

Mapping temporary appropriations in the streets of Guayaquil's informal neighbourhoods

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Abstract

Streets are primary places of collective life in informally developed urban areas of Latin American cities. They are considered fundamental elements of cultural expression and socio-economic development. At the same time, they reflect socio-spatial trajectories and interdependencies between informal and formal processes, actors, and practices. While there has been increasing attention to the design and provision of public spaces to improve the living conditions of these environments, the understanding of the interaction between streetscapes and inhabitants' everyday practices needs further exploration. Fine-grain readings of the complex, self-organised, temporary practices on streets are essential for delineating future urban design operations.

This paper aims to explore how temporary appropriations define everyday experience in the streets of informal neighbourhoods. The study focuses on the neighbourhood El Cisne Dos in Guayaquil, Ecuador, and it relies on field research, mapping, spatial ethnography, and photographic documentation. The findings illustrate the role of streets as places of diversity, cultural representation and socio-economic development. They show that through inhabitants' everyday practices, streets constitute important social spaces that can empower the neighbourhood and not only elements enabling movement. Furthermore, we argue that understanding these streets' temporary appropriation contributes to building up contextualised design approaches.

Keywords

Temporary urbanism, streetscapes, appropriation, informal, everyday spaces.

Introduction

The rapid urbanisation rates of Latin American cities have brought about critical challenges for addressing the role of public space in sustainable urban transformations. More specifically, the public space of informally developed urban areas emerges as an essential element in articulating forms of spatial production, livelihood and socio-cultural practices. However, governmental interventions in public space materialise institutional agendas and models, or rigid urban design schemes that ignore preexistent informal dynamics. Thus, those projects juxtapose the temporary nature of appropriations, particularly in public spaces and streets with predominantly informal dynamics.¹ From urban design practice and theory, an increased number of contributions present temporary transformations as a framework of analysis and intervention.² However, for Latin American informally developed neighbourhoods, change and temporality have been for a long time integral to their socio-spatial trajectories and part of complex everyday street life.

In the absence of formal design and planning, self-produced streets have been primary places of collective life for many Latin American informal neighbourhoods. Their social production and construction are linked to trajectories of change and appropriation logics that respond to inhabitants' needs and desires.³ Studies have addressed the transformation of self-built areas from diverse perspectives but with limited attention to the everyday dynamics of public spaces and streets.⁴ In this sense, the temporary appropriation of informal streetscapes has been widely overlooked in the Latin American context. Understanding how streets are transformed by inhabitants' practices and the socio-spatial and temporal characteristics linked to their everyday appropriation is, according to us, essential for building up contextualised design approaches that could contribute to reframing urban space production and transformations.

This paper aims to explore how temporary appropriations define

1 Duhau and Giglia, 2008.

2 Bishop and Williams 2012; Mehrotra and Vera, 2017; Lydon and Garcia, 2015.

3 Hernandez García, 2013.

4 Lombard, 2014.

everyday experience in the streets of informal neighbourhoods. It relies on empirical data from the neighbourhood *El Cisne Dos* in Guayaquil, Ecuador. The article starts by positioning the study within the broad literature on temporal appropriation and everyday urbanism. Then, after a brief overview of the development of public spaces in the studied neighbourhood, we focus on two micro settings that illustrate the dynamics of transaction and recreation across the area. Through this exploration, we reveal the temporal and spatial dimensions of these spaces. Finally, this description is followed by a discussion on the study's implications for alternative approaches engaging with the temporary appropriation of streets.

