The politics of public construction in a globalized world

*Imagining urban space in Ecuador*

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Chapter 3
Millennium Communities: The space and architecture of extractivism

Introduction
To conceive of a space as a produced space (Lefebvre, 2007) implies to critically analyze the production of categories in which this space is read and decoded in specific periods of time. Accordingly, in order to understand how spatial transformations affect human interactions, it becomes necessary to assume and reveal the dialectical relationship between people and their spatial surroundings. The interstices, textures, gaps and voids of a defined space are constituted by and constitute bodies that internally replicate the external conditions of a political and social struggle (Vidler, 1992). In that sense, every society (and also, as Lefebvre argues, each mode of production) produces its own space and material forms according to its interests and internal dynamics. Taking as a point of departure this conceptual approach towards space and focusing on the urban and cultural transformations promoted by the State in the Ecuadorian Amazon Region, the aims of this chapter are threefold: first, to understand the model of development and the political discourse underlying the urban planning process in the Ecuadorian Amazon region; second, to describe the origins of the Millennium Communities project and the aesthetic of the constructions, and third, to explore what I call the space and architecture of extractivism, which is the amalgamation of the political discourses sustaining the intervention, the transformation of the space reflected in the aesthetic of the buildings and residencies constructed in the Amazon region, and the responses of the inhabitants to the new space.

Much like the cases of the new Quito airport and Yachay, this project reveals how public construction driven by the State is based on the authorities’ idealistic imaginations of the Ecuadorian urban future, and how governmental representatives manage urban planning in relation to the local, national and globalized context. To fulfill the three objectives listed above, I interviewed key actors involved in the Millennium Communities project, including governmental authorities, community leaders and inhabitants of the new constructions. I combined these interviews with field observation, which took place in January 2015. In the following pages, I will first analyze the political

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21 A shorter version of this chapter was published under the title “Space and architecture of extractivism in the Ecuadorian Amazon region” in Cultural Studies (Espinosa, 2017).
Political discourse and development

The Millennium Communities are small villages in Ecuador erected by the government of Rafael Correa Delgado, in power from 2007 to 2017. The first communities inaugurated were Playas de Cuyabeno and Pañacocha, in October 2013 and January 2014. Both are located in the Amazon Region (Sucumbíos province), which for many decades has been considered geopolitically important due to the diversity and multiplicity of natural resources found there. The two communities were constructed on the lands of the Kichwa, which is one of ten ethnic indigenous groups coexisting in the region.22 Even if the physical size of the Millennium Communities is relatively small (12.2 and 14.51 hectares respectively), they were only the first of at least 200 new communities the government planned to construct in order to build a new Amazonia in the hydrocarbon and mining zones (“La comunidad del milenio Playas”, 2013). Given the magnitude of the government’s ambitions, the first step towards uncovering the motivations and imaginaries underlying the Millennium Communities project is to explore the two models

22 Each ethnic group has specific characteristics, traditions and languages. Most of the groups are scattered and live in remote village communities of 40-200 people; because of the dispersion, it is difficult to know the exact number of members of each ethnic group. In the province of Sucumbíos, where the Millennium Communities are located, members of indigenous groups represent 13% of the population, out of a total of 176,000 inhabitants (INEC, 2010a).
of ‘development’ suggested by and visible in this initiative, which overlap and interact with each other.

The first model is reflected in the main characteristic of the Millennium Communities project, which is its close link to oil extraction. It could be said that without oil extraction the Millennium Communities would not exist, since the houses were constructed using oil revenues and Petroamazonas, the national oil company, executed the design and implementation of the communities. This connection responds to a model of economic and social development initiated during the first term of Correa’s presidency, in which the development of infrastructure was considered one of the main pillars for growth, progress and poverty alleviation. In focusing on the idea of social improvement and in having as its main source of financing the exploitation of natural resources, the construction of the Millennium Communities can be situated in a new-extractivist model of development. Extractive activities have increased across South America, due not to domestic but to international demand. This has affected the economic, social and political life of many countries, including Ecuador. Although there are some differences, the new extractive mode of accumulation seems to be at the heart of the production policies of both neoliberal and progressive governments (Acosta, 2013, p. 63). The main activities typically considered as extractive on the continent are oil drilling and mining, and the principal area where oil and metals are located is in the Amazon region. With regard to who controls extractivism, Gudynas notes: “Even if the materiality [of extractivism] is always local, its organization in an economic and political sense is also global. Due to the external conditions and the high volume of money invested, the capacity of the local communities and the local governments to regulate the extractive activities is very limited compared with the capacity to regulate the extractions for national and local use” (2013, p. 5, author’s translation from Spanish).

The key characteristic of the new extractivist model is the presentation of the exploitation of natural resources as providing immediate entry to the paradigms of progress, seen as based on centralized control over the economy and the implementation of “development projects” (Gudynas, 2013). In other words, while the old or conventional model was based only on the exploitation of resources for the exportation and economic growth, in the new extractivist model the State and its social programs play a key role in the productive process. New extractivism converges with progressive government policy when “the extractivism is justified politically to the public opinion as something necessary to secure progress and wealth, which will be returned to society through
different social programs” (Gudynas, 2013, p. 8, author’s translation from Spanish). The progressive governments use the extraction revenues to finance social programs, mostly oriented towards the poorest sectors of the population. The flipside is that these programs legitimize the exploitation of natural resources and reduce local opposition. In this way, new extractivism links the exploitative global oil and mining industries with national and local social plans. Sometimes this connection is established through social state agencies; other times transnational oil and mineral companies negotiate directly with local communities, constructing schools and medical centers, and thus replacing the role of the State (Gudynas, 2009).

In Latin America, the new extractive projects have resulted not in greater economic independence but in relationships of economic subordination to and dependency on the countries that are demanding the resources, as well as on the transnational companies extracting them. In this regard, Acosta has drawn a parallel with colonial times, designating new extractivism as “a mode of accumulation that started to be established on a massive scale 500 years ago” (2013, p. 62). Significantly, the new extractivism has generated social conflict everywhere it is implemented. Strikes and marches against mining and oil extraction are among the main reactions. In most of the cases, the governments discard these social protests and minimize their impact, accusing the social leaders and indigenous groups of “causing damage and preventing the development of the country” (Gudynas, 2009, p. 2006, author’s translation from Spanish).

Gudynas proposes that these conflicts are a constitutive part of the notion of extractivism and he also proposes a new concept to describe this: when the extraction of natural resources violates human rights and the rights of nature, he argues we are dealing with “extrahección”, a concept that brings together the parallel activities of extractivism and rights violations such as forced displacements of the population, assassinations of community leaders and criminalization of social protest (Gudynas, 2013, p. 7).

Following the trend of new extractivism and focusing on the idea of social improvement, in Ecuador, the development of infrastructure was considered as one of the main pillars for growth, progress and poverty alleviation during the first term of Correa’s presidency, and the exploitation of natural resources as the main way to finance it. Apart from the variety of facilities constructed by the government using the revenues of the exploitation of natural resources, in the Ecuadorian case, the new extractivist model is accompanied by a political discourse centered on the construction of a positive imaginary of oil extraction, presenting it as offering the potential for salvation. This discourse of
new extractivism in Ecuador has its basis in a long history of exploitation and exclusion of the Ecuatorian Amazon provinces. Approximately since the 1970s (the beginning of the ‘Texaco Era’), due to the detection of oil, the region has been of geopolitical interest and subject to invasion and control by oil companies and governments eager to push forward oil extraction.

