Freedom to Dwell: Gendered Aesthetics of Informal Settlements

Faye Antonia Hays
Harvard University

Research conducted in 2009. Original version presented as graduate thesis to the London School of Economics and Political Science in fulfillment of the Master of Science in Urbanisation & Development. Working paper version presented at M.I.T. Gender & Sexuality Conference, 2011.

Abstract

This paper investigates aesthetics as a physical and experiential component of well-being by examining its value for various residents of informal settlements in Guanacaste, Costa Rica. Aesthetic manifestations in informal housing serve as visual evidence of a set of need-instigated processes and the power relations inherent in the act of dwelling. This research seeks to investigate how and why these aesthetic manifestations differ among households by individual and by gender, and to what degree they are supported or hampered by a larger scale of collective or authoritative aesthetic will. The paper follows a path laid down by current gender-disaggregated and subjectivity-informed research and by historical contributions theorizing autonomy and being as proffered by the architect John Turner and the philosopher Martin Heidegger. In addition, this work explores the consequences that a global aestheticization of poverty, emerging through the use of universal terminology and tools of globalization, such as film, imposes upon localized contemporary conceptions of informal settlements. The fine-grain household -level inquiry adopted in this qualitative research, along with the visual research tool of photography, lead to a broader understanding of the value of aesthetic well-being as experienced by the inhabitants of informal settlements in Guanacaste, Costa Rica.

This working paper explores aesthetics as a physical and experiential component of well-being by examining its qualitative value for various residents of informal settlements in Guanacaste, Costa Rica. The term aesthetics refers to the ability to exercise an aesthetic will by having the freedom to manipulate the materials of one's surroundings according to personal aesthetic judgments, applicable to both interior and exterior domestic space. The term "freedom to dwell" in this paper is an Heideggerian translation of John Turner's architectural studies in the 1960s of the autonomous agency acquired in the ability to build one's own home in informal settlements, in which he argued for the "freedom to build." By considering the existential value of aesthetics, this paper will explore the notion of the "freedom to dwell."

Qualitative Fieldwork & Photography

Guanacaste is the Northwestern province of Costa Rica, located on the Pacific side of this Central American country, which, through its narrow landmass, divides the Pacific from the Atlantic. I undertook the research for this paper in 2009, spending nearly one month conducting fieldwork in seven neighborhoods of two cities in Guanacaste, where I conducted interviews with twenty-one households in twenty houses. The first of these cities was Liberia, called La Ciudad Blanca, or "The White City," for its unique white soil that hardens into a pulverized, near-concrete hardness in the dry season and becomes a havoc of mud in the rainy season. The second city researched was Santa Cruz.

Through this research, I sought to investigate how and why aesthetic choices differ among households, as determined by individuals and by gender, and to what degree aesthetic choices are supported or hampered by larger collective scales of imposed aesthetic will. This paper fol-

lows a path laid down by current gender-disaggregated and subjectivity-informed research, which supports the expansion of development policy's assessments of poverty indicators to include subjective factors. The most famous of these accepted expansions is Amartya Sen's capability-based determinants, making income an incomprehensive measure of poverty, especially among women who, in development policy, have largely been the false receivers of labels of ultimate poverty due to the lack of consideration for non-economic factors that contribute to their quality of life.

A crucial dimension of my research was the use of photography. As such, it was critical to photograph not only the aesthetic choices and construction materials of each home, but to include the subjects occupying their own homes. The time spent in each house conducting lengthy interviews was supplemented by the interaction between myself and the interviewees centered on the photographic event. Most photographs were taken after having spent one to two hours in the interviewees' homes; as you will notice, most of the photographic subjects seem at ease and are occupying the portion of the home they have aesthetically altered the most and feel most comfortable in, which we naturally migrated to throughout the length of the interview. You may notice differences between single and/or paired men and women as to where these locations are.

