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Drawing rural paths on the urban margins:

An Ethnographic Study of Peacebuilding, Displacement and Place-making in Medellín Largest Informal Settlement

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Abstract

This thesis provides an in-depth ethnographic analysis of La Nueva Jerusalén, Medellín's largest informal settlement, exploring the complex interplay between displacement, place-making, and a territorial perspective within the urban margins. It examines how displaced populations engage with and transform their newly inhabited urban spaces, forging communities at the intersection of rural and urban dynamics amid Colombia's prolonged armed conflict. The study challenges traditional dichotomies of rural-urban, legal-illegal, and center-margin, proposing a nuanced understanding of urban spaces as liminal zones that reflect both the scars of conflict and the aspirations for peace. It delves into how these spaces serve not just as sites of survival, but as arenas where the displaced negotiate identity, belonging, and future prospects of livable spaces.

Focusing on three main dimensions: the material and social production of space, the intergenerational and hybrid identities that navigate between inherited rural traditions and urban realities, and the governance structures that oscillate between formality and informality, this research illuminates the ways in which La Nueva Jerusalén's residents embody and enact new forms of territorial construction from the urban margins It argues that peace should be addressed regarding the plurality of territories advocating to delve into new epistemologies of peace.

Keywords: Place-Making, Territorial Peacebuilding, Urban Margins, Informal Settlements, Forced Displacement

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1. Introduction

Colombia is a country globally recognized for the diversity of its regions, soils, and territories, as well as its ethnic and cultural heritage. Indeed, it is often defined by terms such as "megadiverse," "multiethnic," and "multicultural." Paradoxically, the formation of the National State and its geographical imagination has been plagued by an understanding of the country's composition in dichotomous terms: rural-urban, wild-civilized, State-less and State-full, violent-peaceful, among others. As Serje (2011) states, Colombian geopolitical imagination has positioned the nation as the central axis of development in contrast to the non-nation, which has been defined as *territories* or "no man's lands" that have historically escaped the modern order for various reasons. These areas are characterized as "disjointed and conflict-ridden peripheries, representing obstacles to national integration and development [*My Translation*][1]"(Serje, 2011, p.1). They are imagined on the edges of national geography, in rural areas and what many would call: Deep Colombia.

However, despite the dichotomous understanding of space and in honor of the megadiverse component of Colombian landscapes, a type of territory emerges within the country's cities that could be considered liminal, fulfilling many characteristics of these "no man's lands" yet located in the urban space which is considered the spatial and symbolic representation of development (Hannerz, 1980): **The informal settlements.** These spaces impose themselves broadly on the margins of cities and do not adhere to a framework of legality or formality, neither in their material and architectural forms nor in their internal governance dynamics, often managed through community control and the rule of illegal groups or organized crime.

In the Colombian context, these settlements represent the materialization and visible, open-air result of the forced displacement of millions of people from the countryside and the internal armed conflict that has embroiled the country for over 80 years. Colombia's prolonged armed conflict has fundamentally reshaped its geographical

[1] [MT] hereafter.

and social contours, driving countless rural families to flee their lands and territories since the late 1940s. The resultant land dispossession, perpetrated by various illegal armed groups, has not only altered the rural landscape but has also catalyzed the sprawling urbanization of cities like Medellín. Displaced populations, with nowhere else to turn, have been compelled to forge new lives on the urban margins, giving rise to neighborhoods like La Nueva Jerusalén (NJ), the neighborhood and space that will be the focus of this research.

Imposing in its magnitude, La Nueva Jerusalén (NJ) stands out as an informal settlement in the northeastern mountains of Medellín, Colombia. Legally recognized as a substandard neighborhood, it exhibits classic signs of informality, poverty, and scarce infrastructure typical of such marginalized areas. This reality is not new in the Colombian landscape. "Being here is like traveling back to the Medellín of 50 years ago; it's like stepping back in time," Padre Gonzalo once told me during a discussion about NJ realities. He is one of the priests at the Parish of San Cirilo, who welcomed me during my fieldwork and stay in the neighborhood. This particular neighborhood is relatively new, with most of its inhabitants arriving between 2008 and 2009 when "all of that was just bushes and crops," and the mountain was covered in vast expanses of greenery now lost to rapid urbanization. Today, it is recognized as the largest informal settlement in Medellín and one of the three largest in Colombia, home to over 30,000 residents.

Thus, while informal settlements are a significant part of the Colombian urbanscape, what new insights can be gained by studying the dynamics of La Nueva Jerusalén from a spatial perspective? We could highlight three aspects of vital importance. Firstly, it should be noted that informal settlements have been predominantly studied from the perspective of urban poverty and marginalization (Stienen, 2017) but not as territories and urban mirrors or similes of these "no man's lands" that make up the Colombian landscape. Thus, in this study, La Nueva Jerusalén will be represented as a territory. This approach helps us to explore the concept of territory beyond dichotomous forms and its association with the rural and the distant. Secondly, it is also relevant that they have been built by people coming from these marginalized and abject territories, which opens the possibility to explore their trajectories, rural life and resilience, and how those are inserted and define the construction and production of space in NJ. Finally, it is vital to explore

the urban settings in the context of peacebuilding in Colombia as it has been focused and portrayed as a process only inserted in the rurality of the country.

Therefore, considering that NJ emerges as a liminal space, situated at the intersections of past and present landscapes, rural and urban, formal and informal, legal and illegal, and the center and its margins, it is worth inquiring: How do NJ dwellers' trajectories and material realities intersect in the creation and production of the neighborhood as an imagined and constructed space? The aim of this thesis is to delve into the socio-spatial dynamics of La Nueva Jerusalén, exploring how displaced populations engage in the process of place-making within the urban margins. It seeks to understand the material and social production of space, the intergenerational perspectives that influence community identity, and the complex governance structures that emerge in contexts of informality and marginalization. Finally, this thesis also seeks to encourage further exploration of how studying informal settlements and urban areas beyond the lens of poverty can expand our understanding of peacebuilding from the perspective of internally displaced populations. As the primary residents of these areas, they are both survivors and living testimonies of the violence and restoration.

Through an ethnographic methodological approach, this study showcases the lived experiences, everyday practices, and socio-cultural nuances of residents, providing a rich understanding of the intricate interplay between space, identity, and power dynamics within the context of urban marginality. Throughout my research, I employed participatory observation, conducted interviews, and facilitated focus groups with both the youth and founders of the neighborhood. Engaging deeply with parish activities, I gained intimate insights into the community, allowing for a richer understanding of the dynamics at play. This approach not only allowed me to observe the day-to-day realities but also to participate in them, providing a profound connection to the lived experiences of NJ residents and understanding the dynamics of space construction and geographical imagination.

Finally, as an ethnographic study, the research is delimited to La Nueva Jerusalén, providing a detailed case study that, while offering broader insights applicable to similar settings, remains deeply rooted in the historical and cultural context of the Colombian conflict and formation. This localized focus allows for a nuanced exploration of urban

marginality and community resilience, shedding light on the broader implications for urban studies, anthropology of space and places, and displacement and exile literature.

Outline

This thesis comprises seven main sections, beginning with this introduction. The following section delves into the methodological framework. This research employs an ethnographic approach to understanding spaces and places, emphasizing the fieldwork process and the immersive experiences that inform the research. The section on methodology also discusses the ethical, reflexive, and positional frameworks that guide the interpretation of the fieldwork data, addressing the complexities of engaging with marginalized communities. The subsequent sections are structured around the analytical framework that includes a literature review spanning locality studies, urban anthropology, and displacement studies, providing a theoretical background for the empirical chapters that follow.

Chapters one, two, and three form the core empirical investigation of the thesis. These three chapters respond to basic premises under which the idea of territory has been forged: i) it is socially constructed from the possibilities of the environment and nature (Escobar 2014; Lederach 2017), ii) it produces its own forms and differentiated narratives of geographical imagination (Escobar, 2014; Peña 2019) and is constantly in dispute where various forms of control and sovereignty intersect (Stienen, 2020). Bearing this in mind, Chapter one, "Molding a Space," explores how La Nueva Jerusalén's residents engage in the physical and social production of their space, emphasizing resilience and the exercise of control and sovereignty in their daily lives. Chapter two shifts focus to "Built by Rural Subjects, Inhabited by Urban Dwellers," examining the intersection of rural heritage and urban realities, particularly through the lens of youth and intergenerational perspectives within the community. Chapter three "The Interstices of Power, Violence, and Control," scrutinizes the complex governance and power dynamics within the settlement, highlighting both non-state actions and state-driven interventions.

The thesis concludes with a reflection on the epistemologies of peace from the perspective of territorial experiences, suggesting new ways to understand the space construction in urban margins. Thus, the research aims to provide a detailed exploration

of place-making in La Nueva Jerusalén engaging with broader discourses on urban marginality, socio-political dynamics that shape informal settlements and further opportunities for peacebuilding from an urban perspective.

2. Methodology: Towards an Ethnography of spaces and places

Research on spaces and spatiality has been approached from various perspectives, forming a naturally interdisciplinary field encompassing disciplines from geology to geography and urban or rural studies. In this research, I adopt an ethnographic standpoint towards spaciality, a decision with both epistemological and practical implications, which will be elaborated upon in this section.

Traditionally, social anthropology has been deeply intertwined with the study of culture, often focusing on symbols, representations, and perceptions (Luhrmann, 2010). However, urban anthropology has built a path towards the exploration of spaces, places, and their connections to individuals (Low, 2017). This shift presents an opportune moment to capitalize on ethnographers' inherent capacity (or necessity) for inhabiting and embodying spaces amidst the fieldwork process. As Setha Low articulates:

> Ethnographers have an advantage in understanding space and place because they begin their studies in the field. Regardless of whether it is a long-term study or rapid ethnographic assessment, there is an engagement with the inherent materiality and human subjectivity of fieldwork. (Low, 2016 p. 4)

I lived in La Nueva Jerusalén for a month, as a methodological decision. I sought to understand not only the dynamics of the neighborhood and its construction but also my own feelings, position, and actions. Adjusting to an environment vastly different from any I had previously encountered inquired a profound engagement with both the surroundings and myself. Furthermore, I was eager to break through the barrier of La Nueva Jerusalén as an impenetrable, difficult-to-access, and dangerous space. What are the dynamics of dwellers living on that steep slope? How is the daily life perceived and experienced? These questions needed a deep immersion in the neighborhood.

Despite encountering numerous 'raw moments' during my time there, this approach allowed me to develop a robust perspective about the place I was dwelling. During my first walks on the rusty and stony ground, I realized the significance of experiencing the environment firsthand and how this interaction would inform my

observations. I could not take my eyes off the ground, as misstepping was risky. I felt frustrated during the initial days, sensing that I was missing valuable information by constantly focusing on the ground. However, this experience became one of my main findings: in such a place like the one I was in, it is not possible to analyze the dynamics without considering the construction and materiality of the space. Therefore, this research constitutes an ethnographic study of space and place.

Ethnography of space delves into the intricate interplay between human beings and the environments they inhabit, offering rich insights into social dynamics, cultural practices, and individual experiences within specific spatial contexts. Furthermore, ethnographic studies of space go beyond mere physical descriptions of places; they delve into the lived experiences of individuals within these spaces. In his work on "Taskscape," Tim Ingold provides a framework for understanding how human activities shape and are shaped by the landscapes they inhabit (Ingold, 1993). This perspective underscores the dynamic relationship between people and their spatial environments, emphasizing the role of daily practices and interactions in shaping the meaning of space which is deeply connected with the endeavor of ethnography.

As Geertz (1973) mentioned, as ethnographers, we try to “read” the textuality of culture as it could be defined as “an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong” (p.86). Thus, in resemblance with culture, space also possesses a textuality and a language that can be read. Vergara emphasizes the linguistic components of space, arguing that places are imbued with various languages: “the bodies that inhabit them, the architectural structures, systems of objects, social practices, the textures, the smells, the sounds and silence, the images, the décor, elements that, together, delineate the particular atmosphere of a locality [MT].” (Vergara, 2013 p. 27).

In this regard, the ethnography of space aims to comprehend the language inherent within spaces, alongside the cultural languages that these spaces facilitate and generate through immersive fieldwork and participant observation. This cocreation of language is particularly relevant to shed light on issues of power, inequality, and belonging as space has deeply considered an identity marker and a constant terrain of dispute.

Finally, it is worth highlighting that the anthropology of spaces and places is particularly useful and relevant to address the spatial effects of contemporary dynamics such as migration, war, conflict, land dispossession and displacement due to environmental or extractivist causes (Low, 2017). These events are intimately intertwined with the material, symbolic, and ideological aspects of space and place, necessitating a nuanced understanding of sociospatial dynamics as they are deeply embedded in the physical reality of humanity. Thus, I employed the ethnography of space and places approach to explore the dynamics of La Nueva Jerusalén,. This perspective enabled me to center my attention on the territory while simultaneously capturing the interactions, dynamics, power dynamics, and my personal responses to the challenges and experiences encountered in the field.

Fieldwork journey

I arrived in La Nueva Jerusalén on a Thursday, February 13th, at noon, settling into a small room on the first floor of the Parroquia's house. The room, named *Pot de Fer*, after a street in Paris where Saint Louis de Montfort once lived, was my home for the next month. Alongside me in the house were Padre Leonardo, the neighborhood's parish priest, and two seminarians, Harold and Stiven. The house, resembling a castle amidst the neighborhood's modest structures, was a generous donation from the German embassy. On the day of my arrival, a meeting was underway with the parish committee, comprised of local residents who play an integral role in the parish's activities. They were discussing plans for organizing a fundraising bazaar and preparing for the Holy Week.

Joining the meeting already in progress, Padre Gonzalo introduced me: "She is Angie, a missionary who has worked with us all her life. I've known her since she was four years old, and now she's a full-fledged anthropologist here to undertake a project with us." This introduction piqued the interest of those present, primarily because few were familiar with anthropology, and secondly, due to my close ties with the Fathers, who held considerable authority in the community. After introducing myself, I integrated into the meeting, offering assistance with tasks related to the bazaar, such as canvassing door-to-door to enlist individuals willing to showcase their talents in singing, dancing, or acting during the event. This endeavor not only facilitated my integration into the neighborhood but also provided an opportunity to acquaint myself with its residents.

The meeting proceeded smoothly, we had *"Onces"* (Colombian Fika) and concluded before attending the 6 o'clock mass, the first of many I would attend after years of absence. Following my presentation, where I outlined my plans to conduct interviews, some of the attendees expressed interest in being interviewed during the next weeks so I write down their phone numbers and agreed to call them back later. Like this, my fieldwork in La Nueva Jerusalén had started. During my stay, I conducted 14 interviews and facilitated 2 focus groups, accumulating a total of 16 hours of recorded material. The interviews were planned to cover my interest groups within the community:

- 5 interviews with community members, founders and leaders
- 4 interviews with institutional actors (NGOs, The Parish and Bello Municipality)
- 4 interviews with youth
- 1 focus group with adults
- 1 focus group with youth

In addition to these formal engagements, constant observations, spontaneous conversations with residents, and participation in parish activities formed a crucial part of my fieldwork. This latter afforded me manifold insights into the neighborhood. On one hand, I gained an understanding of its spatial dimensions, as the Parish holds four small chapels strategically positioned to cover the entire territory. In this sense, I had the opportunity to explore the diversity of spaces and dynamics present throughout the neighborhood. On the other hand, I observed the intricate institutional framework of NJ and the particularities of the power dynamics between the parish, the State, and organized crime.

My daily interactions within the Parish house, encompassing household chores, meal preparation, and shared meals, were filled with both small talks and profound discussions with Padre Leonardo, Gonzalo, and the seminarians. Living and interacting with them provided me with invaluable insights and a longitudinal perspective on La Nueva Jerusalén, tracing back to the congregation's establishment in 2013. Furthermore, I was able to learn from their deep understanding of the concerns and challenges faced by the residents, as they are perceived as a central source of support and a safe haven within the community. Additionally, Steven and Harold, the seminarians, played pivotal roles in my fieldwork. Being natives of the Cauca department, a remote rural area in southeastern

Colombia heavily affected by war, they offered me an immersive glimpse into rural Colombian life. Daily interactions with them and learning about their experiences were instrumental in identifying similarities and parallels with my observations in La Nueva Jerusalén

Finally, it is worth highlighting that, the Parish's backing played a pivotal role in ensuring my safety and facilitating access to the community. It was through Sunday masses in various sectors of the neighborhood that I introduced myself to the community under the auspices of the parish, this helped to generate word of mouth about my presence in the neighborhood and letting Los Muchachos know I was there. Thus, the complex web of structures, powers, and experiences within the neighborhood prompts reflection on my role as an anthropologist and an unknown person digging into La Nueva Jerusalén realities.

Data Analysis

The systematization and analysis process began with the transcription of interviews and focus groups, enabling the conversion of this data into text format. After this, I created a categorization table, incorporating both pre-established categories from the fieldwork and emergent ones that became relevant as the study progressed. Using the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA, I systematically organized and analyzed the data, aligning it with the designed category matrix. This phase involved iterative revisions, during which new codes were identified and incorporated as they surfaced in the ongoing analysis. In parallel, I developed a "characters" matrix to meticulously record vital information about each participant, eventually encompassing details from 28 individuals I engaged with during my fieldwork. This matrix not only facilitated the detailed documentation but also ensured the ethical consideration of participant anonymity. This comprehensive approach allowed for a deeper understanding and interpretation of the nuanced data gathered, significantly enriching the study's outcomes.

Ethical perspective, reflexivity and positionality: Rethinking the ethnographical encounter and the testimony of sorrow

As in any ethnographic research, the interactions I had with the community were deeply profound and, in many senses, emotional. As stated by Hansen (2021), “shared physical

experiences are likely to develop emotions that are collectively shared but individually constituted, between the researcher and the research participants" (p. 48). Furthermore, the researcher's position of power may present a set of challenges regarding how to ethically utilize the information gathered and the reasons behind our access to such information. Therefore, although this subject could be the focus of a broader discussion, in this section, I will specifically analyze my role and the multiple layers of power that I embodied in a space such as an informal settlement, as well as how I used and interpret the testimonies collected throughout my fieldwork.

