

**In the Shadow of the Razor Wire:
Expressions of Class and Insecurity in Guatemala's Urban Core**

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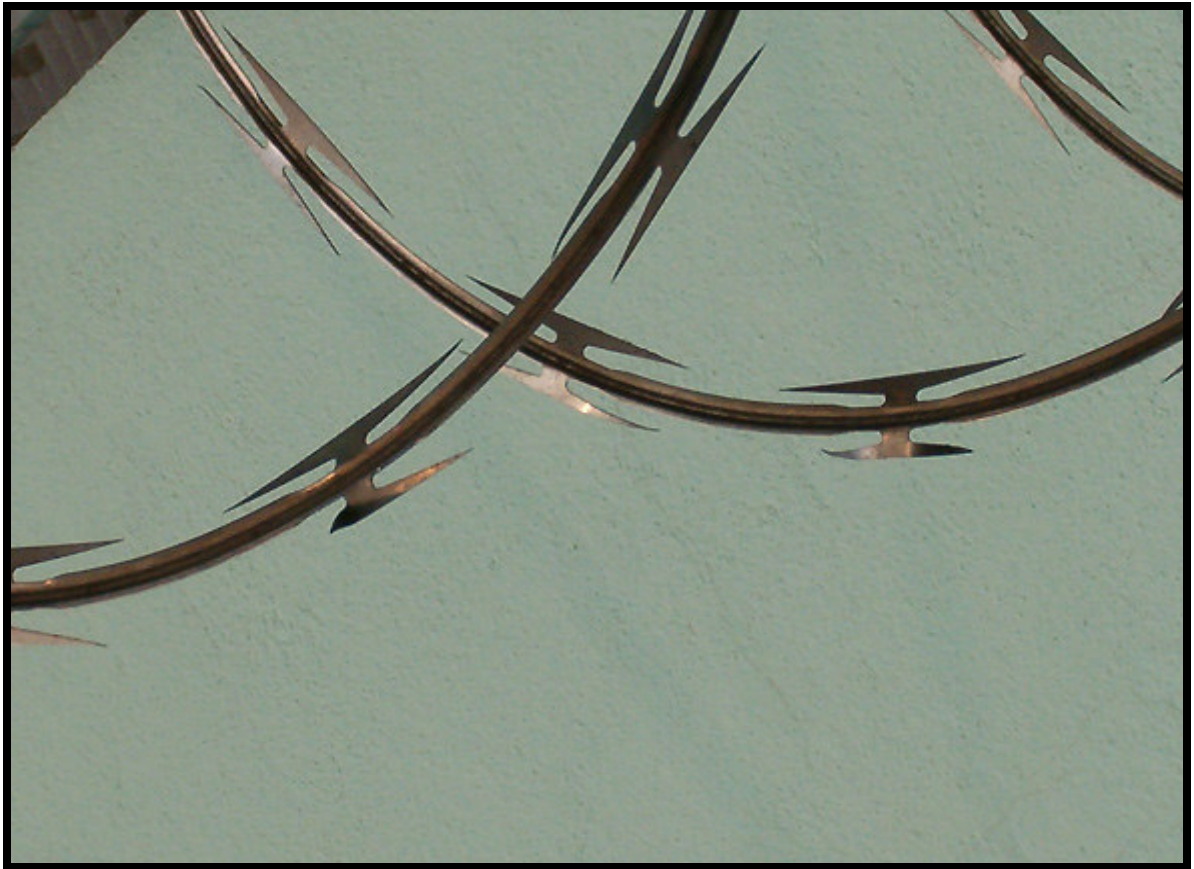


Figure 1- Zone 1: Razor Wire Close up

In Guatemala City's oldest residential areas, razor wires have appeared in the wake of the civil war to symbolize the new violence of everyday living. Entering the global search for an ever-elusive sense of security, Guatemalan homes, businesses and public plazas are adorned with fences, armed guards, and different arrangements of razor wiring. Adding to a long-standing socially accepted paranoia of outsiders disrupting the sanctity of the Spanish-American home (Few 2002, 95), the razor wire and other modern security paraphernalia are shaping the landscape of residential areas in the city core. Fortress homes, razored rooftops and barren sidewalks walled by concrete, metal and a wall of noxious traffic dominate the residential areas remaining in the central core of what ladino nation builders once prized as their tacita de plata or "silver cup" for its faux renaissance architectural design and minimization of urban waste and poverty.

As a pictorial ethnography of how security concerns have shaped the residential spaces of Guatemala City's core, this paper hopes to provide insight into how an endemic threat of arbitrary crime and violence results in the promotion and entrenchment of particular cultural tendencies rooted in national and ethnically specific historical processes. In developing an analytical lens for the study of residential façades, I part from the notion that this type of material culture is an expression of how middle-class ladinos living in

the city core live with and make sense of both real and imagined violence in their lives. According to Rossana Reguillo “society constructs notions of risk, threat, danger, and generates standard modes of response” (2002, 192). In a similar vein, I posit that in Guatemala an individual’s social class and ethnic ascription mediate their sense of insecurity as well as typical reactions to perceived threats.

