Autonomía and Cultural Co-Design. Exploring the Andean *minga* practice as a basis for enabling design processes[1]

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ABSTRACT

The following contribution tackles *autonomía* by reflecting on the relationship between culture and space and, therefore, on the multiple actors involved in an urban project. This interaction and involvement are envisioned through the approach termed as 'cultural co-design'. The work is divided into four main sections. First, the *mega-minga*, an initiative based on the collaboration between citizens and institutions to produce collective urban spaces in Ecuador, is introduced. This is followed by a critical analysis of the *mega-minga* itself through the specific case of the *Comuna de* Santa Clara de San Millán, located in Quito. The deficiencies and the potentials of this collaborative practice will be illustrated by contextualizing the *mega-minga* historically, and relating it back to an evolving customary practice based on reciprocity. The third section of the paper looks at the intrinsic characteristics of the *minga* practice, explores its decolonizing qualities and the opportunity it represents to re-orient mainstream client-based and for-profit urban design practices in Ecuador. The article concludes by turning once again to the case of Santa Clara de San Millán. It envisions a scenario where *autonomía* is attainable through alternatives supporting a more equitable 'interaction' between space, culture, citizens, and institutions.

Keywords: *minga*, cultural co-design, *autonomía*, Quito.

Introduction

On the east side of the Pichincha Mountain, a few hundred meters from the Universidad Central and among the many self-built neighborhoods of Quito, lies the *Comuna* of Santa Clara de San Millán[2]. This neighborhood follows an ancestral communal land tenure scheme, and it is majorly inhabited by low-income people (INEC, 2010). As its legal framework is distinct from other parts of the city, Santa Clara was overlooked by Quito's municipality for decades (Hopfgarten, 2014; Testori, 2016). Due to their autonomous communal status, inhabitants are exempted from property taxation [*impuesto predial*]. Despite this exemption, Santa Clara's residents have to pay all other municipal and state taxes like the rest of Quito's residents, although these contributions do not lead to the provision of public utilities and basic infrastructure.

On the 12th of November 2017, a particular action promoted by the municipality - the *mega-minga* - contrasted its neglect of Santa Clara. According to the municipality, the *mega-minga* seeks to improve the neighborhood's common

spaces by means of public works such as road asphalting or garbage collection. The Secretary of Territorial Coordination and Citizen Participation (*Secretaria de Coordinacion Territorial y Partecipacion Ciudadana*) organized the *mega-minga*, involving municipal companies that provide public services such as potable water and waste treatment. In the course of this action, companies offer the necessary machinery for implementing the public works in question (cement mixers, garbage trucks, or small cranes) at no cost, while inhabitants contribute with their labor force. Each neighborhood's Zonal Administration[3] defines the scope of the works. When the administration gathers, all neighborhood leaders are invited to take part in the ensuing discussions, and depending on their necessities – but mostly according to the availability of municipal companies – they may be entitled to benefit from a *mega-minga*.

Several *mega-mingas* have been organized in Quito during the last years[4], of which the first were promoted during the mandate of mayor Paco Moncayo (2000-2009). These were called 'mingas 50-50' because half of the work was financed by the municipality while the other resources were provided by the inhabitants. To better understand these events, the *minga*'s history is important to trace, since its original conception was aligned with an ancient way of working collectively that is based on mutual aid typical of the Andean Region[5]. In Quito the *mega-minga* has been majorly implemented in peripheral and low-income settlements, basically in the areas of the city that are mostly inhabited by

migrants from the rural area that moved to Quito from the 1970s onwards (Kingman, 2006; Testori, 2018).

The more the *mega-minga* is examined from the perspective of urban spatial production, the more it appears questionable in its enactment. Turning first to the opportunities it may hold for enabling design processes, the *mega-minga* can be viewed as an example where citizens and institutions concretely co-operate to build the city (Fraser *et al.*, 2006). The *mega-minga* is substantially an act of responsibility undertaken by the municipality to provide services in marginal/neglected areas. Subsequently, it can be argued that municipal *mingas* rest on a participatory method that taps into inhabitants' know-how – in this case by harnessing the *minga* as a customary practice –, getting closer to what the paper will later conceptualize as 'cultural co-design'. According to the municipality, the objective of *mega-mingas* is to encourage neighborhood organization for positive purposes that can benefit the community (*Agencia Pública de Noticias de Quito*, 2017). On this note, the ex-mayor of Quito, Augusto Barrera, specified that if all neighborhood rehabilitations were to be entirely implemented by municipal companies, this would take 5 times longer than through the *mega-minga*, ultimately making this shared-responsibility method a more efficient strategy (A. Barrera, personal communication, November 15th, 2017).

