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Usubillaga, Juan

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Article

Change by Activism: Insurgency, Autonomy, and Political Activism in Potosí-Jerusalén, Bogotá, Colombia

Juan Usubillaga

Welsh School of Architecture, Cardiff University, UK; usubillaganarvaezj1@cardiff.ac.uk

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Abstract

Cities today face a context in which traditional politics and policies struggle to cope with increasing urbanisation rates and growing inequalities. Meanwhile, social movements and political activists are rising up and inhabiting urban spaces as sites of contestation. However, through their practices, urban activists do more than just occupy spaces; they are fundamental drivers of urban transformation as they constantly face—and contest—spatial manifestations of power. This article aims to contribute to ongoing discussions on the role of activism in the field of urban design, by engaging with two concepts coming from the Global South: *insurgency* and *autonomy*. Through a historical account of the building of the Potosí-Jerusalén neighbourhood in Bogotá in the 1980s, it illustrates how both concepts can provide new insight into urban change by activism. On the one hand, the concept of insurgency helps unpack a mode of bottom-up action that inaugurates political spaces of contestation with the state; autonomy, on the other hand, helps reveal the complex nature of political action and the visions of urban transformation it entails. Although they were developed at the margins of conventional design theory and practice, both concepts are instrumental in advancing our understanding of how cities are shaped by activist practices. Thus, this article is part of a broader effort to (re)locate political activism in discussions about urban transformation, and rethink activism as a form of urban design practice.

Keywords

autonomy; Bogotá; insurgency; political activism; urban design; urban transformation

Issue

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1. Introduction

The formal sector in cities across the world has struggled to respond to needs and crises in urban populations. According to UN-Habitat (2020), we face a trend of rapidly increasing urbanisation in which over 56% of the world’s population today lives in cities (81% in Latin America), and income inequalities for two-thirds of the world’s urban population have increased since 1980. In Latin America, for example, two in every three families in need of affordable housing are unable to access the formal market, one tailored to middle and upper social classes (Escallón, 2012, for example, details the Colombian case).

Questioning the effectiveness of the formal sector implies interrogating dominant narratives of urban

change and how they overestimate the role and power of institutional actors in the private and public sectors. Underpinning these narratives are conceptualisations of urban design as a profession (for examples of critiques see Bentley, 1998; Rowley, 1994) in which designers work for clients and employers who are ultimately the ones with the power to shape cities (Inam, 2014). On the one hand, some narratives favour change by private investment and assign to the state the role of enhancing market competition (Weaver, 2016). Profit-led development, however, has exacerbated existing inequalities and brought little benefit to the underprivileged (Weaver, 2016). The second set of narratives favours investment from the state and departs from the assumption that only the state can deliver projects that truly benefit the underprivileged. State-led development, however, is

not always successful in doing this and faces challenges related to unstable partnerships between different levels of government (Gao & Ryan, 2021), and can even be instrumental in triggering processes of gentrification, for example (Lees, 2014).

However, these narratives do not exhaust the multiple forces acting on urban change. An emerging counter-narrative departs from extensive and recent literature on urban informality (see, e.g., Bhan, 2019; Inam, 2016; Roy, 2005) and an understanding of change as driven by ordinary citizens in their everyday life. The informal sector is arguably the most powerful force driving urban change since it operates using resources and engaging with formal actors strategically, in a way that is complex and contingent to context (Bhan, 2019; Caldeira, 2016). It is estimated that over 20% of the urban population of Latin America lives in informal settlements (UN-Habitat, 2020), and even in more regulated contexts in the Global North, informal practices have shaped and continue to shape how cities change (Pruijt, 2013; Vasudevan, 2014).

Urban informality as a mode of practice, however, can often be linked to wider political processes and political activism (see, e.g., Miraftab & Wills, 2005). As Caldeira (2016) argues, the work of social movements and grassroots organisations in processes of peripheral urbanisation creates complex and changing political relationships, instrumental in the creation of new citizenships. Furthermore, authors like Banks et al. (2019) highlight how recent debates on urban informality have begun to address notions of agency and the political implications of seeing urban informality as a response to adverse environments. Facing a private sector motivated by profit and a public sector lacking the capacity to address pressing urban needs, communities around the world have built homes, services, and even infrastructure through direct action. By doing so, they have actively opened debates about what is acceptable/unacceptable, legitimate/illegitimate, and legal/illegal (Inam, 2016).