Guatemala’s 500-year history of severe interethnic inequality and its history of political violence in the later part of the 20th century are of relevance to an analysis of the architectural character of its residential streets. A recent past with state-sponsored violence and long-standing ethnic insularity have undoubtedly affected Guatemalans’ current sense of insecurity, aesthetics and the bounds in the establishment of preferred relationships with outsiders. As a result, building façades often betray ladino-specific social attitudes towards “outsiders”, “others” and the sanctity of private space in as much as they represent an attempt to attain physical security.

Yet the trends towards endowing space with facades suggesting hyper-security and social separation are not solely a product of underlying cultural and historical influences but can also identified as social changes that reflect the fostering of market-oriented neoliberal moralities and ways of being (Ong 2006; McMurty 2002). Purchasing Security systems, electrified razor wires, door bell grates and ornate metal doors becomes a way of participating as citizens in the urban life of Guatemala city. In addition to social action through market engagement, neoliberal moralities are betrayed through the sense of insularity and privatization of space that middle class residents of Guatemala city’s central core.

1. Introduction:

Focusing primarily on the image projected by the facades of single-family homes found in Guatemala City’s Zones 1 and 2, this paper asks what approaches to living with everyday violence are evidenced in city core residences. How do the images projected by city core residences reflect both changes in the character of life with violence and changes in the conception of what constitutes the “self at home” and “the outsider” as a threat? Furthermore, what links can be drawn between expressions of security/insecurity in residential buildings and individual social class aspirations?

Single-family residences were chosen as a site for study because their continued presence in the city’s original core speaks of the presence of middle and upper class Guatemalans within what is imagined as one most unsafe urban spaces of the country. Apartment complexes, administrative and commercial buildings of the area are included here only as a point of comparison to the arrangements found in the residences. Because the families living in the central core either own or rent homes in an area where the presence of commerce and the area’s proximity to administrative sites of government has maintained land values; it is assumed that they could have the means to move to many of the gated communities that have sprung up along the city’s edge if safety and security issues of the core had made life unbearable. Instead of fleeing to the safety found behind the armed gates of the suburbs, families living in the urban core have chosen to deal with insecurity by retaining their homes and blatantly closing their entryways to any type of public scrutiny and access.

Living for twelve months between 1999-2005 on the southern edge of Zone 2 just two blocks from its border with Zone 1, I often wondered why residents continued living in the traffic, pollution and crime plagued centre of the city instead of moving to the newer and quieter apartments of the wealthier zones or the cleaner country air of the gated suburbs. Coming from the more regulated urban spaces of the north, I was surprised by the cost of living in an area of such apparent chaos. Though not as expensive as homes in the wealthy Zones 14 or 10, Zone 1 and 2 residences were only affordable to middle and upper class Guatemalans. Rents for very modest apartments ranged from 200 to 400 U.S. dollars per month and free standing homes retained at purchase prices well above fifty thousand U.S. dollars.

In addition to the cost and disorder of the area, ensuring personal safety seemed to be the primary discomfort of life in the area. The preferred topic of conversation between residents I spoke to during my stays was area crime including carjackings, armed robberies, pick pocketing and the occasional violent attack. To avoid becoming prey to criminals residents always advised being behind the closed doors of their homes by 7 pm— advise that most visitors to my home followed to the letter unless traveling by car. With the exception of special community event evenings such as the area fairs or Holy Week celebrations, streets were often deserted of area residents by 7 pm and few businesses remained open past 6 pm.

As I learned to live in the area, I began to understand some of the reasons for its retention of residents and businesses. Though busy and noisy, the area was close to the centre of government, fully served by a great number of small-scale businesses and central for traveling to other parts of the city or country. Visiting the lush and beautifully outfitted garden patios and retrofitted living areas of colonial-type residences in Zones 1 and 2, I gained an appreciation for the charm that attracted resident foreigners and cosmopolitan professionals trained abroad to the area. Homes in the northern part of Zone 2 even followed the familiar North American urban pattern of lots with front and back yards, spacious driveways, sidewalk greenery and were still located within arms reach of the centre of town.

2. History, Design and Geography of Zones 1 and 2

Guatemala City's urban core is physically arranged into twenty five zones— geographic divisions organized in loose grid pattern of numbered streets and avenues—that concentrically radiate from the original 18th century settlement area. Zone 1, where la Nueva Guatemala de la Asuncion (Guatemala City) was first founded in 1773, is still the site of the city's oldest residences, churches, and commercial districts. Though today Zone 1 boasts modern apartment and office buildings built in the later half of the 20th century, highly concentrated commercial areas, and much of the sites of national government; it still retains residences for Guatemalans throughout the breadth of the social class spectrum. Most of these residences are found intermingled with commerce or on the outlying edges of the zone where it borders Zone 2 and 3.

