A Negotiation Between the Public and the Private

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Located 74 km from the port of Guayaquil in Ecuador, Babahoyo is an intermediate city of approximately 175,000 inhabitants, with a high agricultural production but with deficiencies in infrastructure and services, and high levels of emigration due to scarce local employment. Instead of following this migration trend, Natura Futura’s principal architect, José Fernando Gómez, decided to return to Babahoyo after studying in México, dedicating himself to architecture. Since 2014, he has been committed to building facades that break into the urban profile: steep heights, unusual materials, and unique compositions that slowly have captured the attention of the city’s neighbors and inhabitants.

In 2017, Natura Futura was commissioned to design a popular restaurant on the ground floor of a residential building downtown. The uniqueness of the project lies in how it takes advantage of the interstitial space between the roadway and the building. On the other hand, City hall asked to keep pedestrian circulation accessible and reach an agreement with the co-owners regarding the occupation. Thus, the process involved assemblies, adjustments, and, mainly, agreements.

The setback of the building represented a legal loophole and, at the same time, an opportunity. The operation consisted of extending the limits of the commercial premises through a large roof positioned over this space of – collective? – property, contrasting with its urban environment, while also adapting to it, blurring the distinction of interior/exterior and public/private.

Aparecida Arguello – a former Natura Futura architect – argues that the project’s main contribution was to hack into a private investment to offer infrastructure to the city. The owner of the restaurant, Tania Zurita, agrees with the idea, adding: “I know that that outside space is everyone’s... so that people can walk... going about their business like they owned the place.” Within a few months, these strategies were
imitated by nearby premises, generating changes in the urban landscape.

But the pandemic changed the plan. Neighbors called for strengthening the security of the area and the city hall responded with vertical enclosures – fences –, which redefined the borders of the building, transforming a part of that – social? – property into an exclusive area for its inhabitants.

With this division, the La Pesca Urban Restaurant became a border post, with half of its area within the territory of the building (closed) and the other within the territory of the city (open). Thus, it also acquired the task of controlling who enters and who leaves these spaces.

For Tania, “it looked beautiful!... they put up fences, half of my clients are fenced, there’s more privacy.” However, for those of us working in the fields of architecture and urban planning, it should be a call to keep the debate active and to question public/collective/social/private property and appropriations from a critical, intersectional and multi-scale perspective.

Natura Futura’s intervention in Babahoyo is a contemporary approach to architecture as much as a space for negotiation between individual and collective interests, an advocacy tool on local public policy. I am aware that this scope is feasible thanks to the scale of the city and the type of project, but it is still a brave and, more important, necessary bet. ARQ
Notas / Notes

1 I thank José Fernando Gómez for his sincerity and openness about his experience as the author of this work. I also thank David Barragán, partner of Al Borde Arquitectos, for sharing with me his professional opinion on the project as part of his participation in the documentary Hacer mucho con poco (2017).

2 Aparecida Arguello is a Nicaraguan architect who was an intern at the Natura Futura office and worked in the design and construction of La Pesca Urban Restaurant. The opinions collected here were obtained from a conversation via WhatsApp on February 23, 2021.

3 Tania Zurita Maldonado, owner and cook of the restaurant, decided to hire Natura Futura because “Babahoyo is my city, where I made my money, so why not give Babahoyo something beautiful in return? That’s why I decided to work with someone professional!” The phrases presented here belong to an interview conducted by telephone on March 2, 2021.

4 Ibid.

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