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Illegal Housing in Medellín: Autoconstruction and the Materiality of Hope

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on ethnographic research in El Oasis, a highly precarious self-built settlement in Medellín, Colombia, this article examines the illegal practice of autoconstruction as a material expression of hope. It focuses on the multilayered, symbolic meaning of self-built housing, as it represents the pursuit of dignity, permanence, and agency—as opposed to poverty, uncertainty, and lack of agency—and an active and material form of hoping for a better future in the city. The state plays an ambiguous role in residents' perspectives, who conceive of it, simultaneously, as a threat to and a guarantor of their future in the city. This ambiguity becomes materialized in the physical form of residents' self-built housing, as residents either embrace or refrain from making improvements to their houses in response to shifting perceptions about the state's intentions regarding the future of the settlement.

Keywords: autoconstruction, hope, illegality, housing, Medellín

In Colombia, as in many other countries across Latin America, vulnerable populations are forced to break the law in order to access affordable housing in the city. This means squatting or purchasing a plot of land and building a house of one's own using limited resources and without the legal permission to do so (Álvarez-Rivadulla 2017; Lombard 2018; Hernández et al. 2010). In the literature, this process is referred to as autoconstruction: a process that enables low-income urban residents to build their own houses—or hire others to do so—according to their own needs, preferences, and available resources (Caldeira 2017; Holston 1991).

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This article approaches the material process of autoconstruction as an expression of hope for the future, of “the possibility of someday having a house of one’s own with the security and sense of accomplishment that people believe this entails” (Holston 1991, 447–48). As such, “houses are both concrete embodiments and imaginary representations of people’s relations to their conditions of existence” (1991, 456). The fact that autoconstruction “is highly responsive to changing domestic circumstances, budgets and opportunities” leaves room for hope as residents strive to improve their living conditions over time (Kellett 2015, 226). Therefore, we understand a self-built house as “a symbolic vehicle of transformation toward different circumstances” (2015, 226).

Despite being the protagonists of the autoconstruction process, residents’ perspectives on how they inhabit the city are often excluded from scholarly debates on informal settlements and from the fields of urban policy and informality more broadly (Koster and Nuijten 2012; Millar 2018). The absence of residents’ voices, we believe, contributes to the perpetuation of deficient and misleading narratives on informal settlements, which function to entrench negative categorizations and conceal richer and more diverse perspectives.

Colombia’s National Police Code lists a series of repressive (e.g., demolition) and penal measures (e.g., fines) to deter autoconstruction, which takes place in violation of local urban planning norms and regulations (Law 1801, Colombia’s National Code of Police and Co-habitation, 2016). While the right to dignified housing (*vivienda digna*) is enshrined in Colombia’s Constitution (*Constitución Política de Colombia* 1991, article 51), residents who take matters into their own hands and build a house to satisfy their basic needs in the absence of affordable housing options or state support risk a violent backlash from public authorities, who attempt to keep a lid on uncontrolled and “illegal” urban expansion. Yet in tandem, today’s private sector monopoly on the construction and provision of social housing in Colombia is failing to deliver for residents at the bottom of the income ladder. In Medellín, Colombia’s second-largest city, according to a recent report, there is a housing deficit of 32,733 households, meaning that these households are considered to be in need of a new house because they currently live in precarious situations (Medellín Cómovamos 2018). Yet in 2018, only 5 percent of all housing construction in the real estate market was assigned to social housing. In numerical terms, this amounts to 794 social housing units, as opposed to the construction of 15,434 units of regular housing during the same period (Medellín Cómovamos 2020).

Since 2017, the local authorities of Medellín have increased surveillance of the city’s urban area to impede autoconstruction attempts, which, has prevented new “illegal” settlements from forming. On the surface, then, the existence—and persistence—of Medellín’s extensive self-built architecture bears testament to the material triumphs of the poor in spite of the law. Though accurate to a certain degree, this reading eclipses a far more ambiguous state of affairs, in which the categories of legality and illegality become blurred, as residents build their houses and neighborhoods and the public authorities respond in diverse but legally contradictory ways. Over time, the legal status of a self-built settlement shifts, for

instance, as the local government stops brandishing eviction orders, choosing instead to formalize residents' informal access to public services and levy tax contributions on their consumption of electricity and water. This formalization of public services and taxes is also very important to how residents themselves perceive the legality or illegality of their housing and the prospects this status entails.

On March 2, 2018, a group of protestors blocked a main road in front of Acevedo Metro Station and the Metro-cable line in the north of Medellín. This world-famous cable car line runs up and down one side of the Aburra Valley. The opposite side is poised for renovation, including a second cable line with three gleaming new Metro-cable stations. At the roadblock, residents and community leaders protested against these developments, which would evict them from their homes.¹ Human rights activists, city councilors, and students who confront similar problems across the city joined them. Instead of being a material embodiment of social inclusion and urban equity—as its international reputation claims—the extension of the cable car line was contributing to the expulsion of low-income groups from the city.

At dusk, shortly before leaving, a man spoke to us and pointed over to his house—soon to be demolished in the planned extension of Acevedo Station. “Look,” he said, “we don’t oppose the projects; they’re good for the city. What we don’t agree with is how the government carries out the projects . . . in their line of thinking it’s first start the new construction, and then they throw us out on the streets like dogs.” His words reflected a troubling and, at times, more latent sentiment underpinning residents’ participation in the roadblock that day—these changes are desirable, but they aren’t for us.

This article scrutinizes how the local government eradicates the means through which the economically most vulnerable residents manage to inhabit the city, forging and entrenching illegality around residents’ most important form of dreaming and hoping for a better future: the “autoconstruction” of a place to live in the city. Within the typology of illegal activities laid out in the introduction to this special issue, housing is not an illegal product; however, the process of autoconstruction involves violations of local urban planning laws and policies.

This article draws on 15 months of ethnographic work conducted by Moore, which took place over three research periods from 2016 to 2019 in Moravia, a self-built settlement in North Medellín. Eiró and Koster joined him for short stays, conducting interviews and observations together. This research zooms in on a short-lived autoconstruction attempt in El Oasis, a small area of Moravia previously in use as a garbage dump, where a group of newcomers began building their houses in early 2015 but lost everything when a fire decimated the settlement in August 2017 and 349 families lost their homes. The local government has since cleared the charred debris and planted neat lines of trees in its place, seizing the opportunity to set in motion plans for the renovation of the neighborhood, which includes the conversion of El Oasis into an “ecological garden.” As for the 349 affected households, following a sustained period of collective action, the local government extended their temporary rent assistance from an initial 3 months to 12 before leaving them to their own devices: paying

rent, bedding down under a highway bridge, moving into overcrowded boarding houses, moving in with friends and family, or trying to build a house elsewhere.

