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Counterculture and Globalization: Malasaña and the duality of art in urban processes

Contracultura y globalización: Malasaña y la dualidad del arte en los procesos urbanos

Contracultura e globalização: Malasaña e a dualidade da arte nos processos urbanos

Isabel GUEVARA Fernández[1]*, Karla Monserrath ULLOA Chacha[1]*

1 Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (UPM), Madrid, Comunidad de Madrid, Spain.

* Contact e-mail: i.guevara@alumnos.upm.es; karlamonserrathu@gmail.com

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Abstract: The various artistic and cultural expressions that have emerged in the Malasaña neighborhood have played a fundamental role in its socio-spatial configuration. From the second half of the 20th century to the present day, they have functioned both as a vehicle for transmitting political and social demands – supported by organized citizens and social movements – and as a tool in service of real estate speculation and its derivative processes, such as gentrification and the touristification of the neighborhood. This article offers a historical overview that, following the development of a conceptual framework linking the theoretical concepts and key terms necessary to address the research, analyzes the changes in the social fabric of Malasaña's population, exploring their relationship with the successive emergence of different artistic movements, mobilizations, and struggles for the right to the city. Ultimately, the aim is to understand the influence of artistic and cultural practices in the production of space, as well as the necessity of their presence in the city as tools for collective empowerment in the face of institutional efforts – specifically by the municipal government – to exert control over space by homogenizing it to suit the interests of capital. The article concludes that, through artistic expressions, the rehabilitation of spaces, and the proliferation of cultural events, the neighborhood has undergone a symbolic re-signification that has attracted a new creative class with high purchasing power, which in turn has triggered speculative processes in the real estate market.

Keywords: gentrification; creative class; art; social movements; urban commodification.

Resumen: Las diversas expresiones artísticas y culturales surgidas en el barrio de Malasaña han desempeñado un rol fundamental en su configuración socioespacial. Desde la segunda mitad del siglo XX hasta la actualidad, han funcionado tanto como un vehículo de transmisión de demandas políticas y sociales, amparadas por la ciudadanía organizada y los movimientos sociales, como una herramienta al servicio de la especulación inmobiliaria y los procesos derivados de ella, como la gentrificación o la turistificación del barrio. El artículo realiza un recorrido histórico en el que, tras la elaboración de un marco conceptual que relaciona aquellos conceptos teóricos y términos necesarios para abordar la investigación, se analizan los cambios en el tejido social de la población del barrio de Malasaña, explorando su relación con el sucesivo surgimiento de distintas corrientes artísticas y movilizaciones vecinales. Se trata, en definitiva, de comprender la influencia de las prácticas artísticas y culturales en la producción del espacio, así como de entender la necesidad de su existencia en la ciudad como herramientas encauzadas hacia el empoderamiento colectivo frente a la intención de las instituciones y, en este caso, del gobierno municipal, por establecer un control sobre el espacio, homogeneizándolo para amoldarlo a los intereses del capital. Se concluye que, a través de las expresiones artísticas, la rehabilitación de espacios y la proliferación de eventos culturales, el barrio ha experimentado una resignificación simbólica que ha atraído a una nueva clase creativa con un alto poder adquisitivo que, a su vez, ha generado un proceso especulativo en el mercado inmobiliario.

Palabras clave: gentrificación; clase creativa; arte; movimientos sociales; mercantilización urbana.

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Resumo: As diversas expressões artísticas e culturais surgidas no bairro de Malasaña desempenharam um papel fundamental em sua configuração socioespacial. Desde a segunda metade do século XX até os dias atuais, funcionaram tanto como veículo de transmissão de reivindicações políticas e sociais, apoiadas pela cidadania organizada e pelos movimentos sociais, quanto como ferramenta a serviço da especulação imobiliária e dos processos a ela associados, como a gentrificação e a turistificação do bairro. O artigo realiza um percurso histórico no qual, após a elaboração de um marco conceitual que relaciona os conceitos teóricos e os termos necessários para abordar a investigação, analisam-se as transformações no tecido social da população do bairro de Malasaña, explorando sua relação com o surgimento sucessivo de diferentes correntes artísticas, mobilizações e lutas pelo direito à cidade. Trata-se, em essência, de compreender a influência das práticas artísticas e culturais na produção do espaço, assim como entender a necessidade de sua existência na cidade como ferramentas voltadas ao empoderamento coletivo frente à intenção das instituições – e, neste caso, do governo municipal – de estabelecer um controle sobre o espaço, homogeneizando-o para adaptá-lo aos interesses do capital. Conclui-se que, por meio das expressões artísticas, da reabilitação de espaços e da proliferação de eventos culturais, o bairro experimentou uma ressignificação simbólica que atraiu uma nova classe criativa com alto poder aquisitivo, a qual, por sua vez, gerou um processo especulativo no mercado imobiliário.

Palavras-chave: gentrificação; classe criativa; arte; movimentos sociais; mercantilização urbana.

1. Introduction

The transformation of marginalized neighborhoods into landscapes of consumption has occurred, to a large extent, through the convergence of gentrification processes and artistic practices (Smith, 2012). Montmartre in Paris, the Lower East Side in New York, and La Boca in Buenos Aires are paradigmatic examples of this new urban frontier (Smith, 2012); emblematic enclaves that reveal the political and symbolic dispossession of art and its instrumentalization in the service of cognitive capitalism and the creative economy of the dominant classes (González, 2019). The purpose of this process is to establish a strategic reserve of value for capital accumulation and reproduction.

In their initial stages, these processes were characterized by the influx of the so-called marginal gentrifiers (Smith, 2012), social groups with artistic and cultural attributes and alternative lifestyles. Their interest in these degraded urban areas lay not only in the affordability of housing, but also in a search for authenticity that valued the aesthetics of rawness as a distinctive element of the environment (Smith, 2012). Thus, art – which initially sought spaces free from bourgeois restrictions in order to spread through countercultural, political, and activist practices – evolved into a bohemian eclecticism that transformed the built environment and neighborhood identity, endowing the space with a marketable identity conceived as a real estate commodity that generated new consumer demand (Deutsche & Gendel, 1984; Smith, 2012). It is here that the figure of the marginal artist, who inhabited the neighborhood out of necessity, begins to be displaced by the discursive construction of the *creative class* proposed by Florida (2010), which, as Peck (2005) warns, no longer seeks the authentic

roughness of the original landscape, but rather a standardized form of consuming it.