Activist practices, then, are key drivers of urban transformation as they cut across spatial and non-spatial aspects of how the city changes. I argue that they can be understood as a form of urban design practice and doing so allows to challenge some of the dominant narratives of urban change mentioned previously; an understanding aligned with views of urban design that are less outcome-focused (Carmona, 2014) and consider it as a non-professional field (Bentley, 1998). This article aims to contribute to such views by engaging with two concepts developed at the margins of conventional design theory and practice in the Global South: *insurgency* and *autonomy*.

The insight provided by these two concepts is illustrated through the case of Potosí-Jerusalén, an informal neighbourhood in the peripheries of Bogotá, Colombia. Built by families unable to access affordable housing in a context of violence and displacement, this neighbourhood exemplifies how activism can be a driver of urban transformation and trigger changes across scales.

In 1983, a group of radical educators moved into the area and became part of the local community to mobilise people to obtain services and infrastructure. Although most of their activities focused on addressing local needs, their insurgent modes of political engagement with the state and other actors extended beyond the area and were instrumental in defining an autonomous form of urban design practice that brought significant changes to the wider district and the city.

This case study is part of a larger research project investigating political activism as a form of urban design practice in Bogotá and Berlin during the 1980s and 1990s. The research explores how activist practices were built through the deployment of tactics and strategies, how they triggered processes of urban transformation at different scales, and how they were conceived in relation to visions of material and immaterial change. The following sections will focus on Potosí-Jerusalén by drawing on research conducted between September 2020 and March 2021. During this period, I reviewed archival data accessible online, including activist publications and articles from *El Tiempo* newspaper in Bogotá, and conducted online semi-structured interviews with two key activists in the neighbourhood. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour. While archival and secondary data allowed me to reconstruct the events that took place in Potosí from 1982 onwards, the testimonies of activists helped me explore in more detail the rationale and objectives driving their political action.

The article will first give an overview of recent research on activist urban design, before introducing the concepts of *insurgency* and *autonomy* to suggest that theory coming from the Global South is needed in today's context to challenge mainstream narratives of urban change. These concepts will be illustrated through the historical account of the building of Potosí-Jerusalén in Bogotá. Lessons from this case will be drawn to argue how *insurgency* and *autonomy* can shed new light on the way we understand activism as a driver of urban transformation (or an urban design practice), and how Potosí is not an isolated example but part of a larger narrative of urban change based on informal practices that tend to be marginalised by those in power.

2. Activism in Cities and Theorising From the South

2.1. Political Activism and the Political

A starting point to conceptualise political activism in cities is to consider it as a form of participation in political processes. Political scientists such as Norris in the United States (Norris, 2002, 2003, 2005) have written extensively about political activism in relation to existing political institutions and the workings of the state. For her, political engagement happens either through official channels (e.g., facilitated by labour unions, churches, or electoral institutions) or through protest politics or new social movements which bypass

them (Norris, 2003). She acknowledges, however, that modern tactics tend to mix elements from both sides and therefore cannot be categorically labelled as one or the other (Norris, 2002).

In the wider literature on political theory, there are other views that distinguish between two forms of political life: politics (or Police) and the Political (or Spaces of Politics), where the latter encompasses inaugural and disruptive forms of contestation and action (Barnett, 2017). Political theorists and philosophers, such as Arendt (1958), Laclau and Mouffe (1985), or Rancière (1991, 2009) claim that it is action in the realm of the Political which opens spaces of appearance (Arendt, 1958), antagonism (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), or contestation (Rancière, 2009; see also Dikeç, 2012). For Rancière, for example, the entirety of societal structures is represented in what he calls the *Police*, which assigns specific roles to actors based on an assumption of inequality and defines channels through which they can act (Rancière, 1991, 2009). *Spaces of Politics*, in contrast, emerge from an assumption of equality and it is through its verification (or enactment) that the Police is disrupted and contested (Dikeç, 2005; Rancière, 2001, 2009). Following this, discussions on activism in these strands of political theory distinguish between working through pre-determined channels in the structure of society and working in ways that disrupt and challenge them.

