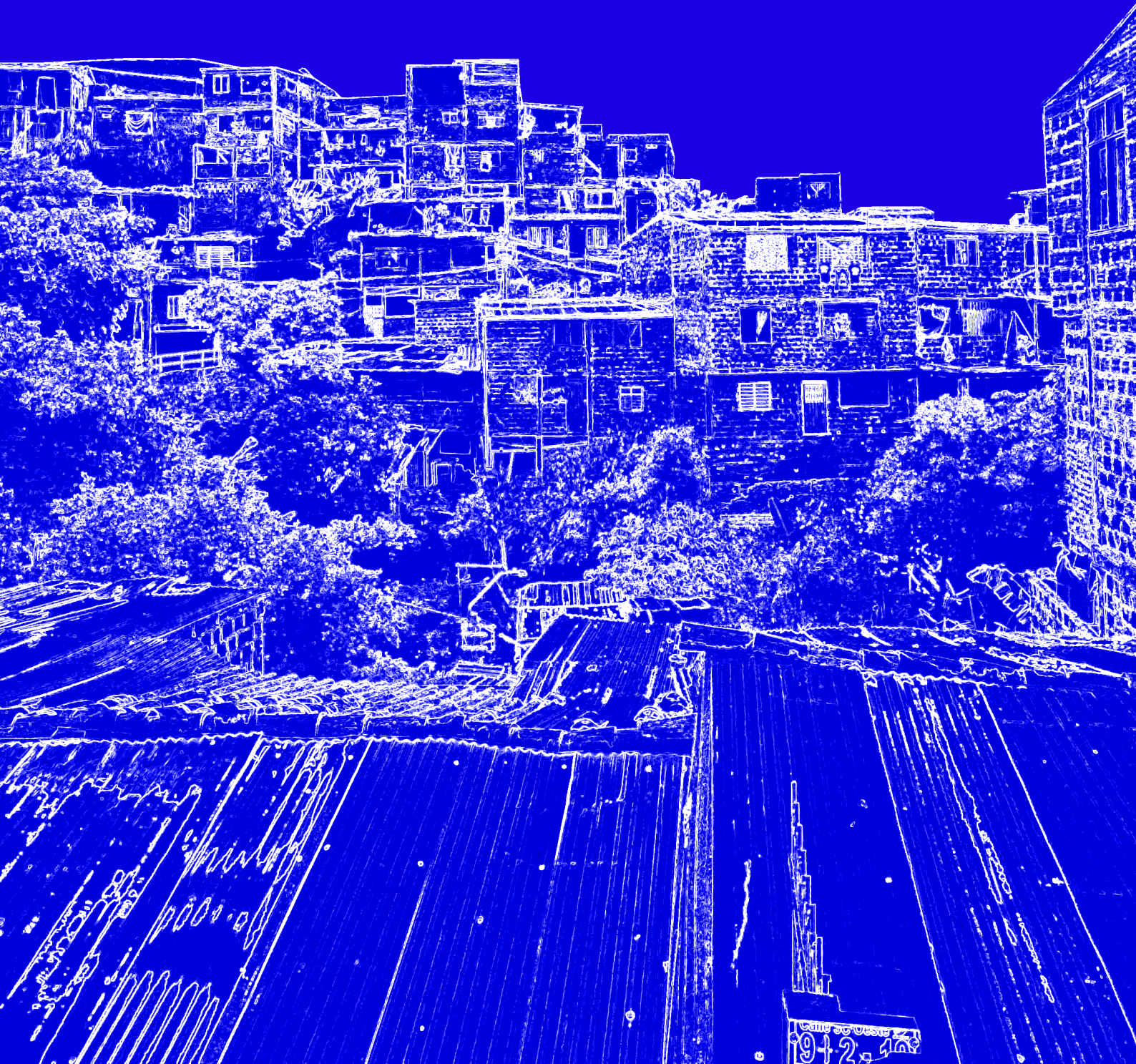
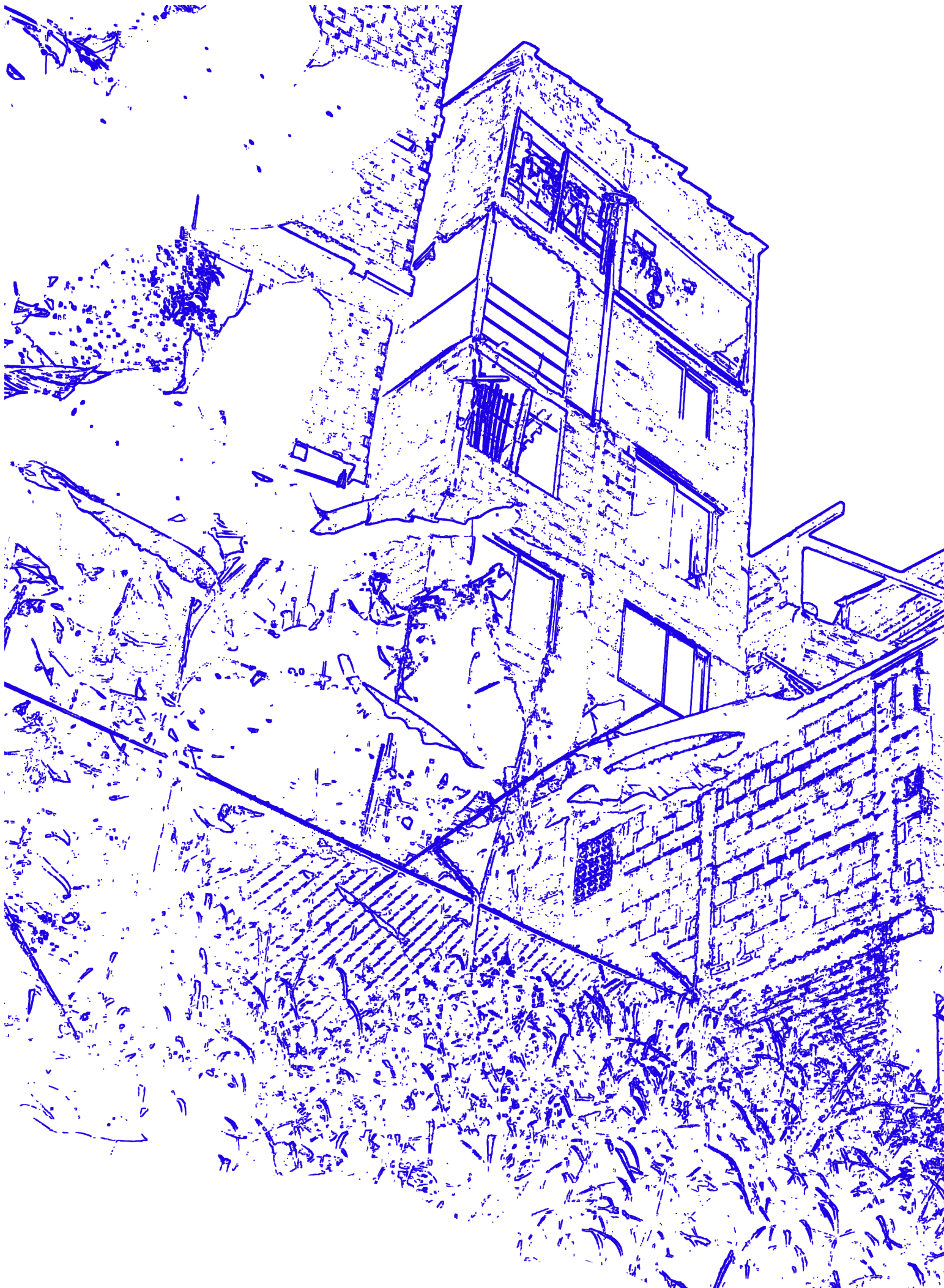


TERRITORIOS EMERGENTES

Pathways for Community-Based Urban Planning Strategies in Cali, Colombia.

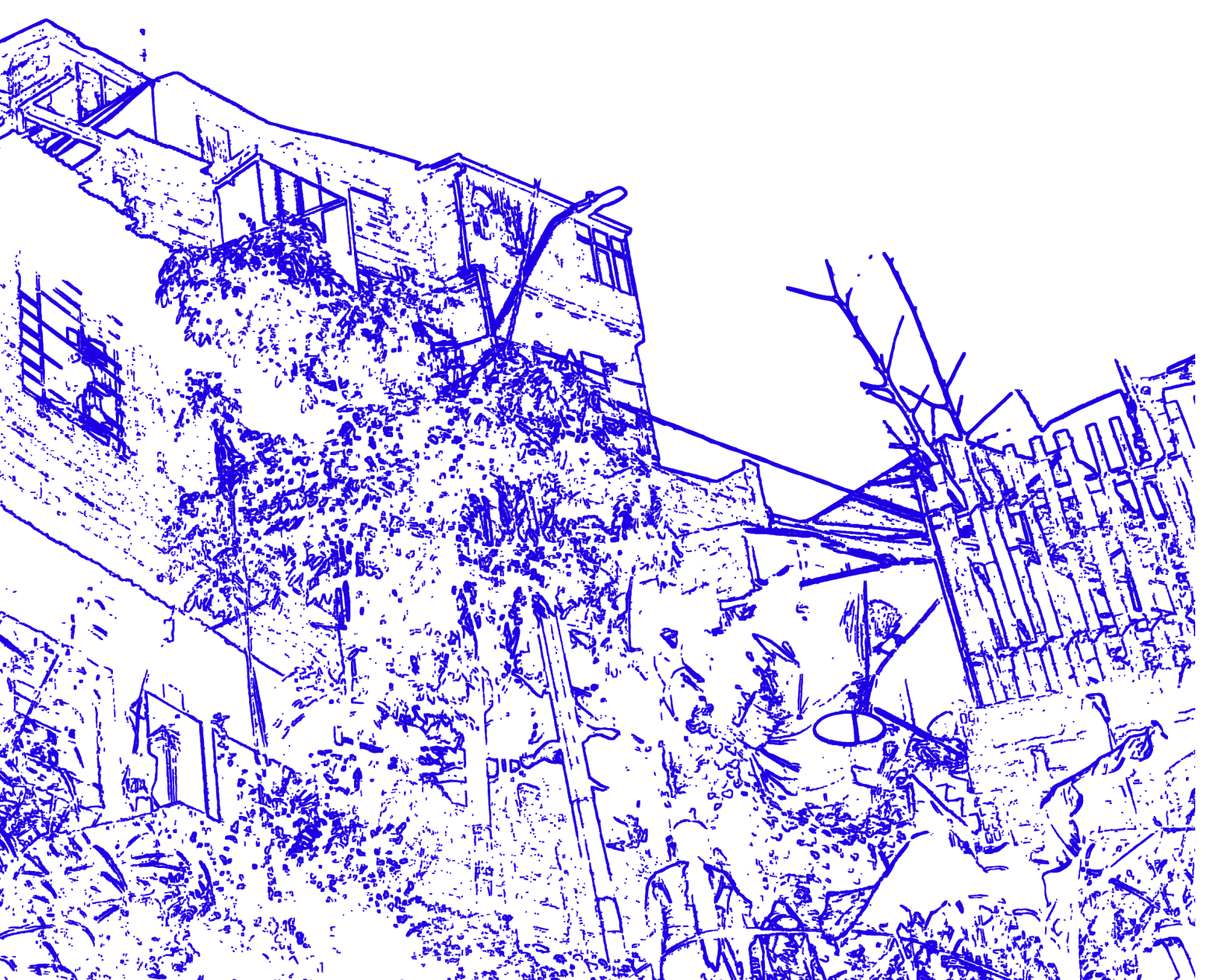
Thesis Report
Isabella Jaramillo Diaz





*"No podemos construir lo nuestro con lo mismo."
We cannot build our own realities with more of the same*

- Arturo Escobar



COLOPHON



Fig. 0 Kid using self- built public space in self-built neighbourhoods. Photo by author, 2021.

EMERGING TERRITORIES

Pathways for Community-Based Urban Planning Strategies in Cali, Colombia.

Master Thesis Report
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ABSTRACT

In Colombia, the expansion of self-built neighbourhoods is driven by displacement, rapid urbanization, and entrenched structural inequality. In cities like Cali, self-built neighborhoods have become a critical response to the failure of formal housing systems, offering shelter to displaced communities, migrants, and the urban poor. Despite their longevity and contribution to the city's social fabric, these neighborhoods remain largely excluded from urban policies, which favors a limited set of communities based on legal and technical criteria. This exclusion reflects a broader capitalist planning paradigm that prioritizes economic interests over social and territorial justice.

Yet in the absence of institutional support, residents of self-built neighborhoods continue to construct and care for their territories through collective organization, resilience, and shared values. Practices rooted in solidarity, care, and autonomy give rise to alternative forms of urban life that challenge dominant planning models. This research analyzes the trajectories of self-built neighborhoods in Cali to identify both the structural barriers that must be transformed and the territorial values that can guide more just, community-driven forms of urban planning. It argues for a redefinition of planning and design practices grounded in the social production of habitat and the right to the city—from below and with dignity.

Key words: Self-Built Neighborhoods, Cali, Social Production of Habitat, Right to the City, Value-Based Community Planning.



Fig. 1 Neighbourhood Improvement work in Consolidated Self-Built Neighbourhoods. Photo by Gynna Millan, 2021.

Open Letter to the Reader

By Isabella Jaramillo Díaz

Dear reader,
Can I tell you a story?

This is one of many that characterizes the large population living in neighborhoods we often label or recognize as “informal” or “slums”.

This is Ari López, he is originally from Cauca, Colombia and is one of the millions of people in Colombia who have been displaced by the armed conflict, who have left their territories to save their lives and with nothing but the hope of improving their situation. He, like many others, found refuge on the peripheries of urban areas, that now constitute the invisible city, those areas that don't appear on the map, where people, precariously, build their homes, and where they find shelter because no one responded, no one took responsibility, and no one took the time to understand and to resolved their situation.

Despite the difficulty of starting from scratch and carrying the uncertainty that the place he was settling in was not allowed to be occupied, Don Ari had no other choice but to stay. As I said before, this story—though unique—has many similarities to others. Don Ari found more people in the same situation, looking for a home and the possibility of giving their families a dignified life.

With Don Ari, a community was born and began to develop values such as the autonomy to decide in their own territory, solidarity among them to solve the problem of access to drinking water, prior knowledge to build latrines or grow food and justice when the state burned everything down and evicted them violently. They took on responsibility and care for their environment, improving it whenever possible. In this process, they created memory.

And though hope is sometimes difficult to hold onto, given the harshness of their lived experiences, it is precisely what keeps them going. Hope is what keeps them fighting, organizing, and working together to improve their situation.

They began to consolidate their lives and claim what they were entitled to—not through institutional channels, but by producing their own habitat, collectively, from the ground up.





Don Ari's story is one of the many stories I listened to while I worked as a researcher in Cali, Colombia before starting this Master Programme. Part of that work is the heart of this thesis. I started with many doubts, but with the certainty that I wanted to work on this topic. I worked with self-built neighbourhoods for two years and this experience marked and changed not only the way I see my career but also the way I see life.

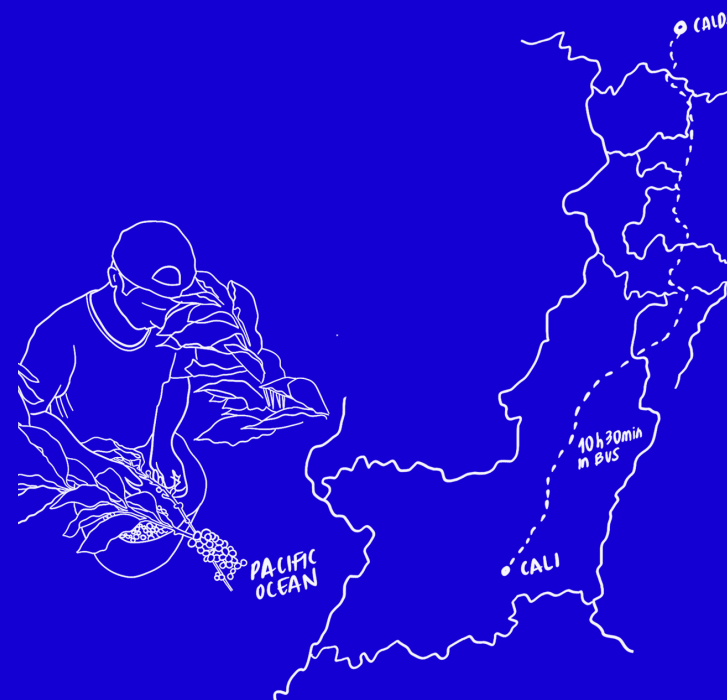
With that clear, I selected 12 personal stories that, like the one from Don Ari's, were marked by struggle, pride, hard work, but also pain, trauma and nostalgia. Through these stories, I wanted to understand how the everyday city was socially constructed despite the absence of the state, as an alternative to a dignified habitat.

Local stories, global echoes

The stories led me to seek their connection to a broader global context, where I came to understand that this is not just happening in Colombia—it is happening in many parts of the world. Today, approximately 1.1 billion people live in self-built neighborhoods, and 80% of them are in countries like my own.

How does this even happen?
Why does it continue to happen?
What can we do about it?

To explore these questions through my thesis, I returned to the Colombian context, where I found that these neighborhoods are closely intertwined with the phenomenon of forced displacement—a situation that has left millions without a home due to violence. Many arrive in cities seeking refuge and better conditions, only to find more exclusion. This was reflected in many of the stories I heard, where most people came from rural areas and had been direct victims of the armed conflict.



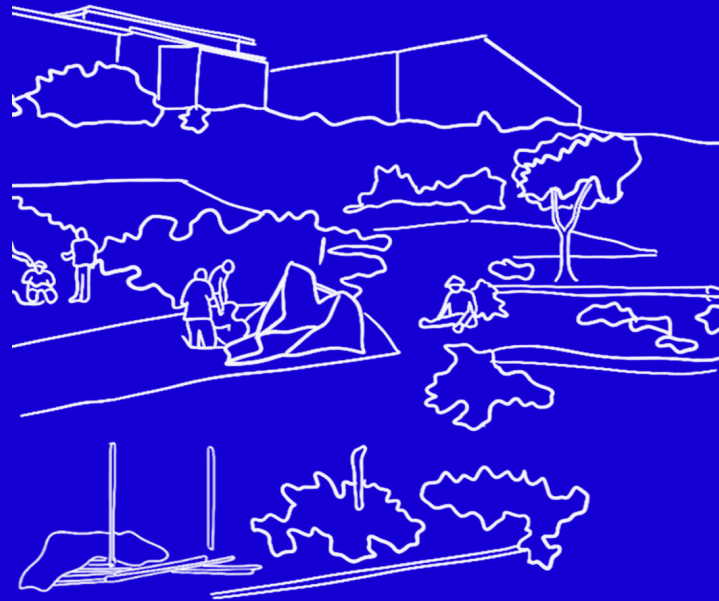
Through their experiences, I came to understand the territory, not only how it was built, but how it might have been built differently. A process in which starting over could have been less painful, and where the possibility of dreaming was not a privilege, but a right. My analysis revealed how the profound absence of the state, and in the early stages, the violence that marked evictions and rejections, created a deep void that led to re-victimization and marginalization, rather than healing and inclusion.

With these stories, I understood how important collective action and self organization and management are, the great solidarity of the people in helping each other because they share needs and aspirations for the future, and how clever and communal they are with space and resource management. This is not to romanticize their process, but to highlight the immense knowledge these populations have, knowledge that sometimes is ignored or dismissed, in the development and construction of the city.

Which theories helped me frame my explorations?

The theories that supported and gave language to my process, such as the Right to the City, Insurgent Planning, the Social Production of Habitat, Autonomous Design, and Radical Imagination, allowed me to better understand what was already happening in the territories I engaged with. These were not abstract frameworks but deeply embodied in the everyday actions of the people I met.

The Right to the City, from a Latin American perspective, helped me recognize that what is often dismissed as “informality” is actually a political and territorial claim: people building, inhabiting, and governing their spaces through struggle, not permission. Insurgent planning showed me how, in the absence or aggression of the state, planning still occurs—through solidarity, creativity, and resistance—by those who have been historically excluded. In parallel, the Social Production of Habitat and Autonomous Design revealed the ethical and relational dimensions of self-construction, not only building homes but weaving care, memory, and justice into the territory itself. These frameworks validated the knowledge and agency of communities like Don Ari’s, who do not wait for solutions but actively create them from within.



Lastly, radical imagination reminded me that these acts are not only reactive, but visionary—they carry with them the potential to transform our understanding of what cities could be. What if we planned from these values? What if these practices were not pushed to the margins, but placed at the center of how we shape our shared futures?

What If... as a Political Tool

The stories I heard in Comuna 18, Cali, taught me about the enormous capacities of the people and their strong agency in claiming their right to the city. But at the same time, they left me with a bitter taste, the bitter taste of “what if...?” A thought I always try to avoid because it only gives me headaches, but in this case, I wanted to use it as an innovative, critical mode that challenges a reality I refuse to accept.

I wanted to imagine...

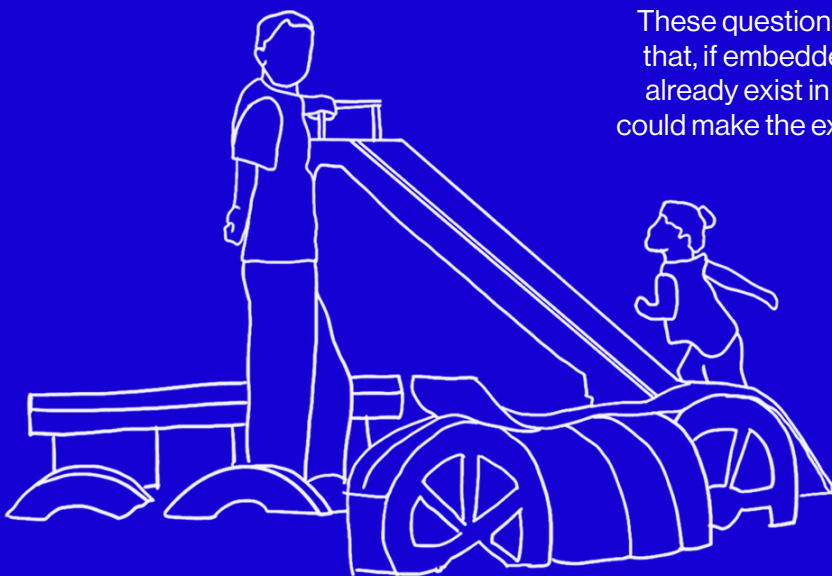
What if Don Ari had arrived and had been welcomed with open arms?

What if people had never had to fear being evicted from their territory and had been able to live in peace, working for their dreams, not just their basic needs?

What if public spaces and mobility had been planned from the perspective of the people—especially the most vulnerable—and not based on what was easiest?

What if their previous knowledge had been acknowledge and used?

These questions inspired me and challenged me to propose a system that, if embedded within the existing planning instruments (those that already exist in many cities but are rarely implemented with intention) could make the experience of arriving in the city profoundly different for those who come seeking refuge, dignity, and a future.



Value Based Imaginaries

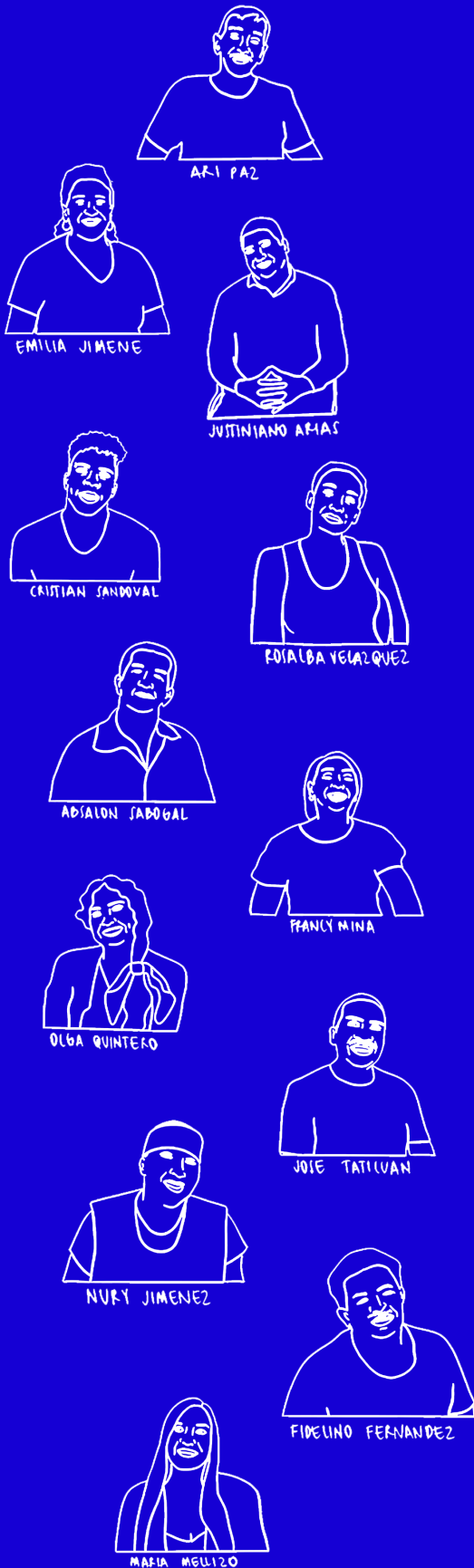
And so, “The Path Made of Values” was born, from the need to recognize that within the territory there is already immense potential, knowledge, and values that can be strengthened. But the state’s responsibility in facilitating this process, not just of community development but also of human development—is essential. It is a duty of the government and must be fulfilled.

So I allowed myself to dream—of how these two parts that constitute the city (the state and the communities) can work together, harnessing each other’s strengths and prioritizing the well-being of the people above monetary gain.

For this, the approach from public policy helped me understand how it could be implemented and what new instruments might be developed for this.

This process of going back and forth, of finding in the stories a sea of experiences filled with knowledge and struggle, returning to theory to understand deeply the situation and its connection to the global context, going back to the stories with a lens of comprehension and analysis, returning to Latin American theories and examples from my continent, and finally imagining how these stories could have been told, is my thesis: a constant back-and-forth filled with emotions, where admiration, frustration, and hope walked with me every step of the way.





So, dear reader,
**Are You Ready to Listen
 Differently?**

I hope that through this project—through these stories, reflections, and provocations—I can plant a small seed. One that invites you to question the world we live in.

May these pages open the possibility of listening in a new way, listening not just for facts or conclusions, but for lived experience, struggle, and care.

If you allow yourself to truly listen, these stories might shift the way you see. And I promise: once you begin to see differently, there is no turning back. It becomes hard to ignore what others reveal to you. And in that shift lies something deeply beautiful, the possibility of sharing, of building city and life in community.

You don't have to follow a linear path.

You are invited to read this thesis from beginning to end, from end to beginning, or to linger in the middle, where tension and transformation often live. On the following page, you'll find a research map and summary that can guide your exploration.

Wherever you begin, thank you for being here.

Thank you for reading.
 Thank you for listening.

Isabella Jaramillo Díaz

The Bigger Picture

Current Challenges

Urbanization, inequality, climate change, and forced migration are not distant concepts—they directly affect how cities like Cali grow. This chapter shows how those pressures give rise to self-built neighborhoods, which are often stigmatized but deeply resilient.

Under

Research

This chapter explores how the conditions of their homes and neighborhoods shape their conditions and collective



Introduction

I begin by sharing where I come from, both personally and academically. Growing up in Cali, Colombia shaped how I see the world, and this chapter explains why I care deeply about the people and places at the center of this research.

How I Approach the Research

Research & Theoretical Framework

By focusing on the historical evolution, spatial logic, and community-led interventions within self-built neighborhoods, I was able to identify the core values guiding their territorial practices and develop a planning proposal grounded in lived experience.

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Understanding the Context

Research & Theoretical Framework

This chapter offers a historical and spatial overview of how these marginalized populations have built their homes and lives under extremely difficult conditions, creating territories through resilience and collective action.

Imagining a Different Path

Value-Based Imaginaries

This chapter proposes a speculative yet grounded framework for future urban planning rooted in community values. Five developmental phases envision an alternative pathway: from dignified pre-arrival planning to collective flourishing. A narrative of "Don Ari" exemplifies this transformation.



Community Narratives

Social Production of Habitat

This is the heart of the work. I analyzed stories from long-time residents to understand how they arrived, resisted eviction, organized for water and electricity, and cared for one another. The analysis identifies a series of territorial values that guided the material and social construction of

Moving from Ideas to Action

Policy Recommendations

This chapter offers a new vision for how urban planning could work. Instead of seeing self-built areas as problems, governments could support them from the start. The author shares a five-step plan where families are welcomed, supported, and involved in planning their communities.

I N T R O D U C T I O N

Positionality Statement
Ethics and Relevance

POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

Growing up in Cali has been one of the greatest gifts life has given me. As a young, mestiza, middle-class woman, I have often wondered what these characteristics mean in my life and how they shape my perspective. Although I did not fully understand it before, I now recognize how my experiences have profoundly influenced the way I see the world and approach my work.

I had the privilege of pursuing a university degree at Universidad del Valle, the best public university in my region. This experience burst the bubble of privilege in which I had unknowingly lived. It was there that I understood my path had not been the same as many others, that there were people facing far greater challenges than mine. This revelation instilled in me a deep sense of humility and immense admiration for those around me.

My time at university transformed how I understood the world and awakened in me a critical awareness of the structural inequalities that affect so many lives. I realized that systemic barriers, such as socioeconomic inequality, structural neglect, and stigmatization, prevented many people from accessing the same opportunities I had and would continue to have in the future. This shift in perspective fueled my desire to address these injustices through my work.

For two years, I worked on a research project in self-built neighborhoods, listening to the stories of their residents. I heard accounts of perseverance, pain, nostalgia, and pride—narratives that revealed a city I thought I knew but had never truly seen. These neighborhoods, laden with stigma, remain invisible to those who do not inhabit similar environments, as was my case. Here, I came to recognize the immense wealth these communities possess in their self-management, communal bonds, and organizational capacity—potentials that are often unacknowledged by the state and society at large.

When I came to the Netherlands to study, I realized that my position and the way I approach my projects are deeply shaped by my life as a woman from Cali.

Despite the stigma often associated with my country from the perspective of people in other nations, I have taken on the role of showcasing not only the significant challenges we face but also the opportunities in my region and the resilience that defines our communities.

Throughout my journey, I have experienced discrimination on several occasions due to my background and gender, which has given me a perspective of empowerment and empathy. It has helped me understand the struggles of others and led me to adopt an intersectional perspective. This perspective allows me to comprehend power dynamics and how each person experiences life differently.

While my educational and professional journey has provided me with tools to analyze inequality, I am acutely aware of the privileges I hold and the biases they may create. My position as a middle-class person, an outsider to these neighborhoods, demands that I work with humility, always centering the voices and experiences of the communities I engage with. I strive to conduct my research ethically, ensuring that it benefits those who have shared their lives and stories with me.

This positioning guides my current research on self-built neighborhoods in Cali, focusing on facilitating the integration of vulnerable communities into the urban fabric. My passion is to ensure that the enjoyment of my city is not a privilege reserved for a few but a right accessible to everyone. I believe that recognizing and addressing the needs of these communities early on can prevent decades of stigmatization, vulnerability, and revictimization.

Through this work, I aim to challenge systemic oppressions and advocate for inclusive urban policies that reflect the diversity and potential of all communities. My ultimate goal is to contribute to making the concept of “living well” no longer an abstract idea but a tangible reality for everyone in my city.



Fig. 3 Interview to Alondra in her house. Photo by author, 2022.

ETHICS AND RELEVANCE

This research builds on the insights gained during my two years as a researcher with the GREAT project (Gridding Equitable Urban Futures in Areas of Transition). In this project, I implemented participatory methodologies such as semi-structured interviews, participatory video, intersectional mapping, and transect walks with residents of consolidated self-built neighborhoods. Reflecting on the wealth of information collected during that time, much of which remains underutilized, I have chosen to base my study on the secondary analysis of qualitative data. This approach will allow me to identify patterns of population dynamics, development, and self-management in self-built neighborhoods. Using these insights, I aim to propose urban strategies that enhance opportunities for these communities while mitigating challenges experienced by older self-built neighborhoods.

The data analysis will continue the work concluded last year and will adhere to the confidentiality agreements previously established and signed. I am committed to presenting the lived experiences of these communities in a manner that is both accurate and contextually grounded.

My academic journey and the critical perspectives I have developed through my studies have informed my approach to this research. Guided by the theories I have incorporated into my theoretical framework, I aim to prioritize the role of self-built neighborhoods, recognizing their histories and potential.

In a commitment to representing the perspectives of my territory and Latin America, this research is conducted in both Spanish and English. This dual-language approach ensures the inclusion of methods, theories, and data that draw not only from the

academic traditions of the Global North but also from the rich body of research and findings originating in Latin America.

This research is particularly relevant because the participatory methods I conducted previously have provided a strong foundation for understanding the dynamics of these neighborhoods. Revisiting the data a year later, with the knowledge I have gained through my master's program, offers a new perspective that may reveal findings previously overlooked. This new analysis has the potential to enrich the original research.

Furthermore, this study highlights how participatory methodologies and secondary data analysis can inform long-term urban planning strategies. It seeks to develop proposals that reflect the realities of self-built neighborhoods and their evolution over time. By doing so, it serves as a model for creating more inclusive and efficient urban policies.

This work also amplifies the voices of those who are often marginalized and excluded, not only from urban decision-making processes but also from broader societal recognition. Through this research, I hope to spark conversations across academic, personal, and community settings, fostering a collective understanding that the city is a shared responsibility.

Finally, self-built neighborhoods are a global phenomenon, and their continued growth underscores the global relevance of this topic. The methodologies and findings from this research will serve as valuable lessons and potential starting points for future studies and proposals addressing self-built neighborhoods worldwide.



Fig. 3 Interview to Alondra in her house. Photo by author, 2022.

C U R R E N T
C H A L L E N G E

Global Trends
Self-built Development
Neighbourhood Upgrading

GLOBAL TRENDS

Urbanization

In recent decades, urban growth has been characterized by both spatial expansion and population increase, two closely interconnected trends that define the concept of “urbanization.”

In 1950, approximately 30% of the global population resided in cities. By 2018, this proportion had risen to 55%, and it is projected to reach 68% by 2050 (United Nations, 2019). As of 2018, the most urbanized regions were Northern America with 82% and Latin America and the Caribbean with 81%. (United Nations, 2019).

Cities are often seen as hubs of opportunity, offering spaces that, for many, symbolize hope and the promise of an improved quality of life. However, this promise is not equally accessible to all, leading to disparities in urban experiences. As a response to the challenge of finding affordable and accessible housing near potential opportunities offered by the city, self-built neighborhoods emerge as a solution.

Inequality

The experience of the city is not the same for everyone. In many cases, the neighborhood where you live significantly shapes your current circumstances and plays a critical role in determining the opportunities available to you in the future. This geographic and social positioning often influences access to resources, education, healthcare, and economic opportunities.

While global data highlights a growing trend of inequality, it often overlooks the complex layers of oppression and power dynamics that disproportionately affect certain communities. Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, women, and children, for example, face systemic barriers that exacerbate their challenges in accessing resources and opportunities. These intersecting forms of inequality create even greater disparities, which are not always reflected in broader statistical trends.

According to the United Nations (2020), countries where inequality has grown are home to more than two-thirds (71%) of the world’s population. Additionally, the share of income going to the wealthiest 1% of the global population has increased in 46 out of 57 countries and regions with available data between 1990 and 2015 (World Inequality Database, 2019). These figures illustrate not only the growing wealth gap but also the systemic structures that perpetuate inequality, often leaving the most vulnerable communities behind.

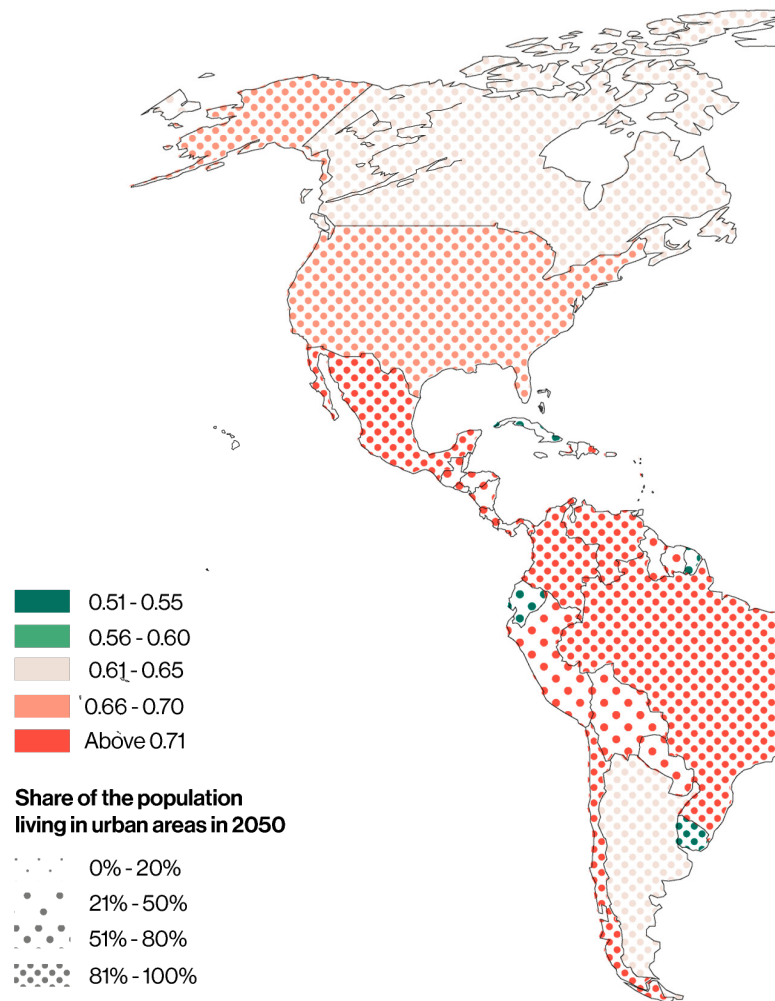
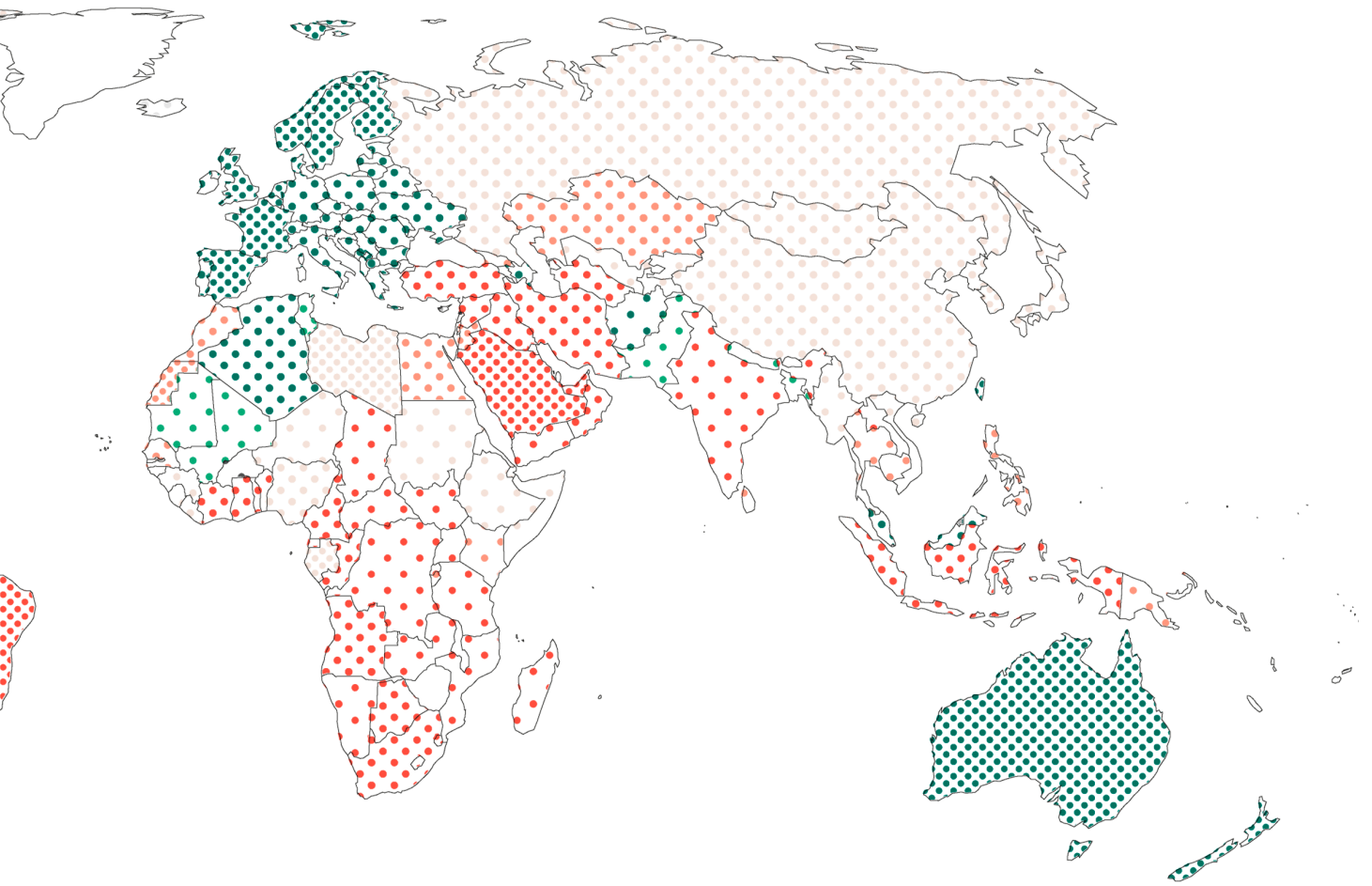


Fig. 6 Map contrasting the percentages of urbanization in 2050 and the inequality globally. Made



Fig. 5 Latin American Landscape [Online image]. 2015. <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2015/11/can-latin-america-trade-its-way-out-of-economic-trouble/>



by author.

GLOBAL TRENDS

Climate Change

Climate change is significantly disrupting access to opportunities. On a global scale, while the challenge of climate change affects every region, its impacts are far from uniform. In tropical areas—home to many of the world's poorer countries—climate change is undermining economic growth and deepening inequality (United Nations, 2020).

At a national level, the most vulnerable populations, such as Indigenous communities and residents of self-built neighborhoods, face disproportionate exposure to climate-related risks. This heightened vulnerability exacerbates poverty, making it harder for individuals to escape its grip and intensifying intergenerational poverty cycles.

A 2016 World Bank study revealed alarming projections. Even under a low-impact scenario—where mitigation and adaptation strategies are successful—between 3 million and 16 million people are expected to fall into poverty by 2030. In a high-impact scenario, where environmental strategies fail, this number could soar dramatically to between 35 million and 122 million people (Mook et al., 2016).

These projections are deeply concerning, given the proximity of 2030 and the slow pace of implementing transformative policies to prevent such outcomes. Furthermore, the global distribution of responsibility for addressing climate change is profoundly unequal. Countries in the Global North are the largest contributors to climate change, while nations in the Global South bear the brunt of its effects.

Climate change is also a significant driver of migration, both internal and international. Increasingly, rural-to-urban migration is linked to the displacement of communities forced to leave their homes due to climate-related disasters and environmental degradation (Munro, 2021).

Addressing these challenges requires urgent, equitable, and globally coordinated action to mitigate the impacts of climate change and support vulnerable communities.

Migration

One of the most fundamental aspirations shared by humanity is the desire to improve living conditions. Amid the current challenges facing our planet, many people find hope in migrating to places where they might have better opportunities to enhance their quality of life. However, the initial conditions for individuals worldwide are far from equal. People's circumstances are deeply influenced by their environments, which, in turn, shape their opportunities and decisions.

This inequality leads to a wide range of reasons for migration, including socioeconomic disparities, violence, natural disasters, and other factors. Migration has thus become an ongoing and steadily increasing phenomenon, encompassing both those who voluntarily leave their places of origin in search of better opportunities and those forced to flee due to life-threatening conditions (Vera & Adler, 2020)

Focusing solely on internally displaced persons whose displacement is driven by internal conflict or climate disasters, the numbers are staggering. Over the past five years, the total has doubled, reaching 76 million people by the end of 2023 (IDMC, 2023).

Urban centers are the primary destinations for forcibly displaced populations. As a result, the proliferation of self-built neighborhoods has emerged as a common response to the lack of adequate state intervention (IDMC, 2018). These settlements are predominantly located in peri-urban areas, which are often high-risk zones. This phenomenon disproportionately affects populations migrating from rural areas, such as Indigenous communities and farmers, who face unique challenges in adapting to urban environments.

Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing inclusive urban planning strategies that address the needs of migrant communities populations while mitigating the risks associated with self built development.



Fig. 7 A person carries belongings due to heavy rains in Las Tejerias. Dialogue Earth, 2022.

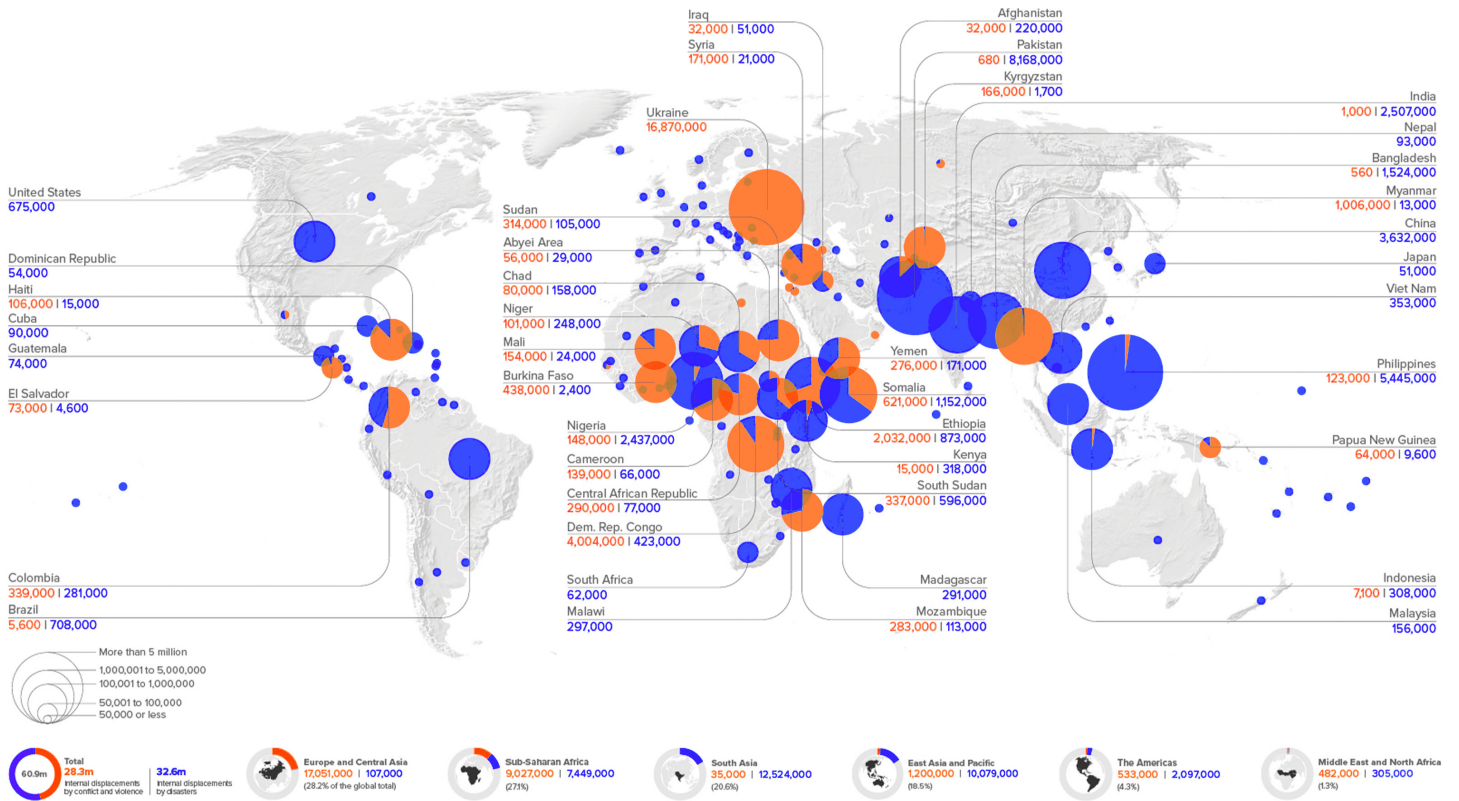


Fig. 8 Countries and territories with most internal displacements in 2022. IDMC, 2023.

SELF-BUILT DEVELOPMENT

Current Situation

In recent years, urban growth, combined with global challenges such as migration, inequality, and climate change, has led to the proliferation of self-built settlements worldwide. According to the United Nations, in 2022, 1.1 billion people lived in self-built neighborhoods (commonly referred to as “slums”), and this number is projected to increase by an additional 2 billion over the next 30 years (United Nations, 2022). This multidimensional issue affects specially countries in the Global South, with more than 80% of slum populations located in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Central and Southern Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean (GSG Impact, 2022).

Perspectives

Self-built settlements are often perceived as emblematic of the Global South, frequently associated with decay and poverty (Roy, 2011). The World Cities Report described these settlements as “one of the most enduring faces of poverty, inequality, exclusion, and deprivation” (UN-Habitat, 2020). Similarly, Cities Alliance – Cities Without Slums characterized them as areas of “inadequate housing” and “miserable living conditions” (Cities Alliance, 2024).

These portrayals not only reinforce the exclusion of these territories but also contribute to the stigmatization of their residents, perpetuating the notion that they are inferior to those living in “formal” parts of the city. While it is essential to recognize the resilience and resourcefulness of these communities, it is equally important to avoid romanticizing their struggles. Highlighting their adaptability and self-management capabilities should not serve as an excuse for governments to neglect their responsibilities. Vulnerable communities must not be left to face crises without adequate state support (Kaika, 2017).

Understanding Self-Built Settlements

The concept of self-built settlements has evolved over time. In the 1970s, Turner (1976) argued that self-built housing provided solutions that better addressed the needs of its inhabitants. Based on this perspective, the state should facilitate self-building processes, progressive development, and neighborhood improvement.

Later, Davis (2006) described these neighborhoods as the embodiment of urban poor survival strategies, emerging from marginality and driven by residents’ ingenuity to create shelter in the absence of affordable, formal housing options. These settlements undergo a gradual process of evolution and consolidation, characterized by self-management and physical improvements to their surroundings. This development often occurs despite the absence of state support, as governments frequently criminalize community-led solutions to problems they fail to address (Miraftab & Wills, 2005).

The neoliberal emphasis on individual progress and property ownership has further shaped the narrative around self-built neighborhoods. This perspective prioritizes securing land titles for individual homes, often overlooking the unique urban dynamics and collective processes that define these communities. Consequently, self-built neighborhoods are rarely understood as distinct urban spaces with their own characteristics and development trajectories, which often diverge from those of the “formal city” (Samper, 2014). Self-built neighborhoods are rooted in the knowledge and collective efforts of their communities. These residents rely on informal tools and processes to address their basic needs, often demonstrating remarkable ingenuity and adaptability.

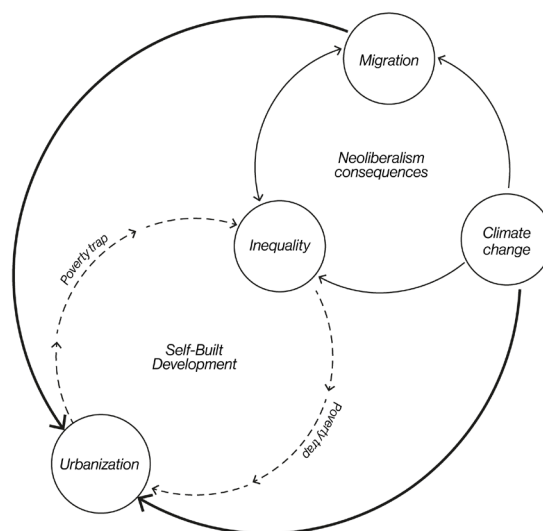


Fig. 11 Diagram of the connections of global trends and consequences.

However, beyond these visible efforts, there are less apparent dynamics that demand attention. Issues such as discrimination, power imbalances, and social hierarchies disproportionately affect the most vulnerable groups within these communities, including women, children, individuals with disabilities, and the LGTBIQ+ population. These groups often face significant barriers to achieving social well-being and stability (Calderón et al., 2023).

Accelerating the transformation of self-built settlements and addressing the needs of the most vulnerable urban territories must be a priority. This requires not only physical improvements but also a commitment to social equity and inclusion to ensure these communities are integrated into the broader urban fabric (UN-Habitat, 2024).



Fig. 9 Self-Built Neighbourhoods in Brazil. Kunak Air, 2023

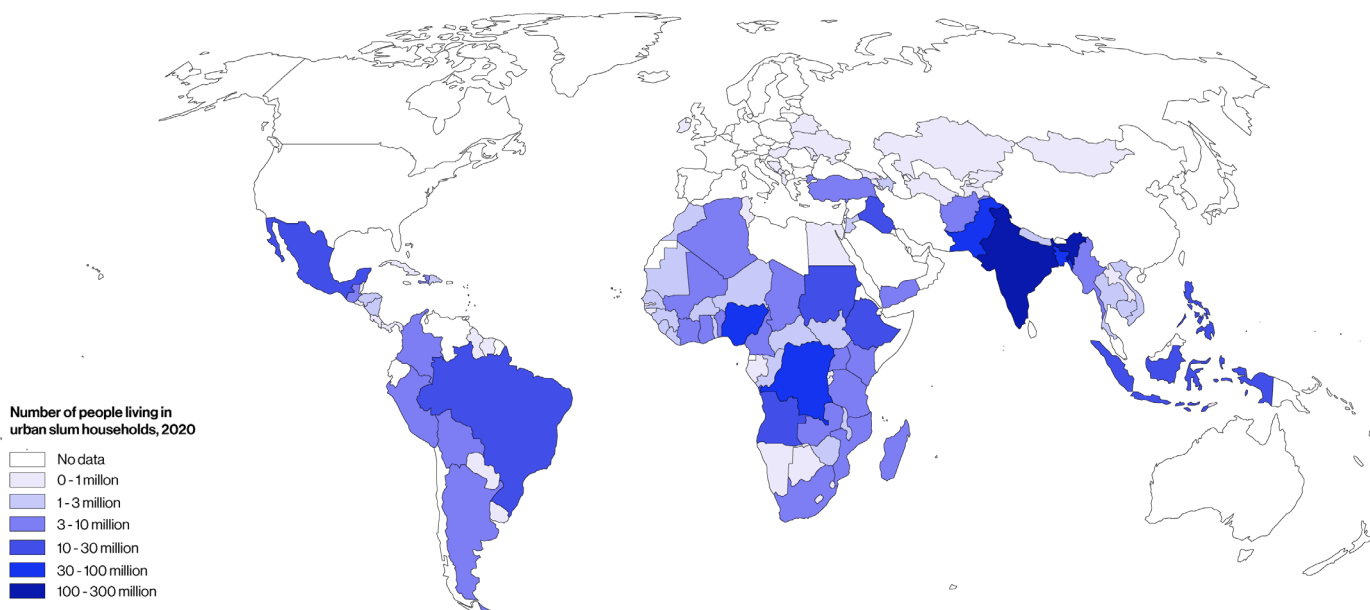


Fig. 10 Global map of the number of people living in self-built neighbourhoods. 2020.

NEIGHBOURHOOD UPGRADING

Neighborhood upgrading has emerged as an alternative to mitigate the challenges associated with self-built development, such as limited access to services, infrastructure, and opportunities. The United Nations defines neighborhood upgrading as a set of interventions designed to improve the living conditions of self-built neighborhoods (2014). Depending on the government's approach, these interventions may include improvements to the physical environment of neighborhoods, such as housing and public spaces.

The literature on slum upgrading largely emphasizes the physical implementation steps or the institutional arrangements between various levels of government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the community (Rigon, 2022).

While the core concept of upgrading is rooted in addressing urban poverty and integrating informal settlements into the formal urban fabric, its implementation has evolved over time, reflecting shifts in policy frameworks and priorities. This evolution underscores the importance of adapting upgrading strategies to the unique needs and contexts of each community to ensure sustainable and equitable development. However, despite this progress, many programs continue to treat informal settlements as homogenous entities, overlooking internal diversity and power dynamics (Rigon, 2022).

Addressing Diversity in Neighborhood Upgrading

A critical limitation of many upgrading programs is their tendency to assume uniform aspirations among residents. Informal settlements are often some of the most unequal urban areas, with residents experiencing varying levels of poverty, access to services, and community ties (Rigon, 2022).

Public space, for example, is frequently contested in these neighborhoods, and top-down interventions often standardize solutions, leading to social discontent (Ortiz et al., 2025).

The development discourse has historically oversimplified diversity within informal settlements, categorizing residents by basic demographics such as gender or age. This approach fails to account for the intersectionality of identities and the nuanced ways in which different forms of discrimination overlap and manifest in specific contexts (Franco Calderón & Ramírez Torres, 2023).



Fig. 12 Self Built Neighbourhood before and after the Neighbourhood Upgrading in Pereira, Colombia. Housing Ministry, 2024.

Consolidated vs. Emerging Self Built Neighbourhoods

Neighborhood upgrading policies often prioritize consolidated self-built neighbourhoods, areas with existing infrastructure, higher levels of urbanization, and stronger community networks. These neighborhoods are seen as more viable for public investment due to their perceived readiness for integration into the formal urban fabric.

In contrast, emerging informal settlements, which lack basic services and infrastructure, are frequently excluded from such programs. This exclusion perpetuates spatial and social inequalities, leaving the most vulnerable communities without access to critical resources or opportunities for improvement.

Governments often find it more feasible to upgrade neighborhoods that already meet certain criteria, such as partial access to public services or proximity to urban centers. As a result, emerging settlements, which require more integral interventions, are left to develop without support, further entrenching their marginalization.

As Satterthwaite (2012) mentions in his research, neighbourhood upgrading programs must take into account the temporal dimension in the formation of self-built neighborhoods and recognize how, over time, residents develop diverse and evolving needs.

To ensure that neighborhood upgrading policies are equitable and inclusive, they must recognize the heterogeneity of the neighbourhoods and address the unique needs of both consolidated and emerging neighborhoods. This requires a shift from a one-size-fits-all approach to a nuanced understanding of the diverse realities within these communities. By incorporating intersectional and participatory frameworks, upgrading programs can better address the aspirations and challenges of all residents, fostering sustainable and just urban development.



Fig. 13 Consolidated Self-Built Neighbourhood in Cali, Colombia. Photo by author, 2023.

R E S E A R C H
F R A M E W O R K

Problem Statement
Lines of Inquiry
Methodology
Conceptual Framework

PROBLEM STATEMENT

In Colombia, rapid urbanization, forced displacement, and deep structural inequality have fueled the expansion of informal settlements, especially in cities like Cali. These self-built neighborhoods arise out of necessity, offering refuge to communities excluded from formal housing systems—displaced populations, migrants, and those living in poverty. However, they often emerge in environmentally precarious zones, such as steep slopes or floodplains, and remain underserved in terms of infrastructure, legal recognition, and basic services.

As of 2022, Colombia recorded 9.8 million victims of armed conflict and 7.7 million people in need of humanitarian assistance (Unidad de Víctimas, 2024). Climate change further compounds displacement, with over 351,000 people uprooted by environmental risks (IDMC, 2023). Simultaneously, the country continues to receive a growing number of Venezuelan refugees, 2.9 million of whom are officially registered (UNHCR, 2024). This convergence of crises accelerates the growth of informal urban peripheries—spaces of survival often neglected by public institutions.

Self-built neighborhoods—many of which have existed for decades—continue to be excluded from comprehensive urban policies such as the Integral Habitat Improvement Program (Mejoramiento Integral del Hábitat, MIH). Although MIH aims to support informal settlements with infrastructure upgrades and urban integration, in practice it prioritizes a limited number of communities, often based on criteria of legal status, perceived consolidation, or technical feasibility. In Cali, for example, of the 194 recognized informal neighborhoods, only 41 are prioritized under

MIH, leaving the vast majority—over 150 communities—without access to institutional support, despite their ongoing contributions to the city’s social and spatial fabric.

This exclusion is not accidental—it reflects a broader capitalist planning paradigm that prioritizes economic profit over human needs. Within this logic, planning decisions often neglect the right to dignified housing and deepen cycles of vulnerability, revictimization, and spatial injustice.

Yet despite state abandonment, residents of these communities generate territory through collective effort, resilience, and shared values. In the absence of state-provided infrastructure, they organize to build homes, secure services, and care for each other. Their actions prioritize communal wellbeing over individual gain, often producing forms of spatial organization grounded in solidarity, care, autonomy, and mutual responsibility.

