Master plans and urban ecosystems: How the poor transform land-use from rigid into organic - A case from Colombia

Marcin Sliwa
Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Department of Architecture and Planning, Sentralbygg 1 Gløshaugen, Alfred Getz vei 3, 7491 Trondheim, Norway

ARTICLE INFO
Article history:
Received 9 February 2017
Received in revised form
21 March 2017
Accepted 16 May 2017

Keywords:
Land-use planning
Informality
Social housing
Urban poor
Livelihood
Latin America

ABSTRACT
In recent years, many Latin-American states have been increasingly involved in the provision of subsidized housing for the urban poor. These housing projects are usually implemented in forms of massive master planned estates located in urban peripheries. The focus on quantity of housing units built, as opposed to the good location, connectivity and functionality of the dwellings, impedes access of the residents to income-generating opportunities and reduces their socio-economic mobility.

This paper analyzes how residents in one of such social housing complexes - Villas de San Pablo in Barranquilla, Colombia - adopt and respond to these challenges in their own, informal ways. Building on empirical data obtained from interviews, observation and an enumeration survey, the author explains how the lack of jobs and economic opportunities in the area motivated many of the dwellers to convert their houses to accommodate different income-generating activities. Thus, this paper documents how a master planned project and its land-use transform from a strictly controlled into a diverse and organic urban ecosystem. The author argues for an urgent revision of the planning practices, inflexible zoning bylaws and outdated design principles that shape these “modern” affordable housing projects.

1. Introduction

With around 80% of its population living in cities, Latin America is the most urbanized region in the world. Some of the common characteristics of its urban areas are income inequality as well as informality in housing and employment. It is estimated that close to half of the working population in the region’s cities are employed informally (International Labour Organization, 2014) and at the same time, anywhere between 25 and 50% of Latin American families live in informal, substandard and/or deficient housing (UN-Habitat, 2011a).

In response to the prevailing issues correlated with poverty and inequality, numerous states in the region have more recently shifted from the neo-liberal policies of the 1980s and 90s in exchange for an increased focus on social welfare (Barrett, Chavez, & Garavito, 2008; Grugel & Riggiorozi, 2012; Yates & Bakker, 2014). The public sectors in Latin America specifically, have played a more active role in housing and labor markets through the regularization of property and workers’ rights, investments into public infrastructure projects, and an expansion in affordable housing units to confront the severe quantitative and qualitative housing shortage (Ward et al., 2015), though according to various corporate-friendly arrangements.

Particularly interesting in this context is the scale of the social housing projects that many of the Latin American states are building as part of the ‘new wave’ of welfare programs. For instance, in the years between 2000 and 2011, Mexico built up to 4.3 million new housing units, primarily in urban peripheries (Eulich & Villagran, 2013). Today, Mexico’s new subsidy programs help hundreds of thousands of workers and their families to access housing in more compact and better-located developments. Similarly in Chile, which has a long tradition of subsidized housing policies, since year 2000 the government has built around 100,000 new social housing units each year (Hevia, 2013). Many of the recent projects incorporate experimental solutions, such as flexible layouts, incremental construction and indigenous design (Aravena & Iacobelli, 2012). Despite political instabilities, the Brazilian government has also been able to construct 4.2 million new subsidized housing units, which form part of the My House My Life (Minha Casa Minha Vida) program launched in 2009 (Arsenault, 2016). The case of Venezuela is comparable. Since 2011, the Big Housing Mission Venezuela (Gran Misión Vivienda Venezuela) program built over 1.5 million subsidized dwellings, which provide shelter for
over 22% of the country’s population (MINVIVI, 2017). The ongoing economic crisis has not stop the Maduro’s government with its plan to complete 3 million units by 2019 (Telesur, 2016). Lastly, in the recent years, over 100 thousand new houses and apartments have been handed out for free in Colombia, primarily to families displaced in the armed conflict (Minvivienda, 2016), and this is only one of many housing subsidy schemes in this country. These and other social housing programs are usually implemented in massive, master-planned projects and play a key role in the transformation of the urban fabric and livelihoods in many Latin American cities.

Unlike the traditional social housing arrangements, which targeted public sector and unionized workers, many beneficiaries of today’s housing subsidies in countries like Brazil, Venezuela and Colombia are usually targeting the lowest income and the most vulnerable groups in the society, such as the internally displaced persons. At the same time, the labour dynamics in both formal and informal sectors experienced significant changes over the last decades, due to such processes as globalization and technological advancement. While housing markets in Latin America remained quite stable, people increased their working mobility and change jobs more often than before, which has a great impact on the distribution of welfare and repayment of subsidized mortgages. However, the socio-economic mobility of the recipients of the reformed subsidy schemes has not yet received sufficient attention from researchers, architects and decision makers across the region.

