

Bottom-up tactics: land occupation, temporality, organization and resistance.

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ABSTRACT:

This article develops ideas about temporary land occupation, as opposed to a permanent one. The State understands an occupation in relation to the first, an intervention –forced– of the site for a determined time. Through the analysis of the occupations of La Victoria, Peñalolén and Puerto Viejo, it is suggested that the status and action indefiniteness of the occupation itself sets off a permanent occupation, recognized by the parties involved (the State and the society). The “illegal” land occupation and, by means of strategic mechanisms of social organization and light scene that, occasionally in our history, has contributed to solving housing problems for the neediest.

OCCUPATION 1: LA VICTORIA

In the present world, social movements and collective groups establish new orders of interaction between the people and the State. This reality suggests then the need to understand what a group of organized individuals does in order to empower themselves and get “space”. This

empowerment means a feeling of bottom-up⁽¹⁾ pressure that, with ambition, aims at satisfying a need. Occupation⁽²⁾ refers to the conquest of a piece of land that is significant (symbolically), and done with the purpose of being present in some way. In the case of this text, land occupation means at the same time giving a certain visibility to a situation of unbalance between those who can take decisions and those who cannot. Land occupation represents a way of exerting pressure because of certain collective demands. These actions are sometimes temporary and others permanent. Occupations are the coordinated and organized display of a wish, a show of aspiration to equality.

Chile has a history of land occupation. In October 1957 the first big land occupation⁽³⁾ took place in our country and in Latin America (Cortés, 2007). This occupation took place at a crucial moment in Chile, during the 1950s, just as rural life was projecting itself more and more to the city and the first urban planning projects began to shape Santiago. It was the propitious context for the birth of slums (“poblaciones callampas” as they were called) a result of the high propagation and lack of available buildings to accommodate those who came to the capital city looking for new life opportunities. It was a crucial moment in our history; it illustrates, on the one hand, the evident misery of a disadvantaged class and, on the other, the strength and conviction of those who have not had access to a real housing solution.

The families that carried out actions for this land occupation were driven by their own need to settle down and their wish to improve their condition. This action shows the illusion of those who wanted to progress to be part of a higher order of organization established by society (home owners).

The occupation of La Victoria came up in a context of an increasing deruralization and the crisis of an economic model that began to show a strong polarization of Chilean society (Cortés, 2007). The occupation inaugurated a series of contradictions in society that remain until today. Housing is perhaps the most specific way we have had, as a society, to differentiate ourselves and, consequently, to see signs of the magnitude of the prevailing inequality⁽⁴⁾. As it has been suggested, this action of land occupation was one of the first definite and interesting events to perceive a significant social movement (which put pressure on the agenda of formal politics to territorialization –or conquest– of the Housing Corporation called Corporación de la Vivienda, CORVI). Since then, occupations have meant the shift from formal policies to territorialization —or conquest– of popular policies (Salazar, 1990). The State policies of the time did not contribute very much to promoting a solution to the demand of those who used the occupation as a tool to beg for attention to their most basic needs⁽⁵⁾.

The group of people that carried out the

occupation committed themselves to continuing progressive work persistently in order to achieve their own objectives, resisting and implementing their own initiatives in order to obtain the cession of the land. They succeeded. The buildings made, although characterized by their vulnerable materials, were sustained in time and became a consolidated, true community that was completed with the construction of its streets⁽⁶⁾ in 1959. The allusion to "la victoria" is directly related to the feeling of success of the neighbours when they fulfilled their wish by the occupation, achieving the configuration of their own environment. La Victoria is, today, a kind of patrimony in the sense of the pride and conviction of the most vulnerable social class, which actively represents an identity value of self-improvement. This is how it could be established that the action of "land occupation by force" carried out meant an emblematic and symbolic act of appropriation⁽⁷⁾. Land ceases to be merchandise (as a commercial view would establish) and acquires a specific value in the symbolic terms of a community, beyond its own value. La Victoria remains until today and what started as an occupation constitutes an organized community that stands out as a model within the local scene (distinctive because it started from the basis of self-management). La Victoria is a reason of pride and acknowledgement for individuals who fought for their rights⁽⁸⁾.