Eduardo Galeano, in “March 29: The Jungle Was There” (2013), describes what the beginning of oil extraction meant for the Ecuadorian Amazon Region:

Miracle in the Amazon: in the year 1967 a huge gusher of oil erupted in Lago Agrio. From that moment, and for a quarter of a century, Texaco Petroleum Company sat at the table, napkin at throat, knife and fork in hand, stuffing itself with oil and gas, and shitting eighteen billion gallons of poison on the Ecuatorian jungle. The Indians had never heard the word “pollution”. They learned its meaning when fish went belly up in the rivers, lakes turned to brine, trees withered on the banks, animals fled, nothing grew in the soil and people were born sick. Several presidents of Ecuador, all of them above suspicion, collaborated in this undertaking, which earned a chorus of selfless applause from the publicists who praised it, the journalists who celebrated it, the lawyers who defended it, the experts who justified it and the scientists who absolved it. (2013, p. 19)

Before the oil boom, the Amazon region had been isolated and separated from the rest of the country, experiencing a lack of public schools, public institutions, communication and transport. Since the oil boom, the region and its inhabitants have been subject to policies of attack and control on the part of governments and oil companies. Abuse of power became part of the governing mentality that reconfigured the Amazon space without the consent of those living there and accompanied by the denial of their rights. The Ecuatorian population, moreover, has had little or no influence on the process of extraction, while indigenous communities have seen their livelihoods come under threat as they have been marginalized and excluded in its wake. In terms of the environment, oil spills, deforestation and epidemiological effects have been associated with oil extraction, and many conflicts have emerged in response and opposition to
continuing pollution in different parts of the Amazon region. Bustamante and Jarrín, comparing oil zones with other territories in the country, highlighted two characteristics of the oil zones: a) a notable deficit in infrastructure, equipment and quality of housing, and a disadvantage in terms of education indicators; and b) average indicators related to poverty and health (2005, p. 20-22). That means that, at least until 2005, the presence of oil activity was unsuccessful at eliminating poverty or improving housing conditions. As a result of this history of extraction, inhabitants of the Amazon provinces and intellectuals have named oil exploitation and its consequences a “curse”, in line with the principle of “the resource curse”, which describes how countries rich in natural resources find it more difficult to develop economically (Acosta, 2013).

Considering this history, it makes sense that a government calling itself “the government of the people” would want to intervene in the Amazon region. Thus, diverse actions directed at the region have been implemented under the Alianza Pais government: highways, schools and hospitals have been constructed, and basic services improved. Several of these initiatives were executed by the public enterprise Ecuador Estratégico (Strategic Ecuador), which was created in 2011 to manage all oil and mining proceeds, around 600 million USD in 2013 and 2014 (Araujo, 2013b). Together with this, Correa’s political discourse tried to introduce a whole new conceptualization of oil extraction into the imaginary of Ecuadorian citizens by stressing that “natural resources handled well are a blessing and not a curse” (Correa in Presidencia de la República, 2013, p. 26), and by linking extraction with the possibility of a positive and radical change in the quality of life in the Amazon region. For example, during the inaugural speech of one of the Millennium Communities, Correa and other authorities identified it as an example of the wonders that oil and mining can create when managed with white hands (without

23 The Kichwa Sarayaku case presented to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (ICHR) exemplifies the antagonistic relation between some of the communities and the government and oil companies (see Inter-American Court of Human Rights, 2012).

24 Bustamante & Jarrín (2005) define an oil zone by the presence and concentration of oil wells. Their research shows that 80% of the country’s oil wells are concentrated in four Ecuadorian cantons: Lago Agrio, Shushufindi, Orellana and La Joya de los Sachas.

25 According to the Hydrocarbons Law reform, in force since 10 July 2010, oil profits must be used to benefit the communities living in oil zones. Projects in communities close to oil camps are to be prioritized, with Ecuador Estratégico responsible for their implementation. In 2016, due to the lower price of petroleum, oil profits dropped to about 104 million USD (Ecuador Estratégico, 2017).
corruption), while also emphasizing that “now [the oil] is for everybody and not only for the groups in power” (“Cuyabeno tiene”, 2013, para. 7, author’s translation from Spanish).

The second development model sustaining the construction of the Millennium Communities is that of Buen Vivir and the ‘Rights of Nature’. From the beginning of its mandate, President Correa’s political party Alianza Pais openly expressed its opposition to the narrow idea of development coming from neoliberal contexts (based only in economic growth) and, after discussions with social and indigenous movements, the Rights of Nature and the concept of Buen Vivir were included in the Constitution of 2008. With these concepts development was understood as progress based principally on a harmonious coexistence with Nature and “respect for the values and principles of indigenous peoples, satisfaction of basic needs, social justice and equality as responsibilities of the state, and democracy” (Caria and Domínguez, 2015, p. 20). With the introduction of this model of Buen Vivir and the Rights of Nature, it seemed as though the relation between the government, the citizens and nature would take another route, opening up a wide range of possibilities to rethink, plan and inhabit the Amazonian space. Moreover, the president emphasized the importance of preserving the cultural richness of the ancestral groups in the Millennium Communities, arguing that misery and poverty are not part of the ‘folklore’ or ‘identity’ of the indigenous peoples. For him, thinking that indigenous people could not live comfortably or receive a good education represented “racist stereotypes disguised as a defense of ancestral peoples” (Correa in Presidencia de la República, 2013, p. 9, author’s translation from Spanish).

What has become clear from this discussion of the Ecuadorian political discourse and the two models of development invoked in it is their inherent incompatibility. The main problem with new extractivism is that it is part of an ideology of development nurtured by ideas of Modernity, which, even when trying to free itself from neoliberal legacies, is still obsessed with the idea of progress (Gudynas, 2009). Moreover, it is liable to causing environmental damage, which is one of the main reasons why this model has been contested by strikes and protests against mining and oil exploitation in biodiverse

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26 In the Introduction to this study, on pages 7-8, I explain the concepts of Buen Vivir and the Rights of Nature in more detail.
and legally protected territories in the Amazon Region. Consequently, new extractivism is in continuous tension with Buen Vivir and the Rights of Nature proposed by the Ecuadorian Constitution. In the next section, I will analyze in detail the case of Playas de Cuyabeno to characterize the spatial dimensions of this tension and the configuration of what I call the space and architecture of extractivism.

Before continuing, however, it is important to mention some existing research on the ways in which extractivism, particularly of oil, is legitimated and promoted in ways that obfuscate its negative local effects. Peter Hitchcock (2012), for example, investigates the role of oil in the North American imaginary. For him, oil dependency is not just an economic attachment but appears as a kind of cognitive compulsion that strongly prohibits alternatives to its utility as a commodity and its links to an array of positive cultural signifiers. Other studies investigate the aesthetics of petromodernity and petroleum culture in North America (LeMenager, 2012, 2014), where petromodernity refers to the version of modern life facilitated by the cheap energy systems made possible by petroleum. At Alberta University in Canada, the Petrocultures research group coordinated by Imre Szeman aims to produce and distribute research related to the social and cultural implications of oil and energy extraction on individuals, communities, and societies around the world. With regard to Latin America, existing studies of extractivism and new extractivism mainly concentrate on its economic-political and environmental dimensions; their impact on local spaces and the inhabitants of these spaces and their way of life has been less of a focus. However, Gudynas (2015) does mention how extractivism entails imposing a particular model of development while denying different cultural matrixes such as those of indigenous cultures. He also emphasizes that the territorial changes that have been effected under extractivism and new extractivism are deep: “they modify the configuration of the space, the actors that construct that space and their forms of relationships” (Gudynas, 2009, p. 202, author’s translation from Spanish). How such spatial transformation works and is experienced is what I aim to show through my analysis of the Millennium Communities.

