

COMMON ARCHITECTURE: LEARNING FROM THE INHABITANTS AND THEIR EVERYDAY PRACTICES

Arquitectura común: Aprendizajes desde los habitantes y sus prácticas cotidianas

Arquitetura comum: aprendizagens com os habitantes e suas práticas cotidianas

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Inhabitants of block 270 working on the improvement of the perimeter fence. Source: María Jesús Amigo (2019).

ABSTRACT

Over the last decade it has been possible to see growing ties between several architectural groups and urban communities located mainly in territories marked by decay, informality, and inequality. This process has generated a progressive recognition of the value that the daily practices of inhabitants and their communities have in the production of new ways of living, which poses new challenges for the development of the area. Starting from a description and analysis of a neighborhood improvement experience, self-managed by the inhabitants, this article addresses this challenge by proposing the formation of a common architecture, understood as a process of production of spatialities, supported by communalization dynamics that are open to new learnings that incorporate the everyday knowledge of the inhabitants and their communities.

Keywords: Architecture, community, agreements, urban improvement, urban interventions

RESUMEN

Durante la última década es posible constatar una creciente vinculación entre diversos colectivos de arquitectura y comunidades urbanas emplazadas principalmente en territorios marcados por el deterioro, la informalidad y la desigualdad. Este proceso ha generado un progresivo reconocimiento al valor que las prácticas cotidianas de los habitantes y sus comunidades tienen en la producción de nuevas formas de habitar, lo cual plantea nuevos desafíos para el desarrollo de la disciplina. A partir de la descripción y análisis de una experiencia de mejoramiento barrial autogestionada por los habitantes, el presente artículo aborda dicho desafío proponiendo la conformación de una arquitectura común, entendida como un proceso de producción de espacialidades sustentadas en dinámicas de comunalización abierta a nuevos aprendizajes que incorporan los conocimientos cotidianos de los habitantes y sus comunidades.

Palabras Clave: Arquitectura, comunidad, acuerdos, mejoramiento urbano, intervenciones urbanas

RESUMO

Ao longo da última década é possível verificar um vínculo crescente entre diversos coletivos arquitetônicos e comunidades urbanas localizadas principalmente em territórios marcados pela degradação, informalidade e desigualdade. Esse processo tem gerado um reconhecimento progressivo do valor que as práticas cotidianas dos moradores e de suas comunidades têm na produção de novas formas de habitar, o que impõe novos desafios para o desenvolvimento da disciplina. A partir da descrição e análise de uma experiência de melhoria de bairro autogerida pelos moradores, este artigo aborda esse desafio e propõe a formação de uma arquitetura comum, entendida como um processo de produção de espacialidades sustentadas em processos de comunalização aberta a novos aprendizados que incorporam os conhecimentos cotidianos dos habitantes e de suas comunidades.

Palabras Clave: Arquitetura, comunidade, acordos, melhoria urbana, intervenções urbanas

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, it has been possible to see growing ties between different architecture groups and urban communities, that are mainly located in territories marked by decay, informality, and inequality. This phenomenon has been driven by professional organizations like collectives, NGOs, and foundations, acquiring growing importance in neighborhood improvement processes. This is reflected in a progressive recognition of the value of informal architecture in the production of the architectural “know-how” and the relevance of professionals as facilitators of community processes, in trends like the community organization for the design and management of housing projects through the collaborative and self-managed work of the neighbors, the development of collaborative platforms for interaction, and the shared learning between diverse neighborhood organizations, among many others.

Said recognition has been expressed in meetings of the area, like the XX Biennial of Architecture and Urban Development, held in Valparaíso between October and November, 2017. Under the title *Diálogos Impostergables* (Undelayable Dialogs), an area of activism was included, that included the participation of different renowned professional groups of national civic activism, as well as social community organizations, fostering an interesting opening to dialog and negotiation with citizens around design processes. According to Magrini and Cancino (2017), this interrelation has allowed exploring and experimenting with new collaborative methodologies for communication, work, and the production of collective knowledge.

