Shift Happens!
Critical Mass at 20

Edited by Chris Carlsson, LisaRuth Elliott, and Adriana Camarena

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Cover Design: Hugh D’Andrade
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Translators:
Italian: Laura Fantone, Susanne Zago
Portuguese: Seth Schoen, Chris Carlsson
Spanish: Adriana Camarena, Chris Carlsson
Finnish: Eeva Luhtakallio

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# Table of Contents

- **Ruminations of an Accidental Diplomat** ................................................. 9  
  Chris Carlsson

- **Personal Mass** .............................................................................. 19  
  Hugh D’Andrade

- **The Great European Bike Love Link** ............................................ 31  
  Giuso Ciclocuoco

- **We ARE Traffic** ............................................................................ 37  
  Daniel S. Libman

- **How Critical Mass Built the LA Bike Movement** ..................... 41  
  Adonia E. Lugo

- **Critical Mass Porto Alegre** ............................................................. 47  
  Marcelo Kali

- **Pedaling with Ghosts of the Industrial Revolution in Manchester, England** ......................................................... 55  
  Vanessa Bear

- **“Alegria Entre Tus Piernas”: To Conquer Madrid’s Streets** .......... 59  
  Elisabeth Lorenzi

- **Masa Crítica Buenos Aires** ............................................................... 71  
  Julieta Cal and Juan Manuel Taboada

- **Let’s Take Back Rome!** ................................................................. 79  
  Network of People’s Bike Kitchens of Rome

- **Critical Mass is Dead. Long Live Critical Mass!** ....................... 85  
  Thiago Benicchio

- **San Francisco in A Coruña:**  
  **Masa Crítica as a Prototype of Global Action** ......................... 101  
  Carlos Díez Reboredo and Moncho Vázquez

- **The Blind Spot: Subcultural Exclusivity in Critical Mass** ........ 117  
  Adriana Camarena

- **Bicycling in the Public Sphere** ...................................................... 127  
  Lusi Morhayim

- **Putting the ‘Critical’ in Critical Mass: Patriarchy, Radical Feminism, and Radical Inclusiveness** ........................................... 131  
  Mario Bruzzone

- **Political Critical Mass in Rome** .................................................... 143  
  Rotafixa

- **Guadalajara (Mexico): A Critical Mass of Associated Citizens** .................................................................................. 147  
  Jesús Carlos Soto Morfín

- **Nuevo León, Mexico** .................................................................... 161  
  Raquel Treviño and Gerardo Núñez

- **Positive Symbols And High Optimism In Budapest** .................. 163  
  Justin Hyatt

- **We Have Changed Our City Forever** ......................................... 171  
  Kuki and the Critical Mass Budapest Community

- **And Still We Ride: A Decade Of Critical Mass in Prague, Czech Republic** ................................................................. 175  
  Daniel Mourek
Critical Bike Ride and 30 Years of Mass Bicycle Demonstrations in Helsinki .................................................. 181
  Eeva Luhtakallio, Otso Kivekas, Olli Heikinheimo, Angi Maaranen, Janne Nurminen

Critical Mass Puerto Rican Style .......................................................... 187
  José R. Cepeda-Borrero & Sharon Clampitt-Dunlap, with Gary Gutierrez-Renta

El Paseo Nocturno and Bicitekas ...................................................... 193
  Mónica Sánchez

Letter from Bilbao, Spain ................................................................. 205
  Bilboko Masa Kritikoa

Building a Biking Community with
Critical Mass Baton Rouge ............................................................. 211
  Moshe Cohen

Critical Mass in South Africa: Making Inroads Into a Land of Lycra .......................................................... 219
  Gail Jennings

Vigo Critical Mass, a Second Beginning ......................................... 225
  Gael Sande Avendaño

Naples Critical Mass ................................................................. 231
  Luca Simeone, Roberto Cosccione, Claudio Caccavale, Mari Muscarà, Alfonso Borriello, Davide Chiarito, and Paolo Falanga

A Tumultuous Ride: New York City Critical Mass and the Wrath of the NYPD ............................................... 235
  Matthew Roth

Portland’s Critical Mass: Policed to Death? ..................................... 255
  Joe Biel

Central London Critical Mass .......................................................... 267
  Des Kay

The Johnny Appleseed of Critical Mass ............................................. 273
  Jason Meggs

