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# Generative pedagogies from and for the social production of habitat: Learning from HIC-AL School of grassroots urbanism

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Re-thinking dominant epistemological assumptions of the urban in the global South implies recognising the role of grassroots networks in challenging epistemic injustices through the co-production of multiple *saberes* and *haceres* for more just and inclusive cities. This paper examines the pedagogies of such networks by focusing on the experiences nurtured within Habitat International Coalition in Latin America (HIC-AL), identified as a ‘School of Grassroots Urbanism’ (*Escuela de Urbanismo Popular*). Although HIC-AL follows foremost activist rather than educational objectives, members of HIC-AL identify and value their practices as a ‘School’, whose diverse pedagogic logics and epistemological arguments are examined in this paper. The analysis builds upon a series of in-depth interviews, document reviews and participant observation with HIC-AL member organisations and allied grassroots networks. The discussion explores how the values and principles emanating from a long history of popular education and popular urbanism in the region are articulated through situated pedagogies of resistance and transformation, which in turn enable generative learning from and for the social production of habitat.

**Keywords:** Popular education, grassroots urbanism, critical pedagogy, epistemic justice, Habitat International Coalition, Latin America

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### Introduction

The last two decades have witnessed multiple calls to rethink dominant epistemological assumptions on urban change (Watson, 2016; Mitlin et al., 2020). Brenner (2013, p. 91) noted that '[p]aradoxically, (...) at the very moment in which the urban appears to have acquired an unprecedented strategic significance for an extraordinarily broad array of institutions, organizations, researchers, actors, and activists, its definitional contours have become unmanageably slippery.'

Thus, in distilling a new epistemology of the 'urban', the question becomes: through what and whose categories, methodologies and pedagogies should urban life be understood? Researchers from across the world have responded to this question, contesting the perpetuation of eurocentrism, coloniality, and modernity in global urban studies and seeking to account for new empirics, methods and concepts emerging from subaltern geographies. The work of Colin McFarlane (2011), as well as collective volumes such as *The Routledge Handbook on Cities of the Global South* (Parnell & Oldfield, 2014), and its companion volume on planning (Bhan et al., 2017), among others, are manifestations of the multifaceted nature and breadth of current debates, and remind us of the need of decolonising contemporary ways of thinking about and acting upon cities.

Organised social movements, such as Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI), the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR), as well as multi-actor alliances of movements, civil society organisations and academia such as the Habitat International Coalition (HIC) are amongst the key actors working across local, regional and global levels to re-define the ways we understand what 'knowing' the urban actually means, and who 'the knowers' are. For example, in its fights for social justice in marginalised and informal settlements across Asia, Africa and Latin America, SDI's Know Your City campaign puts these questions centre stage, advocating for informed, bottom-up action based on detailed settlement-profiling by, and for, their residents. Importantly, it has been shown that SDI's firmly contextualised approach has been leveraged to influence the knowledge paradigms framing global policy discourses, including the New Urban Agenda (Cociña, Frediani, Acuto, & Levy, 2019).

Contemporary urban social movements, particularly in Latin America, are built on a long legacy of grassroots or popular urbanism, such as the experiences of *Los Hacedores de Ciudad* (the city-makers) in Venezuela or large-scale movements of *autoconstrucción* in Peru. Since the 1960s, these movements have fought for the recognition of city-makers as entitled citizens, and sought to collectively contest the logics of the market and of political regulation and fiscalisation (Rebotier, 2010) in issues related to housing, territory and land. In Garcia's understanding, grassroots urbanism refers to a 'conceptual proposal, which recognises the initiative, capacity and experience of the population, generally low-income dwellers, to create an urban habitat with its own human resources and materials at different scales and with different degrees of institutional participation' (García, 2017, p. 66, authors' translation).

The aforementioned processes of social mobilisation played a critical role in democratising turning points in the region. Their dialectic relationship with the state has been highlighted by key figures such as John Turner, Manuel Castells and Enrique Ortiz, who reminded us over the years that grassroots urbanism is simultaneously conditioning and conditioned by the rules and processes of urban development envisaged by formal planning (see, for example, Castells, 2016; Ortiz Flores, 2017; Turner, 1976). Within this backdrop, the social production of habitat refers to 'all nonmarket processes carried out under inhabitants' initiative, management and control that generate and/or improve adequate living spaces, housing and

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other elements of physical and social development (...) (Habitat International Coalition, 2018, p.119). Rather than treating the social production of habitat as an anomaly or a marginal practice to be eradicated (Connolly, 2014), key activist scholars and organisations argued for recognising, valuing and supporting everyday practices of city-making, thereby locating the empirics, methods and principles of grassroots urbanism in a renewed epistemology of the urban.

