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THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

and the exchange value of space:
Learning from the Tepito experience

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Introduction

The right to the city emerged as a solution to resolve the contradiction of modern space: tension between space use value (social use of space) and exchange value (commercial use of space)¹. The concept of the right to the city appeared in the 60’s when social space has been subordinated to economic processes in Western societies². An urban revolution was expected to create more human/social adapted codes of space, but this revolution never evolved after May 1968.

The way communities practice space follows a non-capitalistic logic. The recognition of these logics as a principle of organisation of space is still extremely pertinent. However, this Theory didn’t take into account the fact that codes of space can be instrumentalised to legitimate exploitation of space by the community itself.

1 Use-value and exchange-value are concepts from Marxist Theory. Marx defined a product use-value in relation to the characteristics that enable it to satisfy a human need. Exchange-value is the monetary-prize related to a product. Lefebvre applied these concepts to modern space, suggesting that capitalism can take over space as a use-value and transform it into a commodity-like object by creating an exchange-value.

2 Henri Lefebvre (2009 original in 1960), “Le droit à la ville”, Anthropos, Paris.

A community can change and adapt itself to become an exploitative system. I will support this by using the case of the Tepito neighbourhood. A community with great social cohesion in the 60's; which strongly mobilised to defend their right to the city against destruction by the City modernisation plans of the 70's. The empowerment of local community did exactly what was feared from the modernisation plans: destroyed the neighbourhood by exploiting it in economic terms.

Nowadays, many Tepito inhabitants make a living from renting their properties (houses and selling places in the street) and many have move out with their families to middle class areas. The neighbourhood has clearly lost its use value (social use of space) and become "the goose that lays the golden eggs" benefiting local families but destroying the place.

The community was not exploitative in the 60's because they didn't have the opportunity: (1) they were not land owners and (2) land value was little, it had increased as the street market developed and became a metropolitan commercial pole. Based on this study case, we can argue that communities can transform themselves and tend to privatise space if it became valuable, exploiting it with any hesitation to get individual or family economic benefits.

The design of new codes of space (right to the city) must take into account possible negative evolution over time. Sustainability relies in the capacity of the socio-spatial system to survive. Thus, city planners must defend neighbourhoods, not only from economic and political interests, but also from local communities' possible exploitation.

This article is divided in three parts. In the first one, I will discuss meaning of the right to the city in the modern context where it emerged. I will suggest new meaning by looking from a Systems Theory perspective to adaptation capacity of social space over time. In second and third parts, I will use the Tepito study case to support these arguments.

Part I. Understanding a concept: the right to the city

The right to the city was conceptualised by Henri Lefebvre in the 60's. He, as other Marxist perspectives criticised strongly the way modern societies organise space to fulfil accumulation (exploitative) purposes. Urbanisation in Western Europe was subordinated to the development of industry. The construction of housing states was the solution to accommodate the workers, near to industrial areas. However, this kind of habitat was completely de-humanising. Design of housing states was conceived to isolate and control workers by creating ghettos that serve mainly industrial needs (Foucault 1975). However, communities need an appropriate environment that fulfils social needs.

housing satates

tepito neighbourhood in1940's (CETEPIS)



Fig. 1 Housing states designed by Architect Mario Pani in contrast to the Tepito neighbourhood (image from Cetepis).

Lefebvre was a French philosopher. His conceptualisation of space was highly innovative. For the first time, the role of ideology was recognised as being part of the process of organisation of space³. Models of ideal cities were based more on Architects' dreams and plans rather than real understanding of the way the cities actually work (Jacobs 1961, de Certeau 1980). But, more important, ideology was used to hide political and economic interests under the disguise of legitimate objectives. Right to the city, could become a source of power that could be used for legitimate abusive use of space from the part of the community.

Social space was a milestone concept in Lefebvre's Theory. It refers to a principle of organisation of space which is not guided by economic nor political interests; but by people's everyday's practices, representations and experiences of space as the place where the community lives, not as an instrument. Social space as a use value, becomes threatened by modern city production, which renders space as a non-monetary feature into a room for expansion (Biel 2011).

