

Other rural livings: Contemporary rural dwelling phenomena in Colombia

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ABSTRACT

This paper identifies and analyses three phenomena in the current situation of design of rural housing in Colombia, approached as cultural spatial situation, reviewing its causes and main characteristics. The phenomena are product of a search of new types of rural dwelling generated since 1990, that were classified in three groups based on the type of spatiality produced and their relation to rural territories. The types of housing include formal and informal design processes. The groups relate to the overlook of the rural context, the stereotyped rurality and the dwelling derived from political situations. The causes of these phenomena are also reviewed with focus on the role of the spatial disciplines such as architecture, design, planning and urbanism, on the development of rurality and on the role played by the State on the configuration of rural areas through policy, normative and institutional presence. The goal is to be able to understand what is happening in rural housing in the Colombian situation and how the current facts can inform spatial disciplines, as architecture and design, in rural contexts in the near future.

Keywords: Rural design, Housing, Rurality, Contemporary architecture, Forms of dwelling

INTRODUCTION

Rurality is a topic that has gained more attention in recent years but its spatial characterization still remains not fully understood. This can be explained by the lack of two things, in-depth exploration in some related themes and update. Both apply to the case of rural dwelling.

In this context, the goal is to identify new ways of spatial developments related to dwelling rurality in Colombia and analyze them as socio-spatial phenomena, thus they can inform design decision making in rural environments. Through this is possible to understand how the disciplines are currently approaching the topics of rurality and dwelling, and how they can evolve into more accurate practices for this context.

In order to achieve this goal, and for the purpose of this research, clarifying the concepts of rurality and dwelling is key. Rurality is understood as the territory where human

infrastructure occupies small portions of the total land, the rest being occupied by different types of landscapes (Wiggins & Proctor, 2001). Dwelling refers to a spatial structure designed to be inhabited and where is possible to develop affections, either positive or negative, in lesser or greater degree (Guizzo, 2018). Parting from these concepts the idea is to find new types of spatial and cultural relations between dwelling and rurality in the context of Lefebvre's production of space, where space can be either conceptual, perceived or vivid (1991).

1. METHODOLOGY

Considering the concepts of rurality and dwelling introduced before, the investigation starts by looking the production of contemporary rural housing in Colombia from 1990 to 2019, period defined by the change in the production of housing due to the change in policy (Fique, 2006; Rolnik, 2019).

The search of dwelling situations included architectural offices, the State production, informal developments, and the production of large real estate agents. The reviewed projects come from various kinds of sources, as the purpose is to reach the most diverse types of dwelling, these includes revision of specialized press, indexed publications, projects compilations and press.

After the information was selected, it was analyzed and then classified, based on the cultural causes that may lead to these types of dwelling. Thus, formal sources on architecture, planning, economics and political sciences are reviewed to be able to analyse the phenomena. The sources include academic work (books and papers), and institutional and official reports, in order to be able to understand the situations concerning the role played by both the State and design disciplines.

2. RESULTS

The revision of projects showed a big variety of forms of dwelling in rural areas ranging from inherited situations to new ways of inhabitation. The former, showed the continuity of process that existed prior the time frame; like private recreational housing, informal vernacular productive units and large scale agro-industrial settlements. Those were not taken into a deeper analysis as they represent studied situations, and the goal is to focus on the new ways of dwelling in rurality. The latter, showed cases like large residential estate developments on the periphery, architectural projects under the label 'rural housing', settlements product of the peace agreements and housing related to the drug traffic production chain. Those respond to two main phenomena, developments disconnected to its

rural context (to a greater or lesser degree) and dwellings where socio-political situation is definitive to its spatial outcome.

On these findings, two things resulted interesting. The first one, is the diversity of rural ways of inhabitation, despite, how little it represents of the total housing production (Banco Agrario de Colombia, 2014). The second one, how much the spatiality was derived from the lack of understanding of rurality and/or the role played by the State on the territories.

