[[1]](#footnote-1)

Overcoming Urban Challenges through Culture and Social Sustainability in Caracas’ Barrios

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*Abstract*—Social sustainability is an issue scarcely addressed by different authors, being one of its key factors the psychosocial processes of sense of place, sense of community and appropriation. In Caracas’s barrios (Venezuela) these were developed through sharing the construction of the place and different struggles that brought the neighbours together. However, one of the main problems they face is criminal violence, hence being its social sustainability threatened and affected by it. This matter can be addressed by acknowledging communities’ sense of place and engaging in cultural events.

*Keywords*—Caracas’ barrios, cultural engagement, developing countries, social sustainability

# INTRODUCTION

A

S mentioned by several authors, even though social sustainability is acknowledged as one of the most important pillars of sustainability there is a paucity of literature on it [1]-[8]. This paper aims to discuss this important matter from the community and cultural perspective, taking into account the findings of a research about the interaction between catholic processions and the urban space in Caracas’ barrios. The question to be addressed here is: *can urban social sustainability processes and culture help address challenges barrios’ face, as criminal violence?*

Caracas, the capital of Venezuela, comprises over 350 *barrios*, where more than 56% of the city’s population live [9]. *Barrios* are residential settlements of continuous development, built on illegal land via invasions without a plan or urban project that matched the formal urban development of the time [10]. Moreover, barrios are places that have been built by their inhabitants throughout their whole lives, involving two or even three generations in the process.

Caracas’ barrios inhabitants come from different places, thus bringing different cultural backgrounds. However, besides sharing the experience of building their place of residence, people there share Catholicism as the common cultural tradition. In this paper I am presenting the topics of sense of place and sense of community created by the relationship between culture and the urban space where it takes place. From these psychosocial processes, spaces can be claimed and re-claimed, thus leading a way to achieving urban social sustainability.

The second section briefly discusses the topic of social sustainability, and its relation to urban form. Following the topic of barrios how sustainability relate to them is addressed. The fourth section briefly discusses the research and the methodological approach. Finally data from the research is presented to delve into the topic of social sustainability related to culture.

# On Sustainability

The definition of sustainability has been addressed in repetitive occasions since the development of the Brundtland report in 1987. Based on the common understanding that sustainability comprises three main aspects, economic, environmental and social, this paper will only focus on the latter.

Furthermore, as well as in other disciplines, when discussing sustainability in urban design and planning the focus tends to lie on the environmental and economic matters [11]. From this, social sustainability stands as a side topic, that is mentioned but not really developed; and, on the contrary of what Davidson [12] states, when it is developed its final aim is to work towards environmental sustainability.

In this vein, regardless in the past few years the topic of social sustainability has been addressed by several authors, there is still a paucity of literature on it. In addition there is no agreement on its definition as well as with its different components and characteristics.

In another vein, Sharifi and Murayama [5] summarise the common topics within social sustainability, being those equity, democracy, citizen participation, safety and security, accessibility, social justice, among others. Karuppannan and Sivam [4] also define that social sustainability is about equity, fulfillment of basic needs, democracy and inclusion; in addition to the continuity of culture [4]. In addition to these, Bramley and Power [1] emphasise on social equity, quality of life and diversity, also stating that there is no precise definition on this topic. They determine as well, that social sustainability has been mostly addressed from a policy perspective. Within this, the focus is on broader issues like eradicating poverty [1]. However, none of these concepts are clearly and specifically defined, nor have they been developed to understand the depth and complexity involved in each of them.

Moreover, when addressing the topic of urban social sustainability, the real focus is still on the place and not on the human being [1]. Thus, the qualities of the space are mentioned and described, but not the specificities of what happens on a human level for that space actually become socially sustainable.

In this order of ideas, Karuppannan and Sivam [4] emphasise the little amount of research done regarding this theme in developing countries. In Latin-American countries such as Venezuela, the focus when discussing sustainability, as worldwide, is on the ecological perspective, and when addressing social sustainability it is mostly focused on the community relationships and how it relates to environmental issues [8].

Karuppannan and Sivam [4] also emphasise that social interactions are vital to create a community feeling. They base their idea on Bramley and Power [1] who state “the socially sustainable community refers to social capital, social interaction, social behaviour, sense of place, pride and attachment, safety and security, sense of comfort and level of interest” [4].

Regarding the aforementioned, Bramley and Power [1] state there are two main notions related to social sustainability, those being equity and community sustainability. The latter comprises several elements such as interaction, sharing activities, sense of place, residential stability and personal safety. When having all these elements in a neighbourhood, it is thought that people relate better not only to other members of the community, but also relate better to the urban area where they reside [1].

Notwithstanding this paper focuses on the community issue, it needs to be highlighted that there can not be sustainable development if people do not have access to proper housing, to food and education [8]. Adding to this, access to the minimum infrastructure (water supply, sewages, transport) and personal safety are also needed [13]. Thus thinking about real sustainability without addressing and overcoming poverty and supplying these basic needs is not possible [8].

