Metrocable lines such as this at Communa 13 are key projects in the Social Urbanism that is applied in the Medellin barrios.  

Photo: Juan Velasquez

Latin America:
Grass roots in social urban renewal

By JUAN VELASQUEZ

Women have radicalised the democratic system and changed the basis for citizenship itself. Emotions are of fundamental importance in understanding how discrimination, segregation and racism arise, and how the right of the inhabitants to pleasant public spaces is to be managed. In an ongoing research project, a study is made of how “barrio” women have gained a place in the planning of Latin American cities.

Over two decades of radical reforms, participatory democracy has taken root in Latin America. The situation has made it possible to study what conditions are like for the urban poor, such as indigenous, Afro-Americans and barrio women who have often been excluded from both political and planning processes. In an ongoing research project, a study is made of just how barrio women have gained a place in the planning of cities such as Havana (Cuba), Medellin (Colombia), Cochabamba (Bolivia) and Caracas (Venezuela). The study is conducted with the help of qualitative field methods. Around sixty meetings, which deal with matters such as library parks in poor housing areas, “barrios”, and in large housing complexes for the urban poor, have been documented in the planning process.
Politics of emotion
Some researchers have noted how *barrio* women take part in constructing their housing estates, and in this way are at the forefront of social mobilisation for social reforms. With both these aspects, women have radicalised the democratic system and have changed the basis for citizenship itself. But the way in which women manage both these actions is still undertheorised. In order to find out more about this, the project is studying how women create their alliances with the help of what, in different fields, is discussed as *politics of emotion*. This means that feelings are of fundamental importance in organising the understanding of discrimination, segregation and racism, and also the way in which people are mobilised against this. Discrimination is a phenomenon that is felt through daily experiences of humiliation and powerlessness that can result in poor self confidence, anxiety, fear or passivisation. But, at the same time, the phenomenon can get people to feel all from anger to hope, love, solidarity and a pugnacity that can be channelled into forming overriding social alliances.

The question is in what way different forms of the politics of emotion can be used in community planning to remedy social injustices and to carry on a more sustainable development of cities and communities.

The political leaders in the studied cities have employed the motto “to pay the social debt towards marginalised groups”. This device is an important part in forms of the politics of emotion which have been applied with different ambitions in the studied cities.

Social Urbanism
In Meddelin, for instance, which was known in the 1990s as the world’s most violent city, the politics of emotion has been of key importance since 2004 in running what is called Social Urbanism. This is based on concentrating large resources to those parts of the city which have the worst standard of living and the highest levels of urban violence. One important catalyst in stimulating the participation of citizens has been the allocation of resources that the inhabitants can decide on. The resources are administered by the city’s Urban Development Enterprise which also coordinates the other municipal enterprises that are concentrated in the areas. During the time the substandard infrastructure of these places has been upgraded, the local social cohesion has also been expanded. One important element in these projects has been to stress the inhabitants right to beauty in public spaces. One of the ways this has been done is by constructing Library Parks which are a kind of People’s House which, apart from library collections and study premises, also accommodates a space for artistic presentations, lecture and exhibition halls, computer rooms with internet, and assembly rooms. These are built at the centres of the housing estates and their function is to play a key role that unites the leisure time of young people and inhabitants with school work, further education and the best selection of cultural events in the city. They are therefore built at the
outskirts of the city, often at the termini for the *metrocables* of public transport or bus routes, and may be surrounded by small squares, gardens and play areas. Social Urbanism is therefore a good example of planning that gives prominence to good architecture in order to acknowledge the dignity of the poor, and where the inputs are used to create social cohesion in both the affected areas and the entire city.

**Grass roots planning**

Caracas is perhaps the city that has recently been known for its urban violence. The city is also an important cog in the democratic revolution that has taken place in Venezuela since 1999. Here also, the motto “to pay the social debt towards marginalised groups” has had a key place in a number of important reforms. With these, citizen power, or People’s power has been introduced to take its place alongside the legislative, executive and legal powers of the republic. This change has strengthened the women in the barrios where they are most prominent in, for instance, the administration of local projects dealing with poverty and discrimination.

Between 150 and 400 families in a district, 20 in rural areas and 10 among indigenous communities, can form a local communal council (consejo comunal). Together with local grass roots movements and other associated councils, these can be articulated in Social Battle Rooms, Salas de Batalla Social, to work on local welfare programmes which the central government finances. The Social Battle Rooms can broaden the ability of the executive power to deliver, but at the same time they can also radicalise the policies of the government itself. This has paved the way for the grass roots democracy and planning that is growing up in the country. This means that the inhabitants self administer everything from technical committees for water, gas and electricity supply to committees for universal access to health care, education and housing. In this way the inhabitants reduce their historic dependence on outside players, and at the same time the social cohesion is also strengthened.
**Women are the driving force**

The participation of women in these processes is characterised by important features. They know more than men of how local problems arise, know more about laws and regulations that affect their local development, and are the driving force in presenting diagnoses of how social welfare and citizenship can be developed. Women are also noted for conducting discussions in a more pertinent manner and with a more positive attitude, which facilitates organisation and speeds up the work. The leadership of women is based on the idea that they are seen to be most responsible and can perform the work with a greater input of feelings such as solidarity, love and devotion.

Some researchers think that women’s active participation in the development of poor barrios may be a way of exploiting women’s “unpaid work” and may become yet another obstacle to women’s liberation. On the other hand, the role that women have played in the growth of grass roots planning can be seen as an expression of just the opposite. It highlights two important shifts. One is that political power passes from the cities’ political centres and municipal enterprises to new structures at the peripheries such as the barrios where women have a very great influence. The other is that power is displaced from the productive to the reproductive part of the community – or from male dominated to female dominated spheres. These shifts have been conducted with strong elements of the politics of emotion, which radicalise democracy and are playing a key role in wanting to completely overcome different forms of discrimination, segregation and racism in society.

**Women in Medellin**

mobilise for the right to free water and electricity and keep alive the debate concerning new utilities which are to be established so that the urban poor, especially barrio women should fully exercise their citizenship. March 2010.
Alexandra Castrillón
from the Urban Development Enterprise EDU at a meeting to get the work started on building the Library Park at San Antonio de Prado, Medellin. March 2010.

Women are often most active and best informed
when they present their views regarding the local development. Here at a meeting on the strategic housing plan at Medellin, March 2010.

The women’s way of holding meetings in community council rooms and Social Battle Rooms was characterised by relevance, effectiveness and harmony. Here at a meeting in the Social Battle Room Victoria Popular, Chacao, Greater Caracas. June 2011.
Women from the Chacao barrios
meet on Plaza del Indio to welcome President Hugo Chavez’ return from Cuba. July 2011.

Homeless, poorly housed and single mothers with children
constitute a strong basis among Chavez’ supporters. Virginia with her two children demonstrates her pleasure at Chavez’ return on 4 July 2011 after his cancer treatment in Cuba.
Women are often a strong driving force in the planning of self-build housing projects. Here at a meeting at Campamento de Pioneros 22 de Enero at Chacao’s Patrimonial Market, Greater Caracas, July 2011.

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Literature:
