The Right to Adequate Housing
Case Study: El Alto, Bolivia
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As we’ll read later on, cities have always stood as symbols of hope that promise work, wealth and a better life. In the current economic crisis, these three things are even more attractive ever – one of the reasons why there are now more people living in cities than ever before. Yet the vast majority of people ‘living’ in these cities live in inadequate housing or slums.

A slum is defined by the United Nations as an area ‘with inadequate housing, sanitation, tenure security and no or few basic services’. More than 900 million people around the world live in these kinds of areas – which, let’s be clear, are better than nothing – still do not represent adequate housing. And as that’s what we’re campaigning for, it would be remiss of us not to address this part of the issue.

But rather than give you a distant view of this environment, we thought we’d give you a local viewpoint. So we asked our friends in Bolivia to create a portrait of El Alto for us, to give you an idea of what life is like in one of the world’s youngest, most thriving and hardest cities. We’ve divided it into 3 sections: an overview of the city; a couple’s journey to El Alto and their subsequent attempt to establish themselves in the city; and an insight into one of the biggest problems in El Alto – crime. We hope it inspires you.

Huge thanks must go to Susana Machicao and Victor Hugo Ordoez Kock for their time and efforts in creating these powerful pieces.

1. Overview of La Ciudad del Alto

El Alto is a city and municipality located in the highland plateau in the west of Bolivia. At 28 years old, it is Bolivia’s youngest city, a city that was once a suburb of La Paz, the capital of Bolivia, and is now one of Latin America’s largest urban centres with a population of 1,184,942.

It hosts Bolivia’s international airport, is the home of the Public University of El Alto, has a booming commercial centre with over 5600 small & medium enterprises, factories and oil processing plants, and is the place from where the country’s national mineral resources and raw processed material are exported. In short, it’s a thriving city. Daily life in El Alto is a dynamic, impressive spectacle. The city hums with activity as business, industry, and transport rush around to consolidate the city’s status as the place of greatest growth in Bolivia. El Alto’s location and direct relationship with La Paz mean that it can serve as a unifying pole between the neighbouring markets of Peru and Chile, allowing it to develop at a fast rate and enjoy more growth than the rest of Bolivia.
This growth attracts hundreds of new citizens every day, mainly immigrants from the rest of the country, especially newcomers from rural areas seeking an opportunity in “the city”.

Most of the immigrants come from the rural areas of the departments of La Paz, Oruro and Potosí (the plateau and the provinces of Bolivia) plus the neighbouring country of Peru. This influx to the city represents a disproportionate growth in its population that places a huge pressure on the city’s infrastructure. A pressure that leads to problems. Lots of problems. We will investigate the effect of three of these problems, to present a portrait life in one of the world’s largest ‘slums’.

The city of El Alto contains every contemporary urban problem, an urban sprawl made up of dissipate neighbourhoods, with a space occupied by public and private institutions, with all kinds of formal and informal trade, and a concentration of public transport routes. In short there is “a serious deterioration of the public space”.

A diagnosis has identified that poor urban sanitation, obsolete sewer network, a low coverage of the storm drainage system, lack of vegetation, pollution, lack of security and poor environmental sanitation are the most pressing problems of the city of El Alto.

The appropriation of public space is a huge problem. The streets are turned into spaces used for cooking, they become public toilets, mobile and semi-commercial stalls are installed, kiosks are built solely as fixed deposit spaces, because traders prefer to sell on the street, the house is used as commerce, and points of sale also serve as housing.

The problems identified in this city are particularly visible in La Ceja del Alto. It’s impossible to begin to estimate or describe the number of retailers that work on the streets here, the congestion (vehicular, pedestrian, transportation); the chaotic trade of products and services in fixed, semi-fixed and mobile businesses, the housing and trade, the appropriation of public space for folk festivals and regional fairs; the pollution, insecurity and lack of leisure and recreation spaces in this area. About 300,000 people circulate through the Ceja of El Alto on a daily basis; a hub on which 476 lines of buses and minibuses converge.

The majority of citizens have Syncretic character in their religion, so they practice and preach all sorts of religions, from Catholic worships to rites in honour of the Pachamama. The largest cultural festival is the “July 16” celebration, which brings together experienced musicians and dancers, and large amounts of alcohol are drunk. People prepare all year for this celebration, where there is also trading of different handcrafted items related to the celebration and rented gowns and costumes with which they dance.