OCCUPATION 2: PEÑALOLÉN

Following the case of la Victoria came other similar actions⁽⁹⁾, all of them aiming at obtaining a right to own the land. A moment of climax regarding this kind of event took place at the peak of the neo-

liberal effects promoted by the State of the moment. The second big occupation dealt with by this article is the one carried out in the commune of Peñalolén, the night of the 5th of July, 1999, when, after nine months of clandestine organization, 25 hectares of private property were assaulted and taken. This time, the settling was materialized with the choreography of over 1,500 families that in an organized way established themselves on the slopes of the Santiago mountains⁽¹⁰⁾. The conquest of the place was so well coordinated taking into consideration even where people should go and what they should do during the period of occupation at daybreak. Thus, an instant city was built from scratch in a few hours, with light structures and materials such as plastic and cardboard. The collective action was so well organized that even fires were lit to cope with the night's low temperature. The occupation of Peñalolén meant another precedent in this type of fight for the right to housing along the country, no longer now under the regime of a social-democratic State, but of a dictatorship that imposed a different political agenda of social development.

Like the previous occupation, this one is also significant at national level, but this time for different reasons. It is not now a group of families demanding just the right to a basic home, but of a socio-cultural moment (post dictatorship) that no longer takes into account the polarization between the State and the market (association between the State and the private sector for development) as the solution to the possibility of a home, but now, another characteristic is added to the demand: an adequate

environment that would make social development possible for families inserted in society, no longer eradicated towards the marginality of the city where the value of the land is lower⁽¹¹⁾. Also mentioned in this demand is the collective participation in the development of new projects. That is to say, the housing solutions that the State had delivered during the previous thirty years were not adequate regarding the quality the users required, because in addition to a home, the need and the request for a coherent environment⁽¹²⁾. Housing and quality of living are not solved just by a few square meters of land but also with an environment that promotes an inclusive community life. This occupation takes place at a moment when the government has stopped considering the topic of housing as a priority and everything this idea involves.

In accordance with the needs of the progress the city was undergoing under a consumption projection, the State's concerns were aimed more at the quality of the urban space and the development of the infrastructure they were going to build for the modernity scene, such as motorways and public transport works, to the detriment of the quality of housing, which continued to be deficient in terms of size and location. The State ignored the variety of spaces required for the basic home to succeed, without understanding that people's basic place is connected by default with the multiple derivatives of the spaces that expand basic housing: entertainment spaces, green areas, various kinds of equipment, community centers, schools, policlinics and so on, that is, without including the spatial derivatives that favour the articulation

of a group of people in a city sector with identity: a neighbourhood.

The occupation of Peñalolén did not completely prosper (to stay and build a community there). Many of the well-off residents of the so-called “Comunidad Ecológica de Peñalolén” were against having these families of lower socio-economic segments as their neighbours (even though they were native to the area). After six years, the State relocated those people giving them the corresponding support in another sector in the periphery of the city (thus contributing to the creation of new ghettos)⁽¹³⁾. By this, in a certain way, it was confirmed that the State policies were not paying real attention to the possible impact of the sectorized relocation of these social groups.

When an informal space is installed and organized, what is shown is the evident association among people (and their wishes) with some architectural manifestation (in terms of a territorial occupation strategy). Most of the time, the temporary nature of a certain work is extended because of another challenge, the permanence of what this kind of space means for the collective memory. Usually, temporary constructions are related to topics of material duration rather than to those of courage and resistance. What is suggested here has to do with the exploration of the context that drives the occupation and, therefore its relationship with people’s attitudes that give form to the occupation spaces. Here, architecture is a result of the wish installed and not necessarily of the projected one. The architecture of an occupation can be understood as a motor or vehicle to obtain

something else (a permanent home in the best of cases).

