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Approaches to Collective Cognition in the Historic Centre of Madrid: An Erasmus Interdisciplinary Experience

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Abstract: Beyond their direct use, buildings and heritage places are objects and settings which help to guide community actions. Cognitive perception systems interact directly with the built environment through action and generate experiences that will be used for subsequent actions. This requires a reorientation towards phenomenological perspectives that query the conceptual boundary between cognition and action. Five universities from three countries (Portugal, Italy, and Spain) came together in July 2023 through an Erasmus+ BIP (Blended Intense Programme) experience, developed for the La Latina neighbourhood, in the historical centre of Madrid. The intention was to highlight the importance of different disciplines, and interdisciplinary working, for planning an urban future which includes the goals of socio-economic and environmental sustainability, happiness, and the right of residents to maintain longstanding emotional connections with their neighbourhoods. The novelty of this experience compared to existing Master's and PhD programmes in Europe was the early and intense contact of students with the subject through the development of fieldwork over two weeks. This was led by teachers from different disciplines to provide interdisciplinary perspectives for a training programme which included architecture, urbanism, urban anthropology, geography, history, and archaeology. Through this training, the intended outcomes were twofold: to equip students with the necessary knowledge and criteria to critically address these issues and to raise awareness among local stakeholders about the negative transformations affecting historic centres and their impact on residents' quality of life.

Keywords: Erasmus+; built heritage; heritage communities; La Latina; gentrification; Madrid; collective cognition

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1. Introduction

Prior to the advent of late modernity, the preservation and safeguarding of material heritage relied on the integration of heritage into community consciousness [1]. The importance of engaging local communities in this process has also been emphasized by the Charter for the Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas [2]. Furthermore, active community participation has played a crucial role in supporting tourism development and managing heritage conservation efforts [3,4]. This is because a strong sense of belonging and comprehensive local knowledge enables communities to coexist harmoniously with the unique assets of their regions, which are increasingly appreciated for their distinctiveness [5]. The Faro Convention (COE 2005) was instrumental in explicitly introducing the concept of "heritage communities" and advocating for a people-centred approach to heritage [6]. Nowadays, however, the globally dominant economic ideology of neoliberalism opposes the interests of local people and favours those of speculators and bureaucrats, subjugating the lives of residents to impersonal imperatives under the guise of improvement and development [7,8].

This paper presents an experience of teaching (supported by an Erasmus+ programme) that was focused on understanding the importance of an interdisciplinary approach when studying a city. This study aims to present the goals of this Erasmus+ experience, which sought to understand the relationship between the different roles of neighbourhood places over time and how the emotional bonds associated with them were developed by residents. Particular attention is given to the effects of touristification, gentrification, and the intensity of leisure activities on transforming the social tissue and essence of places and the associated impacts on their historical communities (understood as land-, use-, and place-based associations in the traditional sense). This is founded on the understanding that knowledge is polyhedral and enriched by the confluence of different perspectives, which in turn strengthen joint action by communities. This approach enables a consideration of the different perspectives which are present in public spaces, providing a broader view of reality. The experience implied that a re-evaluation of practices which might normally be taken for granted should be conducted, as well as one of norms and management styles.

Five universities from three countries (Portugal, Italy, and Spain) participated in this Erasmus+ BIP, whose lecturers brought an interdisciplinary perspective to the training. The aim was to put into practice the combination of the methodological logics of architecture, urban planning, urban anthropology, and other relevant social and human sciences. To this end, it was proposed to work on the historic centre of Madrid, as this was a suitable area for the application of this methodological logic. This association made it possible to guarantee learning results by investigating questions such as convergences in space and time, the speeds and temporalities of the city, permanence and reinvention, and the narratives and symbolic values that underlie the identities of a neighbourhood. This concept was then tested through a specific case study, an examination of Madrid's La Latina neighbourhood.

Students were first taught to examine without prejudice the rationality behind certain activities that take place in a given community, in order to avoid them becoming discontinuity agents, and to be able to proceed with an awareness of existing dynamics before undertaking action in any place or location.

Although experiences like this have already been undertaken and analysed (see [9,10]), there are still few experiences that combine architecture and social sciences, i.e., the tangible and the intangible when studying cities in an intensive period. Most of the scholars investigating urban matters with the assistance of Erasmus students use them as social actors to understand urban dynamics [9,11] rather than focussing on the educational experience itself. However, there are some studies that have highlighted the interdisciplinary approaches on the study of the city [12] and also the importance of its didactical dimension [13].

This paper is organized into four main sections. In the first, the question is explored of how the connections of the local community mind work, in particular with regard to the cognitive processes of bonding with places. In the following section, the neighbourhood place aspects of the area of study are examined before moving to the next, where the methodology used in the Erasmus+ experience is presented. The fourth section presents an analysis of the experience, provided by the outcomes of the students who participated across their different fields of knowledge together with a critical analysis by the teaching staff involved. The final thoughts are presented at the end.

2. Theoretical Framework

The connection of individuals with the built environment is more than simply a function of experience, but it also represents how people construct their own identities, through a mixture and interaction between their past histories and place or places of residence. The images and forms of heritage environments generate feelings of security and trust known as ontological security; that is to say, they maintain trust (in the form of confidence and belief) in the continuity of the past, present, and future while connecting this trust with routine social practices [14–17]. In this way, the physical environment continues to embody and represent the memories of the community. These collective memories vary in people's individual memories according to gender, age, and education or training [18]. As Debray emphasizes, there is an indissolution of matters considered material and immaterial [19]. The material level of form transmitting is necessary to inform the physical world by manufacturing consultable stores of externalized memory through available technologies, such as conserving, inscribing, inventorying, and distributing recorded traces of cultural expression. In architecture, these are usually conveyed through engravings, reliefs, and paintings on façades and by the buildings themselves [19]. Meanings are created as the direct products of a continuing cycle between humans and the environment [20]. A nodal point appears where materialized organization and organized matter interact [19], and the built environment becomes corporeally absorbed into our behaviour in the pre-reflexive and mechanically repetitive forms of cultural praxis. It is imposed on us in a materially objectivized form by our spaces and buildings, which have become a compendium of meaningful signs and symbols (acting as orientation schemata [21]) and which incorporate routinized networks. In other words, the cultural construction of space comprises not only organized space, but in a real sense, it also represents the spatial relationships between objects and their relative positions. At the same time, the inclusion of subjects implies that there is information about those using and occupying those spaces as well. It is not about simple associations. Instead, they consist of cultural schemata that are both process and structure; that is, they combine the organization and relative disposition of physical elements with the approach, sequence, and succession of behaviours or elements in relation to an end [21].