Temporary everyday appropriation of streets

The complexity of ordinary street life includes many improvised uses and forms of appropriation emerging from inhabitants' everyday actions. Although they are integral to public spaces and dwelling practices, design scholars and governmental intervention schemes often ignore their logic. Over the last decades, a significant body of literature has aligned with influential theoretical contributions highlighting the lived experience and unplanned dynamics of cities' street life.⁵ This strand of literature is critical to conventional urban design and planning approaches and encourages the consideration of informal practices and bottom-up activities. Moreover, amidst conditions of austerity and uncertainty, there has been a growing interest in temporary, tactical interventions to appropriate streets, public spaces and vacant plots.⁶ Informal practices and short-term interventions are presented as tools to enact citizens' rights and legitimate alternatives to large-scale approaches. However, the appropriation of these discourses by policymakers and planners' agendas and their actual potential to promote social transformation have been interrogated. Moreover, some studies have highlighted a lack of critical views on applying concepts in contexts where the links between informal practices and temporariness respond to different logics.⁷

5 See Jacobs, 1961; De Certeau, 1984.

6 Crawford, 2008; Lydon and Garcia, 2015; Tonkiss, 2013..

7 Devlin, 2018; Andres, *et al.*, 2021.

A significant number of studies have explained how, in the context of inadequate institutional planning, lack of infrastructure, and designed public space, informal practices have been a general mechanism of place construction.⁸ In informal neighbourhoods, unplanned streets, street corners and other often overlooked spaces are developed and practised by inhabitants, becoming part of their collective everyday life. Mehrotra (2008) conceptualises informal space as the expression of cultures and identities strictly related to temporariness and citizens' needs and uses.⁹ Temporary public space transformations are more linked to everyday appropriations rather than to planned tactical interventions. As inhabitants appropriate space, processes of identification and temporary transformative actions modify the functional character and meanings of spaces.

A growing body of literature has focused on the relationship between inhabitants' informal practices and public spaces. Echoing Lefebvre (1991), this literature touches upon appropriation concerning use-value and space/time in everyday life. In this vein, by elaborating on informal practices as insurgent everyday forms of resistance, they stress inhabitants' agency to create their own space.¹⁰ For Hou (2020), everyday practices can represent an "everyday form of contention and contestation regarding how urban spaces are used, how activities are organised and negotiated, and how meanings are constructed".¹¹ Looking at overlaps between informal practices and temporary appropriation is not limited to organised collective actions motivated by a specific agenda; it would instead include the daily practices emerging from the everyday needs of inhabitants.

Contextualising Public Space in Guayaquil's informal areas

In Guayaquil, Ecuador, most of its 2.7 million inhabitants live in neighbourhoods originating from a process of self-construction of dwellings and urban space¹². Since the 1950s, this incremental process

8 Lombard, 2014; Simone, 2010.

9 Mehrotra, 2008.

10 Hou, 2010.

11 Hou, 2020, p.121.

12 Rojas and Villavicencio, 1988.

has configured neighbourhoods that have been in constant change. Physical transformations follow a mode of urbanisation in which the construction of dwellings precedes the provision of road infrastructure, urban facilities and designed public spaces. Historically, inhabitants were engaged in diverse individual and collective manoeuvres to improve their living conditions and environments. They play a significant role in the social construction of their spaces, defining particular forms of use and appropriation. In the consolidated neighbourhood of *El Cisne Dos*, individual land occupation and informal auto-construction started in the 1970s.¹³ Initially, in a landscape dominated by wooden stilt houses, catwalks and incipient infilled paths were the alternative to roads and sidewalks. The conditions of public space started to improve gradually by filling marshland and consolidating roads. Over the years, dwellings density increased and consumed most open space while regular street grids expanded into the estuary banks of the *Estero Salado*.

In the last two decades, public space has been positioned as a driver of urban transformation discourses that have also reached *El Cisne Dos*. With most plots ownership legalised, local and national governments have developed large scale projects linked to city-scale urban regeneration and ecological restoration initiatives. As interventions have increased, the physical conditions of public spaces – including streets – have improved considerably. The shortcomings of projects in other areas have been underscored by authors interrogating issues such as the imposition of regulations, deficient participation of inhabitants, and changes opposing local socio-cultural practices of socialisation, recreation, and livelihood.¹⁴ These types of remarks reveal the challenge of intervening in the particular urbanity of these neighbourhoods. Whereas governmental initiatives increase the amount of designed public space, they tend to neglect the spatiotemporal flexibility still prevalent on streets. This study shows that collective appropriations are temporary and emerge recurrently on the streets. Hence, in the following section, we focus on two such spaces, which illustrate the

13 *El Cisne Dos* has followed a process of individual occupation of public land rather than of organized invasions.

