Production, Use and Language of Open Spaces in Popular Settlements, Two Case Studies from Bogota

Jaime Hernandez
Newcastle University
jaime.hernandez@newcastle.ac.uk
hernandez.j@javeriana.edu.co

Abstract  Open spaces in popular settlements, like the housing stock, are to a large extent the product of local self help and self managed processes. It can be argued that these spaces play a significant role in the physical and social dynamics of the barrios. The aim of this paper is to discuss ideas of production and consumption of these places in relation to the people. The subject is explored under three themes: the production of informal urban space; the uses and connections; and the language of the place. Two case studies were chosen to explore the subject and present preliminary findings. A qualitative approach was employed and a range of methods for data collection. The paper concludes by reflecting on open spaces as physical and social tools used to connect people with the city and the urban life, mechanisms to interact with wealthier groups in society, and alternative spaces developed by locals to express their needs and expectations.

Keywords  Informal - Popular Settlements; Open - Public Spaces; Informal Urban Space; Everyday Aesthetics
Introduction

This paper is based on the ongoing study called: ‘Production and Consumption of Open Spaces in Popular Settlements in Bogota’. The research draws on empirical data from nearly sixty case studies the author has researched in informal settlements of Bogota in the last six years. Among them, six case studies were selected and studied further using a qualitative methodology; semi-structured interviews, observation, and mapping. Two case studies are presented in this paper; one barrio is in the first stages of development, Aguas Claras; and the other is in the process of consolidation, Danubio. The paper argues that open spaces in popular settlements play a role in building both physical and social relationships within the barrio and beyond through the way that locals interact with those places and each other. The paper explores how these spaces are produced and transformed; what the relationships are between places and people; and how the ‘language of place’ can be understood and interpreted.

The paper will first explain popular settlements in Bogota, followed by notions of open and public spaces. Just as the housing stock is largely self-built, open spaces play an important role in the physical and social dynamics of the barrios; by comparison however, very little attention has been given to them, in contrast with the extensive literature on housing. Secondly, the study methodology is presented, setting out specific methods and analysis tools used in developing the case studies. An analysis is then developed across three themes: the creation of informal urban space; uses and connections; and the language or a ‘different kind of order’ of the place. Finally, some observations are presented relating to the role of open space within the barrios and beyond and possible ways in which they can be understood are set out.

Popular Settlements and Open Spaces in Bogota

Popular settlements in Bogota normally display economic, social and cultural characteristics that are marginal to the core activities of the city. Both services and housing have often been developed through self-help and self-management strategies and attract very little support from public or private bodies.

http://research.ncl.ac.uk/forum
These settlements are established in one of three ways: the ‘standard way’ (the purchase of plots from public or private companies), ‘clandestine’ (plots are bought from illegal ‘pirate’ developers), or land invasion. Once the land is ‘secured’ (although not necessarily ‘legalised’, which can sometimes take ten, twenty years or more) a continuous upgrading process begins focussed on housing, urban space and facilities; settlements can transform themselves from a basic shelters and almost no urban space to elaborate two, three and even four storey buildings and a range of urban services and community infrastructure.

Peripheral areas, however, consist not only of illegal spontaneous buildings; there are also governmental programmes and more recently, private sector projects. In spite of some interesting developments, several new projects and improvement programmes offered to the people have serious problems in terms of providing what people need, expect and can afford. The community of settlers cannot depend on such projects, instead and whatever the origin of the settlement, they achieve full development thanks largely to self help practices; both in terms of urban improvement and housing upgrading.

In spite of being relatively neglected by public policies and practitioners, popular settlements are the urban reality and the future for a large portion of Latin American cities; and indeed could provide important lessons in terms of their richness, inventiveness and achievement (Brillembourg Tamayo, Feireiss et al. 2005). Reflecting on this assertion, the research intends to contribute to the debate on popular settlements by viewing them not necessarily as a problem to be bulldozed but as an opportunity to understand different ways of seeing and thinking about the city (Brillembourg Tamayo, Feireiss et al. 2005; Roy 2009; Brillembourg and Klumpner In press; Kellett and Hernandez In press, among others)

In these settlements, open or public spaces play an important role in the physical and social dynamics; and in the same way as housing are largely developed by local people. Contrary to some authors’ suggestions, outdoor spaces are important right from the very establishment of the settlement. Residents always ask where the open spaces and the urban facilities are going to be located even if the improvement and consolidation of such spaces may not be realised until many years later.
For Segovia and Oviedo (2000) public space is the opposite to private, but what defines this space is not ownership, it is use. Viviescas presents public space as the expression of the people, a place for confrontation and cultural production, the place to discuss the material and transcendent matters of individuals and societies, ‘the place to build community’ (Viviescas 1997: 5). Open spaces? Built Spaces? Private? Public? Communal? All of them are different and have different meanings. For the case studies in this research, I am considering open spaces as opposed to built ones. These are also distinct from public spaces; which as Madanipour (2003) points out, are ‘the impersonal spaces of the city’, which is certainly not the case in popular settlements.