These experiences of grassroots urbanism have undoubtedly been nurtured by popular education and critical pedagogy, two fundamental levers for developing and articulating the agency of social movements in their struggles for recognition and justice. Paulo Freire, a key founding figure in critical pedagogy, proclaimed that popular education is inevitably linked to action for change, where 'the movement *is* the school' (1991, in Kane 2012, authors' emphasis). Although Freirean critical pedagogy was strongly shaped by the experiences of rural peasant movements in Brazil, there have been clear parallels with the urban question throughout its history. Dynamics of action and change have been articulated by liberation theology in the 1950s and 1960s, through pedagogies of resistance to dictatorships and oppressive regimes in the 1980s and 1990s, and through critical pedagogies with a changing focus on citizens as political subjects as well as an intersectional understanding of 'the oppressed' since the return to democracies (Kane 2012). This particular Latin American history is central to understand the variegated political tactics and articulations of social movement learning in relation to state-led institutions and formal education systems. Negotiating whose knowledge counts, how and why, has been a decisive factor in situating the pedagogic trajectories of social movements in particular contexts and historical junctures. Freire thereby emphasises that this politics of knowledge is not about claiming one's knowledge over the other's in understanding the content of a specific issue. Rather, he advocates for 'epistemological curiosity', which he defines as an ever-expanding, *generative* perspective to learning and knowing (Freire, 1997).

More recently, scholars such as Tarlau (2014) lamented that social movement theory and critical pedagogy have increasingly grown apart, neglecting the potential of critical pedagogy 'to recast social movements as educational, and social movement theory (...) to analyse informal and popular education as partial causes for the emergence and sustainability of social movements' (p.386). For re-establishing a contemporary dialogue between those two fields, she advocates investigating the links between informal education and social change as well as building an understanding of the capacities and roles of social movement participation for building a critical consciousness. Tarlau's call strongly resonates with the aim of this paper, which seeks to bring critical pedagogy and social movements together into the realm of grassroots urbanism. With notable exceptions (see Marzioni, 2012, Guelman & Palumbo, 2018) the question of what pedagogies are adopted by social movements and the role of such pedagogies in developing more transformative epistemic framings of the urban have so far been rarely tackled or even raised.

In filling this gap, the concept of *epistemic (in)justice* (Fricker, 2007) is helpful to examine the pedagogic power, ethics and logics underpinning the producing, sharing and using of knowledge in learning processes (Allen & Wesely, 2020). This notion aims to capture and denounce discriminatory and oppressive practices leading to 'forms of unfair treatment that relate to issues of knowledge, understanding, and participation in communicative practices' (Kidd et al. 2017, p.1). In short, epistemic justice challenges us to think critically about 'knowing' and 'the knower' and how prejudiced practices are reproduced through what Miranda Fricker defines as 'testimonial' and 'hermeneutic' injustice. Testimonial injustice refers to prejudice on behalf of the hearer, leading to the speaker receiving less credibility, such as

## Open Access Journal

when women and men living in informal settlements are not heard or acknowledged by government officials or treated as ‘right-less squatters’. Hermeneutic injustice refers to the deficits, blindspots and biases in social collective resources – processes and institutional practices – that disadvantage specific social groups from having their distinctive experiences and interpretations of their own reality meaningfully heard and considered. Importantly, both forms of injustice do not imply that hearers *deliberately* ignore, manipulate and degrade the knowledge of the speaker; they rather point to underlying, often hidden, structural factors affecting both, the hearer and the speaker, or the oppressed and the oppressor (Walker, 2018; 2019).

Focusing on the experience of the Habitat International Coalition in Latin America (HIC-AL) – conceptualised here as a ‘School of Grassroots Urbanism’ (*Escuela de Urbanismo Popular*) – this article frames the exploration of critical pedagogies in the social production of habitat as a crucial means for building epistemic justice. Building upon Freire’s notion of the ‘movement as a school’, this paper examines the generative capacity of HIC-AL’s schools to stimulate epistemological curiosity, to contest hegemonic epistemologies of the urban, and to envision and realise diverse, transformative alternatives, that draw on the lived experiences of marginalised and low-income women and men living in human settlements often labelled ‘informal’ (Zárata, 2017).

The next section explores HIC-AL’s vocation to act as a school in its manifestations across the network. Sections 2 and 3 explore a number of experiences looking at the following questions: How does grassroots urbanism translate into and through pedagogic principles and practices? And, what pedagogic logics activate the generative potential of grassroots schools? The final section offers some critical reflexions on how the generative pedagogies of HIC-AL’s School of Grassroots Urbanism contribute to advance epistemic justice.

### **The schools that make HIC-AL a networked School of Grassroots Urbanism**

The Habitat International Coalition (HIC) is a global network, which brings together civil society organisations, research institutions and academia, grassroots movements and NGOs fighting for the right to adequate housing, human rights related to habitat, and the right to the city, across five continents. Emerging over four decades ago from a group of NGOs set up in preparation of the UN Conference on Human Settlements in Vancouver in 1976, HIC has since been an active agent from local to international levels in defending habitat rights for all, foregrounding a justice approach to housing, land and human settlements, and the voices and experiences of marginalised communities inhabiting urban and rural areas (Habitat International Coalition, 2018).

