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The politics of public construction in a globalized world

Imagining urban space in Ecuador

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Conclusion

This study sought to comprehend how Ecuadorian authorities imagine and understand the construction of public structures. Specifically, I selected four cases I considered representative in order to respond to the following questions: What governmental discourses about and representations of modernity, development and globalization are operative in planning and promoting these urban projects? What spatial imaginaries do these projects aspire to realize? And how do the resulting constructions, once materialized, influence the way people live in urban space and construct their identities? A close reading of the discourses used by the responsible authorities, interviews with key actors and fieldwork focused on the realized structures allowed me to distinguish many commonalities in the role played in these public construction projects by spatial imaginaries strongly tied to particular notions of globalization, modernity and development.

Even though all the case studies are different in terms of their context, scale, purpose and targeted communities, my findings reveal that state or municipal representatives perceive the projects they manage mainly as serving to re-position local and national space within a narrative of progress associated with development, modernity and globalization that contradicts the discourse of *Buen Vivir* promoted by the same authorities and explicitly evoked in relation to the Yachay and Millennium Communities projects. In addition, this narrative of progress presents a problematic fit with the socio-cultural realities of the sites where the new constructions are placed, resulting in conflicts between stakeholders, amended designs and structures used in different ways than intended.

With regard to the first question listed above, I have found that the discourse of modernity operating in these projects accords with that described by Mary Louise Pratt (as discussed in my introduction) in that it is centered on an idea of progress that positions certain parts of the world (not just the West, but also, for example, South Korea) as models that should be followed by the more peripheral parts. Ecuador is positioned, by its own government, as situated in the periphery and therefore as lagging behind and needing to catch up. Such catching up is envisioned as possible by promoting advanced urbanization (by turning Quito into a city-region and Yachay into a Zone), technological innovation (by modeling Yachay on Songdo and Silicon Valley) and the promotion of tourism (by using monuments as city branding instruments). Within the analyzed projects,

development is conceived as the achievement of economic levels where capital investment is the most important element and globalization is understood to produce a world-spanning economic-competitive context, in which it is deemed necessary to participate in order to survive. Globalization, then, is perceived as a goal but also as a threat, which is why, for the Ecuadorian authorities, it is so important to participate in it as fully as possible. Accordingly, all the analyzed projects aspire to improve the position of Ecuador and/or particular Ecuadorian cities in the globalized world. Taken together, the projects appear like voices clamoring to be included in the collective dream called globalization.

With regard to the second question, concerning the spatial imaginaries the projects seek to realize, I conclude that, in the race against time to ensure that Ecuador will not be left behind in the globalized world,³⁷ the megastructures and monuments constructed, in a sort of alchemical exercise, are expected to fulfill ambitious social and political goals at the local and national levels. These goals take shape in the spatial imaginaries associated with the projects by the responsible authorities. For example, the new Quito airport is expected to transform the capital into a city-region, the Millennium Communities aspire to enable indigenous communities to overcome poverty and exclusion, Yachay should put Ecuador at the vanguard of technological advances, and the local monuments are expected to turn Salcedo and Manta into tourist attractions and trade hubs. The problem in granting such almost magical powers to particular structures, as this study has shown, is that the complex cultural, economic and social changes that accompany spatial transformations are taken as fully predictable when, in practice, they are not.

Significantly, in this effort to place Ecuador at the vanguard of globalization, modernity and development, rather than as lagging behind other countries, the authorities tend to follow external models instead of focusing on developing local and different strategies. The construction of the new Quito airport, for example, was meant to project an image of Quito as capable of competing with global cities such as Bogotá, Santiago or Buenos Aires. In the case of Yachay, it followed the models of Songdo and Silicon Valley, which emerged under very different circumstances and in completely different

³⁷ See, for example, Ramírez's discourse in Chapter Two, page 73, or Analía Navarrete's words when referring to globalization in Chapter Four, page 175.

contexts. Ironically, by following these models, the Ecuadorian authorities end up reaffirming the idea that Ecuador is lagging behind.

