

APPROPRIATION OF THE PUBLIC PARK: AGREEMENTS AND DISAGREEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to present some results of the research “Appropriation of the Public Park in Mexicali, Baja California”, consisting in the identification of the use and appropriation of public parks in the city of Mexicali, Baja California, Mexico; stressing the importance of these places in life and memory of their inhabitants, as well as in the construction of new memories of their own and of their families, replicated from generation to generation. For this purpose, an inventory and through the direct observation of the public parks of the recently created subdivisions, in the formerly Ejido Puebla area were carried out, as well as semi-structured interviews with residents and park users. As a result of the above, different forms of social appropriation were found and even conflicts between such forms.

KEYWORDS: Public Park, Appropriators, Appropriation

INTRODUCTION

The urban public park (UPP), is a basic element in the equipment of the cities destined to the recreation, this means, for the leisure, the amusement or entertainment of the urban inhabitants in their spare time. For this reason, the UPP is generally an open public space, accessible, equipped with infrastructure, facilities, services, vegetation and furniture in such a way, it promotes its common or collective use, especially for neighbors to such facility, who can find in its suitable scenery for interaction with others, for coexistence and socialization.

In the daily life of the inhabitants of a growing city, such as Mexicali, Baja California, public parks and their beneficial effect on the environment impact young people as a platform for mechanisms that reduce crime in this age group by means of social actions and processes, such as the space appropriation. However, they are not the only ones favored by the park of our case study. There are a considerable number of elders, who come and who have linked their existence and their memories to such places; thus building a space appropriation process.

The park of our research is located in the city of Mexicali, Baja California, Mexico, that according to the Encuesta intercensal 2015 conducted by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) has 729,503 inhabitants (Planning Committee for State Development [COPLADE], 2017) and has approximately 300 public parks. The resulting proportion is: a public park for every 2,299 inhabitants and 1.23 square meters per person. Also, we can affirm that these figures evidence a problem that concerns everybody, particularly in relation with two aspects: the conservation and creation of these parks, as well as their social function.

This study is focused on the relationship between the creation of public parks and their contribution to the reduction of misdemeanors committed by young people in an area of recent urbanization, approaching the social function of these spaces, where different forms of appropriation are distinguished.

Function of the Public Space

For Hoffmann (quoted in Velázquez, 2001: 17) “the idea of space is a ‘marked space’ or a ‘lived space’ by the social groups that inhabit it and, by particular social practices and relationships, they appropriate it, make it their own and, by doing this it becomes part of their cultural singularity; IE, their identity, that which differentiates them from the ‘others’.” Therefore, “the composition of public space as a result of social relations and its main characteristics comply the aim of generating knowledge of the particular social reality of the city” (Chardon, 2011: 235-236).

On the other hand, “the real function, the most important one, although it may be the most hidden, the one to develop space, is the complex function of forming and dividing, in a new form, the overproduction of society. In this way the park helps also to control daily life better and create new social relations among the inhabitants of the city” (built-in 1982: 168). The social character is denoted by the actions carried out within this space, around it or even beyond it, favoring the production of social relations and interactions.

So, “the public space is an element representing the community, because it is there the foundation of the expression and social identification of diversity. Representation transcends time and space in two ways: by symbolic appropriation of public space, which allows –from the symbolic charge of space-- to transcend local, national and even international conditions, and by symbolic construction, where the public space is expressly designed with the purpose of representing the community and making it visible” (Carrión, 2003: 5). A way that works as an element, to manage the collective.

We understand appropriators as the subjects who own, take over and make their own the public park: an appropriation process is required. It is a socio-spatial process in which the subjects establish an intertwining of relations with the physical space or the living space, characterizing the relationship between theory and reality along with the construction of histories of natives and migrants, young people and elders.

The Social Appropriation of Space

In its most basic meaning, the concept of appropriation refers to the action of “taking over something by someone” (Royal Spanish Academy), i.e., “Taking something for oneself, taking possession of something” when someone else or nobody is the owner. In this sense, the appropriation of space involves a concrete fact, to make of a portion of the terrestrial surface, physically or de facto, when the subjects delimit and take for themselves real property pertaining to others, of everybody or nobody (Restrepo-Gomez and Varela-Cifuentes, 2017). De facto appropriation is common in the public space (for example, the appropriation of streets, federal zones, canals, etc., by street vendors.)

It is worth mentioning that the physical appropriation process of the public space does not emerge suddenly, but is given in a gradual and parallel way to what is called symbolic appropriation.