HIC’s work is based on a rights-based agenda: In its advocacy for the right to adequate housing and the territory, and in positioning housing as a fundamental human right, the Coalition has firmly conceptualised over time how the social production of habitat creates and protects common functions and goods for all in society. This means that HIC works along four complementary and overarching paths, which are addressed with different priorities and nuances in the Coalition’s regional work: ‘(1) fight against violations of all rights related to habitat; (2) promote and implement the social production of habitat; (3) defend the right to a healthy environment; and (4) advance towards gender equality and equity’ (Habitat International Coalition, 2016, p. 8). Collective learning is an integral and transversal element across these four objectives, through knowledge exchanges, regional workshops and capacity building as key activities, organised collaboratively by members from civil society, NGOs and CBOs and universities, amongst others. These activities often include conceptual as well as

## Open Access Journal

practical components, such as sessions about the social production of habitat, and visits and workshops with housing cooperatives to share experiences and collectively reflect on them.

One of the key characteristics of HIC in the Latin American region – HIC-AL – is the explicit vocation to act as a ‘School’, or rather, through multiple schools where learning is collectively practiced and embedded in action. In a comprehensive survey, members of the Coalition identified critical added value in the work of HIC-AL as a School (HIC-AL, 2017). Detailed consultation with ten member-organisations from Mexico, Argentina, Peru, Uruguay, Bolivia and Colombia revealed a portfolio of seminars, internships, diploma courses, schools for community leaders, forums and discussions as pedagogic activities, which have reached more than 12.000 learners, including urban dwellers, public officials, and university students, between 2003 and 2007 (Ibidem).

HIC-AL’s working group on Capacities Strengthening (*Fortalecimiento de Capacidades FOC-HAB*), in which 61 professors from seven different countries participate, has spearheaded this work by articulating a learning strategy and systematising some of these learning experiences into formal programmes. For example, the experience of a participatory design process in the *Barrio Intercultural Sustentable – Comunidad del Cambio* (Intercultural Sustainable Neighbourhood – Community of Change) in San Martín de los Andes, Argentina, has been transformed into the central case study of a Diploma Course in Participatory Design, which is formally accredited and recognised by the National Autonomous University of Mexico (Enet & Romero, 2019).

The above and several other transformative stories of the social production of habitat have been captured in the book *Utopías en Construcción* (Utopias in the Making) (HIC-AL, 2017), which celebrates the collective efforts of a multiplicity of actors working together to build the capacity of member organisations to strengthen their autonomy, while also having an impact on advocacy and public policy. Through inspiring narratives, the book recognises and values the agency and capacity of everyday city-makers, showing how knowledge is collectively produced, appropriated and used by HIC-AL members. Several schools organised by members feature as essential contributors to build and apply collective capacities, skills, values, and agency for advancing the social production of habitat. Amongst them is the *Escuela Nacional de Formación*<sup>1</sup> in Uruguay – National School of the Uruguayan Housing Federation (FUCVAM) – that operates since 2013 and brings together 200 leaders of cooperatives. The school supports capacities for self-management (*autogestión*), mutual work and collective property management, while also strengthening the bonds between FUCVAM’s members. The *Utopias in the Making* further features several examples of regional schools, which exchange knowledge and practices across HIC-AL members and allies through immersed learning activities. An example is the *Escuela Regional de Formación Cooperativista* – Regional Cooperativist School – run by the Central American Coordination Entity of Self-managed Social Housing (COCEAVIS).

In the following sections, we analyse how HIC-AL member schools and their epistemic claims manifest in different contexts. The discussion draws from a desk review that combed a large number of published and internal reports and fieldwork conducted since June 2019. The latter includes 21 in-depth conversations and, in some cases, participant observation of the schools, with 14 HIC-AL members, coordinators and affiliates, online and in person in Argentina, Colombia, Chile, Cuba, and Mexico. Figure 1 highlights many of the schools and capacity

<sup>1</sup> The Spanish term ‘Formación’ suggests a holistic and embodied understanding of education, whereby the learner capacities and capabilities are nurtured through the learning process.



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building activities identified by HIC-AL back in 2017. Dark red marks popular schools led by social movements, orange highlights civic initiatives, and blue university-led courses, although all schools operate on a collaborative basis.



**Figure 1.** Schools of HIC-AL [Adapted from HIC, 2017, p.143, complemented by interview data. Note that this map does not claim to be comprehensive of all schools (Authors' translation)].

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Through fieldwork and multiple conversations with regional representatives of HIC-AL, we have identified that these schools have a variety of foci towards strengthening capacities for the social production of habitat. Although not intended to be a comprehensive or mutually exclusive typology, schools seem to foreground one or more of the following objectives:

- targeting a particular type of learner, such as schools for community leaders;
- appropriating a particular learning (and action) environment, as in the case of territorial and neighbourhood schools or ‘virtual’ or digital environments such as radio-schools;
- focusing on particular political agendas, and on building capacities for multi-actor advocacy in public policy;
- shaping and transforming curricula in public universities;
- following thematic entry points, such as schools focused on particular legal issues, solidarity economy and cooperative housing; or
- working with a particular theoretical-conceptual approach, including feminist schools or those working with intercultural practices.