Cultural practices have the potential to elicit feelings of "being at home" while generating a sense of community [22]. They are symbolic actions that transmit and represent the values and sense of order that keep a community cohesive, generating a community without communication. They transform "being in the world" into "being at home" [23]. Conducting things in unison carries the message that the community exists [24] and maintains control of its environment. In fact, studies have demonstrated that ritual actions can increase the feelings of control when people are faced with dilemmas or uncertain situations [25,26]. According to Yin Keli [27], cultural practices directly enhance the perceptions of control, while symbolic meaning also enhances perceived control through the mediation of positive emotions. In fact, these meanings and practices promote more participatory experiences while enhancing the enjoyment and pleasure of consumption [28], imbuing it

with a sense of comfort derived from practices which remind individuals that they belong to something that is larger than themselves [29].

Therefore, through the built environment, materialized organizations (such as institutions) can set out and establish communitarian arrangements, namely the diverse forms of group cohesion that bring together the human agents of particular transmissions [19]. Paradoxically, the explicit identification or classification of "heritage environments" represents a fetishized memory of material forms, presenting a facticity which causes us to overlook the origins, processes, and activities of how and why these environments were built in the first place [19]. This becomes visible in narrative testimonies, when people use a passive construction that indicates an official history [30,31].

In order to understand the range and complexity of the qualitative functions that public spaces should offer in today's society, we must also consider the new functions of urban spaces. These urban spaces are increasingly important as a form of therapy, as a "shock absorber", and as a place of social encounter to channel and mitigate the growing potential for aggressiveness and depression for a series of groups in our society, in relation to hard-to-solve problems such as unemployment, immigration, the increasing proportion of the elderly in European cities, and the increasing problem of unwanted loneliness in urban areas. These groups are not homogeneous, but they are united by some characteristics warranting attention, in particular a surplus of free time coupled with limited economic resources [18]. The observations made show that analysing the treatment of free time in the social sciences is obligatory; it must be analysed both in its traditional form, as recounted in the testimonies of interviews with local residents, and by working at the point where society starts to stigmatize this free time, which must, nevertheless, occupy real space in society.

In this context, growing pressures on heritage communities and neighbourhoods associated with the dynamics of urban gentrification and touristification have become particularly intense in the recent past [32]. Gentrification is understood in multiple ways. However, in debates about gentrification, an increasing emphasis has been placed on the relationship between socio-economic processes (such as the uneven circulation of capital and class dynamics) and aesthetic and physical changes in housing stock, the transformation of national heritage, searches for specific lifestyles and identity creation, and even emotional and affective issues [33]. Thus, the meaning of the term remains fluid and far from univocal, having been generated by variegated geographies of gentrification [32,34]. For this paper, however, it is important to understand the perspectives regarding new forms of political struggle over space, interlaced with the socio-spatial configurations produced within contemporary capitalism. Understanding the way in which this is culturally practiced in communities is key to working in historic environments. To achieve the teaching of this goal, the pedagogical approach of this Erasmus+ BIP was drawn based on two key characteristics: interdisciplinarity and practice-oriented education.

The implementation of interdisciplinarity in a short-term programme was based on the idea of raising awareness and recognition among students of the importance of generalist qualities, because being an effective specialist requires more than just deep knowledge in a narrow area. It involves the ability to link specialized knowledge to broader issues [35]. Students should understand that working in an urban environment involves learning from different viewpoints regarding urban development problems, that every discipline has its own value for understanding and offering definitions and solutions to these problems, and that monodisciplinary perspectives rarely deliver solutions without any negative effects [13]. However, according to Snellen [36], different rationales could be epistemologically impossible when it comes to integrating these perspectives completely. This is why practical experience in working with different disciplines forces the development of the

reflective skills needed to effectively understand the difficulties of generating integrated solutions, both in general practice and in addressing touristification in historical centres. At the same time, case-driven education supports students in situated learning, where the emphasis is on the learning environment and the social aspects within it, an approach which leads to activities that are considered "authentic" [37]. This involves a highly active learning approach, where principles and materials are absorbed, integrated, and then applied to new situations [38].

3. The Historical Background of the La Latina Neighbourhood in Madrid

The La Latina neighbourhood, situated in the heart of the Spanish capital Madrid, traces its origins back to the medieval period. La Latina's story begins with its name, honouring Beatriz Galindo, known as "La Latina", a renowned 15th-century scholar, humanist, and educator [39]. However, the neighbourhood's history predates this era, dating back to the Islamic period when it was part of the Muslim citadel that stood where the Royal Palace now resides. After the Christian Reconquista, the area was gradually resettled by Christians, evolving into a small community.

During the Middle Ages, La Latina thrived as a bustling marketplace and a hub for artisans, merchants, and Jewish and Moorish communities. Its strategic location near the river Manzanares and the presence of the Puente de Toledo (Toledo Bridge) contributed to its commercial significance. The neighbourhood flourished, witnessing the construction of churches, convents, and noble residences, shaping its architectural character.

However, a significant turning point occurred in the 16th and 17th centuries when the area faced a decline due to epidemics and economic downturns. This decline led to the exodus of nobility, and the neighbourhood gradually became a working-class district. The shift in demographics and economic status laid the groundwork for La Latina's transformation and re-emergence as a vibrant, culturally diverse area.

During the 20th century, La Latina experienced urban redevelopment initiatives, particularly during the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco, which aimed to modernize and reshape parts of Madrid. Despite these changes, La Latina retained its unique historical essence.