The core argument presented in this article is based primarily on ethnographic observations of residents' self-built housing and retrospective informal and semistructured interviews, wherein residents reflected at length on what it meant to build, inhabit, and then lose their housing after the fire. Moore also followed the community leaders of El Oasis in their pursuit of a permanent housing solution. This involved weekly community meetings beneath a highway bridge, formal meetings with local government departments and city councilors, public hearings at City Hall, regular meetings with human rights defenders, and a series of collective actions: roadblocks, marches to city hall, short occupations of local government offices, and the erection and inhabitation of a temporary encampment beneath a highway bridge next to El Oasis. Moore conducted formal interviews with key informants, such as community leaders, human rights defenders, local activists, and academics, as well as spending time with residents in their different temporary rent accommodations in Moravia and other neighborhoods across the city.

The article is structured as follows. The first section conceptualizes hope as a material practice. Next, two sections examine the context of urban development in Medellín and the intensified criminalization of autoconstruction. Three ethnographic sections demonstrate how the residents of El Oasis put hoping into practice through house building. They describe three aspects that shape this process: first, the struggle for a "dignified house"; second, the residents' autoconstruction practices as a manifestation of their imaginations of the future; and third, the materiality of their hope for the state to provide them with a permanent place in the city.

CONCEPTUALIZING HOPE AS MATERIAL PRACTICE

This article focuses on how residents of Moravia "imagine the future and orient themselves in practice toward potential challenges and opportunities" (Dewey and Thomas, introduction to this section). In so doing, we turn to the concept of hope. Hope has often been understood as an expectation of a better future, especially for those who live in uncertain conditions. We agree that hope is an a priori "internal resource" (Appadurai 2013, 127), a "capacity to aspire" (Appadurai 2004). Others define hope as a form of momentum that presses into the future, giving rise to imaginations of how potentialities can be actualized (Bryant and Knight 2019). As such, hope animates particular practices that work toward a possible future.

This article complements the notion of hope as a resource or a capacity by understanding it as a practice, as an act of hoping. In a recent publication, Hauer et al. (2018) also see hope as a practice. Pointing specifically at its material dimension, they conceive of hope as a "material practice." Their study of periurban expansion through autoconstruction in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso shows how hoping "takes place" as it materializes in the ever-changing urban

landscape, and in so doing, “brings potential futures into being and stabilizes pathways for transformation” (Hauer et al. 2018, 61). “Simultaneously,” the authors also observe, “hoping is performative; it has effects on the very surroundings from which it emerges . . . Hoping ‘takes place,’ it does not only (re)orient and shape life trajectories, but it is coconstitutive of the shaping and changing of the urban landscape” (Hauer et al. 2018, 72).

In a similar vein, Reeves (2017), in a study on roads in Kyrgyzstan, shows how material objects can be invested with hope and contribute to anticipating a materially secure future. Building on this approach, we also take inspiration from Pedersen and Liisberg (2015), who analyze hope as both a philosophical notion and an empirical practice. Building on Kierkegaard, they understand hope as “a modus of human life,” while they also discuss its instantiations in people’s practices (Pedersen and Liisberg 2015, 5). We follow that hope is not only “thought,” but also “practiced,” and therefore in our case, made concrete through autoconstruction. There is a useful analytical distinction, therefore, between, on the one hand, a person’s “hopes” as a capacity, a resource, or a modus of life and, on the other, as “acts of hoping.” In methodological terms, the latter enables the ethnographer to observe acts of hoping unfold, while the former attends to people’s verbal expressions of their hopes, dreams, and future aspirations.

In these acts of hoping through autoconstruction, the state plays a crucial yet ambiguous role. On the one hand, residents consider the state as a threat to their future in the city as it perpetually treats them unjustly. It betrays them time and again, as it fails to deliver on its promises to include them in its plans for a modern city with decent housing and access to services. It makes them wait continuously for procedures that last forever and processes that never end (Auyero 2012). On the other hand, residents pin their hopes on the state, as it may—and should, as they often see it—take care of them and provide them with a place in the city.

For residents of Moravia, autoconstruction represents an active form of hoping for state recognition as a guarantor of permanence, social inclusion, and belonging in the city. Although the hope that is implicit in autoconstruction could be considered a form of acting toward a future beyond the state, as it concerns an illegal activity, this study demonstrates how it also appeals to the state in its role as a guarantor of a right to the city. The state, in its urban development policies and projects, time and again instills new hope in people’s lives, as it promises to include them in the “modern” city through regularization programs, neighborhood upgrading, or resettlement projects. Often, this generation of hope is followed by disappointment due to broken promises, but then it is refueled by new rumors and promises that cater to new possibilities (Nuijten 2003).

As such, the relationship between the city’s most vulnerable residents and the state is characterized by a continuing affective entwining of the seemingly irreconcilable notions of hope and betrayal (Koster 2019). As other studies have shown, the state’s “hope-generation machine” in the context of development projects often functions through material objects, such as legal documents, title

deeds, census stickers, and survey reports (Nuijten 2003; Koster and Nuijten 2012). Indeed, “lists, pieces of paper and numbers matter as they are an integral part of hoping-in-practice” (Hauer et al. 2018, 70). Complementing this view, we emphasize that such material objects produce hope also because they represent what Jansen (2013) calls “gridding”—the process of making people and things visible and legible in the eyes of the state—which residents desire and embrace because it contains the promise of social inclusion and a permanent place in the city.

As the autoconstruction process progresses, our data show that residents make a conscious attempt to disassociate themselves from “illegality” by seeking to obtain the installation of prepaid water and electricity meters in their houses. We present how residents interpret their “illegal” condition as a sign of state abandonment and disinterest in their well-being and at the same time clamor for state recognition as they consider the state as the pivotal provider of a place in the city. Drawing on our case study of El Oasis, we also demonstrate how residents engaging in autoconstruction processes hope that illegality will be only a temporary stage on the path to a state-guaranteed form of permanent housing—something residents felt they were on the cusp of achieving before the fire occurred. In their words, “we were almost legal!”

THE ERASURE OF ILLEGAL SETTLEMENTS FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW URBAN FUTURE

The definition of what exactly is considered an illegal settlement in Medellín is flexible and ambiguous. In some (older) illegal settlements, residents pay real estate taxes—which are a symbol of legal ownership—while quite a few of the city’s luxury high-rises were built without legal approval and the necessary documentation, yet these are rarely referred to as illegal settlements. This ambiguity reflects the argument that illegality is “a politicized category that says less about what targeted groups are doing and more about the values and goals of states” (Panella and Thomas 2015, 8).

Historically, land invasions—the term used by state officials and local residents to describe autoconstruction in empty plots—have been mired in tensions related to urban planning and regularly involve physical stand-offs between residents attempting to meet their basic needs and public authorities opposing what they define as the illegal occupation of public land.

