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## **COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN LOW INCOME SETTLEMENTS IN COLOMBIA**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the relationships that are held in urban poor areas between architecture and urban development with the people who live in those areas. This research intends to explore, identify and analyze what kind of architecture and urban space is produced when people themselves, using their own initiative, develop their own environments; the above explained placed in my home country, Colombia. The article analyzes how residents produce and express their settings by means of local initiative and community participation processes, and suggest that these projects can be better than those produced by public or private plans in low income settlements. It also recommends the need to learn from this community production in order to enrich the formal practice of architecture and the development of public policies.

### **Keywords**

Low income settlements, Community participation, Urban environment.

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## **Introduction**

This Paper comes from the research work developed by the author, research that explores the relationships that are held in urban poor areas between the environment and the urban development and the people who live in those areas. It discusses the community participation in creating, transforming and in most of the times upgrading, those neighborhoods in terms of urban and environment quality. The project took place in Bogota, and it studied 28 cases in low income settlements. This paper presents the findings of the research.

## **Low Income Settlements in Bogota**

Low income settlements or Poor peripheral areas in Colombia are normally boundary sectors which are characterized by economic and urban great shortage of resources; such as the lack of urban infrastructure, proper housing and social services. The origin of these settlements are usually by one of the following ways or the mix of them: the “standard way” (purchasing of developed or undeveloped plots to public or private companies), clandestine (lots that are bought to illegal developers), or land invasion. Community of settlers that later, indistinctly their origin, achieve full development thanks to self build and/or self help practices; both in terms of urban improvement and housing upgrading.

The magnitude and impact of these sectors in Colombian cities is huge, because of the population they have and the portion of the city they engage. Colombian cities are growing –especially boundary sectors-, not only because of demographic factors, but also product of forced and voluntary displacement (the refugees initially settle down- in the main in a definitive way- in the periphery). Nowadays, cities like Bogotá more that 50% of the urban fabric has been developed spontaneously by the inhabitants without “interference” of any private or public planning institution. People themselves have built and improved their own habitat, have built and shared their dreams and ideas about the future, have built a community vision not always explicit but always “there”, have used formal and informal participation channels to achieve their goals.

No matter what the origin of a low income settlement is, the first thing the community is interested in, is in getting the basic infrastructure (water, light and sewerage) and the first roads to enter the neighborhood. After these first steps (that sometimes can take even decades), the interest moves on to the public space, the recreation areas and some cultural and social amenities. These services are basic to the people because they consider them as spaces of identity and symbols of their new neighborhood. There would also improve the image of the settlement and the sense of belonging. At this point the communities either start a community organization to get what they want or improve the organization they already have. In this research, projects under

those characteristics were studied, especially in terms of how community organization and action was crucial in order to manage and develop those projects.

The community organization in the projects analyzed is very similar, all of them start with a problem to resolve and a leader who gather the people. They organize themselves into groups or committees and look for advice and help from the “Junta de Accion Comunal – JAC-” (Community Action Group) and/or public and non governmental organizations; some of the organizations studied were actually the same JAC. Community organization and participation has a long history in Colombia, mainly because neither the public nor the private action actually reach to all the population, therefore the people themselves have to deal with their “own businesses”. Although there are many successful histories, some others just can not leave the ground.

## **The Findings**

During the research work 28 study cases in Bogotá were studied, in order to analyze how community participation works in habitat initiatives. It was also important to explore how people themselves build their own environments and what kind of urbanism, architecture and social links they produce. The cases studied were on public spaces (squares), pedestrian pathways, streets, green urban spaces and improving facades. After studying the projects and comparing the findings with the literature on the topic, the following themes appeared to be the most important:

### **Building Capacity.**

It is perhaps the most important common characteristic of the studied projects, the possibilities that the development of the project leave to the people. The knowledge, the methodologies and the management experience are tools that the communities acquire and there would be very useful for other projects the community may want to develop. In this part very much is related with the possibility of having any help, assistance and capacity from a public organization or an NGO. In some of the projects studied help came from the municipal program called “Obras con Saldo Pedagógico” or “Obras por tu Lugar”, which help was orientated in the form of courses and peers that accompany the community in the whole process.

