

Reimagining Latin America: Challenges and Opportunities in Urban Housing Issues. Interview with Anacláudia Rossbach.

By Antonieta Urquieta¹

Interview with Anacláudia Rossbach

Antonieta Urquieta (Interviewer): Starting from your experience and academic background in urban housing issues, let's begin by asking, how do you see the urban housing problem in Latin America? What do you think are the most acute expressions of the urban housing problem today?

Anacláudia Rossbach: Latin America is the most unequal region on the planet and also exhibits significantly high levels of violence. Gender equity is a crucial issue in the region. Informal labor is prevalent, reaching 50% of the workforce according to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). Additionally, cities throughout Latin America tend to be segregated, with the wealthy residing in one part of the city and the poor in others, creating notable fragmentation and division. This is the characteristic context of Latin America. Our history in housing policy is very heterogeneous and erratic. Chile is an exception, as it has had a continuous housing policy focused on subsidies and housing production for many years. There are also neighborhood improvement programs and programs for informal settlements, among others. In Latin America, there is a strong policy of protecting new homes, as seen in Brazil and Mexico, which also have massive housing programs. However, the region faces an informal situation regarding land use. Unfortunately, we lack precise statistical data due to the lack of methodological uniformity in collecting such data, creating a gap in the statistical data collection process on this informality.

As a consequence of the pandemic, migration flows, along with the economic impact on households, we are experiencing an expansion of vulnerability and informality. In São Paulo, the city I come from, there is a significant number of people living on the streets or in extreme vulnerability. So, in addition to not having very precise consensus today, empirically speaking, it can be inferred that the pandemic has affected the lives of families in Latin America, leading to an expansion of informal situations. Therefore, at this moment, I believe we are witnessing a paradigm shift in Latin America. We are at a moment where traditional housing policies are widely recognized as obsolete, and

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a change in perspective is necessary. On the other hand, in countries like Brazil, Colombia, Mexico (in the past), El Salvador, and Argentina (currently), policies for integral neighborhood improvement have been implemented, seeking to directly intervene in the relationship between the housing environment and the improvement of people's quality of life.

Carlos: Juana, thank you for sharing these elements that allow us to establish a scenario to situate the conversation. From what you say, it is inevitable not to think of Foucault. In this regard, how do you observe, from your research and intervention experience, that the idea of power has been understood?

Juana: Well, first, from a historical review, the concept of power has not undergone major changes. If we remember, in classical Greece the power of the people or Democracy arose, but in that democracy neither the serfs, nor the women, nor the children, nor the peasants, nor the workers participated. Only certain citizens who had certain privileges, especially in the economic aspect, were allowed to participate. Now, from what we observe in the penitentiary system, it is useful to remember what Duverger (1970) states, in terms of power referring to the power to change the behavior of other people in order to obtain compliance with one's own will, despite the resistance of others. This power can be exercised because whoever obeys does so under threat of violence or because he or she has been manipulated. So, what we need is to break with inequalities, with oppression, with alienation, and to be able to transform this reality of injustice.

However, the models of projects we had are also showing signs of obsolescence, facing numerous barriers to their expansion. So, I think we have the goal and the need to change the direction of housing policies and the production of new homes since we need to break with the segregation in the city and the chaotic urban expansion over environmental and rural areas. Now, in the current context of climate change and food crisis, these issues are of great relevance to society as a whole, especially for our urban society. Latin America is among the most urbanized regions on the planet. So, we need these environments to breathe and feed ourselves. However, currently, policy remains disconnected from the ground, which will lead us to continue with this unrestrained urban expansion. On the other hand, self-production and informality also follow this dynamic of urban expansion.

I don't want to blame the poor. Much of urban expansion comes from higher-income segments, such as typical gated communities. So, urban expansion in Latin America, unrestrained and chaotic, whether due to informal occupations, housing programs, or the private real estate market, is generating numerous problems for our cities. We find ourselves in a situation where, as a region, we have largely achieved the former Millennium Goals, which included having pipes throughout the city and ensuring access to water, among other aspects. But we experience droughts because we do not respect environmental limits or environmental protection conditions. So, we find ourselves in this dilemma: we must curb urban expansion in cities while taking advantage of leisure spaces and the already built urban core, among other aspects.

