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IN THE EYES OF SANTA LUCIA: URBAN ART AND COMMUNITARIAN ORGANIZATION IN THE HISTORIC CENTER OF SAN SALVADOR

A LOS OJOS DE SANTA LUCÍA: ARTE URBANO Y
ORGANIZACIÓN COMUNITARIA EN EL CENTRO
HISTÓRICO DE SAN SALVADOR

AOS OLHOS DE SANTA LUCÍA: ARTE URBANA
E ORGANIZAÇÃO COMUNITÁRIA NO CENTRO
HISTÓRICO DE SAN SALVADOR.



Figura 0. Panoramic photograph of the finished mural. Source: Photo archive of the “Living Neighborhoods” project (July 18, 2021).

This research derives from the project “Barrios vivos”, winner of the call “Experimenta ciudad”, Citizen Laboratories Program to experiment, explore and create community in El Salvador, by the Cultural Center of Spain in El Salvador (CCESV).

RESUMEN

El arte urbano ha sido y sigue siendo un componente transformador dentro de los procesos de renovación urbana, a través del fortalecimiento de la memoria, la recuperación del sentido del lugar y la reducción de la estigmatización. El presente artículo ahonda en el rol del arte urbano dentro de los procesos de recualificación (física-espacial) y resignificación (simbólica), analizando cómo se relacionan estos procesos con el fortalecimiento del apego del lugar, el sentido de pertenencia, el sentido de seguridad y la organización comunitaria, y apuntando a reflexionar en cómo estos procesos pueden incidir en problemáticas más profundas como el riesgo social y ambiental en Asentamientos Populares Urbanos. En términos metodológicos, se trata de una investigación-acción participativa, desarrollada junto a la Comunidad Santa Lucía en el Centro Histórico de San Salvador. Si bien las limitantes del arte urbano son claras de cara a problemáticas complejas como la violencia urbana y el riesgo ambiental, el caso de Santa Lucía refleja el potencial de estas intervenciones cuando surgen como una expresión colectiva y consensuada, llegando a convertirse en un instrumento de reivindicación ciudadana y fortaleciendo los lazos y la organización comunitaria.

Palabras clave: apego del lugar, arte urbano, participación ciudadana, renovación urbana.

ABSTRACT

Urban art has been and continues to be a transforming component within urban renewal processes, reinforcing memory, recovering the sense of place, and reducing stigmatization. This article delves into the role of urban art within the (physical-spatial) requalification and (symbolic) resignification processes in Urban Working-Class Settlements, analyzing how these processes are related to strengthening place attachment, sense of belonging, sense of security, and community organization, and trying to reflect on how they can affect deeper lying issues such as social and environmental risk. The methodology used is participatory action research, which was developed with the Santa Lucía Community in the Historic Center of San Salvador. Although the limitations of urban art are clear in the face of complex problems such as urban violence and environmental risk, the case of Santa Lucía reflects the potential of these interventions when they emerge as a collective and consensual expression, becoming an instrument of citizen vindication, strengthening community ties and organization.

Keywords: place attachment, urban art, citizen participation, urban renewal.

RESUMO

A arte urbana tem sido e continua a ser uma componente transformadora nos processos de renovação urbana, por meio do fortalecimento da memória, da recuperação do sentido do lugar e da redução da estigmatização. Este artigo analisa em profundidade o papel da arte urbana nos processos de requalificação (físico-espacial) e ressignificação (simbólica) em favelas urbanas, avaliando como estes processos estão relacionados com o reforço do apego ao lugar, o sentido de pertencimento, o sentido de segurança e a organização comunitária, e buscando refletir sobre como estes processos podem influenciar questões mais profundas, tais como o risco social e ambiental. A metodologia utilizada é a investigação de ação participativa, desenvolvida em conjunto com a Comunidade de Santa Lucía, no Centro Histórico de San Salvador. Embora as limitações da arte urbana sejam claras face a problemas complexos como a violência urbana e o risco ambiental, o caso de Santa Lucía reflete o potencial destas intervenções quando emergem como uma expressão coletiva e consensual, tornando-se um instrumento de reivindicação do cidadão, reforçando os laços e a organização da comunidade.

Palavras-chave: apego ao lugar, arte urbana, participação dos cidadãos, renovação urbana.

INTRODUCTION

Urban art, from its origins until today, has played a significant role in the production, definition, and valuation of public space, and, in a broader sense, civil society (Bohigas, 1985; Castells, 1989), understanding the relationship of art and public space as the “place for its social participation and where to disseminate its aesthetic message” (García-Doménech, 2016, p. 17). The inclusion of this type of artistic expression in urban regeneration processes first appeared in the United States in the 1980s (Hall & Robertson, 2001), before later consolidating itself as an important tool for the vindication of social problems (Remesar, 1997, Ricart & Remesar, 2013). According to Hirsch, Bonelli Zapata, and Valeso (2021), art in the public space “mobilizes memories, experiences, and narratives, and introduces them in the same territorial space in which they are rooted” (p. 2). It is through urban art, that a quota of critical dialog is introduced into neighborhoods, which reinforces or competes with the predominant forms of expression and content (Lacy, 1996), sometimes in the form of protest, and others, as vindication.

Hirsch *et al.* (2021), in their reflection on the “San Martín Pinta Bien” project in Argentina, summarize three of urban art’s main contributions to urban renewal processes. The first coincides with its origin which has persisted: the strengthening of collective memory and place identity. Although the concept of identity should not be associated with a homogeneous unit but rather with diverse identity forms that, “although changing and heterogeneous, give cohesion to human groups, cultural communities, and even nations” (Mandel, 2007, p. 51), it is a fundamental aspect that, in turn, is related with the sense of belonging and place attachment. The second contribution to communities is the recovery of the sense of place, a concept developed by the feminist geographer Doreen Massey (2012), who defined place as the meeting and interaction space of different groups and subjects, which, through exchanges and flows, create social bonds that make the place itself. Finally, the third (and perhaps most ambitious) contribution is to add, along with other complementary strategies, to reversing urban decay, reducing stigmatization, and combating social fragmentation (Hirsch *et al.*, 2021). Although muralism is only one piece within the complex framework of urban renewal, if it is done based on collaboration, outreach, and community care, it can have a positive impact in terms of appropriation for certain groups or minorities and a symbolic, functional, and aesthetic valuation for society as a whole.

These three contributions position urban art as an important component, to lead citizen participation processes seeking improvements that allow a requalification (physical-spatial) and resignification (symbolic) of the place. However, requalification as an ultimate goal, conceived as the reconversion or improvement of marginalized and/or degraded areas, has been criticized for favoring a scenographic urbanism model (Amendola, 2000, cited in Girola, Yacovino & Laborde, 2011), which looks to promote the consolidation of the

neoliberal city by transforming the built environment, (Theodore, Peck & Brenner, 2009). Although this trend has prevailed in recent decades, requalification and resignification have taken on a different connotation when they are managed *bottom-up*, from the margins, in areas not suitable for becoming consumer spaces.

One of the main lessons urban art has adopted, as it has progressed through Latin America, has been the importance of taking citizen participation further; involving communities through meaningful and lasting processes. In some cases, participation levels can become so profound that power relations fade away, the figure of the artist is that of one more collaborator; collectivity comes to the fore, and spaces are opened for co-authorship and co-creation. Some well-known experiences, such as Comuna 13 in Medellín (Colombia) with more than 300 collectively made murals, show how requalification and resignification through urban art can be separated from scenographic urbanism to give rise to more profound and significant processes such as the strengthening of place attachment and the sense of security (Vidal & Pol, 2005).