In a similar perspective, the XXI Biennial on Architecture and Urban Development, held in October 2019, put a particular emphasis on the relevance that the “run-of-the-mill” has for the area’s development, highlighting the value that common, daily, and widespread, but often undervalued and invisible aspects, have for the understanding of the city. This perspective undoubtedly reinforces the possibilities for interaction and exchange with the inhabitants of the territories, recognized as fundamental agents in the production of urban spaces (Urrutia, Coeffé, Villalón, González & Oblinovic, 2019).

In fact, this growing tie between professional groups and urban communities has allowed progressing in a revision of the traditional theoretical and methodological approaches of the area, as well as in the instruments and tools that support it, generating new forms of architectural work in diverse territorial settings. This has promoted the rethinking of the figure of the architect as an individual author and creator, expanding the view towards understanding the collectively produced space.

From this perspective, the current social and health crisis experienced in Chile, resulting from the 2019 Social Uprising and the Covid-19 Pandemic in 2020, makes the revision of these area approaches even more relevant, in the means that a paradox is uncovered between the demands of greater equality, social justice, and citizen rights in public

spaces (Manzi, 2020; Márquez, 2020), facing the reconfiguration of the domestic spaces associated to teleworking and other virtual settings of sociability and spatiality (Ruiz-Hurtado, 2020).

Facing this paradox between the public and the domestic, it is pertinent to underline the relevance of a third socio-spatial order (Giglia, 2012): the “common spaces”. Understood as spaces produced from reciprocity, co-responsibility and mutual benefit, these “common spaces” emerge from the practices and relations of collaboration that break through the institutional limits, where groups of inhabitants commit to a same task, producing specific rules and agreements that regulate said production (Letelier, Micheletti & Vanhulst, 2016; Lange, 2018; Lange & Amigo, 2020).

This article describes the construction of a perimeter fence in a social housing condominium located in the Valle de la Luna neighborhood, in the commune of Quilicura, in the Metropolitan Region of Santiago de Chile, as an example of the production of a “common space” among its inhabitants. Through this revision, the challenge is set for the area of progressing towards a “common architecture”, where the architectural work becomes a setting for negotiations and agreements between architects, inhabitants, and the production of spatiality.

METHODOLOGY

This work falls within a research process based on an exploratory-descriptive design and a qualitative methodology. The research strategy is based on an ethnographic approach, developed mainly through three complementary techniques: the revision of secondary documentation regarding the territorial context where the case study is located; the passive and participant observation around the spatial interventions made by the inhabitants; and unstructured and semi-structured interviews made to the inhabitants throughout the fieldwork. This was done between October 2019 and March 2020, the transition period between the Social Uprising and the outbreak of the Covid-19 health crisis.

This methodological strategy considers an approach from the comprehensive and critical paradigms of the production of common spaces. The work was done looking at three fundamental criteria for this research: permanent long-term dialog with the inhabitants, the generation of a trust-based relationship with them, and the convergence with active and constant speakers in this process.

The description allows making the relevance of the collaborative work done by the inhabitants of the respective condominium, visible. They developed a spatial intervention aiming at generating conditions of safety and privacy in a neighborhood that is badly hit by problems of violence and crime. However, the same scale of the case in question, is relevant inasmuch as it allows making the importance of the collaborative process experienced by the inhabitants, visible.

RESULTS

The Valle de la Luna neighborhood is in the commune of Quilicura, in the northern part of the Metropolitan Region. It emerged in 1994, as a result of a housing policy that prioritized increasing the number of dwellings, over their quality and their setting (Tapia, 2018; Chateau, Schmitt, Rasse & Martínez, 2020) [Figure 1].

According to the Ministry of Housing and Urbanism (MINVU, in Spanish) (2014), this housing complex is characterized on having the most critical level of vulnerability and decay at a metropolitan level, along with an absence of planning that has had negative consequences on the physical-spatial deterioration, the fragmentation of the social fabric, and on the ownership of the property, due to the lack of administration of its common spaces. The dwellings are laid out in three-floor blocks, set out in pairs, connected using two scissor-type staircases that face one another and that, as a result, give their backs to the other buildings.

Figure 1

Location of the Valle de la Luna neighborhood and the communal boundary of Quilicura, as part of the Metropolitan Region.

Source: Prepared by the Authors.



Co-property D3 is one of the 25 co-properties that the entire neighborhood comprises, and is formed by 2 blocks with a total of 24 apartments of 40m² each. Over the years, the inhabitants have organized themselves by blocks, a situation that is fostered by the architectural setup of these buildings. In this sense, it is important to highlight the role that the interior passageway between buildings of a same block plays, as this acts as an articulating space of the different movements the inhabitants make, considering that the access to the apartments opens to it. Therefore, this is the main meeting space between inhabitants, and the place where recreational activities and meetings are held to make different decisions.

Likewise, it is important to report that the apartments were handed over with the rough work, they did not have finishings, fences, or paving. For this reason, the inhabitants have regularly met to improve both their dwellings and their shared spaces, providing and designing solutions to daily problems like security, being able to move around without getting their feet wet on rainy days, recreation and parking. In this context, the fieldwork done has allowed identifying a series of interventions and improvement works based on collaborative practices done by the inhabitants of co-property D3 of the Valle de la Luna neighborhood.

Within the improvements identified, the building of perimeter fences in each one of the two co-property blocks [Figure 2] stands out. As the inhabitants themselves say, these were built to mark

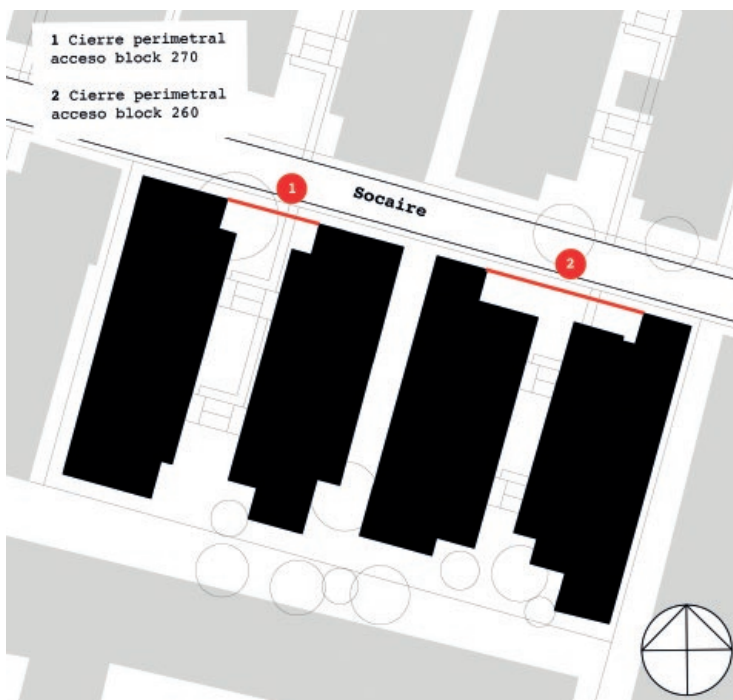


Figure 2

Location of the access perimeter fences of each one of the blocks of co-property D3, Valle de la Luna neighborhood. Quilicura, Santiago. Source: Prepared by the Authors.

them off from one another, and to provide greater security within them, on facing a crime rate that has progressively grown in the neighborhood and its surroundings [Figure 3].

With this in mind, the inhabitants of each co-property block coordinated and decided to build a fence on the access along Socaire street. This decision marks the start of a collaboration process that articulates different contributions among the inhabitants, among which their know-how, time, and work tools stand out.