However, for these spaces to acquire their true market value, they had to overcome their stigmatization as ghettos and underutilized areas, thus allowing their conversion into assets attractive to capital (Sassen, 1991; Santaren, 2021). In this context, gentrification emerges as a phenomenon of *urban renaissance*, promoted and legitimized under the premise of generating benefits for the entire population, regardless of social class (Smith, 2012). The evidence indicates that the benefits were not shared, as most of those displaced belonged to the working class. While this process can be explained by the rent gap (Smith, 2012), it is also necessary to understand it through the logic of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2004), in which real estate capital colonizes urban space to resolve its overaccumulation crises. This dynamic turns housing into a financial asset of the *global city* (Sassen, 1991), where transnational capital flows disregard the basic conception of the right to housing.

However, it was not only working-class households that suffered displacement; this artistic and creative class – the so-called *marginal gentrifiers* – was also affected. Their continued presence in these neighborhoods became unsustainable as the gentrification process advanced and land prices increased. Thus, ultimately, the dynamics of displacement were determined more by economic factors than by cultural and social aspects (Smith, 2012). All of this formed part of a broader process of economic restructuring in which the hegemony of *exchange value* over *use value* prevails (Lefebvre, 1968). Under this logic, the neighborhood ceases to be a space for dwelling – understood as community life that must remain outside the sphere of commodification – and becomes an enclave for the *creative class*. This group, far from being the engine of development proposed by Florida (2010), actually functions as a neoliberal device (Peck, 2005; Rosler, 2013) that legitimizes the expulsion of the early artists and working-class residents to make way for a consumer elite that guarantees the maximum profitability of land.

These processes, initiated in the 1980s, persist forty-five years later, although they have evolved considerably. Gentrification, far from being limited to the expulsion of the most vulnerable classes, now affects the local population as a whole. Today, this phenomenon has merged with mass tourism, intensifying urban transformation and giving rise to an even deeper dynamic of displacement and degradation: touristification. It is a process that continues to reinforce the instrumentalization of art for its own ends and, at the same time, consolidates the transformation of the city into a setting for global consumption.

Thus, art and its practices have played a fundamental role in the dispute surrounding gentrification, understood as "a struggle not only over new and old urban spaces, but also over political and symbolic power in determining

the urban future" (Smith, 2012, p. 88). Its influence on these processes is ambivalent: while it has contributed to the consolidation of a particular symbolic order, it has also fostered challenges to and reconfigurations of that order (Tunali & Erdi, 2019). Thus, while art is instrumentalized and commodified, it simultaneously persists as a countercultural expression that promotes social empowerment. In this sense, it constitutes a political practice of collective claim-making and insurgency that contributes to the construction of a collective identity and a shared imaginary among inhabitants; a sense of belonging in response to an environment marked by dispossession.

Montmartre, the Lower East Side, and La Boca, although geographically distant, share analogous processes of expulsion and hollowing out driven by the incorporation of the cultural sector as an engine of economic development. Against this backdrop, it is worth asking whether Malasaña, whose transformation follows similar patterns of the commodification of urban space, could be considered part of these territories dispossessed through the instrumentalization of art in the service of the so-called *Creative City*.

2. Methodological procedures

This study is defined as a historical-critical analysis that explores the impact of artistic productions on the urban transformation of Malasaña, using a qualitative interpretive approach. The research is structured as a critical case study, using document analysis to trace the evolution of the sociospatial fabric across four key historical periods, identified through a chronological framework based on significant political, economic, and social events over the last five decades. The retrospective approach used makes it possible to identify the artistic practices, cultural expressions, and effects these had on the community, as well as the urban policies implemented in each period.

The research adopts Neil Smith's (2012) *New Urban Frontier* theory as its main analytical framework. This choice is justified by the ability of Smith's model to systematically articulate the economic and symbolic dimensions. Unlike other approaches, this author offers a precise explanation of the rent gap mechanism, which makes it possible to identify the moment when the underutilization of an area becomes an investment opportunity. Likewise, his work is pioneering in positioning cultural groups not as mere inhabitants, but as agents who, through the production of an aesthetic and identity, prepare the ground for large-scale real estate revaluation.

The methodological design is based on a structured content analysis of polyphonic sources. The use of the documentaries #MeGustaMalasaña (2018) and Malasaña 80 Music Bar (2020), by Spanish director Juanjo Castro, as primary sources is justified because they are considered

repositories of oral memory that make it possible to capture subjectivity and neighborhood discourse during key periods of transition. To ensure the contemporary relevance of the analysis, articles from the *Somos Malasaña* section of eldiario.es published between 2021 and 2025 were selected. Both documentaries are in Spanish, so the direct quotations that appear in this article are translations from Spanish to English and the author's own.

The selection criteria focused on texts addressing conflicts over the use of public space, the opening of new cultural centers, and reports of residential displacement, with the aim of incorporating an up-to-date perspective based on the everyday experience of its inhabitants. In this sense, the inclusion of reports and articles from neighborhood associations, or produced in collaboration with them, has been essential because they provide a more detailed and critical perspective on urban processes. This study is based on the premise that those who know a territory best are those who inhabit it.

To ensure methodological rigor, the limitations of the study are acknowledged. In particular, the potential editorial bias of journalistic sources and the narrative nature of the documentaries have been considered. To mitigate these risks, source triangulation was carried out, contrasting media and testimonial accounts with official reports from the Madrid City Council and the press. Likewise, given the absence of independent fieldwork, the research gives greater methodological weight to alternative and neighborhood-based sources due to their proximity to and direct knowledge of the territory.

Regarding the graphic material, the figures included in this article come from public repositories and websites and were obtained in accordance with legitimate-use criteria for academic research purposes. In all cases, they have been systematically cited, acknowledging authorship and the original source to ensure transparency and respect for intellectual property rights.

