

The politics of the makeshift city: materiality, symbolic boundaries, and social relations in squatter settlements in Latin America¹

Interview with María José Álvarez Rivadulla, Universidad de los Andes, Colombia

Petr Vašát

Petr Vašát (PV): Maria, first of all, thank you for meeting with me. For our interview, I have prepared questions spanning from informal urbanism to building techniques to politics. Some of these questions are more related to research, while some are more about urban development. However, let's start with your beginnings. I have discovered that you started to study informal urbanism in Montevideo in the 90s, 1997 to be exact, which is a pretty long time ago. So, how did it all begin? Why did you start studying informal urbanism?

María José Álvarez Rivadulla (MJAR): I was studying Social Work at the time, and we had to conduct fieldwork in a group of squatter settlements that had just been formed and which were just beginning to emerge. We started in three neighborhoods. I was taking classes both in Social work and Sociology at the time and couldn't make up my mind between the two. I liked Social Work more because we did much more fieldwork. So I started going to these neighborhoods and it impressed me that people said, "Oh, we can call the Mayor." They also had jottings in notebooks from neighborhood associations' meetings, where they had everyone's cell phone listed, even politicians', and I wondered how it was possible that they had direct contact to politicians. It surprised me at the time and then I realized how important it is. During that fieldwork, the first thing we did was map the neighborhood history of these three different squatter settlements. One was more planned, more on the left of the political spectrum organized by a group of young anarchists and other politically engaged individuals. The other two had ties to the other two political parties in Uruguay. I did my undergraduate thesis on these settlements, but I was more focused on their poverty, not on their politics. Then I moved to Pittsburgh for my PhD and nobody in Sociology at the time was working on Latin America or urban issues.

PV: Really? That surprises me...

MJAR: But there was an amazing political sociologist, John Markoff, who became my advisor. With John and reading a lot about social movements, I started to examine

¹ The term *makeshift city* is borrowed from Alexander Vasuvedan (2015, p. 347) for whom it "places particular emphasis on the dense matrix of practices that are central to how squatted spaces and communities are pieced together, secured and lived."



more these contacts between politicians and squatters and their relationships with forms of collective action in squatter settlements.²

PV: *And these are also the issues you deal with in your recently published book, *Squatters and the Politics of Marginality in Uruguay*.³ Basically, if you could frame in a few sentences what changed since then because I know — and I am skipping around a little bit now — in your book you offer a multilayered depiction of neighborhood change, describing how some kids got into drugs, guns, etcetera. So basically, what has changed since the time when you initially started your research?*

MJAR: Deindustrialization had a pervasive impact on the younger generations living in squatter settlements and other poor areas.

PV: *Would you know the amount of foreign direct investment (FDI) coming into the country and possibly the amount of sector money? It is interesting because, recently, I studied the nature and extent of land grabbing in Latin America and it seems that it is a huge and complex problem nowadays, especially in Brazil and Uruguay.*

MJAR: I am not an expert but there has been a lot of foreign investment in rural and urban land since the 1980s and 90s when the economy opened up. A good example is *Punta del Este*, the luxury seaside resort in which basically few Uruguayans can actually spend their vacations. There is even a Trump Tower being built. There is an article by Daniel Renfrew,⁴ an anthropologist, on this and he argues that *Punta del Este* is like a gated town. It is also a ghost town during the winter. Rural land, in turn, is today much more concentrated and owned by foreigners who invest in Uruguay and have soy fields, trees for cellulose and other forms of agroindustries, etc.

PV: *So, what changed in neighborhoods since democratization and economic globalization?*

MJAR: The most important change has been the mushrooming of squatter settlements. The city did not experience population growth, which is the main cause of squatter settlement formation elsewhere. Uruguay is 90% urban since the 1960s and most of its urban population concentrates in Montevideo, the capital city. With an early demographic transition, the average fertility rate is 1.6 children per woman, but of course this varies across socioeconomic levels and areas. So, without population growth, you have a rise of squatter settlements in the city. Its inhabitants used to live in the formal city. They were expelled from the city because they could not pay rent, they couldn't support their families, and they had no credit to buy a new house in the city. The peak in the number of new squatter settlements was in the late 80s and 90s, but there are also some old ones in the city. The first one I found was from 1947.

2 John Markoff is a political sociologist (<http://www.sociology.pitt.edu/person/john-markoff-phd>). He writes comparatively about the role of social movements and the history of revolutions and democracy.

