

From Self-built Periphery to Metropolitan Business District: Spatial Transformations, Emerging Urban Identities and the Concept of Citizenship in the *Cono Norte*, Lima, Peru

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"Urban planning has largely failed to create a better human environment and has mostly had negative repercussions for lower income groups. The people themselves have become the modern builders of Latin American cities... Contemporary Latin American cities, like their predecessors, have been constructed by many builders, mostly anonymous, forced to find their own solutions in the face of government neglect and sometimes repression."
Jorge E. Hardoy¹

"When people have no control over, no responsibility for key decisions in the housing process, dwelling environments may instead become a barrier to personal fulfillment and a burden on the economy."
John F. C. Turner²

The sensation of contemporary Lima is the one of a never-ending city along the coastline, a band of low-scale settlements that densify into nodes, stretch out even into the dry hills and dunes along the Pacific before fading out into the desert. If one follows the predictions of local planners and one carefully observes the ongoing metropolitan expansion along the milestones of the Pan-American Highway towards the North and the South, it makes sense to expect that Lima Metropolitana will constitute a continuous urban agglomeration of nearly 400 kilometers of length within the next decades. The metropolitan zone might then reach from the Northern city of Barranca down to the Southern city of Ica, going far beyond what so far are denominated *Cono Norte* and *Cono Sur*, the funnel-shaped extensions of the Peruvian capital along the Pacific coast.

EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

Since the forties of the 20th century, migration of rural population to Lima is the most determinative aspect

of life in Peru. Between 1940 and 2000, the capital city has increased its population from 645.000 to 7,5 million and enlarged its urbanized territory nearly 16 times from 5000 ha to around 78.000 ha.

Today, 8,2 million out of Peru's population of 29 million live in greater Lima, 40 per cent of them live in the more or less consolidated informal city.³

The *Cono Norte* (or *Lima Norte*), as a self-built and gradually densified and consolidated urban agglomeration, counts 2,2 million inhabitants at the end of 2010 and, more than a suburb, it has become a new metropolitan center attached to the capital city with its own logics, aspirations and its own economy. As such it is a driving force into decentralization and a signal for Lima ceasing to be a typical centralist core city while converting into a pluricentric extensive metropolitan zone.

Lima's dominance and the roots of centralism date back to colonial times, when the city was seat of the Spanish political and ecclesiastical power and centre of culture, knowledge and civilization. This notion and the promise of opportunities determine cultural and social values in contemporary Peru, although accompanied by certain unease about *Lima la horrible*⁴, the grey and inhospitable climate and atmosphere of the metropolis.

Progress, health care, education, employment and the promise of better living conditions pulled and still pull people from rural communities to the capital. Internal migration was also produced by push-factors like the social and economical marginalization of *Selvatic*⁵ and *Andean* territories, natural disasters, earthquakes, landslides and the

consequences of the *Fenómeno del Niño* in the late nineties. A failed agrarian reform in the seventies, terrorism of the Maoist *Shining Path* movement (*Sendero Luminoso*) and the violent counteraction of the military forces and the police in the eighties and nineties caused the dislocation of several ten-thousand *sierra* inhabitants, especially from the Ayacucho area and Central Highlands, between 1988 and 1992.⁶

The first immigration wave affected the immediate surroundings of Lima in the early forties, simultaneously with the installation of modern infrastructure and industries in the capital. In 1946, informal settlements emerged on the hill of *San Cosme* and its choice was no coincidence: the proximity to the recently built new central market gave the *campesinos* hope for work. It was the beginning of a development, which marked the city of Lima in the 20th and early 21st century: the constant aspiration for modernization and the incessant urban growth as phenomena of mutual stimulation and constant conflict.

The dominant white and *mestizo* population did neither provide housing to the Indian migrants, nor give them a possibility to acquire land, as the periphery of Lima belonged to the oligarchy's *Haciendas*. Slum clearance programs threatened inner city dwellers with the loss of their living space in central *tugurios*⁷, so intra-urban migration became another decisive pattern. The invasion of uncultivated territories turned out to be a viable and each time more frequent alternative, as the government gradually tolerated it.⁸ In the following decades, this attitude of tolerance became an efficient political instrument.

