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RESEARCH ARTICLE

SQUATTING AND SELF-MANAGED SOCIAL CENTRES IN MEXICO CITY: FOUR CASE STUDIES FROM 1978-2020

Robert González
Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo, México

Diego de Santiago
Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City

Marco Antonio Rodríguez
Sublevarte Colectivo, Mexico City

ABSTRACT: A number of remarkable examples of self-managed social centres can be found among squatting and autonomous social movements in Mexico; despite sharing some of the traits found in European squatting movements, they also reflect the specificities and characteristics of the Latin American context. This paper aims to describe and compare four of these case studies in Mexico City: Biblioteca Social Reconstruir (BSR, Rebuild Social Library), Escuela de Cultura Popular Mártires del 68 (ECPM 68, Martyrs of 68 Popular Culture School), Okupa Che and Chanti Ollin. By examining these four examples in terms of the politics of self-management, it is possible to evaluate the achievements and limitations of this type of urban commons in Mexico from a critical success/failure perspective. Moreover, the different chronology of the four cases allows for an analysis of different stages in the relationship between urban social movements and broad grassroots movements in the country. The methodological approach includes committed ethnography, participant observation and in-depth interviews.

KEYWORDS: commons, Mexico, self-management social centres, squatting, success/failure perspective

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR(S): Robert González, rgonza67@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Almost all academic and activist research on squatted and self-managed social centres (SSCs) focuses on post-industrial and extensively urbanized countries in Europe and the United States of America. It is therefore very important to conduct research on this subject in other parts of the world, such as Mexico. Moreover, no studies so far have analysed social centres of this kind in terms of urban commons and from a success/failure perspective.

Two of the four case studies addressed in this article are squats (Chanti Ollin and Che), while the other two (BSR and ECPM68) have had different legal statuses at different times, including periods of rental, occupation, and other forms of anomalous institutionalization (Martínez 2013). However, all four form part of an autonomous-libertarian-anarchist political arena. SSCs may be considered urban commons as they are cultural spaces whose management is neither public nor private, but common (Martínez 2020).

At this juncture, it is important to clarify the meanings of squatting and self-management and to identify the various types of squatted and self-managed projects present in the history of Mexican social movements. In general terms, "squatting is about the illegal occupation of property used without the previous consent of its owner" (Catteneo and Martínez 2014, 2). This definition allows four main types of occupation to be distinguished in Mexico: farming land occupations, "irregular settlements", indigenous autonomous projects and political urban squatting and self-managed experiences. The first type is exclusively rural, while the other three types can be found in rural and urban settings. Although they all begin by defining a common good, they then take different paths. For example, indigenous autonomous projects shift at a later point to combine private housing with limited public space following a process of negotiation or regularization. SSCs fall into the fourth category, which is the only category that may be accurately described as autonomous urban commons and is also the type of project that the authors are most familiar with.

The four self-management experiences compared in this study are examples of radical political urban squatting or self-managed projects. Two of them, Che and Chanti Ollin, have also existed as a housing alternative on a sporadic basis throughout their history, but this is not their principal objective. This article focuses on the goals rather than the means of self-management, so experiences that have not involved the squatting of a space will also be included. In this regard, rather than sharing a previous history of squatting, the self-management experiences in all four buildings coincide in satisfying common needs, such as a "[s]elf-produced and creative commons culture opposing intellectual property rights; space required for holding political meetings and campaigns; alternative exchange of goods, foods and beverages; social interactions and debates without the pressure of paying with money (that) are possible thanks to the availability, accessibility and openness of these buildings" (Catteneo and Martínez 2014, 3).

The comparative approach adopted in this study is beneficial for several reasons. Firstly, analysis of the case studies in terms of failure or success could reveal whether the use of different tactics, identities, and strategies results in different outcomes. Secondly, if the four experiences are analysed from a historical perspective, it should be possible to detect changes in the social movements' responses to the capitalist city. Comparing these four experiences across different times and stages could reveal a variety of outcomes enjoyed or suffered by urban activists under changing social, economic, and political conditions. Finally, a comparison over time can provide empirical evidence of the innovative nature of squatting in the Mexican tradition of radical struggles, including anarchists, Zapatistas, Marxists and autonomists.

The article aims to describe and compare four social centre experiments in Mexico City, to analyse the different stages in the relationship between urban social movements and SSCs, and to evaluate their outcomes in terms of failure or success. In order to do this, the first section will present the theoretical and methodological framework used, based on a conceptualization of SSCs as urban commons and a qualitative

and participative methodology that seeks to evaluate them from a critical success/failure perspective. Next, the historical background of the squatting and autonomous movements will be explored, emphasizing the peculiarities of Mexico and Latin America. This historical section serves as an introduction to the case studies, which will be described and analysed in detail, before the article ends with several conclusions that summarize the main contributions of this research.

2. Creating the common: a critical, committed success/failure approach

Following contributions such as those of Harvey (2013), experiences of SSCs may be analysed as a response to the common needs that remain unmet by the neoliberal city, such as alternative sociability and housing. Popular self-organization in squatted and self-managed social centres is a way to revive the policy of anti-capitalist transition, which has been hijacked by the interests of capital (Martínez 2020).

The emergence of neoliberalism in Mexico is usually linked to Miguel de la Madrid's presidency in 1982 (Cadena 2005; Salazar 2004), but its origins can be traced back to the 1976 economic crisis resulting from the austerity and protectionism of Luis Echeverría's government, which forced the next president, José López Portillo, to accept the recommendations of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The IMF recommended opening up the country to private investment and privatizing public companies and industries (Hidalgo and Janoschka 2014,158). The fact that SSCs appeared on the social and political scene in late 70s is relevant, as they seek to preserve the principles of common living, creation and work. Members of these social centres focus on ways to attempt to counter the commodification of housing, education and life, opening up their spaces to share and exchange knowledge, as well as to teach and learn different, non-exclusionary, non-discriminatory practices and philosophies.

In order to explore Mexican experiences of SSCs, Eurocentric understandings of these concepts must be re-conceptualized and re-framed. While there is already an ample body of European and American literature on the return of the commons (Ostrom 1990; Hardt and Negri 2009), ancestral practices based on communality persist among indigenous peoples in Latin America. The SSCs in Mexico may be analysed from a European perspective, whereby the metropolis is understood as a factory in which the common good is produced, with significant potential for anti-capitalist critique and political activism. However, the forms of community organization practised by native Mexican peoples can emerge in the city through SSCs, since "communality can be lived and experienced by anyone who is committed to community life and contributes to giving life to institutions such as the Assembly, the Tequio and the Charge System (...) is not exclusive to rural communities, it can stay alive in big cities" (Aquino 2013, 11). Tequio is a Nahuatl concept that can be translated as unpaid or collective work that all members owe to their community. It is "a use and custom" of the indigenous Mexican communities, a way to prioritize communal collaborative work because "for Nahuas, work can never be an individual task; one does not work alone for one's own needs, one must always share the work with others" (Good 2005, 92).

Moreover, according to Oaxacan Mixe anthropologist, Floriberto Díaz (1995), the community has an immanence referred to as 'communality', which is associated with notions such as the collective, complementarity and comprehensiveness. For Díaz (1995), communality cannot be understood without taking other typical elements of indigenous peoples' communal organization into consideration. These go beyond mere social organization and include: a) the land as mother and as territory (the relationship between mother and child cannot be based on property, but only on mutual belonging); b) consensus decision-making (for the pursuit of the common good); c) free service as an exercise of authority (selfless work); d) collective work as an act of recreation (for recreational purposes and as part of a quest for the common good); and e)

rites and ceremonies as an expression of the communal gift (spiritual experience of communality). The assembly dynamics, non-proprietary logic, gratuitousness and concept of work present among SSCs in Mexico City are not far removed from this description.

However, Mayan sociologist Gladys Tzul (2015) warns against an essentialist conceptualization of indigenous communal dynamics. They are not an archaic practice from the past or a romantic idea that must be kept intact so that it is not contaminated by external forms of organization. On the contrary, it is important to view indigenous communities in terms of the functioning of the strategies that men and women develop daily to manage, self-regulate, and defend their territories. Besides, these communal plots are not without contradictions and political hierarchies. They are shaped and surrounded by them, yet despite this, their occupants continue to fight for the autonomy to control their livelihoods. The struggles of the SSCs in Mexico City are a hybrid between indigenous notions of communality and the concept of the commons proposed by Western scholars.

Solidarity between social centre activists and vulnerable groups represents an attempt by the former to expand and reinforce the community. Social centre activists are constantly trying to implement the beliefs and ideas that they endorse, fighting the commoditization of the city by creating spaces where profit is not the main goal and where socializing freedom of living is prioritized. This freedom begins with the recognition of the individual as part of the community and with autonomous, self-managed education, health, work, and housing. In a large city such as Mexico City, where the cost of living is constantly rising and access to many services is limited or conditioned, the chance to establish different ways of carrying out transactions and exchanges that are not based on money or profit by exploitation in collaboration with others represents a potential alternative for many people.

Another important matter addressed in this paper is the possibility of evaluating the experiences of these types of autonomous movements in terms of failure and success and the way in which this should be approached. According to Miller (1999), the success of a movement can sometimes play a role in its demise. In other words, not all social movements fail as a result of repression or co-optation; some decline because they are too successful. This is not the case of squatting, which remains an insurgent urban practice. Success must therefore be understood in other terms. If the projects themselves can be agreed to have a social impact though their public activities, an alternative indicator of success could be length of time. However, if a self-managed project becomes isolated due to factionalism or other reasons, it could fail. As factionalism worsens and repression continues, groups become increasingly insular, leading to encapsulation (Miller, 1999). Following Haiven and Khasnavish (2013), a critical success/failure approach has been adopted in this article to analyse four cases of SSCs in Mexico City. This perspective is informed by the authors' dual status as researchers and activists and is based on a methodological design that allows these long-standing projects to be evaluated. The aim of this theoretical approach is to produce a richer, more rigorous understanding of urban squatting and autonomous movements in Mexico, as well as the significance of their activity for social change.

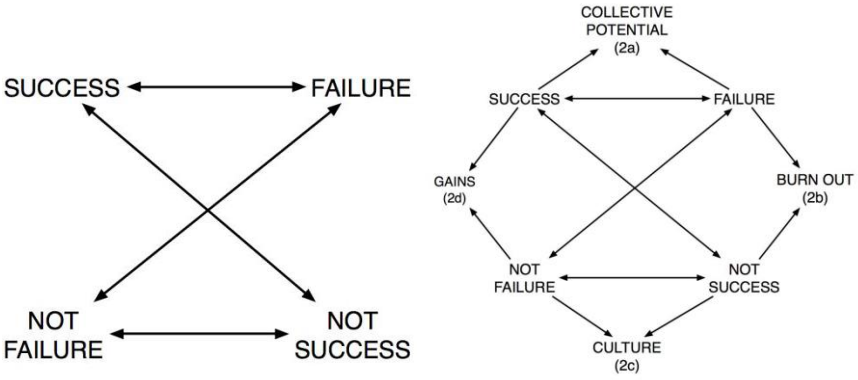
Nevertheless, the prevailing conceptualizations of a movement's success or failure will not be adopted in this article, as Saeed (2009) and the authors' own experience as activist-researchers have shown that they "are inherently unable to grasp the overall consequences and essence of social struggle" (1). Therefore, success will not be understood as the capacity to mobilize material and immaterial resources within a specific political opportunity structure (POS), as in the mainstream literature on social movements, because social movements are understood here not as 'objects' of study but as subjects. The sophistication of POS frameworks and theories does not allow penetration of the mechanisms that foster and facilitate struggles for urban commons. Analysis of success and failure in social movements should instead focus "on relationality, encounter and dialogue" (Haiven and Khasnabish 2013, 481).

The analysis of success and failure in Mexican SSCs presented here does not seek to capture the political or social impacts of these movements, which are contradictory and highly relative , but rather to identify the non-institutional and non-instrumental effects underpinning support for urban struggles against neoliberalism, for common goods and decent living conditions. The creativity and imagination of the squatter and autonomous movements transform social centres into laboratories where different ways of inhabiting the city can be explored (Van Der Steenn, Katzeff and Van Hoogenhuijze 2014).

When adopting a success/failure approach, the criteria employed must be defined. The participatory methodology used in this study, which is based on ethnography and dialogue with social centres, has led these criteria to be interpreted in a relational manner. Firstly, given that infrastructural spaces of this kind produce common goods (neither private nor state-owned), their mere survival in the face of the repression and precariousness imposed by the state is in itself a success. The second criterion is the self-evaluation made by these social centres, drawn from interviews with their most active, long-standing members. Thirdly, failures are also potential sites of rupture and possibility. Through the use of these criteria, the question of success or failure will be kept open to allow additional issues arising to be analysed. The approach to success and failure taken in this study is based on a non-binary logic, which rejects the framing of success that has emerged in competitive neoliberal societies.

Following Haiven and Khasnabish (2013, 484), this article will break the binary of success/failure, adding the contradictory, mixed categories of ‘not success’ and ‘not failure’.

Figure 1. Deconstructing the success/failure binary



Source: *Haiven and Khasnabish 2013, 484-485*

The emerging categories of synthesis on each axis of the square diagram allow the diverse, contradictory aspects of success and failure in the four case studies to be analysed. The synthesis between success and failure is referred to by the authors as ‘collective potential’, a “world of freedom where individuals and groups were able to constitute and reconstitute themselves” (Haiven and Khasnabish 2013, 485); the synthesis between success and not failure is termed ‘gains’ and represents the movement’s practical and material victories; between not failure and not success, a third ‘culture’ category emerges, representing the immanence and day-to-day characteristics of a social movement’s actions and projects; finally, the synthesis between not success and failure is entitled ‘burn out’ and represents demoralization and isolation among the activists in a social movement. However, we must acknowledge the limitations of this approach in accounting for the temporal dimension of success and failure in long-term experiences, where several stages with different characteristics may succeed one another.

3. Methodology

In terms of methodology, the authors are committed to a militant ethnography that provokes the emergence of radical imagination as a condition of possibility for radical social change (Graeber 2009; Juris 2008). Ethnography is not only understood here as a "thick description or even as a set of research methods grounded in participant observation and immersion in the field but as a perspective committed to understanding and taking seriously people's lived realities" (Haiven and Khasnavish 2013, 477-478). The qualitative data required for this type of analysis was obtained by means of six in-depth interviews with long-term activists involved in the four self-managed projects selected and participatory observation during a series of periods ranging from 2014-20. It is also important to highlight the fact that the authors of this article were themselves involved with the self-management experiences and squatting practices explored here. The first author participated in social activities at ECPM 68 and BSR on a sporadic basis in 2015 and 2020. The second author built links to Chanti Ollin and Okupa Che as part of his master's degree research on the identity of squatters in Mexico City. He also collaborated with members of Chanti Ollin to organize a frame-by-frame animation workshop following the November 2016 eviction. The third author was involved with ECPM 68 for a long time as part of a collective known as Sublevarte1. The research for this study was carried out through ethical engagement with activists: the squatters offered the authors an opportunity to spend time with them and attend their meetings, allowing the authors to exchange knowledge through participant observation and become involved in activism. As a result, the authors were able to meet a network of members of different squatted spaces in Mexico City, such as Okupa Che.

Table 1. Long-term activists interviewed

Nickname	*Date*	*SSCs*
dHP	*17 March 2018*	*Chanti Ollin and Okupa Che*
Luna Garza	*26 March 2018*	*Chanti Ollin*
AML	*27 July 2018*	*Chanti Ollin and Okupa Che*
Charly	*30 May 2020*	*ECPM 68*
Tobi	*29 May 2020*	*BSR*
Helio	*1 June 2020*	*BSR*

Source: The authors

[1] A play on the words 'uprising' and 'art'.

4. A brief historical background of squatting and self-management in Mexico City

Squatting and autonomous movements in Mexico City have a long history of social struggle to demand rights to housing or land ownership, as well as recognition for marginalized inhabitants. The irregular, eclectic structure of the city's urban landscape may be understood as the product of these struggles and of extensive demographic expansion throughout the 20th century, when constant flows of people from other states and rural areas arrived in Mexico City. It may also be interpreted as the result of a series of 'influential waves', building a social movement through the presence of foreign activists and philosophies syncretized with the traditional practices and cosmogonies of local indigenous communities.

4.1. The first wave

Examples of squatting in Mexico City may be found as far back as the 19th century, when the government of Porfirio Díaz based its urbanist project on an elitist regime that determined who could inhabit the city and be recognized as a citizen based on their wealth (Quiroz 2016). The inequalities of city living were established during this time: wealthy inhabitants lived in central districts with a planned urban design, while indigenous immigrants built their homes on the periphery, creating new districts that eventually expanded the irregular urban morphology.

These inequalities eventually led to the uprisings of the early 20th century, which were strongly influenced by anarchist and libertarian philosophies perpetuated by European immigrants. Greek immigrant Plotino Rhodakanaty founded a community school on the periphery of the city for indigenous peasants to develop their social and class consciousness and launch projects combining the mutual aid and cooperativism of European anarchists with the traditional communal land ownership and governance of indigenous groups (Sandoval 2011; Hart 1974; Domínguez, 2015). These projects led to the 1910 Mexican Revolution, when indigenous peasants fought to eradicate exploitation and demand recognition of their right to own their ancestors' lands.

The 1917 Constitution (which remains in effect today) enshrined indigenous inhabitants' right to communal property. Despite this, social and racial inequalities persisted in access to housing, for example, prompting the emergence of other autonomous squatting communities. During the 1940s, members of Mexican Air Force Squadron 201, who participated in WWII, protested the lack of housing by parachuting into a vacant lot. A new neighbourhood named 'Escuadrón 201' was subsequently founded on the lot, and the squatters became known in Mexico as paracaidistas or parachutists (Bautista 2015, 9).

