Defensible zoning:
The social control of space in Mexico City

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“Deep down we know that by shutting out the world, by closing down the city, we are locking ourselves into the prison of our own fears” —John Friedmann: City of fear or open city

1. The limits of fear

Fear has never been absent from human experience, while the built environment has been conceived at its origins as a protected space against the surrounding threats. Nevertheless, the ghost of urban insecurity that is invading our cities is generating a fortressed or shielded space, which denies the social dimension of the citizen as part of the civitas – organized community life – and the public dimension of the city.

Even when closed neighborhoods and residential compounds do have a long tradition in Latin America, the tendency to outline, exclude and wall the urban space is expanding to the point of restricting the access to whole sectors of the city, besides from privatizing spaces from the public domain such as streets, parks, gorges, woodlands and historical sites.

Ever since the publication of the stimulating work of Oscar Newman regarding “defensible space” as an answer from urban design to crime prevention, a new theoretical base is being set, from which Mike Davis is to develop a critical approach to the fortification process of cities and the disappearance of public space as a meeting place par excellence; According to Davis, security technology and control strategies are configuring urban space, which allow us to suggest a “tectonic of conflict,” in which spaces would be conceived with possible violence and crime scenarios in mind.
Fear dynamics come into scene when form follows panic, and paranoia transforms into the built environment; When looking for the origin of fear in the urban context, we can define it as a “painful emotion or malestar originated by an imminent danger sensation,” otherwise as “the anxiousness due to the safety concern of a person or object”\(^1\); Notwithstanding, other definitions stress the perception of a threat over some aspect of welfare, concurrent with the impotency feeling to cope with the challenge.\(^2\)

According to the social control theory, fear is determined by the individual’s ability for controlling its own life, and to have some kind of influence on his fellows activities and behavior; Following this reasoning, people would experiment fear when acknowledging his inability to prevent or deal with an aggression’s consequences.

Therefore, the fear of crime would be connected –or even being caused- by some sort of community decay, which strengthen the hypothesis of a fearful community as a result of a feeble organization and lack of public services and amenities, more than a consequence of high risk on real crime.

This personal inability to move ahead in the urban realm, relinquishing every civilians rights over the public space, turns down the very essence of citizenship, while retreating into fortified residential zones or among fenced streets, as distinctive signs of social and civil disintegration.

If we are to consider the creation of a panoptic space, compelled to constant observation and scrutiny, we may come to question the legitimacy of social control and permanent surveillance, which may ignore the social aspects of crime prevention; Moreover, it has been demonstrated that strengthening the community sense among the residents can be even more effective to curb delinquency than configuring urban space on itself.

Even if it is acknowledge that the influence of the environment on the perception of a safe place can in fact foster a greater exchange and social contact among the residents, some distinctions are to be made concerning the results, “since defensive space,” visibility or the difficulty to find escaping routes on themselves are not bound to solve the core problems which are insecurity an the fear of crime.

2. Zoning of second generation

Socioeconomic segregation is hardly a new phenomena on our cities; in fact, zoning and urban planning itself emerge as instruments designed to maintain a certain segment of the

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population privileges, through the regulation of land uses and construction densities along the urban fabric.

According to Foucault, it is since the beginning of the eighteenth century, when Urbanism starts to be part of the State’s instruments of control, joining the program of governmental rationality, which is to be acquainted with conceiving a system to control the individual’s behavior in such an effective way, that the authorities would not need to intervene to make it succeed.³

Ever since the city is foreseen as a scientific object of research, planning starts to transform the social and spatial structure under the assumption that social change can be produced, directed an modified at will.

In this very sense, with the preeminence of functional urbanism as a reference in Latin American cities, the space division through differentiated and monofunctional polygons became institutionalized, fostering planned segregation and also setting the configuration of a dual city characterized by its profound differences.

