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Rethinking the city in the face of the pandemic: Community and Neighbourhood

by Margarita Greene

Introduction

Many things have been said and written since the worldwide spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this paper I wish to address both the social crisis which manifested in Chile on 18 October 2019 and the global health and sanitary crisis of recent months. Both are eminently urban crisis. My perspective for this will be the social housing policy, mainly from the Chilean case but also taking the Latin American and Caribbean Region (LAC) context into consideration, and the factors that have, and still are, affecting the current critical urban situation.

Demography and housing context

Latin America and the Caribbean Region (LAC) have undergone an accelerated process of urbanization in recent years. This process which, according to the national Census of 2017¹ brought Chile's urban population up to 87,8%, has improved the quality of life for many. In fact, the process of urbanization came together with what has been referred to as the «first demographic transition», characterized by a decreasing mortality rate, closely followed by a decrease in the natality rate. There is evidence that the process of

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¹ INE, *Síntesis de Resultados, Censo 2017*, Santiago, Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, 2018.

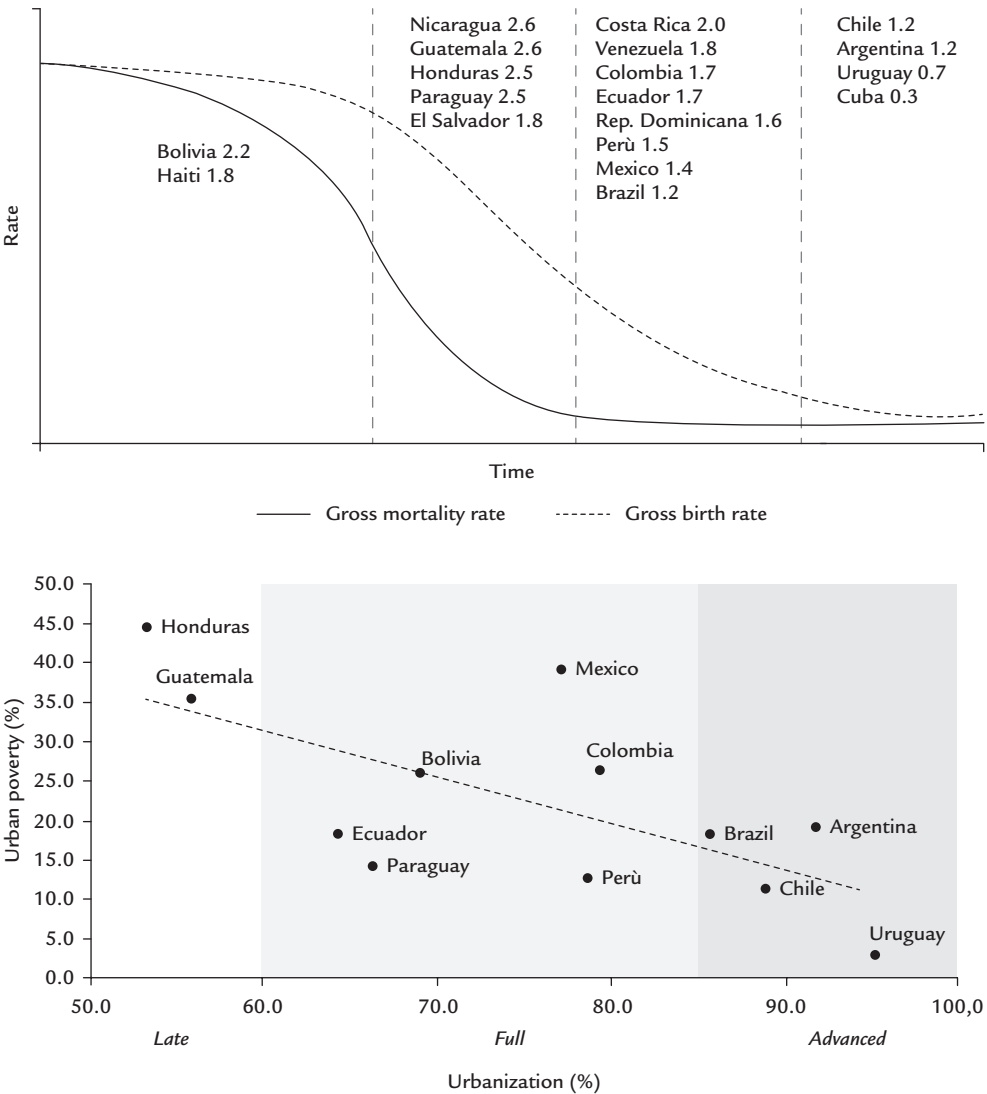
urbanization has been important for the social and economic development of countries, as poverty decreases with an advance in demographic transition. As shown in Figure 1a, the stage in this process describes a country's situation as «late», «full», and «advanced», while Figure 1b shows a significant inverse correlation ($r^2 = 0.45$) between urban poverty and the process of urbanization in a sample of LAC countries, also identifying their phase in the demographic transition.

