

Clothing consumption practice and its impact on the transformation of “public space” in Vía Primavera, El Poblado, Medellín

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Abstract. *Vía Primavera is a fashion district in El Poblado neighbourhood that has become a public referent of city life in Medellín – Colombia, a space that is shown as inclusive and accessible to all types of collectives. This paper is part of a research which purpose is to understand the connection between the public space with its moral and physical organization and the exclusion processes that the clothing conspicuous consumption generates in Vía Primavera. The analysis of this connection is subjected to a mutual play between prior structure and agency and the crystallization, or not, of its existence through an interrelation. In the same way, a concern about the city models resumed in the national and local development plans, and its relevance as the ones that set the social and economic ideal of public spaces arises. An ideal that contradicts with practice, where exclusion processes through consumption practices bring a tension in what is supposed to be public, breaking with its inclusive and collective character.*

Keywords: Spatial transformation, Fashion consumption, exclusion and inclusion processes, Development Plan.

Introduction

This article presents some results of the research: Fashion, city and economy, circulation and circulation spaces in Vía Primavera in Medellín, Colombia.

The research¹ addresses the consumption and circulation of fashion and gastronomy impact in this district, originally residential and, later, commercial. All this, through the consumption practices generated there and the spatial transformations that have shaped the place. These transformations has transcended the physical character of the constructions towards social and economic transformations, originating new ways to inhabit it.

In this study, concepts about fashion and consumption, fashion and space, and space and consumption are discussed. All of them together impact the space that is being studied,

providing and orienting towards a new character.

Through interviews, urban and architectural analysis and authors' analysis, a methodology that seeks to show, according to each theme, its influence and tendency and to anticipate the problems that can be generated, is constructed. This article exposes how Medellín's antecedents as a fashionable city, in addition to conspicuous consumption trends (present today after so many years), trigger physical transformation and change the social dynamics with the reconstruction of the original residential neighbourhood and its architectural and urban particularities, leading to tendencies arising from the change of use. Tendencies that have unleashed a conception of it, that in its beginnings was unthinkable for the city but is crucial for the present moment, because of its location as a hotel and gastronomic centre

as well as its strong economic definition and tendency.

From the city of textiles to the city of fashion

One of the main economic activities of Medellín has been the textile industry. In 1965, its greatest economic occupation was concentrated in this productive sector, taking this tradition to the present days. That allowed that, at the end of the last century, not only the most important textile factories of the city were built, but the design of the main working-class neighbourhoods, which constituted much of the residential and urban fabric of the city. Textile industry had a growing development since its foundation until the mid-1980s, when a veto of the United States tried to curb its development. This obstacle became an opportunity to group the main actors in the sector to have a national and also an international representation.

The reason of starting an industrial activity in an almost inaccessible valley (Valle de Aburrá) where is placed Medellín, was justified in the fact of being able to supply the region and not rely for textile inputs from abroad, who came with very high costs to the city. In spite of the difficulties in the beginning of the textile activity, the nascent industries took advantage of the same condition that interfered accessibility in and out of the valley: the difficult geography provided with abundant falls of water the river of the central valley (Medellín River) that provided energy to the first factories that settled on its banks (Londoño Yepes, 1983).

INEXMODA was born in 1984 to compete in the Latin American and global market related to production and fashion services (INEXMODA, 2005). It has had a great development as a business, with two annual fairs that are iconic in the region; Colombiamoda (A fair that is based on business, fashion trends and shared knowledge) and Colombiatex (textile, input, machinery, chemicals for Clothing and home sample). The development in the fashion design area also had a significant impact and supported the growing industry, with fashion and clothing design schools, as well as institutes, where a cradle of designers and own production of

fashion products was constituted.

Over time and with the opening to global economic dynamics, the textile industry sustained an important transformation. Textile production began to compete with the global market, and production, marketing and design emerged to complement the industry's productive system.

In recent years, emerging brands began to place in different areas of the city, showing greater presence in the design district of Vía Primavera named that way by the pioneers of this initiative who referred to an appellation of the city (Medellín the city of eternal spring). The objective of this design district was to associate a large number of fashion brands that were producing and marketing original design products in the same sector.

Eventually, the process was supported by the most important merchants' guilds of the city, which saw in this initiative an opportunity to organize themselves and other merchants to promote a character focused on independent brands interested in joining the project and encourage their participants to collaborate, more than to compete. This initiative took place in El Poblado neighbourhood, on 37th street, where the first clothing stores own by independent designers appeared, moving away from the typical consumption dynamic that was in Medellín until Then: the mall.

