

Design Tactics for the Displaced: Two cases of co-creation in Colombia

Aaron Brakke

University of Illinois Urbana Champaign

Universidad Piloto de Colombia

aaron@illinois.edu

Summary statement

Exile and displacement have become the reality for 15% of the Colombia's citizens according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre.¹ My work seeks to address questions such as; What agency does design have when enlisted for the service of these people? Can the co-creation of the built environment strengthen vulnerable communities? What tactics are worth replicating? The content herein focuses on architectural responses that I have been involved with as a way to study and engage Colombian communities that have been affected by violence and displacement both directly and indirectly.

Topic

At present more than 65 million people around the globe are confronting the precarious conditions associated with forced migration.² This has become one of the most urgent and complex issues of our time, yet there are no universal methods to combat this situation. Addressing the living conditions of this population has become a multidisciplinary concern at various scales. The work presented in this article operates at the micro-layer of architectural interventions with an interest in understanding the effectiveness of design strategies and tactics that rely on co-creation.

Scope

In Colombia, the excessive condition of displacement that was fueled by decades of civil war is slowly coming to a halt. A milestone victory occurred on August 26th, 2016 when the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Government reached an agreement to the terms of a peace treaty that had taken years to negotiate. Though the firing has ceased, the aftermath of decades of violence will continue to be dealt with for many years to come. One issue that urgently needs to be addressed is the precarious living conditions for the nearly 5 million internally displaced citizens. A great number of these people have sought refuge in the urban centers and have populated the informal developments found at the periphery of cities, such as Cali, Medellin and Bogota. This situation has created complicated social and economic tensions as well as the daunting task of providing enough housing for the demand. There was an estimated deficit of one million housing units in the urban environments in 2011. The Colombian government allotted 583 million dollars in 2013 for the construction of low-income housing to help alleviate the stress of this tremendous influx of urban residents.³ These funds have been injected into new housing projects, which are beneficial to some extent. However, the existing favelas have also absorbed the problematic without the proper tools or resources to navigate this situation in a satisfactory way.

The scope of this paper is the discussion of two case studies that I have been involved with and that can be classified as Participatory Action Research under the influence that Orlando Fals

¹ <http://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/colombia/>

² Figures retrieved from The UN Refugee Agency <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>

³ Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística Report (DANE)

Borda has provided.⁴ According to Fals Borda, the use of PAR has “grown worldwide due to its pertinence to the initiation and promotion of radical changes at the grassroots level where unsolved economic, political and social problems have been accumulating a dangerous potential. PAR claims to further change processes in constructive non-violent ways due to its emphases on awareness building processes.”⁵ At the intersection of my research, civic engagement and teaching I am working to further understand the role of design activism and how it can affect communities facing the complexities of displacement.

Case Studies

Two projects are used herein to demonstrate how we are working with displaced peoples and fragile communities in Colombia. The first is a park and the second is a gathering place. These projects have engaged students and community members with whom we have sought to analyze symptoms, identify cracks and take action at the scale of urban/rural acupuncture. The use of *tactics*, as described by Michel de Certeau, is used to exploit gaps in the playing field and to form projects of co-creation that have the potential to generate novel and inventive outcomes.

The first case study is being developed with a community in the periphery of Bogota. One particular example with them is the work of co-creation being done on a lot that had become a deposit for demolition waste. Before actually starting to think about landscape architecture, the challenge was to activate the community and to catalyze discussion and action. Several years of workshops with inhabitants of every age group helped change the paradigm of what it means to be an empowered citizen. Interaction with local authorities has led to mixed results which has meant that the inhabitants have assumed active roles in the planning and construction of public space. Thus the park shown here became a project that was designed and built with the San Rafael neighborhood in Cazuca.



Image on the left is a rendered plan of park and was developed with my students at UPC after several meetings with the community. Image on the right is a photograph of the park in development.

⁴ The legacy of PARS is present in the imaginary of my colleagues and I. It is admitted that the methods currently employed on projects look very similar to those that have been classified as community based, urban acupuncture and/or tactical urbanism. The issue of metrics and effectiveness of this research methodology has been debated in the social sciences and justly so. However, the application of PARS on projects that directly affect the built environment is fertile ground for further development.

⁵ Fals Borda, Orlando. 1987. “The Application of Participatory Action-Research in Latin America” in *International Sociology* Vol. 2 No. 4. (329)

At the other end of the spectrum is a project that I have been involved with in Santa Rosa de Cabal in the coffee region of Colombia. The project is called MinkaLAB and the name is derived from the word *minga* which signifies collaborative work to the indigenous communities of the Andes Mountain Range. My main contribution has been the design and construction of a Maloca, a ceremonial dwelling common to many of the indigenous tribes of the Amazon and in the Andes mountain range. This has become the gathering place for cultural encounters, including the annual *minga*, a collaborative exchange, between a diverse population that includes, but is not limited to; members of various indigenous tribes, designers, farmers, urbanites and collectives, architects, psychologists, medicine men, chefs, etc. This gathering has created a platform for exchange between a diverse group of participants who share the common goal of keeping ancestral knowledge alive and promoting healthy ways of living. In this case, the development of the event/platform is a tactic that is part of a larger strategy that involves heightening levels of consciousness through the sharing of knowledge. While this has traditionally served as a vehicle to perpetuate one's own culture, our collaborative work together resituates the idea of 'norm' and asks what it could be. This is particularly timely in the context of Colombia as the government is currently navigating the paths with the most potential to meet the needs of displaced citizens. One particular observation is that though many have fled to urban centers, rural life is actually preferred and desired.