Once the decision to build the fence was made, one of the inhabitants, who had more experience in purchasing materials due to their work as a construction worker, made a list of what was required to, then, get a quotation. With the amount needed for the work defined, the inhabitants decided to pay an amount of money to cover said cost, which was collected by the delegates, who kept a record of the contributions made.

Figure 3

View from Socaire street of the perimeter access fence for block 270. Fuente: María Jesús Amigo (2019).



Once the budgeted money was collected, two neighbors were put in charge to buy them materials, using their pick-up trucks to transport them. The delegates were then in charge of accounting for the bills with the respective purchases, demonstrating to the rest of the inhabitants the proper use of the money collected.

When the materials had been bought, different inhabitants of the block offered their services as volunteers to build the fence, considering their previous knowledge on welding. Likewise, other inhabitants helped to carry the materials, painting the profiles once installed, or providing food to the workers. All the tools needed for the fence's construction, like saws, sanders, or welding machines, were provided by the neighbors, as well ladders and chairs to reach the higher parts to paint them. The electricity was provided by one of the inhabitants, who was later paid for the respective consumption with part of the monies collected.

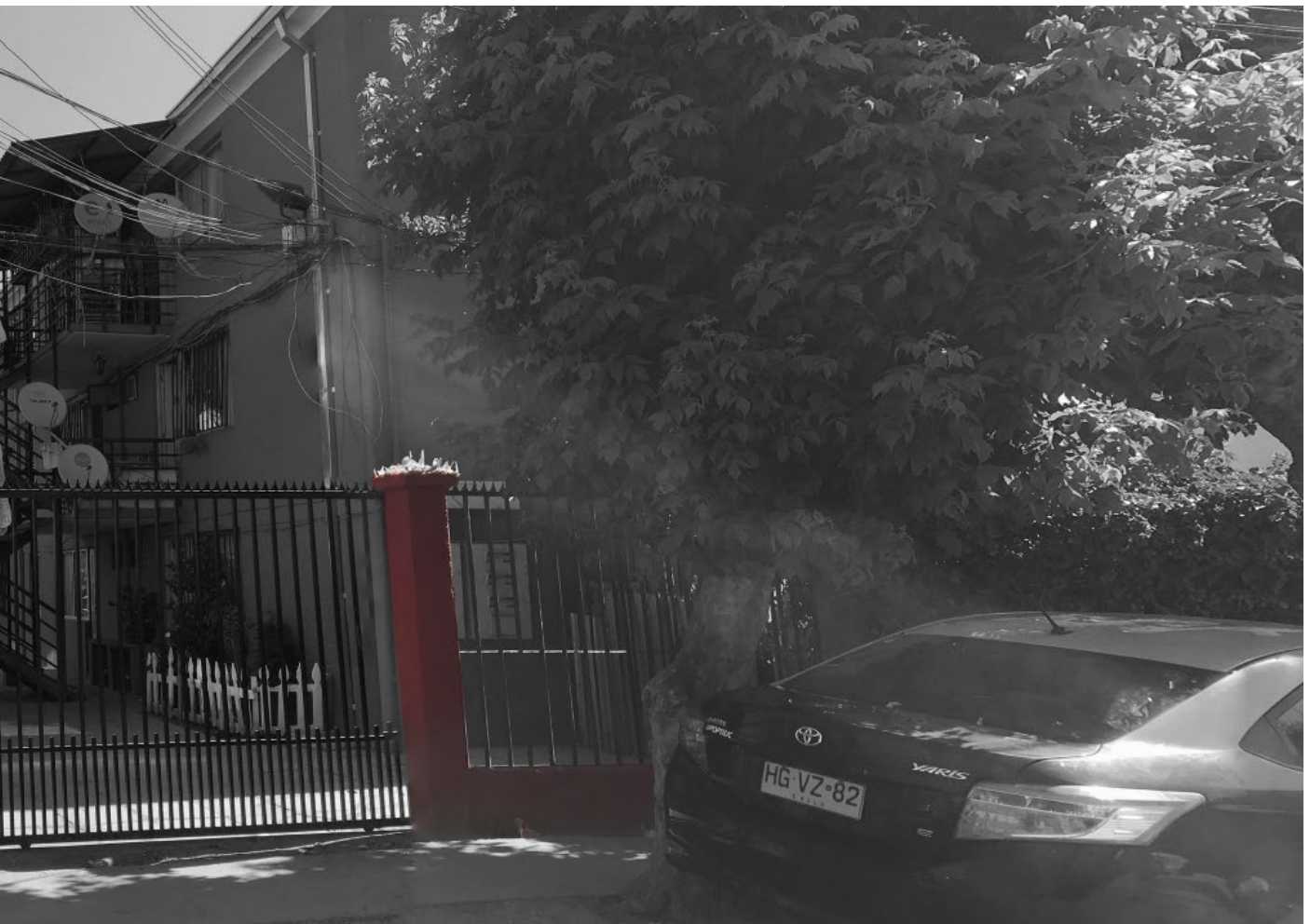




Figure 4

Inhabitants of block 270 working on the improvement of the perimeter fence. Source: María Jesús Amigo (2019).

This description allows establishing the existence of a collaborative process based on the principles of co-responsibility and reciprocity which were present throughout the construction of this fence, manifested in the relationship and coordination that the inhabitants generated to reach a common goal. Likewise, these principles have been sustained over time, being fundamental in its use and upkeep, since the inhabitants established a series of negotiations and agreements, such as always keeping the gate locked, not bashing it when closing it, keeping children from playing with the ball and hitting it, making sure that all the inhabitants had a key, etc. The purpose of these negotiations and agreements is facilitating the use of the fence among all the block's inhabitants, maintaining the security inside, and sustaining its service life over time.

Along with this, it is worth mentioning that the position the perimeter fence has, is not by chance, as it was decided together with all the block's inhabitants, considering the boundary with the paving of the passageway, as well as the other perimeter fences built in neighboring blocks. This decision was based on a tacit agreement between the inhabitants of different blocks, who consider that those who position their fence "further forward" than the line

