Power and domination

An open eye on the 21st century's urban conflicts in Central Bogotà.

P4 Reflection

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La Perseverancia, barrio obrero de Bogotá.

The portion of Bogotà I will scrutinise as first part of my work on the central area of the Colombian capital is a working-class neighbourhood known since the beginning of the second half of the twenty-first century with the name 'La Perseverancia'. This proletarian settlement was born during the first decade of the twentieth century to host the workers of beer-brewing company 'Bavaria'. In this phase of development the city was experiencing a phenomenon similar to the one that occurred in Europe and in particular in England (about a century earlier) in all those cities where the industrial revolution was generating a rapid boost of urban population. This new urban condition has been carefully described with a series of articles and books written by Friedrich Engels,[1] a German social scientist that portrayed in detail the living conditions of the proletarian settlements of Manchester during the 1840's. What is relevant to us are the social, political and economic forms of power that this situation performed at that time. What needs to be highlighted is the connection that tights this particular regime of private property to economic profits within the premises of industrial economies and the social transformations (may be more adequate saying impositions) that such a capitalist model carried for the sake of its own reiteration and implementation. The imposed morphology of this new urban residential area based on principles of minimum individual spaces and maximum homogeneity (in 1910 the standard plot for a single residence in this Bogotian barrio was 4.3 x 8.0 meters) reflects intents aimed at the instrumentality of private space as tool to compose a pre-established social class. In this way the mutual relations between built environment and the necessities and aspirations of the community that inhabits it get subverted. The dynamics of a social organism and its modifications do not find correspondence in the formation of the spaces in which communities develop, instead it is the formal substance of that portion of the city that gives shape to a static social condition.

Barrio la Perseverancia: positioning in the area of central Bogotà and bird-eye photograph

1: See Engels, Friedrich. *The Condition Of The Working Class In England.* 1st ed. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1968. Print.

Views of two streets of the barrio at the beginning of the twentieth century and at the current condition

source: Liliana Ruiz Gutiérrez and Esteban Cruz Niño, *La Perseverancia, barrio obrero de Bogotá*
and personally shot photograph.

Dangerousness as defensive mechanism

At the end of the first half of the twentieth century a combination of economic transformations and the emergence of a stronger class consciousness [2] engendered a crucial transformation in the substance of this neighbourhood. The simultaneous loss of the economic raison d'être that originated the neighbourhood and the advancement of new bourgeois trends in the surrounding areas motivated a transformation of the image for this barrio within the city network. The reformation that occurred in La Persevarancia was enacted in the first place within its social tissue by means of revisitations ,as much rapid as probably subliminal, of the attitude of its occupants. In this phase of renewal of central Bogotà there was a fracture between this working-class neighbourhood (keep in mind the crisis of the economic system that justified its presence in the city in the first place) and the social and formal development that the rest of the city was experiencing all around.

The economic and formal barrier that separated la Perseverancia from the new emerging Bogotà made impossible to envisage an upgrading of the area according to the new city's standards. This was the beginning of a process of enclosure that is persisting even now. A mechanism that exercises its activity of ghettoisation through the promotion of an economic system that does not acknowledge alternatives external to its own internal logic [3] and through instilled feelings of inadequacy. The population of la Perseverancia reacted with a series of social transformations directed at the safeguard of a community in such a struggling condition, this entailed also drug trades, thievery and criminality in general. The increase of lawless activities in the neighbourhood together with the factual class separation that distinguished la Perse [4] from the rest of the Bogotians contributed through the years in the exacerbation of the differences, causing phenomena of segregation. The partially conscious decision of putting on the disguise of dangerousness connoted for la Perseverancia a series of aftereffects that can constitute object of debate in the evaluation of them as advantages or elements of weakness. The partly auto-imposed isolation of this area made possible the establishment of an almost autarchical regime whose ostensible anarchical base actually conceals a well organised body of unwritten rules that perform as a tacit community's manifesto whose core message conveys an intention of auto-confinement.

A derelict construction at the south edge of the barrio
the writing on the external wall states: "this property is not for sale"
Source: personally shot photograph.

If analysed carefully, economy, behavioural tendencies as well as the composition and the formal character of this built environment appear to be tied together. I believe appropriate to start such an analysis from an economic perspective since major part of what has been heretofore exposed found its roots in economy related transformations and/or aspirations.

