



Can Masdeu

RISE OF THE RURBANO REVOLUTION

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Barcelona, Spain, sprawls down to the waters of the Mediterranean from the pine forested mountains of the Collserolla National Park, a swath of rich, ecologically diverse green terrain that until now has stood as a timeless divide between Barcelona and surrounding towns and cities on the other side of the mountains. From the high vantage point of the Collserolla, Barcelona appears as if it is being operated on, the skyline dotted with hundreds of tall cranes, robots surgically dismantling and reconstructing the city in a perpetual cycle of speculation, displacement, and gentrification. The city continues to be a magnet for economic immigration, both national and international. Walking in the narrow streets of the old town it is impossible not to bear witness to the massive changes the city continues to undergo. One can hear as much Arabic as Catalan, as much English as Castilian. And as the center is gentrified, and the suburbs fill, the city penetrates the Collserolla, leaving deep and permanent scars in the beautiful rolling hillsides of the park.

A political tourist to Barcelona will find a myriad of diverse grassroots struggles. Virtually nothing is left uncovered by the vast, integrated and highly organized, yet chaotically Mediterranean social movements. On December 22, 2001, a drop was cast into this ocean. An internationally-mixed group occupied an abandoned building and its grounds called Can Masdeu. Located in the Valley of Saint Genis, where the green seas of the Collserolla National Park collide with the concrete jungle of Barcelona, the community of Can Masdeu was born.

THE RISING TIDE

Can Masdeu is a huge mansion on ample grounds. Records date the house and grounds back to Roman times. One can presume the site was chosen for settlement for its ability to harness surface run-off water and nature's subterranean aquatic systems. At the house you have the impression you are in the forested countryside. South facing terraced hillsides and medieval water systems fit harmoniously into the natural character of the

far left: Christmas dinner at Can Masdeu



The Can Masdeu mansion surrounded by gardens

surrounding mountains and valley. The lush grounds of Can Masdeu form a valley within a valley. A ten-minute walk down the track, however, leaves you at the frontline of Barcelona's urban sprawl. Twenty-five minutes on bike brings you to the city center. Can Masdeu, rather than being in the forest, is set in a *barrio* (neighborhood) community.

The immediate aim of our occupation was to secure a venue in which to host the international conference of the Rising Tide for Climate Justice Campaign due to take place in February of 2002. Three hundred activists—largely European, but also including representatives from Soweto, Morocco, Nepal, and West Papua—were coming to attend. Detritus was cleared, glass recycled, and windows repaired. Sleeping space for all three hundred participants was prepared. Main electricity was located nearby and a basic rewire of the property undertaken. A few wood burning stoves were installed, walls knocked out, composting toilets built, and barricades constructed.

Although most of our early work was focused on the structure of the house, we were already dreaming and conspiring about the potential of the space. Dedicated work and a sense of collectivism, community, and anarcho-fluidity were not the only cornerstones of the project. The search for a water source, and means to store water from winter into the summer were, already in this first month, becoming an obsession.

The search for water initiated our relationship with the biodiversity of the natural valley. It was also, for this group of

squatting city kids, the first step in the journey to recover knowledge lost from the radar of modern society, to learn from it, add to it, and bring it back into the public domain. To us urbanites accustomed to turning a tap for unlimited drinking water and to flushing liters of this precious material down the toilet, the daily two kilometer round trip to collect water from the city with a heavy cart was more than a simple shock to the system. We experienced the hardship and pressures of life without a stable and local fresh water supply. Suddenly, the countless images we had all seen of African women journeying for hours everyday to collect water became real. We felt the weight of water, the physical exertion, the endurance, and the motivation required by countless people the world over, simply to bring this fundamental human right from the source to the cooking pot. That month taught us what remains the most fundamental lesson we have learned. Water is life.

BETWEEN ARCHAEOLOGY AND INNOVATION

Evidence of an ancient dilapidated irrigation system was all over the land and the building was full of tubes and pipes, even a broken toilet. So where had the water come from? Without knowing the water lines, and with the property owners barring our access to the survey plans, our options were limited. We turned to the elders of the neighboring community. The need to answer the water question gave birth to this most beautiful aspect of the Can Masdeu community, the symbiotic relationship between young and old people in the *barrio*. This created a constant two-way exchange of information between generations, realities, and mindsets.