4.2. The second wave

Between the 1940s and the 1980s, the country's urban population grew dramatically. The urban borders of Mexico City continued to expand outwards, while housing rights improved. A second wave of radical ideologies influenced by Maoist and Guevarist Marxism arrived in the country between the 1960s and 70s (Bautista 2015), brought by books, news sources (newspapers, radio and TV), and Mexicans who had been to communist countries, such as Florencio 'el Güero'2 Medrano, who opened a squat in Morelos state (next to Mexico City) (Velázquez 2016).

2 'The Blond'.

One important movement that was influenced by these political ideologies and a touch of anarchism was the Mexican '68, a mass mobilization by young students against the authoritarian, undemocratic, and repressive regime (Ontiveros, Sánchez and Tirado 2017). Mexico City became the main stage for this huge social mobilization. The Tlatelolco massacre on 2 October brought the movement to a bloody end, although some young people joined the urban guerrillas to fight for a socialist revolution (Cerón 2012). Nowadays, the students' struggle is considered a fundamental predecessor in the fight for women's rights, environmental protection, the right to diversity, sexual freedom, etc. (Jardón 1998, 207).

During the same year, the Movimiento Urbano Popular (Popular Urban Movement [MUP]) emerged, bringing together several different social collectives focusing on housing rights in the city (Bautista 2015). The movement grew throughout the 1970s as new squatted neighbourhoods sprung up in and around the city, but it was not until the 1985 earthquake that it acquired greater relevance when it became the main organisation to challenge the government on its inadequate response to the disaster. The MUP took care of the victims, giving them shelter and covering their basic needs.

By 1987, the MUP was so strong that some of its members took part in the creation of a new left-wing political party, the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (Democratic Revolution Party [PRD]), which came close to winning the 1988 presidential elections (Bautista 2015). After this, the MUP (which remains active today) continued to work through the Asamblea de Barrios (Neighbourhood Assembly [AB]) as a diverse urban organization helping people to access housing and acting as a mediator between the government and society. It became more active still following PRD's victory in the first democratic local elections in Mexico City in 1997.

4.3. The third wave

Finally, in the 1990s, the arrival of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista National Liberation Army [EZLN]) on the political scene when NAFTA came into effect in 1994 changed how intellectuals, students and activists understood politics. The idea of autonomous movements based on indigenous communality and a rejection of the state and political parties was adopted by several urban movements and helped to revitalize the urban commons. The difference between these new autonomous movements and the MUP was their negation of the state as the main vehicle for establishing a new society. Meanwhile, Zapatism provided inspiration for alter-globalization movements around the world (Pleyers 2010).

These autonomous movements gained strength with the student strike against tuition fee rises at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in 1999. Okupa Che and Chanti Ollin were created during and as a result of this strike, as part of the goal of recovering spaces for common living and housing based on autonomy and mutual aid.

Since then, throughout the almost two decades of the 2000s, the fight against the commodification and privatization of land and for the protection of common goods, cultural practices and identities has intensified in different parts of the city (Icazuriaga, Pérez, Téllez and Zamorano 2017). This dynamic offers insight into the way in which the revaluation of the commons against privatization plays a central role in the discourse of new autonomous social movements in Mexico City.

In addition, the rise of the internet and social media has strengthened influence and cooperation between social movements around the world. It is for this reason that examples of syncretized urban squatting movements can be found in Mexico City, combining the European social centre model, do-it-yourself punk philosophy, communal practices from indigenous communities and the radical autonomous politics of the

Zapatistas in varying proportions. This third wave can be understood as the art of organizing hope (Dinerstein 2015), as activists realize what they want to pursue and embark upon a continuous process of fighting for their needs. As a result, heterogeneous left-wing political influences, mostly autonomist and libertarian, coexist and delimit the practices and discourses present in SSCs.

4.4. The 'mestizaje' 3 of squatting and self-management in Mexico City

According to Raul Zibechi (2003), Latin American social movements may be understood as a 'mestizaje' of different political perspectives. Squatting in Mexico is one example of this phenomenon, whereby interaction between Western radical philosophies and indigenous practices and cosmogonies produced new identities and forms of action. The adaptation of foreign ideologies to the local context revitalized the political structures of peasant and indigenous groups and reveals how their communal living and land ownership became compatible with the abolition of private property advocated by Marxists and anarchists.

Since the 1980s, Latin American movements have been characterized by a prioritization of horizontal relationships, the importance of land rooting, self-schooling, the central role of women, and self-affirmation of the identity (Zibechi, 2003). Even when activists in SSCs experiences in Mexico City are not indigenous, they identify with the historical struggles of indigenous groups.

The presence of migrants has led to reciprocal politicization (Bouillon in Mudu and Chattopadhyay 2017), causing a feedback loop between local and external agents and allowing the former to learn from foreign projects and apply new practices and ideologies. In some Mexican SSCs, it is easy to find migrants who have been squatters in their respective countries (participant observation, 2017-2018).

Finally, the identification of 'squats' is also subject to local specificities due to historical conditions and the phenomenon of 'mestizaje'. Mudu and Chattopadhyay (2017, 7) note the questionable nature of the label 'squat' when applied in different countries. In Mexico, there is a tendency to label all squatters as 'paracaidistas', which operates as a local umbrella term to refer to any occupation of land or buildings without legal property rights (De Santiago 2018). However, the four SSCs explored in this article do not wish to be associated with the MUP (the 'paracaidistas' archetype) because of its relationship with the Mexican government. They instead prefer to identify themselves as self-managed spaces or autonomist projects within the city.

5. Four experiences of long-term self-management in Mexico City

In this section, four case studies of SSCs in Mexico City will be described in chronological order, from the oldest and longest-lasting to the most recent and short-lived.

5.1. Biblioteca Social Reconstruir: an anarchist form of self-management (1978-2020)

BSR is an anarchist space founded in 1978 by a Catalan anarchist named Ricardo Mestre Ventura, who was exiled in 1939. Throughout its history, it has occupied three different headquarters: it originally opened in Calle Morelos, before moving to Calle López and Calle Independencia, very close to the historic centre of

3 A colonial concept referring to race mixing between indigenous people and Spaniards.

Mexico City. However, due to high rental costs, it has now moved to the FAT (Frente Auténtico del Trabajo), an independent union located in a working class neighbourhood in the north of the city called Colonia Guadalupe Victoria (interview with Helio 2000). BSR is a self-managed library, which is independent from any political or institutional affiliations. It houses more than 3,000 books on anarchism, social literature, reviews and newspapers, punk and youth publications, fanzines, etc.