Most of the colonial-type buildings in Zone 1 were built or re-built after a series of earthquakes that destroyed most of Guatemala City between 1917 and 1918 (Peláez Almengor 1994, 33-42). The rebuilding of Guatemala City occurred during the last years

of the nation building efforts of liberal dictator Estrada Cabrera. In order to push for a grand *ladino* nation, Estrada Cabrera's government favoured promoting colonial images

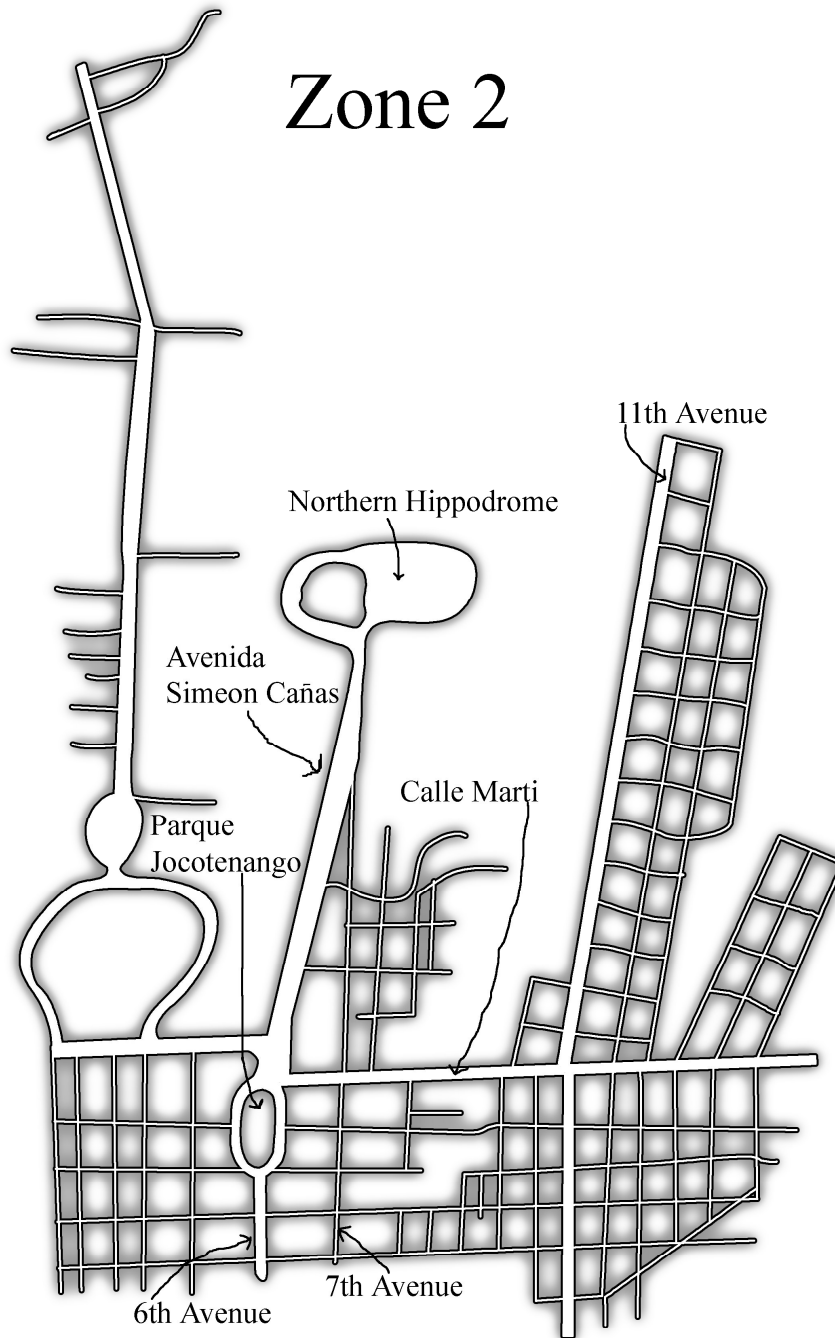


Figure 2- Map of Zone 2. Not to Scale. Drafted by author.

to emphasize the grandeur and civility of the colonial enterprise as the birthplace of Guatemala and the justification for the perpetuity of its ethnic hierarchy (Gellert and Pinto Soria 1990, 42; Taracena Arriola, et al. 2004, 108-109). Guatemala City was thus rebuilt to retain not only its colonial building facades but to retain the mapping of the city's social hierarchy (Peláez Almengor 1994, 42). The central parts of Zone 1 housed middle and upper class ladinos while poorer ladino and indigenous families were pushed to reside in the city's outskirts.

