

Springs and collective laundries in the city of La Paz, notes for their management

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PITCH

The urban landscape of the city of La Paz hides a large number of underground rivers but reveals dozens of springs on its hillside territories. These springs have multiple meanings, mainly for women, who make a collective and productive use of their waters, in such a way that any intervention in the landscape of springs has implications for their lives. This report socializes the results of the research on spring landscapes regarding collective washing of clothes and, at the same time, it challenges authorities, urban territories, and the academia to develop articulated actions for the approach¹, sustainable use and safeguarding of these underground waters.

ISSUES

The landscape results from the convergence between nature and culture² and it is a relevant category for the analysis of the springs in the city of La Paz. The residents of hillside territories have self-managed their access to water through springs and the water cooperatives manage its use primarily for consumption and laundry. When the drinkable water service arrives, the sources are channeled along with the sewer water due to the established idea that landslides are caused by the lack of treatment of the springs. To prevent the disappearance of these sources, the

neighbors suggest the construction of collective laundries but the social management of underground sources is not taken into account.

At the national level, the importance of groundwater in cities requires greater attention, considering that they are not only an alternative source of supply but also because they are an essential element of the urban landscape. According to the Political Constitution of the State, groundwater is a strategic, finite, social, cultural, and environmental resource (Art 373, subparagraph II). Therefore, their use must be managed, regulated, protected and planned to ensure it is adequate and sustainable (Art 374, subparagraph I).

At the global level, since the SDGs³, a central aspect for the construction of cities is the protection of water ecosystems while considering them as a risk element. At the local level, the springs constitute the identity of La Paz municipality, as part of the urban landscape that has been shaped by an ensemble of actors, struggles, visions, and actions in the territory. In a very specific way, the landscape is also part of the daily life of women, washerwomen, tenants, visitors, and neighbors.

METHODS

The study combined photographic production and interviews with national

municipal authorities as well as women, men, girls, and boys from the collective laundries of Pasankeri, Kenanipata, San Antonio, and Valle de las Flores. A workshop was held to present preliminary results and to generate inputs on public policy proposals with the participation of decision-makers from the four municipal secretariats and one sub-municipality (Secretariat of Environmental Management, Secretariat of Development Planning, Secretariat of Integral Management of Risks, Municipal Secretariat for Development Planning and the Sub-municipality of Cotahuma); representatives of neighborhood councils of three territories (Valle de las Flores, San Antonio, and of the Committee for social management and maintenance of laundries in Pasankeri), and researchers.

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RESULTS

In the municipality of La Paz, the springs were formed by glacier waters and rainwater deposits accumulated over the years. In situations of water shortage, these springs were rediscovered along with its good quality for consumption. The social subject of the springs is installed on the slopes of the city and is mainly female. For some families of tenants, the springs are an alternative space given their limited access to the courtyard and drinking water for washing; for the washerwomen, these waters are a source of work; for some visitors, they are a pretext to enjoy nature; for many neighbors, they are an outdoor alternative the miniaturization of the laundries at home and the individualization of this activity.

There are successful municipal interventions in the design of these laundries, confirming the close relationship of the territory with its

water sources and its impact on the organizational network. In other cases, municipal and/or non-governmental organization interventions distance themselves from the needs of women, as is the case in Kenanipata where the early demolished laundries reduced the flow of water and with it the possibilities of work for those who wash there.

The management of the springs faces a legal vacuum. Concerns about the sustainable use of these sources have no handhold in the draft act on efficient use of water promoted by the municipality of La Paz since the 2016 crisis. The municipality's interventions have so far been focused on maintaining forest areas. For their part, the authorities of the Ministry of Environment and Water do not have information on the springs in La Paz and consider that EPSAS and the municipality should have it.

Traditionally, landscape modeling involves a photographic shot or a cartographic product taken in a single visual snap. Usually we are linked to the biophysical part of the landscape, losing sight of the subjects and the sociocultural elements that are part of it. The visual aspect can be a very useful means of producing knowledge and triggering actions, and photomontage can yield combined readings of the biophysical (drone shots) as well as objects and subjects (portrait pictures or video interviews).

Laundries in Pasankeri



Source: Davalos, 2018

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ Develop research on the springs by involving national and municipal government institutions in the inventory and classification, recovering the “water memory” of the neighbors, which is the knowledge on water routes in the territory and on buried springs’ locations. Ensure that the information on springs and laundries is available in the Municipal Statistical Yearbook and on the census form.
- ▶ Promote the social management of springs and laundries as a concrete measure to protect the resource. A Summit on springs and laundries should discuss the difference between protecting these sources and their privatization.
- ▶ Take into account the knowledge and washing practices developed by women in springs (i.e., washing technics using the washers’ feet to wash heavy things or knowledge on the use of the local flora) in the design of architectural objects in the landscape
- ▶ In the framework of the autonomous process, promote the creation of a regulation on the access of springs resources since the neighborhood Annual Operative Plans does not respond to these needs. The amendment of the Municipal Land Use Act on the specific use of springs for collective cloth washing can be an intermediate alternative to the challenge moving towards the approval of a National Water Act. The planning of health and drinking water/sewerage services should be done jointly, and with the participation of the municipal government, considering and prioritizing the health needs of the sectors’ population.

¹ Monclús F., Francisco (2002). Ríos, ciudades, parques fluviales, corredores verdes. In Ríos y ciudades. Aportaciones para la recuperación de los ríos y riberas de Zaragoza. De la Cal y Pellicer (coords.), Zaragoza: Fernando el Católico. <https://bit.ly/2F2Xbug>

² Urquijo T., Pedro (2014). El paisaje como concepto geográfico histórico y ambiental. In Barrera et al. (eds.) Perspectivas sobre el paisaje. Colección Perspectivas ambientales. Colombia: Universidad Nacional de Bogotá

³ Naciones Unidas (2018). Marco de indicadores mundiales para los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible y metas de la Agenda 2030 para el Desarrollo Sostenible. <http://bit.ly/2xt4o0W>