

RSA 2019 Latin America Division Conference Report by Universidad San Francisco de Quito, Quito, Ecuador (USFQ) student delegation

Attending the RSA 2019 Latin America Division Conference in Bogotá, Colombia was a valuable experience that helped us grow individually and as a team. At the conference, we were able to get valuable feedback regarding our research, be exposed to many areas of interest within the context of regional studies, and strengthen our network by meeting very interesting and inspiring people.

We are an interdisciplinary group from the Universidad San Francisco de Quito (USFQ) in Quito, Ecuador. Our research team is made up of five undergraduate students from the college of architecture—Michelle Benavides, Paula León, Alejandro Ortiz, Adrian Silva, Fernando Tuquinga—and a recent USFQ graduate from civil engineering—María Eugenia Duque. Together, we developed a research project that explores how communities from informal settlements deal with the lack of infrastructure for public spaces. The team was guided and supported by Miguel Andrés Guerra, a professor in civil engineering at USFQ, and by Vanessa Guerra, a research fellow at the College of Architecture and Urban Studies at Virginia Tech.

Our research is within the area of informal settlements studies, particularly studying a community from the Andean region located on the outskirts of Quito, Ecuador. The project focused on how this informal settlement has been replacing or creating spaces to satisfy the lack of infrastructure for public spaces. For the study, we developed and conducted 19 semi-structured interviews from a diverse demographic sample of the community members. Preliminary results suggest that this community uses their own resources and social capital. For example, they use a “*minga*”—an ancestral tradition in which the community gathers to contribute with their labor and equipment—to build and improve their roads. Also, the community donated part of their land to build playgrounds and held fundraisers to build a community center that was made up of a medium-sized meeting room, a playground, and a volleyball court. The community has also found ways to implement an informal transport system, a waste-management process, and groceries stores. Attending the conference was very beneficial for us because we received specific feedback from experts. For example, one suggestion was to focus on how the informal processes in different areas (transportation, waste management, internal governance) can contribute to the resiliency and sustainability of the formal city. As young researchers, these inputs were very valuable and pushed us to be more critical about our own work, which we think will be useful when we prepare the manuscript for publication.

We also learned from the opportunity to be exposed to diverse topics of interest within the context of urban studies through the special sessions and plenary speakers. Fourteen special sessions were part of the conference. Sessions such as *Ciudades, Inclusión y Desarrollo Urbano en América Latina*; *Informal Urbanism and Infrastructure in Latin American Cities*; and *Decentralization and Urban Planning in Latin America* highlighted the different dimensions that contribute to the construction of inclusive cities, and also emphasised the connections of such dimensions with inequality and segregation. Other special sessions showcased case studies that aimed to combat social inequality, to take into account the needs and preferences of all the inhabitants of a city whether they have a legal status or not, and to incorporate new governance strategies

in the construction of a new Global South. During the plenary panels, we learned from the strong cases the speakers presented as well as the deep questions the audience asked. For example, in the plenary panel *What's New/Urgent in Latin American Regional Studies?*, the discussion started with topics proposed by the speakers from their own lenses, such as extractivism, new models to include diversity in development theories, rural and urban inequalities, gender issues, and the role the Latin American University has in the current context; however, the discussion quickly included topics that came from the audience such as the effects that climate change has in the variables that influence both rural and urban development in Latin America, and practical ways to disseminate knowledge directly into and from the communities. This type of session was very productive for us because the arguments were based on cases and evidence from research, while welcoming different ideas through a productive discussion, which motivated us to get more involved in the academia and research world.

Another outcome from attending the conference was to start building an international network. During the conference, we met people who are working on similar topics with different lenses, which led to endless conversations. For example, we met professors from all over the world, who are working in a number of fields through cases in Latin America. The conference also offered a good environment to develop friendships with other graduate students. We not only spent time together at the conference, but we formed a group to tour Bogotá together after the conference. We are still in touch and hope to develop collaborations with them and see them at the next conference.

In summary, this was our first time attending an academic conference to present our research. We are very grateful for the opportunity to have attended the RSA 2019 Latin America Division Conference because it was an opportunity to critically think about our own research through the feedback we received, to learn from projects done worldwide, and to start building a strong network. Our next task is to incorporate the feedback and what we learned into the journal paper we are writing. The conference surpassed our expectations and we are looking forward to attending future RSA events.



Student delegation,
Universidad San Francisco
de Quito