

Urban Peripheral Areas and Public Space¹. Bogotá Case Study.

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In the current debate about the living conditions that a city should offer to its inhabitants, the protection of public spaces as meeting places appropriate for the construction of citizenship, as well as its function of structural element of the urban spatiality notably stand out. Even though these principles of democratic organization and of urban space are now more tangible, they are not comprehensible when the citizen's vision in that regard is not considered as an important fact in making city planning decisions.

In Colombia the discussion about the importance of public space is very recent. The conformation of deficient urban space considered as public space in major cities is recognized as one of the consequences derived from the unplanned processes of urbanization but also from the impulse of the housing-urbanization processes with a considerable permissibility regarding urban planning legal regulations.

Bogotá, with the country's greatest urban population, has had to face these consequences within the spatial configuration process, especially in its peripheral areas. On one hand the unplanned settlements focus on obtaining the maximum advantage of the land, thus minimizing the area intended for public space. On the other hand the planned urbanizing processes², according to the flexibility of the urban law statements that aim on driving forward the construction sector as an important economic field, shares the same logic about advantaging the land. This is demonstrated in a recent study about urban patterns that underlie in these urban processes, because nonetheless considerable differences could be expected from essentially antagonic management procedures, equally leading to the construction of deficient public space, both in qualitative and quantitative terms. (Tarchopulos and Ceballos, 2004)

A common point considers that the reduction of the private space as being balanced with an increase of the public space, but in the case of Bogotá, this does not seem to be true. A revision of the legal regulations that have ruled the development of city peripheral areas shows an interest focused on private space areas, while the public areas are marginalized. An urban peripheral location area that for social-spatial segregation reasons, concentrates the housing production aimed at the low income sectors, in zones where balanced fair urban development has not been foreseen.

¹ The present document is based on the following studies:

TARCHÓPULOS, Doris. CEBALLOS, Olga. (2003) "Patrones Urbanísticos y Arquitectónicos en la Vivienda dirigida a los Sectores de Bajos Ingresos en Bogotá", (press releasing), Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Instituto Colombiano para el Desarrollo de la Ciencia y la Tecnología COLCIENCIAS, Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo BID, Centro Editorial Javeriano CEJA, Bogotá

CEBALLOS, O. CARRASCAL, Rodrigo (ongoing research), "La cualificación de la periferia urbana desde la construcción del espacio público en Bogotá", Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Instituto Javeriano de Vivienda y Urbanismo, Bogotá

² The **planned urbanizing processes** concept refers to the settlements in which the urban planning law regulations are applied, while the **unplanned urbanizing processes** refers to those that did not follow the urban planning regulations on terms of building and urbanizing license, unplanned levels of occupancy, poorly built, and others.

The tendency thus found is the reduction of private areas, an increase of built density per area unit (metric hectares), and a decrease of the space intended for public use. Nonetheless, Bogotá's Master Territorial Plan (Plan de Ordenamiento Territorial – POT-) recently adopted by the city, has been unable to change this tendency, even though it overcomes several faults of previous planning concerning housing activity in peripheral areas.

As for intervening the outer city areas, several upgrading programs have been developed and applied, which specially aim to unplanned settlements. These practices counted on the community's participation, for the creation of spaces where the population could be integrated on the task management and preservation of their public space. But planning has not tried to solve structurally the problem of deficient public space in these areas, so that the development of these programs is rather curative, specially regarding the situations in which the community is not taken into account when making decisions. Citizens engage in upgrading and maintenance actions of their very deficient public space to solve the problems created by an urban planning that does not provide them with a good life quality because it focuses its actions on other interests. As a consequence of this situation it is an impossibility to solve the lack of public space in these city areas.

