

## Public space as a territorial linkage. Theory and application in a marginal urban community of México

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### Theme

Based on the concept of public space as a territorial link, we propose a method for the diagnosis and formulation of strategies which will allow for the identification of projects geared towards territorial recomposition. The diagnostic tool was applied in the area of

As a reference point for the identification of public space in cities we use, among others, the Global City Report, which states that in the last 20 years: *“there has been a growing tendency to surround communal areas, reduce or privatize public spaces and shrink them through the use of unsustainable practices”* (UN Habitat, 2016, p. 191). It is estimated that in newly-urbanized zones there is a loss of between 30% to 40% of the area assigned to streets and public spaces when compared to older and more established city neighborhoods.

In recent decades the urban policies and development plans which need to combine *urbs* (built space comprising streets, buildings and infrastructure) with *civitas* (the citizens who live and participate in the spaces), have failed to ensure regulated growth in cities and their environs and have not taken into account the advice of experts, not the needs of diverse social groups or organized citizen participation. On the contrary, precedence has been given to the specific economic and political interests in which power – whether public or private- is concentrated. These interests have viewed the changes in ground use and irresponsible use of urban real estate as fertile ground for economic and political gain. Through inaction or omission, these processes have resulted in cities and urban centers which are fragmented, incongruent, segregated and conflictive.



Confronted by the reality mentioned above, housing policies focused on affordability<sup>1</sup> have come second to and dependent on powerful interests. This has been the dominant scenario in urban planning in Mexico for the last 20 years, and violates the right of every citizen to have access to a home in a dignified urban environment, a home designed with access to basic services in mind. In this context therefore public spaces have a pivotal part to play in the unifying of different areas.

## **Objective**

The systematic study of public spaces and their physical arrangement involves the application of diagnostic methods and the planning of interventions in different stages in order to strengthen the idea of centrality. As an addition to this, micro-centers would be proposed, and these would consist of repurposed or reutilized urban spaces which combine the participation of both neighborhood and citizen organizations and which could become self-supporting if linked appropriately to local authority collaborative structures. The objective is to generate a diagnostic method to enable the conversion of public spaces to central urban centers<sup>2</sup> and with the aim of realizing this goal, the creation of a territorial development strategy.

## **Methodology**

The neighborhood of Santa Margarita was selected as the focus of the study, being a marginalized area in the Zapopan municipality<sup>3</sup> in the Guadalajara Metropolitan Zone in the Mexican state of Jalisco. This neighborhood exhibits a series of patterns related to deficits which can be observed in many Latin American cities, specifically urban areas which, although undergoing expansion, are in fact lagging behind and giving rise to significant levels of inequality and becoming marginalized areas with limited and poor-quality public spaces or no public spaces at all.

The study concentrates on areas of social deprivation, particularly the public spaces in these zones. For the identification and analysis of these areas undertaken by this study it is necessary to define public space conceptually as those public urban areas which are composed of both public and private buildings and where social networks can be developed and social activities take place and which can be considered as meeting-places where sustainable social development can be strengthened.

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<sup>1</sup> (UNCHS, 1991) United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat)

<sup>2</sup> The term 'link' is used in this work to refer to the dynamic condition of public space when articulating or linking two or more areas involved in the study.

<sup>3</sup> Zapopan is one of the eight municipalities which make up the Guadalajara Metropolitan Zone, Guadalajara being the capital of the state of Jalisco, Mexico. It covers an area of 893 km<sup>2</sup>, and has the second largest population in the state, with 1.243.756 inhabitants (INEGI, 2015). It is the seventh most populated municipality in Mexico. Zapopan has almost 30% of the population of the metropolitan area, with a total of 4.434.878 inhabitants (CONAPO, 2010).



Speaking in terms of purpose, public space as urban centrality is comprised of four visions: from the sociological point of view (*civitas*) public spaces are places to meet, socialize and for the construction of public and citizen opinion. The spatial point of view (*urbs*) takes into account the articulated centrality of urban life which takes place between both public and private sites. Mobility refers to the intermediary space in which pathways and containment intersect and finally semiotics is the element which is indispensable for the study, identification, exploration and understanding of the proposed area and its use.

For these four visions to be integrated, public space as a territorial link is identified by the application of two different methodologies, one of which is taken from the Center for Cooperation and Development at Oviedo University (Centro de Cooperación y Desarrollo de la Universidad de Oviedo (CeCodet)). In order to identify the lived experience of public space, I used the methodology of the New York-based *Projects for Public Spaces* (PPS) organization.

The analysis utilizes both spatial and social data to identify the relevant factors worthy of study, and these are subsequently further divided into distinct elements (social structure, physical structure, road networks, economy etc.) and transformed in such a way that the data can be shown as graphs with observable and correlating data. The information thus obtained can be used as a basis for strategy formation.

The application of the methodology at a particular site generates distinct actionable opportunities which can then assist in strategic territorial configuration by way of punctual intervention. For each one of these proposed interventions I present the diagnosis and proposals which are reasoned and laid out in detail.

#### Results and conclusions

The principal results are related to identifying possibilities for improving the conditions of the area through maintaining and repurposing public spaces, not only through utilizing their current characteristics but through maximizing their potential as corridors with the ability to link housing with public spaces of significance.

This article proposes that theoretical discussion is not sufficient to address the problem of public spaces. Even when the problem is identified and both its relevance and significance can be argued, other ideas and specific territory-based strategies are required in order for concrete action to be taken. For example, Habermas (1998) maintains that a significant element when dealing with themes related to public spaces is public opinion, and that the role of the user is fundamental. While acknowledging the importance of this argument, this paper concentrates on the technical methodological process involved in the diagnostic processes which allow for the development of



strategies which can subsequently be implemented in the field with neighbors and citizens through specifically linking the projects to social networks.

This article proposes that the quality of urban life can be improved by way of public spaces which can be transformed into urban centers or even microcenters and which can become agents of significant change. This method can simultaneously be used to understand the territorial and social condition of public spaces while proposing them as key loci of order and urban planning.

