

## 1

# Crystallising Decolonial Praxis: *Minga* and *Convite* as City Making Otherwise

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## Abstract

While decolonial debates are mushrooming in humanities and social science, the field of urban design still needs to uncover the territorial manifestations of decolonial practices to reframe its own disciplinary premises. Engaging with space co-production in Latin America urges us to learn from the long-term spatial practices of solidarity and self-management that gave rise to popular neighbourhoods. This essay offers a joint reflection on two Latin American city-making practices from a decolonial lens. Drawing on our research on the urban legacy of the Andean *minga* and the Colombian *convite* in shaping the cities of Quito and Medellín respectively, we analyse their organising principles, plural uses, potentials, and the risks of co-optation. To spatially visualise the impacts that multiple *mingas* had in shaping urban space, the case of Comité del Pueblo in Quito will be introduced. While for Medellín we will use the case of the trajectory of the neighbourhood of Moravia. We argue that *mingas* and *convites* have shaped cities and crystallise decolonial ways of knowing, planning and (re) producing space.

**Keywords:** decolonial, solidarity, self-management, Quito, Medellín

## Introduction

Urban Design's history of complicity with the spatial distribution of privilege and the universalisation of the Western canon of city-making urges to be recalibrated (Ortiz, 2020). We can learn from the Latin American modernity/coloniality project that calls for de-linking from the master narrative of the West. From a cultural studies perspective, this project proposes an epistemic disobedience that rejects the hubris of the zero-point epistemology of the West (Maldonado -Torres, 2007). In a similar light, Sousa Santos (2014) suggests that the emancipatory transformation of the world may follow narratives that are not contemplated by the western tradition. That is why, Sousa Santos proposes to engage with an anti-hegemonic ecology of knowledges to embark on the unlearning of the coloniality embedded in the disciplines as we know them.

Integrating our discourse in the current discussion of humanities and social science, this contribution, through the urban design lens, sees how some territorial manifestations can be read as decolonial practices. This engagement with space co-production in Latin America urges us to learn from the long-term spatial practices of solidarity and self-management that gave rise to popular neighbourhoods. This essay offers a joint reflection on two Latin American city-making practices from a decolonial lens. Winkler (2018) proposes to focus on resistant texts to further the decolonisation of urban planning and design. She describes resistant texts as the ones that "resist dominant narratives in ways that are unfamiliar, or entirely foreign, to the untrained eye...they resemble a form of epistemic disobedience that produces an uncomfortable and oft-unacknowledged incompetence" (Winkler, 2018). When thinking how cities are produced and can be imagined otherwise, we propose to focus on a particular kind of resistant texts that are the locus of anti-hegemonic ecology of knowledges. We argue that *mingas* and *convites* have shaped cities and crystalise decolonial ways of knowing, planning and reproducing space.

Differently from other decolonial studies' contributions, where the critique relies on the Eurocentric epistemology (Makaran & Gaussens, 2020), this chapter attempts to construct mechanisms of analysis and intelligibility of different historical times. It goes beyond the production and fortification of just decolonial theory, bringing to light empiric investigations. Drawing on our research on the urban legacy of the Andean *minga* and the Colombian *convite* in shaping the cities of Quito and Medellín respectively, we analyse their organising principles, plural uses, potentials, and the risks of co-optation. To spatially visualise the impacts that multiple *mingas* had in shaping urban space, the case of Comité del Pueblo in Quito will be introduced, while for Medellín we will use the case of the trajectory of the neighbourhood of Moravia. By illustrating organisational and spatial legacies, the contribution informs about past and current city's challenges.

## Case 1: *Mingas* in Quito

### What is a *minga*:

*Minga* is an Andean communal and collective form of self-management and self-construction at the base of countless rural and urban Ecuadorian space transformations. *Mingas*, in all their multiple forms, part from Testori's PhD thesis (2020)<sup>1</sup>, have been investigated by social scientists and anthropologists only<sup>2</sup>, and the discussions have covered its rural applications. Such contributions aim to remedy the systematic documentation gap around the role of *mingas* in the transformation of urban space. The word *minga* specifically originates from the Quechua term *minccacuni'* and literally means requesting help by promising something in return (Masmiquel, 2015; Garavaglia, 1997). It is precisely one of many systems of community work and reciprocity where people do not expect anything in return apart from collective benefit<sup>3</sup>. Through this complex practice of solidarity and self-help, bridges have been erected, water channeled, mountain deforested, streets paved, etc.