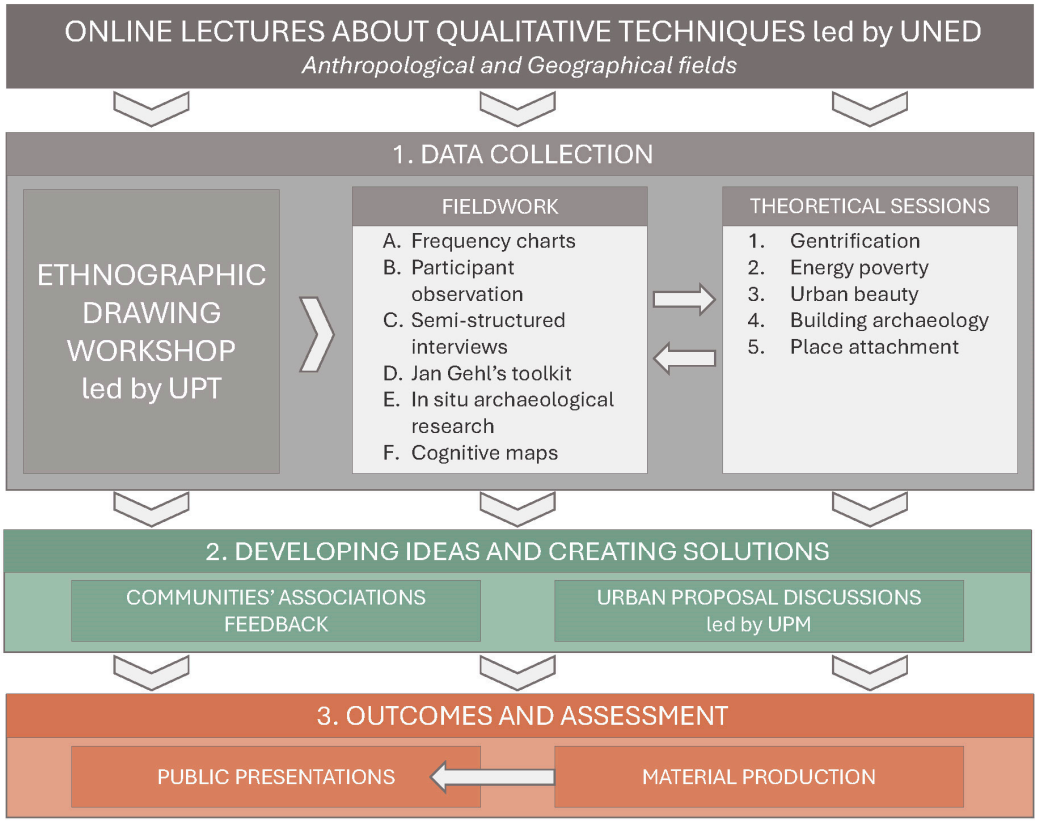
Beyond characteristics such as its gastronomic allure, La Latina is home to significant landmarks, including the San Francisco el Grande Basilica, a magnificent example of Spanish Baroque architecture, and the Plaza de la Cebada, a historic square that has witnessed various transformations throughout the centuries [40].

In recent years, the area of La Latina has undergone an intense process of transformation and gentrification, attracting a diverse community; reinforcing the presence of leisure activity; and becoming a hotspot for culture, arts, and nightlife [41]. This case study offers an insight into the changing perceptions of the local community over time. Its present-day concerns can be summarized as follows: failure to comply with opening hours by nightclubs and bar and restaurant terraces; the lack of street cleaning and failure to comply with the garbage pickup schedule; premises used as STRs (short-term rentals) without certificates of habitability; issues with noise (street music with sound amplifiers and percussion); the over-occupation of public spaces by restaurant and bar terraces; the replacement of ground-floor business premises with tourist apartments; a heavy increase in apartment rent; the loss of local populations; and an increased need for Municipal Police (neighbourhood police) patrols. Some of the problems mentioned stem directly from the increasing number of tourists and the conversion of the old city centre of Madrid into an area of restaurants, bars, and leisure uses [42], while others must be seen as the result of the changing occupants of the neighbourhood. All this is resulting in the loss of the

neighbourhood character of the La Latina area and the feeling of the loss of identity on the part of its residents.

4. Methods

The Erasmus+ educational plan was structured around three main functions, diagnostic, formative, and summative [43], in its approach to working in the city. The diagnostic phase focused on identifying knowledge about the place through various techniques drawn from diverse disciplines (see Scheme 1). These methods provided a robust set of perspectives set within the same context, enabling the generation of a broader and more comprehensive description of reality. Through this program, we achieved a deeper understanding of the existing connections between heritage places and their inhabitants, as well as the critical importance of this relationship for the quality of life. Qualitative techniques from anthropology (interviews and participant observation), geography (cognitive mapping and frequency charts), in situ archaeological research, freehand drawings, and Jan Gehl's toolkit mapping were combined to obtain these insights.



Scheme 1. Educational methodology. Source: self-development.

Ethnography, involving participant observation and interviews, focused on analysing the semiotic keys which would allow students to decipher the varied backgrounds obtained from a place in order to develop a more conscious analytical perspective. Interviews were deemed a critical part of the methodology, aimed at extracting the intersubjectivity of spatial matters. In this way, it was possible to study the meanings behind the public life produced by individuals and their relationship to public spaces [44]. In the collection of testimonies, the perception of change in the time axis and proposals for improvement were investigated from a bottom-up philosophy. This was because it was based on the thesis that local residents had a valuable role in the process of citizen participation with respect to creating a vision for improvement in the study area (which must increasingly coexist with

mass tourism and increased levels of tourism accommodation). The aim was to demonstrate the integral value in using the perceptive, the sensorial, and the emotional dimensions as fundamental chains of expression that must be considered before progressing towards the proposal phase of architectural/urban work.

Also, in addition to these useful qualitative tools, we taught the students Erving Goffman's approach [45], which makes a distinction between what he terms "back" and "front" regions. Front regions are those social areas where people feel the need to construct performances and manage impressions in front of an audience. Back regions, by contrast, are those places where individuals can more easily relax, be themselves, and suspend contrived representations [46]. In this sense, it was important to convey that every field research activity involves the presence of the researcher in the actions of the people being observed.

Freehand drawing helps us to observe and see more deeply. In fact, all kinds of drawings enhance the understanding of the physical world as more than a composition of completed objects but rather as part of an unfolding cultural process interwoven with actions and articulating behaviours (Ingold cited in [47]). Kuschnir [48] in particular highlighted the importance of incorporating ethnographic drawings into anthropological research, through a review of the most significant authors of traditional anthropology.

However, drawing as a tool is hardly discussed in contemporary ethnographic manuals, with the exception, as mentioned earlier, of the cognitive maps created, in this case, by the interviewees, not by the researchers. Within the context of this project, drawings were created by the student researchers during the research phase, rather than simply at the proposal phase which is much more common amongst architects.

Last but not least, Jan Gehl's Mapping toolkit emphasizes the observation and documentation of how people interact with their surroundings, including the patterns of movement, social interactions, and stationary activities. This toolkit incorporates quantitative and qualitative metrics to assess factors such as accessibility, comfort, safety, and sociability.

However, in order to carry out the fieldwork, the creation of a field guide was necessary, enabling students to establish a filter for understanding the fundamentals which shaped the worldview of this location. Therefore, different theoretical sessions were set up dealing with concepts such as gentrification, energy poverty, urban beauty [49], building archaeology, and place attachment.

