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THE VICIOUS CIRCLE OF SOCIAL SEGREGATION AND SPATIAL FRAGMENTATION IN COSTA RICA'S GREATER METROPOLITAN AREA

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Abstract: In Costa Rica around three quarters of the national population is living in urban areas, the majority of which is located in the Greater Metropolitan Area (GAM). The GAM is composed of four historic cities and their respective peripheries, which in recent decades have started growing together in a seemingly random collage of urban, suburban and rural typologies. A separation of functions on territorial scale has led to social, economic and environmental concerns. The spatial fragmentation is a reflection of the social segregation within society and at the same time increases it. This vicious circle forms a downward spiral of the quality of life in cities, which forces local governments, in collaboration with the inhabitants and the private sector, to search for more adequate and just models of living together.

INTRODUCTION

The spatial and social condition of the Greater Metropolitan Area (GAM) of Costa Rica offers two alternative readings: either from a neo-liberal point of view that sees the "irrigation of territories with potential" –an urban development left to the forces of the free market economy– as proposed by Koolhaas (1995: 969); or as critique of a capitalist society that has led to spatial injustice, as described by Soja (2009: 3): "Spatial (in)justice can be seen as both outcome and process, as geographies or distributional patterns that are in themselves

just / unjust and as the processes that produce these outcomes."

This paper focuses on the latter, analysing the shortcomings of the existing situation in terms of the accessibility to socio-economic resources and opportunities for all sectors of society, and the potentials to improve it. The concept of spatial justice is linked to the struggles related to the notion of the right to the city (Harvey, 2009; Soja, 2010), which was first developed by Henri Lefèbvre more than four decades ago, calling for the creation of more democratic and equitable cities (Lefèbvre, 1968).

Urban planning tools, developed to implement territorial policies, or a lack of both policies and tools, do not only influence how a city looks but also how the urban society functions, or does not function. As suggested by Lehman-Frisch (2011: 71) "a clearer understanding of the relationships between segregation, justice and space may help politicians and planners to design urban policy and progress more efficiently towards a just city."

At the same time, urban policy, planning and design should be reviewed constantly and critically in order to enable the right to the city for the majority of the diversified urban population, instead of them being defined by a powerful minority with their own specific interests, as pointed out by Wastl-Walter and Staeheli (2005: 2 in Attoh, 2011: 674-5).

For Soja, seeking spatial justice is a vital political objective and as he suggests, concentrating on a particular example of where and how spatial (in)justice takes place, helps to ground the search for spatial justice in socially produced contexts, from the global to the local (Soja, 2010). At the same time, contextualizing spatial (in)justice, as Soja (2010: 32) argues: "becomes to a significant degree a matter of locating it in the specific conditions of urban life and in the collective struggles to achieve more equitable access of all residents to the social resources and advantages that the city provides."

Following Soja's line of thought, this paper describes Costa Rica's GAM as a particular example of how and where spatial (in) justice is taking place. The vicious circle of spatial fragmentation and social segregation is analysed, looking at both its territories of potential as those of decay. The downward spiral of spatial fragmentation and social segregation has negative implications for life-quality for the majority of Costa Rican urbanites, including the (lack of) appropriation of public spaces, accessibility to urban services and citizen (in)security, which are all interlinked, as explained in this article.

COSTA RICA'S TERRITORIES OF POTENTIAL

Costa Rica is typically known for its agricultural products, abundant biodiversity, and protected national parks, which has made it one of the world's main destinations for eco-tourism. Nevertheless, today 76 percent of Costa Rica's population is qualified urban; well above global average (54 percent) but below Latin and North America (at or above 80 percent), the most urbanized continent worldwide (UN-DESA, 2014). The large majority of these urbanites lives within 4 percent of the country's territory (FLACSO, 2007): the GAM, composed of the historic cities San José, Cartago, Alajuela, Heredia, and their respective metropolitan areas (image 1).

The term 'metropolitan' is relative as it is both urban and rural; around 13 percent of the inhabitants of the GAM are considered rural (FLACSO, 2007) and the territory includes vast areas of farmland, as well as pristine nature. Looking at the GAM from above dramatically illustrates what Koolhaas described as territories of potential, or can also be referred to as 'airdrop urbanism' in

terms of a development defined by large scale private enclaves in the periphery that seem to have fallen from the sky without any further consideration of context, locational or site-specific parameters (image 2 and 3) (see also Davis, 2000).