Inventing an Autonomina ................................................................. 283
  Tatiana Achcar

“Critical Mass ” Meets Italian Cycle Touring .................................. 287
  Marco Pierfranceschi

Good Times and Plastic Smiles in Dubai,
Mapping the Invisibles in France .................................................. 293
  Daisy Gowda and Uma Sherwood

International Solidarity: The Bicycle As Creative Response . 300
  Robbie Gillett

Take a Bike to Ecotopia (Take a Car to Hell) .................................... 304
  Alissa Starodub

The Occupation Will Be Pedal Powered ........................................... 310
  Elly Blue

CM@20: Revolution in the Street ..................................................... 316
  Iain A. Boal
"Alegria Entre Tus Piernas": To Conquer Madrid’s Streets¹

by Elisabeth Lorenzi

I ride around the city and I ride regularly in Bicicrítica (this is the name of Critical Mass in Madrid) so I am in tune with the movement for sustainable mobility focused on the bicycle. I am also keenly aware of the intense relationship that has been formed between Bicicrítica and the social centers of el movimiento de okupación (the squatting or Okupation Movement³) for their mutual expansion.

Bicicrítica encompasses a great many perspectives, motivations, practices and influences, and affinity with the Okupation Movement is one of them. One of the greatest strengths of the Okupation Movement has been its role as an integrator of different citizen movements and initiatives, including unique activist practices that were pioneered by Bicicrítica. Based on Critical Mass practices, do-it-yourself (DIY) bicycle workshops have emerged in autonomous and okuped spaces.

The workshops in autonomous spaces offer bicycle repair and mechanical knowledge, and have become focal points of Bicicrítica expansion. Currently, there are nine DIY workshops distributed in different autonomous spaces of different styles (CS Seco, EPA Patio Maravillas, CSA La Tabacalera, CSOA Casablanca, CSOA La Enredadera, CSOA El Dragón, Escuela Popular de La Prospe). And new connections keep emerging. In the Summer of 2011, the People’s Assembly of the Mortalaz neighborhood, related to the 15M¹ movement, began pedaling their own monthly Critical Mass around the neighborhood and also guided the Bicicrítica over to their location to embrace it on their home turf.

As the problem of mobility in cities, and the bicycle as a tool for improving this situation, becomes more important in the discourse and practices of many centros sociales okupados, they help sustain the growth and maintenance of bicycle-related actions. These DIY workshops, which are connected to each other through common initiatives related to bicycling in Madrid, in turn open a window on connections among social centers, other movements, and the general citizenry.

The okuped social centers mean much more than the space they occupy. They are directly influencing the broader political moment. The activities they host give rise to countless social links and initiatives.

In a mutually beneficial process, Bicicrítica has brought a broader public
increase in the bicycling once infrastructure has been provided, whether public bikes or bike lanes. While Madrid’s bicyclists catalyze a range of citizen initiatives and new daily life dynamics, the daily experience of a bicyclist remains relatively solitary in the gray breath of traffic. That isolation is heightened by the incomprehension of friends or colleagues who pat you on the back condescendingly and call you “brave,” “crazy,” or “athletic.”

Madrid is a hilly city and many of these hills dot the peripheral neighborhoods, but we also have good weather (although it is not advised to pedal under a blazing summer afternoon sun). The traffic is noisy, congested, dirty... but not everywhere. Madrid is almost the geographical center of the peninsula and like many Mediterranean cities, has a center, the Puerta del Sol. Everything flows to the center through an urban design that combines radial compartmentalization with two concentric traffic rings to channel traffic. Long commutes inevitably pass through disagreeable bottlenecks.

Madrid, in comparison to other cities, has an ample and affordable urban transport network, which most people use. In peak hours it is badly overcrowded. The system tends to leave the peripheral areas without good connections amongst each other. This tendency of the transit system to converge towards the center has helped the bicycle become an alternative means of public transportation. As a form of transport it also knits together the “small homeland” of Madrid, unifying different neighborhoods, while allowing riders to cover greater distances in less time. In a city divided by concentric boundaries, it is common to use the bicycle for trips within the zones marked by these asphalt borders, the districts, the neighborhoods, the “central almond.” Meanwhile, the car has become less popular for short trips within the city, whether because of congestion or the lack of available parking. Ironically, increased bicycling in Madrid actually meets social desires for greater efficiency in commuting, quality of life, and social opportunities.