Still, defining what is meeting the needs in developing countries is rather different from what it could mean in developed countries. In addition, how this is achieved is also completely different. It is important to highlight that from barrio people’s perspective their basic housing and infrastructure needs are supplied, regardless of their quality and that according to official statistics around 30% of the population is located under the poverty line [14]. Therefore, parting from that point, this article focuses on the sense of place and sense of community needed to achieve social sustainability related to urban environments.

## Urban Form and Social Sustainability:

According to Gabaldón [13] cities have seriously affected the environment not only because of land occupation, but also because of pollution, rubbish disposal, endangerment of fauna and flora species, among others. Hence some current development processes try to apply better construction practices, and within those, better urban design and planning. However these have not always included the social aspect. As developed in the previous section, social sustainability can be described as a compound of themes that range from equity to sense of community and place. Regarding the latter, some authors emphasise the relationship of these psychosocial processes with the space where they occur. Moreover, some argue that the urban space (and its different characteristics) can highly influence the development of these community matters, thus urban sustainability in general [3], [5]. In Caracas’ barrios the urban space interact closely to the social sustainability issue. These areas are considered to have a very high density[[2]](#footnote-2), thus being influenced by it.

Dempsey, Brown, and Bramley [3] argue that density is one of the important issues addressed related to a sustainable urban form. The authors mention how on this matter there are still very different opinions, beginning with the dichotomy in concepts having spatial density, which is measured traditionally considering the population (inhabitants per hectare), and social density, which is the one perceived by people [3]. In addition there are perspectives and movements as new urbanism that relate social sustainability, and sense of place within it, to the provision of mixed used places, public spaces and social amenities and facilities. Thus, it is acknowledged that traditional settings contribute to social sustainability [5].

On the other hand, the approach by Dempsey, Brown, and Bramley [3] on the discussion about density and community relationships lead to believe that density itself is not as strong a determinant of the psychosocial processes such as sense of community and sense of place. Therefore, even though with density you can achieve a sustainable urban form, it does not mean that it will have the same impact on the social aspect. In the same vein, the authors state that the higher the density the less attachment to place there is [3]. However this does not apply to barrios[[3]](#footnote-3) either. It can be stated that it is not the population density itself, but it is the urban form that could an impact on the different social linkages.

Usually high density in the built environment is associated with high-rise, not acknowledging that those are different concepts that are not determinedly bound. For example. in the case of Caracas, Venezuela, Petare, where the tallest building has five stories, has a much higher density than La Urbina (upper-medium class suburb) where the lowest building has eight stories. In barrios, the building scale is pedestrian friendly, local and comfortable. However the population density is very high, mostly due to overcrowding. Regardless the amount of people living in these areas, the fact that several generations of families have built the place together along the years investing time, effort and a large proportion of their income [8], in conjunction to the fact that they share a few open spaces and facilities, promotes the closeness so worshiped by sustainability academics. Hence developing a sense of community.

Dempsey, Brown, and Bramley [3] showed in their research that sense of place is closely linked to sense of community [3]. Having a strong relationship with your neighbours encourages people to stay in a place, hence to maintain it and care about it… This is the start of urban social sustainability. Understanding that by having strong communities (which ties can be created or encouraged by common cultural activities) leads to having place attachment and following urban sustainability from the social perspective[[4]](#footnote-4).

In this case it must be highlighted that in both a developed country as UK and in a developing country as Venezuela, with very different cultural backgrounds, and with different references and history, people are the same. In the sense that they create bonds with other members of the community through activities, and that encourages creating attachment, sense of belonging and sense of place. The space itself, though the participants did not mention it as a determining factor in these psychosocial processes, it does have an influence in them. Having an urban form that promotes closeness, and that drives people to specific, contained and well-defined open spaces, in addition to having spaces (both open and enclosed) that can host community activities, help in the creation of those community ties.

Dempsey, Brown, and Bramley [3] also inform that high criminality and anti-social behaviour rates and high-density areas are associated, because of the existence of sense of anonymity (people not knowing their neighbours, etc.) and lack of place attachment. However, in barrios this does not apply, in the sense that in these high-density areas everyone knows their neighbours and their relationships. Despite the strong sense of community, barrios have a very high criminality rate. As in UK, people in Caracas’ barrios are discouraged to use open spaces due to safety issues [3]. Participants in Dempsey, Brown, and Bramley’s [3] research did not address density as an underpinning reason, but rather the usage of those spaces by youth (with activities such as drinking), and reputation of the space.

Though the authors mention density and sense of place, the association they make to important factors such as location and accessibility, rooms per dwelling, personal income, house room for growth, among others, seem a bit superficial and not go deep into the morphology and people’s understandings and meanings [3]. There are also other factors about urban dynamics that can not be disregarded such as the individualism encouraged in city centres, combined with working hours meaning less opportunity to meet your neighbours, that also occurs at an age previous of having families. When having children, as expressed by some participants, and when being an elder, there are more opportunities to interact, just because you have time to linger in your neighbourhood. And all of this obviously affects their sense of attachment and place. This is related to lifestyles. In Caracas’ barrios, even though they are very high density, because of family composition and unemployment, people have plenty of time to relate to other neighbours, thus reinforcing a high sense of community and sense of place.