From this standpoint, we very rarely see architecture in direct relationship with what is lighter and has to do with the moments of experience and transfer of that experience. Architecture is a tool of political communication that can be used for collective and social purposes. Thus, when in architecture you speak of time, in this context, it might be said that it is mainly a reference to architectural phenomena that have to do with a certain social integration of particular finite characteristics (with an end date) that we can also associate to vulnerability factors among people and organizations. The occupation of Peñalolén ceased to exist in 2006 when the State negotiated family relocation, and offered to pay 2.5 UF per square meter⁽¹⁴⁾ to the landowner (Emol, 2010). The authority’s intention of making a park for the community was not totally well received by the owner. This decision of the local government undoubtedly constitutes a gesture towards the rest of the community: if the authority promoted the eviction of the families, this was done to create a certain kind of democratic space (a park).

The notion of temporary nature has more to do with life perceived regarding the activity spaces developed to improve those same conditions of permanence. Thus, a lighter variable is introduced, which has to do with the perception of the more permanent space that is nothing but the same “situation” set up⁽¹⁵⁾. It could be said that the architecture of the occupation is a presentation of wishes and meanings, that it is a presentation of ideals built with moments of collective

experience in view of an ephemeral architecture. In other words, a permanent architecture can also be subtle in a temporary sense because it provokes in its users unique moments that will not be repeated in a context or particular situation⁽¹⁶⁾. Ephemeral architecture analyzed from the lens of performance⁽¹⁷⁾ studies becomes a real and precise construction whose objective is the representation or transfer of a convincing significance (in terms of carrying out an action of significant character). In the case of these occupations, the reason to obtain the minimum (and the not so minimum), justifies the analysis from a performative dimension of the occupation, through architecture. These same characteristics, understood from the perspective of performance studies, might become a battle resource and constant resistance to permanence. Impermanence defines temporary nature, that is to say, like an installation, ephemeral architecture sets itself performing in the place to then disappear decisively. This is perhaps the most relevant of the notion of short term nature intended to be highlighted here: the installation of a light structure, in a determined place, definitively transforms the existing spatial situation, to the extent that it can be perceived as permanent. Architecture is not only perceived for the construction of a spatial environment but also for the intensity that the space creates in the conviction of the people. Seen in a different way, an occupation might become violent (for a group of people) if it is analyzed from the perspective of territorial invasion. Spatial interventions of the ephemeral have not been valued in relation to what we have been demanded to develop (as valuable and permanent

architecture) in the course of our own profession. History reminds us that the value of the work is often in what transcends time, what is more solid and balanced. Seen from another perspective, the ephemeral, in this context, has some value because it can now undoubtedly be much more transcendent because, additionally, it is loaded with ideology (as in the case of the occupation and the people of La Victoria).

OCCUPATION 3: PUERTO VIEJO

The third example of an occupation interesting to be dealt with is found in the north of the country, in Puerto Viejo. This case does not refer to the need for "basic" housing presented previously, but understood in relation to another kind of minimum related to the need of certain families to have a second house, a summer home. The resident of Puerto Viejo, Gladys Cisternas, says to the Atacama newspaper: «it is the only place where we, humble, working people of Atacama and other areas, can rest» (Diario de Atacama, 2011). This statement questions the fact that access to such kind of "benefits" (the second house) is only for the wealthiest. The occupation of Puerto Viejo considers the right every person has to a place where to rest, establishing it as something equally important for the quality of living. Our national architecture has taken charge of positioning very highly a second type of house ("beach house") that solves the question for well-off families. The most relevant works that make an important group of national architects stand out, have been commissioned by a very privileged sector with the possibility of acting as patron-owners. These architectural works are far from having

the characteristics of the buildings in an illegal occupation, as in the case of Puerto Viejo. The resulting architecture in Puerto Viejo has been created by the owners themselves, lower middle class families who have understood progressive growth. The logic of progressive construction of these dwellings has been the way to solve their own commitment⁽¹⁸⁾.

