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Articulating Nature and Re-appropriations in Public Space. Insights from the *Estero Salado's* Waterfront

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Abstract

Academic and professional discourses on urban regeneration and environmental awareness have motivated the redevelopment of urban waterfronts around the globe. Although the official discourse emphasises the benefits of these interventions, they tend to overlook the implications for inhabitants' rights and everyday practices. At the same time, the inclusion of the Rights of Nature in the Ecuadorian Constitution materialised in an urban regeneration project exacerbated existing vulnerabilities for low-income citizens in the name of nature. This essay, grounded on qualitative research, reflects on how nature-based re-appropriation practices in public space can contribute to developing an approach foregrounding the articulation of discourses on the rights of citizens and nature.

Keywords: waterfront, informal , appropriation, urban rights, Guayaquil

Introduction

Latin America's condition, as one of the most unequal regions in the world (OXFAM International, 2015), has provided a fertile ground for discourses linking urban rights and planning. The notion of the right to the city is invoked for policies and projects responding to persistent concerns on distributional justice and active citizens' participation in urban transformations. At the same time, growing threats to biodiversity have revealed the need to expand notions of justice and granting of rights also to non-human entities. The Latin America and the Caribbean region is incredibly rich in biodiversity and is home to six out of seventeen megadiverse countries in the world (OECD, 2018).

One pioneering response was given by Ecuador, in 2008, when - inspired by the Andean cosmivision of the *Sumak Kawsay* or *Buen Vivir* (loosely translated as Good Living) - it became the first country in the world to grant constitutional rights to nature. This notion advocates for a harmonious coexistence of all living beings. In the context of self-produced urban areas, in-situ upgrading has been put forward as a suitable strategy to materialise these agendas. However, conventional urban transformation models ignore the articulations of these rights-based discourses with the everyday production and appropriation of informal space.

For decades, discourses on city competitiveness and environmental upgrading have supported the development of large public space projects around the globe. Redeveloping waterfronts has become a widespread urban strategy materialising market-driven motivations, city branding agendas (Brownill, 2013; Cuenya, 2009) and urban greening narratives. The benefits of increased contact with nature in public spaces, more green infrastructure, and reduced vulnerability to natural hazards are emphasised by local governments and planners. However, the mobility of generalised urban models tends to underestimate preexisting relationships between inhabitants and their environment. The logic of unplanned production of places in incrementally built urban areas and their specific relation with nature is not integrated into upgrading agendas.

In this context, the notion of appropriation seems promising as it suggests a relational phenomenon emerging from the interaction between people and spaces (Korozeć-Serfaty, 1984) and brings about a spatial dimension of inhabitants' everyday practices. Lefebvre (1991) presented appropriation in relation to citizens' rights; so that the 'right of appropriation' is integrated as a constitutive part of the 'Right to the City' notion. Appropriation or re-appropriation can be associated with the capacity of citizens to access, occupy, and use urban space (Lefebvre, 1991). In addition, it simultaneously evokes transforming actions that give identity and meaning to a place (Pol Urrútia and Vidal Moranta, 2005).

The rights-based discourses linked to urban transformations and the inclusion of the 'Rights of Nature' in the Ecuadorian Constitution of 2008 constitute a critical basis for this essay. It attempts to unravel potential articulations between nature and re-appropriation practices in the public space of self-produced urban areas. The essay does not tackle the broad spectrum of nature-human relationship in its entirety and complexity, including economic activities (like fishing, farming, tourism, contamination) or the relation to wildlife, biodiversity loss, etc. Rather, we limit ourselves to the issue of inhabitation, looking at how inhabitants produce places in interaction with nature in public space.

Informal transformations, projects, and re-appropriations along the *Salado* Estuary

Guayaquil, Ecuador's main port and biggest city¹, is exemplary of the rapid, uneven urbanisation process that has characterised urban development in Latin American cities. It depicts an urban landscape tending toward territorial fragmentation and segregation, as found in many other cities in the region (Janoshka, 2002). Guayaquil's uneven urban development has materialised in vast self-built consolidated areas that reshaped estuarine waterfronts by decades of incremental transformation. The enormous transformation of Guayaquil's southern periphery has resulted in self-built neighbourhoods, which although mostly legalised and physically improved, still have acute socio-economic and environmental issues (Ministry of Environment, 2015). An essential component of their physical improvement has been the execution of projects part of strategies for urban upgrading such as the '*Urban Regeneration*' and the Project *Guayaquil Ecológico*.