3. DISCUSSION

Rurality has suffered from a neglected view both from architecture and its related disciplines, like design and urbanism, and from the State as a whole. This fact has led towards a situation where spatial disciplines hardly ever work on the rural field and when they do, is guided by many misleading stereotypical views (Marinic, 2013). Additionally, the State that many times is an incentive to work in certain fields; with rurality its view has been restrained to productive policies focused on big actors, leaving the territory unattended and vulnerable to problems that range from basic services to the presence of armed groups (Moreno, 2018).

In this context, added to the fact that housing in the last decades became an economical rather than a spatial problem (Brenner, 2016; Rolnik, 2019), is easy to understand why the recent approaches misunderstand the problem and provide solutions that have many defects. On the other hand, there are interesting situations that could give hints towards a clearer understanding of the problem but they are so stigmatized and related to a more political frame that they are overpassed by spatial disciplines.

These two broad contexts, the disciplinary and political, help explain the causes of the three main categories of spatial dwelling situations found: overlooking of context, superficial understanding of context and dwelling created by political situations.

3.1. The rural condition overlooked

From the three categories, two, the one produced by construction companies and the one coming from the architectural realm with a rural label, stand out by their lack of understanding of rurality. Despite two opposites approaches to design, they share the fact of do not properly stablish a relation among territory, economy and dwelling, key factor in rural housing, as its spatiality strongly depends on the context and is more a response to these situations than to a preconceive idea of dwelling (Saldarriaga Roa & Fonseca Martínez, 1984; Jimenez Rosas & Verduzco Chirino, 2009).

The one regarding large scale construction companies, totally ignores the context of the place and treats it as in any other of their urban housing developments, despite being on rural or periurban areas. This means, projects with areas bigger than three hectares, with generic designs that are the same architectural typology (monofunctional spaces, reduced areas, clear zonification, and spatially rigid) repeated several times, urban design that encourages closure, among other well-known features of the spatiality produced by the standard real estate market (Carrera, 2015). If this situation is already bad within the context of the city, it becomes even worse on the periphery and rural contexts because they follow a different type of socio-spatial structure creating several problems.

Some are related to the disruption of a landscape, with a large scale structure that is not spatially related, affecting the surrounding ecological structures and other territory qualities. Incompatible uses, such as industrial areas, rubbish disposals, water generation and treatment, among others, is detrimental to both: the new inhabitants that have difficulties with these types neighbors, and to the productive landscapes that find an irruption in their functioning (Brenner, 2016). Also, despite being made to supply the housing demand from the city, they are disconnected from it; which means complications of accessibility to transport and other services. This fact diminishes the life quality of those who live there and overloads the capacity of the city systems as they have to expand to these areas (Foley & Scott, 2012). Another, is the fact of the low flexibility of the spaces makes it harder for the creation of affections that allow to develop identity with the place, creating rapid deterioration of the projects both on the urban/landscape scale and in the architectural one.

Part of the explanation to these type of situations, rely on the way Colombian planning policies, both for territory and housing, approach to normative. The rural is understood as the space of agro-industrial production and the area of expansion of the urban realm (Ministerio del Interior y de Justicia, 2011), leading an almost exclusive economical view of its development. Same approach taken for housing, where the focus is the number of objects produced and reducing spatial quality to construction quality (Fique, 2006).

Despite these negative circumstances are clear, these projects are the largest production of housing in rural territories and they rely on, government's support through: normative, subsidies, and sometimes even promoting this type of projects as it happens in Bogotá's region with projects like Tres Quebradas, Lagos de Torca and Ciudad Verde, to name a few (Rueda, 2019).

Ciudad Verde, is a clear example of this situation. The project is located near the borders of the urban area of Bogotá but is surrounded by plots that are still used for small scale agricultural activities and water bodies, facts the project ignored to suddenly replace the rural land with 326 hectares of urban development containing 25.000 habitational units, all of them designed by big construction companies (Flórez, 2009). The problems caused by the lack of urban infrastructure have been such that informal transports have appeared as well as informal commercial situations, in addition to riots to obtain government's attention for their needs (Redacción Periodismo Público, 2016).