3. Study area

Malasaña is located in Madrid, in the city center. Administratively, it is part of the Universidad neighborhood, one of the six neighborhoods that make up the Centro district. Malasaña does not have a precise delimitation; its boundaries are diffuse and subjective. For this reason, the study area has been defined to encompass those landmarks and urban nodes that have played a fundamental role in the historical and spatial configuration of the neighborhood. This delimitation, although it does not correspond to official administrative boundaries, seeks to capture the essence of Malasaña as an urban space with a distinctive historical and cultural identity. The study area covers approximately 50 hectares, more than half of the total area of the Universidad neighborhood (94,8 ha) (Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2025). Its boundaries are: Calle de Carranza to the north, Fuencarral to the east, Gran Vía to the south, and Calle de San Bernardo to the west (Figure 1).



Figure 1
Madrid. Delimitation defined as the study area.

Since official data are available only for administrative units, the sociodemographic context of the Universidad neighborhood is described in order to contextualize Malasaña. According to the Madrid municipal register, as of January 1, 2024, Universidad has 34.073 inhabitants, making it the second most densely populated neighborhood in the Centro district. Its demographic structure is characterized by a high proportion of residents aged 16–64, who represent 77% of its population. Older adults (aged 65 and over) and young people (aged 0–15) account for the remaining 33%. In terms of its economic activity, Malasaña is characterized by a tertiary sector linked to tourism, which is reinforced by the services and cultural facilities that have gradually been implemented through public initiative (Palacios et al., 2024). It could even be considered that the neighborhood has developed a certain functional specialization around specific art-related uses, such as galleries, theaters, schools, among others (Palacios et al., 2024).

To describe the current context of gentrification and touristification in Malasaña, it is considered pertinent to begin with the increase in housing used for tourist accommodation in the neighborhood as a tangible and quantifiable expression of the advancement of this process. According to the most current data found within the framework of this research, housing used for tourist accommodation places such pressure on the existing housing stock that the proportion of properties intended for tourism in Malasaña has reached 5%. This figure, which represents the most recent and official record, significantly exceeds the 0.5% average reported for

the city of Madrid as a whole (Casado, 2018). This situation translates into a high tourist density, where it is estimated that, at present, there is one tourist in the neighborhood for every three residents (Casado, 2018). Studies by the Observatorio Metropolitano de Madrid (OMM) corroborate that the influx of this population with greater purchasing power has driven a 40% increase in rental prices over the last five years. This increase in costs, driven by the conversion of housing into tourist accommodations, makes access to housing more difficult for local residents and generates a process of population displacement and replacement: "[...] the pattern is clear in the case of Malasaña. From being a space inhabited by the popular classes in the 1990s, it has become one of the areas where the most professionals settle" (De la Cruz, 2016).

To understand the causes that have led to the neighborhood's current situation, the following section begins a historical journey that places the role of culture at the center of its sociospatial transformation.

4. Results and discussion

Since one of the main sources of this analysis is a documentary, throughout this section, direct quotations from the people who participated in it are incorporated, identified by their names. This decision reflects the intention to respect the authorship of the statements and to situate each testimony within its context of enunciation, thus allowing the plurality of voices and experiences that shape the subject of study to be reflected. The idea is for the quotations to function as elements that articulate the different perspectives present in the analyzed narrative.

4.1. Background

Malasaña retains a village-like character within the city (Castro, 2017). This perception, widely shared by its inhabitants, is grounded in the configuration of its urban layout, which preserves the irregularity derived from former farms, dehesas, convents, and vegetable gardens. Its consolidation took place between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the relocation of the court to Madrid spurred growth that led to the construction of palaces and convents outside the town, while respecting pre-existing roads and boundaries.

During the nineteenth century, Madrid experienced rapid population growth due to industrialization and the mass arrival of workers. At the same time, the neighborhood acquired a strong symbolic identity through the struggles for independence against France, with the figure of Manuela Malasaña as an emblem of resistance. At the end of the century, the establishment of the Central University of Madrid in the San Bernardo area introduced intense intellectual and academic activity, generating a shared space among an emerging bourgeoisie, the working class, and students.

Malasaña became the setting for works by authors such as Benito Pérez Galdós, Pío Baroja, and Rosa Chacel. *One of the reasons I like living in this neighborhood is because I live in a Rosa Chacel novel*, comments Anna Rossetti, a writer and neighborhood resident (Castro, 2017; 00:15:27). Currently, several streets in the neighborhood bear the names of these authors, and commemorative plaques referencing their legacy are preserved.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the neighborhood experienced a progressive decline in population, mainly due to the widespread deterioration of buildings, which had not been subject to municipal renewal plans (Figure 2). Thus, the Centro district went from 332.973 inhabitants in 1955 to 167.957 in 1980 (Datos abiertos del Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 1955; 1980). Despite this, Malasaña retained its neighborhood life: *People would sit outside at night to get some fresh air, sitting on the sidewalk on little wooden benches, the women with blankets at night, the family playing, children running around, there were no cars...* explains Teresa de Pablo, owner of Librería Reno and a neighborhood resident (Castro, 2017; 00:19:21).

Starting in the 1950s, urban planning projects of a hygienist nature were formulated with the aim of modernizing the urban center. This process can be explained through the concept of potential rent gap formulated by Smith:

> The potential rent gap is produced mainly by the devaluation of capital (which decreases the proportion of land rent available to be capitalized) and also by urban expansion and continuous urban development (which have historically increased the potential land rent in depressed urban areas (Smith, 2012, p.126).

As Smith points out, above all, gentrification is a process that has to do with class (Smith, 2012). The proposal for the Gran Vía Diagonal, later reformulated as the Malasaña Plan, approved and annulled in 1977 following neighborhood protests and the technical objections submitted (El País, 1977), contemplated the demolition of 45 blocks to replace them with infrastructure aimed at an affluent middle class, which would have displaced approximately 30.000 residents with fewer economic resources, many of them under the old-rent housing system.

The official justification for the project was based on modernization, traffic decongestion, and urban hygienization, which in practice meant widening roads, constructing parking facilities, and displacing residents.