3 Álvarez-Rivadulla, M. J. 2017. *Squatters and the politics of marginality in Uruguay*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

4 Renfrew, D. 2004. *Punta del este as global city? Competing visions of Uruguayan nationhood in a geography of exclusion*. *City & Society*, 16(2): 11–33.



While the older ones are more by accretion, the new ones tend to be more planned. Some of their leaders had experiences in formal work, unions, political parties, the cooperative housing movement and they transferred that organizational knowledge to urban squatting. The reasons behind the peak are economical and also political, given that the electoral competition for the votes of the urban poor increased in the city around that time. I do not see the same level of organization now. On the contrary what I see today is lack of opportunities, especially for the youth growing up in those squatter settlements. There are no quality jobs and there are few educational opportunities since students are expelled from secondary education. The drug dealing market is tempting.

PV: Mike Davis in his famous book, Planet of Slums (2006), describes slums as a result of the transformation of the global economy associated with the neoliberal reforms that took place across the globe at the turn of the 80s and 90s. According to Davis, these changes polarized societies and produced social inequalities. Slums, as the extreme materialization of social inequalities, are according to these terms a reflection of economic inequalities. In your book, you were critical of this narrative. However, isn't what you just said actually an indicator that in the 90s neoliberalism had a huge impact on especially these types of neighborhoods?

MJAR: Yes, this is partially true. Fragmentation is increasing. Social integration is decreasing. Yet, it is also true that there has been a significant increase in the number of people in the middle-income bracket for the last fifteen years, at least until the current recessive and pandemic situation. Although I find Mike Davis' book interesting food for thought, I think it doesn't apply completely to what happened in Latin America in recent years. For example, I would say that THE urban phenomenon in Latin America in recent years has not been the rise in squatter settlements (that in general happened before) but the rise in privatized social housing.⁵ Simply put, I am not convinced by Davis' narrative of polarization as valid for all places.

PV: I see. Speaking of class, you have written an interesting paper comparing classes in Uruguay and Colombia. Could you elaborate a little more on the differences? I have noticed that to be part of the middle class in Colombia education is very important, specifically getting an education from private universities.

*MJAR: And private schools as well. Well, Uruguay is much more egalitarian than Colombia. Colombia currently is one of the most unequal countries in the world. So, to understand how this plays out for everyday people, the first difference is that in Uruguay you have a language of class — when you ask about the school you went to or the neighborhood in which you live, people say “a middle class one”, without being asked about it. In Colombia, people avoid talking about class; they speak about *strata*, not about classes. It is very interesting because the *strata* language is a product of public*

⁵ The term “social housing” in Latin America has a slightly different meaning than in the Euro-American context. Usually, social housing is a type of housing that is subsidized by governments; however, in Latin America, it is primarily for purchase as opposed to living in it merely as a tenant. As a result, the emergent middle classes live in social housing because they are the ones who have enough money to pay for it.



policy. *Strata* began as part of a progressive policy measure to classify cities into six socioeconomic groups, so that people in *strata* four, five, and six would pay more for public services subsidizing the other *strata*. But people now say, for example, “I live in *strata* two, but I am from *strata* three,” and so they use it as a language of class. If you ask them “What class do you think you belong to?”, people tell you “well *strata* two or three.” It is very interesting how a policy became part of people’s everyday language and thoughts.

PV: Another one of your papers was about inequalities that are being played out at an elite university.⁶ You described very nicely in the introductory vignette one girl, from the lower classes or strata, that got into this elite university and who went to her classmates’ parties, where she noticed various symbolic markers of her classmates from the upper classes; for example, people from the north of the city (upper classes) use more familiar names or always have nice, clean hair. Can you elaborate on this more? From my own experience in Colombia, I could list several attributes through which I am typically able to recognize the different classes. So, could you mention more about this argument on symbolic boundaries?