In terms of planning and social housing, demographic transition has significant importance too, since it has changed the residential needs of the population. It started with changes in the household structure, decreasing in size and simplifying in composition, transitioning from extended families living in close-knit rural communities to nuclear families (couples and their offspring) in smaller urban dwellings.

As the process advanced, many LAC cities received a massive influx of people from rural areas in search of a better quality of life. Most were not prepared, and rings of informal settlements began to surround the urban centres, especially in the bigger cities. At the time, there was much confidence that, through the industrialized production of dwellings, governments would be able to provide residential estates with varying degrees of infrastructure for the community. Therefore, many LAC countries concentrated their housing and social housing policies on the production of housing estates, sometimes with collective green areas and childcare facilities, while trying to control the production of informal dwellings. Nevertheless, many houses in these estates ended up owned by middle-income families, the government institutions that built them did not recover their investment, and the informal settlements and slums increased yearly².

² E. Rojas, *No time to Waste. Applying the Lessons from Latin America's 50 Years of Housing Policies to Rapidly Urbanizing Countries*, Quito, Ecuador, Housing Policy Dialogue: Moving Towards Implementation of the New Urban Agenda, Habitat III, World Stage Event, 2016.

Figure 1. Demographic transition process and relationship to urban poverty in LAC.



Source: J. Chackiel and J. Martinez, *La dinámica demográfica en América Latina. Serie Población y Desarrollo 52*, Santiago, Centro Latinoamericano y Caribeño de Demografía, Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, 2004; CEPAL, *Panorama Social de América Latina 2018*, Santiago, Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, 2019.

In the 1960s, and based on Turner's research in Peru³, it became apparent that «slums were not the problem, but part of the solution». An incremental approach to housing was validated and incentivized through self-help programmes, sites and services and neighbourhood improvement. It was a time of social and political unrest which, in many LAC countries, culminated in a second paradigm shift: the neoliberal, more individualistic, approach in which an efficient market was going to provide finished and complete dwellings for every nuclear family.

As such, the 1980s brought a market approach to housing production to Chile with little or no planning by the government: the «subsidy on demand». Based on the idea that governments had been inefficient both in the distribution of resources as well as in the production of dwellings, and that the market would be a better distributor of scarce resources, a system where individual families were given a direct subsidy to buy basic, finished housing was implemented.

By the end of the XXth century, it became apparent that the housing solutions produced massively by the private sector and assigned by an objective governmental system was not the solution either. Although the production of houses, at least in Chile, increased significantly⁴, the houses produced were segregated and had poor or no urban services and equipment, if any. In fact, a consensus was reached that we had passed from the problem of those without a house (*los sin casa*), to «the problem of those with a roof» (*los con techo*), arguing that, in many cases, the solution had become the problem⁵.

Twenty years on, many things have happened; a second demographic transition has been declared, where the nuclear families have given way to

³ J.F.C. Turner, *Housing by People: Towards Autonomy in Building Environments*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1977.

⁴ MINVU, *Atlas de la evolución del déficit habitacional en Chile 1992-2002*, Santiago, Ministerio de Vivienda y Urbanismo, 2006.

⁵ A. Rodríguez and A. Sugranyes, *El problema de vivienda de los «con techo»*, in «EURE», vol. 30, 2004, pp. 53-65.

non-traditional smaller households (in Chile the mean size household in the 2017 Census was 3.1 persons/household⁶), women have entered the work force, immigration has increased significantly (much of it return or circular immigration), especially from other LAC countries, and more flats than houses are being built in the cities⁷.

This new process has been called the «second demographic transition», especially affecting the middle and higher groups integrated to the global economy. It suggests a model that tends to the dissolution of the nuclear family, low fertility rates and individuation processes, where the patterns of reproduction, nuptiality, divorce, and the types of bonds between couples changed; for example, marrying later, longer bachelorhood, more frequent consensual relationships, more births out of marriage, and more family ruptures⁸.

The social outbreak

This social inequality in LAC, expressed in Chile in terms of an acute spatial segregation, where the poorer families live isolated from the benefits of the city, while better off families enjoy a standard of living comparable to that of developed countries, exploded in a social crisis in Chile on 18 October 2019.

A civic protest triggered by a 30 CLP (0.03 Euro) rise in public transport, which continued with demands for a higher minimum wage, improved pension funds and many other social demands, basically put a stop to what had been labelled the Chilean success story: with poverty diminishing from over 48% to less than 10% in 20 years, very low inflation and unemploy-

⁶ INE, *Síntesis de Resultados...*, cit., 2018.

