



Figure 1. Map of Usme without scale: village, part of the urbanised area and urban expansion area
Nueva Usme. Source: Author, 2020

TRUEQUE BASED URBANISM

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Usme is a village and former municipality in the south of Bogotá. Urbanisation has transformed the social and spatial structure of the village deeply. Agrarian production and distribution has been affected strongly by the global trend of industrialisation of agriculture and changing agents in the field during the second half of the twentieth century, while at the same time a significant share of the area of the former municipality turned urban. Both processes are analysed in a parallel way with a focus on overlooked existing and changing relations and potentials of food cycles between rural and urban inhabitants and challenges regarding production and distribution of agrarian goods. The problems and solutions of food flows could represent alternative benchmarks for the sustainable future of the urban expansion area between the rural and the urban part of Usme. This analysis is developed in the framework of my PhD Thesis.

Bogotá / megacity / polycentric / rural-urban linkages / urban growth



Figure 2. Small scale mixed cultivation in the rural part of Usme and spatial encounter of the rural and the urban. Source: 1, 4, 6 Corporación Campesina Mujer y Tierra 2018, 2 Jaime Beltrán 2018, 3, 5 Author 2018

Since colonial times Usme has always played a decisive role in food supply for Bogotá. This is due to its agricultural productivity and its condition as a transit area. Usme is located in the south of Bogotá, where the high plains of Bogotá narrow and rise from 2,500 to more than 3,000 m to the Paramo area, a natural environment completely different to the Bogotá savannah. Crossing the Andean mountain chain, it also provides access to the hot and fertile Eastern Plains and has always been the gateway of Bogotá to that region (Fig. 1).

The scientific study of Usme is limited to very few works, so a huge share of information about Usme in my PhD derives from locally produced grey literature and local initiatives for cultural heritage. These sources have not yet been put in relation. My research intends to establish these references and to contribute to the debate on an extended notion of cultural heritage, also by applying a multi-method strategy: interpretatively historical methods for examining heterogeneous written and cartographic sources, qualitative and inventive methods for creating and interpreting participative mappings and photographs, interviews with representatives of institutions, as well as own site analyses. The intense field work in Usme was realised in 2018 with the *Mesa de Patrimonio de Usme*¹ (including interviews and images by Jaime Beltrán, Carolina Díaz, Harold Villay) and the *Corporación Campesina*



Figure 3. Closed down trading house, a small farmstead finca, an old dairy farm *hacienda*, butchers and a *piqueteadero*. Source: 1 Jaime Beltrán 2018, 2 Corporación Campesina Mujer y Tierra 2018, 3 Harold Villay 2018, 4-5 Luisa Ardila 2016, 6 María José Casasbuenas 2016; 4-6 in the framework of *Fotografía y Cartografía social* (miradas.poligran.edu.co/)

*Mujer y Tierra*² (including images by the group). The walks, pictures and discussions conducted with these actors have significantly contributed to my understanding of the place and the complex relation of rural and urban aspects in Usme.

During the conquest in the sixteenth century, the Spanish set up *pueblos de indios* (Indian Villages) in places of already existing settlements, to concentrate and evangelise the natives. These places became centralities in the colonial network and were surrounded by a small portion of common land (*resguardo*) for the self-supply of its indigenous inhabitants who were obliged to work mainly in a share-cropping system of tithe and forced labour (*mita*). The rest of the occupied land was mostly divided into big *haciendas* that became the centres of commercial agrarian production (Urrea 2011). In Usme the *resguardo*, with the national independence in the beginning of the nineteenth century, transformed into small scale farms that as the surrounding *haciendas* continued producing potatoes, cereals, and pulses for Bogotá (Moreno y Escandon 1778, Gutierrez 1887, Urrea 2011). In the twentieth century meat and dairy products became relevant products, too (Santafé 1998, Higuera 2012).

When in 1954 Usme and five other villages were incorporated into the Capital District of Bogotá the village's notion was still exclusively rural although since the

1930s the municipality hosted the water reservoir for the capital's first modern water supply system. However, the village itself did not receive water provision until the 1970s (Urrea 2011), and the railway that was built to construct the dam was dismantled immediately upon completion of the reservoir. With Bogotá's accelerating urbanisation in the 1950s, brick clay and gravel were other products exploited from the territory of Usme. In 1964 Usme did not present any urban areas and was home to only 4,626 inhabitants. Since the 1970s local urbanisation consisted of a growing number of informal settlements in the territory of the municipality (Fig. 2), increasing the number of inhabitants to 164,847 in 1985, but lacking access to infrastructure and legal recognition (Urrea 2011). The role of Usme in modern times remained unidirectional, an extractive exploitation, without receiving the benefits by the city.

