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# Progressive Politics and Inclusive Social Housing: Enablers and Barriers to Transformative Change in Bogota

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# **Progressive Politics and Inclusive Social Housing: Enablers and Barriers to Transformative Change in Bogota**

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## **Abstract**

Governing authorities in cities around the world are facing challenges to incentivize compact and more inclusive cities through investments in social housing. This paper investigates the case of Plaza de la Hoja – a public housing complex in a Bogota, considered to be the flagship project in a larger, city-wide progressive vision built on a commitment to bringing public housing for the poor to the inner city. Through a focus on the dynamic relationships between comprehensive urban plans, specific project components, and post-project reactions, we document the pitfalls and possibilities for implementing progressive policy agendas.

Keywords: social housing, progressive politics, NIMBYism, urban design, participatory processes, comprehensive planning

## **Introduction**

Governing authorities in cities around the globe have struggled against the forces of capital, real estate speculation, and “NIMBYism” that prevent social housing projects in a city’s most desirable urban areas. Even in contexts where federal or local mandates require a certain degree of social housing provision, officials are often stymied by developers who trade off housing provision against location, agreeing to build subsidized units only in areas where market housing is not in high demand. Neighborhoods, for their part, often use decentralized democratic mechanisms and ideologies of local control to push back against government efforts to equally distribute social housing across all communities. The result tends to be socio-spatial inequity, with poorer consumers of social housing pushed to the under-serviced periphery, while middle and upper-class populations inhabit market-driven housing that concentrates on high-end properties in readily accessible locations near desirable urban amenities. This explains why so many cities face challenges in producing both compact and inclusive urban landscapes.

In the face of such challenges, many local officials are often reluctant to impose top-down solutions. This owes to the fact that intervening in market dynamics or pursuing housing and land-use policies that prioritize the poor can carry great political costs. Even when city planners and housing specialists are committed to such goals, informed by their professional commitments to equity and sustainability, the fact that the elected officials to whom they must answer can be voted out of office often prevents them from supporting such lofty ideals. Any city mayor would need considerable political legitimacy, or a firm citizen mandate, to start the process of enacting more inclusive social housing policies, and even for those coming into office with such agendas already well articulated, as seen recently in New York City under the administration of Bill de Blasio, the actual implementation process can be fraught with barriers to change. For this reason, even when a progressive political leader embracing such commitments is elected to office, there is no guarantee that fundamental urban policy change and more equitable spatial outcomes will occur.

### ***Inclusive Social Housing in Bogota: A Case Study***

This paper examines the case of Bogota, a large and rapidly urbanizing capital city in Colombia where a far-left mayor campaigned on a commitment to producing a less spatially-segregated, more socially inclusive city. The main mechanism for achieving such aims was *Programa de Ordenamiento Territorial*, a path-breaking but highly controversial land-use plan built around new social housing priorities, introduced by Mayor Gustavo Petro, a former member of the M-19 radical movement, who had previously spent time in jail as a political prisoner. Elected to a four-year term in 2012, Petro had renounced his guerrilla membership decades earlier, was elected to the country's Congress and Senate, and ran unsuccessfully for president in 2010 before he became heavily invested in urban policy and politics in Bogota.

The new mayor's plan called for a series of new social housing projects in areas of Bogota that had historically been reserved primarily for market-rate housing geared toward middle- and higher-income populations. The centerpiece of his ambitious and unprecedented plan was Plaza de la Hoja (La Hoja), a strategically located and expertly designed new housing complex intended to shelter internally displaced people fleeing to Bogota in the face of violence and armed conflict in the Colombian countryside.

The La Hoja social housing project, built in a middle-income neighborhood in Bogota's inner city, was the sole successfully completed project of Petro's larger *revitalization plan* for producing a more compact and socially mixed Bogota. With its completion, the Mayor simultaneously brought public housing for the poor back to the central part of Bogota while also serving the needs of the country's internally displaced people, the latter of which had historically been relegated primarily to the city's formal and informal urban peripheries. In this paper, we examine the case of La Hoja, how it fit into the mayor's progressive vision, and the measures he undertook to advance both this project and his larger urban equity aims. We ask what political forces and conditions – as well as design practices and planning processes – enabled or constrained Mayor Petro's capacities to achieve the radical social project of creating a more compact and less segregated city through social housing investments in La Hoja and elsewhere across Bogota's inner city. More specifically, we ask why La Hoja was the only successfully completed housing complex in a larger arsenal of projects mandated by his new land-use plan.

In addressing these questions, we frame our analysis through literatures that speak to the difficulties of policy implementation, both generally and with respect to egalitarian and inclusive social housing policies in particular. By so doing, we seek to contribute to the planning literature on equity and justice, but through an analytical rather than normative lens. For one thing, much

of the seminal planning literature focused on the moral importance of creating open and just cities (Fainstein, 2010; Harvey, 2010; Young 1990), is focused on planning actions and outcomes that unfold at the scale of the city (i.e. the “just city”), often leaving untouched the question of whether planners and urban designers’ judgements about how to link overall ideals of just city-building translate from the scale of the city to the scale of the project. For another, within the case-study based research focused on the implementation of progressive urban plans on housing (Chaskin & Joseph, 2015; Espino, 2015; Goering, 2005; Sanyal & Mukhija, 2001; Thomas & Grindle, 199), the focus is on how different variables and actors produce successful or unsuccessful outcomes, instead of how progressive policies in city building scale down to the level of housing projects.

In this paper, we examine a case where a single project intended to jumpstart more comprehensive socio-spatial change was successfully realized while the larger and more socially transformative revitalization plan of which it was a part ultimately failed. As such, our aim here is to focus on the dynamic relations between an ambitious socially inclusive plan and its constituent project components, including but not limited to La Hoja, both during the planning and implementation phases, and during the post-project resettlement processes for beneficiary populations. Through a focus on the dynamic relationships between comprehensive urban plans, specific project components, and post-project reactions and how they unfolded in a path-dependent process, we can better grasp the struggles associated with the implementation of progressive policy agendas, how these are interrelated, and the difficulties of fundamentally transforming cities through a series of targeted policy actions.<sup>1</sup>

In specifying the conditions that affected social housing policy implementation in Bogota, we use three different analytical entry points. The first involves a recognition of the

power of citizen opposition, sometimes identified as the NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard) phenomenon (Dear, 1992). The second requires a more focused appreciation of party politics and national political conditions, and how partisan strategic negotiations, political loyalties, and intractable party conflicts can impact local authorities' room for maneuver (Davis, 1991; Flores & Davis, 2013; Grindle, 1980; Sanyal, 2005). Through analysis of public documentation and interviews of public officials we address both points introducing Mayor Petro's vision for Bogota, and then show that opposition to the progressive plan occurred not only through NIMBYism but also as a product of unstable and contentious political re-alignments. The third entry point interrogates the agency of design and planning, and focuses on the ways that particular design or participatory process decisions made by professionals can positively or negatively affect outcomes (August, 2016; Harvey, 2005; Holston, 1989; Sander, 2003; Scott, 1998).<sup>2</sup> Through interviews with displaced residents of the housing complex and residents in surrounding neighborhoods, and analysis of secondary documentation, we identify some of the limitations imposed by planning and design specifications for the housing complex, and reveal how its own residents reacted to the project's form and function.

