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Abstract

This paper delves into gentrification and segregation in 21st-century Mexico City, connecting a critical visual photo-documentation approach to understanding contemporary urban relationships and social identities. It integrates Charles Morris' triadic model (syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic levels) in analyzing photo-documentary images. These models help identify urban elements as visual narratives, contributing to segregation and gentrification. The study focuses on Mexico City, specifically the San Nicolás Totolapan neighborhood, using this method to interpret images in context and assess their impact on constructing meanings and representations. The research outcomes offer valuable insights for informed decision-making in architectural and urban design. This work contributes to understanding and addressing the issues of gentrification and segregation in Mexico City's urban landscape.

Keywords | Social frontier in Mexico City, symbolic frontier, semiotics and urbanism, significance of urban space, gentrification in Mexico City.

Análisis semiótico de la relación entre las formas arquitectónicas y los fenómenos urbanos de segregación y gentrificación en Ciudad de México

Resumen

Este trabajo profundiza en la gentrificación y la segregación en la Ciudad de México del siglo XXI, conectando un enfoque crítico de foto-documentación visual para entender las relaciones urbanas contemporáneas y las identidades sociales. Integra el modelo triádico de Charles Morris (niveles sintáctico, semántico y pragmático) en el análisis de imágenes documentales. Estos modelos ayudan a identificar los elementos urbanos como narrativas visuales, que contribuyen a la segregación y la gentrificación. El estudio se centra en Ciudad de México, concretamente en el barrio de San Nicolás Totolapan, utilizando este método para interpretar las imágenes en su contexto y evaluar su impacto en la construcción de significados y representaciones. Los resultados de la investigación ofrecen valiosas perspectivas para la toma de decisiones informadas en el diseño arquitectónico y urbano. Este trabajo contribuye a comprender y abordar los problemas de la gentrificación y la segregación en el paisaje urbano de la Ciudad de México.

Palabras clave | Frontera social en Ciudad de México, segregación urbana, semiótica y urbanismo, significación del espacio urbano, gentrificación.

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Introduction

When analyzing an object or an image of a place, it is essential to consider various modalities that enable a better critical understanding and interpretation, especially in an urban context where the photographer's perception is conveyed to an audience. To reduce potential disparities between the author and the recipient, Gillian Rose suggests four modalities that should be considered for image interpretation. These modalities include production, circulation, technology, and the image's location (Rose, 2023, p. 53).

It is through the technology and the production that underlies an image that one can identify the social development and urban experience based on the image's composition, characteristics, and location. It is in this way that the genre to which it belongs is recognized, as in this case, an urban setting, where economic processes, as well as cultural and social production, are delineated. For example, "while producing certain kinds of differences between one neighborhood to another or may be between two countries are the cultural aspect of contemporary cultural practices" (Rose, 2023, p. 53), "And it is at this moment, from an image, that meanings are constructed for the viewers, even though there is a subjective feel that is ineliminable in our seeing something" (Rose, 2023, p.57). However, social analysis is perhaps the most important as it includes and leads to the identification of specific places within places (Rose, 2023, p. 61).

It is precisely here where the perception of segregation and gentrification is identified and experienced, both through images and physically, for those who belong to or know certain areas or neighborhoods in Latin America and especially Mexico. Their position within the social stratification guides them into a specific urban location where cultural patterns and individual perceptions of status and family improvement make sense. Likewise, a correlation exists between inhabitants' perceptions of their homes and the urban environment. Disciplines such as sociology, social anthropology, urban planning, and architecture have examined how social groups are separated, identifying conditions such as physical and social boundaries that have generated urban segregation, gentrification, fragmentation, and social exclusion.

Also, this perception is influenced by internal distribution, size, and privacy. Additionally, it is necessary to consider the appropriation that individuals make of the inhabited space and their gradual identification with the place since human beings “live, symbolize and appropriate urban space as part of their identity” (Gómez & Villar, 2014 p. 268-290).

