

Public space and the right to the city

Public space in the popular neighborhoods of Colombian cities—developed informally—is often characterized by precarious conditions, the result of an also poor urban process. The pursuit of greater profitability by illegal developers—pirates, as called in Colombia—makes that although lots which are “sold” have the potential of achieving greater area homes; just the minimum possible public space is left. Thus, this ends up in narrow streets and uninhabitable lots because of topographical conditions or because they are too small to be “sold”¹.

This phenomenon has widespread in the formation of Colombian cities for more than six decades, and no urban planning, public policies of housing and land use housing management and its and programs, have managed to overcome neither the practice of informal urbanization nor the precariousness existing there. The process of legalization of informal settlements has lacked real actions of urban planning, which has been reduced to factual situation recognition.

If we review the formal housing developments, we note that, in structural aspects of urban and architectural spatiality, they tend to approach the poor quality of the informal offer, because even though public space is given according to urban standards it has not been in the best conditions. Added to this, it is clear that new urban developments are subjected to pressure from high densities, with which are able to improve the profitability and recover, in some way, what was given as public space. This is evident in the case of Bogotá, where the areas of housing programs have been reduced, while housing density has increased significantly in the last forty years (Tarchópulos and Ceballos, 2005). At present, this situation becomes a

sensitive issue given the current city administration proposal, which aims at a compact city and the recovery of degraded areas for the development of housing projects, although the deficit of public space has not yet been overcome. We have a city that generally has few parks and a large percentage of informal home neighborhoods in a more critical situation.

But while the debate on the future of Bogotá advances among theoreticians, politicians and technicians, the population living in poor neighborhoods is still subjected to very deficient housing conditions, with a public space that does not meet their recreation and leisure needs. The kids have nowhere to play, the young, where to play a sport and the adults, where to rest from their daily routines. Numerous studies have shown the correlation between chronic diseases and the absence of public space (Ceballos, Caicedo, Fernandez and Rincon, 2012), but in Bogotá this is a secondary issue, despite the associated health problems which are evident (Ceballos et al., 2011).

In this context, what are the options of neighborhoods citizens to demand their right to a friendly city that dignifies their existence? The channels of participation in urban planning have proven elusive, since the macro planning makes somehow invisible what daily life denotes. The inhabitants of these neighborhoods are aware of the importance that it has for their lives to have recreational spaces near their homes and they perceive a decrease in violence factors when young people have places for sports and children can play safely.

This was demonstrated in a recent experience that we shared with our students from the Proyecto Vivienda Popular² and our friends from the University of Costa

1 The quotes in the words related to the sales process are intended to relativize this process, because although they appear as a commercial transaction between the seller-buyer it is always relative, to the extent that the property firm is not expedited, as it is only given a promise of sale, with it, buyers must prove ownership and find a way to legalize their tenancy.

2 Subject to the second cycle of the career of Architecture, Faculty of Architecture and Design at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana.

Rica, in the neighborhoods of Caracolí in Ciudad Bolívar and Compostela stages 1 and 2 in the Usme locality. In the first, with the support of the social program Vidas móviles, from the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, we decided to listen to the local people, understand their problems and design with them a project to improve the small park which is attached to the small school from the National Police, Centro educativo Amigos de la naturaleza. In the case of Compostela 1 and 2 neighborhoods, where the University has a social program called Prosofi, which also supported us in this experience, it was developed a parallel exercise with another group of our students and teachers, as well as with the inhabitants .

For those who participated in this experience, it was amazing how the anonymous to urban planning expressed their needs, concerns and possible solutions. Workdays were shared with different results. In Caracolí, the joint work allowed us to reach a solution for the park's improvement which was concerted with its inhabitants, who provided ideas and work to make it come true. Simple but important actions: a path of access to the park made from recycled tires, painting the available playgrounds, painting the six-a-side football and basketball court, putting an additional mesh around the court, making a slide for the children who would use an abandoned rainwater tube—where often children were trapped and had to be rescued—, painting a mural with the kids in the back wall of a modest community hall and some flower pots built with recycled bottles .they were four intense days , in which students, teachers and community worked energetically with the hot sun, loading, digging and painting, to see, with satisfaction, happy kids “opening” their park with a “new face”. Our expectation: To generate in the community the ability to react to their difficulties with viable solutions, to make them understand that claiming the attention of the State to their problems is important and imperative, but acting is also important and it is not impossible. Sustainability and continuity of this action is in their hands and we hope to continue supporting them.

In the case of the neighborhoods Compostela 1 and 2, the experience was focused on an area selected by the community to design a park. In several days with the community, students and teachers identified the needs and alternative solutions. The students, divided into

three groups, raised ideas and the community expressed their agreement and disagreement with them. In this case, the design has been left in an initial stage in which we hope to engage the community in the process to make it happen, course of action in which we aim to accompany them.

It is not the University interest to replace through these actions the State in its obligations to the citizens , but to help communities build up capabilities in reaction to their problems to improve their quality of life and become citizens aware of their rights. The indefinite wait for urban planning to change its approach and review from the other side of the coin—the one which belongs to these other city builders—and to make the programs meet their most basic needs can no longer be passed from one generation to another without solutions. Causing a positive, critical and creative reaction will always be important to leverage democratic processes in the construction of the city. That is our commitment.

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