



# Contrachapada con alma

digital manufacture providing a sense of  
'home'

Steve Threlfall – We Make Places, Liverpool, UK

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## Introduction

What this document forms the proposal for the residency of Steve Threlfall (of We Make Places, Liverpool,UK), at Media Lab Prado in Madrid. Steve's residency is supported by The European Cultural Foundation, which initiates and supports cultural exchange and creative expression across wider Europe.

During his 4 week residency he will be working with communities and individuals of Madrid on a project titled Contrachapada de Alma (Plywood with Soul). The project will run side by side with the same process, to be carried out by a fellow artist/designer in Liverpool.

The main aim of the project is to explore how digital manufacturing processes can be harnessed to enable citizens to co-design and fabricate objects for their homes at the point of need. The focus targets beneficiaries who have limited or no financial resource to put their own mark on their living accomodation.



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## About the lead artist

Steve Threlfall is an architectural designer, teacher, artist, joiner and social activist. Most weeks, his work crosses all of these roles!

Over the past 20 years, his studio practice as a designer has placed emphasis on the participation of end users, designing schools, colleges, workplaces, social housing as well as retail. Accolades and awards have acknowledged the difference that involving end users makes.

Steve is co-founder and Director of We Make Places CIC, established to empower citizens and their communities to instigate place-making projects in their neighbourhoods. Based in Liverpool, We Make Places works alongside beneficiaries both on advocacy and physical delivery.

With Urban Workbench (an activity within We Make Places), Steve works alongside communities in the co-design and manufacture of interventions in public space and furniture for place-making in homes and community buildings.

Steve is also the educational lead for Interior Design at the University of Chester, having just written and delivered the first year of the course in 2016-17.

## The Project - The Contrachapada de Alma (brief overview)

Contrachapada de Alma aims to kick-start a new democratic process which will enable citizens and communities to commission and produce affordable furniture and objects for their homes, using digital manufacturing. With the use of a CNC router (Fresadora de Control Numerico), in both Liverpool and Madrid, we will work with communities to co-design furniture and objects from plywood. Our focus will be that the beneficiary groups will be individuals and families that would benefit from a 'starter-pack' of objects, yet do not have the ability to purchase them.

Our self-imposed limitation at this first stage of the project will be the availability of just one single 2.4m x 1.2m sheet of plywood to create a starter pack of objects.





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## Why just one sheet of plywood?

We are not looking to provide a full pack of furniture and fittings for a whole home. I believe that by setting ourselves the limitation to one sheet, we can distill discussions to explore those 'principle' objects that could provide someone with a personal sense of belonging. In conversation, we will seek to explore personal needs, rituals of importance.

We will explore those personal activities, rituals and relationships that are 'most' important to individuals and families that we speak to. Through this, we intend to co-produce products that the beneficiaries will feel an attachment to, which we hope will play an important part in their homes and will stay with them, even if they move on to another place. The products manufactured in this phase will be donated to the communities that we engage with.

In these present times of change and upheaval, when communities are being damaged by the politics of austerity in the UK, Spain and other parts of Europe, there is much soul-searching and reflection as we collectively realise that the model of 'consumption' that drives the economics of 'capitalism' is not working. For that reason, it is important that this project focuses first and foremost on human activity rather than the collection 'possessions'.



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## Where do we see the need?

We perceive more or less, 2 key routes to need:

- 1) Relocation** - This may relate to individuals or families moving on to somewhere where they have little or no furniture. They may be moving on from the family home or be displaced. This displacement may be through fleeing conflict/political instability (migration), or having to leave their home behind through economic insecurity. This final reason is particularly critical in Spain. In 2016 alone, as a result of austerity, more than 30,000 families were evicted from rented accommodation. The most significant demographic affected are single-parent families, headed by mothers \*(1). This crisis is not limited to Spain's rented accommodation. Foreclosures and repossessions of homes through mortgage defaults (many for homes bought in the pre-2008 mortgage boom) are hitting hard, where in 2014 70,000 foreclosure proceedings relating to dwellings were launched\*(2).
- 2) Community organisations** - Spain is certainly progressive when compared to the UK, when it comes to self-organised communities. Some of these communities may be established cultural communities, such as the Arganzuela Bangladeshi community in Madrid, or collectives of like-minded people looking for a sustainable, progressive, self-managed neighbourhood. Such communities are not limited to Spain's urban centres. Spain contains a considerable proportion of sparsely-populated rural space. The young settler community of Fraguas in the Guadalajara region, 90 mins from Madrid is re-building a long-abandoned village (whilst under threat of removal by the same authorities who claim to support a strategy to re-populate rural areas)\*(3). Whether, urban or rural, we feel that such communities could make great use of localised manufacture in their own neighbourhoods.



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## Why CNC?

