

Island City: From fenced streets to inclusive public spaces.

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Abstract

Gated communities in Bogotá create fenced streets, formed when two or more gated communities face each other, causing desolated, inactive and exclusive public spaces bordered by fences, walls and the occasional gate. What does that mean for a city like Bogotá? Moreover, what can we do about it? As an international and transdisciplinary team, we are reflecting on the causes of the proliferation of this urban model, trying to understand its effects on urban life and experimenting with design opportunities to transform this large portfolio of enclaves in the city. To us, the enormous amount of existing gated communities needs to be seen as an opportunity for change and adapting and activating them is going to be an essential project for the years to come. Hence, we experiment with the intervention of fenced streets by introducing new buildings capable of transforming the current exclusive urban dynamics. Following the premise "Never demolish, always add, we do not deem it necessary to tear down enclaves and start anew. Our idea is to take advantage of the existing and complete it to create more habitable and inclusive places, creating a role model for upgrading of obsolete gated communities and fenced streets globally.

Introduction

More than 1360km (equivalent to the distance between Curitiba and Buenos Aires) of fences and walls of 3500 gated communities predominate Bogotá's contemporary urban landscape (De la Carrera 2019). Gated communities today house close to 40% of Bogotá's households and constitute the prevailing form of formal housing provision, as 6 out of ten m² of all residential projects constructed are gated communities (De la Carrera 2019; DANE 2017). Urban regulations, profit-led real estate developers, the privacy-based lifestyle and the exaltation of security make the gated community the new predominant cell of urban growth. This form of living can be understood as the most direct manifestation of social inequality and 'fear of the other' in space. What does that mean for a city like Bogotá? And what can we do about it? Gated communities mark a unique form of the built environment, as they are a group of mostly residential dwellings that share exclusive spaces and services, show a weak relation or interaction between the private and the surrounding public spaces and have restricted access and controlled entrances. This form of housing is creating desolated public spaces bordered by fences, walls and the occasional gate. We call these in-between spaces fenced streets, formed when two or more gated communities face each other. With 80% of its population living in cities, Latin America is among the most urbanized regions in the world. If this trend continues, the region will be almost completely urbanized in 30 years (Inter-American Development Bank 2016). In large parts, this urban growth is taking shape through the proliferation of gated communities. For many urban theories that advocate for a dynamic interrelation between the built environment and public space, these fenced

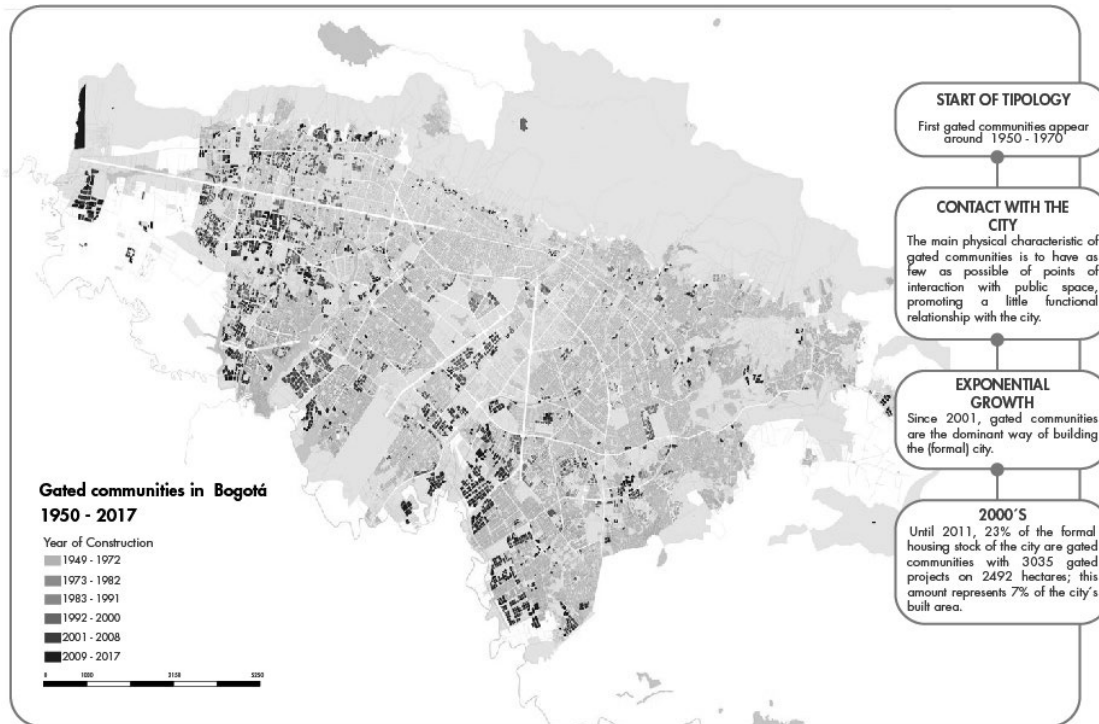


Figure 1: Gated Communities in Bogota (De la Carrera 2019)

streets would encompass the worst-case scenario (Jacobs 1972; Gehl 2010; Caldeira 2000): the blind facades, lack of eyes on the streets, scarce openings to the street and omnipresent security devices may lead to exclusive and insecure public spaces. But their impact goes beyond their built form, as they are reproducing insecurity, the main driver for the rise of gated communities, in the spaces outside by sending a message of rejection and mistrust to the users outside the gates, creating inactive and insecure public spaces. Do the 3500 Gated Communities in Bogota that are built to create more security for the residents inside create hundreds of kilometers of fenced streets with a lack of activity, social interactions and security? As Bogotá and other Latin American cities are already and will be in the future strongly shaped by gated communities, it is relevant for urban researchers, architects and policy makers to understand what impact they will have on the urban fabric and how they can design policies to avoid or mitigate negative externalities.

A transdisciplinary, activist research and design approach

Taking Bogotá with its 3500 gated communities as case study, our transdisciplinary team of architects, urbanists and social researchers from Colombia, the Netherlands and Switzerland have been investigating the urban dimension of the gated community for the past half-decade, with a special focus on the surrounding public spaces, the fenced streets.

In order to foster a critical debate on the impacts of enclaves on adjacent public spaces in the contemporary city and to create inputs for policy and design decisions in the future, we apply an activist research and design approach, engaging with international universities, policy makers and local stakeholders to tackle the following three aspects from a transdisciplinary perspective:

- reflecting on the causes of the proliferation of this urban model,
- understanding its effects on urban life
- experimenting with design opportunities to transform this large portfolio of enclaves in the city.

We are integrating academic research on the origins and impacts of gated communities in Bogotá, architectural and process design proposals, development of pilot projects, activist interventions (developing large exhibitions, workshops, art interventions) and policy engagements through conferences and the formulation of policy briefs. All these efforts make up a common narrative that will feed the presentation at the UIA2020. For this paper, we will focus on the creative aspects that are fed by all the elements mentioned above.

Shifting the focus of gated community research to the spaces between gated communities

Socio-spatial effects of gated communities have been studied mostly on a city or even metropolitan scale, looking at wider settlement and segregation; and on a smaller scale focusing on the internal socio-spatial structures of individual gated communities. Our aim is shifting the focus from the individual gated community to the spaces in between, to the fenced street.

Upgrading fenced streets: how to build soft edges for the existing gated communities

How can cities react to this challenge of the rise of the fenced street that is shaping the urban life, creating exclusive, fragmented and insecure public spaces? If cities aim to prevent the creation of these inactive and insecure fenced streets bordered by gated communities or to activate the hundreds of kilometers of existing fenced streets, we recommend a two-folded strategy: Managing the urban growth and adapting the existing stock, which is the focus of this paper. The enormous amount of existing gated communities needs to be seen as an opportunity for change, adapting and activating them is going to be an essential project for the years to come.

Based on our research, we came up with some basic principles that can help cities formulate policies that mitigate and avoid the creation of exclusive and insecure fenced streets:

- **Scale is key** – The size of urbanization projects, the city block and the individual lot are essential for designing inclusive streets in urban expansion areas. Smaller blocks and plots tend to create more inclusive and safe public spaces and a more interesting urban environment.
- **Numbers matter** - Streets with clusters of large-scale gated communities and long fenced or walled segments are least active and inclusive. A single gated community integrated in an open neighborhood has fewer negative implications for public space
- **Design matters** – The design and integration of the façade into public space defines how people perceive security in the street – the more integrated, meaning directly facing the street, the safer people feel. Urban regulations can easily achieve integrated facades



Figure 2: Ciudad Isla, Exhibition in the Architecture Museum of Bogota, fall 2019. Colectivo Sushi Negro (F.Chaparro, S.Beaumé, M.Cervantes) (Up) / F.Ruiz (Down)

- **The large-scale urban expansion projects are challenging** – They often fail at providing inclusive streets but rather create fenced projects taking up an entire block.
- **Profitable for residents, developers and the city** - There is a great (financial) potential of reactivating fenced streets in areas with existing gated communities
- **Never demolish, always add** - We do not need to open or prohibit or dismantle gated communities in order to solve the problems of the surrounding public space

What do we do with the enormous stock of existing gated communities in Bogotá and the fenced streets they create? In a series of design workshops, we experiment with the intervention of fenced streets by introducing new buildings capable of transforming the current urban dynamics. Following the premise "Never tear down, do not subtract or replace, but add, transform and always use" by the French architects Druot, Lacaton and Vassal, we do not deem it necessary to tear down enclaves and start anew to improve the city. Our premise is to take advantage of the existing and complete it to create more habitable and inclusive places. To our understanding, those neighborhoods dominated by gated communities are obsolete, as they are unable to create inclusive and safe places for social interaction. We believe that this obsolescence is fostered by the message of



Figure 3: Fenced streets between gated communities in two different neighborhoods of Bogota. Sushi Negro..



Figure 4: Before and after: Proposed Intervention in a corner in Ciudad Salitre. M.Santos. (2018-I) UNAL

insecurity that fenced streets transmit through the dictatorship of private security. We are convinced that mono-functional structures that necessarily require motorized means for urban life are environmentally obsolete. Obsolescence is hence not in architecture but in the relationship between the architectures and the activities that they favor.

We believe in the possibility of energizing the street without affecting the life of current residents and in densifying what exists by improving urban quality for all. We believe these interventions can be beneficial for all, as real estate developers are interested in further developing their projects in this central area of the city, residents will not lose any quality through the interventions or are generously compensated and public spaces around the blocks can again serve as integrative, inclusive and active stages for urban life.

Analyzing these areas, we find that there is plenty of space for re-densification in gated community neighborhoods: void corners, fenced front yards, obsolete/unused public spaces and other urban situations that carry potential for new creative ideas for building an active, integrative interface between public and private spaces.

A Pilot Project for Urban Upgrading of Gated Communities and Fenced Streets

We are currently testing the hypotheses that emerged during several years of architecture workshops at the National University developed by professors Ramón Bermúdez and Sebastián Serna. We created a research group within the architecture school to develop the theoretical basis of a pilot project with the purpose of opening the now academic discussion to other realms, such as public or mixed institutions as well as developers and builders that can influence the urban transformation of these spaces.

The research team is working on three representative case studies in Bogotá – gated communities with different sizes, densities, location, and social characteristics.

Through five so called *viabilities* that we have defined as necessary (spatial, technical, normative, financial and social, see figure 5) we intend to approach each specific case and produce a series of documents that allow creating a constructive conversation with different groups in order to prepare a pilot project intended to test all the hypotheses that we have explained so far.

We are in dialogue with owners and residents of these three gated communities to test the odds of an intervention of this type and define the precise needs of the inhabitants. Doing so, we aim to match the vision of architects and urban planners of activating the first floor (academia) with the needs and desires of the inhabitants (community) and find a way to make it a reality, including public and private institutions (regulations and the market) which are the final agents of transformation.

In doing so, we are hopeful to upgrade gated communities and the surrounding fenced streets into inclusive urban spaces, creating a pilot project with impact beyond Bogotá and the Latin American Metropolis.

Upgrading Gated Communities from a pandemic perspective

In the current context the research on upgrading gated communities becomes more valuable for three reasons worth mentioning:

- On the one hand, seeking to reduce commuting within the city to avoid unnecessary crowding, the proposal of completing the existent with mixed uses is an ideal mechanism to make the city more decentralized and therefore less congested, following the proposals of the “15 minute city” that is currently being applied in capitals like Paris (Moreno, 2019).