The project described in this article attempted to study the dynamics of livelihood strategies and the changes in land use in a specific case study area being a large social housing estate Villas de San Pablo (VSP), located in the city of Barranquilla, Colombia. The overall objective was to explore how the different planning, design, and management aspects of housing and the built environment affect the socio-economic situation of the beneficiary households, focusing primarily on the accessibility to jobs and income-generating opportunities. Cities in this context are seen as complex urban ecosystems, composed of humans, as well as the built and natural environments, regulated by a set of formal and informal laws, habits and practices. The conclusions from the project contribute to the housing debates in Latin America, and provide recommendations for the planning and design of subsidized housing, and the human habitat in general.

2. Methods and research design

The choice of VSP as a case study housing project was motivated by the fact that the main donor organization, developer and operator, the Mario Santo Domingo Foundation (FMSD, for its abbreviation in Spanish), promotes it as a socially, environmentally and economically successful model and has encouraged its replication in other places across the region (FMSD, 2014). On the other hand, the design, the location and the types of subsidies applied in the project constitute a rather representative example that shares many similarities with a large number of other recently built social housing estates in Latin America.

The collection of the primary data used in this article took place over two extensive site visits to VSP. The first one took place in July 2014,1 and the re-visit in October and November 2016. The data for analysis include both qualitative and quantitative information. Altogether, over 30 semi-structured interviews with local residents, business owners, community leaders and administrative staff were conducted. Photographs in conjunction with an enumeration survey and a map of the economic uses in residential buildings (Fig. 7) supplement the information collected from the interviews. Research for this paper also included an extensive literature review (summarized in the next section) and a revision of applicable planning regulations, building codes and zoning bylaws for the VSP project and the rest of Barranquilla.

3. Livelihoods and housing in Latin America

As already mentioned, housing and employment in Latin America are accessed through both formal and informal means. In case of housing, the main difference is whether the property rights issued to the occupants or owners are legally binding, usually by an official notary public seal. Formal employment implies taxation on wages, as well as certain guarantees, such as worker rights, medical insurance or paid holidays. Informal work arrangements do not include these benefits, usually in order to avoid taxation and other fees, which increase the actual costs or employment. In that sense, this investigation looks at how the transition from informal to formal housing affects livelihoods and, vice-versa, how do formal and informal jobs impact living conditions and housing arrangements.

‘Livelihood’ is defined as “means of supporting one’s existence, esp. financially or vocationally” (Random House, 2010). Livelihood strategies, therefore, are actions and approaches to secure income and ensure satisfaction of basic needs of a person or a household. In order to access shelter, food and other basic necessities, urban poor in Latin America still rely on the informal sector, which is embedded in social networks and oral agreements (Hernández et al., 2012).

Altrock (2012) explains how urban informality takes different forms and shapes, depending on two dimensions: the strength of imposed regulations and the degree of negotiated agreements. Street gangs and drug sale are perhaps the most extreme examples of non-regulated and non-negotiated types of informality. Nevertheless, most urban income-generating activities are ‘hybrid’ forms that have characteristics of both formal and informal arrangements (Altrock, 2012). For example, farmers’ markets might be formally regulated, but informally negotiated types of income-generation. Informal rental arrangements or extralegal businesses that are not officially registered, but operate according to commonly accepted rules, are examples of highly negotiated, yet not regulated activities. These formal and informal survival strategies have always been an integral part of urban livelihoods, and Latin America is a good place to study these phenomena.

Researchers who studied urban livelihoods tend to focus primarily on poverty and the intangible aspects of human, social and financial capital. It seems that little attention is paid to the spatial dimension, as well as the built environment, housing condition and location, as assets and constraints in livelihood development. This paper argues that, the study of urban morphologies and the processes of housing production is crucial in understanding the current challenges of urban poverty and livelihoods. Unfortunately, the decision makers and designers who stand behind the master-planned housing seem to pay little attention to the successes and failures in housing developments in the region. This probably results from: the persisting ignorance; the lack of initiative to update the old and rigid building codes and zoning by-laws; and the abundance of over-generalized theories on housing as compared to

1 The senior management at FMSD signs up to present at national and international conferences (including Habitat III in 2016), and invites representatives from different housing banks, donors and governments from across the region to show a very biased view on how VSP is developing and operated.

2 The main objective of the fieldwork was to study how the offer of fully subsidized Free Housing units for the displaced families impacted their livelihood choices and eventual return decisions. For more information about this investigation and its results, see Sliwa and Wijg (2016).
دریافت فوری متن کامل مقاله

امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات