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Urban design and social capital in slums. Case study: Moravia's neighborhood, Medellin, 2004-2014

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Abstract

Taking as reference the historical context of the expansion phenomenon of Medellin and the anthropogenic processes based on Moravia's neighborhood, this paper purpose is to make an impact evaluation of the Integral Improvement Plan (PPMIM 2004-2011), using the relationship between the urban design features and the social capital variables. Initially, a theoretical and conceptual framework of the various topics under review is presented. Secondly, we confront the PPMIM's principles, its urban design strategies, its procedural methodology with the built project and evaluate its general socio spatial impact. Finally, we analyze its impact on the cognitive and structural dimensions of the social capital. The Integral Improvement Plan (PPMIM) brought the physical, ecological, cultural and social rehabilitation of the human settlement allowing recovering the historical as well as the cultural memory of the community and strengthening some aspects of the social capital and its ties, as the bridging and linking networks. Finally the paper highlights and summarizes positive and negative implications of slum upgrading programs and some necessary recommendations for urban design, the social capital that can really be translated into real resources for the self-sustainable development of low-income communities and their future generations.

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1. Introduction

In a globalized world with dominant neoliberal economy and with half of its population living in cities in rapid transformation, the weaknesses related with social inclusion and territorial cohesion which reduce the overall prosperity of cities and the quality of life of its inhabitants, proliferate rapidly.

Today, the population that lives in precarious settlements represents 1/3 of the world's urban population, number that estimates to double until 2050, specially in the urban areas of the emergent regions such as Asia, Africa and Latin America (UN-Habitat, 2003; 2015). Rapid urban growth, insecurity of housing policies and urban

management and other instabilities, such as limited resources on the planet, climate change and economic crises make urgent to focus the attention on the needs of the populations located in the urban centers of these countries. As Newirth refers, "these places are the cities of tomorrow" (Newirth, 2005).

The challenge is to ensure that this new expanding cities continue livable, manageable and more sustainable. A higher urbanization level implies more "urban security", understood here as an equal access to goods and services, territorial orderly development and management, rational use of natural resources and, essentially, a peaceful and civic coexistence of its inhabitants, helping to prevent and mitigate the different types of vulnerabilities and threats.

The hypothesis presented is that urban design view as a process and as "placemaking" and combined with social capital theory may be an effective resource for the local development of low-income communities. Urban design in slums may have an ethical and aesthetic power to build social capital, which enhances more stability of a society as well as their common interests without destroying, however, the uniqueness of any social group. (Sander, 2002; Svendsen, 2010; Moobela et al., 2009). The physical design of neighborhoods may impact social capital, as its highly context-specific and determined by history, culture, social structures, economic inequalities or individual social patterns (Claridge, 2009). Although, there is lack of operational knowledge about the role of the urban space in relation with social capital, and even less, regarding the assessment of this relationship in spontaneous settlements.

Upon this background and taking as reference the historical context of the anthropogenic processes based on Moravia's neighborhood located in Medellin, a spontaneous settlement known to have grown on the top of the city's former garbage dump, this paper aims to make an assessment of the physical and social impact of the Integral Improvement Plan of Moravia (Plan Parcial de Mejoramiento Integral de Moravia PPMIM), and, in particular, in the social capital of the community. The PPMIM was based on sustainability concepts under the "Social Urbanism" city model and on the strengthening of the different actors's capacities as well as on the construction of associative ties and mutual trust.

We sought to highlight two main questions through the case study:

- How has the social capital of Moravia's community been affected by the slum-upgrading program (PPMIM)?
- Which urban design strategies contribute more to create social capital, allowing to meet the criteria of a local and sustainable development?

As the softer and intangible attributes dealt with, cannot be easily quantified, the paper specifically accentuate forms of proxies that could be used in the assessment, such as the main urban strategies, their principles and the social services' improvement that helps to build social capital.

2. Methodology

To assess the impact of the PPMIM at a socio-spatial level and on the several dimensions of the social capital, we proceeded with a comparative study of the initial conditions of the territory and the current. In first place we collected quantitative and qualitative data, and through technical documents, we identified the principles of the urban design strategies and methodology of the urban rehabilitation program. Secondly, we confronted them with what has been built and, through an interview to the municipality responsible for implementing the plan and the analysis of statistical data of the review process to PPMIM (2014), then we proceeded with the socio-spatial impact evaluation.

To analyze the impact on the social capital, we conducted questionnaire surveys at a community level (150 surveys) to social organizations leaders and local development promoters (35 surveys). This questionnaire was based on the "Integrated Questionnaire for Social Capital's Measurement" (SQ-IQ) promoted by the World Bank (Grootaert et al., 2003).

The data collected seek to understand what are the positive and negative implications of the Integral Improvement Plan of Neighbourhoods (PMIB) and some necessary recommendations for the urban design and social capital than can be translated into real resources for the development of low-income communities and their future generations.

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