The evolution of urban planning lets us see which have been the main concerns of the local government about this subject, derived from the macro-policy of the Colombian government regarding the growth housing industry's growth as an important economic sector for the country's development. This way of addressing the problem allows us to understand the relationship between the State and the society, and to establish whether there has been a general consent to control the decisions relating to the configuration of urban periphery in an efficient, stable, and legitimate manner. In other words, to recognize if a dialogue has been sought out between government, private sector, commerce, civil society, and local communities. And if, at the same time, a way of strengthening the society's civil organizations has been sought after, these are organizations created to deal with issues of public interest either directly or in association with government, in convergence and the negotiating partners.

The necessary starting point for this revision is the development and later adoption of the study about minimum standards for low cost housing projects (ICT, DAPD y DNP, 1972)³ which in 1972 collected the guidelines referring to the housing industry's economic policy, intending simultaneously to contribute to the solution of the problem of lack of housing for the lowest income citizens. Its proposal is based on providing urban infrastructure to be improved progressively by the promoter, and the building of houses by the users themselves; in the case of Bogotá, it contributed to the decrease of the number of spontaneous settlements. A sector of the demand was attracted to the legal production of low cost housing, because it was not put into practice exclusively by the government, but it could also be adopted by private promoters. The applicability of its statements for the peripheral settlements' development ruled during the next three decades.

³ During the 70's, Colombian government faced the growing housing deficit problem for the poorest, as well as an increase of unplanned urbanizing processes (within social and urban contexts) with the largest impact in Bogotá. This situation demanded the exploration of new alternatives for a better and more efficient government management, one of which alternatives was to be followed by a study of minimum standards for low cost housing in peripheral areas.

The study was based on the proposal of a theoretical model built on specific criteria items such as the increase of urban densities, the definition of an urban layout that would diminish the costs of urbanization and the creation of an urban structure allowing progressive development, all these to establish the minimum standards in the matter of urban design and public services. The model's viability was supported by the diminution of costs obtained when the basic principles were applied. As to urban development for housing, important aspects were considered, such as areas available for private space (enough for a decent housing unit) with a reduced percentage of public space and specifications, which would be complemented gradually until a level of normal developments would be obtained.

The urban standard principles were meant to cover either new urbanization projects or the upgrading of the existing ones that had problems coming from their spontaneous origin in infrastructure or in deficient communal built-services. The definition of a minimum area for the house plots (from 60 to 82 sqm), as well as a maximum level of occupancy allowed (maximum net density: from 70 to 100 houses by hectare) would let to reach the best advantage of the land in terms of total number of house units. The standards for pedestrian roads were included in the study, while the local administration had to set the vehicular ones. In order to public space, a reduced percentage was recommended (18% of the total urbanizing area), whose greatest percentage had to be located in a single land globe so as to conform a community center on a neighborhood scale. The remaining percentage was to be distributed with no specific guidelines. Referring to the community center, there was the possibility of public buildings so as to conform a civic plaza. And last but not least, public and infrastructure services were to be improved and well supplied until normal standards were progressively reached.

A point discussed during this study was the possibility of restricting design principles and how this could bring about the reduction of private areas and the increase of densities in terms of habitability. The conclusion to this discussion was that multifamily projects were not viable for the low income part of the population in view of its very high costs. Additionally, the urbanization works and the construction of the progressive housing units, would allow an acceptable standard of 10 built square meters per person, which would improve any overcrowding condition.

It is very clear that there was a lack of analysis of public space wherever it is considered to be an important structural element of urban spatiality. With the increase of urban densities the consequences in terms of citizens-space appropriation and sense of belonging should have been taken into account. Neither was there any proposal related to intervention on the urban processes going on at the time. Instead, the new urban model was attached to the one already existing with the goal of increasing the low cost housing offer without touching either the demand tendencies, or the voids in urban planning. The voids in urban planning were mostly on the absence of specific patterns that would regulate the urban spatiality on the peripheral areas of the city.

