Housing the Contingent Life Course: Domestic Aspiration and Extreme Poverty in Peruvian Shantytowns

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Abstract
Peru’s urban peripheries have long been shaped by the intertwining of urban development policies with Peruvians’ domestic aspirations. Since the 1960s, different formulations of progressive and self-help housing policies have relied on and reproduced a domestic life course model in which Peruvians’ inexorable progress through the “domestic cycle” is mirrored in the steady transformation of their precarious, unconsolidated shantytown homes into “noble” (modern; concrete) constructions in fully urbanized neighborhoods. While shantytowns partially reflect this predictable life course temporality, they are also shaped by future imaginings and contingent time. People use shantytowns to fulfill ideals of adulthood, autonomy, and success, but also to hedge their bets, retreating from some relations while striving to forge new ones. Drawing on twenty-one months of fieldwork in Peruvian shantytowns, this article examines informal urban development from a contingent life course perspective to demonstrate how Peru’s urban peripheries are embedded in and shaped by Peruvians’ efforts to pursue domestic life projects while managing fluctuating kin relations and preparing for uncertain futures. [Housing; Life Course; Family; Latin America; Shantytowns]

Introduction: Housing poverty and progress

August 2010. It seems the most challenging thing about conducting Peru’s National Household Survey (ENAHO) is demarcating the household to begin with. Lucia and I hopped out of the government SUV and tumbled down the sandy hillside in search of the first household on her list: Señora Viola, Block A, Lot 22, Heroes De Cenepa, Pachacútec. Yet when we arrived at the address, all we found were dilapidated straw mats on a barren patch of sand. According to neighbors, Viola and her youngest son were visiting Viola’s ailing parents in the northern province of Trujillo and would not return for eight weeks. “But does she really live there?” Lucia asked, pointing to the precarious shack. The neighbors explained that the plot was indeed Viola’s house, but that she generally lived across the street with her partner Victor and his two children from a different marriage.

For the purposes of the survey, Viola suddenly went from a single mother of three to a partnered mother of five. To Lucia’s relief, this meant she could complete the survey with information from Victor, who...
owned the house that Viola normally lived in. Victor accommodated Lucia’s request for information but insisted that he and Viola were heads of different households, and that getting accurate information required talking to Viola directly at her own house. When we arrived to finish the survey three days later, we found Viola on the barren plot, leveling sand so she could install concrete flooring, and ready to answer questions about her independent, four-person household (Figure 1).

The fact that Viola returned from her trip to be recorded on the survey as head of her own household did not surprise me. Prior to my stint shadowing ENAHO surveyors, I had spent approximately twenty-one months conducting fieldwork in Pachacútec, a shantytown in Lima’s northwestern periphery, and had often witnessed Pachacutanos moving strategically in response to official counts, convinced that retaining land rights in this context required appearing as a resident on as many documents as possible (Skrabut 2010). What was special about Viola’s case was how clearly it illustrated the clash between normative understandings of how shantytown homes should be used—as immediate residences for impoverished and growing families—and the ways people used them in practice to pursue particular domestic ideals while also trying to hedge their bets and cope with relational uncertainty.

Since the 1960s, scholars, politicians, and planners have described shantytowns through two interrelated development narratives. The first is the “progressive housing” narrative in which shantytowns begin as sites of poverty and misery—absent infrastructure, hospitals, schools, or green areas—that residents eventually transform into “dignified,” suburban neighborhoods through their collective investments, hard work, and

Figure 1. ENAHO surveyor interviews a resident of Pachacútec at her house. August 2010. (Photo: Kristin Skrabut.) [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]
political mobilizations (Fernández-Maldonado 2007). The second developmental narrative draws on anthropological theories about the developmental cycle of domestic groups (Fortes 1958) and posits a relationship between the domestic cycle and housing conditions over the life course. Anthropologist William Mangin and architect John Turner argued that as Peruvian families move through the domestic life cycle—proceeding through stages of union formation, familial growth, and eventually becoming elders with adult children who in turn form new families—their socioeconomic status also improves and they expand and consolidate their houses accordingly, collectively building entire communities in the process (Mangin and Turner 1968).

Peruvians’ successful progression through stages of urban and familial development is assessed based on the quality of their houses. National censuses and surveys inquire about construction materials, connections to water and electricity, how many people occupy how many rooms, what people cook with and where they defecate, because these attributes send official signals about the poverty of the household (see INEI 2010, 2007). From this vantage, the recent finding that only 6 percent of homes in Lima’s barriadas (shantytowns) constitute “finished” dwellings, while over 90 percent remain in incipient and medium states of consolidation seems especially troubling (Fernández-Maldonado 2007; Tokeshi et al. 2005). It signals that development in Lima’s peripheries has stagnated and that “self-help” housing settlements like Pachacútec have resolved Peru’s quantitative housing deficit only to replace it with a qualitative one (Fernández-Maldonado and Bredenoord 2010). Meanwhile, these housing attributes also send unofficial signals about the cultural and moral standing of the inhabitants. Because young couples are expected to “consolidate” their homes as they mature and move through the domestic life course, Peruvians often read the precariousness of the family in the precariousness of the house, an ideology that perpetuates stigmas of shantytowns as sites of family disintegration and moral degeneracy (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Typologies and rates of household consolidation in ten barriadas in Metropolitan Lima (Tokeshi et al. 2005). (A) Provisional dwelling: construction of precarious materials with a single room serving multiple functions. (B) Incipient dwelling: single-story structure of “noble” materials; adequate for family needs. (C) Partially consolidated dwelling: advanced single-story construction that requires modification to produce additional stories. (D) Consolidated dwelling: sturdy, multi-story construction, including a habitable second floor. House examples from Pachacútec. (Photos: Kristin Skrabut.) [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]
While theories of progressive housing trajectories and the domestic life cycle capture important features of shantytown development and shantytown residents’ aspirations, the puzzle of Viola’s household and many others I encountered with ENAHO surveyors suggests that these theories are not sufficient to explain the complex ways Peruvians inhabit and use houses in the urban periphery. In this article, I argue that we should read the landscape differently by analyzing urban development from the perspective of the “contingent life course.” As Johnson-Hanks (2002) explains, rather than presume an inevitable progression through discrete life “stages,” a contingent life course perspective adopts a dual focus on “institutions and aspirations” (871, 878). It recognizes that the progression through particular life stages is neither natural nor inevitable, but is made to seem so through the coordinated interventions of institutions like schools, banks, families, and government administrations. Moreover, while a model of life stages suggests an inescapable process that people undergo, people do not generally experience their lives in this way. Most “vital events” such as marriage, motherhood, and migration “are negotiable and contested, fraught with uncertainty, innovation, and ambivalence” and “are rarely coherent, clear in direction, or fixed in outcome” (Johnson-Hanks 2002, 865–66). A contingent life course perspective leaves open the possibility for regularities in how people use houses over the life course, but prohibits presumptions about inevitable cycles that might obscure the array of “housing transitions” that people may make over their lifetimes and the diverse meanings and uses people apply to houses at different moments (Beer and Faulkner 2011). These contingent life course dynamics shape the appearance and development of the urban periphery by informing the ways people inhabit and use the houses that constitute it.