The state of enclosure in la Perseverancia made necessary to reformulate the constitutional organisation of this barrio thus downscaling its entire economic system. La Perseverancia responds to an almost autonomous micro-economy that implies two fundamental consequences that can be summarised in stillness and reiteration.

The population reacted by bringing inside the area primary services as a school, basic healthcare and little shops so to establish a higher degree of autonomy. This gradual operation clearly deepened the separation between la Perseverancia and the rest of the surrounding urban sector. The low quality of these services together with spontaneous activities of renewal and expansion of the single dwelling units participated in the formation of a peculiar urban character that became so much deeply-rooted in the cultural anatomy of this barrio that this local identity became itself a narrow cage for evolution's possibilities that now does not allow transformations too distant to its actual image.

Different building types in la Perseverancia, all of them are largely composed of parts constructed by locals.
The proliferation of self-constructions are material manifestation of processes of urban appropriation.
Source: locationcolombia.com/laperseverancia

2: Partially due to the populist movement led by Jorge Eliécer Gaitán and subsequently to the period of riots that followed his
   assassination

3: See theories about capitalism in Tafuri, Manfredo. *Architecture And Utopia*. 1st ed. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1976. Print.

4: Vernacular appellation used by local communities to identified la Perseverancia. See Liliana Ruiz Gutiérrez and Esteban Cruz Niño's
   article *La Perseverancia, barrio obrero de Bogotá,* 1st ed. Print, Bogota.gov.co, 2007.

Beneath a global eye.

"No nation can now afford to miss out on the global unification game and hope to survive"
from Woods, Lebbeus. *Anarchitecture*. 1st ed. London: Academy Editions, 1992. pp. 17

The second part of my analytical research on the area of central Bogotà will be focused on a practice of urbanisation that is produced by a type of economy that developed within managerial mechanisms that operate on a global extent. Such a phenomenon evolved in the Colombian capital in a way similar to the rest of the world triggering extensive morphological transformations and socio-cultural movements standardised on a unique model. In the previous section we briefly examined how industrial economies in their early stages needed to dictate a specific urban arrangement based on the principles of utility and control (and the various social implications that this model entail at its beginning as well as during the phases that saw the recession of such a model) in order to secure public order and to facilitate the activities that were taking place in the city and that directly produce profits and accumulation of capitals. If such an economic scheme presented a direct relation between the city's spatial organisation and its operative apparatus the dynamics that govern the development of urban environment within globalised supra-structures are founded on different criteria: iconography, foreseeability, unreadability and - in this case as in all the human arenas that present unbalanced power conflicts - control. On the very material level of the city this happens through the employment of rigidly pre-established building types.[1] The use of whatsoever type in architecture imply the imposition - upon the supposed organic functioning of the city - of an extensive pattern based on precepts of conformity and uncritical compliance to guidelines. The composition of the city gets thus depleted of chances for self-determination; the limitation of possibilities for free interpretation and usage of the urban spaces enables a tacit domination over the individuals. The ultimate goal of such a political management of the city is to ensure foreseeability over an highly programatic financial system whose social components represents nothing more than an unstable elements that need to be shaped according to a functional and controllable mould. This metamorphosis - into subordination - of the elements that regulate and affect behavioural trends in a community according to economic schemes occurred in light of the radical alteration that occurred in this second element because of revolutionary advancement in the fields of information exchange, connections and management of finical capitals in international market networks. The scale on which financial transactions and multinational agreements take place nowadays are organised and monitored on a perceptually intangible level that vastly exceed any conceivable metropolitan dimension. As a consequences big cities necessitated to conform to an enlarged context that connoted primarily systemic features, this happened and happens in a way that do not contemplate site-specific previous conditions.

Panoramic view on the area of central Bogotà highlighting the striking typological and dimensional differences
between the working class housing area on the left side of the photograph and the area including the International Centre.
Source: commons.wikimedia.org.

This up-scaling of the frame of reference with which metropolis had to refer and relate their activities resulted in a superimposition of requirements over inadequate economic and social grounds thus generating unstable conflicting urban settings. Cities got inhabited of over-human architectures that exercise a kind unspoken violence upon the population for their intrinsic intelligibility. People are made powerless in front of prescribed building typologies and related forms of usage. Skyscrapers, gigantic hybrid building blocks or large scale infrastructural interventions are realised according to financial intentions whose grounding raison d'être does not pertain any everyday dimensions but it affects them inevitably. Within a built environment characterised by standardised positions - forcedly imposed on each individual - people result incapable of reading and interpreting its constituent elements and therefore to operate transformations upon it. Practices of urban transformation that occur according to control-directed precepts constitute a political act that is the manifestation of the natural evolution of the way in which power is embodied in societies.

With the emergence of modern forms of government power was no longer identified in symbolic and monumental buildings that directly represented the sovereign but it was rather codified as set of instilled behavioural guidances spread throughout the entire social body of a community.[2] Now we are witnessing a further evolution of the procedures with which authoritarian patterns are devised and applied in contemporary metropolitan scenarios.

Masses are immobilised in their possibilities of movements for self-determination because of the rigidity that disciplines the conformation of the newest and therefore most modernised parts of the city. An highly programmatic approach as this one connotes a precise intention pointed not so much at offering services or opportunities for enhancing the individual conditions of the members of a distinct community, typified by site-specific connected features. On the contrary masses are nailed down as an element necessary for a particular financial purposes and then moulded through informations bombing that identify univocal behavioural standards and through an inculcate estrangement towards public areas. Use and users are defined simultaneously. Big encountering spaces modulate individual inclinations towards common demeanours; limitations in indoor and outdoor circulations and a regular monitoring of activities deprived people of a significant degree of autonomy in the psychological appropriation of the city. Masses became in this way the silent bearers of a system in which individuals' diversity is obscured for the sake of safeguarding a hidden authoritarian regime. What allows such a concealed form of violence is the - broad and most of the time uncritical - compliance that this behavioural domination presents in the public realm. Moreover incomparable economical possibilities and assumed preconceived superiority towards alternative models contributed in the rooting of an auto-accredited recognition of legitimacy.

1: See Lebbeus Woods' introduction in *Anarchitecture: Architecture Is a Political Act*. 1st ed. London: Academy Editions, 1992
2: Ibid.

Preliminary Proposal _ The Program

The actual situation of Bogotà, as described in the last part of my research, is now affecting la Perseverancia more closely. Gentrification is now the threat. Real estate developers are trying take advantage of the difficult situation of this barrio through urban speculations that would have as ultimate result the replacement of present the low-income inhabitants with middle-upper class.

La Perseverancia had two different reactions in regard to this phenomenon, the first one is related to the tendency of hiding behind an image of dangerousness, as we have already said, while the other uses cultural practices as defensive instrument.

The population of this barrio founded in 1988 "la Chicha Festival". The Chicha also known as la cerveza andina" is a drink with a long history in the working class cultural identity of Colombia. This alcoholic drink made from corn was brought in Bogotà during the demographic transfer from the countryside that happened at the beginning of the twentieth century. This drink was very papular in la Perseverancia as well but during the 1950's it was banned for hygienic reasons, motivations that actually concealed economic interests. The campaign was organised primarily by the beer company *Bavaria* for which the inhabitants of la Perseverancia were working.

This festival therefore has great value for the inhabitants of la Perseverancia because it represents the rediscovery of a traditional drink but more importantly is a psychological revenge over history's cultural oppression and over economic-driven abuses of power.

The festival brought through the years other benefits in the social and economic sphere. The preparation of the festival requires four months of production and it involves more than 250 families whose domestic income amply benefits from the sales. Moreover it has been proved that during the celebrations of the festival there is a relevant reduction of lawless activities. At the moment the production of Chicha is very disorganised and takes place in private houses.

My proposal takes the form of a future scenario for la Perseverancia in which the production of Chicha can perform as medium to activate self management processes, to intensify the community cohesion, to strengthen cultural identity and to restore the reputation of the barrio.

I then started to analyse the neighbourhood more closely individuating its potentials and weak spots, respectively the intersections of the infrastructural grid here seen as point of intensity and the derelict and abandoned buildings as element to be dismantled to undertake a process of regeneration of the area. This operation alone partly dissolves the grid introducing an element that is totally absent in the barrio, free space. The new spaces should be then put in dialogue with the rest of the built environment through an operation of emptying out. Existing private properties would lose their ground floor, a space that can thus become a resource to organise the production of Chicha and other types of public space.
La Chicha's micro-areas of production are scattered over the entire neighbourhood and are based on a new concept of factory in which the inhabitants are owners of their own activity.
The second part of my proposal deals with distribution. I imagined the Chicha's points of sale to be located along the South and West edges because of their proximity to areas that are experiencing a quick urban development. This points of distribution would perform as the only element of contact between la Perseverancia and the rest of the surrounding areas. The community would be in this way in control of the entire production-distribution loop.
All the micro architectural interventions are for the moment located at the level of the ground floor that is seen as the space for the community and as the space where major part of urban and social conflicts can be approached.

