

The challenges of researching place in informal settlements

Gabriela QUINTANA VIGIOLA
ORCID: 0000-0002-4157-5287

Abstract

Place is a concept that is studied by several disciplines through various approaches, thus leading to numerous meanings. Urban designers traditionally understand places through a morphological lens. Informal settlements (*barrios*) all over the world share certain urban forms, yet they are home to different peoples and customs, and are usually situated in different political, economic, and institutional contexts. These non-physical particularities highlight the importance of approaching the investigation of these areas not just from a spatial perspective, but also from a social one. Undertaking social research in barrios comes with several challenges. Thus, this chapter discusses the challenges involved in researching place in barrios settlements, focusing on the case study of Caracas, Venezuela. The discussion focuses on the different aspects and methods applied in research: building rapport, interviewing, engaging in participant observation, the inclusion of audio-visual data, the data collection process and analysis, and the ethical considerations when researching place in barrios. The chapter concludes with the reflection that urban design research (and practice) in these areas should not be “for” people, but “with” people, as they are then ones creating the meanings and converting the spaces into places.

Introduction

This chapter discusses the challenges involved in researching place in informal settlements. These urban areas have historically built by people with minimal resources or help from governments. Usually, they do not follow any official plan nor regulations, thus they arise from people’s needs and the latter providing housing for themselves and their families (Bolívar & Pedrazzini, 2008; Roy, 2005; Turner, 1976).

Several methodological approaches can be applied to study these areas, and to specifically study *place* in them. Therefore, to understand the best approaches and the different challenges to study place - and place-making- in informal settlements, it is important to first understand what those concepts are and the relevance of the context when researching these areas.

Built environment disciplines have traditionally understood place as the physical sphere in which activities that drive life take place (Cresswell, 2004). Urban designers usually recognise the practice of place-making as the creative act in which professionals, sometimes accompanied by users, create places (spaces) that cater for their needs (Gehl, 2010).

But what is *place*? Place is a space with meaning (Relph, 1976). Spaces that urban designers create become places once the people who use them attach a meaning to them; meanings that arise from psychosocial processes such as place attachment, sense of community and sense of place. Thus, place-making, the art of creating places, is not something that urban designers themselves do. Place-making is a process in which the spaces that designers (or people) create aim to promote social practices that lead to the construction of meaning.

Informal settlements is a contested concept that usually encapsulate areas in the city (especially in the Global South) that are built by people without complying to any planning regulations nor building controls. These areas are often executed without professional guidance, and sometimes with strong

opposition from the governments (Roy, 2005; Varley, 2017). Informal settlements around the world vary in morphology and history (Dovey & Kamalipour, 2018). However, one of the shared reasons they exist is that the state could not provide housing for who could not access the formal housing market, leading people to find land (often deemed as undevelopable by officials and developers) in the interstices within or the peripheries of the city.

The case study: Barrios in Caracas, Venezuela

Informal settlements in Caracas, Venezuela are the focus of this chapter, and this city is no exception to the process explained above. Since the start of the 20th century and with the rise of the oil industry in the country, the capital of Venezuela experienced an unprecedented population growth that led to people squatting on the edges of the creeks that ran from the Ávila mountain to the North to the Guaire River in the centre of the San Francisco Valley. Simultaneously, the hills enclosing the valley began to be developed by the poor who could not access the formal housing market. Petare, the case study that informs this chapter, is the second largest conglomerate of barrios in Latin America (Silva, Caradonna, & Galavis, 2016) and is located on one of these hills to the East of Caracas (Figures 1 and 2). *Barrios* is the term Venezuelans use to refer to informal settlements, thus is the term adopted in the rest of this chapter.

[Figures 1 and 2 to be placed here]

Figure 1: Caracas in the San Francisco Valley, and Petare highlighted to the East. Source: Author on Google maps satellite image.

Figure 2: Panoramic view from Petare to the west of the San Francisco Valley

The study that informs this chapter focused on understanding place-making processes in barrios through Catholic processions as a cultural phenomenon. Petare was selected as the case study following two main criteria namely embedding a barrio morphology (fine-grained and compact structure built by people) and me being acquainted with community members to guarantee safety. Researching this topic came along with both anticipated and unprecedented challenges that are linked to the nature of investigating social processes: the creation of meanings that transform spaces into places in an area built by its residents. This chapter focuses on discussing the challenges that arose throughout the different steps of the investigative process: the choosing of the methodological approach, the process of building rapport, the application of the data collection methods, as well as the data collection and analysis processes themselves. The chapter finishes with the ethical considerations and a brief discussion.