Scholars working across Latin America have shown that houses can variously serve as: flexible containers for kinship that reflect inhabitants’ changing circumstances (Mangin and Turner 1968; Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995), symbols of success and enactments of autonomy (Pauli 2008; Han 2012), conduits for economic and affective support (Pribilsky 2007; Leinaweaver 2009), and fungible assets that raise a person’s fallback position when other things fall apart (Chant 2015). This article illustrates how Peruvians draw on these different possible uses of houses to pursue their visions of “dignified” lives while managing fluctuating kin relations and preparing for uncertain futures. Shantytowns can thus be understood not only as spaces of poverty or progress, but also as sites of possibility and exigency. They are places where people go to fulfill their ideals of adulthood, autonomy, and success, but also to hedge their bets, retreating from some relations while striving to forge new ones.

I begin this discussion by describing the large shantytown of Pachacútec that informs this analysis, as well as the housing policies that have shaped the expectations and dynamics of urban growth in Peru. I then draw on anthropological understandings of kinship and life course to analyze how Peruvians have integrated these policies into their domestic life projects and livelihood strategies. I show how Peruvians use the
informal urban periphery to realize state-sanctioned ideals of “dignified” adulthood, pursuing simultaneous dreams of casa propia (homeownership) and “duly constituted” families while reproducing the apparent poverty of the urban periphery with every generation. Next, I demonstrate how houses are used more generally in the construction and maintenance of kinship. The constant assembling and reshuffling of families is evident in the architecture of “flexible” houses, in the establishment of ampliaciones (neighborhood extensions), and in the maintenance of “empty” houses in neighborhoods that are supposedly teeming with impoverished masses. Finally, I illustrate how houses are used, not only as immediate residences, but also as investments and sources of security that allow people to prepare for uncertain relational futures. In doing so, I align with other scholars who suggest that we need to take analyses of shantytowns out of an urgent present tense and instead examine how their long histories inform individual expectations and future plans (Fischer 2014; Nielsen 2011).

Housing paradoxes in Pachacútec

Pachacútec first developed a reputation as an “extreme poverty zone” in February 2000 when President Fujimori relocated 25,000 squatters from a land invasion in the south of Lima to a barren desert in Callao’s northernmost district of Ventanilla, founding the Pilot Project New Pachacútec (Figure 3). As one settler explained, relocating meant...
moving into “extreme poverty”: “Most of us had come from our parents’ houses [but] at that time [upon arriving in Pachacútec], everyone was equal. Everyone was living in extreme poverty. See, we didn’t have anything. Everyone was living in esteras [straw mats], that’s it.”

Fujimori’s promise to quickly distribute land titles and install urban infrastructure prompted thousands more to join the settlement, seeking homes of their own. The site also soon became a dumping ground for people displaced by natural disasters and property disputes, as well as a housing and urban development laboratory for different state and non-governmental agencies. The influx of new residents and crush of political attention complicated land ownership and delayed infrastructure installation. Thus, by 2010, Pachacútec housed approximately 180,000 residents, organized into roughly 150 block organizations and three different geopolitical bodies based on their occupation history and tenure status, all of whom lacked basic requirements for “dignified” urban existence (Figures 4 and 5).

The area’s combined “lacks”—of water and sewage infrastructure, quality schools and hospitals, recreational areas, and sufficient employment opportunities—together with the sprawling and precarious urban landscape these lacks generated, cemented Pachacútec’s identity as one of the largest “pockets of poverty” (bolsones de pobreza or bolsones barriales) in Metropolitan Lima-Callao. As a UNICEF official working in Pachacútec’s encompassing district of Ventanilla explained,

> The indicators of extreme poverty [in Ventanilla] are equal to the [rural] regions in which we intervene. Only one-third of the population has access to water and sewage, the problem of pollution, access to schools and more importantly quality education, the issue of the basic basket of goods, life expectancy at birth and various themes. . . . Ventanilla [is] the district with by far the most pockets of poverty. And that’s for multiple reasons, like the issue of migration. You’ve seen how Pachacútec is.

Despite an array of metrics developed to provide nuanced understandings of poverty and inequality in Peru (see Fernández-Maldonado and Bredeenoord 2010), the description of Pachacútec as a “pocket of poverty” reflects a tendency to bundle these indicators together to convey an image of abject social exclusion that is distinctly spatial and can be assessed visually. As a field agent for FONCODES, a state organization
responsible for mapping poverty and targeting social assistance programs, explained,

Of course we have extreme poverty here in urban areas. . . . It’s like two different realities. On one side of the highway, everything is normal. And on the other side, you have extreme, extreme poverty. . . . It’s a poverty of everything: a poverty of health, education, infrastructure, [and there is] even domestic and sexual violence.

In a public speech in 2009, the Mayor of Ventanilla likewise explained that, as a site of rapid population growth and its incumbent urban “disorder,” the district faced many challenges.

Ventanilla has more than 300,000 inhabitants. . . . Seventy percent live in squatter settlements, 50 percent lack water. . . . As the population increases, so does the delinquency. Many come from destroyed families. Seven of ten mothers here are single or abandoned.

