

The London School of Economics and Political Science

The ‘Casas GEO’ movement:

**An ethnography of a new housing experience in
Cuernavaca, Mexico**

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Abstract

Through an ethnographic approach, this thesis looks at a new housing form and what is claimed to be a new urban way of life in Mexico's neoliberal era. The study looks in detail at residents of a single housing project in Cuernavaca, Mexico, and explores how this group has struggled to construct itself as a new cultural category or what I call the *Casas GEO movement*. The research is guided by a series of questions: why and how did the *Casas GEO movement* emerge; how do residents experience a new housing project in everyday life; and, what meanings do they communicate through these everyday practices? Specifically, the research engages with recent literatures on new middle classes and approaches that consider 'class' as a process that grows out of cultural and "classificatory practices" (Bourdieu, 1984).

The research builds on these literatures in a number of ways. First, it conceptualises the housing project as a mutable place, produced through daily interaction and a varied coexistence. Second, it understands the residential space as the arena for the emergence of a new cultural category created in everyday life through specific claims, values and symbols expressed in the urban landscape. The thesis shows how the developer, the GEO company, attempted to construct a set of individual values and codes of behaviour *for* residents, as an imperative to make the site liveable. But, it considers also how residents use their houses differently from the developers' intentions through strategies of re-appropriation and personalisation in order to communicate ideas of distinction and 'good' taste. Importantly, residents had to deal with a range of inconsistencies, flaws and drawbacks in the project's realisation that challenged representations of the 'good' city, social progress and modernity. The research shows how these failings influence people's lives, especially their aspirations and sense of identity.

My claim is that in the making of the *Casas GEO movement* people negotiate a cultural formation and produce a new space that allows ways of imagining, aspiring to, and modes for taking part in a modern 'urban' life. Yet, the making of the *movement* also exposes the fragility of a housing project that claims to be the formula for upward mobility of lower-income groups in Mexico.

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Acronyms

AC	Asociación Civil (Civic Association)
AGEB	Area Geo-estadística Básica (Basic Geographic Statistics)
AMAI	Asociación Mexicana de Agencias de Investigación de Mercado y Opinión Pública (Mexican Association of Marketing Research and Public Opinion Agencies)
BANOBRAS	Banco Nacional de Obras y Servicios Públicos de México (National Bank of Public Works and Services of Mexico)
BBVA	Banco de Bilbao Viscaya (Bilbao and Viscaya Bank)
CANADEVI	Cámara Nacional de la Industria de Desarrollo y Promoción de Vivienda (National Chamber of Industry and Promotion of Housing Development)
CAPUFE	Caminos y Puentes Federales (National Control Centre)
CAT	Costo Anual Total (Total Annual Cost)
CIDOC	Fundación Centro de Investigación y Documentación de la Casa, A.C. (Centre for Housing Documentation and Research Foundation)
CIVAC	Ciudad Industrial del Valle de Cuernavaca (Industrial City of Cuernavaca Valley)
CNBV	Comisión Nacional Bancaria y de Valores (National Banking and Securities Commission)
CNDH	Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (Human Rights National Commission)
CNOP	Confederación Nacional de Organizaciones Populares (National Confederation of Popular Organizations)
CONAFOVI	Comisión Nacional de Fomento a la Vivienda (National Commission for the Support of Housing)
CONASUPO	Compañía Nacional de Subsistencias Populares (National Company of Public Subsistence)
CONAVI	Comisión Nacional de Vivienda (National Housing Commission)
CONEVAL	Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social (National Council for Evaluation of Social Development Policy)
CONDUSEF	Comisión Nacional para la Defensa de los Usuarios de las Instituciones Financieras (National Commission for the Protection of Users of Financial Services)
COPLAMAR	Coordinación Nacional del Plan Nacional de Zonas Deprimidas y Grupos Marginados (National Coordination of National Plan of Depressed Areas and Marginal Groups)
CROC	Confederación Revolucionaria de Obreros y Campesinos (Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Peasants)
CTM	Confederación de Trabajadores de México (Confederation of Mexican Workers)
DIF	Sistema para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia (National System for the Integral Family Development)
DUIS	Desarrollos Urbanos Integrales Sustentables (Integral and Sustainable Urban Developments)
ENIGH	Encuesta Nacional de Ingresos y Gastos de los Hogares (National Survey of Household Income and Expenditures)
ENLACE	Evaluación Nacional de Logro Académico en Centros Escolares (Evaluation of Academic Achievements in Primary Schools)
ENOE	Encuesta Nacional de Ocupación y Empleo (National Survey on Occupation and Employment)

FNMTE	Frente Nacional de Trabajadores del Estado (National Front for State Workers)
FSBO	For sale by owner
FONADIN	Fondo Nacional de Infraestructura (National Infrastructure Fund)
FOVI	Programa Financiero de Vivienda (Funding Scheme for Housing)
FOVISSSTE	Fondo de la Vivienda del Instituto de Seguridad y Servicios Sociales de los Trabajadores del Estado (Housing Fund of the Institute of Social Security and Social Services for State Workers)
FPFV	Frente Popular Francisco Villa (Francisco Villa Popular Front)
GAUSCC	Grupo de Asesores Unidos (United Advisors Group)
ICA	Ingenieros Civiles Asociados (Civil Engineers Association)
IFC	International Finance Corporation
IFRS	International Level in Real Estate Accounting
IH	Indice Hábita (Hábita Index)
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INEGI	Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (National Institute of Statistics and Geography)
INFONACOT	Instituto del Fondo Nacional para el Consumo de los Trabajadores (Institute of the National Fund for Workers' Expenditures)
INFONAVIT	Instituto del Fondo Nacional para la Vivienda de los Trabajadores (Institute of the National Workers' Housing Fund)
INSP	Instituto Nacional de Salud Pública, México (National Institute of Public Health, Mexico)
IPO	IPO Initial Public Offering
LATIBEX	Market for Latin-American Stocks in Euros
LyFC	Luz y Fuerza del Centro (State Power and Light Company of Central Mexico)
MUP	Movimiento Urbano Popular (Popular Urban Movement)
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OREVIS	Organismos Estatales de Vivienda (State Housing Agencies)
PAN	Partido Acción Nacional (National Action Party)
PEMEX	Petróleos Mexicanos (Mexican Petroleum)
PGR	Procuraduría General de la República (Attorney General of Mexico)
PRD	Partido de la Revolución Democrática (Party of the Democratic Revolution)
PRI	Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party)
PROFECO	Procuraduría Federal del Consumidor (Federal Consumer Protection Agency)
PROSOC	Procuraduría Social (Social Attorney)
SAPAC	Sistema de Agua Potable y Alcantarillado de Cuernavaca (System of Drinking Water and Drainage in Cuernavaca)
SARH	Secretaría de Agricultura y Recursos Hidráulicos (Ministry of Agriculture and Hydraulic Services)
SE	Secretaría de Economía (Ministry of Economy)
SEDESOL	Secretaría de Desarrollo Social (Ministry of Social Development)
SEMARNAT	Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources
SENER	Secretaría de Energía (Ministry of Energy)
SEPESCA	Secretaría de Pesca (Ministry of Fisheries)
SHCP	Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público (Ministry of Finance and Public Credit)
SHF	Sociedad Hipotecaria Federal (Federal Mortgage Society)

SNTE	Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (National Union for Education Workers)
SOFOLES	Sociedades Financieras de Objeto Limitado (Limited Purpose Financial Companies)
SRA	Secretaría de la Reforma Agraria (Ministry of the Agrarian Reform)
STERM	Sindicato de Trabajadores Electricistas de la República Mexicana (Electrical Workers Union of the Mexican Republic)
STPRM	Sindicato de Trabajadores Petroleros de la República Mexicana (National Union for Oil Workers of the Mexican Republic)
UDIS	Unidades de Inversión (Investment Units)
UNITEC	Universidad Tecnológica de México (Technological University of Mexico)

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Preface

Casas GEO is the largest private developer of low-cost housing in Latin America. To most Mexicans the term ‘Casas GEO’ conjures up an image of thousands of identical, ‘small-track’ houses built far from city centres across the country. In Mexico City, the way to reach a Casas GEO complex is to travel along more or less any one of the highways out of the city for upwards of 50 minutes. Eventually, one will encounter a billboard advertising a GEO development. The billboard may show a family in a swimming pool accompanied by the slogan “*Te imaginas...?*” [Can you imagine this is yours?] or a map showing the location of the complex, the distance to it in kilometres and the time it takes to get there. Further along the highway one will get a first sight of the GEO complex, perhaps just a small speck of concrete in the midst of open maize fields. As one gets closer, the speck starts to look bigger, in the arid, monotonous, landscape and then the speck appears to multiply and becomes organised into identical forms. The only variant is a protruding building that bears the emblematic Casas GEO logo. If one continues beyond this complex, there is a good chance of finding another GEO complex or one developed by a competitor such as Ara or Sare.

This landscape, created by Casas GEO and other private developers, is one of the clearest expressions of decades of economic liberalisation, which has entailed the greater involvement of foreign capital, an attempt by the state to redefine its role in national development and a strong emphasis on the private sector as the force that will bring prosperity to the country. In this thesis, I examine how Mexico’s economic and political reorientation has shaped the everyday lives of people living in Casas GEO housing complexes. Since the first housing development project of this kind was set up two decades ago it has been promoted as a formula for ‘good city’ growth, a method for mass-scale low-cost housing production, and a condition for the social betterment of millions of Mexican families. Casas GEO housing is not only transforming urban growth patterns, but also having an effect on how urban life in contemporary Mexico is conceived and experienced. In spite of this, what we know about these new geographies is largely based on opposing stories of success and failure with regard to the impact of planning, architecture and liveability, largely through press articles and countless

rumours. However, despite the value of these accounts there has been little or no systematic research on the lives of the residents, their motives and aspirations or on how they assess success and failure, their frustrations and struggles.

The number of GEO-type complexes began to grow in the mid 1990s after the government began modernising the housing sector through a new market-oriented housing finance system with the close involvement of private developers (Puebla, 2002). The reorientation of housing policies formed a part of wider restructuring policies that begun during the 1980s as a response to the debt crisis and austerity. Promoted by the World Bank and IMF (International Monetary Fund), the discourse of neoliberalisation arrived to Latin America with several phases of structural adjustments reforms. In Mexico, such reforms entailed adopting a model of a limited interventionist state with regards to foreign trade and investment (Ros, 2000), as well as a new organisational relationship between government (national and local), the private sector and civil society. The new arrangement promoted a public management at different levels of government and a political and fiscal decentralisation (Guarneros-Meza, 2009). As Guarneros-Meza suggests, the political project of neoliberalisation in Mexico entailed a “network of governance” (Ibid: 477) where decentralisation, democratisation and institutional legacies from the past constitute an ongoing process with the main tendencies: i) a declining role of the public sector towards the participation of the private elites and voluntary sectors, ii) a shift from the scope of policies based on redistribution toward enterprise and accountability goals, and iii) the rise of public-private partnerships as new forms of governance (2009:464).

An essential part of this new path to modernisation was the creation of an efficient and competitive housing sector and a massive housing reform programme was undertaken.¹ The most significant changes in the housing sector were carried out in 1992 with the reform of INFONAVIT (the Institute of the National Workers’ Housing Fund), a parastatal organisation run by workers’ representatives, businesses and the government department responsible for providing workers’ housing. The institution was changed in two fundamental ways.

¹ The housing policies that were implemented in Mexico from the 1930s but especially the 1960s have been studied by Garza and Schteingart (1978), INFONAVIT (2005) and Coplamar (1982).

First, INFONAVIT became a purely financial institution and ceased to have responsibility directly for housing (that is, in matters of land acquisition, architecture, pricing and mortgages), which was transferred to private intermediaries such as mortgage agencies and housing developers (Puebla, 2002; Siembieda and López, 1999). This change of responsibilities allowed INFONAVIT to devise new funding methods and conditions for granting mortgages to its beneficiaries, as well as to lay down stringent conditions for the repayment of the loans. Macroeconomic stability and inflation control became determining factors in the development of adequate financing products such as mortgages at a fixed rate in pesos and long-term payment terms. The new focus of INFONAVIT, even as regards subsidies, was to allocate mortgages with a “formula system” which abolished the practice of prioritising potential customers through a clientelism system that was highly susceptible to corruption (Puebla, 2002). The elimination of ‘corporate loyalties’ gave to formal workers (in the public and private sectors) a real possibility for accessing a housing mortgage.²In 1997 the reform of the pension system allowed greater transparency in the management of workers’ resources. This transparency was achieved by creating a system of individualised accounts where workers could choose from a pool of commercial banks and financial intermediaries to administer their pension funds.

Second, to gain the financial stability and the political legitimacy as a democratic institution, the reform of INFONAVIT involved drawing up agreements with private developers interested in producing low-cost housing. These agreements however, favoured specific developers that had worked for decades as INFONAVIT contractors (Ara, GEO and Urbi). INFONAVIT fully funded the initial operations (such as the land purchase and construction work) through a combination of savings held on behalf of formal sector employees through wage deductions and federal money, continuing a system of guarantees as well as subsidies within the system in order to assure long-term housing production (Esquivel, 2005).

² Before the INFONAVIT reform, the allocation of loans was driven by votes for the Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI. The system of loyalties from the citizens to a leader produced a network of favours and thus the distribution of loans was controlled in coordination with trade unions and companies in the private sector that had subscribed to the fund (Guarneros-Meza, 2009).

In 1992, controversial amendments were made to the Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution governing the *ejido* land that was enacted after the 1910 Mexican Revolution (Azuela, 1989; Jones 1996). The constitutional amendment represented one of the strongest signs of the advent of neoliberalisation in Mexico. The reform brought two changes. First, the Agrarian Reform Act of 1915 came to an end. This meant that the *ejidatarios* [land owners] were enabled to sell or lease their plots, once redistributed by the government, if the majority of members of the *ejido* agreed to do so.³ Second, *ejido* members were prohibited from redefining the boundaries of communal land and from exercising their informal right for selling plots of land to small *fraccionadores* [private developers/ subdividers] (Soloaga and Lara, 2007; Schteingart, 1989:29-31). While the *ejido* reform intended to boost agriculture with private investment, the legal sale of the *ejido* largely benefited large-scale homebuilders that managed to assemble through purchase land controlled by *ejido* communities and to implement what became a suburban model of low-cost housing (García Peralta and Hoffer, 2006; Jones and Ward 1998).

In the 2000s, the housing reforms continued and new institutions were created. The Federal Housing Fund, FOVI, was replaced by the Federal Mortgage Society (SHF) which, like its predecessor, granted loans to intermediaries to cover building costs and secured loans with federal money from the Central Bank of Mexico. But the SHF also performed a new role which was to set up a secondary mortgage market, supported by a group of mortgage-backed securities known as the Limited Purpose Financial Companies (SOFOL) (Gavito, 2012; Puebla, 2002; Siembieda and López, 1999).⁴

³ The Agrarian Law specified that the title to the *ejido* land was retained by the state, to be expropriated and redistributed to landless peasants upon application. The peasants had the right to farm the land, the *ejidatarios* [owners] could inherit their right to the land but could not sell or mortgage it. The Agrarian Law was widely abused and the 'owners' often subdivided land into small lots for sale to subdividers. The lack of legal deeds, basic urban services and the constructions that did not meet building codes meant these self-built neighborhoods were called "irregular" or *colonias populares* (Schteingart, 1989:29-31).

⁴ A SOFOL is a non-institutional mortgage intermediary. It works as a mortgage lender without the capacity to attract savings from the public and can only obtain interbank credit or resources by issuing securities. They were created as a part of NAFTA with funds from the World Bank, Central Bank of Mexico and United States to allow foreign investment agencies to participate in the Mexican mortgage market societies. The SOFOLES housing mortgages are calculated in UDIS (Investment Units) linked to the monthly minimum wage and targeted families with i) the capacity to pay small monthly payments, and ii) who need a long-term financing (15-30 years). The mortgage is adjusted to inflation and the average annual interest rate is close to 9 percent, therefore it is less financially risky than granting a loan in Mexican pesos. An example of a SOFOL is *Su Casita Hipotecaria*, the non-institutional intermediary that allocated mortgages to customers interested in a GEO property at Bosques and similar housing sites in the state of Morelos. CNBV (National Banking and Securities Commission) (2012). SOFOLES.

FOVISSSTE (Housing Fund of the Institute of Social Security and Social Services for State Workers), which was responsible for granting mortgages to public employees, was restructured in a similar way to INFONAVIT, but with the stress now laid on co-financing agreements with other agencies and commercial banks. Although INFONAVIT remained the largest provider of mortgages, up to 75 percent of the total, the SHF has extended its network of mortgage agencies as well as forming private-public finance partnerships (between INFONAVIT, FOVISSSTE, public agencies and commercial banks) to secure more mortgages for workers in the informal sector and temporary employees (Babatz, 2004) and to continue consolidating the housing financial system.

New decentralised institutions became the main enforcer of the National Housing Programme. Coordinated by the National Housing Commission (CONAVI), State Housing Organisations, known by the acronym OREVIS, located in each state became responsible for allocating subsidies and financing schemes, granting housing construction permits and designing and monitoring the codes for house construction and compliance with urban codes, amongst other duties (CONAVI, 2010d). The housing 'network of governance' included local branches of the National Chamber of Industry and Promotion of Housing Development (CANADEVI). The representatives of each branch, often a renowned housing developer join the advisory boards of CONAVI, INFONAVIT and SHF at national and sub national levels. In conjunction with the role of housing developers, the position of public notaries [*notarías públicas*] have expanded enormously in the housing sector due to their legal task in validating the deeds and the sell of the *ejido* land, as well as in performing other duties such as the handover the houses.⁵

According to supporters, the financial and institutional reforms proved to be successful from the very beginning. Between 1991 and 2000, INFONAVIT and the FOVISSSTE jointly granted 1.5 million mortgage loans. In the following decade, the trend continued upward. Between 2000 and 2008, the annual number of mortgage for finished housing (new and used) grew from 250,000 in 2000 to 640,000 in 2008 (Coulomb and

Available: Last <http://www.cnbv.gob.mx/OtrosSupervisados/Preguntas-Frecuentes/Paginas/Sofoles.aspx>. Last accessed 6th May 2012.

⁵ In Mexico, notary public [*notario público*] are lawyers publicly appointed by the State Governor who specialise in Contract Law. Legal documents such as deeds, wills, powers of attorney, constitution of corporations, establishment of trusts and other legal transactions must be made before a notary public in order to be valid. If the document is not notarized it is not legal (Penner & Associates, 2012).

Schteingart, 2006). During these eight years the new breed of developers - Ara, Casas GEO, Homex, Sare and Urbi - accounted for 22 percent of the nation's housing market. The reforms were contributing to what was regarded as a new 'housing boom' in Mexico. At the end of 2010, the number of institutional loans (INFONAVIT and FOVISSSTE) totaled 4.4 million, 20 percent of these loans represented co-financing schemes established between INFONAVIT or FOVISSSTE and commercial banks and/or SOFOLES (CONAVI, 2010a). For the Mexican families, these numbers meant that between 2000 and 2010, one of every 12 households received a loan from these institutions (INEGI, 2012b).

After a period of dynamic growth, the housing industry faced a deep and necessary adjustment. The detonator was undoubtedly the world economic recession in 2008, although the magnitude of this adjustment was related to a combination of various factors. Signs of an excess supply and a limited quality of the housing model became visible. These factors pushed the former government to amend 'the unwanted effects' on the established housing policy. The diversification of instruments and channels for accessing mortgages and the group of institutions involved in the housing sector indicated that the 'housing boom' had been driven primarily by supply. The housing authorities admitted that the financial scheme that privileged a model of new single-family housing over the provision of greater basic services and transport networks. It also recognised the almost nonexistent role of the state, particularly at the local level, for directing the housing policy. In 2008, the former President Calderón (2006-2012) implemented a long-term city building policy called the "Integral and Sustainable Urban Developments" (DUI) with the purpose of fostering verticality and of building housing with sufficient infrastructure, services and connectivity to places of work (CIDOC-SHF, 2011:14).

The 'city making' new rationale entailed constructing regional, industrial, technological, tourist or service 'poles', by creating new towns of over 50,000 inhabitants. Calderón set out a financing policy goal of six million housing units to be delivered during his six-year term, almost one-half to be targeted at families with an income below four minimum wages (USD \$600 per month) (CONAFOVI, 2008). On a positive side, the DUI pushed for constitutional amendments to the Housing Law (Art. 73). In particular, in relation to the standards for construction of housing projects and

for an orderly urban growth that were often overlooked by developers and local authorities (Topelson, 2011).⁶ The DUIS legislation included the involvement of nine public institutions to coordinate and monitor the architectural, neighbourhood, urban and regional level aspects of house planning (CONAVI, 2008; SEDESOL, 2009).⁷ Notions of density, verticality, green technology, mixed land use, housing for different market segments in the same site and connectivity to transit system formed part of the guidelines to lead to better planned new cities (CIDOC-SHF, 2011:14).⁸

Despite the global financial crisis that affected Mexico's growth rate in 2009, the target for housing building was achieved in March 2011 (Arteaga, 2012) and thousands of families are already living in DUIS promoted homes; for example, in the municipality of Huehuetoca, State of Mexico, in the industrial corridor of Villagran-Celaya, Guanajuato, or close to the technological park in Nogales, Sonora (Topelson, 2011). These mega-projects constituted the first phase of the 19 DUIS that have been approved by the government nationwide (Gavito, 2012). The construction of thousands of housing units, as well as schools, parks, suburban train stations and major feeder roads, has transformed developers from residential and project builders into the role of "nation builders" (Orvañanos and Ahumada, 2011). Indeed, as the title of a new initiative organised by GEO suggests – "*Casas GEO Por fin en Chiapas*" [Casas GEO at last in Chiapas]. The new housing production model and a particular form of consumption, is extending modernity to the poorest states of the country.

In terms of financing, the law opened new schemes with a focus on demand. Since 2010 INFONAVIT has reduced the supply of new housing and launched instead mortgages for repossessed houses, used housing and for the *Renueva tu hogar* [Renew your home] programme. Although it is still too early to know the exact impact of these schemes there is a possibility to design plans for mortgages (BBVA, 2012: 11-12).

⁶ Interview with the Sub Secretariat of Urban Development and Territorial Ordinances under SEDESOL. February 14, 2011. London, UK.

⁷ The institutions involved in the DUIS policy are the Ministry of Finance and Credit Public (SHCP), Ministry of Social Development (SEDESOL), Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources (SEMARNAT), Ministry of Energy (SENER), Ministry of Economy (SE), National Housing Commission (CONAVI), Institute of the National Workers' Housing Fund (INFONAVIT), Housing Fund of the Institute of Social Security and Social Services for State Workers (FOVISSSTE), National Bank of Public Works and Services (Banobras) and the National Infrastructure Fund (FONADIN).

⁸ The reformed Housing Law represented an important achievement as it meant that by 2012 about 25 percent of units financed by a public institution will incorporate quality criteria for construction and urban surroundings (CIDOC-SHF, 2011).

After almost two decades of housing reforms in Mexico, it is possible to identify the social groups who can access the new housing schemes and whether it is possible to consider the approach a new model of low-cost housing. The first “SHF Housing Price Index” published in 2011 shows that the housing market is oriented towards economic and social (traditional) housing market segments. In mid 2011 the distribution was 74.6 percent to economic and social (traditional) housing (or families in socioeconomic segment D, D+ and C with monthly minimum salaries up to 6.9 (MXN \$12,382.74 pesos, or USD \$993.80). The remaining units are divided between the medium (23.1 percent) and residential (2.3 percent housing segments).⁹This Price Index coincided with the type of mortgages assigned: a high proportion (over 90 percent in the case of INFONAVIT and over 70 percent in the case of FOVISSSTE) of the mortgage market is focused on the economic and social housing segments (CIDOC-SHF, 2012: 43,45-46; SHF, 2012).

This economic restructuring has influenced people’s dreams and aspirations, suggesting different ways of relating to the developer, the community and nation. The new developers have not only increased the stock of houses in Mexico but also introduced a new language around low-cost housing. At present, people can buy houses via different lending programmes - *Credijoven*, *Cofinavit*, *Credidiferente*, *Renuevate* - that allow them to choose from a range of housing prototypes such as *Tucán*, *Canario*, *Esmeralda* or *Safiro*. These prototypes are tied to different prices based on the number of minimum salaries. But, unlike the previous INFONAVIT or FOVI model, buying a new house does not mean receipt of an already constituted object. Rather, people are encouraged to participate in the production of the house by improving, extending and furnishing it. Different actors such as home retailers, decorators and real estate agents help in this process. Low-cost housing has ceased to be a social good and become instead a consumer good that is defined in terms of its architecture and its potential for improvement. Although aimed at people with lower incomes, the individual houses with front gardens in suburban gated communities are designed to evoke the comfort and lifestyle of the middle classes.

⁹ These data are for the second quarter of 2011, the last confirmed data set available. The next quarters (from mid 2011 to the end of 2012) are based on projections.

The lifestyle apparently being ‘sold’ in these complexes has attracted the attention of international journalists drawn to stories of Mexico’s economic growth and on the look-out for an emergent new middle class in the developing world (Booth and Miroff, 2012; Do Campo, 2007; Lyons, 2005; Malkin, 2004). In their awareness of an emerging new middle class, journalists narrate stories of sales managers, taxi drivers and car cleaners whose ‘success’ is expressed through accounts of material acquisitions and refined tastes such as eating Chinese food, sending their children to ballet lessons and driving new cars. The image below appeared in a recent article in the Washington Post. The article provides a series of photographs of new middle-class Mexicans spending on private education for their children and flat-screen TVs from Home Depot. The authors argued that these images are challenging the notions of the stereotypical illegal migrant hustling for day labour outside Home Depot in Arizona (Booth and Miroff, 2012).

The consensus amongst journalists is that Mexico has joined the list of countries with a significant new middle class. But, is a housing form that *promises* a middle-class lifestyle for a target group that is, or was, in a lower socio-economic position indicative of similar processes attributed to the experience of countries such as India and Brazil? Are the neoliberal urban landscapes constructed by Casas GEO and others a reliable or ambivalent sign of a sustainable class position or will the dream remain no more than that?

This image, shows a dance instructor helping a girl, during a ballet class in Rosarito Beach, Mexico, has been removed for copyright reasons.

Image 1. Ballet class at Rosarito, Tijuana

Source: The Washington Post/Getty Images (2012).

These key questions arising from these new geographies have not attracted much academic interest. A few academics have been concerned with the adverse effects of massification, remoteness, poor planning and the standard of the houses (Coulomb and Schteingart, 2006; García Peralta and Hoffer, 2006; Mokkonen, 2011), and the effects on people's quality of life (Esquivel, 2006; Maya, 2005). So far, there have been no academic accounts that explore the personal aspirations and desires or frustrations and disillusionment of people who inhabit the new housing landscapes that symbolise one of the most profound economic, social and cultural changes that the country has faced in the last 20 years. Yet, there are indications that frustration and disillusionment exist. The website of Profeco, the Federal Consumer Protection Agency, reveals that since 2007 the second highest number of complaints has been received in relation to faults in the construction of housing built by private developers such as GEO. These complaints have included cracked walls, inadequate electricity supply, concerns about subsidence and a lack of promised services (Soto, 2011). There have been complaints that the developers and sales personnel practised deception and fraud in some cases, accusations and evidence of which have appeared on various web-logs and uploaded videos. However, the accusations reflect divergent opinions, with some people saying that these widespread failings and examples of fraud are mostly based on hearsay. For many, the GEO complexes represent wonder, or as a taxi driver told me en route to a Casas GEO complex.

“What you see there is real [pointing to the horizon], and they are building more. People say that the houses grow by themselves. [You see] The land around here is fertile, everything used to be found here, sorghum, maize. Over by the Ara [houses], animals used to graze. It was good land ... that's why things grow without help, nothing can stop them ... It's just like fairytales, myths that people believe. But the truth is that all kinds of things go on over there. That's the real Mexico. Now that you're going there I am sure they'll tell you.” (Taxi driver in Ixtapaluca, State of Mexico. February, 2007) (See photo 1)

On the one hand, therefore, there is the dream of developments produced by GEO, ARA and others improving people's lives, and on the other there is the suggestion that the reality is different. The taxi driver dispels this possibility as a 'myth' but suggests that only the residents can confirm whether the dream has gone sour. My research sets out to consider residents' views through ethnographic work in one development.



Photo 1. Casa GEO in Ixtapaluca, State of Mexico

Source: Cristina Inclán-Valadez, 2007.

Research aims and structure of the thesis

This thesis starts out from an assumption that the experience of living in urban Mexico has changed in recent decades. Processes described broadly as globalisation, economic liberalisation and market-oriented policies, and democratisation requires a different approach to urban living. This shift also challenges how social scientists need to understand the urban process. As I explore later in the thesis, academics, in particular anthropologists, have tended to analyse urban Mexico from the perspective of poverty, marginality and social exclusion. The experience of an important group of Mexicans, however, suggests that we need to understand a wider range of social changes in cities and from a perspective of (claimed) inclusion, social mobility and ‘social differentiation’. I argue that *class* best accounts for the way everyday urban life is experienced in Mexico.

This study focuses on a group of people who live in a single housing project. The residents of GEO Bosques in the city of Cuernavaca work to carve out a presence in the ‘middle ground’ of contemporary Mexican society, and shape their sense of a modern urban way of life. The selection of a research site at the periphery of Cuernavaca was a deliberate choice, a response to the changing ‘map’ of urban Mexico. The new breed of GEO-type housing sites and the (mega) projects that often accompany them, including facilities such as supermarkets, shopping malls, and private schools and universities, are transforming urban Mexico (see also Jones and Moreno-Carranco, 2007). More specifically, these developments challenge the view that Morelos is rural and impoverished and its politics is focussed on conflicts regarding issues of land and the drug war. The classic ethnographic texts focussing on the state have been undertaken in the countryside and small towns, and have been important as expositions of a Mexican way of life (Bataillon, 2002; Redfield, 1930). But Mexico’s new reality demands an urban focus, reclaiming an ethnographic method that has been devalued in recent decades, and for which Morelos is an appropriate location of study.

The research considers how what I term the *GEO movement* as a new cultural category captures GEO residents’ engagement with the process of *making class* through their everyday practices.¹⁰ By drawing on ethnographic insights, this thesis examines why and how the *GEO movement* emerged, how residents experience a new housing project in their everyday lives and what meanings they communicate through these everyday practices. The research addresses the general question of how ordinary Mexicans think and feel and what they expect and experience from contemporary urban living.

In examining the most significant social practices that serve to ‘produce’ the *GEO movement*, my analysis is based on the argument that residents are *co-producers* of their lifestyles. The neoliberal approach to poverty reduction argues that there are limits on what the government can do. In most nations, city and municipal governments lack the fiscal and institutional base to meet citizen needs. *Co-production* is a widespread term

¹⁰ The term *Movimiento GEO* was coined by one of my informants, Isis, a resident in Bosques and an ex-employee of GEO. Isis with the help of her daughter was also the housekeeper for several weekend properties in the complex, but she called herself a neighbourhood administrator. She regarded the *Movimiento GEO* as a means of being involved with other house vendors, tenants, mothers and administrators who were creating the place that I was studying.

to explain how people plan, act and build alliances with government and aid agencies. Particularly for the urban poor, getting access to land for housing and tenure and/or services requires collective organisation. In theory, the *co-production* gives citizens an active role in designing, implementing and managing answers to their needs. It also allows the planning of solutions in terms of inter alia house design, building materials and infrastructure standards. As such, *co-production* as a strategy looks to go beyond confrontational methods as means by which poor and middleclass groups have tried to influence government and to adopt a productive partnership or citizen-local authority relationship. Examples of *co-production* of housing and services for poor groups is the building of coalitions between citizens and grassroots to prevent demolitions or evictions in India and house-building programmes that combine metropolitan authorities and informal settlement dwellers that assist land transfer to homebuilders for new residential or commercial projects in Colombia (see Satterthwaite, 2008).

One of the fundamental ideas of the Casa GEO company is that residents are encouraged to participate in the production of their living space. It is also a notion that illustrates how the ethnography evolves. The term *co-producers* captures a sense of how neoliberalisation permeate the everyday life of ordinary residents. This notion of active producers of their space illustrates how a partnership between Casas GEO and the residents leads to the formation of a middle-class lifestyle. With regard to the developer, it involves building houses, while at the same time constructing and conveying to would-be residents a set of values and codes of behaviour which are imperative to make the site liveable. The role of residents is to make sense of those values and codes of behaviour, interpret them and apply them to their everyday lives. More specifically, it means that they must become builders and interior decorators, neighbourhood managers, entrepreneurs who are capable of finding ways to finance their dreams and responsible neighbours who can live with others. The active role of the residents is best seen through people's interpretations of 'good' taste and comfort (discussed in Chapter Seven). But it is also demonstrated in the way that people attempt to *produce themselves* as more cultured, stylish and devoted people (as discussed in Chapters Four and Six).

Finally, the concept of *co-producers* is crucial to understanding the many flaws, drawbacks and inconsistencies in what Casas GEO claims to be its goal, to encourage upward social mobility. This thesis shows how the residents at GEO Bosques often found themselves aspiring to an image of a modern and middle class lifestyle that is always beyond their reach. Throughout this thesis, I seek to explain how the *GEO movement* has been formed by a wide range of practices, from attempts to demonstrate economic success and symbolic status, to desires to accumulate the capital needed for upward mobility as well as efforts made to overcome the anxieties and frustrations of being excluded from the ‘dream’ of social mobility.

In particular I examine how residents attempt to produce this cultural space, and hence shape their identity as new urban subjects, through three different areas of their life. These include: a) the process of collectively improving the site they live in and managing it by themselves; b) remodelling and extending their homes with new architectural styles that express individual tastes and show a desire to live in a safe and comfortable environment; and c) ensuring personal and professional growth through jobs, religion, education, sports activities and self-help groups. These strategies occur as a dynamic process; they do not follow a defined order and are not expressed in the same way by everyone. However, taken together, they serve as a set of practices that reveal general ideas, beliefs and experiences that provide people with the prospect of dreaming about, aspiring to and experiencing a modern middle-class lifestyle. These practices also express the struggles that an emerging group must undergo before they can gain recognition in contemporary Mexico.

The thesis is structured in the following way. Chapter One outlines the theoretical framework for the *GEO movement* which is treated as an intermediate cultural category that needs to be explored ethnographically. To put this work in context, the chapter examines the important urban ethnographies that have been carried out in Mexico, especially since the 1950s, to explore their contribution to an understanding of urban life, and how they have neglected middle-class groups in their view of the city. It then provides a brief historical sketch of the ‘traditional’ urban middle class, which was a central protagonist in the narratives of national progress and modernity during the post-revolutionary period (1940-1980), and highlights some of the key economic and

political changes in the last two decades that shed light on the emerging patterns of the 'new' middle-class groups. These groups are viewed from the perspective of the anthropological literature on the emergence middle-class groups in societies that are undergoing rapid economic and social change.

Chapter Two outlines the methodological rationale for the research. I discuss my role as a resident and researcher inside GEO Bosques and in particular in the *privada* (the subsection where I conducted most of the research) to engage in the task of doing ethnography 'at home'. The chapter provides a brief historical account of recent patterns of urbanisation in Cuernavaca and indicates how these are embedded in the economic and political processes of neoliberalism. The chapter then provides an outline of how the ethnographic work was carried out, which includes the selection of the site, the access to it, my interaction with residents, employees of the GEO company and property developers, and the research techniques that were employed. The methodology shows that participant observation, interviewing and writing up are linked stages in the conduct of ethnography.

Chapter Three provides an ethnographic explanation of how the study site was planned and built by the Casas GEO Company, and follows the different stages of the firm's business model for house production. This chapter demonstrates that the new model of low-cost house planning in Mexico requires taking account of larger production practices that go beyond architectural concerns. The chapter reconstructs the company's general model for house production by drawing on my analysis of written reports and house plans, as well as on interviews with the company employees and my participant observation in the recently sold sites. By analysing these stages of housing production, the chapter introduces the two main ideas of the thesis. The first is that the goal of the Casas GEO is to 'sell' a middle-class lifestyle people can aspire to. The second is that residents must become actively involved with the firm's business model by acting as *co-producers* of their living space.

Chapters Four, Five, Six and Seven are ethnographic chapters that examine the day-to-day social dynamics of the study site. The material is analysed to show how the GEO residents construct the boundaries around the *GEO movement*, and debate the terms of

their group membership. Chapter Four investigates the situated practices that shaped the social organisation of the place during the first two years of habitation. It also details the formation of “*Comunidades GEO*”, a self-administrated neighbourhood model devised by the company and conveyed to the residents through a set of prescriptive values, codes and expected behaviour which follow the principles of self-governance. This model is then contrasted with the self-help strategies and the informal community activities that emerged from people’s needs to make GEO Bosques liveable.

Chapter Five provides an overview of the GEO residents by giving an account of their jobs and education, material possessions, political views, and beliefs, as well as the ways they use their homes. Chapters Six and Seven deal with the specific practices carried out by the GEO residents to shape their idea of a modern style of urban life. Chapter Six examines the practices employed to mitigate the stigma attached to the “Casas FEO” [ugly houses], a connotation that posits the site as a place in social and physical decline and occupied by ‘undesirable’ residents. These strategies include measures taken by the neighbourhood committee to keep the site tidy and safe, and involve notions of ‘good neighbourliness’. It also includes steps taken by the residents to seek out spaces and communities that lie beyond the borders of the residential space, in sports clubs, charismatic churches and private educational institutions. Chapter Seven investigates how people play the role of *co-producers* of Casas GEO by improving and altering the original design of their houses on the basis of their notions of ‘good’ taste, comfort and stylish living. The chapter demonstrates that the constant need for house improvement that the residents feel they need to carry out, forces them to question the issues of permanence, security and the legality of their homes, and introduces the idea of a temporary dwelling. The upgraded houses and the notions of a temporary dwelling reflect an uncertain condition as an emerging middle-class group in Mexico. The main findings of the thesis are outlined in the Conclusion, Chapter Eight, which links the detailed observations from a single site ethnography to more general observations on urban lives and neoliberalism in Mexico.

1 Chapter One: The making of class and the *GEO* movement

1.1 Introduction

This chapter examines a range of important ethnographies on social change and urban life in residential settings, and discusses the need for an ethnographical approach to the emergence of new urban modes of life in contemporary Mexico. It involves understanding that the experience of living in urban Mexico has changed considerably over the past few decades, particularly as a result of economic liberalisation and market-oriented policies, and democratisation. These processes have brought about significant changes in the everyday life of Mexicans, as well as the emergence of new towns and cities to live in and new and different places within all towns and cities. For many, people's realities in these new geographies mirror the lifestyles of a so-called new middle class. I argue that ethnography is the best way to delineate this changing reality accurately and that there is a need to restore a lost tradition of urban ethnography in Mexico to understand the way urban experience occurs in cities today.

Recognising a new urban reality in Mexico requires adopting a different approach to urban living. This involves a shift from viewing a city through factors such as poverty, marginality and social exclusion, to observing the many ways that emerging social groups are confronting a changing social order, and investigating their habits of consumerism, aspirations and social differences. These approaches reflect the concrete processes of class formation. But class, as Wacquant (1991) argues, is one of the most difficult concepts to pin down, writing that there are two alternatives. First, class can be treated as a given category or an abstract concept made up of separate and 'exclusionary' sectors (workingclass, middle, upper) that speak for themselves or, second, an attempt can be made to actually explain the world by describing the experience of class in everyday life. Wacquant adds that the recent emergence of a new middle class in contemporary societies provides an opportunity and challenge to study class as a cultural concept. That is, it entails studying the real class practices that make up these new entities, and understanding the nature of the new or distinct symbolic and material conditions that sustain them as a group.

In this research study, urban ethnography serves as a means of understanding the concrete processes of everyday living that underlie middle class lifestyles. More specifically it sees the Casas GEO Bosques as the arena where the symbolic and material struggles for *class-making* can occur, and examines the creation of the *GEO movement*, which is understood as a cultural space formed out of the residents' everyday practices. This space allows people ways of imagining, aspiring and experiencing an urban way of living, that has some signs of (or an affinity with) a new middle-class lifestyle.

In recent years, the task of capturing the lives of the new middle classes in emerging societies has become increasingly significant in urban studies, and especially in anthropology. Different debates regarding the class analysis have emerged. In the view of authors such as Bauman (1982) and Giddens (1990), the decline of the class identities is related to the transformation of the welfare state or what has been described as reflexive modernity. These and other authors assert that in a stage of advanced capitalism, class categories and identities has lost their explanatory potential. Along the same line, Pakulski and Walters (1996) argue that the concept of class has failed to account for the new ways in which inequalities are increasingly being explained, specifically on the basis of consumption patterns. According to this perspective, if recognised class (working class, middle class) biographies were characteristic of a period of welfare state, in periods of uncertainty and social change identities become reflexive and depend more on the decisions of individuals.

For other group of scholars, class has become highly a relevant analytical category, as individuals still need to situate themselves socially in order to define their identity. These authors acknowledge that it is important to address class identities from a less traditional angle, focusing on its cultural dimensions, as well as to recognise and explore processes of disidentification of class (Savage, 2000; Skeggs, 1997), or the emergence of new class subjects (Fernandes, 2006; De Koning, 2009; Lietchy, 2008; Wacquant, 1991; Zhang, 2010). Most of these authors have been influenced by Pierre Bourdieu, especially his work on class and stratification as a cultural process (Bourdieu, 1984, 1991). Bourdieu's notion of social space is an attempt to break with a linear model of social class in favour of a relational approach that goes beyond an exclusionary hierarchical differentiation and offers a multi-dimensional space composed

by the overall volume of capitals (social, economic and cultural), the composition of capitals, and the change of these two properties over time, the trajectory. These trajectories are not exclusively defined by individuals, but depend on the volume of inherited capital which leads to particular social positions. Bourdieu's view of class formation (types of capitals and trajectory) as an individualised and continuous practice has been acknowledged by urban ethnographers. Bourdieu's approach allows exploring how individuals assess their own life stories instead of adhering to any strong claim of class membership. My understanding of the *GEO movement* as a cultural phenomenon allows the urban experience in GEO Bosques to be seen from the eyes of its inhabitants and in perspective and compared with other emerging social groups in changing societies around the world.

This chapter recognises the need to study contemporary lives from a less traditional angle by approaching class subjects in continuous formation. The chapter begins by reviewing important ethnographies in Mexico since the 1950s, their theoretical and methodological importance for the understanding of urban life, as well as how they have neglected middle-class groups and planned spaces in their view of the city. Next, the chapter deals with various aspects of the understudied 'traditional' middle groups in Mexico, and tracks what appears to be emergent new middle-class groups akin to those found in other countries experiencing rapid economic and social changes. The literature on the new middle class is then examined in terms of a theoretical framework to study the *GEO movement*.

1.2 Urban Ethnographies in Mexico. A focus on the urban poor

The study of poor, deviant, ethnic or racial sub-groups in ghettos and on street corners, has led to what Hannerz (1980) called the ethnographic study of the exotic 'other' and its 'different' social worlds. Studies of urban Latin America have not been immune from this tendency. As García Canclini infers, academics have used Mexican cities and in particular Mexico City as a laboratory for understanding urban poverty in a period of rapid urbanisation.¹¹ The urban poor and 'spontaneous', 'irregular' and 'self-help'

¹¹ The shift to ethnographies of the city is relatively recent. Studies by Redfield (1930) and Oscar Lewis (1951) in Tepoztlán; Friedlander (1975) in Hueyapán; and Fromm and Maccoby (1970), Romanucci-Ross

settlements have been the object of extensive ethnographic attention (Hiernaux and Lindón, 2000; Lewis, 1961; Lindón, 1999; Lombard, 2012; Lomnitz, 1975; LeVine and Sunderland, 1996). By investigating the details of everyday practices, ethnographers have attempted to accumulate evidence on the social order, factors that allow poor groups to survive, and the persistence of exclusion and marginality in cities.

Despite this focus on the exotic ‘other’, as García Canclini (2005) has pointed out, urban ethnography in Latin America has had a generally marginal status in the field of urban studies. The detailed and thorough analysis that ethnography involves has been disparaged by some economists, demographers and planners who accuse it of only portraying a partial reality and over-identifying with the subject. In an attempt to increase academic interest in urban life, since the 1990s García Canclini has ‘announced’ that the city is a qualitatively different place. The flows of capital and people, new built forms, and presence of new hybrid forces linked to globalisation and traditional practices, provides an opportunity to reconnect disciplines within the social sciences (geography, sociology and urban planning) and approach the city from ‘below’ (García Canclini, 1997). Most notably, García Canclini has sought to revive the idea that the ‘culture’ of the city is studied through its representation of people’s urban experience.

Foremost in the study of the relation between the city and culture through the medium of ethnography was the work of Oscar Lewis. The concern of Lewis was how people responded to the radical changes experienced in Mexico during the 1950s and 1960s. Rapid urbanisation, national economic growth, the wealth of a minority and the proximity of the United States and exposure to its culture, were for Mexico City affecting “nearly two million Mexicans, one half of the city’s population, liv[ing] in slumlike housing settlements know as *vecindades* ... woodenshacks or *jacales* ... and developments on the outskirts of the city” (1975: 10). In his view, this social phenomenon required a careful examination on the micro-environments of the urban poor, how they lived, what they ate, and where they went to work, as well as what they “think, worry about, argue over, anticipate or enjoy” (1975:1). By living with them and

(1973) in las Cuevas and Ingham (1968) in a sugar production village appear as the most representative for picturing rural life in Mexico.

employing innovative ethnographic techniques, Lewis managed to provide an almost intact picture of different but ordinary families, through a detailed observation of their livelihoods and by giving a certain order to people's stories.

The results of Lewis's research are best represented by his study of the Sánchez family, where what he termed "ethnographic realism" gives a portrait of urban poverty characterised by general despair which is expressed in lives permeated with domestic violence, mental illness, distrust, alcoholism, and high incidence of abandonment of children and mothers (Lewis, 1961: xviii). Lewis's informants were described as uneducated and unskilled, people who could only survive on a day-to-day basis through mixed occupations, pooling resources among family members, borrowing from friends, working as moneylenders, and exchanging goods. In their small crowded rooms, there was little space for happiness. Resignation, a fatalistic attitude to life and constant disease dispelled any possible dream of securing a better life. It was only the persistence of a particular loyalty and cohesion among their family and friends that allowed members of the Sánchez family to survive. Lewis found there was a similar pattern in other Mexican and Puerto Rican families, and concluded that exposure to urban poverty created 'ways of life' characterised by a tendency to espouse complex destructive values, attitudes and behaviour that were passed down and maintained even when the social context had changed, and even improved (Lewis, 1966, 1975).

Lewis's proposition of a "culture of poverty" was strongly criticised by his colleagues because it assumed that the poor are trapped not only by their disadvantages but also by psychological traits. Bourgois summarised this criticism as a form of failure on the part of Lewis "to note how history, culture and political economic structures constrain the lives of individuals" (2003:16). Lewis has, however, been defended persuasively by Bourgois (2001), who writes:

"The angry denial by academics of the existence of the types of violence and self-destructive behaviours described ethnographically by Lewis among the vulnerable families that he tape-recorded and described reveals how far removed intellectuals can be from the inner-city street... none of the behaviours or personalities described by Lewis should shock anyone who is familiar with everyday life in the US inner city or Latin American shanty towns. On the contrary, Lewis's ethnographic realist descriptions, unfortunately, still ring true four decades after they were written" (2001:11905).

Along the same line, Harvey and Reed (1996) argue that Lewis's subculture of poverty concept has been misinterpreted as a theory bent on blaming the victims for their poverty. The authors correct this misunderstanding by explaining that Lewis's culture of poverty idea, far from being an attack or stereotype was an attempt to bring out "the resilience and resourcefulness of the poor, not a denigration of the lower class and the cultural defenses they erect against poverty's everyday uncertainty" (1996:465). In Harvey and Reed's view, Lewis's political and academic aim was to denounce poverty and despair as a system, a structure, a psychology, as well as an economic outcome; and therefore to show a set of positive mechanisms that are socially constructed by selected poor families in their everyday life, and which allow them to adapt and survive, under otherwise impossible material and social conditions generated by a growing capitalism of the 1950s (ibid:466-467). Harvey and Reed push academics to engage in ethnographic approaches which allow space to explore inventiveness, tenacity and creativity among the poor, which in many cases enables them to escape the trap of poverty.

Lewis has been reappraised among anthropologists owing to his ethnographic realism, and there have been excellent portraits of the poor in different contexts by employing either his research techniques or his style of writing. In their book *Dolor y Alegría*, LeVine and Sunderland (1996) 'borrowed' some of the Lewis' analytical categories to provide a rounded ethnographical study of three generations of women who explained the cultural change and continuity of Cuernavaca (a rapidly urbanised medium sized Mexican city) through their experiences of marriage, motherhood, religion, family and social relations. Taking a situational approach of poverty, they explain how different cohorts of women were constrained by the facts of their situation. The interviewed women are seen to share the values of the larger society but find it difficult to succeed in terms of these values. Particularly relevant is the observation that younger cohorts have aspirations similar to those of the middle class, although their behaviour differs from them. Notwithstanding the different intergenerational lifestyles, women respond to some circumstances similarly to what Lewis described. The lifestyles of the poor are marked by insecure employment as well as by psychological traits of marginality, dependence and inferiority.

On methodological grounds, Lewis's detailed ethnographic realism approach is being reassessed by a new wave of anthropologists who argue that it captures the essence of ethnography. The ruthless realities of poor groups are now analysed as forms of resistance or opposition to social marginalisation (Bourgois, 2003), as well as opportunities to narrate people's hopes and aspirations with regard to changing their reality (Higgins and Coen, 2000). In the work of Higgins and Coen, the *ondas* or lifestyles of a small group of poor and marginalised individuals (such as homosexuals, handicapped people, and sufferers from AIDS) in Oaxaca city are given 'potraits' by the authors that leaves their narratives almost intact on the page.

The need to understand the realities of the poor as embedded in larger social and cultural structures push ethnographers to approach the urban poor through the concepts of marginality and exclusion. From this standpoint, the main unit of analysis became the 'urban community' which was regarded as being formed of extended families living in compact urban neighbourhoods, where survival was the fundamental question that had to be addressed (Nieto, 1999). Larissa Lomnitz's (1975) ethnography on the networks of social exchanges in Cerrada del Cóndor, a typical squatter settlement on the outskirts of Mexico City, became the most influential research on the strategies of survival of the urban poor. Lomnitz found that what allowed groups of poor families to survive was an organisational system based on a reciprocal network of goods, services and mutual favours, which compensated for a lack of income. The network which was supported by favours and collective aid amongst relatives and fictive kinship acted as an economic structure parallel to the market structure. Lomnitz argued that by persisting over a period of time, these networks of exchange tended to maximize the economic security of the families.

Lomnitz was not alone in portraying the fluid, reciprocal and well organised lives of the urban poor. Janice Perlman's ethnography *The Myth of Marginality* (1976) was decisive to the future research agenda on urban poverty in the region. Perlman proved that marginality was a myth. More specifically she criticised the paradigm about the reality of *favelados* [shantytown dwellers] in Brazil and by implication the urban poor in Latin America more generally: that the precarious living conditions of the urban poor was indicative of a lack of integration to the modern economy and some sort of 'pathology' that needed to be eliminated. As Lomnitz argued for the Mexican context, Perlman

found that it was not disorganisation and isolation what ruled the lives of the poor in Brazil but rather a set of particular integrated and cohesive strategies that allowed them to fight and to aspire to social and economic betterment. The author described an “asymmetrical integration” with the rest of the ‘formal’ city dwellers in terms of jobs, education and transportation but discriminated and stigmatised in the daily activities for matters of colour, physical aspect and living conditions. Their social and physical location at the margins of society was a social construction used by the state to keep them stigmatised, exploited and apart from a closed social system.

Lomnitz’s (1975) and Perlman’s (1976) influential critiques on the paradigm of marginality engendered a shift in policies that went from the removal of the settlements to the upgrading and promotion of self-help strategies [building without professional help] as ways of giving ‘autonomy to dwellers’ in the cater of their needs and personal growth (Turner and Fichter, 1972:x-xi). During the 1980s and 1990s numerous researchers adapted the “freedom to build” (Turner and Fitcher, 1972) and “network of support” (Lomnitz, 1975) analysis to explain the growing “informal periphery” but often by mixing qualitative and statistical methods.¹² Some of these studies claim to be or are called ethnographies. An exception was the rigorous ethnographical study of Hiernaux and Lindón (2000) on everyday life in the Valle de Chalco, one of the largest ‘informal peripheries’ in Mexico City.

González de la Rocha (1986) also followed the network analysis to explain the adoption of informal support mechanisms amongst families during the economic crisis of the 1980s. Looking at Guadalajara, her research combined life stories and the findings of more formal surveys to uncover what she called the “resources of poverty”. The author argued that middle sectors and the urban poor lacked the resources of community solidarity and exchange that a decade before had provided a cushion for support. Contemporary families had to pool their resources at the household level, which involved women as the main providers of both income and the emotional support during

¹² The informal periphery summarises the presence of *colonias populares* [popular settlements] or irregular, informal, uncontrolled or spontaneous settlements. The term *colonia popular* has been the most common term to describe the phenomenon of irregular to housing schemes in Mexico. The adjective *popular* make reference to what some decades ago was the predominant working-class composition of these settlements. In the same way, the autoconstruction, self-building or self-help housing reflect the common usage in academic language for the process of informal housing production.

the years of crisis. Although not employing ethnographic techniques, Chant (1991) and Sheridan (1991) also showed the crucial role of women in obtaining daily subsistence through manual work or informality. Both texts gave a voice to women and evoke rich descriptions of their lives.

The structural paradigm that shaped research carried out in the 1980s on the mobilisation of the *pobladores* [settlers] and neighbourhood organisations in their struggle for urban services gave little scope for anthropologists to explore the cultural and symbolic dimensions of self-management (Schteingart, 1995:162). An exception was Nuñez (1990, cited in Schteingart, 1995) whose ethnography on the left-wing religious movements and everyday lives of groups of *pobladores* in different neighbourhoods examined in detail the daily struggles for community management, negotiating power and changing ways for coping with marginality. Even though community action for addressing or demanding better services was also present in planned spaces, the bias in favour of poor urban communities meant that there was little or no interest in the lives or urban experiences of those living in planned areas.

Haciendo Pueblo by Logan (1984) stands out as one of the few ethnographies conducted in the 1980s on an archetypical suburb or *fraccionamiento* built by private enterprise. Logan incorporated the view of different actors involved in the ‘making of the *barrio*’ (*fraccionadores* [informal subdividers or developers], local institutions, the church, and neighbourhood groups). The author highlighted the presence of ‘spontaneous’ and ‘unofficial’ place-making strategies often employed in informal settlements that show the complexity involved in the political, spatial and social construction of a place. In many respects her work was innovative and theory-building. She not only studied the middle class, a group that had been neglected by most ethnographers, but abandoned the convention of using poverty, marginality and survival as the basis of inquiry.¹³ Logan investigated a suburb in terms of its ordinariness and internal differences in family life arising from political, religious and social

¹³ It is important to notice that Oscar Lewis was pioneer in studying the upper-middle classes in Mexico. In *Five Families* (1975), he devoted one chapter to the nouveau riche Castro family, in which the father is “a self-made post-Revolutionary wealthy man” (ibid:16). The Castros exemplify how the wave of modernisation and prosperity that reached Mexico City during the 1960s have altered much of Mexican life. The ‘drama’ in the routine of the Castros resides in the fact that the material prosperity, achieved through North American material culture (leisure time, jargon, diet, material objects), did not remove some of the psychological and behavioural traits linked to the culture of poverty.

practices among both poor and more affluent residents. Her study anticipated a more recent cultural ‘turn’ in the study of consolidated *colonias* and *barrios*, which were now seen as “neighbourhoods undergoing change” shaped by the hybridity of old and new, as well as local and global forces (García Canclini, 1997). Although still focused on the urban poor, a tranche of studies aimed to find something ‘new’ or extraordinary through the diversity of its residents and way of life (Higgins and Coen, 2000; Napolitano, 2002). Stories of diversity, hope, opportunities and changing identities began to raise new questions about urban lives, as well as changing the way ethnographies are carried out and written.

While Higgins and Coen (2000) and Napolitano (2002) gave a micro story of ordinariness in consolidated *colonias* in Oaxaca and Guadalajara respectively, Lombard (2009) undertook research exploring the relation between “discourses and their marginalised objects (people or places)” (Ibid:15). Through place-making approaches she proposed to understand ordinary life in two informal settlements in the medium-sized city of Xalapa, Mexico. Lombard gave a picture of ordinary dwellers and the dynamic processes that turn these informal settlements into *places*. Her aim was not only to shed light on places where around 50 percent of the population in urban Mexico still live, but to critically question simplified discourses that confer to formal housing a status of ‘normal’ and ‘accepted’, versus informal housing that is often viewed as something outside the ‘normal’: the ‘inferior’, the ‘unaccepted’, the ‘other’ where filth, violence and sadness is the constant. Lombard’s study echoed an important earlier literature on informal housing that counteracted the dominant narratives on marginalisation by giving evidence that informal settlements were mundane places formed by unconventional planning practices (Connolly, 1999; Varley, 1998; Ward, 1999). Finding that in the name of ‘good planning’, governments have perpetuated the marginalisation of these places by reinforcing segregation through regeneration programmes and the proliferation of gated residential neighbourhoods, the author argued that the academic field has also contributed to reinforce marginalising views around *colonias populares* portraying only negative readings about how these places are formed and lived. Proof of the stigmatising view has been the adoption of the term ‘slum’ as a universal image of informal settlements (Gilbert, 2007; Varley, 2008). These authors stated that such misleading interpretations not only harm the material

conditions of people, but most importantly, the status of the settlements as part of the city (Lombard, 2009: 20).

The research on the ordinariness of life in *colonias populares* exemplifies how in different contexts complex and non-linear processes of place-making occur and life evolves in ways that challenge the rigid preconceptions of marginal and non-marginal, integration or exclusion. These works pull us back to Ward's (1999) classic conceptualisation of informal settlements in northern Mexico. Ward's loose classification of informal settlements included those places formed by low-income housing cheaply acquired by different means, built gradually with self-help methods and provided with limited basic infrastructure. The author added that, with time, often decades, these places become fully integrated to the urban fabric becoming working-class districts with consolidated houses, functional services and legal property rights (Ward, 1999:1,11). Through the book, Ward illustrates how the formalised *colonias* were sites under constant construction where disorder, messiness and poverty, as well as order, cleanliness and economic and social growth may coexist.

For Mexican academics, the study of urban life through a cultural approach has meant seeking to understand identity formation, appropriation of new spaces and consumer practices, as topics that have taken on a new form. Shopping malls, mega-projects and gated communities, and historical centres have become places where identity and consumerism are defined (García Cancini, 2005; Jones and Varley 1999; Safa and Portal, 2005). Additionally, there has been a revaluation of the Latin America narrative [chronicle and essay] that uses qualitative approaches and includes personal reflections for discussing issues of classstruggle, values and social change.¹⁴ Increasingly, Mexican academics have favoured the use of discursive and representational analysis to study the city and its differences (De Alba, 2007; Hiernaux, 2008; Lindón, 2008; Nieto, 1999; Rodríguez and García, 2007). As a recent trend in anthropology, the 'reading' of the built environment has become more important for academics in Mexico than giving voice to those who use it.

¹⁴ The chronicles of Carlos Monsiváis and Roger Bartra are possibly the best known examples.

Such an approach has been critiqued. Burawoy (2003) emphasises that the empirical focus on representational realms provides a restrictive notion of experience and gives limited evidence of the 'everyday' dimension of meaning and practice. He argues that discursive representations are also practices that must be understood in an ethnographic sense, but the current fashion of overemphasising textual analysis is hiding the real understanding of the living space, the space of everyday life. He stresses that it is time to think critically about the methods by which the cultural is understood; and proposes to use 'simple' or less reflexive procedures such as participant observation of everyday life.

Although the representational focus has laid the ground for a resurgence of qualitative approaches in urban studies in Mexico, repositioning the ethnographic project has not been a priority. Moreover, there have been spaces and people that remain neglected by research. It is well documented that in Mexico, the study of the poor and informal settlements has not been offset by a study of the middle groups (García Canclini, 2005; Schteingart, 1995). With some exceptions (Aguilar et al, 1998; Garay, 2004) the opportunity to study the lives of people living in a housing estate or industrial town has been missed. Equally with the exception of a few narrative accounts, there are no ethnographic accounts of the livelihoods of the large spectrum of the middle classes, such as commercial employees, doctors, salesmen, or bank clerks to mention a few.

The richness of ethnographic studies on survival strategies, consolidating processes in informal settlements and emerging cultural dynamics in the contemporary Mexican urban space remind us about the need for more nuanced understandings of urbanity, whether living in formal or informal settlements. A fundamental question for guiding research, therefore, should be: which daily processes found in formal or informal places can nourish our understanding on housing in Mexico? The neoliberalisation processes in Mexico have shaped the urban landscape and with it the opportunities to approach sites from a different view.

The massive suburban developments built by Ara, GEO or Sare have been ignored by ethnographers. As discussed in the introduction, these new geographies and the discourse on social mobility that accompany them are transforming medium cities or even rural municipalities into modern and appealing places to live. Linked to the new

types of housing are new ways of urban life. These new ways of life (practices and preferences) suggest affinity with some of the lifestyles of the ‘new’ or ‘modern’ middle classes that are emerging in India, Egypt or China amongst other rapidly changing societies. The next section addresses some of the issues concerning this new middle class that are raised by the recent literature. These studies draw attention to new *class-making* practices.

1.3 Ethnographies of the new middle class

1.3.1 Defining a new middle class

The ethnographic study of a new middle class shaped by the advent of the neoliberal state and globalisation is still in its infancy. In the last decade, a small number of academics have drawn attention to the growing presence of a non-western middle class, particularly within the booming economies of East and Southeast Asia and in countries that have undergone economic liberalisation in the last two decades. These studies document how the recent trend towards liberalisation has given rise to a highly visible social group that is geared towards consumerism and the display of new forms of social recognition, and give a comparative perspective on the local specificities that have also shaped the presence of new class subjects (Cohen, 2004; Fernandes, 2006; De Koning, 2009; Liechty, 2003; Rutz and Balkan, 2009; Zhang, 2010).

The ‘modern’, ‘liberalised’, ‘global’, and ‘nouveau riche’, as the authors have rather indiscriminately called them, have been endorsed by the State and their expansion as a group has been linked closely to (further) economic liberalisation. The overarching presence of an emerging new middle class, the authors argue, represents a social, economic and cultural rupture with the older ideologies of state intervention, and hence with traditional practices of *class-making*. Wacquant (1991) proposes that the concept of the new middle class is not new and nor is the role of the state in its endorsement. Nevertheless, he argues that the last century can be interpreted as the history of different highly educated groups who have aspirations to power of their own, and, on different historical occasions, have pursued ‘social mobility’ or ‘new class’ projects. He adds that history had proved that social mobility projects endorsed by different governments to

create nations of middle-class society have failed but that these projects were real and there is no reason not to believe that a new middle class is growing throughout the world, this time endorsed by neoliberal states.¹⁵

In attempting to provide a definition of what the new class or groups are, Wacquant argues that the new middle class consists of “educated waged-labourers [that] cannot be viewed as proletarian. They are technicians and what he calls “cultural producers” ...“clerical staff and the self-employed” (1991:46). Thus, they must be distinguished from the older petty bourgeois, working-class and capitalists. Wacquant states that these new groups form a distinct class in a capitalist society: the “Professional-Managerial Class” that has evolved with its own organisations (professional associations), its own ideology (technocratic liberal) and its own centres for recruitment and indoctrination (elite universities and places of employment). The new middle class includes bureaucrats and technical workers, which might be seen as the same groups that had formed the previous new classes during the 20th century. However, Wacquant believes that the ‘newness’ of this class is that its power base is essentially cultural. It consists of cultural and symbolic capital and its decisive ‘middle ground’ existence is not linked to the working class but rather to the ruling class. Consequently, Wacquant argues that the new middle class is in a permanent dispute with the upper class groups (in this case large corporations, businessmen and a market-oriented state) not over economic issues, but because of aspirations and desires shaped by those who are socially above them. As a result, many of the adopted values and beliefs of the new middle class can be seen as replicas of the upper classes.

Fernandes (2006) argues that in the context of India, where there is a long-established but small middle class, the ‘newness’ depends on creating an entirely new image of a contemporary group. The main conditions for forming this new class are: a) that its members have the right credentials (an elite education) which can allow them to obtain jobs in the new economy; and b) its members display consumer practices, for instance in their choice of where to live and leisure activities (e.g. gated suburbs and shopping

¹⁵ Wacquant refers to the Soviet and the American middle-class projects that were endorsed by its corresponding states to transform their countries into “modern middle-class societies”. The Soviet Union government intended to create a middle-class society through an educated bureaucracy. The American sought to create middle-class society through the acquisition of technical skills and education (Szeleny and Martin, 1988).

malls). In the context of Egypt, De Koning (2009) adds that displaying consumer practices requires a certain familiarity with an elite lifestyle or 'global repertoires', as well as class-based leisure places and practices. Finally, Zhang (2010) has argued that the new middle-class subjects in China are mostly young professionals and those who have purchased new houses which are a key feature of their new identity.

All these authors seem to agree that although an elite occupational/educational grouping and consumerist behaviour are key features for belonging, the governmental project for creating a new middle class should not be regarded as an elite and exclusively urban based grouping. The expansion of new private jobs, private schools and sorts of places associated with consumerism have become accessible to a broader group of people located in the lower social strata and even living in semi-urban centres, and who may be involved in consumer practices as a strategy for upward mobility. As a result, the new middle class is regarded by these authors as an amorphous entity with flexible borders; that is, formed by people with different backgrounds and occupations. These include individuals who seek to belong to the middle-class group, and for whom the lifestyles of the upper-middle groups serve as a kind of "standard to which [a] larger group can aspire" (Fernandes, 2006: xix).

The different projects of societies as diverse as India, Egypt and China, thus comprises a set of collective aspirations, desires and ideals. They appeal to those who have not secured a space but who are striving to become middle-class subjects by emulating the lifestyles of the upper classes (i.e. having similar jobs, living in smaller but similar homes and sending their children to similar but cheaper private educational institutions). However these ethnographies do not include the voices of those aspiring groups other than, as De Koning for example suggests, to indicate that they are in some way already consuming the 'global repertoires', and although with low wages, insecure employment and modest social worlds, they see themselves as members of the new middle class.

Further complicating the sense that the new middle classness is both a feature of an identifiable group with similar characteristics across a range of different economic, social and cultural settings and a group that aspires to belong is the observation that scholars use the term middle class interchangeably with 'elite' or upper-middle class. The structural experience of 'betweenness' in the sense of occupying a space between

other classes is largely missed. There is an equation with a professional class reproducing itself in new private schools, jobs and specific new class-based spaces (De Koning, 2009), a middleness framed within notions of development and nation (Rutz and Balkan, 2009) and specific concerns for issues of religion and gender inequalities (Cohen, 2004). These differences from ‘elites’ are often slight in economic terms. In some degree the possibilities for class formation seem most evident in the display of cultural or symbolic capital.

1.3.2 ‘Doing’ class. A non-elite view

Another group of scholars point out that the formation of class in emerging economies is not a reality or a fact as Fernandes or De Koning suggest, but rather a national rhetoric of an emerging middle classness that people aspire and desire to reach (Gerke, 2000; Lietchy, 2003; Newcomb, 2008). A further reflection of these scholars is that people’s aspirations for becoming middle-class subjects do not entail exclusively following global patterns of economic success and prestige, but rather are strongly rooted in particular national contexts, and most importantly, are shaped by pre-existing cultural norms linked to religion, caste, gender, or the existing practices that are associated with the middle-class construction.

Following Bourdieu, Lietchy (2003) argues that forming a class can only occur from within and cannot be imposed as a standard. According to this view, it is essential to understand what class *does* as a cultural practice rather than trying to define what class *is* by categorising those individuals who formed it (ibid: 265). His ethnography of the making of a middle-class culture in Kathmandu during the 1990s gives a realistic view of the ‘middle-grounds’ practices that De Koning and Fernandes failed to take into account by focusing on its members - young educated professionals familiar with the lifestyles of a foreign elite. Lietchy regards the concept middle class as a “performative cultural space” in which different individuals have the opportunity to negotiate and ‘carve out’ their existence through a wide range of practices. The practices themselves he suggests have a strong symbolic meaning that serves as social and economic identification (ibid: 265).

Lietchy argues that although consumerism appears to be the main strategy for class membership, other local and familiar practices are accepted for *class-making*. His book gives examples of the use of fashion, religion, technical know-how and knowledge of local stories of decency and respect as tactics for class formation in Kathmandu. Viewed collectively as suitable class markers, these practices are constantly being remade. What Liechty is suggesting, is that the 'middle ground' is formed by a constant negotiation between global and local realities, as well as between the established discourses of 'decency' and older ideas of prestige, and new ideas about acting in a modern way and looking modern.

Unlike the other authors, Lietchy provides a diverse ethnographic portrait of individuals *doing* class. These range from teenagers wearing second-hand clothes that are shared amongst friends to housewives creating a local dress-code based on the fashion they see in Hindu movies. Viewed as practice, the process of *doing* class is also a kind of knowledge that is perfectible over a period of time. Being familiar with the local norms of moderation, as synonyms of decency and traditional prestige, appears to be key to choosing the right 'class' practice. The process of *doing* class also includes falling into the extremes of what might be deemed to be locally suitable. The ethnography includes examples of young Nepalese who are obsessed with consuming foreign movies or fashions at all costs, as a sign of being 'modern', but which keeps them isolated and stigmatised by their 'middle' counterparts. The suitable modern middle class, as the title of the book suggests, is about striking a balance between foreign influences (fashion, movies, TV programmes) and local codes. A modern middle-class culture, Lietchy argues, is a unique and constant local construction.

Newcomb's ethnography of middle-class practices amongst Moroccan women also indicates how understandings of class rely on a local construction (Newcomb, 2008). She argues that being a 'modern' middle *fassi* [native of Fes] involves incorporating the new foreign notions of individual progress and success into the locally established moral codes of religion and 'shame' [which is a combination of decency and discretion]. The author exemplifies how a good job obtained without the aid of old family connections made young women become 'self-made' and thus a 'modern' middle class. The same happens with women who go to 'modern' places such as cafes or sports gyms. However, their 'modern' lives are not defined by the performed

activities but rather by having the professions and friends or holding beliefs that can allow them to have a 'decent' life. What this means is a reputable marriage and family life, which constitutes the most important value for middle-class women. Newcomb explains that in the context of Morocco, having 'shame' is a local middle-class value that clashes with 'foreign' middle-class attitudes and beliefs in relation to divorce, religion or motherhood.

Lastly, Gerke (2000) shares Lietchy's ideas that class should be conceived as a cultural production which involve people aspiring to a certain lifestyle. The study of what he termed "lifestyling practices" was developed by a group of low-ranking officials in Indonesia during the 1990s. The author found that consuming new foreign goods or practicing sports, which in the 1990s were regarded as exclusive upper-class practices, symbolised style and introduced a middle-class 'touch' to otherwise low-ranked officials. The symbolic aspect of these practices helped officials to see themselves as middle-class subjects, and this was concomitant with the government discourse of building a 'modern' class society.

The flexible and imaginative practices of *class-making* developed by these authors give an account of the production of the cultural and symbolic power which is needed, following Bourdieu, for cultivating mentalities, perceptions and aspirations for social mobility. Lietchy and Gerke conclude that a large part of the middle-class experience is a state of mind. Rather than being a fixed notion, the process of *class-making* entails "*claiming* and creating space for active expressions and aspirations regarding class"(Lietchy, 2003:115-116); it recognises any attempt to try to find or keep a space in the middle ground.

1.4 A focus on aesthetics as class differentiation

An important component of the literature is concerned with the relationship between landscape, class identity and aesthetic sensibilities as mechanisms of class assertion and forms of spatial exclusion (Caldeira, 1996; Duncan and Duncan, 2004; Falzon, 2004; Pow, 2009; Zhang, 2010). On the basis of Caldeira's classic study of 'gating' as a prerogative for a distinctive way of living, there is an interest in how the newly consolidated upper middle classes (whether or not their status has been deliberately and

consciously acquired), employ aesthetic tastes as a way of obtaining class status and define themselves in relation to lower social groups.

As shown by research in Brazil and South Africa, class status is acquired by a dual mechanism (Caldeira, 1996; Jones and Ballard, 2011). On the one hand, it is achieved by displaying an outer “aesthetics of security” (walls, fences, armed guards, technologies of surveillance) which, in addition to asserting wealth, are ostentatious forms of self-protection against the disorganized and insecure streets beyond. On the other hand, gating and walling are ways of living enclosed in “suburban paradises” with a range of domestic, management and luxury services, isolating those within from potential physical and more existential ‘threats’ of the city. Falzon (2004) and Pow (2009) argue, from work in India and Singapore, that the social distinction of the upper classes is maintained through a lifestyle associated with notions of a ‘healthy’ lifestyles and clean environments as opposed to the poverty, dirt and environmental squalor found outside the limits of the gated compounds. The Indian upperclasses engage in visible (displayed) practices linked to leisure and recreation (jogging or walking their dogs in the private open spaces), representing means of cultivating aesthetic principles and a distinctive lifestyle.

Zhang (2010) shows that in the case of China, private housing is the main benchmark of a new class membership. The “search for paradise” as the title of her study indicates, stems from the desire of successful young professional Chinese to live above and be differentiated from ordinary Chinese citizens. This social distinction requires establishing a life of material comfort. The author explains how this ‘new’ class gains prestige by investing a considerable amount of time and energy in selecting the ‘right’ gated compound and home to live in, which have to follow certain architectural styles. Zhang gives an example of how people attain a “*Daoist* principle of living close to nature” (a local high standard of living) (Ibid: 95) by merging local and foreign elements: streets with foreign names (Victoria Garden, Windsor Rose), Chinese gardens with artificial ponds and swans to provide the ‘green’ element, and houses with a ‘foreign flavour’ (Ibid:87). These features help an emerging upper class to create a living environment that distances them from not only the poor(er) but importantly the old communist way of life.

As these studies underscore, acquiring and maintaining social status is an everyday practice. This is not a process, therefore, limited to the new middle class in the Global South but is at work generally. A mechanism of creating a landscape as a mode of preserving class status and a social distance is seen, for example, in Bedford village, an exclusive ‘rural-looking’ suburb outside New York studied by Duncan and Duncan (2004). Here, the residents are shown to have engaged in a series of practices involving aesthetic judgment that aimed to enhance and preserve the rural landscape of the area. Their driving force is a desire for staying apart from the ethnic ‘pollution’ of low-class Latinos, as well as from the presence of low-income housing. Yet the signs of social distinction and aesthetic ‘rural’ taste include the preservation of muddy roads and wild gardens, while actively engaging in initiatives aimed at the historical conservation of their social environment.

What I draw from these studies is how aesthetic practices that are planned to preserve and protect a perceived scenic beauty are intertwined with issues of poverty, dirt, race and cultural identity. There are parallels, then, with wider processes of urban social change, often also involving the middle class as both group and symbol. For Mexico, Jones and Varley (1999) show an attempted revival of an imagined ‘colonial’ past as a symbolic reassertion of a ‘superior’ local middle-class authority over an urban poor, while analysing the conservation of the Historic Centre of Puebla. The ‘Spanish’ appearance of the centre represented by the restored historical buildings for museums, private schools and retail services, and ‘cleaned’ of the undesired uses such as cantinas, bus stations and street vendors, can be viewed as a strong moral discourse that imposes a regained middle-class ‘dignity’. As this research and that of Duncan and Duncan reminds us, the assertion of middle-class identities is not necessarily a progressive impulse but can just as often be driven by social and cultural conservatism.

These studies demonstrate the capacity of social groups to search for differentiation by classifying themselves in relation to others outside the group (Bourdieu, 1984). According to Bourdieu, it is the display of “taste” (or similar expressions of a particular lifestyle) that allows people to change the reality of their current lives, for instance by gaining a social acceptance by others as ‘equals’ or by distinguishing themselves from those in a social class below. The role of taste, Bourdieu argues, is not only to show a social position or status, but to act as the main strategy for social differentiation. Tastes

are thus “classificatory practices” that people use to maintain a social place in a group or to move upwards. The differences of taste that the groups above have revealed depend on larger social structures that frame people’s position in society and also their ability to remake their existence in everyday lives. It is in combination with the structures of geography, income, inequality or age that they operate.

1.5 Houses as a sign of *class-making*

Housing as symbol of prestige and identity construction has been examined ethnographically by several authors (Colloredo-Mansfeld, 1994; Fletcher, 1999; Humphrey, 2002; Klaufus, 2000, 2006; Ley, 1995; Mitchell, 1998).

Colloredo-Mansfeld (1994), Fletcher (1999) and Klaufus (2000) investigate the transnationality of the ‘migrant architecture’ that is changing the landscape of small, often rural areas in Ecuador and Mexico. The focus of these studies is on how people who have migrated abroad have introduced designs and features that are reminiscent of American comfort and ‘modern’ and contemporary life. The authors argue that the practice of importing foreign designs is a strategy for acquiring or asserting a higher social position in their community of origin. However the adopted styles are not simply replicas of those encountered when they worked, for example, as maids, builders, and traders, but are rather styles adapted to their local circumstances, producing a blend of more traditional construction materials and building techniques. The blending of local and foreign styles leads to an “architectural metamorphosis” comprising a constellation of opulent houses (i.e. vertical constructions with elevators, polarised windows, and flat-topped roofs) that can be regarded locally as ‘distinctive’ (Colloredo-Mansfeld, 1994). The opulence of so-called ‘migrant architecture’ results from an attempt to reconcile two forms of house building and occupation. On the one hand, a foreign and individualistic style of architecture regarded as status enhancing, and on the other hand, a traditional architecture built with communal work that looks to preserve values of community support and mutual respect.¹⁶ The ‘migrant architecture’ suggests that there

¹⁶ Colloredo-Mansfeld found that in Ecuador, the use of village working groups in the mansion-building process enhanced social respectability. By contrast, in Russia, Humphrey found that social distinction

is need for local ‘suitability’ and a reliance on people’s own pre-existing class values, tastes and understandings of local recognition. The argument is essentially made for architectural aesthetics in housing in similar ways to the points debated by Lietchy and Newcomb for other forms of lifestyle, and involves key issues on the question of ‘middle-class making’.

A very different experience with ‘migrant architecture’ among what we might consider to be a new middle class has been studied by Ley (1995) and Mitchell (1998). The ‘Monster Houses’ built by wealthy Chinese immigrants in elite Vancouver neighborhoods employ historically remote and traditional oriental aesthetic principles derived from Feng Shui; large square constructions lacking windows and visible signs of nature. Rather than a mere architectural style, these authors argue that the ‘monster’ mansions communicate the need of Chinese immigrants to affirm citizenship and property rights. Both authors trace how these aesthetic changes in the cultural landscape of Vancouver neighbourhoods have, however, met with hostility. Contests over housing, therefore, become a symbol of other ‘socially undesirable’ changes and a threat to the ‘superior’ moral English heritage. But, according to Ley (1995), the *monstrosity* of the new architecture put into question the notions of ‘good taste’ and market value of the English architecture (neo-Tudor mansions). A growing number of real estate agents and young foreign architects were promoting the Chinese properties as appealingly and lucrative.¹⁷

In other cases, the making or regaining of new class subjectivities is strongly aided by using the memories of an old or distant home to establish social ties with the present. Humphrey’s ethnography on the Villas of the “New Russians” examines the importance of reviving imperial Russian architecture and adapting it to fit local notions of a new Western lifestyle (Humphrey, 2002). Luxury and the opportunity this provides for displaying an expensive western lifestyle are the benchmarks of distinction. The author outlines how in people’s view the most prestigious and popular villas combine ‘self-images’ that characterise the aspiring new rich class: “that of a haute bourgeoisie within

was strengthened by creating social enclaves fenced off from the original villages that embody the old Soviet model of rural life.

¹⁷ Klaufus’ (2006) study notes that the new ‘migrant architecture’ and what it stands for (the growing presence of upward mobile groups) provoked the upper-middle class, together with established architects and policy makers, to assert their superiority by framing discourses for ‘rescuing’ the genuine vernacular architecture and the preservation of the rural landscape.

an imagined 'historical' empire and that of a sleek, efficient European within a globalized vista of modern business elites" (2002: 176). Consumerism is a key feature in creating this desired modern self-image in a traditional landscape.

The first indicator of class or 'privilege' displayed by an aspiring new Russian is the ability to resurrect the symbols and material objects of a lost aristocracy. The choice then continues when people create an image of a modern nouveau riche, with the help of real-estate agents, interior decorators, magazines and photographs from the past. Humphrey explains that the villas are not a finished construction as in Soviet times, but rather are "constructed and marketed ... as a repertoire of parts ... staircases, heating systems, Saunatec sauna, bricklaying, roofing and so forth" (183-184). The clients are encouraged to take part in the production of the villa. Drawing from a wide range of styles and decorations the result is their own version of comfort and luxury that amalgamates a pastiche of European styles and times (18th century country estates, new pseudo-Russian Byzantine styles and modern architect-design houses). But, Humphrey argues, as well as making this range of choices this aspiring class must face the question of "non-choices". These are "the outcomes that no one really wanted or consciously planned" (ibid: 185) but which represent the underlying socio-political condition of the villas, often built with outdated planning laws, in remote locations, of low quality and with absent residents. In some cases these grandiose mansions decorated with chandeliers and jacuzzis cannot be occupied because of a lack of basic urban services, a sign of the fragile state of the emerging newly rich Russian class.

These literatures coincide to highlight the 'middle grounds' where the emerging social groups of migrants, nouveau rich, or middle and upper classes, move. The symbolic struggle for identification and communication through highly visible 'opulent', 'monstrous', and old 'aristocratic' architecture are signs that new social groups are claiming social recognition. This 'middleness' is a factor that is the driving-force behind this desired visibility. But studies also stress that class definitions are not static and, rather, that they are strongly dependent on political and economic realities. Aspiring new middle classes or 'emerging subjectivities' are linked to new social forces that employ symbols, material objects or practices linked to old and pre-existing assumptions about status and individual progress. In some societies, the existence of traditional middle or upper-class groups has an influence on the way new middle-class

groups are formed. In order to understand the processes in play in locations such as GEO Bosques therefore it is necessary to contextualise the position and role of the traditional middle class in Mexico. This is the task of the next section.

1.6 The traditional middle classes in Mexico and the state

The notion of the Mexican middle class is essentially the outcome of a process begun in the mid-1920s that sought to shift Mexico from the legacy of 'rural development' toward an industrialised urban nation. The middle class emerged from a set of alliances established by the government with a small section of urban-based labour groups that was extended rapidly to include a large group of public employees and the technical and managerial personnel of private companies, many of which were directly or indirectly linked with the state apparatus, and which became known as the "governing pact" (Davis, 2004: 288). By the 1940s, the 'pact' was consolidated into a number of labour and professional organisations, mostly incorporated into the PRI and protected by a number of different statutes and unions.¹⁸

This broad spectrum of the urban middle - and working - class residents, collectively referred to as the "the urban bases" (Loaeza, 1990) or the "popular middle sectors" (Davis, 2004), was strengthened and supported by state intervention in the form of import substitution policies which in principle were designed to increase industrial and manufacturing development. The state promised and mostly provided employment, education, health care, housing, schools and nurseries, which were seen as special rights or privileges as the rest of the population were excluded from their provision. The unions were responsible for arranging these class-related privileges and granted other rights to offset the low wages that the workers were often paid. The privileges acted as a form of tacit bribe in exchange for loyalty and most tangibly for votes. They were mostly granted through a 'network of favours' that ranged from administrative assistance in obtaining certificates, passports and loans to specific *palancas* [levers of power] where 'influence' could provide people with access to housing, public university

¹⁸ Some of the unions were SNTE (National Union for Education Workers); the FNMTE (National Front for State Workers); the STPRM (National Union for Oil Workers of the Mexican Republic) and the STERM (Electrical Workers Union of the Mexican Republic).

courses, 'good' medical treatment or a second job (Lomnitz, 1981). The 'who you know' and 'who you are' pattern formed by a web of *compadrazgos* [fictive kin] and trusted friendships acted as an effective social security network. The public system of education, in particular the UNAM (National Autonomous University of Mexico) supplemented this network by cultivating social relations that eventually enabled people to obtain key administrative and political positions (Camp, 2002). In summary, the affiliation of the state employees with the PRI, the access to public schools, housing and health care, and the maintenance of a network of favours and friendships constituted a form of material and symbolic capital that gave stability and a strong sense of belonging to a vast section of the urban middle class.

On the sidelines of the state apparatus, there was another group that can also be described as an urban middle class, which comprises self-employed professionals, salesmen, private workers and small entrepreneurs linked to the growing banking, trade and service sectors. The members of this class lacked any kind of social security or state support but adopted characteristic middle-class lifestyles, represented as the acquisition of houses in *fraccionamientos* [neighbourhoods], automobiles and holidays. Between the 1950s and 1980s some members of this middle class were encouraged to get organised and defend their economically-privileged position so that they could improve their urban living conditions (Tarrés, 1990a).

The archetypical example of the middle groups that grew outside of the corporate control of the government was in Ciudad Satélite, a planned suburb inhabited by the upper middle class (the self-employed, and employees in private national and transnational companies). Tarrés (1990a; 1990b) has shown how people living in Ciudad Satélite acquired an identity based on their place of residence as opposed to the state social organisation and unions. They achieved this by compelling the local municipality to grant the area some form of self-administration, thereby gaining greater control over the delivery, quality and cost of water, postal delivery services and security. From the early 1970s, the population of Satélite formed organisations, such as neighbourhood, private schools, sports clubs, religious groups, professional organisations and commercial bodies. Through these groups, the people from Ciudad Satélite were able to establish a civic life that was removed from the clientelistic methods used by the political system (i.e. involving levers of power) and began to carry

out projects that went beyond local concerns (Tarrés, 1990b). This collective experience mediated by the churches and small local organisations gave rise to a set of values and common interests in what Loaeza (1988) saw as a conservative identity and a political behaviour that was embodied in the “Catholic opposition” of PAN (National Action Party).

Loaeza added that the forms of political participation mirrored the two ‘traditional’ middle-class groups of the post-revolutionary Mexico. There was a core group comprising salaried public employees and industrial workers supporting the political system and a peripheral group of private sector employees, small business owners and independent professionals who were either opposed to the system or negotiating with it. The author argued that although splintered and different from each other, the Mexican middle-sectors were highly politicised, using unions, political parties and less formal organisations as effective channels to maintain their position of privilege and increase their demands. Nevertheless, Tarrés argued for caution in defining the middle classes too generically as *Satélite* showed support for the “notion of the middle classes as consisting of individuals unable to generate their own organisations” (Tarrés, 1990a: 147). This group consisted of men and women who were worried about their incomes but whose jobs demanded a respectable status; who wished to have friends in upper positions who could help a brother who lived in poverty but commanded respect from those below; who aspired to better positions and often lived on much less; who worked hard to pay for private schooling for their children and to go on holidays; and rarely took part in an organisation or political party but declared themselves as sympathisers with a political party. By either opposing or supporting the state, this group gave stability and political power to the PRI for over 50 years.

In the theoretical approach proposed by Bourdieu, these were middle classes like many others in the world, who lived for their aspirations and dreams as well as being conditioned by their objective reality. Their ‘middleness’ denoted a state of mind [disposition] that was geared towards specific social, cultural and economic worlds. They led lives of ‘opportunity’ defined by highly local and particular factors: the endurance of the PRI, the high price of oil, an imagined political relationship that could help them to open up a business or get a better job or even win a lottery prize.

In the mid-1970s, this middle class constituted 27 percent of the total population, but when the emerging or lower middle class groups are taken into account the number reached 50 percent (Loaeza, 1988:127). However this percentage fell sharply in the early 1980s due to a combination of political and economic factors. In 1982, the Mexican Government announced that it was insolvent and unable to pay its external debts. The IMF (International Monetary Fund) required the Mexican government to implement an austerity programme involving cuts in every area of state spending and the promotion of the private sector. The essence of the austerity reforms was to set the country on the course of liberalisation. Between 1982 and 1994 the government carried out a set of reforms that included signing free trade agreements (notably with NAFTA), the sale of state-owned and government companies [*paraestatales*], reform of public sector employment contracts and changes to *ejidal* property by amending Article 27 of the Constitution (Mercado, 2010; Middlebrook and Zepeda, 2003; Ros, 2000) (see Preface, page 17 for further explanation).

For the middles classes the cost was high. High inflation during the mid 1980s brought about a drastic cut in real wages and the collapse and disappearance of the least productive sectors of Mexican industry such as small businesses, shops, and factories, and with them the jobs of at least 800,000 workers (Hellman, 1994:3). Thousands of state employees lost their jobs, and those still in work suffered from severe cuts in social spending. There were sharp reductions in the subsidies provided for transport, health care, food and state housing, and a removal of special bureaucratic favours [loans, vouchers for food, access to schools or medical services] granted by unions to help state employees. As a result, millions of families had to rely on the ‘informal’ economy and relatives to regain the financial security that they had lost (Lomnitz, 1990). By the end of the 1980s, the real incomes of public employees had declined and between one-half and two-thirds of urban households had incomes below the official minimum wage (Hellman, 1994: 3).

The privatisation policy and opening up of trade implemented during the Salinas de Gortari *sexenio* (1988-1994) brought some hope for the middle classes. New jobs were created in the revived industries in the provinces through *maquiladoras* [in-bond

plants], and in the new service sector and banking companies in the main cities. Additionally, free trade allowed the middle classes to have access to a middle-class landscape consisting of American fast-food chains, new supermarkets and cinema complexes. However, in 1995 there was a new economic crisis caused by this rapid 'liberalisation', which had been accompanied by limited regulatory mechanisms and corruption among the new technocratic cadres. The rate of inflation in 1995 soared to 100 percent and interest rates rose on loans; up to 80 percent on mortgages, 100 percent on personal loans and 120 percent on credit cards (Hellman, 1994:8). Large numbers of the middle class were declared insolvent and lost their businesses, homes and new cars. The debtors reacted to this measure by forming *El Barzón*, a national debtors alliance made up of 450,000 members, small and medium-sized entrepreneurs, the self-employed and small land owners (Senzek, 1997).

El Barzón was one of the many signs of how middle class and anti-PRI regime sentiment started to emerge. Loaeza (1989) argued that in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the middle classes began to reshape their political values and perceptions. The emergence of new leaders from the opposition also prompted the middle class to call for change. The right wing PAN led by Manuel Clouthier, a businessman, stressed the value of individual merit, the work ethic and efficiency, as opposed to the clientelism of the PRI. The new left FDN (National Democratic Fund) led by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, offered a promise of democracy and social justice that was aimed at those who were impoverished. Loaeza argued that these perceptions of possible change, along with the democratisation occurring in Latin America at that time, meant that "the symbols of the Mexican revolution used by the PRI lost their immediacy ... The state's popular origins were no longer sufficient identifications of the symbols which for years had protected the post-revolutionary regimes" (Loaeza, 1989: 354). The concept of the "masses" and "unity" and an "old rurality" began to lose validity. In the 2000 national election, the middle class expressed their anxiety about sharp reductions of income and the lack of social mobility by voting the PAN to power.

More importantly, the middle class began to undergo a radical change. Castañeda (2011) described how the older cohorts of public workers survived but their numbers stopped growing in relative terms. It became very difficult for young people to obtain jobs in the public sector as the government stopped creating new *plazas* [positions].

Some of the upper echelons of this group, such as entrepreneurs and young cohorts of professionals, benefited from the growth of the private market and rose to the upper classes. Other groups moved downwards, and new groups began to emerge. This restructuring of the classes, and above all, the emergence of new groups, occurred during the years of modest but consistent growth provided by the neoliberal economic system. According to Castañeda, the transformation that the Mexican middle class has undergone during the last 25 years has been “regional, professional, ethical and existential: a new middle class joined its forebears, and became a majority in the country” (2011: 42). The next section will explain how this debate has arisen from the emergence of a new middle class group and describes its general attributes and the way old notions are changing about what constitutes a modern Mexican middle class.

1.7 New *Clasemedieros*

According to a small but influential group of Mexican intellectuals and journalists over the last two decades Mexico has been witnessing the emergence of a new middle class that is slowly transforming the country into a middle class society (Castañeda, 2011; Castañeda and Aguilar, 2009, 2010; De la Calle and Rubio, 2010a, 2010b; Reyes Heróles, 2010). In contrast with the Indian, Chinese or Egyptian experience, in which the ‘new middle-class project’ has benefited the upper sectors of the group, the ‘newness’ of the new Mexican middle class is the presumed social mobility of poor groups and the implications of this for the country’s development.¹⁹ As in other countries, Castañeda, De la Calle and Reyes Heróles state that consumer patterns are closely linked to the rise and evolution of the Mexican new middle class. Castañeda (2011) provides data to show that for the last five years the households just above the poverty line are spending 30 percent of their income on luxury goods such as mobile phones, furniture, TVs and private schools. This is a similar rate of expenditure to rich families (ibid: 46-47). Commentators have pointed to explanations of this behaviour in both Mexico’s integration to the global economy but also a wide range of local factors.

¹⁹ Data indicate that in spite of inequality and poverty – 47 percent of the population still live in patrimonial poverty - since 2004 at least 12 percent of families have risen above the official poverty line (López-Calva and Lustig, 2010:197).

An important local factor is what the last three presidential administrations have called “safe finances” which have been caused by structural adjustment policies.²⁰ Price stability, public policies targeted at low-income groups, better incomes through the creation of low-wage jobs, a sharp increase in the number of remittances sent from relatives in the United States and demographic factors such as smaller families and the presence of women in the market economy have all been identified as contributing factors to the emergence of the new class (Castañeda and Aguilar, 2009; Szekely, 2004). De la Calle and Rubio see the ‘newness’ in terms of a work ethic:

“People that have been forging themselves as a middle class through their productive capacity: immigrants, informal workers, small entrepreneurs, or low-ranking employees in new industries and the service sector ... looking for business opportunities for themselves and their families ... by emigrating to Cancún to gain a better quality of life or to Chicago in search of a better job. These are individuals who tend to adhere to a work ethic, in which competition [is seen] as a way of life.” (De la Calle and Rubio, 2010a: 27).

In addition, NAFTA and the expansion of private companies have allowed consumer goods to circulate in Mexico, prices to fall and all kinds of credit facilities (granted by banks, supermarkets, department stores and airlines) to reach a large number of Mexicans for the first time (Castañeda, 2011: 52-53; De la Calle and Rubio, 2010a:62).²¹ As a result of the long-term inflation control and ‘safe finances’ there was the creation and growth of a private house financing system which, as discussed in the introduction, has allowed the government, banks and financial intermediaries to provide a variety of loans. These financial arrangements fed in to the real estate market and encouraged private property developers to produce low-cost housing on a large scale, with Casas GEO as one of the leading homebuilders.

²⁰ The OECD defines “public safe finances” as a margin of financial output, or how much foreign debt can fall before a country reaches its breakeven point (OECD, 2012:4). Macroeconomic measures such as fiscal discipline, the maintenance of adequate reserve asset and a modest or low public debt are key factors for economic recovery and growth. The IMF target for Mexico’s 2000 decade was to keep the public debt below the 4 percent. This deficit excluded the revenues from oil and instead included different financing instruments to increase the country’s recaudatory capacity (Ibid, 2012:26).

²¹ In 2008, ten million new credit cards were issued. By the end of 2008, there were 75 million credit cards in circulation. Many of them acted as a form of participation in the banking system. According to the 2007 GAUSCC survey about the situation of financial services in Mexico (cited by De La Calle, 2010a), Mexico still remains an ‘under-banked’ society. In 2010 only 25 percent of Mexicans had a savings account, compared with 61 percent of Brazilians.

Commentators began to draw out evidence of a new *clase mediera* lifestyle. As described by Castañeda:

“Large families off to their first vacation by plane, ... all Mexican-looking in an archetypal way: short in height, dark-skinned, beardless, and straight-haired; a bit of a paunch even in their twenties and thirties, and immensely happy with their new station in life ...”

Next to the high-rises in Punta Diamante [Acapulco] where Mexico City’s upper middle class has bought thousands of rooms in condos ... they ride horses, three-wheel motorcycles, jet skis and delta planes ... The beach is messy, noisy, crowded ... Here one can see the new Mexican middle class in action.” (Castañeda, 2011:43).²²

Beyond the material evidence of spending patterns, Reyes Heróles (2010) has argued that the new middle class is an aspirational construct. Drawing on the results of a survey that showed that 80 percent of Mexicans see themselves as belonging to the middle class, he records how thousands of Mexicans rely on symbolic assets, such as [unused] credit cards and living close to shopping malls, which reflect an aspiration rather than a stable condition.²³ De la Calle and Rubio (2010b) have added that a similar desire for social differentiation can be seen in the most popular names of the newborns published by the National Population Registry during 2008 (eg. Alexis, Bryan, Evelyn, Jacquelin and Kevin), or in recently opened private schools, which reflect a strong preference for foreign, mostly American names, or inferences to ‘excellence’: for example, Abraham Lincoln School, Henry Wallon, Excel Kids, Instituto Wisdom, are the names of new private schools in Iztapalapa, one of the poorest and most populous districts in the metropolitan area of Mexico City. However, these academics argue that almost nothing is known about the lives of this emerging group and stress the need to explore and compare its characteristics with similar groups that can be found in other economically emerging societies.

²² The phenomenon of vacations was analogous since there was a jump from nearly 1.5 million domestic trips in 1994 to more than nine million in 2009 (De la Calle and Rubio, 2010a:26).

²³ The 2008 National Household Survey, Parametría, Mexico City, 2009.

1.8 Placing the GEO residents in the new middle-class debate

My study of the *GEO movement* as a new housing experience in Mexico reflects the questions and debates that I have outlined above. As both Castañeda and De la Calle have argued, the huge demand for housing stimulated by private property developers is one of the factors that illustrate the emergence of this new class in Mexico. The expansion of Casas GEO complexes throughout the country is linked to the neoliberal policies that have been predominant during the last two decades. As I will outline in more detail later, the residents of these complexes also reflect these changes: Casas GEO is the home of a diverse group of informal workers, families of migrants in the US, small entrepreneurs and employees working in new industries and service sectors. Put another way, the residents in GEO Bosques lack the traditional attachments to public offices, unions, political parties or professional organisations that characterised the middle class until the early 1980s in Mexico.

Residents have become affluent enough to be on a rung of the social ladder and display tastes similar to those described in the literature on the new middle class. As I explain in the following chapters, new homes and automobiles, jobs in the private sector and private educational institutions operate as benchmarks of social status. The everyday lives of people living in GEO Bosques display great imagination and a capacity to adapt to their changing reality that has not been documented in the literature on the traditional middle class.

However, according to some definitions, the GEO residents would not be classified as members of a new middle class. The ethnographic accounts about the new middle class in India and Egypt focus on the *class-making* practices of the upper classes whose lifestyles are shaped largely by the rhetoric of globalisation (attending elite schools, holding jobs in multinational companies and being fluent speakers of English). This elite-centred view does not match the case of the residents that I have studied. Socio-economically speaking, the residents of GEO Bosques remain closer to the lower sectors of the middle class.

The study of GEO Bosques also stands against some of the assumptions and claims in the writing on a new middle class in Mexico. First, although writers have acknowledged

that the new middle class in Mexico is not a near-to-elite category, they nevertheless tend to imagine a homogeneous emerging group. Descriptions tend to assume that there is little class diversity in terms of people's backgrounds, present conditions and expectations. Second, they fail to recognise the views people have of themselves and the aspirational practices that support such a self-view, something which Reyes Heróles argues is essential in this new 'class' formation. Third, but most importantly, these authors are seeking to construct a new middle-class category out of negation, or as opposed to what they consider to be or have been the traditional middle classes. As a result, the view that Castañeda and De la Calle is that the new middle class embodies moral values associated with hard-working and rational individuals, new political preferences and constant attempts to achieve social assent. These views give no room to consider the historical and local patterns that shape the formation of new identities. By these patterns I refer to the local narratives of what constitutes a middle class such as respect, religiosity, moderation or physical appearance which, as Lietchy argued, are key to obtaining local recognition and status.

This study follows the approach of Lietchy's ethnography in so far as it enquires how people produce or *do* class and experience it in the context of their everyday lives, rather than tries to define what class *is* by classifying its members. More specifically, I study how 'class' is culturally constituted through everyday practices, and by doing so, I seek to understand new ways of urban life in Mexico. I therefore follow Wacquant's argument that categorising people as 'types' invariably constrains or distorts the meanings behind practices. Moreover, for research purposes, categorising the new middle class in social terms reduces the opportunity of revealing the different practices that made people struggle to 'gain' their class status, which include their self-presentation (verbally and physically) and their actions. The differences between their dreams, ideas and actions is crucial to understanding *who they are* and *what they aspire to become* while living in a place like *GEO Bosques*.

1.9 The *GEO movement* as a cultural category

Bourdieu's (1984) proposition that the concept of class should be studied as a practice with cultural and classificatory principles supports my idea of studying the *GEO movement* as an emerging cultural category created by people's everyday practices. These practices can include demonstrations of status and aspiration (systems of prestige), as well as forms of capital (economic and social) which, taken together, lead to the tastes, preferences and dispositions of a middle class lifestyle. In taking these ideas forward I regard the residential space as the arena where what I have termed the *GEO movement* is produced and expressed in the landscape (homes, proximate spaces and neighbourhood) and assume that this is undertaken through specific claims, values and symbols. However, I also take account of practices outside the residential space that help people to aspire to their dreams or maintain their presence in the *GEO movement*. I argue that factors such as jobs, education, religion and leisure act also as symbolic and material assets in the formation of identity, and as such, can help to establish the boundaries of the *movement*.

The making of the *GEO movement* is a complex process. The capacity of residents in GEO Bosques to accumulate symbolic and material assets and to engage in strategies to change their reality are shaped by the government, the house developer and its employees, as well as by the media and home retailers. All of them have specific notions (old and new) of class and social mobility. An example of what it means to be middle class today in the post-liberalised Mexico, include older patterns of upward mobility such as the possession of an individual house and an automobile and having reached the university level, which are combined with new politics of class (having a personal credit history, accessing private services including education and consumption patterns).

The role of the government in shaping the *GEO movement* can be seen in the housing policy that continues to promote home ownership and that continues to serve as the largest provider of housing loans (up to 90 percent in the case of Casas GEO) to formal workers through the public funds of INFONAVIT and FOVISSSTE (Corporación GEO, 2012). Although the subsidy for these houses is minimal, the state still makes rhetorical

claims that, by granting loans for ‘modern and new houses’, it is providing a mechanism for the social mobility of lower-income groups.

For its part the Casas GEO company employs an entirely new language which is about selling ‘dreams’ and ‘lifestyles’: *Un estilo de vida a a tu alcance* [an attainable lifestyle] which includes a new architecture of individual houses in pseudo-gated communities and a new culture of living. Casas GEO has become a new, vital source of authority in Mexico. The task of building homes is only one of the firm’s several stages of house production. The company works as a land-broker, landscaper, house designer, mortgage facilitator, and community and self-help trainer. In this last role, Casas GEO seeks to ‘instruct’ residents to become involved in the production of the house as a whole enterprise and in the new culture attached to it. The residents are thus, at least in the developers’ rhetoric, encouraged to produce their own middle-class lifestyle through participating as self-builders, home decorators, active residents and neighbourhood managers, community trainers and even GEO employees.

GEO is not alone in the creation of ‘an aspirational lifestyle’; supermarkets, department stores and microfinance banks, as well as private schools and sports centres, all target people living in GEO-type housing. As De la Calle and Rubio (2010) argue, access to these goods and services are now considered ‘necessities’ by the residents living in these new geographies. Thus, Casas GEO is actively involved in creating a new ‘urbanite’ through a range of behaviours (a responsible and good neighbour), motivational strategies (training) and encouragement of lifestyle traits (especially via consumption).

However, the *GEO movement* is not merely the response of people to the ideal of mass consumerism promoted by the private market; it is rather the result of a complex interaction between people’s desires and fantasies in the context of an objective reality. The *GEO movement* consists of the ‘opportunity’ to aspire to and take part in a new kind of urban life. In pursuit of this desired lifestyle, I explore how people modify their lives by mixing familiar and newly acquired knowledge. In some cases, they improve their homes and neighbourhoods with familiar practices to ‘survive’ the new reality of their surroundings. These practices reveal the fine line between present circumstances and poverty and the strong attachment they feel to the conditions of their social origins.

At the same time, they are anxious to accumulate the cultural and economic capital that they think is needed to eventually move upwards. They are anxious to become civil and responsible subjects, for instance by cultivating personal skills or by joining self-help or religious or sports groups. By doing so, they are involved in consumerism and make use of the new spaces (microfinance banks and shopping malls) that have been created for them. Moreover, as Newcomb and Lietchy remind us, like others aspiring to become middle class groups, people at GEO Bosques must attend to established ‘middle-class values’.

Old and new notions of a middle class urban life permeate people’s attempts to construct a new socio-cultural space and claim legitimacy as a social group. My objective in this thesis is to uncover the ways in which a group of people who bought a house in GEO Bosques struggle to negotiate a cultural [intermediate] space that I call here the *GEO movement*, which allows them ways to imagine, aspire to and experience a modern urban life. Specifically, the research engages with recent literatures on new middle classes and approaches that consider ‘class’ as a process that grows out of cultural and “classificatory practices” (Bourdieu, 1984).

The questions that have guided my investigation are: why and how did the *GEO movement* emerge; how do residents experience a new housing project in everyday life and what meanings do they communicate through these everyday practices? I examine how residents attempt to deploy various forms of capital to produce this cultural [intermediate] space and hence shape their identity as new urban subjects. The use of different strategies or forms of capital explored in this study include: a) improving the site so that it is in accordance with their needs and desires; b) remodelling and extending their homes with new architectural styles; c) the process of self-managing the neighbourhood and d) ensuring personal and professional growth through jobs, religion, sports and self-help groups. These strategies occur as a dynamic process and do not follow a certain order or have to be expressed equally by everyone. However, taken together, they serve as a set of practices that express the struggles that an emerging group must undertake to produce a ‘modern’ way of urban life, and claim a local recognition in contemporary Mexico.

1.10 Conclusions

The emergence of new urban modes of life in contemporary Mexico suggests an affinity with a new middle class that can be found in several rapidly changing societies. This new class requires us to abandon a view of urbanities that is solely based on notions of poverty, marginality and social exclusion and instead to observe the way people are confronting a changing social order through processes of inclusion, aspirations and social differentiation. More specifically, in this chapter I have attempted to outline an approach to study a group of people living in GEO Bosques by exploring the everyday cultural and classificatory practices that involve *class-making*. I argue that ethnography is ideally suited to delineate the urban experience of an emerging group who, by living in new places such as Casas GEO complexes, struggle to make themselves a space in the ‘middle grounds’ of Mexican society. The urban experience of middle class groups living in planned areas is a field of study that has been overlooked by ethnographers.

Some writers in the recent literature on the new or liberalising middle class in non-western societies have argued that new consumer patterns geared towards a multi-centred global capitalist economy are leading to the emergence of new middle class subjects. Writers such as Fernandes claim that the new middle class is a political or national ‘project’ that is endorsed by different governments with the aim of using the new market economy as a mode of transforming these countries into modern middle-class societies. However, at a structural level, this new class largely encompasses upper-class groups who have mostly benefited from economic liberalisation. The higher education and specific credentials from elite schools, jobs in the new private economy and consumerist patterns appear as the main benchmarks of the new class. These authors have added that the main assumption of the ‘new class project’ is that a wide range of individuals from other, lower, social segments can potentially join it. By emulating the lifestyles of upper-class groups, they reveal a mindset, aspirations and a set of dispositions that can be associated with a perceived upward mobility.

Although providing stimulating ideas about new urban lifestyles, these ethnographies only provide a restricted view of the upper classes. One of the main problems of these ethnographies is their attempt to define what class is rather than exploring how it is constructed on a daily basis. By contrast, Lietchy and Newcomb provide a

comprehensive view of the practices that make up the contemporary urban middle class in particular contexts. Both authors believe that the *making* of the middle class is a constant process that consists of a wide range of practices, the ultimate goal of which is to obtain local recognition through specific symbols, claims and class values. In this endeavour, as authors studying the ‘forms of assertion’ of nouveau riche, successful migrants and impoverished middle class groups have argued, the urban landscape is a site where class identity is expressed. Taken together, the studies highlight the importance of the symbolic elements in the process of *class-making*.

Some of the features explored in the literature serve as a theoretical framework for my enquiry into the *GEO movement*, which can be understood here as an intermediate cultural space formed of the residents’ everyday practices. I argue that this space allows residents to carry out different forms of imagining, aspiring to and experiencing of modern urban ways of living and thus carve out a presence as an emerging social group. I have stressed that my aim in this thesis is to portray people’s struggle to ‘gain’ class recognition which includes the way they present themselves and how they act. The differences between their dreams, thoughts and actions is a key to understanding *who they are* and *what they aspire to become* while living in a new place like GEO Bosques.

2 Chapter Two: Living in *la privada*

2.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters, I argued that new modes of urban life are appearing in Mexico, and that this is illustrated by the appearance of the Casas GEO complexes. This phenomenon has transformed urban growth patterns as well as influenced common ideas with regards to what is attainable through living in a ‘modern’ country. I also argued that ethnography can delineate contemporary urban experience in new places such as the GEO complexes, and in particular the way people living in these geographies (as a group) are trying to make themselves a space in the ‘middle grounds’ of Mexican society. In this chapter, I explain the way I use ethnography to explain the formation of the *GEO movement* in the city of Cuernavaca. It first situates the city of Cuernavaca and the GEO Bosques complex within recent patterns of urbanisation and consumption that fit within the economic and political reorientation of Mexico. The chapter then provides some reflections on how the ethnographic ‘insights’ were built up in the course of my fieldwork through my role as a tenant and as a researcher of GEO Bosques. This involves explaining the intertwined process of interviewing, observing events and writing ethnography.

2.2 Cuernavaca, a city in transition

Ever since Redfield’s study *Tepoztlán, a Mexican village*, the state of Morelos has been a favourite site for understanding Mexican rural life. The large amount of research that has been conducted in the state has led to an image that it is poor, indigenous, agricultural and deeply rooted in issues of land and its politics. Indeed, so significant have been the contribution of these ethnographies of the Morelos landscape and its people, that they have formed the basis for understanding national culture and history (Bataillon, 2002). As Bartra (1996) made clear, in the opinion of Anglo-Saxon anthropologists, the concept of *mexicanidad* was primarily formulated on a partial reality of the state of Morelos. There were however several reasons for an anthropological interest in the region. First, as a region that gave rise to the Revolution of the South in 1910, and also as the home and burial place of Emiliano Zapata,

Morelos symbolically represented the quintessential image of rural Mexico. Morelos became the first state granted *ejido* land and one of the states where the agrarian reform was carried out most extensively. By the 1940s, 80 percent of Morelos comprised *ejido* and communal land (Warman, 1976). Hence, while a peasant class-based ideology and claims on the land served as the official flag of post-revolutionary governments and an important symbol of Mexican identity, Morelos was prominent in academic writing and official discourse.

Second, Morelos also represented a place where one could seek a good life and escape from the pressures of Mexico City. Historically, Morelos and more specifically Cuernavaca had been a favoured vacation spot for elites, from Emperor Moctezuma, Hernán Cortéz, Maximilian I and, after the Mexican Revolution, a host of Mexican ex-presidents, artists, intellectuals, diplomats, and refugees. More recently, the city has been a favoured location of drug dealers.

According to Lomnitz-Adler (1992), Cuernavaca was ‘planned’ by the Mexico City elite to be preserved as a semi-rural city retreat. In 1924, following the years of hunger, killings and disease in the aftermath of the Revolution, President Calles decided to make Cuernavaca a tourist centre. A new constitution was established for the State of Morelos, and Vicente Estrada Cajigal, a close friend of Calles, became Governor. During the Calles regime (1924-1935), Cuernavaca became a site for gambling and political activity. The Mexico-Cuernavaca highway was built, together with the Casino de la Selva and a few fine hotels and private villas, and Calles set up key consulates and an alternative presidential office (López, 1955). This was the period described by Malcolm Lowry in *Under the Volcano* (1962) when Mexican politicians, diplomats and wealthy foreigners spent extended periods of time building a web of secret relationships in large colonial-style mansions and hotels, where they had private parties but almost no contact with the locals. Yet 1930s Cuernavaca lacked a drainage system and paved roads and only the central areas and the wealthy villas surrounding the Casino de la Selva hotel had running water. In 1934, the new president, Cárdenas, banned gambling and abandoned the tourist project in the state. Instead he supported the Zapatismo legacy, promoted the formation of cooperatives for peasants and granted further *ejido* land, with the result that the development of Cuernavaca was left aside (Lomnitz-Adler, 1992).

It was not until the 1950s that Cuernavaca began to develop the infrastructure of a modern city; this time driven by a few families who regarded real estate as the means of encouraging development. The Casino de la Selva was renovated and converted into a hotel and new residential areas were built. By the 1970s, there were boulevards, fountains and public gardens and well-planned districts - *fraccionamientos* [subdivisions] - for the elite. A few local elite families and politicians turned Cuernavaca into a small weekend town by ‘urbanising’ the land they had inherited from their family *haciendas* as well as by the expropriation of communal land. The Estrada, the Rivera and the Echeverría families (the former were relatives of the former Governor of the state of Morelos and later President of Mexico between 1970-1976) are locally recognised as being responsible for having ‘built’ Cuernavaca. The residential areas of Vista Hermosa, Rancho de Cortés and Jardines de Cuernavaca were built in the northern part of the city and provided with a good infrastructure including wide paved roads, boulevards, a drainage system and public gardens.²⁴ On the other side of the city, districts such as Unidad Morelos were sites of social housing schemes and formed part of the CIVAC [The Industrial City of Cuernavaca Valley] project. CIVAC was planned in 1961 to boost the industry of the region by creating more than two thousand jobs in the automobile, pharmaceutical and manufacturing industries. The city also witnessed increasing informal settlements [La Lagunilla, Ruben Jaramillo, Otilio Montano] formed mostly by invasion and housing migrants from inner Morelos and the neighbouring state of Guerrero (Tapia, 2000:26).

Cuernavaca’s population soared in the mid-1980s following the arrival of the upper and middle classes from Mexico City. Some of these new arrivals had been displaced by the 1985 earthquake; others were prompted to move by the idea of improving the quality of life that Mexico City could no longer offer.²⁵ Many of these new migrants settled in

²⁴ Interview with the CEO and Founder Partner, Desarrolladora Tepoztán. October 3, 2007. Cuernavaca, Mexico. According to the interviewee, the Rivera family was involved in the building Cuernavaca from 1950 to 1990, including many of the residential areas and the CIVAC project.

²⁵ Evidence of the Mexico City post-earthquake decentralisation policy in the state of Morelos is described by Hiernaux (1986) and Tapia (2006). Hiernaux reported the decentralisation of public institutions such as the CAPUFE [National Control Centre], as well as part of the SRA [Ministry of the Agrarian Reform], SARH [Ministry of Agriculture and Hydraulic Services], and SEPESCA [Ministry of Fisheries]. To this list, Tapia added the decentralisation and creation of 39 research centres (mostly concentrated in the metropolitan area of Cuernavaca), 166 laboratories where more than 1,900 researchers and 3,000 employees work.

smaller homes in the new vertical condominiums or in social interest apartments serviced with gardens and communal swimming pools. The city acquired a certain suburban character as many of the new arrivals kept their jobs in Mexico City and commuted to work every day, returning home in the evenings (Araoz, Mentz and Crespo, 1985). This mini boom slowed during the 1990s, however, so that the average population growth for the period 1980-2000 was 2.4 percent per annum, less than what had been experienced in the 1970s (4.4 percent) (INEGI, 2012b). The structure of the city consolidated during the 1980s and 1990s; the wealthiest residents tended to live in the northern districts or in the villages of Ocotepéc and Ahuatitlán often in houses hidden behind high stone walls or in small horizontal gated condominiums. These areas were served by elite private schools, well-known Spanish schools for foreigners, good restaurants and retail services. The poorer families, often locals or immigrants from the State of Guerrero, lived in the southern and eastern parts of the city. The south was served with state schools linked to the CIVAC project, two public hospitals, a bus station and low-price retail outlets. The city centre or ‘old Cuernavaca’ kept its traditional character with a blend of elite *casonas* or houses converted to restaurants or hotels, tenements and the municipal market.²⁶

Population growth and urban consolidation meant that a medium-sized city planned to be semi-rural began to experience problems of water, environmental pollution and traffic congestion.²⁷ But, by the mid 1990s, Cuernavaca was experiencing more serious problems. It acquired the moniker of the ‘capital of kidnapping’. There was a wave of extortions, threats and an estimated 400 kidnappings [*secuestro express*], which created a climate of fear (CNDH, 2010). The violence and political crisis was aggravated by the involvement of top local politicians, including the commander of the police and the Governor, Jorge Carrillo Olea, and the fact that drug dealers and kidnap gangs settled in the state. The cruelty of these gangs is illustrated by El *Mochaorejas* Arizmedi, who was responsible for the majority of the kidnappings in Morelos and whose ‘signature’ involved cutting off the ears of victims and sending them to relatives. The levels of violence and corruption triggered a huge reaction among the middle and upper classes.

²⁶ Despite CIVAC and some light industrial plants, 74 percent of *cuernavacaquenses* [native of Cuernavaca] earn their living by working in the commercial and service sectors (INEGI, 2012b).

²⁷ Congestion only got worse over the next 20 years. By 2010 only Tijuana had more taxis, *rutas* [public transport] and private automobiles per person [268 automobiles per 1,000 inhabitants] than Cuernavaca (INEGI, 2012b).

Protective measures such as erecting barbed wire and raising the height of walls surrounding properties became the norm and new routines for socialising were adopted in houses, private clubs and a few restaurants in the city.

High levels of crime and insecurity also prompted a political realignment of the middle classes. Allegiance shifted to the opposition PAN which forced the state governor to step down. The social crisis strengthened the move by Sergio Estrada Cajigal (already a municipal president in Cuernavaca) for the opposition PAN to win the municipal election in 2000. Estrada was an entrepreneur and grandson of the state's first elected governor (Vicente Estrada), who had brought a degree of splendour to Cuernavaca in the 1930s. Sergio Estrada dreamed of modernising Morelos by restoring its international image as 'the city of eternal spring'. He used public funds to remodel the *Zócalo* [Historic Centre Square] as well as to extend the *libramiento* [the highway that traverses the city from north to south] and re-paved the main avenues. He also employed private capital to clean and modernise the city with new monuments, such as a new statue of Zapata, as well as buildings that could add a new identity to the *morelenses*. These included a modern shopping mall, Galerías Cuernavaca, and a large red sculpture, seen from the *libramiento*, which became a new symbol of the city (see Photo 2).

The most controversial of Sergio Estrada's projects was the demolition in 2001 of the Casino de la Selva, an historical, ecological and cultural icon of the city. The Casino de la Selva was part of the collective memory of the city. It was the site where the International Cervantino Festival had been founded and film festivals had been held, including the internationally renowned psychoanalytic cinema directed by Fromm. It was also the place where the left-wing newspaper La Jornada had been founded and where leaders of the '68 student movement' lived in hiding following a period of government repression. The local residents regarded its vast gardens and trees as being the garden and 'lungs' of the city (La Jornada, 2001). When it was announced that the US Price-Costco company had acquired the land to build two supermarkets, a chain restaurant and an American-style parking area, citizens, artists, intellectuals and regular visitors to the city protested. Estrada Cajigal argued that the state welcomed private financial investment but only under strict regulation and forced Costco to preserve some trees, and some of the famous murals and paintings of the hotel were moved to a small

museum, the Museo Muros, located beside an American Sam's Club supermarket. Today, it is mostly visited by school children.



Photo 2. The 'new' Cuernavaca.

Source: Cristina Inclán-Valadez, 2008, 2010.

The Costco-La Selva project represented an attempt by the municipal government to promote a consumer culture in Cuernavaca. This involved Domino's Pizza and Dunkin' Doughnuts franchises, Elektra retail stores and Sam's Club affiliate supermarkets, as well as new shopping malls, the Henri Durand Hospital and the Tec Millennium and other private schools. The elite clientele have been provided with boutiques, hotels and spas in remodelled *Hacienda* health care centres, retirement homes and new golf courses (Tapia, 2006:26). According to one source Cuernavaca has more swimming pools than any other Mexican city and the most bars, discos and table-dance clubs per inhabitant of any city except Tijuana.²⁸ All of these developments helped to reshape the city after 2000 and to expand the south-east district, in what some city dwellers call the "New Cuernavaca". People throughout the state and even from the State of Guerrero began to think of Cuernavaca as a place to go shopping or skating at the ice rinks or as a place to study or receive medical treatment.

The long history of corruption, the presence of drug organisations and the lack of political interest for funding agriculture, public education and health care for the local community have left deep scars in the state and city.²⁹ Across the city a common sight are the *Frenaleros* [car watchmen], street children, *Marías* [indigenous women selling crafts and begging in the streets] and the sunburnt indigenous men selling corn and cane-sugar in white clothes and *sombreros*. Almost half of the population lives in "multi-dimensional poverty", meaning that they suffer from a shortage of food and lack education, health care, housing and a regular income (CONEVAL, 2010). People queuing for hours outside the IMSS [Mexican Institute of Social Security] hospital waiting for medical treatment is a common sight. The public hospital (Hospital del Niño Morelense) has to have translation services to communicate with the more than 30 different indigenous ethnic groups. Teaching in some public schools is divided into three sessions as they lack the facilities to accommodate all the children. Sanitation is a serious problem in Cuernavaca; since most of the drainage goes to rivers the

²⁸ Data taken from a personal communication with the CEO and Founding Partner, Desarrolladora Tepoztlán. October 3, 2007. Cuernavaca, Mexico.

²⁹ According to the marginality index constructed by SEDESOL (Ministry of Social Development), Morelos is far from the country's poorest state; it was ranked 16th of 33 Mexican states in 2010 (CONEVAL, 2010). These data suggest a combination of governance and inequality rather than resources are the problem. Perhaps indicatively, Sergio Estrada ended his administration accused by the PGR [Attorney General of Mexico] of corruption and of having links with the Sinaloa Cartel which used Cuernavaca airport to transport drugs.

subterranean waters are badly polluted and the government has not yet provided a dump for garbage disposal (García et al., 2007).

In the housing market inequality is represented by La Estación informal settlement that straddles the Mexico-Cuernavaca railway-line and goes through Vista Hermosa, the most exclusive residential neighbourhood of the city, which includes a heliport. New *colonias* have emerged on the outskirts of the city, including site-and-service projects such as La Nueva Barona, Bello Horizonte and Nueva Sección that share the names of the adjacent informal settlements. And, of course, new housing complexes constructed by GEO, Ara and other local developers were formed in the adjacent municipalities of Jiutepec, Zapata and Temixco, taking advantage of the concentrations of *ejido* lands in these areas.³⁰ In 2001, the government granted hundreds of permits to build new housing throughout the state.³¹

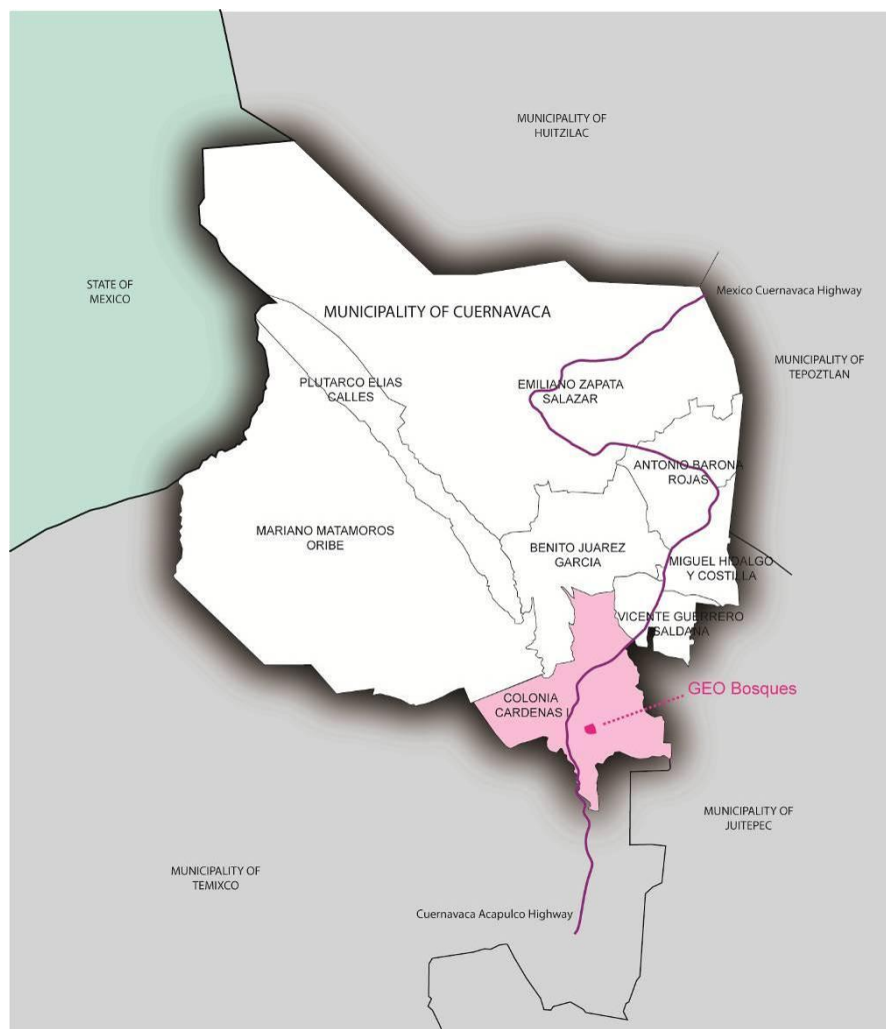
2.3 GEO Bosques: at the periphery of the city

GEO Bosques is situated three miles from the centre of Cuernavaca, on the city's southern outskirts in *colonia* Las Minas close to the old road to Puebla. As in the case of many other GEO complexes, one does not arrive at Bosques by chance; you need precise instructions. Arriving by car is the most straightforward, going past the signpost that says *Autopista Mexico-Acapulco km 94* one turns left to take the Avenida Toluca. From that point there are no other signposts and one has to look for the entrance to Bosques which is steep and sometimes muddy (see Maps 1 and 2 for location). If travelling by *ruta*, it is better to get off at the highway close to the signpost and take a taxi as there is no means of access for the *rutas* to the complex. A taxi costs four pesos (USD \$0.42). Once at Avenida Puebla, you pass a couple of factories and turn left where a narrow and partly paved road leads directly to the complex. In front you can see

³⁰ The *Censo Agropecuario 2007. IX Censo Ejidal* [National Agricultural Census, 2007] showed that there were 233 ejidos and agrarian communities, accounting for 47 percent of the state as opposed to the more than 80 percent granted to peasants in the period 1920-50. Morelos also had one of the most fragmented structures of land holding with cultivated land per person of 2.9 ha, with only the Federal District and the State of Mexico recording lower amounts (INEGI, 2009).

³¹ Cuernavaca continued to receive large numbers of migrants through the 1990s and 2000s. According to data provided by INEGI (2012b) the city recorded the second highest rate of internal migration of all major cities: 28 percent of permanent residents were born in another state and three of every ten inhabitants commute every day from or to Mexico City for work.

the hoarding with the name GEO Bosques stuck on a small and partially-built column, and next to it, a high water tank painted in yellow with the logo of Casas GEO in large print. Both the plaque and the water tank are partly covered by graffiti, glued-on messages and advertisements of condominiums for sale. To the right there is the taxirank and a couple of small refreshment stalls that are open in the late afternoon. To the left there is an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who is the patron saint of taxidriver. The image is adorned with candles and plastic flowers and stands in a glass case inside a small guardhouse. Close to the Virgin there is an empty plot that is fenced off. A part of the fence is covered with advertisements for houses for sale or to rent, cleaning services, second-hand furniture and other kinds of goods and services related to the complex.



Map 1. Location of GEO Bosques in Cuernavaca

Source: INEGI. (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía). (2012c). Sistemas de Información de Indices de Vuelos Ver 3.0 . Available: <http://gaia.inegi.org.mx/siiv3/viewer.html>. Last accessed 23rd Sept 2013.

GEO Bosques is surrounded by one of the four dredged sand mines of Las Minas. From the main entrance walking to the right end of the complex you can see the mines and notice how far they have eroded. You can also instantly feel the dust whirling in your face and entering your throat. Some of the mines are being filled with garbage, rubble and discarded building materials, while others are being occupied with small houses made of asbestos where waste pickers live. From this location, the inhabitants look down on the GEO complex and over a green steep rocky cliff separating the complex from the back of the residential neighbourhood of Las Palmas. From the mine one can see the huge stone walls of the houses, some fences and a few tennis courts.³²



Map 2. Location of GEO Bosques in Las Minas

Source: INEGI. (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía). (2012c). Sistemas de Información de Índices de Vuelos Ver 3.0. Available: <http://gaia.inegi.org.mx/siiv3/viewer.html>. Last accessed 23rd Sept 2013.

