

## Urban policy, communication, and organization in informal neighborhoods in Brazil and Colombia: Vila Autódromo and Samanes del Cauca<sup>1</sup>

*Política urbana, comunicación y organización en barrios informales en Brasil y Colombia: Vila Autódromo y Samanes del Cauca*

*Política urbana, comunicação e organização em bairros informais no Brasil e na Colômbia: Vila Autódromo e Samanes del Cauca*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32870/cys.v2023.8557>

RICARDO RODRÍGUEZ-QUINTERO<sup>2</sup>

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8093-2374>

RAFAEL SOARES GONÇALVES<sup>3</sup>

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8887-8931>

This article compares the genesis, consolidation, removal and resettlement of two informal neighborhoods: Vila Autódromo (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil) and Samanes del Cauca (Cali, Colombia), with emphasis on organizational and communicative aspects based on three semi-structured interviews: one in Samanes del Cauca (January 2019), another in Vila Autódromo (January 2020), and a third shared via videoconference (November 2020) with the leaders of the two neighborhoods. The comparison of both processes based on the testimony of the protagonists has yielded significant results on the processes of emergence, consolidation strategies and forms of state control and administration of these neighborhoods, as well as the political mobilization actions of the inhabitants, from the perspective of communication as an organizational resource.

**KEY WORDS:** Community action, informal neighborhoods, social communication, communication strategies, urban policy.

*Este artículo compara la génesis, consolidación, remoción y reasentamiento de dos barrios informales: Vila Autódromo (Rio de Janeiro, Brasil) y Samanes del Cauca (Cali, Colombia), con énfasis en aspectos organizativos y comunicativos a partir de la realización de tres entrevistas semiestructuradas: una en Samanes del Cauca (enero de 2019), otra en Vila Autódromo (enero de 2020), y una tercera compartida vía videoconferencia (noviembre de 2020) con los líderes de los dos barrios. La comparación de ambos procesos a partir del testimonio de los protagonistas ha arrojado resultados significativos sobre los procesos de surgimiento, las estrategias de consolidación y las formas de control y administración estatal de estos barrios, así como las acciones de movilización política de los pobladores, desde una perspectiva de la comunicación como recurso de organización.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Acción comunitaria, barrios informales, comunicación social, estrategias de comunicación, política urbana.

*Este artigo compara a gênese, consolidação, remoção e reassentamento de dois bairros informais: Vila Autódromo (Rio de Janeiro, Brasil) e Samanes del Cauca (Cali, Colômbia), com ênfase nos aspectos organizacionais e comunicativos com base em três entrevistas: um em Samanes del Cauca (janeiro de 2019), outro na Vila Autódromo (janeiro de 2020) e um terceiro compartilhado via videoconferência (novembro de 2020) com as lideranças dos dois bairros. A comparação de ambos os processos a partir do depoimento dos protagonistas trouxe resultados significativos sobre os processos de emergência, as estratégias de consolidação e as formas de controle e administração estatal desses bairros, bem como as ações de mobilização política dos moradores, numa perspectiva da comunicação como recurso organizacional.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Ação comunitária, bairros informais, comunicação social, estratégias de comunicação, política urbana.

### How to cite:

Rodríguez-Quintero, R., & Soares Gonçalves, R. (2023). Urban policy, communication, and organization in informal neighborhoods in Brazil and Colombia: Vila Autódromo and Samanes del Cauca. *Comunicación y Sociedad*, e8557. <https://doi.org/10.32870/cys.v2023.8557>

<sup>1</sup> This article is the result of research projects carried out by the authors between 2020 and 2021 with resources from the Research Support Fund of the State of Rio de Janeiro (FAPERJ) and the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES), of Brazil.

<sup>2</sup> Pontificia Universidad Javeriana Cali, Colombia.  
[ricardorq@javerianacali.edu.co](mailto:ricardorq@javerianacali.edu.co)

<sup>3</sup> Pontificia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.  
[rafaelsgoncalves@yahoo.com.br](mailto:rafaelsgoncalves@yahoo.com.br)

Submitted: 01/04/2023. Accepted: 06/15/2023. Published: 10/11/2023.

## INTRODUCTION

This article compares the origin, consolidation, removal, and resettlement of two informal neighborhoods: Vila Autódromo (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil) and Samanes del Cauca (Cali, Colombia). Emphasis is placed on organizational and communicative aspects. One of the objectives is to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how these neighborhoods emerge, grow, and consolidate, as well as the forms of state control and administration that affect these communities. Using a perspective that views communication as an organizational resource, this study also examines the role of local activism in the form of political mobilization. Research on both neighborhoods is based on the testimony of protagonists, witnesses, and the available archives.<sup>4</sup>

The following analysis is inspired by Wieviorka's idea (as cited in Silva, 2016) about *the era of the witness*, the moment, in the social sciences and history, of the centrality of the victims of a "bad past" and of the representation of the witness as a victim and survivor who testifies, so that the truth of a great outrage is known and is not repeated, due to the pain of the victims and the affront to the human condition. In that sense, communicative analysis takes place in the dialectic between history and memory, a transcendent issue in that the sources of this work are at the same time protagonists and witnesses. That is, if communication is viewed as a process of social production of meaning

---

<sup>4</sup> The joint research trajectory described by the authors since 2013 organizes cross-fields, where each researcher presents his or her city as a case and thus better understanding of the other's city in order to undertake comparative analysis. Therefore, three semi-structured interviews were carried out with social leaders: one in Samanes del Cauca (January 2019), one in Vila Autódromo (January 2020), and one shared via videoconference on November 13, 2020. The third interview included Sandra María de Souza Teixeira and María da Penha Macena (local leaders from Vila Autódromo), Yoides Gómez, (local leader from Samanes del Cauca), and the authors, between whom an exchange of knowledge has been developing for at least six years, and some of whose most relevant achievements are analyzed here.

and collective resource useful for the achievement of relevant social goals (Fuentes-Navarro, 2010), the media and languages involved in the processes of organization and resistance are sources of memory, traces of social communication that enable historical analysis, in the junctures of urban conflict and for the protagonist groups where they have been generated and have acquired full meaning, in their condition as victims.