While Pachacutanos certainly have many challenges related to difficult living conditions and a lack of employment opportunities, the grandiose imaginaries of “extreme poverty” offered by development agents map unevenly onto the realities of life in Pachacútec. Firstly, like the UNICEF official, many Peruvian functionaries described Pachacútec as a site...
of “pure migrants” (pura migrantes). However, over half of the 50,000 recent migrants in Ventanilla “migrated” from other districts of Metropolitan Lima-Callao (Table 1). Pachacútec is thus perhaps better understood as a “self-help” housing project for second and third generation migrants—people raised in Lima for whom the site is not an entrée into the city but a means of realizing a dream of casa propia in a context where formal sector housing remains inaccessible to many.

Secondly, although as a site of “extreme poverty” Pachacútec is often described as being full of single mothers, what it means to be “single” in this context is not entirely clear. Rates of formal marriage in Latin America have always been much lower than normative discourses of patriarchal and monogamous families would suggest (Kuznesof 2005, 859). Since the sixteenth century, illegitimacy rates across the continent have ranged from 30 to 60 percent (859). In 2013, Peru’s Ministry of Health found that 78 percent of births in public hospitals were to women in informal partnerships (Andina 2014). Moreover, national surveys of civil status indicate that only 28 percent of the population is legally married (INEI 2014) (Table 2).

The high rates of informal partnership, particularly amongst new mothers, echo the mid-twentieth-century findings of Andeanist ethnographers who described marriage as a process rather than an event. In these contexts, young couples transitioned into marriage through a series of “intricately interwoven rituals, each of which sanction[ed] a given stage of marriage and a given ontological level of growth on the part of the marriage partners” (Carter 1977, 212). Similarly, in urban Peru today, couples become tied to each other over time and through life course events such as having children, cohabitating, building a house, and constructing relations with in-laws, with formal marriage often occurring only after many years, if at all. However, in Pachacútec, unions rarely seem to follow such a straightforward progression, and law intersects with these relationships in complex ways.

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<tr>
<th>TABLE 1. ORIGINS OF RECENT MIGRANTS TO VENTANILLA</th>
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<tr>
<td>Origin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Metropolitan Lima-Callao</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coastal province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mountain province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jungle province</td>
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Statistics derived from INEI (2008). Given spatial patterns of urban growth in Ventanilla, most of these migrants likely live in Pachacútec.

<table>
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<th>TABLE 2. CIVIL STATUS RATES IN PERU, 2013</th>
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<td>Status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabitating</td>
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<tr>
<td>Married</td>
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<td>Separated/divorced/widowed</td>
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Finally, although Pachacútec is widely represented as housing Lima’s marginal masses, many houses are empty. The words NO VIVE are scrawled on walls in large letters, while X’s on doors and windows provide subtler indications that a house is not adequately occupied (Figure 6). These “empty” houses are most prevalent in areas of Pachacútec with high proportions of legally titled lands, leading some residents to describe these neighborhoods as pueblos fantasmas (ghost towns) that are only vaguely populated by formal shadows. According to one longtime resident, these “abandoned” houses have hurt community efforts to transform Pachacútec into a thriving urbanization.

Now there are many abandoned properties. . . . Because there aren’t many people that live here we can’t ask for many things [from politicians]. At one time delinquents moved into those empty lots and it was dangerous for people.

Although Peruvian housing studies often acknowledge the prevalence of unoccupied homes in the periphery, they tend to gloss over them, understandably focusing on the struggles and strategies of more visibly “active” residents. However, in Pachacútec, these unoccupied homes are important features of the urban landscape, exacerbating the difficult conditions in shantytowns while also materializing domestic aspirations and kinship strategies.

I derived these insights about lived realities and relationships in Pachacútec during several one-to-three-month trips in 2007–2008, a ten-month stay in 2009–2010, and a five-month stay in another shantytown that suggested these findings may be applicable beyond Pachacútec. Through participant observation with municipal employees responsible for surveying the area and promoting local government programs, and with dirigentes (community leaders) who coordinated neighborhood development initiatives and grassroots food assistance programs, I became acquainted with Pachacútec’s different neighborhoods and developed relationships with area residents who were active in community development initiatives. Of the forty Pachacutanos whose names appear most frequently in my field notes, all were twenty-to-fifty-year-old Spanish speakers, whose geographic origins roughly aligned with those of “recent migrants” in Pachacútec. Twenty-five percent were men, 75 percent were women and, of those women, approximately two-thirds were de facto “single” mothers.
However, the better I got to know my interlocutors, the more convoluted these civil statuses became. Some women were legally married but de facto separated. Some had never been married but had cohabitated or had a child and then separated, sometimes filing reports of “household abandonment” with police to certify their “separated” status. Some were “separated” but still living with partners. Still others had separated and reconciled numerous times or were separated but remained connected to partners through familial, financial, or emotional ties. The uncertainties of intimacy and kinship across the life course inform how Peruvians use houses and are refracted onto Pachacútec’s pockmarked and precarious landscape as people negotiate these uncertainties within the institutional framework established by Peru’s complex housing and urban development history.

Housing history and policy

In the mid-twentieth century, Latin American elites derived their ideals of modern urbanism from the US and believed that formal, pre-planned housing projects constituted the most desirable solution to rapid urbanization (Bromley 2003; Fischer 2014). In practice though, Peruvian governors adopted a laissez-faire attitude, allowing migrants to develop homes on vacant land relatively unimpeded and unaided by formal government programs. However, when elite anxieties about Lima’s growing “belt of misery” and the increasing political importance of the poor collided, politicians began seeking solutions that might satisfy both constituencies (Collier 1976).

The first significant policy innovation was Peru’s 1961 Law on Marginal Settlements. This law prohibited the formation of new settlements while promising to help “organized communities” improve infrastructural conditions in existing settlements until they complied with modern urbanization standards and became eligible for individual land titles. However, when the government could not keep pace with its obligations to upgrade settlements, Congress passed legislation allowing for legal recognition of settlements and property holders before infrastructure was installed (Calderón Cockburn 2002; Fernández-Maldonado and Bredenoord 2010). Thus a pattern emerged in which illegal occupation was followed by legal recognition and infrastructure would be installed after the fact through settlers’ lobbying and “self-help” construction efforts.

Around the same time, national agrarian reform policies helped legitimize land takeovers as a form of redistributive justice. In 1969, left-wing dictator Juan Velasco declared that land should serve a “social function in a new system of justice” and rightfully belonged to “those who work it and not those who charge rent without tilling” (Velasco [1968] 2005, 282). This stance was later written into the 1979 constitution with a provision that “land must be used in harmony with the social interest.” This created discursive space for...
squatters to argue that, as impoverished citizens seeking “dignified houses” in which to properly formar (form; raise) their children, their private appropriation was in the social interest.

Squatters thus drew both on progressive political ideals and conservative moral frameworks to justify their land claims. A “dignified house,” in this case, meant an owner-occupied, single-family home, constructed of material noble (noble materials) like bricks and concrete, equipped with modern infrastructural amenities, and containing enough discrete, private spaces to support occupants’ social, psychological, and moral development. The desire to provide a “dignified home” for one’s family appealed to middle-class ideals and reproduced a moral order that rendered illegal actions in service of this goal beyond reproach, while also demonizing households that fell short of this ideal as socially aberrant and morally suspect. 

Behind these public discourses, informal urbanization processes were being sustained by the “quiet, steady intertwining of informality, economic gain, and political power” (Fischer 2014, 26). In an article tellingly entitled, “Recipe for a House,” Torribio (2005) describes the formula for successfully obtaining a home of one’s own in Peru’s urban periphery. First, collaborate with neighbors to organize a simultaneous, overnight “invasion” of vacant land. Then enact your land claim and your poverty—which many interlocutors defined as having “nowhere else to go”—by remaining on the land until you obtain some form of juridical recognition. (Until 2014, this could happen in as little as twenty-four hours, after which authorities were technically no longer allowed to remove squatters by force.) Either before or soon after the land takeover, secure the support of a local politician who, in exchange for the promise of political support, will recognize settlers as needy citizens deserving of assistance rather than delinquent “invaders” who undermine the social order. Finally, secure your land claim by accumulating constancias (documentary proof of residency distributed by local governments) and a national land title, while also lobbying for infrastructure and structurally fortifying your house (Webb, Beuermann, and Revilla 2006). This recipe, and the legislative history of informal housing in Lima, demonstrates that establishing a new settlement demands creative combinations of clientelist politicking, legal manipulation, rights claiming, social mobilizations, emotive performances of virtuous poverty, and declarations of familial commitments (Collier 1976; Dietz 1998).

Nonetheless, international observers frequently ignored these complex dynamics in favor of narratives that more directly aligned with their ideological commitments (Bromley 2003; Harris 2003b; Fernández-Maldonado 2007; Fischer 2014). Writing in the 1960s, John Turner extolled the virtues of Peruvians’ self-help and progressive housing techniques, arguing that squatters were enacting the most logical solution to housing shortages, investing only what they could afford and building their homes progressively in ways that
responded to their changing needs over the life course (Turner 1967, 1972, cited in Harris 2003a, 248–49). The international housing community adopted much of Turner’s “progressive” housing agenda, but coupled it with “sites and services” upgrading policies that helped governments regulate urban development while ensuring the poor maintained a stake in the liberal capitalist order (Harris 2003b). In so doing, the international community bolstered squatters’ moral legitimacy as people “mainly interested in consolidating their housing investments, getting their kids into school, and identifying themselves as respectable property owners” (Mangin and Turner 1968, 155) and sanctioned the rise of “planned barriadas” like Pachacútec as viable housing solutions for needy families (Fernández-Maldonado and Bredenoord 2010).

Ten years later, neoliberal ideologue Hernando De Soto rocked the international development community with his controversial assertion that Third World poverty had a legal solution in land titles. He argued that formalizing the property claims of the poor would give them access to capital, collateral, and bank credit, which would lift them and their countries out of poverty (see De Soto 1989, 2000). In a world emerging from the Cold War, the idea that poverty could be cured by grassroots capitalism was well received and quickly became international policy doctrine (Calderón Cockburn 2002). With the blessings of the World Bank and the IMF, in 1996 President Fujimori created the Commission to Formalize Informal Property (COFOPRI). By 2009, COFOPRI had issued approximately 1.8 million urban land titles, thousands of which went to residents of Pachacútec (Fernández-Maldonado and Bredenoord 2010).

Yet despite their neoliberal gloss, COFOPRI’s titles continued and exacerbated urban Peru’s long history of fraught titling policies. As Gilbert (2002, 5) explains, throughout Latin America, land titles have long been an “apparently unchallengeable recipe for popularity with ordinary people,” with politicians at different levels of government competing to distribute them. In Peru, between 1961 and 2002, the administrative responsibility for titling lands changed at least thirteen times (Calderón Cockburn 2004; Dosh and Lerager 2006). Today, whether titling powers lie with the national, regional, provincial, or district government depends on the specific history of the settlement, resulting in a mosaicked legal geography in which multiple legal recognitions might matter for land rights, and it is often difficult to determine whose authority matters most.

In this context, property in land is best understood as an unstable enactment. It requires the performance of possession over time punctuated by different “official” authorizations that promise to unite legal record with the residential reality (Skrabut 2013). As such, the injection of thousands of national land titles into Pachacútec did not alter Peruvian settlement strategies so much as amplify them, revealing how Peruvians incorporate “ghosts”—that is, documents that stand in for a person’s physical presence—into their kinning and livelihood strategies,
and how the commercialized dimensions of shantytown homes are entangled with familial obligations and aspirations.

Housing aspirations

Every state “proposes for its citizens a model of the life course”—a sequenced series of life stages that involve realizing specific relational identities, often marked by particular events (Borneman 1992). For instance, as women move through the life course, they might strive to inhabit relational positions and identities as good daughters, independent women, intoxicating lovers, loving wives, and doting mothers. Meanwhile, the transition from one stage to another may be marked by events like graduations, civil or religious marriage ceremonies, moving into a new house, or having a child. Through the coordinated interventions of institutions and governmental technologies—such as schools, banks, tax policies, housing regulations, marriage laws, ID cards, and various other apparently neutral administrative forms—this model life course comes to feel both normal and natural. It informs citizens’ material, moral, and relational aspirations, as well as how they imagine, measure, and interpret their lives (Johnson-Hanks 2002; Kreager 1997).