Zone 2 is located immediately adjacent to Zone 1 along its northern edge (See Figure 2). Though there is substantial commercial activity along the major transit arteries that crosscut the zone (6th Avenue, 7th Avenue and Calle Marti), the majority of Zone 2 is composed of residential settlement that developed between 1940 and 1970. Zone 2 is spatially characterized by three geographically delimited juttings of settlement north of the traffic wall created by Calle Marti. Though these areas were settled by large wealthy estates and nation-building monuments prior to the turn of the 20th Century (Gellert and Pinto Soria 1990, 25), most of the current settlement dates from the later part of the 20th Century. The out jutting leading to the Northern Hippodrome still retains vestiges of its former status as a national monument. Avenida Simeón Cañas and the northern most section of 11th Avenue both boast unusually wide expanses. The design of these streets added to the cul-de-sac at the northern hippodrome, both signal that the outcroppings' urban development followed different principles of density and attracted a different class stratum than the main settlements south of Calle Marti.

In demographic terms, the combined Zone 1 and 2 area has changed in the last half century from housing a third of the city's total residents to remaining home to only 8 percent of city dwellers in 1994 (Asociación para el Avance de las Ciencias Sociales (AVANCSO) 2003, 133). This demographic change is a factor of an absolute reduction in the total number of Zone 1 and 2 residents (reduced by approximately 25 thousand during the 1950-1994 period) and the extension of the city to outlying and low-income zones of the municipality (Asociación para el Avance de las Ciencias Sociales (AVANCSO) 2003, 133).

3. Alternatives to the Downtown Core: Notes on Middle Class Gated Residences

Moving away from the urban core to suburban "gated communities" is the most popular middle-class approach to deal with the crime and violence that take place (or are imagined to take place) in the city centre. As a result, the character of Guatemala City as an urban area particularly in terms of notions of safety and security has to take into account the popular belief that distance from the city centre is equivalent to personal safety. Most of the growth of Guatemala City in the last 30 years has been outside the city's official municipal boundaries. Many gated communities have developed in the municipalities adjoining Guatemala City. Between 1981 and 1995, growth rates for these municipalities have averaging 2 to 5 percent per year at a time when some areas of the city core experienced population contractions (Asociación para el Avance de las Ciencias Sociales (AVANCSO) 2003, 132).

Municipios like San Lucas, Sacatepequez or Amatitlán, now house new middle class homes behind security gates and franchise mini-malls littered along the side of the

highways leaving Guatemala City. The approach to attaining security in these areas consists of restricting and monitoring the entry and entry of individuals into compounds and to gain physical distance from the bustle of the city core. Within these gated communities— unless the residential project featured prefabricated American-style suburban homes— there is often great variation as to the quality and size of homes as well as the degree to which security features are incorporated into the home design. While most homes feature fences that demarcate the division between private yards and the often unpaved roadways, most fences are short and allow for full visibility into yards and home frontage. Doors and windows of these homes are often reinforced with iron grates and in some cases there is evidence that security firms have installed home alarm systems or have been contracted to patrol the area. On average homes in these type of middle class residences are valued at between fifty and one hundred thousand U.S. dollars. As in north America, a move to suburbia indicates a change in life style from the one city dwellers are imagined to lead. While suburban homes can provide greater square footage than a similarly priced home in the urban core, commute times to and from work and access to public services take a toll on suburban residents (Seijo 2003).

4. Assessing the Security Threat:

Residents of Guatemala City, like many of their counterparts in other large Latin American cities (Caldeira 2000, Rotker 2002), live in fear of armed assaults and other arbitrary crimes that could end in murder.

For most residents, the fear of crime and the violence associated with it are based on very real high and rising national homicide rates and the prevalence of robberies and assaults in the city core. In 2004, an estimated 4,507 homicides were committed in Guatemala as a whole (Seijo 2005). This figure represents an increase in the homicide rate of over one thousand people more than the average year of the previous decade (Centro de Investigaciones Económicas Nacionales (CIEN) 1998, 8). Though the system devised for reporting of homicides in Guatemala allows for a wide divergence between accepted, actual, and official homicide figures, the country's homicide rate in 2004, is 37.6 per hundred thousand people a figure that is nearly seven times the U.S. homicide rate in 2000 and twenty-one times Canada's homicide rate in 2000 (Alan and Zawitz 2004; Government of Canada National Parole Board 2003).

In a survey of Guatemalan families conducted in December 2004, 42 percent of respondent families indicated that at least one of their members had been a victim of a crime in 2004 (POLSEC (Plataforma de Investigación y Diálogo Intersectorial para el Diseño de una Política de Seguridad Ciudadana) 2004). Just over 80 percent of the crimes reported by these families were armed robberies that did not result in physical injury and that took place on city streets (60 percent) between the hours of 8 a.m. and 6 p.m. (nearly 70 percent) when individuals tend to engage in shopping and work related activities. 99 percent of the robberies reported by families took place within the municipal limits of Guatemala City. Amazingly, the threat of robbery was found close to home as 50 percent of the robberies took place within the zone in which the individual resided.