Overall, we highlight a paradox. A comprehensive and progressive agenda intended to produce a socially inclusive and sustainable housing program for the city *as a whole* will have to build on *individual* projects, whose value and benefits will be assessed by political stakeholders, neighbors, and beneficiary populations at the site of the housing unit and its surrounds. Hence, while La Hoja may have set a precedent for the implementation of other social housing projects in the inner city, the political and social trade-offs leading to completion of this project generated less-than-ideal social, political, and design outcomes, thus jeopardizing the more ambitious and transformative aims of which this project was a part.



## **The Revitalization Plan: Formalizing a New Urban Agenda**

In 2012 Gustavo Petro won the local elections for mayor of Bogota, achieving the third consecutive victory for a left-wing candidate in Colombia's capital city. With the slogan Humane Bogota (*Bogotá Humana*), Petro came to office on a twofold promise of densification and social transformation, targeting longstanding conditions of spatial segregation by economic class. Under the promise of social transformation, the new administration defined itself in opposition to two longstanding traditions in city-building.

First, city officials adopted a discourse against CIAM's principles of modernist architecture and modernist planning, arguing that while these approaches claimed to facilitate planning legibility and avoid social conflict, they also legitimized a city built on strategies of separation and segregation. At the same time, the Mayor and his planning staff criticized the liberal model of urban policymaking, which they argued was privileging the interests of private entrepreneurs and private speculators because raising land values resulted in the expulsion of low-income households from fast-growing real estate markets. To push back against both legacies, the administration proposed a new, more politically progressive urban plan, one intended to foster equality and inclusion through social contact and by mixing people of different social classes in the same residential vicinities (Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá, 2014).

Petro's plan for Bogota echoed ideals embodied in Fainstein's (2010) *principle of diversity*, and Young's (1990) *ethics of difference*, both of which are considered fundamental building blocks for guaranteeing social and spatial justice in city-building. In particular, his revitalization plan aimed to guarantee: i) social mixing and equal access to city services and amenities, ii) density and diversity of social interactions, and iii) hybridization of institutional, economic, and residential uses (Martínez, 2016). He sought to advance these goals through the

adoption of urban design and planning principles intended to push back against mono-functional land uses and privatized forms of mobility. Furthermore, he sought a comprehensive and spatially interventionist land-use plan, built around the rejection of two key trends: i) suburbanization, with middle- and high-income households moving to live in gated communities in hot real estate markets in neighboring municipalities to the north of the city, and ii) social marginalization, with housing units for the poor concentrated in the urban peripheries in the south of Bogota, in areas where land was cheap and residents had minimal access to public amenities.

As expected, reversing these age-old trends was a huge challenge, and the commitment to these goals forced the mayor to simultaneously undertake a wide range of planning and policy interventions across several institutional spheres from land use to domiciliary services. For example, to fight suburbanization and marginalization, the mayor decreed that *Empresa de Acueducto y Alcantarillado de Bogota*, a city-owned-company that not only provided water and sewage services in Bogota but also sold water to surrounding municipalities, would no longer sell water to any newly-built housing projects located outside the city's boundaries.<sup>3</sup> He also mandated the creation of a four-year urban plan for an area labeled Bogota's *extended inner city*, whose contours would be reflected in a revised overall land-use plan for the city as a whole. The extended inner city was geographically defined as the area beyond the traditional city center, covering all residential locations less than 20-minute commuting time – via public transportation – to the main working places in the city. Both the plan for the extended inner city and the new land-use plan were meant to support the densification of Bogota's inner city. Moreover, both plans were meant to foster social integration through the development of mixed-income neighborhoods.

In line with these goals, Petro instructed the local housing authority to adopt a vision plan for 2016. It contained, among other things, the mandate that there should be at least one extremely low-income housing project less than 20 minutes away from every housing unit or residential building in the city. Were this vision to be realized, low-income housing would no longer be concentrated in Bogota’s urban peripheries, as it historically had been (see Figure 1). With this vision plan as a guide, the first low-income housing development projects slated for 2016 – La Victoria, La Estacion, El Pulpo, La Maria, Comuneros, and Plaza de la Hoja – were to be located within the extended inner city (M. M. Maldonado, personal communication, 2012). In total, these projects were expected to add 1,572 low-income housing units in the extended inner city. Adding a further layer of complexity, the city also announced the tenant-selection process for each project would prioritize internally displaced people from among all eligible low-income households.<sup>4</sup> This mix of plans, projects, and policy commitments signaled a new, more radical politics of urban redevelopment for Bogota, which we further examine in the upcoming sections.

**Figure 1.** Low Income Housing Units in Bogota by UPZ.

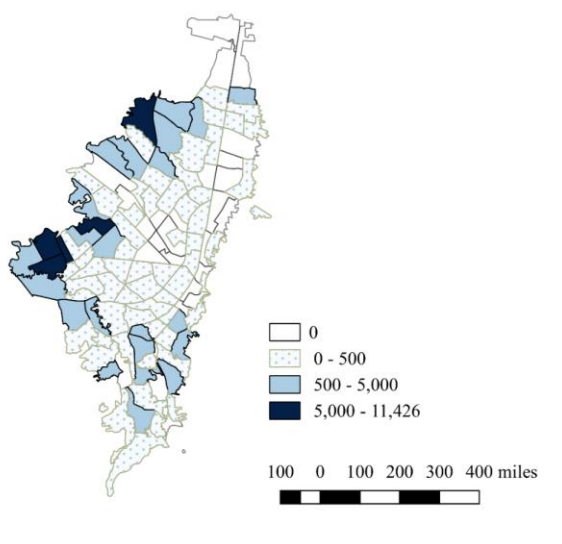


Image by author. Data source: Censo de Edificaciones (2010)

## **The Politics of NIMBYism**

Where, exactly, in the city social housing should be located had rarely been discussed openly before Petro's administration, at least as a concern of public policy. Rather, since the 1990s affordable housing policies were usually framed in the context of general supply and demand. In Colombia's neoliberal context, this generally meant that housing demand was supported through a system of subsidies to eligible low-income households. On the other side of the equation, actual units of low-income housing were built and managed by private construction firms, while public authorities made efforts to make more land available (Cuervo & Jaramillo, 2009).