Aesthetics & Poverty

Although not intangible, aesthetics are not a field lent easily to quantification and, therefore, might easily be dismissed as a non-utilizable form of poverty investigation. However, development organizations have recently favored a highly expansive incorporation of localized qualitative methods in fieldwork and policy-informing. These methods often require a fine-grain scale of household-level interview and inquiry, as did my research of the aesthetics of informal urbanism in Guanacaste. In the face of a much-heightened interest in the magnitude of informal urbanism, how can one truly grasp the landscape of an urban geography without understanding the individual strokes of human habitation that delineate it? The qualitative, multidisciplinary, and localized nature of data that aesthetic inquiry provides is in this way highly valuable to gaining a sharper image of the dimensions of poverty and well-being that compose informal settlements. While the current unprecedented scale of global urbanization may be occurring at slower rates in Latin America (UNFPA, 2007, p. 6), the fact that since the 1980s new population growth in this region

has been entirely urban (Tannerfeldt & Ljung, 2006, p. 22) makes Latin America of particular interest to the study of urbanization's effects, The five official categories of shelter deprivation determined by UN-HABITAT by which one might measure "slum" conditions do not examine many of the qualitative aspects that make a shelter useful or deprived, nor do they include a gender-sensitive evaluation of which qualities are most or least depriving for various individuals among and within households. To consider more subjective elements of the everyday housing experience of what the U.N. dubs "slum" dwellers is not to question the necessity of established deprivation categories, such as non-durable housing, but to do so would better inform policy that seeks to relieve these deprivations. To this end, aesthetic research may further enrich the data that informs our understanding of—and policy responses to—the value of a house as experienced by various non-homogenous individuals in harmony or disharmony with their dwellings.

Acknowledging the crucial call of gender sensitivity has allowed a wider use of terms in development terminology, such as "power relationships, materials and symbolic resources, self-respect, dignity, empowerment, belonging and participation" (Chant, 2007, pp. 31, 38). Could aesthetics of housing be a valuable dimension of everyday experience in informal settlements that relates to the above-mentioned terms in a gender-specific manner?

Female-Headed Households

Olsen de Figueres (2002) posits the existence of a Costa Rican "feminization of poverty" when he declares that "single parent homes headed by women are the most poor and precarious… [and] the percentage of poor households headed by women has increased in recent years" (cited in Chant, 2009, p. 21). However, Sylvia Chant's qualitative research considering "women's subjectivities and experiences" shows us that the "feminization of poverty" as a process in Costa Rica is not necessarily qualified (Chant, 2009, p. 26). Problems exist in using income as a determinant of poverty because it "fails to capture dimensions of poverty that appear to be most meaningful to women" (Chant, 2009, p. 20). What could men's and women's subjectivities and experiences tell us about dimensions of housing most meaningful to them? Is there any sort of certain aesthetic, or a freedom to make one's own aesthetic choices, that may make an informal house more or less viable for an individual?

In 2009, Costa Rica ranked 92nd in the world according to the World Bank's G.N.I rankings per capita using the Atlas method, with an annual per capita income equal to $6,060 US dollars.

Panama was the only Central American country to outrank it, sitting two places above. In 1988, Costa Rica was the wealthiest country in Central America as measured by GNP, the previous nomenclature for GNI (see Chant, 1991, p. 239). However, Costa Rica also has one of the highest incidences in the world of female-headed households, a reality that facilitates the research of values perceived differently according to the structure of the household. Guanacaste is one of the economically poorest parts of Costa Rica (Chant, 2009, p. 31). For this reason it serves as a useful area for juxtaposing non-income determinants of well-being and/or deprivation alongside more generally recognized income-based and material forms of poverty. Guanacaste's population in 2009 totaled 264,238, of which 41.9% was urban.

Sylvia Chant's qualitative research in Guanacaste, Costa Rica found that although structural challenges exist with female headship, many women find it a positive alternative due to the independents it affords. This comes with more choice over occupations, finances, and mobility. Aesthetic choices made in the home may possess both physical value and symbolic value of the aforementioned independence. If so, they must be properly understood so that housing initiatives, such as Costa Rica's initiative through the National Institute of Housing and Urbanism (INVU) to provide free resettlement homes built of concrete block, which are intended to improve the situation of women in poverty, do not unintentionally worsen it by jeopardizing their aesthetic well-being.