People in the *barrio* have witnessed the abandoned, closed off, and neglected house and gardens of Can Masdeu deteriorate for the last fifty years. Some remembered the building in its final days as a leper hospital. They felt the injustice as the landowners criminally left the beautiful architecture and cultivation to degrade while the value of the land continued to increase in a flagrant example of property speculation.

This popular sense of disgust with the landowners quickly enabled us to build strong relations within the *barrio*. Combining

their knowledge with our enthusiasm, we set out to unearth the water system, striving to understand both its complexities and its beautiful simplicities. The dilapidated water system is a gravity fed system that harvests rainwater into a series of open tanks, a huge tank on a hill behind the house, and smaller tanks spread throughout the terraces. The tanks are connected by a complex series of open brick channels, which weave an intricate path down the steps and along the terraces to provide irrigation for cultivation of the land.

This style of gravity fed water system was brought to Catalonia by Moorish conquerors in the seventh century and the system at Can Masdeu appears to have been constructed at the very beginning of the sixteenth century. The drinking water for the house comes from a different branch of the same system, a series of water mines, which are narrow and low brick tunnels, some up to three hundred meters long are dug deep into the hills. These mines intercept underground aquifers. The aquifers were in disrepair when we arrived, and unfortunately the channels to the house still have not been found.

A great aspect of squatting old buildings is the mixture of archaeology and innovation needed to make a space usable. Somewhere between low tech and no tech is squat tech. Squat tech is assessing available resources, appreciating that most of them are broken or in disrepair, and dismantling existing items in order to use their parts for more urgent functions. In this case, through an interesting process of old community knowledge, archaeology, and squat tech innovation, we managed to get one of the water mines to feed into a spring in the gardens near the house just in time for the Rising Tide Campaign. In just over a month, the small group of okupas (occupiers/squatters) transformed a derelict space, abandoned for over 50 years, into a rudimentary but functioning social center.

By the end of the conference, our core group had increased in size from twelve to twenty four, and our vision was clear. The activists that participated in the Rising Tide conferences, combined with the fact we had not been evicted, fueled ideas for the life and project we wanted to create. We would create an urban social center based on rural principles: a *rurbano* social center. At

Can Masdeu we could have our cake and eat it too. We were tied to the land, while in the midst of urban political networks. Here we would reverse the invasion of the city on the country by renovating the house, clearing and cultivating a small garden, and learning to live within the finite balances of the valley. Then the eviction notice arrived.



Women trying to break police lines with water for the climbers

RESISTING EVICTION

The Can Masdeu project was off to a successful start. At a time when we were distracted by the European Union summit bringing European heads of state to Barcelona, the property owners of Can Masdeu decided to move against us okupas. The hospital trust fund—the owners of the property—whose three board members are the city government, the regional government, and the Catholic Church, sought and won an eviction order set for late May 2002. Our group chose to resist non-violently, but with active confrontation.

In the weeks leading up to the eviction, we kept busy. Drawing on the group's varied experiences of evictions and direct action protest, we relied on strategies harkening back to the road protest tree camps used in the United Kingdom and anti-logging blockades. Attached to the exterior of the house were bathtubs, chairs, and death planks; on the roof there was a tripod and lightning conductor that people could climb and hang from. When the

police arrived at dawn one morning in early June we were ready. At the call: “the police are at the bottom of the track,” our defense machine went into action. Nobody stayed “in the house,” as our counter-positions had been constructed outside of the house.

Our resistance surprised the police. These tactics were new in Catalonia and the police had no resources to remove the “climber” okupas. In the meantime some protesters left the grounds to contact the press and supporters in the city. People arrived from the barrio. At the end of the day the police had not made a move, and the evening TV news broadcasted the resistance. People were hanging from the building in the rain, and over a hundred more people were setting up camp in the gardens below. The police never gained control of the situation.

