



## **Civic Safety and Residential Urban Space Natural surveillance in community appropriation limits**

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### **Introduction**

The present exploratory essay deals with the subject of civic safety in relation with the delinquency in the residential urban space of four social housing compounds or “villas” located in the Puente Alto district of Santiago, Chile. In order to approach this subject, a theoretic framework was built following the main lines of thought that exist and considering authors such as Jane Jacobs and her *Death and Life of Great American Cities*<sup>i</sup> written in 1962, a pioneer piece of work in its time, Oscar Newman’s *Theory of Defensible Space*<sup>ii</sup>, Bill Hillier’s *Theory of Spatial Syntax*<sup>iii</sup> and the *Situational Theory of Crime* with the CPTED strategy. The principle of natural surveillance was used to state the investigation problem that arose from the ideas pointed out in the previous lines of thought, a principle that acts as an inhibition mechanism of chance crime and fear perception.

Every author has mentioned it, but with different emphasis. From this debate, a research question is raised about what the relationship might be between the urban form of the social housing compounds of Puente Alto and the spatial crime location and how natural surveillance connects them. In this real case and its context, the local community concept becomes interesting since each one of them exercises natural surveillance in a different way.

This is why it has been necessary to delve deeply into the type of communities that inhabit the space under study. Furthermore, natural surveillance is not carried out in the same way throughout the urban space of the designated compound, as the analysis chapter shows, but it would depend on what this thesis has stated and denominated as community appropriation limits.

### **The Civic Safety and Urban Space Problem in Chile**

Civic safety is on the national public debate. There are several authorities and experts on the subject with different visions that are yet to undertake the relation between civic safety and urban space in a more precise way. The attempts to define and approach it are diverse, but generally fall into vague definitions, diagnosis, simplistic solutions and reductionism of a problem that involves to great lengths, social and spatial aspects that concern all urban inhabitants. According to the Ministry of Interior by Civic Safety, it is understood: “Ensemble of life and citizen goods protection systems with regards to risk or threats caused by diverse elements like psychosocial ones or linked to urban development.<sup>iv</sup>” So, it is known that such relation exists, but it’s functioning and the main social and physical variables involved have not been described exhaustively and precisely in specific.

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This is why establishing and exploring the relation between Civic Safety and Urban Space is a pressing need, from an academic perspective as well as public policies in Chile and Latin America.

### **The Models**

From the beginning of last century, the relation existing between Civic Safety and Urban Space has been studied in countries outside the Latin American region. A pioneer in this area is the Chicago School<sup>v</sup>, with its early investigations on crime location geographical patterns in the city of Chicago in regard to the youth vandalism areas of this urban periphery.

Another breakthrough on the matter is Jane Jacobs's 1962 book *Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Aside from the debate started by this publication, branded by some as simplistic and romantic and by others as relevant and of local scale, was a starting point for diverse actors who began to propose and work on the Civic Security and Urban Space issue. In it Jacobs states that in order to attain a safe and healthy life in the communities, the contact between neighbours and public space users is fundamental, and for this the urban space must provide certain permeability characteristics that will allow it. That is to say, Jacobs highlighted the relation between the design of urban space and social conduct patterns.

In 1972, Oscar Newman defines the theory of Defensible Space. In it, Newman pleads for a clear marking out of boundaries between public and private space, which leads to an excluding and confining urban model and residential areas with clear access controls. Subsequently the investigations of the Spatial Syntax group of the Bartlett School in London appear in regard to the matter. They establish the relation between Civic Security and the possibility of contact between the inhabitants of an urban space in its flow system. They define the community as the group of people formed by the co-presence in the urban space and define it as virtual community.

The Situational Crime Theory rises from another perspective. In it the spaces vulnerable to crime are analysed from the rational perspective of the aggressor, that is to say, that in order for there to be a crime, there must be a vulnerable victim, a favourable environment and a willing aggressor.

Despite the diverse lines of thought to approach the subject, every model states the natural surveillance issue as one of the main axis of civic safety and urban space, understanding by natural surveillance the ability to see, be seen and feeling trust in the urban space because of its characteristics and the people who inhabit it. This approach grants the urban inhabitant the responsibility of its own urban safety experience and for that reason gives it a role of power and conscience regarding its environment, something that, up to date, does not exist in Chile.