In the axis of real-industrialization processes, there were three processes and their results verified, two of them induced by the Economic Development Act (concentrated industrialization process)
WORK
An Economic Development Act was introduced to make it easy for large and medium industries to settle in El Alto through the liberation of taxes and tariffs, for the import of machinery (33 companies generating 3900 jobs). A second process was focused on the ATPDEA with consortiums that were able to import products to the U.S. These consortiums tied contracts with 45 medium businesses and each of these in turn was related to 5 small and medium businesses of 9 or 10 workers. The third process of industrialization refers to small or medium enterprises – of which 8000 were created, but now many are currently closed. This process of SMEs generates lots of bad quality, informal low-wage jobs. Capital is small, technology is not the best and the productivity is low, because the training of manpower is basic.

According to the National Observatory of Public Safety, in a recent protest Alto neighbours asked for the death penalty to be applied to the cogoteros (muggers) after two journalists of that city were killed as they were heading to work. In one weekend there were at least two attempts to lynch suspected thieves (one of whom turned out to be policemen) and one young man who was mistaken for a thief, was burned to death. El Alto has the highest crime rate in attribution to economic factors (unemployment, extreme poverty).

SOME FACTS
• Less than 5 out of 10 households were affected by a crime or act of violence.
• El Alto ranks first place in violence against people.
• Only 11% of crimes are reported to the police.
• 7.8% of victims in El Alto believe that if they report to the police they may face reprisals from the aggressor.
• 45% of respondents believe that the main cause of insecurity in their neighbourhood is unemployment and extreme poverty.

2. Access to Housing and Development in the city of El Alto: A couple coming to El Alto
The sun beats down relentlessly, the breeze becomes heavier with every moment, as drought and wind work together to blind the eyes of everyone within their reach. The micro (the local slang for buses) arrives. A young couple step out. All they have with them is the little money they got from selling their belongings, and all they’re weighed down by are the worries of beginning an adventure that they can’t help but feel will entail a lot of pain and sacrifice. They carry in their hands a few utensils, their only tools to help them carve out a shelter to embark on the biggest battle of their lives: the conquest of the city.

THE FIGHT TO SURVIVE
It is a battle of honour; losing it will make them despair and feel as if they are zombies stumbling through the city of hope. Yes, El Alto is a city of hope, just as every city has always been a symbol of progress and prosperity. Many young people in rural communities were forced to leave their place of origin due to the lack of opportunities they had there and the precarious conditions in which they raised their children. In other words, they made their way towards the Promised City to achieve an objective, both simple and complex: to improve their livelihood with dignity.
THE FIRST STEP
The first step in the battle against the obstacles imposed by the city of El Alto is to try and arrange a place to live. This isn’t an architectural project, it’s more similar to the construction of a trench in warfare, a practical space forced upon people by necessity, regardless of whether or not it possesses the basic conditions to house a family. It’s no secret that the city of El Alto has configured its structure through the creativity and survival instincts of its inhabitants, as despite a lack of technical or financial support or even suitable building materials, newcomers to El Alto have to carve out a place to seek shelter.

SOLIDARITY, A FAMILY DYNAMIC
The family that plays an important role at this stage, as it assumes responsibility for hosting its members, regardless of whether there is any room for the new arrivals or not; in short, the need is pressing, but the heart is large. So the couple rushes to obtain, legally or illegally, a piece of land. Once you have the required space, the construction has a special attachment: family support, either financial or moral.

URBAN DEVELOPMENT
The expansion of the city of El Alto has transformed as the rural soil has become urban space due to the human settlement and migration. Spontaneous and uncontrolled bursts of growth are common, visible in the emergence of new areas that spring up as quickly as they do vigorously, making it difficult to maintain urban control. Without a general or regulated pattern of growth, mixed with the impulses of individual initiatives of those wishing to live in the city, our couple decide to construct housing according to their means. The most common form of access to housing in the city of El Alto is “self-construction”, which does not necessarily mean that people “construct” the entire building. The only form of control is that people decide where, how and when they want to build.

