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# SOCIO-SPACIAL HABITUS IN COASTAL COMMUNITIES UNDER THE NEOLIBERAL CONTEXT

## THE CASE OF EL MORRO COVE, TALCAHUANO<sup>1</sup>

HABITUS SOCIO-ESPACIAL EN COMUNIDADES COSTERAS BAJO EL CONTEXTO NEOLIBERAL  
EL CASO DE CALETA EL MORRO DE TALCAHUANO

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Las caletas constituyen asentamientos costeros marcados por su vocación productiva ligada a la actividad pesquero-artesanal. En ellas surgen formas específicas de habitar que dan lugar a prácticas socioespaciales que producen y reproducen el espacio y que, en este documento, se conciben como "habitus socio-espacial" (Giglia, 2012). Actualmente, estos asentamientos y comunidades se han visto amenazados por el avance homogeneizador de la expansión urbana neoliberal. El artículo describe las características del habitus socio-espacial de Caleta El Morro de Talcahuano y sus expresiones durante y después del tsunami de 2010. La metodología incorpora técnicas cualitativas como la entrevista, revisión de material de archivo fotográfico, y cuantitativas, como revisión de estadísticas e instrumentos de planificación territorial. El análisis constituye una síntesis cartográfica e histórica de las prácticas socio-espaciales de la caleta, sus nudos y potencialidades para la preservación del asentamiento y su cultura. Los resultados evidencian que la caleta se posiciona como una frontera dentro del espacio urbano, una heterotopía (Lefebvre, 2013), que resiste las amenazas naturales y al espacio abstracto, caracterizado este último por la urbanización de carácter global que amenaza al borde costero regional y nacional.

**Palabras clave:** espacio diferencial, habitar, habitus socio-espacial, neoliberalismo, caleta urbana.

Coves are coastal settlements, marked by their productive vocation, linked to artisanal fishing. In them, specific forms of inhabiting appear that give rise to socio-spatial practices that produce and reproduce space and that in this document, we will call socio-spatial habitus (Giglia, 2012). Currently, these settlements and communities have been threatened by the homogenizing advance of neoliberal urban expansion. This article describes the characteristics of the socio-spatial habitus of El Morro Cove in Talcahuano and its expressions during and after the 2010 tsunami. The methodology incorporates qualitative techniques such as interviews and the revision of photographic archive material; and quantitative, such as a review of statistics and territorial planning instruments. The analysis is a cartographic and historical synthesis of the socio-spatial practices of the cove, its nodes and potentialities for the preservation of the settlement and its culture. The results show that the cove is positioned as a frontier within the urban space, a heterotopia (Lefebvre, 2013), which resists natural threats and abstract space, characterized by global urbanization that threatens the regional and national coastline.

**Keywords:** differential space, to inhabit, socio-spatial habitus, neoliberalism, urban cove.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Current cities are characterized by the presence of progressive urbanization processes linked to neoliberal capitalist development (Harvey, 2012). In Latin America, this fact is characterized by the mixture between urban development models marked by the formal large-scale real-estate market, oriented towards middle- and upper-class groups; and informal working-class construction and appropriation processes, generally on the outskirts or fringes, defined by working-class groups with little or no access to the formal housing market. Such is the case of the fringes of Chilean coastal cities, where large property developments, generally focused on tourism (Hidalgo et al., 2016), and urban-port system complexes (Alarcón & Sandoval, 2016) cohabit with artisanal fishing settlements, popularly known as “caletas” or coves (Marcucci, 2014), which are characterized by a human scale and self-built economy, strongly linked to the artisanal extraction of marine resources (Orellana & Díaz, 2017). Both forms of urbanization and appropriation of the coastline coexist in a complex manner, generating expulsion, segregation and urban invisibilization processes (Guerrero & Alarcón, 2018; Hidalgo et al., 2016; Orellana y Díaz, 2016).

Artisanal fishing involves social practices, identities and the production of a local culture (McGoodwin, 2002; Gajardo & Ther, 2011), that is expressed by means of the construction, use and meaning of the coastal space, favoring a particular lifestyle. This lifestyle covers “phenomena like self-construction, the practices that

organize and give sense to the domestic space, as well as the representations of the urban setting and reading of a map” (Giglia, 2012, p. 9). In addition, it incorporates their own knowledge that allows coastal communities to react to the demands imposed by the territory, through resistance or adaptation processes (Riffo & Pérez, 2016).