El Poblado, from a Little settlement to a new centrality

Vía Primavera is located in the 37th Street, in the border between Lleras and Provenza neighbourhoods in the centre of El Poblado, one of the most traditional neighbourhoods of Medellín. Even though at the beginning it was a small settlement and it was not part of the urban perimeter of the city, as Medellín grew and the necessity of a bigger urban field was required, it became part of the city because in 1945 due to its urban and economic potential for a future development. (Figure 1)

The Lleras (1937) and Provenza (1956) neighbourhoods are projects that were built by the same state agent (BCH – Banco Central Hipotecario)² with almost 20 years of

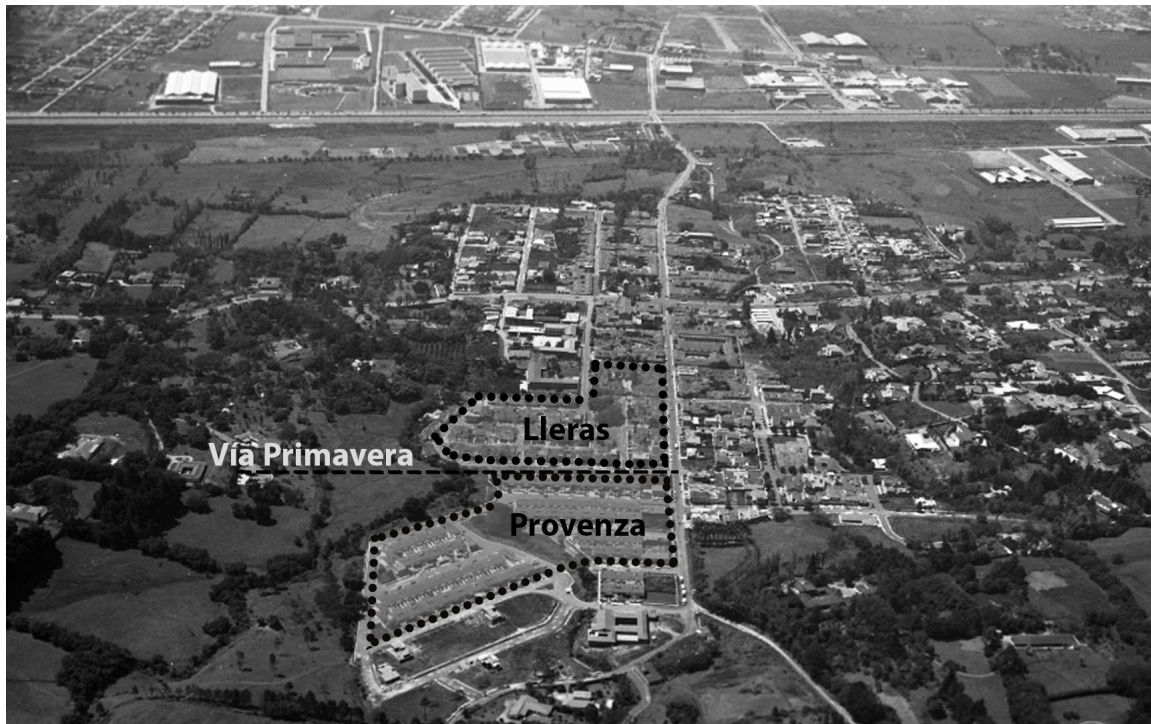


Figure 1. Aerial view. Via Primavera, Lleras and Provenza neighbourhood. Source: Photograph archive Piloto Public Library. Photo by Gabriel Carvajal Pérez, 1963.

difference, have multiple differences such as typologies and urban disposition.

The Lleras neighbourhood consisted of a traditional neighbourhood design for the time, with a very important base of a park with most of the houses around it focused on a strong relation with the street and the interior exterior relation. Houses were approximately XX m², so many rooms designed for large families - according to their time.

Provenza neighbourhood, on the other hand, reflects the influence of the modern movement that Medellín adopted not only for its buildings but also for the design of the pilot plan that would define the future development of the city, elaborated by Wiener and Sert in 1950. Provenza hosted another type of urbanism, defining narrow lots for a better use of the land and rationalized the soft slope terrain in which it was located. Its architecture was framed in a measured architecture, for a family not so numerous, with a much more interior relation and simpler and defined volumes and proportions, an area of approximately XXm², and adjusted program, simple but flexible structure system and more controlled spatial

boundaries. (Vélez Ortiz et al. 2010) (Figure 2) Due to its rapid urbanization since the 30's of the previous century, El Poblado has had different models of territorial development and has been built under variable criteria. The perception of its built environment is a reflection of these constant changes that its planning has been caused by trying to satisfy the growing demand -even today- of inhabiting its territory. This massive and disorderly urbanization has brought some consequences, such as the lack of vial infrastructure, lack of adequate public space and lack of services, in a neighbourhood completely dependent on the car despite the constant efforts to equip it to mitigate the consequences of its accelerated growth.