Within Pachacútec, Peru’s model life course is most clearly articulated in public school curricula—which teach students about stages in the family cycle, how to construct a “life project,” how to make rational and informed choices about romantic love, and the sorts of families they should aspire to—and in various state and NGO workshops that promise to fight the deleterious effects of poverty by teaching women to create “Healthy Households” for their children (Ministerio de Educación 2008; Tierra de Niños 2009). However, this model life course is also asserted through housing regulations and the various formal and informal ways the Peruvian state promotes and monitors development in the periphery.

The ambiguous legality of settlements and the formulaic nature of “illegal” occupations have encouraged many Peruvians to think of land invasions as viable, low-cost housing alternatives. Much like getting married and having children, establishing your own home on your own plot of land is viewed as an important stage in the life course. When I asked people why they had moved to Pachacútec, many responded with the aphorism, casado casa quiere (the married want a house). By highlighting the shared etymology of casado (married) and casa (house), this phrase indicates that marriage is intimately tied to and partially constituted by household formation, and that the apparently desperate need for urban housing, vividly represented in Peru’s sprawling shantytowns, is linked to state-sanctioned ideals of family, co-residence, adulthood, and modernity.

One prominent dirigente in Pachacútec described these ideals of household autonomy as the Peruvian Dream. “You know how you have the American Dream . . . Well, we also have a Peruvian Dream, where we have our own houses and our own things.” Another dirigente
suggested that this dream of household autonomy was linked to the “inevitable” need for privacy and independence implicated in the transition to adulthood. When I asked him why someone would move to a shantytown like Pachacáteque rather than continue living in their parents’ house, he forcefully articulated the complexities of household belonging over the life course.

Do you think your parents’ house is the same as your house?! Maybe when you were young, they struggled to make it nice for you. Maybe you were the reason they made a home in the first place. But the house is not yours; it belongs to your parents. You grow up and begin to realize that la casa te queda chica [the house fits small], that there is no privacy, that to go to your room you always have to walk by your parents. You come to see that you lack space, that you lack independence. So you need your own house.

While the move to casa propia (a home of one’s own) was largely considered a normal and necessary part of the transition to adulthood, for many of my interlocutors the dream of casa propia remained an unrealized ideal. For instance, Marisa was the only one of her five siblings to leave her parents’ house.

All of [my siblings] have partners and children, but I’m the only one who has moved out. I don’t know how they can tolerate living for so long in casa ajena—[that is,] a house that isn’t yours. For example, you can’t invite friends over because the house isn’t yours. What if the grandma doesn’t like them? No, it’s better to have something that’s your own. When I visit [my parents], my nephew tells me how responsible I am, and how his mom isn’t responsible at all. He tells me, “You’re responsible because you have your own house, your own things. You manage everything that is yours.” And it’s not easy to buy your house, but it’s possible.

By using the term casa ajena (another’s house) to describe her parents’ home, Marisa seconds the dirigente’s assertion that estrangement from one’s natal household is part of an inevitable process of personal growth. She also affirms that the need for household autonomy is amplified by the presence of partners and children; the obligation to provide for children and dependents is the reason for establishing an independent house in the first place. The Peruvian state supports this notion by measuring “household need” based on the presence of married children or “children with children”—that is, multiple family “nuclei”—in a single household. An independent house is therefore a symbol and enactment of autonomy and an asset acquired to care for others and “properly” raise children.

Thus, while land invasions are demonized for their illicit foundations and contributions to urban disorder, some shantytown residents believed that invading land and constructing homes and communities from scratch were vital, character-building components of personal and familial growth. Older interlocutors spoke with pride about building their
homes from nothing, offering dramatic but ultimately triumphant narra-
tives of their hardships. However, the recollection of past suffering is
qualitatively different from its experience in the present. In real time, the
experiences of squatters or “invaders” are akin to soldiers in battle; long
periods of vigilance and boredom are punctuated by violent encounters
with police or opposing factions. Moreover, there is never any guarantee
that these efforts will be successful.

As such, the decision to join an invasion was not taken lightly, but
was based on a combination of aspiration, opportunity, and constrained
choice. Francisco, for instance, grew up in Lima’s middle-class neighbor-
hood of Surco, attended a good school, and earned good grades. But
when his girlfriend became pregnant, he left school, found work, moved
into her parents’ home, and began calling her his esposa (wife). He only
moved into Pachacútec after becoming fed up with his mother-in-law.

It was horrible. . . . I don’t want anyone telling me how to act as a
father, in my relationship with my wife. . . . What I do with my
partner is my problem. . . . It’s a totally intimate and private uni-
verse and no one has any reason to get involved. . . . I’ll take
advice, but I won’t tolerate commands.

Without the resources to rent or purchase a home in Surco, Francisco was
faced with a choice: remain in the neighborhood he loved under the con-
rol of his in-laws or actualize his visceral sense of appropriate relational
privacy and autonomy in Pachacútec. He chose the latter. It took him six
months to establish his house and convince his wife that the move was
worthwhile. After living in Pachacútec for ten years, Francisco began
helping younger family members strike out on their own, having reformu-
lated his own constrained choice as a necessary stage in the life course.

I’m helping my niece move into the new invasion, the ampliación [set-
tlement expansion] on top of the cerro [mountain]. It’s hard, of course.
They don’t have water, or electricity, and the cold is horrible. But
we’ve all had to go through that. We’ve all had to suffer like that.

