

## Ethnography of the uses, practices, and socio-spatial interaction in okupa (squatted) spaces

Etnografía de los usos, prácticas y la interacción socioespacial en los espacios okupados

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**Abstract.** This article hereby analyses okupa (squatted) spaces based on the different types of use, practices and discourses that come from their different users. It has been shown that these spaces house a set of cultural, recreational and leisure practices open to the public, which allow the convergence of a plurality of individuals from a wide social, political, economic, and educational spectrum. The research was based on floating observation, conversational interviews and semi-structured interviews which analyse the okupa spaces of the city of Concepción (Chile) regarding their different practices, the reception of their users, and the heterogeneous topics of public interest that they harbour. I argue that okupa spaces, as elements of socialisation, allow a new alternative for the development of the public sphere in Concepción, creating new physical and symbolic spaces for dialogue and debate.

**Resumen.** Este artículo analiza los espacios okupa en función de los diferentes tipos de usos, prácticas y discursos que provienen de sus diferentes usuarios. Se ha demostrado que estos espacios albergan un conjunto de prácticas culturales, recreativas y de ocio abiertas al público, que permiten la convergencia de una pluralidad de individuos de un amplio espectro social, político, económico y educativo. La investigación utilizó la observación flotante, entrevistas conversacionales y entrevistas semiestructuradas para analizar los espacios okupa de la ciudad de Concepción (Chile) en torno a sus diferentes prácticas, la recepción de sus usuarios y los heterogéneos temas de interés público que albergan. Se sostiene que los espacios okupa, como elementos de socialización, permiten una nueva alternativa para el desarrollo de la esfera pública en Concepción, creando nuevos espacios físicos y simbólicos para el diálogo y el debate.

**Keywords.** Squat house; public sphere; social-spatial practices; urban ethnography.

**Palabras clave.** Casa okupada; esfera pública; prácticas socioespaciales; etnografía urbana.

**Formato de citación.** Bloomfield, Fabián A. (2021). Ethnography of the uses, practices, and socio-spatial interaction in okupa (squatted) spaces. *URBS. Revista de Estudios Urbanos y Ciencias Sociales*, 11 (1), 81-93. [http://www2.ua.es/urbs/index.php/urbs/article/view/bloomfield\\_fabian](http://www2.ua.es/urbs/index.php/urbs/article/view/bloomfield_fabian)

**Recibido:** 30/03/2021; **aceptado:** 9/04/2021; **publicado:** 5/05/2021  
**Edición:** Almería, 2021, Universidad de Almería

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### Introduction

Various authors have corroborated that there is a strong relationship between *okupa* (squatted) spaces in Chile and practices within their dependencies mainly associated to: political actions of ‘protest’, ‘rebellious culture’ and ‘struggle resistance’ against the market economic system (cf. Ganter Solís, 2005; Monsalve Román, 2013; Venegas Ahumada, 2014). A less careful reading would give the representation of these characteristics as unique qualities of these places, which is insufficient to account for the diversity of existing elements that live in the complexity of these urban spaces.

Notwithstanding, we can observe that they harbour a greater number of characteristics of the most diverse nature, allowing us to notice scant dynamics penetrated and known up until then, to a greater extent thanks to the development of free access practices of the members of the city revealing new ways to interaction possibly ignored or unnoticed by other researchers in these types of places. Hence, how the uses and discourses that operate on *okupa* spaces offer the possibility of analysing how spectators-users interact, reflect and develop around the use of those spaces.

The present study is located in the metropolitan city of Concepción (Gran Concepción), Chile. A city that is characterised by being a complex metropolis, in a sizable residential estate industry expansion, in constant architectural renovation, and that has been continuously rebuilt throughout history by its earthquakes (Vivallos Espinoza and Brito Peña, 2008).

Furthermore, the residential estate business had significant freedoms in its development as a result of the economic model implemented in the 1970s (Rojas et al. 2014), which has resulted in the sale of new modern housing complexes in addition to the sale of antiquated residences acquired through family inheritance or through the purchase of second permanent homes in the city. However, many of the homes do not manage to be sold for a considerable period of time, resulting in certain architectural buildings (many of them in a dilapidated condition) having become abandoned spaces and subsequently illegally occupied by certain city dwellers.

Concepción has a long history of squatting within the last few years. Nowadays, two *okupa* spaces with important histories of operation remain active and constantly receive inhabitants from different parts of the city who live in spaces independent from the *okupa* spaces and participate by attending through their different activities and initiatives open to the public. This allows spaces and dynamics of socialisation among different types of attendants that vary in political spectrum, educational and economic levels. These types of activities open to the public in their quality of public activities have traditionally been considered under the accessibility of the physical space that houses them, notwithstanding, the implication of their public condition cannot only refer to this last condition, but also to the degree more current appearance of conspiracy of public interest: the public sphere (v. Hauser 1998, 1999).