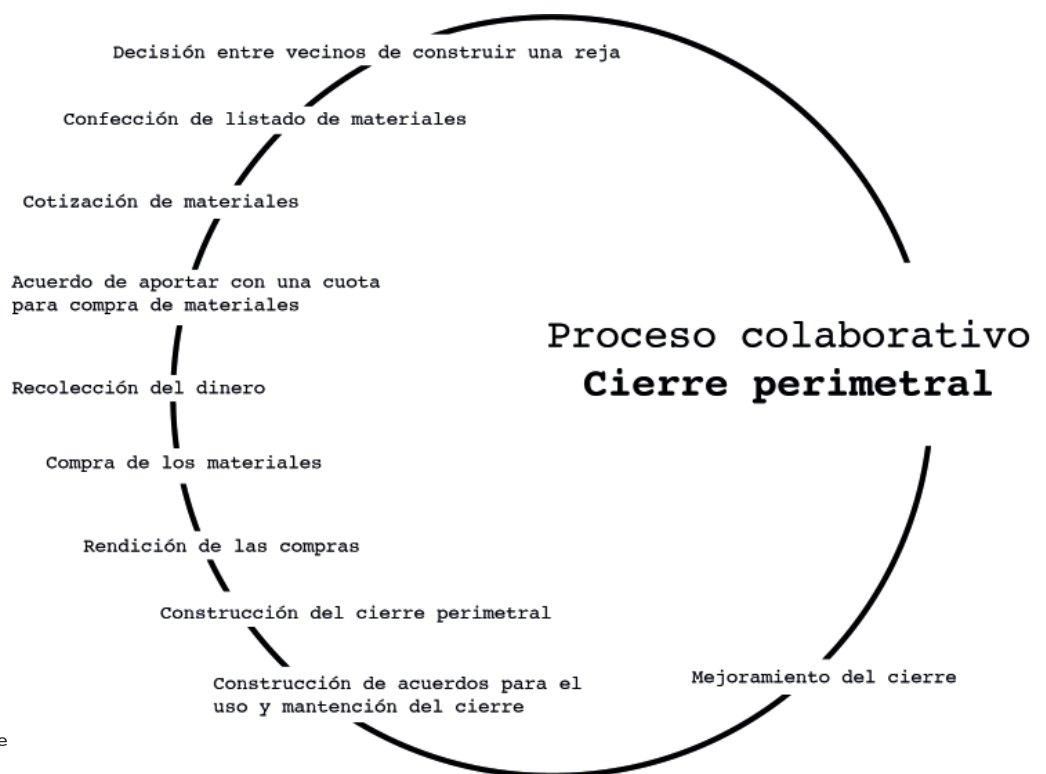


Figure 5

Daily practices involved in the collaborative process to build the perimeter fence. Source: Prepared by the Authors.

of the rest, are “taking over” a space that does not belong to them, regardless of whether the co-property legal-administrative boundary states otherwise.

In addition, it is possible to see that the fence has had repairs and improvements over time, like for example, the installation of wooden cleats between the bars, which impede visual contact between the outside and the inside the block for greater security [Figure 4]. These interventions have been managed and materialized by the same inhabitants who, just as happened during the construction process, came together to buy the materials, made a collection to gather the necessary funds, bought the materials, and carried out the required repairs.

Starting from that presented on the production of the perimeter fence, it is interesting to discuss about its conception as a “common space”. This conception does not just acknowledge the importance of the collaborative process involving the inhabitants, but it also reveals different communalization practices that make its materialization and maintenance possible through negotiations and agreement, which demonstrate their agency capacity to improve their neighborhoods [Figure 5].

DISCUSSION

Understood as “common space”, the perimeter fence allows questioning the traditional ways of conceiving and understanding architectural projects and constitutes a production of spatiality that does not require architectural knowledge for its production (Elorza & Mattioli, 2020). This consideration does not assume a deliberate exclusion of architecture in the production of “common spaces”, but rather opens an area of learning for developing it and, certainly, for the formation of ties between architects and inhabitants and their communities. In this line, and with the goal of focusing the analysis of the case study, as well as the learning that emerges from its production process, three considerations associated to its minor, tactical, and communal nature are proposed.

A first consideration indicates that a perimeter fence like the one described, can be conceived as a work of “minor architecture”. Following the definition proposed by Stoner (2012), the denomination of “minor” is not used to underestimate architecture, but rather invites thinking about it beyond its traditional codes and standards, considering the ways in which the inhabitants organize their daily lives, and that, given its daily, singular, and circumstantial nature, often end up becoming invisible.

This conception of minor architecture, applied to cases like the one described, makes understanding the discipline as an area of action that can be developed not just by architects, and that is not just focused on observing the work made as a product and result. From this approach, minor architecture leaves the architects in a horizontal relationship of negotiation and collaboration with the inhabitants and their communities, in a shared production process of common spaces.

The perimeter fence can be understood as a minor architecture project inasmuch as it promotes forms of sociability and spatiality based on practices of mutual co-responsibility and collaboration, fundamental values of common spaces, that invite the architect to join in and collaborate in collective initiatives and not to emphasize their individual authorship. Thus, minor architecture constitutes a way of understanding architectural work that is nourished from the daily knowledge of the inhabitants.

A second consideration highlights the tactical nature of a minor project like the perimeter fence. Following the suggestions made by De Certeau (2000), said “tactical” nature is based on those daily practices, that allow solving infrequent and circumstantial, but recurrent problems over time, that stand out from those strategic ones focused “from a subject of willingness and of power”, which are consolidated through a future long-term project, and that traditionally have supported the rationalist conception of Latin American cities. The collaborative process described assumes, in this sense, a tactical nature too.

