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7. LaFábrica detodalavida (Los Santos de Maimona, Spain)



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Executive summary

[LaFábrica detodalavida](#) (The Factory of a Lifetime) is a participatory cultural space located in an abandoned cement factory in a small municipality in Extremadura, a rural region of western Spain. It is a place of experimentation with various economic, social and cultural processes that strive for inclusive self-management in the region and expanded culture and opportunities in a rural context. LaFábrica detodalavida uses the commons, cooperative production, free culture and DIY construction to develop creative dynamics and methodologies. The heritage site is the host to projects and programmes such as Cine al Fresco, Pecha Kucha, Territorio Komún and Fábrica Komún as well as other entities such as La Fundación Maimona.

Timeline

- 1952 The Badajoz plan is approved
- 1955 Construction of the cement factory building is completed in Los Santos de Maimona
- 1956 The Asland cement factory is inaugurated
- 1972 The Badajoz plan comes to an end
- 1973 The factory closes
- 2009 LaFábrica detodalavida collective forms and begins to make plans
- 2013 Agreement signed with the town council, crowdfunding campaign on Goteo
- 2014 Renovation begins
- 2015 The new space is inaugurated

1. The Extremaduran Context

Extremadura, Spain, located in the west of the country and formed by two of the largest provinces in Spain, Badajoz and Cáceres, covers about 8% of Spain's total area. It is the connecting ground between the two capital cities of the Iberian peninsula, Madrid and Lisbon, and its location on the border of Portugal gives the region the flavour of both Portuguese and Spanish cultures. Spanning roughly 4.2 million square kilometers and containing slightly more than one million inhabitants, it has the lowest population density in the country (25.75 inhabitants/km²) and the lowest housing prices per square-meter in Spain.

Extremadura has a wealth of cultural heritage sites, with three UNESCO World Heritage sites in the cities of Cáceres, Mérida and Guadalupe, known as the "World Heritage Triangle", along with many other preserved sites and museums from Roman, Medieval and Renaissance times. It is also popular for its regional gastronomy, with its own designation of origin. Known for traditional Spanish cured ham (jamón), olive oil, cheeses and local wines, it traces the influences of the Arab, Jewish and Roman inhabitants of the past and reflects a long tradition of blending ancestral customs and cultural heritage with forward-looking innovation.

Despite the wealth of cultural history and natural resources, Extremadura has been one of the poorest regions of Spain economically. After the Spanish Civil War, economic policies such as the Badajoz Plan were put into place to try to industrialise and modernise the region. The cement factory and subsequent economic activity and employment around it were part of this endeavour, but when the plan ended it left little lasting effect on the area. The region became once again a region depleted by emigration, losing almost a quarter of the population between 1960 and 1980¹, mostly to more prosperous regions of Spain in search of work or education. This trend continues to the present day.

Extremadura as a region was not spared by the 2008 economic crisis that shook Spain along with much of Europe, and although Spain is said to have made a remarkable "recovery", Extremadura still has one of the highest unemployment rates and lowest activity rates², leaving it far behind the rest of the country economically speaking.

According to the European Commission, "unemployment is one of the biggest challenges faced by Extremadura. In 2017 the rate was 26.3% (129,900 people), being youth and women the most affected segments of the population. This figure is way above the national and EU average of 17.2% and 7.6%, respectively. At the beginning of 2017 the prospects continued the negative trend, almost reaching an unemployment rate of 30%, but data has shown some improvements in this regard, going back to proportions similar to those registered in 2016 (Eurostat, 2018)."³

Nevertheless, Extremadura's natural beauty and cultural heritage may prove to be the region's ticket out of economic depression and unemployment. Innovative and collaborative projects such as LaFábrica detodalavida are already making use of forgotten or overlooked heritage sites to breathe new life into local culture and generate new and beneficial economies around the commons, DIY construction,

collaboration and the arts. As research, development and innovation have been cited⁵ as areas in which Extremadura is particularly lagging behind the rest of the country, these kinds of community projects may be just what the region has been needing to create sustainable opportunities for growth, livelihood and community and thereby creating the cultural gravity needed to keep its youth from moving away and to attract new energy, ideas and activity into the area.

2. The story of the building and its heritage

As mentioned above, in 1952 the Badajoz Plan was approved by Franco's government in order to modernise and industrialise the Badajoz area of Extremadura, giving special attention to large projects such as the construction of reservoirs, dams, villages and road networks. For all of these projects to be possible, a local source of cement was needed, and that is how the cement factory came to be.



Picture 1: Alejandro Hernández Renner

"There was a direct order coming from Madrid and there was no great debate that you should respect it as a law. You can imagine, in an area where we only had olive trees, pigs walking around, no line bringing electricity at the level that the factory needed – everything had to be done, produced here, even the electricity was produced here with a generation system based on coal. So, this was the reality of how this space was created 50 years ago." Alejandro Hernández Renner

The cement factory completely changed the economic landscape in the town of Los Santos de Maimona. The rural village, which had previously only engaged in agriculture, was chosen for its location near two major roads and a rail line, as well as for the quality of limestone in the nearby Sierra de San Cristóbal. With experts and professionals brought in from other parts of Spain to construct the facility, the population of Los Santos de Maimona experienced rare growth. Construction was

completed in 1955, and in the following year the Asland Cement Factory opened its doors. The village benefited directly from the increase in employment opportunities, with around 300 families supporting themselves from local cement production. The factory was a success and after only a few years in operation, it expanded its facilities, constructing the tower that would come to be a symbol of the town's industrial dreams.

"Extremadura is a very rural area, in general terms. This was one of the very, very few industries that was set up in the region – big industries. And this was a very important place, in this sense. There were thousands of people depending on this activity. When it stopped, thousands of people left, and left for good. They never came back. We are talking about a region where six thousand people left. It's like the effect of a war." Alejandro Hernández Renner

The unfortunate end of the Badajoz Plan came in 1972. With the large scale construction projects complete, there was no longer a local market for mass quantities of cement, and the Asland factory was forced to close its doors in 1973. The result was devastating for the local community, which in only 17 years had begun to thrive and prosper from its industrial dream. The factory remained empty and unused, lying in the shadow of its tower, now a symbol for a faded, failed dream.

"We don't want to emigrate. We want to continue to enjoy this wealth, which is a right of our town." Asland factory worker, Hoy newspaper, 19 April 1972

Asland sold the factory and quarries to the town council of Los Santos de Maimona for a symbolic amount of 1 peseta with the pretense that they would soon recommence operations at the site, thereby shirking any duty or responsibility to dismantle the facilities or clean up after themselves. In reality Asland already had plans to modernise other factories with much larger capacities for production. They took advantage of the town's desperate state and left behind a patch of industrial wasteland. This site remained abandoned for the next 40 years, with the exception of one business that used it in the 80s to install and make use of a cement mixer.



Picture 2 : Asland Cemetery Factory

<http://historiasdelossantosdemaimona.blogspot.com/2010/10/las-industrias-en-los-santos-de-maimona.html>

The heritage of this particular factory entails a mixture of different emotions for older local residents. On the one hand there are memories of “the good times” that the factory brought and the pride in having contributed to some of Spain’s most important works of infrastructure.

“We are talking about an industrial site created, from Madrid, serving a bigger project which was creating a whole structure of agricultural land in the whole region. Thousands of hectares are now being watered with the installations that were initially built with cement coming from this factory.” Alejandro Hernández Renner

On the other hand, the abandoned factory, largely in ruins, represents the false promises of industry made by distant officials who knew little about the lives and needs of the local population. It stands as a symbol of loss, not only of livelihood and dreams of modernity, but also of a significant portion of the population, nowadays encompassing the continued loss of the town’s youth.

“It has always had a very controversial history because it was only active for 17 years, so for the population itself, it was a dream of industry in a rural world that was not used to population growth, that was not used to having work, that was made up of peasants.” Siro Santos

Nevertheless, the youth of Los Santos de Maimona, now with a population of just over 8,000, have taken inspiration from the factory site. There is an interest in approaching the space through the lens of industrial archaeology – protecting the ruins, preserving the state of the site, while using DIY construction to repurpose the space and give it new life. Some young people who had left Los Santos de

Maimona have come back to be a part of something new and to work with the raw potential of this post-industrial space.