In Colombia, paradoxically, the progressive advances of the 1991 Constitution, which consecrate the universal right to dignified housing, unfolded in parallel to the neoliberal retreat of the state from the provision of social housing. The dramatic increase in levels of forced displacement owing to the armed conflict and the adoption of neoliberal agricultural policies by President César Gaviria (1990–94) exacerbated a longer-term decline in the economic viability of a life in the countryside for the Colombian masses, driving thousands of campesinos to Colombia’s largest urban centers. In the 1990s, armed violence, forced displacement, and land dispossession relating to Colombia’s civil conflict intensified. The arrival of new urban dwellers exacerbated high levels of unsatisfied

demand for land, infrastructure, housing, and employment among low- and middle-income groups, and prices of land and real estate increased (Echeverría Ramírez 2004).

This national trend contrasted with local experiments in urban governance and development projects in the 1990s and 2000s that appeared to mark a substantial shift in the local government's approach toward the state-led integration of self-built settlements into the urban fabric. The administrations of Mayor Sergio Fajardo (2004–8) and Alonso Salazar (2008–12), for instance, implemented a program of Integrated Urban Projects based in the principles of “social urbanism,” which targeted the city's poorest and socially most marginalized neighborhoods for investment in participatory forms of urban intervention (Calderón Arcila 2008). These interventions predominantly involved the construction of large-scale infrastructural works, such as cable cars, outdoor escalators, parks, and public libraries.

In mainstream representations of the city, Medellín's U-turn from pole position in world homicide rates to rebirth as a pioneer of social urbanism by the mid-2000s has come to be known as “the Medellín miracle.” This seductive narrative of transformation has captured the hearts and minds of international development practitioners, business leaders, and urban planners alike. In 2014, Medellín triumphed over strong competition to host the 7th United Nations HABITAT World Urban Forum, with “equity” at the center of the development agenda. The city has also won many prestigious awards in recognition of local government efforts to distribute the benefits of urban development and innovation “evenly” across the socioeconomic spectrum.

More recently, however, the local government has adopted a distinct logic of “urban renovation,” which means that self-built neighborhoods like Moravia, once targeted for upgrading via Integrated Urban Projects, find themselves instead subject to demolition and architectural overhaul. In 2018, reflecting on this disappointment, a community leader from Moravia lamented, “[In the early 2000s] we genuinely believed we were finally about to have the neighborhood we'd always wanted.” Medellín is situated in the basin of a valley, so vacant, urbanizable land is scarce. This scarcity has raised land and real estate prices in the city to an exorbitant degree. Thus, Medellín's ongoing transformation has levied intense “pressure upon residential areas owing to changes in the cost of land” (Galeano Duque 2013, 127–28).

Local government plans for urban renovation in Moravia today pledge the construction of middle-class tower blocks and green spaces in place of current residents' self-built housing (Alcaldía de Medellín 2018). Furthermore, since the local government adopted a distinct logic of “urban renovation,” the criminalization of autoconstruction has been intensified by state authorities. In September 2017, in Medellín, a new program established “anti-invasion squads” to prevent construction in breach of planning norms. In the first six months, these anti-invasion squads carried out 2,800 inspections and 204 demolitions citywide (*El Tiempo* 2018). Areas considered invasion hot spots are under permanent surveillance, El Oasis included. In order to understand how and why such a shift

is playing out, one must turn to the city's urban and economic development visions and the experiences of local residents.

Recent critical scholarship on Medellín's current urban makeover demonstrates that the plight of the urban poor is inseparable from a substantive shift in the city's economic strategy to move from light manufacturing to services. This shift places new demands on the distribution of space, infrastructure, and the optimization of land use to foster the creation of knowledge, technology, and services in the sectors of energy, tourism, telecommunications, construction, and textiles (Galeano Duque 2013). The transition to a service economy shapes Medellín's built environment far beyond the unsavory erection of "Latin America's Silicon Valley" (the Medellín Innovation District), which towers over Moravia in the historically underfunded northern part of the city. As Anguelovski et al. (2019, 136) criticize it, the "greening" of city spaces "augments efforts to attract knowledge workers with new bikeways and leisure spaces conducive to their preferences, and has already brought in new real estate development projects for middle- and upper-class residents." For many residents, conversely, these new green public amenities spell eviction, dispossession, and a wide range of human rights violations.²

According to Franz (2017), Medellín's economic elite today includes oligarchic conglomerates, such as the Antioquian Business Group (GEA), which represents a "transnational capitalist class," rather than the regionally minded industrial elite of the past. Since the 1990s, this transnational capitalist class has enforced global market-led urban development through the reconfiguration of local ("good governance") arrangements and the large-scale construction of what Hylton (2007) calls showcase public works to attract international capital investment. In sum, the "success" of the GEA's ambitions to position Medellín as a provider of services in the global economy rests heavily on reimagining the urban landscape in strategic areas across the city. Favorable tax breaks and flexible employment conditions for multinational companies alone are not enough, Medellín must become a place where these businesses and their future tech-savvy employees want to work, live, and play.

An important contextual factor to consider in relation to Medellín's urban transformation is the large-scale displacement of the civilian population within the city boundaries, due to armed territorial disputes over the last decade. This phenomenon remains an episodic menace in certain neighborhoods, but the total number of reported cases has significantly declined, from 17,954 in 2011 to 3,494 in 2017 (Agencia de Prensa IPC 2018). In 2018, urban activists and human rights defenders denounced 5,924 cases of eviction and displacement caused by urban development projects within Medellín (Múnera 2018). As things stand, this means that the local government (together with its backroom network of "master planners" in the form of the GEA) has replaced armed groups as the main perpetrator of forced displacement in Medellín's urban area.

It is also relevant to point out that many of the residents caught up in cycles of state-led displacements in the city are families who already figure in government databases as internally displaced persons (IDPs), who fled other parts of the

country because of regional conflict and who built their own houses in Medellín precisely because the government failed to fulfil its obligation to provide them with housing subsidies. In El Oasis, for instance, José was displaced from his rural home in Urabá by paramilitaries in 2006, only to be displaced again within Medellín from the neighborhood where he first lived for refusing to make an extortion payment to an armed group. In late 2018—more than a year after the fire in El Oasis—unable to find work or pay rent, he left the city and went to live with family in rural Chocó. His story is far from exceptional.

Medellín's government plans for urban renovation promise the eradication of self-built settlements from the urban landscape (Alcaldía de Medellín 2016, 2018), enforcing the implementation of a distinct architecture that prioritizes the emergent needs of the knowledge economy at the expense of residents at the bottom of the city's income ladder. This means that "peripheral urbanization," in which residents build their own houses and neighborhoods, is entering a new era of contestation in Medellín (Caldeira 2017). The economic and aesthetic shift involves not only the demolition of self-built settlements (or certain parts of them) in strategic economic areas but also doubling down on institutional measures to prevent the formation of new ones. For Caldeira, what makes peripheral urbanization peripheral is not spatial location but rather the crucial role of residents in the production of space, whereby "residents are agents of urbanization, not simply consumers of spaces developed and regulated by others" (Caldeira 2017, 5).