Cali and Rio de Janeiro are distinct cities, with varied histories and geographies.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, when viewed through the lens of urban policy, these two cities exhibit stability and similarities between characteristic features of the origin, consolidation, and relocation of working-class neighborhoods. The following comparative approach initially intends to examine the formation processes of Vila Autódromo and Samanes del Cauca.<sup>6</sup> This is realized within the context of urban

---

<sup>5</sup> Cali was founded in 1536 and its metropolitan area reaches 3 200 000 inhabitants. Just like Rio, this Colombian city has great ethnic and cultural diversity, with a significant population of Afro-descendants. Rio de Janeiro was founded in 1565, and is one of the most important urban centers in Latin America and its metropolitan area is home to more than 13 million inhabitants.

<sup>6</sup> The comparative perspective has a long tradition in the social sciences, particularly in political science. Such uses range from the elaboration of causal generalizations, where the validity of the result obtained from the selected cases is usually debated, to the explanation of specific historical events. This latter emphasis is adopted in this work. See Valduvico (1996) and Geddes (1990). The conceptual theoretical framework is put into operation in the methodological process, as follows: a) selection of situated cases that contain common denominators to the problems of urban policy and local social organization; b) in the development of individual semi-structured interviews that draw on the memory of social leaders who are protagonists of the cases; c) an online discussion group with leaders from both cities, with simultaneous translation, where convergences and specificities are identified and discussed, and d) with the adoption of the comparative method that allows interpreting and explaining specific historical events, such as urban politics and conflict in two cases that

conflicts, similar *modus operandi* employed by the local authorities in these two settlements, grassroots organizing, as well as the symbolic struggles and the role of communication in them, including forms of resistance and alliances undertaken by the residents.

### CHRONOLOGIES, DISTANCES, AND SIMILARITIES

Vila Autódromo arose in the southeast of Rio de Janeiro (Baixada de Jacarepaguá) at the beginning of the 1960s. Fishermen settled on the shores of the lagoon, starting the formation of the neighborhood alongside laborers from the nearby commercial worksites that were built during the 1970s, such as the Riocentro exhibition center and the racetrack itself, which inspired the name of the community. The first attempts to remove Vila Autódromo date back to the 1990s, at the initiative of the municipal government. This happened despite the fact that residents received concession titles for the use of their homes from the state government of Rio de Janeiro between 1994 and 1998 (Vale & Gonçalves, 2018).

The Samanes del Cauca neighborhood did not originate until the early 1990s, when peasant tenants on farms near Cali obtained permits to lease lots on the expansive levee that separates the Cauca River from the low flood zone in the southeast, in order to care for and repair the levee and prevent the appearance of irregular settlements.

In both cases, the communities were strengthened through the regularization of public services and neighborhood organizations that promoted their own way of life. In Vila Autódromo, the Association of Residents, Fishermen, and Friends of Vila Autódromo (AMPAVA) was born in 1987, while in 2004 the Community Action Board (JAC) emerged in Samanes del Cauca.

During the 1990s, Cali's government remained relatively absent from the neighborhood despite the fact that nearby (on the eastern plain that the 17-kilometer-long dike enabled for agriculture in the 1950s and the construction of neighborhoods from 1980 onwards)

---

show similar elements of the historical dynamics caused by urban removal policies, as connecting threads of a transnational phenomenon.

political, economic, and social forces were agitated between the formal, informal, and illegal development of these settlements. In Colombia, this represented one of the most accelerated and conflictive processes of urbanization and political incorporation of new urban masses into a normalized society (Romero, 1976) of the twentieth century.

In Vila Autódromo, if the 1990s marked the beginning of the community's confrontation with the institutional world, the 2000s, in contrast, brought with them a new expansive urban policy that conceived the city as a desirable product for the global investment circuit in the primary form of a stage for mega events.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the Olympic Park and its sports venues were built right next to Vila Autódromo.

In Cali, between 1992 and 2002, the community of Samanes del Cauca grew in the shadows of mayors who respected the informal nature of the settlement because they lacked the necessary resources to resettle the already sizeable community. But in 2000, the Municipal Council declared the levee (or "*jarillón*") an unimprovable high-risk area that was not habitable. This was the end of a period of relative calm.

In 2008, the Colombian government allocated an enormous budget for the "Jarillón Plan", a "social project with an infrastructure component" (Mayor's Office of Santiago de Cali, 2022), which was never properly executed, according to the Comptroller's Office and community leaders. In 2010, a large family compensation fund<sup>8</sup> in

---

<sup>7</sup> Rio de Janeiro hosted a series of major international events between 2007 and 2016 (Pan American Games 2007, Military World Games 2011, UN Rio+20 Conference in 2012, World Youth Meeting 2013, FIFA Confederations Cup 2013, FIFA World Cup 2014 and finally the 2016 Olympic Games).