In light of the aforementioned, Mexico City, as part of Latin American urban areas, stands out for its rapid demographic growth, socio-economic inequalities, and the lack of adequate coverage in terms of infrastructure and urban services. This disparity is what characterizes socio-spatial segregation: while in the former, the focus is on inequality related to factors such as race and housing, in the latter, the differences are structural and are linked to the government's inability to provide essential urban services, along with high rates of informal employment, low wages, and limited coverage of social services (Pérez & Santos, 2011). Sociological and anthropological analyses of gated residential communities expose the trend toward voluntary segregation of groups belonging to the middle and upper classes, alongside the increase in poverty in their vicinity.

In the case of Mexico City, the population has been compelled to self-segregate because of architectural and urban design actions carried out by real estate companies and the State. Since the 1980s, inequality and fragmentation have arisen in society due to the isolation of the privileged sectors and the exclusion of the most disadvantaged - or vice versa - from the urban environment, a social gradation with its corresponding spatial disparities generated by the economic differences of the population divided into the architectural typologies: low-income housing, middle-income housing, and housing of abundance (Pérez & Santos, 2011).

Therefore, this text aims to identify and analyze what factors and urban-architectural elements through the analysis of photographs of the place mean to the neighbors in their daily lives that generate fragmentation, urban segregation, and social exclusion. The proposed methodology allows an analysis of the visual images exhibited and explains their interpretation in specific contexts and how they influence the construction of meanings and representations. The study results provide elements of judgment for intentional decision-making in the design of architectural and urban narratives, such as landscape design, the construction of walls, and the use of specific materials and colors, to mention a few.

Method and materials

The research method that allows the analysis of social meanings is social semiotics, as it addresses how images create meaning and reveal an ideological status. It is not simply description but considers compositional interpretation, which offers analytical tools to analyze their functioning concerning broader meaning systems since human culture is composed of signs. In this sense, the people who inhabit these spaces give meaning to these signs (Rose, 2023, p.171). In this sense, semiotics starts from the study of signals. It has an elaborate vocabulary to legitimize social inequalities, focusing on the social effects of meaning and “laying bare the prejudices beneath the smooth surface of the beautiful”. Therefore, Gillian Rose comments that:

“Ideology is knowledge that is constructed in such a way as to legitimate unequal social power relations that reveal those inequalities. Ideology works to legitimate social inequalities. Semiology, then, is centrally concerned with the social effects of meaning” (Rose, 2023, p.172).

Therefore, Semiology assumes that these constructions of social differences are articulated through the working of signs in images themselves, like segregation and gentrification (Rose, 2023, p.175).

Many semiotic investigations often place a significant emphasis on the image itself as the primary locus of its significance. Additionally, the concept of an image's audience is predominantly associated with reception, and social semiotics highlights the social implications of its meaning, so most of the communication incorporates multiple modes, highlighting the multifaceted nature of semiotic composition (and, at times, social semiotics is referred to as multi-modal research) (Rose, 2023, p. 175).

The text begins with the definition of concepts of two different urban phenomena such as urban segregation and gentrification, from the perspective of hierarchical social organization based on the symbolism of identity. These phenomena are explained through the triadic model of Charles Morris, who takes up the semiotic principles of Charles Sanders Peirce from a social behavior approach. The hypothetical-deductive semiotic method allows the analysis for a particular case - the identification and correlation of the minimum elements that make up the object of study, the architectural-urban elements of the San Nicolas Totolapan neighborhood, and how a group perceives them - to understand the urban phenomena that occur in a generalized manner in Mexico City and throughout Latin America from the perspective interested in the symbolism and cultural value of urban space. The application of semiotics in this study is relevant as the chosen method and theory provide a framework to elucidate how signs (images, textures, colors, materials, among others) function as modes for communication and have the cultural value that can be interpreted for the creation of meanings and concepts used in society. Likewise, it offers insight into the construction and negotiation of identities, societal cultures, and the collective ideology constructs implicated in developing complex phenomena such as segregation and gentrification.