The right to the city emerge as a concept in this context of tension between contradictory logics. Lefebvre believed a new codification of space would lead to a new organisation of society and space that would prevent use value from commodification. This conceptualisation of the problem lead to think that community's use of space is permanently based on use value, which is not true. It depends on values, material conditions and mechanisms of regulation that guide these communities. Under certain arrangements communities can be as exploitative and destructive as other economic actors.

³ Lefebvre calls this dimension « mental space ». Three major principles interact in the process of production of space: social space, mental space and physical space.

Part II. The fight for a legitimate right to the city and space commodification process

I will present first the broad lines of the historical process from the 70's to the 90's. I will make emphasis in the specific context in which mobilisations emerged and how community empowerment evolved in a negative way over time. In the third part, I will present a "before and after" analysis of a *vecindad* located in the Aztecas Street n°63, reconstructed by the Renovation Programme after the 1985 earthquake. The objective is to demonstrate that the materialisation of the "right to the city" has facilitate the process of commodification of space, which is now a source of income for empowered inhabitants who now rent their properties to street market vendors.

The 70's defence of the neighbourhood as a use value

Community mobilisations started as a protest against the Plan Tepito in early 70's (Aguilar Urbina 1987). This Plan was created by City Government as part of an ambitious modernisation plan for Mexico City. An extension of a kind of Nonoalco-Tlatelolco housing state was planned in the Tepito neighbourhood. This was going to transform radically urban structure. The Authorities justified destruction of the neighbourhood as a strategy to tackle urban poverty and convert slums into modern dwellings (Tomas François 2005).

Neighbours were against the Plan Tepito as they argued City Government real intentions were to move out urban poor to the periphery in order to recuperate land in the City Centre surroundings to develop real state projects. They argue also that modern housing was not suitable to their spatial practices characterised by polychrony (Hall 1971)⁴. For example, *vecindades* were used not only for living, but also for productive activities, house daily activities, celebrations, etc. Modern space, characterised by monochrony was incoherent with local needs.

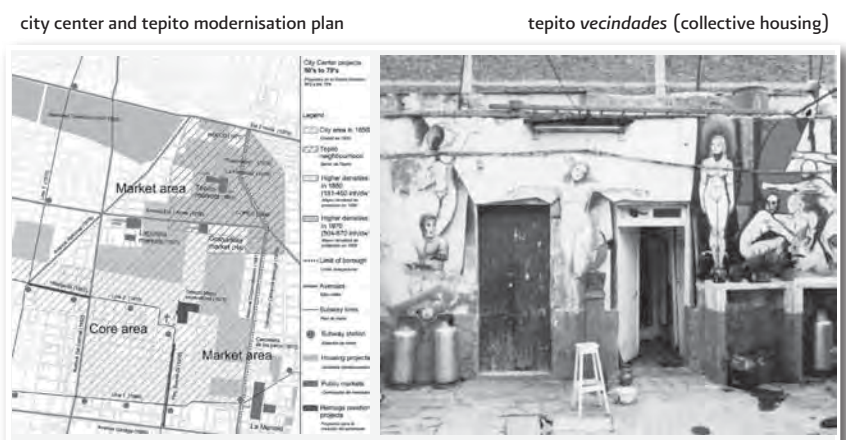


Fig. 2 Lila Oriard (2011), "City Centre modernisation plan", Daniel Manrique, "Tepito Vecindades".

The neighbours start organising themselves to stop the Plan. Meetings took place in the *vecindad* Tenochtitlan n° 40, so the group was called the "Commission of the 40". This commission tried to negotiate neighbours' needs and spatial practices. Negotiation was impossible, local practices and Plan major objectives had irreconcilable differences. Basically, community asked for improvement of the

⁴ Polychrony and monochrony are concepts developed by Edward Hall from an anthropological perspective on space. He argues time and space are related elements structured in different ways according to different cultures. Polychrony are spaces are characterised by its multiple, while monochrony are mono-functional spaces.

existing *vecindades*, while the Authorities preferred radical reconstruction.