Guayaquil's '*Urban Regeneration*', formulated in the 1990s, was the institutional response to what was considered a generalised urban decay by the local government's political and administrative model (Delgado, 2013). From its first stage, the local government strategy focused on public space as a symbol of the strategy, making it a mechanism to achieve land revalorisation, increasing the city's competitiveness, and linking it to networks of global tourism and investments (Navas Perrone, 2019). Emblematic waterfront projects such as *Malecón 2000*, *Malecon del Salado* and *Puerto Santa Ana* were followed by interventions in the consolidated informally developed areas along the Salado Estuary. In addition to these projects, the national ministry-led project *Guayaquil Ecológico* -based on the *Buen Vivir* discourse- has recently played a significant role in the socio-spatial transformation of informal neighbourhoods along the Salado Estuary. The mega-project started in 2010 and consisted of three components: an urban park, a conservation area, and a linear park along the Salado Estuary. It explicitly targeted environmental concerns and the provision of green areas for the city.

In both cases, official discourses legitimised the implementation of the projects based on ecological upgrading and the assumed economic benefits obtained from increased tourism. Critical voices have denounced issues regarding appropriation, participation, or inclusion in the projects led by the local government (Allán, 2010). While others have focused on highlighting shortcomings in phase 5 of the *Guayaquil Ecológico* project since it does not truly address meaningful ecological restoration nor responds to broader aims of promoting the Constitutional Rights of Nature or the *Buen Vivir* objectives (Ordoñez et al., 2022).

In the last decades, the local and national governments executed several interventions to provide extra public space, including sports facilities and waterfront regeneration along the Salado Estuary in the neighborhood *El Cisne Dos*². These interventions coexist with a multiplicity of re-appropriation practices that respond to inhabitants' needs and desires. Mendez et al. (2021) have identified four categories of re-appropriation occurring in different public spaces in *El Cisne Dos*. Through actions related to livelihood, recreation, socialisation, and spatial personalisation, inhabitants of this area re-appropriate spaces that have been developed within institutional conceptualisations of public space. The analysis shows how daily practices represent spatial renegotiation linked to the neighbourhood's cultural and socio-economic characteristics. Overall, these re-appropriations are enabled by the capacity for temporary, direct intervention in a spatial setting. Inhabitants' small, improvised actions transform the functionality of streets, sidewalks, and waterfronts, for socio-economic and cultural dynamics to unfold.

Building on the category '*spatial personalisation*', one component becomes especially relevant: nature. This observation holds particular significance in the linear park-phase 5 of the *Guayaquil Ecológico* project, where not only '*spatial personalisation*' occurs through the daily use of nature, but most interestingly, because the project's genesis was based on the premises of the *Buen Vivir* and Rights of Nature. The mega-project promised to simultaneously upgrade both social and ecological dimensions of Guayaquil in general and the Salado Estuary in particular. The linear park component of the mega project was made up of eleven phases, phase 5 corresponded to *El Cisne Dos* area.

Opposite to the inclusion of a plurality of visions that the *Buen Vivir* concept predicates, the project ended up being a top-down implementation that required the relocation and eviction of hundreds of families who lived along the estuary border in the name of nature's rights. In this sense, the project continued exacerbating the socio-economic vulnerability of the estuary's relocated population, whose economic and social networks remained in *El Cisne Dos*. Currently, the project is in a state of neglect and abandonment (Ordoñez et al., 2022). Nevertheless, interestingly, signs of nature-based re-appropriation have emerged at some spots of the linear park-phase 5 and its adjacent areas.

In this context, the following paragraphs explore the potential of nature as a driver for re-appropriation of public spaces where these nature-based practices can become articulations between discourses of rights for people and nature. We, therefore, argue that considering nature's potential as a driver for re-appropriation can foster community participation and involvement in upgrading projects and can leverage its potential socio-ecological contributions.