Charles Morris Model

The Morris method will be used for this case study; he acknowledges that human beings are the predominant species in the use of signs, with the capacity to establish sign systems for communication and the development of civilization. That is, humans can derive meaning from the sensory stimuli they perceive (Morris, 1985, p. 31-32). For the study of signs, he proposes a triadic model based on Charles Sander Peirce's typological model of the sign, which incorporates three distinct levels of analysis interconnected in a dyadic relationship as Peirce says that the signs can be classified as either a qualisign, a sinsign, or legisign. Additionally, since that sign has an object, it can be classified as an icon, an index, or a symbol. In this case, Morris considers the typology of the sign in its relation to the represented object and associates it with aspects of communication and culture.

The typology refers to iconic signs as those that have a formal relationship with the entity they represent, indexical symbols that have a causal or contiguity relationship with what they described as an object, and symbolic signs whose association with the object is based on social and cultural conventions. Morris's theory is closely related to Peirce's because it establishes the effect of meaning produced in the observer's mind depending on the employed sign and its social implication. Revisiting the three levels of Morris' model, as you can see in Figure 1, the first one refers to a syntactic class, encompassing the identification of the elements and the implicit relationships implied between them. At the subsequent semantic level, it relates to the relation of the sign with the object "to which it is applicable". In this case, the analysis is conducted based on these elements' designated meaning for the users. Finally, the pragmatic level allows us to identify how these signs are expressed by their interpreter, that is, how users use the elements and their meaning in making decisions about their way of life, which is manifested in this case as an urban phenomenon.

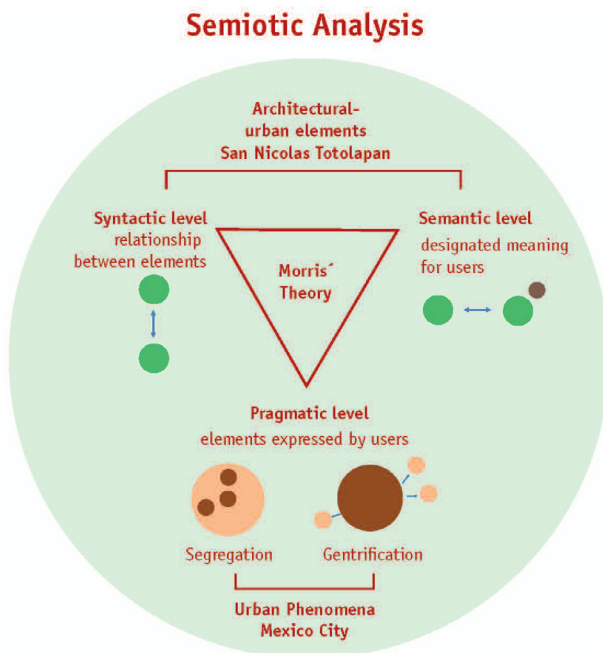


Figure 1. Semiotic Analysis according to Charles Morris Model. It is divided into three levels and a dyadic relationship between them: syntactic-semantic and pragmatic class and its relationship with the phenomena analyzed.
Source: Monica Solórzano.

In this sense, the pragmatic approach of Morris' model is most relevant for this study since it allows us to focus the analysis of the urban-architectural element's impact on the inhabitants of San Nicolas Totolapan. The hypothetical-deductive method will enable us to consider this case as a departure point for comprehending the dynamics of social relations and their broader implications in the construction of culture and identity.