Interviewees mentioned several rationales for identifying their efforts as schools. On the one hand, many see it as a means to challenge conventional pedagogies largely associated with the banking model of education (Freire, 1973). Hence, they explicitly use the term ‘school’ to contest hegemonic practices and discourses of outdated schooling models. Examples of this re-framing include defining a school not primarily as a physical space, but as a dialogic encounter, and questioning hierarchical roles, such as teacher-student or layperson-expert, through more horizontal relations. On the other hand, schools are also associated with some degree of institutionalisation, which means that educational efforts potentially gain visibility and legitimacy by providing degrees or accreditations by formally recognised education institutions. Although some HIC-AL schools collaborate with universities, such as the Autonomous National University of Mexico (UNAM) to provide accredited higher education courses, the schools are not generally framed by an overarching governing or regulating body. This ensures in general a high degree of autonomy and flexibility, which is fundamental for a horizontal network.

What follows is a transversal reading of these schools to examine how they articulate and translate the notion of popular urbanism and the social production of habitat into pedagogic principles and practices. The analysis uncovers how common pedagogic principles and practices are situated in particular contexts and struggles. Context-sensitivity is manifested in the heterogeneity of schools in regards to their (explicit or implicit) political vocation, their capacity to create space for new collectives to emerge, and their responsiveness to demands arising from specific political, social and cultural conditions.

Common characteristics include their focus on intergenerational learning and on dismantling hierarchies between teacher-student or layperson-expert; the inseparability of ways of doing from those of knowing; and open curricula that evolve in-the-making.

### **On learning, learners and pedagogues: Nurturing multiple ways of ‘knowing and doing’**

#### ***Heterogeneous pedagogic principles and practices***

HIC’s principles of autonomy and horizontal relations are closely tied to the political vocation of education, which manifests across schools in different facets. For instance, schools led by social movements have the explicit objective of learning with others for advocacy and incidence in political processes, often aligned with leftist political agendas. For example, the

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Occupants and Tenants Movement (MOI) in Argentina, which runs a popular bachelor's programme, states that 'we see popular education as a tool which is inseparable from 'construcción autogestionaria' [self-managed construction] and from cooperativism, because it shares the same ends and the same organisational forms that prioritise the comprehensive development of individuals and collectives, and the protagonism of the participants in decision-making and in the everyday-doings to resolve their concrete necessities' (Rapp, Rodriguez, & Wrobel, 2015, p.1-2).

Other schools do not follow explicit political agendas, but emphasise that the social production of habitat is inevitably political, as is education about various techniques and strategies to transform collectively the living conditions of marginalised and impoverished inhabitants. Participatory planning and design processes, securing land tenure, and developing a solidarity economy are amongst the foci of many schools, demanding particular knowledge and skill-sets to enable learners to fundamentally change and challenge norms, values and institutional systems (Interview with Mariana Enet, National University of Córdoba, 29.11.2019).

What was articulated particularly by interviewees from Chile, is that schools are not only embedded into, but fundamentally responsive to, the political, cultural and socio-economic environment in which they operate. The importance of responsiveness was highlighted, for example, in the immediate aftermath of the Chilean dictatorship. At the time, HIC member SUR – a civil society organisation for Social Studies and Education – established a School for Social Planners (*Escuela de Planificadores Sociales*), which was attended by about 5,000 people between 1986-2002 (Interview with Susana Aravena, Corporación SUR, Santiago de Chile, 30.07.2019). The school addressed the fundamental need to reflect with participants – many of whom were forced to exile and saw their education, professional and personal life deeply disrupted by regional coups – on tools, practices and strategies to become active makers of their history during the return to democracy. The value of the school and power to steer collective action and ignite leadership, became visible when several participants decided to run for public office, and became mayor candidates and local council members as Chile returned to democracy.

In other instances, the pedagogy of HIC-AL schools has enabled not only collective learning in response to a particular political economy, but it saw schools igniting a collectivising capacity. This development has been highlighted in a citywide school in Talca, in the Maule Region of Chile. Over the last decade, Talca has been growing rapidly and under increasing socio-spatial segregation – with similar trends observable in other urban centres of Chile such as Santiago and Valparaiso – but without any collective space to reflect on this trend and to develop articulated responses. In the Talca school, participants learnt to de-normalise the way in which the city had developed through a series of conversations and workshops contrasting trends with other cities. This opened the possibility to perceive the city as a context amenable to analysis, discussion and change, to be shaped through the experiences, struggles and imaginaries of its inhabitants. As highlighted by Patricia Boyco, one of the pedagogues nurturing this experience: 'A group of community leaders, public officials, the Mayor and service providers, participated and talked in sessions about the city. And inequality in Talca – which at first seemed to be something natural, an entity that was changing in a way no-one seemed to understand – started to become an object of analysis, of opinions, of suggestions, with space to say and imagine how and where we want it to go' (Interview with Patricia Boyco, Corporación SUR, Santiago de Chile, 31.07.2019).

The process of collectivising involved the creation of a newspaper and radio programme to raise public awareness and expand collective discussions beyond the school. Moreover, after



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a devastating earthquake in 2011 that affected in particular the historic centre, participants in the school established a citizen's platform called *Movimiento Ciudadano Talca con Todos y Todas*<sup>2</sup>. The platform in turn developed a people-centred alternative recovery and reconstruction strategy that, if implemented, would have allowed residents to rebuild their habitat avoiding displacement and relocation.