Particularly in the area called El Poblado (center), where the Via Primavera is located, has been assigned with the category of Centrality because it is inscribed in the polygon Z5_CN4_9. The Centrality System is defined as (Alcaldía de Medellín. Concejo de Medellín, 2014):

The Centralities are places of the territory with a strong capacity of attracting of people, where there is place for high exchanges of

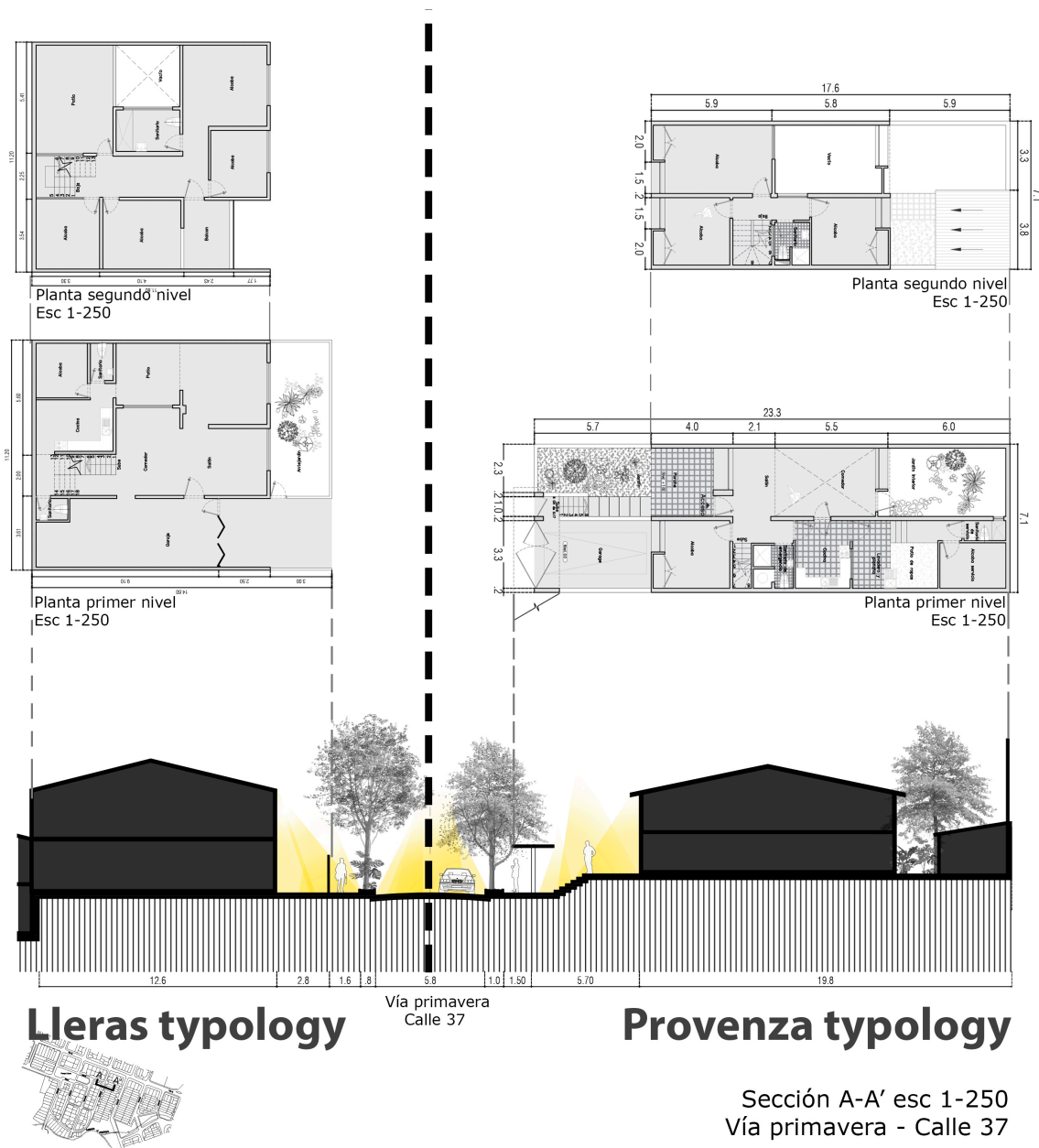


Figure 2. Lleras and Provenza houses typology. Ground and first floor, street section.
Source: Authors

goods and services that act as multifunctional spaces of different scales.