If it can be argued that one of the reasons there are no sustainable cities is because of the mismatch between what people want and the sustainability principles [15], and if participation is one of the fundamentals of social sustainability… why do not we as planners and built environment professionals actually involve people to create more sustainable places?

# On Barrios

Even though Venezuelan barrios were not developed by built environment professionals that could oversee its process, they became an important part of our urban landscape.

As mentioned before, barrios are a highly complex type of residential area in Venezuela characterized by being built over time by their inhabitants. In Caracas, barrios are usually located on the hills surrounding the city, morphologically small and dense grain, spreading to the tops of the hills, creating a mixed fabric between continuous and dispersed edges [16].

Barrios originated in Caracas because of Venezuela’s notable economic growth at the beginning of the XX Century, due to the exploitation of the oil industry. Caracas had a very rapid and violent urbanisation process from the 1940’s to the late 1960’s, when Venezuela went from being a country with around 30% urban population to 80% [13]. This had a deep effect on the sustainability of the Venezuelan cities, especially Caracas, where the majority of the rural-urban migration occurred. Because of this large migrations, the government and the private developers could not cope with the high demand of housing and infrastructure. Even more there was a lack of capacity of attending the poor who could not access the formal developing housing market in the city.

In addition to this, the planning discipline was always behind, and all the plans developed for the city failed to go into place. Thus, Caracas still functions nowadays as a disorganised city. It was developed without a pre-thought guideline just by constructing on the different plantations that were located in the San Francisco Valley. While this formal and quasi-planned city evolved, the eastern and western hills surrounding the valley were invaded by squatters hence being the origin of barrios.

When barrios development started, they grew as a slum, with dirt roads, without any services or infrastructure and with an initial housing called *ranchos* made out of cardboard and/or tin. From that their residents kept on improving their houses up to the point that most of them were built with reinforced concrete structures, brick walls and cement floors [17]. This process is known as *consolidation of barrios*, where the original unstable squatted settlement became a permanent area in the city.

Nowadays, Caracas’ barrios have taken all available non-protected space, and now their growth is done vertically. This phenomenon occurs mainly because families keep on expanding and people who want to stay in the barrio because of economic and/or personal reasons, usually want to stay close to their relatives. This is the primary reason of barrios high density mentioned in the previous section.

Considering this, barrios were originated and kept on developing with an initial disadvantage from the sustainability perspective. Not only was there no social security (land tenure, accessibility to facilities and basic infrastructure, social equity), but also they were located in spaces not suitable for development and/or without the technology required for housing a residential area on those steep hills. Hence, from an ecological perspective, not only did the barrios consume and demolish a lot of valuable natural areas, but also put people in risk areas such as the edges of creeks. Furthermore, people did not have dumping stations or places, hence contaminating the spare lands and creeks. Also there is a huge wastage of water, because of the lack of a proper piping and continuous potable water service; being aggravated with the poor sewage system which only runs under the main streets (and usually not properly). Also there is a paucity of green open spaces, and so the streets, intersections and some basketball courts are the gathering places [18].

From the economic sustainability perspective, barrios have been challenged from their origin, because they are located in the outskirts of the city, having their inhabitants to spend a lot time and money in transportation. In addition the materials to build the barrio are more expensive because of the extensive supply chain to these areas. Furthermore, beyond money specificities, being born, growing up and living in a disadvantaged area, with a limited family composition forces a large amount of the residents to withdraw from school and work in casual jobs with minimum wage salaries from early ages, reinforcing the poverty cycle throughout generations. This issue relates to the association of young teenagers to criminal gangs. All this, has brought about other social issues such as gang’s territoriality related to drug dealing and thus lack of personal safety. These criminal gangs mostly take control of the little open recreational spaces there are.

As aforementioned, people in barrios were not provided with acceptable quality infrastructure and housing by the government, so in a lot of cases they had to develop it themselves. From their perspective those basic needs have not only been satisfied, but even more they built a strong sense of appropriation because they *fought* for what they currently have [9], [17]. Therefore, putting aside those social issues[[5]](#footnote-5) and focusing on the community aspect of social sustainability, as discussed before, in Venezuelan barrios there is usually a strong sense of community, created and strengthened through the years. These have been built by sharing goals, expressing solidarity and gathering on the few and well-defined public and semi-public spaces [8]. Also, the residents involved in the construction of their houses and common spaces, have a strong sense of place and of appropriation to them [8], [19].

In the past couple of decades, different efforts are made related to barrios sustainability[[6]](#footnote-6), one being the launching of international competitions to improve barrio’s infrastructure and housing conditions, as is the Holcim Awards for Sustainable Construction. Besides that, other governmental programs were created to improve these conditions, such as the *Programa de Rehabilitación Física de Barrios* (Barrios Physical Retrofitting Program) launched in 1999 and funded by the World Bank. However these kinds of programs did not last and were not fully executed. In some cases just some facilities and public spaces were built in some of Caracas’ barrios; major infrastructure needed as roads and water systems were not developed. On the other hand other grand scale infrastructure had been developed just as political gestures, not really focusing on people’s needs and priorities.

