# *Narratives of Appropriation* Abandoned Spaces, Entangled Stories and Profound Urban Transformations

Dalia Milián Bernal

> *It is not just saying, 'I want to occupy a space', rather, it is 'I want to create concrete examples of the kind of country I want to live in' . . . that is the power of urban activation and community activation and all that is related with manifesting the dreams and the imagination physically.*
>
> *Sofía Unanue, personal communication, 21 February 2018*

Sofía's statement is a powerful one and can only be understood when contextualized. The day I interviewed her, she was talking to me from her home in the city of San Juan in Puerto Rico. It had only been a couple of months after Maria – a Category 5 hurricane – struck the island in September 2017, ploughing its way through the fields, destroying an already fragile urban

infrastructure, disconnecting towns from any form of communication – not to mention killing thousands of people and leaving many others without home or shelter.[1]

As claimed elsewhere, the hurricane is only partly at fault for the devastation, because Puerto Rico's social, economic and political systems were already in precarious conditions before the passing of Maria.[2] For years, the island had been subjected to land grabbing and unregulated resource extraction and plunged into a financial crisis. In 2016, a fiscal board was appointed to oversee and manage the economic crisis. Known as La Junta, the board put in place harsh austerity measures that further impoverished already poor public services and institutions, leading to either their closure or privatization, raising the unemployment rate and catalysing a wave of migration from Puerto Rico to the United States mainland.[3]

As I was told, Maria crystallized Puerto Rico's lack of sovereignty and its dependency and colonial relationship to the United States. It is no coincidence, then, that in the interviews I conducted with Puerto Ricans, words such as 'unleashed neoliberalism' and 'colony' coloured the conversation, and the word 'exodus' was often used to explain the landscape of vacancy and abandonment – it is estimated that 24 per cent of Puerto Rico's housing stock stands vacant. [4]

It is within this context that Sofía and *La Maraña,* a non-profit organization she co-founded in 2014, began to join and support communities to 'activate' abandoned urban spaces in San Juan. In this way, Sofía became part of a web of actors that have found the appropriation of abandoned urban spaces to be a stark form of political action that challenges established power dynamics and that can help mobilize communities to pursue social justice by confronting entrenched processes of urbanization.

Based on a narrative inquiry, this article presents the stories of four women who are, individually and collectively, appropriating vacant and abandoned urban spaces, physically transforming them, providing them with new uses, while unleashing other processes that have the potential to lead to profound systemic transformations. Building on these stories, the article discusses the notion of appropriation, utilizing Henri Lefebvre's writings. The key argument of the article is that, through the appropriation of these urban spaces, these women are asserting their right to the city and their right to challenge and participate in the processes of urbanization.

In the following sections of this article, I will first provide a brief definition of Lefebvre's notion of appropriation. Then I will describe the research methodology and explain the meaning of narrative in this research. Subsequently, I will narrate the stories of Michelle, Omayra, Marina and Sofía, four Puerto Rican women appropriating urban spaces, and reveal how their stories became entangled on a vacant plot, disentangled across the city of San Juan, and how their actions unleashed other processes. To conclude, I link these stories to Lefebvre's notion of appropriation, draw connections to similar stories emerging elsewhere, and lay out possible paths for future research.

## Appropriation According to Lefebvre

To appropriate something means to take it 'for one's use, typically without the owner's permission'.[5] To understand appropriation in Lefebvrian terms, it is first necessary to comprehend what that *something* that is to be appropriated is – which is an abstract space.

According to Henri Lefebvre, abstract space is the social space produced under contemporary forms of capitalism.[6] Space has become 'concrete abstraction', the likes of exchange value, commodity, money and capital – at once the spaces of consumption and the consumption of space.[7] At the same time, it is the product of the fusion of knowledge and power result-

ing in the flattened, dispersed, divided and segregated space envisioned by architects and city planners, such as Le Corbusier and Haussmann in Europe.[8] Abstract space is the 'container ready to receive fragmentary contents', the functionalist architecture of modernity produced by abstract labour for abstract users.[9] It is a contradictory, fragmented, homogeneous and hierarchical space asserted through violence and domination over nature and the body, its time and its rhythms.[10]

In the contradictions of abstract space, however, the emergence of a differential space is rendered possible. A differential space is a political project through which the right to the city – 'a demand for political and aesthetic appropriation of space' – is asserted.[11] While 'abstract space is founded on domination', the creation of a differential space requires appropriation.[12] Therefore, a differential space 'relies upon the active agency of the inhabitants [and] a massive intervention of personal and collective uses of space'.[13]