<sup>8</sup> The Family Compensation Funds are entities created in Colombia in 1957 to administer and pay family subsidies to medium and low-income beneficiaries, in cash, in kind or services, and to implement social policies. They are non-profit legal entities under private law, organized into corporations, under the control and supervision of the Superintendency of Family Subsidies, which comply with the country's social security policies. The main economic associations, such as industrial and business, have formed the country's largest Cajas, which also build social housing.

the region built the Vallegrande neighborhood very close. The new neighborhood was built using new standards for homes and urban spaces. This generated the rather ironic stigma of an “invasion” against the settlement, as an informal and dangerous space, which was already established on the levee but until then had been invisible to the city. With its rural and urban way of life, the settlement of 105 houses with yards where animals were raised, food was grown, or where workshops and recycling depots were operated began to perceive the unprecedented signs of a new urban model more challenging than anything previous.

With the new Risk Management Law 1524, the Jarillón communities were included in an unmitigable risk zone, because the Cauca River, in a flood can break the Jarillón and flood Cali. More than a million people would be exposed. It would be irresponsible if I fought to stay, I would not want a catastrophe to happen to the city on a whim. So it was better to negotiate, and know that we are leaving in the best way (Yoides Gómez, Samanes del Cauca leader, virtual meeting, November 13, 2020).

During the dialogue between residents of both communities, one of the leaders of Vila Autódromo criticized the official start of the removals before resettlement options were ready.

Something extremely dangerous, because in Rio we have many cases of communities being removed. With that expectation, in those areas, in the end, garbage was dumped, other things happened, and those families were left homeless (Sandra Maria de Souza Teixeira, leader from Vila Autódromo, virtual meeting, November 13, 2020).

In this sense, Yoides Gómez provided new details about the situation in Samanes del Cauca:

That was another victory. When the new Mayor arrived, we said that we were not going to let even one more house be demolished because there was still more than 70% of the community left. Until the new housing was available, we would not let go of any more homes. And they told us, ‘Perfect. Then let’s start working on the designs of the homes that we are

going to provide for you.’ (Yoides Gómez, leader from Samanes del Cauca, virtual meeting, November 13, 2020).

In the Brazilian case, the real estate market shaped decisions made by public authorities and even gave impetus to the removal of Vila Autódromo. Most of the favela did not impede the construction of the Olympic Park. But its removal would allow for greater real estate profits due to the freeing up of land and the appreciation of the surrounding area.

The residents of Vila Autódromo knew how to use the tools they possessed, including their ability to make alliances. This is why in 2013, the Multidisciplinary Professional Academic Working Group (GTAPM)<sup>9</sup> prepared a report on the Plan Popular of Vila Autódromo and the city government’s projects and concluded that the residents’ proposal better addressed the principles of the right to the city, the social function of property, and a democratic, socially integrated, and environmentally responsible city (GTAPM, 2013).

Nonetheless, in 2014, pressure on families increased with the violent removal of homes and other forms of pressure for residents to accept the proposed compensation or their resettlement in a housing complex financed by the city government. The tradeoff indicated an almost total razing of the favela, and on the eve of the Olympic Games, the city proposed resettling the last families that did not accept compensation or resettlement. In the end, only 20 of the 700 families remained in the favela, but this is considered a sign of the success of the residents’ fight.

---

<sup>9</sup> The Grupo de trabalho acadêmico profissional multidisciplinar para análise e avaliação das alternativas de moradia para a Vila Autódromo/RJ (GTAPM) was formed by: the Brazilian Association of Anthropology (ABA), the Association of Geographers of Brazil (AGB), the National Association of Postgraduate Studies and Research in Social Sciences (ANPOCS), the National Association of Postgraduate Studies and Research in Urban and Regional Planning (ANPUR), the Regional Council of Social Service (CRESS), the Brazilian Institute of Architects (IAB), the State of Rio de Janeiro Union of Architects (SENGE), and the Engineers Union from the State of Rio de Janeiro (SARJ).

The resonance of their activism would travel far beyond the borders of Brazil and became a reference for contemporary urban conflict, where communication for community organizing played a pivotal role.

They were the families that did not accept any type of agreement with the city government. They stayed here and did not talk about removal because they wanted to stay. In the end, the city was paying compensation at the same rate per square meter of land as in Barra de Tijuca. And even here, they offered more than one apartment per family. So, those 20 families have this in common: they stayed and said, 'I don't want those apartments; I want to stay in Vila Autódromo' (Sandra Maria de Souza Teixeira, leader from Vila Autódromo, interview, January 25, 2020).

Upon hearing about the victory of the residents of Vila Autódromo, Yoides Gómez commented:

What we have seen about Vila Autódromo is very similar to what happened to us in Cali. The constants removals in Latin America: the remove of people, not even relocate them. Because I would call resettling entering into an agreement with the communities so that they don't go backwards but also win in this. And let it be something logical for us. Because the uprooting and everything that the institutions made us suffer at that time were very traumatic (Yoides Gómez, leader from Samanes del Cauca, virtual meeting, November 13, 2020).

Samanes del Cauca faced authoritative eviction for an environmental reason: the declaration of the levee as a high-risk area that cannot be improved, that is not habitable, and therefore not legalizable. The urgency to evict its inhabitants during the government of a businessman and philanthropist Mayor, was supposedly motivated solely by environmental risk, and it is not possible to speculate on public-private interest in any new investment project in the area.