The challenges of digging into the reality of the margins

There is an undeniable fact: La Nueva Jerusalén is a poor neighborhood where people mostly live in conditions of extreme poverty. This entails a series of particular dynamics that I must take into account in both my entry into the field and my interaction with the residents: I made it clear upon entering that I was conducting a research project associated with my studies in Sweden, which would last for a month and result in a written text. However, the reference to coming from a European country despite being Colombian provided me with an image of respect and curiosity, but also of a potential donor or someone who could contribute to improving their conditions or providing assistance. Furthermore, through word of mouth, I was known as "the girl visiting the Parish" or "the friend of the priests," which implied a certain distance from the general population as they are considered figures of authority.

Thus, it was particularly imperative to clarify that while I was willing to do what I could, I did not have a position that allowed me to contribute at that precise moment. There were many occasions when I was approached by people who wanted to talk about their difficult economic situation, the challenges of a sick family member, or the conditions of their house on the verge of collapse. It was clear that they were sharing their experiences to ask for help. I chose to listen to them and try to guide them with my knowledge of entities or individuals who might be able to assist them in their situation.

As a researcher, it was very difficult for me not to pay attention to these conditions. "I don't know how not to be distracted by all the misery I see and witness daily. What to do?" This was one of my diary entries. However, after a few days, perhaps as a human survival mechanism, I managed to find the concentration I was seeking. One

day, I discussed this with Father Gonzalo, and he said to me, "Here, you run the risk of your feet growing and your head shrinking." It seemed like a curious phrase, so I asked for an explanation:

> *You're working or doing your own things, so no longer think about the situation, no longer sees the situation, no longer sees poverty, no longer sees the lack of rights, you just walk and don't even notice the child who has to walk 45 minutes to go to school or the elderly person who goes several nights without eating. It doesn't affect you anymore. So, yes, your feet grow because in this neighborhood you walk all the time and all day, but what about your head? You no longer think about the situation.*

This fact opens up the discussion about the ethnographic process of participatory action within the field. How much intervention is acceptable? How to do it?

In anthropological research, particularly in vulnerable or marginalized communities, the boundaries between the roles of researcher and advocate can become blurred (Hansen, 2020). Ethnographers often find themselves immersed in the lives and struggles of the people they study, forming emotional connections and a deep sense of empathy. This closeness can create ethical dilemmas as researchers grapple with their dual roles as observers and potential agents of change (Stark, 2020). As Setha Low (2016) points out, "ethnographers have a unique position that allows them to bear witness to the injustices and challenges faced by marginalized communities." (p. 23) However, this proximity also raises questions about the extent to which researchers should intervene in the lives of their subjects. Furthermore, as articulated by Hansen (2020), the desire to influence the welfare of the communities studied can lead to tensions between the participation of people, their autonomy on the research and the information that we gained from them.

In the midst of this debate I decided to take action by giving a non-material intervention: I reached out to an alternative local media to talk about the neighborhood and make visible the dynamics of the neighborhod. Although I was concerned in terms of my security and compromissing the role of the Parish towards los Muchachos, Padre

Leonardo and Gonzalo allowed me to do it under certains conditions[2]. Therefore, I pursued this strategy by leveraging the power of journalism to raise awareness of various situations or issues. This approach can have significant implications, as representation and visibility are fundamental to instigating changes in the landscape. As noted by Castillejo (2013), there are ways to take actions that impact research development without compromising its integrity. Thus, participation and research should not be viewed as opposing poles in ethnographic practice. Instead, the level of engagement of the ethnographic practice and political advocacy are aligned to work upon the margins.

Turning the testimony into data

Something I observed in the neighborhood is that people express themselves with their entire bodies, not just through words. Emotions, when recounted, manifest physically—in the tone of voice, even in tears. Moreover, another crucial observation is that the majority of my informants are individuals displaced by violence, implying that "their lives are marked by the experience of forced rupture" (Castillejo, 2016, p. 3).

As such, there are numerous accounts, interview fragments, or experiences that I could not encode as "data" due to their sensitive nature, the profound symbolic and personal significance they held for those who shared them with me, and the impact that some of them had on me. Thus, they will remain as testimonies of violence rather than empirical research data. Episodes of violence and profound pain were shared with me, many of which won't appear on these pages. Most of the individuals I interviewed or interacted with have firsthand experience not only of displacement but also of the murder, torture, or disappearance of their loved ones. However, the narratives of pain and violence require a particular storyline and a delicate, caring space for construction—a space I lack in this work and would not contribute to my argument beyond the morbidity of sorrow.

Out of respect for all those who kindly shared their lives and daily experiences with me, these testimonies will remain in my memories rather than in the academic records. As Castillejo (2016) states:

[2] To see the article in Spanish go to: https://elarmadillo.co/historias/las-trochas-y-las-luchas-de-la-nueva-jerusalen-un-barrio-en-el-margen-del-estado/

> The memory of a son's murder, the literalness of a massacre, or the disappearance of someone, in other words, listening to the other from their abyss, is not something that is carried out, collected, or written like any other interview. Universities have never taught us to look into the abyss in the eyes (p. 6).

The various forms we use and code testimonies lead us into a broader discourse within anthropological inquiry: How do we give voice? Or, indeed, is that the objective? As noted, anthropological practice aims to unveil the textuality and languages of dynamics and places (Low, 2016; Vergara, 2013). In this context, I state that the issue does not lie in the absence of voice, but rather in the necessity to develop methodologies capable of understanding the variety within the forms and languages of communication, one of which is the language to communicate the deep human relationship with land, spaces and territories.

Thus, the duty of anthropology lies not in "giving voice" from a vertical position, as that would imply establishing the conditions and rules of enunciation, but in generating the appropriate methodological and semantic tools to learn to listen to the languages of testimony that go beyond the words uttered by our interlocutors. Finally, it's worth noting that the anthropology of violence and conflict in countries like Colombia is particularly extensive and has detailed the horrors of war. In this regard, I chose to prioritize the realm of construction over destruction, to narrate those experience of displacement through place-making.

3. Analytical framework

Previous research

This research is nourished by three distinct but interconnected lines of inquiry, each contributing a robust set of literature that enhances our understanding of how spaces are constructed and experienced. i) Locality studies ii) Urban studies and urban anthropology and iii) studies of displacement and exile. In each subsection, a selection of relevant literature is discussed, showcasing how these themes collectively enrich our understanding of spatial construction and social dynamics in informal settlements as La Nueva Jerusalén.

Locality Studies: The dimensions of the places and spaces

In recent years, the scholarship within the field of (human) geography has witnessed a resurgence of interest in the concept of locality, spurred by Doreen Massey's and other human geographers' influential framework during the early 1990s (Paffenholz, 2015). This analytical framework delves into the multifaceted dimensions of understanding and analyzing localities which is particularly relevant within the context of urban margins as *the urban* represents a particular form of spatial organization (Björkdahl & Kappler, 2017).

Thus, Understanding the complexity of urban spaces requires a nuanced exploration of both their physical dimensions and social constructions. Although the realm of locality studies is brad, in this section I will provide a perspective of this bodie of literature from the urban context. Thus, the literature on locality studies provides valuable insights into how these spaces are appropriated, constructed, and often marginalized within the metropolis to explore the intricate interplay between the physical environment and the social dynamics that shape these spaces.

Firstly, Agurto Venegas (2002) offers an early exploration into how spontaneous urban settlements in Concepción come to embody collective spaces through the process of social and physical appropriation. His study sets a foundational understanding of how informal communities interact with and transform their physical environments to meet the communal needs. Furthermore, building on this notion of community-driven space creation, Silvonen (2022) examines the dynamic relationship between neighborhood

formation and community construction. His work in a self-built neighborhood questions the sequence of community and spatial development, suggesting that social ties can precede and dictate the physical layout of neighborhoods. This perspective challenges traditional notions of urban development and highlights the importance of social structures in shaping physical spaces.

As an important concept for this thesis, Lombard (2015) introduces a place-making approach to study informal settlements, emphasizing that these areas are not merely haphazard collections of dwellings but are actively constructed through the everyday practices of their inhabitants. This approach aligns with the concept of "ordinary places," where “the mundane activities of daily life contribute to the continuous creation and recreation of space” (Lombard, 2015, p. 45). In the same area, Schneekloth and Shibley (1995) articulates a broader philosophical framework with their work on place-making, which encompasses both the physical and social realms. They argue that the act of building communities is inherently a creative and integrative process, involving the deliberate shaping of our physical surroundings to reflect collective values and social relationships.

Urban Studies and Urban Anthropology: Understanding the Urban Experience

To gain an analytical gaze on the dynamics of La Nueva Jerusalén, an important body of literature on this research is Urban Studies. Urban studies is an interdisciplinary field within the social sciences that focuses on the study of cities, urban areas, and urbanization processes (Ocejo, 2013). It has been deeply rooted in the early work of Chicago University at the beginning of the twentieth century by marking the emergence of Sociology as a discipline and consolidating a remarkable group of urban ethnographers (ibid). Thus, Urban ethnography stands as a cornerstone of urban studies, offering profound insights into the lived and quotidian experiences of urban residents and the complex dynamics that shape urban spaces.

Rooted in deep immersion and participant observation, as part of the diverse world of urban studies, urban ethnography illuminates how individuals navigate their daily lives amidst the myriad forces that define the urban landscape (Ocejo, 2013). Moreover, urban ethnography underscores the importance of understanding how urban

inhabitants grapple with their surroundings and negotiates the impacts of global processes on local conditions (Ocejo,2013; Stuart 2021). Thus, in examining the evolution and dynamics of informal settlements, a rich body of qualitative research provides diverse perspectives on how these communities develop and function.

Among these studies, Santos (1977) offers a foundational analysis in "The Law of the Oppressed," which explores the construction and reproduction of legality in Pasargada. Santos's work delves into how laws are perceived and enacted by residents of informal settlements, providing a critical lens on the interplay between legal frameworks and marginalized communities. Parallel to Santos's exploration of legality, Connolly (2009) observes physical and social changes over time in Mexico City's "colonias populares." His study spans fifteen years, capturing the evolution from irregular settlements to more structured urban communities. This longitudinal perspective highlights the dynamic nature of urban development and the gradual integration of informal areas into the broader urban fabric, drawing some comparisons to the legal and social constructs discussed by Santos.

Further enriching this discussion, Torres Tovar (2009) compiles insights into the Colombian informal settlements in "Ciudad informal colombiana,"[Informal Colombian City] emphasizing the grassroots nature of neighborhood construction. This edited volume presents a narrative where communities are the primary architects of their space, echoing themes of agency and resilience seen in both Santos and Connolly's analyses but from a distinctly grassroots perspective. Lastly, Hernández, Kellett, and Allen (2010) in their collaborative work, "Rethinking the Informal City," challenge conventional perceptions and propose new frameworks for understanding informal settlements across Latin America. Their critical perspectives question established narratives and suggest a reevaluation of how informal settlements are integrated into urban planning and sociology, linking back to the legal and societal themes explored by Santos and expanding on the community-driven focus discussed by Torres Tovar.

Studies of displacement and exile

Finally, this thesis draws from literature of studies on the process of internal displacement and exile. The scholarly exploration of forced displacement and exile encompasses a rich

and diverse body of literature that investigates the profound social, psychological, and geographical transformations triggered by these experiences. This body of literature is embedded within the broader field of refugee and migration studies, yet it retains distinct focus on the particular dynamics of internal forced displacement. Scholars within this area study the ways in which displaced persons reconstruct their lives and identities in new settings, often under conditions of uncertainty and adversity (Dasgupta, 2016). The literature addresses various themes including the strategies for coping with loss and memory, the re-establishment of social ties in unfamiliar environments, and the negotiation of space and place in the context of migration. These studies also explore the political and economic factors driving displacement, the role of policy in shaping the experiences of displaced populations, and the social dynamics of integration, resistance, and community formation in host environments

Hence, Osorio (2002) and Oslender (2004) both delve into the nuanced geographies of terror and resistance in the context of forced displacement. While Osorio's exploration of "Territorialities in Suspension" emphasizes the liminal spaces inhabited by displaced populations, Oslender's analysis of des-territorialization in the Pacific region of Colombia underscores the construction of landscapes fraught with terror. Through their respective lenses, both authors highlight the ways in which displacement reshapes not only physical spaces but also social and psychological landscapes. Similarly, Muñoz Balcázar's examination of "Geographies of Terror, Geopolitics, and Forced Displacement" in Mexico resonates with the themes of violence and insecurity explored by Osorio and Oslender. By exposing the mechanisms of dispossession and deterritorialization at play in Mexico, Muñoz Balcázar's work complements the analyses of displacement dynamics in Colombia, illustrating the broader geopolitical forces driving forced migration across borders.

In a different vein, Castillejo (2016) exploration of "Poetics of the Other" offers a reflective meditation on the existential dimensions of displacement. While Castillejo work focuses on the internal exile experience in Colombia, its poetic sensibility and existential inquiries resonate with themes of solitude and loss explored by Osorio, Oslender, and Muñoz Balcázar. Through a blend of anthropological inquiry and literary expression, Castillejo Cuéllar invites readers to confront the existential realities of

displacement, where the boundaries between self and other blur amidst the ravages of conflict.Meanwhile, Riaño-Alcalá's (2008) study on "Trajectories and Scenarios of Fear" intersects with themes of memory and trauma explored by Osorio, Oslender, and Castillejo Cuéllar. Through an examination of memory narratives among refugees and internally displaced persons, Riaño-Alcalá uncovers the enduring impact of trauma on displaced communities, highlighting the ways in which fear reverberates across generations and shapes collective identities.

Lastly, De Marinis (2017) offers a unique perspective on the experiences of forced displacement among Triqui women, exploring themes of materiality and affect. While De Marinis's focus differs from the geopolitical analyses and existential inquiries of the other authors, her ethnographic study enriches our understanding of displacement by foregrounding the embodied experiences and emotional landscapes of displaced individuals. Together, these qualitative and ethnographic studies weave a complex tapestry of narratives, illuminating the multifaceted dimensions of forced displacement and internal exile

Theoretical approach

To establish a solid theoretical foundation on this thesis, it is crucial to define and interconnect a set of key concepts that are central to understanding the construction of space. This section outlines critical notions such as space, place, territory, and body, each contributing to the comprehension of how displaced populations engage in place-making activities and the social construction of informal settlements. These concepts are explored within the broader disciplinary contexts of urban studies, human geography, and cultural anthropology, offering a comprehensive framework that informs the interplay between material realities and social dynamics. This theoretical approach facilitates the comprehension of how individuals in NJ navigate and transform their environment through both individual actions and collective endeavors and how trajectories are deeply connected with human and embodied experiences.

The discourse on space is rich and varied, with scholars like Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, and others providing foundational insights. Henri Lefebvre (1991) posits that space is not a passive backdrop but a dynamic social product. His triadic

conceptualization — spatial practices, representations of space, and representational spaces — illustrates how space encompasses physical form, cognitive constructions, and lived experiences. This "illusion of transparency," as he terms it, masks the contradictions inherent in space production, emphasizing the active role of human agency in shaping spatial realities. Moreover, David Harvey (1973) expands on this by questioning not what space is, but how it is created and utilized in various human practices. He introduces the concepts of absolute, relative, and relational space, highlighting their constant interaction and the implications for understanding urban processes under capitalism. Harvey's framework reveals how space is continuously negotiated through human actions, encompassing both material conditions and the dialectics of human experiences.

On the other hand, the concept of place takes the discussion from the abstract to the more tangible and intimate aspects of human environments. As scholars like John Agnew (2005) have argued, place is where the human experience takes root, encompassing location (a site within space), locale (the setting for social relations), and sense of place (the emotional and cultural attachments people develop). This tripartite framework shows how place is both a physical location and a lived experience, imbued with meanings and values (ibidem). Furthermore, Melissa Lombard (2015) focus on place-making as a process that underlines the agency of communities in shaping their environments. Place-making in informal settlements, for instance, involves both the physical construction of spaces and the social creation of meaningful, culturally resonant places. This process highlights the dual nature of place as both created and experienced, underlining its significance as a source of identity and belonging. In her words:

> Place-making is seen here as the construction of place by a variety of different actors and means, which may be discursive and political, but also small-scale, spatial, social and cultural. As a way of understanding the socio-spatial nature of construction, it captures the messy, dynamic and contextualised processes that construct urban informal settlements, which may include the role of discourses in constructing specific marginalised places (Lombard, 2015 p. 86)

Thus, it is important to differentiate between space and place, Björkdahl & Kappler (2017) present an insightful theoretical framework to comprehend the multidimensional aspects of localities by drawing into this distintion. In their words, space could be defined

as “an immaterial, imaginary phenomenon and place as a material phenomenon. (…) On being inhabited, space is appropriated, given meaning and interpreted and thus transformed into place.” (Björkdahl & Kappler, 2017, p. 2)

Thus, the concept of place emerges as central to understanding socio-spatial dynamics. Places are not merely physical locations but sites imbued with social meaning and historical significance. At the heart of this theoretical framework lies the recognition of agency as the capacity of local actors to shape their environments and influence larger-scale processes (Massey, 1993; Björkdahl & Kappler, 2017). In this sense, the locality studies take into consideration the experiences of the individuals who inhabit such places. And this agency is particularly salient in urban peripheries, where marginalized communities often grapple with issues of violence, insecurity, and socio-economic exclusion

Moreover, territory extends the discussion of space and place into the realm of larger-scale socio-political dimensions. It is often described as a socially constructed space where political, economic, and social life unfolds (Peña, 2019). Territories are not just administrative units but lived realities, characterized by the relationships, histories, and cultural identities of those who inhabit them (ibidem). This view is particularly prevalent in Latin American discourses, where territory is seen not only in terms of political control but also as a space of community life and social struggle. Arturo Escobar (2014) emphasizes that territory should be understood as a vital space for the enactment of 'Buen Vivir' (good living), reflecting a deep interconnection between ecological systems and human communities. In his words:

> Territory is a collective space, composed of all the necessary and indispensable places where men and women, young and old, create and recreate their lives. It is a living space where ethnic, historical, and cultural survival is ensured. As such, the territory embodies the life project of a community[MT]. (Escobar, 2014, p. 88)

This concept aligns with indigenous and Afro-descendant communities' views in Latin America, who advocate for an understanding of territory that goes beyond mere land ownership to encompass broader socio-ecological relationships and a profound bond

between identity and land. Furthermore, territory is also an arena for semantic disputes between the perspectives of communities and other public and private actors. According to Peña (2019), in Colombia, the state's view of territory has helped to define the nation's margins, coupled with the perception of it as an untouched space available for extractivist exploitation. Consequently, “the concept of territory as a repository or storehouse for resources, infrastructure, people, and waste underpins extractivist policies, ecological degradation, governmental development plans, and the prevalent practices of spatial planning [MT]” (Peña, 2019, p.17). This perspective encourages us to consider how informal settlements might align with or diverge from the various interpretations and reproductions of territory as both a container and a margin.