The amalgam of the GAM spread out over 1758 km² (PRUGAM, 2009) measures roughly 1.5 times the size of Los Angeles, a global city known for its suburban sprawl characteristics and dependency of individual motorized transport, with only two-thirds the number of inhabitants (image 4). Its cities have expanded outwards to substitute rural uses, resulting in a seemingly random collage of scattered life-worlds: nature parks or agricultural fields now border high-end gated residential communities, slums, industrial areas, free trade zones, office parks or shopping malls (image 5). The historic urban centres remain as one typology amongst many and have to compete with their suburban rivals for inhabitants and investments (van Lidth de Jeude and Schütte, 2010; see also Molina, 2009).

An exponential growth in suburbia is mirrored by the decline of the former urban cores. The most extreme consequences can be seen in the capital San José, with 1.2 million 'users' daily[1], leaving behind a resident population of only 50,000 at night (FLACSO, 2007). The capital still houses most of the public sector institutions as well as public and private banks, hospitals, museums, cultural centres and emblematic architectures, but many historic buildings have been erased to make space for parking lots that serve the fleet of vehicles required by the rurban commuters. The modernist separation of functions, and the continuous mobilization of people it caused, has led to preoccupying levels of environmental pollution, as well as an extreme perception of insecurity in the contemporary low-density rurban periphery and the largely abandoned historic urban centres by night. Armed guards, dogs, cameras, barbed wires and (electric) fences have been instated to protect the majority of capsular developments and buildings. The image of Costa Rica as a nature and peace-loving country is contradicted and caricatured by its malfunctioning urban condition.

THE VICIOUS CIRCLE

The spatial fragmentation (e.g. functions separated over a vast terrain) is a reflection and physical expression of social segregation within society and the growing gap in the distribution of wealth; inequality based on class, gender, age, ethnicity or other personal characteristics; social exclusion (see also Pujol, Sánchez and Pérez, 2011; Alvarado and Jiménez, 2012; Pérez, 2006; Brenes et al, 2008); as well as the loss of social cohesion and consequent individualization of the local culture (see also UNDP, 2013). But it also creates a sense of fear (see also Alvarado and Jiménez, 2014; Huhn, 2009), thus augmenting the fragmentation of the rurban landscape, as it entails that people apply extreme measures of security (see also Quesada, 2006), abandon public spaces, and withdraw into their own –individually controlled– life worlds, which have spread so widely that they can no longer be reached by public services (van Lidth de Jeude and Schütte, 2010).

This vicious circle of spatial fragmentation and social segregation forms a downward spiral regarding life quality within the GAM, where a culture of solidarity has turned into a culture of individualism (less citizen participation and more social exclusion) and consumerism, with people spending more time in shopping malls instead of appropriating public parks and squares (see also UNDP, 2013). Moreover, public transport remains inefficient and

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1. Numbers from the Costa Rican Ministry of Transport and Public Works, 2008.

excludes them from certain urban services or leads to adults as well as children having to travel for hours each day in order to get to work, university or primary school at peak hours (van Lidth de Jeude and Schütte, 2010).

Together with the individualization of society, the reflection of social injustice on space, and the production thereof, is linked to the so-called 'right to the city'. However, this is not a uniform concept. Many scholars have written about the right to the city, focusing on different issues, including not only the right to high quality public space but also the right to housing, transportation, public participation in urban design, and citizenship in general. The question is: whose right is it and to what? (Attoh, 2011: 675).

Above all, the right to the city entails that all groups of the urban society should be able to plan, design and use 'their' city. It focuses on the injustices that have been created within the urban space based on socio-economic differences between urban population groups. Congruently, we look at it foremost as a collective rather than an individual right as expressed by David Harvey (2009: 23) who relates the question of what kind of city we want to the type of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire. The right to the city is a right to change oneself by changing the city, a transformation that inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power. This addresses the issue of how each person can influence the city and vice versa. It means looking beyond the frontiers of one's own property, it means looking at the city as a collective home and as a shared entity. Or, as Soja argues: "Fighting for the right to the city, as a demand for greater control over how the spaces in which we live are socially produced wherever we may be situated, becomes virtually synonymous with seeking spatial justice" (Soja, 2010: 6).

Although all population groups have a right to the city, the right of one group should not limit the right of other groups. These rights can however be conflicting sometimes as was also underlined by Attoh (2011: 677), who adds: "[…] the right to the city can equally be a right to collective power and a right against unjust collective decisions."