Manuel Castells point out a valuable distinction between zoning and segregation, in which even when the two concepts share the creation of highly social homogeneous internal zones, segregation implies a razor sharp disparity among this areas, not only on terms of difference, but in terms of hierarchy⁴; Notwithstanding, Navez-Bouchaine underlines the fragmentation of urban society as a unit, and its replacement by a series of autonomous territories which are strongly related to an identity.⁵

The residential enclaves put forward an urbanization model, which stands for the creation of homogeneous residential compounds for specific socioeconomic clusters, where controlled access, private security, and independent services would ensure the insulation from the city as an independent and self-governed entity.

This new developments are sustained on the creation of a privatized world, with little contact with the surrounding environment, and even less relations with a bigger political unit; This has serious implications on the city’s performance, since the exclusion of citizens from areas of the city is being permitted, and basic services and security provision –as functions traditionally provided by the State- are being handed over to the residents.

The complexity of urban interfaces and its interdependency have been exposed by Henry Lefevre and Christopher Alexander when they highlight the “overlapping” and juxtapositions inherent to the city’s socioeconomic structure, differing from the simplistic

⁴ Manuel Castells, 1974, La cuestion urbana, Ciudad de Mexico: S. XXI Editores, p. 204.
view of the zoning stated by functionalist urbanism, and which has been proved as a key element on the reproduction of division in the urban fabric.

We can suggest that the city as an inclusive and integrated entity, has implicit the establishment of interdependency bond among the parts, since the notion of integration deals with the “incorporation of a new element inside the psychological system previously constituted”; Therefore, if integration implies the necessary acquisition of a new element within the system—that is, the one which identifies the unit and provides the overall sense-, we can state that the contemporary city has failed at the different scales, to provide the inhabitants with a minimum sense of identity and belonging related to common grounds.

Therefore, we can suggest that the closed residential compounds represent a zoning of second generation, in which socioeconomic divisions and spatial segregation are assumed as “natural” components within the urban fabric, justifying with it, the creation of fortified enclaves which continue to challenge the public significance of the city.

3. Orthopedic space

In his book “take back your neighborhood,”6 the president of the High Supreme Court of Virginia, appeal to the citizens to take the law in their own hands, in relation to the rising levels of insecurity on American cities, arguing that the formal institutions of justice have become irrelevant to prevent and control urban crime.

Even when some of the residents efforts can be articulated with the police forces on preventing crime (such as neighborhood watch, private security and local surveillance), to transfer the citizens protection into self-defense mechanisms is far from representing a solution to the criminal and insecurity issues prevailing today.

Moreover, recent studies reveal that crime, disorder and fear are more closely related to causal basis than it had been admitted, and that ever since the publication of “Broken windows: police and neighborhood safety”7 article, when the relevance of minor offenses and incivilities in the escalade of major crimes in the same areas is to be discussed, and the moral weakening of the neighborhoods while acknowledging its vulnerability to control crime is being recognized.

On this sense, the social control theory becomes widespread through Travis Hirschi’s work,8 where in an innovative way suggests that under certain circumstances, any person may become an offender, since an underlying rationality concerning human actions is assumed, and the rational choice of the individual represents the departing point of the theoretical framework.

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On this statement, a key element is the consideration that choices are based on a rational calculation over the moral considerations, which if even if this do not necessarily imply the internalization of social norms or the capacity to recognize a legal framework with some degree of legitimacy; What is interesting regarding the fortified city is that such a theory states that the weakening or fracture of social bonds among the community members, can develop into criminal behaviors, deviances an offences.

Therefore, the concept of bond is referred to the disposition of being sensitive to other people’s opinion, and acknowledging some common behavior norms; nevertheless, another view stress the commitment to rules because of fear to the consequences or penalties of trespassing this arrangements. Daily urban insecurity is considered to be an evident symptom of decaying quality of life, since the dissolution of social interaction generates a feeling of insecurity, whether it is real or imagined by the citizens.

