

# Social Struggles for Public Spaces in Guayaquil, Ecuador

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## The Age of Urban Regeneration

GUAYAQUIL is Ecuador's most populous city, and since the 1990s it has entered into its latest administrative, political, social and territorial metamorphosis. Economic growth and large numbers of tourists have been drawn to the city's neoliberal urban planning model, where the private sector has led the growth and management of the city at the expense of citizens' freedom and participation.

This model arose in the wake of numerous political scandals, which led the population to lose confidence in City Hall. Factors that contributed to this lack of confidence included low public self-esteem, the mismanagement of public funds, a poor provision of basic services to the population and a scandal involving municipal workers who received pay but never attended work. The "Partido Social Cristiano" promised to solve these problems, and was rewarded with a political victory. From the beginning, the party undertook a campaign of "urban cleansing", starting at City Hall, and later moving to the city's streets and public spaces.

As an early phase in the remaking of the city, new ordinances and laws were passed by Guayaquil's City Council to remove street vendors, who were cataloged as an undesirable element of the city's past. They were now confined in new municipal markets, where they

could carry out their work in a controlled environment. These new buildings, however, were not accompanied by an urban planning project that would maintain old customers and attract new shoppers. Therefore many of these merchants were hurt economically.



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**TOP**  
Malecón Simón Bolívar (1960)

**BOTTOM**  
Malecón 2000 Shopping Mall (2014)

Source: Guayaquil Historical Archives

Source: author archive

Next, the new administration proposed an architectural reconstruction of the city's linear coast park, which is Guayaquil's traditional public space. Under previous administrations, the park had suffered from deterioration and poor maintenance. In the words of one of the designer/architects aligned with the new local government, the linear coast park was a place where "the informal trader, juvenile offender, low-life, homeless person and drug dealer had made their headquarters."

The new reconstruction project was called Malecón 2000. To execute the plan an organization called Malecón 2000 Foundation was formed. This entity designed and managed the reconstruction of the linear coast park, and was an example of how the private sector appropriated a public space by turning it into a semi-exclusive space. The redesigned space was highly symbolic of the government's political intentions: a shopping center within the park created a visual obstruction from the sidewalk to the river; a perimeter fence was raised around the site; controls and prohibitions restricted who could enter and stay; citizens considered undesirable were excluded.

Paradoxically, many citizens were pleased with this process of urban sanitation. They approved of the new spatial order, in which social actors that generated a messy, dirty, chaotic and undesirable city were either expelled from the touristic areas to other, more confined spaces or were marked as "illegals" and apparently disappeared.

The physical aspects of the park have not suffered greatly, but its modes of public use have been severely constricted by regulations, ordinances and laws that identify and dispose of those activities and actions that do not boost tourism, commerce and construction.

After Malecón 2000 came the Diego Arteta y Noboa stairs in the Santa Ana Hill. This architectural and ornamental intervention similarly boosted tourism and promoted economic development and quality of life for certain citizens while further excluding so-called undesirables.

With this intervention, the Santa Anna Hill was divided into two sectors: one part was regenerated, but the other had no such luck. The neighborhood be-



Source: author archive

Door and wall that separate the two sides of Santa Ana Hill, 2010.

came fragmented, and its urban imagery was changed and controlled by municipal policies imposed by the foundation in charge of this project. "Moral codes," which stipulated how the inhabitants had to dress and how loud they could play their music indoors, and banned clotheslines, traditional games and neighborly recreation on the steps, were all enforced so as not to bother the new visitors to this "rehabilitated" urban space. Bars and doors were placed to separate the two sectors and make tourists feel safe.

All of this "urban progress" is gradually administered to indoctrinate people into the idea that this model can only be maintained by the current administration. The people are told that if changes are made to the administration, the city will lose its restored public spaces, contests, foundations international conventions, etc. This has politically disciplined the inhabitants, especially those who lived in or have a visual memory of the eighties, which are recalled in terms of garbage in the streets, parks and public spaces in poor condition and a proliferation of informal vendors. However, over the 20 year urban renewal period, a new generation of citizens has spawned – the children of those who originally benefitted by urban regeneration – and it is they who now criticize this model.

## City Awakening: The Generation of the Regeneration

According to the last Guayaquil census, the age range with the largest urban population is between 5 to 24 years old. This demonstrates an important generational change. Young people are critical of their city, and their urban image is not subject to the historical fear of the chaotic eighties. This younger generation has lived through municipal actions aimed at social control and exclusion from public spaces, and has experienced other urban problems, such as public transportation deficiencies and the lack of green areas, among others.