"It had been a private place, that means closed to the public for 25 years and well, it evolved into a ruin. So, the idea was, let's turn it into a space where companies, innovative companies, can do things. [...] It was an element of modernity in the 50's and it should for all of us be again an element of modernity in the 21st century." Alejandro Hernández Renner



Picture 3: Past and Present Asland Cemetery Factory
<https://lafabrikadetodalavida.org/historiacementera/>

3. The initiative (objectives, activities and values)

The initiative of LaFábrica detodalavida began at the end of 2009 with a small collective of people interested in creating something out of the abandoned factory space. The factory had suffered neglect and vandalism and was in a complete state of disrepair. The original idea was to draw a connection between public intervention and the restoration of the space, though with a focus on political, public art. They wanted to turn the cement factory into a factory for social management and leisure in a rural environment and to use it as a starting point for creating an open network of creators, thinkers and social agents throughout the territory.

The Los Santos de Maimona ceded the now public site to the collective in a kind of urban masovería (use of land in exchange for its cultivation or maintenance) arrangement, whereby the collective is guaranteed long-term use of the site in exchange for renovating the space. Over the years different constellations of about 4-5 individuals kept the collective and the project alive until about 2017, when between 20 and 25 people became regularly involved.

"Those of us who intervened were professionalising our practice a little and we were also collaborating with outside projects. And from 2017 until now, a new and much broader community is intervening, tangibly much closer to the village, with actors and citizens from the local population, especially young people." Siro Santos

In reclaiming the old factory space, one thing was very important for those involved: to use this as an opportunity to rewrite a history of industrial failure. There was an impetus to take inspiration from cases in northern Europe and rethink what modern, industrial and productive sector spaces look like. What could be done to make this previously flourishing and relevant factory not only once again productive and relevant, but also liveable. The idea arose of creating open and shared green and leisure spaces to provide the setting and inspiration for creative, innovative, collaborative and political productive work. By bringing life into this space, the activists from LaFábrica detodalavida wanted to revive and explore a forgotten heritage and then convert and socialise that heritage into an open space where the community could connect, learn and share.

"We're changing the associations with the memory of the factory. We're changing the historical associations that my grandmother has and that I have when we think about the factory." Siro Santos

4. Objectives

The objectives of LaFábrica detodalavida are manifold, and this speaks to the openness of the collective to what the community wants and how it decides to use the space. In this vein, the collective aims to:

- promote the cooperative production of commons
- bring this cultural and meeting space into the daily lives of the community
- create proposals and initiatives based on public feedback
- promote reflection on how culture is constructed
- create a space that is multicultural, intercultural and open to other cultures
- strengthen the image of Los Santos de Maimona
- facilitate and support tools for analysing and understanding Extremaduran society
- create concrete programmes for community participation
- establish a public space that is dedicated to its surroundings
- mediate around controversial local issues
- create social and cultural dialogue nationally and internationally from Extremadura
- support free culture as a value and practice

- set up permanent programming based on local needs and concerns

5. Values

Though the key players have changed to some degree since back in 2009, the core values of LaFábrica detodalavida have remained relatively consistent and well in line with the objectives of the project. In the agreement signed between LaFábrica detodalavida and the town council of Los Santos de Maimona, the three core values cited are:

1. The promotion of free culture
2. The encouragement of culture created in the countryside such as in villages or towns
3. Contribution to the commons

Siro Santos, one of the founding members of the collective, explains his take on the project's values. First, he mentions the ethic of DIY construction, reuse of materials and zero cost as an act of empowerment and making dreams a reality, the idea of empowerment being particularly important for the community in terms of their connection to and attitudes around the local heritage of the factory.

"...our position is to keep reusing material and standing in defense of the heritage site with very concrete and visible interventions to continue recovering materials." Siro Santos

Second, there is the value of taking typically urban practices and bringing them to the countryside. Specifically, this refers to ideas about the commons, imagining futures, sharing knowledge, working with collective intelligence, etc. These ideals are generally developed and given attention in urban centres, though they could be just as helpful and relevant to rural communities. LaFábrica detodalavida works to give rural space to these urban practices.

Finally, the third key value is simply community and giving attention and care towards how to build and practice community in rural contexts. Collaborator and activist Elena Galleiro echoes this sentiment as well.



