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Houses in Mexico City as Metonyms of Family Histories

During 2012, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Unidad Santa Fe, a nineteen-fifties housing project in Mexico City conceived by the country's social security institute and modernist architect Mario Pani as a model community. The project's houses and apartments were originally public property; planners imagined this would allow families to move as their configuration changed, or in case their members changed jobs and needed to be closer to their place of employment. Through the construction of the project and by favoring public over private property, architects and public officials believed they were ushering a new era of prosperity and equality within the framework of state institutions.

Houses and apartments in Unidad Santa Fe, however, were not necessarily assigned to the types of families for which they were conceived. Discretionality and corruption allowed for single individuals with good connections to be assigned big, freestanding houses, and large families moved into small apartments. Moreover, the size and organization of families changed quickly and they rarely moved. The hopes of the project's creators to sideline private property and bring about a new social order were overridden by deeply rooted associations between family homes and their histories. Families resisted moving; they rather developed a deep attachment to their homes that was reinforced when, in the eighties, the social security institute gave up ownership of the project and presented residents with property titles.

In this presentation, I describe two interactions with Unidad Santa Fe residents in their homes. One of the points I want to make through these stories is that common ideas on domestic space, exemplified by Gaston de Bachelard's description of the house as an image of the ideal, might be incomplete and counter to the native's point of view in Mexico City. Bachelard does not say the house *is* and ideal set of emotions or relations, but rather something that we imagine as such; an image we hold on to orient us as we conduct lives that

are inevitably complex. By contrast, the images of home my informants put forward combine both a sense of comfort and original harmony, and of brokenness. Concrete events and relations qualify idealizations and, through their inscription in spaces and objects, they invite individuals to confront and make sense of untidy family histories.

Anthropologists have long documented the political dimensions of domestic life (Borneman 1997; 2013). Recently, architects and art historians have offered vivid illustrations of the home as a site of contestation (eg. Preciado 2014, Jaque 2011). Their works have upset common notions of domestic space as detached from lager social fields. I build on their arguments by showing other ways in which homes are not sites of exception. One of the reasons why ideas of home in Mexico might be complex and contradictory is that people not only remember the places where they grew up or formed families, but actually continue living in them. As suggested by the following account, which I have titled "El Marshal's Daughter," people live alongside treasured memories and reminders of the messiness of the past and of family life.

El Marshal's Daughter

While Martha prepared three cups of instant coffee in the kitchen—for her husband, herself and I—a boy came into their 36 square meter apartment without knocking and said: "Aunt, my mother asks if she can borrow your iron."

"You know where it is son," she answered, and the boy took it from a drawer.

We sat by the dining table and Martha invited her daughter to join us—she promised we would have a great conversation—but she chose to go in her room with her boyfriend and they kept the door closed. Martha and Ricardo had ceded the apartment's only room to their teenage daughter. They slept in the living room, on a foldout couch next to the table where we sat. Before they went to sleep, I imagined, they would fold the clothes left out to dry in

metallic racks by the couch and in the kitchen. By the table there was a cabinet with a microwave oven, plates and cooking pots. Next to the cabinet was a full sized refrigerator—it would not fit in the tiny kitchen—and, by the door leading to the building's hallway, there was an old desktop computer under a bookshelf.

Martha saw me looking around and said: "You think this place is crowded? Back in the day much larger families lived in apartments this small. Our neighbors downstairs, they had twelve children. Once, I saw the two oldest kids crying, saying that their mother was dying, that she was in bed making horrible noises. It turned out she was going into labor.

"At that time we lived very close to each other. When our neighbor had a newborn, my mother would take care of her kids. She did the same thing for us. We also took care of our younger siblings. The older girls looked like mothers, carrying babies around… We had it a bit better than our neighbors. We were eight kids, but my father managed to get two apartments, right next to each other, and although the project's manager told him he was not supposed to do that, he tore down a wall to connect them. The children, we lived in one of the apartments, and my parents lived in the other one, where we also cooked and ate. My uncles also lived with us for a while, until they married. Grandmother slept in the living room, by the kitchen."

Martha brought a little box and took out some pictures of her father. He was a policeman who worked in Unidad Santa Fe. In one of the images he is eating lamb tacos and Coca-Cola with his colleagues. Concha's father is not looking at the camera. His stylized hair is shiny with Vaseline. He has a thin, carefully groomed mustache. In the second picture he is in the project's central plaza posing with some fifteen other policemen in full uniform.

"Isn't he handsome?" Martha asked. "They called him 'El Marshall' because he looked like a character in an American TV show. He was tall, light skinned, and very strong. He always took great care of himself."

El Marshall arrived in Unidad Santa Fe in 1956, a few months before it was dedicated. He was employed by the project's administration. He settled in an apartment with his mother and three younger brothers. Soon after, he started dating his next-door neighbor's daughter. They had a child and got married when she was pregnant with the second one, who they named Martha.

"My parents were fast!" she laughed.

El Marshall would work nights, patrolling Unidad Santa Fe. Martha's mother locked the door when he left. "But she was exaggerating," explained Martha. "It was very peaceful here. There were some petty thefts, some drunken fights, but nothing serious, and we all knew our neighbors, so we took care of each other. Even my husband had what we might call 'a run in' with El Marshall." Ricardo assented as she started telling this story. "Once he was walking to kindergarten and he decided to stop on his way there, to sit in the garden and eat his lunch. And my father ran into him, asked why he was not in school, and took him by the hand to his mother… Can you imagine a time when kids would walk to kindergarten by themselves, and when the police knew them and was friends with their parents? Those times are long gone!"

Martha made it clear, however, that not everything in the past was to be cherished. She pointed to an ornate spur sitting next to the TV and told me it belonged to her grandfather. He was rich, a landowner in the state of Veracruz, and he was also very violent. He had raped his grandmother many times—that's how Martha's mother was conceived.

"My grandmother kept that spur," explained Martha, "and when she died, my mother did. My grandfather was not a nice person, but he was the origin of our family. There's no use in denying that."

Martha's story shows how the project's past provides an image people value and use as a stepping stone for the narration of the present. Descriptions of El Marshal as the protector of a beloved community help draw a model community like the one imagined by Pani and described in political speeches and the press in the mid-twentieth century (*Excelsior* 1957; Ortiz Mena 1957; *Zócalo* 1957).

The model is challenged, however, by events in Martha's family history memorialized in objects in her apartment and narrated through its transformations. Families in Unidad Santa Fe came together into complex configurations through sexual relationships, marriage and practices of care. Sleeping arrangements in the apartment outline the configuration of Martha's family; they involve negotiations that continue until the present use of the apartment's bedroom by her daughter and her boyfriend.

The second account I will present complement's Martha's story. The story of Ms. Silvetti corroborates accounts by anthropologists who have pointed out discrepancies among plans and realities (Holston 1989; Scott 1998; Boon 1990). The lives of Unidad Santa Fe neighbors and their relation to the built environment do not correspond to the intentions of planners. However, I believe that the often-used concept of *resistance* (Scott 2009) is not the best frame to understand this discrepancy. Rather, the people I met integrate the work of planners into their practices and histories in a process more adequately described as *collaboration*. Residents in Unidad Santa Fe populate notions of the ideal they were handed down by Pani and others with their own memories and experiences. At the same time, they qualify idealizations of their past and living environment by letting them flash up along accounts of their wounds.

The Good Husband

One morning, I went to visit Ms. Silvetti with Rafael Monroy. The maid was wearing an outfit like those one sees in the movies. “Ms. Silvetti is busy at the moment,” she said. “Please come back in half an hour.”

We used the time to buy Silvetti a plant in the market. Half an hour later we were back by her door. The maid ushered us to her dinning room and told us to sit where we wished, but not at the head of the table. “This is Ms. Silvetti’s place,” she explained.

