

URBAN SOLUTIONS

A) Changing social landscapes in medium-sized cities

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Several projects are included in this research line. Given that one of the current tasks in Latin American studies is to understand the role of cities in global flows of people, money and ideas, experiences from places that are normally off the intellectual map can deepen our insight into the array of impacts made by globalisation. For that reason, one specific project of the research line explores socio-spatial transformations in non-metropolitan cities. Medium-sized cities are often mentioned as locales that hold out a promise for sustainable urban development. Their urban growth, however, may threaten the promise of coherent urban development in non-metropolitan urban areas. As is known, rapid unplanned urbanization reduces the chances for sustainable development because of environmental hazards, land speculation and new forms of social segregation. The relevance for understanding these processes outside metropolitan areas has been widely acknowledged by international organizations that promote sustainable forms of urban development (e.g. in various programmes of UNDP, UNESCO and IDB). Therefore, urban transformations in medium-sized Latin American cities need to be studied by exploring how different actors contribute to changing cityscapes and, vice versa, how changing cityscapes influence the urban society.

As said, the local actors of this research project of the research line are inhabitants of urban peripheries or peri-urban neighbourhoods and the activity under scope for microanalysis is individual house building, based on a previous research-find that designing, building and dwelling are inextricably intertwined and ongoing as a process. Peripherization or peri-urbanization not only refer to geographical phenomena such as urban expansion or reclassification of rural settlements, but also to increasing social fragmentation that is caused by a juxtaposition of, for example, informal settlements and gated condominiums for a new middle class. This occurs in every type of city, albeit under different forces. Arguably, one of the forces that seem to push the transformation of provincial peripheral areas into urban-like settlements is the investment of remittances from transnational migration in land and housing. Theoretically, this implies the need for microanalysis that uses local dwellings as embodiments of global migration and capital flows. In various cases, areas with high levels of transnational migration that surround relatively stable growing cities have encountered rapid and uncontrolled physical transformations. Migrant families use remittances to build three- or four-story buildings, and developers buy plots to develop turnkey houses or condominiums to attract a new middle class. Such processes have been noted for example in the suburban areas of Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, and Cuenca, Ecuador, both of which have high numbers of transnational migration and incoming remittances. Physical urban transformation signals and influences larger social and cultural changes. The direction of change, however, remains unclear. While the increase in urban-looking houses in the suburbs might point to social mobility of formerly marginal groups, it can also indicate unsustainable forms of urbanization for the city and its surroundings as a whole. Within the discussed theoretical context of the “everyday” as a site of individual creativity, opportunity and resistance, this research explores both individual possibilities and collective

risks and opportunities of peri-urban transformation. Sub-questions address the impact of remittances on the construction and real estate market; socio-spatial divides; and the effects of spatial policies.