– CRITICAL URBAN PEDAGOGY: *Convites* as Sites of Southern Urbanism, Solidarity Construction and Urban Learning

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Abstract

Learning from the pedagogical potentials of Southern city-making practices is imperative to foster emancipatory urban learning settings. However, the ways in which urban learning spaces beyond professional settings operate and how Southern urbanism practices constitute new critical pedagogies are poorly understood. We draw on research about urban learning on 'slum upgrading' in the city of Medellín (Colombia), a benchmark in dealing in tandem with informality and urban violence, to analyze the pedagogical potentials of convites. Convites *are an essential sociospatial mechanism of self-build settlements rooted in solidarity networks that initiate collective action and celebration through public cooking. This practice of makeshift community kitchens led by women became the backbone of the response to the scarcities caused by the pandemic in self-built neighborhoods in Latin America. In this article we ask what Southern urbanism and critical pedagogy can learn from* convites. *We then analyze the ways in which* convites *combine community kitchens as learning environments, the use of collective storytelling as a learning device, and collective action through networked solidarities. We argue that critical urban pedagogy is a situated pedagogy derived from everyday relations of place, body and materiality infused by memory and articulated by storytelling.*

Introduction

'*Convite* is a sacred word; it is when the community gets together to work for the common good based on a dialogue of knowledges. A *convite* without a community pot and food is not a *convite*.'
Cielo, community leader, Moravia, Medellín

'The community pot is a symbol of unity, of collective and collaborative work, a sign of solidarity and reciprocity, a sign that we help and care for each other. People contribute what they have, either a plantain or a potato—all are valued.'
Fernando, activist, Medellín

'Practically this neighborhood is already all self-built, because we ourselves when we arrived, through *convites*, we started to flatten the land; we carried stones to level the land to make a space for the houses.'
Ada, community leader, Nueva Jerusalén, Medellín

A *convite* is an essential sociospatial mechanism to self-build settlements rooted in solidarity to initiate collective action and celebration through public cooking (see Figure 1). The grounded practice of the makeshift community kitchen became the

FIGURE 1 Public cooking in a *convite* in the neighborhood of Moravia (*source*: Community Archive, Moravia Cultural Center, reproduced by permission of Centro de Desarrollo Cultural Moravia)

backbone of the communities' response to the scarcities resulting from the pandemic in self-built neighborhoods in Latin America (Duque *et al.*, 2020). The emotions Cielo, Fernando and Ada expressed when explaining what a *convite* is and what it does convey the significance of this practice. Conceptualizing and learning from collective practices that have created entire areas of cities is central to a Southern urbanism agenda. In this article we align ourselves with a growing interest in recalibrating the geographies of knowledge production and resituating the epicenters of urban theories (Roy, 2009), inasmuch as the Southern urban critique 'is an ontological position against universality and asserting the subjectivity and locatedness of all theory' (Lawhon and Truelove, 2020: 11). If place matters in shaping urban thought, then we need to anchor our understanding of the myriad practices of city making, particularly those regarding the self-production of space of the urban majority.

Our focus on *convites* allows us to expose the dislocation between sites where pedagogy of the urban has been discussed, and historical sites of city making in Southern cities. In this article we draw from the research project 'COiNVITE: Activating Urban Learning for Slum Upgrading', which was aimed at finding alternative spaces and methodologies to reframe the debate on slum upgrading policies and the role of urban learning around the city of Medellín, a city considered a global benchmark for tackling issues of informal settlements (Ortiz, 2014). Within the Southern urban critique several authors concur that 'understanding the affective game of everyday urbanism' (Simone and Pieterse, 2017: 56), bringing attention to 'incremental urbanism and tactical learning' (McFarlane, 2011: 23) and focusing on the 'rhythms of endurance' (Simone, 2019: 10) are imperatives for working towards the wellbeing of the majority of urban dwellers.

Critical pedagogy involves modes of engagement as political praxis grounded in people's subjectivities, histories and struggles (Freire, 1993). Southern city-making struggles such as repair, maintenance and squatting become pedagogical settings

(Walsh, 2018; Bhan, 2019). In this way, *convites* enact 'a politics of saying-by-doing—a politics that is related to the Latin American communitarian-popular tradition whereby politics is a shared task to sustain life' (Riero *et al.*, 2021: 25).[1] In this article we explore the following question: What can Southern urbanism and critical pedagogy learn from *convites*? To address this question, we link current debates on urban learning, critical pedagogy and Southern urbanism by proposing the notion of critical urban pedagogy and expanding the repertoire of pedagogical strategies drawn from Southern city-making practices. We argue that critical urban pedagogy is a situated pedagogy derived from everyday relations of place, body and materiality that are infused by memory and articulated by storytelling.

Urban learning and critical pedagogy have been addressed mainly in critical urban geography, education studies and urban planning. In urban planning, critical pedagogy is invoked when dealing with curricula designs for fostering social justice education and strategies for engaged scholarship and service learning (Schön, 1983; Sletto, 2010; Angotti *et al.*, 2011; Sletto, 2014; Porter, 2015; Sen *et al.*, 2017; Sartorio and Thomas, 2019). Similarly, debates on critical pedagogy in education research focus on the link between teaching and learning in school environments and counter-institutional settings to achieve radical democracy (Kress, 2011; Alexander, 2018; Shih, 2018; Hattam, 2020). Conversely, critical urban geography offers an approach to urban learning through the connections between people, materials and space (McFarlane, 2011). Urban learning in planning and policy foregrounds the multi-stakeholder interactions in institutional planning systems and cultures using social and collaborative learning approaches. Social learning is, at the same time, considered to be a process resulting from the interaction of urban actors that leads to constructive outcomes, and regarded as an agenda of planning practices themselves (Gerlak and Heikkila, 2011; Davoudi, 2015; von Schönfeld *et al.*, 2019). In contrast, education research relates to learning in the city and the multiple devices embedded in urban settings that are understood as public pedagogies (Sandlin *et al.*, 2011; Facer and Buchczyk, 2019; Robin *et al.*, 2019). Overall, these bodies of literature frame the city as pedagogy, as learning infrastructure, and as a learning machine.

While the existing literature sheds light on multiple facets of how urban learning operates, and on the myriad uses of critical pedagogy, what is less explored is how urban learning spaces beyond professional settings operate, how critical pedagogy can be articulated in urban studies, and the role of critical pedagogy in urban learning. Urban learning in planning is characterized by peer-to-peer tactics that are necessary but not sufficient to explain the memory of places, people and institutions, the trade-offs of policy interventions, myriad social actors' contributions to city change, and the innovations found in de facto community planning. Overlooking these aspects reinforces an asymmetrical perspective on urban learning and reproduces technocratic perspectives of city making and authoritative knowledge. We focus on the nexus between Southern urbanism and critical pedagogy through the analysis of *convites* as a fruitful setting to address these overlooked aspects. In this article we seek to reveal the pedagogical potential of Southern practices of city making and offer the concept of critical urban pedagogy as a basis for fostering more emancipatory urban learning settings.