Definition of the architectural strategy

No social forms are static. As dynamic entities they do not operate only to assure their perpetuation, they always tend towards a direction that would imply mechanisms of transformations.

In the further analysis that came with the evolution of my architectural strategy of intervention I managed to systematise the main architectural issues of la Perseverancia. This neighbourhood is characterised by a totalising uniformity that is due to several factors: the grid - the urban density - the lack of open space - the absence of typological variety - a lack of scale variations - a widespread sense of chaos deriving from non-regulated, self-constructed development.

The formal elements from the list above are strictly related to economic and social conditions and in them they find their explanation. Since the very beginning in la Perseverancia people lived in a state of limitation given by phenomena of categorisation in classes and because of the consequential characterisation of their living space. The history of la Perseverancia and of its transformations is an example of how social and somatic are always connected in urban spaces.

The common resources that I have individuated in la Perseverancia are related to two distinct practices of making, the first one comes from the knowledge that people have on the production of Chicha and the latter from the knowledge that people have in the construction and transformation of their built environment.

La Perseverancia has always transformed itself pushed by individual interests that brought to an unsatisfactory result in terms of space for the community. My proposal intends to establish new connections between the urban and social sphere in order to promote practices of care and maintenance of the public spaces. Collective spaces could then be seen as extensions of the domestic space. Blurring the line between public and private engenders different sense of belonging. This would partly subvert the all encompassing regime of private ownership cuttingly present in the barrio.

The Question of Ownership

Ownership appears to be one of the central issues and my investigation on this thematic has been carried out through the study of spatial configurative elements. I decided to start from stairs since they play a fundamental role in relation to another topic internal to concept of ownership, the one of accessibility.

Through very simple experimentations I managed to recognise the crucial importance that stairs can have when located inside a closed space or when placed outside.
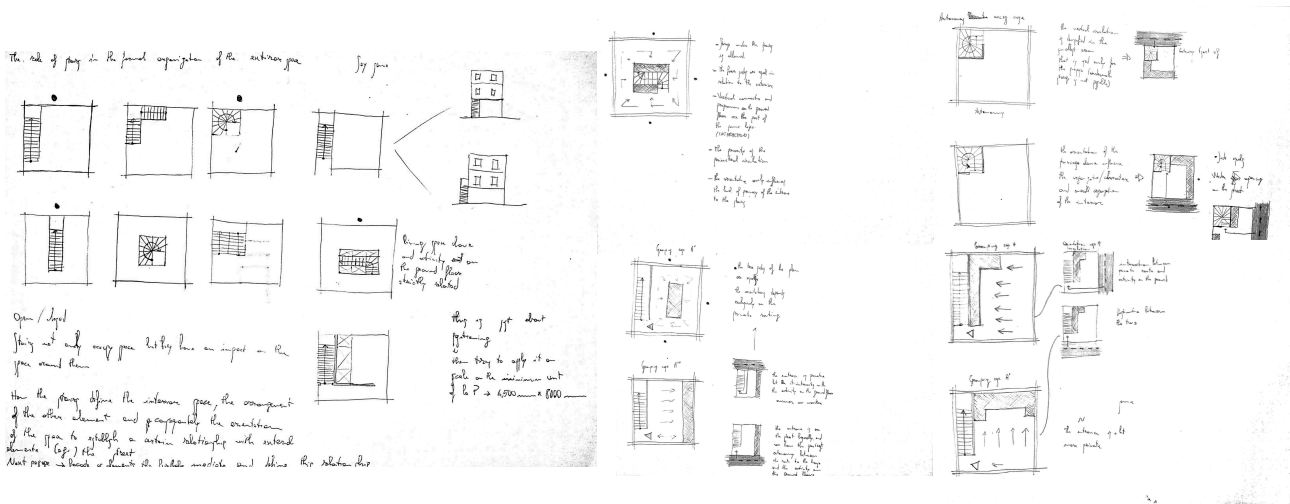
As following step of my process I defined characteristic spots in the area such as: Crossroads - Wide street - Narrow street - Transversal axis - The edge.