Nature as a driver for re-appropriation

So far, in *El Cisne Dos*, individual and collective actions can be considered non-organised claims for spaces and use, not fully incorporated into the upgrading initiatives. Temporary spatial arrangements emerge from inhabitants' daily routines and needs, often defining a diversity of places of encounter that emerge in unplanned locations including several spots along the waterfront or adjacent to natural elements. Nevertheless, the upgrading initiatives developed by the local and national governments are characterised by meagre consideration of inhabitants' practices linked to an estuarine landscape where nature is not only a resource for recreation but also for cultural identification and livelihood. Thus, there is a need to read (and re-read) urban regeneration projects and public space upgrading through the relationship between nature and re-appropriation practices. Currently, the articulation between nature and re-appropriation practices has a dual dimension: symbolic and material which are manifested simultaneously in space.

Symbolic Dimension:

The symbolic dimension of nature-based re-appropriations are representative of the unquestionable and complex link between humans and nature. In this case, they emerged from neighbourhood upgrading initiatives -adjacent to the linear park- promoted by the municipality to encourage citizen participation, neighbourhood's self-esteem and aesthetic improvement. Small-scale interventions include representations of nature in artistic work- and craft-projects on facades as a means to embellish the neighbourhood. Bare façades are not only painted, but some are turned into murals by local inhabitants depicting various kinds of flora and fauna, some more elaborate than others. Some even portray non-endemic species such as tigers. Other symbolic representations of nature include facades decorated with flowers and animal-inspired figures made from paper, cardboard, or plastic (Figure 1).

Other examples of nature-themed murals are located along phase-5. These, however, have a different origin and aim. The goal of the project was the area's socio-ecological upgrading achieved through its implementation and complemented with environmental awareness programs in the community. In



Figure 1. Nature-themed mural by local artist and neighbour. Planted tree in personalised 'pot' and plastic flowers decorating the façade. Source: Authors, 2019.



Figure 2. Painted wall phase 5. Legend reads: "Take care of the estuary...it's yours!". Source: Authors, 2018.

several spots along the intervened waterfront, painted walls (some with the logo of the Ministry of Environment, MAE) incite neighbours' cooperation to take care of the estuary -and by extension, the linear park- by trying to imbue a sense of place. Phrases such as "Take care of the estuary...it is yours!" (Figure 2) or representations of people interacting with water and estuary fauna expose environmentally friendly messages and decorate otherwise blind, grey walls. Although due to extreme water and soil contamination of the estuary, reforestation was only possible in a limited number of areas, the paintings depict children playing at the estuary border where mangroves, birds, fish, and people coexist. The natural elements in these paintings are both, reminiscent of a biodiverse past and, a vision for a desired possible future of coexistence between humans and nature.

Material Dimension:

The material dimension of Nature-based re-appropriations is more evident along the linear park and to a lesser extent in other spots of the neighbourhood. In the latter, practices include planting small trees and bushes on the sidewalk in personalised self-made concrete 'pots'. While in the former, the material articulation between nature and re-appropriation practices takes the form of larger fenced orchards and gardens, which function as extensions of residents' properties. It is worth noting, however, that these practices are not *ex post facto* actions emerging spontaneously from the linear park implementation. Instead they are a continuation of the existing and established forms of interaction with nature in public space and socio-cultural dynamics and needs (Figure 3). In this sense, the project has not fully taken advantage of many nature-related practices for the project's design and instead it incorporated concrete pathways, greenery and even artificial grass

Organised collective actions in some areas of the linear park emerge as responses to the new challenges brought regarding management and maintenance. While the designed pathway remains public, it also connects residents' houses and the orchards that occupy the originally conceived public green areas (Figure 4). In contrast with the abandoned overall condition of the park, these spaces are taken care of, visible because of the presence of painted fences, carefully planted fruit trees and flowers and improvised benches, which turn the space into open-air extensions of houses.

Also, nature provides the opportunity to create a bond with a given space by enabling conditions for its recurrent use. The search for shade is a case in point. As a coastal city in the equatorial line, Guayaquil's average temperature is 25 degrees; as such, the need for shade in public spaces is a determining factor for the presence of people in public spaces. In the linear park, the search for shaded areas has led to spaces under tree canopies to be used as such, eventually becoming spaces for gathering and temporary appropriation (Figure



Figure 3. Prior to the implementation of the *Guayaquil Ecológico* linear park inhabitants already used the estuary border as fenced orchards. Source: Google Earth, 2014 (circa).



