

The struggle to belong
Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings.

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Housing and Belonging in Latin American Cities:
The case of Tunja in Colombia

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Abstract

Taking as reference the case of Tunja an intermediate city of Colombia, it is exposed how the suburbanization process starts with a regional infrastructural development, while followed by greenfields areas conversion contained by the existing urban fabric and the peripheral road. This new urban land is developed to satisfy mainly the preference for low-density dwelling of high-income groups, a residential pattern of controlled access and overall of space privatization.

Meanwhile, this new urban configuration is increasing the distances in between dwelling areas and the functional ones, which in the case of Tunja has being located in the traditional city Centrum. However, this expansion process has also started for business-related areas with the incursion of a shopping mall, which has visibly impacted the routines of the city inhabitants, suiting in a better manner the needs of the new urban and suburban Tunja.

Key Words

Suburbanization, rural land, social cohesion, public space

Introduction

The establishment of dwelling in the city periphery is a visible rupture of the urban versus rural paradigm, i.e. the emergence of the suburban lifestyle: dependence on motorized mobility, low density, service developments within residential units, among others is the delusion of the fixed limit among urban and rural areas. In this study case city sprawl is a growth allowed by a normative void in urban planning, since the city has kept its official area distributed in urban and rural, where specifications on land uses are only resolute inside the urban land perimeter and homogenizing the outer space. Although, urban life takes place in inner-city areas, and there still a traditional assumption that relates rural land to rural lifestyle with activities related to agriculture, animal raising, etc.; urban goes further than city (Lefebvre, 1991) and it has been characterized as another hybrid landscape.

Therefore, urbanization processes on peripheral areas of intermediate cities is a challenging trend demanding for a proactive planning that associates changes of lifestyles within its spatial needs, under the focus of smart urban growth in any context (Duany, 1997). Moreover, the case of Tunja in Colombia evidences how the weakness of the public planning profile in its fixed normative borders and distinctions inside the city limits could cause a chain reaction of gentrification and expulsion of the traditional dwellers. Since the new urban inhabitants are settled in enclaves that expel the existing rural life of this portion of territory, this neighbourhood confront demands for a public awareness and actions that advocates for social cohesion, prevailing over the private tendencies.

Urbanization and land development processes in Colombia

Nowadays, Colombian population is distributed between 75% urban and 25% rural, plus the main five cities of the country are the settlement of almost 40% of the national population, which was 42 888 592 in the official national 2005 Census (DANE, 2005) and currently, the estimation is 44 725 543 with a population growth rate of 1.15% (World Factbook, 2011). Thus, even if Colombia has a land area slightly bigger than The Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and France (1 141 748 km²), its urban system is clearly located in the Andean highlands region and facing the coastal line of the Caribbean and Pacific Ocean.

Furthermore, the national urbanization trend that augmented during the 1950's, due to different motives including internal conflicts, will persist by means of 1.7% urban rate of urbanization (annual rate of change, estimation 2010-15; World Factbook, 2011), accordingly the national statistics foresees that 88% of the population will be living in urban areas by the year 2050 (DANE, 2005). While this proportion goes in line with the worldwide tendency, (United Nations Development Program, 1996) the local responses show different assumptions to the urban growth, which in general conditions are the accentuation of the urban stain or its expansion.

In spite of this, a factual distinction is the time management to respond to this growth

pressure and housing provision, which goes from a blueprint plan standing out against tenant' spontaneity, this second one more familiar with the Latin-American character, i.e. the central government has stated that the country has a quantitative deficit of housing estimated around one million units. Given that urban land is not a critical issue (yet) for intermediate cities in Colombia, the urbanization processes have a tendency to the spreading out instead of urban re-densification, being the agricultural land adaptation a common strategy to boost up the urban land available with distinctive implications in the dwelling progress, because new housing areas must meet the demands for low, middle and high-income population.