Findings & Consequences

Of the twenty-one households interviewed, seven were female-headed. In only one of these was the female head also the sole occupant. Eleven households were male-headed constantly. Household headship status was often dynamic. A household head may be a woman if a male partner is away on seasonal labor-driven migration, and for a brief period during his presence, the status of headship will transfer to the male. In one case study of a rental house shared by two families, the chief female renter was the seasonal head while the female sublettee was the sub-head, and her male partner only had a say when present, which was rarely. A total of three respondent households were de facto female-headed during a majority of the year and male-headed when a male partner returned from seasonal work. Of the eleven constantly male-headed households, one head was the sole occupant. Ninety-three permanent or regular members inhabited the twenty Guanacasteca houses and twenty-one households researched.

Of the seven female-headed households, two had deceased spouses. The death of one female head's spouse was from illness and unavailability of an organ transplant, while the other female head (the single sole-occupant female head) lost her spouse to a retaliatory murder for theft. Another four females became household heads due to partner separation or desertion, and one became de facto head due to her spouse's inability to hear or speak. The single sole-occupant male head became such when his ex-wife divorced him because of his extramarital relations. Many homes were built for one or two members and eventually housed seven or eight. Due to their construction from lightweight materials, such as wood and metal, adaptations catering to changing household size were possible and exercised frequently. These personal examples of mostly unplanned inheritances in headship and change in household size, along with the previous examples of seasonal headship, lead us to certain aesthetic points of interest, but they vary greatly from case to case.

In one case, a woman built her home after separating from her husband and had full control of aesthetic decisions. Hers was the most developed in terms of materials, colors, and landscaping of all the homes researched. Some women had originally built or purchased their home under their husband's direction before separation. When circumstances changed, they not only inherited household headship, but also the house that aesthetically had been largely or entirely dictated by the ex-husband. The home then became a space for reclaiming gender autonomy. The aesthetic decisions made post-separation are of an adaptable nature, changing spaces to suit color preferences, spatial arrangement, or material preferences and to become, more generally, the reclaimed space of the newly headed home. In this scenario, the preferences of multiple family members were considered and negotiated. Post-separation construction and post-separation renovation are both likely scenarios in Guanacaste due to the region's high rate of separation or divorce. It can be concluded that an important aesthetic need may be to have adaptable materials that can be altered with changing household composition. Concrete block, INVU's material of choice for relocation housing, is not an appropriately adaptable material.

An interesting household head and aesthetic relationship was found in the case of the two women interviewed whose headship had been inherited due to the death of their spouses. Both women revered the memory of their husbands. Jenny, the single sole-occupant female-headed household respondent, whose husband had been murdered, decided when she had to move that

she would build her new home entirely from the materials of the home they had previously occupied together. In her case, there was actually a general lack of desire for aesthetic invention or personal identification; instead, there was an understood desire for aesthetics to serve as memorial space, recreating, literally, a re-built copy of the environment once shared with her deceased spouse. Aesthetic freedom was still exercised in her case, as she had the freedom to carry out her intentions and provide the kind of aesthetic well-being she sought. She also adapted the materials into a slightly different arrangement and claimed to have made the new construction larger than the original using the exact same materials.

In addition to memorial spaces, aesthetic freedom provides the possibility to construct healing spaces. In the case of Isabel, whose husband had died from a disease that could not be cured without a vital organ transplant that was never delivered, aesthetic needs differed. One of her four sons inherited the same disease from his father, and Isabel's energies are entirely directed toward his healing. All of the best anti-element materials available to her were put into this son's private space, which he shares with his wife. The house was adorned with vivid colors, plastic flowers, comfortable seating, and idyllic posters depicting picturesque tropical palm tree landscapes with multi-color sunsets, one of which included a typical well-off American farm home with two-stories and a sloped roof. The exterior was equally colorful due to lush flowering trees. Isabel's husband had originally built the house twenty-six years ago; it was small, and they slowly expanded it. Even with her chronically ill son, Isabella stated that "it is better to build your own home; you can decide better the materials: beautiful materials, healthy materials."