³² The area neighbouring Bosques was purchased by the homebuilder Homex for a new housing project despite pressure on existing service capacity and environmental problems.

Entering GEO Bosques, one's first impression is probably of a quiet place that is half-empty, warm and dry. There are some dogs lying in the shade of the cars, a few builders working and an occasional woman walking along under an umbrella. Cars are most likely parked on both sides of the streets and some are encased in high cages for security. At times, a tangle of electric wiring reach into the trees or the roofs of houses. The layout of GEO Bosque is circular with a U-turn at the end; the street grid leads to 12 independent gated clusters spread out on its west and east sides. The clusters, known as *privadas*, are sealed off by walled gates. On average, each *privada* comprises 40 units of houses which are usually arranged in two identical rows of 20, facing each other and separated by a rectangular parking lot. Most of the *privadas* have a common garden at the end. In some cases these spaces have become impromptu areas for mixing or storing cement and building materials, or storerooms for old furniture and car parts, while others have been kept as gardens for growing a variety of plants; or otherwise they are just abandoned as waste land.

The entrance gates to the *privadas* are built in a wide range of styles and sizes. There are warning signs on the gates such as: "Do not park in this area"; "Private property"; "Neighbourhood watch"; "Beware of the dog" and "Danger: Electrified Fence". Three of the 12 gates are permanently closed off from the surrounding area and the remaining nine either stay open during the daytime or simply do not work. There is also a stark contrast between the *privadas* located at the extreme ends of the complex. The first resembles a typical Mexican *vecindad* [slum tenement]: a single row of a maximum of 12 double storey houses which lie exposed to the gaze of passers-by through an enclosed high gate. Here one can find a narrow concrete-paved patio which acts as an extension of the houses and is shared by the residents as a place where they can hang up their laundry or play football. The houses in this section have undergone only minimal alterations. By contrast, in the last *privada*, there is a cluster of 100 dwellings protected by gated walls, a private guarded entrance and more extensive common gardens, which are fully occupied most of the time. There are no car cages or chains, and there seem to be no domestic activities being carried out beyond the houses. (Photos 3 and 4 show the main entrance and surroundings at GEO Bosques Photo 5 shows the different *privadas* at the complex).



Photo 3. Main entrance

Source: Cristina Inclán-Valadez, 2007.



Photo 4. Surroundings at GEO Bosques

Source: Cristina Inclán-Valadez, 2007.



Photo 5. Privadas at GEO Bosques

Source: Cristina Inclán-Valadez, 2007.

Administratively and politically, Bosques forms a part of the Delegación Lázaro Cárdenas that is provided with basic services and amenities (paved streets, running water, a sewage system and electricity, a health-care clinic and two primary schools). Las Minas is poor area which has been developed by trash pickers, brickmakers and builders around the former sand mines. Currently, Las Minas contains the largest controlled and uncontrolled open rubbish tips in the state of Morelos. It also has several factories, a petrol station, a few small motels, and several car repair garages, street kitchens and food stores. Its location near to the Puebla highway makes Las Minas an obligatory stopping-off point for trailers and bus drivers on journeys coming from/to the centre or north of the country. In the daytime, the area serves as a loading zone for

merchandise leaving the factories, as well as a means of access to the warehouses and to transport rubbish and building rubble. At night, it serves as a ‘temporary hotel’ for bus drivers who stop to fill up with petrol, rest, spend the night and use the many street kitchens, motels, bars and *botaneras* [local grocers] which fill Avenida Toluca and the narrow adjacent streets.

2.4 My way of doing ethnography

In ethnography we “invent concepts, models, and schemes to make sense of experience and, further, we continually test and modify these constructions in the light of new experience” (Schwandt, 1997:237). This open method allows ethnographers to construct their way of understanding and interpreting people’s experiences and situations, on an ongoing, constantly changing basis. My overall objective was to gain an insight into everyday lives in an ‘ordinary place’ and, in the words of Higgins and Coen (2000), to bring texture to the ordinary. However, capturing the ordinary is often a difficult task; there can be a seeming absence of drama, colour and even dialogue. Nevertheless, as Monsiváis (1995) pointed out, we should be attuned to the strong symbolic references which can tell us much more than words. The aspects of lives that I wanted to reflect mostly took place behind doors, in people’s cars while they commuted to their jobs or at their workplaces. Ethnographers argue that it is essential to conduct long-term research to understand the ups and downs of people’s lives. As Oscar Lewis argued, it is by living with people, eating with them, commuting with them and in general situating ourselves so that we become a part of their social reality that we can understand people’s wishes, aspirations or tragedies.

I lived in a Casa GEO for nine months between February and November 2007 in one of the 12 subsections of the complex, or as my neighbours called it, *la privada* or *privada Colorín*. This was a cluster of 100 houses, the biggest in Bosques, where nearly 85 families live and some people work in houses used for commercial purposes. During the course of fieldwork, I also got to know and was able to talk with people living all around the complex. I went back to the field several times in 2008 and 2010 to find out about the way the place had changed.

Before I could understand women and men as residents of a new place, I felt that I had to understand them as mothers and fathers, siblings and workers, as well as their degree of religiosity and political commitment. My research questions could only be answered if I was prepared to accompany them out of their homes into their cars when they commuted to Mexico City, went to a sports club or church, to supermarkets, *taquerias* and *fondas*, through which they showed me the Cuernavaca in which they lived and experienced. I also visited the offices of the property developers to see the projects under construction, the municipal offices where the construction permits were granted, the GEO salespoints and the venues of the events that were organised by the GEO personnel to sell the houses and the associated ‘lifestyles’. I interviewed the former chief architect of GEO and the creator of *La Morada*, the house type that forms the basis of the current trend of low-cost housing that is reproduced all over Mexico. I attended the 8th and 9th “Mexican Housing Day” in London and talked to developers there.³³ Through participant observation I followed how the Casas GEO Company kept on growing, built more houses, and changed its marketing policies and slogans.

I got to know my neighbours by engaging them in long conversations, holding open-ended interviews and conducting my own participant observation. In trying to give a context to their lives, I also carried out observation in other sites, and talked to the house developers and employees of GEO Morelos and to people living in other similar complexes. During the course of the study, I talked to 83 individuals, who were directly or indirectly involved in the *GEO movement*, as well as administrators of *privadas*, guards, gardeners, builders, taxi drivers and so on (see Appendix 1). In other words, I accompanied the people from GEO Bosques in their everyday struggle to build the *GEO movement* by means of positive attributes such as hard work, imagination, faith, and their strong wish to be something else; as much as the latent violence and the fear thereof which form a part of their everyday co-existence.

I also looked at articles in the press and reviewed legislation, official documents, reports produced by the GEO company and all sort of brochures and housing magazines containing information about Casas GEO. During my time in Mexico, I encountered Casas GEO in my everyday life: in supermarkets, *telenovelas* [soap operas] and menus

³³ The 8th and 9th Mexican Housing Day in London held in the Chatman House (February 14, 2011) and Deutsche Bank Central Offices (March 12, 2012), respectively.

in restaurants; on billboards and political campaigns; and during conversations with taxi drivers, maids and friends. I found that Casas GEO was becoming my way of relating to and understanding my country and in doing so I became aware of how pervasive the *GEO movement* was. As Bourgois (2003) has observed, conducting ethnography by positioning oneself in the lives of others is a very personal experience. So it was for me. Long after the physical fieldwork was complete I found it very difficult to stop ‘doing’ fieldwork in my mind.

2.4.1 Talking in GEO Bosques and about GEO

This thesis and the fieldwork on which it is based departs from traditional or classical ethnography in two ways. The former concerns how the self, the research subjects and the objectivity of the research are handled. The latter is related to the way the ethnographer portrays the lives of the people with whom s/he has established a social relationship and close attachment. For generations classical anthropology argued that unless one approached others as a detached, objective observer, it was impossible to leave people’s lives untouched, and, hence to report people’s voices and real facts by giving them an order and consistency, and treating them with objectivity (Gans, 1967). Ethnographers paid little attention to their presence in the field or the impact of that presence on people’s lives had, and they tended not to consider that their interpretation was in any way subjective.

However, contemporary ethnographers have suggested alternative ways of thinking about and doing ethnography, particularly in dealing with the self in the field and in capturing the stories of people not as situated subjects in specific settings (eg. home, family, neighbourhood, community), but towards a systems of relations which define them (Clifford and Marcus, 2010; Marcus, 1998, Scheper-Hughes, 1992). These authors have argued that the way traditional units or objects of study present themselves that has complicated how the classic terms in ethnography are understood operationally. In the words of Marcus (1998), contemporary lives are multi-sited, obliging ethnographers to draw pictures in multi-sited space, and understand subjects in development, as on the move, displaced and hybrid.

This perspective in ethnography has also led to a more ethical discipline, with people and researchers being less constrained by notions of objectivity. Instead of following a particular ‘method’ ethnographers are able to go on a personal and academic ‘journey’, incorporating a willingness or recognition that to make mistakes or misunderstandings as a better path for obtaining ‘clarification’ and then making a cultural ‘translation’. Documenting of the personal fears, anxieties and feelings of insecurity that are faced during fieldwork is regarded as a valid way of dealing with people that we do not know and with stories that we would often prefer not to know. This path can become so personal at times that the researcher regards the process of fieldwork itself as a way of resisting or denouncing marginality (Bourgois, 2003) or as a way of becoming engaged in some sort of community work with people, sometimes in ‘exchange’ for information given (Higgins and Coen, 2000, Scheper–Hughes, 1992). These ethnographers have argued that it is the feelings of solidarity or attachment experienced during fieldwork that provide the main motive for writing the ethnography.

In being faithful to my own ethnographic journey, I sought to rely on people’s experiences and on my own experience in the fieldwork. At the time when I was planning my fieldwork, few academics and researchers were discussing the Casas GEO phenomenon in Mexico. Some referred to the presence of a “new informality” that was emerging from this version of social interest houses (Castillo, 2006). Others pointed out that there was a need to focus on the precarious nature of people’s new suburban lives, which are best expressed in the first complexes built in the State of Mexico. These authors set out to study what they call “the new Mexico City periphery” (Maya et al., 2005).

Although I had originally intended to conduct fieldwork in a GEO complex on the edge of Mexico City, possibly in Iztapalapa or Ixtapaluca, I decided to conduct the study in Cuernavaca instead.³⁴ This decision was for two principal reasons. First, Cuernavaca is a much under-studied city. Second, I had worked there for three years and many colleagues and friends at the INSP (National Institute of Public Health, Mexico) had

³⁴ According to Maya, Cervantes and Carrillo (2005), between 1990-2000 the municipality of Ixtapaluca, State of Mexico, experienced the fastest population growth in Latin America. Almost 70,000 house units were built by private developers including Casas GEO, doubling the municipal population in a single decade. This population growth contrasted with the 70 percent shortage of public amenities and infrastructure.

commented how acquiring a house in a GEO complex represented a good first-time home opportunity, a 'dream' weekend house, or good choice for renting. What my colleagues revealed about their experiences in these places did not correspond to what academics and journalists were writing. Colleagues did not consider a Casa GEO as an example of social interest housing but simply as a house in Bosques or La Pradera (the names of urban complexes). This distinction avoided associations with public or social housing, labels still used by academics in reference to these places, and thus attaching a stigma to the dwellings that many people were trying to avoid by choosing a GEO house.

However, I also learned that the term GEO implies a particular kind of tension which is only noticed within the sites. Some neighbours would describe a Casa GEO as a "Casa FEO", as ugly housing. On other occasions, the GEO 'brand' is completely erased when people call their remodelled houses "Villas" or "Chalets". It was important therefore to embark on the fieldwork with the aim of studying life within a Casas GEO site and to let the residents, if they wished, assign categories such as 'social' or 'affordable'. In contrast to the labels deployed by others I regarded this sensitivity to terms heard in conversation with neighbours as an important sign that GEO Bosques symbolises many of the shifts that have occurred in Mexico. The new tastes, jargon and forms of identification with the living space capture that these shifts are not a singular conformity but a more varied, tense, direction of change.

Hannerz (1980) and Marcus (1998) added that urban ethnography cannot be undertaken by looking only at a single site. Contemporary lives are fragmented and multi-sited and it is the cultural outcome that occurs in several different places that constitutes the social phenomena under study. The task of the ethnographer is to examine people, and trace connections and relations between them in space. For this reason, even when only a single site is being studied, it should be treated as a place where specific situations tell fragments of the story that the researcher is trying to build. This way of approaching an urban context requires the ethnographer to constantly 'negotiate' his/her position in the field and recognise the need to adapt to its dimensions.

The lives of my informants took place in different sites. They commuted regularly and for long hours; they also moved to other towns and cities and spent a part of their leisure time outside the complex. I moved in the same way as they did and lived in the house I was renting in different ways over the months I spent in the field. For the first six months, I was a permanent resident and the time I spent there gave me the opportunity to become immersed in the everyday dynamics of the place. During the summer holidays I started to live in the house as a weekender, which gave me a different view of the place and enabled me to establish closer relations with my neighbours. I talked to some of them in Mexico City or in places outside the complex. I also sometimes shared the house with Vero, a friend from the INSP and the owner. Vero would visit both to check the house and to demonstrate her presence as a resident. My moves were in response to fieldwork and practical needs but also fitted with the dynamics of GEO Bosques itself. People in GEO Bosques moved in and out of their houses frequently as, for instance, they changed jobs or if they ran out of money, in which case they would lock up or rent out their homes temporarily and return after several months. It was a common experience to find that families with whom I had established a rapport, suddenly moved out without leaving a trace and then months later suddenly came back as if nothing had happened.

‘Moving’ was a common dynamic amongst the employees at the complex too. The private guards were rotated frequently by the company, and people working in homes that were used as offices sometimes left abruptly and never came back. I found this instability difficult to cope with at times and felt a need to gain a more permanent sense of ‘access’ to the field. I also found it difficult to put together the pieces of a story that was subject to sudden interruptions. However, this seemingly ‘disorderly’ way of living, and the fragmented stories that I got from my informants, constituted the social reality of the *privada* and of GEO Bosques generally.

I talked with people alone, in groups or in the presence of friends who were visitors. Most of the time, our conversations were not scheduled and took place in living rooms, on patios at the backs of houses, in front gardens, taxis, or during walks. I learned that it was better to go to the person’s house and let them decide if they could talk or wanted

to do so. At times the conversations would spill over from the house to the car when the residents went to pick up their children from school. I learned both to appreciate and to capture the way in which different settings produced different responses. These conversations fell in to three categories.

First, some conversations were long and might last off and on over several days. Even shorter exchanges could be disorganised and range over topics from people's backgrounds and previous homes, their reasons for moving to a place like GEO, their experience with the company during the sale and on other occasions, the first years of their life in the complex and attitudes to their homes and other possessions as well as opinions and thoughts about food, faith, free time, education, jobs, politics and the state of Mexico and what they call *verdades* [truths], which in Mexican Spanish includes anxieties, fears, dreams and hopes, that "reveal the essence of the[ir] lives" (Lewis, 1975:6). To get a hold of these conversations I took notes constantly and occasionally recorded a conversation. I found it was easier to establish a rapport when there was no recording but there were times when informants wanted to be recorded and know that their voices had been written up in my transcriptions and notes, which were afterwards given to them. Others, like Marta, went further and asked if they could see how I had described the place [*privada* and the complex] they lived in, and I agreed to show them my notes. Marta suggested adding some ideas such as the way the *privada* was designed to visually 'look like' (a gated community). After leaving Bosques I have kept in contact with some residents by email and telephone.

Second, and as is usual in ethnography, some people were more forthcoming than others or were more articulate at describing their experiences. Use of local slang was a constant challenge. My neighbours from the state of Guerrero, for example, mixed the English they had learnt as migrants in the US with Spanish and local words from their hometown. I learnt from them that in a conversation the Spanglish term "*between between*" [strictly between ourselves] was a signal that I should pay close attention. This apparently 'unsystematic approach' was time-consuming and required me to adjust my personal narrative so that it accurately reflected people's differences, while also providing a view of the diversity of the life in GEO Bosques.

Third, there were many residents who were unwilling to share their lives and views with me, and never accepted my presence in the *privada*. Everyday life in GEO Bosques was characterised by numerous ‘membership symbols’ [e.g. owning a car, decorating a home at Christmas, having a family meal in the garden] and an attachment to these symbols signified a public commitment to the place (Goffman, 1959). I tried to fit in by conforming to some of the symbols. When this worked the neighbours appreciated my efforts or what I brought to the *privada* life. Marta, for example, pointed out that my presence was sometimes ‘convenient’ for those tenants who had travelled abroad. I was selected as the audience to hear their experiences of Miami or London, and to look at postcards and photos that ‘others’ could never understand.³⁵ Equally, some neighbours with difficult personal problems knocked on my door to ask for hot water to bathe their children or to borrow money, or simply as a form of ‘protection’ as I was seen as being close to the administrator.

However, I was not routinely accepted, not least because I was a single woman living alone and with no children. I found it easier to talk to women and the women were more willing to share their lives than were the men. Some residents, mostly men, argued in several neighbourhood meetings that it was not ‘safe’ to have me around and advised people not to disclose too much information about their lives. But gender alone is insufficient to account for the mistrust felt by many residents. Suspicion was shared by the administrator of the *privada* and key informant, Lydia, as well as by members of the neighbours’ committee, which included the female private guards. Although Lydia was extremely helpful and candid throughout my research, she also prevented me from talking to some residents, excluded me from meetings and asked me to pay double the neighbourhood fee to keep neighbours who did not accept my presence ‘quiet’. In the opinion of the neighbourhood committee, I was one of those ‘unwanted’ neighbours who were challenging the notions of the *privada* as a place for a family to live. This sense of mistrust was symbolised by my ID card which allowed me to enter the *privada*. This showed that I was a temporary resident, meaning that my routines or when I had visitors required more supervision from the guards compared with the permanent residents. In the text I have tried to maintain a balanced perspective, picking out the

³⁵ Eleven of the 54 individuals whose accounts appear in this thesis reported having travelled to the US as illegal workers, as tourists to the US and Europe, and on school exchanges to Spain and China.

voices of men and young people wherever possible. But it is the voices of women that dominate many of the pages here, especially those of Lydia, Vero, Isis, Marta and Marichú.

I became many things during the time that I lived in the *privada*: a good and ‘decent’ or an unsafe and unwanted neighbour; a member of the monthly *tandas* [rotating saving schemes], someone who could be converted to Christianity. There was a certain amount of gossip about which married neighbour I was getting involved with or what chances there were for a male guard to have a date with me. Sometimes they did not know how to place me: I was *Cristina*, señorita [Miss], *doctora* [doctor], *hermana* [sister], *extraña* [outsider] and someone who was lost just hanging around and talking with people. At times, I felt all of these things.

2.4.2 Witnessing

From the beginning of my fieldwork, I found participant observation to be a useful research technique for understanding how life unfolds in an ordinary place like GEO Bosques. As Miller argued, “language is often defensive, restricted and carefully constructed as narrative. You can ask people about themselves, but the results are often less informative than one would like” (2008:2). Rather, he found that material objects and decorations are ways through which people choose to express themselves. In the opinion of Burawoy, observation can be regarded as an elementary form of ethnography and is a reliable way of undertaking “the study of people in their own time and space, in their everyday life” (1991:2). Its main advantage is that it allows what people act out or express to be juxtaposed with how they understand and experience these acts. It brings to the fore the idea of a dialogue between the researcher and the people being studied, thus helping to prevent feelings of inequality among subjects in the research. By observing people’s dynamics and the non-verbal signs that they employ, we are making them fuller participants in the research.

My observation in GEO Bosques began as soon as I moved into the house that I rented in the *privada*. I was particularly interested in the interior of the house, its decorations on the walls, its furniture, the added security devices and the general layout. The arch

that separated the kitchen from the living room, the security locks and grilles on every window and the decorations in the house where I lived were “not a random collection. They have been gradually accumulated as an expression of that person or household” (Miller, 2008:2). The relationship between both objects and people form an ‘aesthetic’ that is characteristic of a Casas GEO complex, and when I observed the details, it gradually enabled me to understand how residents had created it and the kind of style that differentiates them from others. I was very lucky that my supervisor was able to see my fieldwork site at an early stage. We visited different sites together and he observed things that I had missed, and pointed out details, possible relations and explanations that were helpful during the rest of the fieldwork.

I proceeded to conduct the same visual survey in the houses of my closest neighbours. I learnt to observe the gardens and flowers that united some of them, as well as the more visually ‘hostile’ materials such as plastic panels and grilles ending with barbed wire which sharply separate one side of a house from that of its neighbour. I reported and coded in my notebook what I observed: the ways people demarcated their boundaries (e.g. thick hedges, short concrete walls, images of the Virgin of Guadalupe); the type of grilles used for protecting homes (corroded or painted in bright colours); the house extensions or dwellings in which the original unit had been kept unchanged; and the kind of cars people had. These signs conveyed different things: economic success, social status, religiosity, a love for the property, as well as hostility, indifference and lack of money. I continued by studying the dynamics of people in the common areas, which included the role of the guards in securing the main gate and the matters that concerned the neighbourhood committee. I did these things systematically, which allowed me to link or contrast what people said about their lives and homes to what they expressed through them.

I also carried out a general visual survey by hanging around the complex and visiting the ‘important spaces’ to get a sense of the place. This included my rounds to the local shops, internet cafe, football pitches, evening food stalls and *kermeses* [fairs] that were organised by neighbours to obtain some money for a common cause. As is often the case in ethnography, it was hard to draw a line between participant observation and interviewing, as any conversation might lead to moments to observe and vice versa. I was invited to special gatherings as well as to share a meal or spend some time

watching TV for no other reason than friendship and desire for company. Sometimes I ‘observed’, including overheard through thin walls, family dynamics held in the domestic sphere that I was not supposed to witness. I observed as a researcher and reported what I saw in my notebook. On other occasions, I regarded the residents as part of my life as a tenant in Bosques and these experiences were recalled a long time after my fieldwork and incorporated into my analysis.

One of the most valuable pieces of data that I obtained from my participant observation enabled me to understand the strategies employed by the GEO Company for selling and transmitting notions of good planning, security, privacy and lifestyle that shape these new housing geographies. Either accompanied by a developer or member of GEO or ARA staff, or going on my own, I visited projects under construction (or already finished) in the state of Morelos or in the state of Mexico. I also visited the different *Puntos de Venta* [sales offices] of the company, where I acted as a potential customer and saw some show-houses. I visited the Casas GEO main office and witnessed how the different employees ‘play’ their roles as architects, salesmen, managers and “coaches” of the Casas GEO philosophy. The invitation I received from the GEO staff to attend several events organised by the company was also of great value to my research. They allowed me to see how they work to instil the company’s ideas of self-management and ‘community making’ among the tenants. These meetings enabled me to contribute to the neighbourhood meetings in which I regularly took part. Above all, the picture I obtained of the developer helped me to understand people’s notions and practices towards self-governance, community making and neighbourhood incivility.

Since the private developers are also selling symbolic values such as class, status and social mobility (which are later reproduced by the residents), photography was an excellent tool to document a number of issues. These include the everyday routines of the people at GEO, the interaction between the company personnel and the new tenants and the built environment in its various phases (house interiors, original and upgraded facades, common areas and surroundings). Photos as literal and metaphorical snapshots were sometimes taken of fleeting events and sometimes while I was on the move, in a car moving along the highway, coming in to or out of the *privada*. I was aware that photography, like interviews, can offer a subtle record of information but can just as easily be intrusive.

2.4.3 A note on the methods and timing

Without doubt, my experience as a resident created multiple social realities in GEO Bosques and became a ‘strategy for discovery’ in a line of enquiry that is rare in the ethnographies of middle or upper class social groups. But it also became the most difficult aspect to deal with during the course of the fieldwork. I grew up in an upper-class suburb of Mexico City and my family conformed to the idea of the traditional middle class previously described, combining a mixture of middle and upper class elements that are not easy to separate. As a result, I have had experience of interacting with people from different social groups and backgrounds. For example my experience of studying in a public university and my work as a researcher in public health involved work in poor communities, although I had had no previous experience of living in a social housing estate, nor in a place that was remotely similar to a Casa GEO. Thus, while living in the *privada* it was easy for me to find common ground with my informants but also to encounter factors that divided us. While these power dynamics put me in a favourable position, there were also times when this ‘difference’ put me in a vulnerable position.

The ‘reflexivity’ of ethnography entails recognising the inequalities of power that academics create by doing research. These inequalities concern the power of guiding the course of the research as well as the opportunity for ‘protecting’ ourselves from what we witness when we carry out fieldwork around people’s everyday lives (Katz, 1994). At times, these power inequalities are reversed when the context of the study is close to one’s own personal reality. As Scheper-Hughes (1992) makes very clear, participant observation often immerses ethnographers in spaces of human life which they would prefer not to have seen. Through my fieldwork I encountered a Mexico that I disliked and I sometimes felt vulnerable, anxious and uneasy when doing my fieldwork. My ‘different’ Mexican accent, the fact that my skin was paler than many of my informants, and what seemed to be a naïve way of doing my research in GEO: “you are *muy confiada* [too trusting] and you don’t belong here... be careful this is not an easy place” were often communicated to me in the course of the fieldwork. Bosques was a difficult place to live in for me. I found that the people were utilitarian in their dealings with

each other, indifferent to others' problems and dismissive of those whom they thought were beneath them; and the place itself was pervaded by a subtle but constant feeling of violence that was reproduced in everyday behaviour. I witnessed the hostility of neighbours against families who were in a vulnerable position or adults who sent their children to private schools to show they were good parents but gave very little time or affection to their children and were often uncaring. These attitudes made me doubt if ethnographers are sincere in stating that they establish close friendships with their subjects. People's attitudes at GEO Bosques were obviously rooted in wider contexts including the years of poverty and exclusion or in stories of downward mobility - that 'educated' Mexican families that have nowhere to go but to a GEO house.

Nor during the fieldwork, and even in retrospect, did I like GEO Bosques. The poor quality of the houses made me and the rest of my neighbours constantly cross the 'barriers of privacy' of those living nearby. In my case, many of these people were my informants and being overheard raised questions about confidentiality and consent every time a conversation began. There were also issues about what could be 'observed' through the walls of my house - family interactions, meals, quarrels, cries, laughter and sexual intercourse. The odours of food, gas escaping from boilers and the smell of detergent were often intensified at night even when the windows were opened. There were the intermittent sounds of water filling the elevated tanks and the everyday sounds of construction work taking place in different houses, dust that came from the sand mines and the burning garbage that brought on allergies which stopped only several months after I left Bosques. These practices reminded me that doing ethnography was about being physically present and personally involved in uneasy dynamics.³⁶

Finally, I should not forget the timeframe in which the fieldwork was undertaken in the shaping of my informants' words and actions and in my experience during the fieldwork. The fieldwork coincided with the beginning of President Calderón's 'War on drugs' campaign. During the nine months I spent in Cuernavaca in 2007, and my following visits in 2008 and 2010, people's lives were profoundly affected by the presence of drug cartels, a military crackdown and murders in public spaces. People

³⁶ I eventually learnt how to adapt to these situations both personally and by adding locks to doors or cork to walls.

experienced the drugs war in small but recurring events that had an impact on their everyday lives. Close to the entrance of Bosques on the Mexico-Acapulco highway there was a military check-point and several of the residents at Bosques were inspected, including myself. The checks, some argued, together with subsequent extortions on the part of the soldiers, increased the feeling of fear among residents and resulted in the spread of distrust and a series of measures to deal with insecurity and crime. Within the *privada*, my closest neighbour was found murdered, which people presumed to be in connection with drug dealing, and a house was checked by the police searching for drugs. Finally, Ema, a close neighbour, died in an accident on the Cuernavaca-Mexico highway after becoming involved in a chase between drug dealers and police and losing control of her car. The events of the 'war' marked people's lives and provided a constant shadow of insecurity to a space that had been chosen as an exhibition of or aspiration to middle-class success.

2.4.4 Advantages and limitations of the study case

The selection of GEO Bosques as a case study was not only based on convenience. I was looking for a site that was large enough to have a significant selection of housing types and household backgrounds and interests. I was also interested to avoid an explicitly 'weekend' type development to minimise the number of vacant properties and maximise the chances for what I thought, initially, would be a permanent population. In fact, it became clear that second properties were not only a feature of weekend or holiday housing types. The neoliberal model, designed to address the housing deficit, became a major generator of second homes. GEO Bosques was no exception and it became an unintended dimension of city and site selection that I was able to observe how 'second homes' became part of the middle-class idea.³⁷

I also wanted a complex that was identifiable to GEO staff who I might wish to interview. In 2002, Bosques was given the CONAVI Housing Award, which in itself was a useful talking point to approach the developer. The basic questions of why the site was given the award and what developers and inhabitants have to say about it were

³⁷ The allocation of mortgages for a second property was a extended strategy to boost the housing financing schemes. See the *Real Estate Outlook, Mexico. January Economic Analysis* (BBVA, 2012) for further explanation.

a first step to understand ideas of image and status. Bosques's relations with planning norms, however, were not quite as I expected. As with other GEO, Ara and Sare complexes, forms of state intervention seemed mostly non-existent (Castillo, 2006; Esquivel, 2006; Maya, 2005). Bosques lacked infrastructure for education, health services or religious uses; public space was limited to the parking areas. In terms of the location, although the site was at the periphery of Cuernavaca, it lacked a connection to the city's transport infrastructure. Nevertheless, as a complex that was seven years old at the time of fieldwork, Bosques presented an opportunity to see how residents might have addressed shortcomings of the original design. In one sense, the configuration of *Bosques* afforded little room for transformation; for instance, to add a church, market or a commercial area. This limited 'space' for transformation contrasted with the evidence of change to the houses, for example, through extensions, as well as to 'common' areas such as gardens and parking spaces. At the same time, it challenged the views of progressive growth commonly associated with informal settlements and achieved through years of community struggle and family change. I hoped that as an older housing complex, the residents would have a more complicated 'story to tell' than newer sites.

Lastly, I was aware of the limitations of fieldwork in a single site. The aim of the research was not to give a representative picture of all people who live in spaces produced under the new housing model but to understand the everyday practices that unfold in a new way of urban living. As already indicated, there is a wide diversity of housing typologies even within the GEO portfolio and the long-established role of Cuernavaca and Morelos as a commuter or weekend destination for Mexico City dwellers provides specificity to my findings. Nevertheless, the selection of Cuernavaca and Bosques worked to my advantage as it facilitated access to interviews with developers and other actors in Mexico City and allowed me to experience the daily commuting that many residents undertook as part of their daily routines and conversations about Mexico City which is a city that I know well.

2.5 Writing ethnography

Fieldwork is only one aspect of ethnography. There is also the task of writing, and writing ethnography is a complex activity, especially when the task is not in your first language. Since it is a cultural translation of people's stories and I regard ethnography as a dialogue between researcher and subject I had scope to decide what material to include and what not. Nevertheless, I was aware of the risk of 'romanticising' fieldwork, as Wacquant (2002) points out, and the impulse to smooth inconsistencies in people's self-presentation compared with their acting. Moreover, the task of ethnography, as Wacquant argues, is:

“not to exonerate the character of dishonoured social figures and dispossessed groups by ‘documenting’ their everyday world in an effort to attract sympathy for their plight. It is to dissect the social mechanisms and meanings that govern their practices, ground their morality (if such be the question), and explain their strategies and trajectories, as one would do for any social category, high or low, noble or ignoble” (Ibid: 1470).

In the process of fieldwork I tried to build a degree of empathy - whether this was reciprocated or not - and I tried to hold positive views of people's lives despite counterfactual evidence that many were no 'angels'. I had to be careful, therefore, that in committing material and interpretation to papers I did not seek to hide informants' prejudiced, lies or deceit in an implicit project to present them as 'good', 'decent' and 'honest' people. In the task of writing ethnography I tried to take people's lives seriously and to relate their narratives and actions to broader concepts and processes, not least the idea of a 'new' middle class and what this means.

In attempting to add validity and reliability to the information, I followed the method of data triangulation. I analysed written documents including local newspapers, legal documents related to planning and housing regulations, reports from the GEO company and its main competitor (Ara), and neighborhood bylaws. The document analysis was relevant for two reasons. First, it helped to establish the basic facts around the proliferation of house complexes in the state of Morelos and the regulatory frameworks

in the provision of housing. This proved to be crucial because private developers and municipal officials had diverging views about the rules for urban planning and about who should provide urban services. Second, I was able to get the different views on the GEO type housing debate and to compare the statements given by the respondents with the information from the documents.

It is important to mention that the search for municipal documents was not straightforward. While municipal guidelines for buildings are public, approved master plans are not. The master plan that I did manage to access was used by GEO to compete for the 2002 Housing Award, and focused solely on the housing design and landscaping elements. A particular frustration was that although the municipality in Mexico is responsible for drawing up guidelines for house building, designing the urban development plans and granting construction permits, municipalities with significant *ejido* land within their area often lack regulations for large-scale urban projects and simply rely on other municipalities' rules and/or extra-legal negotiations with developers. For instance, statements from house developers and GEO employees pointed to a lack of consistent local or national rules to standardise construction (in terms of quality, size, or the provision of services from each part), I was not able to confirm the situation for the case study complex. The first National Code for House Building which specified responsibilities was published eleven years after Bosques complex was built (CONAVI, 2011). Similarly, the approval of the *Programa Parcial de Desarrollo Urbano* [Partial Plan for Urban Development] in 2009, helped to confirm the private developers' statements with regards to municipal involvement in planning years after the housing projects had been occupied (Periódico Oficial del Estado de Morelos Tierra y Libertad 4711, 2009).

The information followed the principle of saturation reached with the repetition of ideas or when the interviewees brought out non-related ideas on the processes of constructing the *GEO movement* (Gaskell 2000). For the analysis of the collected data, I relied on Masson's analytical steps: "literal, interpretative and reflexive analysis" (1996:54). Once the interviews were transcribed into Spanish, I coded and organised the information by using an open coding approach or a "literal analysis" for the process of extracting texts from the original source and converting them into more manageable information. The open coding approach allowed the data to 'speak for itself', rather than

making it necessary to examine the data through pre-determined frameworks. Second, I followed a closed coding scheme or “interpretative analysis” to see the repetitions and relations with themes. This ‘open’ and ‘closed’ coding procedure provided a certain kind of qualitative cross-checking, which is common to ethnographic research. Third, the “reflexive” analysis or the process of making sense of the participants' accounts, involved a circular process of constantly going back to the original text, revising the generated codes, and finding relationships between themes and groups of people, as well as the missing ideas contradictory viewpoints or behaviours.

This study conforms to the principle that preservation of anonymity is crucial in ethnography. The complex and the local area have been given fictitious names and with the exception of the two high-ranked housing developers (the CEO and founding partner of Ara and the former Vice President of Design and Planning at Casas GEO), I have changed and/or omitted the names of all my informants. In most cases, real occupations have been replaced with similar ones. I tried to make these changes in a way that does not affect my interpretation.

2.6 Conclusions

Ethnographic work is a personal and academic journey. It is an empirical task that entails a cultural ‘translation’. This means that it is bound up with the experience of people that we have got to know during the fieldwork as well as being based on our own experiences. In this process of ‘translation’ we construct our own ways of understanding and interpreting people’s experiences and situations that seem contradictory. Our means of validating the data is to engage in a dialogue with our academic ‘baggage’, our participant observation and what people say about themselves. This requires being willing to adapt to people’s lives, as well as adopting the principles of authenticity and ‘reflexivity’ while conducting the research. The use of different research techniques and approaches to establish and maintain a close rapport with the subjects is of crucial importance.

I gained experience as an ethnographer as a result of my role as a researcher and tenant in the *privada*, a subsection of GEO Bosques, where I lived for nine months, and which

then visited several times. Like my neighbours, I experienced the ups and downs of living in a place located on the outskirts of the city of Cuernavaca which suffers serious problems of pollution and accumulated garbage, dumps and conditions of corruption and insecurity which permeate people's lives. However, despite this, I experienced a city that is trying to reinvent itself as 'modern' and prosperous and more inclusive of different social groups.

In this chapter, I have attempted to point out the various challenges that I faced during the course of my fieldwork. The first challenge was how to understand the worlds of my neighbours both within and outside their residential space. Like them, I became both a permanent resident and a weekender. Like many residents I used the house as a place of work and then became a visitor. I also 'reconstructed' important experiences that occurred outside the residential space. A number of factors enabled me to contextualise the lives of the residents and juxtapose their acts and words. These included holding conversations with the property developers and employees of the GEO Company, carrying out participant observation of the everyday routines, possessions and specific interactions people had with GEO employees and conducting several 'visual' surveys of the city.

The second challenge was how to gather the information that was needed to undertake an ethnographic study. As explained in this chapter, I did not follow a structured form of interviewing but let my informants decide about our encounters and guide the content of our conversations. The most important factor was to maintain empathy between my neighbours and myself. My theories of 'class formation' and 'social practices' underpinned the difficult task of ordering, coding and analysing the information.

Finally, I faced the challenge of my position as a researcher at home but in a context that was unknown to me. I believe that my own reflexivity and frank approach to the field enabled me to discover one of the many 'truths' about other people's lives and question my assumptions about who are those close to me, as well as my own identity. I discovered that the "power inequalities" that researchers create while doing research are not so clear cut when exploring the lives of those who share many of our real experiences. It was however this personal experience which allowed me to distance

myself from debates that did not reflect people's experiences as well as to give what I regard as a more accurate account of how life unfolds in GEO-type complexes. I consider ethnography as the best pathway to make visible urban lives and places that have not been documented. This thesis is my dialogue with the people that I came to know as neighbours and informants during the nine months I spent in Cuernavaca. All of them contribute to creating a 'movement' of ideas, beliefs, dreams and practices that are described in the following pages.

3 Chapter Three: Producing lifestyles and the Casas GEO model

“We didn’t understand the American dream.”

Former Vice President of Design and Architecture at Casas GEO

3.1 Introduction

The largest private builder of houses in Mexico is a firm called Corporación GEO, commonly known as Casas GEO, whose CEO and founder Luis Orvañanos has been described in business circles as “a kind of Mexican William Levitt”(Palmeri, 1995:96). Levitt & Sons Company changed the US urban landscape in the 1950s by building modern homes in the suburbs that most Americans could afford. Often displayed in foreign exhibitions, Levitt’s suburban ranch-style home complete with modern appliances, furniture and domestic gadgets, “represented the tangible symbol of the American innovation, a powerful weapon of Cold War propaganda” (May, 1988:145). In 1950 a special number of Time magazine explained the Levittowns as follows:

“Each development project consisted of approximately 17,000 homes to house 82,000 people with integrated parks, swimming pools, schools and churches ... The houses in Levittown, which sell for a uniform price of \$7,900, cannot be mistaken for castles. Each has a sharp-angled roof and a picture window, radiant heating in the floor, 12-by-16 ft. living room, bath, kitchen, two bedrooms on the first floor, and an “expansion attic” which can be converted into two more bedrooms and bath. The kitchen has a refrigerator, stove and Bendix washer; the living room a fireplace and a built-in Admiral television set.” (Time, 1950: 67).

But Levitt’s houses also epitomised the kind of good business practices that changed housing production in the US. Levitt perfected the art of mass-produced houses by dividing the construction process into 22 different stages. The company, or its subsidiaries, produced lumber, mixed and poured concrete and even sold appliances (Larrabee, 1948:80).

Like Levitt & Sons Company in the past, Casas GEO has attracted attention because it is one of the few firms in Mexico committed to building housing for the average Mexican: a GEO house has an average price of USD \$22,000. Like a Levitt house, a GEO house is marketed to fulfil the ‘dreams’ of thousands of families and improve their lives in modern, well-planned houses. As an article in Forbes magazine put it, “when

you've just gotten married and you're living with your grandparents these are like the Palace of Versailles” (Palmeri, 1995: 98). The founder of Casas GEO, Luis Orvañanos, has gone on government tours and held conferences and press interviews to communicate his “social mission”: namely, employing a “concept that has never been used in Mexico before”, a model that not only “seeks to improve low-income housing, but also to dignify it” (McCosh, 2000). Just like William Levitt before him, Orvañanos has also succeeded in revolutionising the production and commercialisation of low-cost houses in Mexico with examples of good business practices. He has recommended a number of reforms in his company, including greater accountability and constant research and quality control, and, in direct response to consumer demand, his firm has been building cheaper houses at a faster rate throughout the country. Mr. Orvañanos claims that Casas GEO is a family team, comprising a firm of architects together with personnel concerned with new technology, marketing strategies and innovation, operating training schemes and ensuring investors’ interests.

The aim of this chapter is to give an explanation of how GEO Bosques was planned and built by the developers by means of a housing production model that challenges conventional ideas about planning social interest housing. The chapter employs the business model of the company (the vertically integrated system) as a guideline to explain how the site was first planned as a blueprint, built and marketed, how the units were sold and how the residents assisted by the post-sales office to get settled. The research considers critically how the Casas GEO business model is not just about the construction of houses but also the production of “social creations” (Jackson, 1985:236); that is, places where people can find new rules and habits and acquire new tastes. More specifically, the objective is to use the house model to create a middle class lifestyle to which people can aspire and which in this thesis is termed ‘the GEO attainable lifestyle.’ The ethnography uncovers how this notion of selling a lifestyle is evident at every phase of the business model, but particularly once the house has been built. Crucially, the Casas GEO business model is designed to ensure that the residents become actively involved with the firm’s business model by acting as co-producers of their living space. I argue that it is by perfecting its practices at different stages of production that Casas GEO is reinventing housing as low-cost but middle-class housing.

3.2 A new form of low-cost housing

Corporación GEO was established as successor to Orvi Construcciones, a medium-sized construction company formed by Luis Orvañanos and Raúl Vilchis (their surnames provide the acronym of the company name). Orvi operated as a non-specialised construction firm, building hospitals, offices and banks, and as a contractor for INFONAVIT and FOVI. From its foundation as Orvi in 1974 and through its reincarnation as GEO in 1984 the firm has produced more than 600,000 houses where over two million Mexican families live (Corporación GEO, 2012c). The relative scale of this achievement is enormous if we consider that in the period 1970 to 1992 INFONAVIT and FOVI produced a little over one million houses whereas Casas GEO, Ara and Homex and a handful of other developers produced about the same number in the four years between 2003 and 2006, (CONAVI, 2010a). The goal of the company is to produce 45,000 units per annum by 2015, to contribute to the government's intention to allocate one million housing mortgages and subsidies by the end of 2012 (Casas GEO, 2012; Corporación GEO, 2012a).³⁸

The data provided by CONAVI indicates GEO is the sector leader in terms of number of houses produced via INFONAVIT and FOVISSSTE mortgages (CONAVI, 2010c). From 2000 to 2009, GEO sold between the 63 and 68 percent of the total number of houses through INFONAVIT mortgages and in 2010 to the figure reached 78 percent. Similarly, the co-funded INFONAVIT-FOVISSSTE programme granted 91 percent of loans to GEO in 2011 (Corporación GEO, 2011:28). The vast majority (82 percent in 2011) of the institutional loans were for economic, traditional low and traditional house types. To reach in further down the income profile, from 2010 the company set up the *GEOfácil* [easyGEO] programme to reach households that do not qualify for an institutional mortgage. Reaching 'downmarket', however, appears not to have adversely affected company revenues, which increased 10.5 percent in 2011 compared with 2010, or the average cost of the houses (Corporación GEO, 2011:27).

³⁸ The Calderón government projections for allocating one million housing mortgages during 2012 (his last government year) considered four different programmes: (i) for finished housing (new, used and for rent), (ii) initial housing (progressive, self-construction and extension) and (iii) house improvements and infrastructure. CONAVI (2010a). *Estadísticas Históricas de Vivienda*. Available: <http://www.conavi.gob.mx/meta-anual-seguimiento-tren-vivienda/vivienda-cifras-estadisticas-vivienda>. Last accessed 3rd July, 2012.

Actual and potential scale is possible because GEO does not operate as a traditional homebuilder. In the past, [from 1972 to 1992] state-sponsored construction was achieved with small and selected contractors employing labour-intensive conventional building techniques. The distribution of housing loans was controlled through coordination mechanisms with trade unions and private-sector companies that subscribed to the institutional funds (INFONAVIT and FOVI). These institutions invested funds in large housing estates that followed modernistic architectural typologies of multi-storey buildings designed, planned and financed by the housing institutions themselves. The concentration of planning and building tasks, and the clientelistic relations that evolved between unions and funding bodies for mortgage allocations, impeded the growth of the housing sector; and the initial goal of providing quality housing to low-income workers was only marginally achieved (García Peralta and Hoffer, 2006:132).

Casas GEO is a corporate firm working in a ‘vertically integrated system’ that includes every aspect of house production from land acquisition, design and construction, mortgage allocation, marketing and sales and delivery to post-sales services. This construction process is divided into more than 60 different stages and involves subsidiaries throughout the country, international financing partners and factories for the assembly of houses and fittings (Corporación GEO, 2010). The vertical- integration approach reduced costs without compromising quality, allowing GEO to provide a new two-storey 750-100 sq.ft. unit for an initial down-payment of USD \$90 and a balance on the deposit of around USD \$3,500 (16 percent of the total value of the house) to be paid on settlement.³⁹

At least according to the former Vice President of Design and Urbanism at Casas GEO, Carlos García-Vélez, growth of the company is also attributed to the ‘quality’ of housing design.⁴⁰ In 1982-1983 García-Vélez embarked on an extensive research

³⁹ Prices at 2007 levels for the sales in the State of Morelos. Average exchange rate for 2007: MXN \$10.94 per USD. Interview with the Sales Manager, GEO Morelos. October 17, 2007. Cuernavaca, Mexico.

⁴⁰ He worked as the Vice President of Design and Urbanism of Casas GEO for 30 years [1975-2005]. Since 2006 he runs a new firm: *Garcíavelez Arquitectos* and patented a new product *Casaflex* (a system of pre-assembled houses in factories). In 2010, in partnership with Bernardo Quintana, president of ICA, he opened the first *Casaflex* factory. Interview with former Vice President of Design and Urbanism at Casa GEO. July 11, 2007. Mexico City, Mexico and information taken from Nuñez (2012). *Carlos García-Vélez* *Arquitectura* *Humanista*. Available:

project to devise a model of low-cost houses that could be more efficiently produced and more attractive to clients. He believed that the modern style of architecture employed in the massive housing estates built by INFONAVIT or FOVI was too rigid, monotonous and spatially depersonalised and that this clashed with the need for security and individuality. Evidence for this view was found in the alterations undertaken by residents, including the installation of cages and storage places, as well as the need for overall house renovations. These serious defects led to a stigma being attached to ‘social interest’ housing estates throughout Mexico.

His first research project was conducted in Egypt with Hassan Fathy, from whom he learnt to apply his ideas of an appropriate technology to create a new model of social housing that could be both cheap and appealing to people. Fathy believed in the value of vernacular building methods and rejected the use of reinforced concrete and red brick that were becoming the standard materials in housing projects in the 1950s. Instead, he insisted on building with handmade bricks produced in the traditional manner from mud, mixed with straw and dried in the sun. He argued that clay was affordable, resistant and more aesthetically pleasing, when used not only for walls but also for roofs in the form of vaults and domes (Mitchell, 2002:184). Fathy’s ideas with regard to vernacular building methods became internationally renowned through his The Villa of New Gourni project and described in his book *Architecture for the poor* (1973). Created as an experiment that was never completed, the project represented a rejection of modernism in architecture and a return to traditional local styles and construction materials.

García-Vélez’s admiration for Fathy motivated a proposal to change the business model of Orvi Construcciones and transform it to Casas GEO. The new firm would also apply García-Vélez’s patent for a model house, *La Morada*, a low-cost unit produced on site with local soil and pre-fabricated materials (García-Vélez, n.d:101). *La Morada* was created in 1984 as a flexible house that could be progressively expanded or transformed from inside by its residents. The use of terracotta colours and wood and sloping roofs also made it aesthetically appealing. While the firm began building projects based on the *La Morada* housing model, García-Vélez continued his research at Harvard

University where, together with a group of architects at the Graduate School of Design and Architecture, he formulated ideas about effective construction and urban planning that could support his product.

In 1987 his research in the US resulted in a second product that was called *GeoMorada* which was “a modular system of construction that made it possible to maximize the number of two-level townhouses in a determined area” (García-Vélez, n.d:7). The *GeoMorada* incorporated more technology than the original version. The house mainly comprised a set of pre-assembled parts. The new house parts were designed to be lighter in weight, the roof, internal walls and floors made of sheet steel and cement separated by Styrofoam, and designed for rapid shipment and assembly. In the new version the house fronts are made of hollow block with aesthetic features comprising adobe and tiled plastic roofs or a light ceramic.⁴¹ Having pre-assembled parts allowed the firm to build a unit in approximately 12 weeks by assembling pairs of houses that rapidly form blocks of six, ten or 12 units (Corporación GEO, 2012a). The *GeoMorada*, moreover, was organised in a micro-cell layout connected to a town pattern called *Centros de Barrio*. This meant that the houses were arranged in groups called *privadas* or *clusters* that were connected by street grids, footpaths and common areas leading to the main community plaza, which included an elevated water tank or solar panel and served to give the site its social identification and sense of a community (García-Vélez, n.d:7) (See photo 6). The *GeoMorada* was planned to work as a town in itself with schools, clinics, a market or commercial areas as the main amenities, needing to be built in cooperation with the local government according to the needs of the inhabitants.

The architectural solution proposed by GEO was a twin house model. Broadly, each house comes with a living room and small open kitchen downstairs and two bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs, a patio at the back and space for a front garden or parking lot. The houses can be extended with an extra room. Although units look almost exactly the same, potential buyers can choose between five or six different styles. The ousetype Canario [Canary], Colibrí [Hummingbird], Quetzal [Quetzal] or Flamingo [Pink Flamenco] for instance, have different floor plans - most have a front door facing the

⁴¹ My observation on site and personal communication with Casas GEO personal in 2007 and 2008, 2010 in the State of Morelos.

street but some have the main entrance facing the side of the house - different dimensions of construction and the potential for adding an extension.⁴² For an extra cost, the houses can include some “plus” elements such as ceramic tiled flooring, wooden doors or luxury bathroom fittings and they can be located in front of a swimming pool which is a feature of some subsection plans. In some cases, complexes are landscaped; subsections are designed to have a club house and swimming pool; all the utilities will be connected; and there are either concrete or paved roads. According to the specifications, complexes will be zoned as a *conjunto urbano* [urban complex], meaning that the project will include commercial areas, schools, churches and a community or sports centre (Periódico Oficial del Estado de Morelos, 2001). GEO promises that a project will be finished in approximately nine months. With names like Valle de los Sauces [Willow Valley], Campo Verde [Green Field] and Senderos del Lago [Lake Paths], located in Pueblo Viejo, Temixco, or Tlatizapán de Zapata, the name of GEO complexes implies fulfilment of a suburban dream.

⁴² Housing is sold by economic segments calculated in TMMW (times minimal monthly wages). The Canario corresponds to the economic market segment (<1.99 a 3.99 TMMW); Colibrí to the traditional low (>4.00 TMMW); Quetzal to the traditional (<6.99 TMMW) and Flamingo to the residential (11.00+ TMMW) (Casas GEO, 2008:6-13).

This photo shows the archetipycal planning of GEO, including the clusters of houses connected by street grids, footpaths and common areas leading to a town pattern, has been removed for copyright reasons.

Photo 6. *La Morada* planned on paper and as built at different sites.
Source: Carlos García-Vélez, 2007.

The first projects comprised no more than one thousand units and were built close to urban centres. But García-Vélez argued that numerous factors had led GEO to adopt a 'massification' policy which involved accumulating land banks. The firm started its 'industrialisation' policy in 1994 when, during the economic crisis, it was able to secure the building mortgages that smaller homebuilders were unable to obtain. In the same year it went public through an IPO (Initial Public Offering) and became the first housing company in Mexico to be listed on the nation's stock exchange and one of the few in Latibex (Market For Latin-American Stocks in Euros). From that point on GEO steadily expanded, extending its geographical reach, increasing its targeted market and diversifying its products. Since 2009, the firm is regarded by the Mexican Stock Market as having of the best corporate governance practices (Corporación GEO, 2010). A combination of a continued support from the federal governmental, GEO's accumulated financial revenues and land under the scheme of outsourcing and joint ventures with foreign enterprises (eg. Prudential Investment Management, Citibank Group, Banorte Solida) have helped GEO to be the leading developer in Latin America (Corporación GEO, 2011a, 2011b).

Casas GEO is governed on the basis of a corporate governance system. As a public company listed on the Mexican Mexican Stock Exchange (BMV) and Madrid's Latin American Euro Securities Market (Latibex) its programmes, goals and financial performance are constantly monitored. The administration is formed by a board of 16 Directors/owners from which seven are independent and the company's corporate practices are audited by an independent group. In addition, there is a Finance Committee, an Ethics Committee, Steering Committee, Planning Committee and a Sustainability Committee which evaluate the course of the actions taken in the various aspects of the firm. At present the firm operates through six regional offices that coordinate the work of 22 local offices called subsidiaries located in different states of the country. Tiendas GEO [GEO sales centres], Alpha [factories of houses], Equipa-T and K-BE [company that designs and sells furniture and home accessories] and GEO Importex [imports for the Alpha and K-BE] are subsidiaries that also form part of the GEO corporate system (Corporación GEO, 2011b). See Appendix 3 for the firm's organisation chart.

Through its regionalisation, the company offers house typologies according to climate conditions, topography and local tastes. The recent agreement with the IFC (International Finance Corporation), a member of the World Bank, is set to allow GEO to increase the number of Alpha factories to build houses faster and with a better quality control (Corporación GEO, 2012a). By the end of 2011, GEO reported a workforce of more than 10,000 administrative staff and over 4,000 architects, engineers and construction workers on its building sites (Corporación GEO, 2011b:32). This workforce responded to the company's new strategic project GEO+más [GEO+more] started in 2010 "in 3 housing developments increasing the size of 73,517 housing units" (Corporación GEO, 2010:21). The size of these sites responded to the President Calderón city building policy initiative. The growth of the company has been precisely for keeping their target in the low-cost housing market. Table 1 shows how in spite of the inflation in Mexico (50 percent from 2000 to 2011), (BANXICO, 2012b) the company's average price sales have been relatively maintained (between MXN \$260,000 and \$360,000).

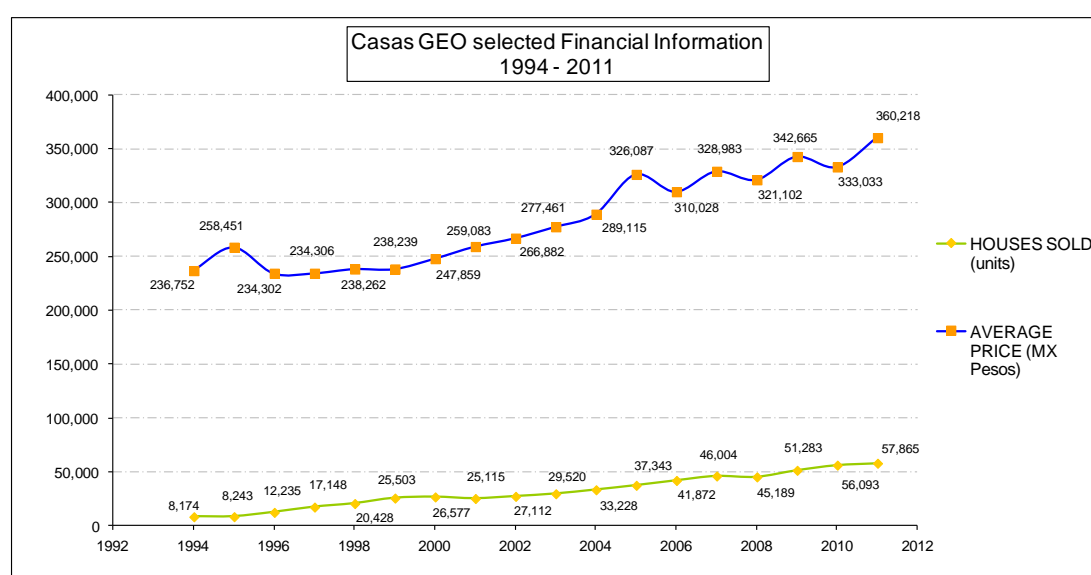


Tabla 1. Casas GEO average units sold and price. 1994-2011

Source: Corporación GEO. (2006a), (2008b), (2011c). Author's elaboration

3.3 GEO and its competitors: the IH participants

Casas GEO forms part of the IH (Hábita Index) on the Mexican Stock Exchange (*Bolsa Mexicana de Valores*, BMV) that is made up of five publicly-traded housing developers (Consortio Ara, Desarrolladora Homex, Sare Holdings, Urbi and Consortio Hogar). Together, the IH accounts for 22 percent of the total volume of affordable housing market in Mexico with the remainder provided by several small and medium-sized builders that mostly work on a local level (CONAVI, 2011:8).⁴³ Nevertheless, at the end of 2011, the sales volume of these six companies represented the 1.4 percent of GDP (CIDOC and SHF: 2011:34). Table 2 summarises a comparison of GEO and its competitors in terms of sales, land reserve and shares in the Stock Exchange Market.

In terms of the sales, GEO, Homex and Urbi have been the leading companies since 2009. In 2011, GEO alone allocated more than one-third or almost 15,000 units, followed by Homex with 12,574 and Urbi with around 9,000 (see table 2). The change to the national housing model initiated by President Calderón via the DUIS programme, with a shift towards vertical housing from 2011 seemed to have benefited the publicly traded companies, at least in the short and medium term (BBVA, 2012:18). The advantage of the IH participants relies in the liquidity generated in the BMV that has helped to cope with the short-term demand for building a new housing scheme under strict building regulations and more requirements (eg. increase in the number of units per site, building with mix-use, schools, medical services, commercial services, connectivity to transport, community centres) (Topelson, 2011).

In terms of land reserves, table 3 indicates that Homex holds the largest land bank, 8,020 hectares, followed by GEO (7,167 hectares). Together Ara, GEO, Homex and Urbi possess 90 percent of the territorial reserves held by IH participants (CIDOC-SHF, 2011:34). However, there are doubts regarding the current value of the land banks. The orientation to vertical construction has pushed developers to look for a better-located land. The two most recognised housing reports produced by the government (SHF) and

⁴³ In 2011, INFONAVIT reported 1,304 housing developers authorised to build houses via the governmental subsidy programme (CONAVI, 2011:8).

by the private sector (BBVA research centre) coincided on the need to generate information about the land reserves. At present, commercial confidentiality makes it impossible to work out the location of the land and its value. However, through the recent participation of the Hábita Index in the IFRS (International Level in Real Estate Accounting) since 2012, the big six developers are seeking to adopt international standards that could help to calculate precise figures about the valuation of the land reserve and the requisites to urbanise it (BBVA, 2012: 18-19).

Company *	Main characteristics
Ara	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Shows a stable growth in recent years (at low rates) and a surplus of land reserve. - The main projects “Crystal Lagoons” developments represent a key strategy to the business medium-term growth. - Long-term plan to position itself in vertical housing projects for the low-income segment.
Homex	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focused on an income segment slightly higher than GEO and Urbi. - It has made important investments in land reserves as well as in entering new markets (Brazil) and other businesses (building penitentiaries). - The company is working with medium/long term horizon but it still requires investment in working capital to operate with subsidy programmes (granted to economic and social housing).
GEO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Well-positioned in the lowest income segment. More than ½ of its sales are concentrated in houses of MXN \$300,000. - It is the highest beneficiary of the subsidy programmes (90% solely by INFONAVIT). - It has developed a construction model adapted to the new model: vertical buildings with technology that allows for accelerated construction. - Good land reserves bought in association with investment funds. - Relatively high indebtedness levels.
Sare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It is facing a restructuring process based on selling land reserve as a strategy for lowering indebtedness. - Financial restrictions have made it difficult to move from low-income to medium segments. - Needs liquidity to expand its operations.
Urbi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Well-positioned in the non-affiliated segment (Urbi Alternative) - Good commercial strategy for attending this segment (savings and rental programmes with an option for purchase). - It has ample reserves (the most important in terms of value) with a possibility for marketing reserves with high margins. - The company has a long-term growth strategy to generating a future free cash-flow.

* Given that Hogar has accumulated negative returns and the highest debt since 2008, there is not much specific data to draw comparisons with the rest HI members.

Table 2. Comparative table. Casas GEO and its competitors
Source: BBVA, 2012, CIDOC-SHF, 2011. Author's elaboration.

Lastly, the companies' performance on the Mexican Stock Market is essential to generate sufficient funds to operate the business model. The Hábita Index has been hit since 2008, with the price of shares contracting by 27 percent and only showing signs of a slow financial recovery from 2012 (BBVA, 2012:21). The data show with widely different company performances across a range of financial criteria in recent years. In terms of annual net income, for example, the 2011 data show that Urbi recorded the highest "return on equity" (4.2 percent) while Hogar presented negative numbers. In terms of leverage, Ara and GEO had a debt-to-capital proportion below the average (1.7 times) while Hogar had the highest debt (2.6 times leverage). Ara reached a hard drop in 2008 and retrenched to such an extent that it had managed to recover three years later. In 2011 the company had the lowest financial burden (40 percent) and the highest utility rate (12.7 percent) (BBVA: 2012:17). This achievement contrasted with the relatively high financial leverage (60-70 percent) and a poor utility (6-8 percent) of Homex, Sare, Urbi and Hogar (Beteta, 2011). While Ara, overall, outperformed most of the other five companies, in terms of liquidity to pay debt (in money, mortgages, goods or services), the index revealed Urbi as having the highest liquidity (53.0 percent), followed by GEO. Overall, GEO is well positioned, both due to the capacity to access various financing sources to buy land and to develop technology for building, as well as for the high share of the mortgages granted by INFONAVIT and FOVISSSTE (BBVA, 2012:17-18).

House Developer	Registered Units. 2nd semester 2011	Land Reserve (thousands of hectares)
GEO	14,724 5.14%	7,167
Homex	12,574 29.95%	8,020
Urbi	8,932 21.26%	5,690
Ara	4,387 10.44%	4,490
Sare	837 1.91%	862
Hogar *	477 1.13%	726
Total	41,952 100.00%	26,915

* Data updated to first semester of 2011. The territorial reserves are approximations.

**Table 3. IH participants. Housing units
And Land Reserves. 2011**
Source: CIDOC-SHF, 2011. Author's elaboration.

3.4 The diversity of housing complexes in Mexico

According to Pérez, Cervantes and Carrillo (2005) the exponential growth of the housing complexes began in the state of Mexico. More than 85,000 housing units were built between 1993 and 2002 in the municipalities of Atlacomulco, Chicoloapan, Huecotecca and Tultitán, that border the metropolitan area of Mexico City. The municipality of Ixtapaluca appeared as the paradigmatic case of the new housing production. Between 1990 and 2000 Ixtapaluca increased its growth rate from 5.6 to 11.6 percent (Castillo, 2007; Pérez, Cervantes and Carrillo, 2005:37). From about 2000 onwards, this new form of urban growth spread throughout the country: in the states of Hidalgo, Morelos, Puebla and Querétaro, where existing urban connectivity facilitated the daily commuting to Mexico City and in the north in the states of Baja California, Chihuahua and Sinaloa (especially municipalities of Tijuana, Rosarito Ciudad Juárez and Culiacán) where the *maquiladora* [in-bond plants] sector was concentrated (Alegría, 2006). Developments were extended quickly and at scale to the Bajío region [lowlands] of Central Mexico: the states of Guanajuato, Aguascalientes, Jalisco and Michoacán and to the north in Zacatecas. Expansion to the south, however, was far slower and the housing model only took off in 2008 when more housing loans were targeted to lower income segments (Corporación GEO 2012d; Homex, 2011; Sare 2010; Urbi, 2010).

By the mid 2000s, the new housing model seemed relatively ubiquitous across Mexico.⁴⁴ This sense of blanket coverage was aided by the monotonous design of units set out in relatively high density sites. The only visible difference between sites built up to 2000 were the colours of the houses that worked as the ‘seal’ of the company: the red roofs and terracotta brick houses of GEO, the pale blue houses of Ara, the colourless facades with black window frames of Urbi. As the model extended nationally, new

⁴⁴ Within regions GEO targeted complexes to urban corridors that connect small and medium sized cities with centres of employment such as Villagrán-Celaya in central Mexico and Villahermosa-Cárdenas-Palenque.

projects began to emerge with regional specificities such as two or three house types and contrasting colours (orange, yellow, navy blue) in the same clusters of houses.

Doubtless, one of the main features of the new breed of low-cost housing has been the names of the sites that clearly express a symbolic social mobility. Opposed to the popular settlements that hold names of Mexican heroes, national days, ex-presidents or urban social movements; the new complexes have names that suggest suburban life in valleys, vast gardens and elite residential areas. In this sense, the complexes express a similar recent phenomenon of the foreign names given to newborn children and to the recently opened private schools documented by De la Calle and Rubio (2010). The CONAVI website provides some hints of preferred names - Cañandas del Lago Real [Royal Lake Ravine] in Costitlan and Real del Cid [Royal Cid] in Guanajuato [Central Mexico]. Senda Real: Castilla, Rioja y Baena [Royal Lane] in Tijuana and Terranova Residencial La Castilla [Newfoundland Residential] in Juárez and Monte Bello Residencial [Beautiful Hill] in Chiapas de Corzo [Southern Mexico].

This same pattern is seen in the typologies of houses offered by developers. While CONAVI (2011) established five house types (economic, popular, social traditional, medium and residential) that are linked to socioeconomic segments (from low to middle-upper income); developers mask these labels to avoid any possible allusion to a 'cheap' or low quality housing. Instead, names refer to birds, flowers, trees and stars or galaxies as signs of distinction (see table 4). But the names also work as balancing the differences of socioeconomic segments. A glance at Andrómeda [Adromeda Galaxy] (residential) model reveals no apparent difference with a Cometa [Star] (economic) model. It is the built space or the amenities included that make a see sharp difference in terms of the price, size and quality of the property. Likewise, apart from the size, the differentiation between an economic and a popular house type are the location and the amenities provided. The Homex' economic Olivo [Palm Oil] prototype is built in a corner which gives a sense of more space. Apart from the size, the 'plus' between the Sare's Sol [Sun] (popular) and the Orión [Orion Belt] (traditional) housetype is of having a front garden. In the case of GEO, the advantage of the Canario [Canary] economic housetype is the access to common swimming pool built within the cluster of houses.

CONAVI house types compared with the developers' house types					
CONAVI House types (minimum sq.m)	Ara State of Mexico	Homex Puebla	GEO Morelos	Sare Guanajuato	Urbi Baja California
Economic (30 sq.m)	Gladiolus	Margarite	Canary	Star	Maple
Popular (42.5 sq.m)	Cypress	Palm Oil	Colibri	Sun	Jasminea
Traditional (62.5 sq.m)	Plum Tree (Crystal Lagoons)	Olive	Pink Flamenco	Orion Belt	Magnolia
Residential (91 sq.m)	Rainforest (Crystal Lagoons)	--	Cardinal	Amdromeda Galaxy	--

Table 4. Comparative table CONAVI and the IH participants' house types

Source: Consorcio Ara, 2006; Homex, 2011; Casas GEO Morelos, 2008; Sare, 2010; Urbi, 2013.
Author's elaboration

The number of sites, location and typologies of houses make it difficult to present a national panorama of the new urban forms. But the state of Morelos, where this research takes place, gives a hint of the great variety and evolution of the new architectural form in Mexico. Between 2000 and 2007, the government of Morelos authorised 33 construction permits. The broad distribution of the sites shows a concentration in the municipalities located near the centre of the state. Mostly these are in the municipalities of Emiliano Zapata and Xochitepec, where *ejido* land is still available but the connectivity to the main urban centres – Cuernavaca and Cuautla - is possible through two highways (Mexico-Cuernavaca and Cuautla-Puebla).

A brief look at the characteristics of the complexes in Morelos shows a mixture of older (those built before 2000) and new house typologies (after 2000) (see photo 7). The majority of earlier complexes can be distinguished by differences of service provision and quality. GEO Acopala, for instance, the first urban complex (1,400 housing units) built by GEO in the state (1993-1994, just one year after Article 27 was amended) includes a market, a public primary school, a medical clinic and a church built by the government and that are shared with the residents of the adjacent informal *colonias*, collectively known as Acolapa. There are no entrance gates that define the boundaries of the site. Other complexes such as Residencial Ahuatlán built in the late 1990s have a commercial area just outside the complex. As opposed to Acolapa, the commercial area

gives the impression of being built by the developer. It is fully served by the private economy with restaurants, banks, mini-supermarkets, a gym, church, private schools and kindergarten. Others like Bosques, finished in 2000, were built without entrance gates as well as education, health and transportation services (public or private). Although some of the services (eg. eateries, car garages, laundry, taxis) are provided by the residents of the neighbouring informal *colonia* – including businesses run out of the ground floor of their houses - there is a distinction between what is GEO, hence a formal urban complex, and an informal *colonia*.

The sites built from the mid 2000 onwards typically include an Oxxo mini-supermarket, management housing companies, taxi cooperatives and churches built with contributions of the worshipers. Larger in size, some of these complexes were authorised and built by sections (eg. Royal Lake I, II and II). In this case, the last subsections are at the front of the complex, while the older sections are located in the middle and back of the site. The trend in Morelos is for the larger sites to offer more variety of house typologies to different socio-economic segments. However, these models are separated from each other in gated clusters. This is the case of Residencial El Campanario [Bell Tower Residential], in the municipality of Jiutepec, which includes residential, medium, traditional and economic housing, but each separate from the other.

Finally, it is worth drawing attention to two types of urban complexes in Morelos. The first is the ‘weekender’ house.⁴⁵ From both personal observation and my talks with GEO staff there seemed to be a pattern with the sites furthest away from Cuernavaca and Cuautla more likely to include the weekend house type. Importantly, this model, which includes swimming pools, gardens and club houses, is not considered to be residential or high market segment. Economic house types can be located in a cluster of houses that share a swimming pool. The second is residential sites for high market clientele. Built by the developers such as Ara and Sare the Residencial Paraíso Country Club, [Paradise Residential Country Club] built in 167 hectares is totally gated, includes vertical and horizontal housing, a golf club, tennis courts, artificial lagoons and a hotel. Similar vertical projects such as Altitude: Habitat and Resort [original names are in

⁴⁵ The weekend model is also found in the states of Veracruz, Guerrero, Tamaulipas and Campeche.

English] built by Sare and the Kloster Sumiya offer elite services. In these cases, people have to pay for the access roads [*carreteras*] that were built by the developers to reach the sites.



Photo 7. The diversity of urban complexes in the State of Morelos
Source: Cristina Inclán-Valadez

3.5 Improving the GEO business model

When GEO Bosques was planned in 2000, the idea of Morada existed only on paper. Housing projects throughout the country were provided with basic infrastructure but often lacked zoned space and planning for education, health, transport and job centres. The houses built within the GEO block and in a single typology began to seem monotonous and cramped. The projects were also getting ever larger, some with as many as 8,000 housing units, and every year they were built farther away from the urban centres, causing problems for the residents and rapidly turning the estates into dormitory towns with as many as three quarters of residents commuting every day for work, schools and leisure (Carrillo, 2005; Maya, 2005; Esquivel, 2006: 99). In the view of García-Vélez, the pressure of the financial markets for profits and the structure of land markets in Mexico were factors that pushed GEO to sacrifice the integral aspects of *GeoMorada*. The federal policy of building larger sites with very low regional governance, he added, also contributed to intensify some of the problems it set out to solve.⁴⁶

In the state of Morelos, the history of its subsidiary, GEO Morelos, had not been auspicious. The company had been accused of negligence and a breach of regulations, and in 2000 the local government suspended its construction licences because of serious irregularities in the construction of the Rinconada Acolapa complex. The Ministry of Health found that the drains in at least 600 units were polluted and detected the presence of hepatitis, typhoid and skin problems in nearly 100 families. Moreover, the complex had been built over the boundary of two municipalities, adding to procedural irregularity and requiring time and expense to negotiate a solution (La Unión de Morelos, 2011). The construction licence was renewed after a few months but GEO Morelos had to cover the cost of supplying water, electricity and garbage collection services for several years. This requirement prevented the company from carrying on

⁴⁶ Interview with former Vice President of Design and Urbanism, Casa GEO. July 11, 2007. Mexico City.

with the construction of subsequent projects.⁴⁷ Moreover, in Morelos and elsewhere these problems threatened Casas GEO with a reputation for building low-quality houses (Maya 2005). In view of this, in 2000, Casas GEO began a restructuring process with the main objective of building estates of a better quality and regaining the trust of its potential clients.⁴⁸

The company annual report in 2006 outlined how since 2000 the company had introduced a concept of ‘total quality’ that included a huge investment in three areas of the company (Corporación GEO, 2006). This involved new research to improve the quality of the *GeoMorada* and to allow the company to diversify its products. Subsequently, GEO introduced new technology and quality control systems, greater use of site surveys to find out the main drawbacks and the nature of people’s needs and a strong emphasis on marketing and commercialisation. GEO Bosques was a deliberate attempt to raise planning and design quality. The ‘improved’ *GeoMorada* model in Bosques involved a better supply of public facilities and many more common areas, including a swimming pool for specific clusters of houses, a football ground and space for a shopping area. A water supply system and two residual water plants were to insure against drainage pollution. With the exception of the football facilities everything was to be built by GEO and in advance of occupation. By adopting this approach, GEO Bosques was to become what the Chief Architect at GEO Morelos described as “an experiment” for renewing the company brand in the state of Morelos.⁴⁹

As part of the “experiment” Bosques was to be a completely enclosed housing complex consisting of different housing clusters themselves divided from each other by gates and connected by a street grid and large footpaths. The plan that I was given by GEO Morelos and which was also used for the “INFONAVIT National Housing Award, 2002” competition showed identical rows or blocks of houses. Each row provided from four to ten housing units (Ayuntamiento de Cuernavaca, 2002). Most of the houses were designed to have a front garden connecting with the common open areas. There were other innovations in the plan, such as the inclusion of two house prototypes: a two-

⁴⁷ Interview with the Chief Architect at GEO Morelos. July 23, 2007. Cuernavaca, Mexico.

⁴⁸ The competition for external capital pushed GEO to target a slightly higher-class clientele with new products. Casa GEO’s closest competitors, Ara and Sare, were also now listed on the Mexican Stock Exchange and were covering regions where GEO was absent (Consorcio Ara, 2006).

⁴⁹ Interview with Chief Architect at GEO Morelos. July 23, 2007. Cuernavaca, Mexico.

bedroom 55 sq. m (34 sq. m ground floor and 21 sq. m upper floor) “progressive classic *morada*” construction with a possible growth of 10 sq. m and a three-bedroom 65 sq.m. (34 sq. m ground floor and 31 sq. m upper floor) “extended classic *morada*” construction [referred to by GEO staff and residents as “plus” built to the same 39 sq. m floor plan. (See image 2 for the house plans at GEO Bosques).

The configuration of the space was simple. On the ground floor a living/dining room organise the space. From this room people have access to a semi open kitchen and to a bedroom. In addition there is a patio that can be accessed through the kitchen but there is no downstairs toilet probably due to cost reductions. The upper floor of the “progressive classic *morada*” included two bedrooms and a full bathroom: one bedroom facing the street and a vestibule that could serve as small bedroom or as a TV room. At the back of the house there was an empty space for potential house extension. The “Plus” was a completed version of the progressive house. The house was equipped with a toilet on the ground floor and two identical bedrooms on the upper floor, one facing the street and one overlooking the patio. In between, there was the same rectangular vestibule; and to the left or right there was a complete bathroom. The two models integrated García-Vélez’s proposal of “housing as a process” by allowing for addition of rooms.

In general, both the house plans and the master plan of GEO Bosques were very similar to those designed in other sites, but to a non-architect like me the overall project seemed better planned. The houses looked less cramped than in previous developments and there were larger common areas with connecting footpaths among the different clusters of houses. The commercial spaces/amenities were located in the middle of the developments to provide easier access for all residents, and the elevated water tank and the main common plaza were at the main entrance; the size of the complex was much smaller in terms of the number of projected houses, the difference being the larger proportion of common areas. Finally, the main access to the complex was planned to lead to a wide boulevard belonging to the residential neighbourhood of Las Palmas, a higher-income semi-gated condominium.

*This image, which details the house plans for the studied site,
has been removed for copyright reasons.*

Image 2. House plans for GEO Bosques (progressive and extended *morada*)
Source: Casas GEO Morelos, 2002.

The principal innovation (and probably the most attractive feature) of GEO Bosques was the design of a “Plus Area” or a subsection of 100 houses that represented a shift of the company towards a better and more profitable housing model. The “Plus Area” (known here as *Privada Colorín* or *privada*) was planned specifically to attract a weekend clientele by offering leisure facilities such as a swimming pool, a clubhouse and three different common areas. The houses were supposed to have a front garden and the dwellings were exclusively planned as an “extended classic *morada*” or “plus” three-bedroom houses that could be personalised by the client with particular finishes. The proposed facilities exceeded what was stipulated as necessary by the *Reglamento de Fraccionamientos, Condominios y Conjuntos Urbanos del Municipio de Cuernavaca* (By-law of Residential Areas, Condominiums and Urban Complexes of the Municipality of Cuernavaca) (Periódico Oficial del Estado de Morelos 4149, 2001).

The smaller size of the complex, the amount of green areas and the “Plus Area” were all signs of the company’s interest in improving quality and ensuring security, exclusivity and leisure.⁵⁰ However, the master plan of Bosques was adjusted before and during the sales process at least three times. According to the main architect involved in the construction, the changes were, in part, a response to the uneven topography that included a stream and a number of fruit trees that had to be looked after.⁵¹ In the end, the master plan of Bosques omitted many of the innovations that had initially been included. Amongst these were the gates to each of the clusters and the commercial area (the five locales were put up for sale). The recreational area was scattered around the complex and included walking paths, one garden surrounding the elevated water tank and two small playgrounds for children.

Probably the most radical change in the plan was the decision to provide access to Bosques. At first, it was decided that the road should go through the residential neighbourhood of Las Palmas. However, the route was changed to run through a set of narrow streets of an unplanned settlement. Instead of Las Palmas, arrival at Bosques came to be by way of Las Minas, an area containing warehouses, an illegal open rubbish dump and motels for long-distance bus drivers. Regarding the “Plus Area”, the projected clubhouse and the swimming pool were left out of the final project and as the master plan shows there were no football and basketball pitches, but instead an empty plot indicating a potential “area for urban infrastructure”. This land corresponded to the ten percent of the donated land stipulated by the By-law of Territorial Ordinances and Human Settlements in the state of Morelos (Periódico Oficial del Estado de Morelos Tierra y Libertad 4071, 2000).

Despite these amendments, Bosques was a radically improved version of the sites built in earlier years in the state of Morelos. For instance, the idea of offering two types of houses was a real innovation, as well as the provision of common areas throughout the complex. The lay out of the “Plus Area” gives a visual glance of a would-be gated

⁵⁰ GEO Bosques was built on a 94,430 s.q.m terrain. 46.9 percent (31,438.18 s.q.m) corresponded to houses; 33.9 percent (22, 707.52 s.q.m) to green areas and 19.3 percent (12, 913.63 s.q.m) to parking spaces and streets.

⁵¹ Interview with former GEO Bosques’ Project Manager at GEO Morelos. October 20, 2007.

community, with a wide entrance in the middle leading to a semi-circular cluster and green areas spread among the different blocks of houses. Compared with subsequent master plans, where thousands of identical dwellings had to be differentiated using numbers, letters and colours, the comparatively small size of GEO Bosques made it easy to identify particular houses within the complex.

3.5.1 The role of the local government

The planning of GEO Bosques did not take place in a vacuum. Decisions on urban development are principally a matter for the municipal authorities. The government is responsible for allocating mortgages, control the land acquisition, granting construction permits and drawing and directing the development plans (Periódico Oficial del Estado de Morelos Tierra y Libertad 4071, 2000). In principle, local governance could be a positive contribution to planned urban development, but the role of providing services and planning is beyond the capacity of the majority of municipalities. Guarneros-Meza (2010) argued that decentralisation has incorporated new actors and programmes, but “the reverse side of the coin has been the erosion of the power and legitimacy of local politicians” (Ibid:122).

As elsewhere in Mexico, the housing growth in the state of Morelos has been so rapid, that the local authorities have had no time to form a common view particularly with the federal institutions on the most important issues to address. One of the main limitations of the municipal governments is that the term in office is three years. Moreover their capacity to implement the federal planning guidelines or programmes is limited by the availability of economic and human resources. In many cases, the municipalities lack an updated municipal development plan as stipulated by the By-law of Territorial Ordinances and Human Settlements (Periódico Oficial del Estado de Morelos Tierra y Libertad 4071, 2000). There are other cases where planning laws are updated but evaded. The Rinconada Acolapa case exemplified how GEO avoided the existing territorial ordinances by building over the boundary of two municipalities. The main problem is that there are no legal mechanisms to guarantee the use of ordinances.

The limitations of the local institutional frameworks are reflected in the unequal growth between housing construction and the provision of urban services. A SEDESOL (2011)

report on the expansion of Mexican cities between 1980 and 2010 (cited in BBVA, 2012:41-42) shows how municipalities that in 2005 had populations in the range of 50,000 to 100,000 inhabitants, within five years saw their size multiply several times, without having sufficient infrastructure to cope with the growth or the budget to provide the required services. Housing institutions are increasingly recognising that the municipal government often provide the required infrastructure once the housing project have already been built, when what would be reasonable would be to do so beforehand. The INFONAVIT Financial Plan 2012-2016 reveals that, on average, municipalities undertake around the 19 percent of investment in infrastructure and services that are required to serve actually constructed housing projects. The report also specifies that the municipal budget is not being increased in the same proportion as their population growth (INFONAVIT, 2012).

On matters of planning regulations, the officer who was authorised to grant licences for housing construction in the municipality of Cuernavaca commented in 2007 on the urgency of drawing up an entirely new law for large-scale projects.⁵² The officer argued that the problem was that projects with perhaps 8,000 units built in municipalities at the edge of cities were treated in the same way as small weekend condominiums built in urban areas requiring limited public infrastructure. The deficiencies in planning regulations allowed homebuilders to negotiate with the local authority about the nature of the projects and many municipal officials, particularly in the small municipalities, were driven by the pursuit of profit and, as a result, many of them were willing to accept conditions set out by the developers. Large companies such as Casas GEO or ARA were able to offer officials the provision of roads, sewage plants, electricity systems and schools that the local governments were simply incapable of providing. As a result, the local authorities realised that whatever large developers offered would be better than what could be built with public funds. The planning of Bosques in one of the poorest areas of Cuernavaca was therefore welcomed by the municipality.⁵³

In terms of the purchase of *ejido* land, taking advantage of the legal reforms initiated in

⁵² Interview with the Director of *Fraccionamientos*, Condominiums and Urban Complexes Office. Ministry of Urban Development and Housing. Municipality of Cuernavaca. August 21, 2007. Cuernavaca, Mexico.

⁵³ On most matters the municipalities and Casas GEO are never very far apart. The municipality of Cuernavaca especially regards GEO as a partner to make the city accessible to the middle class.

the early 1990s, large firms such as Casas GEO gained experience of negotiating the purchase of land from *ejidatarios* without becoming involved in political conflict. Interviews with the Chief Architect at GEO Morelos confirmed their experience at acquiring land from *ejidatarios*, negotiating the cost of the land and agreeing the conditions for the sale.⁵⁴ Each of the 20 Casas GEO regional offices has a Land Reserve Division consisting of a team of lawyers and policymakers in charge of the land acquisition process. The leader of the CANADEVI (National Chamber of Industry and Promotion of Housing Development) and ex-director of GEO Morelos added that the company had a reputation for having one of the best teams working in the Land Reserve Division.⁵⁵ There is a strong incentive for this effort. As the leader of CANADEVI added, on average land in Morelos costs 20 percent more than in the neighbouring state of Puebla:

“We [homebuilders] have to pay not less than MXN \$150 (USD \$14) per sq.m.; a very high price for land that is difficult to reach and lacking in basic services. We have to build roads and highways, electricity generators and drainage systems, and also treat the polluted water, build football grounds ... everything ... only because of the symbolic value of buying Zapata’s land. In the end, the cost of the land rises to MXN \$250 or \$300 per sq.m. (USD\$23 to \$28) and the negotiations can take a year.” [Leader of the CANADEVI in the State of Morelos. May 18, 2007. Cuernavaca, Mexico].

The symbolic value of the land in the State of Morelos and the need for lengthy negotiations for the land acquisition were explained by the GEO Morelos Chief Architect by means of an example of the purchase of one of the many *ejidos* in the state of Morelos called Emiliano Zapata.⁵⁶ Its purchase was regarded as one of the most difficult negotiations undertaken by the company. The *ejido* was owned by a cooperative of more than 80 *ejidatarios*, many of whom were families of peasants who claimed their ancestors had taken part in the Revolution. Land acquisition lasted more than 18 months during which time the GEO team carried out several negotiations. It had to deal with the refusal of some *ejidatarios* to sell the land (particularly to Casas GEO) and the refusal of some to accept the agreed price. The final sale agreement was conditional on an additional pay-off in favour of the *ejidatarios* that included adding a

⁵⁴ Interview with the Chief Architect at GEO Morelos. August 14, 2007. Cuernavaca, Mexico.

⁵⁵ Interview with the Leader of the CANADEVI in the state of Morelos. May 18, 2007. Cuernavaca, Mexico.

⁵⁶ Interview with the Chief Architect at GEO Morelos. August 14, 2007. Cuernavaca, Mexico.

dozen *micros* (mini buses) and taxis, digging a water well for the community and building an auditorium. This extra ‘payment’ was also negotiated with the municipal government. After the conditions for the sale had been established, the *ejidatarios* demanded another ‘payment’ and invaded the access roads and symbolically took possession of the land stopping initial construction work. The problem continued throughout the period of construction. The project had to be adjusted and part of the land was given back.

In 2008 GEO had to conform to construction ordinances laid down in the CONAVI Code for House Building (CONAVI, 2011). The new code of construction set out the requirements for building ‘habitable spaces’, which meant there were precise specifications with regard to density, housing typology, design (size, construction), urban facilities and studies of the environmental impact. The amendments of Housing Law (article 73) in 2009 conferred to State Housing Agencies (OREVIS) the control over the purchase of *ejido* land. Linked to the DUIS policy, the new Housing Law also required nine public institutions to intervene in the provisioning of the amenities and services needed in municipalities that can be transformed into high density urban centres in a matter of months. The law includes technical assistance for municipal management from the part of federal institutions (INFONAVIT, CONAVI and SHF) for effective management, financial and GIS skills. It is too soon to know whether the new federal planning and housing laws will resolve the problems that large scale projects are bringing to municipalities where they are located. But the projections of the authorised DUIS in the state of Morelos -the Centro Urbano Morelos- are that housing stock in the municipality of Temixco will double in the next ten years (BBVA:2012, 42-43).

3.5.2 Marketing ‘an attainable lifestyle’

It can be said that the intentionally ‘planned’ aspect of the Bosques project occurred in the marketing of the houses. The aims of the company as laid down in 2000 - continuously renewing the image of the company and improving projects - stressed that GEO Bosques was built for a particular market. First, it was designed for young couples buying their first home (a group which the firm had appealed to ever since it started building homes), and second, it was aimed at a new clientele interested in buying a

weekend house or a second property. GEO Morelos embarked on an advertising strategy to attract a new clientele, concentrating on marketing the ‘utility and affordability’ of the houses, with much less attention to providing amenities and services. It was a new strategy that laid stress on building stylish houses in safe and exclusive communities that were usually advertised in middle- and upper- class neighbourhoods. This new image needed reorganisation, particularly to improve the management of sales and to include a strong component of service to clients, with a focus on follow-up strategies, from the first contact established with the client to the handover of the property.

The new marketing strategy entailed replacing the traditional sales slogan of the firm – *GEO: Una casa a tu alcance* [GEO: A house within your reach] - with one that focused on the promotion of a lifestyle – *Casas GEO: Un estilo de vida a tu alcance* [Casas GEO: A lifestyle within your reach]. The traditional slogan had served well in previous years to communicate the fact that it was not only the ‘affordability’ of the houses that made them attractive but their location. In 2000, Casas GEO had already spread to 13 states and as García-Vélez stated in the interview, “GEO was putting on the mental map of thousands of Mexicans, municipalities that only few had known existed. Who could have thought that Actipan in Puebla could become a town?”.⁵⁷ But the subtle shift in the slogan announced a radical change in the idea of what a low-cost house implied. The notion of house as a benefit or social right, and designed with the needs of a family in mind, gave way to marketing notions of ‘lifestyle’. This new idea not only fitted well with notions of investing in a lifestyle that tend to be associated with middle class property, but more importantly, it introduced the idea that style and good taste were not incompatible with a low-cost property, and that anyone – within the wide spectrum of the middle sectors of society - could own a ‘stylish’ house.

GEO Morelos advertised this ‘attainable lifestyle’ by restructuring the marketing division. The company did not have enough trained staff or adequate infrastructure to provide an efficient client service. In view of this, it began to invest in training its sales personnel. The manager organised a sales team of around 60 representatives who were carefully selected and trained in professional sales skills. The agents were also given a

⁵⁷ Interview with Carlos García-Vélez. Former Vice President of Design and Urbanism at Casas GEO. July 11, 2007. Mexico City.

‘uniform’ in blue and white - the colours of the firm - so they could look like executives, as the marketing manager explained. A part of the training included instructing agents how to talk in a friendly manner and communicate the new image of the firm. The purpose of this training was to distance the company apart from the growing number of homebuilders that employed the typical untrained, smooth-talking sales agents. While explaining to me about this restructuring of the sales approach, the Sales Manager at GEO Morelos mentioned that selected new sales agents, and those already working in the company, were generally aware of the concept of selling a ‘lifestyle’ through commodities such as automobiles or houses, but argued that it was in Casas GEO where they received a formal sales training.

3.5.3 Selling strategies: Sales centres, supermarkets and show-houses

An additional strategy was to ‘guarantee a healthy sale’, meaning to give the potential client the necessary information to decide whether they were able to pay back a house loan over a period of approximately 30 years. Since the INFONAVIT reform in 1992, the prices of privately produced houses are calculated in TMMW (times minimum monthly wages).⁵⁸ GEO Boques was targeted to clientele ranked with socioeconomic status C, that is, with the capacity for buying a progressive *morada* of 130 TMMW (MXN \$149, 863 - USD \$15,808) or an extended *morada* of 160 TMMW (MXN \$ 291,124.00 - USD \$30,709).⁵⁹ The extended *morada* was targeted at a slightly higher income segment –the traditional plus- compared to the conventional Casas GEO market (the economic and the traditional). (See table 5 for the GEO market segments, prices and characteristics of housing units).

The company went to considerable pains to offer clients a low down-payment: MXN \$14,986 (USD \$1,580.83 deposit) and MXN \$29,112.40 (USD \$3,070.93) at settlement (equivalent to 10 percent of the value of the property), divided into three instalments up

⁵⁸ For the INFONAVIT and FOVISSSTE mortgages, the payment is deducted from the worker’s monthly wage. In the case of the SOFOL, the sum it is deducted from the customer’s bank account. The maximum value of the house needs to be up to MXN \$500,000 or 90 percent the total value of the house allowed by the mortgage scheme (CONDUSEF, 2012).

⁵⁹ These are calculations for the GEO list prices in 2000 in zone A. MMMW for 2000: MXN \$1,152.79. The annual average interbank exchange rate for 2000: MXN \$9.48 per USD. Source: Banco de México, 2012.

to six months from the date of the sale.⁶⁰ A ‘healthy sale’ entailed screening people to separate suitable from unsuitable clients or market segments. Years later, this became a formal marketing scheme called “Multichannel strategy: reaching out to the client”. This strategy involved a combination of sales in macro-sales centres, call centres and direct sales in the sites in the developments themselves (Corporación GEO, 2011a).

In the context of Bosques, screening the appropriate client required sales agents who were able to identify the kinds of families who could fit into the new GEO lifestyle. The first screening strategy was to select formal workers who could qualify for a mortgage from the public institutions: INFONAVIT or FOVISSSTE and that could cover the 130-160 TMMW prototypes. This was because, since 1995, nearly 80 percent of the sales of the company were secured through mortgages granted by these institutions, and in recent years this has reached 91 percent of the total sales (Corporación GEO, 2012c). The second strategy consisted of selecting clients who could qualify for a mortgage provided by a financial intermediary institution (SOFOL) *Mi Casita Hipotecaria* (see pag 15 for further explanation of a SOFOL). As a mortgage with SOFOL could only cover up to 90 percent of the total cost of the house, these clients had to prove they had enough personal savings and a clear credit history. “The unemployed, beneficiaries of social programmes and dishonest people trying to fake their incomes”, the manager added, “had to be eliminated from the group through screening to avoid possible defaults.” [Sales Manager at GEO Morelos].

The third strategy was to search for the ‘right client’. This meant finding “key groups” who could be interested in a weekend home or a second property. This strategy was particularly important for promoting the “Plus Area”. Key groups could be found, for instance, in multinational pharmaceutical companies, banks and retail companies, where there was a wide range of *profesionistas* (analysts, managers, skilled manual workers and salesmen). There were also potential clients in selected public institutions located in both Cuernavaca and Mexico City.

⁶⁰ Interview with the Sales Manager at GEO Morelos. October 17, 2007. Cuernavaca, Mexico. Annual average interbank exchange rate for 2000: MXN \$9.48 per USD. Banco de Mexico, 2012.

Business Areas (GEO's Sales Percentage)	Market segment	Selling Price (MXN pesos and US dollars 2011)	Socioeconomic segments (2) (MW 2011 **)	Total average built area. sq m	Characteristics		Selling Price (MXN pesos and US dollars 2011)	Selling Price (MXN pesos and US dollars 2000)
GEO I (81.8% total sales)	Economic 21.40%	less than MXN \$232,772 (US \$ 18,681.54)	D (-<1.99)	30.39	1 level: 2 rooms, 1 full bathroom, kitchen, laundry area (1 - 2 room for an upper floor extension)		Houses Values in MXN Pesos during 2011 Bosques. Progressive Morada Total built area: 55 sq.m (34 sq.m ground floor, 21 sq.m upper floor) Selling price 130 TMMW*** = MXN \$241,332.14 (US \$19,368.55).	Houses Values in MXN Pesos during 2000 (1) Bosques Porgressive Morada Selling price 130 TMMW***= MXN 2000 \$149,862.92 . (MXN 2011 \$241,332.14; US 2011 \$19,368.55) Bosques Extended Morada Selling price 160 TMMW***= MXN \$291, 124.00. (MX 2011 \$468, 812.30; US 2011 \$37,625.39)
	Low Affordable (Traditional low) 34.70%	MXN \$232,772 - \$287,327 (US \$18,681.54 - US \$ 23,059.95)	D+ (-<3.99)	38.20	1 or 2 levels* 2 rooms, 1 full-bathroom, kitchen, laundry area (1-2 rooms for an upper floor extension)			
	Affordable (Traditional) 25.70%	MXN \$287,327 - \$418,261 (US \$ 23,059.95 - US \$ 33,568.30) [\$360,218 ASP for 2011**]	C (>4.00)	48.04	2 levels: 2 rooms, 1 full bathroom and/or ½ bathroom, living/dining area, kitchen, laundry area (1/2 rooms for extension)			
GEO II (17.9% total sales.)	Affordable Plus (Traditional Plus) 12.60%	MXN \$418,261 - \$681,948 (US \$ 33,568.30 - US \$ 54,730.98)	C (-<6.99)	57.61	2 levels: 2 floors: 3 rooms, 1 alcove/TV room, 1 full-bathroom, ½ bathroom , living/dining area, kitchen, laundry area (fully extended or 1 room for an upper floor extension)			
	Middle Income (Medium) 5.30%	MXN \$681,948 - \$1,349,348 (US \$ 54,730.98 - US \$ 108,294.38)	C + (-<7.00)	66.05	2 levels: 2 floors, 2 -3 rooms, 2 full- bathrooms, 1 alcove/TV room, ½ bathroom (2 rooms for a ground and upper floor extension.)			
GEO III "G" homes (0.30% total sales)	Residential 0.30%	MXN \$1,349,348 + (US \$ 108,294.38)	A – B (11.00-<)	79.19	2 levels, 3 rooms, living area, 1-2 full- bathroom, ½ half-bathroom (fully extended or 0 room extension)			
Total: 100%		Total: 100%						
<p>(1) Housing prices of the year 2000 were obtained from list prices reported by Corporación GEO [Corporación GEO, S.A.B. de C.V. (2000). <i>Annual Report 2000. Solid Strategy of Growth.</i> Available: http://www.corporaciongeo.com/anales.aspx?menu=4&submenu=19&language=. Last accessed 2nd Jan 2013.]. Correspondingly, house prices for 2011 were obtained from: Corporación GEO, S.A.B. de C.V. (2010). <i>First Report of Sustainable Communities. Mexico.</i> Available: http://www.unglobalcompact.org/system/attachments/11793/original/First_Report_of_Sustainable_Communities_2010.pdf?1314749445. Last accessed 15th Jan 2012. p18.</p> <p>Corporación GEO, S.A.B. de C.V. (2011b). <i>GEO Annual Report.</i> Last accessed: 30th Nov 2012. p17.</p> <p>Prices for both sources concided with houses listed as Traditional Low. Author's elaboration.</p>								
<p>Note: House prices from Corporación GEO are listed prices, which are established as times of montly minimum wages. They do not reflect other expenditures from housing purchasing activities, neither take into account other financial costs and particular conditions of potential buyers (eg. deed of sale). In this regard, the list prices of Corporación GEO are intended to reflect the cost value of affordable housing. It is important to notice that changes in list prices, hence, reflect changes in prices indexes.</p>								
<p>(2) Mexican Socioeconomic Segments are annually established by the Mexican Association of Marketing Research and Public Opinion Agencies (Asociación Mexicana de Agencias de Investigación de Mercado y Opinión Pública, AMAI). The AMAI classifies the Mexican households into 6 different categories (A, B, C+, C-, D+, D and E) according to their annual income and their purchasing power. The variables considered to determine the socioeconomic segment are the following: i) education level of the head of the household, ii) car ownership, iii) number of light bulbs in the house, iv) the possession of a TV, computer and similar house appliances.</p> <p>Socioeconomic Level "A" and "B", account for the 7.2% of the urban households in Mexico. The members of these segments are homeowners of houses fully serviced with public infrastructure (eg. piped water and electricity). Food expenses represent the 7% of household's income. Family members attend private institutions and hold post-graduate education and have considerable leisure time. As seen on the table, consumers in the segments "A" and "B" accounted for the 0.3% of GEO's total sales during 2011.</p> <p>Socioeconomic level "C+" represents the 14% of urban Mexican population. The majority of the members in this segment (66%) are homeowners. Their houses are fully provided with urban infrastructure services. Members of this segment own at least one car and the head of the household had completed further education. Around 12% of their income goes to food expenses. This segment represents 5.3% of GEO's total sales during 2011.</p> <p>Socioeconomic level "C" constitutes the 17.9% of Mexican urban population. The majority of its members (66%) are homeowners or have relatives who own a property that is fully serviced with public infrastructure. Food expenses represent the 18% of the household income. They own at least one car and the head of the houses had completed further education. Consumers type "C" accounted 38.3% of total Casas GEO sales (affordable and affordable plus segment) in 2011.</p> <p>Finally, socioeconomic segment defined as "D+" represents 34.7% of GEO's total sales (the largest segment targeted by the company) and it represents the 35.8% of Mexican urban population. Half of the families grouped in segment "D+" are homeowners of houses provided with basic infrastructure. Food expenditure represents the 50% of their monthly income. A fourth of these families own a car and the majority of the household's head have completed primary education.</p> <p>To summarise, the socioeconomic segments proposed by the AMAI demonstrate that the Casas GEO main share is constituted by households who have access to credit markets but cannot be considered as medium or higher income households. Most of them have access to basic infrastructure and education. Nevertheless, their high food expenditures prove their low or medium-low income level. AMAI. (2008). <i>Nivel Socioeconómico en México</i>, AMAI 2008. Available at: www.inegi.org.mx/me/docs/Pdfs/Mesa4/20/HeribertoLopez.pdf Last accessed: 30th of November, 2012.</p>								
<p>*MW 2011 (Minimum Wage 2011). According to the Mexican law, it refers to the minimum wage that a worker has to receive for a day of work. As of December 31, 2011 it was MX \$59.82 per day or \$1,819.52 per month, equivalent to US\$146.03 monthly.</p>								
<p>** ASP: Average Selling Price for 2011.</p>								
<p>*** TMMW: Times Minimum Monthly Wage.</p>								
<p>Annual average interbank exchange rate in 2011: 12.46. Source: BANXICO (Banco de México). (2012). <i>Tipo de Cambio.</i> Available: http://www.banxico.gob.mx/portal-mercado-cambiario/index.html. Last accessed 22nd Dec 2012.</p>								
<p>Annual average interbank exchange rate in 2000: 9.48. Source: BANXICO (Banco de México). (2012). <i>Tipo de Cambio.</i> Available: http://www.banxico.gob.mx/portal-mercado-cambiario/index.html. Last accessed 22nd Dec 2012.</p>								

Table 5. Casas GEO market segments, prices and characteristics of the houses
Author's elaboration: data taken from Corporación GEO, 2010, 2011b; AMAI, 2008.

Temporary sales modules involving a ‘door-to-door’ sales strategy were set up in selected companies. A further strategy was to employ “in-store sales” for an open market. This scheme was carried out by operating temporary sales modules in popular retail stores such as Wal-Mart, Elektra or the principal shopping malls; these were located at strategic points such as store entrances, outside banks, next to cash machines and in walkways leading to car-parks. Some modules were livened up with loud music to get attention and the sales agents were helped by *Edecanes GEO* [GEO escorts] who were young women wearing uniforms of white and blue miniskirts. The idea of these temporary stalls was to channel potential buyers to the *Centros de Venta* [Sales Centres] where people would be given a more detailed idea of the different projects, the price of houses, the kinds of mortgages available and design features.

The *Centros de Venta* were the main marketing outlets of the company, according to the Sales Manager at GEO Morelos, and the places where 86 percent of the houses were sold. They were also the places where potential clients could see the master plans of the sites being marketed, the house models and the floor plans, as well as a show-house that was fully furnished and even included future extensions. Salesmen working in “Sales Centres” usually have better sales skills than those working in any of the other marketing sites. They are better trained and have a better knowledge of the mortgage system and how the company operates. In 2000, when GEO Bosques was in its pre-sale stage, the “GEO Morelos Sale Centre” was a new phenomenon in Cuernavaca. It was strategically located in a popular commercial district of the city and surrounded by all sorts of trading activities mostly targeted at a lower-and middle-class clientele. These included Coppel and Elektra (in-store credit retail outlets targeted at the low-income market) as well as and plenty of taquerias, restaurants and informal stalls. The location of the “GEO Morelos Sales Centre” in this popular commercial area seemed to be of symbolic importance since the new slogan gave clients the feeling that the house was within their reach. Some of my interviewees recalled that the former “Sales Centre” was like a department store as it was large and had background music. It also had a large master GEO Bosques plan at the centre. On the floor, there was a simulated drawing of an actual-size house plan that showed the different interiors of the houses. Some of the residents remembered that that the agents encouraged people to walk through the

drawing that simulated the entire house: bedrooms, studio, kitchen, living-and dining-room and even the patio, so they could feel the dimensions of the house and have a true perception of the size of the houses.

Finally, the on-site show house also served as a sales strategy. Those residents who remember having seen the show house during the sale described it as being “finished”, meaning that it was fully furnished and decorated and had two room extensions with large balconies on the second floor made out of wrought iron (painted light brown and matching the protective grilles on the windows). The location of the house on an elevated piece of land right at the entrance of the project, occupying the corner of a block of houses, made it look bigger and more stylish than people had imagined. Isis (43, resident and former GEO Sales Agent) remembered that what most impressed her, as a sales agent, were the interiors as the house was nicely decorated with “minimalistic modern furniture in light colours, [It had] built-in mirrors in the walls, a ceramic tiled floor in cream colours, and energy-saving light bulbs ... It was perfect. The perfect furniture”, Isis concluded. The general feeling of a spacious and modern house was achieved by the use of K-Be multi-functional furniture and accessories that were especially designed to fit the dimensions of a GEO house, as well as to create a different interior atmosphere. Isis added that the show-house included a small front garden illuminated with dimmed blue lights. The idea of the decoration was to include a set of “plus” accessories, appliances and ideas for house extension that could make the house look larger, brighter and more modern. In Chapter Seven, I will show how the functional furniture, decoration and construction methods were marketed by the firm and obtained by the residents.

When I arrived to conduct my fieldwork, GEO Morelos had recently opened a new “Macro Sales Centre” in Avenida Diana, an upper-class area of the city facing the new *Galerías Cuernavaca* shopping mall and the huge sculpture erected by mayor Estrada (see Chapter Two), which could be easily reached from the Mexico-Acapulco highway. The “Diana Macro Sales Centre” - as it was known by the sales agents - included two or three show houses with different types of house and a section exhibiting selected K-Be furniture. There were several other small sales offices or modules in popular shopping malls, supermarkets and commercial areas of the city, as well as in development sites that were marketed in the State of Morelos. In the later case, the sales

offices were mobile homes that could be moved from one site to another or around different areas of large-scale developments. I remember that the offices were dark and warm but they were equipped with two computers that were connected to the credit simulator system of INFONAVIT and FOVISSSTE so that potential clients could see which house type matched their budget, brochures for the different GEO products and the layout of the different house types on sale. From the outside, the mobile sales offices were covered in Casas GEO advertisements and usually surrounded by a small garden with round tables and umbrellas where clients could sit to peruse the information (see photos 8 and 9 as examples of the Sales Centres in the state of Morelos).



Photo 8. GEO Sales Centres in Morelos 1

Source: Cristina Inclán-Valadez, 2007.



Photo 9. GEO Sales Centres in Morelos

Source: Cristina Inclán-Valadez, 2007.

A simultaneous aggressive advertising campaign was launched on the local television stations and on billboards alongside the Mexico-Cuernavaca highway. The purpose of the campaign was to create a strong brand association with the new slogan – “GEO: A lifestyle within your reach.” The ads focused on a house with a swimming pool and the lifestyle that could be acquired when buying the GEO brand. These ads were also innovative in portraying the ideal of a ‘new’ Mexican family: young with two children, with a less Mexican-looking image, slim, with lighter skin and blond hair. These families were portrayed playing in the pool, enjoying the weekend and giving the impression that GEO Bosques was an exclusive complex for a middle-and upper-middle class clientele.⁶¹ Accompanying these images were details of the deposit needed to secure the house.⁶² (See photos 10, 1 and 2).

⁶¹ I was unable to gain access to the advertisement campaign that was used to promote GEO Bosques in 2000, but the follow-up campaigns (of 2005 and 2007, provided by Casas GEO Morelos) and some advertisements on the web give a good picture of the stylish features of a modern middle-class Mexican family that GEO want to portray in their developments.

⁶² The INFONAVIT and FOVISSSTE websites also promoted the Casas GEO projects. In this case, potential clients were advised to obtain the necessary information and complete the sale.

This photo, shows the adverstising campaigns at billboards which focusd on a house with a swimming pool idea and the middle-class lifestyle adquired when buying the GEO brand, has been removed for copyright reasons.

Photo 10. Billboards on the Mexico-Cuernavaca highway 1

Source: GEO Morelos, 2008.



Photo 10. Billboards on the Mexico-Cuernavaca highway 2

Source: Cristina Inclan-Valadez, 2007.

3.5.4 The Sale: a view from the residents

All the houses in GEO Bosques were sold in around six months and the great demand for the “Plus Area” obliged GEO to set out a second “plus” cluster in a plot that had been originally planned as a common area.⁶³ The company also decided to market the idea that any of the other sections forming the project could potentially become ‘plus areas’ if residents wanted to include a swimming pool, a clubhouse or improve the common areas with gardens. These ‘plus’ elements depended on the capacity of neighbours to form a community as well as demonstrate a willingness to pay necessary expenses. The GEO Morelos managers suggested that the customers of GEO Bosques could turn their *privadas* into an exclusive gated community [*condominio*] like those seen all around Cuernavaca.

⁶³ The change in the original layout was approved by the municipality and the document presented for the 2002 INFONAVIT Award included the new cluster. Interview with the Former GEO Bosques’ Project Manager at GEO Morelos. October 20, 2007. Cuernavaca, Mexico.

Although the advertising campaigns and the ‘multichannel strategy’ suggested that GEO Bosques was targeted at an upper middle class clientele of weekenders and young professionals, the ‘social screening’ strategy designed to minimise possible defaults proved to be less important for sales agents than securing the deposit and down payment on the house. Thus, GEO Bosques was sold to a diverse group of clients that included the traditional group of formal workers (state school teachers, factory labourers, accountants, administrative clerks) and also a group of self-employed people running their own business. From my fieldwork it seems only a few residents could be considered as the young professionals and upper-middle class weekenders with monthly wages of between MXN \$4,216 – \$7,367 (USD \$437- \$777) that the strategy intended to reach.⁶⁴

Marketing the new face of Casas GEO proved to be so successful that many residents during conversations made statements like “I bought blindly”, “I bought on paper”, “on a drawing made by the salesman” or we bought from “what we saw on television or on a billboard”. Nevertheless, the professionalisation of the sales process did not ensure accurate and consistent procedures. Some of my neighbours, for example, indicated that the sales agents referred to many of the ‘plus’ design elements as if these were standard to secure the sale. These tactics generated confusion about whether the “Plus Area” or the other clusters would include a clubhouse or not, or if houses had front gardens, American-style kitchens or tiled flooring. Similarly, my neighbour, Héctor (40s, independent worker), stated that the person at the “Sales Centre” guaranteed him a house with a swimming pool. He tried to prove his point by showing me layout of the ‘*privada plus*’ which included the swimming pool, but it was unclear whether the original layout had been overdrawn by the salesman or even by Héctor (see image 3). There were also problems of houses being assigned to the wrong customers and of being oversold. As in the case of my landlords, the Muñoz family, some families bought a house in a regular section of the development but were assigned a “Plus Area”. When I asked the Muñoz family about this, they replied that it may have been because their income or even their ‘look’ [*pinta*] made them more ‘plus’-like. Such discrepancy was condoned by the apparent status the company’s designation of the family as ‘plus’ seemed to confer.

⁶⁴ Wages were between 4 - 6.99 TMMW. Average exchange rate at 2000: MXN \$9.480 per USD. Source: Banco de Mexico, 2012.

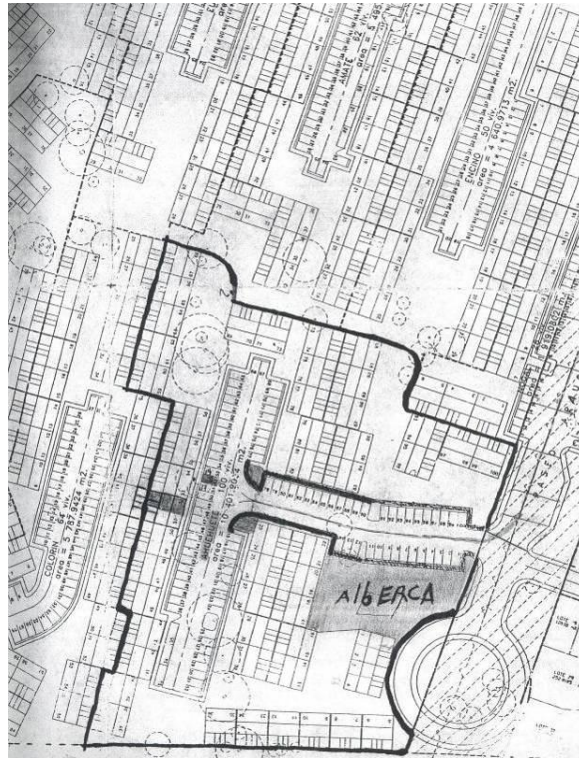


Image 3. Layout of the “plus area” with the swimming pool

Source: Cristina Inclán-Valadez, 2007. Layout provided by Héctor.

Despite the suggestion that the business model was clearly thought out and prescriptive, the narratives of GEO staff and residents indicate that Bosques was built up in a process of trial and error, in which the new image for GEO and the complex was in tension with sales techniques driven by profit, mortgage availability and ad hoc redesign. Other inconsistencies soon came to light during conversations. According to some residents, the sales reps. mentioned that, prior to the date of the delivery, they would be invited to join a guided tour to see a show-house and the progress of the construction, but none of those things happened. After the down-payment, some families went to the area in person and tried to see their houses without success. Some mentioned making regular monthly visits to see the construction progress. Recalling these visits, people remembered walking around the area, asking builders questions, taking pictures and dreaming of what their new home and the surroundings would look like. Mario, for example, indicated how his commitment to the GEO idea of a new middle class lifestyle was instilled by the sales team and reinforced with site visits:

“I remember that the sales agent compared the *Plus area* with a luxury car. He said it was like buying a Grand Cherokee ... He made me feel that I was the sort of person who could live in a classy place, to live well ... from that moment, I decided to come back regularly to check my house. Every two weeks from Ecatepec ... to see the progress [of my house]. My fiancée enjoyed going to [the department store] Liverpool, where I work, to see furniture, kitchens, or a set of dishes ... anything. We wanted the best things for my new home. My brothers laughed at me because of the swimming pool, because I don’t know how to swim, but that Christmas they gave me a beach towel ... they made me cry ... They thought I might need it. Years later we all found out here that the swimming- pool was never built.” [Mario 46. Salesperson]

Here are the seeds of the *GEO movement* that reproduces ways of imagining, aspiring and experiencing new ways of urban living. I explore people’s reflections on the marketing of lifestyle through housing design in more detail later in the thesis, but for now it is worth noting how new residents ‘bought into’ the GEO model. In most cases, it was an image of a bigger, nicer and more exclusive place that framed these ‘imagined futures’, a space of refinement and good taste in line with the image the sales reps. sold.

For some, the lifestyle ‘dream’ was so strong that they resisted the temptation to visit Bosques during the construction phase, preferring to keep the ‘illusion’ and wait to see the new house. As Marta recalled:

“It was not so important to see the house. We used to say, if they are selling us a house with a swimming- pool it doesn’t really matter if we get the house number one or one hundred. It was the illusion of the new house and in a completely new place ... and to begin a new life. The feeling was similar to when you are expecting a baby. It doesn’t matter if it’s a boy or girl, you know that your life will change ... you are only getting prepared and imagined the future.” [Marta, 28. Housewife and seller of Tupperware]

Linked to these accounts was the belief that GEO Morelos was a serious company and a safe investment. People expressed that that the strong bonds of GEO with INFONAVIT and FOVISSSTE gave the confidence that other developers lacked. As in many other cities, the private housing market in Cuernavaca is uncontrolled and rife with fraud, deception and irregularity. Notably, small developers buy *ejido* land and emulate the GEO style building and marketing techniques but do not have the infrastructure and skills of the larger developers. Three informants told me in detail that before buying the GEO house they were the victims of fraud by small local homebuilders who offered a

good deal but disappeared once the first payments were made, or there were cases of people realising too late that houses were not being built due to problems with land rights or corruption.

It would be wrong to assume that the new marketing skills of GEO or its reputation as a serious company were sufficient reasons to explain why virtually all the residents that I talked to did not demand to see the progress of their houses or at least a show-house. This explanation is less credible when it is taken into account that a large proportion of my neighbours came from informal settlements, where it was very unlikely they would be detached from the process of construction. Indeed, I am left with the sense that many people knew – to predict an analysis developed later in the thesis – that the houses and facilities delivered by GEO would differ in dramatic ways from what was advertised. GEO itself was complicit in this idea. The *Morada* model had built into it the suggestion that an ‘unfinished’ GEO house, as some put it, would increase status and lead to a world of comfort and style. During fieldwork it was evident that the most powerful form of communicating the GEO ‘attainable lifestyle’ took place once the houses were sold and people took up residence. Through the Post-Sales Service GEO encouraged residents to improve their houses and purchase the extra features that could give them the stylish and comfortable homes that had been marketed months before. As I outline in the following chapters, inhabiting Bosques was about understanding people’s roles in the *co-production* of a GEO home.

3.6 The Post-sales system

The production of a Casas GEO project did not end in the sales centres, mobile selling points or in the show houses but continued through the “Post-sales Division”. This was regarded by the GEO managers as the face of the company.⁶⁵ The role of the service was to build up trust and good relations with the new residents. Since its creation in 2007, it has given support, by checking the quality control of the houses and responding to people’s complaints and, if necessary, by showing the validity of insurance claims for

⁶⁵ Interview with the Manager of the Post-sales Division. September 8, 2007. Zapata, Mexico.

hidden flaws and defects. However, it also serves to encourage residents to maintain the urban image of the site.

When GEO Bosques was built, the “Post-sales Division” had not been formally constituted. However, because of the company’s new mission to improve the properties and perhaps also because it had sold to people a project that was radically different to what had been advertised, GEO Morelos paid particular attention to the post-sales services. The very first priority of the “Post-Sales Division” was to hand over the houses in an appealing way. This was done through a social gathering organised for those residents living in the same cluster. The gathering was known by the GEO staff as the “Customers’ Day” and the staff had to make this the happiest day in the lives of the new residents. Some of my informants at GEO Bosques described the event and I supplemented this information by attending two events of this type as a participant-observer. As a part of the business profile of the company was to standardise its forms of operation, the hand-over of the houses was a benchmark system replicated in each of the cluster of houses throughout a complex or city. In view of the size of some projects, not less than 17 events can take place simultaneously in a single complex.

The hand-over of the house takes the form of a ceremony and a day-long party. In Morelos, this ceremony often takes place at the weekend and in the corresponding *privada*. The GEO staff make every effort to create an appropriate atmosphere in order to make the residents feel like they have bought into a distinctive place. On the events I attended the staff wore uniforms with a t-shirt that displayed the company logo and the common gardens were adorned with a white rectangular tent where people were given food and refreshments. There was background music, a plastic swimming pool and playgrounds for children to help make the event more cheerful, raffles with home appliances as prizes and a photographer on hand to take photos and video to record the event.

In the case of GEO Bosques, the handing over of the house keys took place in the office of the public notary responsible for ratifying the title deeds of the properties sold by the company. By organising the hand-over in this way, GEO Morelos was trying to communicate to its clients the legality of the sale. From what my neighbours told me, the event was essentially the same as those I witnessed at other sites. My neighbours

described how, in a party tent, and sitting in chairs at round tables decorated in blue and white, each resident was summoned by a member of the GEO staff to come to the front to be given their house keys, the deeds and a Diploma that certified the ownership of the GEO home and 'the official photograph of the moment'. On each occasion the other participants would applaud and relatives would hug each other - some informants remembered having tears running down their cheeks. The ceremony is clearly highly emotionally charged. I observed how, for instance, applause would break out, how people took photographs and video-recorded the event, how some cried when they received their keys and how some spontaneously gave speeches in honour of a son, a husband, God or a lifetime job that had helped make the dream of the house come true. Phrases like "This was my dream", "I am a simple person, and now here" or "If my mother could see me here" were repeated in the two events that I observed.

The GEO staff - normally in the person of the Manager of the "Post-sales Division" - added to the emotional nature of the event by giving a speech on the issue of patrimony and the kind of new life that people would experience in the new property. Special music such as anthems and instrumental pieces were played at the moment when each person received his/her keys. Each family was also given a household appliance or DVD as a present from the company. Local authorities such as officials from the SAPAC (System of Drinking Water and Drainage in Cuernavaca) and the Sub-secretary of Environment and Ecology and a representative of the public notary's office also took part in the event, which, according to some informants, added a note of "seriousness" to the proceedings. People had the opportunity to chat and start to get to know their new neighbours. They could also meet decorators and retailers of security devices, flooring and other consumer goods. The celebration ended when, with keys in their hand, and accompanied by a GEO staff member, the residents cut the ribbon that was hanging across their front doors (See photos 11 and 12). After a final quality control check by GEO staff the new residents could enter the house for the first time. If a fault was found or something was missing, the staff member accompanied the resident to a temporary "Post-sales Division" module installed on site and the process of testing the validity of the guarantee would begin.

This photo, shows a family at the door of their new house, has been removed for copyright reasons.

Photo 11. The hand-over of houses. 1

Source: GEO Morelos, 2007.

In the case of GEO Bosques, my neighbours remembered being driven from the Notary's garden to their new homes. Since the "Post-sales Division" had yet to be established, the houses were not given a final 'quality control check' and no member of the GEO staff accompanied them in this process. Rather, it was the residents themselves who had to check the general condition of the houses and then report any items that were missing or any other problems in the following days. A small team of three architects was assigned to deal with the flood of complaints from GEO Bosques after the hand-over ceremony and in the following weeks, but the residents complained that most of their complaints were never dealt with. In an interview with the former GEO Bosques' Project Manager, he told me that the small team was unable to cope with the amount of work.⁶⁶ He explained that many of the complaints were not related to what the firm or any architect considered to be structural defects (e.g. walls with cracks of more than 1.5 millimetres long and 1.5 wide, a broken window or a missing door handle), but more to do with their confusion about what they thought their "plus" houses should include, such as tiled flooring, painted walls, closets, bathroom appliances or larger parking spaces that were supposed to convey ideas of style and comfort.

⁶⁶ Interview with the former GEO Bosques' Project Manager from GEO Morelos. October 20, 2007.

This photo, shows a customer receiving a household appliance as a present from the company during the house hand-over ceremony, has been removed for copyright reasons.

Photo 12. The hand-over of houses. 2

Source: GEO Morelos, 2007.

From my observations during fieldwork, it was very difficult to find visible defects and problems at first sight and the structural problems of the construction normally only became apparent when the houses were lived in. The complaints of the residents were related to problems such as damp walls or windows that would not open and most such complaints were immediately attended to. A case that caught my attention was of a resident who insisted on talking with the Manager of the “Post-sales Division”. He explained that his concern was not with the noise coming from the adjacent houses, as he knew how to solve this problem, but with whether the width of the walls could support a large painting that he was planning to hang up. The answer of the manager was that one of his colleagues could be present when the painting was hung. The example illustrates two important points. First, the customer knew that his house was not built to the highest quality, and second, the company’s response seemed to acknowledge this and was aimed at minimising any possible future complaint.⁶⁷ (See photo 13 for an example of a GEO Post-sales Division in the state of Morelos.)

⁶⁷ For the last five years, GEO has supported research to map the problems in dozens of its projects and try to mend them. The company has developed a monitoring system in new developments termed “Ten satisfaction criteria for well-being” that addresses issues concerning the quality of housing, security and



Photo 13. The Post-sales Division in Zapata, Morelos

Source: Cristina Inclán-Valadez, 2007.

3.7 Conclusions

This chapter has examined how GEO Bosques was produced by following the different stages of the Casas GEO business model. In tracing these stages, the chapter has demonstrated how GEO was able to promote ‘lifestyles’ by designing, building and commercialising low-cost houses and assisting residents through post-sale services. The chapter has shown that the GEO model requires a broadening of the way social housing is understood by taking into account production practices that go beyond architectural concerns. The privately produced urban complexes in Mexico are clear signs of the new ‘paradise’ where millions of Mexicans now live. The names of the sites - suggesting a suburban life in noble residential areas- as well as the house types - birds, constellations and flowers- play key strategies for gaining a class ‘touch’. It is the first step for taking part of a new cultural space in Mexico.

amenities. This monitoring system is linked to the CONAVI obligation to comply with building codes and regular supervision of built projects (Corporación GEO, 2010).

The case of GEO Bosques shows that producing houses entails adapting the initial ‘dream’ – represented by the flexibility of *La Morada* and a fully serviced complex - to contingent factors. The Bosques project was shaped by pressures on the firm to bring together quality with affordability and to address the problems of negotiating for land, the limited resources of the local government, and perhaps most importantly, the lack of planning and regulations to support the new market-oriented housing.

Although the vertical integration and architectural innovations of GEO propelled the company to a fast rate of growth in its early years, it is the marketing strategies that form a key element of the GEO business model in the past decade. The different ways of “reaching out to the client” – through temporary stalls in retail stores, websites and call centres, mobile offices and a referral system - reflect the firm’s sales objectives for treating a house like any other easily attainable consumer object. Equally, the firm’s slogan proved another potent strategy to attract clients. When GEO Bosques was being advertised, the slogan “GEO an attainable lifestyle” radically changed the image of affordable housing in Mexico. GEO introduced the idea that anyone within the wide spectrum of the middle class sectors could buy both ‘stylish’ and reasonably-priced homes. Finally, the presence of retailers and decorators promoting consumer goods and representatives of the public notary ‘certifying’ the sale, illustrate the firm’s efforts to communicate to clients their entry to the world of private modern housing.

The field research suggests that it is helpful to think of house production not only in terms of a fixed practice that concludes with a physical object, but a set of practices or experiments that shift between more or less attention to design, marketing and ‘fixing’. Hence, a decade on from the “experiment” of the “Plus Area” designs and amenities (swimming pool, gardens) that were first planned in GEO Bosques, these are now the norm for GEO projects in Morelos. Some even include clubhouses and small golf courses, changing the urban landscape in what is claimed to be a “revival” of the ‘weekend tone’ in the state.⁶⁸ GEO has created the house type “GEO weekend” which has been marketed in eight states (Casas GEO, 2012d). The shifts also represent a subtle

⁶⁸ One of the main local development strategies of the government (2006-2012) has been to attract tourism and to revive the image of the state as a weekend spot and a place for leisure. Gobierno del Estado de Morelos. Secretaría de Turismo. (2011). *Descubre Morelos*. Available: <http://www.morelostravel.com/>. Last accessed 6th July 2012.

shift in relations between company, staff and client. Hence, the marketing slogan “GEO an attainable lifestyle” is used interchangeably with slogans such as “GEO changes your life”, “GEO the best place to invest” and “GEO Culture” and the staff with *GEOcolaboradores*. If a staff member successfully completes the virtual “GEO University” training programme and reaches their performance goals they now become *GEOheroes* (Corporación GEO, 2010: 30-31).

In terms of ‘fixing’ GEO displays a strongly paternalistic attitude to developments premised on an idea of property ownership and individualism. Although the house designs and marketing stress the opportunities for residents to adapt and extend their homes, the Post-sales staff stress to people the importance of keeping the original image of the construction and conduct regular site checks. GEO itself has also become more directly involved in controlling the process. The large number of house extensions and facade alterations since 2007 prompted GEO to offer detailed plans for extensions according to different housing typologies as well as a dedicated construction service for extensions. Picking up that some modifications are so widespread but stylistically varied – the addition of ‘American-style protective grilles’ to windows for example – GEO has incorporated these changes into the basic house design to ensure a more uniform aesthetic appearance.

The research also shows how house production is no longer a matter of builder-client relations mediated by finance and contracts but a series of practices in which the client is an active agent in a changing GEO business model. There is a strongly performative element to buying a GEO house that draws, or aims to draw, clients to the company and its model through an imagined lifestyle. Consider the sales strategies - getting potential buyers to walk through made-up house templates on the floor - and the handing over ceremonies with high levels of emotion induced through music, speeches and photos. A large-scale project fitted with minimal infrastructure, fairly monotonous aesthetic appearance, that is difficult to reach, and lacks many of the “plus” elements of exclusivity, leisure and lifestyle that were promised is held up as a marker of ‘middle class’ achievement. GEO actively supports the idea among residents that they have made Bosques a success: while it just so happens that a growing number of sales, perhaps 30 percent of the total, come through referrals from residents living the ‘GEO lifestyle’.

4 Chapter Four: Building a GEO community

Quiero ser otro! Necesito ser mejor! Debo prosperar!
Carlos Monsiváis. Los rituales del caos, 1995.

4.1 Introduction

In 2003, the GEO Bosques complex was two years old. By August of that year, the houses had been built and were occupied; the main street grid and the roads giving access to the complex were paved and had lighting and most of the neighbourhood clusters were secured with entrance gates and enclosing fences. Most of these clusters had some kind of neighbourhood organisation and there was a general administrator to represent the residents' interests through a residents' committee. GEO Bosques had become a community and resembled many other Casas GEO sites throughout the country in its daily routine, aesthetics and self-governing mechanisms.

In becoming a community, GEO Bosques had gone through what seems to be a general pattern for this kind of housing complex. Casas GEO had at first helped to constitute the original neighbourhood groups in accordance with principles of autonomy, efficiency with regard to the management of infrastructure and amenities and ethical codes of behaviour designed to sustain the formation of what the company termed "*Mi Comunidad GEO*" [My GEO community]. Yet, these groups broke up relatively quickly owing to discrepancies between what the developer claimed and the reality. The residents had been promised an exclusive and secure housing complex with common areas and public services that were 'ready to be managed'. However, what they found when they arrived were plain and unfinished houses, with poor quality or no facilities, and a place that seemed desolate and lacked security and the promise of a better life.

Eventually, new community groups appeared in reaction to everyday community and individual needs. These groups were led by leaders who attempted to provide what the housing site lacked. In dealing with difficulties, these leaders adopted some of the community organisational practices commonly seen among informal settlements when fighting for security of land tenure and the provision of basic services (Coulomb and Sánchez-Mejorada, 1992; Varley, 1993, 1995; Ward and Chant, 1987). Accordingly,

people established alliances with local government officials, local congressmen and the formal and informal providers of goods and services such as garbage collectors, taxi drivers, and distributors of gas tanks and food supplies. The community leaders also took measures to obtain the amenities that the developer had promised when advertising the properties, such as a road to the housing site from the residential neighbourhood of Las Palmas and entrance gates. These alliances also helped to ‘restore’ what some people call the “appearance and dignity” that GEO Bosques lacked. In the course of time, the activities ceased and some of the community leaders disappeared. The rationale of social action evolved to meet new needs such as the provision of amenities for the weekend clientele or more sophisticated security measures which could ensure a level of security and exclusivity that people had always dreamed of having in the Casas GEO complex.

GEO Morelos only agreed to carry out minimal basic repairs and then passed on responsibility for the poor infrastructure and lack of facilities to the residents. It argued that a *sociedad* [partnership] needed to be established between the company and the residents to ensure that the site could function as intended. It was suggested that this partnership should employ two strategies. The first was to involve people in the improvement of the houses and common areas. The second was to ensure the ‘self-provision’ and management of the services and infrastructure located within the limits of each of the housing clusters. Moreover, GEO Morelos disputed the residents’ complaints about the alleged poor quality of the construction and the company’s fraudulent sales strategies by pointing out that it had won the “INFONAVIT National Housing Award, 2002” which is the highest distinction that a housing developer could receive from the federal government for building houses that had proved to increase the quality of life of the occupants.⁶⁹ This honour was conferred on GEO Bosques because of the ‘habitability’ of the complex, meaning that the project had successfully incorporated urban design and facilities suitable to the promotion of sustainability (CONAVI, 2008). The municipality also supported this achievement by recognising the status of Bosques as a *Conjunto Urbano Modelo* [an exemplary housing complex].

⁶⁹ CONAVI specifies that the INFONAVIT National Housing Award aims to recognise outstanding housing projects which, through technology, design, densification, urban planning or sustainability, to possibly improve the lives of residents (CONAVI, 2008).

In an internal report the municipality described Bosques as “an urban complex promoted by GEO Morelos, consisting of 702 housing units divided into 18 lots. The project was carried out in 9.443 hectares of land and was provided with essential urban services, a water tank with a capacity of 720 sq.m, extensive areas for a common use, technology and green infrastructure” (Ayuntamiento de Cuernavaca, 2002). The impression is of a consolidated, planned and high-specification development. However, even the basic details in the report are wrong. During my fieldwork I counted 762 housing units separated into eleven lots or gated clusters [*privadas*]. The commercial area was missing and instead people worked intermittently at several informal food stalls and in few fixed locales that surrounded the development. The areas for common use located within the confines of the *privadas* could either be treated as private property by residents in the form of front gardens, terraces or patios, or abandoned. A 9,000 s.q.m. planned “recreational area” was in fact a piece of dusty scrub land used for three football pitches. There was no green infrastructure apart from a water treatment plant that was out of order. Every house had a water tank that solved the problem of water shortage and the only available technological items that the people said they had were Cable TV and Wi-Fi connections.

This chapter investigates the nature of community life in GEO Bosques and the situated practices that shaped the social organisation of the place. The evolution of community life in GEO Bosques will be examined by analysing the tension between, on the one hand, a model of community organisation (which has principles of civic engagement, unity and homogeneous behaviour) and efficient government that seeks to respond to fixed needs and make long-term plans versus, on the other, the emergence of an informal organic community effort based on divisions, adaptation of the rules, improvisation and community leaders taking action for the evolving needs of the residents. In this chapter I do not consider GEO Bosques as a social unit which can reveal a ‘sense of community’ through the eyes of the neighbourhood association, but look instead at the situated practices that shape the social organisation of a particular place. The questions to answer in this chapter are: how are people ‘neighbourly’ in these new contexts?; how do residents understand and practice self-management?; and what kind of social body can organise the different needs and wishes of people living in a Casas GEO complex and can give some sense of being involved in a community?

These queries relate to the wider research questions in understanding how to live and experience a new housing project, and what do people communicate through community-making practices.

The chapter follows a chronology and attempts to focus on the almost two years that it took people to settle down and make the place habitable. It first details the formation of *Comunidades GEO*, a self-managed neighbourhood model promoted to the residents through a company-run workshop. The chapter then moves on to explain the community organisation that emerged from people's needs in what one group of residents called the "*operativo rescate*" [rescue operation]. This was an individual and collective effort to "rescue" their houses and improve the surrounding areas with the available resources. The last part focuses on the activities of the former community leader who provided a catalyst for shaping the future of Bosques: this involved a tension between reconciling traditional grassroots community leadership methods with notions of self-management and technical competence.

4.2 Getting the GEO community started

People in GEO Bosques attempted to get organised from the very beginning. The initial approach was to set up *Mi Comunidad GEO* [referred to from now on as the GEO community]; that is, a neighbourhood association that needed to be democratically elected and accountable for keeping order and the maintenance of common services and infrastructure (Casas GEO, 2012a). The constitution and rationale of the GEO communities form part of what Nikolas Rose has described a new territory of governance "upon which micro-moral relations among persons are conceptualized and administer" (Rose, 1996: 331). The 'GEO communities' scheme required residents to adopt a new way of thinking and acting collectively in relation to the neighborhood. Since it is a self-governed community, the "monitoring of the self and others" (Rose, Ibid: 330) and the regular use of symbols for collective identification form the main moral postulates and powers of endurance of the GEO communities. Their ability to function thus depended on individuals active in their own government and committed to a particular set of community values, beliefs and shared responsibilities.

Drawing from the work of Michel Foucault and the revival of the literature on governmentality, Nikolas Rose has reassessed the transformation of subjectivity and the changing rationales of political power in developed and/or neoliberalised countries. For Rose, the proliferation of “new communities” or self-governed groups exemplifies the emergence of new rationales of power. Rose identified three significant features of the “new communities”. The first is the spatial (localized and thematically or geographically defined) that respond to a certain commitment (lifestyle, locality and ‘activism’) and as such include symbols and images of self-identification that reflect the community members ‘rights’ and ‘values’. The second feature is an ethical character. New communities are formed by moral individuals with bonds of obligation and responsibilities which enable them to forge emotional ties with other ‘equals’. The third aspect is psychological identification. The participants of these groups see themselves as ‘members’ committed to a single integrated group. The commitment is achieved by employing a new vocabulary as a form of psychological identification. Symbols, new stories, documents and strategies for the ‘empowerment’ of individual commitments such as self-motivation, personal responsibility and self-reliance act as a means of encouraging participation and moral affinity (Rose, 1996: 335).

The general norms, moral obligations and symbols of identification linked to the GEO communities are made explicit in the *Manual del Propietario* [Owner’s manual] and other advertising materials given to residents at the hand-over ceremonies. These fully explained what constituted the first neighbourhood meeting: “*Aprendamos a (con)vivir en comunidad*” (Learning to live/coexist in a community). The meeting which is organised by the company represents a key strategy for making residents understand and embrace the GEO community project. The meeting follows a benchmark system applied to every *privada* recently handed over to residents in projects built throughout the country. The meeting takes the form of both an instruction workshop and a self-help group with the aim of assisting residents and empowers them to achieve the three core commitments of the GEO community: self-reliance, self-motivation and enterprise. From my participant observation of four meetings and my interviews with Casas GEO personnel it was clear that the meeting followed more or less the following procedure.

Once the families have been sold their houses, the personnel of the post-sales department known as *GEO coach* or *GEOcolaboradores* [GEO instructor or GEO collaborator] invite the residents from each *privada* (between 25 and 60 property owners) to a two-hour meeting with the aim of setting up the first GEO community. Each participant is expected to bring or take from the “GEO instructors” an extra copy of the “Property manual”, grab a chair and gather round in a semi-circle in the parking lots or common gardens of the corresponding *privada*. The instructor, standing in front of the group, opens the meeting by introducing some ideas about the community life that the residents, now considered Casas GEO *co-partners*, are expected to adopt:

“Let me start by saying that all of you have come here to fulfil a dream, the dream of community. This is the time for change so let’s get started!”

A GEO community is formed by all of you. It is about getting families together. It is about holding hands and working for a common project. It is about building a future for your children, living properly, with a sense of decency. It is having a positive mindset and enthusiasm. It about forging a new life here, in “Casas GEO: the best place to live.” [Ricardo, 37. GEO instructor. August 5, 2007. Zapata, Morelos].⁷⁰

Then he asks everybody to open their manual and carries on the meeting by reading out loud what constitutes a GEO community. Phrases like “pro-active residents”, “the best lifestyle”, “innovation”, “self-management” and “determination” emerge from this first reading. The instructor usually asks people to take an active part in the meeting by reading aloud the guiding principles of a GEO community that broadly states the following:

- i) It is managed by a board of neighbours made up of different residents who are periodically elected;
- ii) It is supported by positive and enthusiastic residents who obtain membership to the community by paying a neighbourhood fee and by actively participating in community meetings and social gatherings;
- iii) It is supported by the actions of all the community members - property owners and the board of neighbours - who, through principles of respect, good manners, commitment and co-responsibility make life in the community a unique experience. (Manual del Propietario, n.d:3-6).

⁷⁰ *Casas GEO: El mejor lugar para vivir* [Casas GEO: the best place to live] and *Casas GEO te cambia la vida* [Casas GEO change your life] are two slogans of the company that appear in the deeds, mortgage and advertising

4.2.1 The “GEO spirit”. “*Estrategias para vivir como se debe*”⁷¹

The meeting starts to take shape when the “GEO instructor” introduces the notion of the “GEO spirit” or the “GEO attitude”, meaning the idea of forming part of a broader group of people who think, believe and work for the same cause, while seeking to pursue a new way of life in a GEO housing development complex. The “GEO spirit” is explained by the instructors as a set of strategies that encourage people to have a positive attitude towards life so that they can *vivir como se debe* [live as they should]. In Spanish the implication of the term covers a broad notion of ‘living in a different way’ for instance by complying with the rules, stop drinking, finding a good job or getting settled. In this case, it is by embracing what the “GEO instructors” call *una mente emprendedora* [an enterprising mind] or a *perfil de triunfador* [a leadership profile] which entails persistence, self-confidence, innovation, assertiveness, character and, most importantly, a positive attitude to facing the common difficulties of life.

In the instructor discourse, the exercise of the “GEO spirit” can bring many benefits to life: a happy home, a good job and friendly relations with neighbours. It is an important way to achieve the “GEO attainable lifestyle” that, as explained in the previous chapter, comprised the company slogan and summarised one of its main objectives. It entails the selling of ‘dreams’, aspirations and new lifestyles, rather than simply houses; and also of what the residents aspired to when they became the owners of a GEO house. These ‘aspirations’ were referred to in a TV advertisement broadcast in 2008 as:

“Today is the time for your family to live safely, in tranquility and harmony in a pretty place, improving their quality of life forever. Today is the time to choose the best place ... Today I choose Casas GEO, will you?”

The relationship between adopting a “GEO spirit” and the opportunity to achieve the “GEO attainable lifestyle” was explained by the “Condominium Life Manager” as follows:

⁷¹ Translation. Strategies for living as one should.

“In our philosophy becoming a Casas GEO proprietor does not only entail owning a house. It is about having a decent life ... a life where there is a cohesive family, a nice house, a stable job that could pay, for instance, for education ... A life where good relations with neighbours are possible. We want to change people’s attitude to life ... We want to form leaders ... Our philosophy is inspired by the methodology *El Coaching Orientado al Talento* [Training Geared to Skills] provided by the renowned Certificated Programme called *La OlaCoach*. Basically *OlaCoach* is an organisation that helps people to display their potential ... their skill in their personal and professional lives. We follow the same philosophy; the idea is to make people feel that they can *vivir como se debe* [live as they should]. We believe in the principle of attraction: if you wish and work hard for something, the fruits will come. The coaching seeks to train people how to obtain this fruit.” [Manager of the Condominium life, GEO Morelos. October 13, 2007. Zapata, Morelos].

The manager added that the principles of the “Training Geared to Skills” had given the company the ‘know-how’ to encourage residents to “become leaders or forgers of their own ‘lifestyle’; for instance through group discussions, or the use of songs, jokes and a particular jargon to understand new concepts. These strategies are also designed to help residents to boost their self-confidence so they can set an objective in their lives, design an action plan and become committed to achieving a goal.

The instruction methodology includes personal and professional training. On the personal level for instance, the workshop deals with issues of self-confidence, self-approval and communications skills. On a professional level, there is a focus on the development of enterprising skills (decision-making, efficiency, strategic thinking and competitiveness). The practice of both levels is what the instructors call an “enterprising mind” or a “leader profile”. This set of incentives reflects the psychological identification and set of signs and values that – pace Rose (1996) – form an essential part of people’s commitment to “new communities”.

When following ‘the coaching’ methodology, the “GEO instructors” use different strategies to encourage leadership and an enterprising spirit to form enduring GEO communities. The first strategy is to help people to find their “inner” entrepreneurial skills with self-help books such as *Detrás de la mente del vencedor* [Inside the mind of the winner], *El secreto* [The secret], *Las 21 leyes irrefutables del liderazgo* [The 21 irrefutable laws of leadership]. The use of these books shows the endless opportunities people have to become a leader for life. The general purpose is to ‘teach’ people to

develop psychological skills, for instance, to confront their personal failures and learn from their mistakes in a determined way or, alternatively, to acquire an ability to be decisive in their thinking so as to be able to act positively and become ‘personal leaders’. The instructors select quotations from books to help people contextualise the ideas in their living space. For example, a regularly cited book, “Inside the mind of winners”, is used by instructors to encourage residents to accept that the reality in Casas GEO is what people expected it to be:

“Listen everybody; this is what we call a classic! It says: “Pause a moment and think. How are you using your scraps of time? How many days do you have left to live? Really try and calculate this. Now, when you know the limited number of days you have, ask yourself what do I want to do? How am I going to live these days?”

So, fill your days with positive thoughts! Don’t be one of those negative residents who are always complaining. Tell me!! what is your attitude when one of your neighbours complains about the lack of transport or when she complains that she has to walk 35 minutes to get to the nearest Oxxo [supermarket]? What is the correct answer everybody? ... Be positive, you have a new house! Do things step by step. Today, you can walk and lose those extra kilos you have! Tomorrow you can take a taxi or perhaps drive your new car! ... Carlos Bruke [the author of the book] says “the actual reasons for my decision are always mine alone!” ... you took the right decision by buying a GEO property, now take hold of the reins of your life and join the group. Make things work here and today!!!” [Rubén, 31. GEO instructor. August 19, 2007. Zapata, Morelos].

The residents are told they can embrace the new life at GEO with a positive attitude, if they begin ‘practising’ the process of community identification by using a new jargon to refer to their neighbours and the new place where they live. For example instructors encourage people to make a subtle shift from words like *unidad habitacional* [social interest estate building] or *patio de juegos* [playground] to *conjunto* [housing complex] and *club de juegos* [playground club]. In the same way, they suggest people find new phrases as a way of ‘appropriating’ their new space, this time by adding the GEO prefix in ways that can sound familiar to them. For example, the common area that surrounds the elevated water tank could be called “*GEO plaza*” and the common gardens the “*GEO club de juegos*” [GEO playground club] or the “*GEO club de playa*” [the GEO beach club] if the *privada* is equipped with a swimming pool. Another way of

bringing about a new community identification is by conveying the importance of “treating neighbours with respect”. Joel gave the following advice:

“Remember ladies, try to be courteous to others, your neighbour is not “*La del 6*”, she is Mrs. López. Equally, he is not *El Bolas* or *El Tuerkas* just because you saw him fixing his car, but Mr. López.” [Joel, 40s. GEOInstructor. August 12, 2007. Zapata, Morelos].

Addressing people by their names rather than by using the house number marks a distinction between Bosques residents and a common practice in *vecindades* [house tenements] and social interest apartment buildings.

This stress on new jargon and symbols of identification typically witnessed at these meetings is the perfect preamble for talking about the importance of the “GEO spirit” for the community-making process. Residents become more participatory when the instructors raise a matter that has to be solved by the groups. The idea is to make people examine examples that could either obstruct or assist the GEO communities to teach their doctrine. Examples like “how to solve a problem with a neighbour?” or “how to approach a resident who is making a noise and disturbing the sleep of a baby?” are mixed with examples that can hold the interest of people, like “what are the key factors needed for a successful business?”, or “what helps you to get a job promotion?” The words that help people deal with the everyday problems are dialogue, confidence, character and determination.

Finally, the instructors try to gain people’s interest in the “*Socio GEO*” [GEO member/affiliation] project, a multi-level organisation that operates at a national level and involves residents working as advertisers or sales personnel for Casas GEO. This is presented as an opportunity for someone to start his/her own business in a quasi federation with other residents /salesmen. The residents are invited to become ‘Socios’ by recommending potential buyers through the “*Recomienda y Gana*” [Recommend and Gain] programme (Casas GEO, 2012b).⁷² The evidence of membership is a plastic card with the GEO logo on it and which works as both a discount card in supermarkets or department stores and as a money saver card. If a

⁷² Please note, the \$ is not a typo, *Socio* is written as *\$ocio* as a rather clumsy reference to partnership bringing financial reward.

resident recommends a potential buyer they receive points on their card which can be redeemed in selected supermarkets and furniture stores or as vouchers to attend a self-help conference or training course for personal improvement. If people are really motivated to do so, then the training courses can allow a resident to become an instructor.

As the substitution of ‘\$’ for ‘S’ in the nomenclature of ‘Socio’ implies, a close partnership with GEO promises ‘success’ in material ways. Again, however, this success is also strongly performative. A 2008 Annual Report for GEO entitled “*Ciudadano Corporativo Responsable*” [Responsible Corporate Citizenship] noted a convention organised by the Casas GEO head office at which people were to embrace the GEO spirit. On this occasion, the gathering of sales personnel at a hotel was entertained by famous TV comedians and the meeting was chaired by an author of the self-help books used in the GEO communities workshops. Selected employees received the “*Héroes GEO*” award for their annual performance (Corporación GEO, 2008).

4.2.2 The GEO religion

The rules that make the GEO communities function are explained at the end of the meeting, once the residents are familiar with the new jargon and the symbols of identification. The “Property manual” includes a set of clauses that are outlined in the *Ley sobre el regimen de condominio de inmuebles para el estado de Morelos* [By-law of the Condominium Property Regime of the state of Morelos] (Periódico Oficial del Estado de Morelos Tierra y Libertad 3677, 1994).⁷³ This is an act of legislation designed to regulate residential areas that share amenities and services (i.e. apartment buildings, condominiums, or enclosed neighbourhoods [*fraccionamientos*] and, most recently, large-scale housing complexes). It also includes some regulations to determine whether the developer is responsible for altering the original construction design. The Property manual serves as a guideline for construction - underscored by legal requisites

⁷³ A condominium regime is legally defined as “the absolute ownership of a housing-unit based on a legal description of the space the unit occupies, plus an undivided ownership of the common elements. Each unit owner has an individual title to the space inside his unit, and each unit owner has an undivided interest in the physical components of the condominium buildings and land”. Author’s translation. Periódico Oficial del Estado de Morelos Tierra y Libertad 3677. Art. 4. (1994:3).

- and codes of behaviour for residents and guests which are illustrated in simple language, with drawings and checklists.

The regulations are wide-ranging and address the ‘rights and wrongs’ of life in condominium. They are divided into more than a dozen different clauses and include warnings about excessive noise in the evening, misconduct in common areas such as talking loudly, drinking, wearing inappropriate clothes (i.e., no bikinis, no naked upper body) and keeping pets. (See image 4 as examples of the by-laws). They also contain a small number of ‘tips’ regarding ‘positive behaviour’ and lay down the conditions for the mandatory payment of maintenance charges, the holding of neighbourhood meetings and voting procedures for the neighbourhood reps. (Manual del Propietario, n.d:13-45).

This image, illustrates the by-laws explained in drawings and checklists, has been removed for copyright reasons.

Image 4. By-laws in the Property manual

Source: Manual del Propietario. GEO Morelos, n.d.

The instructors treat the regulations as ‘suggestions’ or ‘tips’ for improving coexistence between the neighbours rather than as hard-and-fast rules. Yet, one instructor, Rubén, offered perhaps a more revealing sense of how the manual is viewed.

“The rules written in the manual” Rubén stated “are the bible of GEO. They should be taken as the pillars of the residents’ life ... we spend time with the people to instil this idea ... my job as an instructor is to help people accept it as a religion.”

The instructors stress that the residents should memorise the ‘tips’ seen in the “Property manual” so that they can be applied to their lives and give the following explanation:

“The coaching methodology means that participants should memorise the goals. We read the rule and explain it several times ... we use examples and we joke with people. We believe in the power of the groups. People get more stimulated when they are together. A good exercise is to repeat [the tips] several times and to memorize them in groups, as a mantra or as a religion.” [Rubén, 31. GEO instructor. August 19, 2007. Zapata, Morelos].

The residents are given a lesson in how to memorise the text when the instructors pick out a common example of a misdemeanour, for instance “hanging out clothes” or an example of the kind of conduct that is expected such as putting up “Christmas Decorations”. They then ask people whether they approve or disapprove of these actions, and with the use of familiar phrases such as *sí se puede* [yes we can], applause or verbal censure like “not in this place”. The ultimate sign that the meetings are going well is when participants express their enthusiasm and positive attitudes, holding up their hands and shouting phrases that remind everybody of their affiliation to the new community. These ‘spontaneous’ comments are often repeats of GEO slogans “*Hoy eligo vivir en un mejor lugar!, y tu?*” [Today I’ve decided to live in the best place!, and you?]; “*Nosotros podemos y queremos tener una nueva vida!*” [We can and we want to have a new life]; or the extended phrase *en México, sí se puede, sí se puede!, go, go, go!*, with subsequent spontaneous applause and jokes made by participants.

As Carlos Monsiváis observes in his essay *La hora del ascenso social* [The time for social climbing], this phenomenon of expressed aspiration is a kind of self-motivation which he describes as the “new religion of success ... a religion where individual improvement and success are venerated” (1995:214). According to Monsiváis, these

meetings form part of a set of rituals and practices that allow people to take part in the life of a city that often excludes them. He argues that the ritual of self-motivated groups is a potent strategy for an imaginary social ascent. They are the context where all kinds of sales personnel – for cosmetics, Tupperware, shoes or jewellery - can briefly become leaders or heroes. Like the participants at the GEO meeting, the individuals described by Monsiváis are a group of sales personnel who internalise/memorise the rules of individual success in different ways; for instance by adopting what he calls a “good archetype”. One example is the “entrepreneurship look” which is a strategy that makes people look taller, slimmer and more confident and thus a successful salesman. Monsiváis also gives details of the practices used to “overcome fears” and achieve individual success, for instance through the use of videos, making speeches and using sales strategies in front of relatives. Alternatively, they can attempt to acquire a new personality in front of a mirror by practising the jargon from the self-help books. Phrases such as *Alturízate* [reach a high goal] and *Como te ves, te impones* [the way you show yourself you project to others] accompanied by phrases in English that form part of “the jargon of success” (Monsiváis, 1995: 212, 216). People might even imagine a promising future by identifying themselves with condors, eagles, tigers and lions, ‘figures’ who are able to “keep a clear distance from el *naquerío*” (Monsiváis, Ibid: 216). Author’s translation.⁷⁴ In Monsiváis terms, the “religion of success”, a combination of personal commitment and good luck, is used as a strategy to overcome failure, family disgrace or unemployment.

In the case of GEO, after people have been ‘enlightened’ with the GEO spirit with its new terminology, ideas, and the potential benefits as a means of constituting a GEO community, the instructor ends the session by proposing a neighbourhood rep. to the group. The introduction might be pitched as:

⁷⁴ Monsiváis’ dissection of the ‘leadership techniques’ for distancing oneself from el *naquerío* can be understood through Lomnitz-Adler (1996) who explains that the *naco* category has always been a derogatory term used as an insult against peasants, someone in a low-status or anyone who stood for provincial backwardness. The urban uncultured, the uncivilized, the unemployed or looter, or simply the masses can be categorised as *nacos* and “represent the counterpoint at the level of distinction: fear of proletarianization and of blending in with the ‘vulgar classes’... The *naco* then ... could only be redeemed through an international culture” (Ibid:58). To Monsiváis, “The time for social climbing” alludes to what Lomnitz terms the “open or “popular” *nacos*... the “Nac-Art,” which is based on commercial North American culture, a distinction that flags an elitization of history” (ibid:58) In the context of this research, the GEO markers or *GEOismos* (leadership workshops, jargon, names of newborns and of private schools) illustrate many of Lomnitz’s analysis about the new “Nac-Art” aesthetic.

“Mr. Sánchez, you look quite interested in becoming the first administrator of your *privada*. You have a positive attitude. Please don't be shy about nominating yourself. The Neighbourhood wants you as a rep!” [Rubén, 31. GEO instructor. August 19, 2007. Zapata, Morelos].

It normally takes less than ten minutes for the proposed resident to accept the appointment and sign the “red book” where the subsequent neighbourhood agreements will be recorded. As a guide to leadership skills, the newly appointed rep is given a couple of books that are used by instructors during the meeting and several brochures about the *OlaCoach* methodology, and after nearly three hours, the meeting comes to an end. The participants clap or hold their hands and repeat the GEO mantra “*sí se puede, sí se puede!, sí se puede!*”

In the following weeks, the appointed rep has to face the challenge of making the corresponding GEO community survive or even thrive. This is expected to be done by working with a board - normally a secretary and a neighbourhood watch - and by fostering the “GEO spirit” through monthly meetings that might take the form of a ‘leadership workshop’. As with any other self-governed community the neighbourhood board has the task of holding neighbourhood meetings as well as of enforcing the internal bylaws. But in the GEO case the board is not an ad hoc arrangement but must assert the legal status of the GEO Community through establishing itself as *asociación civil* [civic association, AC]. AC status empowers the board to enforce the internal rules of the neighbourhood. This requirement comes as a surprise to both board members and residents as the need to formalise the GEO community as an AC is not mentioned at the workshops.⁷⁵ Moreover, of course, when the residents attended the workshop, extolled the “GEO Spirit” and had a rep nominated on their behalf they were not endorsing a particular set of legal rules but a set of principles and codes of moral behaviour. In the aftermath, guidelines had become rules.

⁷⁵ Moreover, in the state of Morelos, it is unclear what legal status a board constituted as an AC would actually have as a Condominium Law did not exist at the time. Legal constitution it seems is enough to bring powers without the latter being officially sanctioned.

4.2.3 The collapse of the GEO communities

After a couple of months, the neighbourhood board generally breaks up and the recently formed GEO community ceases to function or changes the form of organisation from that suggested by the GEO instructors in the coaching workshop. For instance, some people dissolved the board in their *privadas*, others modified it by appointing new members with different responsibilities, for instance by appointing a “security supervisor” or a “president” (as it is explained later in this chapter). Others failed to nurture the “GEO spirit” through the mantas, songs or by exchanging ideas on leadership in the subsequent neighbourhood meetings. My neighbours put this shift from enthusiasm to collapse down to a concern with their own lives and a lack of time to ‘practise’ the leadership skills and technical knowledge taught by the manuals and self-help books. Some argued, however, that the ‘coaching lesson’ was probably one of the best memories of their early life in GEO Bosques. There was also a general agreement that the ideas of self-determination and courage had helped many of them to cope with their difficulties as shown in the following comments:

“you know, there was a combination of happiness and dissatisfaction with our houses, with our new life. The shared enthusiasm worked well! ... In a way, [it] helped us to start from the bottom, alone ... What I learned that day is that it is only with a positive mind that one can cope with problems and slowly achieve something.” [Laura, 43. Ex-neighbourhood rep, elected during the workshop].

The effects lasted longer for some of the others. Some people became ‘\$ocios’, members and kept their card and “Property manual” as proof of their proprietorship and claimed they were ‘aficionados’ of the self-help books and guidance from the coaching workshop. Some mentioned that they were active participants of leadership blogs and groups such as *El Grupo de Liderazgo Ejecutivo* [The Executive Leadership Group], and the international Landmark Education Group. These ‘aficionados’ openly admitted that “personal improvement”, “self-determination” and “the desire for triumph” formed part of their new values and gave them a new mode of life. Their opinions and memories showed that the GEO ideas of leadership and enterprise had a positive impact, at least in times of hardship, which constituted one of the objectives of the company - to make residents capable of solving their problems and giving direction to their new lives.

Research informants also commented that they became less supportive of the GEO communities concept in practice because, and above all, it was impossible to comply with the by-laws when the complex lacked adequate infrastructure or basic amenities. As I have already intimated, GEO stands accused of using the self-help methodologies and principles of good behaviour as a means to conceal the poor quality of construction and flaws in their housing model. In general terms, as already mentioned in Chapter Three, the history of GEO Morelos has been marked by examples of negligence and breaches of regulations, including a rare instance in 2000 of having its construction licence suspended for serious irregularities in the Rinconada Acolapa complex. As also outlined in Chapter Three, one of the approaches of Casas GEO to problems of quality has been to invest in the ‘image’ of the company by strengthening the work of the post-sales department. It is difficult, however, for neighbours to adhere to concepts of behaviour in common areas when those areas have been left as dusty open areas or have been taken over as private spaces by property holders.

Finally, the GEO community concept suffered from the disjuncture between what GEO presented at the workshops as a mechanism for neighbourly ethos and individual success and the subsequent legal reality of a legally constituted neighbourhood board. The “Law of *Fraccionamientos*, Condominiums and Urban Complexes of the Municipality of Cuernavaca” stipulates that any neighbourhood associations working in a “Condominium property regime” should acquire the ‘legal’ status of a civil association and thus be able to enforce the by-laws (Periódico Oficial del Estado de Morelos Tierra y Libertad 4149, 2001:6, 13). However, it is difficult and expensive to seek this legal status which requires the support of the majority of tenants (51 percent at the first neighbourhood meeting and 65 percent at a subsequent meeting), certification by a notary public and a renewal of the licence every four years (Periódico Oficial del Estado de Morelos Tierra y Libertad 3677, 1994:15).⁷⁶ Hence, in practice, the condominium rules only act as ‘suggestions’ which the boards work informally to apply and with which neighbours comply in diverse ways, sometimes creating new rules and creating inconsistency between resolution of individual and collective needs.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Moreover, the state of Morelos lacks a *Procuraduría Social* [Social Attorney General] or department responsible for supporting measures taken by neighbourhood associations.

⁷⁷ According to the Casas GEO post-sales office manager, there were very few legally constituted neighbourhood associations in Morelos. The existing ones were located in the new Casas GEO residential district (the upper-middle class district) and were run by external agencies.

4.3 The beginning of a community life

There were four to eight months between the time when people are given the GEO community workshop and when they move into the houses and start to make a life in GEO Bosques. Over this time people recalled losing ‘faith’ in the ‘GEO philosophy’ and instead concentrated on their new life and house, families and jobs. Above all, the houses required major improvements in order to be habitable. Residents narrated how the houses lacked flooring, kitchen utilities, fitted wardrobes and internal doors, and that walls were unsealed and both walls and ceilings had holes left by builders for the supposed installation of bathroom accessories and electricity sockets. Outside the conditions were no better. There was uneven and arid ground in the common areas. The walls surrounding the *privadas* were low, and none of them had a lockable gate or guard post. In the case of the two “plus sections”, there was no swimming pool or clubhouse and there were no signs of the individual front gardens that people had expected. Many summed the work up as being *obra negra* [unfinished].

People’s feelings about these conditions are best described by Memo:

“Everything was only partly completed or suspended; like when you run out of money and can’t finish a construction. I felt a lump in my throat and I couldn’t put it in words because it was my family’s patrimony. It was almost impossible to stop thinking about having another house, one that is more deserving of respect. When I passed my hand over the walls and felt the damp I knew that we couldn’t move in soon. The house was in *obra negra* ... It was like receiving the shell of your house in 52 square meters, and then asking what can I do with this? ... It was difficult to adapt ideas seen on TV or in a brochure, as there was nothing to start from.” [Memo, 46. Entrepreneur, insurance company]

María supported this view and expressed her frustration at being forced to live without basic amenities even in a “Plus Area”:

“The conditions at the beginning were harsh, as I was forced to live among a group of houses that seemed to be on top of each other. Nothing else. It was all grey and plain. This was a house of the ‘no’s’ ... no trees or green areas, no shops, fondas [small restaurants], no public transport and no swimming pool.

The main avenue had not been paved yet ... It was all a lie, and I was here, in a new city, with a new job, with my new house, but it was all a lie. I got so depressed ... when you buy a house you can't look back ... I had to start from scratch, bit by bit." [Municipal worker, 54. Member of the ladies' committee].

For Memo, María and others, the "Property manual" was almost useless as a guide to dealing with the problems related to poor quality construction, the lack of planning and the incompetence of the developer in failing to deal with faults. Instead, the different stories of occupation in GEO Bosques reminded me of the classic studies of peripheral urbanisation in Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s (Gilbert and Ward, 1985; Lindón, 1999, Lomnitz, 1975; Perlman, 1976). The GEO residents too realised that they would have to use their own economic and social resources to cater for what they considered to be basic shelter needs. As a result, the residents of GEO Bosques engaged in a similar process of incremental consolidation more commonly associated with informal settlements in Latin America and in contradiction of their new aspired-to middle-class lifestyle.

The GEO residents, however, faced a problem not commonly encountered in informal settlements. Repairs and alterations to doors, water tanks, tiles etc. automatically invalidated the guarantees in their contracts with Casas GEO. To make matters worse, many of the guarantees and insurance policies taken out by residents, as well as the financing arrangements to acquire the property, were in the name of one family member whereas the claim against GEO was undertaken by another member, or a relative or even tenant. When their claim was rejected, the residents realised that they had to get organised in community for achieving the 'stylish' houses and exclusive, secure, *privadas* they dreamed of living in.

Compared with the "yes we can" notions of 'self-help' espoused at the workshops, the rather more familiar, to students of informal settlements at least, form of self-help that residents deployed in order to make good the physical flaws in GEO Bosques was called *Operativo Rescate* [Rescue Operation] by residents of the *privada* where I lived. *Operativo Rescate*, however, was talked about as more than an effort to make good: it was also a means to 'rescue' people's savings and the value of their house [*patrimonio*].

This is a rather different inflection of the term from what might be used in an informal settlement. And there were other differences too. Unlike an informal settlement where the self-building process can take years, the ‘rescuing’ of GEO Bosques could be undertaken fast, indeed ‘needed’ to be undertaken fast in the neighbours’ view. The unfinished houses and un-serviced settlement brought back memories of *colonias populares* where some had lived before and did not want associated with a place that signified mobility and opportunities for a better life. The process of ‘rescuing’ a finished and planned project affected profoundly the way the community at GEO Bosques conceptualised itself in the years ahead.

4.3.1 Getting organised with the *operativo rescate*

The process of ‘rescuing’ and improving *privada Colorín* took an individual route which is reflected in the studies conducted by Esquivel (2006), García Peralta and Hoffer (2006) and Maya (2005). These authors argue that people living in *Casa GEO* complexes are “modern home builders” in so far as they engage in building, improving and extension work over a long period of time.⁷⁸ I mostly concur with this view but in the case of GEO Bosques the process of becoming a ‘house builder’ was focussed on a search for security. The physical shortcomings of GEO Bosques and its isolated location, adjacent to the sand mines and illegal open rubbish tips, meant residents equated ‘rescue’ with tackling multiple feelings of personal insecurity. Arrival at the complex required passing factories and warehouses, associated with cantinas during the daytime and motels at night, but once within the site there were constant electricity cuts that obliged people to walk along dark unpaved streets. Finally, the houses themselves offered little protection, as people discovered how front doors and windows could be opened with the use of a paperclip or by slipping a credit card or piece of cardboard along the side of the frame.

One security measure was to bring dogs to the houses and keep them locked up for days so that neighbours and strangers thought that the house was inhabited. José explained how this system worked:

⁷⁸ Personal communication with María Teresa Esquivel. April 27, 2007. Mexico City.

“the bigger or more aggressive the dog was, the better was the feeling of peace or protection ... My pit bull was trained. It is a particularly aggressive animal and we had to be extremely careful not to let it leave the house. And in a certain way, it was a very good protection because in the first year, there were builders around night and day ... my niece and wife were alone most of the day.” [José, 46. Telmex store Manager].

A more tangible strategy was to ‘cage’ the houses with security grilles and put in as many locks as possible. People had a wide range of options offered by different suppliers. The “essential package” for instance included grilles on front door and windows, a “full package” which involved caging the entire house-front and back doors, windows, rooftop and backyard, as well as items such as cars, gas tanks and water heaters that could be stolen, damaged or altered or the cheaper alternative of chaining items (See Photo 14). This caging strategy, as explained in Chapter Three, introduced the very image associated with large-scale public sector ‘social interest’ housing estates that architect García-Vélez had criticised. His view that good, flexible, design could ‘mend’ problems of security without compromising aesthetic sensibility was clearly not shared by residents faced with no street lamps and unpaved roads.

Caging was not only a tangible strategy for securing houses and possessions but also reflected a personal attitude towards the concept of space. People recalled that specific places were particularly unsafe and had to be avoided. These places might be the street grid connecting the complex, the blind corners of housing blocks, the dark common areas inside the *privadas* and the community plaza. Ironically this last space had been planned by GEO to play a community-making role. At the same time, certain hours of the day were never spent outside the house and some people would only walk in the streets after taking certain precautions. Although there are no specific stories to provide supporting evidence for this assumption (other than vague expressions like “it was unsafe” or “deserted”, or the fact that a few gas tanks, boilers, and construction materials had disappeared), the narratives suggested strong feelings of distrust amongst

the neighbours. Privately some residents confided that some of the robberies had been carried out by their own neighbours who, in their view, were still strangers and failed to respect other people’s things. These feelings of insecurity and of living surrounded by

strangers caused people constant anxiety, which in the coming years took the form of expressions such as ‘bad neighbours’ and ‘unsafe’ or ‘problematic places’ (this will be explained in Chapter Six).

With regard to housing improvements, some stated that they had resolved problems to do with heating, lack of ventilation, and water leaks around the windows and under the doors through a gradual, often informal, process of self-help at weekends, during holidays and after work. It was a period, according to Lydia, when anything was allowed:

“Any idea that could help repair the different defects of the houses. In some houses, the outside walls needed waterproofing. The problem for others was the heat inside the houses ... the problems differed from block to block. They might be the accumulation of mud or the amount of dust, or the heat or lack of light, or the smell coming from the flooded areas. We did not pay any attention to whether GEO would agree with our ideas. Any ideathat could improve the houses was welcome and sometimes copied by others.” [Lydia, 41. Housewife and administrator of the *Privada Colorín*].

Several of the newcomers recalled that the temperatures inside houses were high enough to allow people to feel the heat coming up from the floor while wearing sandals or thin-soled shoes, which meant that they repeatedly had to throw water on the concrete or tiled floors.⁷⁹ Another measure taken to reduce the heat during the hot months, as well as the problem of water flowing under doors during the rainy season, was to add small front porches made of asbestos or plastic.

⁷⁹ A recent study revealed that houses in Las Américas, one of the largest ARA complexes, experience temperatures of over 65 degrees Celsius. The size of the dwellings, the construction materials, mostly pre-fabricated, and the nature of the terrain were causing an excessive concentration of heat. El Universal. Estado de México. (2009). *Fraccionamiento de Ecatepec se convierte en una bolsa de calor*. Available: <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/edomex/410.html>. Last accessed 14th Sep 2009.



Photo 14. Caging homes at GEO Bosques

Source: Cristina Inclán-Valadez, 2008

Some people embarked on larger constructions projects by pulling down walls or doors to enlarge their kitchens and bathrooms; these constructions entailed leaving a pile of cement and construction materials in the front areas. The residents who embarked on these larger projects stated that they had spent months living in one part of the house in ways reminiscent of Oscar Lewis' account of *Casa Grande*. Rosa, a 40 year old housewife and fruit seller, her husband Justino, a 39 year old chewing-gum distributor and their three sons were living in two rooms: the children in the cot and the couple with the baby on a mattress on the floor, with their personal belongings kept in

cardboard boxes, and with improvised spaces where children could eat, play or watch television. The house looked ‘semi-rescued’ as it was dark, lacked flooring and was full of cardboard boxes (see photo 15). Rosa commented that her “house was not a house” and a place she could be fond of, but was always ‘incomplete’ or ‘not ready’ to live in, to cook a proper meal, to invite relatives or listen to music.



Photo 15. Rosa’s daughter (Karina) in her ‘incomplete’ home

Source: Cristina Inclán-Valadez, 2007

4.3.2 The ‘community spirit’ of the *operativo rescate*

Although the housing improvements carried out by my neighbours in their role of ‘home builders’ were a key factor during almost the entire time I spent in the complex, this was only one of the roles played by the residents. Many argued that the real rescue efforts involved the community organisation in issues that mattered to all residents, the meeting of collective needs for basic services. The best illustration of the *operativo rescate* were the *brigadas* [brigades] whichlike the *faenas* [cleaning tasks] carried out in informal settlements required commitment to a certain amount of unpaid work for the good of the community (Ward and Chant, 1987). The brigades usually entailed forming small teams of neighbours living close to each other to work on a single task. This might be security, water distribution, cleaning initiatives or to ensure the delivery of a specific service. The water brigades, for instance, brought *pipas* [tankers] from the

municipality and shared the water between neighbours. The brigades for security involved a system of nightshifts to watch the main entrance and to control the entry and departure of construction workers working in different houses and of street sellers who were allowed access to the *privada*. The Sunday *faenas* involved cleaning the drainage canal, fumigating the area to eradicate dengue and painting the parking lots.

Since the brigades operated on the basis of carrying out provisional work mostly with the closest neighbours, the notion of ‘community’ as defined by the “GEO instructors” became of minor importance to people’s lives. The brigades appeared at moments of real need and vanished when the problem had been solved. However, as a temporary resource, these small and intermittent efforts helped families to bond with each other and share common interests. Each brigade either brought people closer and led to friendships being formed, some of them long-lasting, or revealed differences between them resulting in neighbours staying apart. Some of the social activities that I witnessed during my fieldwork, such as the Wednesday coffee gatherings amongst a group of women or the monthly *tandas* [rotative saving system], all originated from the brigades.

As a result of this cooperation between the closest neighbours, a set of norms began to be established. According to Laura, building a front garden required setting out “acceptable regulations” regarding its use and maintenance:

“We were three families who started out with the idea of building a garden together. It was cheaper and we all acted like good neighbours ... First, we brought a truck with stones and concrete to fill the gaps. Then we purchased the grass together and the rest of what was needed ... another neighbour decided to join us. We decided to leave the garden open, without any fences or gates [between the houses]. The idea was to have a large common garden but just for ourselves as families. Nobody else could use the garden, but this was fair, since we had made it ourselves. We added the ponds and terraces later, again after reaching an agreement.” [Laura, 43. NGO worker].

These norms or ‘acceptable regulations’ operated through the ‘culture of the block’; community was not a practice at housing complex level, since the complex was too large to establish face-to-face relationships. Nevertheless, collective effort such as brigades and *tandas* forged relationships between close neighbours that afforded

feelings of pride and identification on a larger scale. When a *privada* or GEO Bosques in general was cleaned or a facility improved, it gave residents a general sense that people wanted to convert the place into a ‘real’ GEO community (see photos 16 and 17 as examples of cooperation).

During my fieldwork people recalled the ‘community spirit’ that arose during the *operativo rescate* and regretted that it was gradually lost. It was often said that the “feeling of acting together for the same cause” could never reach a similar level as that witnessed during the first years. However, informants meant by this more than an attitude toward the community but rather mutual help patterns and support given in times of personal need or during an urgent situation. For example, Héctor described having kept the “GEO spirit” because among his various jobs he used to drive some of the children to school. A similar case was Celina, whose ‘sense of community’ was attributed to her “good will” because she lent money to neighbours, her organising skills in running a monthly *tanda* and invitations to her closest neighbours to say prayers for those neighbours that she thought were in need. What this ‘community spirit’ revealed, however, was that life in Casas GEO was very much confined to the house, the closest neighbours and what could happen in the space nearby.



Photo 16. Community making: *faenas* and common gardens 1

Source: Cristina Inclán-Valadez, 2007.



Photo 17. Community making: *faenas* and common gardens 2

Source: Cristina Inclán-Valadez, 2007.

4.3.3 The community leadership

In spite of the mutual help and support patterns that people displayed in the *privada*, some residents never abandoned the idea of getting organised on a more permanent basis. There were pressing needs such as securing the *privada* with gates and private guards, and ensuring a regular supply of drinking water or garbage collection. In the absence of an organisation of the type promoted by GEO, exuding a sense of ‘managerial’ efficiency and of a strong cohesion and neighbourliness among residents, individuals often referred to by residents as *padrinos* [godparents], presidents or organisers emerged. These leaders operated along three lines. First, they set out to tackle specific interests often excluding the majority of neighbours in a *privada* or complex. Second, they operated by granting concessions and even adopting quotas according to levels of financial (tips) or moral support. Finally, they operated through often loose and informal arrangements that were susceptible to change over time.

There are a number of examples of these leaders. Remedios, a 72 year old widow, was guided by principles derived from her religious community, the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Through the Witnesses, fees were collected and money was made through selling food. Neighbourhood problems were resolved using a popular radio show *La línea caliente de Giovanni* [The Giovanni Hot Line] that would air problems and connect people to service providers, but it also operated to ‘help’ or to punish neighbours by exposing their problems. As with many of the wide range of ‘educational’ soap operas or reality shows broadcast in Mexico, The Giovanni Hot Line aims to target issues often silenced in Mexico such as domestic violence, infidelity or corruption. Giovanni’s populist style has outperformed long-standing local radio programmes such as *La Hora Romántica* [The Romantic Hour] that transmits songs of Mexican idols such as Pedro Infante or Javier Solís and popular *mariachi* or *banda* music. The radio broadcaster has won status as a ‘social mediator’ in different towns in the state. Claiming to present dramatisations of real stories sent in by the audience-rivalries between neighbours, love affairs or community problems with services providers - Giovanni narrates intense melodramas that generate sympathies and discredit from the audience. He contacts the people involved and tries to mediate a solution by transmitting values of civility, respect and personal growth. Remedios saw Giovanni’s selection of cases as a mechanism of class distinction as she argued that “Giovanni knows which problems can be solved with dialogue and cooperation and which ones cannot. I think that it is not a coincidence that my phone calls or those [problems] coming from this *privada* are always welcomed [by Giovanni]”.

Isis (43 years old) was a former Casas GEO sales agent who called herself a neighbourhood administration but maintained a patron-client relationship with her neighbours. Isis worked as a *mozo* [housemaid] for about 20 weekender properties in the complex, receiving a fixed weekly salary. She used this role to ‘gatekeep’ services using GEO contacts to the benefit of the weekender owners and her own personal financial gain.

Other leaders worked intermittently when needed and receded into the background once a problem had been solved. Héctor (in his 40s, independent worker), for example, was the neighbourhood watch rep in my *privada* and spent several months sending emails to people in the complex about strategies for coping with insecurity. Samuel collected money to construct a wall between his block and the neighbouring *ejido* that often experienced fires during the hot season. Samuel’s main strategy was to organise fairs

with food stalls, a mechanical bull and *sonidera* [loud music system] to raise money. The clearest sign of a pending fair was a truck that belonged to Samuel parked in Bosques (See photo 18). The truck always looked abandoned, and certainly did not conform to a middle class urban landscape ideal, but it represented one of the most important symbols of self-organisation.



Photo 18. Samuel's parked truck

Source: Cristina Inclán-Valadez, 2007.

The most important leader to emerge in Bosques was Abelardo. A middle-aged bureaucrat and owner of two food stalls in the municipal market of Cuernavaca, Abelardo also had long-standing experience as a political negotiator on issues of land and housing tenure. He had been a community leader in La Carolina, a consolidated informal settlement made up of *paracaidistas* from the state of Guerrero, and a stronghold of the Francisco Villa Popular Front (FPFV). As an ex-resident of La Carolina and member of the FPFVI, he fitted the profile of an active resident, with the enthusiasm and ability to be a leader and to address the residents' needs. Being a bureaucrat and an activist gave him an understanding of local legislation and government "as strategic resources to exploit" (Holston, 1991:453).

Abelardo was regarded by his closest neighbours as a “natural leader” and someone who appeared at the “right moment when there were pressing needs”. His leadership began when he attempted to find a long-term solution to three key problems: constant water shortages, electricity cuts and people’s feeling of insecurity due to the lack of entrance gates and walls surrounding the *privada*. He introduced the practice of writing petitions through collectively signed letters and he acted as the political spokesman [broker] for bargaining with the relevant local authorities. Thanks to Abelardo’s negotiations with the local government and suppliers of private services, my neighbours and I had a telephone box installed within the *privada* and three extra lamp posts installed near the parking spaces. In addition, our electricity bills remained very low and my landlord Julián argued this was due to some sort of ‘concession’ given by the public company *Luz y Fuerza*, since not long before this all the residents had been *colgados* [illegally connected]. Thirteen of my neighbours managed to obtain a small elevated water tank from the SAPAC (Drinking Water and Drainage Systems of Cuernavaca), which solved the water shortage problems. By contacting the ‘right’ people, Abelardo was able to register the *privada* in the local Congress so that it was entitled to receive food vouchers and at election times to receive food or *tortilla* vouchers, t-shirts and children’s toys, which some of my neighbours appreciated.

However, Abelardo’s real skill as a community leader was displayed in bargaining with private suppliers to obtain everyday services, ranging from gas tanks to coca-cola delivery, dry cleaning services, bottled water, a taxi service and a grocery service. The regular provision of these services made a real difference to people’s lives, as they brought a sense of stability to the *privada* and seemed to confirm the much sought-after ‘plus’ status. These suppliers worked on the basis of what they called “agreements with exclusive rights” for the delivery of services and goods. This meant that the company that offered the best bid was selected as a permanent supplier of the service. In the case of water delivery, Abelardo had contacted two or three companies; each was asked to make a fixed price bid for a scheduled delivery – once or twice a week - and a payment in kind, which represented the real bid. The payment in kind could include the provision of free-of-charge services for certain houses, or the painting of parking lots, or the payment for the lockable-up gate for the *privada*. In return, the residents had to enter into a contractual agreement with the supplier for at least a two-year period. As a result

of this agreement, the water supply company *Agua de los Angeles* paid 75 percent of the cost of the forged-iron gate that enclosed the *privada*, and *Gas Nieto* refunded the expenses of the wire fencing [*reja alambrada*] that surrounded the main gate.

Provision of transport followed a similar arrangement. In this case, Abelardo contacted a cooperative of taxi drivers and offered an exclusive service to GEO Bosques and the surrounding areas by allowing a group of 12 drivers to park at the main entrance of the complex which constituted the taxi rank *Sitio de taxis Bosques*. In exchange, the taxi drivers were obliged to charge fixed rates per service (i.e MXN \$4, USD \$0.37) for a short trip, which was the equivalent of the public transport rate), plus a tariff of MXN \$2 (USD \$0.18) per trip that was collected at the end of the day by Abelardo. One of the taxi drivers calculated that this arrangement led to no fewer than 200 trips per day. Finally, the problem of garbage collection was solved with the help of El Güero, a municipal worker who agreed to collect the garbage on a door-to-door basis in exchange for ‘tips’. This system of suppliers quickly spread to the rest of the complex and the residents simply followed the same negotiation techniques as Abelardo.

The visible achievements in *privada Colorín* enabled Abelardo to become the general administrator of GEO Bosques. His aim was to provide the ‘gated look’ that the housing complex lacked and that most residents dreamed of having. In doing so, he sought to employ the ‘managerial’ form of government recommended years before by the “GEO instructors”. He persuaded the residents of other *privadas* to get together and form a “cooperative” of *privadas* to ensure the complex was secure and had a uniform appearance. The idea was that residents should negotiate to obtain their own entrance gate and Abelardo would do the same for the main entrance of the complex. Indeed, within a few months, ten *privadas* were enclosed with gates.⁸⁰ Abelardo had also obtained funding for a guardhouse and traffic control fence at the main access to GEO Bosques and hired two private guards to police the main entrance.

⁸⁰ As an example of the informal practice, some gates did not respect the boundaries established by the GEO plan and a new agreement was drawn up between the neighbours to establish rights of access and common areas.

The experience of Abelardo as a ‘natural leader’ eventually illustrates two points about *privada* and GEO complex living. First, residents’ interest in working (and living) together remained at a “culture of the block” level despite the ability of Abelardo to resolve some collective problems. An illustration concerns the failure to deliver a gate for the entire GEO Bosques complex. The proposal involved residents paying a monthly charge of MXN \$100 (USD \$9) to maintain the new ‘gated look’. But residents objected arguing that they were already paying administration charges for gates to their own *privadas*. Not even the common practice of having a *boteo* [money collection tin] was enough to persuade people to become contributors. There was disagreement about how the money should be spent and people eventually stopped paying for the private guards. An idea to wall the entire complex never got beyond the proposal stage.

Second, there was a growing mistrust of Abelardo, exemplified by the swimming pool fiasco in *Colorín*. The swimming pool had been a part of the original GEO plan but was never built. Abelardo revived the idea but again the pool was not built. According to some people in the *privada* Abelardo’s son had spent the money collected to build the swimming pool and clubhouse on buying a couple of taxis. For these and others this was proof that Abelardo was a “corrupt politician” who had used his power as a neighbourhood leader for personal benefit. When asked what kind of personal benefit, Marta (28, housewife), one of my neighbours, replied that Abelardo and his family were involved in “real politics” as he had become the chauffeur for a federal deputy and his son was in charge of the taxi drivers at the rank. Abelardo had indeed become a chauffeur but whether he had misappropriated funds is impossible to verify. Rather, his mistake was perhaps to introduce the ‘managerial’ model of neighbourhood organisation to a ‘community’ that existed at best impermanently.

4.4 Conclusions

In the introduction to Chapter Three I drew a parallel between Casas GEO and the Levittowns in the US. This chapter has analysed the ideals of ‘community’ promoted by GEO, with particular forms of organisation and purposes, and the tensions between this idea and the reality on the ground. This reality included both the physical deficiencies of the Bosques complex and the social make-up and motives of the residents. In some

senses, what I have described in this chapter is somewhat similar to the experience of Herbert Gans (1967) in his account of community life in Levittown. Gans argued that what brought the community into being was not the “pre-occupancy aspirations of the residents, but rather a complex process of external initiative and subsequent internal transformation that produced organisation which reflected the backgrounds and interests of the majority of the population” (1967:141).

Casas GEO encouraged residents to embrace a notion of partnership through which they become a “Casas GEO ambassador” - according to Isis, spreading the company’s philosophy of management, promoting particular ideas of self-help and enterprise and promoting possibilities of becoming “GEO instructors”. Despite enormous efforts by GEO that seemed to be reciprocated with residents’ enthusiasm at workshops and ceremonies for their new way of life, the GEO communities did not get off the ground. Residents did not find the adoption of new forms of organisation, with its new jargon, codes of behaviour and symbols of identification to be feasible. They preferred to stick to forms of community management to fix construction faults and to obtain security and basic services - that had been tried and tested in previous residential contexts, including informal settlements. Although most residents shared similar problems with their built space and had similar lifestyle aspirations they did not consider themselves a permanent and complex-wide community. Rather, the kind of community that emerged proved to be more socially richer and more persuasive - ‘neighbours’ established lasting socialrelationships and emotional attachments - than the “GEO instructors” had originally advocated, but it was also more segregated, short-term and manipulative.

The *operativo rescate* set up by a group of residents in the *privada* during the first years of residence illustrates the tactics of self-construction, community support and negotiation that is characteristic of informal settlements. The tension for reconciling community leadership with a self-management neighbourhood model was expressed by one of the first and most successful community leaders, Abelardo, who lost his legitimacy after trying to establish principles of accountability, steady participation and social unity amongst hundreds of families with the use of clientelistic techniques. These organisational tactics not only facilitated the corruption of the leaders but pushed residents to withdraw from dealing with broader community concerns to concentrate on solving specific problems shared only with their closest neighbours.

5 Chapter Five: The GEO residents

5.1 Introduction

Héctor was in his early forties but looked a bit older. He was tall and had grey short hair and dark skin with scars on his face; he wore tank-tops. He often carried a diet coke, apparently for his diabetes. Héctor was a good storyteller and told me about his life. He grew up in Mexico City in El Cerro del Judío, with his parents and his young brother, in an informal setting in the south of the city. When Héctor was 17 years old, his mother passed away and he left for Cancún with his older brother. He made good money there working in hotels and night clubs. At the age of 29, his brother got AIDS and died a few years later. This event caused a dramatic change in Héctor's life. He moved to Cuernavaca, found a stable job as a car mechanic working for Nissan and then Mercedes-Benz; he got married, had a daughter and bought a GEO house. Héctor believed that coming to GEO Bosques represented a number of life changes: responsibility, marriage and fatherhood, but also a degree of loss. Later, he got divorced and lost his job and his health declined. Héctor is now an alcoholic, which makes him have breakdowns followed by periods of recovery. He is also a diabetic with long-term complications such as renal failure and retina damage and has been in hospital several times. He recently converted to Evangelism and claimed it made him feel stronger and happier. The morning of one conversation, Héctor was happy and with some pride he detailed the various jobs that had allowed him to survive. I was mesmerised:

“I try to live on less than MXN \$150 a day (USD \$11). Money comes and goes ... on basic things - paying the bills, medicine, food, my daughter's expenses, her paediatrician, sometimes some treats for me, like the Palenque [cockfighting]. My debts are under control ... I use a credit card to pay other people's debt. It works for me.

Let's say that I am an independent worker. I carry out 13 different activities ... I sell honey and related products like coffee and cheese. I also sell ceramic figures of Christ; I call them the 'flash of lightning Christ' because he follows you round with his gaze. I sell second-hand clothes and furniture. I offer a delivery service and drive children to school in my van. I am a 24-hour taxi driver for any neighbours who need a service ... I wash some of my neighbours' cars. I am a mechanic too. I pay some of my neighbours' telephone, electricity and water bills. I teach artistic skating to teenagers. I sell caskets for pets that have died and include the cremation service. I sell face creams and makeup from a

catalogue. I sell activated charcoal deodorants for the smells of pets or fridges. I install kitchen appliances and sell the remaining parts on the second-hand market. I also like to act as a sort of real estate agent for houses that are to let or for sale. Ah... and I'm the neighbourhood watch rep. A great part of my 'modus vivendi' is here in *la privada*."

Months after this conversation, the pressure of a new job as a carer in a home for the elderly made him relapse into a diabetic coma. Héctor moved away to live with some relatives and I lost trace of him; according to my neighbours, he has now passed away.

Héctor's story struck me from the very beginning and provides a good starting-point for talking about my other informants. It is a story of growth and strength but also of failure, disease and sadness - a unique story of breakdowns and recovery, but at the same time, it was the story of many of my neighbours. Like Héctor, many people in GEO Bosques tend to change their jobs, houses and cities quite frequently. They move back to their previous homes or on to better ones; and this move is accompanied by feelings of hope and sadness.

These dynamics have made some residents view Bosques as atypical, dystopian and something that failed to be what it was planned to be; the residents felt that they were not real residents but people who were not supposed to be there. My landlord repeatedly warned me that there were not many nice people living in Bosques. He advised me about which neighbours I should avoid and which to visit and insisted that I must not always believe what people said. In a kind of confession he said "this is the jungle, you can find everything" - referring to prostitutes, the wife of a kidnapper and a violent father abusing his children. There were the "pretentious weekenders" he said, "who wanted to be special but slept on the floor". All and all, throughout my fieldwork, while some people expressed great disdain and suspicion towards their neighbours, others stated that only "decent" people lived there and, with some annoyance, told me that if I wanted to get to know a real Casas GEO site, I should work in the State of Mexico as there was nothing that I could get from them.

There should be nothing surprising to an urban ethnographer about the internally contradictory nature of these narratives (Ferguson, 1999; Ring, 2006). Surely, living in identical small houses, located at the outskirts of a provincial city like Cuernavaca that

retains the traces of a bygone elite and is now full of demographic changes, there must be both risks and opportunities for its inhabitants. The architecture and its location form a part of the story. The other part belongs to the people who dwell in these kinds of places. The objective of this chapter is to analyse the people who live in GEO Bosques (from now on called GEO residents), for whom, in addition to the shift they have made toward a planned and 'finished' home, living in Bosques is a significant sign of personal transition. As I argued in Chapter One, rather than adopting the 'new middle class' category, I approach the GEO residents as an *emerging cultural entity*, constructed through different practices that, taken together, speak about a new kind of urban life in Mexico. Although it is true that the people described in this chapter have gained access to a new standard of living that not long ago was only accessible to a much smaller social group in Mexico, categorising them as members of a new middle class raises the problem of limiting or distorting people's lives (their trajectories and strategies) and the meanings behind their practices (Wacquant, 2002). I would add that, for the purposes of this research I avoided use of the label 'new middle class' as it reduces the opportunity for residents to present themselves (either verbally or physically) in their own terms, and then compare their claims with observations of their actions. The differences between their words and their actions is a key to understanding *who they are* and *what they aspire to become* while living in a place like GEO Bosques. More specifically, I propose to examine the GEO residents in terms of what their different practices, tastes and beliefs reveal.

The chapter first provides an overview of the GEO residents by giving an account of their jobs and education, material objects, political views and religion beliefs. With a focus on residents from my *privada*, I then look more closely at people's differences and how they use their homes. This might be as permanent residents, weekenders, temporary dwellers or as workers in houses that have commercial uses; and the chapter explains how they change the forms of tenure relatively easy. Over the course of the chapter I discuss how everyday life in the *privada* is marked by people's very different routines and forms of dwelling, and the extent to which this brings out socio-cultural tensions that both divide and unite the residents.

5.2 “We are all immigrants”

Based on the AGEB (Basic Statistical Geographic Area) information generated by the 2010 Census (INEGI, 2012), my estimates of the total population of GEO Bosques was of 2,500 individuals living and/or working in 702 houses.⁸¹ I decided to use estimates rather than AGEB data as these comprised a residential neighborhood, three housing complexes including Bosques, several informal settlements (consolidated and in the process of consolidation) and adjacent *ejido* property. In this regard, it was not possible to gather reliable secondary estimates based on AGEB information.

According to a list of residents given me by the neighborhood committee and which is used to monitor practices in the complex such as use of automobiles and parking lots, payment of neighbourhood fees, advertisement of houses for rent or sale, there were 63 houses occupied in 2007-2008. Forty one houses were inhabited on a permanent (weekly) basis whilst 22 were used as weekend or holiday houses. There were 14 rented properties -12 were used by permanent tenants and two by weekenders/holiday tenants. Finally, 23 houses were listed in the category of “empty” “abandoned” or intermittently used for “commercial purposes”. Of the 100 houses in the *privada* 13 were for sale or rent (of which two were repossessed by the mortgage institution).⁸² This list provided me a first indication of the residents’ profile and some insights of the socio-economic status the *privada* (see Appendix 2 for the list of residents).

However these categories were not neat. The ethnographic richness of my experience as a tenant in the *privada* and my multiple subsequent visits to the site allowed me to distinguish the many ways people use their homes: on a daily basis, seasonally, and during the weekends or holidays. On the the basis of my observation and of personal accounts during in 2007 and 2008, it seems houses are inhabited by on average three to six people. For a few houses this number went up to 12 people, who might be linked by

⁸¹ According to the 2010 Census, the most fragmented level at which socio-demographic characteristics can be estimated is the AGEB. An AGEB comprises a clearly defined area, bordered by streets, with a common use of land (residential, commercial, recreational and industrial). It is expected to be homogeneous enough to allow meaningful socio-demographic estimates to be conducted (Chavarría, 2005).

⁸² The neighbourhood committee had no information on whether the repossessions were undertaken by the SOFOL *Hipotecaria Mi Casita*, INFONAVIT or by FOVISSSTE.

family ties [kinship], jobs or their community of origin.⁸³ But, occupancy was variable across the year. Easter holidays, *puentes* [religious or national days] and spring weekends were periods with high occupancy; and on weekdays and during the rainy season [August and September] occupancy was relatively low and at least two houses per block looked as if they were abandoned or only sporadically occupied. Some of the houses in the *privada* were converted into commercial spaces, with uses ranging from offices to showrooms and storerooms for keeping the files of the local government and inventories of medicine, as well as for more ‘hidden’ activities (eg. one house was occasionally used as a sex motel and another one was presumably used as a *picadero* [place used for drug dealing]. None of these uses were fixed.

People of all ages lived in the *privada* where I lived, but the households were mostly formed by young and middle-aged families with children and teenagers. The households were mostly nuclear families but a three-generation household, particularly in single-headed families, where the grandmother usually carries out the role of bringing up the children, was not uncommon. It was also not uncommon to see different families occupying the same house, one family during the weekdays and another one during the weekends or holidays, or to find that a family with whom I had developed a rapport had unexpectedly moved out without mentioning it in any of our conversations, only to reappear months after their absence. The impermanent nature of the residents was mirrored in the flexible nature of the houses; some were houses for residential purposes permanently, others only during the weekends or holidays.

The residents at GEO Bosques do not have a shared story. Most did appear to have migrated from low-income, informal, areas of Mexico City, the state of Guerrero or elsewhere in Morelos. Most notably, they came from self-built houses in Mexico City or social housing apartments located in Cuautitlán, Coapa, Ciudad Neza, Tláhuac, or Atenco; which not long ago were peripheral settlements but are now fully serviced and integrated into the city. Other residents had arrived directly from rural or semi-rural areas spread across Morelos or Guerrero, in particular from localities with names such as Ocuituco, Atliaca, Petatlán, Otilio Montero, or Tixtla de Guerrero, that for Mexicans are either associated with drug dealing or high rates of marginality. For the majority of

⁸³ The 2010 AGEB figures for the municipality of Cuernavaca provide an average number of 3.6 persons per occupied household (INEGI, 2012).

these residents, being able to move to a GEO house was a sign of a great achievement in terms of social and economic mobility. Importantly, the sense of achievement was not related to the GEO brand per se but to being able to have a first or a second property in a place like Cuernavaca. As I explained in Chapter Three, Cuernavaca has been associated with notions of leisure and quality of life that not long ago was only accessible to the middle and upper classes.

The majority of my middle-aged informants stated that they had spent their childhood and much of their adulthood in self-built houses, often shared with an extended family. Others expressed having lived in rented (social interest and/or self-built) apartments that were constantly changed. In one way or another, most of the interviewed adults had experienced 'self-housing': they had built previous homes on land without legal title and struggled to obtain urban services and eventually gain 'ownership'. Only for a very select few was the move to a Casas GEO complex a downward move.

"We were among those who lost their house in the 1994 economic crisis. We said, we are going downhill, but at least this is a house and not an apartment ... and it is new." [Marichú, 50. High-school teacher].

These were families who had fallen on hard times due to disease or economic crisis and had been forced to leave better homes for 'cheap', small and far-away houses.

For most residents I spoke with the opportunity to become homeowners was the main reason for moving to GEO Bosques. "To own a house" was perceived as an investment; it could mean a roof for the whole family or an economic asset to count on in times of need.

"I thought it was a good investment. This could be a house for a life-time, a house where my children can grow up." [José, 32. Telmex store Manager].

Homeownership affords a sense of stability in an uncertain world where 'you are on your own' and have to tackle the difficulties of having an unstable job and suffer exclusion from the social security net which can be accessed by only a few.

As explained in Chapter One the access to social security in Mexico has been a privilege restricted to the urban middle classes (Davis, 2004; Loaeza, 1988, 1990; Tarrés, 1990a, 1990b). A class that was broadly formed by people with low-paid but stable jobs in the public sector and compensated with a security net (access to social housing, governmental education and medical care) and a network of favours and *compadrazgos* [fictive kin] embedded in jobs and unions; and in less quantity, people working in an incipient private sector who were able to pay for private education, medical care and housing. At the margins of this middle class, millions of Mexicans struggled to slowly build shelter and to bargain with the government all kind of services (from water to sewage services) and eventually gain ‘ownership’. This reality in Mexico partly explains why there is a symbolic value in owning a house, rather than an apartment; a house that could be expanded as the family grows and with it, it could be valued as the foremost important family patrimony.

In one way or another, what I frequently got from my middle-aged informants was the perception that owning a GEO (terraced house) could be equated with a ‘real property’, and, particularly for young families, represented a home where they could settle down. Ariana summarised many of the opinions provided in conversations about owning a GEO property:

“GEO is a two-storey house, not an apartment. You see the difference? It is your own house, with your own entrance. You don’t share the staircase... your “clothes drying cages” and then [jaulas para tender] with anyone. It is different. I had my previous apartment at my mother’s house. It was a two-rooms apartment separated from the house. The whole terrain was very big but I had only an apartment. It was my mother’s house, I just occupied a tiny part. An apartment will never be the same. A house gives you space for the family to grow. The independence you need for the children”. [Adriana, 41. Municipal worker].

Together with the opportunity to obtain a mortgage, resulting from an aggressive housing financing and building policy in Mexico, some neighbours stated that GEO provided the option to “choose” a place to live in. A GEO home had many “attractive features” that people valued: the various types of houses, the different locations and the flexibility people saw in the payment plans, certainly represented alternatives to what they were accustomed to. The attractions of Cuernavaca, once known as a favourite

weekend spot for the upper classes of Mexico City, also influenced decisions. As one of the estate agents stated, “Cuernavaca’s reputation for good weather, peacefulness and easy access to Mexico City was a guarantee of status and prestige.” Owning “a weekend home with a garden” or a “peaceful place for retirement” was far more attractive than a small house in Ixtapaluca, Tultepec or Epazoyucan, municipalities in the state of Mexico and Hidalgo, where similar housing complexes were advertised at that time.

“A house with a garden in a safe environment ... a different environment for my children ... away from the crowd, noise and disorder, from the unpleasant people in La 5 de Mayo” [Ignacio, 51. Bank clerk].⁸⁴

While a house in Cuernavaca allowed people to keep a good job in Mexico City and experience a kind of life in the countryside, those coming from poor municipalities in Guerrero and Morelos thought that a new house on the outskirts of Cuernavaca meant a radical improvement in their lifestyle as it gave them access to better schools for their children, better medical services and shopping malls and more opportunities for starting up businesses than in their hometowns.

Almost none of my informants said that they came to Bosques for the facilities that GEO had promised. According to Violeta, a 46 year old public primary teacher, having a market, a public school or access to public transport was inconsistent with a Casas GEO complex as these facilities could harm the ‘concept’ of a gated community. Her dream of a ‘well-served GEO community’, Violeta added, was one with larger gardens and a *club de playa*, a small supermarket with some small retail shops and probably a primary school. In her ideal place, a Casas GEO would be peaceful and be home to decent middle class families, aircraft pilots, retired Americans and more weekenders. Violeta’s imagined community expressed the ambivalence of the place and a critique of her actual neighbours. To understand the many ways in which a place such as GEO Bosques functions, we must turn our attention to the actual residents and provide a picture of their everyday lives.

⁸⁴ La 5 de Mayo is a consolidated *colonia* in Mexico City. The informant is referring to the crowds in the city centre.

5.2.1 Who are they?

Despite their multiple origins, the GEO residents shared a similar identity while describing themselves as members of the middle class, who could broadly be self-described as “educated”, “decent”, “unproblematic” and with jobs that allow them to look forward to a better life. As suggested by the GEO post-sales staff, people generally preferred to describe themselves as *residentes* rather than *colonos*. As noted above, a *colonia* was for many a symbol of their past but also referred to a socio-economic space in the making. Low-income social groups were now labelled by my informants as *el populacho*, *la chusma* or *el montón*.⁸⁵ Although the actual monetary income might be relatively slight - by my estimates the annual income ranged from MXN \$79,000 to 119,000 (USD \$7,300 to \$10,960) – the difference this permitted in consumption patterns, borrowing and self-perception was significant.⁸⁶ And although employment profiles in general terms were not that distinct from residents in many colonias or apartment buildings, respondents used terms such as “professionals”⁸⁷, “entrepreneurs”, or “independent workers” and sometimes used overlapping adjectives such as “enterprising minds” or “forgers of our own destiny” to describe their status. Again, there is a strong element of social aspiration in their self-portrait.

The majority of professionals were bank tellers, auditors, architects, clerical officers or analysts with university or technical college degrees and those working in middle-ranking positions in transnational firms (i.e. HSBC, Santander, Mix-up, Phyzer, or Bayer). As entrepreneurs they could also run their own business, from food stalls or *taquerías*, to wrestling studios, car insurance companies and timber stores. The members of this group regarded income and professional success as a complex formula which could be defined as “business talent” (Monsiváis, 1987), is a combination of hard

⁸⁵ These are adjectives commonly used by the upper and upper-middle cases to refer to the lower income sectors.

⁸⁶ The difference of incomes represents aprox. MXN \$40,000 (USD \$3,000). In the Mexican context this is a growth rate of 50.14 percent between the two wages. Importantly, this growth does not represent a change in socioeconomic status but an important difference in terms of consumption access. These figures are based on the average exchange rate for 2007: USD \$10.94 per peso. Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público. *Tipo de cambio del dólar Americano 2007*. Available: http://www.sat.gob.mx/sitio_internet/asistencia_contribuyente/informacion_frecuente/tipo_cambio/42_8980.html. Last accessed Dec 11 2012.

⁸⁷ Degree-holder or college/university graduate. In Mexico a sign of social mobility is a person who has qualified in a profession or even passed through the university even though he or she is not engaged in a specified activity.

work, luck and constantly changing networks. They believe in continuous professional training and the development of personal skills, for example those requiring the aid of graduate courses, diplomas and business training groups. Their professions are relevant for them because of a self-perception of a gained social status. Some proudly claimed that they were the first people in their families to obtain higher education. It was also the professionals and entrepreneurs who were the most affluent neighbours in the *privada* and put this wealth on display. The signs of success might be a brand new car, holidays in beach resorts or home renovations. Since their jobs were often located in the west and the northeast parts of Mexico City, they had to spend up to four hours a day commuting to the city, which made some of them ‘symbolically rent’ a room in Mexico City, usually with relatives, to avoid the exhaustion of the everyday commute.

An important group in the *privada* were independent workers. Many of them had completed further educational *preparatoria* [grades 10 to 12] and a few had started but not completed a degree at a public university.⁸⁸ Members of this group might work as home retailers, waiters *infondas* or salesmen for stores. Others worked as taxi-drivers or chauffeurs for upper-class families, moneylenders or informal vendors. Some had experienced migration to the US. As with Héctor, independent workers tended to seek to increase their income by carrying out various trades, often combining for instance a job driving a taxi with selling contraband American clothes. These trades could be carried out on a door-to-door basis in the complex or on temporary stalls, often using the car boot to display their merchandise outside private schools, churches or supermarkets.

The public workers were a minority in the *privada*, and with the exception of one person who had a high-ranking position in a political party, they held jobs such as teachers, nurses, policemen and tax officers. It was common to find that public workers supplemented their low wages by selling any product possible, from costume jewellery and quilts sold from a catalogue to fresh fruit and imitation bags sold from their offices or homes. The shifting and transient activities carried out by many of my neighbours were similar to those described by De Koning (2009) and Scrase (2006) for recently built middle class housing projects in Egypt and India. The authors reported how once

⁸⁸ *Preparatoria* level is a kind of sixth form college which only takes 16-18 year olds.

people had moved to their new homes, they found they had to keep pace with the new lifestyle by making a living out of running small businesses or working in call-centres, while also taking temporary jobs in small computing and biotechnology industries, often during the weekends or on nightshifts.

The profiles and jobs of residents at the *privada* suggested that, the capacity to access a mortgage in GEO Bosques was much less likely to result from permanent jobs or from educational credentials. The current financing scheme has been adapting to the employment market and consequently more flexible loans are offered. The resident profiles in the *privada* reveal large numbers of informal vendors and independent workers, and few public workers. This finding is consistent with an analysis by INFONAVIT in its 2012-2016 Financial Plan, that there is “a strong mobility from the formal to the informal sector, but not necessarily a return to the formal market” (BBVA, 2012:11). The INFONAVIT Financial Plan showed that workers that end their labour relationship face difficulties in returning to the formal market; the reason being, the institution has been finding alternative solutions. For instance, the eligibility for an institutional mortgage by proving only one year of formal employment without interruptions and the possibility of choosing different financing schemes such as co-funding with commercial banks or SOFOLES non-bank schemes (BBVA, Ibid:11-12).

Living in GEO Bosques is not cheap. My estimates in 2007- 2008 were that a family with five household members found it difficult to live on less than MXN \$9,000 a month (USD \$800), as their expenses included an INFONAVIT fixed-rate mortgage (MXN \$1,900: USD \$173); basic household services (MXN \$2,500: USD \$230) and transport costs (MXN \$2,000: USD \$180). This was the case of families who sent their children to state schools or were using prepaid mobile phones, as well as those with expenses for minimal improvements to their homes. However, there was a sharp rise in monthly expenses for those paying a non-institutional (SOFOL) mortgage with an adjustable rate, around MXN \$3,600 (USD \$330). For those who had jobs in Mexico City regular commuting could cost MXN \$7,550 (USD \$690) for petrol, car maintenance and highway expenses, at times comprising 40 percent of the household monthly expenditure. Additionally, private school fees, TV cable or mobile contracts, doctors and a live-out maid could add up to MXN \$4,000 (USD \$365) per month. But

expenses were highly variable in the *privada*. Some neighbours were driving Mercedes Benz or Land Rovers that cost more than their houses (see Appendix 2) for the brand of automobiles at the *privada*); others were almost certainly having harder times as they resorted to tampering with the electric meters to reduce energy costs, ‘borrowed’ their neighbour’s water supply and reported having skipped meals to make it through the month.

For few families, a property in Bosques provided the possibility to maintain a certain middle-class standard of life. Sixty-two-year-old widow Ema and her son Tomas (a 45 year old) experienced a decline in social status when they decided to move to a GEO house. Ema reported feelings of being trapped in a situation that she disliked and described her life as being “surrounded by boxes throughout the house, where [she] keeps their past”. She described her neighbours in similar terms, also living surrounded by boxes, cramming up to five family members in units designed for fewer people and living in a situation more akin to conditions of poverty than success. The people living opposite Ema, for example, occupy the ground floor of the house, the windows are cracked and repaired with paper, the owner steals water from the neighbours’ garden tap and uses it for cooking, cleaning and bathing the babies; the children hardly leave the house.

5.2.2 Attitudes

After homeownership, it was common for adults with children at the *privada* to see education as a formula for social mobility: a “family investment” as some of them put it, as it was a path to a well-paid job. Thus, children almost exclusively attended primary and lower-secondary government schools but there was a shift thereafter to private institutions. It was common for my teenage neighbours (indistinctively, permanent residents or weekenders), to be more inclined to choose short or vocational/training college courses. The most popular short courses were: beautician, culinary and gastronomy studies, languages, international commerce and tourism. For

some teenagers these courses provided some assurance of a ‘good job’ that will enable them to pay back what their parents had spent on them.⁸⁹

“But education comes in different ways”, Nadia (22, communications student) argued, “travelling is also a form of education” and in the opinion of many youngsters it forms a part of one’s identity. At least four of the youngsters I talked to stated how, as a result of extraordinary efforts by their parents or relatives to obtain the necessary funding (e.g. through family or bank loans, an incentive granted by the –trade union of public schools teachers (the SNTE)-, or savings from *tandas*), they had been able to travel to Barcelona, Toronto or Beijing. These trips could be linked either to the *quinceaños* [coming of age] celebrations, university exchange trips or the camping holidays of protestant churches. The experience of travelling abroad had given these teenagers different views about education, jobs and lifestyles in general. In 2009, Nadia, a daughter of a govertment primary school teacher, spent a term at the University of Valladolid, Spain, and planned to visit me in London. Although she could not make it, she still plans to travel to Europe. Similarly, since his trip to Beijing with the Rotary Club youth entrepreneurs’ convention, 23 years old Antonio, who is studying Tourism Administration, has been learning Cantonese. His eyes are set on a job with Asian tourist services.

Some adults explained that these careers were linked to high-demand jobs, preparation for which could be carried out in either a “good but expensive” private locally well-known universities such as the Tec de Monterrey or the Universidad Internacional. According to Castañeda (2011), private education in Mexico has become a symbol of middle-class status. He reports how in 2008, private institutions (universities, technological institutes and colleges) had nearly doubled their intake of students compared with a decade and a half earlier. However, this has prompted the emergence of ‘second quality institutions’ that often have provisional certifications (Castañeda *ibid*: 163; Fernandes, 2006; De Koning, 2009). The attempt to attain social mobility through education forced some teenagers to end up in more affordable but low quality

⁸⁹ The short-courses are sometimes called “careers” [*carrera*] by strudents and parents to demonstrate a higher social status, but I want to clarify that these courses are from six to 18 months at the most, making them more technical than a formal university career.

universities: Universidad del Sol, Universidad Latina, Instituto Triunfante and Finisterre Institute, which in some cases were providing uncertified degrees.

The teenagers expressed mixed views about the places they had visited or would like to visit with friends. The examples ranged from the hometowns of their grandparents, mostly located in rural areas or informal *colonias* to sites that clearly ‘belonged’ to upper-class groups such as those in the lagoons in the Sumiya clusters (a gated community) in Morelos that were restricted to residents or the exclusive Plaza Bosques or Santa Fe shopping malls located in Mexico City, almost two hours from their homes. Although only a few people had gone to these sites, this was a clearly an ‘aspirational’ reaction. Just knowing the nature of these places led to a rise in their expectations and they saw themselves as much better equipped than their parents to be able to gain access to them.

Religion shapes the identity of many GEO residents. They often wear religious jewellery, hang religious images of saints and virgins in their homes or cars and usually cross themselves when passing in front of a church, religious image or a cross. I noticed however that there was a tendency to shift towards new Protestant religious movements, such as the Pentecostal Revival Movement, the Christian Soldiers and the Latter Day Saints (Mormons). This conversion to Protestantism had allowed many to become what they described as “sober or less violent”, “better fathers or neighbours” or “more satisfied with my life.” A part of their worship consisted of praying and lighting candles for the “troubled” neighbours such as alcoholics, relatives of presumed kidnappers and those who had lost their jobs. Apart from worship, these neighbours were regularly involved in activities such as bible-reading gatherings, talks about sexuality and guitar lessons, which kept them away from the *privada* almost every day. In summary, it was through the networks established in the church that adults and teenagers met their friends, fell in love, remarried, travelled and generally experienced the city. Some had kept some of their traditional Catholic rites such as the popular pilgrimage to Chalma, or setting up altars on the Day of the Dead, as they argued that these were practices that did not interfere with their new beliefs.

The openness toward the adoption of new religions is also expressed in the different political views of most of my informants. Although it was common to express that voting for presidential elections was as a civic duty, it was difficult to detect a predominant political view. Some of my neighbours expressed a preference for *Panismo*, drawing a link with democratisation and certain diversity in ways of thinking, working and living supposedly represented by Bosques. Elena, a 53 year old retired nurse, for instance, used her experience of living in GEO Bosques to explain her political preference for the PAN:

“twenty years ago, this was unimaginable, different people living together, with different views and different jobs. We don’t know each other. No more *compadrazgos* for getting a house loan ... pure democracy.” [Elena, 53. Retired nurse]

Others preferred to support individuals from different political parties, one of which, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, was regarded as a leading moral figure who could possibly change Mexico. Issues arising from national debates such as tax revenues, the drugs war and migration were often raised in our conversations. These attitudes showed me that people were broadly informed and concerned about national issues.

However, in the total period of nine months that I spent doing fieldwork, I found an overwhelming sense of disillusion with politics, which could be attributed to the seemingly irrecoverable loss of morality by politicians and the way in which their corruption and ineptitude was affecting people’s everyday lives. What had been lost by people, it seemed, was not simply the minimal level of material comforts that (as they put it) a “less corrupt government” could bring to their lives, but the accompanying sense of legitimate expectation - a certain ethos of respect or dignity for ordinary people - that many were sure was clearly absent. Once again, the lived reality in GEO Bosques was used as a yardstick to measure the performance of politicians and politics in Mexico. Their opinions included the following: local officials, as well as neighbourhood reps, were either absent or embedded in power relations, *compadrazgos*, personal gain or corruption; public services were poor or non-existent; and some houses were used by policemen as sites for extortion.

What struck me most was that whenever people engaged in conversations about politics, many of the everyday anxieties (that were concealed when other topics were discussed) came out and revealed feelings of despair, anger and frustrated expectations. The image that I got was that they were “on their own”, *echando pa'lante* [moving forward]. In specific terms, this related to the fact that they had to struggle to pay long-term mortgages, private institutions or doctors, while coping with the difficulty of having an unstable job, long commuting hours and houses that had to be constantly maintained. The confidence and optimism displayed by the government and illustrated by journalists when referring to the Mexican housing boom seemed to be absent in GEO Bosques. Many of my neighbours expressed a view that they lived in a state of uncertainty about whether their recently acquired lifestyle might soon vanish. In other cases, the taste was even more bitter as they found themselves trapped in a place that, in the words of Ema, a 62 year old widow was, “really problematic ... it takes from you more than what it gives. It is a sobering experience and destroys the few expectations that you may have.”

Although the profile of people described in this chapter illustrates my interviews and routines observed from my neighbours in the *privada* -where being a neighbour facilitated my *rapport* in a site which coincided with being a “plus area”-, my neighbours shared similarities with residents of ‘non-plus’ *privadas*. The opinions and thoughts of residents within and beyond the *privada* broadly revealed that the “plus area” was seen as symbolically rather than as factually ‘superior’ way of living. The ‘plus’ was mostly indicative of a better design and outlay (a larger cluster with already extended houses) that allowed some of my neighbours to ‘touch’ -with a little less struggle- the dream of social mobility. However the predispositions towards jobs, schools, politics or faith were roughly similar across GEO Bosques. Many children from different *privadas* attended the same public primary school and some adults expressed a preference for private further education (although in some cases, they could not afford it). The selling of imitation handbags, shoes by catalogue or cooked food [*lunches listos*] in car trunks outside private colleges and shopping malls was a common ‘job’ for women in Bosques. The two or three hours commute to reach jobs in Mexico City was also quite widespread amongst adults at the site. Brand new automobiles, as

well as old ones, such as those seen in the *privada* were parked throughout Bosques. Likewise, the sharing of tips about personal security and text messages with bible verses for personal protection was practised amongst residents without distinction between the ‘plus’ and ‘non-plus’ residence.

My argument here is that in spite of the physical deterioration of houses and what some of my neighbours saw as “poverty-like” routines (tending clothes and selling food outside the house, hearing loud music or experiences of overcrowding) was more evident in some ‘non-plus’ *privadas* than in the *privada* plus. For many families living in a place like Bosques increased the belief of having climbed a social ladder, or at least, the expectation of climbing higher some day.

In reality, the picture of the GEO residents (see photo 19) is more complex than what I have depicted in the last pages. People’s preferences for certain jobs, schools and material objects were closely linked to their life stories: to the place where they dwelled before coming to Bosques, to the circumstances that brought them to this place and to the way they live now in a GEO property.

Many of my informants not only moved from one job to another, or spent a long time commuting, but also moved in and out quite frequently. I witnessed how they would lock up their houses and then come back after several months. They often used their homes for commercial purposes and decided to live in them again with no apparent consequences. These different forms of occupation and people’s constant ‘moves’ gave the *privada* a feeling of permanent transition. It was also one that was inhabited in very different ways by very different individuals. In the following section, I give a more detailed analysis of the different people who dwell in the *privada* and investigate why there is a marked predisposition towards a mobile form of occupancy. This helps to explain another key cultural feature of the GEO residents.

5.3 Different Ways of Living

Anyone spending a reasonable amount of time in GEO Bosques would notice the many ways people use their homes: on a daily basis, during seasons, at the weekends or holidays and at specific hours of the day; there were very different routines taking place

in a single space. The forms of occupancy let me to give a close look at five different groups of residents and their routines. The groups can be categorised as follows:

- i) Commuting residents who spend their time primarily in GEO Bosques.
- ii) Mobile residents who divide their time more evenly between their hometowns, mostly in the State of Guerrero, and in GEO Bosques.
- iii) Weekenders whose life revolves primarily around Mexico City and on the weekends or occasionally come to GEO Bosques.
- iv) Proprietors or tenants using dwellings for non-residential purposes.
- v) Tenants mainly from the State of Morelos who rent houses initially purchased by *defeños* (people from the Federal District).

The uses of the house tend to reflect people's backgrounds or personal trajectories. The people from Mexico City are more predisposed to be permanent dwellers or weekenders and they were proprietors in majority, while those coming from the state of Guerrero tend to behave like temporary residents in so far as they move regularly from their hometowns to different houses at the *privada* and back again; and those originally from the state of Morelos tend to prefer to use their house for commercial ventures or to let their house while not attaching any apparent importance to the way the tenant uses it.

People's backgrounds and dwelling preferences define their forms of occupancy and the way they portray themselves to others. Commuting residents, for instance use their status as city dwellers to show their refinement and 'good manners' to those coming from 'less urban backgrounds'. Weekenders seek to portray themselves as being 'well-off'. Their homes are often upgraded with front gardens and fountains and are seen as giving a relaxing and exclusive tone to the *privada*. Mobile residents see themselves as coming from self-made families but with hard work have reached a reasonable income for the GEO standards. They have with strong bonds to their rural hometowns in the State of Guerrero, but also as capable of feelings of solidarity with their neighbours who came from from Mexico City. Mobile residents were regularly accompanied by a couple of *guaruras* [personal security guards, who were at the same time their relatives] who gave others a sense of security. Families from Guerrero were, however, the group that was least tolerated by the others because they were associated with an image of 'poverty' (signalled by their loud voices, cramped homes and ongoing construction).

Those proprietors or tenants using the houses for commercial reasons remained unseen and their lives and activities were mostly hidden. The owners of these ventures were normally seen as good neighbours, who were just taking advantage of their houses, but their workers who spent days there were treated as visitors.

Lastly, a small but growing number of families (14 during my fieldwork) from the State of Morelos were slowly forming a group of what could be categorised as permanent tenants. These were individuals renting houses that were left by *defeños* [from the Federal District] as weekend houses. However, this group was treated as ‘second category’ dwellers. Some (of us, as I fitted the category) were banned from some neighbourhood meetings, had to pay an additional fee to have the right for parking our cars inside the *privada* and relevant agreements made at neighborhood meetings were communicated directly to the property owner rather than to the tenant. My hypothesis is that on a long run, tenants could become a larger and more consolidated group in the *privada*. From the list of residents passed to me by the neighbourhood committee there were eight houses marked as ‘for rent’ as well as fourteen were already rented. Lydia (the *privada* administrator) mentioned that the difficulty for selling and renting houses had forced property owners to find flexible renting schemes (eg. 3 - 6 months renting contracts, holiday/weekend rents, commercial uses).⁹⁰

However, people did not have a fixed attachment to any of these groups and some residents would switch, altering their self-presentation and the way they were perceived by the rest of the residents. For instance, it was common to see that commuting residents moved back to their previous homes in Mexico City or rented their homes out for the weekends. Equally, weekenders might shorten their holidays or abandon their weekend homes and reappear a few months later; and quiet homes used as offices could be turned into catering showrooms or sex motels. As a result of these changes, the ‘well off’ weekenders could become ‘unwanted’ neighbours; and the ‘polite’ permanent residents could become ‘impoverished’ and have to abandon their property for financial reasons. Equally, the ‘poor’ and ‘uneducated’ families from Guerrero could at times be

⁹⁰ According to the *privada* administrator and residents from different subsections at the complex, the houses that had a sign of for sale/rent (FSBO-for sale by owner) without the representation of an agent could stay advertised for two years.

seen as good friendly neighbours and some 'second category' tenants could be welcomed as property owners.



Photo 19. Residents of GEO Bosques

Source: Cristina Inclán-Valadez, 2007.

In this way, the changes in the groups and the labels assigned to them suggest not only a highly mobile occupancy but also a continuous change of ‘masks’ (Goffman, 1959) that people undergo, in most cases out of necessity, as a mechanism of survival. This change allows people to keep on paying necessities such as mortgage payments, a car for long-distance commuting, the children’s private schools or a second home that they could not maintain. Socially, the ‘moves’ at times led to a “rebalancing” of the internal order (Hannerz, 1980) in the *privada* because if a sufficient number of workers were absent at the weekends, there would be more available parking spaces for the weekenders, and, equally, the intermittent presence of the families from Guerrero gave a sense of security to those living in Bosques permanently (when they were on the premises) and a feeling of spaciousness and of a more ‘civilised’ environment (when they were absent).

In the next sub-sections I set out to show how people craft their forms of presence in terms of the routines carried out by individuals living or working in four different houses. My purpose here is to show the contrasting routines that give an indication of life in the *privada*.

5.3.1 The Rangel Family. Commuting Residents

From Monday to Friday, doorjambes, showers, smells of beans or coffee and the car engines of those living on a permanent basis can be detected from very early in the morning. The day begins at around 5:00 am for the Rangels. Beatriz, who is 43 years old, has breakfast early while Memo (46 years old) takes a shower and makes sure that the children (9 and 12 years old) get ready for school as they all have to leave home at 5:50 am. Memo runs an insurance company that specialises in freight containers and he spends most of his day at Mexico City airport. Beatriz holds a part-time job as an accountant in a small firm located in north-east Mexico City and sells imitation bags and wallets to earn some extra money. Working in Mexico City means a five-hour commute every day. The journey starts when they drive the children to school in Cuernavaca, then they take the Cuernavaca-Mexico highway, cross half of Mexico City, and then one of them takes the *ruta* [public transport] or taxi to reach the office. On

three days of the week they reach home between 8:00 and 10:00 pm when the children are already asleep. Sometimes Memo stays with his mother in La Merced Gómez, a neighbourhood in the southeast of Federal District formed by a mix of consolidated *colonia* and social interest estates. Memo's house at La Merced Gómez was the Rangel's home for nine years before moving to Bosques.

Before 3:00 pm the children come back home in a pre-arranged taxi; they eat the food that Beatriz leaves in the microwave, do their homework and spend the rest of the afternoon on the terrace and in the front-fenced garden that Memo built in what was formerly a common area. The children cannot make friends with their neighbours or pay them visits or invite them to their home. Memo wishes to buy a family membership card at the Coral Sports Club so they can spend some time outside home in a 'safe place', meet 'appropriate' friends and do some sport. Like many other permanent residents, the Rangels employ a domestic worker [*muchacha*] two days of the week to do some of the household chores. Gaby, the *muchacha*, who is also a good friend of Beatriz's sister, serves food to the children and looks after them, washes and irons, and at times, leaves at 8:00 pm after serving the children's *merienda* [evening snack]. On these occasions she is paid MXN \$15 (USD \$1.35) extra or given used clothes or food instead. Before leaving, Gaby's handbag is checked by Beatriz or by the private guard in turn. Thus, although there is little social difference between my neighbours and their *muchachas*, the regular bag check-up is a way of reminding the *muchachas* that they are servants who are below the status of their employers and need to be treated with suspicion.⁹¹

The Rangel family spends their time primarily in GEO Bosques but from time to time they alternate between living in Mexico City and in Cuernavaca because the time spent on commuting to work is exhausting and they are concerned about the children growing up alone. They make a change of residence at least twice a year during the children's holidays and *puentes* [religious or patriotic holidays in Mexico]. The regular move from living on a permanent basis to using the houses for short periods of time means that they have to cover the cost of maintaining two properties. While the Rangel family are living

⁹¹ It was common to find that *patrones* and *muchachas* were relatives (cousins or aunts), or old friends from the same hometown or area where they grew up or were even together at primary school. The private guards working in the main gate of the *privada*, may also work as domestic workers in their free time. The test of 'trust' depended largely on the servant's appearance (and factors such as whether she was tidy, helpful, and willing to work extra hours).

in La Merced Gómez, the GEO home is kept shut. The electricity and water are turned off and the parking space is rented to the neighbourhood administration for a fixed fee. The long-term plan is to spend more time in GEO Bosques, as in the view of the Rangels a home in Cuernavaca represents a good standard of life for the children and a place where they can have meals in the garden, sleep in their own bedroom and go to private college. This contrasts with life in La Merced Gómez, where as Memo stated “the moment you put a foot out of the house ... informal street-sellers ... and pollution from the *rutas* [public transport] are common.”

Although the Rangels see themselves as socially superior to most of their neighbours, which was shown in their use of phrases such as “not everyone here has two houses, a *muchacha*, and a garden with a *jacuzzi*”, they rarely spoke about how their constant moves to the house in La Merced Gómez and back affects their alleged status in the *privada*. In the opinion of the Rangels, moving was a matter of convenience, as opposed to staying fixed or stuck in the same environment, as their less privileged neighbours did. Moreover, they denied knowing about many other families who, like themselves, used to move out, rent or abandon their homes. However Beatriz revealed how she was misunderstood by her neighbours, who placed the Rangels in the wrong category, when they were away: “they automatically changed our status and classified the house as abandoned ... when in reality we became weekenders. It is actually a higher status. Once, my neighbour, who was a money-lender, knocked on my door and offered me a loan.”

5.3.2 The Álvarez Family. Mobile Dwellers

Carlos Álvarez (aged 32), his brother Alan (aged 23) and his sister-in-law Lola (aged 26) leave home at 8:30 am to reach their jobs in the PRD (*Partido de la Revolución Democrática*) in Mexico City. Carlos works as an accountant of the party and he has also been nominated as a candidate to run for the municipal president of his hometown, Atoyac, Guerrero. Alan is his driver and *guarura* [bodyguard] and Lola is his personal assistant and his political campaign manager. Carlos's wife, Celina (aged 28) and the rest of the family (father and two brothers with their families and Carlos's *compadres*) stay in Bosques and are constantly travelling to their hometown in Guerrero where they

run a number of businesses. Celina is a moneylender and sells gold jewellery; her sister Isis runs a small restaurant; and the rest of the family work in various jobs according to their needs: as builders, car salesmen or in the coffee trade. Carlos acts as the pillar of more than ten family members linked by blood, kinship ties and place of origin.

The family lives in four different houses within the *privada*. Two of these houses function independently and the other two form a sort of single household where the family members share their domestic tasks and expenses. The houses at GEO Bosques serve almost as an extension of their hometown. It is thus a place that can be used by anyone who might need it. Implicit in these houses is the idea of a transitory dwelling as a mode of keeping the family close-knit. Depending on their needs or jobs, the family divide their time more evenly between their hometowns (in the State of Guerrero) and Bosques. Members might live in Bosques on a daily or on a temporary basis (for weeks or months). It is a common practice to make use of living rooms and for sleeping inflatable beds and to share rooms between adults and children. The idea of leisure is rooted in their hometowns. On Friday evening or Saturday mornings, a part of the family goes back to Guerrero. “The *palenques* [cock-fighting pits] are better in Guerrero”, Carlos explains, and says the same of the food markets, restaurants, churches and the football matches or *ferias* [fairs] they attend.

Celina, who spends most of her weekdays at home, keeps herself busy by cooking, cleaning and finding out what might be needed in the different houses. She has her afternoon meal in her father’s home, with him, the *muchacha* [maid], and whoever might be around at home. At 4:00 pm, while the *muchacha* washes the dishes and cleans up the house, Celina turns on the TV to watch the *telenovelas* [soap operas], attends to a couple of clients who need to borrow or pay back money or tries to sell her gold jewellery. In spite of what looks like a rural type of household arrangement, the Álvarez family shows some of the strongest civic values in the *privada*. They commissioned the wall that forms a semi-enclosure of the *privada*; every afternoon, they water the common gardens, recycle the garbage, regularly paint the pavements and the lines of the parking areas; and organise *faenas* [communal cleaning] with their closest neighbours to clean the street.

The Álvarez family raise all sorts of ideas and speculations. Physical factors weigh more heavily than the civic values that the Álvarez family hold. While Carlos and Celina were often considered to be “the richest” people in the complex and were responsible for paying for an additional entrance guard [Carlos’ *guarura*], the endless extensions of their houses and Carlos’s fondness for expensive cars (one of them a Land Rover with tinted windows) gives them a “classless status” and a reputation for possibly being a corrupt politician involved in some sort of illicit business. The rest of the family were simply referred to as “the visitors from Guerrero”, and their physical appearance and behaviour – their loud voices, and the fact that they took their shoes off and ate in the common areas – were a source of gossip as residents reconciled how material wealth was contradicted by improper behaviour.

5.3.3 Gabriel’s Kitchen. An entrepreneur working in his GEO house

Gabriel (aged 32) is a native of Cuernavaca and does not have to rush in the mornings. His day begins at around 8.30 in the upper middle class neighbourhood of Tabachines, 15 minutes from GEO Bosques. He does some weightlifting, takes a shower and generally puts on black trousers, white shirts and black pointed shoes. At around 10:00 am he drives to his house in the *privada* which he has adapted as a catering kitchen that supports his businesses, together with a *taquería* franchise and a catering service company. Gabriel pulled down a wall and added a ventilation system to accommodate an industrial fridge, a convection oven, a freezer and space for 100 catering trays and the necessary dishes for 200 people. Every morning, he checks to see if the fridge and extractor system are working properly, smells the fresh meat and takes out the garbage which he sometimes burns on the adjoining plot. His employees (two cooks) arrive soon after him, sometimes with the weekly fresh meat or the food for the caterer. They take “from three to five hours cooking *moles* and stews, rice, *tamales*, cold soups and *flanes* [custard pudding]”.

Although Gabriel’s constant worry is blowing a fuse and having the neighbours blame him for his large consumption of electricity in the kitchen, he tries to be considerate to his neighbours. His employees are not allowed to listen to music during working hours, or to shout or have naps or meals in the common areas. Before two in the afternoon, he

leaves the *privada* after checking that no neighbour is around. At times, late in the afternoons, he goes back to supervise the cooking, deliver food, or to check the kitchen supplies. He regularly tips Rocío, one of the female guards who watch over the *privada*, or gives her some food or meat. In exchange, she cleans the house, takes the garbage out and keeps Gabriel informed about the neighbours' gossip. Gabriel will be aware that 'keeping in' with the neighbours is important as complaints led to the closure of asolicitors' office, the medicine warehouse, the home of two prostitutes visited by clients and their pimp and a house used to keep animals (cats, hamsters and birds) and pet accessories.

Gabriel's name appears on the residents' list as a permanent resident who is up-to-date with payment of his neighbourhood fees, but little indicates that his house is used as a caterer kitchen or that in the past it was used as his office, a storage room and a showroom for 'tasting' sessions and food presentations, or a temporary home where some *taqueros* lived while they were doing training courses. So long as the activities were kept hidden or discreet, business ventures were usually tolerated by the neighbours, committees and leaders (although some claimed that this tolerance was also bought with bribes). Unclear 'regulatory' and social status of non-residential activities that are nonetheless tolerated illustrates the informal practices of self-management in the *privada*. As seen in Chapter Four and will be explained in Chapter Six, there were not only differences between the bylaws instilled by the company through the "GEO communities" workshop and what residents design as more realistic neighborhood bylaws, but the use of 'hidden' non-residential activities shows that internal procedures were negotiable in the *privada*.

5.3.4 Fausto and Elena. Weekenders

The weekend for Fausto and Elena (both in their 50s) starts in Mexico City on late Friday afternoons when they do their shopping and drive for two hours to reach *GEO Bosques* in the late evening. They live in Iztapalapa, one of the largest and poorest districts located on the eastern side of the metropolis. As with the other 24 families registered as "weekenders" (proprietors and tenants), Fausto and Elena's life revolves primarily around Mexico City and they occasionally come to *GEO Bosques*. The

majority of these weekenders own a house, have stable jobs and a well-established family and lead social lives outside the limits of Bosques. Fausto and Elena live with their son, they run a *tortillería* that delivers corn *tortillas* to an industrial canteen and to a few *fondas* [small restaurants] in the local area. On Elena's retirement as a public sector worker, she bought the house with her FOVISSSTE savings. The city of Cuernavaca had a particular significance for weekenders like Elena because of the countryside, which, she claimed, was reflected in the *telenovelas* that showed *villas* and *quintas* [cottages/country houses]. A Casa GEO is simply the means of obtaining a weekend home, a traditional inherited home or a family investment in what they see as a perfect location.

On Saturday, Fausto and Elena wake up after 10 am. They take a shower and put on light clothes and have a morning meal: fried eggs with tamales, dry meat with tortillas, sweet bread and a strong coffee or Coca-Cola. After breakfast, they go for a walk and spend the rest of the day on the front porch reading the paper, eating, playing cards or watching a movie. They go to bed between ten and eleven p.m. From time to time, the warm, quiet nights are broken by loud laughter and music coming from the homes of neighbours, who lend their house to friends or relatives or invite them to celebrate the completion of a new room or a family event. These weekend parties can last until dawn.

On one particular weekend, three houses further on from Elena's, a daytime gathering turned into a late karaoke party. The front door was open and the lights on; the people sang, had something to drink and laid bets on who was the best singer until an annoyed neighbour complained and stopped the music and ended the apparent 'neighbourly coexistence' in the *privada*. An argument began and someone called the municipal police. These sorts of gatherings and what accompanies them (loud music, the use of other people's parking spaces or the presence of guests sleeping in cars or gardens), instil uncomfortable feelings about the weekenders. They believe that this automatically changes the status of the neighbours from being respectable people to problematic, drunk and undesirable neighbours.

On Sunday, Fausto refused to stay home to witness another gathering or a conflict between neighbours. They spent the day in the Ayala ponds where they could fish and eat trout and came back late in the afternoon when the guests that had spent the night in

the cars had gone and all traces of the party had been cleared up. The smell of burning garbage told Elena that the weekend was almost over. Fausto burnt their garbage or dropped it on the highway on his way back to Iztapalapa and the landscape that she saw from the highway makes Elena look forward to the next weekend.

5.4 Conclusions

In this chapter, I have sought to provide an ethnographic portrait of GEO Bosques residents and everyday life in the *privada*. I have attempted to demonstrate that, for many residents, GEO Bosques not only marks a historical shift towards living in a planned and finished home but represents a site that allows them to make a personal shift in their lives. This shift is marked by a strong aspirational drive: residents equate the aspiration to be something different (from their past) with acquisition of a house in GEO Bosques, with the lifestyle characteristics of being part of the *GEO movement*. The aspirational shift is expressed in people's attitudes to jobs, education for their teenage children as well as to leisure spaces. However, achieving the status of being a GEO resident is not an easy task. The people have to work hard for long hours, skip meals, live 'trapped' in houses which they regard as boxes and obtain extra loans to send their children to a private college.

The situation that many of the GEO residents face in their everyday life is more akin to conditions of poverty than of social mobility. This is observed in both families who perceived themselves as suffering a decline in social status when they moved to a place that lacked the quality and comfort they had imagined and those families with a material and social existence dominated by necessity (Bourdieu, 1985), who struggle to make a living in a place like GEO Bosques. Stealing water from neighbours' garden taps, pooling family resources by selling any possible product and constant residential 'moves' as a way of ensuring survival are part of the everyday realities of GEO residents.

People at GEO Bosques also appear to be 'working' to find a suitable framework that can accommodate both their aspirations for a GEO lifestyle and the complications they face in trying to achievement it. Residents seemed predisposed to accepting new beliefs,

for instance in Protestant worship, educational courses leading to diplomas and self-help groups. These activities helped to relieve people of feelings of despair, anxiety and disappointment that arise from the practical difficulties of ‘struggling to succeed’, the flaws in the GEO complex and disillusionment with neighbours and neighbourhood groups. Rather than a state of permanence, therefore, living in GEO Bosques has a transitory and mutability quality. It is both a pathway to a perceived middle class status which is achieved through working and sometimes living away from the area.

GEO residents demonstrated transitory characteristics in many ways. Thus, although residents’ aspirations was of a certain ‘type’, a set of relatively familiar middle class attributes, people’s circumstances demonstrate much greater variety. Indeed, the chapter has shown a tension between the idea of a defined, singular, GEO resident and the multiple distinctions between residents. Across the *privadas* that I was able to study the houses were modified to accommodate a range of different functions, sometimes incorporating physical changes to layout and appearance. A house one day could be a storeroom the next. Similarly, many residents appear to be constantly changing the way they occupy the GEO units; a house might be abandoned, locked up for a few weeks, used only at weekends or given over to multiple occupancy. The impermanence and mutability of residents at Bosques is also expressed by the growing number of rented houses and of those that are continuously advertised as for rent or sale. These mobile and transient forms of occupancy question how realistic people are being when aspiring to the life in a GEO house according to the Mexican values of permanency and homeownership through the possession of a single home where a stable life can be created. It challenges the notion that people are building a ‘collective story’ (throughout family generations and with neighbours) through the GEO lifestyle.

In the next chapter, I look closely at how people deal with their differences and try to overcome the perceived stigma of living in a Casas GEO complex. This is achieved by drawing up a set of neighbourhood rules, as well as searching for other communities beyond the boundaries of the housing complex.

6.1 Introduction

It was nearly 9:00 pm. Vero had arrived earlier than usual. Every three or four weeks, she used to spend the night with me in the *privada* to check her house and find out how things were going with my fieldwork. Sometimes we spent long evenings talking about each other's lives before she left early in the morning to reach La Villa in Mexico City where she lived with her family and relatives while I rented her house. That particular evening she thought I might need company because two days earlier my closest neighbour had been murdered. His house had been forced open and in his car there was a warning note hinting that there was a “trade-off to be paid”. Some neighbours said that it was a drug-related murder and there was a rumour in the *privada* that sooner or later the police would come to undertake a search and question the closest neighbours, meaning me and Vero. Lydia, the neighbourhood administrator, called people from my block to an extraordinary meeting to warn us about the search. That evening Vero was tense and I was scared. It was one of those occasions when she expressed a desire to sell her house and I thought about interrupting my fieldwork. While opening her mail, she abruptly said “Look, I don't know what is so surprising. This is something that has happened before on the other side. Next to Lydia's house there was a family of drug-dealers. There has always been prostitution here and everybody knows it. Not long ago you could see the pimp waiting in the car playing loud music. I am telling you this because there have been big problems on both sides of the *privada*, but she [Lydia] wants to present things as ‘us’, ‘*los de Las Lomas*’ (the side of the *privada* where she lives) and them as ‘*los de Tepito*’ (the other side of the *privada*), ‘those of the typical Casas FEO’.⁹² This is one of [Lydia's] ways of controlling our lives, to frighten people to make sure they behave properly. There are good and bad people everywhere and she knows that. Good people like us must keep out of trouble’.

⁹² Both Las Lomas and Tepito are well-known as representing social and economic extremes. Las Lomas de Chapultepec has been the home of some of the wealthiest Mexicans; and Tepito is at the bottom of the social pyramid and is known as “The Barrio Bravo” for its robberies, smuggling and crimes of violence.

It was the first time that I heard a resident using the expression “Casas FEO” [ugly houses] to refer to her living space, a connotation that posits this kind of housing complex as something that has deteriorated socially and physically. The stigma attached to this phrase often makes residents omit the ‘GEO’ prefix when referring to their home. Subsequently, I often heard the term being used and I could sense its significance as well as the implied feelings of tension. This tension was how to reconcile problems such as a failure to maintain the houses and gardens, domestic violence and drug dealing, all of which were directly linked to the “Casas FEO” stereotype, with the idea of living in a safe, decent and socially organised neighbourhood. One way to understand this tension was to look at the tactics used by people to avoid the ‘FEO’ connotations which involved either attempting to ensure that the unwanted practices of the neighbours were avoided or finding new spaces and communities beyond the limits of the residential space which could make life in the *privada* more bearable.

This chapter focuses on the techniques employed by the neighbourhood committee to mitigate the effects of the “Casas FEO” stereotype. The first part focuses on the set of measures taken by the neighbourhood committee to organise the *privada* as a safe and well-maintained neighbourhood according to principles of responsibility, orderliness and decency and opposed to the ‘FEO’ connotations of disorganisation, apathy and troublesome neighbours. I adopt a governance approach to explain how these measures (which involve preventive, punitive and reward schemes) can mould people’s behaviour and foster self-control and a continuous vigilance of others. The second part seeks to explain people’s tendency to adopt a practice of physical distancing to minimise the risk of encounters or conflict with ‘FEO residents’. These strategies include seeking appropriate spaces and communities to belong to which are beyond the boundaries of the *privada*, such as sports clubs, private schools and charismatic churches. Overall, this chapter illustrates that these new geographies allow people to acquire a ‘good’ and ‘decent’ life in GEO complexes through an indoor family life, leisure activities and a new faith.

6.2 The 'FEO' connotation in GEO Bosques

Lydia, the administrator of the *privada Colorín*, was one of those residents who opposed stigmatising Casas GEO complexes as 'ugly sites' characterised by domestic negligence, social disorganisation and a poor standard of living, and believed this was an image fabricated by people from outside or sensationalist journalists. In one of our conversations, she gave me a detailed explanation of the different types of GEO houses and the possible lives that one could lead there. She expected one day that she herself would move to one of the new "G homes" or what in 2007 was advertised by Casas GEO as the latest housing prototype that included well-maintained swimming pools and tennis courts, thanks, Lydia argued, to the management policies of the external agencies. Lydia did not deny that the Casas GEO brand could carry a negative stereotype and even admitted that the new "G homes" had attempted to disguise the stigma that the GEO word carries, by using the G to suggest sophistication and limit association with the company. Her wish as an administrator was to counter the 'GEO stigma' and she made a great effort to help families to create "their own small oasis".

GEO Bosques confirmed these two views of Casas GEO – both Lydia's description of the "small oasis" and the FEO view that it represented social and physical decay. By 2007, the six-year-old housing complex looked old and run down. The common plaza was abandoned as was evident from the overgrown grass, bushes and litter scattered around as well as the graffiti which covered half of the elevated water tank. The concrete benches were cracked or more likely had never been completed by the developer. The main street grid needed to be repaved and was jammed with parked cars, some of which had been secured with chains or cages.

The same panorama could be seen in the numerous small common areas throughout the complex. Unless they had been turned into private dwellings with front gardens or terraces, they served as storage for old furniture, cars parts and garbage. The only area which was used by the residents as a common area was the "*area de fut*".⁹³ This area

⁹³ The "*area de fut*" occupies 9,000 m² that GEO Morelos granted to the municipality as 10% of its developed land. The grant was a requirement for the company to obtain a construction licence. The purpose of this was to make developers responsible for the local development of the area. The local government was supposed to build a school and a market or commercial centre. The area is a dusty stretch of land that was converted by a group of residents from the neighbouring colonias into three

accommodated six football teams formed by the residents, the people from neighbouring *colonias* and taxi drivers. However, it was announced by the municipality that this land would be converted into a large municipal rubbish tip [Interview with the *Delegado* of Lázaro Cardenas. August 2, 2007. Cuernavaca, Mexico].

The evident physical deterioration of the complex suggested that people were still struggling to cope with the problems of infrastructure that they had described during their first months of living in GEO Bosques. Some of the problems included a limited electricity supply and constant power cuts which often ruined the household appliances; water shortages, particularly during the dry months; frequent robberies of car parts; and the smell coming from the water treatment plant which was out of order. During the months of my fieldwork, the only attempt to undertake a general upkeep of the common areas was made by a small group of residents who called an urgent neighbourhood meeting to discuss general problems of insecurity and physical decay and to set up a subsequent ‘community task-force’. The meeting was advertised by hanging a large ragged cloth from two of the lamp-posts at the main entrance. In spite of the unanimous complaints about the cleanliness of the public areas, the meeting was poorly attended and the cloth remained hanging for almost four months until it was finally ruined by the rain and dust.

In this context, it was quite easy for people to make use of the word FEO in our conversations, particularly as a means to express concerns about the ‘chronic’ problems of the complex. The following statements which have been taken from longer conversations exemplify the criticism linked to the connotations of the “Casas FEO”.

“What I hate is the main entrance which looks so ugly ... when passing by I feel as if I’m coming into a *vecindad*.” [Alicia, a retired lawyer, aged 63].

“The further away I am the better. We don’t want to live near the *populacho* at the main entrance. That is the worst part of this place ... There is nothing that can improve that area.” [Beatriz Rangel, 43. Part-time accountant].

football pitches. It was the home of six teams formed by residents from GEO Bosques, colonos, taxi drivers and workers from the local factories at El Polvorín, who meet every week to play matches.

“The municipal rubbish will destroy the already dilapidated image of the place. It will attract undesirable, street-sellers, *rutas* [public transport].” [Remedios, 72. An administrator and resident at the *privada Robles*].

“These cages for cars, I hate them, some of them are rusty and the group of *vagos* [layabouts] that you can see down there. They make the place look grey, unsafe, and poorer than it really is. It’s not for nothing that people say that these are Casas FEO.” [Rocío, 20. Student].

As these and similar comments make clear, the general view of the FEO elements is that they are situated in what people saw as public areas and include groups of lower class people who should be avoided. There was a close correlation between the standard of maintenance and what people considered to be “strictly public”. The further away the *privadas* were from the public areas (i.e. main entrance, the street grid and the elevated water tank), the better maintained and more secure the conditions were. The closed gates displaying neighbourhood watch plaques, lawns with trees giving shade and garbage in containers were indicative of the resident’s efforts to make improvements; they contrasted with the general picture of the complex.

6.2.1 Opposing the image of the Casas FEO in *privada Colorín*

Privada Colorín was located at the very end of the complex and, in the opinion of many people living at GEO Bosques, was a good example of what could be done socially and aesthetically in a Casas GEO complex. The entrance gate was kept closed all the time and was partly covered by a large purple bougainvillea and other trees, and it was protected 24 hours a day by private uniformed guards. On the gate, one could always see large handwritten messages in brightly-coloured paper stuck up for the benefit of neighbours who had failed to pay the administration fees or to give notice of the next neighbourhood meeting. These messages were renewed regularly and the phrasing and colour of the paper were changed so that the residents could not fail to notice them. On the right-hand side of the gate, there were four fixed metal plaques with regulations that were designed to control the behaviour of residents, visitors, real-estate agents and potential buyers by asking them to show a valid ID, reduce their speed while driving,

pay their bills and settle their debts (bills and neighbourhood administration charges) before renting or buying a house. The variety of messages was indicative of the permanent presence (uncommon in other *privadas*) of some sort of neighbourhood body (see photo 20).



Photo 20. Entrance gate to the *privada*

Source: Cristina Inclán-Valadez, 2008.

When I started my fieldwork, the neighbourhood committee had been working for four consecutive years. It was formed of one administrator (Lydia) and a committee of four women representing the different housing blocks; it also included two female guards working at the main gate and Héctor, the neighbourhood watch rep., who ran the “Security workshops” that were designed to instruct residents on strategies to avoid robbery and escape threats of violence. Having a female administrator, a committee made up of women and female private guards patrolling the gate gave the neighbourhood committee an interesting gender composition that reflected the concerns with particular *privada* problems. As is commonly seen in informal settlements, the

work of the neighbourhood committee was characterised by honesty, cooperation, solidarity and integrity (Chant, 1991). In this particular case, the committee was concerned with making the *privada* a clean, tidy and more attractive place to live. The question of gender roles was also referred to by Lydia to distance their work from that of Abelardo, the former administrator who, as explained in Chapter Four, was seen as corrupt and who, it was alleged, had embezzled the payments made by the neighbours for the construction of a swimming pool and the entrance gates of the complex. Similarly, some of the male guards who had been employed in the past proved to be inadequately committed to their task. There were stories of male guards sleeping or drinking while on duty or being accused of sexual harassment, and this made Lydia claim that women were better than men in dealing with neighbourhood matters.

Lydia was enthusiastic to promote a positive image of the *privada*. She created a slogan that exhorted: “*Vivamos en comunidad, con respeto y dignidad*” [Live in the community with respect and dignity], that appeared on all the committee stationery and neighbourhood ID cards. To some extent, Lydia has proved the truth of her exhortation. During her four years of administration, she has persuaded 80 out of 100 residents to pay regularly or at least try to pay their monthly administration charge of MXN \$250 pesos: USD \$22. This was more than double the fees charged for other sections of GEO Bosques and almost half the level of fees charged in a middle-class gated community. It therefore strengthened Lydia’s aspiration to have the *privada* thought of as a gated community. Factors such as security, the conservation of the built environment and the fostering of good community relations were crucial to her agenda. More than half of the collected payments were used to pay the security personnel and the rest was devoted to the maintenance of the common areas, which included the cleaning and repair of infrastructure such as the entrance gate, guard house, parking lots, lamp posts and waste water canal, as well as Lydia’s monthly salary of MXN \$3,000: USD \$274. It was the residents’ responsibility to keep their private front gardens tidy, which in fact, constituted the vast majority of the common areas.

Lydia was not new to community organisation. Her experience started after the 1985 Mexico City earthquake while she was working as a nurse for the Mexican Red Cross. On that occasion, she treated patients from the public hospitals that had collapsed during the earthquake and afterwards joined the Red Cross brigades that organised the

distribution of food and international aid. Lydia's involvement in the disaster rescue measures formed a part of what Monsiváis (1987) and Poniatowska (1988) have called the triumph of civil society. Organised groups were involved not only in rescue operations but also in organising effective responses to housing-related problems. Lydia kept her interest in community matters by taking part in the social groups in the *unidades* where she and her family lived before moving to GEO Bosques. Lydia's vast experience in neighbourhood organisation enabled her to adopt what she called "a negotiation style ... a reconciliation that takes time. A 24-hour job that requires me to be aware of problems and in permanent contact with my neighbours ... the creation of rules."

Accordingly, she drew up a document called "*Reglamento Interno*" [Internal By-laws of the *privada Colorín*]. The Internal By-laws was a pastiche of "preventive measures, reward schemes and reprimands" (Flint and Nixon, 2006:2) designed to classify and control residents, visitors and workers (i.e. guards, maids, builders and suppliers of water and gas tanks). It synthesised some of the suggestions made by Casas GEO for construction and self-motivation and ideas borrowed from condominiums and gated communities in Cuernavaca, as well as the experiences of neighbours in other situations. The document included a wide range of programmes and control measures, ranging from ID cards for entry to the neighbourhood, to a dress code, the registration of cars and pets and competitions for best decorated house. The purpose of these programmes was to classify people as 'good' and 'bad' residents. 'Good neighbours' for instance could include those who regularly paid their neighbourhood charges or those whose house fronts were clean and well maintained. In Lydia's words, the 'bad neighbours' included those who "do not fit here. Those who do not want to integrate with the plan ... are not interested in living in an appropriate way or with the dignity and respect [that] our slogan says". More precisely, this group includes families who avoid paying the neighbourhood charges, residents who lack money to improve their houses and people who have failed to comply with the regulations or regard the estate as a family place. The category of 'bad neighbour' is a clear reminder of the presence of the 'FEO' connotation and how it needs to be monitored.

The construction of “Casas FEO” as a stigmatic notion that requires the social control of residents reminds us of Foucault’s argument concerning governance. To Foucault, the praxis of governance entails a variety of techniques and rationalities of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1991a). This concept of discipline does not take an overtly repressive form but is a system for regulating general conduct or, as Foucault has put it, “a body is docile that maybe subjected, used, transformed and improved” (1991b:136). Hence, as the author captures by his term ‘governmentality’, target populations are constructed, classified and subject to constant surveillance. When applied to the study of housing and anti-social behaviour in housing estates, scholars have argued that governmentality involves acquiring the practice of correct behaviour and respect, as opposed to what is socially constructed as anti-social or uncivil (Flint, 2004b; Flint and Nixon, 2006; Nixon and Parr, 2006; Saugeres, 2000). In practice, these authors have argued that the “discourse of the responsible tenant” (Flint, 2004b) is ambiguous and contested as it depends on individual interpretation, location, context and community tolerance. Taken together, these studies suggest that in stigmatised contexts such as housing estates, the search for social and physical order often leads to the construction of a ‘problematic neighbour’: someone with economic needs or a particular lifestyle or appearance (Stokoe and Wallwork, 2003; Nixon and Parr, 2006). These studies suggest some similarities in the use of the ‘FEO’ connotation in the *privada*, such as the constant surveillance and classification of residents through positive behaviour and punitive action, appear as everyday techniques for dealing with the threats of ‘FEO’.

6.3 Classifying the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ neighbours of the *privada*

6.3.1 Recording Formats

The first general classificatory system used by the neighbourhood committee was the “*Formatos de Registro*” [Recording Formats] which were forms that residents use to request permission to carry out construction or other activities. In the *privada* bylaws, the “Recording Formats” were defined as measures that “might disturb the peace of others, or put at risk the physical security, health and comfort of those living in a condominium regime” (Internal By-laws, n.d.: XIX). More specifically, these were certain kinds of behaviour and practices that could make life in the community

complicated - for instance, noisy pets, on-going construction or using other people's parking space. The Formats were drawn up to help residents exercise self-control. A set of written rules were linked to each "Recording Format". For instance in the format for construction, the residents had to describe the type of construction – whether it was an extension or remodelling or involved an extra room or floor - and include the plan or at least a drawing or picture from a magazine, signed by the *maestro* [foreman] or an architect. Both the resident and the *maestro*/architect had to sign a statement of liability (that was not legally binding), with phrases such as "*doy mi palabra*" [I give my word], in the case of damage to adjoining houses or common areas. The format also includes some basic rules for construction such as permissible working times and the code of behaviour for builders (i.e. avoiding exposure of the upper part of the body, sleeping in common areas or listening to loud music).

Similarly, other "recording formats" had their own specifications for controlling what could be seen as 'inappropriate' behaviour by neighbours. For instance, *micros* [public transport vehicles], old taxis or cars with flat tyres cannot be parked in such a way that gives "a messy look to the *privada*" [María, member of the ladies' committee]. Equally, there should be no large or noisy pets, unless they are kept in the back patio and cleaned and trained to avoid having a "street dog look". María explained that pets were under her surveillance and that owners were obliged to observe the "*Reglamento para mascotas*" [Internal By-laws for pets] which was an additional set of rules aimed at preventing cruelty to animals. In the context of the *privada*, cruelty to pets included locking dogs inside the house for weeks as a deterrent to burglaries.

In the same way, some commercial activities were preferred to others. Offices, store-rooms, bakeries and kitchens were preferred to food stalls outside the front door, car garages, hair salons and *picaderos* [places for prostitution and drug-dealing]. María also explained that women selling, for example, Tupperware, coffee or cosmetics were also encouraged "to register their businesses, just to feel sure that they were abiding by the rules of the *privada*".

Some of my neighbours argued that the 'formats' were mere formalities of the neighbourhood committee, as everything was negotiable. With a *mordida* [bribe], perhaps in the form of an additional neighbourhood fee, businesses, noisy pets, large

gatherings with live music and old cars parked on the street were accepted. But Lydia thought that these rules constituted a form of control over people and their activities in what she called “The inventory of residents and belongings in the *Privada Colorín*” which included lists of occupied houses, residents’ cars and commercial activities carried out in the *privada*. She argued that the list was helpful in the task of managing a hundred houses, and if it was updated regularly, it could allow her to make a personal classification of the residents. In this document, each resident’s record was marked with an observation, such as “congratulations”, “excellent neighbour”, “very problematic”, “difficult” or “refuses to pay the charges”. These observations were linked to whether, for example, residents were paying their maintenance charges or not, building without following the rules or employing a maid that she did not know.

6.3.2 Neighbourhood meetings and the “*privada* news”

“Extraordinary Meetings” and a monthly report known as the “*privada* Newspaper” were the formal channels used by the neighbourhood committee to control people who were not following the rules. The extraordinary meetings operated at the housing block level and were never scheduled. They were held when Lydia considered that a particular problem or conflict between neighbours could be solved through her ‘mediation’, meaning that Lydia identified and ‘grasped’ the nature of a problem. Hence, a meeting might be called with little warning and such meetings were usually set up for after 10 p.m. or very early in the morning when people were around even though they might be tired and busy with their family lives.

Most of the problems raised concerned faults in construction that had no real solution or everyday nuisances (e.g. annoying pets, electricity cuts, noises coming from the TV, domestic quarrels, hanging out clothes in public areas). Others were to do with Lydia’s desire to improve the upkeep and appearance of the *privada*. These issues might include trees that were deemed to be too tall, plants that did not fit in with the landscape, a dirty car or the smell of burned garbage. All these ‘problems’ can be regarded as what Nixon and Parr (2006) call “neighbourhood offences” and as such they were subject to corrective measures that ranged from a public reprimand - that normally started with “With all due respect Mrs. Benito, this is not what we expect from someone living in a

community, right?” to a punishment that normally included a fine or a cleaning *faena* [task]. Although it most often seemed that fines were not paid and tasks were not done, the exposure of the problem clearly caused personal problems among the closest neighbours and the meetings became opportunities for personal issues to be discussed. Conversations about gardening and ways of avoiding electric surges tended to become more heated with phrases like “you did the same, I have heard you” and “you are a resentful woman, because your husband is with someone else.”[as cited in the Monthly Report, May, 2007].