The 1990s were a decade of massive land invasions, reaching territories each time more inadequate for urban use. In the mid-1990s, around 700 clandestine occupations emerged in Lima, and 14 mayoral ones between 1998 and 2002. In quantitative terms, invasion of public territory and self-construction is responsible for the majority of city and housing in Peru.⁹

At the beginning of the 21st century, informal land occupation is no longer a subject only of the urban poor. Wealthy citizens are stretching out their beach houses and weekend resorts, especially beyond the *Cono Sur* and mostly on public land. An increasing number of *gated communities* absorbs public space, neglects it as such and converts it into mere buf-

fer and circulation zones for a car-determined high-income social stratum. The informal and its peculiar aesthetics becomes a model for the rich in places like the *Playa de Asia*. In terms of territorial hegemonies, what remains intact is the traditional model of social discrimination and racial segregation.¹⁰

On the other side, formerly poor settlements consolidate, as it is the case in the *Cono Norte*. Along the Panamerican Highway, the colorful facades of new shopping malls, building supply stores, tailors, hairdressers, restaurants and night clubs, private clinics, Internet cafés, gas stations and workshops make it hard to believe, that some 40 years ago life here began with an invasion of desert dunes.

BARRIADA PROCESSES AND POLITICS

When in August 1963, the British architect John F. C. Turner guest-edited an *Architectural Design* issue on *Dwelling resources in South America*, he focused on the *Barriadas* of Lima and on the *Pampa de Comas* settlement, which is the first settlement in the Carabayllo area and therefore the origin of the *Cono Norte*. It was at that time entirely self-built by spontaneously formed associations of low-income blue- and white-collar workers and their families with 30.000 inhabitants. The initial land taking was carried out by a group of families evicted from an inner city slum demolished for the construction of an office block.¹¹

No governmental aid was given until 1961, when the *Barriada Law* acknowledged unplanned occupation of public and private land in urban fringe areas that had occurred since then,¹² provided legality, infrastructure and technical assistance to the self-construction process, which different governments recognized as a cheap and easy solution to the housing problem.¹³

For the first time in 1971, due to a massive and violent invasion south of Lima, in *Villa El Salvador* a settlement for 50.000 inhabitants was officially planned by the military government at that time as parade-example of poverty orientation, modernization and social reformation. Functionaries of the *SINAMOS*¹⁴ provided water, healthcare and transport connections to Lima.

Since then, the reproduction of this urban prototype was more or less directed and instigated by

the state. In 1979, the *Barriadas* were denominated as *Urbanizaciones Populares* and areas with titled plots had to be recognized as ordinary districts with municipal rights and responsibilities. The neoliberal dictatorial government of Alberto Fujimori (1990–2000) promoted further suburban growth and denominated the self-built settlements as *Pueblos Jóvenes* (young towns). Propaganda boards for self-construction all over the city should evoke the dream of a own house. As a populist instrument of power centralization, the Commission for the Official Registration of Informal Property (*COFOPRI*) took over the municipalities' task to distribute land titles. Invasions and social upheavals were literally provoked by the government, in order to resettle people in distant desertlands and demonstrate social engagement and gain the votes of the poor.



Figure 1. The self-built settlement of Comas in the early 1960s, photographed by John F. C. Turner and published in *Architectural Design* in August 1963.



Figure 2. Comas in 2010: The *Cono Norte Mega Plaza* and other commercial centers have completely changed the face of the area. Photo: Kathrin Golda-Pongratz.

In today's young towns the second and third generation of immigrants have formed their own families. As their *barrios* and parents' houses become too small, they are gradually invading and urbanising vacant territories within the existing settlements, thus public space and living conditions are diminishing.

INVASION STRATEGIES, ASPIRATIONS AND IDENTITIES

The act of building is often the expression of the wish for a social change.¹⁵ No other reason makes provincial Peruvians abandon their communities and build a new home on a desert place close to the capital. The simple survival is followed by values like progress, hard work, savings and living together, which are seen as urban qualities.¹⁶ The property title as major aim means personal fulfillment and the feeling of social acceptance.