It has become common to consider that if a person has a home, this automatically entails increased welfare and that they have a more developed place to ‘live’. In fact, it’s amazing how “neoliberals” and “critics of the system” have reached a consensus on the role of “self-construction”. Although it must be recognized that this road has not been exempt of contradictions. More than a decade ago, a renowned international organization declared: “There is no doubt that much has been achieved in different cities with the adoption of new standards and investments specifically aimed at improving the supply of housing and infrastructure in urban areas.”

This establishes that the important thing is to provide “homes” because there was a high housing deficit.

The idea that urbanization equals development comes from the progress seen in the metropolises of developed countries, but this has been shown to be false when it became clear that the urbanization processes in countries such as Latin America generate new problems and exacerbate existing ones. This happened even when the newcomers to the city did enjoy better economic conditions than the ones in their homeland. The development of large circles of poverty in cities (such as El Alto) shows that increased urbanization is not always linked to greater progress.
3. Crime in El Alto

According to reports of the Special Force against Crime (FELCC), delinquent associations exercise over 20 criminal activities, among those classified as higher risk, are the cogoteros, who besides their intent to steal objects value or theft of a motor vehicle, aim to take the life of their victims in order not to have witnesses who can identify them. Added to them, the criminals and thieves known as boatmen, descuidistas and others who spread panic among the thousands of people who pass through this sector.

Criminal activities in El Alto are concentrated in urban areas with higher levels of pedestrians. Among the areas considered high risk in La Ceja, where people engaged in criminal activities are located at different times and days, are the March 6th and Jorge Carrasco avenues between the first and seventh street, the Villa Bolivar “A” zone, the Juana Azurduy de Padilla Square and the Villa Dolores sector, the July 16 Fair, the Juan Pablo II avenue, the Río Seco sector, the Satellite Town and the Ballivián square, areas where criminals operate on holidays and weekends, due to the large crowd of citizens who attended the fair or some social event, activity that is served by different ballrooms located in the mentioned areas.

Reports from law enforcement show that they have classified more than 300 gangs, of which about 100 are engaged in illegal activities of various kinds, including those in high-risk groups like the cogoteros, “these kids have a trademark with which they are identified, they are often caught with knapsacks that carry inside: pitas, ropes and knives, for the intention of intimidating people in order to steal their belongings, and potentially to kill their victims”. Other techniques employed by these criminal groups is to pose as passengers to intercept public service drivers, especially taxis, murder them inside their own vehicles and then abandon them on the streets.

OTHER CRIMES

Among other activities of delinquents that are installed in affluent areas such as the bus terminal in the city of El Alto, are the boatmen who throw a package of fake money in front of the victim, who they distract by encouraging him to distribute the money while they steal his own valuables. Similarly conmen invent awards ‘given’ by well known companies to lure their victims to a location where the criminals steal all their valuables. Finally there are the “authorities” - people who pose as policemen and mug the victim inside taxis.
The July 16 Fair is a venue for many of the crimes. It has about half a million registered merchants that offer everything from pins to vehicles and original electronic devices. According to a leader, there are over 120 associations of different fields that group approximately 500,000 merchants. This supply centre is installed every Thursday and Sunday in the July 16 zone of the city of El Alto (hence its name) and due to its constant growth it has expanded to more central areas of the city. The fair starts at 05:00 and runs until about 18:00.

Throughout the day there is a huge variety of products and services on offer, ranging from used clothes and objects to vehicles, food, wool, animals, plants, antiques, appliances, electronics, spare parts, furniture, in addition to agricultural, electrical and construction products among other things.

One of the most popular sectors is the Plaza Pacajes, which offer all types of vehicles, in the beginning the sale of vehicles was destined to occupy a single street but today it dominates about 20 blocks in total, where you can see anything from motorcycles to heavy trucks. There are four associations concentrated at the show dedicated to the purchase and sale of motor vehicles.

In other corners, like the Fournier Street, animals are sold as pets and many times wild animals have been found being sold as well, sparking anger amongst animal advocacy organizations. On every street you can find “a bit of everything”, but generally used items. Merchants are usually are poor and sell anything from screws, old newspapers, cards and obsolete computer hard drives, old toys and props. According to several studies, the show itself moves up about 2 million dollars per day while the Mayor of El Alto gets a collection of about 200,000 bolivianos per month by charging “sentaje”.