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Mini cities: the new trend of the real-estate market in Central America

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Abstract

The emergence of mini cities as new trends in the real estate market in Central America, is an original case study little investigated due to its recent nature in the region. This paper aims to identify and characterize Central America's mini cities proposing they are a hybrid urban form including characteristics of gated communities, themed spaces and commercial spaces. This discussion is part of the progress of a PhD thesis that contemplates different case studies in Central America.

The methodology integrates a review from the perspective and frame work of the "new towns" proposed by Galantay (1975) in order to portray another stage in the economic and social evolution of living how this follows the urban commercial logics. They are seen as a newer typology of this classification of planned cities in the context of neoliberal urban development. Observation, interviews and a marketing analysis are part of the method to identify these new urban forms which have been introduced less than ten years ago as private mix use projects.

Since 2014, a rapid growth of these mini cities has been recorded in Costa Rica, Panamá, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. These are sold by the private sector as a "solution" to the new urban challenges that are emerging as a response to an increasing negative urban perception, a deteriorated and collapsed urban transport system, and also due to the introduction of innovative retail patterns.

It is concluded that the private sector is emphasizing its investment in mix use projects seeking to concentrate land uses in order for users to avoid contact with the external negative urban realities. It is an evidence of the real estate-market's most recent neoliberal tactics to participate strongly in the transformation of the urban space.

Key words: mini cities, retail centres, real-estate market, mix use, Costa Rica.

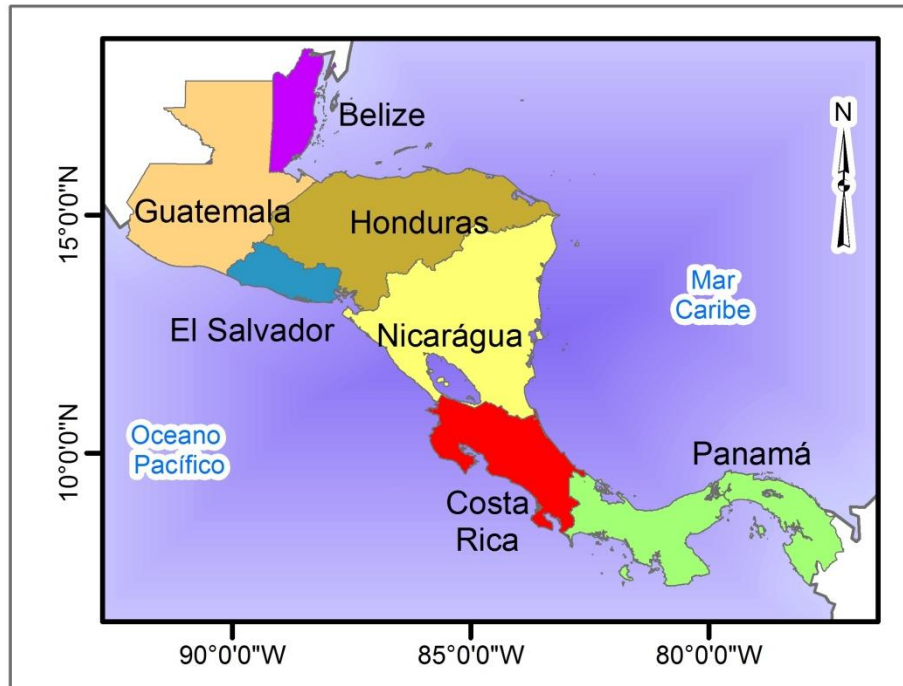
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Introduction

The constant reconfiguration of cities makes them a complex object of study. It has been observed how the city is a mirror of the restructuring of the productive system and of the internationalization of economic, social and political relations, among others processes. Central American cities are not only growing in quantitative terms, they are transforming the functions, goods and services provided, and they are also changing the political relations between the different actors that produce the urban space.

This investigation pretends to identify and characterize mini cities as new hybrid urban forms in Central America specifically at Costa Rica and Guatemala. (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Location of Costa Rica and Guatemala in the Central American Isthmus



Source: Author, 2017.