The tactical nature is associated to spontaneous, informal and/or self-managed spatial interventions, that have marked the develop-

ment of cities throughout their history, revaluing their incremental and emerging nature. Although these have always been developed by the inhabitants, they currently have a renewed recognition associated to the recovery approaches linked to the right to the city and dwellings (Lefebvre, 1969).

The case described emerges from the knowledge the inhabitants have (Jirón, Lange & González, 2020), which is not necessarily visualized, recognized, or valued by technicians and professionals linked institutionally to the development of architectural knowledge, that predominate over the design and planning of public and private spaces.

A third consideration allows understanding the perimeter fence as a “common space”, following the outline developed by Ostrom (2011), who underlined the historic capacity of the inhabitants to manage natural and cultural resources efficiently, generating self-management protocols, that are respected over time and sustained on social bonds of trust. From the same perspective, Laval and Dardot (2014) highlight the importance that said protocols have in the formation of urban communities, and their capacity to “commonly” handle resources that are not necessarily traded in the market.

In this way, daily social practices are key in the constitution of “communalization” processes, based on principles focused on sharing, looking after and producing together; principles expressed in a set of norms and rules that organize their production and management, and that are decided collectively (Tan, 2015). These rules are built socially, are updated, and are permanently transformed through daily practices, restricting the use of said assets for personal or commercial purpose by the members of a community.

In the case of the perimeter fence, the inhabitants collaborate not just with work, knowledge, monetary resources, and construction materials, but they also settle negotiations and agreements that allow them to keep it operational in an orderly fashion, forming a hybrid socio-spatial order between the public and private spheres.

In brief, the minor, tactical, and common nature associated to the perimeter fence, invites progressing towards an understanding of architecture associated to forms of appropriation, welfare, and solidarity historically developed by the inhabitants and their communities. Just as Boano and Astolfo (2015) say, architecture is facing the task of overcoming the double gap between professional design and the daily act of survival. From a similar point of view, Peliowski (2017) questions the architecture-centered paradigm, considered as an “omniscient creator”, where their collaborators are subordinate to their artistic vision. For this author, architecture is just the result of the imaginary of the architect, but that it is a cultural, social, and historically influenced and defined event, the result of politization processes where technical, economic, and social aspects are related. For this reason, the discipline's focus must be in the production conditions associated to the content of the built work, rather than in its shape.

CONCLUSIONS

The progress experienced by architecture over the last decade, in terms of ties with the inhabitants and their communities, constitutes an important area for observation and learning in the area's development, while opening multiple challenges for its consolidation. One of these challenges is the recognition of the production of common spaces as architectural projects and areas for architectural intervention, supported by the daily practices of the inhabitants and based on their daily knowledge, and not on the expert knowledge and/or the creative architectural leading role. Said recognition opens the need to progress towards the formation of a common architecture, that considers the redefinition of the traditional project and theoretical frameworks.

From this point of view, architectural intervention is not conceived as that which triggers a process of social transformation of the setting, but rather one that is preceded by a social transformation that supports the architectural intervention, driven from a history which, in some cases, translates into years of struggle in the territories, so that the spatial intervention can effectively take place and be projected over time. As a result, the discipline becomes a support that promotes that local organizations can be developed, providing technical tools and accompaniment policies.

Likewise, the formulation of an architecture of this kind invites reflecting about the relationship there is between "the legal" and "the legitimate" in the production processes of common spaces. Considering that in Latin America there is a high tendency towards informality, the production of common spaces is generally placed from the legitimate, and not from the legal. In this sense, in the most vulnerable sectors of the city, there is a right to build that is more legitimized, as most Latin American cities have been built based on informality, where many of their inhabitants have been excluded from the formal systems and processes of urban development.

This distinction between the legal and the legitimate also forces rethinking the importance of the daily knowledge that the inhabitants and their communities use for the production of common spaces. As is known, said daily knowledge is often made invisible from the position of the expert and professional knowledge. A common architecture should, ultimately, consider a complementary relationship between both types of knowledge, handled through negotiations and agreements that emerge directly from the communality of the inhabitants.

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