Starting from the very high degree of control that this community have over this enclosed urban space my intention is to investigate the potential transformations that could be generated by a switch in the attitude from individual to collective.

In the typical architectural situations aforementioned I followed a sequence of operation:

- First I freed spaces according to the characteristics of the section of the neighbourhood in which I was intervening. This happened through demolitions and openings at the ground floor in private properties.
- The second step was about circulation intended as possibilities of movement for public users and new ways to access private properties.
- Last operation was related to the definition of preliminary spatial intentions.

Almost all the decisions I made a this stage of the process were informed by a precise intention, introducing the idea of collective space. These new patterns of ownership were manipulated and controlled through means of occupation strategies and accessibility's management.

Private and public circulation, accessibility and visual and a physical permeability are the factors on which I based these preliminary spatial operations. These issues helped me in the investigation on the question of private ownership ,shared ownership and all the nuances that can exist in between them.

From a more strictly architectural perspective what I did was:

- Breaking the rigidity of the grid dissolving the continuous facade.
- Focusing at level of the ground floor.
- Partly dissolving the heaviness that characterised the area.
- Combing accesses to houses and public spaces when beneficial for my intents.

Typifying these situation I looked at recurring elements from which I the extracted some abstract principles:

- Moving out towards the street with light structure.
- Compensate for the space taken giving out space from private properties.
- Creating accesses on the first floor.
- Introducing perpendicular circulation to the street.
- Reshuffling ownership on the ground floor.
- Permeability on the ground floor.
- Unify ground floor spaces of previously separated properties.
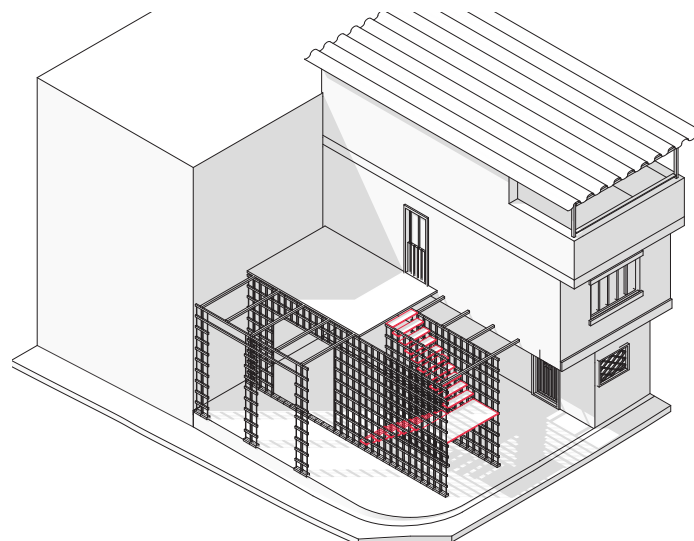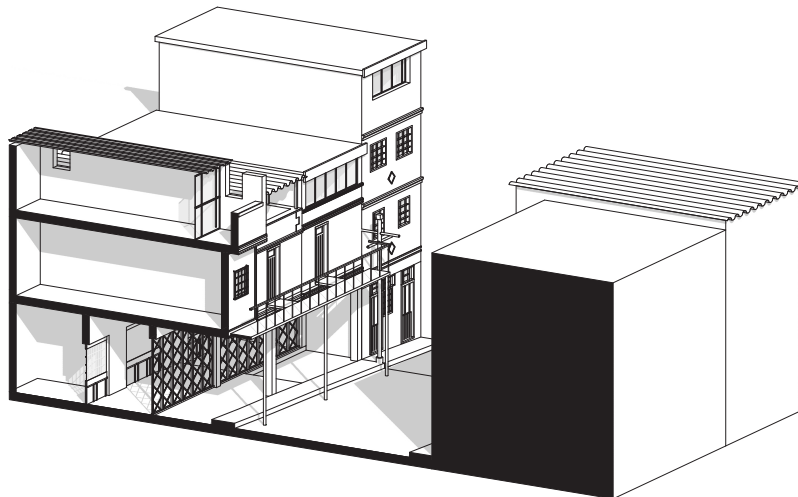
The Configuration Approach _ The Module

Each of this principles is favoured by particular forms contained in architectural elements.

