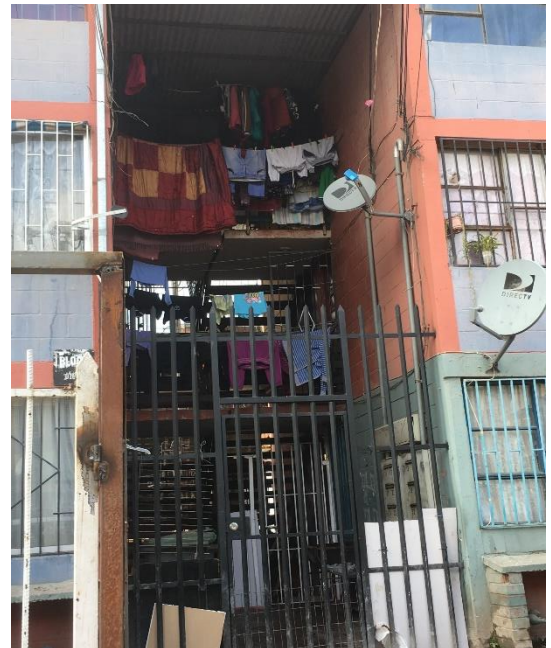


*Using Urban Planning to improve the quality of life of the residents of Puente Alto*

For my International Award, I travelled to Bajos de Mena which is a sector in Puente Alto, a municipality located in the most-southern part of the capital of Santiago in Chile. In Puente Alto, poverty and its effects are most notable in the third sector, Bajos de Mena which is isolated, overcrowded and has a high in crime rate; roughly 10.6% of the population falls below the poverty line. My field research brought me to this sector of Puente Alto since the municipality of Puente Alto is in the process of revitalizing this neighborhood using urban planning principles some of which include: storm water management, CPTED principles, increasing connectivity and green areas as well as allocating healthcare and social services. My research included site visits, participating in a workshop and speaking with local women as well as members of council and the mayor of Puente Alto.

These collaborative efforts and projects are a necessity for Bajos de Mena. My first few days in Bajos de Mena were spent conducting a site visit and talking to residents. Walking the streets of Bajos de Mena only reaffirmed the sense of poverty that I had been told about; there was garbage everywhere, dogs wandering the streets looking for food, people sleeping on the sidewalks with their whole lives around them and clothes hung on any available wire. All buildings had gates to increase the sense of security in the neighbourhood, however, I was taller than most of the gates making the act seem futile. Many of these gates were made from scrap pieces of metal or wood and were broken. It gave the sense that people were trapped, not protected. Many people had also installed grids in the entrances of their apartments for security which blocked the entrance between floors and doors of different apartments.



The physical structure of the community contributes to the aforementioned poverty. The sector is characterized by vacant land and social housing units which were built 30 years ago and are famous for not being waterproof. The neighbourhood is physically isolated from the rest of Puente Alto by a major highway and there is only one road connecting it to the rest of the



commune. This isolation, when paired with a severe lack of amenities which I noticed on my site visit has increased the social vulnerability of the population. These lack of amenities and access including pharmacies, stores, bank branches, plazas or medical aid was very surprising given that the community has 120,000 residents, a similar size to the City of Kingston. Only recently was the neighborhood of Bajos de Mena given funding for a police and fire station.

After doing a site visit and experiencing the current state of Bajos de Mena, I attended a series of workshops at the *Universidad de Desarrollo de Chile*. Students, urban planners, municipal officials, and professors were placed into groups and each was given a different section of Bajos de Mena to examine. Emphasis was placed on the fact that the overcrowding of Bajos de Mena is inter-related to all the other urban and social problems the community faces such as lack of connectivity, few green areas and high crime rate. After each presentation, other groups gave feedback. Last year, a group proposed a community mosaic project which would help create a sense of community and bring people together and implement art into the community, adding a great visual effect! It was great to see so many different people collaborating and working together on finding solutions that will be used to further improve Bajos de Mena.



The municipality is in the process of revitalizing this neighborhood. The urban intervention plan for Bajos de Mena was presented to me by the mayor. It is a long-term plan that will take until 2022 to complete, however annual goals have been established to resolve the existing issues of housing, security, health, education, and infrastructure. The mayor explained that “here [they] have to do everything since there are only houses”. This plan is looking to fix this by providing the community with the ability to pull themselves out of poverty. The first steps taken to improve the neighborhood were to build a police station and install public lighting to enhance the safety of the community.

One of the major issues that Bajos de Mena faced and still faces is the density of the community. Bajos de Mena needed an additional 4 million square metres of green spaces to comply with the World Health Organization’s (WHO’s) recommendation of 9 square metres per inhabitant.



To start opening up the community, a park was created on 13 hectares of land that previously functioned as an illegal dump. The park now includes an outdoor church, soccer field, splash pads and children's games, exercise machines, picnic tables and various trails. When visiting the park, I noticed large poles throughout the park which were placed there to allow for the monitoring of garbage smells and deterioration of the illegal dump site still located underneath the park. An amazing community effort spearheaded by a group of women emerged: the women monitor the park and make sure that it is kept clean. They work in shifts so that the park is monitored, kept safe and clean for 24 hours. While they have done work increasing green areas and decreasing crime, the next step of the plan seeks to improve the quality of life of the inhabitants through addressing overcrowding.

While in Bajos de Mena, I also had the pleasure of interviewing a group of women and getting a view of a resident-perspective. Most of them arrived to Bajos de Mena because of a housing subsidy. The women, who not only are the leaders of the community, have made a concerted effort to speak up and have their voices heard. It was impressive to see that it is the women who hold the power and made and still make the decisions regarding the urban intervention happening in their neighborhoods. These women are some of the many who are responsible for the keeping of the park.



During my time in Santiago, I had the opportunity to attend National Congress and the Senate meeting. and talk with the Minister of Housing and Urbanism about this project. The project was describe to be “a rose full of thorns” and that 700 social housing units are currently being demolished to build a large center with public and private services. “The residents are anxious and want answers now but creating change by improving transportation, demolishing and rebuilding takes time, especially since the city officials are taking the time to listen to the needs of the residents.” The solution posed to the overcrowding problem in Bajos de Mena which consists of providing families who live in poor conditions with subsidies to buy a new home in a better located sector so that their houses can be demolished to build new services. This project is currently underway as consultations have been started regarding what residents would like to do; stay in the neighborhood or move and receive a subsidy and some of the new housing has already been built in parts of the sector.

While the project has a lot of work to do, it has accomplished some amazing goals. The neighborhood has installed a recycling centre to help get rid of the excess garbage on the roads and encourage a sustainable green community. It also offers an exchange cart where residents can place items on the cart that they no longer want or need and another resident can take it. Similarly to the construction of the new park, and the bringing of the police and fire department, a local municipal office has been constructed in Bajos de Mena to provide easier access to residents while they work on improving the connectivity problems to the city center of Puente Alto. While they have many projects on the horizon such as installing a metro line, creating a new school and soccer stadium, they have done a lot of work already.



The International Experience Award provided me with an incredible opportunity to learn about urban revitalization and more specifically social housing. It was inspiring to see so many different people working together towards the same goal: to create a better quality of life for residents of Bajos de Mena. I am so grateful for having received this opportunity to learn and travel to new environments to expand our understanding of planning principles and designs.