Two recent studies have addressed other dimensions of the Millennium Communities project: first, Japhy Wilson and Manuel Bayón’s working paper entitled

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27 See, for example, the Chevron case and reports published by organizations such as Observatorio de derechos colectivos del Ecuador CDES.

“Millennium Cities: Staging the Origins of Twenty-first Century Socialism” published in February 2016 by the Centro Nacional de Estrategia Para el Derecho al Territorio [National Center for Territory’s Right] (CENEDET) and, second, Cristina Cielo, Lisset Coba and Ivette Vallejo’s article “Women, Nature, and Development in Sites of Ecuador’s Petroleum Circuit”, published by the American Anthropological Association in March 2016. Using a Marxist approach, Wilson and Bayón use the Millennium Communities project to analyze the twenty-first-century form of socialism promoted by the government. They suggest that the project reflects a foundational violence of capitalistic accumulation and results in buildings that are “mere facades of modernity” (2016, p. 3). Cielo et al., on their part, explore the Millennium Communities to understand the changes in women’s work under the exploitation of natural resources, concluding that the Millennium Communities render women dependent on the institutionalized State energy regime. Although, like Wilson and Bayón, I also analyze the project in the light of its relation to notions of modernity, my exploration of the Millennium Communities concentrates on the process of urban planning and the architectural design of the houses in order to understand how the new natural resources exploitation conditions and the progressive political discourses, which base their economy in the extraction of natural resources, converge – in often contradictory ways – in the debate on the urbanization of the Amazon Region. As in the cases of the new Quito airport and Yachay, at the core of my work is the analysis of how political imaginaries affect urban space.

Violence and the modernity/coloniality legacy

The history behind the first Millennium Community project, Playas de Cuyabeno, is important for understanding the struggles shaping the space. Apart from the political discourses previously described, the origin of the construction of this Millennium Community was marked by an act of violence. In October 2008 heavy machinery owned by Petroamazonas (the national oil company), under military protection, entered Playas to start oil exploration in the area. Taken by surprise, the residents of Playas contested the intrusion and confronted the military forces. Three hundred soldiers were mobilized by helicopter and teargas bombs and rubber bullets were used to scatter the people (“Disputa”, 2008). The intrusion was severely criticized by the residents for disregarding the procedures and rights guaranteed by the Constitution of Ecuador (Constitution 2008 art. 57 sec. 7). Only after the military intrusion was denounced in the media by diverse Amazonian indigenous groups did the government promise to resolve the problem in
consultation with the affected communities (L. Montesdeoca, personal communication, January 18, 2015).

Once the consultations had begun, residents of the community turned out to be divided, with some wanting oil exploitation and others not. The government suggested the construction of the Millennium Community as a compensation measure, offering a budget of twenty-two million dollars. Finally, the community accepted. According to the president of the Kichwa community, this was at least in part because the Millennium Community was seen as an opportunity to escape from isolation and marginalization, but also because it was understood as a ‘must’, since sooner or later the government would start to exploit the area anyway (Participant 31, personal communication, January 19, 2015). As he mentions:

> After a big war, finally they convinced us to construct the city. (...) My intention was good… I talked with the fellows and I told them: Considering that they will exploit the petroleum here…, they have to build us a good infrastructure, a health center so we can die in a quality bed, otherwise only they can die in a good bed, not like us, dropped somewhere with some disease. (ibid., author’s translation from Spanish, emphasis added)

The community sought an opportunity of visibility and recognition as an indigenous people, which had historically been excluded from the ‘development’ and ‘progress’ of the rest of the country. Without full knowledge of the consequences of this process of urbanization, the fact of having infrastructure similar to the ‘city’ was perceived as a step forwards.

After the community’s acceptance, the government decided to build the Millennium Community within a timespan of one year. Because the new community was to be erected within the former community, this implied the displacement of the inhabitants to temporal residencies until the works were finished. The houses were constructed before the establishment of Ecuador Estratégico, which is why the company in charge of their construction was Petroamazonas, the national oil company. With the rapid construction of the houses, the government sought to demonstrate that, thanks to the oil exploitation, it was producing a radical change in the living conditions of people in the Amazon region, which had been negatively affected by earlier extractivism.
As one of the managers of the project argues, technically it was not necessary to construct a whole new community for the Kichwa group, since they already had houses that could have been remodeled and improved with the installation of basic services (Participant 36, personal communication, February 28, 2015). According to the same key actor, the construction of the houses was realized mainly as part of a ‘Plan B’ related to the Yasuní initiative. This governmental initiative was aimed at keeping the oil in the ground to protect the Amazon Region, but was put aside on 15 August 2013 as economically unaffordable, despite objections by citizens, indigenous groups and non-governmental organizations. The construction of the Millennium Communities of Playas de Cuyabeno and Pañacocha finished 31 July 2013. Since the Millennium Communities were supposed to demonstrate the benefits of oil exploitation in the region, the fact that they were already built by the time the Yasuni initiative was abandoned (coupled with the testimony of Participant 36) reveals that the construction of a whole new community mainly fulfilled the political purpose of legitimating the resumption of oil exploitation.

The first architectural designs for Playas de Cuyabeno and Pañacocha were made under the label of “Millennium Cities”. The purpose of the government was to give the communities all the facilities and commodities that “they deserved” and that would enable them to overcome poverty. That is why, in terms of public services, spaces and buildings, the millennium communities are provided with basic services such as water, electricity and telecommunication, as well as protection walls placed in the river and a sewage treatment plant. The government presented the construction of the cities as a means to redistribute the wealth of the nation and to give the benefits of oil extraction back to the Amazon Region. As President Correa emphasized: “Never again the Amazonia with high levels of poverty. Poverty is one of the biggest injustices of our country” (Presidencia de la República, 2013, p. 12, author’s translation from Spanish) This discourse translated into the prioritization of improving housing conditions so that houses in the Amazon

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30 For critiques of the suspension of this initiative, see the information collected by Yasunidos, a civil society group created to protect the Yasuni forest and the governmental initiative: http://sitio.yasunidos.org/es/yasunidos/cronologia-de-hechos.html.
would have the same quality as those in the cities, as reflected in the amount invested per house and the equipment installed in them (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MILLENNIUM COMMUNITIES MAIN CHARACTERISTICS</th>
<th>PLAYAS DE CUYABENO</th>
<th>PANACOCHA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Investment (USD)</td>
<td>20 million</td>
<td>23 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hectares of construction</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>14.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Beneficiaries</td>
<td>392 inhabitants</td>
<td>860 inhabitants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houses constructed</td>
<td>82**</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building area/per house</td>
<td>96.04 sqm</td>
<td>96.04 sqm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost per house (American dollars)</td>
<td>60,000*</td>
<td>60,000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equipment per house</td>
<td>Each house consists of three bedrooms, one kitchen and one living room; and is furnished with beds, one computer, a refrigerator and kitchen equipment**</td>
<td>Each house consists of three bedrooms, one kitchen and one living room; and is furnished with beds, one computer, a refrigerator and kitchen equipment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Buildings constructed</td>
<td>Sports coliseum, millennium school, market, football court</td>
<td>Health center, sports coliseum, fire station, Pedro Vicente Maldonado millennium school, community police unit, public plazas, playgrounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other services</td>
<td>Basic services, sewage treatment plan, quays, telecommunication services, protection walls in the river</td>
<td>Basic services, sewage treatment plan, quays, telecommunication services</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Millennium Communities Main Characteristics. Compiled by the author on the basis of the following sources: Presidency of the Republic of Ecuador (2014), Ayala (2014a), Araujo (2013a), Araujo (2013b)**, Rodriguez (2013)*.