### **Architecture and Urban Development.**

The architecture and the urban spaces that are produced as a result of these community projects, was also analyzed. The first thing observed is that the projects and the production is very much functional. The projects are related to basic needs in terms of mobility, pedestrian connections, children playgrounds, gather public spaces, and some with the image of the neighborhood (improve the “aesthetics”, as some said). The second thing observed is the simplicity of the forms used, the same as the “lack” of diversity in the design themes. In contrast with the previous it is worth to mention the use of decoration and the use of colors in different ways. Perhaps the formal production can not resist an “academic” or even a “professional” examination in terms of innovative design, however this production has at least two very important aspects, first it is what the people like and need, and it generates a great sense of belonging.

## Environment.

Far from the idea that common people just do not care about environment, especially poor people, what it was found give the opposite view. People care very much of the environment, especially in terms of the quality of the air, the garbage collection and the green areas. These three topics were specially treated in the projects developed by the communities, the first and the second because they identify them with health issues (respiratory and gastrointestinal problems), and third with the quality of the public space in their neighborhood.

## Identity/Sense of Belonging.

Together with building capacity, identity or sense of belonging is the most important issue that arise from these projects. Community feel those projects as belong to themselves, and it is traduced in the way they refer to them, the way the remember them, and very important, the way they maintain them (in most of the cases, but not in all). People consider those projects as symbols, when somebody ask about the neighborhood, they answer indicating that space. These projects are also where the people used to gather, use to stay, use to show to the strangers.

## Sustainability.

Sustainability is related with economical aspects and maintenance issues. The first, people identify with the possibility that this new space or amenity gives to make “business”, to place a shop, to offer a service. The second aspect in terms of the maintenance of that space, cleaning, protecting from strangers, gardening and so on. However, it is important to mention that not in all projects the maintenance was properly developed; in some it just was not done and with the time the project started looking deteriorated.

The community initiative projects showed a number of important issues:

- Public spaces are very important in low income settlements (and not the other way, as it is generally considered), due to the fact the very basic commodities of the houses; therefore the urban space replaces those facilities. Moreover there are the public spaces which give identity to the neighborhoods when the people themselves have had the opportunity to be involved in the creation and development of those.
- In similar terms it is possible to say that people create and develop an especial link to their territory, link that allows the place to be sustained by the community.
- Community organization is a crucial factor to a successful or unsuccessful project. In the cases studied, strong communities were more able to develop better projects; on the other hand, when community links were not very developed, projects were more difficult to achieve results.
- Another important issue is the possibility or not to have “someone” who help the community, both in technical and management terms. The relations with public and private organisms, the

same as participation tools, are also matters that communities do not have and if they do not count with help (NGOs, private or public consultancy groups) usually the project fails.

- Building capacity is perhaps the most important aggregated valued of these kind of projects. It is the “know how” that will allow the community to engage in other projects that improve their urban, architectonic and social life.

Finally it is possible to assure that community initiatives projects create important relationships between the people and their environments and between the people themselves. We can also say that, although there are not easy, these kinds of projects achieve much more that traditional way projects. We, as the “formal” urban planning approach, can learn and enrich our understanding and practice from the “informal” urban development approach.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

In Colombia community initiative or community involved projects are important to the communities themselves, but also for a qualify developed environment.

- Community involved projects have demonstrated that can build better environments; more suitable to the people, healthier for the cities, easier to maintain and “loved” by the communities.
- Community involved projects have demonstrated that there can also “build” better citizens; with superior community links, with higher social organization and with leadership.
- Capacity building is the main profit that communities obtain; given them the possibility for developing others projects to improve the quality of life.

Although the important advantages of participation, to develop projects within this strategy is not an easy task in Colombia The following lines express suggestions in approaches and tools to make this practice more achievable.

- In Colombia public participation is made compulsory by the planning process laws. Formal strategies and methodologies are being developed however the results are very poor, meanwhile informal strategies (in low income sectors) have had many years of developing but there have not always good quality results. It is necessary to work to find better approaches and skills to make “more formal the informal processes”, or to make “more informal the formal processes”.
- There is a need to work more in the local level, in the neighborhoods; more “with” the people and less “for” the people.
- Specific tools and community work strategies to make public participation possible need to be improved; there are some but still have to be developed to be more successful.

Experiences in Colombia demonstrate that “top down” and “bottom up” approaches can be met and find “middle” approaches is possible. Build the environment it is not only a physical matter, it is especially a social matter; therefore to involve the people in this construction and find the tools to do it successfully, seems to be the challenge to take.

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