Finally, the concept of body as explored in spatial terms brings another layer to our understanding of space, place, and territory. The body is both a producer and a product of space as it allow “the creation of space and place through trajectories, movements and actions. (Low, 2016 p. 95) Moreover, The notion of "cuerpo-territorio" [body-territory] connects the body directly with the territory, suggesting that personal and communal identities are shaped through physical and symbolic interactions with space. This perspective is particularly relevantt in discussions of how bodies navigate and define spaces, and how these spaces, in turn, shape bodily experiences and social identities.

The interplay between the body and space highlights how human experiences and the material environment are mutually constitutive. Bodies enact and are enacted upon by the spaces they inhabit, engaging in a continuous dialogue that shapes individual and collective realities (low, 2016). This reciprocal relationship underscores the importance of considering the body in any comprehensive analysis of spatial phenomena. Together, these concepts form a robust theoretical framework that underscores the complexity of understanding human environments. By integrating the material and the social, the individual and the collective, these perspectives offer a multi-dimensional view of how humans interact with, shape, and are shaped by their geographical and cultural contexts, especially in spaces that are in constant construction and transformation as La Nueva Jerusalén.

4. Context of violence and war: The landscape of a history of confrontations

Colombian armed conflict: A quick overview

Generalities

War and violence in Colombia have been integral parts of the country's history as a republic. Although armed conflict has been recorded since the creation of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia Guerrilla (FARC, known by its acronym in Spanish) in 1964, civil conflicts have been documented since the beginning of the 20th century and even earlier, such as the One Thousand Day War (1899-1903) (Molano Santos, 2017). The conflict has primarily had political causes, revolving around the control of land and political and social power. In the early 20th century, the rivalry between the Conservative and Liberal Parties in Colombia resulted in significant numbers of deaths, displacements, and confrontations throughout the country.

In 1948, the liberal leader and presidential candidate Jorge Eliecer Gaitán was killed by the Conservative Party in Bogotá, a historical event known as "El Bogotazo". This event marks the beginning of the period known as "The Violence" (*La Violencia)*, during which the guerrillas war conflict took shape. Consequently, in the midst of the disputes, influenced by the Cuban Revolution, the Communist Party, and the discontent of peasants or "campesinos" due to poverty and inequality conditions, new and relevant actors emerged: the leftist guerrillas. Although among these, FARC has been the most internationally renowned group, other leftist formations were also created, such as the National Liberation Army (ELN) (1964), Popular Liberation Army (EPL) (1967), and 19th of April Movement or M-19[3] (1970). As is stated in the compilatory report of the Colombian war made by the National Center of Historical Memory (CNMH, 2013), the historical bipartisan violence that shaped the beginning of the war, became subversive violence.

[3] It is worth mentioning that the current President of Colombia, Gustavo Petro (serving from 2022-2026), is a former member of this guerrilla group and was involved in the peace process with this group in 1991.

After this period, during the 1980s and 1990s, the influx of drug trafficking dynamics into the territory reconfigured the country's landscape, providing a new form of financing and added value to disputed lands. In this case, land became a spoil of war, used to expand crops for the production of illicit drugs. Furthermore, during this period, a strong alliance between landowners, the business sector, and the state forces gave rise to the paramilitary project, aimed at mitigating the impact of subversive violence in rural areas. Extortion, kidnappings, and control over daily life practices were common power tactics used by the guerrillas, which powerful sectors sought to confront. In 1995, the Regional Governor of Antioquia (a region in Colombia, with its capital in Medellín, widely affected by the war) signed a legal resolution allowing civilians to establish "Surveillance and Vigilance groups" equipped with weapons and communication devices exclusively for military use. These groups were known as "Las Convivir" (Riaño Alcalá, 2016).

Following the period of the 1990s, there have been various conflict dynamics wherein all involved actors have played an active role in the generation of violence. According to the National Center for Historical Memory (2017):

> It is a prolonged conflict, (...) It is a complex conflict, due to the large number of actors involved: the State, guerrilla groups, and paramilitaries. It is a discontinuous conflict, given the contrasts in the evolution of the armed actors. And it is a conflict with enormous regional differences that can be appreciated in the multiplicity of dynamics and modalities of the same (p.19).

Thus, three important factors must be taken into account for a broad understanding of the Colombian conflict:

- **The multiplicity of actors:** The war in Colombia has been shaped through a multiple configuration of actors who, depending on the historical context, may have been staunch enemies or formed alliances with each other. Particularly common are alliances among guerrilla groups and between paramilitary groups and state agents. This has greatly complicated the possibilities of ending the conflict given the diversity of interests and forms in which territory is distributed.

•**The role played by land and natural resources:** Since the beginning of the conflict, land has been the main cause of disputes among groups. Whether it is for territorial control as part of a military strategy, border areas to facilitate drug trafficking, or due to land productivity[4]. According to the National Center for Historical Memory (2013):

The appropriation, use, and possession of land motivated both the origin and persistence of the armed conflict. Research indicates the gradual convergence between the war and the agrarian crisis (violent takeovers, concentrated ownership of unexploited lands, inadequate land use, and failed processes of legalizing ownership). However, new problems were added to the old ones, revealing the dynamics introduced by drug trafficking, the exploitation of mining and energy resources, agro-industrial models, and criminal alliances (p. 27).

•**The weakness of the Colombian state and the lack of institutional trust:** As shown, the state has played a central role in the production and reproduction of violence since the beginning of the conflict. The state, particularly the armed and military forces, have been perpetrators of crimes against humanity, particularly in rural areas of the country. Additionally, the state has formed various alliances, primarily with paramilitary groups, resulting in massacres, assassinations, and human rights violations.

This has led to two outcomes. First, there is little trust in the institutions, which translates into the underutilization of institutional or democratic channels to resolve conflicts or disputes. Second, illegal armed groups have vast territorial control across the country, controlling not only the territory but also the ways of life of its inhabitants, their practices, education, beliefs, and morals. In other words, armed groups have replaced the most basic functions of a state, posing a significant challenge for the state to "decolonize" territories where the power of illegal armed groups is overwhelming.

[4] Colombia has almost 39.2 million productive hectares, that is, almost one-third of its territory (114 million hectares) (La República, 2022)

Finally, from 1985 until today, the victims of the Colombian armed conflict amount to 9,702,896[5],[6], of which more than two million have yet to receive any form of reparation from the State (RUV, 2024). Additionally, considering the country's history discussed on these pages, there is clear evidence of significant underreporting, bearing in mind that the conflict began almost 40 years before the governmental efforts to collect data. Thus, the struggle for the dignification of victims, the restoration of rights, and non-repetition are constant factors in the Colombian political landscape.

For this reason, the peace efforts by the State have been considered monumental, as they face numerous challenges to overcome towards civil society and the armed groups. In this regard, the policy, conceptual, and legal frameworks that emerged in this conjuncture need to be expanded to broaden the possibilities of achieving peace. One such conceptual tool has been territorial peace.

Forced displacement and informal urbanization: an inextricable nexus

A crucial aspect of the armed conflict landscape in Colombia, and a central focus of this thesis, is forced displacement. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), Colombia ranks fourth globally in terms of internal displacement due to conflict, following Ukraine, Syria, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The country currently records 8,649,955 internally displaced persons (IDPs), accounting for 89% of the total registered victims in Colombia. Displacement has become a normalized crime, spanning generations and dating back to the period of La Violencia. Despite its longstanding prevalence, authorities have largely overlooked the issue, either due to the technical challenges of addressing its magnitude or because, if not linked with other crimes and abuses, it is often not considered a victimizing event (CNMH, 2013). Thus, forced displacement "is a structural element that transversely characterizes Colombian history [MT]" (CNMH, 2015, p.13)

[5] To access the digital tool provided by the Victims Unit and the Unique Registry of Victims of the country go to: https://cifras.unidadvictimas.gov.co/Cifras/#!/infografia

[6] Data as of April 30, 2024.
It is relevant to highlight when I started writing this document, I used the data as of February 29, 2024, which was 9,659,204. This means that within 2 months, Colombia reported 43,692 new victims of armed conflict.

The majority of displaced individuals come from rural areas, reflecting the country's ongoing struggles with land access. Millions of hectares of land have been forcibly taken or abandoned, leading to widespread upheaval across rural communities. Nearly all Colombian municipalities (99%) have experienced population displacement (CNMH, 2015), underscoring the pervasive nature of the problem. Furthermore, the armed conflict in Colombia has been exploited by various groups to seize land and displace communities to take advantage of raw materials and land fertility.

This exploitation extends to illegal activities like drug trafficking and illegal mining, as well as legal ventures such as mining projects and large-scale farming. Consequently, to cause the exile, different forms of violence, including massacres and disappearances, have been used to coerce people into leaving their homes (ibidem). Thus, there are political and economic interests driving displacement and marginalized communities bear the brunt of this exploitation, facing displacement as a result of competing interests.

In adittion, beyond the economic and material loss of land and belongings, the human cost of displacement is immense, affecting communities socially and culturally:

> The displaced person is not only stripped of their land or belongings (…) but also deprived, by being cast out of their environment, of their life as they knew it. The movement that defines the displaced person is experienced as a definitive distancing from the space that constituted their identity (CNMH, 2015, p. 20)

As a result, the displacement journey itself is full with uncertainty, as individuals are uprooted from familiar surroundings and pushed to the margins of the city which has caused an imminent territorial reconfiguration all over the country and particularly in the biggest cities. Forced displacement in Colombia has not only affected individual lives but has also deeply transformed the national landscape and urbanization emerges as a significant consequence of forced displacement in Colombia. The influx of displaced populations into urban centers results in a forced reconfiguration of cities and the emergence of intra-urban displacement. It is evident that the exodus, characterized by its magnitude, systematicity, and duration, has become a defining factor in the country's territorial configuration processes leading to rapid and often unplanned urban growth.

This fact poses significant challenges for municipal authorities and urban planners, exacerbating existing socio-economic disparities because, among other factors, rural poor are the most likely to be affected by forced displacement (Torres Tovar, 2009).

Thus, in urban areas, displaced individuals must compete with the poorest residents of large cities and rely on existing networks to survive, making the probability of remaining poor very high (Castilo & Salazar, 2008). In this sence, the forced urbanization of Colombia has far-reaching consequences for both displaced populations and host communities. Municipalities lacking the fiscal capacity to meet the needs of incoming populations witness the proliferation of informal settlements on the peripheries (Torres Tovar, 2009).

These settlements exacerbate existing environmental, urban planning, and quality of life challenges. Additionally, considering that IDP networks possess a high incidence of unemployment, low educational levels, high informality, and limited resources, the challenges faced by displaced individuals are even higher. As will be exposed, urban peripheries and informal urbanization represent an ongoing encounter between the urban and rural worlds in Colombia, shaping a landscape extensive with practices and dynamics typical of rural areas—a phenomenon that has been widely overlooked, much like displacement itself.

Peace-making and the peace agreement of 2016

The peace agreement signed between the Colombian government and the FARC guerrilla group in 2016 marked a historic milestone in the country as a new attempt to stop war and conflict[7] (Bouvier, 2016). Emerging from years of negotiations, the accord aimed to bring an end to one of the longest-running conflicts in Latin America, which had left deep scars on Colombian society. At its core, the peace agreement sought to address the root causes of the conflict, including issues of land inequality, political exclusion, socioeconomic marginalization, and the illicit drug trade, among others. The comprehensive accord comprised six main pillars: integral rural reform, political participation, end of the conflict, illicit drugs, victims' rights, and implementation

[7] It was not the first attempt at a peace agreement in the country. From the decade of 1970, it had been eight attempts to sign a peace agreement with an illegal group (El Heraldo, 2016)

mechanisms. Each pillar addressed specific grievances and sought to lay the groundwork for a more inclusive and peaceful society.

Integral rural reform represented a pivotal aspect of the agreement, aiming to address longstanding grievances related to land ownership and rural development. By redistributing land to small-scale farmers and investing in agricultural infrastructure and rural education, the agreement aimed to alleviate poverty and promote social equity in Colombia's countryside. The rights of victims, who had suffered immensely throughout the conflict, were also a central concern. The agreement provided for truth, justice, and reparations for victims, aiming to bring closure and healing to those who had endured the horrors of war.

However, despite its ambitious goals and widespread support, the peace agreement faced significant challenges in its implementation. (Fernandez & Pachón, 2020) One major obstacle was political polarization within Colombia, with some factions opposing certain aspects of the accord and seeking to undermine its progress (BBC, 2016). Moreover, the resurgence of violence throughout the country, fueled by other armed groups and criminal organizations, posed a threat to the fragile peace process. (Fernandez & Pachón, 2020).

Although the peace agreement has faced significant challenges in its implementation, it has contributed to the establishment of institutions seeking justice, truth, and reparations in the country, such as the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), the Truth Commission, and the Missing Persons Search Unit. Furthermore, it has introduced particular concepts and forms of understanding peace, such as territorial peace seeking to integrate the margins territories to the peacebuilding process.

Medellín: A historically urban landscape of the war

Medellín located in the northwest of Colombia and standing as the second-largest city in the country compels a myriad of significant contrasts. Recently, it has been declared a special district of science, technology, and innovation (EAFIT, 2021), drawing attention from scholars, politicians, and journalists who emphasize the remarkable transformations it has undergone. In the 1990s, it was considered the most dangerous city in the world as

in 1991 it witnessed 6810 murders (CNMH,2017), now the picture has changed considerably as the last year the city presented 375 murders (El Colombiano, 2023).

However, despite the shifting dynamics of the city, it still retains memories of its conflicted and violent past. I remember my first days in Medellín. Before heading to the neighborhood where I planned to conduct my fieldwork, I stayed at a hotel in a central and tourist area. The hotel had an immense rooftop on the 8th floor, so I went there to observe the landscape. One particular mountain caught my attention because it lacked vegetation, standing in stark contrast to the greenish hills surrounding it. I turned to one of the hotel workers who was nearby and asked, 'What happened to that mountain?' He responded with a profound naturalness, “Oh, that one you mean? That's a mass grave.”

He was referring to 'La Escombrera,' a mountain in Comuna 13 nearby, where paramilitary groups hide and bury the bodies of their victims. It is considered the largest mass grave in Latin America, and the families of the disappeared continue to demand justice (Pérez Torres, 2015). Unfortunately, this is not an isolated case. The city is deeply marked by its history of violence, which dates back to the 1960s and extends beyond its borders. Furthermore, the entire region where Medellín is located and stands as its capital has been profoundly affected by war and conflict; Antioquia is the most affected state in the whole country as it gathers 20% of the victims nationwide (RUV, 2024). As a result, the city has become a haven for a diverse range of victims of armed conflict and Colombians seeking to improve their living conditions (Pérez Fonseca, 2018).

From the early 20th century, Medellín has been a hub of industrial development, attracting thousands of migrants seeking new opportunities. As Pérez Fonseca (2018) writes, “The city's growth was propelled by informal population processes, driven by the allure of progress and employment prospects” (p 149). However, the 1940s saw a surge in armed conflict in rural areas, leading to displacement and accelerated urbanization, with cities becoming shelters for those seeking refuge. From then on, Medellín has continuously expanded under the logic of war, migration, and urban colonization.

The report: *Medellín: Memories of an Urban War* (CNMH, 2017) identifies that the history of conflict in Medellín can be segmented into four distinct periods. The first, covering from 1965 to 1981, laid the foundation for the rising armed conflict in the city

when glimpses of the national violence had some influence in the city. The second, from 1982 to 1994, witnessed the rise of violence and terrorism by the Medellín Cartel, led by Pablo Escobar, alongside political violence with significant complicity from state institutions, known as the "Dirty War" (*La Guerra Sucia*).

The third period, between 1995 and 2005, saw the expansion of paramilitary groups and rural guerrillas across Colombia and Antioquia, leading the department to become the country's main battleground. Medellín and its metropolitan area became the geographical and logistical epicenter of this conflict, becoming targets in the military struggle between paramilitary organizations (some of which were heavily influenced by narcotraffickers) and criminal bands operating on the poor neighborhood in the slopes of the city. This is supported by the testimony of Arturo[8], a former criminal gang member who is now working with a religious organization that currently works with youth in La Nueva Jerusalén. He states:

> *Back in 1998, there was a lot of gang confrontation here in the city because the Medellín cartel had fallen. There were a bunch of armed youngsters left without a leader, living very expensive lifestyles. There was no longer any way to support them because there were no more bosses to pay for jobs. Medellín became chaotic because everyone had to fend for themselves and arm themselves. The policy was: steal wherever you can, except in the neighborhood. So, it became a confrontation because everyone wanted to defend their piece of the neighborhood, but they also wanted to rob from others. (...) So, these militia groups end up so corrupted that they end up joining the criminal gangs. And then the paramilitary project arrives here in Medellín, in the city, right? We're talking about 2005 now. The paramilitary project arrives in the city, buys up some sectors, negotiates with militia leaders, negotiates with gang leaders, and tries to unite the three biggest gangs that were here in Medellín.*

The last period identified in this report occurred between 2006 and 2014. During this time, there was increased social rejection of violence and warfare. However, the city witnessed the restructuring of criminal structures and became the epicenter for the reintegration of demobilized paramilitaries. This was accompanied by complex processes of rearmament and new expressions of violence, such as the targeting of leaders, especially young individuals involved in artistic and cultural resistance movements, the

[8] The names of all individuals involved in the research have been modified to preserve their identity and security.

exacerbation of invisible territorial boundaries, and increasingly visible violence against women.