The unequal convergence, between industrial urban and artisanal forms, produces a threatening scenario over the latter due to the expansion of processes like the global scale industrial growth and neoliberal urban development (Harvey, 2012; Guerrero & Alarcón, 2018). These forces are characterized by a dialectic relationship between the values of use and change (Lefebvre, 2013), which are worsened on facing natural catastrophe scenarios and expose these communities to urban transformation and eradication processes that, apart from homogenizing the urban landscape, jeopardize the permanence and sustainability of alternative ways of life (Moussard, Carrasco, Aliste, Ther & Hidalgo, 2013; Riffo & Pérez, 2016).

The Metropolitan Area of Concepción (AMC in Spanish) brings together seven coastal communes which, together, group a total of 33 artisanal fishing coves (SERNAPESCA, 2013). El Morro Cove, the case study analyzed in this work, is located in the commune of Talcahuano, very close to its urban downtown. This settlement emerged in 1912, as part of the spontaneous occupation of lands by fishing families who, taking advantage of its location on the coastline, progressively inhabited the space, setting it up from their needs and uses. Its population comprises extended families that have grown over four generations

**Caleta El Morro de Talcahuano, Región del Biobío, Chile**



**Figure 1.** Location of El Morro Cove. Source: Own preparation.

(Moussard et al, 2013), marked by their ties with artisanal fishing that has allowed them to remain stable in the space.

This cove was one of the those most affected by the 2010 tsunami. After this, the settlement has been subject of diverse reconstruction and mitigation actions, which have caused tensions and mobilized the community. Currently, 173 people live in El Morro, 83 men and 90 women (INE, 2017).

This article analyzes the characteristics of the socio-spatial habitus of El Morro cove, its continuities and ruptures, facing the anthropic and natural threats that have changed the coastline in recent decades. The document focuses on two specific goals: a) describing the makeup of the socio-spatial habitus of the cove, and b) analyzing the action to face natural disasters and that of the state in this regard, specifically to face the 2010 tsunami. The hypothesis is that the socio-spatial habitus built by the community of the cove being studied, emerges as a frontier, a heterotopia (Lefebvre, 2013; Foucault, 1967), that resists natural and anthropic pressures, making possible the configuration of differential spaces that privilege modes of production and reproduction at a human scale, preserving the traditional identity and dynamics of the community.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Practices and socio-spatial habitus

The conceptual debate regarding living, demands the question about the space. Lefebvre (2013) introduced the spatial twist from his unitary theory of the space, taking as a base, the progress of urbanization in capitalist industrial societies. His decoding of the space indicates that the modes of production locate and develop their own spaces. The triad of the space (Lefebvre, 2013) comprises: a) the spatial practice, that covers production and reproduction, specific places and spatial groups typical of each social form and, that ensures the continuity of a community; b) the representations of the space, which are linked to production relations, to the order these impose and, in this way, to the knowledge, signs, codes, and frontal relations; and c) the spaces of representation, that express complex symbolisms linked to the clandestine and underground side of social life, but also to art, as a code of the spaces of representation (Lefebvre, 2013, p. 92). Ultimately, the triad defines the space as process and product. As process, it is a social construction that incorporates practices, actions and representations of the individuals and collectives that interact in the society. Its reinvention is constant and responds to the historic moment in which it is circumscribed (Baringo, 2013). As product, it gives rise to different ways of experiencing the space: a)

the perceived space, defined by daily use, which produces and dominates it; b) the conceived space, defined by the prevailing representations and the institutional exercise (given by planners, urbanists and engineers); and c) the lived space, emerging from the spaces of representation, that are built by symbols and images, a dominated space that the subject wishes to change and transform (Lefebvre, 2013).

Spatial practice is the nucleus by which, people order, organize and dominate the space, based on daily reality, giving form to the perceived space (Lefebvre, 2013). This may be conscious, reflexive and even automatic and it constitutes an action that by repetition gives rise to specific ways of living in the space (Lefebvre, 2013; Giglia, 2012). Angela Giglia (2012), using Bourdieu's (1991) notion of habitus, defines these spatial practices as a form of socio-spatial habitus, understood as "knowledge incorporated" through the body, that represents, reproduces the space and its ways of living. The practices allow people to recognize their environment, organize it and themselves, making a system of reference regarding their surroundings. It involves the agency of the subject, who acts and moves in the space considering their needs and intentions. Thus, the socio-spatial habitus, along with the representations and the spaces of representations, favors the production and reproduction of the space and with it, a given form of living.