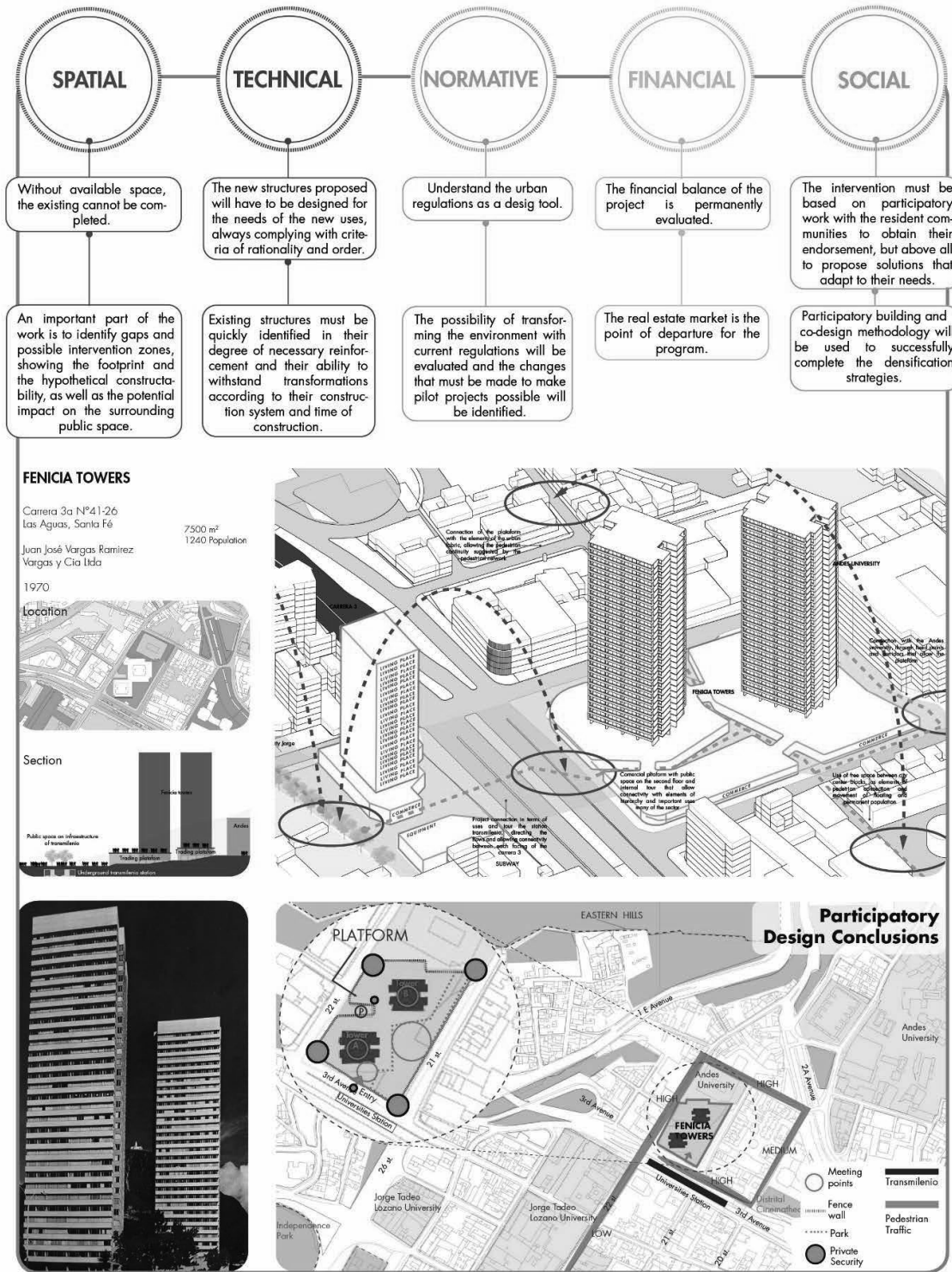


Figure 5: Torres de Fenicia Case study. Methodology, social outcomes, opportunity areas and viabilities. Research group 2020-I. M.Barrera, S.Jaramillo, Z.Ustariz, L.Largo, N.Moreno, D.Forero, J.Serna, C.Ávila, D.Velasquez, A.Velasquez, C.Múnera.

-On the other hand, the global pandemic has highlighted sociospatial inequality within cities and countries, with the elites having access to large quantity and high quality public (and private) spaces whereas marginalized neighborhoods are lacking adequate housing and open spaces to mitigate the risk of the pandemic and to cope with external effects of lockdown measures. Gated communities with their exclusive private open spaces and the desolate surrounding public spaces are a shocking example of this inequality in our cities and intervening these spaces has never seemed timelier than today.

- Moreover, the research project encourages a revision of the current state of the buildings and their potential to accommodate transformations of living spaces to meet the new demands of the house in confinement (living / working, transformable spaces, exterior extensions of private spaces). An initiative such as “island city” may be an adequate approach to provide improved strategies to existing homes to meet new standards that are required from the new global reality.

Endnotes

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