For the particular case of the Historical Center of San Salvador (El Salvador), hereinafter CHSS, a territory marked by urban violence in all its dimensions, territorial disputes between gangs, smuggling, and organized crime, urban art has emerged as a fuse within reappropriation processes by social collectives and organizations. However, reflection and analysis of these interventions' impact on CHSS have been scarce, or almost non-existent, which is why some questions arise: How is physical-spatial requalification through urban art related to the processes of resignification, strengthening of emotional attachment, sense of belonging, or sense of security? How do participatory urban art interventions affect organizational processes within communities and vice versa? How can low-cost interventions, such as muralism, contribute to more complex problems such as social or environmental risks found in most working-class urban settlements of CHSS?

This article looks to reflect on the implications of recent urban art interventions in the requalification and resignification processes of CHSS through the "Barrios Vivos or Living Neighborhoods" project¹. In particular, the case of the Santa Lucía Community, an Urban Working-Class Settlement (APU, in Spanish)² on the edge of CHSS, will be addressed (Figure 1). The project was based on a participatory action-research process, to know the inhabitants' perceptions regarding previous urban art and tactical urbanism interventions made by Glasswing International, as well as to learn about their own organizational processes, the perception of their current situation, and their future needs. The process involved interviews, a focus group, and a participatory workshop, before ending with making a community mural

¹ Thanks to the "Experimenta Ciudad" program it was possible to start with the first intervention of the "Barrios Vivos" (Living Neighborhoods) project, which was chosen along with three other initiatives to be part of the "Experimenta" laboratory. This space was born as a citizen laboratory promoted by the Cultural Center of Spain in El Salvador (CCESV), an initiative to exchange ideas and actions for community development and, particularly, of historical centers in Latin America.

² According to FUNDASAL (2007), Urban Working-Class Settlements (APUs, in Spanish) are housing settlements located within the urban fabric that meet at least one of the following characteristics: (a) uncertainty in land tenure; (b) low-quality housing materiality; (c) limited or non-existent coverage of basic services (water, electricity, sewage or rainfall drainage).

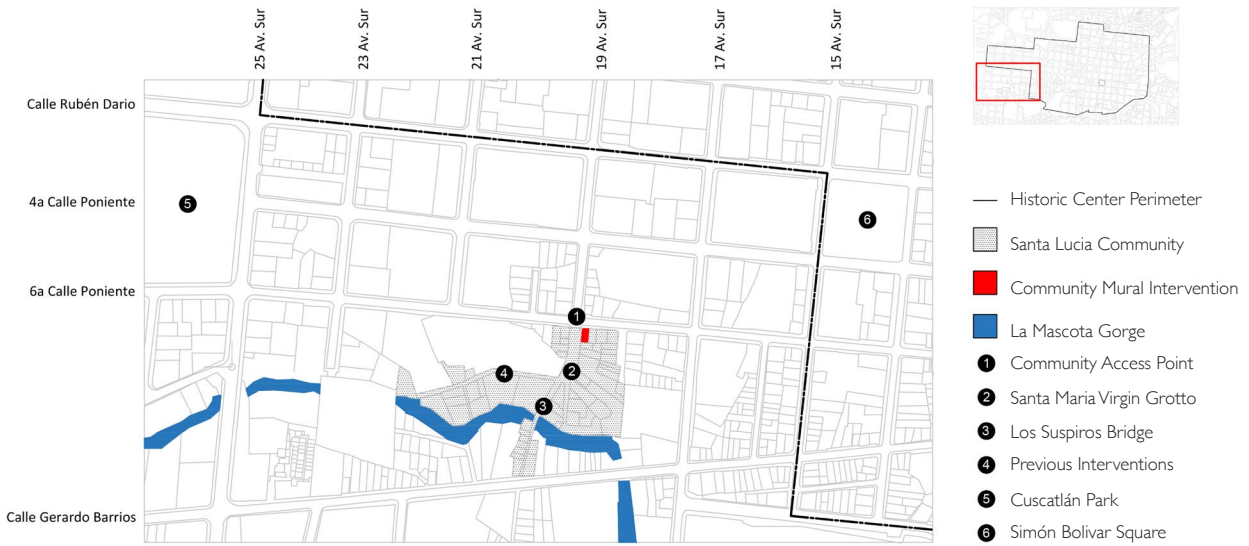


Figure 1. Location of the Santa Lucía Community within the Historic Center of San Salvador. Source: Preparation by the authors.