While these efforts demonstrate extraordinary creativity and capacity, they remain disconnected from formal urban systems. This disconnect exacerbates inequality and limits the potential for equitable, sustainable urban development.

This research seeks to analyze the trajectories of these self-built neighborhoods in order to identify which aspects of the current system require radical transformation, and to surface the territorial values and practices that can inform alternative approaches. It argues that the values already present in the social production of habitat must be recognized not as informal or marginal, but as legitimate principles for rethinking planning, design, and the right to the city—toward dignified urban futures that begin from below.



Fig. 14 Soccer field in Emerging Self-Built Neighbourhood (5 years old) in Cali, Colombia. Photo by author, 2021.



Fig. 15 Soccer field in Consolidated Self-Built Neighbourhood (30 years old) in Cali, Colombia. Photo by author, 2021.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

This research framework integrates the Critical Planning Approach and Prefiguration, providing a foundation for investigating how community-based urban planning strategies can support self-built neighborhoods. This integration is particularly suited for exploratory research, which seeks to investigate under-researched or poorly understood phenomena.

Critical Planning Approach

The Critical Planning Approach, as conceptualized by Peter Marcuse (2009), provides a structured methodology for identifying and addressing systemic inequalities in urban contexts. It is particularly relevant in this research framework because it emphasizes not only understanding the socio-spatial dynamics of marginalized communities but also advocating for transformative change. Looking at Critical urban theory to radical urban practice (Marcuse, 2009), the four steps of this approach (analyze, expose, propose, politicize) align with my subquestions, which allows me to organize my research in the following way:

- **Analyze:** Critically analysing and understanding the socio-political, economic, and spatial conditions of self-built neighborhoods.
- **Expose:** Showing the structural inequities and power imbalances that perpetuate marginalization, as well as their strengths that makes them self-organize their environment
- **Propose:** Developing actionable strategies, policies, or frameworks to bridge the gap between self-built neighborhoods, state institutions and the rest of the residents in the city.
- **Politicize:** Advocating for systemic change by framing my findings within broader discourses on the right to the city, justice, urban equity, and social transformation.

Prefiguration through radical imagination

Prefiguration complements the Critical Planning Approach by focusing on the creation of alternative practices and systems in the present that embody the desired future (Antje, 2024; Bhatt et al., 2024; Yates, 2015). It emphasizes the importance of experimenting with and modeling transformative practices within communities, making it a natural fit for research on self-built neighborhoods.

To achieve meaningful change, it is essential to rethink the way the current system is organized. If efforts to gain power and enact change are confined to the same hierarchical institutions that perpetuate the status quo, we risk remaining trapped within the logic of domination. This perpetuation of existing structures undermines the possibility of achieving the equity and justice we seek.

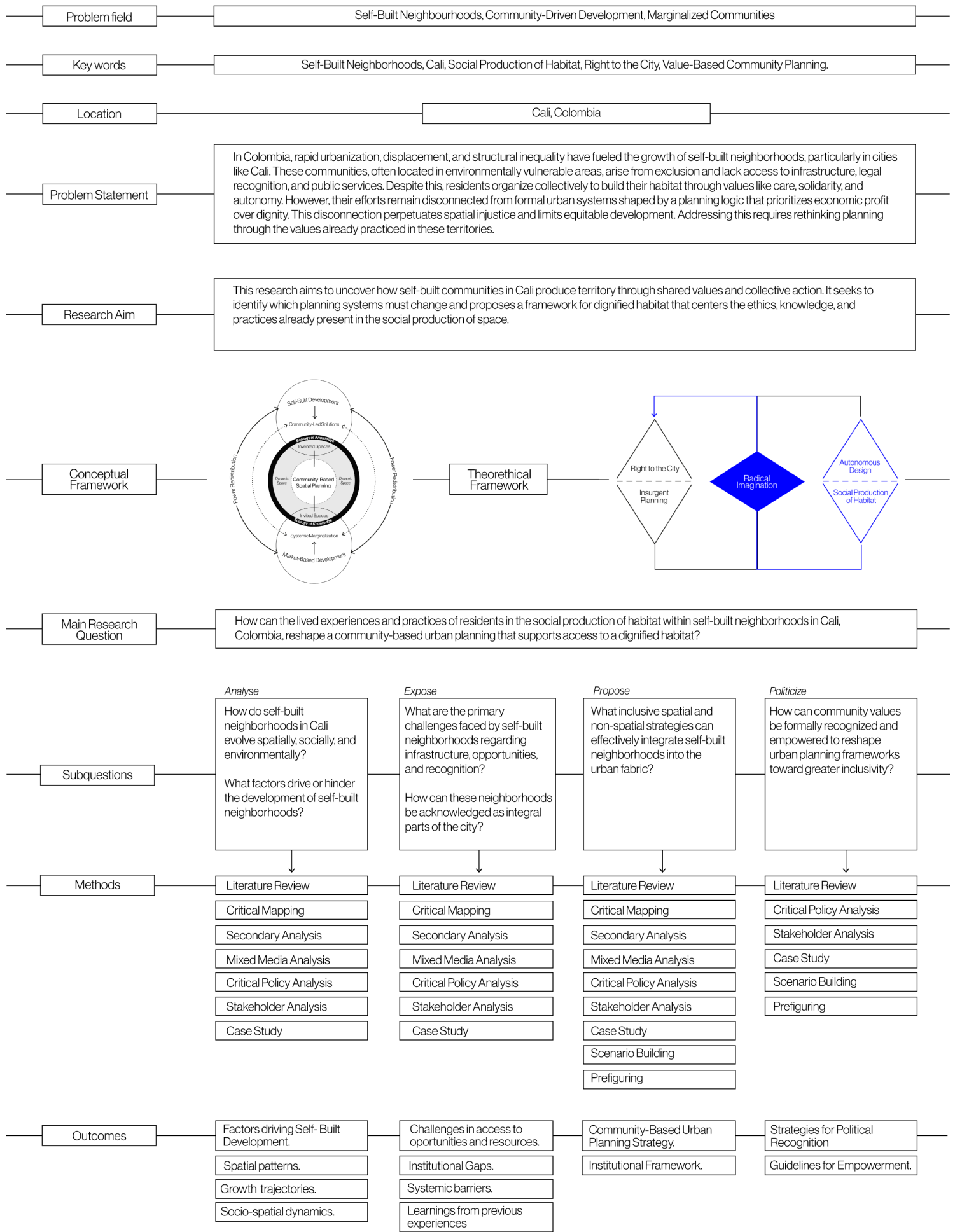
In this context, prefiguration provides a framework to imagine and actively work toward transforming these institutions and society as a whole. This approach enables us to question and redesign power structures so that the institutions currently holding power no longer maintain roles of domination and oppression, particularly over the most vulnerable (Antje, 2024).

In this research, prefiguration offers a practical lens for designing and implementing community-based strategies that prioritize empowerment, collaboration, and sustainability. It is particularly useful in addressing the “propose” subquestions of the Critical Planning Approach, ensuring that solutions are not only theoretical but also rooted in actionable and transformative practices.

Exploratory Research

Since my interest is investigating how community-based urban planning strategies can support self-built neighborhoods, the research involves exploring an area that is likely under-researched and not fully understood (Stebbins, 2001), focusing on the intersection of self-built development, institutional frameworks, and community empowerment.

To guide this inquiry, I adopted an exploratory research approach that combines both inductive and deductive reasoning. The **inductive process** emerged from the narratives shared in stories of displacement, resistance, care, and everyday decision-making, which revealed patterns, values, and territorial practices. This grounded data shaped the theoretical lens, with concepts such as the right to the city, social production of habitat, and dignified housing. In parallel, a **deductive logic** informed the structuring of the project using adapted frameworks (Samper’s phases of settlement development) to interpret and organize the findings. This dual approach allowed the research to remain open and responsive to the lived realities of the residents, while also maintaining analytical rigor.



PROJECT PHASES

This research has unfolded in four interconnected phases, each building on the previous to develop a grounded and values-based proposal for rethinking urban planning through the lens of dignity, community knowledge, and territorial justice.

In the first phase, I focused on understanding the lived realities of self-built neighborhoods in Cali, with particular attention to Comuna 18. Through qualitative interviews and spatial mapping, I documented how residents have collectively produced their habitat—physically, politically, and emotionally—despite prolonged exclusion from formal planning systems.

In the second phase, I examined how residents have shaped their environment: the decisions they made, the reasons behind them, and how these relate to their evolving relationship with the territory. By identifying key moments in their process—moments of resistance, innovation, or mutual support—I constructed a framework that interprets these experiences not as informal improvisations, but as meaningful territorial practices.

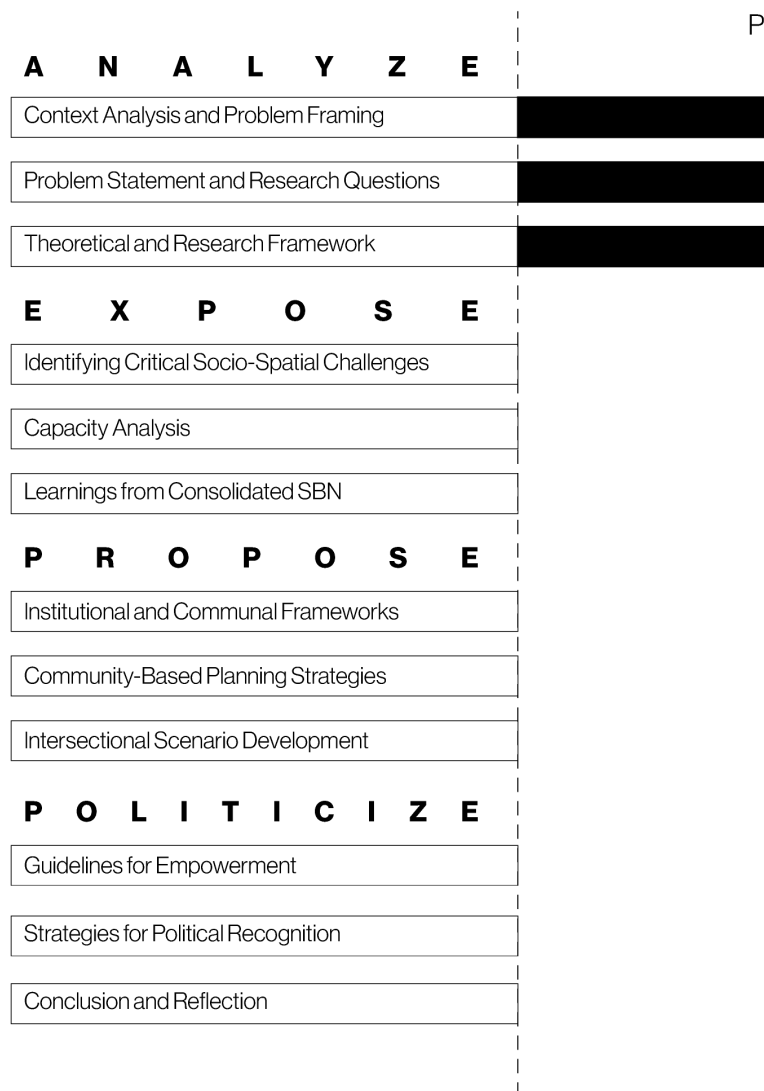
In the third phase, I developed a proposal grounded in those territorial values—what I define as a dignified habitat. Drawing on principles of autonomous design and community-led planning, I began to reimagine how urban development could be structured not from the outside in, but from the territory outward.

In the fourth and current phase, my focus has turned to the political and institutional conditions required to make this transformation possible. Beyond proposing alternatives, I examine how change can be enacted at a systemic level: through public policy, land management strategies, and professional training in planning, architecture, and engineering.

Together, these phases culminate in a values-based planning framework that challenges dominant urban paradigms and invites both public institutions and academic disciplines to recognize the legitimacy of community-led planning. My findings will be shared with residents, planners, and public actors in Cali, contributing to an ongoing dialogue on how to co-create more inclusive, dignified, and just cities.

Project Phases

Research Phases





LINES OF INQUIRY

This research explores strategies to meaningfully integrate self-built neighborhoods in Cali, Colombia, into inclusive and dignified urban planning frameworks. It seeks to address the spatial, social, and environmental challenges these territories face while recognizing the values, capacities, and territorial knowledge already present within them.

By examining the spatial organization and community-driven processes that shape these neighborhoods, the study aims to bridge the divide between the social production of the habitat and formal planning systems. It proposes context-responsive strategies that promote territorial justice, improve living conditions, and enable communities to pursue el Buen Vivir (good living) and their Proyectos de Vida (life projects).

Research Objectives

- Analyze the spatial, social, temporal, and environmental evolution of self-built neighborhoods in Cali, identifying the factors that shape their development and the structural challenges they face.
- Identify the barriers these communities encounter in securing access to basic infrastructure, public services, and formal recognition, with particular attention to legal, institutional, and territorial exclusion.
- Explore and co-develop community-based planning imaginaries that propose alternative approaches to urban integration—rooted in the values, aspirations, and collective practices of the residents themselves.
- Advocate for the recognition of community knowledge and self-management as central to planning processes, emphasizing the role of institutions not as top-down enforcers, but as facilitators that acknowledge and support territorial autonomy and the transformation of the habitat from within.

Critical Planning Approach

Lines of Inquiry

How can the lived experiences and practices of residents in the social production of habitat within self-built neighborhoods in Cali, Colombia, reshape a community-based urban planning that supports access to a dignified habitat?

ANALYZE

How do self-built neighborhoods in Cali evolve spatially, socially, and environmentally?

What factors drive or hinder the development of self-built neighborhoods?

EXPOSE

What are the primary challenges faced by self-built neighborhoods regarding infrastructure, opportunities, and recognition?

How can these neighborhoods be acknowledged as integral parts of the city?

PROPOSE

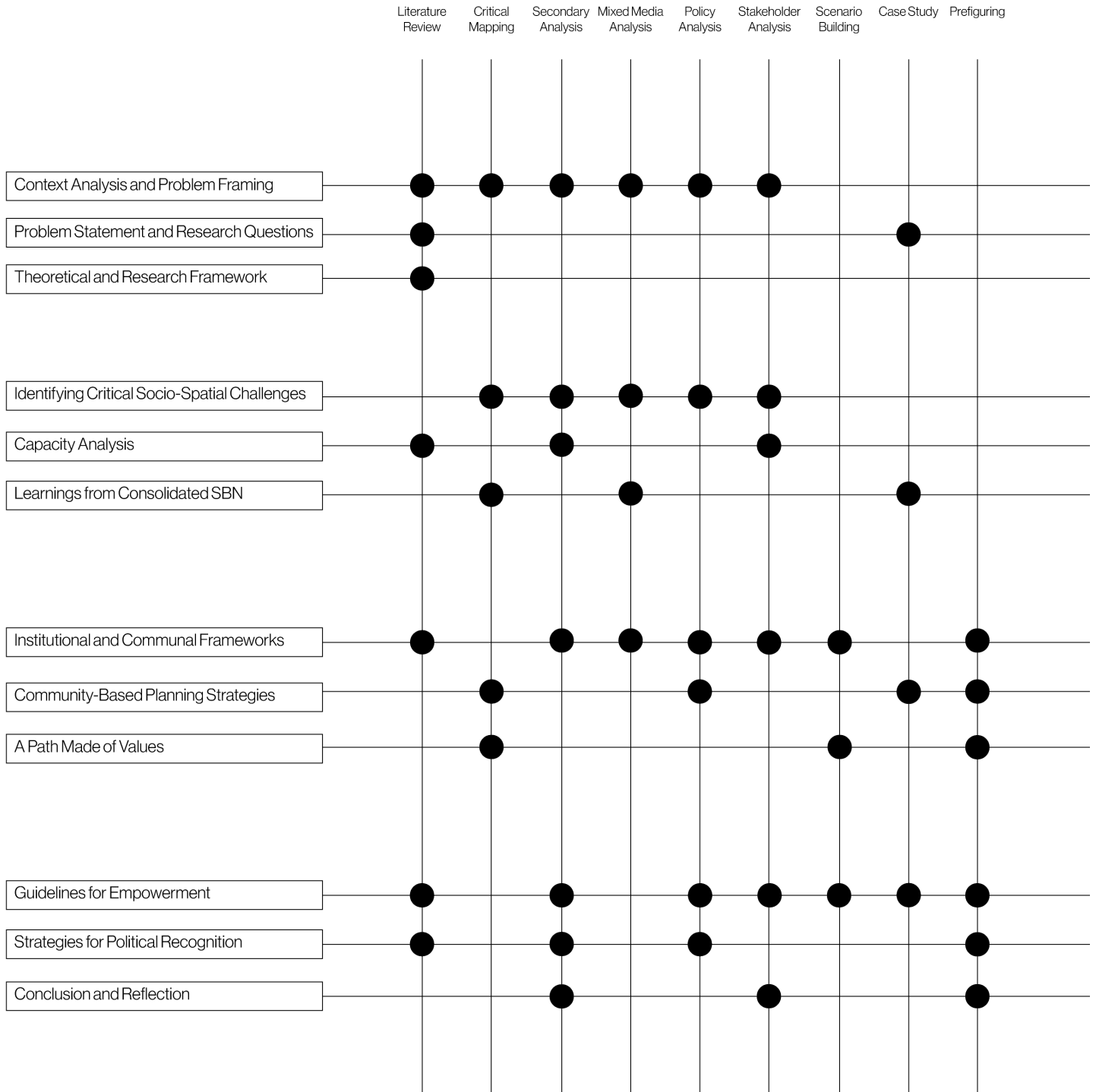
What inclusive spatial and non-spatial strategies can effectively integrate self-built neighborhoods into the urban fabric?

POLITICIZE

How can community values be formally recognized and empowered to reshape urban planning frameworks toward greater inclusivity?

Project Phases

Methods



METHODOLOGY

The methods I will use in the research and proposal process are organized into four stages: Analyze, Expose, Propose, and Politicize. Each stage addresses specific sub-research questions, employing tailored methods to understand challenges, and propose actionable solutions.

These methods align with Jota Samper's (2014) framework in his article "Toward an Epistemology of the Form of the Informal City: Mapping the Process of Informal City Making." This methodology employs a four-part framework to understand how the physical characteristics of self-built neighborhoods influence the development of the communities living within them. It also seeks to examine the role of physical and policy implementations in shaping the geographies of self-construction.

Analyze

How do self-built neighborhoods in Cali evolve spatially, socially, and environmentally?

What factors drive or hinder the development of self-built neighborhoods?

Methods:

- Literature Review: To explore theoretical and empirical research on informal settlements, urban growth, and community-led development.
- Critical Mapping: To visualize the spatial organization and environmental risks of emerging neighborhoods, highlighting patterns of informal growth and their integration (or lack thereof) with formal urban areas.
- Secondary Analysis: To analyze existing qualitative and quantitative data, including reports, census data, and prior case studies, uncovering trends and challenges.
- Mixed Media Analysis: To incorporate visual and narrative data (e.g., photographs, videos, community testimonies) that reveal lived experiences and spatial dynamics.

Expected Outcomes:

An understanding of the spatial, social, and environmental evolution of self-built neighborhoods. Identification of key factors that facilitate or obstruct their development.

Contextualized insights into how urban policies and community dynamics intersect in these neighborhoods.

Connection to Jota Samper's Framework:

This stage focuses on the history of self-built neighborhoods and their urban logic, aligning with Samper's emphasis on understanding the formative processes of self-built neighbourhoods and their spatial characteristics.

Expose

What are the primary challenges faced by self-built neighborhoods regarding infrastructure, opportunities, and recognition?

How can these neighborhoods be acknowledged as integral parts of the city?

Methods:

- Literature Review: To identify systemic inequalities and historical exclusion faced by informal settlements.
- Critical Mapping: To visually highlight disparities in infrastructure, accessibility, risks, and opportunities in these neighborhoods compared to formal urban areas, emphasizing spatial inequities.
- Secondary Analysis of Qualitative Data: To analyze existing interviews, reports, and testimonies, extracting narratives that reflect lived experiences and structural barriers faced by residents.
- Policy Analysis: To assess existing urban policies and frameworks, identifying gaps, biases, and areas where informal settlements are overlooked or misrepresented.

Expected Outcomes:

An understanding of the primary challenges related to infrastructure, opportunities, and recognition faced by emerging self-built neighborhoods.

Insights into the systemic and structural barriers that prevent these neighborhoods from being fully acknowledged as integral parts of the city.

Identification of key stakeholders and their influence on the integration process, forming a basis for targeted interventions and collaboration strategies.

Connection to Jota Samper's Framework:

This stage aligns with Samper's focus on the urban logic of neighborhoods and spatial interventions, revealing how spatial dynamics, policies, and stakeholder actions shape the challenges and potential of self-built neighborhoods.

Propose

What inclusive spatial and non-spatial strategies can effectively integrate self-built neighborhoods into the urban fabric?

Methods:

- Scenario Building: To explore and evaluate future urban planning strategies under various conditions, ensuring inclusivity and resilience.
- Stakeholder Analysis: To identify key actors and their roles in facilitating integration and collaboration between communities and formal institutions.
- Prefiguring: To model and experiment with alternative planning approaches that prioritize community empowerment and equitable development.

Expected Outcomes:

A spatial and procedural pathway that imagines an alternative way self-built neighborhoods could have been developed, challenging the dominant planning system and reorienting the priorities of design and decision-making toward dignity, community values, and territorial justice.

Connection to Jota Samper's Framework:

This stage emphasizes proposing better practices, using Samper's predictive model to develop actionable and context-specific strategies for equitable urban integration.

Politicize

How can community values be formally recognized and empowered to reshape urban planning frameworks toward greater inclusivity?

Methods:

- Advocacy and Stakeholder Mapping: To identify and actors who can influence policy changes and amplify community voices, and share it when I go back.
- Scenario Building: To envision future urban planning models that integrate community-driven practices, exploring pathways for collaboration between informal and formal systems.
- Prefiguring: To experiment with and conceptualize small-scale, participatory interventions that demonstrate the potential of inclusive urban planning practices, fostering empowerment and recognition.

Expected Outcomes:

A framework for recognizing and empowering community-driven initiatives.

Policy actions that embed community knowledge into formal urban planning processes.

Connection to Jota Samper's Framework:

This stage aligns with the political recognition of spatial interventions, advocating for systemic changes that empower marginalized communities and reshape urban planning frameworks.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

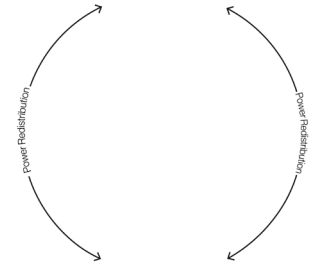
This conceptual framework outlines the project's objective by critically examining how the current urban development system operates.

The framework begins with the recognition that achieving the project's goals requires a redistribution of power. This redistribution addresses the imbalance created by the systematic urban development model, which is driven by market forces and profit, and perpetuates the oppression and domination of marginalized communities. In contrast, these communities often resort to self-development of their built environments as a response to exclusion. By prioritizing and empowering these oppressed communities, the framework sets the foundation for addressing systemic inequities.

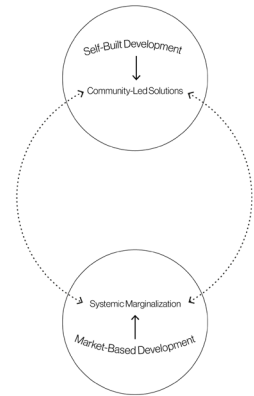
Building on this redistribution of power, the second component focuses on the coexistence of two distinct approaches to territorial construction. On one hand, there is grassroots planning, which is rooted in community-driven solutions that emerge in the absence of state support. On the other hand, there is the formal urban development model, which reinforces the dichotomy between "formal" and "informal" and deepens the marginalization of those deemed informal within the city.

The proposal then introduces a second layer: the integration of these two knowledge systems into an ecology of knowledge, a concept inspired by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (Santos, 2009) and adapted to this context. This integration draws from the invited spaces created by institutions and the invented spaces generated by grassroots movements. Both are essential for fostering collaborative actions that support vulnerable communities and address their needs effectively.

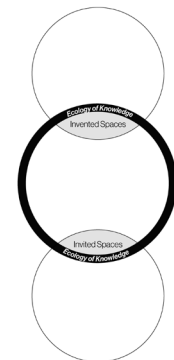
Finally, these invited and invented spaces, as described by Miraftab (2009), form a dynamic and inclusive arena where community-based spatial planning can flourish. This approach enables the blending of institutional resources and grassroots innovation, creating pathways for equitable and sustainable urban development.



1. Balance



2. Coexisting Approaches



3. Integration



4. Dynamic Space

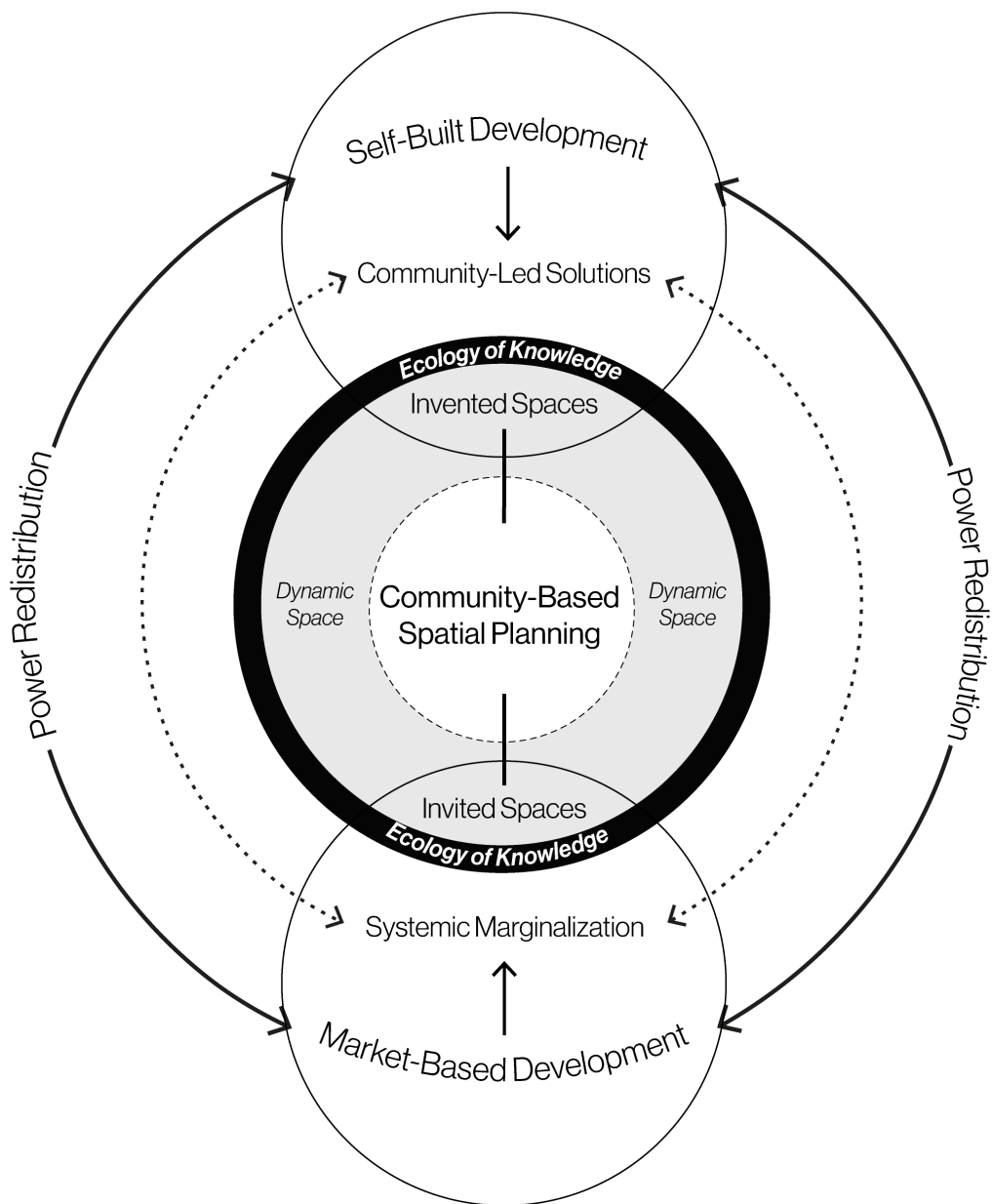


Fig. 16 Conceptual Framework.

THEORETICAL
FRAMEWORK

Base Point
A Needed Shift
A Radical Starting Point
Theoretical Framework

BASE POINT

Currently, urban planning and development decisions in cities are driven by the prioritization of economic growth, market-driven policies, privatization, and an obsession with attracting global investment. Neoliberalism, the framework underpinning this capitalist system, has positioned urban planning as a tool to facilitate these economic objectives, which continue to benefit a privileged few. Instead of redirecting efforts toward addressing social issues—which, as we have seen, persist or even worsen—or correcting the failures of the current market model, urban planning often exacerbates marginalization. This is especially true for the most vulnerable communities, as it deepens socio-economic disparities, limits access to opportunities, and hinders their ability to fully enjoy and benefit from the city.

Neoliberalism operates as more than a set of economic policies; it is a network of ideologies, values, and rationalities that reinforce capital's hegemonic power (Browne & Misra, 2003). It applies market forces to determine resource allocation, where consumer demand dictates supply, often favoring private entities over public welfare (Opeyemi, 2024). This framework prioritizes private consumption and creates monitored urban spaces that exclude low-income and minority residents, reinforcing patterns of class exclusion and racial segregation while normalizing socio-spatial divisions (Beatty, 2014).

Under neoliberal governance, cities are reshaped into aestheticized spaces that conceal deep-seated poverty and inequality (Opeyemi, 2024). Simultaneously, neoliberalism fuels heightened competitiveness, individualism, and consumerism, fostering a social climate that undermines collective responsibility and human equality. This erosion of solidarity weakens the foundational values of welfare states, such as shared accountability and equity (Nafstad et al., 2007). The resulting ideological shift toward extreme individualism diminishes the strength of local communities and curtails the state's role in addressing critical social needs.

In urban planning, neoliberal policies restrict democratic participation, narrowly define “appropriate” policy choices based on the perspectives of decision-makers, and suppress

dissent and oppositional mobilization (Brenner & Theodore, 2005). Community participation, often reduced to a routineized and superficial process, serves to extend state control rather than genuinely empowering marginalized voices. Rather than forming the foundation for design and decision-making, participation is treated as a procedural formality where “experts” share information in a perfunctory manner. As a result, public discourse on urban development prioritizes market efficiency over the equitable distribution of resources and opportunities, further marginalizing vulnerable communities.

In this research, I aim to critically examine the current system and explore pathways to achieving the “right to the city,” as articulated by Harvey (2003). This concept extends beyond individual access to urban resources, encompassing the collective right to reshape the city in alignment with shared aspirations and needs. Despite the systemic challenges posed by neoliberal urban policies, new forms of social resistance and struggle have emerged in response (Brenner & Theodore, 2005).

The following pages will incorporate these theories into the theoretical framework of this research. These movements and ideas highlight the urgent need for a paradigm shift in urban planning—one that prioritizes territorial justice, collective well-being, and equitable development. To address systemic inequalities, it is essential to rethink urban governance, empowering vulnerable communities and ensuring their voices are central to shaping the future of cities.

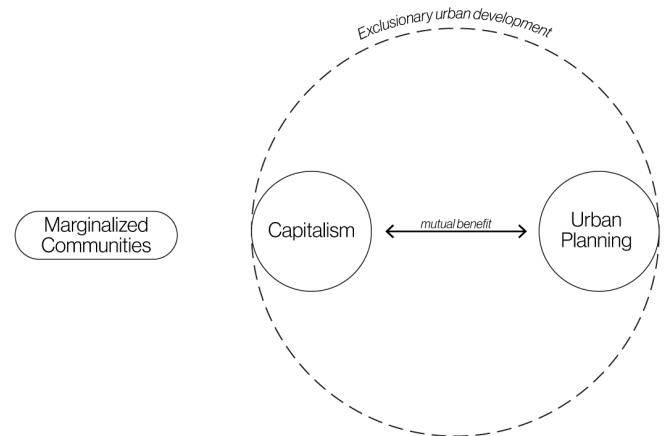


Fig 17. Current relation with neoliberalism and urban planning

A NEEDED SHIFT

My critique focuses on how urban planning often marginalizes populations who, despite being integral to the city, remain outside institutional frameworks and are excluded from the formal urban grid. **This exclusion perpetuates spatial oppression**, compounding other forms of systemic inequities tied to identities such as ethnicity, gender, and class.

Addressing this issue requires a departure from the constraints of the current system. Merely integrating marginalized populations into the existing urban framework risks imposing predefined notions of the city, erasing the community values and practices these groups already embody. Instead, **the focus must shift toward empowering these communities to actively shape their environments**, fostering a more equitable and horizontal distribution of power.

Design serves as a critical tool in this transformation. As the foundation of urban planning, it holds the potential to challenge hegemonic practices that prioritize top-down approaches. Traditional models often position the “expert” as the sole authority, presenting solutions that may be disconnected from the lived realities of people.

By contrast, **design can propose alternatives that prioritize the autonomy of territories, enabling them to develop in harmony with their unique social and environmental contexts.** **This approach must center on the community’s knowledge, capacities, and the specific characteristics of their surroundings**, ensuring their actions foster sustainable, inclusive development without causing harm to others.

In this way, **design becomes a vehicle for reclaiming the right to the city—one that emphasizes territorial justice, collective well-being, and a reimagined urban future shaped by those who inhabit it.**

RIGHT TO THE CITY

The concept of the Right to the City is gaining increasing relevance in contemporary urban discourses. Institutional agendas, academic literature, and grassroots struggles frequently invoke this notion as a way to claim the right of all urban inhabitants to access and enjoy the city. The city is imagined as a space where people can improve their living conditions and actively participate in shaping their urban environments.

But this raises key questions: What kind of city are we talking about? And more importantly, do all people have the same right to that city?

Western Perspective

The Right to the City was first articulated by Henri Lefebvre in his work *Le Droit à la Ville* (1968). For Lefebvre, the city was not merely a collection of buildings, infrastructures, or administrative boundaries, but a social space produced, experienced, and contested through the everyday practices, needs, and desires of its inhabitants. His formulation of the Right to the City was a radical call for reclamation of urban space, especially by those historically marginalized and excluded from its production. It constituted a counter-project to the dominant capitalist logic of urban development, which Lefebvre viewed as inherently commodified, alienating, and exclusionary.

Lefebvre argued that overcoming the dominant strategies of capitalist urbanization required a global mobilization of social life itself, emphasizing that individual actions could at best open the way and experiment with alternative strategies (Lefebvre, 1996).

Years later, David Harvey (2003) extended Lefebvre's proposition by framing the Right to the City as a political claim for agency in the process of urbanization—the power not only to inhabit but to shape and reshape the city.

“The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is... one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.”

However, as with many concepts grounded in critical theory and social struggle, the Right to the City has increasingly been appropriated by institutional and technocratic discourse. Today, it is frequently invoked in urban policies, development frameworks, and international planning agendas as a normative aspiration (Brown & Kristiansen, 2009; European Parliament, 2018; United Nations, 2017). Yet these references often fail to engage with the underlying structural conditions that produce urban inequality in the first place.

While institutions may acknowledge the Right to the City, they rarely accompany this recognition with concrete mechanisms for implementation. As a result, the concept risks becoming diluted and symbolic rather than transformative, and rhetorical rather than political.

This shift from a tool of critique to a checkbox in policy documents raises pressing questions:

What does it mean when the Right to the City is mobilized in urban master plans that simultaneously facilitate eviction, exclusion, and privatization? How can a concept originally formulated to challenge capitalist urbanization be integrated into the very institutional apparatuses it was designed to oppose?

It is therefore essential to resist any universalized or depoliticized reading of the Right to the City. Rather, it must be understood as a deeply political and contested concept, whose meaning shifts depending on the socio-spatial context in which it is claimed, and the struggles that give it life.

In this thesis, I adopt a Latin American perspective, where the Right to the City is a lived and political struggle. Across neighborhoods, social movements, and territories marked by dispossession, exclusion, and spatial injustice, the Right to the City is asserted through everyday acts of resistance and community-building. This agency is vividly illustrated in the proliferation of self-built neighborhoods, which not only contest formal planning paradigms but also embody alternative urban futures grounded in collective praxis and dignity.

The Latin American Perspective:

In Latin America, the Right to the City goes beyond an ideal or policy objective. It becomes a political and territorial practice rooted in the everyday struggles of communities historically excluded from formal urban development. These are populations who, faced with state institutions that tend to uphold the urban status quo, have had to meet their needs through autonomous, collective, and often informal means (Carrión & Erazo, 2019).

Although the demands of these urban movements are not always framed explicitly as anti-neoliberal, they nonetheless challenge the foundations of capitalist urbanization. Their practices often propose alternative logics of space production, grounded in cooperation, mutual aid, and grassroots planning. In this way, their struggles transform theory into practice, especially when it comes to rethinking how the city is experienced, inhabited, and collectively reshaped (Schiavo et al., 2017).

The Latin American perspective thus grounds the Right to the City in a collective and territorial logic. As outlined in regional charters and declarations, it is understood not merely as an individual human right, but as a comprehensive framework that integrates civil, political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights, placing them in a spatial and territorial context. It is a call to build cities that guarantee not only access to services, but also the collective production, governance, and transformation of urban life toward the fulfillment of a dignified existence for all.

However, despite its strong foundations in action and collective work, this vision often clashes with the way public policy is formulated and implemented. Many Latin American states and municipalities have developed legal frameworks and institutional tools that appear to support more inclusive urban agendas. Yet, even with formal recognition of the Right to the City, the priorities often remain unchanged.

In the face of cyclical fiscal crises and neoliberal reforms, these same governments tend to promote exclusive urban interventions, such as gated communities, luxury megaprojects, and speculative real estate development, which deepen socio-spatial segregation instead of confronting it (Cuenya, 2009). In doing so, they undermine the very core of the Right to the City they claim to uphold.

Still, there are inspiring examples that point toward the possibility of structural change. The Mexico City Charter for the Right to the City stands out as a powerful reinterpretation of the concept in practice. Rather than limiting itself to a list of individual rights, the Charter articulates a broad, collective vision that integrates both rights and responsibilities in the co-production, management, and transformation of urban space. It calls not just for equal access to existing resources, but for a radical reimagining of the city as a collective project for future generations. Crucially, it outlines not only what kind of city is desired, but also how it can be achieved and who must be responsible in that process (Corporacion Region, 2014).

In recent years, this vision has also been carried forward by urban social movements that resist the expulsion of marginalized communities, whether through forced evictions or systemic neglect, and demand equal access to urban life. These movements contest dominant land-use models and advocate for urbanization grounded in care, social function, and territorial justice. As such, they have become key political actors in the Latin American urban landscape, transforming the Right to the City from an abstract ideal into a material and political struggle over space, resources, and the meaning of urban life.

In sum, the Latin American perspective insists that the Right to the City must go beyond institutional acknowledgment or rhetorical inclusion. It must be claimed, built, and defended from the ground up, through the organized action of those most affected by urban injustice. It is a radical call to democratize the production of space, not just to access the city, but to remake it collectively and with dignity.

A RADICAL STARTING POINT

In this thesis, I position myself within a Latin American and community-rooted interpretation of the Right to the City—one that recognizes urban space not as a neutral or technical setting, but as a site of political dispute, collective construction, and responsibility. I align with the framework developed by the Global Platform for the Right to the City, not as a fixed doctrine, but as a radical starting point for rethinking how we build, govern, and inhabit our cities.

For me, the Right to the City means reclaiming urban space as a collective good, a space to be produced, shaped, and inhabited by all who live in it. It calls for a fundamental shift: from cities designed as engines of profit to territories of life that prioritize justice, inclusion, and dignity.

This perspective requires us to understand that cities are not merely made of infrastructure and services, but of ideas, values, and relationships. It is through this lens that I approach this research and the principles outlined by the Global Platform for the Right to the City strongly align with this vision. I build on their framework to uphold a notion of urban life that:

- Rejects all forms of discrimination and exclusion, embracing plural identities and lived experiences;
- Centers gender justice, especially in the recognition of care and domestic work;
- Defends inclusive citizenship for all, including migrants, informal workers, and those living in precarity;
- Demands participatory governance, where communities shape policies and budgets affecting their daily lives;
- Prioritizes the social function of space and supports the social production of habitat;
- Values public space and services not only as amenities, but as sites of culture, cohesion, and belonging;
- Promotes diverse and inclusive economies, recognizing the invisible labor that sustains community life;
- And finally, commits to environmental sustainability and territorial equity across urban and rural divides.

In this work the Right to the City is not understood as an abstract principle or a policy checkbox. It treats it as a territorial project, a daily practice of those who, despite abandonment and marginalization, build dignified urban life with collective ethics, resilience, and imagination.

It is precisely in these everyday practices of producing territory—from organizing for water, to mapping the land, to building homes and collective spaces—that the Right to the City becomes material. These actions are what the Latin American tradition has named the Social Production of Habitat. It is there, in the intersection between necessity and solidarity, that the right to the city is exercised and made real.

INSURGENT PLANNING

Territorial Practices of Urban Resistance

In the Latin American context, insurgent planning can be understood as an alternative planning theory, it is a lived and territorialized response to systemic exclusion. It emerges from the same conditions that have given shape to the Latin American perspective on the Right to the City: the withdrawal of the state, the dominance of neoliberal urban policy, and the resilience of communities who produce space in the absence of formal support.

Far from being isolated acts of informality, the collective production of housing and infrastructure in self-built neighborhoods constitutes a form of planning from below, what Miraftab (2009) describes as “planning from the ordinary.” These are acts of resistance, but also of construction, in which marginalized communities reclaim their right not only to remain in the city, but to define and transform it on their own terms.

The literature on informality (Davis, 2006; Miraftab, 2009; Roy, 2005) has shown that the boundary between “formal” and “informal” is not neutral, it is politically produced. In this context, insurgent planning offers a counter-narrative to dominant planning frameworks by centering the knowledge, experiences, and practices of communities often criminalized or erased by institutional processes. Their planning is insurgent not because it is illegal, but because it challenges the spatial, legal, and political boundaries of who has the right to shape urban space.

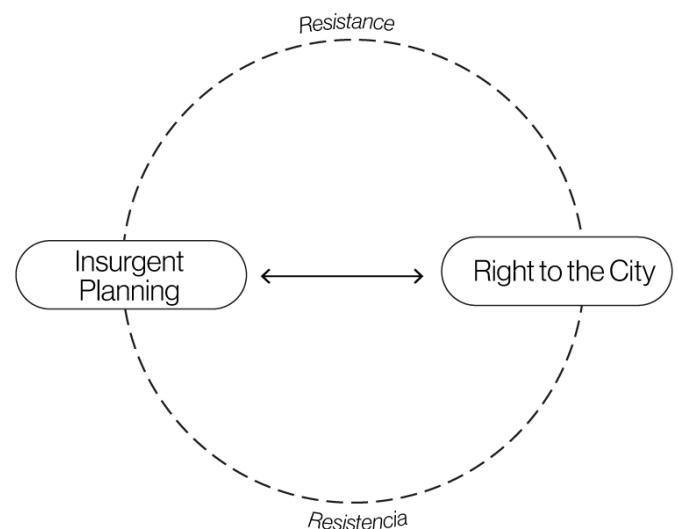
As with the Latin American perspective of the Right to the City, insurgent planning is grounded in territory and community. It emerges not from technocratic intervention, but from collective decision-making, mutual aid, and a relational understanding of space. These are not merely tactical acts of survival—they are strategic assertions of autonomy, care, and urban citizenship that contest the hegemonic logics of market-driven development.

Insurgent planning, then, becomes a key practice through which the Right to the City is materialized. While the Right to the City provides the political and ethical horizon, insurgent planning offers the everyday, place-based actions that bring it into being. It transforms space through daily struggle, organizing, and construction, often without permits, but never without purpose.

As Miraftab (2009) writes, “In this neoliberal moment, tangible citizenship does not arrive through the state’s legislative institutions. It rather grows under the skin of the city, through the insurgent practices of marginalized communities.” This insight resonates deeply with the realities of self-built neighborhoods in Latin America, where residents continuously assert their presence, rights, and dignity, not by appealing to the system, but by making the city through their own means.

Ultimately, insurgent planning challenges us to redefine what counts as planning, who gets to participate in it, and what values guide its practice. It aligns with this thesis’s broader argument:

The future of urban development must be rooted in territorial justice, community autonomy, and the everyday ethics of those who have always built the city from below.



SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF HABITAT

The Social Production of Habitat refers to the collective processes through which individuals and communities create, shape, and make decisions about their built environment, often in response to unmet needs. These processes may occur through formal or informal means, and are typically driven by collaboration, solidarity, and local initiative. They emerge from the bottom-up, as communities organize to solve urgent challenges in their surroundings.

As defined by the Habitat International Coalition (HIC), the social production of habitat arises precisely because of the absence or failure of capital investment, and it acknowledges that monetary capital is increasingly concentrated elsewhere. They not only produce physical infrastructure, but also build forms of collective governance, ownership, and participation. People become co-authors of their territory, not simply recipients of housing or services, but decision-makers and designers of their everyday environment.

When access to basic elements of life—like water, housing, or public space—is denied, communities often mobilize collectively to fulfill these needs. In this sense, social production is not just a response to absence; it is an active realization of human rights. As HIC notes, “social production means collective action to meet human needs and, thereby, to realize human rights in accordance with prevailing concepts of human dignity and justice.”

In this context, building a home, a path, or a water system becomes more than a technical act, it becomes a form of resistance and a claim to space, visibility, and dignity. But this leads us to deeper questions: **What does it mean to achieve human dignity through space? How is dignity reflected in the built environment, and in the everyday habitat of individuals and their communities?**

These questions lie at the heart of this research. They guide the analysis of self-built neighborhoods not as spaces of deficiency, but as territories of collective action, places where communities produce habitat not merely to survive, but to reclaim, after enduring exclusion and hardship, their right to live with dignity.

Adequate housing vs. Dignified habitat:

In international human rights frameworks, particularly those set out by the United Nations, the concept of adequate housing is recognized as a core component of the right to an adequate standard of living. This definition has contributed significantly to securing housing as a human right, emphasizing the importance of minimum physical and legal standards to ensure shelter, safety, and security for all.

According to the UN (2019), adequate housing must fulfill a range of conditions: legal security of tenure; access to basic services, infrastructure, and safe materials; affordability; habitability; accessibility; appropriate location; and cultural adequacy. These criteria are vital in global efforts to prevent housing insecurity, displacement, and structural neglect. The emphasis on durability, safety, and affordability has been instrumental in shaping national and regional housing policies, especially in humanitarian and development contexts.

However, while these guidelines are comprehensive in scope, they tend to center physical and legal attributes of housing, what can be measured, codified, or engineered. Much of the focus is placed on the structural integrity of walls and roofs, compliance with safety codes, and the availability of water, sanitation, and electricity. In this model, a home is often seen primarily as a unit of shelter, an object to be delivered or upgraded, rather than as a space embedded in social, cultural, and territorial life.

This becomes particularly evident in the final component of the UN's definition: cultural adequacy. Unlike the other criteria, which are technical and quantifiable, cultural adequacy speaks to identity, memory, belonging, and the symbolic dimensions of dwelling. Yet in practice, it is the least developed and least prioritized.

While a home may meet structural standards, it may still fail to reflect the values, histories, and collective practices of the people who inhabit it. As Leckie (1992) reminds us, housing is not merely a shelter—it is the space where life is lived, where relationships are formed, and where dignity is claimed.

This gap reveals the limits of a purely technocratic or universalist approach to housing. In self-built neighborhoods, especially those shaped by displacement and marginalization, housing is not only a response to necessity, but also a territorial expression of culture, adaptation, care, and resistance. To understand housing solely through the lens of adequacy is to risk missing the everyday creativity, ethical frameworks, and spatial intelligence that communities bring to the process of building their habitat.

In this sense, this research invites a shift: from thinking of housing as an object to be assessed against standardized checklists, to understanding habitat as a social, relational, and political process. This is where the concept of dignified habitat becomes essential, a perspective that builds upon, but also goes beyond, the notion of adequate housing, grounding itself in values that are already being practiced in the margins.

Dignified Habitat:

While the concept of adequate housing offers important minimum standards, this thesis argues that it remains incomplete. It often overlooks the emotional, symbolic, and collective dimensions that shape the experience of home and territory. In response to this gap, I propose an expanded framework: the notion of a dignified habitat. The term dignified stems from the Spanish word “dignidad”, which refers to the recognition of every person as inherently worthy of respect, regardless of their origin, condition, or circumstance. In Latin American contexts, the idea of “vivienda digna” (dignified housing) is already present in legal and political discourse. It gestures toward a housing condition that goes beyond physical adequacy to include the human experience of living with dignity.

However, I believe that dignity must extend beyond the dwelling itself. It must reach into the broader habitat, the physical, social, and cultural environment where life unfolds. A dignified habitat is not just about having a safe roof, but about living in a space that supports one’s aspirations, protects one’s rights, enables community, and fosters belonging. It is about being able to imagine a future from the place one inhabits.

This idea could be loosely translated into English as “to inhabit with dignity”, but it goes further. It calls for a redefinition of the conditions of the habitat itself, how space is produced, governed, and experienced in a way that generates dignity at three levels: in the territory, in the collective, and in the individual.

Throughout this research, I have sought to understand how the values already present in the social production of habitat, can serve as the foundation for rethinking what makes a habitat truly dignified. This values-based approach allows us to move beyond a checklist of adequacy and toward an ethical, situated, and community-rooted vision of urban development.

DIGNIFIED HABITAT

This thesis contributes to the ongoing dialogue by proposing the concept of a **values-based dignified habitat**. It builds on the human rights framework of adequate housing but grounds it in the everyday realities, practices, and ethics of communities who have long built and defended their territories without institutional recognition. **This concept challenges planners, architects, and policymakers to center dignity not as an outcome, but as a starting point in the way we conceive, design, and support urban life.**

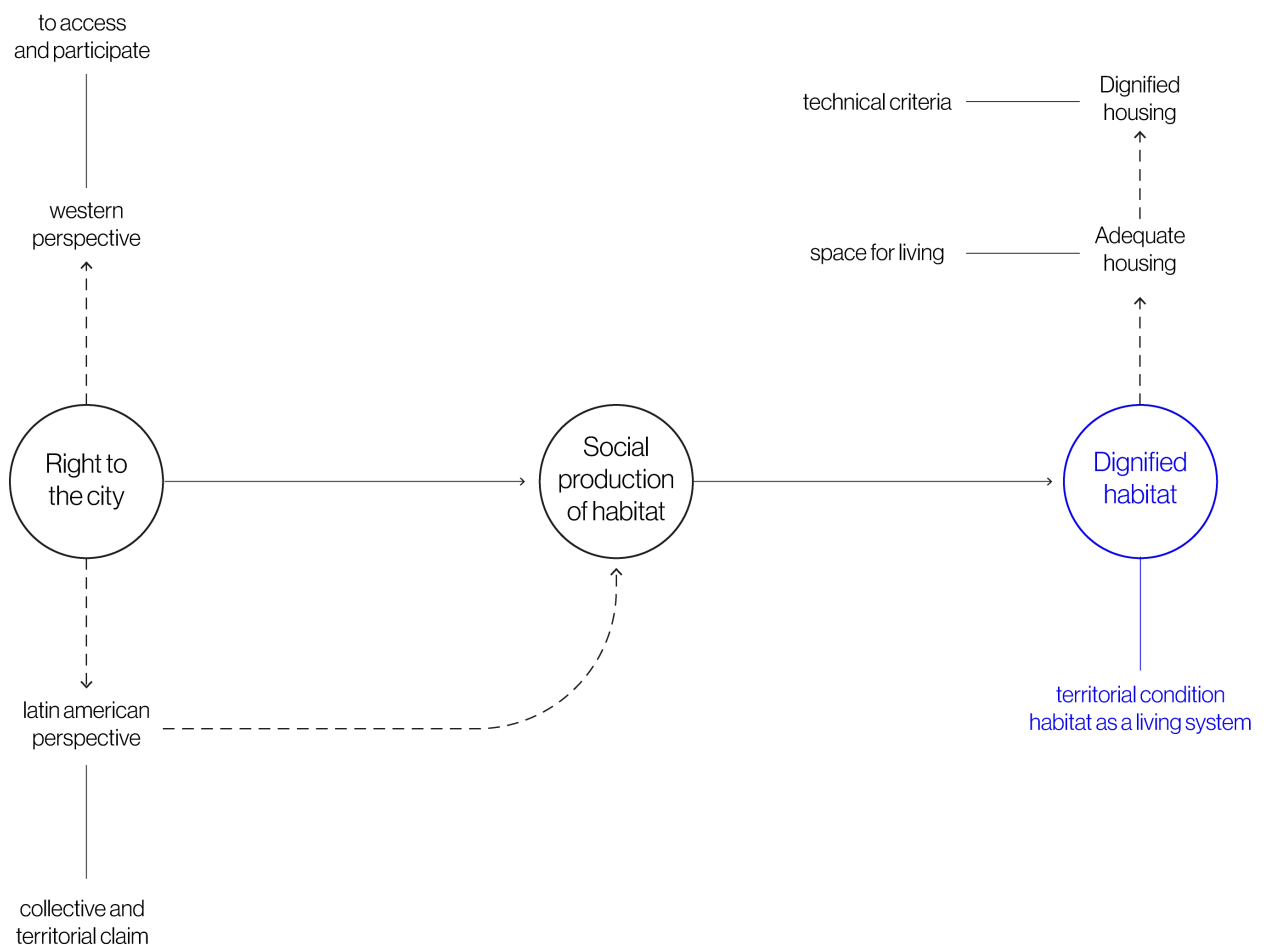


Fig. 19 Perspectives on the Right to the City and their links to the social production of habitat and dignified habitat.

AUTONOMOUS DESIGN

If the social production of habitat reveals how communities have long shaped their territories from the ground up, and the concept of dignified habitat reframes what those territories can and should offer, then autonomous design provides a path forward — a way of designing that aligns with, rather than overrides, the values and processes already alive in these spaces.

Autonomous design, as articulated by Arturo Escobar (2018), is a decolonial and political approach that repositions the community as the primary actor in shaping its environment, not as a recipient of technical solutions, but as a holder of knowledge, relational intelligence, and collective memory. It emerges as a response to Western-centric design paradigms that often impose external norms and models, especially in the Global South, where communities are frequently labeled as informal or insufficient.

In contrast, autonomous design begins from within. It affirms that communities possess the capacity to define, imagine, and create their own futures. It values not just what communities build, but how they build — through cultural practices, shared responsibility, care, and mutual support. These are the very values already present in the social production of habitat and identified in this research as the foundation of a dignified urban life.

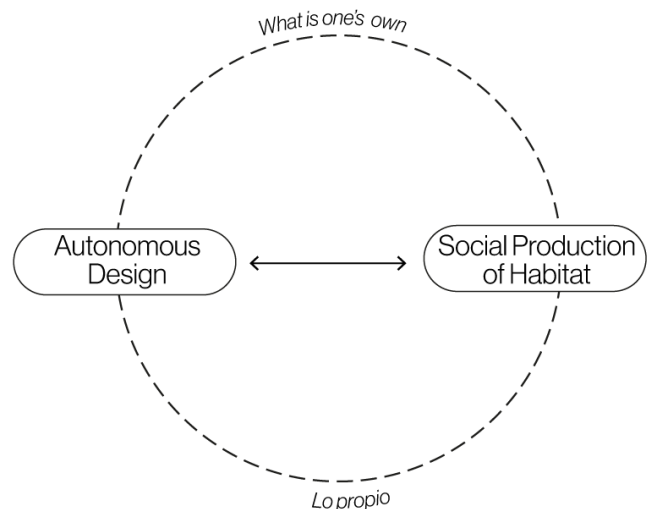
This approach understands autonomy not as isolation, but as relational and evolving. It is rooted in the defense of local traditions and the invention of new ones, constantly negotiated through everyday experience. Escobar connects this to the Latin American concept of *Buen Vivir* (Good Living), which envisions well-being not as individual accumulation, but as collective harmony — with one another and with nature.

Autonomous design thus offers a way to design from dignity. It moves beyond the technical fix, and instead centers inquiry, reflection, and learning. The designer, in this context, is not the expert who delivers solutions but a co-researcher who accompanies the community in understanding its needs, testing ideas, and imagining possibilities.

Together, they generate solutions that are not imposed but cultivated, grounded in territorial knowledge, daily life, and the pursuit of *los proyectos de vida* (life projects).

In the context of this research, autonomous design becomes a methodological and political extension of the concept of dignified habitat. It responds to the question: How can we support the values already present in the territory, not just recognize them, but amplify them in practice? In doing so, it provides a pathway toward a different kind of planning: one that does not begin with the blueprint, but with the people; one that does not end with technical delivery, but with political empowerment.

Autonomous design therefore does not just propose better houses or better infrastructure. It proposes a different way of inhabiting and transforming the city — one that begins with territory, dignity, and the right to shape life from within.



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This thesis is grounded in a framework that challenges dominant urban paradigms by recognizing the territorial practices, ethical values, and collective intelligence embedded in self-built neighborhoods. It brings together three interlinked theoretical lenses: the Right to the City as a political and territorial claim, the Social Production of Habitat and Autonomous Design as grounded community planning practices, and Radical Imagination as the bridge between resistance and transformation.

Right to the City and Insurgent Planning: Territory as a Political Struggle

The Latin American reinterpretation of the Right to the City is not merely about access to urban services—it is a territorial and political practice that emerges from the daily struggles of communities historically excluded from formal urban systems. Rather than waiting for recognition, these communities actively build the city through collective effort, asserting their right to inhabit, transform, and co-govern the spaces they live in. Within this context, insurgent planning operates as a practice of resistance—rooted in the lived realities of marginalized groups who, in the face of systemic neglect, shape their environments through mutual aid, negotiation, and creativity. These acts are not isolated responses to precarity; they are territorial assertions of autonomy and citizenship, revealing that real urban planning already happens in the margins. Insurgent planning thus grounds the Right to the City in place-based action, transforming political claims into material practices.

Social Production of Habitat and Autonomous Design: Building with Values from Within

If insurgent planning represents the resistant production of space, the Social Production of Habitat (SPH) reveals how communities organize their lives and landscapes through shared ethics. SPH is not only about building physical infrastructure—it is a collective mode of producing housing, governance, and care. It centers community agency, values, and knowledge in response to the systemic absence of the state. This production is not informal—it is intentional, relational, and constitutive of dignity.

To support and amplify these territorial processes, this thesis turns to Autonomous Design. Articulated by Arturo Escobar (2018), autonomous design prioritizes local knowledge and self-determination over externally imposed models. It reframes the act of design as a communal inquiry, where communities investigate, decide, and shape their own territories in alignment with their cultural and political values. In this view, autonomy is not a static claim but a dynamic and evolving practice—where communities design from what is their own (*lo propio*), resisting the epistemic violence of universalist, technocratic planning.

Together, SPH and autonomous design offer not only an alternative way of building, but a different way of knowing, valuing, and inhabiting territory—one that is already practiced across Latin America and remains largely unrecognized in formal planning systems.

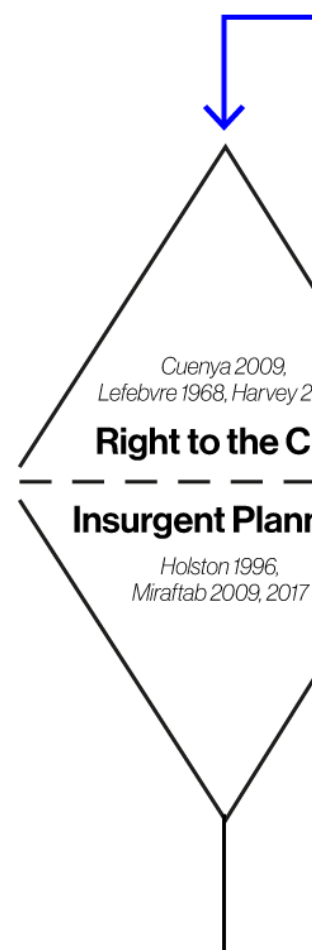


Fig 20. Theoretical framework.