Housing policies have become obsolete, as have neighborhood improvement policies. We need to rethink this situation, as we do not have fiscal capacity to carry out these processes. We cannot live from project to project. In the past, we had a project financed by development bank A, another project financed by development bank B. As was the case in Brazil, for example, which had a national neighborhood improvement program for 10 years, but it came to an end. Or Colombia, which has a program in Medellín but has not yet implemented a nationwide program. Argentina has a strong program in Buenos Aires, as well as a national program, but faces numerous difficulties in expanding it due to various issues. So, addressing land use informality through these types of projects no longer worked. So, what to do? In my opinion, the future is related to a systemic change that means, from a more practical and pragmatic point of view, recognizing the social and ecological function of the land, as well as the importance of infrastructure. On the other hand, it is crucial to recognize the existence of informal settlements, and this informal dynamic as a structural aspect of the region, as it is currently fundamental for the survival of families and for access to opportunities in the city, such as employment, economic opportunities, education, and health services, among others. Accepting this reality and systematically incorporating these territories into city planning and public policy, in general, is essential.

What does that mean? It means giving priority to these territories as recipients of long-term public policies. It is no longer about working on specific projects that start, are implemented, and then abandoned because to address the structural issues that affect our society, such as inequality and structural poverty, a single urban improvement project will not be enough to achieve the social and cultural transformations that we are expecting. And that's where Social Work comes in, I believe. I was thinking about this: what is the role of Social Work? I think we need to understand the importance of Social Work and the opportunity to have Social Work projects connected to housing programs,



neighborhood improvement, camps, etc. But we need to manage expectations regarding this Social Work.

From my perspective, having Social Work does not mean a profound and structural transformation of these spaces, but it is an important condition for this. Why is it an important condition for this? Because Social Work facilitates the process of sharing legal knowledge, architectural knowledge, technical knowledge with the community, and thus developing physical improvement processes. On the other hand, Social Work can be the bridge and connection to better understand the social and cultural dynamics of a particular territory, help leverage, think about how public policies, social policies, economic policies can act in a more structured way in the territory. Also, to promote actions of recognition and strengthening of social capital, which is an axis that we usually do not work on.

In Brazil, for example, Social Work is very focused on enabling the execution of works, promoting moving actions, and technical assistance. However, I believe that an approach focused on strengthening and mapping social capital is not sufficiently explored or developed in Brazil. In general, it is challenging to achieve development processes with real community empowerment. Although dialogues, consultations can be established, strengthening social capital is a part that is not very developed. In my opinion, Social Work can play a very important role in recognizing local organizations, identifying alternatives, strengthening these organizations through public policy, whether in the field of housing, neighborhood improvement, or other social policies.

Antonieta Urquieta: Claudia, if you allow me to delve deeper into some of the things you have proposed, you present us with a very interesting panorama regarding how the urban problem is configured today around a series of processes that have deepened inequality. So, in that sense, it is necessary to understand that observing these phenomena is an important key to understanding the dynamics of inequality, not simply conceiving that inequality in an abstract way, but rather recognizing these territorial structures that sustain inequality schemes. In this regard, your description questions a public policy in Latin America rooted in the neoliberal paradigm that has existed since authoritarian governments. This policy is based on the theory of social risk, which places the burden of risk on individuals. According to this perspective, overcoming inequality and poverty depends on strengthening individual, family, and community capacities. In this context, how do you think this structural territorial perspective of inequality confronts the assumptions that accompany and profoundly affect the structures of social policy in the region?