Thus, as Medellín's local government exercises renewed vigor to exert "aesthetic control" and "discipline" over the transformation of the urban landscape, local residents not only are displaced from their locations and dispossessed of land and social capital (Anguelovski et al. 2019), they are also alienated from the very means through which they manage to inhabit the city and make urban life livable. Therefore, as the local government—together with a network of private actors, including project developers, real estate investors, and the metro company—imposes a more regulated and exclusionary architecture on the city, the targeted demolitions of self-built settlements and draconian measures to guard against the formation of new ones are engendering a profound disruption of the sociomaterial relationship that the city's poorest residents have established with the built environment.

In the recent past, residents of illegal settlements had better access to resettlement programs than they do today. Integrated Urban Projects (2004–12), for instance, included access to different housing subsidies, including the option of resettlement in new apartments or used housing across the city. Since 2013, however, there has been a notable change in the city government's approach to evictions. Today, evictees in illegal settlements receive only small financial compensation. As one human rights defender explained, "if evictees are possessors (*poseedores*) rather than owners (*propietarios*)," as is the case for most residents in illegal settlements, "it is cheaper for [the local government housing department] to pay them the value of the [house's] building materials than to fund a resettlement project." Given they

are not “owners,” neither the government nor the private buyer in question pays them the market value of the land.

In other contexts of displacement in self-built settlements, such as a natural disaster, the very category of possessor becomes a highly contested one.³ According to housing subsidy eligibility criteria, if a natural disaster occurs, possessors, just like owners, are eligible to receive a permanent municipal housing subsidy and not merely a temporary rent subsidy, as is the case for occupants (*tenedores*)—a category that includes tenants (Decree 2339, 2013). Yet in practice, many possessors struggle to access housing subsidies following a natural disaster because they fail to prove their possession by submitting required documentation. Or, conversely, they fail to comply with other eligibility criteria, such as the head of the household having to substantiate six years of uninterrupted residency in Medellín. In such cases, the local government reclassifies possessors as occupants, and in doing so, strips away their eligibility to access housing subsidies.

In sum, the local government has taken a lead role in forced displacement, and by doubling down on repressive penal measures to impede the formation of new self-built settlements, is also responsible for eradicating the means through which residents at the bottom of Medellín’s income ladder have historically managed to inhabit the city.

Such strategies form part of what Anguelovski et al. (2019) refer to as “grabbed landscapes.” Their study of Medellín’s “green belt” development shows how green infrastructural planning, or greenscaping, and the “beautification” of certain territories in and around self-built settlements dispossess residents of location, land, and social capital and prevent the “undesirable” expansion of autoconstructed settlements. Thus, green interventions that purport benefits for all (e.g., parks) produce new inequalities by “disciplining” the landscape to prioritize the leisure needs of wealthier classes over the basic survival needs of the poor. This logic is also reflected in the local government’s response to disasters in self-built settlements.

FACING HOUSING PRECARIETY AND THE CRIMINALIZATION OF AUTOCONSTRUCTION

Also present at the March 2018 roadblock in front of Acevedo Metro Station were representatives of the 349 families who had lost their self-built housing in the fire in August 2017. One of the residents affected by the fire was Noelia, a middle-aged grandmother and primary caregiver for a young granddaughter. When her wooden house burned to the ground in El Oasis in 2017, it became the fourth time in ten years that she had lost a home due to a natural disaster. She had suffered through another fire in El Oasis in 2007. On the next occasion, a flooded riverbank carried her home away, and later she narrowly escaped with her life when a landslide buried her home in mud.

Reflecting on what happened when the latest fire broke out, she recalled receiving a phone call while at work in a nursery in the wealthiest part of the city. She had rushed back to the settlement just in time to witness, from a distance, the second floor of her wooden house collapsing into the first. Noelia described her sense of devastation as

something akin to a descent into madness. She would later discover that the first fire engine to arrive on the scene had empty water tanks and the second one a broken hose. After the disaster, Noelia struggled to keep a roof over her head, forgoing meals to make the rent in Moravia, constantly on the dehumanizing precipice of eviction.

In the wake of the disaster, Noelia had applied for the local housing department's temporary rent program, which offers a monthly rent subsidy to victims of natural disasters or housing evictions for up to a full year. However, Noelia's application was rejected for her failure to submit the required documentation on time. Her feasible plea that these documents were still smouldering in the ashes fell on the unforgiving ears of state bureaucracy. As Noelia moved from one rental property to the next, eventually ending up in a cheap boarding house, the local government set about converting the plot of land in El Oasis into the planned ecological garden. The disaster in El Oasis became an opportunity for the local government to consolidate its land-grabbing ambitions. In November 2018, many of the 349 families were living under a highway bridge.

Noelia hoped that her time living in the overcrowded boarding house would be only temporary. Entire families occupied single rooms, and the bathroom facilities were shared. A gas canister stood next to her mattress because no facilities or common spaces were available for cooking. It was far from desirable, but living in these conditions allowed Noelia to save some money. As soon as she built up enough savings, she planned to purchase a plot of land wherever she could from the paramilitary groups that govern and profit from illicit land markets in Medellín, and then rebuild her home from scratch.⁴ But more autoconstruction is exactly what the local government was hell-bent on eliminating, meaning that Noelia's future plans looked more unattainable now than ever before.

Yet—and herein lies the ambiguity (or better put, hypocrisy)—while the state criminalizes residents who attempt to build their own housing “illegally” in Medellín's urban area, the state simultaneously finds ways to benefit from the already constructed houses that constitute more consolidated self-built settlements around the city. In Moravia, for instance, there are state-organized walking tours for international visitors, which celebrate the historic achievements of Moravia's residents in constructing their homes and neighborhoods against the odds. All the while, the autoconstruction practices that brought Moravia into being are criminalized. In effect, then, the state is kicking away the “illegal” ladder to material advancement for residents who find themselves excluded from, or unable to afford, housing in formal markets, while glorifying its own protagonism in “turning these places around” through investment in a handful of large infrastructural projects such as libraries, parks, and cable cars.

HOPING FOR A DIGNIFIED HOUSE

When talking about their hopes for the future, residents of El Oasis repeatedly used the expression *vivienda digna* (dignified housing). This term has an emic meaning, and we understand the struggle for it as a practice of hope. In Medellín, the historical roots

of the term *vivienda digna* trace back to the religious activism of the Catholic Church and liberation theology, which championed social justice for the urban poor in the 1970s. As Pérez (2018) highlights in the case of Santiago, Chile, “dignity has long been a fundamental element of the political language used by the urban poor [who] often draw on this concept when claiming housing rights from the state” (Pérez 2018, 511).

In Medellín, as many low-income residents continue to mobilize for access to affordable housing or to contest state-led evictions across the city, they do so in the name of *vivienda digna*. Residents’ personal reflections on the meaning of *vivienda digna* show how their sense of dignity can be fostered or compromised by their housing situations. From the residents’ perspective, self-built housing is dignified because it provides the most favorable conditions available to escape a situation of severe privation described as *pasando necesidad* (experiencing need).