The apparent poverty of shantytowns, also called pueblos jóvenes (young
towns), does seem to have a life cycle and generational component.
According to both Peruvian popular wisdom and progressive housing poli-
cies, “young towns” are generally occupied by “young couples” whose pre-
carious homes reflect their limited economic resources and the fragility of
their relationships. If couples make it past the foundational stages of the
“domestic lifecycle,” the household will “mature,” adding members
through biological reproduction, fostering, and incorporating nieces,
nephews, or younger siblings who will contribute to the household econ-
omy until each is ready to form their own family nucleus. Moreover, in
the progressive housing framework, household developments go hand-in-
hand with community developments. As Anderson (2000) explains in
her discussion of another shantytown community in Lima, residents move
into shantytowns to aspire to various interrelated goals.
[They seek to] build a proper house, ensure indisputable legal title . . . and preside over a growing family. . . . They also aspire to become part of a reasonably pleasant, safe, and socially integrated neighborhood that possesses the usual range of urban services . . . where they will be recognized and honored for their contributions, where their family’s achievements will be applauded . . . and where their privacy will be respected. Achieving these goals is the structuring principle behind the cycle of community building. (8)

Although ideas linking family, household, and community development shape Peruvian aspirations and inform how Peruvians understand and inhabit the periphery, these predictable temporalities and clear distinctions between natal and conjugal homes do not adequately reflect the varied ways Peruvians relate to houses in practice. Moves from natal to conjugal households are rarely singular, complete, or irreversible events. Houses are flexible containers that not only reflect family growth but also the constant reassemblage of kinship (Anderson 2009). As I demonstrate next, houses are important relational resources that allow people to maintain ties across generations and accumulate extended kin, while also serving as sites of projected futures and sources of security against relational failure.

Housing relations

The Peruvian state interprets “unfinished” and “unconsolidated” houses as reflections of poverty. However, there is another sense in which houses are always unfinished and constantly being adapted to meet the changing needs of occupants (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995). Silvia’s home epitomized the idea of “flexible” housing. When she invited me over to discuss her latest love interest, she led me into an unassuming yellow wooden house, through a small foyer-family room with a concrete floor, behind a wooden wall, past the kitchen with its packed-dirt floor, through a maze of straw mats, plastic, and cloth curtains, up a stepladder, left at the bathroom, and into a room enclosed by esteras and exploding with clothes at every stage in the laundry cycle. Silvia washes clothes for the eleven people who have been incorporated piecemeal into her house over the last ten years. Silvia’s mother Iris arrived first, establishing the house in 2000 after fleeing an abusive partner. Silvia and her children joined Iris four years later after Silvia’s husband left her for another woman. Silvia’s grandparents soon followed, explaining they were lonely in their rural home and less able to care for themselves. Other extended family members had also rotated through the house, some staying for years, and others leaving quickly to establish homes on nearby plots.

In Andean contexts, relatedness is not strictly biological but rather is made through processes of co-residence, reciprocity, nurturance, and temporally elongated acts of “growing accustomed” to different households (Lobo 1982; Weismantel 1988; Leinaweaver 2008). Likewise, scholars
have shown that contributing to household construction, through physical labor or migrant remittances, reinforces kinship ties and relational identities (Leinaweaver 2009; Pribilsky 2007). The fact that Iris occupied a large plot and could provide spatial resources to family members allowed her to expand her local kin network until close friends and family dominated community-based social assistance organizations, such as the comedor popular (popular dining hall) and Wawa Wasi (childcare center). Silvia described the benefits of this network in affective and economic terms.

Before when I was living . . . with the father of my children . . . I spent practically all day by myself. I’m much happier here . . . What’s more, when I need help with something . . . like a fundraiser for the childcare center . . . all of them [my kin] support me.

Although Iris’s resources in land allowed her to accommodate the changing residential needs of myriad family members, in most cases possibilities for household growth in the periphery were limited by population density, the real estate market, and the legal strictures of urban planning grids. Moreover, many of my interlocutors explained that, legally, each person was only allowed to obtain one “free” plot of land from the government and that, since land in shantytowns was intended for “truly needy” people with “nowhere else to go,” this land was supposed to be used as an immediate, owner-occupied residence. As a result, accumulating and extending these spatial resources to kin required some creativity.

One common strategy was to gain de facto use of adjacent plots by putting them in the names of close family and friends. As one dirigente explained matter-of-factly, “You know how it is. Someone wants two plots, so they put it in the name of a cousin or an in-law who is always working or on a trip somewhere.” It was not unusual to find that a few individuals were responsible for maintaining all the houses on a block and going to great pains to ensure that no one outside their social network moved in. Retaining control over nearby plots gave residents with de facto use rights greater capacity to respond to changing circumstances and assist friends, family, and anyone else they sympathized with.

When Marisa came to Pachacútec, she took over two plots: one for herself and one for her then four-year-old daughter. She described this action in terms of kinship obligations, arguing it was necessary because “You can’t leave your kids with nothing.” However, since her now fifteen-year-old daughter still had no reason to move out, she was lending the plot to her friend Isac, a polite young man from one of the poorest rural regions of Peru. When Isac fell in love with a woman in Marisa’s neighborhood, she took pity on him. “He was suffering living in [his girlfriend’s parents’] house, so I lent him my daughter’s land and now we’re neighbors.” As neighbors, they had become even more like family, doing regular favors for one another and collaborating productively on neighborhood development projects.

When it was not possible to retain control over adjacent plots, shantytown residents would resort to ampliaciones to provide for kin. While
COFOPRI’s titling campaigns were designed with a sunset provision to avoid encouraging new invasions, residents and bureaucrats found a loophole in ampliaciones. Officially, land settled after 2005 is not eligible for formalization through COFOPRI. However, with ampliaciones, the antiquity of the initial settlement is extended to include newly constructed houses, making them less illegal and potentially eligible for state assistance. By design, most people with use rights in ampliaciones are relatives of residents in more established settlements nearby. The development of the periphery thus follows an intergenerational logic, with new settlements tied to older ones in multiple ways.

Frequently, the main protagonists in the physical and legal development of the ampliación are title-holding residents of established neighborhoods. Daniel, for example, is a retired schoolteacher who owns a concrete house, which he proudly explained had a foundation over two meters deep—an allusion to the stability of his house and his family. Yet when I met him, he and his wife were literally in the trenches trying to build another foundation for their son’s family. He explained that since his son and daughter-in-law worked, they did not have time for the meetings, physical labor, public demonstrations, and politicking required of residents in self-help communities.

We’re helping our kids now to set an example so someday they’ll do the same for their kids. Maybe not with a house, but perhaps supporting them with an education, a degree, who knows. It’s a matter of having a good relationship with your kids, doing things for them.