14 Allán, 2010.

temporary transformation of streets into spaces of transaction and active recreation.

Temporary spaces for transaction

In *El Cisne Dos*, the gradual physical improvement of the neighbourhood included the construction of several urban facilities. Nowadays, as they provide the necessary services to inhabitants, their use generates an increased presence of people and cars around them. One example is the area next to the *Health Centre El Cisne Dos* at the intersection of *Calle 11* and *Calle Ch*. The Centre is one of the larger public health facilities in southern Guayaquil, so it receives a considerable range of the population every day.¹⁵ In 2015, it replaced a smaller pre-existing building, substantially increasing the number of people visiting the area. Its daily operations involve many workers and users whose needs for food and transportation have translated into opportunities for informal vendors and vehicles (e.g., *tricimotos*, informal taxis).¹⁶ Vendors offering diverse forms of local food seek to take advantage of the increased flux of people while overlapping with the commercial activities of a few restaurants and stores in front of the building.

Mobile selling carts and *tricimotos* start occupying the street in the morning hours. From 8 AM., with a few cars parked on the street, vendors start locating in front of the building. The street occupation goes hand in hand with the increasing movement of private vehicles seeking parking on both sides of the road. Also, the arrival and departure of *tricimotos* and informal taxis coincide with pedestrians walking towards and from the main entrance located on the southern sidewalk of *Calle 11*. From 11 AM. the presence of vendors and users intensifies. Some vendors occupy the sidewalk adjacent to the entrance without blocking the building's access ramp. However, the majority of them align across the road. An average of six vendors carts and four tricycles occupy the opposite side intersecting the main pedestrian flows moving around the corner. Vendors and their mobile selling stations share space with

15 The Health Centre El Cisne Dos is a centre type C: an establishment that serves a population from 25,000 to 50,000 inhabitants.

16 *Tricimoto* is the local term to describe motorized tricycles used for transportation.

other mobile objects that occupy the roadside along this block.

The mixture of parked cars, traffic cones, plastic chairs and improvised wooden devices that reserve parking bays, restaurant signs, and trash bins characterise the alternative use of the space in-between the sidewalk and the road. At the same time, on the 2-meters sidewalk, several multiservice stores use a portion part of the circulation space to put plastic chairs, tables and commercial signage on facades and electric poles. The movement of people between 11 AM and 3 PM is not restricted to the immediate space adjacent to the building but also extends along the street up to nearby restaurants and transportation vehicles. For instance, across the corner, no more than 50 meters away from the entrance, a couple of Venezuelan immigrants sell lunch in a restaurant that opens around 10 AM. This business and the other four restaurants in front of the Health Center use the sidewalk and road as working space. Its spatial arrangement configured by plastic chairs and tables shares the road with unregulated taxis waiting to pick up more clients during these hours. After 3 PM, commercial activities start to decrease, and some vendors leave the area. However, new vendors still arrive.

The case of Cecilia, an unemployed, elderly woman, is illustrative of this dynamic. Living two blocks away from the Health Centre, she recently started to see the proximity to this facility as an opportunity to improve her living conditions. The absence of a secure income motivated her to begin selling roasted plantain at the southern corner of this street intersection. Although after 3 PM, the space in front of the health centre is not as crowded as in the morning, she locates in the opposite corner where there is more available space. The mixture of vendors living in nearby areas and the surroundings show a heterogeneity that corresponds to the diversity of users of this space. Vendors are not part of any organisation and do not have a fixed assigned place on this street. However, they can repeatedly be seen located at the same selling spots and recognise this street as an essential source of income. Even during the pandemic COVID-19, the presence of informal vendors remained. In 2020, vendors highlighted the importance of being able to work on this street since lockdowns and quarantine had affected their income. At the same time, the conditions of this working space are per-



Fig.1 - Street occupation in front of the Health Center Cisne Dos - Source: Author 2019

ceived as negative by some inhabitants for whom the streets have become chaotic and messy.