### **Common pedagogic principles and practices**

Freire (1997) reminds us that: 'Whoever teaches learns in the act of teaching, and whoever learns teaches in the act of learning' (p.31). Analysing the role of learners and pedagogues in different HIC-AL schools, it becomes clear that the principle of foregrounding individual and collective subjects as agents of change, is closely aligned with the principles of popular and critical pedagogy. The above-mentioned horizontal relations in HIC imply that learners in the schools are not perceived as empty vessels, whose brains need to be filled with expert knowledge (as critiqued by Paulo Freire as the 'banking model' of education). Instead, they are active agents holding the moral and political responsibility and capacity to enact their learning towards transformative practice, agents capable of bringing their own knowledges to the school, where inputs are collectively nurtured, tested and expanded (Interview with María Luisa Cuenca, COPEVI, 13.12.2019).

The initial stages of the schools are paramount for learners to become conscientious that everyone can contribute to a horizontal co-learning process. This approach often translates into pedagogies that start from micro-spaces of personal experiences: 'No one arrives [to the school] without knowing anything, even the person who says: I haven't studied, I don't know anything. So, we start from people's practice, from their knowledge, and we strengthen it with readings, with materials that support them to deepen their knowledge so that they can get back to their practice with new elements' (Interview with María Luisa Cuenca, COPEVI, 13.12.2019). This pedagogical model is not about 'flipping classroom' techniques and letting students take the lead in selected sessions. Rather, it concerns the fundamental orientation of conceiving participants simultaneously as pedagogues and learners, which involves valuing all knowledge and experiences, as well as learning relations.

Due to the long history of HIC-AL, several interviewees raised the importance of thinking specifically about how to nurture intergenerational dynamics in three different ways:

- a) First, when learning relations are galvanised between new organisations and those with longer experience in habitat rights. Schools in many instances provide the learning space for hands-on collaboration, such as in the collaboration between the well-established Corporación SUR and the recently formed team of Ciudad Común, in supporting an emerging grassroots school in La Granja, a low-income neighbourhood in the periphery of Santiago de Chile (see Figure 2).
- b) Second, when the youth take a leading role in the learning space, for instance, introducing the use of digital media. In the metropolitan area of Medellín, Colombia, Corporación Región has been working in five neighbourhoods with different learners such as community leaders, people with disabilities, and youth, with a particular focus on how to activate the right to the city. The contributions of youth groups brought a distinct quality to the co-learning process, particularly through the use of video-making and arts to express their own understanding of the right to the city.

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<sup>2</sup> Citizens Movement Talca with all Men and Women.

## Open Access Journal

- c) A third way in which intergenerational learning works in many schools is through the participation of the so-called 'wisdom keepers', individuals within the Coalition with decades of experience in the social production of habitat and advocating for housing rights. Their presence in learning experiences – be it through personal participation, written material or remote contributions – puts the learning processes of the schools into a wider historical and regional perspective.



**Figure 2.** Grassroots pedagogies at work in the School of La Granja, Chile. (Adriana Allen, 2019).

The contextual responsiveness of the schools is also reflected in the shared pedagogic principle of openness of the curriculum, which is sensitive to particular situations. Many schools start by covering basic contents around the right to the city and the social production of habitat to build a shared language. From that basis, the schools' 'curriculum' is fundamentally built around its purpose, be it learning to resist eviction threats or to develop a housing cooperative. This implies that learning is approached as a process of *formación de haceres y saberes*, where the collective construction of ways of knowing are inseparable from those of doing.

One clear example of this approach is a school that led to the co-development of a baking cooperative in Antofagasta, in the north of Chile. Led by the dwellers of Arenales – an informal '*macrocampamento*' of migrants from all over Latin America – and with support from the local NGO Fractal, and academics from the Regional Observatory of Human Development

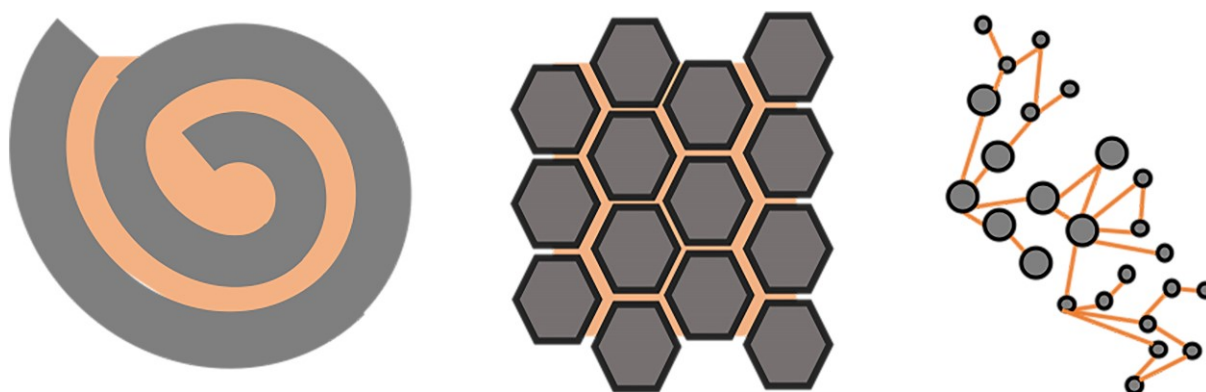
## Open Access Journal

(ORDHUM) at the Catholic University of the North in Antofagasta, the school was set up on demand from the community leaders to learn about their rights. Academics were transparent from the onset about what they felt they could best contribute and put forward for discussion different theoretical propositions about what the right to the city entails. Dwellers from Arenales embraced the proposal and collective readings of Lefebvre became the basis for deep reflection and awareness raising on the reality of living in a context of high social-spatial segregation, tenancy insecurity, and migrant struggles.