> The conditions of overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, an aging population, traffic difficulties, deterioration of the buildings, and the parallel "social deterioration", together with the increasingly central and valuable location on the map, are present, necessary conditions for private greed of all kinds to exert pressure on it and for the defense of the interests of its inhabitants to become a splendid political platform (Baldellou, 1976, p.81).



Figure 2

Street of Malasaña, 1960's.

SOURCE: SomosMalasaña (2011).

In reality, the car was the great beneficiary: destroying heritage to facilitate the movement of private vehicles was a sign of modernity (La Cabeza Llena, 2023). The neighborhood's reaction to the Malasaña Plan consolidated a strong resistance movement. A strong neighborhood movement emerged in response to the construction of Avenida Diagonal, notes Carlos Osorio, writer and neighborhood resident (Castro, 2017; 00:42:13). The residents, together with the support of the Official College of Architects of Madrid, succeeded in having the project annulled by arguing that "there will be no improvement if the most important element of

the urban sector, its population, has to be expelled beforehand in order to produce it" (Baldellou, 1976, p. 82). In this context, the name "Malasaña" began to replace "Barrio de Maravillas" in honor of the symbol of resistance represented by Manuela Malasaña, reinforcing the neighborhood's collective identity.

By the late 1970s, Malasaña was a working-class neighborhood with a strong cultural identity and a cohesive neighborhood fabric, where the deterioration of the urban fabric and its strategic location made it vulnerable to speculation and future processes of urban transformation.

4.2. Rockers, punkis and "progres": the years of La Movida

Following Franco's death (1975) and the beginning of the period known as Spain's democratic transition, a process of social and cultural reopening took place, within a global context that was also undergoing transition, as neoliberal policies began to become hegemonic in the Western world. The growing connection with international cultural circuits facilitated the arrival of new musical and artistic influences.

With Malasaña's demographic and urban decline in the late 1970s, the neighborhood underwent a sociocultural transformation driven by the arrival of young people with alternative cultural interests. During this period, Malasaña became a decentralized ecosystem of cultural production. The lack of public investment and the devaluation of the environment allowed the proliferation of nightlife venues, bars, and alternative spaces that fostered direct interaction among musicians, filmmakers, painters, and writers, generating creative synergies that strengthened the local artistic scene.

La Movida Madrileña, whose explosion had its epicenter in Malasaña, represented a generational and symbolic rupture with previous cultural structures. During its early years, the movement's accessible and spontaneous character allowed musicians without formal training to compose and perform their own music live, while filmmakers such as Pedro Almodóvar and artists such as the Dúo Costus found in the neighborhood a setting of their own in which to develop their work.

This dynamic was particularly visible around Plaza del Dos de Mayo, which became a central node of interaction among different countercultural groups: punks, rockers, mods, hippies, and progres were some of the terms used to describe themselves. Public space was reclaimed through music as a common space in its entirety, even extending beyond the façades of bars:

If you wanted to be part of the music scene, everything revolved around the bars and clubs. If you didn't set foot in a bar or club, you weren't part of the scene. You didn't think of it that way, but looking back, everyone who was involved in La Movida and later in indie music would gather here; there was nowhere else (Castro, 2020; 00:13:09).

The social composition of Malasaña during La Movida was heterogeneous, with a strong component of experimentation and liberation that was expressed not only in music (Figure 3), but also in painting, film, photography, and other