Figure 2. Aerial view of La Mascota Gorge and the surrounding houses. Source: Photo archive of the “Living Neighborhoods” project (June 12, 2021).



as a dialog that allowed reflection on the identity of the community, materializing both their fears and hopes, before making a short film.

METHODOLOGY

A COLLECTIVE CONSTRUCTION

The participatory research-action process was conducted in three stages: research, analysis, and action. The inhabitants of the Santa Lucía Community participated, as did a group of students and volunteers from different disciplines: two architects, two artists, an anthropologist, an international relations student, and a graphic designer. During the initial stage, contact was established with the Santa Lucía Community, where an urban art intervention had previously been carried out and with whom there was previous communication. The first meetings, held between May



Figure 3. Inhabitants of the Santa Lucía community during the focus group. Source: Photo archive of the “Living Neighborhoods” project (June 5, 2021).



Figure 4. Inhabitants of the Santa Lucía community during the participatory workshop. Source: Photo archive of the “Living Neighborhoods” project (June 12, 2021).

and June 2021, were opportunities for the community and the volunteer team to share, building an atmosphere of trust and permanent dialog. Through semi-structured interviews and a focus group (Figure 3), it was possible to collectively understand the perception of the inhabitants, both of their community and the previous interventions by Glasswing International, while learning about their own organizational processes, the perception of their current situation, and their future needs.

During the second stage, the perceptions and conditions identified in the interviews and the focus group were analyzed. An examination was made collectively in a participatory workshop (Figure 4), where two main needs arose: (a) to make an urban art intervention at the entrance of the community, and (b) to coordinate governmental or institutional support



Figure 5. Significant elements of the Santa Lucia Community. Source: Preparation by the authors.

Figure 6. Inhabitants of the Santa Lucía community during the short film's presentation. Source: Photo archive of the "Living Neighborhoods" project (August 14, 2021).



to mitigate the risk of flooding within the La Mascota Gorge (Figure 5). A first proposal for the mural was made in this workshop, adding elements such as the figure of Santa Lucía, La Mascota Gorge, the name of the community, and a "map" with the points of interest within the community.

Finally, in the third stage (action), five participatory workshops were held to paint the mural. After requesting authorization from the property's owner, materials were acquired, the donation of paint was coordinated, molds were made, and a call was made to gather more volunteers. A short film called "In the eyes of Santa Lucia"³ was also recorded. This made it possible to gather the growing concerns with the rise in the flow through the La Mascota Gorge,

³ Vasquez, A. (2021). In the Eyes of Santa Lucia. Short Film: <https://vimeo.com/589458155>

as a community strategy to attract the attention of institutions and international organizations that could finance an intervention to mitigate the risk of collapse where a large part of the community is located. The final video was shown at a small event which collectively reflected on the results of the entire process (Figure 6) and the next steps.

IN THE EYES OF SAINT LUCIA

History and testimonies of the Santa Lucia Community

The Santa Lucía Community is located within the limits of what is legally recognized as the Historic Center of San Salvador, between the Santa Lucía and El Calvario Neighborhoods. Although it was not possible to find the exact date of its foundation, there are testimonies such as that of participant 5 (woman, 82 years old), who indicated that she has been living in the community for about 62 years, and that of participant 4, who is currently 60 years old and commented having been born there. Although the community dates back more than six decades, it was not until 1975 that it was constituted as such. According to Participant 5, it was the home “of many humble, hardworking people (...), there were a lot of people there who lived in trailers and that’s how the neighborhood appeared, little by little it was changing and reached Santa Lucía” (personal communication, June 5, 2021). An important milestone that marked its beginnings was the “La Bolsa” Lodge, as about 400 families lived there, and they were the ones who originally populated the area. The legacy of “La Bolsa” continues today and, even though the lodge was destroyed in the 1986 earthquake, the passageway that legally bears the name, “Pasaje El Rosal”, is still in people’s imagination, “Pasaje La Bolsa”.