The basic open space in the barrio is the street (Nino and Chaparro 1997). These are circulation areas and provide an extension to houses and shops, and playgrounds for children to play with others in front of their houses. Stairs are also streets, very important and very much used due to the steep topography in these areas. Other important open spaces in the barrio are those used for recreation and meetings (usually the functions are combined - a place can be as good for a community meeting as for a football game). Some spaces have no recognisable form, left over land not used for other functions. These spaces can be where material objects that give meaning to the community are placed, some self evident, a statue for example, others less readable, a painted rock where young people meet. Open spaces are the most important social places in the barrio; they are the place for cultural exchange and building values (Nino and Chaparro 1997; Viviescas 1997; Segovia and Oviedo 2000; Hernandez Bonilla 2001).

**Methodology**

The research is structured around the interrelationships between people and open spaces in informal settlements in Bogota; it poses the following questions: 1. How is open space designed, built, managed, transformed and sustained? 2. What is the relationship between these spaces and the people? 3. How can they be understood and interpreted?
A qualitative approach is employed as it allows the research to explore the subject within its own context; in other words, the context is as important as the subject of enquiry itself (Yin 2003; Corbin and Strauss 2008). Similarly, a qualitative approach gives the author the opportunity to incorporate the knowledge and experience gathered from an “intense and prolonged” contact with the field of study (as it is argued in Miles and Huberman 1994) over ten years of research and engagement with key stakeholders both within and beyond the settlements studied.

The Doctoral research is based on fifty seven empirical case studies undertaken from 2003 to 2007; from them, six case studies were selected to explore in greater depth during fieldwork carried out at the end of 2008 and the beginning of 2009. For the purpose of this paper two case studies were chosen to explore the subject and present preliminary findings. Methods used to collect the data involved semi-structured interviews, observation, mapping, informal conversations, photography, photo elicitation, maps and documentary sources. Data was organised by case studies and to a certain extent encompassed within the three key research questions. Draft analysis reports were prepared for each case study, then comparisons between case studies and further analysis was carried out.

The case studies chosen for this paper are Danubio and Aguas Claras, two barrios located in the south-east periphery of Bogota. Both settlements were initiated at approximately the same time, however their levels of consolidation are different and their open spaces, although sharing some characteristics, are different too.

The barrio el Danubio was developed on private and public land invaded by the first squatters at the beginning of the 1980s. The first squatters started dividing the land and selling on to families that came to the location looking for a plot of land of their own. The barrio was legalised in 1994, but in 2008 only around 50% of the 2,541 plots had ownership deeds. The example to be studied is the main park of the barrio (see Figure 1), although some references will be made to the main street and other open spaces. The park has two multipurpose pitches (micro-football and basketball), one playground with play furniture and several paved and green zones with street furniture. It is located in one of the barrio’s borders and the terrain is very steep.
Aguas Claras was developed through what is called: pirate urbanisation. The illegal developer bought farm land in the western outskirts of the mountains of Bogota in the late 1980s, subdivided it, organised the layout of blocks and streets and started selling the plots as urban building land. The barrio has not yet been legalised (2009) and is still a matter of dispute with the planning authorities. Water and sewerage was, and still is, organised by the community. Energy was made available by the public utility company soon after first settlers arrived and telephones were in use since 1995. Currently more than 300 families live in the barrio. The open spaces in Aguas Claras are the streets (see Figure 2) and two parks.
The production of informal urban space

“When we first arrived to Aguas Claras there were few houses, but most of the streets were clearly established. Our plot was marked out but was full of bushes; it was hard to clear it up and start making our first home. We did not know where the park was, but we knew it was somewhere”. (Interview with Maria, Aguas Claras’ resident, 2008)

In both case studies, outdoor spaces had a place in the first designs of the barrios, although their importance and use were realised after houses were initially developed. The location of the open space in both cases was marginal; in Danubio the park started as a spare piece of land bordering a stream that came down from the top of the mountain; in Aguas Claras the park is located at the edge of the settlement. The open spaces were located on ‘spare’ land were no plots could be sold because no houses could be built; however these places were and still are important to the people.

