Gated Communities or Open Communities? Guatemala City's Bottom-Up Approach to Insecurity

By Katarina Hall

Guatemala City ranks among the world's top 20 most dangerous cities.[1] Not only are crime[2] and theft ubiquitous, but corruption[3] and government inefficiency only seem to make insecurity for Guatemalans even worse: police are nowhere to be seen when needed, criminals are often not prosecuted, police are frequently involved in criminal activities themselves.[4] Like many other public goods in Guatemala, public security is left heavily underprovided by the state.

Guatemalans have made a habit of providing such goods for themselves,[5] and security is no different. Residents of neighborhoods around the city have come together to deal with security issues. There are two general approaches that neighborhoods have taken to reduce insecurity: In the first approach, neighborhoods have organized to claim public roads as their own and have closed them from the rest of the city by installing security checkpoints. These neighborhoods have, in essence, become gated communities. In the second approach, roads remain public and the neighborhood resorts to other ways to combat insecurity, including hiring private patrolmen and installing security cameras and license plate readers. We will call the first approach the *closed approach* and the second the *open approach*. Both approaches generally achieve their desired effect: crime is reduced drastically in both kinds of neighborhoods. Because of these proven results, many other neighborhoods of all income brackets around the city have followed by using one of the two approaches to tackle insecurity.

To understand the effects of these two approaches, I examine two zones of Guatemala City: Zone 14 and Zone 15.[6] These neighborhoods were chosen because they

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[1] Schmalburch, Sarah (September, 2017) The 20 Most Dangerous Countries in the World. http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/worlds-most-dangerous-countries-colombia-yemen-el-salvador-pakistan-nigeria-a7934416.html

[2] Kirk, Ashley (December, 2015) Mapped: Which Countries Have the Highest Murder Rates? http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/12037479/Mapped-Which-countries-have-the-highest-murder-rates.html

[3] Call, Charles (September, 2017) What Guatemala's Political Crisis Means for Anti-Corrpution Efforts Everywhere. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/09/07/what-guatemalas-political-crisis-means-for-anti-corruption-efforts-everywhere/

[4] Organizaciones criminales de Guatemala, las mas poderosas de C.A.: https://cerigua.org/article/organizaciones-criminales-de-guatemala-las-mas-pod/

[5] Hall, Katarina (August, 2016) Competition and Innovation in Polycentric Systems of Governance: Bottom-up Solutions to Collective Action Problems and Public Goods. http://jihu.ufm.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Hall.Katarina.16.cdl_.pdf

[6] Boroughs of Guatemala City. Described in: http://cultura.muniguate.com/index.php/component/content/article/114-zonasciudad/679-zonasciudad

exemplify the two approaches, have similar economic backgrounds and are heavily transited by the rest of the city's residents. Because data is usually not available in Guatemala, this paper utilizes interviews with the presidents of the respective neighborhood associations, workers of the municipality, and residents of the neighborhoods.

Zone 15: Vista Hermosa

Zone 15 is home to two neighborhoods, divided by a boulevard, that have tackled security in different ways: *Vista Hermosa I* (VH I) and *Vista Hermosa II* (VH II).
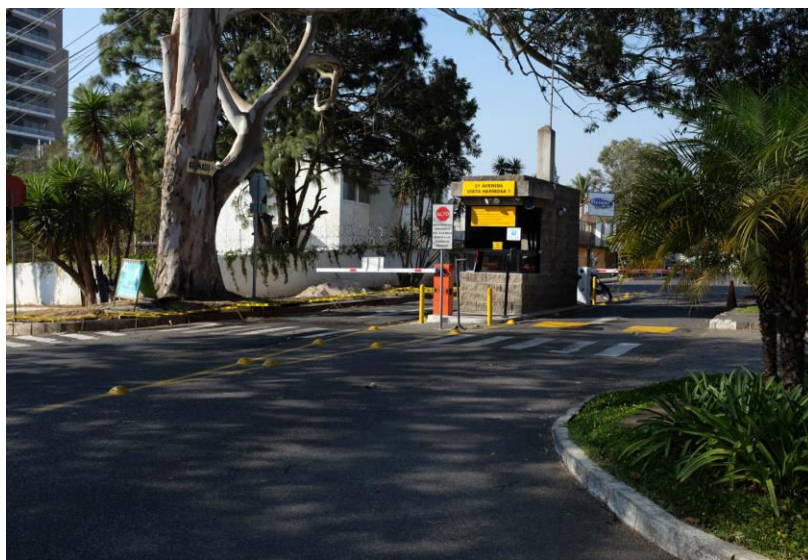

Source: Google Maps
Vista Hermosa I (north-east side) and Vista Hermosa II (south-west side) divided by the Vista Hermosa Boulevard.