*Mingas'* characteristics and habits have changed much throughout history and according to Guevara (1957) they were practiced since the conformation of the *Ayllu*<sup>4</sup>. During the Inca conquest of Ecuador in the XV century, the notion of *minga* was employed for the realisation of sacrifices to the King Sun: the used



Figure 1. Comité del pueblo de Quito, 1973. Source: private archive of Carlos Arias.

term was *Mit'a* and consisted of a mandatory service for all married men and employed as a labour tax to the Empire. During the Spanish colonial period, the indigenous labour force was also exploited, but to build roads, churches and extract silver to finance European wars. Moving forward in time, even after the Ecuadorian independence in 1830, profit was taken from the indigenous people to work collectively in the *haciendas* (big private estates) in exchange for firewood, water and pasture. This lasted until the third Agrarian Reform in 1973, when the *hacendados* transformed their lands into capitalist enterprises and the peasants finally had the right to freely dispose of their own labour time. *Minga's* characteristics and habits have changed much along history, but the unifying point that connects its transformations from pre-colonial times can be found in its many re-interpretations and often co-optations.

### A propitious momentum and the case of *Comité del Pueblo*

The 1970s represented for Ecuador a real social and economic turning point. It was a period of big reforms, Victor Ibarra's dictatorship ended and oil started to be exploited nationally, bringing to Quito and Guayaquil extraordinary investments in infrastructure and industry (Testori, 2016). The Ecuadorian rural population, proved by centuries of exploitation, saw in the economic boom their chance of redemption. This induced massive waves of migration from rural to urban areas. Finding a job in the spreading industries was not the real dilemma for this newly resettled population. The greatest concern for newcomers was the scarce housing market, due to the lack of social housing and urban facilities. These caused the rise of spontaneous uncontrolled human settlements predominantly in the peripheral areas of the capital.

An enigmatic case is the one of *Comité del Pueblo*, a neighbourhood of Quito that today counts almost 50.000 inhabitants and that was born in 1973. It was promoted by the Communist Marxist Leninist Party of Ecuador (PCMLE), which through a massive political campaign to recruit members and money, and a contested legal escamotage, it was able to acquire a land in the north-east of the capital. The affiliated families which complied with the requirement and in need of housing, were a total of 4,500 to a piece of the land of together 140 hectares.

The movement sought technical advice from the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanisms of the Universidad Central (FAU) and they were asked to design a new neighbourhood for all the members. The study and design process were done collectively, either on site or in the architecture faculty. In the second case, the future settlers were invited to the faculty to take part to the TISDYC workshops<sup>5</sup> Questionnaires hanging on walls were identifying the families' necessities and abilities to work collectively. Students and teachers were not asked to draw just some architectural details, but to participate in an enormous machine of design, citizens' involvement and physical construction of the neighbourhood. The effective work started in mid-November 1973 and the plots were delivered to the

families on the 24<sup>th</sup>. Of January of the next year; a tour de force that lasted only two months.

*Mingas* in the study phase were done to map the topography and measure the site. When on site, students and inhabitants were divided into twelve zones – the same ones *Comité del Pueblo* is divided by today – and through *mingas*, they physically implemented all the work, including clearing, and flattening grade and tracing roads (Fassin 1992). *Mingas* worked during weekends, day and sometimes night; they were attended by both men, but mostly women. All future *Comité del Pueblo* inhabitants always had to prove to the leaders of their attendance, not just to *mingas*, but also to general political meetings in the city centre (Fassin, 1992; Borja, 2011). It is also relevant to point out that being autonomous from the State, by decision or by force, required enormous personal and collective efforts, time, and resources to provide missing services that in other cases the State shared equally between all citizens. Moreover, under an economic system that requires people to devote most of their time to a job, finding this resource to meet community needs was extremely challenging for some people (Fassin, 1992).