In 2016, an investigation by the Cali Comptroller's Office showed a disorder in the management of large official resources destined for adaptation and resettlement. In 2017, the number of settlements on the levee increased, and in 2019, the demolition machinery intensified its work through tactical destruction that, as in Rio de Janeiro, ensured



environmental degradation in the community and little by little undermined the will of legitimate defense and the desire to remain in the area. In both places, certain strategies were repeated: the public authorities marked houses without providing necessary information about what was taking place; they destroyed homes but did not remove the rubble, transforming the area into a war zone in order to force the last resisters to acquiesce. The selective application of environmental risk zones would legitimize interventions, according to those interviewed in Colombia and Brazil:

But the imminent risk does not seem to affect large projects, although they do not mention this much (...). They are very careful not to reveal what they are going to do in the Cauca River, so that we do not make any type of claim (...). But the word “development” no longer sounds so nice to me. Because this development cannot be accompanied by attacking the communities, as is being done, removing them hastily (Yoides Gómez, leader from Samanes del Cauca, interview, December 28, 2020).

And the truth is that this story of risk is something that they use to remove communities. It is a false argument. Because they want to keep that rich area, that is something to enjoy, as can be clearly seen in the video [about Samanes del Cauca]. And they are violating the rights of those families who have lived there for years. The residents have to fight and unite against that mayor to be able to strengthen themselves, go out into the streets, and draw a lot of attention from civil society (Maria da Penha Macena, leader from Vila Autódromo, virtual meeting, November 13, 2020).

But the word *resistance* contains diverse practical nuances. This makes these stories of two distant working-class Latin American communities something that should be contrasted and told again.

#### THE ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESSES. RISKS, SILENCES, AND MEANS.

The community organizing process is the common denominator between these cases. This process includes access to public services, real estate regularization, political mobilization against announced threats of removal, the untangling of the forms of state control and

administration, alliances for the defense of the right to the city, collective survival strategies, and negotiations with public authorities.

Local governments in both cities provided reasons about risk and preservation that were never of much importance in the past, as in the case of Cali, or that were completely ignored, as in the deforestation of the Atlantic forest due to the works of the mega sporting events in Rio (Brum, 2013; Gonçalves & França, 2010). The discourse on environmental risk was incorporated into the flexibility of the interpretation of rights and responsibilities (Gonçalves & Vargas, 2015). Both cases demonstrate this:

There was a green belt (...). And when the city removes the community, it cuts down about 500 trees. We had drains for sewage, but it did not flow into the lagoon. We had sanitation (...). They said they were going to reconstitute the vegetation. Lie. They didn't even respect the distance from the water protection area. But [the high-income neighborhood of] Barra de Tijuca was built with the sewers facing the water (Sandra Maria de Souza Teixeira, leader from Vila Autódromo, interview, January 25, 2020).

The leaders have not wanted to be the stick in the wheel of development. There were studies that showed risk since 1998, done by the Universidad del Valle. The issue was how do we go (...). In 2000, the Municipal Council declared Jarillón a high-risk area (...). But this last government did not dialogue with the communities. And the Nation transferred one trillion 300 billion pesos, which would have been enough for decent resettlements. But the money disappeared, and the Jarillón Plan became a scrapped pot, as demonstrated by the Comptroller's Office (Yoides Gómez, leader from Samanes del Cauca, interview, December 28, 2020).

On the other hand, administrative silence is one of the challenges that community organizing usually faces in cases of threat of removal, and it not only constitutes a lapse in information that hinders the participation of residents in local projects, but it is also conceived of in the sense of how projects develop as a deliberate act. In Samanes del Cauca, the high turnover of public officials, the presumed technical insolvency of the administrators on duty who had to account for

an official position, the ties of the probable solutions to the opportunism of electoral campaigns, or the endless requests, detours, and conditions, like a Kafkaesque nightmare, were part of an official conspicuous silence confronted on many occasions by only the persistence of hopeful leaders.

... I felt very alone, like other leaders who have also fought for rights in Jarillón. Totally alone. Not even the UN, which came and gave us workshops. But we never received a response when six elderly people died in my community after the demolition of their homes (Yoides Gómez, leader from Samanes del Cauca, interview, December 28, 2020).

In the case of Vila Autódromo, this reality was also denounced by the leaders. They at least obtained the support of the Land Nucleus of the Public Defender's Office of the State of Rio de Janeiro.<sup>10</sup>

Here in Brazil, our Public Defenders don't always work well. But we have been very lucky with the Public Defender's Office in Rio, mainly our Land Unit, because the lawyers of the Public Defender's Office, which defends the people, the favelas, are women and activist lawyers who are truly committed. Because people know that not all of the Public Defender's Office works like this. And [there] in Cali, it seems that they are more on the side of the Mayor's Office than on the side of the residents (Maria da Penha Macena, leader from Vila Autódromo, virtual meeting, November 13, 2020).

Paradoxically, in both cases, the administrative silence coincides with information about evictions and other decisions made by authorities through the local media. Frequently, television, the press, and radio have been the regular channels of irregularity. The media participate in the creation of a new urban ideal that does not include favelas in

---

<sup>10</sup> The Public Defender's Office is an executive branch agency of the federal states and seeks to defend those who cannot assume the legal costs. The Rio de Janeiro State Public Defender's Office is organized into special units, such as the Núcleo de Terras e Habitação, which is solely responsible for matters involving land and property conflicts, such as those in Vila Autódromo.

its project. On more than one occasion, the media has presented the removal of favelas as an efficient public policy to achieve specific objectives (Nunes, 2017).