One male household respondent eloquently and rather existentially stated that building a home is equal to "being a man." Interestingly, this man, named Leonardo, had chosen various pieces of reclaimed, colored wood to construct his home, and composed their arrangement so as to group similar colors together in the assembly of the façade. A clear aesthetic intention was exercised in the making of his dwelling. One might compare Leonardo's existential statement to the inverse view held by many women in male-headed households: that, in essence, to be a woman is not to build, a notion which women in female-headed households mostly deny. This begs the question: how are these identities constructed? How are they deconstructed? Is it perhaps nature, as Heidegger articulates, even if not in a gendered manner, for human beings to dwell through environmental adaptation, a nourishing aspect of nature withheld from women by

societal or familial identity construction? If it is, then the aesthetic freedom and desire to adapt spaces that female household heads discover—as do other occupants in their home, since female household heads often incorporate the aesthetic wishes of other members—must contribute to their well-being by enhancing their freedom to dwell.

Wide-sweeping generalizations as to how aesthetic well-being is experienced differently or similarly by gender cannot be made from twenty qualitative interviews, nor should they be. What the research does show, however, is the reality of differing needs from case to case and evidence that different genders do dwell aesthetically differently, even if the manner in which they differ is not constant. One set of questions asked of the respondents was: "If you were given a bucket of paint of your favorite color, would you paint anything? If so, what would you first paint?" Seven women from both male- and female-headed households preferred to paint a front façade in order "to show the people," in addition to five out of six interviewed male heads. Three women had non-aesthetic desires to use the paint for the exterior façade in order to better protect the materials from wear. The respondents who were most concerned with painting the interior spaces of the home were almost entirely women, totaling six. The sole man in this category was Damasco, the only sole-occupant male head who lived without a female companion inside the home and who was hence most likely the male head who spent the most time inside the home compared to all the other male heads interviewed. He wished to paint the interior in order for it "to look cleaner." In the three male-headed households where the women also participated in the interview, the preferences always differed—the men wanting to paint the exterior and the women wishing to paint the interior. One man, Leonardo, previously mentioned as having color-composed the reclaimed wood construction of his home, stated that he would paint nothing because it would be much better to paint his carreta (sale-cart) and have better chances of selling from it than to invest anything in a home which the government might take away. Yet he had invested his energy in composing the materials with a certain aesthetic intention to satisfy him and had stated that building is equal to being a man. This would seem to suggest an understated importance of aesthetic freedom both expressed in his composition and hampered by his house's illegal status, a contradiction negotiated aesthetically but limited economically.

Two forms of aesthetic adaptation seemed to be favored by all the female-headed households free to make changes (renters therefore excluded) and were evident in half of the male-headed

households that included women. One form consists of a very sensual use of flowered, patterned, or lace fabric, which were draped over walls built of wood with gaps of light between their slats so that the lines of light were diffused through the translucent fabric. Fabric was also draped over interior elements and stretched as partitions to create subdivided private spaces for various household members.

Due to their translucent nature, these divisions never read as spatially restrictive even though they formed relatively "small" areas. Had they been made of entirely opaque, thick materials, such as concrete block, a material favored by INVU's housing projects, a claustrophobic effect would be likely. Appended or sculptural decorations were also abundant in female-headed households. These were usually very colorful elements, such as tropical lays, colorful posters, and flowers. The fact that these decorative adaptations were present in some male-headed households, but not all, suggests that their presence may depend on the degree of aesthetic freedom exercised by its female members. If such adaptations are favorable to some, then housing policy, be it self-help or granted housing, should keep in mind the necessity of allowing its possibility, rather than restricting adaptation by facilitating only pre¬-designated, immobile divisions of space.