The Centrality subsystem is a polycentric network of multifunctional spaces of different scales, where the public and collective systems are synergistically articulated with the urban and rural socio-economic structure, mix of uses and intensity in the occupation of the land, generating spatial and functional tension in the territory, according to its capacity for the provision of services and generation of flows of people and exchanges of goods.

The centralities, not only provide services to the communities, they are also essential in the production and development of social capital, science, technology and innovation. (p. 295)

The Centrality of El Poblado (Z5_CN4_9) is defined as a Centrality of first order, of City scope and is classified under the character with economic emphasis. This classification has influenced the changes in the sector since 2006, in a process of adaptation to the regulations

to accomplish the assigned character. It has brought as a consequence the gradual change of use, replacing the original sense of the residential neighbourhoods in places that mixes different uses, mainly commercial and services and gradually producing changes in the architectural typology and in the future, in urban morphology.

Consumption practices

The decision of the municipality to define a polygon as a centrality in this place brings as consequence the change of use, and with time the physical change. In the case of El Poblado centrality, towards the end of the nineties, a vocation oriented to places of entertainment and gastronomy began to consolidate, which being in an exclusive neighbourhood of the city had shades of prestige. This place is called Zona Rosa and initially was a symbol of exclusivity and class.

The expansive effect of the Centrality, brought changes in the street of Vía Primavera, which consolidates as a commercial walkway where other type of businesses make their appearance, such as gastronomy business and bars, activating the place not only during the day, but also at night. Inhabitants completely change, families become consumers -mostly young people- that looked for an offer of clothes and accessories -initially- different from the one that can be found in a mall, and also the possibility of exhibit themselves and being seen.

This kind of commerce oriented to the passerby who seeks something exclusive and wants to be seen, acquires nuances of a phenomenon associated with the Theory of the leisure class (1899) formulated by Thorstein Veblen, sociologist and economist of the nineteenth century, and that consists in the recognition of certain social groups through the ostentation related to the consumption practice as an expression of their economic power.

This is how conspicuous consumption is validated in the development of consumption habits necessary to be able to exercise this socioeconomic practice, which also acquires its value when it is taken to the public sphere

to demonstrate domain over others through the exhibition of what is acquired; individual expressions become public through collective actions. (Veblen 2005).

The ostentation, Veblen spoke about, was directed to acquire luxury goods to gain prestige. Today, this phenomenon has changed, transcending the ostentation of goods to establish a product symbolism with social intentions referred to ways of doing and being of certain groups which purpose is to gain recognition and social prestige (Kawamura 2004). (Figure 3)

El Poblado is one of the neighbourhoods where the wealthy people of the city of Medellin settled. Both in the Zona Rosa and in Vía Primavera, these practices of exposure to acquire prestige and status are present. The fact of living there, is a social symbol of status, but also it is to visit these places and, especially, to be seen in there. Many times people don't even go to consume in this place, instead, they go just to expose themselves. That way, Vía Primavera becomes a stage and a gateway for the acquisition of a social status; about this, Veblen says (2005):

In the modern community, there is more frequent attendance to places where a large number of people that are unknown to each other in daily life congregates -places such as churches, theatres, dance halls, hotels, parks, shops, etc.- In order to impress the temporary observers and preserve the own esteem; while under observation, the signature of the individual pecuniary strength must be written in characters which every passerby can read. (p. 93)

The city becomes the sphere where the socioeconomic practices exercised by man and his interaction with others and their ways of living; and fashion and the facade as a link to forms or ways of life (Park & Burgess 1984), this is how the relationship with Veblen is linked, who gives to these forms and ways through the process of imitation that is no longer that a form of communication that emphasizes the differentiation and that Park understands by competition.

The loss of the bonds of the primary groups in the urban environment in which we live and the increasing acceleration of mobility



Figure 3. Vía Primavera, street view towards Provenza side. Source: Authors.