In addition, by having these models in mind and by associating these urban projects with notions of progress that echo received western discourses of modernity and development, colonial practices and ways of thinking are perpetuated. In the case of the Millennium Communities, for example, the government did not hesitate to enter the Kichwa territory by force to start oil exploration, while the imposed distribution of the space and the construction of house-machines followed modernist models and the whole project echoed an idea of the salvation characteristic of modernist and developmental discourses. Similarly, in the case of Yachay, the original design reveals a restricted definition of knowledge and innovation (from which indigenous forms of knowledge are excluded) and imagines the project as an economic zone that, in terms of its architecture, replicates modernist notions of order and control. Discourses of modernity emphasizing homogeneity (of space and of cultural identity) also surface in relation to the Salcedo and Manta monuments, with the majority of the local authorities assuming that the monuments are capable of capturing the essence of the city in a single image.

However, my analysis of the four projects has also shown that, during the process of implementation and/or once the constructions have materialized, the authorities' spatial imaginaries were not fully realized or were realized but lived in different ways. In the case of Yachay, clear opposition from local architects emerged to the first plans for the buildings, which had been composed by the South Korean team, and the plan to make it a globally known center of technology has not been successful because of the disregard for local conditions. In the case of the Millennium Communities, once the constructions were finished, the inhabitants, finding that the structures were not compatible with their everyday lives, developed practices of resistance and started to use the spaces for other purposes than intended by the authorities. In addition, the houses quickly began to decay due to the use of inadequate materials and lack of maintenance, countering the spatial imaginary of the Millennium Communities as guaranteeing the enduring modernization of the Amazon region and its communities. In the case of the local monuments, the mono-identity reflected by these monuments was also called into question by their spatial juxtaposition with monuments asserting different mono-identities and by critics wanting a more pluralistic image of the cities to be reflected. In all cases, the tensions that emerged between the spatial imaginaries that accompanied the projects' conception and their realization expose the necessity of adjusting the politics of public construction to the

social and cultural realities of the chosen sites, also in relation to the local and national contexts.

With regard to the last question, about how the resulting constructions, once materialized, influence the way people construct their identities, I want to note the following: all the projects embody particular spatial imaginaries of Ecuadorian local, national and global identity that the authorities seek to disseminate through the location, form and function of the projects. The resulting constructions constitute a narrative in which buildings, houses, monuments and the airport are embedded within political and economic interests, aspirations and desires. What the four cases have exposed is an intention to radically enhance Ecuador's position on the global stage through various forms of modernization and economic development, which, however, did not always turn out to be realistic or successful. In this context, it is worth considering whether these structures, as they were conceived by the authorities, could nevertheless play a role in the construction of a diverse and plural identity, full of a sense of social belonging, or whether, on the contrary, they can only affirm an "empty" and sterilized identity in accordance with restrictive discourses of globalization, modernity and development. The former seems unlikely as, in the end, despite their apparent differences, all four projects, through the spatial imaginaries associated with them, promote a sense of belonging with a non-existent reality, a sense of belonging that lacks a meaningful connection to the actual social dynamics, landscape, traditions and history of Ecuador.

Some of the criticisms that these conclusions raise are related to the voices of the users of these constructions, which are largely disregarded in the public planning and construction processes. It is necessary to ask how these users feel about these projects and whether they perceive them in the same way as their mentors. I have tried to consider the ways in which the users interact with, perceive and live in the spaces of public constructions in each case, most extensively in my discussions of the lived space of the old Quito airport and of the ways in which the Millennium Communities' inhabitants use the new space in inventive ways that counter the way it was conceived by the authorities.

In closing, I would like to mention some recent developments related to two of the projects discussed, which support the conclusions formulated above. First, with regard to Yachay, in January 2018 its newest rector, Carlos Castillo-Chávez, withdrew from the office due to personal reasons ("Carlos Castillo", 2018), reinforcing the impression that Yachay-Tech, and the larger Yachay project, are mired in instability and uncertainty.