The formative phase was carried out during the two weeks of on-site interaction, where corrections were made, questions clarified, and observations refined in real time. This phase involved contributions from professors across multiple disciplines, compelling students to continuously think from different perspectives. This dynamic approach effectively regulated the learning process and fostered the development of the educational project [50]. Finally, the summative phase culminated in the production of written and graphic documentation, which was presented publicly. This final output served as a synthesis of the entire process, showcasing the integration of disciplinary insights and the educational outcomes of the project.

This training was aimed at students interested in reflecting on the new challenges arising from recent socio-cultural and economic phenomena that materialise in the public realm and spaces of the city, particularly in the historic centres. For this, it was paramount to explore the urban conditions and physical context which underpin and form part of socio-cultural structures. In particular, an attempt was made to overcome the difficulties of giving a voice to local people and residents by providing the future professionals who will work in these areas with a broader perspective supported by the interdisciplinarity of different fields of knowledge and allowing factors which are significant for the local communities (who are being served) to be captured. The difference between "space" and "place" was a key concern that guided this experience.

Students learned to use diagnostic tools and techniques that augment and complement the results of the ethnographic method, and they used them to make proposals for action in the public and symbolic space of the historic centre.

The objective of the discipline of architecture is to produce or provide solutions to problems of space, but Omahna [51] argues that anthropology focuses on understanding the causes in specific problems. Considering the dynamics of both disciplines, the issue is to seek different kinds of a common form of expression in order to successfully work with the subjective perception of the dialectic between people's habitual capabilities and that of constructed space [51]. Regarding the link between the two fields of architecture and anthropology, Omahna [52] lists a series of synergic issues which include the following: research on historical buildings and urban landscapes that indicates the process of socio-cultural change; constructive typologies and the organization of space; the culture of building in itself; and, finally, the use of space by social agents and institutions which, according to "the logics of their specific practices in relation to the space provoke changes in it" [52] (p. 41).

Promoting the understanding of the synergy between architecture and anthropology establishes the use of reflection as a process of knowing a place as a means of better understanding the worldview of the communities who live there [53]. This is why the development of a diagnostic methodology based on ethnography was proposed as a method of microcosm research of particular value to architects entering into the proactive field of architecture. The particular relevance of the ethnographic method is that its use provides a tool for identifying and capturing the various issues which must be addressed with urban regeneration projects. These range from specific issues related to the direct orders or requirements of individual clients to other variables related to the community such as touristification. Importantly, it should not be forgotten that individual processes continue to be social, since they always originate from a social reference [54]. In this way, we aimed to transmit to our students that environmental knowledge is "constructed" in the sense that individuals invent models which enable them to both understand and deal with reality. The nature of the structures or models that are developed by individuals determines what that individual "sees" in the real world. It was very important for students to realise the existence of several realities, which in a certain way are layers that overlap each other. It was also important to transmit to the group that knowledge results from interaction between factors internal to the individual (needs, personality, motivation) and by the social situations in which that person is operating. This means that the implicit knowledge of local residents built up through goal-oriented activities (e.g., shopping, going to work) constituted important dynamics which students needed to be aware of in their practice of data collection [45].

However, a common problem which emerges in the use of qualitative techniques is "researcher bias", and trying to neutralize distorting biases was one of the essential aims of this experience. Objectivity in ethnography, if it exists, focuses on the choice of strategy employed by the researcher. From an interactive and cognitive perspective, there is not a single cultural reality, and it must be recognized and understood that there may instead be different cultural realities [53]. The key is not to lose sight of the intrinsic logics, rhythms, and/or tendencies toward disassociation and division which often occur as dominant patterns in cities.

Starting from this principle, one of the objectives pursued was to reduce the production of data informed or influenced by the principles, beliefs, and values in which students have been endo-cultured as social agents, in order to recognize and then overcome cultural relativism. In seeking a position of relative objectivity, the proposed ethnography worked with a series of related techniques and different sources, as well as borrowing from human

geography (frequency charts, cognitive maps, stress levels, the social eye, etc.) [55]. Together with techniques from the field of urbanism and archaeology, this enabled the triangulation of data, providing internal validity to this method while acknowledging that external validation is not possible, given that this is not allowed for by qualitative work [56].

In addition to the aforementioned quality mechanism, objectivity was also ensured by having several researchers working in the same place so that this study was carried out by more than one student. This ensured that there were re-studies of the same place, enabling the accumulation of individual biases to annul one another and ensuring a better and closer understanding of what is conceived as objectivity.

After developing an integrated diagnosis [57], the students made the leap to the propositional sphere, where they proposed actions aimed at the public interest and the collective quality of life of residents, as well as to the maintenance of their traditions, identity, and memory, seeking to make them compatible with economic activity (tourism, hospitality, etc.). All this was developed from a logic where sustainability, equitable resilience, and progress towards recognition and response to ecological imperatives were at the heart of the proposals. Moreover, this training was developed in full alignment with the Urban Agenda for the European Union, the United Nations 2030 Agenda, and the Spanish Urban Agenda.

5. The Erasmus+ Experience

The group involved with this project comprised 22 students, including 10 Portuguese, 5 Spanish, and 7 Italian students and those from various disciplines, including 11 geography students, 7 anthropology students, 1 archaeology student, 2 architecture students, and 1 urban planning student.

The experience began with the creation of interdisciplinary groups of different nationalities and fields of knowledge (mainly comprising five students) to carry out the work of analysis and the development of an urban micro-project of soft regeneration that would address the problems of the different public spaces of La Latina in the Palacio neighbourhood. The overall area was divided into sub-areas formed by Plaza de la Paja, Plaza de Puerta de Moros, and Plaza Lina Morgan + Plaza de la Cebada. The particular areas analysed included the streets that interconnected the plazas mentioned: Costanilla de San Andrés, Carrera de San Francisco, Calle Toledo, and Calle del Humilladero (see Figure 1).

The aim of this study, from an anthropological perspective, was to focus on the testimonies of individual and collective memories, working on the feeling of belonging with respect to the different places that made up the study area intersected with an analysis of the current situation of its public spaces in terms of use and dynamics. This study was based on the concept of the "vital place" as a resource of well-being, personal security, and mental health for individuals and the concept of the "city of proximity".

Although the students received instruction on the ethnographic method and techniques via PowerPoints coupled with comments in a shared online space, the first week of activity was used for four online classes to introduce the teaching team and the group of students from the three countries. In these classes, the unit of study and the application of the techniques to the specific terrain where the fieldwork was going to be carried out were presented (see Scheme 1) [55].

