

“From utopian planning to lived experience in a suburban social housing community: the case of Ciudad Verde, Colombia”

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1. Introduction

Ciudad Verde is Colombia's largest social housing project, located in Soacha, a city in the southern edge of Bogotá (Colombia's capital). Although it is aimed at middle and low-income households¹, the project was designed and promoted under a similar logic of that of high-income gated communities: modern, enclosed, with ample green spaces, security, amenities and communal services, a "city inside the city" where you can achieve "quality of life" (Álvarez-Rivadulla, 2007; Cabrales, 2001; Caldeira, 2000; Demajo Meseguer, 2011; Girola, 2005; Low, 2003; Srivastava, 2012). Almost three years after its inauguration, Ciudad Verde is different from what was imagined: neighbors' noise is heard in the apartments, clothes hang out of building windows, walls are made more secure with electric fences and CCTV, and public spaces are enjoyed not only by the smiling families that were predicted in the project's advertising, but also by youth "gangs", street vendors; one can already see trash in green areas and graffiti on walls.

This paper presents preliminary results of an ethnographic exercise in Ciudad Verde as part of my doctoral dissertation, based on observation, interviews with inhabitants of all income levels and documentary analysis (of the project's advertising, policy and planning documents).

It suggests that in social relations among residents of the planned community, and even in the relationships between people and residential spaces, there are tensions between different ways of conceiving an "us" -a "living together" (Girola, 2013)-; and that these tensions feed on social and spatial imaginaries that circulate among urban policy, real estate narratives, and everyday practices of the inhabitants.

2. Utopian planning in Ciudad Verde: social and spatial imaginaries

¹ The residents of Ciudad Verde are households with a relative variety of socioeconomic conditions: from the beneficiaries of free housing (households in extreme poverty, victims of the armed conflict and those affected by flooding) to those who can access mortgages (apartments with prices between USD \$25.000 and \$ 65.000).

It is a project without precedent that wants to change inhabitants' city lifestyle by being an urban planning model, respecting the environment, and giving dwellers a safe place with all comforts within reach. (...) this large project has been thought as an urban model of a new city (...) a city with mixed land uses that reduces commuting from home to work (...) the project has been designed taking into consideration sustainable design principles, where car trips, pollution and long trips are reduced (...) Ciudad Verde proves that it is possible to achieve a balance between urban development and nature (...). Amarilo S.A and Ciudad Verde, committed with Colombia.

This is what the voiceover of Ciudad Verde's promotional video² says, while parading images of green areas, smiling children with their dogs in the park, perfectly aligned buildings, bike and pedestrian paths in which the new inhabitants of this citadel wander happily. Life in this "city within a city" is illustrated as the realization of the "dream of homeownership", typical of the imagination of a modern society where the individual is the unit of thought and action and where kinship ties are restricted to the nuclear family (Charry Joya, 2006; Salazar Arenas, 2008). The "modern life" shown in the video and in real estate ads relies on several elements that sociologists in the early twentieth century described as something inherent to life in the metropolis: the city as a sphere of individual freedom in which social ties imposed by the social structure are no longer rigid and social relations are reduced to multiple but ephemeral everyday interactions (Simmel, 2005; Wirth, 1938).

Despite being presented as a best practice in housing policies by the Colombian government, the project has been criticized by academics. While the government highlights the huge green areas, public spaces and facilities of Ciudad Verde and announces that it is every bit as good as high income housing projects (implying that the

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wx3riw1TaUo>

lower middle classes also want, and have the right to live the “suburban living” of higher income households); academics underscore that Ciudad Verde is too large and too far from the rest of the city, that the concentration of middle-low and low income households reinforces the segregated structure of the city, in addition to the lack of access of the project to the city center (Acosta Restrepo, 2011; Guevara, Guevara, Escallón, & Vargas, n.d.; Moreno Luna & Rubiano Bríñez, 2014). Less explicitly, academics also seem to equate gated communities or closed apartment complexes to inhibitors of community life, non-places (Augé, 1995), and their assumed incompatibility with the social life attributed to low income neighborhoods.

