

**Intervention**

**A Space of Possibilities:  
Situated Research with/from *La Casa dels Futurs***

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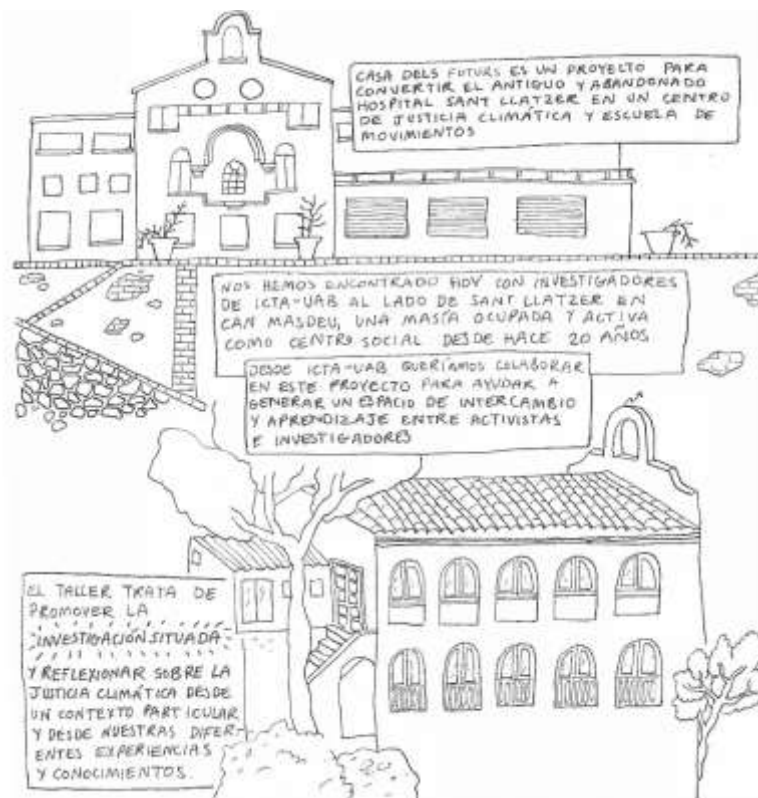
## Introduction

Margit Mayer (2020: 37) recently proclaimed that “radical urban research may need to take a leap” due to “three interrelated tipping points” emerging from the climate crisis—of biophysical systems, of the economy, and of the social fabric. While mainstream discussions of “the city” are ripe with repetitions about urban population increase and the “integral” role cities “may” play in combating the climate crisis (Andersen and König Jerlmyr 2022), Mayer (2020) is joined by an increasing body of literature which draws specific attention to the key role of situated knowledges and radical social transformations, particularly those surfacing through environmental and climate justice movements (Apostolopoulou et al. 2022; Goh 2020; Temper et al. 2018). Rather than highlighting cities as the spearhead of sustainability policy discourses (Angelo and Wachsmuth 2020), the embodied knowledges (Derickson 2018) of urban environmental and climate justice movements offer tangible possibilities of transformative transitions towards sustainable and just (urban) futures.

We situate this intervention precisely in the creation of such spaces of tangible possibilities for just urban futures. We offer here a critical reflection of a one-day event organised with *La Casa dels Futurs* (<https://www.casafuturs.org/>)—an activist-led initiative aiming to convert an abandoned hospital in Barcelona’s periphery into a climate justice centre seeking to support social and ecological movements—where researchers and activists joined together to co-create situated research guidelines with and for *La Casa dels Futurs*. Through this reflection we explore two questions. First, *how to set up just processes for scholar-activist/situated research with and within social movements?* And second, *what role can/do researchers/activists play in the other extending legitimacy?* We draw upon both the embodied experiences and struggles in and of situated research of activists and researchers involved in climate/social justice-oriented research and action while imagining *La Casa dels Futurs* as a space for exploring those possibilities. We share our reflections from the event supported by illustrations done in situ by the artist Cristina Fraser during the day of the event.

