

The City of Fury: Affordable housing in uncertain and informal Buenos Aires

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Summary

This thesis is a study of the relationship between uncertainty, informality, urban planning and housing access. Based on case studies in Buenos Aires, Argentina, it identifies and analyses different dimensions of uncertainty in informal settlements and shantytowns. The analysis concerns their impact on shelter access and affordability for marginalised communities, as well as the implications for the top-down and bottom-up planning practices in these areas.

The theoretical grounding of the thesis is based on a literature review outlining a disconnect between theory and practice and an insufficient conceptualisation of uncertainties in informal urban settings. Per definition, urban planning is meant to act upon the future and guide development through formal laws and regulations that are supposed to reduce uncertainty and informality. A contemporary reality of scarcities, unfolding crises, uncertainties, as well as ever increasing social, economic, environmental and political inequality impedes such planning activity. Uncertainty and informal development are more than just challenges to planning; they are also produced by the act of planning itself. In uncertain conditions, marginalised communities who cannot afford or are otherwise excluded from the formal housing market, access shelter through informal and often illegal strategies. This thesis explores these phenomena and supports an emerging paradigm in planning and housing provision that embraces uncertainty and informality.

Buenos Aires was selected as a place of study because of the unique combination of recurring economic crises and the normalisation of informal housing and employment as a strategy to deal with such problems. In this study, a distinction between centrally located shantytowns and suburban or peripheral informal settlements is made. The empirical research was conducted at two scales: at the metropolitan region and in individual settlements. Three areas were selected as case settlements: shantytown Villa 31, informal settlement Costa Esperanza and a contested land occupation in Guernica.

This study was guided by three research questions: first, How is uncertainty experienced in informal settlements and shantytowns in Buenos Aires?; second, How do different uncertainties impact the planning and development of these settlements?; and third, How can the practice of urban planning respond more effectively to conditions of high uncertainty and informality?

Urban ethnography was applied as a general methodological approach. Due to the unexpected outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, on-site fieldwork was supplemented with data collected remotely from Norway. The main research methods included: face-to-face and online interviews, focus groups, site visits and transect walks, photography and analysis of satellite images, secondary documents and literature. The analytical approach was inspired by and adapted from thematic analysis and process tracing. This was executed through generating narratives for each case study area and performing several rounds of coding before and after the case narratives were drafted.

The thesis is structured into 12 chapters. The first four chapters lay out the theoretical and analytical grounding, methodological considerations, as well as the context of the study. This is followed by five narrative case chapters, where the first two outline the development of shantytowns and informal settlements at the metropolitan scale, and the other three concern each of the case settlements. The final chapters of the thesis bring the cases together by identifying

the types of uncertainties that impact the case settlements, and by discussing the meaning of these uncertainties for the practice of planning in informal settings in Argentina more widely.

The findings support the idea that, as the practice of urban planning is meant to respond to uncertainties and formalise informalities, it often does the opposite: magnifying the existing and creating new uncertainties and informalities. In short, informal practices develop when planners have little to no control over the planning process, lack sufficient resources or disagree over goals and means of planning. In this study, uncertainties related to insecure tenure, economic instability and political decision-making appear to be experienced as more challenging to communities than health, safety and environmental risks and crises. Even the Covid-19 pandemic and the climate change have not made a meaningful difference to this order of priorities.

Since tenure uncertainty was identified as the most urgent risk or problem, the way in which it has been changing across time in the different settlements, was the primary focus of the empirical analysis. It is shown how the bottom-up planning initiatives led by local community leaders and activists are often motivated by the fact that engagement with or imitation of formal planning regulations and codes usually increase the perceived tenure security for residents in these settlements. If and when security from eviction is achieved, however, or when households who occupy these lands do not aspire to stay in these areas in the long-term, planning efforts might be ignored or even rejected. In such situations they may refocus their priorities on livelihood strategies and savings. The thesis also documents the role of community leaders as political actors and de facto planners, who attempt to address tenure and economic insecurity in their areas of influence.

The author argues that architects, planners and policymakers can learn from informal planning processes. The organising capacities and contingent reactions, which the communities mobilise against uncertainty and crises are often underestimated or not sufficiently communicated to planning practitioners. Planning cannot be an antidote for uncertainty and informality if it does not engage with these phenomena in a manner that is meaningful to communities. As for the implications of the study for urban theory in the Global South, this thesis rejects the notion that uncertainty is a state of nature causing urban informality. Instead, researchers and practitioners should be encouraged to investigate the contextual experiences of uncertainty and how they impact the quality of life for local communities. Participation and community empowerment should be central in such planning efforts.

The final part of the thesis is a list of policy recommendations for the different levels of government in Argentina and Buenos Aires. Concrete ideas and measures are proposed to enable state agencies, academic institutions and urban planning practitioners to better recognize and address the most pressing uncertainties and informalities. This is done conscious of the contextual differences between urban areas, thus rejecting the idea of the universality of planning solutions and importing best practices from the Global North or other faraway places, which have often done more harm than good.

Resumen en español

Esta tesis estudia las relaciones que existen entre la incertidumbre, la informalidad, la planificación urbana y el acceso a la vivienda. Se han identificado y analizado las diferentes dimensiones de la incertidumbre en asentamientos informales y villas, considerando estudios de caso de Buenos Aires, Argentina. El análisis aborda el impacto de la misma en el acceso a la vivienda y la asequibilidad de las comunidades marginalizadas, así como las implicaciones para las prácticas de planificación de arriba hacia abajo y de abajo hacia arriba en estos barrios.

A partir de una revisión de la literatura existente se ha identificado una desconexión entre la teoría y la práctica, así como una débil conceptualización de las incertidumbres que existen en sectores urbanos informales. Por definición, la planificación urbana está destinada a actuar sobre el futuro y guiar el desarrollo urbano, a través de leyes y reglamentos formales, reduciendo supuestamente los niveles de incertidumbre y la informalidad. Sin embargo, la realidad contemporánea de escasez, creciente crisis, y aumento de desigualdad social, económica, ambiental y política, limita la actividad de planificación. La incertidumbre y el desarrollo informal son mucho más que solo desafíos para la planificación; también son un producto del acto mismo de planificar. En condiciones inciertas, las comunidades marginales que no tienen un ingreso suficiente o han quedado excluidas del mercado inmobiliario formal, acceden a la vivienda a través de estrategias informales y en muchos casos ilegales. Esta tesis explora estos fenómenos y apoya un paradigma emergente en la planificación y provisión de vivienda que contempla la incertidumbre y la informalidad.

Buenos Aires fue seleccionada como lugar de estudio debido a la combinación única de crisis económicas recurrentes y la normalización de vivienda y empleo informal como una estrategia para enfrentar estos problemas. En este estudio, se hace una distinción entre las villas ubicadas cerca del centro de la ciudad y los asentamientos informales en zonas suburbanas o periféricas. La investigación empírica se realizó en dos escalas: considerando la región metropolitana y el barrio. Se seleccionaron tres áreas como asentamientos de casos: la Villa 31, el asentamiento informal Costa Esperanza y la ocupación de tierras disputada en Guernica.

Tres preguntas de investigación han guiado este estudio: primero, ¿Cómo se vive la incertidumbre en los asentamientos informales y villas de Buenos Aires?; segundo ¿Cómo las diferentes incertidumbres impactan a la planificación y el desarrollo de aquellos asentamientos?; y tercero ¿Cómo puede la práctica de la planificación urbana responder de manera más efectiva a condiciones de alta incertidumbre e informalidad?

El enfoque metodológico ha estado marcado por la etnografía urbana. Debido al contexto inesperado de la pandemia originada por el Covid-19, el trabajo de campo in situ ha sido complementado con la recopilación de datos de forma remota desde Noruega. Los principales métodos de investigación incluyeron: entrevistas presenciales y en línea, grupos focales, visitas al sitio y caminatas participativas, fotografías, así como el análisis de imágenes de satélite, documentos secundarios y literatura de referencia. El enfoque analítico adoptó los procesos de análisis temático y el rastreo de procesos. Esto se ejecutó mediante la generación de narrativas para cada área del estudio de caso y la realización de varias rondas de codificación, tanto antes como después de construir las narrativas.

La tesis está estructurada en 12 capítulos. Los primeros cuatro capítulos establecen la base teórica y analítica, las consideraciones metodológicas y el contexto del estudio. En los siguientes cinco capítulos se presentan las narrativas

de los estudios de caso, donde los dos primeros describen el desarrollo de las villas y los asentamientos informales a nivel metropolitano, y los otros tres se refieren a cada uno de los asentamientos elegidos. Los capítulos finales de la tesis reúnen los casos identificando los tipos de incertidumbres con más impacto en los asentamientos estudiados y discutiendo el significado de estas incertidumbres para la práctica de la planificación en sectores informales en Argentina más amplio.

Los hallazgos respaldan la idea de que, dado que la práctica de la planificación urbana tiene como objetivo responder a las incertidumbres y formalizar las informalidades, muchas veces ocurre lo contrario: magnifica las incertidumbres e informalidades existentes y crea nuevas. En resumen, las prácticas informales se desarrollan cuando los planificadores tienen poco o ningún control sobre el proceso de planificación, carecen de recursos suficientes o no están de acuerdo sobre los objetivos y las medidas de planificación. En este estudio, las incertidumbres que han aparecido vinculadas con la inseguridad de tenencia, la inestabilidad económica y la toma de decisiones políticas parecen ser más desafiantes para las comunidades que los riesgos y emergencias de salud, seguridad y medio ambiente. Incluso la pandemia de Covid-19 y el cambio climático no han marcado una diferencia significativa en este orden de prioridades.

Dado que la incertidumbre sobre la tenencia fue identificada como el riesgo o problema más urgente, la forma en que ha ido cambiando a lo largo del tiempo en los diferentes asentamientos fue el enfoque principal del análisis empírico. Las iniciativas de planificación dirigidas por los referentes barriales y activistas locales de abajo hacia arriba a menudo están motivadas por que la imitación de las normas y códigos de planificación formales tienden a aumentar la percepción de seguridad en la tenencia de los residentes en estos asentamientos. Sin embargo, los esfuerzos de planificación urbana pueden ser ignorados o hasta rechazados, cuando se logre las garantías de la seguridad contra el desalojo, o cuando los hogares que ocupan determinadas tierras no aspiren a permanecer en ellas a largo plazo. En tales situaciones, se ha identificado que estas familias suelen reenfocar sus prioridades en estrategias económicas y ahorros. La tesis también documenta el papel de los líderes comunitarios como actores políticos y planificadores urbanos, que intentan abordar las inseguridades económicas y de tenencia en sus áreas de influencia.

El autor argumenta que los arquitectos, planificadores y legisladores pueden aprender de los procesos de planificación informal. Las capacidades organizativas y las reacciones contingentes que las comunidades movilizan contra la incertidumbre y las crisis, muchas veces están subestimadas, o no se comunican lo suficiente a los profesionales del urbanismo. La planificación no puede ser un antídoto para la incertidumbre y la informalidad si no se involucra con estos fenómenos de una manera que sea significativa para las comunidades. En cuanto a las implicaciones del estudio para la teoría urbana en el Sur Global, esta tesis rechaza la noción de que la incertidumbre sea un estado de la naturaleza que cause la informalidad urbana. En cambio, se debe alentar a los investigadores y profesionales a averiguar las experiencias contextuales de incertidumbre y cómo estas afectan la calidad de vida de las comunidades locales. La participación y el empoderamiento de la comunidad deben ser centrales en dichos esfuerzos de planificación.

La parte final de la tesis contiene una lista de recomendaciones de políticas públicas para los diferentes niveles del gobierno en Argentina y Buenos Aires. Se proponen ideas y medidas concretas para permitir que agencias estatales, instituciones académicas y urbanistas reconozcan, para así abordar mejor las incertidumbres e informalidades más apremiantes. Esto se realiza teniendo en cuenta las diferencias contextuales entre las áreas urbanas consideradas, rechazando así la idea de la universalidad de las soluciones de planificación.

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

ACIJ – Civil Association for Equality and Justice – *Asociación Civil por la Igualdad y la Justicia*

AMBA – Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area – *Área Metropolitana de Buenos Aires*

BID – Inter-American Development Bank – *Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo*

CAB – Neighbourhood Service Centre – *Centro de Atención Barrial*

CABA – Autonomous City of Buenos Aires – *Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires*

CEAMSE – Ecological Coordination of the Metropolitan Area State Property – *Coordinación Ecológica Área Metropolitana Sociedad del Estado*

CEDEL – Centre for Entrepreneurship and Local Development – *Centro de Desarrollo Emprendedor y Laboral*

CGP – Participatory Management Council – *Consejo de Gestión Participativa*

CIBA – Coordinator of Tenants of Buenos Aires – *Coordinadora de Inquilinos de Buenos Aires*

Covid-19 – Coronavirus disease 2019 – *Enfermedad por coronavirus de 2019*

CTEP – Confederation of Workers of the Popular Economy – *Confederación de Trabajadores de la Economía Popular*

EDENOR – Northern Distribution and Commercialization Company – *Empresa Distribuidora y Comercializadora Norte*

FADU – Faculty of Architecture, Design and Urbanism (University of Buenos Aires) – *Facultad de Arquitectura, Diseño y Urbanismo (Universidad de Buenos Aires)*

FdT – Everyone's Front – *Frente de Todos*

FOTIVBA – Forum of Organisations of Land, Infrastructure and Housing of the Province of Buenos Aires – *Foro de Organizaciones de Tierra, Infraestructura y Vivienda de la Provincia de Buenos Aires*

GBA – Greater Buenos Aires – *Gran Buenos Aires*

GCBA – Government of the City of Buenos Aires – *Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires*

GIS – Geographic Information System – *Sistema de Información Geográfica*

IDUAR – Institute of Urban, Environmental and Regional Development (Moreno municipality) – *Instituto de Desarrollo Urbano, Ambiental y Regional (Municipalidad de Moreno)*

IGN – National Geographic Institute of Argentina – *Instituto Geográfico Nacional de la República Argentina*

INDEC – National Institute of Statistics and Census of Argentina – *Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos de la República Argentina*

IVC – City of Buenos Aires Housing Institute – *Instituto de Vivienda de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires*

JxC – Together for Change – *Juntos por el Cambio*

MOI – Movement of Occupants and Tenants – *Movimiento de Ocupantes e Inquilinos*

NGO – Non-governmental organisation – *Organización no gubernamental*

NHT – Transitory Housing Nuclei – *Núcleos Habitacionales Transitorios*

NSD – Norwegian Centre for Research Data – *Autoridad Noruega de Protección de Datos*

OPISU – Provincial Organisation for Social and Urban Integration – *Organismo Provincial de Integración Social y Urbana*

PAV – Program of Self-Management of Housing – *Programa de Autogestión para la Vivienda*

PBA – Province of Buenos Aires – *Provincia de Buenos Aires*
PJ – Justicialist Party – *Partido Justicialista*
PRO – Republican Proposal – *Propuesta Republicana*
PROCREAR – Bicentennial Argentinian Credit Programme for Single Family Housing – *Programa de Crédito Argentino del Bicentenario para la Vivienda Única Familiar*
PROMEBA – Neighbourhood Improvement Programme – *Programa de Mejoramiento Barrial*
RENABAP – National Registry of Informal Settlements – *Registro Nacional de Barrios Populares*
SAP – Strategic Action Planning – *Planificación de Acción Estratégica*
SECISYU – Secretary of Social and Urban Integration – *Secretaría de Integración Social y Urbana*
UCR – Radical Civic Union – *Unión Cívica Radical*
UGIS – Unit for Management and Social Intervention – *Unidad de Gestión e Intervención Social*
UN-Habitat – United Nations Human Settlements Programme – *Programa de las Naciones Unidas para los Asentamientos Humanos*
UPE – Unit of Special Projects – *Unidad de Proyectos Especiales*
USD – United States Dollar – *Dólar estadounidense*
UTEP – Union of Workers of the Popular Economy – *Unión de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras de la Economía Popular*
WB – World Bank – *Banco Mundial*

All photographs were taken by the author unless otherwise indicated.

*Me verás volar
Por la ciudad de la furia
Donde nadie sabe de mí
Y yo soy parte de todos
Nada cambiará
Con un aviso de curva
En sus caras veo el temor
Ya no hay fábulas en la ciudad de la furia*

You will see me flying
Over the city of fury
Where no one knows about me
And I am part of everyone
Nothing will change
Even with a warning of a turn
I see fear on their faces
There are no more stories in the city of fury

*Me verás caer
Como un ave de presa
Me verás caer
Sobre terrazas desiertas
Te desnudaré
Por las calles azules
Me refugiare
Antes que todos despierten*

You will see me diving
Like a bird of prey
You will see me diving
Over deserted terraces
I will undress you
By the blue streets
I will take refuge
Before everyone wakes up

*Me dejarás dormir al amanecer
Entre tus piernas
Entre tus piernas
Sabrás ocultarme bien y desaparecer
Entre la niebla
Entre la niebla
Un hombre alado extraña la tierra*

You will let me sleep at dawn
Between your legs
Between your legs
You will know how to hide me well and make me disappear
Amidst the mist
Amidst the mist
A winged man misses the land

*Me veras volar
Por la ciudad de la furia
Donde nadie sabe de mí
Y yo soy parte de todos
Con la luz del sol
Se derriten mis alas
Solo encuentro en la oscuridad
Lo que me une con la ciudad de la furia*

You will see me flying
Over the city of fury
Where no one knows about me
And I am part of everyone
With the sunlight
My wings melt
Only in the darkness I can find
What binds me with the city of fury

*Me verás caer
Como una flecha salvaje
Me verás caer
Entre vuelos fugaces
Buenos Aires se ve
Tan susceptible
Ese destino de furia es
Lo que en sus caras persiste*

You will see me falling
Like a wild arrow
You will see me falling
Between fleeting flights
Buenos Aires looks
So vulnerable
It is the fate of fury
What persists in their faces

*Me dejarás dormir al amanecer
Entre tus piernas
Entre tus piernas
Sabrás ocultarme bien y desaparecer
Entre la niebla
Entre la niebla
Un hombre alado prefiere la noche*

You will let me sleep at dawn
Between your legs
Between your legs
You will know how to hide me well and make me disappear
Amidst the mist
Amidst the mist
A winged man prefers the night

*Me verás volver
Me verás volver...*

You will see me come back
You will see me come back...

– from Soda Stereo song *En la Ciudad de la Furia* (In the City of Fury)
by Gustavo Cerati (1989)

1. Introduction

As an experience, thinking about how the reactions to the crises have been, they were not that serious either. When they are seen on TV they seem more serious, like an earthquake. Suddenly the next day you wake up and it continues. One president resigns, another resigns, I don't know... I'm going to have breakfast at a bar anyway. Maybe you got used to living with uncertainty. Gives us freedom too. (Interview 3).

One of the first memories I have of Argentina (besides the white and sky blue stripes on the jerseys of their national football team) are the images of the massive riots in Buenos Aires at the end of 2001, which I saw on the TV. Some weeks later, the same news commentators announced that the Argentinian government defaulted on its foreign debt. To help people comprehend what was happening, they said that the situation was like 'a country going bankrupt'. 'What does it mean? How can a country go bankrupt?' – I thought. 'Does it mean that there will be no more state? No more institutions? That there will be total anarchy and everyone could do whatever they want? Where will people live and how will they earn their money?' In the following years, Argentina disappeared from the mainstream news once again. Now I understand that this happened largely because the media prefers to focus on dramatic and shocking events, rather than stories of growth or recovery.

The information I gathered about Argentina and Buenos Aires after I started studying urbanism about a decade later, was rather contradictory. The country had experienced multiple deep crises, yet it was among the most developed in the region. Argentina has received a large number of economic migrants from neighbouring countries, but Argentinians themselves dream about new opportunities in Europe or North America. The beauty of Buenos Aires was compared to that of Paris or Madrid, but the city also has a large number of makeshift houses in informal settlements, like the ones we have seen in the documentary films about Diego Maradona's childhood.

As my curiosity about Argentina has extended to cover popular culture and art, I discovered how the sensation of crisis was normalised as part of everyday life experience. The lyrics of *En la Ciudad de la Furia* quoted at the beginning show this very well. Stylised in a gothic rock genre, the song was written in 1989, when inflation surpassed 3,000% and the banking sector almost collapsed. In what became one of the unofficial anthems of Buenos Aires, the main character describes himself as 'one of many' winged people flying over the 'furious', 'vulnerable' and unpredictable city 'like a bird of prey'. He is constantly fighting for survival, without knowing what the future brings, but at the end of the day, he will 'find refuge', hidden 'between the legs' of Buenos Aires. The song presents the city as an uncertain place where falling and rising again is part of the everyday, but eventually everyone will find somewhere to sleep safely. These perhaps contrasting sensations were further reinforced during my first conversations with Argentinians. For example, the quote which starts this chapter tells us about how people in Buenos Aires not only got used to uncertainty, but have learned how to cope with it so that they can still continue their daily errands as they did before, and make the best of the uncertain conditions.



Figure 1. Artwork “The future is now” in Buenos Aires. Author unknown.

Others went even further and turned the situation into comedies and jokes. The paradoxical conditions of crisis and hyperinflation, as well as the rather unexpected, but strangely logical coping strategies, became a common topic in movies, theatre plays, comic books and stand-up comedy acts. Many of these works recall histories about housing or agricultural cooperatives and ‘recovered enterprises’, which emerged as a popular reaction to the crises and series of bankruptcies which I saw years earlier on TV. It somehow started to make sense to me that coping with uncertainty had to do with contingent and informal actions of a proactive civil society, which is constantly reminded to be aware and look for opportunities in what otherwise might seem like hopeless situations.

However, as I continued reading, watching and listening, I ended up with more questions than answers; and this is how I came up with the idea of conducting the research which is summarised in this thesis. I decided to focus in particular on urban planning as a way to provide housing, because I presume that the uncertainty regarding where to live and the struggle to secure access to affordable shelter in a longer perspective must be among the most uncomfortable feelings a human being might experience.

Problem statement

Buenos Aires turned out to be a very interesting place to study how urban dwellers deal with crisis or unexpected circumstances, for many reasons. The ‘everydayness’ of crisis and emergency has been normalised not only in the imagination of Argentinians, but also in laws and policies, including those that concern housing and urban development.

While the term emergency assumes a temporary and extraordinary situation, in Argentina it has practically become a permanent condition. The state of housing emergency has been declared in different documents and laws over the last four decades. The most notable ones order ‘temporary’ suspensions of evictions of vulnerable families. For example, Law 1408 from 2004, which protects those who illegally occupy publicly owned land in Buenos Aires was modified and extended in 2007, 2008 and again in 2010. Similarly, Law 27.453 from 2018, which suspended evictions in over 4,400 selected vulnerable areas in the country was extended in 2022 for ten more years. The most radical was Decree 320 from March 2020, which suspended all evictions everywhere in the country during the Covid-19 pandemic. Originally approved as a measure lasting three months, Decree 320 has been extended for an additional year. For many activists this is not enough. Their demands go beyond extending the protections of vulnerable households in more elaborated housing emergency laws, and include adding urban and environmental emergencies,

which recognise the risks and challenges to living quality, insufficient green spaces and natural hazards (Baldiviezo & Koutsovitis, 2022c).

The questions I wanted to explore concern housing policy and access strategies in the critical socio-economic conditions that define the everyday in Buenos Aires. In such an uncertain context, is housing considered as a basic right or an investment? What role does housing play for those most vulnerable to economic changes? What are their different strategies to access housing they can afford? How do people relate to money and financial capital, when it is impossible to predict income and economic prospects?

What I believe makes this case special is that the history of economic turbulence in Argentina has shaped a rather different understanding of the role of money in one's life. It is a country where people have more faith in football idols and astrology than in their own currency, the economy and financial institutions. Yet, housing and property markets in Buenos Aires are regulated by financial systems similar to those operating in most other countries in the world.

I argue, therefore, that Argentina should not be seen as an isolated extreme case and that there are many things other places can learn from studying what happens there. Buenos Aires has many of the characteristics of cities in both the Global South and Global North, which my readers might find relevant regardless of where they are from. The Buenos Aires case might also be important considering that the world as a whole is becoming more uncertain, as the title of the most recent Human Development Report from 2022 suggests: "Uncertain Times, Unsettled Lives: Shaping our Future in a Transforming World" (UNDP, 2022). Uncertainty is further globalised through the outcomes of such recent events as the Covid-19 pandemic (which, by the way, was nowhere near the horizon when I started this research) and the economic impacts of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In this sense, we might speculate that in the future, more places in the rest of the world will become more like Argentina, rather than the other way around.

The fact that economic development and investment prospects are difficult to predict is not the problem in Argentina alone. Philip E. Tetlock, Professor of Management and Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania has been studying predictions of the (so-called) experts in economy and political science for over three decades and concluded that on average, these predictions are only a bit better than a coin flip (Tetlock, 2005) and slightly better than that of the general population (Tetlock & Gardner, 2015). This means that even qualified economists are regularly surprised by crises and economic shocks. Why, then, should we believe and trust that these experts know better about what is best for us? How can we be certain that their models and forecasts ensure the stability and security of our most important life-long investments and assets, such as housing?

Urban planning, just like economic planning or all other types of planning, is meant to reduce the unknown. However, there are reasons to believe that the profession of urban planning struggles to cope with uncertainty in cities. Its noble goal—to make cities good places to live for everyone—is constantly impeded by the brutal reality of scarcities, crises, uncertainties, and increasing social, economic, environmental and political inequalities. While some might consider their cities as good places to live, an increasing number of people are excluded from the spaces and opportunities they offer, leading to more informal and sometimes illegal development that materialises in substandard housing conditions.

In 2015, the International Society of City and Regional Planners (ISOCARP) published the sixth edition of its International Manual of Planning Practice, in which members of the organisation and their networks performed a comprehensive survey of the state of the urban planning profession in 135 countries (Ryser & Franchini, 2015). The main message was clear: although planning approaches varied across the globe, all governments to some extent fail to address the complex realities of cities and the environment. In the conclusions, the editors suggest that

planning needs to move from its premise to create certainty and long term stability and accept its role as active partner in coping with uncertainty. (p. 73).

Another collaborative study on the state of contemporary city planning, “The Quito Papers”, communicates the same message (Sennett et al., 2018). The publication accompanied the United Nations’ New Urban Agenda, adopted in 2016, and gathered ideas of some of the leading thinkers about how to achieve a better future for our cities. The Quito Papers and the UN urban programmes overall criticise the rigidity of modern architecture and planning, and call for a renewal of the profession. “Unlike the temporal and spatial certainties of past models”, the authors claim,

the emerging discourse on cities acknowledges experience, temporality and surprise as central to the choreography of city-making. (p. xii).

These proposals suggest a new paradigm in planning and housing provision, one that embraces uncertainty and informality, in such a way that no matter what happens in financial markets, everyone would have a safe home to come back to, or a local bar to eat breakfast in. However, do we have an idea about how this could be achieved and who takes the leading role? Does embracing uncertainty and informality give urban planners a new mission to relate to, or should we let the city, as Kayatekin (2020) claimed, “shape itself”?

My research is an attempt to address this call for new planning paradigms. I chose Buenos Aires as a case due to its chronic condition of uncertainty, and I decided to focus specifically on housing in informal settlements, because these areas are home to the most vulnerable population and represent living conditions that may arguably differ the most from the more established and planned neighbourhoods. I wanted to explore how uncertainty affects access to affordable housing in Buenos Aires, and study the effectiveness of the informal housing strategies, which emerged outside of the official planning frameworks and housing policies. In my study, I will make a contextual distinction between informal settlements and shantytowns, which will first be explained in chapter 4. I worked both at the metropolitan and neighbourhood scales. To situate my research in context, I chose three different settlements in different parts of the city for a qualitative ethnographic study.

Research questions

Considering the problem statement presented above, I attempted to address the following main research questions:

1. How is uncertainty experienced in informal settlements and shantytowns in Buenos Aires?
2. How do different uncertainties impact the planning and development of informal settlements and shantytowns in Buenos Aires?

3. How can the practice of urban planning respond more effectively to conditions of high uncertainty and informality?

The first two research questions have a more exploratory character. Question 1 focuses on identifying and describing different types of uncertainties in informal settlements and shantytowns, and analysing the ways in which they impact the living conditions for their inhabitants. My study of the typology about uncertainty responds to a research gap of studies that would document or conceptualise the different logics of the unknown, and explore the relations between them. Question 2 focuses on the role of urban governance, planning and participation processes in addressing or shaping these identified uncertainties. The third question focuses on the implications of my study and attempts to propose ideas for the improvement of the planning frameworks and methods. Recognizing the importance of context in urban development, my findings will first and foremost relate to Buenos Aires, but I hope that they can inspire and challenge urban thinkers in other places as well.

To find meaningful answers to the main research questions, I propose the following supporting empirical questions:

1. How do households in informal settlements and shantytowns access housing and basic infrastructure?
 - What are their livelihoods?
 - What formal and informal mechanisms and strategies do they apply?
2. What are the most important uncertainties impacting informal settlements and shantytowns?
 - How do these uncertainties change over time?
3. Who takes responsibility for planning and improvement of informal settlements and shantytowns?
 - What motivations do these actors have?
4. What role does corruption, clientelism and political or commercial opportunism play in the development of informal settlements and shantytowns?

The main message I want to communicate in my thesis is that urban planning, while it is meant to respond to uncertainties and formalising informalities, often does the opposite: magnifies existing and creates new uncertainties and informalities. In my study of informal settlements and shantytowns of Buenos Aires, I found that uncertainties related to insecure tenure, economic instability and political decision-making are more important than, for example, health or environmental risks. Consequently, I proposed ideas and measures which the state and urban planners can take to recognise and address the most pressing uncertainties and informalities.

Outline

I will start with defining and problematising the concepts of uncertainty and informality in planning and urban studies (chapter 2). After briefly explaining my theoretical framework, I will outline and discuss the methods I applied to conduct this study (chapter 3). The chapter that follows will introduce the historic, geographic, political and economic context of Buenos Aires, summarising the information, which readers not familiar with Argentina need to know to understand my case descriptions. Chapter 4 will end with an explanation of the terminology applied in this study and

a brief introduction to the case areas. Next in this thesis will be the case study section, which will start with outlining the historic development of the general situation of shantytowns and informal settlements in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires (chapters 5 and 6), followed by more detailed stories and narratives of the three selected case areas (chapters 7-9). After the case descriptions, I present my empirical analysis (chapter 10), where I bring together the insights from the cases and categorise them according to the type of uncertainty. In chapter 11, I will answer my research questions and relate my findings to the relevant theory, focusing on the ideas introduced in chapter 2. This chapter will end with reflecting about the theoretical and methodological contributions of my research, and a short epilogue. In the last chapter (12), I will provide a list of urban and housing policy recommendations for Argentina and Buenos Aires.

Although this thesis is written primarily to satisfy the requirements to obtain the title of PhD at the University of Oslo, my aim is to make it relevant, useful and accessible for a wider audience with diverse expectations. My academic colleagues who are not performing research in Argentina will probably focus on the theoretical (chapters 2 and 11), methodological (chapter 3) and analytical insights (chapter 10). Urban practitioners and policy-makers who live and work in Buenos Aires might gain new knowledge and inspiration in my summary of findings (chapter 11) and the list policy recommendations part (chapter 12). The general public (including my friends and family) will hopefully find my narrative descriptions of the case settlements (chapters 5-9) interesting and engaging.

2. Theory on urban uncertainty and informality

If there is any consensus about 21st century cities, it is that it is impossible to predict what they will become. (Zeiderman et al., 2017, p. 10).

My thesis attempts to address the issue of uncertainty in urban planning and cities in general in the context of informal settlements and housing. In this section, I review relevant literature and present the 'state of the art' theory on urban uncertainty and informality. My review is critical, meaning that I attempt to establish links showing connections as well as contradictions between different classical and contemporary ideas, frameworks and theories. The goal of this review is to ground the problem statement, identify gaps in research and pave the way towards a new analytical framework.

Most of the works cited in this chapter include selected works that combine keywords from three different groups: 1) 'planning', 'planner', 'urban development' or similar; 2) 'uncertainty' or variations related concepts such as 'unpredictability', 'vulnerability', 'crisis', 'contingency', 'risk', 'change' or 'temporality'; and 3) 'informality', 'informal' and similar. Since there are relatively few works that include keywords from all three groups, I also considered a large number of key texts that include keywords from a combination of two of these groups. Selected readings in Spanish have been included based on the translations of the corresponding key words. This was done to widen the geographic scope of the reviewed literature and to ensure terminological correctness, which proved to be useful in data collection.

My literature review shows that despite many similarities and apparent relationships, there is a disconnection between the literature on urban uncertainty and informality. This can be explained partly due to the geographic and epistemological divide in planning theory. There is also a significant gap between the presented theory and planning practice. I explain how despite a relatively rich theoretical base, the field of planning not only struggles to acknowledge and deal with issues of uncertainty and urban informality, but it further exacerbates them.

As an urban practitioner and researcher, I recognize that urban informality is to a large extent a product of the inequalities that are embedded in neoliberalism and that said informality is at the same time necessary for this system to function. However, even though my thesis concerns primarily urban poor communities who are disadvantaged in highly uncertain neoliberal economies, and I strongly sympathise with classical Marxist concerns about the living and working conditions of the lower classes, I find this simplification unhelpful. I do believe that in a country like Argentina, where informal development and social mobilisation have been widespread in so many aspects of living and working, focusing on the determinism of the political and economic structures alone would not give a full picture of the difficult situation of limited access to affordable housing. As I study the relations between the 'necessary' structural factors, and the agencies, practices and strategies that are contextual, informal and contingent (in space and time), my approach combines the principles of post-structuralism and critical realism. This is a rather uncommon perspective in urban studies, which has historically been more preoccupied with generalising about cities and finding common

terms to describe the urban conditions in relation to global trends and processes, than exploring the particularities and irregularities of different places (Brenner, 2003). Such perspectives that challenge the determinism of the global structural forces by studying emergent mechanisms and contextual urban practices is especially needed to generate 'urban theory from the South' (Watson, 2003, 2009a, 2009b; Robinson, 2013; Bhan, 2019).

Urban planning as art, science and communication

Planning is what planners do. (Vickers, 1968).

All human settlements, including those we consider 'informal' (which I will problematize later), result from some kind of foresight, in which planners or planning practitioners consider the short- or long-term implications of their modifications in the physical environment to be inhabited (Bolan, 1973; Hamdi, 2004). According to one of the most cited definitions, the purpose of planning is to extend what we know from our past and present experiences into the future (Friedmann 1987). It enables expectation and anticipation that make our actions better prepared (Anderson, 2010). Planning, therefore, is a future-oriented activity, which requires knowledge about the particular object or process being planned.

Urban planning is most often represented as a practice (Lennon, 2017) or set of practices (Alexander, 2015) oriented towards projecting and acting upon the future of the environment inhabited by people (Friedmann 1987; Forester, 1989; Healey, 1997; Connell, 2009; Abram & Weszkalnys, 2011; UN-Habitat, 2013). The act of urban planning regulates many different sectors that constitute the wellbeing and functioning of cities, such as land use, housing, commerce, industry, transportation, mobility, public space, historic preservation and environmental protection (Bayer et al., 2010). Since more than 70% of land in cities is used for housing (UN-Habitat, 2016), many planners specialise in drafting building codes and housing policy. However, planning tends to count most in coordinating actions to install and upgrade infrastructure, such as roads, water, electricity and internet.

No one could ever be an expert in all these areas; therefore, the planning decision-making processes almost always involve different groups of stakeholders spanning multiple sectors. Planning is done by "people who a particular community acknowledges are involved in a process it recognizes as 'planning'" (Alexander, 2015, p. 91). Urban planners are the kinds of planners "who direct the development of cities and towns" (National Geographic, n.d.), and who act in public interest (Friedmann 1987). Although in this thesis I will refer to urban planners mainly as those who have a professional and formal role in the activity of planning of urban settlements, I recognize that the discipline is practised by a wide variety of actors, including community members, civic organisations, social movements, politicians and increasingly private consultants and investors. These actors may have the expertise, but not necessarily academic or vocational backgrounds in planning (Hamdi, 2010).

While there are many contextual differences between cities in different regions of the world, planning efforts in most countries have been insufficient and ineffective to face such challenges as very rapid population growth, lack of resources, poverty and unstable governments (Watson, 2009b; Ryser & Franchini, 2015; UN-Habitat, 2022). This is also the case in Latin America, a region with very high rates of urbanisation and inequality (UN-Habitat, 2012).

Urban planning is a relatively young discipline, which has gone through some significant ideological shifts, each introducing new approaches towards envisioning and acting upon the future of human settlements and therefore, our lives. Lennon (2017) summarised the evolution of the planning profession into three branches: the oldest is the practice of planning as art or a design-oriented discipline; then emerged the idea of planning as science dominated by quantitative methods, modelling, mapping and predicting; and finally, the most recent understanding of planning is facilitation, where planners manage decision-making processes in a collaborative manner. While these ideas emerged more or less chronologically, they did not necessarily replace each other. They developed in their own ways, magnifying the diversity of planning approaches.

Urban planning as an art

With a few exceptions, most urban theory and practice before the 1960s involved designing urban spaces and performing technical problem-solving exercises (Taylor, 1998). Typical mainstream urban planners, as taught in most universities in the early- and mid-20th century, were utopian visionaries who designed end-state, ideal environments and then defined roadmaps to achieve them, following a simple lineal planning sequence proposed by Patrick Geddes: 'survey-analyse-plan' (Davoudi, 2006; Mukhopadhyay et al., 2021). This was done for example by drafting master plans to replace existing buildings or introducing strict zoning codes to separate housing, commercial and industrial uses in new developments. Planners and designers assumed that when structures or settlements reached their perfect states, they would not need to evolve or change further (ibid.). These principles were summarised in the "Athens Charter", a collaborative work published in 1933 (Le Corbusier, 1973). According to this modernist paradigm, architecture and planning can serve social purposes through universal and mechanical solutions for creating ideal habitats. For example, the Athens Charter proposed that

[t]he keys to urbanism are to be found in the four functions: inhabiting, working, recreation (in leisure time), and circulation (p. 95),

and that the role of plans is to

determine the structure of each of the sectors allocated to the four key functions and they will also determine their respective locations within the whole. (p. 96).

The principles of Athens Charter were quickly reproduced in textbooks around the world and remained the most influential work in modern city-making in both the Global North and South throughout the 20th century (Sennett et al., 2018). This vision of city-building had little respect to anything that preceded it. It was especially common in totalitarian states, which used it politically, as a way to demonstrate power and enforce order. The impact of Le Corbusier's functionalist conception of the city is particularly visible in the development of most urban centres in the Eastern Block and allied states (Drummond & Young, 2020). Also in many parts of Africa, municipal plans and regulations are still based on archaic texts about separation of uses and functionalism that are "strongly influenced by colonial town planning" (Watson & Agbola, 2013). Modernist city-planning materialised in extensive removal and replacement of older buildings and areas considered slums, as well as foundation of new national or regional capital cities, such as Abuja (Nigeria), Astana (Kazakhstan), Brasilia (Brazil), Chandigarh (India), Ciudad Guayana (Venezuela),

Dodoma (Tanzania), Islamabad (Pakistan) and Putrajaya (Malaysia). These utopian visions received heavy criticism before and after they were implemented. To a large extent, these new cities failed to deliver the promises to improve living conditions and in some cases, new slums and informal settlements developed around them (see Gilbert, 1989; Holston, 1989; Lusugga Kironde, 1993; Irazábal, 2004; Rossman, 2016; Sennett et al., 2018). Similar plans were also made in Argentina, but the project of moving the capital to a new city in Patagonia failed due to difficulties caused by the hyperinflation crisis in the late 1980s (Di Santi, 2010).

Urban planning as a science

At the same time, the quantitative revolution in geography and technological advancements in the mid-20th century resulted in new methods to operationalise planning processes. Two new scientific views of planning emerged: systems and rational process (Davoudi, 2006; Taylor, 1998). The former perceived physical environments as systems of interconnected parts that can be analysed and controlled by cybernetics (McLoughlin, 1969). The latter is a more process-related, instrumental approach, which introduces planning as a circular process (an improvement from Geddes' 'survey before plan') of problem statement, scenario building, decision-making, implementation, monitoring and so on (Davoudi, 2006). The scientific advancement and computerised mapping enabled planners to act upon the future with more confidence based on evidence that was not available before. Both the systems and rational viewpoints shared a few main principles: that planners are experts in problem identification; that human behavioural patterns are predictable; and that powerful computer systems can support long-term economic and demographic modelling (Hall, 2002). The mid-20th century was also a period where comprehensive planning, that is a long-range regulation and goal-setting of the city as a physical space and all the functions within it, started to be widely practised in the Western world (Innes, 1996). The exchange of expertise and knowledge globally allowed the ideals of master-planning to spread to countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, but they were not very effective (Ryser & Franchini, 2015).

The artistic and technocratic-scientific approaches, which still constitute mainstream urban planning today, began to be criticised for ignoring the spatial and temporal contexts of places being planned, as well as the people who live there (Davidoff, 1965; Friedmann, 1987; Sennett et al., 2018), leading to a growing gap between theory and practice (Davoudi, 2006; Hamdi, 2004). Favouring high-rise construction and prioritising car circulation over pedestrians exemplify how modern cities neglect the human scale. Perhaps the most influential criticism came from journalist Jane Jacobs (1961) who argued that well-functioning neighbourhoods develop organically and include both old and new buildings, providing a variety of flexible and adaptable spaces for different uses, budgets and timeframes. Her opposition to large-scale, demolish-and-replace projects gave her a role model status among activists, while her books made a strong impact on planning theory. Comprehensive planning, though still practised today, has also been subject to heavy criticisms (Innes, 1996). Altshuler (1965) argued that this approach is too rigid to make space for debate and innovation, and at the same time it is practically and politically not viable, because its success depends too much on the expertise and power of planners, which they often lack.

Other notable criticisms of scientific methods in handling complex planning issues in this period include two influential essays: one by Rittel and Weber (1973) on the 'wicked problem' and the other titled "The Science of Muddling Through"

by Lindblom (1959). The former examined the issues of wrong problem formulation or statement of problems that are impossible to solve due to multiple unknowns, while the latter argued that the practice of 'rational decision-making' actually entailed incrementalism and partisan mutual adjustment in the planning process. Nevertheless, much of the debate in planning theory around the 1980s and 90s focused more on the process of planning (how to plan) than on the content (what to plan), which maintained the self-perception of urban planners as experts (Davoudi, 2006).

Towards collaborative and strategic planning

Around the same time, a growing movement pointed out the increasing gap between plans and the real world, and demanded broader public participation and decentralisation of planning (Friedmann, 1987). Arnstein's (1969) 'ladder of citizen participation', with eight 'steps' ranging from manipulation, through consultation to citizen control, heated up the discussion and introduced useful vocabulary. One of the results of these different criticisms was inclusion of less technical professions into the process of planning, particularly sociologists, social scientists, geographers and economists (Davoudi, 2006).

Even when there is a stable planning system in place, it may be difficult to identify which planning approach prevails today. What we can say instead is that there are different, often overlapping planning practices (Alexander, 2015). Perhaps the most widely accepted framework that has produced different offshoots (i.e. collaborative planning) dominating the planning practice now is the strategic planning approach. Strategic planning can be summarised in three steps guided by three critical questions: 1) Where are we now? 2) Where do we want to be? and 3) How do we get there? (Stenberg & Austin, 2007). It aims to be a reflexive process that attempts to involve a wide scope of stakeholders to define a compromise roadmap towards achieving predetermined goals and visions (Corti, 2021).

Participation has become a more integral part of planning, though in many places such democratisation only led to more bureaucracy and new political conflicts (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). The idea of planners as facilitators is difficult to turn into practice, as the "relationship between the state, the market and community" is characterised by "mistrust, mutual disrespect, self-interest, conflicting objectives, corruption and unequal power relations" (Hamdi, 2004, p. 109). The success of strategic planning, therefore, is still vulnerable to conflicts over goals and means, as well as the actual power(lessness) of planners, considering that planning proposals need to be approved by elected politicians, landowners and other stakeholders, who are often driven by self-interest. Planners are also challenged when they propose unpopular measures, such as urban densification or congestion charges. They are very often blamed for failed projects or inadequate response to crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, but when market forces function as they should, planners are frequently told not to intervene. At the same time, factors such as uncertainty related to working conditions, power relations and personal benefits can push many planners to make decisions that are not necessarily in the public interest. Planning is not immune to corrupt and nepotist practices. The situation is most critical in cities in the Global South, where weak governance and lack of planning capacity led to uncontrolled urban sprawl as well as an unprecedented growth of slums and other types of irregular settlements (Davis, 2006; UN-Habitat, 2022), which is a topic I attempt to address in my thesis.

Uncertainty as a challenge to planning

As pointed out by Ryser and Franchini (2015) and Sennett et al. (2018), many planners ignore the presence of risk and uncertainty in their professional work and act as if cities required straightforward and universal solutions. At the same time, those who do acknowledge the kind of challenges mentioned before may not apply adequate tools and frameworks that would help them understand and respond sufficiently. They may also not recognize how their own planning actions might unintentionally create the problems that they try to solve. In other words, the planning profession

falls to acknowledge the mismatch between such an ideal world of planning and its actual disordered, uncertain and essentially political realities. (Davoudi, 2015, p. 317).

Mainstream design-oriented and technocratic planning approaches are often linear processes based on false assumptions that development can be guided by economic and demographic predictions, projections, and simulations that reach many decades into the future (Innes, 1996; Davoudi, 2006). This modelling might work in conditions of growth and stability, but not in times of turbulence and chaos (Balducci et al., 2011), like that which we are now experiencing globally. This consideration is critical for the planning profession, because

[p]lanners and planning institutes may be held morally and legally accountable for failing to take adequate action amid uncertainty. (Zandvoort et al., 2018, p. 112).

Planners facing uncertainty may become defensive and instead of acknowledging and facing it, they tend to respond with “more specialisation and, at worst, more jargon and abstraction” (Hamdi, 2004, p. 13). These debates reflect a crisis of planning expertise. The myth of being able to act upon the future is obstructed by the gaps in knowledge and the fragmentation of the planning practice.

Planning is a future oriented activity and if we accept that to act in regard to the future requires knowledge, and the lack of knowledge is uncertainty, then planning is a tool to reduce uncertainty. However, too many planners struggle to recognize uncertainties and are often unprepared to deal with them. They tend to see uncertainty too often as something to be avoided, a ‘thing’ to be removed from reality with a stroke on the paper.

Internal and external uncertainties in planning

Literature on uncertainty in planning addresses two main issues: understanding uncertainty and acting on uncertainty. The former debate concerns what uncertainty is and how it challenges the planning practice. In the latter, planning theorists take these discussions further and attempt to answer what planners can do to reduce uncertainties in order to improve the planning process.

Uncertainty in this thesis is understood as “the gap between what is known and what needs to be known to make correct decisions” (Mack, 1971, p. 1). Knowledge is different from information and data, which can simply be collected and shared. Planners use information and data in the process of knowledge production, which rests on values, meanings and experiences of different actors, making it “political by nature” (Jacobs et al., 2015, p. 426). An

important consideration that I would like to add to Mack's definition is 'whose' knowledge and 'whose' decisions. I'll return to this later.

If we apply the famous Heisenberg's uncertainty principle from quantum physics –that it is impossible to know everything about a situation– to urban planning, we can think of uncertainty as part of a continuum, where nothing is fully known or fully unknown (Hamdi, 2004). This is reflected in Connell's (2009) claim that "the function of planning is to *maximize* what is known and to *minimize* what is unknown" (p. 96, my emphasis) and Abbott's (2000), definition, where "the planning process is one of managing uncertainty or addressing knowledge gaps through time" (p. 82). Using Rumsfeld's (2011) terminology, uncertainties can be known-unknowns, where we know what we do not know, or unknown-unknowns, where we do not know what we do not know. The unknown-unknowns relates to the fact that knowledge is never finite and that we cannot predict what it could be the future:

On the one hand, the future will be uncertain in the sense that it will exceed present knowledge (or the capability to generate knowledge). On the other hand, the future will be indeterminate in that perfect knowledge is impossible. (Anderson, 2010, p. 780).

The extent to which we know what is uncertain makes a big difference in planning action, as exemplified by resilience of urban systems discussed later. Hamdi (2004) also mentioned not being able to explain knowledge as another part of uncertainty:

Today's intelligent practitioners, however knowledgeable, are (...) people who stand somewhere between knowing and not knowing, or at least between what they know and can explain and what they know and can't. (p. 131).

According to Anderson (2010) in uncertain and contingent contexts, futures can be 'made present' by such practices as 1) calculating futures using quantitative techniques, 2) imagining futures where we envision different scenarios; and 3) performing futures through simulating, acting or pretending. He further distinguishes anticipatory action as precaution (prevention of threats *after* their emergence and identification), preemption (prevention of threats *before* their emergence and identification) and preparedness (mitigation of the probable aftermaths of disruptive events). This terminology is useful in an urban context and can be applied across scales to different actors, from planners and decision-makers, to property owners and regular citizens.

There is little literature that provides a wider overview of examples of different urban uncertainties. Most research is done on one chosen type of uncertainty, crisis, emergency, risk or disaster. This is surprising since uncertainties are interrelated and overlapping (UN-Habitat, 2022). A Spanish-language 'urban glossary' identifies the unpredictable outcomes of natural catastrophes, armed conflicts and economic crises as the main uncertainties for city authorities (Corti, 2021). A broader scope of urban uncertainties was identified in a research project by Zeiderman et al. (2017), who studied situations of political and governance crises, economic downturns, climate change impacts, natural hazards such as floods and droughts, water shortages, infrastructure fragilities, energy supply problems, health emergencies and pandemics, unclear land tenure situations, different types of insecurity (criminality, violence, armed conflicts and terrorism), transportation and mobility problems, and finally communication challenges. The lack of

categorisation for types of uncertainties in urban planning is one of the gaps in research I attempt to address. I do this by proposing a typology of uncertainties, which I encountered in my case study areas.

The examples and definitions of uncertainties mentioned above concern primarily environmental uncertainties ('in the real world'), or external to the planning process. However, different authors highlighted uncertainties within the planning system and the guiding values (Friend & Jessop, 1969; Abbott, 2005). Abbott (2005) claimed that these process-related uncertainties ('within the practice') have to do with unknowns within the approaches and methods applied in the planning process. This is important, because it implies that the act of planning *per definition* produces or adds to uncertainty. More specifically, process-related knowledge and uncertainties concern cognition, skills, moral choices and action. According to Davoudi (2015), only addressing these together can lead to practical judgement or wisdom. Most of the time planning has to deal with a combination of environmental and process related uncertainties, which is what makes this activity particularly difficult.

Process related uncertainty was also addressed by Christensen (1985), who in her article "Coping with Uncertainty in Planning" reflected upon planners' diverse roles and approaches. She visualised planning processes in a matrix with two conditions: whether the means (technology) are known or not, and whether a consensus about the ends (goals) exists among actors.

While this was a refreshing proposal, it came at a difficult time for planning practitioners who had to give up much of their decision-making and facilitating powers in the new wave of neoliberalisation of public management. In the 1980s, most industrialised countries began to apply neoliberal policies, which implied a "conversion from publicly planned solutions to competitive and market-oriented ones" (Sager, 2011, p. 148). About a decade later, these ideas spread in the Global South through agreements such as the Washington Consensus, whose implementation was often a pre-condition for governments to obtain loans from the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Neoliberal thinkers perceive planning as a bureaucratic process that interrupts the market's natural dynamics of supply and demand. Therefore, they attempt to completely deregulate state-led planning or, alternatively, convert it into a tool for promoting economic efficiency, competitiveness and private investment. The good intentions of the stakeholders that interact in a market-based economy were supposed to ensure stability and growth. In the new economic reality, housing is no longer seen as a place to live, but as a commodity or investment that generates prosperity (Ryan-Collins et al., 2017; Sennett et al., 2018). The deregulation of planning does not mean abandoning it, but instead it gives more power to real estate developers and consultancy firms who (with some variation between cities) take the leading role in all stages of the planning process. As explained by Sager (2011), the neoliberal policies have fragmented planning processes, weakened public participation, relaxed land use and zoning bylaws, and permitted privatisation of public space, services, infrastructure and housing, causing growing inequalities and gentrification. The free movement of capital facilitates progressive dismantling of protected, unionised and permanent employment, which introduces additional risk for housing mortgage takers (Harvey, 2013). Increased homeownership rate, which is typical in neoliberal economies, is correlated with growing unemployment (Ryan-Collins et al., 2017; van Ewijk & van Leuvensteijn, 2009) that disrupts the ability of households to foresee and prepare for the future.

Therefore, the faith in self-regulation of the free market is an enemy of centralised planning in ‘public interest’, as it leaves urban development to unpredictable and rapidly changing economic forces and relations. In such conditions, uncertainty in planning, or the impacts of deregulated planning, is moved on to the society in general. However, it does not affect everyone the same way, but rather it is unequally distributed between those who own and those who do not own capital, including land, housing and other real estate. The urgent need of addressing the necessities of ‘here and now’ “dominates the lives of the urban poor and prevents them from building effective assets” (Procupez, 2015, p. 59).

A normalised and systematic uncertainty for the urban poor under the neoliberal governance model has been referred to as ‘precarity’ (Müller, 2019). According to Muñoz (2018b), precarity can also serve as

a conceptual framework from which to analyse the ways that urban communities and individuals live and experience chronic uncertainty, instability, and crisis. (p. 412).

People living in precarious conditions are also more exposed and vulnerable to different kinds of risks (Satterthwaite & Bartlett, 2017). Risk is a relevant and important part of uncertainty that planning, and the governance system in general, attempts to reduce. It comes from not knowing the probability and impacts of future hazardous events (ibid.). Dealing with uncertainties and risks concerns both planners responsible for larger settlements, and individuals struggling to secure dignified living conditions for themselves and their families. These precarious communities may experience time and space differently from other groups in society (Muñoz, 2018b).

Uncertainties, precarities, risks and knowledge are contextual in space and time (Beck, 1992; Davoudi, 2015; Jacobs et al., 2015). This means that knowledge is always in transition, and challenges the ideas that the future is linear and that it is possible to apply universal planning solutions in different places (McFarlane 2006; Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015). A contextual understanding of risk and uncertainty calls for a contingent approach to urban planning, which I will briefly introduce in the next section.

Besides spatial and temporal contexts, knowledge is also dependent on power relations (Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015; Davoudi, 2015). Planning is a contested process, where acting in the ‘public interest’ turns difficult, as different actors compete to get their ‘truths’ and values to define development agendas in a given space (Jacobs et al., 2015). Instead, many planners, especially those with design or engineering backgrounds prefer to avoid confrontation and attempt to maintain power and control over the process through applying traditional master and comprehensive planning methods. This may bring relief in the early phase of planning, but sooner or later, external and internal uncertainties and conflicts make the realisation of their plans a very challenging task. The problem is that top-down planning too often conceives of much contested community knowledge and agency as purely external uncertainties, rather than part of the planning practice. Ignorance, as a type of attitude of urban planners founded on either the use of scientific arguments or high self-esteem, is also a type of uncertainty in planning (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982).

So far I have discussed uncertainty as a challenge that planning attempts to address (knowledge gaps and risks) and as a result of inefficient or dysfunctional planning systems (neoliberal deregulation, precariousness and contestation of truths). However, uncertainty can also be seen as an opportunity to achieve a more positive outcome or a way out of difficult and hopeless conditions. Different authors have presented disasters, crises and uncertainties as ‘windows

of opportunity' for societal renewal (Romero Lankao & Qin, 2011) or 'starting points' for new partnerships (Müller, 2019; Bregman, 2021). Disturbances and uncertainties can also change the dynamics of the planning process from rigid towards more democratic, open and flexible approaches to problem solving:

Not knowing, (...) 'leaves space to think creatively.... uncertainty gives room to think'. It changes fundamentally power relationships because it invites questions, the answers to which are not already pre-set. In this sense, not knowing encourages the participation of others to engage with each other in search of ideas not based on pre-established routines, nor on so-called best practices. (Hamdi, 2004, p. 39).

Looking at the action of planning from this perspective, one can conclude that it is a tool that aims at ensuring the functionality of modern society, creating value and triggering innovation. The value of urban planning in conditions of uncertainty and scarcity was highlighted by Sager (2011), who claimed that the

task of planning [is] to provide public goods even when markets are non-existent, and protect against externalities even when payment systems are not in place. (p. 155).

Uncertainty therefore, is deeply related to planning, because it is on the one hand a precondition that gives a sense of purpose to the planning practice, and on the other a product of the planning process itself or a threat resulting from an unrealistic wish for stability and control of the planning process.

Responding to the unknown

Planners hate uncertainty as much as most other people do, and they spend their working lives trying to reduce it. (Christensen, 1985, p. 63).

In the following pages I will give a non-exhaustive overview of different proposals and approaches to how planning can address different uncertainties, or knowledge gaps within the planning process and in the planned environment. Starting in the mid 20th century, Western planning theorists began constructing models to define what kind of planning behaviour is the most appropriate for specific contexts of unknown situations (Zandvoort et al. 2018). These discussions have multiplied recently, despite the fact that, historically, most of these theories have not had many practical implications for urban planning.

One of the first proposals that considered uncertainty in planning was the 'strategic choice' approach (Friend & Jessop, 1969), which distinguished between uncertainty 1) in the working environment, 2) about guiding values and 3) about external related choices. According to this framework, addressing the first type of uncertainty demands in-depth investigation, the second type needs clarifying objectives and the third should focus on wider coordination and collaboration (Friend 1993). To put it simply, what this means for planners is that the gaps in knowledge should be addressed by either collecting more data or improving communication with the stakeholders.

Another well-known framework was put forth by Christensen (1985), who, from her matrix of known or unknown means and ends, prototyped how planners can act in different situations of uncertainty, for example regulating,

facilitating, experimenting and problem finding (Figure 2). Consequently, not adapting planning approaches to the context might result in increased disagreements and uncertainties.

The more recent frameworks and models that identify the ‘correct’ planning approaches in different conditions of uncertainty have a tendency of being more complex and schematic. For practitioners who work in rapidly changing conditions, some of them may seem less intuitive and difficult to apply in real situations. These frameworks often borrow from, or combine, earlier classifications. For example, Abbott (2000) referred to the uncertainty about value judgements, proposed by Friend & Jessop (1969), and distinguished between the value judgements of politicians and the community. In his model, Abbott matched different types of uncertainties with four types of planning models:

1. Comprehensive rational (there is always a right or wrong),
2. Incrementalism (many small changes),
3. Mixed scanning (seeking compromise and satisficing) and
4. Transactive (dialogue and mutual learning) (Abbott, 2000).

A few years later, he developed a new, more complex framework that combined the matrix proposed by Christensen (1985) and Friend (1993), which resulted in identifying multiple types of uncertainties categorised under either environmental or process uncertainty (Abbott, 2005). He concluded that the environmental and process dimensions “overlap and interact” (p. 248), and explained how dealing with uncertainty requires multi-scale perspective (from regional to local) and multi-actor collaboration. The matrix of Christensen (1985) has also been adopted by Islam & Susskind (2013). Their main contribution was to introduce a model with gradual variables to assess the proximity of the planning situation from the ideal state, which is that of consensus and certainty.

		GOAL	
		agreed	not agreed
TECHNOLOGY	known	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • programmer • standardizer • rule-setter • regulator • scheduler • optimiser • analyst • administrator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • advocate • participation promoter • facilitator • mediator • constitution-writer • bargainer
	unknown	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pragmatist • adjuster • researcher • experimenter • innovator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (charismatic leader) • problem-finder

Figure 2. Christensen’s (1985) matrix of planning roles categorised by planning conditions.

One of the most recent proposals, developed by Zandvoort et al. (2018), combines all of these ideas together into one extensive plural-unequivocal uncertainty matrix of possible planning interventions according to the nature, level and location of uncertainty (Figure 3). The three types of nature of uncertainty include ontic, epistemic and ambiguous; its four levels are shallow, medium and deep uncertainty as well as recognized ignorance; while the location could be geographical, institutional or in society. While these models are presented as conceptual and open to interpretation, there is little explanation of how they can be put into practice in different ongoing planning processes. As Zandvoort et al. (2018) admit themselves, their “analysis is still very abstract” (p. 104).

One interesting proposal made by Zandvoort et al. (2018) is the distinction between measurable and unmeasurable uncertainties (which is in line with the concepts of known-unknowns and unknown-unknowns by Rumsfeld (2011)). As these authors explain, measurable uncertainties can be dealt with risk management and statistical-based assessment, while unmeasurable uncertainties might require the application of scenario planning and adaptation pathways approaches (ibid.).

Scenario planning as an approach to address uncertainty considers multiple development pathways and their impacts on different social groups (Zapata & Kaza, 2015). It combines quantitative methods, such as modelling and forecasting with qualitative and experiential approaches (UN-Habitat, 2022).

The contingent adaptation pathway method takes these ideas one step further. It is an alternative to traditional static policies and predefined rigid frameworks. This approach facilitates adaptive and reflective policymaking, multiple scenario mapping, simulation exercises, as well as quick planning responsiveness (Kato & Ahern, 2008; Rauws, 2017; Haasnoot et al., 2019). It can even enable some degree of reversibility in case the achieved results are unsatisfactory (Kwakkel et al., 2016). Nevertheless, introducing alternative more or less likely scenarios is also contributing to uncertainty, because in the best case only one of the scenarios will be materialised and planners have no certainty about the exact outcome. The role of planning would then be reduced to guiding towards approximation of the most desired scenario and preventing the least desired ones from happening.

Planning	Nature			Level	Location
	Ontic	Epistemic	Ambiguity		
What can be known (guiding facet)	Unknowable phenomena up to a specific level	Knowable phenomena up to a specific level	Differently (un)known	Degree of certainty to which a phenomenon can be known	Knowledge about where a phenomenon can become manifest
Prescriptive to what can be done (developmental facet)	Intervening in uncertainty	Enlarging or correcting current knowledge	Search for one way of knowing	Specify what can be done regarding the measurability of phenomena	Specify what can be done regarding the possible location where uncertainty manifests itself

Figure 3. The plural–unequivocal analysis of uncertainty developed by Zandvoort et al. (2018).

Making cities resilient

The concepts of reversibility thinking and scenario mapping are central for urban resilience, which is one of the planning paradigms that attempts to address the uncertain future. Urban resilience is defined as:

the ability of an urban system-and all its constituent socio-ecological and socio-technical networks across temporal and spatial scales-to maintain or rapidly return to desired functions in the face of a disturbance, to adapt to change, and to quickly transform systems that limit current or future adaptive capacity. (Meerow et al., 2016, p. 45).