Radical Imagination: Bridging Resistance and Transformation

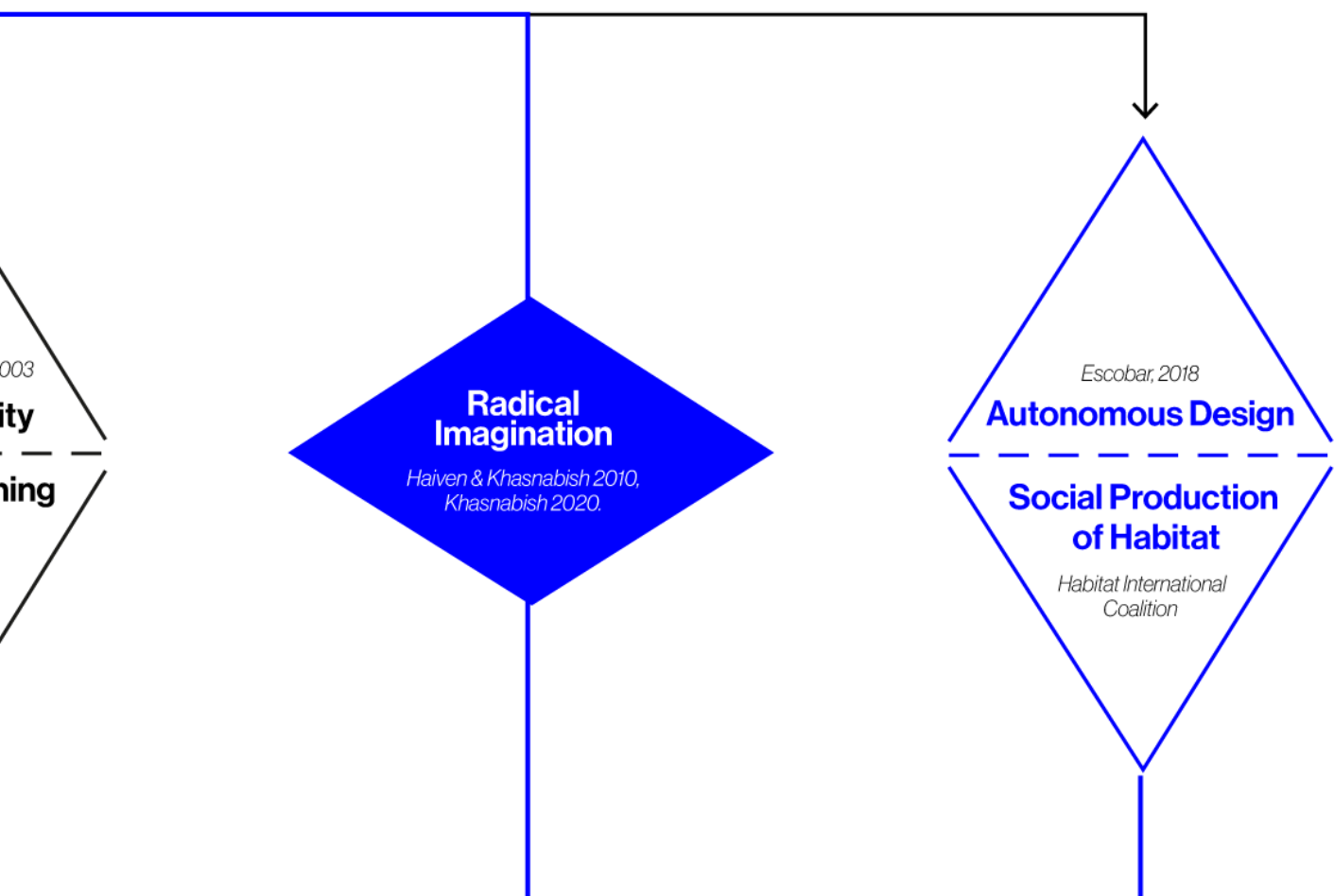
The final component of this framework is Radical Imagination—the capacity to envision futures that break with neoliberal logics and prioritize dignity, care, and justice. It serves as a connective thread between resistance and construction, between insurgent planning and autonomous design. It asks not only what must change, but what else is possible, and how we can get there collectively.

Radical imagination draws from the lived aspirations of communities: their *proyectos de vida*, their desire to live well (*Buen Vivir*), and their everyday acts of world-making. It transforms critique into vision—enabling us to move from diagnosing inequality to designing dignified futures grounded in community ethics and territorial sovereignty.

A Living Framework for Territorial Justice

This values-based framework is not linear—it is cyclical and evolving. The Right to the City provides the political horizon. Insurgent planning reveals how that right is exercised through everyday resistance. The Social Production of Habitat and Autonomous Design show how communities already build with dignity from within. And Radical Imagination enables the shift—from recognition to transformation.

Together, these concepts offer a holistic, decolonial, and community-rooted planning framework. One that not only critiques the violence of existing systems, but proposes an alternative path forward—where territory is not produced for people, but with them, through dignity, care, and collective authorship.



C O N T E X T
A N A L Y S I S

Colombia Autoconstruida
Timeline of Colombia
The Pacific Region
Historical Understanding
The Urban Logic
Conclusions

COLOMBIA AUTOCONSTRUIDA

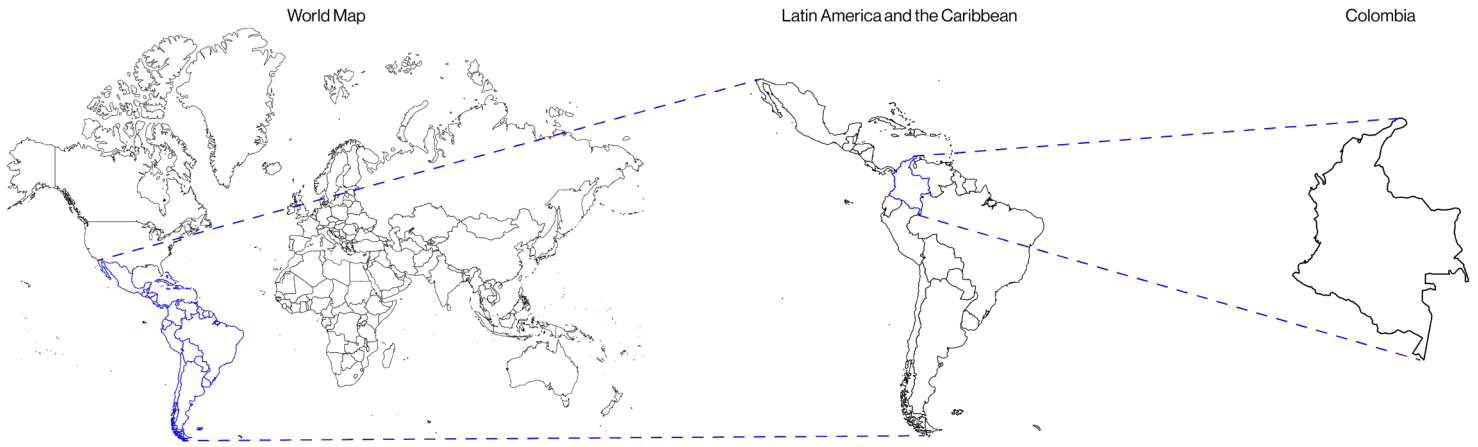


Fig. 21 Location of Colombia globally

Colombia, located in the northern region of South America, is a country of contrasts and diversity. It is one of the most diverse nations globally and the second most biodiverse country in the world (UNEP, 2021). Despite its immense natural and cultural wealth, systemic inequality and oppression have created numerous challenges for its population, disproportionately affecting marginalized groups (Duque et al., 2023).

Informality in Colombia emerges as a response to the lack of solutions and resources provided by the state to address the challenges faced by these populations. Informality plays a pivotal role in shaping Colombia's economic and social landscape. According to the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE), of the 22.8 million jobs in Colombia, nearly 13 million are informal (Editorial La República, 2024). This includes street commerce and unregistered businesses that do not pay taxes. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) identifies Colombia as the country with the highest rate of labor informality among its member nations.

The informal economy serves as a critical source of income for millions of Colombians, particularly in rural areas and marginalized communities. It provides employment opportunities for those who lack access to formal education or face systemic barriers to entering the formal labor market. However, workers in the informal sector often experience lower levels of education and endure precarious working conditions (Peña, 2013).

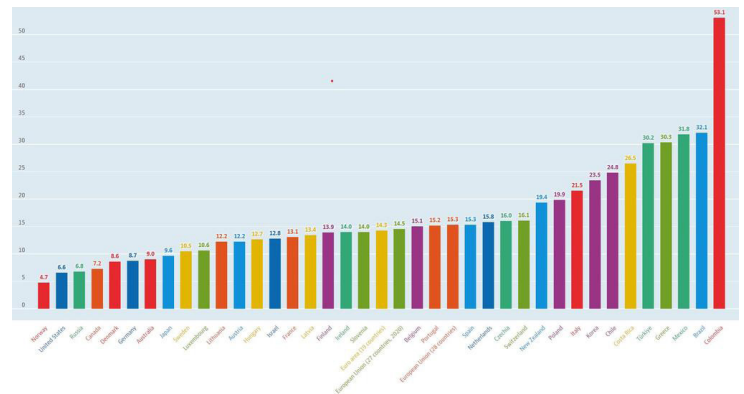


Fig. 22 Comparison of informal labour between Colombia and the rest of the countries in the OECD, 2022.



Fig. 23 Regular street full of informal economies in Colombia. Manuel Saldarriaga. 2022.

This situation simultaneously acts as a driving force behind the emergence of self-built neighborhoods. Abramo (2003) highlights that being an informal worker increases the likelihood of individuals and their families residing in informal settlements.

In Colombia, informal housing production significantly contributes to the country's urban growth. According to the Ministry of Housing, during the last intercensal period (1993–2005), nearly two-thirds of the housing units added to the national stock were generated through informal processes (Secretariat of Social Housing and Habitat of Cali, 2017). These settlements develop incrementally based on the financial capabilities of their residents, meaning lower-income individuals face poorer housing quality and overcrowding. Furthermore, the informal housing market is shaped by the lack of accessible social housing programs, the high cost of urbanized land, and inadequate public investment in urban infrastructure (Torres Tovar, 2011)

The expansion of the informal market is one of the primary drivers behind the growth of self-built neighborhoods. At the same time, both phenomena have been significantly amplified, particularly from the late 1990s to the present, due to the armed conflict, which has resulted in millions of deaths and forced displacements (Unidad de Víctimas, 2024).

As of April 2021, the National Registry of Victims (RUV) reports that Colombia has 9,123,123 civilian victims of the armed conflict. This longstanding conflict has been driven by two key factors: the inequitable distribution of land and the denial of participatory and democratic mechanisms to address various social conflicts (Jaramillo, 2023). The Colombian state, through both action and inaction, has played a significant role in the forced displacement of populations, particularly in specific periods and regions. This state failure continues to affect many individuals, whose rights remain unaddressed or who face ongoing dispossession of their territories. The consequences of forced displacement extend beyond the loss of material resources. It disrupts individuals' life projects, leaving them in a vulnerable state that often leads to revictimization (Jaramillo, 2023).



Fig 24. Emerging Self-Built Neighbourhood in Cali. Pastoral Afro Cali, 2022

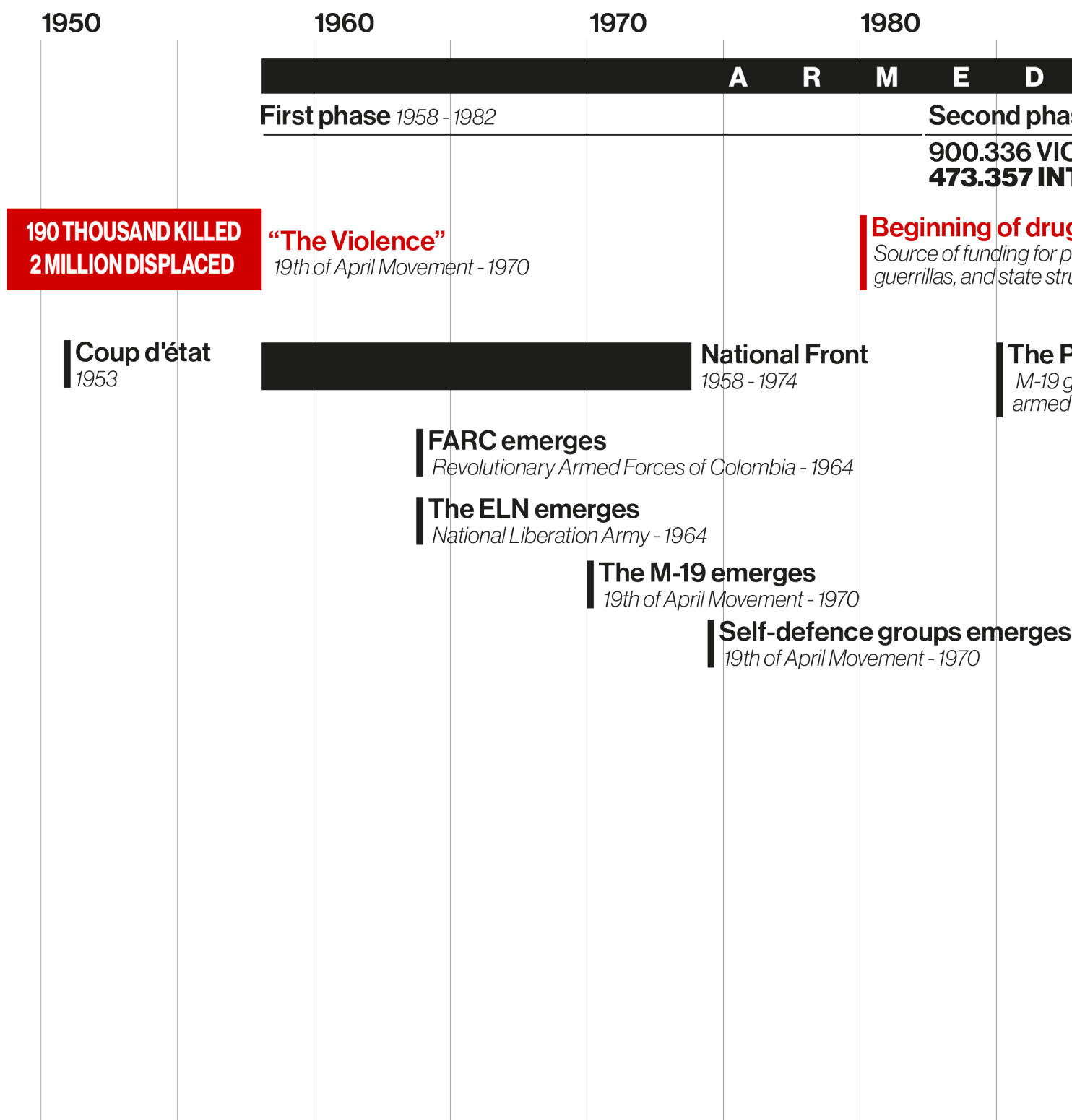


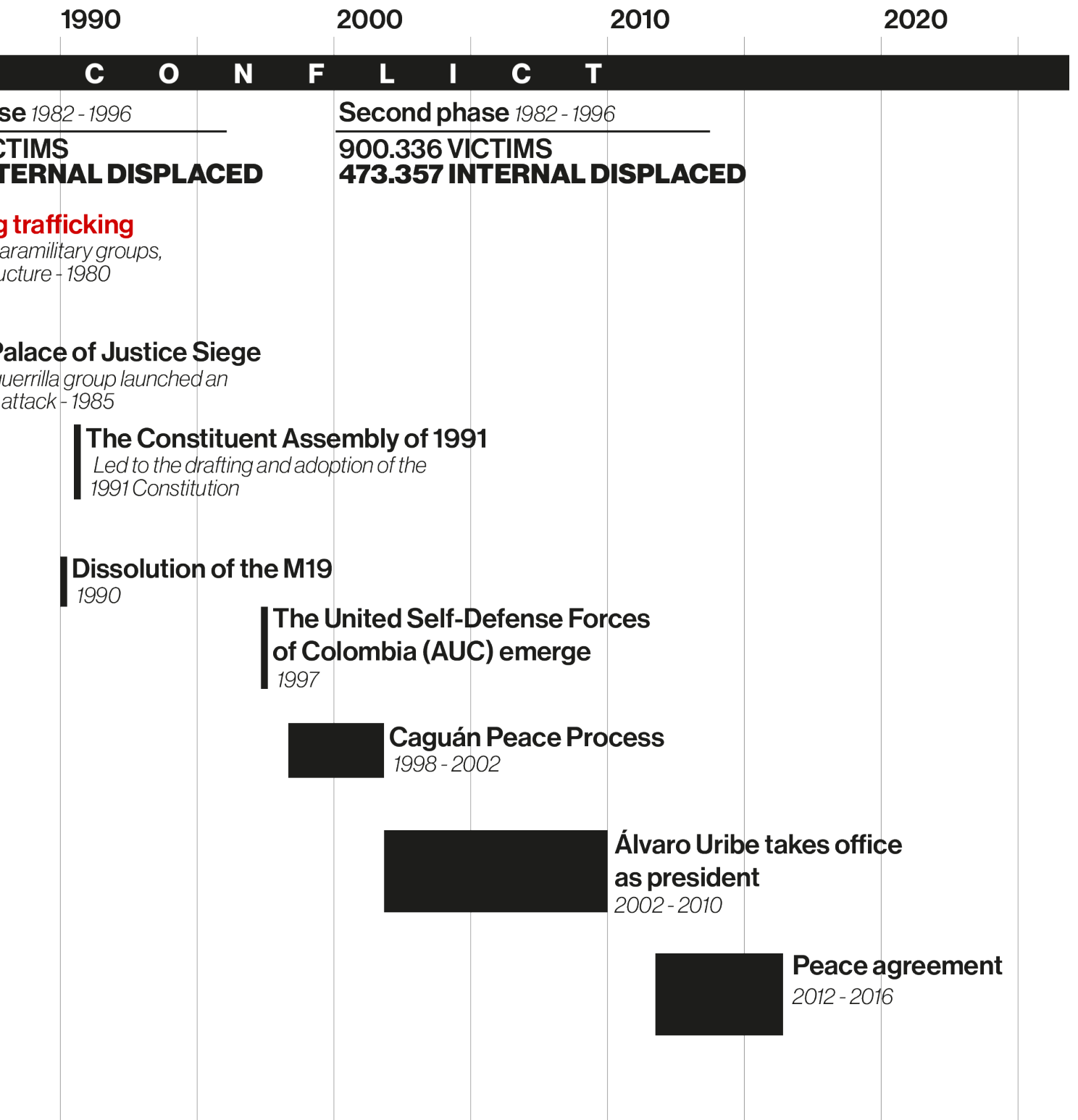
Fig 25 Indigenous communities forcibly displaced due to armed conflict
Página 12, 2021.

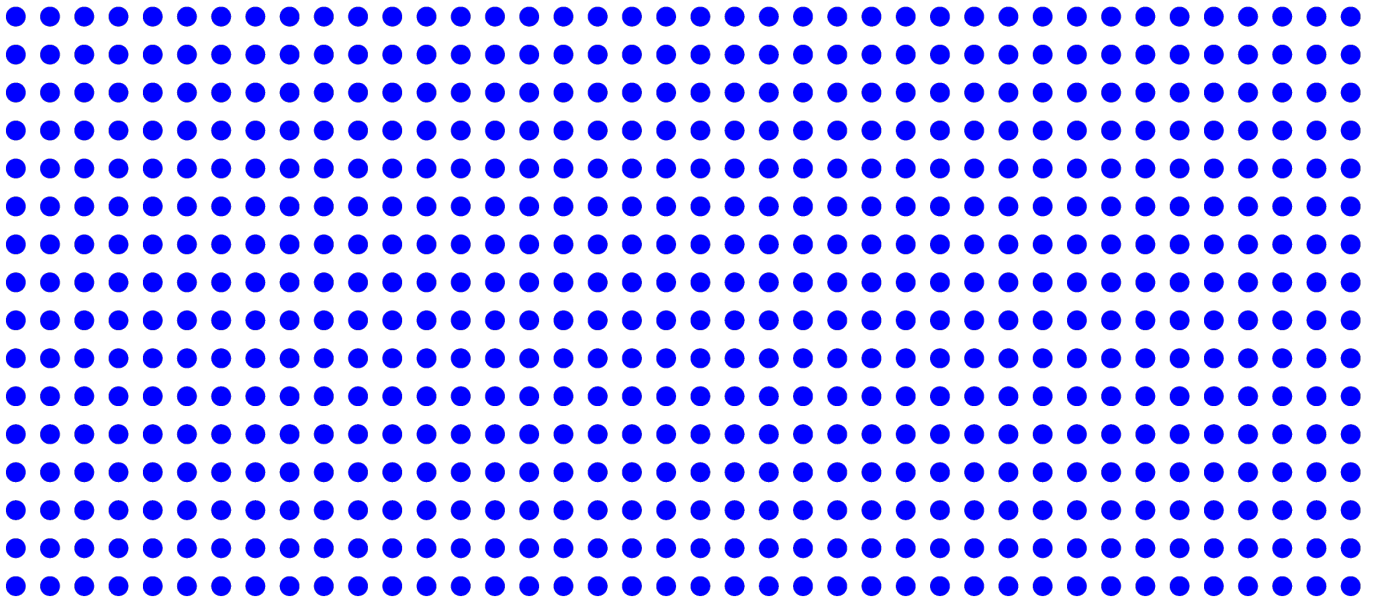


Fig 26 Afrocolombian communities forcibly displaced due to armed conflict. El Herald, 2020.

TIMEFRAME

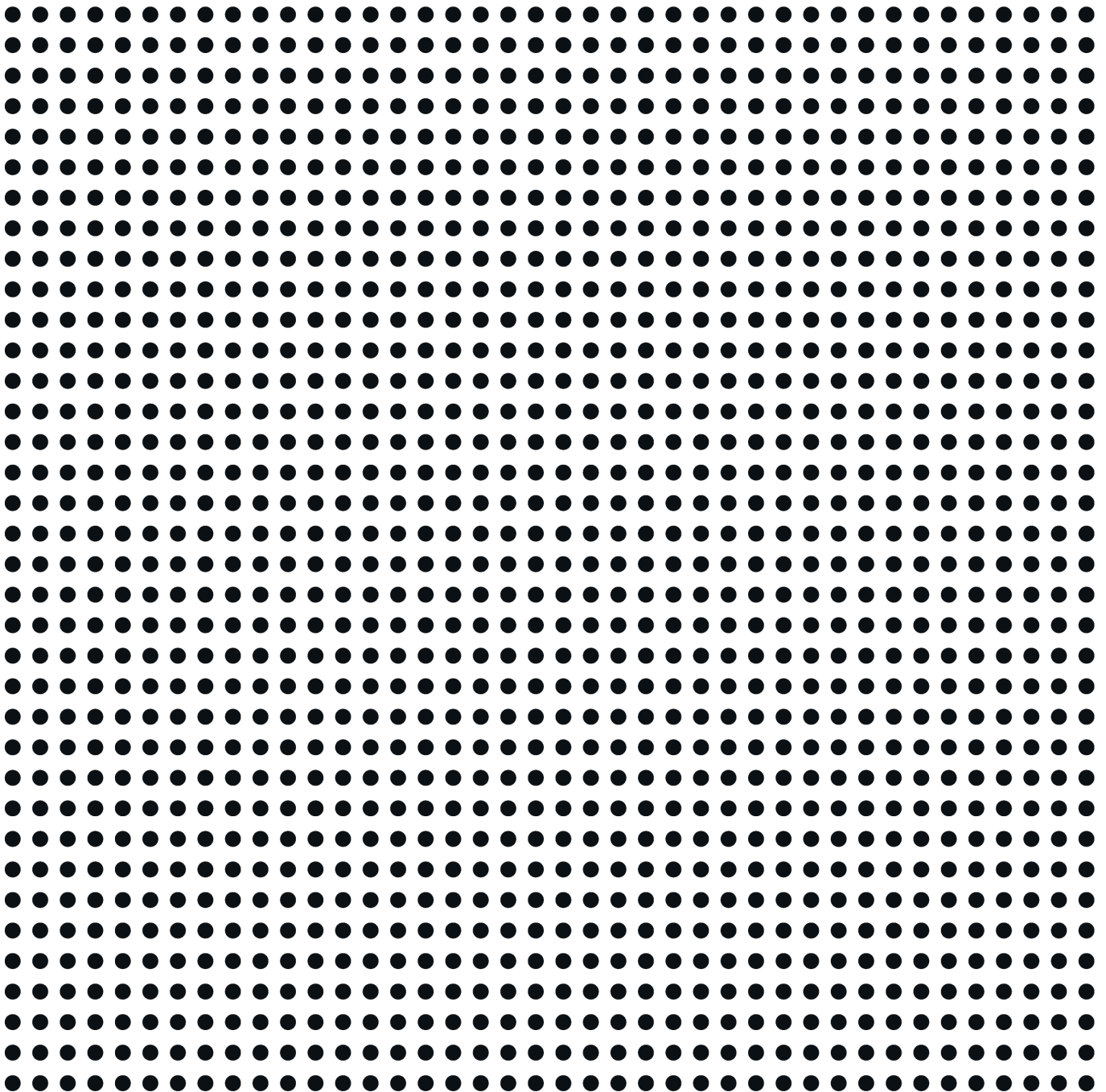






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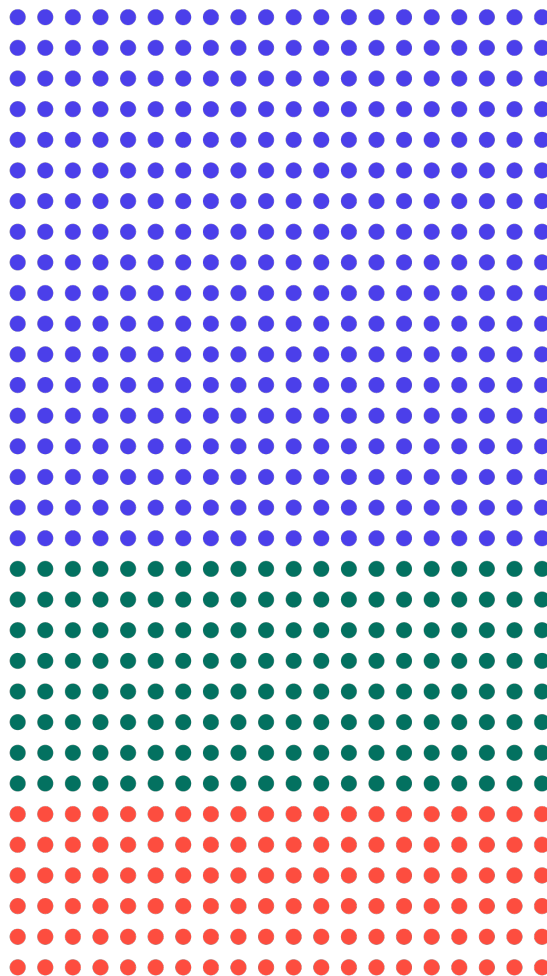


● 25.0
Colom

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the total population of Colombia
has been **displaced** by the internal conflict,
natural disasters or are Venezuelan **immigrants**.

Colombia faces a significant displacement crisis, with over 8.5 million displaced victims from the armed conflict, according to the National Registry of Victims (RUV). In addition to those displaced by violence, the country has also seen large numbers of individuals forced to flee due to environmental disasters, with over 350,000 people displaced by natural hazards in recent years (IDMC, 2023). Furthermore, the ongoing migration crisis from Venezuela has added to the strain, with nearly 2.9 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants currently residing in Colombia (UNHCR, 2024). These combined factors have resulted in a complex and ongoing displacement crisis, further exacerbating the challenges of urbanization and resource distribution in the country.



8.578.124
Total displaced people by Internal Conflict

4.214.646
Total displaced people by Natural Disasters

2.808.968
Total internal migrants from Venezuela

000 persons
Colombia currently has 52.000.000 inhabitants

THE PACIFIC REGION

As I mentioned earlier, Colombia is a country of contrasts, with its Pacific region standing out as a striking example. This region is home to one of the most biodiverse ecosystems in the world and is incredibly rich in natural resources. However, its abundant biodiversity and strategic location have also made it a target for guerrillas and armed forces seeking to control its territory.

The Pacific region has been one of the most heavily affected by internal conflict and violence, with more than half of the internal displacements linked to these factors occurring in this area. Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities, in particular, have borne the brunt of these impacts, facing disproportionate levels of violence and displacement (CIDH, 2021). These communities, despite their deep connection to the land, continue to struggle with the consequences of the ongoing conflict and the exploitation of the region's resources.

This region, encompassing the departments of Cauca, Chocó, Nariño, and Valle del Cauca, is strategically important for the illicit activities of non-state armed groups. Its rich natural resources, extensive coastline, and remote geography make it a prime location for drug production and trafficking, as well as illegal logging and mining (IDMC, 2024). The proximity to the borders with Ecuador and Panama has further fueled a growing trade in human trafficking and migrant smuggling.

In 2023, Nariño recorded the highest number of displacements in Colombia, with 75% of those displaced coming from Afro-Colombian or Indigenous communities, despite these groups representing only about 33% of the department's population (IDMC, 2024). The widespread violence in this region, including massacres, forced disappearances, and sexual violence, has been perpetrated by a range of illegal armed groups, including paramilitaries, guerrillas, and drug cartels. The Colombian government's limited presence and response in these areas have allowed these groups to operate with relative impunity, exacerbating the suffering of local populations.

Internal displacement due to conflict or violence

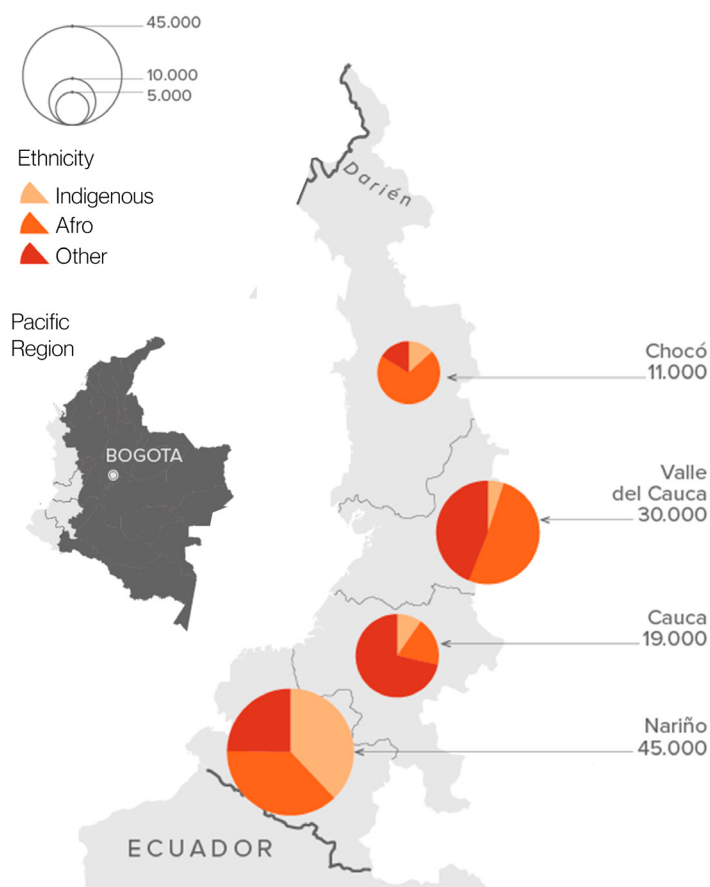


Fig. 27 Internal displacements in the Pacific region of Colombia contrasted by ethnicity of the displaced communities. IDMC, 2022

As the third-largest city in the country and the capital of the Pacific Region and the Valle del Cauca department, Cali has been the principal destination since the 1990s for persons displaced from the southwest of the country. According to data published by the Unit for Victims (2019), between 2000 and 2019, 207,469 people have declared in Cali that they are victims of the armed conflict.

The city has been the primary center of attraction for migrant populations from the South Pacific Coast of Colombia, where the Afro-Colombian population is prevalent (Basante, 2020). The population that has arrived in Cali as victims primarily comes from the Pacific coastline. Afro-Colombians face higher vulnerability than the non-Afro-Colombian population in Cali when working in both the informal and formal sectors.

Regarding destinations within Cali, people primarily arrive in the peripheral neighborhoods in the east and the western hills, areas that concentrate the most vulnerable populations in the city (Universidad del Valle, 2020).

One key point is that victims who belong to ethnic groups are part of the segregated social arrangement that has predominated in the urban development of Cali. As we have observed, Afro-descendants and Indigenous people who have arrived in Cali seeking refuge have concentrated in the peripheries and the poorest areas of the city.

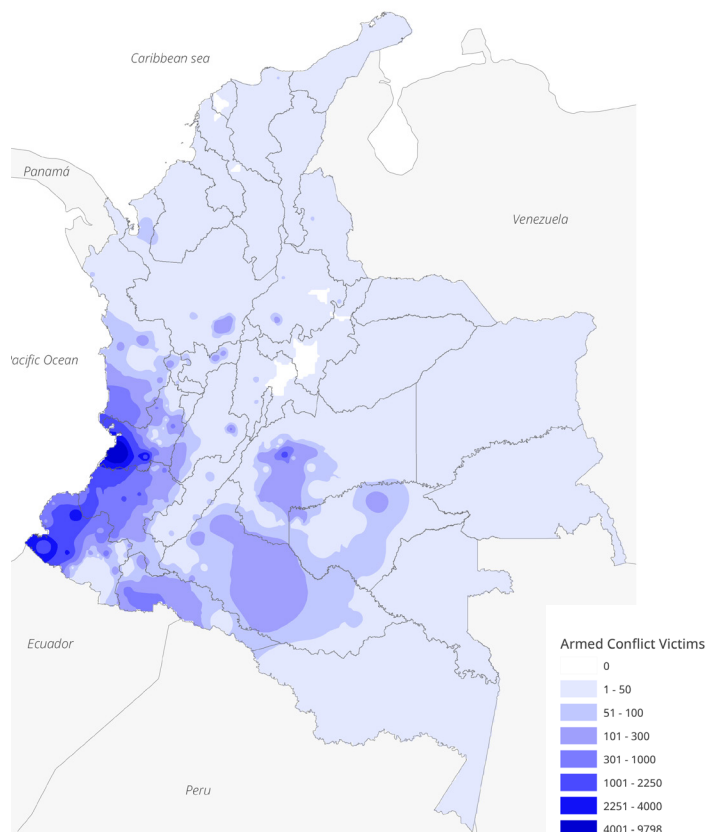


Fig 28. Places of origin of displacement victims who have arrived in Cali. Universidad del Valle, 2020

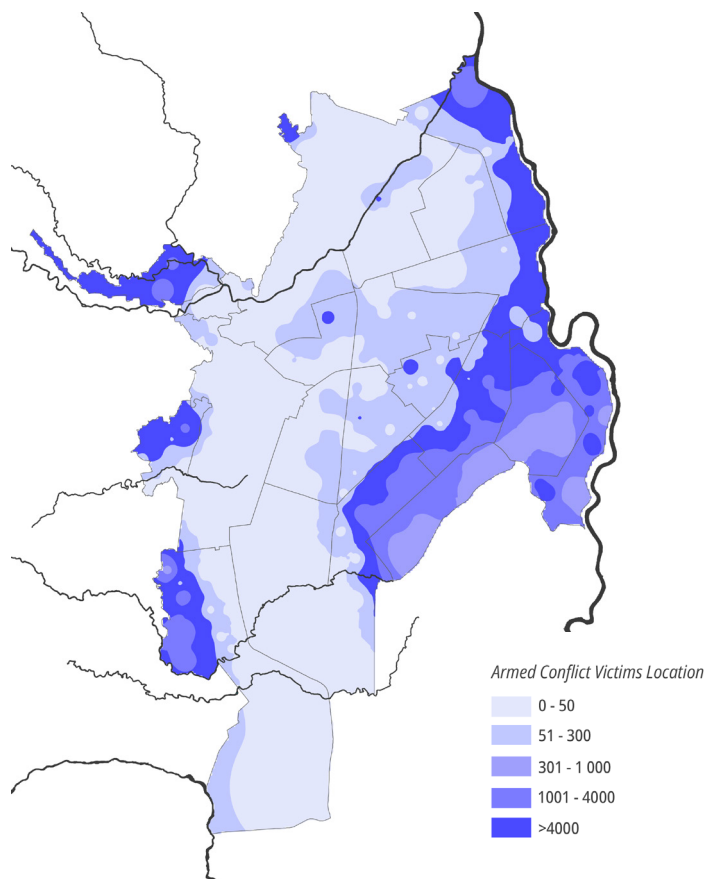


Fig. 29 Places of arrival of displacement victims who have arrived in Cali. Universidad del Valle, 2020

HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING

Cali is the most important attractor city in southwestern Colombia. The city's growth has been largely shaped by the violence the country experienced over several decades. From a population of 230,935 in 1950, Cali's population has surged to an estimated 2,890,430 in 2024, reflecting significant urban expansion over the past 75 years (World Population Review, 2024).

In the early 20th century, Cali was a relatively small city with a focus on agriculture, particularly sugarcane production. It was an important commercial and industrial center in the Valle del Cauca region, benefiting from its proximity to the Pacific Ocean and its role as a transportation hub.

Cali began to experience rapid growth during the mid-20th century, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s. This period saw a major urban expansion driven by industrialization, which attracted people from rural areas in search of better opportunities. The city's economic base expanded, and it became an important center for manufacturing, commerce, and services in Colombia.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the city also began to experience the early effects of the violence that would intensify in the following decades. Political instability, particularly in the context of Colombia's "La Violencia" (1948-1958) and the rise of guerrilla movements, began to affect rural areas in Valle del Cauca (Jaramillo, 2023).

The 1980s and 1990s were marked by significant social and political challenges in Colombia, and Cali, being strategically located, became a hub for the drug trade, and was heavily impacted by the violence and social instability that accompanied it. This period saw the city struggling with issues of insecurity, poverty, and inequality, which disproportionately affected the marginalized communities that had recently arrived.

By the 2000s, the violence from drug cartels had declined, but the legacy of the armed conflict continued to shape the city. The city remained a key destination for displaced populations, and they continued to face challenges related to integration, employment, and access to services.

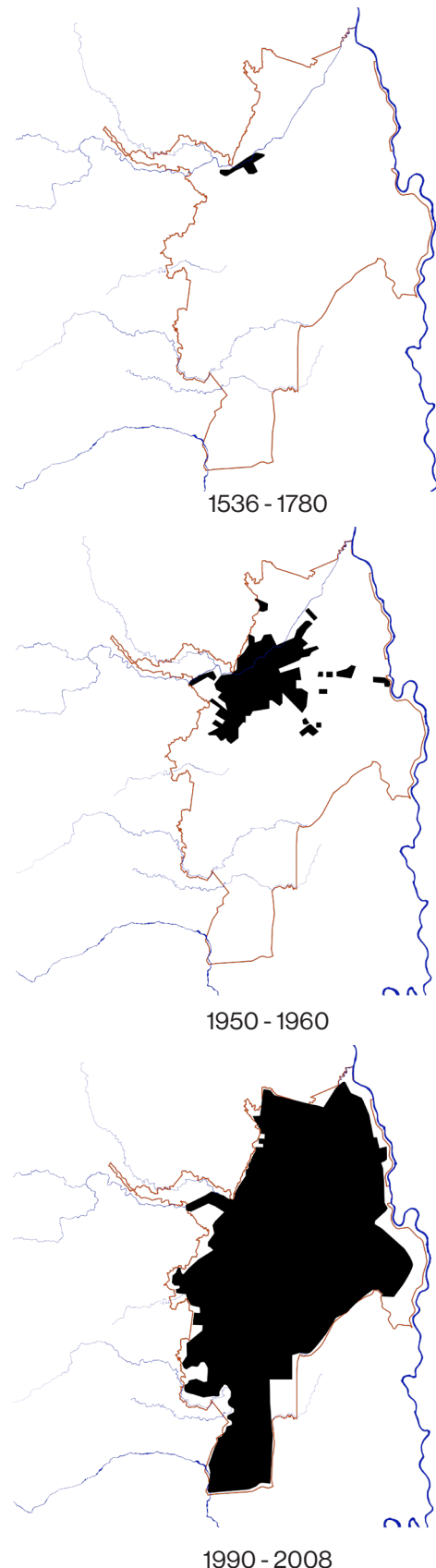


Fig. 30 Urban growth of Cali between 1536 - 2008.

According to data from the Secretariat of Social Housing and Habitat of Cali (2017), the growth of SBN has been significant since the turn of the century. Between 2000 and 2013, the number of families living in these areas increased by 67%. These neighbourhoods are the result of long-standing issues stemming from decades of bipartisan violence, which has turned them into a historical problem, contributing to widespread family displacement.

This rapid expansion is constrained by two geographic elements, the Cauca River, as well as by the mountain range of the hills, which has to some extent limited Cali's growth to the west.

The following images illustrate the population growth in the western part of the city, an area known for its self-built neighborhoods. Urban expansion in this region has evolved from horizontal growth (between 2000 and 2007), closely tied to the peak of displacement caused by the armed conflict, to a shift toward vertical development. In recent years, families have increasingly focused on improving and consolidating their homes as part of this transformation.

2000



2007



2012



2020



2023



Fig. 31 Urban growth of self-built neighbourhood located in the west side of the city (Comune 18). Google Earth.

THEIR URBAN LOGIC

The current situation in Cali poses a significant challenge for approximately 254,792 households living in self-built neighborhoods (SBN), which account for 40.4% of the total households in the municipality (Secretariat of Social Housing and Habitat of Cali, 2017). A study by the Universidad del Valle (2020) identified 195 SBNs, marking an increase of 47 since 2017.

As shown in the images, the neighborhoods depicted are emerging self-built neighborhoods located on the western outskirts of the city. These neighborhoods have experienced rapid growth, with both horizontal expansion and vertical growth becoming evident within just six years.

This ongoing expansion highlights the urgent need to address the lack of basic services, infrastructure, and adequate living conditions. However, it is equally important to acknowledge and incorporate the efforts of the communities themselves, who have been actively shaping and improving their environments through grassroots initiatives for years. Understanding and learning from the historical experiences of these communities is crucial, as it can help emerging SBNs avoid the challenges and revictimization faced by previous settlers.

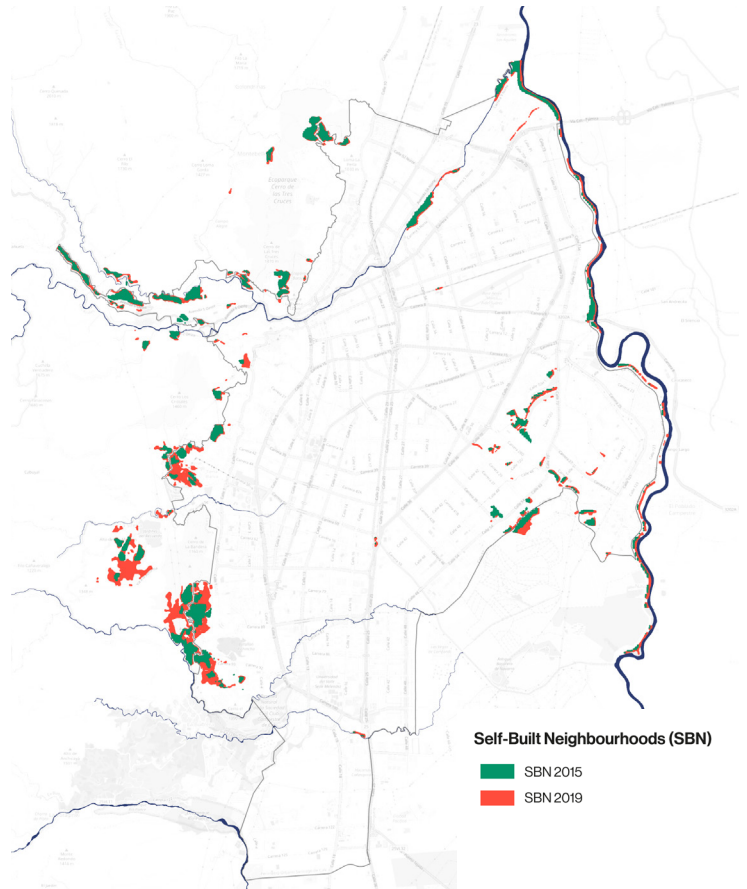


Fig. 32 Self-built urban development between 2015 - 2019. Universidad del Valle, 2020.

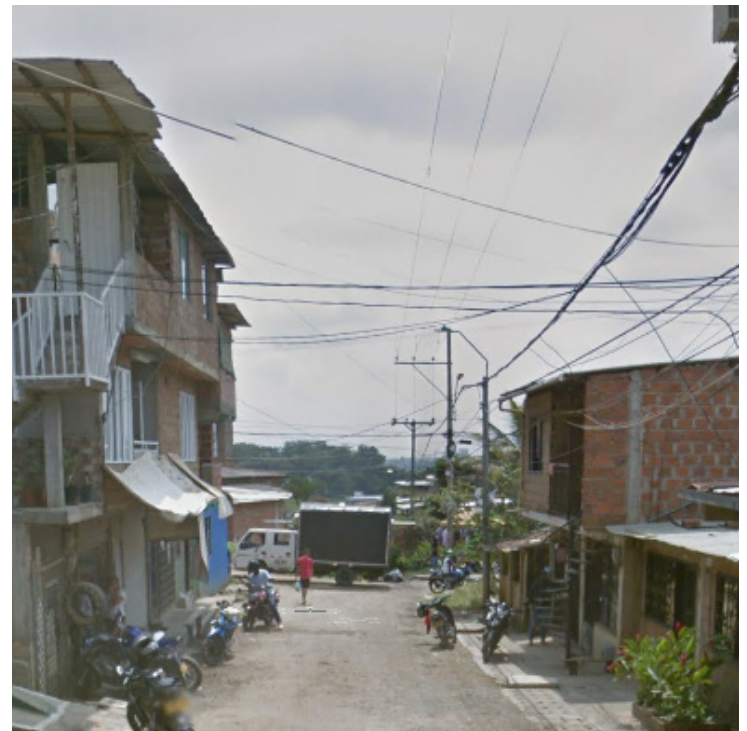


Fig. 33 Improvements of streets, side walks and materials of the houses between 2013 - 2019 in Emerging Self Built Neighbourhood located in the west side of Cali. Google Street View.



Fig. 34 Improvements of streets, side walks, as well as horizontal urban growth between 2013 - 2019 in Emerging Self Built Neighbourhood located in the west side of Cali. Google Street View.

The growth of self-built neighborhoods in Cali is accompanied by extreme conditions that force these communities to face multiple layers of oppression. Cali, often seen as an aspirational destination for those seeking to improve their quality of life, find refuge, and gain security, presents a harsh reality that falls far short of these expectations.

Upon arriving in a territory where everything seems to work against them, newcomers must start from scratch. Accessing opportunities becomes a daunting task, often trapping residents of self-built neighborhoods in cycles of poverty. Over the past six years, an average of 50.2% of households in Cali have worked under informal conditions, exceeding the national average of 49.6% (DANE). This widespread informality, coupled with limited access to stable employment, exacerbates poverty and insecurity within these communities.

Adding to this is the significant number of people without employment, as Cali ranks as the third municipality with the highest unemployment rate among 13 major cities in the country (Secretariat of Social Housing and Habitat of Cali, 2017). Residents of precarious settlements, often located on the peripheries of the city, face significant barriers to upward mobility due to their isolation from the formal urban fabric. Socially and economically, they have fewer opportunities to form connections with individuals from other social groups, which deprives them of access to diverse resources and networks. This isolation further entrenches their exclusion and limits their ability to improve their circumstances (Secretariat of Social Housing and Habitat of Cali, 2017).

Adding to these layers of oppression is racial discrimination. The majority of residents in these marginalized areas are Afro-descendants (DANE, 2019), who often face systemic exclusion. Many are also victims of armed conflict, and women in these communities face the compounded burdens of gender, racial, and socioeconomic discrimination. These intersecting forms of oppression create significant barriers to accessing opportunities, resources, and the possibility of achieving a better quality of life

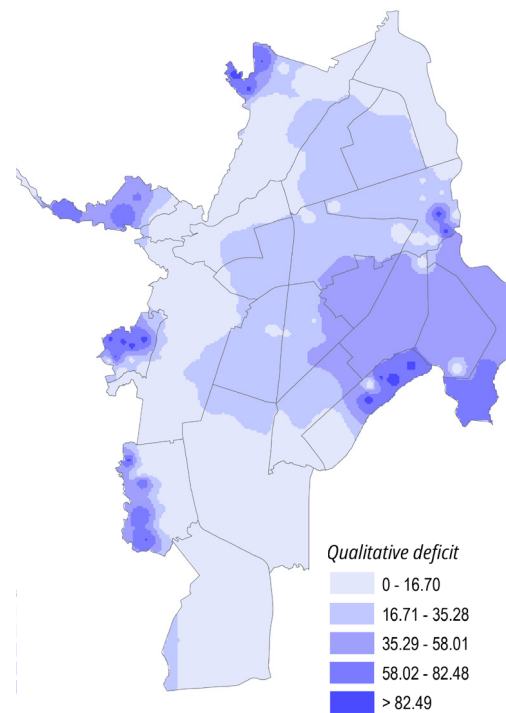


Fig. 35 Areas with qualitative deficit in Cali. Mainly located in the periphery, specially the east.

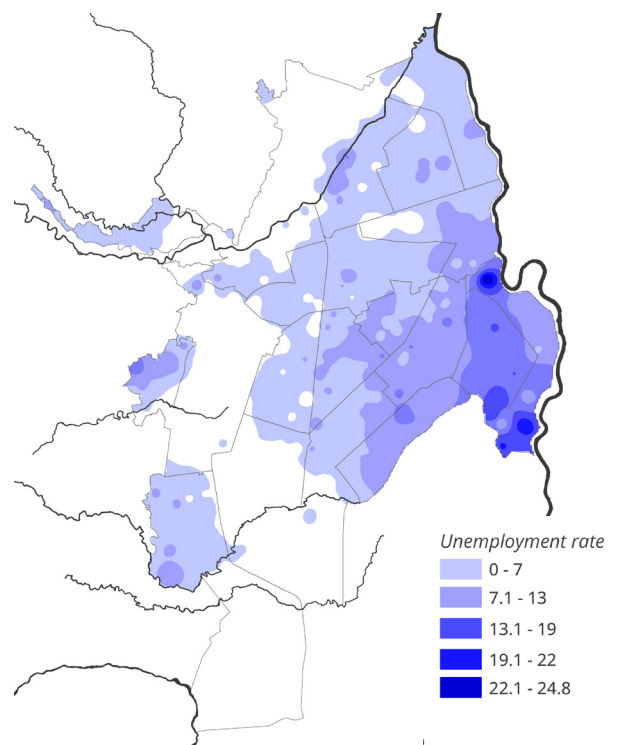


Fig. 36 Areas with the majority of unemployment are located in the periphery of the city

The socio-economic challenges faced by residents of these settlements are deeply intertwined with their spatial and geographic conditions, which influence not only the physical development of the neighborhoods but also the daily lives of their inhabitants. The eastern and western peripheries of Cali, where self-built neighborhoods are most prevalent, are shaped by two dominant natural features: the Farallones de Cali mountains to the west and the Cauca River to the east. These geographical elements act as natural boundaries, but they also contribute to the marginalization of these communities. While they have offered refuge to those seeking shelter, they have simultaneously reinforced the isolation of these neighborhoods, adding another layer of oppression to the already difficult circumstances.

The irregular and often informal way in which the territory has been occupied by both developers and disadvantaged communities highlights a troubling reality in Cali: poverty and risk are inextricably linked (Franco-Calderón, 2020). The city's urban development has long followed a segregationist pattern, rooted in colonial history, which continues to push the poorest segments of society to the most vulnerable and hazardous areas. This pattern of spatial exclusion perpetuates inequality, leaving these communities exposed to environmental risks and limited opportunities for upward mobility.

Moreover, the socio-economic vulnerabilities faced by these populations are compounded by the ever-present threats of natural disasters and the destruction of fragile ecosystems. Despite the urgent need for intervention, government efforts to address these issues have been inadequate. Programs designed to legalize and upgrade these neighborhoods are insufficient, leaving the most vulnerable residents without the support they need to improve their living conditions. The lack of direct and effective action from the authorities underscores the systemic neglect that continues to affect these communities, further entrenching their poverty and marginalization. (Universidad del Valle, 2020)

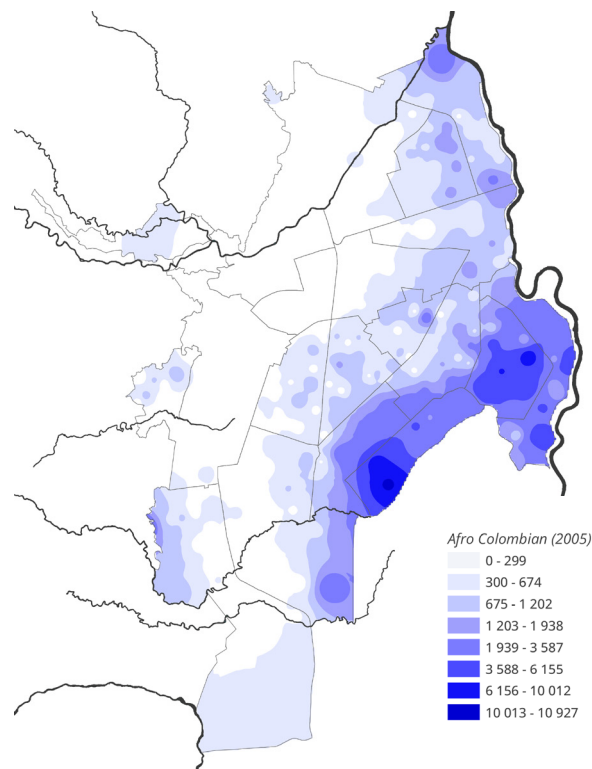


Fig. 37 Location of the majority of afrocolombian communities. They are mostly in the east side of the city.

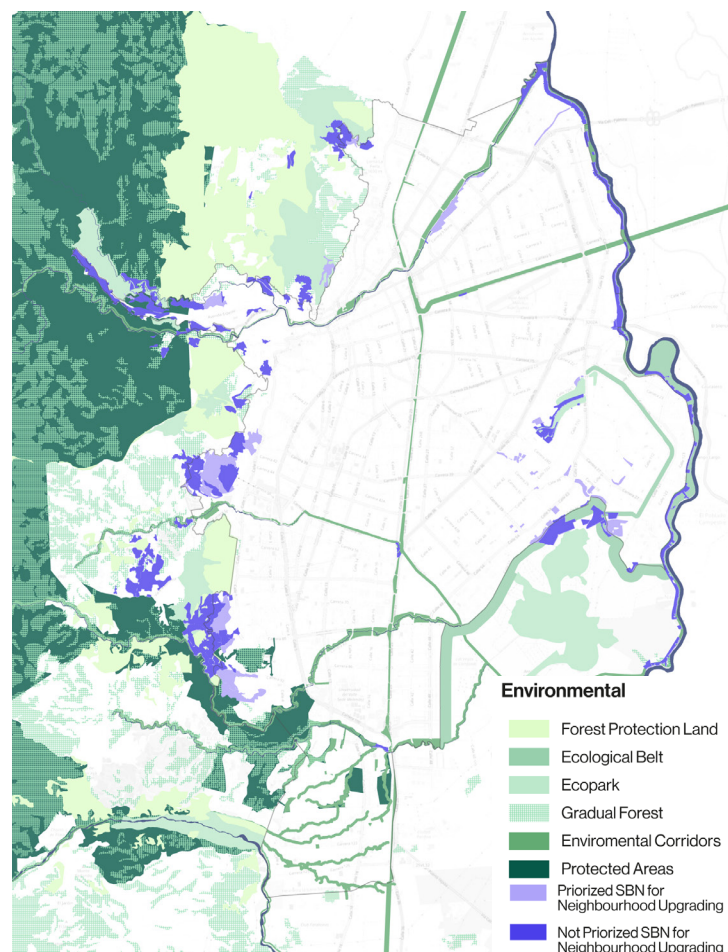


Fig. 38 Majority of the SBN are located in protected areas, making their integration more complicated.

The East Side: El Río

These neighbourhoods are characterized by the occupation of historically flood-prone lands, many of which are classified as areas with non-mitigable flood risks, either due to the Cauca River or from rainfall overflow.

The eastern zone of Cali, which includes the Aguablanca District, is located along the flat area of the city, bordering the Cauca River. This area is highly vulnerable to flood risks. Within this zone, 71 settlements are located in flood-prone areas, accounting for 28.8% of the total settlement area (174.4 hectares). Of these, 16 settlements are in areas with non-mitigable flood risks, and 48 are in high-risk zones (Universidad del Valle, 2020).

The eastern part of the city, particularly the Aguablanca District, is home to many migrants who have come from various municipalities along the Pacific coast, such as Tumaco, Buenaventura, and several regions of Nariño. These people are drawn to the lowlands, wetlands, heat, and rivers, seeking environments similar to the ones they left behind. Their settlement patterns reflect this connection to their origins, with linear typologies along bodies of water that resemble the typical forms of occupation found in the Colombian Pacific coastal regions. This is especially evident in the communes that make up the Aguablanca District (communes 13, 14, 15, and 21), where much of the population originates from.

These conditions underscore the complex relationship between the socio-economic vulnerabilities of these communities and the physical environment they occupy. In the way they self-build their territory, these communities, drawing on their previous knowledge, not only seek a new space in the city that mirrors their former homes, but they also replicate the methods used to construct them. This process reflects the urban growth patterns that have historically been shaped by community efforts, further reinforcing the continuity of their lived experiences and spatial practices.



Fig. 39 Urban morphology of the SBN located in the east side of Cali

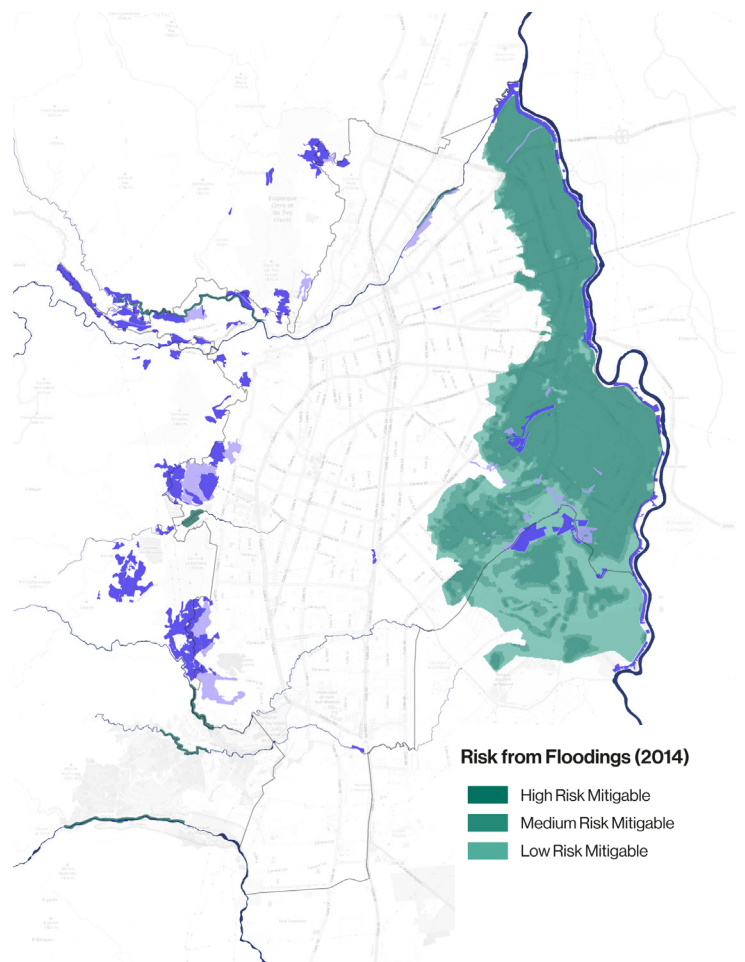


Fig. 40 Contrast between the SBN and the Risk areas from flooding.



Fig. 41 Urban configuration in the Pacific Litoral and their relation with water bodies.



Fig. 42 Urban configuration of the SBN located in the east side of Cali and their relation with water bodies.

The West Side: La Ladera

Those who settle in the upper parts of Cali, particularly on the hillside, predominantly come from the mountainous regions of Cauca, Nariño, and Caldas. These communities, primarily of peasant and indigenous descent, seek out spaces that either remind them of or resemble their previous homes. In doing so, they recreate environments that align with their cultural and geographical roots, making the new space feel familiar and comforting.

These communities often settle in mountainous areas, which are typically classified as protected land within the city. In some of the most vulnerable cases, their constructions are located in areas designated as high-risk or non-mitigable threat zones.

The hillside zone, in particular, is highly susceptible to landslides. A total of 116 self-built neighborhoods (SBN) are located in this area, representing 67.7% of the total AHDI area. The high-risk zone extends over 71 of these neighborhoods, indicating that a significant portion of the hillside settlements are exposed to low and medium-level risks (Universidad del Valle, 2020).

The settlement patterns in these areas are predominantly organic, following the natural contours of the western hills of Cali. These settlements have grown gradually over time, with a high density of land occupation. According to the Universidad del Valle (2020), the settlements exhibit an orthogonal grid pattern, the result of planned subdivisions, which are then progressively developed by the communities themselves. The plots tend to be rectangular with narrow facades, and the blocks are irregular in shape.