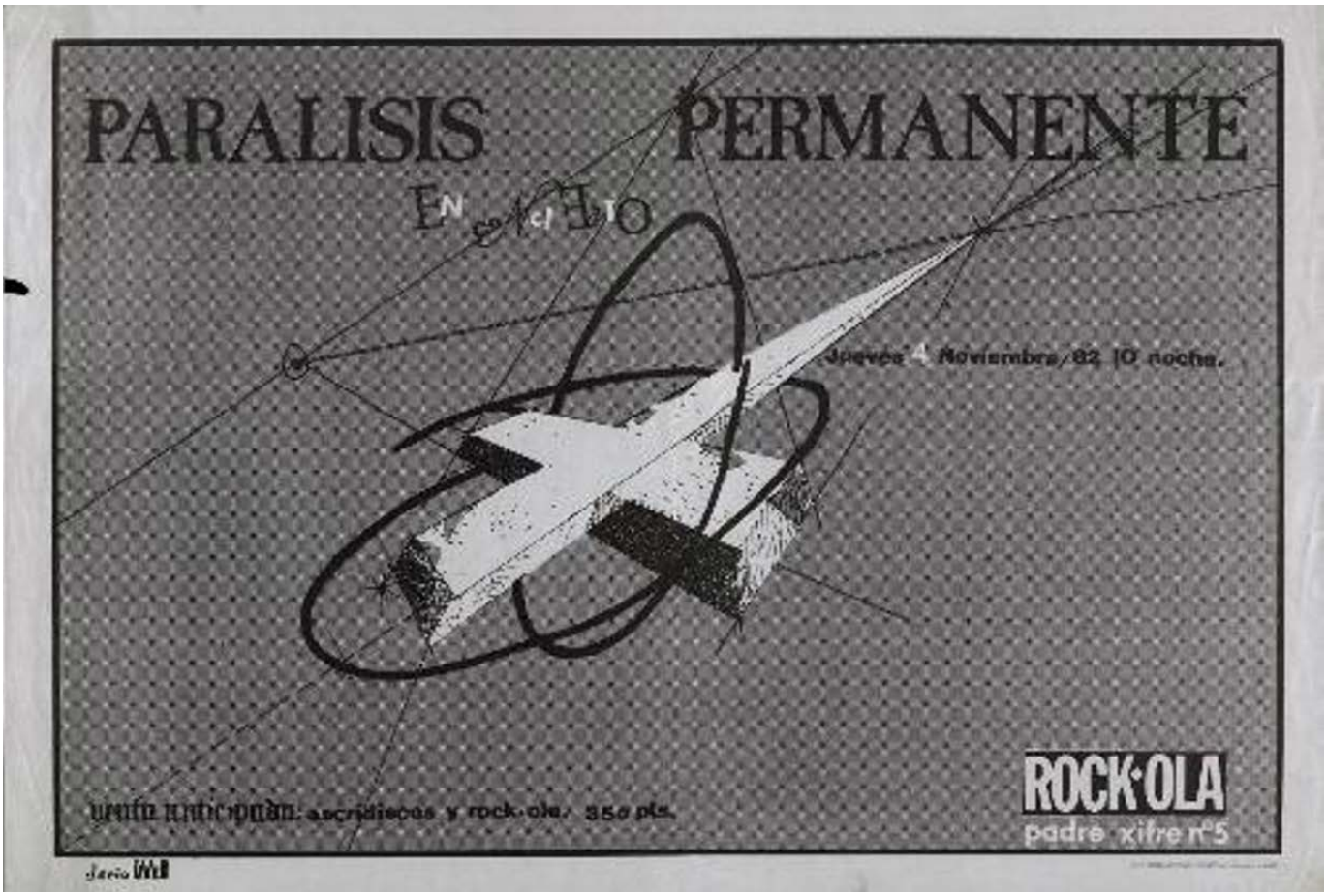


Figure 3

Concert poster for Parálisis Permanente, a popular punk band of the time, at Rock·Ola. 1983.

SOURCE: Museo Reina Sofía (s/a). Author: Ángel Mata Comino, 1982.

artistic disciplines (Vargas, 2021). On the one hand, there were young people who settled in Malasaña because of their professional ties to the music and arts scene, whether as bartenders, bouncers, DJs, or members of emerging bands. On the other hand, there were people with greater economic and cultural capital, attracted by the modernity and aesthetic experimentation emerging in the neighborhood, without a direct connection to its productive fabric. As Smith warns:

> [...] these early occupants – whom he calls "marginal gentrifiers" – do not usually remain in the neighborhood as land values increase. Marginal gentrifiers are important, especially in the early stages of the process, and can be identified by their cultural attributes and alternative lifestyles (Smith, 2012, p.174).

During this period, no improvements were made to the condition of the buildings, which suffered from complete institutional neglect. Some areas of the neighborhood became unsafe, particularly during this period and throughout the 1990s, when the presence of drugs such as heroin and prostitution posed problems for neighborhood coexistence.

In 1987, the Madrid City Council launched the Madrid City Center Rehabilitation Plan, which included the Priority Intervention Programs (PIB) in strategic areas such as Malasaña-Pez, Conde Duque, and Lavapiés. These programs established a comprehensive assessment of buildings,

public spaces, the urban fabric, and the socioeconomic characteristics of residents, with the aim of defining rehabilitation strategies. However, the implementation of these plans was limited. Interventions were reduced to scattered actions supported by subsidies for private rehabilitation, without achieving the major social objectives that had been proposed.

The consolidation of Malasaña as a cultural enclave contributed to its progressive visibility on the international scene through the recognition of La Movida as a mass phenomenon. The popularity of musical groups and the media recognition of its protagonists attracted increasing commercial and institutional pressure. In this process, La Movida lost part of its subversive and countercultural character and became a symbol of modernity incorporated into official discourses about the city.

4.3. Indie, disinvestment and global crisis

While La Movida generated cultural appeal in Malasaña, the neighborhood continued to lose population. Between 1986 and 1996, the population of the Centro district decreased by 14,6%, and in Malasaña specifically by 12,5% (Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 1986). The crisis of traditional commerce and the arrival of new migration flows added complexity to the process, making it difficult to consolidate a stable social fabric. With the flame of La Movida already subdued and absorbed by the mainstream, Malasaña's residents had to confront some of the negative effects of an ephemeral era that left a significant mark on the neighborhood's image.

Once the cultural explosion of La Movida had passed, Malasaña entered a phase of urban and social degradation that coexisted with its appeal as a youth epicenter (Figure 4). The neighborhood became consolidated as a space for mass nightlife, but also as a focal point of conflict: street drinking, petty drug dealing, theft, and litter-filled streets were part of the everyday landscape, creating a noisy environment that was difficult for residents to inhabit. This stage shows how, following the creative momentum of the 1980s, Malasaña evolved toward a model of intensive and uncontrolled use of public space, where cultural vitality became intertwined with dynamics of urban deterioration (Cabezas, 2018).

Given the persistence of urban and social deterioration, in 1994 the national, regional, and local administrations signed an agreement for the rehabilitation of the residential and urban built heritage, which made it possible to unblock the Rehabilitation Plan and continue the PIBs. Three priority rehabilitation areas were identified, including Plaza del Dos de Mayo, a central space in the configuration of Malasaña.

The global crisis of 1994 also had a significant subsequent impact on the Malasaña neighborhood: the depreciation of properties and the availability of abandoned or poorly maintained housing provided opportunities for investors and new residents to acquire and rehabilitate properties in the neighborhood.



Figure 4

Young people in Plaza del Dos de Mayo, 1990s.

SOURCE: Cabezas, Flooxer (2018).

As the economy recovered and demand for housing in central areas increased, interest in Malasaña grew significantly. The intervention in the Dos de Mayo area, which consisted of repaving streets, widening sidewalks, lowering curbs at pedestrian crossings, planting more trees, and reducing on-street parking, as well as subsidies for private rehabilitation aimed at improving common areas and building infrastructure, brought about environmental improvements that encouraged private investment in the construction of new buildings, the diversification of commerce, and the attraction of a higher-income population. These resulted in "changes that brought an undeniable improvement in neighborhood ecology, which, nevertheless, have had a much more limited impact when it comes to fostering community spaces" (De la Cruz, 2012).

This process was linked to a new cultural wave: the rise of the indie movement. Numerous bands emerged on the local scene, contributing to the consolidation of the neighborhood's reputation as a breeding ground for alternative musical talent. Concert venues and establishments such as El Barco became emblematic spaces of the period. At the same time, there was an increase in the diversity of its commercial offerings: small vintage clothing stores, specialized bookstores, record stores, and other independent establishments flourished in Malasaña. Despite the countercultural character that had defined the neighborhood's identity in the 1980s, the baton passed to the indie movement (lacking an activist stance and oriented toward a depoliticized audience) facilitated the internationalization of the Malasaña brand and the positioning of Madrid as a culturally alternative

city, but stripped of the political and subversive content of the previous period. In short, "the indie scene killed punk" (De la Cruz, 2013).