In Lefebvrian terms, appropriation can be understood as a potentially emancipatory praxis that, Lefebvre argues, would 'fall to women to achieve'.[14] Appropriation is a practice that requires an 'active and creative transformation of urban life'.[15] It 'implies time (or times), rhythm (or rhythms), symbols, and a practice'.[16] Appropriation culminates in a differential space that, in contrast to abstract space, 'nurtures differences and particularities' and helps restore the relationship between the body and space.[17]

### Methodological Considerations

This article is based on a qualitative and inductive narrative inquiry that studies 26 cases of temporary appropriations of vacant and abandoned urban spaces across Latin America, including Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, Panama, Peru and Puerto Rico. Here, narrative is defined as:

> *Everyday storytelling [in which] a speaker connects events into a sequence that is consequential for later action and for the meanings that the speaker wants listeners to take away from the story. Events perceived by the speaker as important are selected, organised, connected, and evaluated as meaningful.*[18]

Textual and visual data were collected from an array of online sources, such as websites of the grassroots' organizations, reports, social media, online news, blogs, online videos, academic articles and conference proceedings.[19] Subsequently, fourteen online in-depth narrative interviews were conducted with the main actors behind each case – some responsible for more than one case.

Held between 2018 and 2020, the narrative interviews have an average duration of two hours. These were recorded and transcribed *verbatim*. The language of the interviews is Spanish and only excerpts have been translated into English. The interview transcripts were analysed employing constructivist grounded theory procedures and situational analysis. Both analytical tools deconstructed the narratives to locate relationships among the actors, their stories and the cases.[20] Deploying Donald Polkinghorne's narrative analysis, the stories were (re)constructed using the array of online sources as well as the narrative interviews.[21]

This article builds on four of these interviews. For stylistic purposes, I will only reveal the first names of the people involved in the stories throughout the text and disclose the full identities of the four women who are part of the research only in the endnotes: Sofía, Michelle, Omayra and Marina. The four women represented in this narration read and commented on initial versions of the article.

At the time of the interview, these women were between 25 and 45 years old, all of them have followed tertiary education, and all have attended uni-

versities outside of Puerto Rico (more information about these women will be communicated throughout the narration).

Thus, let me begin this narration where many of these narratives began: on a small vacant plot in the city of San Juan in Puerto Rico.

### Entangled Stories on an Empty Plot

Before Puerto Ricans met the forces of hurricane Maria, or Sofía began appropriating abandoned spaces, Michelle and her sister had been transforming a small abandoned plot into an open-air community cinema. At the time, Michelle was a young film director who had recently returned to Puerto Rico from the United States and had just finished filming two short movies in Loiza Street. She thought it would be a good idea to show them there but, due to the lack of spaces to showcase her movies, she settled on showing them on a vacant plot. Initially, this was going to be a one-time event, but the warm welcome of the community and the high number of attendees motivated her and her sister to transform the vacant plot into a community cinema for the next three years. Inspired by one of Michelle's favourite films, the open-air community cinema was called *Cinema Paradiso en la Loiza*.

From 2012 to 2015, every second Sunday of the month, the sisters showed movies from all over the world and of different genres and also provided a special niche for emerging Puerto Rican film directors and artists to showcase their films. Movies were projected onto a white rectangle painted on one of the three walls surrounding the plot. These eroded walls were soon covered by colourful murals painted by local artists who wanted to participate in the transformation of this space.

The community cinema started to generate a lot of energy around it, attracting people from different parts of the city, for all sorts of purposes. Omayra, Yazmín and Andrea were among those who wanted to join the efforts of

Fig. 1. *Cinema Paradiso en la Loíza*, San Juan, Puerto Rico, Michelle and friends cleaning the plot, 2012. Photographer: © Michelle Malley Campos

transforming the plot. All architects and teachers from schools of architecture in Puerto Rico, these women and their students designed and built spaces on the plot where people could sit, perform and sell their art.

The open-air cinema also attracted Marina, an anthropologist turned urbanist who had recently returned from Barcelona, and who was a 'regular' of the movie nights. She organized a weekly, Saturday morning local arts & crafts' market on the plot. The performers of the National Circus of Puerto Rico, the Plenazo Music Festival, and the Independent and Autonomous Book Fair, were among others that found a house on the once-vacant plot.

The plot was also filled with curious little stories, like the one of an elderly man who passed by while Michelle was cleaning the area on a Sunday morning and asked '¿hay cine hoy?' (movie night tonight?), becoming an emblematic phrase later used to announce evening sessions. Another elderly man used to bring Michelle a list of movie recommendations. 'Movies,' she told me, 'that I had not even heard about.'[22] All these people and their stories helped transform a plot into a collective space, forging the essence of *Cinema Paradiso en la Loiza*.