The degradation symptoms in marginal neighborhoods and big housing developments in Latin American cities, area perceived initially as “landmarks” on the territory set up by local gangs, and which produce minor offences an acts of vandalism such as urban amenities destruction and even hostilities among rival groups; Even when most of this acts are produced locally, very often they expand to nearby neighborhoods, in which this decline signs are bound to be reproduced.

It is also common, that offenders and crime victims may be residents of the same neighborhood, and in such case the latter ones usually try to avoid the dangerous places inscribed on their risks mental map wherever possible, and in many cases the people retreat into their own houses to reduce the risk of being aggravated. According to recent testimonies in Mexico City, burglars were youngsters under 23 years old, tempted by “opportunity delinquency,” as well as better-structured criminal organizations, which often have links with the police an drug dealers.

Following Maurice Cusson,⁹ social control can be defined as the “ensemble of positive and negative penalties to which a society may recall in order to regulate human behavior according to specific models”; in other words, organized community life demands a certain degree of social control in order to function, and to guarantee a framework of order and fair play. Nevertheless, social control for Durkheim has to do with the moral pressure as an outcome of the social unconscious; under this foresight, social control would allow the integration to society of the individual, by means of undertaking certain order requirements, fundamental to express his own self-reliance to live in a civilized way.

However, social control can also be perceived as a boundary, as well as a constraint to individual independency and imposed through culpability and repression, while on the other hand we have the unrestricted liberty and the total lack of moral constrains which could also become a source of individual’s alienation¹⁰; moreover, we ought to recall the

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interpretations of space as a place where social order takes place, and where urban space permits a strict control of offensive behavior and its normalization.  

In this very sense, Foucault acquaints that control can be taken to extremes, as in Bentham’s Panopticon, where after analyzing the XIX century prisons, observes that “the resident is brought into a permanent condition of visibility, in order to ensure the automatic operation of power”; therefore, residential space can be arranged in such a way that permanent surveillance is guaranteed, and even if its actions are discontinuous, its effects are of permanent nature, suggesting that the “architectural device” can be as efficient as to create and maintain the relations of power, with no need to rely on the individuals exercising it.  

Therefore, we can suggest that social control of space has to be the outcome of a profitable arrangement among the citizens’ personal interests, in such a way that social conviviality can be ensured under the framework of common welfare assembled through social bounds among the citizens.

4. The feudalization of the public realm

Habermas consider the feudalization of the public realm as a part of a complex process of assimilation between the public and the private domains, in which certain groups of interest manipulate the public sphere; notwithstanding, physical division of the territory according to this hierarchies has been a regular practice in Latin America ever since the first functionalist statements of “modern” urbanism, which laid the basis for establishing the social segregation processes that came to institutionalize the physical and morphological transformation of urban space, maintaining and even stressing the population’s socioeconomic differences.

However, the spatial disarticulation of the urban fabric as well as the ambiguity between the public and private realm, are generating a razor-sharp differentiated city due to the physical barriers such as gates, fences, chains and controls of access to streets and even whole sectors of the city. Therefore, the present conditions of insecurity are generating the progressive disappearance of the public space as a place for contact and social interaction.

Even when Mexico city’s “fortification” constitutes a recent phenomenon with regards to the middle-income colonies, high-standing residential developments have settled down for decades in sharply differentiated areas by means of topographical features, controls of access or the natural setting.

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12 Nevertheless, Deleuze states that we have entered into a social control societies era, in which we move around different spaces of confinement (which somehow shape the person), containing a set of forces in a subtle equilibrium. See Deleuze, G. (1992) “Postscript on the societies of control,” October No.59.
We can acknowledge that the public sphere is being privatized when social activities, parties and gatherings—traditionally celebrated in open spaces—are rather performed indoors within a new concept of territoriality. These places are assuming the function of sheltering urban collective life although lacking the conditions to enhance social diversity, to construct an authentic public opinion on issues of general interest or furthermore, contribute to the critical sense that characterizes the public sphere.