The *mega-minga* however, holds dubious content as well. According to Barrera and Mancheno, such Ecuadorian co-management principle perpetuates an inequitable
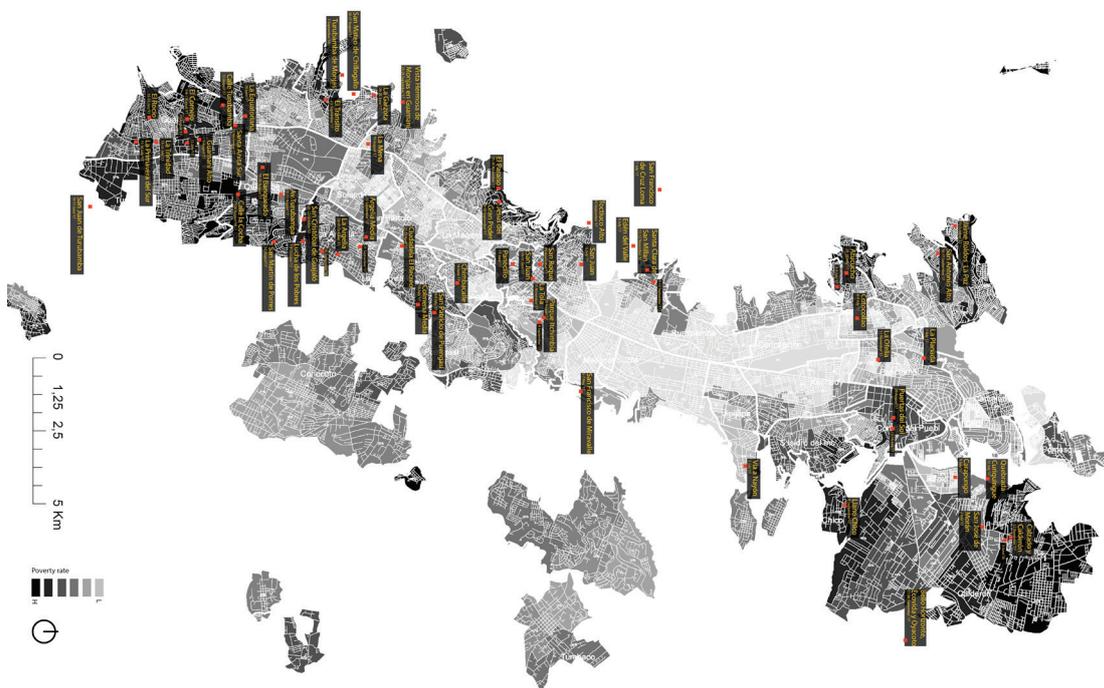
Figure 1. Map of recent mega-mingas in Quito (from May 1st to November 30th, 2017).

Source: based on http://www.quitoinforma.gob.ec/

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[3] In Ecuador, these units are called *Administraciónes Zonales*. To date there are 8 in Quito: La Delicia, Calderón, Norte Eugenio Espejo, Especial Turística La Mariscal, Centro Manuela Sáenz, Eloy Alfaro, Quitumbe, Tumbaco, Los Chillos.
[4] Since the 7th of July 2017, there were 57 *mega-mingas* organized in Quito's municipality, benefitting 112.000 inhabitants with an annual investment of US$800.000 (Quitoinforma, 2017).
[5] A deeper description of this practice will be presented in the section "Challenges and opportunities of the *minga* as a communal work practice" of this article.

way of providing for, and accessing to, basic services in the city. They also specify that several people feel uncomfortable with this unequal way of acting in Quito, not only because citizens often do not have time to dedicate to collective work, but also because in other urban neighborhoods services don't arise from self-execution, but are provided and carried out entirely by the municipality (Barrera and Manchedo, 2013). Such critique of a government-supported self-help case like the *mega-minga* is not new. In the 1970s and 1980s, authors like Ward and Burgess already harshly criticized Peruvian self-help projects rooted in the concept of 'sweat equity'. These were seen as acts of co-optation of the low-income groups (Peek, 2015; Ward, 2012; Burgess, 1982).

Relatedly, Barrera and Mancheno add that *mingas* are being held freely by some neighborhood organizations or community groups in Quito. For the authors *mingas* should continue to be practiced autonomously and not as a forced requirement to obtain public services from the municipality (Barrera and Mancheno, 2013). On this, Raúl Zibechi (2015) reports the sentence of a Mexican Zapatista who says, "collective work is the motor of autonomy" and adds that it means dignity and self-esteem. As one of the figures that has reflected on the relationship between collective work, autonomy and institutions in Latin America, Zibechi offers a radical position. In his view (2015), every state-form is oppressive because it removes the community's capacities to organize, regulate and reproduce itself.

When reading about the *mega-minga* in the Ecuadorian newspapers[6] on the other hand, inhabitants recurrently report about the "grain of sand" provided "to take care of our city", while other celebrative accounts express how "the community is very grateful to the Municipality for these actions" (Epmmop, 2014; Quitoinforma, 2017). However, such views underline how the institutionalization of cultural practices does not necessarily entail a shift in the participants' social status. They also illustrate how, even under the slogans of participation and citizen involvement, marginality can be sustained and (re)produced. The case of Quito's *mega-mingas* therefore*,* holds potential for understanding the position of autonomous processes of design and the dangers of their co-optation. Do *mega-mingas* embody the possibility to help support and scale up processes of autonomous design? As seen so far and will be further explored, the *mega-mingas* are laden with contradictions. However, this contribution argues that *mega-mingas* hold potential for the transformation of current processes towards a more socially just urban design practice. To do so however, as Irwin points out, "design must be informed by a deep understanding of local eco-systems and culture" (Irwin *et al.,* 2015, p. 11).

