Post-Disaster Reconstruction in Medellin Informal Settlements and the Associated Resilience Dimensions of Place-remaking

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Abstract

In urban planning research, studies that investigate the process of reconstruction after natural disasters in Latin American countries, and the set of resilience coping strategies organically developed by residents of these areas, are very limited. In Colombia, for instance, the lack of understanding on how these communities have reshaped the built environment through grassroots actions has amplified the gaps between the historical development of urban slums and the principles for the latest top-down participatory urban developmental strategies. In response, this thesis aims to reveal the process of development of an informal settlement, Villatina located at the Comuna 8 in Medellin Colombia that has followed a long process of reconstruction after a major landslide in 1987. The main resilience community aspects created during the reconstruction are unveiled and discussed against the backdrop of the outbreak of civil war in the 1990s, which significantly affected the informal settlements of Medellin.

Following a principle of sequential mix-method research, ethnographic field work was conducted for a period of six months in the community. Focus groups and interviews with residents, local leaders, and the local government were performed, and survey responses were collected. The findings revealed a long history of resilience represented by insurgent movements of space re-construction and territory protection (i.e. attempts of eviction and extreme violence) against the government. These movements gave rise to grassroots places that were built by the community. However, the introduction of a new 'top-down' model of development (social urbanism) applied in urban slums by the local government has halted community actions and the development of future grassroots places. To understand if the community has been disempowered by the government, the two types of interventions in Villatina (i.e. top-down and bottom-up) were compared in order to determine their main differences. The results have revealed that the underlying factors identified in grassroots places were strongly aligned with territory protection, community action and place attachment, which were absent in government top-down places.

These findings can be used to facilitate a discussion on the principles in which the communities interact and create their own built environment. These can then be used in slum upgrading programmes that integrate participatory design strategies. To this end, concepts grounded in planning theories and complementary fields (i.e. sociology and anthropology) were used to help this thesis to find alternative and progressive routes to urban development in these urban informal settlements.

Acknowledgements

This PhD work symbolises a personal journey that started in 2015 amid unforeseen events that, besides testing my own personal beliefs, showed me how to develop the conditions to create resilience after a disaster. This journey has brought the best and most inspiring experiences and showed me that the key to resilience is without the shadow of a doubt the feelings of oneness and cooperation. Those were the feelings that showed me the way to resistance, and faith and that, besides all the psychological pain that one can endure, there is always a doorway to transcendence. That door opened after the fire in 2015 when this PhD journey was only beginning to unfold. And it was there, in the darkest times where I understood the essence of 'resilience'.

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Glossary

Abbreviations

ACI	Agencia de Coperacion e Inversion de Medellin
CAP	Comandos Armados del Pueblo (Armed Commandos of the People)
CCA	Climate Change Adaptation
CTI	Cuerpo Tecnico de Investigacion (Techinical Investigation Team)
DRR	Disaster Risk Reconstruction
EDU	Empresa de Desarrollo urbano (urban development Enterprise)
ELN	Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (The National Liberation Army)
EPL	Ejercito Popular de Liberacion (Popular Liberation Army)
FARC-EP	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército de Pueblo (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army)
IP	Insurgent Planning
JAC	Juntas de Accion Comunal (Community Action Institutions)
M-19	Movimiento 19 de Abril (the 19th of April Movement)
PDS	Participatory Design Strategies
PUI	Projecto urbano integral (Urban integration projects)
PRIMED	Programa Integral de Mejoramientos de Barrios subnoramles (Program for the Integral Improvement of Subnormal Neighbourhoods)
UNAL	Universidad Nacional (Sede Medellin)
UVA	Unidad de Vida Articulada (Articulated life unit)

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