The present does not seek to criticise or expose the illegalities in which the movement finds itself, its struggles with legal justice, drug and alcohol abuse, or the marginal characterisation of certain participants, but rather from the consideration that this type of movement it enriches –as far as its plurality is concerned– the urban social dynamics of cities. The article proposes to tackle *okupa* spaces according to how users practice and relate to these spaces, and how these spaces host a series of social practices that allow the plural meeting of individuals, and that is understood as a space open to the community and the inhabitants of the city. Consequently, the writing describes the spaces studied around their different practices; then, it addresses the reception that the different users have of this type of spaces and their activities, and, finally, the behaviour of the heterogeneous topics of public interest that these spaces host given the plural agglomeration of individuals.

Thenceforward, it seeks to problematise the conception that has operated regarding *okupa* spaces in Chile, in view of the fact that the interpretations and discourses coming from their administrators have constantly been privileged –over the practices carried out in their branches– offering a marginal and passive place on its different users. Based on this approach, a search for the understanding of the meaning of the socio-spatial elements (Wise, 2000) in the *okupa* spaces of the city forces to ask: What are the elements that configure the *okupa* spaces of the city as a determined social element according to the different valuations of its users? This, given the different reflections and uses that these users have in front of these spaces, no longer as mere spectators, but also, as active actors within the social dynamics that arise in these places.

### **Methodological clarification**

For this article, an ethnographic study was carried out between the months of March and December of 2019 in the unique *okupa* spaces in Metropolitan Concepción: *Centro Social Okupado El Escombro* and *Casa Oasis*. In order to recognise the majority of elements that organise the socio-spatial dynamics of *okupa* spaces, an increasingly more frequent methodological resource in urban ethnographic research was used: floating observation (Pétonnet, 1982). This resource consists in ‘floating’ and ‘wandering’ absorbing as many stimuli as possible, trying to remove ‘expectations’ and ‘filters’ that could blind the research.

With the purpose of achieving a greater ‘naturalness’ among the speakers, which would enable a greater level of cooperation and dynamism, informal conversational interviews were carried out. This type of methodological tool, away from planning, allowed the speaker to have the freedom to communicate and deepen certain ideas considered relevant from itself, allowing afterwards as a researcher to be able to discriminate the necessary information within the framework of the research.

In addition, semi-structured interviews (20) were conducted with the different *okupa* spaces users of the city. For a better understanding of the facts, an attempt was made to carry out the interviews –as long as it was possible– the following days and in closer proximity to the event attended by the interviewee in order to be able to have a ‘fresh’ perception of the experience reported. The semi-structured interviews were highly relevant, enabling the interviewees to evoke remote memories, if applicable, about their previous attendance at extinct *okupa* spaces in the city. All participants were able to join the research thanks to the ‘snowball’ (Patton, 2001).

Finally, many anthropologists and ethnographers today try to ‘demonstrate’ certain social dynamics and facts of social life when publishing their articles. But this would raise an epistemological error of great proportions. The word ‘demonstrate’ only applies to logical and mathematical contexts (or at least formal systems), not to empirical issues. To ‘show’ is an expression full in virtues, among them that it refers to something empirical and evidence is offered in this regard. Therefore, the research techniques that were carried out help us to exhibit and then understand by virtue of the facts according to they have a meaning for the subjects participating in this study.

### **Okupa spaces: a brief account of squatting**

The habitation of abandoned infrastructure has its first antecedents during the 1950s in Europe, nevertheless, its practice was consolidated in the 1980s within the context of job insecurity coupled with rising prices in the residential estate sector as a result of financial speculation (Feixá, Costa and Pallarés, 2002). In its beginnings, squatting was motivated by the lack of housing, but later motivations associated with youth groups emerged, such as the meeting points of ‘urban tribes’ (mainly punks) and the need for places in which for the artistic development of musical bands (from rock, punk and their associates), with a close connection to the critique of private property and the right to possession (v. Proudhon 1876, pp. 42-69).

The organisation of the movement in Europe was a key point for its consolidation, as it was developed and executed by individuals from the same family before expanding to external organisations of individuals who shared the same neighbourhood. Subsequently, it incorporated groups of individuals of diverse origins who shared the same interest outside the Institutional Estate (motivational interests such as the right to housing, development of cultural and social spaces, creation of feminist spaces, vindication of anarchist ideas, etcetera) (cf. Adell Argilés, 2005; Monsalve 2013).

Mainly in Spain, England and Italy the movement saw its ‘apogee’ by anarchist groups and punks, through squatting in old and large abandoned residential buildings and factories (del Solar Pérez, 2008). The *okupa* spaces could be differentiated in a) their more residential character, mostly known as *casas okupadas* (squat houses); and b) those destined to the creation of social centres with ties to the community, characterised by the offering of activities –mainly– self-managed and with a very limited number of resources, mostly known as *centros sociales okupa* (squatted social centres, known as CSO for its acronym in Spanish). Nowadays, variations have arisen regarding its denomination in order to highlight certain qualities e. g. *centros sociales okupados autogestionados* (self-managed squatted social centres, known as CSOA for its acronym in Spanish), *centros sociales okupados juveniles* (youth squatted social centres known as CSJ for its acronym in Spanish) and *centros sociales okupados feministas* (feminist squatted social centres, known as CSOF for its acronym in Spanish).

Considering the American continent, the situation between North America and South America is far from similar. The aforementioned has had a greater presence in the United States, concentrating concentrated predominantly in New York City, but even so, there is a short durability and intermittency in *okupa* spaces as a result of owners, in conjunction with the use of police force, claiming private property (v. Pruijt, 2003). Nevertheless, there are some notable cases, including the Lower East Side neighbourhood and the iconic location of MoRUS, the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space, an *okupa* space that functions as an archive and a ‘memory’ space on local squatting (many of them related to the economic recession of the 1970s).

In Latin America, there seems to be a greater presence in respect to squatting. Some of the most emblematic cases are found in the centre of Sao Paulo, Brazil. The *Prestes Maia*<sup>1</sup> skyscraper, an old textile factory of great proportions that houses a large number of families who found a way off the streets through the squatting, has been a squat since 2010 and resisted more than twenty eviction orders. In the Argentine case, the movement dates back to the end of the 1990s, with the iconic case of *Galpón Okupa de Rosario*<sup>2</sup>, the former *okupa* railway shed located in the homonymous city that was intended to be a cultural and artistic space, capable of hosting, thanks to the community management of the place and mainly its dimensions, a large number of audiences at artistic and musical events (mostly national punk rock). The space was not exempt from eviction attempts by the security forces, which resulted in its final closure in 1998.

In Chile, the *okupa* movement has been known since the late 1990s. In Santiago de Chile, the CSO *La Kasita* was one of the first *okupa* buildings of which there is a record, and which also functioned for social purposes in 1997. CSO *La Kasita* did not defer much if compared to the rest of European countries (a marked punk tendency among its followers, an infrastructure that functioned for artistic purposes, the adherence to anarchist and libertarian ideologies in their administrators or at least in their sympathizing character) (del Solar, 2008). This lasted a couple of months as soon as the abuse of alcohol, drugs and parties ended the project through voluntary and gradual abandon. Later, the *okupa* house *La Pajarera* emerged in Santiago de Chile in 1999 with a big reception among their users, and *La Marraketa* in Valparaíso, with an uncertain beginning in 1996-7, stood out as one of the most iconic *okupa* spaces due to its mediatic eviction in 2004. However, since 2009, the squatters have taken over the media due to the involvement of one of the participants of the *okupa La Idea* in the so-called 'bomb case'<sup>3</sup> (Monsalve, 2013). Other small cities with the presence of *okupa* spaces also stand out, such as Osorno, La Serena, Quintero, Copiapó and Talca (Alamos Cardemil, 2009).

Metropolitan Concepción has its own recent important history of squatting. The field work carried out and the information obtained by our informants has made it possible to identify a series of *okupa* spaces that have developed in the city and gone undocumented. One of the most important in the area was the CSO *Claudia López*<sup>4</sup>, located in the Penco district in 2005 and led by young people who mostly sympathised with the anarchist movement. Its importance mainly fell on the size of its building, as it was an abandoned train station that allowed the agglomeration of a large number of individuals in case of activities open to the community, mainly artistic activities. The CSO was evicted in 2013 and was later converted into an elderly activity centre by the municipal administration.

As well as highlighted CSO *La Fábrica*, with its occupation from 2007 to 2016 until a fire inside it calcined the building, leaving it unusable and in ruins. It was located next to one of the best-known parks<sup>5</sup> in Metropolitan Concepción and it was considered a 'libertarian' space within the city centre. It formally changed its name at least twice since 2012 as the 'administration' of its occupants changed, despite the above, many of its users continued to use the popular first name of *La Fábrica* with which it was created.

In addition, other CSOs with a varied and shorter duration can be recognised, among them *La conciencia* and *El Extanque* in Talcahuano district, and *La Chimenea* in Chiguayante district. Likewise, other *okupa* houses were squatted by young people for housing purposes (mainly young punks), but which hardly lasted more than a few months due to the rapid evictions they faced as they were mainly government properties.

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<sup>1</sup> v. reports of Jiménez (11 February 2016) and Santandreu (10 May 2018).

<sup>2</sup> v. Fraga (09 September 2017).

<sup>3</sup> 'Bomb case' (*Caso bomba* in Spanish) was the name given by the media to the investigation conducted by Public Prosecutor's Office (*Ministerio Público de Chile*). The case claimed to find the people responsible of explosives attacks in public places, mainly banks. Mauricio Morales was the single fatal victim, who was the bearer of one of the bombs that exploded in his backpack. In addition, he was participant of the *okupa La Idea*.