The process of consolidation depends on political interests and the capacity of self-organization and solidarity among the dwellers. A close relation is noticed between official registrations of property and the standards of living. Settlements go through several phases of construction, from cane or cheap wood shelters to houses of *noble* material like bricks or concrete. A whole industry of basic building material like wooden piles and rush-mats (*esteras*) has developed on the edges of the Pan-American Highway. Building materials and architectural styles are a clear manifestation of social status, and the upgrading dweller imitates the wealthy neighborhoods and some kind of international architecture seen on television. Architecture is ambivalent, modern as well as traditional. It is temporal, as houses are never finished, forms and materials change and the use of rooms often is not specified: the garage can turn into a shop and the hall into a workshop.¹⁷

Cultural traditions are the basis for identification and the definition of the living environments. Migrants organize themselves within regional¹⁸ and within effective voluntary associations set up without governmental support. In case of a successful progress they can prove this triumph to the community they come from and are often followed by other *paisanos*. The Andean tradition of a shared economy is maintained and often enables the creation of urban self-employment.¹⁹

In fact, a mixture of rural customs and global influences creates the new urban culture of the *chicha* city, as a hybrid of styles and influences, which penetrates all social strata and parts of the metropolis.

THE FORMATION OF A NEW URBAN CLASS AND ECONOMY

The *Cono Norte* of Lima, as a conglomerate of informally developed districts and self-built neighborhoods, has become the most successful and surprising territory of the *Gran Area Metropolitana*, where self-built settlements have been transformed into a fast-growing commercial district since the end of the 1990s. Since then, the periphery has generated a new centrality there. This seems to be giving prove to the thesis formulated by John F. C. Turner and William Mangin in the 1970s, according to which the hard working and progress oriented immigrant would determine decisively the urban economy of the future generations.

Aspirational values, values of modernity, like Internet access and technical equipment, as well as a trend towards consumption and leisure activities determine the dwellers self-determination of the *Cono Norte* at the beginning of the 21st century. Local shoe manufactories' and tailors' designs are inspired by international websites, public Internet *cabinas* are to be found all over the young towns. Ambitious and well-organized *barrios populares* have local radio stations and their own websites,²⁰ and medical doctors from the consolidated city open up private clinics with the most modern equipment in this emerging metropolitan area.

Metropolitan networks among immigrants depend on criteria such as the information flow, relations of confidence based on personal relationships that facilitate transactions in the processes of decision-making and production, the exchange of solid knowledge about forms of production and political processes, the development of rules for formal and informal participation and the support for monetary and informational transactions, including systems of transport and telecommunication.²¹

Along with these recent developments, the demography of the capital city has changed with the rhythm of its growth: Whilst at the turn of the century about 75 per cent of its citizens were not born

in the capital city, today it is only around 50 per cent, as a second and third generation of rural migrants have been forming a new urban class with migrational background, but a clear identification as citizens of Lima.

On the other side, six per cent of the households in *Lima Norte* have one or more family members living abroad in 2010. The reception of remittances from Peruvians living in Argentine, Chile, Europe or the US has been noticed decisively and pushed forward the construction of unfinished houses, the extension of them for renting out parts of the house or the setting up of small businesses in the emerging city.

The *ciudad popular* is more than suburbia; it is surrounding, overtaking and conquering the traditional city, and is creating a new model for a pluricentric metropolitan area. The marginal city has generated an industrial and artisanal development, which is successful, contributing to the Gross National Product at least a 42 per cent. *Lima Norte* has generated successful small and medium-sized businesses, which have developed out of improvisation and the needs of the population. Strategies are social models like the system of the shared budget (*presupuesto participativo*) applied on a municipal and regional level in Peru since 2005, or capitalist models which have consolidated during the neoliberal orientation of the country between 1990 and 2000 and orientate themselves both on the global market but also on the Andean solidarity, which provides solid networks and relations of confidence.

Lima Norte is the place where most cash flows in the entire country. This economic growth responds to a growing purchasing power of the population in this emerging city. After a first moment consolidating nightlife establishments, discotheques, gambling places and amusement arcades such the *Boulevard El Retablo* in the late 1990s, big shopping malls have been installed, such the commercial mall *Mega Plaza Norte*, which, after eight years of existence, claims to be the most successful shopping center in Lima Metropolitana. Another major one, *Plaza Lima Norte*, has just been opened and is, with 138.000 square meters, the largest mall in the country.

The economic development plan of Lima Norte (*Plan de Desarrollo Económico de Lima Norte PDELN*) goes along with a claim for private investment

with social responsibility and the attraction and anchorage of cultural and educational institutions. In 2007, the *Universidad César Vallejo* opened for 45,000 students. The French cultural institute has stepped out of the traditional neighborhoods and opened up a new seat in the *Cono Norte* in 2010.