Picture 4: Elena Galleiro, an organizer at LaFabrika by Rubén Prieto Fernández

"While we (at LaFabrika) follow certain values, which for me are care work, social transformation, integration, inclusion, the reality is that we're in a world where these values are exactly what is missing. Instead, we're (as a society) regressing, we're completely focussing on our differences, on closing ourselves off. We're more and more neoliberal. We work more and more under policies that are destructive for the environment and life in general. We meet this resistance every day and even in a context like this. I mean, you can make very theoretical contributions, but at the end of the day, the practice is your jumping off point for trying to convince other people. Philosophising is great. It's great and we can leave it to academia, but here we focus on daily practices." Elena Galleiro

6. Activities

LaFábrika detodalavida is home to a network of various organisations, projects, initiatives and individuals joined together by their shared passion for the space and dedication to slowly moulding it into the kind of creative cultural space that the region so desperately needs. While not having total carte blanche from the town council over what happens to the old factory site, the activist collective is often left to their own devices in terms of how to proceed with ideas, allowing them to plan independently and with minimal support. Instead of feeling discouraged by the lack of consistent local administrative engagement, though, the collective simply dives further into their DIY ethic.

"Since we don't hold the power of making a decision over what this [space] could be – even though we do have many ideas – we have presented projects and developed or tried to develop these ideas with the public administration in many negotiations. But our ideas have never been heard or even minimally supported, so we keep doing things in our own way, which means learning as we go and learning as we build." Siro Santos

The collective's persistence has paid off. Beyond local actions organised to reclaim the public factory space by clearing out previously inaccessible areas and creating parks and renovating the façade of some of the factory buildings, people have been coming to LaFábrica detodalavida from all over the country and the world to teach, explore and even set up businesses.

"Mostly, people who belong to this project through this process are people who are very related to what we would call 'knowledge economy', intensive in technology, intensive in training. It's well-educated people. And this is the thing, that they mainly share. They do training or they do mentoring, or they organize an event where they can really share what they do and know professionally, with people that can profit from this knowledge." Alejandro Hernández Renner

Alejandro Hernández Renner has been serving as director at La Fundación Maimona (The Maimona Foundation), an NGO founded by Diego Hidalgo and dedicated to local development through entrepreneurship and innovation. This foundation is one of the organisations that has made LaFábrica detodalavida its home, and Renner is working to grow the innovative community and use the space to its fullest potential.

"I have been facilitating the constitution of a community of SMEs, NGOs, public administrations and individual people which are interested in the rehabilitation and adaptation of the abandoned industrial site of the old cement factory in Los Santos de Maimona, Extremadura, Spain. Which projects illustrate this? The most visible outcome are the new buildings, the new infrastructures, and The Social Lab.⁵" Alejandro Hernández Renner

In addition, regular programming at LaFábrica detodalavida has included:

- Los Sábados detodalavida (Saturdays of a lifetime): open house days of lectures, workshops and leisure in a convivial, community atmosphere.
- Fábrica Komún (Communal factory): programmes and processes based on Collaborative Social Management and Communal Social Action and centred around the needs of the local community and online solutions.
- Cine al fresco: open air audiovisual and staged art during the summer months: shorts, documentaries, films and plays.
- PechaKucha: a special kind of event for presenting ideas in a 20-second, 20-slide format.
- Territorio Komún (Common territory): a space of open participation for collaborating on creative, social and cultural content. LaFábrica detodalavida assists in managing, organising and producing related activities within the factory space.

"For me the most important thing now is to begin to systematise all of the information that we are starting to generate. [...] We're going to experiment. We're going to be the laboratory where we mix together everything that has influenced us." Elena Galleiro



Picture 5: Photo of LaFábrica detodalavida by Luis Miguel Zapata Luna

7. Governance (regulations & policies)

7.1. Relationship with the local government

The physical space of the old Asland factory is primarily regulated by an agreement⁶, signed December 27, 2013, between the collective LaFábrica detodalavida and the Town Council of Los Santos de Maimona. The factory site is public property, but the agreement between these two parties cedes use of a portion of this public property to LaFábrica detodalavida in exchange for the renovation of the space and the subsequent management of the space itself as well as all of the activities that occur within it. This agreement calls for mutual support between parties and references the Spanish government's constitutional responsibility to promote access to and youth involvement in political, social, economic and cultural development.

The space ceded to the collective includes two main buildings of the factory and the covered outdoor space that joins them, totalling 473.86 square meters. Upon signing the agreement, the relevant factory spaces were deemed unsuitable and unsafe for occupancy, and the collective had to put in a considerable amount of work to bring the buildings up to code so that they could be frequented by locals and used for the greater social mission.