Urban phenomenon: gentrification and urban segregation

There are two interrelated urban phenomena upon which the research will focus. Gentrification is the "process through which a neighborhood inhabited by low-income population is modified and occupied by middle- and upper-class population, who in turn -either on their own or through private investment with real estate agents - undertaken housing renovations" (Salinas, 2013, p. 281-304). According to Salinas (2016), it is the "restructuring of class and social relations in space, from capital investment for the satisfaction and attraction of higher income population, leading to population displacement" (Salinas, 2016, p. 357-365). Gentrification processes have resulted in segregation. This phenomenon will not cease until a space of identification with the inhabitants is generated,

until there is a symbolic appropriation of these spaces, that is, a feeling of belonging to the place, as Aguilar & Mateos (2011) comments below.

“Segregation is the accumulation or distribution of social groups of the same socioeconomic status in space. This segregation can be identified according to factors such as ethnicity, migration, or socioeconomic status among the most critical socio-identity characteristics” (Aguilar & Mateos, 2011, p. 5-30).

Therefore, it can be said that urban segregation tends to be a more significant physical proximity between residential spaces occupied by different social groups in any part of the city. At the same time, gentrification processes are closely related to the displacement of the population towards the periphery of the city (Aguilar & Mateos, 2011, p. 113).

Social context of urban phenomena

The first part of this document reviews, from the perspective of the social frontier, various contemporary urban phenomena occurring in most Latin American cities and, in this specific case, in Mexico City. The social boundary refers to the hierarchical differentiation of social classes. It is generated when a community socializes, recognizes, shares, and interacts. It is manifested through lifestyle, that is, the way of speaking, dressing, using personal objects, etc. Consequently, people organize themselves hierarchically, symbolically shaping social spaces and making the inhabited spaces their own. When this sense of belonging is consolidated, an urban identity is created, as P. Bourdieu points out.

Thus, the structure of space manifests itself across diverse contexts in the form of spatial oppositions, in which the inhabited (or appropriated) space functions as a kind of spontaneous symbolization of social space. In a hierarchical society, no space is not hierarchized and does not express hierarchies and social disparities (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 120).

This process of belonging arises unintentionally and has manifested itself throughout the history of urbanism in the scheme of the Latin American city. The recognition and identification of the population are directly related to culture, education, ways of living, daily life, and art, among others, and are now symbolized in urban space; that is, social spaces reflect identity.

However, this behavior, which in principle is natural, has been manipulated by modernizing the federal public administration since the eighties of the last century, coupled with the influence of globalization. Regarding the former, the State ceased to be the leading provider of public services, mainly general security and cleaning services, giving way to private companies and releasing its own “hallmark” as a government. Therefore, semiotics will help to unravel political and social strategies and to understand how they influence public perception of urban segregation.

Fragmentation has, to some extent, a political origin, which became even stronger after 1985, following the earthquake that shook Mexico City. After that event, the federal public administration was modernized. With it, article 27 of the Political Constitution of the United States of Mexico was reformed, facts that allowed the incorporation of socially owned land into real estate development. In a sense, this illustrates how political leaders use language and image to present urban segregation as a natural or even desirable phenomenon, depending on the objective or public policy they want to implement and reinforce.

Real estate developers have capitalized on this situation to access land in the urban peripheries, where land prices are lower than in the rest of the city. They have designed different spaces within the city that have gradually become landmarks, such as shopping malls considered artifacts of globalization and used as entertainment centers; tall multifunctional towers (housing, commercial, and hotel); and large-scale peripheral developments. The real estate trade has interspersed the different social classes by purchasing and selling

low-priced land in neighborhoods where the lower-class population prevails, building housing complexes exclusively for the upper class. In addition to this, the characteristics of habitability, construction, and design have been inferior, i.e., lacking basic infrastructure or accessible public transportation networks to communicate with the rest of the city.

Although this has created physical integration between both socioeconomic strata, social groups resented segregation and exclusion (Aguilar & Mateos, 2011, p. 5-30), as competition is generated between them. The natives do not accept with pleasure the newcomers who inhabit homes with better finishes and larger spaces and whose cost is higher than theirs or that, due to their arrival, their lifestyle is diminished (Gómez, 2018, p. 1-14); and in the same way, the newcomers view with displeasure the originals because of the differentiated conditions of their homes. This situation results in the two urban phenomena already mentioned, which are gentrification and urban segregation.