The article proceeds in six further sections. In the next section we set out the relationship between urban learning, critical pedagogy and Southern practice to show how current debates inform our definition of critical urban pedagogy. The third section provides the background to Medellín's urban transformation to situate the relevance of *convites* and explain the methodological strategies used. In the fourth section we explain how the *convite* operates by describing how it is performed, what principles underpin

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1   All Spanish extracts were translated into English by the authors.

it, and for what aims it is used. This section also illustrates the empirical grounds that inspire the use of *convites* as part of a new vocabulary for 'Southern practice' (Bhan, 2019). In the fifth section we show the pedagogical lessons learnt and used in the COiNVITE project. We show how *convites* combine the functions of community kitchens as learning environments, of collective storytelling as a learning device, and of collective action as networked solidarities. Here too we frame the notion of critical urban pedagogy through radical togetherness, dialogue with other ways of knowing, territorial memory, and situated hope. We outline the implications of our findings for Southern planning practices in the concluding section.

Southern urbanism, critical pedagogy and urban learning

In this section we group together three streams of literature that helped us uncover the nexus between city making, critical pedagogy and urban learning. The subsections that follow draw from debates on urban planning, urban studies, critical geography and education studies.

–   Learning in cities and with city makers

Learning in planning and policy foregrounds the pluri-actor interactions of institutional planning systems and cultures using social and collaborative learning approaches, mostly in cities of the global North. Social learning is at the same time considered a process resulting from the interaction of urban actors that leads to constructive outcomes and an agenda of planning practices. These outcomes demonstrate the key role of narrative work in engaging stakeholders (Quick, 2018). For von Schönfeld *et al.* (2019: 6) 'interaction is key in the profession and tendencies show that social learning with non-planners will continue to play a significant role in planners' learning processes'. Urban planners and policymakers rely on 'best practices' as heuristic devices to tackle shared challenges, while civil society and grassroots networks exchange experiences of mobilization and political alliances for influencing the decision-making process at multiple levels. Nonetheless, learning processes in planning exhibit a persistent gap concerning the link between learning and policy change (de Jaegher *et al.*, 2010; Gerlak and Heikkila, 2011; Davoudi, 2015; von Schönfeld *et al.*, 2019). Regarding urban policy and planning, international networks of local governments, city-to-city exchanges and peer-to-peer learning are the linchpin strategies for harnessing urban learning that have given rise to a reinvigorated 'city diplomacy' (Musch *et al.*, 2008). This approach often privileges 'expert knowledge' and peer-to-peer exchange and assumes that urban policy can be transferred and blueprints standardized (Moore, 2013; Vainer, 2015; Angotti and Irazábal, 2017). Grassroots and civil society organizations have established horizontal, expansive networks of exchange and solidarity promoting co-creation workshops, community leaders' visits across countries and myriad partnerships (Boonyabancha and Mitlin, 2012; Appadurai, 2001). The rationale and dynamics of those learning processes have been analyzed through the lenses of policy mobility to illustrate the former, while processes of co-production and translocal learning are used to depict the latter.

Conversely, education research delves into learning in and through the city. Educational geographers conceive of the city as a learning infrastructure (Facer and Buchczyk, 2019). The spatial turn in education research has been championed by educational geographers who have made linkages with assemblage and network theory (Gulson and Symes, 2007; Nespor, 2008; Morgan, 2012; Hemingway and Armstrong, 2014). Educational geographers propose questions such as 'How does a city learn? How can this learning contribute to navigating the main shared challenges?', which link de facto city leaders, planners and urban theorists with education researchers. This resonates with emerging work on city networks (Acuto and Leffel, 2021) as pivotal spaces to access peers' experience of learning on similar challenges. A central element of learning

infrastructures is that 'learning must be understood not as an outcome of schools alone, but as a consequence of the enmeshed practices of cultures, communities, and places' (Facer and Buchczyk, 2019: 169) and that learning in the city occurs through 'discursive, material and affective infrastructures' (*ibid*.: 168). Thus, learning is the ongoing product of 'active engagement by users, connectors, and creators' (*ibid*.). The relational approach of both literatures provides complementary insights for understanding urban learning: from planning as a tool to inform governance but limited to pluri-actor interactions in 'professional practices', and from education to frame the multiple practices and spaces embedded in urban settings that enable learning in the city.

–   Critical pedagogies and the urban

Education is understood as a site of the reproduction of oppression. In this context, 'Critical pedagogy is seen as the praxis that can liberate the oppressed' (Porfilio and Ford, 2015: xvii). Critical pedagogy comes from a Marxist tradition that burgeoned in the 1970s and subsequently engaged with feminist and poststructuralist debates. It is not merely reduced to a type of method but is a strategy that contributes to operationalizing commitments to social justice that not only involves academic processes but also includes myriad modes of engagement (*ibid*.). Critical pedagogy is mainly associated with the work of Brazilian thinker Paulo Freire. His work on how to recast the role of education systems to challenge power structures and center the knowledge of the 'oppressed' remains seminal to education debates. Freire's political commitment to work towards a radical democracy had an emphasis on bringing 'students' worldview into the educational process' (Freire, 1993: 77) on the basis that 'pedagogic practice requires an understanding of the genesis of knowledge itself' (*ibid*.: 74). He envisioned a state school system 'that seeks collective knowledge, by articulating critical, scientific knowledge through world experiences' (*ibid*.: 77). In this context, the roles of pedagogy and politics were intertwined in the search for 'a social invention that demands a certain political knowledge, a knowledge born of the struggle for and the reflection on citizenship itself' (*ibid*., 1996: 113). Freire understood state schools as contested sites where the politics of the everyday shaped the links between power and knowledge, and regarded them as a setting for the construction of democratic life through the cultivation of emancipated political subjects. In Freire's view, democracy itself was a 'learnable' process and pedagogy had a role in envisioning how to allow this to occur. He emphasized how the relationships between cognitive and affective learning, theory and practice were 'undichotomizable'. His contributions have transcended the realm of education and have informed other fields that deal with situated expressions to bring about progressive social change.

The notion of pedagogy has sparse articulations in urban studies. For instance, Pinder (2008) explores the pedagogical potential of urban art and activism, while Shields (2008: 714) proposes thinking of cities as pedagogy when presenting the urban elite's strategies to learning across cities. Both authors acknowledge that the pedagogical function of the urban is not fully captured in current literature. In planning education, critical pedagogy is invoked at the interface between activism, service learning and engaged scholarship (Sletto, 2010; 2014; Saija, 2014; Porter, 2015; Campkin and Duijzings, 2016). It is framed as a means to teach social justice (Angotti *et al*., 2011; Sen *et al*., 2017) and has been used to show its links to a reflective professional practice (Schön, 1983; Sartorio and Thomas, 2019). Likewise, education research encompasses long-term discussions that center on the potential of critical pedagogy to explore an educational philosophy that allows a rethinking of the link between the curriculum and people's lifeworld contexts (Giroux, 1996; 2011; Kress, 2011; Shih, 2018; Alexander, 2018; Hattam, 2020). Although in education research the lack of understanding about how learning operates at the city scale (Facer and Buchczyk, 2019) and how the role of space relates to critical pedagogy (Martin, 2017) is acknowledged, there is long-term

engagement with the notion of public pedagogy. Since 1894, education studies have tackled public pedagogy to inquire into learning beyond institutional spaces. Public pedagogy operates in five main settings: '(a) citizenship within and beyond schools, (b) popular culture and everyday life, (c) informal institutions and public spaces, (d) dominant cultural discourses, and (e) public intellectualism and social activism' (Sandlin *et al.*, 2011: 348). These different articulations demonstrate the relevance of critical pedagogy to city making as a crucial setting for social justice struggles.

– Critical pedagogy, urban learning and Southern urbanism

The 'South' is not a fixed geography but rather a prism through which to see the urbanization of uneven development and its multiple empirical configurations. Southern urbanism refers to settings where the urban majority is exposed to a multidimensional vulnerability (Robinson, 2016; Simone and Pieterse, 2017; Bhan, 2019). This is why 'the present rules of the game in urban governance and development do not work in most of the geographies we are concerned with' (Simone and Pieterse, 2017: 10). As Bhan (2019) puts it, Southern urbanism consists of 'speaking from moving and relational peripheries to challenge dominant forms of knowledge and practice, as well as a commitment to remaining rooted in the specific geographies of these peripheries at different historical conjunctures' (*ibid.*: 653). In this project 'a vocabulary of Southern practice must make forms of doing, moving, and acting apparent' (*ibid.*). Southern urban practices, Bhan argues, need to articulate 'squat, repair and consolidate' as new vocabularies to recast the urban and, also, as a way to reimagine new practices to debunk policies and framings that ignore existing sociotechnical processes. For Bhan, 'squat' defines strategies to make spaces inhabitable under the premise of enduring temporariness disconnected from current regulatory systems; 'consolidate' refers to the sociotechnical systems of multiple infrastructures that defy the traditional view of networked systems of delivery; and 'repair' alludes to an easily accessible 'expertise' to restore the material functionality of the habitat. These three practices anchor in urban space how incremental and auto-constructed urbanism operates.

Our understanding of urban learning requires a spatial and critical lens like the one McFarlane (2011: 14) offers, who suggests that the city is an assemblage for learning. For him 'assemblage signals how learning is produced not only simply as a spatial category, output of resultant formation, but through doing, performance and events' (*ibid.*: 17). From this perspective, learning 'is a name for the specific processes, practices and interactions through which knowledge is created, contested and transformed, and how perception emerges and changes' (*ibid.*: 3). Learning the city operates through assemblages of processes of translation, coordination and dwelling in the context of Southern incremental urbanism (*ibid.*: 25). Learning the city recognizes that knowledge is a relational and heterogeneous social process whereby knowledge is learnt through multifarious practices and materialities. Here, translation refers to the mechanisms that authoritative, situated and mobile knowledge navigates through distribution, intermediaries and comparison (*ibid.*: 17). Coordination refers to the collective agency to organize—through mediating structures—different domains of calculation knowledge such as maps, policy conferences, urban forums and so on (*ibid.*: 19). Dwelling emerges through the engagement with the everyday city to draw attention to ways of seeing and inhabiting the world as a sensed and embodied practice (*ibid.*: 21).

It is precisely the incrementality of squatting, consolidating and repairing in their performative dimensions that pedagogy can reveal. Hence our interest in the pedagogical potential of repairs echoes what Bhan (2019: 647) describes as follows: 'thinking about repair as both as practice and pedagogy begins to give us a way to respond to the theoretical disjuncture as we unearth them'. This pedagogical potential resonates with Freire's conceptualization of pedagogy as method and political praxis grounded in people's subjectivities, histories and struggles. Central to critical pedagogy is the notion

of solidarity 'as a condition that links the recognition of situations of injustice, with active promotion and struggles for social justice' (Diaz, 2020: 167). Social struggles are pedagogical settings and, as such, city-making struggles such as repair, maintenance and squatting constitute spaces of 'learning, unlearning, relearning, reflection and action' (Walsh, 2018: 88). Thus, a focus on city-making practices that bring about urban pedagogies has the catalytic potential to expand our knowledge of everyday urbanism and how to frame spaces for urban learning differently.

Grounding learning in Medellín

In this article we focus on Medellín, a globally acclaimed benchmark for tackling, in tandem, urban violence and neighborhood upgrading (Ortiz, 2019; Duque and Ortiz, 2020) to learn about the pedagogical potentials of grassroots urbanism. After the city's deep crisis, which was caused by deindustrialization, narco-trafficking and extreme urban violence, its transformation in the past decade is responding to broader shifts in governance that have actively involved local government, decentralized quasi-public entities, military groups, economic elites and grassroots organizations (Ortiz, 2019). A decisive convergence of extended practices of strategic planning, urban design and public architecture have focused local state interest and public investments in traditionally excluded peripheral neighborhoods (see Figure 2). This convergence of political alliances and institutional arrangements has been depicted as the core of Medellín's urban governance innovation under the label of social urbanism from 2004 to 2014 (Ortiz and Lieber, 2014; Sotomayor, 2015; Maclean, 2015; Franz, 2016). Hence, neighborhood upgrading strategies under a social urbanism policy, underpinned by an iconic architecture of public facilities, an interconnected transit system and strategic urban projects were used as the linchpin strategy to increase accessibility and generate symbolic inclusion.