LaFábrica detodalavida is not required to pay anything for the use of the space, so long as they fulfill their commitment to renovation in accordance with all legal requirements and necessary permits. The initial agreement was valid through

December 31, 2015 and continues to be renewed for periods of four years. Aside from the main task of refurbishing the premises, LaFábrica detodalavida is also responsible for maintaining the heritage site in good condition, promoting local tourism, culture and economy, securing insurance for the buildings, managing the programming of the factory and creating an annual report for the town council.

In exchange for this, the town council provides and covers the costs of water and electricity services, support in seeking out assistance, municipal brick layers, electricians and plumbers, disposal containers and regular rubbish collection services. LaFábrica detodalavida is also given access to public materials stored in one of the factory buildings, as well as materials found nearby on the factory premises.

As for the activities carried out by LaFábrica detodalavida in the factory, all ideas and methodologies generated within the space are not subject to any intellectual property rights, and the project itself is registered under Creative Commons or Move Commons licenses.

Finally, the agreement also calls for a monitoring committee, made up of members of both parties, to stay informed about the progress and needs of the parties and to address any relevant concerns in biannual meetings.

7.2. Internal governance

LaFábrica detodalavida itself is a non-profit organisation. It forms a part of the international network of collectives Arquitecturas Colectivas (Collective Architectures). The collective also collaborates with the work group Mainova Social Lab and Centro Diego Hidalgo de empresas e innovación (Diego Hidalgo centre of enterprises and innovation), all operating out of and equally committed to developing the reclaimed factory space. These entities operate independently, though under the same social principles and ideals, and the latter two are funded by the Fundación Maimona (Maimona Foundation), which also has an office at the factory.

Thus, taking into account the local government, various entities and the townspeople, there are many different groups with an interest in the success of the reclaimed factory space, a space which has a special significance in the mind and collective memory of the community:

"We have a community of neighbours, so we're not just the public administration, the foundation and LaFábrica detodalavida and the abandoned space of the cement factory, which – to me and to LaFábrica – has its own identity that does not go through the administration or the foundation or LaFábrica, but rather has its own identity." Siro Santos

Given the variety of stakeholders involved at different levels and to different degrees, as well as the mission to include any interested community member, LaFábrica has chosen to organise itself rather horizontally, focusing governance on individual projects and work groups that are tied together under a common mission. This governance is based on micro-agreements (microconvenios) that are created by and apply to a particular group of individuals or entities working on a specific project together. Micro-agreements facilitate the organisation and

management of these projects, establishing members' capacity, time allotment, commitment and responsibilities. Micro-agreements can be established between any individuals or entities that want to be located in or make use of the factory building.

Beyond this, there are also work groups for issues such as economic sustainability. These groups evolve and change over time and name representatives who take on the responsibility of the work group's function. Work groups display a certain level of independence in that they are responsible for their own actions and the direction that the work group takes is in the hands of its members, but there are periodic assemblies to transparently and horizontally make decisions that affect the whole collective. LaFábrika detodalavida's open and dynamic form of internal governance is based on the idea of (disorganised) society⁷.

Disorganised society - refers to organising around specific goals, disorganising and deconstructing and then re-organising around further, newer goals, the collective creates myriad ways of relating to one another and working together, both broadening the spectrum of experience for all those involved but also forming a system based on social equality and closeness. This results in the distribution of power and knowledge and supports the mutual support and well-being of the collective as a whole.

8. Challenges

Despite a successful start in transforming this once forgotten space into an important centre of culture, creativity and ideas for a community with few resources, there are still a number of challenges that LaFábrika detodalavida faces in terms of governance and regulations. The biggest challenge is probably the lack of serious engagement and imagination on the part of the town council.

For instance, in 2013 when the town council brought in electric and water services to enable work to begin on the space, they were focused only on the technical, physical process of renovation without giving consideration to important details such as the question and significance of preserving local heritage or the condition of the "public" areas of the factory.



Picture 6: Siro Santos

"More thought was given to opportunities stemming from new constructions than from defending the heritage, playing with softer structures – softer interventions, recovery of spaces, cleaning, giving a little attention to the amount of danger that the cement factory still poses. There is a lot of access to spaces in the cement factory that still aren't fenced in, and I think it's the responsibility of the public [administration] to deal with that. Any person, any child can just climb up a seven-story tower because it's not closed off." Siro Santos

The town council has also proven to be rather hands-off in terms of continuing to collaborate with LaFábrica detodalavida over the years.