Recent scholarship in geography and urban studies, on the other hand, has brought the discussion on activism to debates around citizenship (see, e.g., Purcell, 2006; Smith & McQuarrie, 2012; Wood, 2017). Wood, for example, understands politics as something that “is grounded in the concrete, in the embodied experience of inhabiting the city, and a recognition that these politics are constituted differently, and in a diversity of ways” (Wood, 2017, p. 19). The Political here, instead of being an alternate state (as in Rancière’s foundational approach, for example), is something rooted in practices of the everyday life, which has the power to mobilise, politicise, and foster activism with potential to push for radical change whenever it needs to.

2.2. Activism and Urban Design: Tactical and Guerrilla Urbanism

Discussions on activism in urban design practice also depart from an understanding of change rooted in the everyday life. Bottom-up approaches to urban design have been documented under the umbrella of *everyday urbanism* (Chase et al., 2008) or *DIY urban design* (Douglas, 2014), and there have been diverse practices around the world, such as Urban Catalyst in Berlin or Recetas Urbanas in Spain (Awan et al., 2011), which align with everyday understandings of change and activism. Perhaps one of the most widespread contributions in the field, however, comes from *tactical urbanism* (Lydon & Garcia, 2015), which is described as a form of practice that disturbs the order of things through small-scale

actions. These actions are *tactical* (in a de Certeauian sense) in that they are quick, unsanctioned, and represent small but incremental gains in a political struggle. They are posed in opposition to *strategies* or place-based tools used by the powerful (de Certeau, 1984). Examples are citizen-led initiatives to reclaim vacant lots and underused spaces in the city, but they rarely address crucial needs or more structural issues, such as housing or health services. Nonetheless, despite its activist origins, tactical urbanism has slowly been integrated into the workings of the formal sector. Thus, it has arguably been co-opted by the neoliberal agenda (Hou, 2020; Mould, 2014), which has reduced its capacity to tap into the realm of the Political.

Hou (2010, 2020) proposes the concept of *guerrilla urbanism* as a form of insurgent spatial practice against the prevailing political conditions. These are unsanctioned and informal actions by the disenfranchised and underprivileged in their everyday struggles. In contrast to tactical urbanism, this concept resists absorption into mainstream narratives as it comprises design by non-designers. By expanding urban design beyond professional practice, guerrilla urbanism allows the integration of new theories into the field. In Hou’s words, tapping into bodies of knowledge beyond urban design theory “enables us to discern and articulate how the dominant structure of the society can be subverted, appropriated, or circumvented in ways that may be invisible to the state or the dominant class, or that they would not openly acknowledge” (Hou, 2020, p. 120). At the core of practices of guerrilla urbanism, then, there is an intention to act in the realm of the Political to contest existing structures of society (or the Police to put it in Rancière’s terms) and reclaim spaces for the disenfranchised to design their own space in the city.

2.3. Theory From the South

There is a need in urban design, then, to engage with theories coming from the South and in particular those looking at informal practices as design praxis (Boano, 2014; Kamalipour & Peimani, 2019). Recent scholarship has questioned what decolonising theory means for urban studies (Halvorsen, 2018; Inam, 2016) and the need to see all cities as being equally capable of producing theory (Robinson, 2015, 2016). This is in line with understandings of ordinary cities explored by geographers Jacobs (2013) and Robinson (2015), which challenge the primacy of traditional centres of production of urban theory (e.g., London, New York City, etc.) and advocates for theory to be produced—and cities to be thought—through elsewhere (Robinson, 2015). Cities in the Global South are important sites for this, and concepts emerging from them are particularly important when thinking about activism as a form of urban design practice. Thus, the conceptualisations of insurgency and autonomy that follow will depart from theories coming from the South, rather than their northern counterparts (for theories

on autonomy rooted in northern geographies see, e.g., Hodkinson & Chatterton, 2007; Vasudevan, 2014).