Before these programs, on an official level barrios were overlooked and ignored, proved by the fact that in official plans and maps they were categorised and zoned as “green areas” as if they did not exist. Moreover, when their existence was somewhat acknowledged, the official approach was trying to eradicate the barrios. At the same time, politicians running for any governmental role traded votes for materials, so people could keep on building the houses and the barrios. After that, as Giuliani and Wiesenfeld [8] state, some ‘superficial strategies’ were developed, leaving unfinished sports and educational facilities.

If the government and other institutions were successful in their approach to implement the different programs created to improve the quality of barrios, their story would be different. Even though residents did their best to build a place for living, the institutional assistance is vital to generate and implement improvement actions and programs. As stated in the research by Giuliani and Wiesenfeld [8], even though community participation is key, it needs to be oriented by technical assistance.

The best approach to solve the different sustainability issues in barrios, rely on the government and its programs and policies as the one mentioned previously, all in conjunction to working with the community. The sustainability issues barrios face are not just of an ecological nature, they also face dramatic economic challenges, and dramatic social equity issues. Furthermore, they also face personal safety and deep violence problems.

As discussed previously, the different processes i.e. sense of place, attachment, belonging, among others, create strong tights within a community, thus leading it towards achieving urban social sustainability. However it also needs to be acknowledged that all these are closely related to a shared culture that in the case of barrios is a mixture of different backgrounds that came together in the process of developing the place creating the barrio culture [20].

In the research developed and presented in the following section, it can be noticed how with these psychosocial processes that are linked to this cultural background and to the place were it occurs, can deeply contribute to coming closer to the achievement of social sustainability.

# On The Research

The answer to the question presented in the introduction, is drawn from a research where I aim to understand the relationship between cultural constructs and urban space, and the role of urban planners in enabling the development of this relationship. In this conceptual approach, I study the role of catholic processions as one of the most important cultural activities engaged in, in the urban space of Venezuelan barrios. This study contributes to our understanding of the complexity of urban space and the cultural constructions that shape its meaning, thus influencing on the constructs of sense of place, attachment, belonging and community. Therefore, also shaping the social sustainability of the barrio.

## Methodological Approach, Design and Methods

The methodological approach that informs this research is constructionism, also known as the emergent paradigm. This was chosen because this perspective emphasizes that *reality* is constructed through social interaction, and that the only way to grasp it is through recognising as equals the actors involved in the actions and places I am studying, rather than treating them as objects of this study.

Given this approach, a qualitative methodology was appropriate for the purpose "to reconstruct reality as we observe the actors in a pre-defined social system" [21]. This research is framed around qualitative methodology in order to comprehend the relationship between urban morphology and people, in a deep and significative sense, not in a quantitative manner. This approach is fundamental in getting to know a vital part of Venezuela's barrios through their people's cultural expressions, specifically catholic processions.

Regarding the research design, I refer to the specific strategy to adopt to study and analyse the chosen phenomenon. The research design for this investigation comprises two elements. The first one is categorising the design as *emergent*; considering the nature of this phenomenon it was necessary to approach it with an open mind in order to explore and understand the different meanings given by people and the significant aspects of this matter. The second one relates to the specific *case study* approach; as Marshall and Rossman [22] and Vieytes [23] specify, case studies are used to study culture or societies, but from critical events, specific social groups or institutions. The aim is to research the depth of the case [23]-[25].

In order to achieve this, a variety of methods and techniques should be applied in the data collection, which makes the case study approach one of the most complex research designs [22], [23], [25]. In this research several techniques were applied in order to grasp the phenomenon of study from different angles. Thus being able to comprehend it from the participants’ perspectives as well as from the researchers observations and analyses. The methods were participant observation, in-depth interviews, informal conversations, audio-vicual survey and urban mapping.

## Participants, Data Collection and Analysis

The process of sampling in this research was a combination of purposeful, convenience and snowball sampling. Main participants were chosen based on their active engagement in the processions studied, and based on if they had ever lived in the selected areas. Those main participants also informed me during the research of other key members of the community relevant to this study.

The data collection was developed in two main stages, the first being a one-year pilot in 2008, where I attended different processions and interviewed several participants. In this process the importance for barrios’ inhabitants of the Holy Week processions arose, thus acknowledging that this should be the focus of the research.

From there, the second stage began, which comprised a three-year data collection period (from March 2009 to June 2011). This process was developed with the help of research assistants, so I could attend each set of processions at least once, in addition to having supplementary data from places that I could not attend simultaneously during that 3 years period, as some processions happened simultaneously

All the collected data was analyised framed on qualitative content analysis, which was conducted on a semantic and sense level as well as on a conative level, focusing on the relationships and their interpretation [23]. In order to achieve this, the software Nvivo is being used, to enable the linkage of the various data collection techniques described above.All the interaction with participant was done in Spanish, which is the official and spoken language in Venezuela. The selected quotes that informs the research are translated into English.