The official ignorance towards the rural and urbanising everyday life has been contrasted by a strong internal sense of community in the rural and the urban part of the municipality. A large variety of community organisations have been the driving force to organise construction, transport, education, and culture, complementing rural traditions of tight agricultural collaboration among small scale farmers. Many of these activities, seen from the perspective of Bogotá, are widely considered to be "informal" and often watched suspiciously and without understanding.

Today, 345,689 inhabitants live in Usme (Secretaría del Habitat 2019), mostly in the urban part. The panorama of rural-urban relations and food cycles is complex. A local trading house in the village and a number of dairy farms functioning as intermediaries between rural producers and urban consumers have been closed since several years (Interview Jaime Beltran 2018, Fig. 3). The industrialisation of agriculture and the growth of the city have turned national food retailing into a lucrative business: the appearance of modern supermarkets and wholesale markets in the 1960 and 1970s led to long trade chains, raising the prices for the consumer and lowering the profit for the producer. Big landowners and wholesalers used their political influence to gain control over the market; resulting hygienic regulations particularly hit small scale farmers practicing mixed cultivation and using local and traditional seeds. The niche for Usme's farmers had become very small, although possible consumers were spatially getting closer by the ongoing urbanisation. Small scale networks in the rural part still function for producing and trading agricultural goods and even include traditions of barter trades (*trueque*).³ Yet, the formal and informal markets in the urbanised part of Usme mostly receive their goods by wholesalers, without benefitting from the agricultural production nearby.

Concepts to reduce long retail chains on a big scale are thwarted and have failed. *Surabastos*, a *centro de acopio* (collection centre for local producers) and a whole sale market in Usme, that should receive and distribute local and incoming agricultural products, were never realised due to the interests and influence of Bogotá's central whole sale market (Santafé 1998, Interview Carolina Díaz 2018). *Mer-kandrea*, a supermarket chain with several branches in the poor south of Bogotá, arisen in the 1990s from a grocery shop in Usme, used to offer basic food supply to low prices because of direct contact to the producing farmers. However, in 2018 the owners were accused to launder money for the FARC guerrilla,⁴ expropriated, and the stores were closed. (Fig. 4) This illustrates how powerful and ruthless external forces intervene in the field of food supply in Usme, while the consumers and producers have to bear the consequences.

Though, concurrently, less formalised novel coalitions have broadened and extended existing forms of exchange between the rural and the urban part of Usme. The inexpensive meat production in the rural part of Usme, partly due to unauthorised butchering, during the weekends has led to a dynamic of gastronomic shopping and popular party in the village centre, including cattle markets and horse shows. The gatherings of rural and urban inhabitants have led to the appearance of several piqueteaderos, rustic restaurants offering fried meat (Santafé 1998, Higuera 2012), generating the notion of Usme as destination for weekend trips. As an answer to the pressing need of affordable housing, the city of Bogotá considered Usme the ideal environment for the biggest urban expansion project so far, Nuevo Usme. Since 2000 the project with up to 53,000 housing units (Urrea 2011) is discussed, planned and to a small part already realised, but has above all caused harsh reactions in the rural area of Usme. As part of the refusal to sell their parcels to property development companies, peasant women founded the *Corporación Campesina Mujer y Tierra*, a cooperation actively acknowledging and dignifying traditional forms of farming by offering educational walks through their lands (Castellanos 2016). The initiative is well connected to educational and cultural institutions and further peasant groups that also promote eco-friendly mixed cultivation and support the concept of "food sovereignty".⁵ This concept stresses the right to cultivate and distribute locally and culturally rooted food, understanding agriculture and gastronomy also as cultural concepts beyond the mere alimentary aspect of "food security", as mentioned for instance in the United Nation Sustainable Development Goal 2 "Zero Hunger" (UN-SDG 2016). When in 2007 excavators started the soil preparation for a section of the Nuevo Usme project, a huge pre-Hispanic neropolis was discovered. The finding of the archaeological legacy gave life to the