The authors of this definition highlight the difficulty in comprehending the equilibrium of a system that resilience attempts to 'maintain' or 'return to' be. The idea that resilient systems should 'bounce back', which means returning to a state of 'normal' as quickly as possible, has many critics (Kelman et al., 2016; Coaffee & Lee, 2016). The condition of 'normal' might not be desirable at all, since it was not strong enough to prevent damages from shocks or stressors in the first place, as we have learned from the different waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. Resilience, therefore, should aim at 'bouncing forward', that is building more robust, and adaptable systems and structures without much consideration of the past (Manyena et al., 2011). The construction of this 'new normal' could also involve "transformative adaptation", which integrates climate mitigation, adaptation and development goals into one policy agenda (Revi et al., 2014).

At the same time, urban resilience provides limited answers for how to prepare for and cope with future disruptions and uncertainties, because it deals mainly with known-unknowns and not the unknown-unknowns (see Anderson, 2010 and Rumsfeld, 2011). We might not know when and how a shock or stress will happen, but in order to make infrastructure or housing resilient, we need to know what to prepare for (Meerow et al., 2016). This problem could potentially be addressed by the antifragility approach, which is the way in which a system can not only withstand, but also improve itself through unknown or unpredictable disturbances, because of its learning capacity, openness and flexibility (Taleb, 2012). Until now, however, no concrete examples of the application of antifragility in urban planning have been documented. That said, some more recent approaches to resilience under deep uncertainty have suggested that the new ways of dealing with the unknown-unknowns should move away from the traditional 'predict and act' scheme and apply the 'monitor and adapt' idea, which involves being prepared for a range of possibilities, monitoring developments, and taking action when 'adaptation tipping points' are reached (Marchau et al., 2019). Such internal uncertainties caused by the inability of dealing with unknown-unknowns therefore require shifting planning from being proactive to assuming a reactive role.

Multiple scenario and adaptive planning approaches are also far from widespread in practice, because they are time-consuming and costly (Stults & Larsen, 2018), or because they allow other actors (such as real-estate developers) too much power and flexibility (Rauws, 2017). At the same time, resilience (just as neoliberal deregulation) tends to shift the responsibility for human life and safety from governments to individuals, through encouraging "a mentality of coping with risk, rather than resolving it" (Satterthwaite & Bartlett, 2017, p. 4). Kaika (2017) supports this claim, arguing that imposing resilience on communities normalises the idea that people "can take more suffering, deprivation

or environmental degradation in the future” (p. 95). This understanding of resilience challenges the assumption of urban uncertainty as a collective phenomenon, while suggesting that it is experienced and dealt with by individuals.

Kaika also challenged the intentions of the smart city ideas and top-down targets and indicators such as the Sustainable Development Goals. Instead, she brings up examples of successful disconnected, alternative, community-driven initiatives, which –if incorporated into policy and scaled up– have a great potential to (unintentionally) meet these targets (ibid.). MacKinnon and Derickson (2013) agree that resilience approaches rely on expert knowledge and maintain hierarchical capitalist social relations. In order to reflect the agency, learning capacity and mobilisation of community actors in coping with uncertainties, they propose shifting vocabulary from *resilience* to *resourcefulness*. In my study of emergent planning and housing practices, the idea of ‘resourceful’ communities can be particularly useful.

The tensions between designed or fixed and emergent or open planning and architecture are central in contemporary urban debates. While the former is dominant in the way planners act, the latter becomes more pronounced in theory. The new post-structural paradigms suggest opening up for new possibilities, being flexible and reflective, experimenting, thinking contingently, and imagining different futures (Hamdi, 2004; Hillier, 2007; Wilkinson, 2011; Sennett, 2018; Koshy et al., 2022), creating conditions for development that enable adaptability and increase “responsiveness of urban areas to both foreseen and unforeseen change” (Rauws, 2017, p. 42), or considering reversibility, recyclability and transitory character of structures (Mehrotra et al. 2017). Nyseth (2012) suggests that neither fixity nor fluidity is the right way to respond to uncertainty, but instead the goal should be to find the right balance between the two.

Aligning time frames

The gaps of knowledge needed to act upon the future can be addressed by applying a more realistic temporal frame for the environments being planned and designed – neither too long, nor too short. Dealing with temporality and setting time frames for plans are some of the central tasks in planning. The challenge is that temporalities are social constructs and are experienced differently by individuals, communities and policy makers, which often leads to conflicts (Livingstone & Matthews, 2017). ‘Slow’ and ‘quick’ planning systems, therefore, result in many distinct types of urban development, with both having positive and negative impacts for citizens and developers (Raco et al., 2018). Balducci et al. (2011) argue that planners should focus more on short-term predictions and plans, and draft long-term general visions only for the sake of orientation. As uncertainty increases when the horizon year is further away, sometimes the best option may be abandoning target years altogether and focusing instead on the evolution of applicable development scenarios (Zapata & Kaza, 2015).

Uncertainty in a built environment can be better understood and accommodated if we shift our perception of urban spaces from material or spatial to temporal (Raco et al., 2008). For example, Sennett et al. (2018) proposed to think of cities as processes, while D’Avella (2019) wrote about built environments as ‘practices’. Turner (1972) argued that thinking of housing as a verb, rather than a noun, enables us to envision multiple contingent forms and types of structures, which adapt to the changing realities and circumstances of those who ‘are housed’. Jane M. Jacobs (2006)

(name similarity to noted planning author and activist Jane Jacobs is coincidental) challenges practitioners to think of buildings as events, rather than structures. Buildings and infrastructure are never complete. They are always in a state of being made or unmade, and go through endless processes of construction, maintenance, renovation, extension, reduction, decay, closure and demolition.

The understanding of 'multiple' and 'diverse' temporalities of planning agencies, citizens, and the built environment itself should be a key component in planning urban interventions in public spaces and regeneration projects (Degen, 2018). The mediation of these often conflicting and contested temporal frames, therefore, may enable planners to integrate the more certain past and present with the uncertain future (Abram, 2014). This temporal way of thinking in physical planning comes under different names, such as "the politics of space - time" (Raco et al., 2008, p. 2652) or "complex spatio-temporal ecology" (Degen, 2018, p. 1088).

Timeframe conflicts often occur in prioritising between environmental and social agendas as well as in situations of expert-lay community disagreements over planning efforts (Jordhus-Lier et al., 2019). Those who give more weight to the so-called 'brown agenda' emphasise the importance of human health, urgent adaptation, immediate satisfaction of basic needs and access to services and infrastructure for all, while those who advocate for the 'green agenda' focus on ecosystem health and work towards long-term sustainability, mitigation and resilience (McGranahan & Satterthwaite, 2000). In addition to being contextual, both approaches require a different way of thinking about the future and knowledge necessary to act upon it. Planners are therefore challenged to integrate the brown and green agendas and develop cities that are environmentally sustainable and at the same time satisfy our needs and protect us from different types of emergencies and hazards (ibid.). An 'ideal' development would find a balance between not exceeding the planetary limits that guarantee sustainability and ensuring satisfaction of basic needs for everyone (Raworth, 2017). Environmental risks, where the conflict between short- and long-term goals complicates planning action, can also be dealt with by intersecting humanitarian emergency response and spatial planning into a contextualised contingency planning approach, which shares common principles with the adaptation pathways method (Koshy et al., 2022). This proves once again that traditional planning models are not fit to deal with emergencies and situations that require quick action.

Communicating with communities

Prioritisation between long-term and immediate needs requires communication and consensus building at different levels, from neighbourhood to national. When "properly designed", consensus building "can produce decisions that approximate the public interest" (Innes, 1996, p. 469). Planners who see themselves as facilitators in consensus-building processes perceive urban environments as communities that need to be invited into the decision making process. They support a more pronounced shift in planning towards communicative and collaborative approaches, which are inclusionary, transparent and consensus-oriented. The key to addressing uncertainty for facilitators is to reach out to those who are most affected by planning decisions and have the local knowledge, experience and capacities to make planning possible (Davoudi, 2015; Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015). This approach to planning focuses on strengthening social capital, community resilience (or resourcefulness) and the structures that lead to increased

local autonomy. It assumes that community members are specialised citizens, or special kinds of experts (Hamdi, 2010), or at the very least that their knowledge is relevant and that planning 'does not belong' to planners (Fisher, 2000; Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015). As Hamdi (2004) suggests, when a problem is "too complex to resolve", planners can

turn it all upside down and look at it all from a different angle, a different point of view – maybe not your own. This is where participation counts. (p. 132).

Forester (1999) and Healey (1997) explained that achieving stakeholder support can play an important role in reducing uncertainty. The former perceives planners' role as deliberative practitioners who engage in a messy and sometimes chaotic process of joint problem solving through, for example, experiential learning and storytelling (Forester, 1999). Healey (1997) draws heavily on Giddens' and Beck's ideas about reflexive modernity, which are infused with the previously discussed concerns about risk and uncertainty (Beck, 1992; Beck et al., 1994). She highlights the importance of recognizing cultural and political differences and including diverse voices in a collaborative institutionalist approach (Healey, 1997). Innes and Booher (2010) point out how collaborative planning can be especially effective in addressing ambiguity, or multiple interpretations of the same issue. Central to this way of thinking is the idea that the knowledge planners do not possess or cannot generate themselves must be extracted from other disciplines and the local population (Blanco et al., 2009; Balducci et al., 2011; Watson, 2014). The role of planners is therefore not to plan, but to enable a planning process where multiple specialists, stakeholders and people interact and exchange their expertise. Planners could become "trend-spotters, matchmakers and facilitators" (Rauws, 2017, p. 42).

This represents a change in the principle of planning from outcome- to process-oriented. This shift has huge implications for uncertainty, which is no longer understood as a threat to the end product, but rather as an intrinsic part of the planning process that is unevenly distributed between those who take part in planning. Following this idea, Faludi (2000) proposed that strategic plans should not be evaluated according to the degree of implementation, but rather to the extent to which they "improve the understanding of decision makers of present and future problems they face" (p. 300). Similarly, Neuendorf et al. (2018) claim that in landscape planning proposals, the issue is not necessarily about addressing the gaps of knowledge themselves, but communicating these gaps to their audiences. That information helps involved actors assess uncertainty for project financing and human life. Using the terminology proposed by Smith (1996) and Davoudi (2006), we should shift from "evidence-based policy" to "evidence-informed society", which has the capacity necessary to "make use of the available evidence" (Davoudi, 2006, p. 22).¹ Knowledge therefore, should not be limited to scientific evidence, but also include the way it is communicated and appropriated by different actors, which altogether constitutes 'appropriate knowledge' (Fisher, 2000; Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015; Watson, 2014).

The benefits of communicative planning, participation and consensus building are both short- and long-term. On the one hand, it has proven to be an effective and necessary tool for crisis management in contexts of governance and

¹ However, Davoudi (2006) and Hamdi (2004) acknowledge that too much information can also lead to frustration and confusion, or may never be used by policy-makers.

economic disruptions (Rodgers, 2010; Lopes de Souza, 2012; Koshy, 2022). In the more distant future, adequate inclusion of local communities in the planning process generates trust and increases their sense of ownership of the planning process and spaces being planned (Corburn, 2003; Hamdi, 2004; Hamdi, 2010; Jacobs et al., 2015). Participation is helpful to generate agreements on far-reaching goals and priorities which a particular community can pursue, reducing uncertainties related to both ends and means.

On the other hand, where democracy in decision-making is absent, planners tend to impose goals and policies on people and act as if all humans have a shared rationality. In reality, such shared rationality does not exist (Watson, 2003); therefore, the role of planners should be negotiating social experiments that could be proposed by the people themselves. This approach could represent a compromise between planners as technocratic experts and as facilitators. Contrary to the early modernist perceptions, human diversity and disorder is not necessarily an obstacle to planning, but rather an opportunity for the emergence of new ideas (Balducci et al., 2011). To make the participation process efficient, the involved citizens need to understand the technical language of professional planners (Davidoff, 1965), or planners need to adapt their language to be understandable to the general public (Hamdi, 2010). Community leaders, local representatives, or 'knowledge brokers' play an important role in participation and generation of the appropriate knowledge that is necessary to address uncertainty in planning, because they usually understand the planning language and have access to information, which makes them more powerful (Jacobs et al., 2015; Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015).

Strategic Action Planning

Hamdi (2004), includes influential knowledge brokers in the category of development practitioners, which are central actors in the Strategic Action Planning (SAP) approach he proposed (Hamdi, 2010). SAP has its roots in social and urban ecology, which focus on the complex interactions of individuals with their urban environments (Park et al., 1925; Bookchin, 1993). It emerged from criticisms of mainstream planning, which is authoritarian, inflexible, seeks total prediction and ultimate control, relies on expert knowledge, and is blind to the realities of the poor (Hamdi, 2004). SAP assumes that cities develop more efficiently when they are composed of and governed as multiple small ecosystems.

As an alternative to top-down planning, the SAP approach proposes network governance, "where government cooperates with, rather than serves, its citizens, moving from provider to enabler" in a model "based on participation and social entrepreneurship" (Hamdi, 2004, p. 107). It recognizes community representatives as development practitioners who are key in the planning process together with fieldworkers (planning practitioners) and policymakers (local or national). Referring to the principles guiding the planning process, Hamdi (2010) claimed that the purpose of planning is "to meet the needs of now, while working toward the aspirations of soon and later" (p. 65).

This is not about forecasting, nor about making decisions about the future. But it is about the long range, about making sure that one plus one equals two or even three, about being politically connected and grounded, and about disturbing the order of things in the interests of change. (Hamdi, 2004, p. xix).

One of the important parts of the SAP practice is learning in the field and reflecting in action, based on Schon's (1983) idea of reflective practitioners. Practice, according to Hamdi (2004) requires improvisation, incrementalism and spontaneous decision-making that adapts to the changing situation:

spontaneity, as a quality of practice, is vital because most problems and opportunities appear and disappear in fairly random fashion and need to be dealt with or taken advantage of accordingly. Sometimes problems appear all at once and not according to predictable patterns. One therefore has to be selective, knowing that once one problem has been dealt with another will appear equally randomly. When you have run out of resources but not out of problems, you improvise – inventing rules, tasks and techniques as you go along. Improvisations then become a means of devising solutions to solve problems which cannot be predicted, a process full of inventive surprises. (Hamdi, 2004, p. 98-99).

Improvising and acting incrementally or spontaneously may imply giving up the ambitions of comprehensive planning and total control over development. Instead, planners need to do more to embrace a certain degree of emergent structures, which are adaptive, evolving and capable of change. The added value of balancing pre-designed and emergent structures is that it contributes to creating more resilient (resourceful) systems (Capra, 2002) that “handle the unexpected in controlled and creative ways” (Hamdi, 2004, p. xxii). As Hamdi explained, planning should support a collective wisdom of building densely interconnected environments with simple elements, where sophisticated behaviour emerges naturally. Typical to this philosophy is working on small, incremental, and punctual interventions in cities that serve as catalysts for a lasting change (Hamdi, 2010; Lerner, 2014; Campbell, 2018). Planners may play an important role in this process by identifying options, trade-offs, resources and constraints, as well as by forming project teams and tasks (Hamdi, 2004). This can work best at small-scale, where planning is area-based, and not done separately by type of infrastructure or sector, such as housing, transportation, water etc. (Sanderson, 2017). Successful interventions and activities at local level could then be scaled-up at the city or even national level (Hamdi, 2004).

Limits to participation

However, there are challenges and limits to the idea that increased participation can provide the knowledge to reduce uncertainty in planning. Hamdi (2004) himself admitted that the perception of community as stable or “good and worthy” (p. 70) is often exaggerated and romanticised, a claim that was also supported by Cooke and Kothari (2001). In the insecure world we live in, redefinition of community, and the interaction between planners and citizens might be the most challenging tasks planning practitioners and theorists need to face. As Zygmunt Bauman (2001) points out:

We miss community because we miss security, a quality crucial to a happy life, but one which the world we inhabit is ever less able to offer and ever more reluctant to promise. (p. 144).

Since people constitute an additional source of uncertainty and democracy in itself tends to be unpredictable, messy and time-consuming, many project managers and politicians are sceptical to engage communities in the planning process (Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015). Despite being dominant in contemporary planning theory, the vision of planners

as facilitators is far from widespread in practice (Ryser & Franchini, 2015). In many countries, especially in the Global South, planners and planning students often reject collaborative and advocacy models; and defend their roles as experts who design, create and implement plans (de Satgé & Watson, 2018). Facilitation is risky and many planning practitioners tend to cling to control as a way of dealing with uncertainty.

In some cases, participation processes can be spoiled by power imbalances. On the one hand, it may be used by planners and policy-makers to manipulate the public and justify their actions (Davidoff, 1965; Arnstein, 1969; Cooke & Kothari, 2001), or disempower communities, especially when they lack access to the necessary technology and means of communication (Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015). When communities in democratic societies are stripped of opportunities to impact future development, they might be forced to retreat to defence (Müller, 2019). On the other hand, participation may impose divisions within the community and benefit the more connected or powerful individuals that represent it (ibid.). In either case, reaching meaningful consensus may be impossible or counterproductive, because at some point someone will have to surrender (Hamdi, 2004; Watson, 2006). Therefore, in order for planners to approximate the ideal of 'objective' knowledge to protect the 'public interest' and address the uncertainty gaps, it is necessary for them to manage the unequal and dynamic power relations between different stakeholders, and recognize their conflicting identities, interests and agendas (Jacobs et al., 2015; Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015).

Failed participation processes cause mistrust and false or badly communicated expectations generate disillusion, which results in conflict (Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015) that magnifies uncertainty for planners. Such conflicts can lead to dissensus (Kaika, 2017) and insurgence (Holston, 2009), both of which are preconditions for alternative, bottom-up and autonomous forms of governance. Many communities in situations of scarcity, unpredictability and crisis not only plan, but also finance their own initiatives through saving groups (d'Cruz & Mudimu, 2013) or crowdfunding (Davies, 2014).

Nevertheless, collaborative and reductionist planning approaches like SAP or tactical urbanism (Lyndon & Garcia, 2015), whose success depends on the motivation and mobilisation of civic society, can be criticised for giving up on large-scale public interventions, and therefore legitimising the neoliberal agenda in urban development and maintaining unequal socio-economic relations (Mould, 2014). This allows powerful private corporations and real-estate investors to make all the important decisions about the city and gain profits from its development, while individual citizens can only make a difference at the local level (ibid.). Thus, the idea of 'scaling up' requires strong political pressure, which many communities lack.

The Right to the City

Uncertainty generated from the abandonment of state-led planning in favour of enabling market-driven decentralised development typical in neoliberal economies, led to the emergence of the 'Right to the City' movements. It is also one of the central concepts used by critical urban geographers and sociologists to explain both the origins of and solutions to the contemporary economic, political and social crises and oppressions in urban areas. The origins of the concept of the right to the city can be traced back to the work of the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1967), who saw it as a "cry and demand" (p. 158) to 'inhabit the city' and to 'produce life' in it. He highlighted the universal need to open up

new political and social possibilities for collective participation and enjoyment in cities. For him the right to the city is an ultimate condition of inclusiveness, justice and shared prosperity.

His ideas have been reinterpreted in multiple ways by writers who found the concept suitable to describe processes that occur in a rapidly urbanising world. This diversity of definitions was nicely summarised by Attoh (2011), who explained how the right to the city could mean anything from liberty rights (to be 'free'), socio-economic rights (to be entitled to welfare and be on equal foot with others) and solidarity rights (to have the 'common good' protected). For Harvey (2008; 2013) the right to the city is a common (or collective) right to be part of a just wealth redistribution and command system. Writers in the Global South highlight that the right to the city is primarily about the urban poor and their access to land, dignified housing and basic services (Holston, 2009; Rolnik, 2014; Cutts & Moser, 2015; Schiavo et al., 2017; Muñoz 2018b) or the right to stay on occupied land, meaning security from eviction (Bhan, 2009; Alkhalili et al., 2014).

Urban theorists writing about the right to the city agree that reforming the planning system is not enough to achieve dignified living conditions, justice and certainty for all. These authors call for a revolution that would lead to profound structural changes. According to Harvey (2013), social movements must overthrow capitalism and establish truly democratic structures for urban management. This 'class struggle' needs to combine the apparently independent demands for better living and working conditions. Similarly, Marcuse (2009) argued that the society should reject profit as a driver of everyday life, and reform each sector (health, education, housing, etc.) to be based on the principles of solidarity, humanity, creativity, cooperation and social economy. In this sense, decent living conditions cannot be achieved unless inequality and poverty are eliminated (Gilbert, 2019).

Ryan-Collins et al. (2017) claim that a revolution or 'reset' of socio-economic relations is inevitable, because the growing housing unaffordability will sooner or later trigger "a political crisis, with unpredictable consequences" (p. 108). Mitchell (2003; 2018) argues that the right to the city is constantly in the making and that the struggle for it has no end. For him, public squares, streets and parks are critical, as they are spaces of representation where protest can take place and be visible. In addition, governments should reverse their actions to limit freedoms of speech, expand policing and surveillance, privatise public spaces and criminalise homelessness (Mitchell, 2003; 2018; Mitchell & Heynen, 2009).

What then, are the limits of the roles of planners in the politically contested and uncertain development process? To answer this question, many radical urban thinkers refer back to Davidoff (1965) and his vision of planners as professionals who advocate for the underrepresented, thus becoming drivers of the 'urban revolution'. According to this philosophy, planners should get involved politically, mobilise research and focus action to improve the situation of the urban poor. Separating planning from politics reduces the power of planners, which is necessary to combat inequalities and balance uneven power relations that create vulnerability and uncertainty (ibid.).

Political involvement of planners is necessary at all levels, from local to national. Hamdi's (2004) vision of planning practitioners is that of activists whose grounding principle is seeking justice and equity for the vulnerable communities. At a municipal, regional and national levels, planners could draft policies and lobby for project funding. For example, as marginalised communities seek ways out of the unjust property market, planners could propose laws

and subsidy schemes that facilitate access to collective tenure arrangements or affordable rental housing (Gilbert, 2016; Florida, 2017). Collaboration and pressure of different stakeholders in Brazil resulted in the incorporation of the right to the city concept in the legal framework of urban management and creation of the Ministry of Cities in 2003 (Fernandes; 2007).

Detachment of theory and practice

As I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the traditions of the planning discipline are based on an overly teleological perception of the world, meaning that planners have been naively confident about the possibility of a final and ultimate condition of cities. Mainstream urban planning has struggled to acknowledge the importance of uncertainty and temporality, not only in the environment, but also within the planning process itself.

Contemporary literature increasingly challenges the mainstream traditions and suggest shifts in thinking about planning; from utopian visions to strategic facilitation, from expert-driven to community-driven, from standardised to reflexive, from resilient to resourceful, from designed to emergent, from fixed to open, from permanent to temporary and experimental or even spontaneous and incremental. Many of these are complex frameworks and models, which are based on solid empirical evidence, but so far they have had little impact on the practice of planning. Other new approaches may have either reduced or increased bureaucracy, which unintentionally introduces a new set of different uncertainties and challenges. A significant gap exists between the presented theory and practice of planning, and between data on the planners' desks and the messy reality of the cities they plan. At best, uncertainty has been treated by planners as an external challenge, but what is under-communicated is that uncertainty is in many cases produced by the act of planning itself. In other words, more sophisticated and complex planning processes create gaps in knowledge needed to fulfil the function of planning, which leads to creating more uncertainty. Note how, for example, the principles of the very common strategic planning approach (Where are we now? Where do we want to be? and How do we get there?) are based on questions and gaps in knowledge, which constitute (at least) three different types of uncertainties.

Cities throughout the world and especially in the Global South have experienced a detachment of urban planning from the everyday reality of residents. Plans are often made in an authoritarian, top-down manner by unqualified staff or underfunded planning institutions without engaging other relevant actors. Planning agencies often lack the capacity to maintain the robust and up-to-date data needed to generate knowledge to plan efficiently and reduce uncertainties, which, paradoxically, are created by these same planning systems. Urban management struggles with tensions between planners, state institutions, politicians, private capital owners and communities regarding who should carry the burdens of these uncertainties. Planning in cities in the South is challenged by 'conflicting rationalities', where the universalised modern visions of the ideal environments designed by planners are confronted by residents who make claims to their rights of citizenship and self-expression (Watson, 2003). These problems lead to unsustainable and chaotic development and the failure to implement plans, which contributes to increased inequalities in the provision of housing and infrastructure (Ryser & Franchini, 2015; Sennett et al., 2018; UN-Habitat, 2022). Whether this

happens through neoliberal deregulation, insufficient participation or lack of preparedness for natural or human-caused disasters, the vulnerable are the ones that suffer most.

In my understanding, many of the proposals and frameworks for planning approaches presented above are based on a simplified vision of development or single case studies, which assume that formality (in normative planning) is the main mode of development and that planners are experts who know, or can teach themselves how to minimise uncertainty. At the same time, these proposals of addressing uncertainty (perhaps with the exception of Hamdi's Strategic Action Planning idea) ignore the widespread presence of the 'unplanned', or informal: that 20 percent of the world's population live in squatter settlements, slums and other types of substandard housing (UN-Habitat, 2022), and that 61 percent of all workers are employed in the informal sector (ILO, 2018).

In the next section, I will explain theories that influenced my understanding of informality and how it relates to urban development, planning practices and uncertainty. This will also serve as a background theoretical explanation behind the emergence of the three settlements in Buenos Aires I chose to study.

Informality as a challenge to planning

one ought not to see formality as the normal state of affairs.
(Altrock, 2012, p. 185).

According to Altrock (2012), "[t]o speak of informality only makes sense if there is something like formalisation that has led to formality" (p. 173). Roy (2005) claimed that informality should not be understood as a sector or "object of state regulation", but a "state of exception" or a mode of governance "produced by the state itself" (p. 149). The characteristic features of informality as a phenomenon, or way of life is that it is highly adaptive to different situations (AlSayyad, 2004, Roy, 2005). Carrizosa (2021) argued that informality can be a verb, process, practice, action, or a different type of production, both destructive or constructive. She identified five distinct schools of thought about informality:

1. Dualism – informality and formality as binary spheres, where the official or formal is correct and the non-official or informal is wrong. Dualism is the most conventional and traditional understanding.
2. Structuralism – in a Marxist understanding of the structuralist theory, informality is necessary for the formal to function.
3. Legalism – a neoliberal perspective, which perceives formality as bureaucracy and claims that whatever threatens efficiency should be de-regularised, leading to more informality.
4. Voluntarism – informality as preference practised by certain opportunists to gain profits and benefits.
5. Continuum – there are no pure formalities or informalities, but a range of variations. Whatever functions remains (Carrizosa, 2021).

The understanding of informality as a continuum is most common in contemporary studies of urban informality (AlSayyad, 2004; Altrock, 2012; Kamalipour & Peimani, 2021). This phenomenon can also be explained as "hybrid

formal-informal arrangements” (Altrock, 2012, p. 171), the combination of “formal rules and social norms” (Sanyal, n.d., p. 2) or “grey spaces”, which are

developments, enclaves, populations and transactions positioned between the ‘lightness’ of legality/approval/safety and the ‘darkness’ of eviction/destruction/death. (Yiftachel, 2009, p. 250).

As I discussed before, the same continuum principle of informality can be applied to uncertainty, where it is also difficult to define a clear division between what is known and unknown. Both phenomena are time and place-specific. While the opposite of uncertainty is knowledge, information and data, the opposite of informality is regulation, law or official recognition. These are related concepts, because typically, regulations and laws are generated from knowledge, information and data. Therefore, in the understanding of informality as a continuum, uncertainty and informality are correlated. Certainty is a precondition for formality, while uncertainty creates room for informality to thrive. This, however, is not necessarily the case from the legalist or voluntarist perspectives.

Following the continuum perspective, and assuming that “acting informally does not necessarily mean a deviation from the formal rules” (p. 171), Altrock (2012) identified two distinct dimensions of informality: complementary and supplementary (Figure 4). Complementary informality *fills the gaps* in spheres that are not covered by formal rules. It supports the functioning or improvement of formal institutions through “informal negotiations, power demonstrations or just informal exchange of ideas and information” (Altrock, 2012, p. 176). An example of this could

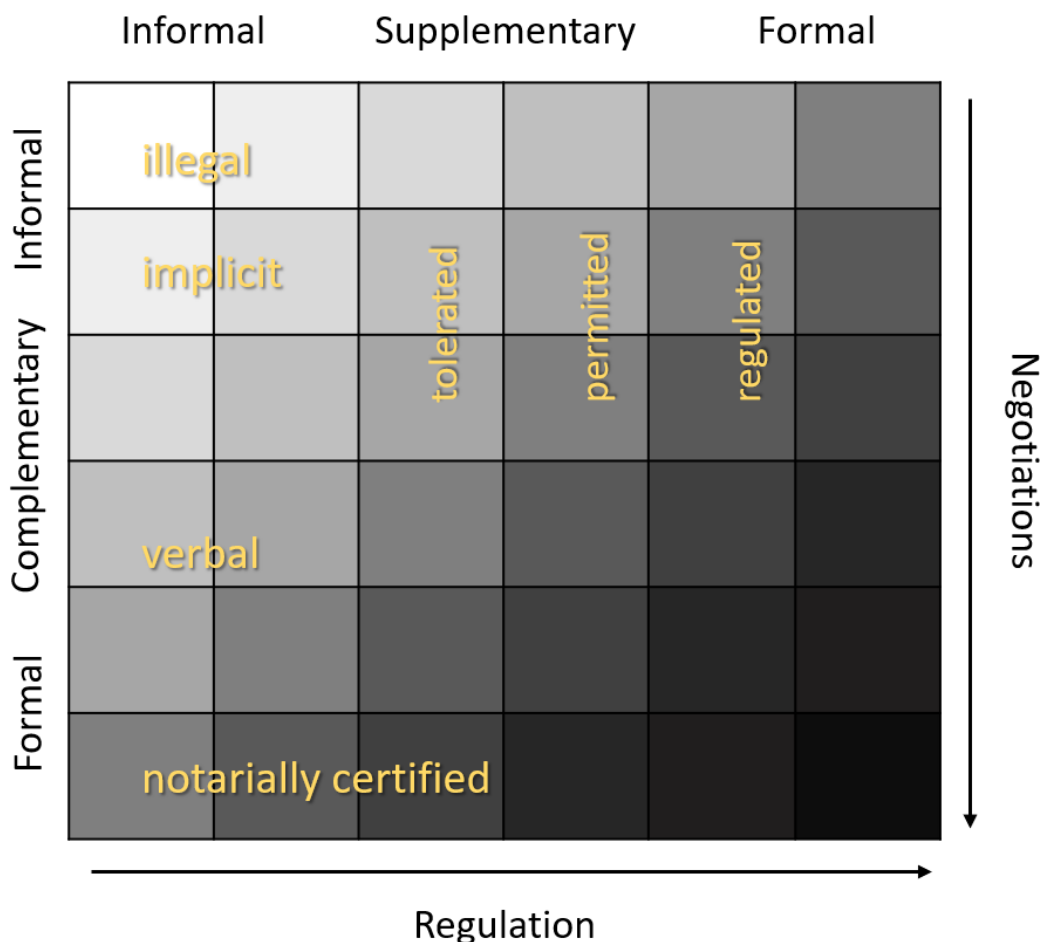


Figure 4. Altrock’s (2012) degrees of complementary and supplementary informality

be temporary appropriation of abandoned land, which does not have a clearly defined use or owner. Supplementary informality, on the other hand, *replaces* formal regulations when they do not work in reality or do not guarantee the desired social order and prosperity. It creates a parallel system of governance and organisation that fulfils similar tasks as formal institutions, but with its own rules and norms (ibid.). This can be exemplified by the act of illegally squatting of a privately owned building, where the occupants disobey official private property rights, but agree to respect the alternative, internal rules of cohabitation dictated by their leaders. An important geographic division has been demonstrated by Altrock (2012), who claimed that since complementary informality is present in all types of societies, more about it has been written in the Northern contexts, while the debates about supplementary informality leading to governance crises and insurgencies are more typical to cities in the Global South.

Similarly, one can distinguish between informality practised by the urban poor and the affluent groups. Marginalised communities tend to rely more on supplementary informality. Here, the structuralist perspective on informality (Carrizosa, 2021) comes in handy to explain the power relations and survival strategies of those excluded or disadvantaged in neoliberal economies (Castells, 1983; Roy, 2005; Müller, 2019). This debate, however, is contested, because informal practices of the poor are by some stigmatised or equalised with poverty and criminality, while by others called heroic, innovative or empowering (see for example de Soto, 2001; Roy & AlSayyad, 2004; Roy, 2005; Watson, 2009a; Yiftachel, 2009; Parnell & Robinson, 2012; Müller, 2019; Kamalipour & Peimani, 2021; Kovacic, 2022). For the more affluent groups, informality is not a survival strategy, but an option, privilege, desire, or calculated choice (Roy, 2005; Altrock, 2012; Devlin, 2018; Müller, 2019; Satterthwaite, 2020; Carrizosa, 2021). Their informal actions can be better explained using the frameworks of voluntarism and legalism.

To sum up, informality should be seen as a normal state of affairs and is a logical outcome of formalisation processes. The tension on the continuum between informality and formality can be both a matter of efficiency and a power struggle. For some, rejecting formality can be a way to escape obligations, while for others, entering formality in the first place proves to be impossible or irrational. In both cases, those who resort to informality do not want to give up the claim to certain rights, which guarantee their survival and well-being. When informality results in a governance crisis, the state can use its resources (including force) to defend the stability of the political system and the officially recognized rules and rights, or it will have to tolerate 'chaos' or a mode of living based on social norms (Altrock, 2012). Uncertainty plays an important role in this struggle, because it obscures these regulations and the interpretation of different citizen rights. In the next section, I will explain how these tensions are reproduced in urban planning through informal development.

Urban informality as planning

Roy (2005) defines urban informality as "an organising logic, a system of norms that governs the process of urban transformation itself" (p. 148). While Roy focuses on the way in which urban informality produces and regulates space, Altrock (2012) pointed out that we should pay close attention to the interrelations between spaces and the different informal non-spatial activities happening in cities, particularly between shelter and work. According to him, urbanisation leads to a growing overlap and complexity of formal and informal practices (ibid.). Similarly, Abramo

(2012) defined urban informality as “an aggregate of irregularities” (p. 41) around institutions, laws, rights, norms and practices. Applying the theory of informality as continuity to urban spaces, Altrock (2012) claimed that no space is truly formal or informal, but instead, people live in hybrid modes that combine the two.

The significance of urban informality in the contemporary world cannot be overstated. As cities grow and more urban policies and plans are being approved, so does the informal mode of development become more profound. In many regions of the world, the major part of urban spaces continues to be developed through informal practices (Ortiz Flores, 2012; Sennett et al., 2018; UN-Habitat, 2022).

The most visible representation of urban informality are informal settlements, which developed to a certain degree outside of the formal planning norms and have typically lower indicators of quality of life compared to regular neighbourhoods. Depending on the context, these areas can be called for example slums, shantytowns or squatter settlements. I will return to discuss the translations and meanings of these terms in Argentina in chapter 4. What is important to note here is that slums and shantytowns (like all other places) change and evolve over time, but as long as living conditions in these settlements are behind the updated general official indicators and housing standards, which define what a house should be or what it should have, they will still be considered slums and shantytowns, or places not worthy of habitation (Gilbert, 2007). When planning systems and housing standards are too rigid, change in itself constitutes uncertainty. Importantly, these standards are often “guided by international policies and agencies” (Echavarria et al., 2021, p. 16), meaning that they are in many cases detached from the context of the place.

Just as uncertainty, informality constitutes an epistemological challenge for planners (Roy 2005). Informal spaces tend to be considered by them as ‘unplannable’, uncontrollable, exceptional or foreign (ibid.). However, in the complex urban reality, planners are tasked to both prevent informal development and improve or integrate these spaces when they emerge. This is similar to the (often frustrating) mission of planners to reduce and cope with uncertainties in the planning process and the environment being planned. The way in which informality is produced by the acts of formalisation and planning does not seem to be acknowledged and addressed by many urban practitioners. The eternal condition of informality in these ‘grey spaces’, which are “waiting ‘to be corrected’”, puts them “in a state of ‘permanent temporariness’” (Yiftachel, 2009, p. 251).

It is important to note that informal development does not necessarily mean abandonment of planning. Recent research shows that communities in the so-called informal settlements increasingly engage in different forms of informal planning and development practices (Figure 5). Rauws (2016) distinguishes between “self-organisation”, where “citizens deliberately organise themselves in order to realise a collective ambition”² and “self-governance”, defined as “spontaneous emergence of urban structures on a particular scale out of the uncoordinated interactions”

² An example of self-organisation is the global social movement and federation of the urban poor Slum Dwellers International (SDI). Their main focus is improving housing conditions, providing water and sanitation infrastructure and ensuring tenure security in informal settlements. Some of the activities run by SDI include undertaking surveys, enumeration and mapping to identify needs and priorities, establishing saving groups to raise funds, lobbying governments to help implement slum upgrading projects and organising events to exchange knowledge with network partners and across informal settlements in other cities (SDI, 2020). SDI was established in 1996 and is now present in over 30 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

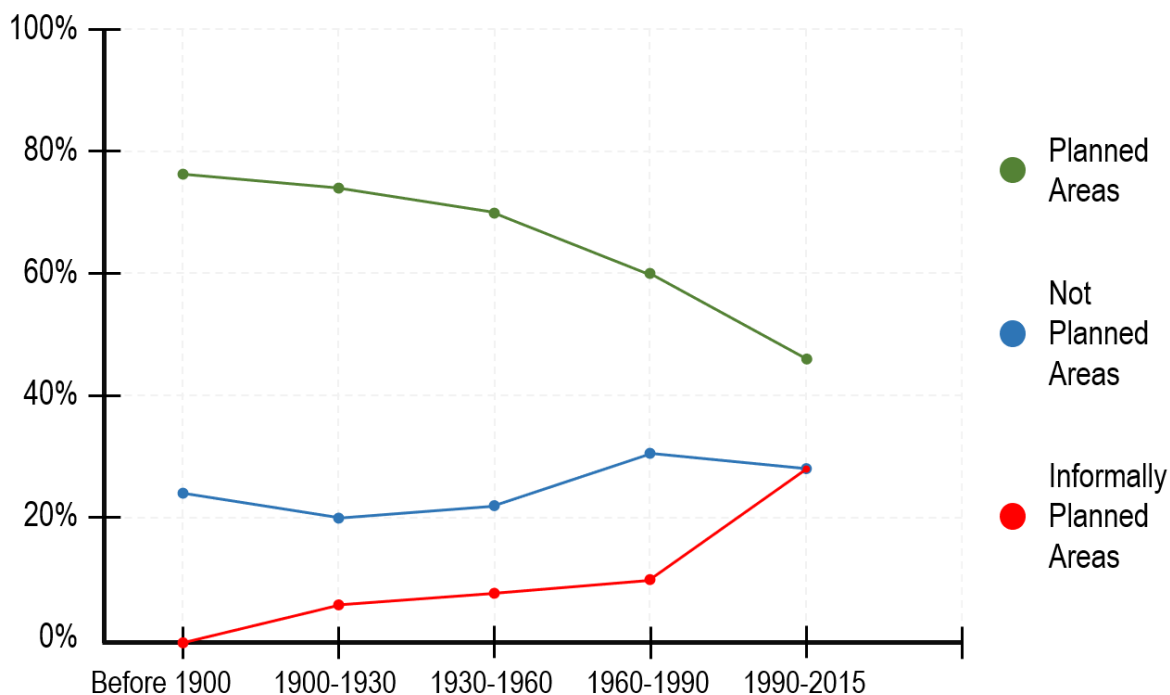


Figure 5. Growth of informal planning over time. Source: UN-Habitat / Shlomo Angel. Adapted from Sennett et al. (2018).

(p. 139). Regardless of how it is structured in practice, this way of bottom-up and emergent development can be understood as a reaction to the condition of uncertainty that the planning system does not manage to address.

Residents, and especially community leaders in these areas often acquire a good understanding of the planning process and methods, but they usually apply them outside of the formal planning system (Hamdi, 2004; Holston, 2009; Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015; Shrestha & Aranya, 2015; Kaika, 2017). Brazilian geographer Lopes de Souza (2006) called this “grassroots urban planning” and noted how in Brazil

civil society does not only criticize (as a ‘victim’ of) state-led planning, but also can directly and (pro)actively conceive and, to some extent, implement solutions independently of the state apparatus (p. 327).

For Miraftab (2009), contexts of struggles for citizenship tend to radicalise these actions further into an ‘insurgent’ way of planning, which is based on the principles of “counter-hegemonic, transgressive and imaginative” practice (p. 32).

While different forms of urban informality are also practised by the affluent (Roy, 2005; Müller, 2019), it is mainly urban poor in the Global South that rely on informality on a daily basis, due to lack of alternatives to satisfy their shelter and basic needs (UN-Habitat, 2022). Researchers and anthropologists who studied urban informality in Latin America agree that informal community organisation, social relations, trust and reciprocity are the foundations of urban development in that region (Turner, 1972; Gilbert & Ward, 1985; Gilbert, 1994; Auyero, 2001b; Lopes de Souza, 2006; Holston, 2009; Redondo Gómez, 2009; Hernández et al., 2010; Abramo, 2012; Fisher et al., 2014; Ward et al., 2015; Müller, 2019).

Challenging the planning sequence

Access to shelter through informal means is often conceptualised as the reverse of what is accepted as the formal housing process. Writing from their experience in Argentina, de Paula et al. (2010) explain how the rich normally begin with buying the property and acquiring the title deed, then building the house (or having it built) and finally moving in at the end to a finished house. The poor, however, do it the other way around: they move into the land first, then build a shack to live in and at the end, if allowed to stay on the occupied land, attempt to buy the land and obtain formal title deeds. McLeod (2001) and Hamdi (2010), who worked primarily in South Asia and Africa, encountered very similar patterns (Figure 6).

The formal process assumes a logical sequence and high degree of certainty, while the informal method is characterised by risk, conflict, unpredictable outcomes and uncertainty. However, due to the often exclusionary character of housing markets and policies, this way of informal housing access is, for many, the only affordable option (Roy, 2005). It is highly adaptable and flexible to the local needs and conditions (Rudofsky, 1964; Hamdi, 2004; Gilbert, 2016), occurring mainly in peripheral areas, though it is not uncommon to observe it near city centres. The location, and whether such housing is temporary or permanent depends on such factors as availability of land to build, degree of tolerance of the local authorities and accessibility to jobs (Turner, 1972; Ryan-Collins et al., 2017; Gilbert, 2019).

Informal housing construction is most often referred to as 'self-help', which means that the occupiers construct some or all of the building structure, with or without professional assistance (Gilbert, 2019). According to Gilbert (2005), this mode of "building and consolidating" of housing "has been highly effective in making up for the deficiencies of both the market and the government" but at the same time he warns that its quality may not be good enough to "withstand 'natural' disasters" (p. 43). Self-building as a mode of housing production has been much more common in the Global South than in the North, at least since the 19th century (Gilbert, 2019). In Latin America, between 30 and 60 percent of all housing has been built that way (Whitaker Ferreira et al., 2020).

Pelli (1994) identified three modes of self-help construction: 1) spontaneous and autonomous, with limited possibilities of consolidation and integration with the rest of the city; 2) directed, where a state institution or professional organisation guides the construction process done by the occupiers; and 3) assisted, where third parties (with or without experience) participate in the construction process led by the occupiers. Informal and self-help construction usually occurs incrementally, which means that house expansions and modifications progress over a long time, depending on the changing household needs, saving capacities (or access to financing) and tenure situation (Turner, 1976; Greene & Rojas,

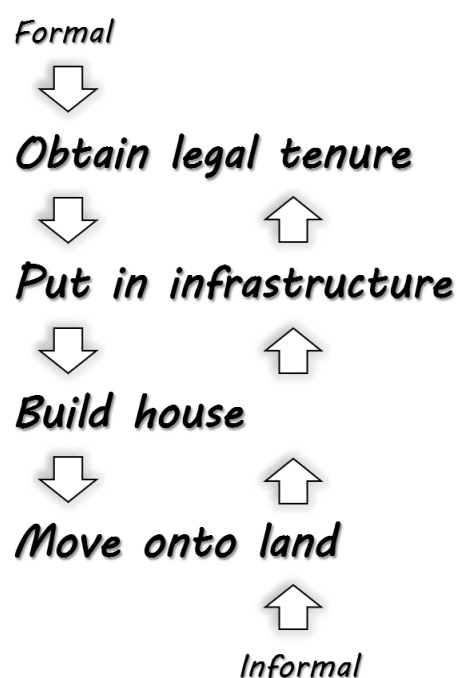


Figure 6. The formal and informal housing access processes. Adapted from Hamdi (2010).

2008; Ward et al., 2015). In consolidating and densifying informal settlements, basic infrastructure, public spaces, market places and commerce can emerge spontaneously or through some form of informal planning or agreements (Hamdi, 2004).

Standards as guides or barriers?

One of the most influential voices in the debate around informal settlements was John F.C. Turner. Together with other architect-practitioners like Charles Abrams (1966), he disagreed with the mainstream negative perceptions of slums and the idea of eradicating them. At the same time, Turner criticised both massive provision of housing in a modernist fashion and “authoritarian housing systems”, which are “impractical in economies of scarcity” (Turner, 1972, p. 169). He claimed that informal and low-quality housing is the result of unrealistically high and unmet standards of what dwelling should be and what services it should have:

If governments cannot, or will not, make up the difference between what housing laws require and what the effective demand can purchase, then why do they create these problems? (Turner, 1972, p. 150).

Turner (1972; 1976) argued that in this context of prohibitive housing standards, low-income groups themselves produce the best housing, as they use their resources efficiently and transform their dwellings according to the changing household priorities. As he demonstrated, these needs and priorities are much different from the middle- and upper-class families (Figure 7). The poorest households prioritise strategic location, which would enable access to job opportunities that would help them get out of their difficult living conditions. Since their livelihood strategy focuses on maximising saving capacities, decent quality housing with infrastructure connections and freehold ownership may be inconvenient, because that contributes to increased expenses. Low-income families may, however,

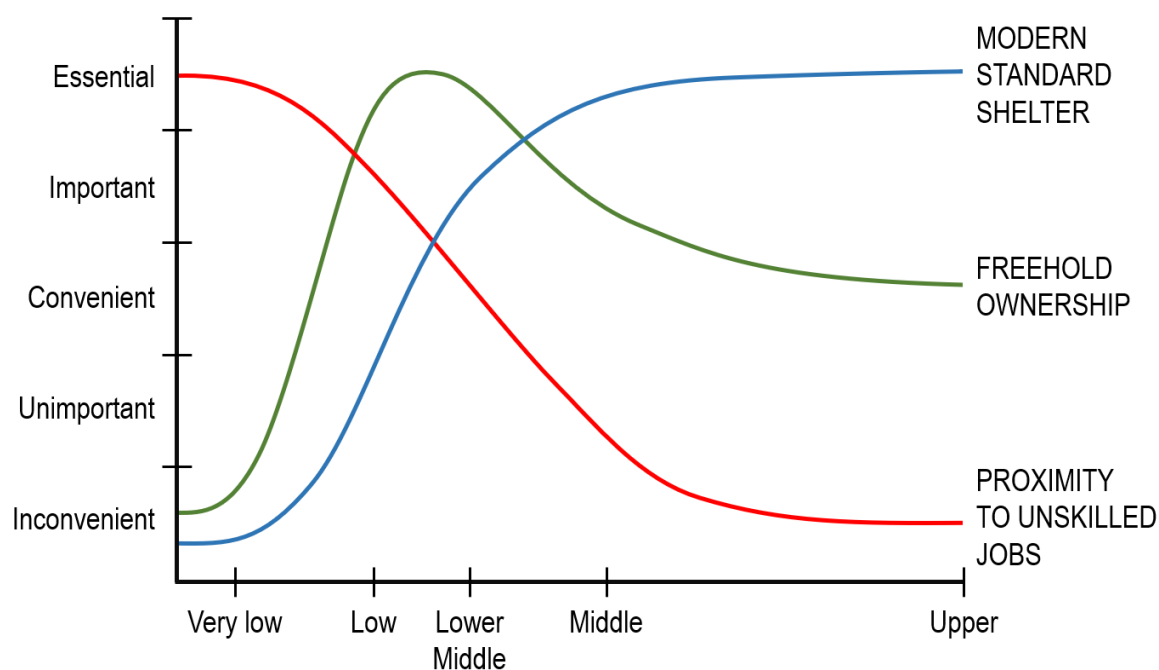


Figure 7. Priorities for housing needs according to income level. Adapted from Turner (1972).

together with the neighbours, establish community facilities and infrastructure connections that support their immediate needs and potentially increase their tenure security. The desire to be a homeowner becomes relevant when the households' economic capacities improve. In this case, formal property ownership is seen as an asset to protect against uncertain events, demonstration of social status, or capital that can be passed on to the next generations. At the same time, with the increase of household prosperity and mobility options, proximity to unskilled jobs becomes less important (ibid.). These radical shifts in priorities in different living situations is a manifestation of uncertainties and risks regarding possible eviction, loss of income, limited mobility and other daily struggles of the poor, who are excluded from the formal-official planning and market systems.

The problem, according to Turner (1972; 1976) is that the priorities of the lowest-income families are either not recognized or ignored by housing and planning institutions, who, instead of addressing these needs, design housing policies targeting households with sufficient saving capacity to afford mortgage payment for a finished dwelling. Since waiting to get housing subsidies, or saving a sufficient amount of money for buying a house takes too long, many families prefer the illegal and informal alternatives for accessing housing (ibid.). This supports the claim that informal development processes can be represented as the reverse of formal development (Figure 6).

The main proposal made by Turner (1976) is that the individuals and families should have the freedom and control to choose the best housing option, and be able to evaluate the alternatives according to their own priorities and needs, or what housing *does* for them. He envisions an open, decentralised and democratic system of housing provision, where households who wish to build or direct the construction of their own home should be allowed and supported to do so in order to "make the best use of their own resources in their own ways" (Turner, 1972, p. 173). Achieving this requires scrapping the minimum required housing standards:

The modern minimum standard concept, which acts as a barrier to development by attempting to prohibit the intermediate stages, must give way to a concept which uses standards as guides toward the progressive achievement of minimum goals. (Turner, 1976, p. 179-180).

Turner's ideas received worldwide recognition in 1976 at the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, 'Habitat I'. He was also one of the first to acknowledge the planning capacities of residents in informal settlements. Some of the most important legacies of his way of thinking about informal development are in-situ slum upgrading and the so-called sites-and-services projects, both of which gained popularity in the 1970s and 80s (Gilbert, 2019). Slum upgrading involves provision or extension of necessary infrastructure as well as public services and spaces in existing slums, with as little displacement as possible (Satterthwaite, 2020). In the sites-and-services process, the government or private developer subdivides vacant land and provides basic infrastructure connections, and then sells or distributes empty individual lots. The property owners are therefore responsible for erecting their own houses. UN-Habitat continues to promote both slum upgrading and sites-and-services projects, but stresses that their effective implementation requires adapting them to the contexts and involving local communities (Vaggione, 2014).

The neo-anarchist perspective of Turner has been challenged from both the radical left and neoliberal camps. The former accuse him of not addressing structural issues of the capitalist economic and political system, which led to a class struggle and inequalities in the housing sector (Burgess, 1978). Maintaining the status quo at the political level

makes it impossible to implement the assisted self-help development proposed by Turner at a larger scale (ibid.). Marxist writers also criticise Turner's ideas to scrap standards and promote the self-help housing production, arguing that his approach justifies self-exploitation of the working class, who are already disadvantaged in capitalist economies. This happens because they contribute their time and energy to develop housing in addition to their regular jobs and reproductive tasks, without being remunerated for it (Pradilla, 1983). According to Burgess (1978),

'self-help' is not a new idea but a very old one. The new idea in fact is that people do not and should not build their own houses. It is only in the last two centuries or so, and in relatively restricted areas of the world, that the majority of people have not had to build their own houses. Historically this has been a function of how far the capitalist division of labour has been directed towards the satisfaction of housing needs. (p. 1106).

Others highlighted that the self-help modality and the disregard to building standards have also been used as an excuse for many governments to withdraw from their obligation to ensure or provide decent housing for all (van Lindert, 2016; Gilbert, 2019).

The lure of land titling and formalisation

While many neoliberal thinkers agreed with Turner that informal housing should not be eradicated, they proposed a different path towards improvement of the housing conditions of the poor. Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto (2001) dismissed Turner's recognition of the use-value of housing and claimed that housing is first and foremost a commodity to be exchanged on the market. de Soto was convinced that capitalist markets, through the trickle-down effect, would lift living standards of the urban poor, and emphasised the urgent need of regularising informal housing and including it in the formal property market. This measure would then enable the creation of 'invisible capital' that adds surplus value to these properties through recognizing them as assets operating in virtual financial systems (ibid.). The poor could then use this unlocked capital to access loans or trade for other properties. de Soto's ideas were endorsed by the World Bank (Deininger, 2003), which influenced policy in many countries in the Global South, leading to massive titling formalisation campaigns, especially in the peripheral informal settlements. It also contributed to the gradual withdrawal of the government as a provider of housing.

de Soto's viewpoint encountered even stronger critiques than Turner's. Gilbert (2002) argued that legitimate housing transactions and financing mechanisms are not uncommon in informal settlements and that land titles are often not enough to obtain formal loans. Titling does not automatically lead to poverty reduction and improved access to financing (Payne et al., 2009). Harvey (2013) claimed that the benefits of formalising property rights are "nullified in the absence of secure and adequately remunerative employment" (p. 20). This position is supported by Payne (2002), Roy (2005) and Ryan-Collins et al. (2017). "Any lack of investment" –according to Payne et al. (2009, p. 452)– "appears to be controlled more by limited income than lack of title".

Despite a common perception, formal property ownership does not necessarily guarantee tenure security and it does little to prevent gentrification and displacement caused by market forces (Payne 2002, Roy, 2005; Payne et al., 2009). Moreover, formalising tenure often accelerates the process of socio-spatial segregation (Lees et al. 2016). Displacements are especially common when formalisation is done together with infrastructure upgrading, which

contributes further to housing unaffordability (van Lindert, 2016; Satterthwaite, 2020). However, the example of Santiago (Chile) shows that the problems of segregation and unaffordability can also occur in contexts where formalisation efforts are accompanied by removal of planning controls on urban development (Sabatini, 2000). This supports the claim that it is not formal ownership, but tenure security or guarantees of protection from eviction, which encourage housing improvement and investment (Gilbert 2002; Varley, 2002; Satterthwaite, 2020). Other criticisms of the land titling strategy proposed by de Soto are that this process tends to be slow, complex and expensive (Payne et al., 2009). The different shortcomings of formalisation have been acknowledged later by the World Bank (Buckley & Kalarickal, 2006), which gradually shifted its policy recommendations towards a more proactive role of the state in housing provision and regulation. To address the issues of unaffordability of housing in the formal property market causing informal land occupations, many scholars working in different parts of the world suggest implementing collective property ownership models, such as community land trusts (Payne, 2002; UN-Habitat, 2015; Wily, 2018; Arnold et al., 2020; Davis & Fernández, 2020; Rodríguez, 2021).

While formalisation appears to be a logical development process in cities in the Global South, it also works in reverse. There is unfortunately relatively little research done on the process of informalisation of urban spaces and activities. Literature on this topic addresses primarily informalisation in formally planned subsidised housing estates, for example in India (Aranya & Ulset, 2016), Colombia (Sliwa, 2017) and China (Jin, 2021) or concerns urban development in Ethiopia more generally (Fransen et al., 2010).

Informality as inspiration for planners

Recent literature on architecture and city planning in the South acknowledges that there is a lot to be learned from informal, emergent as well as incremental building and development practices (Roy, 2005; Holston, 2009; Watson, 2009a; Hernández et al., 2010; Koster & Nuijten, 2016). Davoudi (2015) claimed that:

Informal rules, which may not act as instructions, can also influence practical judgement by providing planners with a rich archive of prior experiences as well as what is considered 'appropriate'. (p. 326).

Such learning potentials relate to both the processes and products of planning. The former is about the way in which decisions about shared spaces are made, executed and followed up autonomously by the communities themselves (Watson, 2002, 2003; Hamdi, 2010; Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015). The latter has to do with the design, structure, use of space, as well as the choice of building materials and methods, which are often inspired by indigenous traditions, pragmatic responses to the local needs, or contextual characteristics of the places, such as local land use, landscape features or hydrological cycles (Habraken, 2000; Bredenoord & van Lindert, 2010; Mehrotra et al., 2017).

When Hamdi (2004) asks: "How much structure do we design before the structure itself interrupts the natural process of emergence?" (p. 73), he suggests that the role of architects and planners is to support the users in the construction process, and not take total control over it or set high building standards. One of the most known examples of this is Alexandro Aravena's affordable housing concept inspired by self-built dwellings in informal settlements in Latin America. The principle design, which he himself calls "half of a good house" (Winston, 2016), challenges the idea of buildings as finished products. These projects not only acknowledge and make space for incremental and

flexible expansion of the base structure, but they are also cost-effective, allowing planners to allocate a higher share of the budget for acquiring land in better locations, closer to jobs and services (Aravena & Iacobelli, 2012). What is interesting in these typologies is that house expansions can result in varied spatial forms and follow different timelines, which fit better the needs and saving capacities of the households.

Another way of engaging with urban informality is co-production, which is a joint delivery of infrastructure and services “with roles for both government and organized citizens” (Mitlin & Bartlett, 2018, p. 1). However, as I indicated previously, while co-production, incremental construction, self-building and acknowledgement of informal development may improve efficiency in housing production and social cohesion, they raise questions regarding the withdrawal of the state from its role to provide access to affordable and dignified housing and ensure social equity and justice (ibid.). The position of the government institutions and the political dilemmas regarding urban regulation and housing policy appear to be the central debate around the issues of uncertainty in planning and urban informality.

Nevertheless, the potential which informal and insurgent planning practices can influence the official urban governance systems is far from being exhausted. My study in Buenos Aires opens up the possibility to identify these kinds of processes and development practices, and discuss whether or not there is something in them that can be adopted or incorporated in the planning frameworks at the different levels of government in Argentina.

Uncertainty and informality as products of planning

Yet, the formal and the legal are perhaps better understood as fictions, as moments of fixture in other-wise volatile, ambiguous, and uncertain systems of planning. In other words, informality exists at the very heart of the state and is an integral part of the territorial practices of state power. (Roy, 2009, p. 84).

This excerpt from Roy’s diagnosis of the urban condition in India makes a rather unexpected and, for many planners and architects, an inconvenient shift of thinking, where informality and uncertainty are not exceptions, but the norm. In a similar way to uncertainty, urban informality is too often portrayed as ‘bad’, while the way in which it ‘corrects’ the inefficiency of the formal has not been sufficiently communicated to planning practitioners and policy makers. These groups often treat informality in the same way as uncertainty: as an external challenge to be addressed through planning and formalisation. Moreover, the reviewed literature supports the same claim that informality is in many cases produced in the actual processes of planning and formalisation. At the same time, it can be argued that informality in planning, just as uncertainty, is what can be unknown to the local authorities who define what is formal or official, but not to communities or regular people who act pragmatically. In some situations, however, when something is deemed formal or known, people tend to act on and rely on these formalities and knowledges, which makes their vulnerability to the unknown and the informal greater, such as in the case of dealing with the concept of time before and after the invention of the wristwatch.

In other words, as uncertainties and informalities are usually treated as challenges for planning, in reality they are often the results of the act of planning itself. This suggests that the concepts of informality and uncertainty in the

context of urban development have a lot in common. The question then is: does less planning and more relaxed standards lead to more informality and uncertainty, or is the opposite true?

The gaps in research

In the reviewed literature, I found insufficient research that would study the relations between planning, different forms of uncertainties and informality. This problem concerns both camps. While those who study uncertainty in planning tend to ignore the presence of informal modes of development, authors who conceptualise informality simplify uncertainty as something that is embedded in the general context:

Uncertainty is so pervasive in the narratives of informality that it has become naturalised, a “fact” that governance must deal with. (Kovacic, 2022, p. 5).

More specifically, little has been written about how inefficiency in the planning processes leads to informal development. I was also surprised not to find much literature that would question the purpose of urban planning itself in conditions of high environmental and process uncertainties and informality. Most authors who theorised about uncertainty in and for planning seem to have a ‘solution’ or ‘recipe’ for planners about what to do about uncertainty and informality. However, if planning requires knowledge to act, and uncertainty is not knowing, are then the ideals of planning out of reach no matter what? Do these weaknesses imply reducing planning to a simple process of monitoring and adaptation?

As a starting point in my research, I do not assume that all human settlements have been planned in a sophisticated way, but rather search for traces of any forms of top-down or bottom-up planning in their emergence, formation and development. This includes considering community actors as active drivers of development who can shape their own parallel planning processes, which challenges the idea put forth by many of the cited authors that addressing uncertainty can be solved by increased participation and including urban dwellers in the formal planning process.

Part of the problem is that most of the theory on urban planning and uncertainty, as demonstrated by the works cited in this chapter, has been done in the Global North, while urban informality is researched primarily in the Global South (Roy, 2005; Parnell & Robinson, 2012). As the ‘Northern’ scholars may have faith in the robustness of the planning systems in their part of the world and usually perceive informality as something marginal, the Southern urban theory assumes that uncertainty is a general context or structural problem that naturally leads to informality, but it is not worth a deep discussion or analysis itself. Robinson and Roy (2016) point out that much research in cities in the Global South suggests a dystopic and pessimistic urban future, and that many scholars incorrectly formulate overgeneralised planning theories based on “common dimensions of all cities”, which is unhelpful (p. 184). As Alexander (2015) claimed, “realism demands a contingent, not a universal, definition of planning” (p. 91).

Following this premise, more useful conceptualising of planning practices across borders requires a post-structuralist perspective and adaptation of vocabulary to the local contexts. For example, Bhan (2019) suggests that urban planning in the Global South lacks more pronounced discussions about such processes as ‘squatting’ as a practice, ‘repairing’ as opposed to constructing, or building and ‘consolidating’ as an alternative to centralising or formalising.