Data collection began with a workshop on the use of drawing. These drawings helped students internalize the proportions, materials, and architectural language characteristic of the La Latina neighbourhood (see Figure 2). Through the use of this tool, they identified and explored the neighbourhood's character of narrow, winding streets and historic buildings with façades of brick and stone, wrought iron balconies, and tiled roofs, which collectively create a cohesive urban fabric. They were also able to analyse public space in terms of

aesthetics, urban scene, scale, structure, the presence of vegetation and street furniture, the presence of bar terraces, bioclimatic conditions, activities (or lack of crucial activities supportive of daily life) on the ground floor of buildings facing public spaces, etc. The fieldwork also entailed the mapping of the main public facilities in the area (markets, schools, centres for the elderly, etc.) and the presence of cars in the public spaces (circulating or parked).

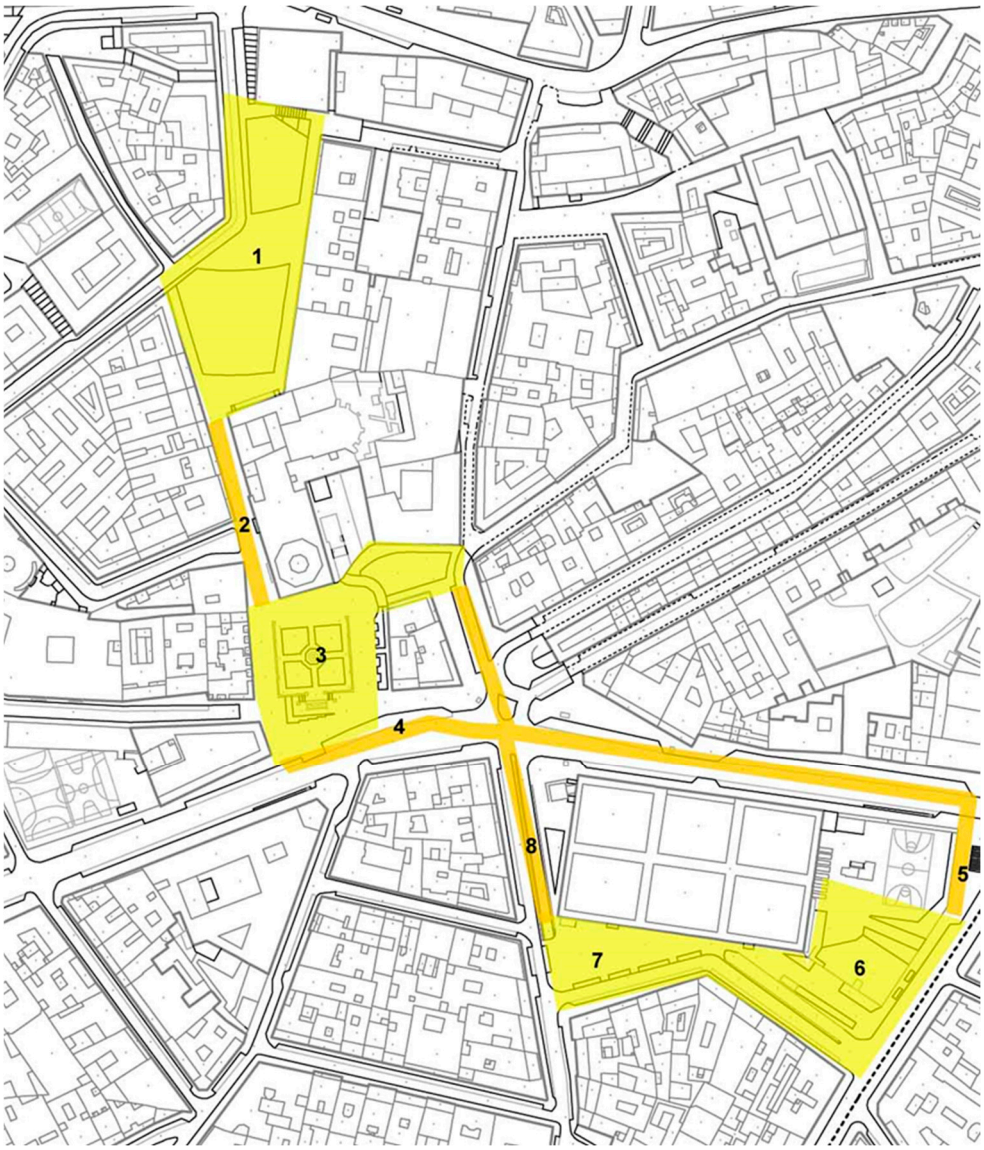


Figure 1. Study areas of La Latina, Madrid. (1) Plaza de la Paja, (2) Costanilla de San Andrés, (3) Plaza de Puerta de Moros, (4) Carrera de San Francisco, (5) Calle Toledo, (6) Plaza Lina Morgan, (7) Plaza de la Cebada, (8) Calle del Humilladero. Source: self-produced course material.

Also, from the outset, the student groups carried out combined tasks which included the creation of frequency charts, participant observation, and writing in field diaries for their assigned study areas. In this way, they were able to integrate information from different sources and create a basis for what would, from then on, be their growing empirical material and at the same time their knowledge base for formulating questions to enable them to carry out semi-structured interviews.

A particular characteristic of the neighbourhood is its dualistic nature—during the day, its public squares, such as Plaza de la Cebada and Plaza de la Paja, provide public

space for the daily life of local people, while at night, the area transforms into a lively social scene with tapas bars and terraces (see Figure 3).

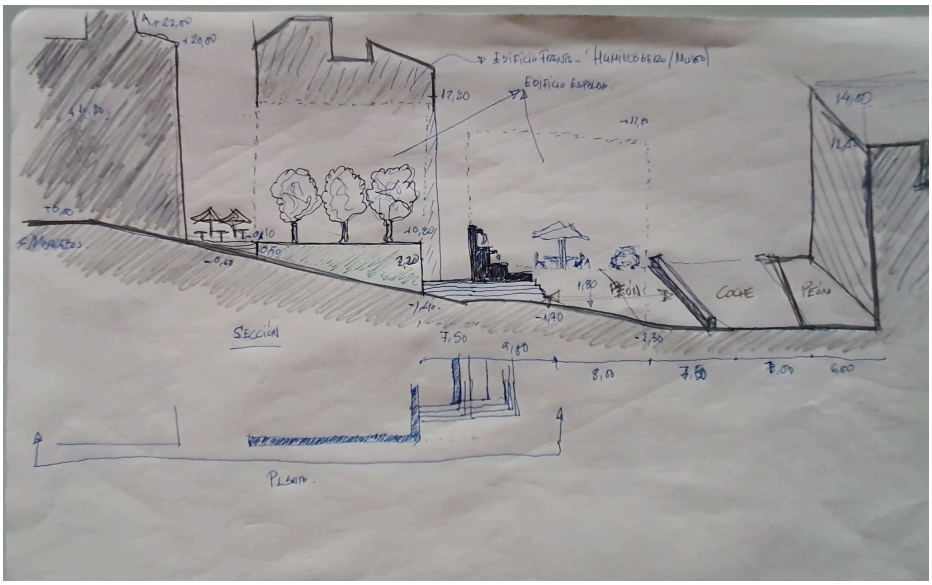


Figure 2. Hand drawing. Source: Valiño, J.