While learning about neighborhood upgrading in Medellín has prioritized state-led interventions, less is known about the practices that sustained collective life even before the state's 'arrival'. Marginalized communities' histories, memories and actions are key contributors to the urban transformation process from the bottom up, rather than a spontaneous and chaotic set of actions. In this sense, to challenge orthodox urban narratives that argue otherwise, we need to understand the broader urban transformation of the city by recognizing *barrios populares* (informal settlements) as sites of urban planning innovation and their inhabitants' collective agency as crucial for city making. *Convites*, in this context, have been the main community planning and self-management tool to self-build the urban space, and to generate social organization and strengthen community ties. *Convites* are not unique; many Southern city-making practices identified by different names (e.g. *mingas*) are similar. In this article, we ask: What can Southern urbanism and critical pedagogy learn from *convites*? Our analysis is based on some results from our six-month-long research project titled 'COiNVITE: activating urban learning for slum upgrading', which was aimed at exploring alternative methodologies for multi-actor urban learning that could lead to a recalibration of the debate on slum upgrading policies.

COiNVITE's methodological core was based on a co-designed workshop that simulated the pedagogical structure of a *convite* and brought together urban actors working at multiple scales and with different interests and agendas in city making. The 30 participants—from community leaders to representatives of multilateral agencies to global activists for the right to the city—were invited to a seven-day workshop explicitly framed as inspired by *convites*. Attendees also participated in in-depth online interviews. To stage the COiNVITE that formed the basis for the analysis in this article we used a three-stage methodology. The first stage aimed at studying how *convites* became the most significant tool of collective action for neighborhood self-building in Medellín. We focused on a systematic review of secondary data about *convites* in local
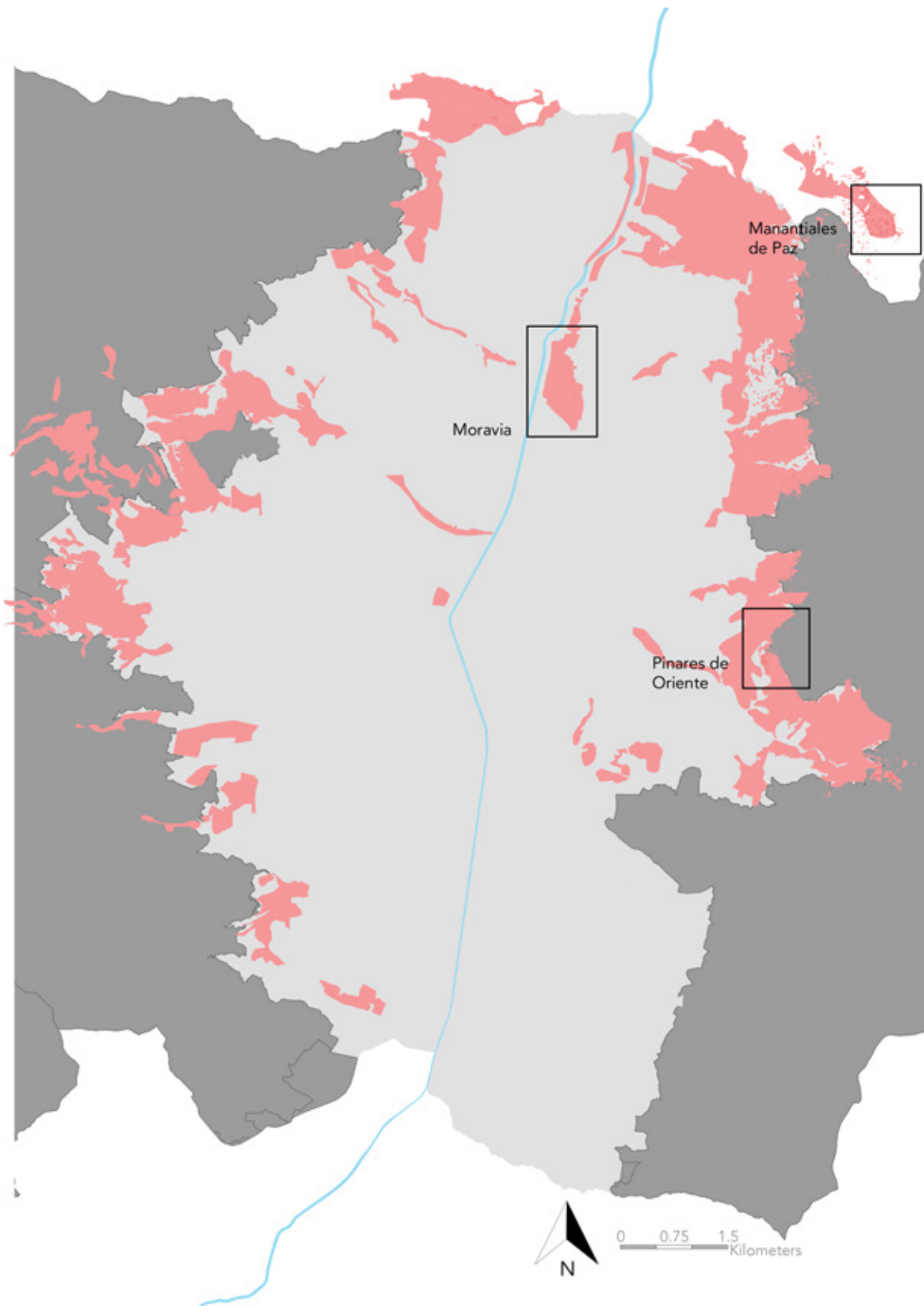
FIGURE 2   Map of Medellín, showing the location of self-built neighborhoods (pink shading) and the areas (outlined) where community participants live (*source*: base map © Jota Samper, 2014, reproduced with permission)

public archives, grey literature and publications from local scholars and practitioners. We analyzed how *convites* operate in Medellín using Bhan's (2019) modes of Southern practice (squat, maintain and consolidate) in conjunction with Samper Escobar's (2014)

phases of neighborhood transformation (foundation, infill, and consolidation), on which we expand in the next section.

In the second stage we aimed to translate the lessons from *convites* into a pedagogical tool. We co-designed our approach together with the team organizing the workshop to devise a combination of methodologies that incorporated the *convite*'s spirit of engagement, empathy and solidarity while responding to the complexities of neighborhood upgrading debates. To refine the pedagogical lessons of the *convite* in a methodological strategy, we used three cross-cutting categories from critical pedagogy and critical/educational geography: first, dwelling, embodiment and the 'undichotomizable' relation between cognitive and affective learning (Freire, 1996; McFarlane, 2011; Facer and Buchczyk, 2019); secondly, the relationality of material and discursive spheres to sustain pluri-actor engagement for city making (Freire, 1993; McFarlane, 2011; Quick, 2018; Facer and Buchczyk, 2019); and thirdly, the political praxis of fostering solidarity through network building (Freire, 1993; Angotti *et al.*, 2011; Giroux, 2011; Diaz, 2020). In the third stage we delved into storytelling methods to help participant actors narrate Medellín stories on urban development from different perspectives, that for the purpose of the COiNVITE would be fed into a dedicated transmedia platform. The three stages generated a wealth of empirical data, including timelines, maps, videos, transcriptions of workshop discussions, audio and graphic recording, podcasts, pictograms, and information from 25 in-depth online interviews with participants. All material was categorized according to the theoretical streams identified for the research project. However, only data that related to *convites* and urban learning, mainly from interviews and transcriptions of discussions, were selected for this analysis.