Anacláudia Rossbach: It is challenging to strengthen social capital if the policy has an individual goal, and I believe it is a contradiction we will have to live with because the culture is already established, and the demand is for individual benefits. There is an established culture and a dynamic where supply and demand are individual. This individual demand is justified for legitimate reasons due to the high incidence of poverty and vulnerability. If I were a mother in a situation of poverty and vulnerability, I would also want to have the house in my name, as this way, I would be sure that my children would have a secure place in case something happened to me, with a room and guaranteed protection. I am talking about a context of societies that are violent, where there are significant economic and political risks. We are in an erratic context, where sometimes we are better off alone, for example, when we have more employment.

The economies of Latin American countries have never experienced continuous periods of growth. There is always a crisis that negatively affects us, and then we start again. And in these crises, the ones who suffer the most are families in situations of vulnerability and lower incomes. I understand the legitimacy of supporting the population in general during crisis periods, whether collective or individual, due to the temporary difficulties we face from an economic and social systems perspective, among other aspects. Individuals also go through times of crisis. I think we need to aspire to that legitimate need for social protection, which for many takes the form of housing or ownership. So, it is important to understand that, but at the same time, I believe it is necessary to reinforce the importance of the collective, co-creation, participation in public policy, co-responsibility.

Therefore, we may be able to develop social policies, and Social Work plays a key role in this regard, to promote a cultural change where it is understood that the transformation will be a collective effort. The urban transformation we hope for, aiming to overcome segregations, must be a collective effort and must be understood by all social segments. We will not overcome segregation if there is no broader understanding that it affects the entire society and that, therefore, overcoming it will generate benefits for everyone. And we are far from being there; we have this “not in my backyard” mentality: “I don’t want a low-income person living near my house; I don’t want a poor person living near my house.” So, we must address structural issues, such as the issue of land. Why are cities segregated? Because the price of well-located land is high, and we don’t have many present and/or efficient mechanisms to control prices or regulate these prices. We have some examples: Colombia, Brazil, which have more developed land management instruments, but they are still segregated societies. So, we have instruments



in many countries, but they still do not meet the desired efficiency. For example, in Brazil, there is a type of zoning known as “special zone of social interest.” What does this mean? Reserving areas in the city for housing construction or establishing protections for informal settlements. This is done to prevent these areas from being gentrified due to improvements in infrastructure. Special zones of social interest set a limit on the production of market units. So, this zoning serves as protection against evictions, provides security in housing tenure, and acts as a safeguard against gentrification, fulfilling various functions. One of them is to flexibilize construction parameters because the city should not be the same; it cannot be the same; we have different economic parameters, so we need different urbanism parameters, and these zones allow for that. But the presence or existence of these zones is still very low, mainly in the case of Brazil; for example, in informal areas, it is clearly present, but in vacant areas, we cannot achieve a good presence. Because, of course, there is always resistance to this type of policy. So, it is very challenging to have instruments on that scale and efficiently in our countries. To have them, we must understand that this segregation does not benefit us as a society, and this cultural change is a significant challenge that we have ahead.

Antonieta Urquieta: I completely agree with several points you raised. In the framework of this interview, it is important to highlight the need to recognize the tension between two perspectives: one more structural and another focused on the ability of communities to act. As you mention, we must adopt a more complex perspective that integrates and recognizes this tension. This implies creating mechanisms that address both challenges more effectively. As you mentioned, true integration is achieved collectively. But you speak of collectively, not just communally, but of a joint effort involving multiple actors.

Anacláudia Rossbach: Exactly.

Antonieta Urquieta: So, it is an articulation of actors of different nature, among them those directly linked to the land market and housing production, and certainly, the families themselves.

Anacláudia Rossbach: Those are very interesting points. I was going to mention community responsibility because there is often a tendency to hold the community responsible for solving its problems. So, the community is expected to solve, self-build, and self-produce. In my opinion, it is essential to respect grassroots initiatives, self-production, and the spontaneous dynamics that develop, but the responsibility to address these



needs lies with public policy. It's a matter of co-responsibility between the government and society.