The processes of production and transformation in the settlement and the urban spaces have largely been in the hands of the community. In Danubio the park was built on unstable land, where the houses at each side of the stream were at risk of collapse (see Figure 3). The community organised themselves and, after several months and a lot of hard work, they ‘solved’ the problem. Although the settlement was ‘legal’ only a little support was provided by the municipality. Paradoxically in Aguas Claras, which remains
unrecognised by the planning authorities, public support was forthcoming from a community project fund called Pedagogic Outcome Works (OSP in Spanish) to improve the park.

The community and municipality are not the only actors involved in the production and transformation of urban space in popular settlements; politicians also play an important role. In Danubio local politicians ‘helped’ (in exchange of support in the elections) the community to build the park with resources and contacts; in Aguas Claras they ‘made the links’ to secure public funds for the park. Politicians were and still are a major force behind the development of popular settlements in Bogota, contributing to the ambivalent relationship between formality and informality, or legal and illegal:

“In this very same chair (referring to the chair I was sitting inside her simple house) two Mayoral candidates for Bogota (in different elections) were seated: Mr Caicedo and Mr Lozano. They have been very good to our barrio”

(Interview with Maria, Aguas Claras’ resident, 2008)

Transport and open spaces have played an important role in the development of these two barrios, in Danubio the Transmilenio (a rapid public transport system on dedicated roads) have changed the way people connect with the city; while in Aguas Claras the ‘busetas’ (small buses, see Figure 4) transport the people in and out of the settlement. The Transmilenio buses have increased the dynamism to the already busy main street of Danubio, creating and re-creating almost on a daily basis the use and function of the open space. The transformation and consolidation of the open spaces in Danubio and Aguas Claras is related to their use, as Harvey (1996) explains: production and consumption processes work in a dialectical relationship.

It can be argued as some authors suggest (Kellett and Hernandez In press; Lara In press; Segre In press) that there are formal planning processes in these ‘unplanned’ informal settlements. Both in Aguas Claras and Danubio an orthogonal grid layout of standard blocks is observed, with minor changes because of the topography. It may be seen ‘as the imposition of an ‘ideal’ social order through rigid planning which makes tangible in built form and space the power and value system of those in authority’ (Kellett and Hernandez In press). These unconscious planning ideas of the informal

http://research.ncl.ac.uk/forum
settlers could be read as a way of becoming part of the city by imitating other patterns in more affluent parts of the city; they ‘aspire to create conventional, legal, fully-serviced neighbourhoods’ (Kellett 2009: 3). Kellett also suggests that this can be interpreted as an aspirational journey from poverty towards prosperity, from the past towards the future, from exclusion towards inclusion and from margins towards the centre.

Figure 4: Aguas Claras’ bus stop

Uses and connections

“There are a quite large number of bars in the barrio, perhaps too many. People used to drink beer especially on Fridays and Saturdays, but any evening is good too. They buy the beer inside the bar, and weather permitting he or she takes the bottle to the pavement and a chair from the store [or in an improvised chair: a box for example] to drink and chat with friends” (Interview with Carlos, Danubio’s JAC president, 2008)

The main street is the centre of the social and practical day to day life of Aguas Claras. Most of the barrio dwellers get on and off the bus in this street and walk to their houses; making it a central focus to life in the settlement. This dynamic is emphasised by the location of two important meeting points at the two ends of the street. At the ‘top’ the last bus stop and at the ‘bottom’ a temporary Catholic church. The function of the street is completed by several shops. The big park does not have as much as activity as the main street; but it has a different kind of dynamic at different times.

---

FORUM Ejournal
and with different users. Similarly Danubio has a busy main street, which is also the centre of the commercial activity of the barrio and the only route in and out of the settlement. Here the park is arguably the centre of the social and recreational life of the community, a place to meet others, to rest from the daily activities, to hold sports and community events, but above all, it is the main place for children to play (see Figure 5).

Uses of the open spaces of both settlements, the same as buildings – outdoors interchange, are augmented by commercial relationships. In front of the bus stop in Aguas Claras, several activities are observed: people having a coffee and a piece of bread (‘un tintico con pan’), smoking a cigarette, making a phone call or checking emails/internet from one the cyber-cafés, buying from a street vendor, chatting with friends while waiting. In Danubio something similar is observed: there are a few stores in front of the park which sells snacks, ice creams and beers (among other things), ‘tiendas’ that make an important contribution not only to the social activities of the barrio but also to their economies (Coen, Ross et al. 2008).