After the construction started, the people in charge of the project decided to change the concept from “Millennium Cities” to “Millennium Communities”. The reasons for this shift are not clear but a possible explanation is that, during and after the construction, the people in charge of the projects realized that instead of constructing everything anew in a city shape, it was preferable to retain the previous form of the settlements (Participant 36, personal communication, February 28, 2015). However, in the political discourse and media reports, the terms “community” and “city” continued to be used interchangeably. At the end of 2013, the Millennium Community of Playas de
Cuyabeno was inaugurated, allowing a new model of urbanization to be presented as the future of the Amazon Region and as one of the most important benefits of oil extraction.

As in the case of the Yachay project, the modernist legacy is fundamental to understanding the spatial organization of the Millennium Communities project. In the modernist architecture and urbanism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the design of the city is seen as an “end state – a vision to be first created and then fulfilled” (Artibise, 2010). Crucially, this vision, aimed at making possible a new future, attempted to erase any trace of the past or the local:

This urge to escape history was joined to a therapeutic program, dedicated to the erasure of nineteenth-century squalor in all its forms, that proposed an alliance between the hygienists and the architects that would be reinforced on every level by design. […] modernism proposed to consign the cluttered interiors and insalubrious living conditions of centuries to oblivion. By these means it was thought that disease, individual and social, might be eradicated once and for all, and the inhabitants of the twentieth century rendered fit for the marathon of modern life. (Vidler, 1992, p. 63)

The modernist urban desire was “to construct a theoretically water-tight formula to arrive at the fundamental principles of modern town planning” (Le Corbusier, 1929/1987, p. 328) and to construct rules and principles that could be used in any system of modern town planning, no matter where it was located. The new, ideal city should be built on a cleared site, an empty space, and constructed geometrically, using designs not dependent on the particularities of the territory or its history.

The consequence of geometrical planning, Le Corbusier argued, was repetition and mass production: “repetition dominates everything. We are unable to produce industrially at normal prices without it; it is impossible to solve the housing problem without it” (Le Corbusier, 1929/1987, p. 430). Consequently, the modernist house was conceived as a “house-machine” that had to be practical and emotionally satisfying, while also accommodating a succession of tenants: “the idea of the ‘old home’ disappears, and with it local architecture, etc., for labor will shift about as needed, and must be ready to move, bag and baggage. The words ‘bag and baggage’ will do very well to express the kind – the ‘type’ – of furniture needed. Standardized houses with standardized furniture”
(Le Corbusier, 1929/1987, p. 444). Thus, the idea of the modernist city was based on similarity and standardization.

In the Millennium Community of Playas de Cuyabeno this modernist legacy is present in different forms. First of all, the space, in terms of its architecture, is reduced to a fixed and neutral background acting as a “mere container or stage for the human drama” in the terms Edward Soja uses when talking about western social thought concerning space during the nineteenth century (2006, p. xvi). As is clear from the reference to “millennium” in the project’s name, it evinces a desire to drag the Amazonian Region into the new millennium (which, paradoxically, was not new anymore at the time of construction) and to turn it into an urbanized territory. The first step towards realizing this urban aspiration was to destroy almost all the buildings that had been part of the Kichwa community, such as residential buildings and a communal building for meetings and social activities. Second, a modular and standardized design was used. However, it is important to note that this was done not so much because such a design was deemed better, as in modernist architecture, but rather as a way of reducing the cost and duration of construction, as is characteristic of other large infrastructure projects implemented by the Ecuadorian government (Correa in Secom, 2012). In personal communication, one of the Petroamazonas managers argues that, from the beginning, the ringmaster was time and the priority was to build the new houses as rapidly as possible. Consequently, factors such as the sustainability or aesthetics of the buildings were not considered (Participant 36, personal communication, February 28, 2015).

The result of this complicity between a political necessity and a race against time was a new community – a new city – based on a homogenized and regimented distribution of space (Figure 0.1). All the houses have a green roof and are located in rows. They are configured in a symmetrical pattern: the distance between the houses is about fifteen meters and the main streets have right angles, giving the impression of a military camp. More specifically, the buildings evoke and follow an aesthetic and infrastructure similar to that of the Petroamazonas oil fields, which use the same colors and the same principles of rational division. This is hardly a surprise, since the people in charge of constructing the Millennium Community were Petroamazonas engineers, for whom it made sense to design the community in the image and likeness of what they already knew. As I will show in the next pages, the fact that the inhabitants of the Millennium Community are perceived as Petroamazonas employees (which many of them are) facilitates their subjection to the national oil company’s rules and spatial structuring.
The use of materials also provides clues as to the logic underlying the Millennium Community’s use and spatial organization. The houses in the Millennium Communities are stilt houses with white walls, made using iron rods and concrete (Figure 0.2). This is a radical departure from the traditional houses in the Ecuadorian Amazonian Region, which are made from wood and palm leaves, elements capable of regulating the temperature in an environment characterized by high temperatures, frequent rain and humidity (Figure 0.3).
Apart from the use of different materials, the rational use of space in the Millennium Communities does not accord with the perceptions and concepts used by the Kichwas to understand the forest. Traditionally, the Kichwas have perceived the forest as a resource of life and spiritual energy, and many Kichwa concepts proclaim a connection between the space and spirits (Participant 32, personal communication, January 17, 2015). They use, for example, the dynamic concept of *llakta* to designate the *created space*, which involves an environmental and a spiritual dimension. According to this concept, the territory is shaped by the space-soil, the space-water, the space-forest and the spiritual space (Calapucha, 2012). In other words, *llakta* comprises a range of social, cultural, spiritual, political and historical relationships that are part of a whole composed of space-time-water-soil-wind and based in a physical, bio-diverse territory (Calapucha, 2012). The concept of *sacha*, moreover, is used to refer to the space inhabited by animals, plants and local spirits. At the same time, *sacha* harbors a spirit called *Amazanka*, which is the most important spirit of the Kichwa world. It is a masculine spirit, owner and protector of the animals of the forest, and it has the ability to appear in the shape of any animal (Calapucha, 2012). In the Millennium Communities project, these concepts proposing an integral unity between the settlement and the environment are not considered. Instead, the past and all local traditions are disavowed as everything is made to look new and urban.