Symbolic segregation

In Mexico City, the segregation of middle- and upper-class social groups is discernible, based on lifestyle, identifiable by signs that show certain related behaviors identified as status symbols (Salinas, 2016, p. 112). Groupings are determined by how people go to work, household compositions, and the diversification of cultural and consumption patterns (Veiga, 2009, pp. 54), among others. Together with lifestyle, the concept of standard of living is presented, which Cardona & Agudelo (2005) relates to

The individual's dominion over resources in the form of money, possessions, knowledge, mental and physical energy, social relations, security, and other means by which the individual can consciously control and direct their living conditions (Cardona & Agudelo, 2005).

Both concepts are pertinent to this study since they focus on aspects identifiable as signifiers that lead to seclusion and grouping. This social phenomenon is linked to symbolic segregation, i.e., spatial separation and territorial appropriation based on individual perceptions cultural patterns.

In this way, spatial distances are fostered by the imagined construction of the other their habitats and, therefore, contribute to de-socializing the social structure (Saraví, 2008, p. 93-110). The study conducted by Vicente Moctezuma (2017) indicates that the conditions of exclusion/integration refer to not only the material choice - shape, size, style - of housing but also the symbolism and daily experiences when choosing a dwelling. Housing and socialization of spaces endow symbolisms and meanings in tune with the culture and its cultural heritage (Gómez & Villar, 2014, p. 277).

In the case of Mexico City, the great inequality in the population's living conditions - income, education, health, and culture - has fostered the exclusion and segregation of groups that identify these differences by signifying them as status symbols. For example, there are restricted or "off-limits" spaces for specific sectors of the population, which are not necessarily physical barriers but are separated by symbolic walls, such as urban legends, types of paving, smells, the clothing of the people who inhabit specific spaces, the variety of cars parked in the area or even the discourse of the people who label certain moral conduct and categorize it according to social class. In other words, territorial stigmas associated with insecurity, crime, and violence contribute to the imaginary construction of "dangerous classes" or social denigration (Gómez & Villar, 2014, p. 277) that somehow, a vicious circle of segregation and exclusion is formed.

Case study: colonia San Nicolas Totolapan

Urban research has been carried out by Enrique Pérez and Clemencia Santos (2011), whose text focuses on sociological and anthropological studies on gated communities that show a self-segregation of middle- and upper-class groups together with the growth of poverty and its surroundings in some areas of Mexico City and identify a differential pattern of educational levels about self-segregation. Mier y Terán, Vázquez, and Ziccardi (2012) identify the regions where there is greater poverty segregation in the City and catalog them by municipalities; Gonzalo Saravi (2008) analyzes urban segregation and inequality as a phenomenon according to the socioeconomic position of the inhabitants of the City's neighborhoods; Adrian Aguilar and Pablo Mateos (2011) examines the division between residential areas occupied by higher income social groups and concludes that Mexico City is where features of the traditional model of segregation and fragmentation of urban space are perceived. Finally, Danilo Veiga (2009) studies the phenomena of segregation and gentrification in several delegations of Mexico City focused on the highest concentration of the population in poverty.

However, research on segregation in urban and residential settings is scarce, especially in providing an overview of crucial social cleavages in Latin American cities. This is partly due to differences in approaches and the use of various statistics or measures that cannot be easily compared, especially in middle-class and affluent-class groups. That is why, in this research case, we will focus on three urban scales: the first in the municipality little studied in the state of the art of urban phenomena, La Magdalena Contreras; the second in the municipality or ejido of San Nicolás Totolapan; and the third in the Progreso condominium. We chose to analyze these places because we had the consent of both the owners of the condominium and the neighbors to take the photographs.