We find that while much of our discussion around situated research is echoed in scholarly literature, the *process* of co-creating research guidelines with researchers and activists fostered in itself a more *just* process which may foster *just* situated research approaches. Furthermore, co-creation brought to the surface how research–activism alliances can create mutual-aid dynamics, as well as its challenges and limitations. For instance, the

(potential) legitimacy gained with certain institutions through scholar-activist bonds. On the one hand, the privileged position of researchers and their greater potential access to decision makers may give legitimacy to social movements in their negotiations with official institutions. On the other hand, working with social movements in such a process can open up caring and intimate spaces outside of the machine of neoliberal academia through which more *just* research practices can be (co)imagined and (co)enacted.



**Image 1:** Hospital Sant Llàtzer (above) and Can Masdeu (below) (source: Cristina Fraser)

Quote 1: “Casa dels Futurs is a project to convert the old and abandoned Sant Llàtzer Hospital into a climate justice centre and a school of social movements.”

Quote 2: “We find ourselves today with researchers from ICTA-UAB next to the Sant Llàtzer in Can Masdeu, a large occupied and activist social centre which is over 20 years old.”

Quote 3: “From ICTA-UAB, we wanted to collaborate in this project to help to create an exchange and learning between activists and researchers.”

Quote 4: “The workshop is centred around *situated research* and aims to reflect on climate justice from a particular context as well as from our different experiences and knowledges.”

### **The Event: Situated Research towards Climate Justice**

On a November morning in 2022, over a dozen largely early career researchers from ICTA-UAB (the Institute of Environmental Science and Technology at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) and activists from *La Casa dels Futurs* met at Can Masdeu (<https://canmasdeu.net/>), an emblematic building occupied for 21 years that operates as both social centre and housing in the periphery of Barcelona. The day began with a short round of introductions and a presentation of *La Casa dels Futurs* projects and activists. Just a five-minute walk above Can Masdeu lies the former Hospital Sant Llàtzer, a building abandoned and empty of social use since the mid-1970s, where activists aim to physically locate *La Casa dels Futurs* projects and create a Climate Justice Center and Movement School. The project is organised along three axes: climate resilience (working on *local* climate change challenges); global solidarity (working internationally with land defenders, focusing on the Global Souths); and knowledges (the building of a permanent Movement School which cultivates social solutions through and with popular education). The workshop was organised as part of the “knowledges” axis. One of *La Casa dels Futurs*’ key arguments for placing the Climate Justice Centre in the abandoned hospital is its location on the margins of the urban and the rural. Situated in Nou Barris, one of Barcelona’s poorest neighbourhoods, and at the foot of the Collserola mountains, it fosters an engagement of thinking through these worlds together. *La Casa dels Futurs* activists guided a brief tour of the building. From the terrace of the abandoned hospital, a *vecina* (neighbour) outlined how Can Masdeu’s community gardens function, outlining the empowering and emancipatory potential of community food stewardship. Sharing and observing such practices underscored the importance of conducting the event and situating the project in this *particular* space. A space on the periphery of the city, navigating the urban–rural boundaries in both place and thought.

Upon returning to the terrace of Can Masdeu, two short presentations were given by ICTA-UAB researchers around the themes of “situated research” as well as the challenges facing the Collserola mountain range and neighbourhood. After lunch, a world café event was facilitated to explore our first question: *How to set up just processes for scholar-activist/situated research with and within social movements?*



**Image 2:** “From the terrace of Sant Llàtzer, Dan and Nelly explain to us the history and the current state of the building. From here we can see the community gardens of Can Masdeu and Isi tells us how they work.” (source: Cristina Fraser)