Figure 3. Daytime and evening activities at the Plaza de la Paja. Source: Azevedo, C.; Giach E.; Gomes E.; Niccoli, M.; Bartoli, T.; and Usón Gasca, T.

The toolkit developed by Jan Gehl for the diagnosis of public life was used [58] for gathering data on the age, gender, and flow of people who frequented the study area and the physical characteristics of spaces and how they enrich the experience of those spending time there.

Additionally, this toolkit also revealed that private furniture for bar terraces in the squares, such as tables, chairs, and umbrellas, varies significantly throughout the day. For instance, in the Plaza de la Paja at 10 a.m., it is possible that no furniture might be seen, while by 10:10 a.m., more than 20 tables and 40 chairs from various establishments may have been set up (see Figure 4). While there are also public seating areas, by contrast, these are often unkempt and neglected.

Pedestrian movement predominantly occurs along the edges of the squares, especially during the hottest part of the day, as the centres lack shade. This study also revealed

the limited presence of children, likely due to the end of the school term. In fact, the majority of individuals aged 15 to 24 observed in the squares were tourists accompanied by their parents. Adults aged 25 to 64, however, represented the largest group (comprising similar proportions of men and women), either strolling through the square or seated at bar terraces, and they were made up of both residents and tourists. People aged 65 and older were frequently seen sitting on benches or walking their dogs, with this group consisting primarily of local residents (see Figure 5).

Figure 4. Jan Gehl's mapping. Source: Azevedo, C.; Giach E.; Gomes E.; Niccoli, M.; Bartoli, T.; and Usón Gasca, T.

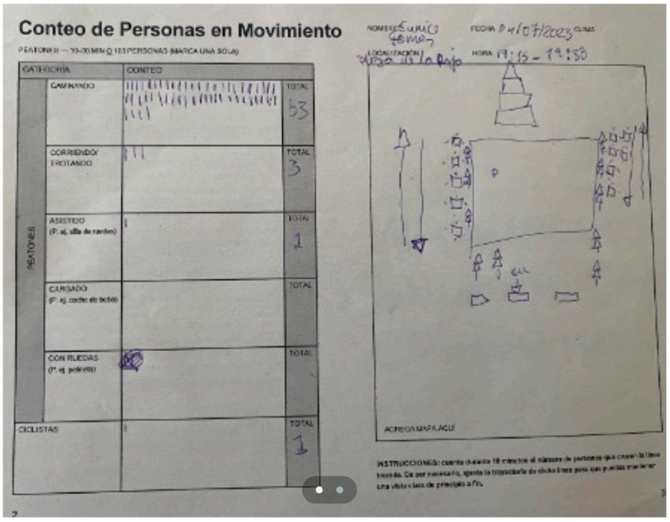


Figure 5. Jan Gehl's mapping. Source: Azevedo, C.; Giach E.; Gomes E.; Niccoli, M.; Bartoli, T.; and Usón Gasca, T.

Simultaneously, the fieldwork incorporated the idea of a lived-in past that remained imbricated in the new uses and contemporary objects of the urban spaces studied. Through exercises of observation and interpretation, the team explored how the past emerged in the palimpsest of uses by residents, tourists, and others. This enabled the students to develop an appreciation of the timespans over which the transformations had taken place, aimed principally at revealing how cultural heritage could support the suggestion of improvements being designed as part of the project [59].

The interviews were conducted with workers, residents, and institutional representatives, and they revealed significant insights into the neighbourhood's transformation due

to gentrification and touristification. They reflected how residents occupied, used, and related to their places throughout the year, above all regarding the people who have lived in this area for decades. The narrative recognized and recorded places and landmarks that were part of these people's entire lives, which they shared with parents and grandparents and now with their own children. Among these memories were the public swimming pool that once stood at the intersection of Plaza de la Cebada and Calle de Toledo, which has now been substituted by a modern sports centre, and the vibrant local shops that once characterized Calle de Cava Baja (now completely transformed into a street for restaurants and bars). Recollections also referenced popular festivals and personal routines, such as Sunday walks, social gatherings, and recreational activities, all of which have contributed to the rich and evolving identity of the neighbourhood.

Workers in local restaurants and bars consistently highlighted the dominance of tourists among their clientele, with estimates ranging from 70% to 80%. Nonetheless, some businesses continue to attract local residents, especially on weekends or through offerings tailored to neighbourhood preferences. Despite the economic benefits, many workers noted that the increasing presence of tourists is contributing to the gradual erosion of the neighbourhood's identity. This sentiment was echoed in observations about gentrification, which has significantly altered the demographic and social fabric of La Latina.

> *'Nos afecta mucho el tema de los pisos turísticos ya que no se ponen en funcionamiento de acuerdo a la normativa y han subido mucho el precio de pisos y alquileres.'*
>
> *'We are very affected by the issue of tourist flats, as they are not being put into operation in accordance with the regulations and the prices of flats and rents have risen a lot.'*
>
> (Resident 55 years old)

Also, institutional representatives, such as the director of the Santa Bárbara Institute, pointed out that the local population has declined and aged, with many residents converting their homes into short-term rental apartments for higher profits. This trend has severely impacted local schools, which now rely on students commuting from other districts, such as Lavapiés and Carabanchel, with approximately 80% of their attendees coming from outside La Latina.

On the other hand, residents' perceptions of these changes are mixed. While some older residents feel unaffected, younger and middle-aged respondents acknowledge both positive and negative aspects of the neighbourhood's evolution. They praise La Latina's charm and its ability to retain a sense of community but expressed concerns about issues such as noise, odours, and the rising cost of housing driven by unregulated tourist apartments.

Another local stakeholder, however, the religious institution Hermanitas del Cordero, has experienced distinct and nuanced effects. For instance, it has benefitted significantly from the influx of tourists, as the increased visits to the Capilla have provided funding for its restoration. They regard this as an opportunity to extend their mission and breathe new vitality into their space. This dynamic, often subtly interwoven with contemporary elements, highlighted how touristification not only engages with the rich historical legacy of La Latina but also influences the preservation and reinterpretation of that heritage. Consequently, it demanded thoughtful consideration in the site analysis to balance historical conservation with evolving uses.