Figure 2. Banner inside BSR, Mexico City, 2015

Source: *BSR Facebook, downloaded from https://www.facebook.com/1529157054005667/photos/a.1617045761883462/1617047535216618/?type=3&theater*

BSR is managed by eight people, although it has an assembly with around twenty people "for the important decisions". In addition to the groups that manage BSR, other groups also meeting on the premises in 2020 include a libertarian pedagogy group, an anarcho-punk revolt group, an antipsychiatry group and several others who have requested a meeting space (interview with Tobi, 2020).

BSR also carries out political, social and cultural work in the neighbourhood, such as reading promotion, political activism, and children's activities. However, visitors to the library tend to be researchers, students, professors, and, most of all, young libertarians who search inspiration and knowledge in its collection to inform their quest for freedom and justice (interview with Tobi 2020).

BSR has been beset by financial problems due to rental prices and other current expenses. Despite this, it rejects subsidies of any kind and is instead maintained by contributions from activists and supporters from Mexico City and around the world, as well as by self-managed initiatives such as solidarity concerts held in more appropriate venues such as Multiforo Alicia (interview with Tobi 2020).

Throughout its 40-year history, BSR has been involved in a variety of social movements in Mexico City. While it was very active in the field of anarchism in the 1990s, its activity peaked during the alter-globalizing movement, the high point of which was the Carlo Giuliani Caravan. In collaboration with this group, BSR organized mass displacements from Mexico City to Monterrey, Guadalajara and Cancun as part of grassroots protests against the World Trade Organization, the World Bank and the G20. In 2004, the group suffered brutal repression: 150 people were detained and several BSR members were imprisoned for long periods of time (interview with Tobi 2020).

Like all anarchist and libertarian spaces, BSR suffers persecution and harassment from police forces. On 15 September 2015, police were observed loitering in a provocative manner outside the social centre during a talk about squatting in Spain. The police patrol spent three months in front of BSR, harassing and following some of its members (participant observation 2015).

Rather than a squatted space, BSR is an emblematic, self-managed social centre where all kinds of activities supporting social movements in the city take place. One of its activists explained: “for example, in Chanti Ollin they offered us the space, that we went there, Che Guevara also, but we told them that the problem is that if we were evicted we would lose a very important cultural heritage (…) we always prefer to have a space even if it costs us a lot to maintain it, a lot of work to pay for it” (interview with Tobi 2020).

BSR has consistently rejected all forms of negotiation with the authorities. In 1997, they received an offer from the municipal government through the Young Cause organization just as the institutional left came to power. They have also received financial offers from universities (UNAM and UACM), but have rejected them all on the basis of a radical perspective of autonomy: "in anarchism, it has always been argued that when the state puts its hands on culture, it does so to drown it, or to numb it, or to tame it, that is, to make it obedient " (interview with Tobi 2020).

BSR continues to work in cooperation with other SSCs, such as Chanti Ollin, Che, ECPM 68, El Clandestino, El Castillo del Brujo, El Banco and Multiforo Alicia. In the words of one of its activists, “these are working and fraternal relationships” (interview with Tobi 2020).

According to an activist at BSR, the organization’s modest goals have made it possible to achieve relative success:

Its function is to preserve and document things, it is not to carry out an anarchist movement (…). Have we accomplished it? Yes, we have managed to spread, have a presence. Many people who have trained close to us are now teachers or researchers (...) our work has been to disseminate the ideal and we believe that up to now we have achieved it (…) (interview with Tobi 2020).

5.2. The Escuela de Cultura Popular Mártires del 68: anomalous institutionalization (1988-2020)

ECPM 68 was founded in 1988 by a coalition of people involved with the MUP and artist collectives; some had also participated in the ’68 social movement and had Marxist tendencies. The school arose from the need to implement cultural education projects linked to the country’s social movements, which were calling for socialism and liberation. It was founded by Alberto Híjar, Enrique Cisneros and Iseo Noyola, members of the Taller de Arte e Ideología (Art and Ideology Workshop [TAI]), Centro de Experimentación Teatral y Artística (Centre for Experimentation in Drama and Art [CLETA]), and the dissolved Organización de Arte y Cultura (Art and Culture Organization), respectively. The Círculo de Estudios de la Casa del Lago (Lake House Study Group) joined the project at a later date.

The 1999-2000 UNAM students’ strike movement brought a second wave of members, who displayed more Zapatista and libertarian tendencies. The space aims to operate as a school, teaching graphic arts (posters, screen prints, engraving and fanzines) as a method of political action and communication for popular sectors of society (interview with Charly 2020). There is also a consumer cooperative and local groups.

Following a series of moves and prosecution by the authorities in the 1990s, the school found a more permanent site near the city centre in a working class neighbourhood called Colonia Obrera in 2002. In legal terms, it is a comodato (loan regime) or ‘use loan’, that is, a contract whereby one of the parties gives the

other a property to use free of charge until it is no longer needed. This cession of use by the Mexico City Government was the result of negotiations concerning the previous site, which used to be a social housing unit.

Government negotiations of this kind tend to arouse internal debate among the members of self-managed spaces regarding the potential implications and impacts on the objectives and prerogatives of their projects (Martínez 2013). In order to obtain the comodato, ECPM 68 had to officially register as a non-profit organization, which led to further discussion among members; several disagreed on principle but the majority believed that it would be possible to continue to operate as a cultural centre aimed at the working classes. Through this procedure, ECPM 68 was legalized, but despite being recognized as a non-profit organization, it does not receive money from the state or from private organizations, working instead as an anomalous institution (Martínez, 2013). Moreover, the comodato was granted for only 6 years (the duration of a government mandate), so it could be said that the school premises have returned to squatted status since 2008. It is for this reason that ECPM 68 continues to define itself as an autonomous, self-managed space.