Urban cycling in Madrid is an emerging movement based on riders who experience its difficulties and benefits. But, local government has largely ignored the growing embrace of cycling, which has emerged from below at the initiative of the citizenry itself. This genuine grassroots mobilization has seized public imagination, but even more, the bicycle as a battlehorse of social mobilization has captured broad attention in Madrid. Pedestrians and car drivers have finally noticed, and statistics confirm what has been well known to those who frequently steer their pedaled mounts over Madrileñan asphalt: bicycle traffic is multiplying. The 2009 Report on the State of Mobility in the City of Madrid declared the number of bicycling citizens has doubled in one year, reaching 45,000 daily trips (0.6% of total
trips). That is not such a great proportion of cyclists among city residents, but something is happening.

What provoked this growth? Was it the pro-bike initiatives of the municipality? Clearly not, since these are nearly nonexistent. Urban cycling is the result of citizen efforts, the mobilization of mobility.

**Bicicrítica, the Citizen Mobilization of Mobility**

*Bicicrítica* is the best example of citizen mobilization. The last Thursday of each month at 8 pm, hundreds (or thousands!) of bicyclists gather at the central Plaza of the Cibeles to ride together. From the window of City Hall, the Mayor can see the Mass. Everyone knows where it begins, but not everyone knows what the route will be, nor where it will end. This information circulates on virtual forums and is carried out by whomever decides to lead it. The global spread of this movement coincides with the extension of the Internet, the virtual space that allows information, opinions, events, and goals of *Bicicrítica* to be dynamically debated. The Madrileñan Critical Mass is so successful and popular that we joke it will "die of its own success." The global motto, "Ride Daily, Celebrate Monthly," had special resonance in Madrid and complemented perfectly the other catchphrase, "Put the fun between your legs," which is flaunted with particular brilliance on the back of t-shirts and identifies the Madrileñan Critical Massers.

*Bicicrítica*, like Critical Mass elsewhere, embodies two distinct characteristics, simultaneously making political demands while also holding an open celebration. As a leaderless, critical, and playful mass, it presents a challenge to that which is normally considered "critical" in the city. "Is it a demonstration? What are you demanding?" often ask the pedestrians who watch the mass go by. "We want bicycles on the street!" we answer. But we aren’t just asking for it, we are effectively making it happen then and there. *Bicicrítica* is obviously a collective bike ride that only exists when it happens. But it is also a social movement that is articulated three different ways: the *Bicicrítica* on its own, the web and email lists where it is discussed (along with many other topics), and the DIY bicycle workshops located in social and autonomous spaces.

Critical Mass is not an isolated movement. It is a discourse and praxis connected to other movements and broader discourses, which has led to its rapid growth, since often the activists of related movements take the initiative to promote *Bicicrítica*. But Critical Mass also embodies the desire for immediate and sustainable access to a better quality of life.

As a celebration, it fills the streets accompanied by music blaring from sound systems carried by bicycles. The music bikes are also a reference point and guide for the ride. Sometimes rides have ironic and humorous
gathering becomes a cultural stew where new initiatives and social opportunities emerge, whether for activism, pragmatic organizing, or pleasure. In Madrid, for example, there are different associations that have been working for years to make this city a more rideable place and have built the foundation for bicycling as a legitimate transportation choice. But it has been the DIY workshop activists who have done the most to diffuse bicycling broadly and promote Bicicrítica, as they now offer weekly and daily activities related to the bicycle. The DIY bike workshops are housed in autonomous spaces, and when participating in them, visitors and activists merge urbanism, transit, political mobilization, and technological skill-sharing.

The workshops’ development depends on the initiative of the most consistent participants. Unity has been established among the workshops because they have spread virally like an expansive wave by the same people who started the first workshops. Each workshop is self-managed, openly inviting all to participate in its decisions and initiatives. A principle has been established to share in the economic management of funds obtained through activities related to Bicicrítica. This practice has become a conduit between the different autonomous spaces that house the workshops, that otherwise do not have formal communication.

History and Expansion of DIY Bicycle Repair Workshops

In 2009 I witnessed the emergence and development of eight DIY bicycle workshops. In general terms, these places offer support to bicyclists to fix or reinvent some aspect of their bike, construct a new one from loose parts and facilitate the lending of rebuilt bicycles. Tools, recycled parts, and people with a passion for mechanics are the basic infrastructure of these workshops, where not only is it important to know about mechanics, but also to have personal initiative, creativity, and a cooperative spirit.