Three years after the community cinema began, Michelle and her sister, with the support of Omayra, Yazmín and Andrea, started negotiations with city officials to make this temporary space a permanent one. Just when the prospect of becoming permanent was in sight, the owner of the plot decided to rent it to someone else. There and then ended this chapter of the story.

### Stories Disentangled across a City

While *Cinema Paradiso en la Loiza* ended in Loiza Street, its energy had spread to many other abandoned spaces across Puerto Rico and led Omayra, Yazmín, Andrea, Marina and Sofía to start their own stories of appropriation in different parts of the city.

Fig. 2. *Cinema Paradiso en la Loíza*, San Juan, Puerto Rico, performance by the National Circus of Puerto Rico, 2013.
Photographer: © Michelle Malley Campos

### *Taller Creando Sin Encargos*

In 2012, Omayra, Yazmín and Andrea founded *Taller Creando Sin Encargos*, an all-women design collective that supports individuals and communities to put abandoned urban spaces to better use through temporary and permanent appropriations.[23] Their work is always part of didactic activism in the form of a workshop called *Workshop Arquitecturas Colectivas* (Workshop Collectives Architecture). Since its foundation, *Taller Creando Sin Encargos* has organized two workshops. In their first edition, the team and workshop participants joined the community of La Perla. Through creative activities, they engaged with the women and children of the community to analyse the area together, select three sites, and through a hands-on collaboration transformed three ruins into spaces for children to gather and play. In the second edition of the workshop, the women's collective and the workshop participants joined the community of Puerta de Tierra and a group called Brigada PDT, building together a colourful and functional bus stop.

It is worth noting the creative processes and activities that the all-women collective undertook to acquire resources and engage with the community. In their first edition, the collective organized a brunch and cooked meals to acquire funds for the workshop. They also obtained a donation of disposable cameras, which were given to the children to participate in a Scavenger Hunt, during which the children photographed areas of their everyday life that were meaningful to them.[24] These photographs were exhibited in La Perla's community centre and served to select the sites for future action. Omayra recalls seeing the children's 'little faces' while looking at their work and their pictures and told me 'the love they had towards what was done, it was very special because they [the children] saw how everything came out from them'.[25]

An important part of the workshop is to work in collaboration with communities, responding to their needs and desires. The design is a week-long

process called a 'charet' after which the community leader, the broader community and other professors of the universities select the best projects. Selected projects are built together! The third edition of the workshop was going to be held in the summer of 2020 but, due to the pandemic, it was postponed until further notice.

### *Casa Taft 169*

Upon her return from Barcelona, Marina lived opposite 169 Taft Street, which had been abandoned for more than forty years. According to Marina – who has become literate on abandoned properties and the legal jargon surrounding this issue – the property had been left in a legal condition known as intestacy after the owner died in the 1970s and had later been declared a 'estorbo público' (public nuisance). According to the Supreme Court of Puerto Rico, a public nuisance is 'anything that produces harm, inconvenience, damages, or that essentially hinders the enjoyment of life or property'.[26] When a property is declared a public nuisance, owners must demolish or repair the properties, otherwise the state may intervene and 'get rid of such nuisances', usually through demolition.[27]

While the access to the house had been blocked, the front yard was used as a dumpster for several years. Given the situation, a few women in the neighbourhood, including Marina, decided to clean the property and plant a little *huerto*.[28] Marina told me that the little huerto 'marked a moment of inflexion that forced the neighbours to get out of their houses, go to the street, take care of it, talk and get to know each other', while unleashing other processes.[29] Soon after, the women started to 'see the house in another way' and decided to 'occupy' the property and transform the space into a 'civic centre' called *Casa Taft 169*. A few months later, they established the neighbourhood association and registered it as a non-profit organization; the civic centre would serve as a meeting point for the community and space for the women to plan collective actions.[30]


Fig. 3. *Taller Creando Sin Encargos,* San Juan, Puerto Rico, the team of collaborators at the newly constructed bus stop, 2017.
Photographer: © Doel Vazquez Pérez.

Fig. 4. *Casa Taft 169*, San Juan, Puerto Rico, abandoned house, 2013.
Photographer: © Marina Moscoso Arabía.