Since its foundation, the Santa Lucía community has settled within a flood zone **4**, defined by Vélez *et al.* (2003) as areas alongside rivers or gorges, in strips parallel to the water flow, where restrictions on land use and anthropic interventions should be imposed, in this case, the La Mascota Gorge (Figure 2). The risk and vulnerability to floods have worsened in recent years due to the increased flow (Fernández-Lavado, 2010), the result of accelerated urbanization processes in the Metropolitan Area of San Salvador (AMSS). Despite this, the inhabitants reject the possibility of moving and being relocated to another area, alluding to the time they have been residing there and the ties they have developed toward the neighborhood and the community itself. According to the testimonies, on one occasion they tried to get a property located in the area where the “La Bolsa” Lodge was formerly located, where they would have been able to relocate the houses. However, since the area is predominantly for industrial use, land prices have risen in recent years, so relocating to a neighboring site has become almost impossible **5**. Regarding this possibility, one of the

RESULTS

4 In El Salvador, flood zones have historically been home to Urban Working-Class Settlements (APUs), a symptom of the high housing deficit that, according to one of the most recent INCAE studies (Guevara & Arce, 2016) considers 75% of the population, namely, 75 out of every 100 people either do not have a home or the one where they currently reside does not meet the characteristics of adequate housing.

5 Some of the community’s families have set up a Mutual Aid Housing Cooperative called ACOVIHSAL, whereby they hope to have access to decent housing with support from the State and the Italian Cooperation, nearby the community.

participants whose house adjoins the gorge, said“ “(...) I was born here, I have always lived here, my daughters were born here, grew up here and well, I would have to do it (move), not by will, but by the will to not slip into the river” (Participant 4, woman, 60 years old, personal communication, June 5, 2021).

Apart from environmental vulnerability, there is the social risk and criminal violence that the community has experienced due to the presence of gangs and the sale of drugs, as well as stigmatization due to its topography and being a “dead end”, leading to the name of “El hoyo” (The Hole). In the surrounding area, the community is still known by this name, about which one of the participants expressed:

Over there, where the grotto is, that's what they called El Hoyo... That name was given by the police because they would capture the criminals who arrived there (...), but it didn't seem like that to us, so around 1975, we formed a directive and the first thing we did was to change the name (...) today it is the Santa Lucía community. (Participant 1, male, 72 years old, personal communication, June 5, 2021)

Physical-spatial requalification and the processes of resignification, strengthening attachment, and sense of security

In Santa Lucía, a long-shared history has allowed consolidating strong community ties, and a spirit of cooperation, empathy, and solidarity. According to the accounts, the community has worked to improve the perception towards its neighborhood, seeking to leave behind the toponym, “El Hoyo”, although when it comes to any procedure involving their official address, they have to indicate, “Comunidad Santa Lucía - Ex Hoyo”. An important milestone within this process was the intervention in December 2020 by the San Salvador Mayor's Office in collaboration with Glasswing International, where the first murals were made in the community and a roof and urban furniture were added into the area known as “Santa Lucía Grotto”, located a few meters from the entrance of the community.