Methodological approaches

Urban design research is traditionally approached through the study of morphology, but to study *place* in barrios the need to incorporate a social perspective as well becomes paramount. Getting a deep understanding on the nature of the phenomenon to investigated is the first step in this process. In this case, as I wanted to understand the phenomenon of construction of place in barrios through my own experience and participants' perspectives, a qualitative approach was adopted for the research, with *constructionism* the paradigm to inform it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Hatch, 2002).

As mentioned above, choosing the topic and the paradigmatic and research approaches came with several challenges I had to overcome as a person and researcher: fear of the unknown and of dangerous barrios; preconceptions about space and place; the need to have control over research experiences; and overcoming my belief that academics must be objective. Reflecting on these

challenges resulted in a shift in me as a person, leading me to understand that my previous experiences shaped the research from the moment I chose the topic. Being aware of my subjectivity led me to acknowledge my voice in the research process and, from that point onwards, the research approaches I have engaged with in my career. This reflective process is also reflected in the writing of this chapter in first person – it is personal, *you* are part of the research: your background, your culture and present self.

Double interpretation of the data (my interpretations of residents' interpretations of their experiences) and my desire to go beyond the literature and my preconceptions enriched my interactions with participants, enabling me to evaluate, improve and re-evaluate the research process. This is an *iterative* approach, wherein theory and findings are in continuous interaction, feeding each other throughout the study (Bryman, 2008). Part of the relevance of this inductive and iterative process led to furthering theoretical knowledge of other fields, such as criminal violence, institutions, and power relationships. This process enabled deeper familiarisation with the research topic, its nature, and the unexpected knowledge and understandings arising from it.

Building rapport

Building rapport goes is embedded in the whole process of interacting with people. Therefore, it must come ahead even deciding what specific methods to apply. It is also paramount to understand the context as it allows the researcher to select the best approach to engage with the participants and build enough trust to obtain the data needed. In Latin American barrios, building relationships on a personal level is fundamental for people to open up and tell you their thoughts and stories; to literally open their houses and talk about their relationship to their place, and even show you pictures of its evolution. It is personal.

This process of building relationships – building rapport – is one of the main challenges of researching place in informal settlements. Initial trust was gained by arriving to the barrio with the priest, who is a highly valued community member. Followingly, trust was progressively strengthened throughout the research. This trust building process relates to establishing these relationships. For participants to trust the researcher, the researcher needs to be flexible, honest and share activities and personal experiences with the participants. The researcher also needs to be a good listener, empathetic, patient, active and respectful of others' perspectives (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

Although having different educational and socio-economic backgrounds, sharing Catholicism as the same cultural background with the participants enabled me to share common experiences and start building close relationships with them. This was achieved not only through talking and interacting with them, but also through collaborating and participating in different activities throughout the year. As part of flexible designs, in this case I had prolonged involvement in the research (Creswell, 2007). As Marshall and Rossman (2006) and Vieytes (2009) argue, in this type of study the researcher enters the participants' lives and relationships emerge in the field.

Data collection methods

Casual conversations and In-depth interviews

To understand people's meanings, it is vital to give them a voice. The aim of in-depth interviews is to allow participants to express their thoughts, beliefs, and knowledge about a certain topic or issue relevant to their lives. Through such interviews, a large and varied amount of information can be acquired in a relatively short period, and any clarifications can be obtained immediately (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Residents know their landmarks, nodes, and all the other traditional urban design

elements that have meaning to them. When researching communities, we need to understand their stories and the history of their barrio from their own experiences and from the narratives/stories of their families.

I thus organised in-depth open-ended interviews. These were structured by the main topics I wanted to discuss with residents: the urban space, their religiosity, and the meanings of both. The interviews allowed me to reach a deeper understanding of the barrio morphology and the life people lead there. I also engaged in short conversations with participants while on the urban space. These short conversations included talking not only to some key participants about specific happenings, but also to other people who were randomly selected in situ. The latter revealed insightful information about their relationship with the event and the feelings it generated. The interviews and conversations helped with the interpretation of the meaning people attached to space, and the way these meanings constructed sense of place. They also enabled me to enhance the reliability of the data collected.