In summary, the interviews revealed the complexity involved in intervening in historic centres in order to find integrated solutions. They also highlighted the importance of avoiding monodisciplinary perspectives as they rarely deliver solutions without negative effects.

The sessions with the three neighbourhood associations, followed by a walk in the Parque de la Cornisa with one of these, were strategic. The first took place in the Municipal Public Library Iván de Vargas, located on the border of the study area (see Figure 6). The

representatives of the Neighbourhood Associations Plaza Mayor and Cavas-La Latina provided a historical framework for the area studied, and information on the evolution of neighbourhood participation in struggles against new problems was shared. These included issues arising from malaise and the declining quality of life in the area where we carried out our research, with some of the most important problems mapped being the prevalence of tourist apartments, the touristification of the area, and the intensive use of public spaces to locate bar terraces. The second session took place in the green area nearer to La Latina (Parque de la Cornisa) (see Figure 7). The local collective "Vecinas Corniseras" shared with students the refusal of the municipality to engage in dialogue with the local community about the rehabilitation of the park. From these sessions, students developed an understanding that despite a clear need, the problems, demands, and necessities of the local community were not being responded to by the municipality.

Figure 6. A session with the two neighbourhood associations in the Public Library Iván de Vargas. Source: De Gregorio Hurtado, S.

Figure 7. A walk in the Parque de la Cornisa with one of the neighbourhood associations (Vecinas Corniseras). Source: De Gregorio Hurtado, S.

From an urban perspective, different intervention proposals (micro-projects for soft regeneration) were proposed in the different study units that sought to include specific measures (social, economic, governance of the place, etc.) on the basis of an integrated approach (see Figure 8). These were aimed at tackling current problems, as well as strengthening the contribution of this part of the historic centre of Madrid to a model of a sustainable city that moves towards equitable resilience, always bearing in mind social cohesion, ecological and climatic challenges, quality of life, equality, and the development of "vital places".

Figure 8. The different student groups generating their proposals in a classroom of the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid. Source: De Gregorio Hurtado, S.

A number of key findings stand out, especially with regard to the area of the La Cebada market where there was an opportunity to adapt a new space recently created by building work for a new sports centre, introducing new uses in a place that would normally be associated with intense collective memories. Dynamizing this "virgin" ground, which as yet had no meaning for "long-term" residents, offered a chance to create a new image which could work to better reconcile the new needs generated by a high degree of touristification in recent years. We were also able to highlight new perspectives regarding "cultural assets", in particular wine cellars on the edges of the Plaza de la Paja which are currently in a neglected state but could be restored.

Also, tangible proposals arose from the understanding of the meaning of "being at home", reinforcing the existing symbolic meaning which enhances perceived control through the full mediation of positive emotions for "long-term" residents. In other words, the strategy was to present proposals for better incorporating and reducing the flow of tourists usings shared spaces, in order to recover the notion of belonging and identity connected to the place. This involved highlighting traditional uses in different parts of the study area, removing the invasion of the public spaces by bars and restaurants, and improving the environmental quality and urban scene of public spaces (see Figures 9 and 10).

Figure 9. Plaza de la Paja proposal. Source: Azevedo, C.; Giach E.; Gomes E.; Niccoli, M.; Bartoli, T.; and Usón Gasca, T.

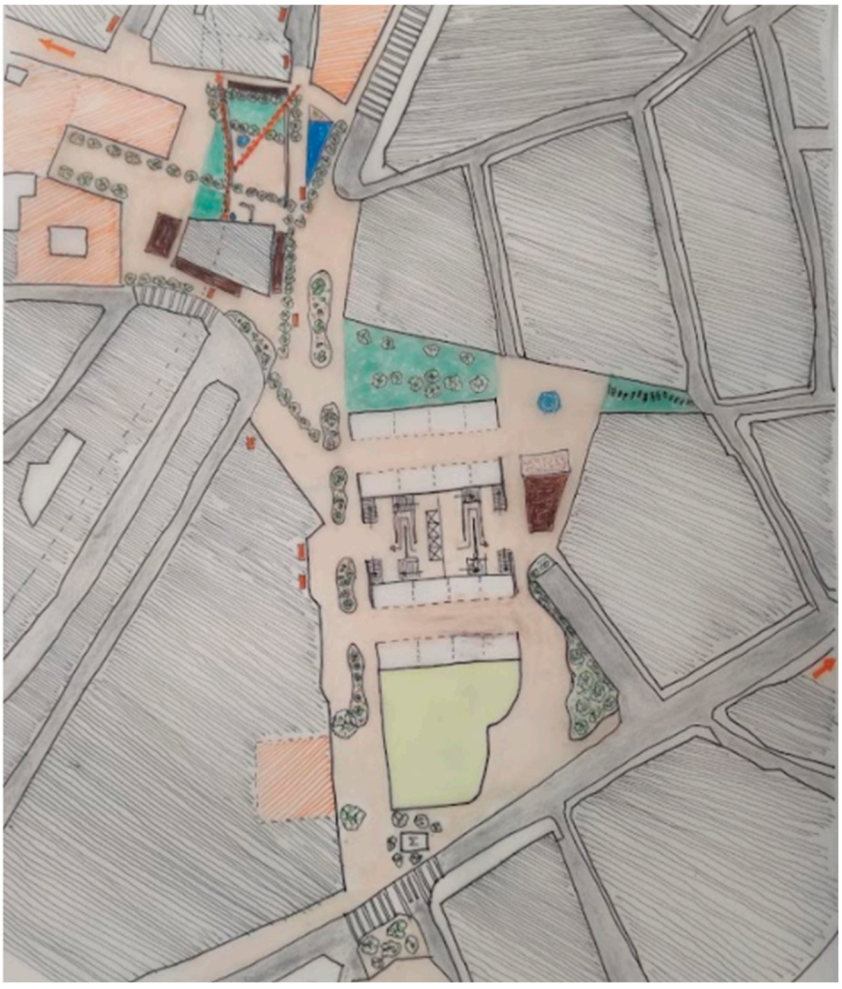


Figure 10. Plaza de Puerta de Moros proposal. Source: Mendes, A.B.; Miranda, A.L.; Fittipaldi, A.; Valiño, J.; Masili, M.; and Corrêa, R.