This pattern also reflects the communities' prior planning efforts. The self-built neighborhoods on the hillside play a crucial role in shaping the western urban boundary of the city. They occupy a significant portion of the mountainous face that faces both the city center and the eastern side of Cali. Over the years, these settlements have become highly visible and socially relevant, becoming an integral part of the city's urban fabric.



Fig. 43 Urban morphology of the SBN located in the west side of Cali

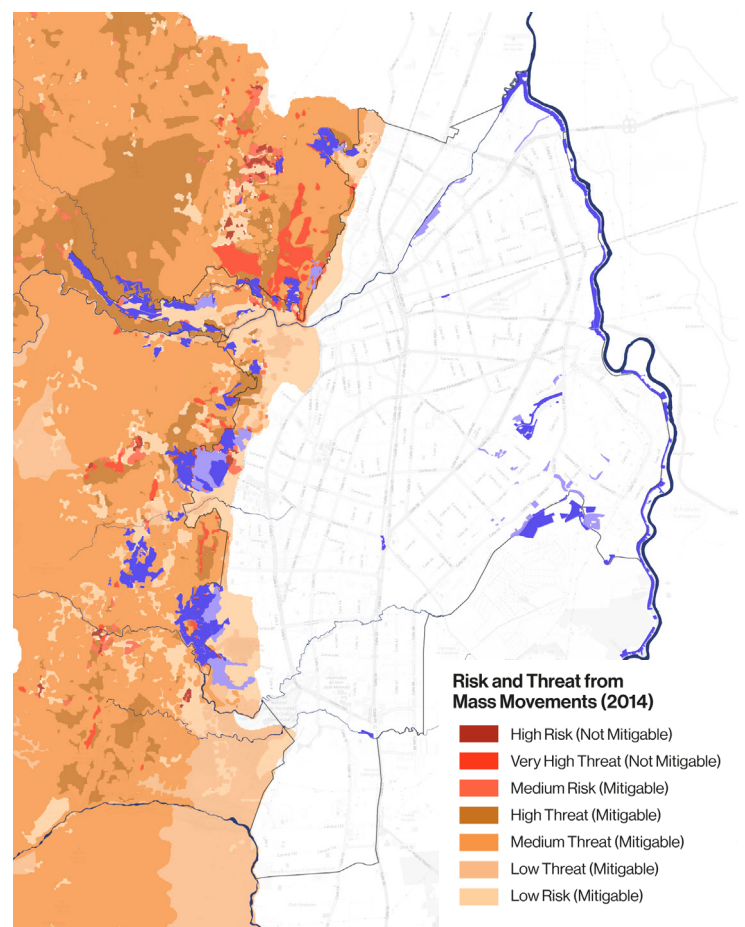


Fig. 44 Contrast between the SBN and the Risk areas from mass movements



Fig. 45 Urban configuration in the mountains of the Cauca department.



Fig. 46 Urban configuration of the SBN located in the west side of Cali and their relation with the mountains.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the growth of self-built neighborhoods (SBN) in Cali reflects a complex interplay between socio-economic vulnerabilities, geographical conditions, and historical patterns of urban development. The city's expansion has been shaped by the migration of marginalized communities, primarily from rural and mountainous regions, who seek to recreate environments that are familiar to them, thus reinforcing their cultural and geographical ties. These communities often settle in areas that, while offering a semblance of home, are located in high-risk zones, such as flood-prone areas or unstable hillsides, where land is often classified as protected or deemed unfit for development.

The persistence of segregationist urban planning patterns, which have been entrenched since the colonial era, continues to relegate the poorest segments of society to the most vulnerable areas. Despite these challenges, the self-built neighborhoods have become an integral part of the urban fabric of Cali. They have grown organically, with community-driven efforts to adapt to the environment and create spaces that reflect their needs and aspirations. However, the lack of adequate planning and the absence of effective government interventions to improve their living conditions perpetuate the cycle of vulnerability and marginalization. So far in my analysis, I have found that the patterns of self-built urbanization hold significant potential in terms of utilizing the communities' previous knowledge.

The spatial organization, streets, and plots reflect a connection to the geographical reality and the familiar environment these communities know. At the same time, the pursuit of physical improvement in their surroundings leads to the continuous growth of homes, often without state assistance. This can be linked to family growth, as well as the search for new sources of income through renting out spaces on their properties. I believe that combining local knowledge, from both the residents and urban planners, can strengthen the subsequent phases of consolidation, especially in neighborhoods that are still in their early stages.



Fig. 47 View from the "formal" city to the self-built neighbourhoods. Picture by Felipe Montenegro

SOCIAL PRODUCTION
OF HABITAT

Learnings from the Past
A Method Based on Stories
Understanding the Habitat
Framework of Values
Territorial Manifestations

LEARNINGS FROM THE PAST

A central focus of this chapter is the in-depth qualitative analysis of interviews with long-term residents of self-built neighborhoods in Cali. Rather than treating these interviews as static records of the past, I engage with them as living testimonies of territorial construction—narratives that reveal how people, in the absence of institutional support, shaped their environment through collective strategies, emotional labor, and everyday resistance.

This phase of the project is not simply about reconstructing the chronological development of these neighborhoods. It is an attempt to understand the processes, values, and decisions that residents enacted in the shaping of their territory: from how they secured land and built shelter, to how they organized water access, cared for one another, and negotiated their survival amid exclusion. By identifying these patterns, this chapter offers a grounded understanding of how urban life is produced from below, outside formal planning systems.

The goal of this analysis is not to interpret self-built neighborhoods as waiting to be integrated into the formal city, nor to frame them in terms of lack or deficit. Instead, I examine them as spaces of social production and value creation, as territories where knowledge, care, autonomy, and solidarity have guided urban development. This approach allows me to trace not only the material evolution of these neighborhoods, but also the ethical and political frameworks that sustained them.

Through this process, I aim to identify key elements that can inform a radically different approach to planning, one that begins not with technical prescriptions, but with the lived experiences and aspirations of the communities themselves. The intention is to shift the priorities of urban development: away from efficiency, feasibility, and profit, and toward dignity, collective wellbeing, and territorial justice.

Rather than bridging informal and formal planning models as separate systems, this research challenges the binary altogether. It seeks to demonstrate that the so-called “informal” is already a form of planning, rich in adaptive solutions, spatial intelligence, and ethical grounding. What’s missing is recognition. Institutional planning can and must learn from these practices, not to formalize or assimilate them, but to support them on their own terms.

Ultimately, this chapter lays the groundwork for imagining how future planning frameworks could be built not in abstraction, but from the values that already govern these territories. It argues that recognizing and uplifting these values is not only a matter of equity—it is a necessary condition for any truly just, sustainable, and human-centered city.

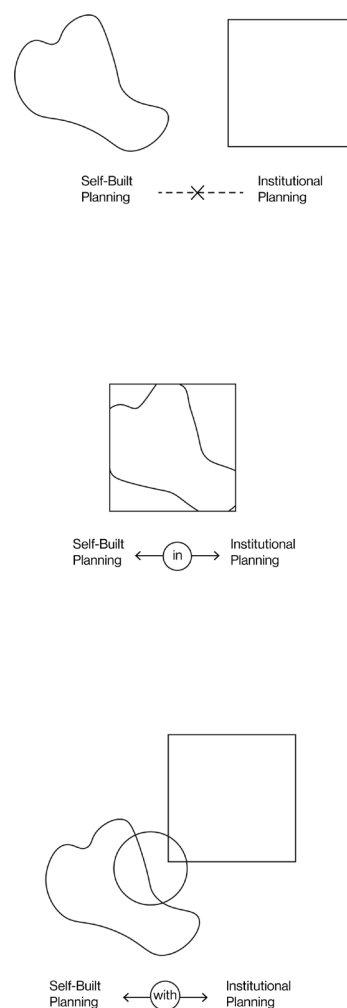


Fig. 48 Planning models: separation, capitalist integration, and coexistence between formal and informal models. Made by author.



Fig. 49 Community-led installation of sewage system during the early stages of the self-built neighborhood Brisas de las Palmas. Picture by Francy Mina.

A METHOD BASED ON STORIES

At the heart of this project are the 30 interviews I began with—conversations that ultimately shaped the direction, structure, and outcomes of my entire process. These interviews were conducted with current residents of Brisas de Las Palmas, Pampas del Mirador, La Arboleda, and Alto Polvorines, self-built neighborhoods located in Comuna 18 of Cali. From the outset, I understood that these testimonies were more than data; they were territorial narratives, and honoring them required a method grounded in care, time, and attention.

The first challenge was transcribing and translating the interviews, a task that required me to listen closely—often multiple times—to the depth of each person’s story. For the methodology I developed, it was essential to engage with detailed and layered accounts of how these neighborhoods were formed: why people arrived, how they decided to stay and build, and what obstacles, material, emotional, political, they had to overcome in the process.

From the original set of 30 interviews, I selected 12 for in-depth analysis. These particular narratives shared a key characteristic: each interviewee was involved in the foundational stages of the neighborhood.

I also ensured a balance of voices, men and women of different ages and roles, to reflect the diversity of perspectives, experiences, and visions for the future. This allowed me to better understand how gender shaped opportunities, risks, and responsibilities within the broader process of territorial formation.

With these 12 interviews, I began identifying the spatial decisions and turning points embedded in each story, moments when people had to act, choose, organize, or resist in order to shape their environment. From this, I developed a soft map of the neighborhoods, a diagram not only of physical layout, but of the values, decisions, and actions that made space livable, functional, and meaningful.

This mapping process helped me uncover connections and patterns across individual experiences, highlighting both shared strategies and specific challenges. It became the foundation for the analytical framework I built: a lens through which I could identify the values underpinning territorial practices, and a guide for imagining a different way of planning, one that begins with the well-being, dignity, and lived wisdom of the people who already build and care for the city every day.

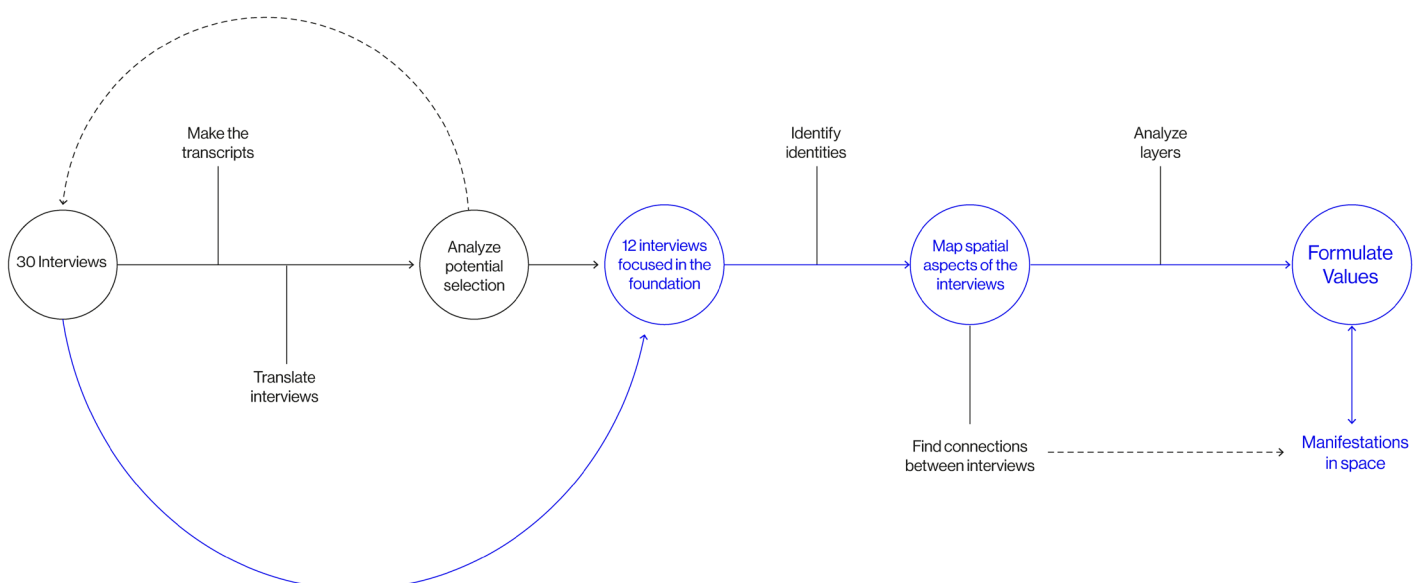


Fig. 50 Diagram of the methodological process based on territorial narratives as the foundation of the project. Made by author.



Fig. 51 Aerial image of Comuna 13, located in the western area of Cali. Picture by Monoceja.

TERRITORIAL NARRATIVES

Ari Paz is one of the founding settlers of Brisas de Las Palmas. Originally from Cauca, he arrived displaced by guerrilla violence. He played a central role in organizing land occupation and coordinated community efforts to bring in basic services like water and electricity. Ari has been a guiding figure for newcomers and continues to support neighborhood initiatives. Though elderly, he remains deeply involved in shaping local development and offers moral and logistical support for community action.

Male | Elderly | Rural area



Francy Mina is president of the Community Action Board of Brisas de Las Palmas. Displaced from rural Cauca, she arrived in 2002 and has led numerous community projects, including the daily operation of the local dining hall. A determined leader, Francy advocates for housing legalization, food security, and youth empowerment—especially for young women. She mentors other women to take on leadership roles and coordinates with foundations and public institutions to improve living conditions in the neighborhood.

Female | Adult | Rural | Afro-Colombian

Justiniano Arias is the vice president of the Community Action Board of Pampas del Mirador. From Cauca and living with a disability, he champions accessibility, youth safety, and mobility. He led the community effort to pave roads and continues to push for housing formalization and expanded public transport. Justiniano envisions a neighborhood with safer streets, cable-car access, and opportunities for youth. His leadership reflects resilience, care for public space, and a long-term vision for territorial inclusion.

Male | Adult | Rural | Functional Diversity



Fidelino Fernández is the president of the Community Action Board of Pampas del Mirador and was born in Pescador, Cauca. He arrived in Cali in the 1980s and has spent decades working for land legalization, public services, and housing rights. Active in health oversight and neighborhood development, he helps coordinate programs with local institutions. He is a respected leader with strong relationships across community and government entities, and is committed to formalizing land titles for hundreds of families.

Male | Elderly | Rural Area



Emilia Jiménez is originally from Urabá and arrived in Cali as a displaced person in 1995. She rebuilt her life in La Cañada (Polvorines), raising a family through informal labor and persistence. Today, she volunteers distributing food packages to elderly neighbors and is a key figure in supporting vulnerable residents. Emilia speaks openly about the pain of forced displacement and housing insecurity, and she believes deeply in community solidarity, faith, and the value of helping others despite limited resources

Female | Elderly | Rural

Cristian Sandoval is a young soccer coach and construction worker from Cauca, raised in Brisas de Las Palmas. Passionate about guiding youth away from drugs and violence, he organizes daily soccer practices for local children. With limited equipment and resources, he teaches discipline, respect, and teamwork. His dream is to become a professional coach. Cristian sees sports as a life-saving alternative and a way to strengthen community ties while giving kids a safe and motivating environment.

Male | Young | Urban | Afro-Colombian



José Taticuan is a construction worker and longtime resident of Pampas del Mirador, originally from Nariño. He's been part of the community since the early 2000s, helping build roads, kitchens, and public spaces through collective labor. José actively supports the community dining hall and is involved in neighborhood improvement projects. Despite economic hardships, he remains committed to self-built housing, believes in the power of teamwork, and values giving back to a place that gave him shelter.

Male | Adult | Rural | Indigenous



Rosalba Velásquez is an environmental advocate and kitchen volunteer living in Brisas de Las Palmas. Originally from Manuela Beltrán, she's a single mother who raised three daughters through domestic work and determination. She now educates neighbors about recycling, supports the Zero Waste initiative, and participates in community projects. Known for her sense of humor and perseverance, Rosalba believes in caring for the environment and sees personal transformation as essential for building a better future for younger generations.

Female | Adult | Urban | Afro-Colombian

Olga Quintero, is a home-based artisan and community advocate from Cali. A resident of Pampas del Mirador for over 30 years, she left factory work to focus on plant care, recycling, and crafts. She has turned her home into a peaceful and eco-conscious space. Olga promotes responsible pet ownership, environmental sustainability, and mutual respect among neighbors. She envisions a cleaner, greener, and more organized neighborhood and encourages other women to develop skills and participate in community life.

Female | Adult | Urban



Absalón Sabogal is a librarian and agroecology educator from Morales, Cauca. He runs a small community library where he teaches environmental care and food self-sufficiency through gardening. His “Sowing Words” initiative combines literacy and sustainability by involving children and elders in cultivating vegetables and herbs. Known for his creativity and empathy, Absalón integrates ancestral knowledge and ecological values, creating a space that promotes environmental awareness, food sovereignty, and intergenerational learning within the neighborhood.

Male | Elderly | Rural



Nury Jiménez is a community kitchen worker and informal shopkeeper from La Sierra, Cauca. Living in Pampas del Mirador for over 30 years, she balances caring for her children and grandson with running a small store and helping prepare daily meals for over 80 people. Her journey began as a beneficiary of the dining hall before becoming a core team member. Nury is deeply committed to her neighborhood, advocating for more food access, youth safety, and peaceful living spaces.

Female | Adult | Rural

María Mellizo is a community leader and alternate treasurer of the Brisas de Las Palmas Action Board. Originally from Rosas, Cauca, she has lived in the area since 2010. María is a bridge between local residents and external institutions, coordinating street paving, infrastructure projects, and social programs. She promotes leadership among women and dreams of opening a sportswear shop. Her dedication lies in building dignity and visibility for families in self-built neighborhoods through formal recognition and services.

Female | Adult | Rural



UNDERSTANDING THE HABITAT

To construct a more grounded and spatially attuned understanding of the stories shared by residents, I draw on and reinterpret the analytical framework proposed by Jota Samper (2014) in his work on self-built settlements. Samper emphasizes that these neighborhoods should not be seen as static or incomplete fragments of the city, but rather as dynamic urban territories shaped through long-term processes of social, economic, and spatial transformation. He urges us to understand informal settlements not as anomalies, but as legitimate spaces with their own urban logic, histories, and ways of producing territory.

A central critique in Samper's work is directed at the overly individualistic lens of many urban policies—especially those focused on titling and private property—which often obscure the inherently collective, negotiated, and relational nature of informal urban development. These policies tend to reduce self-built neighborhoods to legal irregularities to be corrected, ignoring the rich social fabrics and systems of mutual care that sustain them.

Inspired by Samper's perspective, I use his framework not as a rigid model, but as a guiding structure for my own analytical process. My approach diverges in two fundamental ways. First, while Samper works primarily from a macro-spatial and policy-focused lens, I center the voices and lived experiences of the residents themselves. Second, rather than applying the phases as fixed stages, I treat them as analytical lenses that help uncover the patterns, emotions, and spatial memories embedded in the narratives of those who built and continue to inhabit these neighborhoods.

Below are the phases as I have adapted and interpreted them in my analysis:

Historical Understanding:

I interpret the early stages of self-built development through the lens of collective action and resistance. Residents' narratives reveal the political and social labor involved in claiming space, organizing for basic services, and establishing a sense of community in the face of structural neglect.

Urban Logic:

From the interviews, I identify the forms of spatial knowledge embedded in residents' decisions—where to settle, how to build, what to avoid, and how to adapt to environmental constraints. I analyze the physical layers of the neighborhoods as they evolved, and reflect on how these layers now shape current conditions, challenges, and possibilities.

Interventions in Space:

Here, I explore how residents have actively shaped their environment—whether through collective construction, risk mitigation, or informal infrastructure provision. These actions are not incidental, but deeply meaningful. Understanding their origins and intentions allows me to recognize which practices should be strengthened, and which might need to evolve in a future scenario.

Toward Better Practices (developed in the next chapter):

Building on the lessons of the previous phases, I envision an alternative planning model—an imaginary grounded in the territorial values already present in these neighborhoods. This speculative model challenges top-down approaches and proposes a path where community ethics, rather than external priorities, guide the design of urban life from the outset.

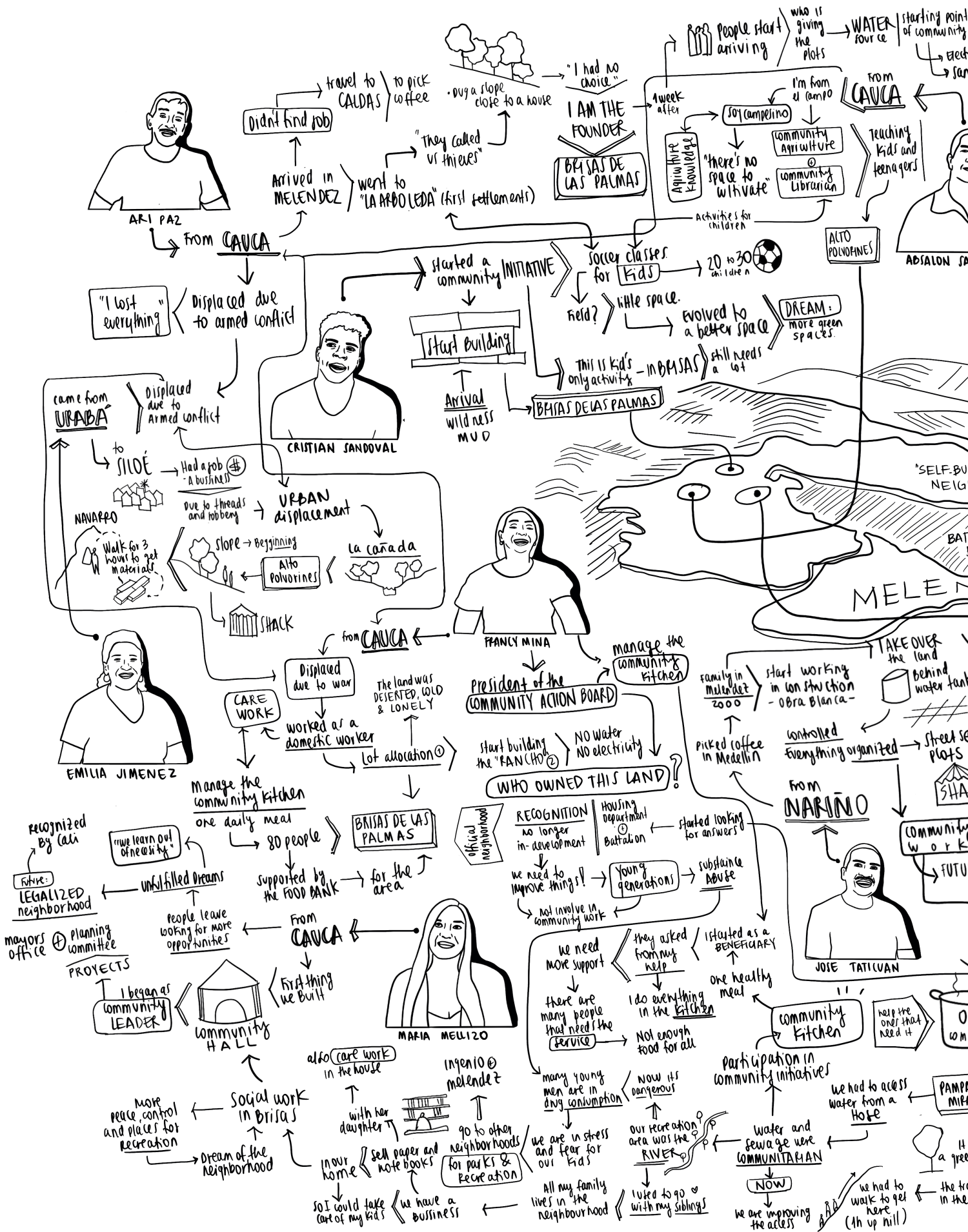
For the purposes of this chapter, I focus on the first three phases: historical understanding, urban logic, and physical interventions. These phases allow me to draw out territorial insights from the narratives—mapping the decisions, tactics, and spatial strategies through which residents claimed land, resisted evictions, accessed services, and wove a shared urban fabric. Through this lens, the interviews become more than personal testimonies. They serve as portals into the territorial history of self-built neighborhoods—spaces shaped by continuous negotiation, adaptation, and collective care, often in the absence or outright opposition of the state.

At the same time, I maintain a critical stance toward formal interventions in these areas. Too often, institutional responses treat informality as a deviation to be corrected, rather than as a generative process worthy of recognition and support. Rather than offering a prescriptive fix, my aim is to learn from what is already there—to understand the phases of arrival, defense, and transformation not just as physical events, but as ethical and political acts grounded in values of care, solidarity, autonomy, and responsibility. In doing so, this chapter lays the groundwork for the next, where I propose a values-based imaginary for dignified habitat—one that begins not with control, but with trust in the knowledge, practices, and aspirations of those who have built the city from below.



Fig 52 Geographical location of the neighborhoods in Cali where the stories are set. Made by author.

COUNTER MAPPING



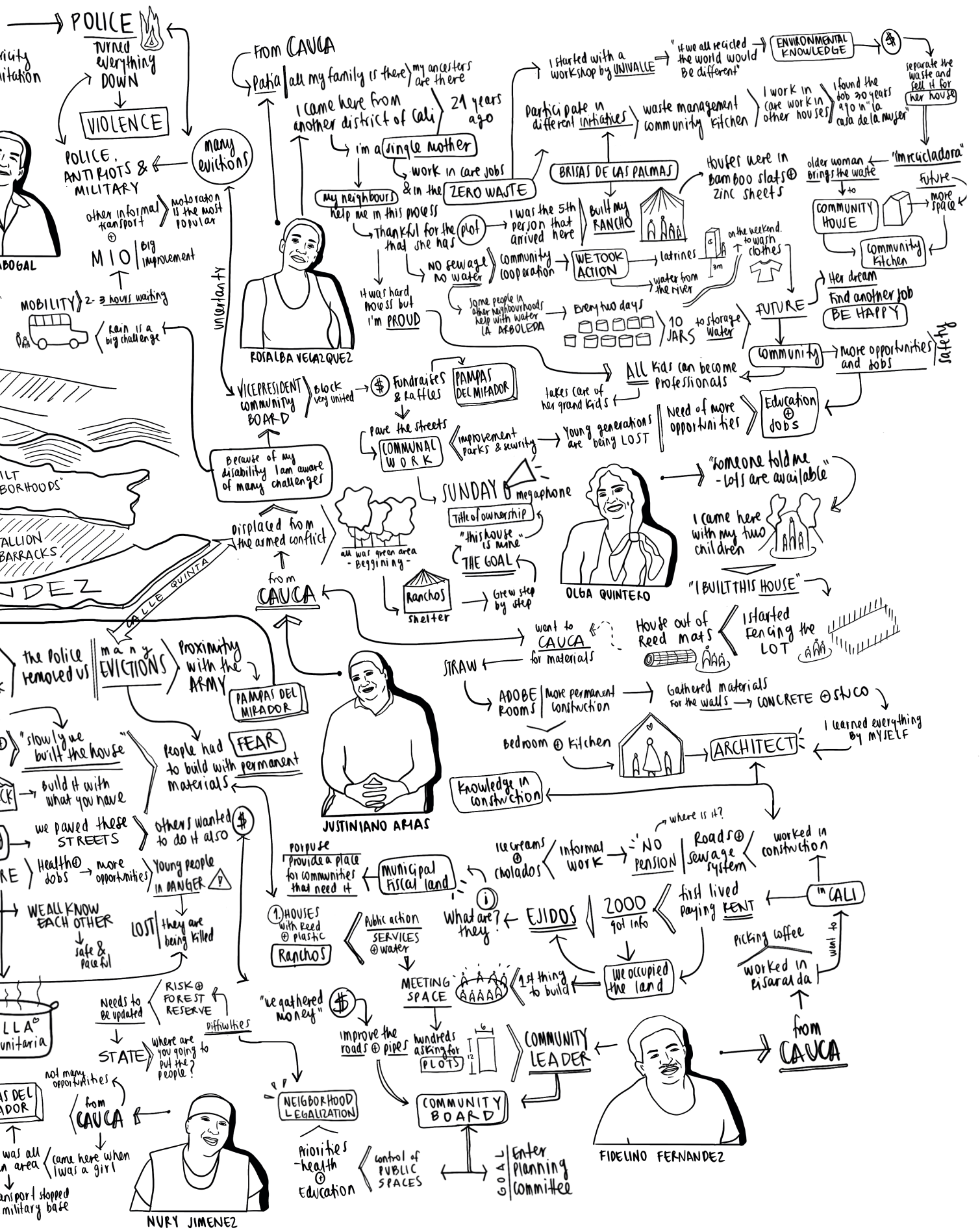


Fig. 53 Countermapping of stories from 12 residents, forming the basis for analysis and proposal. Made by author.

Counter-Mapping

In order to carry out this analysis through the lens of historical understanding, urban logic, and spatial interventions, it was essential to construct a grounded and relational interpretation of the interview data. For this, I developed a process of *spatial counter-mapping*, which allowed me to identify, abstract, and visualize all spatial references embedded in the life stories of the residents. This method served as a tool to understand individual decisions and spatial actions and to find overlapping patterns, shared timelines, and common territorial experiences across the twelve interviews.

The process illuminated clear collective trajectories. One of the most prominent commonalities was origin: the majority of interviewees come from the rural areas of Cauca, and nearly all were displaced by violence. The foundation of these neighborhoods was not born out of speculation or opportunity but out of urgent need for survival. The territory was built by people arriving with little more than hope, strength, and the collective will to create a place to live. By spatializing the stories, I began to identify three distinct layers of territorial experience—each offering a different but interconnected view of the urban fabric:

1. The Community Layer:

At the community scale, the interviews reveal a deep sense of ownership and collective responsibility among the original settlers, many of whom led or participated in early organizational efforts. Shared challenges, such as bringing water and electricity, prompted community-wide action from the very beginning. In many cases, civic spaces like meeting points, kitchens, and sport areas were among the first elements built, illustrating the strong social and ethical foundations of these territories.

However, this layer also captures a growing intergenerational gap: while the founders maintain strong community ties, they often express concern about the future of the neighborhood's youth, who they feel are increasingly disconnected from the communal struggle that defined earlier stages.

One of the strongest unifying elements at this level is the collective dream of legal recognition as a form of tenure security and symbolic validation. Being recognized as a formal neighborhood by the city is tied to dignity, visibility, and a long-awaited acknowledgment of what they have built with their own hands.

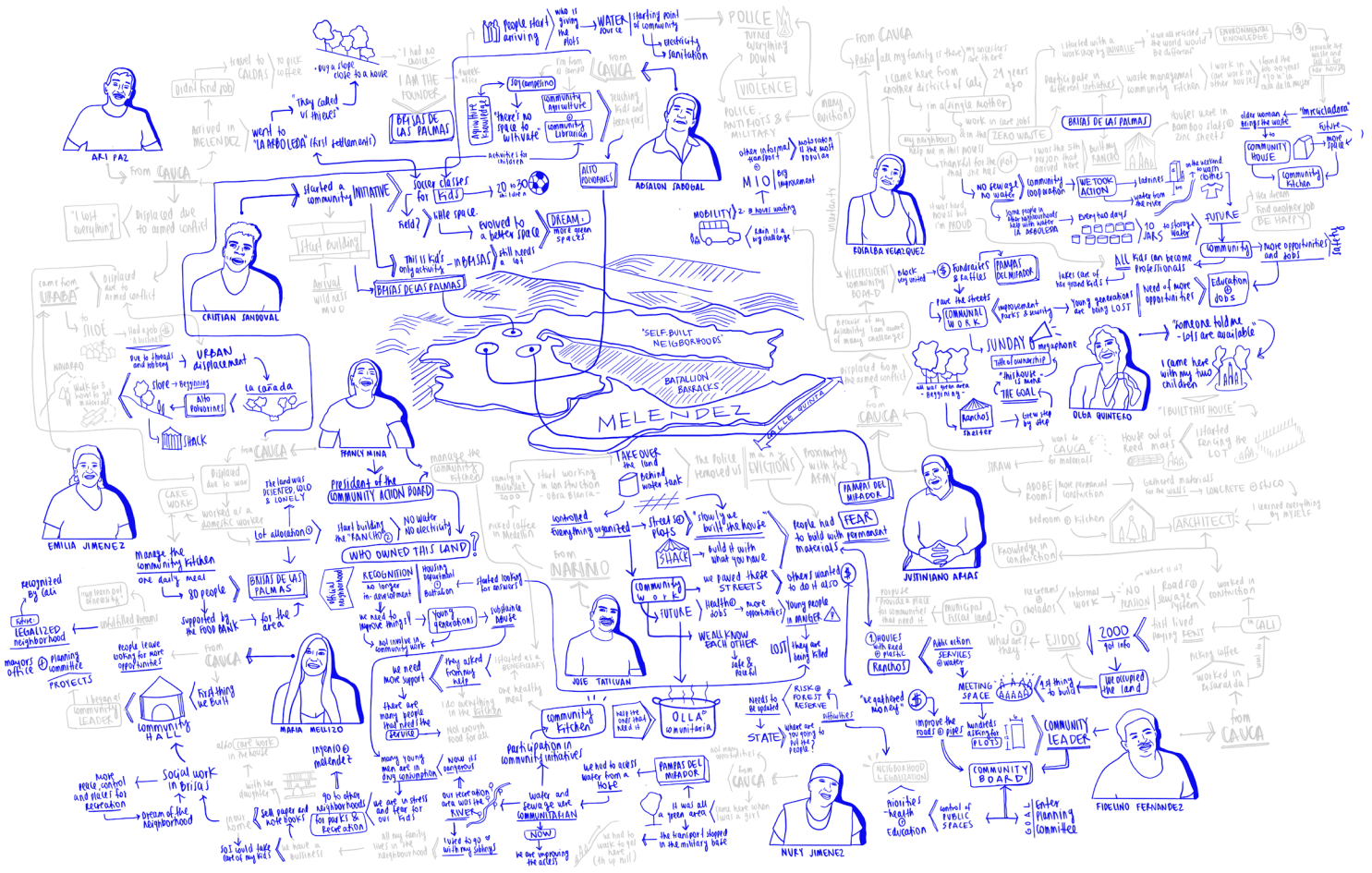


Fig. 54 Community layer analysis within the countermapping. Made by author.

2. The Individual/Family Layer:

At the personal level, the interviews highlight the slow, fragmented process of building a home—a process shaped by financial uncertainty and physical labor. Most homes were built incrementally: one room, one wall, or one upper floor at a time, depending on the month's income or the availability of materials. Many residents expressed that their skills were acquired out of necessity, not aspiration—learning to build, repair, and adapt without formal training. Women, in particular, carry a double burden: many work outside the home in paid care roles while simultaneously managing unpaid care work within their households.

A recurring sentiment is that many adults no longer imagine their own futures. Instead, their attention is focused on survival and on ensuring something better for their children. This layer reveals a quiet but profound sacrifice, where hope is often deferred and personal goals are eclipsed by the immediacy of daily needs.

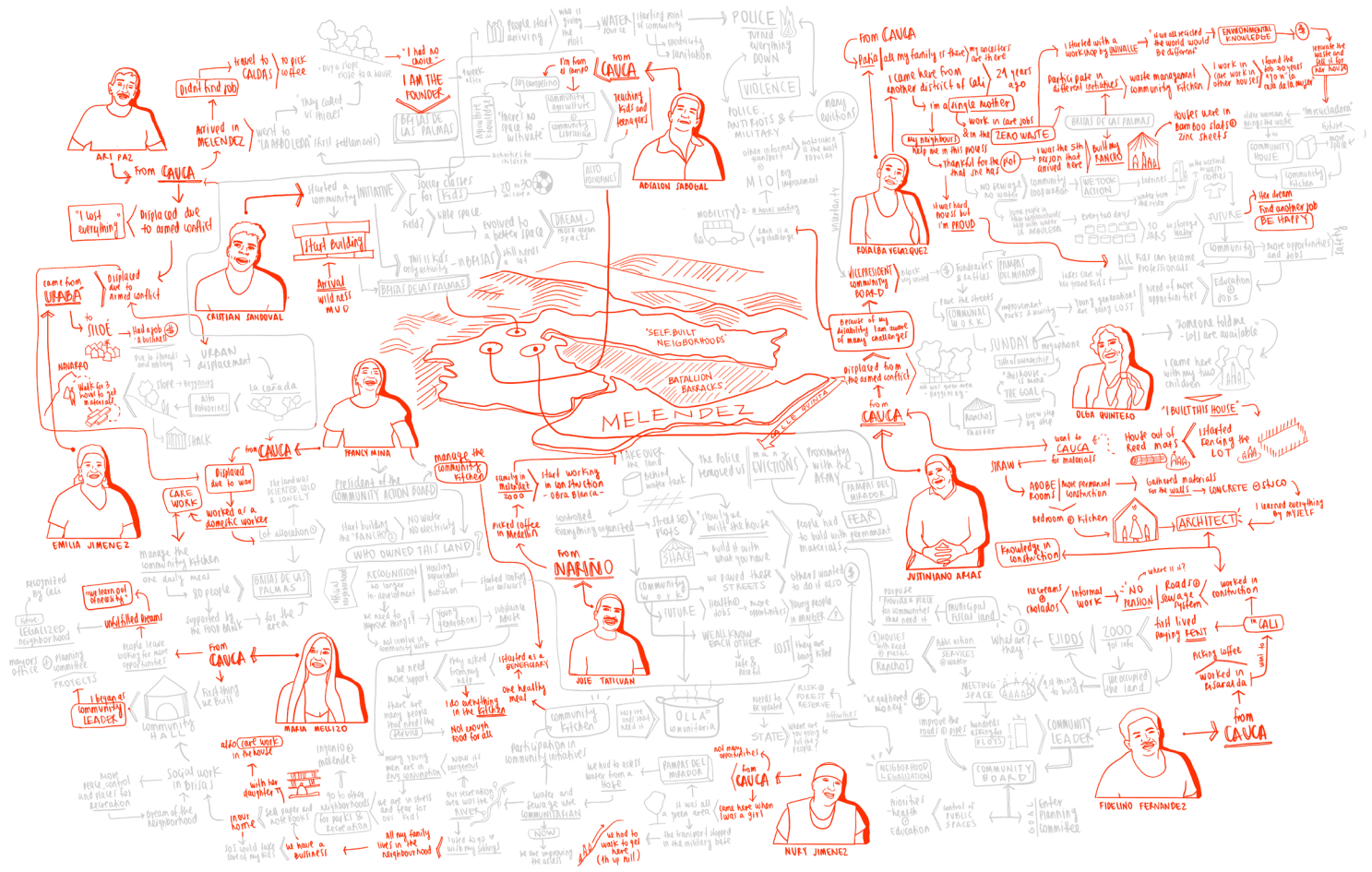


Fig. 55 Individual and family layer in the countermapping. Made by author.

3. The Layer of External Actors:

The final layer reflects the role of actors beyond the community in shaping the space—most notably, the state and its absence. The earliest moments of neighborhood formation were marked by violent evictions and threats of displacement, enforced by police and other state forces. Over time, however, this presence receded, leaving behind a vacuum of responsibility. Into this void stepped other actors—NGOs, universities, and social organizations—offering limited but important forms of support. Despite these efforts, the overwhelming feeling is that these communities have had to do everything themselves, often navigating the thin line between autonomy and abandonment.

This layered analysis does not only illustrate the temporal and spatial evolution of these neighborhoods—it also lays bare the ethical and emotional dimensions of territory-making. These stories reflect more than physical construction; they represent processes of resistance, adaptation, mutual care, and collective survival. And while each layer reveals its own logic, they all converge on one central insight: the making of these neighborhoods was never just about housing—it was about creating a dignified place to live.

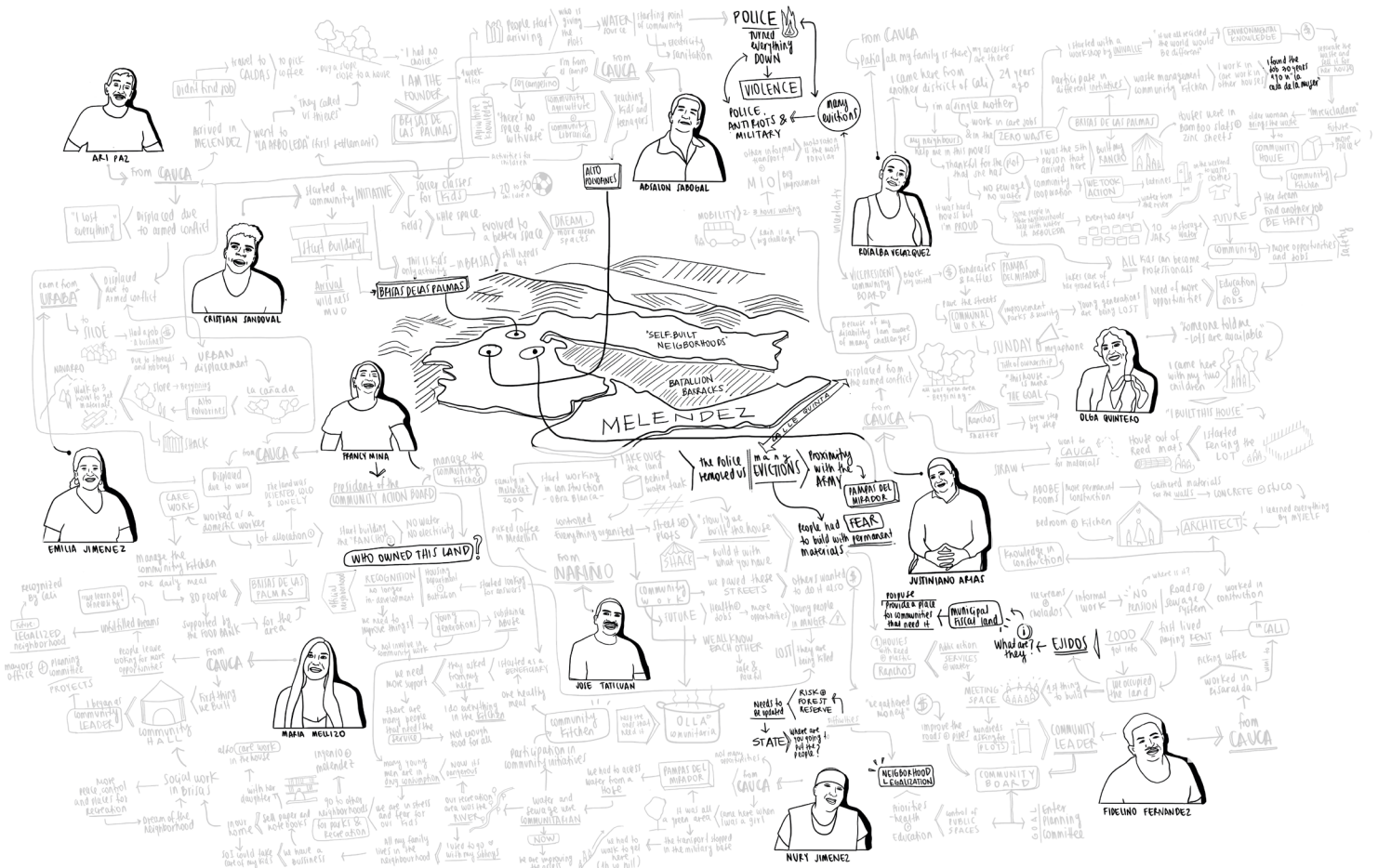


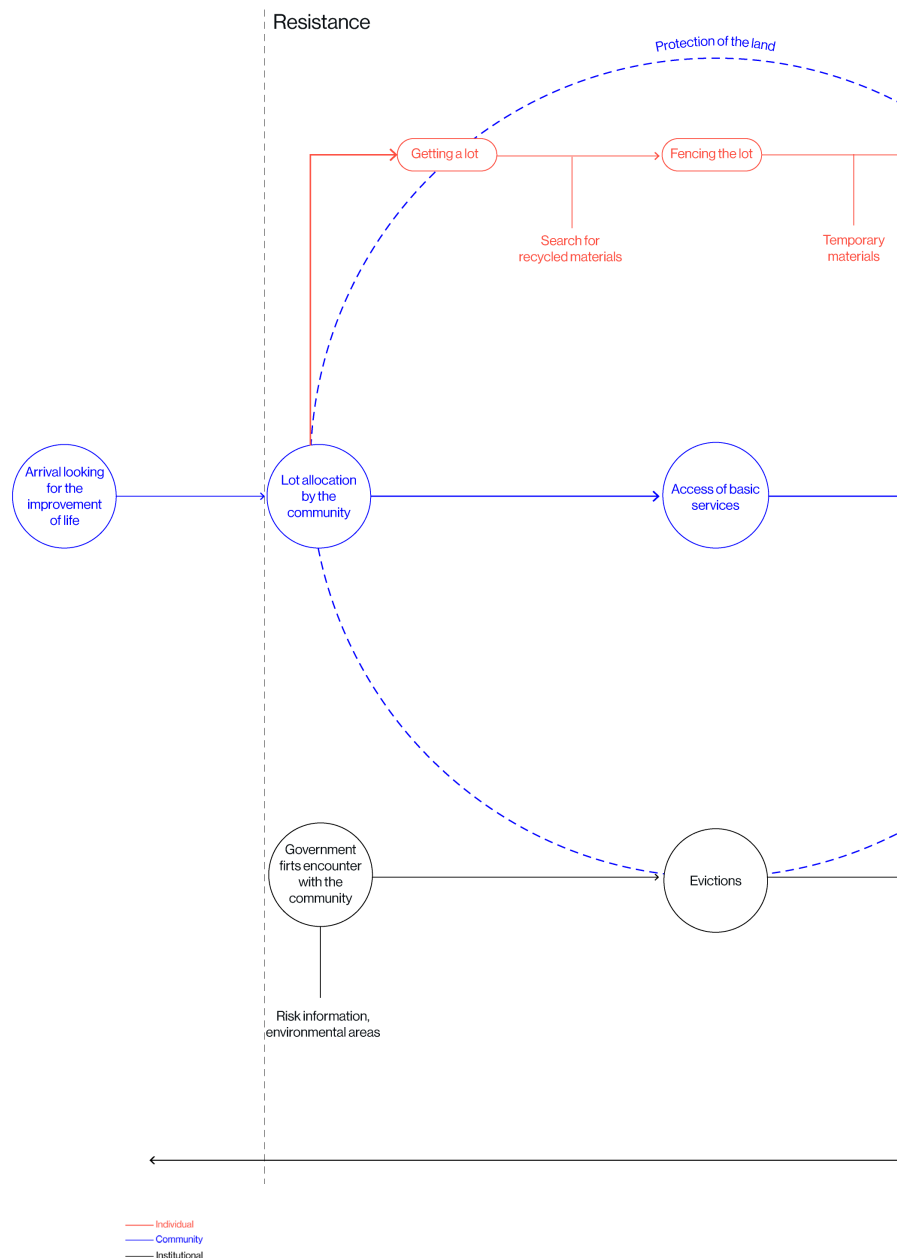
Fig. 56 External actors layer in the countermapping. Made by author.

HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING

With the findings of the counter mapping and to better understand how the territory developed over time, I constructed a timeline composed of three interconnected layers, drawing directly from the conclusions of the spatial counter-mapping. These layers reflect three distinct but interrelated perspectives: *community*, *individual/family*, and *external actors*. Each of these perspectives contributes to and influences the others. Actions in one layer often trigger responses or transformations in another, revealing a complex web of territorial dynamics.

This layered timeline highlights key moments and turning points that define the evolution of the neighborhood. One of the most critical transitions identified is the shift from repeated evictions to a negotiated agreement, or the change in building materials that allowed residents to stay. This moment marks a fundamental change: it signals the transition from the “Arrival and Settlement” phase to the “Community Development” phase. With the reduction of external threats and the fading of uncertainty, a new sense of permanence emerges, one that changes how people build, how they relate to the space, and how they organize collectively.

This shift in conditions also transforms the spatial logic and social fabric of the neighborhood. As insecurity recedes, collective efforts become more structured, spaces take on new meanings, and long-term planning becomes possible. In this analysis, I was also able to identify how territorial values such as care, solidarity, autonomy, and responsibility appear throughout different stages of the timeline. These values are not abstract ideals—they are embedded in the very practices that shaped the neighborhood from the ground up.



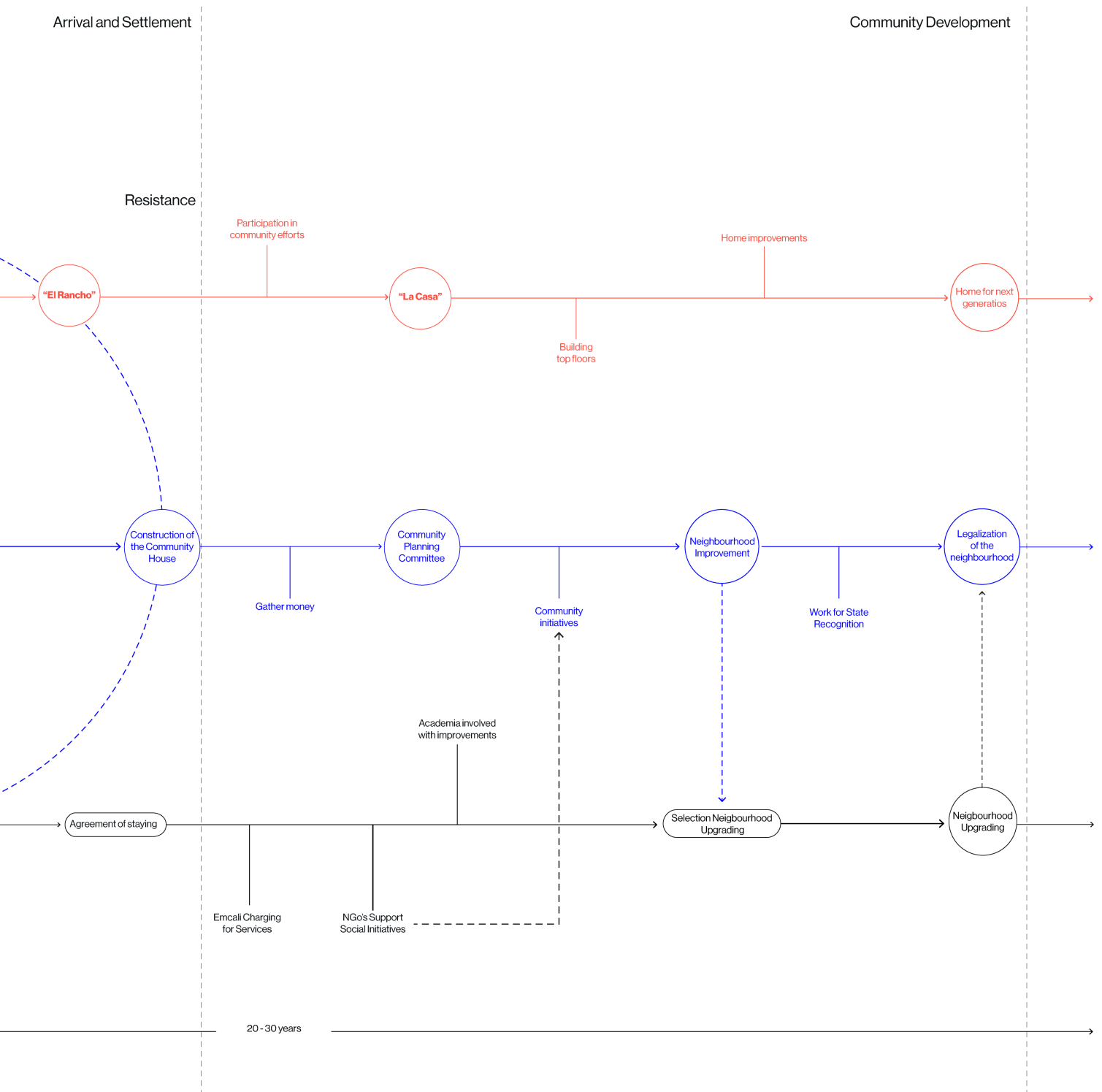
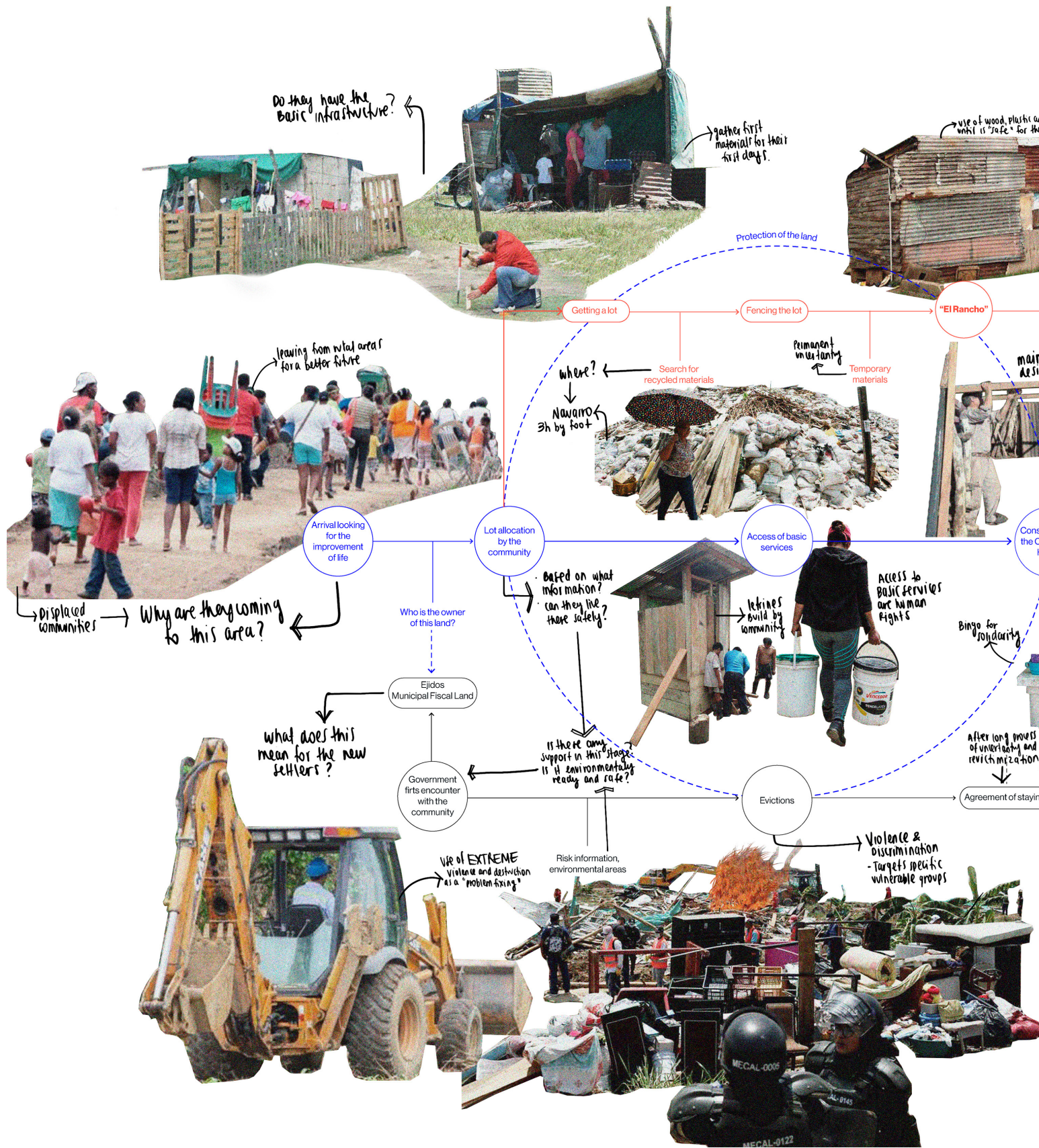


Fig. 57 Layered timeline showing key turning points in the neighborhood's evolution, highlighting the shift from eviction to permanence. Made by author.



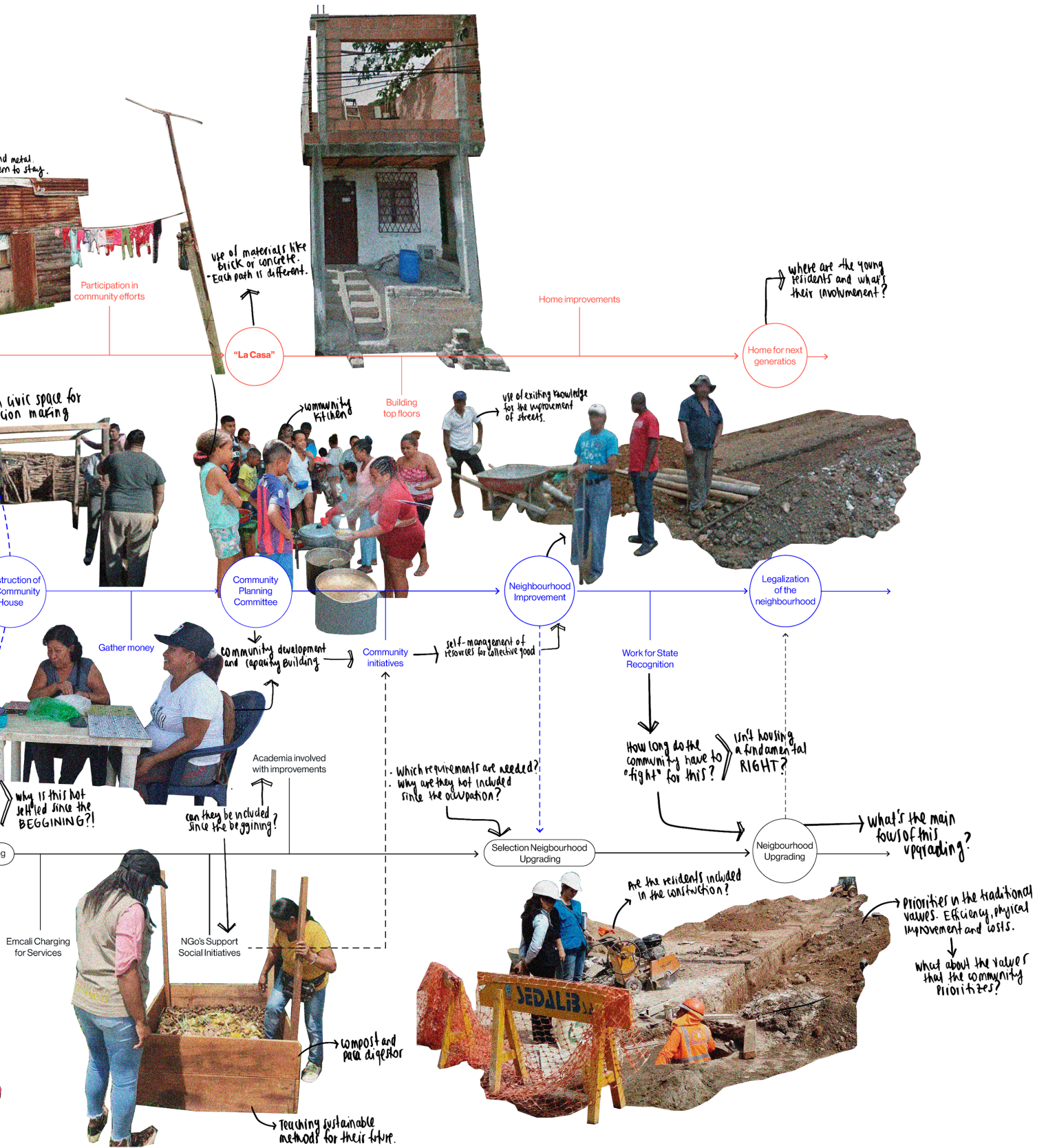


Fig. 58 Layered timeline collage illustrating the self-built neighborhood process through images that convey each stage in human terms. Made by author.

ARRIVAL AND SETTLEMENT

In this first phase, the arrival of residents is marked by total disorientation. Newcomers arrive on foot, often with nothing more than the clothes they carry. They don't know who owns the land, whether they're allowed to settle, or even where they might begin to build. They have no materials, no services, no information, and the prevailing feeling is fear.

Eventually, driven by necessity, people begin to observe or hear that others are settling on the hillside. This marks the beginning of a precarious but collective process. In most cases, the first person to arrive informally assumes a leadership role, helping to organize the territory and suggesting where others might establish their lots. Through mutual negotiation and need, plots begin to be self-organized, and an early social fabric starts to take shape.