The convergence of global and local networks, on which this growth and process of transformation is based, has produced the emergence of these new economic actors as well as changes in the industrial processes, which have diminished the borders between the formal and the informal economies. At the same time, the social diversity increased in the spaces of consumption and, in parallel, the level of segregation in residential areas.²²

A GLOBALIZED URBAN IMAGERY

The appearance of gated communities goes along with the economic growth and is, since the turn of the century, an increasing phenomenon even in the emerging city. Lima's urban space is highly fragmented and segregated. The appropriation of public space through commercialized use is, especially in areas like the *Cono Norte*, seen as a positive and progress-indicating process and therefore not sufficiently controlled. Brands and giant billboards are taking over the urban landscape, while the experience of being in a square (*Plaza*, as the malls are called) is no longer separated from being in a commercial area and subject to constant affusion of sales propaganda and the need to consume.

Robert Venturi's and Denise Scott Brown's theory of the ugly and the ordinary, exposed and visualized in *Learning from Las Vegas* in 1972,²³ a critical analysis of architecture and the esthetics of the urban peripheries, and, at the same time, an extensive criticism of the moralism of the *architectural establishment*, has not lost of its validity nearly 40 years later. There is no urban periphery that does not follow these characteristics, so it ends up being true that both, the ugliness and the banality of the malls and commercial centers represent symbols and styles, a certain democracy of consumerism and certain happiness for the citizen and consumer in any part of the globalized world.²⁴



Figure 3. Giant billboards and commercial announcements make up the urban imagery of the Panamericana Norte. Photo: Kathrin Golda-Pongratz, 2010.

LIMA AS A CONSOLIDATING POST-METROPOLITAN SPRAWL - POTENTIALS, DANGERS AND CHALLENGES

The act of occupation, through which this emergent city is made, is an act of wide territorial consequences for the abandoned as for the invaded landscape. The progressively extending and consolidating *mancha urbana* (urban stain)²⁵ is gradually destroying the three river valleys of *Rímac*, *Lurín* and *Chillón*, it causes the erosion of the soil through the sealing of permeable surfaces and the loss of recreation spaces. Prehispanic archaeological sites and ecological resources like the fragile microclimate of the *Lomas*²⁶ are endangered by human settlements.

Newly created infrastructures and mega-projects related to the urban and economic growth, such as the extension of the airport, the harbor enlargement into a *Mega-Puerto Callao* and the massive construction of highways and by-passes are putting at risk the fragile coastal landscape's ecological equilibrium and prehispanic heritage.

The choice of a semi-rural district in the *Cono Sur* as a future land reserve for the installation of leisure equipment and service industries, in order to serve the luxurious spas and second residences' urbanizations that have developed more than 50 kilometers beyond Lima, is a clear sign that these remaining rural territories will be highly disputed between the last *campesinos* and the real estate speculators in the next decade.²⁷

Without any doubt, the territorial proportion of the traditional central city and the different forms of

suburbanization have been inverted in the second half of the 20th century, and the classical terms and spatial denominations do not work any more: *barriadas* or *pueblos jóvenes* are becoming consolidated and economically active sub centers; the old seaside resorts densify and grow vertically; and the remaining rural territories are already registered as spatial capital and will as such sooner or later be completely absorbed by the economic development of this macro-region.

To imagine Lima of the future beyond the old concept of the metropolis opens up new perspectives towards its diverse realities, its contemporary tendencies of land colonization, its promising hybridity and its actual fragmentation. It makes us understand that an obsolete centralism will have to be replaced by a regional and pluricentric model. It makes us see that the major challenges for this territory are the reading of its macro and micro scales and the promotion of their convivence, the instigation of an interaction between the different local actors, the finding of mechanisms for a well-balanced connectivity and the development of infrastructural networks that strengthen and protect the diversity of the cultural, spatial, economic and social potential of all its parts.



Figure 4. The ongoing horizontal expansion of Lima Norte. Photo: Kathrin Golda-Pongratz, 2010.

ENDNOTES

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25 Between 1940 and 1984 the extension of Lima from 3.900 ha to 35.000 ha has increased almost tenfold. Up to the year 2000, another doubling to 70.000 had taken place, for the year 2015 it is expected to cover 99.600 ha. Source: INEI, *Tendencias del crecimiento urbano de Lima Metropolitana al año 2015*. (Lima, 1993), 486f.

26 The Lomas are hills where coastal fog gathers and therefore between July and October the desert turns green.

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