Currently, criminal gangs in Medellín have ceased confrontational violence and entered into a tacit agreement or 'cold war,' whereby they have agreed to evenly divide the city. This arrangement implies that each group has a structured control over neighborhoods, known as 'combos.' These groups oversee the economy, daily practices, access to rights, and even conflict resolution within their designated areas. One of these gangs controls life in La Nueva Jerusalén, shaping both its physical environment (places) and social landscape (spaces).

Chapter 1.

Molding a space: Practices, tales and landscapes of a self-built settlement

I have never before frequented or inhabited a place where the founders, builders, and inhabitants were the same individuals. La Nueva Jerusalén is a place of living history that grows day by day before the eyes of those who walk its stone alleyways. I still remember the day I arrived at that mountain. I took a cabin from the hotel I was staying very close to the "coolest neighborhood in the world"9 and I felt how slowly I was leaving the flat part of Medellín to start a very steep ascent. At some point, it became very clear how the landscape changed and it became more informally constructed and with a pretty vibrant atmosphere. Likewise, the streets were filled with people, noise, street vendors and music out loud in any commercial store. I felt in a comfort zone because these places are quite familiar to me as they are constitutive landscapes of almost every Colombian city.

I arranged to meet with Padre Gonzalo, one of the priests who lived in the neighborhood and who pick me up that first day. He was waiting for me just next to a long line of autorickshaws[10] or as they are known in Medellín: mouse-motorbikes (*Moto-ratón*). We were at París neighborhood, a very well-known area of Bello with a long history of gang violence and insecurity issues. I was convinced that, since that neighborhood was the entrance of La Nueva Jerusalén, it would be pretty similar to what I was observing at that moment. But I was definitely wrong. "Angie, welcome to Medellín!", he said after giving me a big hug. He was accompanied by Gloria, a woman

[9] The popular social media group focused on tourism in diverse cities of the world TimeOut published its renowned yearly list of the coolest neighborhoods in the world, which has as its 2023 winner Laureles neighborhood located in the mid-western side of Medellín. Currently, Medellín is experiencing a rapid wave of foreign tourism and gentrification that is causing multiple problems in the city. To further explore this topic go to: https://www.vice.com/en/article/m7bgv8/digital-nomads-work-from-home-gentrification

[10] The autorickshaw, also known as Tuk-Tuk, is a compact three-wheeled vehicle primarily used for short-distance transportation within cities and towns. This vehicle usually does not have windows or doors, and it is designed to carry up to three passengers at the back and one driver in the front. The autorickshaw features an overhead canopy for protection from the sun and rain and is powered by a small engine.

who would later become central to my fieldwork experience. She was already sitting in the autorickshaw while we put my luggage on our lap. We could barely squeeze inside the little cabin.

After a couple of strange engine noises, the vehicle started running towards our destination. We drove two blocks through a narrow street, and we came across a stream, which is named 'La loca (crazy woman) Stream'. We crossed La Loca Stream, with its flowing water and rocky terrain, and suddenly everything changed in front of my eyes. It was as if I had arrived in a new town, even though we had only crossed two blocks and the stream. There was no more pavement on the road, and not as many brick houses as before. Instead, a bunch of wooden constructions stood in front of us and despite it was still noise and bustle as in París, the atmosphere was distinct. Crossing amidst other autorickshaws and heavy-duty vehicles and with no division between cars and pedestrians, I felt a sense of departure from the urban life I had inhabited. Thus, without a doubt, I knew I had arrived in La Nueva Jerusalén, my home for the next month.

Considering the neighborhood's unique dynamics shaped by its terrain, territory, and location, this chapter aims to provide a detailed description of La Nueva Jerusalén from its material reality and the symbiotic relationship between its inhabitants and the space they occupy. Drawing upon the concept of "the social production of space and nature" and "the social development of the built environment" (Low, 2017), I delve into the challenges resulting from the physical dimension of the space and the dialogical construction between bodies and spaces.

This exploration illuminates how the ongoing construction and evolution of the neighborhood are integral, daily processes that contribute to its uniqueness and constant resilience. The chapter consists of five sections that illustrate the ongoing relationship between territory-space production and social practices. These sections are inserted in three forms of engagement with the space: i) the production of space ii) resilience and adaptation, and iii) exercise of control and sovereignty.

1.1. Space production

"When I arrived, there was nothing": The settlement that came to life

La Nueva Jerusalén is a distinctive area spanning over 65 hectares (650,000 square meters) and is home to almost 40,000 people. It is a common topic among the population to discuss how the neighborhood's landscape has evolved over the years, transitioning from barely populated land to the densely inhabited locality it is today (See Figure 1.). It is possible to suggest that these changes and rapid expansion are a response to the cyclical nature of the armed conflict, violence-forced displacement, and urban colonization (Sánchez, 2021), which entail an endless cycle of dispossession and occupation of unowned land.

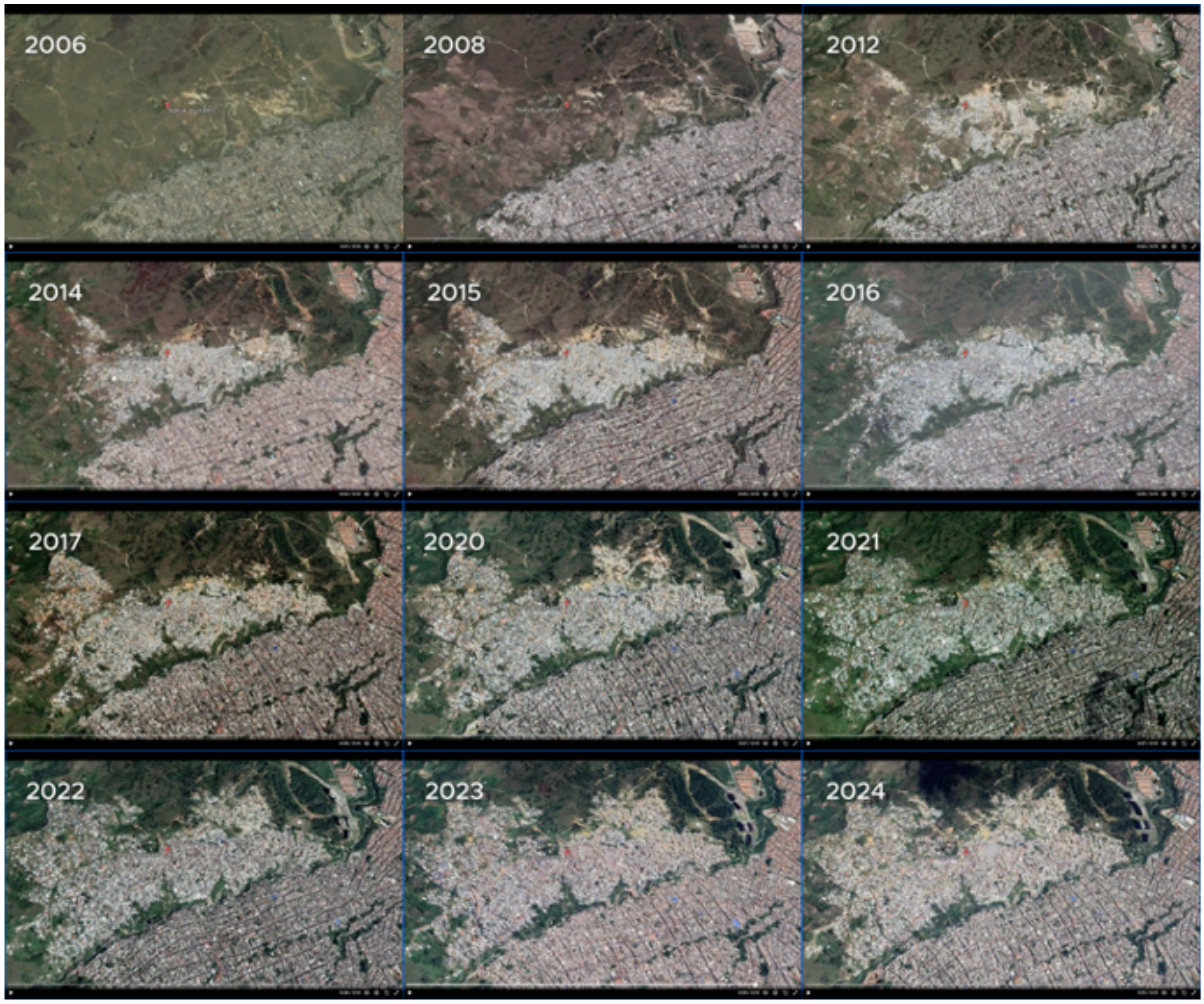

Figure 1. Evolution of La Nueva Jerusalén. Satellite Images. Collected by: El Armadillo Media

The property where is situated the neighborhood nowadays belonged to Mr. Jesús Antonio Correa Restrepo, a front man for drug trafficking[11] apprehended by the authorities (Tabares, 2023). Consequently, this property came under the control of Medellín, despite falling within the jurisdiction of the municipality of Bello. Other neighboring areas that now make up the neighborhood were owned by coffee growers, who, during the neighborhood's expansion, began giving away parcels of land to those who arrived there.

The majority of the current residents are displaced people who arrived mainly from all over Antioquia Department and the Caribbean Coast region[12], under vulnerable conditions, leaving everything behind. Thus, the establishment of the neighborhood stemmed from a physical necessity to settle and inhabit a place after being deprived of their homes and livelihoods. Marcela, a woman that used to go to the Parish house once shared her story with me during a coffee break:

> *I arrived at Los Sauces [the adjoining neighborhood], not knowing where to stay or what to do; suddenly, a man told me, 'look over there, the mountain, go and cross the stream and build a shack. No one will notice.' So I did. I went with my children, built a shack, and started planting and a new life here".*

Stories like Marcela's are quite common and represent the spontaneous origins of the neighborhood. In fact, some residents had to construct their shacks under the cover of night, fearing detection by authorities' helicopters that regularly patrol the area. They were aware that the government would eventually notice the informal construction in the area; however, they hoped to evade detection until it became too difficult to demolish.

Additionally, the terrain and its geographical conditions present significant challenges. Situated within the Aburrá Valley where Medellín is placed, La Nueva Jerusalén lies amidst the Andes Mountain Range. This means that upon the community's arrival, there was hardly any flat land available on this slope. As José, a community leader and dedicated parish helper, once recounted: "You see that flat area where the church stands? Well, we cleared that space using nothing but our picks and shovels, working day

[11] These individuals are often used as proxies or fronts to disguise the true ownership of narco properties or properties and assets associated with drug trafficking activities.
[12] These areas have been widely affected by displacement and land dispossession due to activities related to extractivism, illegal mining, and livestock farming, and the presence of paramilitary groups.

and night." Now the neighborhood has three soccer fields also constructed in the same conditions.

Photo 1. Main road and Bombillo Rojo sector. Taken by the author.

Furthermore, despite the now present rocky terrain, when the first settlers arrived, this was not the case and the mountain soil easily turned into a muddy area. Residents have utilized blasted rocks found during construction to stabilize the ground, allowing for the creation of roads and pathways. Nevertheless, during rainy seasons, it remains a challenging area to navigate for both people and vehicles. In fact, tuk-tuks are unable to move there and individuals must rely on the only two 4x4 trucks available in the neighborhood for transportation. Yolanda's testimony clearly represents the prior landscape of the mountain and the first dwellers' conditions:

> *When I arrived, there were very few houses, and the few that existed were made of wood because building with materials wasn't possible, obviously, as everything was just starting out, you see. So, they were just a few wooden ones, but there were some houses that you'd look at and think, 'Oh my, what is this?' I mean, people would take four sticks and some plastic, wrap the sticks in plastic for the roof, and put their belongings in there, and that was it. That's how it was for many families, for many. The road was there, but it wasn't like it is now; it was mud, it was a swamp. When I arrived, it was during a heavy rainy season, and it was all mud. Let me tell you, you'd take a step and sink up to your knee. It was tough, it was something else. And it was the same little entrance, but not like it is now; there were just some houses here and there, the rest was all empty lots. And it was much greener because of those empty lots. There were some areas where they had banana and coffee plantations, lots and lots of areas.*

Thus, the narratives shared by the inhabitants shed light on a sense of primary nothingness, highlighting the process of "creation of space through trajectories, movements and actions" (Low, 2017, p. 95) which configured the entailing process of appropriation and molding of the space. Inhabiting a self-built environment fosters

distinct forms of belonging and appropriation, shaping unique modes of socialization within the community (Lombrad, 2015). The collective activities and prevailing political context have significantly influenced both the physical landscape and social dynamics of La Nueva Jerusalén.

The collective building of the space

An important aspect to consider is that establishing a neighborhood involves more than just constructing individual houses; it also entails ensuring access to essential services for all residents. In the case of La Nueva Jerusalén, the original landowners allocated plots to displaced individuals arriving in the area with the stipulation that they participate in communal work sessions, known locally as *convites* or contribute to collective efforts aimed at providing services or planning infrastructure, such as roadways. As is stated by Lefebvre in 1967: "The right to the city is a common right rather than individual, as this transformation inevitably depends on the exercise of collective power to reshape urbanization processes" (p.23).

This highlights how social interaction among residents serves not only as a source of benefits and well-being for newcomers but also as a fundamental necessity for the establishment and cohesion of the neighborhood itself. As Silvonen (2022) asserts, within the framework of informal settlement construction, social relations are formed not only through social contact but also through the connection with the space, thereby creating a dual sense of belonging, both to the community and to the constructed environment.

Furthermore, another significant aspect involves the networks of solidarity that are formed as relationships are built based on a common bond, that is, displacement. While collective construction around the discourse of armed conflict in the neighborhood is far from being addressed in daily life, the shared experiences of dispossession and rural life ensure mutual assistance within the community, particularly during its construction phase. Yolanda shared with me how her house was going to be demolished by armed actors in the neighborhood, so she decided to spend the first night in her unfinished house and was greatly assisted by her -then- upcoming neighbors:

> *So, when they saw, I was going to stay, right away a neighbor said, "Oh, señora. Yolanda, are you staying?" And I said, "Yes." "Oh, Señora Yolanda, let me lend*

> *you a cardboard to fix the bed." Then another neighbor said, "Señora Yolanda, let me lend you this blanket, let me lend you this sheet." And that's how we set up our bed. Later, I had some leftover food that I had brought, and another neighbor said, "Look, Yolanda, if you're going to cook, if you're going to warm up anything, whatever it is, come to our house, we'll lend you the stove. If you're going to bathe, if you need water, whatever it is, come here, we'll lend you." I mean, the neighbors right there responded.*

An important aspect of the process of building the space is the intricacies of social organization. At some extent, social interaction was not enough to make the neighborhood come to life but the establishment of responsibilities and routines. Thus, small committees were established to manage the basic services of the neighborhood: water, sewage, and electricity. Water was sourced from various places: part of it was obtained by tapping into the water pipe of the Public Enterprises of Medellín (EPM), which oversees the city's services, in the Los Sauces neighborhood, while the rest came from the surrounding farms and natural water sources located uphill. This led to the formation of the first group of plumbers, who continue to manage the water supply to this day.

Regarding sewage, as described by Padre Gonzalo: "They were collected in makeshift pipes. For this purpose, a group of neighbors would gather, purchase the pipes, and proceed with their installation, covering as much ground as the budget and participation allowed." Moreover, electricity posed a significant risk, yet individuals with some experience in the matter made informal connections with other neighborhoods in the area. María describes this process in the interview:

> *They do this by adding wires to París and making direct connections to the houses, but there are no regulators. The electricity flows directly into the houses, resulting in electric shocks. Once, one of these shocks damaged my washing machine. (...) When the EPM technicians came to install the electricity, they couldn't understand why this neighborhood hadn't burned down.*

Thus, La Nueva Jerusalén stands as a space of solidarity and the formation of social relationships, serving as the foundation for both physical construction and social cohesion. Interestingly, within this urban geographical space, something remarkable occurs as it reshapes a foundational notion of city life. Traditionally, the city has been viewed as a place where neighborhood networks break down, and anonymity and strangeness become intrinsic to urban life. As Simmel argued at the beginning of the 20th

century: The inner side of this external reserve is not only indifference (…) it is a slight aversion, a mutual strangeness and repulsion which, in a close contact which has arisen any way whatever, can break out into hatred and conflict.

However, the very need to construct habitable materiality in the space implies distinct forms of socialization that are not inherent to urban areas, highlighting the unique nature of informal settlements. As Silvonen (2022) states: “Informal settlements that are formed through residents’ collaborations to improve local infrastructure are an interesting setting for the consideration of the relation between neighborhood and community because of the intertwined nature of social and spatial processes (p. 65). This is highly relevant considering that the residents of Nueva Jerusalén are victims of the armed conflict, a fact that undoubtedly fractures and disrupts social relationships. Thus, the new scenarios of integration represent an opportunity for reparation and resocialization.

1.2. Resilience and adaptation

The outcomes of an informal construction

From all these informal and artisanal construction techniques, today the neighborhood resembles a labyrinthine network of houses where each home reflects the unique construction logic and necessities of its builders, creating a landscape of multiple nuances and contrasts. Uniformity is not a quality possessed by the neighborhood; for this reason, mental and embodied memory becomes the most important element for navigating it. Each street has its own logic, with alleyways leading to either an exit or circling back to the starting point. Some paths do not even resemble passageways but rather pastures or vacant lots, and this heterogeneity ultimately becomes distinctive conventions of each area: The Pink House, Red Light, The Windows, The Pool, are key points for orientation.