Paradoxically, during the inauguration of the Millennium Community Playas de Cuyabeno, in his speech, President Rafael Correa pointed out that it was the government’s intention to be more demanding with regard to the design of future new projects, and that it is possible to build modern houses while also maintaining aspects of traditional Cofán and Waorani (indigenous groups) architecture. “In this case”, Correa added, “we will assume a little bit of a dominant role. It is not worth constructing houses made of cement everywhere with the same design if we have a beautiful tradition of housing from the Waorani, Confanes, Shuar, Achuar…” (Presidencia de la República, 2013, p. 20, author’s translation from Spanish). Yet, according to Felipe Borman, the president of the *Junta Parroquial* (the administrative level of government in charge of the area where the Kichwa community is located), during the process of construction of the new houses, the government did not consider the culture and identity of the people at all. According to him, what the government was trying to do was to urbanize the people and make them lead a modern lifestyle (F. Borman, personal communication, January 19, 2015).
It is important to mention that the type of housing was indeed discussed with the Kichwa residents prior to construction, and that they agreed with the plan not to use traditional designs and materials. This is understandable in view of the history of the region. Traditional Kichwa houses have changed shape over time and traditional concepts about Nature are rarely put into practice anymore in Amazonian cities, mainly because of the increasing dominance of a discourse that repudiates ancestral and local practices, and associates any trace of indigenous traditions as a sign of being ‘undeveloped’. As a result, many indigenous communities have adopted a new imaginary of their future, in which the idea of living in an urbanized area is considered synonymous with leading a good life.

Figure 0.4 President Rafael Correa with indigenous people at the inauguration of the Millennium Community Playas de Cuyabeno (1 October 2013). Photo by Walker Vizcarra. Reproduced by permission of Walker Vizcarra.

This explains why, when the architecture of the houses was discussed with the Kichwa, they preferred to use materials similar to cement instead of wood and palm leaves, arguing that they deserved houses made of the same materials as those in the city (perceived as a developed space). As a testimony presented in “Comuneros acceden” notes: “[During the inauguration of the Millennium Community] Bolívar Tapou from the [indigenous] Tarabiayo community asked the President to construct the same kind of houses in his community because they also wanted to be part of the progress” (“Comuneros acceden”, 2013, para. 8, author’s translation from Spanish, emphasis added). Similarly, the president of the Kichwa community, explains:
We took our position, we claimed our right as indigenous people with ancestral territories. We said that not only developed provinces are in need. We are also Ecuadorians, who have been living here forever, we want decent housing, decent education, decent infrastructure, like any human being. [We told the government that] we also wanted good hospitals, a school, as in any other city. And also skilled teachers so we can have a quality education. I don’t think that they [the government] will keep us marginalized all our life for being indigenous people. (Participant 31, personal communication, January 19, 2015, author’s translation from Spanish)

As these testimonies demonstrate, large constructions made of concrete are perceived as decent infrastructure and decent housing, and as offering a way of life that counters marginalization.

One of the main buildings constructed in Playas de Cuyabeno is a Millennium School. The “Millennium Schools Project” is another initiative launched by Correa’s government to improve education in Ecuador. It consists in the construction or renovation of public schools mainly in zones where the educational infrastructure has been characterized as being of a low quality. What draws attention in the architecture of these schools is the complete denial of the potential of the space and landscape. There is no creativity and diversity in the use of materials, and the structures have no relation with the environment or local practices. In the governmental discourse, the facilities of the schools, which are equipped with computers, sciences laboratories, libraries and classrooms with beamers and electronic boards (Ayala, 2014), are invoked to demonstrate that education in the Amazon Region can be as good as in Quito (the capital) or in Europe and the United States (Correa in Presidencia de la República 2013). Yet, in practice, in the Millennium Community, the internet barely works and teachers are reluctant to work there due to the low salaries, short-term contracts and the remoteness of the community.

Even if some residents of Playas de Cuyabeno feel that the quality of life is better than before (F. Borman, personal communication, January 19, 2015), the problem with the spatial transformations implemented by the government and their reproduction of the rhetoric of modernity is that they also carry with them the darker side of the modernity project described in detail by Walter Mignolo (2009). Mignolo conceives of modernity as a European narrative that hides its darker side, which is “coloniality”. Modernity and
coloniality are two sides of the same coin, with one constitutive of the other: there is no modernity without coloniality (Mignolo, 2009, p. 39). In Latin America, the idea of "modernity" became synonymous with the ideas of salvation and newness that governed the colonial process in the sixteenth century. The idea of salvation through conversion to Christianity was translated into the idea of salvation through civilization, while the idea of newness converged with an idea of progress that followed western parameters. Modernity/coloniality was articulated through ontological and epistemic differences: indigenous or native people were perceived as, ontologically, lesser human beings and, consequently, not fully rational. A comprehensive colonial matrix of power was constructed in this way, resulting in the dominion and control of subjectivities, authority, economy and knowledge. The reproduction of this colonial matrix is visible in the management and construction of the Millennium Communities project. Beginning with the use of violence as a first act, the Ecuadorian government, mainly through the oil company, established rules to control and urbanize the Kichwa community, using a political discourse that echoes the colonial rhetoric of salvation, civilization and progress in service of its own (mis)understanding of Buen Vivir.

The desire to control space is combined with the desire to discipline the inhabitants of the Millennium Community through the structure and aesthetic of the houses in order to promote ‘good’ habits. For example, even though the community’s main activities are agriculture and fishing (Araujo, 2013b), growing crops within the Millennium Community has been forbidden by the oil company, so that the inhabitants need to commute frequently (mainly by canoe) to work their lands, some of which are located approximately five kilometers away, but others ten kilometers or more. In order to keep the clean, uniform appearance of the houses, it has also been prohibited to keep domestic animals or to make any changes to the facades for at least two years. Seemingly in contrast to these rules ensuring the community’s homogeneous look, the biggest buildings (the Millennium School and the Coliseum) are decorated with the Ecuadorian “country logo” (Figure 0.5), which intends to represent Ecuador’s pluricultural vision.31 This same logo, as I noted in Chapter One, was used by the artist Fernando Rivera in his artistic proposal for constructing a sculpture in the new Quito Airport. Using this logo, Rivera aimed to enrich the proposal and make it more attractive to the authorities. In the Millennium Community, the country logo appears as a brand of the State and as a

31 In Chapter 1, on page 64, I explain the use of this logo by the State in more detail.
statement of national identity, showing visitors that the communities were built by the government as part of its commitment to a pluriculturalism that, however, finds no real expression in the way the Millennium Community was constructed and is managed.

![Image of the Millennium School](image)

**Figure 0.5** Millennium School (January 2015). Photo by the author.

It is important to underline the way the shadow of the modernist-colonialist legacy hangs over Playas de Cuyabeno, shaping the extractive space. The rigid spatial segregation of the Millennium Community from its environment not only makes it easier (and cheaper) for the planners, in this case the government and the oil company, to construct social housing, but also promotes the idea of a future city where Amazonian communities can live happily together with the oil camps and extractive activities. The intention to construct a new Amazonia and to promote national development (which gestures towards plurality but also needs to bring all Ecuadorians together) results in the ignoring and erasing of the history of the residents and the space. The narrative supporting the creation of the Millennium Communities is based on an idea of progress, spatial homogenization and rationality that, in the communities’ architectural execution, is visible in the straight lines, white walls and controlled vegetation, as well as in the rules implemented to discipline the residents. Therefore, similar to the modernist project, with coloniality as its darker side, the space of the Millennium Communities reflects a monopolistic interpretive power that is also *diffusionist*, interpellating those situated in the periphery from a center that imposes its values without allowing them to be questioned or reshaped (Pratt, 2002). In the end, the indigenous communities of the Amazon Region
are not really consulted, but called upon by the center to participate in a discourse of progress that they find hard to refuse.