Symbolic Appropriation

The appropriation of space refers to appropriation as a cultural process related to another process: sociability. In the construction of social life, people recognize as their own places, shared moments in common spaces. At the same time institutions delineate the desired social behaviors in public spaces. These two processes converge there: the first place that of sociability and that of appropriation, creating patterns of symbolic appropriation.

Cultural activities carried out in public spaces such as streets, squares and public parks through symbols, spaces, and social interactions comply with another function; the management of authority; the crossing among heterogeneous subjects in the public space. The encounter and the respectful exchange between different and unknown people are typical situations of the modern urban experience.

Geographical Perspective

So, we observe that the appropriation process is immersed in a "reconceptualization of space, as a product of relationships, a complexity of networks, links, practices, exchanges, both at a very intimate level (such as a home) and globally. Space is not simply the sum of the territories, but a complex of relations (flows and borders, territories and bonds). It implies that 'a place', a territory, cannot be something simple, closed and coherent" (Massey, 2004: 78-79).

This means that the appropriation of open space is part of the globalizing process of the current community, and that the appropriation of the public space is related to the identity processes since part of this process you identify yourself with the other (otherness), with what the other does in the shared space. The common activities identify you with the group as well as with space; then the cultural, symbolic, communitarian appropriation of space, in particular public space, a socio-cultural process and therefore a process related to the processes of sociability, dwelling, and experientiality and of course these processes together give authenticity to it.

The appropriation of space-place in a global sense: "Each place is an open node of relationships, an articulation, a network of flows, influences, exchanges, etc., and that implies something else: identity. This means that the specificity of each place is the result of the different mixture of all relations, practices, exchanges, etc., Which intertwine within this node and is also a product of the development thereof as a result of this entanglement" (Massey, 2004: 79).

Individual appropriation "of those spaces originally consecrated to the collective, which reveal inconsistencies between that which is projected and what is effective, or between the planned and the inhabited place" (Florencia-Girola, 2007: 140-141).

Appropriation of the public space "the appropriate term refers to those members of the community that meet in public spaces, their behavior in public space and their respect to the rules that regulate social interaction" (Florencia-Girola, 2007: 143). This author refers to the practiced place. In this work, we understand this text as the appropriate space, the appropriate space-place.

Conflicting Appropriation happens where individuals or groups take distance from those expected behaviors tending to harmonious coexistence in a public space, according to the interviewed persons. Within the category of uncivil uses and appropriations of space, it is especially due to the negative effects attributed to these occupants. The uncivil uses of space extend to a variety of hostile behaviors, among which we can include throwing garbage through windows and imposing quotas" (Florencia-Girola, 2007: 140, 145).

Other authors focus on "the study of space and spatiality understood as experience, representation, perception, i.e. as non-tangible realities. Manuel Baeza (2000 by Lindón) warns that, social imaginaries are the shared way of representing space and time" (Lindón, 2007: 9).

The process of appropriation that produces the social imaginary, in particular the social appropriation of public space generates social and urban imaginaries at the same time. Hence, the social appropriation of the public space

generates social imaginaries originated by particular groups.

Ex Ejido Puebla Public Park Case Study

Methodological Proposal

The approach to the social appropriation of the public park was carried out in two phases: in the first one, the critical urban area (study area) was selected, taking as a selection criterion two main aspects: the index of crimes committed by young people in the area and the deteriorated condition of the public parks in the area (high index, deteriorated parks).

This was obtained by analyzing information from two main sources:

First, according to the Municipal Institute of Research and Planning (IMIP), in 2010-2011, the city of Mexicali had 286 neighborhood gardens, 14 neighborhood parks, 8 playgrounds and 1 urban park, which, for the purpose of this work, they jointly represent 309 urban public parks distributed throughout the city, of which less than half (46.5%) were in good condition, and the rest (54.4%) was in a regular or bad one.

Second, according to data from the Dirección de Seguridad Pública Municipal (DSSP) (Municipal Public Safety Directorate), it was identified that, in the city of Mexicali, in 2012, 28,576 young people aged 12 to 28 (93% male and 7% female) were arrested for committing some social offense or minor offenses. Of the offenses committed by young people, the most important are: spying on the interiors of homes or vehicles (32.5%), organizing groups or gangs in public places (7.9%), ingesting alcoholic beverages or toxic substances (7.4%), missing consideration or respect for persons, among others that undermine public peace.

Based on the above, the study area located on the southeastern side of the city of Mexicali was chosen. It is a recently expanded area of the urban spot on the formerly Ejido Puebla (whose settlement was trapped by the outgrowth towards this zone) where, since 2003, large housing developments of social interest have been promoted.