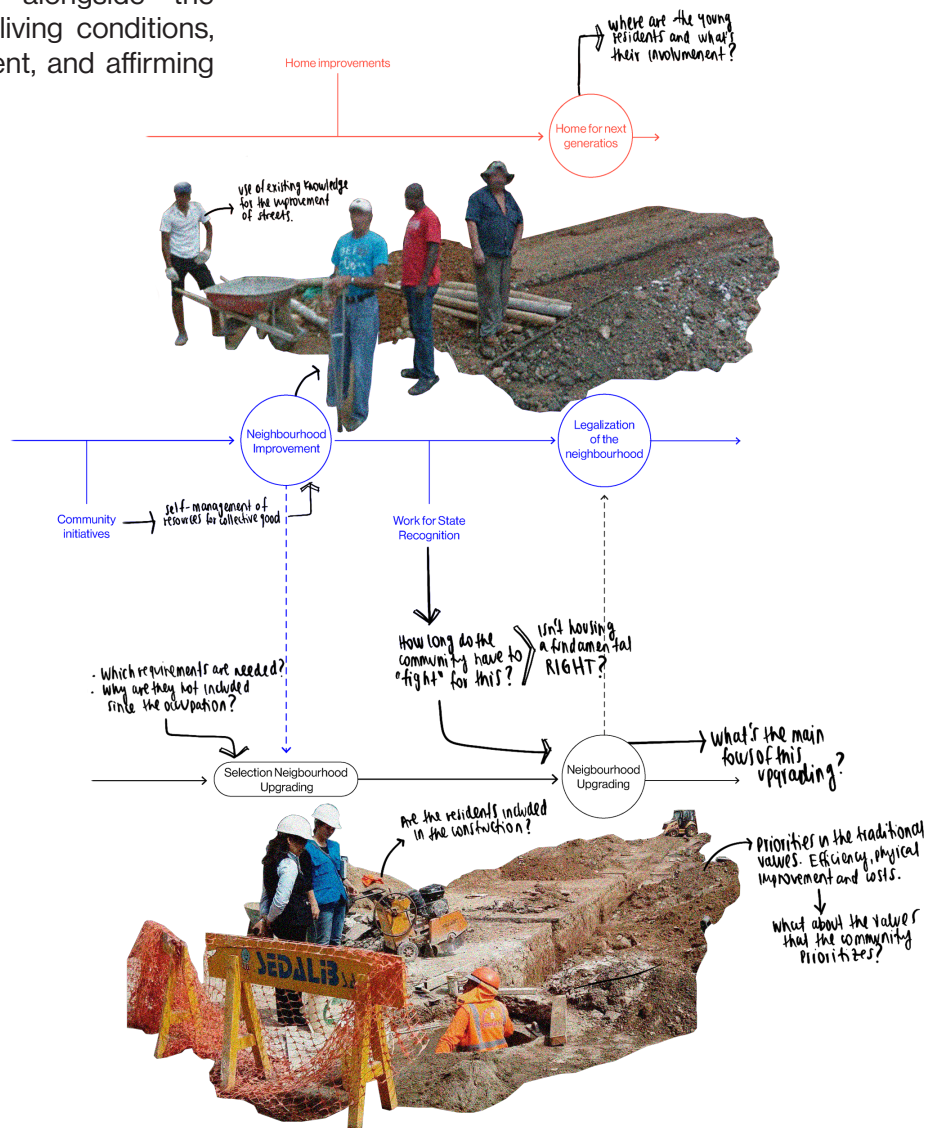
It is during this moment of emerging order that the state enters, not through support, but through force. Institutional actors and police authorities attempt to remove these populations, asserting that they cannot legally settle on this land. This confrontation becomes a defining feature of the phase. Due to the constant threat of eviction, homes are constructed with temporary and easily dismantled materials. In many cases, these structures are destroyed repeatedly, reinforcing a climate of instability and fear.



A key shift also occurs at the symbolic level: the feeling of being recognized becomes more pronounced. As the neighborhood becomes more consolidated, residents grow increasingly aware of the state's continued absence and silence.

They see their progress, yet their community remains legally and politically invisible. This fuels a collective desire for formal recognition, not just as a technical goal, but as a validation of their history, effort, and place in the city.

The dream of becoming a legal neighborhood becomes a shared aspiration—alongside the ongoing goal of improving their living conditions, strengthening the built environment, and affirming their right to the city.



THE LIFE OF DON ARI PAZ

To better understand how territorial processes shape everyday lives, Don Ari's story offers a powerful example, one where values like autonomy, care, and solidarity have been practiced and embodied in the making of a dignified habitat.

Nearly 30 years ago, Don Ari arrived in Cali after being forcibly displaced from Cauca. He fled violence with his children, carrying nothing but determination. With no land, no resources, and no certainty, he decided to settle on a hillside, guided only by hope. He cleared the land with his young son and built a shelter from bamboo and leaves. This early phase reflects the values of autonomy and uncertainty, as well as the constant threat of eviction and invisibility.

As others arrived, Ari played a key role in organizing peaceful settlement. He helped define plots, encouraged neighbors to coexist respectfully, and quickly became a central figure. Together, they brought in water through a 300-meter hose, installed electricity, and stayed up at night protecting what they had built. These actions reflect deep solidarity, care, and responsibility—not just for survival, but for the wellbeing of all.

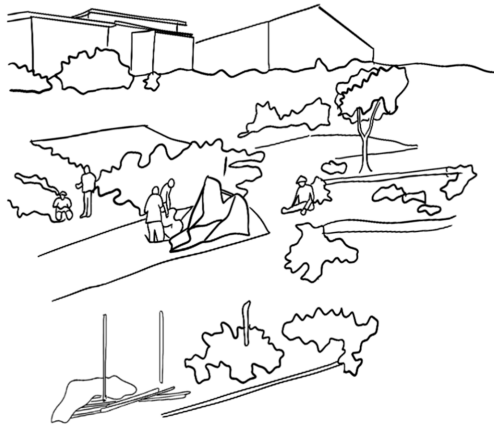
With time, Ari contributed to the collective development of the neighborhood, guiding new residents, helping improve infrastructure, and advocating for recognition. His story is also an act of memory, recalling the labor, resistance, and community strength that built Brisas de Las Palmas. His connection to the land, shaped by his rural origins, reveals a quiet but enduring connection to nature.

Today, Don Ari continues to dream of formal recognition for his neighborhood, a dream rooted in the value of justice. His life illustrates how communities, through shared values and determination, build dignified habitats from the margins of the city.

Life of Ari Paz



(Responsibility)
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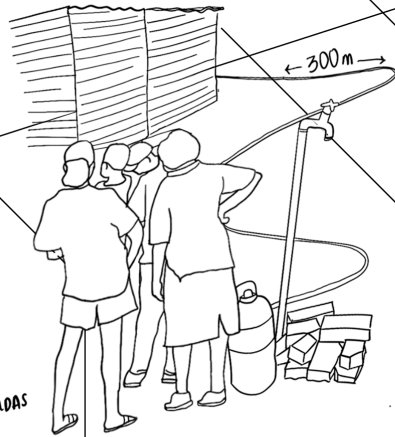
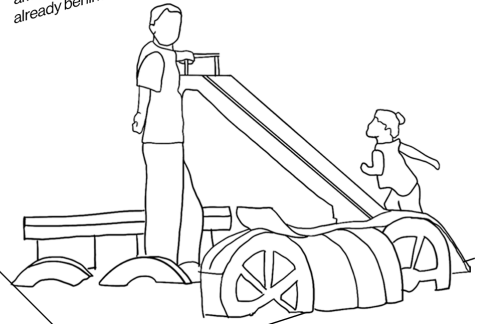


(Solidarity / Responsibility)
**Early Organization
with New Neighbors**
People started marking their land,
and we all helped each other.

(Autonomy / Responsibility / Care)
**Ongoing Struggles,
Economic Survival**
"When work comes up, I do it. If not,
I stay and take care of my wife and
granddaughter."

(Care / Justice)
**Hope Invested in
Children**

My future is not mine anymore—it's
my children's. And at my age, what
am I supposed to do? My future is
already behind me."



(Justice / Autonomy)
**Facing Evictions and
State Violence**
When they tried to evict us, we
defended the neighborhood
ourselves without legal help.

(Ownership / Care / Solidarity)
**Improvement of the
Neighbourhood**

"I sometimes take on work that
needs to be done around here.
What's missing, what's wrong, what
needs fixing in the park, all of that."



(Autonomy / Solidarity)
**Initial Survival and
Search for Land**

I had nothing to do, so I somehow
got enough for a bus fare and went
to Caldas to pick coffee. I came
back to bring food to my children

(Autonomy / Solidarity)
**Building Water and
Electricity**

We shared the water like family.
Some people stayed up all night,
watching over everything.

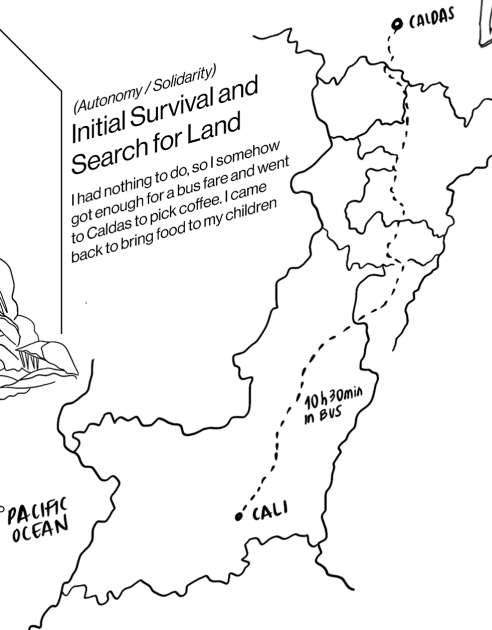


Fig. 59 Don Ari's story as a human-scale representation of the timeline, illustrating how territorial processes shape their environment. Made by author.

THE URBAN LOGIC

Narrative Cartography

Building on the historical understanding, this section of the analysis focuses on the current spatial configuration of the territory, guided entirely by the voices of its residents. Rather than imposing a predefined framework, I used the interviews as the foundation for what I call a narrative cartography, a mapping process shaped by the emotions, urgencies, and lived realities of those who inhabit the space.

Through their stories, concerns, and memories, a set of recurring themes emerged, revealing the underlying architecture of inequality, but also collective work and values that define their everyday experience. The spatial layers presented here are a direct response to the priorities expressed by the community, those elements of the territory that, in their view, are essential to building and sustaining a dignified life.

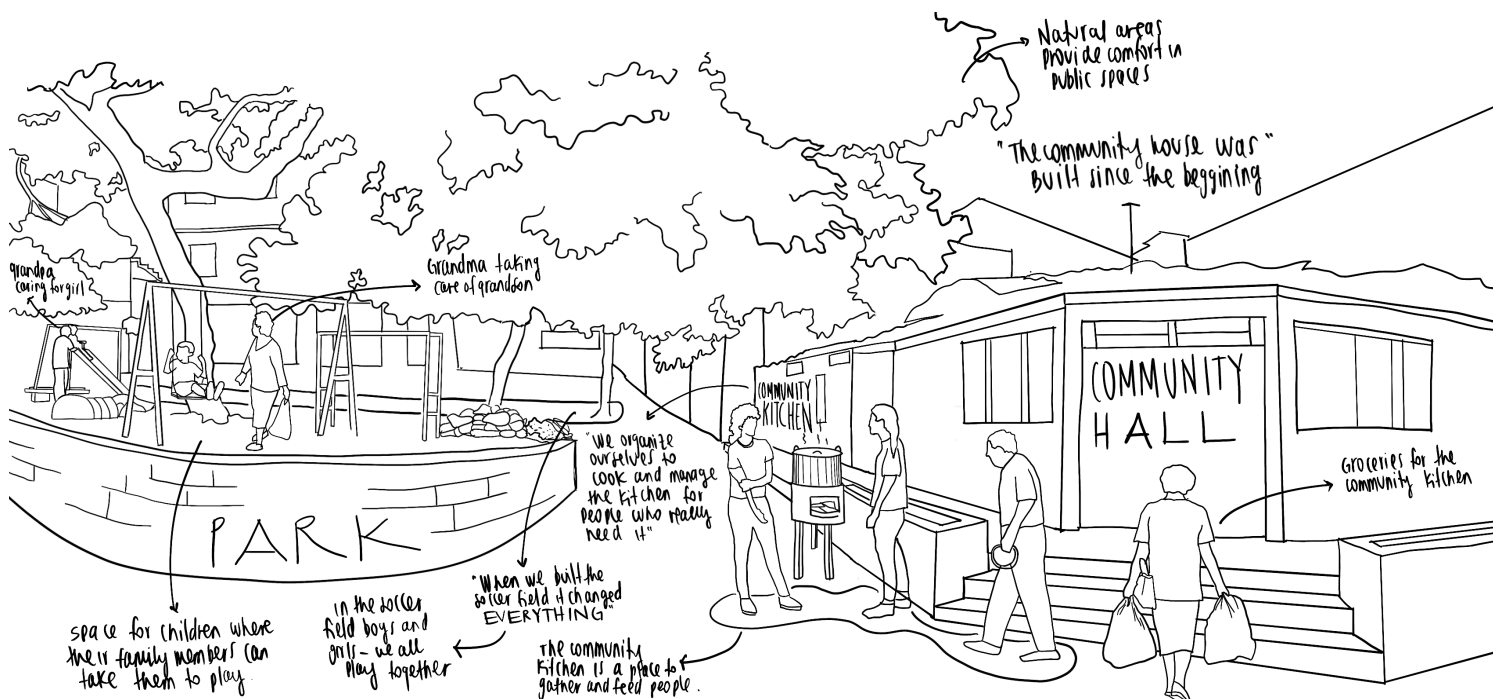


Fig. 60 Drawing of how spatial conditions enable or hinder community processes, based on the use of El Palo park in Brisas de las Palmas. Made by author.

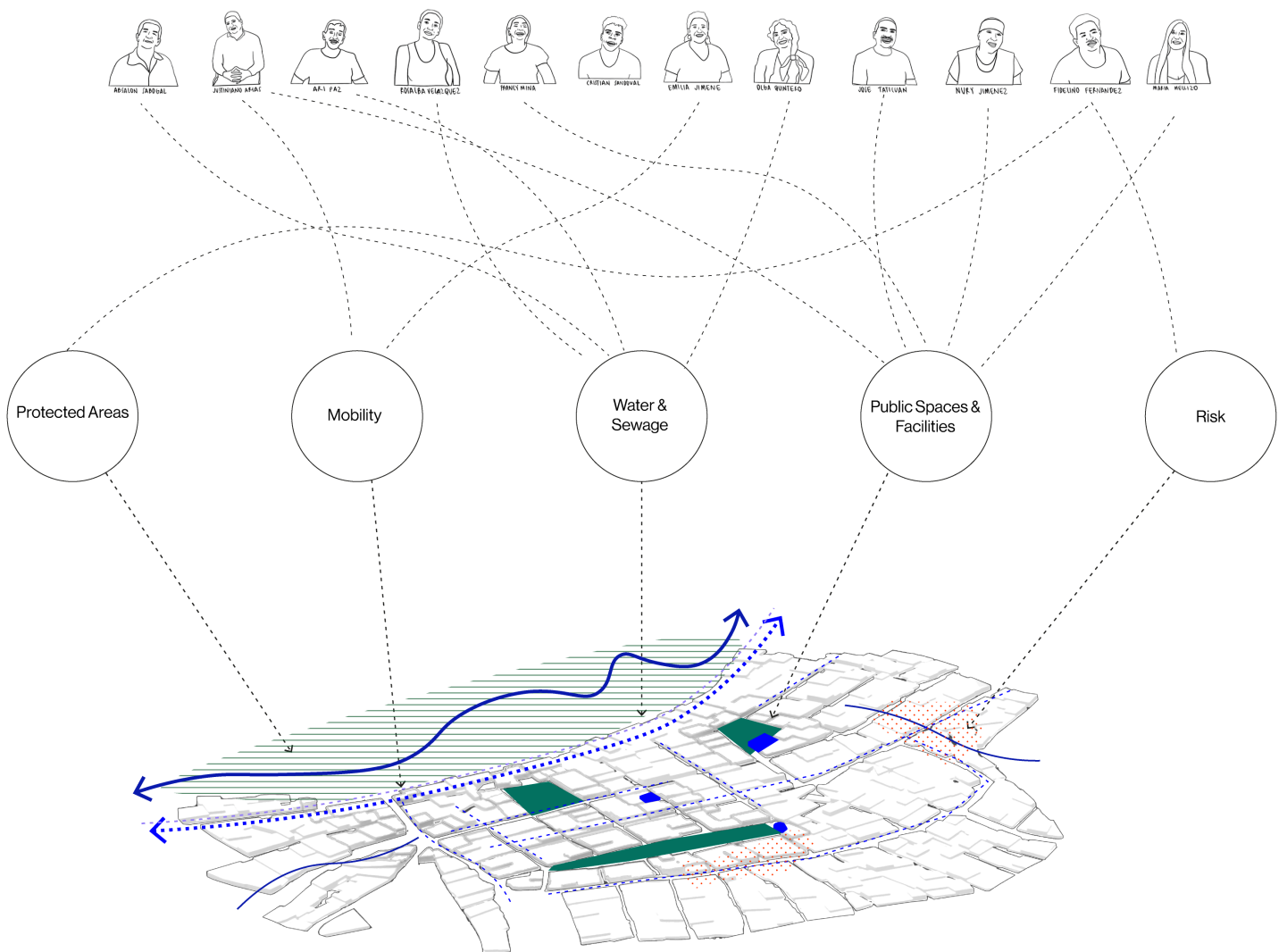


Fig. 61 Narrative cartography based on residents' voices, mapping spatial configurations through lived experiences and collective values. Made by author.

Environmental Layer:

The environmental layer is one of the most significant and challenging dimensions shaping the territory. Flooding and the presence of protected zones have left deep marks on both the landscape and the lives of the residents. A portion of the population currently lives in areas designated as environmental protection zones—land that, according to municipal regulations, should remain uninhabited. However, this knowledge came only after the settlements were established. The majority of residents were unaware of these restrictions when they arrived, driven by necessity rather than choice.

Today, the designation of these areas as “non-apt for housing” is frequently used by state institutions to justify eviction, displacement, or relocation—often carried out with little consideration for the social and emotional ties people have developed with the land. Beyond the legal and political implications, these zones also pose serious physical risks. The steep slopes and heavy rainfall characteristic of the area make flooding and landslides a constant threat to the safety of residents, particularly during the rainy season.

At the same time, a strong emotional and historical connection to the natural environment persists. Many residents recall with nostalgia how the nearby river once served as a site for bathing, playing, and spending time with family. These memories highlight a past relationship with nature rooted in joy, community, and daily life. Yet today, pollution and restricted access have severed this bond, reducing what was once a living resource to a distant memory. The environmental layer, then, is not only a site of vulnerability, but also of lost connection—between people and the landscape they once knew intimately.

Environmental Logic

- Ecoparks
- Environmental corridors
- Protected areas
- Forest protected areas

Water Bodies

- Ravines
- River
- Water Resource Protected Areas

0 50 100 200





Fig. 62 Flooding in La Arboleda during the rainy season, reflecting environmental risks in the neighborhood. Picture by author.



Fig. 63 Relationship between built areas, topography, and natural environment in self-built neighborhoods. Picture by author.

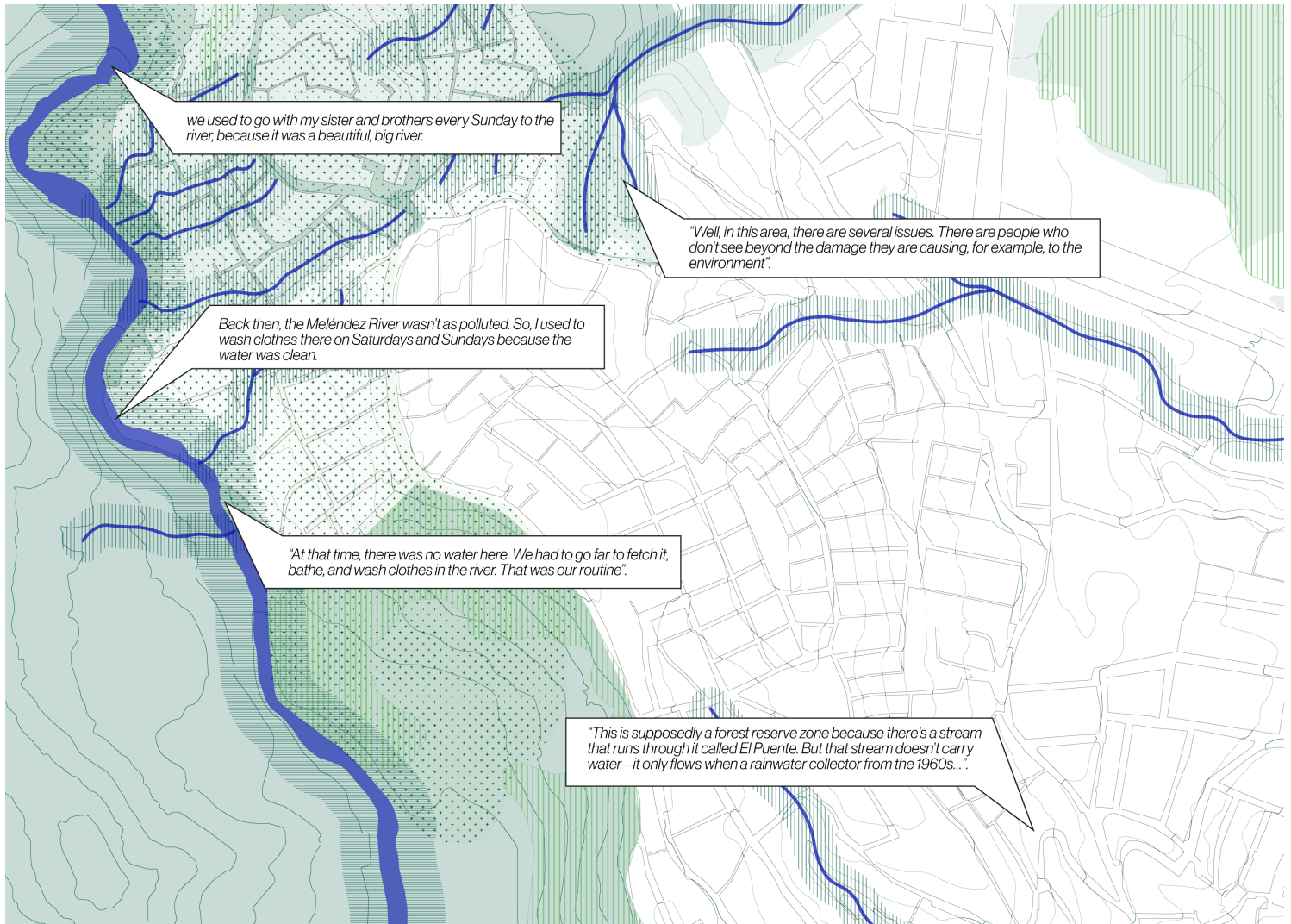


Fig. 64 Environmental layer: strong emotional ties to water coexist with disconnection from protected areas, shaped by limited environmental knowledge during early settlement. Map made by author.

Risk Layer




Risk is a defining condition in self-built neighborhoods and is deeply intertwined with the way the environment must be designed, planned, and built—particularly in its structural aspects. In the territories studied, risk is most visible in the instability of the terrain, the steep slopes, and the increasing impact of climate change. Residents often settle incrementally, building their homes little by little, adapting construction to their limited financial resources. However, this progressive approach—while necessary—makes it difficult to ensure long-term structural safety. As rainfall intensifies and the earth continues to shift, the built environment is constantly at risk.

The fact that the terrain itself is unstable adds another layer of vulnerability. Many residents live with the fear that heavy rains could trigger landslides or cause the gradual collapse of poorly reinforced structures. This uncertainty becomes especially acute for those who must repeatedly invest in reinforcing their homes—an ongoing and costly effort for families with already limited resources.

From a planning perspective, the risk layer reveals how the lack of formal support during the early phases of settlement has long-term consequences. Had the territory been understood from the beginning as a legitimate place of habitation, early technical guidance and structural planning could have mitigated many of the risks residents now face. Instead, the absence of this support has made structural vulnerability a constant burden.

Municipalities frequently use risk as a central argument for eviction or relocation. While environmental safety is a valid concern, these interventions often fail to acknowledge that people are not just occupying dangerous land—they are doing so out of necessity, without viable alternatives. As a result, the discourse of risk, when not accompanied by inclusive planning and structural support, becomes a tool for exclusion rather than protection. The risk layer, then, is not only a technical issue but also a political one—calling attention to who gets to live safely, and under what conditions.

Risk Management

-  Non-mitigable
-  Priority assessment
-  River

0 50 100 200





Fig. 65 Exposed structural foundations in homes, highlighting potential danger for residents. Picture by author.



Fig. 66 Evidence of mass movements and terrain instability in the area. Picture by author.

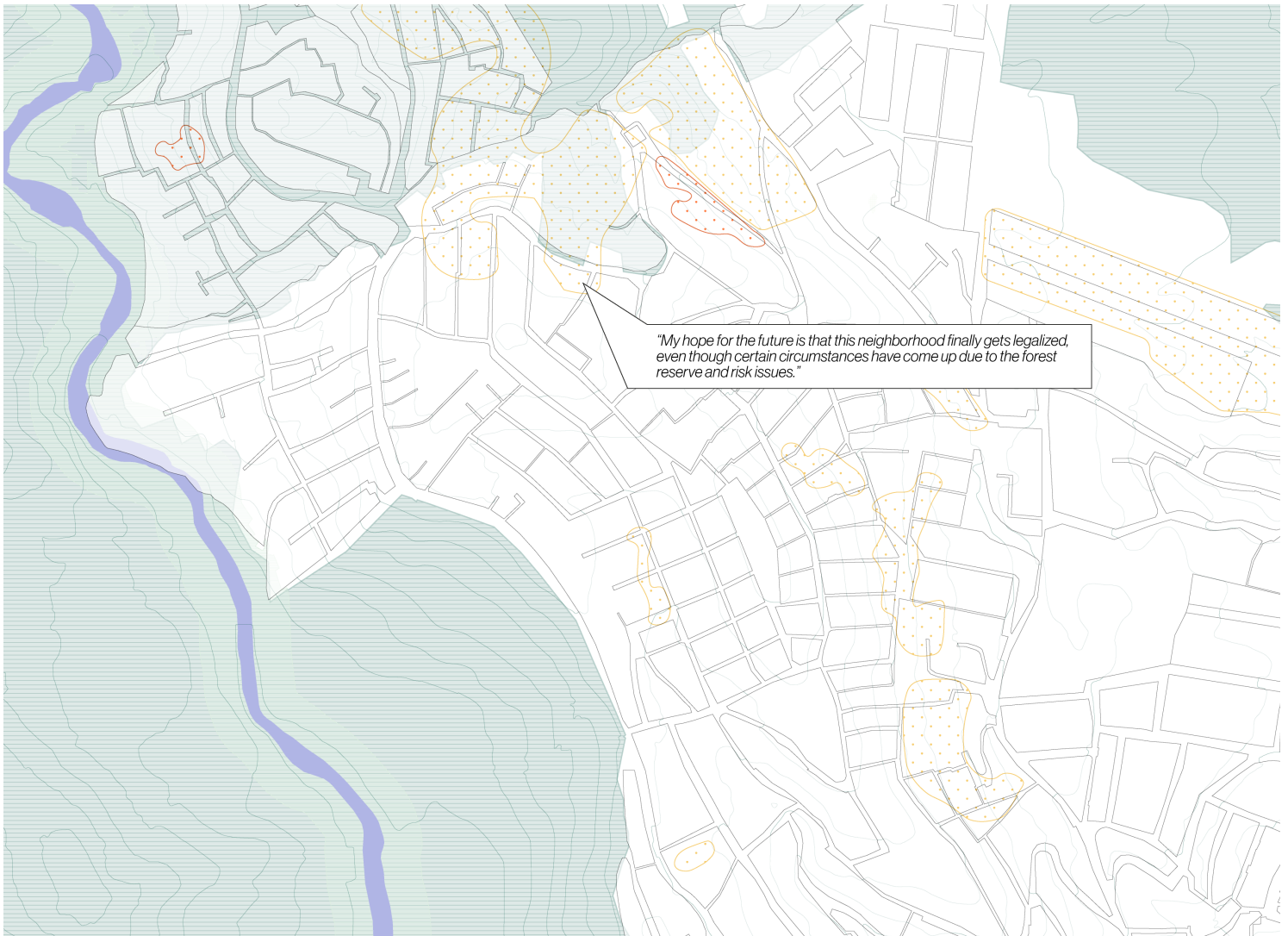


Fig. 67 Risk layer: structural vulnerability, environmental threats, and exclusion shaped by lack of early technical support and planning. Map made by author.

Water and sewage Layer

From the moment residents arrived, access to water emerged as one of the most immediate and pressing concerns. After securing a lot, the central question was: How will we get water? In these self-built neighborhoods, clean water and sewage infrastructure were not guaranteed—they had to be imagined and physically constructed through collective effort. Despite being a recognized human right, access to these basic services remains uneven, precarious, and deeply tied to spatial injustice.

In the absence of institutional support, residents mobilized their own knowledge, labor, and limited resources to devise makeshift systems. Using hoses, connectors, and salvaged materials, they drew water from neighboring areas—sometimes stretching connections hundreds of meters uphill. These improvised networks were both practical and symbolic: they represented acts of care, solidarity, and refusal to be excluded from urban life. Sewage systems followed a similar trajectory—installed incrementally, guided by experimentation and mutual learning.

Institutional involvement typically came only after these systems were already in place—not to build alongside communities, but to formalize or regulate what had already been achieved. This pattern—neglect followed by control—creates a cycle of revictimization: communities are first abandoned, then their self-determined solutions are co-opted without recognition or reparative support.

Today, parts of the neighborhood, especially in higher elevations, still lack reliable access to water and sanitation. These areas face daily challenges in cooking, cleaning, and maintaining personal hygiene, while health risks from inadequate sewage persist. Such deprivation erodes dignity and forces families to constantly negotiate their most basic needs.

In this context, water is more than a utility—it is a foundation of life, care, and the right to inhabit the city. This layer reveals how access to essential services is not just a technical matter, but a profound indicator of whose lives are valued, and whose dignity is deferred.

Water and Sewage

..... Water supply
— Sewerage

0 50 100 200





Fig. 68 Ongoing construction of water and sewage infrastructure in areas still lacking basic services. Picture by Gynna Millán.



Fig. 69 Communal construction of water and sewage systems by residents using self-managed strategies. Picture by Francy Mina.

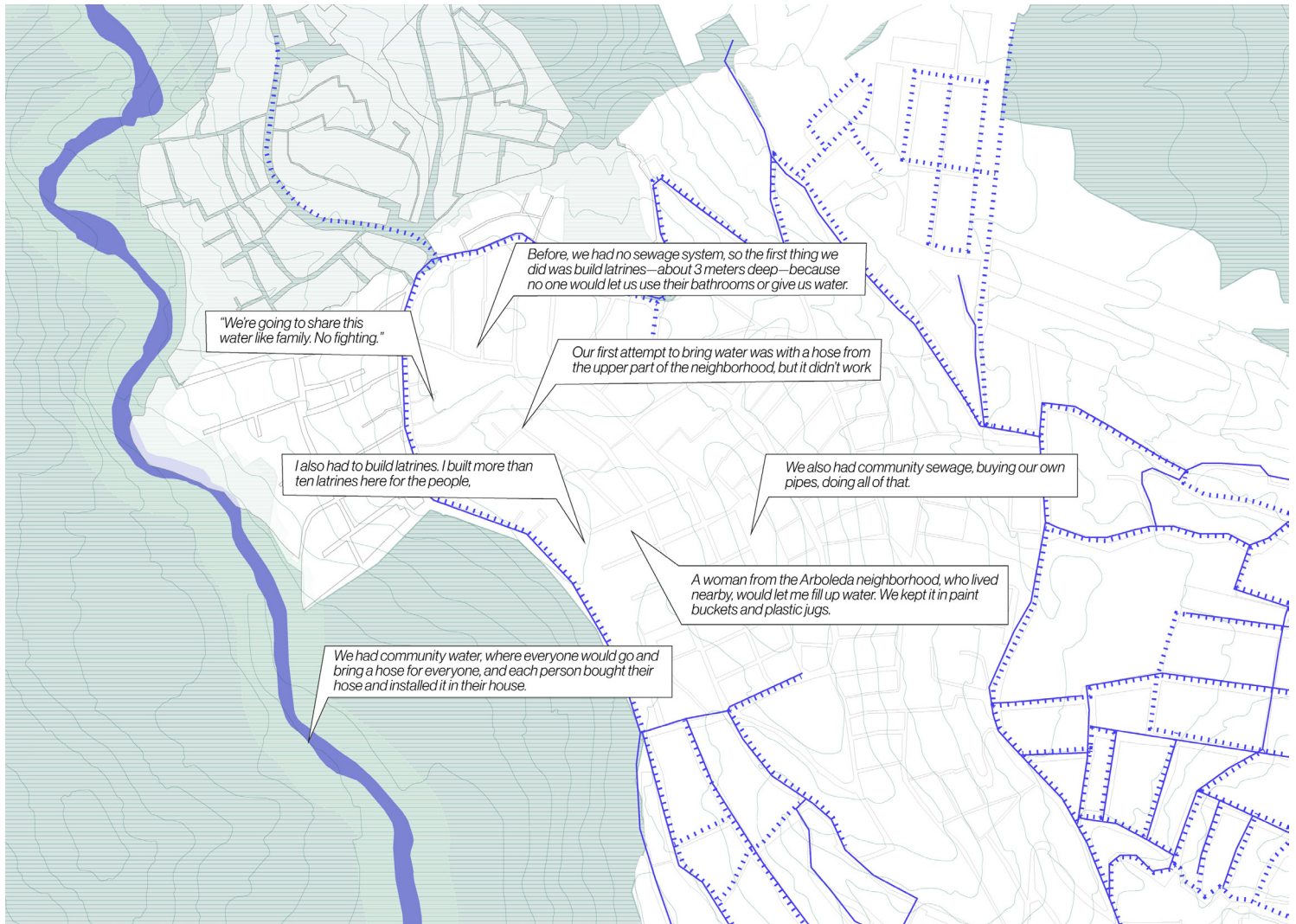


Fig. 70 Water and sewage layer: collective strategies, institutional neglect, and the ongoing struggle for basic services and urban dignity. Map made by author.

Mobility Layer

Mobility in self-built neighborhoods is shaped as much by the terrain as by the human body. Steep slopes, narrow passageways, and unstable ground create daily obstacles, particularly for those with limited mobility—elderly residents, people with disabilities, and caregivers. In many areas, vehicular access is impossible, forcing residents to navigate challenging paths on foot. This makes even the simplest movement—leaving home or reaching help—a demanding task.

Public transportation only reaches the lower parts of the neighborhood, where terrain permits road infrastructure. Those living higher up, often in more precarious conditions, remain isolated. Walking long distances becomes the only option, often under harsh and unsafe conditions, especially during emergencies or bad weather. This physical disconnection deepens social and economic exclusion, reinforcing inequality through geography.

Mobility here is not just about infrastructure; it's about access—to services, opportunities, and dignity. Residents spoke of the exhaustion from daily climbs, the fear of medical emergencies, and the emotional weight of being “far from everything.” Proposals like a cable car or improved walkways are more than conveniences—they are demands for recognition and inclusion.

In response to institutional absence, neighbors have created makeshift stairs, cleared paths, and supported one another. These acts of care and responsibility demonstrate resilience and solidarity. Yet, while these efforts temporarily ease the burden, they do not remove it.

This mobility layer exposes how uneven terrain, when left unaddressed, becomes a barrier to equity. It underscores that accessibility is not a luxury but a condition for full participation in urban life. If a city is to be truly inclusive, then every step—literal and symbolic—must be considered in the design of dignified urban futures.

Mobility

- Local streets
- Local streets for vehicles
- Public transport line
- Bus stops

0 50 100 200





Fig 71. Extremely steep street limiting mobility, especially for people with disabilities. Photo by Populab.



Fig 72. Makeshift stairs built into the slope to provide access to homes. Picture by author.

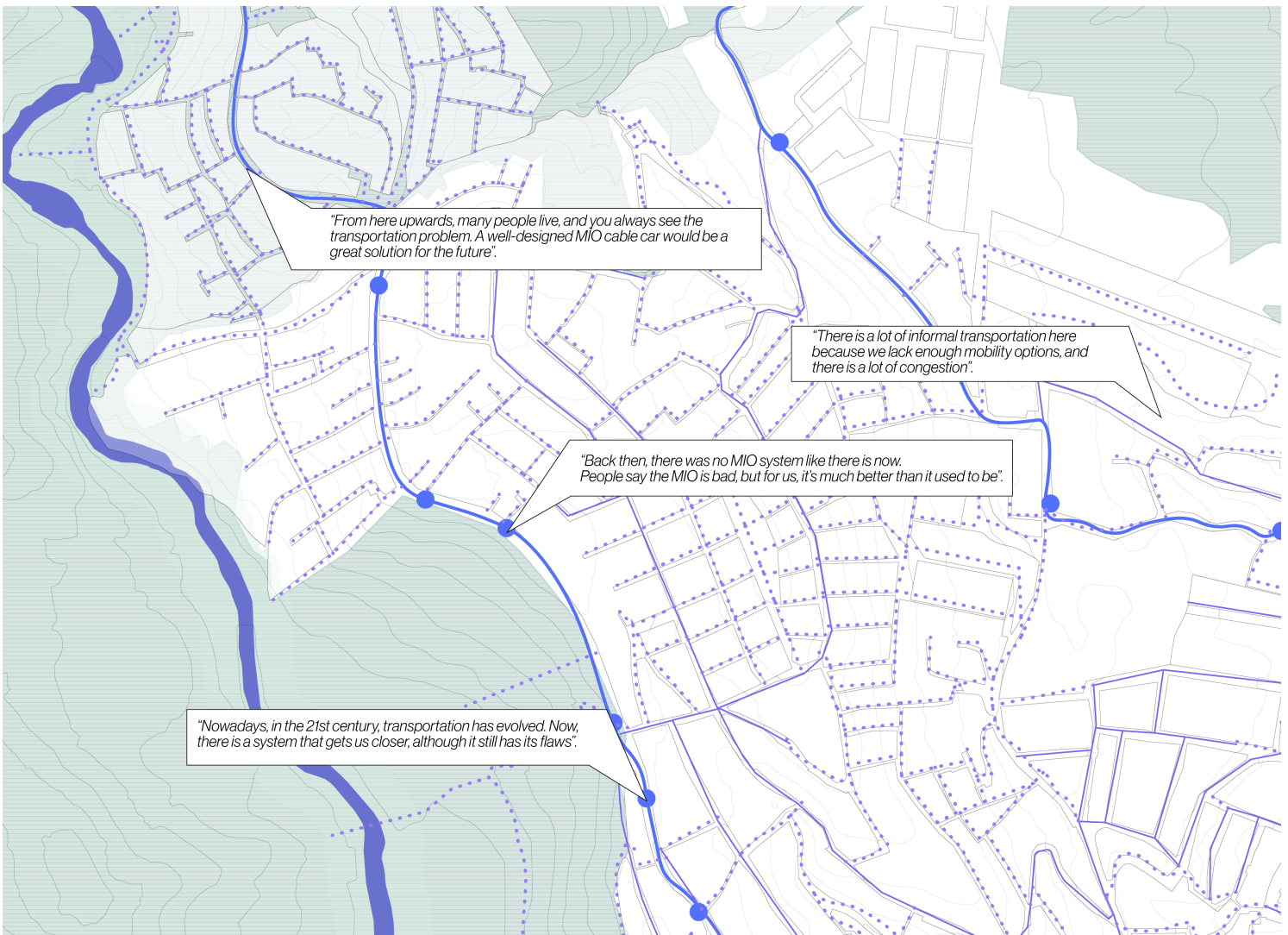


Fig 73. Mobility layer: challenging terrain and limited infrastructure met with community-driven solutions to access and daily movement. Map made by author.

Public spaces and facilities layer:






In the absence of formal planning, residents of self-built neighborhoods have taken it upon themselves to not only construct their homes but also shape their shared spaces. Public areas are often intentionally placed in locations of both symbolic and practical significance—at key intersections, along common circulation routes, or on elevated ground with views of the city. These choices reflect a clear understanding of how spatial organization can foster connection and communal life. Yet despite the intentionality behind these efforts, such spaces are often constrained by structural deficiencies. Basic infrastructure—such as lighting, sanitation, or accessible pathways—is frequently missing, leaving these areas exposed to underuse, insecurity, or physical deterioration.

This same pattern extends to community facilities. Schools, libraries, recreation centers, and cultural venues are scarce or unevenly distributed, often concentrated in just one section of the neighborhood. This imbalance makes access difficult, especially for residents in higher or more remote areas, and disproportionately affects children and youth, who face greater barriers to education, play, and safe gathering. Even so, the community continues to activate these limited spaces through collective action—organizing bingo nights, shared meals, children’s dance classes, and neighborhood meetings. In doing so, they transform modest spaces into vital centers of social life, demonstrating a deep commitment to mutual care and belonging.

Still, the lack of adequate facilities underscores a persistent marginalization. While residents fill gaps with resilience and solidarity, this cannot justify the ongoing absence of institutional investment. Real potential exists in these spaces, but it requires recognition, support, and shared responsibility.

This layer of public spaces and community facilities reveals the dual reality of self-built neighborhoods: remarkable community agency on one side, and systemic neglect on the other. Dignity in the city is not only about having access to space—it’s about having the means and recognition to use it fully and collectively.

Public Spaces and Community Facilities

-  Parks
-  Green areas
-  Education Facilities
-  Community kitchen
-  Community center

0 50 100 200





Fig 74. Precarious conditions of playground infrastructure, posing risks for children. Picture by author.



Fig 75. Playgrounds as intergenerational gathering spaces, especially for women and caregivers. Picture by author.

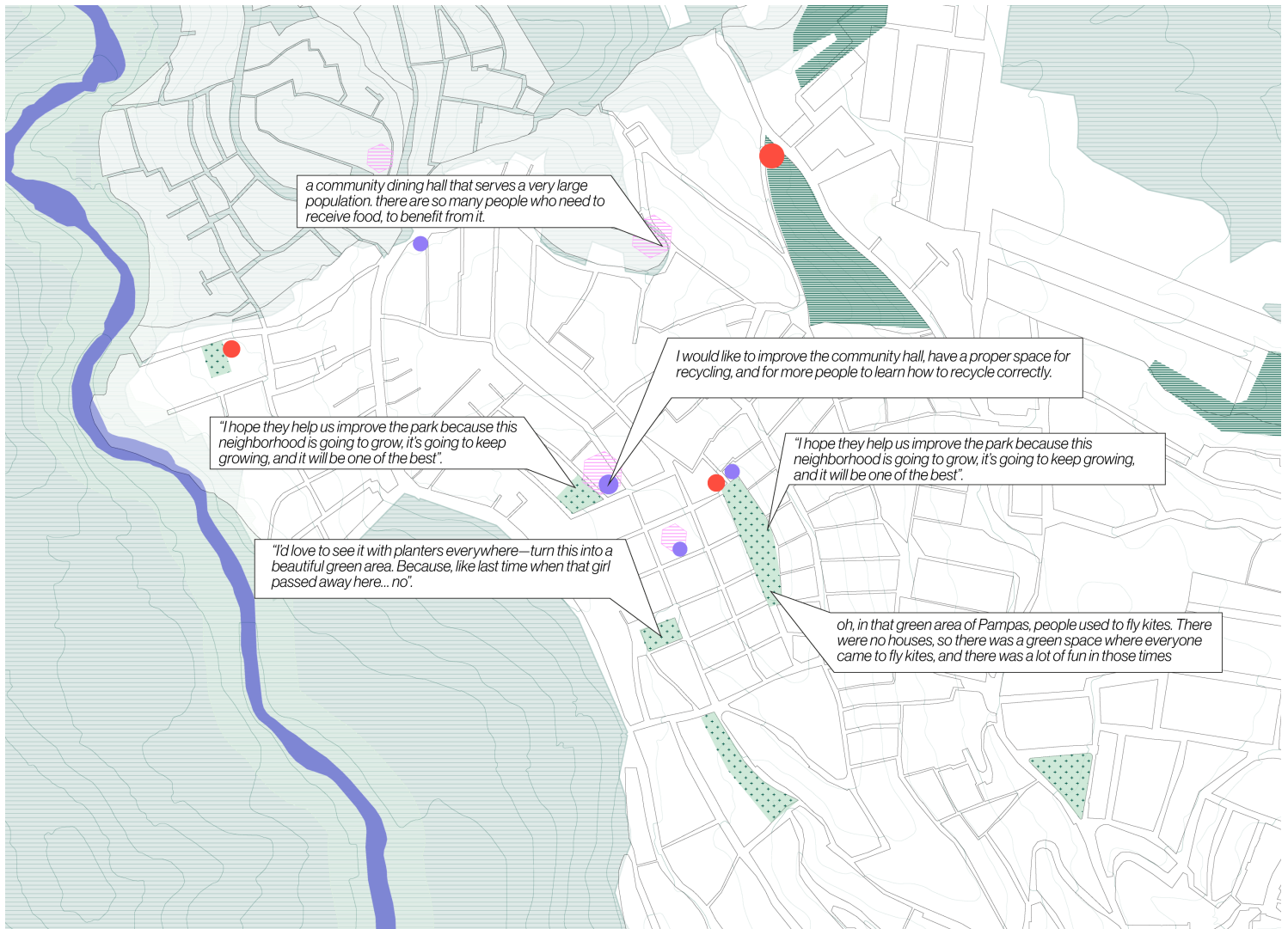
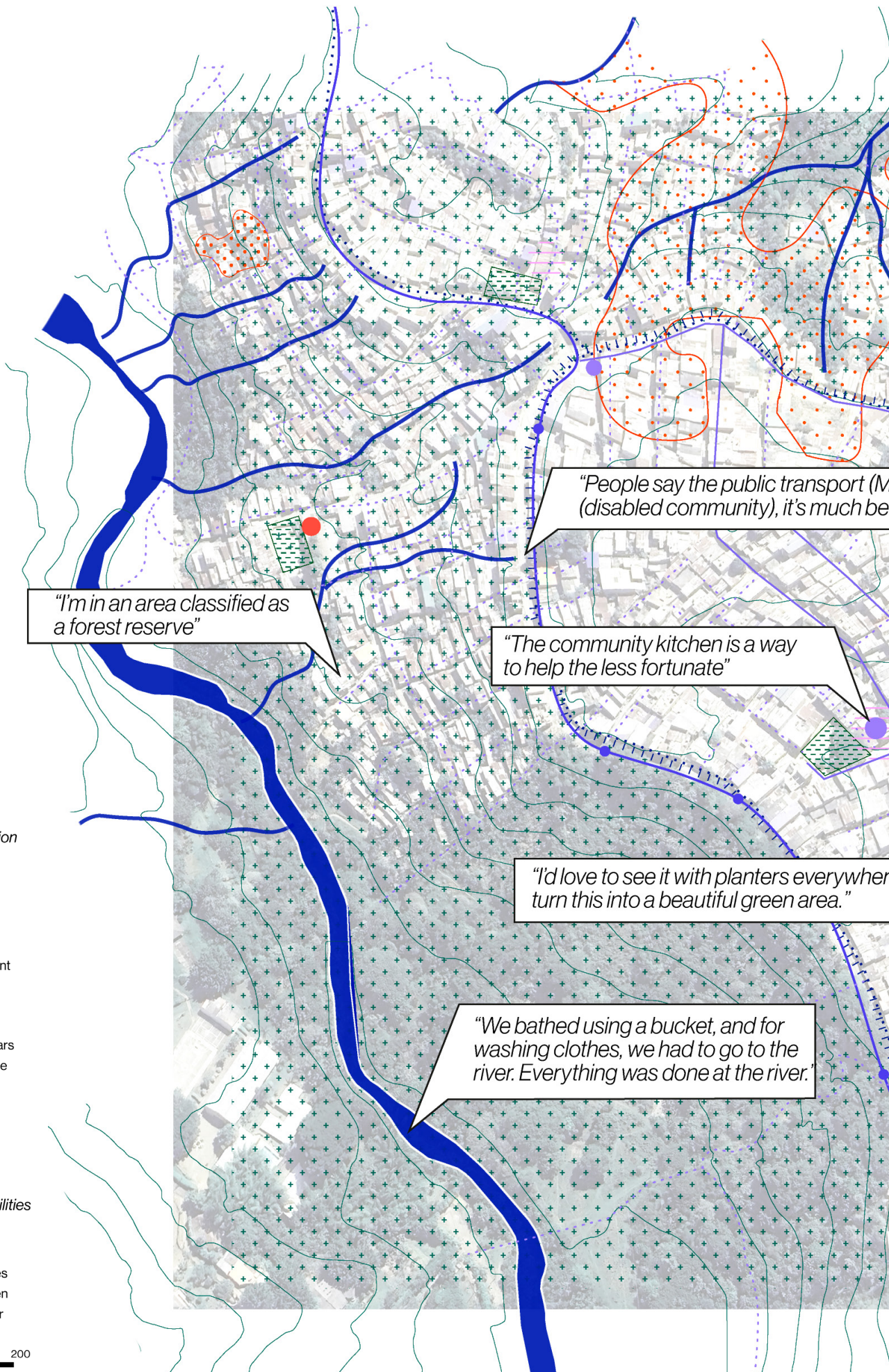


Fig 76. Public spaces and facilities layer: community-built areas foster connection and care despite limited infrastructure and institutional support. Map made by author.



"I'm in an area classified as a forest reserve"

"People say the public transport (M... (disabled community), it's much be"

"The community kitchen is a way to help the less fortunate"

"I'd love to see it with planters everywhere turn this into a beautiful green area."

"We bathed using a bucket, and for washing clothes, we had to go to the river. Everything was done at the river."

The Urban Logic

Environmental Protection

- Protected Areas
- Water Bodies

Risk Management

- Non-mitigable
- Priority assessment

Mobility

- Local streets
- Local streets for cars
- Public transport line
- Bus stops

Water and Sewerage

- Water supply
- Sewerage

Public Spaces and Facilities

- ▨ Parks
- ▨ Green areas
- Education Facilities
- ▨ Community kitchen
- Community center



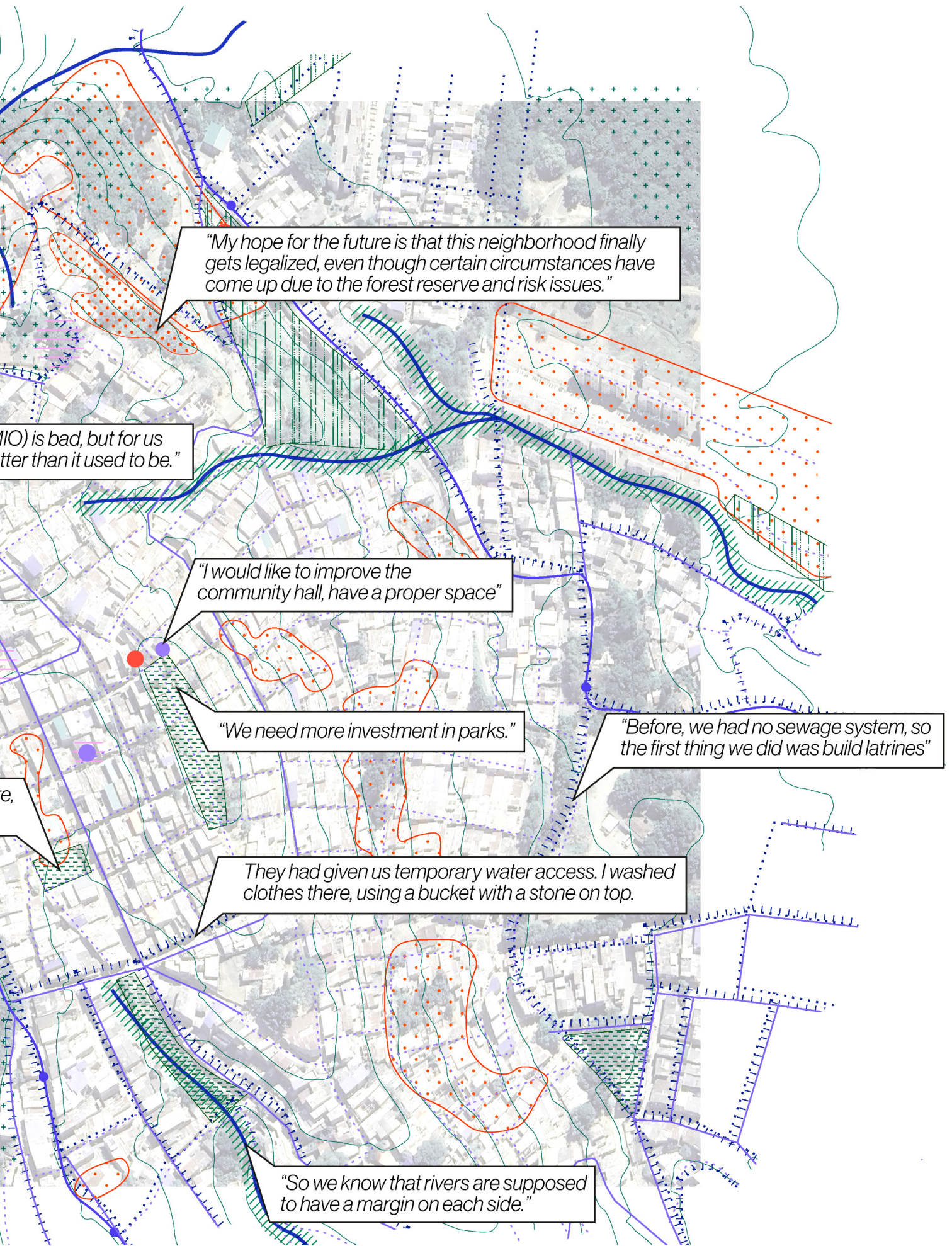


Fig 77. Narrative map combining interview insights with spatial layer analysis of the territory. Made by author.

A FRAMEWORK OF VALUES

To translate these values into a spatial and analytical framework, I developed a four-step process that allowed me to move from story to space, revealing how ethics become material in the urban landscape.

1. Listening for Values:

The process began by engaging deeply with the interviews, focusing not only on what was said but how it was expressed. I paid close attention to the emotional and relational content of residents' stories—their fears, strategies, motivations, and mutual commitments. Through this lens, I identified core values that repeatedly surfaced: care in everyday acts, hope in uncertain times, justice in the face of dispossession, and responsibility in collective efforts. These values became the interpretive key to understanding the community's relationship with space.

2. Identifying Territorial Manifestations:

Once these values were established, I revisited the interviews to locate specific quotes and actions that exemplified how each value took spatial form. I asked: What is built, protected, resisted, or nurtured because of this value? In answering this, I identified territorial manifestations—from collectively built water systems and shared food kitchens to neighborhood defense strategies and public spaces created through communal labor. These manifestations are the embodied outcomes of value-driven action.

3. Mapping Manifestations to Temporal Phases:

To understand when these manifestations emerged, I mapped them onto the three-phase timeline of neighborhood development: Arrival, Settlement, and Community Development. This step revealed how certain values became more pronounced at specific moments—solidarity during the defense of land, autonomy in the construction of homes, care in the creation of public infrastructure, and hope in the visioning of future recognition. Temporal mapping allowed me to understand how values are not static but evolve with the neighborhood's trajectory.

4. Future Orientation and Design Approach:

Finally, I reflected on each manifestation in terms of its potential contribution to a more just and dignified urban future. Is this a practice that should be empowered and sustained, or does it signal a condition that needs to be reimagined or transformed? This forward-looking step bridges the analysis with the next chapter, where I propose a value-based imaginary—a planning approach rooted not in efficiency or formalization, but in the community's own ethics, aspirations, and spatial intelligence.

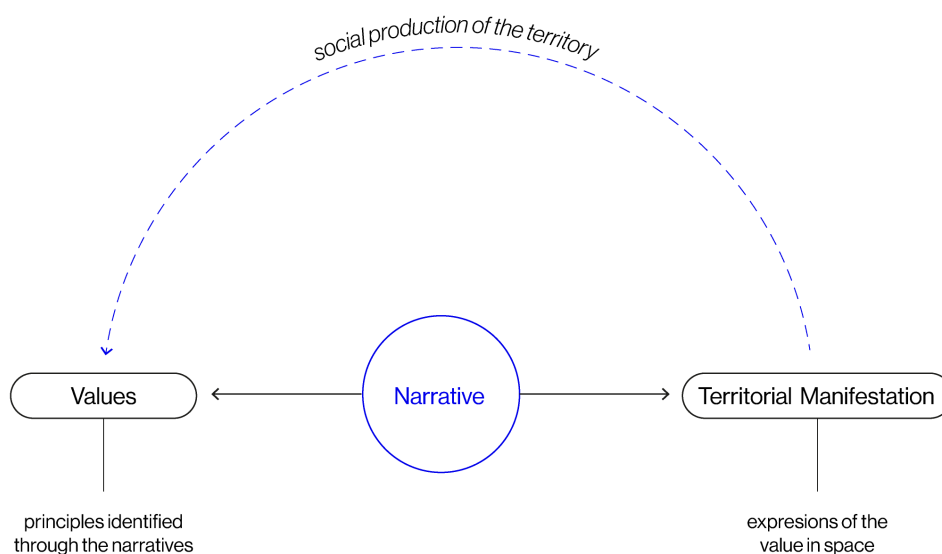


Fig 79. Narrative as the foundation for identifying values and understanding their spatial manifestations in the social production of habitat. Made by author.