This is a process running since 1975, to improve the community. In those times, few visited us because of the antisocial actions, but over time it has been improving, today at least we have a beautiful space (the grotto) where people have the confidence to be there, but that does not mean that it is over, a lot is missing. (Participant 1, male, 72 years old, personal communication, June 5, 2021)

The physical-spatial requalification process of the community through urban art, furniture, and lighting has marked a before and after. First, Santa Lucía Grotto has always been one of the most important sites, since it has historical, religious, and social value. With the intervention, it is now the place where they carry out most of their collective activities: meetings, religious celebrations, and recreational activities (birthday parties, outdoor movie screenings), among others, which has allowed them to regain the sense of place and, therefore, re-signify a space that they have valued so much. Secondly, the “El Rosal”

passageway, where most of the fun murals are located, lacked lighting and was marked off by two blind walls. Now it has been transformed into a space for play and recreation.

Regarding the sense of security, although both CHSS and the community itself are located within an area generally associated with illegal activities such as drug trafficking, organized crime, and the presence of gangs, it was possible to experience an atmosphere of tranquility and a strong sense of security among its inhabitants. This is mainly related to community ties and the time they have lived there, two predictors of place attachment. Although it is not possible to attribute this achievement to a physical intervention such as the murals and the urban equipment, it was possible to perceive a deep pride among the community toward what the murals convey both to visitors and people who previously lived in the community and have now migrated to other countries. "(...) (before) The purpose was to get out of here. Today, it is to stay" (Male Participant, 59 years old, personal communication, June 12, 2021), expressed one inhabitant, who links the strengthening of pride and a sense of belonging to the urban art interventions.

Participatory processes, organization, and urban art

During the first stages of the research-participatory action (identification of problems and analysis), the inhabitants raised the need to strengthen the neighborhood's image since, although the previous intervention of the murals and the grotto area had improved the perception of the community, it is a phenomenon that is restricted to the area itself, so they expressed that they wanted to "welcome" visitors using a mural that invited them to come in. During this process of dialog and identification of problems, the participation of three older men stood out, one who officially acts as a community leader, and two who continuously took part. The participation of women was in specific events, during collective activities, with less participation of young men and women. Because the community has previously worked with other institutions, organizations, and volunteers, they have managed to articulate a way of working and responding, developed their capacity for self-management, and have been able to recognize the transformative potential that urban art has.

Subsequently, in the participatory workshop, an initial proposal was prepared with the main elements of the mural: the welcome phrase, the name of the community, and the figure of Santa Lucía. An accidental aspect of the project was that the house used was magenta, so to optimize materials, the decision was made to keep the background color and work with four basic colors: black, white, yellow, and cyan. In the final design, some elements that characterize or have some value for the community were incorporated into the Virgin's cape (tortillas, cats, corn, vegetables, flowers). This is displayed in cyan along the entire intervened corner, simulating a river, the flow of the gorge (Figure 7 and Figure 8). The previous urban art intervention experience, carried out by Glasswing, generated confidence in the community, so they did not hesitate to take the lead when proposing ideas for the welcome mural (Figure 9).



Figure 7. Participatory day making the “In the eyes of Santa Lucía” mural. Source: Photo archive of the “Living Neighborhoods” project (July 10, 2021).

Figure 8. Panoramic photograph of the finished mural. Source: Photo archive of the “Living Neighborhoods” project (July 18, 2021).

Urban art and environmental risk

As mentioned, the vulnerability to possible overflows of the La Mascota gorge is the greatest concern for the inhabitants. Some participants pointed out that in recent years they have carried out mitigation works. However, during 2020, in full confinement due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Tropical Storm Amanda (May 30 to June 9, 2020) caused major erosion that today threatens to cause the collapse of numerous homes in the community alongside La Mascota gorge. Indeed, “(...) La Mascota gorge worries us, many children live alongside the gorge and we need help, but so far we have not received a response



from anyone who can help us (...)” (Participant 2, female, 25 years old, personal communication, June 5, 2021). In this regard, another inhabitant emphasized “ (...) about 10 years ago it was already beginning to feel that the currents were stronger. Like in 2006, when we lost the wall for the first time. No one helped us build” (Participant female, 60 years old, personal communication, June 12, 2021).