The monthly report documented the agreements that were drafted during the meetings, and the expenditure and achievements of the month. A section called: “*OJO Vecino: necesitamos de tu cooperación*” [Watch out neighbour: we need your cooperation] was devoted to exposing what the neighbourhood committee considered a situation that needed to be dealt with because of its improper or unsafe nature. The idea was to examine a situation in detail with times of the event, place and names of the people involved. Examples of these stories included maids accused of robbery, clashes between guards and residents, neighbours seen drunk or having sex in common areas and gatherings that ended in *borracheras* [drunken sprees]. The aim of the detailed descriptions was to warn people about an ‘unsafe’ person or situation, as well as to give examples of what a decent GEO resident should avoid.

6.3.3 Friendly reminders: the “system of notes” and decoration competition

According to Lydia, the most rewarding job was not to punish but to “remind” people to conform to the kind of behaviour that was expected. Amongst the most effective “corrective actions” (Flint, 2002) designed by the neighbourhood committee to encourage appropriate conduct was the “system of notes”. These were handwritten messages written on brightly-coloured paper that were glued to the front doors of those neighbours who were contributing to the ‘messy’ appearance of the dwellings. This could be a dog fouling the premises or the presence of litter, leaving construction materials at the front of houses or having uneven surfaces or dry grass in front gardens. They were summarised in the internal rules as “failings that could spoil the appearance and general good living standards of *Privada Colorín*” (Internal By-laws, n.d.: VI). The

messages could adopt a conciliatory tone and mention others neighbours as good examples to follow:

“Neighbour in house 50, we require your help to clean your parking space and nearby common areas ... Your tree is beautiful but you should remember that it is higher than 2.5 metres. Don't forget to follow the rules. Let's live with respect and dignity!

‘... we remind you that banana trees are not appropriate for the pavement. Look at your neighbour's bougainvillea ... Your house will look nicer and your neighbours will be pleased’.

‘... we invite you to be responsible for your pet and stop it from fouling the area outside your home. Please read the rules. Use a dog chain’’. (see photo 21 for examples).

But, similar to what Flint (2004a) found in housing estates in Scotland, the constant inspection of people's behaviour made the notes take the form of demands for compliance rather than being mere exhortations.



Photo 21. Written reminders for neighbourliness

Source: Cristina Inclán-Valadez, 2007.

A second type of note acted as a “reward system” (Saugeres, 2000), and was reserved for residents whose attitudes towards the enhancement of the *privada* deserved the respect of the rest of the community. In Lydia’s view, some neighbours should be rewarded for attempting to overcome the problems caused by others who showed no interest in improving privada aesthetics. These meant being concerned with tidy gardens and clean house frontages, as well as introducing all kinds of adornments, for instance balconies, running fountains, or aromatic candles in the gardens, or playing instrumental music that others could hear. These measures were applauded with phrases like:

“Well done neighbour”, “Perfect example of a garden” and “We are lucky to have you as our neighbour!”

Lydia explained that these notes were designed to instil in residents a feeling of pride in their houses, as well as serving as a channel to encourage the same feeling in their neighbours. In her view, a good example of this ‘pride’ in their homes was the Christmas decoration housing competition which elicited a note such as “God bless your family this Christmas too”. When María, the organiser, attempted to describe the displays (i.e. white lights on terraces, fronts decorated with stars, snowmen, and snowy landscapes) there was an element of ‘good’ taste, in her opinion, about what the residents themselves were doing thanks to this competition.

There was a general dislike of large illuminated inflatable decorations because they were bulky and attracted dust. As the following comment shows, in María’s assessment of a well-decorated house, there was a constant attempt to describe the owner as a healthy and safe resident and a good example for others to follow.

“When you look at Ramiro’s house, you automatically think: this is a healthy person, right? Healthy families, healthy houses ... my heart leaps. I sleep well, and feel a sense of peace when I see this, because it means less work for me and more ideas for all of us! You know, it is very rewarding to see how people who never clean their fronts, suddenly do it for the competition. It is a certain community spirit that we all want. Each year, more and more people are joining the competition. For once, they want to be part of the community.” [María, women’s committee].

The ways in which María regards Christmas decoration practices as beneficial to the ‘community’ corroborates the findings of Edensor and Millington (2009) in their study on the production of Christmas landscapes in Sheffield and Manchester housing estates. The authors argue that the association of Christmas with notions of conviviality, communal respect and generosity give people the opportunity to find what they think are appropriate space-making practices and ways in which their space should be organised. Through the narratives of different residents, the authors found that friendly practice that started off as a desire to communicate pleasure and festivity led to communal obligations and a sense of common understanding that needed to be sustained and improved each year. In the case of the *privada*, people were not forced to take part in it; but some of my neighbours saw it as a form of collaborative behaviour that should be expected of each member of the community, and a good way of showing their love for their homes.

6.3.4 Debtors, unwanted neighbours and problematic blocks

At a higher level of control, there are activities specifically designed to deal with residents who, according to María, “consistently fail to pay the neighbourhood charges, or who do not show up at neighbourhood meetings [or those] whose lifestyles do not match the lives of the majority”. These were people who challenge the normative standards of what constitute ‘appropriate’ space-making practices, for instance, revealing their poverty or a physical appearance or lifestyle that could be seen as ‘out of tune’ with the rest of the community. These residents were punished with blatant forms of aggression that forced them to change their lifestyle or find a different place to live.

On top of the list were the debtors who were behind with the payment of the neighbourhood charges. Every two months, their names and debts appeared on brightly coloured paper stuck to both sides of the main gate. If the sum of the debt was high, the names were accompanied by a short phrase explaining the reason for having failed to pay the neighbourhood fee. For instance, “long term debtor due to unemployment” or “problematic neighbour, refuses to pay”, which usually exposed people’s economic circumstances. Debtors were only treated as visitors and the guards were not allowed to open the entrance gate for them, and, at times, their personal belongings or the boot of

their car were inspected for security reasons. The committee's approach to debtors tended to start in a conciliatory way by knocking on doors and asking for a short chat to negotiate the debt (i.e. ceding the parking space as payment in kind or making small weekly payments) but a lack of agreement could lead to further punitive measures that could include the loss of bills and personal mail or weeks without garbage collectionservices. These threats were often neutralised by making a 'deal' with the guard, meaning a tip or a *taco* [bribe] for opening the main gate or for collecting the garbage.

The problem was the stigma attached to being in debt and the conflicts that the exposure of personal lives caused among neighbours. Marichú, a secondary school teacher who refused to negotiate a debt, described the problems that she faced with the neighbours who felt she was taking advantage of them:

"In the list of debtors I appeared as a negligent neighbour, my name was written in red. But as if this was not enough, the vigilante ladies regularly left the same messages outside my front door with words like: Don't live off others! Don't take the easy road and join us now! It was very alarming to see my name appearing all the time, but reading phrases like 'you shouldn't live off others' was an open insult. The tone of the messages became angrier when we refused to park our car outside the gate. At midnight my son used to bring it here and then ... in the mornings there were messages on it with words such as *pobretón* [poor guy], lazy this or the other. My son had an argument with the neighbourhood watch rep and the situation got worse. One day I found the car windscreen was covered with mud, water and dog-shit. It was a traumatic experience and I couldn't speak for days. Unfortunately, I got the message too late. The only way to stop the violence was to negotiate my debt" [Marichú, 50. High-school teacher].

Marichú was only able to stop this intimidation once she agreed to negotiate her debt with the neighbourhood committee.

The presence of drugs, prostitution and violence of different kinds were serious issues throughout GEO Bosques. The *privada* was not an exception. In the course of my fieldwork, a home was twice investigated by the police on suspicion of drug dealing; my neighbour was murdered presumably for the same reason and there were also houses used as working brothels and storerooms of apparently contraband medicines. Knowledge that these activities were openly taking place, sometimes in the same block,

created anxiety and put pressure on the committee to control them. As Millie (2007) argues, in the residential context, vagueness about what constitutes the limits of acceptable behaviour often leads housing reps to anticipate situations that could potentially have an impact on the safety and well-being of residents at the cost of stereotyping people. In the case of the *privada*, it was impossible to control all the activities that were taking place inside the house. An inevitable consequence of these concerns was that the committee tended to link activities with a particular person or a group of people rather than with the behaviour itself. A divorced woman coming back home late in the evening might imply indecency or prostitution; a young man with tattoos denoted delinquency, much as an outspoken mother might be regarded as rude. Moreover, real or fabricated stories of divorced women engaged in prostitution, cases of infidelity, presumed domestic violence or kidnapping committed by apparently peaceful neighbours were reported in the “*privada* newspaper”. When necessary, personal letters were sent to each resident to warn families of the people suspected and to discredit them.

A story narrated by different neighbours (who thought it could be useful for my research) was the case of “indecent behaviour” of a woman accused of having sex in a car late at night. In the “Monthly report”, the story appeared as follows:

“Indecent behaviour of Mrs. Flores, resident of house 46, occurred in the parking lot. We hope it will be corrected soon for the good of the community.”

“On Wednesday the 24th, an anonymous resident reported that one of our neighbours was having sex in the car late at night. It is not the first time that the aforementioned neighbour has been seen indulging in compromising behaviour. For the good of our children, for the respect of our community, please avoid this kind of embarrassing situation.” [Monthly Report –March, 2005].

As recounted by different people, the story suggested that this was common behaviour and should be controlled. Neighbours such as Martha [28, housewife] added details to the story, describing the clothes that Mrs. Flores liked to wear or the type of men that used to escort her. She would use telling phrases such as “fortunately she is not here anymore. One less of those here”, which confirms how certain groups of people were seen as potential threats. Other neighbours however, used the story to exemplify the intrusiveness of the neighbourhood committee into the private lives of residents:

“The vigilante women, as I call them, suffocate you. All they want is to run your lives. They push you to the limits, so you only have two choices. Some of us decide, “ok I will pay, or I will change or ‘pretend’ to change just to live in peace.” Another choice is to adopt the attitude of – “listen if my life upsets you, then I’m sorry but don’t come around to look at my house, and poke your nose into my life - ... it may be a wrong life for you but this is my own way of living ... But if you do this, you lose a lot because the war never ends.” [Licha, 44. Housewife].

Licha narrated how after the aforementioned note appeared in the “*privada* newspaper”, many neighbours embarked on a discrediting campaign against Mrs. Flores by sticking messages on her car and labelling her an “indecent woman”, actions which it appears eventually forced her to move out.

Lastly, the problems included blocks of houses that had become well-known as ‘unsafe areas’. These will often be described by the committee as in a state of decline because of the large number of families unable to comply with the rules of the *privada*. Many of the neighbours, Lydia added, required extra monitoring, or else they would be compelled to live elsewhere. In Lydia’s discourse, people’s problems of poverty or violence were seen as ‘social pollution’ (Hunter et al. 2003) that could spread to other blocks. The southern block where I lived was seen as a place that was full of ‘serious’ problems. It was repeatedly labelled (in extraordinary meetings and informal conversations) as “a time bomb” since a combination of incidents, apathy and lack of physical maintenance was regarded with turning the block into an unmanageable area. In reality, the southern block reflected common problems in the *privada* that occurred in a short period of time and involved people who were often vulnerable.

This can be illustrated by the case of my neighbour Zoé, both a victim and a perpetrator of serious domestic violence. Next to her, was Carla, a young student who lived alone until near the end of her pregnancy. In the two houses beside her, there was an old woman with senile dementia who was often left locked in the house during the weekdays by her son. In the house to my left a three year-old boy accidentally drank paint solvent and became extremely ill and on my right lived the young guy who, as stated earlier, was murdered. Some houses had the “Casas FEO” appearance: the use of

cardboard as a substitute for curtains, corroded security bars on windows and gas tanks secured with chains. This physical deterioration was more evident because part of the block faces a large space that is completely unused. This was the area where the swimming pool had once been planned but which was neglected after the project failed.

The context was ideal for a discourse on the ‘right to live in tranquillity’. In the following extract, Lydia describes how she sees the block as “rapidly going downhill” and attributes this to a combination of people’s physical appearance and/or behaviour (looking dirty, drunk or stunned) and the state of the houses that reflect the resident’s problems:

“There has been so much violence in this block ... She [referring to Zoé] thinks that the front garden is a rubbish tip. Instead of encouraging the children to use the front areas to play in, Zoé tells the boys to urinate outdoors or in the laundry *patio*. The children stink and if you want to find the husband, go to the corner shop and you will see him getting drunk ... The guy inhaling drugs in the car, is sometimes so stoned that he has to spend the night in the car ... Everybody living on top of each other, do you think that is safe for our children? Then there is another problem for the people from House 13. It is a decent family but the boy got poisoned right there in the garden. The screams of the mother could be heard in my house. A tragedy, but then you must ask what a paint solvent was doing there. The neighbours’ lives are also affected by tragedy. Now people just don’t want to go outdoors.” [Lydia, administrator of the *privada*].

The reaction to these everyday nuisances was to build walls, cultivate plants as borders, add more grilles or even put up a plastic panel at the back of the patios to avoid any kind of contact with unwanted neighbours. At the end of my fieldwork, Lydia expressed a desire to build a wall that could act as a barrier and separate the southern block from the rest of the *privada*. So far, this wall has not been built but Lydia ‘punished’ the entire block by regularly missing it out from the pesticide control service and other maintenance tasks including the garbage collection.

6.4 The GEO and the 'FEO': a permanent tension

6.4.1 Trying to maintain some distance

The many different 'remedies' people employed to 'fix' everyday problems amongst the neighbours revealed deeper problems related to self-management. In places such as GEO Bosques, the neighbourhood groups often operate informally and the *privada* was no exception. As mentioned in Chapter Four the question of 'legality' and therefore the enforcement of the rules was absent in the "Condominium Regime in the state on Morelos". The legality of a neighbourhood association as an AC (Civil Association) can only be given by a public notary. An additional problem was the lack of a *Procuraduría Social* [Social Attorney] provided by the state of Morelos; a public office where people could request formal mediation or a solution to their problems. In addition, the majority of the residents of the *privada* could only afford to pay for their security "gatekeepers" or "maids disguised as guards" that in their view lacked security. In fact the guards were housemaids in different houses in the *privada*; they were also flower-pickers during the summer, street cleaners or washerwomen, jobs that they did as a means of surviving a life of poverty. They worked on temporary contracts and were untrained, underpaid and inadequately screened. Instead of a 24-hour shift, they usually worked 48 or 72 hours shifts, just to earn a bit more, and it was common to see them washing cars or collecting garbage to earn extra income and then unexpectedly disappearing because they had found a better job.

The guards that I talked to stated that they did that job out of necessity, either because they failed to meet the requirements to become a police officer or because they found it the best way of getting extra jobs as housemaids or gardeners. Rocío, the guard who was working there while I was doing my field work, was living in a *Casa Hogar del DIF* [DIF Homeless Shelter], a social assistance institution for people in extreme social need. She was recommended to work as a guard by the psychologist of the DIF as part of her social rehabilitation. These stories evoked feelings among residents of both distrust or compassion towards the guards. The guards' routine was plagued by incidents that reflected these complex feelings: the guards stated that they had received insults and personal threats from residents, and the residents accused the guards of

harassment, robbery and a poor service. At the same time there was a degree of complicity seen in the fact that they ate with the residents, showing affection with greetings, hugs or the use of expressions like *comadres* when they looked after each other's children.

The ambiguous relationship of distrust and complicity between the female guards and some of the residents was another sign of the kinds of conflict people faced when balancing the GEO and the 'FEO'. On the one hand, many people recognised the presence of the neighbourhood body as it 'guaranteed' that they could live in relative peace in spite of the anxiety associated with living in a 'FEO'. On the other hand, it was common to hear that "nothing really works here", as it was believed that the Committee adopted "made-up measures (more gardening or collective tips for the guards) to justify Lydia's salary ... and give the impression that we are organised and live in safety" [Memo, 46. Entrepreneur, insurance company].

Over the course of my fieldwork, I was often aware of this contradiction. For instance when residents treated each other with the same tactics of public scrutiny and aggression as they received outsiders. Measures needed to be taken, for instance, to prevent residents throwing stones at people's doors or cutting the electricity cables. After conciliation there would be a short period of peace, lasting perhaps a few weeks or even some months. But fights between neighbours and conflicts over noise or unpleasant smells were harder to resolve and would flare up frequently. The feelings of latent violence made people live in a state of uncertainty about not knowing when and where a problem with a neighbour might erupt and of the need to cope with this problem. The next section explains how some residents try to find ways of overcoming the conflict between the GEO and 'FEO'.

6.4.1.1 An indoors life

The tension caused by attempting to reconcile the constant threats of the "Casas FEO" moniker with the pressure of showing a façade of peace and safety obliged residents to find ways of creating or appropriating other spaces that could give them the feelings of peace and security that the *privada* lacked.

Some, like my landlord, found a peaceful and comfortable life in a GEO house, without the intrusion of neighbours or members of the neighbourhood committee. They did this by establishing what they call a “tranquil” or a “family life”, meaning that what happened outside, even a few metres from the house, mattered little. The constant vigilance of the neighbourhood reps and the lifestyles of some neighbours encouraged them to live a life set apart from neighbours or common matters. Their example suggested that a GEO house could be owned without any ties to the social environment that surrounded it. The house was well adapted for this attitude. It looked totally caged, with protecting grilles at the windows, doors, roof and *patio* at the back. The interior looked larger than other houses as it had a kitchen extension and a large arch that separated a multi-use space where there was a TV studio from a matching set of living and dining rooms. The quantity and relative quality of security measures and housing redesign were clear signs that the Muñoz family felt the best approach was to separate themselves from neighbours by staying indoors.

The search for a “family life” meant not challenging the internal regulations but going along with them by adopting what Goffman (1959) called the “tactics of impression management”. These tactics could help maintain an image of ‘appropriate’ or ‘good’ neighbours. Vero explained:

“We are a quiet family. We are very simple. We don’t get noticed by the neighbours or give them any reason to talk about us ... Home for us starts at the front door and ends at the back door. The less you know about other people’s lives, the more you stay out of trouble. We try to avoid any kind of confrontation with the committee or with people living here. We greet our neighbours and pay the neighbourhood charges to avoid problems. ... we water the garden and greet our closest neighbours, and take part in the Christmas decorations. It is not a big effort because it means more to us than them. ... at times, we have breakfast in the garden, just to get noticed. We enjoy the garden for a few hours and stay indoors for the rest of the day. We don’t have time or interest to get involved in gossip. I value my house for what it is, a house.” [Vero, 33. Public worker].

This ‘indoors’ life at times seemed to be contradictory, as in many of our conversations; the residents stated that one of the main reasons for having bought a GEO house was because of the ‘bonus’ that a house-with-a-garden could bring to their lives. Moreover, they would often state that they wished to live in Cuernavaca permanently because it offers a peaceful outdoors life with good weather. However, different factors have

forced an indoors life on families. Long working hours away from their children and the constant tension of keeping up appearances have forced many residents to employ “strict forms of control over their children’s movements” (Jensen, 2008: 114). The deterioration of the streets and the common plaza was a reminder of the FEO image that had to be avoided as much as possible. The scene was no better inside the *privada*, although here at least the parking areas were safe and clean. Letting children go out meant there was a risk they would witness the drug dealing and prostitution that were taking place just a few houses away from their home.

A combination of these factors made some adults insist that their children stayed indoors most of the time. It was a common practice for girls to invite friends to play ‘indoors’, and it was essential to have cable TV, a computer or a good collection of video games for most teenagers. The girls said they were bored staying home watching the *telenovelas* and that they preferred joining their mothers in their jobs and coming back home together in the evenings. Apart from the school, and a few places that were considered to be ‘safe’ - the Cybercafé, the *area de fut*, and, during the weekends, the burger stall - the teenagers in particular did not have much to do. A group of six adolescents who often met to play football complained that the *area de fut* was disappearing, since it was the only true place where, as they said, there was something for them to do.

6.4.1.2 Sports clubs and private further education institutions as appropriate environments

Other families were following a similar lifestyle, by keeping children in what they called “appropriate environments”, to reduce the time they needed to spend indoors. A number of the new private further education institutions offered extra-curricular activities to their pupils as a marketing strategy to attract more students. In the view of many teenagers, school and career paths automatically gave them new tastes or interests, as Marina states:

“If you go to a *escuela privada* [private further education institution] you have a wider range of choice. There are extra-curricular classes. You can join the choir, play volleyball or do something. There is no need to stay at home watching TV or in the streets like those guys who go to *la pública* [state school]. You can also learn a language. If you study tourism, you have to take classes to make sushi or French bread, or Chinese food. It’s always fun ... I go there twice a week and wait for my mother to pick me up at 7.00 pm. Sometimes we go to the Carrefour supermarket that is close to the school and spend some time there, always in a group. You don’t go to the town centre or to *ferias* [religious festivals in open spaces] even if they are close by. You just go with your parents.” [Marina, 16, studying tourism].

The private education institutions were perceived as a safe and purposeful space that complemented the lifestyle aspirations of the parents and of many of their children. After-school activities were not only ‘instructive’ – offering ways of learning – but also served to maintain peer group bonds and distinction from other groups of the same age not from the *privada* or complex.

Sports clubs appeared to be a relatively inexpensive option. Sports clubs were not unusual for the residents of GEO Bosques and other similar complexes, and people used them in different ways. Residents might for example be weekend or weekday members, and use tickets of five, ten or 20 days; or they might cancel their membership when necessary and enrol again when they could afford it. During my research I observed that sports clubs were mushrooming fast around these kinds of housing complexes. With names such as Coral Gables, Olimpus, El Beverly Hills, Acuasol and Springfield, they were advertised on billboards on the way to the recently-built housing complexes. These clubs were relatively small and tried to attract the Casas GEO clientele by drawing up agreements with companies or public institutions with constant discount offers throughout the year and options for upgrading or interrupting membership. The basic services of the clubs included a swimming pool, a garden and shower rooms, although some of them were equipped with tennis courts, gyms, saunas and gardens for picnics and social gatherings.

Without exception, all the people I talked to in the *privada* had taken out a membership or wished to have one. Those who were members described the clubs as contrasting with and adding to their lives in GEO Bosques. For instance, the Rangels explained how

they ‘stretch to its maximum’ the family membership in the Coral Gables Club, as it serves as the perfect way of supplementing a child’s development. The clubs also allowed access to certain leisure activities that can only be enjoyed there. Elvira, for example, cited Belly dance as a leisure activity that she and her daughter could enjoy. More importantly, the sports clubs represented a place where her daughter could make ‘appropriate’ friends with similar tastes – and who attended the same private school or took the same kind of holiday.

“To be honest, I cannot tell you much about the people here. We live, let’s say, 40% here and 60% in the Club Coral. I take Susana to the club every day after school. I take some food with me and we eat there. There is a cafeteria and some tables in the garden. It is the place where she studies ... she has friends, birthday parties ... It is wonderful, you could come with us and see the gardens yourself ... the gym and the classes that you find, like you find in the dances of Bollywood films, where else? ... It is something different for us, something exclusive. We know that ‘home’ is both our house and the club. Here you find two types of children: those ‘with-a-club’ and those ‘without-one’. The no-club children, who spend their time outdoors in the parking spaces, climb the few trees that we have here ... and have no place to go to.” [Elvira Morales, 41. Reception school teacher].

The sports clubs therefore provided families such as the Morales with the additional value or ability to ‘sort’ people out and find their ‘equals’, something that they argued was not possible in the *privada* because of the secluded life of most residents. As is evident in the quote above, for Elvira, the club was a substitute for home, which became just a space to sleep, whereas the club was a space for domestic and community life.

6.4.2 The attraction of charismatic churches

In a similar way, another group of residents found that charismatic churches gave a community spirit and the chance to improve their lives. An important group of residents regarded themselves as *hermanos* [brothers and sisters] and were members of the Evangelical church, the Christian Congregation of Jehovah’s Witnesses or the Mormon Community; there were local congregations which had several churches in Cuernavaca

and the nearby municipalities of Temixco and Zacatepec. These *hermanos* attended different congregations and together they constituted a group of nearly 17 families in the *privada* where I lived, almost 19 percent of the occupied houses. When these numbers are seen in the context of the neighbourhood activities, they involve many more people than any neighbourhood meeting attracted. In the national context, the 2010 Census shows that in the last ten years, the proportion of Mexicans saying they are Protestant or Evangelical grew by 7.6 percent of the total population, higher than in 1990 which represented 4.9 percent of the the population (INEGI, 2011a).

The *hermanos* only took part in neighbourhood meetings in extreme cases. They did not usually visit each other's houses or express feelings of neighbourliness, but many of them held prayer meetings and spread Christian doctrine by text messaging to support each other or simply to remind people of an activity held in what they called their "community" or "group". Forty-one year old Adriana and 15 year old Fanny were very active in their congregation at the largest evangelical church in Cuernavaca. Like many other *hermanos* in the *privada*, they spent Sundays and some weekday afternoons in their community with people Adriana described as "avid to become better people and better parents ... and more satisfied with what you have". From a pragmatic perspective, she compared the work of her congregation with the programmes carried out by the neighbourhood committee. In her view, the congregation was more effective in dealing with the kind of issues that made some families "problematic":

"We are people who want to deal with our 'monsters'. You find everything there: widows and housewives who feel in despair. ... separated families, parents and sons living in violent conflict, drug abusers ... and thieves. It is what we call the 'diseases of life', but the difference [with the committee] is that we try to enter into a dialogue and show respect. We listen to people and help each other. We are friends ... we sing, go on excursions and organise kermeses [fairs]. These things help you to change. Here, the ladies do not understand that things cannot be solved by being aggressive. If you don't behave, you have to pay a fine or get reprimanded in public. The idea is to embarrass people. The members of the congregation do not judge you, but help you to be reborn as a good person ... a caring neighbour, a tolerant car driver ... an upright citizen." [Adriana, 41. Municipal worker].

This quotation suggests that the church was a safety network for people to find a community. This particularly applied to young families who had moved directly from one of their parent's homes, where joining a social network through the church was valued highly as it replaced the support and solidarity left behind on moving to GEO.

Of equal importance to the solidarity and support that people found in churches was the idea that Charismatic churches allow people to belong to a larger world, where they could feel like global citizens, and be able to see beyond the restricted space of the *privada*; they could be liberated from the mechanical lives of 'home-job-home' that most GEO residents have to endure. The networks of these churches are vast. The evangelical church in Cuernavaca, for instance, is linked to the Carolina Youth Commission in Pennsylvania and the International Crusades for Christ, a movement which began in American schools and has now extended to Mexico and Central America.

While accompanying Adriana and Fanny to church, I was told how the congregation welcomes regular visits from members from other countries and seeks to expand the size of the congregation and missions. Teenagers from Pennsylvania and Carolina come on "mission trips" to Mexico and are hosted by families who are members of the local congregation. The church in Cuernavaca offers similar opportunities to young people who want to join Christian camps in Canada or missions in Nicaragua and Kenya with the "*Juventudes Evangélicas Mundiales*" [Protestant/Evangelical Youth Ministry]. Fanny explains her experience in an international mission:

"My Mum and I went to Canada with the community last year. I spent several months collecting paper from my neighbours here and selling it to help pay for the trip. I made friends with whoever I chatted to ... I think I have more friends from the *juventudes* [Evangelical Youth] than from school. I also joined a Christian camp in the mountains where we talked about the environment ... how the *juventudes* could help. I know now how to recycle goods and I am showing this to the *señoras* here. We went to see Niagara Falls and to Toronto ... after finishing my studies, I want to join a six months' mission in Argentina! Alternatively, I might join the Pennsylvania Crusades or the *Juventudes* again. My mother says that it is all right. ... but I that must keep on evangelising, working hard, and studying hard. I love looking at maps and imagining myself out there, somewhere." [Fanny, 15. Higher Education student in tourism].

Although the congregational life of the Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses is less active, the Charismatic churches are certainly a means of promoting solidarity, neighbourhood responsibility and good manners among those people who could not find these qualities in the neighbourhood. As the Evangelical Church shows, these communities represent a good way (especially for young people) of making contact with people in other countries and thus offers a contrast with the very insular lives that people commonly lead in the *privada*.

6.5 Conclusions

In this chapter I have analysed the spatial practices and tactics of self-governance that have been played out in the *privada*, primarily for dealing with the constant 'threat' posed by the ascription of the "Casas FEO" tag. The chapter has described how, in order to deal with the 'FEO threat', the neighbourhood committee proposed a set of preventive and corrective measures based on notions of responsibility, decency and cleanliness. These notions lead to the social construction of the 'unwanted' or the 'problematic neighbour' in need of correction. The Residents who did not fit the standards of a nuclear and prosperous family were the prime target of these activities. The forms of control included the exhibition of personal problems, alienation through aggression and the temporary loss of basic services. These practices of self-management also intensified feelings of hostility and alienation among the neighbours. This is seen for instance by the way imaginary barriers or real walls are built to reduce contact with unwanted neighbours. As well as describing how residents distrust their neighbours, I have also explained the presence of conflicting feelings of distrust and acceptance with regard to the neighbourhood committee and its programmes. The female guards reflected this tension. They were seen as untrustworthy and unsafe, but, at the same time, they were indispensable as maids, housekeepers and allies [*comadres*] because they gave the kind of informal support that people could not find from their neighbours.

Throughout this chapter, I have also examined people's strategies for coping with the fear that the 'FEO' label might be associated with them. By leading an indoors life, some residents developed what they call a "*vida tranquila*" or family life, as opposed to

allowing their children to be seen or as to become a ‘FEO resident’. The adults thought that having a well furnished and comfortable home was indispensable for keeping their families indoors. In the case of the teenagers, the activities found in private schools made up for the limitations of living in a place that lacked activities or a community that could embrace them. Finally, the sports clubs and charismatic churches were seen as “second homes” and “real communities” respectively. The reason for this is that they provide people with enough space to find and to reproduce the emotional affinities, tastes and beliefs that a secluded life in the *privada* lacked.

Their sense of belonging to these ‘controlled’ or ‘appropriate’ spaces – private further education institutions, sports clubs and new religious groups – leads to two reflections. First, it places GEO residents into what Wacquant (1991) explains as the importance of cultural and symbolic elements in the process of ‘class-making’ and its ‘middle ground’ existence compared to those who are socially above them. By emulating the lifestyles of higher, class groups, GEO residents display the mindset, aspirations and dispositions that can be associated with a perceived upward mobility. Second, it shows how people at GEO Bosques – in the same way as other emerging social groups in contemporary societies - are carving their own ‘forms of assertion’ and local recognition through specific symbols, claims and class values. Overall the chapter demonstrates that by means of practices and beliefs associated with the notions of ‘good neighbourliness’, the GEO residents were able to contest the ‘Casas FEO’ stigma and create a space that provided them with a sense of status, social mobility and a global outlook.

7 Chapter Seven: Building a “Plus home”

7.1 Introduction

In 2007, the residents of the *privada* decided that it was worth entering their neighbourhood for: the municipal project “*Las 20 nuevas joyas de la ciudad de la Eterna Primavera*” [The 20 new jewels of the City of Eternal Spring]. The initiative formed part of the urban improvement programme which was designed to attract tourism and highlight the city as a weekend spot and a place for leisure and relaxation. Since the mid-nineties, kidnapping and violence, severe economic stagnation and environmental degradation had threatened people’s perception of the city. The ‘20 new jewels’ project sought to encourage local residents to improve the appearance of their neighbourhoods by adding plants, painting house façades and cleaning the streets. What most attracted some of my neighbours to this project was that if it was selected, the *privada* could form part of the “Cuernavaca real estate book of the year” targeted at the foreign market, which could increase its commercial value and recognise Bosques as a ‘distinctive’ place.

In explaining the municipal initiative and how the *privada* could be selected, Memo mentioned that there was a story behind what I was seeing in Bosques. He was referring to the front gardens and the many purple bougainvilleas that provided the terraces of the upgraded houses with shade. That story, he said,

“started when we all decided to give our houses a ‘Cuernavaca look’. This *privada* was sold as an ‘upmarket’ area but there was nothing upmarket about it. We converted a dry and rough place into our refuge, into our oasis ... From our point of view, it deserves to be part of the Initiative.”[Memo, 46. Entrepreneur. insurance company].

As has been stressed throughout this thesis, the story I heard from Memo and many others was of continuous alterations from what had been promised by the developer, to what was sold by the estate agent and handed over by the Post-sales GEO staff. Later, improvements were made by the residents so as to achieve the style and comfort of which they had initially dreamed. There were many stories about these alterations, but

one that linked them all was the desire to give the *privada* the atmosphere of beauty, sophistication and style that could make people feel part of what in their view was, the modern and exclusive Cuernavaca that the government was trying to revive and that the developers had emphasised not many years before.

This chapter investigates how residents of the *privada* use architecture and aesthetics to create places of ‘good’ taste, distinction and security and enable them to achieve what Casas GEO termed “*un estilo de vida a tu alcance*” [an attainable lifestyle]. Specifically, it focuses on how people living in GEO Bosques play a role as ‘partners’ of Casas GEO by improving and altering the original house design on the basis of their own notions of style, security and comfort. The analysis follows Humphrey’s (2002) ideas about the importance of distinguishing between the image of a building/object and what it really expresses. I argue that while the upgraded houses are seen as a means of forming the self-image of a contemporary middle-class citizen, this is hardly ever achieved. There is a gap between the mental image of what an upgraded GEO house stands for and the physical fact of the construction. As the last analytical chapter of this thesis, my aim here is to examine people’s practices and experiences for improving a type of dwelling that lacks quality and regulation and needs constant maintenance to keep it habitable. It argues that the constant need for improvement made people reconsider the notions of housing and the implications of moving from ‘permanence’ to ‘transitory dwelling’, challenging their notions that a house is the achievement of a lifetime.

The chapter first focuses on the selling and commercial strategies employed by the developer and partners - a group of house retailers and home decorators - to finance and sell furniture and services for house improvement, designed to help residents to add the comfort and style that the houses initially lacked. It then investigates people’s creative ways of improving the original housing model on the basis of personal notions of good taste, comfort and style. The last part illustrates the rationale and aesthetics of the ‘plus style’, an architecture created by a group of residents that seeks to radically change the original GEO model. It examines the different forms that the ‘plus style’ can take and how the constant upgrading of people’s houses influences their aspirations and sense of belonging.

In investigating the perspective of the developer and home retailers, as well as that of the residents, I follow Bourdieu's notions of the display of 'taste' (or similar expressions of a particular lifestyle), analysed here through the aesthetics of the house and decorative items. Tastes revealed are not individual choices but depend on larger social structures that frame people's position in society and also their ability to remake their existence in everyday lives. It is through a wide range of practices - "pertinent", "distinguished" "vulgar" or "pretentious" (Bourdieu, 1984:176) - that people are able to change the reality of their current lives and draw a distinction between themselves and others who are their 'equals' as well as those in a lower social class. This idea of display of taste as transformative actions that work within a given structure point to important ways in which people in the *privada* understand, use and reorganise the spaces and the 'options' they have been given by the GEO company and other home retailers.

7.2 Selling lifestyle through the post-sale system

In Chapter Four I argued that the aim of Casas GEO is not to build houses but to sell lifestyles. I explained that an important part of the business model is to communicate the 'virtues' of its products to its customers. That is, on the one hand, a GEO house is a flexible dwelling designed to be extended and personalised as much as the owner requires, by adapting interiors, adding rooms, finishes and attractive decoration. On the other hand, the houses do not stand alone but form part of a broader urban pattern that GEO calls a "town" formed by clusters of houses that are ready to be enclosed with gates and security measures, common areas and *Centros de Barrio* [community plazas]. I also explained that this house planning can only work well if the residents are involved in maintaining and organising their living space; that is, establishing a partnership with Casas GEO. This partnership obliges people to carry out a wide range of repairs, changes, and alterations to their houses and nearby areas to achieve the notions of security and exclusivity that the model promises to provide.

The idea that residents are *co-producers* of their space was broadened by the Former Vice President of the Design and Urbanism at GEO and author of *La Morada*, Casas GEO main housing model, who argued that rather than being regarded as unfinished or inadequate products, the houses should be seen as an opportunity to replace the

practice of self-building in informal houses with planned houses that can be extended and adapted according to people's needs and ideas. He explains this as follows:

"I did not want to impose a rigid model on housing, but to give people the option to live in a legal and planned house that has enough scope for expansion and can be adapted from the inside. This is a holistic concept ... we do not just build houses and go away. We design houses that aim to cut the roots of informality. Informality is a myth. It is expensive and inefficient. Nobody likes living with the eternal presence of the bricks. We offer finished houses that people can improve as much as they want. We offer people the choice of taking part in the building process ... We did not intend to exclude or forbid people from playing the role of an 'architect'. In the end it is they who build a house ... people now have a wide range of options ... they can have a TV room ... a bigger bathroom, etc. We should all be less critical about what we build. People radically improve their lives in a Casas GEO. We in GEO have helped millions [of families] to climb the ladder." [Carlos García-Vélez. Former Vice President of the Design and Urbanism. Casas GEO. July 11, 2007. Mexico City].

The idea of giving people a basis to improve their living conditions by making them co-producers of the house was not new in Mexico or Latin America. It is often an intrinsic notion within squatter housing relocation and upgrading programmes. A current example in Mexico is the *Piso firme* [Firm floor] programme for families living in extreme poverty. The partnership is simple and involves families laying wet concrete provided by the government. According to cost-effectiveness evaluations, this measure leads to improvements in child health, school attendance and adult well-being (Cattaneo et al., 2009).

In the case of Casas GEO, the improvements start from a higher base and are less easily measured through indices of child health or school attendance. Rather, extensions and decoration are held to have effects on people's happiness and well-being. This is the phase when Casas GEO and the residents display their real partnership by building together a middle-class lifestyle that was planned months before. On the side of GEO this means 'assisting' residents to enter the world of style and comfort, by offering a variety of credit plans and packages for house extensions or decorations; while on the side of the residents it entails improving their homes by agreeing to decisions made by the company and retailers. Although the elements of style and comfort offered by the developer are available at the time of purchase, when people see the show houses at the "Sales centres", it takes many years in most cases for the dream to come true.

7.3 The “GEO partners”: ‘Buy now and pay later’

During fieldwork in 2007 and 2008, a group comprising home retailers, supermarkets, house decorators and money lenders, or what I call here “GEO partners”, played a crucial role in forming people tastes and attitudes to their new life in GEO Bosques. The ‘GEO partners’ included had an extensive geographical presence in Mexico through firms such as Elektra, Walmart and Carrefour that provide in-store credit for different goods and services. They also included the state-owned entity Infonacot [National Institute for Workers’ Expenditure], which offers retail finance to salaried workers. In addition, two furniture and in-store credit stores (K-Be and Equipa-T) sell, online, furniture and decorative items specifically designed to fit the dimensions of a GEO house. The term “GEO partners” can also cover the many other small retail stores and micro-lending banks that benefited from the explosion of Casas GEO and similar large homebuilders. Together, these actors formed a portfolio of items and services ranging from furnishings, home accessories and gardening suggestions, to items for extending or transforming the house.

According to De la Calle and Rubio (2010), the number of department stores and supermarkets in Mexico grew by 44 percent between 1988 and 2008, with their growth tied to the emergence of new urban areas (De la Calle and Rubio, 2010a:64). A natural consequence of this relationship was that it increased access to in-store credits so that the new city dwellers could afford to improve and furnish their new homes. It is common knowledge in Mexico that the retail stores Elektra and, more recently Walmart, are the largest companies that offer payday loans to lower-and middle-income groups (Epstein and Smith, 2010). With nearly 2,000 locations and sales points spread throughout the country, since the 1970s Elektra has been one of the most popular retail stores for Mexicans who lack access to traditional banking and credit channels. The company’s stores serve as places for buying furniture, televisions and household appliances (particularly in provincial and even rural towns), as well as finance centres for receiving remittances sent from relatives living in the US and Canada. Since the mid 2000s, Elektra and multi-national supermarkets such as Walmart and Carrefour started operating aggressive payday loans and small banking financing schemes (Epstein and Smith, 2010).

Grupo Elektra offers a good example of the growth of in-store micro loans. In 2002, it extended its financial services by becoming a retail banker. This meant that it could operate through an affiliate, Banco Azteca, with branches located in-store, to ensure the allocation of micro-credits. The main strategy is to offer personal loans for items exclusively offered in the store (i.e. ranging from electronic products to furniture and household appliances). The Bank can also however grant a second or third credit to continue covering the debt. Data from the Grupo Elektra webpage shows that more than half of the company's sales are on credit and the target is to expand this facility through recently introduced loans for cars, insurance policies and weekend homes. The target market consists of nearly 4.5 million Mexican families who still do not qualify for commercial credit (Epstein and Smith, 2010). Other stores such as Wallmart, Carrefour and General Electric Co. are adopting the same strategy of obtaining banking licences in order to expand their sales via micro credits. General Electric, for instance, operates through a network of banks termed "Money Outlets" which offer cash loans from USD \$100 to USD \$1,100, credit cards for a specific use and small loans for larger expenses such as cars, and more recently, homes (Epstein and Smith, 2010). Smaller furniture shops such as K-Be or Equipa-T work with the same strategy with credits operated by Casas GEO.

People living in GEO Bosques were familiar with the in-store credit plans as well as with the retailers. In explaining the credit plans, Licha [44, housewife] argued that the weekly credit schemes were similar to the *tanda* system [rotating credit association] or money-lending by relatives or a work colleague. However, residents were unaware of how profitable these methods could be for the retailer stores. A growing number of consultancy reports and articles in academic and business magazines have disclosed that there is a lack of consumer protection and control of interest rates associated with micro-credit practices in Mexico (Epstein and Smith, 2010; and Morduch, 1999). According to these studies, the profitability of the small loans is based on the number of payments made. As a result, the sum that is borrowed is split into a number of small payments, with interest rates rising to 109 percent, which forces people to become or remain permanently in debt.

The controversy around the micro-credit practices and poor consumer protection in Mexico has drawn attention to the large profits made by NGOs such as *Banco Compartamos* [Compartamos Bank] by granting micro-loans to poor people. Muhammad Yunnus (2011) details how Compartamos, now the sixth largest bank in Mexico, expanded in 2006 by changing its status from an NGO with a SOLOF financing capacity [allowed for accessing commercial funds] to a commercial enterprise). Compartamos operates through a network similar to that of Elektra and General Electric Co. with almost 200 branches around the country. One of its most popular programmes, *Crédito Mujer* [Woman Credit], consists of granting small business loans, from MXN \$1,500 (USD \$118) to MXN \$30,000 (USD \$2,118) to women wishing to open micro businesses ranging from door-to-door selling to growing vegetables (Compartamos Banco, 2012). The money is lent to a group of ten or more women who gather together every week to receive or pay back the corresponding loan instalments. As in the case of the in-store credits, the Compartamos loans have high interest rates (up to 117 percent CAT weekly payment⁹⁴) but the pressure for repayment is on the group. As it is a rotating credit system, the members of the group are responsible for repaying the loan as well as for obtaining further loans. Moreover, the programme imposes a degree of saving, since it requires borrowers to have savings that are the equivalent of MXN \$2,000 (USD \$157), as a kind of collateral fund. A common practice for participants is to pay back the loan in retail stores such as Elektra or Chedraui, which, once again, encourages people to spend their savings on consumer goods.

During my months of fieldwork, the most common micro-lending strategy employed by GEO partners such as K-Be, Equipa-T and Elektra was the “*Pagos Chiquitos*” scheme [small payments]. This was a fixed weekly instalment plan specifically designed for buying home appliances and furniture. In this case, the goods were advertised in catalogues which show a picture of the item with the corresponding weekly instalments written in small letters. In the graphics, it appeared as if there were 60 weekly instalments of, for example, MXN \$144; however, the advertisement omitted the total

⁹⁴ CAT (Total Annual Cost). CAT is shown only for illustrative purposes, and to be compared only with similar credit products from other financial institutions.

Compartamos Banco. (2012). *CAT y APR Informativo*. Available: www.compartamos.com/wps/portal/ProductosServicios/Credito/CreditoMujer. Last accessed: July 10, 2012.

cost thus giving the illusion that the plan was easy to pay or cheap. Discounts are offered for up-front cash payments which are promoted with slogans such as “*chaz chaz*” [cash, cash] (Elektra Tiendas, 2009). The pictures of the furniture are accompanied by phrases such as “your family deserves it” or “fulfil your dreams” and these are regularly added to the credit plan to make it look more appealing. The on-line catalogues of Elektra or K-Be, for instance, allow people to combine items (i.e contemporary lamps, modern-Scandinavian furniture and Mexican finishes) and create a particular atmosphere: Zen, modern, classical or functional. People can see different surroundings by selecting furniture, a decorative item and a wall colour from a list that appears on the webpage and, by using the mouse, can move around different areas of a Casas GEO house plan. Finally, the interactive digital house plans allows people to create the dwelling they want and, as a sales agent of K-Be argued, these interactive plans seek to work as an “online interior-design course”, so that people can understand how a choice of colour, illumination, or space left between items can have a positive effect on the style and functional design. The same sales agent mentioned that the interactive house plans were designed to show the real difference that the owners can make in their houses by making a good investment in “buying complete sets of dining room and bedroom furniture for less than MXN \$500 (USD \$45) fixed weekly payments for two or three years”.⁹⁵

The growing number of insolvencies and complaints that have resulted from this credit plan has forced Profeco to help customers to calculate the real cost of the scheme by using a data simulator. The simulator specifies the CAT [total annual cost⁹⁶] or interest rate that combines the total cost of the item plus the interest and charges for the credit operation (Profeco, 2010b). Table 6 provides an example of similar audio systems offered on the market in 2010, showing that the CAT almost triples when purchases are made in long-term weekly instalments; it should be pointed out that the “GEO partners” (Mega Elektra and Famsa, in this case) possess some of the highest CAT rates on the market.

⁹⁵ Personal communication with a K-Be Sales Agent. June 29, 2009. Cuernavaca, Mexico.

⁹⁶ The CAT (Costo Annual Total) is defined by the “Ley para la Transparencia y Ordenamiento de los Servicios Financieros”. Profeco. (2010b). *Ley para la Transparencia y Ordenamiento de los Servicios Financieros*. Available: <http://www.profeco.gob.mx/juridico/pdf/LTOSF.pdf>. Last accessed 15th Feb, 2010.

Mexico City January 2010 Data							
Product	Retailer	Payment in cash	Period of payment	Fixed payment	Number of payments	Total	CAT. Annual Total Cost
Audio system LG	Liverpool	7,368.65	Monthly	1410	6	8,460.00	61.9%
Audio System Panasonic	Sears	5,150.62	Monthly	977	6	5,862.00	56.9%
Audio System Panasonic	Coppel	8,299.00	Monthly	822	6	10,693.90	70.8%
Audio System Panasonic	Coppel	8,299.00	Monthly	1536	12	10,045.90	109.5%
Audio System Sony	Viana	7,785.00	Monthly	947	12	11,364.00	109.6%
Audio System Panasonic	Famsa	4,523.00	Fortnightly	261.95	24	6,286.80	95.0%
Audio System Sony	Viana	7,785.00	Weekly	219	52	11,388.00	122.1%
Audio System Sony	Famsa	4,523.00	Weekly	130.98	48	6,287.04	109.6%
Audio System Sony	Mega Elektra	4,349.00	Weekly	120	52	6,240.00	112.7%

Table 6. CAT calculated by Profeco for items offered with in-store credit

Source: Profeco (2010a). Author's elaboration.

Another strategy was the “*cuenta a pagar*” [post-dated bill], which was mainly employed by furniture retailers owned by GEO such as K-Be and some small local furniture stores and was designed for purchases of lower-cost appliances or decorative items. The strategy operated by charging a percentage of the total value of the item on the day of the purchase and left the rest of the bill to be paid with small weekly payments. This scheme allowed people to hold the product for a certain period of time, but very often people stop paying and ended up losing their initial sum.⁹⁷

Finally, there is the “*lista*” [list], a common rotating raffle credit system that is designed to finance high-priced items such as fitted kitchens and protective grilles, representing the highest expenditure for the families according to the retailers (up to MXN \$40,000: USD \$3,800). Since the 1990s, this credit scheme in any of its variations (*autofin*, *puntos*, *sorteo*) has become increasingly common in Latin America as a means of

⁹⁷ As explained in Chapter Four, residents might also be eligible for debit cards such as Socio GEO if residents agree to advertise houses or become house managers, which also entitles people to discounts or points equivalent to discounts with ‘GEO Partner’ retailers.

enabling people to buy imported cars and high technology products (O'Dougherty, 2002). The "list" group was formed by up to 12 people, each of whom make weekly payments over a period of four months that represented one-twelfth of the cost of an item. Essentially, this is a lottery system and each month a participant's name is drawn and the pot used to acquire the product or service.⁹⁸

In practice, none of these schemes worked in the way that Casas GEO or any of its partners indicated or residents anticipated. The residents' partnership schemes for the improvement and furnishing of homes proved to be more complicated and less straightforward than expected. Since they are regarded as familiar 'tactics', these schemes do not operate as fixed systems for consumer products, but rather are used, pooled, or combined with others tactics that people employ for convenience or out of sheer necessity. Both Bourdieu (1987) and de Certeau (1984) stated that people formulate a set of alternatives on the basis of what they experience in their daily life, and that they improvise or contest the 'systems' that involve stability of practices and control. The attempts of home retailers to impose stability through regular and punctual payments, as well as to control the way people live and decorate their homes, were modified by the residents. Apart from improvising in their daily lives, people kept altering their tactics owing to a lack of money. For example, Rosa, a 40 yearold housewife and fruit-seller, like many others, found that it was easier to buy what she called semi-new furniture or housing appliances that had been seized by Elektra or Famsa from those unable to cover credit costs. Like Rosa, many residents argued that there was always a chance of getting a similar item that was seized by the retailer for stopping payments by simply going to the Elektra second-hand stores. It should be added that people's tactics for improving their homes are evidence of how disruptive the increasing number of changes were. In this research, this was a key factor determining what people thought of the "GEO attainable lifestyle".

⁹⁸ As it will be explained further in this chapter, GEO residents spend much more on building extensions, but these extensions are built gradually, according to people's needs and budgets, and could even be left unfinished for long periods of time with no financial consequences

7.4 Adding style to the *privada*

Although Casas GEO and its partners played a key role in shaping people's tastes by offering credit facilities and a wide range of decorative choices, as explained in Chapter Four, people were forced to 'rescue' their properties by sorting out the problems and replacing what had been overlooked by the developers. In finding their own means of making their homes secure for a short period, or in making them less damp and or fresher, there was also a concern for taste and style which challenges Bourdieu's assumptions about class distinction.

The search for style and refinement was expressed in different ways. A good example is how neighbours fixed construction problems by adding a thin layer of concrete (render) to the interior walls. This was not only a long-lasting solution for preventing damp, but it also added a different interior style, what Marta called "a Mediterranean look:"

"you will see in some houses that the wall corners are rounded, as in the Mediterranean style. This is not usually found in Mexican houses. We did not plan it ... it was our solution, and that of others, to repair a serious leak, but it looks very nice when the walls are kept very white." [Marta, 28. Housewife].

There were other cases where a measure brought about a series of alterations and the 'rescuing' of homes seemed to have no real beginning, peak or end but just became a continuous process of house improvement. Many of the residents stated that their main goal was to make their houses look better or larger and to have a personal touch or style, through small details such as painting the floor and walls in bright colours, adding plants or furnishing the houses with selected items from their previous homes. This was particularly the case of families who could not afford to make big changes and concentrated instead on "simple things that you probably cannot notice", as Rosa expressed it, referring to the banana trees and a deck-chair placed in her front garden where her family spent most of the time (as well as a few decorative items such as a mirror and a painting that adorned the ground floor that was used to store the boxes of chewing gum and piles of mangoes that her husband sold).

The collective story of the *privada* was that after nearly two years, it had improved considerably. The houses were ‘habitable’, which meant that they were equipped with basic things such as protective grilles, tiled flooring, improved kitchens and basic furniture. The main problems of space, security, ventilation and shade were somehow solved with temporary or more sophisticated and ‘stylish’ features such as air-conditioning, insulated outside walls, large windows and sloping roofs that served as porches over the main doors. But there were also some people, like Joaquín (28, coffee merchant), who felt a need “to pull down the walls and make a radical change ... change it all! The doors and windows were too narrow, and everything looked cramped in this house.”

7.4.1 The need for ‘the weekend tone’

Ramiro, 44 and divorced, was trained as an engineer but is now working as a jazz musician in restaurants, spas and private parties in Cuernavaca. He was one of the residents who said they had purchased a Casa GEO in a “plus area” because of the swimming pool and 24-hour security. Our conversations never centred on the difficulties of living in a GEO house but only on the benefits that his home had brought to his life. In 2004, he drew up a plan for two community projects that he believed could make the *privada* a real gated community. The first project was designed to include the swimming pool and Clubhouse that were never built by the developer. A second project was for a small open plaza with benches and trees surrounding a fountain, or as an alternative, to have this as a “Japanese garden with running water that could provide spiritual calm”.

Ramiro’s projects were rejected by most of the neighbours who interpreted them as attempts to privatise the common areas. According to Ramiro, some tenants stated that the projects “looked too elegant and exclusive” and were not suitable for families with children who were more in favour of a playground or a plain open garden. In reality, economic reasons were behind the rejection of both the projects as for some residents funding improvements to the ‘basic’ housing package by adding new flooring, protective grilles and net curtains and by levelling the front areas had become a burden. In some cases, the cost was as high as MXN \$90,000 (USD \$8,500) which was nearly a quarter of the cost of the house. Ramiro thought that the failure of the projects resulted

from having neighbours from dissimilar socio-economic backgrounds with whom it was impossible to forge a common language, or what he called “a group mentality project” to create living space. He abandoned his project and concentrated on improving his own house. He knew that his project could not be built entirely as he wanted. On the contrary, he had to contend with neighbourhood politics as well as the structural limitations of the construction such as the use of prefabricated materials, the problem of shared walls and the small size of the building.

His aim was to keep his house as simple as possible. This meant respecting the GEO-block terracotta colour and the original square forms, but with a “certain style [which included] some ideas [taken] from the Colonial architecture of Cuernavaca”. These included the use of adobe, quarry stone and wood in finishes, and open terraces and balconies as extensions of the building. With the help of two ‘experts’ – a construction worker and a furniture designer - Ramiro altered the facade by adding a sliding door and extending the house to the front with a terrace and a second floor veranda by combining construction materials such as quarry stone and wooden beams (see photo 22). He also had lots of plans to improve the GEO-block, which involved creating microclimates, explained as follows:

“[In this house] wherever you are there is a microclimate, as I call it – separate spaces with different atmospheres ... There is no extravagance here. It is a small house but a special one ... It has my personality and my own taste ... I borrowed some ideas from the Colonial architecture of the Mexican haciendas. You can see the porticos with separate spaces, or the red clay flooring and the mosaics ... but with the influence of the spas that you can see abroad - in Thailand, for example, - or here in Morelos. The terrace is an imitation of a spa ... I think it is a house which has the concept of comfort.” [Ramiro, 44. Musician].

Ramiro’s microclimates and concept of comfort included an air-conditioned bedroom, a second-floor balcony/terrace that serves as a gym, a music studio covered with cork for soundproofing, a front terrace with a jacuzzi, and interiors decorated with “do it yourself” matching furniture. He covered the front with a large palm tree and different plants to give his house more privacy.



Photo 22. Ramiro's Colonial-Spa house

Source: Cristina Inclán-Valadez, 2007

Ramiro's construction was severely criticised by the neighbourhood committee and different neighbours tried to regain possession of the common area taken over by him for the jacuzzi. While he was away some neighbours would spy or would bring their children to play in his front garden and new jacuzzi. After a period of time, Ramiro's plants grew, people got used to the new view, and he became an accepted and admired neighbour. "A creative person ... stylish and refined" and his house became "an oasis, that we should all regard as an example of good taste" as Lydia, the administrator of the *privada* put it.

Ramiro's oasis proved that his version of a GEO house was superior to what the developer had envisaged or what people had imagined was possible. Not all the neighbours admired Ramiro's expressions of wealth and luxury, and some of them referred to how he used to lie in the sun while relaxing in the jacuzzi every afternoon. Nonetheless, it was recognised by my neighbours that he had started a movement of what they called "plus changes" or house modifications, that changed the image of the *privada* by giving it a 'weekend tone'.

The Weekenders were the first to try to imitate the 'weekend tone' of the jacuzzis, terraces and privatised gardens. This involved building terrace or porches made of quarry stone and terracotta colours that, as Ramiro had shown, could blend with the original colours of the GEO construction. Others got together to build terraces with sloping ceilings made of wooden beams or to adopt strategies for reproducing the Colonial look that the *privada* was acquiring. Some neighbours, however, took Ramiro's ideas a step further by building gardens twice the size of their houses or fencing them with grilles, walls or tall trees to separate themselves from the rest. Fabián [aged 59, engineer], for instance, extended his house to the front and right-hand side with two terraced gardens, one with a fountain and the other one with a jacuzzi, and raised the height of the wall that divided the *privada* from the adjoining subsection of the complex. Instead of fencing his new house and gardens with grilles, he planted trees. The house was practically surrounded by green areas. As I could see in the neighbourhood reports, these kinds of projects were often contested by the neighbours, who made footpaths to walk across the private gardens, and measures were taken by the administration, such as cutting down the trees, removing the fences or walls under construction. After some time, the complaints ceased and a certain balance was struck with the residents accepting the idea of building front gardens and balconies as examples of status and good taste (see photo 23) for examples of front gardens and balconies).

What I found in the *privada* was an acceptance and normalisation of the "plus changes" which had once been censured for being extraordinary and unobtainable. My everyday day view in the *privada* had once consisted of a combination of houses that showed the original Casas GEO construction, with finished or partly finished balconies, terraces with outdoor furniture, room extensions, and plastic pools in front gardens that

were hardly used. This patched landscape was supported by some neighbours, who often showed me the new rooms or the recently-acquired garden furniture with enormous pride despite clues that these changes were sometimes far beyond their economic means and had been bought by making great sacrifices elsewhere. Nevertheless, the sacrifices of the present were seen as part of a lifestyle attainment, and a contrast with the housing struggles of the past.

Colloredo-Mansfeld (1994) described a similar phenomenon in his ethnography of architectural styles in Ecuador. He discusses how styles incorporating ideas from foreign countries, which were initially seen as extravagant and at odds with traditional local building standards, gradually became the adopted norm and combined with traditional building techniques. This fusion of techniques and styles produced an “architectural metamorphosis” formed by a constellation of different opulent styles that gave status to the village. In Bosques I realised that changes provided residents with a certain “architectural idiom” or what some called “a plus style” that “became the symbol of a new group identity” (Klaufus, 2000:343). It helped residents to acquire a social status and quality of life that the original GEO construction had failed to provide. The new style reflected people’s desire to keep a distance from the ‘FEO stigma’ and demonstrated residents’ need to remove any possible trace of the Casas GEO identity by using architecture as a powerful resource.

The next section explains the eclectic and evolving architectural style called the “plus style” and discusses what people claim they have gained from it as well as the obstacles they have faced.

7.4.2 The aesthetics of the “plus homes”

The wave of ‘plus’ changes carried out in the *privada* was described by the neighbourhood committee as the “plus style” or “plus homes”. This was an eclectic style taken from different sources and for different purposes that a growing group of residents were adopting (or wishing to adopt) as a means of living more comfortably in a GEO house. Similar to the *Kottedzh* villas in Russia described by Humphrey (2002) or

the so-called “Monster houses” in Vancouver (Mitchell, 1998), a “plus home” reflected the desire of its residents to adapt the original house to fit an aspiration for something larger, more elaborate, and symbolically different. This could include doors with stained glass, darkened or polarised windows, golden-coloured protective grilles, large sculptures, fountains or ponds at the front of the house, inflatable swimming pools, jacuzzis and porticos decorated with Christmas lights all year round.



Photo 23. The ‘weekend tone’ in the *privada*

Source: Cristina Inclán-Valadez, 2008

The practice leads to an uneven and patchy landscape composed of the following: house extensions with square rooms that lacked windows, additional rooms on top of or at the front of the building; narrow front gardens; small porches or terraces sometimes shared with three or four neighbours; second floor balconies; new doors or windows; and entirely new facades. These “plus homes” often stand beside other houses with half-completed constructions or houses that retain their original model but include a touch of the “plus style”, for instance on the front door (see photo 24 and 25 for different examples).

The unevenness is both material and linked to status. Improvements are produced by different combinations of ‘experts’ or none. A ‘plus’ house plan, for example, can be drawn up by the owner with the help of an architecture student and built by a group of construction workers. It can also be planned by an architect or a person familiar with the Casas GEO construction (usually a builder or a house agent who has worked for the company) and the work continued by the owners with a couple of construction workers or else it might be solely planned and managed by a paid architect. The result is a variable standard of quality and originality. The greater the involvement of ‘experts’ (i.e. architects, students, *maestros* and interior designers) the more residents feel that the projects have originality, quality and style.

The desire for originality and inspiration for the design of extensions, gardens or decoration does not prevent almost all improvements representing copies or adaptations of existing ideas. These are often picked out from specialist magazines or, as with Ramiro’s house, from weekend houses seen in upper-class residential areas in Cuernavaca. I saw similar house extensions and decorations in the different housing complexes that I visited in the region, which suggests there might be an exchange of ideas across the Casas GEO sites. There is undoubtedly a wide range of possible influences, both locally and abroad. My landlords stated for instance, that the arch that separates the kitchen from the living-room was a replica of a Colonial Hacienda seen in Guanajuato. Some residents said they had taken ideas from American TV series and soap operas, others from constructions seen while working in the US; all of them provide examples of different domestic settings and lifestyles.



Photo 24. An ‘improved’ landscape at Bosques 1

Source: Cristina Inclán-Valadez, 2007, 2008, 2010



Photo 25. An ‘improved’ landscape at Bosques 2

Source: Cristina Inclán-Valadez, 2007, 2008, 2010

The merging of ideas of the people involved in the construction, and their desire to make Bosques a weekend spot, made the residents build what people regard as examples of a “Colonial house”, a “Quinta chalet”, “type of bungalow”, or simply a “house in ‘Cuerna’ [abbreviation, Cuernavaca]. As explained by Ignacio:

“This is a type of Colonial house but with a little from here and a little from there ... The outside is more Colonial, you can see it in the small terrace that is very open and has a wooden ceiling. The front garden is more Japanese. The idea is to keep plants that are short and similar in style ... It was designed by a professional gardener. I think it is the garden that makes this house valuable. You will not find anything like this. The next thing I want to add is an interior garden in the living-room with the four elements of the feng shui.” [Ignacio, 51. Bank clerk] (see photo 26).



Photo 26. Ignacio's Japanese garden

Source: Cristina Inclán-Valadez, 2008.

Residents adopt a wide variety of interpretations of what a Casa GEO should look like as well as how these changes might reflect on the real value of their properties.

In contrast to Ramiro's or Efrain's ideas about creating surroundings that could transport them to a Thai spa or a Japanese garden, some of the weekend homes tend to have fewer alterations than the permanent ones. The owners value the GEO house for the weekend experience that it offers. These houses were only improved with protective grilles and a very simple garden with terrace chairs, and a barbecue. Weekenders such as Milagros wanted to keep their house simple and with the bare essentials and have a house that could be considered rustic and modern.

"The idea is to keep it as a weekend house, with no luxuries. Every time I come, I automatically feel I am transported to a beach, to Cancún if you like. This is my Cancún, or to the mountains of Canada when the evenings are cold. This view reminds me of Canadian landscapes. Look, we have a perfect view of the volcanoes. Here you feel a cool breeze blowing in your face ... I take a towel and lie down on the grass for hours to see the sunset. This is our small paradise, our therapy for stress. Nothing more! We keep it functioning with all the

services running and pay the mortgage ... we have plans to remodel it, but my idea is to leave it like a hotel room, a suite in a boutique hotel. My vision is of a large room all in white and with linen curtains ... downstairs all in white with a small kitchenette and sofas where you can lie down, and a hammock to see the sunset.” [Milagros, 55. Retired primary school teacher].

Milagros explains that the real value and added status of the house is the experience she gets from it every weekend.

Those with less space for alterations or fewer resources applied the “plus style” to their interiors. These were houses that had so many extensions that they looked ‘stretched’ to a maximum size and comprised, for instance, larger kitchens, studios or television rooms, and small bedrooms built on additional floors. Some families followed the advice of K-Be or Elektra with regard to decoration and included new functional furniture and a combination of colours and shapes that were chosen to simulate more space.