Fig. 1. Localization of Ciudad Verde (yellow) on the borders of Bogotá and Soacha. The project clearly contrasts with the urban fabric and the rural territories. (Adapted by Omar Campos from, Google Maps, 2019)

3.2. Stereotyped rural housing

The other part of the phenomenon regarding the not so rural practices, present situations of architecture competitions, government housing for peasants, and some independent initiatives from architecture offices. Their problem is that they are also disconnected from rurality, despite their good intentions of trying an opposite approach to the one from construction companies. The reductionist approach from this group is to try to deliberately do rural housing, but they actually relate to a stereotyped rurality, despite many of its features are already part of the urban realm.

This view of rurality is one where rural is equal to a farmland meadow, thus is synonym of calm, emptiness, farm life, a few productive animals, small crops and in some degree wilderness (Marinic, 2013). Is a view of the rural as the opposite of city, where the former is the natural and the latter the artificial (Terada, 2017). To sum up, is a utopic bucolic view, an aesthetic and oversimplified one; result of a disciplinarian binary view of the relation urban-

rural. These misinterpretations become more visible in a territory like Colombia where there is, not just an immense diversity of productive landscapes, but also, many different types of ecosystems and cultural contexts (Arroyo, 2019; Etter, 1993).

Of course, not all the practices stereotype in the same degree. Some are closer to a broader view of rurality that include an ecosystemic approach, the variety of rural situations and productive landscapes, but they still fall short to integrate with a notion of economy and territory beyond the architectural object.

The broken relation comes in many forms. Materiality, scale, the interpretation of the notion of production, spatial distribution, are some. The material choices many times fail in their rural feasibility, either because the material itself or the workforce to install it does not make it to the territories and it is only available in the cities. General design features like scale and spatial distribution are also points thought from an urban point of view and overlook facts like the disaggregation of the housing in rurality, either by environmental reasons or productive ones (Jimenez Rosas & Verduzco Chirino, 2009), the scale of the crops and animal spaces reveals an idea where the inhabitants only produce for themselves, which translates in one more small room of the house.

The competition for the design of Prototype Habitational Sustainable and Productive Units for Rurality in Bogotá, organized by the Colombian Society of Architects (2019), one of the many that have appeared on the subject in the last ten years, is an example of how the problems comes from the brief of the projects and they are expanded onto the designs¹. The laureate projects presented flaws on the design that included: materials that were either too expensive or impossible to install in rural areas, cattle in a Paramo ecosystem where its productivity is low and risks the environment, crops of sizes that were unable to be productive as economic activity. These depict an aesthetic perspective of landscape.

However, despite the lack of connection to actual rural conditions, is worth to mention that these types of rural housing are making an effort to address a relatively new problem to architecture. The rural has become a theme in contemporary architecture design in the last 15 years approximately, which means, that most of those whom are working on these housing projects had never faced this type of context before, nor in their formation nor in their practices; and they have very few examples to refer to at the moment of the development of proposals. Seems natural that within time, they will evolve into more accurate projects, losing the clichés, and hopefully, bringing into account participative

processes and interdisciplinary teams that are more used to working on, and consequently know better, rural environments.

3.3. Political dwellings

The role of the State, or the lack of it, is key to understand deep rurality. It explains abandonment of several areas due to low economical attractiveness and/or difficulties to access. This translates into lack of infrastructure and economic development, fact that leads to territories where there is no quality of life, nor employment, thus people have to reach out to illegal economies to make a living. Another outcome, is the missing of State institutionality, which facilitates the presence of illegal groups and they end up controlling large portions of the land and consequently the people that dwell in them (Moreno, 2018; Reyes, 2011). Both situations are reflected in the contemporary production of rural housing.