Antonieta Urquieta: Indeed, this debate is very relevant in the region, especially in Chile, where a new constitutional process is underway, involving the redefinition of the relationship between the State and citizens in a new social pact. This is based on the logic you have outlined of ensuring human rights, especially in terms of spatial justice, which poses a considerable challenge. Unlike classical models of subsidiary states, where the state is a benefactor for lower-income and vulnerable sectors, here, a different kind of relationship must be established between a state that guarantees rights, a private sector, and civil society that also co-guarantee and participate in this network of guarantees for the exercise of rights. How do you see this challenge for our region?

Anacláudia Rossbach: I think it is a significant challenge, and I consider that these debates, especially the constitutional debate, are exceptional opportunities to address these issues and understand the dimension of the social life we are experiencing, as well as its impact on the environment and the challenges we face in terms of poverty, hunger, unemployment, etc. So, these processes are of great importance, and having active participation from society in them is crucial. Currently, I work at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, and the truth is that I am not here just for the cause, beyond the organization's mission. My professional background has led me to this point. I am an economist and worked for many years in designing housing programs, among other things, and also participated in community work. Now, I lead the Land Institute. I believe that land is the key to transformation, and that starts with recognizing that its social and ecological function is fundamental. So, based on this recognition, I think we can think more sustainably about our cities. For example, consider urban centers and offices that are empty, as well as the idle and underutilized spaces that exist in cities. The value and cost of those spaces for society do not always adequately reflect in market prices. Therefore, I think we should seize those opportunities to expand awareness of what the city can offer us. I am speaking from the city's perspective, considering that our societies are predominantly urban in Latin America. The city is our home. So, obviously, there are issues related to preserving large natural biomes, among other topics. But, I want to focus on the city chapter, thinking about the city where we live. I hope that this debate allows us to adopt a more strategic and realistic perspective on our cities and understand how we can leverage the spaces and land opportunities that the city offers us to promote equity and create more public green spaces.



Understanding the city more as a common good, I believe that markets can operate in a way that also contributes to the common good and is sustainable for the city. I think that if we manage to understand this, the constitutional process is an opportunity. Currently, in São Paulo, the city's master plan is being reviewed, leading us to a significant debate. Several changes are emerging, and this process is being replicated in other cities and countries. These processes are showing us both alarming and concerning situations but also opportunities. These opportunities are related to recognizing that the city is a public good and that land has a social and ecological function. It is important to consider how markets and public policies can operate in a way that the impact on the city is more positive than negative, with a positive influence from public policy. If we do not achieve this cultural change towards a more collective and broad awareness, it will be very challenging to implement policies or expect communities to work on their own development. We cannot expect the collective vision to be limited only to communities where the poorest and most disadvantaged people live. Social work, housing policy, improvement policy can play a role in strengthening this social capital. This social capital is crucial, but we must not limit ourselves to having an isolated vision of a specific territory.

We must also work to share knowledge and understand the overall dynamics of the city in collaboration with families in those spaces. This morning, I attended an event on Latin America that focused on precarious settlements, and a campaign was launched to improve these areas. This issue was discussed during the event. So, it is essential that participatory processes are not limited to specific communities and territories. They must be expanded to promote a comprehensive understanding of the entire city and how that territory relates to the city as a whole. Working in those territories is more critical because there is a whole complex process of sharing this technical knowledge. Certainly, engaging the entire society is a challenge, but working with these communities is strategic, as they need to be empowered and equipped with the necessary technical knowledge to move forward. If there are changes in government or interruptions in policies, these communities are faced with the need to maintain a dynamic that must continue. Hence the importance of that technical power. If we look, for example, in Brazil, the most advanced, interesting, and progressive master plans, such as those of São Paulo and Belo Horizonte, are two cases I really like because they were driven by movements and social organizations. In my opinion, these master plans would not have been approved without the influence of social organizations. I am referring to more solid organizations that have strengthened their presence over time. These organizations now have a comprehensive understanding of the city and understand the impact of a specific

plan and the technical reasons adopted on the territory, and how they affect people's lives. Therefore, promoting, empowering, and sharing this knowledge is essential in the long run. That is a function of social work. We can take advantage of this opportunity that social work provides to build a longer-term vision with excluded and marginalized communities. However, working with the entire society is an effort that involves public policy, various actors, and joint work, including academia, among others.