Additionally, land development in Colombia has being customarily determined by economic interests that have shown a correlation of commercial initiatives and an informal housing offer, a social treat in every urban conglomeration, where the case study is not the exception. Paradoxically, this alternative processes are also responding to high-income needs of settling in the periphery, then informality could be understood, as an autonomous response to the accommodation requirements of all income-markets. In view of that, in some cases it is the only offer available and subsequently there is a high social admission to the unofficial and independent land developments.

Periphery in the case of Tunja

Tunja is an intermediate city located in the centre of Colombia in the Andean Highland Region at 2800 m.a.s.l. at 115 Km north, or two hours drive from Bogotá. Its administrative area is 121.4 Km², which 87% corresponds to rural areas and 13% is contemplated as urban county, this latter one is where 95% of its 171082 inhabitants (DANE, 2010) are settled and the remaining 5% live in the rural outskirts. Naturally, according to the municipality statistics, the urban density varies dramatically from 7630 inhab/Km² in contrast to 95 inhab/Km² established in the rural segment (for the year 2008). However, only in the last few years the suburbanization and its course of actions have started to modify the peripheral density of the city, and although low density will remain, clearly the future city census and its surrounding towns data will reflect on this tendency.

Functionally, Tunja's profile is a combination of a city campus condition, with more than four significant regional universities and the power concentration of being the capital of an administrative region, Boyacá. This region is acknowledged in the country for its natural and green landscapes attractiveness promoted through tourism and related activities; besides, it has a recognized agricultural productivity, which satisfies the food demand of Bogotá and has secured a rural profile in the majority of its territory. In this way, these shaped setting has kept its balance between rural and urban population with 16 urban centres that represent 51% urban versus the 49% conformed by 107 towns (rural municipalities), (DANE, 2005).

Briefly, the urban history of this 472 years old city relates initially by the colonial conquerors, whom overlapping the settlements of the natives in the region, established a place as many others in the colony, to represent a political, administrative and ecclesiastic organization linked with Spain (Romero, 2001). From that time, the noble city emerged in the historical centre neighbouring the "plaza", with the establishment of the aristocratic families in its surroundings and where the functional areas of commerce and leisure activities of this undulating city were located. On the contrary, the fixed limits of the city endorsed the imaginary that to settled outside the city' doors was the alternative for the poorest and excluded ones. Along this process, the introduction of the European culture is associated with the emergence of the urban way of living, and it was different from the one executed by the natives and later on what was determined as the countryside. However, this urban-rural distinction is still present, and is characterized by a rural life style (Campesino) with a preference for agricultural and cattle raising activities and the labour-specialized one.

Along its history, the periphery of Tunja was initially intervened by public actions to expand the city in the north and south direction, since the mountainous west is a natural limit and the east was the forgotten river path. During the first half of the twentieth century, the national government sponsored the location of the public university in the northern periphery of the city, a hub that attracted and developed its functional profile. Meanwhile, the upper society was moving from the plaza to the northern city Centrum border, this north-south growth was pulled also by the governmental housing institutions by building new neighbourhoods for lower and

middle-income population in the north periphery of the city which was very low-priced land, but leaving a big portion of empty urban land to be developed in between, by private developers in the coming decades. Even if those projects were initially criticized for being isolated from the City Centrum activities, these initiatives not only solved the demands of the city of workers, but also guided the city growth to this side of the city. In the course of the first decade of the Twentieth Century, the location of a private university in the area exchanged the dwellers of the neighbourhood from workers to students, reinforcing also this trend of spreading out the northern city.

Nowadays, the state doesn't solve directly the housing demands of the population, but it regulates where to establish social housing and controls the other dwelling construction process and location throughout the framework of land uses allowed. Thus, regarding social housing the preferred location still the periphery of the city, because of the inexpensive land, and the housing projects are much more simplified from the neighbourhood's creation during the welfare state, to a low-priced shelter solution more according to the Neoliberal orientation.

But, to live in the periphery does not represent the exclusion in that way anymore; infrastructural developments to connect in a better way the city to Bogotá and with the urban corridor of its region, are currently shaping the spreading of the city and the way of living it, because dwelling is noticeably following this path. Tunja is experiencing the "global" desire of the middle and upper class society, to settle in the edge of the urban condition, and individuals and organized sponsors are offering low-density dwelling options. These gated communities are nowadays overlapping the traces of the "rural periphery" of the city, vanishing the distinction of the urban limits and the starting of the rural land, besides the dispersion phenomenon of the "artificial urban or pseudo-rural" is displacing their lifestyles.

