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Housing access and governance: The influence and evolution of housing organizations in Mexico City

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ABSTRACT

Through the analysis of personal interviews, resident surveys, government documents, newspaper and community accounts, among other relevant data, this paper studies housing movements and organizations in Mexico City, and exemplifies the reach that social mobilizing and organizing may have on cities and their political structures. In this context, mobilizations around detrimental housing conditions provided more than support to low-income tenants and affordable housing production; they contributed to the democratization of the local government. This in turn helped, with the election of a sympathetic government, to consolidate housing programs, norms, and institutions. Thus, and despite limited resources, new local housing strategies set notable standards at the national level. More recently, however, grassroots organizing efforts and community involvement in processes of affordable housing production have lost standing. Furthermore, housing organizations and leaders have become increasingly susceptible to political processes and electoral cycles. As civic groups have ceased to effectively monitor government actions, housing policies and efforts have lost legitimacy among the citizenry and housing unaffordability has remained a significant issue. Yet, although some housing organizations have lost autonomy, they have not necessarily lost their ability to influence local politics and policy. The evolution of these organizations, therefore, provides notable lessons to those that seek to institutionalize their demands and strengthen their ability to shape the growth and development of their cities and regions.

1. Introduction

A number of recent social movements in Latin America have caught the attention of scholars and researchers (Zibechi, 2010a, 2010b). Important Mexican urban movements, however, have received less attention. This may be due in part to their ability to influence mostly only local politics (Bennett, 1995). Yet, given the size and importance of major Mexican cities, and the country's capital in particular, their achievements and evolution should not be overlooked. Thus, this paper highlights the ability of housing movements in Mexico City to drive urban and political change in singular and powerful ways. While these movements and organizations have faced numerous challenges and, on occasion, have exhibited problematic practices, they have also informed policies and reorganized social and political relations.

Rapid urbanization in Mexico City during the twentieth century made housing conditions increasingly harsh for low-income residents. Besides the physical deterioration of low-income housing and inner-city neighborhoods, a lack of oversight and regulation produced power imbalances between landlords and tenants, accelerated rent increases, and contributed to an escalation in the number of evictions. Furthermore, urban renewal projects led to the demolition of thousands of low-income housing units (Coulomb, 1985; Perló Cohen, 1981). Consequently, tenants and low-income residents began mobilizations that culminated in the formation of the *Asamblea de Barrios* (*Neighborhoods' Assembly*) in 1987. Its main objectives were to promote rental housing regulations and low-income housing construction, for which they had to move beyond mobilizing to strengthen and institutionalize their demands.

Since its formation, the *Asamblea de Barrios* became an important source of sociopolitical mobilization, especially given their opposition to the then established political regime and party that had occupied power and the presidential seat since 1929. Working together with other civil society and political organizations, one of their most significant endeavors was to push for increased political and administrative autonomy at the local level, which led to the formation of a Legislative Assembly and the establishment of mayoral elections in the 1990s. In turn, this increase in local autonomy gave more prominence to housing issues and drove the creation and establishment of important

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housing norms, programs, and institutions. Since then, and despite limited resources, Mexico City's budget for local housing initiatives grew to be equivalent to one-third of federal expenditures on housing.[2]

Scholars have highlighted the ability of urban movements to foster sociopolitical change (Bennett, 1995; Castells, 1983; Zibechi, 2010a). This has been the case of housing organizations in Mexico City, which have been able to considerably influence public policy. More recently, however, grassroots organizing and community involvement in processes of affordable housing production in Mexico City have lost some of their potency and popular support. Housing organizations continue to be involved in housing programs and projects, but mostly as lobbyists and intermediaries between the government and potential residents. Political processes and electoral cycles have also heavily influenced some housing organizations. Castells' (1983) work is helpful in analyzing these latter processes as well. He notes that political and interest groups are frequently targeted by governments through policies and 'rewards' in accordance to their capacity to mobilize and bargain for resources. This, however, can later lead to cooptation and the weakening of community organizing (Auyero, 2001, 2014).

This paper analyzes the evolution of social movements and organizing around housing issues in Mexico City, and examines their role in promoting low-income housing access. I argue that mobilizations around detrimental housing conditions provided more than organizing support to low-income tenants and affordable housing production. They also pushed for the democratization of the local government and the election of an administration committed to housing issues. In turn, this led to the consolidation and institutionalization of housing programs that have expanded housing access through rehabilitation and densification programs, among other strategies. However, this paper will also discuss some of the implications of the recent weakening of the powerful grassroots organizing that developed before the turn of the century.