Months after the completion of this experience, the community leaders approached the university again, asking for support in setting up a baking cooperative, which they identified as a way to pursue their right to the city and to enhance the collective autonomy of their livelihoods (Interview Francisco Vergara-Perucich, UCLAS, Santiago de Chile, 02.08.2019). Reflecting on the process, one of the academics involved in the experience, describes this 'learning on the go' approach – as opposed to following a pre-defined curriculum – as a surprisingly rich learning experience for all involved; one that required strong reflective skills and openness to make mistakes and learn from them. In addition, the pedagogic pathway adopted without prior design, became generative of high levels of autonomy thanks to its focus on building the agency of the community (Vergara-Perucich & Arias-Loyola, 2019). In this sense, the notion of 'the movement as a school' means that the learning community *is* the curriculum, allowing for learning intentions to be co-defined throughout the process, precisely because agency-building outcomes, centred on the particular individual and collective capacities and challenges, are the focus.

### Generative pedagogies for the social production of habitat

The previous sections have shown that HIC-AL schools are rooted in principles of autonomy, flexibility and collectivising action, and assembled through variegated pedagogic logics. Which pedagogic logics, then, activate the generative potential of these schools for the social production of habitat? Figure 3 graphically illustrates three underlying, interdependent pedagogic logics, identified through the many schools analysed, with each logic examined below.



**Figure 3.** HIC-AL pedagogic logics, with orange areas highlighting their generative aspects: Virtuous spiral, inter-learning spaces, and multiplying emancipatory practices.

### *Transforming vicious cycles into virtuous spirals – ‘el caracol peregrino’*

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In the re-telling of his professional and personal trajectory, former HIC President and General Secretary Enrique Ortiz Flores uses the 'peregrine snail' as a metaphor for conceptualising his understanding of the reflective practitioner (Ortiz Flores, 2017). Spiralling outwards yet remaining centred, learning is not a linear process, but wandering towards an opening up from the level of the individual agent to its immediate and then extended environment, and ultimately to the world and cosmivision. The snail's shell signifies a connector across levels, which is solid yet fragile; its circular movement representing distinct phases of life and learning (Interview with Enrique Ortiz Flores, former HIC General Secretary, Mexico City, 12.12.2019). This poetic account of one of HIC's 'wisdom keepers' merits a closer look, as it hosts a generative logic that is shared in the pedagogies of several schools. The pedagogic logic of transforming vicious cycles into virtuous spirals can be illustrated through the work of the Mexican NGO Cooperación Comunitaria, which started working in rural areas of the state of Guerrero immediately after the occurrence of hurricanes Ingrid and Manuel in 2013 that devastated the housing and infrastructure of many Indigenous communities.

The main aim steering Cooperación Comunitaria's pedagogic logic was to approach reconstruction efforts without reconstructing the risks that made local communities highly vulnerable to disasters in the first instance. Among such preconditions were the loss of local Indigenous knowledge, a dominance of modernistic visions of 'good quality housing', but also a close relationship across livelihoods, environmental conditions and cultural traditions. Pedagogically, these pre-conditions translated into two key principles: A focus on experiential learning based on nurturing pre-existing knowledge, particularly indigenous ones; and learning to manage complexity in practice rather than simplifying problems that lead to simplistic solutions.

For example, one of the major challenges for re-constructing seismically resistant buildings was the desire of many inhabitants to live in concrete buildings, following modernistic visions of 'safe' housing. Rather than imposing expert knowledge to the re-construction approach while advocating for local materials use, the NGO facilitated a dialogic learning process that enabled collective reflections on participants' personal housing experiences in relation to their environment. New perspectives on how to rebuild were gradually nurtured and expanded, starting with an evaluation of sensorial experiences – e.g. how does the indoor climate in a concrete building feel in comparison to a traditional adobe structure? Hence, reflective capacities matured from the personal to the household and community levels, and gradually to tackle critically broader issues, such as livelihoods, deforestation and climate change in relation to the local context. Through this pedagogy, complex issues were not simplified, but transversally and relationally learnt. Importantly, these reflections were immediately tied to actions, as Cooperación Comunitaria co-created physical pedagogic spaces such as a community centre to experiment with emerging ideas for a solidarity economy and eco-construction, such as building dry toilets, rainwater harvesting tanks, and re-enforced adobe housing units (Interview with Elis Martínez, Cooperación Comunitaria, 10.12.2019). Emerging ideas and concepts of the social construction of habitat were shared with a wider public in Spanish as well as in Mé'pháá (local language) through radio programmes.