**The production of the uncanny and new dynamics of the use of space**

One year after the community’s inauguration economic and political problems arose in relation to the maintenance of the infrastructures, which was costing around USD 200,000 per year. In 2014, in the municipalities were the two first Millennium Communities are located, two candidates from opposition parties were elected as mayors. According to one of the directors of the oil company, this led to two problems: first, the central government did not provide the mayors with the necessary economic resources (as a punishment for not being from the ruling party) and second, the mayors themselves showed no interest in keeping the Millennium Communities in good condition. In practice, therefore, in the first years of operation of the communities, the institution in charge was Petroamazonas.

The relation between the community of Playas de Cuyabeno and the oil company is ambiguous. According to the authorities and residents interviewed, there is some dissatisfaction with the oil company regarding its intervention in the territory and the construction of the houses (e.g. complaints that these “are plastic houses” or that “now we pay for the services” or that “we prefer the fincas [farms]”). On the other hand, an alliance between the oil company and the community has been forged. Directly or indirectly, most of the families are receiving money from the oil company; they are either hired as laborers, offer services or obtain rewards every time the oil company conducts exploration activities. The income gained in this way enables the families to fulfill more than their basic needs.

According to the president of the Kichwa community, by 2015 the relation with the oil company is not good enough. First, the conflict of 2008 (in which the company violently entered the community to start oil exploitation) had not been fully settled; and second, the conditions imposed by the oil company on the workers from the community were considered too demanding (e.g. asking the workers to change their cars and canoes every year if they want to keep offering services to the company). According to the president, the community is constantly asking the oil company for accountability and reports, as well as for guided tours to see the activities of the company first-hand. This testimony suggests that the oil company is refusing to provide this accountability. According to Felipe Borman, the president of the Junta Parroquial:
This oil company has really taken into consideration the relation with the community; they have a whole department just to deal with the people and they have tactics, they have people who are prepared to deal with the people. In one way, this is good, but in another way, you can look at it, ok, they have a whole department to deal with indigenous people so they can keep them calm in a way, keep them suppressed, I think… (F. Borman, personal communication, January 19, 2015)

From the perspective of the Community Relations department of Petroamazonas, the idea is to maintain good relations with the people and to negotiate with the community so the oil company can enter the territory (Participant 26, personal communication, January 19, 2015). Nevertheless, when analyzing the testimonies, it is clear that the current situation is characterized by a strong dependency on the oil company, both in terms of infrastructure maintenance and economic support (through salaries and compensations).

Walking through the streets of Playas de Cuyabeno in 2015, a little more than a year after the Millennium Community’s inauguration, it was already possible to see the effects of weather conditions and daily use on the buildings, which seemed to be waging a constant battle with nature. In the Coliseum, for instance, some of the lights did not work and the basketball hoops were in very poor condition. In the boarding school, damage caused by moisture was visible. The oil company had also been forced to build an expensive barrier to prevent the river from flooding the Millennium Community. While the decay was not as evident because of ongoing maintenance performed by the oil company, it was clear that the moment these efforts would stop, a process of rapid degradation would commence. Thus, while the community was constructed at extreme speed, it had also started to deteriorate almost immediately.

This temporality of constant rapid change observed in the Millennium Community seems to be in harmony with the temporality of the oil company, which is one where oil needs to be kept flowing at all times. In Petroamazonas’ 2009 “Corporate Magazine”, José López, the company’s manager of social responsibility and community relations, explained that Petroamazonas aims to always work with efficiency because in the oil industry any hesitation or mistake could be very expensive. Paraphrasing López, the magazine explains that “because it is a company of the State, the oil company measures the results in terms of the oil obtained, that is to say, time is measured in oil barrels”
(Petroamazonas, 2009, p. 13, emphasis added, author’s translation from Spanish). As long as the oil company is in charge of the Millennium Community’s maintenance, the buildings will remain standing, but once oil extraction finishes in the region, the community will most likely be left to its own devices. Given the problems with infrastructure and the high maintenance costs, the president of the Kichwa community, admitted in January 2015 that he would not recommend starting a similar project in other communities in the area (Participant 31, personal communication, January 19, 2015).

Alongside the threat of rapid degradation, empty spaces of different kinds are appearing as reminders that this is an artificial community. Many of the residents of Playas de Cuyabeno, for example, prefer to spend most of their time on the farms (fincas), where they have animals and crops. This is why many of the houses are only partially occupied and some even uninhabited. The uninhabited houses are being used for storage or simply stand there, like Lego houses dropped on a carpet. In the case of the Millennium School, it was designed for about 600 students, but in 2015 only 200 students were enrolled. Moreover, the school cannot guarantee a quality education. According to the schoolteachers, they are demotivated due to the salaries, which are too low to compensate for the effort it takes to live in Playas de Cuyabeno. In addition, the teachers’ contracts with the Ministry of Education are only for three months, which does not guarantee economic stability (Participant 30, personal communication, January 18, 2015). As a result, there is a shortage of teachers in the Millennium School, so that even if the children attend classes, they are not always actually learning. Another problem is the school dropout rate; many young people from the community decide to stop studying because it is easier to get a job with the oil company, which pays very good salaries. For example, driving canoes can yield a monthly salary of 2,000 USD per month (F. Borman, personal communication, January 19, 2015). As summarized by a Petroamazonas Community Relations officer: “It’s complicated, because a big effort has been made in terms of infrastructure but education is not giving good results. Some children are even dropping out because sometimes they do not have a teacher. And if you ask the point of view of the teachers, they are not happy with the salaries” (Participant 26, personal communication, January 19, 2015).

Other examples of empty spaces are the cemetery and the market. The cemetery is located in the remotest part of the community; made from cement, it exudes emptiness and degradation. Its walls (once white) are already becoming gray and mildewed. In 2015, residents mentioned that so far only two bodies have been placed in the niches. A manager
from Petroamazonas whom I interviewed explained that the cemetery had not been used because, in Kichwa tradition, the deceased are buried near the houses where they lived (Participant 36, personal communication, February 28, 2015). Thus, the cemetery is a space for the dying that is itself dead. In the case of the market, it was built according to desk plans made by the oil company; the Kichwa community never had a space designated as a market and found no use for it. Bringing back Lefebvre’s ideas of conceived and lived spaces (1974)32 it is possible to say that in the Millennium Communities these empty, decaying spaces contribute to a sense of a badly designed, artificial space conceived by the authorities as an example of urbanization and development, but not lived as such. Similarly to the case of the New Airport, the lived dimension of the space is put aside and there is almost no connection between the everyday experiences of the community and the new structures.