In Latin American cities, communities have organized themselves to face common basic needs such as security of land tenure, water and sewage, roads and services, etc. creating social bonds through mechanisms of reciprocity and self-support networks.

Nevertheless, this grassroots’ organization rarely achieves a full-served environment with amenities, services and public spaces. Once the initial goals have been reached, migration, the lack of stronger leadership skills and further political ambitions tend to debilitate the social structure and often resulting in the organization’s dissolution.

We can suggest that when this social bonds grow weaker, the social control of space becomes less effective, citizen’s duties start to vanish and issues of common interest are addressed on individual basis. This first reaction is accompanied by the withdrawal to “safe” or even exclusive places (combining status features) as well as renouncing a “right to the city” with full access to amenities and services. Therefore, the relation between citizens’ participation and the social appropriation of space is crucial to maintain a healthy community. To establish social bonds is necessary to provide the physical conditions for communication, social interaction and tolerance that precedes an integration of the differences among the residents.

5. Fenced communities in Mexico City

Exclusive residential developments are by no means new to Mexico City. With the creation of Chapultepec Heights in the west part of the city at the beginning of the XX century, gated communities was a common phenomena across the country. However, ever since the eighties middle-income neighborhoods started to fence their boundaries or “closing the traffic to non-residents.

While “protecting” their neighborhoods with fences, walls and private police services, these actions are contributing to disarticulate the social and urban fabric of the city and at the same time eliminating any local public spaces left. The basic reaction to insecurity has been to voluntarily curfew into our private space as a way to deal with fear.

One of the main outcomes of the Mexican financial crisis of the mid-nineties was the growth of urban insecurity in the cities, and its physical manifestation was the multiplication of gated communities and fenced neighborhoods all over the place. Even with the risk that the city may to turn into an “oversized jail”—as a high police official pictured it—apparently fencing resulted in a significant reduction of crime according to various groups of neighbors. Nevertheless, side-effects are to be questioned such as
fracturing the existing urban fabric, the displacement of delinquency to adjacent areas as well as the prevention of free transit and the use of public spaces.

As a primary typology for this urban configuration we have the Closed Residential Neighborhoods (CRN), which have existed in Mexico City for more than a century. However, these first developments were associated with the projection of socioeconomic status rather than with security concerns which has become a major asset nowadays. The CRN tend to decline the use of large public spaces on behalf of smaller private spaces but sealed from the outside world and possibly with some particular facilities that would make them more desirable such as a golf course, sports club, artificial lake, etc. The spectacular expansion of this kind of neighborhoods in Latin America can be traced within the suburbanizing trend that has become a metropolitan factor. This trend has been fueled by the perception of the inner city as a place where crime, pollution, accessibility and extended transportation time concentrate, making the suburban dream a compelling option for the middle and upper classes. However, this trend is creating some kind of external or “edge cities” formed by a series of gated communities with little contact within themselves and which compete in status through imposing stockades, security systems and strict internal codes.

In this respect it is noteworthy the complementary key features that are being offered by developers and real state companies for marketing the projects: the CRN as safe places (protected from vendors, teen-agers and strangers), as exclusive places (with a clear identity and distinctive facilities) and as a place for a life style of high standing.

The second typology is the Fenced Middle-class Neighborhoods (FMN), where since the residents do not have the chance to move to a safer area, they secure their environment in situ. Different strategies are being put in place in order to establish “security zones” within the neighborhood and recovering some control of the space, such as barricades, fences, chains, flowerpots, barriers, etc.

The FMN emerge as an strategy of defensible space for the kind of residents that are interested in securing their neighborhood rather than looking for exclusivity. The intention to “fencing off” from the world may respond to an effort to configure the urban space according to their capacity to socially control it. Moreover, in order to guarantee their security, the quality of life or even the possibility to “sleep peacefully” many residents have met with an unreliable provision of public security by the state so they haven’t found a better alternative to fencing their neighborhoods.

