

We are Geoide en Revolución, a political group composed of students and alumni of the Faculty of Geography at the University of Buenos Aires. At some point in our activism, a few years ago, we began to understand and use social cartography (similar to participatory mapping) as a valuable tool for working with and for social organizations. Social cartography as a method is not offered within our college training, so we had to educate ourselves on our own. We started out through internal reading groups, participated in summits on the topic and soon put the tool to use. We have held workshops in secondary schools for adults, where some of our members teach, and in the villa (slum) n° 21/24, where we have been involved in the “Mesa Por la Urbanización Participativa de Villa 21/24” (the task group for participatory slum development).

While following this path, we decided to act on a territory which is key for Geoide: our school within the university, the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras (School of Philosophy and Literature). In November 2011 we organized a workshop aimed at mapping our school from the students' points of view, based on our knowledges as subjects who participate in creating this space every day. Our proposal and our challenge was to think about the school environment not only as a physical space but also as a socially constructed space which is disputed by different actors: students, authorities, teachers and other staff, each of whom possesses their own interests and political stances.

At the time the workshop was organized, there was a conflict – which still has not been solved – among school authorities, students and other actors concerning the construction of a new building. Many blueprints for this construction were presented by different architectural firms, but none of the buildings reflected student interests. Considering the current shortage and overcrowding of classrooms, the student body requests a building with large classrooms for undergraduate courses. We have also asked for a cafeteria with affordable meal prices as well as a nursery for the children of students and staff, both of which would facilitate the access of lower-income students to higher education. Neither of these have been included in the blueprints. The final blueprints for the new building include only classrooms, most of them small, which might be set aside for paid graduate programs or private language lessons (whereas undergraduate courses are free). On the other hand, the funds for construction will come from a company that is associated with transportation infrastructure mega-projects throughout all of Latin America – a fact which has caused alarm among students.

Our project started with a workshop in which we explained the potential of social cartography and then divided the participants into small groups for debating, exchanging ideas and drawing maps on blank posters. Some of the key questions we suggested were: What different spaces can we find in our school? What kind of actors, processes and problems do we associate with each one? What spaces do we feel closest to? Which spaces do we perceive as strange and unknown?

In this workshop, more than 50 students showed up from different majors (geography, history, anthropology, education and art history). Together we decided to merge the ideas that came up in the small groups into a single map, with the aim of showcasing both our work and the issues we wanted to make known and intervene with. We also particularly intended to systematize the discussion taking place during the activity. The workshop consisted of making maps but it went beyond that: How could we give an account of the concerns that came up during the process, exceeding the possibilities of expression on the map? Systematization, as an exercise of putting the collective production of knowledge into words, became a key tool in the project. After many meetings, in which we read and analyzed the maps, we put together a single map – presented here – that is intended to summarize our discussions. The map displays the building's five floors as concentric circles. The lower floors (represented by the larger outer circles) happen to include the busiest and most democratic spaces, such as the courtyard, the student-run cafeteria and classrooms for entry-level courses. The upper floors are increasingly “elitist”: The second and

third floors contain more advanced courses and administrative offices, whereas research departments and other offices are located on the fourth and fifth floors (which are unknown to most students). The shrinking circles provide a visual analogy for the fact that many students start to study at university, fewer of them manage to continue and graduate, and even fewer can access research positions.

This map condenses the ideas, visions and representations which appeared in most of the initial maps, among which there were differences but also surprising similarities. Through different icons, it displays concerns and claims which are central to the student movement at our school and in our country. Examples include the disconnection between spaces of learning (classrooms) and spaces of research (in the case of our school the fourth floor, which is represented by question marks on the map); the commodification of knowledge; the need to democratize university decision-making processes; and the rejection of the school authorities' control of public spaces (security cameras, fences, private security guards, regulations on courtyard usage, limitations on poster-hanging and political activity in the hallways).

Additionally, the map expresses infrastructure problems which have worsened over time: insufficient classroom sizes, malfunctioning bathrooms, locked emergency exits, flooding that destroyed part of the library and power outages. Besides these issues, the map shows spaces which are connected to student activism. These places convey great symbolic meaning. Their very names honor the memory of young activists murdered during protests, such as Darío Kosteki, Maximiliano Santillán and Mariano Ferreyra. Finally, the map mentions the historic moment in 2010 when students took over the school in protest: for 31 days normal activities were interrupted and public lectures as well as mass meetings were held.

This "map made by students" has been useful in several ways: When it was made, it condensed – in a single collective production – all student claims with regards to the new building, thus contributing to the student movement. The conflict concerning the building has continued through institutional channels, in a commission initially composed of teachers, students and staff representatives, facing many bureaucratic obstacles. For that reason the student body has ceased to participate and school authorities have gone ahead with their original blueprints (which have been described above) for a new building located next to the old one. The confirmation of construction has been considered a partial victory – since an imperfect new building is better than no new building at all – but as of 2016 it has not yet begun.

Our social cartography workshop has achieved its goal of making this tool more widely known and of solidifying our specificity as geographers and activists for a critical geography. At the same time we have positioned ourselves as part of a much larger collective: the student body of our school. We also had the chance to share this instrument with schoolmates who had not been aware of it and who now use it in their activist work as a tool for visualizing, constructing and transforming their territories.

Workshop of Social Cartography in the Faculty of

Philosophy and Language

While searching for social transformation, which is based on the collective construction of new knowledge, social cartography is a tool that allows to show the different conflicts hiding behind a variety of hegemonic practices. Although they omit various inequalities and social conflicts, maps are often used as unquestionable representations of the real world. At the same time the world is constructed from multiple perceived realities and thus collectively and heterogeneously built. Deconstructing the idea of the map as something widely accepted means to appropriate the tool in order to dispute the relations of power.

Let's get together and build a map of our faculty in order to learn more about the conflicts around us and to facilitate change collectively!