<sup>4</sup> Claudia Lopez was a young anarchist and victim of a police shooting, when her back was fired upon by Chilean Police (*Carabineros de Chile*) in a commemoration protest of coup d'etat by General in charge Augusto Pinochet Ugarte on 11 September 1973.

Currently, two other *okupa* spaces have emerged in the city, remaining in force to this day. One of the longest in operation dating from 2005 to the present, the CSO *El Escombros*, the latter is located in Lorenzo Arenas, a neighbourhood near the city's General Cemetery and its construction corresponds to a two-storey residential-type house. Likewise, Casa Oasis, has remained in operation since its formal creation in 2016, and its building corresponds to a house with a large plot of land protected by a gate that delimits the public street. Casa Oasis is not recognised as a CSO, nor has it been openly categorised as an *okupa* house, which has meant a degree of ambiguity from its administration. Despite the foregoing idea, the occupants have not denied the category of *okupa* space and almost all of their attendees recognise it as such; it is believed, by the latter, that it is due to the harms and consequences that they could face such as evictions and police persecution<sup>6</sup>.

### **Okupas of Concepción: the narrative of the context**

The buildings that are still in operation, CSO El Escombros<sup>7</sup> and Casa Oasis, have a façade that does not differ greatly from their peers, if we consider that both houses correspond to buildings in residential neighbourhoods, making it difficult to identify them at first glance. Nevertheless, a meticulous eye can see that the structures appear to have mostly deteriorated and are absent of any type of motorised vehicle, characteristics that are hidden at Casa Oasis thanks to its entrance gate that blocks the view inside<sup>8</sup>. Both buildings have undergone countless stylistic remodels since their occupation, considerably improving their façades and infrastructure; this includes conditioning with sheet metal, wood and concrete, as well as constantly improving the cleanliness of the site from its initial conditions. The maintenance costs of the building have been sustained mainly with voluntary contributions by its members and by different activities that usually require a fairly low<sup>9</sup> payment of money for their participation, mainly of them of artistic nature.

The buildings are well equipped to receive a large influx of public. CSO El Escombros has a fairly extensive patio with a large warehouse on the ground floor of its infrastructure that allows ad hoc space for artistic activities, popular workshops, etcetera. Casa Oasis, on the other hand, has a large outdoor space for its activities, which starts from the gate that delimits the public street, from with a long initial corridor accompanied by lush vegetation until arriving at a small courtyard with a central fountain (characteristic of early 20th century houses in the city). On one side of the central fountain is the building corresponding to the inhabitants of Casa Oasis.

However, the extinct *okupa* spaces have presented other visual and structural characteristics that are noteworthy to mention. Our interviewees and participants have recognised a series of qualities that differ from the current scene, mainly in CSO Claudia López and CSO La Fábrica. As a result of the initiative of the youth administration at the time, CSO Claudia Lopez had remarkable workshops open to the public, in which one of the important 'regional' rock groups began. Notwithstanding, the changes in administration, mainly from young people with a punk tendency, ended up transforming the space into an exclusive centre for public activities of a punk-rock musical nature. Despite generating a significant influx of public, the building was transformed into a space of neglect and constant revelry. Mainly, the young people came to its facility motivated by the consumption of alcohol and drugs in the context of musical events. The place gradually became a dirty centre with poor hygiene that could not provide patrons with functional public toilets. The fights among its administrators and the excess of parties ended up hindering

<sup>5</sup> Parque Ecuador is one of the most concurrent and largest parks with green areas in Concepción.

<sup>6</sup> Arriving to CSO El Escombros, takes five minutes from downtown on public transport. As for Casa Oasis, it is possible to arrive walking in 15 minutes from anywhere in the city centre.

<sup>7</sup> The house building coexists with other old and contiguous houses, which allows mixing harmoniously among them.

<sup>8</sup> «It's too hard to recognise it at first sight. Just you know it and go there because you were informed about specific activities and shows, by social media. When you arrive, you realise at that moment that it's a squatted space» (sic) (pers. comm. 2019. Spanish teacher Student, 23 years old. Translated by the author).

<sup>9</sup> 2USD approximately.

any substantial improvement to the building prior to its eviction by fiscal order. CSO La Fábrica had a similar ending. Since its creation it was considered as one of the only 'libertarian' spaces in Metropolitan Concepción centre, highlighting mainly the access of all public to small cultural activities such as workshops, conversations on topics related to the local reality and artistic activities, in addition to having a self-managed library through which its users could access prior knowledge of the terms and conditions for its loan and use. The unrestricted access of members to its administration ended with its replacement inside the space, which concluded in modifications to its formal name and, more importantly, the end of its characteristic activities, concentrating exclusively on musical activities and adopting a more music-recreational and residential function. Its tragic end, the product of an internal fire, is described by its oldest users as a direct consequence of its mismanagement and excessive abuse of alcohol, drugs and parties.