Figure 2.

a) Image of the Magdalena Contreras municipality inside Mexico City;
 b) San Nicolas neighborhood demarcation;
 c) clusters inside de San Nicolas Totolapan. Photograph taken from Google Maps, 2019.
 The municipality is comprised of neighborhoods and towns.
Collage: Carolina Magaña.

At La Magdalena Contreras, by 1970, there was a notable increase in population and the appearance of new residential areas. During the 1970s to 1980s, this expansion was centered mainly on the west side. However, this growth occurred without adequate infrastructure and services, which led to the creation of settlements in conservation areas. At present, most of the colonies are highly developed, but those located in conservation areas face irregular and precarious conditions.

The town or communal land or neighborhood of San Nicolás Totolapan, which is part of the La Magdalena Contreras delegation, had a total area of 2,760 hectares in 1924 and has substantial natural resources and urban solid pressure from the popular sectors that faced changes in land use from rural to urban with all the problems that come with accepting irregular settlements as you can see in Figure 2. According to the development plan of the Magdalena Contreras municipality, it is overcrowded, deteriorated, and precarious housing due to the risk of landslides and ravine areas, as you can see in Figure 6. However, the document indicates that Colonia San Nicolás Totolapan belongs to the type of housing in deterioration and includes part of the original towns of San Jerónimo Lidice, San Bernabé Ocoatepec, La Magdalena Contreras, and San Nicolás Totolapan (Marketdatamexico, s/f).

To understand in depth how the phenomenon of segregation that has been discussed occurs, an analysis of the architectural and urban elements of the San Nicolás Totolapan neighborhood in Mexico City is presented, applying Morris's sign theory, to explore how signs, or architectural-urban components, in this case, convey meaning to the inhabitants of this space, understanding architectural elements as visual narratives. This theory includes three fundamentals of the semiotic process components: the object, the signified, and the interpreter. This analysis shows how the relationship between these components reaches the most complex level manifested in the social phenomenon. It begins with the object of the architectural diversity present in the neighborhood, as shown in Figures 2 and 6. This is described as the first level of analysis, or syntactic level. Subsequently, it describes how these architectural elements and their arrangement in space have generated meanings or concepts in the inhabitants of this place, identifying walls, sidewalks, and landscape, for example. Finally, the interpretation component is located at the pragmatic level. It describes how the meaning associated with the arrangement of the architectural elements is translated into complex behaviors.

The study presented here uses photographs to show the elements observed at each level visually. They were made from the interest in identifying the constructive and architectural aspects of the San Nicolas Totolalpan neighborhood. The use of photography for this analysis is based on the method proposed by Gillian Rose of photo-documentation:

Photographic images are considered particularly effective in urban research because they can convey something of the feel of urban places, of space and landscape, and certainly most especially of those qualities that are in some way visible: they can allude, for example, to the layout (plan), color, texture, shape, volume, size, and pattern of the built environment, and they can also portray people. Photography can capture something of the sensory richness and human inhabitation of the urban environment (Rose, 2023, p. 481).



Figure 4.

Sample of the self-built and progressive housing type typical of the San Nicolás Totolapan neighborhood. There are loosely demarcated vacant lots, untamed vegetation, exposed wiring, visible hydraulic installations, and narrow streets without sidewalks. **Source:** Google Maps, 2022 and Carolina Magaña.



Figure 5.

Sample of the type of housing in a gated community delimited by a fence and guardhouse. View showing the delimitation of the “Progreso” cluster in the San Nicolás Totolapan neighborhood. **Source:** Carolina Magaña.

From the architectural perspective, popular, middle-class, and abundance-type housing can be identified. The first category includes self-construction and progressive housing in the consolidation and finishing stages, where nuclear, extended, and compound families live. The continuous expansions identify these with permanent materials such as exposed cement blocks and several rooms organized in a heterogeneous and disorganized form and lacking a master plan (Figure 3). The middle-class segment and the middle class are observed within the urban layout, configured as closed horizontal condominiums or clusters (Figure 4). The closed condominiums are divided uniformly, both in private areas of land that accommodate single-family homes, as well as in areas of everyday use. Generally, only nuclear families with four or five members and a service person live there. During the dry season, water shortages are frequent.