Indeed, these principles were written on the next Bogotá's urban legal planning regulations.⁴ To be able to get higher densities than those proposed on the previous study

⁴ There were Published: (local regulation) Decree 1259 from year 1973, through which were defined the urban design guidelines, complementing the very poor standards proposed in the previous urban planning

of minimum standards for low cost housing, the minimum plot area for “individual housing”⁵ required a front length minimum 5m and an area of minimum 60 sq m. The concept for “house grouping”⁶ was introduced for which the housing units had smaller areas as established in the local law regulation (Agreement 65 of 1967).⁷ On a way, the net density index was liberated on a certain measure, so that even with the maximum allowed, that is 100 houses per hectare in “house grouping”, there was a possibility of exceeding it with an average of 850 persons per hectare, without establishing a corresponding average of persons by house unit. If the previous study about the minimum standards had established an average of 6 persons by house unit, the resultant density would be 141.66 houses by hectare, a number that clearly exceeded the maximum allowed by the aforementioned study.

Regarding the streets system, minimum sections were established for pedestrian and vehicular ones, without considering a main street for access to each neighborhood. Regarding the areas intended as public spaces there was a greater requirement than that one contained in the previous study, (24.20%, of which 12.30% in green zones and 11.90% in communal zones.) with a minimum of 50% in a single land globe and residual areas of at least 1000 sq m.

Even though the percentage of the grouped public area was reduced, the management of residual areas was improved due to the reduction of the possibilities of their becoming just a “left-over” space. However, instead of what was proposed in the study of minimum standards, the conformation of a civic center that would help integrate the community was not considered. Thus, the public space lost its character as structural element for urban spatiality as outlined in the previous study. Additionally, neither Agreement 65 of 1967 nor Decree 1259 of 1973 mentioned any requirement or need of public communal buildings.

As a synthesis, at this point of city planning it may be stated that the modification of the model proposed by the study of minimum standards (by reduction of some aspects, exclusion of others or an increase of some percentages), surely responded to concrete demands related to profits on urbanization processes. Probably, the increase in densities, with the consequent reduction of plot size, and the use of the “house grouping” concept as an efficient way to justify profits, together with the apparent appearance of a greater residual area intended for public space, were not related to technical considerations but rather to those of an economic nature.

These are not the only changes on the initial model, which already had a slant towards the growth of the construction industry as mentioned above. In other successive regulations the tendency towards the reduction of the private space was outlined as well as the increase in net density of houses by hectare, with a small margin public space. In 1979, a new regulation by Agreement 7 was adopted by the city, with a concrete explanation regarding the control of city growth based on the increase of urban densities.

regulations that dealt with progressive housing developing projects. (Local regulations) Decree 1260 from year 1972, ruled all technical aspects dealing with public services.

⁵ This refers to those housing projects where no co-property tenure exigencies are required.

⁶ This refers to those housing projects where there are requirements of co-property tenure for communal areas and/or for the plots themselves.

⁷ According with paragraphs 1 and 2 of Article 29, within the “house grouping” it was permitted to reduce the size of the plots as long as the residual area was used for communal buildings and to increase the density as long as it did not double the basic one allowed on the zoning regulations.

The purpose was to avoid the urbanization on the agricultural areas surrounding the city. The public space was not recognized as a structural component of city planning, and the principles stated on the study of minimum standards for low cost housing were adjusted and retaken for the development of peripheral areas.⁸ This regulation, started off by establishing two different categories: nondeveloped areas and incompletely developed areas and defining specific actions in each case, therefore obtaining a greater precision in relation to the advance of the different and pertinent stages of progressive development, according to the situation of each urban area to be implemented.

In addition, this regulation increased the densities allowed (between 150 and 180 house units by hectare), with the use of the bi-familiar, whose minimum area was 60 sq m, the maximum 90 sq m and, a minimum front length of 5m. The areas intended for public space were considerably reduced as compared with those of the previous study (17%, distributed in 7% for green zones and 10% for communal spaces). In the same case of regulations n. 65 of 1967 and 1259 of 1973, nothing about communal equipment was defined. In Decree 1259 of 1973, continuity was required with the surrounding urban road system as well as with the surrounding neighborhoods. Maximum distances between vehicular streets (400m), pedestrian streets (120m) as well as between houses and roadsides (12m) were established. As a contribution in urban design, there was the requirement of a main access way, as well as a connection to some of the main city-avenues.