Understanding and addressing the preservation of cultural practices associated with a neighbourhood's public space, i.e., the contemporary rituals of the old residents who gather there, enriched the different rationalities of students from different disciplines. At the same time, the attempt to develop comprehensive proposals that considered both the needs of residents and tourists highlighted the value of applying specialized knowledge to address larger, more general challenges.

Finally, through an anonymous survey, the perceptions of the experiences of 19 of the 22 students who participated in the program were collected. The interdisciplinary work between different cultures and fields of knowledge turned out to be one of the most valued aspects, since the learning came not only from theoretical classes but also from the discussions students had amongst themselves. It was also apparent that the work of the teachers in relating all of these to each other was of great importance in regard to the formative dimension of the educational experience.

When it comes to teaching, and therefore learning, two activities occur at the same time. On the one hand, there is the academic task environment, comprising the curriculum which researchers and cognitive psychologists focus on. On the other, there is the structure of social participation, which is the way in which this governs the sequence and articulation of interactions [60]. The Erasmus+ BIP experience allowed equal attention to be paid to both tasks, as a means of overcoming the difficulties involved in understanding the complexity of the city. It was crucial to activate the different "expertise" provided by each of the students (coming from different courses and different disciplines, as mentioned above). This involved a highly active learning approach, where principles and materials were absorbed, integrated, and then applied to an empirical case in the form of a real location. It forced them to develop reflective skills to understand and act to find integrated solutions for touristification in historical centres.

It was particularly important to establish the structure of social participation by students [60] in order to identify any gaps which needed to be addressed, in order to ensure the development of required and desirable skills. In the accompanying analysis of the city, cooperative and interdependent actions dominated. This was derived from what Vygotsky [61] referred to as the zone of proximal development, in which the teacher's reaction depended upon the degree of internalization of the contents by the students.

This experience was an essential precursor to developing and conveying the meaning of "context", holistically understood as constituting the enactment of activity involving people and spaces, since it involves specific objects and goals together with specific settings—the conception of context as a transformative relationship between people, spaces, and artefacts (c.f. [62]). Through the Erasmus+ BIP experience, students were encouraged to actively question the rationale behind various community activities, rather than focusing solely on the physical environment. This approach prevented them from becoming agents of disruption, as they developed an understanding of the existing social dynamics before taking action in any location. By fostering interdisciplinarity and involvement, this experience allowed students to consider the intangible dimensions present in public spaces, offering a more comprehensive understanding of reality. It also prompted a re-evaluation and re-examination of assumed norms, practices, and management styles, encouraging a more thoughtful and context-sensitive approach.

6. Final Thoughts

Public spaces not only provide conditions for being human but also for responding to the human condition. There is a need to pay attention to the philosophy underlying material manifestations that, roughly, are induced in projects by architects on behalf of communities yet still act as detached and independent agents with very different worldviews. Therefore,

architects and other "experts" are unsurprisingly viewed with suspicion [63], and to overcome this, it is paramount to explore the public space conditions that support and are part of socio-cultural structures.

This methodology is based on taking a broad perspective and allowing factors which are significant to the communities studied to be captured. In this way, students were supported in their search for hidden rules and patterns, for developing a sense of future orientation, and for making strategic judgements about the meaning and relevance of design [64] in facing the transformation of the city. This allowed for a critique of the spirit of the place that characterizes La Latina and that which has emerged from its long history, its adaption to the social and cultural changes in urban design, and the uses that are now taking place in its streets and plazas.

Briefly, the learning outcomes of the Erasmus+ BIP experience are the following:

Improved communication across disciplines and diverse backgrounds which will help close the gap between fields such as anthropology, archaeology, geography, architecture, and urban planning.

A heightened awareness and sensitivity towards the preservation of heritage communities was successfully cultivated among the participants with regard to the threat of touristification.

All participants were exposed to and engaged with tools from a variety of knowledge areas.

However, to understand the extent to which students were able to construct an understanding of daily life in the territory which formed the study area, a series of issues must be mentioned that could potentially result in an incorrect view of the spaces investigated. As was described, the fieldwork was carried out in only 15 days. From the perspective of qualitative research, this is a very short time to carry out the rigorous fieldwork needed to generate sufficient empirical material required to produce serious and weighty conclusions. In fact, the fieldwork was undertaken in the month of July when the school year had finished, an important point to consider as the study area is a vital space for after-school activities during term time and a meeting point for parents and children in the hours before class is dismissed (see Figures 11 and 12). It was important to present this reality to our students, enabling them to realistically understand and assess the cyclic use of the study areas throughout the year, rather than relying on observations shaped during the most touristed months of July and August when the area was simultaneously almost free of children.

Figure 11. Carros plaza in July 2023. Source: Müllauer-Seichter, W.

Figure 12. Carros plaza in February 2024. Source: Müllauer-Seichter, W.

Another aspect that can lead to the incorrect interpretation of the empirical material gathered in this space of time is the fact that very few zones have vegetation and trees. Historical city centres, due to their nature, present narrow streets and alleys, and the oldest city centres do not offer many options for incorporating parks, unless there are empty lots that make it possible. Because of this, both in general and in our specific case, the long-time residents of these historical spaces have their strategies for using the plazas and the "urban green" [18], depending on the time that they have available (plazas for a short amount of time and for social encounters; if they have an hour or more, they go to the gardens that are relatively close). This was also the case in our study area, which at first sight might seem to be a "hard space" characterized by plazas, in general paved with old stone and accompanied by narrow sidewalks. What is less apparent, particularly when visiting as a stranger with limited local knowledge, is the enormous greenbelt presented by the nearby Las Vistillas; the Parque de la Cornisa (which we visited with the local collective "Vecinas Corniseras"); the Jardines de la Cuesta de la Vega; the Parque de Atenas; the Campo del Moro; and, since 2009, the Madrid Río linear park that merges all of these interconnected green areas with the Casa de Campo. In total, these collectively offer an enormous belt of urban nature for the historical centre and particularly for the Palacio neighbourhood in which the area of La Latina is located.

The Erasmus+ BIP experience was built upon the fundamental recognition of the vital connections between heritage places and their heritage communities. However, the neoliberal context of recent decades has steered conservation efforts towards a predominantly economic focus, often at odds with the interests and well-being of historical communities [65]. Through this training, our goal was twofold: to equip students with the necessary knowledge and criteria to critically address the current challenges facing European traditional city centres from a people-based approach and to raise awareness among local stakeholders about the negative transformations affecting historic centres and their impact on residents' quality of life. In this sense, the training aligned with our ongoing commitment to fostering meaningful reflections on social and urban challenges through our roles as educators and researchers.

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