The design of the settlement foresaw equal plots for every family, different blocks of facilities matching every zone and was reachable by walking distance. By the time the communist party left the settlement, competitive forces soon came to action and nowadays *Comité del Pueblo* is characterised by exaggerated densities, extreme narrow streets, constructions on slopes, and lack of public spaces. With the eyes of an architect or an urbanist, particularly if from a European perspective, it is very easy to criticise these places: either for their aesthetics, the often-precarious structure of the settlement, or the little coherence between the building styles. But, as Raul Zibechi wrote: "the classist categories, the blind trust in the forces of progress, the application of concepts coined for other realities, have distorted the reading of those spaces where the popular sectors oscillate between rebellion, the dependence of caudillos and the search for benefits from the State. It insists on considering the slums/ borderlands/marginal areas as a kind of anomaly, almost always a problem" (Zibechi, 2007). This to say that a decolonial urban study, should not just consider the contemporary outcome of an urban evolution, but should better make a deeper effort in understanding its multi-faceted socio-spatial evolution.

## Case 2: *Convites* in Medellín

### What is a *convite*:

"A *convite* is an encounter to build paths with creative potential. These paths activate and rejuvenate bonds of trust that weave the community"

María García, Inhabitant Medellín

*Convite* in Spanish means an invitation to a gathering, to feast and celebrate. In the Colombian city of Medellín, *convite* is a social and cultural practice, as well as a technological tool, used by the urban poor to ensure, by themselves, access to a life with dignity in settings of precarity, scarce resources and in the absence of the state (Ortiz & Millan, 2019). The urbanisation of the peripheries was the result of resistance and popular organisation. In this process new socio-spatial identities were generated amidst new tensions and disputes (Perez Fonseca, 2018). Medellín became a paradigmatic model of urban renaissance in the beginning of the XXI century, after a deep crisis caused by deindustrialisation, narco-trafficking and extreme urban violence (Ortiz, 2019). In this context, *convites* became a community-based experimental practice to undertake neighbourhood upgrading, that comes into existence when community members commit their time, knowledge and skills –on a volunteering basis– to develop small or medium, achievable common goals. The *convites* become the “most significant tool of collective action and intervention of the territory by the community, allowing the exchanges that take place there, forge feelings of identity, create strong awareness of belonging and motivate a large number of individual and collective behaviours” (Rios-Castro, et al, 2011). The *convites* have been a catalyst of dreams and stories. It has been a space for dialogue, but also for tension, as is proper in the framework of social relations. These actions range from a roof repair to the building of road accesses, to the assessment and mitigation of environmental risks in the community.



**Figure 2.** *Convite* in Moravia in the 1980s. Source: Archive Community Cultural Centre of Moravia.

The *convite* is a praxis of solidarity in *barrios populares* based on self-management and a singular territorial organisational logic. The Klan Ghetto Popular (KGP) describes the role of the *convite* as “resistance, protection and joy” (2020). This three-layered nature is intertwined (Ortiz & Yopez, 2020): *Convite* as a strategy of resistance is enacted to foster social mobilisation for the right to stay put and collective strength to face militarised evictions or exclusionary interventions and narratives led by the state; *convite* as a mutual help practice operate in the construction and maintenance of communal infrastructures, attend disasters, and provide support for caretaking and basic livelihoods; *convite* as a space for cultural celebration brings people together to shape the living heritage of the place, showcasing different symbolic representations and talents in the public space and using collective meals as a reward. *Convites* are a vital collective action strategy to co-produce space. They have different roles depending upon the phases of neighbourhood transformation: foundation, infill and consolidation (Samper, 2014). Nonetheless, *convites* all have in common moments of collective decision about the gathering, communication, social organisation, food provision, storytelling, physical labour, material delivery of a collective good or support, and celebration.

#### Moravia as the byproduct of *convites*<sup>6</sup>

Moravia represents a site of urban learning about the multiplicity and potentials of self-construction and self-management. Moravia is “a neighbourhood of migrants” originated due to forced displacements, the violence of war and social injustices. It is a diverse territory in its cultural expressions which are reflected in the forms of its urban tissue and the close interaction experienced in its sidewalks and spaces. The self-construction of houses, aqueducts and roads, evidences the transformation of the territory was made through *convites*. The neighbourhood of Moravia is distinguished by its central location within the city of Medellín, it is one of the most densely populated neighbourhoods in the country, for its social mobility, for its process of spatial transformation and for its rich cultural diversity (Alcaldía de Medellín, 2005). It is a popular neighbourhood, with diverse forms of use and spatial appropriation.