Perhaps most surprising in exercising this research was the general aesthetic of the "slum" settlements visited in Guanacaste. I myself had attached aesthetic connotations to the idea of informal urban settlements, undoubtedly my own acceptance of the aestheticization of poverty, and as these regions were included in the U.N. description of a "slum," I expected to witness the visual aesthetic associated therewith: density, dirt, despair. Guanacaste's cities of Liberia and Santa Cruz are urbanizing, so I was surprised to find these settlements very evocative of a pastoral setting: each settlement was interwoven into trees, bordered by a plot of usually state-owned countryside, and houses were often surrounded by planted fruit trees. Large, welcoming yards lacked the ominous bars typical of downtown middle-class houses and were delineated with welcoming wooden fences or none at all. Chickens and dogs filled these yards as children played with them.

The settlements were much more pastoral and lived-in than expected, some houses being over twenty years old; the light and tree-filled spaces between houses are priceless to the occupants, who mostly shunned the dark density and inability to adapt the houses in state housing projects. If their craftsmanship is nonetheless not to a standard the state might aim for, perhaps

If their craftsmanship is nonetheless not to a standard the state might aim for, perhaps knowledge of durable construction methods should be offered to the people rather than a complete reversal of environment caused by building in non-pastoral materials with non-pastoral densities designed for economical state-sponsored construction. Many occupants who had invented their own construction methods, including men and women, said they would be eager to learn more established methods for wood, sheet metal, fiber-cement siding, and even cement block, provided they could design its use as they saw fit. Given the colorful landscape and farm-related imagery in almost all of the posters that people had hung in their homes, a pastoral aesthetic within the socioeconomic opportunity of an urban setting is undoubtedly an aesthetic value the occupants hope to retain.

Five of the Guanacaste respondents I interviewed were adamant about the preferability of improving their own home with methods of their choosing to receiving and moving to a bono (state-facilitated) house. Eleven respondents were emphatic that they would prefer to build their own house and would prefer a provision of materials over financial compensation. Yet they also at some point contradictorily stated that they would take "the gift house." In one instance, Jenny, offered the insight of an old saying: "if someone gives you a horse, you don't examine its teeth." Additional reasons for the contradictions were the labor , time, financial cost, and knowledge of construction techniques required for building or adapting a home. Although many of the respondents did not have extensive knowledge of construction techniques, they were eager to learn them.

Many respondents offered perplexing contradictions in our discussions regarding aesthetic or functional needs and desires—contradictions that highlight a crucial point of contest in regard to aesthetic research in the context of informal urban settlements. As Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs would claim, aesthetic or creative needs that fall into his highest tier of the pyramid—self-¬actualization needs—would only be considered by an individual after all other tiers of needs were met, including shelter, solely in a physiological sense, within the bottom tier. This would chime with the sentiment that it is superfluous and inefficient to consider aesthetic needs when food, income, and anti-element shelter are more urgent priorities of poverty. However, Maslow's research hardly included residents of informal settlements in Latin America; his subjects were narrowed to a few intellectually successful or famous respondents.

Most respondents considered functional and aesthetic needs as two separate possibilities, a consideration that would normally lend itself to having to choose one and sacrifice the other, but through their contradictory responses, it was clearly evident that they weighed both simultaneously and sought a negotiation. In Isabel's case she was very willing to move for the sake of better anti-element protection for her ill son, although she would much prefer to build. The inherent value of what is perceived as "a gift" (although bono houses often come with new expenses) cannot be ignored, even though almost all respondents preferred to be in control of the design and construction methods of their homes. Four respondents would accept moving to a bono house, but only if they could design and "improve it," and only one respondent was willing to take a bono house as it was, no changes necessary. This research-gained qualitative insight of men and women needing both anti-element protection and aesthetic freedom supports Maslow's Chilean critic Manfred Max-Neef, who largely researched Latin America, by bolstering the contention that human needs are holistic, ontologically universal, and not hierarchical, and that poverty, or poverties, occur(s) when someone is deprived of any one of them (Cruz, Stahel, & Max-Neef, 2009, p. 2023).

The above illustrates how functional habitation and aesthetic intention may not always be at odds. The assertion of such co-prioritization is furthered by the articulations of twenty (of twenty-one) respondents who seek both anti-element performance and aesthetic freedom.