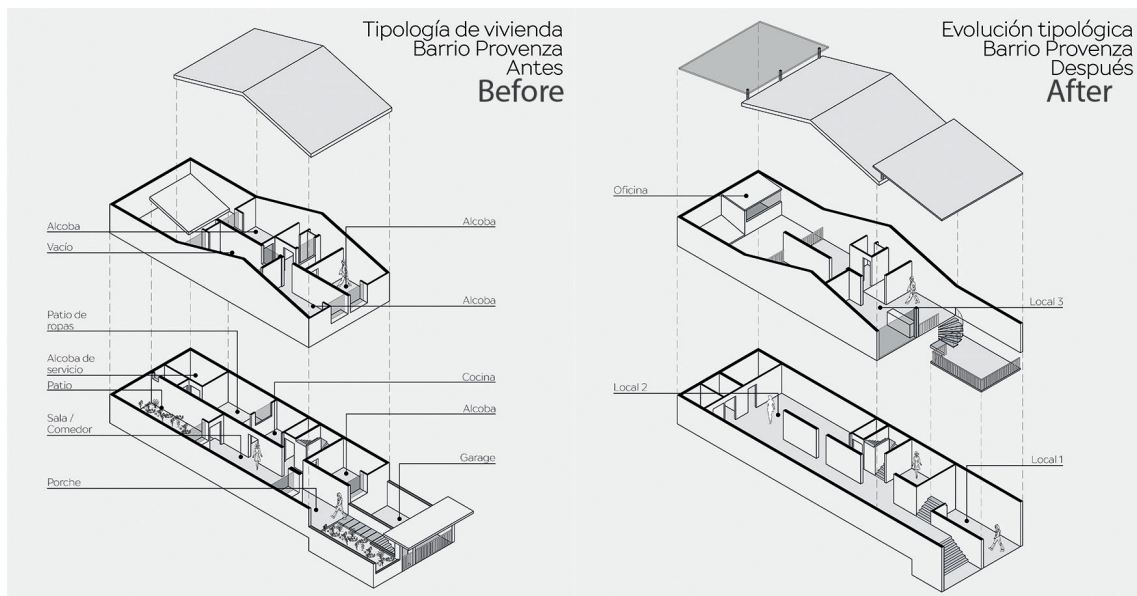


Figure 5. Spatial transformation. Provenza house. Source: Authors.

has surrounded the realities of strangers who depend on external signals. The opportunities for association and connection between different individuals, and even social groups, have increased; even so, they have acquired a transient and not stable character. In modern

society and its eagerness for urbanity “the status of the individual is largely determined by conventional signs -by fashion and the “facade”- and the art of life is basically reduced to skating over fine surfaces and to a scrupulous Study of style and forms [Manners]” (Park &

Burgess 1984). According to this, each of the members of a society plays a specific role, through which it knows itself and others in a given context, manages to move from a state of individuality to a character that allows it to be recognized in a collective.

In relation to the above, due to the phenomenon of the city in which secondary social relations excel, individuals tend to divide and specialize more and more, and also to rationalize their actions, that is, to order them as they are carried out, so that they become more and more practical and technified. This is why Park calls cities: the social forms that predominate in modern civilizations, where each individual concentrates on a single task, and in order to succeed in every action he performs, he develops rational methods, technical means and specific competences.

Imitation and competition are two processes that according to theorists Thorstein Veblen and Robert E. Park organize and define the behaviour of individuals in a modern society that is constantly readjusted. In this section, the role of consumption and its relationship with clothing products is pointed out; two elements in which these processes are implicit, and which become social mobiles in the measure in which the interests are directed towards the search of prestige or social esteem. Competition, through which the characteristics of imitation are visible, brings with it tensions that are expressed through processes of inclusion or exclusion in a given space; this is the *Vía Primavera*, in the city of Medellín. This last phenomenon will be transversal throughout the chapter, indicating the adoption and validation of habits crystallized in ways of life (being and doing).

In this sense, it is this socioeconomic practice, a condition linked, not least, to the spaces in which it is contained, explained from the same and from the material and even moral contents that are acquired in them. It is evident then that the space is a category transversal to the subjects specified previously, and those that will come. In this sense, the city and practices such as consumption, are transformed to the extent that new spaces take on meaning.

With Veblen's economic theories of fashion and consumption, disciplines such

as economics and sociology begin to address socio-economic processes such as the consumption of clothing products, and begin to refer to them as symbolic systems that establish social differences. According to this, the mere fact of consuming does not express any symbol if there is no witness who recognizes and validates what is being exposed. The dress here plays an important role since it is related to private property, since it becomes an artefact that fulfils the function of making visible the distinctions of value between individuals or groups. (Veblen 2005)

However, from what has been previously conceptualized as fashion, clothing products support the expression of the economic and social culture of a population, and are those goods that; by means of the social change that happens due to the processes of imitation; make it possible for value distinctions to be considered as ways to achieve esteem or social or personal prestige.

