

In Madrid's Heart, Park Blooms Where a Freeway Once Blighted

By Michael Kimmelman

Dec. 26, 2011

MADRID — Even on a chilly Thursday afternoon in December, the old men, engulfed in cigar smoke and reading newspapers, were sitting around chess tables under tall pines. Nearby, a young woman had strung her line between the trunks of two mulberry trees to practice tightrope walking.

Behind her, hypnotized toddlers stared into a small oval fountain full of swirling water, and cyclists pedaled across new bridges with cement roofs that are shaped like upside-down canoes and also across a new steel forked bridge, an elegant nod to industrial-age steelwork, with a great view of the royal palace on its hill.

The park here, called Madrid Río, has largely been finished. More than six miles long, it transforms a formerly neglected area in the middle of Spain's capital. Its creation, in four years, atop a complex network of tunnels dug to bury an intrusive highway, also rejuvenates a long-lost stretch of the Manzanares River, and in so doing knits together neighborhoods that the highway had cut off from the city center.

All around the world, highways are being torn down and waterfronts reclaimed; decades of thinking about cars and cities reversed; new public spaces created.

Most famously, in beauty-mad San Francisco, the 1989 earthquake overcame years of entrenched thinking: the Embarcadero Freeway was taken down, which reconnected the city with its now glorious waterfront. In Seoul, the removal of a stretch of highway along the now-revived Gaecheon stream has made room for a five-mile-long recreation area called Cheonggyecheon. In Milwaukee, the destruction of the Park East freeway spur has liberated acres of downtown for parks and neighborhood development. Even the nearly-30-year, bank-busting Big Dig fiasco made Boston a better place by tunneling a downtown highway, though it was obviously nobody's idea of a stellar urban redevelopment project.

In New York, city and state officials are inching closer to tearing down the Sheridan

Expressway, a mile-and-a-quarter-long gash in the South Bronx connecting the Bruckner and Cross Bronx Expressways, perhaps to replace it with homes, commercial spaces, playgrounds, swimming pools and soccer fields arrayed along the Bronx River.

But Madrid Río is a project whose audacity and scale, following the urban renewal successes of Barcelona, Spain's civic trendsetter, can bring to a New Yorker's mind the legacy of the street-grid plan, which this year celebrates its 200th anniversary. That's because the park belongs to a larger transformation that includes the construction of dozens of new metro and light-rail stations that link far-flung, disconnected and often poor districts on Madrid's outskirts to downtown.

On my way from the park one day I came across Marisa Álvarez, a physical therapist, who told me that her commute from Móstoles, a sprawling, hard-hit suburb to the southwest of the city, took nearly an hour and a half each way before the new metro arrived. Now, it's 45 minutes. The metro had changed her daily life, she said.

"This is like new lungs for us," is how Pilar López described what the new park has changed in hers. At 73, she said she has lived for more than a half-century in an apartment in a housing project nearby, suffering the fumes and noise from the highway.

"When the highway was here, I sat on my sofa and watched television all day," she told me. "Now I feel healthy again because I walk with my friends in the park for hours."

During the 1970s, the M-30, a ring road constructed along both sides of the river, ripped a crippling gash through the city. Neighborhoods on both sides of it declined. Tourists had little or no clue this area of town even existed, and most Madrileños avoided it, save for trips to the soccer stadium of Atlético Madrid or along the highway, which turned into an infamous bottleneck.

That was then. Two centuries back, Goya painted bucolic picnickers in shaded pastures above the Manzanares. After decades of the highway, they're returning.

The park is still a work in progress. A stretch of highway has yet to be moved underground, and the soccer stadium needs to be torn down. The whole place, in barren weather, anyway, has a slightly rough-and-ready air, which is what you would expect, considering that Alberto Ruíz-Gallardón, the city's populist mayor (who has just been named Spain's justice minister), a conservative, ordered the burying of the M-30 before there was any plan for a park.

Only several years after construction on the tunnels had begun in 2003, with the inevitable traffic snarls provoking a political firestorm, did the city organize a competition. Various big-name architects proposed erecting flashy buildings. The winner

was a group of local architects, led by Ginés Garrido, who teamed up with Adriaan Geuze and his high-profile Dutch urban design and landscape firm, West 8.

They proposed no grand new time-consuming, budget-breaking monuments, but a suite of modest new bridges, along with the renovation of some great historic ones, amid a variety of green spaces. The park was to be generally informal, low-key and practical, in certain respects more American than European, full of playgrounds and ball fields and bike paths.

Most important, it would be constructed in stages. Every month another section could be rolled out. The mayor wanted to stand with grateful citizens in front of news cameras in the first section of the park before re-election day in 2007. He did. Public grumbling about traffic jams gradually morphed into praise for a new green space.

Of course Madrid is now just about broke, and Mr. Gallardón's opponents point to his civic improvements as one cause. They were indeed expensive, albeit a fraction of what the costs would have been in America. Pilar Martínez, who oversaw the park project in the mayor's office, told me that the official price tag of Madrid Río hovers near \$5 billion, all but \$500 million of it spent to bury the highway. Twenty-seven miles of new tunnels were dug; countless tons of granite installed to make paths and fountains; some 8,000 pine trees planted. A new, elegantly simple boathouse has been designed, and a 19th-century complex of brick and glass buildings, including a derelict slaughterhouse and greenhouse, are now being renovated to house art studios and a dance theater.

Add to this wading pools for toddlers that landlocked Madrid parents already fondly call "the beach," and a paved plaza, in patterned tiles, large enough to fit a few hundred thousand people.

New York has recently benefited from the growth and upgrading of its own parks, but much of the city's expanding public realm is now dependent on private investment. At the epicenter of laissez-faire capitalism, a skepticism about big government, a web of well-meaning regulations and opposition groups empowered by easy access to the courts combine to create barriers to the investment of public money in major infrastructural improvements. Change happens slowly and incrementally, certainly compared with what Madrid has accomplished.

The sort of visionary will that produced W.P.A. projects from which the country continues to benefit seems almost anachronistic. It takes the rare political strongman, like Mayor Richard M. Daley of Chicago, to push through something big and great that is entirely for the public, like Millennium Park, 24.5 downtown acres of cultural attractions risen largely from rail yards and parking lots. (And the State of Illinois is now contemplating a 140,000-

acre park, potentially the largest urban park in America, on underused and post-industrial land on Chicago's southern edge, but for the moment it's just an idea.)

Like Millennium Park, Madrid Río needed no commercial justification, though it is clearly a boon to business and development. It arises from a political culture that presumes public service is an end in itself.

"Now people who opened their windows onto the sound of cars, open their windows onto the sound of birds," is how Ms. Martínez, the Madrid official, put it. It's only a pity that the city also awarded Dominique Perrault, one of the celebrity architects who lost the competition, a late commission. Evidently nervous about leaving the project without a new architectural landmark, the government approved his costly design for an oversize footbridge. Wrapped in an immense, incongruous spiral of Mr. Perrault's signature stainless-steel mesh, the striking bridge blocks views and conjures up some giant antenna that has crashed in the park.

That said, a decade ago, bringing back the Manzanares River and the neighborhoods around it sounded impossible. As Madrid Río proves, the question for big public projects should not be what *can't* be done.

No. It's what can.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: In Madrid's Heart, Park Blooms Where a Freeway Once Blighted