The workshop brought together 30 participants and was held in Medellín in March 2019. Participants were invited on the premise that the pedagogical strategy used for the workshop would be based on the *convite*, regardless of their familiarity with the practice. Thus, community leaders from the neighborhoods Manantiales de Paz (in the squatting/foundation stage), Brisas de Oriente (in the infill/maintenance stage) and Moravia (in the repair/consolidation stage) participated. Some residents of the neighborhoods in the foundation stage had not participated in collective processes of this nature before; however, community leaders from consolidated neighborhoods already had extensive exposure to and experience with interaction in multi-stakeholder environments, which made for a vibrant exchange of knowledge. The workshop was also attended by representatives of multilateral agencies and global coalitions (UN-Habitat, Cities Alliance, United Cities and Local Governments or UCLG, the Global Platform for the Right to the City or GPRC, and the Habitat International Coalition or HIC), alongside local government organizations (the Municipality of Medellín, Exploratorio, Moravia Cultural Center) and academics from Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Universidad de los Andes and the University of Colorado Boulder. As a result of interactions among participants, several of whom were already part of the authors' professional networks, a learning alliance was formed.

Learning from *convites*

Convites are a form of urbanism from below. They constitute a singular territorial organizational logic based on episodic gatherings underpinned by emotional bonding, coordination of knowledges, associative physical labor, and belonging to transform the sociospatial conditions of a place. They operate differently in at least three stages to contribute to the process of urbanization in Medellín: first, *convites* that focus on squatting or creating the foundations for a future settlement; secondly, *convites* that assist with maintaining or infilling of ongoing settlements; and thirdly, *convites* that repair or consolidate. The three phases illustrate people, processes and places interacting in a non-linear manner. *Convites* in Medellín not only provide spaces for

undertaking construction projects; they also promote the principles of mutual help and organization to ensure access to food, care and protection, foster social mobilization and resistance, and offer new avenues for cultural and popular expression, identity and belonging.

Convites that engage in the practices of squatting/foundation focus on attending to first-order concerns of inhabitation. At this stage, *convites* prepare and make decisions on dividing land according to the number of families, self-planning and construction of services such as community electricity, water and sewerage. These services are initially either completely off-grid or provided through illegal connections (Torres, 2007; Ríos-Castro *et al.*, 2011). Temporary housing structures are usually made from precarious or short-lived materials, sometimes recycled from clandestine landfills (Velásquez *et al.*, 2019). This settling pattern was predominant during the 1970s and early 1980s, when migration from rural to urban areas was still relatively slow compared to the massive displacement of the late 1980s and 1990s, which was driven by the armed conflict (Perez Fonseca, 2018). The words of these two speakers capture the uncertainty of their arrival in the city and the steps these first inhabitants took through community organization:

> We started to open this road, from there to the bottom, through *convites*. We also started to see how we could organize ourselves with electricity, and the leaders there began to get electricity, it was a big and long process (Antonia, 55-year-old resident of La Honda, 2011, quoted in Ríos-Castro, *et al*. 2011: 12).

> When there were so many people participating in the gathering, interpersonal relationships were made with people from other sectors when we were sharing work on Sundays, building a street. We also set up the pot because it was very important, after working together, to share the food. When we are sitting around eating 'el sancocho' [stew], friendships are consolidated (Maru, resident of La Cruz, 5 March 2012, quoted in Perez Fonseca, 2018: 162).

Starting a new life in the city after experiencing traumatic events such as displacement is hard, and the *convites* become spaces for fostering empathy and solidarity through processes of memory making and collective healing (Piedrahita Orrego, 2007). This bonding is a particularly important aspect of collectively protecting residents from, and building resistance to, threatening events such as evictions, or ensuring that everyone in the community has access to food (Velásquez *et al.*, 2019). There have also been exceptional cases where *convites* within larger areas of occupation have turned into terrains of dispute between genuine penniless settlers and those who want to grab land to make a profit from it later (Coupé, 1993). Therefore, the collective stories that emerge at this stage are strongly connected to processes of displacement, violence and evictions, and to processes of endurance, self-empowerment and peace building (Corporación Región, 2011).

Convites are involved in the practices of maintaining/infilling support groups of families joining the initial settlers to consolidate a place. Temporary structures are adapted to last longer. Open spaces are reduced to accommodate more housing units (Samper Escobar, 2014). *Convites* who are at this stage bring together initial settlers who use their knowledge to help new dwellers to delineate and adapt spaces, and work on connecting the new neighborhood to the city's utilities and infrastructure. These steps imply a more structured organization to put together collective demands to the local government (Coupé, 1993). The formation of small peoples' committees around water management (Perez Fonseca, 2018), education and housing, or the constitution of Community Action Boards (Juntas de Acción Comunal or JAC), represents the germination of local political participation:

> The community started to get organized in sectors through a working
> committee and the board of directors in 1984 … on Saturdays and Sundays,
> the JAC would ask for collaboration of families and people to help build the
> 'centro educativo'. While this was being built, the kids had their first classes
> with the person who would become the first director of the school (Augusto,
> Las Independencias, 2012, quoted in Samper Escobar, 2014: 92).

These activities center on moving from the provision of structures of survival to the provision of public facilities and spaces where social activities can take place. Commonly, settlements at this stage are either under construction or have built a school, a church, spaces for children to play or small shops as part of dwellers' livelihood strategies (Perez Fonseca, 2018). This new spatial arrangement is twofold: it constitutes the material representation of community by building heritage and is a stepping stone on the long road to legal recognition of the settlement within the city (see Figure 3).

Convites that engage in the practices of repair/consolidation are found less frequently, and their purpose is shaped by public agendas around upgrading (Samper Escobar, 2014). Convites mature as spaces for discussing and debating strategic collaboration and alliances with external institutions such as academia or NGOs to build and mobilize knowledge and resources and engage in political lobbying that may ultimately open up possibilities for land tenure and legalization of settlements (Convivamos, 2018). For communities that reach this phase, empowerment means the capacity to create spaces of meaningful participation and negotiation with local governments—and with their allies who are involved in top-down urban development projects—to recognize and include community-led neighborhood upgrading strategies.