Traditional games with roots in rural traditions are also found in the open spaces. ‘Tejo’ is played in Aguas Claras and ‘Rana’ is played in Danubio. Another similar reflection of ‘the village’ is a loud speaker located on the main street of Aguas Claras to make announcements from the Community Action Group (JAC, in Spanish), to call a meeting, to announce that
someone from the government is coming, to advertise a campaign or even to invite people to vote in the elections. In some Colombian villages, the loudspeaker can be also found but in the central park or square, close to the church, and it is ‘administered’ by the priest. These activities come from provincial and rural areas and they are found only in certain parts of the city, especially in popular settlements.

Consumption of open spaces can be seen as linking strategies; these connections may go beyond the settlement and the city and can often be traced back to local or rural traditions and even international trends. Connections in terms of use can be also seen through economic activities; ‘La tienda del barrio’ (the barrio’s store) is not only a trading place, but also a social centre for the community (Coen, Ross et al. 2008). Formal and informal economic activities, such as the street vendors, are all part of the dynamics of Danubio and Aguas Claras; and they can be associated with the centre of the city, where informal street trading is relatively common (Donovan 2008).

Other uses and functions of the open spaces can also be understood in terms of connecting strategies within the city and beyond; in Danubio and Aguas Claras at least three can be observed: religion, rural traditions and cyber cafes.

Religious traditions and beliefs play an important part in the life of the settlements, however, large scale use of church facilities is not observed. It seems rather that they represent something important, in other words, they have a more symbolic than functional significance in people’s expression of faith. This could be read as an aspirational connection with the city, in how people want to be, as they perceive they ought to be. They are not necessarily religious but it is important to have a church (see Aguas Clara’s church in Figure 6).

Rural games and the loudspeaker in the main street tell a different story, the aspiration here is to connect with the rural past, a past that in many cases is very recent.

Another connection that can be observed is the relatively recent appearance of ‘tiendas de minutos’ (cyber-cafes and phone calling stores); places where people literally connect with ‘the world’. Interestingly, these places transform into meeting points in the barrios (‘nos vemos en la tienda de minutos’, see you in
the ‘minutes’ store), as ‘social places for conversation and general conviviality within communities’ (Averweg and Villanueva 2009); and through the internet as ‘a window to the world’ where new ideas, trends and traditions are consciously and unconsciously incorporated into the everyday lives of the popular settlers.

![Figure 6: Aguas Claras’ church](image)

**A different kind of order**

“I love my barrio very much because I have experienced many things here, for example the first football championship where I took part. After that, teams always call me to play with them, it was a good fun” (Interview with Rocio, Aguas Claras’ resident, 2008)

First impressions, when observing life in the barrios, conveys a disorder, or a different kind of order. It is not clear where the boundaries of the open space are, the different stages of construction of the houses and buildings reinforces this image. There is rubbish and untidiness everywhere and the deterioration and abandonment of some parts of the settlement completes the picture. A second look however reveals a different picture, there is something going on, people are using the spaces, there is evidence of people making the place their own adding shops, terraces and windows to the space. First impressions of disorder and mess gradually becomes something
more interesting, wherever you look, you spot something unique, a bit different. The third level of observation, the informed and analytical one, is more interesting still; disorder is replaced by a different kind of order. The community uses and cares for ‘their’ places; however, it doesn’t stop them from complaining. There are places for community gatherings and events, and for informal meetings with family and friends. There are places where many of them have played and spent a significant amount of time in their lives, and for many, it still the case. These spaces are not perfect (in their words) but they are proud of them. They are under construction, very much the same as the barrios themselves. Diversity and a sense of incompleteness is observed, which may be interpreted as a different kind of order; as Lara (In press) suggests: ‘Contrary to the definition of the term informal found in the dictionary..., informal settlements have a formal architectural structure’ (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Danubio’s park: different kind of order?