Figure 4. Contrasting conditions between re-appropriated spaces and the overall state of neglect of the linear park. Source: Xavier Méndez Abad, 2019.



Figure 5. A resident's chair sits right under the tree canopy. The designated bench space from the project sits at the canopy's edge. Source: Authors, 2019.



Figure 6. Improvised harbor in phase 5. Source: Authors, 2019.

5). Nevertheless, trees not only serve to provide shadows for improvised sitting spaces. They also provide shelter for homeless residents, for informal trade, leisure and rest, and other temporary activities.

Other examples of the interaction between nature and daily practices are related to direct contact with water. Here, opposite to the elimination of existing orchards in some areas, the waterfront typology of phase-5 indeed tried to integrate nature-based cultural practices by providing designated spaces for harbours and swimming activities. After the construction of the project, inhabitants continued to adapt it. For instance, wooden railings were built on the new rocky edge of the estuary to function as an improvised harbour and as help to reach the waters (Figure 6).

Conclusion

The practices of re-appropriation of public spaces identified in *El Cisne Dos* respond to inhabitants' everyday needs, desires and cultural practices. Like other consolidated informal areas in Latin American cities, public life unfolds primarily in streets and open spaces (Hernandez García, 2010; Duhau, 2008). Here, spaces are fundamental assets reflecting socio-cultural reproduction for people living in daily interaction with nature. Particularly, in personalisation processes, as a form of spatial transformation, nature (or the idea of nature) also plays an essential role. The case of *El Cisne Dos* shows that everyday practices related to nature increase and promote inhabitants' engagement with public spaces in deprived neighbourhoods. Reading public space re-appropriation with nature as an analytical category evidence its potential as an articulator between projects discourse and practice.

There is of course a spectrum of nature-based re-appropriation yielding positive as well as negative outcomes. The opportunities and benefits of these practices do not negate potential adverse repercussions. There is still a tension between nature and humans that should be addressed by planning and design. Low-income populations logically prioritise satisfying their basic needs before focusing on the ecological benefits. Many environmental issues are not undertaken in re-appropriation practices. Gandy (2018) sums it up: "Urban nature should be considered as this diversity of potential appropriations, which also have political implications: from more inclusive or sensitive responses to urban nature, to attempts to simply use nature, or symbols of nature, as part of speculative dynamics of capitalist urbanisation" (Gandy, 2018). Contrary to the idea of nature appropriation, which can lead to gentrification (Anguelovski et al., 2018), nature as a driver for appropriation can enhance and promote local costumes and dynamics that point to the aspirations of the *Buen Vivir* (good living).

Understanding nature as a driver for re-appropriation can contribute to delineate inclusive design approaches where community participation can be integrated into the creation of natural urban landscapes. In this way, urban interventions can materialise collective aspiration while raising ecological awareness, becoming a link between dualist discourses derived from the Right to City and the Rights of Nature. It is essential to realise that many socio-ecological layers need to be incorporated into a design process. For instance, the role of aesthetics is an important one; as Meyer (2008) points out, “it will take more than ecologically regenerative designs for a culture to be sustainable (...) what is needed are designed landscapes that provoke those who experience them to become aware of how their actions affect their environment and to care enough to make changes” (Meyers, 2008). In this sense, small intervention as planted greenery are not purely functional but also esthetic, embellishing their environment. Small-scale bottom-up appropriations, born from daily needs and cultural practices, can add up to large-scale strategies creating new urban natures that contribute to ecosystem restoration and social empowerment. Furthermore, and not fully deviating from the anticipating and aesthetic nature of design, collectively designed projects could intentionally provide the spaces for nature-based appropriations to thrive while addressing citizens’ rights.

Notes

- 1 Based on data from the last Ecuadorian Census in 2010, Guayaquil's estimated population is 2.6 million people.
- 2 *El Cisne Dos* is a self-developed neighborhood, resulting from a long process of land occupation and incremental auto-construction, and consolidation that started in the 1970s.

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