While these urban improvements allowed for the revitalization of public space and a notable environmental improvement, they also had an impact on the neighborhood's social reconfiguration. Rehabilitation, combined with Malasaña's growing visibility as a cultural enclave, increased the attraction of private investment. The replacement of deteriorated buildings with new construction, the opening of businesses targeting new population segments, and the arrival of residents with greater economic capacity marked the beginning of a process of urban transformation that, in subsequent decades, would consolidate into dynamics characteristic of gentrification (García Pérez, 2014).

This process was driven by the role of an emerging creative class, whose interest in the neighborhood's aesthetic and cultural potential unintentionally acted as a catalyst for gentrification by consolidating an image of modernity and dynamism that attracted capital and accelerated urban and social transformations.

4.4. Renovación urbana: inversión privada frente a la autogestión

The process of renewal in the Dos de Mayo area began to consolidate in 1997 with the injection of funds from the European Union, such as Cohesion Funds and URBAN projects. Initiatives such as the *Fuencarral Street Axis* and the Architectural Improvement Programs, aimed at restoring façades at key points (Glorieta de Bilbao and the Municipal Museum), laid the foundations for the neighborhood's revaluation, facilitating the entry of private capital (Justo, 2011).

The process continued in 2005 and 2006 with the creation of Comprehensive Rehabilitation Areas (ARI), which included the large-scale rehabilitation of housing on streets such as Hortaleza, Pez, and Luna, as well as the redevelopment of public spaces, such as Plaza Soledad Torres Acosta, which was planned to become *the gateway to Gran Vi*a. However, some interventions, such as the renovation of Plaza de la Luna and the modernization of the Barceló Market, generated opposition among residents and merchants due to limitations in the planning of public facilities.

Starting in 2007, the neighborhood profile was already undeniably different. Changes in population figures quantified the arrival of new residents to the neighborhood. From 2001 to 2010, 27% of the total population was foreign-born, having increased by 13,5% over 10 years (Justo, 2011). Likewise, the number of one-person households increased, but reversing the declining and aging trend. At the same time, the number of residents in the 30 and 54-year-old cohorts grew significantly (Justo, 2011). Changes in the age groups within the neighborhood's demographic structure are factors that could indicate a gentrification process (Smith,

2012). Thus, a replacement can be observed of the older population or those with lower purchasing power by a new young and professional population aligned with the market dynamics accompanying the revaluation of land.

In 2008, on the eve of the real estate bubble's burst, the influence of a group of real estate developers operating under the acronym TRIBALL was consolidated, a company whose capital belonged to Rehabitar Gestión S.A. TRIBALL promoted a profound transformation of the neighborhood through the acquisition of several properties and commercial ground-floor spaces, as well as the creation of the merchants' association ACtriball, which brought together more than 170 businesses in the Ballesta Triangle Area. Its "fundamental objective" was to recover the area's ability to attract visitors and promote a quality commercial offering with its own distinctive identity.

With the full support of the City Council, the company carried out a major transformation that extended its influence to adjacent areas, demonstrating how the articulation between urban planning policies and real estate capital reinforces the gentrification process by increasing the value of space and facilitating the entry of private interests (Smith, 2012). Indeed, the gentrification process is not limited to residential rehabilitation: it encompasses a broader transformation of the urban landscape, which materializes in changes in the use of commercial premises (Smith, 2012). Through the conversion of traditional establishments into spaces intended for a new public, as part of a strategy to increase the value of certain areas in order to attract investors, which in turn affects the social and economic restructuring of the neighborhood, a phenomenon of urban transformation oriented toward specific population segments can be observed (Figure 5).

The consolidation of Malasaña as the birthplace of artistic movements continued to be captured by the market and maximized the notion of the neighborhood as a meeting place for multidisciplinary artists.

> *I think it's a very creative neighborhood, I don't know, historically there hasa always been a lot of artistic activity, on the walls, in the houses, studios... I have contact with artists from the area and since I also live here, I see what is being done. It's not the same to work in insolation as it is to work in a place that nourishes you and conveys so much energy* (Castro, 2017, 00:32:04).

During this period, art galleries, artists' studios, and alternative spaces proliferated.

Despite investments in infrastructure and the redevelopment of public space, planning prioritized the expansion of private activity, with the proliferation of terraces, kiosks, and advertisements at the expense of spaces for gathering and community life. At the same time, cuts to public facilities left residents without adequate resources for community development.



Figure 5
Vintage shop in Malasaña.
SOURCE: Madrid pour vous (s.f.).

In response to the lack of public infrastructure, Patio Maravillas emerged in 2007, a self-managed space that became a reference point for social movements in Madrid. Its creation not only responded to the absence of adequate facilities, but also represented a form of resistance to the commodification of the neighborhood. Patio Maravillas occupied a building at 8 Calle Acuerdo (Figure 6) that had been abandoned for more than 10 years and became a center for community activities, promoting a community-based economy through activities such as free classes, alternative cinema, agroecological markets, and urban gardens (Patio Maravillas, 2010).

On the one hand, its philosophy of openness and community participation helped strengthen the neighborhood's identity, providing a community facility that the City Council had not provided. Through activities such as free classes, talks, assemblies, alternative cinema, agroecological markets, and urban gardens, or even by making spaces within the building available for any proposal, during the project's different phases and locations until the eviction of its final location, on Calle del Pez in 2015, the Patio promoted a community-based economy that challenged the speculative logic.

Returning to the concept of *marginal gentrifier*, it could be argued that the existence of Patio Maravillas may have inadvertently contributed to the neighborhood's revaluation. After all, its cultural and social activity made it a symbolic attraction for a very broad range of social profiles, including



Figure 6

Interior of Patio Maravillas, on Acuerdo Street

SOURCE: Ovelar, El País (2009).

young people with higher levels of education and an influx of people into the use and management of the space that was not led by neighborhood residents. However, the difference lies in its self-managed nature and its focus on citizen collaboration, which separates it from the market-driven and speculative logic that usually characterizes gentrification processes.