In 1992, for example, Bogota Mayor Jaime Castro (1992-1994) implemented the first efforts to create a local land bank to support the provision and construction of affordable housing. While this bank initially had only limited resources, in 1998 Mayor Enrique Peñalosa (1998-2000) created Metrovivienda, a local land bank that had the financial capacity to buy large parcels for the provision of low-income housing. Metrovivienda's main goal was to facilitate the circulation of capital to accelerate affordable housing production (Jolly, 2007), rather than to transform the spatial distribution of land accessible to low-income households in the city. In other words, Metrovivienda sought to get land mainly in the cheap urban peripheries of Bogota,<sup>5</sup> where both private developers and public entities saw opportunities to profitably increase the volume of housing production. Thus, it continued to contribute to the concentration of low-income housing in the city peripheries. This longstanding trend of prioritizing the volume of housing production over its location was altered by Petro's administration, which directed Metrovivienda to focus on location in line with his *ethics of revitalization*.

During Petro's administration, the main goal of Metrovivienda became the successful construction of social housing projects in Bogota's extended inner city. This new emphasis

generated considerable political and social tensions, not only with potential neighbors of the proposed housing projects, but also with the association of private constructors of Bogota (Camacol) as well as with members of the city council and national authorities. Coalitions between these different actors enabled political and economic elites to stop many of the housing projects that were proposed for the extended inner city.

To understand how different interests and actors coalesced into robust opposition against the plan of revitalization, it is useful to start with the common response of NIMBYism.<sup>6</sup>

Although the literature on NIMBYism has pointed out the limitations of the concept, identifying it as narrowly focused on self-interest and often ignoring other explanatory reasons for why neighbors oppose the implementation of given projects (Devine, 2009; Wolsink, 2006), the concept is useful here to study a general trend where self-protective attitudes and oppositional tactics are adopted to prevent a public project from happening. In particular, Dear's (1992) efforts to reduce the chaotic NIMBY phenomenon to "manageable proportions," are useful as a prompt for identifying patterns and consistencies in the way local opposition in Bogota was organized against the housing projects associated with the revitalization plan.

In line with the NIMBY literature, local opposition to Petro's housing projects for displaced people in Bogota's extended inner city was framed around a perceived threat to property values, a rise in insecurity, and an expected decline of neighborhood quality. The following two excerpts are examples of the line of argumentation that was adopted and proliferated among the leaders of the residents' organization representing the neighborhoods El Chico and Santa Barbara (Corpochicó), and the residents' organization representing neighborhood Cundinamarca (which is the current address of the housing project Plaza de la

Hoja). El Chico and Santa Barbara had four parking lots that were meant to be transformed into housing for the displaced.

We are worried about how segregation is created and how to address issues of segregation. We do not object to the goal of getting displaced peoples involved and curbing segregation. What we argue is that these [the four lots in question] are areas that provide a service to the community. The local administration was using these lots to provide parking services, and we do not have enough parking in the city, why not keep these as parking lots, or build a parking lot building? Why are we bringing those people to live in areas where they will not be able to provide for their own sustenance? I mean how much would they have to pay for their services? (...) we are not doing anything bringing them to live here, there is proof that there is high delinquency, because they go out and steal, to survive in these areas (W-Radio, 2014).<sup>7</sup>

Public opposition to the housing projects was framed through a concern with missed economic opportunities, safety issues, and the needs of the community already living in those areas. In doing so, opponents of the plan made a clear effort to be politically sensitive and strategically careful with their public statements, arguing that opposition was not an issue of discrimination, classism, or indifference towards the needs of the displaced. In each case, residents argued that their neighborhoods, or even the larger residential vicinity, were simply not the right locations to house the displaced, because the new residents would not be able to afford the high cost of living in those wealthy areas.

In the previously cited interview with the community leader of CorpoChicó, broadcast by the radio station W-Radio, the interviewer asked whether similar reasons against the project could be given by any neighborhood representative in the city, thus making it impossible for displaced people to find any place to live in Bogota. The community leader's immediate answer was "no," implying that displaced people should be able to find a place to live in the city. However, the interviewee toned down his answer, stating that if any given neighborhood association established a proposal to make a "better" use of the land than that of housing the displaced, that should all count towards the goal of involving displaced people and making a

better city (W-Radio, 2014). In other words, he implied that parking – which was the use originally established for the lots in question – was a “better” use of the land, and the community should be given the right to use the land for that “better” purpose. For the leader, and for many other residents who were against the implementation of the housing projects, this was seen to be the best way to “start involving” displaced people: one in which ideals of democracy and self-determination prevailed over ideals of equality and “relational autonomy.”<sup>8</sup>

We found similarly complex responses in our own interviews of residents of Cundinamarca. Most of them agreed that while it was appropriate for the state to provide housing to displaced people, that housing should not be in their neighborhood or, apparently, in any other neighborhood they could think of inside the city. When we asked one of the interviewees what his vision of housing for displaced people in Bogota was, he replied: “in Mosquera,” referring to a municipality outside of Bogota. Similarly, when we asked another neighbor whether allowing displaced people to live in the extended inner city would help them establish new social relations, especially with people who were better connected and could introduce them to new working opportunities, she answered: “No, I think proximity does not give them anything. We live in a space where that does not occur. We have not taught our children that: to share. I don’t think it is possible to join cultures and learn from each other. Our daily life is separate” (interview by author).<sup>9</sup>

The similarities in rationale for opposing the housing projects in El Chico, Santa Barbara, and Cundinamarca not only show why Petro was so adamant about trying to establish socially mixed projects for the extended inner city, it also explains precisely why this policy fueled such a widespread (and perhaps not entirely unexpected) NIMBY attitude among potential neighbors. Still, it is interesting to note that whereas the project in Cundinamarca (i.e. La Hoja) was

successfully completed despite NIMBY opposition, neighbors of Santa Barbara and El Chico were in fact able to stop their respective housing projects. With 457 housing units to be constructed in the single development of La Hoja, as opposed to 372 units distributed across four different housing projects in El Chico and Santa Barbara, one would have expected La Hoja to have generated the strongest opposition – a supposition quite consistent with claims in the literature (Dear, 1992). Why, then, was La Hoja successfully completed, whereas the other smaller, less concentrated and more territorially scattered social housing projects were successfully stalled by surrounding communities?