In 1978, when the City Government changed administration, Authorities decided to stop negotiation and start the implementation of the Plan. Two blocks were expropriated; *vecindades* in these blocks demolished and housing states called "Fortaleza" and "Palomares" were built (Aguilera Urbina 1987).

The 80's an adapted plan for local needs

In early 80's, the Commission of the 40's asked professors and students of Architecture at the National University (Atelier Max Cetto) to help them develop a Plan of Improvement for the Tepito neighbourhood, which really responded to community practice of space and specific needs. This Plan was developed in 1982; it was the first urban Plan of this nature in Mexico. The Plan won a prize in Varsovia in recognition to its innovative approach and sensibility to social space (Arregui Solano *et al.*, 1981).

In 1985, an earthquake 8.4 Richter scale hit the City Centre damaging seriously the *vecindades*. In the Tepito neighbourhood there was no destruction of buildings, but this disaster call the attention of neighbours about the risk of inhabiting in old, low-quality structures. Neighbours in Tepito were already organised, which facilitated the implementation of a Reconstruction Programme after the earthquake.

The earthquake raised anger among citizens because City Government gave priority to recover National economy rather than taking care about population. This explains why after strong social mobilisations, the City Government changed radically its policies, and focused more on social needs to build up legitimacy, almost in crises after the earthquake (Davis 2005).

As a result of this policy change, in 1986, the City created a Renovation Programme to reconstruct old *vecindades* in the Tepito neighbourhood⁵.

⁵ A total of 48 800 dwelling were reconstructed by the Programme in 1985 and 1986 (Dowall and Perlo 1988).

This Programme brought a major change in the neighbourhood: inhabitants became owners of their dwelling⁶. Before reconstruction most plots belonged to bourgeois living in the City Centre. Plots were expropriated, *vecindades* demolished, and reconstructed in a similar configuration, and families were relocated in the same plot. This Programme could be considered as a culminating event that concretises the community “right to the city”.

The 90's, Tepito neighbourhood subordination to the street market

A parallel process was occurring in the neighbourhood: street market was expanding quickly; becoming the most lucrative activity in the neighbourhood since the 70's when *fayuca*⁷ was introduced. Many inhabitants became street vendors and claimed the “right to use the street” in the name of a legitimate, traditional practice. Local Authorities tolerated the Tepito street market, which was becoming an attractive commercial pole at regional scale. Local leaders had agreements with Authorities to manage streets, arguing the street market was an important asset for community survival. Selling places in the streets were distributed to inhabitants. The growth of the street market increased the neighbourhood land value. As Alfonso Hernandez explain:

You can earn 5 000 MXP per week storing 50 metallic stalls of the street market, earning is even bigger if you store merchandise. In Florida or Aztecas Streets a storage place of 30 m² in the third place can cost 500 000 MXP (a place to sell in the street can cost 200 000 MXP). So it is better to transform dwellings in storage places and buy a house in a middle class neighbourhood such as Pedregal, Villa Coapa, Satélite, Lindavista or Jardín Balbuena. It is easier to move out with the family that transport merchandise (Tomas 2005, prices actualised by LO to 2011).

Street market expansion in the Tepito core area



Fig. 3 Tepito core area, google maps 2012.

The community not only became owners of their apartments, but also they became “owners” of selling places in the streets. Juridical status of the selling

⁶ Percentage of tenants diminished from 80% to less than 25% during the period 1985-1987 (Tomas 2005).

⁷ Illegally imported goods. At the beginning articles included toys, decoration articles; but afterwards it included also electronics, guns and other kind of illegal merchandise.

<http://www.sxc.hu/photo/1405673>

The *vecindades* were built in the **30's**

and 40's

as a solution to offer a low-income collective housing option to the migrants coming to Mexico City.