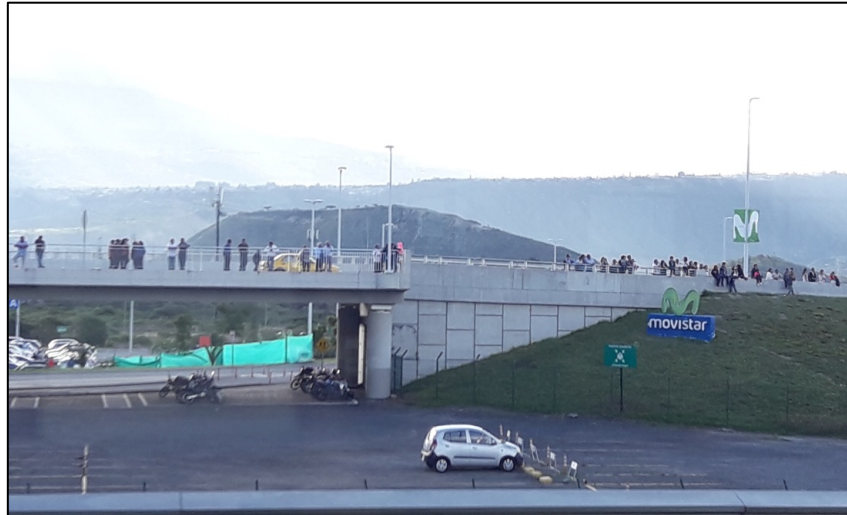


Figure 0.1 Exterior of the new Mariscal Sucre Airport (January 2018). Photo by the author.

Second, a recent photograph shows people gathered on an overpass near the new Mariscal Sucre Airport (Figure 0.1). They are watching the planes depart in the same way as at the old Mariscal Sucre Airport. The fact that some of them are sitting is an indication that their presence is not momentary but has duration enough to produce a need to rest the body. Clearly, the place they occupy was not meant as a space to watch the planes (and their family members on board) depart. Nevertheless, what the image reflects is that they have found a way to inhabit its space in a similar way to that of the old airport, even though the spatial imaginary according to which the new airport was built does not envision this.



Figure 0.2 World Mirror - sculpture by the South-Korean artist Young-ho Yoo (29 May 2017). Photo retrieved from <https://twitter.com/mauricirodasec/status/869263590083186688>.

The final development I want to mention is also related to the new Mariscal Sucre Airport (Figure 0.2). In 2017, a new sculpture called “The World Mirror” (original name in English) was placed in the roundabout where the architect Fernando Rivera had proposed to install the sculpture *El Retorno* [the Return], through which he wanted to make visible the return of migrants to Ecuador.³⁸ While Rivera’s project was rejected (for unknown reasons), the new sculpture is a donation of South Korea and was made by the South-Korean artist Young-ho Yoo. The installation and selection of this sculpture follows the logic of conceiving the airport as a pivotal structure for converting Quito into a city region. The sculpture is projected more towards global connections than local ones. Significantly, its name is in English and what it depicts is a man facing his identical mirror image. According to Ana Díaz, third secretary at the South Korean embassy in Quito, the sculpture “symbolizes between the northern and southern hemispheres, the exchange between two civilizations and the encounter of Seoul and Quito” (Lee, 2017, para. 3). By imagining Quito as the mirror image of Seoul rather than as having its own identity and its own specific relation to the globalized world, the sculpture reinforces the spatial imaginary that produced the new airport, as well as the other projects discussed in this study.

This study has suggested that the urban planning process in Ecuador could be improved by adjusting the spatial imaginaries of the authorities to the actual national and local conditions rather than basing them on unrealistic aspirations. A first step towards this could be to take seriously the task of achieving Buen Vivir instead of staying on the well-known and well-worn path of global neoliberal capitalism. Using Buen Vivir not just in a rhetorical way, but as a central framework for the design of public constructions in Ecuador would open up the possibility of acknowledging the pluralism and diversity of its society, and of a better equilibrium between conceived and lived space in Lefebvre’s sense.

³⁸ This initiative is discussed in Chapter 1, on page 64.