One possible explanation is that the socioeconomic status of each neighborhood played an important role in determining outcomes. Whereas Cundinamarca is a middle- to low-income neighborhood in an industrial area close to the city center, Santa Barbara and El Chico contain some of the city's most expensive housing. These differences can help explain why opposition in Santa Barbara and El Chico was more successful, not necessarily because “the most affluent tend to be less welcoming” (Burningham et al, 2006; Dear, 1992), but because the most affluent in Bogota were armed with better resources and connections to wage a citywide political battle against the mayor and his policies.

### ***Coordinated NIMBYism: Fighting Revitalization for Multiple Purposes***

In May 2012, four months after Petro took office, the general atmosphere between national and local authorities was one of comradeship and concurrence. Petro, who represented a left-wing political party called *Movimiento Progresistas*, and German Vargas Lleras, who represented a right-wing political party called *Cambio Radical*, announced that they were going to join efforts to construct housing for the “poorest of the poor” (Dinero, 2012). Both were highly invested in the construction of new housing units in Bogota, and both saw an opportunity to further their



larger political aims by working together. Vargas agreed that city would get funding for its projects from the Housing Ministry's new *Free Housing* initiative, a high-profile effort championed by Vargas that aimed to create 100,000 free housing units for low-income households and displaced people.<sup>10</sup> In return, Petro agreed that the city's ban on providing water to housing developments outside of Bogota would not apply to projects being built under that initiative.

Although it is not uncommon to see pacts between politicians holding different political ideologies, undertaken for self-interested purposes, this one was almost unprecedented in its ephemerality. Just one month after the highly fruitful meeting, the chief manager of Bogota's water company, Diego Bravo – appointed by Mayor Petro in 2012 – announced that the city administration would stand by its policy of not selling water to surrounding municipalities for any newly established housing developments. Although the decision could be seen as being consistent with Mayor Petro's development plan to build a more compact city, the mayor himself had negotiated with Minister Vargas that he would make an exception for the *Free Housing* projects, as noted above. Faced with what looked to be a bureaucratic about-face, Minister Vargas, with several projects already under way in Bogota's surrounding municipalities, took the issue to the plenary meeting of Bogota's City Council in August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2012. He made harsh accusations claiming that the administration was being negligent with the provision of water for the Ministry's peripheral housing projects, and he noted that Petro was not even moving forward with his own planned housing projects for the extended inner city (Concejo de Bogotá, 2012). After the incident at the plenary meeting, relations between the Housing Ministry and the city only got worse, and can be characterized as a constant back and forth of criticisms, accusations,

and insults from both sides, which were portrayed both in the media and the Twitter accounts of public officials.

The intensifying quarrel between these two public authorities, one local and one national, cost the mayor dearly, because it helped widen and accelerate political opposition to Petro's administration more generally. This, in turn, ended up derailing his capacity to move forward on many of his inner-city housing projects. In particular, Minister Vargas rallied his own political allies within the City Council,<sup>11</sup> and became an important force of vocal political opposition to Petro.<sup>12</sup>

With escalating opposition to the housing projects in El Chico and Santa Barbara, Roberto Hinestrosa – a city councilor who was a member of Vargas' political party – joined the residents' organization *Corpochicó* (introduced above) and took the issue to the local court. Through a class action lawsuit (*acción popular*), the city councilor and the neighbors sued the administration in 2015. The judge ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, ruling, among other things, that even though the lots in question were owned by the city, they had been established for parking purposes and “that was the use that should be given to them” (Fundación Vivienda Popular, 2015). Consequently, even though housing was permitted as a “primary use” in the land use code for these areas (Decree 190 of 2004), work on all four proposed housing projects in El Chico and Santa Barbara were suspended indefinitely.

With this precedent now established, the same councilor joined another group of neighbors and proceeded to file a very similar lawsuit against another of the proposed housing projects for displaced people called La Victoria. They were able to get the courts to suspend work on that project for the remainder of Mayor Petro's term in office. La Victoria had been started in 2013 as one of the first housing projects for Bogota's extended inner city, at least one

year before the administration announced the goal of building the four housing projects in Santa Barbara and El Chico, and two years before the local judge ruled against their implementation of the latter projects. Although there had been local opposition against the construction of La Victoria since 2013, it was only when Hinestrosa joined the neighbors who opposed the project and pursued a second lawsuit against the city that it also was suspended.

So, the question is: Why did the projects in Santa Barbara and El Chico set a precedent for the suspension of La Victoria, when construction on La Victoria project had commenced at least two years before? Again, in contrast to the case of La Victoria, or La Hoja, residents of Santa Barbara and El Chico had much higher socioeconomic status, which gave them more access to political elites while also ensuring they could tap financial and organizational resources in their efforts to oppose the city's overall housing plans. Once a precedent was set by the coalition between upper-income neighbors and political elites with high stakes and often direct interest in city-building, the latter became inspired to mobilize opposition in other neighborhoods, like the neighborhood of La Victoria. This logic does not strictly apply to the La Hoja project, because it was already finished and delivered to displaced households by the time city councilor Hinestrosa joined the neighbors of Santa Barbara and El Chico to file the lawsuit against the four housing projects. The difference between the periods of execution of the two housing projects helps explain why La Hoja was successfully completed while La Victoria was not.

All this suggests that organized political opponents used coalition-building at multiple jurisdictional levels, as well as the local and national court system,<sup>13</sup> to undermine or stall Petro's plan to achieve his housing aims. Consequently, by the end of Petro's administration in 2015, except for a few projects that remained under construction (i.e. La Estación), all the proposed

housing projects for Bogota's extended inner city, except for La Hoja, had been stalled by the opposition.

### **Beyond Elite Politics: The Mismatch between Design Priorities and Everyday Life**

As the only one of several social housing projects planned for the extended inner city to be completed, La Hoja's opening should be viewed as a measure of success for Mayor Petro. But it is worth asking what the criterion for success should be, and whether the construction of La Hoja did indeed advance the goals of a more compact and socially mixed city that Mayor Petro aspired to. In order to delve more deeply into this, we examine the functionality of La Hoja and its bearing on neighboring residents and surrounding areas. We also consider the planning and design underpinnings of the project, and we ask whether and how they aligned with the mayor's revitalization aims.