The illegal settlement of Puerto Viejo means the expanse of space for families who live in the area of Caldera and Copiapó. The active life of the area increases considerably in summer (the rest of the time it subsists on the activities of the fishers of the cove), giving room to an important, intensive, austere tourist activity in accordance with those who have taken the beach, young families generally. In 2001, the Chilean justice denied the right of a well-off family who claimed ownership of the land⁽¹⁹⁾. Until today, ownership of that land has not been clearly established as a result of the movement of the tides that set the occupation limit with the rising of the sea, which is set at 80 meters from the water edge to the inner land.

The residents' organization has managed to maintain the right to a minimum land considering other kind of areas that serve community life. Worth mentioning are a residents' center and the stands of the fishers who provide the place with food (also attracting the attention of visitors to the area). This community has also organized itself to have electricity, delivery of water and periodical waste collection. There is no other example of coastal occupation in Chile like the case of Puerto Viejo. The continuation in time of that spontaneous architecture has been

giving way to a characteristic landscape, outstanding for its precariousness, color and lightness. Unlike other occupations, this one has become an icon that attracts the interest of tourists and people who go to the north of the country in summer. The occupation can transmit a certain significant message to visitors to the area. Puerto Viejo is today a place that has managed to subsist because the State has not initiated relocation actions as has been the case of other occupations⁽²⁰⁾.

CONCLUSION


These occupations would not have been so relevant without the media coverage they have had, either by press news or research of some professionals (architects, sociologists, urban planners, and so on) interested in the repercussions of this form of action and spatial implementation by means of territorial conquest. Each of these visibility opportunities contributes to highlighting the room for demand of a sector of society shown as wanting. The actions of this illegal settling have other repercussions as well, repression, for example. In spite of this, the State has shown to be understanding, as in the case of La Victoria.

The strategy of visualizing dissatisfaction, in an action similar to a sit-in⁽²¹⁾ (set in the occupied land), with media coverage and consistent reflection on this phenomenon, is another kind of action tool (of the activist type). This bottom-up visibility allows for dialogues that aim at the inclusion and participation of various sectors of society, which, in fact, contribute by questioning the usual (social) project development. Besides, possibilities are open and promoted for the action, collaboration and negotiation

with authorities in a different, new and unexpected way. Thus, the future project does not refer to top-down dynamics but also to the search for a balance that considers, or rather incorporates, bottom-up⁽²²⁾. These are the inclusive tactics that begin to shape new models to carry out a project. In the case of architecture, this becomes relevant not only for the incorporation of the meaning itself that brings the need expressed by a “client” (his wish), but rather for the annexation, in the process, the view and the demands of the end user. The “client” as a user, enters the very process of project decision, what used to be done just by the work manager⁽²³⁾.

Architecture is no longer a design space in the formal sense, but a challenge of inclusion for the construction of a significant and symbolic space for those who use it.

Eloquently, each one of these actions contributes to make us witnesses of a kind of development that no longer acts by inversion and implementation (from a hierarchical perspective) but rather in an inverse and inclusive way. The contribution of occupations goes exactly in that direction because they give voice to individuals who do not have it but who are very relevant at the time of obtaining a significant and really efficient project in terms of providing meaningful solutions. All the current systems of communication that have allowed the setting up of a transversality of organizations and that resist the conventional pyramidal structures should be mentioned here. It will no longer be as easy as in the past to make a place of symbolic value disappear. As a brief epilogue, mention should be made of the meaning of

participative design in the processes of architecturization of our environment. The occupation, naturally, does not allow the definite participation of a professional supervision in terms of the conventions established in our professional practice; however, this does not mean that architects have not participated in those processes supporting the community with their ideas. With their designs, architects can contribute to the solution of topics of organization and care of the environment. 

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