Unsurprisingly, I’ve found during my fieldwork with the residents of Ciudad Verde that neither the government nor the academics are completely right or wrong; that the expectations and lived experience of Ciudad Verde’s inhabitants have a mixture of assumptions and ideas from different social and spatial imaginaries that are circulated, negotiated and contested; and that they ultimately form part of the lived experience itself.

A social imaginary (non structured and non articulated understanding of our whole situation) involves specific notions of human sociability (Taylor, 2004). In the case of Ciudad Verde these imaginaries seem to be fed, as will be outlined below, by the narrative of real estate advertising (modern housing, modern living), the demands of horizontal property (living in community, primacy of collective interests above individual, strict behavior regulation) and a generalized disgust with everything that resembles low income neighborhoods (even when most residents previously lived there) and their associated behaviors.

a. Modern housing, modern living

In the ads of Ciudad Verde’s condominiums (with slogans like “The perfect blend of modern charm and nature’s simplicity”, “You’ll sleep better in your own home”, “More

than houses or apartments, we like to think these are bridges to make dreams come true” or “Making that your children have their own space to play is having the power”) one can see how the social imaginary of modern life corresponds to the spatial imaginary of modern urbanism, characterized by the design of functional and compartmentalized spaces for the nuclear family - a place for everything, which is why it is so important that "children have their own space to play"- and the inclusion of clear boundaries between public and private (Holston, 1989), which is ultimately the objective of horizontal property regimes.

Other ads highlight the "new lifestyle" proposed by Ciudad Verde: sports and wellness, enjoyment of nature, “architectural details that make the difference” and enjoying the place that "you have always dreamed". This notion of "lifestyle" has been analyzed in other contexts (Fraser, 2000) as a fundamental part of the imaginary of housing consumption as part of a modernization process, in which the concept of community is eliminated and social relations are restricted to the nuclear family.

Resident interactions in Facebook groups and interviews also show inhabitants constantly communicating their construction of what means (and should mean) to be a homeowner through social differentiation markers. These social markers are evident in two aspects of the resident’s lived experience: the *moral talk* (that I’ll address below) and social differentiation through behavior regulations, specifically in the form of rulemaking for horizontal property.

As Graeber (2015) calls it, we live in an era of total bureaucratization, characterized by the intromission of bureaucracy in daily life. Horizontal property and its behavior regulation is, in my view, a perfect example of how the “utopia of rules” shapes even domestic life. In the same sense as McKenzie’s *Privatopia* (McKenzie, 1994), homeowner associations in Ciudad Verde have in their hands a level of social control and even intrusion that no elected government could have. Just one example of this is the “cohabitation manual” (the community’s rights and duties, or rules of the homeowners association) of the apartment complex Frailejón, in which “external decoration of the apartments is

forbidden, only acceptable in special holidays like Halloween, Christmas and national holidays, in which the administration will coordinate a unified decoration for the apartment complex". The prohibitions also include hanging clothes from the windows, leaving personal belongings in communal spaces, children playing ball, skating or cycling in the corridors, and in some apartment complexes like Palo Rosa there's even a curfew from 9pm for children and youth. This social control is strongly supported by residents who align to the narrative of upward mobility through modern housing, even if that means losing some of their individual freedoms. It is in their words, the "culture of horizontal property".

b. Yes to community, but not *that* kind of community

The imaginary of modern life that appears both in advertising and in behavior regulation through cohabitation manuals finds its limit when faced with the need to manage the citadel as a "community". There has been an effort to erase the "community" from the social imaginary of the modern city (at least in the middle classes, because in social studies of poverty it has never disappeared), which now comes back in this specific form of residential spatiality: living in a gated community or in horizontal property necessarily implies the notion of an "us", of belonging to a collective.