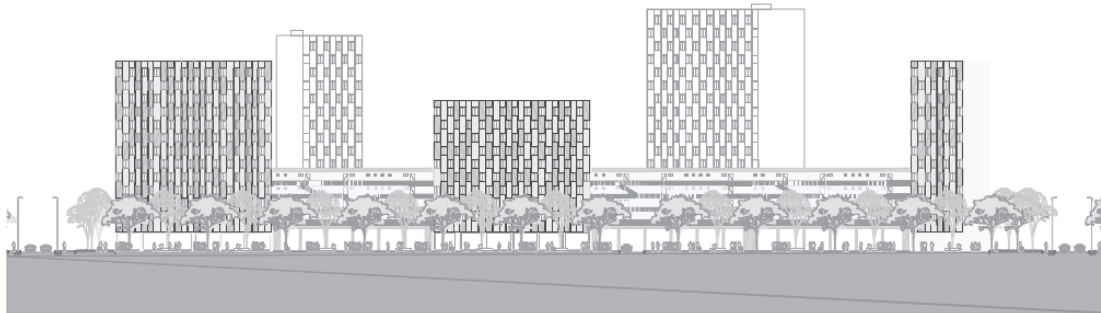
When La Hoja opened to great fanfare in January 2015, it was celebrated by those who saw this project as exemplifying Petro's larger goal of social mixing and social integration. Yet just a couple of months after it was completed, several problems emerged that invited significant criticism by the media, and thus called into question the overall value of the experiment. Indeed, despite the fact that La Hoja was the first ever large-scale social housing project to be built for displaced people in a central location in Bogota, it turned out to be the source of considerable resident dissatisfaction from the very beginning.

In particular, the administration's progressive vision for this space clashed with the lifestyles and priorities of the displaced people who were relocated there, and their own aspirations for social mobility and security. Of course, it is not unusual for residents in new public housing projects to face problems with unfulfilled deliverables and other myriad inconveniences associated with building operations and construction processes, both of which

can diminish public enthusiasm. Yet the case of La Hoja shows that dissatisfaction can also derive from the nature of project design. Much of the criticism was in response to the lack of coordination between the urban visions of the architects and city planners who formulated the project and the desires of local residents, and particularly from the failures to include or communicate with residents and surrounding neighbors in the early stages of the design process.

One explanation for the failure to follow the basic planning principles of community engagement was the fact that from the very beginning city officials had other, much grander, aspirations for this project than merely shelter. Indeed, they sought to commission a building that would be known as much for its beauty and for its embodiment of progressive ideals as for its pragmatic utility and everyday functionality. The high hopes for the project were reflected in the city's decision to mount a national design competition to attract the best and the brightest urban designers, whose charge was to both transform the site and challenge old models of social housing with imaginative new typologies. The winner, *MGP Arquitectura*, entered the competition with a design that included commercial and communal spaces in the ground floor, all of which would be open to the public, in keeping with the latest ideas about public space and housing typologies. Residential units would start from the second floor and up, and the entire site would comprise five towers, all connected through hallways and stairs.

**Figure 2.** Plaza de la Hoja, Façade from Avenue 32.



Source: MGP Arquitectura (2013). Available at: <http://www.metrovivienda.gov.co/httpdocs/index.php/2013-04-02-16-49-13/plaza-de-la-hoja>

A priority for both the architects and the city administration was the importance of creating a permeable space which, in contrast to a gated community, would allow for free flow and contact between people at multiple points, horizontally and vertically. With this design, anyone coming from the surrounding neighborhood of Cundinamarca would be able to walk freely through the ground floor of the high-rise housing complex towards the Bus Rapid Transit system running on Avenue 30. But design beauty, a commitment to creating open public space, and streamlined access to affordable mass transit – three characteristics considered by many to be the holy grail of good urban planning and design – were not exactly what the residents were looking for in their new location. Many were upset by the lack of parking lots at La Hoja, not just because residents saw parking spaces as a necessity, but also because failing to provide them was in fact a violation of the law.<sup>14</sup> To resolve the issue after residents started to complain, the construction company demarcated parking lots in areas which were originally meant to be the communal open spaces and public thoroughways of the housing project, which undermined the permeability that had been a principal feature of its design.

If parking was required by law, one must ask why the Petro administration failed to push

for parking. Should this be attributed to flaws in both design and planning, or perhaps limits in the city's capacity to coordinate the multiple elements of the project?<sup>15</sup> Some interviewees suggested that the decision to not provide parking spaces in La Hoja was the result of the administration's desire to reduce construction costs.<sup>16</sup> But cost was not the only factor determining the city's approach to parking spaces. Its posture also aligned with the prioritization of public over private transport services, another priority for the mayor, whose overall development plan promised to incentivize the use of public transportation and bikes over the use of private cars (Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá, 2012), a goal that he saw as a critical part of a larger planning vision that sought to be both sustainable and progressive. Despite these laudable goals, such logics did not always sit well with the everyday needs of La Hoja's own residents, including their articulated desires for parking.

Complicating matters, some residents charged that the city's inability to recognize residents' priorities owed to stereotypical social conceptions of displaced people adopted by the architects and city planners who developed the project (i.e. who they are and what they should, or should not, have). Such views did not bode well for resident satisfaction. For example, many of the residents we interviewed mentioned that when they complained to the city about the parking issue, authorities responded with comments like: "Why do you want parking in the first place? Weren't you supposed to be poor?" (interview by author). Similarly, the architect responsible for designing the project – who lamented the transformation of open communal spaces in La Hoja into parking lots – mentioned in an interview conducted by students from Universidad de los Andes that he did not understand why the owners of housing in La Hoja used the open public spaces as parking lots, since a person who is able to have a car should be able to pay for private parking outside the residential complex (Sainea, 2017).

The assumption that the poor or displaced should rely on public transport and not own their own cars, or should be expected to pay for parking elsewhere, irritated the residents of La Hoja, many of whom felt deceived by the city and the construction company, particularly given the fact that provision of parking was required by law. To be sure, the location of La Hoja did facilitate access to the public transportation system, and the housing complex was located within walking-distance of various public amenities. Even so, many of our interviewees – some of whom worked in the surrounding municipalities – insisted that they needed a car for work, and a few mentioned that they saw the acquisition of a car as a marker of their own social mobility, arguing that the displaced should be as entitled to have a car as any other person. All this not only suggests that urban design logics and sustainability principles incorporated into the construction of La Hoja clashed with the desires of its residents, but that the mismatch in priorities may have owed to as much to a lack of cultural sensitivity or to misguided assumptions about what was best for the displaced residents La Hoja was being built for in the first place.

