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Grundström, Karin

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*Total number of authors:*

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117  
221 00 Lund  
+46 46-222 00 00

# Room for Resistance

## *Gendered Appropriations of Space in a Poor Urban Community in Costa Rica*

*Karin Grundström, MsArchitecture, Teknologie licentiat  
Housing Development and Management (HDM)  
Dept. of Architecture and Built Environment, Lund University, Sweden*

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### Abstract

This paper discusses spatial interventions as an important part of women's struggles to improve their living conditions in poor urban areas. A case-study from San José, Costa Rica is the basis for the discussion. Women's interventions are analyzed in three public places – a park, a playground and a community centre – through the concept of appropriation. The study shows that women's interventions have influenced both the built environment and the position of the participating women. The study points out women's participation and challenges the image of the female poor as passive victims.

*If we talk about men and women we could say that women are more active. More active because it is women who have been concerned about making /this housing areal/ a better place every day, within the limited possibilities that exist. There are many women that have made beautiful parks around their houses, planted trees, fixed their streets, and improved the education of the children.*

Juan Carlos, resident of Linda Vista.

Even though many poor women struggle to improve their living conditions in cities, women are often portrayed as passive and vulnerable in development discourse, where the city is described as dangerous and full of challenges and difficulties (Tibaijuka, 2002). Urban life might hold potential dangers for poor

women, but as previously pointed out by many scholars, a one-sided focus on women's vulnerability, risks constructing women as passive victims and render their work invisible (Mohanty, 2007, Arnfred, 2001). In line with this critique, the aim of this short paper is to point out women's struggles to improve their living conditions through a discussion of women's spatial interventions in a poor, urban community in San José, Costa Rica. The paper starts with the context of social housing in Costa Rica; previous research on appropriation is introduced followed by a presentation of the case study of Linda Vista and a discussion of the consequences of women's interventions.

Since the 1980's Costa Rica has subsidized housing in order to improve living conditions of urban poor groups. In spite of these efforts, a pattern of segregation has developed where subsidized, social housing areas are concentrated to specific parts of the capital. During the past ten years an increase in land values has meant that many of the social housing areas have been built in the periphery of the Metropolitan Area around the capital of San José (Estado de la Nación, 2006). These social housing areas are characterized by a lack of social infrastructure and a typology of freestanding, single family dwellings on small individual plots, a typology frequent not only in Costa Rica, but also in other parts of the world (Davies, 2005). This typology of social housing, where the poor, due to lack of choice, are forced to live in areas marked by poverty, has been criticized as an example of differential access to urban goods and resources – such as lack of health centres, work places, schools and parks – exacerbated by the structure of the city itself (Harvey, 1971 in Rose, 1993). The lack of social infrastructure is likely to increase the work load on women and have a negative influence on women's living conditions, since women often are the main providers of care for members of their household and also take on responsibilities for community managing work. Not only is there a lack of social infrastructure, in poor urban areas, but previous research also points to difficulties for women and girls to access and appropriate places such as parks and recreational facilities due to fear of violence and norms based on gender power relations (Terlinden, 2003).

Appropriation of space is a way of understanding spatial interventions in every day life, originally developed by Lefebvre (1974 (2003)). The modern city is a dominated space, a product and a production of abstract space that is formal, homogenous and quantitative. Even if the modern city is a dominated space, the citizens have a right to the city, to change it, make it their own, to recreate – to appropriate it. The concept of appropriation was further developed by Korošec-Serfaty into a concept with stronger power implications of how a place could be taken over; such as delimitation of territory, remodelling, transgression of

anonymous laws, changes of rhythm and redisplay of objects (Korosec-Serfaty, 1973). In research on access to the city, feminist research has focused on power relations between women and men and has shown that gender power relations also have spatial dimensions (Domosh Seager, 2001; McDowell, 1999; Molina, 2007). Appropriation as a gendered practice has been analyzed in studies on women's access to public places in both a European and Latin-American context (Harth, 2007; Terlinden, 2003).

Even if women face many difficulties when trying to appropriate public places in poor, urban areas, as shown in previous studies, I argue that such spatial interventions still could have positive consequences for the living conditions in these areas. In this paper, the housing area of Linda Vista – where women have carried out spatial interventions during a period of ten years – will serve as a case to discuss two related questions:

How did women create public places for caretaking activities in Linda Vista, an area characterized by a lack of social infrastructure and an absence of authorities?

What were the consequences of women's spatial interventions on the built environment and on the position of women themselves?

The aim of the discussion is to emphasize the importance of women's struggles to improve their living conditions and at the same time show the complex and often difficult reality in poor, urban areas.

The empirical data is based on observations and semi-structured interviews from a case study in 2008 and from data gathered in a previous study (Grundström, 2005). In the following presentation, three interviews serve to contextualise women's interventions and to give examples from a park, a playground and a community centre.

