

Works in Madrid: cars before people

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It is difficult to get an idea of what has been happening in Madrid in the last few years regarding infrastructures and mobility. One has to live in the city itself or in its outskirts to fully appreciate the severe consequences this excessive construction activity being carried out by the different Administrations is having on the quality of life of the madrileños (people from Madrid). This excessive construction of transport infrastructure is being carried out without any coordination or definite plan to indicate the final goal, it is the product of great demagoguery, of “I can do more than you”, with the sole purpose of inaugurating sites before the next election. Faced with this situation, there is a surge of resistance actions by citizens who do not agree with the many abuses of power they are witnessing. This article will briefly explore this situation.

Aggressions

Madrid is, currently, the European Metropolitan area with more motorway and highway kilometres per citizen. It is also one of the areas with greater and more frequent traffic jams every day. The rate of high capacity road constructions is excessive: in the last ten years we have gone, *grosso modo*, from 500 to 1,000 kms of motorways and highways. Far from improving the traffic situation, these new infrastructures have caused a significant calling effect and thus, more people choose to use the car as transportation every day, and congestion keeps on growing.

Certainly, there have also been important investments in public transportation, of which we should highlight the significant extension of the metro (subway) towards the Southern part of the metropolitan area, within the project known as MetroSur (41 new kilometres of metro). However, these investments have been made without a sustainable mobility plan, without contrasting the different alternatives (there were other options, cheaper and more efficient), with the main purpose of being able to state by election day that more kilometres of metro had been built during this term than in any other previous term, and generating a great debt that will be dragged along during many years to come. The data confirms the situation we describe: during 2004, car traffic in Madrid increased 4%, versus a 1% increase in the use of public transportation.

Far from dealing with this situation, the Government in the Comunidad de Madrid and Madrid City Hall is fixated on building new highways (completing the M-50, new radial R-1...) or on separating or extending the ones that already exist. These actions are being carried out, in most of the cases, avoiding the valuation of the environmental impact by using different tricks, which are often fraudulent, and which, unfortunately, are successful most of the time due to the inefficiency and insensibility of our judicial system when it comes to environmental matters. As an example, it will be enough to take a look at the resolution of the State Council which validates the City Hall's version that argued that there was no need to evaluate the environmental impact of extending the M-30 since this motorway is a street. It is, certainly, a very unique street, fenced all along, with up to 12 lanes in some stretches, with speed limits of 90 km/h, without pedestrian crossings, without sidewalks, without access to houses, without public transport...

This precise project, the extension of the M-30, is one of the most representative and worrying ones regarding the current situation in Madrid, and it shows the extent to which the quality of life of a whole city is sacrificed in order to favour car transit. It is also the project encountering the most social opposition. Let us, therefore, review some of its characteristics.

The City Major, Ruiz-Gallardón, “sold” the project very well during the previous electoral campaign: most of the madrileños thought he was going to bury the M-30, which actually totals 32 kms. In reality, however, the truth was that cars would only “disappear” from the surface in the stretch that runs parallel to the Manzanares river. Certainly, the project entailed a brutal extension: since no more road could fit at ground level, the solution was to bury it. However, and this part was well hidden by the Major, the rest of the belt motorway would be kept at ground level, with the only exception of the mentioned stretch of 6 kms along the river. It is worth mentioning that 40 kms of tunnels are being built, in some cases with 4 lanes on each direction.

The budget for this highly counterproductive extension (since it will allow the circulation of an additional 200,000 cars in Madrid) is astronomical: 5 billion euros, which is equivalent to the annual City Hall budget. To make matters worse, the debt will be payable over the next 35 years, i.e., it will be the following municipal governments the ones that will have to deal with this squandering, diminishing their capacity of investment in any other area.