Likewise, the centralized hub of commerce, dwelling and urban activities has been altered, as well as the doors of the city have being removed and its urban-rural contour looks more like a transition than a limit. Even if, the city-centre still plays a very important collective role; the urban activity is not only responding to its attractiveness, because of some commercial and cultural activities transference. Furthermore, a recent mutation in the functional structure of Tunja, a viaduct linking

the centre with a new hierarchical road and the lately built higher-income housing developments, could be the evidence of how its Centrum (for more than 400 hundred years) is being displaced from the “plaza” to the shopping mall, transforming the notion of public space and the means of the urban experience from a pedestrian to a motorized one (since it’s the only way to access it and to go to their new homes), while changing the significance, use and relevance of the colonial urban fabric.

Specifically, Tunja evidences how the infrastructural developments initiate the opening and insertion in the urban system of agricultural land, afterwards a second phase is the exchange of land owners and exchange of uses from agricultural to dwelling, most of the cases the urbanization offer is originated by private promoters and then the high-income demand takes place, expanding the city and upgrading the neighbourhoods. The economic and non-social aim of the real estate market plays a vital role in this type of housing developments, not only due to this provoked low density housing on agricultural land, but also because it is advocating a collateral displacement of the rural way of living in the border of the city by the introduction of a new urban occupier.

Even if this suburban trend exposes clearly the desire for space privatization and reinforcement of individuality, it shows as well how the economic inclination of this type of developments isolates its users from the urban diversity and the public contact of those areas of the city by setting a restricted access. In other words, the evidence shows how the new enclaves are mainly solving housing needs, where the lack of mixed uses is leaving behind the commercial, social and cultural needs of its inhabitants.

In contrast, the new mall has assumed the role of container for gathering the suburban and urban collective, by introducing new commercial habits (i.e. scales of groceries consumption) as the hypermarket, which is the main attractor. Moreover it has also reinforced this mercantile attractiveness by adapting cultural performances in its inner public space. However, spontaneous youngster activities locate in its sidewalks, as an evocation of the mall as the “park” and some small local business are located across the street for the daily basis needs. Meanwhile, the traditional Centrum is still important in terms of administrative and banking activities, but its use has diminished

for non-functional needs, especially in late hours and Sundays. Although, its great heritage of Catholic churches complement and characterized the free-time oriented activities for Tunja's traditional settlers.

The gentrification process is evident in the northern part of the city, where high-income population occupies the new suburban housing offer, while the south side supports a regional rural connection of the territory through the food and met market. This place is occupied on Fridays, since very early in the morning by a varied group of peasants who sale and trade their products. Besides the commercial activity, it seems like the cultural and social urban space of encounter for the inhabitants of the towns near Tunja, an autochthonous trademark of the liveability of the marketplace.

Understanding the Latin-American society, for a "small city" like Tunja, as a layered social fabric where each layer was a cohesive part developed by the neighbourhood homogeneity and similarities, shows how an even more fragmented city that the one led by the Spaniards is raising. This dichotomy in the life style, the "status" differences of rural and urban, plus the apparent chain reaction of gentrification, could help us illustrate how the occurrence of the city is mutating from an open and pedestrian one to a more private and car oriented experience, where the main uncertainty is the role of the public urban planning, while the challenge is to figure out, if the artificiality of the public space generated in the new shopping malls is what will keep holding us together.

Since diversity in the periphery has arisen by this opposition of lifestyles, it is mandatory to recognize that this diversity doesn't mean interaction; on the contrary it could be leading towards fragmentation. So, the urban planning perspective of the territory must encourage a leading strategy for urban cohesion, where spatially, the role of the public could guarantee the mediation of interests among the community.