Besides offering mechanical education, these workshops are the principle centers for gathering and articulating ideas and initiatives related to Bicicrítica. They are an important resource, not only because of the mechanical support, but because they are in spaces that offer important infrastructure for cycling events (space for parties, silk screen t-shirt printing, virtual support, guest housing). They are places that favor conviviality and open discussion, the foundation for new initiatives. All the spaces share similar values: autonomy, an anti-authoritarian political vision, support for social movements, and open participation and use of these informal spaces.

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The location of these workshops in these spaces is not accidental. There are not many spaces that freely offer space to projects without formal structure, a certain malleability of space, and that support improvised and immediate initiatives. “Do It Yourself” is the inspiring motto of Critical Masses since the beginning. It is a guiding principle that perfectly coincides with the philosophy of the social centers.

The first Bicicrítica started in October 2004, followed by the first workshop in Spring 2005 in the old Centro Social Seco, an initiative embodied by the pioneers of the Bicicrítica who requested space from the Assembly there. Knowing about this type of place in other cities, and the desire to have a proper space to manage tools and experiment, motivated contact with the Assembly. The DIY bike workshop relates to the social center as a hosted project, participating in some other initiatives, but without fully integrating
themes, appealing to riders to come in costume. “Carnaval” and “Elegant” are repeated every year, but other themes have been “Beach,” “Pirate,” “Back to School,” “Olympics 2016 towards Tokyo,” and so on.

Riding in Bicicrítica puts one into a slow rhythm, sprinkled with conversations among cyclists and occasional disputes with impatient car drivers or pedestrians facing the endless river of cyclists. Combine this with the lack of consensus about stopping or not stopping at red lights, and the mass can be seen as disorganized. But underneath the apparent disorganization is a different kind of social self-management oriented to the shared pleasure of the moment. Invisibly, the monthly ride is activating imaginations and expanding the repertoire of local collective action in an urban context while informing what it means to be Madrileños.

Madrid’s Bicicrítica has been heavily merchandised by its own participants, offering t-shirts and stickers with the popular symbol of Bicicrítica, as well as the website. It is an interesting way of both disseminating and self-financing, usually initiated by DIY shop workers. The sale of these products during the Bicicrítica also offers the occasional participant tangible evidence that the movement exists, helping reinforce the social cohesion around the bike and its re-establishment as urban transport.

On many occasions Bicicrítica ends at party where food and drink are offered for nominal prices, usually organized by activists belonging to the DIY workshop where we arrived. Activists have the greatest access to the opportunities offered by autonomous spaces, and the greatest need to find cash to cover the needs of the workshop. At a pragmatic level the party is a form of financing the workshops and the social centers or other collectives. And the fiesta is always a special occasion to reinforce social bonds while also connecting to a new tradition of how the Bicicrítica ends.

Bicicrítica has steadily grown month after month over the last six years. On the first one in October 2004, there were only four cyclists in the rain. They never even started to ride. By October 2010 there were 3,000 riders. As a monthly gathering, Madrid shares the forms that have been made globally recognizable by Critical Mass in more than 200 cities around the world: organized spontaneity, no acknowledged single leadership, xerocracy, DIY, and above all, occupation of the street and flow of traffic by a mass of cyclists. Riders assume personal and collective responsibility for the development and diffusion of Bicicrítica. Madrid is the Spanish city where the monthly ride gathers the greatest number of people, but others are also notable, such as the ones in Barcelona, Bilbao, Valencia, Sevilla, A Coruña, and Valladolid. Bicicríticas have also proliferated in neighborhoods and towns on Madrid’s periphery: La Latina, Morataz, Ciudad
Lineal, Alcalá de Henares, Getafe, Alcobendas, Pinto...

Biciérítica offers an exceptional environment for socializing and empowerment around the bicycle, but it only happens once a month. The monthly gathering becomes a cultural stew where new initiatives and social opportunities emerge, whether for activism, pragmatic organizing, or pleasure. In Madrid, for example, there are different associations that have been working for years to make this city a more rideable place and have built the foundation for bicycling as a legitimate transportation choice. But it has been the DIY workshop activists who have done the most to diffuse bicycling broadly and promote Biciérítica, as they now offer weekly and daily activities related to the bicycle. The DIY bike workshops are housed in autonomous spaces, and when participating in them, visitors and activists merge urbanism, transit, political mobilization, and technological skill-sharing.