Similarly, Watson (2009a) as well as Parnell and Robinson (2012) call for considering application of a broader range of theories to cities in the South beyond the mainstream discussions around neoliberalism. Some examples of alternative approaches they mention are poverty, informality and traditionalism (ibid.). My choice of applying uncertainty and informality as theories that inform my analysis fits this proposition very well. By building upon the idea of 'conflicting rationalities' (Watson, 2003), my thesis attempts to contribute to the Southern urban theory by conceptualising the tensions around uncertainty and informality within their contexts in Buenos Aires.

The few publications that implicitly address uncertainty *and* informality in planning respond to this gap differently. In the article by Kovacic (2022), who studied slum policies in Brazil and South Africa, uncertainty in contexts of informality is defined as the lack of data. This problem, according to her, can be addressed "by enumeration and self-enumeration exercises" (p. 5). While it is a useful contribution, her proposal does not consider a broader scope of uncertainties that impact communities in informal settlements beyond data uncertainty. Kovacic (2022) has also overlooked important distinctions between data and knowledge and how planning knowledge is generated (see Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015). Müller (2019) claimed that "informality unsettles communities by producing a generalised uncertainty" (p. 72). In his research conducted in Mexico and Brazil, he found that normalised uncertainty in informal settlements does not only disturb, but also mobilises bottom-up action and organisation at the neighbourhood level.

Other contemporary authors who studied uncertainty, informality and planning have focused on particular sectors and social groups that share urban spaces, or on isolated uncertainties and crises. Linking uncertainty and informality has been a common approach in many studies of urban labour markets. Merkel (2019) warned that the growing culture of freelance work and establishment of co-working office spaces in New York, London and Berlin is not so much about the wish for flexibility, but results from gradual informalisation and precarisation of creative labour markets. Similarly, Thieme (2018) used informality and uncertainty as a way to describe the realities of youth in Nairobi in the context of demographic and economic transitions. Applying the uncertainty lens is also typical in studies done on informal practices and planning regulations of street vendors (Kamalipour & Peimani, 2021), in such places as New York (Devlin, 2011), Bangkok (Batréau & Bonnet, 2016), China (Jiang & Wang, 2021) and Indonesia (Song, 2016). Kamalipour and Peimani (2021) who studied informal urban development in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic concluded that informal community adaptation and social capital are some of the most critical assets and coping strategies to reduce uncertainty and achieve resilience. Little has been written about uncertainty and informality in connection with access to housing. In one such study, Fawaz (2017) looked at the housing strategies of refugees in Beirut and suggested placing more attention on informality, uncertainty and resilience in planning.

What is underplayed in many of these studies is the question about 'who knows?', and the idea that uncertainty is experienced and acted upon much differently across the spectrum of the more and less powerful actors. Further investigation is needed to recognize diverse knowledge rationalities of the stakeholders involved in urban development, and the conflicts that may emerge from the different interpretations and valuations of knowledge (Hordijk & Baud, 2006; Jacobs et al., 2015). In addition, research on informal housing and slums neglects the changing conceptions of rights that guarantee dignified living and belonging (Holston, 2009), as well as the "everyday material and symbolic manifestations of chronic precarity" (Muñoz, 2018a, p. 413). Planners tend to ignore the contested land-ownership situation and how informality impacts access to affordable land and housing (Roy, 2005).

I argue that there is space for a deeper conceptualisation of uncertainty and informal development, both as external threats *to* and products *of* the urban planning process. These are some of the research gaps I would like to address in this thesis.

Towards a better framework for uncertainty and informality

A possible way to approach the challenges of uncertainty and informality would be to start thinking differently about planning to avoid exacerbating the problem, and to develop more flexible and contextual capabilities in the planning system where uncertainty and informality are addressed or embraced and not generated by the system itself.

As I discussed above, while uncertainty and informality are not synonymous, there are different ways in which these two co-construct and reinforce each other. As a starting point for my research, I assume that the condition of being outside of legal and formal rules and norms constitutes uncertainty for both those who are directly affected by it, and for planners whose task is to shape official laws and enforce order. More informality therefore widens the gap between the known and unknown. In other words, from a planner's point of view, informality increases uncertainty. It generates spaces that are difficult to plan according to the more established methodologies or approaches, and magnifies marginalisation of communities whose access to dignified housing is steadily more limited through formal systems of planning and redistribution. Engaging with uncertainty and informality requires seeing them as a normal state of affairs that needs to be analysed critically and acted upon, and not reduced, eliminated or eradicated.

My interpretation of the context and my research methods are heavily influenced by the idea of cities as ecosystems characterised by networks of complex political, social and economic relationships between the inhabitants, decision makers and other stakeholders (see Sliwa et al., 2018). These connections and power relations are constantly changing and evolving, which challenges the structural status quo, though most of the time this reinforces socio-economic inequalities. Urban areas consist of spaces and activities, which are on the continuum between formality and informality, where formality is more often a mode of living and working of the more affluent part of the society, while informality is typically associated with the involuntary reality of a large part of the urban poor. Studying urban areas defined this way requires collecting empirical data that includes opinions, ambitions, plans, choices, and actions performed both by those who defend the official (formal) and those who practise the informal, or semi-formal:

Relevant theory must be built on empirical and analytical work about real-life experiments in city-building, whether in the form of official government programs or the mundane, ordinary practices associated with reproducing livelihoods and “lifeworlds” in the city. (Parnell & Robinson, 2012, p. 598).

The knowledge of planners, as it is transformed into maps, portray urban space as compartmentalised, manageable and orderly – as seen from above. Other forms of knowledge – that of a community member, or a visiting journalist – might portray urban informal spaces in very different ways, as narratives, for instance. (Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015, p. 124).

I argue that urban development is not a direct outcome of urban planning, but rather it is contingent upon certain contextual circumstances where formal and state-led planning is only one factor. In reality, planning is never truly

linear, while development is driven by many other temporal and place specific forces and influential actors. Knowledge exchange, uncertainty and formalities/informalities shape the 'rules of the game', defining and contesting the relationships and activities that are indispensable parts of diverse planning practices. Considering informality requires thinking of it beyond its role as a mode of spatial production. It calls for giving voice to community actors, who are often silenced or are not recognized as drivers of development (Romero Lankao & Qin, 2011), while in fact they are the ones who hold the knowledge necessary to resolve the challenges of uncertainty and informality.

As Watson (2009b) claimed, there are "no ready-made solutions for Southern urban context" (p. 151). Thus, my theoretical and analytical approaches have been inspired by the work of Watson (2003, 2009a, 2009b), Hamdi (2004, 2010) and Robinson (2013), who warn against replicating the western perspectives of urban modernity that have been widely practised by urban scholars. Instead, I follow Watson's (2009a) call to challenge the dominance of the western planning theory and the way in which it contributes to the growing gap between the normative planning approaches and the realities in cities in the South. For this reason I reject the application of well-established theoretical frameworks in urban studies and instead write from contexts rather than about them (Bhan, 2019). In other words, I attempt to theorise from the studied spaces and timelines, which I will present through narratives.

Analytical strategies

My overall objective is to develop empirical knowledge about how uncertainty is experienced and acted upon in informal settlements and shantytowns in Buenos Aires. This will be achieved through analysing the spatial and temporal contexts to identify patterns and relations of the different degrees of the known and unknown, as well as the formal and informal. The analysis of the narratives of planning processes in the selected case areas is inspired by the analytical methods of thematic analysis and process tracing, which I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter.

Although my thesis is situated in the discipline of human geography and has an obvious spatial dimension, studying uncertainty requires accommodating the aspect of time. In this sense, it is required to study and analyse my case areas not as being static, spatially defined contexts, but as multiple dynamic contexts: the same geographical locations seen as different spaces across time. The temporal realities and conditions cannot be simply aggregated and merged into one, but instead they need to be investigated as separate (yet densely interlinked through causal relationships) contexts or 'units' of study.

I will then partly engage in doing 'future geographies', that is, how have people, human settlements and urban planners envisioned the future of urban spaces in the past and study how these practices and ideas adapted to the changing situation in reality. Here, the vocabulary around anticipatory practices (as calculation, imagination and performance) and logics (precaution, preemption and preparedness) introduced by Anderson (2010) will be particularly useful. In my further analysis, I will also evaluate the normative planning exercise as a process that tends to consist of three steps: Where are we now? Where do we want to be? and How do we get there? (Stenberg & Austin, 2007). My challenge goes beyond doing research about the future in the past and the present. It also includes multiple pasts and presents in the past. Investigating the chronological development of the chosen areas, the sequence of relevant laws

and regulations, and behaviours or decisions of different actors over time, as well as constructing timelines and scenarios might help in capturing how time- and place-specific uncertainties and informalities affect living conditions in the present and aspirations in the unknown future.

I apply a holistic and comprehensive approach to research. As I suggested in the literature review part, most research on urban development studies the problem of uncertainty or informality from a narrow perspective, taking one process, or one set of stakeholders at a time, which leads to leaving out many important and influential actors or processes and not considering other external and internal uncertainties and informalities (as threats to or products of planning) that might be very relevant. My intention is not to narrow down what urban development and planning or uncertainty is at the data collection stage, but rather make sense of it in the analysis and construct new understandings in an inductive methodological and analytical process.

Provided that my topic of study concerns conflicting and complex rationalities (Watson, 2003) that are open to multiple interpretations, I concluded that the appropriate way to answer my research questions is to construct detailed narratives about the observed cases first, and then search for traces of uncertainties within the narratives. Since no framework for identifying different types of uncertainties in space and time has been proposed in urban planning literature, I attempt to keep it open and create my own categories and typologies of uncertainty. To achieve my objectives, stories and situations in the chosen case study areas will be compared, but as this is an inductive and qualitative study of uncertainties, there will be no predefined frameworks or indicators for comparison.

Therefore, my empirical analysis follows these steps:

1. Construct detailed narratives of the studied informal settlements and shantytowns.
2. Identify uncertainties within these settlements:
 - Uncertainties that led to their emergence,
 - Uncertainties that impacted their further development.
3. Analyse similarities and differences between uncertainties across the case study areas.
4. Analyse how different actors are impacted by these uncertainties and how they attempt to decrease or accommodate them through formal or informal means.
5. Analyse how uncertainty impacts the practice of urban planning in the context of informality more generally.

As per the sequence of my research questions, the first objective is to identify, categorise, explore and understand uncertainties in the selected settlements before, during and after they emerge. I will then use this knowledge to analyse how the identified uncertainties impact development and planning of these areas as practised and performed by urban planners and other stakeholders, including the communities living there. While the identification and categorisation will be done thematically ('what type of uncertainty is it?'), its development and impact will be analysed through tracing the encountered processes ('how is the uncertainty addressed?'). This will be followed by a reflection upon the implication of my study for the planning profession and urban policy more generally.

The ambition is not to develop a new universal planning approach, but rather contribute to the existing body of knowledge by challenging the limitations of the studied planning processes, evaluating the appropriateness of the encountered contextual practices, and proposing loose ideas of possible improvements of the planning system in Argentina and beyond. This is in line with Alexander's (2015) claim that there is not a single thing we can call planning, but rather different (professional and non-professional) planning practices. He proposes

abandoning abstract generalizations about "planning" to develop mid-level theories for particular planning practices such as spatial planning. Such mid-level theories can be based on realistic empirical analysis and case studies of contextuated planning practices, relate to epistemology that fits the relevant epistemic practice, and develop contingent prescriptions for good practice usable in that context. (Alexander, 2015, p. 99).

3. Research methods

Research is formalized curiosity
- Zora Neale Hurston (1996, p. 143)

As I argued previously, many authors writing about uncertainty in planning try to quantify it and reduce it to universal models or rigid frameworks. I find it only partly helpful, because a lot of it is abstract and detached from reality, which means that it can have little practical value for the planning practice. Instead, I want to study and analyse the behaviour of planning actors, and the involvement of communities in highly uncertain and informal contexts. This is driven both by my dissatisfaction with the mainstream planning literature, and my own curiosity as an explorer and urban ethnographer. However, operationalising these principles in a research project proved to be challenging and required constant adjustments. In this chapter, I will focus on my role as a researcher and describe my turbulent journey from developing a problem statement to answering my research questions and disseminating the findings. First, I will explain the key principles that guided my methodology and how the methods have changed in the process. Then, I will outline and explain each of the research methods and analytical tools I applied, as well as the measures I took to make this work as credible and legitimate as possible. I will conclude this chapter by discussing limitations of my research, ethical considerations and my positionality as a researcher.

Methodological approaches

Ideally, I would have chosen to perform a mixed qualitative and quantitative study (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007; Stephen Ezennia & Hoskara, 2019), but due to time and budgetary limitations, this proved to be unrealistic. My choice was then to abandon quantitative measures and apply a qualitative case study research methodology through ethnographic physical and remote fieldworks. As I will explain, my narrative approach is driven by reflexivity (Dowling, 2010), principles of decolonisation (Howitt & Stevens, 2010), and relativism, where “we accept the validity of multiple, and possibly conflicting accounts of the social world” (Irwin, 2010, p. 419).

Limitations of research on affordable housing

Although housing affordability is not embedded in the main research questions, this concept plays a key role in my study of informal settlements and living conditions of the urban poor in Buenos Aires. Going beyond its theoretical implications, a deeper understanding of housing affordability measures has been particularly relevant to inform my methodological choices and approaches. According to one of the most cited definitions,

Affordability is concerned with securing some given standard of housing (or different standards) at a price or rent which does not impose, in the eyes of some third party (usually government) an unreasonable burden on household incomes. (Maclennan & Williams, 1990, p. 9).

As noted by Stephen Ezennia and Hoskara (2019), the precise definitions and measurement approaches of housing affordability vary between professions and disciplines. For example:

economists mostly prioritize clarity of concept, utility and objectivity, while sociologists usually focus on social inequality concerns and the research capacity of HA [housing affordability] to cover actual experiences of household housing stress. Architects are focused largely on providing savings and cost reductions on both upfront costs and the ongoing cost of occupation. (Stephen Ezennia & Hoskara, 2019, p. 5-6).

The authors highlight that the application of distinct approaches may lead to very different outcomes (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, the use of economic and quantitative measuring methods has historically been much more common than alternative approaches (Sunega & Lux, 2016; Ryan-Collins et al., 2017; Stephen Ezennia & Hoskara, 2019). Researchers opt for quantifying affordability as a way to compare its development across time and space, to draft housing policy and to inform subsidy budgets. Many of the housing affordability indices are based on a simple formula of the ratio of average housing-related expenses to disposable household income. Most organisations and institutions, which use such quantitative measures define the unaffordability benchmark at somewhere between 30 and 40% of income dedicated to housing (*ibid.*). This measure has also been endorsed by the World Bank and UN-Habitat, who use the 30% affordability threshold in their policy advice documents for governments in the Global South (World Bank, 2014; UN-Habitat, 2019).

However, these conventional measures of housing affordability have recently received substantial criticism. The most common arguments against quantitative affordability indices is that they tend to overgeneralise the situation by neglecting the differences in household conditions, compositions and sizes, as well as their individual preferences for location and housing type (Stephen Ezennia & Hoskara, 2019). The percentage affordability benchmarks are accused of being arbitrary and assuming that all households have the same non-housing expenditures and saving capacities (*ibid.*). Another important consideration is that what matters for people varies across time, which means that quantitative indicators can quickly become outdated. Happiness and well-being can be determined both by circumstances at a given moment, as well as overall lifelong satisfaction and sense of achievement; and these two dimensions are difficult to separate from one another (Alexandrova, 2014). The stability of preferences is, therefore, uncertain in itself. The same can be said about capabilities and possible future pathways at a certain point in time. The cultural differences in local housing conditions, together with the difficulty of collecting robust data in different contexts, also makes it very difficult to make reliable comparisons of housing affordability between cities or countries (Sunega & Lux, 2016; Stephen Ezennia & Hoskara, 2019; Satterthwaite, 2020). These perspectives have inspired the way I approached my research through influencing the methods I used to investigate housing struggles and strategies of the low-income population in Buenos Aires.

To respond to the weaknesses of quantitative measurement of affordable housing, various types of qualitative and non-monetary alternatives have recently been proposed. These new approaches suggest supplementing or

complimenting traditional economic affordability indices with social, environmental, geographic, behavioural and other contextual factors (Stephen Ezennia & Hoskara, 2019). One of such proposals is to include subjective indicators of housing conditions and economic well-being into affordability studies. These can be especially useful in times of crises and uncertainties, where the gaps between objective (quantifiable) and subjective (contextualised) evaluation tend to be significant (Hayo & Seifert, 2003; Sunega & Lux, 2016). Subjective indicators allow extending economic measures with perceptions about such diverse, but very important aspects as: appropriateness of dwelling type, housing standard and quality, as well as overcrowding, health concerns, neighbourhood qualities, transportation, participation in decision-making and choice of housing (Sunega & Lux, 2016; Stephen Ezennia & Hoskara, 2019). Furthermore, Sunega and Lux (2016) claim that it is not necessarily true that subjective perceptions of affordability change over time more than monetary and objective indicators.

For me it was evident early in the process that any form of quantitative studies of housing affordability would not be appropriate in the context of Buenos Aires. The main reason why it is difficult to make reliable numeric estimates and comparisons is the rapidly changing economic situation and unpredictable inflation (Procupez & Rodríguez, 2019). This was also confirmed by housing expert at the Civil Association for Equality and Justice (ACIJ), Rosario Fassina:

Calculating inflation in Argentina today, I mean, not even a magician could do it, all the inflation forecasts that were made, have failed. (Interview 7).

Statistical data on housing affordability is very fragmented, while the flaws in the national population census disqualifies it as a reliable source of information (Rodríguez, 2009). Maria Cristina Cravino, who has a long research trajectory within the domain of housing and informality in Argentina, warned me that I should be particularly sceptical about statistics and aggregate survey data on informal settlements, arguing that this information may be manipulated or that it poorly reflects the real dimensions of the problem. Such a perception of informality of housing follows the premise that it “is often seen as a local issue, to be resolved at the local level” (Roy, 2005, p. 154). The implications of this is that

Causal models are no better than the assumptions on which they are founded. Sound knowledge is built, rather, on intensive empirical work, which holds qualitative insights and is available to testing and to falsification. (Irwin, 2010, p. 421).

Following these recommendations, I decided to focus on qualitative and ethnographic methods, inspired by the idea of behavioural and subjective measures of housing affordability. By abandoning quantitative measures, I lose the possibility of comparing affordability between the different cities and setting the Buenos Aires conditions in a global context, but that would be of little value considering the specificity of this case. The implications of my choice is that instead of applying quantitative surveys or relying on secondary statistical data, I built my fieldwork around site visits, where I met the local population in their places of residence or work, and asked them directly about their perception of affordability of housing, their general perceptions of living quality, their worries and challenges, as well as their future choices and aspirations. This allowed me to ensure that the collected information is situated in the spatial and temporal context of the research, and link it to the housing policies, norms, plans, standards and practices that applied (or did not) there.

Multi-scale case study and process tracing

The next step after deciding to apply qualitative methods was defining the appropriate scale and spatial boundaries of my study. Many urban researchers consider qualitative or mixed-method case study approaches as the most appropriate for studies in affordable housing (Ward et al., 2015; Stephen Ezennia & Hoskara, 2019) or planning and urban development more generally (Watson, 2002; Flyvbjerg, 2006). According to Watson and Agbola (2013):

Case study work is a pre-eminent means of addressing the need to produce new knowledge relevant to practice, enhancing skills and competencies, and establishing values that planners should embrace in the course of their professional careers.

Such qualitative case studies assume indicative approaches (Davoudi, 2015) where, as I discussed in chapter 2, writing and theorising is done from, and not about places (Watson, 2009a; Bhan, 2019). However, case study research on urban development and housing can be performed at different scales, from a single household to the entire metropolitan region. The method I applied in my research followed a multi-level ethnographic approach (Irwin, 2010). My choice of working at different spatial scales, was driven by the principle that “global and local” are not “mutually exclusive” (Roy, 2005, p. 154, see also Harvey, 2000), and that “the use of evidence from different ‘levels’ adds to our capacity to explain social pattern and process” (Irwin, 2010, p. 433). Applying this to my research, I attempted to study both the subjective perceptions and agencies of individual actors at the neighbourhood scale, and retrieve information that allowed me to identify general patterns and structural issues at the metropolitan scale, in which the local processes are embedded.

Acknowledging that studies based on more cases are more robust than single case-study (Yin, 2014), in the way in which they justify a higher degree of generalisation (Silverman, 2001; Tsang, 2016), I decided to choose several different neighbourhoods and housing projects within the same urban area as main cases. Selecting dissimilar cases at multiple scales was also a strategy attempting to strengthen the credibility of my study through mitigating the problem of anecdotalism, which many single-case ethnographies are accused of (Silverman, 2001). The cases and informants within them were not selected all at the same time, but they were added and removed at different stages of my research, following the emergence of new factors, and as an effort to test and falsify my early assumptions (ibid.).

Detailed data was originally collected in six places, but due to lack of space in this thesis, further in-depth analysis was conducted based primarily on data from three of them: shantytown Villa 31, informal settlement Costa Esperanza and land occupation Guernica. These areas will be introduced again in chapter 4. The three places which do not form part of the main analysis are: social housing project Carlos Gardel, neighbourhood La Boca with the social rental housing project Estela de Esperanzas located there, and a housing cooperative ‘27th of May’ run by an organisation for Bolivian women.

At the larger scale, I chose to separate my data for the two main types of housing areas under study: shantytowns and informal settlements. The main differences between these two will be introduced in the next chapter. These accounts build on both empiric and secondary data from different other neighbourhoods that fit these descriptions, supplemented by a review of relevant planning policy and practice at the different tiers of government.

Narrative generation and analysis

The next dilemma was finding the best way of processing the complex accounts of the studied cases. Considering that the time dimension plays an important role in my study, I decided to present the different cases as narratives and use these narratives later for further analysis. A narrative is defined as “a story or a description of a series of events” (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2023). The advantage of storytelling is that it preserves contextual characteristics of the objects of study and simultaneously enables interpretation of the meanings (Bamberg, 2012). The communication of the contextual specificities of case settlements was further strengthened by incorporating elements of settlement profiling and explanation of relevant laws and policies that apply there.

My methodological and analytical approach was inspired by a combination of narrative generation, process tracing and thematic analysis, which were performed more or less simultaneously. Compared to grounded theory, thematic analysis is a similar, but theoretically more flexible method (Braun & Clarke, 2008). It is well suited for both essentialist and critical realist perspectives, including the contextualist approach (ibid.), which I adapted in my research. The categorisation and analysis of data adapted elements of the process tracing strategy, which pays special attention to the temporal dimension and change over time. This inductive approach enables theory building through constructing empirical narratives of the different cases and performing cross-analysis that enables identification of causal mechanisms and patterns (Beach & Pedersen, 2013). As noted by Gubrium and Holstein (2010), narratives are particularly useful to understand “experience through time, especially in relation to significant life transitions” (p. 245). Further, they argue that since “we do not have direct access to experience” and “life comes to us in the form of stories”, therefore “the analysis of narratives becomes a way of analyzing experience” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2010, p. 256). Narrative research is also well-suited to understand and engage with the processes of transformation and change (Rosiek & Snyder, 2020).

My writing was largely inspired by the rich tradition of multi-scaled narrative argument by Argentinian urban ethnographers, anthropologists and political scientist (see Oszlak, 1991; Auyero, 2001b; Zapata, 2017; D'Avella, 2019; Del Nido, 2021; Carman & Olejarczyk, 2021). What these authors have in common is that they set multiple individual stories and narrative accounts from defined settlements in the perspective of processes and trends that apply for Buenos Aires as a whole. In these works, narrative writing and ethnographic methods go ‘hand in hand’. For example, Oszlak (1991), explained how he intended “to reconstruct the movements of the different actors throughout the process of resolving each issue” (p. 33), while Auyero (2001a) defined his political-ethnographic approach as close observation of the actions, thoughts and feelings of the individuals and political institutions in time and space.

In practice, most of the process tracing and thematic analysis of data was done through several rounds of coding. The first rounds of coding were done to categorise the unstructured, raw data and prepare it for narrative writing. In this process, data was structured both chronologically and thematically. I also followed the premise that “[w]riting is an integral *part* of analysis, not something that takes place at the end” (Braun & Clarke, 2008, p. 86, emphasis original), therefore I have started generating narratives for each of the case study areas while I was still performing coding exercises and before all the data was collected. This means that I have returned to the first drafts of the narratives and updated them with new information.

The later rounds of coding considered insights extracted from the narratives as new data that was coded more openly (without pre-existing coding frames), and then analysed in relation to the research questions as a way to generate new theories (see Braun & Clarke, 2008). I will return to the technical aspects of the coding exercises later.

Fieldwork, technology and changes made under COVID-19

Choosing physical fieldwork in the case areas as a strategy to collect ethnographic data was rather natural:

fieldwork protects against the risk of major sociohistorical narratives overwhelming the complexity of causal chains, while investigation allows reconstructing the contexts of action and of unactualized potentials. Teleological risk obtrudes all the more when the researcher relies on monocausal explanations, such as natural resources, climate change, or identity conflicts. The risk of apprehending these contexts by inscribing them in a long trajectory or by arbitrarily focusing on archival traces leads to smoothing out the uncertainties, the indeterminacies that notwithstanding characterize situations of conflict. (Baczko & Dorransoro, 2020).

Nonetheless, important choices had to be made regarding how long such fieldwork should last and how much prior preparation should be made in advance. My previous ethnographic research experiences in comparable urban settings taught me not to be very rigid about predefining research methods. The fact that in this project I decided to study uncertainty and informality made this need for flexibility and contingency even more evident.

However, even in my darkest dreams, I had not expected something of the magnitude of the Covid-19 pandemic to happen in the middle of my fieldwork. This global emergency and its aftermath impacted my research in many different ways. In later chapters, I will explain how the pandemic influenced the choice of my case study locations and describe how it affected the development and planning in the areas under study. The remainder of this section will focus on the original research design before the Covid-19 outbreak and the methodological changes that had to be made in the process due to the mobility and social distancing restrictions.

My initial idea in executing this research project was to conduct two fieldworks (a shorter preliminary and a longer main fieldwork) in Buenos Aires. The main applied methods were supposed to be focus groups with community members in selected areas ('the community group'), and a combination of interviews and focus groups with planners and decision makers ('the expert group') who worked there, in addition to other ethnographic methods, such as site visits, observation, photography, news review etc.

The idea of focus groups is that the participants interact as much with each other as with the facilitator(s). Recognising that subjective perceptions and feelings may differ, even in what appears to be a homogeneous group of neighbours or fellow planners, the advantage of focus groups is that the "participants are able to describe, discuss, debate, disagree and defend their views on the discussion topics" (Hennink, 2010, p. 208). The exchange of ideas and collective thinking may reveal and clarify certain contradictions and misconceptions, or in the best-case scenario, spark new ideas for action. If such initiatives emerge, then it will be interesting to monitor their development by

organising or facilitating follow-up meetings. The project would then incorporate aspects of action research (Boulton & Preiser, 2021).

The preliminary fieldwork took place between April and June 2019 and went according to the plan. I conducted a few pilot interviews, familiarised myself with the context of the study area, and made initial contacts with a group *Urbanismo Vivo*³, whose members were later contracted as research assistants. *Urbanismo Vivo* is a multidisciplinary team of architects, consultants, researchers and activists with rich experience in applying participatory research methodologies and making urban interventions. Their main tasks in my project were helping identify suitable case study areas, assisting in performing focus group interviews with community members, and exploring possibilities for spatial interventions through co-creation and participatory planning as an additional method.

The 'main' fieldwork started in January 2020. In the first months, I had conducted three focus groups in three different planning institutions and several individual interviews with informants from the 'expert' group, in addition to several site visits. Focus groups with community members and eventual spatial interventions required more preparation. These were planned to be conducted between April and June the same year. By the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, the preliminary selection of case study areas was being finalised in cooperation with *Urbanismo Vivo*. The idea was to use our contacts in the selected areas to identify 5-10 participants (representative as much as possible of age and gender) to perform two rounds of focus groups. These conversations were supposed to identify the main uncertainties through discussions concerning the previous and current housing situation or access strategies, as well as household economy, livelihoods and social capital. The discussion would also try to find answers about the visions and aspirations for the future of home and the neighbourhood. My idea was to try to make the participants think about the ability to plan at the household and community scales in the contexts of overlapping uncertainties.

The strict mobility and social distancing restrictions were introduced in Argentina on the 20th of March 2020, which was two weeks after detecting the first official case of coronavirus in the country. All my scheduled site visits and meetings were suspended immediately. Uncertain about how long these restrictions would last, I spent the first days of the pandemic doing online research and monitoring the situation in the case study areas and the city in general. When it became clear that the restrictions would last at least for several months, I, in consultation with *Urbanismo Vivo*, began developing a contingent research strategy. My reflections from that period concerned the ideas that since I was critical of the coherence and rigidity of urban planning (as I explained in chapter 2), it would be hypocritical of me if I forced the coherency with my methodological approach in such uncertain times as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Together with my collaborators, we agreed that "technology-based approaches may not be appropriate to international focus group research" (Hennink, 2010, p. 216), and even more so in informal settlements, where access to technology and the Internet tends to be limited and often exclusionary (see Baczko & Dorransoro, 2020). Therefore, we decided to abandon the idea of conducting focus groups online using remote technologies. I have also rejected a potential shift towards conducting online surveys with open-ended questions, or any other methods that would reduce interaction

³ Webpage of *Urbanismo Vivo*: <https://urbanismovivo.com.ar/>

with research participants from face-to-face or audio-visual to text, because that would mean giving up valuable insights from verbal expression and gesticulation (Lobe & Morgan, 2021).

Nevertheless, the use of online methods had not been completely abandoned. As noted by Lobe et al. (2022) they can also have many advantages, if they are adapted to the context of the study. Since in-person interaction in Argentina (and most other parts of the world) was significantly reduced, many communities, including the poor, have turned to cyberspace as a new channel of communication and information exchange. This allowed me to adapt to the new temporal condition of human activities, while at the same time breaking the burden of the long distance between my places of residence and the research locations. Ignoring this increased online activity would have also removed an important dimension of knowledge generation and mobilisation within and around marginalised urban communities. This notion had already started to become evident before the Covid-19 pandemic:

If we fail as a society to acknowledge and prepare for the Internet's myriad meanings for the human condition, we risk descending into social, political and/or spiritual chaos. Responsible citizenship, careful yet open consideration of accessible information and the creation and sustaining of responsible online participatory communities are becoming imperative skills sets that can set local and global communities on a shared path towards social justice or descent in to social fragmentation. (Glassman, 2019, p. 1909).

One of the decisions made in collaboration with Urbanismo Vivo was to continue with individual online interviews during the lockdown period in Argentina, and after I returned to Norway in May 2020. Members of the group helped me identify relevant 'expert' stakeholders who worked in the selected case study areas, and were themselves present at some of the interviews. For the 'community' research participants, I replaced focus group meetings with individual repeated interviews with community leaders in the case areas. I have also been asking my contacts, who due to the nature of their work, place of residence or local engagement, had the possibility to visit the sites where I had temporarily no access, to send me testimonies and pictures from these areas. The pandemic has also opened up new possibilities for participation in meetings that would otherwise take place only physically, allowing people to gather irrespective of their location. It can be argued that during the strictest lockdown period, the Internet had replaced the 'commons' and public spaces, or other meeting places (see Glassman, 2019). This was also the case for Buenos Aires, where both community groups and different organisations replaced physical with online meetings, which allowed me to participate from Norway. Application of online methods in 2020 and 2021 was essential to advance data collection, while I was waiting to resume physical fieldwork.

Technologies are by definition extensions of human abilities to organize and regulate the world around them (...), but only extensions. (Glassman, 2019, p. 1892).

Despite having a quite productive period of data collection and analysis during the pandemic, the need to resume physical fieldwork was evident. As I was organising and structuring data, new gaps in research have emerged. I recognised that there were spaces I could not understand and actors I could not reach out to using online tools. It turned out that I was not alone. In their article "The Ethical, Epistemological, and Conceptual Need to Resume Fieldwork", Baczko and Dorronsoro, (2020) expressed their concern about the fact that physical fieldwork is being replaced with different forms of online research. "[T]he pandemic, or more precisely the practices it entails" –they write– "risk exacerbating the neoliberal bureaucratization of research that has played a role (...) in what is—possibly—

a decline of the social sciences” (ibid.). Moreover, the authors claim that such a new way of organising research contributed to normalising the North-South power relations. This is particularly evident in cases of outsourcing, where the risks are transferred to local actors who, in addition to their daily struggles, are asked to accommodate the needs and requests of the foreign researchers. Baczko and Dorronsoro (2020) conclude by advising that researchers who are prevented from physical presence in the areas they study should resume “fieldwork as quickly as possible, while adapting it to the constraints imposed by Covid-19.” The qualities of performing in person interviews were also highlighted by Lobe et al. (2022), who claim that they tend to be richer in information than conversations using digital communication tools.

The third and last physical fieldwork commenced in December 2021, shortly after Argentina reopened for international visitors, yet before the last Covid-19 restrictions were revoked. Since a lot of data had already been collected, organised and analysed, I decided not to perform any more focus groups, but rather continued with the redesigned methodology. I have revisited all the main, and several secondary case areas, and I have met physically with many of the research participants, whom I got to know either during the previous fieldworks or online during the pandemic. This fieldwork was very productive. Not only have I met my minimum goals of filling the gaps in data and getting updates on the situation, but I also managed to uncover new, relevant plots and stories, which have significantly deepened my understanding of the topic I was studying. The third fieldwork concluded in May 2022.

I have two main reflections and lessons from the turbulent pandemic period. First, modern ethnography can be improved by combining physical and online fieldworks and data collection, as long as we recognise the values and limitations of both. Second, it is immensely important to remain flexible and make space for adjustments whenever necessary to balance the eventual practical restrictions of physical presence, ethical issues implicit in qualitative research, and the appropriateness of the wide variety of ethnographic methods.

Data collection and analysis

In the previous section I described the more general methodological approach and the choices I have been making throughout the research process. As it is often the case in similar studies, which apply thematic analysis strategy, my workflow has not been predefined, but it shaped itself in the research process (see Braun & Clarke, 2008). In this part, I will list the main methods for data collection and analysis I ended up applying, and explain in more detail how I operationalised them and what specific tools I used.

To get from research question to findings, I followed these steps:

1. Data collection at the metropolitan scale and in six case areas.
2. Thematic analysis with two rounds of coding of data:
 - according to case and general theme
 - categorising thematically / chronologically within each case / theme
3. Selecting three case areas for further analysis.

4. Writing narratives:
 - Stories of informal settlement patterns, development processes and regulations (macro scale)
 - Stories of the development of the three case settlements, including the actors involved, their perspectives and decisions in relation to changing political and economic situation (micro scale)
5. Highlighting insights (important messages) within the narratives and coding these insights to identify and construct the types of uncertainties they relate to.
6. Analysing insights within each type of uncertainty in the different areas to answer how they impact the different actors and the practice of urban planning.

Urban ethnographic fieldwork

As a general approach, I adapted a qualitative urban ethnography (see Vengas & Huerta, 2010; Duneier et al., 2014 and Pardo & Prato, 2017). The term 'ethnography' combines the words 'ethno', meaning 'people' and 'graph', meaning 'writing'. It is therefore a highly descriptive form of enquiry. The purpose of ethnographic work is to investigate "how people respond to particular settings" (Silverman, 2001, p. 54). My research is largely inspired by the methodology that originated in the 1920s at the Chicago School of Sociology (Park et al., 1925), which adapted fieldwork as the best way to study cities and urban life. The multi-scale case study approach assumes sensitivity to the context and does not intend to perform a very rigid comparison based on the same predefined indicators.

Data collection was performed during three physical fieldworks in Buenos Aires and a remote fieldwork from Buenos Aires and Oslo:

- Physical fieldwork 1 in Buenos Aires: April - June 2019,
- Physical fieldwork 2 in Buenos Aires: January - March 2020 (interrupted due to Covid-19 outbreak),
- Remote fieldwork in Buenos Aires: March - May 2020; and Oslo: May 2020 - December 2021,
- Physical Fieldwork 3 in Buenos Aires: December 2021 - May 2022

Limited background and follow-up data was also collected in the periods before the first and after the last physical fieldworks respectively, and between the first and second fieldwork.

As I mentioned before, my ethnographic approach assumed a flexible combination of different, mainly qualitative methods for data collection:

different methods may be deemed most appropriate to different parts of a study. The pattern of enhancement, in which data from different methods are seen to be supplementary and adding value or insight, was one of the most common uses of mixed methods (Irwin, 2010, p. 416)

An important part of the fieldwork (both physical and remote) was the practice of writing memos and notes in a structured way. This included all types of facts, information and reflections that were not recorded or stored in text or audio formats elsewhere. The memos and notes have been included in the dataset and coded together with most of the other types of data.

Face-to-face and remote interviews and focus groups

The main methods I applied in my research were face-to-face and remote interviews and focus groups. Of the total of 44 conversations, 24 were done physically and 20 remotely. 17 of the physical conversations were done with single individuals, four with two individuals and the remaining three were focus groups with three or four participants. For practical reasons, the focus groups were coded the same way as the interviews, and they will also be referred to in the narratives the same way. Regarding gender balance, 29 of the 46 research participants were women and 17 were men.

When it comes to the division between the 'expert' and 'community' groups, the former classification applied to 26 interviews and all three focus groups, while the latter concerned the remaining 15 interviews. Five of the research participants representing both groups were approached for repeated interviews, between two and five rounds, done both physically and online. Some of these follow-up conversations spanned a period of over two years, which made it possible to collect data about uncertainty and change over time. The strategy of repeated interviews also allowed me to perform a certain degree of respondent validation, where I discussed and verified some of my preliminary ideas and findings.

In addition, a few of the informants from the 'expert' group have worked in more than one of my case study locations, which was particularly interesting, because it allowed me to compare the experiences and reflections from different locations. There were also informants who had no relationship with any of the selected case study areas, but the information provided by them was crucial to understand the general context and the situation at the macro scale. For a detailed list of the 44 interviews and focus groups, see Appendix 1.

Communication with my informants and arrangement of meetings usually took place via email or the mobile application WhatsApp⁴, which is commonly used in Argentina. This was the case both during my stays in Buenos Aires and throughout the remote fieldwork.

Recruitment of research participants was driven by pragmatism and in most cases followed the snowball sampling technique, which involves networking and referral (Parker et al., 2020). Most of the informants were either identified in an online search and digital communication channels, or were recommended to me by other contacts (including partners from Urbanismo Vivo) and acquaintances. During the first two fieldworks, the recruitment process was very organic and happened while the selection of case study location was ongoing. Recruitment of community leaders was not easy and, in many cases, required introduction (in person or online) by local gatekeepers, such as political activists or other researchers I came across during my fieldwork (see Hennink, 2010). At the same time, the choice of one of the case areas (Costa Esperanza) was to a large extent motivated by the fact that I got direct and privileged access to both planners and community leaders involved in this neighbourhood early in the research process. During the digital data collection period and the last physical fieldwork, recruitment was in many cases driven by the need to fill the gaps in data and address the 'blind spots', or to explore new plots that appeared to be very relevant to my study.

⁴ Webpage: <https://www.whatsapp.com/>

An important consideration in recruitment of both the 'expert' and 'community' research participants was their political affiliation or orientation. While it was not always evident which side my informants were on, I experienced many Argentinians being relatively outspoken about politics and tending not to hide their preferences (I will discuss the implications of this for data privacy later). Therefore, whenever possible, I attempted to achieve a balance in the representation of the different political ideologies to ensure a more objective account of the complex situations I study. As I will show in the case study narratives (chapters 5-9), all of the main political alternatives in Argentina have been considered, including the perspectives of the governing and opposition forces in the corresponding local governments.

To further diminish the influence of subjective biases in my data, I attempted to interview more than one informant from each group in each of the key case areas. This strategy allowed me to develop multiple 'ethnographies' of community and decision-making groups, and show neighbourhoods and government institutions as heterogeneous and pluralist social structures, where disagreement between those who live or work together is not uncommon, even when they share the same political preferences.

Interview formats

Instead of applying a positivist approach to interviews, where the purpose is to access 'facts', I applied a mix of emotionalist and constructionist perspectives. Although neither my research questions nor the discussed theory are deliberately asking for studying emotions, finding out about the expressions, impacts and responses to uncertainties and informalities requires exploring the individual and subjective lived experiences and constructing meaning of the choices and actions of my informants (see Silverman, 2001). This means that I attempted to focus on discovering what the situation means to them and how they interpret it, rather than collecting verifiable facts.

Consequently, the interviews and focus groups had a semi-structured or, in some cases, open-ended character. The semi-structured interviews did not follow the same general interview guides. Instead, the list of questions and conversation topics was prepared separately for each meeting, according to the specific expertise, function, experience and/or geographic area. For the 'community' group, the most repeated questions asked indirectly what uncertainties they face at a household and settlement level, and how they impacted their housing strategies. I have asked about the story of the settlements, their current challenges, as well as future plans and ambitions. For the 'expert' group, the interviews concerned their work in the different areas. I have also asked both groups directly and indirectly what uncertainties impacted these settlements and the planning or spatial interventions of the state there, and what can be done about it from their perspective. All this was supplemented by follow up questions to elaborate on the more relevant topics. The length of the interviews and focus group meetings varied between 15 minutes and over three hours.

The location of physical interviews and focus groups was almost always chosen by the research participants. Most of them took place either in their places of residence, in offices, or in bars and cafeterias. Some of the interviews were done before or after guided transect walks, which I will return to later. When it comes to online interviews, the communication channel was also negotiated. The informants were able to choose one of the alternative platforms:

Google Meet⁵, Zoom⁶, Microsoft Teams⁷ and WhatsApp. They are similar in the way that they allow both audio-visual and text communication. The main difference is that the first three are better suited for desktop computers, while WhatsApp has been designed primarily for mobile phones. The advantage of Google Meet, Zoom and Microsoft Teams is that they allow the screen sharing option, which was used in several cases to supplement the discussion about the ongoing plans and projects with visual presentations (Figure 8), photographs and even 'virtual walks' using the Google Street View⁸ platform.

All of the remote interviews with community leaders, and several others from the 'expert' group were conducted via the WhatsApp platform. Using this application in the research and surveying of marginalised communities was in fact endorsed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), particularly due to its wide availability, flexibility, and end-to-end encryption, which ensured data security (UNDP, 2018). Interviews using WhatsApp were conducted either as a voice call in real time, or a combination of text and voice messages, depending on the preference of the research participants. The option of exchanging voice messages turned out to be very practical, because it allowed my informants to answer in their free time (Figure 9). Such interviews have often taken more than one day to conclude. WhatsApp was also used by my informants to share their photographs and videos, or links to relevant news stories and documents (Figure 10). In a way, this method of data collection through mobile applications adapted to the most common contemporary communication and information exchange practices in Argentina.

While WhatsApp voice messages can be downloaded directly as audio files, most other interviews have been recorded using a portable dictaphone. Nine of the interviews were not recorded, either because the research participants did not give me their permission, or because it was not practical in the particular setting, for example because of audible

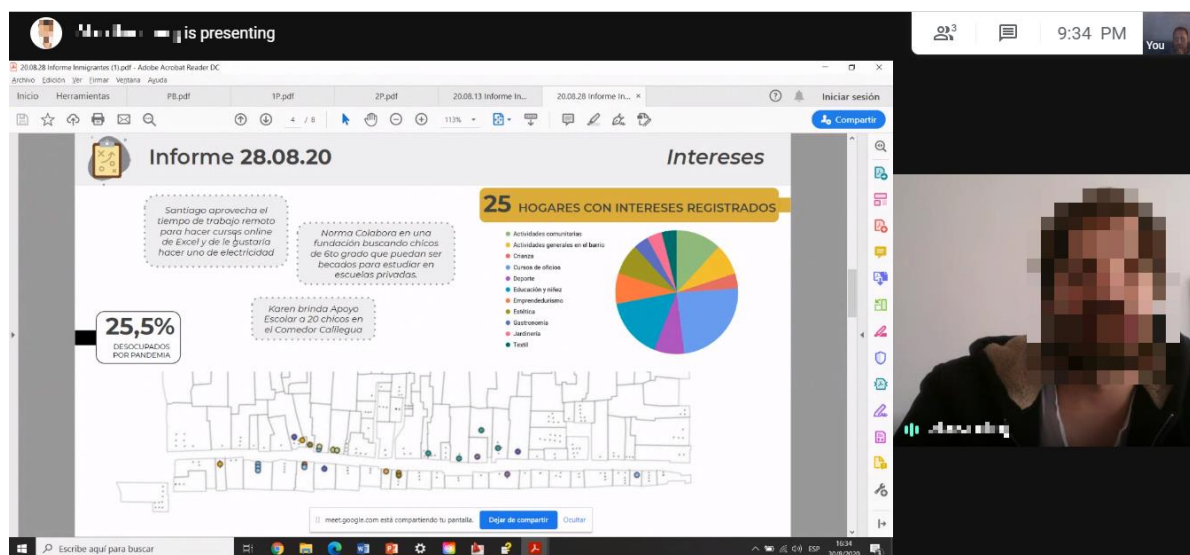


Figure 8. Screenshot from an online interview combined with a visual presentation using the Google Meet platform.

⁵ Webpage: <https://meet.google.com/>

⁶ Webpage: <https://zoom.us/>

⁷ Webpage: <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-teams/>

⁸ Webpage: <https://www.google.com/streetview/>



Figure 9. Screenshot from the beginning of an interview using the WhatsApp application, which was performed by exchanging voice and text messages.



Figure 10. Screenshot from a WhatsApp conversation, where my informant shared photographs she took in the settlement, and commented on them using text and voice messages.

background conversations of other individuals not aware of the interview, which would have been recorded simultaneously. In these cases, I tried to take as detailed notes as possible.

All the interviews were conducted in Spanish. The recorded interviews were transcribed either by me or by an assistant who is a native Argentinian and belongs to the Urbanismo Vivo group. The transcripts were not translated to English until the selected quotes were incorporated in the narratives. This means that most of the coded data was in Spanish.

In addition to the 44 formalised encounters, I engaged in dozens of casual, not recorded conversations with all kinds of different stakeholders, which have also contributed to my understanding of the studied contexts and situations. I met some of them during my site visits and transect walks, while other conversations happened more spontaneously and unexpectedly during more informal and social occasions. These participants were informed verbally about my research, but since I did not ask for any identifiable personal information, no formal consent was necessary. The insights of these talks have been anonymised and summarised as notes and memos.



Figure 11. Meeting of the Participatory Management Council (CGP) in Villa 31 shantytown in April 2022.

Participation in meetings and WhatsApp groups

Data was also collected through passive participation in relevant physical and online meetings and in WhatsApp group discussions. These encounters had both thematic and territorial character. Some of the most important ones were facilitated by the Habitar Argentina collective, which brings together experts, academics, activists and community leaders interested in housing and urban issues. I have also attended physical community meetings (Figure 11) and was part of WhatsApp groups for residents in the different case study locations. As a general rule, meeting participants and/or administrators of the groups were always informed about my role as a researcher and the type of data I was collecting. Although recordings of some of the meetings I attended are available publicly online, I have not recorded any parts myself specifically for the purpose of this research. Instead, I took notes of the relevant parts of the conversations, ensuring total anonymity of the speakers. The activity in the physical and online meetings, as well as WhatsApp groups was also useful to identify research participants who were then invited for personal interviews.

Site visits and transect walks

Central in my ethnographic study were site visits and transect walks, which enable community and spatial mapping (Okoko & Prempeh, 2023). I visited over 50 settlements of interest alone, either by foot or bicycle. I have also had 19 extensive transect walks guided by community leaders or planners/architects who had good territorial knowledge, including two in Villa 31, three in Costa Esperanza and one in Guernica. Some of these walks have involved informal interaction with local residents and community leaders (Figure 12). As noted by O'Neill and Roberts (2019), these methods are very valuable, because they involve multiple senses through observing, listening, smelling, feeling and touching. The insights and reflections from each site visit and transect walk were summarised later as notes or memos alongside information gained in meetings and WhatsApp group conversations, and included in the dataset for coding.



Figure 12. Site visit in a community garden in Costa Esperanza during a transect walk in January 2020. Photo: María Luisa.

Photography

Historically, ethnographic research has focused more attention on the analysis of text and talk (Silverman, 2001). However, the use of visual material in form of pictures, images or videos as data is increasingly gaining more attention in contemporary ethnography. In my research, photographic documentation also played an important role. This dataset includes over 4,000 photographs I took myself during site visits and transect walks and a few hundred pictures taken and shared by my local contacts during the remote fieldwork, and after returning from the last trip to Argentina.

Most of my photographs were taken using a digital camera Canon Powershot G7X Mark II. I find this model very suitable for research in informal settlements and shantytowns, because it takes higher resolution pictures than most mobile phones, and at the same time it is quick and compact, which made it easy to hide it in my pocket in situations when I did not want to attract unnecessary attention. I suspect that most of the photographs that my informants shared with me were taken by them using their mobile phones.

Although the application of participant photography in my project was motivated primarily by the interruption of my fieldwork due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the advantages of this method in social science research have already been well-documented (see Miller & Happell, 2006; Van Auken et al., 2010; Byrne et al., 2016 and O'Hara & Higgins, 2019). Similarly to guided walks, allowing research participants to narrate their photographs was not only a way to increase the understanding of the current conditions of these spaces, but it also strengthened my understanding of the future worries, aspirations and plans of the local communities. Some of the pictures taken by my contacts in the case study areas have been reproduced in this thesis, with their consent. In some cases, photographs and other visual content was incorporated in the interviews and focus groups as conversation starters.

Photography is particularly useful in urban ethnographic research when it is accompanied by narrative descriptions and interpretations, which altogether help transmit the 'feeling of the place' to the readers and strengthen the

argument being made (Krase, 2017). For me, photographs were also useful to evoke memories, recall places and contexts mentioned in other bits of data, and analyse how particular spaces changed over time. Openly available archival photography and visual materials borrowed from secondary sources have also been used for comparison and to gain better understanding how the studied areas have evolved in history.

Desk research

All the ethnographic methods discussed above were supplemented by extensive desk research, which included different kinds of policy and archival documents, planning laws, news updates, (limited) demographic information, maps, satellite photography as well as research articles and books that concerned similar case areas. This secondary data allowed triangulation, by testing the relevance and enabling generalisation of the information I collected myself. It helped me understand the extent to which the anecdotes and processes mentioned in interviews and focus groups are representative or rather extreme cases for the metropolitan area.

While the reliability of the statistical information was questioned (see the discussion at the beginning of this chapter), it also allowed me to develop a better understanding of the scale of the phenomena I was studying. The parallel process of reading academic work and news updates served me to not only comprehend the context of study, but also identify issues and questions that need to be asked in interviews and focus groups, which resulted in more profound conversations well beyond basic facts and definitions. During these conversations, I was often interested in getting a more updated situation of the phenomena I got to know through secondary literature.

A useful source of information regarding change over time were panoramic pictures from Google Street View (Figure 13) and satellite photographs from Google Earth⁹ (Figure 14). Both platforms enable open access to a rich collection of historic images of Argentinian cities dating as far back as 2013 and 1985 respectively. Some of the satellite photographs have been reproduced in this thesis.

Coding and analysing data

The main method used in both structuring and analysis of data was coding. I adapted this analytical tool in an inductive and flexible way. The data was read multiple times and coding was done in several rounds, both before and after writing the case narratives. Most of the coding work took place using the NVivo software¹⁰, which is commonly used in qualitative research. In the coding process, I followed the steps for categorising and connecting data proposed by Maxwell and Miller (2010), as well as the phases in thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2008). Of the different rounds of thematic analysis I adopted, the identified themes were both 'data-driven' and 'theory-driven' (Braun & Clarke, 2008). In the initial phase of coding, I put together all primary and secondary data stored in text format into NVivo, which has different tools that enable naming and tagging sections of text in different data items to

⁹ Webpage: <https://earth.google.com/web/>

¹⁰ Webpage: <https://lumivero.com/products/nvivo/>

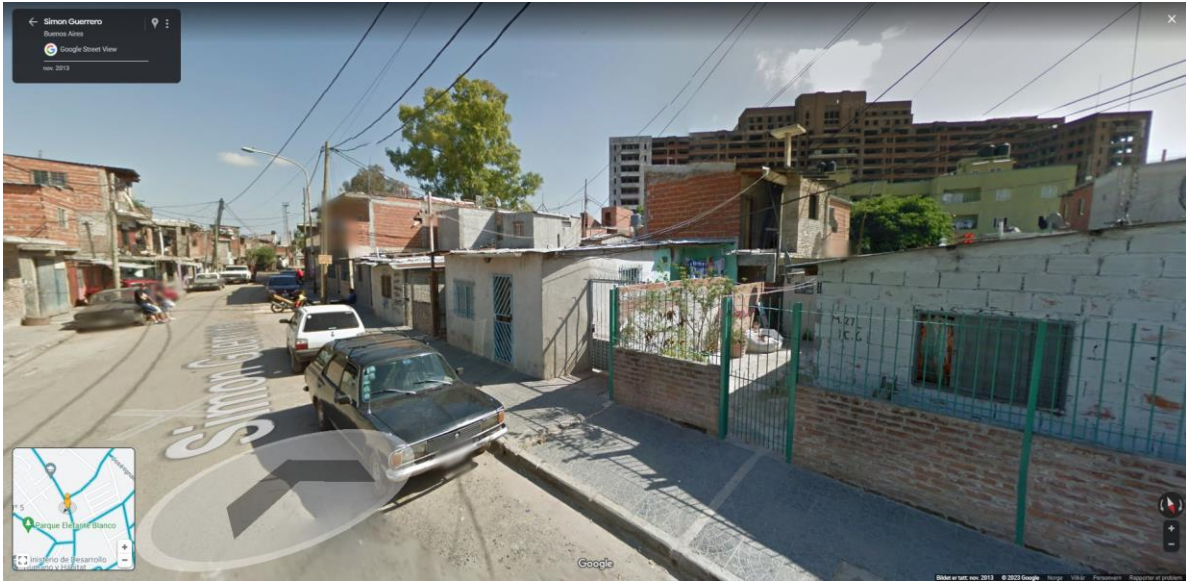


Figure 13. Screenshot from a 'virtual walk' in the Villa 15 (Ciudad Oculta) shantytown, using the Google Street View platform. Source: Google.

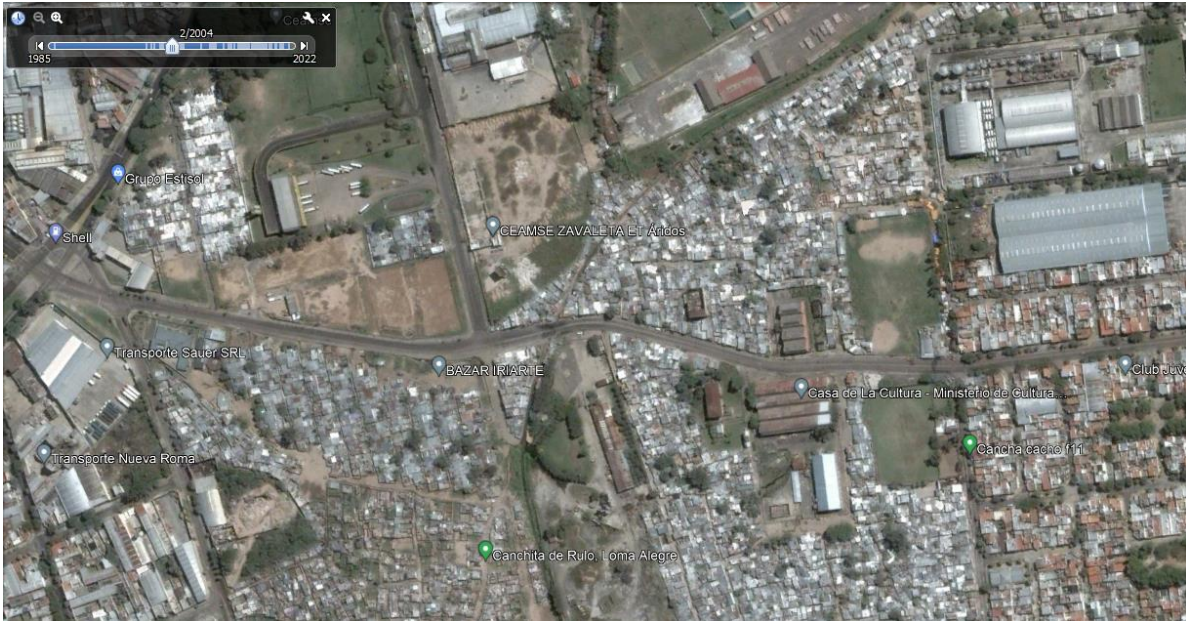


Figure 14. Aerial photograph of the Villa 21-24 / Zavaleta shantytown and surroundings from 2004 in the Google Earth platform. Source: Google.

construct a framework with general categories and more specific subcategories. In the first round of coding, I filtered and structured the data according to the case study location and importance. Additional codes were developed for texts that might be relevant to the general theory or methodology. In some cases, the same fragments of text were coded for multiple categories depending on their relevance. The second round of coding had a more open character. The data was structured thematically and chronologically within each case into categories that emerged organically during the exercise. This information was then turned into narratives about the development of the case areas and the roles and behaviours of the stakeholders:

The analytical steps subsequent to open coding involve making connections among categories, developing a 'story line' about the central phenomena of the case study, and identifying 'conditional paths' that link actions with conditions and consequences. (Maxwell & Miller, 2010, p. 470).

The finished five narrative texts –one for each case study area and two concerning patterns at a larger scale– were then analysed to identify one-sentence insights. These insights from all the narratives were then coded and labelled thematically according to types of uncertainty they relate to. This process was further explained in the introduction of chapter 10. In the last round of coding, the data within each uncertainty group was coded once again in search for patterns and contradictions across cases, in an “attempt to look for unexpected relationships, antecedents, and consequences within the flow of items” (Maxwell & Miller, 2010, p. 464). This exercise helped me structure the empirical analysis (presented in chapter 10), which then served me to answer my research questions (chapter 11).

Study limitations

The methods I applied in my research are not free of limitations and weaknesses. Perfect research does not exist, though I attempted to anticipate and adapt to these limitations as much as possible. In some cases, this required abandoning and changing certain methods, while in others the best I could do was to acknowledge and control the potential risks that they may cause. Data triangulation and cross-case comparison were challenged due to the lack of reliable statistical data, or conflicting accounts of the same situations. As I mentioned previously, this made me rely more on ethnographic methods, supplemented by fragmented secondary data, which might not be available in the same quality for all cases. This ethnographic approach was further challenged by the mobility restrictions imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic.

A set of challenges that complicate research, which includes interviewing about the past, are the problems related to the subjective and selective character of human memory, meaning that some important information can be forgotten, that individuals may remember the same situations and spaces differently, and that their perspectives may change over time (see Melhuus et al., 2010; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010 and Haripriya, 2020). Many of my respondents have (in most cases unconsciously) given an account about the past from the perspective of today, which includes certain new experiences and knowledge that they did not have in the moment they attempted to recall, and at the same time they might have missed important details as time passed by. I could not simply assume that human memory is perfect and that research participants act with the same rationality over time, which means that the act of reconstructing the temporal contexts was difficult, especially when I tried to understand what was uncertain or not, and for whom, in specific moments.

To mitigate this challenge, I tried to diversify the dataset and reconfirm certain information by including historic data from different sources, such as research articles, media reports and even popular culture (graffiti, songs, movies, TV series, etc.) produced in the periods I was most interested in. I also applied the strategy of repeated interviews and used pictures (including satellite photographs) of the same places at different points of time. To organise this information, I constructed timelines for the different case locations and important processes, which were then also included in the dataset and coded alongside primary data.

Another potential limitation related to language. Although I consider myself a fluent Spanish speaker, the fact that I am not from Argentina (or not even a native language user at all) made it somehow more difficult for me to understand certain terms and expressions in their full depth. That many of my respondents come from other countries, such as Paraguay, Bolivia and Peru, where additional variations in Spanish vocabulary and meaning exist, made it even more complex. The language challenge has been addressed in different ways. First, I made sure that research assistants and the interview transcriber are not only native *Rioplatense*¹¹ Spanish speakers, but also have relevant background in geography, architecture or planning, which means that they had a good understanding of the topic of my research, and could clarify the meaning of certain phrases whenever necessary. My ability to understand and translate local terms and expressions was also strengthened by the practice of reading academic and popular literature about Buenos Aires, both in Spanish and English. However, in certain aspects the differences in written communication in Spanish and English is very large, making it impossible to translate the exact same meaning for readers who are not fully familiar with the context. Therefore, some of the most relevant quotes were not directly reproduced in the narratives. Instead, I attempted to describe the situation in my own words, alongside the comments that help in the interpretation of the information. This partly explains the extensive length of the case narratives.

Ethics, positionality and reflexivity

A motivation behind this thesis was to challenge the dominance of western planning theory in the Global South (see Watson, 2009a; Hamdi, 2010; Robinson, 2013), but how could I do this given my position at a 'western' university? As a recipient of a fully-funded PhD position in Norway, I was in a privileged position compared to most of my informants. This could raise concerns about the potential of reproducing neocolonialist power-relations in research (Pels & Saleminck, 1994; Fife, 2005; Ndimande, 2018). Therefore, the nature of my study demands a high degree of reflexivity, defined as the examination of how my own assumptions, judgements, practices and beliefs might have influenced the research itself (Dowling, 2010). Performing my research in an ethical and credible way requires me to pay special attention to how my positionality and professional background may (consciously or not) introduce an unwanted bias in my study.

I am a male urban researcher of Polish-Ukrainian descent who has grown up in a middle-income family in Poland, and was educated in universities in Canada and Norway. I am currently living in Oslo and write about the struggles of marginalised communities in Argentina. My relationship with Latin America began at the age of 23, when I first moved to Mexico for an internship in an international NGO. This was followed by a total of over two and a half years of living, working and travelling in different periods and in various parts of the region, especially Mexico, Colombia and Argentina. My upbringing in a comparable, middle-income country, where a lot of people dream about a better life in more stable economies, together with shared passion for football, are only some of the things that make me feel 'at

¹¹ Rioplatense Spanish is a variety of Spanish spoken in Buenos Aires and surrounding areas, including most of Uruguay.

home' in Latin America. However, I am aware that I have been, and will be, more of an outsider than insider in Buenos Aires.¹²

One of the important considerations in my study is how my positionality as a resident in a high-income country with relatively good living standards and long life expectancy might influence my perception of what constitutes decent housing conditions. Despite having lived and travelled in Latin America, I had to constantly remind myself not to apply my housing standards and expectations from Oslo to a population in a completely different city. Instead, I tried to understand the living choices, arrangements and designs in accordance to the local climatic conditions as well as cultural and social norms and values. In other words, my positionality forces me to think about what is adequate in the particular spatial and temporal context. For example, in warmer climates like Buenos Aires, the need for quality outdoor space near places of residence is higher than in Norway, where people spend more time at home due to lower average temperatures. Similarly, the incremental and self-built traditions of housing development in Latin America can only partly be explained as the result of insufficient funds. These processes also reflect the cultural practices of progressing towards a long-term vision of multi-generational family houses and/or incorporating spaces for income-generation, which is not very common in Northern Europe. This relates to the discussion from the beginning of this chapter, where I argued why it is wrong to apply the same universal and often quantitative definitions for overcrowding and living standards across the world. It also refers to the idea that the definitions of dignified housing change over time, as I explained in chapter 2.