This table, our first test with our CNC in Liverpool, uses material that costs less than €10 to source. It is assembled through slot and peg connections, with no additional fixings. Output from a digital file, the design can be customised. The cost (even taking equipment overheads into account), improves on the prices of the cheapest mass-produced tables that can be found in Ikea.

Sharing and improving designs in a digital commons community loosens the grip of the traditional industrial economy and considerably reduces transport and logistics. With just-in-time design and manufacture, scope for customisation (through design, materials and mixed media) we could easily have a craft revolution on our hands!





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## Our co-designers/beneficiaries in Madrid

We are looking at 1-2 co-designers in Madrid. The co-designers themselves will either be in need of furniture or be closely associated with those in need (through experience or culture). The project will begin with conversations around the project and exploration of activities and rituals of personal importance. A second session will use 3d imagery and laser-cut models to gain feedback and evaluation.

At the end of the residency, the co-designers can choose to take the final manufactured projects with them. The designs will be made available in the digital commons for sharing.



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## How will this manufacturing process be accessible to those who need it in the future?

I could choose to simply implement the conversations and manufacture of our first objects during this residency and be gone. Even making the designs available in the digital commons still leaves a wide open question: *With the outlay required for CNC equipment, how would this be an accessible and affordable form of manufacture?*

Firstly, there are CNC router kits available and this significantly reduces capital costs, utilising readily available manual router tools. There are also free software packages that will do the job for designing and output. To ensure a legacy and the take-up of this technology, it is essential that we continue dialogue, research and enabling long after the residency (In Madrid and Liverpool).

In terms of capital cost, Individual purchase of equipment is unrealistic in our beneficiary groups. What is possible is collective ownership in communities, supported by workshop access and skills training.

We will extend our work to establish both need and appetite prior to then supporting communities/neighbourhoods in the steps to establish their own localised manufacture. Dialogue with local municipalities and agencies for practical and political support we feel will also help to grow the project.

In addition to making designs available for the commons, more knowledge sharing will be needed to enable the project to multiply. To avoid this stagnating as a niche project within the existing maker communities, we need to demonstrate and share how it is possible to establish interest, raise funding and set up infrastructure (equipment and people).



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## Further background information



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## About We Make Places

Established in Liverpool UK in 2014, We Make Places CIC exists to empower communities to take control and spaces and places in their neighbourhoods. These projects are about reconsidering ignored, underused or condemned places in a new light, allowing them to rise again becoming healthy, happy, active and loved

Our tools for empowerment include:

- advocacy to community groups and third sector organisations
- community place-making (construction) – co-design, facilitation and co-build
- ‘Provocations’ – Offering visions for the city which bring citizens into dialogue and provoke decision-makers into thinking differently
- ‘Urban Workbench’ our project to use learning in making and construction and a means to bond people and communities, whilst learning skills of positive social activism

We Make Places was established by a group of friends working in co-design, regeneration and architecture. As citizens of our city, we recognised the need for communities to feel greater confidence to take control at a grass roots level, set against a backdrop of decades of social ‘displacement’ through effects of top-down decision-making and development, more recently coupled with the widening gaps in socio-economic conditions and municipal investment due to the UK’s politics of austerity.



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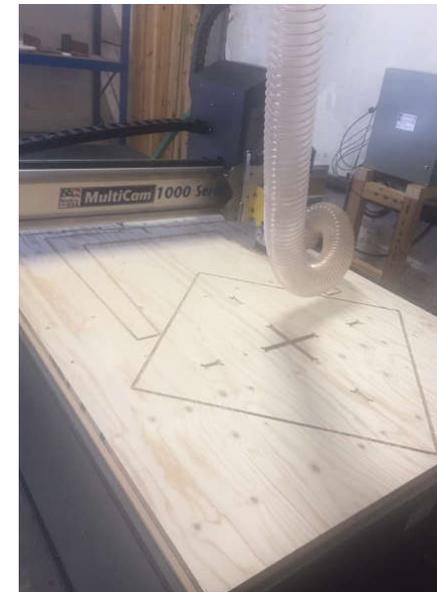


## About Urban Workbench

As a project within We Make Places, Urban Workbench invites local people to develop skills in furniture making, upcycling and construction, whilst growing their capacity to contribute to positive social activism. Our learning delivery and live projects offer a 'holistic' approach to skills development, with a primary focus on well-being and self-confidence of individuals and their communities.

Through our CNC digital manufacturing facility, we can be commissioned for the co-design and production of affordable and beautiful furniture for starter-packs, work-place fit-outs, plus physical structures and more. All profits are invested back into We Make Places to support our work within communities.

Contrachapada de Alma is an Urban Workbench project.



## The Flyover - where it started for us

Instigated by the founders of We Make Places, the Flyover was a 'provocation' in response to the Liverpool's proposal to demolish Churchill way, an elevated highway with pedestrian walkways and spaces beneath.

Our successful crowdfunding campaign delivered a participative feasibility study to investigate retention of the structures, proposing a unique citizen-led space for public realm in the city centre.