In our view, more than showing their respectability to others (Holston 1991), the residents of Moravia wanted to have the experience that they themselves were moving forward in life; autoconstruction, for many, is an action that keeps hope alive. Residents also describe a self-built house as dignified because it is theirs. Liberated from the landlord-tenant relationship, residents experience a greater degree of “dweller control” over their households and in their daily lives (Turner 1972). In this way, they extend the symbolic meaning of autoconstruction to being, or rather, feeling like “one’s own master—the possibility to act as a master in one’s own house and on one’s own piece of land” (de l’Estoile 2014, 68). This resonates with the idea of “hope to get a grip on one’s own life, felt from the first-person perspective,” as introduced by Pedersen and Lissberg (2015, 9).

A common theme that arises in residents’ definitions of *vivienda digna* is a sense of ownership, both of property and of one’s own time (de l’Estoile 2014), expressed in sayings such as “building things my way” and “being relaxed” (*estar tranquilo*). As one young man described it, “despite the fact that it was an invasion, we felt like owners; no one told us what to do, no one told us we had to vacate the [rental] house on a certain date, nothing!” Such descriptions resonate with existing scholarly work that foregrounds “a sense of control” as a central component of human dignity in the context of housing (de l’Estoile 2014; Pérez 2018; Varley 2015). To achieve, pursue, or regain that sense of dignity, residents turn to the only feasible means within their reach: the autoconstruction process, putting them in a more favorable position to mitigate everyday economic uncertainty, as compared to constantly fretting about making the rent or sacrificing their most basic needs in order to do so. The following ethnographic excerpt demonstrates how this is articulated by residents themselves.

One of the many humiliations that residents commonly complained about having to endure while renting was a sense of powerlessness to negotiate the length of their stay in a particular apartment or to contest abusive landlords who ended a rental agreement prematurely—the landlord was the master of residents’

time. “Paying rent isn’t dignified,” residents often stated. In 2018, as Noelia sat in the bare living room of a rental property that she could scarcely afford and would therefore imminently vacate, she explained, “a *vivienda digna* is a house where nobody’s going to kick me out.” “Happiness,” she continued, “is how I felt while I was living in El Oasis. There was no one who humiliated me . . . there was food in the fridge . . . it was a fixed place.” Finally able to “stand still” in El Oasis, Noelia could invest her time, energy, and resources in moving forward, in hoping for a better future within her reach.

It wasn’t a *rancho* like when you saw it [in 2016]. It was a house. Super beautiful! It had furniture—beautiful furniture—a fridge. The house was also a small shop, where I sold fizzy drinks, beer, and rice. I sold all kinds of things. My life was changing; it had already changed a lot. In what sense? I was progressing. I was no longer living in cramped conditions like the time that we met—sleeping where I used to cook, mud floor. ¡*Todo maluco!* (horrible!) My life had changed because I’d built the house from wood and built a second floor. On the ground floor, I’d put in cement flooring, so I didn’t tread on mud anymore. All cement—solid. Everyone looked at my *rancho* . . . I mean house! I got used to saying *rancho*, but it was a house—beautiful, wooden, well designed. I was thinking about changing the wood for bricks and concrete. Everyone was fixing their houses up nicely. Everyone was throwing away their wooden boards. There were already lots of houses built out of bricks and concrete, but then the fire occurred.

Like Noelia, many residents in El Oasis highlighted the material difference between a hut (*rancho*) and a house (*casa*), as well as the experience of a transition between the two. It is important to acknowledge that residents emphasized certain material conditions as indicators of *vivienda digna*, which they accrue—or hope to accrue—over time. For example, as one resident put it, “a comfortable house with drinking water and electricity, structurally adequate.” One elderly gentleman explained that the “makeshift shelters” they had built in El Oasis in the beginning could not be considered dignified; “while we were living there, it wasn’t *vivienda digna*, those were *cambuches* [improvised shelters]!”

Although residents’ material standards or personal preferences regarding the form of their houses were by no means uniform, material considerations were always secondary to permanence in their descriptions of *vivienda digna*. As several residents emphasized, permanence—“a place where nobody is going to kick us out,” being able to stay put—is a prerequisite for the improvement of their material circumstances over time. This helps to explain why, in 2015, 349 families—and many of them for the first time in their lives—decided to leave behind the status quo of scraping by” in more materially consolidated rental properties and to pursue a more dignified life by building their own housing, even if this meant embracing a material and sanitary downgrade.

None of the residents expressed fond memories of building their houses in the fetid conditions that greeted them on arrival at the former garbage dump: ten years’

worth of litter piled up, no sewage system in place, and rats everywhere. One mother of two almost turned away at the sight of it: “I thought it looked too unpleasant for my kids,” she said. However, this squalid plot of land also represented something that rental living did not: a future horizon that allowed them to keep hoping for a better life. This speaks to Turner’s claim that “the worth of a physical product cannot be assumed to lie in its physical qualities, but rather in the relationship between the object and the user” (Turner 1972, 159).

In El Oasis, Eliecer, a resident who works as a gardener, reflected as we sat one afternoon amid the immaculate greenery of his workplace, “we felt like you do when you put your things down at the end of a tiring journey. That’s how it feels to have a house of your own, and, despite the fact it wasn’t a luxury, it felt like one.” As residents’ tiring journeys finally appeared to be approaching a most welcome end, and as they experienced a rejuvenated sense of control over their housing situation, residents’ hopes for “possible worlds” started to become tangible.

Analytically, we understand the struggle for *vivienda digna* as a practice of hope. A dignified house is one that fosters residents’ sense of permanence. It is a material expression of the hope of being able to stay there and build a future. Being able to improve one’s conditions of life through autoconstruction is an experience of future-oriented agency, as it acts toward and gives expression to a particular imagination of the future. Noelia’s story provides a clear example of the subtle distinction between a priori hopes—as a capacity to aspire for possible futures (Appadurai 2004)—and hoping as a material practice that shapes the urban landscape. While Noelia carries hopes of one day securing a house of her own, hoping takes a far more active form and a material expression. If hopes for having a house of one’s own, for instance, sit in people’s imaginations and daringly light up the horizon from time to time, acts of hoping actually involve doing something toward making these hopes and dreams a reality, most notably when people go about “fixing their houses up nicely,” as Noelia put it.

The conceptualizing of “imaginaries of future events,” in the introduction to this special section, as guiding people’s actions helps us to visualize how hoping can be considered a driving force that changes in incremental ways the materiality of the urban landscape as residents improve their self-built housing.

A STEADY PATH AND PROGRESS: ANTICIPATING POSSIBLE WORLDS

When the first group of residents built their houses in El Oasis in 2015, not all of them expected—or even wanted, in a handful of cases—to stay there forever. However, they all hoped it would lead to something better—if not a possibility to stay there, then an opportunity to apply for a state-financed resettlement or compensation to live elsewhere. The stories of two residents, Noelia and now William, show how the desire to have a place to call one’s own and to experience progress in one’s life becomes manifest in practices of hoping in a very material way. These stories demonstrate how “anticipatory action . . . takes seriously those ‘possible worlds’

which, although not yet realized, inform people's everyday actions" (Nielson 2011, 398). We highlight the different possible worlds as particular imaginations of the future that informed residents' decisions to build a house in El Oasis.