FIGURE 3   Building a road through a convite in Moravia (source: Community Archive, Moravia Cultural Center, reproduced by permission of Centro de Desarrollo Cultural Moravia)

However, these processes are not frictionless. Community participation is often permeated and co-opted by individual or specific group interests—regularly also by illegal armed groups that exert control over such territories (Ríos-Castro *et al.*, 2011; Convivamos, 2019)—or are hampered by the apathy of households that have reached a certain level of stability, thus limiting collective political gains (Amortegui, 2015).

Convites have declined in many neighborhoods that were born out of this practice, as the presence of the state manifests in the provision of new public infrastructures erected over formerly self-built and self-financed community spaces (Samper Escobar, 2014). However, *convites* continue to operate beyond the repair of infrastructure to foster social mobilization and political engagement and claim and defend the right to the territory and the city (*Visión 8,* 2018). As Ortiz and Yepes (2020) describe, *convites* have a polyvalent nature as a strategy of resistance, a mutual-help practice in times of crisis, and a space for cultural celebration beyond self-building aims. The legacy of *convites* in the city is epitomized by the recent community response to the pandemic. During this time it was crucial to channel humanitarian aid and public resources to support the most vulnerable, and in cases where external aid was absent, the solidarity and empathy manifested through community kitchens and public cooking helped to secure at least one meal a day for those who were worst hit by the government's stay-at-home policies (Duque *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, *convites* are self-built neighborhoods' key praxis of solidarity, a praxis fueled by popular resistance and organization, albeit not without tensions and disputes. They have contributed to the generation of new sociospatial identities and given value to the peripheries, which has, however, also resulted in many of these neighborhoods being 'cleansed' of their original dwellers as they become new objects of economic interests (Perez Fonseca, 2018).

Pedagogical lessons from *convites*

In this section we provide detail on some pedagogical lessons from the analysis of *convites* as 'spaces of learning through practice' (McFarlane, 2009) and the ways in which these lessons inspired the creative co-design of participants' urban learning in the COiNVITE project (Ortiz and Millan, 2019). What we present here are facets of a generative learning space that uses lessons from the *convite* structure to discuss urban (planning) issues with often antagonistic urban actors. This pedagogical approach is set not only as a critique of the authorized version of Medellín's best-practice story in particular, but also as an exploration of urban learning strategies in general. Learning about the conditions under which transformation is possible goes beyond merely listening or praising official narratives about success. In the process, we identified three key features of the *convites* that may help us rethink pedagogies for plural urban actors and, in turn, renew an urban grammar from the South (Bhan, 2019).

–   Community kitchens as learning environments

The central importance of food for keeping the *convite* going is evident in practices in Medellín: cooking and eating together is an act of bonding and caring. To bring together participants with diverse and often adversarial agendas, knowledge and interests, an experimental collective kitchen in which to cook new 'urban recipes' was set up (see Figure 4). The facilitators of the process claimed: 'We pursue cooking to foster affective encounters to care for each other. The kitchen is the connection with the ancestral memory of the home's heart and with the cartography of the ingredients that link several landscapes of the region' (workshop, 29 March 2019). Workshop participants were divided into teams of five people consisting of representatives of diverse organizations, and assigned roles. Each team was then asked to create a dish with the ingredients provided. Teams had to use a recipe while also minimizing waste and ensuring that there would be enough food for the group.

FIGURE 4   Experimental kitchen: cooking together at COiNVITE (*source*: Sandelion Productions, reproduced with permission)

As part of the activity, participants had to evaluate the available ingredients together to decide on the menu. The culinary knowledge and experience of each participant came into play to define recipes and discuss quantities, times, ways of preparation and alternative flavors in case any ingredient was missing. They were allowed to negotiate and exchange ingredients that were considered indispensable for their recipe with other teams. Once the teams had decided on a working plan, the atmosphere became one of joy and bonding. The experience of negotiating ingredients encouraged solidarity and mutual assistance—if an ingredient was left over by one team, it could be used by another. At the end, each team shared its final dish with the rest of the participants. The atmosphere at the communal table was celebratory and participants expressed appreciation for everyone's efforts to feed the group (see Figure 5).

The use of recipes as a metaphor to think about 'urban recipes' and the translation of the community kitchen of the *convites* into a space for learning about neighborhood upgrading helped participants engage in concrete discussions about the success (or not) of Medellín's transformation recipe, and to evaluate the ingredients that were essential but also to identify those that were missing. Jota, an architect and academic, noted that 'there is usually more interest in testing international recipes by importing some of the ingredients, and less interest in creating or improving local recipes that can make the most of the locally grown ingredients' (workshop, 28 March 2019). Cielo Holguin, a community leader, stated that he believed the city's recipe lacked the history and memory of many residents who had participated in the process: 'It is necessary to generate a narrative where past efforts are not erased; there are 40 years of construction of Moravia and all of that is ignored in the construction of a recipe made for international tastes' (workshop, 28 March 2019). We therefore argue that learning through the processes of cooking reveals that cooking is a political act and recenters the role of affect in changing collective behaviors, building and retrieving memory, thinking creatively, improving decision making, working in collaboration, managing resources and experimenting with new possibilities. Collective cooking as a mode of engagement prioritizes the bonding experience and emotions over cognitive exchanges, thereby generating an atmosphere of joy and care.

FIGURE 5   COïNVITE participants sharing the food they prepared themselves (*source*: Sandelion Productions, reproduced with permission)

–   Collective storytelling as learning and memory device
        The *convites* provide a space for sharing stories of life and of everyday struggles, and in Medellín, many of these are about violence, displacement and trauma. Individual stories also help disseminate practical knowledge of how to transform the materiality of a place. The sharing of stories becomes a healing act: stories activate imaginations and

memories that are woven collectively into new identities. Neighborhoods are made up of stories and storytellers who organically constitute a complex system through which community learning and knowledge circulates. As Herlindo, a senior community leader in Nueva Jerusalén, said:

> I arrived displaced and very distressed; I arrived very worn down because of what displacement is—I do not wish it on anyone. That is very hard. To arrive here and find more people to relate to and tell stories in *convites* was encouraging, and we learnt a lot. Because the vast majority of us, sixty or seventy percent, were all displaced, these [were the ones] who were making [connections] ... who were building the neighborhood (quoted in Triana Pulido, 2019: 52).

Based on the power of storytelling and its potential to circulate collective memories in *convites*, all workshop participants adopted the identity of 'urban storytellers'. We created an urban storytellers' map on which participants could map themselves based on who they are, the governance level they work on, how they are connected to the story of Medellín's transformation, and from where they are telling its story. We designed activities to facilitate the process of creating stories from the standpoint of each organization, but also to enable participants to generate collective stories about urban trajectories in Medellín, based on visual thinking (see Figure 6).