During the first night there were cat and mouse games between the police and the climbers, who were ill equipped to survive a sustained protest, and needed to sneak into the house to recover blankets and nourishment. The following morning the media machine was in overdrive. As with all great media spectacles, the coverage helped create the event. The more the media discussed the resistance, the more people came to join. On the second day there were enough people to march down the hill and block the motorway in protest.

below and far right:
Climbers during
the eviction



At the end of day two, the resistance spread to the city with protesters visiting members of the hospital trust fund. At this time there were over three hundred people camped in the rain. The story was headline news. The police, apart from trying to start a few fights, could only block food and supplies from reaching the climbers.

At dawn on the third day one could see, through the mist of clouds and campfires, a valley full of police vans and press vehi-



cles. We didn’t know how long the climbers could sustain resolve without food, water, or sleep. Some, in fact, had already come down. We hired a lawyer who appealed to the judge arguing that the police were acting illegally and inhumanely, unquestionably endangering lives by actively prohibiting food and drink from reaching the climbers. The police responded that this was the quickest method of resolution. With medieval siege tactics they would starve the okupas out.

The judge, in an unprecedented decision, ruled in our favor and called a halt to the eviction. Before word had filtered out to the crowds camped in the gardens and those hanging from the building, the police withdrew. The media went crazy and the regional fame of the Can Masdeu project was established. Nobody knew what to expect for the future, but for now the project survived.

Of course, not everything went perfectly because despite the fact that our eviction story was turned into a children’s book, fairy-

tales do not exist. Even as the climbers descended, the first murmurings of discontent could be heard. Some members of the Can Masdeu community simply could not carry on. The rapid dynamic pace had begun that December and went off the dial during the eviction, emotionally and physically destroying some. Others of our group and supporters felt it wrong that we actively engaged the media, which some perceive as a branch of the state propaganda machine. Others claimed we were separating ourselves from the rest of the squatting community, colluding with the press to present the case of “good squatters verses bad squatters,” and that the spectacle of our non-violent resistance was overshadowing other struggles.



A press conference that happened spontaneously minutes after the police left

The accusations hurt. In a way they were a continuation of the constant activist debate about violence and non-violence. For many of us veterans of the anti-globalization circuit, this internal conflict had become old and tired. Many of us had actively worked to prove that fundamental differences in tactics could be a source of strength rather than division.

Some of our critics to this day have not been placated. Perhaps this is because we never changed our media strategy. But as long as we do not compromise individuals, projects, or strategies with which we have solidarity, it is sensible to fight and protect our project and ideals with all available strategies, tactics, and tools. It is undeniable that the Can Masdeu project has absorbed a lot of media coverage, but it is debatable whether that means we are drawing attention away from other issues.

FROM EVALUATION TO INITIATION

The early days after the eviction siege saw us living in a continued state of high alert. And the two years following the first eviction attempt have seen a marked increase in political repression both at a local and international level. Many of the oldest occupied social centers in Barcelona have been evicted or are due for eviction, in the culmination of the latest cycle of the property speculation game. In an attempt to rebuild a healthy dialogue with our critics we reinitiated the defunct Okupas Assembly, a monthly meeting open to all the squats in the city, to strengthen existing networks between occupied social centers in Barcelona. The assembly has been crucial for pooling resources, discussing differences in tactics, and collectivizing resistance to threats against our spaces.

The heavy evaluation and decision-making process that followed the eviction fight was too much for some who sadly left Can Masdeu. The remaining group of 20 grasped our potential and reaffirmed a key aim of the group living at Can Masdeu: dedication to permaculture and self-determination while bringing the issues of autonomy and ecology into the political agenda. We continued to rely on a non-hierarchical, consensus-based organization model. There are no votes in meetings, instead decisions are arrived at through a process of discussions, proposals,

Toothbrushes in a shared bathroom



amendments, facilitations, and evaluations that ideally are representative of everyone's opinions. We have a general assembly once every two weeks, a legal assembly once a week, and task-based groups that organize their own commission assemblies when they need to, reporting back to the general meeting for final approval. Life at Can Masdeu sometimes feels like a never-ending string of meetings, conducted after dark so that one can fit two day's work into one.

After seven months of activities we felt we still were not engaging the local community in a permanent enough manner. While the land and house were theoretically open spaces, we were not mounting the educational programs we desired, and had not developed the space into a genuinely open-use entity. Work began again.