There was a clear relationship between the increase of densities with the use of bi-familiar houses and the reduction of the area intended for public use, with unfavorable consequences for the quality design of the houses. There were no longer projects with individual plots of small areas, compensated with considerable public space as in the “housing groups” of the previous model. Instead, a huge increase of the number of houses by hectare was obtained.

According to this, there was no compensation either in the private areas or in the public ones for the increased densities. The private area was reduced by the use of the bi-familiar unit and the public space lost a vast 7.2% in cessions from the net area. Aspects of easy manipulation to obtain bigger densities were then: the percentage of area required for public space, as well as minimum front length and area for typical plots. Concerning the plots, it is equally effective to play at reducing the areas through tricks such as the system of “housing groups” or the use of bi-familiar units for which there are clear regulations that generate advantages related to an increasing number of houses per hectare.

With the Agreement 6 of year 1990, new regulations dictated by Legal decree 9 of 1989 about urban reform were integrated, in which the area and social function of the public space are rescued. In this sense, Public Space is located in a preeminent place in urban regulations and backed with a will to protect it. As to the construction of the peripheral areas of the city, there were rigorous changes proposed for the process of urbanization by progressive development. In this case, the concept of progressive housing development (that was introduced in the study of minimum norms) was defined by considerations derived from the experimental management of it and, with the

⁸ The Decree 2489 was adopted from 1980 onwards with the goal of putting together on a single regulation all items related to progressive development urbanization.

complementary application of the same minimum regulations taken from the normal housing processes.

While reviewing the general constraints in urban design applicable to both urbanization modalities, important changes were found. For the individual house plot, front length and minimum area remained at 5m and 60sq m respectively, in the “house grouping”, plots of 3m front by a length of 11m for single family houses, or 6 m front length by 11m length for bi-familiar units were proposed. The densities were self regulated just as in the previous norm, becoming a result of the application of other norms.

As far as criteria for free areas which are components of public space, their rank was reduced (between 17% and 25%) in comparison with the one in Agreement 7 of 1979, clearly against the regulation’s general ideology which gave initial priority to public space. This meant a reduction of the area intended for public space of 4%, compared to the previous norm. As to urban design, new dimensional parameters for the area to be treated were introduced, such as the front – depth relationship according to proportionality criteria. The location of these areas was surprising, even if article 431 of the Agreement 6 from 1990 had forbidden the use of flooding zones or plots with slopes 25%. In paragraphs 1 and 2, the possibility of getting permission from local authorities to use those locations was left open.

About the areas for communal buildings, a percentage was stipulated for the area to be given over for public space (40% of the total area). Regarding the permitted uses, they were listed without any kind of guidelines for local authorities that would establish any designing principles. For the street system, there was mandatory continuity with the city and also with surrounding neighborhoods through the connection of the main avenues with the principal local streets, even if there were no definitions of the parameters for each case.

These new parameters made possible the increase of densities for single family house units, following again two key resources: the reduction of the plot area, and the reduction of the percentage of area to be given over for public use. The discussion about plot size for “house grouping” got out of control. This meant that it would be taken over by the house dealing commerce bringing the worst possible consequences in terms of habitability. Once again, it was clear that benefits were given over to the commercial sector, where topics related with the conditions of public space’s appropriation and sense of belonging were totally unknown. Instead, public space became an abstract sort of percentage to be calculated as an alternative for extracting advantage from urban land and not as a support of urban context and city life.

The POT of Bogotá⁹, introduced new concepts to obtain a more efficient urban local management. This document includes concepts of sustainability and stands for the defense of an urban growth keeping compact urban shapes. To reach these goals, it defines an urban model based on the concept of sustainability. Public Space, as structural component of urban spatiality is now being approached from different points of view: Main Ecologic Structure, Complementary Services equipment system, Built Public

⁹ This urban planning regulation was adopted through Decree 619 form year 2000, and modified by Decree 469 of year 2003 (Departamento Administrativo de Planeacion Distrital, Bogotá, 2000)

Spaces system and City Street system¹⁰. Several policies have been defined for each one of the systems concerning the improvement or upgrading of Public Spaces as a structural element of both urban spatiality and urban life.