Different countries in the Central American isthmus show different patterns and intensities in the real estate growth. Panamá's real estate growth is one of the fastest in Latin America presenting innovative developments and high technology tendencies. The other countries central American countries, such as Belize and Nicaragua have shown a less intense evidence of mini cities' tendencies, which doesn't mean that the mix use projects are not present. Honduras has experienced its first smart mini city with Altia in San Pedro Sula. El Salvador also shows a particular case of mini cities' tendencies as a response to the high violence situation of the country which encourages population to live in gated communities seeking to have services and jobs situated in one accessible place.

State of the art: mini cities an innovative proposal at Central America

No scientific works in the urban geography domain have been found on these recent real state tendencies called mini cities in Central America.

This research focuses specifically on the development of mix use projects in Costa Rica and Guatemala where during the second decade of the twenty-first century, there has been an development of real estate projects that can be analysed as mini cities. These results are part of a larger doctoral research on the same subject and that covers the Central American case. Although these typologies of the real estate market characterized by a mix use are not new worldwide, these projects are an innovative proposal in the Central America region. They have characteristics of lifestyle centres, closed neighbourhoods, shopping centres and theme parks, functioning as what we could say: a mini city. One of their main characteristics is that they are a private sector initiative which distinguishes them from other urban renewal projects launched by the public sector, which commonly follow the New Urbanism principles.

The studies more related to mini cities are generally approached from the perspective of socio-spatial segregation and closed neighbourhoods in the Latin American context, however these mini cities are a recent real estate phenomenon of the last decade in Central America, so their dynamics and effects have not been deeply incorporated in studies of local urban geography.

Unlike existing research that usually covers gated communities or commercial spaces, I propose to analyse these new mini cities as a hybrid real estate product that gathers characteristics of the latter in a project that alludes to a multifunctional city, despite still being a private project. We can view them as a new way of commercializing residential and commercial urban space.

For this investigation Costa Rican and Guatemalan case studies were selected. Both countries participate strongly in the processes of globalization and present a highly active and competitive real estate market. They have been participants in an increase in international and regional economic relations and urban changes that are the key to understanding many of the political economic processes that affect both cities.

This innovative approach to analyse these real estate products allows us to see another form of commercialization of the living space, the evolution of the urban space and the adaptation to a new model of Latin American and Central American city. Likewise, it verifies how the real estate market participates strongly in the transformation of the Central American urban space.

Mini cities worldwide

In the world there are several examples of large closed neighborhoods that function as mini cities. We can highlight Nordelta in Buenos Aires. This is considered one of the largest mini cities in Latin America and Argentina. With 1,600 hectares, it has its own schools and tertiary education centres, recreational areas, commercial hypermarkets and shopping centers, offices, medical and cultural centres (Janoschka, 2005). There are also the famous Brazilian AlphaVilles. The largest, Barueri, is in São Paulo and has 35,000 permanent residents and 200,000 fluctuating residents. It houses 12,000 residences, 42 residential towers and 16 commercial ones. In India, Jamshedpur or Tata City is the first planned industrial city of the country, including planned public leisure spaces, educational and sports' centres and other conveniences that a city may offer. It is a planned city of a little more than one million inhabitants under no municipality jurisdiction.

The magnitude of these projects is impressive to be a project of private initiative. These could be seen as new cities within the same city, as a kind of "in vitro city," according to Prieto (2011). They are far from being merely closed neighborhoods, however, they are strongly criticized for following the line of being "privatopías" which encourage socio-spatial fragmentation.

From new towns to mini cities

Ervin Galantay (1975) defines the new towns as planned communities consciously created in response to clearly stipulated objectives. Within this framework, I propose that Central American mini cities can be analysed as a new typology of this classification of planned cities in the context of the actual neoliberal urban development.

Galantay (1975) explains that the emergence of the new towns has followed a cyclical pattern and has not been a continuous activity. Waves of constructions of new cities alternate with periods of calm. It is possible that in the Central American case we are in a phase of sudden rapid growth of this kind of mixed use projects. If each wave of growth is an effort to develop a new community structure that responds to the economic changes of the moment (Galantay, 1975), we could point out that the mini cities are a product of the local reality and of the neoliberal model of urbanism that responds to the desires and trends of the current urbanites of the 21st century by following the principals of New Urbanism (CNU, 2001).