The amount of conversations raised on topics related to house aesthetics and decoration revealed the importance that most residents attach to transforming their GEO house. People revealed desires for a house that could resemble another space: a hotel, a foreign landscape, a Japanese garden, a spa; or a modern and functional home different from the intention of the GEO original. To the owners, the adaptations form the components of an “ideal house”. Linked to the prospect for transforming houses into something else was people’s awareness that these were changeable and temporary constructions (see also next section). Although the “plus style” added emotional and material value to people homes, it often led to additional problems: after a certain number of years people were forced to fix and alter what had already been improved.

7.4.3 Building second floors

In their attempt to fulfil their dream of an ideal house, some residents embarked on major renovations that included large-scale vertical constructions above of the second floor. This was the latest trend that I observed in GEO Bosques and was gaining popularity among the permanent dwellers, most of whom were young couples with

children who wanted to stay in the same home for at least another seven to ten years. The decision to embark on major house renovations was crucial, particularly for young families, as the widely held view was that GEO houses were like cars, “affordable and easily renewed”. This reasoning was influenced by the ability for people to transfer their mortgage to a new property, as well as people’s experiences of the poor quality of the construction. The choice was to embark on major housing renovations or transfer the mortgage to a newer GEO house and start the cycle of housing improvements again.

The residents who joined this trend for major renovation were the most affluent residents of the *privada*, who thought that, after living in their houses for seven years “it was time for a definite change or upgrade” [Pedro, in his 40s, architect]. These residents explained that more space meant more opportunities for innovation, a fusion of styles and decoration. In addition, embarking on a major renovation project could allow people to solve many of the structural problems of the original construction. These could not be fully dealt with through small and isolated repairs (i.e. the warm synthetic tiled roofs, the porosity of the block that caused damp or leaks and the poor electrical system that was easily damaged during the rainy season). Major renovation, people argued, could give people the opportunity to extend their stay in the same GEO home.

Vertical constructions or so-called “second floors” (in reality third floors) were carried out by building new rooms on top of the original house. The extensions provided larger bedrooms for the children, laundry rooms, roof gardens or patios for laundry. A variation of the vertical homes was to change the design of the house as much as possible to replicate a “Sea villa”, “German chalet” or a “minimalistic style”. The new styles required the drafting of new mortgages, as well as the presence of ‘experts’ such as architects and interior designers who could supervise the project. The presence of experts not only gave residents the guarantee of good quality construction, but also a degree of certainty that the renewed houses complied with the regulations and thus would not cause any problems to their closest neighbours. Although it was a necessity given the need to maintain structural integrity, having a house plan designed and approved by an architect or an engineer was also viewed as a sign of quality. People also took the unusual step of gaining approval for the changes from the municipality

even in cases when it was known that remodelling did not require a municipal construction licence.⁹⁹

The following are examples of the latest trends in renovation. The first, described by its owners as “*Casa estilo Americana*”, includes two extra rooms built on top of the original construction, a front balcony and major interior renovation (see photo 27). The *Casa* belongs to the Álvarez family and stands out as the most modified house in the *privada*. The Álvarez spent five years fixing and extending it, while living in situ, but at the end of my fieldwork its owners argued that the construction was nearing an end. The new vertical construction followed a plan bought by Carlos from an American contractor and was granted full planning permission. Pablo explained the project as follows:

“We built the third floor for my wife’s dressing room and a room for the baby we were expecting. It was not only to increase the size of the house. Thanks to the renovations, we are solving the problems that kept on appearing ... the noises that can be heard from my neighbours’ house and the smells. One night we could even smell the marihuana that the girls next door were inhaling ... Some people here in the *privada* openly expressed their opinion that the building is quite flimsy and will not bear the massive construction work. But no one puts his own family at risk so why should I? This (construction) is more serious than what people think. My brother and I got a plan from a *gringo* contractor who builds houses in Minnesota. Every aspect of the construction was revised by the contractor ... the quality, which walls could act as pillars ... the materials to be used - he followed up every step ... He is a professional ... We renovated the kitchen including the pipes ... and stopped the water leaking by changing the plastic tiles for a real ceramic tiled roof and reinforced the walls with cement, to reduce noise. The new bathroom has a hydro-massage tube ... You can see the cedar wood of the staircase and the doors. We brought the kitchen from the other side (of the border, meaning the U.S.). When people ask us about the style, my wife says that this is a Californian house, a *Casa estilo Americana*.” [Pablo, 32. Politician].

Pablo is keen to stress the quality and scale of the work. But the alterations reflect more closely the taste of his wife, Celina. For her, it was important that the renovated house look like those shown on “*Desperate Housewives*”, the popular American TV show. It was a copy of an imagined suburban middle-class ideal.

⁹⁹ According to the Director of Fraccionamientos, Condominiums and Urban Complexes Office, at the Municipality of Cuernavaca, constructions of less than 90 sq. m. did not require a Construction Permit. The majority, if not all, the construction work carried out in the new housing complexes could not be sanctioned or controlled. Information provided by email on June 15th, 2010.

The second example is a “German chalet” and belongs to Alicia, a retired lawyer (see photo 28). The renovation was prompted by constant worries about living in a low quality house with a short life span. Alicia disagreed with the idea of building vertically as she thought it would damage the already fragile house structure; she also wished to live in a small and practical home. A young architect drew up a plan of a German chalet based on the original structure and remodelled the house. The style was achieved by painting the GEO bricks red, pulling down some walls, replacing the windows and adding an open balcony on top of the original construction. Alicia described the renovation as follows:

“The front part was remodelled with a large window with wooden frames that has a German look ... The kitchen is completely new, with a new bathroom and new doors; the finishes have been completely changed too ... The kitchen bar and wooden built-in furniture are made of sandstone. We changed the colours of the walls and we bought furniture that matched the new decorations. Upstairs, we pulled down a wall to make one large bedroom. The architect added a lounge-studio room with a square terrace ... This style does not go with the protecting grilles because it has a European look.” [Alicia, 63. Retired lawyer].



Photo 27. Casa estilo Americana

Source: Cristina Inclán-Valadez, 2007.

These two examples (the *Casa estilo Americana* and the German chalet) are stems from the desire of the most affluent residents at the *privada* to be differentiated from ordinary GEO residents. The social distinction of Alicia and the Álvarez family require establishing a life of material comfort, which can only be achieved by erasing the Casas GEO image and its corresponding lifestyle. Through the display of a new architectural style, both residents expressed aesthetic sensibilities as potent mechanisms of class assertion (Duncan and Duncan, 2004; Pow, 2009; Zhang, 2010). For instance Alicia's 'Chalet look' house, lacking protecting gates, contests the common aesthetic pattern in Bosques and different GEO complexes of 'caging' houses as expressions of a perceived lack of security (discussed in Chapter Four). In both examples, the display of furniture and expensive items through windows and on balconies speak also of emulating the upper classes in Cuernavaca, expressing no concerns about the lack of security. In Bourdieu's terms, the taste displayed through a German chalet and a *Casa Americana* are manifestations of practices of distinction in the *privada*. These uncommon styles expressed the maximum of economic and cultural capital observable during fieldwork. However, these housing styles worked as new symbolic signs that began to shape the landscape in GEO Bosques in a new direction.

In my follow-up visits, I noticed that the trend to carry out major renovation was being gradually extended and not necessarily by the most affluent residents in the *privada*. I noticed too that there was increasing disagreement and concerns among some of the neighbours. There was a feeling of nostalgia for the days when the *privada* looked newer, more homogeneous and better maintained. Ramiro, for instance, stated that the *privada* was sadly in a state of decline owing to the excessive number of three-storey houses that spoiled the general appearance of the place.

"These houses that look like castles or churches ... are as unsightly as those that are abandoned. People don't understand that nobody will pay much for those third floors simply because the constructions look unsafe and lack any style. People have lost their way, a sense of what looks safe or tasteful ... they insist on building castles in the *colonias*." [Ramiro, 44. Musician].



Photo 28. German chalet

Source: Cristina Inclán-Valadez, 2007.

Ramiro's backlash against major renovations seemed to be contradictory given that, with his Colonial-spa house, he started the movement of "plus changes" in the *privada*. However his strong criticism reflects not only his fears of living in a tasteless place that was becoming 'FEO' [residents' allusion of an informal *colonia*] but mostly of his awareness about the structural limitations of the GEO construction. The small size of the houses, the shared walls and prefabricated materials with a short-life span, to mention some, will always be present even with sophisticated constructions.

The statement summarises the feelings of those residents who stated that, no matter how big the houses looked or how many improvements were made, the place had reached a point of deterioration which could not be stopped, even with sophisticated

constructions. In their view, it was a clear sign that it was time to move out. The new style exposed once again the limitations of the original construction and the fact that the residents could never achieve the lifestyle they desired.

Although the major renovations gave some residents the feeling of having achieved a middle-class lifestyle, the changes also imposed great sacrifices. Some people were paying an additional mortgage for the remodelling and others depended on remittances or family loans. The difficulties were evident in the differing speeds of improvements and the varied degrees of individual comfort and styles. The major remodellings added to the patchwork aspect of the GEO Bosques landscape, but so too did the unfinished nature of these large-scale works. Roughly one out of four houses was unaltered (left in the same condition as when first built by GEO). Some houses were completely remodeled with “second floors” while others were left roughly finished, balconies were uneven or held up with understrength looking pillars (see photo 29).

For all the dream of a stylish house, of high quality, following the inspiration of a magazine or a TV programme and full of consumer goods, residents had to tackle the seemingly endless shortcomings of the original Casa GEO structures, the poor quality construction materials and poor infrastructure, as well as the exploitative mortgage payments. People were forced to narrow their choices and restrict their dreams to what was possible. Walls were thinner than recommended and would not support the weight of forged-iron protective grills. Water pressure was too low for the power showers and the frequent water shortages meant the new jacuzzis and bath tubs lay idle. The studio rooms with plasma TVs and other electronic devices would trip fuses or remain silent when the electricity supply failed, as it often did.

7.5 Conclusions

This chapter has discussed a wide range of ways in which people invest time and resources in transforming their houses. The purpose of these practices is to fulfil their dream of a middle-class lifestyle, the “attainable lifestyle” promised by GEO but left unfulfilled because of the poor quality of the original project. “GEO partners” play a role in fostering this lifestyle by the aggressive marketing of furniture and decoration

with purchases made possible by money lending and savings and credit rotating systems. Although often caught up in these schemes, people might discard them in time or combine their use with other means (tactics) to gain finance or goods and services to carry out home improvements. Despite the financial risks the practice of fixing, extending and improving a house allowed the residents to obtain the aesthetic satisfaction of building a “Plus home”. This was a major house renovation trend that sought to radically change the original Casas GEO model, and at the same time, to solve once and for all structural defects. The need for major renovations made some people question the permanence of their GEO residence, leading them to choose between major renovations or getting out.



Photo 29. An 'aspiring' middle-class landscape at GEO Bosques

Source: Cristina Inclán-Valadez, 2007, 2010.

The idea of a GEO “Plus home” as ‘finished’ therefore, proved to be illusory. A GEO house was not the end, a symbol of success achieved, and neither was the ‘rescued’ version nor the remodelled house. The house might constitute a medium for expressing aspiration through the adoption and display of aesthetic features but it also reflected or exposed the countless flaws on which the housing model rests: materials of poor quality and a lack of basic amenities or rules for housing extensions. The constant, almost endless, process of improvement, from the addition of jacuzzis on the front garden to entire new floors, speaks to a strategy for meeting through practice the dream of a class position. But achieving the dreams of some has given the complex an unfinished, uneven and rather fragile appearance very much at odds with people’s aspirations to a middle-class lifestyle overall.

Despite the limitations of the “plus model”, my argument in this chapter has been that people did not resist or criticise the housing model *per se* but on the contrary improved it by bestowing on their houses the attributes of flexibility, short-term living and the potential to become something else. It is through a wide range of alterations that the residents express how far their aspirations can go. A GEO house might be a house ruled by feng shui with functional and modern furniture, a German chalet, or a weekend house in a style designed to transport the owner to a foreign country. A Casa GEO can also be affected by the transnationality of returning immigrants and the aesthetics of international decoration magazines. It is this appeal to aspirations that made Casas GEO similar to other emerging construction forms that have appeared in changing societies: the extravagant or “monster” houses built by migrants in Ecuador and Vancouver and the summer villas built by nouveau rich Russians, which reflect how social groups are pushing hard to carve out a presence.

8 Chapter Eight: Conclusions

8.1 Introduction

During the last few decades Mexico's political and economic reorientation and restructuring have resulted in a change to established privileges and entitlements. Along with these shifts, social groups and the way these groups live and experience a changing country have been reconfigured. For some of these groups, the more open, 'efficient' and democratic Mexico has brought new privileges, experiences and feelings of a direct 'membership' of a modern, globalised, nation. For others, the changes have made them push harder to aspire and to dream to take part in the country's new changing order. This thesis has examined how Mexico's economic and political reorientation has shaped the lives of ordinary Mexicans who live and work in a Casas GEO complex in Cuernavaca. It has looked at how salesmen, small entrepreneurs, teachers, clerks and housewives, the GEO residents, think, feel and experience contemporary urban living and what they expect from it. As Fernandes (2006) and De Koning (2009) have argued, the power of the new middle class discourse lies in the promise of lower-income groups accessing the benefits of liberalisation. By looking at one site, I have argued that by living in a Casas GEO, a particular group of people work to carve out a new presence in the 'middle ground' of Mexican society and to shape their own sense of a modern urban way of life. The study sets out from the assumption that Casas GEO, the largest developer of low-cost housing in Mexico, symbolises one of the most profound economic, social and cultural changes that the country has faced in recent decades. The company with a handful of other large-scale developers has not only transformed urban growth patterns with new house construction methods but has also had an effect on how urban life in contemporary Mexico is conceived and experienced.

In order to grasp fully the significance of both the new geographies and the shift in urban living, I have proposed the use of an ethnographic approach to understand the cultural production of the *GEO movement*, a notion that captures the GEO residents' engagement with processes of *making class* through their everyday practices. My underlying theoretical premise has been that a constructivist approach (through ethnographic research) allows a detailed analysis of the ways in which a group of

residents of a single housing project are confronting social changes in cities from a perspective of (claimed) inclusion, social mobility and social differentiation. What is the distinctive significance of the *GEO movement* in our understanding of contemporary life in Mexico? My analysis has analysed three central and interrelated areas of importance: (a) Influence of Casas GEO and similar developers on shaping the lives of lower-and middle-class sectors in Mexico by selling houses that hold the promise of social mobility; (b) the emergence of an group as a self-reliant actor with its own set of interests, beliefs and agency, that primarily aim at social mobility; (c) the ways in which, together, private developers and new social groups are re-reconfiguring the urban map in Mexico with a new form of urban experience.

8.2 The role of house developers

First, I have argued that one of the fundamental ideas of the Casas GEO company is that residents need to participate in the production of their living space and hence to become *co-producers* of their own middle class lifestyle. I have argued that the notion of active producers of their space illustrates how a partnership between Casas GEO and the residents leads to the formation of a middle class lifestyle. The term also captures a sense of how free market policies and liberalisation permeate the everyday life of ordinary residents. The state remains central to this relation by setting the policies and instruments for the developer to produce houses and by offering different mortgage schemes for residents to access home-ownership.

The thesis has analysed the evolution of partnership between the developer and residents. With regard to the developer, it involves building and selling low-cost homes, as well as conveying a set of values, tastes and codes of behaviour to residents, which are imperative to make the site liveable. Residents, in turn, need to improve their houses and interpret the new codes of living in a GEO-type complex and apply to these lessons in their everyday lives. This means that these practices are not only loosely related to the need to reach the desired middle class lifestyle, but rather they are practices that are embedded in larger framing structures. They operate under the current structures of income, employment, age and personal biographies as well as established middle class values. Following Bourdieu's approach I have argued that the everyday practices constitutive of the *GEO movement* respond in large part to people's place in the

socialstructure. The developers and behind them the state, promise to improve people's lives while at the same time they perpetuate their exclusion in different ways. Thus, the relevance of studying new places such as the complexes built by Casas GEO is to understand the ways people experience the promised social mobility or whether they just keep hoping to reach it.

What is the role of the GEO Company and similar developers in shaping the lives of people living in GEO-type complexes to become autonomous agents? More specifically, what is the role of the company and its partners in the production of *the GEO movement*? I have shown the many ways in which the GEO company 'produces' and transmits notions of social mobility and a middle class lifestyle through the lucrative business of low-cost house production. House developers like GEO are in charge of the entire process of house production, from buying the land, to planning and negotiating the construction licensing, commercialisation and sale of the houses, and then assisting residents through post-sale services. I argue that throughout this long process, the urban planning and building phases are the least significant aspects. They primarily require the company to: i) assure mortgages to acquire a land reserve so that it can build more houses in the next five years; ii) develop the necessary technology to improve the quantity and the speed of the mass-production of *La Morada* [a patented pre-assembled house type finished on site]; iii) build hundreds of clusters of houses in tracks that could resemble a gated community. With some variations related to the size of the project, topography and climate, and, more recently different densities, this model is reproduced throughout the country. The variables of speed, massification and standardisation of projects are concomitant with the government's demand to urbanise new regions through the DUIS housing and planning policy as the main driving force. Moreover, these variables respond to the business goals of the company to ensure growth and revenues. In sum, planning and building are responses to needs of social actors other than residents.

The thesis also argues that while planning and building entail perfecting a manufacturing process that can ensure growth and expansion, the constant innovations and investments in the company's house-production model focus on the aesthetics. The marketing and sales strategies are key stages in the aesthetic aspects of house production. Examples of the focus on the aesthetic dimension range from the

marketing of the houses as typologies with different elements that people can combine to make the house of their choice to the uses of slogans and symbols that promise social mobility (*GEO: Te cambia la vida*- GEO: changes your life), and the Sales centres that resemble shopping malls staffed by employees professionally trained in good manners and sales techniques. Equally, I have explained the fundamental role of the “GEO partners” (furniture retailers and supermarket chains) in the aesthetics of low-cost housing production. By offering micro-credit schemes for everything from furniture to decoration courses the company and its partners create and transmit a new set of tastes and desires that people can use in the construction of their identity as modern middle class subjects. Because of the strong focus on the aesthetic aspects of the house, I argue that the model of low-cost housing in Mexico has ceased to be a social benefit and has instead been transformed into a *prestige-bestowing* consumer good. It acts as a standard of how an ‘aspiring’ middle class can feel as though they belong to a larger global consumer-good movement (Chapters Three and Seven).

A second finding regarding the company has been that the promise of a middle class lifestyle embodied in a low-cost house does not refer only to the built forms but also to a new set of codes and expected behaviors. In order to sell these houses, which were poorly located, lacked amenities and were often built to poor standards, the company needed to create an atmosphere and symbolic meanings that transcended the mere utilitarian value of the houses and would be seen as an asset to meeting a middle class status. Thus, questions regarding the kind of personal and professional satisfaction a GEO house can provide appear to be relevant. Chapter Three outlines the self-motivation techniques that the company utilises to make residents embrace the ideals of a new middle class lifestyle. The developer’s view was that a new set of codes of behaviours and attitudes linked to the culture of ‘self-help’ books, leadership groups and multi-level companies were needed to make the communities work. These were also needed to help people to find growth in the professional and personal realms as a way to ‘finance’ their dreams. In other words, the act of dwelling in a GEO house entails becoming home-builders and interior decorators; neighbourhood managers and tolerant neighbours who can live with others; skilful workers; and entrepreneurs who are able to find ways to finance their dreams.

In the view of the developer, when combined, these skills and attitudes can ‘aid’ people to map out their own cultural territory. Behind the use of these techniques and discourses of self-reliance, however, lay the problems of construction quality and obsolete planning laws on which the GEO project stands, which the residents needed to deal with on a day-to-day basis. The production of independent and self-governed individuals is the hidden agenda of the partnership with GEO and a precondition for the moulding of middle class citizens.

The ethnographic insights into the Casas GEO model of housing production have revealed the predominant role of the private sector in Mexico’s modernisation agenda. The objective of the company is to continue its expansion. The federal government’s long-term ‘city building’ policy implemented through the DUIS (Integral and Sustainable Urban Developments) has encouraged the firm to build larger projects at a faster rate. Massive projects, some of them comprising nearly 200,000 houses, are currently being built by different developers and have enabled the company to continuously find ways for perfecting its model of house production. The new expansion model involves: designing different house types to suit the socio-spatial variations across the country, building at higher densities, as well as providing amenities and improving access to industry and education. GEO’s role in the ‘city building’ policy is further strengthened by its role in building service hubs from community centres and universities to medical clinics, alongside the private services that accompany life in these new cities. This means that educational loans to access private schools, private medical insurance and security companies now have the Casas GEO seal.

Within the lower-and middle-social class circles’ ambitions and references, the ‘private rationale’ has become hegemonic insofar as it has become normative and self-evident. The middle class lifestyle promoted by GEO and other developers has come to represent the ideal lifestyle conveyed in government reports, *telenovelas*, the press and advertisements’ portrayal of the modern Mexico. I have argued that the extensive actions taken by house developers such as GEO confirm their proclaimed rhetoric that they are the new “nation builders” (Orvañanos and Ahumada, 2011). The recently announced investment by the IFC (International Finance Corporation), to extend the ‘Alpha’ fabric of houses, will encourage the company to ‘build-down’ for the

poor(Corporación GEO, 2012a).¹⁰⁰ The investment of the IFC within the company is conditional on the expansion of house production to the so-called economic segment;that is, families with daily wages less than MXN \$119 (USD \$9.55). At present, the economic segment accounts for not more than 20 percent of the company's sales. It is not improbable that in a few years time GEO will be involved in anti-poverty programmes and that these ideal middle class lifestyles and normative standards will be further expanded. The notion for dignifying the economic housing in Mexico is driving the IFC and GEO initiative. The production of economic houses in the Alpha factories will involve expanding the housing typologies and with it, notions of suburban lifestyle in sites that hold 'noble' names [Campo Real] and small units that, as shown, are named for birds, flowers or constellations as a strategy to suggest at a class 'touch'.

8.3 The emergence of a new social group

The second element that allows us to understand the *GEO movement's* significance in contemporary urban living in Mexico lies in the way an aspiring middle class is struggling to claim a presence as a distinctive social group with a wide range of practices and activities. These practices speak of an autonomous citizen, with their own set of interests, beliefs and agency, and a minimal reliance on the state. I have shown that this emerging self-reliant identity is articulated in residential space with place-making practices as well as with practices developed elsewhere (schools, jobs, churches and leisure spaces) that help people aspire to gain personal and professional growth, both of which are pre-requisites for social mobility. My research has demonstrated that such emerging activities are shaping a new urban experience in cities like Cuernavaca. Most importantly, amidst the reality of people who do not always actually experience the social mobility that the Casas GEO brand has promised, these practices, attitudes and beliefs allow people to imagine, aspire to or experience modern urban life.

How do GEO residents carve out their presence as anemerging new group and which practices constitute the *GEO movement*? I argue that, in their daily lives, people contest, improve and reimagine the Casas GEO model from its built forms, to the rules laid down by the developer to make the sites liveable. The business model based on efficiency,

¹⁰⁰ The IFC is a part of the World Bank that finances infrastructure in developing countries.

speed and standardisation has had severe drawbacks and inconsistencies that residents have needed to fix in their role as *co-producers*. When place-making practices are examined in locations such as Bosques, a differentiation between residents is revealed and with it, intricate strategies in terms of how people handle the difficulties they face on a daily basis. Everyday practices of people living at Bosques show that the *GEO movement* is far from being an homogeneous and well constituted cultural category in Mexico. Moreover it is not possible to affirm the presence of a definite or structured new middle class. On the contrary, it shows a loose group of people whose daily practices are constituted primarily by symbolic assets: a house mortgage that will be cleared in decades, a repossessed car, a weekend home that is barely used, a short course in a private institution. These practices serve as classificatory practices for a perceived gained socialposition (Bourdieu, 1984).

Chapter Four details how the poor quality of the construction and the missing facilities that residents had to deal with when they began inhabiting their homes forced them to engage in a similar process of incremental development to that found in informal settlements. The analysis of the place-making practices evidence the emergence of reliable informal ways to solve problems, for example through the gradual improvement of the houses, the deals established with private suppliers for the provision of missing services and the intermittent work of community leaders to improve security and the appearance of the *privadas*. These strategies reveal practices that are expanding the notion of informality to solve the irregularities in planned sites like Casas GEO developments. Like the urban poor, people in Bosques adapt: they pool family resources, implement coping strategies (skipping meals, organising *tandas* asking for loans), or abandon their recently-acquired lifestyle and return to their previous realities. This informal way of dealing with everyday life in GEO-type complexes reveals that, as is the case with the physical location of the developments on the periphery of cities, GEO residents remain on the edges of a modern country.

The uncertainty with which GEO residents live is revealed in different aspects of their situation. For example drawing on people's jobs, this ethnography demonstrates that behind a self-portrait as middle-class professionals, entrepreneurs and independent workers, people hold temporary positions in the new service economy that force them to commute many hours a day, own short-lived small businesses and juggle all sort of

activities in the informal economy, from selling fantasy jewellery to services for pets. Héctor had to hold dozens of informal jobs simultaneously as an example of the unstable economic condition of many people in Bosques. Similarly, the consumer goods (cars, furniture and home appliances) which allow people to self-constitute a new middle-class identity are often acquired as semi-temporary items. People stop paying the leases on new cars or recently-bought furniture, as strategies to cope with other expenses in Casas GEO. The items are then seized and months later they are recovered in second-hand shops. This in-between position brings different experiences, some more positive than others. These practices combining loans, money raised through *tandas* or churches or pulled together by relatives can enable their children to study in private further education institutions in Cuernavaca or sometimes abroad, or to go travelling. For some, however, life in GEO is a sobering experience that destroys expectations and freezes lives. As Marichú stated: “*hasta el aire se detiene acá*” [even the air stops here], or as Ema put it, GEO evokes feelings of a place that takes away more than it gives.

Practices of *class-making* exist in a continuum. It is difficult to separate out the activities, relations and places in which people are involved in the course of their everyday lives. The private schools, sports clubs and protestant churches appeared to be the arenas where important class logics and narratives emerged. Chapters Four, Five and Six give accounts of how people found the ways to acquire skills, new tastes and activities needed for accumulating cultural and social capital to (get the sense of a) move upwards in these places. As such, ‘membership’ access to these places was key to shaping their aspirations and boundaries as a group.

As I hope to have demonstrated, the result of liberalisation combined with discourses celebrating a new middle class has been a complex set of strategies and practices that GEO residents have used in their attempt to shape and negotiate a new class identity in contemporary Mexico. Examples of these strategies range from adults expressing beliefs in the need for continuous professional training with the aid of course diplomas and business training groups to teenagers choosing courses in tourism, gastronomy, beauty therapy or languages in order to gain specific skills in communication, etiquette or self-presentation. Interestingly, despite education’s being seen as a formula for socialmobility, the ‘chosen’ careers and/or institutions are relevant because of the social

status they confer. More specifically, the private institutions represent the path to a potentially well-paid job, but most importantly to spaces that reproduce new tastes and social relations aiming to create a distance from the groups standing below them. The trend has persisted despite the fact that some of these private institutions are neither certified nor of the quality to which teenagers (or their parents) aspire. In other cases, the family's situation forces its young members to opt for short or technical courses that can quickly result in a profit for the family.

Similarly, the new charismatic churches with links to international missionary movements gave people the opportunity to belong to a larger world. There are places to learn English, to refine speaking skills by preaching in public and to learn lifestyles experienced abroad by other *hermanos*. The flexible arrangements to access sports clubs, again on a temporary basis, with passes, vouchers or stop-start memberships became the symbolic spaces to reproduce the social relations gained in jobs and private schools and to continue 'cultivating' the newly-acquired tastes and worldviews. Taken as a whole, these practices and new arenas echo new social distinctions and shifting lifestyles of a group that aspires to entry to the middle classes.

The GEO residents' predispositions for 'new' values and beliefs in tune with a 'modern' country lead to two reflections. First, it places the groups studied into the middle-class debate, specifically into the notion that this decisive 'middle ground' existence is tied to the upper classes, not in economic but in cultural and symbolic terms. Wacquant (1991), as much as other proponents of the new middle class (Fernandes, 2006; De Koning, 2009; Lietchy, 2003), points out the 'newness' of the new middle class is its constant display of cultural and symbolic capital that reveals desires for replicating the lifestyles of upper-class groups. Fernandes has argued that the new middle class project includes individuals who seek to belong to the middle-class group and for whom the lifestyles of those who are socially above them serve as a kind of "standard to which [a] larger group can aspire" (Fernandes, 2006: xix). By emulating an upper class lifestyle, GEO residents reveal the mindset, aspirations and dispositions that can be associated with a perceived upward mobility. Second, as with other emerging social groups that are trying to make for themselves a presence in contemporary societies, people at Bosques showed very particular ways of carving out recognition through specific symbols, claims and class values that can provide them

with a sense of status, social mobility and a global outlook. This thesis has demonstrated that access to the Casas GEO residential space has led to a rise in their expectations and it is where the process of making a middle class starts.

Chapter Six showed how residents of the *privada* appealed to notions of responsibility, decency and cleanliness to deal with the constant threat posed by the “Casas FEO” tag (associated with social and physical deterioration). Their aspirations to set themselves apart from lower social groups did not come without a cost. The micro tactics of self-governance played out in the *privada* led to the construction of a unwanted or problematic neighbour, often formed by people who do not conform to the ‘notions’ of a nuclear and prosperous family. Thus, problems such as intrusion into private lives, alienation through aggression and the temporary cutting of services and avoidance by neighbours served as ‘accepted’ means of moulding the day-to-day behaviours of the GEO residents. These problems arose even though their experience was the opposite of the community that they intended to create through self-governance. These measures reflect the struggles to turn a *privada* that lacks a social and physical infrastructure into what residents envisage to be a middle-class gated community. Far from adopting new practices that could classify GEO residents as a well defined and distinct group to those living in informal urban settlements; their strategies for achieving a higher status (through punishments, aggression and exclusionary methods) pull them back into what they perceive as a FEO (ugly, dirty, lower status) reality.

At the same time, Bosques permits people the ‘space’ to conduct practices of a middle class lifestyle. The GEO *privada* for example reveals people’s mindsets and hopes to convert their living environment into a illusory gated community. My aim in this thesis has not been to categorise the *GEO movement* as a constituted new middle-class group. As seen in different groups who are navigating into the middle grounds of emerging societies (nouveau riche, migrants, a professional new elite), I have said that a ‘modern’ residential space like Bosques gives people the possibility to *perform* different kind of ‘middle-class’ practices (real or fabricated) that allows them to set themselves apart from the residents living in ‘old’ informal settlements, and with it to carve out a new cultural space in neoliberal times.

I have also demonstrated that people found a middle class niche through a continual process of fixing, improving and extending homes which constitutes a key element in people's projects for *making themselves* a space in the middle class. Chapter Seven gives an account of the different ways in which GEO residents invest their time and resources into transforming their homes on the basis of personal notions of good taste, comfort and style. The purpose of these extensions is to communicate a status and quality of life that the original construction failed to confer. The display of aesthetics – from stained glass windows to Japanese gardens - constituted a medium for expressing the aspirations to emulate wide-ranging middle class standards. The *Casa Estilo America* (owned by the Álvarez family) is one of the many possible examples that demonstrate how a TV show becomes the model to construe a middle class reality. The stories behind extended houses speak of people mixing an array of local and global narratives taken from the media, local examples like Colonial *haciendas* and upper-class together with their own imagination of what constitutes the modern Mexican lifestyle.

However, even in these 'modern' spaces and conditions, the paradox of impermanence and insecurity remains a central focus of anxieties and challenges as residents recognise that their lives in GEO housing are far from the standards of the modern middle class world. The house improvements exposed the countless flaws on which the GEO housing model rests: poor quality construction materials, structural defects and a lack of regulation for house improvements. This led residents to embark on major renovations or to think about transferring their mortgage to a newer GEO house and start the cycle of housing improvements again. For others in less fortunate social positions, who cannot undertake the necessary expenses, the alternative is to lock up the house or to rent it out for certain periods of time or even to abandon it.

I would agree with Humphrey (2002) that, like the new Russian *kottedzh*, the GEO house is not the place to settle down, set out as an inheritance for future generations and build a community life, as they aspired to do when they purchased into it. Rather, when residents realise that a GEO house is not what they expected, they understand the difference between owning a house and living in it. This is a common pattern which raises the question of whether a distinction can be drawn between owning a GEO house and living in it throughout the year. One of the main findings of the thesis is what I term

‘transitory dwelling’, which is characterised by the conditions of impermanence in which people who live in places like GEO Bosques find themselves. I have sought to demonstrate that GEO residents do not have fixed occupancy patterns. They lock up and rent out their homes for periods of time (or even abandon them) as a way of coping with the new expenses that accompany a life in GEO: keeping up with the mortgage, paying maintenance costs, paying for the children’s private institutions or driving a car when they commute long distances.

The stories here have shown that, at least in the state of Morelos, the GEO houses are anything but permanent assets. They are places to sleep, weekend or spare homes, houses to support a business, or houses in a constant process of change to become something else. Moreover, it is not only the house that represents a temporary asset. The feelings and experiences of an impermanent life expressed in different ways (temporary jobs, short higher-education courses, frozen club memberships and furniture that is seized and then recovered months later) constitute important cultural features that characterise the ‘modern’ lives of people in Bosques. The impermanence that people experience in their day-to-day lives and the conditions of the houses (which are in constant need of improvement) reflect the uncertain condition of the GEO residents as an emerging ‘class’ category in contemporary Mexico, status which remains more of an aspiration and a dream rather than a new reality. In other words, it is the transitory dwelling that allows people to achieve a state of permanence – to hold on as it were – in what I call the *GEO movement*.

8.4 A new urban map in Mexico

Finally, the *GEO movement*’s importance lies in the insights we gain regarding the relatively new housing model that is changing the ‘map’ of urban Mexico. A central finding of my research has been that the new urban experience (or new modes of urban life) takes place in small cities and in new sites that were until recently not considered to be relevant for urban research. The new breed of GEO-type housing sites, as I have demonstrated, forms part of an urban trend of large-scale projects, including supermarkets, shopping malls, and private further education institutions and

universities, that are transforming urban Mexico. This changing ‘map’ forces us, as social scientists, to look beyond the better known urban areas to explore new built forms and new cities. The selection of the site, on the periphery of the city of Cuernavaca, reflects the urban shift in the country. I have argued that the GEO-type developments are challenging the State of Morelos’s status as a rural and impoverished area. The countryside and small towns in the state of Morelos were for many decades the preferred sites for classic analyses of the Mexican way of life. In response to the State’s new reality, I have given the thesis an ethnographic urban focus.

Cuernavaca illustrates how a small town that was kept as a semi-rural weekend spot by the upper classes for decades seeks to reinvent itself as a ‘modern’ touristic destination to compete with the cosmopolitan progress of the rest of the country. The presence of house projects built by GEO and other companies, along with other urban projects and consumer practices, are contributing to the local project of modernisation. One of the paths that the State of Morelos has taken in order to attract lower and medium-income groups’ interest is to offer low-cost weekend properties. My analysis of Bosques showed that a GEO weekend-house typology, with gardens and swimming pools in enclosed communities that were first introduced in the studied site, became the norm for building low-cost housing complexes in the State of Morelos and, later, other states in the country. Housing projects that include swimming pools, clubhouses, gardens and mini-golf clubs are targeted at groups that not long ago had (or still have) a lower socio-economic status. These are changing the landscape of the region and becoming essential features of a new urban lifestyle in the region of Morelos. Once again, this reveals the importance of the aesthetic dimension of house-production.

In terms of advancing knowledge in urban planning research, Cuernavaca has provided an account of how the narratives of ‘progress’, ‘modernisation’ and ‘efficiency’ promoted by large private companies such as GEO are spreading at a faster rate than local actors can cope with or local planning laws, sustain. The thesis shows how modern projects are confronted with traditional local planning practices and outdated planning laws that are constantly being tampered with and amended. Residents have to pay the consequences of these flaws and inconsistencies in the laws.

The small accounts of events, experiences and impressions that I have given speak of this disjunction between local reality and the national forces of modernisation: two decades of free trade, liberalisation and the private sector's strong role have left an important group of Mexicans on their own *echando pa'lante* [moving forward], making sense of their new situation and trying hard to adapt to the country's new ideologies. The testimonies of GEO residents chronicle their new habits and beliefs, personal investments and growing hopes and dreams, but they also tell of frustrations, disillusion and the sadness about working hard but still living in a permanent uncertainty as regards the possibility that the recently acquired lifestyle could soon vanish.

8.5 Future research and policy implications

In this study, I have offered my story and that of a group of residents regarding the uncertain and difficult negotiations required to build a cultural space in which to experience a modern country. Because it has, to date, been an almost overlooked research field, there are several areas still requiring an in-depth examination of both the experience of living in low-cost housing complexes built by private developers, and that of emerging social groups in contemporary Mexico. In terms of understanding life in GEO-type complexes, this line of research could in the future be expanded to include the voices of residents in a different site. Working with a case study methodology to compare GEO Bosques with a similar Casas GEO complex in a different state of the country could help to extend our understanding of the notion of 'transitory dwelling' used in this thesis, both in terms of the regular movement in and out of the same house and in terms of the length of residence. The use of surveys to map out houses that are occupied on a regular basis, the socio-demographics of residents and their prevalent forms of occupancy could also help to advance knowledge regarding the different experiences of living in these kinds of places. Without any doubt, owners, renters and people who have been loaned a home by friends or relatives have different living experiences in a Casas GEO complex. Also, having the type of tenure differentiated from the outset could both save time and add valuable information.

Ethnography has showed us that people's micro-worlds can be captured in many ways. This research shows the analytical value of observing and reporting the minutiae of daily living in urban planning and research. Participant-observation unveils the hidden, mundane and unnoticed aspects of everyday life. The thesis has included lengthy ethnographic accounts of people's lives in some of the spaces they claimed as theirs (homes, churches, private schools and sports clubs). However, I have argued that the practices developed in these places are constitutive elements of larger processes of cultural formation occurring in the lives of GEO residents. I recognise that there are other practices that help people to aspire to their dreams or maintain their presence in the *GEO movement*.

Having conducted ethnography in a particular site also calls for further visits to see the social and cultural evolution of the place. The difficulties that I encountered in this research in acquiring sufficient information from specific individuals, due to the constant changes of residence, could be solved by selecting specific families and following them to the other places they dwell outside Bosques. In turn, a life-story methodology would help us to understand the role a GEO home plays in people's lives, particularly in relation to the subject of this thesis, which is how people struggle to make a presence into the middle-sectors in Mexico.

There is also the need for further empirical research into the role of house developers in their own discourse of 'nation builders', and more specifically, in-depth enquiries into the business model of house production that private developers such as Casas GEO follow. Zanin Shimbo's (2012) challenging research on the recent housing reforms and the role the global financial capital for the development of a low-cost housing market in Brazil, serves as a firstview of the new role of the private homebuilders as nation builders. The author poses a fundamental research questions that should be considered for the Mexican context. First, which analytical categories can be used to explain the links between the expansion of the homebuilders, the housing policy and the financialisation of the sector? Second, how has the new financing scheme transformed the role of architects in the production of new space?. Zanin Shimbo gives examples of how the entire production of houses respond to the financial needs of companies listed on the Brazilian Stock Exchange Market. The author emphasises how 'social' housing architecture has been reduced to the visual: bad replicas of gated neighbourhoods and

typologies of houses with ‘gourmet’ spaces as a way to ‘craft’ middle class consumption desires. And with it, the creative role of the architect has been replaced by project management and marketing skills. In sum, architects have become producers of a monotonous low-cost model niche across the Latin America.

As Zanin Shimbo has suggested for the Brazilian model, after two decades of housing reforms in Mexico it is essential to examine to what extent the present classification of ‘economic’ housing (accessible, popular, traditional) has been oriented towards the lower-income groups (economic and social segments) as it has been claimed by the government. As with Brazil, Mexico lacks information that could show the variations of prices in the different housing segments (whether they are biased towards the top or bottom of the market segment), the house type (single house or apartment), or the condition of use (new or used housing).¹⁰¹ As Zanin Shimbo (2012) argues, the neoliberal housing scheme has become one of the most needed and difficult fields to study. In this thesis, I have stated that the current affordable housing model in Mexico cannot be described with existing categories of social housing and/or of informal housing schemes. I have proposed a theoretical and empirical approach that could reflect residents’s reality.

As a legitimised form of urban planning and house construction in Mexico, questions arise regarding the role of house developers in the country’s urban development in the near future, particularly in light of the newly-elected federal government whose work will start in the coming months. It would also be useful to examine the innovations the company is incorporating into new projects that are part of the long-term city-building policy. According to the DUIS city-building policy, the size of the projects and the projected number across the country (approximately 18) entails companies such as GEO participating alongside other house developers (small and large) in the planning and building process, to incorporate different densities, different house typologies and principles of mixed-land use, among other factors. Moreover, a closer supervision by CONAVI, which has designed compulsory construction codes, might bring more quality to the private developers’ projects. Finally, the company is revisiting some of

¹⁰¹ It is important to notice that the housing developers offer a great variety of house prototypes within a single housing segment. For GEO, the “economic”, “traditional” and “traditional plus” house types are indexed as “social segments”.

their developments, which, due to important limitations in design and construction quality, have deteriorated severely and at present have high rates of house abandonment. Questions should be asked regarding the kind of solutions the company propose for these sites and what lessons is it learning from past mistakes in order to build better projects in the future.

In terms of policy implications, the in-depth study of the housing experience, as presented here, recognises an urban reality that current housing policies often dismiss. It is only recently that the government has approved the 2011 Housing Act that tries to regulate housing policy, some 20 years after a financial housing system mostly based on the supply of a single house mortgage market was initiated.

Linked to a lack of qualitative enquiry on people's experiences, urban studies and interventions in housing have assumed people's residence as fixed and as such housing has to be approached as long-term family assets. This approach shows that GEO-type housing complexes are still seen through frame of the old reference that once characterised the social housing model. However, my research has provided evidence that the experience of living in GEO complexes challenges the assumptions. Residents in Bosques do not see their living space as social-interest housing and their homes may not be permanent assets. By ignoring the everyday living experience, urban studies neglect the fact that houses are constructs, socially and temporarily produced through daily interaction. The recently-introduced renting mortgage schemes by INFONAVIT, providing the option to buy the house in order to make housing more accessible for poorer groups, could be a good starting point to offer people more flexible options for dwelling in these places.

The landscape of GEO Bosques provides a starting point to examine the materialisation of the neoliberal project and new forms of living in contemporary Mexico. Moreover, the lives of the men and women in Bosques show comparable experiences to other emerging groups in similar countries facing rapid economic and political changes. The horizon of our research in the coming years should be to continue to explore the stories of Memo, Lydia or Héctor as they contest and interpret the national neoliberal narrative.

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Appendix 1

List of interviewees

Residents at GEO Bosques	
Name	Description
1. Antonio	23 years old. University student in tourism administration. Lives with his mother and aunt.
2. Adriana	41 years old. Municipal worker. Single mother.
3. Fanny	15 years old. Higher Education student in international tourism.
4. Alicia	63 years old. Retired lawyer. Divorced, lives alone.
5. Elvira	41 years old. Reception school teacher and mother of a 13 years old girl. Married to Pedro who works as an architect in Mexico City.
6. Edgardo	46 years old. Municipal police officer. Married and has three children.
7. Ema	62 years old. Sales Agent. Widow.
8. Tomás	45 years old. Unemployed. Single.
9. Fausto	50s. Entrepreneur. Owner of a <i>tortillería</i> .
10. Elena	53 years old. Retired nurse. She helps Fausto with the <i>tortillería</i> . They live in Iztapalapa, Mexico City.
11. Fabián	59 years old. Civil engineer. Married with two daughters. He lives in Villa Coapa, Mexico City.
12. Gabriel	32 years old. Entrepreneur and chef. Converted his house into a catering kitchen. Married.
13. Héctor	40s. Independent worker. Neighbourhood-watch representative. Divorced with one child.
14. Ignacio	51 years old. Bank clerk. Married with one child.
15. Ivonne	37 years old. Hairdresser. Married.
16. Isis	43 years old. Former GEO Sales Agent. Housemaid for weekend properties. Married and has a daughter.
17. Joaquín	28 years old. Coffee merchant. Married with Darcy.
18. José	32 years old. Manager of a Telmex store in Cuautla, Morelos.
19. Marta	28 years old. Housewife and Tupperware sales representative. They have two children (4 and 2 years old).
20. Laura	43. NGO worker. Ex-neighbourhood representative, elected during the workshop. Married and has one daughter.
21. Licha	44 years old. Housewife. Married and has three children (16, 13 and 7 years old). Husband works in Iguala, Guerrero.

22. Lydia	41 years old. Housewife and <i>Privada Colorín</i> Administrator. Married with three children (23, 15 and 13 years old).
23. María	54 years old. Municipal worker. Member of the ladies' committee. Single. Lives alone.
24. Marichú	50 years old. High-school literature teacher in a private school. Married and has two sons (21 and 25 years old). Her husband is unemployed.
25. Mario	46 yearsold. Salesperson at Liverpool. Divorced. Lives in Mexico City with his brother and sister-in-law.
26. Milagros	55 years old. Retired primary school teaching inspector.
27. Gustavo	56 years old. Graphic designer. Works at the Kodak in Mexico City. They live in Mexico City (<i>Villa Coapa</i>). Two sons and one grandchild.
28. Marina	16 years old. Higher Education student in tourism administration. Lives with her mother and a younger brother.
<i>The Álvarez</i>	
29. Carlos	32 years old. Accountant and politician.
30. Celina	28 years old. Housewife and money lender, also sells gold jewellery.
31. Alan	23 years old. Carlos' brother and driver. Single.
32. Lola	26 years old. Carlos' personal assistant and his political campaign manager. Celina's sister. Single.
33. Raúl	32 years old. Carlos' brother and builder. Involved in the Álvarez's house extension.
34. Rosa	40 years old. Housewife and fruit-seller.
35. Justino	39 yearold. Chewing-gum dispenser. <i>Compadre</i> of Carlos Álvarez. They have three children (17, 8 and 7 years old).
36. Chagy	17 years old. Higher Education student.
<i>The Muñoz</i>	
37. Vero	33 years old. Public worker in the Ministry of Health, Mexico City.
38. Emilio	37 years old. Engineer and MA student in Health Economics. Works in a transnational pharmaceutical in Mexico City. They have two children (8 years-old and 6 months).
<i>The Rangel</i>	
39. Memo	46 years old. Entrepreneur. Owner of an insurance company. Works in Mexico City.
40. Beatriz	43 years old. Part-time accountant and sells counterfeit fashion purses. Works in Mexico City. They have two children (9 and 12 years old).
41. Paola	20 years old. University student in Commerce. Lives with her mother, older brother and her uncle.
42. Ramiro	44 years old. Jazz musician in restaurants and spas in Cuernavaca and Tepoztlán. Divorced and has a 6 year-old son.
43. Remedios	72 year old widow. Leader of the <i>Privada Robles</i> . Lives with her daughter and granddaughter.
44. Rocío	In her 30s. Private security guard at the <i>Privada Colorín</i> . Lives at Casa Hogar DIF with her daughter (9 years old).
45. Samuel	In his 40's. Independent worker. Neighbourhood leader. Fair organizer. Married and has two daughters (7 and 8 years old).

46. Violeta	46 years old. Public primary teacher. She covers two shifts. Single mother and has two daughters.
47. Nadia	22 years old. University student in communications. Was an exchange student for one term at the University of Valladolid, Spain.
48. Zoé	35 years old. Housewife. Married with a truck driver. She has three children (3, 5 years old and 7 months).
Other actors at GEO Bosques and other GEO-type complexes	
49. El Güero	Garbage collector.
50. Pascual	Representative of the Cooperative of Taxi Drivers' Union.
51. Marga	Private security guard at the <i>Privada Colorín</i> .
52. Violeta	Maid at the <i>Privada Colorín</i> .
53. Gema	22 years old student in Graphic Design. Neighbourhood representative at <i>Privada Lagos</i> .
54. Jesús	38 years old. Private driver. Lives in Las Americas, Ara. State of Mexico.
Private Sector	
Casas GEO	
Position / Name	Date and place of the interview
1. Former Vice President of the Design and Urbanism. Casas GEO. (Carlos García-Vélez)	July 11, 2007. Mexico City, Mexico.
2. Director of GEO Morelos	June 5, 2007. Cuernavaca, Mexico
3. Chief Architect, GEO Morelos	July 23 and August 14, 2007. Cuernavaca, Mexico
4. Sales Manager, GEO Morelos	October 17, 2007. Cuernavaca, Mexico.
5. Post-sales Division Manager, GEO Morelos	September 8 and 21, 2007. Municipality of Zapata, México
6. Condominium life Manager, GEO Morelos	October 13 and 20, 2007. Zapata, México.
7. Former GEO Bosques' Project Manager, GEO Morelos	October 20, 2007. Cuernavaca, Mexico.
8. GEO instructor, GEO Morelos (Ricardo, 37 years old)	August 5, 2007. Zapata, México.
9. GEO instructor, GEO Morelos (Rubén, 31 years old)	August 19, 2007. Zapata, México.
10. GEO instructor, GEO Morelos	August 12, 2007. Zapata, México.
11. (Joel, 40's)	
12. Sales Agent, K- Be	June 29, 2009. Cuernavaca, Mexico.
13. Sales Agent, GEO Morelos	February 18, 2007. Cuernavaca, Mexico.
House developers	
Position	Date and place of the interview
14. CEO and Founding Partner, ARA	February 14, 2011. London at Mexican Housing Day.
15. Investor Public Relations Director, ARA	July 16, 2007. Mexico City.
16. Infrastructure Services Director, ARA	July 16, 2007. Mexico City. July 19, 2008. Interview by telephone.

17. Leader of the CANADEVI in the state of Morelos. Former director, GEO Morelos	May 18, 2007. Cuernavaca, Mexico.
18. CEO and Founding Partner, Desarrolladora Tepoztlán. (Felipe Rivera, son of former Governor of the State of Morelos)	October 3, 2007. Cuernavaca, Mexico.
19. Vice Director of land and market, Urbi, Desarrollo Urbano	August 26, 2010. Mexico City. May 14, 2012. Interview by telephone.
Public Sector	
Position	Date and place of the interview
20. Director of the <i>Fraccionamientos</i> , Condominiums and Urban Complexes Office. Secretary of Urban Development and Housing. Municipality of Cuernavaca, Morelos.	May 30, August 21 and September 19, 2007. Cuernavaca, Mexico. June 15, 2010. Email
21. Director of the <i>Fraccionamientos</i> , Condominiums and Urban Complexes Office. Secretary of Urban Development and Housing. State of Morelos	June 15, 2007. Cuernavaca, Mexico.
22. Director of the Institute of Housing. State of Morelos.	May 25, 2007. Cuernavaca, Mexico.
23. Delegate of Lázaro Cárdenas. Municipality of Cuernavaca, Morelos.	August 2, 2007. Cuernavaca, Mexico.
24. Director of Territorial Reserves Office. Government Secretariat. State of Morelos.	September 13, 2007. Cuernavaca, Mexico.
25. Under-secretary of Urban Development and Housing. Municipality of Cuernavaca, Morelos.	June 19, 2007. Cuernavaca, Mexico.
26. Síndico [Trustee] of Urban Development and Housing. Municipality of Emiliano Zapata, Morelos.	November 16, 2010. Zapata, México.
27. Under-secretary of Urban Development and Territorial Planning. Federal Secretary of Social Development. Mexico.	February 14, 2011. London at Mexican Housing Day.
Academic Sector	
Name / Position	Date and place of the interview
1. Brachet, Viviane El Colegio de México	January 25, 2007. Cuernavaca, Mexico.
2. Castillo, José Universidad Iberoamericana. Arquitectura 911sc	October 29, 2007. Mexico City.
3. Esquivel, María Teresa Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Azcapotzalco	April 27, 2007. Mexico City.
4. García Barros, Raúl Centro de Estudios Interdisciplinarios, UNAM	September 18, 2010. Cuernavaca, Mexico.
5. García Peralta, Beatriz Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, UNAM	March 13, 2010. Berlin, Germany.
6. Maya, Esther Facultad de Arquitectura, UNAM	February 20, 2007. Mexico City.
7. Ortíz Struck, Arturo Universidad Iberoamericana	November 11, 2009 and Mar. 24, 2010. Mexico City.
8. Tarrés, María Luisa El Colegio de México	May 16, 2007. Mexico City.
9. Valenzuela, Alfonso Universidad Autónoma de Morelos	July 19, 2007. Cuernavaca, Mexico.

Appendix 2

List of Residents at the *privada*

LIST OF RESIDENTS AT PRIVADA COLORÍN.								
House No.	Proprietors		Tenants		Empty, Abandoned, Commercial uses	Automobiles	Neighbourhood fee	Observations
	Weekly basis	Weekender	Weekly basis	Weekender				
1					X		Regular payer	Leased parking space to cover part of the neighbourhood fees.
2		X				Mercedes Benz, WV Derby	Regular payer	
3		X				VW Caribe GT, Dodge Neon	Regular payer	Lease the parking space to cover part of the neighbourhood fees.
4		X					Debtor	
5					X			Without information.
6	X					Ford Fiesta	Debtor	House on sale since 2004. House is abandoned by periods of time, used by daughters.
7	X						Regular payer	
8			X			Nissan Tsuru	Regular payer	Tenant pays extra fee for the parking lot.
9		X					Regular payer	
10					X (for sale)		Intermittent debtor	Proprietor passed away in May 2007. House announced for sale.
11			X			VW Jetta, Seat León	Regular payer	House rented. Tenant pays extra fee for the parking lot. The house is also inhabited by proprietors during the
12	X					Mazda 2	Regular payer	
13	X (for sale)						Debtor	House announced for sale. Parking space taken by administration as a fine.
14		X (for rent)					Regular payer	House announced for rent.
15					X		Intermittent payer	Leases parking space to cover part of the neighbourhood fees.
16		X					Intermittent payer	At times the house is used as a warehouse.
17					X		Regular payer	
18	X						Regular payer	
19					X	Jeep Grand Cherokee	Intermittent payer	Leases parking space to cover part of the neighbourhood fees.
20	X*					Chevrolet Chevi	Regular payer	Pays fees in advanced.
21					X (warehouse)	Ford Wagon	Regular payer	House used to keep pets to be sold on the weekend market.
22					X		Intermittent payer	Rents parking space to cover part of the neighbourhood fees.
23		X (for sale)					Regular payer	House announced for sale. Leases parking space during the weekdays to cover part of the neighbourhood fees.
24	X						Debtor	Parking space taken by administration as a fine
25	X					VW Golf, Nissan Tsuru	Regular payer	Parks one car outside the <i>privada</i>
26	X					Ford Explorer	Regular payer	
27	X						Regular payer	
28					X		Regular payer	Leases parking lot to cover part of the neighborhood fee.
29					X (warehouse)		Debtor	Parking lot taken by the administrator as a fine. The house is used by Ramon, (builder) to keep construction
30	X					VW Caribe, Toyota Yaris	Regular payer	Parks one car outside the <i>privada</i> .
31			X				Regular payer	The owner does not share/rent the parking lot
32		X				Chrysler Voyager	Regular payer	Leases parking lot during the weekdays to cover part of the neighborhood fees.
33	X					Nissan Tsuru	Intermittent payer	House lent by the proprietor to a relative.

LIST OF RESIDENTS AT PRIVADA COLORÍN.								
House No.	Proprietors		Tenants		Empty, Abandoned, Commercial uses	Automobiles	Neighbourhood fee	Observations
	Weekly basis	Weekender	Weekly basis	Weekender				
34		X					Regular payer	The owner does not share/rent the parking lot.
35					X		Debtor	Parking lot taken by the administaton as a fine
36			X			Chevrolet Chevy	Debtor	The house is used by the tenants for living and working place (bake cakes and ground coffee)
37	X**					Ford explorer	Regular payer	
38				X			Intermitent payer	Leases parking lot during the weekdays to cover part of the neighborhood fees.
39	X					Jeep Cherokee	Regular payer	Uses the house intermitently (lives between D.F., Tepoztlán and Bosques.
40					X (for sale/rent)		Debtor	House announced for rent/ sale. Parking lot taken by the administration as a fine.
41		X				Peugeot 207	Regular payer	House is kept empty most of the time. Main entrance flooded with the rain.
42							Debtor	House abandoned. No information about the proprietor
43		X (for sale)					Debtor	House announced for sale. Parking lot taken by the admiistration as a fine.
44	X					Ford Fiesta	Debtor	Parks car outside the <i>privada</i> .
45	X					Chevi Monza, VW Pointer	Intermitent payer	Rent one parking lot for the additional car.
46	X**					Ford Mustang, Ford Escape, VW Jetta	Regular payer	Rent 3 parking lots for the additional cars.
47					X		Intermitent payer	House is abandoned.
48					X (for rent)		Intermitent payer	House announced for rent. Leases the parking lot to cover part of the neighbourhood fees.
49			X				Intermitent payer	House intermitently rented for commercial uses (office/keep medications).
50	X					Nissan Tsuru	Regular payer	
51	X					Dodge Atos, VW Pointer	Regular payer	House is empty at different times of the year. Parks one automobile outside the <i>privada</i> .
52	X					VW Combi	Regular payer	Fees reduced. Member of the neighbourhood committee. Leased parking lot to cover part of the
53	X					Chevy Monza	Regular payer	
54	X					VW Derby	Regular payer	Feed reduced. Member of the neighbourhood committee.
55	X					Chrysler Shadow	Intermitent payer	
56					X (repossessed)		Debtor	House rented to municipal workers during 2005. Currently repossessed. The parking lot is taken by the
57		X				Ford Contour	Regular payer	Pays fees in advance
58		X					Intermitent payer	Leases the parking space during the weekdays to cover part of the neighbourhood fees.
59	X						Intermitent payer	The house is empty most of the time.
60	X**						Regular payer	
61		X				Chrysler Neon, Chrysler Chevy	Regular payer	
62			X (for sale)				Regular payer	House is announced for sale.
63		X				Chevrolet Shadow	Regular payer	
64					X (for sale/rent)		Debtor	House is announced for rent / sale. It is kept empty most of the time.
65		X					Regular payer	
66					X		Intermitent payer	

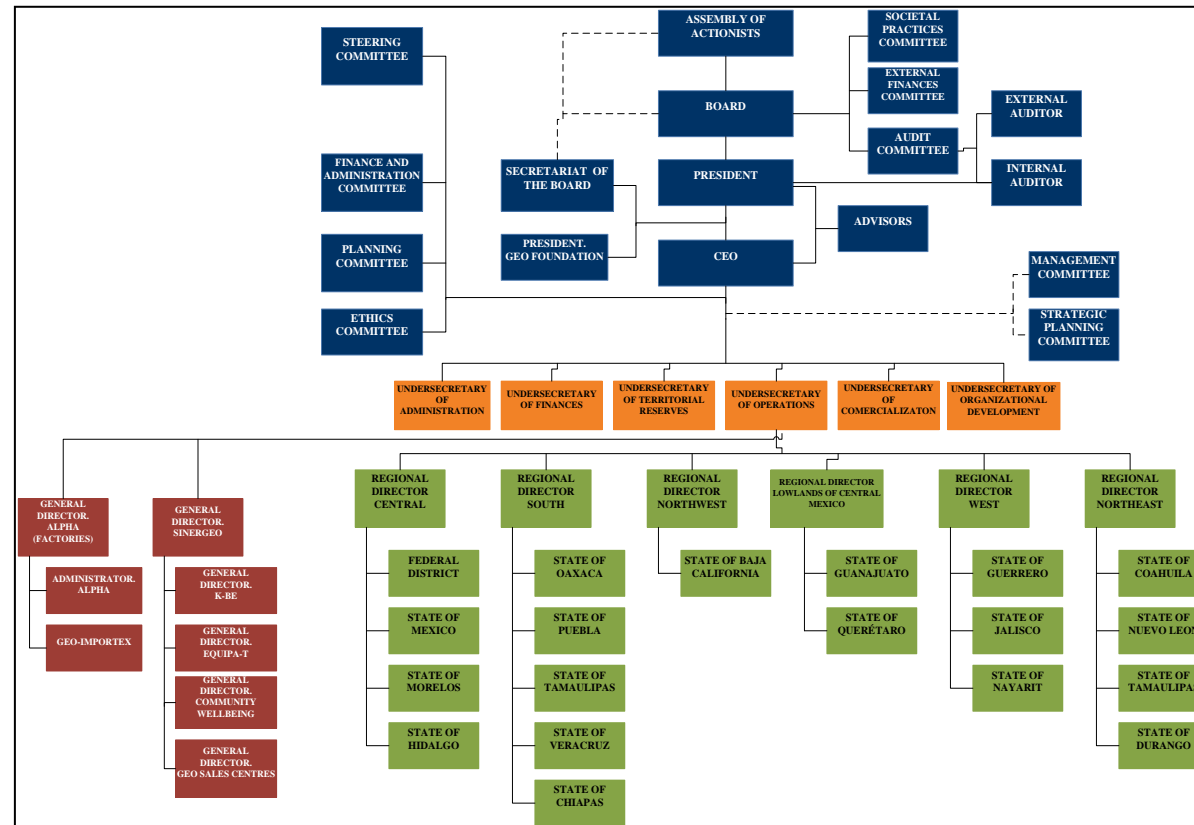
LIST OF RESIDENTS AT PRIVADA COLORÍN.								
House No.	Proprietors		Tenants		Empty, Abandoned, Commercial uses	Automobiles	Neighbourhood fee	Observations
	Weekly basis	Weekender	Weekly basis	Weekender				
67			X			VW Bocho	Regular payer	On rent since January 2007. Tenant pays additional fees for the parking lot.
68		X				VW Pointer	Regular payer	House empty most of the time. The owner does not lease the parking space.
69	X					Chevrolet Chevy, Ford Fiesta	Regular payer	Rents a parking lot for an additional automobile.
70		X				Ford Escort	Regular payer	House kept empty for long periods of time.
71			X			Nissan Pathfinder	Regular payer	
72	X						Regular payer	Leases the parking lot to cover part of the neighbourhood fees.
73	X					VW Golf, Nissan Tsuru (taxi)	Regular payer	Rents a parking lot for an additional car or keeps the taxi outside the <i>privada</i> .
74	X					Nissan Tsubame Wagon	Regular payer	Pays fees in advanced.
75	X					Chevrolet Chevy	Intermittent payer	
76			X				Intermittent payer	Sometimes used by relatives, sometimes by tenants. Tenant pays extra fees for the parking lot.
77	X					VW Jetta, Ford Wagoner	Regular payer	Rents a parking lot for an additional car.
78	X					Ford Focus, VW Jetta	Regular payer	Rents a parking lot for an additional car.
79					X (repossessed)		Debtor	House repossessed by INFONAVIT. Parking space taken by the administration when needed.
80	X						Regular payer	
81		X		X		Ford Sable	Regular payer	House is empty for periods of time. Rented since June 2007. Tenant pays additional fees for the parking lot.
82	X						Fees reduced	Leases parking space to cover part of the neighbourhood fees. Member of the neighbourhood
83		X (for rent)					Debtor	House announced for rent
84			X			Eco Sport, Ford Fiesta	Regular payer	Rents a parking lot for an additional car.
85					X		Debtor	Parking lot taken by administration as a fine.
86	X						Intermittent payer	Leases the parking lot to cover part of the neighbourhood fees.
87					X		Regular payer	The owner does not lease the parking lot.
88	X					Ford Platina	Regular payer	
89		X				VW Beetle	Intermittent payer	
90	X					Chevi Fiesta	Regular payer	
91			X				Regular payer	Leases the parking lot to cover part of the neighbourhood fees.
92			X			VW Golf, VW Bocho (taxi)	Intermittent payer	Parks one car (taxi) outside the <i>privada</i> .
93					X		Intermittent payer	At times the owner leases the parking lot to pay the neighbourhood fees.
94	X					VW Pointer	Regular payer	
95					X		Debtor	No contact with the Proprietor.
96		X				VW Jetta	Regular payer	3 graduate students renting the house. Tenant pays extra fees for the parking lot.
97					X (for rent)		Regular payer	House announced for rent.
98	X					VW Lupo	Fees reduced	Member of the neighbourhood committee.
99	X					Ford Runner	Regular payer	
100	X						Regular payer	
TOTAL	41	22	12	2	23			

* The house is used by the proprietor as an office / industrial kitchen.

** The house is used by the Alvarez' family intermittently (during months, weeks, holidays or weekends).

Appendix 3

Casas GEO organisational chart



Source: Corporación GEO (2010). Author's elaboration.