## Case Studies

The specific context of this study is Petare. Petare is a region located in the eastern part of Caracas, Venezuela, with mostly low-income population. Morphologically it is very diverse, ranging from traditional colonial urban fabric to barrios. Within this area a lot of ecclesiastic parishes are established, directly linked to the Arciprestazgo of Petare[[7]](#footnote-7). Given that the main study investigates religiosity as a cultural construct, it was appropriate to base the areas of study on the catholic political–administrative division of the city.

Departing from this first criterion, the second stage set of criteria was developed to delineate the precise areas to be researched. The nested four criteria were: (1) *morphological features,* selecting only the ones with barrio characteristics, previously mentioned; (2) *having contact* with the community and the Priest of the area, because of personal safety issues; (3) the *number of processions* that took place in the sector, selecting the ones with more processions during the Holy Week; and (4) *the population*, giving priority to those parishes with the highest number of inhabitants.

The specific chosen areas of study were: (1) the Evangelisation Centre Julian Blanco in the barrio Julian Blanco; (2) Parish Nuestra Señora de Fátima in the barrio El Nazareno; and (3) Parish San Francisco de Sales in La Dolorita.

Even though Julian Blanco, La Dolorita and El Nazareno are very different barrios with diverse religious institutions guiding this cultural aspect, they share values and meanings. The processes of sense of community, sense of place, attachment and appropriation can be found in all of them, and the religious cultural aspect is what in all cases ties the community together and enables people to freely use their public spaces. As aforementioned, the focus of this paper is these psychosocial processes, leaving the religiosity matter for future publications.

# On Urban Social Sustainability in Caracas’ Barrios

Barrio residents have a very strong sense of community and place that has been socially constructed along the years. This can be related to the closeness enabled by the urban morphology of the place and being directly involved in the development of the barrio over the years. However, along with those strong psychosocial community and place processes, they have also developed some important social issues such as criminal violence. The latter has deeply affected the ability of people to freely use their own spaces without being afraid. Notwithstanding, when such an important cultural event as processions occur, the community comes back together and take back those spaces. In these occasions it can be argued that the urban social sustainability of the place is momentarily regained.

In this section quotes from the participants were selected to dialogue with the text. These quotes are an integral part of the narrative letting the interviewees build the story of their processes and relationship with place.

## Origin of the Barrio: Being Together and Culture

As mentioned before barrios developed because of various factors that drew people from different parts of Venezuela and overseas to cities. In the case of Caracas, there were also internal movements from the time were barrios were not acknowledged and being eradicated.

*FA: (…) these barrios are the outcome of invasions; then, there is no regulatory plan, no! Everyone just goes where they can!*

*Q: (…) I believe that people here, I mean, have come, well, it’s an invasion that has come from elsewhere, because they came to the city and didn’t, where… and this is what they found and here it’s where they’ve settled!*

*M: Then when Caldera* [president of Venezuela from 1969 – 1974] *started evicting people from barrios, because I don’t know what he was going to do some houses around that area… Then, all of us had to go from there, because they told us to vacate!*

The constructions of barrios are embedded with stories of placement and displacement. In this last quote, we can see how the lack of land security was an important factor for internal migrations within the city, leading people usually in groups to locate another area where to develop a place to live. However, this lack of security as a product from lack of land tenure kept on existing after this *final* invasion in Petare. This perpetuated a sense of vulnerability that could only be overcome by the relationships built with neighbours who were experiencing the same. In addition staying close to family who could provide support through struggling times became a determinant of how barrios grew.

*M: then my mum bought this house there that she kinda had the money, which is in front of my sister’s (…) and I bought a ranchito[[8]](#footnote-8) over theeeeeeeere! (…) then I came crying at 2 am to my mum’s (…) and suddenly my sister’s mother in law (…) was selling this rancho here, and I said ‘Ay, would you sell it to me? (…)*

*GU: well, I got here as a boy, about… twelve, eleven year, when this was starting to be founded… This was sort of an… invasion (…) and then my dad… someone tipped him that here people were invading lands, and my dad too a land, and since that moment we started to develop a… a modest house [referring to a rancho], to have it just in case, and afterwards we came to live here definitely and we started the construction of our house; the family, we lived several families there. Then… I got married, have my family there. I have my wife, my kids and even grandkids.*

People in barrios have been deeply involved in the development of their houses and their context, not only aiming to maintain close relationships with their families. More than that, families strengthen their bonds, and expanding those supportive feelings to their neighbours. From this start, usually barrio founders become leaders within the community [26], and in some cases leadership is transmitted to next generations, as is the culture of living close to each other.

*JE: barrios in general are kind of the same idiosyncrasy… little space, closeness, union, etc. (…)*

This closeness is in this sense not only physical, but also communal. As described before, barrios are very dense areas, with a paucity of public spaces, being the existing one the places built by the community for the community. These are the places originally thought to be the spaces for encounter, for sharing.

In addition, this barrio culture, this proximity, is closely linked to the feelings of collaboration, solidarity and appropriation that as mentioned in section II, are fundamental in the processes of sense of community and place as a part of urban social sustainability,

## Sense of Community and Place

Sense of community and place built throughout the process of constructing the barrio together with their family and neighbours has deep roots in people. Not only they recognize who belongs to that valuable space, but also the easily identify who is not part of the community. Thus, these psychosocial processes underpin social territoriality. Along with this process, there is an overlapping structure of privileges related to your social connections.