In 2016, the atmosphere among the residents of El Oasis was extremely tense, due to the recent state-led evictions of 38 *ranchos* that had occupied a narrow stretch of land nearest the roadside. Apprehension among residents was rife. Noelia's home narrowly escaped this particular round of evictions, but she felt unsure about what might happen next. "We want the government to help us with something," Noelia remarked as she sat inside her *ranchito* on a chair that had its back to a steep hillside of mud against which the rest of the housing structure was propped, "either by giving us a house [elsewhere] or saying yes they'll let us stay here, so then everyone can figure out how to improve their *ranchito* . . . not like the *ranchos* look now. We're not here for any other reason." Thus, as Noelia engaged in the everyday improvement of her *ranchito*, she established a meaningful relationship between the present and the future, despite the notable absence of defined outcomes. Although, like her neighbors, Noelia feared that eviction was still a genuine and perhaps even imminent possibility, while engaging in the material practice of autoconstruction, she also felt as though she had brought the possibility (or, rather, possibilities) of a more favorable housing outcome closer.

Although, like Noelia, many residents of El Oasis would prefer to stay and work on transforming their houses into *viviendas dignas*, state-supported resettlement was also a desirable outcome, one they had seen happen around Medellín in the past. Although such projects were not taking place anymore, people still referred to them when imagining their future in the city.⁵ In Medellín, autoconstruction practices, especially in the most recent "occupations" should thus be interpreted in light of these possibilities, as anticipatory practices.⁶

The case of 68-year-old William illustrates how residents often have no alternatives to autoconstruction as a way to maintain hope of a better future. At the time of fieldwork in 2018, William was worried that his employer would soon force him to retire, although he could not afford it. This would usually have been a welcome state of affairs. At his age, and cycling 10 km to and from work each day for the minimum wage, he spends exhausting, labor-intensive days shifting cargo boxes around a warehouse. William is fit as a fiddle and proud to say that he has never touched a drop of alcohol in his life. Without a pension to fall back on and having battled with rent payments each month since his displacement from a rural town, Tuluá, in 2005, he has looked to El Oasis as the only feasible alternative at his current stage of life—an affordable place to spend his remaining days. Registered as an internally displaced person (IDP) since 2007 and waiting for a housing solution from the state, the only way William has found to keep hoping for a better future is to take matters into his own hands. In 2015, he built his house in El Oasis: two floors and a small balcony that faced the Medellín River. This step toward illegality was a calculated one.

Why did we build our houses there? Sincerely, because, above all, we couldn't afford to pay rent, bills, and food. Second, because I've been eligible for a housing subsidy since 2007 [as

an IDP] and, up until now, it just hasn't happened. So I said to myself: if they [the local government] ended up evicting me [from El Oasis], it'd be easier for them to find me a house. That's the truth.

This quotation shows that William also thought that if the government ended up evicting him from his autoconstructed house in El Oasis, it would finally provide the house he was entitled to and had been waiting for since registering as an IDP. Thus, his engagement in autoconstruction in El Oasis represented a means to an end, but also an end in itself, if he managed to avoid eviction.

Although the future of El Oasis was steeped in uncertainty from the outset, these two accounts show that residents valued not only experiencing a greater sense of control over their housing situations in the present but also how their decisions to build a house in El Oasis anticipated the realization of subtly different “possible worlds” or “futures not yet realized” (Nielson 2011).⁷ These two seemingly separate experiences come together as residents continue longing for the sensation of “forward motion” that they often described as experiencing in El Oasis once their material conditions began to improve. “For one short moment,” a young lady recalled, “I felt as though I was moving beyond a *rancho*, and I said to myself, ‘this is where I’m going to make a home, I’m going to build my house,’ and that is what I did.”

What Noelia missed most about her time in El Oasis, as compared to paying rent for an apartment elsewhere thereafter, was precisely the feeling of having a steady path (*rumbo fijo*) toward a better future and one marked by stability. “While I don’t have this [a steady path], I don’t feel happy,” she said. Other expressions that residents commonly used that convey a desirable sense of forward motion include, “I was progressing!” or “getting ahead” (*salir adelante*). This sensation of forward motion that residents describe and experience is fed by a sense of control over the present that simultaneously propels them toward “possible worlds” and brings these more tangibly into view. In short, in El Oasis, for a brief but meaningful time, residents felt as though they were moving along a path to a better somewhere. “My dream,” said Eliecer, “is that they [the government] give us a *vivienda digna*, so that we can regain the impulse that we had before.”

Residents’ engagement in the autoconstruction process engenders multiple possible worlds in which they might possess the security they seek, whether in the form of “staying put” or resettlement. We understand their practices of building and improving their dwellings as an expression of hope, as a “figure or measure of an imagined future” that is different from the conditions that people were in when they started building (Holston 1991, 451). People’s practices of autoconstruction give expression to what they define as a steady path and as progress that contributes to a crystallization, however fragile, of their future in the city. In the words of Eliecer, we also notice how the ambiguous role of the state becomes manifest in residents’ hopes for housing. While Eliecer and his fellow residents felt that the state had abandoned them in El Oasis before and after the fire, they simultaneously pinned their hopes on the state.

THE MATERIALITY OF HOPE FOR THE STATE: ENERGY METERS AS SYMBOLS OF LEGALIZATION

During a short period before the fire, El Oasis residents believed that Medellín's Public Utilities Company (EPM) was about to provide the legal installation of energy meters on their houses. EPM is a state-owned enterprise responsible for the distribution of basic domestic services, such as water, sewage, and electricity. The enterprise is 100 percent owned by the Municipality of Medellín, which is its main client. This set-up, which is common throughout Latin America, places the distribution of public services in the hands of companies that are privately managed and do not receive external public funds, relying solely on the revenue generated through the provision of services. In the case of El Oasis, the promise of the installation of energy meters became a catalyst for replacing temporary building materials (e.g., plastics and scraps of wood) with more permanent ones (e.g., dry wood, bricks, and cement).

Our analysis of this ethnographic vignette builds on recent research in the politics of infrastructural objects, such as energy meters (Pilo' 2017, 2020), water meters (Anand 2020), and water pipes (Ranganathan 2014). Such apparently mundane technical objects embody the relationship between residents (or consumers) and the state or public-private partnerships that provide utility services. In this case, the possible installation of energy meters in El Oasis symbolized an opportunity for the residents to have their houses included in the formal public services grid and, as such, become recognized by the state as legal, or at least, less illegal than before. Energy meters thus catalyzed residents' hopes for future longevity in the plot and a stable place in the city. As Varley explains, most residents of illegal settlements do not base the assessment of their security of tenure on regularization but "on processes indicating official tolerance of their settlement [such as] infrastructural improvements" (Varley 2002, 455). The energy meters were the kind of improvements that would indicate official tolerance of their neighborhood, of being included in the process of gridding (Jansen 2013). Securing these material objects would open up different future possibilities for a permanent place in the city.