On the other hand, the second phase deals with qualitative methodological aspects divided in turn, into two moments: At first, direct observation of the parks was carried out, by means of observational tours in 15 public parks located in the study area, in order to know the dynamics of each park and thus, to choose the parks more crowded mainly by young people and in better physical condition. The state of the parks was recorded and classified in two senses, firstly its basic physical aspects (urban image) at the global level and, secondly, its constructed aspects that promote socialization as well as the different types of users (appropriators).

Secondly, semi-structured interviews were carried out with the young users (appropriators) and adjacent neighbors of two of the parks observed with contrasting characteristics. This means, a new park in an area with high index of social crimes compared to an old park in an area that was previously rural and with a lower crime rate; this is with the idea of identifying the use and appropriation, mainly by young people of the city, as well as their similarities and differences in both parks.

Study Zone

It is a formerly rural village with more than 80 years of age; it has approximately 15,000 inhabitants and is one of the towns with the greatest social backwardness (National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy

[CONEVAL], 2010) of the municipality of Mexicali, which in turn is the border of the area known as Valle de Puebla, a 10-year-old zone, characterized by being inhabited by young couples the majority of whom work in the transformation industry (maquiladoras or factories), besides being migrants (less than 5 years in the city).

Study Subjects

- First: neighbors adjacent to the public park, both sexes between 53 years to 68 years.
- Secondly: young people from the southeast, users of the selected parks, both sexes, between 11 and 32 years of age, because group experiences, values, social circumstances or expectations will terminate the social perception of public space.

The Premise or Assumption

It is possible to find a criminal appropriation derived from juvenile delinquent behavior. It can be considered a "factor generating affectation of the quality of urban life in terms of wasted opportunities of the territory, loss of identity" (González, 2008); in other words, an inhibitor of the adequate appropriation of the public space or, under another view, an institutional —strategy for the creation and promotion of its use. And there is the premise; the appropriation of public spaces by young people to reduce violence in areas where this goal exists as a priority of government programs.

The information provided through these interviews are the compass in the review of the abovementioned premise because the perception of the actions will demonstrate the stimuli and sensations to satisfy the needs of recreation, leisure, culture, sport, recreation, among other things, in their community, whether individual as well as collective. From here a symbolic thought takes place, which causes the collective to appropriate the space.

In the park of the Ex Ejido Puebla, according to its current characteristics, there is a symbolic appropriation process, due to the sense of belonging, urban social identity, place identity, attachment, space and people bonding, collective memory. It goes beyond the physical support of activities and generates identification process, interaction circuits, and urban symbolic space (recently). Public space as the center of social life, public space for people, collective symbolism, identification of individuals with the environment, integration and differentiation of groups (urban culture) and urban patterns, process of building relationships, alterity, conflict-integration relationship. The above was observed during observational tours, photographic memory and interviews, in activities such as:

Recreation, chatting, sitting on the benches alone or accompanied; flirting (young people), talking on the public phone, feast day of children (festivities), family parties (piñatas, barbecues).

- Recreation: children's games, flying kites, playing ball, party child's day (festivities).
- Sports: soccer groups, basketball, fast football, baseball.
- Individual sport, walking, running, cycling, motorcycle riding.
- Commercial activities inside the park and on the sidewalk.
- Cultural activities: playing the guitar, dancing.
- Maintenance activities: watering can, gardening (planting a tree), cleaning of sports grounds.

- Political activities: partisan meetings.
- Citizen participation activities: neighbor committees.
- Urban mobility activities (bus stop).
- Leisure activities: reading.
- So it is at the same time an inclusive public space and an exclusive public space. A space of cordiality or a space of conflict?
- The Ejido Puebla Park preserves the characteristics of the central parks despite the changes undergone in recent years.

The Park It's History

At first

Since I was born I was already here; not as it is now, but yes. In 1970, there was still no kiosk, no sidewalks, nor anything like that in 1978, 1979 In that time the sidewalks and kiosk appeared When the sidewalks appeared the kiosk came along with them It must have been 1980, a long time ago And the closed street must have started in 2000, when they began to close around for events like when they used to organize dancing parties before

Well, I remember, there was nothing left but the square... After that, they constructed the sidewalks that happened in year 78 or 80, the sidewalks, the kiosk. Then they started to plant more trees the esplanade was closed for events, basketball courts, games it has been improving a lot. The benches were made after the sidewalks. The benches must have appeared in 2000

Mmm, since I remember, since I was born the bench, the trees. I was about 15 years old. There was the esplanade, the church, everything and it all was the same, even the field. They did the courtyard until after I was married when they did it, the children's games.