During the workshop, participants created timelines and maps that prompted the sharing of stories to discuss the enabling conditions of urban change and to reveal the interwoven links of the memory of people, places and institutions. These memories help us understand how neighborhood upgrading processes have been taking place and reveal their incremental and iterative nature. During this activity, contrasts between different timelines and maps produced by participants helped us elucidate the antecedents of neighborhood upgrading strategies and the conditions for their

FIGURE 6   A community leader telling the story of arrival and settlement in the neighborhood using the visual thinking technique (*source*: Sandelion Productions, reproduced with permission)

emergence, augmentation and decline. Luz Mila Hernandez, community leader from Moravia, reported:

> Stories are key to making memories of the community processes. If we are clear about them, we will not be deceived again. Stories also help with generational learning, which is very important to avoid losing the history. The one who tells the story, reconstructs it (workshop, 1 April 2019).

We infer, then, that stories also facilitate intergenerational learning and serve as a powerful means of transmission of continuously generated community knowledge. They reflect and consolidate everyday life, particularly in self-built neighborhoods.

The construction of the urban storytellers' map required participants to acknowledge that, although they all work on neighborhood upgrading strategies, their agendas and ways of operating are often at odds with each other. During the workshop, participants were invited to share their own stories, and the stories of their collectives, organizations and institutions, which generated a space of empathy and active listening from which a more horizontal dialogue was established (see Figure 7). Lorena Zárate, GPRC co-lead, stated that 'the challenge for all urban actors is to acquire new storytelling skills to express opinions and divergences in a horizontal way' (workshop, 30 March 2019). Similarly, Elkin Velásquez, UN-Habitat Regional Director, reflected that 'today, power is in the people; community collectives and narratives are the center of power, so there is a need to connect narratives within the sphere of power with those of the community to transcend to other spaces of decision making' (workshop, 30 March 2019). Based on these activities, we identify stories as a mode of knowledge translation. The practice of sharing opens up other ways of knowing, as lived experiences are intertwined and made relatable to others, which increases empathy. The set of pedagogical strategies used unlocks the creative potential of connecting stories to share urban learning from a polyphony of voices.

FIGURE 7   Participants share their personal stories while the urban storytellers' map is being drawn up on the back wall (*source*: Sandelion Productions, reproduced with permission)

Collective action through networked solidarities

From the *convite* we learnt that bonding and making and expanding connections are just as important as collectively delivering a task. *Convites* are a habit and provide a constant call to action within communities. Once a roof has been repaired or an access path has been built, the next *convite* is programmed, and depending on the complexity of the job, more actors are invited to take part and share their knowledge. In this way, Medellín's self-built neighborhoods are constructed through networked *convites* that exchange knowledge and share culture, emotions and struggles. After a long period of collective work with local and international participants, an important part of the COiNVITE agenda was to imagine a call to action that would facilitate the continuity of collaborative working, mobilize support from other actors working at different scales and widen the possibilities of influencing current narratives around neighborhood upgrading in the Latin American region.

To imagine future possibilities, two activities were carried out. The first was a joint walk to visit landmarks that attest to Medellín's transformation, and neighborhoods built by *convites* where this practice is kept alive. The second activity involved creating a space to collectively explore the coordination of a common agenda after the end of the COiNVITE, regardless of scale, interests and geographical differences. The city walks allowed participants to make a collective diagnosis of the current state of self-built neighborhoods and of their relationship with the rest of the city. These walks helped underline the imperative of demystifying the actions of dwellers to achieve a life of dignity for themselves (see Figure 8). According to Isela Quintero, community leader, different knowledges have to align with the territory to have an impact:

> We must first recognize each other's knowledge and respect each other's thinking, and then ask ourselves how we reciprocate, even if we do not agree with them. Also, we must recognize the territory where we are standing and what this territory means to us to be able to propose actions (workshop, 2 April 2019).

FIGURE 8   Workshop participants walk through the Moravia neighborhood (*source*: Sandelion Productions, reproduced with permission)

The second activity, which was aimed at moving participants towards a call to action, centered on putting together collective manifestos, based on what they had learnt from their reflections on collective recipes. In these manifestos, a sense of what neighborhood upgrading should stand for was to be defined through the diversity of voices, and the future direction of joint efforts were to be derived from these collective intentions. Some of the most relevant parts of the manifestos highlighted the need to co-design strategies with communities, to guarantee dwellers their right to stay in the territory, to approach territories from a gender perspective, and to respect community stories, memories and knowledges (see Figure 9). This activity led to the discussion of a proposal to establish a 'learning alliance' (Moreno-Leguizamon *et al.*, 2015) among all participant actors. The alliance would promote an agenda that could scale up some of the activities tested during the workshop to weave a new neighborhood upgrading narrative. In April 2020, as the world faced the Covid-19 pandemic, the learning alliance got together online and launched a campaign called 'Synergies for Solidarity', which, through a series of coordinated actions over several months, managed to create and present to the housing authorities of Latin America the 'Decalogue for Participatory Slum Upgrading' in November 2020 as a roadmap for the region. So far, the decalogue has gathered support from networks of social collectives, NGOs, academia and multilateral organizations from all across Latin America.

Convites as critical urban pedagogy

The lessons we learnt about why *convites* emerged and how they operate allowed us to reveal the pedagogical values of everyday incremental urbanism. We drew insights from critical pedagogy and Southern urbanism to inform the ways in which more emancipatory urban learning spaces can bring together plural actors to advance the right to the city. Thus, *convites* become 'a particular empirical configuration' (Bhan, 2019: 643) that offer a kind of critical pedagogy that allows a connection 'to the "coexistence"

FIGURE 9 Collective manifestos created by COiNVITE participants: 'What neighborhood upgrading we should advocate for' (*source*: Sandelion Productions, reproduced with permission)

of different spatialities of knowledge' (Martin, 2017: 12). Framing *convites* as part of the learning infrastructure of Southern practices and critical pedagogical strongholds help us frame critical urban pedagogy through radical togetherness, dialogue with other ways of knowing, territorial memory and networked solidarity.

To respond to the insufficiently addressed role of critical pedagogy in urban learning in the context of Southern urbanism, we propose the notion of critical urban pedagogy. Although this term is not new—it was already used by Venus Evans-Winters in 2011—we draw on *convites* to link debates on urban learning, critical pedagogy and Southern practices to expand it and bring a different approach to it. 'Critical urban pedagogy' links the 'urban' as the plural sphere of collective sociomaterial struggles to the potentials of the 'critical', as it refers to the force that shapes the disjuncture between the actual and the possible in rejection of the status quo, and to 'pedagogy' that focuses on modes of engagement for learning, rooted in existing practices in a search for alternative spatial imaginations for the present and future. We posit that critical urban pedagogy is a situated pedagogy derived from everyday relations of place, body and materiality, infused by memory and articulated by story. It directs attention to the spatiality of urban struggles as pedagogical settings and as crucial modes of engagement to operationalize commitment to social justice.