But how have the various activities opened to the public –in socio-spatial terms– functioned for city users in these *okupa* spaces? First of all, part of the discussion regarding *okupa* spaces revolves around their involvement and repercussion on the communities and neighbourhoods surrounding their location and, in this case, to what extent certain individuals participate as users in these open places on specific days. Could we say, then, that *okupa* spaces are open spaces understood as public spaces?

To understand public space, colloquially, places with large territorial dimensions, free of physical barriers that could obstruct any 'free' movement and away from 'owners' have been used synonymously (frequent examples being squares and central parks outside of free access tariff conditions). However, in that simplifying perspective, public space would contain considerable challenges in our contemporaneity, especially if we enter into the question: what is really public within the elements that complement the space we frequent? Given the constant privatisation of places and the unavoidable presence of a limited group of individuals within their administration, fall in question the 'rigor' of the most utopian definitions of an urbanity that completely ignores the presence of owners (and administrators), since all the places in the city have at least one owner, or vice versa, it is not achievable that everyone owns everything in the literal sense of its meaning. Therefore, the public space inescapably cannot be judged by its administration; but to the extent that, given the general materiality available to them, it allows subjects and groups of individuals, strangers to each other, to meet and interact verbally and non-verbally (which includes from parks and squares to pubs, auditoriums and fast-food restaurants, to name a few). Then, the public space is far to being a space of openness and freedom (v. the central idea in Habermas, 1984); its access is not unlimited, many times it is necessary to meet financial requirements (payment of admission, e.g. museums) and there are certain implicit and explicit behaviours considered inappropriate, which is why it becomes a space with significant and important degrees of restriction.

The *okupas* of the city, in spite of being administered by rather hermetic groups, have continuously functioned as public spaces; no less public than a pub that is open in the evenings. Most of the attendees come from different districts of the metropolitan city in a much greater proportion than those from the same neighbourhood (and less frequently extra-provincially), which allows a wide plurality of individuals in terms of geographical origin.

Secondly, without quantifying their salary income, many of the users interviewed when referring to themselves revealed that they were in diverse work situations such as 'redundant', 'out of work' or 'unemployed', compared to those who occupied 'stable' and 'good' work positions. In addition, many of them have studied or composed, a wide range of disciplines, depending on the individuals; which implies a heterogeneous socioeconomic situations on the part of the attendees themselves.

Third, those who consider themselves to be 'frequent' attendees cannot recognise a large part of the attendees of these spaces, which shows that these places are mostly shared by strangers among themselves. The latter is due to the fact that its users are not fixed, but rather of a rotating nature and that

it obeys a plurality of individuals with different interests motivated by the different categories of activities offered by these places: a) artistic, b) economical, c) educational or instructive, and d) thematic conversational days (See Table 1). These categories are not exclusive and, according to ethnographic observation, the classification of these activities is due to the predominance of one characteristic over the other, v. gr. the gigs, which could charge money for their access, and is the indisputable acquisition of goods (recreational), their artistic qualities predominate in them.

Category	Type	General description	<i>Okupas'</i> activities distribution					
Artistic	Visuals	Photography expositions	CSO La conciencia	CSO la Fábrica	CSO el Extranque	Casa Oasis	CSO el Escombro	CSO Claudia López
		Films and documentary exhibitions						
	Aural	Poetry lectures						
	Scenic	Stage plays						
		Monologues						
		Tocatta shows and musical performances						
Educational or instructive	Formatives workshops	Musical instruments						
		Screen printing (serigraphy)						
		Bicycle mechanics						
	National curriculum teaching	School reinforcement						
		Adult literacy						
		University selection tests teaching						
Economics	Manufacture	Maker's fair						
	Alimentation	Prepared food sale						
		Fast food sale						
		Alcohol sale						
	Others	Fanzines sale						
		Tattoos sale						
Seeds swap								
Thematic conversational days	-	Vegetarianism/veganism						
		Animalism						
		Social movements						
		Anti-patriarchates, feminism, and gender						
			CSO La conciencia	CSO la Fábrica	CSO el Extranque	Casa Oasis	CSO el Escombro	CSO Claudia López

Table 1. Activities by *okupa* spaces according to interviews and fieldwork

Finally, both users and administrators recognise that it is possible to access this type of space 'freely' (provided a monetary fee is paid when appropriate), however, it could be said that there is an 'implicit filter' given the nature of the spaces associated mostly to political thoughts determined by their administrators, which makes it difficult for people (who recognise themselves as a political 'right-wing', or at least sympathisers) to venture into these spaces given their own political motivations. This last condition is not alien or strange to other public spaces that also have their own implicit filters, such as museums or theatres, where the reception and participation of its users is linked to certain age groups and determined cultural motivations (v. Antoine-Faúndez and Carmona-Jiménez, 2014).