To this respect, local authorities have taken ambiguous stances regarding the “legality” of this gates and fences, alternating between repressive and permissive. In the first case when the authorities try to reclaim the control over the territory and public spaces, an in the second permitting interventions when they cannot provide an effective and articulated

13 During the Porfiriato (1876-1911), many residential neighborhoods were established for the high income sector with some degree of control of access.
response to address urban crime. In brief, even when in some cases the enclosure of neighborhoods have benefited the communitarian bonds of the residents, fencing brings along a further fragmentation of the city, affecting the citizenry and attempting against a basic political space, the one where major issues are discussed and transcendental decisions for the country are taken.

6. Revisiting public spaces

The origin of closed and fenced communities in Latin America rely on deeper grounds than urban patterns and typologies. Segregation, socioeconomic polarization violence and social exclusion structure the framework from which urban policies ought to be made. Therefore, in order to address the urban environment it is mandatory to prioritize the social integrity and spatial continuity of the city. Strategies may range from strengthening local cultural identities, consolidating urban centralities and using public spaces to articulate the production of the city as well as enhance civic values that encourage equilibrium in development.

Public open space as an essential part of the Latin American urban culture has been in constant transformation during the last century. Opposed to a long-standing modernizing trend that transfers public life into shopping centers and indoors activities, there are some other paths that have been looking into identity, common language, meaning and recovering traditional parts of the city with historical value. The daily relation between the residents and their surroundings is essential to achieve meaningful social interaction which enables the people to “care” for each other’s interests. However, the universe produced by the media induce the individuals to refer to its television set or their computer connection as the only way to relate to the world, inside an artificial public sphere in which assimilation is more valuable than discussion.

Moreover, the actual trend of urbanization is fostering a rapid polarization of the social life into public and private domain. The public as a concept describing issues of general concern, public good or welfare is growing apart from the privatizing trends that prevent links and correlations that ought to exist as essential conditions of urban life. For instance, even when shopping centers may be considered as semi-public or semi-private spaces, they fail to reach the civic character attributed to the public sphere since it lacks the range of political and ceremonial features in a broader social dimension. According to Hollen,¹⁴ the shopping centers represent some sort of “curtailed urbanism” which does not connect with far-reaching civil participation forms like the ones you can find in civic centers. Therefore, we are suggesting that public spaces are crucial for reestablishing mediating links to articulate the urban fabric, permitting human contact, social interaction and at the end of the day foster the formation of non-induced public opinion to address and legitimate issues of common concern.

However, it is necessary to point out that a strategy for public spaces has to be envisioned in the broadest terms, that is, not only contemplating the immediate context but under a metropolitan or even a regional perspective. The various scales of intervention permit to distinguish the specific dynamics that intervene in the layout of the city, such as the function of existing centralities, new hubs of activities, changing patterns of mobility, renovation of sectors or new developments. Such dynamics have a direct influence on the territory since they are responding to economic activities and political decisions that will affect the quality of life of citizens.

If a comprehensive approach is to be taken, public spaces may contribute to construct stronger social identities and grounding the local culture. Public spaces draw diversity when urban functions are surrounding them, so human relations and social interaction can flow along activities that nurture this same dynamic. We are suggesting then that the local government can assume the creation of public spaces as a source of political legitimacy and can take charge in promoting and producing these spaces to consolidate the urban fabric of the city in a more redistributive fashion. The relevance of having stronger centralities relies in the capacity of addressing the needs for a healthier environment, socially integrated and with an overall sense of dignity.

Fenced neighborhoods while restricting free access and permeability in the city, are instead reinforcing the divisions within the urban fabric through a reproduction of an endogenous environment, self-contempted and unaware of its historical background. Therefore, in order to elaborate a comprehensive strategy that articulates urban spaces and respects the urban social character, we have to acknowledge that the production of the city is a collective endeavor, open-ended, discussed and consented with every stakeholder. The city as a social project assumes an identity (or non-identity) that will have to be translated into instruments of urban policies that prioritize the integration of the urban, social and economic features of the territory.

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