As Galantay (1975) clarifies, the term “new town” is ambiguous and therefore subject to discussion. It should be noted that in this case, the mini cities are private initiative projects, with a master plan that can be developed in stages as the sales are financing the various phases. Typologies are diverse and closely resemble the classic closed neighborhoods, however, they have different characteristics. I propose that mini cities are studied as a hybrid between shopping centers, closed neighborhoods and theme parks.

In this context, I recall Gotsch’s (2009) proposal of referring to this projects as New-New towns. This author proposes a new category of analysis called the *neo towns* or *neo cities*. His theory is derived from a combination of the term *neoliberalism* and *new town*. He develops a methodology for identifying neo towns that emerged in a postcolonial context on the developing periphery. His proposal seems valid to guide the identification of these typologies in Costa Rica and Central America

New towns from the colonial period

Continuing in the context of new towns’ classification, we can point that new towns are not a typology related only to the XX or XXI century. Colonial cities have also been categorized by Galantay (1975) as an example of new towns whose main objective was the exploitation of human and natural resources. Within the typology of colonial cities, there are different functions from agro-military settlements, trade centers, regional centers, or mining towns (Galantay, 1975). Although the objective of this article is not to make a temporary return to analyse the evolution of the new towns, it is interesting to emphasize that these have existed throughout the urban development and responding to different changes in the productive systems. As Milton Santos says “[...] history is always recovering” (2012, p. 103). What appears today as a result is also a process; a result today is also a process that tomorrow will become another situation. The process is the permanent becoming (Santos, 2012).

As matter of drawing a comparison between colonial new towns and our contemporary “new-new towns”, we can state several similarities. Colonial cities in Central America were regulated by the Laws of the Indies which were a compilation of various norms of the Kingdom. Specifically “Book 4” of these Laws, was related to the discovery and territorial conquest, the establishment of norms for the population, land distribution, public works, among other issues associated with the planning of settlements. It was also stipulated in these Laws of the Indies, that it was a requirement that the new cities had a plan, an act of foundation and a minimum of settlers to ensure its viability. Contemporary “new new towns” are also planned projects containing norms for its foundation, growth, and management. They both even have what can be called a master plan and an inaugural event.

The guidelines of urban planning proposed by the Laws of the Indies seemed so practical to allow urban growth, that their format and organization persists to this day. Even many

contemporary mini cities have their master plan designed following the patterns of these incipient colonial cities. For example we can point out the use of “plazas” as a centre of congregation and architectures that emulate a historical return. *Ciudad Cayalá* in Guatemala is a clear example of this case of space theming as a way to create an immersive space. (Figure 2).

Figure 2 Facades of Ciudad Cayalá, Guatemala.



Source: Author, February 2017.

Recalling Santos (2012, p. 73) that “each form on the landscape is created as an answer to certain needs or functions of the present”, colonial towns were planned in the context of colonial territorial expansion. Nowadays, our mini cities respond to the dynamics of neoliberal market laws that seem to be controlling the urban planning selling them through a discourse of being the innovative solution to the contemporary urban crises. New towns have been part of the reality of urban growth as a response to socio-political and economic changes in different places and times.

Immersive spaces and marketing strategies to create illusions

As commentes before, these new urban forms are a hybrid between the three types of spaces (shopping centers, closed neighborhoods and theme parks) creating a mix use project as an innovative space to live, entertain and work, all in one place (Figure 3).

Mini cities look like a successful and fashionable real-estate product; however it is worth pointing that the marketing has played a fundamental role in the creation of a universe of symbols and meanings that leads us to want new fashion products. In the case of closed neighborhoods, Janoschka (2005) states that it is the creation of a discourse that includes a range of illusions that are sold and promoted with these new real estate products. Marketing carefully selects a range of images, colours, phenotypes and directs specific grammatical, lexical and semantic patterns depending on the targeted population and the illusion it wants to

create. Capron (1996) suggests how the dominant discourse of the shopping malls sends another parallel discourse about the “urban crisis”. It exposes an ideal view of the shopping mall as the antithesis of the city. Central American mini cities sell convenience and tranquillity by offering the variety of uses in one same place to avoid the users from having to confront the “urban odyssey” (Figure 3).