4.5. Who even are you?

Since the closure of Patio Maravillas, Malasaña has undergone an accelerated process of urban transformation that responds to the dynamics of gentrification described by Neil Smith. The disappearance of self-managed spaces such as Patio Maravillas highlights the advance of a revanchist city model imposed through policies of exclusion, population displacement, and the commodification of territory.

The neighborhood's cultural identity, once associated with countercultural movements, has been progressively absorbed by elements that seek to homogenize the urban experience for global consumption. Examples of this symbolic appropriation include the proliferation of businesses that capitalize on the neighborhood's *authenticity*. The expansion of the hipster movement, which originated in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, has brought together, as a new form of cultural expression among young people, the transformation of Malasaña, reflecting the neighborhood's internationalization. It is

perceived by residents such as Pedro Barbero as a façade in which forms of dress, behavior, and tastes are adopted without any genuine connection to the neighborhood's identity, according to Fernando Monge (Castro, 2017).

The arrival of businesses targeting a high-income creative class, the proliferation of hipster-style establishments, and the increase in the supply of nightlife have contributed to a symbolic transformation of the neighborhood, presenting it as a culturally attractive product for investors and tourists. Urban dynamics in the neighborhood have moved beyond gentrification toward touristification, generating an economic dependence on the tourism sector that threatens the sustainability of the social and residential fabric.

The conversion of housing into tourist rentals has reduced the supply of residential housing, displacing longtime residents and contributing to rising real estate prices. *The problem with tourism in the neighborhood emerged when rents began to rise*, comments Natalia Oliveras (Castro, 2017; 00:58:40). As Pablo warns, the *speculative bubble* of gentrification has created an imbalance in the coexistence between residents and tourists, making it increasingly difficult for the neighborhood's traditional population to remain (Castro, 2017; 01:01:14).

"This social deterritorialization brings with it a parallel disappearance of local commerce; an abundance of bars, around 600, have colonized the space" (Azcárate, 2018). Commerce has been one of the sectors most affected by this urban reconfiguration. The transformation of streets such as Fuencarral has involved the gradual disappearance of traditional businesses, replaced by franchises and establishments catering to tourists or people with high purchasing power. Natalia adds *that she has difficulty finding a store where they sell you a normal button, a normal butcher shop, a bar where they serve you a vermouth that isn't designer* (Castro, 2017; 00:52:08). The uncontrolled rise in commercial rents has generated high business turnover, making it impossible for small entrepreneurs to remain. *Not to mention commercial gentrification, when they ask you for €4,000 a month for a little corner, it's something few people can afford*, Pablo points out (Castro, 2017; 01:04:53).

Touristification does not affect only housing or commerce, since community life also extends into public space. *Despite being home to 133,000 inhabitants, the city center receives between 600,000 and 1 million people every weekend (*Castro, 2017; 00:55:01).

In addition, several interviewees have pointed out that Malasaña has reached such a level of notoriety that it has become a *theme park* (Castro, 2017; 00:51:34), and they call for action through the SOS MALASAÑA platform (Figure 7).

At the same time, there has been an increase in police presence in areas such as Plaza del Dos de Mayo, traditionally a space for neighborhood gatherings and alternative leisure. The criminalization of free leisure, not mediated by consumption, responds to the logic of the *revanchist city*, in which authorities impose restrictive regulations to control the use of public space in favor of commercial and tourism interests. This control is manifested



Figure 7

Balconies in Malasaña with flags bearing the slogan "SOS Malasaña" in protest against the touristification of the neighbourhood.

SOURCE: Aquí Madrid (2024).

in the criminalization of those who use public space autonomously, while the expansion of private businesses that profit from the neighborhood's cultural identity is encouraged. The commodification of public space is evident in the proliferation of terraces in squares and streets, restricting free access to these spaces and reinforcing the privatization of the urban environment, generating disputes between residents and hospitality businesses.

Since opposition to the construction of the Gran Vía Diagonal in the 1970s, neighborhood activism has persisted. Antonio points out that one of the main sources of pride for residents is the existence of various platforms and collectives, such as Plataforma Maravillas, which emerged with the aim of recovering the neighborhood festivals. According to him, *through that festive contact, a bond has been created among everyone*, reflecting the key role of community action in constructing a shared identity (Castro, 2017; 01:05:14). Fernando Monge highlights the importance of the neighborhood's network of associations, *noting that with roughly 31,000 residents, Malasaña is home to around 80 associations, and of those 80, 80% are dedicated to issues related to the neighborhood* (Castro, 2017; 00:43:13).

Building on the legacy of Patio Maravillas, and in collaboration with the various neighborhood associations, the SPA Maravillas collective continues its program of activities, this time on a vacant lot, Solar Maravillas, which has been converted into a multipurpose space hosting different cultural initiatives removed from capitalist logics, in contrast to other artistic

projects such as *Pinta Malasa*ña, which emerge from private initiatives as a tool for attracting tourists and as a showcase for major brands that construct imaginaries and atmospheres oriented toward cultural consumption, attracting new audiences and revaluing the neighborhood.

Although muralism has historically been a tool for resistance and community building, its incorporation into institutionalized initiatives tends to shift its critical character toward a primarily aesthetic and promotional function. *Public space is a battlefield in which images are the weapons* (Castellanos, 2017, p. 146). Thus, a practice originally linked to the collective appropriation of space becomes a resource serving its commodification (Sánchez-Naudin & Vivas-Elias, 2018).

The *#PisaMalasa*ña action, which emerged in May 2016 (Figure 8), can be understood as a direct response through non-institutionalized urban practices to this process (Rock Hasta las 6, 2016). The action was undertaken as a form of reappropriation of public space, questioning the legitimacy of these interventions and making visible the conflict between institutionalized urban art and autonomous practices. In this way, it becomes evident that processes of gentrification involve not only urban transformation but also forms of resistance that contest the meanings and uses of space.