I always introduced myself to my informants in a similar way: a PhD researcher from Poland working at a Norwegian university, not affiliated with any institution or organisation in Argentina. Considering that Buenos Aires, due to its larger proportion of people with European descent, has more white-skinned people than other places in Latin America, I could 'blend in' much easier than for example in Mexico or Colombia. However, my skin colour might have played a role during encounters with migrants coming from Bolivia, Peru and Paraguay, or other regions of Argentina, where more of the native population has indigenous origins and darker skin tones.

Even though Argentina enjoys about as much academic freedom as Norway (V-Dem Institute, 2022) I still felt that I was in a privileged position compared to most of my local counterparts. In some cases, I got the impression that the fact that I was not from Argentina and had no strong affiliations with local institutions or political organisations gave me the advantage of being trusted that I would not use any of the collected information against the informants. This was especially evident during the repeated interviews, when I was not accompanied by any local assistants or collaborators. Some of these conversations exceeded my expectations in terms of how much my respondents opened up to share personal information and strong opinions with me.

Given the importance of identifying and reproducing narratives, and understanding their role in shaping how people and systems encounter uncertainty, understanding local language practices was also extremely important. As I discussed before, not being native Argentinian was in this sense a limitation, because of the inability to fully

¹² Nevertheless, this was not always the case. For example, while I was reading some reports or academic publications on Latin America written by English-speakers who, in my understanding, had limited knowledge of the context, I felt like I was more of a local researcher who writes 'from' the region, rather than someone writing 'about' it.

understand the precise meanings of the local expressions. On the other hand, if we accept that informants tend to explain stories and situations more clearly to outside researchers (Dowling, 2010), then the practical implications of this apparent challenge might have been smaller than I expected.

Another ethical concern in my research was the idea of reciprocity, or the way I could 'give back' to the research participants (see von Vacano, 2020). This need was growing stronger during encounters with informants who showed more dedication and interest in helping me than I had expected. Unfortunately, as a PhD researcher with limited time and budget, there is little I can do to materialise my appreciation. The idea of doing action research and trying physical interventions has been abandoned due to the pandemic restrictions. Instead, my aim is to contribute to a positive change in long-term perspective. My strategy to achieve that is to produce research outputs in Spanish and disseminate them among my contacts in Argentina. My findings also led me to develop a list of policy recommendations for the Argentinian state (see chapter 12), which will be translated and shared with the research participants. In addition, I have always left my contact information with all my informants, in case they had some questions or inquiries. While there were few requests for help, I maintained a friendly relationship with several of my informants, which led us to exchange experiences and ideas about a wide variety of topics, not always related to my thesis.

As there is not much I can contribute to directly improve the lives of those I worked with, I tried to follow the 'do no harm' rule, meaning that my study does not cause unnecessary trouble (see Bjønness, 2020). Although it is "almost impossible not to raise expectations when engaging with very vulnerable communities" (UNDP, 2018, p. 7), I tried to remind my informants that this is not more than an academic research project, which will not lead to any tangible changes in the short term. At the same time, I attempted to assure the research participants that their participation does not put them in any kind of risk, and I showed my flexibility, so that I would cause as little disruption in their daily routines and practices as possible. This included accommodating both physical and online meeting places and times for my respondents. Some of the walks were done while my guides were doing their errands and routine visits in the settlements, which they would have done at some point anyway. In cases when I had meetings and interviews in cafés and restaurants, I always offered to pay for the food and drinks.¹³ In regards to online interviews and meetings, some of them were held in late evening hours Oslo time, due to the time difference between Buenos Aires and Oslo¹⁴.

Another way of avoiding causing unnecessary harm was, as I mentioned before, trying to ensure fair representation of political forces and different sides of the conflicts I encountered. Doing otherwise would potentially silence the different subjective 'truths' and weaken the agenda of certain opposition groups. Although achieving a perfect representation of opinions is impossible, I believe that I managed to collect information from a relatively balanced and diverse sample of respondents. Doing this required a careful selection of research participants. There was one situation, where this became a problem. After an interview, one of the community leaders sent me a long list of contacts of different individuals (mainly government officials and activists), whom, according to her, 'I should

¹³ However, the offer of paying for the food and drinks was never mentioned as an incentive for the interview before the meeting, to avoid a situation where the informants would try to act in kindness as 'recipients' in a way that they would tell me what I want to hear, rather than telling me what they really felt or thought.

¹⁴ The time difference between Buenos Aires and Oslo is four or five hours, depending on the season.

interview', claiming that their accounts would be useful in my research. While I appreciated the help, I quickly noticed that nearly all of them knew each other and belonged to the same political movements. This made me suspect that my contact wanted me to interview them knowing that they share the same viewpoint, which would therefore strengthen these arguments and give an advantage to 'their' cause. Nevertheless, due to their relevant experience and positions held, I invited two of the individuals from this list for an interview, while the rest were not contacted.

My choice of including case narratives with an extensive use of quotes was also motivated by the idea of mitigating the influence of my positionality by presenting the cases 'as they appeared to me' before their further analysis. According to Brown and Strega (2005), narrative research centred on the voices and perspectives of the informants has the potential to act as an emancipatory process and shift the power balance. Similarly, Carman and Olejarczyk (2021) who do action research in shantytowns of Buenos Aires claimed that using ethnographic and anthropological methods may also help bring these marginalised communities closer to the rest of the city. In my research on uncertainty in similar environments, I also allowed for spontaneous co-production of knowledge, which

challenges the idea of research *on* disadvantaged and marginalized groups, instead demanding the recognition of research processes *with* organized citizens. (Mitlin & Bartlett, 2018, p. 5, my emphasis).

Therefore, as I had to abandon the idea of performing action research in my study, the participant-centred narratives I include in this thesis are meant as a contribution to the decolonising practice in research (Howitt & Stevens, 2010).

Informed consent and anonymity

Written and oral informed consent was used to formalise an ethical relationship between me and the research participants. The consent was assessed by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD)¹⁵ and complies with the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The original version of the document in Spanish and its translation to English are attached in appendices 2 and 3 respectively. Most of the participants have signed the written consent form and received a copy for themselves. In a few cases when written and signed consent was not practical, for example during online interviews, the main points of the consent were either confirmed orally (with recorded evidence), or transmitted by email or through text messages. The consent included basic information about the purposes of my research and outlined the rights and conditions of participation. Most importantly, it enabled the participants to withdraw from my research at any time. It also informed them about what personal data was collected or not, and that any notes, transcripts or photographs that involved them were stored separately from the list with identifiable personal information. The informants have received contact information to NSD and me directly. At the moment of writing this, none of the research participants used their right to withdraw from my research, nor have they issued any other complaints.

The collected data does not have exceptionally sensitive character. Although it included collecting limited identifiable personal data and contact information, there are no records of anything that would put my informants in any type of

¹⁵ In January 2022, NSD merged with Uninett AS and the Directorate for ICT and Joint Services in Higher Education & Research (UNIT), forming Sikt – the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (Sikt, 2023).

serious risk. I did not ask personal questions beyond what was strictly necessary for the research project or anything I was not advised to do according to the NSD guidelines. Research participants who revealed their political affiliation or preferences typically do so openly and publicly in their social media accounts, which means that this cannot be considered secret information.

Following the commonly accepted standards in social science research, I gave my informants the choice of staying anonymous if they wanted to. However, I recognise that anonymity has both advantages and disadvantages (Walford, 2005). On the one hand, it can ensure privacy and confidentiality of research participants. On the other hand, anonymity may “deny research respondents the right to be heard and operate in a form of silencing” (Gordon, 2019, p. 541). The reactions of my informants to the offer of anonymity varied. Those who had experience in academia and are familiar with research standards usually appreciated it, though only some of them chose to remain anonymous. Other research participants were confused about the need for anonymity or thought it was unnecessary. Some have even explicitly asked to include their full names as a way to ensure that they get the credit for their contribution in my study. In general, individuals who decided to reveal their identity are the ones who share their opinions and stories on the same topics in publicly accessible channels, including social media or various news outlets, in podcasts, or on webpages of the organisations they are associated with. This fact reinforces my argument that it is highly unlikely that my research would have caused any negative consequences for the participants.

Privacy was also ensured in the selection and publication of photographs. In this thesis, I have not reproduced any visuals or photographs, which would include identifiable personal features, such as faces, of any individual without his or her permission. In cases when I reproduced photographs taken by my informants, I asked for permission to publish anonymised versions of the visual on two occasions: upon receiving them and again shortly before delivering the thesis, showing how the edited image would look. None of my respondents rejected any of such requests.

4. Tracing the City of Fury

- I wanted to ask you about the word 'resilient'...
- Because there is no other... You have to get used to it. We all know that every 10 or 15 years there is an economic crisis... Because of one government, or another, from the right or from the left... Whatever you want... (Interview 30).

As I mentioned in the introduction, my choice of Buenos Aires as a case is not coincidental. In this chapter, I will explain the way in which hyper uncertainty and informality have been normalised in Argentina's largest metropolis. Before presenting a chronological story of different periods of economic crises and recoveries, I will give a short account of the historic, geographic and demographic information about Buenos Aires. I will also introduce the main political forces and define the local leadership structure, which is necessary to understand the case study narratives introduced at the end of this chapter.

Nostalgia in the periphery

While different indigenous people inhabited the Buenos Aires area for many centuries before European colonisation, the first permanent settlement was established there by the Spanish empire in the early 16th century. Due to its strategic location as a port city at the mouth of la Plata river, it became the capital of the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata and then of the independent Republic of Argentina. By the end of the 19th century, Buenos Aires was both a major trade hub for products coming from the interior of the continent, and an important industrial centre. In the following decades, Buenos Aires was one of the fastest growing and wealthiest cities in the world, attracting new waves of immigrants from countries like Spain, Italy, Germany and Poland. At the same time, it became an important cultural centre, which made many residents believe that Buenos Aires had much more in common with such powerful European capitals as Paris, Madrid or Rome, than other cities in Latin America.

The downfall of Buenos Aires and Argentina as a whole began around the early 1950s. The next decades were characterised by economic and political instability and several periods of military dictatorships¹⁶, of which the last one (from 1976 to 1983) was particularly brutal and oppressive, causing the assassination and disappearance of around 30,000 citizens (Catoggio, 2010). The military *junta* government also introduced radical neoliberal reforms, including deregulation of prices and rents, dropping trade barriers and weakening of welfare systems, which contributed to increased poverty and inequality. Turbulence and uncertainty in Argentina continued after democracy was restored in 1983.

¹⁶ There were in total six military dictatorships in Argentina in periods: 1930-32, 1943-46, 1955-58, 1962-63, 1966-73 and 1976-83.

Many of the middle-class *porteños*¹⁷, whose purchasing power has been steadily weakening, still cannot accept the country's fall into a peripheral, lower-middle income country and are nostalgic for the old days of glory (Del Nido, 2021). The events after the 1950s are described by many as "Latin Americanization of Argentina" (Faiola, 1999). Indeed, Buenos Aires struggles with many of the same problems as other countries in the region, including socio-spatial segregation (UN-Habitat, 2012) and unaffordability of housing (Ward et al., 2015). At the same time, it is still a place with attractive employment and education opportunities as well as a relatively good healthcare system, which attracts migrants from such countries as Paraguay, Bolivia, Peru and Venezuela. Together with Chile, Argentina has the highest Human Development Index in Latin America (UNDP, 2022).

The megacity and its numbers

My study covers the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area (*Área Metropolitana de Buenos Aires* – AMBA), which includes the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (*Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires* – CABA) and 27 adjacent municipalities, also called *partidos*, in the Province of Buenos Aires (*Provincia de Buenos Aires* – PBA), confirming Greater Buenos Aires (*Gran Buenos Aires* – GBA) – see Figure 15. AMBA covers an area of around 14,000 km². The provincial capital of PBA is the city of La Plata, located about 50 km south-east of CABA. La Plata is considered by some as part of AMBA.

With 92% of the population living in cities, Argentina is among the most urbanised countries in the world (World Bank, 2021). According to the most recent census data, the estimated population of AMBA is around 15 million people (Martínez & Ferreiro, 2023). This means that about 1/3 of the total population of Argentina lives in an urban agglomeration covering less than 1% of its territory. The population of the capital city (CABA) is around 3.1 million (ibid.) and remains relatively constant since the 1940s. However, the metropolitan area as a whole has experienced a remarkable demographic growth, with a population increase of around 13% in the last decade.

The different national and provincial governments have considered imposing various measures to discourage this centralisation and urbanisation trends, including the already mentioned proposal to move the capital to the sparsely populated region of Patagonia in the 1980s, but all these attempts failed (Di Santi, 2010; Corti, 2020). Between 10 and 15% of the 15 million inhabitants of AMBA live in precarious and substandard conditions (SECISYU, 2023).

CABA is the capital city with a status similar to a province, governed by the Government of the City of Buenos Aires (*Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires* – GCBA). It is divided into 15 *comunas* (communes or boroughs) (Figure 15) and 48 *barrios* (neighbourhoods). Both CABA and PBA have substantial legislative autonomies and their own constitutions.

¹⁷ *Porteño* ('a person from the port') is a term that those from outside of Buenos Aires sometimes use to refer to people from the capital city. It has a hidden meaning, as it describes someone who is overconfident and has an exaggerated self-esteem.

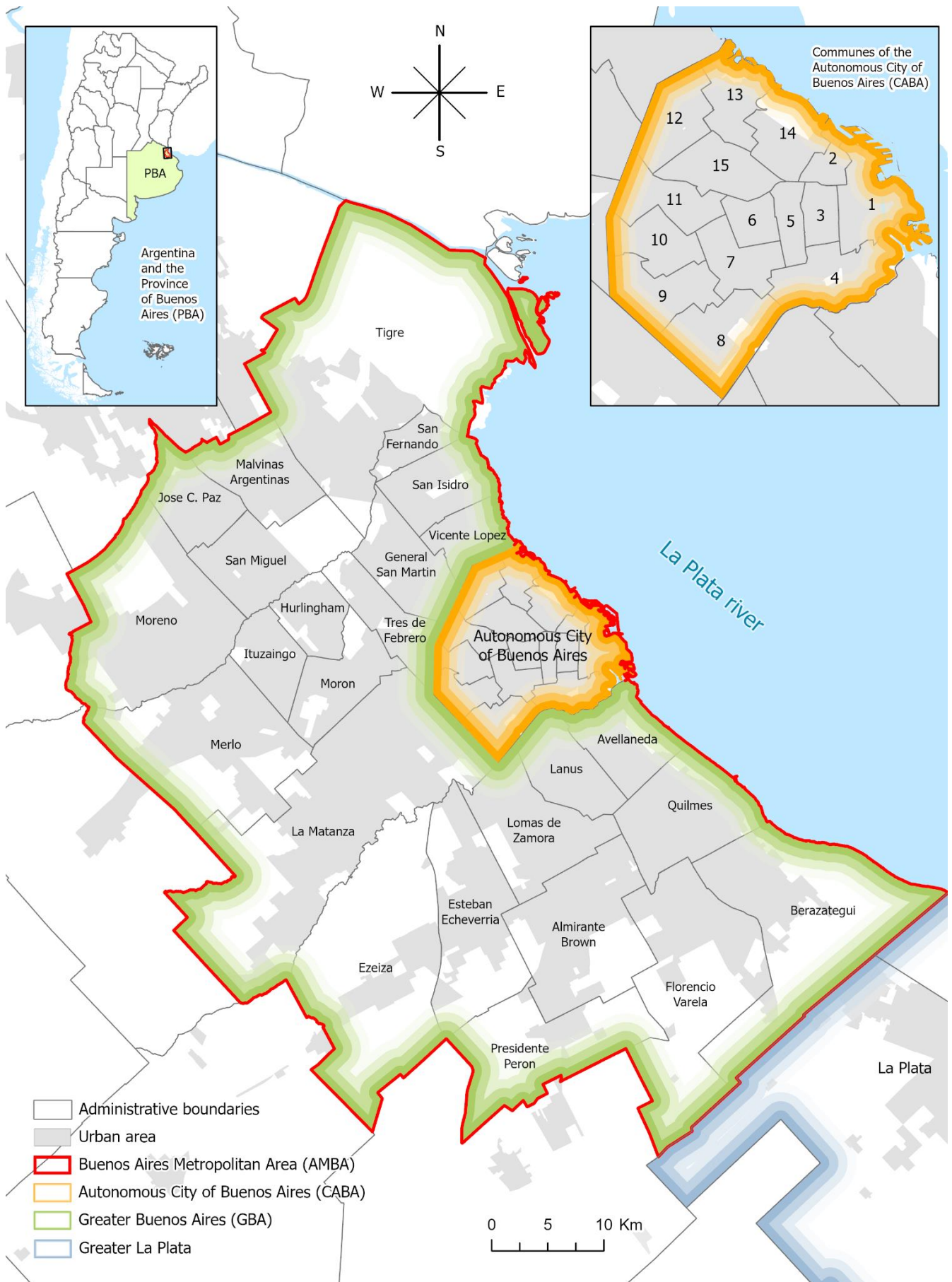


Figure 15. Municipalities/partidos of the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area and Communes of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires. Sources: ESRI / INDEC / IGN

Everything is political

...But, unfortunately everything in this country is political and the next government always strives to destroy the previous one... When we arrived, we had to work hard on the issue of trust in the state. It's the biggest challenge... But the truth is that they're right. It's impossible to trust in such a changing context. (Interview 28).

Politics plays a very important role in urban planning and development. In this section, I will introduce the main political parties and coalitions in Argentina, and outline their ideological principles. Importantly, Argentinian politics does not follow a clearly defined, traditional left/right or liberal/conservative divisions. Although democratic elections have continued without major interruptions since 1983, the political situation in the country is characterised by instability and ambiguity. As I will elaborate on later, all of the main parties penetrate informal settlements and shantytowns by establishing local networks, which compete against each other for political support.

Peronismo, Kirchnerismo and Frente de Todos

Peronism emerged in the 1940s and is the largest political movement in Argentina. The name of the movement refers to the founder, two-time former President Juan Domingo Perón and his second wife Eva 'Evita' Duarte de Perón. Peronism does not have a narrowly defined political line, and people who consider themselves as followers of Perón may represent different ideologies and belong to diverse parties. What unites the movement is the cult of Perón and Evita. The main principles of early Peronism were the strong role of labour unions, support for workers' rights and expanded welfare state, combined with nationalism and isolationism. After the turn of the millennium, the main 'faces' of Peronism were Néstor Kirchner and his wife Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, both of whom were elected presidents in periods 2003-2007 and 2007-2015 respectively. However, their movement, which is also referred to as *Kirchnerismo*, has also faced strong opposition from many Peronists, who disapproved of the populist rhetoric, and sometimes radical stances on human rights, social issues and economic isolationism by the Kirchners (Cantamutto, 2016).

Generally considered left-of-centre, the Peronist movement is divided into different factions, including socialist and conservative camps (D'Avella, 2019). The former favours the working classes, fair wages, universal education and expanded healthcare services. They also support the nationalisation of key services and infrastructure operators. The conservative faction follows a populist, anti-communist line founded on the ideas of catholic nationalism and more authoritarian trade unionism (ibid.). There was also a neoliberal exception in the Peronist movement represented mainly by the former president Carlos Menem, who introduced privatisation, deregulation and austerity reforms in the 1990s.

The largest branch of the movement is the Justicialist Party (*Partido Justicialista* – PJ), but it is not strong enough to hold power on its own, and therefore depends on forming broad coalitions, primarily with smaller Peronist, social-democratic and even communist parties. The most recent such coalition was established in 2019 under the name Everyone's Front (*Frente de Todos* - FdT). The Peronist ideology is broadly considered as contested and populist (Auyero, 2001b; Weitz-Shapiro, 2014; Cantamutto, 2016; Kyle & Gultchin, 2018; D'Avella, 2019; Del Nido, 2021).

Its political machine continues to rely on propaganda, public festivals and iconography referring to Perón and Evita (Auyero, 2001b; Del Nido, 2021). Peronist politics is supported by most labour unions, as well as many of the urban poor and lower-middle classes.

Propuesta Republicana, Macrismo and Cambiemos

After the military dictatorships and failed economic reforms in the 1980s and 90s, which weakened the trust in mainstream politics in Argentina, the main opponent of the Peronists has been a movement led by Mauricio Macri and his political party Republican Proposal (*Propuesta Republicana* – PRO) established in 2005. Although PRO is generally defined as having an economically liberal and socially conservative ideology, it also incorporated many Peronists who opposed the hegemony of the Kirchners (Del Nido, 2021). However, in the last two decades, the polarisation of the political support between Peronists and the supporters of Macri has been increasing.

Similarly to Partido Justicialista, PRO cannot rule on its own and had to form coalitions. The current one was created in 2015 as *Cambiemos* (Let's Change) and is now known as Together for Change (*Juntos por el Cambio* – JxC). It incorporated a broad range of social-liberal and conservative parties, including the Radical Civic Union (*Unión Cívica Radical* – UCR), which was the biggest non-Peronist political party throughout the 20th century.

The main differences in the ideology of *Juntos por el Cambio* compared to FdT is that the former proposes opening up the market for international trade and cooperation, as well as stricter enforcement of the rule of law. They promote a technocratic agenda by inserting people with higher education in the government structures and contracting international consultancies to help modernise the country. Among their main urban strategies is to finance infrastructure improvement projects through foreign loans and the privatisation of public land.

Macri's movement, often referred to as *Macrismo*, has been successful in attracting middle and upper-middle class voters. It is now also increasingly competing with the Peronists for support of the low-income groups. Since 2007, PRO has a political hegemony in CABA and in 2015, *Juntos por el Cambio* managed to defeat Peronists in PBA for the first time since 1987. Mauricio Macri was elected President of Argentina in 2015, and became the first non-Peronist head of state who completed his mandate since 1938. Similarly to Peronist politicians, Macri and his movement are accused of nepotism and corruption (Alconada Mon, 2018; Delfino, 2018; Hauser et al., 2019). His government is also blamed for fraud and irresponsible management after assuming the largest loan packages in history from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Riggi, 2021).

Frente de Izquierda and other opposition parties

There are no significantly powerful political parties in CABA and PBA who do not belong to either Peronist FdT or Macri's JxC coalitions. However, the Workers' Left Front - Unity (*Frente de Izquierda y de Trabajadores-Unidad* – FIT-U) has established structures in many informal settlements and shantytowns. FIT-U is a political alliance of Marxist and labour movements who refuse to enter the FdT coalition, though in some cases they collaborate for the same

causes. There are also movements with territorial characters or libertarian or radical orientations, which are highly visible in social media, but had relatively little political impact and presence in the areas I studied.

Punteros, referentes, manzanas and other types of community leaders

To fully understand the decision making processes and development dynamics in my case study settlements, it is important to discuss how local politics and leadership structures play out there. In some of the shantytowns and informal settlements, the local governments have established official councils where the inhabitants elect delegates (*delegados*) or councillors (*consejeros*) who represent their immediate neighbours (*vecinos*). This is the case primarily in CABA, where the government set up a more bureaucratic form of governance in shantytowns within its jurisdiction. While the decision making powers of these councils are limited, they serve as important meeting points between the residents and the state. The delegates and councillors may or may not run from party lists, but the vast majority of them belong to some kind of political coalition or movement. These official councils are supplemented or complimented by sophisticated unofficial and informal governance systems and decision-making processes. Wherever councils are in place, these unofficial processes may run more or less independently and often involve people who do not recognise the validity of the formal councils. What both the official and unofficial systems have in common are the alliances and conflicts based on party affiliation and the political divides between Peronists, anti-Peronists and others.

There are different terms used to refer to the unofficial leaders in informal settlements and shantytowns. The main ones include *manzanas* (block representatives), *punteros* ('pointers' or political brokers) and *referentes* (referrer or simply leader). The same person can be all of them at the same time, in addition to having the role of elected delegate or councillor. Most however, could be categorised under one of these roles.

Manzanas are almost exclusively stay-at-home mothers, whose main responsibilities are distributing welfare subsidies and food rations to neighbours living in the same block, coordinating joint action and raising their concerns to local authorities. Their role is voluntary, but their networks and access to state resources puts them in a privileged position compared to regular *vecinos* (Auyero, 2001a). In one of my case study areas, female leaders who were identified and assigned similar functions by local authorities were also known as *noderas*.

Punteros have similar roles to *manzanas* in the way in which they redistribute state resources in their settlements, but they tend to be more powerful and represent more people. Many *punteros* made their 'careers' by leading land occupations or through active participation in local political movements. They may be both men or women, and are sometimes involved in illegal activities, such as selling drugs (Zarazaga & Ronconi, 2018). *Punteros* exist wherever the state is missing. As one of my contacts whom I would classify as having upper-middle class background told me:

I personally believe that *punteros* exist due to the absence of the state. I don't have a *puntero* in my neighbourhood (...) I have an [elected] commune leader, who is part of the state... He's not a neighbour... So clearly when the state arrives, the *punteros* feel threatened, because they lose their influence... (Interview 24).

Punteros can act as gatekeepers, mediators, lobbyists, administrators and governors at the same time (Zarazaga & Ronconi, 2018). Many of them have their own 'offices', either at home or in local community centres (Auyero, 2001b). Such places might be called 'small municipalities' (ibid.), while punteros can be referred to as 'mini-mayors' (Zarazaga & Ronconi, 2018). In many marginalised neighbourhoods, the presence of the state depends on establishing relations with local punteros, who can either enable such cooperation or deny entry by mobilising opposition (ibid.). In addition to the tasks outlined above, punteros play an important role in spatial planning and development of informal settlements and shantytowns. For example, they can take responsibility for the distribution of construction materials, or supervise the maintenance, provision and extension of public services and infrastructure, including parks, electricity, sewage, solid waste collection and bus routes. Punteros often establish and coordinate the work of local cooperatives, community kitchens and health stations (ibid.). By doing this, they might also have the task of distributing the much needed jobs to local residents. Besides political influence, the value of punteros for local authorities is that they have a good understanding of the local needs and necessities, which means that they can direct state resources into initiatives and interventions that make tangible differences (ibid.). Seen from this perspective, punteros can be classified as what Jordhus-Lier et al. (2015) call "local knowledge brokers" (p. 139).¹⁸

The influence of *punteros* is particularly visible in periods of crisis and before elections. During economic downturns, they may coordinate emergency response actions to ensure the survival and basic functionality of the settlement (Zarazaga & Ronconi, 2018). In the cases of upcoming elections, punteros tend to gain access to more resources and jobs than usual, which they can redistribute within their neighbourhoods in exchange for votes (Auyero, 2001b; Zarazaga & Ronconi, 2018). This means that they are often accused of clientelism and nepotism (ibid.).

Punteros are typically associated with Peronism (Auyero, 2001b; Weitz-Shapiro, 2014), but it is not uncommon that other political parties make use of similar networks of punteros (Zarazaga & Ronconi, 2018). Politically, they tend to promote certain candidates and arrange acts of political support. In the case of Peronists, punteros play an important role by maintaining the cult of Juan Perón and Evita, with the goal of consolidating support for Peronist politicians (Auyero, 2001b). The loyalty of punteros to the ruling political parties may also be ensured by employing them in the local administration structures or including in welfare subsidy programs (Zarazaga & Ronconi, 2018).

Although Auyero (2001b) and Zarazaga & Ronconi (2018) used the terms *puntero* and *referente* interchangeably, I got an impression that these concepts do not have the same meaning. In my conversations and interviews, *puntero* was typically used to highlight the clientelist, self-centred and opportunistic types of behaviour, while *referente* was given more neutral and even positive connotations, indicating someone with an altruistic attitude, whose leadership is

¹⁸ The roles and commitments of punteros are very well visualised in the award-winning TV series *El Puntero* from 2011 (IMDb, n.d.). Although the plot is fictional, my contacts indicated that this series is an excellent approximation of the political ecology of a typical informal settlement in GBA. For example, in the first episode, the main character, who is an influential puntero, responds to a request of a resident to move the bus stop a few hundred metres away, without consulting the bus operators. In another episode, the protagonist coordinates an action to put some of the precarious dwellings on fire as a way to request housing subsidies for the 'victims'. Later in the series, we can see how the puntero is involved in complex negotiations of upgrading and relocation plans with the local authorities as well as a real-estate developer, and when they fail to reach an agreement, the puntero mobilises violent protests in the settlement. The series shows how different punteros tend to compete for power within the same settlement and promote their favourite politicians, but whenever it is necessary they can also join forces and collaborate.

motivated by sincere willingness to improve living situation of his or her neighbours. While the divisions are not always clear, I find it necessary to make this distinction in order to avoid risking giving wrong labels to people whose true intentions are not known, or at least cannot be proven. Therefore, in the rest of this thesis, I will limit applying the term *puntero* to only the most obvious cases of clientelism and opportunism, while *referente* or other types of more neutral leaders will further be called community leaders.

Local political movements and neighbourhood leaders are also present in many middle or upper-income areas. These emerge primarily as protest actions against radical densification, loss of architectural heritage, construction of gated communities, privatisation of parks and squares, or development in waterfront and ecologically sensitive areas (D'Avella, 2019; Azerrat, 2021; Brunetto, 2021; Romero, 2021). While I am not going to assess whether this type of opposition can be characterised as NIMBY ('not in my backyard') behaviour or not, I would like to highlight that many leaders of such movements gain a high degree of expertise in urban planning. As D'Avella (2019) recalled:

I follow some of these neighbourhood groups into the halls of city government, where their efforts to rewrite the city's urban planning code drew them into the legal and bureaucratic world of state institutions surrounding buildings. They became experts at reading and interpreting these codes, conducted audits of construction to detect code violations, and engaged the political and bureaucratic machinery of urban construction. (p. 27-28).

The economic roller coaster

Immediately after the crisis, even the present was unknowable. (D'Avella, 2019, p. 78).

To understand the housing struggles of the poor in Argentina, it is important to recall the economic development in the country in the last few decades. Since the 1950s, the Argentinian economy has gone through periods of economic turbulence, where catastrophic collapses followed periods of rapid growth in unpredictable and uncontrolled ways.

The main focus in the first years after overthrowing the last military dictatorship in 1983 was to restore democratic governance and normalise the deregulated and devastated economy. While the new government led by Raúl Alfonsín (UCR) was successful in sentencing leaders of the *junta* for their crimes and human rights abuses, it did not manage to stabilise the economic situation. The return of price controls and introduction of yet another new currency called Austral in 1985 did not help. The second half of the decade was characterised by hyperinflation and extreme chaos on the financial markets, which culminated in 1989 with the resignation of Alfonsín.

1990s: Glory and fall of neoliberalism

The new president Carlos Menem (PJ) and his government implemented a series of neoliberal reforms according to the recommendations of the Washington Consensus and the Structural Adjustment Programmes by the IMF. These reforms included privatisation of state-owned enterprises, cuts in spending for health, education and welfare, as well as transfer of the state's responsibility to the provincial governments, opening up the economy for foreign investment,

and linking the exchange rate of the new Argentinian peso to US dollar, known as the convertibility plan. These policies halted inflation, brought instant growth and improved efficiency and productivity of the newly privatised companies. The middle classes could finally afford to travel abroad and buy foreign products. However, the new economic reality also paved the way for corruption, flight of capital, tax evasion and the emergence of private monopolies, which further weakened the role of the state in ensuring a stable and equal redistribution of welfare (López Levy, 2004). In order to sustain the economic growth, Menem's government took loan packages from the IMF, making Argentina increasingly dependent on foreign debt. As a result of the convertibility plan, local goods became expensive. Trade deficit was further compensated by new rounds of foreign loans. The attachment to the US dollar also meant that the federal government had limited control over its own fiscal policy. Poverty and unemployment soared in the second half of the 1990s, and Argentina was once again on its way towards a new crisis and inevitable restructuring:

there was a sense that the country had lost its way (...), drunk on a cocktail of privatization and free markets, and people seemed ready to look for a different path to the construction of viable futures. (D'Avella, 2019, p. 8).

Massive protests broke out in 1997 and continued over the following years. The government reacted by introducing new austerity measures. Yet another new round of loans from the IMF was taken in hope to rescue the rapidly worsening economic situation. This, however, did not bring the expected improvement and later that year the international lenders decided to raise interest rates and denied further 'emergency aid' to Argentina (Schamis, 2002).

2001-03: The greatest crisis of all times

Unable to cope with the unfolding crisis and following a massive flight of capital, the government put strict limits on cash-withdrawal in 2001, an intervention known as *Corralito*. This decision frustrated the middle-classes and labour unions, who joined the unemployed and the poor in their protests and strikes. Public unrest culminated in the so-called *Argentinazo* in late December, a two-day period of widespread and violent riots where the frustrated crowds looted banks, supermarkets and convenience stores.¹⁹ Police repressions of what was "the largest mass demonstration ever to occur in Argentina" (Schamis, 2002, p. 12) caused the death of 30 protesters. In the following weeks, hundreds of thousands of people from all social classes continued to gather in public spaces, banging their metal pots and pans loudly to demand the resignation of the ruling elites, which was reflected in their slogan: "out with all of them, not a single one must remain" (*que se vayan todos, que no quede ni uno solo*). These protests led to the declaration of state of emergency and the eventual resignations of President De la Rúa (UCR) and Minister of Economy Domingo Cavallo (independent). After a 10-day period of political and social chaos where three different presidents briefly assumed power and resigned, Eduardo Duhalde (PJ) was appointed as interim president to lead a transitional government. Uncertainty and crisis continued with protests and strikes involving between two and three million people occurring during 2002 (Petras, 2003).

¹⁹ Although the financial crisis lasted roughly from 1997 to 2003, I will further refer to it as the 2001 crisis, because of the culminating and dramatic events of *Argentinazo* in December 2001. It is this period that I referred to in the beginning of the introductory chapter.

Early in 2002, Duhalde's government declared defaulting on its foreign debt of 132 billion USD, which was then the largest sovereign debt default in world history. The inevitable detachment of the Argentinian peso from the US dollar led to a sharp devaluation of the local currency. At the peak of the crisis in October 2002, the poverty rate reached 57%, unemployment hit 30%, schools shut down and state pensions and salaries of public sector workers went unpaid (Rodgers, 2010; Grugel & Riggirozzi, 2007). The middle class has shrunk and thousands of families lost their capacity to pay their mortgages, resulting in expropriation of private properties and defaults on loans (Schamis, 2002; López Levy, 2004), which contributed to the rise of the already high quantitative and qualitative housing shortage.

The growing mistrust towards the state and the banking system led to widespread civil disobedience, spontaneous emergence of neighbourhood assemblies and organised occupation of vacant buildings. Various forms of social economy were established, including barter clubs, unofficial currencies and cooperatives which occupied and reinitiated production in abandoned enterprises (López Levy, 2004; Coraggio, 2007; D'Avella, 2019). Disillusioned with failed promises of the previous governments, Argentinians craved new, more inclusive paths beyond neoliberalism.

2003-08: 'Bouncing off the bottom' and remarkable economic recovery

Following a year of transitional government, relative political stability was restored in 2003 after the election of Nestor Kirchner (PJ) to the presidency and Peronists to gain a majority in the Congress. The quest for recovery after a devastating period of turmoil started with establishing new partnerships with the opposition and civic organisations. Many activists and leaders of social movements became public servants, extending representation of the urban poor in the governance structures at the local and national levels (Scheinsohn & Cabrera, 2009). In CABA, the structures of neighbourhood assemblies, which emerged during the crisis, have been institutionalised and incorporated in the new participatory budgeting scheme.²⁰ The federations of the unemployed were perhaps the main winners insofar as they were given a meaningful voice, decision-making power, legitimacy and economic backing. The new governments

²⁰ The framework for the participatory budgeting process had been included in the Constitution of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires from 1996; a response to the intensive campaigns and lobbying by trade union activists (Rodgers, 2010). However, only pilot projects were carried out before it was introduced in the entire city in 2002. The implementation of participatory budgeting was a contingent, but at the same time deliberate reaction to the economic crisis and popular demands. This scheme was based on neighbourhood assemblies and unofficial referendums, which sparked a culture for bottom-up mobilisation and participation during the crisis (López Levy, 2004). In the first three years, over 1,500 budget priorities were identified and voted on, of which 976 (65%) were executed. Each year, up to 14,000 individuals participated in hundreds of public meetings across the city (Rodgers, 2010). What was unique about the structure of participatory budgeting was that the citizens actually decided budget priorities and order in which the city's resources were spent until public finances were depleted. This was different from practice in most other countries, where the public could only decide how to allocate a specific percentage of the overall spending. The Buenos Aires scheme fitted the post-crisis scenario well, as it avoided the discussion about inadequate funding and budget scarcity that often paralyse participatory budget efforts, or reduce it to meaningless and low-impact interventions. In this sense, this process resembled more elaborated forms of participatory planning, rather than the conventional participatory budgeting. However, the pressure of certain influential politicians who attempted to politicise and reform the process, sparked conflicts and caused its slow decay. In 2007, participatory budgeting was replaced by a more decentralised model, where a fixed, small budget was allocated for each of the city's communes (ibid.).

introduced important reforms to national economic policy and social welfare programmes, including increased investment in social housing.²¹

The political and economic system that has been unfolding since 2003 has been called 'post-neoliberalism' (Benwell et al., 2013) and 'new developmentalism' (Grugel & Riggirozzi, 2007). Argentina adopted a more Keynesian approach, with increased public spending aimed at stimulating the economy and protecting the most vulnerable (Barreto, 2012). Certain enterprises of strategic importance were re-nationalised, while new public institutions, including ENARSA (petroleum, natural gas and electricity sector) were created (Grugel & Riggirozzi, 2012). Along with democratisation and contingent decision making by the government, key to economic recovery was a boom in exports after the devaluation of the peso. In fact, income from export tariffs offset the loss from devaluation to such an extent that Argentina managed to pay off a large part of its renegotiated external debt within a few years. In that period, Argentina was "the fastest growing economy in the western hemisphere" (Weisbrot & Sandoval, 2007, p. 2).

As the trust in banks and the local currency had still not been restored, many middle-class Porteños started to allocate their savings by buying US dollars in cash as a way to protect themselves from inflation and devaluation. Since housing was considered a safe investment and mortgage lending was practically non-existent, these dollars (as cash) were often used to buy real estate, which since the last military dictatorship has also been valued in USD (Nemiña & Gaggero, 2016). This practice, together with the fact that property values in Buenos Aires had fallen dramatically during the 2001 crisis, sparked an unprecedented construction boom in the city (D'Avella, 2019).

However, despite all these shifts, housing had not become more affordable and the share of property owners has in fact continued to decrease in that period (ibid.). Although the unemployment rate has been radically reduced since 2002, a large share of the new jobs have been more precarious and temporary (Benwell et al., 2013) and many residents of the city continued to operate within the informal sector (Grugel & Riggirozzi, 2007). Nevertheless, the new employment opportunities and restored welfare attracted a new wave of migrants from other South American countries.

²¹ Shortly after assuming power, Kirchner's government restored the Ministry of Federal Planning, Public Investment and Services as a separate entity, reinforced other public institutions dealing with housing at the federal, provincial and municipal levels, and launched new subsidy programmes – too many to list here. These programmes provided shelter options for households in different socio-economic situations and included new housing construction schemes, reactivation of projects that were unfinished or had been stopped in the recession period, upgrading programmes, support for self-builders, and regularisation and support for house building cooperatives (Barreto, 2012; Rodulfo, 2008). Overall, between 2003 and 2013, close to 770,000 social housing units were built or improved, compared to 473,000 in the period of 1992-2002 (Rodulfo & Boselli, 2015). The government rightly presumed that increased spending in housing would not only directly contribute to an improvement in living conditions, but it would also create jobs and give an instant stimulus to the economy in a state of deep crisis (Barreto, 2012). The post-crisis housing policy has also received criticisms. While there have been interesting examples of well-located and serviced housing that contributed to rehabilitation of the surrounding areas, a large part of the budget was spent on new, low-density housing built far away from employment centres and without proper infrastructure (Murillo et al., 2011; Barreto, 2012; Rodulfo & Boselli, 2015; Michelini & Pintos, 2016). At the same time, there are no mechanisms to create socially mixed neighbourhoods in Buenos Aires, for example by requiring real estate developers to allocate a certain percentage of units at affordable rates, as is the case in many other large cities in other countries.

2008-19: Stagnation, downfall and growing inflation

Economic growth continued until around 2011. Since the real estate system in Argentina was largely cash-based and therefore delinked from the international banking and investment schemes, the actual impacts of the global economic crisis of 2008 were not as damaging for the country's economy (D'Avella, 2019) as in other parts of the world. However, decreased demand for Argentinian goods combined with increased export tariffs and continuation of unsustainable subsidy programs led to economic stagnation (Benwell et al. 2013). The official annual inflation rates increased from around 10% in 2007 to 20% in 2010 and 40% in 2014 (Giménez, 2022), but these figures are likely underreported (Mander, 2014). Economic insecurity and inflation led to more capital flight and scepticism of foreign investors. It has also caused interruption and paralysis of thousands of building projects all over the metropolitan region, as many real-estate developers faced budgetary problems or went bankrupt (Gómez, 2022).

As a new crisis was developing, the Peronists and Kirchners lost the 2015 elections to Mauricio Macri and Cambiemos, who proposed to lower taxes as a way to stimulate economic activity. However, this helped little, as GDP started falling (World Bank, 2023) and inflation continued to increase (Giménez, 2022). By 2018, Argentina was considered by many the most fragile economy in Latin America together with Venezuela (Prado, 2018). In a desperate move, Macri's government took a new round of loans from the IMF.

2019-today: Crisis, uncertainty and the COVID-19 pandemic

I was at the beginning of my first fieldwork in Buenos Aires, when I heard an interesting, but somehow uncomfortable discussion on the *Radio Nacional*: "uncertainty is the wrong word" –said one of the speakers– "it means risk or potential. Danger sounds better. There is a distress that things are going very bad" (Radio Nacional, April 26, 2019). Less than one year later, the Covid-19 pandemic came to Argentina.

In previous economic crises, low-income people managed to find ways out of difficult situations using their rich social capital, improvisation skills, informal practices, or what my informants referred to as resilience. These abilities, however, were of little use when the government ordered everyone to stay at home and implemented one of the most strict and longest lockdowns in the world. By the time of writing this, the official statistics registered over 10 million infections and 130 thousand deaths in Argentina as a result of the Covid-19 virus (Ministerio de Salud Argentina, 2023).

The pandemic intensified the already difficult economic situation. At the peak in mid-2020, the poverty rate reached 40% (INDEC, 2022) and the government announced again that it was going to default on its foreign debt (Dube & Pérez, 2020). By 2023, for the first time since 1991, the annual inflation levels in Argentina surpassed 100% (Bianco & Martini, 2023), which is the 4th highest in the world and 2nd in Latin America (IMF, 2023). Interruptions of water, gas and electricity services became more frequent. Some of the most important survival strategies from the 2001 crisis returned during the Covid-19 period. For example, the activity of barter clubs and carton recyclers has grown significantly. As the mistrust in the local currency continued, the tradition of allocating savings in US dollars has been supplemented by a new practice of investing in Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies.

The situation started to normalise after lifting mobility restrictions in 2021, but the economy is nowhere near where it was 15 years earlier. In a document called “The future after Covid-19”, the Peronist government, which returned to power in 2019, proposed a new vision of the country after the pandemic. Once again, neoliberalism was blamed for everything that had gone wrong in Argentina:

Future is a right. The empire of uncertainty destroys it. The insecurity generated by climate change, the future of work, the economy, and gender inequalities grow with the total freedom of the market, in the kingdom of the strongest, in societies where hatred and violence spread. On the other hand, the collective construction of coexistence in difference and with a present State, which guarantees the sustainability of agreed policies, reduces uncertainty. It expands rights, expands futures. (Jefatura de Gabinete de Ministros, 2020, p. 5).

Figure 16 summarises the economic and political development in Argentina in the last three decades.

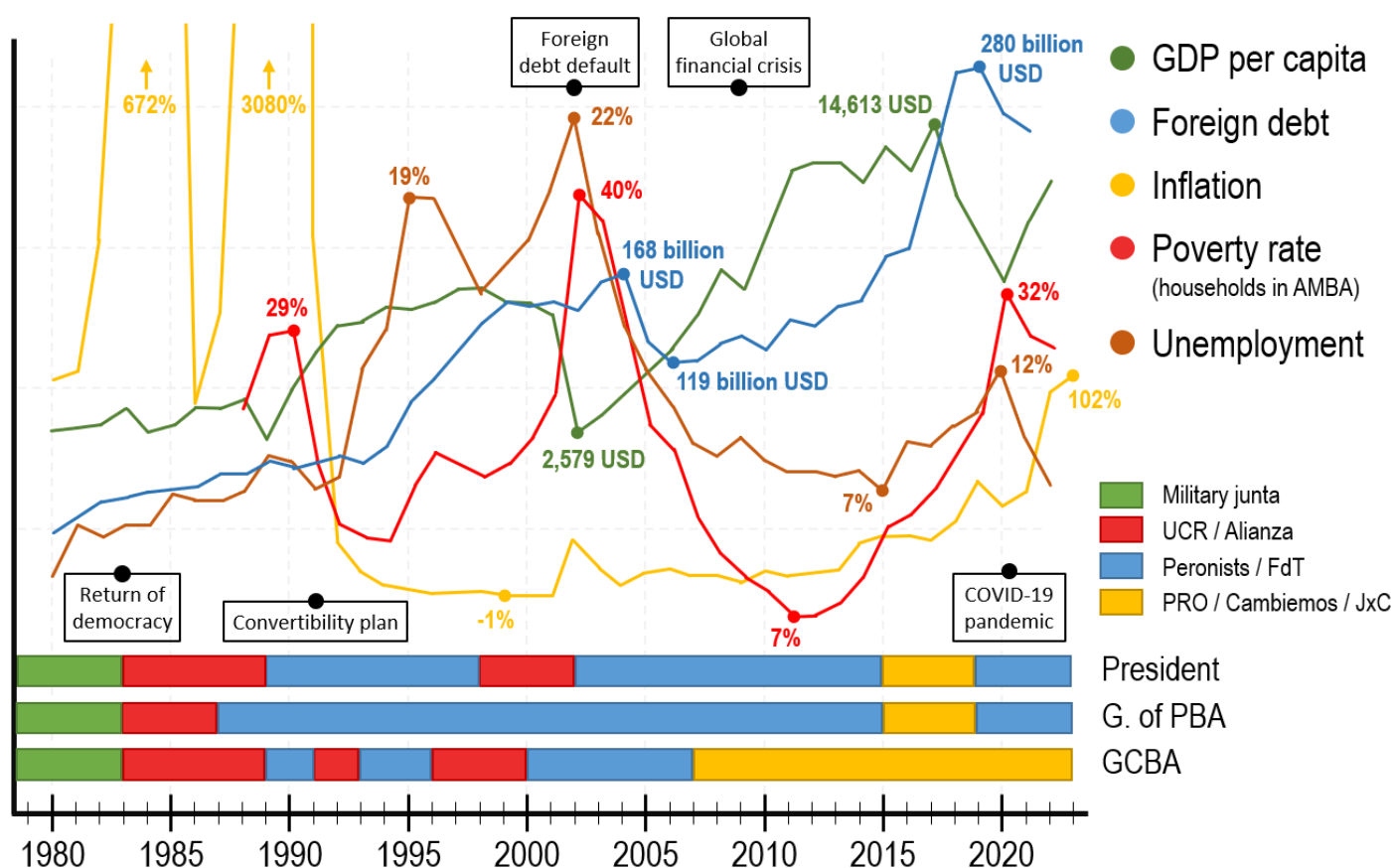


Figure 16. Timeline with economic and political development in Argentina between 1980 and 2023. The stripes on the bottom show party affiliation of the Argentinian presidents (top), ruling coalition in the Province of Buenos Aires (middle) and ruling coalition in CABA (bottom). The presidents were most of the time aligned with ruling coalitions in the federal government. Sources: IMF / World Bank / INDEC / Dirección Nacional Electoral

The bureaucratic and popular planning practices

Urban development in Argentina follows a decentralised governance framework. Land use planning and infrastructure development is coordinated by GCBA and each municipality/partido in PBA within their jurisdictions. Despite many efforts, there are no formal institutions that coordinate development for the entire metropolitan region (Corti, 2020). However, there are relatively efficient systems of roads and local trains crossing the administrative boundaries, which are supervised by the federal Ministry of Transport. Such management schemes for AMBA also apply to energy, water and some other sectors. Most of the urban growth in the metropolitan region has been based on the model of extending the colonial grid street structure outwards from the capital and along the train lines. The different attempts and visions to redevelop the city according to modernist and functionalist planning principles have largely failed (D'Avella, 2019).

Similarly to other megacities in Latin America, the urban growth of AMBA in the recent decades is characterised by the contradicting bureaucratic and popular modes of development (Abramo, 2012). The former is linked to the regulation and interpretation of the formal planning laws and building codes, where the state institutions and market actors interact by negotiating and approving plans and construction permits.²² This system, which in principle also makes space for certain public participation processes, is not much different from planning frameworks in most other countries in the world (Ryser & Franchini, 2015). Landowners in Buenos Aires enjoy a lot of freedom and power. The local governments not only do little to prevent land speculation, but also openly encourage private investment through relaxing building codes, financing infrastructure upgrades, and issuing tax incentives in selected areas with high development potential (Reese & Vera Belli, 2018; Labiano et al., 2021). This leads to gentrification of centrally located neighbourhoods and market-driven displacement of low-income households (Di Virgilio, 2020). Due to space constraints, I will not go into more details about the official urban planning framework in Argentina in this chapter. However, some of the key urban planning laws and land use regulations will be introduced in the case narrative parts.

The popular mode of development in Buenos Aires is driven by necessity and the inefficiency of bureaucratic systems, which fail to ensure sufficient affordable housing for the rapidly growing population, even though Argentina has a tradition of building social housing and issuing subsidised mortgages (Greene & Rojas, 2008; Barreto, 2012). This resulted in widespread informal urban growth, which is also typical to the rest of Latin America (UN-Habitat, 2012; Ward et al., 2015). It is this type of development that my study focuses on.

What is important to note is that both the bureaucratic and popular development modes produce their own forms of compact and diffused cities (Abramo, 2012). In areas considered as formal, compact development is materialised by allowing construction and consolidation of high-rise buildings with apartment units²³, while diffused development

²² It is important to highlight that the building industry involved in real-estate development according to planning laws in Buenos Aires often lacks transparency and is prone to corruption. As D'Avella, (2019) suggests, "authorship over the urban planning code (...) was understood to be linked to the machinations of a powerful but obscure set of monied interests working in collusion with state actors to resist any limits on the real estate and construction sector" (p. 28).

²³ While compact and dense urban form is generally considered as sustainable and efficient (UN-Habitat, 2013), its application in Buenos Aires has reached extreme forms and caused many conflicts. Many of the capital's neighbourhoods where most of the older buildings were one or two stories tall have within a couple of decades converted into areas where high rises up to ten stories tall dominate the urban

means the so-called urban sprawl and neighbourhoods or gated communities with single-family houses. Similarly, popular development can result in compact and diffused urban forms, which I will explain in the next section.

As I discovered from my conversations and interviews, most planning professionals in Argentina have academic backgrounds as architects and engineers and are trained primarily to work in the formal-bureaucratic development system.²⁴ Importantly, in contrast to most European and North-American countries, where the division between practice and research is more pronounced, most lecturers and researchers in universities in Argentina combine academic and practical work through multiple part- and full-time agreements, which means that they can actively apply urban theory in their everyday work, and at the same time use examples from practice in their teaching and research.

Informal settlements and shantytowns

Those who have travelled around Latin America know how to spot informal neighbourhoods or *favelas*, as they are called in Brazil. You just need to look at the hills, and you will find dense settlements with houses built tightly together following the rough topography. Many of the poor in cities like Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Bogotá, Lima, Santiago de Chile or Caracas have no other choice but to occupy steep and unstable land, where no one else wants to build. Like in the rest of Latin America, in Buenos Aires there has also never been enough housing for everyone. However, there is one major difference from the cities I mentioned above. Buenos Aires has a predominantly flat topography.

Here it is not so much topography and chronic governance problems, but rather the land use and timing of economic and political crises that define the patterns of emergence of new typologies of informal settlements. In accordance with Abramo (2012), we can identify two main types of neighbourhoods for the poor in Buenos Aires: inner-city shantytowns and peripheral informal settlements. The difference is not only in their densities and urban forms, but also the way they are planned and managed. Unfortunately, many authors writing about urban informality in Buenos Aires in English ignore this distinction and introduce oversimplified or confusing definitions (see for example Campesi, 2010; Hanrahan, 2011; Bastia, 2015; Carman, 2015; Wilkis, 2015; Mitchell, 2016; Bastia & Bressán, 2018; Mark & Heinrichs, 2019; Almansi et al., 2020; Macchia et al., 2021; Goytia et al., 2023), which may be particularly frustrating for those engaged in a comprehensive literature review. This indicates that I should pay special attention

landscape. This redevelopment pattern has drastically changed lifestyles in these areas by creating privacy and sun access issues, thus limiting such popular and traditional activities as grilling or gardening (D'Avella, 2019).

²⁴ Similarly to other regions in the Global South (see Watson & Agbola, 2013 and Mukhopadhyay et al., 2021), planning education at many universities in Argentina has been focusing on teaching design and scientific skills, which normalised the self-perception of architects and planners as 'experts' and 'visionaries'. However, there are certain exceptions from this rule. Some of the largest public universities promote a social-democratic vision of city development, as taught in study programs and courses that focus on developing housing solutions for the poor and marginalised communities, where the ideas of participatory design, living quality and social justice are important (see D'Avella, 2019). Other universities (including private institutions) have recently opened similar courses.

to give proper names to the different types of marginalised neighbourhoods and their housing typologies, especially when there is a need for translation.

Shantytowns are land takeovers that happen in a spontaneous way, typically on smaller, irregularly shaped vacant land (often in triangular form) within the previously developed area, close to major employment centres. As there was little planning beforehand, their layout is more organic, with many curved, dead-end streets and passageways, most of which tend to be too narrow for cars (Figure 17). For many architects, their dense urban structure resembles old European towns. One of my contacts, architect and urban planner Alan Gancberg told me that shantytowns

are being built on a human scale, like mediaeval cities. Walled, because you always have very strong edges and the entrance is intricate. They are walled, mediaeval cities. I don't see much difference [morphologically] with what was happening in Europe. (Interview 5).

While the scale and topology are similar to mediaeval Europe, the difference is that informality in the shantytowns in Buenos Aires is much more visible, which reminded me of the chaotic historic centres in Indian cities. As I will discuss later, one reason that explains the irregular character of shantytowns in Buenos Aires is the fact that they were primarily meant for temporary residence:

So the difference between a shantytown and a settlement is on the one hand the urban form, but on the other hand, that one is considered as transitory and the other as definitive living. (Interview 12).

There is no agreement about how these inner-city informal settlements in Argentina should be referred to in English. Different authors have their own preferences. Some writers call them slums (Campesi, 2010; Macchia et al., 2021; Mark & Heinrichs, 2019; Wilkis, 2015), which is a very contested term, due to its embedded association with chronic poverty and dilapidation (see Gilbert, 2007 and Mayne, 2017). I find this unfit in the Argentinian context, because (with some minor exceptions) the settlements I am going to introduce shortly do not have precarious buildings in a state of decay, but rather new informal constructions that are generally improving and expanding.²⁵ Squatting or squatter settlements are also not the correct terms to use (Fernández et al., 2021), because they imply a different rationality of space appropriation. In Argentina, squats can also refer to occupations of existing abandoned buildings, which is another kind of desperate housing strategy that has also occurred in Buenos Aires in a massive scale before the reforms of the penal code in the mid-1990s. Other writers use the local term *villa* (Carman, 2015; Hanrahan, 2011; Mitchell, 2016; Repetto, 2020), which is well understood by Argentinians, though it may be confusing for Spanish-speakers from other countries, who may associate *villa* with a village or old mansion. Villa as a precarious settlement in Argentina is a short version of terms *villa miseria* ('misery town') and *villa de emergencia* ('emergency town'), which are no longer used because of the stigma embedded in these concepts. Moreover, there are many regular

²⁵ However, the definitions of slums applied by UN-Habitat might be more relevant for Buenos Aires. This organisation defines a slum as a settlement which lacks one or more of the following: 1) durable structure, 2) sufficient living space (no overcrowding), 3) access to clean water, 4) access to sanitation, and 5) security of tenure (protection from eviction). UN-Habitat also makes a distinction between 'slums of hope', which are settlements that are generally progressing and improving, and 'slums of despair', referring to neighbourhoods where living conditions are declining (UN-Habitat, 2003). Although these definitions are widely applied by experts in planning and housing policy, most people who do not live in slums themselves have a much more negative perception of these areas, considering slums as places of extreme poverty and insecurity, whose inhabitants are 'unfit' for city life.

and not necessarily poor neighbourhoods in and around Buenos Aires that include 'Villa' in their names, for example Villa Crespo, Villa Lugano and Villa Ballester. This may confuse non-Argentinian readers even more. There are also authors, such as Di Virgilio (2020), who refer to the same types of settlements using a combination of the different terms interchangeably.

In order to combat the stigma attached to these areas, the Government of the City of Buenos Aires (GCBA) decided to rename all the precarious *villas* within its boundaries to *barrios* ('neighbourhoods') (Carman & Olejarczyk, 2021; Secretaría de Hábitat e Inclusión, 2016). I was willing to follow this line, until I read an opinion article that challenged this idea. Shortly after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, which hit residents of these *barrios* very hard, a researcher and historian from the University of Buenos Aires, Valeria Snitcofsky wrote that using the term 'neighbourhood' is "a way of silencing" the real problems in these settlements and pretending like there is no overcrowding or marginality (Snitcofsky, 2020). The author defended the use of the term *villa*, claiming that it is a powerful reminder of structural inequality and injustice, and a call for urgent action. Convinced by Snitcofsky's argument, I decided to keep searching for a better term. Unable to find a 'perfect fit', I chose to follow the Argentinian anthropologist Javier Auyero, who himself has done extensive work in villas and documented it in English. He uses the term shantytown (Auyero, 2001b; Auyero & Swistun, 2009). Although this term suggests the predominance of makeshift structures built of wood and other non-durable materials, which is no longer true for most buildings in villas in Buenos Aires, what it does well is highlighting their original temporary and transitory character. Moreover, unlike the word slum, shantytown refers primarily to the physical condition of the settlement and does not imply a state of social or economic degradation.

In Argentina, the term informal settlements (*asentamientos informales*) is typically not used to refer to shantytowns (*villas*). Informal settlements are typically horizontal extensions of the city, which follow a regular grid street network and lot structure (Figure 18), resembling many formally planned suburban neighbourhoods in the Americas. In both formal and informal settlements, the quality and level of consolidation of housing can vary, depending on the prosperity of individual households and the amount of time since the original settlement. Later I will show examples of how these



Figure 17. Typical pedestrian passage in Villa 20 shantytown.



Figure 18. Street in an informal settlement Liniers in Tigre partido.

characteristics often make it difficult to distinguish between formally and informally planned areas. What is typical to most informal settlements is not easy to spot at first: low tenure security. Nevertheless, inhabitants of these areas see them as places of permanent residence and hope that they will eventually be fully integrated with the rest of the city.

Unlike the term *villa, asentamientos informales* can be translated directly to English without causing much confusion. Their literal meaning is simply informal settlements. Therefore, in the rest of the thesis, the inner city informal neighbourhoods I introduced earlier will be referred to as shantytowns, while the term informal settlements will be reserved for peripheral informal neighbourhoods. To sum up, what these two typologies have in common are their origins as illegal land occupations²⁶, precarious living conditions and lack of tenure security. The main differences are their location within the city, urban form and expected length of residence.

Introducing the case settlements

I chose to do my research at two scales. The first one is the metropolitan scale, where I focus on the general situation and pick examples of processes and events in different shantytowns and informal settlements for analysis. The other scale is local and contextual. For this purpose, I selected three settlements as cases for more in-depth study. These chosen settlements are not just different in terms of their location in central, suburban and peripheral areas, but they have also emerged and developed in different time periods, which provides me with an interesting selection of different spatial and temporal contexts for analysis.

→ Villa 31 is the oldest, largest, and the most well-known shantytowns in Argentina, located near the Buenos Aires city centre. It is a place characterised by rapid change, political conflicts, high land values and large expected investments from both the public and private actors.

→ Costa Esperanza, and its more recent expansions known as Costa del Lago and 8 de Mayo, is among the largest and most precarious informal settlements located in Greater Buenos Aires. The activity of government planning agencies in this area during both the original takeover and further development varied, but was generally low, which contributed to maintaining its informal character.

→ Guernica was added as an additional case study later in the process, due to its sudden emergence and high relevance to my research. It is a place of a very large and organised land takeover, which happened in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic in the peripheries of Buenos Aires. The significance of this case has to do with the way in which it sparked a nation-wide debate about the contradictions between the rights to housing and property, and how urban planners should act in contexts of informality and housing unaffordability.

²⁶ According to the Argentinian national penal code, unauthorised occupation (clandestine or through physical violence and threats) and use of another's property can be punished with forced eviction and prison time between 6 months and 3 years (Chequeado, 2022). For a discussion about occupations as an established housing strategy and mode of space production in Latin America, see Fernández et al. (2021).

Table 1 provides a general overview of the three case settlements, while Figure 19 shows their location. The case study part that follows will begin with narratives for the two settlement types at the metropolitan scale, followed by the three chapters with narratives for each of the three case settlements.

Table 1. Main characteristics of the chosen case settlements.