2.4. *Insurgency and Autonomy*

The first concept coming from the South that I propose to engage with when looking at how activist practice designs cities is *insurgency*. In relation to urban transformation, this concept has been developed by scholars like Holston (1998). He argues how, when used in the context of spatial forms and practices, insurgency emphasises opposition to the traditional narrative that points at the state as the only legitimate source of citizenship. Scholars such as Cornwall (Cornwall, 2002; Cornwall & Coelho, 2006) and Miraftab (Miraftab, 2009, 2017; Miraftab & Wills, 2005) further explore insurgency by looking at how it is useful in defining spaces of political engagement with the state. Activists, in Miraftab's (2017) view, can choose to work with existing organisational structures in spaces of collaboration with the state (*invited spaces*), or against them in spaces of contestation (*invented spaces*). By defining engagement from the bottom up, theories on insurgency liberate the figure of the political activist from a definition departing from formality and institutions (e.g., those coming from political science).

The second concept is *autonomy*, as defined and explored by Escobar. In his book *Designs for the Pluriverse*, he departs from Varela's (1999) minimalist understanding of autonomy as "finding one's way into the next by acting appropriately out of one's own resources" (Escobar, 2018, p. 167) to discuss how this Latin American concept plays out in contexts of ontological struggles in defence of people's territories and lifeworlds (ontological occupations). This reflects the daily struggles faced by communities living in highly informal contexts, who build the city with their own resources to assert their place in the city. Escobar (2018, p. xvii) proposes *autonomous design* as a theoretical and political project in which design can be "reoriented from its dependence on the marketplace toward creative experimentation with forms, concepts, territories, and materials, especially when appropriated by subaltern communities struggling to redefine their life projects." Autonomous design aims at the realisation of the communal: the creation of organisations, social relations, and practices that allow communities to self-create (Escobar, 2018, pp. 165–201). Thus, Escobar's argument implies a reframing of design theory and practice based on design's ability to create new worlds. This view of design praxis aligns with others on activism and urban design, such as Inam's (2014) understanding of urbanism as a creative political act that pushes for radical change in contexts of oppression and resistance, or Hou's (2010) understanding of guerrilla urbanism as the subversion, adaptation, or creation of spaces distinct from those by institutions.

A second Latin American author who has discussed autonomy in the context of social movements is Zibechi

(2012, 2018). He highlights the need to understand autonomy as a process of creating other worlds, in which societies develop new entities for decision-making, administering justice, and managing the everyday life of bottom-up spaces; autonomy is not an end-state but is enacted through daily practice. Thus, like insurgency, autonomy helps challenge mainstream narratives of how the city changes by recognising the power of ordinary citizens.

3. Potosí-Jerusalén

Potosí is a neighbourhood at the north-western edge of the locality of Ciudad Bolívar in Bogotá. Its origins are embedded in patterns of violence, displacement, and neglect from the state. Since the second half of the 20th century, Colombian societies have been subject to the co-existence of multiple modes of violence (Sánchez, 1987) that are co-constitutive (Ávila, 2019) and have prevented the consolidation of truly democratic institutions (López, 2016). Violence has become a generalised tool to push forward political agendas, which has made social movements historically scarce compared to neighbouring countries in Latin America (Cruz, 2017). A key characteristic of this violence is how it has caused waves of displacement, with over 6 million people having migrated from rural areas to cities like Bogotá (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013). As they arrive in the city, however, these families struggle to find a place to live.

Housing and urban development policies in Bogotá have historically been unable to accommodate the increasing need for affordable housing. Before the 1991 Colombian Constitution, the provision of social housing relied heavily on government programmes and its direct involvement in the construction of homes through institutions such as the Instituto de Crédito Territorial (Territorial Credit Institute; see Rueda, 2011). Despite numerous changes in policies throughout the years, these institutions lacked the capacity to address the growing housing deficit. Thus, as Camargo and Hurtado (2013) explain, a significant part of the urban population in cities like Bogotá has only been able to access homes through the informal market. This situation worsened with the withdrawal of the state from the provision of housing in the 1990s (for a detailed analysis of more recent housing policies in the country see Escallón, 2012).

Informality, then, has become a generalised mode of production of urban space (Camargo & Hurtado, 2013; Torres, 2009) and families have built their homes in informal settlements through direct action. Potosí-Jerusalén emerged in this context. Before Ciudad Bolívar was urbanised, the area consisted of a few large rural properties owned by a handful of families in Bogotá (Secretaría de Hacienda, Departamento Administrativo de Planeación, 2004). One of such properties was Hacienda Casa Blanca, where the first houses of what would later be known as Potosí were built in 1982.