By the decision of the community, this problem was reflected both in the mural (virgin’s cape) and the short film. Although the project’s temporary and economic scope did not allow supporting the community in its search to reduce the vulnerability they find themselves in with the La Mascota gorge, it was through testimonies collected in the video and symbolism inside the welcome mural that we were able to raise their collective voice and denounce the risk they live under.

The physical-spatial (requalification), symbolic (resignification) and discursive (message) implications of urban art in the Santa Lucia Community allow reflecting on the transformative potential of this type of intervention in a context such as the Historic Center of San Salvador, characterized by being the scene of multiple manifestations of urban violence and vulnerability to environmental risk. In these territories, the contribution of urban art goes far beyond the scenographic urbanism cited by Gyrola *et al.* (2011), apart from being an aesthetic improvement and triggering gentrification processes. If it is done collectively through a continuous process of reflection by the community, it can contribute to strengthening the sense of belonging,

Figure 9. Team of volunteers of the “In the eyes of Santa Lucia” mural. Source: Photo archive of the “Living Neighborhoods” project (July 18, 2021).

DISCUSSION

increasing the sense of security, and even reversing migratory processes (exodus), as one of the inhabitants stated, referring to people who previously lived in the area and now wish to return.

Based on the interviews and testimonies, it was identified that the interventions made in December 2020 had a significant impact on strengthening collective memory and place identity. The interventions have not only been a reason for the recognition of the Santa Lucía community in the surrounding areas, but they have also recovered essential aspects of its history and identity, allowing them to reflect important faces for the community in the community gallery and to re-signify the image of the virgin Santa Lucía, representing her history in her cape which is, at the same time, the image of La Mascota Gorge. This ultimate purpose of strengthening memory corresponds to the very origin of muralism (Mandel, 2007). However, in interventions carried out collaboratively, bottom-up and from the margins, the message and discourse behind the memory are not an official history, but the wishes and needs of the communities themselves.

The "In the eyes of Santa Lucía" mural also represents the desire of inhabitants to reiterate their name, part of their identity, in a friendly aesthetic that seeks to welcome and mark the entrance to a territory that has been, for more than four decades, defended and preserved by those living there. The possibility of institutionalizing urban art as a tool that promotes, based on citizen participation, the effective materialization of the interests and expectations of a community can undoubtedly trigger greater urban transformation processes to the immediate context of the community. When an intervention exceeds the initial commitment to the space where it is inserted, committing itself to the audience that has to interpret its message (Brugnoli, 2011) and with the message that it wants to communicate (vindication), it can transform into a means of democratization to discuss reality and re-signify the diverse and polysemic character of public space (Brandão, 2011 and 2014).

Likewise, the urban art interventions made in the Santa Lucía community allow reflecting on the need to recover the sense of place. Both the "El Rosal" passageway (or "La Bolsa", as the older inhabitants call it) and the Santa Lucía grotto have become places for activities, meetings, and exchanges that were not generated before the intervention. The re-qualification and re-signification of these previously empty spaces into spaces of encounter and memory have had a positive impact on the community dynamic, strengthening the pride of the Neighbors (Remesar, 2019). Currently, CHSS continues to be one of the areas with the highest crime and homicide rates in San Salvador, one of the most violent cities in the world between 2008 and 2019. However, low-budget urban art interventions are emerging as a transformative effect that can trigger other processes and initiatives such as increasing the sense of security and reducing criminal violence.

While place attachment is directly related to the time of residence and community ties (Lewicka, 2011), an improved perception of the community

by passers-by and visitors through the urban art interventions deployed also contributes to reducing the stigmatization of being known as “The Hole”, reversing urban decay and combating social fragmentation (Hirsch *et al.*, 2021). Although the community has been organized since 1975, recent interventions (those of Glasswing and the Living Neighborhoods project) have demonstrated the community’s organizational capacity, motivating them to self-manage other types of initiatives (a community garden, and building a communal house on a vacant lot).