Gloria, the woman who was with Padre Gonzalo on my arrival, accompanied me on all my walks during the first week in the neighborhood, leading me through the streets and alleys she knows by heart while smoking a cigarette and simultaneously climbing the steep paths of the neighborhood, a combination I never quite understood: "You're too slow," "Don't touch the wires, they're dangerous," "Watch out for that, it's sewage," she

would say with a hint of impatience, concern, and care that I came to appreciate in her particular tone of voice and *paisa*[13] accent.

This artisanal and informal construction carries serious problems for its residents, such as skin and stomach issues due to the poor quality of water, constant damage to sewage systems resulting in the neighborhood being flooded with an unbearable and overwhelming odor, and the moderate to severe damage that houses constantly face. "That's why you need a man in this neighborhood," Doña Jimena told me; —a woman who came from an affluent family in Bello but fled her husband due to the intense abuse and mistreatment she was bearing. The neighborhood became her refuge despite the daily hardships she faces.— "Yes, *mija*[14], here you need a man to help with everything, whether it's fixing a board, replacing a tile, or adjusting a door... that's why I spend most of my time at Cristina's and her husband's, how else would I manage? They help me." Thus, this is how it is evident how social processes are embedded in spatial processes (Low, 2017).

Thus, the instability of the neighborhood's service systems created a situation I did not expect to deal with and with no doubt was one of my "raw moments" (Luhrmann, 2010) while inhabiting NJ. One day, upon waking up, I heard brooms inside the Parish house, where I was staying at. My room was on the ground floor, so the sounds became clearer as I woke up, but it was 7 in the morning, an unusual time for cleaning chores in the house, so, without paying much attention, I decided to get up, put on my shoes, and go to the kitchen for water as I usually did in the mornings. Upon opening the door, my sense of smell instantly detected what was happening: the house was completely flooded with sewage, and Padre Leonardo, with the help of some men from the neighborhood who were supposed to pick up some materials, was trying to clean up the mess.

I had to contain the nausea caused by the odor that began to penetrate my entire olfactory system. Padre Leonardo had to leave, so I had no choice but to turn back to my

[13] *Paisa* is a colloquial term used to refer to people from the region where Medellín is located. It's derived from the word "Paisano," which means "countryman" or "fellow countryman" and can also be used as an adjective to describe anything related to the *Paisa* culture, including their customs, traditions, food, and accent.

[14] In some countries of Latin America, "*mija*" is a widely used expression, especially between middle-aged and old women. It is a contraction of "mi hija," which translates to "my daughter", and it is commonly employed informally among friends, family members, or acquaintances to express closeness, and familiarity.

room, put on my boots, and head to the kitchen. The smell permeating the entire house did not even allow me to drink water, so I decided to go directly for a broom and start cleaning and trying to remove all the water there. "Good morning, Angie!" Padre said with a hint of sarcasm in his voice, "we woke up flooded." He told me that this was like "a chronicle of a death foretold" (using Gabriel García Márquez's book as reference) because it was known that the sewage box of the house was on the verge of capacity since in its early days, 40 families that were building right on the land above the parish needed a connection to anchor the sewage outlet of their homes.

That day, after Padre Leonardo left, I spent three hours sweeping the house with the help of one of the neighbors: "You sweep with the broom, and I'll help with the garden hose" he said. A few days later, we found out that a truck had broken an artisanal pipe a few blocks away, causing sewage to flow freely, inundating the environment with its nauseating odor. Consequently, a resident near the scene decided to find a stone large enough to block the sewage outlet. However, she did not inform anyone and caused the Parish house sewage box to overflow. After that incident, Padre Leonardo, along with *Los muchachos* called for an emergency meeting on the block to try to address the problem.

It was the first time I thought thoroughly about the sanitation systems I have been using all my life, things that have never been a problem or something I have had to deal with, which at that moment felt like a privilege that I had never been aware of. Later that day, Gloria came to the house and explained that it was quite usual for residents who live near the artisanal pipes. "Don't worry," she told me. "Living in this neighborhood is like being in a relationship with a person. There are good things and bad things, and there's nothing you can do about the bad ones except learn to deal with them and take advantage of the good ones." Her words made me consider how space comes to life and is understood more as an entity that, "through a constant exercise of interventions and appropriation, starts to animate within the social imaginary (…) and is endowed with agency and power" (Ocejo, 2019, p. 24). Thus, the neighborhood is seen as a living space that, although built by the residents themselves, is far from being dependent on their control and action.

A Space for Surviving Precarity: The Neighborhood as Both a Product and Witness of Poverty

One of the most significant factors shaping the neighborhood's formation as a space, and the structures within it, is the material conditions of existence, particularly tied to the income levels and poverty status of its residents. In this context, it is crucial to acknowledge the forced displacement experienced by the majority of residents. Unlike other forms of migration, this displacement was neither planned nor desired. As noted by Oruc (2015), "this type of rural-urban migration was not a rational decision driven by economic motives" (p. 47). Such displacement significantly impacted families' economic stability, especially considering their vulnerability upon arrival. Heightened by the fact that many residents relied on farming and land cultivation for their livelihoods, the loss of land exacerbated their economic challenges.

In this context, residents of the neighborhood live in precarious conditions of poverty, with many lacking formal employment and thus having to venture out daily to procure sustenance for the next 24 hours. Typically, women undertake domestic cleaning work in households outside the neighborhood, while men engage in construction, maintenance, surveillance, and warehousing tasks. However, there are individuals who do not have a specific occupation or stable employment: Some women stand with their children at supermarket entrances on Paris Street, soliciting money from strangers, while others board buses to sell sweets and snacks, and some sell food or groceries within the neighborhood itself, which boasts numerous commercial establishments of all kinds. Thus, the "wealthy" within the neighborhood are those with a fixed monthly income, either under informal conditions (often less than the minimum wage) or formal employment, earning the legal minimum wage in Colombia, which stands at around 330 USD per month, representing the upper-income limit in the neighborhood.

Consequently, the neighborhood bears witness to these precarious conditions of poverty, evident in the multitude of unfinished houses that pervade the area. As Padre Gonzalo remarked, "Here, people begin to build, but they do not know when they will finish." This is because acquiring materials entails additional expenses beyond those used to cover daily basic needs. This description aligns with Niño Murcia's (2023) portrayal of "Handmade Bogotá": "We see unfinished houses awaiting the next slab; columns from

which protrude, like metallic hairs, rods to support the next floor, representing a better future. There are no two identical houses, but they all resemble each other." (p. 20).

Thus, the neighborhood stands in a constant contrast of unfinished and completed houses scattered throughout. In fact, the parish has had to employ this same method to carry out its activities and buildings. Pondering the size of the neighborhood, they designated four lots as chapels for parishioners to engage in parish activities. However, budget constraints prevent the completion of these constructions, so these semi-built spaces begin to be utilized despite being unfinished.

Photo 2. Los Pinos Chapel after the Mass' beginning. Taken by the author.

Furthermore, the neighborhood has fostered its own commercial dynamic, with hardware stores abound and grocery stores sporting a distinctive aesthetic that aligns with the economic reality of the residents: everything can be bought individually or in tiny portions. For instance, a portion of butter, a chocolate bar, eggs, powdered milk, instant coffee for just one cup, small cans of tuna, and small packages of rice and beans, widely consumed staple foods. Even toiletries and pills can be bought individually: towels, sanitary napkins, condoms, or paracetamol. This phenomenon creates a unique aesthetic for the neighborhood stores, all crowded with tiny products to their full capacity.

Photo 3. Mattress metal springs as a security fence Taken by the author.

The reuse of unconventional elements for housing construction is also prevalent. For example, there are businesses dedicated to collecting old mattresses in the neighborhood and city, which are dismantled to obtain the internal spring structure used as security grilles in homes. Likewise, billboards and advertising fabrics serve as roofs or walls for many residences. For instance, Gloria used the internal part of a Sony speaker as a doorstop in her home. Thus, the landscape is enriched with multiple elements and artifacts serving unexpected or imagined functions.

1.3. Control and Sovereignty

Territorial and Biopolitical Control in the Neighborhood: "Los Muchachos" as Agents and Pillars of Surveillance

One of the most important aspects for understanding the dynamics of the neighborhood is the control exerted by "*los muchachos*" who play a fundamental role in the neighborhood's daily life. In fact, they have been central since the neighborhood's inception. Shortly after the invasion of the mountain began, one of the criminal gangs in the area, "*La Oficina del Doce*" [The Doce Neighborhood Office][15] (Isaza, 2024), arrived to expel the original inhabitants who were giving away plots to displaced people in order to start dividing the area and selling it by the meter, an activity known as illegal land division. This is recounted by Padre Gonzalo in his historical account:

> *Los Muchachos* appeared, exerting sovereignty and dominion over the nascent community. The landowners stopped giving away and selling, and the new "owners" continued with this task, eventually dividing up even the lands of the credentialed farmers and others who had considerable coffee cultivation areas. Thus began their intervention in the community up to the present day. (Tabares, 2023, p. 3)

What Padre Gonzalo calls "intervention" involves a series of dynamics and exercises of power inscribed in the neighborhood's landscape itself, through the control of the population's daily life and the silent presence of the members of the gang, which has serious implications in terms of discipline and behavior for the neighborhood's

[15] It is common for organized crime gangs in Medellín to be referred to as 'offices' of the municipality or sector in which they are located or originated. The Envigado Office is the largest and has the most extensive reach within the city.

inhabitants. Thus, we can speak of an "embodied space" as the location where human experience, consciousness, and political subjectivity take on material and spatial form (Low, 2017, p. 95). In the case of *los muchachos*, it functions on a dual level: firstly, the physical presence of *los muchachos* in the neighborhood carries particular symbolic meanings of control and behavior for the population, thus being "a human structure that moves within the symbolic connotations of its materiality" (Stoller, 2022). Secondly, their presence inscribes "bodily action, movements, and intentions" (ibid) onto the bodies of the inhabitants, further integrating the physical and social landscape of the neighborhood.

Los muchachos move freely around the neighborhood and do not wear a uniform like guerrilla or paramilitary groups in rural areas of the country. However, they are recognizable because they always have communication radios protruding from their pockets that leads to an earpiece in their ears. In some cases, their weapon is also visible in their pockets. They are all men between the ages of 20 and 30, patrolling the neighborhood on motorcycles or staying at strategic points such as the four entrances or stalls along the main road. They maintain order in the neighborhood and in case of any inconvenience, people turn to them for help in resolving conflicts or disputes. They also impose rules such as not consuming drugs inside the houses in front of children, not hitting one's mother, and particularly, not stealing. This was portrayed by Doña María:

> *You see, when something happens, the normal thing here is to call los muchachos, who are the ones who take care of this. If you bring someone you know has been a criminal, who likes to steal, who likes to do those things, if those people find out, they'll kick them out and kick you, a delinquent, out of your shack. So, it's better not to give anyone shelter and stay quiet.*

This modus operandi of social control is well known in the dynamics of the Colombian armed conflict since armed groups, with the need to control the territory, also exert control over the population to ensure this objective through techniques of persuasion, coercion, or a combination of both (CDLV, 2022; CNMH, 2013; Sánchez, 2021). Control has encompassed various dimensions of social life, including everyday behavioral norms, mobility inside and outside the territory, identities, and political organization. Thus, the compilation report of the Truth Commission emphasizes that:

> In different phases of the armed conflict and depending on the type of presence of armed groups in the territories, the impacts of these dynamics have caused not only numerous human rights violations and breaches of International Humanitarian Law but also imposed the obligation on the civilian population to adhere to models of social, political, and economic order [MT]. (CDLV, 2022, p. 644)

On a couple of occasions when I was walking with Gloria through the neighborhood, I witnessed some of their "interventions" where they mediated disputes between neighbors and/or couples. The first time I passed by, I felt curious about the situation, but Gloria quickly warned me: "Don't look! Do you want to get into trouble?" So I kept walking, pretending nothing had happened, yet the tension in the air was more than noticeable.

In the case of NJ, in addition to social rules, the organized crime groups have distributed the area for the last 14 years, could be said that have also been involved in the design of the neighborhood. Since they are the ones who distribute psychoactive substances in the neighborhood, they have allocated distribution areas known as "pots" and consumption areas where consuming substances is allowed.

Moreover, certain constructions function as surveillance houses: they are quite small, about 1 or 2 square meters, distinguishable for being more rudimentary than the rest of the houses and made of wooden boards. Additionally, they have a small slit that allows someone to peek out and see what is happening around the neighborhood. Thus, no one in the neighborhood doubts the fact of being watched and controlled 24 hours a day; however, for most of the residents who come from rural areas of the country, this fact is not new, in fact, it only presents slight and better changes compared to the territorial control they have experienced in their places of origin.

The dynamics of control and surveillance exercised by *los muchachos* play a pivotal role in shaping the daily lives of neighborhood residents, influencing everything from social interactions to behavioral norms. This modus operandi of social control mirrors patterns observed in Colombia's broader conflict context, where armed groups exert authority over civilian populations to maintain territorial dominance. However, it is crucial to contextualize these dynamics within the rural backgrounds of the inhabitants,

as their perceptions and responses to such control mechanisms are often shaped by their prior experiences and cultural heritage. Understanding the interplay between urban dynamics and rural origins deepens our comprehension of the neighborhood's social fabric and underscores the need for nuanced approaches to community engagement and development.´

Chapter II.

Built by rural subjects, inhabited by urban dwellers: Intersections, trajectories and age difference in the construction of space

Throughout my fieldwork, I often perceived the neighborhood as a diverse collection of experiences and landscapes that, despite their variety, seemed to form a cohesive whole. Each morning the neighborhood fluctuates between the rural tranquility and the urban routine of its inhabitants. I used to wake up very early as the day at the Parish house starts at 6 am when the Priest and the seminarists begin the daily prayer session. At that time of the day, the sun began to rise over the horizon and the sound of the morning roosters flooded the space harmonizing the path of multiple residents who were on their way to work. They were guards or service staff, kids who were with their moms going to school and all the rest of the inhabitants that have any productive activity "in the city", as many of them call Medellín. "But are not we in the city also"? I usually asked: "Yeah, but… it's just different, we are special". Carlos, an electrician and longtime resident once answered me. Thus, I kept confirming this uniqueness every morning as I listened to the roosters crowing, while the light gradually unveiled the astonishing landscape of the Aburrá Valley, with the urban backdrop of Medellín, Colombia's second-largest city, as the background.

The construction of space in the neighborhood, as well as its practices and activities, are imbued with rural practices that came from the intersections of the dwellers' trajectories and place of origins and the possibility of having a "blank canvas" to depict and materialize "the territorial dimension of peasantry identity" (Saade, 2020). Nevertheless, the proximity and belongingness to an urban space mark particular dynamics within the neighborhood. Therefore, after grasping the material dimension of La Nueva Jerusalén in the previous section, this chapter aims to explore how the cultural and symbolic dimensions of rurality intersect with urban environments, particularly in neighborhoods situated on the outskirts of cities.

Moreover, I intend to shed light on how these intersections shape the subjectivities of individuals, especially the youth who inhabit La Nueva Jerusalén as they grew up in the midst of the neighborhood constructions. They have witnessed its changes and the constant interplay of urban and rural dynamics, a fact that is deeply embedded in their identities. This is particularly important in further discussions about peacebuilding processes in territories as the understanding of the territory constructions, especially those where boundaries are disputed, can play a crucial role in reparation and justice achievement processes. Therefore, this chapter comprises four sections divided into two main parts i) traces of rurality and ii) urban permeation that aims to showcase from an intergenerational perspective the continuums and discontinuities between spaces, landscapes and identities.

2.1. Traces of Rurality

Unfolding the rural background: When the Landscape Speaks for Itself

The landscape and atmosphere of La Nueva Jerusalén present a set of challenges for the newcomers particularly if we try to pigeonhole in a particular category defining whether we are located in an urban or rural space. Various aspects of the neighborhood contribute to this sensation. Firstly, in La Nueva Jerusalén, one can still find coffee crops or banana plants scattered throughout, evoking the landscapes of rural Colombia. Additionally, it's common to see houses with spaces for horses or mules, particularly the latter being used for hard work of the farms. Sometimes these animals are parked in front of the houses, or their owners take them out, either riding them or walking them with reins. The unpaved streets, small streams, and scattered trees also create a countryside atmosphere.

Photo 4. View from my room. Taken by the author

Moreover, some houses—especially in the upper area of the neighborhood—are adorned with colorful flowers and broad-leaved plants that emit their natural and pleasant scents. Through these scenes, the neighborhood often diverges from the typical sensations evoked by Colombian cities. However, the density of the neighborhood, its closely packed houses, bustling commerce, shops, nightclubs, and fast-paced life remind of urban living.

Thus, the answer to the question of whether we are in front of a rural or urban landscape is neither both but basically, in both. During my interviews, I did an exercise where I asked my interviewees for two dichotomous qualifiers and they had to choose one that fits the best with the neighborhood reality. One of this pair of qualifiers was "urban/rural": "Wow, that's a tricky one" Mateo answered -a fifteen-year old NJ inhabitant- while he made a cheeky smile as if he would have found an interesting challenge. After a few seconds, he said:

> *Well, now it´s more like a city than before, because there are no big crops anymore. Here where we are sitting there were some onion crops. – So, in sum, do you think it's more urban but at the beginning it was a bit more rural, right? - Yes, because there weren't as many houses and there were empty plots of land, so people would take the land and plant things and such, but not anymore. Instead of planting, they built houses.*

When discussing informal settlements, the topic of urban and rural spaces holds significant importance. This is due to the fact that individuals who reside in and expand these types of settlements as La Nueva Jerusalén frequently originate from rural areas or the countryside. This reality is crucial in the development of Latin American cities (Niño,

Photo 5. House from the upper part of the neighborhood. Taken by the author.

et al., 2023; Pérez, 2009; Torres, 2018). Moreover, “urban” and “rural” are terms that have a symbolic weight and hierarchy tied to modernity and progress. Throughout history, cities have symbolized progress and advancement in society, particularly during the industrialization process in the North. Meanwhile, rurality -including their landscapes, inhabitants and practices- have often been perceived as backward or inferior to urbanity.