Consequently, attendees are mainly youth and young adults and preferably enter in small groups of 2 to 3 people. Non-verbal contact between strangers is fast, as social distance is reduced by crowding among the public, especially when it comes to massive artistic activities, on the other hand, verbal communication is imminent in other types of activities, given their own nature of the same (e.g. the exchange of seeds, days of conversation on certain topics, sale of certain goods and sui generis activities). Although it is possible

to observe that communication between attendees is supplanted by the individual use of mobile devices that allow the temporary absence of users (cf. Fortunati, 2002; Ling and Campbell, 2011; Thulin, Vilhelmson and Schwanen, 2020), there are important and frequent social interactions of short duration that allow for sporadic and multiple communications.

As an interesting fact, only one of the interviewees declared himself a ‘sympathiser’ of the anarchist movement out of all the interviewees (20). This does not allow us to affirm with certainty that our sample is eventually representative of the public that attends and participates in these activities, and thus to assert with certainty that the vast majority of these individuals, up to a certain point, are far away from these political conceptions, but without a doubt it calls into question the idea of an ‘affinity public’ in the sense that its ‘squatters’ resort to «articulation with diverse groups that have in common a *radical criticism* of the capitalist economic system»<sup>10-11</sup> (Venegas Ahumada, 2014, p. 102) for the support of these spaces.

### **Reception and relationship of users with *okupa* spaces**

People attend these spaces with important recreational motivations, predominantly fostered by free access to artistic activities, but not excluding the rest of the activities that are developed. These recreational expectations are manifested in their admission and voluntary participation. The latter is influenced by involvement and personal disposition, to the extent that the reception becomes pleasant for the subject and obeys certain motivations and satisfactions, whether in intellectual matters, the search for creativity, learning or recognition and participation –sporadic or not– in certain communities (McLean and Hurd, 2011, pp. 24-26).

It should be said that the reception of these spaces has been widely positive by their attendants, mainly due to the artistic activities offered, and provided that these spaces do not become exclusive places of revelry and alcohol and drug abuse that could arise in situations with acts of violence among the users themselves. This perception generally encompassed other individuals who live in the neighbourhood and who have never even made use of their premises, which allows the space to coexist with its neighbours apparently without conflict. The foregoing idea is exposed in the following representative testimony: «I lived here. The people who went and the neighbours in general had a positive vision of the place, but as long as things didn’t get out of control –he emphasises– mainly related to alcohol abuse and that the activities were not until very late, there was no problem» (sic) (pers. comm. 2019)<sup>12</sup>.

Many of these activities offered take place simultaneously or at specific and sequential times (the sale of products is frequent in artistic manifestations, discussion sessions or *sui generis* activities). The latter allows users to face unforeseen and novel situations after attending certain specific activities that motivate their arrival, generating, in turn, the creation of new audience’s effect of interruptions and intrusions that have occurred in the space (v. Doherty, 2008). In addition, users have constantly identified a series of characteristic practices and goods that are not offered in other plans of the city, highlighting the sale of artisan books, fanzines and unpublished poetic readings by authors not contracted with a publishing label, characteristic of the ‘do it yourself’ counterculture<sup>13</sup> (Restrepo-Restrepo, 2005; Triggs, 2010; Guerra and Quintela, 2020).

It should be noted that these types of activities and social practices that have been associated with the counterculture in Chile cannot be distant from the consumer practices that exist in these spaces (cf. Ganter Solís 2005; Monsalve Román 2013; Venegas Ahumada 2014). The consumption of goods from the idea of ‘do it yourself’ by users who participate in these instances: manufacturing fairs, food sales, fanzines and *sui generis* activities, unquestionably allow new spaces where transactions and exchange of goods, i.e. the presence of the market.

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<sup>10</sup> Italic is my own addition

<sup>11</sup> The original Spanish reads: «*articulación con grupos diversos que tienen en común una crítica radical hacia el sistema económico capitalista*».

<sup>12</sup> Master of Arts in History student, 25 years old.

<sup>13</sup> The DIY (do it yourself) movement makes a strict critique of consumerism and production within a capitalist society and proposes its mitigation through self-management (v. Restrepo-Restrepo, 2005; Triggs, 2010; Guerra y Quintela, 2020).



On the other hand, in addition to existing practices considered as characteristic of *okupa* spaces, there are others, mostly associated with trade, that are not recognised as exclusive to these spaces (without neglecting the specificities of each one) and are also present in shopping centres and shops. However, on larger scale, aesthetics and type of goods which is given primarily by the economic resources that these individuals have for production are much smaller and, consequently, the activities also have a lower budget. It is convenient to note that this is a situation that is recognised by some attendants, and that could be portrayed in a representative response of an interviewee under a spontaneous question:

– «But why did you prefer that type of activity in that type of space and not, for example, another central location?