Analyzing the Millennium Communities project, and specifically the empty and dying spaces in Playas de Cuyabeno, gives rise to the notion of an extractive-uncanny space emerging from the government’s radical spatial and architectural intervention. The Freudian concept of the uncanny or Unheimlich literally means unhomely and refers to “something that is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated” (Freud, cited in Lindner, 2009, p. 94). In his book The Architectural Uncanny (1992), Anthony Vidler defines the uncanny as a concept that evokes nostalgia and the “unhomely”, notions that are connected with a sense of estrangement, alienation, exile and homelessness reflected in architectural shapes. Uncanny or unhomely houses are described as houses that generate a non-specific feeling such as a sense of abandonment, real or imaginary, or nostalgia or fear. The structures of the Millennium Communities are uncanny in the way they evoke a sense of estrangement. For the inhabitants, the entire space they knew was transformed. This transformation was not within their control, but planned and imagined following parameters brought in from elsewhere, drastically changing their living conditions. In the useless, empty and dying spaces of Playas de Cuyabeno, it is indeed possible to perceive something disturbing and strange, a sense of lurking unease, an uncomfortable sense of haunting (Vidler, 1992, p. 23), which, in this case, would be the haunting of a notion of progress imposed upon the community from the outside, taking the place of their traditions.

32 In the introductory chapter of this study I explain Lefebvre’s categories of lived, conceived and perceived space in more detail. See pages 27-29.
The implications of this irruptive urbanization and the production of uncanny space are not only visible in the disused parts of the infrastructure, but also in what the residents do with the spaces they actually use. Even if the desire to be part of the country’s “progress” is transversally present in the whole community, in its bodies, practices and statements, some gestures and actions reflect a concurrent impulse to resist this model and to reconfigure it in a distinctive way. Infinitesimal and more comprehensive transformations are wrought in order to adapt the new spatiality to the community’s own interests and conventions, generating a particular culture of everyday life within the dominant cultural model (De Certeau 1984, p. xiii-xiv). Everyday life thus emerges as a sphere of resistance, taking shape not as overt opposition but as a process that slowly develops and that includes both preservative and inventive forms of appropriation (Highmore, 2002). It evidences an “inventiveness” through acts of appropriation and through the redeployment of materials, procedures and tactics, which, together, compose the network of an *antidiscipline* (De Certeau, 1984, p. xv). In Playas de Cuyabeno, the residents, consciously or unconsciously, refuse in different ways to be fully interpellated by the domineering modernist-colonialist spatial organization.

One such antidisciplinary response can be discerned in the attitude taken by the residents with regard to the monthly payment for services. When the Millennium Community was being constructed, neither the residents nor the engineers-planners considered the sustainability of the buildings and of the way of life they imposed upon the families living in them. As mentioned by the Petroamazonas community relations officer:

No prior social assessment was carried out before the constructions. The government sold an idea...how can I put it? It sold an idea to start oil activities...but without prior social assessment. We should have realized that the Kichwa people have always been hunters, gatherers (...). If you ask the people how they see the new community...you will see that the infrastructure has generated needs. Needs. Now, the people will need to work to pay for the basic services. (Participant 26, personal communication, January 19, 2015, author’s translation from Spanish)
This statement is reinforced by Felipe Borman, the president of the junta parroquial, who noted:

when they were building the Comunidad del Milenio they didn’t think about how it was going to sustain itself in the long term and that is a big problem. They didn’t take into consideration the sustainability of the whole community, including the public infrastructure, they didn’t take into consideration that. And, most importantly, they didn’t take into consideration the sustainability of the families, how they were going to sustain their houses. Now they have electricity and pumping water, for which the government has started to charge, you know, like with everybody else. (Personal communication, January 19, 2015)

The new space has confronted the community with a previously unknown reality: having to make a monthly payment for basic services like water, electricity and a telephone connection. When the telephones had first been installed, the residents started calling everywhere, but at the end of the month, when the bill came, they did not want to pay, arguing that the amount charged was too high. The same occurred with the internet connection. Thus, while the community was conceived as a Millennium City with the same access to services and means of communication as those living in cities, these services and means were not used as the government and the oil company intended and expected.

Another response in the sphere of inventiveness is the creation of neighborhoods with their own identity. The Millennium Community is formally divided into blocks and each block has a number. Nonetheless, as mentioned by some residents, the blocks have become neighborhoods and each neighborhood has a name and celebrates certain festivities. For example, there is the neighborhood “January 12” and the neighborhood “May 2”, recalling dates of importance to the inhabitants. Significantly, there are no signs on the streets or on the houses showing the name of the neighborhood (in accordance with the prohibition of changes to the facades). Yet, even as an invisible dynamic, the creation of neighborhoods disrupts the homogeneity of the Millennium Communities. The neighborhoods also participate in the minga, a collective activity for the benefit of the community. Following Kichwa tradition, once a month, all the families gather to clean the streets and other public places. Before the communal minga, each neighborhood must
ensure the cleanliness of its block, and families that do not follow this rule are punished with a fine. The consumption of chicha (a typical Kichwa drink) is also part of the minga.

Besides the creation of neighborhoods and the maintenance of the minga tradition, some changes have been made in the structure of the houses, mainly on the ground floor. Some families have closed off the ground floor, adapting the area as a business (Figure 0.6), storage room or place of leisure. The businesses are primarily grocery stores (there are seven in the Millennium Community), with the space modified to welcome customers, who can also take a seat outside. Other types of businesses construct canoes or carry out mechanical repairs (Figure 0.7). There are also bars (two or three), which are deliberately made difficult to distinguish, since not all of them are legal (Figure 0.8).

Changes to the prescribed use of time can be also pointed to as part of the inhabitants’ anti-disciplinary conduct. Since traditional activities (such as growing crops or raising animals) are restricted, the new infrastructure has led to an expansion of leisure time, with some of the residents interviewed noting they feel bored and prefer to stay on the fincas (Participant 31, personal communication, January 19, 2015; R. Yumbo, personal communication, January 16, 2015). To fill the time, it is common for families to organize parties that can last for more than twelve hours; such an activity is far removed from the oil company’s mantra that time is money.

The latter example of anti-disciplinary practice also opens up the discussion of the reverse situation, when the changes enforced in the inhabitants’ use of time reveal that
disciplining is taking place effectively and that the residents are being affected in a way that is favorable to the pursuit of oil exploitation. Thus, the expansion of leisure time is not only an effect of the restrictions imposed on the community, but also of the economic changes caused by the presence of the oil company in the area. As I explained earlier, many residents work, directly or indirectly, for the oil company and most of the families receive monetary “bonuses” every time the company conducts seismic explorations to find oil. This has created an economic dependency on the oil company, causing the inhabitants to prefer to stay on good terms with it. Economically speaking, when the head of the family works for the oil company, the family income surpasses the amount needed to fill basic needs. Consequently, many inhabitants have plenty of free time and almost every house in the community has the television on for the whole day, showing North American movies, morning shows and government announcements. The residents express that, more and more, the younger generation prefers to stay in Playas de Cuyabeno to use the computer or watch television instead of going to the fincas. They no longer want to fish or farm like their parents, and are not interested in speaking the Kichwa language (Participant 31, personal communication, January 19, 2015). The high consumption of alcohol among the young is also a growing problem.

Figure 0.7 Family business – Millennium Community Playas de Cuyabeno (February 2015). Photo by the author.