Over the years, the civic centre has established alliances with different communities and groups, including *Taller Creando Sin Encargos* and *La Maraña*, and, like *Cinema Paradiso en la Loiza*, it has generated a lot of energy around it, attracting other members of society to join. In 2015, a law scholar and activist and his students joined the efforts of *Casa Taft 169*, initially helping by cleaning and painting the house, later collaborating with a Puerto Rican legislator to amend the law regarding public nuisances. Marina and her colleagues wanted the government 'to recognize that demolition is not the only alternative' and soon began a campaign called *Todos Somos Herederos* (We Are All Successors) – Sofía was one of the campaigners and signatories.[31] Their efforts resulted in the amendment of Puerto Rico's Civil Code of 1930, with the addition of the law Ley Núm. 157 de 9 agosto de 2016, which indicates that: 'In the absence of people with the right of inheritance, the municipal government will inherit the public nuisance . . . five months after the University of Puerto Rico has expressed a lack of interest in the property'.[32] After this time, the municipality 'may assign, donate, sell or rent these properties' to non-profit organizations, making these spaces available to them to further develop their activities.[33]

In 2017, *Casa Taft 169* was awarded the ArtPlace Award and, at the time of our interview, the property was in the process of being acquired with the funds that came with the prize.[34]

### *La Maraña*

Before Sofía met Marina, she had been living in the United States studying social movements developing in the Middle East. When the Arab Spring began, she travelled to Egypt and evidenced the transformation of Tahrir Square and became 'fascinated about the takeover of the city'.[35]

Upon her return, she met Edgardo and Cynthia with whom she founded the non-profit organization *La Maraña* (The Entanglement), to help communi-


Fig. 5. *Casa Taft 169*, San Juan, Puerto Rico, appropriated house, 2013. Photographer: © Marina Moscoso Arabía.

ties 'activate' abandoned urban spaces. Their first project was *Parque Estrella*, a self-organized community park on a public space abandoned approximately 40 years previously that had become a 'clandestine rubbish dump'.[36]

Through a process of participatory design, Sofía, *La Maraña* and the people in the neighbourhood began to define the future of the park, and to build it. Different to the process in which the community designs and the government executes, *La Maraña* believes that participatory design 'requires all sectors of society, not only the government' to get involved and to take action. After obtaining permission from the municipality to appropriate the park, the non-profit organization started to put in motion a *maraña de alianzas*, a network of alliances that included the local community, other non-profit organizations, the private sector and various governmental institutions – hence the name *La Maraña*.

### Maria Reorienting Actions

In the days following hurricane Maria, *Casa Taft 169* became a temporary school for children and a space where the community found emotional support as well as canopies, construction materials, food and water filters, among other things. However, Sofía told me that, after the hurricane, she thought that Puerto Rico was in a 'state of collective depression'. Marina's feelings resonated with Sofía's comment. The day I spoke with Marina, she confessed that she felt defeated and that the project of *Casa Taft 169* was at a standstill.

Despite how Maria affected people's emotions, it also unravelled new actions. Moreover, it reoriented the efforts of the groups that were already active and gave new meaning to their work. A day before my conversation with Marina, she and the legal team of *Casa Taft 169* travelled to the mountains to provide legal advice to a group of activists called *Urbe Apie*, mobilizing in the municipality of Caguas. Shortly before Maria struck the island, *Urbe Apie* had appropriated a building with the hopes of trans-

forming it into a community art gallery. Their dreams were cut short by the hurricane, but the space was quickly transformed into a community kitchen. This would be the first of six appropriations undertaken by *Urbe Apie*.[37]

In 2018, before Marina travelled to Caguas, the alleged owner of one of the properties, accompanied by the police, appeared at the door asking the activists to vacate the building. With the support of Marina and her legal team, the alleged owner was not able to vacate the property and has not returned. Today, *Urbe Apie* runs a community kitchen, a community boutique, a *huerto*, a centre of mutual support, a community gallery and a community theatre. In 2020, in the midst of the global pandemic, *Urbe Apie* has been quick to react to people's needs and urged the municipality to provide Internet in public spaces for people to work and children to follow their online courses.

### Final Thoughts

Going back to Sofía's words, all of the above are 'concrete examples' of women appropriating urban space, asserting their right to the city, inserting themselves in the processes of urbanization and challenging established forms of sociospatial production (abstract space). The vacant and abandoned urban spaces these women are appropriating are the product of contemporary forms of capitalism. Abandonment and vacancy in Puerto Rico are the abstract, yet concrete, spaces that have been produced through violence and domination over people and nature by colonial rule and global capitalism (neoliberalism), via extraction, impoverishment, forced migration, lack of democracy and sovereignty.