This perception is closely tied to the development of urbanism as a discipline and the notion that city planning is the preferred and superior method of creating habitable spaces. Consequently, informal settlements are sometimes viewed as "underdeveloped" or inferior forms of urban living, carrying with them the stigma of rural inferiority as it exists within spaces -cities- meant to embody modernity and progress. (Torres Tovar, 2009). Nowadays it is still possible to trace these discourses in urbanism studies. Neu (2016) names the areas that are neither part of the city nor the countryside *“intermediate landscapes”* as space in transition with a undefined its status:

> Cartographic analyses of modern cities allow for the identification of peripheral areas that result from the expansion process of a city, which do not quite qualify as urban but are not considered rural either; they are lands without a specific use, leftover areas*[MT]*. (Neu, 2016 p. 56)

Thus, the author proposes that intermediate landscape is a space in transition that needs to “shift from emptiness to utility; from fragmentation to becoming a functional part of urban expansion and evolution” (ibidem). In this sense, following this perspective, the notion of a "space in transition" carries a negative undertone. However, what is intriguing is how this very characteristic is perceived as an advantage or positive attribute by many residents of La Nueva Jerusalén as they can relate with their previous experiences:

> *What I really like about the neighborhood is still feeling the strong presence of the countryside because, yes, we still live kind of in the middle of the city and the countryside, and I lean more towards the countryside because you can still feel its presence with so much open space and green areas. Even though we have a dirt road, I feel a strong connection to it because, obviously, when I lived on the farm during my childhood, the road was like this. So, it doesn't bother me that it's unpaved; on the contrary, I really like seeing it like this, and I can sense in the community that there's still a little taste of the countryside, not much, but it's there.*

It's like it reminds me of being in the countryside, with what I experienced many years ago, so I like it.

Mateo also highlights some positive aspects of the neighborhood concerning the quite atmosphere.

The atmosphere here is unique, because, well... there isn't as much commotion as in the city, so I like it. Also, when you go to a city, you see all the houses packed together, but here you still see spaces without houses. And the air is fresh, because there are so many trees and that's cool because sometimes in the city it gets really hot, but here it's not as hot.

Finally, a crucial part of the landscape is the practices that are embedded in the daily life of the space. As stated by Vergara (2013) both routines and rituals are spatialized, which also implies that social practices legitimize the localities where they are embedded.

Practices and costumes that survived the dispossession

The dynamics within the neighborhood shift significantly depending on the day of the week. On Saturdays and Sundays, the neighborhood transforms into a bustling stage, as those who typically commute to work during weekdays remain within NJ to tend to household duties, spend time with family, or engage in small-scale businesses selling food or groceries, serving as an additional source of income. Moreover, with children out of school, the streets are livelier with more youngsters than usual. Local spots serving beer, known as "Chicherías," blast rancheras[16] and vallenato[17] at full volume, while residents in their homes also crank up their sound systems playing reggaeton, rap, or salsa.

This lively atmosphere caught my attention during my initial visit to the neighborhood on a Saturday. Although similar dynamics may unfold in other popular neighborhoods across Colombian cities, two incidents stood out, unsettling my usual comfort zone. Firstly, I witnessed two individuals carrying a freshly slaughtered, large pig tied up in front of where I stood. Gloria, accompanying me, noticed my shock and explained that such scenes were commonplace, as the animals are butchered nearby and

[16] Música ranchera refers to a genre of traditional Mexican music that often incorporates themes of rural life, love, and patriotism. It typically features instruments such as the guitar, trumpet, and accordion, and is characterized by its emotive melodies and lyrics.
[17] Vallenato is a traditional Colombian folk music genre originating from the Caribbean region, characterized by its distinctive accordion-driven sound, rhythmic percussion, and lyrical themes of love and rural life.

then transported to local meat shops downhill. As someone raised in the city, I'm not accustomed to witnessing or being close to the early stages of meat production, particularly since I am not familiar with the locations where these animals are kept.

Later that same day, as we roamed about the neighborhood, a loose horse approached us when we were walking in a narrow road. It was a young, relatively small horse. Gloria, fearing horses due to a past incident where her sister was injured, warned us to move aside. The owner followed, shouting for someone to stand in front of the horse with open arms to halt its progress: "¡Just open your arms, he will stop, open them!" he yelled. Feeling unqualified for the task and wary of potential harm, I just moved to one side of the road, as Gloria advised. The frustrated owner eventually returned, leading the horse by the reins, and assured us that next time, simply opening one's arms would suffice without harm. This experience highlighted how everyday life in the neighborhood is deeply intertwined with rural elements across various dimensions, including production, culture, and organization, and how this interplay embodies space and reproduces culture through material expression.

Photo 6. Saddled horse outside a house. Taken by the author

To delve into this topic, it is important to come back to the main identity layer of the people who built the neighborhood: peasants or *campesinos*[18]. Following Saade (2020), a peasant could be defined as "an intercultural subject, who identifies as such, vitally involved in direct labor with the land and nature, immersed in forms of social organization based on unpaid family and community work or in selling their labor power

[18] There is a debate regarding the translation of the term "campesino". This term has a specific and cultural background that is linked to the history of rural populations in Latin America. To delve into this discussion, you can refer to (Desmarais, 2008), which presents reflections on the topic as discussed by La Vía Campesina.

[MT]."[19] (p. 19). Thus, it could be said that NJ inhabitants are producing their idiosyncrasy in the place or in Low's (2017) words: they are "inscribing their own trajectories on the landscape". To trace the productive dimension, there are multiple practices that could be highlighted but as I have mentioned throughout this chapter, one of the most important is the relationship with the animals particularly, chickens, pigs, and horses.

Photo 7. Interior of a house. Taken by the author.

What these animals have in common is that they are widely used in rural areas for various purposes, particularly the first two for food and self-consumption. Many family households in the neighborhood keep chickens, roosters, and hens for selling purposes, and on special occasions, they may sacrifice one of the birds to make the traditional "sancocho"[20] stew. In fact, it is common in the neighborhood's grocery stores to find special food for chickens alongside cat and dog food. Thus, these animals are part of the daily life of the neighborhood, as evidenced by their constant crowing throughout the area. This aligns closely with the characterization provided by Saade, who suggests that self-consumption is a crucial aspect of peasant identity, as it often works to "generate products and raw materials destined for self-reproduction and circulation in the market, as well as for the maintenance of public and common goods." (Saade, 2020, p. 27).

In terms of cultural dimension, it's noteworthy to highlight the prevalence of magical thinking and the significance of religious practices within the neighborhood. The

[19] This definition was formulated by a commission of experts in the field of social sciences in Colombia in compliance with a legal action filed by a group of organized peasants, with the aim of being included in the Population Census of 2018 and having questions included about their economic and social situation, as well as their cultural identity.

[20] Sancocho is a traditional Colombian stew that is often prepared with a variety of meats such as chicken, beef, pork, or fish, along with a mix of vegetables such as plantains, cassava, potatoes, and corn. Sancocho holds cultural significance beyond its culinary appeal as it often serves as a symbol of sharing, community, and tradition in Colombian culture.

strong ties that rural people have with religion and with paranormal explanations for everyday occurrences are well known. As Saade argues, "In their daily practices, as well as in their festivities, rural communities generate and transmit visions and representations of the world, as well as practice beliefs and other types of bonds with the sacred." (Saade, 2020, p.25) During my fieldwork, I encountered time and again paranormal explanations for natural events or revelations based on connections between uncontrollable events, reality, and the future.

For instance, one early morning there was an earthquake in the neighborhood, with the epicenter just 10km away, causing significant shaking and rumbling. The next morning, during a communal breakfast at the parish, we discussed the event. "The devil passed through here last night," said one of the ladies at the table. When we asked further, she explained that strange noises were heard during the night, and those with expertise in the topic, confirmed that it was indeed the devil who had caused the sounds. There were various reactions at the table, but mostly nobody dismissed the explanation.

Ultimately, one of the practices or occurrences that marks the daily life of the neighborhood and is particularly associated with people's trajectories and the lack of state presence, is the tolerance of or familiarity with living in areas controlled by illegal groups. La Nueva Jerusalén is sometimes portrayed as "no man's land" or "the lost city," as a taxi driver who curiously asked me why I was going there, named it, which is widely related to how the Colombian countryside is often depicted. The fact that it is understood in this way also reveals the distance from state authorities shared by both rural areas and La Nueva Jerusalén. Thus, the practices of the territory of origin are recognized and reflected in the settlement territory where, in this case, it implies the continuation of para-state territorial control that constantly endangers the communities who are living in these conditions.

Thus, the exploration of practices and customs within La Nueva Jerusalén offers a revealing glimpse into the intersection of rural traditions and urban realities. Through weekend activities, cultural rituals, and organizational structures, the neighborhood's identity emerges as a complex mosaic, shaped by historical legacies and contemporary challenges. The enduring presence of rural elements reflects a deep-seated attachment to heritage and community, while adaptations to urban life underscore resilience and

adaptive capacity. However, persistent vulnerabilities, such as para-state territorial control, highlight ongoing struggles for autonomy and security. In essence, La Nueva Jerusalén serves as a microcosm of broader socio-cultural dynamics, illustrating the intricate interplay between rural and urban encounters in the dispossession landscapes, which is even more evident through the analysis of particular subjects: the youth, the persons who grew up in this diverse setting.

2.2. Urban Permeation

The Youth: subjectivities in the Intersection

Something intriguing to observe in La Nueva Jerusalén is the experiences of the youths who have grown up alongside the neighborhood as their early memories and childhood deeply intertwined with the constant urban-rural in-between. I had the opportunity to speak with a group of young people who have spent their formative years there, from early childhood to adolescence: “I honestly don’t know where I was born; I think it must have been here because I can't recall ever being anywhere else,” Martin shared with me, still a bit guarded as I began our interview. Martin, a 16-year-old adolescent I met during some of the Parish's youth activities, represents just one example of the neighborhood’s youth, whose experiences are deeply intertwined with the space itself. They embody a distinctive blend of practices shaped by the neighborhood's particularities, representing an 'in-between' that bridges rural Colombian dynamics with the expectations prevalent in Colombian cities. Thus, the subjectivities and trajectories of these populations offer insight into “the role of locality in the construction of young people’s identities” (Farrugia, 2014, p. 293)

In this way, when we discuss experiences of growing up in the neighborhood, the experiences related to its construction stand out, which was seen as part of the everyday life of inhabiting La Nueva Jerusalén. In fact, it's viewed as the natural way neighborhoods are created:

> *There in Santo Domingo [a neighborhood of Medellín], it was just like here. It's the same everywhere, really, that everything used to be like this. Because this is like a neighborhood that's just starting now, there's no pavement, none of those things, and it's just like that across the country, actually, across the world.*

In this regard, the neighborhood's youth possess varied knowledge about construction, building materials, and construction procedures being this a fundamental part of their childhood memories, even in terms of socialization and community formation associated with the built environment:

> *I think the most interesting part when we were little and there weren't so many houses, was when they started building a house, you'd say 'a little friend is coming.' Well, I've always been so friendly, I hoped a boy or girl would come with the newcomers so I could play.*

The constant and ongoing process of building the neighborhood also provides work activities that were initially understood as play. Luis, a 27-year-old NJ resident, recalls how when they were around 12 years old and before starting to carry construction materials, they would chase after moving trucks that arrived in the neighborhood to earn some extra money.

> *We would stand at a strategic point at the entrance of the neighborhood, and as soon as we saw the trucks coming, we would run after them, and when they reached the point, we would start unloading, bringing down chairs, furniture, bringing down everything. 'Oh, those people are rich, look at what they're bringing here,' we would comment among ourselves about the moving we saw.*

Later, when the upper part of the neighborhood began to be populated and he was older, he would go with a friend to carry bags of cement for 5,000 COP (15 SEK), an amount they split between them at the end. Thus, just like in various impoverished areas of the country, particularly rural ones, the youth of La Nueva Jerusalén embark on processes of adulting early. This involves starting work and a build a family at young age, both men and women within a hegemonic division of labor, particularly due to the rapid formation of households and families. It is common in the neighborhood to find couples living together from the age of 15 and recurring teenage pregnancies from the age of 13. Furthermore, the neighborhood's youth are widely familiar with the territorial control exerted by organized crime groups in the area and even have their own way of naming them as "the dudes from the block" [*los manes de la vuelta*], while adult peers, as I mentioned, know them as "the boys" or "los muchachos". This also fosters a particular understanding around governance mechanisms, surveillance systems, and the very actions of the State, which are perceived in light of its absence.

While the dynamics I've just mentioned may align closely with the experiences of previous generations in the neighborhood, displacement as a macro-level spatial process (Farrugia, 2014) intersects with the lived reality of residing in a locality geographically adjacent to a city. This juxtaposition shapes unique perceptions of space and collective expectations, heavily influenced by the urban representation as a symbol of progress (Hannerz, 1980; Nieto & Nivón, 1993; Niño et al., 2023). When asked to characterize the neighborhood as either rural or urban, Martin's response was intriguing: "It has a lot of both. It's just that lately, it's been getting too much into *the world*." I found that answer interesting as his perspective positions NJ as an entity somewhat apart. Then I questioned about his opinion on this shift: -Do you like that? -Yes, that's fine because it brings economy to the neighborhood and then we benefit -What from? -Money.

"Mud only seems harsh when compared to pavement" The clashes on the space perception and the idea of progress: adults and youth perspectives

The perception of the youth towards their neighborhood differs from that of adults, particularly with regards to how they view their location within the larger city of Medellín and how they perceive the idea of progress. Let's explore these two scenarios. Regarding spatial differentiation, while both groups agree that the neighborhood is a distinct geographical entity situated close but not within the city, they differ in their sense of proximity to the city itself. Adults, especially those who founded the neighborhood or have been for a long time there, feel that they live in a central or well-located area in relation to the rest of the city. In contrast, the youth feel more alienated and distant from the city center.

In terms of spatial positioning and owing to its informal settlement status, it stands on the outskirts of Medellín. Despite it probably not being far from the central area of Bello, the municipality to which NJ is legally affiliated, services like education and healthcare are predominantly available in Medellín rather than in Bello. Thus, residents need considerable commuting time –a fact that also partially influenced my decision to reside within the neighborhood.

One day, Gloria asked me to accompany her to a medical appointment. She mentioned it was scheduled for the morning, so an early start was in order. Gloria picked

me up at the parish house at 6 a.m. sharp. We made our way by foot to París Neighborhood, where public transportation was accessible and got on a bus, fortunately finding it not yet crowded. After some time, we got off at a station of the Medellín metro, where the bustle of city mornings intensified. After a struggle, we managed to squeeze ourselves into one of the wagons, barely able to move once inside. "We should look like in a cattle transportation," remarked a funny guy behind us.

The metro remained packed throughout the journey to our stop, and upon disembarking, we faced a long walk to the health facility where Gloria was scheduled for her appointment. When we reached our final destination, Gloria was pleased that we had arrived half an hour early, affording her some leisurely preparation time. In total, it took us two and a half hours to reach her medical appointment, which, ironically, lasted only eight minutes. Despite my initial shock at the disproportionate time spent commuting versus the time actually spent in the appointment, it was evident that Gloria had grown accustomed to this. Curiously, despite these exhaustive journeys in and out, many of the adults I interviewed didn't use "far" as a category to describe the neighborhood. When I inquired if the neighborhood was central or remote to María she answered “But far away from what? To María and other women and men that spend the majority of their time within the neighborhood, this relational entity does not have a big meaning, nevertheless, for the youth, La Nueva Jerusalén is far from the city center and symbolically far from their progression and ideas about a successful future.

In this sense, it is crucial to differentiate between peripherality and marginalization in order to better understand the nuances of these concepts. Both terms refer to the way spatial-temporal inclusion structures fail (Máliková et al., 2016). However, while the periphery is tied to the establishment of a center that possesses the social, economic, and cultural networks to sustain the functioning of a space, marginalization implies a power relationship where an "inside and outside" is structured, which can be defined from different nodes of relationship. As Máliková et al. (2016) assert:

> Border regions can be peripheral in terms of the geographical location, but their socio-economic situation can be more advanced than of a central region. On the other hand, not every marginal region is necessarily peripheral; for instance,

> regions with underdeveloped socio- spatial relationships can have a more favorable position with respect to the urban or regional centre. (Máliková et al. 2016 p.94)

Thus, it could be argued that while young people feel part of both the periphery and the margins of the city, adults do not directly perceive a sense of periphery, but they do make extensive references to feeling marginalized and forgotten, particularly by the state.

On the other hand, progress, tied to the idea of the future, has different nuances for people in the neighborhood depending on the age group under consideration. The concept of progress, in general, has been consistently present in debates surrounding the construction of the individual, society, and development, almost becoming synonymous with industrialization and capital accumulation during modernity (Cowen and Shenton, 1996). Therefore, the values associated with progress generate particular expectations about the future as they represent:

> an ideal as an aspiration to construct a future which is an improvement of the present and, equally, they can imply an absolute ideal to criticise the present. What matters here, however, is that the 'subjective values' are being employed to bear upon the 'reality' (…). (Cowen and Shenton, 1996, p.412)

Therefore, it is important to highlight how the idea of progress has not only been constructed based on abstract associations and ideals but has historically been imbued in concrete landscapes and spaces. Thus, the dichotomy between the urban and the rural plays a central role in this discussion of the spatialization of progress. As mentioned earlier, "cities have often been portrayed as symbols of progress and modernity, while the countryside is seen as stagnant or underdeveloped, creating "the image of the rural as an 'outsider' in society and of rurality as synonymous with 'backwardness."(Máliková et al., 2016 p. 93) This dichotomy reflects a dialectical relationship between urbanization seen as a pathway to development, and underdevelopment associated with rural areas.

