



Learning from Nature: New forms of urban permaculture in Seville

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La Boldina's perma-formance in barrio Macarena, Seville; using public performance to share their permaculture philosophy. Photo by Christopher Yap

La Boldina is a group dedicated to urban permaculture in Seville, Spain. Whilst the group's practice is rooted in classical permaculture principles – promoting biodiversity, sustainable resource management and self-maintaining green spaces – they are also experimenting with new ways of learning and engaging with the city through agroecology.

La Boldina emerged from Huerto del Rey Moro, an occupied community garden in Macarena; one of the few green public spaces in Seville's *Casco Antiguo* (Old Town). There exist some differences of opinion regarding the management and development of the site. Some local residents emphasise organic food production and gardening. Others are driven by a more holistic vision for managing the land that draws on both permaculture and, implicitly, agroecological principles.

In response, at the start of 2017, a group of permaculture gardeners began to look for new growing spaces. La Boldina now cultivates sites across the city including school gardens, occupied spaces, allotments managed by the City Hall, and a small farm in Hinojos, 40 km outside of Seville.

Working with rather than against nature leads inevitably to the development of diverse and distinctive growing spaces. These spaces are characterised by companion planting, water recycling, and the protection of the long-term vitality of the soil. La Boldina focuses on cultivating spaces in a way that maximises their long-term resilience. Food growing is a secondary activity. In addition to urban agriculture, their

activities include performance art and storytelling, public lectures, and public permaculture training workshops.

La Boldina's commitment to permaculture is reflected both in the spaces they cultivate and in the group itself. This includes how it operates and how it engages with the wider city. The group is consciously diverse and non-hierarchical. It comprises gardeners, architects, teachers and performing artists, amongst others. Knowledge of permaculture varies significantly, from those that are entirely new to the practice, to those that have accumulated a vast knowledge over many years. However, by creating a space for knowledge sharing, discussion and experimentation, La Boldina has become a creative and adaptive organisation. From it, diverse projects emerge and take shape organically.



Boldo, from which La Boldina takes its name, is central to the group's permaculture practice. Photo by Christopher Yap



Huerto del Rey Moro, Seville. Photo by Christopher Yap

For this group, permaculture is a philosophy that extends beyond managing gardens. La Boldina uses permaculture as a lens for engaging with other urban processes. A permaculture-inspired community, for example, should be diverse, adaptive and self-managing. At the same time agroecological ideas, such as recognising interconnectivity and cycles, are being repurposed as social and political principles for engaging with broader urban issues. These include the speculative housing market and gentrification of working-class neighbourhoods. As one member explains, permaculture principles are increasingly “reflected in the private lives of the group”. This thinking is reflexive within their small community of 30-40 individuals, but it also shapes their wider engagement with groups of residents in the neighbourhood, and other self-organised networks across the city.

To date, La Boldina has transformed several new growing spaces and given new life to existing sites. However a number of challenges remain. The group, though growing, is still a small exception in a city of almost 700,000 people. In order to cultivate wider change, La Boldina will need new allies to share their vision for a greener, community-managed urban environment. Moreover, La Boldina’s commitment to participatory processes and the organic emergence of new initiatives has led to a conscious lack of clear strategic direction and clear group identity.

Yet these challenges are not necessarily critical. Whilst the group’s identity is still emerging, there is a strong, collective sense of identification *with* the group. Rather than trying to influence institutional political processes, La Boldina is collectively developing an urban permaculture philosophy that profoundly affects how they and other citizens might understand and transform the city, materially and socially. One member of the group described the process as “throwing seeds”, the aim being not to grow as one organisation, but to proliferate, multiply and connect.

In La Boldina, we can see an emergent form of urban permaculture; one that reconciles classical permaculture principles with the local social, cultural and ecological contexts. In learning from nature, the group is seeking new ways make their urban environment more sustainable, more interconnected, and more collective. It is precisely this form of organisational innovation that will better enable us to articulate and share the multidimensional benefits of urban agriculture, and better integrate permaculture and agroecological principles into European cities.

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