Antonieta Urquieta: In that sense, I agree with you that in some way, social work – not just social work – should promote, favor what you are pointing out, which I would describe as a sort of transdisciplinary dialogue for the approach to the city. As you point out, the purpose is to know the knowledge of citizens in their different expressions, also that of academia, the political world, the technical world, and how they converge in a project that is collective and that surpasses them all, beyond each of the readings that we may partially make. What are those possibilities? What possibilities do you see for that transdisciplinary dialogue, that more coordinated, interconnected construction of knowledge in the service of these processes of spatial justice, guarantee of the right to the city and housing?

Anacláudia Rossbach: I believe that much depends on establishing participatory governance mechanisms at different levels. That is fundamental. First, promote practices, spaces of collaboration, co-creation, sharing, and second, have more institutionalized processes of participatory governance, for which local protagonism is fundamental; municipalities need to be closer to public policies. The municipality is closer to citizens, in general, and can be a source to drive transformations in public policy, an important source. In our countries, we rely heavily on national spheres for investments in public policy, both in more and less decentralized countries, but it is the same in federal countries; there is a great dependence on national resources. However, citizens are in the municipal sphere, where their political power is continually growing during decentralization processes. Despite this, their fiscal capacity remains extremely limited because politics is structured sectorally at the national level, and resources are also at that level. So, this is the bridge we must establish. I think it is the municipality's responsibility to facilitate this dialogue between citizens and general public policies, promoting changes and improvements. National organizations are also important, as you mentioned, in events like the constitutional change in Chile, among others. However, connecting this local dialogue with the national sphere is of vital importance. To achieve this, it is necessary to establish multilevel and participatory governance mechanisms. Promoting real participation in this context is a challenge. I think many governments, in the context



of the Covid-19 pandemic, realized the importance of having organized communities at the territorial level. Because it turned out to be quite challenging to carry out interventions in many territories without the support of civil society organizations. So, I believe that the legacy we take from the pandemic, and it will be a strong legacy, will lead us to really promote structures, models, and systems to drive participatory governance.

Antonieta Urquieta: Finally, I would like to ask for your opinion on the challenges posed by a somewhat broader understanding, from my point of view, of the notion of spatial justice. When one reflects on the concept of spatial justice in its more restricted sense, it is related to a geography of equitable opportunities. In this context, from the Complex Territorial Systems core at the University of Chile, we have been interested in promoting an approach to spatial justice that includes the redistribution of services and resources, with the aim of creating an equitable city in terms of accessibility. Additionally, we seek social justice that ensures the recognition of the different communities that inhabit the territories, as well as adequate representation, which is similar to what you mentioned earlier. How do you conceive a more extensive, demanding, and complex notion of spatial justice that recognizes these different levels? I am fundamentally alluding to Fraser's concepts of social justice.

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Anacláudia Rossbach: Much is talked about today regarding climate justice as well. All of this could be connected. I think it is much easier to plan the territory from a physical standpoint, although coordinating infrastructure works, water, etc. are complex issues. But it is easier than understanding the social fabric, social dynamics, the connection to opportunities. How to act on this? It is an extremely structural issue. Improving a house is simpler: installing a roof, connecting water. However, we are immersed in an extremely complex social infrastructure. This goes beyond just opportunities and services; it encompasses structural issues such as the gender inequalities we face and the issue of violence. Our children and men are dying, becoming victims of a highly violent system, especially in these more vulnerable and informal territories. So, we have a very difficult complexity to act upon. Spatial and social justice are closely related to all these aspects.