– But I've seen things like this in the mall, but you just see it differently, in the mall there are still fairs, maybe people sell their things that they made it, resell, have their businesses. It would not seem strange to me if there would be exactly the same kind of things there, it would be unusual, but not strange...» (sic) (pers. comm. 2019)<sup>14</sup>.

It is important to recognise that all individuals in *okupa* spaces participate and consume in a sovereign manner (Douglas, 1994, p. 123). Accepting and positively appreciating *okupa* spaces is related, to a large extent, with choosing to consume what is developed in these places precisely because it is part of a project that allows individuals to choose other people to accompany and help them build the type of society that they individually and collectively consider the best possible (Ibid: 124). There is, therefore, no dissociation between what the individual consumes and what they project. Furthermore, the fact that a group of individuals attends the event is one of the ways that the community has of identifying who its members are (Ibid: 128), allowing them to interact and share certain elements for certain times in light of their individual differences on a wide range of subjects.

### Discussion of public topics, mutual interest and public sphere

Traditionally, any type of 'public activity' and its advertising has been considered in accordance to the physical space that houses it, either, *sensu lato*, the geographical or architectural space, or *sensu stricto*, in terms of its accessibility and inclusiveness. Again, to consider a notion as reductive as the one previously exposed would be a mistake. The degree of publicness of any activity may not only correspond to the physical properties of the public space that contains them, but also, is directly related to the degree of involvement that emanates within the mutual interest, the discussion that results from it, and the possible consensuses to be carried out when possible. This discursive space where individuals associate for discussion is known as the public sphere (Hauser, 1998, p. 21).

The public sphere has an important empirical support and is far from being a normative-theoretical project, rather, it is constructed through dialogue and the action that individuals carry out constituted as public. Although, the public sphere and degrees of publicness for the different activities are different elements, both are correlated, the latter enabling the former (Hauser, 1998, 1999).

Habermas (1974, 1984, 1991) introduces a –unique– totalizing notion about the public sphere that is not very grounded on the empirical plane, being rather of an idealised and restricted character that corresponds exclusively to the democratic plane and of autonomous character. Not only does this notion not coincide with reality (and our research case), but also does not agree with other forms of public expression of contemporary society, such as mass culture. The public sphere does not necessarily refer to consensus spaces by essence, but rather maintains characteristics associated with debate in less heterogeneous publics in pursuit of common social referents that dominate public life (Hauser, 1987, 1998).

<sup>14</sup> Graphic designer and barber, 28 years old. Translated by the author.

Consequently, public activities and the public sphere are united, but the former should not be valued regarding their publicness in terms of their spatial conditions or location, but instead for their levels of socialisation and discursive practices that they evoke among individuals for the discussion of matters of public interest according to a common world is shared and that they allow informal and formal spaces for its development (cf. Arendt, 1958, p. 52; Hauser, 1985, 1999).

The latter allows for better understanding of the dynamics that occur in *okupa* spaces at different levels. First of all, the attendees with more years of schooling and who shared university disciplines associated with the fields of humanities, arts and social sciences were generally capable of discussing the activities of *okupas* at more complex levels than the rest of the interviewees: which included aesthetic reflections, the administration of the space, the themes they covered and the possible influences for their creation and development; versus attendees without university studies, who mostly accounted for the recreational and emotional aspects of their experience and from time to time on the ‘political discourse’ of the activities.

Secondly, the activities allowed different users to reflect at that time about explicit and implicit topics in the activities or, many times, without any link.

These activities enable the emergence of new discursive spaces, many of them as a result of the thematic conversation sessions and artistic exhibitions mainly about issues related to capitalism, the educational system, animalism, ecology and machismo and sexism as the most recurrent, and that allow, –as one attendant emphasised– for individuals «to talk with people about different important topics and from different points of view, face to face, which is very different if you do these activities in a library or auditorium [...] and there is a completely asymmetric relationship» (sic) (pers. comm. 2019)<sup>15</sup>.

By the same token, the events allowed the attendants to place emphasis on more or less implicit questions within the space of conversation and discussion, in the generic sense of their activities, and that can be portrayed in specific situations. A suggestive example concerning the free children’s workshops conducted by CSO El Escombros (which commonly included shows of children’s films and games), where children from a social children centre that was in the neighbourhood<sup>16</sup> attended. These children had significant vulnerability rates and they are characterised as being orphans or by being separated from their parents by risk factors in their legal custody. These situations generally resulted in «putting into question the problems that these children have» (pers. comm. 2019)<sup>17</sup>, notwithstanding, they also emphasised the problems that possibly lay ahead for them in the future such as hard drug addiction and –in a macro sense– the level of «social responsibility» (pers. comm. 2019)<sup>18</sup>.