The hacienda was illegally subdivided by *urbanizadores piratas*, individuals at times associated with criminal or clientelist organisations who sold plots of land cheaply to families arriving in the area (Torres, 2009). Homes were built without property rights and lacking services and infrastructure.

In 1983, a group of radical educators arrived in Potosí to build a community-based space (*escuela-comunidad*) and teach under the principle of social justice (Botero et al., 2017). The project aimed to trigger processes of social transformation by bringing the working class into the classroom and developing political alternatives to capitalism based on Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Ocampo, 2008; Camilo, interview, March 1, 2021). They sought a permanent base in Potosí since they believed this was the place where they could achieve the biggest impact. By 1984 they had built their school: Instituto Cerros del Sur (ICES). Activists and students from the time explain how the school was born with the neighbourhood and grew with it (Marcela, interview, February 8, 2021). The land was bought from *urbanizadores piratas* and they sought help from charities to build their classrooms. During the day, the facilities served as a secondary school for children, in the evenings as a school for adults, and on the weekends as a community space for activist meetings (González, 2002).

Although this was initially an educational project, activists quickly saw the need to address more pressing issues, such as the lack of health services, infrastructure, and utilities (energy, water, and sanitation). Their first actions involved crowdfunding activities to vaccinate children and provide temporary access to energy and water (González, 2002). This broadened their activist agenda: They engaged with local struggles and eventually deployed a wide set of tactics and strategies to push for more permanent access to services and infrastructure (González, 2002). In doing this, they also joined efforts to claim institutional spaces of participation, such as the Junta de Acción Comunal (neighbourhood board) or the Junta Administradora Local (local administrative board).

However, activism came with challenges. Besides the difficulties in engaging with the state, teachers were constantly threatened by local clientelist powers. They were reported to the police as members of guerrilla groups, the most visible leaders received personal threats, and one of them (Evaristo Bernate) was assassinated on 11th May 1991 ("Mataron a Evaristo," 1991). Despite this, they kept mobilising efforts to build much-needed facilities in Potosí. They were instrumental in the creation of wider grassroots organisations, grouping leaders from other neighbourhoods in Ciudad Bolívar and, on 11th October 1993, they organised a general civic strike (Forero & Molano, 2015). This was one of the largest protests in the history of the locality—a protest that forced the Mayor of Bogotá and his cabinet to negotiate and agree to invest in infrastructure, services, and educational facilities (Forero & Molano, 2015; González, 2002).

3.1. Insurgency and Autonomy

3.1.1. Insurgency

Potosí was built from the bottom up by ordinary citizens in their struggle for urban space. Their actions were insurgent in how they opened political spaces of negotiation and contestation to push for urban transformation or, to put it in Miraftab's (2017) words, in how they relied on direct action as means of inclusion. At times they acted through official channels or in partnerships with the state by signing petitions, participating in elections, or working alongside charities. Often their fight to access services started there and on occasions, this led to major gains for the neighbourhood. In 1996, ICES decided to participate in a programme with the District Secretary for Education in which subsidies were given to private schools to take on students from low-income families. This income helped them pay salaries to their teachers (previously they worked as volunteers) and eventually start building bigger facilities (González, 2002).

These *invited spaces* created opportunities for local authorities to participate in and legitimise activist actions. They engaged in the activists' terms, by giving them funding and addressing issues identified as a priority by communities themselves. In this example, ICES activists appropriated an official channel (the partnership with the Secretary for Education) and used it to push their political agenda forward. This reflects a desire to exercise their citizenship rights, as Miraftab (2017) would call it, following their counter-hegemonic interests. However, in other cases, they decided to act against the state when faced with neglect, silence, or inaction from institutional channels. Activists mention how there was a strategic logic in their insurgency. Marcela, a teacher from ICES in the 1990s, describes the day they took over the headquarters of the District Secretary for Education to demand being paid their salaries:

We were at our limits and were unable to handle it anymore. So, we would say, well, we must take over the Secretary....So we would organise major protests, with buses full of people. I mean, we weren't 20 people, we were 200 or 500 people taking over the 30th Avenue. We would take the secondary school students with us, never the kids from primary school....So our strategy would be to have the negotiators go in first by themselves. They would find a pretext to enter the building and once inside, the buses with the rest of us would arrive. By the time they stopped us from going in, we already had the negotiators inside. So, we wouldn't leave. (Marcela, interview, February 8, 2021)

As Marcela explains, they usually exhausted action through structures of the state before resorting to other tactics. These tactics were carefully planned in relation to the ends sought and were executed with wide support

from community members. The confrontation with local authorities created what Miraftab calls invented spaces of active citizenship (Miraftab & Wills, 2005), that is, spaces to challenge a status quo that neglected and ignored communities in informal settlements.

In Potosí, spaces of political engagement with the state were opened according to their strategic value and how they facilitated the activists' goals. The *tomas* or takeover of buildings described in the quote above were planned to be disruptive, but a space of negotiation with the state was kept open. Having the negotiators already inside while the community protested outside put pressure on those with power to negotiate on the spot. Over time, these tactics became part of a repertoire of political action that was shared with other local organisations. Between 1987 and 1991, activists occupied the headquarters of local authorities and utility companies several times to get access to services and infrastructure (González, 2002).

Activism involved an active and dynamic engagement with the creation of invited and invented spaces of citizen action, which goes back to Miraftab's understanding of *fluidity* in insurgent citizenship practices (Miraftab, 2009, 2017). For her, insurgent practice is fluid in that it moves across and between all spaces of participation as required by specific struggles (Miraftab, 2017). Activists in Potosí deliberately chose which tactics to use depending on the ends sought, and they constantly moved between spaces of collaboration with the state and spaces of contestation against it, as shown in the *toma* of the Secretary for Education headquarters. They also appropriated formal channels like the programme by the District Secretary for Education and used them to further advance their political agenda by strengthening their educational programme. This shows how movements can appropriate spaces created by the establishment to contain dissent and use them to invoke new imaginations of inclusion (Miraftab, 2017).

Insurgency in Potosí, then, became a mode of action that opposed mainstream narratives of urban change and gave power to the families living in the area. Families enacted their citizenship in deciding how to deploy their tactics in ways that enabled them to transform aspects of their neighbourhood that needed urgent work. However, the impact went beyond the neighbourhood scale and triggered wider processes of urban transformation. In Bogotá, political activism in the 1980s and 1990s brought drastic changes in planning policies and the attitude of local authorities towards communities in informal settlements. An example of this is the civic strike in Ciudad Bolívar in 1993. Frustrated by the lack of sufficient institutional efforts to address the needs of neighbourhoods like Potosí, activists in the early 1990s mobilised and created multiple community and youth organisations (Forero & Molano, 2015; Robayo, 2013). Leaders from ICES played a key role in coordinating and articulating these organisations across neighbourhoods since the struggles for infrastructure and services they

faced were often shared. On 11th October at 4:00 am, residents from Ciudad Bolívar blocked the main roads in the district and by that same night, the mayor agreed to negotiate. They reached agreements on several issues affecting the district and the city, including investments in water supply and sanitation, waste collection, education, the legalisation of informal settlements, among others (González, 2002; Robayo, 2013).

The civic strike is nonetheless one of many instances of activism and grassroots efforts having a wider impact on the city scale. Authors such as Pava and Escallón (2020) explain how social dynamics in informal settlements in Bogotá have had a very close relationship with institutional efforts and public policies, and how there are historical traces of causal relationships between the two. Therefore, insurgency as a mode of action has far-reaching effects, which goes back to Holston's understanding of insurgent citizenship (Holston, 1998). In the case of Potosí, insurgency was born out of localised action, but had wider impacts at the city scale and embodied alternative futures that subverted state agendas.

3.1.2. Autonomy

ICES activists enacted what Escobar (2018) calls *autonomous design*—they practised the design of themselves and worked towards creating new worlds. They deployed place-based actions using all their available resources (e.g., people, time, materials) in ways that achieved maximum impact. They defined their own norms and refused to work through imposed modes of political engagement (e.g., political parties or guerrilla groups). Their norms were always contested in that they were subject to internal discussions and debates in the group, and contingent on the political context in that they were continuously re-evaluated depending on the opportunities or threats they faced. This involved recurring discussions on how to engage with the state. Activists developed autonomy in how they found ways to “change traditions traditionally,” to put it in Escobar's (2018, p. 172) terms. They sought to establish new foundations of their social life not by capturing the state, but by taking back from the state key areas of it.