The media, by not questioning State actions, could be viewed as collaborating with administrative silence without serious investigative journalism on state violence. The residents then relied on social networks and alternative media to confront the silence and invisibility imposed by traditional media companies. This strategy allowed Vila Autódromo to appear frequently in international media reports (ComCat, 2016), which helped the neighborhood develop a more appropriate strategy for the case, its causes, and social demands in the media.

The demolition of Penha's house had a great impact on social networks. Everyone started posting about it. And the case appeared in the alternative media. And no mass or official media did anything. Then a project surfaced that said that not everyone needed to leave Vila Autódromo. And that's how they presented it to the press... And that the residents, inside the community could say what they wanted. But it was all a lie. They told the press one thing, but in practice it was something else: they told us that everyone would have to leave and that the person who didn't negotiate was at risk of being left with nothing (Sandra Maria de Souza Teixeira, leader from Vila Autódromo, interview, January 25, 2020).

In Cali, the experience with social networks was similar:

Social networks have helped us so much more than traditional media. They don't show anything; the networks do. We have to show it there. Because morning, noon, and night, all day long, the institutions were beaten for the things they had been doing... But with truthful, timely information, not made-up or exaggerated (Yoides Gómez, leader from Samanes del Cauca, virtual meeting, November 13, 2020).

After the news in the media, officials showed up gathering data, measuring and marking the houses as a prelude to the removals. Thus, the bureaucratic rationality of authoritarianism and the citizen intelligence of the residents in resistance were put to the test and the other ingredient in the recipe for removals was put on stage: the

individualization of the link for deterrence and negotiation with the resisters. In Vila Autódromo, officials co-opted some inhabitants to convince others to enter into negotiations, accept compensation, or live in the resettlement apartments built by the municipality.

In both Cali and Rio, the removal processes were supported by a resettlement policy, generally in apartments in housing complexes that were intended for families coming from the different areas of the official removal work. For the most part, the resettlement housing received a negative evaluation, due to its small size, the quality of materials and finishes, the distance from the original place of settlement, and the rupture with the ways of life in the original locations. This issue became evident in the case of Samanes del Cauca, where properties of 500 square meters or more, mostly dedicated to productive activities for more than 25 years, had to be exchanged for apartments of 40 square meters. The disproportionate change was also experienced in Vila Autódromo, where some houses were large and had their own land.

In both cases, the removals shared other characteristics, such as the *modus operandi* of the local authorities. Psychological pressure and threatening calls were followed by real actions, after which the community looked like a disaster zone. It is difficult to conceive of a modern-day scenario more unworthy of the human person. Likewise, it seems logical that the seed of resistance had to sprout from the scene of humiliation in both neighborhoods:

(...) removal is closely linked to the question of memory. Removal cannot be the erasure of memory. Removal is the erasure of geography, because every time something is removed, it changes the entire geography of the place to the point that it is no longer recognizable. In that process, as people left, the walls were demolished, the community was demolished. And the city government did not remove the rubble; it demolished the houses and left the rubble (...). It's the same, step by step. The recipe for removals (Sandra Maria de Souza Teixeira, leader from Vila Autódromo, interview, January 25, 2020).

Why, if there are resources, don't they give people [housing] in a better area? Because what the Political Constitution says is that: improve the living conditions of the communities. If before I lived in 500 or 1000

square meters, why are they going to put me in 40 meters, which is what those apartments measure. That is worsening my life, and from that, the elderly began to decline, to let themselves die (Yoides Gómez, leader from Samanes del Cauca, interview, December 28, 2020).

## SYMBOLIC STRUGGLE AND COMMUNICATION

The traces of communication produced within the events and processes in the settlements (audiovisual, sound, printed, or multimedia) comprise a repertoire that, instead of forming an opposition to historical rigor, is distinct from the written document. This difference allows for “the introduction of new terms, of new conceptions about the terms and realities that before were simply opposed” (Silva, 2016, p. 223). Historical analysis and memory are not opposing figures or sides of the same coin, but... “two forms of relationship with the past, with their own legality and legitimacy, their specific modes of elaboration and putting into circulation, which are supported by their own resources, enhanced by different political situations, supported by diverse institutions and practices” (Silva, 2016, p. 224).

In Samanes del Cauca, the resolve to challenge the image of “invasion” with an almost idyllic image of a dream community is represented in the seven types of productive housing and its environment, identified by Uribe et al. (2017). Certain elaborate shapes of the façade, certain special materials for the most visible parts, the manicured and fenced gardens to scare away cows and discourage criminals, and the central path in the shade of the samanés trees, reinforced the identity of the territory as its own place, with distinguishable homes. This represented a clear spatial communication strategy. Internally, it implied a clash with those who abandoned agricultural practices and converted their properties into sets of rooms and small ranches for rent, and denouncing the change in the type of land use painstakingly integrated years ago into the story of the fight against dispossession. Externally, it updated the predicament of a rural way of life that justified staying in wide properties and the privileges of a natural environment with urban benefits and dispelled fears of eviction.

In Vila Autódromo, the persistence of 20 of the almost 700 original families may seem like an insignificant triumph. However, the intensity

of the struggle and the imbalance of power were such that a single family would have been enough to give full meaning to the process of civil resistance in Rio de Janeiro. Along these lines, the official name of the only street in the new Vila Autódromo carried its own symbolic weight:

And we got the street to change its name. Because we understood that the community would be left with only one street. Then we got the street called “Vila Autódromo Street”. It was a matter of memory, a way to keep Vila Autódromo on the city maps, because if not, in time, it was going to disappear... in time the residents would say, ‘the street I don’t know what’... but no. , it is Vila Autódromo Street. And so it was done, and we achieved it through a decree (Sandra Maria de Souza Teixeira, leader from Vila Autódromo, interview, January 25, 2020).