The in-depth interviews took place in quiet spaces, such as the church, the participants' workplace, or home. These spaces help participants feel more comfortable, open and in control, which result in reduction of bias and participants discussing personal matters freely, delving into their feelings about the barrio urban space and their meanings. However, the challenge of working in the participants' private space was guaranteeing my personal safety, as often this means going to unfamiliar places with unknown people. This challenge was addressed through: (1) someone always knowing my location and schedule, (2) having somewhere safe where I could stay in case of a barrio shootout, and (3) all the key participants interviewed being highly regarded community members whom I trusted. Trust building addresses one of the most significant challenges of interviewing: participants' cooperation and sincerity (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

Other challenges of the interview process included the potential of missing some culture- and language-specific clues that may have appeared, and not asking sufficiently relevant questions to provoke long and insightful answers (Finch 1984 cited in Távara & Cueto, 2015). In this case, sharing the same cultural background facilitated the process of understanding the cultural expressions and the Venezuelan slang used during the interviews. However, acknowledging that I came from a different city area with a different upbringing made me engage in a critical assessment of my own approach and how to address this matter. As the research evolved, the participants and I overcame those background differences enabling me to understand the different layers of communication.

Finally, in-depth interviews should involve minimal intervention from the researcher (Creswell, 2007), which could make the *questioning* process challenging. My open approach to the topic under discussion meant I had to encourage the participant to talk freely yet keep the interviewee on track without leading the answers. In this process, the researcher also needs to be mindful of not interrupting and minimising their interventions and diverting opinions that may inhibit the participant.

Participant observation

Participant observation also allows the researcher to get *inside information*. This method implies a deep involvement in the social environment being studied (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) involving the researcher entering the social and symbolic world of the participants. Sharing the Catholic symbolic world with the participants, I could fully participate in the various activities required for this research and relate fully to the different events. This immersion allowed me as a researcher to experience the phenomenon as the other participants did and learn from my own experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). When you embed yourself in the context, you get to truly understand and experience yourself the experiences of the users of the space, which highlights the importance of this approach.

The purpose of participant observation is to observe people's actions, listening to conversations between participants and with the researcher, asking questions and clarifying situations and behaviours (Bryman, 2008). The most common recording method for this technique is field notes, which brings challenges of multitasking or not being able to write as there is the need to pay full attention to what is happening. Thus, in this research, field notes were taken both in text and as voice notes (then transcribed).

Audio-visual data

Audio-visual and photographic surveys allow the researcher to examine physical evidence, social situations and people's actions (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Through photographs and mapping, urban spaces can be compared at different times, and transformations associated with each activity can be identified. Peoples' facial expressions were also recorded, producing additional evidence for providing context for the feelings associated with the activity and place.

Audio-visual and photographic data were collected to complement the information obtained through participant observations, the interviews, and short conversations. Throughout the research, 4831 files of photographs and videos were collected. The data captured the actual interaction between people, the activities they were engaging in and the urban space; such evidence facilitates communicating to a broader audience the physical and social environments in which the phenomenon being studied took place. One challenge related to audio-visual evidence was to define the focus of the data collection, which in this case was the urban space on an everyday basis and during the procession. Another challenge was classifying and organising the files accumulated, for which downloading, filing in detailly named folders, and backing up the files immediately after their collection became fundamental. However, there are further lessons learnt: there needs to be further focus on what needs to be collected and how. Researchers continuously need to ask themselves: how is this video / photograph / map going to be useful?

Process

As mentioned above, the research approach was iterative and progressive involving a snowball approach to participant *recruitment*. As part of this process, the first year of research emerged as the pilot study, which in turn informed the investigation process.

In the initial steps of this research, I became involved with three local processions that allowed me to assess what data collection techniques were going to be the most appropriate to understand the phenomenon in question. They also directed me in a self-reflexive process regarding my path as a researcher. Approaching an unfamiliar context for the first time required immersing myself in that experience by applying naturalistic observation. The challenges I experienced on a personal level by being in an unfamiliar context where I was evidently identified as an outsider, made me question my decision to study Catholic processions in barrios. Knowing I was safe by being with the priest, but at the same time feeling unsafe for being in a dangerous area, started a reflexive process about "*how far do we go with research?*" Although I did not find the answer to that question, reflecting on it encouraged me to challenge myself and my self-imposed boundaries.