Crime and its associated violence tends to affect middle class Guatemalans disproportionately. Using employment status and education levels as indicators of

economic status, most individuals assaulted (70 percent) had some form of post-secondary education and were employed at the time of the assault (73 percent). In a country where unemployment and underemployment are calculated to be near 45 percent and where only 3.5 percent of the total population have some university training, the aforementioned profile of the victims makes them disproportionately middle class.

5. The Business of Security and the Display of Social Class

The treat of crime associated violence allows middle-class Guatemalans to imagine themselves as part of a new global nation where the protection of private property becomes a paramount concern of a modern professional's self-conception as a neo-liberal individual. As the analysis of residence facades will show, the display of security measures in Guatemala City often overpowers the admittedly real security concerns. Homes are overprotected with redundant security measures that speak more of the image that residents want to give to the public than of the actual security needs of the home.



Figure 3- Zone 2: "Careful! Bad Dog"

I posit that the reason why Guatemala City residents want to display their ability to protect their residences is because the spectre of imminent violence and crime resonates with pre-existing and well-worn fears of outsiders repeatedly used by ladinos to assert their ethnically insular approach to living in a multi-ethnic and highly hierarchical nation. If outsiders are by definition threatening, then social networks must be developed and nurtured in the safety and security of insular private spaces where the character of individuals is certain. In Figure 4, residents claim that their ownership of a "Bad Dog" will dissuade outsiders from entering their residence. Interestingly the sign characterises the dog as a "bad" animal, instead of the wording used in similar signs in North America

that speak of “guard” dogs or K-9s on duty, or advise potential trespassers to be wary of the premise’s dog. The animal’s character— not his occupation or training— is offered as the basis of deterrent. The dog, streets and public life are defines as perilous and violence dominated and more importantly as spaces unsuitable for the interaction of buena gente/gente decente or good/decent people. In this way, fears of violence and crime also perpetuate a gendered form of social organization that defines the “goodness” of women dominated private spheres as locales in need of “protection” and isolation from the threats posed by public spaces.



Figure 4- Zone 1 and 2: Security Firms (From Left to Right) Grupo Galil, El Guardian, Grupo Golán, and SAS (Lower Left)

The constant threat of violence in Guatemalans’ imaginations is also fuelled by a growing and powerful private security industry that began during the civil war and now relies on crime and violence to expand their business (Gudiel 2004). Signs of the growth of security firms in Guatemala are seen on both residential and business facades. Israeli inspired security agencies like Sistemas Israelis de Seguridad, Grupo Galil or Grupo Golán provide their clients with metal plaques or plasticized stickers to add to the image of security presented by the building fronts. Though most security companies operating in Guatemala have expertise beyond the home security system, home security is now provided in Guatemala by more than 120 legally licensed firms (Gudiel 2004).

6. Security in the Historical Façade



Figure 5- Map of Zone 1. Featured home indicated by star.

The residences of Zone 1 are found in either low-rise apartment buildings (three to eight stories) built mostly between 1960 and 1980 or in colonial-type homes—single level adobe walled homes with internal open courtyards and garage—built between the last decade of the 18th century and the first three decades of the 20th century. The historical facades of Guatemala City show that Guatemalans have a long-established interest in the sharp separation of home from the public space of the streets. Historical homes are designed not only to dissuade intruders but to close off all private space from public view. At the

same time, these homes structurally allow those inside to spy or survey the street without being seen—a function served today by the security camera.



Figure 6- Zone 1: Worn Hardwood Doors and Bared Windows in Unkempt Colonial-type Houses of City Centre. House built at the turn of the 20th century.

The house shown in Figures 6 and 7, a classic example of a colonial-type house with a solid façade, was rebuilt during the architectural renaissance of Guatemala City after heavy damage in the 1917/18 earthquakes. The pictorial view (Figure 6) shows the full breadth of the originally intended building facing 10th Avenue in the northwest quadrant of Zone 1. The image shows what seem to be three separate structures— from the left, a yellow office building with a brown hardwood door and a stepped entry, a blue residence with large blue fold-out doors, and small brown door in a reddish orange front space— but are in fact all part of an original single-family home that was subdivided to increase the rental value of the property in the 1960s.

From its exterior, it is nearly impossible for the onlooker to discern the use or layout of the building. Having visited some colonial-type homes in Zone 1, it is important to note that a home with an unkempt outer façade such as the one shown in Figure 6 does not necessarily indicate a home under disrepair on the inside. The degree of care given to the outer façade of the home may instead indicate the resident’s attitude towards downtown

city streets. From interviews with residents and visits to the home the author drafted the floor plan of the inward facing home pictured in Figure 6 (See Figure 7). The plan labels the areas that served as the living space for an extended family. Two inner courtyards or patios adorned with tropical plants and flowers dominate the space. Sleeping and leisure areas border the residence's northern end. Kitchen, washing and servants quarters (Room 7) are found on the opposite end of the patio. The home housed parents and their married children and their children. One live-in house workers resided in the home and a cook and washer woman were contracted on occasion. The family did the bulk of their socializing in their homes, at work or in the homes of friends and family.

