

Repelling violence by design? Effects of the social and physical structure of resettlement communities on violence in the Bajo Lempa, El Salvador

Rachel Berney

University of Washington, Seattle, USA

rberney@uw.edu

Confronted with violence and chaos in the 1980-1992 Salvadoran Civil War, citizens fled to nearby countries to wait out the conflict. In the process most lost their land and their livelihoods. At the war's end, citizens returned in large numbers, but, as a result of government economic reforms and land repatriation processes, they were forced to relocate into different regions than those from which they had come. In many cases, people relocated with those they had fled with and/or met in refugee camps, and established new communities using only what skills they possessed collectively to establish a governing structure and physical design. As a result, several communities were founded in the early to mid-1990s throughout El Salvador by people in very similar circumstances, but with many different ideas about what an "ideal" community might look like. Currently, many of these planned communities, along with the country at large, face daunting levels of violence, especially gang violence. What is unique, however, is that some these communities are much more successful in keeping violence outside their borders. This paper asks why?

Using a comparative case study method, this paper analyzes and cross-examines the formation, development, and ongoing life of two communities established in the Bajo Lempa region of El Salvador: Ciudad Romero, founded in March 1990, and Amando López, founded in December 1991. Ciudad Romero has experienced the slaying of eight adolescents by outsiders in 2015 alone--all gang killings. In contrast, Amando López, just nine kilometers south, has, so far, suffered no gang-related deaths. Using a literature review, along with mapping, and interviews with residents, this paper explores the different social life and physical layouts of the communities to

ask and answer how social and spatial structure might affect the ability of gang influence to infiltrate, the ability of gang members to operate within the communities, and how the distinct histories of the communities--including social cohesion and identity, choice of physical settlement layout, and community services and amenities--have shaped each community's ability to enforce its own boundaries, among other factors, and keep its residents safe.

Of particular interest are the layout, design, and use of each community's public spaces, or what they define as shared space. Amando López was designed with a main road that serves as a communal cultural spine through the settlement off of which are located the school, cultural pavilion, and other shared community spaces. The founding fathers also created a protected wood, agricultural areas, and a public park. On the other hand, while living as refugees in, first, Honduras and, later, Panama, the families of Ciudad Romero had a poor experience with communal resource sharing. After suing for and receiving the land that they settled in the Bajo Lempa, they opted for a disbursed settlement pattern of equal, independently owned micro farms.

This paper documents what types of expertise and influences were available at that time that residents designed and began living in their new communities and analyzes planning and design decisions along the way. It examines how differences in physical layout and social life are contributing to different levels of community resiliency and how this resilience affects protection from violence, and supports community-building activities. The spatial policies governing these communities have resulted from conflict and migration and have evolved within a difficult environment of layered contestations of space, socio-spatial inequities, and hopes for a brighter future. Spatial policies and land use planning have evolved in El Salvador's resettlement communities in response to very specific conditions, yet the communities formed in these processes have something to offer generally – lessons learned about social and physical resilience in the face of challenge. They have acted locally by necessity, but offer examples appropriate for other places. This paper elucidates spatial policies for resilience, drawn from the direct experience of those displaced by war, who returned to seek social and spatial new beginnings and, now, when threatened by a new source



of violence, are trying to draw needed strength and support from the communities they designed for themselves.