### **Linda Vista – a Subsidized Housing area in the Periphery of the Metropolitan Area**

One example of the recent urban development of subsidized, social housing is Linda Vista. The neighbourhood with about four hundred dwellings was established in 1998 and was built through a self-help construction scheme supported by a local NGO. Most of the residents came from surrounding areas where they previously lived in illegal settlements. Linda Vista is situated in a peripheral location on donated land one kilometre off the main road, completely surrounded by grass lands and farmlands. Today, one third of the families live on less than one minimum salary and one third on less than two minimum salaries. Men work in low-paying jobs in the construction industry, in transport or as guards and women work mainly in domestic services.

Through the years Linda Vista has undergone a process of everyday, spatial interventions – a school has been built, a community centre is there and work groups have formed with activities for the youth and the elderly. The driving force in this process has been the women of the community and their influence is widely acknowledged. Women were the ones who influenced authorities and brought about improvements that affected both themselves and other members of the community. Maria Carmen is one of the women with a position as a local leader in the community. Her leadership started during the self-help construction process, when she was appointed Social Coordinator. She is now a member of the steering committee of the Association of the community. She says that since the self-help construction phase women have taken on leadership roles:

*Here, I don't know, the men got used to that the women were the ones working and organizing everything, they got used to it and because of that, now I think that here the women were fundamental to everything and are fundamental to everything. / ... / the women are the ones that have made the neighbourhood a community.*

### **Places of Interventions – Parks, Playground and a Community Centre**

Since the inauguration of Linda Vista, the parks of the neighbourhood have been a concern for Maria Carmen and for the community. Linda Vista has a number of small parks and green areas. The maintenance is the responsibility of the Municipality, but so far they have not kept the parks in order. Most of the parks are practically unusable; they are a piece of land with little attraction, sometimes used for garbage. Together with a supporting NGO and the Swedish Cooperative Centre, Maria Carmen and a few other women of the community formed a group that started to plant trees and keep the parks tidy. In the small parks all over the neighbourhood, trees were planted, but almost all of them were broken. Maria Carmen thinks it was the children who were responsible for these actions and says that the children have not learned to take care of things and their parents do not educate them. The work group started out well, but after this event the other women did not show up and in the end Maria Carmen got tired of always being the one who tried to keep the work going. Now she has decided to maintain the little park next to her house instead.

*I always know that I had to be part of this and I have spent and still spend a lot of time on the park here, and I keep everything tidy, but now I do it just around my house because I can not keep on fighting all these people that could work so much more.*

*It's better that I just keep to my surroundings, and not with other people, because I started out very well with the parks. I initiated a group of women to take care of the parks and collect garbage and I was at the forefront, but I got tired because people do not correspond.*

The little park is about 120 m<sup>2</sup>, the same size as the plots for the dwellings. Maria Carmen takes care of the little park with the intent that one day a playground will be built and then there will be some trees and plants to give shade. She has planted bamboo, palm trees and some flowers. She and her husband water the plants in the evenings in the dry season and Maria Carmen keeps an eye on the park from her house, to defend it against vandalism. The little park next to her house is special to her, she says that this is her neighbourhood and she feels that all her neighbours are good people.

One of Maria Carmen's neighbours, Patricia, tells us of another experience that occurred about a year ago.

*There was a playground, but it was destroyed by gangs that don't have anything to do and instead of taking care of the parks, they destroy them. That is a problem for the community, and it is a very serious problem. It takes a lot because sometimes you don't know what you can do about it. There is no choice. There is no football ground or basketball court or something like that, that can be used for some activity.*

The work with the playground was initiated by women. Trees were planted, swings, slides and some furniture was arranged. The playground was in use for some months, but then it was vandalized by a youth-gang who came to sell drugs. The remote location of Linda Vista and the location of the playground next to the main road, made it attractive as a place to hang-out and sell drugs. The neighbours phoned the police who never showed up, no-one dared confront the gang and the playground was left in ruins. This experience makes motivation to participate more difficult; as Patricia says "*it costs a lot*".

Another local leader in Linda Vista, Isobel, tells of a more inspiring experience, the community centre that is being built in one of the parks, a little off the main road. The community centre will be open for residents and will be free of charge. It will be used for the groups with the elderly, for leisure activities, for meetings of the Association. There is also an expressed demand for a place that is accessible for women where they can spend time and be involved in various activities. As Isobel says:

*For instance, the adults and the youth go out and spend their time in the street. The women don't have a place to take for their spare time.*

The building is designed with four rooms around an inner courtyard and will be totally enclosed, fenced in, from the outside. This is due to the need for surveillance and protection from the risk of vandalism, as expressed by the women.

### **Appropriations of Space**

#### *a Resistance to the Lack of Social Infrastructure*

Common to the examples above is that from the point of view of the women, these spatial interventions have a gendered connotation of femininity; of care-taking and community managing work carried out in places outside the dwellings. The aim of these interventions was to create places for the children to play, for the elderly to sit in the shadow of a tree in a small park, for women to spend time in a place outside their own dwelling. The group of active women in Linda Vista has taken on activities of care that includes not only their own families but also the well-being of the community.

