

AN EXPERIENCE OF SAVAGE URBANISM. LA CONDESA

Julia: A heliport seen from the window

Julia is a professional working in the field of communication. She is almost fifty years old and became a kind of anonymous activist on social networks when her commitment to denounce the irregularities that impede everyday life and coexistence in the Condesa neighborhood led her discover and document the unregulated construction of a heliport on the roof of a building in the district.³ One ordinary Sunday morning regular hammering caught her attention. She began to ask her neighbors and workers in her building about the source of the noise. After a few

³ The Condesa neighborhood, south-west of the center of Mexico City, is perhaps one of the most significant local examples of gentrification: a middle-class neighborhood that was severely damaged by the 1985 earthquake, that only gradually recovered and became an exclusive residential zone as well as one of the most important hubs of cultural activity and nightlife in the city. It combines a large number of formal businesses—restaurants, bars, cafés, concert halls, stores—with informal ones that function symbiotically with the former: people who watch cars, street food stalls and other street vendors.

conversations she identified a building that could just about be seen from her window. On top of it, a striking metal structure under construction immediately aroused her curiosity. What could it be? And why was it so urgent to finish it quickly? The workers and their supervisors were prepared to work at weekends and at hours that exceeded construction regulations.

Julia took some photos from the street and the information began to circulate on the internet. Other local residents who lived even closer to the building took an interest in the matter, asking questions and taking more photos. To their surprise, the construction was intended to be a heliport. Together with the noise, the trash, the traffic jams, and the lack of security suffered by those living in the neighborhood, they would have to put up with the noise of helicopters landing and taking off.

Naturally, this led to more questions relating to the construction regulations. The building hosting the heliport was not new, nor well-maintained, and it was surrounded by buildings that also showed the effects of the passage of time. Something about the situation led those involved to suspect that the matter was not legal. They soon consulted the authorities, and although sometimes the responses from officials seemed contradictory, the predominant view was that the construction lacked the necessary permits.

This led to a classic political action: the local residents began to organize and decided to take to the streets to protest an action that was, at least, going unpunished. If the construction wasn't permitted, why hadn't it been suspended? The protest that occupied the street of Nuevo León led to the symbolic shut down of the construction, followed a few days later by the official one. Despite the intervention of the authorities, the atmosphere of suspicion prevails until the present moment. Although the paper seals suspending the construction are in place, the heliport has not been dismantled, which has led the local residents to suspect that the construction firm may yet succeed with its plan by means of legal or illegal measures. They wonder if the large sums of money involved in a business like a heliport enable certain actors to ignore laws that others cannot, in an interesting form of class discrimination.

While the investigation team of the Seminar on Peace and Violence at El Colegio de México documented this incident in May 2017 the problems date back to November 2016, and the closure (both symbolic and official) took place four months before our arrival, in January 2017. However, no one expected that another severe earthquake would hit Mexico City on September 19, 2017, and as a consequence the case of the heliport would reach the headlines of some newspapers. It was not until November 2017, following renewed protests and reports on the damage to the building hosting the heliport and to two adjacent buildings, that the

city's Department of Works and Services carried out the dismantling of the structure.

The Condesa: between gentrification and irregularities

The story told by Julia about the heliport is embedded in the process of gentrification of the Condesa neighborhood, characterized by the continual appearance of new luxury buildings and the arrival of occupants for these, together with the tensions, resistance and often departure of the original inhabitants of the area. Our interviewee is one of the pioneers in the explosion of popularity of the Condesa, having purchased a brand new apartment there in 2006. Over the past 11 years, Julia has witnessed a series of social and cultural changes that are worthy of analysis.

With respect to this kind of process of “creative destruction”⁴ that has multiplied the number of buildings in the neighborhood, Julia can

⁴ “Creative destruction” is a concept defined by economist Joseph Schumpeter and refers to the processes of modernization. Although in Schumpeter's case he uses it to talk about the modernization of the economy (how the old circuits of local producers and consumers were destroyed when forced to compete with the new, efficient and more productive market economy), today it is a widely used concept in the field of social sciences to refer to similar processes. Thus phenomena such as the

give first-hand examples: at the corner of her street a recently-built five-story building stands that replaced a traditional tenement that wasn't just "falling down" but also caused discomfort among local residents for its poor state of repair in an area that saw itself as exclusive. It contained food restaurants that were dirty as well as half-empty, and occupants made noise and drank alcohol in the street. In reality, Julia explains, these seemed to be the vestiges of a Condesa with an atmosphere typical of more working-class areas.