"For four years, since right when we signed the agreement, we have never even minimally been invited to find out anything about governance and what future the space that we meet in holds." Siro Santos

LaFábrica detodalavida has persisted in their dedication to making the space operable and implementing year after year of actions, events, exchanges and cultural activity to engage the local community and bring in outside talent and expertise. Many concrete proposals to expand the work of LaFábrica detodalavida have been made to the town council, but they have generally not been agreed upon and have resulted in stalemates.

Aside from a lack of shared vision with the town council, there is also some degree of unity missing among the various groups using the factory space. LaFábrica detodalavida have always maintained transparency as an important value in terms of their own governance but have not found that to be the case with all of the groups sharing the factory space.

"Governance among the entities, collectives, citizens that frequent and occupy the cement factory has always been pretty unclear, so to speak. On the one

hand, from our side, we did an exercise, the little exercise of transparency that we could do, to have our agreement free, open and downloadable on our webpage so that everyone could know the rules that we have and that we have negotiated with the public administration.” Siro Santos

Alejandro Hernández Renner echoes the sentiment that shared values are not enough – shared and open governance must also drive this project and be a point of engagement for everyone involved:

“I think that an integrated approach is necessary, a clear governance and strategic open structure with [the] participation of all stakeholders and shareholders, a dynamic emergent planning process which does not exclude future alternatives, openness to global and local trends and circumstances, maintenance of symbolic elements, harmony with nature and surroundings, and connectivity.” Alejandro Hernández Renner

9. The economic model

“[In the past] the town council used public money to restore certain sections of the cement factory, but it never intervened with public money here. LaFábrica continues to be completely self-run.” Siro Santos

As mentioned above, LaFábrica detodalavida receives basic services and some raw materials from the town council, but aside from these provisions, the project is entirely self-funded. In 2013, the collective launched a crowdfunding campaign on the Goteo⁸ platform for phase one of the project, restoring the “technical office”. The campaign aimed to raise a minimum of 4,500 euros and exceeded this goal, bringing in a total of 6,000 euros from 92 different contributors. LaFábrica detodalavida has also received smaller amounts of money from grants and awards, but in general they have managed to accomplish an impressive amount with a very limited budget and a lot of self-determination.

crowdfunding - the means of finding funding for a project by raising money from a large number of people whether it be in large or small amounts, more often than not through the Internet. Crowdfunding is a type of crowdsourcing and alternative means for finance.

This in itself has been a part of the collective’s economic policy. The reliance on DIY construction and sourcing of recycled materials is not an alternative option in the face of scarcity, but rather a consciously chosen strategy to show that it is possible to effectively, safely and collaboratively carry out construction in different ways that actually educate, engage and build community.

With this approach the collective wants to show that social capital is just as important as economic capital. All of the contributions of knowledge, labour and time spent collaborating and problem solving to renovate the factory space together end up yielding usable resources. In this way, the social capital of intangible relationships is converted into tangible resources.

LaFábrica detodalavide, however, does not ignore the fact that monetary funds are also necessary to take things to the next level and create opportunities to continue building the social capital of the project as well. The collective lists P2P loans, ethical banking, microloans, European and national funds as possible approaches to funding moving forward. In fact, most of the other organisations in the factory space have counted on many of these types of funding, including the INTERREG programme and the Fundación Maimona, adding to the diversity of experiences under the factory roof.

"LaFábrica detodalavida did its own self-building, recycling and renewal process at a very, very low cost with crowdfunding and the help of a lot of people from the whole country. Those processes were happening at the same time. I had visits from colleagues from architecture colleges, that were very interested in seeing all this happening at the time. Now, if you have a look at the space it's got a feeling of patchwork because the result of this is necessarily different, and all these realities coexist in a very harmonious way. You can see the traces of those different management approaches. This floor is clearly one approach, this building on the left is a very organic and handmade approach, and ours is much more techie and oriented to companies which have a different profile. And all this is around us, it's interesting." Alejandro Hernández Renner



Picture 7: LaFábrica detodalavida Goteo crowdfunding page

10. Community engagement

Community engagement has been central to the mission of LaFábrica detodalavida. It is the absence of opportunities to engage, teach and learn from the community that has driven so many young people to seek out broader horizons in big cities around Spain, leaving their home town behind. LaFábrica detodalavida has been conceived of as a way to bring new life and new ideas into this rural community and give it stronger connections to the outside world. As these efforts have mostly been led by younger people, there has naturally been some reluctance and scepticism on the part of the older generations of the town, but LaFábrica detodalavida maintains that the involvement of this older part of the community

is essential to the success of the project and that these relationships must be handled with care and patience.