*E: Of course, no, what happens is that they know each other very well… They are a community, it’s known people. They looked at me oddly because… ‘who is that?’ But when they saw me with this bloke Wilky, it was another thing, well… But everyone knows each other! It’s a congregation… almost family, all know each other (…)*

Being associated with one of the key members enables people to be part of the group, part of the community. Therefore, these links modify attitudes, actions, and feelings towards outsiders. This also applies when trying to implement policies, programs, or plans in barrios. Residents there have a very strong sense of appropriation with the space and also with their neighbours, so trying to come with an external proposal just plays against their history, their way of living, their culture.

This fact is also strengthen by the high level of solidarity that exists in barrios, that does not only relate to the physical construction of the space, but also to any other day to day activity or event.

*D: (…) they somehow all seek to help me too, because ‘what can I help you with?’ ‘What do you need?’, it’s always about sharing.*

Helping each other, being part of that community in the end is as becoming a vital part of a big family. Those feelings of sharing and the construction of the sense of community are intertwined with the space. The community in this particular case was built along with a physical space, which makes them inseparable. These are residential areas that people built and where they have lived most of their lives, a vital part of their existence.

*Ñ: To me Julián Blanco is… my home! (…) very dear to me. I’ve visited other barrios, with other communities… and say ‘I won’t change my barrio for anything!’, because… I mean, I feel safe!... within what can be, I mean (…) To me Julián Blanco is… the thing is that I’ve been here in Julián Blanco since I arrived when I was 14 years old! All my life! (…) but I needed my Julián Blanco! Because there’s where my people are, the ones I know, the ones that have grown old with me, and that! (…) But yes! It’s different! It’s my street! well I mean, it’s my life! yes! that street… the main street most of all!... There my daughter grew up, there they scratched their knees, all those things (…)*

It can be seen that barrio people focus on the positive social and community aspects that can be found only in their areas of residences, because place cannot be separated from its people. Hence, sense of place is obviously related to the sense of community. These processes are also related to how the urban space is shaped and the different activities that occur there on an everyday basis.

## Activities in the Public Urban Space

In the three areas of study the urban spaces found are similar both in morphology and urban structure. Therefore there are also similarities in the different activities that are engaged there. Among those activities markets, exercising, community meetings, drinking and criminal activities can be found. The paucity of public space that exists is flexible enough to accommodate those uses and more. Usually open public spaces in barrios comprise basketball courts, streets and intersections [18].

*B: It is really a favour from God having this court there, because there are celebrated the masses of Palm Sunday… also, there are people who organise soccer sports teams in the community, and that is their Sports Centre. There the Communal Councils[[9]](#footnote-9) from other sectors meet, go there to that court and engage in cultural festivities, dances… it’s a sole court where everything is done! (…) that’s the entertainment place of the whole community! (…) now after 10 pm, as the court doesn’t close, it’s a place that allows itself to alcoholic drinks, drugs and all that sort of stuff*

*BA: But… I always see the police who is attentive of getting the guys out of there, at night, yes! (…) the module [referring to the police module] is closely the court (…) It’s close, it’s close! (…)*

In the case of El Nazareno, as seen in the latter quote, the main public space is a basketball court that is shared by the whole community. This court has the advantage to have a police module closeby, thus it is looked after. In addition this space is located close to the parish, which is highly respected in that barrio. However, this situation does not apply to other places in El Nazareno, which are dangerous because of criminality issues.

The cases of La Dolorita and Julián Blanco also differ from the initial case presented here, they lack of police presence. Notwithstanding a diverse range of activities take place in their urban space.

*GU: Public spaces as such don’t exist, because the only space we have is the sports centre. And usually people go to play sports. There were a few good classrooms, but that all got lost (…) because that’s another thing… that violence also, mostly you can go there I’d say on weekends, that there are a lot of people. Because on weekdays people go walk or jog, but notwithstanding they go with a sort of fear because suddenly there can be a shootout, suddenly they can get mugged… Then, that also discourages people from participating of a lot of things, because of violence, that is unleashed. It’s not only because people wouldn’t want, people want, but they are afraid. Do you get it?*

As can be noticed from the last quote, even though there are some community spaces that people could and would use for recreational and sports activities, these are also used by thugs. However, in this case is not only a matter of place but also of time. Moreover, even though people are afraid to go to some places at some specific times, there as communal and social activities that still take place. Thus there are still some gathering places.

*Q: (…) the fact of the Roundabout is a meeting place, the fact of the Arch is a meeting place, now,* *that it’s because of a political reason, that now it’s a religious reason, that now it’s because of a festivity reason, that now it’s for a death reason, that now it’s for an economic reason, that now it’s for a social or cultural reason (…) Meeting place!*

*JE: or the public spaces of meeting in front of the convenience store, with booze, they meet… music, and the kids that play on the streets, in the cul-de-sacs, or in the spaces where there are no cars, they run, play as a relief because they don’t have space in their houses.*

*M: People?! Drink beer! They what they do is drink! (…)*

Even with these different activities that are organised by the community, by neghbours, by the government or by the Catholic Church, there are places that are also meaningful, but with a negative connotation. There are spaces that are stereotyped as dangerous, as being taken by criminal gangs, as unaccessible by the community. These public spaces that once were an important part of the community open space network, became no-go places that people avoid.