The dinning table was made of solid wood, with heavy, carved legs. The chairs—eight of them—belonged to the same set. There was also a cabinet with cut glass vases and bowls in the room. On each side of the cabinet were small oil paintings. They were images of faraway landscapes with pine trees, rustic wooden bridges and snow-capped mountains. The paintings were either foreign or a local painter’s imagination of foreign lands.

On the opposite wall were two small tables with white, hand-embroidered tablecloths. On one of them there was a telephone—I had not seen one with a dialing disc in years—and on the other a bronze menorah. Above the menorah was a terracotta plaque with an image of Jerusalem’s Wailing Wall and the word “Shalom.”

“Ms. Silvetti will be with you shortly,” announced Elisa.

She came out of her room leaning on a walking cane. Elisa helped her take a seat. Following Mr. Monroy’s lead, I had stood up when she entered the room.

“It’s a great pleasure, Ms. Silvetti. You have no idea how happy I am to see you are still so strong and healthy. I only wish your late husband could be with us right now. What a great man he was! If he were here, we would open a bottle of whiskey and toast to your health, as we did in the good old times!”

Mr. Monroy’s incessant talking fuddled Ms. Silvetti. She did not respond, except with an understated smile. She did the same when Mr. Monroy gave her the plant we had bought for her. “Please put it in my room, Elisa,” she said.

"You have a beautiful house," I said.

She explained that her daughter Silvia, the youngest, had painted the oils. She was very artistic, a very learned young woman. It was also her who brought the Jewish objects to the house. She had a very good friend in college who was Jewish. They were inseparable. Silvia was very serious, at times even humorless—she was often in pain from a progressive lung disease that killed when she was thirty five—but when she was with Hannah she never lost her temper, around her she was truly happy.

Mr. Silvetti's husband died five years after Silvia. Ms. Silvetti had been a widow for a long time. Her two older daughters took good care of her. She would go to their houses from Thursday to Sunday, at times even Monday. Each would pick her up every other week.

"Sandra wants me to go live with them. She's the oldest. They even built a special room for me in their house. Her husband, you see, is an architect, Álvaro Álvarez Gómez-Gonzaga, and they live in a very nice house he built, with a big garden. But I'm ninety-three and I don't have much time left. I want to stay in this house where I lived my happiest years."

Mr. Silvetti sold water pumps for industry and agriculture. He traveled a lot. He was gone for a couple of days every week, at times more. He had been introduced to Dr. Cifuentes by a common acquaintance and they became good friends. When Cifuentes was appointed manager of Unidad Santa Fe, he invited them to move to the complex.

"It was a beautiful time. I helped organize the party in honor of president Ruiz Cortines and Ortiz Mena, who was director of the social security institute. Ortiz Mena was a very distinguished man. A gentleman. At the dedication of the housing unit we offered them a party. We had moved in a few weeks before.

"Back then the land was barren, there were no trees. So my husband and a few other neighbors planted many of them. Some of those you see out there, they planted them sixty years ago. And after every meal, my husband would save part of the loaf of bread I put by his

plate, and he would break it down into little pieces and go feed the birds. They started arriving, making nests in the trees, and that made this place beautiful."

"He was a great man, your husband," said Mr. Monroy. "He once…"

Ms. Silvetti interrupted him. "Tell me something, Rafael. You knew him well in his last years. Was he a good husband? Did he fool around much?"

"Oh, Ms. Silvetti," Mr. Monroy replied, "the man was of one piece, he only had a mind for his daughter Silvia. One only had to mention her name to see his heart melt."

Mr. and Ms. Silvetti's participation in the construction of Unidad Santa Fe—by planting trees, feeding birds and organizing parties for state authorities—highlight the role of collaboration in the formation of the housing project. Their work was complicit with architect Mario Pani and state authorities in shaping Unidad Santa Fe as a model community. Ms. Silvetti holds on to an image of her living environment that appears to fit well with Bachelard's description of the house as a bosom and "a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability." This is not, however, the end of the story. Alongside her cherished memories are openings to other places and relations, unspoken liaisons and lingering doubts.

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