Improving access and the right to the city and developing mobility systems that allow all citizens to access the various possibilities the city offers, including services, cultural opportunities, sports activities, and enjoyment of diverse public spaces, is a possible vision. It is also feasible to imagine how to promote and close the existing infrastructure gaps in the city. However, when you get into the social fabric and really try to



understand all this and act in a way that promotes real change, the situation becomes extremely complex. It goes far beyond urban policy and housing policy. And it extends beyond just directing social policies in the territory. It has to do with deep structural, economic, and social changes; it involves addressing the deep inequalities we have in our Latin America. Having access to the city's infrastructure and eliminating those spatial infrastructure gaps is fundamental; it is a bridge, but we must do it, it is the minimum necessary. If we do not delve into processes of truly understanding this social fabric and these social dynamics and do not know how to act consistently, constantly, and sustainably, we will not achieve this spatial and social justice that seeks to improve people's quality of life, not just justice itself. There is a difference between improving people's lives and justice.

On the other hand, perhaps justice is only possible in some generations, not in ours. How to overcome these structural differences? The differences between women of my age, for example, are ingrained and will not disappear quickly in a single lifetime. But we have possibilities with future generations if we can change the culture and mindset today. This implies gradually eliminating these urban gaps, which are not few and are not minimal. They are very relevant and important. Eliminating urban gaps, providing access and the right to the city, mobility, as well as generating improvements in the quality of life, is not a small feat; it is a lot. It must be done; this is where policies play an important role, and this is where we can act during this lifetime. Overcoming structural challenges to achieve true spatial justice linked to social justice is a process that spans several generations. However, it is crucial to move in a unified and agreed-upon direction, with a critical mass of people agreeing on the direction to take. Currently, we are still very polarized regarding the direction we should take. So, agreements and consensus need to be reached. I believe that today there is a great convergence in terms of public policy in general, with a shared perception of the existing gaps and that we are not reaching many people, with various policies related to mobility, housing, health, and education. We are not reaching the entire population as we should. There is a certain convergence in general terms, but we still do not fully understand the magnitude of the necessary transformations.

This is again related to the issue of land, access to it, and the location of housing. It is crucial to consider where we really live in the city, in addition to access, to be able to establish a more balanced perspective on the city. Because if I live on the outskirts of the city, I am going to have a perspective on the city from that place. So, as we achieve a greater diversity of perspectives and people are everywhere, the perspective on the



city will be more balanced, as well as pragmatic access to services such as education, among others. However, in Latin America, we face huge income gaps and significant inequalities. So, until we overcome these inequalities, it will be very difficult to address and overcome infrastructure and improvement issues, but it is not a less important step.

Antonieta Urquieta: It has been very inspiring to hear your thoughts. I would only finish by asking if there is anything else you would like to emphasize.

Anacláudia Rossbach: At the beginning, I mentioned the importance of systemic transformations that effectively address needs, including planning systems and laws that work. That is a transformation process that demands broad participation from all of society. An advantage in the region is that, in a way, we have managed to be more connected as a regional community. I see it that way as well. There is a certain convergence among public policies in Latin America, and nowadays, we are seeing many more connections between various actors, both at the national and municipal government levels. So, there is a process of transnational knowledge, experience, and expertise transfer in Latin America. This accelerated a lot after the Hábitat III conference, which took place in Quito, Ecuador, in 2016. In the last six years, with the internet and Zoom, we have become much closer as a region. This has enabled us to strengthen a critical mass of agreements. There is, for example, a decalogue for the improvement of neighborhoods in Latin America that was signed by several organizations. This morning a regional improvement campaign was launched. So, there are regional movements that allow us to generate this transfer of knowledge, experience, expertise, at all levels: social organizations, academia, local governments, national governments. This represents a great window of opportunity, at least to transfer knowledge and technical know-how since we still need technical solutions to address these structural transformations. It also gives us the possibility to gain strength and consensus on the direction we want to take. This is very important at a time and in a context where our society, in general, is very polarized. So, the actors working on city issues, housing, urban policy are reaching an interesting convergence. The public policies of different partisan colors in Latin America today show a notable approximation, which represents a great window of opportunity and progress that I think we must recognize.

Antonieta Urquieta: Thank you very much, Anacláudia. It's a tremendous pleasure to hear you, and your reflections are very inspiring.



Biography of Anacláudia Rossbach (interviewee):

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