*JM: Regarding public spaces, well, they can also be seen around… sports courts and that. However, the same situation, the same vision that people have of what a barrio is, well, that makes them… not so frequented by people. Kids don’t… don’t usually, well, go to the courts and that. In fact there is one I believe is the most emblematic around here, that is the famous Parquecito [little park]. It’s the court that is below after the school Presidente Kennedy Fe y Alegría. And notwithstanding, people just by listening about it, and they already say they don’t want to walk by there (…) Well, because, it has, because a lot of stories. It’s almost the centre of gangs around there! There are plenty of stories of… people that have died in that place. (…) In fact, we have… witnessed things like that. We were once at the Kennedy school doing a rosary, praying the rosary, then a shootout started down there at the court… (…) because around there there are some gangs, they make that simply those courts are not used. The same around up here, close to the dumper in Julián Blanco there is another court, and there is a court that is most of the time empty, it’s alone. You can see kids playing ball here on the street even with how hard it is to play ball on these streets, that are uphills and downhills, and… But well the court is empty because… maybe they are places taken by the gangs and thugs hang out, and all that.*

*M: In the courtyard now they don’t do much. They played and stuff, but now… but as now in that barrio there are a lot of thugs… (…) It was a good park that there was before! I used to go there, around that place, to my knitting friends’ (…) About five year ago, that, but lately… five years, yes… lately a lot of thugs have gone there. They kill each other! I mean, the gangs! The one from the 24 of March[[10]](#footnote-10)! and they fight with the ones from… from up here close to El Parquecito, and kill each other!*

In barrios a huge contradictory and complex situation arises with the matter of public spaces. On one hand they were places built by people, that literally belong to them and with which community members are attached. On the other hand, by different social issues they have become unfamiliar areas where people just will not go. These places have changed their meaning. Here we can realise how through the different activities that are engaged in the public spaces and how those relate to people can have a huge influence on the psychosocial processes of sense of place and appropriation. Attached to this, the urban social sustainability of the area and the community is challenged by these external factors, which in the end are not so external.

As seen in the previous quotes, even though people try the best they can to live their everyday lives carrying on with different normal activities as markets, exercising, and sharing with friends, delinquency and criminal gangs have taken over important community spaces.

Criminal violence has become a very impacting problem for barrios’ inhabitants, thus not only threatening their community ties and the urban social sustainability processes, but more than that actually impacting it on deeper levels. People are afraid to use their own spaces, built by them over time, because of its *new* appropriation by gang members.

## Criminal Violence and Thugs as a Problem – Links to Place and Community Relationships

As aforementioned, because of criminality people have stereotyped barrios and specific urban spaces within them. Notwithstanding these general perspectives linked to explicit places have a very solid ground.

*Ñ: The other day we were walking up the stairs and some boys say to us ‘Come on, come on, against the wall! Against the wall and give us everything!’*

*Q: [about El Parquecito] In that particular place, in that area, more that in that particular place. In that area is perhaps where more… where there has been more violence, and there still is. Always… El Parquecito for whatever reason, has been a violence place. People, well, they fear it!*

*Ñ: That Parquecito is like the centre of… ‘let’s release… the bad things we learnt’, because it’s like that, not the good, but the bad… then, it’s cruel, but that’s how it is. El Parquecito is already a red zone.*

These public spaces, and barrios in general have been deeply affected by the new owners of the space, thugs. However, these gang members who deeply influence these feelings of displacement and detachment in the community, in the end are not outsiders. Furthermore, because of this feeling of belonging the thugs have, territoriality issues arise. They also have been playing and using these spaces since they were born. In most cases the gang members are teenagers or early adults.

In summary, even though there is a very high level of criminality, and thugs mess with residents, they still are part of the community. In addition, despite people are afraid of them, and because of that people somewhat segregate them, they are still known because they are someone’s neighbour, kid or grandchild. Therefore, community ties are still there, implicitly.

*Ñ: Here there are boys that have been killed! That I’ve seen them, that call me Ñaña, because everyone here calls me Ñaña.*

*Ñ: I say this because I leave very early morning, and all of them, for example today a Saturday, they are all screwed up. Drugged! Wasted! Sometimes… there is one people call Trapito [literal translation: little cloth], and many like that who ‘Ñañita, borrow my gun…! I take care of you!’ Those things I’ve had to live! and many of them around here ‘I take care of you Ñañita? Do you want to borrow my gun?... whatever…’ Then I say to them ‘Don’t worry, sweetie. I’m with God, and He accompanies me’. And you know, if I’m carrying bags then they help me out.*

Contradictory feelings are bound to the relationships between the thugs and the rest of the residents. They are identified as part of the community and at the same time they are these characters that people deeply fear. However, because of these community ties barrios’ residents sometimes disregard the fear generated by thugs, and find a way to approach them. In the end, they are still kids who in some cases were a valued part of the community. Also they share the same believes and traditions, in other words they share the same culture.