So the following step had to be defining this micro elements that could generate the macro-interventions and it was clear that the result of my work did not have to be a specific form. The definition of a form would have lead me to a close system. On the contrary what I wanted to use was a configuration approach based on principles. My goals in terms of space were defined in the previous stages of the process while the construction principles that would have determined a methodology of forms generations still had to be defined.
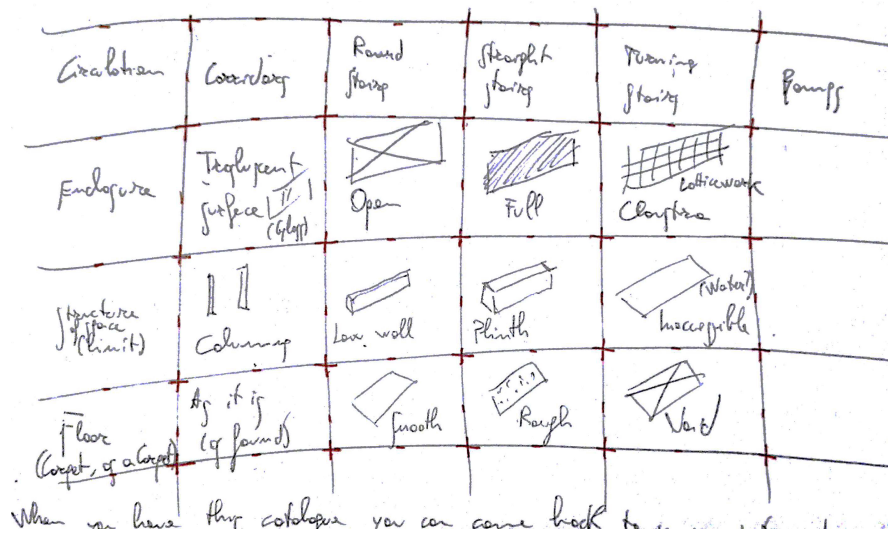
The elements resulting from the previous steps of my work had to fit in a modular scheme and this because modularity allows for flexibility and at the same time it provides what is lacking in la Perseverancia, coherence and order. Order in this way is not imposed from the top but is allowed and generated by an architectural logic of standardisation.

The transformative nature of la Perseverancia has always been very dynamic and I am answering to its problems with a dynamic system that define principles. My intervention plugs itself in a logic of community control of the built environment. Providing a system instead of an architectural fixed project means allowing transformation of the space based on self invention. This enacts a political and economical empowerment that has nothing to do with impositions.
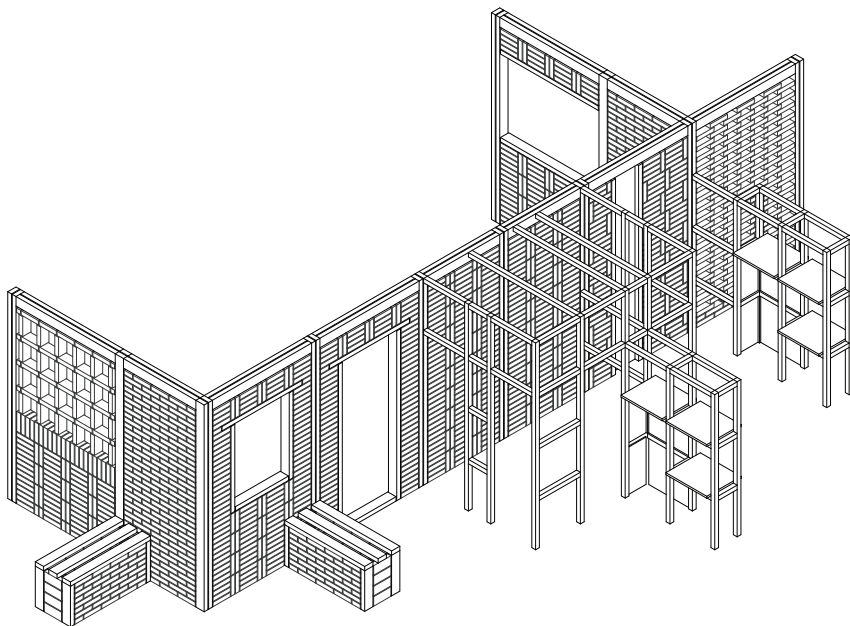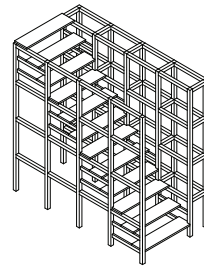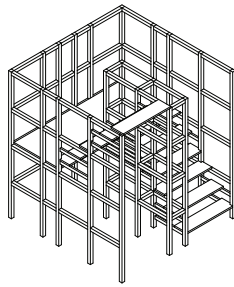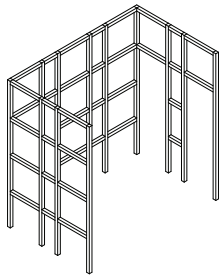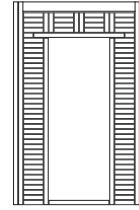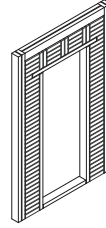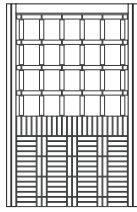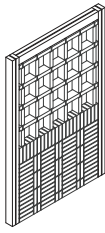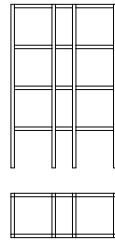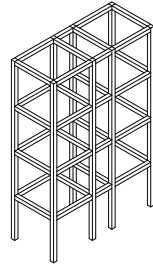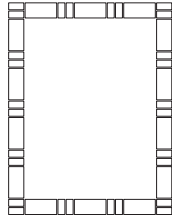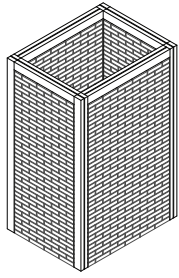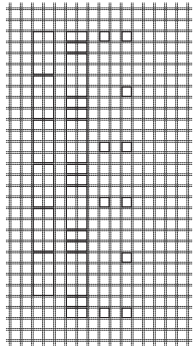
Simplicity is one of the principles contained in my system. I believe that making things simple can empower people because this widens the range of functions and actions that an individual can accomplish.