Challenges and opportunities of the minga as a communal work practice

Minga is a communal work practice from the Andean Region. It specifically originates from the Quechua word '*minccacuni*' and literally means requesting help by prom-

ising something in return (Masmiquel, 2015; Garavaglia, 1997). The *Real Academia de la Lengua* dictionary posits instead that it comes from the term *mink'a,* which also refers to a voluntary agricultural collective work serving a social utility. For Glenghorn, a *minga* describes the collective effort of community residents to help one another during a time of need or crisis (2013). These various definitions promote an understanding of the *minga* as a multi-dimensional practice (Ramires, 1980). In general terms, however, a *minga* is usually 'called' to involve a group of people that works collectively on a particular task (Lozano, 2013). Geographically speaking, the word *minga* has an equivalent meaning in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Chile. In the last two countries it is known as '*minka*' and '*mingaco*' respectively, whereas in Brazil it is comparable to '*adjunto*' and '*mutirão*' (Lozano, 2013; Masmiquel, 2015). In some specific contexts such as in Colombia, moreover, the term *minga* is also employed by the Indigenous Movement to organize mass protests and marches for social justice, or adopted to describe a collective way of empowering knowledge (Schmitt, 2010; Lavalle, 2011; Gleghorn, 2013; Quince, 2016).

The *minga* is one of many systems of community work and reciprocity where people do not expect anything in return apart from collective benefit. In the sub-Saharan African context for example, the Rwandan Government relied on the customary *umuganda*. This was used to enrich and adapt development programs to the needs and context of the country as part of post-war reconstruction efforts and to cultivate a shared national identity. Today, around 80% of Rwandans participate in the monthly *umuganda* community work. The last Saturdays of each month, from eight to eleven in the morning, the population engages in cleaning up public spaces. The law stipulates that those escaping their duties are liable to be sanctioned. The projects include the construction of schools, medical centers and hydroelectric plants, as well as wetland rehabilitation and the creation of highly productive agricultural plots (Villaverde, 2014). A similar custom coming from Haiti is called *kombit*, recently used for post-earthquake reconstruction.

In Uzbekistan a voluntary public mutual aid known as *khashar* has been practiced for centuries. It is described as a hard work consisting in watering vineyards, mowing, harvesting, digging irrigation canals, but it is also used for the collective construction of public and private buildings (Villaverde, 2014). One example are the *kashers* practiced on a yearly basis by students and staff of the Russian Economic University in the Uzbek city of Tashkent, where on a specific day of the year everyone comes out to the university and tries to make the street, the courtyard, the district, parks and the whole city as much clean and neat as possible.

Communal work and mutual aid are not limited to the global South. In Spain for example, we can find collective practices of self-help such as the *auzolan* in the Basque Country, the *andecha* in the Asturian region, the Galician *tornajeira* and the Valencian *tornallom* (Villaverde, 2014). In Finland the *talkoot* is an example of a unique customary

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[6] Articles such "En distintos barrios de Quito se realizan mega mingas" from (QuitoPress, 2016). Or "La minga en Quito es una herencia del Estado Inca" from ElComercio (2012).

form of social participation. As Hyyppä specifies, it works as an alternative form of collective work, which does not consider any kind of reimbursement besides the possibility of a shared meal once work is over (2010). Like the *minga*, along the years *talkoot* has also followed migration waves from rural to urban areas. "The purpose of the *talkoot* may be something of a common concern, that is, for the good of the group. It may involve building or repair work, or assisting someone with a task that exceeds his or her own capacity" (Hyyppä, 2010, p. 33). Nylund adds that in villages it can also consist of building community houses, schools and churches together (2013). Finally, in Ireland the *meitheal* is still practiced. In this case too, it consists of a general coming communal gathering to help one another. Michael Kelly, founder of GIY (Grow It Yourself association), offers an example from Waterford City, where though a multiple set of *meitheals* – mostly consisting of cleaning and planting a group of volunteers created a native woodland based on an old Irish list of trees.

Returning to the Andean practice called *minga*, it is important to point out that its specific history and evolution date back to the pre-Incan Empire. Its characteristics and habits have changed much along history, but the unifying point that connects its transformations from pre-colonial times is found in its many re-interpretations and co-optations. During the Inca Empire the indigenous ability to work collectively was, for example, used to construct temples. During the Spanish colony, *mingas* were used to build entire cities, whereas under the Ecuadorian '*hacienda* period' (1830-1960), peasants were forced to work collectively in ranches in exchange for land-rights (Guevara, 1957; Meier, 1984). Nowadays, in the Ecuadorian case, *mingas* are rarely practiced independently [7]. In Quito it is rather the municipality that pushes people to construct their own services and infrastructures through *mega-mingas*. Despite its problematic historical mutations, this article considers the *minga* to be a practice with significant potential for enabling design processes that are genuinely rooted in *autonomía*.