One of the main aspects that distinguished them from other (more institutional) political actors was how decisions were made by consensus. Activists describe how they avoided voting in meetings. Instead, they engaged in long debates to agree on what to do next (Marcela, interview, February 8, 2021). These debates included community representatives and were hosted by the school on Sundays. They are highlighted by interviewed activists as an important part of their organising efforts since it contributed to strengthening relationships as people made efforts to understand and work across different points of view. Furthermore, one of the conditions for consensus was for people to be assigned specific tasks to put agreements into place and ensure ownership and accountability, which further created trust inside the group.

In their exercise of autonomy, activists defined their visions of change. Ultimately, in their effort to transform society and develop political alternatives to capitalism (González, 2002), they sought to reclaim a sense of dignity when faced with neglect from the state. This involved multiple aspects of their daily life in the neighbourhood, from housing to infrastructure (Camilo, interview, March 1, 2021). However, the means to achieve this were heavily contested. An example is a recurrent discussion of whether ICES activists should participate or not in local elections. There was a pressing need to access decision-making spaces and leaders such as Evaristo Bernate were seen as key to represent them in such spaces. He led a group of activists to run for elections to the Junta de Acción Comunal in 1987, which triggered a debate within the organisation on whether they should become part of the structure of the state (González, 2002). Some saw in this the potential to achieve long-term urban transformation, while others saw it as contrary to their political values and principles.

A similar discussion took place in 1996 when they signed a funding partnership with the District Secretary for Education. Although this provided much-needed funds to pay teachers and buy class materials, many activists felt that signing the partnership meant being complacent with efforts to privatise education. In her interview, Marcela explained:

So there was a tension in considering whether or not we needed to be within the state or stay out of it to transform our reality...Would being part of the state mean we were co-opted, or would it definitely trigger the social transformations that we sought?...Even the discussion on whether to participate in the programme by the Secretary for Education was very strong because many, including myself, would question whether that would contribute to the privatisation of education. Ultimately, as the school-community, we were conscious of the important role of public education in social transformation. But many educational institutions in the locality, especially the low-quality private ones, did not have this clear and would take the programme as a way to increase their resources and gain profit. (Marcela, interview, February 8, 2021)

Thus, discussions of means and ends were a recurrent element embedded in their political action. This had concrete material implications in the way the city was transformed, since decisions made there allowed them to access institutional resources and capacity to carry out projects and works at a wider scale. These discussions also went beyond individual leadership and became part of their way of doing things. When Bernate was assassinated, for example, ICES activists recalibrated their actions and continued their work. This shows how autonomy is a long-term process and, as Zibechi (2012) explains, involves an understanding of it as an aspect

of a society in movement (or worlds in movement for Escobar). For him, a key characteristic of urban activism in Latin America is the way it mobilises entire societies like the one living in Potosí, rather than cross-cutting sections of them (e.g., along class issues only).

As explained earlier, this process of mobilisation is an example of an autonomous design praxis in which the community practised the design of itself (Escobar, 2018). In line with Escobar's conceptualisation, this understands the communal not as a precondition but as a product of social interactions within the group: It was through the creation of social relations (e.g., between ICES teachers and neighbours), decision-making processes (e.g., consensus-based rather than majority-based), and the development of tactics and strategies to engage with external actors (e.g., the state) that the community was created. This is based on an assumption that "people are practitioners of their own knowledge" (Escobar, 2018, p. 184), not someone else's (e.g., external experts') knowledge. Thus, Potosí as a neighbourhood was designed and built from local needs and practices born out of activists' understanding of the realities they faced and the context they operated in.

Finally, participation in local institutions also helped scale up their political action. The election of ICES activists to the Junta de Acción Comunal in 1987 allowed to bridge efforts with other local councils to form a union called JERUCOM in 1990, which became very influential in local politics (González, 2002). This was particularly important given that some of the infrastructures and services they were fighting for were also needed in surrounding neighbourhoods. As years went by, JERUCOM activists linked up with other groups to form Unidad Cívica—the organisation driving and planning the 1993 civic strike mentioned earlier.