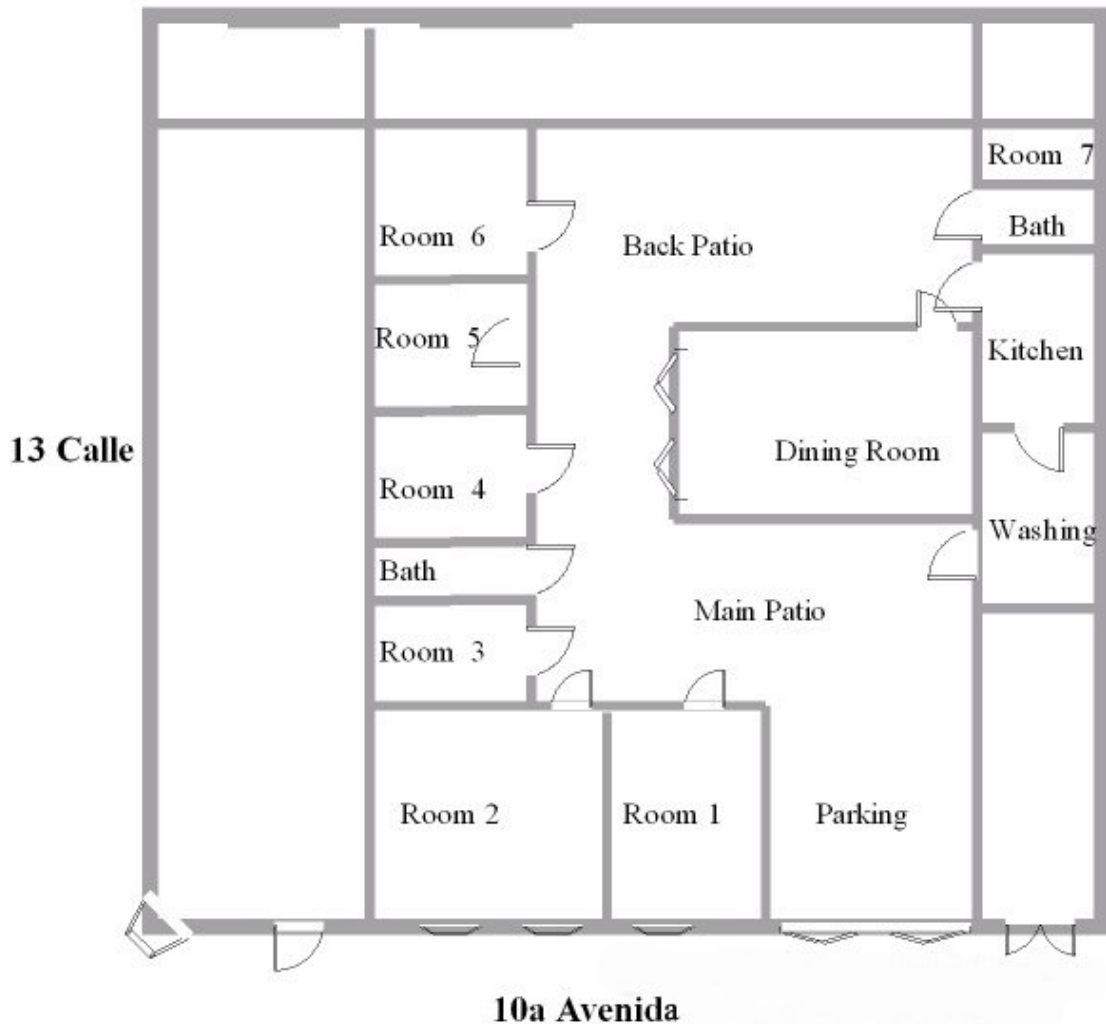


Figure 7- Zone 1: Colonial-type Home Floor Plan. Unlabelled Areas were part of the original home. These areas were subdivided by the owner and made into separate offices and homes. Pictorial view shows the original facade of the home facing 10a Avenue.

A concern with security and the demarcation of private space developed over time in Guatemala City as is shown in the featured home. According to residents of this home, the window grates are original to the home and were meant to dissuade intruders. While it is possible that the design of the solid façade (see Figure 6) where reinforced doors and windows shut out street life from inner courtyards and garages reflects a cultural attitude towards the maintenance of a strict division between private and public space; the presence of wrought iron grating, razor and chicken wires on roof edges and multiple padlocks also reflects an interest in keeping intruders out of the home. Despite the solid façade and the building's security features, residents report intrusion on more than one occasion. Robberies took place when individuals gained access from rooftops into the residence's two inner courtyards. Access to the rooftops was ironically gained by climbing the wrought iron window grating of the home's windows.



Figure 8- Zone 1: Ornate Window (Ground Floor) Wrought Iron Treatment on Traditional Colonial Type Home.