Recent protests and events by these younger citizens have been politicized by the municipality and its related groups. This is controversial, especially considering that since 2007, the left-aligned presidency of Rafael Correa Delgado has introduced a political movement towards changes in the state and provoked political criticism against Guayaquil's neoliberal model. This has led to the perception that public outcry should be stigmatized: if you protest against the local government for rights to the city and use of public spaces, it is immediately presumed that you support the social policies of the national government and you become the enemy of local politicians and leaders and their neoliberal agenda for progress.

It is important to point out the use of social networks as a mode of expression, dissemination and the exchange of opinions and ideas about this social dilemma. These social networks have also provided individuals with the means for logistical organization of events and peaceful civil protest.

Since 2009, social protest has occurred using public spaces as stages for urban struggle and civil demonstration against the exclusive ownership model of the Urban Regeneration. The current urban projects represent a form of cultural and social indoctrination that has fragmented the city and revoked its citizens' rights to freedom of movement, activities and the use of piers, squares, parks and sidewalks. This is all a result of the lack of inclusivity in planning and a failure in comprehensive urban planning on the part of all the actors involved.

That same year, people held protests such as the Gay Pride Parade on Nueve de Octubre Avenue, even though there was a municipal ban on the execution of this event. Activists also held a event called, "The tongue does not reserve the right of admission," where artists and social activists invited journalists, couples and the general public to be on the Malecón 2000 and passionately kiss each other in protest of legislation that forbade public displays of affection in public spaces. The "Rockers Parade" along the Malecón 2000 was staged to promote free access to these areas by removing signs displaying the message: We reserve the right to admission.



Public board in Malecón 2000 in 2003.

In 2013, two flashmobs took place, in which a group of protesters performed coordinated dances: one, in Barrio Las Peñas, between steps 37 and 38 of the Santa Ana Hill, protesting municipal regulations on the operation of bars and clubs in this sector; the other, in Administration Square (Municipality of Guayaquil), focused on the right to use public spaces. This last demonstration was unlike those of 2009, and ended with clashes between protesters and the Metropolitan Police, who used clubs and tear gas to control and

intimidate the protesters. Thereafter, the political discourse between the two political fronts – local and national – used these events for their own political agendas, proselytizing for the mayoral election.



Source: El Telégrafo

TOP: Flashmob      BOTTOM: Metropolitan Police retaliation

Young citizens continue their social struggle with demonstrations throughout the city, critiquing a neoliberal model that excludes informal mercantilism, freedom of dress, minority groups and international models of social and urban architecture in favor of privatized public spaces. But this battle has not been joined by academic institutions, which might back these claims and promote alternative proposals and possible solutions in the fields of architecture, design and urban planning.

### What Can Be Done?

In Guayaquil, Urban Regeneration projects have caused fragmentation due to the loss of public spaces and the exclusion of various social groups considered undesirable. The local government's vision prizes tourist and commercial development over citizens' rights. This leads to a mode of urban planning based on a biased model of progress and social cleans-

ing. In this context, it is useful to remember Henri Lefebvre's formulation that "the right to the city cannot be conceived of as a simple visiting right or as a return to traditional cities. It can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed right to urban life."

So what can be done to change this urban reality? Academic criticism within the walls of schools or through books and papers is not enough. Academic leaders must put forward proposals that benefit everyday citizens, especially at the neighborhood level, because this is the most intimate territorial unit in the daily life of city dwellers. Joint work between academia and civil society can be achieved through mechanisms and initiatives for participation in public spaces, producing a sense of belonging and empowerment in the community.

Social movements have begun to organize and are unifying efforts. This shows the need for a change in urban planning at the city level to respond to claims, complaints and criticisms of the model that is being developed in Guayaquil. Cultural activist groups and associations of young professionals in the field of architecture are promoting urban projects such as Jane's Walks – neighborhood walking tours – outdoor cinemas and other initiatives.

In the last mayoral elections, the issue of the right to the city and public space was first touched on by the candidates. These issues became the focus of campaigns for politicians opposed to the current administration, which allowed these topics to appear publicly and begin to be spoken about by the citizenry in general. This is true not just for the young people of the generation of the regeneration, but also for their parents and grandparents who have realized that youth's claims are not simply generational ravings, but are grounded in solid critiques of the social reality.

In Guayaquil, discussions revolving around the bicentennial celebration of the city's independence from Spanish colonial rule have begun. This historical landmark can be used to generate a change in the popular mindset, which could affect not only public and private institutions, but also the academic establishment and the general citizenry through the development of architectural and engineering projects with fundamentally sound and positive social bases. **P<sup>2</sup>**