The first issue, as always, was the legality of our inhabitation. The path to achieving continued defense for the space was evident: community support. With this type of support we can consistently beat criminal charges by arguing our social legitimacy. For example, when the second eviction notice arrived over three hundred of our neighbors requested that charges also be brought against them, as they too used the space, and therefore were okupas.

We received a lot of help and advice from people who passed through the house on a daily basis. Some planted their own gardens alongside ours, and we struggled to convey to them our message of ecology and autonomy. That November saw the inauguration of the community gardens at Can Masdeu.

BECAUSE GARDENERS ARE WARRIORS

After cleaning one water tank, excavating and restoring another, we had enough irrigation to open up more of the land for cultivation. We posted notices around the barrio advertising that anyone was welcome to some land, provided they were interested in cultivating organic, non-transgenic food, and were prepared to embark on a journey of collective work, learning, and skill sharing. Most people in the Spanish state live in flats with no land. The initial response was enormous and there has been a waiting list for gardens ever since.



Gardeners at Can Masdeu

Today there are over thirty parcels of land worked by over eighty people. The group has organized itself into commissions, some responsible for collective work such as continuing renovation and improvement of the water system. Other commissions are responsible for research into new techniques of water efficient cultivation, plant varieties, etcetera. Others research new and old techniques of permaculture and organic gardening, such as companion planting to naturally discourage pests and disease.

In accordance with our low impact ethics we have developed and evolved many energy efficient systems for the house such as solar water heaters, bike powered sound systems and washing machines, a small solar electricity system, different grey water systems, and composting experiments. We use the compost generated by our dry toilets to cultivate a small orchard of fruit trees. To strive for autonomy we continue to recycle as many of the materials we use as possible.

The community garden project has become one of the key public focuses of the house. The gardens and terraces are the combined domain of the living group and the community gardens group. The neighbors are no longer participating in our project rather we participate in theirs. This has inspired and empowered everyone. We are no longer twenty people protesting eviction, but a hundred and twenty. This influx has enabled us to focus on a myriad of other projects.

THE CLASS OF CAN MASDEU

The hospital trust fund, still the landowner, continues to try to evict us. To this end they advance vague plans for the development of the valley. Before our occupation the land was simply held in speculation of rising value for future profit. But despite the coming infrastructure of two new metro stations nearby and a huge motorway exit at the foot of the hill, the hospital trust can no longer publicly justify its desire to sell the land for demolition and development. Demolition is undoubtedly Can Masdeu's eventual fate should we leave.



Participants in an environmental workshop

To counter us, the hospital trust has presented media savvy plans that are basically legal co-optations of the work we do at Can Masdeu. They propose to use the house and grounds as a “gateway to the Collserolla National Park,” setting up an info-point in the house. Given that we have been doing this since our beginning, we decided to evolve our project and open a visitors’ center ourselves. We call our center the Punto de Interacion de la Collserolla (PIC).

The PIC is basically a renaming of the largest space in the house at Can Masdeu to serve our legal and media strategies. In the PIC there is a library, research station, info-stall, free shop, an exhibition about the Collserolla’s flora and fauna, maps of good bike

rides and the zones endangered by urbanization. It is a space many groups use for meetings, presentations, and events. The living community also uses it to mount some of its own projects and initiatives. Groups of school children taking part in our environmental education program begin the day in the PIC, later moving to the gardens then into the valley. This room is used every Sunday to mount our School Without Teachers, a series of workshops and activities aimed to deliver information about and techniques for existing autonomously. These workshops are public, free, and extremely diverse. The program between January and May 2004 featured workshops on Chinese herbal medicine, wild medicinal plants of the Collserolla, edible plants and mushrooms, the political and ecological situation in Venezuela, how to make shoes, and how to deal with trauma resulting from police repression.

We continue to organize actions and campaigns in Barcelona while also participating as an affinity group in annual anti-globalization mobilizations. After hosting a training weekend for the Street Medics Network, an affinity group from our house left for the 2003 protests against the G8 Summit in Evian, France, though the group never actually took to the streets as medics.