As for new urbanizing projects in peripheral areas, the document adopts a range of regulations aiming at correcting the deficiencies found by the analysis of city growth and planning. The requirements for all new urbanizing processes now include a minimum plot size (10hectares for urban land and 20ha for suburban expansion land), and that must be developed within the guidelines of the proposed urban model by means of partial plans. This new planning tool (partial plans) allows intervention from an intermediate point of the main urban project to translate in a more specific way the general regulations of the POT. The specific standards for each new process of urbanization in the peripheral areas of the city will be defined in the partial plans. Additionally, this allows the possibility of proposing ways to implement progressive housing projects. Differing from previous regulations, the conditions for progressive development of housing are not predetermined according to concrete parameters, but they will be established for each particular case.

This new frame adopted for urban planning includes new concepts on the definition of design guidelines that will allow a better qualification of urban space. But it generates doubts regarding the real possibilities of obtaining a homogenous quality of specific city-planning aspects because somehow, all partial plans must fulfill the general parameters of the POT. In these parameters there are several advances in relation to the previous norms. In the public space aspect, the location of given over areas in flooding zones or in zones with slopes of 25% are expressly forbidden, as well as in the implementation of the different ranking scale of parks. The greater scale ones (metropolitan, urban and zonal) now require their own master plan with parameters of management and design.

As to the area to be handed over for public and communal uses, both the plots for individual units as well as those for house grouping must show an increase on the average (minimum of 25% of the total net area: 8% for public communal buildings and the 17% for parks, plazas, and tree-lined avenues). As in previous norms, a 50% grouped on single land globe is mandatory and the remainder must have a minimum of 1000 sq m. As far as the relation between front-depth of these areas, there are now parameters according to different size possibilities. In the case of zonal and local parks that result from new urbanizing processes, the promoter shall propose and develop their design and implementation.

Regarding the streets, their plan was assembled as part of the general street system responding to the different kinds of roadways. Due to a lack of guidelines orienting the new urbanizing projects towards a better integration with their immediate context, the definition of an intermediate street net must be established, with which it should be possible to overcome deficiencies in connectivity existing in the peripheral areas. There are also important design guidelines that will contribute to the development of new and better-structured projects; laying down parameters for the areas that each street net should frame, and defining the roadway contours required according to each street.

¹⁰ The area to be handed over by new urbanizing projects would be used within the complementary services equipment system, and the built public space system.

There is better level of precision in the guidelines for the streets layout defined by the new regulations. Different hierarchies have been established starting from access streets to the main, local and pedestrian ones. The complementary services equipment was classified according with its physical scale and possible social impact. Its design and implementation must be controlled by the local administration. The regulations regarding uses and covering-scales must be made according to the master plan. As for architectural design guidelines, volumetric shape, construction and occupancy index will be included within each partial plan, together with its corresponding specifications. The positive flexibility that the new regulations allow on the changing conditions of the demand for housing must be underlined. The recognition and definition of what is needed and where it is needed will be left to the master plans.

There is a noticeable relationship between the increased densities achieved by the use of bi-familiar units and the corresponding reduction of the areas given over for use as public spaces; this is having extremely bad consequences for the general quality of housing and habitability conditions. Thus, for low cost housing made up of single family units, the front-length and plot area were reduced from the dimensions that historically had been applied (minimum front-length of 4.5m and minimum area of 54 sq m). Concerning the house grouping system, the conditions of minimum plot area for individual houses were not defined, which means that it will be determined by offer and demand. A maximum density of houses by hectare was not defined either, but an occupation index was fixed according to the type of grouping.¹¹