In Samanes, the symbols were agitated from the beginning because the name of the settlement came from the saman tree, a robust species endemic to the area, it had a political motive: a name was required to stand and resist external threats. It would be one of the first symbolic resources of the process of communication and community organization that the confrontation with the greater power had unleashed forever and that, recently, was extended in “Renacer de los Samanes”, the name of the future neighborhood, incorporated into the new Plan of Cali Development.

The power of nomination is manifested, and here it is a street saved from shipwreck and the dream of a new neighborhood, but above all from the groups. In the words of Bourdieu (2000):

However, the dominated have a practical authority, a practical knowledge of the social world, on which the nomination can exert a theoretical, revealing effect. When it is well founded in reality, the name truly contains a creative power... words can construct things, and by assembling in the objectified symbolism of the group they designate, they can, even if only for a time, make collectives that already exist as groups, although only in a potential state (p. 128).

In Rio, the Museum of Removals, which was born with the demolition of Vila Autódromo, has an open-air route between the ruins of the houses of former neighbors, marked with their names, to “face the double process of erasure sought by state practices: both the physical space and the networks of emotional, moral, political, and economic relationships that historically formed the community” (Museu das remoções, s.f.).

With this museum, it is intended that, from the rubble of the removal of Vila Autódromo, it will be a place of memory and debate against all forms of arbitrary removal in Rio de Janeiro and other cities around the world; and it is integrated into current experiences of social museology (Chagas & Gouvea, 2014), which evoke initiatives of resistance to attempts at normalization, standardization, and control promoted by certain cultural and academic sectors.

The idea of the museum is that it circulates around the world. Let people denounce that the Olympics are also being removed. In Brazil, 77 thousand people were removed to prepare for the Olympics. (...). The Museum of Removals has a very good digital archive of practically all judicial processes. It has a number of undergraduate, master’s, doctoral, and post-doctoral theses written on the topic. It has a series of documentaries and everything that was managed to gather. There is ease for research and for the preservation of memory (Sandra Maria de Souza Teixeira, Vila Autódromo leader, interview, January 25, 2020).

The Vila Autódromo resistance movement gained support from civil society groups, public universities, individuals, alternative media, and other social agents inside and outside Brazil, including communities that had faced removals due to similar mega events (Vale & Gonçalves, 2018).

When that investment came from the Olympics, they managed to make the removal. And we began to do a series of activities that people called “Occupy Vila Autódromo.” An occupation movement is a cultural movement. Cultural and educational activities, open courses, parties, book launches, guided tours of the community, in the rubble, telling the story, showing



the removal. It was a way to break with the fact that it was a busy area and to give visibility, because that gave us security. When they came to carry out violent action, many people from outside also arrived, with cameras, parties, artists, many interviews, and reports, and that protected us... People alone would not have won in that fight; a lot of support is needed. If we had been left alone, we would not have what we got; we would have been crushed. A large number of supporters from Rio and around the world were mobilized. The international press came (Sandra Maria de Souza Teixeira, Vila Autódromo leader, interview, January 25, 2020).

A melting pot of artists, leaders from other favelas, researchers, students, journalists, and professionals made Vila Autódromo a mandatory stop to understand the other side of Rio, the Olympic city. In Vila Autódromo, the process of organization and alliances acted as a lens that magnified both the severity of the aggression and the imperative urgency of defense. The residents' struggle gained enormous proportions, becoming a counter discourse to the elitist urban model of large events. The images of the Vila Autódromo struggle were spread throughout the city, and the population that did not know the favela began to understand the importance of protecting it. Although the issue was very important for its protagonists, it meant the possibility of questioning the elitist model of mega-events, which denied residents their right to the city (Lefebvre, 1975).

FIGURE 1

LOGO SYMBOL OF THE REMOVALS MUSEUM (RIO DE JANEIRO)



FIGURE 2  
LOGO SYMBOL OF THE NEW NEIGHBORHOOD,  
RENACER DE LOS SAMANES (CALI)



On the contrary, in the case of Samanes del Cauca, the leader has wavered between complaining about the insufficient support of the various social sectors and raising awareness about the importance of alliances in the organizational process:

What we needed was for the academy to speak out, with forums in universities for us to present our needs (...). And we need to interact more with the government. Let the academy be a kind of arbiter to get closer to the government and say, 'look, we can solve this'. I invite you to also build a community, from the academy, the private company, the public company, and the government (Yoides Gómez, Samanes del Cauca leader, interview, December 28, 2020).

The victory comes after this social and collective struggle of the communities, after making a lot of resistance. It was when we felt that the academy supported us that it hurt that they were treating us that way. A sociologist came in and wrote a whole book. The communicators came in with a documentary video so that we could be in the Development Plan, which helped us prevail before the Municipal Council, which gave approval

for us to appear within the communities to be relocated (Yoides Gómez, Samanes leader of the Cauca, virtual meeting, November 13, 2020).

For its part, in the Brazilian case, it is evident that the struggle is constituted by certain acts of communication, the capitalization of broadcast resources, and the amplification of their demands and ideas.