During the early 1950s, Moravia’s first settlers came to inhabit the territories on the banks of the Medellín River, on both sides of the track of the old Railroad (Ortiz & Yopez, 2020). In the foundation phase *convites* are mainly used for the land preparation and plot division as well as the self-provision of public services –electricity, water supply network in community aqueducts of non-potable water-. These services were provided through illegal or pirate connections to the general network. In this phase, the dwellings are made of precarious or not very durable materials that are recycled from clandestine dumps. Over time, the settlement was consolidated with the progressive arrival of new families, with the sector known as *El Zancudo*, Fidel Castro and Camilo Torres beginning to

take shape. The Priest Vicente Mejia in 1965 started working with the community and promoted an organised planning of the settlement envisioning future facilities. However, *convites* at this stage not only contribute to shape material infrastructures but also catalyse initial social-political organisation to fight the right to stay put and start planning the future consolidation of the site. In 1968 the Central Committee of *Tugurianos* (i.e. slum dwellers committee) was created and used *convites* to support activities of mutual help for the provision of food, care and protection against police brutality to confront evictions.

The infill stage was propelled by the canalisation of the Medellín River in 1972 that freed up land in the area to be used for new housing. In this stage, more inhabitants arrive, and a clear demarcation of blocks gets defined while the dwellings start being built with more durable materials but remain mainly one-story constructions. Through *convites* *El Bosque* sector was formed. In 1977 the Mayor's Office of Medellín declared some land in Moravia to be of public interest and set up the municipal landfill. The landfill (*morro de basuras*) became a source of economic income through recycling and a site for new shelters. Despite its difficult territorial conditions, the sectors of *Casco de Mula*, *La Divisa*, and *La Paralela* were self-built around and on the landfill. *Convites* were used to gain accessibility to the neighbourhood sectors by means of building tertiary network systems such as roads, stairs, driveways or paved sidewalks. In this stage inhabitants also negotiated with state and non-state actors including public universities and the catholic church for the provision of basic facilities like day care centres or schools. In 1984 the municipality declared a sanitary emergency and the dump was closed. Many families that lived off recycling became unemployed. Nonetheless, the advocacy for the defence of the territory of the Central Committee of *Tugurianos* remained not only to perform the self-management of different spheres but also the political lobby to be recognised by authorities and qualify for neighbourhood upgrading programmes. This Committee navigated the heightened violence in Moravia and in Medellín at large, that was marked by the emergence of the first criminal gangs, racketeering (*vacunas*), drug trafficking and the assassination of social leaders. In response to gang action, another armed actor appeared in the territory: the Popular Militias of the Aburrá Valley.

After years of struggle, Moravia was legally recognised as a neighbourhood of Medellín in 1993, marking a turning point for the consolidation phase. *Convites* are pivotal for the consolidation of the neighbourhood. Collective action gets intertwined with patronage tactics that oftentimes support the legalisation process of the connection to utilities networks or expansion of existing networks and initial security of tenure steps. In this stage the process of densification requires *convites* for repair activities and risk mitigation works. However, the consolidation process cannot be disentangled from the broader socio-political context as the trust and solidarity bonds are crucial to cope with conflict and

the incursion of armed actors in the neighbourhood. As a result of a negotiation process with the local and national government, the first urban demobilisation of militias in the country took place in 1994. The strong social mobilisation and organisation is the backbone of resistance in Moravia that allowed that in parallel to the demobilisation process, the Work Group for Peace and Coexistence was set up, resulting in the Plan of Development and Coexistence of Moravia. *Convites* here were also instrumental for peacebuilding.