Name	Origin	Location	Settlement type	Est. Pop.	Size
Villa 31 (alt. Barrio 31, Barrio Padre Mujica)	1930s	CABA (city centre)	Shantytown	60,000	32ha
Costa Esperanza (Including Costa del Lago and 8 de Mayo)	1997	General San Martín partido (suburban)	Informal Settlement	30,000	95ha
Guernica	2020	Presidente Perón partido (peripheral)	Informal Settlement	10,000	100ha

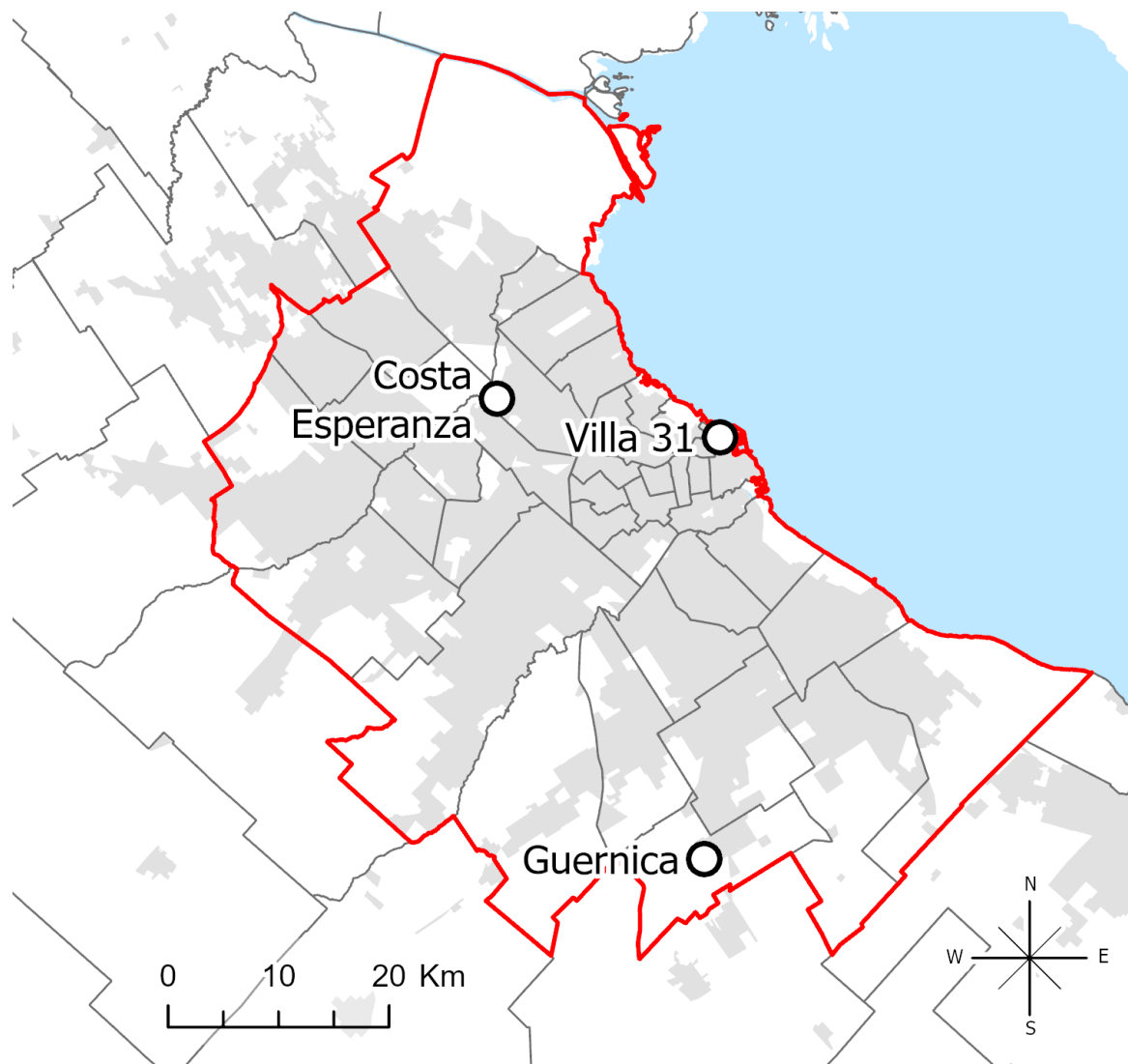


Figure 19. Location of case study areas. Source: ESRI / INDEC / IGN

5. Shantytowns: From transitory residence to permanent struggle

In the shantytowns... Sometimes yes, sometimes it gets out of control. I mean, when there is a lack of planning, it causes destruction, but there are other forms of planning, outside of the formal. (Interview 3).

The enormous demand for affordable housing in central areas has been to some degree satisfied by settling on all types of vacant lands. Many of these settlements no longer exist, because at some point they have been evicted or resettled. Nevertheless, attempts of eradication had mixed results and usually ended up displacing the occupants elsewhere, where they tried to build their small shacks and make a living in the same, informal way as before (Cravino, 2018; Rodríguez & Di Virgilio, 2016).

These shantytowns, known locally as *villas*, are visual expressions of socio-spatial inequalities. They are places of survival, activism and resistance. They are also areas which have been damaged by the fact that residents could not fulfil their hopes of finding better housing alternatives elsewhere, while, as my informants claimed themselves, planning efforts to make these places suitable for long term residence have come too late. As I will explain in this narrative, despite all the temporality and uncertainty that defined their context, shantytowns evolved into dense settlements with solid multi-storey brick structures and advanced social and political organisational structures.

I will begin this chapter with explaining the origin of shantytowns in Buenos Aires, and the reactions of the state to this phenomenon throughout cycles of crises and recovery. Next, I will describe a paradox of how shantytowns have over time transformed from places of transitory to permanent residence, while also gradually increasing the share of dwellings for rent. Later, I will discuss the situation before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. This story focuses on visualising the planning challenge caused by the parallel formalisation and informalisation processes in shantytowns and explains how finding one best approach to resolve these challenges has never been easy.

From shelter to home

The first shantytowns in Buenos Aires emerged in the 1920s and 30s on vacant properties owned by the state railway and port authorities, as temporary shelter for newly arrived migrants from Europe or the country's interior provinces. These settlements usually started with precarious shacks built primarily of wood, meant as transitory housing before finding a rental elsewhere or buying land to build on outside of the city. In the decades to follow, new shantytowns developed under highway overpasses, on unused industrial properties, on abandoned construction projects, around deteriorated social housing estates, in parks and land reserves, or next to rivers and lakes, where the risk of flooding was high. It was particularly the last type of settlement, where living was especially difficult. Auyero (2001a)

documented the efforts of settlers along the Riachuelo river trying to fill in wetlands to prevent flooding and build their shacks. He described one such shantytown as a “*space* for survival” (p. 28), but then he added that its residents were hopeful for the future, knowing that they were on an ascending socioeconomic trajectory. It is estimated that in 1956, about 34,000 people lived in these kinds of settlements in the capital city, which corresponded to approx. 1% of all population (Carman & Olejarczyk, 2021).

Until the 1970s, there was no comprehensive strategy for state intervention in shantytowns. While there were isolated cases of forced evictions or resettlement to social housing projects, most shantytowns were allowed to stay and many were also upgraded with basic infrastructure. Given their transitory character, relatively small scale, and the fact that they developed on abandoned land, the harm as seen from the outside was primarily visual. Shantytowns were simply considered one of many contingent housing strategies of the working classes in a city unable to cope with providing housing and infrastructure for its rapidly growing population.

The military dictatorship recognized an accelerated growth of shantytowns as a major problem and took a radical approach to solve it. In 1977, it declared Decree 33.653 called “Plan of eradication of shantytowns”, which ordered removal of all these settlements before the 1978 Football World Cup hosted by Argentina²⁷ and a set of measures to prevent the formation of new shantytowns. The plan proposed assistance in the return of the residents to their places of origin, offers of housing subsidies and construction of new housing. In reality, the reaction of the military regime was much more hostile and violent. Most shantytown dwellers were evicted or deported by force without any allocation of alternative housing solutions (Snitcofsky, 2018). Infrastructure and facilities built by both the residents and the state were destroyed, while community organisations that formed in these settlements were dissolved (Auyero, 2001b). These actions were later defended by the city mayor appointed by the military regime Guillermo Jorge del Cioppo in his famous speech, when he said “one has to deserve to live in Buenos Aires”, suggesting that shantytown dwellers were not civilised enough to live in the capital city (Oszlak, 1991). As a result of the eradication operations, the population of shantytowns in CABA decreased from 213,823 in 1976 to 12,593 in 1983, which means that over 200,000 people were forcibly displaced (Snitcofsky, 2018). Many of those displaced have participated in massive land takeovers in the peripheries, which I will introduce in chapter 6.

The return of the democratic government in 1983 was a clear retreat from the repressive policies and approaches introduced by the military regime, which has also meant a relative (or temporary) tolerance for squatting and other forms of occupations of vacant inner-city properties. The economic situation continued to be unstable, which further aggravated demand for affordable housing. Therefore, shantytowns have repopulated once again and new villas started emerging in the partidos of the first ring, particularly on railway properties and along the Riachuelo river to the South of the capital (Figure 20). By 1991, the population of shantytowns in CABA rose again to 52,608 (Rodríguez & Di Virgilio, 2016). In addition to those who returned to the city after being expelled by the military

²⁷ Preparation for the tournament was clearly only an excuse to speed up evictions (Snitcofsky, 2018). Similar mega-events are frequently used to justify slum clearance, forced displacement and urban renewal (Rocha & Xiao, 2021). Some recent examples include the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing (Broudehoux, 2012; Shin & Li, 2013), the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa (Goldman, 2015; Ngonyama, 2010), as well as the 2014 FIFA World Cup and 2016 Olympic Games in Brazil (Lopes de Souza, 2012; Silvestre & Gusmão de Oliveira, 2012; Butler & Aicher, 2015).



Figure 20. A shantytown along the Riachelo river in Lanús partido.



Figure 21. Vertical expansion in the Playón de Chacarita shantytown.

government, and families who were no longer able to afford rent in the formal sector²⁸, there was a new wave of immigrants from Paraguay, Bolivia and Peru as well as the poorer provinces of Argentina who were attracted by better employment, education and healthcare opportunities in Buenos Aires.

At that time, shantytowns were still places of transition, though year after year it was becoming more difficult to save up enough to access better housing, especially for those who preferred to maintain their location advantage by moving elsewhere within the city centre. As there were few alternatives for affordable housing and the newcomers spent more years in shantytowns than they had originally hoped, they started to gradually upgrade their buildings. Many of them were experienced construction workers and put up new structures with bricks reinforced with steel and concrete themselves. The housing expansion was happening incrementally by adding new floors with rooms. This way of densification continues today (Figure 21).

As shantytowns were gradually becoming places for permanent residence, their inhabitants started to organise themselves to coordinate a collective process of planning for provision and improvement of infrastructure and facilities, traffic circulation, and public spaces. They were also setting up committees that would request and negotiate infrastructure upgrading and tenure regularisation with the municipal governments. The results of these processes varied between settlements. In the meantime, while waiting for, or working on a permanent solution, most residents made illegal connections to access electricity and water.

The aftermath of the financial crisis of 2001 was the growth of existing and establishment of new shantytowns. As they densified, these settlements started turning into cities within cities, with their own economy and commerce, and

²⁸ The national Rental Law 23.342 introduced by the military government in 1976 totally liberalised rent controls from 1943 in an attempt to increase the supply of housing for rent, assuming that the market would correct prices itself. However, the opposite has happened. Rents have risen sharply along with inflation. To avoid price fluctuations and ensure stable profitability, rentals started to be valued in US dollars. At the same time, the purchasing power of the working class was reduced drastically due to the economic crisis that continued into the late 1980s. As a result, more families could no longer afford to rent in the formal sector and were pushed into informality (van Gelder et al., 2016).

an increasing offer of rental housing, for which there has always been a high demand among low-income people. For many, it was no longer a transitional place, but rather a manifestation of exclusion and a new sense of permanent precarity driven by unaffordability and uncertainty about the future.

New shantytowns have also emerged on empty land around social housing estates. This includes both projects meant for long-term residence and the so-called Transitory Housing Nuclei (*Núcleos Habitacionales Transitorios*- NHT). The latter were built by the military regime as temporary resettlement accommodations for those evicted from shantytowns, but because no definitive solutions have been provided, NHTs eventually became permanent. A very interesting example of this is the Carlos Gardel neighbourhood in Morón partido. It is a social housing complex built in the 1970s for people relocated from shantytowns in the capital city. Carlos Gardel consisted of both solid multi-storey housing blocks (called Presidente Sarmiento) and simple NHT units. The absence of state institutions and lack of building control caused the emergence of new makeshift housing and building extensions in the 1980s and 90s, practically turning the area into a shantytown. The most precarious shacks and the old NHT buildings were later demolished and replaced by new row-houses by the government. However, informal housing development and extensions continue today (Figure 22). Similar NHT projects that eventually turned into shantytowns are still present in the capital city. Some examples are Villa 15 - Ciudad Oculta and Villa 21-24 NHT Zavaleta.²⁹



Figure 22. In the Carlos Gardel neighbourhood, new houses and housing extensions (front) were built in open spaces between the original buildings (back). This is an example of informalisation of a modernist housing project, which has gradually turned into a shantytown.

²⁹ Older shantytowns in CABA have been assigned numeric names (i.e. Villa 1, Villa 2, etc.), which are still in common use today. As I mentioned before, many of them have been renamed recently to neighbourhoods (*barrios*). For example, three shantytowns that have consolidated into one called Villa 1-11-14 have been given an official name Barrio Padre Rodolfo Ricciardelli.

The economic recovery during the first decade of the 21st century has not halted densification and vertical growth of shantytowns. Quite the contrary - the improvement of living conditions, free public healthcare and good quality education attracted a new wave of immigrants to settle in Buenos Aires. As a result, the population of the capital's shantytowns increased from 107,422 in 2001 to 170,054 in 2010 (GCBA, 2019), and it is estimated that today the actual number might be over 300.000 (Carman & Olejarczyk, 2021).

This growth continued despite the fact that evictions or eviction attempts intensified in the last years, and the total surface of shantytowns has decreased (Rodríguez & Di Virgilio, 2016). The most insecure were the recently settled or expanded shantytowns and those located in areas where properties are expensive (Carman & Olejarczyk, 2021). For example, the Villa Rodrigo Bueno settlement located between the ecological protection area and the luxurious Puerto Madero district (Figure 23), has been under threat of eviction for two decades, precisely because of its high land value and proximity to the protected zone, but after a series of threats and a long, dramatic court case, a decision was made to allow the shantytown to stay in 2014 (ibid.).



Figure 23. Villa Rodrigo Bueno.



Figure 24. Villa 20 (centre), Indoamericano park (green areas in the back) and San Francisco housing projects (white buildings on the right).

The most known and largest recent collective takeover within CABA happened four years earlier on the other side of the city, on terrains that belong to Indoamericano park. This is one of the largest parks of the city, though a major part of its territory has not been open to the public and has remained vacant. The initial takeover was done by around 1,500 families with an urgent need for housing who came from the neighbouring areas, primarily shantytown Villa 20. They were brutally evicted by the police three days later and their makeshift houses were removed. Several people died as a result of clashes with the police. Two days after the expulsion, the population made another attempt to settle on the vacant land. Armed forces arrived on site once again, but the order of eviction was postponed by the court, which was about to decide whether the occupation was a case of an illegal usurpation or a legitimate act of claiming the constitutional right to housing (Ferre et al., 2014).³⁰ In the meantime, the local government, together with the park administration authority provided portable toilets and humanitarian assistance, while police were making sure that no new settlers arrived on site. The GCBA also engaged in negotiations, made a local census and promised to provide the occupants with alternative housing solutions. The occupants, supported by the local ombudsman, agreed to this proposal and left Indoamericano park. Nevertheless, the land takeover was later deemed by the court as a criminal act and some of the community leaders were detained and prosecuted (ibid.).

As no progress regarding new housing was made, a new takeover happened in another place near Indoamericano park, expanding the boundaries of Villa 20 towards an old car graveyard. The occupants were immediately evicted with bulldozers and left without any compensation (Almansi et al., 2020; Rodríguez et al., 2015). Several years later, construction of a social housing project, Padre Francisco, began on these terrains (Figure 24). Many of the residents who were allocated housing in these buildings were those who took part in either of the land takeovers. At the same time, a large part of Indoamericano park remains vacant and is not accessible to the public.

It is difficult to say exactly how many shantytowns there are in the metropolitan region,³¹ but according to the National Registry of Informal Settlements (RENABAP), which I will introduce in the next chapter, there are about 100 shantytowns in the study area (of which 57 are in CABA), housing about half a million people (Figure 25).

Growth that does not stop

Shantytowns continue to grow both in CABA and the adjacent municipalities in the GBA. Wherever there has been abandoned land without regular surveillance, it has most likely been filled with shacks that might or might not have been replaced with more solid construction. Some of the worst living conditions are in shantytowns that developed around lagoons or streams, which also tend to become illegal landfills, like La Cava in San Isidro partido or Villa Itatí in Quilmes. Soil in these areas is too wet and unstable for habitation, yet people in need are still trying to erect houses there.

³⁰ The government's obligation to ensure the right to dignified housing is in fact mentioned explicitly in the National constitution of Argentina (Article 14 bis) and the constitutions of the City of Buenos Aires (Article 31) and the Province of Buenos Aires (Article 36).

³¹ Baldivezo & Koutsovitis (2022a) suggest that GCBA (the city government) "has political and electoral motives to prevent the real count of shantytown population from coming to light."

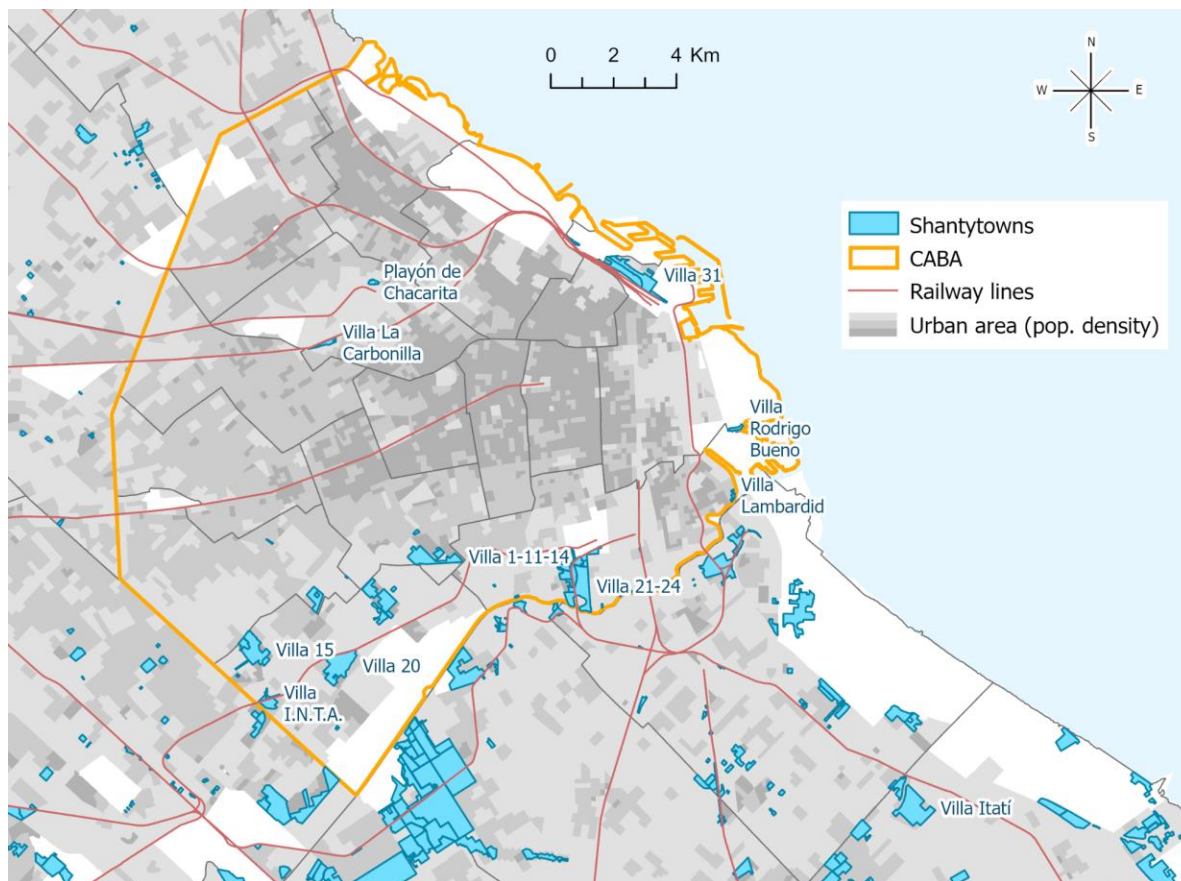


Figure 25. Approximate Location of shantytowns (blue) in CABA and the first ring municipalities in GBA. Shantytowns mentioned in the text are labelled. Source: Ministerio de Desarrollo Social / ESRI / INDEC / IGN



Figure 26. A 7-storey building in Villa 1-11-14.



Figure 27. Spiral metal stairs in Villa 1-11-14.

Densification of shantytowns accelerates. Some of these self-built structures reached up to 7 or 8 floors (Figure 26), though they are built on very small lots. Many dwellings do not have road access and cannot be entered from the room on the ground floor, so the only way to get there is through narrow pathways and very steep metal spiral stairs (Figure 27). To increase indoor space, upper floors are often extended towards the street and over alleys, which practically turns access paths into tunnels. This type of vertical growth causes shade and ventilation issues (Cravino, 2018).

One very visible feature of shantytowns are the messy wires and cables hanging everywhere (Figure 28). Access to infrastructure is irregular and usually consists of a combination of networks set up by the residents themselves and formal extensions made by state companies. As was explained by the former manager at UGIS, the Unit for Management and Social Intervention, which is responsible for fixing infrastructure connections and attending to emergencies in shantytowns in CABA, electricity is one of the major problems, because informal and illegal connections to the grid cause frequent fires. Service cuts generated by electric overload happen on a regular basis. My informant told me that shantytowns expand so fast that UGIS cannot keep up with the work to ensure safety:

You can fix electric connections in one building, or one block. And then, what happens? A few weeks later you see that the owner has built another room above, and plugged new cables into our network, his own way, without consulting us. There is no way we can maintain control over this... (Interview 11).

To supplement UGIS efforts, there are also electrical emergency guards made of experienced residents, who can be communicated with directly via special WhatsApp groups. There is an apparent division between residents who prefer formal electricity connections and those who would rather keep connecting illegally themselves. The first group argues that formal connections legitimise their right to stay, improve safety and ensure good quality service. The latter are well aware of the risks, but they do not want to pay the bills and have regular controls from servicemen.



Figure 28. Hanging electric wires in Villa 1-11-14.

Connections to water in most shantytowns also tend to be informal. As the settlements are densifying, water pressure drops and some neighbours may be periodically without water for many days. The situation is the worst during summer months, which are getting warmer and dryer every year due to climate change (Pellettieri, 2022). To mitigate this problem, residents and/or state authorities upgrade hydraulic infrastructure and install water tanks on the roofs. Whenever there is no water connection, it is delivered by tankers. At the same time, leakage from damaged or poorly installed pipes and hoses is very common. Moreover, drainage is often clogged with debris or garbage, causing floods, even in shantytowns that are not close to rivers or lakes. Standing water combined with humidity and overcrowding leads to the spread of life-threatening diseases, such as dengue (Sandá, 2020). On top of that, the quality of piped water, if it comes at all, is inadequate most of the time even for cooking, so residents need to buy it separately, which is a major burden for their household economies (Di Santi, 2014). In contrast to electricity, a vast majority of residents in shantytowns support efforts for improved connection to water and sanitation.

The more centrally located the shantytown, the more intense the densification. A lot of the new construction is dedicated to informal rental housing. Expanding upwards and renting out rooms is a common livelihood strategy for those who own (or claim ownership to) the housing unit below.³² It is estimated that between 40 and 50% of all housing stock in shantytowns is rental (Labiano et al., 2021; Muñoz, 2018a; Rodríguez & Di Virgilio, 2016).³³ Rental units in shantytowns vary in size and quality. Typical apartments are between 10 and 20m², which includes one room with a kitchen annex and access to a shared bathroom. Overcrowding is very common. Such apartments are often

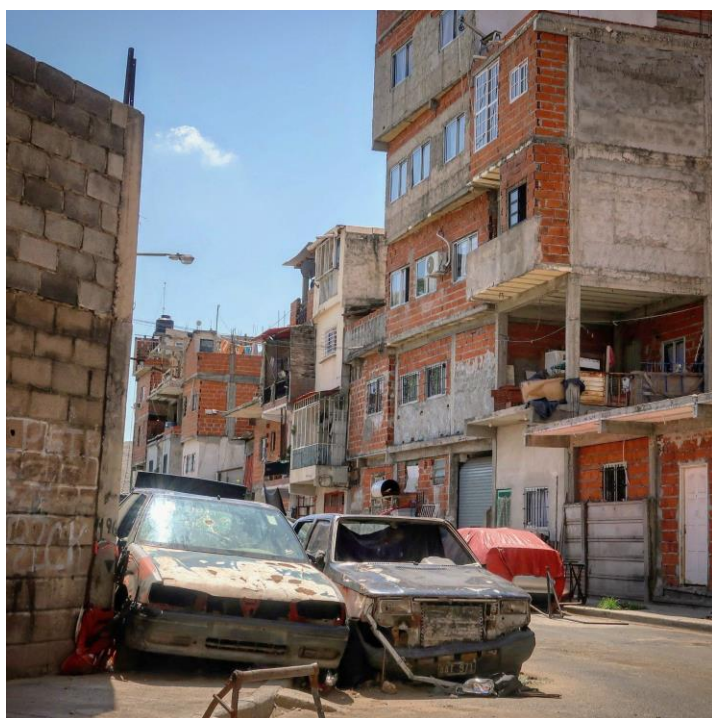


Figure 29. Villa 1-11-14.

shared between four or more family members. While rotation of tenants is high, the saving capacity of low-income households has decreased in the last decades, so instead of moving out of shantytowns into the 'formal' city, many families move within the same *villa*, or into one of the informal settlements in the peripheries. This happens both in cases of young couples and families who want to find a larger or more suitable space, or because the individuals or households lost their capacity to pay and were evicted from their previous dwelling. Laws that regulate rental agreements are generally not respected in shantytowns, and price increases or

³² In his master's thesis, Kisser (2009) estimated that the profit margin for rentals in shantytowns may be between 30 and 43 percent. Landowners who rent these rooms can relatively quickly become prosperous and influential actors within their shantytowns. They may own up to several multi-storey buildings in the same settlement.

³³ This is different from shantytowns in Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro and other large Latin American cities, where the majority of housing is acquired through informal purchase (Abramo, 2012).

evictions can happen without previous notice as soon as the landlords find someone else willing to pay more (see Rodríguez et al., 2015).

Perhaps surprisingly, rent in shantytowns normally does not reflect the living conditions there and is not proportionally lower than in the formal market. This was explained to me through a personal story:

When I went to live alone, I read in the newspaper that the rent of a room in Villa 31 was the same as my student house. I lived with a friend. We shared a really nice apartment. What is the difference? That my parents –class privilege– my parents pay me the guarantee to be able to rent, and the deposit, which is the ability to pay in advance. That is, I showed that I had the back that is my parents. Which is what they do not have in villas, even though they have the same salary as me as a 25-year-old student... (Interview 3).

What this means is that tenants in shantytowns need to compensate for the fact that they do not need to meet all the entry conditions for renting. Considering that they often live in reduced spaces and in most cases with limited access to basic facilities such as kitchen and bathroom, their relative rent is higher than in the formal market. At the same time, not having a formally binding contract increases the situation of insecurity:

Renting a villa is a vulnerable situation within vulnerability itself, it means not having *any* type of stability. (emphasis original). (Interview 7).

The lack of formal rental agreement is a major problem, because without such evidence tenants are not protected from evictions and may also not be eligible for welfare support or compensations, such as the emergency housing subsidies. These subsidies have often been used strategically by the government in relocation projects or as compensation in cases of eviction caused by their own arbitrary plans and decisions. However, the monthly sum of this subsidy, which in 2021 was \$13,000 pesos (approx. \$130 US), was never enough to cover full rent of a decent place, even in shantytowns (Canal Abierto, 2020a).³⁴

The paradox in all this is that due to affordability and instability in the rental market, a growing number of tenants in shantytowns will never realise their dreams of becoming property owners. As noted by Cravino (2018), historically,

renting was a point of entry into the shantytown, because over time tenants saved enough money to buy in the neighbourhood (...) this cycle is beginning to exhaust itself. (p. 84).

³⁴ The emergency housing subsidies are modest monthly payments to evicted families extendible for a maximum period of one year. This program is run by the GCBA and its earlier versions date back to the housing emergency in the period before the 2001 financial crisis. The number of recipients of these subsidies has been growing exponentially during economic crises and the pandemic: from 1,160 in 1999 to 8,000 in 2001 (Procupez, 2015) and from 10,615 in 2019 to 19,600 in 2021 (Pécora, 2021). To be eligible for the subsidy, a family must be in the house at the moment of eviction, and then apply at the welfare office (Muñoz, 2017). Those who do not want to live in shantytowns use these subsidies to rent in the so-called welfare hotels. These establishments operate under licences of residential hotels, which allow them to charge daily rates, though they may also accept weekly and monthly payments. This accommodation model allows owners to be legally permitted to evict tenants, even when they are one day late with paying rent (Procupez, 2015). Similarly to tenements in shantytowns, rents for rooms in welfare hotels tend to be as high as in the formal market and the main difference is that they have more relaxed entry requirements (Oliva, 2022). Due to deterioration, inadequate maintenance and overcrowding, living conditions in many welfare hotels are not necessarily better than in shantytowns (see Muñoz, 2018a; Procupez, 2015 and Rodríguez, 2009).

This shows how shantytowns are becoming cities within cities, with their own internal economies and housing markets that cause internal exclusions and marginalisations.

A steadily growing group of residents in shantytowns are employed in so-called *changas*, which are precarious, short term and informal jobs, without any social security. Many of them work in construction workers (*albañiles*), carton recyclers (*cartoneros*), hawkers (*vendedores ambulantes*), or babysitters (*niñeras*). Considering the extent of the city and long travel times, this explains why the densest shantytowns have emerged closest to central areas. Some of the more stable job possibilities are with the local cooperatives, which are often implementing tasks assigned by UGIS and other local government institutions, such as cleaning or waste collection. Job access often depends on personal connections and ties with the local community. When the economy is recovering and the demand for work increases, shantytown residents often, instead of hiring someone locally, invite their relatives and friends from places as far away as Paraguay, Bolivia and Peru, contributing to increased demand for housing and further densification.

Contrary to common perceptions among more affluent sectors of the society, the majority of residents of shantytowns are not involved in serious criminal activities, nor are they lazy or just demanding government assistance. Based on my experience, I would argue that this reputation is exaggerated. As I explained before, welfare subsidies are in any case not high enough to cover rent or mortgage fees, even in shantytowns. According to a former employee of GCBA, who worked on economic integration in shantytowns, these are:

...some of the most stigmatised places in the city. Many news stories that come out are about crime, and not, for example, about the entrepreneurship of the neighbours (Interview 2).

Such prejudices make finding work outside of the settlement more difficult and contribute to a growing socioeconomic divide. For many, the solution is to get fake ID cards, which display residency in another part of the city.

It is however true that insecurity is a serious problem in shantytowns and indeed there are some criminal groups that deal with drug dealing, human trafficking or robbery. I personally have never felt unsafe in any of the shantytowns I visited, though this may have to do with the fact that I am a man, and that most of the time I was accompanied by someone known by the local community. My contacts, however, mentioned that insufficient surveillance and poor illumination contribute to gender-based and domestic violence, which makes many women and children live in constant fear. One of the female planners, who has worked in shantytowns for many years, told me:

When you have less money, you have to tolerate much more fear. To fall down the stairs, to have your son get into trouble with difficult gangs... That someone breaks in at night... To be abused by the police or your neighbours... That's fear. But you get used to it. So... How much do you tolerate how unsafe it is where you live? For me fear is a part of living in a shantytown. (Interview 3).

The residents try to protect themselves as much as they can. For example, a lot of windows in shantytowns have grilles to prevent robberies. Yet this is also the case in the 'formal' city, where similar security measures are common and people are advised not to walk outside alone in the dark. Does this mean, then, that the difference between shantytowns and other neighbourhoods is not as large as we may think?

Intervention strategies: Upgrading or resettlement?

Uncertainty for residents in shantytowns goes well beyond their precarious employment, insecurity and (inconsistent over time) risks of eviction. Ever since the first occupations happened over 80 years ago, the state has been changing their approaches regarding what to do with shantytowns (Cravino & Segura, 2021). With the exception of the military dictatorship, which applied the same repressive and violent expulsion strategy everywhere, the responses of all democratic governments varied from case to case. The list of options ranges from total omission, tenure formalisation and incremental upgrading, resettlement of the residents to other places and replacement of the precarious dwellings with new social housing.³⁵ In many cases, more than one of these approaches have been applied in the same shantytown. Due to administrative delays and sudden political changes, it was never easy for the residents and their representatives to predict what would happen with their places of living. This might not have been such a major problem until shantytowns became places of permanent residence, and the inhabitants realised that their condition of vulnerability might extend for years, or even decades.

Since the democratic transition in the 1980s, whenever eviction was not necessary, the state was more willing to discuss other alternatives with the inhabitants. One of the main forms of assistance was the principle of allowing shantytown dwellers to stay where they are, issuing them property titles and improving their living conditions in situ. This idea emerged for different independent reasons. First, different factions of the government have been using progressive infrastructure provision and other forms of support as a vote-buying strategy. Second, the authorities accepted that they were simply unable to materialise their promises of the provision of dignified housing alternatives for the poor. Third, the new permanent houses built by shantytown dwellers were of much better quality compared to the precarious shacks they have replaced. It is important to note that all this has happened in a period when the idea of slum upgrading and formalisation had by then also gained momentum in academic circles and international development organisations. Fourth, there has been increasing pressure from the community leaders as well as ombudsman and human rights organisations who defended their right to remain, which included opposing several eviction threats in courts.³⁶ As a result, GCBA and authorities in the 'first ring' partidos of GBA started a process of gradual integration and improvement of existing shantytowns.

³⁵ In Argentina, there are two types of social housing. The first type are dwellings meant for temporary or permanent resettlement of shantytown dwellers, as described in this chapter. The second type is a government-financed construction of housing for groups that meet specific criteria, usually regarding income (needs to be below average, but high enough to guarantee regular payments). Although in some years the quantity of new units have been impressive (particularly during the post-crisis economic recovery between 2003 and 2007), these programs have never come even close to satisfying the demand for affordable housing. In cases of both types of subsidised housing, the beneficiaries assume subsidised mortgages to become freehold property owners. At the moment of writing this, there is no social rental housing scheme in Argentina, though the intent to create such a program has been included in the new rental law from 2020. Traditional social housing schemes in Argentina have been heavily criticised, for example for in-existent participation of future residents in design and planning, design uniformity, bad quality of construction, inadequate maintenance, poor location and unaffordability (see Baer & Kauw, 2016; Carman & Olejarczyk, 2021; Labiano et al., 2021; Rodríguez & Di Virgilio, 2016 and Zapata, 2017).

³⁶ In recent years there have also been instances when international organisations intervened to defend shantytown dwellers and other low-income groups in Buenos Aires from forced evictions. In 2021, the United Nations' Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) ruled against eviction of 26 persons in Villa 15, citing the situation of similar cases in Spain (El Grito del Sur, 2021). One year

The first important planning regulations in CABA that addressed shantytowns specifically were Decrees 1001 and 1737 from 1990 and 954 from 1991. They introduced a new zoning code, U31, which relaxed some building and planning restrictions that apply elsewhere in the city, to adapt them to the realities of organic development in these settlements. For example, the permitted lot size within U31 zones was smaller, streets could be narrower and small-scale industrial activities were allowed within residential areas. These decrees have also introduced pathways towards upgrading and formalisation (Di Virgilio, 2015; Rodríguez & Di Virgilio, 2016). This is an example of how a democratic state accepted and attempted to incorporate informal practices within their governance structures. While this has not necessarily reduced uncertainty, it opened new possibilities for communities and planners to define how chaotic shantytowns could evolve into ordinary neighbourhoods.

Another step in the same direction was Law 148, approved by GCBA in 1998. It called for a prioritised attention to the social and housing problems of shantytowns and degraded public housing projects. The law defined the creation of specific area action plans for formalisation and socio-urban integration in each shantytown, where the ultimate goal is:

when families in popular neighbourhoods reach the same standards of quality of life, opportunities and political, economic, environmental and social rights as the rest of society (Corti, 2021, p. 166).

As defined in Law 148, planning processes in these areas had to be based on detailed social and spatial surveys and active participation of local residents at all stages. Shantytowns required a planning approach, where focus is on 'repairing' the disorder that was caused by the lack of spatial planning, which was omitted at times where shantytowns were meant for temporary or transitory residence. As one of the planners who worked in shantytowns told me, approval of these laws is very important even if they do not lead to major improvements in infrastructure. As she suggested, for people living in uncertain tenure conditions, a simple recognition of their residence serves as a guarantee of citizenship and the right to stay:

If nothing else happens, these people have a paper, a document that states where they live. And this gives them rights and tools to move on with their lives, which means a lot. (Interview 3).

For villas within CABA (with the exception of Villa 31 introduced in chapter 7), the main responsible authority for socio-urban integration is the City Housing Institute, IVC. Shantytowns that lay within the boundaries of the Province of Buenos Aires are being attended by both the municipal authorities, and since its creation in 2018, the Provincial Organisation for Social and Urban Integration (*Organismo Provincial de Integración Social y Urbana* - OPISU), which I will introduce in more details later. Improvement of infrastructure in shantytowns has been financed primarily by the state and multilateral organisations (mainly World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank - BID) and was coordinated through various smaller or larger programs. To meet the goals of socio-urban integration, other government institutions complement physical improvement with social programs and initiatives. This may happen both in collaboration or competition with NGOs and community organisations. Some of the main lines of action are

earlier, a human rights organisation The Shift, led by former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing Leilani Farha published a report condemning the insufficient attention of the Argentinian authorities to the urgency of the housing needs in shantytowns and in other marginalised areas (The Shift, 2020).

education, labour inclusion, health and culture. At the same time, other important aspects, such as environmental sustainability, are given a lower priority and in some shantytowns are completely absent from planning, due to the fact that they are not considered urgent, or because of insufficient funding (Almansi et al., 2020).

At the time of writing this, only five shantytowns in CABA have their socio-urban integration laws approved³⁷. Whether a shantytown was granted its own law or not depended mainly on how well the local community was organised, and how much they lobbied to pass such laws through the legislation. This does not mean that interventions are not happening elsewhere, but actions in other shantytowns are done in a more sectorial manner and are not as coordinated by the different institutions as compared to settlements that have their own laws. These action plans do not set very clear targets and goals, but rather focus on the processes and strategies towards improvement and integration, which are subject to adjustments according to the changing situation. The contextual complexity and informality are in many instances recognized and addressed.³⁸

On the positive side, each socio-urban integration plan includes local initiatives and projects that might either have been proposed by the community itself, or planners who facilitated the participation process. For example, the plan for Villa Rodrigo Bueno includes a community garden (Nueva Ciudad, 2020) and an outdoor food court (Horvat, 2019). This would not be feasible in most other shantytowns due to their high densities and lack of available space. Local plans identify areas (whatever small they may be) to insert new meeting places, community facilities, parks, plazas and playgrounds, and therefore also improve sun and air conditions. There are also incentives for facade improvements and painting. These interventions are usually done as the first step in planning because they generate a visible change in a relatively short time without allocating a lot of financial resources, with the objective of creating a better sense of trust between the community and the municipal planners. Why this approach can be problematic will be explained later.

The social aspect of socio-urban integration has to do primarily with improving and maintaining local employment opportunities. Each of the five approved plans recognizes that true shantytown transformations cannot happen if their residents remain poor. Therefore, each of the five plans proposes different programs and incentives for work-related skill training and entrepreneurship. Whenever new housing is built for the resettled population, it includes commercial spaces for local businesses on the ground floor (Figure 30). Most upgrading projects in shantytowns also define in their regulations that at least 20% of the workers employed to execute improvement, maintenance, construction or demolition tasks have to be local residents. This usually happens through contracting local workers' cooperatives.

While the socio-urban integration plans look good on paper, implementation of many of their components has not been easy. Participatory processes are not always successful and are often hindered by mistrust and conflict between the community and some city planners, who are used to making decisions from their desks, instead of trying to reach consensus with the residents (Almansi et al., 2020). Another problem was that the budget allocated for socio-urban

³⁷ The five shantytowns are: Villa 31 (Laws 3343 from 2009 and 6129 from 2018, to be discussed in chapter 7), Villa 1-11-14 (Law 403 from 2000), Villa 20 (Law 5705 from 2016), Villa Rodrigo Bueno (Law 5798 from 2017) and Playón de Chacarita (Law 5799 from 2017).

³⁸ In a detailed analysis of the socio-urban integration process in Villa 20, Almansi et al. (2020) claim that this planning model is resilient and appropriate for such uncertain and complex contexts.



Figure 30. Commercial uses on the ground floor in new housing for resettled inhabitants in Villa Rodrigo Bueno.

integration was uneven: some shantytowns got more money per capita than others (ACIJ, 2021b), which generated a sense of injustice between shantytown dwellers and NGOs that complimented the action of the state.

Formalisation of tenure in shantytowns is complicated due to irregular lot sizes and difficulty in defining property limits, especially considering how upper floors of buildings encroach over neighbouring lots and public spaces. The high share of rental housing is also a problem, because the property formalisation process can take many years, during which tenants can rotate up to several times. Even if the right tenants are identified, there remains a question whether they deserve to be included at all, and if so, should they get freehold ownership rights or recognition of their rental agreement, which is often done orally.

The priority in the infrastructure component of socio-urban integration plans is ensuring formal and good quality access to water and sanitation. Rainwater drainage is also essential to prevent flooding. Gas connections, electricity, and transport infrastructure are also addressed in most of these plans. However, despite large monetary investments through different funds and projects, access to infrastructure is very uneven between shantytowns. According to a planner who has experience working in different marginalised settlements, the chaotic structure of shantytowns, their very high density, existence of parallel informal connections and scarcity of open spaces makes any kind of intervention very difficult. A lot, however, depends on the location and size:

Within the *villas*, you have enclave shantytowns, which are like Villa Fraga [Playón de Chacarita], less than five hectares, inserted in an urban fabric that already has infrastructure networks. So, it is already consolidated, you could very easily connect to the existing networks. You will have the feasibility of hydraulic trunk connection, or sewer or water supply, because the surroundings have it. (Interview 5).

Larger shantytowns are much harder to integrate:

And then you have extensive villas, because they are very dense, they are so large in hectares, that they are like cities in themselves, like [Villa] Itatí. Itatí has 60 hectares, it's enormous. A city in itself. It has 30,000

people. One of the largest. Or Villa La Cava, in San Isidro. Cities in themselves, which clearly are not going to give you sewage feasibility, they are not going to give you hydraulic feasibility, you need to do acupuncture work, open up the streets, respect what is built... While in a small shantytowns perhaps, you can resettle half of it. (Interview 5).

A few months after this conversation, a note in a local newspaper described how the progression in infrastructure upgrades in Villa Itatí (Figures 31 and 32), located on wetlands along a contaminated stream, has been very slow despite many millions of dollars from the World Bank allocated to this project (Soriano, 2020). On the one hand, this very extensive use of resources was a result of an underestimation of the costs necessary for upgrading, and on the other, overconfidence of decision makers and the community that the shantytown could be upgraded in situ, without any resettlements.

Making infrastructure connections and building improvement in itself is not enough if it is done only once. As I have explained before, shantytowns are in a process of constant organic growth, which means that new connections need to be made and the capacity needs regular upgrading. If infrastructure is not maintained and expanded properly, the problem of fallacies is back. Water pressure goes down, leaking increases, sewage and drainage pipes are clogged and power cuts become more frequent.

In the most hopeless situations, parts of shantytowns might be declared unfeasible to upgrade and end up being demolished and replaced by social housing, either in the same place or elsewhere. This is the case for around one third of all housing in shantytowns. Residents whose buildings are not meant for demolition are normally offered subsidies for repairs and improvement alongside interest-free mortgages to formalise their property ownership and finance the transaction of buying the property they have been occupying.

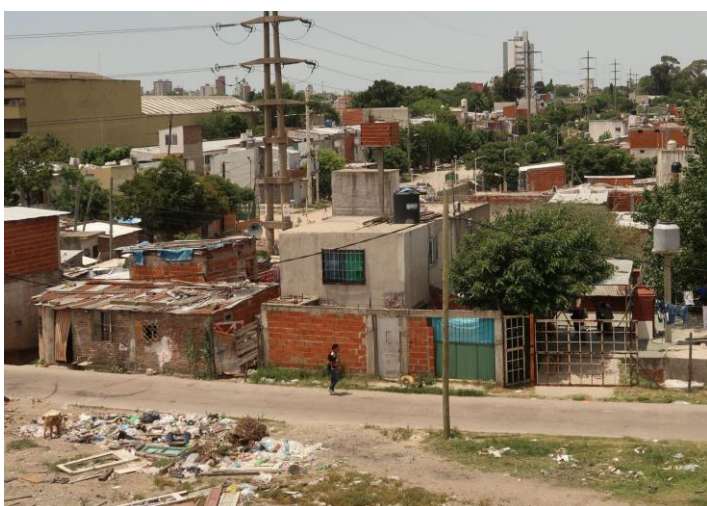


Figure 31. Villa Itatí in Quilmes partido.



Figure 32. Villa Itatí. The lagoon in the middle was originally much bigger, but it was gradually filled with land for construction of new housing. Source: Google / Maxar Technologies

Orders of demolition of housing in shantytowns happen for different reasons.³⁹ For example, they may be located within flood-prone areas or lay too close to or beneath highways and railway overpasses. It may also be done in order to open up new streets (Figure 33) to improve circulation and integrate the settlement with the grid structure of the surrounding areas. Street opening addresses the problem of a labyrinth-like urban structure with long paths and with very few entry points, which cause a feeling of isolation, insecurity and increased travel time. It is also necessary that the streets are wide enough to make space for new infrastructure connections and allow emergency vehicles like ambulances or fire trucks to enter the settlement.

The relocated residents do not get keys to their new housing for free, rather they need to assume similar low-interest and partly subsidised mortgages. They may also be eligible for monetary compensation for demolition of their old houses, whose value depends on the size of the dwelling and their structural quality. In some cases the compensation might be deducted from the cost of the new house (Almansi et al., 2020). This means that families relocated to the same buildings may have much different mortgage conditions, depending on where they lived before.

The success of this process depends on the efficiency of IVC, OPISU or other responsible institutions, and good collaboration with the residents. If, for example, a family is relocated to new housing and their old building is not protected or is demolished right away, it may be squatted by new occupants and all the effort goes to waste.

Inadequate offers of new housing, miscalculations of mortgages, wrong value estimates or poor communication may also lead to scepticism of residents, who may feel that they are unable to pay off the mortgage.⁴⁰ Such conflicts lead to resisting relocation and refusing to sign agreements to vacate their buildings (Recalde, 2019). Protests may also occur when shantytown residents are relocated to housing that is of poor quality or too far away from their original places of residence (Carman & Olejarczyk, 2021; Rodríguez & Di Virgilio, 2016; Rosende, 2021).

In other cases, delays in the implementation of upgrading or relocation plans had disastrous impacts on shantytowns. This is because while residents wait for definitive solutions, they stop investments or repairs to the existing infrastructure and building stock, which they would normally have done themselves. Such situations may last several years, leading to a reversal of the gradual process of improvement and degradation of living standards. This has happened for example in Villa Lamadrid, which does not have its own local law, but due to its location under a highway overpass, it was designated for demolition and relocation over a decade ago (Gonzalo, 2022). The shantytown is still in its original place in 2022 (Figure 34).

³⁹ Some demolitions have been done quickly and without the necessary security precautions, causing structural damages to adjacent houses and frustration of the local residents (Carman & Olejarczyk, 2021)

⁴⁰ The difficulty of mortgage repayment is a problem that extends well beyond shantytown dwellers and other marginalised groups. In a conversation with one of the leaders of a self-organised group that represents participants in a National Government's mortgage subsidy programme PROCREAR, he stressed that the problem is that housing in these schemes is considered a commodity and not a place to live in: "What we criticise is precisely that, because we are not making that profit calculation, we are not buying a house to sell it. That's what they [the banks] have in mind, we value housing for its use, for its use value and not for its exchange value. Nobody is thinking of selling it. So what would be the solution they propose to you: 'well, sell it'" (Interview 14).



Figure 33. Street opening and widening in Rodrigo Bueno shantytown. The sign on the left says “Do not buy, do not sell, do not build” and is meant to prevent further encroaching and expansion.



Figure 34. Villa Lamadrid located under the highway overpass in La Boca district.

Many shantytown inhabitants did not want to wait for government intervention and have actively looked for alternative ways to access affordable housing formally. One such opportunity was the Program for Self-management of Housing (*Programa de Autogestión de la Vivienda* – PAV) in CABA launched as a response to housing shortage during the 2001 financial crisis.⁴¹ Through PAV, the IVC issued subsidised loans for housing cooperatives to buy land, hire a

⁴¹ The principles of PAV were formulated in Law 341 from 2000 and modified in Law 964 from 2002.

team of advisors (including architects) and build their own dwellings, through self-construction or by hiring external construction companies. Several groups of shantytown dwellers formed cooperatives and took advantage of these loans before the program was discontinued in 2007 (Rodríguez, 2009; Pedro et al., 2020). In addition to effective use of resources, another reason why housing cooperatives delivered positive results during an uncertain economic period was that they gave more agency to the residents themselves (ibid.).

Informal and semi-formal planning

There is all the logic, which has to do with what I call 'para-formality'. Which is like, it's not informality and it's not formality either, but it's like something that goes alongside formality, or is the process of intra-formality...

I don't know what the hell to call it. But it's something that is before formality, yet within a regulated scheme. I mean, is this formality? (Interview 18).

In the previous section, I described the attempts of the government institutions to improve living situations in shantytowns through incorporating them into formal regulations and implementing participatory local socio-urban integration plans. This does not mean that the residents are fully dependent on the government to prepare and execute plans.

Many shantytowns are self-managed and self-regulated - they have their codes. Some more than others. (Interview 4).

Ever since shantytowns started to become places of permanent residence, community leaders have increasingly been engaged in an informal style of planning, which relies on respecting agreements that may not necessarily be inscribed in law. Some of them might be practices that follow a simple intention of 'being a good neighbour', for example not placing windows facing another property without the permission of the resident next door or not blocking access to properties inside the block. However, as I will explain shortly, the informal planning practices can be much more complex.

Sometimes these state-led and community-led planning processes are tightly connected and other times these are done in separation, or with the help of NGOs or universities. The degree of cooperation depends to a large extent on the promises of the government and the level of trust that both parties will act with good intentions. It is also not uncommon that a community, which objected to a plan for intervention in their settlement, responded with their own alternative plan, which might even include a simple cost-benefit analysis (Carman & Olejarczyk, 2021).

As my informants told me, the state should have as much respect to the informal practices of shantytown dwellers, as the shantytown dwellers need respect for the rules and regulations established by the state:

Here the entire system of extreme participation in *villas* is also disputed, and it's like... Well, they self-managed their city: their house, their streets, they self-managed everything. (...) The neighbours have a

history of fighting and self-managing their own habitat like no other inhabitant of the city of Buenos Aires. This has to be respected. (Interview 6).

One way of gaining trust of the local community is through active incorporation of local leaders in the governance structures. For example, the majority of the 150 employees of UGIS are themselves from Commune 8, which is one of those with the highest proportion of people living in *villas*. The local community in shantytowns addresses these public servants as ‘neighbours’ (*vecinos*) and treats them more as skilled professionals than politicised bureaucrats. UGIS has also gained popularity and trust because they create local jobs by delegating many of the simple tasks of maintenance and cleaning to local cooperatives.

A common approach to reach planning goals is to take advantage of the self-management and self-regulation in shantytowns by inserting planners in the already existing community-led processes, instead of opening up new spaces of participation, where the local government sets the rules of the game beforehand. An example of this was explained to me by Paloma Garay Santaló, a planner formerly employed at the National Government, with an academic background in urban geography. She ‘invited herself’ into the community of a small shantytown Villa la Carbonilla in La Paternal neighbourhood (Commune 15), where she was assigned to work.

The settlement was established in 2001 on a long and narrow parcel that belonged to the national railway company (Figure 35). The original settlers were of Peruvian origin working as carton recyclers who wanted to live close to their places of work. As other shantytowns, La Carbonilla transformed from an area of temporary residence to a consolidated settlement meant for long-term residence. After some years, the *cartoneros* organised themselves into a cooperative and negotiated the right to use a nearby empty warehouse that also belonged to the state. Today, La Carbonilla has around 4,000 residents and solid buildings with up to 4 or 5 floors, right next to the railway tracks (Figure 36).



Figure 35. Villa la Carbonilla is located on a long and narrow site along a railway line. Source: Google Earth / Maxar Technologies



Figure 36. Villa La Carbonilla as seen from a passing train.

Villa La Carbonilla has been under many threats of evictions, especially in the first ten years of existence. It still does not have its own local planning law and there was little presence of the municipal planning authorities. Apparently the reason why GCBA has not intervened there until recently is that the settlement has not been officially recognized by the justice as a shantytown, which prevented registration and prioritised integration according to Law 148 (Waldmann, 2014).⁴²

Despite not being empowered to make large-scale infrastructure interventions, the National Government, as a landowner, wanted to take charge. The planning approach it chose to apply there was unique, because that it was not pre-established, and not even very important whether or not the planning process would end up in a law or other legally binding decisions. The idea of Paloma and her colleagues was to help the residents agree on their own internal codes and regulations and make them responsible for executing them. If that went well, the next step would be to negotiate with the city government to officially recognize Villa La Carbonilla as a neighbourhood, and then help upgrade the settlement according to the insight from the community, pledging full cooperation of the National State. One of the silent conditions of her work with the residents was that these new negotiated rules needed to fit the U31 zoning code that would also apply in La Carbonilla. The rest, regarding both the process and outcome, was totally uncertain and subject to change.

Due to political differences, collaboration with the GCBA did not go well. That, however, did not prevent the improvement process from happening. What I found interesting was that implementation of the different new projects

⁴² This was also the case for other newer shantytowns, such as Playón de Chacarita and Rodrigo Bueno, where the state took many years before it officially recognized them as shantytowns (Carman & Olejarczyk, 2021). These two, however, got their local plans in 2017.

in La Carbonilla did not happen after, but was done in parallel to the planning process, which resulted in increasing sense of ownership:

Neighbours improved the pavement and determined the widths. So, this work of appropriation of the territory makes the neighbours more confident about what we are doing. (Interview 3).

By using 'we', Paloma referred to both the planners and the community leaders. She saw these as one group, working towards a common objective. The only difference was that some lived in the settlement and had better insider knowledge, while the others had better theoretical knowledge and experience with bureaucracy. For her, planning was about finding common grounds. "These are social agreements" - she said - "so if they work in informality, let's try to generate them informally" (Interview 3).

Besides insecure tenure, the coexistence of housing with railway operation was the greatest uncertainty, which increased further as the settlement densified. One of the biggest challenges for the neighbourhood was therefore to define how close to the railway tracks people could live:

Once, the railwaymen tore down and marked houses on the edge of the villa, and then put up a fence defining how far they [the residents] could build. I don't know why. They were told this was because of railway safety. It's fine, but it [the accidents] doesn't happen very often. So there was another border line, and they started to disobey the railwaymen. (Interview 3).

This is an example of how the local community challenged the authorities by redefining the boundaries of how far they considered reasonable to build. Driven by a need for space to expand, and accepting the risk of both accidents and conflicts with the railway company, the residents of La Carbonilla decided to build over the area where houses were demolished once again. Paloma acted as a mediator between the railway company and the residents. The railway authorities did not want to give up, but at least she managed to prevent a violent eviction and convinced the residents not to continue building too close to the railway. Without making any firm promises, she said that the government was looking for options to resettle those who were in the danger zone.

This is only one of many such informal agreements that her team made in La Carbonilla. As she explained to me, all the meetings and negotiations led to a natural process of defining internal codes and rules that guided further growth of the shantytown, taking into consideration for example circulation of trucks and carts for transporting cartons for recycling. This participatory process created a sense of mutual trust and need for more internal regulations. The positive experience from the execution of the informal codes led to the idea of writing down all the agreed regulations and submit them to GCBA as a law proposal:

I've met with the elected board, with one delegate from each block, and we reached an agreement. We measured what existed and what could be built, as if there was a particular urban norm for that neighbourhood, and we defined an official line of construction. And people respect it, because it is getting closer from being regularised. (Interview 3).

This step is very important, because the authority responsible for repairing and upgrading infrastructure was GCBA and not the National Government, despite owning the land.

So what we have been doing is, all the small steps in planning, but also generating the conditions so that at some point we could move forward. And if not, set standards so that the informal growth has some guidelines. (Interview 3).

As agreed, a version of the planning document for La Carbonilla has been turned into a socio-urban integration law proposal and submitted to GCBA by the empowered shantytown residents. At the time of writing this, there has not been any progress in processing the law, though IVC has made some preliminary population surveys and declared willingness to integrate La Carbonilla. In the meantime, as noted by Paloma, “the neighbourhood developed following the guidelines, with which it developed better” (Interview 3). The challenge, however, was that in the last years, the railway tracks have been elevated and the new line goes very close, and in some places even above, the shantytown structures (Figure 37). This requires renegotiating where and how houses in La Carbonilla can be built. Paloma has changed her job since then and no longer has the authority to act there as a planner, but she is still in touch with the community of La Carbonilla:

My bond with the people continues. When they have to talk to the new authorities, they call me, so there are some, informally, continuities in the process. (Interview 3).

Her conclusion is that in order to make a real difference, the government has to incorporate informality. Planners need to recognize that some laws and regulations are harmful to these settlements, and instead of trying to establish and execute new laws from above, they should let the community take the lead and then build up and formalise all the informal social agreements that emerge in this collaborative planning process.

Those who work more in villas have a different approach with people... People in popular sectors have a lot of experience of urbanisation and conflict, so this library and those technicians tend to work more as partners and are more accustomed to chaos. (Interview 3).

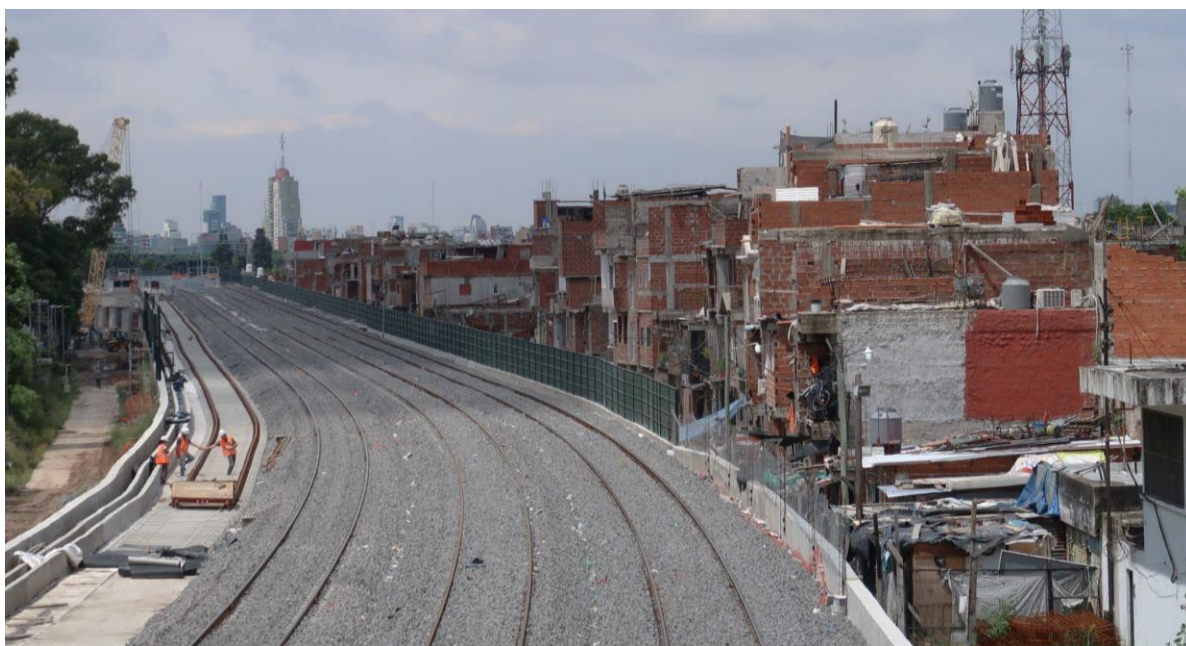


Figure 37. The new elevated railway tracks are closer to the buildings in La Carbonilla and cast shade to many residential units.

The rise of political participation

Formalisation, that they are not moved from the place, is something that was won, with neighbourhood struggle, with organisation, with sacrificing the body on the street... Of a lot of neighbours, for many years. For some more than forty years, they were fighting to be allowed to stay where their family was born, where their parents arrived, where they made their lives, where they built their streets, their kindergartens, their nurseries, their squares, with their hands and their money. (Interview 7).

Before the 1990s, when shantytowns were still primarily places of transition, the organisation of communities living there was mainly driven by resistance to evictions and emergency response (Auyero, 2001a). As these settlements became places of long-term or permanent residence, so have local identities and social bonds strengthened. In recent years, we have observed the emergence of powerful political movements and social organisations in shantytowns. These groups are also taking partial or full responsibility for planning and local activism to lobby government officials to take action.

The strengthening of autonomous participation processes and formation of political movements in shantytowns in recent years has been to a large extent motivated by a shared feeling of disillusion with government-led improvement efforts and meaningless meetings where city representatives have been under constant attack. Shantytown representatives have accused public servants of slow action, constant changes of their ideas and plans, or failing to deliver their promises. As a result, in most shantytowns there are two parallel participation processes: some are internal, facilitated by community leaders, and others are open, organised by local planning authorities. Paloma, who represented the National Government, has also experienced that gaining trust and “entering” into the inner circles of a shantytown she worked in was not easy:

They also distrust, that is, they have many strategies that are valid, and building trust takes time. The truth is that you are learning with experience also how to manage these things. (Interview 3).