It is worth noting that in the framework of consumer practice, there are multiple elements that can be part of it; even so, the emphasis on dressing products lies in the immediacy with which images and ways of life communicate, to be in sight. In *Vía Primavera*, the consumption of this type of goods is an important part of its economic activity; since its formation as a corporation, and its introduction to the Textile / Clothing, Design and Fashion Cluster, clothing products have become a means by which not only specific economic status is evidenced, but the individual is also recognized as a public; this is due to their participation in specific collective activities in that space, such as consumption practice (Park, 1996).

In this way, when in the city of Medellín we talk about *Vía Primavera*, a constant reference is made to certain values of inclusion and collectivity, values that have the possibility of being expressed, or not, in space, through the clothing product, making readily apparent, ways of life of social groups, which are validated according to the manner in which these clothing artefacts are consumed and exposed.

The "public space" that configures *Vía Primavera* has been previously structured and imagined with an inclusive city model; Even so,

its public character can not only be determined by the discourses found in institutional reports; it is also a structure imagined and organized by different practices, such as the consumption practices of clothing products.

It is important to reiterate that once certain consumption habits are adopted, processes of exclusion arise based on whether or not they belong to a given context; this is because interactions and behaviours are stipulated by a collective, and who behaves differently, is not allowed to give attributes or qualities to space; that is, you cannot access it. (Park, 1996) (Archer, 1988).

According to the above, this practice, in a space like Vía Primavera, causes cultural and economic dynamics to be centralized, and in which and through which private interests find expression, determining a way of being and making them. Generates imbalance and social instability (Archer, 1995). This space has been imagined with values of inclusion and collective integration, where each individual or group has the possibility to express themselves. However, the way it is consumed in Vía Primavera ends up contradicting those intentions, and the discourse that names it as a space to which all the population can access, is fractured.

According to Manuel Delgado in his text “Virtuous Circles: New Languages for Social Exclusion” (2005), inclusion and exclusion are a particular complexity; the boundaries that separate one from the processes of another are porous and their crosses are subtle. Depending on the meanings given by speeches and practices and how tensions between them are resolved. As the structure is interdependent of the agency, the process of exclusion is the process of inclusion. In relation to this, in Vía Primavera they are recognized as stressing processes to the extent that the way in which public space is thought and organized legitimizes certain strategies and behaviours that, at times consciously or unconsciously, exclude from the “public space” everything What for being alien, is problematic for them. (Delgado, 2005)

Conclusion

In Vía Primavera, two different phenomena converge so their transformation will be carried out, on one hand, the normative definition of the polygon where it is located and on the other, the consumption practices that are beginning to take place both by the prestigious character of the neighbourhood, as by the type of commerce -fashion and gastronomy- that is located in the place.

The consumption practices have altered the social behaviour of the place, on one hand, they displace their original population to accommodate new inhabitants, but also, on the other hand, the fact that Vía Primavera focuses on the sale of fashion and gastronomy in a place that has the connotation of exclusive, runs a great risk of becoming an space of exclusion.

Although the two typologies of housing present in the sector -Lleras and Provenza neighbourhood- are quite different from each other by the different historical and urban moments in which they are born, the transformations to which they have taken place are more uniform than it seems. On both sides of Vía Primavera, the transformation gradually began, first with the subdivision of its spaces, garages that became stores or disused rooms that became offices or art galleries. These modifications have generated some striking spatial changes.

The commercial success of the place has brought with it, in addition to visitors, investors with greater capital power to invest, which has caused that the dwellings -that mostly are of their original owners- are intervened of important form, giving them a different character to the original. (Figure 5). But the transformation in the last 3 years -since the new Local Plan has been in force- has precipitated, to the point of not only transforming the existing typologies, adapting them for commercial or service uses, but also replacing them with completely new architectural pieces, as well as the architectural and urban unity that existed before.



Figure 6. New architectonic building over Provenza side. Source: Authors.

Notes

1 The research project consists of research groups GIDVT (Research Group on Clothing Design and Textiles) and GAUP (Research Group in Architecture, Urbanism and Landscape) of the Faculty of Costume Design and the Faculty of Architecture of the University Pontifical Bolivarian.

2 The Central Mortgage Bank was a state entity in charge of financing and executing programs of urban and architectural development in different cities of Colombia.

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