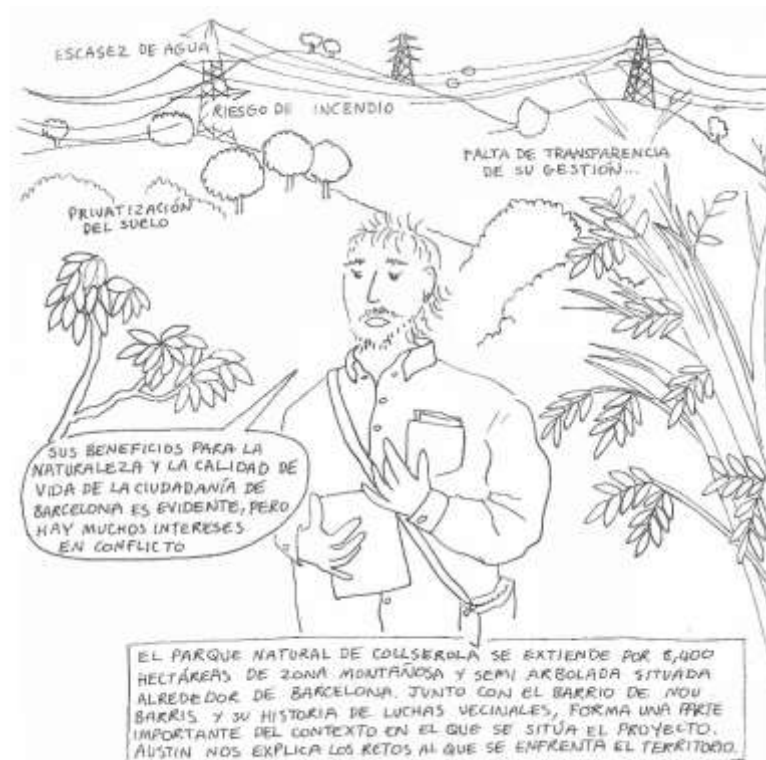


**Image 3:** “The sweet potato, or el camote, as we call it in Mexico, is used by indigenous peoples to relieve the symptoms of menopause.” (source: Cristina Fraser)



**Image 4:** “Situated research is about generating knowledge from a place, a context, and a history—from social relations. It means there are other ways of understanding the world—that there exist other ways of knowing outside of a western framework!” (source: Cristina Fraser)





**Image 5:** “Lack of water—Fire risk—Land privatisation—Lack of transparency of the management of the area—The benefits both for nature and for the quality of life of the residents of Barcelona is evident, but there are many conflicting interests—The natural park of Collserola extends for 8,400 ha in the mountainous zone and semi-forest area situated next to Barcelona. Together the neighbourhood of Nou Barris and its history of activism, these all form a part of the importance of the context in which the project is situated. Austin explains to us the challenges which are facing the area.” (source: Cristina Fraser)



### **Reflections on the Event I: Just Processes for Situated Research**

Through the world café, we discussed what research experiences have (and have not) worked, and what we consider to be the most important methods and tools for a situated research approach. Three major themes emerged: research as a process; the importance of agendas, frameworks, and language(s); and the importance of (connections to) place.

#### *Research as a Process*

Building relationships for the long term was emphasised by many participants as fundamental for just and transformative situated research, as extended engagement is required to generate trust, establishing meaningful relationships, processes, and outcomes. Activist-researchers have underlined specific elements of what this looks like in practice: mutual aid, accountability, embeddedness, reciprocity (Graziani and Shi 2020; Pulido 2008). While long-term commitments can at times be “mundane and painstaking”, “[t]his is often the timescale and reality of winning social struggles” (Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010: 265). Research as a process means that the outcomes of research processes should reflect a co-creation dynamic, with research findings disseminated in accessible, public-facing formats as much as possible. We also discussed a tension between the different dynamics and rhythms of universities and activist movements. Research approaches and outcomes often clash with metrics like publications in high impact factor journals, measures used to assess academic progression and ensure the viability of research projects (see ORCID Unauthenticated 2014). We further problematised the imbalanced temporalities that affect the longevity of these relationships, comparing local activists’ often long-term engagement in a field with early career researchers’ precarious contracts and established institutions, particularly in the Southern European context. The research process also underlines the need for establishing ontological and epistemological positions to mutually unfold in dialogue with the territory and communities, its spatial position, and its temporalities. This echoes what Wolch (2003: 646) points to as *radical openness* as method, which is also “a discipline of humility and courage” in the sense of trusting and following through on what allies and places need. Thus, the definition of research objectives and questions should play a key role in the process of engaging with movements/communities.