Having recognised shared challenges, community leaders began establishing networks of cooperation reaching beyond their shantytowns. An emblematic story is the case of the local communities in Villa I.N.T.A., Villa 15 and Villa 20 (all located in Villa Lugano district in Comune 8 in CABA), which in the 1990s became so fed up with the delays with infrastructure provision in their neighbourhoods that they mobilised a joint action to confiscate construction equipment that the city’s contractor left there, organised street blockades and took the case to court (Rodríguez & Di Virgilio, 2016). Since then, collaboration between organised groups from different shantytowns has intensified.

Until 2019, these networks were mainly informal. However, in January that year, a hundred or so community leaders from different shantytowns gathered in Villa 20 and formed an organisation called the Coordinator of Shantytowns for Real Urbanisation (*la Coordinadora de Villas por la Urbanización Real*) (Prensa Obrera, 2019). Their demands, according to a publicity message I read in one of the WhatsApp groups, are: no evictions, offer of interest-free mortgages, comprehensive infrastructure upgrading, provision of dignified housing, citizen control in the planning process, recognition of investments made by shantytown dwellers in their neighbourhoods and houses, and guarantees of labour continuity.

It is not, however, that all organisations in all shantytowns take the same positions on all issues. For example, inhabitants in these areas are usually divided between groups who want formal access to services and those who do not, or those who prefer to stay where they are and those who would rather be relocated to new housing built by the state. These conflicts often follow political lines. While some patterns and common characteristics can be identified, shantytowns are very diverse when it comes to political orientation. In larger shantytowns, most community leaders collaborate with either of the larger political parties. The most numerous group is linked to the Peronists, but there are also many who take the side of one of the socialist parties or the conservative factions within PRO.⁴³

The last group has experienced the fastest growth in recent years, which to a large extent is due to increased attention of PRO to take action in marginalised neighbourhoods. To increase their presence in shantytowns, PRO politicians and heads of planning offices at GCBA (especially IVC and UGIS) facilitated the establishment of a political movement of shantytown dwellers aligned with PRO called *La Popular* ('The People's') (Figure 38) in 2021 (Fidanza, 2021). The idea, according to my informants, is both to facilitate the government's intervention in shantytowns, and gain new voters in areas where conservative and liberal parties have historically not had a lot of supporters.

La Popular is challenging the hegemony of the corresponding Peronist movements in shantytowns, which have been present there for many decades. It also poses a threat to the socialist and communist groups, who have normally put the universal right to dignified housing on top of their political agenda. This political competition in shantytowns is a very important factor in the planning process, primarily because community leaders may mobilise their followers to



Figure 38. Graffiti promoting the La Popular political movement painted over a political graffiti of a rival Peronist organisation in Villa Lugano.

⁴³ The conclusion from my conversations and observations is that PRO has more support among recent migrants from Paraguay, Bolivia and Peru, who tend to be more religious and have conservative social values, while native Argentinians and long-term residents of shantytowns prefer voting either for Peronists or socialists.

either support or reject plans proposed by the government depending on which political party is in power and not necessarily on the actual benefits for the residents.

The tight connection between politics and planning in Argentina is very evident. Almost all of my informants, both community leaders and planners, are aligned with different political parties and many of them are members who have run, or consider running in local elections. They all claim that they do this in order to have more decision-making power and access to contacts and resources that would help them implement plans and ideas in the areas they work in. Some even go as far as saying that entering politics is the only way to make a real difference:

No intervention, however big or small, is possible without the accompaniment of political activism. It's impossible that it would be received, and especially in the context of such a great need. (Interview 18).

This is well exemplified by the case of Villa Palito (known today as Almafuerite neighbourhood) located in La Matanza partido, which in the last 20 years has completely transformed into what is arguably the first fully upgraded and formalised shantytown in the country. In an interview with a local newspaper, the local puntero who led the process said that “you have to be a Peronist to improve a villa” (Todo Provincial, 2021). While he later explained that it was because of the equality, justice and compassion that are (according to him) the core principles of the Peronist movement, it is clear that an important, or perhaps decisive part of the success was the political alignment of community leaders with the Peronist administration that has been in power in La Matanza without interruption since 1983.

The community leaders who did not want to enter into politics directly might still have been invited to be employed at the local planning administration offices, based on their political affiliation and the influence they have on the population that otherwise might be difficult to reach (Carman & Olejarczyk, 2021).

Political action and mobilisation is not possible without reliable communication networks. Before the arrival of mobile internet and messaging applications like WhatsApp, the exchange of information between community leaders and regular residents had been happening primarily through community kitchens, sport clubs, cooperatives or assemblies. Mobile technology opened up new possibilities for dissemination of information and recruitment of new members to social and political organisations. Good quality Internet connection, however, is not universally available in shantytowns, while affordable mobile data packages do not serve for much more than messaging.⁴⁴ Recognizing that there was a need for efficient communication infrastructure, social organisations in Villa 20 established their own community WiFi network in 2014, which is available to everyone willing to pay a small monthly subscription fee (Canal Abierto, 2020b). Other shantytowns implemented similar projects later.

Another interesting citizen initiative that improved participation and activism in shantytowns was the development of an interactive participatory map *Caminos de la Villa* ('Paths of the Shantytown') which does not only generate detailed maps of (otherwise poorly documented) shantytowns, but also highlights the deficiencies and progress of the

⁴⁴ After the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the human rights organisation ACIJ recognised access to the internet as one of the fundamental human rights and started a campaign to demand that GCBA enables universal and free internet connection in all marginalised areas. This has been later sanctioned by the court (Tiempo Judicial, 2020) and access to the internet has improved significantly.

government interventions in different settlements. These maps can be edited by everyone using a mobile phone. WhatsApp and other mobile applications have also been used by local governments to inform about their activities and services in the shantytowns, and invite them to meetings. These digital solutions and new communication channels proved particularly important during the Covid-19 pandemic, which imposed new life-threatening risks for the shantytown residents.

‘Stay at your (overcrowded) home’

In the City of Buenos Aires, 15% of the inhabitants live without a sewer, which is essential to stop epidemics, diseases and infant mortality. You already know what all that means. Even in places where there is strong state intervention, rights are still not guaranteed. This, for me, is the biggest problem. (Interview 7).

You might think that this was a conclusion after many months struggling with the Covid-19 virus, but it was actually a quote from an interview from January 2020, before anyone in Argentina had imagined that the pandemic would devastate this country so much. Inadequate sanitation and overcrowding in shantytowns caused unsanitary conditions, which has been among the major problems ever since they first emerged. Already in the 1990s, Javier Auyero has warned about “high rates of respiratory diseases” in the shantytowns he studied (Auyero, 2001a, p. 81). Similar stories from other marginalised areas have been documented more recently by Carman & Olejarczyk (2021).

It was, therefore, no surprise that there were around six times more Covid-19 cases in CABA’s shantytowns than in the rest of the city (Esteban, 2021). This was primarily because in such densely populated settlements, where it is common that entire families share one-room apartments, and where some access paths are only 60cm wide, it was impossible to impose social distancing rules. Most shantytown dwellers do not have sufficient savings and adequate living conditions to simply stay at home, as the Ministry of Health was advising (Figure 39). They had to leave their houses to look for work, withdraw cash from ATMs, buy basic supplies and access water.

The struggle of people living in villas during the pandemic has been widely covered by the Argentinian media. It was right at the beginning of the pandemic that Snitcofsky (2020) criticised the renaming of shantytowns into *barrios*, or neighbourhoods, which I wrote about in the previous chapter. The urbanists and architects I spoke with agreed that health and prosperity cannot be guaranteed if there are no dignified homes. Jonatan Baldiviezo, leader of the Observatory of the Right to the City in Argentina⁴⁵ claimed that the pandemic showed that “urban planning influences directly how cities can face sanitary and economic crises” (Huerquen, 2020). Some of the planners I met have also told me that the coronavirus outbreak has challenged their values and positions regarding intervention in shantytowns:

Without a doubt, I believe that this is also a lesson that improving what already exists is perhaps not the best option. I was a faithful defender of improving what exists, improvement of housing, least number of

⁴⁵ Jonatan Baldiviezo is also one of the founders of a new local political movement “The City Are We Who Inhabit it” (*La Ciudad Somos Quienes La Habitamos*), whose main platform is based on the Right to the City principles and radical action against socio-economic polarisation and environmental degradation in Buenos Aires.

resettlements possible, least number of new houses possible. And after this [pandemic], you realise that [new] houses are the best vaccine and if we don't build houses, it's already a health problem... I don't know. I think we have to repair some of that paradigm that was abandoned, of building more houses... (Interview 23).

Soon after the pandemic started, he and many of his colleagues in the planning departments were delegated to coordinate Covid-19 assistance in shantytowns. This included testing for the virus, delivering medical and food supplies to households in need, issuing circulation permits, and setting up temporary hospitals to attend the most serious cases. They were the professionals who were assigned these tasks, because on the one hand they had a unique knowledge of the different shantytowns and experience working with these communities, and on the other, the implementation of their other plans was put on hold anyway, as a large part of the operational budget of their institutions has been redirected by the city council to fund Covid-19 emergency response. This was part of a larger contingent reprogramming of the institutional work to attend the new crisis. However, for most planners and architects it was the first time they were directly involved in emergency health services:

I am doing something very far from urbanism or architecture, that is, we are all far from our areas of knowledge, practically all of it is health issues... (Interview 24).

He added that the irrelevance of the tasks to their qualifications caused loss of motivation and high rotation in the team.

It is difficult to assess the effects of this contingency approach, compared to other strategies that could have been taken. The fact is that Argentina was already in a very difficult economic situation when the pandemic began and the available resources were very limited. Nevertheless, the Observatory of the Right to the City has been very critical about the lack of coordination of the GCBA institutions in terms of their response to the pandemic and that there were no joint protocols and contingency plans that would define who does what (Baldiviezo & Koutsovitis, 2020). The biggest problem was inadequate access to water, which was essential to ensure personal hygiene. "We got soap, but



Figure 39. These messages from the Ministry of Health asking people to “stay at home” have been the most displayed publicity in Buenos Aires throughout the 2020.

how can we wash our hands if there is no water in the taps?”- asked a shantytown resident in one of the WhatsApp groups I followed.

One line of action of the local government institutions that did make a positive difference was supporting the emergency response initiatives that were started by the communities themselves. This included for example employing local cooperatives and shantytown residents to do different paid *changas* and supplying community kitchens with food. These *comedores* played an extremely important role in attending food shortages and coordinating local action even before the pandemic. Through their voluntary work, communities in shantytowns could find subsistence while minimising their need to move outside of the shantytowns. The autonomous Covid-19 response in these areas was to a large extent coordinated through WhatsApp groups, where new crisis committees were formed. This type of contact-free communication might have also helped contain infection. I find it scary to think what would have happened in dense shantytowns if the pandemic happened before mobile technology was widespread.

In the longer term, however, the situation did not look good. Public works projects to improve access to critical infrastructure like water and electricity have been put on hold or postponed due to lack of financing. The budget for shantytown upgrading in CABA has decreased from 2019 and 2020, and has not been raised in 2021 (ACIJ, 2020). Power cuts and water shortages became more frequent, as UGIS was unable to respond to the demand for infrastructure repairs. At the same time, as more people have fallen into poverty, the demand for affordable housing has grown.

Desperate search for a place to survive

In conditions where neither the state, nor the market is able to ensure access to affordable housing and adequate infrastructure for all, low-income families simply find their own ways to access housing where they need it, however precarious their shacks may be and regardless of what laws prohibit this. This continues to happen despite the high risk of expulsion, which is the biggest form of uncertainty for shantytown dwellers. The Covid-19 pandemic did not stop informal expansions of houses in shantytowns, while new takeovers have also taken place on abandoned land in different parts of the city. These desperate attempts to claim new ‘spaces for survival’ were not well received by the local authorities.

One of such occupations started in August 2020, where a dozen families built makeshift houses along the railway tracks in Victoria (San Fernando partido). However, some of the houses were too close to the tracks, causing paralysis of the train service on the Mitre railway for several days (Infobae, 2020a). This problem made it very difficult for the occupants to defend their action. Their shacks were demolished in September and the families were evicted. The temporary suspension of eviction by Decree 320 of 2020 during the pandemic was not applied there.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ The Decree 320 prohibited any evictions during the pandemic (Argentina Presidencia, 2020) and was extended twice until it was revoked in March 2021. This measure was heavily criticised by the real-estate lobby and was many times broken. In August 2020, the Federal Council of Real Estate Associations of Argentina (CoFeCI) issued a statement, in which they claimed that Decree 320 would “imply irreparable



Figure 40. Land takeover near Villa 21-24. Social housing estate Estación Buenos Aires is visible in the distance. Photo: Leandro Lutzky.

A larger takeover attempt happened one year later in the Southern part of the capital city. Around 170 families set up shacks inside the walls of an abandoned private property located between Villa 21-24 and a new social housing complex Estación Buenos Aires (Figure 40) (Lutzky, 2021). The occupants defended their action by saying that their income is insufficient to qualify for social housing subsidies and demanded that if the state could not guarantee access to affordable housing, it had to tolerate illegal occupations. After two weeks of intense police surveillance and negotiations with the state, the occupants accepted an offer of housing subsidies and abandoned the property.

It was not until 2022 that public works and interventions in shantytowns resumed after the paralysis caused by the pandemic. Although significant improvements can be seen, it seems to me that the precarity of shantytown dwellers will not be resolved before structural changes in the system address the chronic inequality, uncertainty and informality that led to the housing crisis in the first place. As the way out of poverty seems very difficult, it is likely that those who grow up in shantytowns today are the first generation who were born and will die in these settlements.

In chapter 7, I will analyse a particular case of Villa 31, the most known and largest shantytown in Buenos Aires, which has also allocated the largest budget for socio-urban integration projects.

damage to the real estate rental market” because it led to reducing the supply of rental housing and discouraging construction (Eiseisgui, 2020).

6. Informal settlements: This land is mine!

I think that what happens a lot in Argentina or Buenos Aires is that illegal occupations occur first and then, when they end up transforming into humble neighbourhoods, then comes the infrastructure and upgrading. (Interview 29).

Informal housing development in Buenos Aires does not limit itself to centrally-located shantytowns. Many of those who cannot afford to rent or buy in the formal sector have tried settling somewhere in the endless suburbs. It is estimated that around 60% of all urbanisation in Greater Buenos Aires happened to some extent informally, that is without previous planning and anticipation by the state. The economic instability and the lack of focused housing policies result in illegal land invasions and the emergence of new informal settlements, which are much different from shantytowns and therefore require a proper introduction.

In this narrative, I will explain the phenomena of the formation and consolidation of informal settlements through illegal land subdivision and occupation, starting with their origins and common characteristics. My attention will be focused on the roles of local communities and NGOs in settlement planning and regularisation, as well as the processes of drafting laws and policies that recognised and responded to these informal development practices. I will conclude by explaining how informal development is a result of the uncertainty regarding access to affordable land, and the lack of knowledge and experience of professionals and public authorities working with marginalised communities before, during and after new informal settlements are formed. At the same time, the high risk of eviction is being mitigated by the communities themselves through self-management and planning.

***Loteos populares* and the suburbanisation of the poor**

Before I discuss informal settlement formation, let me introduce the kind of development that it had replaced. One of the features that differentiated the European countries and their former colonies in the Americas is that in the latter, a typical working-class family was able to own a house within a relatively short time. This opportunity was one of the main motivations behind massive immigration to Argentina in the late 19th and early 20th century. The living conditions, as I will explain shortly, were not so great, but as they say, ‘what is mine is mine!’

The dream of becoming a homeowner in Buenos Aires could be realised through a legal and formal type of urbanisation called *loteos populares*, which can be translated as popular land subdivisions. This development model began in the 1930s and continued for about four decades. The condition that made this possible in Argentina was the same as in most other rapidly growing and industrialising countries: that infrastructure provision followed initial settlement. In *loteos populares*, suburban land was subdivided and sold before buildings and road, water, electricity and sewage

connections were in place. It was precisely this aspect that made the dream of accessing affordable land and housing realistic.

The way these areas developed was different than for the housing of the elites. In *loteos populares*, real-estate enterprises acquired rural land in suburban municipalities, subdivided it into smaller plots and then sold these plots to working class people (Figure 41).⁴⁷ The buyers had to pay interest-free monthly instalments and erect their houses themselves. As I heard from one of my informants:

They were building on weekends, on their own, step by step. I mean, our suburbs in the country are self-built, that's why you are going to see the architectural diversity over there... (Interview 12).

At that time, most men, and especially immigrants or sons of immigrants, had good construction skills. They also appreciated the possibility to customise and extend their homes according to their changing needs and tastes, and since these are different for everyone, most houses built at that time have indeed different styles (Figure 42). Architects, if they were hired at all, would rarely do more than consult self-builders in some particular parts of the project. The owners would themselves assess at what point their houses were 'good enough' to move in (de Paula et al., 2010).

The new subdivisions usually followed the colonial street grid pattern and the local planning authorities would make sure that these do not develop in flood-prone zones. Title deeds, as well as infrastructure, public transportation, parks and facilities such as schools and health centres were progressively provided by local governments, but since many of them struggled financially, these would often come after many years delay. In the meantime, residents had to

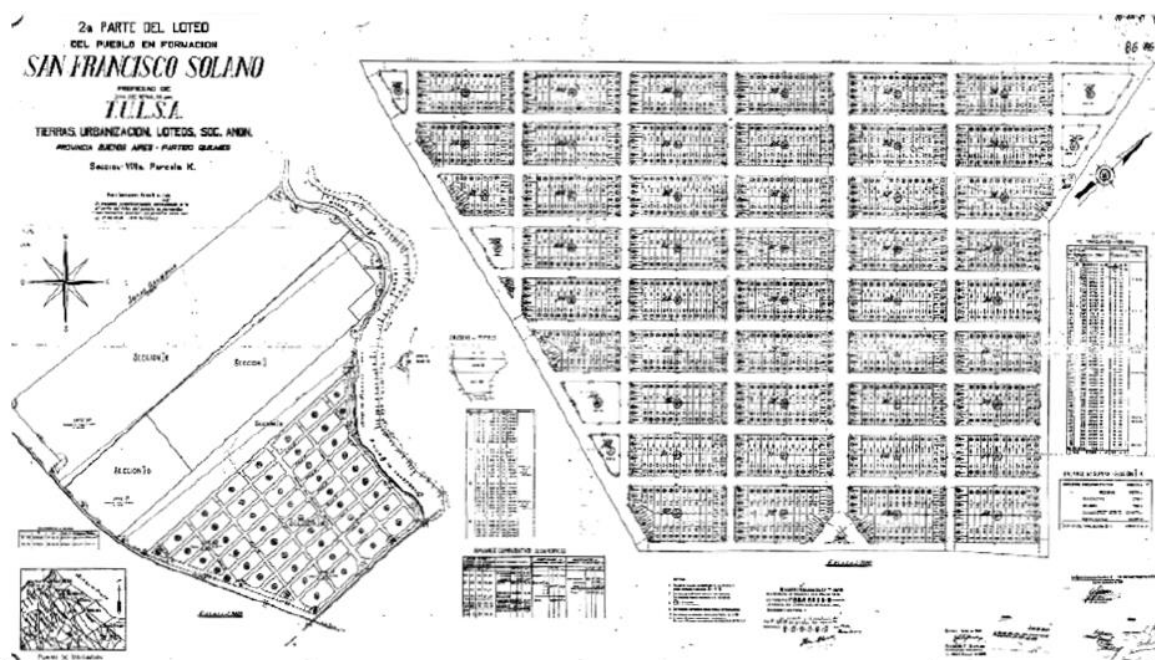


Figure 41. Subdivision plan for *loteo popular* San Francisco Solano, the largest in Quilmes partido, developed by a company Tierras, Urbanización, Loteos S.A. in 1949. Source: Dirección de Geodesia, Ministerio de Infraestructura de la Provincia de Buenos Aires

⁴⁷ Besides Real-Estate developers, some *loteos populares* have also been done directly by owners of agricultural land (Ramírez, 2021).

manage with water wells and pit latrines that they made themselves. They also organised to provide other community services, while lobbying local politicians to speed up upgrading and formalisation. Ward et al. (2015) called this process the “suburbanization of the popular sectors” (p. 239). All of this was legal, though the regulations that guided such development were relatively relaxed.

Those who had better capacities to save, managed to finish their houses faster than others. Many landowners designated parts of their properties for commercial activities or small workshops. Today, most of these land subdivisions have evolved into regular middle-class neighbourhoods with all the necessary infrastructure and with second and even third generations of owners living there (Figure 43). According to Ramírez (2021) the socio-economic status is correlated with the year of settlement - the older the *loteo*, the more prosperous its residents are.



Figure 42. Architectural diversity in a consolidated popular subdivision in Lomas de Zamora partido.



Figure 43. A consolidated popular subdivision in San Martín partido.

The process of (legal) popular land subdivision in GBA was halted in 1977 by a provincial Decree-law 8912 ratified by the military dictatorship. This new comprehensive land use regulation prohibited the sale and occupation of lots without connections to basic infrastructure and services (electricity, sewage etc.), and set high standards for urban development in all of the Province of Buenos Aires.⁴⁸ For example, it established the requirement that a minimum lot size should be 300m², which is much larger than those sold to the poor before 1977. These lots could be used exclusively for residential purposes, which meant that any form of business enterprise was prohibited.⁴⁹ At the same time, Decree 8912 regulated and encouraged development of gated communities, known locally as *countries*. Since there was demand for this type of housing as well, many real-estate enterprises who were previously engaged in developing *loteos populares*, changed their business models and from then onwards, started building housing estates for the rich (Rocha & Castaño, 2016).

The introduction of Decree 8912 “increased the cost of land and thus shut off one of the main forms of legal access to the city for poor households” (van Gelder et al., 2016, p. 1965). Everyone I asked about this regulation said that they disliked it, because it envisioned an ideal, yet unreal situation that was totally detached from the actual living conditions and housing options for the majority. They mentioned that instead of raising standards of new developments, Decree 8912 led to increasing informalisation and marginalisation. Other criticisms of this military decree include a lack of concern of diverse local contexts, giving too much power to technical experts while making no provision for participatory methods, total omission of any form of social and affordable housing solutions, and promoting unsustainable low-density and car-dependent development (I-CAPBA, 2001 and Rocha & Castaño, 2016).

While some notable modifications and exemptions to this unpopular regulation have been introduced, Decree 8912 is still valid today. One reason for this is that many municipal bureaucrats have gotten used to it and do not want to adapt to new changes. Another reason is that although the need for reforms has been recognized by many provincial legislators, they disagree about what regulations should replace Decree 8912. One thing that there was a general consensus about, was that the delay between housing construction and infrastructure provision typical to *loteos populares* before 1977, was unacceptable. However, how can this be addressed in such an uncertain context of economic instability and rapid urban growth?

Same strategy in a new reality: Informalisation of housing access

Then, in the 1980s, started a new period of land takeovers, which was the first great manifestation of resistance of the popular sectors, due to the problem of not being able to access a place to live. (Interview 12).

⁴⁸ It is important to clarify that by the mid-20th century, all available land within CABA was already built or reserved for other purposes, therefore new suburban expansion in Buenos Aires happened in surrounding municipalities that are under the jurisdiction of the Province of Buenos Aires and not GCBA.

⁴⁹ The widespread operation of commercial and small industrial activities in areas designated for residential use is one of the most visible aspects of informality, not only in Argentina, but throughout Latin America.

Introduction of the new, strict land use law coincided with the expulsion of residents from shantytowns, as well as the beginning of a social, political and economic crisis, which resulted in growing shortage of affordable housing. A new generation of working-class families, who were no longer able to afford to rent in the formal market or buy cheap unserviced lots, and did not want to live in a shantytown, were left with no other alternatives but to claim land through illegal occupation, or buy lots informally from 'pirates', who seized and subdivided it themselves. We can say that the undesired result of Decree 8912 was the creation of a whole new strategy to access land and housing and a new parallel unofficial real estate market.

The size of these new informal occupations varied between several families and up to 20,000 people. As I already mentioned, unlike shantytowns, these informal settlements were not thought of as transitional shelter. The hope was that one day these areas would be formalised and integrated with the rest of the city. In this case it was also important that contrary to the military dictatorship, which repressed all attempts of illegal land takeovers before 1983, the new democratic government that took over that year was somehow more tolerant towards these autonomous occupations, or at least did not have the capacity to successfully prevent them (Cravino, 2018).

In the eyes of many middle- and upper-class Argentinians who condemn such land occupations, they are all driven by the greed of mafias, criminal groups, punteros and political opportunists, who steal land and act as quasi-real estate investors or false property owners. This is only partly true. Such groups indeed operated in some areas. They tended to seize land (often with arms), subdivide it and sell plots at low prices to desperate people who might have been lied to about who the previous owner was or who stood behind land grabbing. According to Zarazaga and Ronconi, (2018), such 'pirate' subdivisions were among the most profitable operations in the 1980s and 90s, but they often required collaboration with and/or bribing of municipal authorities to succeed.⁵⁰

Illegal land subdivisions were also done by landowners who did not want to invest in installing infrastructure in advance, because their development proposals did not meet the new requirements established by Decree 8912, due to for example lack of road access, or because of flood risk. Therefore, they decided to secure some income through selling individual plots in the informal market to 'get rid' of land they had little use for.

Most of the time, however, initial occupation was done by the poor who wanted the land for themselves, with the intention to create a neighbourhood and community in which to live, raise family and retire. They tended to be organised beforehand by diverse grassroots political and social organisations, whose members knew each other and shared the same values. There were also many informal subdivisions initiated by the church, which was (and still is) a powerful actor in the real estate market.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Zarazaga and Ronconi (2018) tell a story of one female mafia leader, who led four of such illegal land takeovers and subdivisions between 1985 and 1992. In addition to operating an organised criminal group, she negotiated with municipal authorities the informal pre-authorisation of land invasions, as well as posterior formalisation and provision of urban infrastructure within a relatively short time. In this very drastic account, the authors explain how the mafia protected only the buyers who paid their instalments on time, while those who were behind were evicted and in some cases killed to make space for another family.

⁵¹ For example, Ward et al. (2015) documented the emergence of the San Gerónimo neighbourhood in Almirante Brown partido, where land was donated to the local church, which then subdivided it and sold individual lots informally to its followers. Later, the land as a whole was



Figure 44. Example of an ‘ant invasion’ type of informal settlement development on both sides of Pinazo stream in Jose C. Paz partido in 2006 (left), 2017 (middle) and 2022 (right). Source: Google Earth / Maxar Technologies

The last type of occupations I want to introduce are *tomas hormigas*, meaning ‘ant invasions’ (Figure 44). These happened in a more spontaneous and individual manner, usually in less desired areas, such as landfills. After cleaning the land and settling in, new residents spread the word and encouraged others to occupy areas nearby:

People welcomed these new inhabitants, because they solved the problem of the vacant land - that people deposited garbage there or that the place was insecure, because it was abandoned... So it was a joy for the neighbours that this was resolved... (Interview 8).

The question of who moves in next door has been an important one, especially because residents and their organisations wanted to make sure that the area was free from mafias or criminal activities. As more trusted people settled in, a new neighbourhood emerged and a local committee could be formed to ensure tenure security and take care of further planning and provision of services.

When it comes to where land invasions happened, the first choice of the settlers was always unused properties that belonged to the different agencies of the national state (such as road, railway, water and sanitation authorities), followed by the Provincial Government and then the municipal governments. When these were no longer available or were too far away, people started moving into undeveloped privately owned land.

This order follows the perceived risk of eviction. Residents were usually more secure occupying state properties, while settling on private land almost always resulted in conflict and in many cases in lawsuits, interventions of the police and orders of eviction (de Paula et al., 2010). Occupations on less valuable land, such as landfills, disused brick

sold once again to the local organisation, which took care of the planning of the area. While the act of initial purchase was not accompanied with formal property titles, the fact that it was owned by the local church and not for example a private owner, gave them a perceived sense of security that also counts in the land’s market price.

quarries and flood-prone areas started happening later. Although the risk of eviction was relatively low, these lands were less desired due to the difficulty in adapting them for human habitation.

Despite difficult conditions and uncertainty regarding the high risk of eviction, the formation of informal settlements has not only continued, but even accelerated during the financial crisis of 2001 and from 2017 onwards. Similarly to what happened in shantytowns, many of the new occupants were those who migrated from poorer countries in the region, primarily Bolivia, Paraguay and Peru. Migrants normally had little to lose compared to more established families and therefore they were willing to take the risk of illegal occupation. In times of economic improvement, the building stock in the established settlements has densified and improved qualitatively, while the provision of infrastructure accelerated.

One thing that, in my opinion, is a very interesting and important aspect of these new informal occupations that began in the 1980s is that most informal settlements had a relatively high degree of initial planning even though tenure insecurity was high and the state was initially not involved. The development of these areas imitated the popular land subdivisions that were legal the period before the military dictatorship (Vales, 2020b). Such informal planning was motivated primarily by the urgency of the risk of eviction.

While it is true that the occupiers aspired to live in orderly and well-functioning neighbourhoods in the future just like the middle-class, their first and main goal was to secure long-term tenure. It was understood that by making settlements follow the same development pattern as the surrounding consolidated formal areas, the chance to get them legitimised by local governments was higher than in the cases of invasions that were more chaotic and had weaker social bonds and organisational capacities. Therefore, sticking to the informally agreed upon building codes and planning norms played a crucial role in the struggle for ensuring the right to stay on the occupied land.

The local community leaders who had often motivated and coordinated the collective land takeovers were key in this process. In cases of poor leadership, spatial order tended to be more spontaneous. Inhabitants encroached and claimed areas reserved for public spaces and streets, while communities were divided by internal conflicts. Consequently, their negotiation power with the state and/or private landowners was much weaker. Pre-planning and ensuring spatial order was also important for the so-called pirate developers, who also took over and subdivided land. They pretended to act like professional real-estate agents in order to create more trust and attract buyers or to demand higher prices.

But what does such pre-planning look like in practice? Those who led land invasions prepared simple layouts for the street networks and lots based on the context and surrounding structure of the area to be taken over. To protect housing from flooding, neighbours often coordinate work to elevate their lots and create slopes to ensure that rainwater drains away to the ditches or streets. In a lot of cases, compliance with the local zoning codes was also taken into consideration. Residents in many occupied territories agreed internally on more specific regulations, such as building and corner cut-off setbacks (Figure 45), or reserving space for sidewalks, sport and recreation facilities (which usually began with a football field), as well as parks and community meeting places (de Paula et al., 2010 & Ward et al., 2015).



Figure 45. Corner cut-off setback in an informal settlement Liniers in Tigre partido.



Figure 46. Informal settlement in Presidente Perón partido in an early stage of consolidation with ditches for rainwater runoff along the road.

Before land was initially occupied, parameters of the lots were usually delimited with sticks that might have later been replaced with concrete or metal posts. In order to ensure that the properties were not usurped by someone else, many families built walls or installed fences before they erected their permanent house (Figure 46). While the urgency of land takeovers might in some cases result in more chaos during the initial stages, in many settlements the spatial order has been 'corrected' through negotiations and self-organisation after all the families claimed their lots.

The urban planner who told me how difficult it is to upgrade infrastructure in dense and large shantytowns, mentioned how such pre-planning in informal settlements made a big, positive difference when the state wanted to formalise and improve them:

It is the most efficient typology to intervene, because it is very easy to enter a street that is already straight, has the permitted dimensions, that already has water regulations like the rest of the city, and that does not need resettlement. (Interview 5).

In another conversation, he repeated his appreciation of and support for this way of community-led pre-planning. He recognized that regardless of whether the settlements are evicted or not, engagement in a joint anticipatory action gives the poor hope for a better future and sets common goals:

The exercise of planning is already a victory... That the neighbourhoods recover their dreams and organise themselves to achieve them. (Interview 28).

Unlike in *loteos populares*, where tenure was more secure, residents in new informal settlements had no choice but to move into the land at the very beginning in order to protect it and ensure the integrity of the parcel they claimed. Since at that moment nothing was legally secured, the risk of eviction or new usurpation by someone else was high.

Housing construction occurs typically over a long time and in an incremental manner, starting with setting up a tent or a simple shack to sleep in. Then, when the chances of remaining on land have increased, the occupiers may start building more permanent housing structures with or without help from contractors or neighbours, either as paid labour or as acts of reciprocity. It may begin with one room, bathroom and kitchen. More rooms are added later, according to needs (Figure 47). Multi-generational families living on the same plot may expand their houses vertically or start building independent dwellings in the back of the properties. Additional rooms may also be designated for commercial enterprises, workshops or dwellings for rent, with or without separate kitchens or bathrooms. A study from 2007 revealed that one in four lots in such settlements contained more than one dwelling (Cravino, 2018).

Infrastructure was makeshift and precarious, at least until the settlements were legitimised. Similarly to what has been happening in shantytowns, it was usually provided by the inhabitants themselves. Electricity was accessed illegally by plugging into the existing cables in nearby settlements. Wherever water pipes or wells were not installed, the neighbours organised to order water tankers to deliver fresh water. Before sewage was put in place, residents needed to rely on pit latrines or similar solutions. Such informal connections have of course led to frequent power cuts, unsatisfied needs and unsanitary living conditions. Solid waste management also tends to be a problem. While recycling is seen as both a way to get rid of excessive waste and as a livelihood strategy, most informal settlements struggle with the accumulation of garbage, even after a formal collection system is put in place. However, most inhabitants consider these as temporary issues and look forward to the day when all the necessary connections and services are in place, just like in the rest of the city.

An important milestone for most informal settlements is the moment when the roads are paved. This is because it is the most visible change that gives the residents a feeling of legitimacy, and because it allows public transport operators or local cooperatives to provide regular bus connections (Figure 48). Depending on the case, paving was funded and done by the residents themselves, the local government, or both (see Auyero, 2001 and Zarazaga & Ronconi, 2018).



Figure 47. Incremental expansion of a house with a commercial unit on the ground floor in an informal settlement Juan Pablo II in Tigre partido.



Figure 48. In the informal settlement Villa Fiorito (Lomas de Zamora partido), many of the streets have been paved, which allowed extension of the local bus service.

Reactions of the state

As I mentioned, informal settlements can be characterised by their sophisticated level of leadership and organisation from the earliest stages. Representatives of different occupations that emerged in the 1980s and 90s formed committees in their respective municipalities. Their mission was to negotiate with local governments for the formalisation and provision of infrastructure on behalf of residents of their neighbourhoods.⁵² In most cases, these committees proposed to buy occupied lots from the state and requested collaboration in issuing property titles and

⁵² The delegates have also formed other groups and resistance movements that had a significant role in shaping housing policies and emergency measures during the financial crisis of 2001 at a higher level, for example FTV - Federation of Land, Housing and Habitat.

assistance in infrastructure provision. Most municipal authorities engaged in this dialogue and created their own secretaries that were in charge of informal settlements.

In some cases, different NGOs, academic institutions and independent lawyers, planners or architects were also involved in the formalities and negotiations on behalf of the occupants. To increase the chances for regularisation and speed up the process, community leaders often took the initiative to supplement such requests with surveys of all residents, maps of property subdivision with measurements (usually performed or signed by certified surveyors) and even proposals for spatial plans for the neighbourhood with indications of what future interventions are necessary (de Paula et al., 2010). It is then up to the municipal or provincial authorities to decide whether or not such requests should be taken further or rejected. For privately-owned land, this process is normally preceded by prior negotiations with the landowners. This marked a period of gradual integration and improvement of informal settlements, similar to that of recognition and inclusion of shantytowns in CABA and the 'first ring' partidos of GBA.

Different political factions have their own standpoints when it comes to informal settlements. Left-wing parties, together with labour unions, normally take the side of the occupants and demand formalisation and integration of informal settlements, as long as there are no better housing solutions that would respond to the enormous demand (see for example Fernández, 2022 and Telám, 2020). Peronists, who have had much more power than left-wing parties, also tend to tolerate land invasions and are generally positive about their incorporation with the rest of the city (see iProfesional, 2020 and Vales, 2020a). In fact, many political organisations and movements who claim themselves socialist or Peronist have initiated land takeovers and have their operational bases there (Auyero, 2001; Moreno, 2020). However, as we shall see later, there are also factions within Peronist coalitions who refuse to support formation of settlements that way (see also ANRed, 2020b). The right side of Argentinian politics openly condemns land takeovers and when conflicts arise, they take the side of the original property owners, regardless of whether the land belongs to the state or a private entity (see DataClave, 2022 and Infobae, 2020b).

Nevertheless, in practice, the responses to particular cases did not strictly depend on who was in power or who the land belonged to (Cravino, 2020). As I heard from my informants, local politicians have also taken such decisions in accordance with what they perceive is better for their political career and the next elections; for example, whether they could capture more votes from the occupants than lose support from angry upper-class residents opposed to land invasions. Generally, municipalities located along the more affluent Northern corridor (Vicente López, San Isidro and San Fernando) were more likely to repress illegal takeovers, but they were also the ones with the least undeveloped land available (Cravino, 2018). Authorities in other parts of GBA did not have a clear strategy regarding informal settlements and dealt with them in a case-by-case manner.

As I mentioned earlier, invasions on well-located privately-owned land usually ended up in court and resulted in (sometimes violent) evictions. Some municipalities wanted to act as quickly as possible and remove invaders right when they were arriving on the land, while others negotiated with the occupants that they leave voluntarily in exchange for monetary compensation or some form of housing subsidies (ibid.). However, such expulsions have done little to stop the process of illegal land occupations and rather have led to displacing them to other areas.

Therefore, often the most pragmatic choice for municipal governments was to tolerate and integrate informal settlements, especially when they already followed or imitated formal planning principles and building codes. This attitude in a way resolved what the state could not do itself - ensuring access to shelter for a broad group of the population. The integration strategy coincided with the idea of formalisation recommended by multilateral organisations, such as the World Bank, which had major influence over politics in Latin America at that time (Rodríguez, 2009). During the neoliberal period in Argentina in the 1990s, regularisation of informal settlements has become the most significant housing policy. Consequently, the different governments prepared a series of laws and decrees that facilitated the transfer and formalisation of property rights (ibid.). Generally speaking, formalisation of informal settlements is easier than in shantytowns, because of well-defined property boundaries and lot dimensions that meet the official criteria and often there is no need to apply exceptions in the building or planning codes. However, there are still unresolved problems regarding the financial model of mortgages, bureaucracy and the ownership situation, which complicate this process.

One of the solutions proposed by the National Government was *Programa Arraigo*, launched in 1991. This initiative allowed the selling of invaded and occupied state-owned land to legally constituted neighbourhood organisations. These collectives could choose to pay in one bulk payment or in instalments. The results of this program were mixed. While it ensured tenure security for many poor households, it has never reached the scale it initially aimed for. The main problems were disagreements regarding joint management of collectively-owned property, cultural preference for private freehold ownership⁵³, and insufficient enforcement of payments by individual households during economic downturns (de Paula et al., 2010). Programa Arraigo eventually collapsed during the 2001 financial crisis, bringing hundreds of thousands of families back into the condition of tenure informality.

These problems were reinforced by the fact that many government administrations were in conflict with notaries, which charged high fees and gave low priority to requests for acts and documents confirming transfers of property ownership to residents in informal settlements (Di Virgilio, 2015).⁵⁴

The process of legitimisation and formalisation of settlements that developed on private lands was more complicated and usually more time-consuming. Many undeveloped properties have been caught in an unclear inheritance situation and conflicting claims regarding who the actual owner was. If it was resolved at all, it usually ended up by the local state buying or expropriating (with monetary compensation) the invaded private property and then negotiating selling it further to the occupants. Property owners who had large outstanding tax debts often agreed to donate their land to the state in exchange for getting the debt off the records. In general, the price of land with illegal settlers on it was

⁵³ Despite being frequently recommended by experts on land issues as a promising alternative to private ownership, a legal framework that regulates collective property tenure is not common in Latin America, with the exception of remote and rural indigenous lands and some cooperative housing schemes, particularly in Uruguay (Arnold et al., 2020). In Argentina, collective property ownership has been applied by some housing cooperatives in CABA that were inspired by the Uruguayan example, as a way to protect themselves from pressure on land value and gentrification (Rodríguez, 2021). The cultural preference for private property might be because many poor families are attracted by the possibility of building up their financial capital and passing on property rights to their children, which, according to Rodríguez (2009), could be problematic in collectively owned properties.

⁵⁴ To respond to this situation the provincial authorities established their own program of free social titling services at the governments' notary offices.

far below its potential market value, because waiting for an eviction order may take too long, and there is uncertainty about which side the justice will take (de Paula et al., 2010).

For those who were patient enough, an alternative way to formalise their tenure was to wait and not cause trouble. National Law 24.374, also called *Ley de Perri*, states that if someone can demonstrate peaceful and uninterrupted land occupation over a period of 10 years, he or she can request an individual property title upon the payment of only 1% of its value. This has happened primarily in cases where the land ownership situation was unclear or when landowners (both public or private) have not shown any intentions to expel the occupants. The challenge was that different involved actors interpreted this law in their own way and not all such requests were validated (ibid.).

It is important to recall that it was not necessarily formalisation of property ownership that the communities wanted in the first place, but rather a guarantee of protection from forced evictions. Freehold tenure has not become an attractive condition until the occupants secure sufficient income and security to be able to repay long-term mortgages. Households who succeeded in their quest to formalise their tenure usually agreed to buy the occupied lots with monthly fees paid over a period between 10 and 25 years. Nevertheless, difficulties and delays in the formalisation process caused millions of families to live in permanent unresolved property situations. This proves that Decree 8912 and the prohibition of selling unserviced land it introduced has not only failed to improve housing conditions, but also increased the state of uncertainty and insecurity for the urban poor. In such difficult realities, for many families being recognized by the state and having ensured security of tenure was already a great achievement. Even a single act of registering street names and numbers made a huge difference, because it allowed the poor access services and job opportunities and survive difficult times:

The settlement doesn't have a street [name], doesn't have a [house] number...' So people lie to get work, you know? (...) At a time of economic crisis, when you go out and look for work... 'Where do you live?' If you can say, I live on such a street, at such a number... It's a value, an asset, it means belonging. Being able to say where you live is a guarantee to get a job. (Interview 8).

The state authorities would normally not engage in physical upgrading until the tenure situation was resolved, because doing otherwise would legitimise and possibly encourage illegal occupations. Programs to improve basic infrastructure and assist the population with housing improvements started to emerge alongside formalisation efforts. This process is also somehow easier in informal settlements than in shantytowns, where irregular street networks, high densities and continued rapid growth make infrastructure provision a frustrating and tedious task. The spatial order of informal settlements makes it possible to insert or upgrade infrastructure where it belongs, practically without demolishing any existing buildings or resettling the population, which is often the case in poorly-planned shantytowns. Consequently, as I found out, the cost of housing upgrades and infrastructure provision is much higher in shantytowns, despite their higher densities and closer proximity to existing networks.

One of the most significant initiatives is the Neighbourhood Improvement Programme (*Programa de Mejoramiento Barrial*) - PROMEBA, launched in 1997 and financed jointly by BID and the National Government. An important requirement stated by BID was that local population and neighbourhood organisations need to be actively involved in the implementation of the program (Rodríguez & Di Virgilio, 2016). PROMEBA funds not only physical infrastructure

(sanitation, water, electricity and gas), but also community spaces and projects. Financing for the program has been extended and continues today. A smaller, but also significant project was the Federal Subprogram for the Urbanisation of Shantytowns and Precarious Settlements (*Subprograma Federal de Urbanización de Villas y Asentamientos Precarios*) from 2005. In addition to infrastructure upgrades, public space improvement and formalisation, this project focused on relocating families who settled on environmentally vulnerable land (ibid.). However, while these two programs improved living conditions for hundreds of thousands of people living in informal settlements and shantytowns, they have by no means managed to keep up with the rapid growth of new informal settlements.

In addition, there was a large variation between different municipalities, especially when it comes to allocated budget, availability of land for eventual resettlement, and perhaps more importantly, experience and expertise of public servants to deal with informal settlement upgrading and formalisation (ibid.). Another challenge was that some service providers refused to instal infrastructure in certain areas, because they feared that the 'beneficiaries' would not pay the bills:

The company, despite being state-owned, lives on what it earns to carry out public works, so why would it enter the streets of a marginalised neighbourhood, where people are not going to pay for the service? (Interview 5).

I have also learned about a case, where the Municipal Government in Avellaneda in the 1990s offered residents of a recently formalised poor neighbourhood "to build a house from a catalogue" (Interview 35). However, most of the neighbours rejected the proposal, because they already started building their permanent homes and thought that the price that the municipality asked for, even including subsidies, was too high. Governments in some other municipalities have applied other types of incentives, such as offering discounts and vouchers for construction materials for households willing to extend their housing. As I heard from my informants, these kinds of initiatives were much better received.

What about... Sites-and-services?

In chapter 2, I introduced the concept of sites-and-services as an alternative development model that recognises and incorporates self-help and incremental housing development into a formally planned street and infrastructure network. This idea has also been proposed and implemented in peripheral Buenos Aires. However, it was not the state, but a non-governmental organisation that first developed a sites-and-services project there. The name of this organisation is Madre Tierra, meaning Mother Earth. Who are they?

The story of Madre Tierra begins in 1985, in the context of massive flooding events in PBA and a housing crisis that led to accelerated growth of informal settlements. The organisation was initially established as a legal entity to manage a resettlement housing project on a piece of land that was donated to Caritas in the Moreno partido. A multidisciplinary team of experts (mainly social workers and architects/planners) that was contracted to execute it proposed to implement a sites-and-services scheme according to the existing regulations. The success of this

development led to further growth of Madre Tierra and new projects to plan more neighbourhoods for the low-income population.

The principles of the organisation are democratic participation, empowerment of local actors, gender equality and healthy environment. Madre Tierra operates on different fronts: first, it implements real urban projects; second, it educates and works closely with the poor to become more aware and self-sufficient; and third, it establishes and leads networks that develop law and public policy proposals. Madre Tierra is opposed to the practice of illegal land occupations, but they do justify them. The position of the NGO is that the state is part of the problem, and that in order to address the precarious and uncertain living situation of the poor in Argentina, change in urban governance, land management and planning approaches are necessary. As was explained to me by the members of Madre Tierra themselves, this would be achieved by shifting towards an anticipatory approach, where land distribution and infrastructure provision precedes land occupation. At the same time, Madre Tierra believes in self-help and self-management capacities of the poor, who should be given ownership –legal and symbolic– over the areas they inhabit. This, of course, would take inspiration from self-managed informal settlements. In their urban projects, Madre Tierra does not pretend to replace the state, but rather contribute to strengthening the capacity of local movements in their fight for access to land and housing, and articulate these efforts with public policy.

According to the representatives of Madre Tierra, sites-and-services are basically loteos populares but with infrastructure in place. Their work follows a holistic approach, which includes not only developing a detailed plan for street, public space and infrastructure networks, as well as plot subdivisions, but also enabling property title transfer process through a mortgage payment scheme, and facilitating the formation of local neighbourhood associations. All of this is done through a series of participatory design sessions and thematic workshops with future residents. If necessary, the Madre Tierra team requests exemptions in local zoning codes.

A weakness in Madre Tierra's model was that it depends on donation of land or funding, and only in a few cases the organisation bought land using its own budget. Nevertheless, the NGO has been successful in establishing partnerships and implementing projects together with public and private actors, religious institutions and multilateral organisations. They supplement these efforts funding through monetary contributions from private individuals and online fundraisers.

Despite being supported by the church, Madre Tierra does not restrict access to their projects to any particular religion. Who the target population is depends on the case.

So when the works begin, while the infrastructure is being built, the families sign up. How do the families find out? Word of mouth. We do not make any campaigns. The lists get full anyway... (Interview 12).

Usually, selection is done through open registration, verification of information and prioritisation based on specific criteria, such as the number of children, low income, not owning a property elsewhere or whether the household has been evicted or not. Sometimes the selection process is done by the municipal welfare offices themselves. When selected households are notified, Madre Tierra launches a parallel process of social integration:

Because the idea is to achieve a consolidated neighbourhood with the capacity for self-management, that is why they have to get to know each other. (Interview 12).

To further strengthen local capital, capacity and self-sufficiency, Madre Tierra proposes to reserve spaces for cooperatives, productive activities and urban farming. In the meantime, various thematic groups in the neighbourhood emerge organically: community kitchens, health committees, sports groups etc. While social workers from Madre Tierra help in establishing such groups and make sure that these are included in the overall plan, they do not want to make decisions for the community:

Madre Tierra accompanied, let's say... Has been present at the neighbourhood meetings, with the right to say something, but not to vote... Well, more than anything to facilitate communication. It is them [the community] who are the protagonists. (Interview 12).

Regarding architecture and planning, a big challenge was how to develop such sites-and-services projects in accordance with Decree 8912, which defined what and how much can be built on each lot. Therefore, the design of the lots and buildings had to consider all these specifications, but at the same time these houses had to be flexible and adaptable depending on the preferences of each family. With this in mind, Madre Tierra decided to make it a participatory process. This included workshops led by professional architects, who helped the residents design base housing designs and define the order in which they could grow, according to the local needs and aspirations:

And it's not about having one prototype only, but rather, there has to be a minimum of two, in some neighbourhoods three or four [prototypes]... (Interview 12).

These meetings tend to be very lively with many participants willing to contribute:

There are many people who are dedicated to construction in these neighbourhoods, so sometimes they also make their own proposals. (Interview 12).

Similarly to what happens in informal settlements, families in these sites-and-services projects built and moved into temporary shacks in the very back of the property first⁵⁵ and then started erecting the definite house according to a chosen prototype design developed in the workshops. For the NGO, this is not the end of the process, as they want to make sure that the houses are built right.⁵⁶

The role of the architects from this moment is to give advice, unlike the traditional architect, who supervises construction, this one gives advice... If there are families who do not want to comply with the plan and don't require advice, they don't get it. Madre Tierra offers one or two construction foremen to help everyday and an architect who comes twice a week, or something like that... The truth is that when we arrive in the neighbourhood, everyone is asking (...) is the architect coming? (Interview 12).

⁵⁵ The situation of such early occupancy was technically illegal, but widely tolerated (or ignored) by local authorities.

⁵⁶ Similar approach of assisted self-help construction was applied in the PAV program for housing cooperatives, where the government provided funds for architects/planners to help design the building and supervise construction which was often implemented through mutual-aid processes by the cooperative members themselves (Pedro et al., 2020).



Figure 49. El Milenio neighbourhood in 2022. Source: Google Earth / Maxar Technologies



Figure 50. El Milenio neighbourhood in 2022.

Such an approach, according to my informants, contributes to a positive feeling on the site and establishing “a relationship as if you were a family” (Interview 12).

A flagship sites-and-services project implemented by Madre Tierra was the El Milenio neighbourhood in Moreno (Figures 49 and 50). The organisation bought the land in 1997 using funding from a pilot project sponsored jointly by the Government of Argentina and the European Union. The site was divided into 25 blocks with a total of 400 lots that measure between 200 and 300 m². While street, power, water and sanitation infrastructure was being built, the selected families were divided into cohorts of 20 and included in a series of participatory workshops, which then resulted in development of prototype housing designs, as well as formation of autonomous community organisations, thematic committees and saving groups. Although the official completion date of El Milenio was registered as 2001

(to satisfy the high standards set by Decree 8912), the first families moved in and started paying off their mortgage already in 1999, while most houses were still under construction. Each household signed a 10-year mortgage. My contacts at Madre Tierra told me that they made an error by setting mortgage payments at a fixed rate in Argentinian pesos, which suffered major devaluation in 2002. This resulted in the El Milenio project not paying for itself in the end. It was, as they said, “a lesson learned” (Interview 12).

Many of the houses built in El Milenio and other new sites-and-services settlements in Moreno and the rest of GBA were partly financed through the Federal Program of Housing Emergency “Techo y Trabajo” (“Roof and Work”), which supported small housing projects built by workers’ cooperatives. This initiative was also a result of policy proposals and pressure from social and political movements (especially Peronists movements Evita and Barrios de Pie) as well as labour unions and federations of unemployed, which emerged or consolidated during the 2001 crisis. As the name “Roof and Work” states, the goal of this program was also to combine job-creation with addressing urgent housing needs. The added value of this project was capacity building and valuable experience for municipal planners who learned that such decentralised housing schemes can achieve high quantities at a lower cost.⁵⁷

In over three decades of activity, Madre Tierra developed and implemented plans for 17 sites-and-services neighbourhoods, where over 3,000 families live. Besides El Milenio, other significant projects planned by Madre Tierra were Pachamama in Villa Udando (Ituzaingó partido) and San José Obrero III in Parque San Martín (Merlo partido). In the last couple of years, more sites-and-services developments have also been implemented by both the state, as an increasingly popular alternative to traditional social housing (Figure 51), and the private sector, which offers serviced lots for families with middle-class income.



Figure 51. A sites-and-services project in Berazategui partido developed as part of the PROCREAR housing subsidy program run by the National Government.

⁵⁷ Funding for Techo y Trabajo has been discontinued as the economic situation recovered. However, shortly after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the same social organisations which lobbied for this law nearly 20 years ago, presented a law proposal Tierra, Techo y Trabajo (“Land, Roof and Work”) to the Provincial Government. In addition to housing built by workers’ cooperatives, this initiative proposes support for agricultural activities to improve access to nutritious food in the poorest areas of the metropolitan area (Plan B Noticias, 2020).

It is clear that this settlement model is on the rise in Argentina, thanks to a large extent to the pioneering work by Madre Tierra. Everyone I asked about sites-and-services models told me that it is the right way to go, considering both the scarcity of public funds and the rich traditions of self-building and mutual-aid. At the same time it is important to keep in mind that self-construction is not the best solution for every household, as not all families have the capacity to manage a construction process or build themselves.

I have been following the work of Madre Tierra closely for over three years and I have witnessed how much influence they have. The team has grown to 21 people in 2022. They run numerous initiatives that go beyond supplementing their main activity, the sites-and-services projects. Besides the previously mentioned creation of saving groups and community gardens, the organisation is actively promoting recycling and experimenting with environmentally friendly construction materials. Madre Tierra supports state efforts in existing informal settlements by preparing assessments, diagnostic studies and plans for socio-spatial upgrading and public space interventions. These activities are always built around the principle of an active involvement of the local population. On top of that, Madre Tierra engages in capacity building for low-income people (mainly women) through organising thematic courses, on such topics as urban planning regulations, habitat and environmental protection, as well as more practical workshops on construction, electrical installations and sustainable gardening. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Madre Tierra has also begun a series of podcasts and webinars with interviews and debates on urban issues in GBA.

Law on Fair Access to Habitat

Madre Tierra does not only help low-income communities through their direct action in the territory. The organisation has also made major contributions when it comes to influencing public policy.

Before I elaborate on concrete examples of laws, let me provide some background to why and how Madre Tierra decided to start a political process. The escalation of land takeovers and uncontrolled occupations in GBA during the 2001 financial crisis motivated Madre Tierra to think about the causes of this situation and come up with realistic solutions. Facilitating and promoting the sites-and-services models was one obvious way to make sure that new settlements for the poor develop legally, but the need for intervention was much greater, as it also had to consider what to do with the already established informal settlements. Therefore, Madre Tierra brought together different actors, including community leaders and representatives of the municipal committees of informal settlements, NGOs, academics and some of the more progressive state officials, to debate the ongoing situation and the possibilities of reforms. A series of workshops were organised to analyse and discuss public policy regarding informal settlements. In 2005, around 500 participants of these workshops established FOTIVBA, the Forum of Organisations of Land, Infrastructure and Housing of the Province of Buenos Aires.

The conclusion from these meetings was that Decree 8912 did more harm than good and that the applicable laws supported land speculation, while making no incentives to develop affordable forms of access to land and housing. The proposed solution was to introduce the idea of “property having a social function” (Interview 12), and that the state should have the tools to recover the benefits that private landowners gain from the land value increase caused by

infrastructure upgrading, regardless of whether they use their land or not. These principles were then written down as law proposals that aimed at reforming the obsolete Decree 8912.

It was not until one of the active participants at FOTIVBA, a professor at the National University of General Sarmiento, Eduardo Reese was nominated to join the provincial Housing Institute in 2008 when the initiative could move on at the legislative level. Two years later, the first draft of the 'Law of Habitat' as it was then called was finished and circulated "around the entire Province of Buenos Aires" (Interview 12). After 17 revisions and a lot of pressure from FOTIVBA, the law was finally approved by the provincial government in 2012.

Law 14.449 on Fair Access to Habitat, as the full name states, has not replaced, but rather complimented Decree 8912. As I have heard, it was practically impossible to impose a reform that would replace Decree 8912, because the disagreements among different political factions at that time were too large. What Law 14,449 does instead is to introduce exceptions and new mechanisms that municipalities can apply in order to secure land and housing for the poor, for example through legalising progressive and incremental housing development, and therefore making sites-and-services projects possible, and reducing the minimum lot size requirements from 300 to 200m². It also establishes pathways towards regularising informal settlements through gradual upgrading of infrastructure and formalisation. In other words, Law 14.449 addresses the problems associated with the unrealistically high standards, and miscalculated principles of certainty and prosperity assumed by Decree 8912. Therefore, the new law offers tools to engage in informal and incremental development that were practically illegal since 1977. The practical application of the reforms from 2012 is that development of housing for middle and upper classes can follow regulations established in Decree 8912, while affordable housing for low-income families can be produced in accordance with Law 14.449.

The revolutionary aspect of the new law is that it assumes that collective rights are more important than individual rights. This is embedded in all of its four main principles: 1) right to the city and housing, 2) social function of property, 3) democratic participation in planning, and 4) fair distribution of charges and benefits in the urban development process (Rocha & Castaño, 2016). The law encourages the municipalities to be more proactive when it comes to land management and planning, through for example special taxation for vacant land. It also aims at recognising the experience and strengthening the self-management abilities of local communities through better participation processes and a system of micro-credits for house improvement, infrastructure connections and professional assistance.

To synthesise it, the law understands –and that's why it's called 'Access to habitat'– that there is injustice and that the state must balance. For that, it has different instruments of territorial and urban planning to recover resources and placing these resources back in the habitat for those most unprotected. (Interview 12).

Nevertheless, the approval of Law 14.449 was only a modest step forward in a larger cause. Given its voluntary character, a lot of work is being done to promote it and ensure its application, so that there are better housing alternatives for low-income people and fewer illegal land takeovers. Madre Tierra is among those who work hardest to make this happen. The biggest challenge, according to representatives of the organisation, is that municipal

bureaucrats are simply unwilling to change their routines or give up some of their decision-making powers through increased participation. While the first point may be understandable, the second one is not necessarily true.

A lawyer specialised in issues of land and housing I spoke to told me that Law 14.449 “is excellent” and “one of the most serious that has been made”, because “it is now the local government who takes the initiative to resolve the problem of habitat” (Interview 41). He pointed to the fact that the law actually gives local authorities more power to intervene in the liberalised land market where private freehold ownership is the norm, and enables municipal planners to engage with residents of informal settlements in a way that was previously impossible due to their status as illegal occupants living on land that is not meant for habitation.

The pressure is being placed both at the municipal and provincial levels. Law 14.449 proposed to create a Provincial Council of Housing and Habitat (*Consejo Provincial de Vivienda y Hábitat*), which was eventually set up in 2015. Many of the members of the council have themselves been part of FOTIVBA and use it to propose ways in which different articles of Law 14.449 can be enforced. There are also corresponding local councils in most municipalities in GBA, where the same kind of pressure is being applied by local activists and community leaders.

Planners working in the Provincial Government were easier to convince, especially since there have been major shifts in political power in recent years, which were accompanied by changes of the majority of staff and influx of mainly younger and more open-minded people entering the public administration.⁵⁸ One of such younger architects Alan Gancberg, who worked at OPISU, told me that he understood and agreed with Law 14.449, but the implementation of it was not so much up to them:

Likewise, the municipalities – not all of them have the technical structure to be able to carry out these projects, which means that the province would have to accompany the municipal government much more, and there are some cases where the main obstacle was the municipality, not the people in the neighbourhood. (Interview 5).

Other reasons that hinder the implementation of the Law on Fair Access to Habitat mentioned in my interviews were tight relations between some municipal administrations and local real-estate developers, the deeply rooted understanding of the absolute right to private property among judges and lawyers, and insufficient budget for implementation. In some cases, municipal planners are well aware of the law, but they only apply it selectively, for example to impose additional fees and charges or to expropriate abandoned properties, while at the same time they ignore the main part, which provides them with the tools to develop affordable housing alternatives.

There is also a group of municipalities which apply the law very actively. Since 2014, the microfinance program has funded thousands of housing and infrastructure improvements. Several new sites-and-services developments with

⁵⁸ During the political changes in PBA in both 2015 and 2019, all section leaders and a major part of the provincial administration, including urban planners and architects, were replaced in order to get rid of those who had strong political affiliations to the previously governing party. According to my informants, this has also affected much of the technical staff and those who considered themselves apolitical. This is less common at municipal level, where public administration jobs are normally distributed based on personal connections and place of residence.

smaller lot sizes and progressive service provision have been implemented. Involvement and collaboration with local residents in planning and upgrading in informal settlements has also improved (Bustos, n.d.).

There are some municipalities that have already reacted and begun to see the need to guide land development. Including Moreno, which has a tradition in developing land policy, and has gone a step further. (Interview 26).

In fact, I have been hearing a lot about Moreno being a good example of a proactive municipal administration that uses all the available tools and resources to improve access to affordable housing, including Law 14.449. What is interesting about this case is that this partido is also considered one of the poorest in GBA, with a high ratio of people living under the poverty line (Zamora, 2018). Therefore, I decided to take a train trip to Moreno and talk with the local planners.

Moreno is located in the western edge of AMBA, with a little under half of its territory still being rural (Figure 52). At the same time, it has relatively good and direct highway and train access to the capital city. These conditions make it both one of the hotspots for the spread of informal settlements and an attractive place for investors who build gated communities for the rich. To avoid the mistake of many neighbouring partidos, in 2000 the Municipal Government in Moreno decided to establish a land bank and special planning unit that would take a more proactive role in planning and land management, called IDUAR, the Institute of Urban, Environmental and Regional Development. Their main mission is to ensure more harmonious development and provide alternatives to the growing problem of land invasions. IDUAR has also had a long collaboration with Madre Tierra. Several professionals have worked in both places and held leadership positions. It was also in Moreno where Madre Tierra implemented some of their most important projects, including the El Milenio sites-and-services neighbourhood.