Temporary spaces for recreation

In addition to the emergent spaces and rhythms linked to commerce, inhabitants' recreational practices also significantly shape streets in informally developed neighbourhoods. Active recreation, in general, but football and *ecuavoley*, in particular, are recurrently played.¹⁷ These are the most popular sports in the country and Guayaquil, and the studied neighbourhood is not an exception. Inhabitants of El Cisne Dos not only play in a few designated areas in parks and playgrounds but on a diversity of streets. Streets paved surfaces are temporarily transformed into improvised pitches that adapt to varied spatial characteristics and present different use intensities. Several can also have a polyfunctional role as they might serve for *ecuavolley* and football. The popularity of these alternative playing areas is revealed as we observed that the number of pitches within designed parks is less than the total of pitches on the streets.

One such place is *Calle Décima*, a residential street near the *Palanqueado* Estuary, surrounded by one and two-storey houses, a sports centre developed by the local government, and a recently renovated church. This street marks the limit of the residential tissue and runs between the two main routes connecting the neighbourhood with the public space next to the estuary. It is 20-meters wide and is the neighbourhood's widest road but not necessarily the one with more motorised traffic. Instead, the marks of three pitches painted on the street reveal it as a recurrent centre for sports more than for intense car circulation. Two rectangles of 9x18 meters and one of 15x30 meters have been painted to configure two areas for *ecuavolley* and one for *football*. They are not used on a fixed-time basis, and matches are not synchronised. Sports might be played or not depending on the availability of players, weather, etc. In fact, only one out of the three – the one located in the corner – presents a temporary occupation that repeats on a daily basis.

17 *Ecuavoley* is a local variant of volleyball.