The relative equivalence of education and housing as a way to provide for a child’s future was made especially clear when one dirigente tried to sell me a house, by which he meant a plot of land occupied by a precarious, one-room structure, which he said he had claimed for his sixteen-year-old son. He justified his asking price by explaining the cumulative cost of sending his son to Peru’s naval academy. Either as a home, or an asset exchanged for education, the house was a means of fulfilling his parental obligations to help secure his son’s future.

In addition to time, more established shantytown residents had important knowledge of how to navigate the legal system. I met the fifty-year-old Maricielo while she was screening residents for a new ampliación. “I live in [a settlement below], but since my kids are here and they don’t know the process, I am guiding things.” Although Maricielo needed a critical mass of people to ensure the ampliación would be successful, she was adamant that “these lands are for the people of [my settlement] or for the family of the people. Not for gente ajena [strangers].”

In the absence of other resources, houses were a critical means of creating kin networks and complying with familial obligations that even bureaucrats responsible for enforcing the letter of the law understood. As one COFOPRI official explained,

Many people invade more than once because they need something for their kids. Once they do, it is the responsibility of the state to
give them access to property . . . so they have a right to other benefits like loans or sturdy construction materials.

The above examples suggest that kinship intersects with housing and informs the shape of the urban periphery in a variety of ways. While shantytown homes often serve as flexible containers for the growing nuclear families to which most of my interlocutors aspired, they are also used to construct and strengthen extended kin networks and to accommodate new family assemblages (Anderson 2009). However, Peruvians may also claim additional plots of land for this purpose, constructing provisional houses to retain land in anticipation of a child’s needs and to accommodate additional friends and family in the meantime. Peruvians may settle land this way for several reasons. First, it is likely a cheaper and more accessible accumulation strategy than expanding and consolidating a single house. Moreover, while house construction can be put off or planned with care, inexpensive land must be claimed opportunistically. Second, it allows Peruvians to deploy a particularly hard-won cultural competence regarding how to obtain land in Peru’s informal periphery. Finally, while expanding or restructuring a single house allows one to accommodate kin, having access to multiple properties makes it possible to provide children with some level of independence and, as I show next, helps women retain this option for themselves.

Housing contingent futures

Marisa was a strong proponent of normative family ideals and generally believed that household structures informed and reflected the solidity of the family. I was therefore surprised to learn that she effectively possessed three properties, which she accumulated both through careful planning, as when she acquired a second plot for her daughter, and more unexpectedly, in coping with her own turbulent marriage. When Marisa married her husband, she initially moved from her parents’ “fully consolidated” house into a single-family home with her husband, which her in-laws helped them pay for. However, she now lived in a “partially consolidated” house in Pachacútec: a two-room structure with a concrete floor, wooden walls, and a large, enclosed backyard suitable for future construction. She explained her move to Pachacútec in terms of marital problems.

My husband was a womanizer. . . . I caught him with another woman and I left [with my four-year-old daughter]. . . . Here in Pachacútec . . . there were still plots available so I met with dirigentes and they interviewed me. They ask many things: if you will live there permanently, if you work. . . . Since I was a single mother they gave me the land. . . . Later my husband found me to yell at me. “How could you abandon your home?! I’m your husband!” . . . But I told him, “You have no right to yell at me. . . . You treat me with respect.
Because you didn’t find me in the street. You took me out of my house. You asked permission from my parents. No soy una mujer cual-
quiera [I am not just any woman] that you can treat like that.”

Confronted with her husband’s charge that she “abandoned her home,” Marisa asserts her moral authority by explaining that she followed the appropriate transitional steps in moving from natal to neolocal residence and only left after her husband violated the companionate marriage ideal on which that home was based.

I heard variations of this story many times from self-described “single mothers” in Pachacútec. However, the fact that Pachacútec abounds with single mothers may be a self-fulfilling prophecy. The free lands in Pachacútec are supposed to go to the poorest of the poor. In the Peruvian imaginary, this means single mothers. As Marisa explained, she received land specifically because she was a single mother. Likewise, the only exception I saw Maricielo make to the rule that ampliación occupants had to be family of existing residents was for a single mother who claimed to be fleeing an abusive and alcoholic husband. After hearing her story, Maricielo reluctantly said,

Fine, you can put yourself there and we’ll defend you. But you have to live there. And under no circumstances are you to bring that disgraceful husband of yours around. (Emphasis in the original speech)

In Peru, the “single mother” is an especially potent imaginary; a legible figure of virtuous poverty eligible for state assistance and likely to garner community sympathy. Yet, there is another sense in which the “single mother” is an incomplete social entity—a woman who left her natal family to form a conjugal unit that fell apart, so that now she is half a union. Women who describe themselves as single mothers often do so in the context of telling decisive, and to a degree triumphant, stories of how they became “mother and father” to their children—a phrase that honors the two-parent household norm even as it celebrates women’s independence and resilience. In different circumstances, these same women would describe themselves as “separated” or “abandoned,” characterizing their present identity with reference to the loss of a past state.

That said, in practice, “single,” “separated,” and “abandoned” were rarely complete or permanent conditions. Shortly after Marisa left her husband and moved to Pachacútec, her daughter got sick. According to Marisa, her daughter acquired asthma because she missed her father. “When she was in the hospital, I called my mother-in-law and told her to tell her son to come to the hospital for his daughter. Since then, we’re back together.”

When I told Marisa that I would be moving from a friend’s house in urbanized Ventanilla into Pachacútec’s neighborhood of Techo Propio—the only government-built, fully serviced housing project in Pachacútec—she approved of the choice.
In Techo Propio, they are a different class of people. They come from well-formed families. . . . The rest of Pachacútec, those are gente más sueltos [loose, untied people]. Men who have abandoned their wives, single mothers, you know the type.

There was some basis for Marisa’s assumption, as houses in Techo Propio had originally been lotteried to low-level government employees who could prove that they had spouses and children using formal documents. However, in my experience, the occupants of Techo Propio contended with equally complex and contingent family structures, and they used homes as resources to negotiate these dynamics.