Despite the fact that the gradual departure of the former residents has helped the Condesa to maintain its image as an attractive neighborhood, the question of the behavior of the residents and the difficulties of coexistence does not seem to have disappeared. This gives rise to new practices of discrimination—above all class-based—which are not static or unidirectional. Julia defines many of her new neighbors as "juniors" a term used to define young people given money by their parents to rent or buy a new department in the Condesa, but who lack the culture or education to get along with the other residents, who they startle with loud music, all-night parties and even hanging out clothes on their balconies, which damages the image of the building and of public space.

gentrification of the Condesa neighborhood destroy the former milieu of the local residents and their practices, to be replaced by a "better version" of the neighborhood; however, the question of who the change benefits is what gives rise to its ethical implications.

Julia's anger appears to be rooted in the sense of outrage produced by many of those neighbors who feel more entitled than she does to live at their ease in the Condesa, thanks to their purchasing power. Something similar occurs with the construction companies, who are at the front of a vast moneymaking business they have no desire to slow down, and constantly tread on habitants' rights. Examples include the noise and contamination produced by their machinery, as well as the difficulty of driving around the narrow streets that normal-size cars can barely navigate. Now they must share the space with dump trucks, cement mixers, electricity generators, which has neutered the work of the local residents' organizations, though they have succeeded in shutting down works, even if only momentarily. This is a novel commitment to enforce, as far as possible, the regulations with respect to schedules and other regulations stipulated by the state.

Julia as mediator: citizenship and local powers

It is hard to address Julia's role as mediator in the conflicts in her neighborhood without taking into account her professional and personal experience. It is evident that her expertise in the use of social networks can be linked to her career as a social communications manager for

different companies, including a state agency. What is not so clear is where her strong commitment to “the difficult causes” comes from. She asserts that it is a personal trait that has accompanied her from very early in her life, and, moreover, has led her family to joke about the fact that she was mistaken in her choice of profession, since with her temperament she could have been a top lawyer.

Julia firmly believes that some of the country’s main problems stem from the apathy and lack of demands made by citizens: whether in simple exchanges of products and services or in relations with all types of state authorities, the large majority of the population is not used to making their voices heard. However, she acknowledges that there are limitations to this exercise, and in her particular case she accepts that time is an important resource for engaging in politics and that not everyone is able to do this, she—and many of her neighbors—have to delegate responsibilities and participation to residents with less demanding agendas, simply because they have to work to earn a living. It is worth considering that these are people with relatively privileged social positions.

At the same time, she acknowledges that the climate of violence and insecurity in the country is another obstacle when it comes to demonstrating in the street to demand the laws be applied, and together with the prevalence of corruption and impunity the overall panorama is

frankly disheartening. For this reason Julia preferred to remain anonymous in this paper, just as she did in the case of the heliport, seeing it as risky on two fronts: firstly the construction company that raised suspicion by engaging in illegal activities that remain unpunished, and secondly the state officials who in cases like the heliport give rise to all kind of suspicions about their acts and omissions, whether they be lack of care, negligence, or frank collusion.

In any case, Julia recognizes the heterogeneous character of the state officials, and even if they are not all the same it is no less a cause for concern. She fears the professional politicians who have a lot to lose in the major leagues of politics and who she believes could seek revenge if necessary; but she is much more worried about the reaction of lower-level officials, who have little or nothing to lose and could carry out reprisals from the anonymity of their position and in the public space itself. The stories shared by our interviewee reveal other tensions between the residents of the Condesa and the state officials who work on public space. For example, the constant confrontation between the projects for the modernization of the city and the everyday practices by which people appropriate public space. Julia recalls how the appearance of the second Metrobús bus rapid transit line, which runs along the southern edge of the neighborhood, changed the direction of certain streets and therefore how they are accessed. This altered the daily routines and routes of her and her

neighbors, giving rise to discontent and public protest, although at bottom it was about precisely the tension between the comfort and benefit of a few or of a larger sector of the population.