Conclusion

Having identified individual and gender-specific aspects of aesthetic well-being provided by the freedom to dwell, what are the consequences for policy? Obviously state and development organizations cannot be informed of every individual's personal aesthetic dreams and aim to materialize them. They can, however, be informed of the critical existence of differing aesthetic needs, determined by general gender-sensitive aesthetic trends, by the overall aesthetics of Guanacasteco settlements and the power relations inherent within them and their individual households, and by the necessity for the ability to exercise aesthetic freedom.

This paper has sought to show how gendered aesthetics might serve as a bridge between physical and non-physical aspects of development and as an intersection between politics, gender, philosophy, economics, sociology, and design. Through the contributions of Chant, Turner, Heidegger, and the individual respondents interviewed in Guanacaste, Costa Rica, some insight has been

gained into how well-being is affected by aesthetics, aesthetic freedom, and their combined bearing on a freedom to dwell. Countless facets remain in which an aesthetic research perspective can be taken for further understanding informal urbanism in Latin America as it rapidly forms, alters, and affects urban landscapes and household dynamics. Should wider scale investigations proceed into the socioeconomic and political forces that shape the aesthetics of informal housing, it is hoped that the insights of fine-grain household study and visual documentation during a subjective household interaction will be kept in mind. To do so can only continue to facilitate poverty conceptualizations and policy responses, serving the end that all in the development industry work towards: to bolster well¬-being for as many people as possible in our increasingly urban world.

References

Chant, S. (1980). Gender, migration and urban development in Costa Rica: The case of Guanacaste. *Geoforum*, 22(3), 237-253.

Chant, S. (2008). *Gender, generation and poverty: Exploring the 'feminisation of poverty' in Africa, Asia and Latin America.* Grand Rapids: Edward Elgar.

Chant, S. (2009). The feminisation of poverty in Costa Rica: To what extent a conundrum? *Bulletin of Latin American Research,* 28(1), 19-43.

Chant, S., & McIlwaine, C. (2009). *Geographies of development in the 21st century.* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.

Colson, C. (Producer), & Boyle, D. (Director). (2008). Slumdog Millionaire [Motion Picture]. United Kingdom: Celador Films & Film4 Productions.

Cruz, I, Stahel, A., & Max-Neef, M. (2009). Towards a systemic development approach: Building on the human-scale development paradigm. *Ecological Economics* 68: 2021–2030.

Dreyfus, H. L. (1991) *Being-in-the-World a commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*, division I. New York: The MIT Press.

Moser, C., & Peake, L. (Eds.) (1987). *Women, housing, and human settlements.* New York: Tavistock.

Ranciere, J. (2006). *The politics of aesthetics.* New York: Continuum International Group.

Roy, A., & AlSayyad, N. (2004). U*rban informality: Transnational perspectives from the Middle East, Latin America, and South Asia (transnational perspectives).* New York: Lexington Books.

Sen, A. K. (2000). *Development as freedom.* New York: Anchor Books.

Sepp, A. (2004). *Foucault, enlightenment and the aesthetics of the self. Contemporary Aesthetics, 2. Contemporary Aesthetics.* Retrieved from http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=244

Sharr, A. (2007). *Heidegger for architects.* London: Routledge.

Tannerfeldt, G., & Ljung, P. (2006). *More urban, less poor: An introduction to urban development and management.* London: Earthscan.

Turner, J. F. C., & Fichter, R. (1972). *Freedom to build: Dweller control in the housing process.* New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

Turner, J. F. C. (1980). What to do about housing – its part in another development. *Habitat International*, 5(1/2), 203-211.

Turner, J. F. C. (1991). *Housing by people, towards autonomy in building environments (ideas in progress).* New York: Marion Boyars.

United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT). (2008). *State of the world's cities 2008/2009: Harmonious cities.* London: Earthscan.

United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). (2007). *State of world population 2007: Unleashing the potential of urban growth.* New York: United Nations Publications.

World Bank. World Development Indicators (WDI). (2009). Washington DC: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

Interviews

All interviews with respondents, whose surnames will be kept confidential, took place between 23 March 2009 and 17 April 2009 in Guanacaste, Costa Rica.