In María da Penha's comparative discourse, the common denominators of the type of organizational process that they lived and led, with their particular causal relationships, also emerge. Likewise, the Brazilian leaders assumed the meeting with the Colombian leader was an opportunity to teach from their own experience, to disseminate facts and interpretations of those facts with a theoretical value over practice, to which the Colombian responded with samples of his own interpretative symbolic capital. The intensity of the process, in terms of the characteristics of the confrontation, its duration, its violence, the organization, and the alliances, allows them to have an overview and synthesis in the manner of a systematic analysis of the lessons learned. But this organizational and resistance process does not end when a certain local demand is reached. In Brazil, it has become a broader political reference that brings together efforts from other social actors.

Our victory is the fruit of a collective social mobilization. We managed to mobilize a set of social networks that supported us... It is very important to use social networks, the communication vehicles that we currently have. If the State institutions that should provide support do not provide it, report them. Make announcements (...). So it is very important that they do not give up communicating and calling for the support of society at this time. Because the State is cowardly, and when people arrive alone to meet the State, their tendency is to use its entire apparatus of force and violence (Sandra Maria de Souza Teixeira, Vila Autódromo leader, virtual meeting, November 13, 2020).

Communication, as a process of social production of meaning and collective resource, can be methodically used for relevant social purposes (Fuentes-Navarro, 2010); and the media, technologies, languages, and narratives are sources of memory that enable historical

analyses of diverse nature and scope. The original inclusion of such communication resources in media and mass cultural matrices does not exempt such sources from the rigorous review of their quality and value as documents for historical analysis, but, on the contrary, forces such analysis to work on their meanings in this task.

These traces of communication that in themselves inherit the forms and logic of a symbolic market, that is, they have emulated the function of some cultural merchandise; but mainly they have been, or can be, relative testimonies about the societies and groups where they once acquired, disseminated, preserved, and lost their fullest meaning; in the manner of life stories and by extension the legitimized biographical method, where the actor/author smoothes the communication process through texts equivalent to critiques on social integration, with a moral basis, propelled by the radicality of his experience (Rodríguez-Quintero, 2015). Finally, the strong conceptual and operational link between memory and communication is expressed as follows by one of the Brazilian leaders, from a perspective of vindication:

Memory is one of the main tools we have. Because when they want to destroy us, annihilate us, eliminate us, one of the weapons they use against us is to deny our memories. So our memories are a very powerful tool. Disclose that, record all the meetings, produce your files and your own memories (Sandra Maria de Souza Teixeira, Vila Autódromo leader, virtual meeting, November 13, 2020).

In this perspective, the purposes of social communication must be oriented towards the analysis of major sociological problems. In this sense, Silva's (2016) reflection is transcendent because he refers to the social relevance of such purposes. That is to say, a society cannot move forward in overcoming a bad past if the testimonies of the victims are not related to a growth in society's willingness to listen.

## CONCLUSIONS

The communicative analysis of the organizational processes in these informal neighborhoods is related to the communication practices

that the multiplicity of actors involved have considered necessary and probable, that is, strategic, in the process of formation, consolidation, removal, or relocation. However, it is necessary to differentiate the instrumental existence of the media, languages and narratives as mere resources of media visibility from their importance as expressions of one's own and others' representations about the process of the long and short history of informal neighborhoods, of their inhabitants, and of the urban conflicts that give them meaning, that is, their quality as historical documents.

Subaltern social actors, as victims, generate through communication resources the traces their own perception of history and their role in it, while making it possible to compare their own recent stories with this unique, refined documentary collection. Through the capitalization of media, technologies, formats, and languages, a set of files of diverse quality is generated, useful both for self-reflection, since they are actors of present history, and for an effort of historical comparison.

The resort to strategic management of the mass media in favor of the interests of the State and its private partners in the exercise of government power and in violent removals finds a sophisticated counterweight in the use of stagings of resistance in the community and its visibility in the urban space, on social networks, and in decision-making events. The "occupations" in Vila Autódromo, their instant assembly and intensive dissemination, the documentary videos for tactical political use in Samanes del Cauca, and the assertive media interventions and before specific audiences of the leaders, are part of the communicative resources that each process organizational structure was generated, sometimes with an archival logic, and through which content that the protagonists consider key has circulated.

Symbolic play in organizational processes exemplifies cultural mutations because it touches on profound aspects of human communicative behavior, and they happen, or should happen, with the speed and adaptability that contemporary social visibility would require.

Finally, communication does not imply, according to Munari (1990), only a relationship and a more or less adequate conceptualization of theoretical, historical, and political concepts; but it also implies the

value systems referred to, incorporating, in the cases analyzed, the authentic and sincere adherence of the supporters to social justice, human dignity, the right to the city, freedom of criticism, and the desire for broader changes in society. In this work, the interweaving of dense and operational concepts with problematic testimonies has yielded significant results through interpretation, evident in the new meaning that emerges when the comparison between cases is made.

There remains an effort to identify the terms of a dialogue between interpretations of academics and leaders, and of leaders among themselves, for the assessment of communication practices as memory resources and historical sources in situated cases. Far from apologizing for militancy, links are established between the elements of the social and political phenomenon to understand the unique historical cases in their relevance to the problem analyzed. The theory-comparison-interpretation interaction involves feedback mechanisms and successive approximations that provide rigor and help avoid possible biases during data collection and interpretation. In short, it has been an interdisciplinary interpretive effort in search of meanings for urban history from a communication perspective.