Urban planning as an academic oriented assessment

Initially, this exploration was focused on the correlation of urbanization processes and planning to support the argumentation on how this articulation infers in urban and

social cohesion. Moreover, the involvement of urbanization, “... *to urbanize is the process of becoming urban, the vanishing of a rural character of a territory or a population...*” (Chadwick and Pergamon Urban and Regional Advisory Committee., 1987) to sustainable development in the Latin American context is regarded as an opportunity to inquire on why the connected course of actions are led mainly by economic goals, while it could be set to establish better living quality for its inhabitants and the improvement of their habitat. Accordingly, it is assumed that “sustainable development” is a flexible process closely related to the integration of the local milieu and strongly linked to the spatial conditions of urban growth. Therefore, this statement should be seen from an integral perspective (social, economical and ecological) to clarify the conversion of “development” in the territory and overall to verify if this urban growth relates to social cohesion. Hence, the association of sustainable development to urban planning as the contemporary approach to intervene in a territory is a manner to recognize the relevance of this notion. Furthermore the understanding of “sustainability” far beyond its abstract conceptualization of balanced progress could be a keystone to integrate the academic debate in urban studies with the pragmatic needs of places and people, all people. Fact that is relevant for Tunja in Colombia, as an illustrative case for most of the cities, since they don’t represent the mainstream processes of globalized economies or lifestyles.

Also, it is important to acknowledge that in general terms “sustainability” is associated with the notion of time, “*development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*”, (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) and that means planning, more than chance or spontaneity. Although, the equilibrium between economy, ecology and the social sphere could be simplify as an utopian purpose of harmony; the concern is then on how the orientation of urban planning could be set through goals that aim for a proactive interaction of its multiple dimensions, to pioneer a practice based on the potentialities of the present lifestyles, the resources of a territory and its integration with the economical and external requirements and among them to respond to the global tendencies and pressures.

Conclusions

In conclusion, urban growth must be an assessment to strengthen equivalent conditions for development, if urban planning is associated to sustainable and cohesive community aims, as the Colombian normative has argued. So, if urban growth compulsorily means urban land expansion, it must involve the consequences of regional infrastructural developments, as the cause of integration of rural and urban land and life-styles, by means of the provision of dwelling and regional public services and access.

Finally, it is time to advocate the social value of the territory, the regulation of the uses in the rural periphery of the city means to protect the rural ways of living in it and to integrate them with the urban expansion, which definitely needs to promote a more sustainable option to have some control in its irreversible process of land activities substitution. Nevertheless, if suburbanization preferences are inevitable, it must be update the notion of urban condition “limits”, diminishing the habitat divergence of rural and urban inhabitants, while revising the segregated model of society inherited by the Spaniards.

Furthermore, a stronger public inference in spatial processes could improve its arrangement by assuming that the conceptualization of the territory is not only urban and rural land; but also public and private, to be driven in terms of city-region. Specifically, for Tunja this would mean to encourage a conciliation approach among the interests and needs of inhabitants who belong to suburbs, rural living and traditional city to establish a consensus of traditional and contemporary life-styles while advancing on an integrated city Centrum, periphery and region within the scope of sustainable local development.

To sum up, an argument to reinforce the role of an effective public urban planning is to incorporate long-term perspectives for the city-region focused on public space, since it could be the mean to lead to the possible social cohesion in its rural and urban areas, by ensuring its local liveability, presence of people using the same common facilities at different times, i.e. marketplace, shopping mall, city Centrum, etc. (Jacobs, 1961). Moreover, regional public space could be the articulation of the life-

styles involved, and the standing point to promote the wanted spatial effects of certain course of actions aiming for smart urban growth in a blurred urban-rural landscape of diverse lifestyles aiming to belong.

This paper is an initial advance on the examination on *Intermediate Cities Challenges: Land Development and Urban Growth in Tunja (Colombia)* part of the PhD Research Proposal *Reducing informality by the improvement of the organizational link of Land Use Regulations, Urban Land Markets and Social Housing*. Therefore, this leading argumentation for the round table will be a profitable encounter to revise this findings and its basis contained on the paper "The Role of Public Space in the City without Limits", which will be discuss in the EURA 2011 Conference.

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