Historically, influential thinkers have extolled the virtues of the city as a crucible of innovation and advancement. From the Enlightenment philosophers to early sociologists, the city has been heralded as the epicenter of civilization, where ideas converge, and progress flourishes. Thinkers like Engels envisioned urban centers as

engines of social change, where the forces of capitalism would drive technological innovation and economic growth (Hannerz, 1980). In fact, this is emphasized by Neu even in recent years regarding intermediate landscapes composed of urban settlements like La Nueva Jerusalén.

> If external support is not available in terms of planning, design, and management, the new settlements that emerge with urban growth will likewise result in incomplete urban forms, isolated enclaves, devoid of the benefits of urban life, lacking in services, infrastructure, mobility, public spaces, and symbolic places, which offer dignification, enjoyment, and urban imaginaries *[MT]*.(Hannerz, 1980)

However, this dichotomy oversimplifies the complex interplay between urban and rural spaces. In reality, the relationship between the two is not a dichotomic one with each shaping the other in profound ways. Urbanization may bring economic opportunities and access to services but rurality is not a static entity frozen in time; they are dynamic sites of cultural production and community resilience (Delgado-Viñas & Gómez-Moreno, 2022)

On top of that, although the notion of progress is symbolically inscribed in specific spaces and landscapes, these representations are interrogated based on individuals' particular trajectories and the practices incorporated through these spatiotemporal experiences (Low, 2017). In the case of La Nueva Jerusalén, it is striking how progress for young people differs from progress for adults. While both agree that improving economic conditions is crucial, the spaces that allow this to happen are perceived differently. Generally, for adults, progress has a more collective and community-oriented component tied to the neighborhood and the improvement of their homes, whereas for young people, this dimension of progress implies leaving the neighborhood and making a life outside of it. As it was mentioned by Padre Gonzalo,

> *Living here, so close yet on the outskirts of the city, evokes some big dreams for them [the youth]. Parents don't often complain; they're used to the rural life, walking long distances for everything. For them, since this is like a village, it's tough dealing with mud and all. But mud only seems harsh when compared to pavement. So, the young ones start asking: Why do we have to live in such*

> *conditions? It's like a wake-up call for them. So if we compare rural life with what's here, it's not all that different, really. The same customs, the same education. It's like here's a sort of cultural transfer happening. But when they see paved roads and peers with more opportunities and experiences, that's when they say, "This isn't right." Funny thing is, despite their initial doubts, most of them end up adjusting. (Institutional Interview_030324)*

During my conversations with several young individuals, I discovered that not only did they aspire to relocate from their neighborhood, but they were also keen on moving out of the country. During my fieldwork when I mentioned I currently reside in a different country, many of them expressed a keen interest. They asked me about the places and the people, whether it was very difficult to leave, and they wanted me to show them photos. Moreover, I found out that some of them have concrete plans or ideas to leave. For instance, during a casual chat with Ana, Lorena, and Camilo one day, Camilo told us about having plans to seek a better life in the USA. He shared that he had aunts living in the States who had connections with coyotes[21]. According to Camilo, his aunts had assured him that the journey wasn't as scary as it seemed; they had successfully made the trek themselves and had the necessary network to make it happen. All Camilo needed was to gather some funds to cover the expenses of the journey and pay to coyotes. In the same direction, Ana and Lorena approved his idea. They also knew relatives who had undertaken similar journeys and did not discard the idea for their future.

Thus, for the youth of La Nueva Jerusalén, notions of future and progress are anchored to spaces outside the neighborhood since the neighborhood is not seen as a scenario of development but rather as one of difficult access to opportunities. Consequently, relocation and migration are seen as an imminent decision for the neighborhood's youth. As we explored, the dichotomy between urban and rural worlds is deeply intertwined with narratives of progress and underdevelopment. However, this dichotomy fails to capture the complex realities of contemporary society that La Nueva Jerusalen allows to depict as their young people grapple constantly with the tension between urban aspirations and rural traditions.

[21] Term commonly used to refer to a person who assists individuals in crossing international borders illegally, often for a fee. Coyotes typically have knowledge of smuggling routes, border security practices, and methods to avoid detection by authorities.

Their identities are shaped by the complex interplay of space, culture, and expectations which makes them negotiate their place in a changing world. For this reason, we must recognize the complex relationship between urbanization and rural life, and the ways in which both shape the experiences of individuals and communities. By embracing this complexity, we can move beyond flat definitions of spatiality and work towards a territorial peace approach that takes into consideration the territory as an identity marker that is not necessarily anchored to a specific physical space but is fluid and travels side to side the body and trajectories of individuals.

Chapter III.

The interstices of power, violence and control: The Space as a stage and producer of disputes

The construction and production of space in La Nueva Jerusalén are highly influenced by the complex power dynamics that stem from the control over the territory and population. This power game involves multiple actors with different levels of influence within the territory: The state, organized crime, the church and other few organizations present in the neighborhood. Thus, while some people perceive the neighborhood as "no one's land", in fact, it could be the land of many. Likewise, the establishment of the neighborhood often reflects a process marked by disputes, negotiations, and power struggles. Just as in the formation of national states, where agreements are reached amidst competing interests, the building of new communities involves a complex interplay of conflicting agendas and efforts to assert control over territory. As Padre Gonzalo once told me: "Applying the law of physics, what happens in small happens in large, and what happens in large happens in small. And since this neighborhood is relatively young, it becomes even more evident.

This physics law is also evident when it comes to violence. The neighborhood experiences various forms of violence in daily life that are related with these disputes and the particular forms in which the control dynamics are performed. Moreover, this violence also intersects with the histories, trajectories and forms of control that the neighborhood inhabitants have witnessed, reproduced and naturalized in their past and present.[22] Paradoxically, despite the neighborhood being a tacit battlefield, its inhabitants perceive it as a peaceful space to live and settle. Thus, after previously have looked into the process of construction of the space, the role of the material realities and trajectories on it, and the different manifestations of geographical imagination, this chapter aims to present the disputes that arise from the interplay of such factors and the role that institutions play in it. Rather than focusing solely on the desired configuration of the space in terms of state

[22]The neighborhood serves as a backdrop for widespread gender and familial violence, where physical punishment is considered a legitimate form of education and macho culture is the norm. However, the exploration of these topics falls beyond the scope of the chapter.

presences and functions, I will shed light on the empirical reality of the institutional framework that is mainly composed of the church, the organized crime and the state, (Lagos & Calla, 2007). To unpack this discussion the chapter comprises five sections divided in three main parts: i) the state non-action and the legal pluralism, ii) the state action and its consequences iii) the intricacies of a disputed territory.

The chapter aims to break down the association between the state and order and armed groups and conflict by examining the everyday experiences of individuals inhabiting spaces characterized by a mixed sovereignty (Lagos & Calla, 2007). In these contexts, power is contested, distributed, and constructed through largely tacit relationships, culminating in a complex system and structure of territorial and social organization embedded in different layers of violence. Consequently, this compels us to reconsider how peace initiatives may impact these territories, bearing in mind the institutional origins of peace as a discourse to embrace. This requires examining the historical interventions of such actors in the landscapes and epicenters of conflict in Colombia, landscapes where the majority of La Nueva Jerusalén dwellers come from.

3.1.The Legal pluralism and the mimetic Governability: The non-state action

In the 2023 planning report of the Parish, there is a detailed description of the neighborhood dynamics and a situational framework with a thorough description of the dwellers' current situation in social and economic terms. The last part of this situational framework has a very particular title: "We are in a stage of emergency!". The section describes a set of emergencies where the first one is the violation of the right to life and the last emergency is:

> There is no presence of the state in any of its forms here. Lately, some secretaries have come to alleviate certain specific situations regarding health and pet care. The community continues to be "watched over and cared for" by "Los muchachos," a group that operates and controls the social life of the neighborhood (Parroquia San Cirilo, 2023 p. 20)

This lack of presence of the state is highly intertwined with the fact that the neighborhood has not been legalized and is considered under the Colombian legal framework as a "substandard neighborhood". This poses a set of challenges to the authorities in terms of the scope of its actions and the intricacies between the law and reality. Thus, the absence of the state -or differentiated presence[23]- is a condition that has delineated the dynamics on the territory, its landscape and the relationship that the population has with the state. Despite the apparent lack of state governance, La Nueva Jerusalén possesses two prominent actors that exert significant acceptance and influence within the community: namely, the church and Los Muchachos.

San Cirilo de Jerusalén Parish and the social affairs

During my stay in La Nueva Jerusalén, I was constantly impressed by all the tasks that Padre Leonardo has to accomplish as the main Parish Priest, not only inside the Parish House but mainly in the role within the community. Padre Leonardo is typically in charge of the regular parish duties, but also takes on additional responsibilities such as coordinating the operations of the elder's dining hall, securing funds for the development of the school and multipurpose classroom, and potentially overseeing the construction of the church. Additionally, the Parish organize recreational and exercise activities for the elderly and collect food from Medellín's food bank every two weeks, which they distribute among the community. I once asked him how he managed to carry out the multitude of activities he undertook, and he replied, "Angie, there's no choice; in these places, if the church doesn't do it, no one else will."

It is noteworthy that this role of the church, and particularly of this religious community has endured over the years alongside the process of state-building in Colombia[24]. As Serje (2011) posits, the Colombian state was constructed on the clear distinction between areas under the territorial control of the central administration, which

[23] Since early on this century, a debate emerged regarding the reconsideration of whether one can truly speak of a complete absence of the State. In light of a negative response to this question, political institutions began to discuss the concept of differentiated presence. This notion acknowledges that, even in contexts where the State may appear absent or weak, there may still exist forms of state intervention or governmental presence. For further details, refer to (González, 2003).

[24] The Montfortian Missionaries played a central role in the colonization process of the Colombian Orinoquía and Amazonia, conducting evangelization missions since the early 19th century. In fact, from 1914 to 1949, the Colombian State entrusted the administration of a portion of the eastern territories of the country to the community. For further details, refer to (Duque Gómez, 1953; Cabrera, Becerra, 2018; Cabrera Becerra, 2019).

are closer to the construction of the modern enclave represented in the metropolis, and those "wild" zones or territories destined to be colonized and pacified with the divine power of God embodied in the Church. In this sense, it is noteworthy how the visibility of the state presence in some areas is reassured by the lack of such appearance on the margins. Following Das & Poole (2004) it is important to "consider how this double effect of order and transcendence has been used to track the presence of the state." (p.5)

Thus, Montfortian Missioners have resided within the neighborhood since 2014, serving as a communicative bridge with other organizations seeking to carry out work in the neighborhood to meet basic needs such as food or educational reinforcement, providing sustenance, and ensuring the general welfare of the community. They are even the gateway to interaction with state institutions. For instance, one day when I was home alone, someone knocked on the door. It was a woman inquiring about Padre Leonardo. I informed her that he was not present, so she left a message: "Tell him I come on behalf of the Adult Ministry Secretariat of the Municipality of Bello. We would like to bring a special program for the Afro population in the neighborhood, engage in some inclusion activities, and perhaps organize excursions for recreational use of leisure time." I was somewhat surprised that the Municipality would seek permission and coordinate with the Parish for this, as theoretically, it is not necessary to do so. My surprise must have been evident because after providing the information, the visitor proceeded to explain: "We came here because, as you know, the Parish Priest is the ultimate authority in the neighborhood, and everything works out better if we coordinate from here." I simply took note of the information she had given and assured her that I would pass it on to the Padre later.

Photo 8. Padre Gonzalo handing out food. Taken by the author.

This phenomenon is closely intertwined with two factors: Firstly, the absence of a tangible relationship with the State fosters a pervasive sense of distrust among the

population. Consequently, the success of any intervention hinges greatly upon the mediation provided by the church. Secondly, the State lacks familiarity with the population due to the absence of official records or censuses, hindering local administrations' ability to engage in effective planning activities: “They don't know me, they don't even know what I have or what I need.” José, a current visitor of the Parish house and former community leader told me once when we were discussing the role of the municipality on the neighborhood.

Hence, as Das (2004) posits data production serves as a mechanism for the State to exercise control and governance over its citizens. By collecting and analyzing data, the State not only shapes policies and interventions but also asserts its authority and legitimacy in managing social and political affairs. In NJ case, the only registers that exists were developed by the Parish with funding from the archdiocese of Medellín. Therefore, the pivotal role of the Church in the neighborhood cannot solely be ascribed to its history and activities within NJ. It is also defined by the reverence and influence accorded to it by other actors, namely the State and Muchachos. As pronounced by Padre Leonardo, their actions are not subject to dispute.

Los muchachos

Beyond Parish actions in the neighborhood, other actions related with the control and sovereignty defined as the “political, regulatory, and disciplinary practices that constitute, somehow, that thing we call “the state” (Das & Poole, p. 3) are performed by Los Muchachos. As I highlighted in the first chapter, Los Muchachos have played a pivotal role in shaping the neighborhood's formation by defining plots and dynamics within spatial construction. Likewise, I shed light on how the surveillance system they possess inside NJ has a material impact on the neighborhood landscape and the bodies of those inhabiting it. Thus, beyond this impact, Los Muchachos exert the sovereignty of the neighborhood even in the eyes of the local authorities such as the Police.

Throughout my time living in the neighborhood, I only saw a police officer on his motorcycle at the entrances once. He seemed uncomfortable and avoided making eye contact with anyone. By my third week of fieldwork, I had assumed that police presence simply did not occur. At that moment, I was riding in a tuk-tuk towards Paris when I mentioned to the driver that it was my first time seeing a police officer in the

neighborhood. He replied, "You're right to be surprised; these folks don't come up here. Did you see his face? I think that gentleman is lost." I found his response curious, as there was no rational reason for a police officer to be in the neighborhood, and his presence was perceived as either a mistake or a chance occurrence.

While for people like me, who have not lived in remote areas far from symbolic and administrative centers, life without police and public force may seem unusual, it is not particularly rare, especially in Latin America. As Olasolo et al. (2022) assert, the phenomenon of parallel systems of governance in marginalized communities "is currently so widespread in Latin America that it constitutes, in its various forms, the most common socio-economic environment in which the average Latin American survives" (p. 63). Thus, Los Muchachos set the pace of life in the neighborhood by imposing tacit laws and rules that the population learns through trial and error, or rather, trial and punishment. The methods used by Los Muchachos to control the population can vary widely, ranging from mediation and dialogue to exile or even murder.

I was constantly alerted and informed about this particular control system, or what De Sousa Santos would call "legal pluralism." This occurs when "the dominated classes, or specific group within them, tend to develop legal subcultures which, under certain circumstances, may be connected with a more or less autonomous institutional praxis of varying scope and level of organization" (De Sousa Santos, 1977, p. 9). During my stay in the neighborhood, for security reasons, I chose never to inquire about Los Muchachos, their actions, or the community's opinions toward them. However, the topic emerged daily in each and every interview I conducted. Martin shared his thoughts when I asked him if he believed that people in the neighborhood is open to dialogue:

> *Yes, they are, but you see... here, there's a system, the one of 'los manes de la vuelta'. First, they talk things out. They solve them. If there's no solution, they have to smack them -And do you agree with that system? - No, I don't think it's right; no one should hurt anyone. - And can anything be done about it? - No, you see…they're the ones in charge.*

The topic also constantly appeared in my interactions on the street. Once, while sitting in Doña Cecilia's store, a man nicknamed The Rock arrived. He was somewhat rumpled and noticeably smelled of alcohol. In fact, the bulge I saw on the left side of his pants, which

I thought was a weapon, turned out to be a bottle of *aguardiente*[25]. He approached the table I shared with Padre Leonardo, and in his evident state of inebriation, began praising the Padre, stating that he was the best priest the community had ever had: "You see, he even took me home drunk." The Padre just smiled. After noticing my presence, he decided to sit next to me and introduce himself. "You see, they call me The Rock; I'm an important man in the neighborhood." I simply nodded and smiled and listened as he began to display his masculinity. After a moment of telling me about life in the neighborhood, he stood up in front of me and lifted his shirt. Suddenly, in front of my eyes, I had a man with a stomach deformed by what were evidently bullet wounds that had not healed well. He said, "See? I've been a bit rebellious. I'm not afraid of death, and I once crossed one of the big guys here, but as you can see, that doesn't end well. Here, 'linda', there's an order; you have to set an example, and you have to respect it."

As the term legal pluralism suggests, it would be wrong to assume that in the neighborhood there is a monopoly on the creation and distribution of laws although it is a clear rule or advantage over the regular laws. This is because the neighborhood, both physically and geographically, exists on the margins of dominant power structures, rather than outside of them, resulting in a complex relationship between the two systems. Consequently, an interplay emerges between what Los Muchachos can govern and what falls under the jurisdiction of the State. For instance, in cases involving violence, such as murders, dead bodies, or crimes like rape or femicide witnessed in the neighborhood, state law enforcement is required to enter the community for tasks such as body retrieval or investigation. It is precisely due to this reason that Los Muchachos' control within the neighborhood extends to every aspect of daily life: to avoid the potential intervention of state actors within the territory. In other words, in such cases, their sovereignty and self-governance are challenged by the presence of state actors.

Furthermore, Los Muchachos are frequently called upon by the community to act as mediators in order to prevent potential social confrontations: robberies or unresolved debts, disputes over land use, fights between family members and spouses, brawls at weekend parties, displays of deviant behavior, excessive use of force, among others.

[25] Traditional Colombian alcoholic beverage, typically distilled from sugarcane, with a strong anise flavor.

Likewise, any type of non-conventional activity that takes place in the neighborhood must be reported in such a way that they are aware of what is happening; in my case, I made them aware of my presence through my presentations at the Sunday masses to avoid future inquiries. Thus, Los Muchachos regulate the social life of the neighborhood and set the moral boundaries of behavior. However, considering that this system of legal subculture is far from embracing narratives of human rights or respect for life and diversity, the neighborhood lives amidst the production and reproduction of a series of daily violences that occur at different levels: private, public, and institutional.

One of the stories that struck me the most was the story of Zeus, a dog threatened with death. One day, while Gloria and I were walking through the neighborhood looking for people for a parish activity, Julia, a woman, appeared and offered us something to drink because it was a hot day and the NJ hills were taking a toll on my physical endurance. We sat down to talk with her and as we conversed, the dog that was there approached me, so I started to pet him. He was a mixed-breed dog, large and with brown spots, very affectionate and friendly. I told the lady: "You have a very cute and affectionate dog," and she said, "He's not mine, if you want, you can take him, it's even better for him."