Another one is incrementalism. The operation does not work as through a master plan approach. The system is something that remains to the community, it can be used according to present conditions. Every small intervention can be initiated and carried further as economic resources are found.

Pure configuration approach does not provide the definition of a form but the definition of principles. Then these principles can allow form to be generated and to change through time.

This approach is in close relation with the way the project was formulated initially and with the insights that came out from the spatial experimentations that were developed through the proess. This because what I was after was not a definitive solution but a flexible system that can be applied in many different situation because of the flexibility that is contained in the modular principles that informed it.

Economical advantages:

Resources have to be used in common the get the most out of them. So the best thing that poor people can do is to organise themselves and coordinate their needs in order to achieve some scale economy, so even in architecture standardisation and typification are always beneficial in economic terms.

Final Reflections

The first part of the work i did after the P2 was very site specific and had to do with spatial transformations while the one after had to do with methodological approaches and for this reason it acquired a more general character. These two sides of my project has to be seen as the architectural outcome of a practice of architecture that is strictly related to social aspects. During the first part of the design process I looked at context analysing and understanding its social, economic and architectural problems. Starting from them I formulated scenarios based on architectural transformations. The following steps were about defying a system that once provided to people would empower them as activators of architectural transformation. The modular system contains in itself rules able to generate a limited spectrum of architectural forms; the same forms informed the system in the first place.

My proposal tries to put together in a system different types of reflections and intentions. 'Le fil rouge' that keeps everything together is a renovated idea of ownership for la Perseverancia. The typological transformations I imagined for this area starts from the idea of trading private space for collective space and such a radical upheaval in the living patterns of the inhabitants of this barrio can easily arise questions about compensation.

I believe that what this project tries to do instead is giving shape to a process of negotiation.

la Perseverancia in the state it is now cannot survive long. People have to get together to organise themselves and get the most out of the small resources they have available. One is Chicha that is already there and that merely represents a pretext to unlock the other one. This second resource is hidden and it is space, something you would not think about in such a dense built environment. But here is the cleverness of this proposal, here is where the contribution of a professional make the difference.

Such a profound transformation of the architectural substance of la Perseverancia is obviously very difficult but necessary to achieve fruitful results
Moreover this project does not stand as a simply formal exercise it almost takes the form of a political act.
It is a translation of a reality that already exists but only in the form of potential and for this reason it requires a daring explorative attitude. My exercise had faced and it is facing many difficulties that were necessary in light of the innovative result I was pursuing.
Final goal of this cultural exercise was not finding solutions to problems but rather learning.