



*Not beautiful, but
well-used*

A USEFUL SITE

URBAN PLANNING IN QUITO, ECUADOR

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Until the mid 1950s, Quito was one of South America's smallest capital cities: less than 300 000 people. This changed dramatically as the massive rural migration patterns from rural areas in the Andes mountains to Quito produced a population increase of 200 percent over the last three decades. Today, more than one million people live in Ecuador's capital.

"Quito now faces massive housing problems. More than 40 percent of the population lives in slums or squatter settlements," explained Gilda Farrell, a professor of economics at the Catholic University in Quito. Profiteering and land speculation have pushed house prices beyond the means of most Quitenos. Even when the government constructs subsidized housing, rent costs often become so high that such housing is only affordable to the middle class or, at least, to those persons with steady incomes.

Many, perhaps the majority, of rural migrants moved to Quito in search of higher paying jobs between the sowing and harvest periods, leaving behind their wives and children to tend the fields in their absence. They often worked in the informal construction sector where pay is usually far below the designated minimum wage of 4000 *suces* — about 150 Canadian dollars — per month. Those lucky enough to find more permanent employment stayed in the city, inhabiting cramped and unsanitary dwellings in the older parts of the city, and bringing their families to join them.

To help Quito design appropriate housing solutions and evaluate the effectiveness of government efforts to provide low-cost housing, IDRC's urban policy program funded a recently completed study on the relationship between the urban land market and housing in low-income sectors of the Quito metropolitan area. The project, carried out by the *Banco Ecuatoriano de la Vivienda* — the Ecuadorian

Housing Bank — defined the role of state and private actors and suggested ways of improving availability of urban land for the poor.

The project, begun early in 1983, found that 60 percent of the total market demand for housing in Quito was for housing stock for investment and speculation. The year before, half of all land converted for housing in the city was held by speculators. Conventional housing solutions had largely failed because they were too expensive, tied to a market controlled by speculators.

"Our study showed that the best way to improve the availability of urban land for the poor is through a policy which would emphasize use-values rather than market-values," said Jorge Solomon, chief urban planner with the Ecuadorian Housing Bank. He also said that the viability of a particular land policy or system of policies is largely dependent on the degree to which such policies fit what is actually going on. "The problem with our present policy approaches is that they are not integrated with a complete process description or are geared to a process approach that is outdated or basically inadequate."

Besides the high cost of land, the study concluded, other reasons contribute to the housing crisis in Quito: among them, the high cost of construction materials, exigent technology and construction standards involving expensive procedures, and the lack of urban planning. In addition, poor people cannot qualify as "credit subjects" since they frequently lack permanent jobs and have no title to property.

The study recommended a series of decentralization schemes to reduce the housing problem in Quito. "While some success has been made in encouraging growth outside the city, more government-funded low-income housing projects should be built on

the outskirts." The study further suggested that the housing crisis can be efficiently solved by users themselves, provided they are given the necessary resources: land, finances, technical assistance and the freedom and security of tenure to build.

The major argument of the study is that without a full consideration of *situs* theory much urban land policy is shallow and inadequate. The urban principle of *situs* in essence states that each urban use needs and therefore seeds the location which will give it maximum accessibility to the other uses and services upon which it is dependent and a physical, social, institutional, and economic environment that is compatible and stimulating.

"In its broadest sense, the city is a highly integrated land use mechanism or macro-*situs* pattern," according to the study. The two most important ends of urban land policy are the establishment of conditions conducive to land use cooperation and controlled competition, and the maintenance of a dynamic equilibrium between cooperative and competitive states, the study suggested. Excesses of land policy that single out one use for favour or that tip the scale too far, either in the direction of cooperation or competition, would appear to contradict "natural" tendencies of urban structural interaction. "Without both elements, inefficiency and stagnation results."

As one of the study's urban planners put it: "I feel now, more than ever, that urban planning is — or at least should be — a social as well as an economic process. True planning should entail not just building nice neighbourhoods, but social change to solve the problems of distribution of wealth, services and opportunities." □

Wilson Ruiz is a Chilean-born freelance writer who recently visited the Quito project.