⁷ <https://www.latercera.com/negocios/noticia/estudio-revela-cambio-mercado-inmobiliario-santiago-10-anos/70714/>.

⁸ J. Rodríguez, *Vulnerabilidad demográfica una faceta de las desventajas sociales*, Serie Población y Desarrollo 5, Santiago, Centro Latinoamericano y Caribeño de Demografía, Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, 2004.

Figure 2. Protests in Plaza Italia, Santiago de Chile, 1 November 2019.



ment at approximately 8%. Nevertheless, a month later 1.2 million people (in a city of 7 million inhabitants) marched, demanding a New Social Pact, where the fruits of development would reach all.

The social outbreak slowed during the summer holidays and before it had a chance to restart, the COVID-19 pandemic reached the country and most of the LAC Region in March, sending everybody into varying degrees of confinement.

The house is more than a home

Although the social outbreak attacked the city – its buildings, infrastructure, monuments, authorities, and institutions – there was no explicit demand addressing housing or urban issues.

In fact, if we revisit the brief account of the Chilean social housing process and development, we can recognize another paradigm shift, which is still ongoing, that needs to be understood and managed; it relates to what we understand by a «dwelling».

After the failure to provide dwellings for an increasing population in the 1970s, the concept of a basic dwelling from the 1980s onwards included between four and seven attributes (depending on how they are grouped together): secured tenancy, environmental protection, habitable space and sanitation (drinking water, sewage and electricity). Governments attempted to focus on delivering these attributes using an individualistic approach: minimum-level housing lacking in basic infrastructure and urban equipment, located in the cheaper parts of the cities (e.g. the outskirts). But the most problematic aspect was probably that the governments assigned the dwellings individually, without recognizing the power of the community, its social links, and the survival strategies of the poorer populations. And so, in these new locations, families lost their social links and had no access to the benefits of the urban life. Examples of this are Programmes such as *Mia Casa Mia Vida* in Brazil, or *Vivienda Básica* in Chile.

It did not take long for criticism of these policies to arrive (Ducci⁹; and others). In fact, in this new conception of an urban dwelling, public policies should also provide at least another seven attributes: safe territory, road access, public transport, public lightning, health and educational services, and recreational facilities. In an attempt to answer this new call, Chilean housing policy has implemented several new programmes such as *Parques Urbanos* or *Quiero Mi Barrio*, which are trying to provide what was missing from the previous government actions¹⁰, but there is still much to be done in this regard.

The sanitary crisis

Although the social outbreak did not make explicit demands concerning urban or housing issues, it expressed the main weakness in this regard: social and economic inequity and segregation. Likewise, the sanitary crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, attacks and expresses itself with

⁹ M.E. Ducci, *El lado oscuro de una política de vivienda exitosa*, in «EURE», vol. 69, 1997, pp. 99-115.

¹⁰ M. Greene, C. Cortese, J. Reyes and E. Wagemann, *Sustentabilidad a Escala de Barrio. Re-visitando el Programa Quiero Mi Barrio*, Santiago, CEDEUS y MINVU, 2019.

the most devastating effects, in the homes and in the city of the traditionally excluded urban poor: in slums with no sanitary conditions and in overcrowded minimum houses in areas with no urban services, where social distancing and staying at home is a physical impossibility.

In this framework, many have become aware that it is vital to rethink the city, to examine it during the health emergency, to envisage the paradigm shifts that will come due to the crisis, and the lessons that we should learn about planning. In this sense, it is important to respond to the needs of contemporary households in both the social and spatial dimensions of the residential environment: community and neighbourhood. We need to meet humanity's needs as a whole, to forget the individual approach of those who stand to benefit, and treat them as a community; that is, groupings of urban inhabitants with a certain social cohesion. On the other hand, this quest involves the territory and the built environment, and the neighbourhood, including infrastructure, services, and equipment.

Furthermore, this topic needs to be focused on an intermediate scale – the community and the neighbourhood – which is the articulating scale between the spheres of the private (home and family) to the more public (citizens and city).

Five topics to be rethought

To end this paper, I wish to put forward five topics that need to be addressed in order to approach the crisis that our cities are facing today.

1) *A first aspect that this pandemic has brought forward, is the basic socio-spatial unit; the one that proclaims, «for each home a house».*

After the industrial revolution, Western families became nuclear; the extended or composed families decreased, and the «dad, mom and children» ideal was established as the basic unit of living. Not surprisingly, the motto of «one home-one house» quickly emerged. Since then, countries have

worked hard to try and provide each household with a home, or to at least facilitate access to one.

As we know, this has not been an easy task, and despite the fact that minimum housing standards were lowered and solutions were stripped of practically all urban services, this goal was never achieved. On the other hand, although population growth has slowed, households continue to increase due to the decrease in size of the families mentioned above, related to the demographic and cultural transition.

