacy of actual use, which is compatible with an urban and territorial planning. We do not wish to provide just a solution for the future, because the urban environment is what we enjoy while making a plan. Guadalmedina is an opportunity of present, proximity and urgency.
- 2 *Maintain, facilitate and enhance existing uses.* We understand the channel as a space of freedom where the first step is evaluating and revealing the public situations that take place in it. So it is as simple as it is necessary to visualize the cleaning and maintenance of the riverbed to put up with almost no resources, but with creative actions and uses already embraced by citizens in an informal manner.
- 3 *Without building in the riverbed.* The hydraulic solution we adopted is to not modify the boundaries of the existing runway to avoid a mortgage in terms of investment on the future of the city. The current situation of the river can be improved without major engineering justification, which although necessary, should not be an excuse for not starting the recovery of this public place.
- 4 *Attracting the city to the river.* If the riverbed is not the problem, Malaga is the solution. Thus, we should favour urban uses in the margins and, acting as a zipper, unifying east and west of the city. It aims to harness the rereading of the river as an instrument capable of posing a cohesive and balanced city model.
- 5 *Neighbourhood implication.* This is not a linear project, but a transversal one, where the space adjacent to the river is the priority, the first in which we must act by micro-interventions that prove relevant to the needs of each neighbourhood instead of sectionalizing on a purely functional way. It means to discover the possibilities and problems from the river's margin to the neighbourhood.
- 6 *Joining sea, mountain and city.* The transition from urban to rural environment can be retraced on foot using the different proposed corridors from Guadalmedina to the small mountains that surround Málaga, considering at the same time the possibility of a longitudinal path (walking or cycling) from the port to the botanic garden through the riverbed.
- 7 *Retrieving the Alameda (Main Street crossing the Guadalmedina) as the urban lounge.* La Alameda is the urban lounge of Málaga and the balcony to the Guadalmedina and, unfortunately, it is nowadays full of cars. La Alameda has to be recovered, humanized and dignified. In addition, it should extend its virtue to the west (Avenida de Andalucía), undertaking a project of sustainable mobility.
- 8 *From the river mouth to the centre.* The entry of salty water from the sea aims to promote attractive uses for tourists and reuse obsolete port facilities in order to reconcile the city centre with the end of the river, along the promenades. This can act as a business card, precursor of further phases.



**Figure 3-12** La Alemeda as an urban lounge. Source: Ramon Marrades/NAIDER.



- 9 *Fostering citizens' identity with the Guadalmedina.* From branch managing of Guadalmedina to the active involvement of citizens, or from training to research, we can reconcile city marketing with the satisfaction of citizens' usual needs. With the attractive public space that the Guadalmedina generates, we can revoke the negative connotation of the riverbed and relate it to Málaga's identity.
- 10 *Working downstream.* The crisis of urban planning invites us to take a position suitable for our time, which gives room for taking care of the urban and social fabric through simple urban practices, no less effective, even as a whole, and with long term economic benefits.

## **ECONOMIC AND MANAGEMENT MODEL**

Recovery through public use needed a specific management tool to direct the process, taking into account the adequacy of a public-private partnership in management and financing methods. We specify a management model to allow a flexible management of the four main branches of tasks: (a) cleaning and maintenance of the riverbed, (b) actions to improve accesses and urbanization, (c) actions to improve surrounding areas, and (d) actions related to revitalization activities.

Activation of the Guadalmedina as the main resource of the city in the coming years requires a management model with capability to put work together and stimulate commitment and participation. Our intervention is rather an open and unfinished process and therefore need its own spaces for conveyance.

Three main areas will form this institutional motor for Guadalmedina:

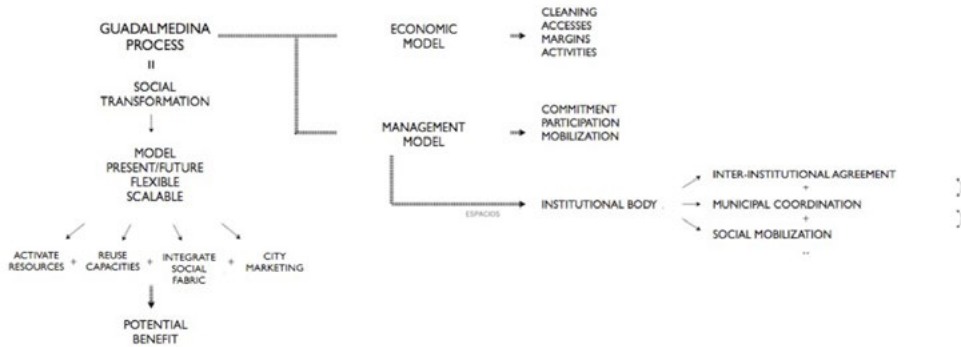
- 1 *Inter-institutional agreement area.* In order to bring together all levels of government with executive and legislation powers on the scope of intervention, capable of ensuring administrative processing and fast approval of the interventions. It will be an institutional space for dialogue and consultation between all government levels to be formed under the legal concept that is most suitable among its members.
- 2 *Municipal coordination area.* Attached to the Planning Department or directly to the City Hall, bringing together all local authorities involved in the development of initiatives likely to take place in the Guadalmedina.
- 3 *Social mobilization area.* It will be a social participation entity that will involve civil society entities to become interested in using the Guadalmedina as a public space and as a resource for strengthening their activities.

These three levels will be complemented by capacity management techniques as Guadalmedina Office, with sufficient human capital, materials and budget. Thinking of Guadalmedina renewal as an open process, one of the keys to its success will be its capacity to attract ideas from the public, to mobilize them, to find public and private resources to make them possible, etc.

## **CONCLUSION**

Adaptive planning means going beyond old disciplines' boundaries and sharing knowledge within different fields of expertise. Moreover (as Einstein once wrote) we should be on our guard not to overestimate science and scientific methods when it is a question of human problems; and we should not assume that experts are the only ones who have a right to express themselves on issues affecting the organization of society.

A multidisciplinary team (in which we were involved) has executed this proposal understanding that the way we act in the city, how people use public space, is the first and most important first participation tool. Not only, but especially in times of great scarcity, planning should not impede



**Figure 3-13 Diagramming the Guadalmedina Process. Source: Ramon Marrades/NAIDER.**

transitional uses of public space. We summarized a specific proposal but its essentials can be replicated anywhere: scalability, flexibility, low budget, enhancement of exiting uses, facilitation of activities with an ad hoc management tool and making the best out of spontaneous dynamics in the city.