In order to delve more into the practice, it is important to emphasize that, as a 'social custom' there is no specific norm that controls the *minga* (Orcasita and Sarmiento, 2005). *Mingas* can indeed be articulated through a myriad of manifestations, and the distinctions between the various forms of social reciprocity are "complex and subtle" (Klaufus and Mitzman, 2012, p. 132; Ramires, 1980). In Andean rural areas, *mingas* were, and in some cases still are, mainly practiced in the context of shared agricultural tasks such as planting, harvesting, and equally distributing the yield. In urban areas however, where agriculture is largely absent, *mingas* are commonly employed to construct or improve collective infrastructures such as sewage networks, and paving of roads. A *minga* however, might also take place to build collective facilities such as *casa comunales* (neighbourhood centres), kindergartens and schools.

Another important distinction refers to the nature of the 'needs' which are being fulfilled through this communal work practice. This contribution posits that 'fundamental' *mingas* deal with the objective of satisfying something that is essential for the existence and survival of the community as a whole, such as a shelter and the access to basic urban services, or education. Other kinds of *mingas*, defined in this case as 'auxiliary', do not generally impact the more fundamental human needs inscribed in the urban environment. Rather, they are *mingas* held to improve the quality of shared spaces, such as collective maintenance of neighborhood parks or playgrounds.

The scale of intervention and the kind of actors involved might be very different for each case. We can also find *mingas* that are organized in a more exclusive way, for example for which attendance is restricted to family members or friends, maybe to help a relative in building parts or all of his/her house. A 'public' *minga* by contrast, generally involves all the inhabitants of one or more neighborhoods. In this second case *mingas* are generally planned to satisfy collective well-being; for instance by cleaning a water channel that
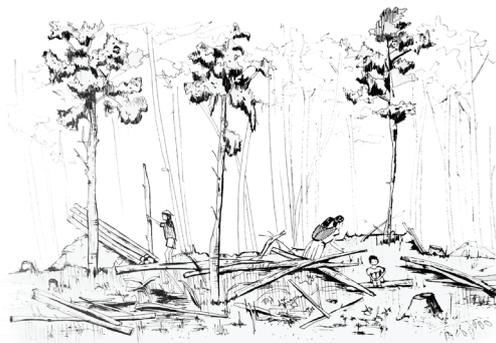

Figure 2. An interpretation of a 'fundamental' minga, representing *mingas* where rural migrants, approaching Quito's peripheries, were cutting trees to start building their new neighborhood.

Source: Testori (2018).

Figure 3. An interpretation of an 'auxiliary' minga in Quito, inspired by direct experience of recent urban *mingas* in the course of which citizens were collectively cleaning the roads of their neighborhood.

Source: Testori (2018).

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[7] Even though the *minga* has generally shifted the focus of its objectives to less urgent domains, a broader look at the actual participation of Quito's citizens in urban issues shows that its practice has drastically decreased (Dew, 1969; Barrera and Mancheno, 2013; Kowii, 2009). One of the reasons for this drop, according to Schmitt, is that "if a community is characterized by an extensive provision of public utilities, the necessity to be engaged in public affairs is lower... and social participation becomes an unattractive option" (Schmitt, 2010, p. 1447). While for Ramires this tendency has much to do with a broader societal trend, which brings people to adopt a more individualistic and self-centered behaviour; aspects widely amenable to the capitalistic globalization in which Ecuador is part of (Ramires, 1980; Masmiquel, 2015).

crosses different urban areas. In order to build something collectively people either gather the required materials, or they collect the required monetary resources. *Mingas* however can also be supported by different entities, such as NGOs, municipal funds or international organizations. This last case is exemplified by the contribution of UNICEF in 1989 to the Atucucho neighborhood in Quito, when the new inhabitants were supported to build water canalizations and collective distribution points (MDMQ, 2002).

The *minga*'s proneness to being re-interpreted and mobilized in a variety of different contexts and power relations interrogates the state's role in providing for the public good. Should it not be the state – in the form of public bodies – to take on the responsibility for providing basic services? While it may be surprising to think the opposite, one should not dismiss that it is only since the 1990s that the various Andean states started recognizing and subsidizing the gradual improvement of some informal settlements (Ward, 2012). Since the 1950s, many migrants settled in the Andean cities, and for these marginal populations the *minga* was basically the one and only tool to satisfy their material needs in their new living environment.