The paradox here is that community life and sense of belonging are conceived as something that has to be taught to some residents (and this is why they have to attend workshops on horizontal property, citizen culture and cohabitation skills); and yet some behaviors that allude to a collective level between neighbors are valued negatively in Ciudad Verde: socialization of young people in the street, sales in public space, and "compinchería" (socializing, gossiping). There is indeed a need to live as a community, but one that does not contradict the imaginary of modern life too much. "Being a good neighbor" seems to mean "being able to coexist without interfering with others' private lives".

This paradox can be identified in conversations with and between residents, in which the evocation of forms of sociability linked to popular neighborhoods are interpreted as evidence of some inhabitant's lack of citizen/horizontal property culture. Through analyzing "the talk", we can grasp the moral charge of the social differentiation narrative of some residents.

Table 1. Excerpts from the analysis of the "moral talk" from interviews and Facebook conversations between residents of Ciudad Verde (own elaboration)

	Spatial imaginaries	Social imaginaries: "people", "the others"
Morally (-)	Public spaces: "Persian market", "center of Soacha" Private spaces: others think they're still living in "the hill", "inquilinato" (rented room, slum), neighborhood house. Comparison with "bad" spaces: Ciudad Bolívar, Soacha, informal neighborhoods, "favelas".	Bad neighbors, lack of culture, vulgar, barbarians, they "come" from certain type of neighborhoods, they "bring" vices and cohabitation problems. They have a "mentality of poor people" <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women: gossipy, "compinche" • Men (older): drunk, violent • Young men: "ñeros" (gang, drug consumers and vendors) • Young women: teenage moms • Children: dirty, out of control, unattended
Morally (+)	Citadel, urbanization, co-property, apartment complex, megaproject. Modern, green, ample, clean, ordered, safe, developed, beautiful, the space "we deserve".	Good neighbors, have citizen culture, horizontal property culture, sense of belonging. They protect the value of their property. Adults: want to thrive "salir adelante", progress, hard-workers, people in the process, doing their tasks, putting their life together. Young people: "de su casa" (of their homes). Leisure time inside the home or outside only for sports.

In their talk and interactions with other residents, inhabitants of Ciudad Verde show, certain disgust with practices linked with the popular housing imaginary. Lawler (2005) says that working class-ness forms the constitutive outside of middle class-ness. In Ciudad Verde, I have found a tendency to assimilate home ownership and modern housing as a marker of being on the way to a middle class existence. It seems, then, that the degree of

aligning with a modern living narrative is used in Ciudad Verde as a marker of upward mobility and moral progress.

3. Conclusions: utopian living?

It seems that the transition from living in rented housing in low-income neighborhoods to owning a home in a suburban citadel with high quality indoor and outdoor design is experienced by some residents of Ciudad Verde as a civilizing and modernizing process. A process that generates high expectations about life in this “dream space” – expectations that are built from the very entrance to the showroom, with real estate ads and with the narrative of the National Government -, and that at the slightest deviation from these expectations due to the undesirable behaviors of “others” (neighbors) triggers disagreements, friction, conflict and need for differentiation. The previous life, the “hill”, the neighborhood, the slum, then form a kind of counter-imaginary or a shadow concept - in terms of Strathern (2011)- that opposes but also gets mixed with the imaginary of modern urban life.

The case of Ciudad Verde shows that, in a utopic planned suburban community aimed at middle and lower middle classes, the problem is not really that the lived experience differs from the planned (it always does), nor planning mistakes or “unmet promises”. The gap between the expected and the lived responds in Ciudad Verde is also mobilized by the inhabitants to construct a social positioning in this new, socially heterogeneous world. In this social positioning, some frictions between neighbors, or between residents and developers, can be read as frictions between different social and spatial imaginaries.

The broader questions seem to be: How do people resolve collective life in a context that favors the individual and the private life and space, but where there is a practical need to function as a community? What new forms of sociality are these contexts bringing? I am starting to find some answers in Ciudad Verde, but I’ll leave them for the next opportunity.

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