The above example demonstrates that biases in perception and decision making initially identified as a vicious cycle – such as the modern, external vision of concrete housing making local communities more dependent on global production chains and more vulnerable to hazard events – was incrementally turned into a virtuous spiral that fosters the recognition of existing indigenous knowledges and local materials. The pedagogy activated a shift from externally prescribed and individualistic biases for reconstructing houses to the collective development of the local community agency for rebuilding and strengthening all aspects of the social



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production of habitat. The role of the NGO and wisdom keepers in this process was to act as facilitators, stimulating a dialogical process that did not pre-determine the learning and reconstruction outcomes based on expert knowledge. Over a period of five years, 526 people were part of this learning experience and the reconstruction programme has benefitted almost 2,500 inhabitants from seven communities (Cooperación Comunitaria, 2018). This approach has been refined and expanded to other rural sites in Mexico affected by hazard events, and several other HIC-AL members have adopted a similar pedagogic logic (see, for example, Santiago Hernandez, 2013). In 2019, Cooperación Comunitaria won the 'Transformative Cities People's Choice' award<sup>3</sup> in the housing category and became a key reference further developed as part of a HIC campaign for local materials. In this case, connecting the approach locally adopted by one relatively young NGO to the wider HIC network expanded the pedagogy of the peregrine snail regionally and internationally.

### ***Inter-learning to nurture convivial spaces***

Building on the metaphoric tone of the first logic, the second generative pedagogy can be visualised as a honeycomb, whereby co-learning takes place at the interstices of each cell. This logic can be explained with the example of the *Barrio Intercultural Sustentable - Comunidad del Cambio*, which came out of a well-documented participatory design process that took place in San Martín de los Andes, Argentina in 2011 (Enet & Romero, 2019). The pedagogy was responsive to the local context characterised by an acute housing emergency, as well as drastic social-spatial segregation between inhabitants of the Indigenous Mapuche community and others. In this participatory design process, led by *Vecinos sin Techo*, Comunidad Curruhuinca Mapuche and supported by the National University of Córdoba, 42 workshops on themes such as energy autonomy, land restitution and cosmovision took place over one year.

The workshops brought together technical and local knowledge into so-called *Espacios de Interaprendizaje* (inter-learning spaces), fundamentally conceived as transdisciplinary and intersectoral spaces. The pedagogic aim was to create synergies and dialogic spaces between different kinds of knowledges on various thematic areas. For example, the local Mapuche knowledge on medicinal plants was articulated in a workshop with the Argentinian plant health network *Red Jarilla de Plantas Saludables* de la Patagonia, generating insights for the growth of medicinal plants and herbs in the community. At the same time, capacities for critical thinking and practice were enhanced through pedagogic exercises like role plays designed to entice a sense of how others think and act upon a commonly identified problem.

The generative aspect of this pedagogy became even more prominent when the character of the process changed from one of resistance to one of working towards an alternative vision of the future. At this point, local inhabitants started to go beyond strategies to cope with the existing housing shortage into the development of collective capacities to transform their way of living together in the neighbourhood. They call it the 'Intercultural Sustainable Neighbourhood - Community of Change', to capture their search for an alternative way of life. Such alternative seeks energy and food autonomy, lovingness and solidarity and intercultural conviviality in a neighbourhood that in today's Argentinian context is still marginalised and where Mapuche people's right to their territory is not fully recognised. Starting from this very negative position, this neighbourhood generated a transformation. It showed that Mapuche and white people can live together in solidarity and can drive alternative lifestyles together. As highlighted by one of the pedagogues involved, in this experience, 'there was a moment of

<sup>3</sup> <https://transformativecities.org/>



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rhizomatic evolution, which no one directed. It was all done through dialogue between them' (Interview with Mariana Enet, National University of Córdoba, Argentina, 22.11.2019).

This shift from a pedagogy of resistance to a generative one was nurtured and made visible in a competition to build dreams (*Concurso Construyendo Sueños*), which used models to exhibit the design practices generated by the School in a collective space. As the community became the curriculum, a cooperative was established with inter-related clusters on housing construction, and small livestock production, amongst others. Moreover, the process of developing cooperative social housing gained attention beyond the neighbourhood, making the experience a reference point for autonomous building and self-management.

In sum, this pedagogic logic of inter-learning created reciprocal recognition of different ways of relational learning. Similar to the experience described above, since its launch in 2011, this initiative has been widely shared and discussed through the HIC-AL network, and has moreover been one of the finalists for the World Habitat Award 2016. The territorial nature of the school meant that people arrived in the neighbourhood to learn from it through field visits and knowledge exchanges. Additionally, the experience was translated into pedagogic material that has been shared in webinars and diploma courses aimed at enhancing the capacities of urban practitioners to work in contested territories (Enet & Romero, 2019).

### ***Multiplying emancipatory pedagogies for democratic practices of citizenship***

The third logic relates to pedagogies in which the generative aspect relies on the rapid expansion and multiplication of capacities at scale. Schools operating with this logic often have elements of 'training of trainers' (*formación de formadores*), whereby learners take the role of pedagogues and get to appreciate and foster parity of participation throughout the learning process.