One of the most severe expressions of spatial injustice in the urban fabric of the GAM is the 11 percent of households (more than 61,000 units) located in areas that are classified by the National Institute for Statistics and Census as "predominantly precarious" (FLACSO, 2007: 58). The inhabitants of these territories live in overcrowded self-made houses of low quality on small lots along narrow alleyways that are often unpaved. Many of the precarious settlements start by illegal squatting of public grounds and in prone risk areas classified, by law, as not suitable for building (such as river beds or former garbage dumps), which implies potential environmental threats from landslides and floods. Moreover, they have an inherent lack of quality public space. It is especially in these cases, when social segregation leads to concentrated poor areas, that the question of justice should be raised (Lehmann-Frisch, 2011: 77), and efforts should be made to understand what makes them unjust and on analysing how to improve them.

USE AND APPROPRIATION OF PUBLIC SPACE

In recent years, in an attempt to revert the above-described vicious circle, some local governments have promoted projects to improve the quality of public space through illumination and urban furniture as well as the construction of new spaces like pedestrian boulevards, parks and playgrounds.

At the same time, there is a constant

privatization of public spaces or formerly public functions that are transferred to privately owned and thus exclusive spaces, such as shopping malls or commercial centres in the suburban periphery that have substituted the classical idea of public space as a destination to meet and share. Before their construction in Costa Rica, urban public life typically unfolded in or around the main quadrant of the urban centre: a square, often with a playground or soccer field, surrounded by the church, town hall, school, cinema, a number of locally run shops, eating places and a farmer market on the weekend. Today, almost all cinemas and many shops and restaurants are brought together in malls, separating entertainment services from political, religious and educational life. The malls appear attractive to the GAM citizens not only because they offer a cross-section of diversion, but also because they provide a feeling of security (through private security guards and exclusion of certain social groups) and protection against the tropical climate.

The majority of shopping malls and commercial centres are located in the outskirts of the historic cities, strategically positioned within the territories of potential, which increases motorized traffic and hampers accessibility for certain groups of the population. For the lower and middle class that do not own a car it is easier to travel through downtown San Jose, where most bus routes end or depart from. Due to the fact that there is no centralized public transport system, all individual transport providers try to get their share of the daily influx and exodus of passengers going to and leaving from the capital where the main avenues and streets are still full of shops, informal street vendors and markets during daytime (before people return to their dormitory enclaves). The upper class generally tends to avoid downtown San Jose and shop or work in the suburban periphery instead, where ample parking spaces and road infrastructure make it convenient to arrive and leave by car, ideally in front of the door or in a weather-proof parking garage.

The resulting transfer of economic functions from the old urban centres to private spaces in the periphery has reinforced the abandonment and loss of many public spaces in Costa Rican cities. Furthermore, important symbolic and popular squares and parks have been enclosed for security reasons (Quesada, 2014). Many spaces are no longer public (i.e., open at any time without restrictions), as they have been converted into fully private or collective spaces (requiring interested users to get permission, a key or pay a usage fee). These collective spaces are often administrated by a community association, which invests the collected money in security measures and maintenance. Although these can be read as positive aspects, a crucial side effect is the compromising of the original public space functions as areas for interaction and integration between different sectors of the population (see also Borja and Muxí, 2003; Carrión, 2004). In many cases, they become exclusive areas for a certain population group, thus increasing social segregation.

In other words, public urban space is losing its sociocultural functions and meanings (see also Low, 2000). The privatization of public space contradicts many of the principles of the right to the city that "implies the right to the uses of the city spaces, the right to inhabit." (Mitchell, 2003: 19. See also Purcell, 2002 and Marcuse, 2009). It also contradicts the right to participation and appropriation, which "includes the right of inhabitants to physically access, occupy, and use urban space." (Purcell, 2002: 102). As Mitchell (2003: 34) states: "In a world defined by private property, public space (as the space for representation) takes an exceptional importance." With the privatization of the public space, the multi-

functionality of public spaces that in theory should allow different social groups to interact and be brought together is lost (Lehman-Frisch, 2011: 84).

This apparent new power of the private sphere over the city, raises questions about what the original public space has ever been and whether this space still exists at all (or if it has been replaced by other configurations). Borret (2008: 304) analyses past and current perceptions of how the city is organized: "Although the public / private dichotomy is casually applied, this pair of concepts is less obvious or monolithic than it seems. We should constantly remind ourselves that public and private are relative terms that only gain meaning through contrast, that they can't simply be consolidated spatially, and that they cover a great variety of definitions and ideologies."

In the GAM, sports fields, playgrounds, parks, squares, and other public recreational spaces do exist in all communities, but they are underused and often not properly maintained. The lack of interest or capacities to activate these spaces has several reasons. Above all, it is owed to the lack of densities and spatial relationships between private developments and public spaces, including the fact that private developments have their own exclusive spaces for recreational purposes.

