

UPON #4/2023 (EN)

Talk with Laura Cala Mejía from Somos Bosque
(Colombia)

Conservation and Maintenance of Vegetation Coverage in Urban Spaces

Valeria: I have the pleasure to introduce Laura Cala Mejía, from Somos Bosque. Laura, would you like to start by presenting Somos Bosque?

Laura: Somos Bosque is a self-managed collective process established around 2019 in the town of Kennedy¹, which has been reclaimed as Techotiba, territory of waters. For many years the beer company Bavaria exploited more than five aquifers in our territory, a property of 78 hectares, 45 of which are of vegetation coverage. During all of those years of industrial activity it generated a large deal of environmental contamination. In 2010, Bavaria closed the factory and decided to leave our territory. Then the four largest construction companies in the country (Constructora Bolívar, Cusezar, Marval, Prodesa) got together to buy the property and implement the Partial Plan Bavaria Factory, which would provide for the clearing of the Bavaria Forest for the construction of 14,200 houses in Techotiba, the area with the lowest vegetation coverage per inhabitant, the highest population density and the highest pollution peaks in Bogota. This would imply significant impacts on air quality, health, housing, and public space in general. I would like to point out that in Bogota, the population difference is rather significant. The urban development projects that are proposed by these construction companies are not located in the north of the city, where capital, economic and political power are concentrated. **The populations of the southern parts of the city, which are more vulnerable and at risk, are the ones that are receiving all of these decisions (partial plans, detours of rivers, expansions of roads) that are made from a desk. And that speaks of the environmental and social injustice we suffer.** Because of this, the neighboring communities decided to mobilize for the protection of the Bosque Bavaria ecosystem and its more than 85 species of flora and 90 varieties of birds that surround it.

Valeria: Could you please tell us which strategies have had the most success in activating and mobilizing neighbors to join the fight for the protection of the Bavaria Forest?

Laura: We organized some playful strategies of popular environmental education for children, young people and older adults, in order to provide them with awareness of what species of flora and fauna inhabit our territory. We also systemized all this information through pedagogical booklets that we distribute through various contexts. The “get-togethers in the forest” have allowed us to get closer to our neighbors, since in today’s society it is very difficult to develop more collective and supportive

¹ Kennedy was the name given to our town due to the visit of President John F. Kennedy, but it does not reflect the ancestry that our territory has.

UPON #4/2023 (EN)

of those giant tree flowers; to see how a sirirí, a cockatoo, or a cardinal rested on an acacia tree. **This refers to the collective memory we have around the forest which we want to preserve for life, so that it continues to be the lung of the southwest of Bogota and a reference for the world.**

Valeria: In our preliminary chat, you categorized as greenwashing the strategy the construction companies are using for the Partial Plan, so that it appears less damaging. You literally said that the developer was hired to sell the project to the community. What greenwashing strategies can you distinguish? And what are Somos Bosque's criticisms of the "participation" process organized by the administration? Participation in quotation marks since you were rather critical of this point.



Laura: Yes, there are a series of euphemisms that the companies tend to use in the face of the advancement of extractivism. **Companies such as Ab Inbev and Bavaria boast of having corporate social responsibility and environmental care, but they still do not recognize the damage caused by the industrial activity they have developed. Neither do they assume any ethical or political**

responsibility with the ecosystems that we can still conserve.

Regarding the Partial Plan, we are concerned that the forest is perceived only as a vegetation barrier, ignoring that there are more than 22,000 extremely diverse trees inside the property. I would like to point out that the construction companies have worked hand in hand with secretaries where the project is located, so that the Partial Plan obtains a wide range of scenarios to promote why it is important to execute it. This has been evidenced in the spaces of "citizen participation" and the communities have always had reduced and unbalanced spaces to express the proposals and arguments we have. On the other hand, the media interviews the developer to tell people what great benefits are of the Partial Plan. These infomercials deepen the imagery around a planning figure that apparently seeks public space and decent housing, but never explains the scope of the project. During one of the participation tables, the construction companies decided to leave the table when we asked how it would affect the mobility of people around the property, how it would mitigate pollution and the massive felling of trees for construction. There have never been any clear answers or social guarantees in this regard.

UPON #4/2023 (EN)

Neither have there been any legal guarantees that the ecosystem will be preserved. We have also found it disturbing that none of the proposals submitted by the community have been taken into account by the institutions. Finally, the participation processes have also not considered the schedules in which people are able to participate.

Valeria: One of Somos Bosque's demands to the Bavaria Factory is that it responds for the ecological debt with the community as a result of the damage it caused in the area. What is the significance of this in practice? What are some of the specific petitions of the Bavaria Factory?

Laura: Basically, we are demanding that Bavaria assumes its ecological responsibilities for the damage it caused in the area for more than 40 years. But there are some very concrete proposals that we have also addressed to the Mayor's Office and the capital district of Bogota, like the transfer of the land to the district to create a series of infrastructures such as a Botanical Garden, a new headquarters for the District University of Bogota and Environmental Classroom. We believe that the property, due to its large size, can have other uses that do not involve the massive felling of the trees within it. **We must understand that we cannot continue to cut down trees and then reforest. We can conserve and maintain all the vegetation cover that exists in this large area.**



Hybrid Talk with Laura Cala Mejía (Somos Bosque, Colombia), Valeria Schwarz. The talk took place on September, 6th at the Floating University.

Transcription and edition: Valeria Schwarz

Translation into English: Richard Cochran

Public Relations: Lorene Blanche Goesele, Dana Schneider

Photo credits: Somos Bosque

UPON is a series of talks that reflects on urban practices from an inclusive, multilingual, context bound and feminist perspective. As a platform for reciprocal exchange and collective research about urban practices in an international context, UPON connects artists, urbanists and activists around the world.

UPON is curated and organised by Lorene Blanche Goesele (transformation architect and transdisciplinary artist) and Valeria Schwarz (artist, curator, art mediator and mother).

This series of talks is supported by the Senate Department for Urban Development, Building and Housing as part of the expansion of the Netzwerkstelle Urbane Praxis, carried out by Urbane Praxis e.V.