### **Civic Safety and Residential Urban Space in Puente Alto**

The Puente Alto district is the largest one in continental Chile, both in surface and in number of people. According to the latest National Census, the district has 550.000 inhabitants and presents the highest demographical growth, a 43.2% of the total of the country's districts. In addition, it finds itself amongst one of the districts with the

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highest crime and fear perception levels in Chile, according to several national surveys. These social and territorial characteristics, added to its peripheral location in relation to downtown Santiago, make the Puente Alto district an interesting study case in order to explore the civic security and urban space problem.

It also important to consider that the crime rate and fear perception are not equally distributed throughout the district (Fig. 1 and 2). The Social housing Villas, built by SERVIU at the beginning of the nineties stand out among this, they concentrate high crime rates, especially residential robbery, located to the district's south-west almost at Maipo river banks.

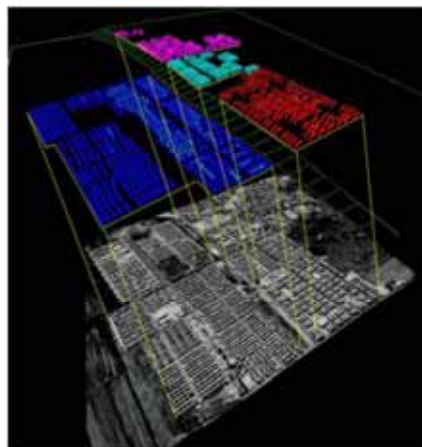


*Figure 1*



*Figure 2*

There are four villas chosen for the study case (Fig.3), this due to the variety present in the types of social housing and urban configuration. The villas Caleuche, Volcan San Jose II and III and Altos del Maipo, are built on the basis of pairs of housing blocks that face each other and the last one is constituted by two-story twin houses. Also the villas of the block pairs are located in a different way in the territory. El Caleuche has patios, Volcan San Jose III in small corridors and Volcan San Jose II also in interior patios. The Altos de Maipo villa has passageways and cul de sac streets. Many of the passageways have been closed by the neighbours to protect themselves. These villas are jointed one to the other by means of barren spaces that show poor intents of being recreational areas.



*Figure 3*

However, despite the spatial and typological description of the villas under study, the questions regarding the civic security issue still persist:

Who does the surveillance? Who is in control of the urban space and where?

It is recognized that it is relevant to understand and learn from the local villas under study, the inhabitants' perspective the real urban security problems.

### Local Scale

A key point when exploring this case is the understanding that the local security experience and the urban space are unique and unrepeatably regarding the villas under study and the communities that inhabit them. Therefore, to further understand and explore this relationship, local information must be gathered on the subject and restrict the scope of the study. According to the foregoing, it was only chosen to study robberies and perception of fear in public spaces.

For this purpose, a survey instrument was designed that sought to tackle the inhabitants' fear issues, crime incidents and use of public space associated to fear. All of this linked to a map, where the inhabitants themselves represented the occurrence.

Attempting to carry out the survey, effected in 2002, was not an easy task due to all the threats received by the surveyor group<sup>vi</sup>.

Finally, the survey was applied and with all the information gathered myth breaking and real understanding insofar as to what social variables and to what urban space was civic security really linked to and how, were accomplished. As an example of this, it was observed that in El Caleuche villa, the micro drug dealers act as the neighbours' protectors just as long as they are not given in. Thus, the community's security falls into the hands of the micro traffic leader and his network, instead of the Puente Alto district police force.

It was also observed that, as a research methodology, it was necessary to analyse the robbery phenomenon separate from fear perception, since they had different nature in their spatial location. (Fig.4)