Further problems are the inaccessibility of public spaces due to the absence or poor quality of sidewalks (whose construction and maintenance is the responsibility of the adjacent land owner according to Costa Rican law), littering as well as a general lack of urban furniture and attractors (such as benches, art, lighting, public telephones). Another important reason is that due to underutilization certain socially excluded groups (such as the homeless) have appropriated some of the public spaces, which has generated a general perception of insecurity regarding these places (van Lidth de Jeude and Schütte, 2010). This situation confronts us with yet another vicious circle, because the appropriation by the excluded is also promoted by the fact that the majority of the population neglects these public spaces and goods.

The abandonment of public spaces is strongly related to the topic of citizen (in) security. Some people (especially women who are disproportionately affected by issues of insecurity and violence) avoid them for fear of attacks or theft. As indicated by Lynch (1961: 4-5), emotional security (the sense of security) and the actual security increase when the atmosphere is legible, distinctive, familiar, known. In other words, something as simple as improving lighting in public spaces may have a significant impact, in particular because emotional security is key to identification with the city (or neighbourhood), a situation that stimulates the inhabitants to take care of the place and feel that the environment is safe.

CITIZEN (IN)SECURITY

Going hand in hand with the transformation of the urban public domain, one of the most striking characteristics of today's cities and suburban neighbourhoods in the GAM is the high presence of security measures. Shops, offices and private homes are protected with iron gates, fences (often topped by barbed wire), alarm installations, surveillance cameras and armed security guards patrolling the sites. The perceived image of the city occasionally resembles a conflict zone or a prison at urban scale; even more so in the mono-functional suburban office parks, free trade zones and gated communities, where this type of fortification is most extreme (van Lidth de Jeude and Schütte, 2010).

Vargas and Rosero (2004) showed that fear of a robbery is the main reason to never let the house alone (more than 75 percent of

GAM households took this decision in recent years). The next three protection measures also imply investment of resources or changes in lifestyles: improving the safety of the house (almost 50 percent), not attending social activities (over 30 percent), paying a private security service (almost 30 percent). Nearly 8 percent had recently purchased a firearm.

The research by Vargas and Rosero (2004: 79-82) also shows that the Costa Rican population believes delinquency is a threat for the country: an almost unanimous perception, well above countries with much higher levels of criminal violence, such as Colombia, Mexico or Guatemala (see also Huhn, 2009). Until today, perceived insecurity by the Costa Rican population "is the most intense in Central America […] although the objective levels of criminal violence are the lowest of the isthmus" (State of the Nation, 2012: 96).

According to a recent study from the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INEC, 2015), 'victimization' in Costa Rica has maintained similar levels since 2010 and even decreased considerably in comparison with 2008 (affecting 20 percent of all households in 2014 and 28 percent in 2008). It does however affect more urban than rural households (21,6 percent compared to 15,4 percent), although these differences are decreasing every year.

Moreover, the process of sensationalizing violence and crime in mass media feeds negative perceptions daily (Bejarano, 2006). Huhn (2009) also analysed how the media, politicians and urban imaginaries of the population fuel the 'culture of fear' and how the negative perceptions of insecurity are socially constructed, in contradiction with the positive image of national identity based on the absence of violence.

Although the national army was abolished in 1949, a 'new army' of private security guards has recently been formed, resulting in a worrisome process of privatization of citizen security. On the one hand, because instead of creating a secure environment it increases the perception of insecurity due to the presence of armed men on the street. On the other hand, citizen security should not be a good or service that is only available to those who can afford it. It is a basic human right that should be accessible to everyone, without exclusion of any person based on gender, ethnicity, sexuality, nor class.

BREAKING THE VICIOUS CIRCLE

Strengthening the right to the city in Costa Rica's GAM implies rethinking the urban, suburban and rural connections. The role of the urban centres as well as their relationships in the GAM as an interdependent conglomerate (within and beyond its political borders) needs to be developed. Unfortunately, a series of governmental planning and zoning approaches have failed until now, due to oppositions both from the public and private sector.

The Urban Regional Planning project for the GAM (PRUGAM), developed between 2004 and 2009, proposed to strengthen the role of the centres and delimit suburban growth for the benefit of protected as well as productive nature. According to that plan, a polycentric network system would consist of multifunctional and compact urban cores with higher densities where non-motorized transport is favoured. These nodes would be interconnected by massive, potentially electric, public transport to facilitate access to services for all sectors of society in an environmentally and socio-economically sustainable way. Moreover, the urban nodes would be surrounded by clearly delineated zones of potential urban growth, as well as agricultural and environmentally protected

areas (PRUGAM, 2009; FLACSO, 2007 and 2012).