The security measures used in buildings of the colonial-type vary. In some cases, the designs of fortifications to the older colonial-type homes are not dictated solely by practical considerations. As Figure 8 shows that window grating, sometimes added after the home was built, can be very ornate with carefully chosen geometric designs that enhance the façade though it may not serve to secure the building.

In other examples, possible entry points to the building are left unsecured as in the balcony window shown in Figure 9.



Figure 9- Zone 1: Second Floor Window with Balcony. No Security Treatment on Colonial Type Home.

While there does not seem to be an overt concern with forced entry in this case, the closed opaque balcony window still reflects a separation of the private and public space

where, in theory, onlookers from the street are unable to catch a glimpse into the resident's life-style.

At the time this home was built and because of Guatemala's socially-stratified society, the location of the residence and the resident's attention to security details were signs of social status (Gellert and Pinto Soria 1990). Today, home location and care continue to signal the resident's status. An unsecured home such as the one in Figure 6 does not reflect the resident's confidence on the character of his fellow city dweller, instead it is most commonly interpreted as evidence of the undesirability of the resident's material possessions.

Lack of security measures put together with the home's location in the hustle and bustle of the city core and the balcony's state of disrepair and haphazard wiring indicates to the Guatemalan reader that the resident's class status is probably in decline.



Figure 10- Zone 1: (From Left to Right) Modernized Metal Grate Door with Electric Lock on Colonial Type Home, Hard Wood Fold-out Door in Colonial Type Home, Hard Wood Entry Door in Colonial Type Home.

As the in-depth example discussed in Figures 6 and 7 shows, many Zone 1 colonial-type homes have been extensively renovated. Figure 10 shows, some buildings have been outfitted by modern security measures such as electric locks and metal doors. When seen side by side with an older set of doors, it is possible to see continuity in that both are

designed to effectively keep the insides of residences detached from street life in as much as they express a need to secure the home.

7. High Security and Class:

Before embarking on an analysis of facades designed with strict security images, it is important to note that there is evidence that projecting a “security image” is not at the forefront for all urban core residents. Although rare in occurrence, there are examples of homes, such as the one featured in Figure 8, where residents have chosen greenery and bush over metal and concrete to demarcate their private space. Though windows and door of the home are protected with unimposing metal grates, trees, shrubs, rock edging and a minimal camouflaged fence overpower this residence’s façade. Forced entry into this residence would still pose a challenge to a potential intruder.



Figure 11- Zone 2: Simple Wire Fence with Overgrown Vegetation Shields a House with Minimal Metal Window Grates. This residence is located along 11th Avenue north of Calle Marti (see Map of Zone 2).

Choosing to emphasize this aesthetic over the image of impenetrability depicted by most homes of Zone 1 and 2 may be a factor of this home’s location in the northern outskirts of Zone 2 on a relatively isolated narrow projection of land into the ravine that fixes the city’s northern edge. North of Calle Marti with minimal foot and mostly local car traffic,

it is possible that this neighbourhood might not be subjected to theft and home invasion to the same degree as other parts of Zone 1 and 2. In general the homes in this part of Zone 2 tend to follow the suburban North American pattern of some open air front and back yard space instead of the enclosed colonial courtyard design found in Zone 1 and other parts of Zone 2. Yet the minimization of outward signs of anti-theft protection may just be a factor of individual preferences as this part of Zone 2 is also the location of the fortress homes featured in Figures 25 and 26.



Figure 12- Zone 2: Architectural Design Minimizes Security Breach. Small Simple Wire Fence Separates the House and Yard from Sidewalk. This residence is located along 11th Avenue north of Calle Marti (see Map of Zone 2).

Another version of minimal protection and sidewalk-yard division is highlighted in Figure 11. This home shows the shortest fence I found in my travels through Zone 1 and 2. It is also unique in that it allows the onlooker full visual access into the well tended front garden.

Despite its open yard, the home is well secured from trespassers by virtue of its architectural design. Windowpanes are too small for intrusion and bordered by concrete and metal. The bulk of the building's frontage is cement and stone with small geometric windows in a repetitive pattern. The entry door, unclear in this view, is made of metal.



Figure 13- Zone 2: Metal Entry and Garage Doors with Wrought Iron Embellishment.



Figure 14- Zone 2: Grated Metal Entry Door with Grated Safety Glass Sides and Overhang.

The most common residential building façade in Zone 2—particularly in the more modest income areas to the south of Calle Marti (see Map of Zone 2)— is the solid concrete façade with a metal garage and entry door . This home façade hides an inward facing residence if similar interior design to the colonial-type home discussed earlier. In terms of intruder deterrence, occlusion of private space and controlled interaction, this home design is most practical as it leaves little room for forced or unexpected entry. The façade leaves only room for an uneven sidewalk crosscut with driveways approximately 3 feet wide. Figures 13 to 17 show different examples of this type of façade. In some instances, the front has no windows (Figures 13 and 15). Where windows have been installed in the front of the building, there are often frosted (Figure 14) and covered with a metal grate (Figures 16 and 17).