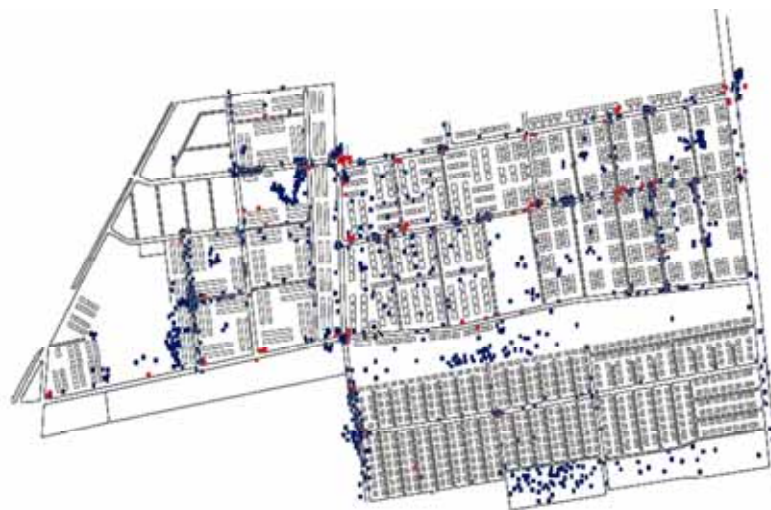


Figure 4

It was understood that the security concept varies from community to community and that in villas under study, there were a number of sub-communities that did not fall into the administrative boundaries of the urban space, but followed virtual boundaries that were part of common knowledge and experience among them. These spatial boundaries were located in those places where robberies took place in public spaces, (Fig 5) that is, up to where the resident communities exercised their natural surveillance mechanism. This is why they were named community appropriation limits. However, these limits failed to explain fully the spatial location of the perception of fear.



Figure 5

### **Territory under surveillance**

The discovery of the existence of this space named community appropriation limit, leads us to the following question:

What physical and social variables characterise these limits? And, what relation do they have with fear perception?

The answer was found in the surveys' qualitative information, as in one of the answers the person stated that only the inhabitants within his block were considered his community. Therefore, every community was defined by a bond of mutual acquaintance, trust and rapport and these communities exercised the natural surveillance mechanism up to the limit of the territory considered as their own.

The community appropriation limit presented similar spatial characteristics in its travel and places considered strategic. Among the characteristics there were: very clear visual field (Fig.6), therefore the urban space configuration did allow a comprehensive natural surveillance and restricted visual control. That is to say, there was little visual control from inside the house towards the space limit. Garbage accumulation could be observed as well as high graffiti levels. Activities were transient like sale of French fries in the street corners, fairs or public transport.



*Figure 6*

Then, the space limit in which all the public space robberies happened, did promote natural surveillance in the public space but not from the resident communities. The question to be asked is: who is in control of the limit if the resident communities are not?

*Community in the limit of community appropriation*

The space of the community appropriation limits is travelled and inhabited by different people or communities in transit that don't exercise control over it and therefore, it is controlled by opportunistic criminals.

Diverse communities that inhabit the limit were observed: mobile communities in transport exchange places, pedestrian communities seeking services, pedestrian flow in lookout space between communities, religious communities and transport exchange, youth and children communities between 2 gang communities, religious communities and barren site, square and youth community from El Caleuche, barren site and community in transit, resident community and uncivilized behaviour in green areas. All these are transient, that is to say, if they exercise the territorial reinforcement principle, they do it temporarily, which makes it easier for the aggressors to have control over the limits.

Regarding fear perception, concentrations of this exist in this limit which could relate to the fear of being victim of a crime. Nonetheless there are other concentrations linked to spaces destined for recreation that would be associated to environmental factors like lack of illumination and uncivilized activities such as drug and alcohol consumption in this space.

**Key lessons learned**

- The study of the relation between civic safety and urban space must begin from the base of profound understanding of the studied community's local scale.
- There is a larger influence between city production and civic safety than urban design and the latter.



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- In order to study such relation it is advisable to separate the fear perception phenomenon from the crime occurrence, especially in a country like Chile in which fear perception is greater than the actual occurrence of crime.
- There are conceptual voids that must be further explored to add definitions such as community appropriation limits in the exploring of the relation between civic security and urban space.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> JACOBS, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York, Vintage Books, 1992, 463p.

<sup>ii</sup> NEWMAN, Oscar. *Defensible space: people and design in the violent city*, London, The Architectural Press, 1976, 264p.

<sup>iii</sup> HILLIER, Bill. *Space is the machine*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, 463p.

<sup>iv</sup> MINISTRY OF INTERIOR. *Analysis Magazine* 2, June 2002

<sup>v</sup> PARK, R. E. W. BURGUESS AND R.D. MCKENZIE. *The City*, University of Chicago. ICS Press, San Francisco, 1928.

<sup>vi</sup> There were three surveyor groups that resigned carrying out the survey. This happened especially to the municipal surveyors that knew the villa's inhabitants.