The park has changed a lot, they have just planted the trees, because it had nothing and the kiosk was smaller and later they made it bigger then they put the benches and the lamps. The courts were smaller, and then they made them bigger. They put the fence, the lamps about 20 or 15 years ago. Yes, they put new trees, because the salty pine that is there it was already there since I remember, since I was little; it has more than 50 years there, put a wall around in there laid the sidewalks about 20 years ago or less

We planted everything, the grass they were finishing the kiosk, they were finishing the court too, and all that was new. Now they put those big lamps, they are about six years old. The benches are about nine years old; now that they sold the lots of land, all the parceleros (small land owners). donated them one out of two.

Well, almost the same, they have not done anything. There were the swings and kiosks they have done very little, it is very little what they have done. They have not been concerned for so many years, the children's games are not so old, they must be about 10 years old, I think. The kiosk is older, but it is even worse. The were some before, about 20 years ago, I believe, they were having dances, and after then, no more dances ("M" is actually referred to the park). Yes, when I was a kid, I used to go to the dancing parties.

"More games, there is grass, but before there was no grass, just the benches the kiosk just changed the color, the bathrooms were there too some 7 years ago the colors

The fast football field was made of soil, and now its floor, and the wood was all destroyed and now it's built again. The basketball court was there, but it was all destroyed, too. The fence was in good state, very well, and the basketball court was also completely destroyed

My park... —the Appropriation

When they are on vacation, yes, because there is no one like that, the boys at night are playing there, we sit on the pews and they are playing there on the swings

Because I like it, because it is inside all this leafy trees, and the person who is here keeps it clean, and because it is quieter than other parks, it is calmer. The only thing is that if it is open outdoors anybody can come inside. More than anything, the child (grandchild) uses more the seesaw (his son commented: and the swing that is a tire, that turns around) also the park I could occupy some palapitas (a kind of small huts) there are more places to stay in.

That it is a big place. I think it is beautiful because, most parks are no like this one, with trees, most are just like one of bear soil, as well as those in Valle de Puebla, some so ugly, and others that I like, some that are around my house. There, in the Valley of Puebla, there are two, one in Villas del Roble, is in the entrance, and another one a little farther, right there Well yes, this is also big and it also has courts, and also has a lot of grass.

I was told that many people come here for a hair-cut. In fact we are three hairdresser stylists here and we cut hair and yes, we can satisfy the demand, sometimes the three of us are full time busy. There is work for the three of us.

It's my favorite park, this one

I could say that this is my favorite one, because it is the one where I come to play more often. Yes, it's the one where I play more

RESULTS

- The following types of appropriation are distinguished according to their characteristics:
- Youth appropriation related to sports and recreational activities.
- Male appropriation in the neighborhood (older adults).
- Commercial appropriation within and in its environment (street market).

Conflict between Forms of Appropriation

In the Ex Ejido Puebla park, which has been in existence for over fifty years, the commercial activity (outdoors market) has been intensified in the last ten years, with a constant and diverse influx of its appropriators and activities, such as: sports, recreation and leisure activities. And obviously, buying and selling products, among others.

DISCUSSIONS

In the use and appropriation of the public park as well as other public spaces, it is almost impossible to limit or delimit only those actions aimed at fulfilling their social function; nevertheless, most appropriations were found positive for the studied urban public park (UPP), "therefore, from the origin of the public space and of the legal elements that characterize it, the concept can be defined as those areas or zones that motivate a collective appropriation by the general interest surrounding its access, maintenance and enjoyment" (Restrepo Gómez and Varela Cifuentes, 2017: 28).

The different forms and stages of the process of spatial appropriation of UPPs converge, due in first instance to the time of construction, the characteristics of the population and the geographical location of the new area (Fraccionamiento Valle de Puebla), in contrast to the old zone (Ex Ejido Puebla); as well as the process of urbanization in both zones, since the studied UPPs are located in a peripheral urban area that were previously part of the Mexicali Valley; i.e., the zoning suffered a transformation from rural to an urban one, mainly focused on the social function of the public park and its long-term consequences.

The public park is a primordial space in the cities that encourages the urban dynamics in a positive way while sparing free time, and in this particular case, despite the extreme climate of the city, its transformation and the incidence of crimes, parks are in good use and comply with the socializing function and also beautify the city. Functions which should be pursued as objectives when building a UPP; it was found that UPP is a factor that helps to reduce juvenile delinquency by focusing young people on the defense of the neighborhood, as with gangs, but with positive ones in this case.

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