As seen previously in the many examples, the reader might think that collective work in cases of necessity is common to many other mutual aid and self-build practices carried out in the global South and which have led, for instance, to the creation of Brazilian *favelas*, or Mexican *colonial populares*. The *minga* however has a robust cultural background deeply rooted in thousands of years of eclectic history (Korovkin, 1992; Macas, 2004). Its longevity and strength are supported by a combination of spirituality, solidarity and reciprocity that even in different spatial and political geographies, made it resist through centuries. Ethical and moral principles see self-help as foundational for community building and are in this case bound to a ceremonial behavior. The *minga* can indeed be considered as an indigenous custom and although it has undergone a process of transformation its fundamental characteristics remain, giving continuity to an organizational expression born within its idiosyncrasy (Ramires, 1980; Macas, 2004;

Quince, 2016). A *minga* generally lasts a day in the weekend, at the end of which there is a moment of celebration (*fiesta*) in which participants share drinks (such as *chicha* or *colada morada*), and/or traditional meals (such as a *fritada*). These are prepared by those who did not participate in the *minga*, either because of age or because of physical impairment and cannot undertake hard work (Guevara, 1957; Klaufus and Mitzman, 2012).

Concerning the governance of these 'events', it is commonly the assembly, which leads decision-making processes, notwithstanding the nature of the *minga* (fundamental or auxiliary) and its context of implementation (rural or urban). In the neighborhoods or communities that still practice *mingas*, assemblies are usually organized once a month and all inhabitants are invited to join. Neighborhood organizations are always headed by a president and a vice-president who are occasionally accompanied by a treasurer and a secretary. In the specific instance of the *comunas* such as the case of Santa Clara de San Millán, representatives are elected every year. *Mingas* are mostly decided depending on what is considered most urgent in the neighborhood. Every assembly sector can propose a different site to be improved by means of calling a *minga*, but it is by direct democracy, normally exercised by hand rise, that the most pressing actions are voted.

To assess the relevance of the *minga* for enabling design strategies rooted in *autonomía*, a two-fold reflection is proposed in the course of this paper. On the one hand, as Guevara warns, *mingas* cannot be considered a panacea: "we shouldn't think that, in the small area of its field of action, the *minga* is the exemplary parable" (Guevara, 1957, p. 8). One of its undesirable aspects, both in rural and urban applications, is that attendance is compulsory and therefore not exercised out of autonomous choice (Erazo, 2010). Attendance is indeed considered as a requirement for accessing certain services or for obtaining infrastructure improvements (Barrera and Mancheno, 2013; Kowii, 2009). Those who do not participate most likely have to pay a fine to the organizers (Dew, 1969; Klaufus and Mitzman, 2012). Besides a monetary penalty, the

Figure 4. A neighborhood assembly in the Commune of Santa Clara in Quito (August 21st, 2016).

Source: Testori (2016).

punishment often becomes moral too, since those who fail to participate regularly are gradually excluded and ostracized by the community and risk becoming the object of criticism, relegation, and even threat (Ramires, 1980; Faas, 2015; Quince, 2016). This aspect still occurs today despite the fact that people are forced into a working system that does not easily allow them to find time for *minga* participation during weekends (Faas, 2015). Moreover, a *minga* nowadays hardly involves young people, often because they do not share the same concerns as the older generation. This is particularly relevant for those second and third generation migrants who were not directly exposed to reciprocity because of their movement abroad (Schmitt, 2010; Barrera and Mancheno, 2013). It is also not uncommon to find deep distrust between different ethnic groups composing a neighborhood, often resulting in prejudice in less educated and poor areas (Schmitt, 2010). This trend is worsened by the dominance of old neighborhood leaders, who remain 'in power' without any intention of divesting their responsibility, perpetuating a clientelistic mechanism (Barrera and Mancheno, 2013).

From the perspective of enabling design strategies, it is also important to evaluate the spatial outcome of the *minga* in terms of actual spatial quality. Even though the objectives to be achieved through collective work are decided by direct democracy, and space is auto-constructed, these are not necessarily synonymous with spatial quality. Spatial quality is not intended here as aesthetic quality which, as Zibechi reminds us, depends on each culture (2015). Rather, it can refer to the fact that most built structures are made only of concrete blocks, resulting in low climatic comfort; or that houses are often constructed on slopes, thus facing a constant risk of landslides. The recurrent lack of professionals/technicians, due to general reliance on the limited knowledge of a master-builder (*maestro constructor*)[8], has an impact on the resulting quality of urban spaces. Therefore, communal self-build processes, even if reliant on mutual aid, more often than not culminate in an urban landscape which is generally undistinguishable from any other so-called 'informal' settlement.

A last point concerns the deficiency of long-term plans and visions typical of collectively-built and self-managed neighborhoods where problems and necessities are pressing and are not integrated in longer cycles of transformation, thus resulting in diffused spatial fragmentation. In the light of these remarks, it can be argued that the practice of the *minga* is not only characterized by altruism, reciprocity and customary embededness, but it is also defined by unequal power relations. In some cases, instead of being the outcome of reciprocal exchange, it may actually become an unpleasant constriction (Fassin, 1992).

Achieving *autonomía* through the minga in post-neoliberal spatial reproduction

What are the *minga*'s potentials vis à vis the city's contemporary challenges? Can such a communal practice re-orient mainstream client-based and for-profit design

Figure 5. View of Atucucho, 2016.
Source: Testori (2016).

Figure 6. Sketch of Atucucho, 2015.
Source: Testori (2018).

practices? Can the *minga* be a medium through which *autonomía* is achieved?