However, in the contradictions of abstract space – in the vacancy and abandonment it has produced – new spaces have emerged. On a small vacant plot in Loíza Street, *Cinema Paradiso en la Loíza* was initially appropriated by one individual for her desires and quickly became a collective space and a space for collective action where people became networks and networks became entangled to help one another and others in need.

The community cinema was an inclusive space that demonstrated to others that a different way of creating space was possible. It allowed *Taller Creando Sin Encargos* to further experiment with different processes of spatial creation; it became a space where knowledge could be at once produced and reproduced. *Taller Creando Sin Encargos* transported this knowledge to other areas of the city characterized by ruins and abandoned urban spaces, and inhabited by communities that have been segregated and ignored. The all-women collective joins these communities, works with them to produce and reproduce knowledge through their workshops and creative activities.

The community cinema was one of Marina's favourite places in the city. She was inspired by the women organizing the movie nights and wanted to be part of the urban appropriation. She soon learned the power of appropriating abandoned spaces and, with her neighbours, occupied and transformed an abandoned house into *Casa Taft 169*. The house became a place to plan collective actions and generated a lot of energy around it, attracting unforeseen actors who wanted to be part of it by sharing their knowledge and were themselves inspired to act. In *Casa Taft 169*, knowledge has been used to give power to the people to challenge the violent domination of the state and its mechanisms that continued to foster the proliferation of abandoned urban spaces.

Sofía was among the unforeseen actors who joined the efforts of *Casa Taft 169*. With her team, she engages and helps other communities to undertake their appropriations. Through their work, they have learned that the appropriation of urban space is a political project that requires entanglements, people and their stories coming together to transform the environments around them.

I have chosen to retell these particular stories and create this narrative to underscore that appropriation is a practice that has the potential to catalyse unanticipated processes beyond a particular site and group of people.

A small vacant plot was transformed into a one-day open-air cinema and unintentionally became a communal space that inspired others to take action and appropriate urban spaces elsewhere. Like an unstoppable chain reaction, these secondary appropriations led to yet others, and those may lead to new ones as well.

The stories I have retold also illustrate that appropriation is a process that restores the relationship between the body and space. Sofía, Michelle, Omayra and Marina are not abstract, nor are their stories, nor are the communities they work with, nor the social spaces they create. Through their concrete labour, abandoned spaces become meaningful.

In addition, these stories demonstrate that appropriation is a potentially emancipatory praxis. While the main characters in these stories are emancipated and highly educated women, possibly well-positioned in Puerto Rican society, through their concrete labour, the energy they manage to generate around their appropriations, the entangled networks they help forge and the knowledge they produce in one place and reproduce elsewhere, these women open the door to less privileged members of society, including children, other women and the elderly, to participate in the making of their cities. All of these actions constitute the foundations that may lead to profound systemic transformations that can challenge established forms of power dynamics and processes of urbanization under current forms of capitalism.

In this article, I am only able to reveal a fragment of these stories and chose to present them in a positive light. However, the processes of appropriation I briefly described take many years in the making and, as Marina told me, the actors are constantly working counter-current, because there is little governmental support, funds are insufficient and voluntary work is often scarce.

Furthermore, due to the strong focus on the actors behind the cases, the perceptions or knowledge of other people involved in the projects, directly or indirectly, are not present in this article. For example, it would be interesting to interview property owners, including governmental institutions, to learn the concrete reasons these spaces are vacant or abandoned. In some cases this will not be possible, such as the case of the ruins in *La Perla*, whose owners are unknown, or *Casa Taft 169*, because the owner died.

The cases I have briefly presented are part of a broader movement of urban appropriations that manifest in different forms and may be named differently depending on the contexts in which they emerge. In the interviews I conducted for this research, actors locate their appropriations in discourses related to tactical and do-it-yourself urbanism, placemaking and temporary uses. And, as I mentioned before, the four cases presented here are part of 26 cases unfolding in different cities in Latin America.

Appropriation, Henri Lefebvre tells us, is a praxis that falls upon women to achieve. However, he offers no description of this praxis nor illustrates how women are to achieve appropriation. This article offers a brief description of this praxis, but further research to understand it must be conducted and would strongly benefit from feminist perspectives and methodologies.

To conclude, I hope these stories find their way into diverse communities and inspire them to create the worlds they desire to live in, support all members of society to be part of urban life, challenge established forms of spatial production, appropriate and transform urban space, and, as Marina once told me, become the seeds that lead to profound transformations.

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23 The team of Taller Creando Sin Encargos has grown throughout the years, in 2013 the team was joined by Irvis G. and in 2016 Irmaris S. became a new member. To learn more about their work, see: tallercreandosinencargos.tumblr.com/.

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