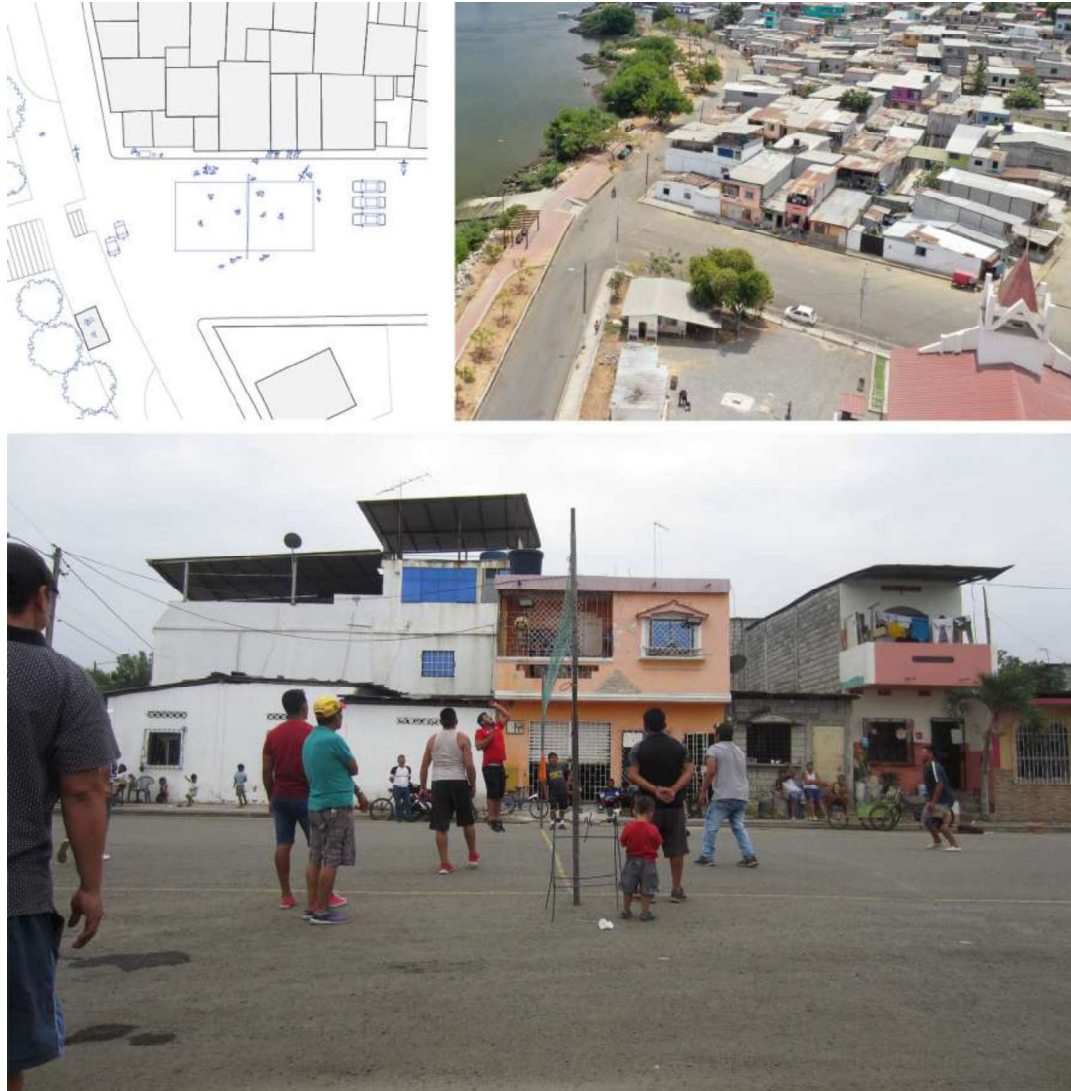


Fig.2 - Street's temporary transformation into an ecuavoley pitch - Source: Author 2019

On weekdays, the morning hours are the moments with fewer activities on this street. Although some inhabitants exercise in the early hours of the day, the street is quiet from 8.30 AM. to 14.00 PM. During this time, the playing areas function as a surface for the circulation of a few private cars and a few pedestrians that move between the sports centre, the estuary area, and the residences around them. In the afternoon, the conditions are different as *ecuavoley* pitches attract individual players and observers that concentrate in and around them. Starting from 2.30 PM, mainly adult men arrive and assemble on the western sidewalk in front of the houses that delimit the playing area near the corner. After setting the net poles inside two holes on the pavement, the net is put by a resident living in the house that borders this pitch.

The movement of people intensifies after 3.30 PM. as more players and observers arrive walking and by bicycle and cars. Some of them would use entrances' house steps as sitting spaces. As more people concentrate around the pitch, other temporary functions start emerging. Mobile vendors, especially those selling juice, come by sporadically. A vendor of roasted plantain locates her mobile selling station at the corner, on the sidewalk. The space is at its peak between 4.30 PM and 6 PM. when a significant number of men wait for their turn to play, a group of four men observe the matches from *Calle F*. At that time the frequency of mobile vendors increases and the accumulation of cars partially blocks the road. Although some players indicated that matches are also set up at night-time, often nobody is playing after 7:30 PM.

On weekends, as a local sports league organises matches on the central football pitch, teams from nearby neighbourhoods participate in a championship that lasts for several weeks. Those days, consecutive games alter the functioning of the complete street as the entire street width is used. Car circulation is temporarily blocked by delimiting the area with a plastic security type. The most significant crowd concentrates around the central pitch in the morning. Some residents gather to chat while observing the matches from improvised porches of the adjacent two-storey houses or the shadowed space below a tree or below an improvised plastic roof. After the matches, at around 6 PM., goals are removed from the road, and car circulation is partially enabled. Many groups would remain interacting near the front of several



Fig.3 - Football players removing mobile goals after a weekend match –
Source: Author 2019

houses for some hours.

In *Calle Décima*, people of different ages play and observe the matches developing on any of the three temporary pitches. Although, at first, one could think that neighbours are the exclusive members of these groups, the interviews revealed that many of them live in other nearby neighbourhoods. For instance, Daniel, a middle-aged adult man, comes from 1 Km. away, he lives around *Calle 14 y Calle Francisco Segura*. The acquired familiarity with other players and the availability of players as positive elements motivates him to regularly attend the matches at this place. The degree of diversity regarding players' living spaces contrasts with the homogeneity in terms of gender. Only a few women can be observed around the pitches, and most of them are not directly involved in the matches or any other adjacent recreation activity. Instead, they sell snacks to players or take care of children playing nearby.