For this research we chose the condominium called “Progreso,” located within this neighborhood, is analyzed. It is considered that this condominium meets the physical and urban conditions to study segregation, and the property was accessed inside with the owners’ consent. Figure 5 shows the surrounding streets are surfaced with asphalt, only single lanes, with no sidewalks or parking spaces. The power lines are apparent, and the vegetation is wild.



Figure 6.
The interior view of the “Progreso” cluster shows the type of roads, landscaping, and housing.
Image: Carolina Magaña.

Family-owned convenience stores are abundant. There are single-family homes and lots with progressive residences and lots in the consolidation and finishing stages. The water tanks of each house are visible from the sidewalk, and there exists no consistent pattern in the number of levels among them. In front of the “Progreso” condominium, there is a lot without a fence, with several houses inside.

The urban and architectural characteristics are different inside the “Progreso” condominium. A two-meter-high volcanic stone wall delimits the horizontal complex, featuring a wooden gate with metal accents as its entry point. The condominium has a cistern that supplies all the houses and a guard house with security guards. The roads are paved with volcanic stone details, sidewalks, and three parking spaces. The green areas and vegetation are well maintained and uniformly placed at the front and sides of each of the nine houses that comprise the condominium. The houses are 250 m², with three parking spaces; they have the same architectural style with white walls, red tile roofs with double height, large windows with semicircular arches, a garden in the front, and a corridor before accessing the house’s front door. The installations are concealed, so the water tanks and wiring are not visible to



Figure 7.
View of hidden installations in the houses
and inside the cluster.
Image: Carolina Magaña.

the naked eye, and some homes also have their cistern (Figure 6 and 7). Cleaning, garbage collection, and internal security (24-hour surveillance) are controlled through constant maintenance and monthly fees the inhabitants pay. There are no stores within the premises.

Semantic level

Semantic analysis provides an understanding of the relationship between signs and the objects to which they are applied. Therefore, in this case, we analyze the meaning of the described elements that make up the urban-architectural characteristics of the San Nicolas Totolapan neighborhood.

Narrow streets uncovered or in poor condition, no sidewalks, wild vegetation, exposed wiring, cars with no parking place, and irregular housing construction are associated with a lack of order, hierarchy, and care. Narrow spaces and lack of finishes, details, or finished structures are linked to ways of life corresponding to low socioeconomic and socio-cultural classes since they do not have the resources for finishes, elements, or acquisition of large spaces or do not prioritize resources. Finally, the lack of water supply during the dry season indicates

that the mayor's office does not have the necessary resources (economic and hydraulic) to distribute water in the neighborhood. In other words, the characteristics mean, for the local population, precariousness, disorder, poverty, and abandonment.

The meaning associated with a fence is division, on the one hand, and containment, on the other, a physical-architectural element of collective separation and social distancing. The characteristics of the interior of the horizontal condominium, streets with sidewalks, and details of the same material as the fence that contains the interior are associated with a sense of order, hierarchy, and structure. The well-kept vegetation is associated with tranquility, neatness, and attention. The width of the roads, the distribution of the houses, and their size are related to the middle and upper social classes since they have the resources to acquire more land. The homogeneity in the paint, wood, and tile finishes is associated with nature and harmony. The ensemble of finishes and decorative details of the houses are associated with an upper middle or high socioeconomic class since their acquisition and upkeep imply additional costs. In summary, the housing characteristics within the cluster mean order, luxury, and exclusivity for the group that inhabits it.

Pragmatic level

The pragmatic level refers to the relationship between signs and those who use them. It is about discovering the model axes of language and human behavior in their interpersonal relationships. Consequently, it is vital to consider the way of life of those who live in the San Nicolas Totolapan neighborhood. The fact that there are differences in terms of housing quality and context underscores that the lifestyle or living habits of each party are different (social frontier).