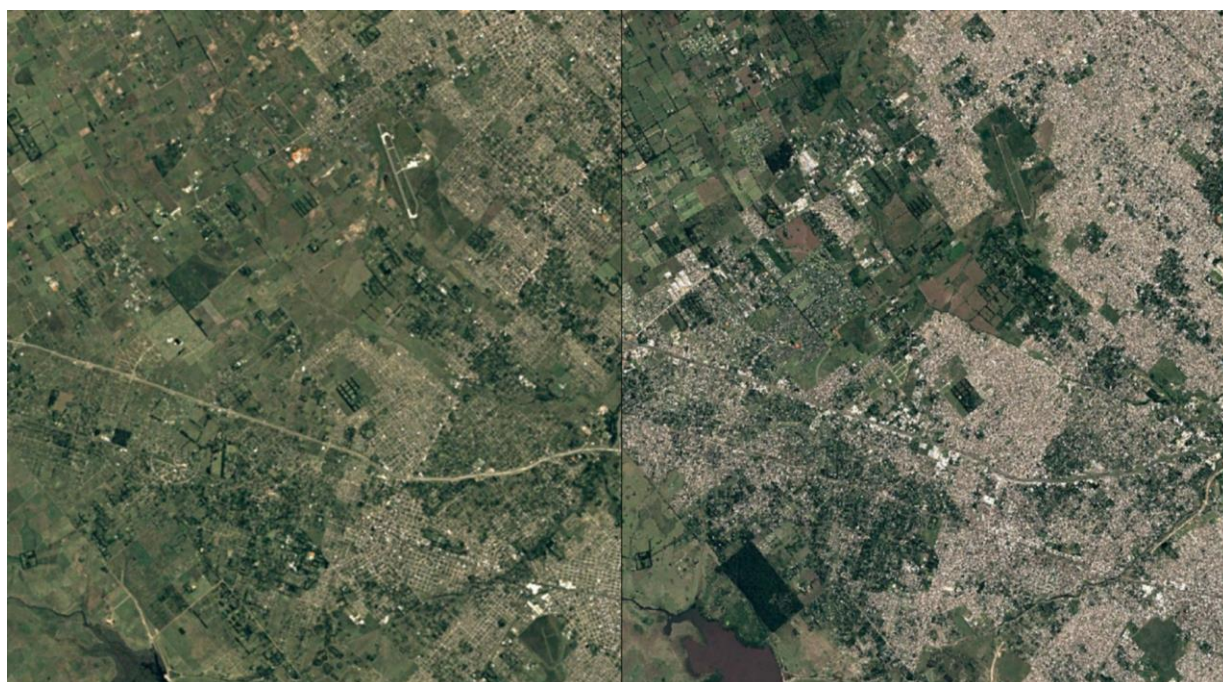


Figure 52. Moreno in 1985 (left) and 2020 (right). Besides rapid outward growth, the town has also been densifying within the already built area. Source: Google Earth / Landsat / Copernicus

As I was told in my interviews, there are no other similar public planning offices in Argentina. One thing that makes IDUAR unique is that the institute does not want to depend on the very uncertain subsidies from above:

Excuse me for saying it like that, but if you live off the tit of the province or the nation, you never end up being self-managing. (Interview 8).

Instead, IDUAR actively acquires land and tries to generate its own capital that can then be reinvested back into housing and infrastructure. Currently, all these strategies are aligned with Law 14.449. Planners at IDUAR recognize that the private sector alone is not interested in building housing for the poor, and share the position that public administration should act against growing inequalities caused by liberal land management practices. Therefore, the institute acts like a semi-public real-estate developer: it buys and subdivides land, paves streets, installs infrastructure, and then sells lots, earning a profit that otherwise would be assumed by private land speculators.

This income is used to fund construction of public facilities and spaces elsewhere, purchase or expropriation of new land (with or without occupants living there), formalisation (free of charge to residents), upgradation of infrastructure in informal settlements, subsidies for community projects and local cooperatives, and construction of social housing. To supplement its budget and recover the costs of infrastructure provision, IDUAR applies property taxes and charges development impact fees. Gated communities are permitted only in some sectors, in order to discourage property speculation in low-income areas. To justify investments in infrastructure and make public management more efficient, the municipality attempts to promote densification on its territory, as opposed to following a sprawled model of development.

When I asked about whether the uncertain economic situation and the impossibility of making long-term projections paralyses their work, they responded that the opposite is actually true. As they explained to me using different examples, there is only one thing that is certain in this world - that land values always go up. Even if there is a crisis,

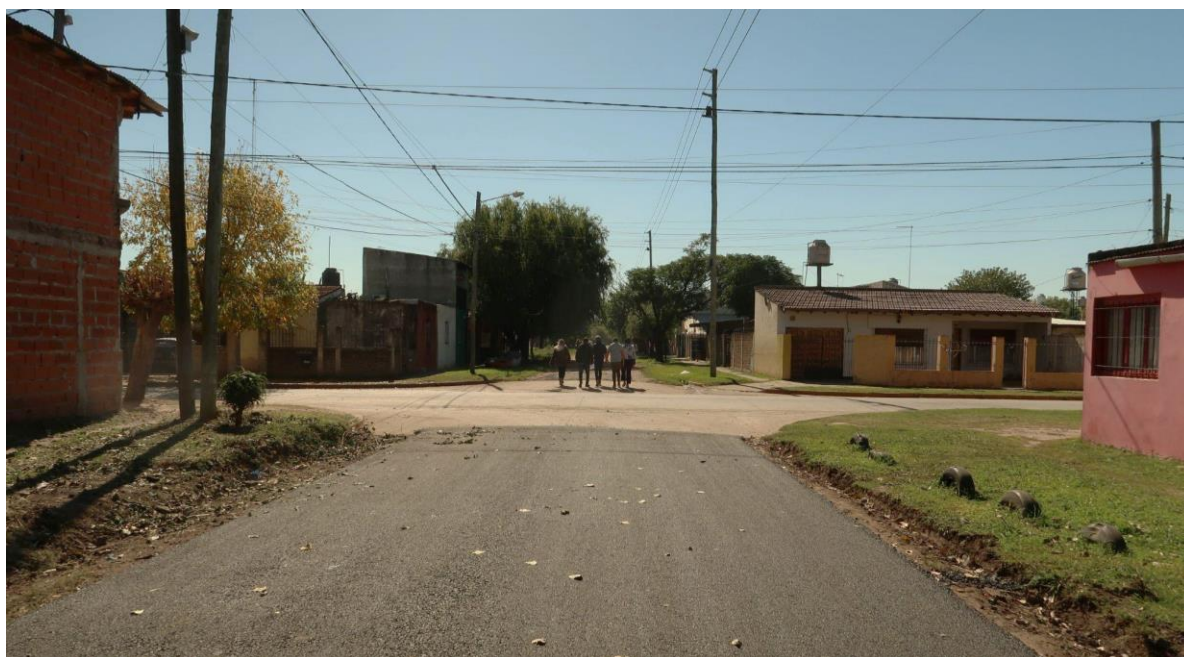


Figure 53. A recently paved street in Moreno.

property values recover after a few years. If so, then why do other municipalities not invest in land? IDUAR had no answer to this:

Because the value of land is an enormous wealth that the municipalities have not yet realised, the mayors themselves do not realise that.... (Interview 8).

Another interesting aspect is that IDUAR has a preference to do multiple small projects, instead of developing very large areas. This is because such punctual interventions are easier to administer, and they make it possible to avoid large concentrations of poverty in one place:

When you allocated a vulnerable family, you worked in a context where other families were not so vulnerable. So, the entry of that family in that environment was more friendly than when you put 1,200 families, all vulnerable, to live side by side, who on top of that, do not know each other. (Interview 8).

If there are no immediate needs, or plans have still not been approved, the institute may designate its lands for temporary purposes, for example as tool and equipment depositories or community gardens. They have also contacted several private owners of vacant properties and installed cooperative agricultural production (Vales, 2020c). Besides addressing food insecurity issues, this also solved the problem of unused property that might be a target for illegal invasion. A lot of this is possible through establishing relationships of trust and cooperation with local landowners, community organisations and cooperatives.

An additional advantage is that IDUAR can adjust zoning codes⁵⁹ to ensure that its investments are more secure, which as I imagine some liberal thinkers may consider as extensive interventionism of the state. However, planners at IDUAR defend themselves by saying that their zoning codes attempt to ensure certainty and transparency, and that no private owner benefits more than anyone else, as how it often happens in other municipalities:

In Moreno we update the codes so that there are no exceptions, because exceptions are technically linked to corruption systems, I would say... Hardly anyone says it, everyone knows... (Interview 8).

Besides, most of the planning decisions including zoning reforms are consulted with residents, large landowners and other important stakeholders. Moreno has a long tradition of public participation around issues that concern both the municipality as a whole, and local communities or individual families in particular. IDUAR sets aside funds for participatory budgeting and helps establish local saving groups in some of its poorest neighbourhoods. There are also design workshops where families draw and suggest changes in their neighbourhoods. For IDUAR, participation is not an improvement of the planning process, but something that its success is dependent on:

We can't start any intervention proposal, if it's not with the organised community in the territory. Because you can't enter if you don't have an agreement with the neighbours. (...) Because you won't be able to do it anyway. (...) So the first thing is to look for the organisations, for the community leaders, all the voices, whatever other organisations or NGOs, or the church, or whoever you have as partners in the territories, to sit at the table, and work together towards the implementation of the project. (Interview 8).

⁵⁹ The last update of municipal zoning in Moreno was in 2010.

In addition, participation contributes to increased sense of local ownership and cohesion:

One of the few things that we learned when we were in Matanza, was that when there is an urban project of 'how do you want your neighbourhood to be?' Which engages a lot of good intentions and transcends governments... In other words, when everyone accepts the project, if you do it as a community, if you're connected, and the neighbour takes ownership, and feels part of that project, and defends it, and you give them the tools to take ownership... That's pure gold! (Interview 8).

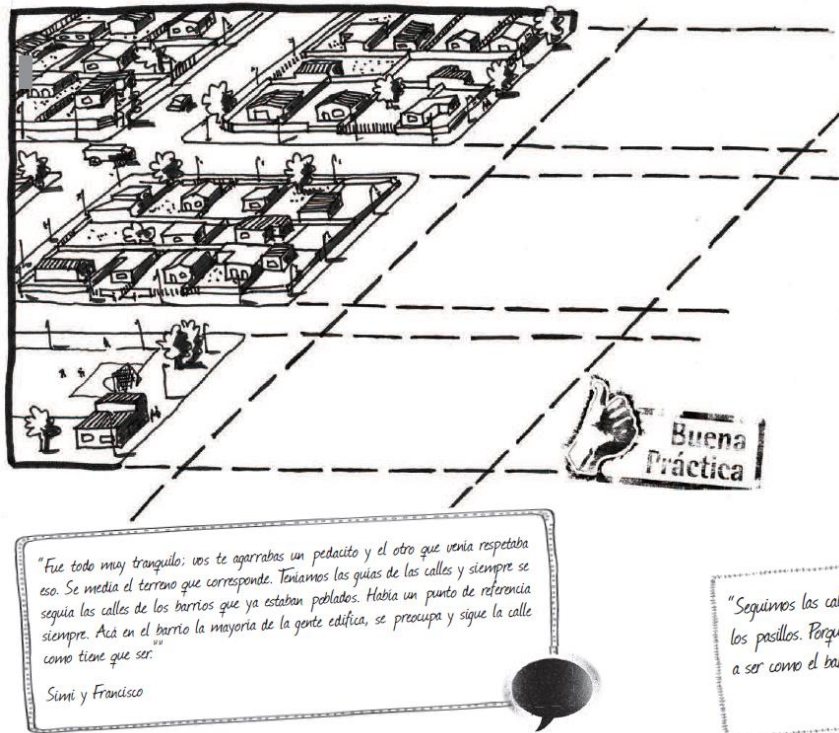
This enabling principle is shared between IDUAR and Madre Tierra and is further supported by different publications and guides. For example, Madre Tierra and their collaborators have authored a series of manuals for residents and community leaders in informal settlements, with the intention to help them understand their rights and make use of the existing laws and regulations. The two most important have been cited in this chapter. One is a step-by-step guide of a community-led process of formalisation and planning in informal settlements (de Paula et al., 2010).⁶⁰ The second publication introduces all the articles of Law 14.449 and explains how these can be interpreted and implemented in practice (Rocha & Castaño, 2016). Both of them complement a larger body of similar publications written by other authors, such as the "Manual of Urbanism for Precarious Settlements" developed by the academic staff at FADU (Asrilant & Sorda, 2009). This booklet helps communities plan their *barrios*, through bringing up positive examples of informal planning for inspiration and discussing how to apply formal zoning and building codes in land occupations that are not (yet) legitimised (Figure 54 and 55).

In addition, there are more specific books and instructions for self-construction and infrastructure connections available in most newsstands and bookstores (Figure 56). A book called "Guide to choose housing and advice to renovate and construct" looks at all aspects of housing development, from the scale of a city to a particular room and targets people with no experience with these issues (Potenze, 2008). All of these publications are written in accessible language and are accompanied by pictures and graphs. The existence of such manuals shows that the role of professional planners and architects is not to make decisions for the people, but support their self-help and autonomous actions. This is reinforced through boosting their confidence and using emancipatory speech, such in this manual by Madre Tierra: "Do not delegate all decisions only to the technicians. The neighbourhood must give its opinion and participate" (de Paula et al., 2010, p. 33).

National Registry of Informal Settlements

While the work done by Madre Tierra, IDUAR and similar organisations is definitely impressive, it is far from solving the problem of informal settlements. Their spread seems to outpace the interventions of the state and NGOs. This means that residents in many informal settlements are on their own to put infrastructure in place and improve their

⁶⁰ This publication, whose full title is For Our Land: Paths in the Struggle for Land (*Por una Tierra Nuestra: Los Caminos en la Lucha por la Tierra*) became a topic for heated debate in 2020, after a conservative newspaper Infobae called it "a manual to how to seize land" and suggested that it incentivises illegal action (Klipphan, 2020).



Conectar nuestro nuevo trazado con el trazado de calles existentes de los barrios contiguos

En caso de tener un barrio próximo al nuestro tenemos que continuar con la dirección de las calles existentes en las manzanas linderas. Así será más fácil llegar a nuestras casas y además integraremos el barrio a la ciudad lo que nos traerá gran cantidad de beneficios.

Si el barrio vecino está construido "legalmente", los anchos de calles de ese barrio probablemente sean los anchos que exige el código; seguir su trazado nos permitirá asegurarnos que seguimos los códigos y el día de mañana será más fácil legalizar el barrio.

Si no hay barrio en nuestro entorno próximo, podemos tomarnos de alguna calle o acceso relativamente cercano (una ruta, un puente, un acceso perpendicular, etc.).

Figure 54. This section from the Manual of Urbanism for Precarious Settlements highlights the importance and benefits of laying the structure of the new settlement by extending the street layout of adjacent formal neighbourhoods, and explains what to do when there is no such street network to connect to. Source: Asrilant & Sorda (2009).

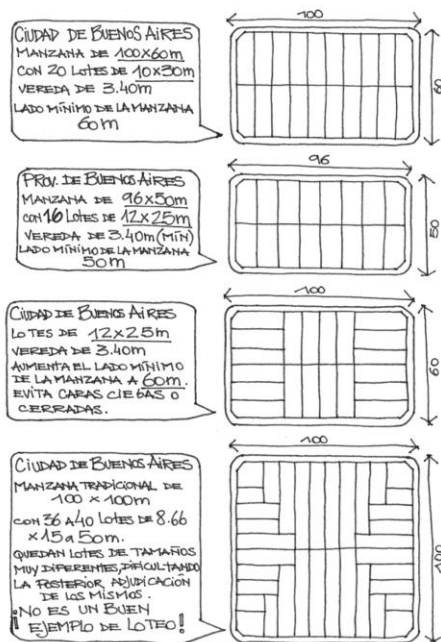


Figure 55. Examples of legally permitted lot configurations from the Manual of Urbanism for Precarious Settlements. The three on top are recommended, while the last one is not recommended due to its complexity. Source: Asrilant & Sorda (2009).



Figure 56. Guides for self-construction like these are easily available in local newsstands and bookstores throughout Argentina.

housing conditions. While significant progress can be seen, my interviewees claim that it would be a lot more efficient if the process was done in tighter cooperation with state institutions. Commenting on the inflexibility of the provincial planning framework when it comes to integration of informal settlements, one of the planners from OPISU Alan Gancberg claimed that “the laws have to accommodate the reality, and not the other way around” (Interview 5).

What makes it difficult for the government to plan and coordinate any actions, besides insufficient budget, is that the context in each informal settlement is different and the information available has been fragmented and is often out of date. There was relatively little knowledge of the real situation in these areas, even when it came to their exact locations. Until recently, most quantitative data on informal settlements was collected separately by the organisations of residents themselves, NGOs or municipal officers for the purpose of regularisation of each neighbourhood. Nationwide population census data is collected only once every 10 years and does not include many of the questions that would be useful in further work on regularising and upgrading informal settlements.⁶¹ Detailed data at both micro and macro levels was needed to help design public policy and prepare planners to act.

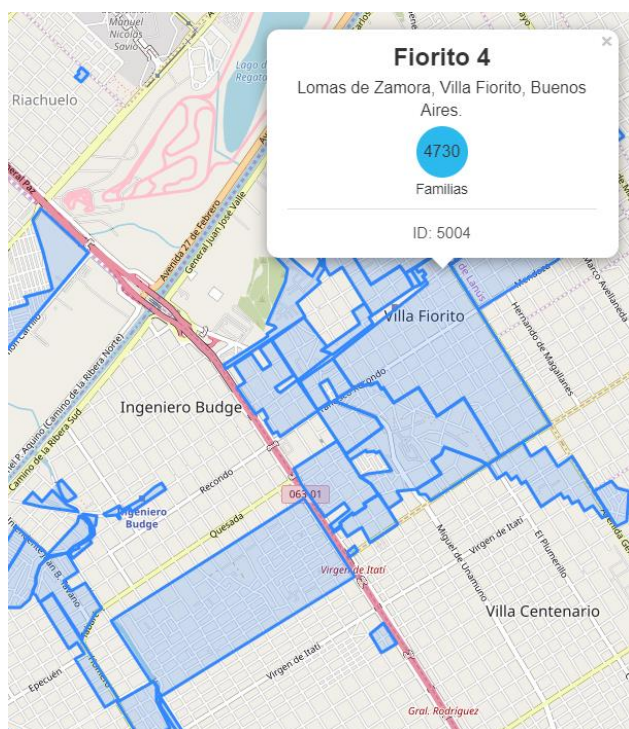


Figure 57. Screenshot from the interactive RENABAP map showing location of informal settlements and shantytowns (blue). Source: Ministerio de Desarrollo Social / OSM

This problem was brought forward by different NGOs and organisations who have worked in multiple informal settlements, such as the Confederation of Workers of the Popular Economy (CTEP)⁶², Barrios de Pie⁶³, Caritas and an NGO called TECHO⁶⁴. In 2016, these organisations agreed with the National Government to perform an official countrywide survey of informal settlements and shantytowns. The initiative is called the National Registry of Informal Settlements (*Registro Nacional de Barrios Populares*) - RENABAP. Implementation of such a big project required managing complex logistics. TECHO was best equipped to do the survey, as it had both relevant experience with data collection and access to a large group of volunteers in different parts of the country. The survey was collected in 2016. The data is available to the public on an interactive map

⁶¹ The latest national census was planned in 2020, but due to the Covid-19 pandemic, it was postponed until 2022.

⁶² CTEP is a labour organisation that represents the interests of informal workers. In 2019 CTEP was rebranded to the Union of Workers of the Popular Economy - UTEP.

⁶³ Barrios de Pie (‘Neighbourhoods Standing’) is a social movement that emerged in the context of the 2001 financial crisis to organise community kitchens and help the unemployed get back on their feet.

⁶⁴ TECHO (‘Roof’) is a NGO dedicated to building housing for the poor. The organisation was founded in 1997 in Chile and today is present in several countries in Latin America. They employ mainly volunteers, most of whom are students in the fields of architecture, engineering and social sciences. TECHO’s main source of income is donations, though the organisation also operates its own factory of construction materials.

portal⁶⁵ (Figure 57) and can be downloaded as a complete table. RENABAP is a unique source of both qualitative and quantitative information about different informal settlements, including their exact location coordinates and parameters, origin and history, demographics, access to infrastructure and services, tenure situation, environmental challenges and more. To identify informal settlements and shantytowns, RENABAP used one common definition:

those [areas] that are composed of a minimum of eight grouped or contiguous households, where more than half of the population does not have property title or regular access to at least two of the basic services such as running water, electricity with individual metre and/or sewage (Ministerio de Desarrollo Social, 2021).

The survey detected a total of 4,416 informal settlements and shantytowns in Argentina, of which 1,012 are in the 24 partidos of GBA (figure 58) with an approximate population of 1,2 million people, which represents about 10% of GBA's total population. Informal settlements account for the vast majority of these areas.

Most informal settlements in the RENABAP registry are recent land takeovers. The majority of low-income neighbourhoods that developed as popular land subdivisions before 1977 and a large share of informal settlements that originated in the 1980s and 90s were not included in RENABAP, simply because the land tenure situation has been resolved and infrastructure has improved to such degree that they no longer fit into the definition I cited above. The major part of those that were included in the registry do not have formal infrastructure connections and continue

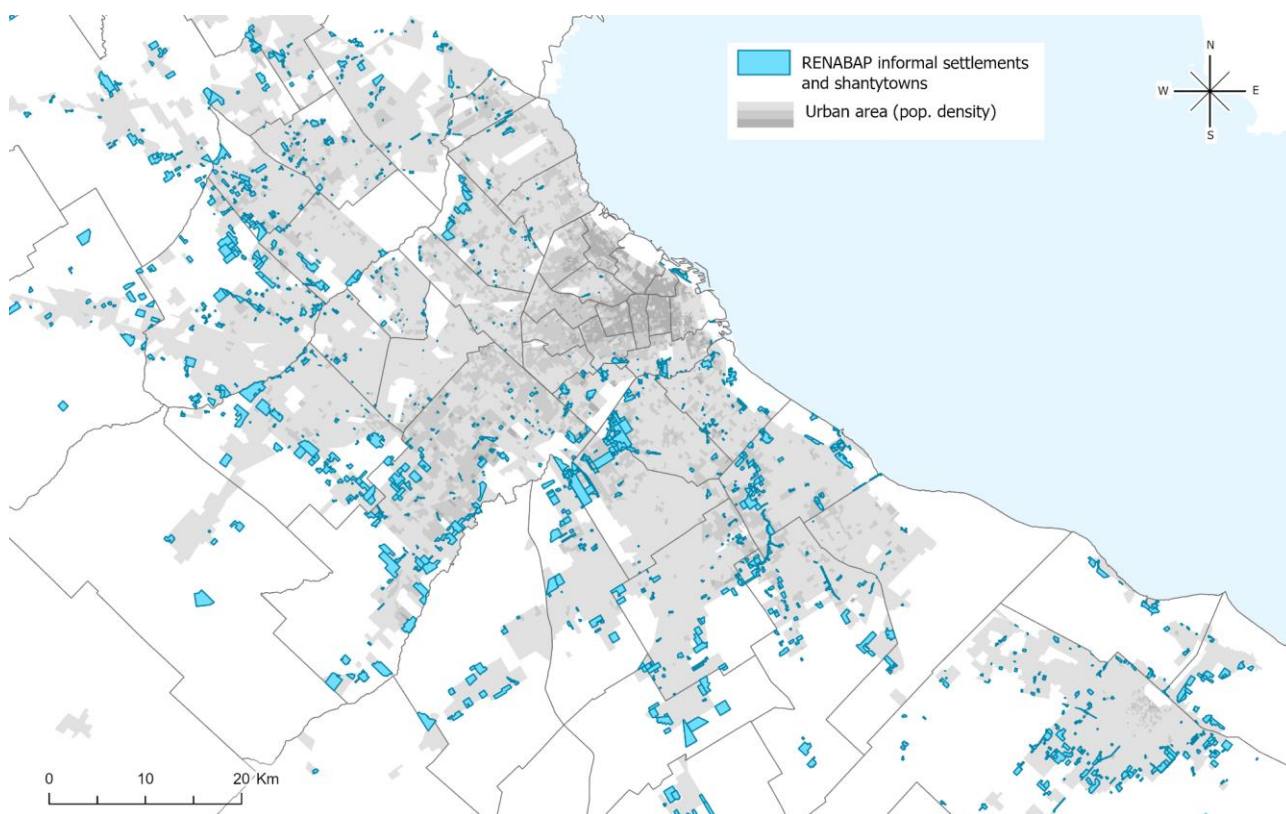


Figure 58. Location of informal settlements and shantytowns in AMBA and La Plata (blue). Source: Ministerio de Desarrollo Social / ESRI / INDEC / IGN

⁶⁵ RENABAP data and interactive map is available at <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/desarrollosocial/renabap/mapa>.

having unresolved land ownership situations. For example, in about 90% of RENABAP settlements, there are no formal sewage connections. Many of them are located in flood-prone zones along rivers and streams.⁶⁶

This information came like a wake up call for the government and motivated politicians to take action. In 2018, the National Government approved (with only a few senators being against) Law 27.453 (to be updated by Decree 819 in 2019), which paved the way towards financing and implementing massive formalisation as well as infrastructure and housing upgrading in settlements registered in RENABAP. To facilitate the process, Law 27.453 suspended evictions from all the detected settlements for a period of four years and enabled residents in these areas to request property titles free of charge (InfoLEG, 2018). These interventions are financed from a variety of sources, including federal reserves, as well as project funds from the Development Bank of Latin America (CAF) and Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). This budget was reinforced later by directing part of the income from new taxes on imports, currency exchange transactions and large wealth holdings.⁶⁷

After the approval of Law 27.453, different small and large projects began to be implemented in RENABAP settlements, involving a wide range of local, national and international actors. The main institution responsible for coordination of these actions is the national Secretary of Social and Urban Integration (*Secretaría de Integración Social y Urbana*) - SECISYU. Also in 2018, the Government of the Province of Buenos Aires created its own unit dedicated to interventions in RENABAP settlements within its jurisdiction, the Provincial Organisation for Social and Urban Integration - OPISU. While as far as I know, there has not been much interaction between Madre Tierra and OPISU (presumably for political reasons), their principles and strategies overlap. My interviewees from OPISU told me that they are strong supporters of Law 14.449 on Fair Access to Habitat and they attempt to apply and enforce it in their interventions.⁶⁸

The formalisation strategy applied in RENABAP settlements by SECISYU and OPISU is not much different from what has been happening earlier, that is state-led expropriation of the settlement whenever necessary and selling individual lots to occupants with subsidised mortgages. What is important when it comes to affordability, is that Law 27.453 establishes that mortgage rates cannot surpass 20% of household income. In terms of infrastructure upgrading, one of the key points is that similarly to upgrading interventions in shantytowns, a minimum of 25% of work has to be done by local cooperatives or other enterprises from the same settlement (ibid.). An example of a housing improvement project implemented by SECISYU in RENABAP settlements is a subsidy scheme *Mi Pieza* that helps women-headed households buy construction materials and hire professional help to expand and improve their dwellings (Vales, 2021).

⁶⁶ This information was retrieved from the open-source RENABAP registry available at <http://www.argentina.gob.ar/desarrollosocial/informesyestadisticas>

⁶⁷ These are called tax PAIS ('For Inclusive and Solidary Argentina') and tax on large fortunes respectively. The former one was introduced after the Peronist coalition returned to power in 2019 and the latter was approved shortly after the Covid-19 outbreak in 2020.

⁶⁸ I also got to know that before OPISU was established, Madre Tierra was the one organisation with the most influence and highest budget when it comes to interventions in informal settlements in GBA. While I find this impressive, this only confirms how passive the state has been when it comes to informal settlements before 2018.

The RENABAP methodology and all the actions that this registry feeds have also their shortcomings and challenges. My general observation from site visits in various partidos in GBA, which has also been confirmed by my respondents, is that it is very difficult to recognize the differences between informal settlements that are registered in RENABAP and those which are not (Figure 59). This is important, because the registry draws clear divisions, for example that households on one side of the same road are protected from eviction and eligible for subsidies, while those on the other side are not, just because they are outside of the RENABAP zone. I encountered many cases of settlements without paved roads and sewage that were not included in RENABAP (Figure 60), while others which (at least from the outside) look a lot better are registered (Figure 61). This shows that settlements cannot be either formal or informal, or have a secure or insecure tenure, but rather they are somewhere between. The situation is further complicated by the fact that residents in some settlements which meet the RENABAP criteria have asked not to be included in the registry due to political reasons or because they do not want the stigmatisation associated with such a status. As my contact from SECISYU claimed:

What sometimes happens to us is that middle-class people view these programs poorly: 'You give to those who don't pay, who don't pay for services, who take over land...' (Interview 24).

As I also got to know, there are informal settlements whose leaders claim that after securing tenure rights and starting the process of serious infrastructure upgrading, inclusion in RENABAP would be downgrading their social status and documenting their inability to progress and develop autonomously. At the same time, in many informal settlements

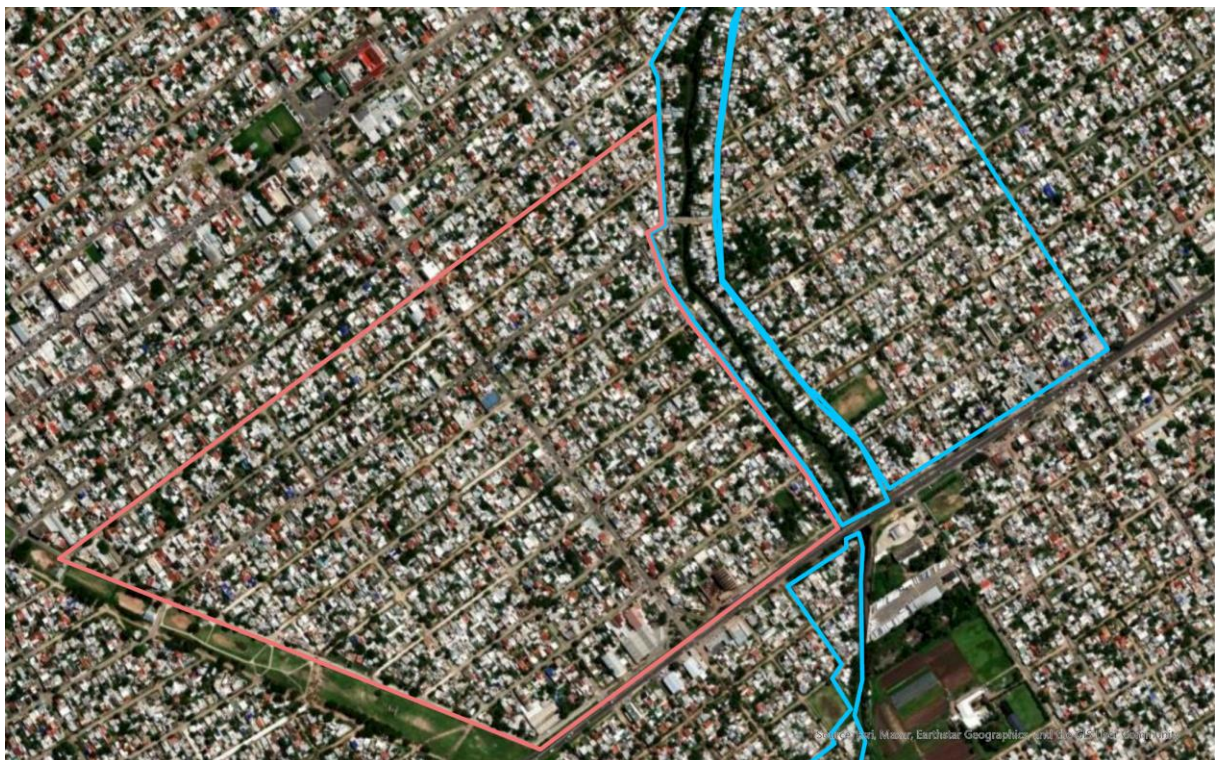


Figure 59. Loteo popular San Francisco Solano (red) - the same neighbourhood shown on figure 41, and Monteverde (blue, on the right side) - an informal settlement, which originated in 1988. In the middle between the two is a settlement Arroyo Las Piedras, which emerged on the two banks of Las Piedras river and presents the worst living conditions. Source: ESRI / Maxar Technologies

protection from eviction ensured by Law 27.453 led to sharply decreased community organisation and the need for participation in planning, both as a bottom-up initiative and as part of the state-led process.

Another problem with RENABAP that was pointed out to me by a lawyer I spoke to has to do with how the large-scale upgrading and regularisation is supposed to be implemented. Its success is contingent on the efficiency of a centralised top-down management and financing of many dispersed projects in different provinces, which, according to my contact, is something that never truly worked in Argentina. This contrasts to Law 14.449 which “breaks with the historical source of the problems” by “inverting” (Interview 41) the responsibility through empowering municipal governments to finance and design their own housing solutions locally. In any case, insufficient funding for improvement of RENABAP settlements leads to a situation where “the problem grows at a faster rate than the solutions” (Poore, 2022).



Figure 60. Despite lacking sewage connections and pavement, this neighbourhood in Moreno partido is not part of the RENABAP registry of informal settlements.



Figure 61. This consolidated area within Villa Fiorito (Lomas de Zamora partido) is part of the RENABAP registry of informal settlements.

The Covid-19 crisis and a new wave of land takeovers

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic hit the poor in Argentina hard. The virus did not only cause a lot of deaths, but it also devastated the country economically. Millions have lost jobs and savings, and can no longer afford food for their families. It was precisely unemployment and not health risk that was claimed as the most serious problem caused by the pandemic (Maceira & Beccaria, 2021). Similarly to shantytowns, other challenges in informal settlements related to the fact that most infrastructure upgrading projects have been put on hold and at the same time, cuts of electricity and water have intensified (ibid). The crisis magnified structural issues that led to the situation of inequality, which can now be visualised more than ever before.

The main coping strategy in this crisis situation was, just like during previous emergencies, relying on networks of solidarity between the residents, occasionally supported by NGOs and government institutions. Meeting rooms and public spaces were turned into community kitchens and medical posts run by internal and external volunteers. Instituto del Conurbano (2020) notes that the “crisis also seems to be the scene of organisational strengthening of neighbourhoods” (p. 13), but one can also say that informal settlements are in permanent crisis at least until they have secured tenure and infrastructure connections; and that there is evidence that strong solidarity ties in these uncertain conditions have been maintained over many years (Besana et al. 2015; Di Virgilio, 2015).

As many people lost their incomes during the pandemic, they also lost the capacity to pay rent, which meant that they got into serious debts or were evicted, despite the fact that evictions were prohibited not only in RENABAP settlements, but also elsewhere for the duration of the pandemic, as stated in Decree 320. I will expand on this later, but here I wanted to mention how this situation resulted in a new wave of land takeovers of different sizes throughout GBA, which in practice meant displacement of the poor from one site to another at the time when mobility was supposed to be limited. These new invasions followed more or less the same patterns as I described before. Some of them were allowed to stay, while others were expelled.

Moreno was one of the municipalities with the highest number of recent land invasions. IDUAR does not tolerate illegal occupations either, but they try to avoid violent evictions. As they themselves reported on their social media accounts⁶⁹, when land invasions happened, the organisation surveyed the population and provided them with emergency medical help to prevent the spread of coronavirus. Then, IDUAR attempted to regularise the settlement or negotiate relocation to one of the sites that they own and then sell individual serviced lots to these families.

As the emergency situation was slowly getting under control, it became evident that with all these new land occupations that happened recently, the RENABAP registry needed to be updated. It is estimated that the number of informal settlements in Argentina might have increased from 4,416 in 2016 to over 5,600 in 2022 (Klipphan, 2021). However, it was not defined whether the most recent takeovers will get protection from eviction. The minister of Social Development Daniel Arroyo claimed that the new goal is to provide infrastructure in 400 settlements per year and the priority will be neighbourhoods that are consolidated and have solid housing structures (Vales, 2020d). The decision to perform an update of RENABAP was officially approved by the government in December 2021 (Argentina

⁶⁹ IDUAR's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/iduar.moreno/>

Presidencia, 2021), while the struggle for housing in the peripheries of Buenos Aires continue. In October 2022, the Argentinian congress voted unanimously to extend the protection from eviction in the original RENABAP settlements for another ten years, and ensure affordable rates for public services and tenure formalisation (Millenaar, 2022). Addressing the uncertainty for those living under constant threat of eviction was mentioned as the official explanation for this initiative (Parlamentario, 2022). A few months later, the Ministry of Social Development established new measures to expropriate lands where these informal settlements have developed (El Destape, 2023).

Since the beginning of the most recent economic crisis in 2017, there has also emerged a new type of informal settlement, which shares some of the characteristics of shantytowns. These are often extensions of existing informal settlements where, due to topographic challenges and a more spontaneous settlement process, the ordered grid street pattern has not been maintained, while the lots are smaller and have irregular shapes.⁷⁰ Another reason why these settlements do not imitate formal spatial plans is because they are seen as desperate and temporary shelter rather than permanent places to live. Some examples will be introduced in chapter 8.

Informal urbanisation as *the solution to uncertainty?*

When tracing how uncertainty is experienced in informal settlements, I realised that uncertainty is both a cause and result of the phenomenon of land occupations. The instability of labour markets and ineffective planning and anticipation by the state caused illegal invasions, which accelerated during the financial crisis of 2001 and again during the Covid-19 pandemic. As the high standards affected land prices, there was a growing mismatch between the availability of affordable land and a high demand for housing for the poor. Access to housing, which is supposed to be the most stable and predictable aspect of life, has become a matter of urgency and risk of a potential eviction. My contacts at Madre Tierra warn that this difficulty in accessing land becomes relevant also for those that have the ability to save:

Regarding place, land and where to access a place to build... Construction is less of a problem for families than access. And it's no longer a problem of the popular classes of the working sectors. It's a problem of the middle classes. In a country where labour instability is so great, the one who rents and is left without a job, is then left homeless. (Interview 12).

This form of housing access can be understood in different ways. As urban planner Alan Gancberg who worked at OPISU told me, in a context of ineffective policy to enable access to affordable housing, “informal settlements are *the solution*” (Interview 5). Others consider the phenomena of informal occupation “as a strategy of the popular sector to defend the right to land” (Rocha & Castaño, 2016, p. 16). It is important to recognise that what we are talking about here are illegal actions, and that pirate land subdivisions or invasions on private properties where landowners have intentions to develop them, are not the same as more peaceful occupations of abandoned land that had no use or was

⁷⁰ Some authors call these types of new type of informal development as “new urban settlements” or NAU (*nuevos asentamientos urbanos*) to distinguish them from older shantytowns (*villas*) and informal settlements (see for example Carman & Olejarczyk, 2021; Di Virgilio, 2015; Rocha & Castaño, 2016).

left vacant for speculative purposes. All the situations are problematic, though in different ways. This, however, does not change the fact that families who end up setting up these informal settlements, regardless of the context, intend to develop them into neighbourhoods and are willing to pay a fair price for the land. I was assured both by residents, community leaders and other actors that the intention is not to steal the land, but since it is not affordable on the formal market and there are few other housing alternatives, the land has to be claimed first, then defended from expulsion and eventually bought at a price that they can afford. Whether or not these actions are legitimised by the state varies from case to case.

To carry this topic further, I chose two informal settlements for a more detailed study. Both have developed in contexts of extreme uncertainty and marginalisation. The first one is Costa Esperanza, one of the poorest informal settlements in GBA, whose origins date back to the late 1990s. The second is the largest and most well-known organised land invasion that happened during the Covid-19 pandemic in the town of Guernica. These stories will be presented in chapters 8 and 9 respectively. First, let me take you back to the capital city and explain what happened in one of the shantytowns, where many of those who now live in suburban and peripheral informal settlements came from.

7. Villa 31: What money can't buy

The 31 is like the Disney of shantytowns... (Interview 24).

Villa 31 is not a typical shantytown. Contrary to most others, there was an abundance of funding, or as one of my informants called it a “rain of money” (Interview 41) designated for implementation of a package of planning interventions and construction of landmark public spaces and buildings in that area. This would upgrade its status from a shantytown not just to a regular neighbourhood, but a showcase example of radical improvement and a place worth visiting. The innovative plans, and in particular the contribution of one of the main private consultancy companies hired to assist in drafting the proposal, were recognized at the 2020 World Economic Forum, by placing Villa 31 on the list of 100 best urban planning projects in the world (El Economista, 2020).

However, more than six years after the funding was secured, Villa 31 is still a shantytown, with all the typical problems: overcrowding, incomplete infrastructure, informal tenure and constant threats of forced displacement, which was identified by the community leaders I spoke with as the biggest uncertainty. A large portion of the residents are dissatisfied with the plans and demand more involvement in the process. Conflicts over land ownership obstruct formalisation, housing improvement and infrastructure upgrading. In this chapter, I will present and discuss these issues and the overall planning process in Villa 31 from three perspectives: decision-makers who proposed the plans, a sample of community leaders, and a group of planners who have been critical to the plans.

Villa 31, also known as Barrio 31, or Barrio Carlos Mugica⁷¹ measures 32 hectares and is one of the oldest and largest shantytowns in Argentina. It is located in Commune 1 in the Northern part of Buenos Aires city centre, surrounded by the Retiro railway station, railway tracks, highways, port facilities, bus terminal, office buildings and military infrastructure (Figure 62). This is also one of the main transportation hubs in the city, with regular train, subway, bus and passenger boat services. Right across the railway is the Recoleta district, which is among the most expensive neighbourhoods in Latin America (Quiroga, 2019).

I find this case very interesting not only because, as my informants told me, ‘money is not an issue’, but also because of how its central location and high land values introduce new actors and increase uncertainty. Villa 31 is one of the most visible shantytowns, which means that what happens there is likely to be replicated in other similar settlements. The fact that many of the proposals in Villa 31 are experimental and innovative makes studying this case even more exciting.

I will begin this narrative with introducing the turbulent history and geographic significance of Villa 31. Then, I will describe in more detail the city government’s recent planning proposals for the shantytown and projects that got funding through multi-million dollar loans from the BID and WB. The following sections explain the conflicts and

⁷¹ This name pays tribute to Father Carlos Mugica, a catholic priest and political activist who worked in Villa 31. He was assassinated in 1974.



Figure 62. Villa 31 and the local context. The Illia highway runs through the middle of the settlement. South of Villa 31 are the Retiro railway station and the Recoleta neighbourhood. Source: ESRI / Maxar Technologies

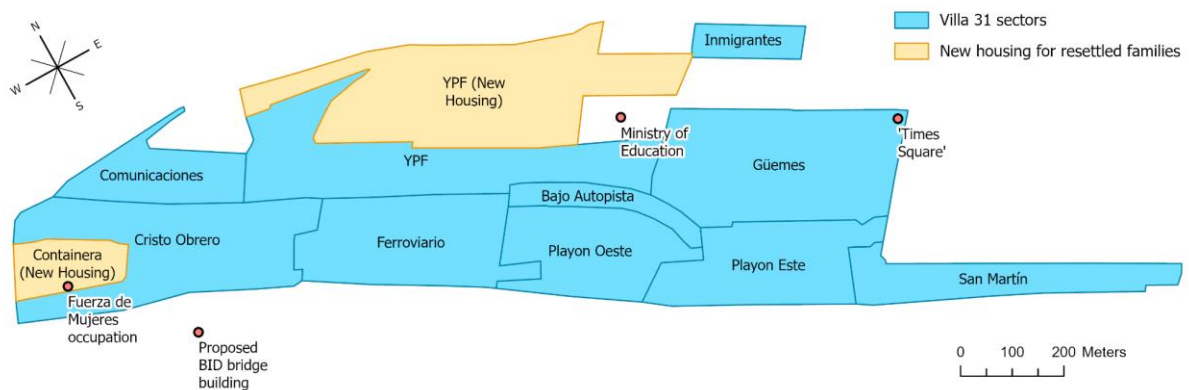


Figure 63. Approximate boundaries of the different sectors of Villa 31 and location of interest points mentioned in the text. Source: Ministerio de Desarrollo Social / ESRI / GCBA

political disputes between the different governmental institutions, and the community leaders I spoke with. Further, I will briefly comment on how the Covid-19 crisis resulted in increased informality and uncertainty that make the realisation of the plans even less likely. I will conclude by explaining how large enough funding does not guarantee success in upgrading projects, where land ownership situation is unresolved and planners fail to acquire sufficient contextual understanding about the strengths and weaknesses of the area.

A succession of disorganised takeovers

Villa 31 is 80 years old, it will be 90 years old soon. During these almost 90 years of history, many governments tried to eradicate this land. The reality is that none had achieved it. (Interview 33).

The settlement dates back to the 1930s, when European migrants (mainly of Polish and Italian origin) together with unemployed neighbours who struggled to pay rent, started occupying vacant land in the port area (Vales, 2020b). The growth of Villa 31 accelerated after 1945 due to rapid industrialisation of the city, which sparked a new wave of migration from rural areas. The military dictatorships, which ruled in different periods between 1955 and 1983, attempted to eradicate the shantytown. These threats motivated the emergence of first neighbourhood organisations and shantytown federations in Villa 31. Local parishes and especially the one led by Father Mugica have also had an active role in supporting the local community in its struggle for the right to housing.

Nevertheless, in accordance with the “Plan of eradication of shantytowns” in the 1970s, Villa 31 was almost entirely erased from the map. Some of the approx. 20,000 residents have been forcibly displaced and allocated in new social housing estates outside of the boundaries of the capital city, while those who have not been offered any housing alternatives formed new shantytowns and informal settlements elsewhere. However, a small group of around 45 households resisted eviction and managed to secure a juridical protection from displacement. After the return of the democratic government in 1983, the shantytown started to repopulate again.

The following decades were characterised by a series of disconnected and contradictory laws and ordinances, which called for upgrading and formalisation on the one hand, and eradication on the other. The shantytown organisations resisted all eviction attempts and continued to upgrade infrastructure to a large extent on their own, partly to satisfy their needs and partly to show that they should be taken seriously by the state. As one of my informants told me, the 1990s was also the beginning of tight collaboration between politicians and community leaders, which materialised in clientelism and the offer of housing subsidies, favourable contracts for local cooperatives or protection assurances in exchange for votes from shantytown dwellers. The only project that the state managed to implement in the area was building an elevated Presidente Illia highway over the settlement, which required expropriation and demolition of many houses (Figure 64). However, as soon as the project was finished, new buildings also emerged under the overpass (Figure 65). The shantytown continued to expand both vertically and horizontally. According to one of my contacts, Villa 31 “is a succession of very disorganised takeovers.” (Interview 41).

The newer occupations occurred mainly on disused railway land to the south and west of the original settlement. This expansion is referred to as Villa 31 Bis. The urban fabric in the old and new parts varies. In some places the street network resembles a grid structure, while in others it is more organic and irregular. Generally, average lot sizes in the new parts in the South and West are smaller to those in the older sector to the north.

Most of the buildings that were originally made of precarious materials like wood or metal sheets have been replaced by brick and concrete structures, but the new expansions started to consolidate only when a certain degree of security from expulsion was ensured and when the average residency period became longer. There were many periods when the state did not permit entry of construction materials into the shantytown in order to prevent further expansion, but that made little difference, as residents found alternative and illegal ways to get them inside, or started their own

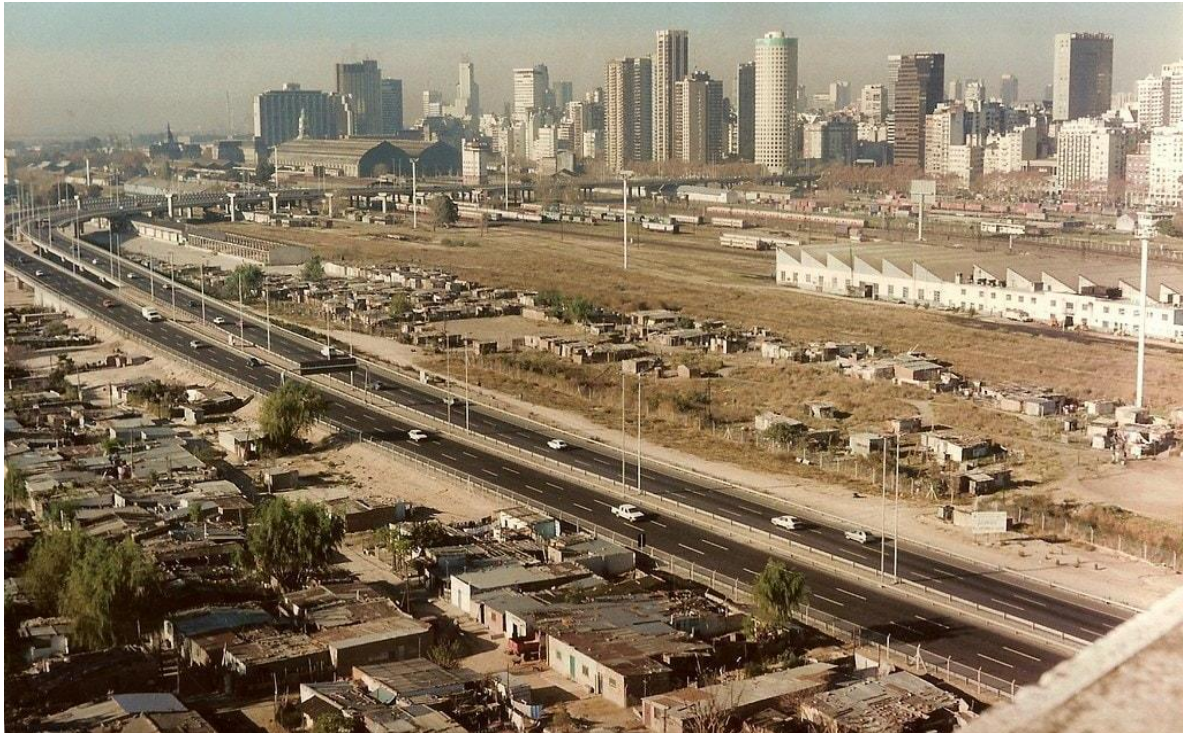


Figure 64. Villa 31 in the 1990s, shortly after inauguration of the Presidente Illia highway, which divides the older part (left) with the more recent expansion (right). Photo: Buenos Aires City Archives.



Figure 65. Buildings under the Illia highway.

production within the shantytown (Carman & Olejarczyk, 2021). Considering that Villa 31 is almost entirely self-built, the density in some sectors is unbelievably high. There are many buildings reaching up to six floors in height built on lots as small as 10 to 15 m² (Figure 66). These vertical expansions are usually designated as rental units.



Figure 66. Buildings in the San Martín sector in Villa 31 are built on very small lots and reach up to five or six floors.

The fact that there is so much rental housing in Villa 31 is hardly surprising considering its central location. As I mentioned before, relative rent in this shantytown is similar, or even more expensive than in the formal sector. The offer is very diverse, as rentals vary in size and quality. They can be either individual rooms in buildings shared with the owners, entire buildings fit for large families, or massive blocks with over 40 very small rooms. It is the massive block type of rental investments where the tenure security, access to basic facilities and overcrowding is the worst.

Villa 31, like other shantytowns, is not just about poverty or illegality. Gangs that deal with drugs, prostitution, human trafficking, thievery, illegal gambling and other types of criminal activity indeed exist there, but as I was told by different people, it is only a small minority.⁷² The shantytown is first and foremost a place where those who are in different ways excluded from the formal sector live, work and invest.

According to the official numbers, there are around 40,000 residents in Villa 31 (SECISYU, 2017), but the community leader I spoke to told me that the estimated population count is over 60,000. About half of them are native Argentinians and the rest is divided between Bolivians, Peruvians and Paraguayans. The average age is around 25 years old, which is well below the city average. The majority of the population is under the poverty line, but unemployment (assuming that we count informal jobs) is not that high. Those who struggle to make ends meet get help from numerous community kitchens and social or political organisations.

⁷² In an attempt to ensure safety in Villa 31, GCBA established seven police stations and posts in the area, which is much more than in other city neighbourhoods of similar size.

While most work outside of the villa, there is a large group that makes their income within the shantytown. There are different types of commerce, restaurants, services and cultural organisations, most of which are lined up along the main streets and around plazas (Figures 67 and 68). Villa 31 also hosts many small businesses and cooperatives which are engaged in construction, maintenance, solid waste management (including recycling) or transportation.

The water, sewage and electricity infrastructure has always been a patchwork of different, and most of the time disconnected networks. These are usually combinations of connections made by the residents themselves, cooperatives contracted by the government, or the state directly through their own service providers and public works companies. There have also been many 'pilot projects', which have never been scaled up due to the complexity of the task or changing political priorities. This lack of coordination combined with inadequate maintenance leads to frequent emergencies. For example, the already limited flow of sewage and drainage is further hindered by garbage clogging the pipes, which results in flooding during heavy rainfalls in some sectors, even though the settlement is not located within a flood-prone area.⁷³

As I mentioned previously, the official plans for Villa 31 have always been shifting between eradication and integration. Yet it was not until it became a place of permanent residence for a large part of the population, around the turn of the millennium, when the idea of launching a comprehensive upgrading and formalisation program started to be taken seriously. It began with an investigation of living conditions done by researchers linked to FADU (the Faculty of Architecture, Design and Urbanism at the University of Buenos Aires) in the context of the 2001 crisis. In the process, community leaders established a strong alliance with the researchers, who concluded that the settlement should be formalised and upgraded. This group was later extended to include different social organisations as well as national and local deputies. As a result of this collaboration, a multi-stakeholder working group was established in 2004 to



Figure 67. Alpaca (Güemes sector) is one of the main commercial streets in Villa 31.

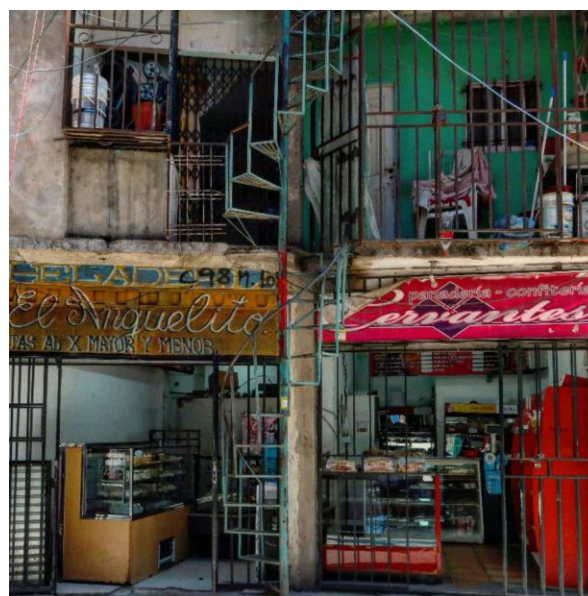


Figure 68. Commercial and housing units in Villa 31.

⁷³ This is at the same time a serious environmental issue, as most sewage and a lot of the accumulated garbage flow through obsolete drainage tunnels directly into the La Plata river, without any treatment.

discuss the future of the shantytown. This work eventually led to drafting a new law for Villa 31, sanctioned in 2009. In the meantime, Mauricio Macri (PRO), the new city governor elected in 2007 had announced his desire to eradicate Villa 31, but the opposition was too strong to get this proposal through the city council (Ons, 2021).

Law 3343 from 2009, whose full name is “Urbanisation of Villa 31 and 31 Bis”, suspended evictions and ordered infrastructure upgrading within the boundary of the occupied area (GCBA, 2009). A detailed plan of action was supposed to be defined later in a participatory process. However, the proposal of this new socio-urban integration plan presented by the multi-stakeholder panel in 2011 was rejected by the same city council led by Macri. This began a new period of uncertainty, tension and disconnected small interventions performed by different state institutions. The newly created Secretary of Habitat and Inclusion (SECHI) as well as UGIS, both of which were in charge of infrastructure upgrading and housing improvement in Villa 31 and other shantytowns, have only partly achieved their objectives. While the overall infrastructure is still a mess, their main contribution was renovating some public spaces and improving transportation connectivity in an attempt to curb insecurity. As I learned in my interviews, this approach was inspired by a successful long-term strategy in informal settlements in Medellín, Colombia.

One of the biggest contributors to the uncertainty that impacts Villa 31, as identified both by the residents and planners I spoke to, is the complex land ownership situation. Historically, the main landowners have been different dependencies of the federal state, but it is primarily the city government who has the legislative and executive powers

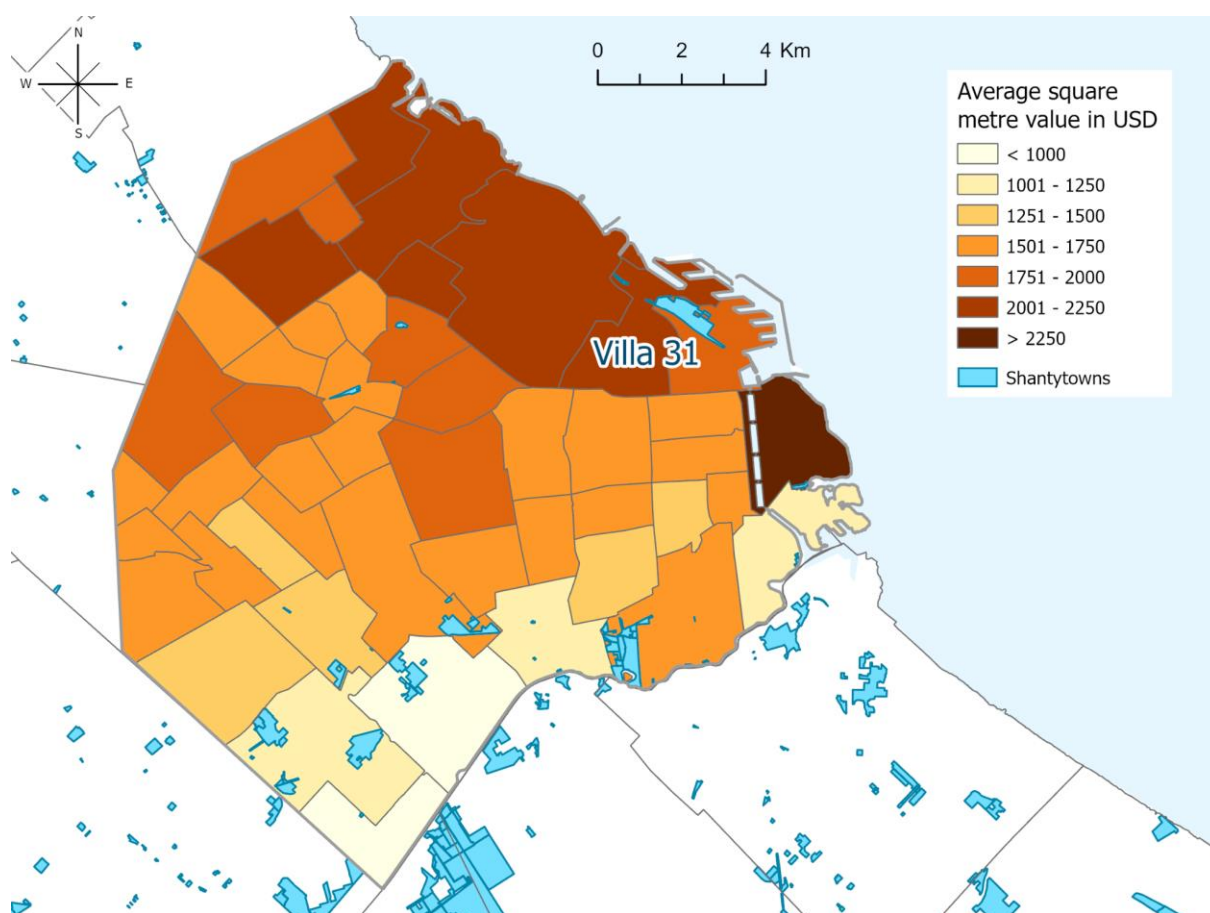


Figure 69. Average land values in CABA by neighbourhood in the period 2016-2020. Source: GCBA / Reporte Inmobiliario / Mudafy / ESRI / INDEC / IGN

to intervene in the shantytown. Moreover, as the value of land occupied by Villa 31 is extremely high (Figure 69), many private actors become interested in investing there.

A multi-million dollar project

It seemed that the situation for Villa 31 would change drastically in 2015, when the PRO coalition won the federal election, leading to a situation when the same political force was in power in both the national and city administrations. Moreover, the new mayor Horacio Rodríguez Larreta seemed to be more positive to the idea of formalisation and upgrading, as compared to his forerunner Mauricio Macri. Villa 31 was not only included in a new strategy for socio-urban integration of shantytowns, but it was also the settlement where the highest budget was allocated.

The new administration was successful in securing a total of 300 million USD for Villa 31 alone, of which around two-thirds were through new loans from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the World Bank (WB). It was then that the Secretary of Social and Urban Integration - SECISYU, was established by the National Government in partnership with the GCBA with the task to coordinate action in Villa 31.⁷⁴ As I mentioned earlier, this institution would later also take charge of formalisation and upgrading projects in RENABAP settlements.

When it was created, SECISYU hired a few hundred employees and had high ambitions to rapidly implement the transformation of Villa 31. The new head of SECISYU claimed that within a few years, “all the infrastructure in Villa 31 will be similar to the rest of the city” (Sylvestre, 2016). However, the projects that have been proposed there go well beyond just infrastructure. The first step towards intervention was elaboration of a new socio-urban integration law that would be aligned with the priorities set in Law 3343 from 2009. A new participation process began with involving (supposedly) all the relevant actors, including resident representatives from each block, leaders of community organisations, researchers, public servants from different governmental institutions and ombudsmen working in the area. As Danilo Rossi, one of the project managers at SECISYU with background in anthropology recalls:

The first objective we set for ourselves was to present all the background documentation that existed on the project and to listen carefully to those who participated in the historical process... Keeping in mind that it didn't start with us, but that we were an actor from the state that came to *impulse* a project... (Interview 19).

In my understanding, SECISYU wanted to detach itself from the earlier unsuccessful attempts to intervene in Villa 31 by other governmental institutions in order to gain more trust, which is crucial to implement their ambitious visions. To gather the necessary data, planners at SECISYU conducted comprehensive population surveys in 2016-2017 and held what some of them called numerous focus group meetings. In addition to this was a structural study of the area, where data for each building was digitised in modern Geographic Information System (GIS) and Building Information Modelling (BIM) databases. Elaboration of the law was done in three parallel commissions: housing, urban integration (which includes infrastructure) and social integration.

⁷⁴ In this sense, Villa 31 is a unique case. Projects in the rest of the shantytowns were still coordinated by the city housing institute IVC.