These questions, as underlined by decolonial perspectives, are "far from any primordialist call to go back" and they do not "urge anyone to return to huts and dugouts" (Tlostanova, 2017, p. 9). Trying to give concrete answers to these questions might help to envision those 'alternatives' that so many decolonial and post-neoliberal authors, mostly from the social sciences aspire for (Esteva, Manzini, Stravides, Escobar, Harvey, Negri and Hardt, Deleuze and Guattari, etc.). As Escobar (2016) points out, the claim for *autonomia* does

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[8] *Maestro constructor* means 'building contractor', a person skilled in the art of building.

not only imply a critique of formal democracy, but it is also a genuine attempt to build a totally different form of government anchored in the lives of the people. It represents a struggle for liberation beyond capitalism and for a new type of society in harmony with other peoples and cultures.

Under this lens, *mingas* are seen as more than just an opportunity for reinforcing collective spatial reproduction. They are a social institution that brings together the organizational, the cultural, the religious and the political spheres of residents (De la Torre and Peralta, 2004). In fact, one of the *minga*'s most fascinating aspects is that this kind of shared labor increases the circulation of several socio-political and cultural dimensions: "whether it be water, electricity, news, entertainment, or people, this shared 'base' is a kind of human-made commons that underwrites the vitality of private holdings largely by interconnecting them" (Colloredo-Mansfeld, 2007, p. 98). It is through participation in these commons, that people strengthen their own voice, dialogue with each other, exchange ideas so that social bonds and bridges within the community can be empowered and consolidated (Kowii, 2009; Quince, 2016). There are then other aspects of the *minga*, that make it inspirational for the envisioning of alternatives, such as its endorsement of pre-capitalist organizational forms (Ramires, 1980). In the course of this practice, for example, the 'super-structural'[9] is not separate from the structure, but is fully linked to it, meaning that the ideological elements of the *minga* act in tandem with economic necessity. Moreover, it is noteworthy that no *minga* is salary dependent. The payment for attending a *minga* is rather two-fold: on the one hand participation implies the prestige of being part of an extended 'family', on the other it is also what avoids the contempt of the community. The spatial reproduction offered by this organizational form differs completely from the one led by financial profit, whether private or public. This makes areas built through *mingas* fundamentally different from all the rest, since "to move away from product-based well-being we need to value community assets more highly" (Manzini and Jégou, 2003, p. 48). Furthermore, as Ramires writes (1980), the product of a *minga* is not for commercialization, but for self-consumption, an aspect which helps conserving a 'natural' system. Collective decision-making through neighborhood assemblies and self-induced *mingas*, are therefore certainly forms of *autonomía*, seen that formal institutions such as the municipality or the state, are mostly either voluntarily or forcibly excluded from the process. By contrast, *mega-mingas* feature the presence of institutions, and *autonomía* is absent. This contribution argues for a middle ground, whereby *autonomía* can be exercised with the support of institutions and other actors such as professionals, who may contribute to the quality of communal work.

Re-designing the city though *mingas: Mingas* as cultural co-design

Having now described the challenges and opportunities of the customary *minga* and the more dubious *mega-minga* variant, the contribution argues for *mingas*

as the premise for enabling design processes under the aegis of 'cultural co-design'. Cultural co-design is a term which was initially used in the early 2010s by the municipality of Birmingham as a concept to introduce culture inside its city's neighborhoods. It was subsequently used, but differently defined, by Sylvain Després (2016). In the first case, cultural co-design was seen as a concept to increase the level of local residents' participation in artistic and cultural activities, and thus as a way to integrate families with complex needs and reduce high rates of unemployment. However, in the case of this paper, the concept of 'cultural co-design' is more aligned with the approach undertaken by Després, who used the term to describe a design methodology that views culture as the supporting column from where to start building "culturally appropriate engagements with Indigenous people and communities" (Després, 2016, p. 3). In his thesis Després stresses the importance of deeply studying the cultural background of some Canadian First Nation inhabitants, before envisioning any spatial design which would affect them. For Després re-affirming cultural knowledge is a critical feature and a way to create inclusive engagement (2016). In similar terms, this article gives high relevance to the *minga*'s many facets to start imagining its potential for the inclusive urban development of Quito.

Després however, does not provide a specific definition of the term, which requires some further detailing in order to prove its potentials. Without attempting to define what the term 'cultural' means, it is broadly intended here as the set of events, actors and vernacular techniques related to spatial reproduction that characterize the formation of shared spaces and facilities in a specific site. By 'cultural' we mean a layer, which apparently remains unseen under each specific man-made collective space, and to which authors like Arturo Escobar give strong importance when talking of design. Escobar (2016) indeed argues that it is by examining how people understand their past and present reality that autonomous design can be implemented. In this specific case, the meaning given to 'cultural', when related to co-design, is comparable to the meaning that Esteva gives to 'ontonomía', that set of norms established though customary cultural practices which are endogenous, site-specific, and historically modified through integrated collective processes (Esteva, 2015).