Reviewing separately what was proposed for low cost housing by the individual plot system and the group formula there appear marked differences in this component. In the first case, it is possible to achieve a proportional relation between public and private space, even if it is not strictly regulated due to the requirement of a minimum plot area. This, together with the requirement of a percentage of areas given over for public space, indirectly regulates the housing densities. In the second case, the considered indexes of occupation may reduce the percentage of private area, this, added to a lack of requirements for a minimum plot area means an increase of densities and a dramatic reduction of the house area. In this sense, regarding the relationship between public and private space, especially in the case of the grouping system, the increase of the percentage transferred to public areas is insufficient and unable to guarantee its balance. Even if it is a convenient measure to provide a greater public space for locating the collective's complementary services required by the new housing projects, the unbalance between private and public space that will not either be compensated through the transferred areas is still there. ¿To what extent would it be possible for public space to play its role as a structural element of the urban space and as the social integrator that was proposed in the POT.

¹¹ As Decree 619 from 2000 /article 325, number 6, letter b), in the case of house grouping (applies for single family units or bi-family units), the occupancy index is 0.25 with no transferences and 0.30 with transferences, and a maximum construction index of three stories. Regarding multifamily housing groups, it is also 0.25 without transferences and 0.28 with transferences. The construction index on urbanizing net area was defined according with the size of the projects. Should they be smaller than 30 hectares, it would be of 1.00 without transferences and 1.55 with transferences. Within 30 and 50 hectares it would be 1.10 without transferences and 1.65 with transferences, and for those greater than 50 hectares it would be 1.20 with no transferences and 1.75 with transferences.

The POT proposes the context of a city model, in which a specific shape for new urbanizing processes stands out, with which it should be feasible to overcome some of the deficiencies of previous planning. But, the present inequity in the relation between public and private space shows an insistent interest in keeping a favorable situation for the housing industry but not for the citizens. In this sense, it is possible to say that the State has not changed its relationship with society while continuing a preferred dialogue with the construction industry sector, leaving aside civil society and local communities as a whole. These should be integrated to a common controlling organization for urban spatiality conformation.

The CONCLUSIONS

An overall revision of Bogotá's urban planning in the last the three decades shows an interest favorable for the construction industry as a profitable market, without considering the implications it has for the inhabitants. The public space in this context has not been assumed as supporting element of the city spatial configuration nor of citizen life but as a part of the components of urban development subordinated to the profitable interests of urban promoters. The adoption of standards for the definition of area percentages intended for private and public spaces has not recognized the citizens' needs in terms of urban life quality, nor its improvement. Somehow it is surprising that a substantial change has not yet been obtained in relation to what was dictated by Agreement 6 of 1990.

Even though the Local Administration has developed programs aiming to stimulate citizen participation in the management and maintenance of public space, its interest has been more of a "healing" sort when facing deficiencies of an urban planning that has not adopted actions pro public interests. As it happens in other sectors of national and local policies concerning citizens' participation. The general idea is that citizens must solve by themselves what the State has not been able to, not because it was unable to achieve its goal, but for lack of real ethic commitment with its social function.

The importance of involving the citizens in the decision making processes must not go unrecognized. What may be discussed is the level in which their contribution will take place. A city cannot be equitable when the decisions that affect its general development are concerted with a few social sectors directly interested, while the citizens of low income levels are left to deal themselves with the eventual solutions to their problems.

Specifically concerning the development of peripheral areas (and the low cost housing processes), it may be said that it allows us to understand how public space, not being recognized as a spatial and social structuring element, leads to the construction of a deficient, unequal, and excluding periphery. In this context it becomes difficult for citizens to build strong solidarity threads or to control their tendency to privatize the public space. A public space that has important deficiencies in both qualitative and quantitative terms is, as well strongly excluding by a basic principle of citizens' life. It will be then necessary to start from a really participative urbanism in which the inhabitant's needs and the inhabitants themselves would be considered not just as potential market, but mainly as citizens of a democratic country where socially viable standards would prevail.

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