After organizing a neighborhood association,[7] VH I closed the public road and created a gated community, installing four security checkpoints—the closed approach. As in any

[7] Data from interview with Patsy Pfister, Founder and President of the Neighborhood Association of Vista Hermosa I.

gated residential area, residents are able to enter with an electronic card, while visitors must announce themselves and present some kind of identification. Although crime has almost entirely been eliminated, there is one major downside: a neighborhood that used to be mixed-use is now primarily residential. While some people might prefer it this way, it has discouraged investment in the area. This causes neighbors to have to leave the neighborhood for anything they might want to buy, adding to Guatemala City's traffic congestion problem.

Source: Katarina Hall
Security checkpoints to enter Vista Hermosa I

VH II, on the other hand, went with the open approach. They did not close off the neighborhood and instead installed four security rings to combat crime:[8]

1. Private security: the neighborhood association hired private security agents to patrol the neighborhood in order to deter crime and report suspicious activity. Additionally, there are other security agents posted in designated areas.

Source: Asociación de Vecinos de Vista Hermosa II.
Guard stations in the neighborhood.

[8] Data from interview with Jose Gonzalez, President of the Neighborhood Association of Vista Hermosa II.
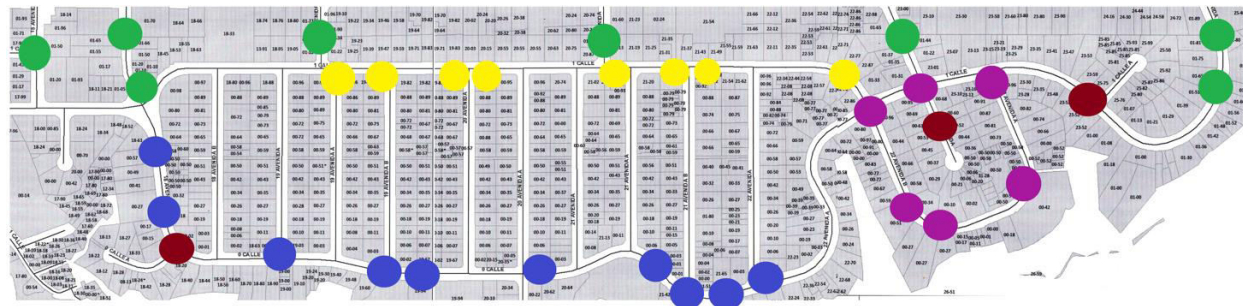
2. Physical barrier: speed bumps with cameras were installed to read license plate numbers and keep control of those entering and leaving the neighborhood.

Source: Katarina Hall
Speed bumps with security cameras keep check of the cars coming in and out of the neighborhood.

3. Electronic equipment: 35 security cameras were placed at most main intersections within VHI.

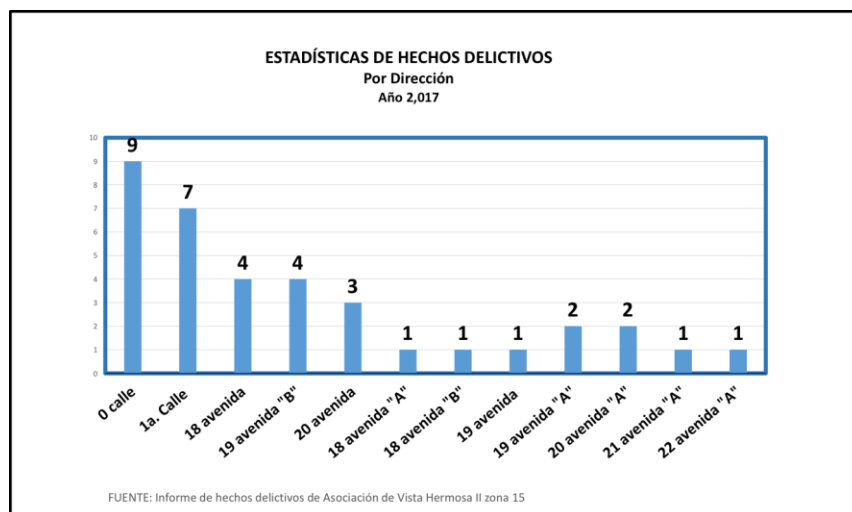Source: Neighborhood Association of Vista Hermosa II.
Cameras installed in the neighborhood.

4. Smartphone panic button: although this has not yet been implemented, the neighborhood association has developed a smartphone panic button for residents to alert security in case of any distress.