*Agendas, Frameworks, and Language(s)*

One of the unexpected beauties of our encounter was creating a space where early career researchers shared, in open honesty, their pitfalls with research interventions and funding that (eventually) were not situated and thus did not meet local community needs, and the lessons learnt in this process. Experiences that, indeed, do not find space within competitive, excellence-driven scenarios of the university. For example, closed research protocols that don't allow for "reality" in its complexity to emerge, and thus the need to open them up from the get-go. The enormous importance of allied agendas and frameworks between researchers and social movements for transformative situated research that emerged in our discussions is echoed in reflections by the Autonomous Geographies Collective (2010). Language was a major point that arose, on two fronts. First, the need to translate academic concepts and jargon into context-relevant and understandable terms for movement comrades. And yet, in turn, the importance of acknowledging social movements as knowledge producers and situated sources of knowledge, where relevant new theoretical concepts are in fact generated (Casas-Cortés et al. 2008; Choudry 2014). Second, the need to make valiant efforts to communicate in the local language in order to foster the profound relational ties and meaningful research outcomes that situated research seeks. In general, we felt that creating a space for early career researchers and activists to be frank about when we "fail" as situated researchers and how to better align research frameworks and objectives with the needs of social movements was a valuable experience.

*(Connections to) Place*

Both these previous points highlight the need to connect to place, an issue that arose time and again in our conversations. Place is key in questions of transformative scholarship and activism (Pulido 2008). Many feminist scholars underline the importance of relationality (Askins 2018; Parker 2016) and a politics of location and belonging (Carrillo Rowe 2005), referring to the connected nature of place, practices, and power and how the human and non-human are interrelated, as well as holding ourselves accountable in/to a collective belonging. Activist scholars have similarly underlined the need for "relation-centered, materially-grounded understandings of constructing knowledge" (Choudry 2014: 86). At the same time, a relationship with place is key in the organising of *La Casa dels Futurs*. The project is centred around place-based pedagogy (Boggs and Kurashige 2012; Gruenewald 2003),

placing the social, historical, and ecological aspects of the location and its surroundings at the heart of its organising.

Throughout our conversations it became increasingly clear that situated research processes underlying the role of place, building relations, and aligning agendas, frameworks and languages are fundamental for more just research processes, which are critical to lead to more just and meaningful research outcomes. In this respect, such an approach is fundamental to manifest the intention of *La Casa dels Futurs*: to create a model of large-scale physical infrastructure for social and ecological transformation, with a material climate resilience dimension, a knowledge and movement school-oriented dimension, and an international, networked-organising dimension for broader transformative movements.



**Image 6:** From our experience with situated research, what has worked well? (source: Cristina Fraser)

Quote 1: “When we arrive with our own frames it’s problematic.”

Quote 2: “And agendas and language and time frames.”

Quote 3: “I was in Cantabria to study the reintroduction of wolves into rural zones. We collaborated with the agricultural community only at the end of the process and we couldn’t take their experiences and critiques into account because the project had ended. In this way, we should have done things differently.”

Quote 4: “We had funding to develop an agro-forest but the community had other needs which were more urgent.”



**Image 7:** What methodologies are the most important for situated research? (source: Cristina Fraser)

Quote 1: “To be conscious of your own cultural baggage and how this influences your perspective...”

Quote 2: “My Western glasses!”

Quote 3: “...for that I decided to do my research in a place where I feel a connection and I can be involved for a longer duration.”

Quote 4: “Building confidence and creating a common understanding is the methodology.”