*Ñ: (…) ‘God give me the words to talk to them and give me courage!’, because… it’s not easy. Then, I go out… and tell them: ‘to who can I talk?’ ‘About what Ñañita, about what Ñañita?!’. I was amazed! (…) because to those people you can’t interrupt anythiiiiing! Because right there, right there you are their enemy! Then I saw their attitude, ‘look, my love… Don’t, don’t be afraid nor mad with me, I just came to ask you for a little favour. Because now our Nazareno[[11]](#footnote-11) as you know that it’s always brought here, please, so when El Nazareno shows up, you turn down the music… and then if you’d like, afterwards, blow up the walls, but while El Nazareno is here, please…’ And in fact, when you guys arrived…*

*G: (…) as soon as we arrived they turned down the music! El Nazareno hadn’t arrived, or anything, but as soon as we arrived, right then they turned off the music! That even the Father told them: ‘no, but it doesn’t matter! We’re not starting yet, so turn on your music…’ ‘No, no Father don’t worry!, and they just turned it down.. right there! (…)*

Gang members in barrios have a peculiar way of interacting with other community members, as it is the other way around. There are mixed feelings, approaches and actions towards them related to the specific activity that is taking place in the urban space. Usually, when it is an activity that congregates the community, and thugs are welcome to peacefully participate in them, they are not just approachable people, but also an integrated part of the community.

# Solution: Involving Thugs in Activities, Place and Violence – as a Conclusion

This relationship between the community and the members of the criminal gangs is tightly linked to the urban space. There are several areas in barrios that are taken by gangs, however the whole community uses them when a cultural event occurs. One example of a place with this condition is the aforementioned El Parquecito who hosts a Holy Week procession.

*JM: And then they said: ‘But it ends in El Parquecito, no? Because it always ends there!’ ‘Of course, it ends in El Parquecito!.’ The rest of the year you tell people something about El Parquecito! and they say ‘No, better not, because in El Parquecito, the people, the thugs, the thing, the shootout…’ But on Good Friday!... Everyone goes there!*

*M: And there has always been, the procession ends there and nothing has ever happened! And it’s been over 10 years! And nothing ever happens!*

In this case not only it is noticeable the sense of community, but most of all the sense of place driven by the cultural activity is more than evident. The claim of a space through this event is an expression of the sense of belonging to that place. In this case, El Parquecito becomes a place of encounter, a place where different communities feel as only one entity that share a feeling, share a space, share their culture, share in bottom line their lives.

*JM: But it’s it, isn’t it?... maybe the heterogeneity of people conforming these communities. It’s like… it’s more, or maybe more beautiful. Or to me, the fact that there is a space like this one, like to… what it… a space like this as processions are! for sharing! for unity and… being able, I mean, to express their religiosity accompanied by one another though… it may be only once a year!*

*Q: (…) it’s that I think that that space more than for religious activities, it’d be a space for the area, I mean, for the whole area. (…) Then I don’t believe that it’s about gaining back spaces for religious activities, because it’s already gained back! That Good Friday’s activity ends there and that keeps on happening, doesn’t it? Now that other activities that have to end in another place, I don’t think so… The problem of… space for the religious activity is no major problem.*

*Ñ: but the thing is… I believe that there… in El Parquecito another similar thing should be done. (…) I mean, the beginning plus other things [about to begin uniting sectors and the use of the court through religiosity]. I mean, take the most of the beginning, but introduce workshops (…)*

From all of the above it can be seen that even though the three areas had a lot of differences their participants share the same meanings and feelings regarding their communities and their places. In all three places, dealing with socials issues can be done departing from acknowledging the relevance of culture, in this case religiosity. Problems as criminal violence can start to being dealt with by ensuring the community feels as one, and by involving all the community members into the meaningful activities they share.

By incorporating all members of the community into the different activities that are engaged in the urban public space, people not only increase their bonds. They also strengthen their sense of community. On these occasions when the community as a whole can freely use their public spaces, their sense of place is also enhanced. In addition, by acknowledging gang members as part of this whole, the criminality issue that challenges the social sustainability of the barrio can be successfully addressed.

Finally, for future papers the topic about barrios’ sustainability can also be addressed by focusing on the religious aspect, which is a vital part of Venezuelans’ culture. In addition, other important issues as the implementation of plans and programs, should be researched from the social sustainability perspective by not only acknowledging and incorporating all community members, but also considering their culture,

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2. This topic will be further discussed in the following sections. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This topic will be further discussed in the following sections. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This notion will be further developed in the following sections. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The topic of community, criminality and place is going to be addressed further in the following sections. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Arciprestazgo* is an intermediate territorial field, led by an Archpriest, between the Archdiocese and the Parish. There is no English translation to this term, thus in this research its Spanish version is used. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Diminutive of *rancho*; as little *rancho*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This is a community based political – administrative council. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 24 of March is the name of that barrio nearby. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In this case El Nazareno is the image of Jesus related to Holy Week. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)