

Informal and formal land markets, value and policy in Bogotá: A first exploration

Isabel Peñaranda Currie

PhD student in the Department of City and Regional Planning

Recipient of the CLAS Tinker Grant

Abstract

My research looks at land markets, value and policy in formal and informal settlements in Bogotá and Sao Paulo. It seeks to put urban economics in dialogue with planning, and particularly, questions of right to the city. Prior to this summer, I had researched the history and theoretical underpinnings of the work of the Lincoln Institute for Land Policy, a US-based thinktank which is one of the leaders in promoting progressive land policy in Latin America. I continued this research by meeting and interviewing some of the leading figures of the Lincoln Institute, including its former director of 27 years, Martim Smolka. I also conducted preliminary research on how the state approaches informal land markets, by following an urban planner, and worked with a local collaborator in spatial analysis of the distribution of informal settlements and informal housing stock relative to the consolidated city. While this is early on in my research, I greatly valued the opportunity to explore possible topics and openings so early in my PhD.

Report

My research this summer took a number of significant turns, particularly regarding my object of study. My original proposal – and dissertation idea – was an exploration of the processes through which intermediate cities formed and grew, and specifically on the access of the urban poor in these cities to formal and informal land and housing markets, as well as the practices of planning in such cities.

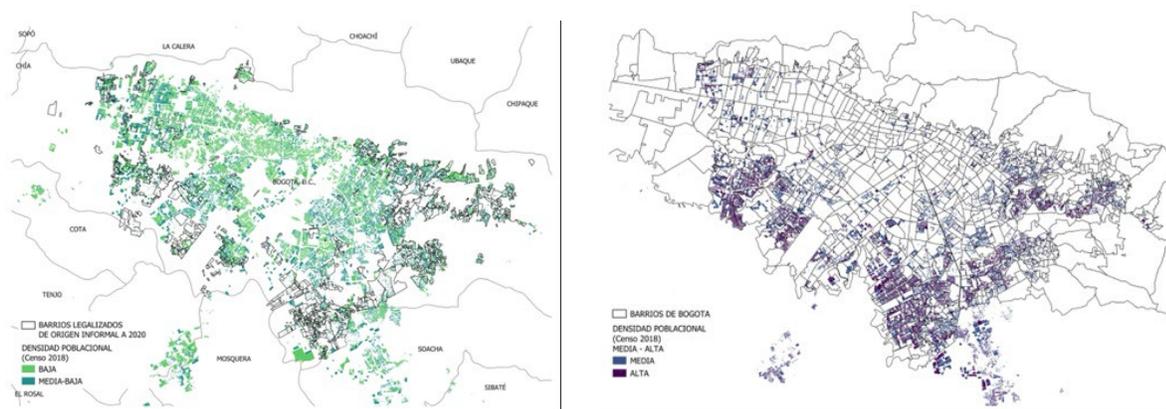
I continue to be interested in this subject, and over the summer was able to participate in networks and events which related to these topics. While in Bogotá, I met with colleagues studying Amazon cities, a previous research topic which continues to motivate my interest in small and intermediate cities. I also have been in dialogue with colleagues around the formation of a CLACSO 2023 – 2035 working group, which would bring members of the “Red Antropourbana” and the “Red de Ciudades Intermedias (REDICIAL)”, of which I am a member. I also presented in Research Committee 21 (RC21), the annual conference on Sociology of Urban and Regional Development of the International Sociological Association, on a panel relating to cities in commodity frontiers in Latin America, which also helped expand this network beyond my colleagues in Colombia.

However, I believe that although I want to continue to pursue intermediate cities as a research agenda, I don't want it to be my dissertation topic. I want to have a more ambitious research agenda which puts urban economics in dialogue with planning in Latin American cities through the issue of land value and policy in formal and informal housing markets. I believe that the mechanisms through which land acquires value are one of the great sources of collective wealth in cities worldwide, including those in Latin America. Interestingly, our continent – and particularly Colombia – has a uniquely long history with experimenting with land value capture in order to finance public works, infrastructure and low-income housing. These are the mechanisms – as well as their history, tensions and potential – that I want to explore in my dissertation.

For this reason, I contacted members of the Lincoln Institute for Land Policy, and was in dialogue with them throughout the summer. I was able to talk to some of their most prominent researchers, including Cynthia Goytia (Argentina), Martim Smolka (Brazil) and Maria Mercedes Maldonado (Colombia). I also took advantage to record episodes of “Sur-Urbano” – a podcast financed in part by CLAS – which can be found [here](#).

Because I am maintaining a focus on informal settlements and the right of the urban poor to the city – including to land and its valuation – I also met with local planners – including Lina Gonzalez, who participated in the drafting of the regulation of informal settlements in the new Land Use Master Plan (*Plan de Ordenamiento Territorial*), and other researchers, including Carlos López who is studying social mobility in low income neighborhoods in Bogotá at Cornell. I accompanied and supported Lina as she drafted the policy for resettlement of informal settlements located in high-risk areas, which served as a kind of preliminary anthropology of the state as I observed how public functions are delegated to external consultants, how these consultants – who rotate in and out of the state – approach urban problematics, and their forms of constructing the artifact of the “policy document”.

One final important collaboration was with Ana Milena Prada, who worked in a City Councilor’s office and is a highly skilled researcher specializing in spatial research. I hired Ana to undertake some research on the localization of informal settlements in Bogotá, as well as other forms of informal urban growth (particularly informal renovation in formalized areas), and how this relates to class. We found that contrary to what may be expected, the densest areas of the city are not the oldest or even the highest, but rather those exhibiting the highest levels of informality. I attach some of the results which emerged from this research below:



Collaborating with someone with the experience she had was fascinating, and I hope marks the beginning of future collaborations. I would not have been able to produce – or even understand the how to access the data – myself (although I am working on developing these skills), so the possibility of working with a local collaborator was immensely fruitful.

A final note on unexpected challenges: unfortunately soon after arriving in Colombia, I discovered that someone I had been in close contact with tested positive for COVID, and I developed some symptoms soon after. I had to self-isolate for 10 days, and for this reason much of my research had to be carried out online. This impaired my ability to meet with people personally and consequently, I did not get a photographic register of my field work. I also confess that in the moment of conducting the interviews with the people mentioned above, I sometimes forgot to take photographs, although I have email and Whatsapp records showing that these meetings happened. The photographs I am submitting are therefore more oriented towards proving that I was in Bogotá, but lamentably not very strong proof of what my field work actually looked like.