*MJAR: As you know I have worked a lot on urban sociology, including residential segregation. We know that segregation is bad for people because of the neighborhood effects I described before for the kids growing up in squatter settlements in Montevideo. Yet, there is a lot we still don’t know about the mechanisms that make the neighborhood matter. Why and in what conditions social mixing works is still an empirical question. We don’t know what the effects are of, say, moving a poor person from a poor neighborhood to a mixed neighborhood. It seems to have worked in different cities, according to the *Moving to Opportunity* project for instance, but we know little about this mixing and how it affects social interactions. Simply placing a poor person in a neighborhood that is better off, does not mean that this person will have friends or even talk to people that are better off. This fellowship program that I am studying, *Ser Pilo Paga*, opened the door to the best universities in the country for poor students, if they excelled at their high school leaving state exam. For this, they had to be outstanding, given that results in that exam are strongly correlated to social class reflecting deep educational inequalities. Many entered elite private universities, like the one in my study. Hence, the program is a natural experiment to observe social interactions across classes in a mixed context. The questions are similar to the urban ones, but in an educational rather than a neighborhood context. The program gave condonable loans to students for four consecutive years.*

PV: Four years. And it is also widely criticized, is that right?

MJAR: It has faced an immense amount of criticism. In such an unequal country as Colombia, public universities and citizens criticized that most of this public money was ending in private institutions. The program is over now, in part for this criticism and in part for a lack of funding.

⁶ Álvarez-Rivadulla, M. J. 2019. ¿“Los becados con los becados y los ricos con los ricos”? Interacciones entre clases sociales distintas en una universidad de elite. *Desacatos* 59: 50–67.

PV: So, how does the program actually work? Because I have met some people from public universities and they were kind of skeptical about the program, just as you at some points in your article imply certain skepticism.

MJAR: Well, it depends on what aspects of the program you look at and what you want to find. If you ask me about the system of higher education, this is just a little part, it is not really a policy but a program. If I was a minister of education, I would devote money to public education. I studied at a public university and I believe that it guarantees much more integration than private universities. Yet, the majority of these kids are not able to enter public universities for different reasons. To enter the best public university, for instance, it is not merely enough to pass your secondary education exam with an excellent score, but you also have to pass another exam, which is a barrier for many people because you have to pay for it and pass it. It is not a lot of money for someone from the middle class, but it definitely is for someone who is poor. You have to come to Bogota to take the exam and then, if you get in, you have to have money to be able to move to Bogota, regardless of the fact that your tuition is covered or very low. You still have to be able to afford life in the city, so most of these kids do not end up taking part in (at least high quality) higher public education. So, public education here also has barriers and we keep losing talent, losing human capital because a good part of these kids are not going to these schools either. So, I would devote money to public education but would create special programs to include these students in public education. I am not an education expert but perhaps private universities can also help in increasing access to high quality education. What I see today in Colombia is a multitude of private low quality institutions full of students that cannot afford other private universities or enter public ones. This has to change. Besides, as I said before, there are huge inequalities of origin by family background, region and primary and secondary education. Those are not covered by the program but they need to be addressed as well. .

So, in short, it depends on what aspects of the issue you look at. If you look at this program as a part of the educational system, it is just a small part. If you look at it from the perspective of the students, then you can see how it can change their lives completely. I mean you are giving them a unique opportunity to truly thrive in their studies. It is just now that the first cohort of students is graduating. It's truly fascinating. We need to study how they do in their adult life. This does not mean that social mobility is easy. I am also working on the hidden injuries of class as well as on the hidden barriers for upward social mobility.

PV: To come back to informal urbanism, there is a trend in Latin America, but also other countries as well, that slums, invasiones, are getting more public attention and are facing an influx of tourism and are being "beautified." We can see many technological but also artistic and design interventions in these places. In Europe and the USA, urban poverty was the subject of social welfare in the past. However, since the 90s, cities in the USA have been facing welfare cuts. Europe is the same story. I do not think the same holds true for Colombia or Latin America. However, many of these interventions today are not funded by the state but rather by the private sector. So, what do you think about this distinction — intervening through an urban-material nexus and through social welfare tools? Are we witnessing a new





policy on how to tackle urban poverty? If so, how does an intervention that is “design-based” and tourist-oriented actually work?

MJAR: Well, there is certainly something new to this “beautification” trend spreading in Rio, Medellín, and many other cities. The model is travelling. There is a great book called *Touring Poverty* in which the Brazilian scholar Bianca Freire-Medeiros compares Rio and Johannesburg.⁷ There is definitely something to it. Before, urban authorities wanted to erase poverty from cities rather than doing something to address it or address it but relocate it making it invisible. It seems tourism has been transforming this, transforming urban poverty into a cultural thing that you can sell, although this can be interpreted in many ways. When I went to Soacha with Diana Bocarejo to do fieldwork, on the one hand people were like “we do want to have a cable car here,” yet, on the other hand, there were so many other urgent things to do, for example, they did not have potable water in the houses.⁸ They thought if someone brought a cable car in, it would make them visible. Many people living in these settlements are invisible and ignored. Based on this, the expectation of having tourists or people coming in was something they recognized as positive. In their minds, this was the experience of Medellín.