The original founders still work at ECPM 68, but they have also opened up the space to students and collectives dedicated to graphic arts and promoting political activism (interview with Charly 2020). Younger members aged 18 to 30 years old can be found working on graphic projects with a social purpose, as well as delivering itinerant workshops in marginalized neighbourhoods of the city, attempting to share graphic techniques as a way of communicating social messages. There have also been foreign members from Canada, the United Kingdom and Chile, who taught workshops and, in some cases, carried out academic research. They shared their knowledge of radical or social movements in their own countries and participated in social mobilizations in Mexico City on several occasions (participant Observation 2015 and 2017).

The presence of younger members is relevant because they keep the group's political and social activism up-to-date. During a visit to ECPM 68 on July 2015, the authors were able to observe members' involvement with struggles such as the Ayotzinapa 43, the anti-femicide (feminicidio) movement, and urban campaigns against gentrification and insufficient housing supply. More recently, members of ECPM 68 have engaged with victims of the 2017 earthquake, with a particular focus on the seamstresses who died inside a building near the school. This echoes earlier activism: ECPM 68 has worked with and received support from the seamstresses' labour union since the 1980s, when several seamstresses died in an earthquake in 1985.

Figure 3. Mural on the exterior wall at ECPM 68, 2015

Source: *the authors*

5.3. Okupa Che: the students' movement squat (1999-2020)

Okupa Che is a university auditorium at UNAM, which has been squatted since the movement began in 1999-2000. It was originally led by the students' organization Consejo General de Huelga (General Strike Council [CGH]), but anarchist tendencies have reigned on the site since 2002.

For several years, Okupa Che hosted the free radio station 'K Huelga Radio'. It is also home to an autonomous art gallery, silkscreen printing facilities, engraving workshops, a fanzine library, an anarcha-feminist space and a vegetarian canteen. In addition, Okupa Che offers a venue for meetings and conferences, as well as a space where people are invited to teach workshops and share their knowledge with others.

The number of people who habitually live or stay on the site is unknown, as there is significant movement of people aged between 15 and 60 within the space. People from other squats, social centres and movements (such as Chanti Ollin, ECPM 68 and BSR) work or collaborate with Okupa Che, but some feel that the centre is too complex because of the presence of different organizations working there. The squat is home to people who were involved in the 1999-2000 students' strike and members of different social movements, squats and collectives, as well as Mexican and international activists (from Chile, Spain, Canada, Germany, France and Argentina) with diverse left-wing political perspectives and practices. Despite being part of the university campus, homeless people and drug addicts could sometimes be found living in the squat without belonging to either the student community or a social movement (interview with dHP 2018).

Okupa Che has also been the headquarters of the Mexican anti-repression movement. By means of large-scale, grassroots collective information campaigns, the group has called for the unconditional release of CGH members such as Roberto Espinoza (imprisoned by Rosario Robles' government in Mexico City), Ericka Zamora Pardo (tortured and accused of belonging to guerrilla organization El Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo Insurgente [ERPI] following the army massacre of ten indigenous people and a student in El Charco Guerrero in 1998), the Cerezo brothers and Pablo Alvarado (accused of belonging to the ERPI), as well as the indigenous people of the Loxicha region in Oaxaca (imprisoned since 1996-97 without evidence and given 40-year sentences following armed activity by the Ejército Popular Revolucionario [EPR] in Huatulco and La Crucecita in Oaxaca), and political prisoners in general.

Since 2002, the space has adopted an anarchist ideology influenced by Latin American autonomous movements such as the Zapatistas. Throughout its existence, Okupa Che has joined and supported important social movements, including the campaign against the Iraq War, the alter-global mobilizations against the WTO in Cancún, the Other Campaign by the EZLN in 2006, solidarity with activists from Atenco and APPO (Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca [Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca]) (2006), mobilizations against educational reform (2012-16), and the solidarity movement with the Ayotzinapa 43 (2014).

In 2014, the UNAM authorities launched a campaign of criminalization and repression, employing paramilitary elements and violence against the squatters. This followed an attempt in the same year by a group of people assumed to be normalists4 from the Federación de Estudiantes Campesinos Socialistas de México (Federation of Socialist Peasant Students of Mexico [FECSM]) to seize the auditorium during the night. After a violent fight, they were evicted the same day by the anarchist members of the space. This conflict ended with discussion forums organized between the anarchists, students from the FECSM, and the university authorities. The lack of consensus meant that no dialogue or decision could be reached, so the Okupa Che squat continued its activities, which are mostly carried out by anarchist organizations.

4 Rural teachers, usually from indigenous communities.

However, the polarization between part of the squat community and the university persists to this day. The threat of an eviction campaign, publicized by the university authorities and official newspapers, has forced members of the space to be cautious in their activities. The squat's poor reputation has led some students and professors to avoid the site, as they perceive it as a violent and unsafe space. Despite this, it is common to see exchange students from Europe, South America and North America and workers from the Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (National Autonomous University of Mexico Workers Union [STUNAM]) eating in the vegan canteen because of the low prices and good quality of the meals served there (interview with dHP 2018; participant observation 2018).

Finally, despite its negative reputation, the Okupa Che squat is an important reference for the autonomous movement in Mexico. Located on the premises of one of the most important universities in Latin America, the space endures as an autonomous social centre broadly sustained by the initiatives of activists and publicly educated students who learn anarchist and autonomous philosophies at a young age (around 15 years old, in the case of those who attended preparatory schools) and are looking for a place to put them into practice.

Figure 4. Okupa Che squat, 2016

Source: *Milenio, 28 March 2016. Downloaded from https://www.milenio.com/estados/la-unam-no-es-solo-para-los-universitarios-okupas-del-che-guevara*

5.4. Chanti Ollin: a squat in motion (2003-2017)

Chanti Ollin was created by members of the 1999-2000 UNAM student movement and the Okupa Che Guevara squat5. Between 2003-2004, a number of students and activists from these movements were seeking alternative ways of living, finally squatting an old, five-storey building which had been vacant for ten years after a long search. They renamed the site 'Chanti Ollín', which means 'house in motion' in Nahuatl. Although they do not describe themselves as squatters, their activities are very similar to those of SSCs in Europe. The site was home to a bread cooperative, a bike workshop, a temazcal6, and a serigraph.