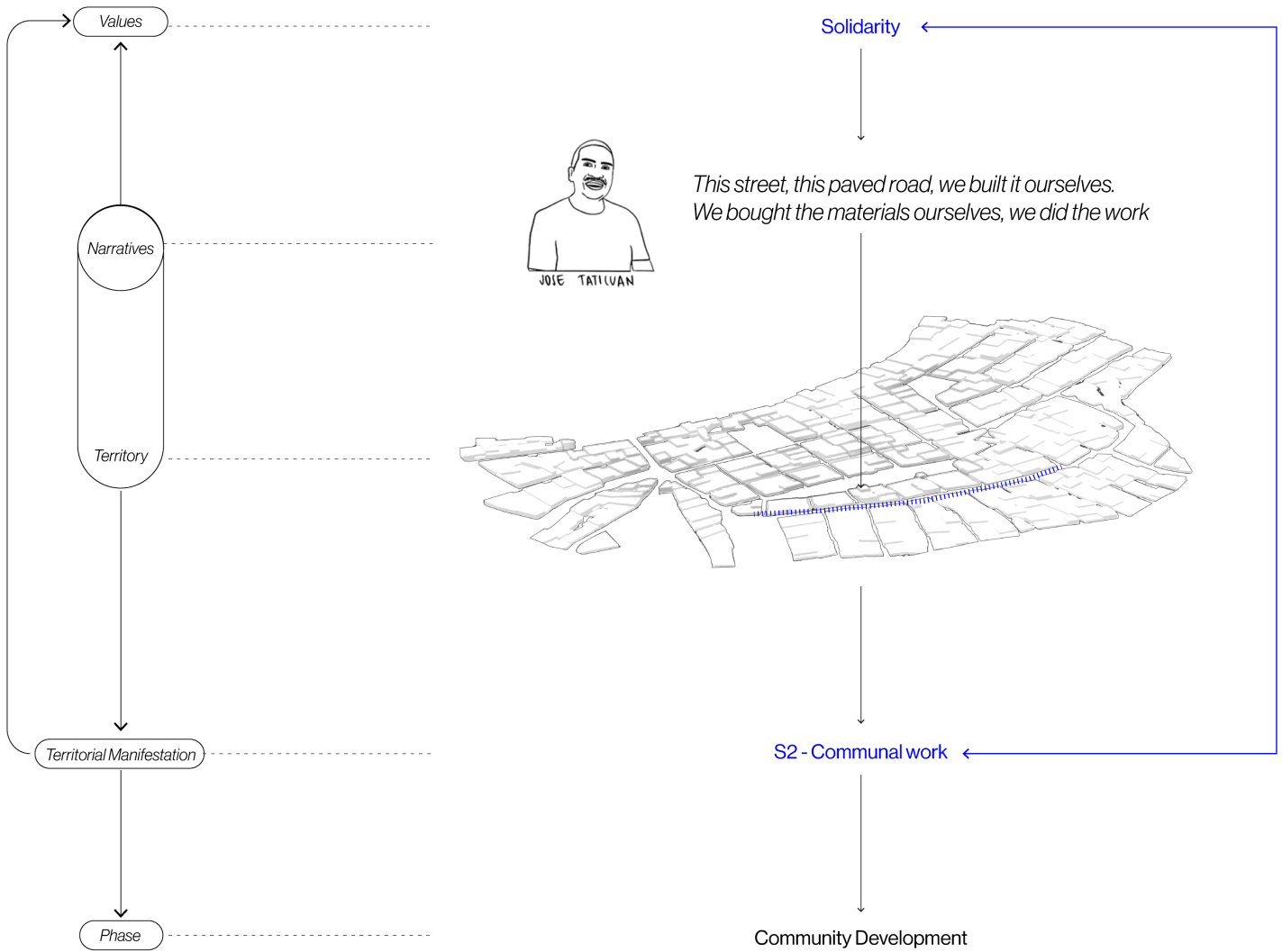
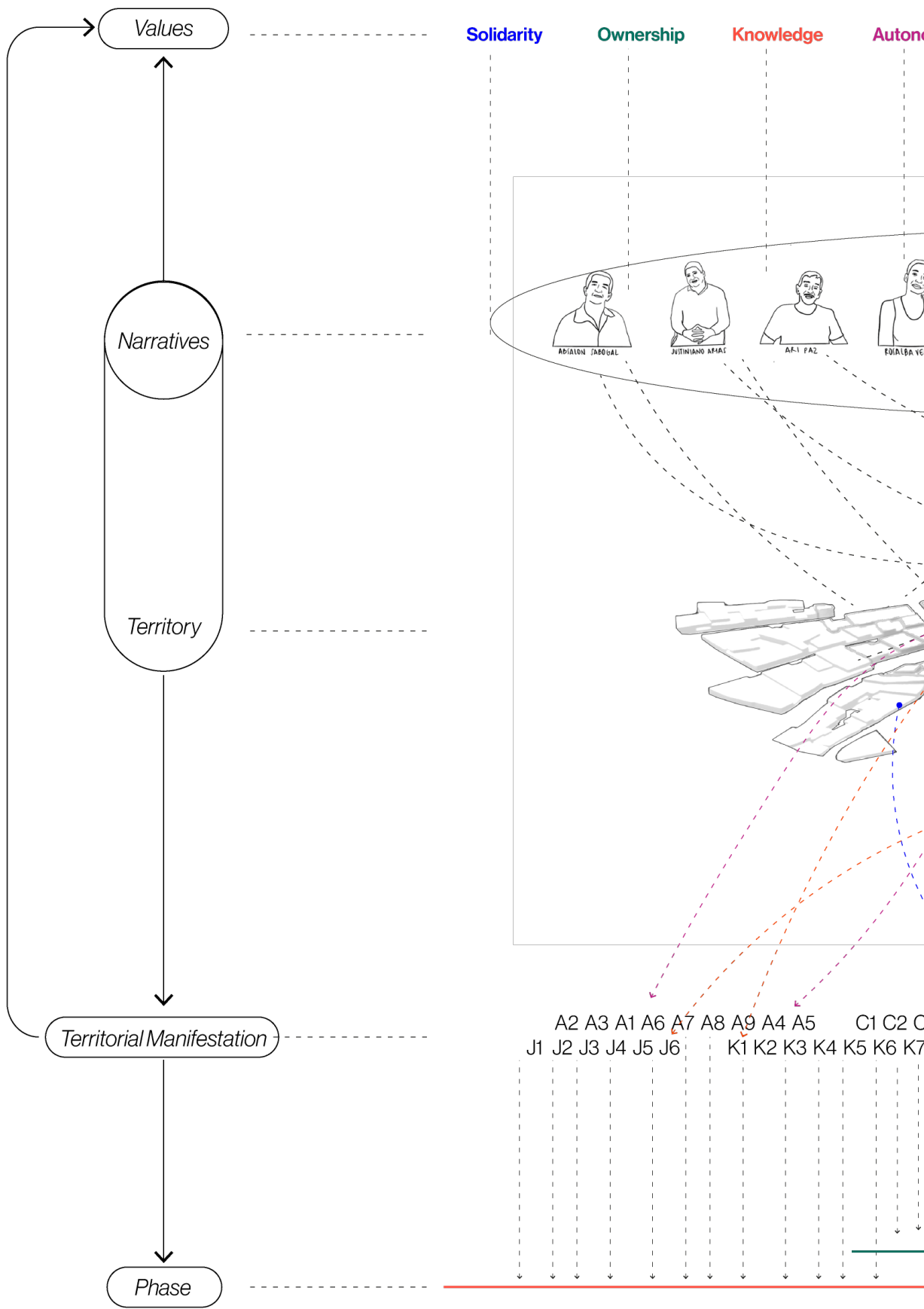


Fig 80. Diagram of the framework of values: connecting quotes, spatial locations, territorial manifestations, core values, and phases of neighborhood development. Made by author.



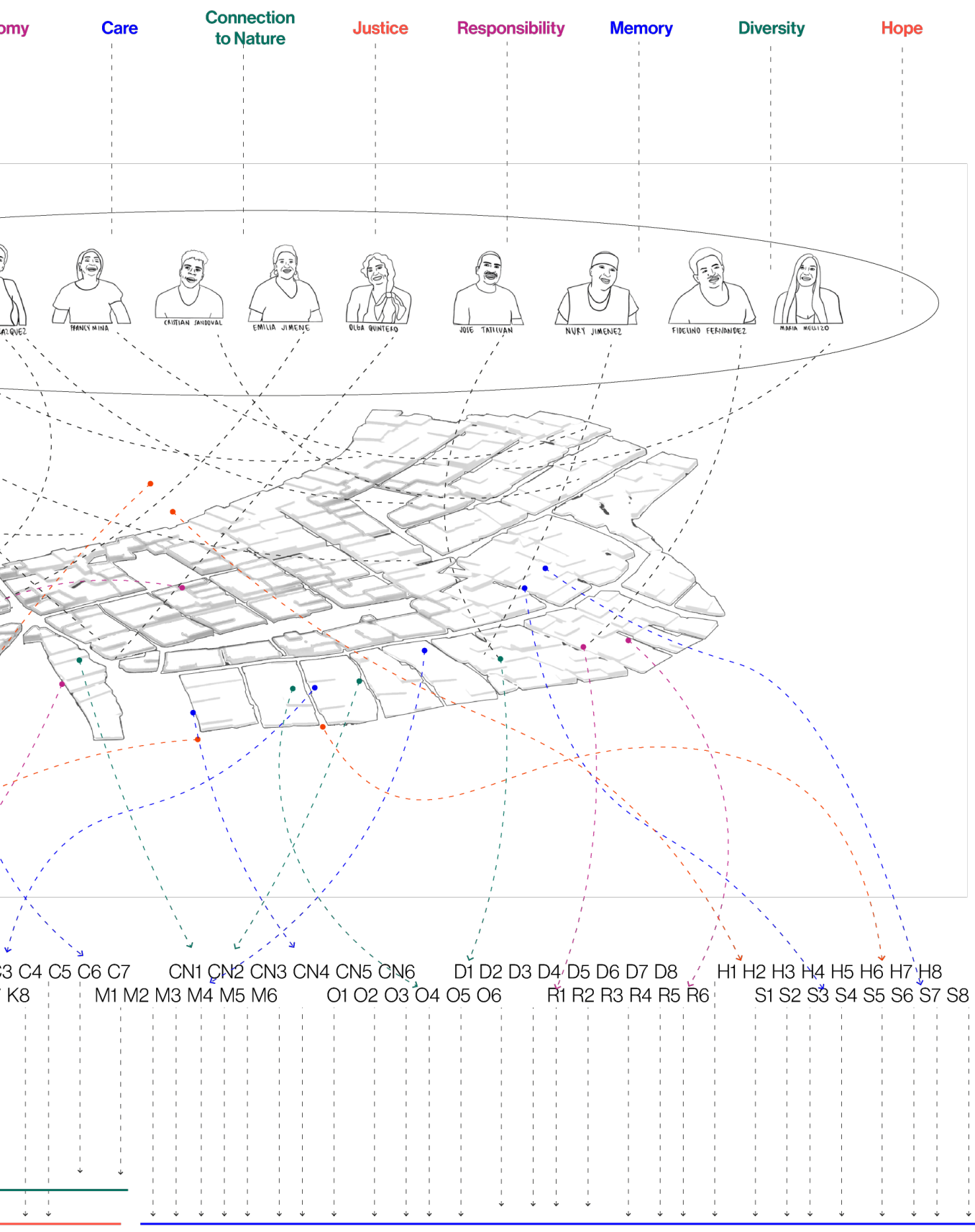


Fig 80. Diagram of the framework of values: connecting quotes, spatial locations, territorial manifestations, core values, and phases of neighborhood development. Made by author.

TERRITORIAL MANIFESTATIONS

Through this framework, these manifestations illuminate how communities actively shape their environments, not just in response to absence, but as an assertion of dignity and agency. Recognizing them offers a powerful lens to rethink urban planning as a practice rooted in values, guided by dignity, and informed by the territorial knowledge already alive in the everyday practices of residents.

In total, I identified 78 territorial manifestations across the interviews. These findings will play a crucial role not only in this analytical chapter but also in the formulation of the design imaginary that follows. Each manifestation will be examined through the lens of its origin, why it emerges in the territory, who holds responsibility for its existence or absence, and what role it plays in shaping the neighborhood.

A key conclusion from this analysis is that many of the manifestations that call for transformation cluster around public service provision, basic infrastructure, access to housing, and the protection of fundamental rights. These patterns reflect structural gaps in state support, but also point toward opportunities for grounded, values-based planning that centers the lives and needs of those historically left behind.



Approach for the Imaginarie

----- To be empowered

————— To be changed

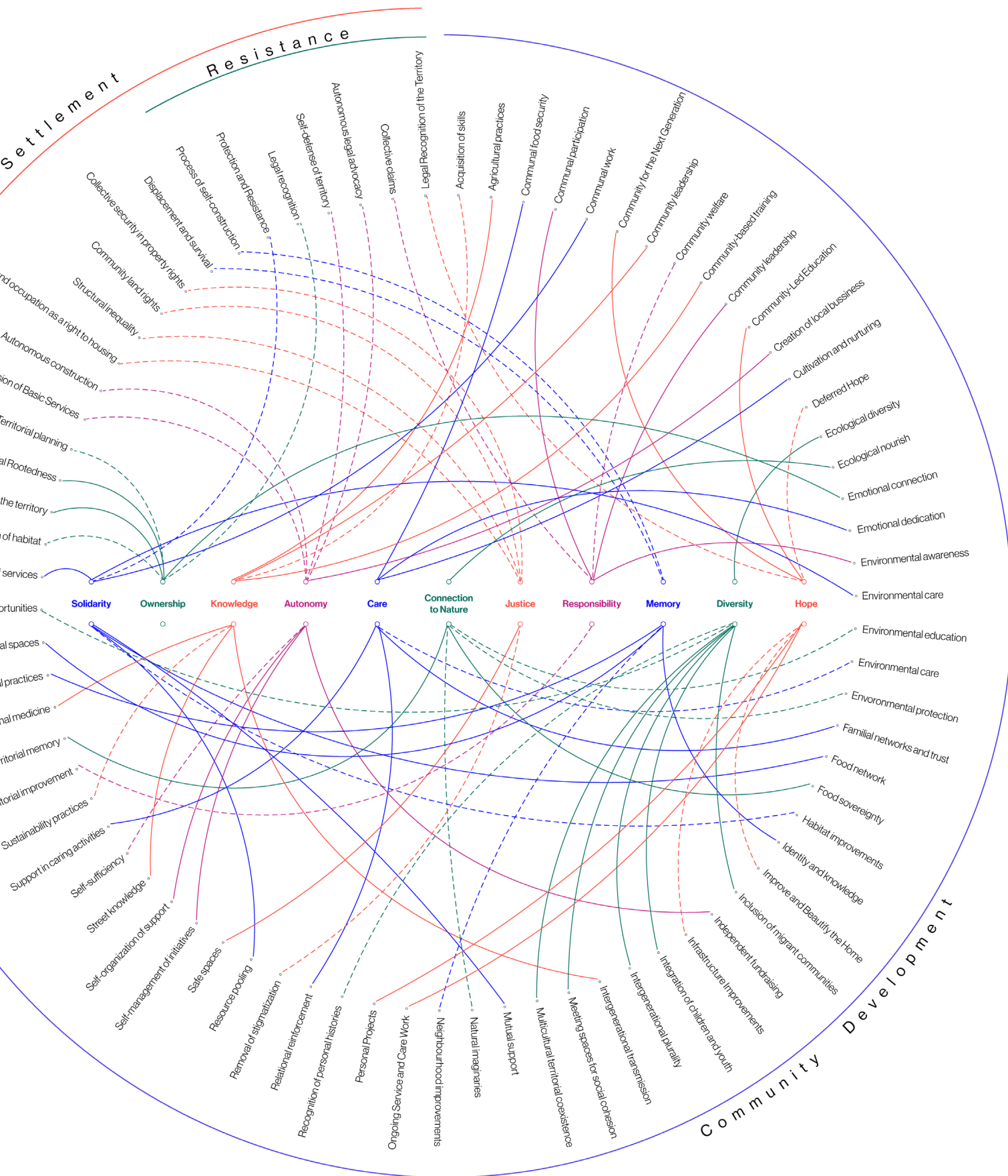


Fig 81. Diagram of 78 territorial manifestations, each analyzed to determine whether it should be empowered or transformed within the framework of values. Made by author..

TERRITORIAL VALUES

Method of Interpretation

To understand these values more deeply, I carried out an interpretive exercise. For each one, I traced how it appeared in the narratives, where it originated in the lived experiences of residents, and what it generated in their everyday practices and territorial configurations. This approach made it possible to move beyond description and to see how values function as active forces within the territory.

Procedural and Spatial Forms

The analysis revealed that the manifestations composing each value often took one of two directions. Some unfolded in procedural forms—such as collective decision-making, negotiation, organization, or social mobilization. Others materialized in spatial forms—including the creation of infrastructure, public spaces, or housing strategies. Recognizing both dimensions clarifies how values flow between social processes and the built environment, and how each sustains the other.

In the following section, each territorial value is presented by showing how it emerges from the lived reality of self-built neighborhoods, how it takes shape in everyday practices and spatial configurations, and what ethical and political significance it holds for the construction of a dignified habitat and the redefinition of urban life grounded in community knowledge and collective action.

Knowledge:

In self-built neighborhoods, knowledge is collective, adaptive, and rooted in lived experience. It is acquired through necessity-driven learning—from construction skills to sustainability practices—and passed on through intergenerational transmission. Knowledge manifests in agricultural work, traditional medicine, and street-based strategies for survival, blending rural traditions with urban adaptation. It is also produced through community leadership, training initiatives, and peer education, where residents teach and learn from one another. Rather than institutional or certified, this knowledge is territorial: grounded in everyday life and essential for shaping a dignified habitat.

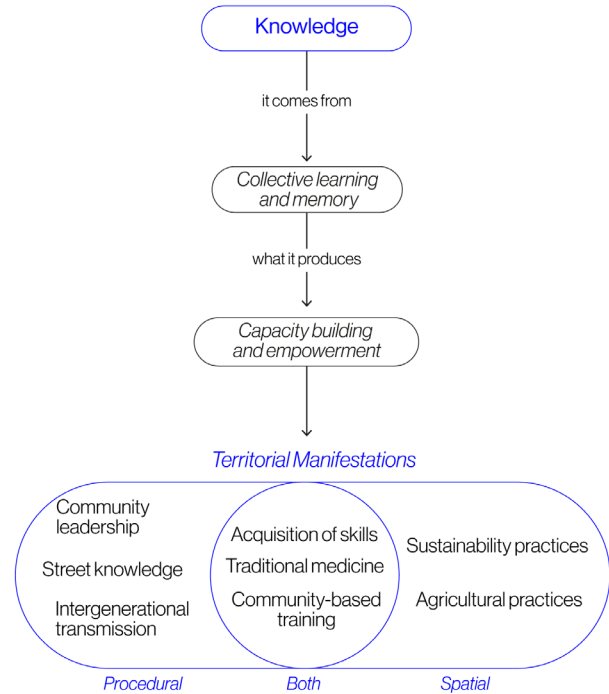


Fig. 84 Diagram of the value of knowledge: its origins, effects, and related territorial manifestations in the neighborhood. Made by author.

Fig. 85 House decoration and enclosure made with plastic bottle caps arranged in various designs. Photo by Populab.

Care:

Care in self-built neighborhoods is both a relational ethic and a territorial practice. It is expressed through communal food efforts, shared caregiving, and the emotional commitment residents invest in their families, neighbors, and environment. It is seen in the cultivation of plants, the creation of support networks, and the maintenance of trust within the community. Care shapes space through everyday acts of nurturing, from looking after elders to tending gardens or organizing collective meals. It is a quiet but powerful force that sustains life and strengthens the social fabric of the territory.

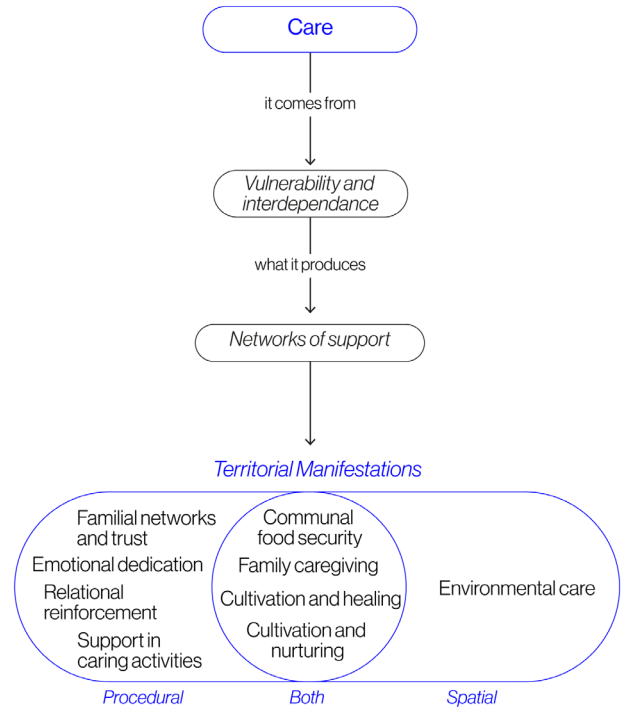


Fig. 86 Diagram of the value of care: its origins, effects, and related territorial manifestations in the neighborhood. Made by author.
 Fig. 87 Woman caring for her grandchildren, who assist her in climbing the hill, reflecting intergenerational care. Photo by Populab.

Autonomy:

Autonomy in self-built neighborhoods is the capacity of residents to organize, build, and sustain life independently from state institutions. It is expressed through actions like self-construction, creating local businesses, and self-provision of basic services when formal support is absent. Communities demonstrate autonomy by managing initiatives, raising funds, and organizing mutual aid based on their own priorities. In contexts of risk or eviction, it also includes self-defense of territory and autonomous legal advocacy. Far from isolation, autonomy here is collective—rooted in shared responsibility and the determination to shape the territory on their own terms.

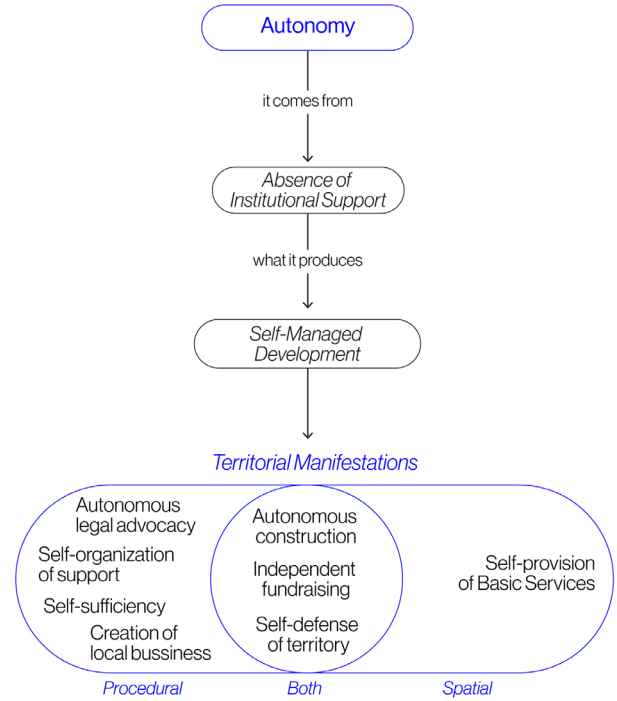


Fig. 88 Diagram of the value of autonomy: its origins, effects, and related territorial manifestations in the neighborhood. Made by author.
 Fig. 89 Self-constructed motorcycle path along the stairs, reflecting the value of autonomy in addressing mobility challenges. Photo by Populab.

Responsibility:

Responsibility in self-built neighborhoods is a collective and territorial ethic. It appears in community leadership roles, communal participation, and the commitment to territorial improvement not for individual gain, but for community welfare. Residents take charge of environmental care through awareness and action, and organize collective claims to demand rights or defend their land.

Here, responsibility is not assigned by institutions, it is assumed by residents as an **everyday practice of care, maintenance, and advocacy for the wellbeing of all.**

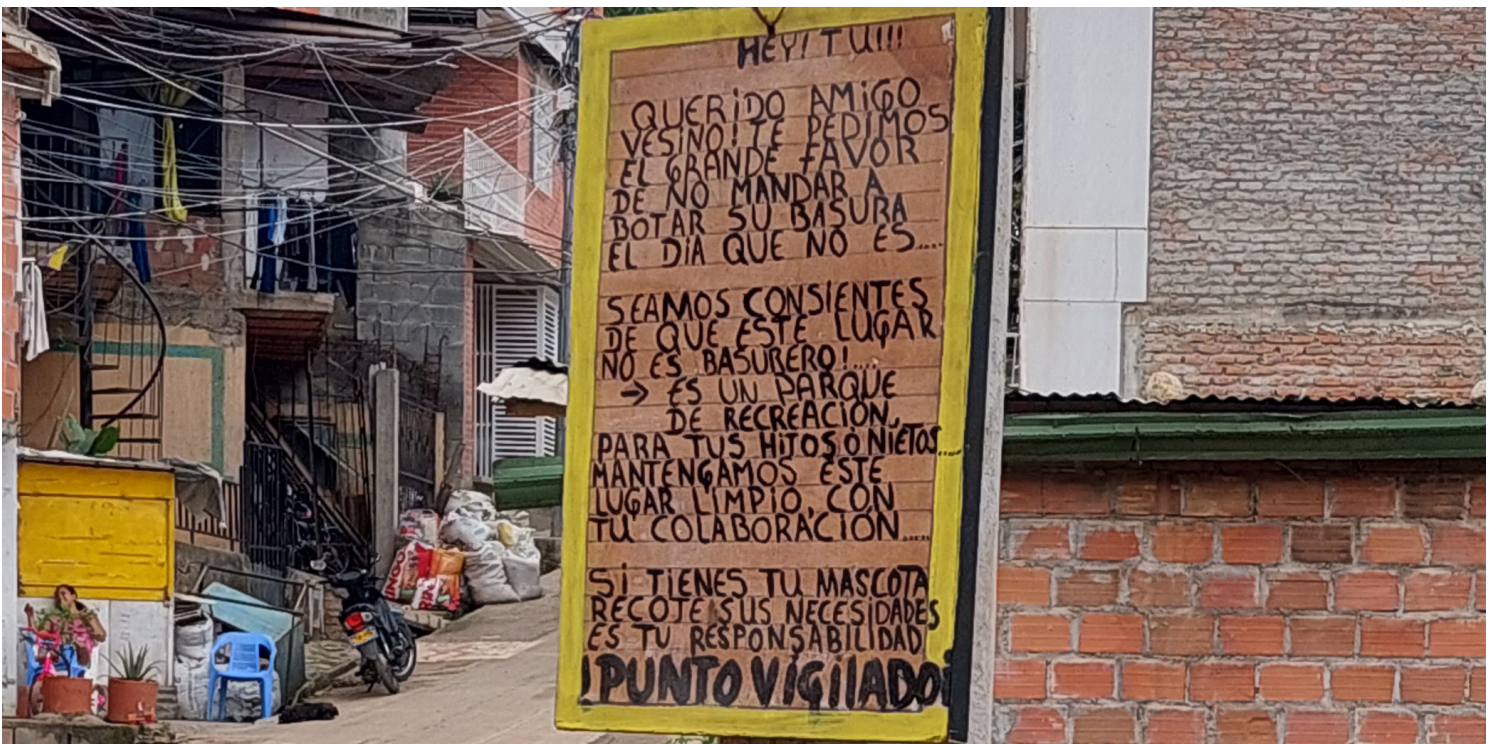
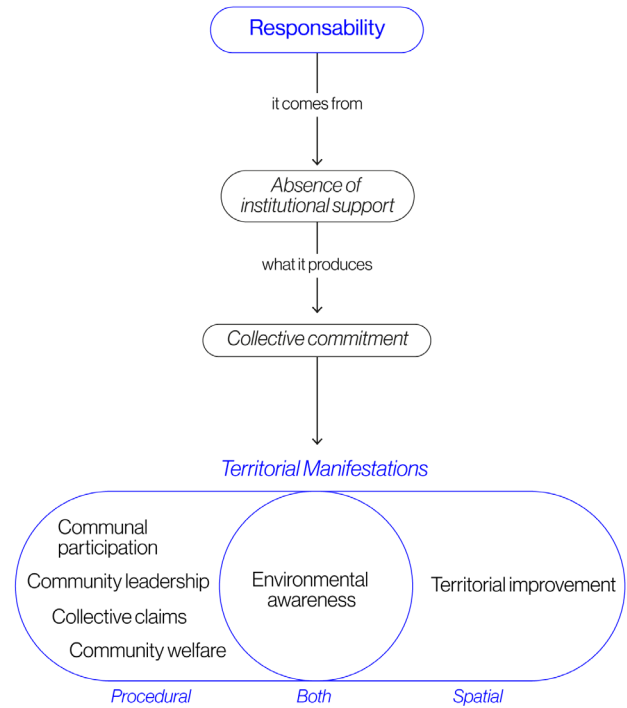


Fig. 90 Diagram of the value of responsibility: its origins, effects, and related territorial manifestations in the neighborhood. Made by author.

Fig. 91 Sign promoting responsible waste management, reflecting community efforts to encourage care and shared responsibility. Photo by author.

Memory:

Memory, in self-built neighborhoods, is rooted in the experience of displacement and survival and carried forward through the process of self-construction. It shapes identity and knowledge, tying past struggles to present place-making. Neighbourhood improvements become milestones in a collective timeline, while traditional practices and the use of natural spaces preserve cultural continuity.

In this context, memory is not static, it is **lived and territorial**, anchoring **dignity and belonging** in the landscape itself.

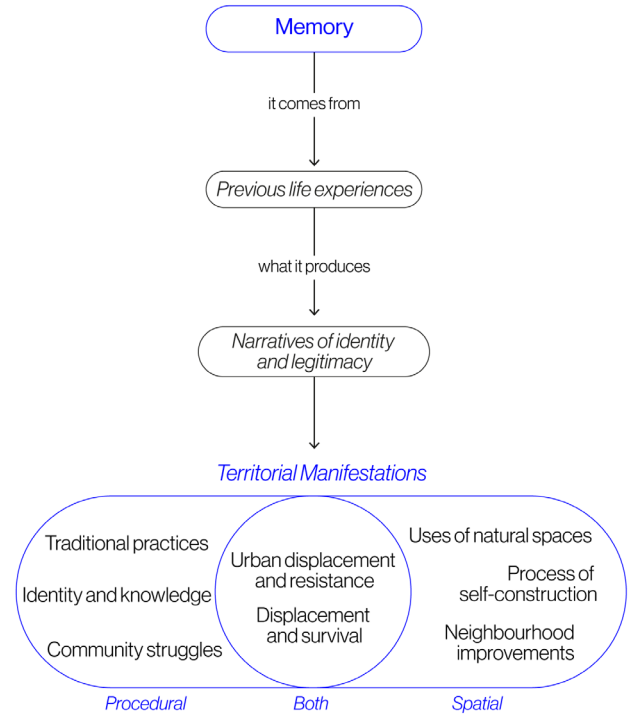


Fig. 92 Diagram of the value of memory: its origins, effects, and related territorial manifestations in the neighborhood. Made by author.

Fig. 93 Small agricultural spaces near homes, reflecting efforts to preserve and recreate memories of past rural environments. Photo by author.

Diversity:

Diversity in self-built neighborhoods is expressed through inclusive coexistence—social, cultural, and ecological. It manifests in the integration of migrant families, the presence of intergenerational life, and the creation of shared spaces that welcome all. These territories embrace ecological and cultural plurality, where different ways of life, languages, and practices cohabit and enrich the environment. Diversity here is not a challenge to be managed, but a strength to be celebrated, shaping a habitat where multiculturalism and collective belonging are embedded in the everyday landscape.

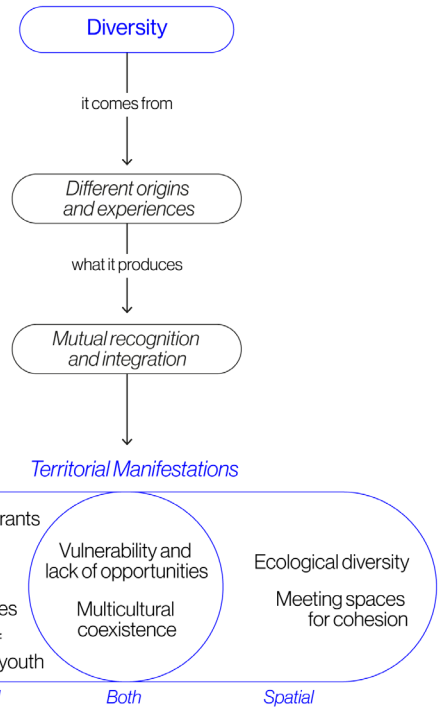


Fig. 94 Diagram of the value of diversity: its origins, effects, and related territorial manifestations in the neighborhood. Made by author.

Fig. 95 Children and teenagers from different parts of the city and country playing together in the neighborhood's fútbol square. Photo by author.

Connection to Nature:

Connection to nature is deeply rooted in the practices and memories of self-built neighborhoods. It is expressed through environmental protection, ecological cultivation, and a relational understanding of the land. Residents care for and learn from the environment, drawing on territorial memory and natural imaginaries tied to rivers, hills, and forests. Efforts toward food sovereignty and environmental education reflect not only a survival strategy but a worldview where nature is kin, not resource. This connection sustains both identity and resilience, reaffirming that dignified living includes a reciprocal bond with the natural world.

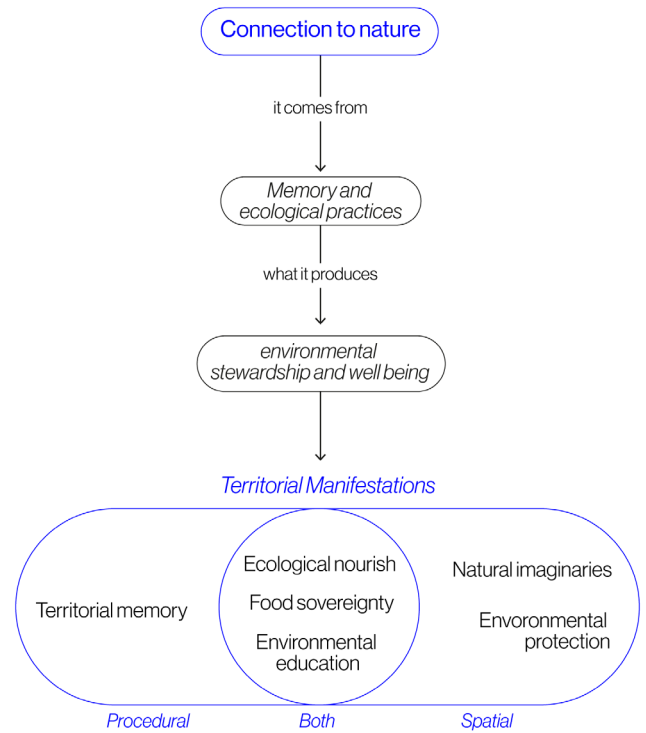


Fig. 96 Diagram of the value of connection to nature: its origins, effects, and related territorial manifestations in the neighborhood. Made by author.
 Fig. 97 Plantain plants cultivated near homes reflect a deep connection to nature. Photo by author.

Ownership and Belonging:

Ownership and belonging in self-built neighborhoods are not limited to legal tenure—they are constructed through the everyday labor of making place. This value is embodied in the construction of habitat, the naming of the territory, and the emotional and symbolic rootedness that residents develop over time. Through territorial planning, legal advocacy, and a deep emotional connection to the land, communities claim both presence and permanence. Belonging here is collective and participatory—it emerges from shaping space together and recognizing that one's identity is inseparable from the territory they inhabit and care for.

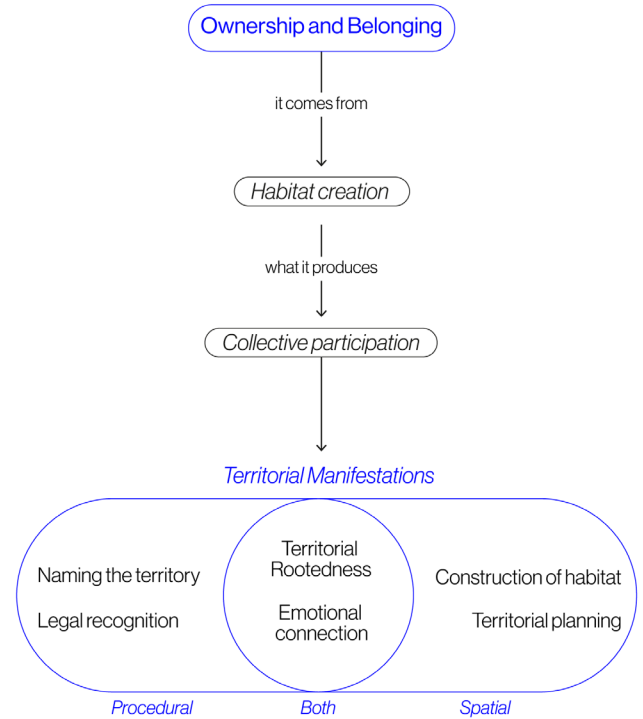


Fig. 98 Diagram of the value of ownership: its origins, effects, and related territorial manifestations in the neighborhood. Made by author.

Fig. 99 A house in the early stages of construction, reflecting how ownership is built through the everyday labor of making place. Photo by author.

Solidarity:

Solidarity is the backbone of collective life in self-built neighborhoods. It is expressed through acts of mutual support, communal work, and the pooling of resources to overcome systemic neglect. From organizing food networks to improving shared infrastructure and the distribution of basic services, solidarity is what enables communities to survive and grow together. It also appears in environmental care and collective resistance—efforts to protect both people and land. Far from being charity, solidarity is a practice of reciprocity and collective responsibility that sustains the territory and affirms a shared struggle for dignity.

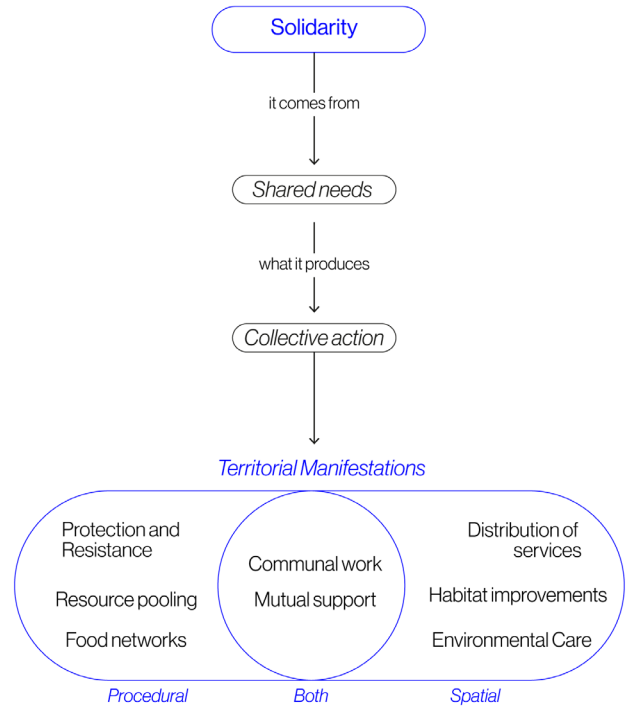


Fig. 100 Diagram of the value of solidarity: its origins, effects, and related territorial manifestations in the neighborhood. Made by author.

Fig. 101 Community pot activities, where shared cooking practices foster solidarity and mutual support among residents. Photo by author.

Hope:

Hope is the emotional and political force that drives residents to build beyond survival, even in the face of adversity. It manifests in the belief that life can improve—materially, socially, and spiritually—and fuels both the pursuit of basic needs and the imagination of a better future. In self-built neighborhoods, hope transforms uncertainty into action, guiding decisions that are rooted in dignity, care, and the possibility of flourishing.

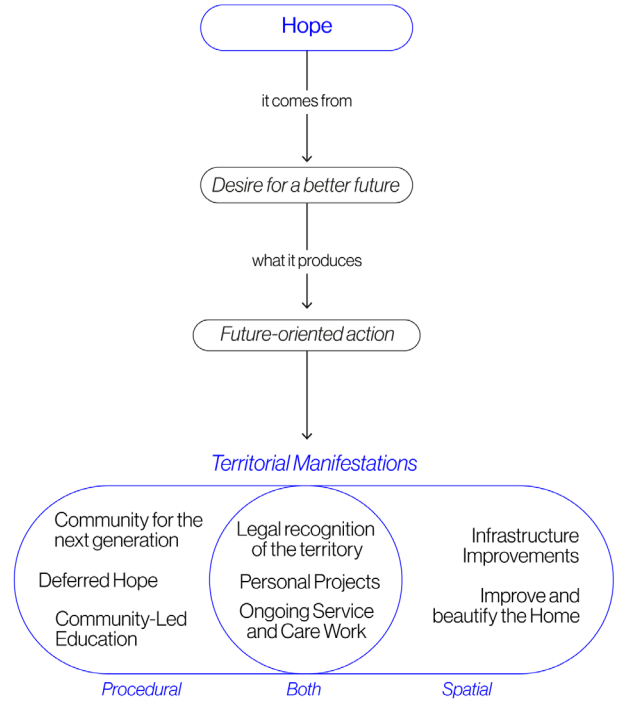


Fig. 102 Diagram of the value of hope: its origins, effects, and related territorial manifestations in the neighborhood. Made by author.

Fig. 103 Informal labor, like selling arepas in the neighborhood, as an expression of hope and effort to improve living conditions. Photo by author.

VALUE BASED
IMAGINARIES

From Recognition to Imagination
A Path Made of Values

Pre Arrival Planning
Arrival and Settlement
Collective Design
Territorial Planning
Collective Flourishing

FROM RECOGNITION TO IMAGINATION

Building on the values and territorial manifestations identified through the analysis of self-built neighborhoods, this chapter takes a decisive turn, from understanding what exists to imagining what could be. Inspired by Jota Samper's final phase, "Toward Better Practices," this chapter does not aim to provide a fixed solution or masterplan, but rather to envision alternative futures rooted in the ethics, knowledge, and spatial practices already alive in the territory.

If planning systems have long responded to informality as something to be corrected, here I propose an inversion: to begin planning with what these territories already do well. The aim is to explore how planning, design, and governance could operate differently, anchored in values such as care, autonomy, solidarity, and justice, rather than profit, efficiency, or control.

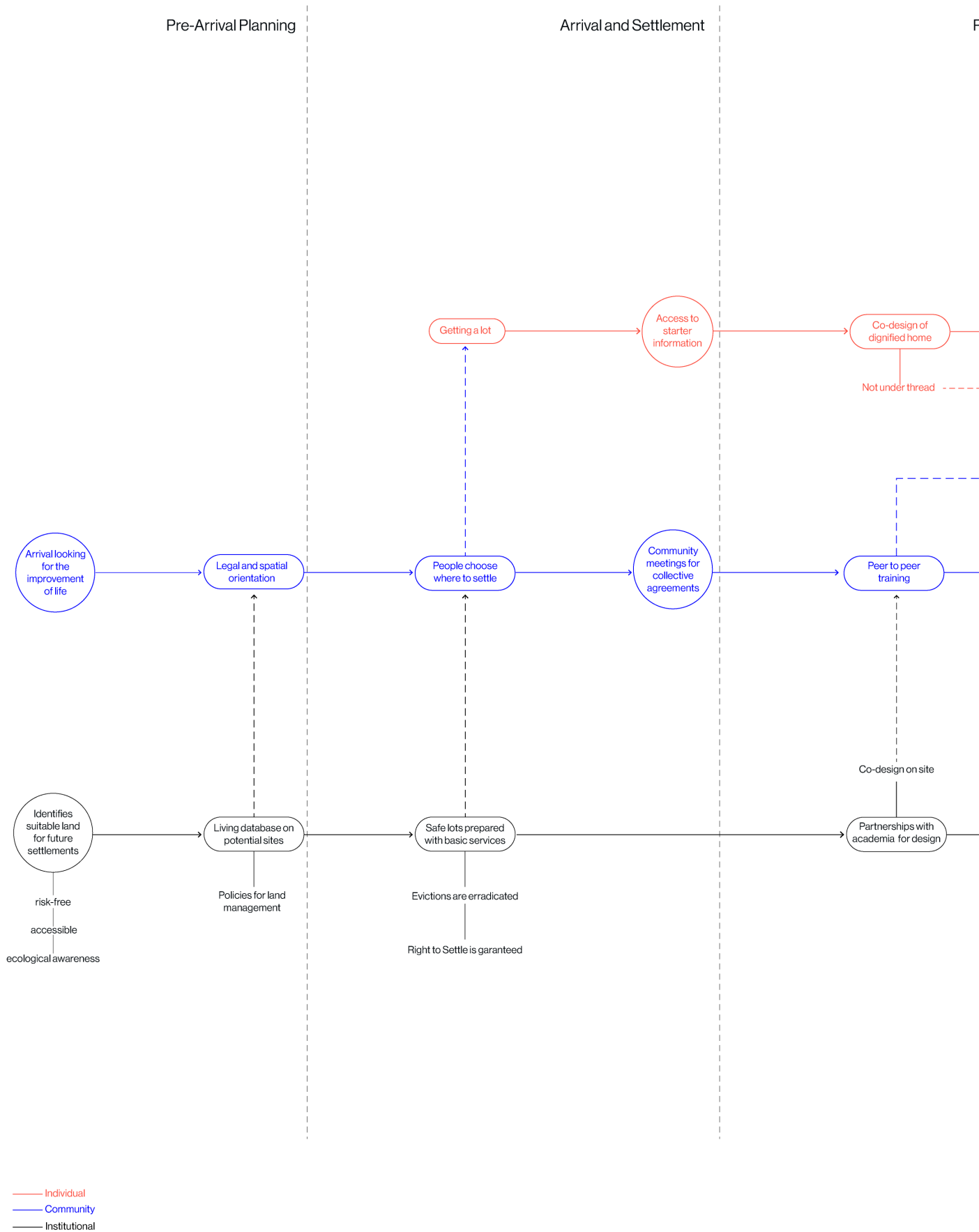
This chapter introduces a value-based imaginary, a speculative yet grounded vision of how self-built neighborhoods could evolve if supported—not repressed—by institutions. Drawing from the 78 territorial manifestations identified earlier, I outline a five-phase timeline of alternative development, rooted in dignity rather than survival. This is not about idealism, but about reclaiming the right to dream collectively and to design urban futures that start from the knowledge, needs, and desires of the people who live and build them.





Fig. 104 Collage of "what if" scenarios, alternative possibilities for the neighborhood had a different path been taken. Made by author.

A PATH MADE OF VALUES



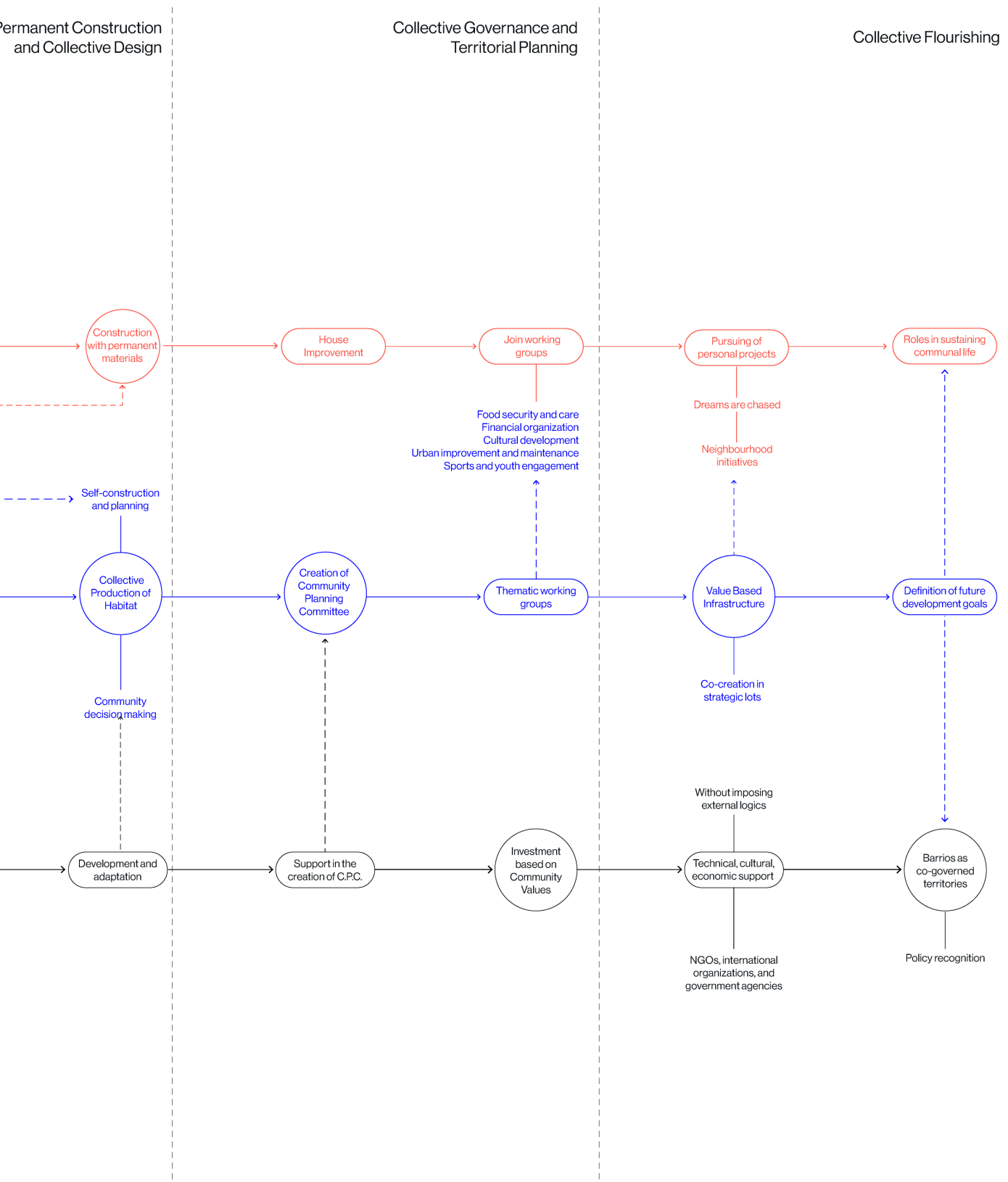


Fig. 105 Value-based alternative development timeline with municipal involvement from the first phase, reimagining self-built neighborhoods through dignity and collective agency. Made by author.

PRE ARRIVAL PLANNING

Before any family arrives, before a single house is built, the city recognizes that displacement is not an exception but a structural reality of the present. In this alternative future, urban planning shifts from reactive crisis management to ethical anticipation. The municipality, in collaboration with community-based organizations and interdisciplinary research teams, proactively identifies land that is safe, accessible, ecologically resilient, and suitable for future settlement.

This land is not hidden, but openly registered in a living database—a tool updated continuously to reflect changing environmental conditions, infrastructure needs, and demographic trends. Public policy reforms align with this logic, transforming land management systems from speculative frameworks into instruments of collective wellbeing.

Rather than waiting for displaced populations to arrive in precarity, orientation hubs are created at regional entry points—where individuals and families receive information about their legal options, spatial rights, and support systems. They are no longer left to navigate the unknown alone.

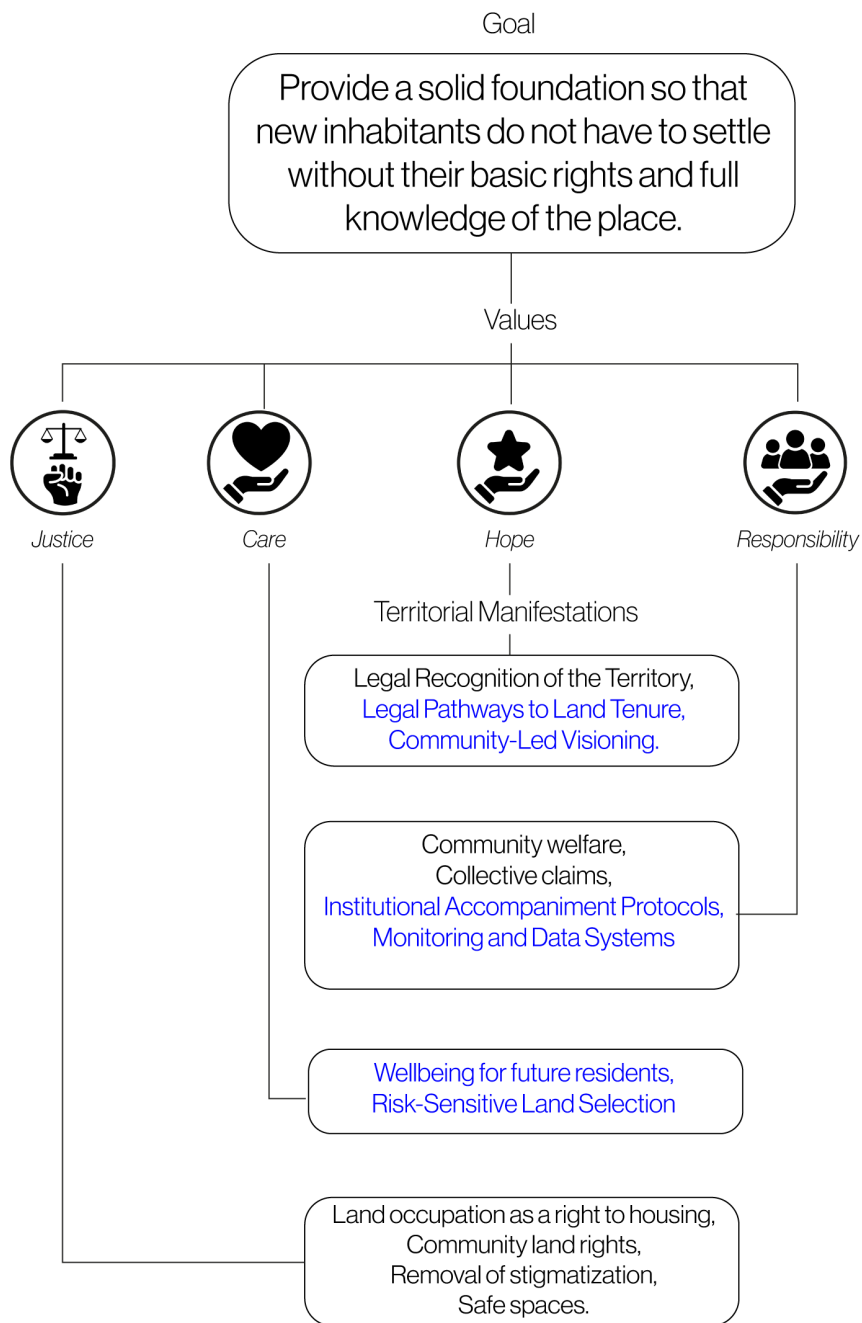
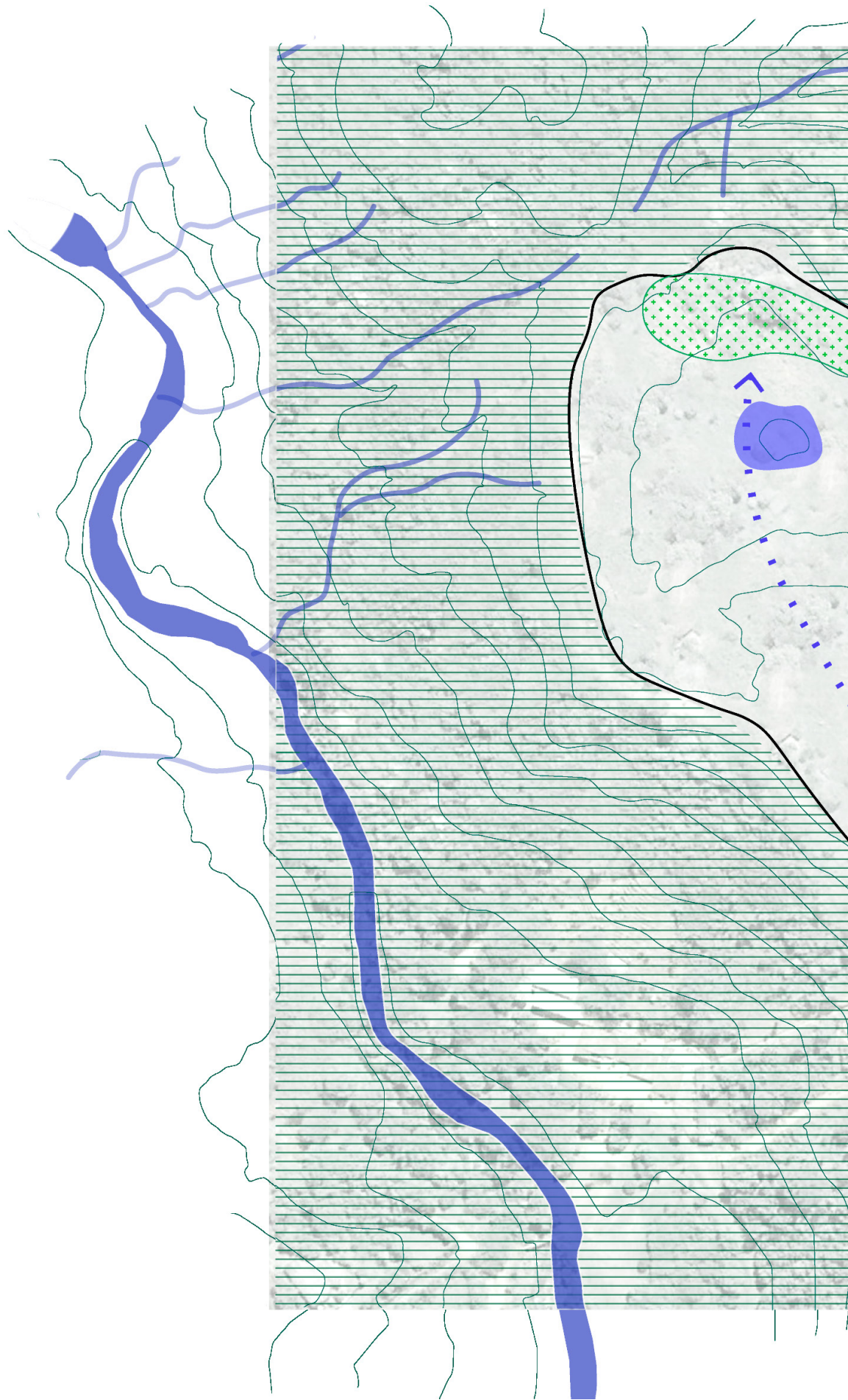


Fig. 106 Diagram of Phase 0: goals, key values, and corresponding territorial manifestations represented within each value. Made by author.



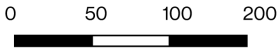
Pre-Arrival Planning

Environmental Protection

- Water Bodies
- Protected areas
- Medium risk areas

Topography considerations

- Available area for construction
- Highest areas
- Elevation continuation



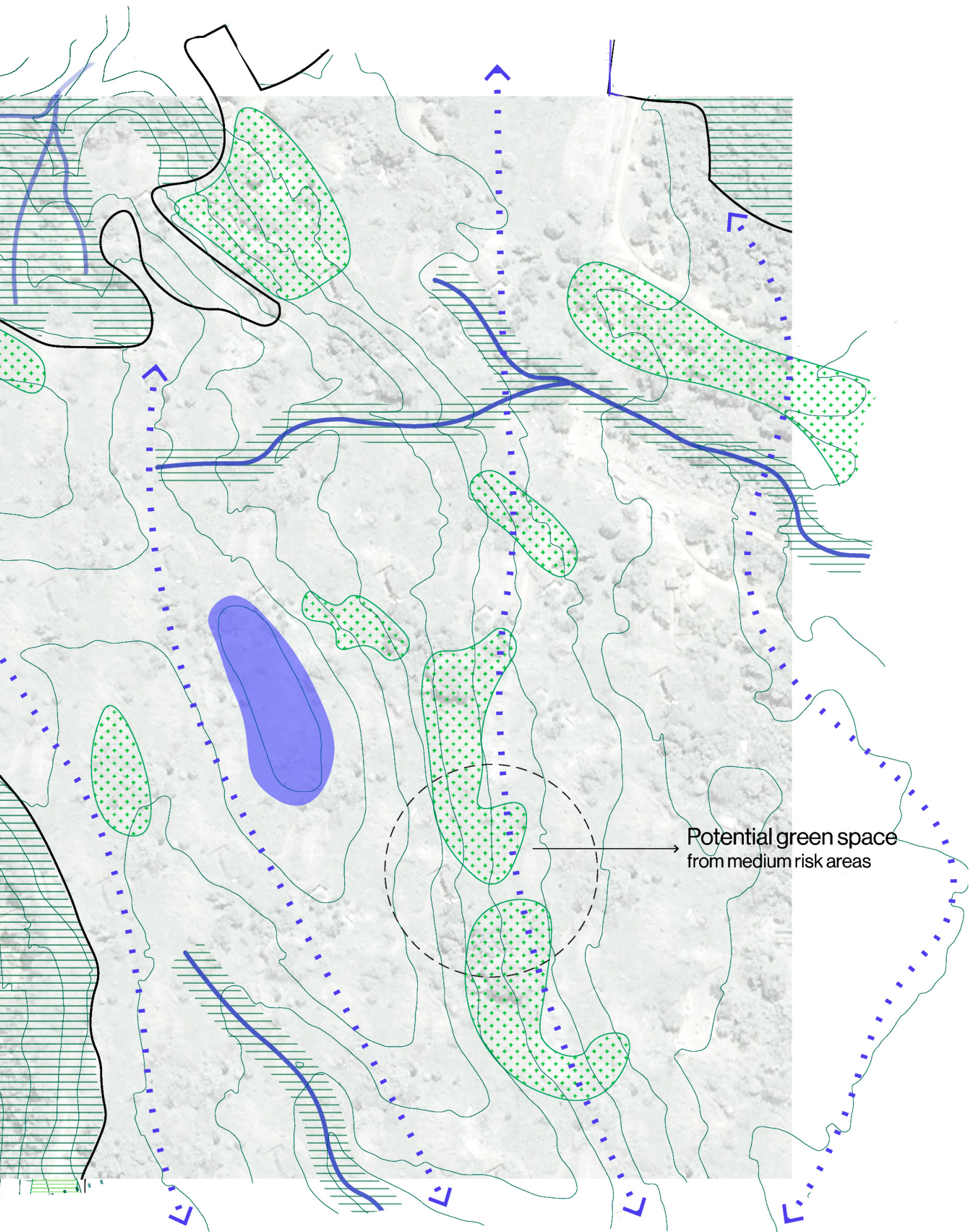


Fig. 107 Map of Phase 0: anticipatory urban planning through pre-identified, resilient land and support systems for displaced populations before settlement begins. Made by author.