4. Conclusions

Relocating political activism in discussions about urban change helps rethink current design practices rising from below and suggests a shift from urbanist activism to activist urbanism; from activist agendas born out of design practices (e.g., tactical urbanism) to design practice emerging from activist agendas. However, to fully unpack the implications of such a shift, more theory on the type of urban transformation it entails is needed. Experiences from the Global South are essential for this to challenge the primacy of traditional centres of production of urban theory and join efforts to decolonise theorisation. In this sense, although the case of Potosí is an illustrative example of an activist design practice, it still needs to be brought into conversation with different experiences in other cities. Furthermore, explorations of concepts, such as insurgency and autonomy need to tap into (and allow reevaluation from) experiences elsewhere.

The building of Potosí in Bogotá is an example of how political activism can transform cities in ways that challenge mainstream narratives of urban change. It is not an

isolated or exceptional phenomenon, but rather part of larger struggles that tend to be ignored or marginalised in the way change is conceptualised. Looking at the case as both an activist *and* a design practice departs from the assumption that cities constantly change by the everyday action of ordinary people. Furthermore, the use of concepts like insurgency and autonomy as theoretical lenses help advance our understanding of activism as a driver of urban transformation in several ways.

Firstly, both concepts help challenge dichotomies between state-led and citizen-led practices. As Mirafteb (2017) argues, these dichotomies are used by powerful actors to control dissent as they celebrate actions through official channels while criminalising those that are against them. The fluid nature of insurgent practice challenges such official narratives as it involves moving across and utilising both invited and invented spaces of participation as required by specific struggles, as well as appropriating formal channels to serve activist agendas. This brings to the forefront discussions about becoming part of the state to achieve the desired goals, which goes back to Escobar's understanding of autonomy. Through practice, and in response to context, activists develop traditions of engagement with the state, as well as ways to "change those traditions traditionally" (e.g., through consensus-based decision-making; Escobar, 2018, p. 172).

Secondly, insurgency and autonomy allow us to further explore how the deployment of tactics and strategies build an activist practice. Cases like Potosí demonstrate how activist action can be both tactical and strategic (which challenges de Certeauian understandings of these terms), as community groups decide how to engage with the state and under what terms. Insurgency here entails a strategic logic in which collaboration and contestation are instrumental in advancing activist agendas. Furthermore, autonomy allows uncovering ways in which activism creates new (*other*) worlds with their own forms of organisation and decision-making structures, which further adds to the strategic value of activist tactics. There is a particular challenge here, however, in reconciling these terms in ways that do not depoliticise them and prevent them from being absorbed into the neoliberal agenda and the formal sector (as happens in tactical urbanism). This is critical when bringing lessons from historical cases into conversation with today's context of practice. Some of the tactics used by the community in Potosí in the 1980s (e.g., engaging directly with private providers in their struggle for services) nowadays would run the risk of contributing to the withdrawal of the state in providing access to such services and infrastructure.

Thirdly, both concepts are useful to connect activist practice with wider discussions on means and ends, especially those coming from prefigurative politics and utopian thinking, concepts widely discussed in the literature on activism and political theory. Escobar's notion of autonomy is particularly relevant here. As shown in

the case of Potosí, navigating tensions between visions of urban futures and the use of tactics and strategies (e.g., discussions on becoming part of the state) pose challenges to the management of consensus, contradictions, and disagreements within activist groups.

Finally, the two concepts highlight issues of scale and how activist practice scales up urban transformation. In this article, scale emerged in how insurgency impacted wider urban-making processes, as well as in how autonomy unfolded as a process throughout years of political action. In future research, addressing scale as a fundamental concept in design discourse would be instrumental in connecting activist praxis with other theories and forms of urban design practice.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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About the Author



Juan Usubillaga is a PhD researcher at Cardiff University, currently investigating political activism as a mode of urban design practice. He graduated with a BA in Architecture from Universidad de los Andes in Colombia and holds an MSc in Building and Urban Design in Development from UCL. His research interests revolve around urban design practices ignited by bottom-up initiatives in areas like housing, social integration, and humanitarian response.