As discussed, the production of the spatiality of the rural habitat is in clear relation with context situations beyond the spatial realm like economics, geography, and in some particular cases politic. Those are cases where the dwelling is correlated to a strong socio-political situation that forces and shapes the space. Two types of dwelling arise within this particularity: the settlements for former guerrilla members and the housing of drug laboratories.

The first situation, settlements for former guerrilla members, is a product of the Peace Agreements of the Colombian government with the guerrilla FARC (Mesa de Conversaciones, 2017). The idea was to gather the former fighters in places that would evolve into settlements where they would develop legal economical activities to support themselves and slowly reincorporate into the civilian life. These places are called ETCR, from the Spanish acronym for Territorial Spaces for Capacitation and Reincorporation. The ETCR appear in large empty plots in zones near the areas where the guerrilla used to have influence. Thus, they are several and they are spread around the country (Agencia para la Reincorporación y la Normalización, 2019).

The ETCR spatial features are configured by situations related to the political context and the origin of the new inhabitants and the community construction. The rapid emergence of these settlements is response to the political process, however, the inner spatial situation happens because these people are a community forged by political factors (Botero, 2017; Valenzuela, 2018) with rural origins (Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2017), thus they know both the territory and rurality, becoming active actors in its spatial production, as it is usual in traditional rural housing. Consequently, their spatial organization and inhabitation, show an

idea of dwelling beyond the housing because their communal spaces and the places for the productive areas are integral part of it, and through it they embrace one of the features of rural housing: the house is beyond the architectural object, it is the territory as well, and the economical feature is a strong element in the composition. Thus, in these cases, is impossible to talk about the object of the house as the habitational space; it is the whole settlement (Gerald, 2017). It is a socio-political way of dwelling in the rurality.

Another politically related type of rural dwelling are the ones inside drug production laboratories. These are large scale laboratories where Drug Traffic Organizations process different types of drugs and require the workers to live there. It is a temporary dwelling as the existence of the laboratory itself is ephemeral (McDermott, 2018). The fact that people live in areas configured by political situation as the war on drugs, derived from the weak presence of the State institutions and legal profitable economies, bring to attention a dwelling phenomenon that have very specific characteristics like hiding, illicit activities, temporary living (O'Neill, 2016) but still shows strong understanding of dwell in the rural space as relation to an economic activity, knowledge of the territory, as this infrastructure deals with features like closeness to water bodies, use of local materials, international borders, access to illegal crops and difficult access from legal infrastructure (Moreno, 2018).



Fig. 2. ETCR in Chocó department. (Agencia para la Reincorporación y la Normalización, 2019)

4. CONCLUSION

The contemporary situation of rural dwelling in Colombia demonstrates a consolidated phenomenon of transformation (when compared with the traditional situations),

characterized by the diversity of spatial situations and approaches, that are both formal and informal. Despite the variety, is clear that formal knowledge and its housing production needs to evolve and move beyond the stereotypes and the financial perspective to better understand rurality. In this context the informal political approaches provide a solid input that must be valued.

This evolution needs to be quick in fronts like normative, public policy, and architectural approach, to be able to foreseen situations that are already happening and will have spatial impact in the near future of rurality as the inclusion of new technologies and big data in rural development and the strength of the economic value of ecological services. All this shall also become a tool to pressure changes in the public agenda regarding rural areas and housing to include spatial approaches in the development of future policy.

This changes are also an opportunity for spatial disciplines as architecture, urbanism and design, to strength their design processes beyond the final product, with the incorporation of other types of knowledge, other types of users and interdisciplinary work. This will benefit their practices in general, not only in the rural projects.

Rurality and housing are the present and future of spatial disciplines, and the decision taken by them to address these urgent themes will be crucial to the way societies defined the relations among territories in the near future.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Many of the briefs represent the inverse migration phenomena (Costello, 2009), thus portrait an urban ideal of rurality.

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