As in other bottom-up practices observed in this neighbourhood, the cyclical temporal appropriation in *Calle Décima* involves the participation of inhabitants who set-up and maintain space. Their transforming capacity is determined by the role of mobile devices such as lightweight goals, net poles, and plastic chairs enable these temporary occupations. These elements allow rapid adaptations which are important to respond to unexpected changes. For instance, in 2020, during the pandemic COVID-19, the recreational use of *Calle Décima* intensified considerably with the addition of 4 new ecuavolley pitches on its surface. Accessing the neighbourhood's public sports areas was not allowed during the pandemic. As a response, after the pandemic's peak, a significant number of inhabitants organise to transform the street for their use. Inhabitants added new playing zones through paintings and daily operation of tents, nets, goals, poles, etc.

Conclusion: Engaging with temporary appropriations

In the studied neighbourhood, temporary spaces of transaction and play emerge with no formal designation and design. They alter the conventional character of streets and increase their functional capacity as they can be spaces of movement and short-term permanence. As the examples of this study illustrate, inhabitants of El Cisne Dos engage daily in temporary collective practices essential to the intensity of the

neighbourhood's street life and livelihoods. Different types of activities overlap according to the time of the day and the day of the week, as seen in the case of pitches used only on weekends. Also, each case attracts a different type of public that interacts in various forms. Hence, temporary complex landscapes are configured as multiple functions and temporalities overlap.

The temporariness of the observed appropriations is what allows their recurrence to a great extent. Activities that emerge in *Calle Décima* and *Calle Ch* might be sanctioned or regulated in other public spaces. For instance, informal vendors are not allowed in some renovated parks and streets. Also, mobile or improvised elements – plastic furniture, carts, sports devices- that enable sports or transactions are rarely visible in official parks. The temporarily appropriated streets are made by assembling permanent and impermanent elements. In both locations, the arrangement of portable, mobile, impermanent structures enables temporary individual and collective occupation. Thus, appropriations are revealed as transformative action linked to flexibility, adaptability and openness.

Although informal activities do not comply with the idealised models of conventional notions of public space, they are essential to redefine the meanings of public space and streetscapes. As illustrated in the examined locations, particularly during the pandemic COVID-19, temporary collective practices make visible the capacity of inhabitants to shape their everyday spaces according to their needs and desires. The vitality of streets is contingent on people's efforts to create new opportunities for use through minimal interventions and adaptations. These initiatives are voluntarily organised and managed by inhabitants that negotiate use and maintenance with minimal interference from government administrators, officials, police, etc.

The paper contributes to expanding the understanding of bottom-up practices of appropriation. More explorations of informal neighbourhoods might contribute to interrogating how to translate the understanding of the contextualised logic to newly designed spaces. Recognising and understanding the logic of collective practices and areas can contribute to delineating conceptual frameworks suitable for the informal context. The understanding from the temporary appropriation of

streets might be translated into other public spaces where the appropriation should be encouraged. A framework for reading public space integrating the forms of appropriation might extend attention to temporary elements and conditions of managing, emergent overlapping of functions and flexibility. This perspective can help overcome an emphasis on the physical layout and standardised aesthetic language. At the same time, it can contribute to interrogating predefined assumptions about long term, static and dominant functions and to looking for temporary transformations emerging from the socio-spatial context.

Temporary collective practices are embedded in processes of spatial and socio-cultural transformation. In the case of Guayaquil and elsewhere in Latin America, change and appropriation have been defining elements of the trajectory of social production and construction of informal areas. Although temporary collective practices on streets are everyday place-making mechanisms, they still have a negative connotation for designers and governments. By embracing the debate on the socio-spatial and temporal conditions for the appropriation of streets, design practice and theory can put forward the role of residents in the making of space. Recognising that temporary transformations are led by residents, their role as passive users might give room for a more active role in the everyday of streets and public spaces. The agency of individuals in the making of space can be highlighted and potentially conducted to a reinterpretation of their role in the definition of the dynamics of urban space.

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the time ^{of} streets

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AND
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