Figure 3 Advertising encouraging a diversity of activities all in one place and close to each other



Source: Screenshot of Distrito Cuatro’s web page: <http://www.distrito4escazu.com/> checked the 22 april, 2017.

From the point of view of themed and immersive spaces, the new strategies of the real estate market include carefully planning and building an urban product with the charm of a colonial city but with the facilities the contemporary urban spaces. (Schnell, 2014, Schnell, 2016). Lukas (2013) clearly explains this is a design strategy to create an immersive place which can be defined as a place where anyone can get wrapped up regardless the background in life. It is a place where people want to be. According to Lukas (2013, pg. 11) this approach involves “highlighting key elements and making them vivid by appealing to the senses.” The architects use the design language to enchant, amuse, fascinate and inspire the users. Recalling Capron (1996) this is a strategy to promote a security island in middle of the insecure urban reality of many Latin American cities nowadays.

Even though the security motives might stand up as one of the top motives for population to choose to live in gated communities, Janoschka (2005) suggests that the strategies for selling closed neighborhoods do not really only respond to the subjective increase of insecurity, but according to him, surveys showed that the desire to return to an orderly and idyllic past is predominating.

A combination of reasons is among the motivations to create immersive places in this new urban mix use projects. This is seen in the architecture of many mini cities that allude to a colonial style, which has been subject to criticism. Architects like Orozco (2016) criticize these imitations of "colonial architecture," however, claim that they are the "sensation and the ultimate" in terms of trends in projects aimed at high-income groups. As seen before, Ciudad Cayalá in Guatemala try to refer to a "past" in its architecture, façades and urban furniture

such as benches, lanterns and signs (Figure 1). Guatemala with a stronger and heavier historic weight than Costa Rica shows more evidences of this “colonial” influence in architecture. On the other hand, Costa Rican mini cities have opted for a more contemporary timeless architecture where the use of metal, glass and straight lines predominates in their design language (Figure 4 and 5).

Figure 4 Facade of commercial and residential building with contemporary architecture in Avenida Escazú, Costa Rica.



Source: Author, April 2016.

Figure 5 Timeless facade of District Four, Costa Rica.



Source: Author, April, 2017.

In this context, Costa Rica seems to be more detached of its historic past probably because of being considered the territory with the most delayed colonial development of the isthmus (Schnell, 2013). It was not considered an important administrative or economic spot. Thus the historic attachment as means to sell it as a themed space isn't as attractive to stakeholders. It seems that the costarican tendencies point to a more contemporary and timeless architecture that alludes to a series of responses more related to luxury, progress, development and portraying a cosmopolite space to enjoy and welcome worldwide users and residents that can feel at home and enjoy an entertainment space regardless their cultural background or age.

As Gottdiener (1997) suggests, that interpretation of symbols takes on a range of meanings when people is exposed to symbolic motifs. The simple clean lines of the timeless costarican designs play a distinctive symbolic appeal connecting the space with the media world of fashion and advertising. Spaces are not inert. They are on purpose themed to interact with its users and immerse them in the buying, living or entertaining experience. Gottdiener (1997) exposes that in the commercial realms of consumption, consumers are not passive and they interact with the commercial milieu to satisfy their desires whether they are manufactured or not. As in our two Central American case studies, a desire might be to recall an idilic past or even to refer to a contemporary fashionista world.

Where and why were these mini cities born?

In general, horizontal urban growth has led to changes in morphology and functions in Central American cities. Urban sprawl, insecurity and poor public transport systems, are some of the main factors that have led to the current trend of creating mixed use projects that are configured as mini cities in Central America. These are projects that offer an attractive profit to stakeholders since they can mix uses in the same project. Another advantage of developing projects of this type is the reduction in the provision of public services.

These projects offer different types of services, commerce and residences with which they intend to satisfy the needs of its visitors or residents and therefore can be seen as planned mini cities or private projects offering urban services. All these elements are part of the diversity that characterizes the city as they combine different functions, goods and services provided and social and political relationships, rather than just the characteristic commercial aspect of lifestyle centres.

