

# Stitching the City – Valencia as a Laboratory for Democratic Infrastructure

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When the DANA, an isolated high-altitude depression, hit the metropolitan area of Valencia, most headlines focused on flooded streets, damaged homes and the familiar language of “natural disaster”. What went largely unnoticed was something less visible but just as fragile: the city’s democratic infrastructure.



Behind the scenes, the crisis revealed a double fracture. Institutions struggled to react with the necessary speed and flexibility. Citizens, meanwhile, mobilised with remarkable agility: neighbours organised via WhatsApp, volunteers appeared overnight, and spontaneous chains of care filled the gaps. It was an impressive display of solidarity, and a warning.

Valencia had shown an extraordinary capacity to improvise. But could it keep living in a permanent state of improvisation every time the climate crisis struck?

From that question emerged a multi-year experiment that has quietly turned the city into a laboratory for what its promoters call **Democratic Infrastructure** – and, with it, a strategy that other European cities can adapt.



## From heroic improvisation to democratic infrastructure

The starting point was an uncomfortable diagnosis: the DANA acted as an **accelerated scanner** of the territory. It made visible a structural duality:

- Public institutions found it difficult to act with speed, continuity and flexibility.
- Civic groups showed strong self-organisation, but in ways that were fragile and hard to sustain.

Between these poles appeared what we could call a **collaborative improvisation**: ad hoc support mechanisms, informal volunteer structures, chat groups replacing formal coordination. Essential in the short term, but too weak to serve as a long-term backbone.



The lesson was not that people lacked goodwill or creativity, but that they lacked **infrastructure**: the social, spatial and narrative conditions that allow democratic collaboration to be something more than a heroic exception.



So the experiment did not start with a new building or a new app, but with a question: **what would it mean to build democratic infrastructure with the same seriousness with which we build roads, bridges or energy networks?**

### **The strategic pivot: slow down, anchor, listen**

A first attempt to plug into the city's "Urban Sandbox", an innovation mechanism designed for quick pilots, quickly reached its limits. The procedures were too rigid, the time windows too short, the crisis too complex.

Instead of forcing the fit, we chose a counterintuitive move: they **slowed down** and **anchored** themselves.

Rather than working at the epicentre of the flood, we decided to operate from **Benimaclet**, a neighbourhood where they already lived and worked. An existing coworking space was repurposed as a hybrid civic hub, a **proto-Space for Encounter**.

Two core insights emerged:

- **Legitimacy cannot be parachuted in.** Working "on" a crisis territory without roots easily becomes extractive. Starting from a place where there is already trust creates the conditions for continuity.
- **Speed is not always an asset.** A deliberately designed **Slow Phase**, based on presence, listening and small-scale experiments, can be more transformative than a fast, highly visible intervention.

In practice, this meant using existing activities as a laboratory: schoolyard renaturalisation projects, community dinners, small markets and cultural events. These were occasions to test new ways of listening, facilitating and collaborating, without promising more than the encounter itself.

## Invisible Democracies and the Space for Encounter

As the Slow Phase unfolded, a pattern became clear. Valencia was already full of actors doing the everyday work of democracy: agroecological farmers linking the huerta and the city, cultural associations managing shared spaces, neighbourhood groups caring for those left out of formal systems.



They did not call themselves “democratic innovators”. Many would never attend a meeting on “governance ecosystems”. Yet any future resilience depended on them.

To recognise and connect this ecosystem, we launched the narrative umbrella of **Invisible Democracies**. Instead of inviting people into a new institutional process, they invited them into a story in which their daily practices, cooking together, maintaining a community garden, building a local AI tool, are acknowledged as forms of democracy.

This story is activated through three thematic “entry doors”:

- **Technology – Sovereignty**, through training and communities of practice around open-source tools and *Common AI* for collective problem-solving.
- **Food – Care**, through encounter dinners and collective paella cooking that use hospitality as social infrastructure.

- **Culture – Imagination**, by turning the coworking into a “covered plaza” for craft markets, second-hand exchanges and small events that sustain local cultural life.



Step by step, the coworking stopped being just an office and evolved into a **Space for Encounter**: a hybrid physical-relational node that acts as a coordination hub, project laboratory and connector between neighbourhood realities and broader policy agendas.

### **A living draft, not a finished model**

The Valencia process is still a **work in progress**. What exists today is a **proto-Space for Encounter** and an emerging coalition, with governance still largely held by the catalyst team. The next phase, starting in 2026, aims to accelerate this transition: launching a Youth Climate Cabinet, organising a major hackathon linked to the DANA-affected areas, and activating nodes in schools and libraries to form a recognisable ecosystem rather than a single isolated space.

What Valencia offers, for now, is not a finished recipe but a **living draft**: a way of moving from heroic improvisation to democratic infrastructure; from isolated initiatives to a pattern that other territories can adapt and improve.

The extended technical paper, available as a downloadable PDF, details the full seven-step protocol, the risk checklist, and the methodological lessons from this first cycle of work.