The *Escuela de Gobierno y Ciudadanía* (School of Government and Citizenship) in Mexico, emerged in the year 2000 as a response to the conjunctural momentum of election results, when the long-lasting one-party regime was ousted. Co-learning democratic practices of citizenship was identified as a need and a right to strengthen local capacities to hold newly elected governments to account. Importantly, target learners were not only citizens, but also public officials working in local governments. This school continues to be ran by the civil society organisation COPEVI (*Centro Operacional de Vivienda y Poblamiento A.C.*), which has worked for over 50 years on issues of popular housing, and on the intersection of citizen participation and capacity building based on principles of popular education. The school does not work in one specific territory or a particular site of learning; instead, it is assembled on demand by specific organisations, such as the Secretariat of Women in Guerrero.

The School of Government and Citizenship aims to strengthen the capabilities of learners as political subjects, as agents that contribute to enhancing 'local power' through their relations with one another and with government institutions. Hence, its conceptual focus is on activating relational knowledge and political action, as critical abilities to act strategically on specific struggles through relational engagement at various scales, such as the household, local committees, the municipality, the national government, international agencies or private sector. As put by one of the school's convenors reflecting on the approach adopted: 'If I conduct an action which allows me to relate to others and to influence government actions, then I am conducting a political action.' (Interview with María Luisa Cuenca, COPEVI, 13.12.2019). In this context, government institutions are understood as connectors with the

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responsibility and capacity for enabling the political action of learners within a given territory or action space.

The generative aspect of this school derives from its work at scale. COPEVI initially ran 16 parallel schools in collaboration with the Office of Citizen Participation from the Government of Mexico City. In a second round, the schools were extended to 54 neighbourhood committees, each hosting between 15 and 35 participants. The School of Government and Citizenship operates every Saturday over three months and, like in the case of other schools analysed, it departs from re-discovering and recognising existing knowledge about the city, based on experiences, material conditions and the histories of each specific neighbourhood. Moreover, a 'Committee of *Formadores*' was formed to propagate the practice of learners as pedagogues among staff from the Office of Citizen Participation. Enhancing the ability of this group to in turn develop the political capabilities of ordinary citizens generated capacities for emancipatory citizen participation at scale.

### Concluding remarks

This paper set out to contribute a better understanding of the pedagogies required for re-thinking epistemologies of the urban. Due to the rich historical engagement with the construction of critical pedagogies in Latin America, reflecting on regional experiences stimulates valuable insights into the relations between grassroots urbanism, critical pedagogy and popular education. Conceptualising the pedagogic work of HIC-AL as a networked School of Grassroots Urbanism guided by common principles and practices, the paper examined Freire's notion of 'the movement as a school', thereby articulating the relation between advocacy and educational activities. A particular concern throughout the analysis has been to explore the generative potential of the multiple schools operating within the network to challenge and transform epistemic injustices.

The analysis reveals that HIC-AL pedagogies have the power to address both testimonial and hermeneutic injustices. The former can be observed through the way in which the schools act as vehicles to transform the often mal- and mis-recognised knowledge and practices of marginalised urban dwellers through the revalorisation of their role in the social production of habitat. The case of HIC-AL shows that generative learning requires individuals and collectives to inhabit – rather than to acquire – knowledge and skills. Each of the three pedagogic logics explored – transforming vicious cycles into virtuous spirals; inter-learning to nurture convivial spaces; multiplying emancipatory pedagogies for democratic practices of citizenship – go beyond learning through knowledge acquisition and accumulation. This entails dismantling the separation between learners and educators and the stigmatisation of knowers and knowledges, giving voice, recognition and legitimacy to diverse learning experiences, and ultimately, carving and claiming political spaces for acting upon these experiences so they become generative to urban equality.

It is also interesting to observe that what gives pedagogic coherence to this movement of schools is not a coherent and systematised design but rather their embodiment of the key principles and values of HIC-AL as a network. These include the defence of habitat rights, the revalorisation of the social production of habitat and the ways in which they activate the right to the city as integrative of multiple human rights. The generative capacity of the schools to enable the viral proliferation of their pedagogies is underpinned by their operation within the horizontal networks that make and transcend the Coalition. These two key characteristics together privilege high learner autonomy; prioritise learning outcomes over pre-defined curricula; focus on experiential knowledge that is responsive to particular historical and

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political struggles; and constantly question and nurture knowledge relations between participants.

Hermeneutically, the logics of virtuous spirals, inter-learning spaces, and multiplications of emancipatory practices, show that developing alternative urban futures requires a collective process of '*formación de saberes y haceres*', but also challenging and expanding hegemonic political processes and institutional practices to listen and respond to the experiences and interpretations of those typically rendered invisible. Hence, several schools work through pedagogies of resistance – to halt evictions and defend territories, amongst others, but they often also generate transformative capacities to co-produce visions for more just and inclusive urban futures, leading to fundamental shifts in power relations, changes in housing policies or the formation of new collectives, amongst others.

Through these generative pedagogies and their implicit claims for epistemic justice, HIC-AL schools call out the power and ethics of producing, sharing, and using actionable knowledge in learning processes, which critically contributes to reframing epistemologies of the urban.

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