It can be noted that the high cost of land has encouraged developers to see the need to diversify their real estate products to share costs. Thus the projects become viable and profitable by combining different uses of land such as commercial, office, residential, hotel, cultural and recreational areas, among others. The services are specialized and outsourced according to the quantity and different socio-economic composition of the population that frequents them. There is also a diversity and convergence of functions that allude to the functions of a large city. You can mention the convenience of living and working in a single space (by eliminating long travelling routes), taking advantage of pedestrian environments, increasing density for better land use and stronger neighbourhood development.

Are they cities?

The city is a physical fact, a set of spaces built by human performance over time. It is multifunctional, concentrates diversity and, being a social product, it is in permanent construction and reconstruction. It materializes in a certain landscape and in a morphology that comes to be the tangible result of a strong cultural legacy, of that multi functionality and

of the social and economic relations existing among its inhabitants over time. Taking into account this context, people, academics, users and scientists ask themselves if these private projects can be named “cities” after being planned as a perfect homogenised space. It is argued that they lack diversity and rather favour socio-spatial segregation in order to emphasize security as a commodity accessible only to elites. Others claim that they are a new urban form of metropolization in the Central American region that should be taken into account as part of the constant urban and real estate dynamics that characterize capitalist investment.

What is clear is that we are facing a moment in the process of urbanization where these real estate projects encourage the reconfiguration of the cities, of their concept and of what is a city today. New urban dynamics may include positive and negative outcomes. For example it often argued about the increasing social fragmentation and a loss of community. Others may see the positive results as innovative retail spaces for middle or upper classes to avoid the old fashioned, insecure, “collapsed” and “dirty” city centre. Developers are seen to be marketing these urban products as the “solution” of an “urban crisis” proving new commercial urban logics as new step in the economic evolution of the way of living

These new urban typologies are the expression of a new conceptualization of cities planned but dominated by the private sector because "they are justified through the marketing of real estate developers and that therefore, they respond to capitalist interests" (Harvey, 2012). On the one hand the private sector tries to maximize its profitability through mixed use and the introduction of trends or fashions that sell and attract consumers of real estate products. On the other side it is the public sector approving the construction of these projects in a context of search for solutions to the current urban challenges. It seems both the private and public sector are heading the urban development to a direction that not all the population might be included, where there are specific interests being targeted, and where the market seems to be deciding the future urban planning.

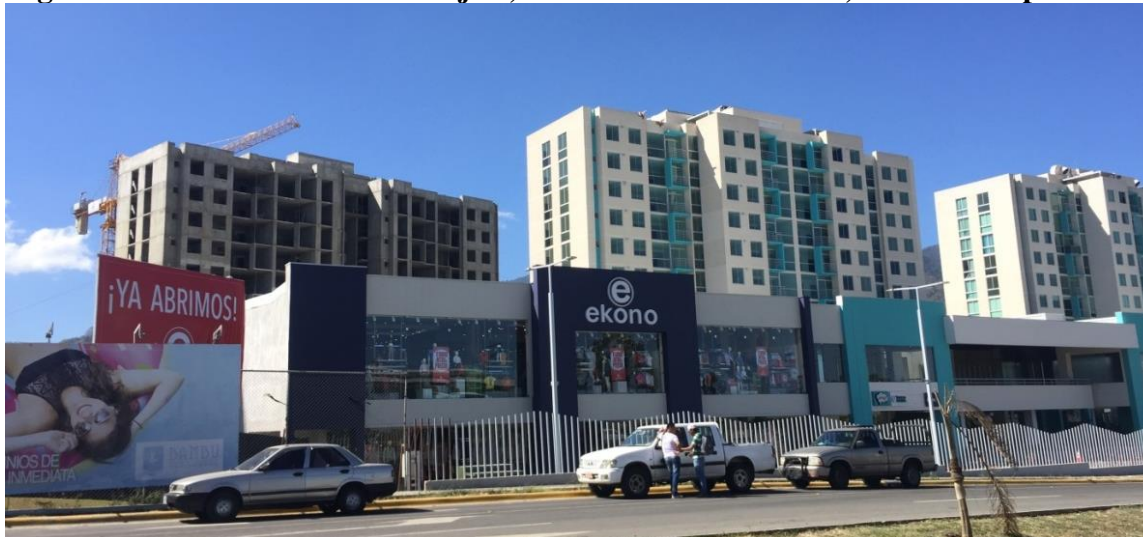
Case studies: Mini cities in Costa Rica and Guatemala