"In the big cities it's easy to find yourself more in circles where you can spend all day feeding off of the fact that everyone thinks the same, but here you leave your comfort zone as soon as you step out of your front door ... because this is also your closest community and it hurts much more when the criticism comes from those close to you. But it's another challenge and another way of beginning to transform things locally, in order to later advance bit by bit." Elena Galleiro

Events such as Heritage Days are opportunities to dialogue with the community and learn about the needs of the neighbours, the foundation, LaFábrica detodalavida collective, the factory space itself as well as the town administration. LaFábrica detodalavida firmly believes that these types of processes must be transparent in order to start to build trust between the community and those managing the factory space that has hurt the town before.

"It's a very necessary moment to exercise transparency, to get to know what everyone thinks and to start to look for common solutions. Not only this idea of direct action, not only the idea that "they should keep giving to me", not only the idea of making demands, but rather sitting together around a work table with trust and, I think, also with a sense of responsibility. Because in the end the foundation has its responsibilities and works in one way, LaFábrica in another way and the neighbours in yet another way, and I think the thing that is held in common is that we do see a value in the heritage and in the cement factory itself." Siro Santos

Many people in the town have a personal connection to the Asland factory and its 17 years of booming success. Their family and professional histories are tied to it. It put Los Santos de Maimona on the map, and therefore there is a vested interest in it as a site of local heritage. LaFábrica detodalavida wants to bring this location back to life and make it once again a central hub for the community, where people can feel that they belong and have agency. However, this time the factory should be more than just an employer who packs up and leaves when profits decrease. It should make up for the tainted past by addressing the concerns and needs of the local community and beyond.

"It is also a great responsibility for this community to link to the worries and the expectations of the rest of the territory and increase its impact, its capacity of helping others to get a better life. Not only yours but also the life of all the other members of your community. So, we have been trying to open up again, to make people aware of the fact that this belongs to them. It belongs to us, it belongs to them. It belongs to all." Alejandro Hernández Renner

Sharing and finding common purpose for this revived industrial space may not be so easy at first, but members of LaFábrica detodalavida are determined to take the time to find shared experiences and points of overlap with other members of the community. Different topics or formats of discussion introduced by the collective might seem very urban and imported, but that does not mean that they are not relevant to Los Santos de Maimona or that the community has nothing to offer in return. On the contrary, collaboration and shared ideas are the foundation of this project.

"If we're having a discussion here about feminism, the first ones we have to talk with are probably the women's association. Maybe they don't share the practices that we consider important, but if we believe that we really empower others and that we are all leaders of the processes we carry out, then we have to involve everyone in this area and on the other side of the factory wall and begin to coordinate – not only to facilitate the spaces, but because it's part of our identity: My name is Elena. I'm from Los Santos de Maimona. I'm a woman. I was a migrant for many years, and all of these things intersect in me. Who else shares these intersections? What other identities do we have as we approach this process which is still being created? There is no script and that makes it dynamic, alive. It's a living entity, it's an organism. How amazing that it will continue evolving just as it has evolved up to this point." Elena Galleiro

In fact, this strategy does bring people together. Members of these various communities enter into discussion with each other and slowly networks begin to emerge. People find out that they share certain concerns or ideas of how to improve life in the town. From this space they can begin to exchange ideas and formulate goals and ultimately work together to create solutions that benefit everyone. This is the work that LaFábrica detodalavida wants to see not only under its own roof but also spreading out into the world via these networks.

"When there is a talk here and 50 people come, it also opens up the margins of the community and new possibilities arise for the concept to be replicated, free, open, for it to [...] reach a completely different community and have the opportunity to mix and be integrated directly in a laboratory of practice that is collaborative, shared and open just like LaFábrica itself." Siro Santos

And this is exactly what makes LaFábrica detodalavida relevant on an international level despite its rural and isolated physical location. This is what attracts new people to this space of possibility. The collective encourages people to come from outside, be inspired by what they see, share their insights and skills and give back to the local community, thereby further expanding the town's network. This is the thinking behind the year-long residencies offered at LaFábrica detodalavida.