**Image 8:** What practical tips can we give to ensure that climate justice-oriented research leads to action?

(source: Cristina Fraser)

Quote 1: “I’m not saying I’m an example but I think we researchers need to get involved in direct action ... get out of our comfort zone! The time is now!”

Quote 2: “In academia you have to accompany processes and get involved with the movements.”

## Reflections on the Event II: Researcher/Activist Legitimacy as a Two-Way Street

After the event, we reflected on our second question: *What role can/do researchers/activists play in the other extending/achieving legitimacy?*

Legitimacy to social movements closely relates to Derickson and Routledge's (2015) first notion of resourcefulness which might inform scholar-activism—namely, directing the resources and privileges of academics to non-academic colleagues. During the event, these resources were reflected in potential connections to other nodes of people/infrastructures throughout the city, such as architects to conduct assessments of the abandoned building, connections to decision makers, and other social movements and researchers inside and outside Barcelona. As *La Casa dels Futurs* is still negotiating the rights-of-use to and conversion of the abandoned Hospital Sant Llàtzer—which must come from Barcelona City Hall, the regional government, the church, and the Hospital Sant Pau (all united through representatives in one independent body called MIA [Molt Illustre Administració])—conducting an event with an internationally recognised research institute may offer legitimacy in the eyes of these players. This is to say that while Barcelona has been internationally recognised for participatory approaches to green urban (re)development—although not without critique (Oscilowicz 2020)—and whose climate emergency declaration mentions climate justice throughout, the approach of the city hall remains one of placing “formal” knowledge and projects coming from international institutions (like the academy) above those emerging from the grassroots. We have no desire to subsume *La Casa dels Futurs*' project into the academy, but the apparent “formalisation”—through collaboration with researchers like the event described here—may have the potential to influence *La Casa dels Futurs*' struggle to convert the abandoned hospital. Our point here is that by recognising the power dynamics that scholar-activist relationships exist *within*, and the privileges that are awarded to those operating within “formal” institutions, scholars may extend legitimacy to social movements through collaboration, and, that this collaboration may play a role in at least destabilising these power imbalances moving forward.

The extension of legitimacy, as experienced in this event, not only travels from researcher to activist but is also provided to researchers through their engagement with activists. Far from being the simple fact that the empirics and theories contained within academic publications largely emerge through participation with activists and social



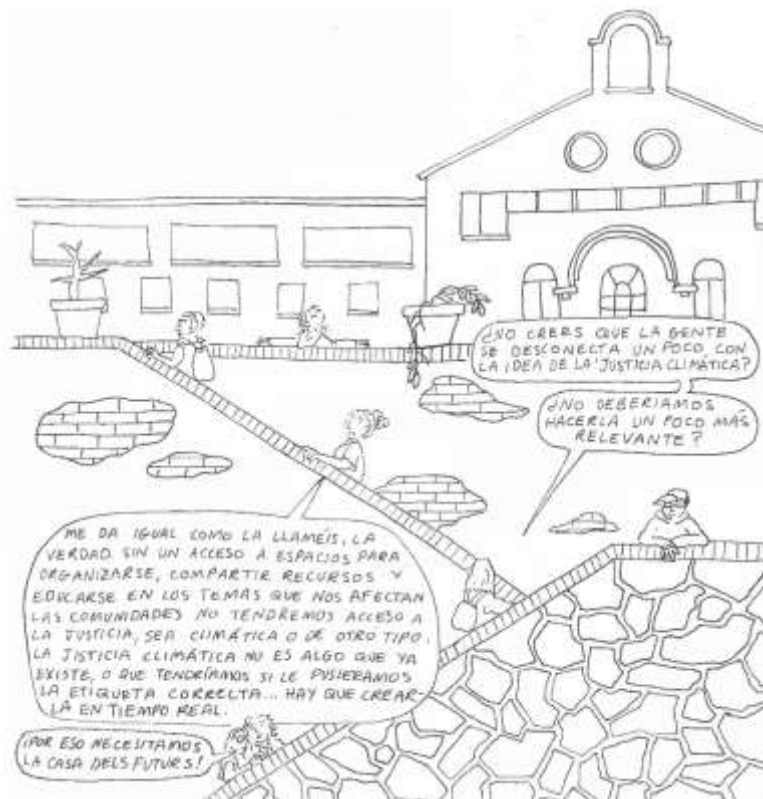
movements—and thus fulfil the requirements of grants and contracts—we understand an *intimate* legitimacy gained by engaging both with activists and within the spaces provided by activists. Similar to our reflection above, the process of co-creating situated research guidelines outside the four walls of neoliberal academia—in both physical location and outside the constraints of precarious grant requirements—offered a caring and stimulating space for researchers to collectively reflect on their previous experiences and future desires. While we are not arguing that these types of conversations cannot exist within the university, the concreteness of social movements—referring to their close ties to place, historical legacies, and active and continuous struggles—offers a distinct framing and legitimacy to the thoughts, experiences, and desires of researchers by involving them in tangible outcomes. Furthermore, the welcoming of researchers by social movements creates inter-personal ties within a physical space which some researchers may lack due to the increasing precarity, internationalisation, and (un)desired mobility of academics in the contemporary era. This caring space, we believe, opens up the possibility for more *just* research practices to be (co)imagined and (co)enacted.