As has been shown in this section, the modernist planning of the houses, the rejection of the past and the local dynamics have led to the emergence of, on the one hand, uncanny dead and empty spaces, and, on the other, disciplining practices. Faced with this
new urban reality, the responses of the inhabitants waver between resistance, boredom and dependency on the oil company (and, with it, the State), a situation that raises questions about the meaning of Buen Vivir for the inhabitants of the Amazon Region.

Figure 0.8 Bar – Millennium Community Playas de Cuyabeno (February 2015). Photo by the author.

Conclusions

As was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, to conceive of a space as a produced space (Lefebvre, 1974) implies a critical analysis of the production of the categories through which such a space is read and decoded in specific periods of time. The architecture and aesthetics of the Millennium Community Playas de Cuyabeno, the dynamic interaction between the spatial planning imposed by the State and the oil company, and the residents’ ways of living there follow the categories prescribed by what I have called the space and architecture of extractivism.

The space and architecture of extractivism are based on a mode of production and model of development known as new extractivism. In this model, unlike in traditional extractivism, the exploitation of resources is accompanied by a strong presence of the State. Among other characteristics, this strong presence of the State is accompanied by a new conception of the exploitation of resources as necessary to combat poverty and promote development, keeping intact the “myth of progress” (Gudynas, 2009, p. 221). Constructions such as the Millennium Communities are created with revenues from the
exploitation of natural resources and are justified to the public as enhancing the social and economic progress of the Ecuadorian nation as a whole. The constructions, in other words, are tied to a discourse that heralds the extraction of natural resources as the main motor of wealth and modernization. As the case of the Millennium Communities shows, when indigenous communities resist, the State is willing to resort to violence and military intervention to further its agenda. Thus, one of the main characteristics of the space and architecture of extractivism is that the spatial transformations are imposed (through violence or coercion by economic means) rather than planned in dialogue with the communities concerned.

Another characteristic of the space and architecture of extractivism in Ecuador is that it is the product of a discursive tension between the new extractivist model of development and the discourse of Buen Vivir and the Rights of Nature. While the government emphasizes the idea of respecting social and cultural differences, it simultaneously homogenizes Ecuadorian society by constructing uniform infrastructures and buildings. As I have shown, the Millennium Communities are far from being a representation of Ecuadorian pluriculturalism or of a harmonious relation with Amazonian flora and fauna. Instead, they reproduce a modernist narrative that perpetuates ideals of modernity, progress and national development. This modernist narrative is linked to a colonial narrative that is reflected in the initial use of violence, the establishment of rules to control and urbanize the community, the community’s economic dependence on the oil company, and the political discourse that reproduces a rhetoric of salvation, civilization and progress in service of the State’s own opportunistic understanding of Buen Vivir and the Rights of Nature. The result of the disconnect between new extractivism, Buen Vivir and the Rights of Nature is a corresponding disconnect between the standardized, sterile way in which the Millennium Communities have been constructed architecturally, their natural surroundings and the traditional livelihoods and practices of the inhabitants.

The produced space in the Amazonia region, therefore, is the reflection of a political struggle or, better, the result of contradictory political intentions in which the Foucauldian triad of space-knowledge-power (1980) is clearly visible: similarly to the Yachay project, in which the political discourse establishes technology as the remedy against underdevelopment, in the case of the Millennium Communities the relation space-power-knowledge is based on the construction of a political discourse proclaiming the benefits of oil extraction, resulting in the construction of a planned community within
which the State tries to promote order and homogenization through a disciplining that is not just spatial, but also affects the inhabitants’ bodies and minds. As with the Yachay project, moreover, the Millennium Communities were constructed in a space conceptualized as a tabula rasa, with no room for traces or residues of former dwellings, or for memories and traditional practices.

The third important aspect of the space and architecture of extractivism is the seeming discord between the temporality of the authorities’ interests, that of the physical structures and that by which the inhabitants live. The temporality of the authorities’ interests, which privileges speed, is continuously struggling to keep up: needing to construct the Millennium Community as quickly as possible and needing to find, extract and sell oil without interruption. The physical structures of the Millennium Community, constructed with great speed at the cost of quality, are finding that they cannot keep up and are already experiencing accelerated degradation. Finally, the residents are finding their traditional temporalities (associated with their farming activities) disrupted and the new expansion of leisure time in the Millennium Community resulting in boredom and elevated consumption of alcohol.

The potential effects of the space and architecture of extractivism on indigenous culture and identity are vast and harmful. Assuming space, culture and identity as inseparable, it is important to ask what kind of identities and cultural practices are promoted and pre-empted by the Millennium Communities project. As I have shown, the extractive space and architecture are transforming elements of the Kichwa way of life. In turn, the inhabitants are adapting to the space, while also manifesting some anti-disciplinary actions. With regard to the latter, it is difficult to know whether these actions are actually escaping the authorities’ narrative of modernity/progress and their intention of disciplining the space and the subjects living in it. To assess the extent to which the inhabitants have adopted the way of life promoted by the Millennium Communities as conceived by the State and the oil company, it would be necessary to analyze in detail the possible implications of both the imposed and the chosen spatial transformations for the construction and formation of the Kichwa cultural identity in the long term. What can be said on the basis of the present analysis, however, is that urban projects with the extractivist characteristics described above devalue the everyday activities and historical practices of the inhabitants of the Amazon territory, irrespective of whether they are indigenous people or mestizos settlers; as a result, the communities in the Amazonian Region are being molded, by means of the rearrangement of the spaces they live in, into
the shape of a national identity constructed on the basis of the interests of the government and the oil companies, and on the basis of a modernist-colonialist notion of progress and development that has been criticized by Mignolo and other decolonial critics.

Analyzing the Millennium Communities together with the construction of the airport and the Yachay project, it is possible to discern the following patterns: behind all three projects lies the aspiration to turn Ecuador into a more developed and more globalized country. In the case of the airport, the country’s advancement is imagined as possible through the transformation of Quito into a global city-region; in the Yachay project, radical progress is imagined as achievable through the development of technology; in the Millennium Communities, the exploitation of natural resources is imagined as the primary way of enhancing the economic and social position of the marginalized communities of the Amazon Region, and of realizing the Constitution’s goal of Buen Vivir and the Rights of Nature. In all cases, a modernist use and distribution of a space positioned as empty is perceived as offering the best way of transforming Ecuador into a developed country at the vanguard of globalization. The rhetoric used to spread this idea is surprisingly effective. In the case of the Millennium Community, even the Kichwa community perceived the new buildings as a step towards a better life and recognition from the State, with the drawbacks (including problems maintaining the buildings and infrastructure, the turning away from traditional Kichwa practices and language by the young generation, and the increasing dependency on the oil company) only recognized later on. Discursively, all the discussed projects were presented by the State to the public as facilitating the emergence of a new country with a better position on the global stage, especially in the planning stage. It is only now that they have been built, in the everyday reality of their use, that the vast gap between the ideals and imaginaries used to promote the projects as capable of constructing completely new spaces and the actual reality of the spaces, including the traces of their histories, is becoming apparent.

In the next and final chapter, I turn my attention to a different type of structure, namely monuments constructed by local urban authorities. As I will show, even though the aims and uses of these monuments are different from those of the previously discussed mega-projects, they, too, are manifestations of the authorities’ anxieties with regard to Ecuador’s position in a globalized world.