### Producing the space in the neoliberal context: the differential space

Capitalism restates the historic role that communities and societies have played in the construction and development of what today we understand as city and its forms of living (Lefebvre, 2013, p. 107). The accumulation of capital results in the capitalist space par excellence or the *abstract space*. This is borne from the processes of capital accumulation that occur in the instrumentalization of the space as a result of the progressive separation of production processes. The representations of the space are structured as an instrument of domination, under the wings of technocrats, who use them in their favor for the implementation of a homogeneous city model that eliminates difference in the social space (Baringo, 2013; Lefebvre, 2013). Harvey (2012) contributes to this notion, mentioning that the traditional city has died as a result of unbridled capitalist development, "victim of its needs", the capital seeks new spaces for investment and growth. Lefebvre (2013) introduces an emerging concept that denotes the possibility of transformation of the abstract space, in a form of utopia, this is the *differential space*. Its makeup is the opposite of the abstract space and its appearance is nourished by the contradictions typical of capitalist society. Baringo (2013) describes the differential spaces by their revolutionary nature, characterizing them as that which favors and gives room to the expression of difference, through the reassociation of "the roles, elements and moments of social practice that the

abstract space dissociates" (p. 129). Facing this, the author adds that: "these counter-spaces of difference, with their inherent contradictions and potential for conflict, also become spaces to face the efforts of homogenization by the spaces (abstracts) of domination" (Baringo, 2013, p.129). Lefebvre (2013) mentions that, by the analysis of the practices, it is possible to decipher the space. Also, through the configuration of the space, we can understand the processes of rationality there are after the construction of a settlement.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted is a phenomenological approach that recognizes the voice of the territory's players as the carriers of the senses of living in the cove. Through a qualitative approach, it is sought to collect how the inhabitants, through diverse practices, have created a unique way of living and adapting to the changes in their daily coastal life. For this, qualitative techniques were used, like interviews with key members of the community (leaders and fishermen and women), ethnographies and observation in the territory, and a review of the historic records of the community<sup>4</sup>. This was complemented with a revision of the documentation of territorial planning programs on the coastline, from before and after the earthquake. This information collection process was made during the second semester of 2019. The organization and analysis of the information collected was articulated around the two specific goals of the study, resulting in: a) a characterization of spaces from a cartographic summary of the socio-spatial practices, made based on their recurrence and meaning; and b) the description of how inhabitants have deployed their practices of use and knowledge around the spaces after the 2010 tsunami, the intervention actions derived from this and what these have meant. Finally, an analysis and discussion of the results, and final reflections about these, are made.

### IV. RESULTS

#### Maps of the socio-spatial habitus of El Morro cove

The cove is characterized on being a plain, which extends from the "El Morro" channel to its namesake hill that shelters it from the wind's action. Both spatial landmarks have been key in the structure and setup of

the settlement which, due to natural catastrophes and by anthropic action have modified its morphology and layout on reiterated occasions.

The socio-spatial habitus is configured from the repetition of the spatial dynamics linked to the fishing trade. According to the narrative of the inhabitants, there are no spaces with a unique vocation, in this, different interactions take place that produce and reproduce local production relations, obviously on a human nature scale. However, in this mix of uses and practices, it is possible to see four different types of spaces.

- A. **Residential space:** This is the place where the historic dwellings are located, which traditionally have been self-built considering the needs of the families. The dwellings are made from different materialities, but integrated to perform the shared fishing-related tasks, through informal passageways. Those who still conserve this construction signature are those closest to the hill, which survived the tsunami. The dwellings from the reconstruction process<sup>5</sup>, are mainly on concrete stilts built by the government
- B. **Productive space:** These are the places where practices linked to the fishing trade, the extraction of algae and the disembarking of marine produce, like the jetty, are concentrated. They are also linked to the sale of processed products, like restaurants, mainly managed by women, who are also the ones dedicated to processing and selling local gastronomy. Marine produce and food are also informally sold close to the channel and the jetty. The fishermen's houses are also places, where processing and storage tasks of fishing resources, work to safeguard and repair the art of fishing, take place.
- C. **Social and community space:** Most of the formal social activities today take place in the community center that, prior to the 2010 tsunami, was a storehouse. Here union, educational (to raise study levels in the community) and organizational activities of an informative, recreational and community nature are held. The jetty, square and coastline areas are also important spaces for sociability of a more informal nature.
- D. **Cultural space:** The fishing trade provides sense to the cove's spaces. The distribution of roles by gender also marks the sense of living. The baiting, drying

<sup>4</sup> Report developed by El Morro Neighborhood Group, which contains maps and historic information of the settlement.