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The Centro Social Seco, after two years of pressuring the municipality to grant them relocation, got a new place! After the move, the bike workshop was larger, had more participants, was more visible, and took on more responsibilities over space management. The new social center, no longer an okupa, must pay rent and therefore the projects that are housed there must contribute. The same summer of the move, the “EPA Patio Maravillas” (EPA Patio of Marvels) was inaugurated, a centro okupado in the central neighborhood of Malasaña. Users of the Seco bike workshop proposed to establish a new one in that space and started by adding new people. More people come to Bicicritica in the summer, increasing our forces, but also our needs. Meanwhile, visitors and participants at the new central location, attracted by its initiatives, embraced the workshop as a regular meeting place, many later joining Bicicritica.

In Summer 2008, another workshop was born at the Palacio Okupado Malaya, which was called Cicloficina (Cycle-Office). The open communications between the activists of Patio Maravillas and the founders of Palacio Okupado Malaya helped inaugurate another bike workshop in that center. As soon as the new social center opened, people on the Bicicritica email lists were encouraged to help recondition and use the space. The location, near the Lavapiés neighborhoods (low income, central barrios), and the condition of the space, facilitated outreach to local residents. Days after the inauguration of the workshop, the space was evicted. Despite its short duration, the expectations established by the workshop, the call for parallel activities, and an end-party of the Bicicritica at this site raised visibility for the social center.
Similarly, this process has reacquainted many cyclists with the movement and its surrounding diversity. People who actively participated in its rehabilitation began germinating other future new workshops.

Until this moment all the DIY workshops were tightly connected to Bicicrítica. As more workshops were started it became more diversified. These newer places came into contact with other processes, developed their own motivations, and the number of activists increased to the point that Bicicrítica became less central. New means of communications have developed beyond the Bicicrítica email list, allowing matters concerning the DIY workshops and social centers to migrate out of the communication flow that originally generated them. The reproductive trajectory of some workshops has tended to unify experiences and reference points, generating a sense of shared purpose among most workshops, even if the structure or gestation of the space itself is different.

On other occasions the activists in DIY workshops are usually intermediaries between the larger spaces and the needs of cycling events. In 2009, animated by the success of the Bicicrítica, a group called for an international event (intergalactic, in fact!): the Criticona. For this occasion, social centers housed most of the related activities and provided a lot of the lodging for people who arrived from other cities to participate. The Social Bicycle Forum was celebrated in November 2009 with activists from different cycling organizations at the EPA Patio Maravaillas.

80% of the different activists that I interviewed had no prior contact or experience with social centers before participating in a bike workshop. Some activists, after taking part in a workshop, joined anti-eviction struggles, and the okupation of new workshops. Over time, some Bicicrítica activists have become activists of the Okupation Movement.

In Spring 2009, new workshops were inaugurated. One is in the “Solar” okupation of Lavapiés, a small cleared and fenced space, boxed in by buildings and the narrow streets of this barrio. In time, the space was fixed up to be more viable in winter, with infrastructure to house projects that require materials and tools. Bicycles inspired a self-managed repair project, including plans to be open every day. Other new bike workshops opened too: La Republika Independiente de la Grasa (Independent Republik of Grease), located in the peripheral barrio of Carabanchel, the Bicilab at the Punto de Encuentro La Enredadera (“The Creeping Vine” Meeting Point), an okupied social center located in the barrio of Tetuán, the CSO Casablanca, the CS el Dragón, and the CSO La Tabakalera, and others that now constitute a labyrinth of workshops that open and close according to the luck of the social centers that host them.
In the Summer of 2011, another workshop burst on the scene. This time a critical vision of gender identities and relationships helped found a trans-lesbian-feminist workshop and bicycle school. From this space, the participants want to show that the world of the bicycle, like any other, has much to do with gender: men, women, dykes, trans... and that the repair shops in particular are heavily masculinized. They call themselves Cicliátrico. Here is an excerpt from their founding manifesto:

A few months ago, a compañera (female colleague) who’s been around the workshops for awhile, started the idea of taking a day or two a month to gather women, dykes, and transpeople to learn about bicycle mechanics. This proposal reached us through the Bicicrítica forum and from there we began inviting colleagues who had a trans/feminist past and are passionate about the bike! We met while preparing the bikeporn (movie festival) that we enjoy during September [...] We gathered daily cyclists (bike activists and not) who are interested in topics of gender and sexuality to plan the CICLIÁTRICO project, a space for those of us who stand outside the obligatory HETERO-NORMATIVITY and those of us who resist and struggle against the HETEROPATRIARCHY and its violence.
—Tino Mutante, Cicliátrico workshop

They created a space for empowerment, autonomy, and self-management where the relationships would be horizontal, given that in other workshops women, lesbians, and transfolk did not always feel comfortable. In this space, there is no fear of making mistakes and learning is a collective experience. The bicycle is understood as a potent tool to break gender, sexist, and machirulos roles that have been encountered also in the world of bicycles.

The bicycle is a means of transportation that has a very intense relationship to the body (it intensifies the body’s inherent potential), but also makes the body visible in the city, especially in a city like Madrid where bicycle riders are not so abundant. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that initiatives arise where the bicycle, body, and gender identity are related.

Elsewhere in Europe, queer theory is already involved with reconquering sidewalks and interacting with okupied space. A good example is SchwarzerCanal® in Berlin, a queer community project around a Wagenplatz (caravan settlement) in a forest east of the city. As such, it is a networked project, a point of confluence for homosexuals and friends and part of a broader network of autonomous spaces, okupas, and other Wagenplätze in Berlin, Europe, and beyond.

**Bicicrítica and DIY Workshops: Chickens and Eggs**

At a pragmatic level, the strong activism of many workshopists within
Bicirética has been an animating force behind the rides, even though Bicirética on its own does not require much maintenance, nor resources. It is passed on by word of mouth, and it has plenty of people attending. By contrast, the workshops need resources, more regular involvement, management help, and therefore a more or less permanent social structure.

The first workshop was inaugurated with certain expectations, but these have changed with the proliferation of new workshops. In practice, new needs have been generated and new ideas to meet them, while the occupation of spaces has transformed imaginations of okupiers AND cyclists.

Social centers are one of the local forms that embody and express the politics and practices born in the global prototype that is Critical Mass. The presence of social centers in Critical Mass initiatives does not happen only in Madrid, but is important to the existence of Critical Mass in other European cities too (e.g. London, Rome, Paris). Is the Okupation Movement a structural form to use specific values of Critical Mass in the European context? Or is it the structural and political characteristics of these cities that make these movements converge?

These social centers are not isolated because connected channels of communication live through the activists, participants, and the movements that use these spaces. The social centers constitute an important support for Bicirética, but at the same time Bicirética also provides support and an important means of communication, while also mediating the relationship between the larger society (as traffic) and the social centers (as outposts of cultural and political transformation).

Notes

1. This article is a summary of a more extensive article published in Spanish, Lorenzi, Elisabeth (2010)“Centro social en movimiento. Los talleres de autoreparación de bicicletas en espacios auto-gestionados” en Ocupaciones en Movimiento. derivas, estrategias y prácticas (ISBN: 978-84-935476-6-0), http://tierradenadicediciones.com/tierradenadie/?p=215

2. El movimiento de okupación ("Squatting movement") is a widespread practice in Spain, as in all of Europe, that consists of taking abandoned lots and buildings to use as gardens, urban farms, places to live, social and cultural centers, and meeting halls. The okupa movement brings together a wide variety of ideologies that usually justify their actions as acts of political and social protest against speculation and to defend the right to housing facing economic or social hardships. The squatter movement also often defends the use of solar, buildings, and abandoned spaces and its use by the public as social or cultural centers. The initial experiences of occupation in Spain can be found in the late 1970s as part of a citizens movement as well as a tactic of the anarchist union, CNT. The squatters' movement started to develop in Madrid in the mid and late 1980s, but the main expansion occurred in the 1990s, essentially as one of the main actions promoted by the autonomist movement and groups of social anarchists. A heavy wave of criminalization and the instability of most of the squats provoked a fierce crisis in the squatters' movement during the first part of the 2000s, with the exception of few remarkable cases. Recently, at the end of the last decade a new explosion of squats in Madrid took place simultaneously with a greater diversity of experiences, actors, ideologies and cultural references. As a novelty, three squats were even legalized. After the May15 Movement 2011, a new wave of squats, both social centres and houses, placed squatting again on the public agenda of Madrid.