Critical urban pedagogy catalyzes radical togetherness. The *convite* links the materiality of the makeshift kitchens in the street with the intimacy of cooking and eating together as a social and emotional venture. These performative moments create an atmosphere of emotional connection as an essential facet of meaningful learning and as a site of knowledge production from everyday life. *Convites* are embodied practices rooted in the peripheries in the sense of 'knowing as a bodily political practice' (Rivera Qusicanqui, 2020: xxvii). The gendered labor of collective cooking alongside the physical labor of transforming the materiality of space itself through self-construction, repair and maintenance involves caring and other ways of knowing, and is rewarded with a celebration. Such collective joy and celebration are essential for radical togetherness. In this way, emotions, personal connections and affective relations become central to the development of the learning infrastructure of the city (Facer and Buchczyk, 2019). Critical togetherness catalyzes place belonging and collective identity.

Critical urban pedagogy articulates territorial memory and dialogue of knowledges. The *convites* enable intergenerational learning of the incremental and cumulative processes of city making, of which collective memory and practical knowledge are cornerstones. *Convites* require 'the articulation of intelligences, knowledge, resources, work and wills' (Convivamos, 2019: 1). While adults carry out the most complex tasks (digging, mixing materials, repairing, cooking), adolescents engage as helpers under the adults' guidance, and kids play around and entertain themselves. The *convite* also plays a symbolic role, inasmuch as it 'serves as a healing space of the harsh consequences that the war has left. By promoting dialogue, the *convite* is a weaver of stories' (Velásquez *et al.*, 2019: 3). The *convite* becomes an informal institution held together by repeated practice over time during which people's subjectivities are expressed through stories of struggles over territorial trajectories. The processes of collective storytelling contribute to making the sociospatial palimpsest beneath the foundations of self-built neighborhoods partially knowable to their participants.

Critical urban pedagogy fosters networked solidarity and situated hope. *Convites* enable the articulation of actions between different social agents and provide a way of organizing work (Arango Pardo, 2019; Triana Pulido, 2019). The *convite* reveals the everyday politics of local self-management capacity for addressing the challenges of incrementally self-building a neighborhood. The '*convites* are solidarity in action' (Velásquez *et al.*, 2019: 3); they show us a mode for engaging a plurality of actors in which episodic alliances contribute to operationalizing commitment to social justice. In this light, '*convites* are catalyzers of dreams' (*ibid.*) that allow a transformation of the

environment to be envisioned. As Freire puts it: 'There is no change without dreams, as there is no dream without hope' (1992: 81). Urban learning in these spaces enables us to understand the political praxis needed to confront and mediate territorial disputes over the right to stay put and live with dignity. In this way, critical urban pedagogy has the power to unlock spatial imaginations for the future grounded in solidarity as a normative horizon of social emancipation (Diaz, 2020).

Conclusion

In current times, care, solidarity and learning alliances are crucial for addressing the urban challenges amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic. In this article we analyzed the pedagogical lessons encapsulated in *convites* as the main crisis response in self-built neighborhoods. We used the case of Medellín as a benchmark to address the urbanization of informal neighborhoods. Despite Medellín becoming an urban laboratory attracting international urban learners, its grassroots transformation narratives and practices are still largely overlooked. *Convites* are at the core of these grassroots practices; they epitomize Southern city-making struggles and as such become critical pedagogical settings. However, this silencing of grassroots knowledges is consistent with existing debates that center on urban learning in planning, which include questions about how urban learning spaces beyond professional settings operate, how critical pedagogy can be articulated in urban studies, and what role of critical pedagogy in urban learning is left under-explored. To fill this gap, we have addressed the question: What can critical urban theory and critical pedagogy learn from *convites*? We offered the notion of critical urban pedagogy to foreground the potential of situated struggles of city making, as these offer pedagogical clues to renewing modes of engagement that can operationalize commitments to social justice. We argued that critical urban pedagogy is a situated pedagogy derived from everyday relations of place, body and materiality, infused by memory and articulated by storytelling.

In this article we aimed to expand the ways in which critical urban pedagogy can help us rethink urban learning in Southern cities. We concur with Robin *et al.* (2019) that more attention to the myriad ways of cultivating pluralistic knowledge-based coalitions is essential for city learning at the city scale, but that the role of pedagogy needs to be at the forefront. We found that Southern urban practices and 'people's education' (*educación populares*) cannot be decoupled in the context of Latin American cities. *Convites* also taught us that the affective atmospheres of care and joy around makeshift community kitchens are crucial for fueling networks of solidarity and collective action. Intergenerational knowledge exchanges that galvanize practices of squatting, repair and maintenance in contingent alliances 'together with the state, despite the state and against the state' (Lopez de Souza, 2006: 327) are also embedded in the collective storytelling. In addition, our research offers a window into renewed ways of engaging with a plurality of actors' knowledges to activate bodies, minds and hearts.

Even though the aim of the COiNVITE project was to learn from *convites* and about neighborhood upgrading, our focus of this article was to reframe urban learning, which is pivotal for urban policymaking beyond peer-to-peer and expert-led spaces of governance and the diffusion of best practices. Therefore our findings have implications for public policy on neighborhood upgrading, especially in the Latin American region. The wealth of urban knowledge circulating through community storytelling, and amplified in *convites,* demands innovative approaches from planners and policymakers to turn collective narratives that constitute community data into evidence that supports at least two objectives: first, to boost self-built neighborhood upgrading policies instead of urban renovation plans that, at best, result in the cleansing of community efforts to start neighborhoods from scratch; and secondly, to promote upgrading policies that acknowledge the critical involvement of communities as an asset, by keeping their needs and aspirations in mind and ensuring sustainable and lively future neighborhoods based on care, solidarity and togetherness.

The use of critical urban pedagogies helped us activate spatial imaginations by interlinking performative, visual and narrative strategies to translate tacit knowledge into codified knowledge so as to inspire narrative shifts for strategic alliances that can serve as a call to action for a more just city. Based on what we learnt from *convites*, we proposed and tested a set of modes of engagement rooted in radical togetherness, dialogue of knowledges, territorial memory and networked solidarity. By introducing the notion of critical urban pedagogy, we wish to contribute to shaping a new grammar to develop transformative and emancipatory urban learning underpinned by critical pedagogical repertoires.

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