The Chanti Ollin squat drew attention to the right to housing and free access to culture in a location close to the centre of Mexico City: Calle Melchor Ocampo 424, in the Cuauhtémoc district next to Paseo de la Reforma, the most emblematic avenue of the country, which eventually became one of the most expensive

5 The two movements have collaborated in other ways, such as sharing their spaces for events like Femstival, which was eventually cancelled due to internal conflicts related to gender violence (Wälty 2018, 11).

6 Nahuatl concept which refers to a pre-Hispanic steam bath.

areas in the city (interview with AML 2018). It provided housing, a social centre and a meeting place for activists.

Figure 5. The façade of Chanti Ollin following the eviction, 2017

Source: *the authors*

Chanti Ollin was generally inhabited by approximately 30-40 people from different social classes—mostly middle-class and poor—, age groups—mostly young people between 17 and 35 years old—and countries—Canada, Chile, Argentina, Guatemala, France, and the United States. In addition, people often spent short periods of time as guests at the squat, ranging from one night to several days (interview with Luna Garza 2018).

Initially, the group discussed whether the space should aim to provide more than just a housing alternative. One of the first ideas to be put forward was based on the Nahuatl concept calpulli, which refers to a piece of land that is shared and worked by a group of people. The calpulli was a kind of integrated housing and schooling space in traditional indigenous Mexica society, where the inhabitants worked and organized communally to provide group support and to raise and educate children. The members of Chanti Ollin attempted to preserve and implement 'traditional' or alternative practices, mostly from indigenous communities, as a way to oppose those imposed by the capitalist economic system and the state. The adoption of practices like tequio at Chanti Ollin allowed relationships to be established between members by performing household chores collectively, such as cleaning, cooking, shopping for groceries, gardening, and organizing workshops or events such as public art and music festivals (interview with AML 2018).

The group also had a crop field in Xochimilco district (located on the periphery of the city) and a green rooftop on top of the building for cultivating food. Both of these spaces helped them to earn money to maintain the squat and improve the infrastructure of their other projects. They used to say: "the house belongs to those who work it", paraphrasing the Mexican revolutionary motto "the land belongs to those who work it"7 (participant observation 2017).

One of the principles underpinning the space was that people could share whatever they wanted without feeling coerced by the state or by the economic system. Members shared the tools and knowledge they had, giving rise to constant creation and collaborative work on a variety of projects in different areas. For example, the members who installed the infrastructure for the music studio shared their equipment with the people from the free radio and television project, managed by the Medios Libres (Free Media) working

7 This quote was originally expressed by Teodoro Flores, the father of the Mexican anarchist brothers Flores Magón.

group. Other projects included the bicimáquinas (bike-machines) workshop8, a temazcal, a cooperative bakery, a silkscreen printing workshop, a dry (organic) toilet, a music studio, a radio booth, and, of course, the green rooftop.

In addition to this, the members of Chanti Ollin also created a strong network with people from other autonomous spaces and social movements in the city, the country, and overseas. They supported social movements, activists, and organizations such as the Congreso Nacional Indígena (National Indigenous Congress [CNI]), the EZLN, Palestinians under occupation by the Israeli army, national and international ecological activists like Bertha Cáceres (who was murdered in 2016), and political activists like Mumia Abu-Jamal, the former Black Panther who is currently in jail (participant observation, 2016-18).

The space was evicted by riot police on 22 November 2016 and 26 people were detained before being released the same day. A camp was set up outside the building, which lasted until 7 February 2017. The eviction revealed the squat's huge support from different social movements, activists, intellectuals, and scholars. This broad network of people, collectives, and other squats allowed the members of Chanti Ollin to continue working in spaces provided by other social movements and communities, such as Café Zapata Vive (a legal Zapatista coffee shop) and La Karakola (a squatted cultural space evicted in 2017 and relocated legally to the city centre).

The fate of Chanti Ollin echoes the Mexican proverb: "Quisieron enterrarnos, pero se les olvidó que somos semillas" ("They tried to bury us, but they forgot that we were seeds") (Knight 2018, 52). The ongoing work and activism by former members of the space is relevant because it emphasizes the significance of the name 'house in motion'. Members knew that the squat was not the main goal of their activism, but that it played a role in putting their beliefs into practice and demonstrating that autonomous social centres could be created in the city.

5.5. Comparing case studies: common fights, phases, successes and failures among SSCs in Mexico City

SSCs in Mexico City have encountered two key problems identified in the recent literature on the commons. Firstly, they are "(…) a social phenomenon based on the collective self-organization of people with little interference from the state or the market" (Martínez 2019, 812). These new collective actors are creating networks of mutual aid and support and the source of their power lies in their recognition and identification of the social issues and injustices that many people have experienced in the city since neoliberalism gained ground in the 1990s. They are akin to "(…) reactions to various forms of enclosures, privatization and dispossession" (Martínez 2019, 812). Therefore, solidarity is one of the most relevant principles endorsed by these movements: it is solidarity that explains why people from Okupa Che collaborate with members of ECPM 68. The power of these spaces and movements is based on common work and recognition.

On the other hand, these experiences of SSCs represent a revitalization of 'libertarian communism', which has in turn been fuelled by alter-globalization and anti-neoliberal movements in Mexico City over the last 40 years. For example, the idea of BSR was to create an archive to spread knowledge of anarchist and libertarian philosophy in particular, which was relevant in the late 1970s when the project was launched and social movements and anti-state actors were being severely persecuted. At ECPM 68, the open school for arts and crafts helped to consolidate a space where anyone could engage in artistic practices, with a political message derived from the mid-1980s wave of popular urban movements. The Okupa Che and Chanti Ollin

8 The workshop is used to make bike-based systems to fuel electric machines.

squats were the product of student initiatives, deriving from the lengthy strike at UNAM in 1999-2000, but they became spaces for implementing the ideals of common and libertarian philosophies on life.

Figure 6. Map showing the location of the four SSCs in Mexico City

Source: *the authors*

These four experiences may be framed in the context of the three waves described in the historical background section. The origin and evolution of the social centres analysed may be linked to the emergence of different waves of mobilization, while their political configuration is related to the prominence of specific social movements.