This article draws from a research project that had the objective of evaluating recent densification and housing programs in Mexico City (2000–2012), particularly in relation to their goal of increasing access to adequate housing. While this analysis made use of qualitative and quantitative methods, this paper centers on the qualitative portion of this study, the findings of which highlight the influence of social organizations on the drafting and implementation of recent housing and urban development programs. The content analysis[3] of fourteen semi-structured interviews with current and former public officials and housing advocates,[4] relevant newspaper accounts, social media sources, government documents, and policy briefs, served to better gage the evolution of housing movements and the effectiveness of their efforts, as well as to triangulate data by drawing upon different sources and perspectives. I also collected qualitative and quantitative data through semi-structured resident surveys conducted in 10% of the units of two housing projects[5] financed by the local government and built in Mexico City's urban core.[6] Together, these data shed light on the individual benefits and difficulties experienced by low-income residents in the process of accessing and inhabiting centrally located housing projects, and on their relations with housing organizations and government institutions.

2. The influence of social movements in urban settings

Import Substitution policies in Latin American countries fueled industrialization and contributed to the rapid growth of cities in the twentieth century. Initially, governments were able to respond to some of the needs, demands, and expectations of such urbanizing populations. Yet, Latin American countries became increasingly dependent on the capital and technology of fully industrialized nations, and vulnerable to external forces of international finance. These developing economies had to eventually undergo profound economic restructuring following the debt crises of the 1980s, and adopt neoliberal policies and a withdrawal of state intervention. Responding to the fiscal limitations of neoliberal adjustment-induced austerity measures and pressures from international lenders, many Latin American national governments eschewed much of their responsibilities to ensure economic and social welfare for their populations (Coulomb & Schteingart, 2006; Roberts, 1995).

Along with the major shifts outlined above, some scholars have argued that the region experienced a process of socioeconomic individualization and fragmentation (Portes & Roberts, 2006; Roberts, 1995). Fragmented groups increasingly organized to defend their interests, each with their own attendant conceptions of the nature of their rights and duties. In parallel, the lines of responsibility for creating – and alleviating – the conditions that the urban poor encounter on a daily basis became increasingly blurry. There ceased to be a common conception of the rights and obligations that come along with citizenship or any plan of action or clear path for negotiating such rights and obligations. This arguably weakened the strength of social movements to call for urban reform and improved social services and material infrastructure, among other demands. Some of the socio-spatial consequences of neoliberalism have also been analyzed by scholars such as David Harvey (2008) who highlight the tendency of neoliberalism to fragment urban life and promote 'creative destruction' through, for instance, the privatization of public space, urban renewal, and gentrification processes which segregate and displace urban inhabitants. This oppressive urban fragmentation, Harvey argues, ultimately results in the political withdrawal of the citizenry.

Yet, when governments disregard their social responsibilities (Marshall, 1950), as was largely the case in Latin America, shared situations of hardship, often endured in particular by low-income and vulnerable groups, have also fostered local action and the creation of sociopolitical networks of support to harness social change and empower marginalized populations (Garber, 2011). In *The City and the Grassroots*, Manuel Castells (1983) studied social movements that aimed to transform the social values, forms, and functions of cities, thus generating political conflict and influencing public policies and urban spatial structures. While he recognized that cities would always be the expression of some institutionalized domination, he also noted that urban crises usually emerge as a consequence. Thus, he argued that the city is a social product resulting from conflicting social interests and values.

Castells (1983) analyzed the historical evolution and interaction between social change and urban form by studying a variety of major social movements that aimed to transform their cities. He argued that the revolutionary attempts of the *Comunidades* of Castilla in the early sixteenth century, the Paris Commune's municipal revolution, rent strikes in Glasgow, Scotland and Veracruz, Mexico in the early twentieth century, and uprisings in various U.S. inner cities in the 1960s, provide evidence of the importance of social movements in the evolution of cities.

[2] From 2000 to 2012, Mexico City's government allocated around 2500 million Mexican pesos a year to affordable housing programs, whereas the federal government allocated around 7000 million to the entire country (CONAVI, 2012).

[3] This qualitative analysis focused on examining recurring themes, initially, with the primary aim of distinguishing the similarities and differences between the policies and strategies of the two local government administrations under study (2000–2006 and 2006–2012). Comparisons among the experiences of different districts or *delegaciones* were also highlighted.

[4] All interviews were conducted in person, and all, except for one due to the request of the interviewee, were audio recorded. Subsequently, these interviews were transcribed for analysis.

[5] These housing projects had 182 and 48 total housing units, respectively, and were in Cuauhtémoc and Benito Juárez. Only willing participants formed part of the survey sample and their identities are to remain anonymous and confidential.

[6] Housing and densification policies sought to promote affordable housing production in four central districts or *delegaciones* (Benito Juárez, Cuauhtémoc, Miguel Hidalgo and Venustiano Carranza) that were considered to have adequate and underutilized services and infrastructure, and to be the socioeconomic hub of Mexico City (PAOT, 2006).

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