Housing complexes become spaces of representation with moral meanings and a shared value system. In this sense, urbanism implies urbanism encompasses more than just geographical and urban arrangements but also behaviors in common, as discussed by Moctezuma (2017) below.

In this way, the social distance that can mean access to the sets in front of the inhabitants with more significant disadvantages of the popular neighborhoods becomes a symbolic distance that reinforces the conditions of social fragmentation and accentuates the social fractures of integration (Moctezuma, 2017, p. 487-514).

Summary of the analysis

In the introduction of this study, it was mentioned that factors condition the choice of housing and its location. The urban and architectural aspects have meaning for the users and add value, associating them with the desired way of life and status. This is how users give meaning to their environment, or it is designed to induce a specific type of behavior; the process of signification transmits social meanings based on existing codes (Lara, Rubio, & Higuera, 2011, p. 140-154).

The social phenomena analyzed throughout the document are crystallized in this area. Despite its original rural character, the area has been impacted by the development of gated housing developments whose inhabitants have a higher socioeconomic level. This transformation not only reshapes the typical urban image of the area and the interaction between neighbors in everyday life. Aguilar & Mateos (2011) states that the main reason for moving to a gated development is not consciously related to social exclusion or fear of crime but merely to the price-quality ratio of housing.

Final thoughts

From the perspective of architecture as a message, housing is semiotically analyzed through Morris' point of view, holds inherent meaning, and explores architectural narrative within a specific context marked by gentrification and segregation in the background—the intrinsic, material, and symbolic importance that housing represents for each sector of the population.

In addition to the physical signs analyzed through semiotics, the cultural meanings and representations associated with different neighborhoods and communities have been reviewed. For example, the popular perception of poor neighborhoods as dangerous places (pragmatic level and related to symbolic segregation) may reflect the discrimination and stigmatization associated with poverty.

The fact that the practice of interspersing housing and services for different social classes (syntactic and semantic level) has been generated reinforced the structure of spatial inequality and the isolation of each sector in terms of urban sociability. Together with architectural elements such as high fences, security to access the condominiums, uniform finishes, and order, among other features, have formed the imaginary of a symbolic border and, therefore, of social segregation (pragmatic level).

When observing these discrepancies, the culturally ingrained associations prevalent in Mexico engender a form of segregation to the principles of uniformity in both cases. The physical appearance of the complex (syntactic level) (semantic level) is a type of building with a defined style that differentiates it from another kind of architecture based on colors, order, tranquility, and security, which generates the sensation of being in a “better” place concerning progressive housing (pragmatic level). Thus, the population's perception is based on the symbolism of having a house with certain luxuries.

In the context of segregation and gentrification, Morris' theory proves instrumental in understanding how signs perpetuate and justify these urban phenomena. For example, in segregation, signals may include words such as “dangerous neighborhood” or “high crime area”, which are used to justify discrimination and exclusion of certain groups of people from specific geographic areas. On the other hand, in the context of gentrification, signs may include words such as “urban renewal” or “real estate development”, which are used to justify the mobility and replacement of low-income residents from urban areas that are being revalued by the arrival of new middle- and upper-class residents. In this case, signs can be used to hide the symbolic violence that underlies gentrification, as the language used may suggest that gentrification is a positive and necessary process for urban development.

In conclusion, Morris' sign theory helps us understand how sure signs are interpreted in different contexts. It even allows us to visualize how the interpretation of signs and the effect of meaning used pragmatically can hide social realities and justify exclusion and symbolic violence toward specific groups of people. Likewise, the method allows understanding of this interpretation's implications on large-scale social groups, resulting in phenomena such as segregation and gentrification, analyzed in a particular case but understood at a general level as a phenomenon transferable to frequently in Latin America.

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