One morning when the heads of state were due to meet, our group deployed as a non-violent blockade to prohibit translators from reaching the conference center, attempting to paralyze this conference of the illegitimate and unaccountable. Two climbers dangled from either side of a single rope that blocked the Aubonne roadway on a bridge over a shallow river. The police cut the rope despite warnings that there were people on both ends. One of the climbers fell over twenty meters sustaining severe injuries; the other was saved by the quick reactions of activists on the bridge who caught her rope.

This repressive violence was a defining moment for many of us. Some of us flew to Switzerland to care for the climbers, to deal with the press and legal work, and to bond with other anti-repression groups. Others back in Barcelona joined international solidarity actions, occupying first the French, and later the Swiss embassies. Another group from our house hung from the seventh floor Swiss embassy for a week to maintain international press coverage on this brutal police violence.

The Aubonne roadway incident left us to reflect that as a group we did not allow time to deal with some of our most fundamental and deep-set psychological, emotional, and gender issues. The short-term reactionary dynamics of urban activism, together with the stress of living in a house with twenty-five or more people, fostered many inter-personal issues we were not adequately addressing. Together we reprioritized, wanting better ways to care for our emotions and weaknesses at a communal level. Assemblies for emotional growth became more frequent. Today, with most of the building work complete, our main internal focus is our personal and collective well-being. In summer 2004 we organized, an encounter in Geneva, Switzerland focusing on the emotional ramifications of repression.

Despite the pull outward, at the end of 2003 we decided to limit our external political activity, not at the personal level, but as an organized group. From that point forward the community would only work on anti-land-speculation campaigns, anti-repression campaigns, and agro-ecological issues. Although the list contains three headings, each campaign contains its own list of sub-sections. For example, agro-ecology includes such diverse yet connected issues as gene technology, agro-autonomy, the flooding of the Itoiz valley in Northern Spain, and natural medicinal autonomy. The anti-repression campaign not only includes highlighting and fighting the rising number of incidents of violent repression in mainland Europe, but also forging a model for social movements to be better prepared in dealing with the emotional trauma caused by repression. We have refined our approach so that any external campaign we involve ourselves in maintains a direct connection with the evolution of our life as a living group, the heart of the Can Masdeu project.

Of course, in this article there is not enough space to touch upon the diversity of the hundreds who participate in Can Masdeu and its satellite projects. Today Can Masdeu facilities include: a ceramic workshop and kiln—the clay harvested from hillsides in the valley, a wood-fired bread oven built and fuelled by resources available in the valley, the PIC, a sauna, solar powered systems, the community gardens, grey water systems, a yoga room, a bike repair workshop, a forge, direct action and

climbing training, a flamenco studio, another dance studio, a cinema, and a party room. We host a hack lab, run youth education, use our bike powered sound system at city demonstrations and barrio carnivals, host meetings of—and sit on—various grassroots platforms. We also cultivate a variety of gardens, including a medicinal herb garden, an edible garden, and show gardens all with organic methods. We replant the valley with indigenous species while felling and harvesting non-indigenous species for construction and fuel. Raised chickens provide a constant source of food for neighboring wild animals, and the occasional egg for the kitchen.



THE FUTURE IS WAITING

Fraggle Band

2004 is the second anniversary of continued resistance at Can Masdeu. The pace of life remains as fast as ever as we continue to balance the contradictory dynamics of a squatted, and therefore temporary, project working with issues of permaculture and sustainability. The okupas of Can Masdeu are entering into the final stages of an un-winnable legal battle. Our concepts and the hospital trust fund's concepts are contradictory. We are combating individualism with collectivism and dependence with autonomy, but no one knows for sure what the future

holds. One thing is for certain, the valley of Can Masdeu will never be the same again.

Even the worst-case scenario is not so bad. An eviction of Can Masdeu will leave it stronger than ever. After two planes destroyed the twin towers, the absence of those universally known symbols became more symbolic than their prior presence. The eviction and destruction of a successfully created autonomous collective strengthens the ideals our collective fights for. Complete autonomy is the aim. After all, in the wider human and planetary context, Can Masdeu, and the sustainable, anti-capitalist ideal it stands for is inevitable. And if somehow we stay, well, who knows?

Stay or go, we are only as legitimate and autonomous as we perceive ourselves to be. This is a fundamental of anarchy, and in Can Masdeu exists anarchy so pure, so fluid and so strong, that some cannot even see it.