In 2020, the Madrid City Council carried out the eviction of the vacant lot (Figure 9), arguing that the land would be transferred to the Community of Madrid for the future construction of a health center, although at that time there was neither a project nor an allocated budget. Although neighborhood groups did not oppose the construction of the health center, they requested to continue their activities until the works

Figure 8
#PisaMalasaña action.
SOURCE: Rockhastalas6 (2006).





Figure 9
Event at Solar Maravillas.
SOURCE: Cárdenas, El País (2020).

actually began, but the City Council did not agree. This decision forms part of a broader policy under the municipal government of Martínez-Almeida (2019–present) aimed at dismantling community spaces inherited from the previous administration, such as Casa del Cura or the stalled Centro Cultural de San Bernardo 68 (Casado, 2023).

Between 2021 and 2025, various events in Malasaña, apparently isolated, acquire coherence when framed within the theory of the *New Urban Frontier* (Smith, 2012): a process of urban reconfiguration driven by capital that advances into territories previously sustained by the commons, transforming them into environments functional to new forms of profitability. In this sense, the changes in the organization of the Fiestas del Dos de Mayo (Somos Malasaña, 2023b) illustrate how forms of citizen participation that do not align with institutional or commercial logics are deactivated: the disappearance of self-managed concerts, street markets, and neighborhood cultural activities has given way to less-programmed, more massive events linked to consumption, facilitating the discourse of disorder, embodied in the *macrobotellones* (Somos Malasaña, 2023a), which legitimizes greater restrictions and urban reconfigurations, in accordance with the *devaluation and strategic* reinvestment described by

Smith (2012). Different neighborhood groups pointed to problems related to the deterioration of public space, denouncing situations of "insecurity and absolute neglect" (Somos Malasaña, 2023d).

The closure of Colegio de la Purísima Concepción (Somos Malasaña, 2023c) constitutes another *small everyday conquest* of the urban frontier: its closure is justified on educational grounds, but it entails the weakening of the community fabric, as it removes a social anchor that hinders the neighborhood's demographic and functional transition. Finally, the public competition for the renovation of Plaza del Dos de Mayo in 2025 (Somos Malasaña, 2025a), a project developed without neighborhood consultation and selected by the Madrid Architects' Association, prompted a symbolic rejection by 99% of participants (Somos Malasaña, 2025b). The proposal, which envisions an open plaza composed of concentric squares, removes stairs and playgrounds and relocates the monument to Daoíz and Velarde, demonstrating the replacement of use values (collective practices and local identities) by exchange values (economic valorization), as Smith (2012) warns. Taken together, these cases highlight the tension between forms of community appropriation and strategies of capitalist dispossession, in which the production of urban space becomes an instrument of control and exclusion.

This type of institutional intervention demonstrates in this final period analyzed how, by suppressing the cultural alternatives fostered by citizens, authorities seek to control the forms of cultural resistance and critical thought that emerge from initiatives opposing the commodification of public space. Conversely, initiatives that fit within capitalist dynamics are favored; driven by private interests, they serve to promote a model of the city oriented toward tourism, real estate speculation, and cultural homogenization.

5. Conclusions

In the Malasaña neighborhood, artistic expressions have played a central role in the process of gentrification and, subsequently, in its touristification. Through artistic expressions, the rehabilitation of spaces, and the proliferation of cultural events, the neighborhood has undergone a symbolic re-signification that has attracted a creative class with high purchasing power; a phenomenon that, in turn, has driven speculative processes in the real estate market. Art, which originally functioned as a means of countercultural expression and community resistance in its various forms (music, muralism, handicrafts), has been progressively instrumentalized as a tool for urban commodification. Thus, what initially emerged as a spontaneous expression of neighborhood identity has been absorbed by the tourism economy, transforming Malasaña into a commercial enclave oriented toward visitors. From Lefebvre's (1968) perspective, this process

demonstrates the hegemony of *exchange value* over *use value*, whereby culture ceases to be a common good, understood as a collective resource for social reproduction, and becomes a financial asset.

The analysis of these processes allows us to draw a series of conclusions that invite critical reflection on the urban dynamics of Malasaña. Over time, art has been a field of contestation among various actors: the local community, which has used public space as a means of expression; the creative classes, which have re-signified the neighborhood through a logic of attraction and differentiation; public authorities, which have promoted narratives of urban regeneration by capitalizing on the logic of the creative classes; and private entities, which have capitalized on this revaluation to maximize profits. By observing this conflict of interests, we can confirm the continued relevance of Neil Smith's theory of *new urban frontiers*, identifying how capital investment colonizes previously degraded spaces through the production of new symbolic and economic value. This dynamic also raises a fundamental conflict concerning the right to the city (Harvey, 2004), questioning the role of public authorities in protecting urban commons from the expansive logic of the market.

It is evident that the instrumentalization of artistic and cultural expressions has marginalized any manifestation that does not conform to the aesthetic and consumption standards imposed by the so-called *Creative City.* The criminalization of alternative leisure and the disapproval of the occupation of public space by social groups (despite being part of the neighborhood's historical tradition) respond to a process of exclusionary selection. Ultimately, the management of culture in Malasaña appears to have shifted, across different periods, from promoting diversity toward a form of cultural governance oriented toward the *marketization of identity*, in which only those expressions that serve the accumulation of capital are accepted and promoted.

The research underscores the need to revalue art and its manifestations, freeing them from their instrumentalization in the service of the real estate market in order to restore their political, expressive, and cultural function. Under this premise, art should be conceived as a common good accessible to citizens, whose protection and promotion should be guaranteed by public authorities. Nevertheless, in order to achieve effective intervention, it is imperative to raise questions that can guide future lines of research: what should the role of institutions be in this process, what public policies could promote cultural practices without encouraging speculation and the displacement of the local population, and which actors should authorities listen to when making decisions? In this context, the urgency of rethinking the model of cultural management becomes evident, prioritizing equity and social justice in the distribution of the benefits of art and culture in the city. Ultimately, it is the neighborhood's residents who should become the

primary beneficiaries of cultural policies in this and all contexts of urban transformation.

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