### **Progressive Ideals, Resident Expectations, and Neighborhood Attitudes**

Lack of parking generated unhappiness among La Hoja's own residents, who felt as if their priorities had been relegated to the sidelines. Moreover, with parking replacing open spaces and throughways, there was little scope for pedestrian traffic and thus limited demand for the commercial locales located at ground level. This, in turn, meant that the administration was not able to rent or sell the commercial units. Because of this after-the-fact accommodation, rather than showcasing a vibrant public ground floor space with retail activity, as the designers had intended, the ground floor locales remained empty and abandoned. This situation was aggravated by the vocal opposition from surrounding neighbors, who were unhappy about having displaced people in their midst. The design decision to create commercial units and a ground floor that



would be accessible to people drawn from both inside and outside the residential complex showed a lack of understanding of whether surrounding neighborhood residents would willingly enter commercial spaces housed in a social housing project that was home to a highly stigmatized population.

When thinking about where to situate commercial units in order to enliven open spaces for social housing residents, designers chose to situate them deep within the compounds of the housing complex. This meant that entrances to each commercial establishment did not face the streets, as is often the case for mixed-use housing projects, but rather were used to link the internal corridors of La Hoja to each other. The progressive vision and normative ideals underlying the decision to use the first-floor commercial units to generate mixed social spaces open to both the neighborhood and residents of La Hoja was not a bad one. But the fact that neighborhood residents might be wary of entering a space associated with displaced people introduces new logics about space and circulation that need to be taken into consideration. The city and the designers drew on long-standing views that building open commercial spaces with no gates or similar forms of enclosure would automatically create vibrant social spaces of contact and free flows of people. But physical space and social space have their own logics, and in the case of La Hoja, the absence of clear physical barriers did not readily erase socio-spatial boundaries.

In our interviews with residents in surrounding neighborhoods, a common assumption was that residents of La Hoja were untrustworthy owing to their roots in regions associated with violence and the armed conflict. Displaced people were generally assumed to be former guerrillas or paramilitaries – even though in principle displaced people in Colombia are victims of these groups – or individuals who have experienced violence and thus were assumed to be

more prone to violent actions. These preconceptions made people reluctant to enter the housing complex, as is reflected in the words of a La Hoja resident, who describes an uncomfortable interaction she had with a resident of the surrounding neighborhood Cundinamarca:

She [the neighbor] asked me: ‘Do you live in those housing complexes? Are you not scared? And with that beautiful girl [the La Hoja resident’s daughter], are you not scared?’ She said: ‘people consume [drugs] a lot there [in La Hoja].’ I invited her to come [to her house] and she said that I would have to join her all the way because: ‘I might get robbed in the elevator.’ They discriminate against us for living here” (interview by author).

To anyone living in Bogota and familiar with the long history of civil war and conflict in Colombia, such a response would not be surprising. Yet this raises the question of why city planning officials failed to address such issues of fear and social discrimination against displaced people when approving the project’s design. It also raises the question of why city officials did not convene meetings with the community to put the project’s design to the test, to understand the conditions in which neighboring residents would enter the project to patronize the new commercial locales, and at the same time to start building trust, thus allowing such sentiments to be revealed at early stages of the project’s planning. In contrast, perhaps in an effort to avoid open opposition to the contentious housing projects, the city delayed the announcement that it was going to build housing for displaced people for as long as possible.

In our interviews of residents in surrounding neighborhoods, many mentioned that they did not know about the project until President Juan Manuel Santos came to announce it at a large public event in June 2012. Further, many were expecting that the site would be used for middle- to high-income housing, a hotel, or public offices – not housing for displaced households. Some interviewees also mentioned that the city did not organize any spaces for them to meet or interact with the future residents of La Hoja, and instead handled everything silently, all of which added to the suspicion and distrust. According to one resident of the surrounding area, “what made us

feel uncomfortable was the silence. That showed us that they [the administration] were not being sincere” (interview by author). With so few lines of communication opened between former residents and newcomers, whether through public meetings or with a more transparent planning and design process, residents of surrounding communities remained fearful of entering a place whose construction they distrusted from the very beginning.

Beyond the issues of communication and tension with neighbors, the vision of an open and permeable La Hoja, reinforced by the enforcement of strict rules against any efforts at physical enclosure of the housing complex, soon became a problem for its residents, who ended up worrying about their own security in this unguarded setting. By the end of 2015, several months after the project had opened, the new residents mobilized and sent a request to the city to enclose the housing complex because of safety issues. This request was denied. In response, residents further organized and enclosed the housing complex themselves (see Figure 3), because, as one of them put it, “things were pretty ugly back then.”

We put the fences because we began to find homeless people sleeping inside the buildings in the mornings (...) We received information that we were going to be invaded. Those named Sayayines [gang of micro-traffickers in Bogota] came and threatened our surveillance, our guards had to stay in their cubicles, they wanted to intimidate us. And they were working with people inside. Here we made a decision, my family left, and I stayed, and we [he and other residents of La Hoja] created a patrolling group (...) They [drug dealers] realized this was a hard nut to crack. We were organized by buildings, around 3 or 4 patrolling each tower, coming up and down every day (interview by author).<sup>17</sup>

**Figure 3:** Front gate at La Hoja. Image by author (2017)



Image by author (2017)

The response of La Hoja residents to concerns about permeability, and their desire to fortify their building in ways that contradicted the visions of urban designers and planners, offers an interesting rebuttal to conventional wisdom about the class underpinnings of such efforts. Studies of gated communities and their proliferation in cities over the last 30 years have examined the gating phenomenon as the result of middle- and upper-class fear narratives, justifying the building of walls and class-based exclusion (Sabatini & Salcedo, 2007; Álvarez, 2007; Coy & Pöhler, 2002; Low, 2003; Svampa, 2001). Less attention has been paid to public housing residents' fears of crime, and their own strategies of separation and differentiation through walling and private surveillance.<sup>18</sup> In our interviews with residents of La Hoja and the surrounding communities, it was clear that displaced people and nearby residents of middle- and high-income neighborhoods both developed a discourse of fear against the homeless and criminals, which to them justified the desire for enclosure strategies. To be sure, this could be seen as an environment in which the poorer populations adopted the same rhetoric as the more advantaged, for their own aspirational purposes. But there are other issues that must be

recognized when considering why residents of La Hoja may have adopted similar practices of separation or gating as those demanded by their more affluent neighbors.

One was the reality of poverty and crime in urban Bogota, and particularly in its social housing projects. Social workers charged with monitoring La Hoja, and other similar *Free Housing* projects in the country, documented that residents expressed deep concerns of being invaded by drug dealers, and that this was not just a conjectural problem of La Hoja.<sup>19</sup> Rather, it was a national problem affecting most of the large *Free Housing* projects in big cities. Their explanation was that large housing projects with displaced residents, like La Hoja, generally received a large youth population coming from vulnerable households, generating a new large potential market for drug dealers who competed to gain control over the projects. They further suggested that whereas the housing projects in large cities were more successful in the provision of basic amenities (e.g. schools, water, parks, transportation etc.), the projects in more remote areas were more successful at controlling social problems, such as drug consumption and delinquency.