"¡*Todo maluco! ¡Feo!* (Ugly!)," Noelia said, disgruntled in reference to the interior of her *rancho* as she offered the researcher a plastic chair to sit on, "look at the conditions I'm living in!" It was March 2016. The settlement was approximately one year into existence, and the steep hillside of El Oasis was already densely populated with *ranchos*. The structure of Noelia's home consisted of three walls nailed together using scraps of wood, poles, and green tarpaulin. The back wall was the muddy mountainside. It dominated the *rancho's* interior. Layers of garbage criss-crossed its surface. Noelia had done her best to tame the gradient of the hillside by digging into the floor, but if one were to place a ball at the steepest point of the *rancho's* interior (where a fridge happened to be perched rather precariously), it would have gathered a frightening velocity by the time it bounced down into the beds—which themselves appeared to cascade into the lower foot of the *rancho* and disappear, almost inexplicably, from view. It seemed nothing short of a miracle that the fridge never toppled and crushed Noelia as she slept.

Noelia was extremely anxious at the time of our conversation because of what had happened to her neighbors after being evicted the previous year. Rather than providing a permanent housing solution, the city government had simply left them in the street. Many of these families returned to El Oasis and moved in with friends and relatives, having received only 150,000 pesos (\$35) in compensation for the demolition of their homes. This worried Noelia. Which fate awaited her? Nobody in the settlement had received an eviction notice since the evictions that occurred in November, so that was good. However, some of her neighbors had been saying that the government wanted to turn El Oasis into a public garden—as they had elsewhere in Moravia. They wondered if more evictions were imminent.

The uncertainty surrounding the immediate future of El Oasis made Noelia feel not only extremely apprehensive and uneasy but also frustrated, because she found herself stuck in a position where it would be foolish to invest her scarce resources in the material improvements that her *rancho* so desperately required, such as a cement floor. She expressed that she and her neighbors really wanted the government to help by offering them another place to live or, alternatively, providing a guarantee for them to stay, so they could start improving their *ranchos*. While Noelia's traumatic experience of the evictions meant that, on the whole, she felt despondent in relation to her prospects of building a future in El Oasis and had refrained from making more material improvements to her house, rumors had started going around the settlement, which left some room for optimism.

They told us to stay at home yesterday because they [EPM] were coming to do a census. But no one came. We thought maybe they'd come today instead, but no one came today either . . . according to what's being said, it is about the installation of electricity meters. Supposedly, if that's how it is, they're not going to kick us out for a while.

In 2018, Noelia's part of El Oasis no longer existed. On August 18, 2017, a short circuit occurred on an electricity post overloaded with cable connections containing different sizes of wire gauge. These overheated, causing a fire to start in one of the houses before spreading across the settlement. As one community leader described it, the overloaded electricity post represented a “ticking time bomb waiting to explode.” The 349 households, including Noelia's, burned to the ground. During conversations with residents, it soon became clear that the El Oasis we knew from 2016 had changed considerably in material terms by the time it was tragically destroyed by fire in 2017. This is how Noelia described it as we spoke one afternoon in an apartment she was renting elsewhere at the time of our return:

I had a lot of plans, I was already thinking about making the house beautiful . . . nobody wanted wooden houses anymore. People were already starting to build their houses in brick . . . They [EPM] were going to install the energy meters, and people were saying we could stay here even if it's for ten or twenty years . . . [and that] they [city government] didn't need the land yet, so we were all thinking about building in brick.

Despite the fact that neither Noelia nor anyone else interviewed from El Oasis ever actually received the installation of energy meters from EPM, they were convinced that it was an imminent possibility. Some residents recall the

presence of EPM representatives in blue vests carrying out inspections of electricity posts in the settlement. In 2018, a pair of community leaders informed the researcher that 21 families had already submitted individual applications to EPM for energy meters.

A meeting with a city councilor together with EPM representatives took place in El Oasis on May 31, 2017. Residents came away from this meeting feeling excited and optimistic because the city councilor had promised them that the installation of energy meters was, indeed, imminent. But then the fire occurred. When Noelia describes her experience of seeing her house burning as something akin to a descent into madness, it is because, like many others, she had thought her life was about to change. “It [the installation of water meters] would have been huge,” said one of her neighbors, “Why? Because once EPM arrives, the ‘invasion’ turns into a ‘neighborhood.’ By acquiring and paying for services, we also contribute via taxes, and this would have meant we gained lots of rights that the government is currently violating [following the fire] because we were an illegal neighborhood.” She said that by paying taxes through energy meters, “we would have had more [ammunition] to fight the government.”

After the fire, ironically, in addition to not paying land tax (*impuesto predial*), it was the lack of energy meters that undermined the residents’ position to negotiate any assistance from the authorities. Residents explained that without the material proof in the form of energy bills, they could not prove their possession of the lot. “We made a settlement here,” one resident said.

We stayed here for a period of time that the government refuses to recognize. Why? Because they [the local government] have never taken an interest in the population of El Oasis. If they had taken an interest in us before the fire, we would have received the connections of electricity and water and [with that] we could have been paying our taxes as they now demand. But given that they didn’t guarantee us these things, we didn’t have them . . . so they categorize us as “occupants” and leave us in the street.

In practical terms, the lack of any proof of habitation, such as energy bills, meant that residents found themselves ineligible for state assistance beyond a maximum of 12 months in the temporary rent program they could apply for. They were unable to negotiate a housing solution, and therefore the prospect of securing a permanent place in the city waned. In Noelia’s case, the failure to submit certain documents meant that her application for the temporary rent subsidy was rejected completely. Many of her neighbors managed to submit the required paperwork and access the temporary rent program for the 12 months. However, the state subsequently refused all their applications for permanent municipal housing subsidies on the grounds that these residents could not prove their possession of the plot—or the length of time spent living there—by presenting required documentation, including bills for water and electricity consumption. This situation resonates with Hauer et al.’s research in periurban Ouagadougou (2018, 70), where, in some cases, registration papers could not be traced. Residents without this official piece of paper were less optimistic about the possibility of receiving a parcel, and in

some cases people even abandoned their small houses and plots because they felt that there was no future for them. They abandoned hoping.

Shortly before the fire decimated El Oasis in 2017, the rumors that the municipality did not need the land catalyzed residents' hopes for the possibility of some kind of permanent occupation. From there, residents not only dreamed—in the sense of their capacity to aspire—but also actively started practicing their hope through building their houses in bricks and submitting applications for the installation of electricity meters. By doing so, residents materialized the hope that the state would help them out of their illegal situation by including them in the city's planning and providing them with a place to stay.