"We offer people to stay here for a while once a year, we make an open call for a project, and we get them to be here with us for free – no cost for one year. The only thing we ask them in return is once a week, once a month, you have to give back to the community the way you think is best, but you have to do that. So that we can really connect to the worries and expectations of the members of the surrounding territory. And this kind of responsibility is also a key element that we have to work on in the future." Alejandro Hernández Renner

Most importantly, the new sense of community around LaFábrica detodalavida is what brings departed, young community members back home to share what they have learned out in the world and learn from what has changed back home. Establishing connections worldwide means that returning back to Los Santos de Maimona is not stepping back in time. The town is not irrelevant and in fact can offer more diversity of experience than ever before.

"I think that we've been able to get many different experiences to come together here. This has a lot to do with the fact that many of us have always been away, but many of us have also always been here, and these experiences have made

us who we are, right? For example, there are many people from this area who have been active in other community centres – either self-managed, leased, occupied or self-employed – in many other places: Seville, Madrid, Barcelona. I think that this is all experience that we have assimilated and been able to pour into LaFábrika’s processes and community. Everything that we’ve managed to accumulate in terms of personal experience influences our networks today. Right now our networks reach both nationally and internationally, which means that anything done here can be carried over to many other spaces.” Elena Galleiro

The process of community engagement involves the creation of a new, expanded community, which requires patience, listening, care and time. This is particularly the case for the factory site in Los Santos de Maimona, which still stands in the shadow of a past tainted by disappointment and injustice. LaFábrika detodalavida remains optimistic, though, and focuses on slowly building trust and relationships with community members one by one.

“The failure of the cement factory has always had a negative connotation for the village, right? So, opening and socialising this negative history from the perspective of new opportunities for new resources and new public spaces... we don’t reach everyone and we know it, but the people that do come end up staying, and that’s important.” Siro Santos



Picture 7: LaFábrika detodalavida by Luis Miguel Zapata Luna

11. Impact and future of the site

"Abandoned spaces often generate images of the future, or rather, they make you imagine the future." Siro Santos

LaFábrica detodalavida has opened up the possibility of something new in an area that has not experienced any kind of cultural, economic or demographic growth in recent generations. This means the possibility of identifying what the community needs and brainstorming in a creative, collaborative and constructive way to bring about change.

"We want to do something, we think about how to do it, we begin to do it. I think that the Fabrika's biggest impact is this: we create the possibility to believe that there are ways to do new things." Elena Galleiro

This has a significant impact on how younger people from Los Santos de Maimona feel about their hometown. As cities become more crowded and less livable, some people are realising that there is possibility and opportunity in returning to the countryside, a stark contrast to the dominant narrative.

"Now is the moment to return home, which is always seen as a failure. You always hear about the 'return to the village' or that 'So and so returned to the village.' It's like a failure because we've always been told that there are no possibilities in the village, no networks, no future." Elena Galleiro

But Galleiro, who herself has returned to Los Santos de Maimona after many years away, has found the experience transformative. She has learned the importance of making changes locally before globally and that with the right networks, changes and actions in a small community can still be shared and transmitted on a large scale.

"For me, having returned to the village after so much time, yes, to a large extent it means rethinking how to transform the most mundane and close things, from the communities that are closest to me through small, small changes and how that can eventually affect other realities." Elena Galleiro

This is an important message that LaFábrica detodalavida hopes to instill in the local youth as they begin to make decisions about their own futures.

"For me it is fundamental to begin to transmit, especially to the young people from here in the village – well, normally most of them go to study away from here – but then they can return and change things from here. You don't need to stay in the cities. You don't need to go anywhere else. There are opportunities here. Believe in them and create them yourself. Create them and begin to change what you didn't like before. Think about how you connect with your past, in order to create a future in and close to the community that will always be your roots and your history." Elena Galleiro

Interviewees

Siros Santos Garcia - Long time resident of Santos de Maimona and organizer within the LaFábrika project since 2009

Elena Galleiro - Longtime resident of Santos de Maimona where the factor is located and organizer within LaFábrika

Alejandro Hernández Renner - Works with non-profit, Fundación de Maimona, that works on promoting and developing local entrepreneurship and innovation and also based within LaFabrika

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