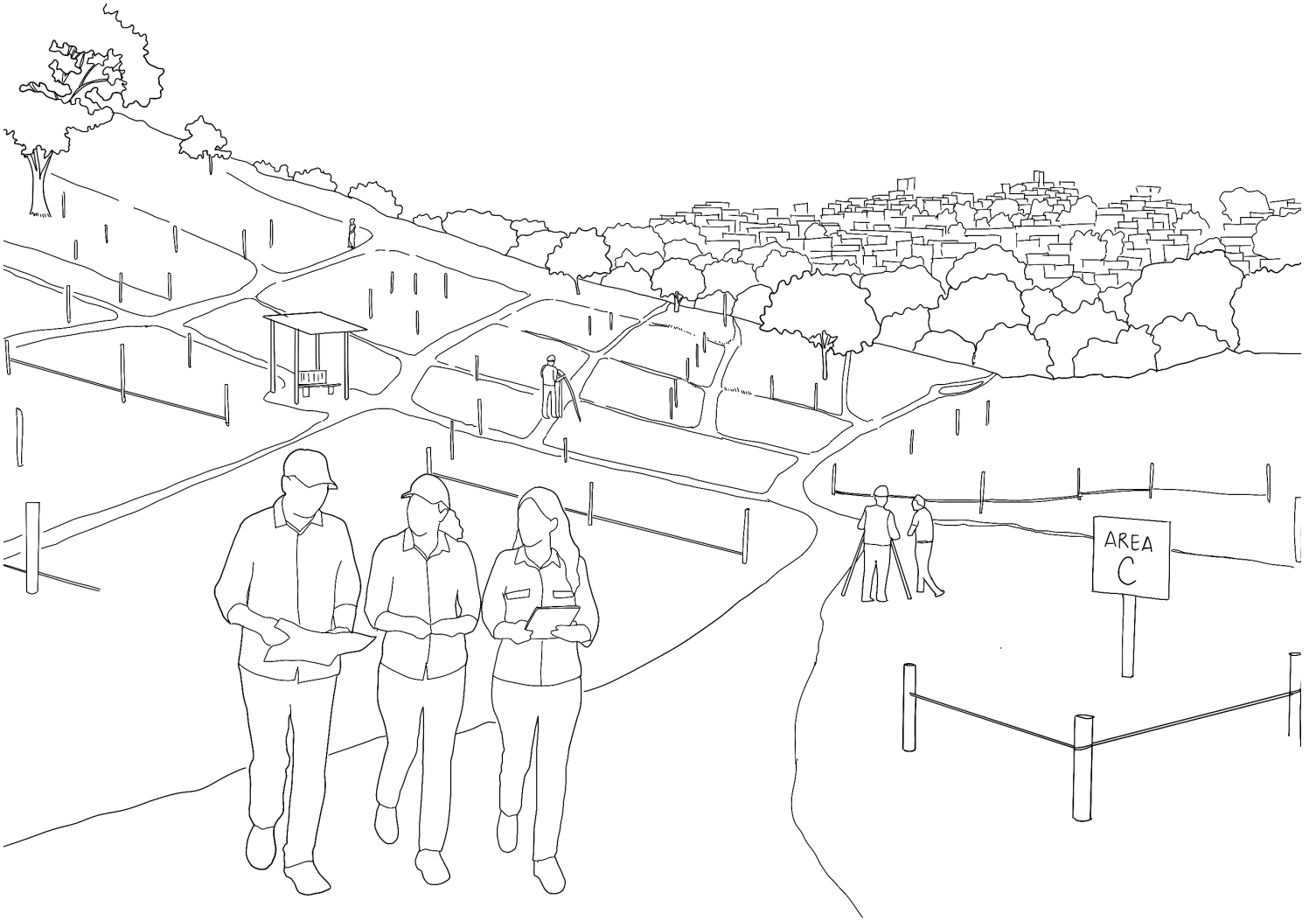


Fig. 108. Municipal officials and professionals assess physical land characteristics to ensure informed, safe settlement for incoming residents. Made by author.

Fig. 109. Phase 0 imagined: displaced families receive orientation, legal support, and access to safe, serviced land. Made by author.



Imaginary Life of Ari Paz

Phase 0:

Before Ari ever arrives in the city, the state has already identified safe, well-connected areas for new settlements—places free from environmental risk, with access to services and proximity to opportunity. When he and his family are displaced from Cauca, they are not left wandering or alone.

At the moment of departure, they receive orientation, legal support, and a welcome plan. Ari learns about his rights and is offered a list of legal, prepared lots where he can settle. There is no fear of eviction—only dignified relocation with informed choice.

ARRIVAL AND SETTLEMENT

When people arrive, they do so not as “invaders” but as rightful co-creators of the city. Upon reaching urban areas, families are welcomed with dignified orientation, not suspicion. They are offered access to a menu of legal and viable lots, each pre-equipped with essential infrastructure: clean water, sanitation, electricity. This transforms the chaotic, unsafe moment of arrival into one of clarity and grounded choice.

Evictions are no longer part of public policy, the right to shelter is guaranteed, and planning recognizes the urgency of rooting life quickly and safely.

Community facilitators and trained mediators host welcome assemblies, where newcomers are introduced to the values, agreements, and existing residents of the settlement. These initial meetings lay the foundation for collective agreements on land use, mutual support, and public space. No one is left to improvise in fear.

Families receive starter kits, packages that include legal documents, orientation manuals, materials for basic shelter, and maps of community resources. Settling no longer means improvising in crisis, but beginning with dignity.

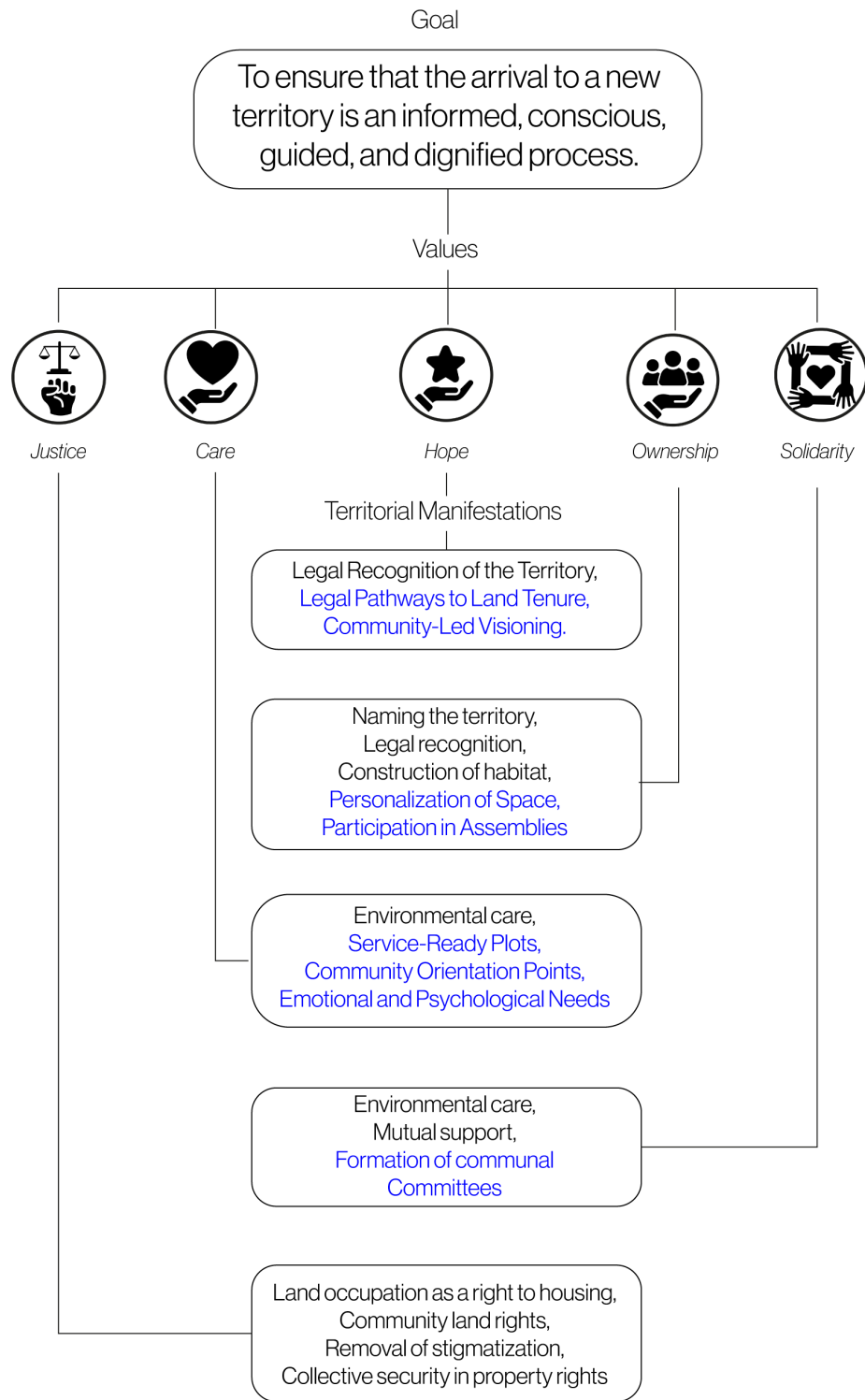
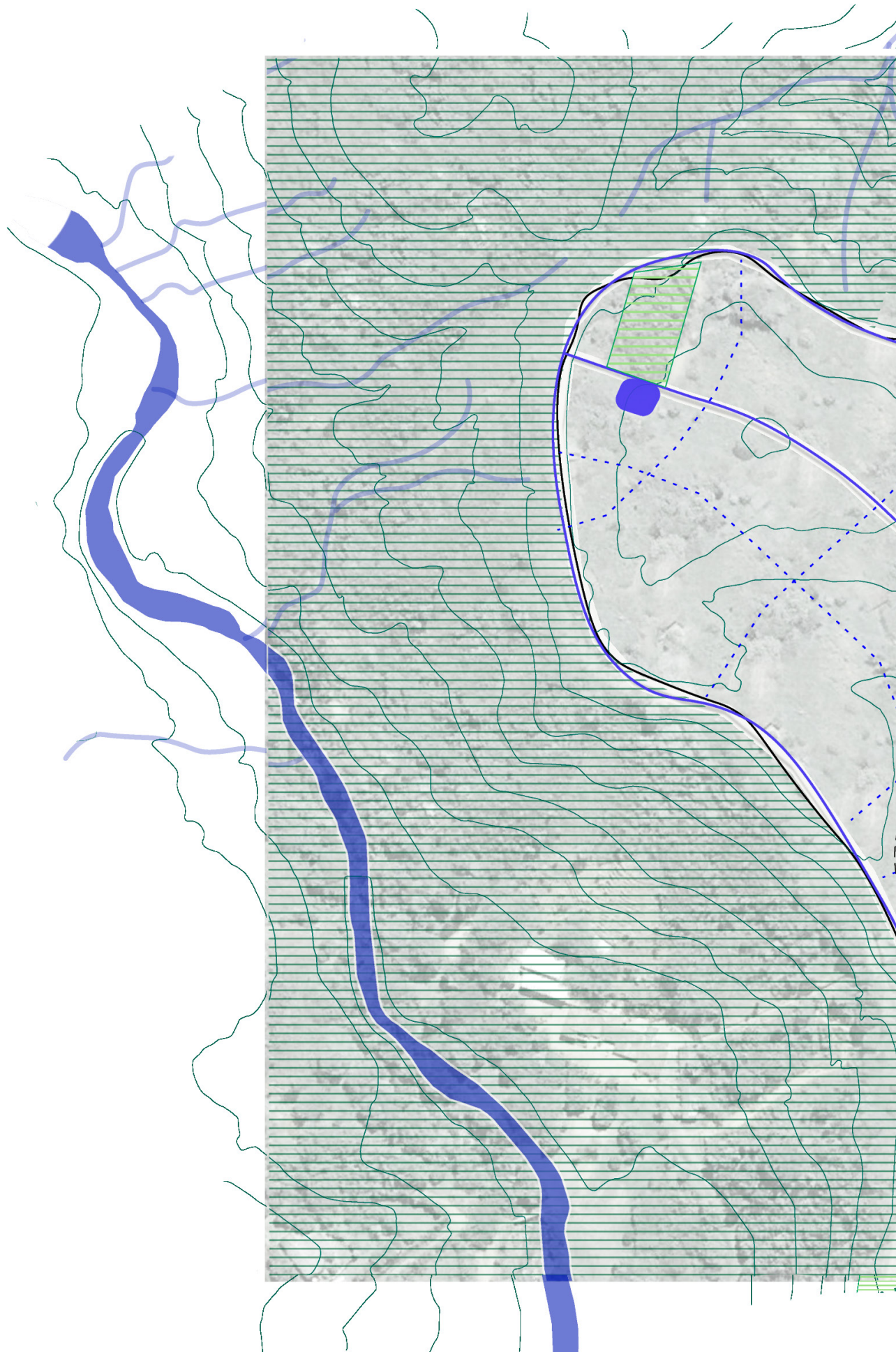


Fig. 110 Diagram of Phase 1: goals, key values, and corresponding territorial manifestations represented within each value. Made by author.



Arrival and S

Potential areas

 Public space


 Urban area

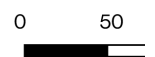
Prefigured space

 Arrival point

 Water environment

 Public space

 Streets



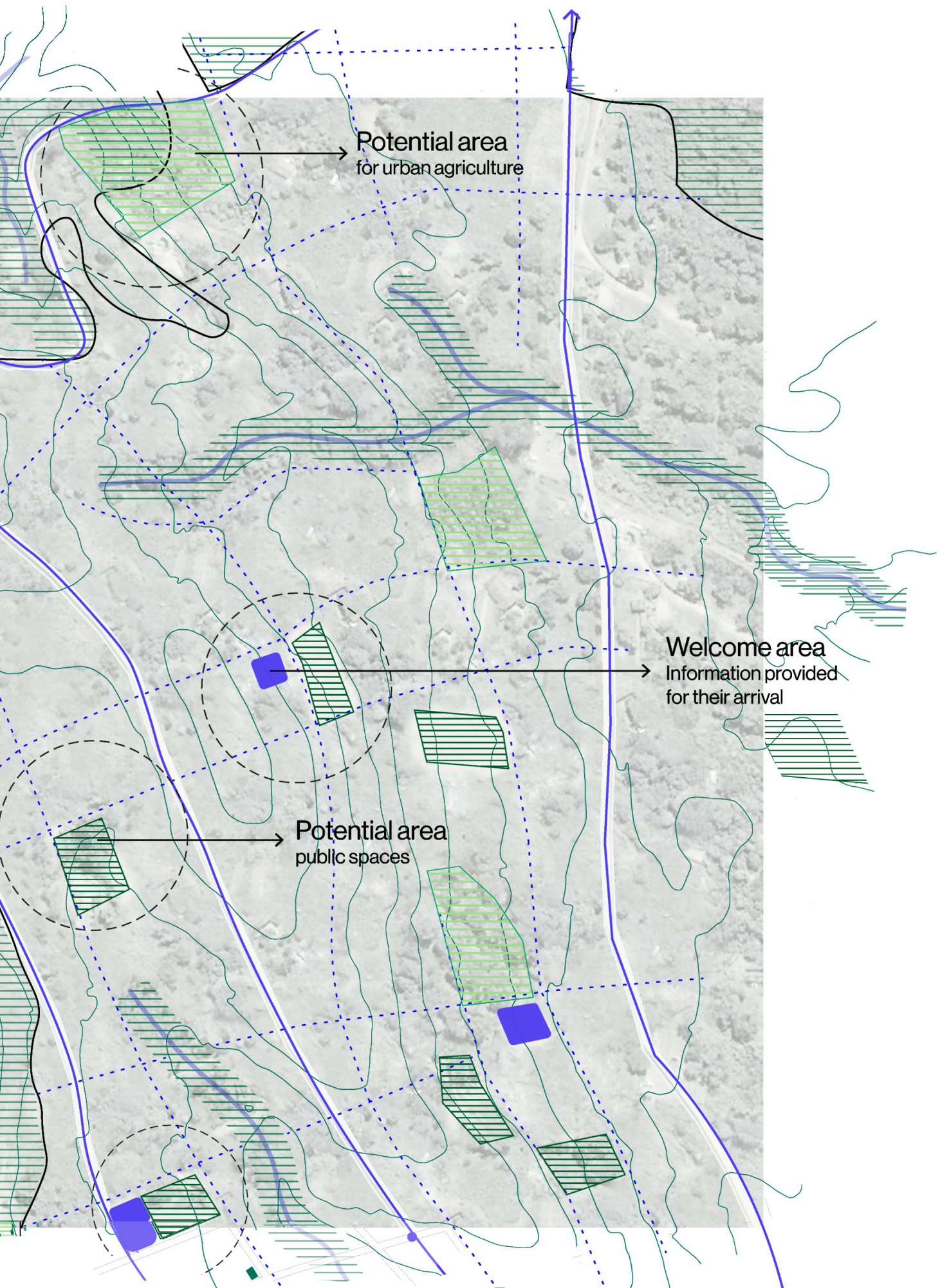


Fig. 111 Map of Phase 1: dignified arrival through access to legal lots, essential services, and collective orientation, recognizing newcomers as co-creators of the city. Made by author.

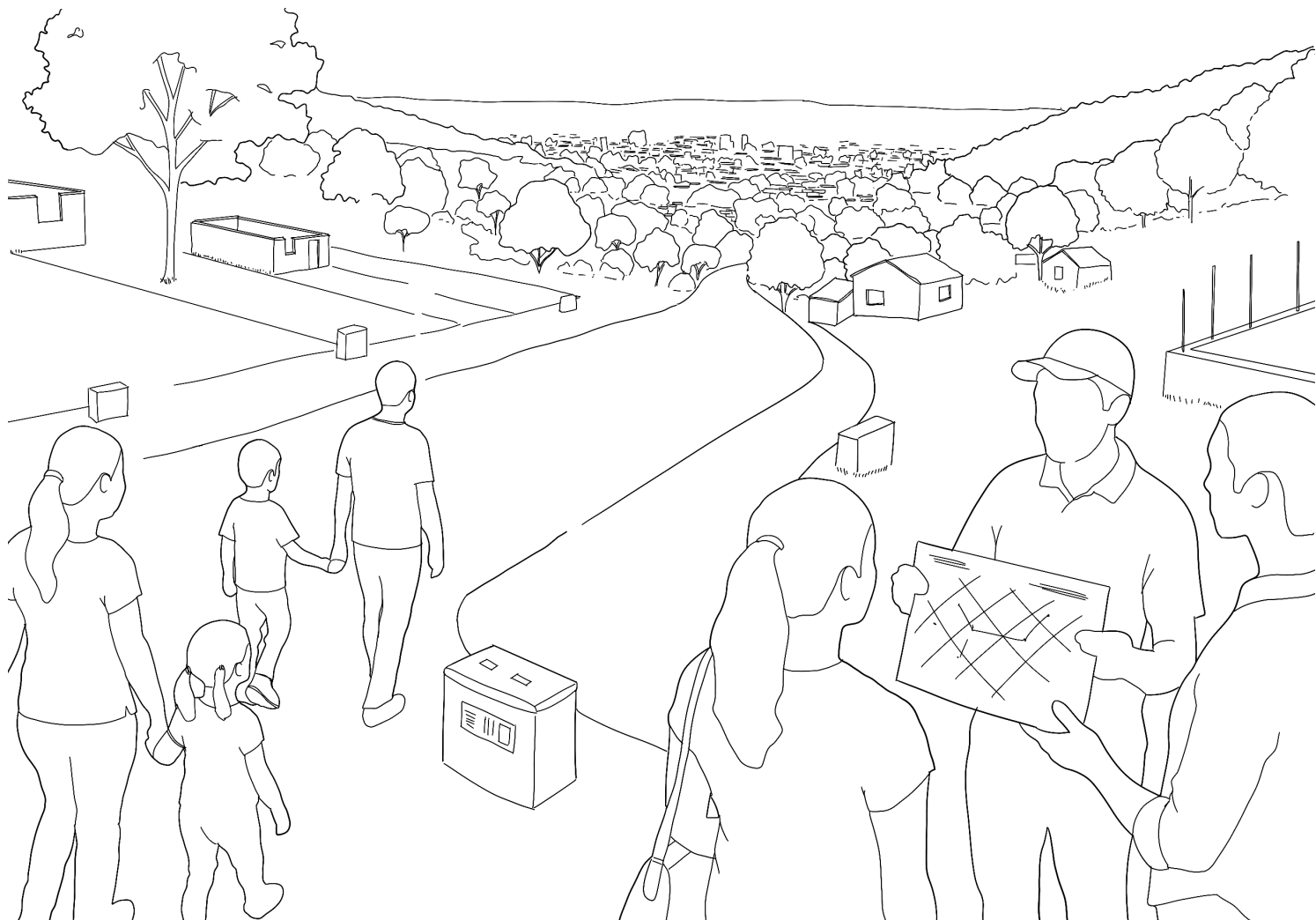
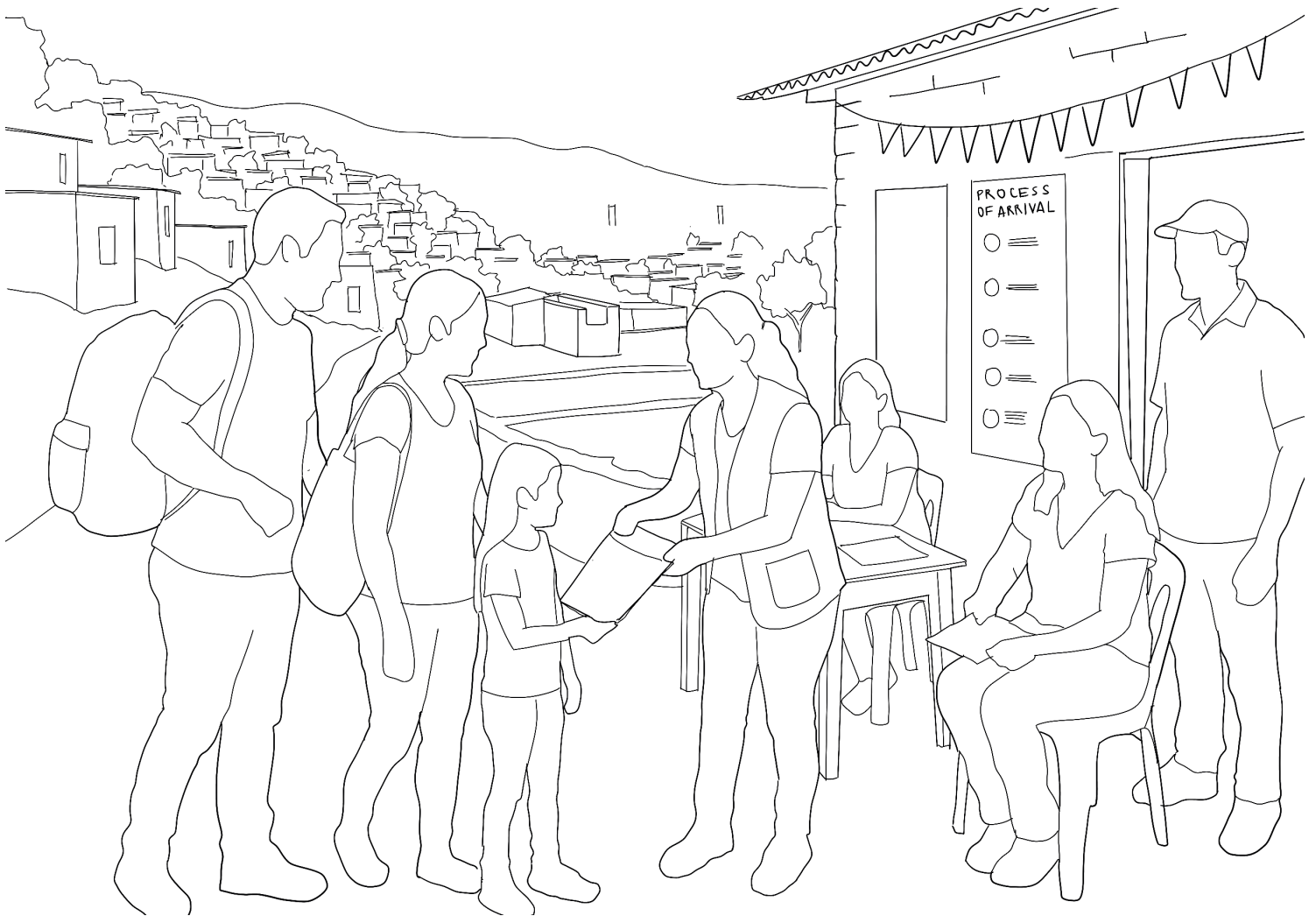


Fig. 112 Arrival as a recognized right: families access legal, serviced lots and receive orientation as co-creators of the city. Made by author

Fig. 113 Ari and his family arrive to the neighbourhood with guidance from facilitators, who explain characteristics of the space, and possibilities. Made by author.



Imaginary Life of Ari Paz

Phase 1:

Ari chooses a lot in a wellorganized, pre-mapped hillside settlement. The land is already equipped with basic services: water taps, a community toilet system, and electricity poles ready to connect. From the first night, he and his wife sleep under a solid roof, not plastic tarps.

Trained mediators introduce him to neighbors and explain collective agreements. He contributes his experience as a farmer to discussions about future food gardens. There's no fear, only shared beginnings and respect for collective norms.

COLLECTIVE DESIGN

With land secured and trust beginning to form, the next chapter unfolds not in precarity, but with intention and imagination. In this phase, construction is no longer an act of survival—it becomes an act of self-determination.

From day one, residents build their homes with the confidence that they won't be evicted, that their efforts will not be erased. Materials are chosen with dignity in mind—structures are safe, climate-resilient, and grounded in personal and cultural identity. This marks a radical shift: homes are not built to disappear, but to last.

At the institutional level, the role of technical knowledge is reimaged. Architecture and engineering faculties partner with communities through embedded design studios—not as consultants or experts, but as learners and collaborators. Together, they co-create basic housing prototypes that are modular, adaptable, and context-sensitive, offering solid foundations while remaining flexible to individual expression.

Meanwhile, within the community, knowledge circulates horizontally. Those with experience in construction or craftsmanship become mentors to others. Workshops emerge organically—under trees, in communal shelters, or along the margins of shared spaces—where neighbors pass on techniques, tools, and tips. Peer-to-peer learning replaces external dependency, and the act of building becomes a form of social cohesion.

Families take pride in their homes not because of real estate value, but because they have shaped them with their own hands, in dialogue with others, in connection with their stories, and in alignment with their needs.

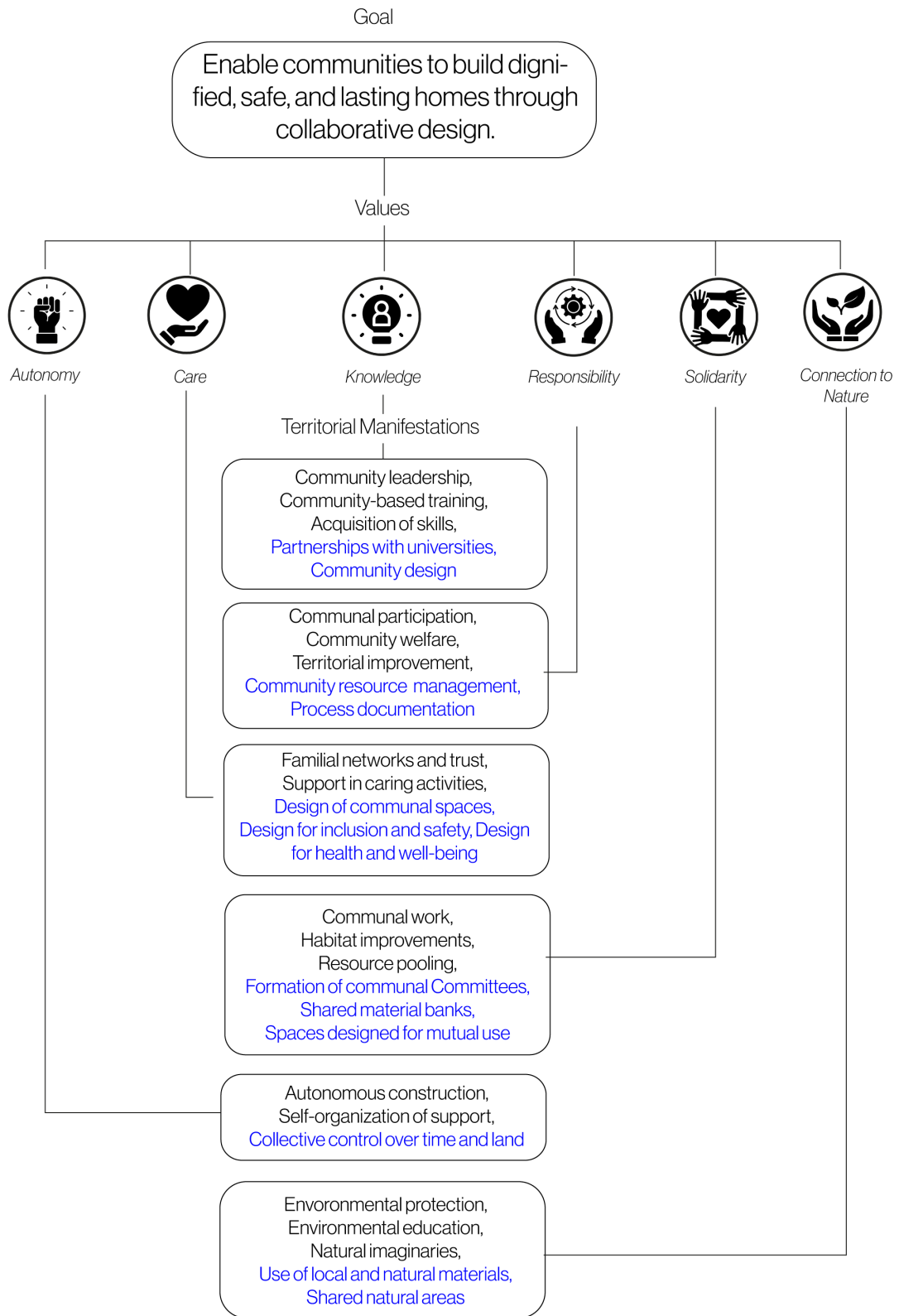
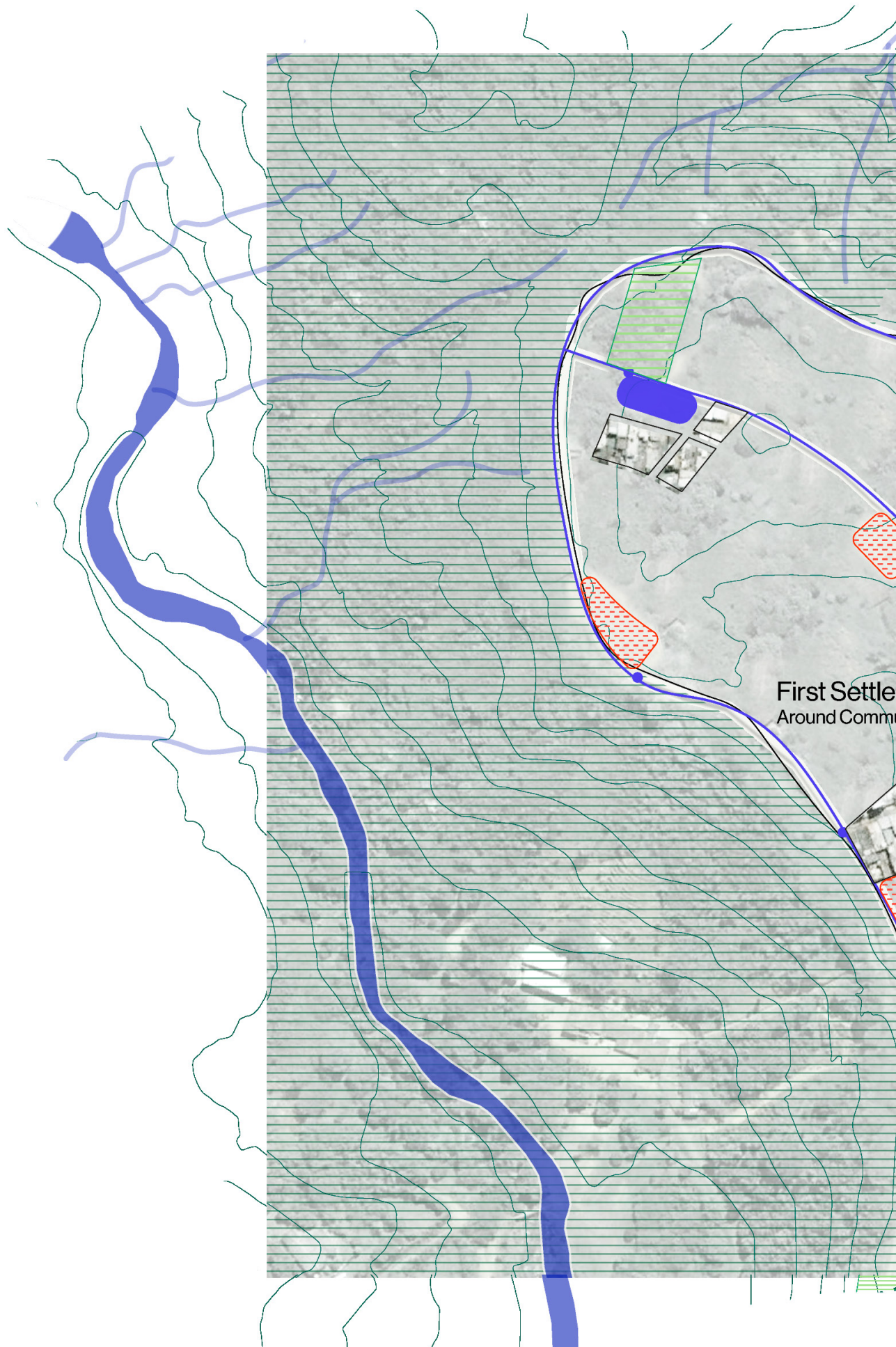


Fig. 114 Diagram of Phase 2: goals, key values, and corresponding territorial manifestations represented within each value. Made by author.



First Settlement
Around Community

**Permanent
and Collecti**

- First S
 - Area w
 - Comm
 - Public
 - Urban
 - Public
 - Stops
 - Street
- Potential Are*
- Value E



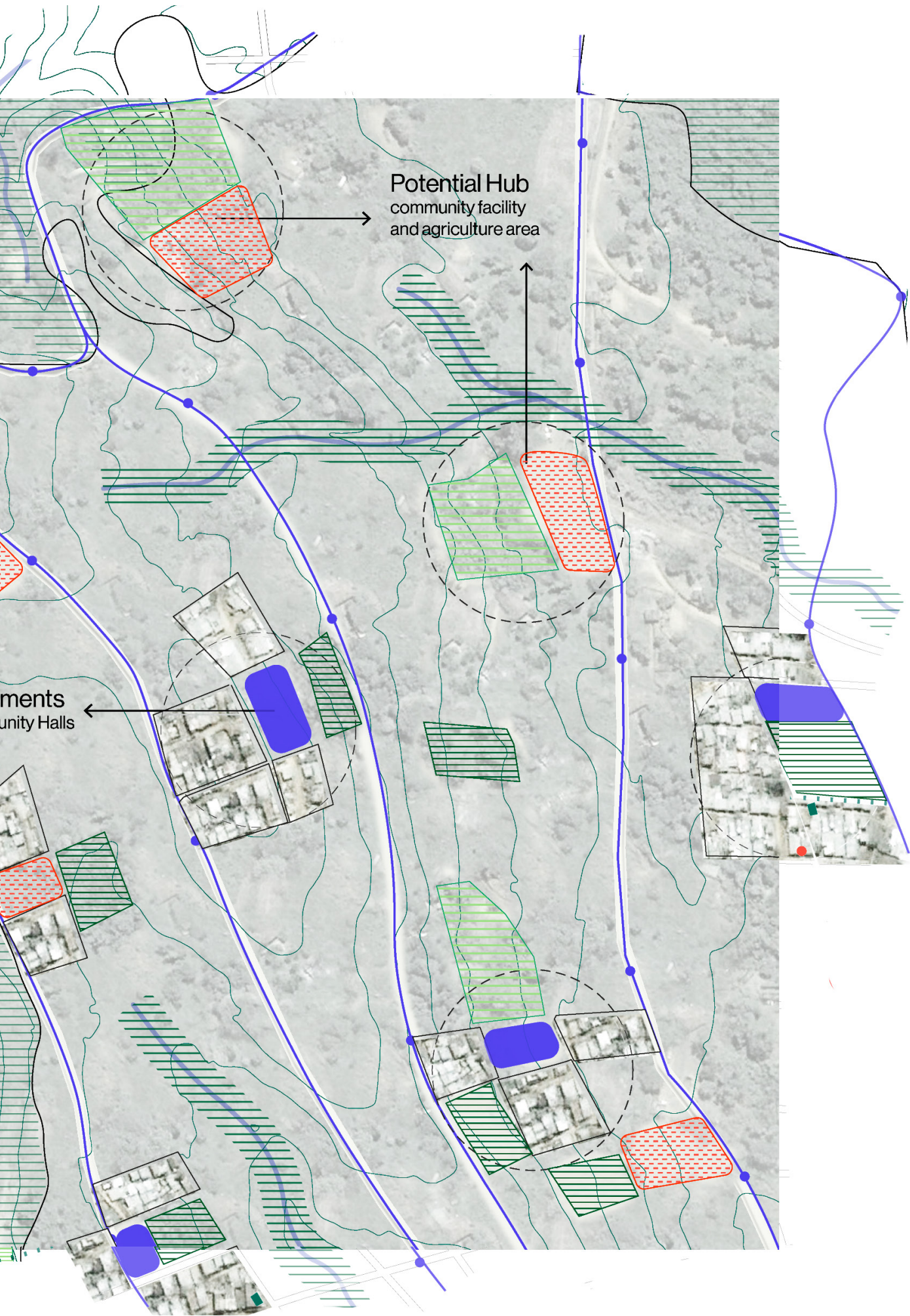


Fig. 115 Map of Phase 2: construction as an act of self-determination, supported by community knowledge-sharing and collaborative design with institutions. Made by author.

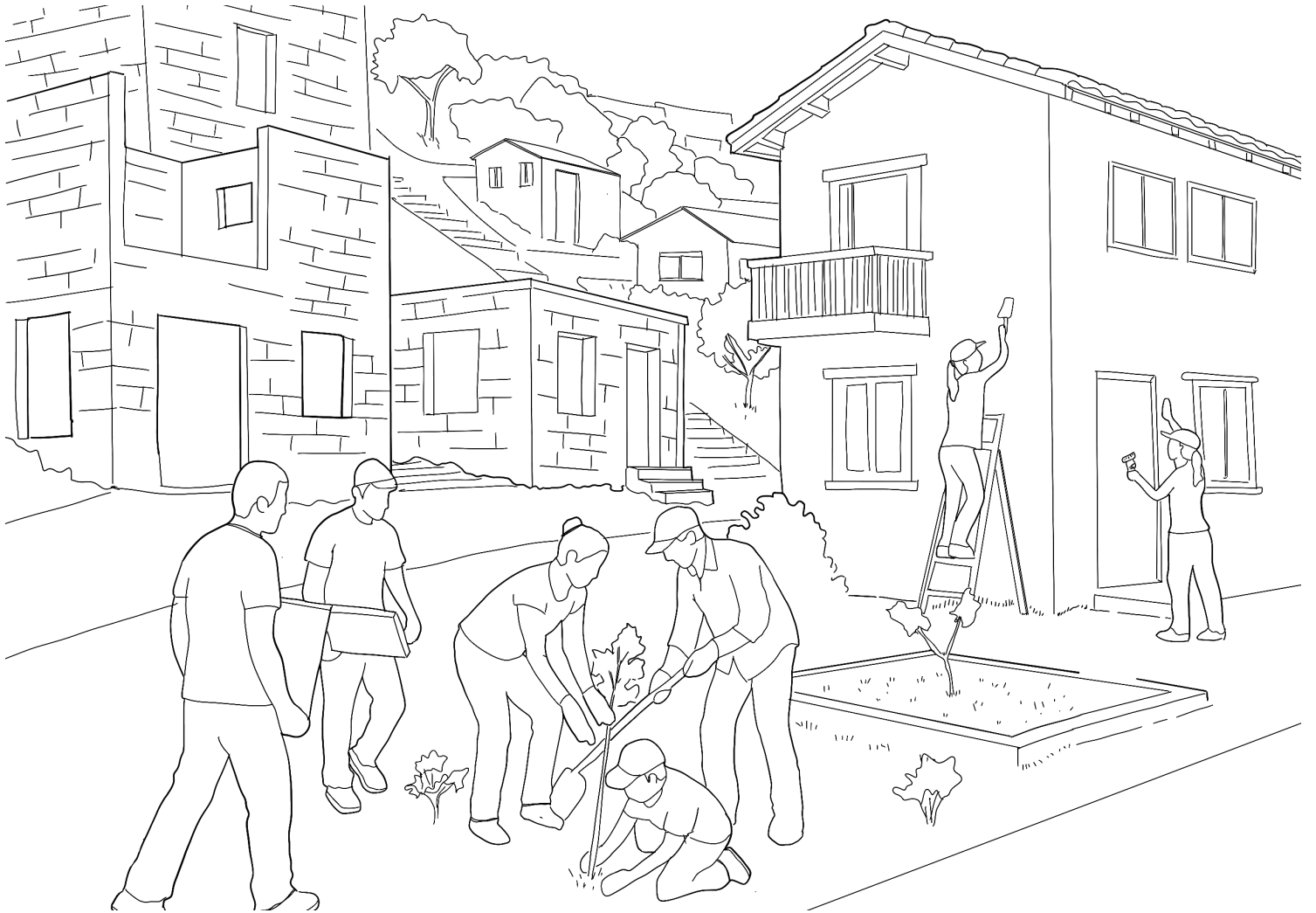


Fig. 116 Community members support one another in building homes and improving shared public spaces, reinforcing solidarity and collective care. Made by author.

Fig. 117 Ari participates in a community-led design studio with university students through shared knowledge and support. Made by author.



Imaginary Life of Ari Paz

Phase 2:

Ari joins a community-led design studio, co-organized with a university architecture program. Young students come to listen, learn, and sketch alongside residents. He shares his ideas: a slope-retaining garden system, outdoor shared kitchens, a playground that uses bamboo.

With technical support and materials already subsidized, Ari builds a strong, two-floor house— with help, not persecution. He learns new construction techniques from a community mentor and shares his agricultural knowledge in return.

TERRITORIAL PLANNING

With homes built and lives stabilizing, the focus shifts toward governance, not imposed from above, but rooted in the rhythms and values of the people who inhabit the neighborhood. This phase marks a transformation: from settling the land to shaping the future of the territory together. Institutions now step into a supportive, facilitative role. Instead of managing from a distance, the municipality co-creates a Planning Committee within each neighborhood. These committees are not symbolic; they are decision-making spaces where public investment is directly tied to community-defined priorities. Infrastructure, education, health, culture, and environment are all planned based on lived knowledge, not statistics alone. At the community level, the Planning Committee branches into thematic working groups, each dedicated to key aspects of collective life:

Food security and care, ensuring nourishment and mutual aid for all. Financial organization, to strengthen local economies and manage shared resources. Cultural development, preserving memory, identity, and joy. Urban improvement and maintenance, for the continuous shaping of streets, services, and shared spaces. Sports and youth engagement, to center the present and future generations.

Participation is not only encouraged, it's meaningful. Individuals join based on their skills, passions, or life circumstances. A retired carpenter leads workshops; a young mother organizes childcare networks; a teenager documents the neighborhood's history. Through these roles, belonging deepens, and trust becomes the foundation of governance. This phase embodies a new vision of planning: not for people, but with them, planning that recognizes communities as sovereign in shaping their everyday lives.

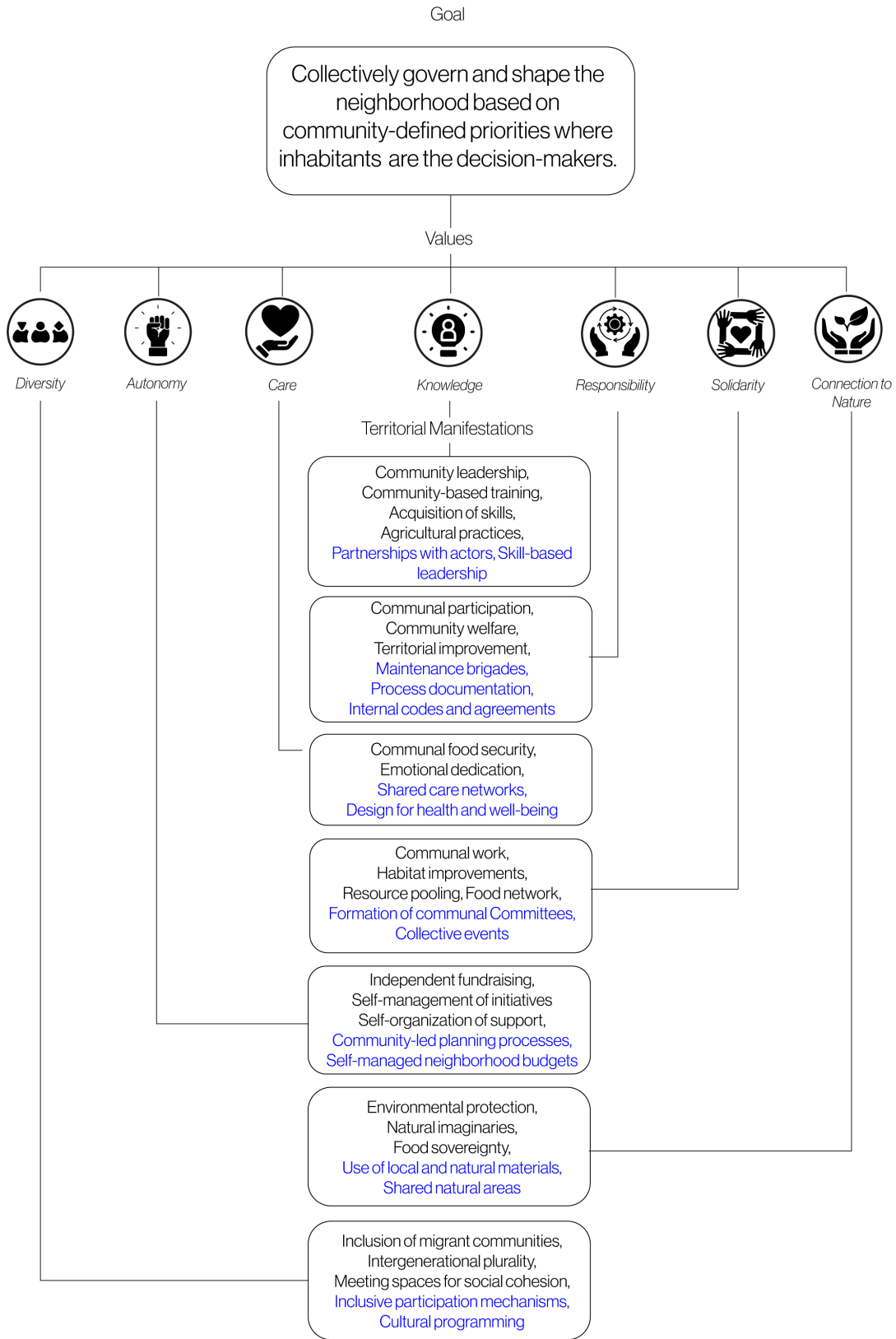
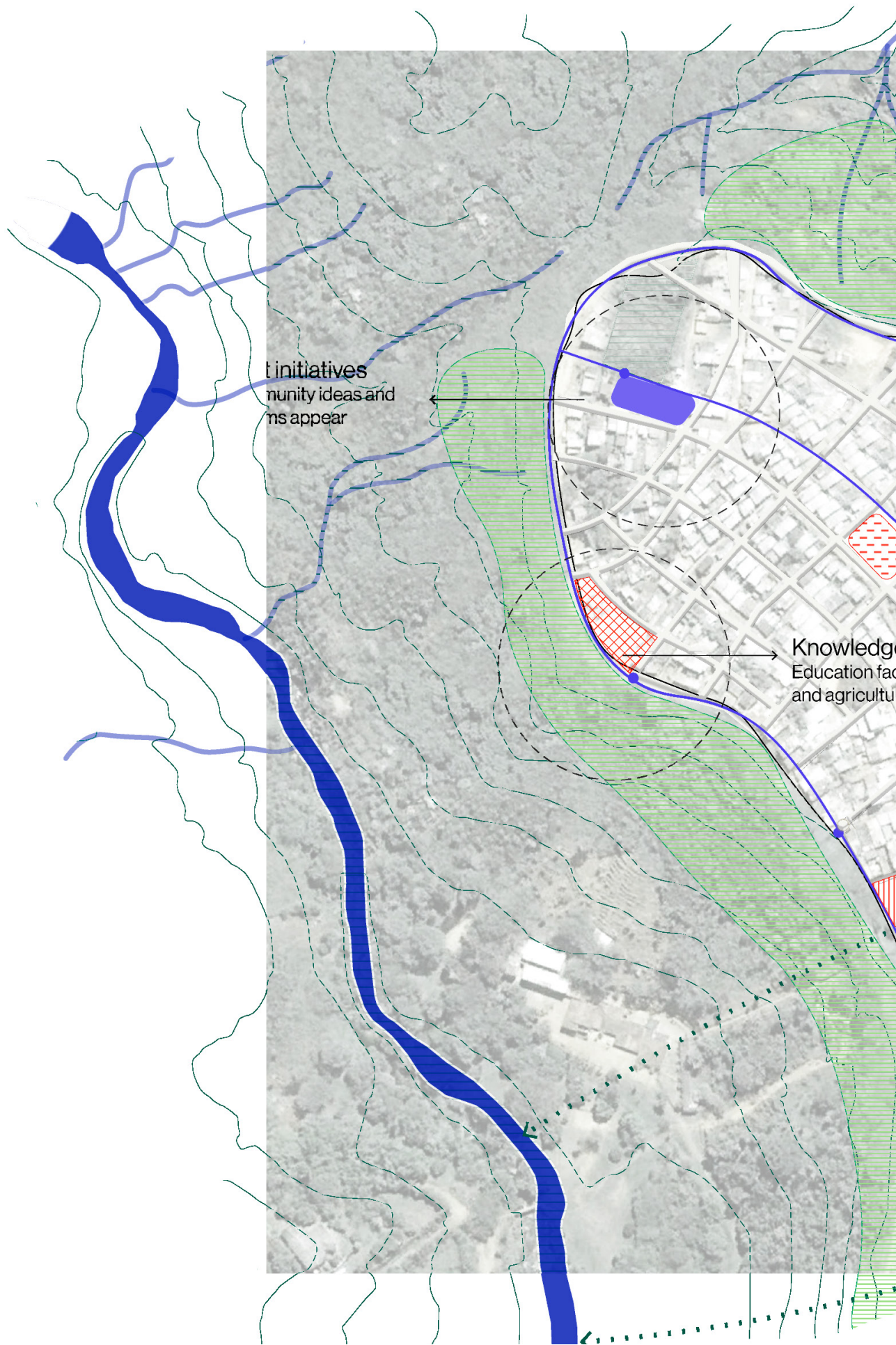










Fig. 118 Diagram of Phase 3: goals, key values, and corresponding territorial manifestations represented within each value. Made by author.



**Collective Gc
Territorial Plz**

Value based C

-  Cultural/
-  Mainteni
-  Educativ
-  Food agri
-  Commu
-  Corridor
-  Transpo
-  Streets



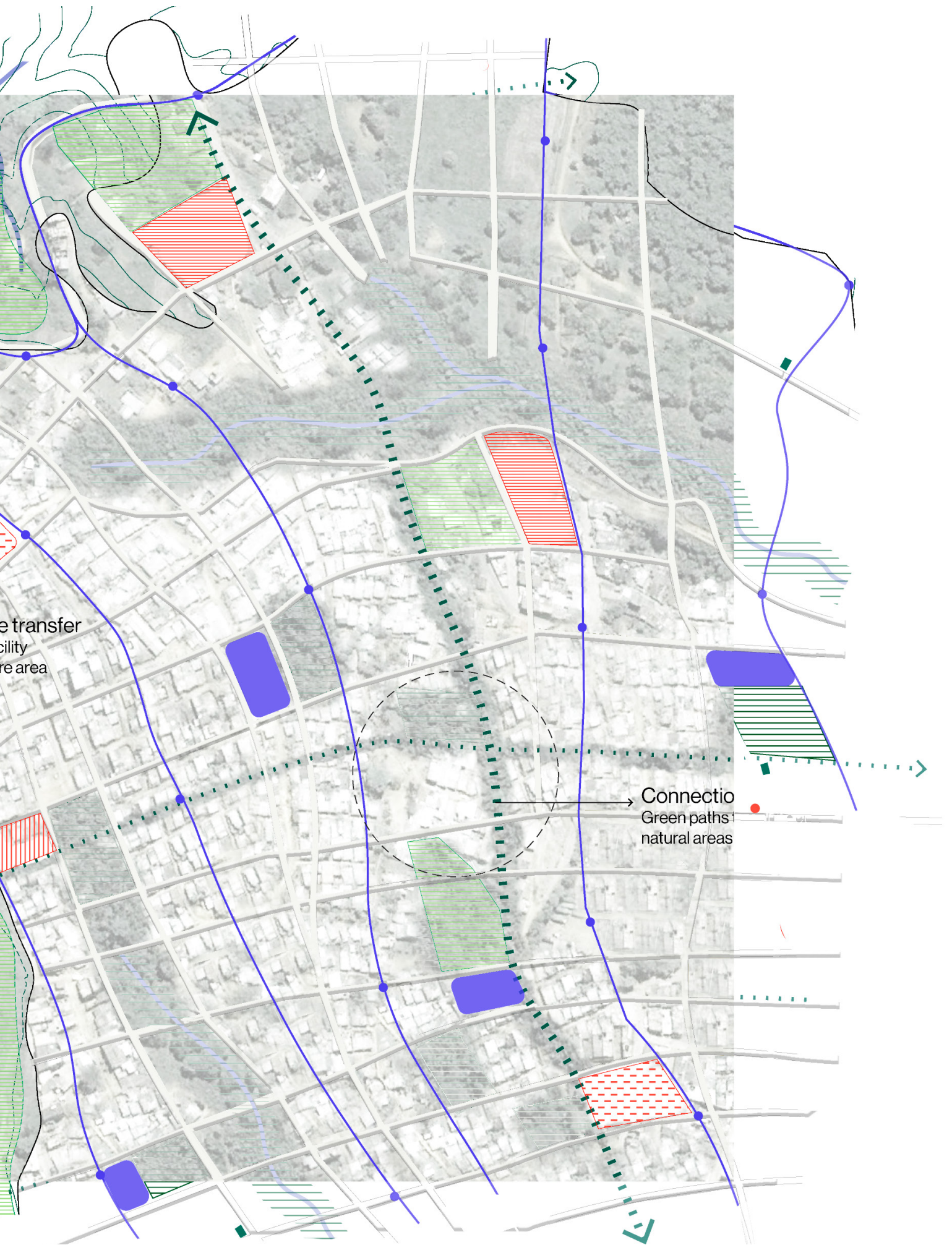
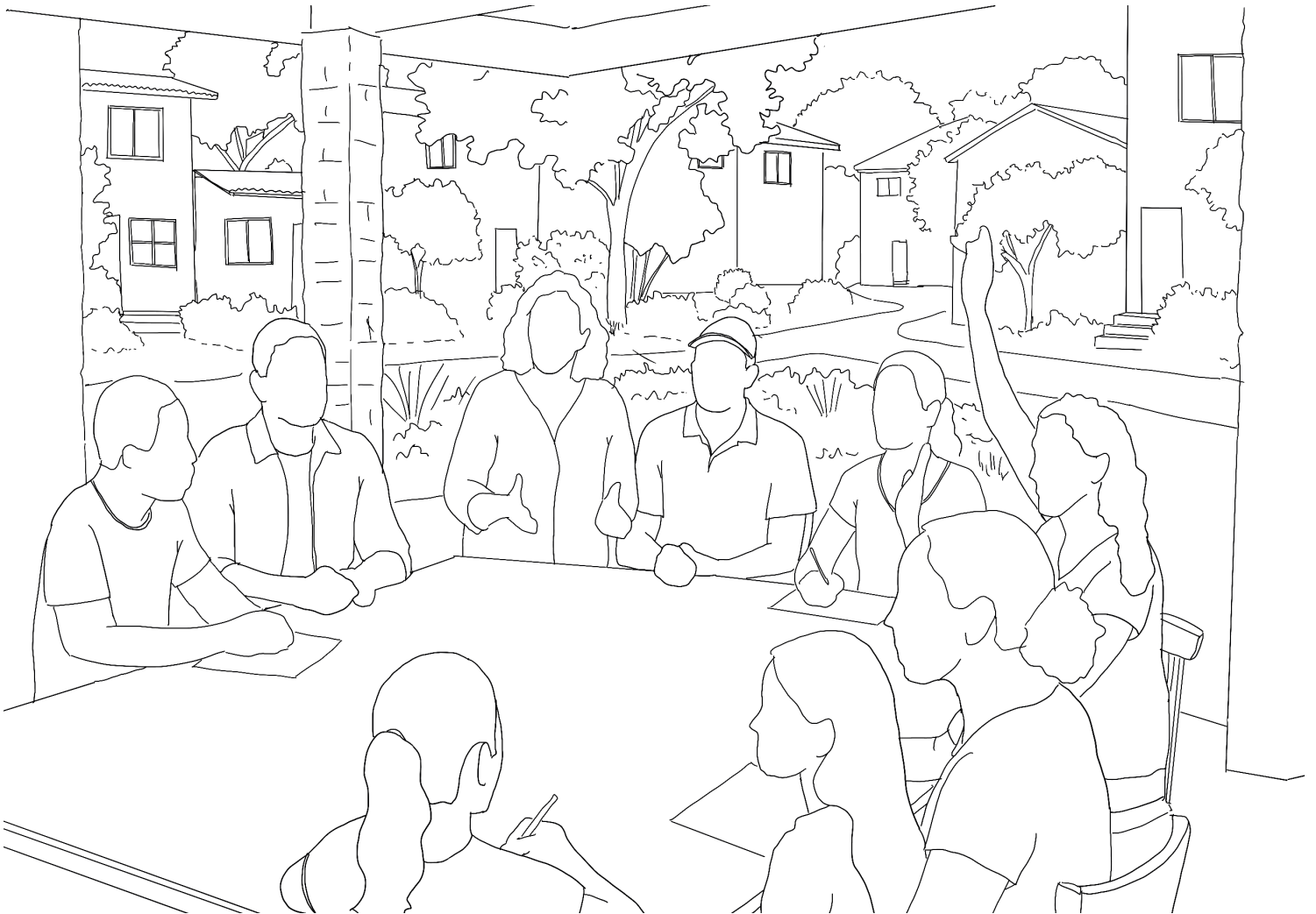


Fig. 119 Map of Phase 3: community-led governance emerges through neighborhood planning committees, the appearance of green corridors, with institutions in a facilitative role with the decisions rooted in lived experience of the community. Made by author.



Fig. 120 Community facilities that host meetings and garden activities, strengthening collective autonomy and local agency. Made by author.

Fig. 121 Ari leads the urban maintenance working group, guiding youth in care-based practices and helping define priorities for public investment. Made by author.



Imaginary Life of Ari Paz

Phase 3:

Ari is nominated to lead the working group on urban maintenance. With his hands-on experience, he organizes training workshops for youth in gardening, composting, and greywater management. He doesn't have to fight for recognition.

He helps set the neighborhood's priorities for public investments— such as a health outpost, a repair shop, and a slope reinforcement system. Through his leadership, youth see land not just as struggle, but as a place of care and permanence.

COLLECTIVE FLOURISHING

This phase envisions a neighborhood not as a space merely allowed to exist, but as a territory fully recognized, celebrated, and sustained. It is the moment when the long journey—from arrival to organization, from struggle to self-governance—yields a place where people not only survive but thrive. Institutional engagement shifts fundamentally in this stage. NGOs, international agencies, and government programs support the neighborhood not by directing it, but by respecting the values that have already guided its formation. Policies are reframed to recognize these communities as co-governed territories—not informal, not temporary, but essential components of the city. External actors enter with humility, offering technical, financial, and cultural resources while deferring to local visions.

At the community level, neighborhoods define their own long-term development goals. Public spaces become places of expression and joy: cultural centers celebrate memory and diversity; community gardens reconnect people to the land and food sovereignty; parks offer rest and play. These are not leftover spaces—they are strategically placed and deeply meaningful, born from collective decision-making.

Individually, residents turn from basic needs to life projects. Art, entrepreneurship, education, and cultural practices flourish. A woman opens a sewing workshop. A young man runs a music studio. An elder teaches medicinal plant knowledge to children. These actions sustain not just livelihoods, but a sense of purpose and legacy. This is a phase of stability and imagination, where the neighborhood moves beyond emergency responses to cultivate a shared future. Life becomes not about reaction, but creation.