I was surprised by her response, so I asked her whose dog he was. She told me that he belonged to her brother, who had been killed by Los Muchachos due to problems he had had with some neighbors. After that, the dog started to attack one of the people involved in the murder, so he spoke to Los Muchachos to have the dog killed as well. However, she found out. "I wasn't going to let them kill the dog, so I told them, since I can't report them for killing my brother, I can report them for animal abuse if they kill the dog, and that carries a prison sentence." For this reason, they decided not to kill the dog, but the next day after the incident, they came with a trained Pitbull to harm him, and although he left the dog badly wounded, he did not accomplish his goal. From then on, Julia lets the dog sleep in the house at night and be with her family. She says she's afraid something will happen to him at night, but she insists that he is not hers, that she simply has him under her protection.

The story of Zeus is illustrative of the neighborhood's dynamics of violence in several ways. Firstly, it is clear there that death is an institutionalized way of resolving

disputes that transcends even objects and inserts itself into all elements that constitute the social world of Nueva Jerusalén. And secondly, State action operates in particular ways at the margins, distorting its mechanisms and priorities (Das & Poole, 2004). For Julia, it was easier to report Zeus's death to the authorities than that of her brother, since within the distribution of powers, the settling of scores carried out by Los Muchachos should not be intervened by the State as it is a subordinate authority to the power of organized crime, while issues of lesser magnitude such as animal abuse can be addressed under the hegemonic legal order. Thus, the legal pluralism of the neighborhood informs us that, while not in its entirety, the state is present in particular forms that may not correspond to its basic functions of state presence. Thus, the State as an ordering entity can also become an axis of violence and conflict in its differentiated forms of presence.

3.2. Unfinished Endeavors: The State Action

State-Driven Displacement: Memories of Evictions

In regard to the violence perpetrated by the State, two types can be identified: direct violence, which acts to the detriment of the population, and another that occurs within the framework of negligence in its actions, where it fails to fulfill its role as guarantor of rights and services. The former is embedded in an event that circulates among the population almost like a founding myth of the neighborhood: The eviction attempts by the Municipality of Bello. Although it has occurred more than once, the most remembered by the population is that of 2017 when, amid an operation involving the army and the Mobile Anti-Disturbance Squadron (ESMAD), also known as the Colombian SWAT, they surrounded the neighborhood from the bottom and the hillside in order to evict 175 homes near the "La Loca" stream due to being located in a high-risk disaster area. This event is described by many as a "battlefield" where the neighborhood residents decided to support these families and confront the ESMAD with sticks, stones, or any element they had to defend themselves. Padre Gonzalo portrays it in his account:

> *"Throughout all the years of occupation and settlement, there have been different eviction attempts with the destruction of houses, even those made of materials. The resistance, persistence, and necessity of the families have been stronger than the legal decisions against the community. Shouts, stones, tear gas, leaders, community, state control forces, a violent mix that only left injured, wounds, and passion for the piece of land that would be the future of the children and young*

people who also made their presence felt in those heated moments [MT]." (Tabares, 2023, p. 3)

Yolanda was one of the people affected by this eviction that completely changed her life. She recounts how officials from the Municipality arrived, claiming they were going to conduct a census but in reality, they had other intentions:

> *"That was horrible! Those people came in pretending to conduct a census. Exactly Bello, the municipality of Bello. They came to do a survey, supposedly to see if they were going to have a health campaign or some assistance. That was the strategy they used, because it was a strategy, really. And it turns out that during these visits, they made people sign a paper saying supposedly that they had been surveyed and so on. But it wasn't for that, it was because the paper they were signing said that you agreed to be relocated elsewhere. That's what we humans do. We sign without reading well what's happening."*

Bureaucracy as a state mechanism to exert power over people on the margins of the state is presented here as a form of symbolic violence that has a dual role: to maintain control of the public in the hands of a few and, likewise, to keep bureaucratic language as the language of the State. By making these control mechanisms illegible to a part of the population, the structure of State power is strengthened (Das & Poole, 2004; Gupta 2012). Thus, in January 2017, the ESMAD entered the neighborhood to evict families using less-lethal weapons, tear gas, and stun grenades. The community organized itself and established vigilance fronts day and night to prevent a new ESMAD ambush, however, preventing their entry was almost impossible. "They didn't ask for permission, they didn't talk to anyone, they just pushed and kicked anyone who got in their way," Yolanda recounts.

They received support from civil society groups, student groups from Medellín who helped them build homemade slingshots to fight the ESMAD: "Those were days without sleep!" Gloria told me, "But how could we leave these families alone? No, that was inconceivable." After five days of clashes between the population and the ESMAD, with wounded people and detained leaders, the families agreed to leave their homes despite the vulnerability they would face, as the Municipality's proposal was pitiful: they were going to receive 250,000 COP (65 USD) for three months to pay rent. The consequences of this event for many of the people there go beyond material losses and

are inscribed in the realm of symbolic losses, remembering the feeling of "losing everything," which is not new to many of the neighborhood's residents considering that violence is not only physical but also "includes assaults on the personhood, dignity, sense of worth or value of the victim." Yolanda experienced it this way:

> *It was very difficult for me to come to terms with the fact that they were going to knock down my little house, as I told you, everything I did and suffered to get the plot, to build it, to get the materials and now they're going to knock it down? But I was strong, I went to see and I stood in front to see how they hit it with the backhoe and my house could hardly be knocked down, they had a hard time with the roof and then the floor, because I had built it well and the wood was fine. A few days later, as I was entering the neighborhood, I saw a backhoe knocking down another house and I can't explain to you what I felt, but I felt something... I felt as if that machine was digging into my heart, it was an incredible thing and what I did was run, and I ran and ran and ran, then when I realized it, it was pure bush, I wasn't even in the neighborhood anymore. So I sat on a rock and cried, just cried. Four hours went by until I said enough, I wiped my tears, I stood up and kept going, after all, it wasn't going to be the first time.*

The paradox of the matter is that to this day, new houses are being built on the same land that the Municipality of Bello forced its inhabitants to leave.

"A Shame There Is No Station Named 'Judas Betrays Jesus', the Municipality Would Be There"

A fundamental correlate of the neighborhood and its relationship with the entities of control and power of the State, be it the Municipality of Bello, the Municipality of Medellín, or the central government, is the utilitarian and disinterested relationship that the municipality has demonstrated not only with its current situation but also with its condition as displaced population. In this regard, within a temporal framework of present, past, and future, the residents of Nueva Jerusalén feel an unfair relationship from the authorities. This is because there are no solutions for their past land dispossession, nor their present situation in the neighborhood, and much less for the promises of a future of legalization and normalization of the neighborhood. In the words of Father Gonzalo: "There are actions, but no processes that end up generating more harm than benefits for the people here.

This sentiment was clearly reflected in one of the focus groups. In an exercise we conducted with some members of the community to plan the Via Crucis of Holy Week, we selected facts or situations constitutive of the neighborhood to relate to each of the 14 stations of the Via Crucis. One of these facts that the participants chose to highlight was the marginalization by the State and local governments, which, with great approval from the attendees, was placed at station number 11: Jesus is nailed to the cross. "The torment of the cross, besides being infamous, typical of criminal slaves or notorious wrongdoers, was extremely painful, as we can barely imagine," they read from the Via Crucis book. Thus, a sense of indignation filled the room where we were gathered. Jorge commented with a firm yet sorrowful voice:

> *How many times has the Municipality of Bello come here to do little 'brigades', a little doctor, a little lawyer for attention to victims, to the displaced, and they do it here in the neighborhood. There are people who once did the activity on a Sunday, and on Monday, they went with a letter given by a lawyer here, and that lawyer never attended to them again, let him call me a liar. Never ever did that lawyer remember that person, on Sunday, they were interviewed in Nueva Jerusalén, they were given advice as displaced, and they had certain rights violated which they have to fulfill. And neither the victims' unit nor any lawyer, recognizes us once they are out of the territory, no one.*

According to the testimonies, this fact is also quite evident during election periods when candidates go to the neighborhoods to seek votes using well-known strategies such as giving away food, money, or bags of cement. What is peculiar about this phenomenon is the utilization of the electoral context by communities to leverage certain advantages. Consequently, they negotiate with candidates to fulfill specific infrastructural projects in return for electoral support: requests may include the construction of paved roads, comprehensive maintenance of sewage systems in designated zones, or the organization of communal clean-up initiatives. Thus, the residents of Nueva Jerusalén capitalize on these ongoing disputes and their status of dwellers and founders to perpetuate the transformation of the Neighborhood into a livable one, just as they have done since they put the first brick on the slope.

3.3. The intricacies of a livable but disputed territory

Something that profoundly surprises me regarding the perceptions held by the neighborhood's residents is the understanding of it as a peaceful, tranquil place, even suitable for raising children. Although initially paradoxical, there are various ways to comprehend this perception. One anchored with having a “protective guardian” as Los Muchachos and second, the possibility to live in a space that, regarding the trajectories of NJ dwellers, fulfills their necessities of feeling belonging and ownership over a place. As I discussed, both the State and Los Muchachos generate dynamics of control disputes and provide services while also reproducing violence at various levels. However, Los Muchachos legitimize themselves as those who monopolize the neighborhood, not only due to their active presence but also because of their effectiveness and efficiency in reacting to the neighborhood's needs; they have created a legal subculture with a functioning system. (De Sousa Santos, 1977) Meanwhile, the State's actions, based on a prescriptive vision, are grounded in a framework of possibilities rather than realities.

Furthermore, through the State's eviction attempts and intermittent presence, it has consolidated itself as an unwanted, dangerous visitor, even an enemy, while generally, the neighborhood's residents feel cared for and protected by Los Muchachos. Mateo, expressed this sentiment in our conversation evidencing that youth also feels protected:

> *For example, there are very religious people who are scared of those guys [Los Muchachos]. But there's no need to fear someone who is looking out for us, right? Because the truth is, they take care of this neighborhood. They prevent bad things from happening, like thefts, land grabs, and so on. That's what taking care means. So, well, some people are just stupid.*

In addition to the sense of care, inhabitants define Nueva Jerusalén as a "healthy" place and a peaceful environment. "If I had to choose, I would raise my children here again," Rodrigo, a community leader from the neighborhood, told me. This sentiment is widely shared among the neighborhood's residents, who, when relating with the public order situation that forced many of them to flee the countryside, see the neighborhood as a refuge and Los Muchachos as custodians of their security. Doña María compared the situation between the countryside and the city:

> *I live very happily here because at least one lives peacefully, without problems with anyone. You know that in the countryside, with all those groups... one doesn't live peacefully. And if you have young boys, it's worse because then they're taken for conscription. And here, in the city, at least, if one doesn't get involved with anything or anyone, then no one bothers you.*

This sheds light on how political power and authority over a space is conferred upon those who generate order and not necessarily the statal one. Additionally, it is noteworthy that the role of the armed actor displacing people has shifted from being in the hands of guerrillas and paramilitaries to being a deed perpetrated by the State, creating an interconnection between processes, forms, and consequences: a political actor using force to expel people from their households and environments without room for negotiation or mediation.

Thus, these forms in which political power and its origins are configured raise questions about what the population percieve as a peaceful space and what the State recognizes. For the residents of Nueva Jerusalén, a peaceful space means a livable space with a system of care and surveillance that ensures the functioning of community life; a perception that clashes significantly with how the State understands processes of pacification anchored to the territories. For the State, a pacified place translates into a space where the monopoly of legality and force has been regained, and "consists of territorial modernization and the integration of regions and communities into the State and the market" (Peña, 2019, p.39).

The Colombian Peace High Commissioner at the time of the peace process declared that "there are conditions of extreme poverty, lack of opportunities, and institutional weakness in regulating public life, which have allowed violence to flourish. Furthermore, there is the undeniable presence of illegal groups and the perpetuation of violence [MT]". (Jaramillo, 2014 p. 3). Nevertheless, the situation in NJ raises questions about the State's role in the production and reproduction of violence and whether the path to peace is the same as development. Thus, the way Nueva Jerusalén has been constructed as a livable space and a cohesive community, amidst a territory where disputes and conflicts emerge and reproduce, constitutes a unique opportunity to learn about the multiple pathways for spatializing and understanding peace, and the necessities that originate from the margins of the State and the city.

6. Conclusions

Rethinking the epistemologies of peace from an urban territory

Every place bear inscriptions upon its physical land that semiotically define the subject who inhabits it [MT]. (Castillejo, 2016, p. 236)

La Nueva Jerusalén is named after a biblical reference with a deep historical and symbolic meaning in Judaism and Christianism. It is essentially a holy city descending from heaven that came after a long period of exile of Israelites in Babylon, and the multiple destruction of Jerusalem temple. It is the very last eschatological promise:

> Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth, because the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God (…) And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (Revelations Book, 21:1-4)

Early Christians, who were often persecuted and marginalized, would have found hope and consolation in the vision of the New Jerusalem. The prophets spoke of a future in which God would bring a definitive end to exile and suffering, and establish a renewed Jerusalem as a center of peace and divine presence. Thus, this slope on the outskirts of Medellín, which became home to thousands of displaced people, is named for the hope of dwelling in a place with no tears, where the physical temple of God is no longer necessary because its inhabitants will embody and represent the temple that God will inhabit.

Therefore, it would be worthwhile to explore the various challenges and aspects that this research helps to elucidate about peacebuilding so that this "city descending from heaven" can be achieved on earth. Firstly, from the first chapter, this thesis attempted to elucidate the importance of materiality and the relationship with the land in the formation of identity. In this regard, considering the processes of building peace in the territories, it

is vitally important to account for the emotionalities surrounding the relationship with the land, the interaction between body, place, and territory, and "the way in which territories constitute frameworks (assemblies, networks, rhizomes) of multiple actors and both human and non-human materialities." (Escobar, 2014, p. 91)

Secondly, the trajectories of individuals are intimately linked with the possibilities of geographical imagination and the enunciation of possible futures. The intergenerational perspective of the second chapter elucidates how spaces can be produced, appropriated, and understood from multiple perspectives, in this case starting from age differences. Taking into account the geopolitical imaginations of youth is a crucial axis in understanding the Colombian territory for future forms of territory appropriation.

Finally, the third chapter highlights the importance of conceptualizing peace beyond the civilizing project of "bringing peace to the territories" (Peña, 2019; Serje, 2011; Stienen, 2017), but rather constructing peace from the epistemologies of peace in territories. Continuing with the state discourse impedes recognizing the nuances of the state presence as both creator and perpetuator of violence and disputes and not solely as a peacemaker par excellence. Therefore, the path to peace cannot be the same as that of development and progress in terms of economic accumulation and development; the interstices of La Nueva Jerusalén illustrate how peace also involves building territories as livable spaces in harmony with communities and the land.

Thus, from the observations in La Nueva Jerusalén, it can be argued that the Colombian territory is a sedimented land—one composed of multiple layers of experience, where its inhabitants embed not only their routines and daily lives but also their identities and unique ways of understanding their relationship with the environment. La Nueva Jerusalén emerges as a hybrid territory that enables us to comprehend the challenges of a fractured past, a present of new materialities, and a future that aims to create livable spaces, helping to heal the scars and wounds inflicted by armed conflict on millions of individuals and communities.

Furthermore, Nueva Jerusalén emerges as a liminal space, steeped in the margins—not only of the city as a tangible manifestation of the development project but

also within the symbolic margins inhabited by its rural community. This situation presents an opportunity to view sedimented territories as a form of knowledge and self-recognition for a nation that carries in its DNA both recent and ancient traces of the rural, marginalized territories considered peripheral to the center. It is crucial to recognize ourselves as a wandering nation, constructed through multiple layers of identity and materiality.

Therefore, this thesis poses the question: How can we construct epistemologies of peace that consider these layers and historical and spatial sediments? How can we acknowledge the margins as integral elements of peace-building and post-conflict scenarios? These questions involve recognizing liminal governances, the varied ways of inhabiting the territory, and how, like snails, individuals carry the traces of our multifaceted pasts. As is stated by Peña (2019) the idea of peace as a diverse, differentiated, and complex process has the purpose of transforming the exercise of peacebuilding by altering the hierarchy and articulation of the actors involved in the processes of conflict transformation" (p. 412)

Finally, this thesis opens the debate and ethnographic curiosity to construct, explore, and trace new epistemologies of peace within the symbolic and material space of the margins and their inhabitants. Firstly, it would be highly relevant to investigate how gender relations are essential for understanding the construction of space and how women experience and live through displacement and resilience from unique vantage points within the margins. Additionally, generational studies represent a field of knowledge that would expand our understanding of the relationship with space, hybrid governances, and how these sedimented experiences of war, disruption, and displacement impact not only the bodies that live them but also their descendants.

While this thesis has focused on the relationship between individuals and social groups with space, it would be worthwhile to deeply explore the subjectivity of displaced persons through their emotions and experiences of pain, and how these can transform the spaces those persons inhabit and create. Thus, the ultimate purpose is to position the spaces that form the margins as windows of knowledge. La Nueva Jerusalén, named after such a potent symbol of hope and renewal, embodies more than its biblical namesake. It represents a tangible manifestation of resilience and a collective effort to overcome

rupture and exile, grounded in the interplay between the trajectories, the embodiment of space, and the geographic imagination of its dwellers.

Within La Nueva Jerusalén I learned to have hens and roosters as neighbors, to wake up to their crowing, to be careful where I step, choosing the firmest stone to tread on. I understood that there are no roads for cars, bikes, or people; we all walk the same path. There are no separate playgrounds; the children play on the same path we all use. La Nueva Jerusalén taught me that all spaces are multifaceted and shaped through interaction, use, and constant redefinition. In that neighborhood, space serves not only as a witness to trajectories of life but also acts as a container of experience Accordingly, they are purposefully crafted to fulfill their intended functions and could undoubtedly become reservoirs of new epistemologies and landscapes of peace and reconciliation.

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