<sup>5</sup> Reconstruction Plan: Earthquake and Tsunami of February 27th 2010 and MINVU (Housing Ministry) Reconstruction Plan "Chile unido reconstruye mejor (Chile together builds back better)".



Figure 2. Facilities and infrastructure of El Morro Cove. Source: Own preparation.

Figure 3. Residential space. Source: Own preparation.

Figure 4. Productive Space. Source: Own preparation.

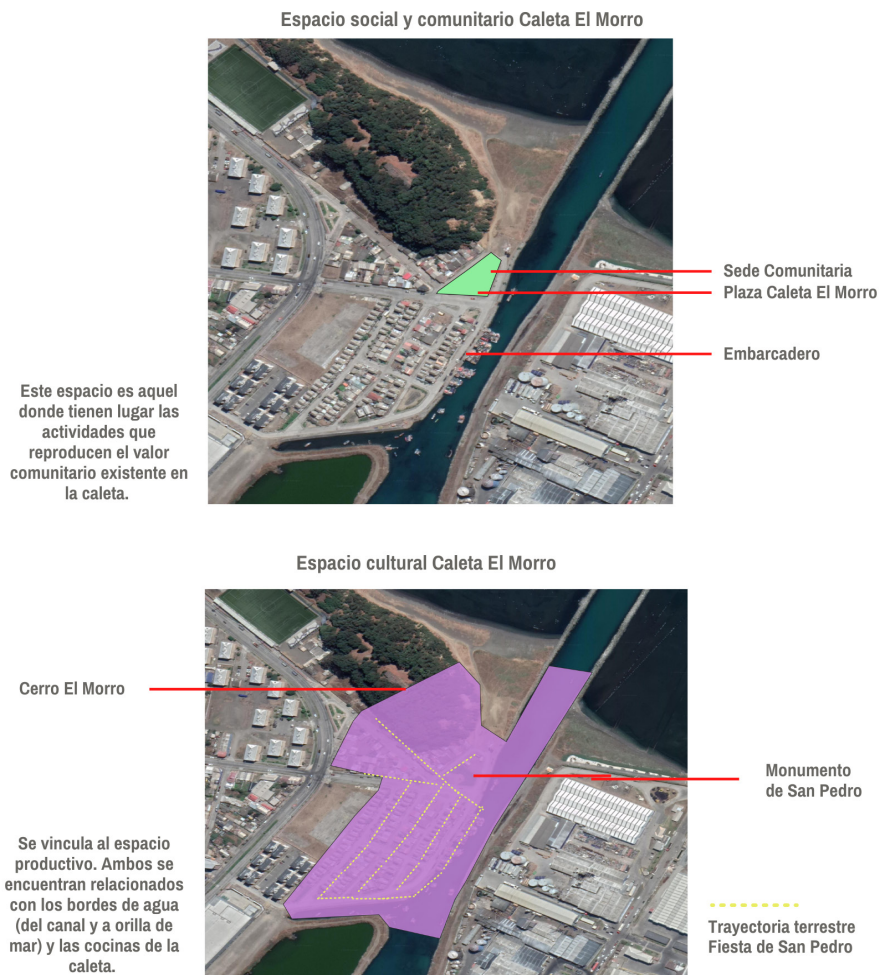


Figure 5. Social and community space. Source. Own preparation.  
Figure 6. Cultural space. Source: Own preparation.

and net repair tasks, historically done by women, give the places their own sense. The fences of the dwellings are used to clean, repair and hang the nets. Before the tsunami, the space between the ground and the base of the houses was also used to smoke shellfish. Another key spatial element within this category is the El Morro hill. This landscape element constitutes a symbolic and historic space of diverse uses and meanings throughout the cove's history, being a space that is central to Morrina identity. The traditional celebrations of the fishermen, like the celebration of Saint Peter, sees the inhabitants come out in the cove, appropriating the public and private spaces. In this celebration, the community also openly receives visitors, preparing traditional food to share and presenting archive images that tell

the history of the place. The boats are decorated and a procession takes place on land and sea.