In short, both the requalification and the resignification given by certain urban art interventions have contributed to strengthening collective memory and identity, recovering the sense of place, reducing stigmatization, and strengthening the community organization of the Santa Lucía Community. However, some aspects exceed the transformation capacity these initiatives have, such as the environmental risk where they are located. The deep place attachment of the inhabitants, understood as the emotional bond that manifests itself in their resistance and unwillingness to move, despite the constant risk of flooding, is expressed in two ways: on one hand, the community fights and organizes itself to constantly improve its physical-spatial conditions as has been interpreted throughout this article, resisting the possibility of moving to live in another area; and, on the other, in parallel, they seek to express their discontent and denounce their concern about La Mascota Gorge, mainly because of the risk of collapse it entails for adjoining houses. This contradiction is reflected in the short film “In the eyes of Santa Lucía”, and poses the challenges architects and artists have as mediators of dialog in public space, between the discourse (message) that can be transmitted through urban art and the real needs of neighborhoods.

The participatory research-action process used in this project allowed establishing a horizontal dialog between artists, architecture professionals, community inhabitants, and volunteer collaborators, blurring the line that commonly divides promoters and community leaders. The results, the approach to the community’s assessment of previous interventions, and the joint elaboration of a mural and a short film, represent important progress in the vindication process by residents of the Santa Lucía Community towards a more autonomous, social, and experiential management and production of space. In this framework, the experience of the “Living Neighborhoods” project represents an approach, from the symbolic re-signification and re-qualification of what is expected to be called a “place” after the artistic intervention, to the strengthening of local identity and the sense of belonging.

Currently, El Salvador is undergoing one of its most conflictive periods in terms of security and respect for human rights⁶. Security policies aimed at reducing violence and combating gangs have resulted in repressive measures that threaten the freedom of the population in general. Although such a complex problem as urban violence cannot be addressed with a single strategy, the participatory processes associated with a work of urban art, from its limitations, are emerging as one of the ways that will heal social

CONCLUSIONS

⁶ Since March 27, 2022, an emergency regime has been established that limits the free movement of people. In less than five months, more than 52,000 people have been detained without the right to defense. During the latest edition of this article, on September 14th, 2022, this emergency regime, which was originally supposed to last 30 days, was extended for the 6th time.

fragmentation and reduce stigmatization, contributing to weave community ties again and returning to the inhabitants their capacity for organization and self-management.

As mentioned by Hirsch *et al.* (2021), "taking art to the street" does not only imply making murals, but a whole series of interventions that, together with the actions of the local community, seek to improve social and spatial conditions. Currently, the few urban art interventions in CHSS have mainly been carried out by organizations such as Glasswing, volunteers (as in the case of the Living Neighborhoods project), or independent artists. From the State, the urban art interventions made in recent years as part of violence prevention policies, are for public facilities spatially disconnected from the communities and their history. The use of urban art as a means to improve the image of public work, and not as a channel for dialog and citizen participation, delegitimizes its transformative potential and reduces the population to the role of a spectator:

As an approach to a future scenario, the possibilities arising from an active and participatory process of this nature are enhanced by debate, exchange, and social resistance that translate into the construction of a common agenda born of citizenship and that can be scaled up to the public and institutional sphere. Based on the recognition of a historical problem such as the flood risk of numerous Urban Working-Class Settlements located in flood zones in the AMSS, it is possible to criticize a deficient institutional apparatus that has gradually ceded decision-making to the financial interest of "developer urbanism", to the detriment of the well-being of the great majority and their most urgent needs. Under this unpromising reality, characterized by the lack of attention mechanisms and delayed responses to disaster threats that can translate into a lack of will and interest on behalf of the different actors, urban art becomes the space for dialog so that the citizens will, can become a value with an aesthetic and symbolic dimension representative of a collective will and thinking that, in the case of the Santa Lucía Community, courageously expresses "we shall not be moved".

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