These interventions have many different readings and are full of contradictions. In Rio and in Medellín, these interventions were connected to pacification, with state violence and human rights violations.

Now, I don’t see these interventions as a substitute to the welfare state. In Colombia, I think they are not substituting anything because the welfare state for the excluded populations living in the intervened *comunas* of Medellín was never strong to begin with. It is simply state intervention in the area and, of course, people welcome it because it is the state coming in, making them visible. In countries that have stronger welfare programs, like Uruguay for instance, these interventions are more complementary to welfare, but there are fantasies that these urban policies will make miracles happen. However, by merely building a park in a neighborhood that lacks employment opportunities and other social policies, miracles will not simply happen. Space is not enough.

PV: Sometimes, as a foreigner from a totally different cultural background, it is difficult for me to tell when a place is safe or not. For example, I was at a famous market close to Macarena once. The neighborhood seemed fine, but I was told not to walk from the main road because it is supposed to be even more dangerous than common “no go” areas in the city. Could you comment on this visual aspect of neighborhoods?

MJAR: When you asked what changed in the neighborhoods I studied, I did not mention one crucial aspect and that is drugs. Drug dealing in these squatter neighborhoods in Montevideo were not evident when I started, yet now it is very common and it has changed everything in the neighborhood. It means, when visiting these neigh-

7 Freire-Medeiros, Bianca. 2013. *Touring Poverty*. London & New York: Routledge.

8 Álvarez-Rivadulla, María José, & Bocarejo, Diana. 2014. Beautifying the slum: cable car fetishism in Cazucá, Colombia. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 38(6): 2025–2041.



borhoods, you always have to go with a local guide. Here in Colombia, I always tell my students who go to certain neighborhoods to do fieldwork to call me when they get there and when they are on their way back. It is necessary to be cautious, but normally there are good people who can take you in. However, it is difficult to tell what is safe, as these markers are not visual; rather it is about symbolic boundaries and this was even the case in 1997, when I started my own research. Drug dealing, for instance, is a very unique issue, and if you cross a line, you might get yourself into trouble. So, yes, there are hidden rules which are not visual; they are quite internalized, so you cannot see them or their limits, and you cannot see it even here [pointing to a neighborhood by the university]. There was a huge police action over there this morning. They took away six people, supposedly drug dealers. They were selling to students from Los Andes and Rosario, according to the news.⁹ The urban is often a gradient, and there is no sharp distinction between a safe space and a non-safe space. Plus, different people feel safe in different spaces. This is funny. When you ask people in *Cazucá*, a place *bogotanos* fear, what they fear, they tell you they fear downtown.

PV: Speaking of socio-material dynamics, in your book you distinguished between different types of squatting. One is more symmetrical and the other involves more atypical constructions and disposable materials. Do they represent the same building practice, albeit with two different types of materials, or are they rather two different practices related to divergent histories and makeshift politics?

MJAR: Well, one type is planned and the other one occurs by accretion. Planned squatters are more politically active and the design of the neighborhood is made to be integrated into the city. A group seizes a plot one day and they plan the neighborhood, including the streets and the blocks. They claim to be part of the city, and they want to be official, legal. They want to have land titles and become owners. They think of themselves not as poor but as working class and they want to be recognized as such, so they create spatial and social boundaries with people that live in the neighborhoods created by accretion. Accretion in the form of invasions is an outcome of families arriving over years. These squatter settlements tend to be inhabited by even more destitute populations. It is simply a last resort type of housing.

PV: Scholars from a material studies background, for example Victor Buchli, have been pointing out that the social organization of material forms, from small things in the home to larger political-economic materiality, have an impact on social relations.¹⁰ Is there any difference in social relations based on the materiality of squatter settlements?

MJAR: Accretion-based occupations are less organized in terms of neighborhood associations. Planned land invasions often have neighborhood associations. They were also prouder of their neighborhood and how much they had achieved. This was the main difference I found between the two different types. There was a moment in history, however, in which some accretion invasions mobilized across settlements, towards the end of the Uruguayan dictatorship. In particular, a very progressive priest

⁹ Universidad del Rosario.