The spaces described do not have a unique vocation, they are intertwined through the different socio-spatial practices. The fishing culture permeates most of the uses and meanings regarding the space, which range from the extractive to the construction of human relations among the settlement's inhabitants.

### **Tensions and transformations of the socio-spatial habitus derived from the tsunami**

The socio-spatial habitus of the cove is built, unfolded and transformed on constantly facing natural and anthropic phenomena; it is both a product and process. In the case



Figure 7. Chronology of the El Morro Cove reconstruction process. Source: Project file.

study, natural disasters have been key in the configuration and reconfiguration of its identity and socio-spatial habitus. During the 2010 tsunami, in spite that local authorities advised to not evacuate the cove, the inhabitants developed a community evacuation plan (Moussard et al, 2013) towards El Morro hill. This hill, that adjoins the cove, has been the historic shelter of the inhabitants when threatened, either naturally or politically<sup>6</sup>. The community evacuation plan avoided loss of life and evidenced the presence of a culture about the risk associated to the space. The actions of the community were guided by their habitus and memory of the place. The community remained for four years on the hill, in emergency dwellings, resisting the eradication proposal.

The initial proposal of the government for the community's reconstruction was eradication, but this was rejected by the community. The basis behind the transfer due to risk had no consonance in a community that had always lived by the sea. The institutional proposal to rebuild the cove was also questioned as it did not adapt to the uses developed by the fishing families. For this reason, a proposal was suggested and defended that incorporated the vision and needs of the community in the design of the houses and the space.

The state proposal was a top down<sup>7</sup> planning model that did not consider the space lived and perceived by the subjects, but

rather that installed a uniform habitability model. The cohesion of the community during the post-disaster reconstruction period was fundamental in the reconfiguration of their space, in the preservation of the socio-spatial habitus and their representative spaces. Its inhabitants and leaders supervised the construction process of the dwellings closely and even broke into them, inhabiting them prior to their official inauguration.

"The houses had been finished for a year, but they wouldn't hand them over (...) with Don Alfonso we would come in to see if they leaked in winter. We started to complain about why they didn't give us the houses. Up until today, they haven't been handed over. We occupied them on a day just like today, May 21<sup>st</sup>, we've been in the houses for 5 years" (Cecilia, inhabitant of El Morro, Talcahuano).<sup>8</sup>

The result of the reconstruction process is an urbanized cove, integrated to the urban structure of Talcahuano, that respects the use and location of the settlement's traditional infrastructure and facilities. Likewise, the distribution of the dwellings is done respecting the proximity there was among families before the tsunami, which is relevant for the inhabitants of El Morro.

<sup>6</sup> According to Decree N°121 of the Ministry of Education (2017), the El Morro Fort and Site of Remembrance of Talcahuano was declared as such by the Monuments Council, due to its historic and strategic importance (1777 and 1930). Once abandoned, the facilities were recovered by the Navy and intelligence services, as a torture center between 1973 and 1985.

<sup>7</sup> The top down approach refers to a vertical planning model that places decision-making from a traditional point of view and where efficiency is the key value (Timarán, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Interview made on May 21st 2019 at El Morro Cove, Talcahuano



Caleta El Morro de Talcahuano.  
Año 2010.



Caleta El Morro de Talcahuano.  
Año 2020.

Figure 8. Aerial view of El Morro Cove, 2010 and 2020. Source: Google Earth.

## V. DISCUSSIONS

Socio-spatial habitus is built from the repetition of practices that produce and reproduce meanings, implicit rules and an order that distinguishes the settlement regarding the environment (Giglia, 2012). It operates as a practice that facilitates reproduction of the space, as well as the culture. As has been observed in the case study, artisanal fishing demands resources, organization and an individual and social daily deployment, this organizes the time, practices and spaces of the cove.