Attending the first procession allowed me to identify the initial naïveté with which I approached the data collection and helped me strengthen the research process. The importance of knowing and understanding the community and their barrio from the participants' perspectives became evident. As a result, the data collection techniques and process were redefined by including in-depth interviews in two stages and participant observation to immerse myself in the phenomenon I was studying. Going through an emergent pilot stage, also made the meaningful focus of the research evident: instead of

studying all processions as catalysts of place-making, the focus should be on certain processions in certain areas.

Analysis

The data analysis begins from the moment the researcher selects a problem to study and ends with the last word written (Fetterman, 2008). The analysis can also be said to start as soon as the researcher learns “something that affects their interpretation of the data” (Morgan, 2008, p. 246). Thematic coding analysis was the qualitative approach to analyse the data gathered through all the techniques. This approach is not usually linked to existing theories and consists of labelling and coding the data in themes as a basis for further analysis (Robson & McCartan, 2015).

In qualitative research, the data can be analysed in two main ways: (1) by similarity, where codes are defined in response to the similarities or differences found, and (2) by contiguity, where the data is analysed based on the relationships of time and space, cause and effect, or the connection with things (Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014). In this research both approaches were taken. The analysis was based on categorising the key elements mentioned by the interviewees. I undertook thematic analysis not only categorising to describe, but also to understand the different linkages and meanings embedded in the data.

However, according to Coffey and Atkinson (1996 cited in Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014), these codes and categories do not expose these underlying meanings and relationships in the data; they are just an organisational tool. Researchers make sense of the data analysed through interpretation (Willig, 2014). Interpretation “is concerned with generating deeper and/or fuller understanding of the meaning(s) contained within an account” (Willig, 2014, p. 137). To do this, researchers make connections through systematisation and organisation that is required when analysing and interpreting multiple in-depth interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

One of the challenges of coding is the risk of losing the initial connections that exist in the original context. By categorising, researchers de-contextualise, thus putting themselves at risk of losing some of the meaning embedded in the original contiguous state (Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014). To prevent this from happening, when presenting a story based on the interpretations derived from the data, its general context also needs to be discussed.

As researchers, we also need to be aware that by selecting parts of the participants’ discourse to identify ideas, actions, and meanings, we are interpreting and ultimately deciding, based on our own preconceptions, values, and knowledge, what is most relevant regarding the phenomena we are studying. In this specific study, because I was part of the culture that was being researched, the possibility of disregarding important aspects of the participants’ accounts was reduced.

Ethical considerations

Working in the Global South, flexibility is paramount. This understanding of the context and flexibility needs to underpin the ethical considerations when researching this context, and especially barrios.

Sometimes barrios can be very dangerous environments for outsiders, as they usually home criminal gangs. This is the case in Petare. Acknowledging these risks and having a clear plan of action aids the ethics process. However, the most important element is to understand that these ethical considerations are mainly to guarantee the researcher’s and other’s safety. These plans of action embed from building relationships that can offer protection, to being flexible as sometimes you may need to stay there in someone’s home because it is safer than to leave the barrio.

The research was limited to people referred by other participants. Informal connections and word of mouth are the commonality in Caracas' barrios and are part of the *trust network*. However, not knowing beforehand who was willing to participate or not from the people referred to me also became a challenge. In all cases, all participants were informed about the research theme, and all gave verbal consent to participate (in some cases, especially with elderly people, residents may not be able to read nor write). In the random sampling in the public spaces, the process of informing and getting consent became a bit more difficult as people were participating in their activities. However, all random participants were also verbally informed of the nature and aims of the study and were always given the option not to participate.

Finally, it is important to highlight that all participants granted verbal consent for their real names and images to be used in the research. They were proud to be part of this study, thus, being identifiable is an acknowledgement of their time and help during the data collection stage.

Discussion

This chapter discussed the methodological approach adopted to study place in a barrio in Caracas, Venezuela, by focusing on the different challenges embedded in each methodological decision and in researching this topic in this context. This study and the approach applied contribute to urban design research and to knowledge on barrios by focusing on the social elements that define place (Quintana Vigiola, 2020, 2021). This research and its methodological path also contribute to enhancing the studies engaged in and about the Global South, with the main relevance lying in giving the residents a voice through sharing their perspectives in the writing of the findings.

This chapter, and my research, aims to encourage academics and researchers to understand that urban design is not “for people”. Urban design should be engaged in “with” people as they are the ones creating the meanings and converting the spaces into places. This is highlighted even further when we work in barrios, as usually residents are the ones who not just know their place, but literally created and built it.

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