On the other hand, most of the topics discussed in these spaces have little or no connection with the ‘topic’ of the events. They tend to hover over a wide variety of issues, from conversations about the attitudes of third parties and their personalities, to local contingency issues<sup>19</sup>.

Nevertheless, it should be emphasised that being the *okupa* spaces described as spaces of ‘protest’, ‘rebellious culture’ and ‘struggle and resistance’ against the capitalist economic system, they are not less willing to talk about new offers in retail, markets and technology, mainly mobile telephony (strongly related to the news of integrated cameras). Sporadic conversations regarding the latest news about the film industry, mainly Hollywood<sup>20</sup>, and some garments with their respective places of sale are added to

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<sup>15</sup> Spanish Language Teacher Education student, 26 years old. Translated by the author.

<sup>16</sup> Aldeas Infantiles SOS Chile (SOS Chile, Infante Village in English), Non-governmental organisation.

<sup>17</sup> English teacher, 29 years old. Translated by the author.

<sup>18</sup> Freelancer cameraperson, 27 years old. Translated by the author.

<sup>19</sup> Some sporadic remarks from that moment stand out, in reference to salvaging the Nature Sanctuary Peninsula of Hualpén from residential estate business, in the Concepción province, Biobío region, Chile.

<sup>20</sup> In the field work, conversations among okupa attendants about new Hollywood films releases such as *Joker* and *Avengers: Endgame* stand out.

this. Appreciations, points of view, arguments in favour of one or another option that allow to convince or not the other individual in the sporadic conversations, as well as their appreciations regarding market prices, are common and frequent situations to observe. This fact is widely recognised by the users interviewed, mainly because they understand that it is «another space for conversation and closeness with [...] people» (pers. Comm. 2019)<sup>21</sup>, a place that is perceived as a place of similar socialisation to any other public space in the city that allows the conversation of free and sporadic topics: «we talk about how each one is at home, in his life, how is his daily life, and the situation in general. The things that one talks about anywhere, anyplace» (pers. comm. 2019)<sup>22</sup>.

*Okupa* spaces and the relationship with their users in terms of visions, behaviours and attitudes differ considerably with respect to those who appear as their administrators. The cultural dynamics where individuals can converge in mutual interests and ideas mediated by the different activities that function as platforms for communication and dialogue, is very distant from obeying exclusive ideas of ‘anarchism’ or ‘struggle against capitalism’ in practice, and rather function as informal spaces for unlimited discursive practices of topics that exclusively obey the matters of mutual interest that their assistants convene (cf. Hauser, 1997, p. 278).

## Conclusions

The socio-spatial dynamics of *okupa* spaces show how these places behave in light of the practices, uses and discourses of their users; offering new forms and modes of urban participation. The results of this research allow us to understand the behaviour and motivations of this type of actors to get involved in this type of space, mainly animated by forms of partition away from traditional spaces and the different categories of activities offered.

The representation of public space has been delocalised from its traditional conception in cities. While literature regularly associates the examples of museums, parks, theatres, cafeterias and cinemas; the socio-spatial behaviour of *okupa* spaces offer a new scope to include the development of these places in the public field. Both the cultural, recreational and leisure activities that are hosted by these non-traditional spaces allow users to enter new and dynamic situations, encouraging them to create new audiences. Getting into this type of novel public activities evokes a previous imagination and curiosity –in addition to functioning as a mediation point for communication with strangers and other topics of interest– that reveals the close connection between public activities in public space and the public sphere.

However, the constant rehabilitation and reuse of abandoned and disused urban spaces allows for new direct spaces in which the inhabitants of the city can discuss and decide directly on the interests that concern them, being subjects that participate in the development of public activities that allow individuals to function as both viewers and users. Public activities in *okupas* allow offering another experience on the comprehension of publicness, to the extent that publicness permits individuals to develop in the public sphere away from the traditional Habermasian formality.

Lastly, these types of activities carried out in these places allow culturally and socioeconomically diverse groups to converge in the same space in an active and participatory way, which allows for the creation of new audiences to be accompanied by the constant creation of networks and new communities. The latter enables *okupas* to function as public spaces thanks to their use value; simultaneously with the reappropriation of public urban spaces, on a micro level, of abandoned spaces and, on a macro level, of neighbourhoods.

<sup>21</sup> Spanish teacher, 26 years old. Translated by the author.

<sup>22</sup> Anthropology student, 24 years old. Translated by the author.

## Acknowledgements

This work would not have been possible without the financial support provided by Department of Research and Artistic Creation of Vice-rectory for Research and Development, University of Concepción (Chile), under the project cod. No. 219173052-S: *Abandoned space conception. Use and discourse about squatted edifices in Concepcion city*. Finally, I want to express a profound gratitude to Abigail Crook for her value advice and making sure this work was written properly.

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