Andrea, a local psychologist and social worker, was happy to lend me her house in Techo Propio. “I had always intended to live there,” she explained. “That’s why it has furniture in it.” Her asthmatic children could not tolerate Pachacútec’s cold and humid climate, so for now, Andrea, her husband, and two children lived in her parents’ house in another district in Lima. Andrea hoped that lending me the house would bolster her legitimacy as an owner, which depended in part on the house being actively inhabited. As she explained,

> When you don’t live there, the neighbors complain. They think that if you don’t live there, you must not need it. That you should sell it to someone that really does need it because they don’t have anywhere else to go. And they’re right. But the thing is, I don’t have another house. This is the only house where I have a title.

That is, Techo Propio was the only space where Andrea had some claim to ownership and thus autonomy. By occupying Andrea’s house, I was helping her enact her property claim and retain this resource in case tensions between her and her husband, or her husband and her parents, came to a head.

Harkening back to a “culture of poverty” frame frequently used to both justify and malign progressive housing sites (see Murphy 2015), Andrea explained that she and her husband had “different formations.”

> I had both my parents, and they’re still together, while my husband’s father wouldn’t recognize him. He denied he was his. So he grew up in a house with a single mother and therefore has another type of formation.

In other words, while Andrea had grown up in a “duly constituted” family, her husband came from a broken home. She believed these different formations led to their marriage problems.

> We were married, both civilly and religiously, and were married for a year before I got pregnant. But when I had my daughter, he left me for another woman. But we also had problems. . . . We fought a lot and he abandoned us, and we were separated for three years. I felt awful being separated. It was like, here I am a psychologist, how can I be separated?! It just felt wrong, like I was living a
lie... But then he started coming back to visit my daughter, and from that, we got our son, and since then, we’ve been together.

In a manner strikingly similar to Marisa’s account, Andrea’s story juxtaposes normative ideals of rigid family structures with the tenuousness and elasticity of conjugal relations in practice, and illustrates the effects that this reality had on how she used houses. As a trained psychologist, Andrea was well versed in the negative consequences of “family disintegration” and she described taking all the proper preliminary steps to ensure that she entered this relationship rationally and intentionally. Nonetheless, her marriage was not as stable as this careful life course sequencing promised. Maintaining a house in Techo Propio while living with her parents enhanced Andrea’s capacity to manage multiple sets of fluctuating relationships.

Although I met Marisa and Andrea at times when they were with their husbands, their familial trajectories may not end there. While coupled individuals strive to establish new homes, separated individuals draw on relational identities as daughters, sisters, cousins, and comadres, as well as whatever financial and spatial resources they have, to cobble together alternative household arrangements.

Conclusion: Housing ideals and normative ignorance

When viewed through the frame of a survey, Viola’s household, with which I began this essay, could be seen as an unconsolidated site of poverty headed by a single mother or a partially consolidated site of familial growth and progress, but it could not be both or something in between. As De Certeau (1998) reminds us, statistics—the state’s science of simplification—can successfully identify the elements of social life but cannot tell us how they are used. When applied to Peru’s shantytowns, statistics can classify the materials from which houses are fashioned, and can even be arranged and interpreted as a “trajectory”—a term that implies movement while simultaneously projecting it onto a graph “which the eye can master” (19). But they cannot capture the expectations, aspirations, or hedgings that inform people’s relations to housing. Moreover, in shantytowns where land is supposed to go only to people who “need” it as an immediate residence, reporting the house for what it was—a resource to care for kin, a site of projected futures, and a source of security against (un)imaginable eventualities—could have put Viola’s land claim at risk.

However, in a context where stable employment is scarce and educational opportunities are limited, land is an important resource. This is especially the case for women who, constrained by their obligations as primary caregivers for their children, must find creative ways to generate value and secure their futures. During the time of my fieldwork in
Pachacútec, plots of land and the precarious shacks and documents that tenuously transform them into property served this function. Yet these uses of shantytown homes are not captured in official surveys or in the visual and visceral ways that onlookers frequently apprehend shantytowns. As Ananya Roy (2004) explains, when evaluating shantytowns, the emphasis on the physical environment and the “architecture of squatting” amounts to an “aestheticization of poverty” (296). This tendency, which is inscribed in official frameworks through survey questions that focus on the physical characteristics of houses, not only “mutes the social, political and economic narratives that also underlie poverty” (300), but also causes us to misread the urban landscape, seeing only poverty and family breakdown rather than aspiration, kinship, and (in)security. In Pachacútec, the large numbers of purportedly empty, unconsolidated households contribute to its ramshackle appearance and its official and popular designation as an “extreme poverty zone.” However, as this ethnography has shown, these houses and the entire shantytown may be better understood from the perspective of the contingent life course and the creative, if tentative, ways that Peruvians occupy and develop the periphery.

Notes

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1Encuesta Nacional de Hogares.

2Duhau (2014) offers a paradigmatic example of tendencies to describe informal settlements as either progressing toward normalcy or stagnating in poverty. “Colonias populares [Mexican shantytowns] show an average trajectory that always begins at the lowest extreme of metropolitan urban and social conditions, and that trajectory usually ends when colonias populares arrive at their maturity, near to the metropolitan average. . . . [Informal cities] generally function as a progressive habitat. . . . [Yet] there exists an irredeemable portion of the informal city . . . that, for different reasons, [does] not evolve” (162–63).

3Han (2012) provides an excellent example of these transitions in Chile.

4This quotation and all other quotations that were originally in Spanish have been translated by the author.

5Fondo de Cooperación para el Desarrollo Social (Cooperative Fund for Social Development).

6Most territorial dirigentes are men. Almost all dirigentes for food assistance programs are women, and women dominate low-level municipal jobs.
Translated from the 1979 Constitución para la República del Perú, Artículo 124.

See Murphy (2015) for a description of these dynamics in Chile.

On July 12, 2014, Peru’s congress passed law 30230 modifying Article 920 of Peru’s Civil Code such that authorities now have fifteen days to forcibly remove squatters before the matter must go to court.


The “normalcy” of the nuclear family household has been explicitly reinforced by Peru’s national census since 1993, when it began recording intergenerational and extended families as cohabiting nuclear families.

References