'Co-design' on the other hand, literally means to 'design hand in hand with' and is a term which Sanders and Stappers (2012) identified as an emerging design landscape (Botero, 2013). Manzini later defines it as "the overall design process resulting from the interaction of a variety of disciplines and stakeholders, including final users and design experts" (Manzini, 2015, p. 57). Moreover, he specifies that the act of co-designing is an activity that promotes and supports contradictory and open-ended processes. The notion of 'co-design' is indeed particularly relevant for what this contribution envisions, because it is "what gives emerging design the possibility to operate as a real agent of change" (Manzini, 2015, p. 61).

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[9] By Ramires (1980) as 'superstructural' are intended: the ideological elements related to tradition.

Amongst the many authors that have been deeply reflected on this term, Botero sees it as "more than a label to demark a concern, a contemporary opportunity, that draws on both the traditions of User Centered Design and Participatory Design explicitly or implicitly" (Botero, 2013, p. 38).

When considering the *minga* as a practice which could potentially be harnessed for 'cultural co-design' processes, it is worth noting that its ancient history does not mean that it cannot be re-interpreted. As previously mentioned, the *minga* as a practice still has to face several fundamental challenges such as achieving a more socially-just interaction between citizens and institutions. Moreover, it is argued here that it should be practiced as an expression of people's autonomy to overcome the injustice perpetuated by neoliberal spatial reproduction.

With the objective of envisioning *autonomía* as reachable an attainable outcome of a renewed 'interaction' between citizens and institutions, the authors conclude by qualifying such 'interaction'. In this scenario the actors are represented by: the inhabitants, the municipality, and a third group of external supporters generally termed, for lack of a better term, as "professionals". In the scenario here proposed, local authorities are imagined to play multiple roles, including that of financially supporting projects and acting as a sort of 'dispenser' of professional figures to the local communities. These could be engineers, architects, urbanists, anthropologists, etc. These figures could take part both in the decision-making processes by the assemblies and sustain the concrete realization of urban projects by offering technical support from a variety of disciplines. Multidisicpinarity and the advocacy process played by this group, as defined by Nishat Awan is essentially a double process of learning and giving (Awan *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, as Esteva (2018) recently defined, what has to be created between citizens and 'professionals' is a needed dialogue; where the community is facilitated to problematize its territorial context, and can contribute to imagine alternative scenarios.

In addition to this, these "professionals" could also facilitate the interaction between local realities, larger scales of action, and longer cycles of transformation. This could encourage integration between local initiatives within a territorial scale, such as the metropolitan one. In this case nearby neighborhoods could work collectively to face shared concerns, like for example the restoring of a contaminated ravine (*quebrada*) or the collective cleaning of a water stream. While these actions do take place in Quito already, they remain extremely punctual. Cultural co-design could furthermore address topics of global interest, such as defining collective strategies to mitigate the effects of climate change, or the loss of endemic species. This process would therefore also be 'cultural', because the "professionals" in question would work at different scales simultaneously. Working from the neighborhood scale could help imagining the potential guidelines for the metropolitan one, and vice versa. By acting as public figures, professionals would place their knowledge at the service of the entire community, and not operate, as now mainly happens, for

the sole interest of individuals and the market[10]. By being receptive to the tacit ad lay knowledge embedded in customary practices such as the *minga*, they can help make this knowledge explicit.

This idea aligns with what Arturo Escobar explains in an interview for Tinta Limon, where he imagines a "form" that would surpass the binary "we" (those that have) and "they" (those that need; Escobar, 2017). A cultural co-design approach would lead to scenarios where autonomies, multi-disciplinarity and interaction among scales are central. This echoes Escobar's idea (2017) of finding a way of including different realities from a perspective of inter-autonomies, through concrete coalitions and networks of collectives and autonomous communities. Even under this scenario however, the challenges to improve the many deficiencies that the *mega-mingas* perpetuate would be still many. For example: how to avoid the participation from being mandatory? How to expand the practice beyond low-income neighborhoods? Even though these interrogations fall beyond the scope of this paper, it remains relevant to consider the potential of Suplicy's theory (2007). The possibility of distributing a basic income fund to each *minga* participant may be considered here as a way to foster involvement, since by remunerating labor social justice and monetary equality may be ensured (Suplicy, 2007).

By situating the abovementioned potential scenarios in the context of Santa Clara, the difference between the mega-mingas practiced today and the potentials of cultural co-design should become apparent. If, for example, Santa Clara's inhabitants would like to develop a sport center, rather than contacting the Zonal Administration and lobbying for the municipality to organize a mega-minga, cultural co-design would instead support inhabitants to autonomously decide how this sport centre would be like. "Professionals" could support this process by underscoring the impact of certain options in terms of inter-scalarity and longer-term transformations. In this way, by taking autonomous decisions, Santa Clara's communities, would not 'have the 'luck' to be entitled to a mega-minga', but they would rather shape their environment directly. Local authorities would not only make the necessary machineries available, but would offer technical assistance to help the community optimize their work and implement them without transcending legal frameworks. Moreover, by eventually considering the introduction of a basic-income fund, Santa Clara's inhabitants would be able to reduce their poverty rate. If collectively pooled, these resources could be invested collectively to achieve structural transformations within the comuna. Cultural co-design therefore, is a possible approach for designing shared spaces, and holds potential to become one of the alternatives to re-organize society by re-designing actors' roles and responsibilities, and guaranteeing crucial rights. In this collective design process autonomía is viewed as a lens to accomplish such rights rather than simply a design exercise. As Julier underscores, this sort of lens "focuses on innovations that individuals or communities create for themselves, seeing that unofficial customization' of resources may be of sig-