The Costa Rican case is one of those that present a greater development of mini cities in Central America. There is a first mixed development that can be considered as a mini city: *Avenida Escazú*. This new urban form offers a mixed use that offers retail, services, medical centres, residences, a hotel and restaurants, without falling into the type of gated community or closed neighbourhood. Around the project there is more commercial, residential and service development that enhances its functions. There is *Plaza Tempo* which integrates a corporate center category A+, a business area and another hotel. Next to these two projects is the *Hospital CIMA* from which you can access the shops, parking and restaurants of the previous projects, creating an interconnected area of mixed use for visitors. These projects form a residential and retail corridor adjacent to the *Multiplaza* shopping centre and parallel to the highway called Route 27.

There is also *Distrito Cuatro*. This project is sold as the first costarican mini city selling convenience goods. Not all the existing mini cities have this type of convenience stores, which can add. This project has 5 hectares, 230 apartments, a supermarket, shops, offices and a range of restaurants (Guzman, 2013). As mentioned, this project has a contemporary architecture where straight lines predominate and a palette of grayish colors refers to a more timeless style.

Bambú Eco Urbano is an “eco-city” located in the south of San José (Figure 6). It consists of five buildings with twelve floors and a commercial area. This project is one of the first to develop in an urban area where vertical developments were not frequent. It has amenities such as gym, club house, ranches, trails, shopping centre and office. It has spaces for fast food, children's recreation centre and 134 parking spaces (Tenorio, 2016).

Figure 6 Bamboo Eco Urban Project, in the south of San José, started in April 2014.



Source: Author, August, 2016.

There are other projects that are being built in stages such as *Hacienda Espinal* with 137 hectares to house residences, apartments, offices, commerce, cycle paths, parks, recreational and sports pools, gymnasium, tennis courts, amphitheatre, supermarket, school and a town centre (Guzman, 2013). This is one of the largest planned projects in the periphery of the city and the first that has its own educational centre inaugurated in 2016. Due to its location, the abundance of space available to develop the project facilitated the master plan to include other amenities that encourage recreation.

The newspaper *La Nación* published on July 23rd 2016 that *Santa Verde*, *Reina del Café*, *Montealegre* and *ECO* projects are the 4 new real estate projects using mix use mini city idea that are planned to be built in the province of Heredia, Costa Rica (Fernández, 2016). The province of Heredia is a hub of jobs which has shown a rapid urban growth but has already collapsed and has limited access routes with serious road congestions. Thus, according to Fernández (2016), these projects already have municipal authorizations (rainwater runoff and land use) and are in the process of proceeding with other permits, such as the construction authorization, to finally be submitted for environmental assessment.

In this province is also planned the construction of *Oxígeno* which is a mix use project that is sold as a “human playground”. It is supposed to generate “connexions and experiences by creating different worlds” integrating community, entertainment, sports, gastronomy, shopping and green open spaces (Figure 7). This project is planned to be finished in the second semester of 2018.

Figure 7 Render of future *Oxígeno* project in Heredia, Costa Rica.



Source: <http://www.cuestamoras.com/negocios/oxigeno/> Access on: 1 May, 2017.

Other mix use projects are *Torres de Heredia*, *Punta Fina* and *La Estación*. This latest project is planned to be in 2018 which shows that these trends of mini cities are not only operating but their boom is confirmed by a diverse list of projects that are still not built.

In the eastern sector of the city of San José, the *Ciudad del Este* project has started its construction process, which will be developed in an area of 35 hectares to include residential villas, vertical condominiums, office space and commerce. The project was designed to create a neighbourhood of medium and high density residential spaces also within the framework of an "eco-friendly" development. The first phase of residential villas has been built and vertical condominiums are included in the master plan. Following the principles of New Urbanism, this project also opted for an architecture of simple lines to avoid being outdated rejecting the option of the old colonial themed space. Open spaces and short walking distances are characteristic of this mini city that follows some of the principles of New Urbanism.