*housing
option
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places was not clear, but in practice it worked like private property, they can be rented or sold. Modification of property relations contributed to transform the neighbourhood into a support for the development of the street market. Main square, streets, local shops and houses were used as a support for the street market activities. Space has reduced to an instrument of market activities.

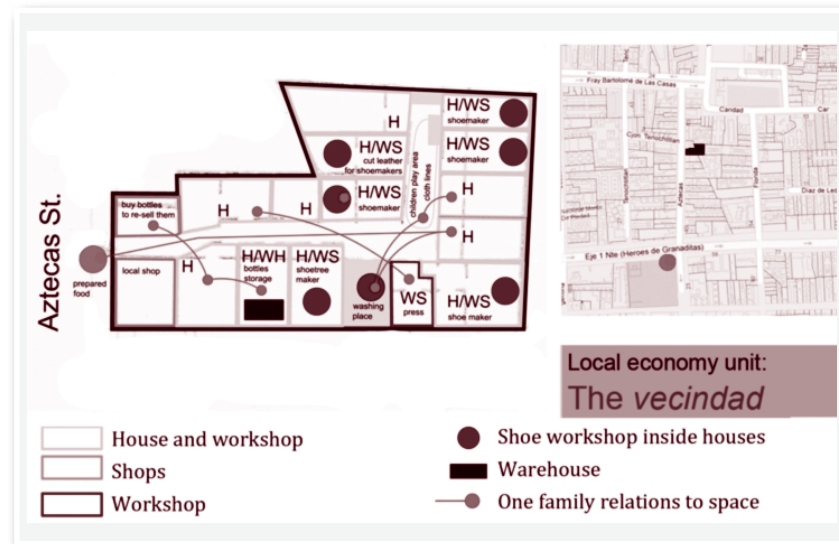
Part III. Transformation of the *vecindad* Aztecas n° 63 into a renovation unit

*The vecindad in the 60's: use value of space*⁸

The *vecindades* were built in the 30's and 40's as a solution to offer a low-income collective housing option to the migrants coming to Mexico City. Aztecas n° 63 had 16 "rooms" of about 25m² around a central patio and 2 shops opening to the street. It had washing places in the patio and common toilets, diagram (1).

Spatial practices in 1960's

(*vecindad* located in Aztecas Street n° 63)



Shops had local uses, one was a local grocery store and the other was used as a place where empty glass bottles were bought. These bottles were collected and sold afterwards to a nearby factory to be recycled. The person who ran this business, Mr Horta occupied 3 of the rooms of the *vecindad*. He lived in one room and used the other to storage the bottles. Space was extremely efficient, working as a low-input system

There were in total 7 shoemakers working and living in the *vecindad*. Four of them assembled the shoes, one cut leather, other do the shoe finishing and other the shoetrees. The *vecindad* worked as a "collective shoe factory" doing complementary productive activities. This way of making shoes promoted complementary relations and solidarity among neighbours. The neighbourhood had an artisans based economy.

There were other productive activities in the *vecindad*. The woman who lived in the room n.7 sold *sopes*, prepared food in the street outside the *vecindad*. As we

⁸ Information was gathered during PhD field trip in 2011 and 2012 directly in Tepito with inhabitants information, in-depth interviews and mapping.

⁹ Low-input systems are those systems that needs few energy (fuel) to work, from a Systems Theory perspective. This kind of systems are less exploitative than high-input systems, which require a huge amount of energy (entropy) to keep functioning.

can see, street vending was a regular practice, but it was not a dominant activity that subordinated the neighbourhood to its own logics.