¹⁰ Buchli, Victor. 2013. *An anthropology of architecture*. London: Bloomsbury.



went to live in these very poor neighborhoods and he helped build a sense of dignity and collectiveness that led them to a huge mobilization in reaction to displacement. This was the time of liberation theology and Catholic Church's great involvement with the poor. He, and other priests, together with activists and professionals working in NGOs acted as brokers in squatter's mobilization to link them with resources. This particular priest contacted the poor communities with another church community from a richer neighborhood and they donated money, so the squatters could buy the land and then build houses. It is not easy to create this kind of organization and reach these goals without a broker.

PV: In Czechia, we have this specific culture called kutilství involving a number of DIY activities very important to Czech identity. Do people living in comunas have something like that, any particular cultural activities, such as repairing homes, making furniture, etc.? And is there any difference in terms of construction techniques? Do they use any expert knowledge or is it more DIY-based?

MJAR: This varies country by country, but there is no particular activity in general. Squatters work in what they can, often in the informal economy. Many women work as domestic workers, many men in construction. But there are also formal workers in low paid occupations from policemen to sellers. There are also small businesses both in people's homes and outside, in the street in the neighborhood or outside.

Construction materials vary a lot across cities but they also vary in the same city. In Montevideo, while planned invasions tend to have brick made houses, accretion invasions tend to be made of disposable more precarious materials. Squatter settlements in general are self-constructed. In Uruguay, it is common that for the most difficult things, for instance putting a roof on, you need an expert but often people in the neighborhood work in construction. These people know how to build. They normally do roofing on Sundays because you have to do it in one day and a lot of people cooperate on it, so they do it in this way like an organized group of self-help. The owner often offers food, a barbecue for instance, for those that helped. It is a male thing. Speaking of cultural activities, house building is an ongoing project. One year, you have only one room, the next year you have two, and then later you build a second floor and gradually the house becomes nicer. In some of the houses I have visited over the years, there is something new every time. People are also very proud of their houses because it is the only thing they have that "belongs" to them, so it is very important as all of this building is their main activity. In accretion invasions, there is actually an activity that identifies them — scavenging — even if not everybody does it.

PV: I see, so it seems to have more of a coping dimension to it. However, what about free time? Do they have any hobbies?

MJAR: Yes, definitely. Yes, I mean you see people playing soccer, you see people hanging around, drinking with their friends and chatting, although there is a lot of boredom as well and not so much to do in these neighborhoods. I can recall an image of myself one Saturday afternoon in the middle of one of these neighborhoods in Montevideo. I was sitting there waiting for something to happen and it got so boring. There was no store I could go to, to buy an apple or whatever, nobody to chat with; it

was an empty public space and many of these neighborhoods are like that — they are very boring places. In Colombia my experience is different. There is always a neighborhood bakery you can enter and have a beer, an *empanada* or a coffee.

PV: That's very interesting. I have one last question for you. I read your paper on clientelism and it reminded me of the situation related to the post-socialist context. There is an asymmetrical difference in the conceptualization of clientelism. To put it briefly, when you search for a job in the US or Western countries and are networking amongst connections, scholars conceptualize it as using "weak ties"; yet, if you search for a job in this way, for instance, in the Czech Republic or in other post-socialist countries, scholars tend to conceptualize it as clientelism. It is basically the same thing, but there is asymmetry in terms of knowledge production. The latter evokes a sort of shortage or catching up to Western societies, as one uses connections in some substandard or old-fashioned way to find a job.

MJAR: In many of the neighborhoods I did research on in Montevideo there were ties to different political parties. It is not necessarily clientelism because in the Uruguayan political system it is not that easy to monitor who voted for whom. Yet, there is definitely an exchange of favors for possible political support. Squatters use political networks as part of their survival strategies to get goods and services for their neighborhoods, such as road building. In some other contexts, exchanges are more personalized, like money for votes. People tend to see clientelism as something bad, but I see it as a survival strategy like any other. If you think about it, the rich also try to influence politicians and have links to them. And yet, what they do is called lobbying, not clientelism. Networks are important everywhere and poor people have used them to survive — they use familial, friendship, and political networks.

PV: Maria, thank you, everything that you have mentioned today is very interesting and inspiring. Thank you very much for the interview and your time as well.