This structure has produced impressive early results: car theft was reduced from 10 stolen cars a month in 2010 to less than one in 2016.[9] By keeping the neighborhood open, the neighborhood association of VH II has been able to implement a trial and

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[9] Hall, Katarina (August, 2016) Competition and Innovation in Polycentric Systems of Governance: Bottom-up Solutions to Collective Action Problems and Public Goods. http://jihu.ufm.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Hall.Katarina.16.cdl_.pdf

error system for testing security measures. After studying the community, they have come to realize that different areas of the neighborhood have different types of crimes. For example, the area close to the ravine has more house thefts, while the area close to the boulevard has more car thefts. By trying out several initiatives, the neighborhood has been able to preserve and scale up those methods that have been most effective at deterring crime.

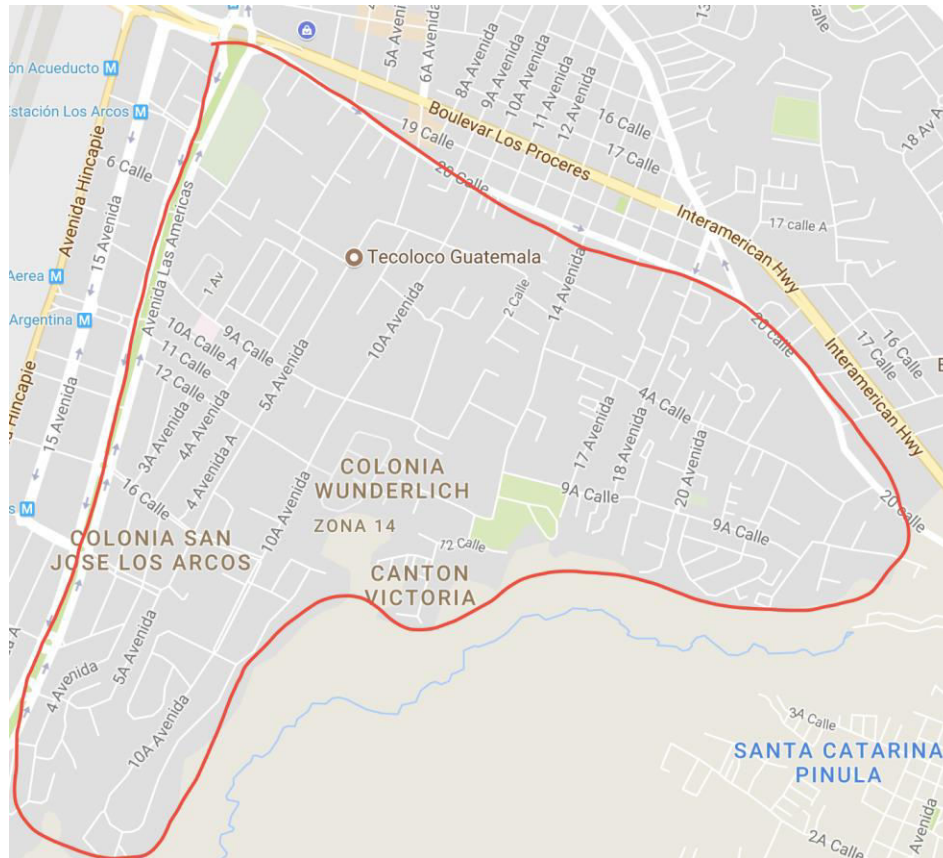Source: Asociación de Vecinos de Vista Hermosa II.
The statistics of criminal activities for each street of Vista Hermosa II. Data through September 2017.

Furthermore, new construction in VH II has dramatically increased. The number of residential buildings, office buildings, schools, retail stores, restaurants has increased in the last decade. In doing so, the area has become a hub for new mixed-use development and urban life, unlike VH I, which remains mostly residential. This has in turn attracted residents with a strong preference for a mixed-use urban lifestyle.

Zone 14

Unlike Zone 15, Zone 14 is not divided into formal neighborhoods. Yet along the various streets, neighbors have organized to fight insecurity with the same two approaches.[10]