Returning to the question on how women create places for care-taking activities, I would argue that their interventions can be understood as a series of appropriations of space, as an ongoing struggle to create accessible places for women themselves and for the community. In line with the concept of appropriation, the interventions to take over space, show a resistance to a dominated space (Lefebvre, 1974, 2003). The original layout for Linda Vista can be seen as an expression of a dominated space, where the citizens were exposed to a preset, existing typology that could not be negotiated due to legal frame works, issues of rationality and cost. Following Korosec-Serfaty (1973) the above examples show different ways of how to remodel a place, such as the maintenance of Maria Carmen's park or the construction of the playground. Norms and laws were challenged, both by the women who took over the playground, but also by the youth gang who vandalized it. In these appropriations the daily rhythms of use in the places were changed and altered for new activities, such as in the intervention of the construction of the community centre that was built in an existing park. The appropriations also meant inviting others, opening places for others to use.

While I would argue that these are all appropriations of space, not all of them were successful in the sense that the women managed to keep the control of an appropriated place or improve their own position in the community. The examples show the complex situation of different groups and individuals who try to appropriate outdoor places of the neighbourhood. There are different groups, like the women's work-group for the parks and the youth gang who appropriate the same place. There is little attention to take care of common areas, the children break the trees and the parks are used for garbage. There is a presence of drugs and

violence in the community and a threat of vandalism and break-ins, a situation that creates a need for surveillance and defense.

### **Changes of the Built Environment**

As is common in social housing areas, Linda Vista was under serviced with social infrastructure. The original layout of Linda Vista had no public facility for any care-taking activity. The lack of social infrastructure is an issue previously debated by researchers and activists as one of the consequences of the spatial implications of a feminine/masculine division related to private /public space (Hayden, 2000, McDowell, 1999) As mentioned above, the built environment has been improved; a school was built on the initiative of the community, then the playground was initiated and finally the community centre is being built.

The appropriations of the play ground and the community centre can be discussed as a way for women to challenge the dichotomy of the feminine/masculine division related to private /public space. The masculine connotation of the street still exists in Linda Vista, the street is a place for men to linger and to socialize to a much larger extent than what is possible for women (Grundström, 2005). The interventions carried out by women, to take over places outdoors, such as the park, is a way to transform the built environment to create places outside the dwellings more accessible for women. The failure with the play ground shows how difficult this process is in areas characterized by an absence of authorities, exposed to vandalism and threats of vandalism. In order to succeed there is a need for safe-keeping and maintenance as in the example of the small park next to Maria Carmen's house. The community centre is also an example of a transformation of the masculine/ feminine divide where a female gendered place for leisure activities is constructed outside the individual dwelling. The community centre is a new type of building with an interior out-door place and it is also a marker of leisure, previously non-existent in Linda Vista.

The consequences of women's interventions have been a start to transform Linda Vista into a mixed-used area with more social infrastructure than was originally planned. A new, innovative design of a public place has been added that could serve as an inspiration for future work of architects and planners.

### **Changes of Women's Position**

The women were organized through formal networks within the Association of the community, some already from the beginning and others for a specific group. They were also part of informal networks, they all knew each other well, since the construction phase, and they kept on supporting each other. This female collective



action (Molineux, 1998) was not organized as a formal women's group struggling for emancipation, but the women were very present in the community and their struggles acknowledged by many.

On the one hand, women have taken on a series of responsibilities; ranging from child-care, to care of elderly, to maintenance of the parks to the construction of the community centre. This situation arises from the incapability or unwillingness of authorities to be involved and points to a risk of overloading women with domestic and caring work, a situation often faced by poor women. On the other hand, women have taken on positions as leaders in the community, already from the beginning of the self-help construction, as previously mentioned by Maria Carmen. A result of women's spatial interventions has been an increased contact with local authorities to lobby for and promote their projects. This has had the effect that the community Association has entered into other negotiations with the authorities; one is for the authorities to agree to run the water treatment plant and another is the maintenance and provision of some sports ground for the youth.

A consequence of women's interventions is that they have continued to take position as leaders of the community and have, in regard to some issues, strengthened their position in negotiations with the local authorities.

### **Room for Resistance**

All in all, these everyday spatial interventions may seem as a small part of the struggles to improve living conditions carried out by women in poor urban neighbourhoods. However, it is of great importance to acknowledge the work women carry out in neighbourhoods such as Linda Vista, and recognize that they have created some room for resistance in a situation of unacceptable poverty. Women's interventions also challenge the image of the female poor as passive victims and serve as reminder to seriously take women's spatial experiences and their insights as important assets when constructing, evaluating and improving urban neighbourhoods.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> The study is part of a PhD in Architecture. The data for this paper was gathered from a case-study of a poor, urban area. Methods used include semi structured interviews with more than forty men and women, a walk through carried out with a group of five local leaders and a questionnaire collected from 300 households on everyday life activities and use of space. The names of the persons interviewed and the name of the area have been changed in this presentation.

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