Figure 4. Contemporary food trading forms in Usme in the urban (above) and rural (below) part: surabastos building, merkandrea supermarket, street market and peasants selling locally grown onions. Source: 1+3 Carolina Díaz 2018, 2 google maps, 4-6 Author 2018.

local heritage group *Mesa de Patrimonio de Usme* and pulled academic and artistic actors on stage. Protests, discussions, information events, and artistic projects such as *El territorio no está en venta*⁶ by Maria Buenaventura shed light on overlooked dimensions of local agriculture and highlight new linkages between the rural and the urban, expressing multiple forms of cultural, historical, and environmental heritage (Fig. 5).

These dynamics, rooted in the territory, make use of the diverse cultural background as a resource and can deepen linkages between rural and urban communities. By strengthening and expanding traditional and at the same time sustainable food cycles, understanding the additional value of the countryside as much needed local recreation areas for the urban population, new value loops can be the outcome of the food production system. The periphery's linkages for producing and distributing food could be strengthened and enriched by a diversified system of value creation in leisure activities and gastronomy. Personal contact between producers and consumers in the framework of eco-tourism and the possibility of direct trading can help to put in value the fertile land and the urban diversity by mutual economic benefit: a refreshed and extended notion of trueque, exchanges based on community and trust. A personally based rhizome of exchanges and



Figure 5. trueque events in rural Usme, El territorio no está en venta by Maria Buenaventura. Source: 1-2 Author 2018, Subdirección Local Usme - Sumapaz at twitter @SLISUsmeSumapaz 2019 4-6 Maria Buenaventura <http://elterritorioenventa.blogspot.com/> 2011.

experiences might be more resilient and less threatened by corruption and take-overs than systems exclusively focused on business. Furthermore, this network of personal and spatial relations could be read as an excellent base for further creative development and understood as a resilient, locally developed system to base on the urban expansion project that will fill the morphological gap between the urbanised area of Usme and the village core. Though, for this the courage of understanding Usme and appreciating its multi-layered dynamics and an intensely changed attitude in planning for Nuevo Usme would be needed. When considering the small scale farms with mixed cultivation not as under exploitation, as presented in the land banks of the urban expansion project, but as “ecosystems of high biodiversity”, “producers of oxygen” and essential parts of a bigger “architecture” (Interview Jaime Beltran 2018), existing structures would be recognized and could be edited for hosting also new uses. Longstanding places like the central plaza, the enormous necropolis and hacienda buildings could be meaningful sites and spatial references for Nuevo Usme rather than being considered hurdles in the masterplan. Existing and new dynamics would add a temporal aspect and create a framework of possibilities of new employment and gaining opportunity, supporting economic development for Bogotá’s city district with lowest income (Secretaría del Habitat 2019). With this mindset even disposition could to be creatively

reconsidered, to be understood as a resource for up-cycling and value creation, disrupting the notion of Usme as a dangerous final repository as is currently the landfill of Doña Juana. With a brave and confident view on Usme, willing to see its potential, building on the sense of community and food production systems developed over a long time, existing structures could be a promising base for enhanced rural-urban circular systems and the new city district.

FOODNOTES

- 1 further information: <https://www.facebook.com/patrimoniousmek/>
- 2 further information: <https://www.culturarecreacionydeporte.gov.co/es/corporacion-campesina-mujer-y-tierra>
- 3 trueque is a system of exchange in which goods or services are directly exchanged for other goods or services without using a medium of exchange, such as money. In Usme revived trueques are regularly organised between the rural and urban communities where, in festive occasions with music and dance, packages of rural goods are exchanged for previously agreed products from the city, like household items or stationary.
- 4 further information: <https://www.eltiempo.com/justicia/servicios/precios-de-supercundi-y-merkandrea-versus-los-de-un-supermercado-186218> and <http://semanariovoz.com/victimas-falso-positivo-judicial/>
- 5 further information: <https://viacampesina.org/en/what-are-we-fighting-for/food-sovereignty-and-trade/>
- 6 further information: <https://mariabuenaventura.com/portfolio/el-territorio-no-esta-en-venta/> and <http://elterritorioestaenventa.blogspot.com/>

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