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[10] Data from interview with Jose Morales, Area Coordinator for Zone 14, Municipality of Guatemala.
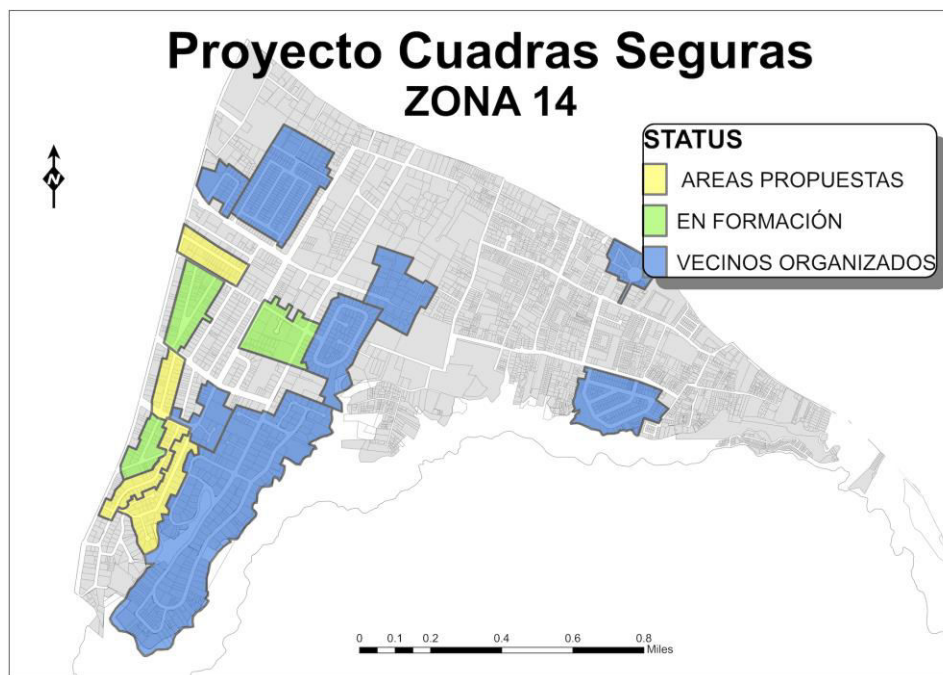
Source: Google Maps
Zone 14, designated by a ravine, Avenue of the Americas, and Los Proceres Boulevard.

Zone 14 has five major closed neighborhoods, along with some other smaller communities. Some of these neighborhoods have been closed to the public for so long that people now think that they have always been private developments. Similar to VH I, these neighborhoods were established through neighborhood associations that petitioned the Municipality of Guatemala to form a gated community of purely residential use.

However, a new trend of community organizing started growing in the rest of Zone 14, which follows the open approach. Many neighborhoods have organized into what is now called the "safe blocks project." Since many of the streets cannot be closed because they are highly transited and important routes in the city, neighbors of certain streets have formed small associations that charge the residents a fee to hire a private security company.

This model was first implemented in 5th Avenue North. The association installed a monitoring center and stationed four to five security agents from a private security agency along the block. In doing so, they created a network of surveillance that is deterring crime and theft on those streets. Many other streets are replicating this

system. For example, the neighborhood on 3rd Avenue and 19th Street hired the same security agency, placed four security agents on every street, and hired another agent to patrol the designated area. Currently, only one neighborhood in Zone 14 is attempting to implement the closed approach, while the rest are implementing the open approach.

Source: Municipality of Guatemala
This map shows the neighborhoods in zone 14 that have implemented, are in the process of implementing and have proposed the safe block project.

As with VH II, the open approach is attracting new development and new retail into the area. Many of the abandoned homes in the area have been transformed into buildings that engage with the street. More people are bicycling, walking their dogs, and exercising—all activities that are rarely seen on the streets of Guatemala City. As a result, demand to live in the area has increased, along with real estate prices.

Conclusion

In the end, both the open and the closed approach reduce crime and insecurity. If the state ever decides to take the lead on public security, it could learn from both of these approaches. As seen in Vista Hermosa and Zone 14, the closed approach quickly and efficiently solves the insecurity problem. While the closed approach does provide certain benefits to the people inside the neighborhood, such as being able to walk your dog or comfortably park your car on the street, for the rest of city dwellers this approach might mean more traffic and might not impact crime reduction outside of its borders.

On the other hand, the open approach has spillover effects to the rest of society: it is making sections of Guatemala City much more urban and dynamic. By remaining open to the rest of the city, the open approach:

1. Attracts more development to the neighborhood: there is a boom in construction of new buildings, businesses, and stores.
2. Encourages mixed use: by not closing off only to residential uses, the open neighborhoods host a vibrant array of restaurants, offices, gyms, and housing. Furthermore, these amenities are available to the rest of the city's residents.
3. Greater walkability: the various uses available in the area encourage more people to walk about, providing a network of "eyes on the street."[11]
4. Allows flexibility: open neighborhoods tend to work on a trial-and-error basis to find the most effective solution. This allows different neighborhoods to implement the security measures that work best for their specific conditions.

The open approach improves security, while at the same time attracting investment, commerce, and improving urban life for everyone in the city. It could motivate people to take to the streets, trust their neighbors, and attract even more development. If we want to make Guatemala City safer for all of its residents, the open approach would be a step in the right direction. Guatemala was once a walkable city—there is no reason why it couldn't be again.

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[11] Jacobs, J. (1964). The Death and Life of Great American Cities. London: Pelican.