During the 2000s, after the approval of the strategic spatial plan of the city in 1999, the local State was actively involved in the formulation of the Macro-Project for the Integral Upgrading of Moravia in 2004. This plan encompassed a significant urban transformation, resettlement, housing relocation and the construction of community facilities. During this period many families living in *El Morro* were resettled to other areas of the city. This urban transformation proposal saw the inauguration of the Moravian Cultural Development Centre (2008), which links art with community encounters. That same year, Moravia's Garden, located in *El Morro*, began to be strengthened as a strategy to recover the soil of the old landfill. In this stage, *convites* decrease in frequency<sup>7</sup> although remain relevant for the political negotiation with state institutions for the implementation of neighbourhood upgrading programs or disputes around gentrification and eviction threads. With the increasing number of inhabitants exacerbates the weakening and fragmentation of neighbourhood relations and as a result a gradual decline of *convite* (Triana Pulido, 2019). It also influences the interference of monetary relations in the organisational processes, supplantation of the meeting through outsourcing of the material construction and the community organisation itself; interference of politicians and external organisations such as NGOs or state organisations that generated processes of bureaucratic corruption and political propaganda that coopts *convites* (Triana Pulido, 2019).

## Conclusions

This essay has argued for considering *mingas* and *convites* as spatial practices that crystallise decolonial ways of knowing, planning and city-making. These practices constitute resistant texts that allow to ground the empirical evidence of anti-hegemonic ecology of knowledges at play. We illustrated how *mingas* and *convites* require collective intelligence, multiple knowledges, material resources, labour and will to contribute to sustain collective life. They are sustained by values such as solidarity, sharing, reciprocity, mutual support and in general, collective well-being. *Mingas* and *convites* along history, without romanticising or praising them, can be defined as decolonial practices, because they are processes of participatory city-making that are culturally and context-based specific (Peattie, 1990; Lombard, 2013; Watson, 2009; Connelly, 2010). They

alike become urban legacies, not just of participation, but of co-production of services and knowledge.

The originality of the cases opens unexplored paths for the social role of the urban designer. These cases question the basic assumptions about who does design the city and whose knowledge counts for imagining the city we aspire to? This perspective resonates with relinquishing top-down impositions, involving directly citizens and learning from bottom-up practices, are principles ever more recalled in contemporary institutional contexts (Cruz, 2015) and the *longue duree* of incremental city-making. Studying places as Comité del Pueblo or Moravia align with Arturo Escobar's statement: "borderlands are the spaces par excellence where novel understandings and practices of design from ontological and autonomous perspectives might most effectively and radically take place" (Escobar 2017). With all their contradictions, these communities show us alternative ways of embedded city-making. They demonstrate how collective spaces can be co-created and collectively maintained.

## Notes

- 1 The thesis has been awarded with a special mention at the biannual international Manuel Solá de Morales prize.
- 2 A rare book is the one of Dario Guevara in 1957 titled 'Las Mingas del Ecuador. Origenes, tránsito y supervivencia'. Other contributions on the topic are Faas (2015), Klaufus & Mitzman (2012), Mayer (2002) and Ramirez (1980).
- 3 Geographically speaking, the word minga has an equivalent meaning in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Perú and Chile. In the last two countries it is known as minka and mingaco respectively, whereas in Brazil it is comparable to adjunto and mutirão (Lozano 2013; Masmiquel 2015). In other contexts, such as Colombia, the term minga is also employed by the Indigenous Movement to organize mass protests and marches for social justice or adopted to describe a collective way of empowering knowledge (Schmitt 2010; Levalle 2011; Gleghorn 2013; Quince 2016). Other practices of collective work in the world exist, such as in Rwanda, where there is the umuganda, in Haiti the kombat, in Uzbekistan the khashar. But communal work and mutual aid are not limited to the Global South, such for example in Finland the talkoot, in Ireland the meitheal, in Baque Country the auzolan, etc.
- 4 The Ayllu is the pre-Inca and Inca entity of territorial organization. It constituted a self-sufficient political, social, economic and religious unit that brought together several family groups related to one another. Ownership and resources were managed collectively.
- 5 Acronym of Taller de Investigación Social, Diseño y Comunicación (The Research, Design and Communication Workshop)
- 6 The content of this section draws from the Living Heritage Atlas of Moravia edited by Ortiz & Yezpe, 2020 and Samper's (2014) phases of neighbourhood self-building in Medellín.
- 7 In times of crisis, like the pandemic, *convites* for mutual aid around care and food provision were reactivated.

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