Such assessments raise further questions about the principled position taken by the designers and city planners pushing back against any efforts at enclosure. Indeed, if one takes seriously the stark reality of insecurity and violence in urban social housing projects accommodating the displaced, the vision of an open and permeable La Hoja could be considered quite problematic. This is so not because such a vision is undesirable in the abstract, but because such a vision does not align well with the social dynamics surrounding the lives of displaced people, particularly in a context where the construction of dense housing projects for vulnerable residents becomes entangled with longstanding social discrimination and with the materialization of new markets for criminal activities. It might be easy to say that the informal walling of La

Hoja was not the right solution to this problem, as it is not a desirable strategy for city-building. But with authorities unresponsive to their requests and few other alternatives at hand to address the social dynamics of crime and insecurity, in a neighborhood context that already implements walling as the main strategy to secure protection, La Hoja's residents saw self-gating and self-surveillance as the sole viable option to guarantee their safety.

In the same vein, we might note that although the goal of a car-free city was normatively desirable, the controversy over whether and how parking should be provided in La Hoja was intricately connected to the needs of displaced residents, not to mention their desires to be allowed to be just as unsustainable as the middle-income communities surrounding them. With sustainability principles embedded into the design of La Hoja, residents had few options but to park in communal areas within the housing complex, which created further social tensions between them and distrust in the city authorities.

When all was said and done, the controversies surrounding La Hoja cost Mayor Petro dearly in terms of political popularity and thus a more long-term capacity to advance his radical urban agenda after his term in office. Although he had drawn scorn and opposition from right-wing constituencies in the city from the moment of his election, the criticism of his urban policies after coming to office came from a much wider range of social and class forces, including some of the displaced who appeared on the media with complaints about La Hoja. Their unhappiness fueled further questions about the mayor's effectiveness and his governance capacities, inadvertently strengthening the rhetoric of the right wing and thus undermining the reputation of the mayor (see note 12).

## **Conclusion: The Challenge of Achieving Progressive Ideals through Social Housing Investments**

When Mayor Gustavo Petro announced his radical urban revitalization plan for Bogota upon taking office in 2012, he was motivated by a progressive vision for the city and a desire to reverse the urban social and spatial marginalization of its poorer residents, among them a large number of conflict-displaced people that had migrated to the capital. La Hoja was a flagship project in this larger initiative. This paper examined the range of obstacles that the mayor faced in achieving these aims, ranging from active social and political opposition to a series of less anticipated problems associated with the embrace of certain planning and design principles for his flagship project.

Of course, there have been many gains associated with the successful completion of La Hoja. This well-situated and modern complex offers much-needed housing for displaced people in Bogota's inner city, and its central location has helped provide better access to public transportation and other public amenities that are unavailable to other social housing projects relegated to the city's periphery. Furthermore, the project's successful realization could be seen as setting a precedent for forthcoming public administrations to show that densification and social mixing – through social housing investments – can do more good than harm even if care is taken in the implementation process, which would include correcting for the lack of social sensitivity in project design and greater responsiveness to residents' context-specific demands. Accordingly, despite the fact that Petro himself was unable to expand this radical revitalization plan, a review of his successes and failures in trying to achieve these aims can hold general lessons for housing policy advocates who seek to mix progressive social ideals with urban sustainability priorities.

The first lesson builds on insights from Sanyal (2005) about the importance of anticipating resistance in order to streamline urban policy change. Anticipating resistance may be particularly critical when it comes to introducing controversial social housing projects, and in the case of La Hoja, project developers should have expected resistance from surrounding neighbors, who rarely embrace the introduction of social housing projects in their backyards. If such opposition is understood to be part and parcel of the implementation process, authorities must be prepared to marshal resources and expand their networks of supporters to counter political opposition. In his discussion of mixed-income housing initiatives (i.e. Moving to Opportunity for Fair Housing initiative) in the US, John Goering (2005, p. 137) argues similarly that an assessment of community opposition should be part and parcel of the implementation process. Although local administrations are generally not to blame for NIMBYism, public officials should accept responsibility for anticipating and managing opposition, particularly when a proposed policy is known to be radical and groundbreaking. In the case of Bogota, considering that the Petro administration's novel emphasis on location was not a popular policy to begin with, and that any local government's capacity to push for change depends in many instances on how opposition is configured and mobilized, such concerns should have been factored into the project's planning processes. The unfinished projects at Santa Barbara, El Chico, and La Victoria clearly demonstrated the power of conservative opposition to progressive social policy in Bogota. In future administrations, the forces of conservative opposition must be reckoned with if progressive social housing policies are to be advanced.

The second lesson is that it is not enough to anticipate opposition from neighbors. In order to build local political support in the fight against NIMBYism, city leaders also need allies at other scales – and likewise need to anticipate and forestall opposition on other scales just as



concertedly. In the case of Bogota, antagonism to Petro's urban revitalization plans may have been made most visible through the complaints of local neighbors, but these groups were encouraged to mobilize opposition with support from backers of a national housing minister who was upset about an unfulfilled water pact, related to housing development elsewhere. Multi-scale political antagonism could have also been preempted through closer attention to the spatial location of projects and a more strategic grasp of timing. One could even speculate that the La Victoria housing project might have been finished (thus guaranteeing the successful delivery of more free housing units to displaced households) if it were not for the decision to establish additional housing projects in some of the richest neighborhoods of the city (i.e. Santa Barbara and El Chico) – a decision that helped jumpstart heavy political opposition to the overall initiative.

Finally, authorities should be prepared to anticipate opposition even among the projects' intended recipients. Here is where the attention to urban design enters the picture. Designers, planners, and city authorities should consider that residents might find fault with the specificities of projects, even if they are grateful for the opportunities offered. In the Bogota case, progressive visions of city-building and project design may have made sense in the abstract, but they did not account for the particular social dynamics surrounding the daily lives of beneficiary populations in this very central city neighborhood. For example, even though design for an open and car-free city is a laudable aspiration, these ideals conflicted with displaced people's own notions of social and spatial mobility and did not serve displaced people in the ways they desired. This was particularly significant given the fact that La Hoja's residents were living in a context where they felt socially discriminated against and where safety and mobility were secured – for the people living around them – with private cars and private walls. This is not to justify gating and the

proliferation of private cars, but the case of La Hoja does raise the question of who is (and is not) required to adjust to the requirements of progressive urban reform. At minimum, it raises the intriguing possibility that normative commitments to creating an open and car-free city might, under certain conditions, contradict the ideals of a just city, if these design and mobility goals are being forced on the least well off, who find themselves disadvantaged by such actions.