Similar to other barrios, the use of colour in Aguas Claras and Danubio is intriguing; primary colours especially (blue, red, green and yellow) are deployed with dramatic combinations, making some houses stand out amongst the rest. Other ‘design elements’ such as diamond shapes, flowerbeds, window frames, doors, and front railings (see Kellett 2008) are also striking and make open spaces unique while contributing to the diversity of the environment. The unfinished and loose atmosphere of the
edges of the open spaces, the steep inclines, the colours and decoration of the buildings, the colourful washing hanging in windows and terraces (see Figure 8), the apparent disorder and untidiness all contribute to develop a unique language, a ‘special order’ and an expressiveness of place. How can this landscape be understood? Clues may be found in García Canclini’s work (1989) where he argues that Latin American expressiveness is built upon the modern and the pre-modern, the local and the global, in a sort of culture of hybridization. Kellett also offers an explanation suggesting that it is a language of aspiration ‘borrowed from dominant groups to which the informal dwellers aspire: a language of order, formality and affluence’ (2009: 5); producing what he calls ‘original copies’.

Figure 8: Danubio: facades and clothes hanging

Final remarks: connections or catching up?

Informal settlements not only represent a large portion of Latin American cities, but also embody a dynamic part of them both in their social and physical make up. These settlements are continuously changing, responding to both the needs and aspirations of the people who live there. It has been argued in some studies that the development of housing has been a crucial ingredient in this dynamic, undermining the role of open spaces. Evidence would suggest however, that open spaces have taken a greater part than initially recognised. Open spaces too, it can be argued, play an important
role in integrating the *barrios* and connecting them to the wider city.

Popular settlements are places ‘of aspiration and change’ (Kellett 2009), where choice and representation can be observed. The richness and creativity that can be found in popular settlements confirms the existence of a form and ‘design language’ in these areas: an “aesthetic of the favela” (Berenstein-Jacques cited in Fiori and Brandao In press). This language may be interpreted as a hybridization of pre-modern and modern (rural and urban) and local and global, as Garcia Canclini (1989) suggests; also as an imitation and aspirational journey (Kellett 2009). It is however this ‘original’ language that deserves to be studied further as it represents and mirrors the everyday lives of a large proportion of the population. Mandoki (2001) suggests that this expression of daily life is a subject to be studied, not only the elite forms of communication – both the poetic and the common ways. The prosaic can also have aesthetic values. Fiori and Brandao (In press) suggest that if spatial design and city planning were ‘...informed by the urbanisms of the informal, [they] could contribute to the creation of cities of greater integrity, inclusion and diversity’.

We need to be cautious about interpretations however, and understand places as they are, not what they could be or what we think they want to be. In other terms responding to Robinson (2006: 1) when she suggests that cities need to be understood as ordinary, ‘rather than categorising and labelling cities as, for example, Western, Third World, developed, developing, world or global’, In other words, consider them just how they are, which would also apply to informal settlements: “The ambition is to explore different tactics for promoting urban development. These would be approaches that release poor cities from an imaginative straightjacket of imitative urbanism and the regulating fiction of catching up to their wealthier [counterparts]” (Robinson 2006: 11).

---

1 Supported by the Programme ALBan, European Union Programme of High Level Scholarships for Latin America, scholarship No E07D 400261CO.

2 Informal or Popular? For the case of this paper, they are used interchangeable; however popular is preferred because in the Colombian context it is better understood, and also helps to avoid the tacit ambiguity between formality and informality. In the same direction *barrios* and *favelas*, two words from Spanish and Portuguese that are widely found in the literature on the subject, are used here to call these settlements.
Open spaces in popular settlements are not impersonal; on the contrary, they are greatly related to the users, to the community. Open spaces are closer to semi-private or communal spaces in terms of use; however, they remain public in terms of ownership and accessibility.

Photo elicitation is about using photos in the interviews to invoke comments from the interviewees. ‘Photo elicitation mines deeper into a different part of human consciousness than do words-alone interviews’ (Harper, 2002).

Parque was translated into English as park; however it may convey a relatively different meaning. Parque is both the cancha (football pitch) and the parque del barrio (neighbourhood’s park), in physical terms is a sort of combination between a square and a green area.

Municipal programme orientated to provide resources and professional assistance to communities wanting to improve open spaces in their settlements.

Both have been members of the Colombian parliament. Lozano is currently the Minister of Housing, Territorial Development and Water. Caicedo was the Mayor of Bogota for one period, however when he went to the barrio he was candidate for a second period. Neither Lozano or Caicedo won the elections.

This is a relatively new phenomenon in Latin American cities. See more in Averweg and Villanueva, 2009.

Tejo is a game played in teams or individually. It is a traditional rural game from the central part of the country, peasants, having worked the whole week and with money in their pockets, go to play tejo and have several beers.

Metallic rings thrown into the mouth of a metallic frog from a distance.

References


http://research.ncl.ac.uk/forum