### ***Bibliographic references***

- Alcaldía de Santiago de Cali. (2022). *Plan Jarillón de Cali*. <https://www.cali.gov.co/gestiondelriesgo/publicaciones/167270/plan-jarillon-de-cali/>
- Bourdieu, P. (2000). *Poder, derecho y clases sociales*. Desclée de Brouwer. (Original work published in 1962).
- Brum, M. (2013). Favelas e remocionismo ontem e hoje: da ditadura de 1964 aos grandes eventos. *O Social em Questão*, 16(29), 179-208.
- Chagas, M. & Gouvea, I. (2014). Museologia social: reflexões e práticas (à guisa de apresentação). *Cadernos do CEOM*, 27(41), 9-21.
- Contraloría General de la República Colombia. (2023). La Entidad. Sobre la Contraloría general de la República. <https://www.contraloria.gov.co/la-entidad>
- Comunidades Catalisadoras (ComCat). (2016). Favelas na Mídia: Como a vinda da imprensa global na era dos megaeventos trans-

- formou a imagem das favelas. <https://comcat.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Relatorio-Favelas-Na-Midia-ComCat.pdf>
- Fuentes-Navarro, R. (2010). Práticas profissionais y utopía universitaria. Notas para repensar el modelo de comunicador. *Diálogos de la comunicación*, 74, 10-23.
- Geddes, B. (1990). How the cases you choose affect the answers you get: selection bias in comparative politics. In J. A. Stimson (Ed.), *Political Analysis* (pp. 131-150). The University of Michigan Press.
- Giannotti, C. S. (2016). *Experiências em Comunicação Popular no Rio de Janeiro Ontem e Hoje: uma história de resistência nas favelas cariocas*. Editora NPC.
- Gonçalves, R. S. & França, B. (2010). Entre o muro e a remoção: meio ambiente e favelas no Rio de Janeiro. In M.F. Cabral, M.G. Barbosa & M.J. de Souza (Eds.), *Cidade e sustentabilidade: Mecanismos de controle e resistência* (pp.263-278). Terra Vermelha.
- Gonçalves, R. S. & Vargas, D. (2015). Desastres e Justiça Ambiental: um desafio para o Serviço Social. *O Social em Questão*, 18(33), 9-22.
- Grupo de trabalho acadêmico profissional multidisciplinar para análise e avaliação das alternativas de moradia para a vila autódromo (GTAPM). (2013). *Vila Autódromo. Proposição da associação de moradores, pescadores e amigos da Vila Autódromo. Proposição da Prefeitura Municipal do Rio de Janeiro. Parecer*. [http://s3.amazonaws.com/portalsenge\\_prod\\_assets/documents/135/original/ParecerVilaAut%C3%B3dromo.pdf?1376071635](http://s3.amazonaws.com/portalsenge_prod_assets/documents/135/original/ParecerVilaAut%C3%B3dromo.pdf?1376071635)
- Lefebvre, H. (1975). *El derecho a la ciudad* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Península.
- Martins, G. & Paiva, R. (2023). Favela da Maré: a comunicação comunitária como geradora de mudança social. *RUA*, 29(1).
- Munari, A. (1990). ¿De verdad o de mentira? En *Videoculturas de fin de siglo* (pp. 107-116). Cátedra.
- Museu das remocoas. (s.f.). Sobre o museu das remocoas. <https://museudasremocoas.com/sobre/o-museu-das-remocoas/>
- Nunes, P. (2017). Favela, mídia e remoções: discurso jornalístico, imagens sociais e políticas públicas de habitação em favelas cariocas. *Transversos*, (9), 349 -374.

- Rodríguez-Quintero, R. (2015). Pobreza, tragedia, gobierno. El caso del barrio El Retiro (Distrito de Aguablanca, Cali, Colombia) en los años 80. *O social em Questao*, 18(33), 289-312.
- Rocha, A. (2004). Comunicação Comunitária e Suas Ferramentas. *Integrar: Pensando a Extensão*, (5), 9-13.
- Romero, J. L. (1976). Las ciudades masificadas. In *Latinoamérica, las ciudades y las ideas* (pp. 420-487). Editorial Universidad de Antioquia.
- Silva, R. (2016). El testimonio y el análisis histórico. In *Cuestiones disputadas. Ensayos sobre Marx, Freud, Foucault, Bourdieu y Bloch* (pp. 181-225). Ediciones Uniandes.
- Uribe, H., Ayala, G. & Holguín, C. (2017). Los Samanes del Cauca. In *La ciudad desbordada. Asentamientos informales en Santiago de Cali, Colombia* (pp. 111-220). Universidad Autónoma de Occidente.
- Valduvico, I. L. (1996). El análisis comparado de los fenómenos políticos (notas de investigación). *Revista Mexicana de Sociología*, 58(1), 153-169. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3541029>
- Vale, J. & Gonçalves, R. S. (2018) Intervención urbana y megaeventos en Río de Janeiro: resistencia de Vila Autódromo a la política de remoción. *Limaq*, 4(004), 123-141. <http://dx.doi.org/10.26439/limaq2018.n004.2645>

## PROFILES

*Ricardo Rodríguez-Quintero, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana Cali*

Social communicator. Master in Communication and Cultural Design, Universidad del Valle (Cali, Colombia), Doctor in Social and Human Sciences, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana (Bogotá, Colombia). Associate Professor of the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana de Cali.



*Rafael Soares Gonçalves, Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro*

Lawyer and historian. Doctor in History by the University of Paris VII with postdoctorate in Anthropology, EHESS (Paris). Associate Professor of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio). Coordinator of the Laboratory of Urban and Socio-Environmental Studies (LEUS). Scientific editor of the magazine *O Social em Questão*. Researcher at CNPq and FAPERJ.