Thus, since the objective is to inaugurate everything before the Municipal elections in May 2007, we find ourselves with a city where 70 major works are taking place simultaneously. It must be said that not all of them belong to the extension of the M-30, but most of them do. Pollution, noise, dust, inconveniences and insecurity for pedestrians, inconveniences for users of public transport, traffic jams and public areas lacking all vegetation are all part of the current typical scenery of our city.

Indeed, among many other problems, the works surrounding the M-30 have meant the cutting down of 15,000 trees, and the "move" or "displacement" (the euphemism used in municipal documents for these moves) of another 6,700 of them, move that almost always ends up in the death of the tree. In other words, as many trees as there are in the Retiro Park have been cut down or have seen their death postponed.

Resistances

From the beginning of the term, a group of social, ecological, labour union, political, neighbour... organizations have come together to form the M-30 Platform: No More Cars (. At the beginning, our message has found a clear boycott from the media, to whom it is always difficult to criticize any measure which favours the use of the car due of the important source of advertising supported by the car industry. Our rationale was neither understood nor listened to: most of the citizens of Madrid still believed that the M-30 was going to disappear under the ground.

However, by the time cranes and diggers have taken over the city, different groups of neighbour opposition have appeared, and more and more people joined our discourse. At the same time, the demagoguery of the Municipal bodies of "improvement, modernization and recuperation of the city" has been unmasked. Two major events have mobilized neighbours: the first one- strengthened by the events that took place in El Carmel, Barcelona- has been the fear regarding the stability of their homes in light of the great number of tunnels running under them (in some cases, less than 2 meters from the foundations). The other mobilizing force has come from the already mentioned massive cutting down of trees, and the destruction of green areas due to the works.

Neighbours who fought, fifteen years ago, to keep the acacias on their street when the project of an underground parking garage was suggested, wrestled and were controlled by the police when they were now trying to prevent their cutting down because of the M-30. Neighbourhoods with very few green areas, such as Arganzuela, Legazpi or Carabanchel, have seen their parks being literally devastated by machinery. Neighbour mobilization has been very significant in some areas in which, for the last several months, hundreds of neighbours gather up every week to prevent this destruction of the green areas.

Since a few months ago, anyone buying a newspaper in the capital will find inside its pages, in the section of letters to the editor, the protests of citizens who are infuriated with the events taking place: neighbourhoods enclosed by the works, almost impossible pedestrian access to some areas (and we won't even mention in the case of having some kind of disability), systematic breaking of the municipal law on noise by the very City Hall, indiscriminate tree cutting, and in many cases done at night to avoid protests, or the lack of possible defence against the aggressions are some of the most recurrent claims.

Much of this unhappiness has been channelled through the M-30 Platform: No More Cars, who has devised a great number of activities and initiatives. Among them we should mention a couple of demonstrations in the centre of Madrid to which thousands of people turned up. The mottos and manifestos in these demonstrations clearly show an important change in people's perception: against the official discourse which equates new infrastructures to welfare and development, the demonstrators ask for a more humane city, with less cars, purer air, more parks and green areas, and more investments in those areas that really represent a clear improvement in the quality of life: better health services, education, social services etc.

Another group which is gaining more and more importance in Madrid lately is the Forum for Sustainable Mobility of the Region of Madrid (Foro por la Movilidad Sostenible de la Comunidad de Madrid), which is made up of all the groups that constitute the M-30 Platform as well as others, like the consumer associations, retired people's associations, etc. This Forum is working for a comfortable Community, with less traffic congestion, in which public transport is encouraged so that all people may

have an autonomous life and universal accessibility, where those modes of transportation which are less aggressive with the environment become more important; working for a healthy Community, with less noise and less atmospheric pollution, a Community that favours healthy behaviours by its citizens; for a habitable Community, where public places such as streets or squares are not dominated by vehicles; and for a participating Community, where decisions imply an information process and consulting the citizens.

The main project in which this Forum is currently centred is to achieve the participatory planning of a necessary and urgent plan of sustainable mobility for the Community of Madrid.