Figure 15- Zone 2: Hardwood Inlay Adorns Geometric Design of Metal Door Façade.



Figure 16- Zone 2: Metal Entry and Garage Door with Grated Centre Glass Embellishments.



Figure 17- Zone 1: 1970s Style Metal Doors and Wrought Iron Window Grates on Decaying Façade.

In cases where only a garage door exists (Figure 17) one of the articulations of the sliding garage door serves as an entry door (far right door). Almost all entry doors have a secure system that allows for residents to look out of their entry door without needing to open the door. As in Figures 14 and 16, the glass on one entry door panel swings in so that the person on the inside can assess whether to let someone without the vulnerability brought about by an open door.

In addition to the nature of the solid façade, most of these homes show security concerns in other ways. Figures 15-17 all show electric meters behind grates and Figures 14 and 15 show stickers that prove they have an installed alarm system or security firm surveillance. Yet despite the practicality of the solid façade for the purposes of security there seems to be some effort to personalize the buildings with metal on metal ornamentation, wood inlay on metal doors or unique window designs.



Figure 18- Zone1 and 2: Door Bell Security Grates (Left), Electric Meter (Right Top and Middle), and Drain Security (Right Bottom).

What is remarkable about the efforts made to secure private property that must be located on the façade of the residence is that there is little profit and conversely little loss from the theft of such items. Are poor Guatemalans so desperate that stealing a 10 U.S. dollar doorbell is worth the risk of being caught and punished for its theft? Are there organized gangs of electric meter counter thieves? Is entry into a home at all probable through a 15cmx15cm rainwater drain? I suggest that to project an image of properly protected

home, the details— doorbells, electric meters, and grates— must be secured behind metal grates. Protecting the details with flimsy locks and sturdy wrought iron is a statement about the value residents place on their belongings and their perception of the character of outsiders that are imagined to loiter in city streets.

8. Wiring and Imaginings of Security



Figure 19- Zone 2: Chicken Wire and Tight Wrought Iron Window Grates on Second Floor Window and Balcony Area.



Figure 20- Zone 2: Wrought Iron Spike Fence on Second Floor Roof.

The injury potential of security wire is a powerful and often repeated image of aggression found in Guatemalan residences and businesses. Razor wire is now prevalent as the primary form of rooftop security for apartment buildings, new and renovated homes and businesses throughout Guatemala City. Replacing the chicken wire, metal spike and crushed glass combinations of the past, razor wire predominates on the urban skyline (Figures 19 and 20). Unlike chicken wire (metal wiring with regular star-shaped spikes) and metal spikes, razor wire threatens injury not only from the sharpness of its stainless blades but also from the unleashing of precariously contained tension of the touch sensitive wire loops. As with home frontage, razor wire is used, embellished and reinforced in a number of ways. There are examples of residents attempting to minimize the severity of the razor's image with greenery as in Figure 21. In most cases, there is evidence that razor wire was added to existing chicken wire as in Figure 21 (see lower and upper ends of razor wire loops). As if this threat were not enough deterrent, electrified wire is sometimes hooked up to razor wire loops to dissuade the intruder brave enough to tackle the tension of the razor wire loop (See Figure 22).



Figure 21- Zone 2: Razor and Chicken Wire Combination with Greenery Embelishment.

Figure 22- Zone 2: Electrified Razor and Chicken Wire Combination with Double Layered Wrought Iron Second Floor Windows.





Figure 23- Zone 1: A Medley of Razor Wire Protecting Adjoining Roof-tops.

In instances where height puts the building at a disadvantage, razor wire loops are strung up and stacked 2-3 loops high (Figure 23). Often razor wire is found dividing adjoining rooftops. When asked, residents indicated that a neighbour's poor security could impinge on their ability to have an "impenetrable" or "unbothered" home ("una casa donde nadie se meta").

Wiring as a symbol of security does double duty as it stands both for the resident's power to threaten/injure outsiders while also representing the protection-worthiness of the resident's home. Following the pattern set by the impenetrability of the solid façade, security wiring adds the threat of violence to uninvited public-private encounters. In most cases, razor wire stands as an imposing reminder of the potential repercussions of an unauthorized entry as its sharp edges glisten in the blue sky (Figure 1).

9. Ultimate Expressions of Social Status: The Fortress Home



Figure 24- Zone 2: Wrought Iron Fortress Home in Pink.



Figure 25- Zone 2: Stone, Wrought Iron Metal Fortress Home.

Unnecessary expenditure on security paraphernalia expresses social status because it is a display of conspicuous consumption. Fortress homes are characterized by ostentatious displays of security measures to such degrees of excess that it is possible to see efforts in triplicate to bar access to an intruder entryway that was only remotely probable. These residents have chosen to display their efforts to keep intruders out instead of adopting the most common approach of the solid facade— limiting the public’s view of the inner space. Both homes shown here are located in an affluent neck of land on 11th Avenue a few streets to the north of Calle Marti in Zone 2.

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