This process implies designating specific areas for agricultural production and strengthening their connections with the urban centres, where most of the consumers live. By structuring the current rurban situation in a more efficient way, an apparent disadvantage could be turned into an advantage: locally produced farm goods could be provided at low (economic and environmental) costs to the densified urban nodes at a short distance, thus contributing to a reduced carbon footprint (and potentially enabling one of the countries key goals for future development: to become carbon neutral at national level).

Lefèbvre's quest for the right to the city included strong notions about the consequential geography of urban life and the need for those most negatively affected by the urban condition to take greater control over the social production of urbanized space. For Soja this makes the fight virtually synonymous with seeking spatial justice; a search that has been politically revived in global, national, regional, and urban social movements throughout the last decade, "stimulating a mutually reinforcing convergence between these two versions of the struggle over geography: for spatial justice and for democratic rights to urbanized space." (Soja, 20[1]0: 6-7).

Besides connectivity, spatial justice also responds to different sectors of the society having access to quality public spaces as well as adequate housing in central locations. Public policies need to be developed, which aim at generating a mix of classes in urban centres and facilitating easy access to urban services through economically viable models. Furthermore, positive cultural expressions should be promoted for the diverse social groups, for example by providing financial,

logistical or infrastructural resources for the arrangement of temporary events that can stimulate a different perception and use of public space, organized by community organizations in collaboration with public institutions or the private sector. The appropriation of spaces in combination with higher population densities can contribute to an increased perception of safety and actual decrease in the number of street crimes.

In recent years, an important tendency emerged in the form of bottom-up initiatives from citizens and 'urban collectives' (like Chepecletas, Pausa Urbana, Río Urbano[2], amongst many others), which, driven by a diversified range of individual agendas, reclaim public space or touch upon important development issues, such as mobility, energy and natural resources. Overall, a new urban development can only be achieved by also generating a new urban culture, which requires a change in the negative aspects of the current one: reverse the culture of fear, lack of solidarity, high levels of consumption and individualized mobility.

The vicious circle of spatial fragmentation and social segregation of the GAM can only be broken by stimulating interaction between the different urban life worlds and investing in the currently neglected public spaces, in order for these to become more competitive and to attract again a diversity of people. It requires the creation of mechanisms based on shared interests of the citizens, private and public sector: a tripartite model that encourages citizen participation and a process of raising awareness about the key problems and potential solutions amongst the different stakeholders of the contemporary rurban society.

This would not only apply for the diversified neighbourhoods of the urban centres but also for the suburban periphery, which could

be based on the traditional *barrio* layout as a spatial entity that many people used to identify with. Some of the recent suburban extensions have grown around these *barrios*, of which many still exist as a spatial entity with their own specific identity. However, the majority has vanished or its structure has been compromised due to their residents moving away, following the mechanisms of spatial fragmentation and social segregation. Re-establishing and further developing the social tissue of these neighbourhoods by providing some of the qualities mentioned above (appealing public space, supply of basic public and commercial services, etcetera) and connecting them to the multifunctional urban centres could make this 'new suburbanity' an attractive add-on to the development of the high-density urban nodes as a 'new (poli) centrality', potentially resulting in a multitude of attractive and diversified opportunities for building and inhabiting a different GAM.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper analyses the shortcomings of the GAM of Costa Rica in terms of the accessibility to socio-economic resources and opportunities for all population groups of society, using the concept of spatial justice and notions of the right to the city as expressed by scholars like Soja (2010), Harvey (2009), Lehman-Frisch (2011), Attoh (2011), Lefèbvre (1968) and others. It shows that the creation of a more inclusive urban society requires breaking the vicious circle of spatial fragmentation and social segregation through improved connectivity, the containment of further suburban sprawl and the promotion of compact multifunctional city centres with a high-density socially and economically diverse population: mixed-use cities composed of high-quality public spaces and buildings that function 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

Repopulating the historic urban centres of the GAM, including Costa Rica's capital San Jose, demands a diversified urban offer for all sectors of the population close to or within the centres of employment. Simultaneously, a redefined low to medium-density suburbanity would surround the easily accessible urban centres and make a clearly articulated transition to agricultural zones and protected nature. The rural uses and its linkages to the cities within the GAM should be strengthened in order to produce and supply food at short range for the citizens within the rurban conglomerate.

An integral urban policy, planning and design process should combine the interests of the entire urban population, the public and the private sector. It should link top-down with bottom-up initiatives and promote citizen participation for both temporary as well as permanent uses, thus encouraging the right to an open, shared and inclusive urbanity as a mirror of the new culture inhabiting it.

NOTES

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