Thus, through the anarchist-punk Chopo movement, BSR combines libertarian tendencies from the '68 movement and the 1970s with the early-1980s punk movement. ECPM 68 carries the legacy of the same wave in its name, but was founded by a coalition of sectors from the popular urban movement in the 1980s (especially seamstresses) and cultural and artistic groups. In the 1990s, it was also permeable to the new alter-global wave which was led in Mexico by the Zapatistas and the 1999-2000 UNAM strikers. Okupa Che and Chanti Ollin are the product of this alter-global wave. All the cases studied collaborate with the latest wave of social mobilization, supporting student movements such as solidarity with the Ayotzinapa 43 in 2014, the fourth surge of cooperativism, and the new wave of the feminist movement, fighting femicide and advocating women's right to control their own bodies from 2016 to 2020.

Table 2. The SSCs studied and the different waves of urban social movements in Mexico City

Social centre	*Wave*	*Main social movements*
Biblioteca Social Reconstruir	*Second (first period)*	*Libertarian tendencies from the '68 and 70s movements*
ECPM 68	*Second (second period)*	*Popular urban movement*
Okupa Che	*Third*	*Students/Alter-globalization/Anarchism*
Chanti Ollin	*Third*	*Students/Zapatism/Alter-globalization*

Source: the authors

The aim of this paper is not to classify any of the SSCs into the categories of success or failure proposed by Haiven and Khasnabish (2013), but rather to draw upon them in order to understand and evaluate the lengthy trajectories of these projects and their stories of struggle and survival in dialogue with the activists themselves.

The work of BSR over the course of its 42-year history has succeeded in preserving and expanding the Spanish and Mexican anarchist and punk legacy in a clear example of the 'culture' category. The project's changing location, accompanied by temporary closures due to a lack of financial resources, threatened to push it into the 'burn out' category, but the support of hundreds of activists and other organizations allowed it to withstand these crises. This degree of collaboration is indicative of the 'collective potential' of anarchist ideas in Mexico City.

ECPM 68 made 'gains' from its negotiations with the authorities by ensuring the precedence and autonomy of the project under the loan formula. Meanwhile, its openness to other social movements in the city and support for their emancipatory struggles are examples of 'culture' and 'collective potential'.

Okupa Che survived the 'burn out' attempted by the university authorities from 2014. Its very existence is the result of a material victory ('gains') by the 1999 students' movement, avoiding the establishment of quotas for UNAM students.

Finally, Chanti Ollin, which housed dozens of projects in the 'culture' category for 13 years, was able to transcend eviction thanks to the support and 'collective potential' of other squatted and autonomous social centres in the city.

6. Conclusions

Analysis of these four SSCs in Mexico City in terms of success and failure offers insights into the situation of these types of commons in one of the biggest cities in Latin America. Moreover, these long-term experiences provide evidence for the existence of several waves of self-managed movements and different generations of squatters and autonomist and anarchist activists, many of whom have worked in collaboration with one another. Indeed, both squatted and non-squatted social centres have been included in this article, as this research has shown that squatting in Mexico is located at the intersection between anarchist, autonomist, squatted projects and indigenous commons traditions.

All four case studies have been affected by urban speculation and have developed dozens of social, cultural, and political activities beyond or in opposition to capitalist dynamics. Examples of gains, culture and collective potential can be found among them, as well as the dangers of burn out. BSR fluctuates between the categories of culture (most of the time), collective potential (in historical terms) and periods of burn out induced by political and economic repression. Culture and collective potential are the categories that best illustrate the role of ECPM68 as a source of support for autonomous movements in Mexico City. Okupa Che survives an intense burn out and maintains the gains resulting from the success of the 1999 students' strike. Finally, despite its eviction, Chanti Ollin falls into the category of culture. These complex analytical categories overcome binary conceptions of success and failure and enable a closer, more horizontal understanding of the contributions made by Mexican SSCs, generating self-reflection and memory instead of questioning them from a supposedly superior academic perspective.

The effects of repression sometimes place squatters in an isolated social position and deprive them of the social networks necessary to push their projects forward. However, the case of Mexico City shows that common people are capable of resisting adverse conditions in access to social spaces.

The main contribution made by this article is that it has begun to address the gap in the squatting literature on experiences of urban self-management in Latin America, as well as establishing some parameters by which to approach the phenomenon of squatting and its presence and complexity in Mexico City. Academic and activist studies on the political squatters' movement as a direct answer to the social issues inherent in the dynamics of neoliberal capitalism in Europe and North America (Catteneo and Martínez 2014) do exist, but very few articles address these types of experiences in the wider Latin American territory, where neoliberal capitalism originally emerged.

Finally, but importantly, this research aims to contribute to the epistemological dialogue between social movements and academic reflection in order to provide Mexican self-managed movements with useful tools from the perspective of activist research.

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Authors Information

Robert González (Lleida, Spain, 1975) is a professor and researcher in Political Science and Public Administration at the Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities at the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo, Mexico. He holds a Ph.D in Political Science from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (2011). As well as being actively involved in different social movements, he has conducted research and produced publications on citizen participation, public policy, youth, and social movements. Correspondence and email address: rgonza67@gmail.com

Diego de Santiago (Mexico City, 1989) has a BA in Visual Arts from UNAM and a Master's degree in Social Anthropology from the Universidad Iberoamericana Ciudad de México, where he researched political squatting movements in the metropolitan area of Mexico City. He defines himself as an ethically engaged social researcher and his research focuses largely on urban anthropology, social movements, anarchist studies, critical pedagogies, and gender and education studies. Email address: tresdescultor@gmail.com

Marco Antonio Rodríguez (Mexico City, 1979) holds a Master's degree in Urban Art from the Faculty of Art and Design at UNAM. He is an audiovisual producer and trans-disciplinary artist who explores processes taking place in the public space. He is also an activist at Sublevarte Colectivo and LaOtraGrafika in Mexico City. He was involved in ECPM68 from 2000 to 2019. Email address: celediseno@gmail.com