Guatemala

Unlike the costarican case study where several built and planned mini cities can be identified, the Guatemalan case study shows two clear projects which can be analysed as mini cities. The main project is *Ciudad Cayalá* which stands out with its colonial style urban form that is sold as "a unique corner within the city", adjacent to the largest natural reserve within the urban area of Guatemala. This project, located 11 kilometres from the capital, began to grow since 1983 offering various types of housing, commerce and services. At the beginning of 2003 the master plan was developed bringing together more than 25 architects in charge of Léon Krier. In 2011 started the construction of *Paseo Cayalá*, the commercial strip centre (Figure 8).

Figure 8 Paseo Cayalá, commercial strip



Source: Author, April, 2017

It is considered the "heart" of the project with more than 44 hectares. This section of the project offers more than 90 shops, cafes and restaurants. Also includes lofts for rent, aimed at university students or executives. The idea is sold under the concept of "live and work" in one place and these residences are located on the second floor of the commercial area. It also offers "courtyard housing" format residences in buildings of no more than 6 stories high with private plazas for recreation. Inside *Ciudad Cayalá* there are different residential neighbourhoods with private entrances. For example there is *Encinos de Cayalá* where the mansions cost between USD 800.000 and 1,2 million dollars. Another section of the master plan is called *Cardales de Cayalá* which directed to the wellbeing, health and recreation of its inhabitants with 6000m². There is also a "Professional District" that includes offices and medical clinics. At present more than 200 million dollars have been invested in less than 30 years and the land value of the sector has increased by more than 450% of its initial value, according to the real estate. At 2017 several stages of the project are pending and with this project, *Grupo Cayalá* is classified as one of the leaders in real estate development in the region.

A second and much smaller mix use project is called *Fontabella*. Although its residential component is not as strong, there can be identified a specialized hotel for long term stays. This aparthotel in combination with retail, recreational areas and a wide gastronomic strip, is organized in a mini city themed space. The squared shaped project is located in one whole block with two levels of commercial stands and the aparthotel in the upper levels.

Even though Guatemala evidences fewer mini cities, *Ciudad Cayalá* seems to be one of the biggest projects with heavy historic theming as a marketing strategy.

Reflections by way of conclusion

When studying these Central American mini cities, we can have an idea of the existence of new urban forms in the context of the production of contemporary urban space. These projects are a recent phenomenon whose peak is being witnessed in the past years. In this context, it is risen a discussion about the new urban typologies and their possible classification as a city.

Although mixed use projects are not a new approach, these mini cities have been commonly categorized as simple closed neighbourhoods or shopping malls, lifestyle centres, new towns or even neo towns.

This research approached Galantay's (1975) classification who suggested different categories of new towns, including those since the colonial period. From this point, it was concluded that these mini cities could be approached as a new category in Galantay's original classification to see how the contemporary new towns have been part of the reality of urban growth as a response to socio-political and economic changes in different places and times. Also Gotsch's (2009) suggestion of neo towns can be applied to its analysis proving a neoliberal approach of market oriented urban planning.

It may be that for many, these projects are not considered cities but the fact is that, when they are called as such, all the positive imagery associated with cities is evoked. For example, accessibility, being close to family, friends and work are some of the positive factors suggested. It even evokes the positive feelings associated with the post-colonial incipient cities where the neighbours were widely known and there was a strong sense of community. Taking this into account it is observed how the real estate market is heavily involved in the transformation of local urban space. Even though these private projects offer urban services, the discussion of them offering urbanity seems more an academic concern.

These mini cities are a different way of selling commercial and residential urban space in Central America. These can be seen as new urban forms that are being commercialized as a solution to the new urban challenges that have emerged for the upper social class as a response to an increasing negative urban perception, a deteriorated and collapsed urban transport system. On the other hand, mini cities have been heavily criticised as they are not an urban space welcoming lower classes to live or use its spaces, thus accentuating the social and spatial urban fragmentation.

Mini cities are a new proposal of the real estate market in a neoliberal context which seems to follow some of the principles of New Urbanism to increase its profitability and acceptance among the population. Further investigation is recommended on the subject of mini cities as they are urban forms with a high degree of influence in the accessibility and right to the city.

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