Now, with the advent of the pandemic, current housing solutions have proven to be unsuitable for quarantine, and a difficult environment in which to exercise adequate social distancing. Single-parent homes by themselves are not sustainable for childcare, nor are older adults living on their own. Furthermore, it is practically impossible for larger groups to live together in small homes, especially if one of the members becomes ill. That is why individual solutions such as «stay at home», which has been the slogan of most countries throughout the world, has received much criticism in LAC because it is understood as another example of lack of sensitivity from the authorities, who... «do not understand the reality of the people».

So, perhaps in these cases we should consider an intermediate housing unit: for example, the block or the passage, with services for the families, a reading room, free and available internet (overcoming the digital gap at the same time).

2) A second aspect revealed by the pandemic is the neighbourhood's (or local scale) potential for resilience.

For a long time, urban planning sought to improve transportation systems by reducing the time required to travel to work, study and to other services offered by the city. To do this, planners sought to improve mass public transport networks. Although these have considerably improved ac-

cessibility to relatively distant places, they have done so based on crowded buses or trains, and continue to involve long hours of travel for some users.

Now, the pandemic has warned us against using mass transport in the usual way, and the social distancing required to prevent contagion will probably make many of these systems too expensive or even unfeasible for the current distribution of land use in our cities.

In this context, the local shops and the sub-centralities with urban services gain relevance and provide greater resilience against this or potential pandemics of the future. The determination to support these small businesses (the corner shop) at this time can be vital to strengthening them through facilitating distribution networks and/or wholesale prices for their own supplies, for example.

3) A third aspect revealed by the pandemic is that streets and public spaces are not just thoroughfares, but spaces for social interaction.

The quarantine experience has made several aspects evident: 1) that some types of work may be done at home 2) that it is possible to carry out various activities virtually (shopping, studying, entertaining), but also 3) that we miss seeing people in the streets, strangers passing by.

Public space has been declared as the most democratic space of all, which we all have the right to use, with minimum rules relating to coexistence but, essentially, without a plan. This has been described as the «virtual community»¹¹, where there is no written function. The «virtual» denomination expresses that it is not strictly speaking a community, since it does not require any interaction between people, but a prelude; yet it has the potential to become one. Its importance lies in co-presence within a space, with the physical possibility of meeting and social interaction.

¹¹ B. Hillier, R. Burdett, J. Peponis and A. Penn, *Creating Life: Or, Does Architecture Determine Anything?*, in «Architecture and Behaviour», vol. 3, n. 3, 1987, pp. 233-250.

The pandemic is giving us the possibility to stop thinking of streets as a mere space to be passed through in order to go from one point to the next, when its major function is for encounters between people, to establish the basis of a rich urban community.

4) A fourth aspect enhanced by the pandemic is the possibility of developing family businesses and local micro businesses.

The traditional conception of «each family a home» has largely been surpassed by reality. Not only do we find multiple types of homes, but also homes which fulfill other functions than the traditionally domestic: workshops, services, micro-enterprises; as well as the post-fordist activities that do not require the physical presence in the workplace. All of these have the potential to generate resources, to make the community self-sustaining, but also to help social cohesion through sociability and association.

There are many experiences in neighbourhoods (from the guilds in the pre-industrial world to the co-working of the XXIst century) that have specialized in certain trades or ways of working, where neighbourhood ties are more related to work than to residence. Although may be hard to visualise in the near future, it is certainly an option worth considering when an economic crisis resulting from the confinement strategies to fight the pandemic is a certainty. It seems that local workplaces, microfirms and collaboration need to be strengthened, adding another dimension to residential units and neighbourhoods: that of becoming a workspace.

5) A fifth aspect is that the problem is not the density, but the lack of proper urban services and equipment and segregation.

It has been said that density is the problem, but the problem it is not the amount of people in a certain area, but the lack of proper services and equipment. The absence of urban planning, weak territorial governance (fragmented into unequal local authorities), a shortage of adequate regulatory instruments, and the neoliberal model of development have produced

highly segregated cities in Chile (particularly the capital, Santiago) with an unequal provision of urban services and equipment. If Chilean cities maintain the current level of segregation and inequity, they will be neither socially, nor economically, nor environmentally sustainable.

The pandemic offers the opportunity to begin reversing this development in favour of one that is geared towards cities which are much more integrated in social, economic, age and cultural terms, with mixed neighbourhoods that house various urban functions and that are heterogeneous from the sociodemographic point of view.

To conclude, I would like to say that if we are today trying to respond to two crises that have attacked us so violently, we cannot forget a third, much larger one, which we have been warned of for a long time, but to which we have not listened, nor have we prepared ourselves to properly solve: the environmental crisis and climate change.

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