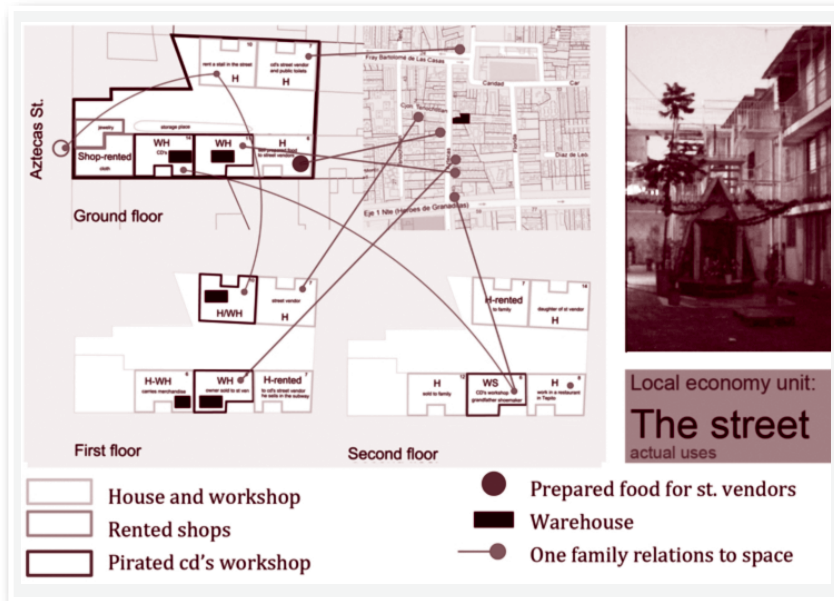
The central patio was used for many functions; among them drying cloth, playing, working, do some domestic work. Festivities also take place here such as *posadas* (celebrations before Christmas), *sonideros* (local typical dancing), *quinceañeras* celebrations, birthdays, etc.

Red points indicate multiple activities carried out in space by the same family, we can see this spatial relations were dense. The *vecindad* was the central unit of local economy and social cohesion. Streets had a secondary role as extensions of the *vecindad*.

The vecindad in the 2011's: exchange value of space

In 1986, neighbours living in the *vecindad* Aztecas n° 63 decided to participate in the City Renovation Programme. The 14 families became owners of in the apartments reconstructed in the renovation unit. Apartments were organised in three floors buildings around the central patio in the same plot; but conceived as individual, modern units.

Spatial practices in 2011's (renovation unit located in Aztecas Street n° 63)



Two shops opening to the street were constructed and original tenants became owners. They rent these shops to market vendors'. Aztecas street market became specialised in cloth and jewellery, local shops were transformed in specialised boutiques.

The central patio had lost its social practices, now it is mainly used to store chariots and racks used in the street market. An inhabitant told me during field trip:

We stopped organising dancing and celebrations in patios because street vendors' have no time; when they go back to home after the market close they count all the money they've earned during the day (LO in PhD thesis notes ucl-dpu, 2011).

Street vending has changed the community organisation of time and space.

In the diagram (2) we can see that 10 out of 15 apartments are still used as dwelling. Most of them are families working in the street market. One is used also as a working place,

preparing food to distribute to street vendors. Four out of 15 apartments (31%) are used as rented storage places. Only one is still used as a pirated cd's workshop. This show to what extent dwellings, streets and social practices are subordinated to the street market.

We can see in the diagram that the local economic unit is the street, which is the major organising principle of the neighbourhood. Social activities and spaces have almost disappeared. Middle class original inhabitants tend to move out, while others settle down and try to extend their properties (stalls in streets and apartments). This shows that community will exploit space as an economic asset if they can, because their priority is to develop family businesses.

Conclusions

In the Tepito neighbourhood the "right to the city" has been materialised as:

- (1) access to private land property (dwellings)
- (2) the use of streets, as private property in practice, to develop individual businesses (market stalls)

Empowerment of local community facilitated the community exploitation of space as an economic resource to develop market activities. Expansion of the street market transformed deeply social relations and organisation of space. Exchange value has subordinated social space to its own needs.

The case study shows that local communities may be willing to adapt themselves to the expansion of capitalism, if they can obtain direct economic benefits from doing so.

The right to the city as a code that empower communities should establish limits to exploitation, to prevent the community to transform use value of space into exchange value. Thus, becoming a factor of self-destruction of the community and exploitation of space.



local community facilitated the community

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exploitation of space as an economic resource

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