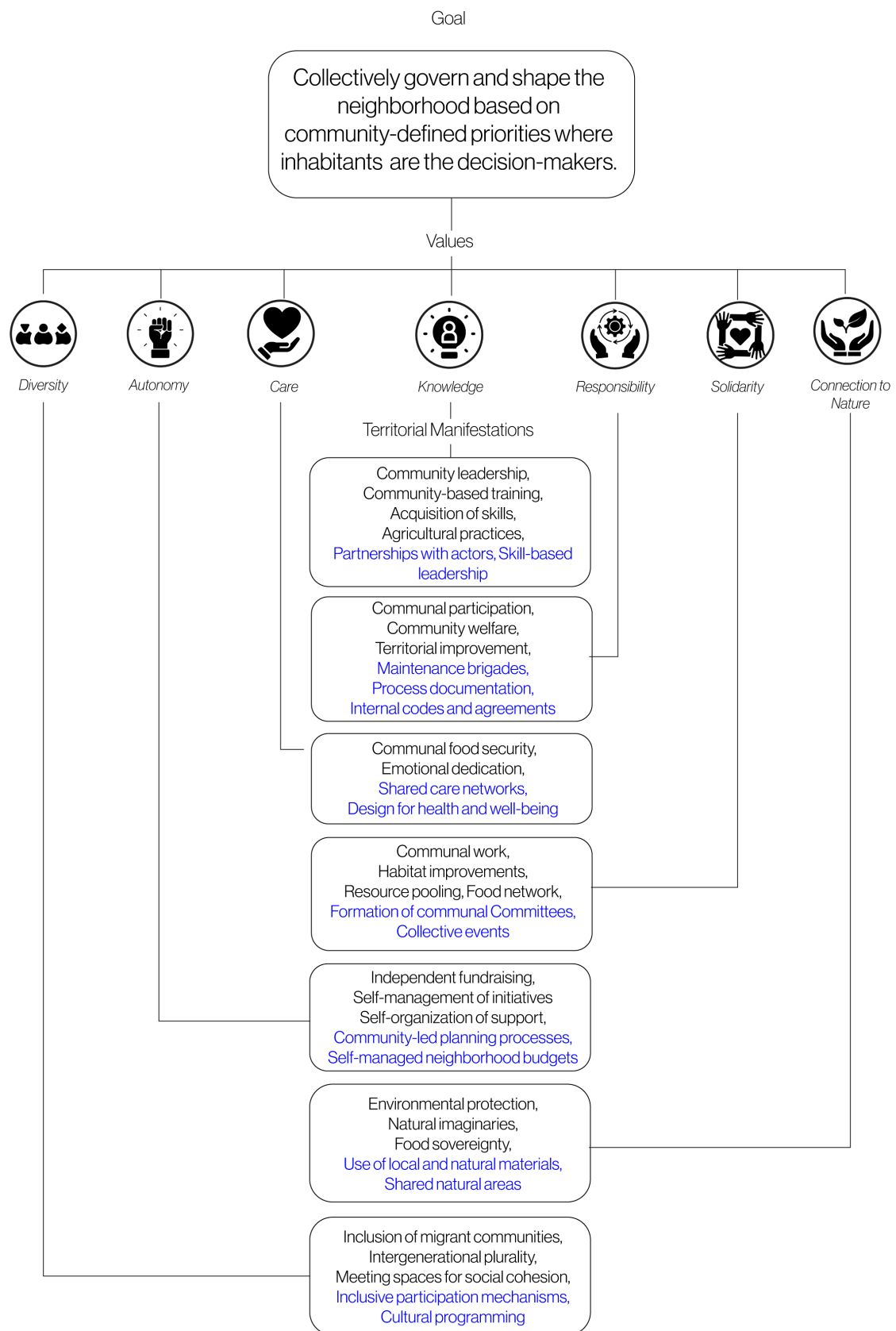
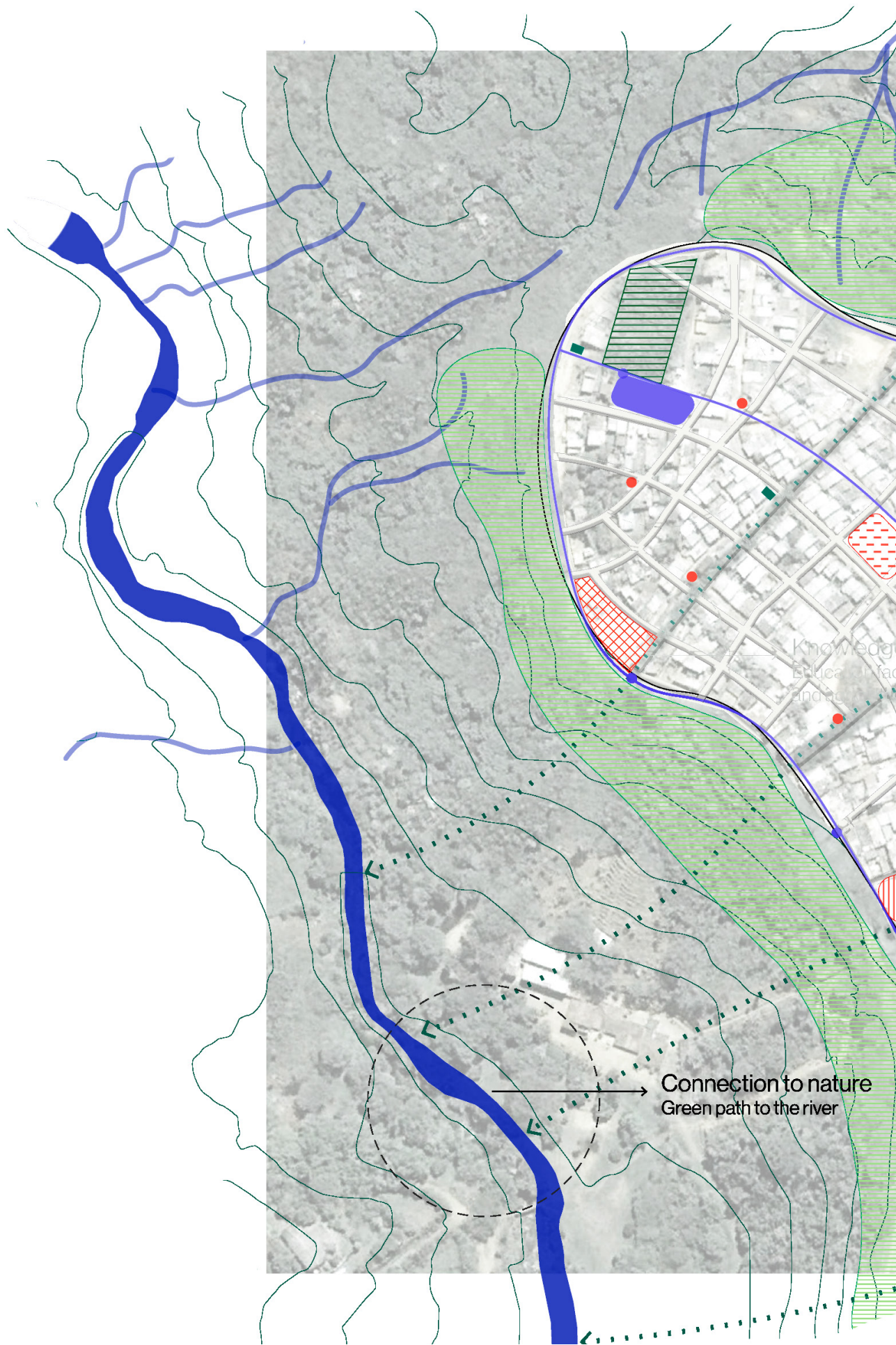
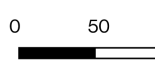


Fig. 122 Diagram of Phase 4: goals, key values, and corresponding territorial manifestations represented within each value. Made by author.



Collective Flo

- Sustainat
- Care netv
- Local Bus
- Value based Cc*
- ▨ Cultural/ E
- ▨ Maintena
- ▨ Educator
- ▨ Food agri
- Communi
- ⋯ Corridor/
- Transport
- Streets



Connection to nature
Green path to the river

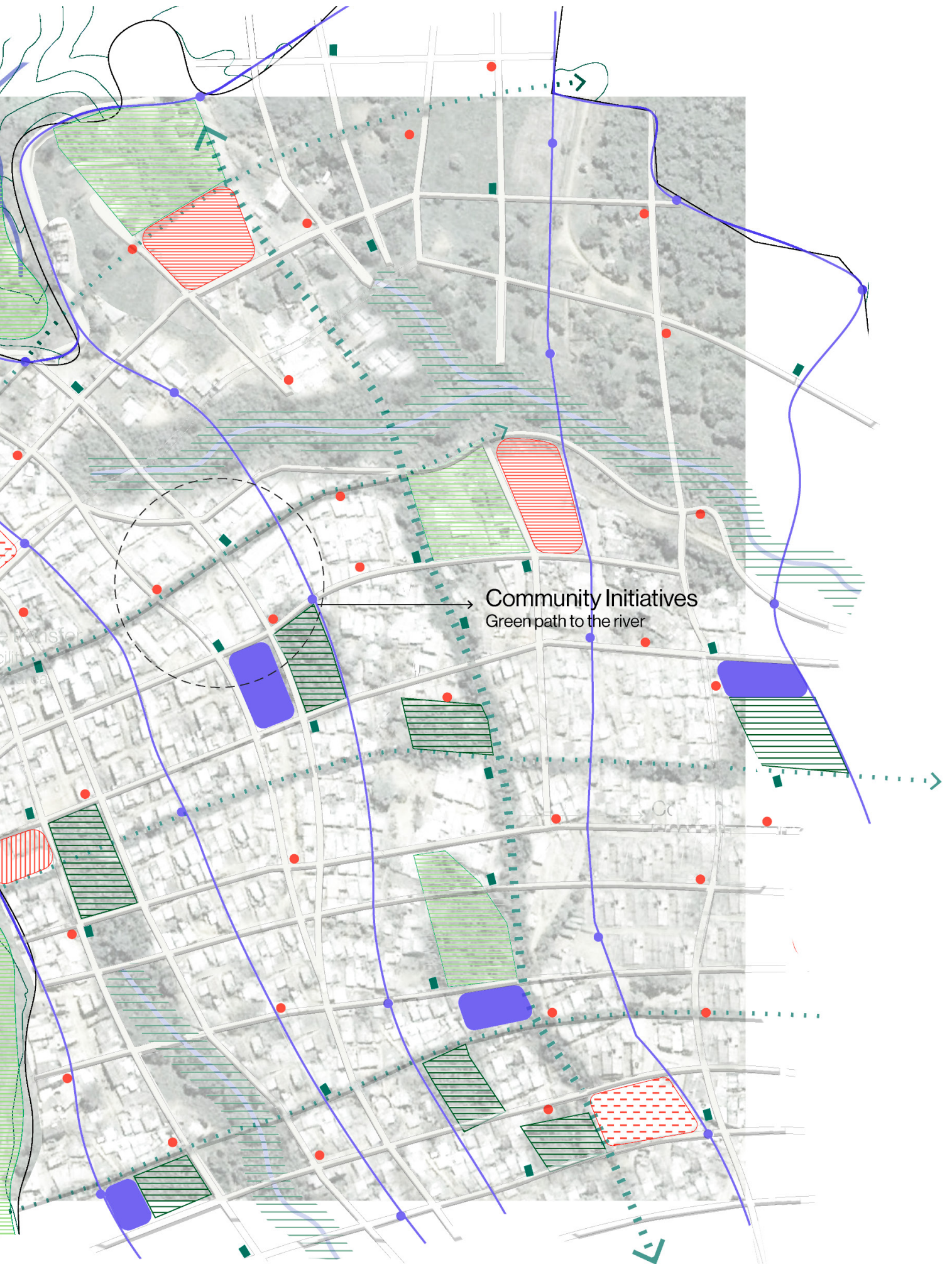


Fig. 123 Map of Phase 4: the neighborhood is fully recognized and co-governed, with institutions supporting community-defined goals and public spaces fostering expression, care, and long-term stability. Made by author.



Fig. 124 Families gather by the river for recreation and shared meals, behind the neighborhood's agricultural land. Photo by author.

Fig. 125 Don Ari runs a garden-based grocery shop, and co-manages a community care fund, embodying legacy, stability, and collective wellbeing. Made by author.

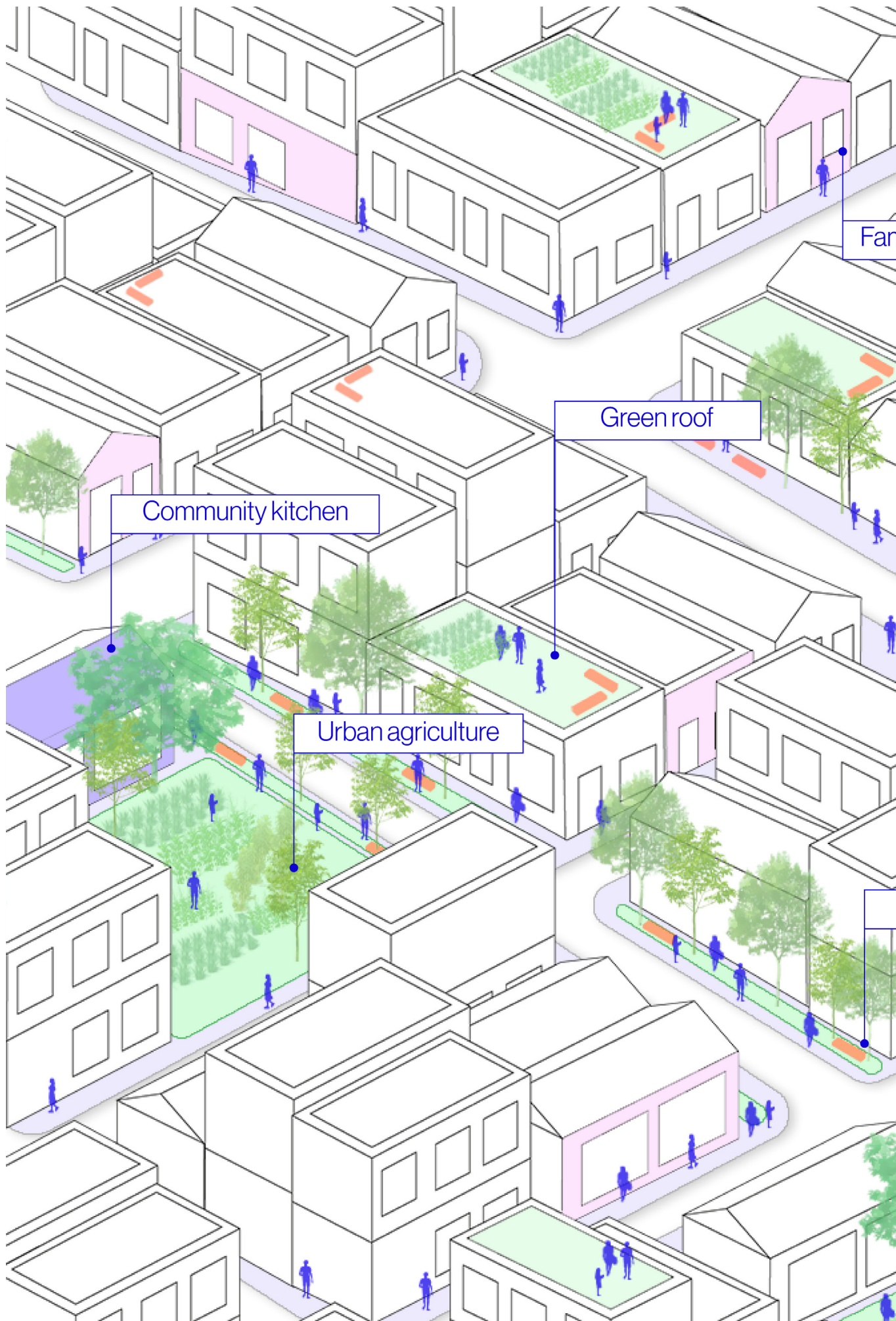


Imaginary Life of Ari Paz

Phase 4:

Don Ari is an elder in a thriving neighborhood. He spends mornings mentoring kids at the school garden. He likes to interact with people so he has a small grocery shop where he sells the fruits and vegetables he gets from his garden.

He manages a community fund for elderly care, created by the Planning Committee. His house is stable, his family is proud, and his neighbors respect him as a builder of both land and legacy.



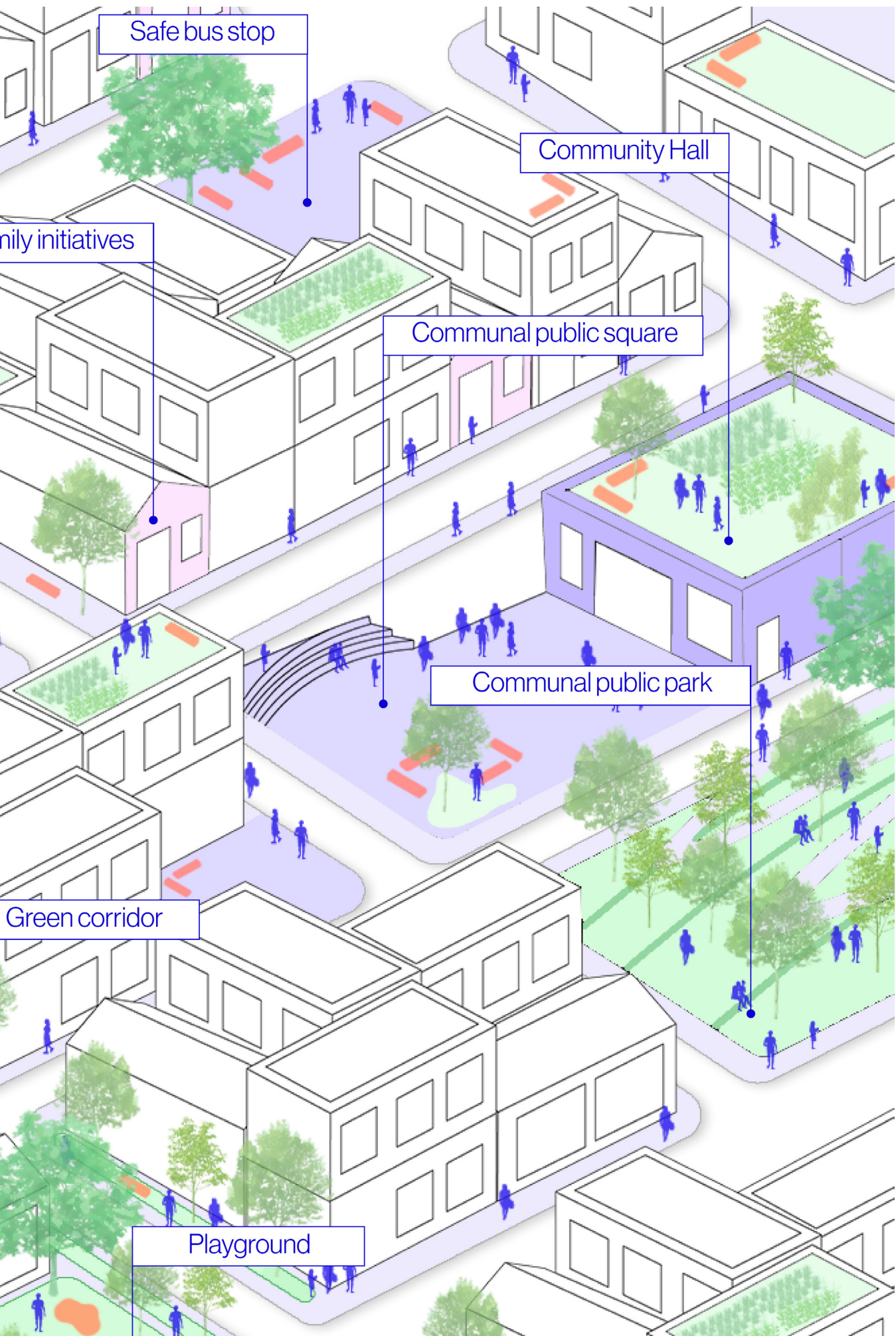
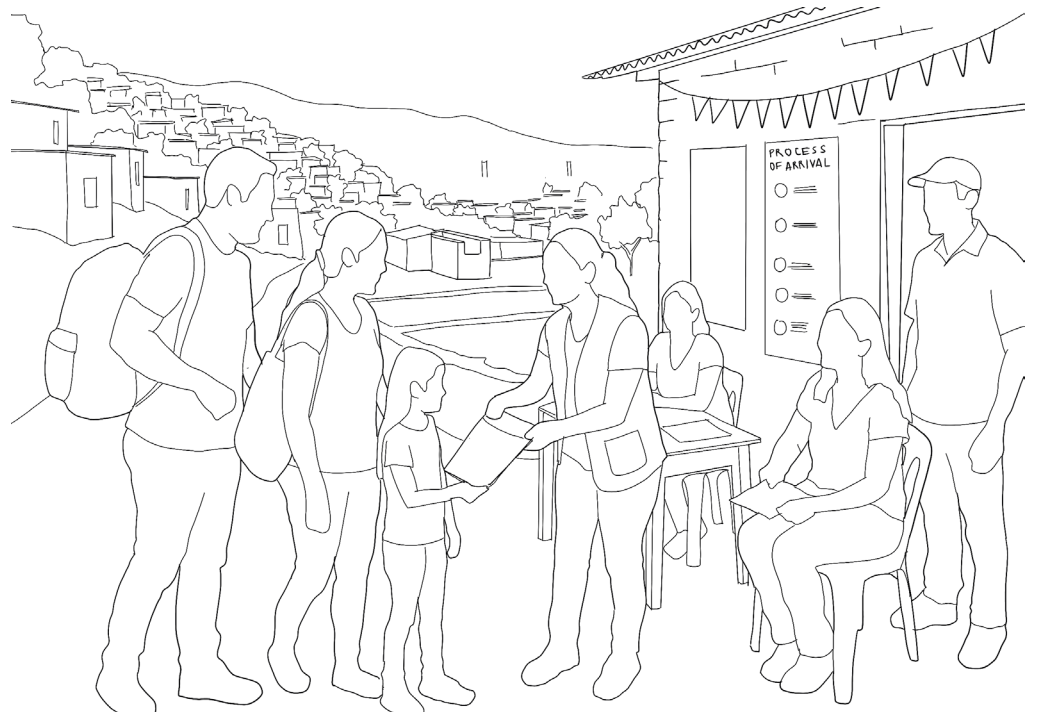
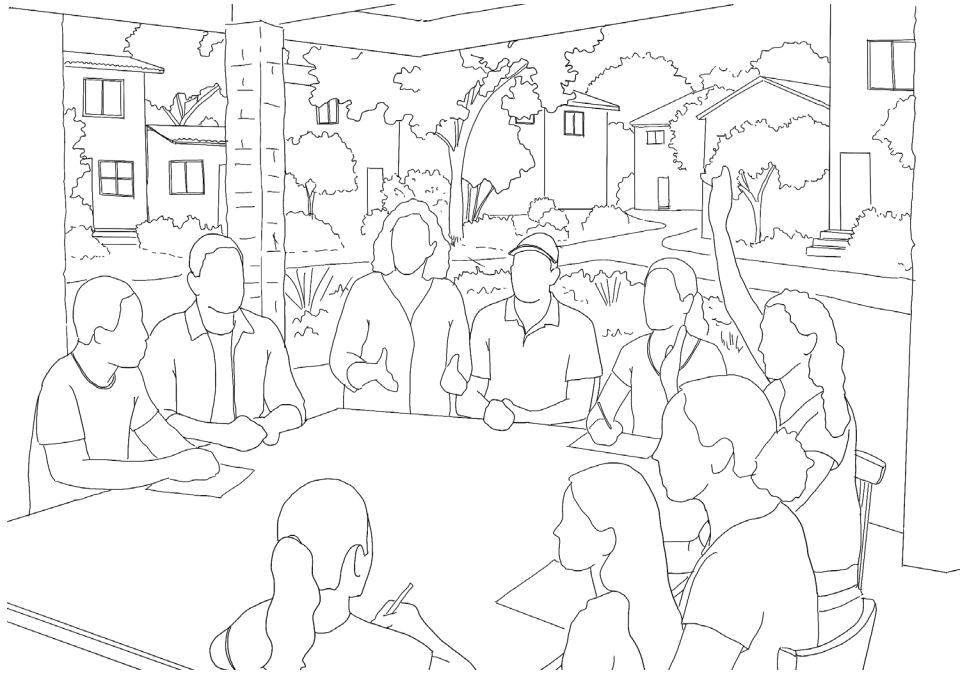
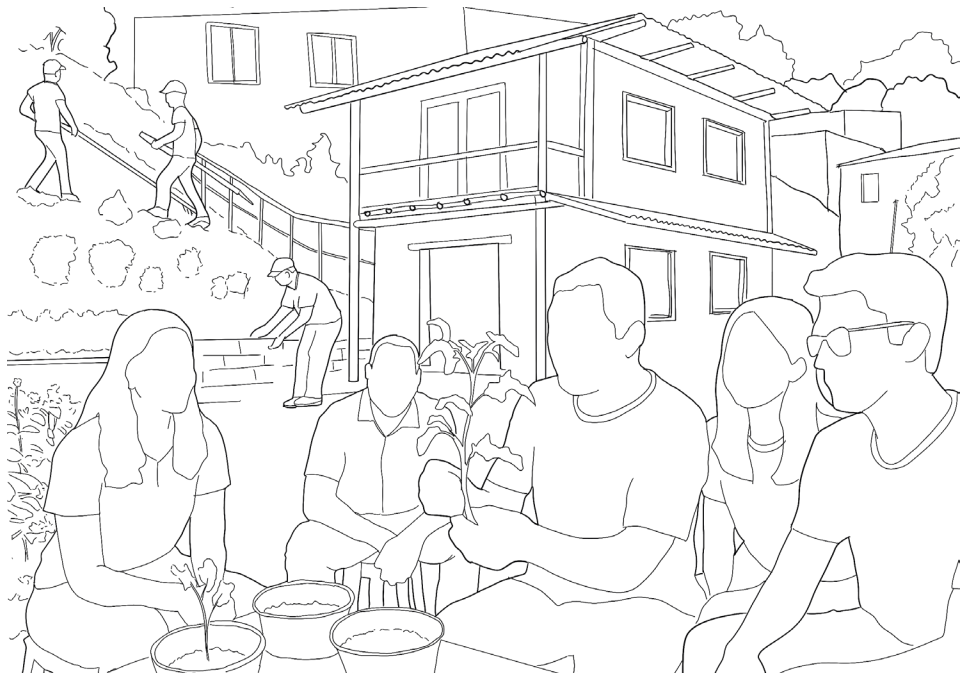


Fig. 126 Isometric view of the neighborhood imaginary, integrating services, spaces, and community-led initiatives envisioned across all phases. Made by author.

Don Ari's Alternative Legacy:

Instead of being remembered as a man who “had no future,” Don Ari Paz becomes a symbol of what happens when cities begin with dignity. His life story becomes part of the local school curriculum. A mural in the community center shows him planting the first seeds of the garden. His dignity is not just restored—it is amplified, shared, and inherited.





POLICY ACTIONS

How can we get there?

Territorial Justice Unit
Community Knowledge Registry
Reform for Collective Land Rights
dignity-Based Infrastructure
Urban Hope Index

HOW CAN WE GET THERE?

To transition from the radical imaginary to the question of “how do we get there,” we must move from vision to strategy. The previous chapter proposed an alternative timeline—one rooted in values such as care, justice, autonomy, and dignity—showing how the process of building self-constructed neighborhoods could unfold differently if grounded in community knowledge and ethical principles, rather than institutional neglect or market-driven logic.

This raises key questions: What needs to change in current governance structures, planning logics, and professional practices to enable such a dignified trajectory? How can the principles that already sustain community-led development be recognized and supported, instead of being ignored or even criminalized?

Here, the framework of a dignified habitat becomes a political tool. It emerges from the collective and relational ways in which communities produce, inhabit, and transform their territory.

To begin moving toward this imaginary, I propose five policy actions. These are based on the five core values identified as essential for achieving a dignified habitat: justice, knowledge, ownership, care, and hope.

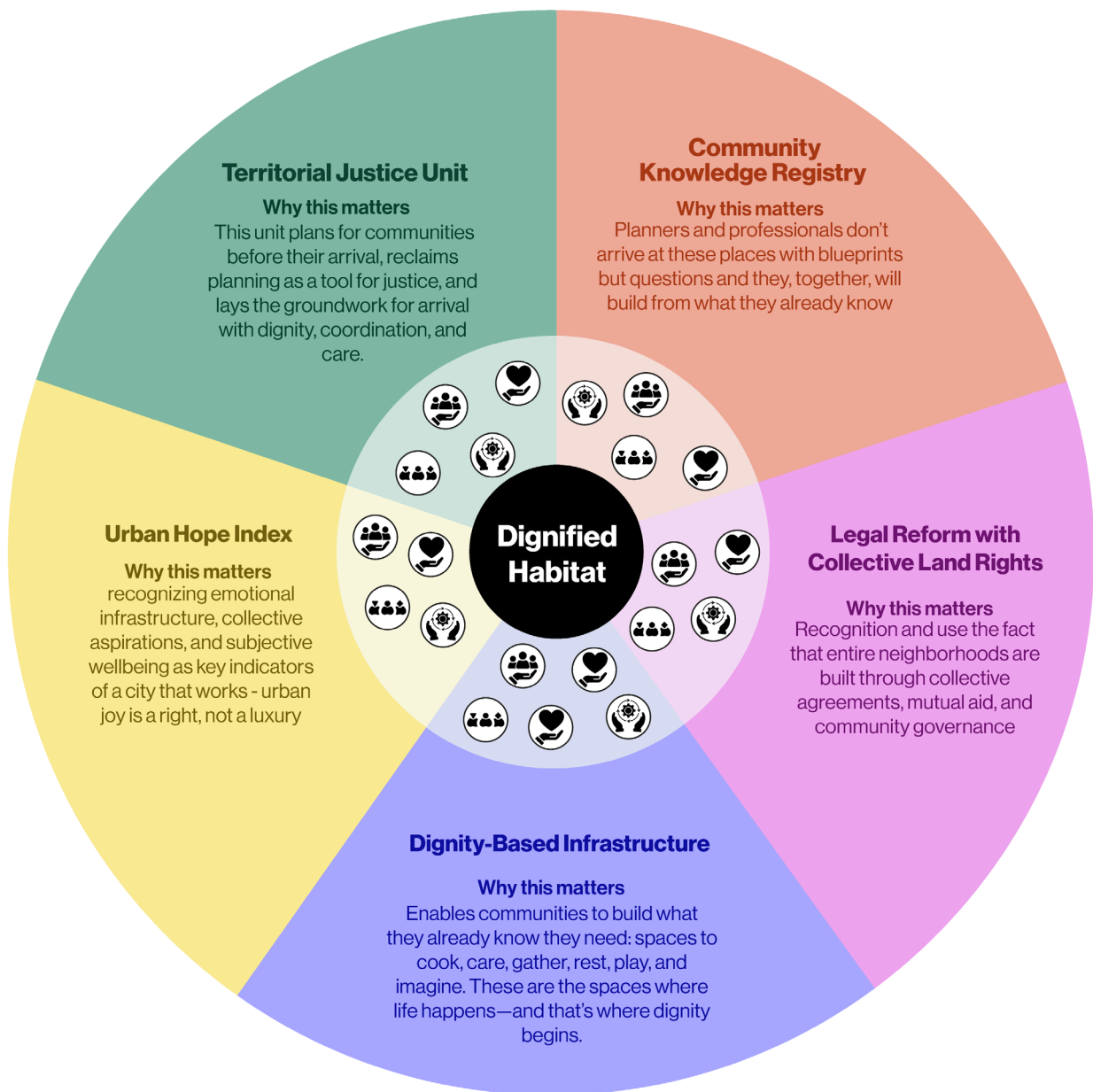


Fig. 127 Diagram of the proposed policy actions, showing their relevance, rationale, and the core values that underpin each one.

TERRITORIAL JUSTICE UNIT

Objective

To establish a permanent, well-resourced entity within the municipal government of Cali that proactively guarantees dignified settlement processes through coordinated, anticipatory, and values-based planning.

Core Responsibilities

Map and protect land for dignified settlement

- Identify land that is risk-free (outside flood zones, landslides), well-connected (near transit, schools, and services), and ecologically viable.
- Create a public, living land database in collaboration with community actors, including suitability ratings based on physical, environmental, and social criteria.
- Prevent speculative land grabs by registering and reserving key parcels for collective housing projects or social interest settlements.

Lead participatory pre-settlement planning

- Facilitate workshops with displaced communities, technical experts, and universities to imagine and prepare for dignified arrivals.
- Design orientation mechanisms for incoming families, such as community welcome hubs and legal guidance networks.

Coordinate intersectoral urban policy around dignity

- Act as a central node between housing, environmental, education, health, and culture departments to ensure that all urban actions align with values of care, equity, and territorial justice.
- Monitor and evaluate policy impact not only through technical indicators, but through social indicators such as recognition, security, and belonging.

Mediate between actors with competing claims

- Resolve tensions between landowners, institutions, and incoming communities through just and transparent mediation practices.
- Serve as a watchdog to prevent evictions or criminalization of communities in early stages of settlement.

Values Involved

- Justice: Guarantees that land use is guided by the right to housing and collective wellbeing, not market speculation.
- Responsibility: Shifts the burden of planning from reactive communities to proactive institutions.
- Care: Positions territorial planning as a form of social care, where anticipation replaces crisis management.
- Hope: Opens space for new imaginaries, where the future is not improvised but shaped with dignity in mind.

Key Actors Involved + Role

- Municipal Government (Urban Planning, Housing, Environment): Host and fund the Unit; implement its recommendations
- Community Organizations & Displaced Populations: Co-create knowledge, identify needs, review mapped land
- Public and private Universities: Provide technical support and participatory methodologies
- Ministry of Housing: Align municipal efforts with national policies and funding
- NGOs / Human Rights Defenders: Monitor that processes respect rights and avoid displacement
- Legal Aid Institutions / Ombudsperson: Provide legal backup for community claims and land defense

Why this matters: This unit plans with communities before displacement happens, reclaims planning as a tool for justice, and lays the groundwork for arrival with dignity.

COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE REGISTRY

Objective

To recognize, document, and activate the existing knowledge of residents in self-built neighborhoods as a valid and central component of formal planning and policy processes in Cali.

Core Responsibilities

Create a living database of local knowledge

- Systematically identify and register community leaders, informal builders, caregivers, herbalists, organizers, water system managers, etc., with their contributions and areas of expertise.
- Record practices, tools, stories, and innovations used in self-built environments—including both material and social infrastructure.

Use the registry to guide public action

- Ensure municipal programs (housing upgrades, public works, education, care infrastructure) consult this registry to tailor designs and strategies to community logic.
- Require that all urban interventions in self-built neighborhoods begin with a consultation of registered community experts.

Validate lived experience as urban intelligence

- Acknowledge that many community members have built neighborhoods from scratch—often with more contextual accuracy, speed, and social sustainability than institutional actors.
- Create official certificates or partnerships that allow community experts to act as co-designers, trainers, and advisors in public programs.

Enable equitable collaboration from day one

- Make this registry a prerequisite for any formalization, infrastructure, or upgrading project, ensuring co-governance, not afterthought participation.
- Pair registered community knowledge holders with professionals in design and implementation phases.

Values Involved

- Knowledge: Validates community expertise as foundational, not secondary, to planning.
- Justice: Redistributes voice and recognition in historically exclusionary planning structures.
- Autonomy: Acknowledges that people already know how to build their lives and neighborhoods.
- Care: Recognizes that territory is made not just through materials, but through social and emotional labor.
- Memory

Key Actors Involved + Role

- Municipal Government (Urban Planning, Housing, Environment): Institutionalize the registry and integrate it into policy workflows
- Self-built Neighborhood Residents and Leaders: Register knowledge, identify key practices, advise on planning
- Public and private Universities: Co-develop the methodology for capturing and validating knowledge
- Planning and Engineering Firms: Use the registry as input and guidance in design processes
- Ministry of Housing: Integrate the model into national participatory planning frameworks
- NGOs / Human Rights Defenders: Act as facilitators and mediators of the registry creation

Why this matters: But self-built neighborhoods in Cali are proof that territorial wisdom already exists in informal settings. The absence of this knowledge from institutional systems is not a failure of communities—it's a failure of governance to listen. Planners and professionals don't arrive at these places with blueprints but questions and they, together, will build from what they already know.

REFORM FOR COLLECTIVE LAND RIGHTS

Objective

To shift the legal foundations of urban land management in Cali—and more broadly in Colombia—toward a framework that recognizes, protects, and enables collective forms of land tenure, especially in self-built neighborhoods

Core Responsibilities

Legally recognize collective ownership and use

- Develop legal categories that allow neighborhoods to be co-owned or co-managed by collectives, cooperatives, or community associations.
- Move beyond the binary of “legal/illegal” to include models rooted in social production of habitat and popular governance.

Protect against eviction during regularization

- Enact legal shields that guarantee non-eviction during recognition, upgrading, or formalization processes.
- Prevent public or private actors from using informal status as a justification for displacement.

Enable flexible incorporation of neighborhoods

- Simplify the legal requirements for communities to gain recognition, access services, and participate in city planning—without needing full cadastral or individual property titles from the outset.
- Allow phased legalization processes aligned with collective governance mechanisms and local timelines.

Recognize the legitimacy of community agreements

- Acknowledge internal regulations, lot divisions, and conflict resolution practices as valid land management practices, even if not standardized by external legal codes.

Values Involved

- Justice: Protects historically marginalized communities from legal systems that favor private accumulation.
- Belonging: Affirms that people have a right to stay where they have built life, not just where the market says they belong.
- Autonomy: Allows communities to decide collectively how they want to organize, use, and care for their land.
- Solidarity: Strengthens shared responsibility over territory and mutual protection from external threats.

Key Actors Involved + Role

- Municipal Government (Urban Planning, Housing, Environment): Draft and pass land reform policies that include collective tenure models
- Self-built Neighborhood Residents and Leaders: Define collective models that reflect local practice and propose legal recognition
- Public and private Universities: Generate legal proposals and comparative models (e.g. community land trusts, ejidos, cooperatives)
- Planning Authorities: Integrate collective tenure into regularization, upgrading, and infrastructure programs
- Legal Aid Clinics and Public Defenders: Advocate for residents' land security and litigate against forced evictions
- NGOs / Human Rights Defenders: Campaign for reform and raise public awareness about the limits of individual titling

Why this matters: The current urban legal system is based on the assumption that land ownership must be individual, registered, and market-oriented. This ignores how entire neighborhoods are built through collective agreements, mutual aid, and community governance. It would also open new models for land stewardship—ones rooted not in speculation, but in care, reciprocity, and communal dignity.

DIGNITY-BASED INFRASTRUCTURE

Objective

To reorient the public infrastructure agenda in Cali from a model focused on large-scale, efficiency-driven projects toward one that prioritizes dignity, care, and community well-being—especially in self-built neighborhoods.

Core Responsibilities

Create long-term partnerships with public universities

- Establish permanent participatory design studios in alliance with faculties of architecture, engineering, and social sciences.
- Ground these studios in real community needs, with students and professors embedded in neighborhood processes as learners and collaborators.

Develop design-and-build employment programs

- Hire residents—especially youth, caregivers, and artisans—to participate in the construction of local infrastructure.
- Train and certify community members in construction, planning, and maintenance—turning everyday practices into recognized labor.

Expand the definition of “infrastructure”

- Invest in micro-scale, life-sustaining spaces: shared kitchens, care centers, cultural hubs, laundry stations, rainwater harvesters, and open-air learning spaces.
- Move beyond technical solutions (roads, drainage, sidewalks) to include emotional, cultural, and social infrastructure.

Create a Dignified Infrastructure Fund

- Dedicate a recurring municipal fund specifically for small-scale, community-led infrastructure.
- Projects are selected based on values (e.g. care, justice, memory), not just cost-benefit analysis or formal metrics.

Values Involved

- Care: Supports spaces where caregiving, healing, and mutual support can take place.
- Dignity: Treats people not as beneficiaries, but as co-creators of their environment.
- Responsibility: Builds a shared sense of stewardship over infrastructure and territory.
- Solidarity: Encourages collective design, construction, and use.
- Hope: Recognizes that beautiful, functional spaces can inspire futures beyond survival.

Key Actors Involved + Role

- Municipal Government (Urban Planning, Housing, Environment): Redirect part of the budget to dignity-based, small-scale projects
- Self-built Neighborhood Residents and Leaders: Define priorities, codesign spaces, and organize local labor
- Public and private Universities: Run embedded design studios and research hubs in self-built areas and Participate as paid workers, planners, and cultural stewards
- Architecture and engineering firms: Serve as technical facilitators and site coordinators
- NGOs / Human Rights Defenders: Provide technical assistance, seed funding, and project scaling support

Why this matters: this policy enables communities to build what they already know they need: spaces to cook, care, gather, rest, play, and imagine. These are the spaces where life happens—and that’s where dignity begins.

URBAN HOPE INDEX

Objective

A participatory tool that tracks whether public interventions genuinely expand residents' ability to imagine, plan, and live dignified futures. It would assess the subjective and communal outcomes of planning: how safe people feel, how proud they are of their neighborhood, how connected they are to place, and how able they feel to dream.

Core Responsibilities

Participatory Indicators of Dignity and Belonging

- Develop qualitative and quantitative metrics with communities to assess:
- Sense of safety and recognition
- Perceived access to opportunity and public space
- Expressions of cultural identity, joy, and community pride
- Hope for the future and ability to pursue life projects (negocios, educación, arte)

Annual Community Wellbeing Survey

- Conduct collaborative surveys, workshops, and story-sharing events where residents rate how policies and investments impact their life.
- Include children, elders, caregivers, and youth to ensure multigenerational perspectives.

Integrate UHI into Budgeting and Evaluation

- Require all public projects in self-built neighborhoods to include a UHI assessment.
- Prioritize funding for programs that improve UHI scores—not just physical metrics.

Public Hope Dashboard

- Share results annually with the city in open-access formats: maps, infographics, community murals, digital dashboards.
- Make hope and joy visible as urban indicators—not just anecdotes.

Values Involved

- Hope: Reimagines futures as legitimate goals of planning.
- Justice: Brings emotional and symbolic dimensions into institutional metrics.
- Memory: Honors histories of resistance and celebrates community stories.
- Care: Recognizes emotional and relational wellbeing as public goods.
- Belonging: Strengthens identity and connection between people and place.
- Responsibility: Invites institutions to be accountable not just for “delivery,” but for dignity.

Key Actors Involved + Role

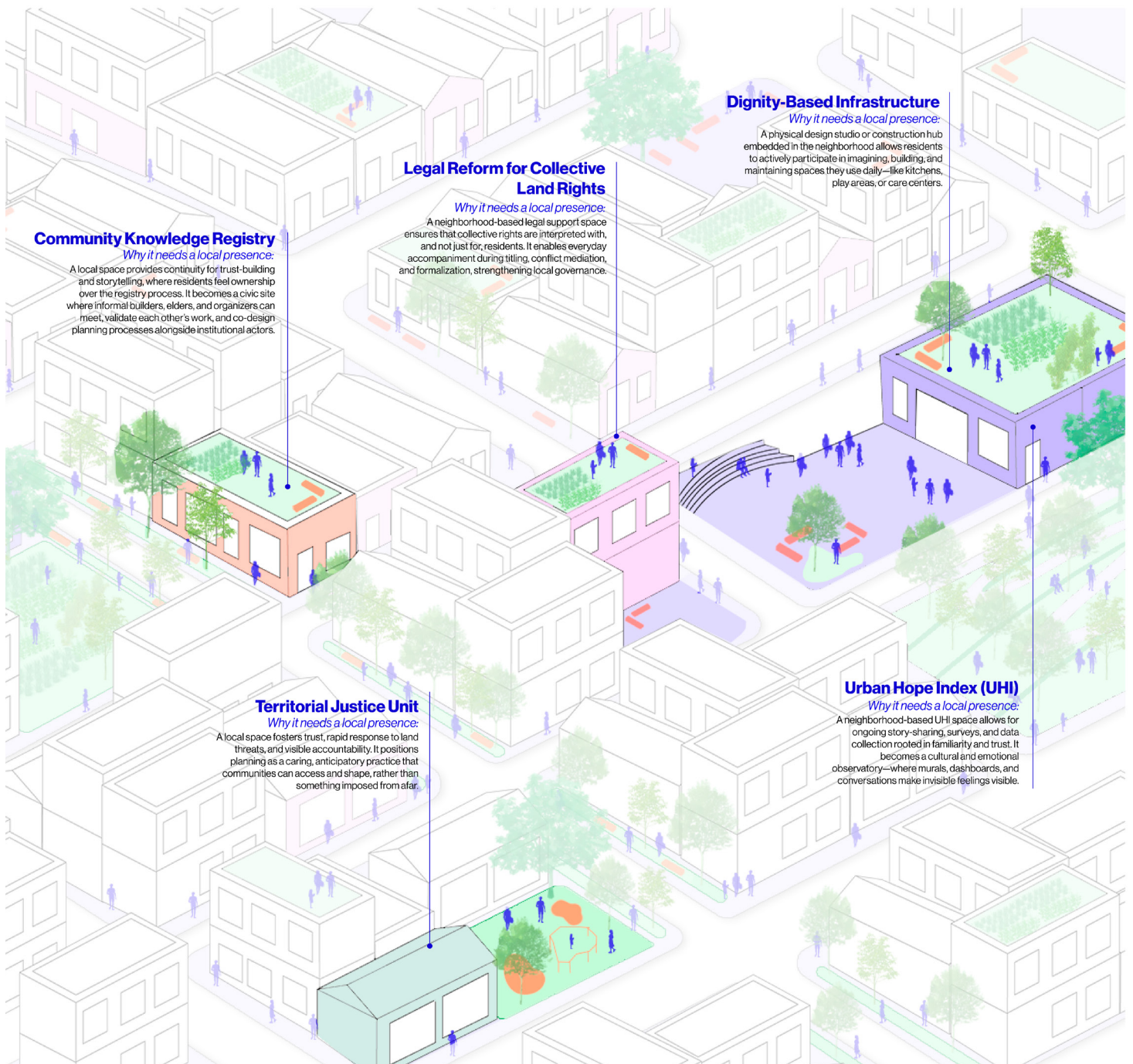
- Municipal Government (Urban Planning, Housing, Environment): Lead the creation and integration of the UHI
- Self-built Neighborhood Residents and Leaders: Define priorities, codesign spaces, and organize local laborCo-create indicators and validate findings
- Public and private Universities: Facilitate mixed-method data collection, ethics, and analysis
- NGOs / Human Rights Defenders: Fund pilot phases and knowledge exchange
- Cultural artist: Translate results into murals, installations, and neighborhood media

Why this matters: recognizing emotional infrastructure, collective aspirations, and subjective wellbeing as key indicators of a city that works - urban joy is a right, not a luxury.

Policy actions on site

In all these cases, a territorial presence transforms planning from transaction to relationship. It makes institutions approachable, accountability visible, and residents central—not peripheral—to transformation.

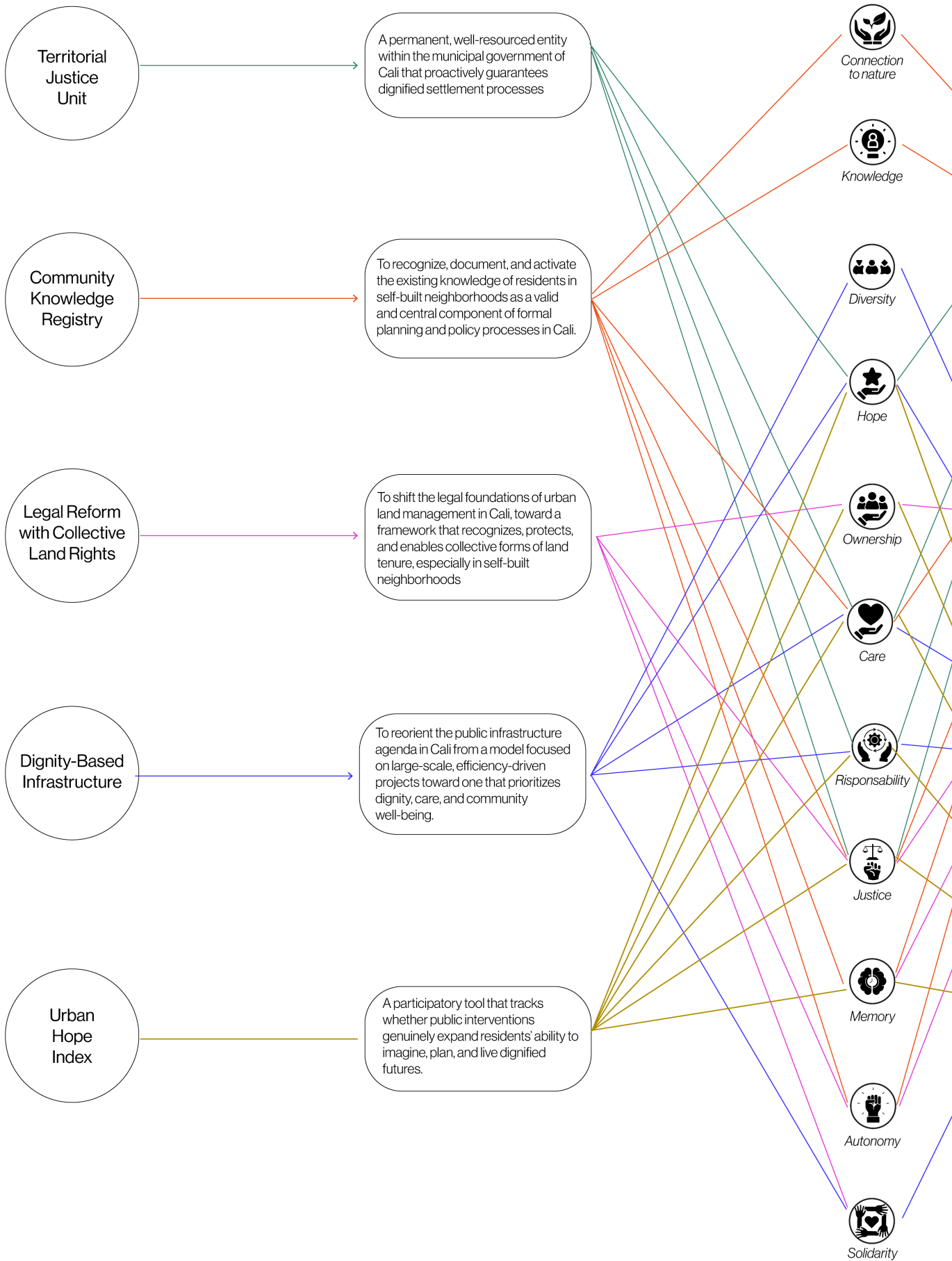
Spaces within the neighborhood are not symbolic—they are functional, political, and affective infrastructures of dignity.



Policy Action

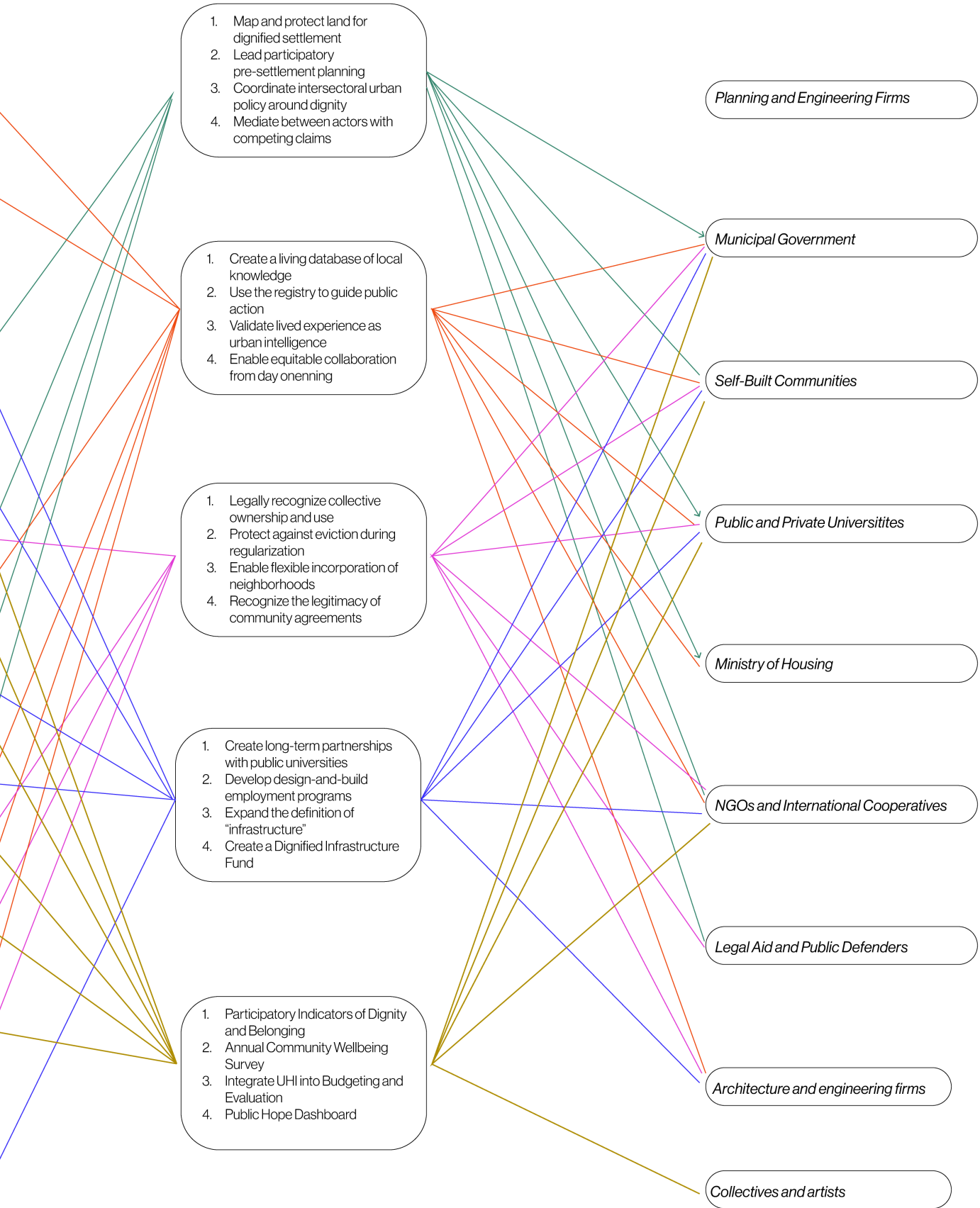
Goal

Main Values



Components

Key Actors



REFLECTION

This graduation project is the result of a long-standing personal and professional journey, shaped by my lived experience in self-built neighborhoods in Colombia. In these territories—often overlooked or neglected by formal planning—I witnessed firsthand the richness of community knowledge, the strength of care networks, and the collective spatial practices that emerge in response to systemic abandonment. These experiences led me to recognize the transformative potential embedded in everyday territorial practices. Rather than viewing them as improvised responses to lack, I approached them as foundational principles for rethinking how we plan, design, and inhabit the city.

This project sits at the intersection of my academic training in urbanism and my deep connection to community-led processes of habitat production. It responds directly to the goals of the Urbanism track and the MSc AUBS programme by critically engaging with dominant spatial paradigms and proposing inclusive, equitable, and justice-oriented alternatives. Focusing on self-built neighborhoods in Cali—territories shaped by displacement, resilience, and autonomy—I examine how planning can move beyond logics of control, profit, and efficiency, toward a framework rooted in dignity, collective values, and relational knowledge.

While the AUBS programme encouraged critical inquiry into contemporary urban challenges, I also encountered the limitations of a curriculum largely shaped by Global North epistemologies. This disconnect led me to actively seek out Latin American thinkers, urban movements, and decolonial perspectives that could provide more grounded conceptual tools for my context. In doing so, I was able to reterritorialize my project and theory, anchoring my work in the realities, visions, and values of the very communities from which my inquiry emerged.

Working With Qualitative Knowledge and Invisible Territories

The decision to work with qualitative data exclusively presented both an ethical and methodological challenge. The areas I chose to study are often invisibilized and difficult to access, not just physically, but also in the availability of structured data. This made spatial analysis, mapping, and even basic documentation far more complex. Yet it was precisely this absence, the invisibility of these territories, that made me more committed to revealing their value.

Each narrative I engaged with carried layers of temporal, emotional, and political meaning. These were not “data points,” but deeply human accounts of survival, creativity, and dignity. Rather than treating people as subjects of study, I approached them as co-theorists in the production of knowledge. Their stories shaped the conceptual foundations of this thesis, while my design work, in turn, challenged me to read those stories more carefully, more justly. This recursive relationship between research and design was not only methodologically sound, but ethically necessary.

One of the most difficult yet transformative shifts was moving away from the way I had been taught to design and plan: the traditional, efficiency-driven, capitalist model that privileges feasibility, cost, and performance. At times, especially while developing the speculative model of the neighborhood timeline, I doubted my own ability to imagine alternatives. I questioned whether it was even possible to conceive of a different reality, one where segregation, inequality, and power relations were not structural foundations of urban life.

But this tension was necessary. It led me to a breakthrough: that real transformation does not only begin with land policy or institutional reform, but with how we teach and learn to plan. That it is possible, and urgent, to shift the priorities of urbanism, from order, efficiency, and control to care, dignity, and the enjoyment of life.

Rethinking Knowledge and Methodology

A central theme in this thesis is the epistemic inequality embedded in planning. Why do we value certain forms of knowledge more than others? Why are the insights and actions of communities, especially those in marginalized territories, so often dismissed as informal, anecdotal, or unprofessional? These questions pushed me to question not only planning systems, but also the power dynamics of knowledge production itself.

At one point in my process, I considered developing a proposal based entirely on community autonomy, where institutional presence would be minimized or removed. However, through deeper reflection, I recognized that while community autonomy is essential, the ideal is not separation, but collaboration. I now believe in cities where multiple forms of knowledge can coexist, teach each other, and co-create futures. A city where institutional expertise meets community wisdom, not to overwrite it, but to support it.

This shift is reflected in my methodology, which combined territorial storytelling, spatial mapping, and value-based interpretation. It was deeply influenced by critical Latin American urban theory, especially concepts like the Right to the City, Social Production of Habitat, and Autonomous Design, as well as by the practical insights from local actors. This methodological framework allowed me to engage deeply with the communities' own planning logics and rethink what it means to design "from below."

Emotions as Part of the Process

This thesis was not only intellectually challenging, it was emotionally difficult. Entering the lives of people who have experienced displacement, violence, and systemic abandonment, and reading their stories over and over, created an emotional weight I hadn't anticipated. At times, I felt helpless, frustrated, and even hopeless. There were many moments when the only response I could give was to cry.

In these moments, my mentors played a vital role. They didn't offer false reassurance, but encouraged me to stay with the discomfort, to use it as fuel to imagine something different. They helped me move beyond critique, toward radical hope. This hope was not naive; it was grounded in the real actions of people who have already built lives with dignity, despite structural injustice. I learned that imagining an alternative future is not escapism, it is political work.

Mentorship and Feedback

Working in an academic context far removed from the Colombian urban experience, I often felt that some aspects of my research were difficult for my mentors to fully grasp. Their expertise and feedback were always valuable, but I sensed a gap between my reality and the frameworks most often referenced in our conversations. To bridge this, I invited Gynna Millán—an architect and activist with experience in these territories—to become my third mentor. Her input was pivotal. She helped me ground my theories in the specificities of my context and guided me toward Latin American thinkers and frameworks that are often overlooked in international academic spaces.

The feedback I received throughout the process was thoughtful, respectful, and generative. It never imposed direction, but rather posed questions like: "What could you do with the knowledge you've already uncovered?" This kind of guidance helped me reconstruct my understanding of what it means to teach and learn design—not as a transmission of methods, but as a collaborative process of inquiry.

Flexibility and Learning

From the beginning, I chose to prioritize process over product. I made a conscious decision not to cling to a fixed methodology or a rigid vision of the outcome. I accepted that I did not know everything and that my work would need to evolve—based on what I learned, felt, and heard.

For example, in the early stages (P2), I intended to focus on newly forming settlements. However, I realized that the interviews I had were extremely rich and deserved deeper, more sustained analysis. That shift led me to redefine my research question, revise my theoretical lens, and reshape my entire project around the idea of territorial values and dignified habitat.

I also learned the importance of not always chasing new information. At one point, I felt pressure to keep adding more data, but I realized that what mattered was not how much information I had, but how deeply I engaged with it. This led me to a slower, more careful, and ultimately more meaningful way of working.

Contribution and Innovation

I believe my main contribution lies in the methodology: in how I listened to voices long excluded from formal planning, how I translated their values into spatial design principles, and how I proposed a framework that challenges the logic of urban development as we know it.

This project shows that designing from values already present in territory—solidarity, autonomy, care—can be a pathway to a truly dignified habitat. One that prioritizes wellbeing and collective life over economic return. It is a small but important step toward a future where cities are not made for the market, but for the people who live in them.

There is, of course, much more to be done. A next step might be to explore how this framework could shift power within institutions, or what kinds of instruments and alliances would be needed to make these values structurally visible and enforceable in planning systems.

Final Thoughts and Looking Ahead

This thesis began with a question rooted in practice: How can we learn from those who already build the city? It became a larger exploration of knowledge, values, power, and care. It helped me unlearn some of the most entrenched assumptions of design education, and to propose something different, not perfect, but grounded, hopeful, and necessary.

Moving forward, I want to keep working at the intersection of design, care, and justice, continuing to bridge academic research with grounded practice in territories that have long been excluded from formal planning. I believe that the most powerful tools for transformation are already in the hands of communities. What we need is to make space for them, to amplify, support, and walk alongside.

Reflection Questions

How can planning institutions reorient their frameworks to value and support territorial knowledge produced by communities themselves?

What shifts in design education are necessary to train planners and architects who understand dignity, not efficiency, as the foundation of urban transformation?



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