## Conclusion

If indeed radical research “may need to take a leap” and “[w]e can and should contribute to building a collective sense of agency” (Mayer 2020: 37, 47), we believe engaging in the building and enacting of situated research practices with and within social movements for climate justice to be a critical starting point. For all involved, the organising and partaking in the one-day event was seen in itself as an act of research-activism aiming for mutual support. In our case, this event revolved around supporting the creation of a physical location of a climate justice centre for, amongst other things, further researcher-activist engagement and the cultivation of social solutions which address the root causes of climate change, although we believe this type of engagement can absolutely be fruitful in various fields and social movements. Not only may this form of engagement provide legitimacy to social movements—to gain control of an abandoned building or gain recognition from decision-making bodies—but, in our experience, extend an intimate legitimacy through the creation of a space of caring in which researchers are welcomed to critically reflect on their research experience and goals outside the pressures of neoliberal academia.

To be certain, this intervention is a textual representation of our support of *La Casa dels Futurs* movement. We call on the Barcelona City Council, the regional government, the church, and Hospital Sant Pau to open dialogue with *La Casa dels Futurs* and to grant right-of-use to the former Hospital Sant Llàtzer that has sat abandoned for nearly 50 years. Our reflections highlight both the value and need for the engaged, situated research on climate justice that can emerge from such a place, at the city of Barcelona's urban–rural interface. A climate justice centre which aims to cross-pollinate social and local solutions for movements to thrive on a fossil urbanised (Simpson 2022) and damaged planet, which acknowledges the historic responsibility of the Global North and prioritises directly impacted communities, all while empowering organisers and activist-researchers with skills to build power and knowledge from below. As our reflections highlight, this can only be done through the creation of a physical infrastructure. In the words of an activist at the event:

Without access to spaces to organise and share resources and educate in all of the areas which are affecting our communities, we won't have access to justice, be it climate or of another type. Climate justice is not something that already exists, or that we will have if we put the right label; it must be created in real time.



**Image 9:** Quote 1: “You don’t think that people disconnect a little bit with the idea of ‘climate justice’? Maybe we should make it a little more relevant?”

Quote 2: “I don’t care what you call it, honestly. Without access to spaces to organise and share resources and educate in all of the areas which are affecting our communities we won’t have access to justice, be it climate or of another type. Climate justice is not something that already exists, or that we will have if we put the right label ... it must be created in real time.”

Quote 3: “That is why we need *La Casa dels Futurs!*” (source: Cristina Fraser)

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***If you are interested in any further information or to get involved in La Casa dels Futurs, please visit <https://www.casafuturs.org/>***