With the 'Flyover Takeover', 2016 saw the testing of the space as a cultural venue, with participative cultural events taking place across a series of 6 road closures.

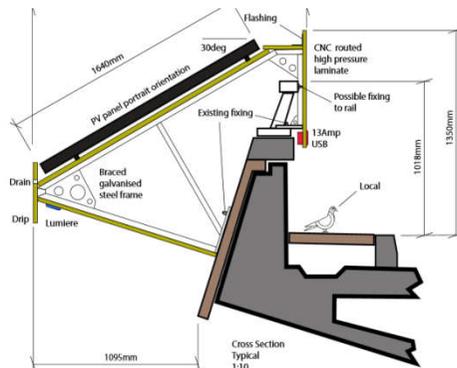
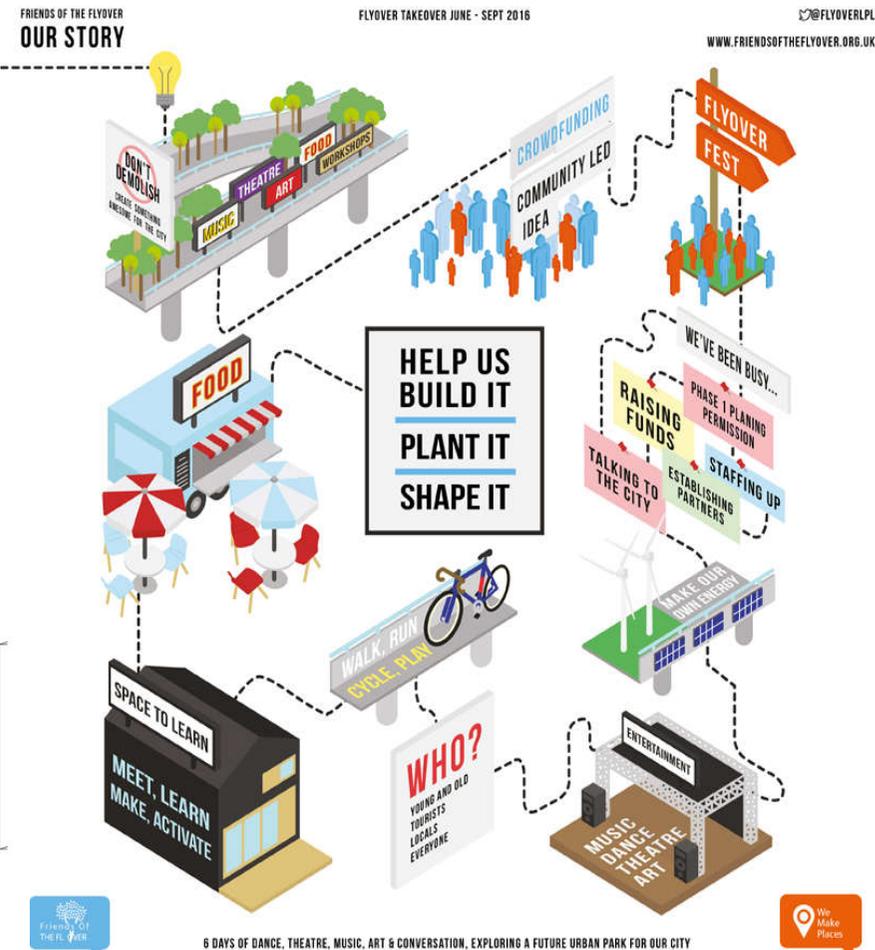


Flyover Takeover events July 3<sup>rd</sup> / July 31<sup>st</sup> 2016

## The Flyover - where it started for us

In 2017, with government funding, we have led a feasibility study into the creation of a sustainable energy scheme at the Flyover, with scope to provide light and power for public realm as well as supply surplus energy to neighbouring buildings.

Planning permission has been obtained for Urban Workbench to site a satellite making and learning base on site at ground level.





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## References/bibliography

- (1) Koldo Kasla, 'Evicted Rights in Spain: no room of one's own'; <https://www.opendemocracy.net/openglobalrights/koldo-casla/eviction-rights-in-spain-no-room-of-one-s-own> 7th June 2017
- (2) 'Almost 100 families evicted daily in Spain – statistics'; <https://www.rt.com/news/238349-spain-families-lose-homes/> 6th March 2015
- (3) Sam Jones; the Guardian; Fraguas: the revitalised Spanish village officials now plan to demolish; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/06/fraguas-spain-ghost-village-back-to-life-environment#img-1> 6th June 2017



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## Links:

We Make Places CIC

[www.wemakeplaces.org](http://www.wemakeplaces.org)

Urban Workbench

<http://www.urbanworkbench.org>

Different (Steve's design studio)

<http://www.differentstudio.co.uk>

Friends of the Flyover

<http://friendsoftheflyover.org.uk/>

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