This vignette sheds light on how material objects act as mediators of the relationship that residents maintain with the state. This relationship is both affective and inherently contradictory, as it centers on hopes, betrayal, and fears (Krupa and Nugent 2015; Koster 2019). To return to the energy meters, certain material objects, such as these energy meters and legal documents, possess symbolic and real value in terms of political claims making in regard to the state. Material objects produced by the state thus shape social and expectations and prospects, which, in turn, fuel a flurry of construction using more permanent materials. In so doing, these objects—as tangible symbols of the state and its promises—generate hope in a very material way, as they reorient people's life trajectories and change the urban landscape (Hauer et al. 2018).

When we think of our case in terms of Navaro-Yashin's "faces of the state" (2002), to the residents of El Oasis, the state has a Janus face. The ugly side of the face reflects Goldstein's account of the "phantom state" in Bolivia's marginalized urban neighborhoods, where local residents feel at once abandoned and threatened by the state and its law enforcement agents (Goldstein 2012). Yet in the case of El Oasis, the positive side of the state's Janus face simultaneously emerges as residents pin their hopes on the state as a guarantor of their inclusion in the formal grid (Jansen 2013) and in response to the promises of development, progress, and care that state actors and bureaucracy eternally generate (Nuijten 2003).

CONCLUSIONS

This article has focused on the illegal autoconstruction practices of the residents of El Oasis, Medellín, analyzing them as material practices of hoping. First, it showed how residents' struggle for *vivienda digna* can be understood as a struggle for permanence and an increased degree of control over their lives, of "get[ting] a grip on one's own life" (Pedersen and Liisberg 2015, 9). A dignified house symbolizes an escape from a situation of severe privation and liberation from exploitative and precarious landlord-tenant relations. It produces an image of permanence and expresses, in a very material way, the hope of being able to stay and build a future in the city. Second, we analyzed how the residents of El Oasis gave expression to their hope through what they consider a steady path and progress: that of building and

gradually improving their own houses with the purpose of staying there or being included in a resettlement program.

Third, this article has demonstrated how, in the material practice of hoping, the state plays an important yet ambiguous role. To the residents of El Oasis, the state shows a Janus face: it abandons them, threatens them, and at the same time, promises them a possible future in the city. The article has shown how such promises may find a tangible demonstration in the material objects that the state provides, such as documents and energy meters. These objects open up possibilities for securing a permanent place in the city. They do so by offering opportunities to escape from a situation of illegality, as they symbolize inclusion by the state in its grid (Jansen 2013). This study underscores, as do the other contributions to this special section, the importance of apprehending illegal practices—such as autoconstruction—from the perspective of actors' visions of future events; in this case, the hoping and anticipation of securing a permanent place to live in the city.

Interestingly, the distinction made here between hope as a capacity or resource and hope as a practice has important methodological implications as well. Whereas hope as a capacity or resource requires expression through language in order for the researcher to have a grasp of it, hope as a practice is something ethnographers can see and document as it unfolds over time.⁸

The case outlined in this article also unsettles the misleading yet hegemonic global narrative about urban transformation in Medellín, which heralds the local government as a world leader in its commitment to “equitable” and “pro-poor” urban development interventions. The dramatic mismatch between this appealing fantasy and the lived reality of urban renovation interventions in Medellín is, in part, explained by the dizzying amount of cash that the city mayor's administration pumps into the commissioning and distribution of favorable PR at home and abroad in multiple languages. In 2016 and 2017, the mayor's administration spent 130 million Colombian pesos (\$US34 million) on official publicity contracts (*El Mundo* 2018). This greatly surpasses the amount spent on publicity in the capital, Bogotá, whose annual budget is five times larger.

While serving as mayor of Medellín from 2015 to 2019, Federico Gutiérrez earned himself a reputation among local residents for seldom being in the country. During his administration, “Fico” spent more than one hundred days abroad at urban and business conferences, spearheading Medellín's internationalization strategy to attract foreign capital investment through the promotion of the city's “socially inclusive” approach to urban development (*El Mundo* 2018). However, as this article has shown, this so-called socially inclusive approach to urban planning does not meet the needs of the most vulnerable residents of the city, and on the contrary, contributes to their immiseration by displacing not only autoconstructors themselves but also the practice of autoconstruction from the urban landscape, and with it, the future possibilities that this practice engenders. Residents engage in such practices with the hope that their illegality will only be a transient, yet instrumental, phase on the path to future legality and a place to stay in the city.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

All authors declare none.

NOTES

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1. Moore's forthcoming Ph.D. thesis pays close attention to the role of these community leaders as they organize protests and neighborhood meetings. They function as channels of information, both from the authorities to the residents (e.g., on urban development or eviction) and vice versa (e.g., communicating the residents' needs to officials). They are important actors at the interface between the authorities and the residents.

2. Urban renovation interventions, such as the new cable line, are leaving a trail of destruction, tears, and human rights violations in their path. Mesa Duque et al. (2018) provide a meticulous case-by-case assessment of ongoing urban renovation projects in Medellín and the harmful trail of destruction (economic, psychological, emotional, material, social, health-related) this confers on local communities.

3. According to legal definitions in Colombia, a possessor is any person who assumes possession of an empty house or disused plot of land and acts as its owner (e.g., by performing construction work, paying land taxes, or paying taxes through the use of public services, such as water and electricity).

4. We define paramilitary groups as follows: "illegal armed actors, whose vocation is counterinsurgency, which functions with the complicity of state elements and economic sectors. Their [the paramilitary groups'] positioning within illegality articulates them with illegal economies, which include narcotrafficking, contraband, extortions, illegal mining, and arms trafficking, among many others. The function of paramilitary groups is defined by their activities against what they consider 'insurgency,' and not by their economic activities" (CCEEU 2017, p. 8). According to the Colombian government's official discourse, "paramilitarism" ceased to exist in the country following a ceremonial demobilization process of paramilitary groups, which ended in 2006. Therefore, the groups we refer to as paramilitaries in Medellín the Colombian government defines instead as organized criminal groups (GDOs) or organized common criminal groups (GDCOs). Following Hristov (2010), we reject the government's choice of language, as it falsely casts the ongoing counterinsurgency activities of paramilitary groups as an artifact of the past, which shields the continuing links between paramilitarism, capital accumulation and the state from greater scrutiny. The CCEEU report demonstrates that a total of 107 community leaders and human rights defenders suffered multiple types of counterinsurgency related aggressions in Medellín in 2016–17 (CCEEU 2017, 101). Moore also gathered personal testimonies from local community leaders who had suffered such aggressions, including death threats, while spearheading resistance efforts against housing evictions in the city.

5. This is a clear example of how the state operates as a hope-generating machine (Nuijten 2003). The success of certain projects in the past still feeds into people's present imagination of the future.

6. While most residents and public officials in Medellín use the term *invasión* (*invasión*), we avoid it in this article for its negative connotation.

7. According to local government criteria, the land in El Oasis is classified as a "high-risk zone" that is unfit for human habitation of any kind. Furthermore, long-term residents living in a different part of El Oasis have been earmarked for resettlement since the mid-2000s, but these plans never materialized, and the old agreements have now expired. Their current and future situation is therefore also highly precarious.

8. Thanks to Kedron Thomas and Matias Dewey for pointing this out.

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