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[10] Several existing examples of socially engaged architects over time include the Community Architects in the UK, the work of Santiago Sirugeda in Spain, or that of the Atelier d'Architecture Autogerée in Paris. On this note see the digital database (http://www.spatialagency.net/).
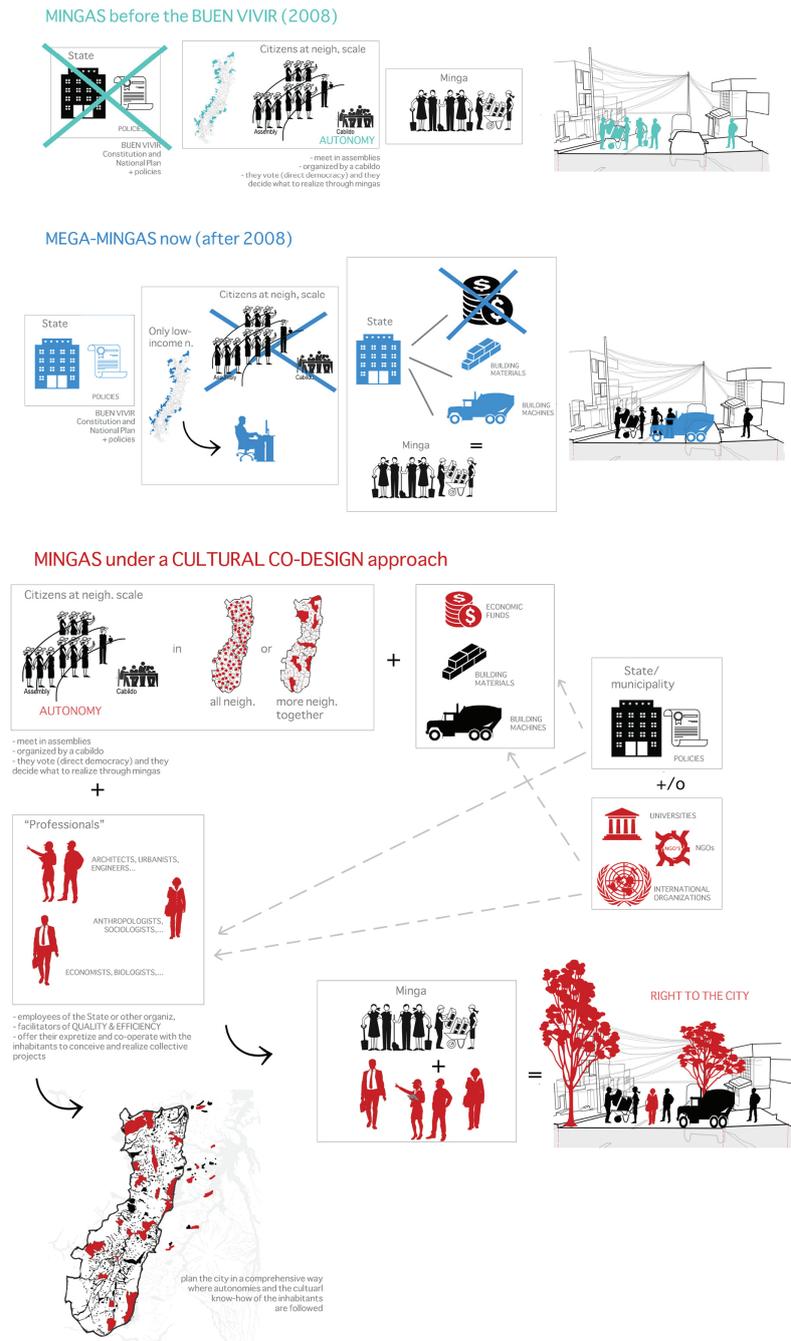
Figure 7. Diagram illustrating the three different kinds of mingas: (A) the original minga independent from the institutions; (B) the mega-minga (C) the future potential minga shaped by cultural co-design.

nificance. The designer's job is to recognize these, facilitate their development and possible up-scaling" (Julier, 2011, p. 2).

By prioritizing common goods, the objective of a *minga* might therefore no longer be to open roads, but could rather aim for the stewardship of water resources, climate change adaptation, and the promotion of values and symbols that give meaning and solidarity to the people (Encalada and Vásconez, 2013).

Ultimately, this article aspires for the rich theoretical literature on decolonial design to be flanked in future by more and more tangible proposals and speculative char-

acter. So as to foment, not only in theory, but also through concrete design proposals, what seems only apparently the oxymoron of autonomous design.

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