The socio-spatial habitus is woven by articulated spatial senses and practices, in this case by the artisanal fishing trade. It is a spatial knowledge defined by a socially, territorially and economically situated practice and identity. It is the coastal trade and the territory that articulates the construction of the habitus, the deterioration of the trade, of their practices and culture would mean the weakening of the habitus that identifies the space and the community. In El Morro, there is a community that has survived alongside the trade, their way of using the space articulates memory, identity and abilities of adaptation. Socio-spatial habitus as "incorporated knowledge" (Bourdieu, 1991), allows preserving the practices of the trade and has allowed them to act in an organized fashion on facing external phenomena, like the 2010 tsunami. The perceived and lived space, the experience, overlaps the space represented from external players. This knowledge was essential after the catastrophe, as it allowed the survival of the inhabitants in the emergency camp.

As a result of this, we can say that the hypothesis that the cove is a frontier or heterotopia, a counter-space, in the terms of

Foucault (1967), is confirmed. A different space, not only in terms of revolutionary paths, following the definition of Lefebvre (2013), but rather simply because of what the people do, feel, perceive and end up articulating in their search of meaning for their daily lives (Harvey, 2012: 15).

Although the fight of the "Morrinos" to keep their settlement is configured under criteria that are unlike the revolutionary form, its character is placed under the idea of the city as a right (Lefebvre, 2013)<sup>9</sup>. It constitutes the intention of keeping development models other than capitalism that respect the value of use of spaces and adapt to the needs of their inhabitants in a way that impedes the progress of the abstract space, materialized under the installation of fishing industries, real-estate projects and port extensions that respond to the neoliberal urbanization of the coastline (Guerrero & Alarcón, 2018). The community approach of El Morro cove contains a strong sense of defense of the lived space, in the sense of "creating a less alienated, more significant and cheerful alternative urban life, although, as always, in the thinking of Lefebvre, conflictive and dialectic, open to the future and to the meetings and search of the imperceptible novelty" (Harvey, 2012, p. 6).

Despite that the Morrina community accessed the State-run reconstruction process after the catastrophe, this process is developed under criteria negotiated by the inhabitants themselves. This fact, responds to the idea of "imagining and rebuilding a different type of city, far from the chaos caused by the frenetic globalized urbanizing capital" (Harvey, 2012, p. 14). That is to say, differential spaces, marked by those communities that are distanced from the means of production and reproduction imposed by the capital.

<sup>9</sup> Although the concept of heterotopia is proposed for the first time by Michel Foucault, this article refers to the concept proposed by Lefebvre, who generates an analysis from the representations built on the space and the spaces of representation.

## VII. CONCLUSIONS

Urban coves or those close to urban spaces are historic spaces that express the contradictions of capitalist society. These are spaces stressed by the progressive pressures of global economic players to occupy the urban coastal space (Hidalgo, 2016). The forced eradication and displacement of coastal fishing communities has historically been a strategy used by capital to appropriate the shoreline and its resources (Harvey, 2012). The crises and disasters, with the compliance of state agents, are understood as opportunities for the use of capital and to execute dispossession practices. The coves and artisanal fishing culture have survived dispossession practices through the development and preservation of a coastal habitus that builds and produces the space. The attachment to the trade and territory allows the existence and preservation of a socio-spatial habitus, and in a back and forth cycle allows that these coastal communities preserve their spaces and the culture, economy and identity that has historically defined them.

The analysis of the socio-spatial habitus, the distribution of uses and productive, social and cultural practices, as an expression of the fishing culture deployed in the space, allows us to understand and reveal how the identity, trade and built territory are factors that allow the communities to adapt and resist entropic and natural processes. The construction of a differential space, not in the revolutionary meaning of the concept, but as a space that fosters difference as an element of cohesion and action, would seem to be key for the preservation of these spaces and their culture. The attachment to the trade and territory is a core requirement for these communities' maintenance.

The constructive forms of the cove and the sociability and culture that are used in the space associated to them, show the possibilities and strengths of the forms of self-management and construction of working-class urbanism. These forms, typical of working-class living, should be strengthened and accompanied by state agents, as they house in it, the preservation of a traditional trade and of a cultural and landscape heritage. However, the governance models of the coastal territories are focused more under the logic of the capital and the large industrial processes than on the communities. The negotiated and participative acceptance of the Morrina community to the reconstruction process, expresses the conflict dimension of construction of the space mentioned by Lefebvre (2013), but opens up an opportunity to observe the central role that the identity and spatial attachment play in the negotiation of permanence on facing forms of domination and homogenization of the space. Elements that must be central, when it comes to thinking and planning a more sustainable coastal urban space.

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