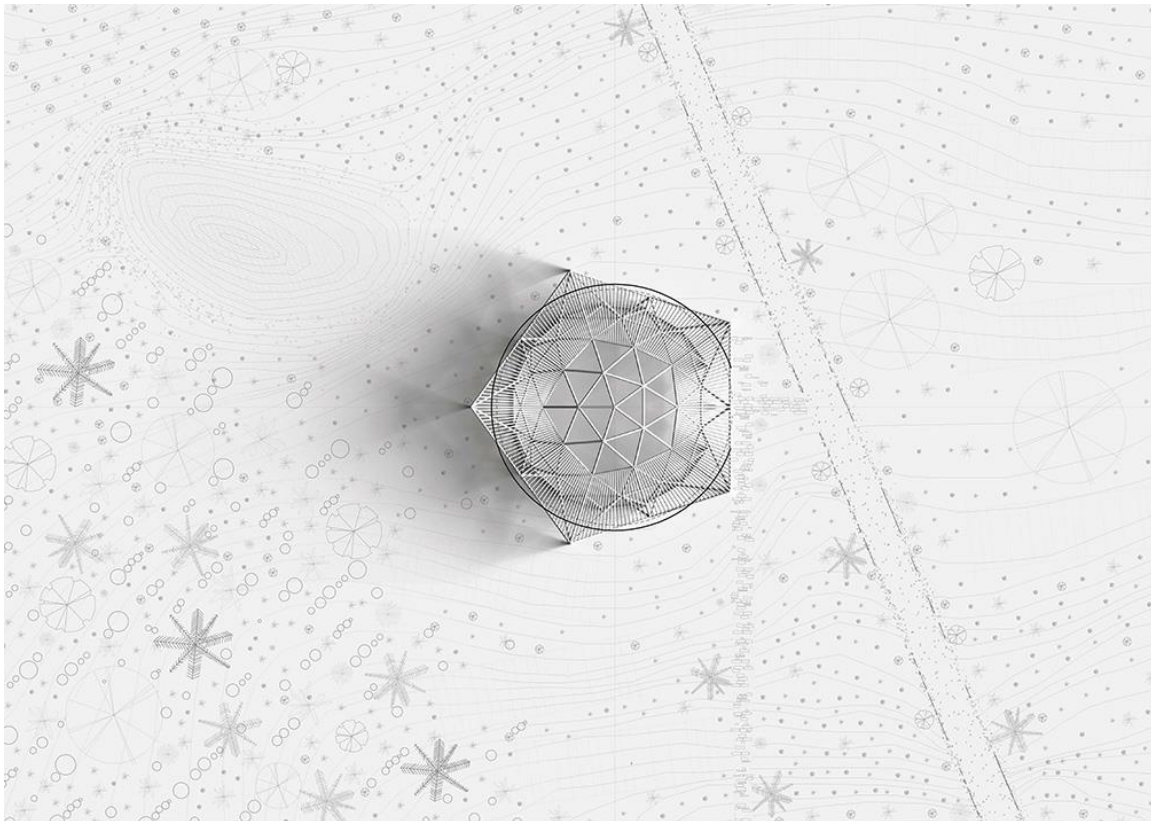


Image is a site plan of the Maloca that was constructed with MinkaLAB by author's design firm (Whiteknee/Directrix Architecture).

Intended Conclusions

This research is on-going and has yet to be conclusive. Up to this point, one lesson worth sharing and discussing is the degree of difficulty that developing projects such as these entail. Places in such a state of flux do not easily permit strategy to be planned, enacted and studied.

Maneuvering changes in politics, economic conditions, zoning and trade agreements are but a few of the variables that will affect the building industry in the post conflict era. As these issues are outside the control of a designer, it is futile to develop a strategy that is obsolete before it can be carried out. Therefore, the focus must be on tactics. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau explains that a tactic is set up “on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power.” As architects, we understand that we “must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them.”⁶

The case studies included in this article shed light on several ways that acts of co-creation are being developed in Colombian communities. It is premature to offer conclusions and so in lieu of results; this paper articulates how we are probing dis-junctions in the post-conflict context of Colombia that has left a massive amount of people displaced and living in precarious habitats. The tactical acts being undertaken in both urban and rural areas are used to illustrate innovative forms of developing stronger communities through conversation, collaboration, co-creation, design and construction. The provocation is that the dissemination and debate of this work will lead to another level of articulation that would be of benefit for architects confronting design problems for populations that have been displaced.

References

All references are included in the footnotes.

I would like to extend a special thank you to my students and colleagues at UPC in Colombia and the students working with me at UIUC. This work would not be possible without sharing the belief that designer and architects can be activists and are able to make an impact by working with communities. The ongoing dedication to invent tactics and execute them is the path forward.

⁶ Quotes are taken from Michel De Certeau's portion of the *The Practice of Everyday Life* where he elaborates on the differentiating strategy and tactics found in Part III. “Making Do”:Uses and Tactics of Part I. De Certeau, Michel. 2002. *The Practice Of Everyday Life*. California: University of California Press.: University of Minnesota Press.(29-42)