In conclusion, we want to underscore the importance of anticipating opposition – particularly when it comes to promoting progressive urban policies – and suggest that the pitfalls of not doing so can reinforce and complicate several of the tried-and-true principles of effective planning practice, such as the importance of involving stakeholders in project design and implementation processes, as well as the value of transparency. Expecting opposition to the construction of low-income housing projects in middle-income neighborhoods in Bogota, the Petro administration might have reasoned that it could avoid opposition to La Hoja and other planned projects by not giving more information than strictly necessary to prospective neighbors and residents. But this also meant that preconceptions and fears about these kinds of projects were not addressed, a calculation that did not serve well the overall reputation of the project, all of which could potentially have been forestalled with a more open participatory process.<sup>20</sup>

We began this paper with a focus on the challenges of introducing radical urban visions and the inevitable trade-offs between pragmatic policymaking and socially transformative urban social and spatial change. Not surprisingly, this case has shown that achieving the latter is much easier said than done. But it also suggests is that even in the most contentious of settings, such as Bogota, where decades of political antagonism between proponents, opponents, and victims of violence hangs heavily over urban policymaking, basic planning principles might go a long way in helping avoid pitfalls in the struggle to advance progressive urban change.

## Notes

1. For a discussion of the distinction between the successful adoption of a single urban project or policy and the achievement of transformative urban change, albeit as framed through the lens of transport, see Davis (2018).
2. Although the revitalization plan and the project of La Hoja were not driven by New Urbanist or High Modernist principles, this housing complex does contain elements from both paradigms, thus allowing us to ask questions about the limitations of planning and design logics to reconfigure social relations and community lifestyles.
3. Because of its large water reservoir (Chingaza) and extensive aqueduct system, Bogota has long provided water to the surrounding municipalities. Because the *Empresa de Acueducto y Alcantarillado* is a city-owned-company, the manager, who is appointed by the mayor, has the authority to define how and how much water is sold.
4. As a result of Colombia's longstanding armed conflict, Bogota has been receiving large influxes of internally displaced populations every year.
5. See for example the housing projects of El Recreo, Nuevo Usme and El Porvenir.
6. Refers to the local opposition to the construction of public facilities – such as public housing – within the compounds of residential vicinities.
7. All quotes in this paper have been translated from Spanish to English by the author.
8. Drawing on the work of Frug (1999) and feminist scholars (Yeatman, 1994), Young (2000) defines relational autonomy as an ideal principle where agents are able to identify and pursue their own ends, but actions and decision-making should be conditioned by the “maximal pursuit of all individual ends,” according to the structuring of relationships individuals are subject to, which include both voluntary and involuntary motives (e.g. kinship, history, proximity, or unintended consequences of action).
9. Not all neighbors we interviewed were against the housing project of La Hoja. The quotes provided are examples of the main arguments provided against it by those who opposed it.
10. The *Free Housing* program was Vargas' signature initiative when he was Housing Minister (2012-2013) and when he was Vice President (2014-2017). He also touted it during his unsuccessful presidential campaign in 2018, when he won 7 percent of the vote in the first round and was eliminated.
11. At the time, Minister Vargas' political party, Cambio Radical, held 7 seats (ca. 16%) in the City Council, elected in 2011.

12. Petro's tenure was marked by increased controversy which came to a head in late 2013, when the country's Inspector General removed him from office and declared him unable to participate in any public position for a period of 15 years, on charges of incompetence in the management and administration of Bogota's trash collection system, a decision that was reversed a few months later when the Inter-American Human Rights Commission ruled that the ouster violated the region's human rights charter. While the government of Colombia usually abided by the commission's rulings, President Santos officially removed Petro from office in March 2014. However, in April 2014, the appellate court for Bogota found that the president had to obey the commission ruling. Two days later, the president reinstated Petro, who then served out the rest of his four-year term, which ended in December 2015. In 2018, Petro, who had run unsuccessfully for president in 2010, again ran for president. Because he finished second in the first round of balloting, Petro moved on to the final election, which he lost to Iván Duque, a right-wing candidate who received 54 percent of the vote. In accordance with the constitution, Petro, as the runner-up, became a senator.
13. An example of appeal to the national court system happened with regards to Petro's local land-use plan. Two local organizations with authority in Bogota (the local association of private constructors and the city's comptroller's office) and the national Housing Ministry sued the city in 2013 before the national State Council, arguing against the implementation of the local land-use plan issued by Petro in 2013 (Decree 364 of 2013). The national State Council ruled in favor of the national housing minister, establishing that Petro's new land-use plan was illegal because it had not been approved by the Bogota City Council. This decision helped stall yet another housing project for the extended inner city (i.e. El Pulpo), endorsed under Petro's new land-use plan (Concejo de Bogotá 2014).
14. By law, all residential developments must provide one parking space for owners, per every 6 affordable housing units, and one parking space for visitors, per every 15 affordable housing units (Decree 190 of 2004).
15. Such as a day care facility at the ground floor level and green terraces on the upper levels.
16. Although it could not be confirmed by informants, one of our interviewees claimed that the Mayor asked the architects to forego parking because of cost considerations.
17. This statement came at about the same time that the city was dismantling "the Bronx" in Bogota. The Bronx was the name for an entire city block not too far from La Hoja, known for one of the largest drug markets in the city, with criminal gangs like Sayayines controlling the space. One of the main goals of Mayor Peñalosa, when he took office after Petro in 2016, was to "clean up" the Bronx. With an army of around 2,300 men, the administration stormed into the streets of the

Bronx, dismantling micro-trafficking organizations and evicting several homeless and drug addicts who moved to other parts of the city, including La Hoja's surrounding neighborhoods.

18. For exceptions see Caldeira (2000), and Blakely and Snyder (1997).
19. To inquire about the safety conditions in La Hoja, we met with a team of social workers at the national Department of Social Prosperity (*Departamento de la Prosperidad Social*), the agency charged with providing social and community support to all *Free Housing* projects in the country, including La Hoja. They have a large network of social workers who monitor 283 projects on a regular basis, evaluating each on a series of goals.
20. Such conclusions are consistent with findings from Davis (2018), who argues that governing capacities for transformative urban policy change (in the case of transport) build not upon single policy successes, but upon larger participatory processes that involve transparency, conflict, and long-term engagement with the pros and cons of a given policy.

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