The new socio-urban integration Law 6129 called “Re-urbanisation of Father Carlos Mugica Neighbourhood” was approved in 2018 with amendments done in 2020. According to Rossi, who coordinated the participatory process and drafting of the law, “85% of the text was written by other actors who were not from the government” (Interview 19). The main components of the plan are tenure formalisation, resettlement of residents living in selected areas, infrastructure and public space upgrading, and new social programs to improve health, education and employment (GCBA, 2018).

More detailed road maps to implement these ideas were prepared by private consultant firms that were hired by SECISYU. They performed different diagnostic studies, advised on intervention strategies, proposed alternative solutions, and made designs for landmark public spaces and buildings, which I will introduce shortly. Some of the consultants are well known, international companies and architecture studios, such as KPMG⁷⁵, McKinsey⁷⁶, Gehl Architects⁷⁷ and ELEMENTAL led by Alejandro Aravena⁷⁸ (Dejtiar, 2018; El Grito del Sur, 2020b; Giambartolomei, 2020; Pertot, 2021).

Both BID and WB required that participation was not limited to elaboration of the law, but all the actions towards its implementation had to be defined and approved in participatory processes, where every resident is given a chance to contribute. The law also defined that a minimum of 20% of the work during its implementation has to be performed by residents living in Villa 31, and that part of the budget will be designated to fund local entrepreneurial initiatives that create formal jobs (GCBA, 2018). This shows that the plan attempted to maximise the appropriation and sense of ownership on the part of the local residents. The infrastructure component of the plan is similar to other proposals in shantytowns and aims to guarantee undisrupted formal access and connectivity to electricity, water, sewage, drainage and street lighting. It also attempts to improve traffic circulation, mobility and solid waste management (ibid.).

Housing improvement is supposed to happen through direct funding or subsidies for retrofitting and renovation of both interior and exterior, and indirectly through establishing a universal building code to control future growth. Although planners who worked in Villa 31 recognize that the shantytown followed its own informal development logic that is hardly comparable with the ‘formal’ part of the city, they were still trying to base the new building codes on the official regulations. The challenge was how to recognize these contextual particularities, but at the same time make sure that “the neighbourhood is not a big exception from all the rules” (Interview 18). For example, the ultra-high built density in some sectors of Villa 31 does not meet any official standards for accessibility, lightning and air circulation, which contributes to bad living conditions of certain inhabitants. Therefore, the planners at SECISYU proposed to open

⁷⁵ KPMG is a Dutch-British multinational professional services network with around 236,000 employees.

⁷⁶ McKinsey & Company is one of the largest and most prestigious international management consulting firms founded in 1926 in Chicago.

⁷⁷ Gehl Architects is an urban research and design consulting firm established by world-famous Danish architect and urbanist Jan Gehl, who, among other things, proposed pedestrianisation of parts of Broadway in New York and contributed to the cycling revolution in Copenhagen. Gehl has also written several top-selling books on urban design and planning.

⁷⁸ Alejandro Aravena is a Chilean architect who received the prestigious Pritzker Architecture Prize in 2016 and was among the main organisers of the Architecture exhibition at the Venice Biennale. His studio designs both iconic landmark buildings and affordable housing projects, including the ‘half of a good house’ concept introduced in chapter 2.

up spaces inside blocks and prevent future construction there, a process locally known as *esponjamiento* ('sponging') (Figure 70). There are also ongoing discussions regarding the permitted building height and desired ratio of residential and commercial units. For this, one of my informants explained, it required working "in reverse" (Interview 18) to what they were used to in a 'formal city'; instead of setting rules for what can and cannot be built beforehand, in a shantytown you have to observe, document and define what constitutes a building block and then find a way to apply codes to impose some kind of order.

Tipología de Manzana	Imagen Referencia	Posible Ubicación de vacíos	Ubicación vacío
Tallarin			Borde
Rectangular			Fondo
Cuadrada			Centralidad
Triangular			Área de mayor espesor
Atípica			A definir según particularidad de la manzana

Figure 70. Examples of *esponjamiento* - opening up spaces inside built up blocks in Villa 31. Source: SECISYU.

Another visible component of the plan is upgrading public spaces, painting building exteriors and opening up streets. The project funded the improvement and establishment of different plazas of various sizes, playgrounds as well as cultural and sports facilities (Figure 71). The proposal includes a total of 57 new street openings leading to reduced length of street blocks (some of which are over 500m long) and improved pedestrian and vehicular accessibility (Figure 72).



Figure 71. One of the new playground installations in Villa 31. Notice the person playing football in the middle.

One of the landmark projects included in the law and funded by the loan is the relocation of residents who have been living in insecure conditions and ‘in the darkness’ under the elevated Illia highway to new buildings. After demolishing their old houses, the Secretariat is developing a new linear public space with vegetation, playgrounds, outdoor gyms, a library, bicycle lanes and meeting places (Figure 73). In the next step, a new highway overpass will be constructed along the southern edge of Villa 31 and the existing obsolete Illia Highway would then also be turned into green space, possibly with commercial spaces, inspired by the emblematic High Line project in New York (Figure 74).

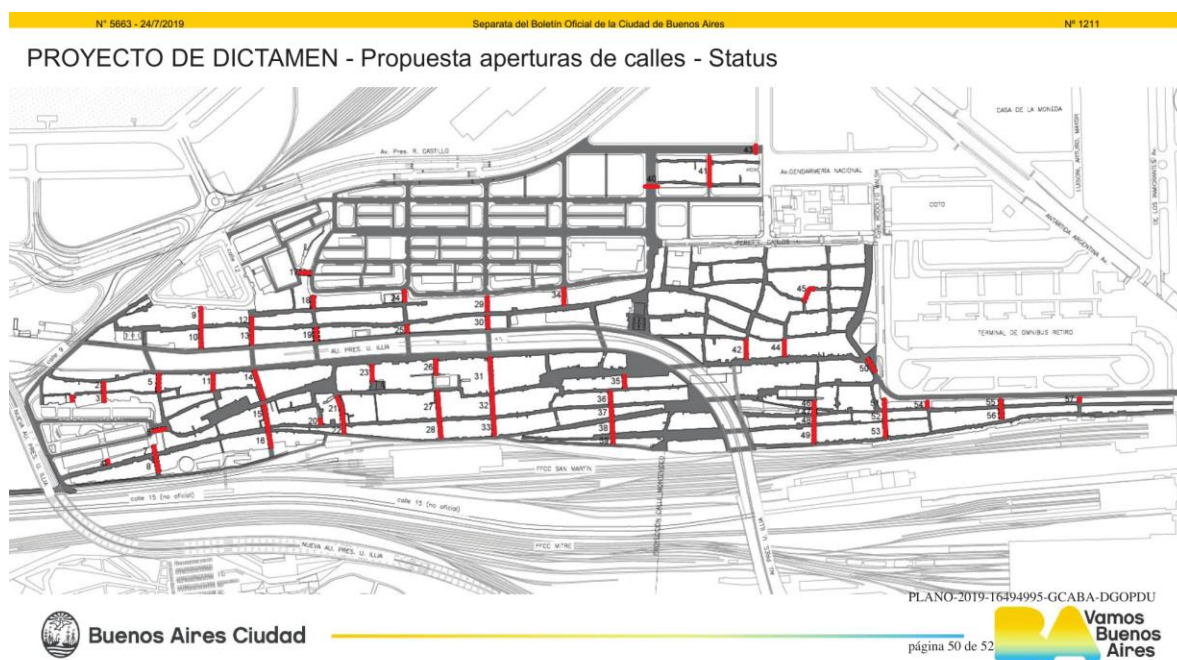


Figure 72. Proposal of 57 new street openings (marked in red) in Villa 31. Source: SECISYU / GCBA



Figure 73. The first completed section of the park under the Illia highway.



Figure 74. Before and after redevelopment of the Illia highway overpass. Source: SECISYU / Ricardo Ceppi

People whose houses are destroyed in the processes of street openings, the Illia highway projects as well as those living in buildings with serious structural damage are supposed to be offered alternative new housing (GCBA, 2018). The relocation process is now ongoing:

These families have to relocate within the same neighbourhood, because that is what the law says: to guarantee permanence within the same neighbourhood... (Interview 18).

According to the plan, there are no forced evictions. It states that the relocations have to be debated in local assemblies, and shall not take place without reaching consent and agreement on the conditions of new mortgages and eventual compensations for the lost space. The relocation and compensation ordinance does not only consider housing, but also commercial and other income-generating spaces. According to the law, new housing has to be of similar or better standards than the old dwellings (GCBA, 2018).

The first to be relocated were residents of the part of the Cristo Obrero sector that was demolished to make space for the new highway overpass. These families now live in new housing blocks locally known as “Containera”⁷⁹ (Figure 75),

⁷⁹ Residents call this sector Containera, because previously this land has been used to store shipping containers. Ironically, and most likely unintentionally, the design of the new buildings and the materials used also resemble shipping containers.

located right next to Cristo Obrero. Those living under the highway and in places designated for street opening have been offered housing in a sector called YPF⁸⁰, along the northern edge of Villa 31. The new housing in both Containera and YPF was built by the government, and has a similar look: 4-storey blocks made of corrugated metal sheets with apartments or row houses of different sizes (Figure 76). Many of them have commercial spaces on the ground floor. In order to contribute to energy saving and efficiency, each new building has solar panels and water heaters on the

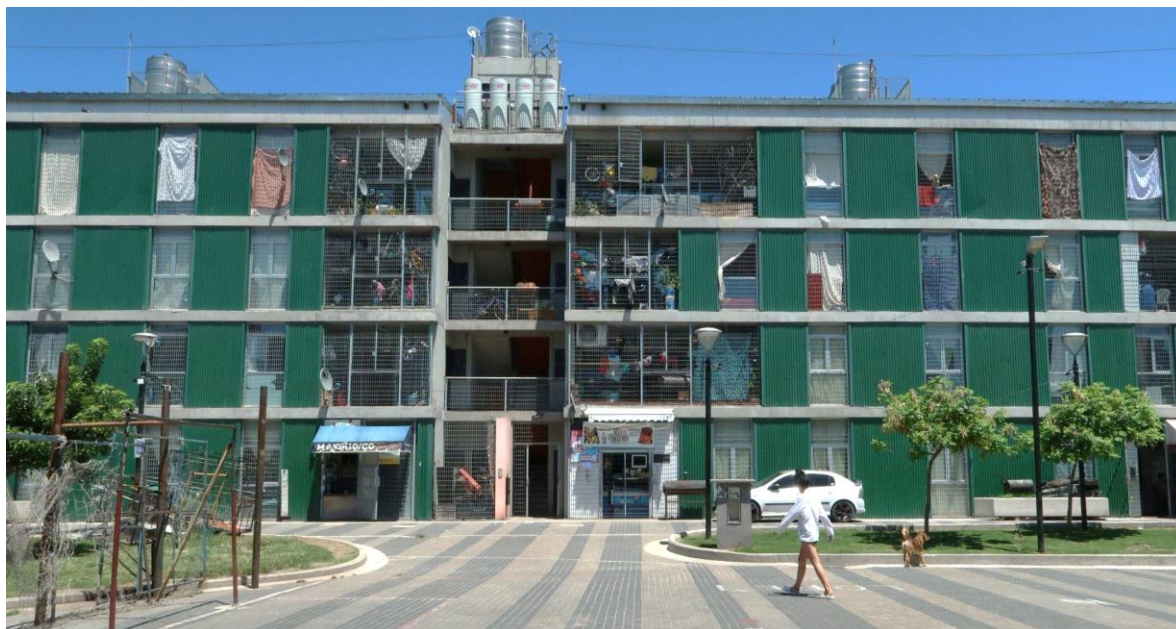


Figure 75. New housing in the Containera sector.

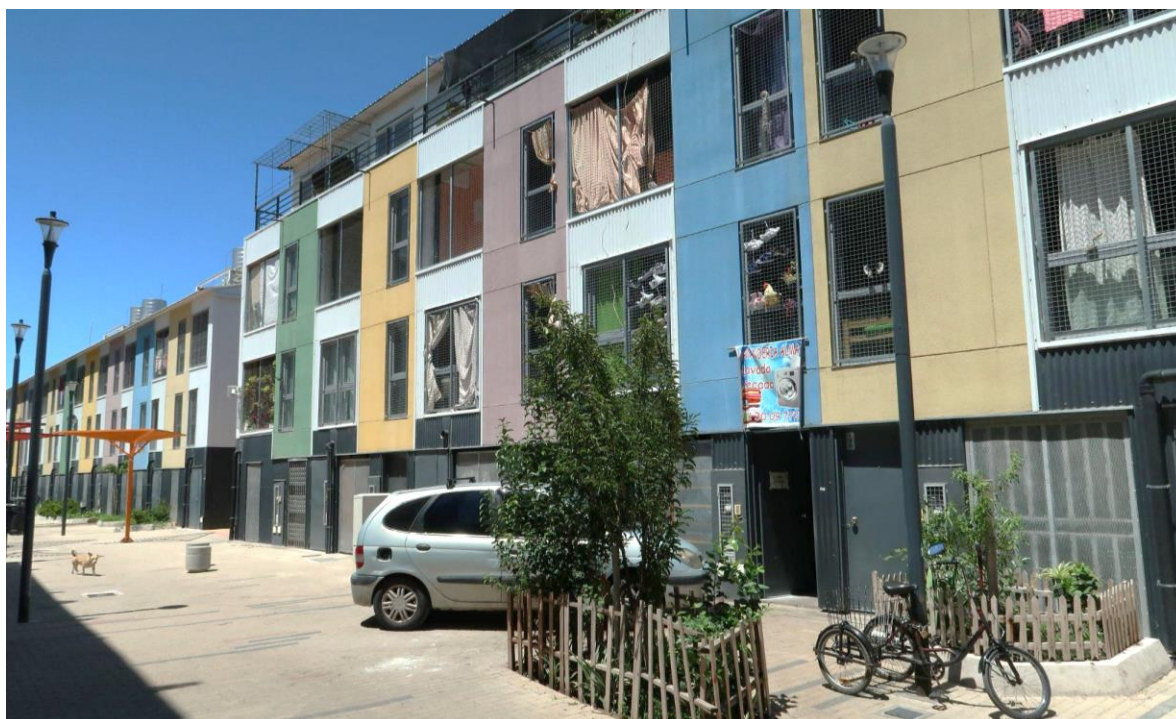


Figure 76. Row houses in the YPF sector.

⁸⁰ YPF is a state-owned Argentinian energy company, which owned the land where new housing was built.

rooftop. For anyone who does not get an offer of new housing, the Secretary promises assistance in financing purchase of another property within the shantytown.

The mortgage conditions are similar for families who were resettled to new housing and those who are in the process of formalising property tenure in the buildings they currently occupy. Formalisation of tenure is mandatory for all parcels within the Villa 31 polygon and all new transactions. Occupiers do not get the property titles for free, but the loans are partly subsidised by SECISYU and are normally set for 30 years. Law 6129 defines that monthly instalments cannot exceed 20% of the household income and that the titles are for all household members, not just the head of the family (GCBA, 2018). The compensation scheme for any demolished units is complicated, but the main rule is that the number of square metres of the old unit is discounted from the mortgage to pay for the new housing. SECISYU has also guaranteed that the residents affected by the relocation projects have access to legal help free of charge.

The idea is that formalisation of property titles are to happen in a parallel process with upgrading and regularisation of infrastructure networks and connections. Another aspect of formalisation is naming streets and issuing official street numbers (Figure 77). This not only makes orientation in the area easier, but it also means that all residents will soon be able to demonstrate legal residence in the city. All these new formal property systems and addresses are registered and updated in the GIS database I mentioned before:

For us as the Government of the City of Buenos Aires, there is a very strong interest in the digitization of the population due to an obvious logic that the world is going towards that... And the more digitised we are, the more access we have to different rights... (Interview 18).



Figure 77. New street name sign placed on the wall of a building in Villa 31.

To prevent formalisation from resulting in unaffordability and market-driven expulsion of the residents, Law 6129 establishes that newly regularised properties cannot be sold to anyone with residence outside of Villa 31 for less than three times the value of the original mortgage updated by the inflation rate (GCBA, 2018). If such a sale occurs, a large part of the profits from the transaction would be assumed by the GCBA as a special kind of tax, which would then be invested back in Villa 31 or other shantytowns.

One of the most difficult issues to resolve in the new formalisation plan were the rights of the informal tenants. The intermediate solution is an obligation for all property owners to register tenants living in their buildings to formalise rental contracts. In cases of buildings designated for demolition and relocation, SECISYU assures that the registered tenants will be eligible for housing solutions, for example an offer of purchasing affordable apartments in the new housing projects in Contenera or YPF.

To accompany the housing, infrastructure and public space improvements I just described, SECISYU has also been allocating a lot of resources to achieve economic transformation and integration, or as one of my informants described it: “the issue of how the hell we do it so that these people can not only access housing, but also sustain it...” (Interview 19). To reach this goal, GCBA designed a strategy that has both addressed training and capacity building of the residents, and also ‘opened up’ the shantytown for private sector actors who would extend the offer of formal employment. The government established the office of the Centre for Entrepreneurship and Local Development (CEDEL) inside Villa 31, which offers, among other services, job-relevant skill training, CV-writing workshops and assistance in job searching. Another important institution that entered the shantytown was the Federal Administration of Public Income (AFIP), whose mission is to assist in formalising economic activities and collecting taxes. A former employee at CEDEL told me that its goal is to “strengthen the economic ecosystem of the residents” as well as to “create a consumer” and “a market.” (Interview 2).

At the same time, the city government facilitates the entry of companies from selected sectors that have little or no presence in Villa 31, such as pharmacies and banks. This strategy consists of finding and preparing commercial spaces where they can establish their local franchise and issuing tax breaks for any company that commits itself to creating formal jobs in Villa 31 and other shantytowns. One of the largest bicycle and motorcycle food delivery companies PedidosYa also has plans to extend their services in Villa 31. My contacts from SECISYU and CEDEL said that because of its location and human-scaled, walkable streets comparable to old European cities, there is a big potential to go well beyond just these basic services, and that Villa 31 “will perhaps become a gastronomic and tourist hub” (Interview 2). One of such proposals included building a public food court, inspired by the very popular La Boquería market in the historic centre of Barcelona (Di Virgilio, 2020). A former SECISYU employee explained how planners were thinking of assisting in this transformation:

Generating a link between Villa 31 and nearby neighbourhoods, generating attractions or making people want to go to 31, because there is an event over there... Like thinking about how the neighbourhood can be integrated with the city. This is the story of Villa 31. (Interview 29).

A very interesting process that visualises many of the aspects of the transformation I have described here is the formation of a commercial hub, a kind of ‘Times Square’ of Villa 31. This is happening around one of the entrances into

the shantytown at the intersection of Rodolfo Walsh and Carlos H. Perette roads in the Güemes sector, and right next to the Retiro bus terminal. In the last several years, SECISYU, in collaboration with other public institutions and private actors, have concentrated a lot of investments in this area. It is where probably the first and only bank and McDonald's restaurant opened in any of the shantytowns in Argentina (Figure 78). On the other side, there used to be an informal street market, which has later been formalised and upgraded with more solid vending stalls. The square itself has been completely renovated and today functions as a multi-purpose meeting place with a playground and a small football pitch. The city government has also sponsored renovation and painting of all buildings around the square (Figure 79). Other interventions included installing a bicycle lane (which in practice functions as an extension of the



Figure 78. McDonald's restaurant next to a bank in Villa 31.



Figure 79. Facades of houses along this square have been improved and painted.

sidewalk) and increasing the frequency of local buses, contributing to a significant growth in both pedestrian and motorised traffic. Owners of the building at one of the corners recognized this as a commercial opportunity and installed a big LED screen with advertisements (Figure 80). While my comparison of this transformation to Times Square in New York is exaggerated and rather sarcastic, other projects like the already mentioned new public spaces on and under the elevated Illia highway and the design of some playgrounds and skateparks have without a doubt been inspired by ‘good practices’ from abroad.

The true ‘cherries on the cake’ of Villa 31 are the new municipal Ministry of Education headquarters and the proposed BID ‘bridge building’. The former has already been completed and it is now the tallest building in Villa 31 (Figure 81). This project did not only include the office building itself, but also the improvement of accessibility and public spaces around it. The construction of the bridge building has not yet begun, but financing was secured and BID has been granted a 100-year long rights to use the property (Rocha, 2019). The design, made by Aravena’s ELEMENTAL studio, incorporates the offices of the Inter-American Development Bank into a structure that will serve as a park and pedestrian bridge over the railway, connecting Villa 31 with the Recoleta district and the Facultad de Derecho subway station (Figure 82).⁸¹ More recently, the city government also announced plans for building a public theatre with 500 seats in Villa 31 named after the local hero, father Carlos Mugica (GCBA, 2022).



Figure 80. One of the corners of the ‘Times Square’ of Villa 31, with a new LED screen with advertisement.

⁸¹ When the enthusiasm around the BID bridge declined, the city government came up with an alternative proposal of constructing a tunnel in the same place connecting Villa 31 with the Facultad de Derecho subway station (Página12, 2022).



Figure 81. The new headquarters of the Ministry of Education of CABA in Villa 31



Figure 82. Rendering of the new BID bridge building connecting Villa 31 with the Recoleta district. This image also slows the proposed new section of the Presidente Illia highway, which would then no longer be above the shantytown. Source: ELEMENTAL.

Let us not forget that Villa 31 is still a shantytown, and it is precisely what makes this intervention package unique; that all these proposals are applied in one of the poorest and most vulnerable areas of the city, using almost indefinite resources. When all the projects are implemented, Villa 31 will become much more than, as the city government likes to say, just a regular neighbourhood. It may indeed be closer to what my contact described as Disneyland.

When I asked about the uniqueness and replicability of this planning approach and Law 6129, my contacts confirmed that nothing like that has been done before not only in Argentina, but in the entirety of Latin America. In the words of a SECISYU employee, Villa 31 “is a laboratory” (Interview 18), while the private sector investors I spoke to were told that “the idea is to replicate this project in all the shantytowns” (Interview 1). A significant part of my respondents were impressed and pleased with the results so far. For example:

Public spaces; they are practically the same as the ones I have around my house [in the upper-middle class part of the city]. Really. They are getting better. (Interview 1).

The neighbourhood is improved by state intervention when before there was a total absence. In other words, the only thing that existed were social or political organisations... All that was done due to a strong state presence. (Interview 18).

Despite delays caused by the pandemic, which I will come back to later, the World Bank officer who supervises implementation of the projects financed by her institution in Argentina, was also content with the progress:

In respect to Barrio 31, in these almost four years of implementation, it has progressed quite quickly. As of today there is already a lot of infrastructure, which has been built or is about to finish construction, such as the water network, sanitation, medium voltage electrical network and also construction of 1,000 houses for the resettlement of families who live under the highway. (Interview 32).

In the meantime, the city government is investing a lot of resources in promoting their achievements in Villa 31. They have started walking tours for both their invited guests and the regular public (upon previous registration) to show the progress that has been made in the shantytown and to create an image of the area as a hub for creativity, entrepreneurship, integration and fast transformation. Every once in a while they also prepare videos, where they interview happy ‘beneficiaries’ and show new public spaces and housing, or present programs related to employment, solid waste, health and gender equality.⁸² The award at the 2020 World Economic Forum, which I mentioned in the introduction, is both legitimising the approach taken by the city government, consultancy firms and architecture studios, and giving a boost of confidence to the people who stay behind these projects.

The land dispute

The real transformation in Villa 31 so far has been mainly visual. Some of the most important parts of the plan, such as the formalisation of tenure and relocation to new housing, have been paralysed by a major land dispute in the government and a strong resistance from a large part of the community, who are dissatisfied with how the plan is implemented.

When PRO won the federal elections and the national and city governments aligned politically in 2015, they reached an agreement that the National Government passes on the land titles in Villa 31 to the city administration, along with some adjacent properties and several smaller lots in other parts of the capital city (measuring altogether 86ha). The

⁸² Many of these videos are published on the YouTube page of SECISYU: <https://www.youtube.com/c/BAIntegración/videos>

deal was that GCBA would then subdivide and sell individual lots within Villa 31 to the occupants (as stated in Law 6129) and privatise remaining properties of the ‘package’ to pay off the debt that the nation and the city governments took together to finance the construction of the Paseo del Bajo highway, part of which runs along the edges of Villa 31. This agreement was not concluded before the federal elections in 2019. When PRO lost the National Government to FdT, the transaction was suspended by the court (Página12, 2021a). The official reason was that there was insufficient public consultation in the process, but my contacts told me that the true arguments were that FdT did not agree with the PRO’s strategy of financing debt through privatising public land, and at the same time they feared that these land transactions were more profitable to GCBA (and potentially to the individuals and companies linked to PRO) than to the National Government.

This situation, of course, makes the titling and formalisation process in Villa 31 very complicated. As Danilo Rossi told me, “in the middle of this dispute are the residents” (Interview 19). The lack of integrated intervention from the state, the continued conflict over land ownership and threats of forced evictions –now in selected parts of the shantytown, to make space for infrastructure and public space projects– frustrates many within the local community, who started perceiving this chaos as a new, secret strategy for expulsion of the residents to prepare the area for expensive real-estate investments, whose value will not only pay off the multi-million dollar debt, but also give benefits to the city government:

It’s a lie about the urbanisation process. Many residents here in the neighbourhood are already realising all this, how they lie to us and want to advance more than anything else with the land issue. They want our land as they always wanted. In fact, *Macrismo* always wanted to get Villa 31 off the map. They didn’t do it during the dictatorship⁸³, they didn’t do it, the bulldozer of Domínguez⁸⁴ didn’t do it in the 1990s, because in the 1990s they came with bulldozers directly to bulldoze the houses and the neighbours fought, and we’re still here. (Interview 33).

In the meantime, the city government issues digital residence registration certificates, which, after the land ownership situation is clarified, are supposed to be the basis for issuing formal property titles and making infrastructure connections. As the land dispute intensified, SECISYU has transformed into the Unit of Special Projects (*Unidad de Proyectos Especiales*)- UPE, which –on behalf of the city government– coordinates the implementation of Law 6129 and other projects in Villa 31, but with reduced staff. According to one of my contacts, it has become “a unit with lower importance” (Interview 41).

Community politics and activist planners

Before I explain the perspective and arguments of the community, let me introduce who the community is, how it is organised socially and politically and who my main informants representing the residents are.

⁸³ Here, my informant suggests that PRO and Mauricio Macri supported the military dictatorship, which is not true, or at least has never been made evident in the public discourse.

⁸⁴ Jorge Domínguez (PJ) was the mayor of Buenos Aires between 1994 and 1996. His attempt of eradicating Villa 31 during the construction of the Illia highway failed due to organised opposition by the local community.

Because we are a mini city within the city itself. (Interview 33).

It is an extremely diverse political, social, ethnic and cultural universe. (Interview 19).

Although the exact numbers for Villa 31 are not known, my contacts mentioned the existence of over 70 social organisations, 65 formal and informal community kitchens, dozens of cooperatives and several media outlets, including Urbana Tevé, which is the only autonomous TV channel run by and for shantytown dwellers in Argentina. Since 2021 there is also a union of tenants of Villa 31-31bis. As one of the community leaders told me, the organisational structure of Villa 31 “has always been very political” (Interview 36).

While close to all organisations have been united around a common goal of resisting evictions, there is a big difference according to political association. Organisations and cooperatives linked to PRO are in favour of the most recent plans and projects that SECISYU/UPE is implementing in Villa 31 and they collaborate in the process. Most of the rest support either the *Peronist*/FdT coalition or less powerful socialist parties, all of which are in opposition in the city government run by PRO. These social organisations mirror the opposition of the FdT and socialist city councillors to the Villa 31 plans, though as I will explain later, the community leaders in Villa 31 gather their own evidence and are not just blindly following the political line. In addition, there is also a clear power division between an organised group of those who consider themselves property owners and the rest, including renters, who might not have a very strong motivation to get actively involved in the process. Nevertheless, organisations which are uninterested or neutral in issues concerning the future of Villa 31 are the minority.

In the November 2021 local government elections, almost half of the eligible population of Villa 31 voted for FdT, while PRO was second with 24% of votes. In reality however, PRO has a stronger position in the shantytown, because of the support of many local cooperative leaders and business owners, who find it essential or convenient to cooperate with the city government: “They cannot decide or say ‘no’, because they are being offered a job” (Interview 33).

When it comes to participation and decision making regarding planning in Villa 31, there are two main parallel processes: one that was established formally by the city government and the other, which emerged from the initiative of the residents. The former has been changing forms and names. Its current format was defined in Law 6129 and is called the Participatory Management Council (*Consejo de Gestión Participativa*) - CGP. It is a series of regular meetings with the representatives from GCBA and other public institutions, NGOs, ombudsman organisations, universities and a number of invited relevant stakeholders. The community is represented by 11 councillors (most of them women) who are formally elected in each sector among the corresponding delegates, one for each block. CGP meetings also allocate time for regular residents to make complaints or ask questions.

The participation system initiated by the community has emerged from dissatisfaction with the CGP process, though it is based on the leadership and communication structures that already existed in the shantytown. It operates under the name *Mesa por la Urbanización Participativa y Rotativa de la Villa 31- 31 bis* (Board for the Participatory and Rotative Urbanisation of Villa 31-31 bis). Its meetings are normally organised in public spaces and are open to everyone.

Assemblies are held, where the neighbours vote and what's decided by the majority is carried out. That's what's done. Neighbourhood assemblies are organised, where what's happening is reported and action measures are taken. Each neighbour proposes, the consideration that's best for all is voted on, and that one is chosen. (Interview 33).

According to my informant, Mesa is apolitical, though the vast majority who participate are either supporters of FdT or the socialist parties. These meetings are organised mainly by elected delegates. My observation is that many times the delegates are in open conflict with each other over personal interests that are not always in line with the interests of the area. However, in general they tend to collaborate in cases of the most critical issues for the community, such as preventing eviction. Referring to the political fight for power by the delegates of Villa 31, one of my contacts said that "they hate but respect each other" (Interview 44).

Traditionally, the communication of important issues between residents was happening through social organisations and community kitchens. More recently, and especially after the Covid-19 outbreak, information exchange moved to digital platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram. It was precisely through one of these WhatsApp groups how I met two community leaders, Mirta and Silvana.

Mirta is originally from the province of Tucuman (Northern Argentina). She moved to Buenos Aires in the 1980s and settled in Villa 31. For many years Mirta served as a delegate, but recently, due to old age, her activity has reduced. Her knowledge and leadership, however, is being passed on to her daughter, Silvana, now in her late 30s, who was born and grew up in Villa 31. They live in a house in the oldest sector called Güemes, not far from the place I earlier referred to as the 'Times Square'. The ground floor of the building they occupy serves as a meeting space for diverse organisations, as well as a place for local assemblies for residents living in Güemes. Mirta and Silvana are *militantes* (activists) in a local political organisation *Peronismo X la Ciudad* (Peronism for the City), which is particularly focused on urban policy in CABA. Besides that, Silvana runs her own civil association, which receives funding from the government.

Silvana was originally not interested in getting involved in issues concerning the planning process in Villa 31, but she changed her mind after her mother asked her to read and interpret the draft of the new socio-urban integration law. As they explained to me, Silvana started to investigate and analyse more documents to get to understand what the entire situation could mean for them and the house they claimed ownership of. To deepen her knowledge and understanding about these issues, she participated in meetings and discussions with the different researchers, students, volunteers and activists who worked in Villa 31, as well as community leaders from other shantytowns. She concluded that the entire planning process may lead to displacement and that Güemes is the most vulnerable part, because it lies close to both the coast and main access roads, and therefore has the highest land value. At the same time she was frustrated by the fact that most of her neighbours were unaware of this. Silvana claims that the best way to defend the neighbourhood is to better understand the urbanisation processes. As she told me, "necessity makes you curious" (Interview 36).

Following this, Silvana left her job to dedicate more time to her activism in the planning process. Later, she got elected as a delegate and took over an important position in the Mesa assemblies. At the same time, she is a regular speaker

at CGP meetings and even represents the shantytown in city council debates. During the Covid-19 emergency, she stood behind the formation of the autonomous Crisis Committee in Villa 31. Silvina and Mirta are also administrators for many of the most popular WhatsApp groups and Facebook pages where they share information and their interpretation of all the different plans and initiatives of the government in Villa 31, which sometimes includes posting recordings of meetings they attend.

Everything I find, I share. I give the information I get, now it's up to you if you want to understand the process, read about it, because obviously one has to read it... And this is something that many councillors and residents don't do (...) They just want public works, they want jobs. (Interview 36).

I found it very interesting to follow the WhatsApp group discussions, where Silvina shares technical planning documents, more theoretical debates or relevant case studies and then explains it in simple words to her neighbours, many of whom did not finish secondary education. This was normally followed by a debate about what that can mean for their future in the shantytown and getting feedback from other group members. For example, there have been lengthy discussions about how the new building codes may impact building expansions, or whether the term 'gentrification' is adequate to describe what is happening in Villa 31:

It's always with organisation, getting together, talking about what's coming, studying what we don't understand... Like the word 'gentrification'. We didn't know what that word gentrification meant. Now we know. (Interview 33).

This is, however, about much more than just curiosity. All this collected information, evidence and analysis is gathered and saved in case of potential court cases, which are not unlikely given the very uncertain situation of tenure ownership. Such documentation can also be used during CGP meetings to reject proposals made by planners at the city government or to support incentives made by the community itself. Silvina's proactivity and ability to articulate complex issues made her also appear almost regularly on local media, where she presents the 'community perspective', or at least the perspective of the part of the community she interacts with.



Figure 83. A typical street in Villa 31.



Figure 84. Housing in Villa 31.

While the work done by Mirta and Silvana is clearly a step forward in further democratisation of planning, it is important to keep in mind that many regular residents depend on people like them and may therefore be affected by their interpretation of the complex technical documents and processes as well as their political viewpoint. Nevertheless, I was very impressed by the planning-related knowledge and vocabulary acquired by Silvana. This, in combination with her expertise on the local context, made her a very valuable partner in the planning process. Just to give an example, while she does not have a formal education in architecture or similar, she was able to distinguish structures that met the applicable land use and building codes and those that did not, or estimate their approximate market values, which is something that even some experienced architects or planners may not be able to do without lengthy verification. Interestingly, in one of our conversations, Silvana compared herself to some of the younger employees working for SECISYU/UPE, who in her opinion knew very little about the planning process in Villa 31:

In fact, yes, many kids resigned... Because, well, what we told the kids, because they gave us their version that 'No, the urbanisation is going to be nice, you'll see...'
'Are you sure? Did you inform yourself? Did you read the law? Did you notice what the law says?'
They didn't know anything, they are kids, they are young, let's say they do what they are told, of course they have a nice salary... Right? That they come to work for the salary is obvious, but then they realised that it was not what they really talked about, because the reality was different... (Interview 33).

Not a long time ago, different media published a note about César, the supposedly first architect with a university degree from Villa 31 (Hernandez Otaño, 2021). When I asked Silvana about it, she said that this is a lie and the media just wanted to make a nice story of a local hero who finished a higher degree against all odds. According to her, there are many architects, planners and engineers in Villa 31 with degrees, though some of them studied or practised in their countries of origin and do not have their credentials recognized in Argentina. She also assured me that her case –of a local resident who has acquired this knowledge through self-learning– is not an exception. My observation of the discussions at the community meetings I attended can confirm that. Other informants agreed that there is a lot of unique and diverse practical experience in Villa 31, which professional architects can learn a lot from. This, in addition to the accessibility, relative safety and abundance of interesting projects in this 'urban laboratory', is why many architecture schools, including FADU, organise student projects and site visits in Villa 31.

Silvana aspires to become the councillor representing the Güemes sector and expressed her interest to work in issues related to planning and community development. At the same time, she rejected the offer to be incorporated into the UPE team, because she was unwilling to serve in an administration run by the PRO coalition. For now, like most of the residents in Villa 31, Silvana is in opposition to PRO and their vision of upgrading and formalisation of her neighbourhood.

Community rejects the plans

The opposition of a large part of the community of Villa 31 to the plans and laws proposed by the city government concerns many different aspects, and results from a thorough analysis of the relevant documentation and consultation with experts on the topic. I will discuss some of the main complaints related to insufficient participation, increased

tenure vulnerability, uncertainty regarding costs of formalisation, inadequate offer of new housing, and failed investments in public spaces and infrastructure.

Contrary to what I was told by Danilo Rossi from SECISYU/UPE, and in contrast to the community-driven planning and law-making process in Villa la Carbonilla I described in chapter 5, residents of Villa 31 claim that there was insufficient public participation before and after Law 6129 was approved. I was also told by the community leaders that the inhabitants of Villa 31 were not consulted regarding the important aspects of the layout and design of new housing in the Cointainera and YPF sectors. I got to know that participatory workshops were organised mainly to decide some less critical issues, such as the formal names of new streets or the colours of building facades, but there was no consultation about the street opening itself or the types of construction materials used in new buildings. Residents claim that there are few opportunities to make formal complaints and important meetings were announced with too little time beforehand. Some of my informants pointed out that the city government purposely did not intend to engage much with the community in order to speed up the implementation process, but they had to open up for at least limited input from the community to meet the funding requirements set by the BID and WB. Silvana called this situation a “parody of participation” (Interview 36).

Indeed, the CGP meetings I attended did not at all resemble a truly participatory process. These were chaotic gatherings, where both sides came with very different expectations. On one side, the residents wanted dialogue and more decision making power, while on the other, the city representatives acted as if they were there just to inform about and validate their plans and visions. In fact, the city government has a very strong position in these assemblies, as according to the Article 10 of Law 6129, all the decisions have to be made unanimously, and in case where unanimity cannot be reached, the decision is made by the “enforcement authority”, which is SECISYU/UPE (GCBA, 2018). This means that if there is at least one resident, councillor or expert present at the meeting who does not agree with something, the city government can overrule the council and decide for the entire settlement. Many of the complaints that the residents speak about in these meetings are also not addressed:

In reality, what the neighbours say is heard, but they [the government] do not solve anything. What the neighbours propose is not taken into consideration, that is, the CGP are not binding for the urbanisation process. (Interview 33).

According to some of my contacts, this situation is a result of a strong political pressure on SECISYU/UPE to speed up implementation of the plans. At the same time, such an attitude can be disillusioning and disappointing for the residents, who then lose their faith in a democratic system and end up feeling more negative towards the city government.

Silvana and one of the planners who has worked in Villa 31 and interacted with her agreed that the participation model in the shantytown is broken and that it has to be reformed. First, they propose that decisions regarding the socio-urban integration process should be made by a simple majority and not unanimously. Second, they agree that Villa 31 is too big to have just one CGP and that in addition there should be official participatory meetings in each of the 11 sectors, where more localised issues and proposals could be discussed. At the same time, Silvana has also raised her

concern that inhabitants of Villa 31 are not consulted regarding the future of the lands and infrastructure around the shantytown, which is currently undergoing major redevelopment.

The last point is of high importance, because Silvana, Mirta and many others within the community I talked to highlight the danger that the valorisation of properties around Villa 31 in combination with formalisation of properties inside the shantytown could eventually lead to increased unaffordability and expulsion of the residents. It is precisely this process, which they call gentrification, that Silvana and Mirta identified as the biggest current threat and uncertainty in Villa 31. As Silvana speculated, the GCBA

realised that by starting this process and setting the price on the land, it can be sold. And that's what's going to generate gentrification for us, because all the added value that it is going to generate, that is, the increase in taxes and land [value], for all these works that we have around our neighbourhood, are going to generate that tomorrow, the prices they charge us will be as if they charge Puerto Madero, or as if they charge Recoleta⁸⁵. Because we are in one of the most expensive lands in the city. (Interview 33).

The community representatives are not convinced that Law 6129 gives them sufficient protection from such market expulsion and point out that the law states that in the case of failing to pay three consecutive mortgage fees, the government enables the city government to expropriate their houses. Others who struggle with repayment of their



Figure 85. A publicity by the GCBA “By transforming Barrio 31, we transform the City” was changed by an unknown person to “By *selling* Barrio 31, we transform the City”. Photo: Silvana Olivera.

⁸⁵ Puerto Madero and Recoleta are districts with the highest real estate values in Buenos Aires, both within a walking distance from Villa 31.



Figure 86. These spaces between housing in the YPF sector are designated for commercial use and will be sold to private investors.

mortgages, new taxes or bills may also be forced to sell their indebted properties just to free themselves from unbearable expenses. Silvana and others mentioned that residents are interested in buying their properties, but there are too many uncertainties that make the formalisation, as envisioned by Law 6129, very difficult to sustain in long term perspective: the predominantly informal employment and lack of stable income, insufficient information regarding the actual land value in Villa 31, and unclear terms and conditions that define whether or not the price estimate will be based on the surface covered by the ground floor only or all the floors, which, as I already mentioned, is constantly changing and is difficult to measure. On top of that there is the ongoing dispute over land ownership between the national and city governments, which puts the entire formalisation process on hold.

My informants have also mentioned that the process of gentrification in Villa 31 is reinforced by the formalisation of the existing business activities within the shantytown and facilitation of entry of external businesses. For example, in between the new housing units, GCBA reserved spaces for commercial use that will be sold in a public auction, but their expected prices are beyond the reach of any potential investor from Villa 31 (Figure 86). New external actors will get the advantage of tax breaks, which will also increase competition with local minor, and to a large extent, informal businesses and may force some of them to reduce employment or shut down.⁸⁶ In fact, those who were excluded from the newly formalised market near the ‘Times Square’ have established a new parallel informal market a hundred metres away. Residents of Villa 31 have also organised protests against new laws that facilitate the entry

⁸⁶ According to Baldiviezo and Koutsovitis (2022b): “The gentrification of the inhabitants will be complemented by the gentrification of the commercial and productive spaces. The law proposal creates conditions for the existing commercial and productive activities to disappear little by little, destroying the economic reproduction of the population. There are no regulations that limit the creation of monopolies or commercial concentration in the hands of a few players or the installation of large commercial chains.”

of external corporations in the shantytown, arguing that they would cause more harm than good for the local economy (Lamberti, 2022).⁸⁷

All this, according to Silvana, is part of a conscious strategy of the city government to force a market-driven integration of the neighbourhood that lacks understanding of the reality of its residents and the consequences of these actions. This apparent insensitivity to the situation of the inhabitants of Villa 31 is materialised in different ways: a fast and incomplete survey, lack of solutions for the tenants, cases of forced evictions, inadequate offers of new housing and lack of progress in infrastructure upgrading.

The biggest complaints regarding the enumeration done in 2016-17 (on which the entire process of formalisation is based) is that it has left out many residents who were not present at the time of the census and that it did not consider the rapidly changing demographics of the shantytown, particularly when it comes to the rotation of tenants and changes in family composition. While the city government opened up for posterior updates of the registry upon individual requests, the problem persists, because local surveys always lead to increased tensions between landlords and tenants, which has even resulted in unannounced evictions right before the census. Property owners believe that if they prevent tenants living in their buildings from getting surveyed, or if they bring their own extended family members on the day of the enumeration, their registered living space will be higher and therefore they will be eligible for better housing solutions or compensation. This, according to Silvana, is a direct consequence of the fact that the socio-urban integration process “does not anticipate the issue of tenants” (Interview 33) and the city government does not specify in more detail what rights and obligations they have. In some cases, the fault was on the surveyors' side, as they only visited ground floor units, assuming that the upper floors are occupied by the same household.

Not just the tenants are threatened with forced evictions. Many property owners who lived under the Illia highway and other areas designated for demolition, and were unwilling to agree to the conditions proposed by the SECISYU/UPE, have been pressured to abandon their buildings. This did not always happen through a direct use of force, but also by making them uninhabitable, for example by cutting access to water and electricity or intentionally demolishing a neighbouring unit in such a way that it caused structural damages to the surrounding buildings.⁸⁸ My contacts told me that the city government has even been hiring professional psychologists to convince the resisting families to sign agreements and move to new housing. SECISYU/UPE was supposedly trying to make individual deals with some of the most ‘problematic’ residents to negotiate their voluntary relocation. As a result, some of the property owners were able to negotiate larger housing units while some tenants were offered entry to a rental subsidy program.

One of the residents who resisted eviction was a former delegate⁸⁹ and active community leader Maria Elena, originally from Peru, who has invested for over 20 years in what is now a four-storey building, the top of which touches the

⁸⁷ After criticisms of CEDEL's strategy of forcing formalisation of commercial activities and facilitating entry of external businesses, the institution launched a new financing program for social economy projects, which among other things facilitates online outreach (GCBA, 2023).

⁸⁸ One of such dramatic cases of a demolition that happened ‘by mistake’ left 30 families without any housing alternative they would accept (Herrera, 2023).

⁸⁹ When the public space under the highway project was started, the area designated for demolition was no longer considered a ‘sector’ within Villa 31, and therefore the local delegates lost their legitimacy for GCBA.



Figure 87. The remaining houses under the Illia highway whose owners resisted relocation. The inscription on the walls means “Do not touch”.



Figure 88. The outside of Maria Elena’s house with rental units upstairs.

highway (Figure 88). The house includes six independent dwellings that she rents out. She rejected the argument that living under the highway is insecure, as she did not recall any accidents. Maria Elena complained that relocation not only means losing income from her renters, but that the alternative housing option offered by the city is much smaller and of lower quality than the place where she was living when I visited her (Figure 89). At the same time, she was in conflict with the tenants living in her building, who were promised relocation to new housing when the building was



Figure 89. Inside Maria Elena's house.

demolished. The tenants were supposedly angry at Maria Elena for not willing to give up the building and were therefore refusing to pay rent. I find this case particularly difficult to resolve, because she has already been one of the more privileged and powerful persons in Villa 31 and was offered to move to new housing, while many other families were struggling to secure even a basic housing alternative. Some projects, like the street opening, have been put on hold, because there is simply not enough new housing for everyone living in areas designated for demolition - an apparent consequence of a hasty and incomplete survey and incorrect estimations.

The concern about the bad quality and fast deterioration of the new houses in Containera and YPF sectors is something I heard and read from many sources. The corrugated metal, which covers the facades of these buildings is often compared to the very precarious old tenements in La Boca district located on the other side of the city centre. There, this material has also been used, not necessarily because of a design choice, but due to lack of access to better construction materials.⁹⁰

My informants comment that buildings in Containera and YPF are both structurally weak and visually unpleasant (Figures 90 and 91). I read an interesting discussion in the WhatsApp group for the Villa 31 community, where some experienced construction workers who lived in the neighbourhood expressed regret that the new housing in other shantytowns, such as Playon de Chacarita or Rodrigo Bueno (Figure 30) were built of brick and looked much better than the “prisons” or “containers” in Villa 31. Silvana went much further and suggested that these buildings were

⁹⁰ La Boca is a historic district in the South of the Buenos Aires city centre. While the contexts are very different, many people make comparisons between Villa 31 and La Boca, where the transformation from a predominantly working-class area and reception point for poor immigrants into a hub for creativity, arts, tourism and upper-middle class housing is already in an advanced stage. In both cases, gentrification manifests itself by painting building facades and raising rent. What this means for La Boca is highly contested. Some critics point to the unaffordability of housing and displacement of long-term residents, while others highlight the improved security and new business opportunities.

purposely made “disposable”, which is an “example that they [the city government] wanted to get rid of them” (Interview 36). The construction workers have also complained that the new buildings had bad layouts, which made it impossible to make major changes or expand them according to changing needs, like the structures they built themselves. Moreover, many of the residents have reported problems with water leakage, cracks on the floor, issues with electricity, bad sound insulation and a sense of insecurity. These issues have also been documented in a survey



Figure 90. New housing in the YPF sector.

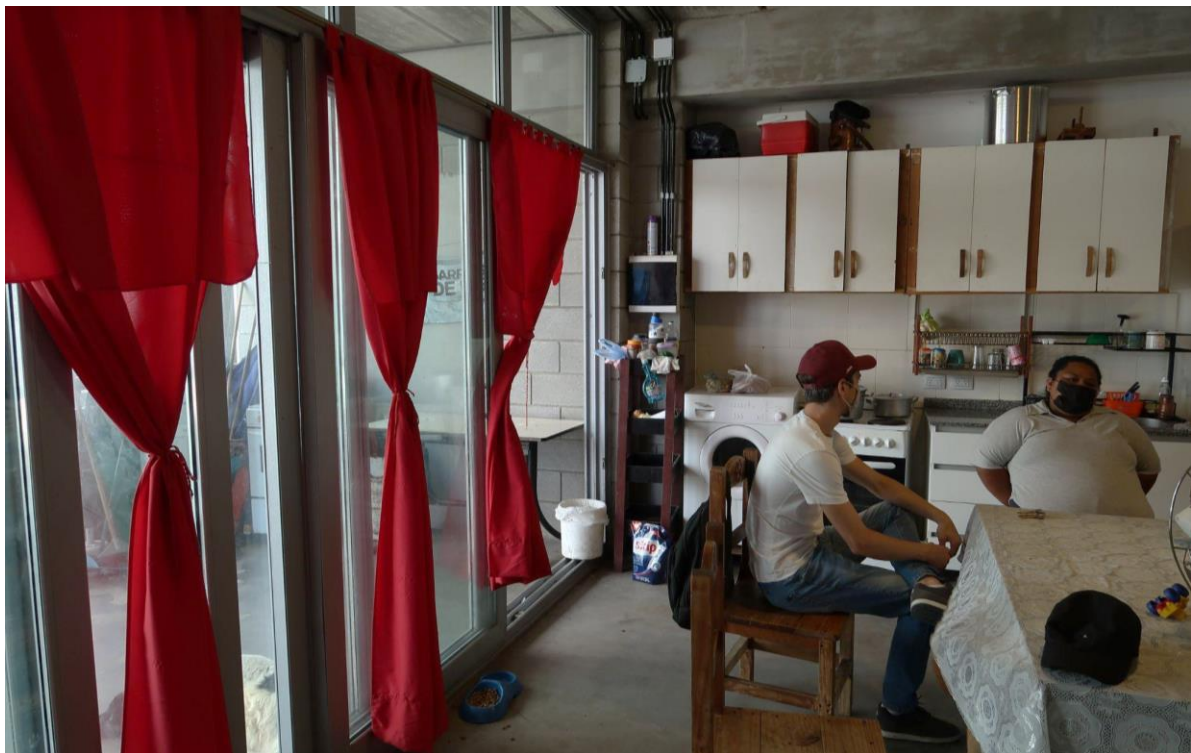


Figure 91. Inside a new house in the YPF sector.

made by the Observatory of the Right to the City in collaboration with other NGOs and community organisations (Stolkiner et al., 2021). The worst part is that, according to the report and my own sources, most of these issues are left without response from the GCBA. In addition, some of the solar panels and water heaters stopped working and have not been repaired for a long time because of lack of qualified maintenance service providers or expensive spare parts that need to be shipped from abroad.

While I have seen similar processes in older social housing estates, I was surprised to find out how quickly the tenure situation in Containera and YPF buildings was informalising. Among the irregularities are: illegal occupation in some housing units before they were assigned to the actual beneficiaries⁹¹, informal selling transactions right after assignment, or abandonment and return to the old buildings before they were demolished. This means that SECISYU/UPE is losing control over the relocation process before it has concluded.

When it comes to other parts of Villa 31, the community representatives claim that they would like to have infrastructure in place before they get their property documents and mortgage agreements. This is because on the one hand, access to water, sewage, electricity, gas and internet is more urgent than formal ownership (which should not be confused with a guarantee of tenure security), and on the other, because they want to pay for what is a dignified place to live in rather than a place that lacks these basic services. However, they complain that upgrading inside Villa 31 happens too slow:

Progress, progress? I did not see much progress. And I'm honest with you about what I see. I was born here, I have lived in this neighbourhood for 35 years, and when this government [PRO] came here, the neighbourhood was the same as it is today. (Interview 33).

Whenever there are infrastructure upgrading works, the new networks are normally disconnected from the rest and likely replaced or redone again later. Silvana showed me how the electric connections continue to be a mess (Figure 92), and the city government has given up with their proposal of laying new cables underground. When I asked my contacts about water access, one of the residents told me that it is ironic that during the warm and dry summer months there are water shortages in the entire shantytown, while Plaza San Martín park, located only 500 metres away, has an extensive irrigation system that keeps it green all year round. Problems with water pressure also affect the volunteer fire brigade based in Villa 31 who attend local fire incidents. Maintenance by service providers is inadequate, and a lot of the work has to be done from the initiative of the residents.

Silvana told me that the new improvement projects have been concentrated mainly in the most visible places and around public spaces:

Upgrading is being done only on the edges of the neighbourhood, on the avenues... When you go inside, nothing is done. There are no infrastructure projects; the sewers that were made at the time are all clogged because they were poorly done, they put in smaller pipes than normal. (Interview 36).

⁹¹ One such case of illegal occupation in new housing in the YPF sector was documented by Gregorutti (2022). This situation is complicated, because these occupants cannot be easily evicted due to regulations that prohibit forced expulsions in Villa 31. It is also common that the occupants defend their right to stay in occupied housing by referring directly to the right to dignified housing in the Argentinian Constitution.



Figure 92. Informal and semi-formal electric connections in Villa 31.



Figure 93. Informal expansions and modifications continued after the facades were renovated and painted.

Journalists at UrbanaTV claimed that the new infrastructure work benefits the businesses and investments outside of Villa 31, more than residents of the shantytown. A similar situation applies to housing and façade improvement:

They painted the houses... You know that painting a house and changing the door or adding a new staircase does not mean that the quality of life improves. The façade is something that was done a lot here, along the main avenues. The paint renews its face on the outside, but inside the house continues to have the same problems... (Interview 33).

Another problem is that when the occupiers agreed to have the façades renovated, they signed an agreement that states they will no longer make structural modifications and expand their houses without permission. This has caused a lot of conflicts (Figure 93). Some residents are also concerned that renovations, though sponsored by external funds, will lead to increased property value, and therefore higher mortgages to pay.

The renovation of selected public spaces, sport infrastructure and playgrounds is another intervention done in recent years that has a lot of visibility. While new indoor and outdoor community meeting places were well received, many residents questioned their modern design and choice of materials of some public spaces (Figure 94). Silvana commented that the new playgrounds are “neither didactic nor inclusive” and that the city government uses photos of these newly renovated plazas as if they have improved “all the streets of the entire neighbourhood” (Interview 33).

It is clear that many residents do not feel a sense of ownership of the new public spaces. Both the newly opened sections of the park under the Illia highway and the bike lane have been taken over informally by street vendors, cartoneros or used for car and motorcycle parking. There are signs of poor maintenance and lack of enforcement of the rules that apply there. The disagreement about the definition of the distance from the highway that was considered safe to live in has resulted in attempts to build back housing in areas where the original buildings were demolished (Figure 95).



Figure 94. New playground near the formalised market in Villa 31.



Figure 95. Due to confusion regarding how far from the highway it is considered safe to live, in some areas new buildings were erected in place of the demolished ones. This particular construction project has even received subsidies from GCBA.

When I asked about the landmark projects proposed or implemented in Villa 31, my informants' responses were generally negative, but they did not consider it a top priority to actively oppose them. They say that what they really need is more housing. Interestingly, when Silvana was originally told that Alejandro Aravena's ELEMENTAL studio was working in the shantytown, she was hopeful that they would replicate their award-winning incremental affordable housing concept, which she had heard of before. It is then no surprise that she was disappointed to see that what they were really working on was a bridge building with offices for an international institution. She recognized that

improving pedestrian connection was important, but this particular project was more about promotion for the city than removing the barriers between Villa 31 and adjacent areas.

To me it seems like there is a misunderstanding about what integration is truly about. While the GCBA wants to transform Villa 31 into a high-end neighbourhood like others in the city centre through formalisation and diversification of activities, the community wants to have access to better housing conditions and employment opportunities both inside and outside of the area, so that it will no longer be considered a “ghetto” (Interview 41). A good example of this is the story of a new proposed school in Villa 31. As of 2022, most of the children were attending schools located outside of the boundaries of the shantytown, but the city government had made plans to build a new school on an empty lot near the Containera sector. I remember the view from the top floor of one of the new buildings in Containera (Figure 96). Down in front was the empty space reserved for the school. “We don’t want the school here,” commented one of the residents who accompanied me. She added: “We want our kids to go out of the neighbourhood, to see how life is outside of the shantytown” and pointed to the towers of the affluent Retiro neighbourhood visible in the distance.

The planners’ dilemma

The situation in Villa 31 is not a typical ‘planners versus community’ conflict. It is a lot more contested. In my fieldwork, I found both community members who were in favour of the plans proposed by the city government, and public servants who opposed different aspects of the plan and agreed with many of the arguments of the community leaders I presented in the previous section. In this part, I will focus on the second group.



Figure 96. The vacant space in front is designated for a new school. In the distance is the affluent Retiro district.

Several of those I spoke with belong to the younger generation of architects and planners who have an idealistic attitude and strong theoretical knowledge. This group is highly motivated to initiate a paradigm shift, but not empowered to do so. They agree with the new strategy of in-situ improvement instead of eviction, but they wish this idea could be done with a more well-defined long-term planning vision. Their biggest complaint is that the main strategic decisions about Villa 31 are motivated by political and economic interests, and not necessarily to help the existing community. Some of these planners still work for the city government, while others have resigned or were laid off. At the core of their conflict with the decision makers are differences regarding time perspectives and community involvement in the planning and implementation processes.

My contacts who worked at SECISYU/UPE confirmed that the reason why certain infrastructure and public space projects were prioritised is because they were under constant time pressure to deliver tangible results “tomorrow” or at least within “three or four years”, whereas such a comprehensive transformation and formalisation should, according to them take “20 years or more” (Interview 41). That leaves no time for inter-sectoral coordination, meaningful participation and revision of important aspects before implementation:

We lacked a number of definitions, for example, what people were going to pay, what they were not going to pay... And on the other hand, we already had a number of projects tendered. (Interview 19).

Another reason why public space improvement was done before any housing and infrastructure upgrades was to “prevent their occupation” (Interview 5). By saying this, the planners meant that one of the main purposes of their work is to make sure that informal development does not grow outside of its current boundaries.

Responses of my contacts at SECISYU/UPE regarding participation in Villa 31 varied from opinions that it was completely absent, that it was purely informative and not consultative, and that they were trying their best, but it was still far from perfect:

In 31, there was not much participation, there is no appropriation of the project. (...) So, clearly people are not very satisfied with everything that was being done... And that is because no, they were not listened to, or they have not participated in the projects... (Interview 24).

There is a logic of strong citizen participation and informed consent. That is where I put more emphasis: informed consent, that is to say that they understand what we are doing and it is a process that has rights, that guarantees rights and that assigns obligations. (Interview 18).

Participation for us (and at least in our experience after having worked for several years on this) is always a concept in dispute. It is in constant redefinition and in dispute. (...) For us it is not a finished idea ‘we are participatory or we are not’, but it was a process in construction. (...) Participation is a condition of possibility, but never a finished process, I mean, never enough. (Interview 19).

As great as the projects were... Maybe they didn't end up being used, or useful, because the neighbours needed something else... So, the idea should have been to try participation before doing [the project]... (Interview 29).

All agreed that it would have made a positive difference to open up more spaces for dialogue with the community, who “built their own houses” and “have earned their right to be at the table” (Interview 41). It is also likely that if participation had been taken seriously, the general understanding of the idea of integration (as defined by the city government) would be much different, which would therefore lead to changing the course of the intervention approach applied in Villa 31.

Planners I spoke to also proposed tighter cooperation with community leaders, who have influence on the local population, rich contextual information and good understanding of the planning process. One of the former employees at SECISYU who knows Silvana told me that

She is above the neighbourhood average; she is very alert, very attentive, knowledgeable, very applied, she feels things, she is curious. (Interview 41).

At the same time, he told me that many at GCBA still “believe that there is no knowledge within these neighbourhoods that could be relevant” (Interview 41) and are convinced that shantytown dwellers need to be educated to become like regular residents of the city. Planners working in Villa 31 told me that they have been proposing and testing different improved and decentralised participation models, but none of them have been endorsed by the leadership and upscaled, despite having enough resources for that: “You have the capacity... You can set up a one-to-one relationship with each neighbour. Why wouldn't you do it?” (Interview 24). As these proposals were rejected, some of the planners decided to leave the Secretary and today work elsewhere.

Such a participation model should, according to one of my informants, neither be about saying ‘we are going to tell you what we want to do’, nor about asking ‘what do you want?’. Instead, it should be about debating what is in the public interest, what conflicts and problems exist, how living conditions will change in the future, and what resources there are. Then, based on all that, make visions, search for alternatives and discuss implementation. He said that it is crucial to do this together as a group, so that the community can take ownership of the plan and drive their own transformation.

Answers to my question regarding whether Villa 31 is undergoing a process of gentrification vary between ‘yes’, ‘not in the near future’ and ‘hard to say’. Those who responded with ‘yes’ use the same arguments as Silvana and her neighbours about formalisation and binding payment agreements in the context of informality and poverty, leading to increasing unaffordability and market-driven expulsion.

Private property is clearly more affected by the logic of the market and more vulnerable to these dynamics... (Interview 18).

The same position was taken by the Observatory of the Right to the City (Ferrari, 2021) and other NGOs. According to Rosario Fassina from the Civil Association for Equality and Justice (ACIJ), the market will

end up doing what the state wanted to do, which is compulsively relocating people, because they can't afford redevelopment prices. There are no mechanisms to curb price increases in places that are now undergoing urban upgrades. (Interview 7).

According to her, the protection measures are not strong enough to prevent gentrification, but they may however postpone the process for some years, until the formalisation process is finished and the land values increase enough to justify investments in properties in the shantytown. She argues that if land values rise faster than inhabitants' wealth and purchasing power, there is no way that this process will be stopped in the long term. Another informant told me that Law 6129 has "articles that are openly expulsive" and that "the idea is to shrink Villa 31 to gain more land and conquer it from the outside." (Interview 44). The rest, according to him, would be exploited for promotion and tourism.

What some of my respondents find uncertain is what is going to happen after expulsion, for example whether Villa 31 will be bought off by the wealthier residents already living there or by middle-class families from outside, or perhaps taken over by corporations who will convert it into commercial, office or new residential spaces for the affluent. All of this has already been happening in La Boca, where gentrification is much more advanced.

At the same time, one of the managers at SECISYU/UPE assured me that the government does not intend to expropriate housing from residents who fail to pay mortgage fees:

Regardless of the economic condition of that family which has to comply with a payment, economic incapacity is not prohibitive of the right, that is to say that they can continue using and accessing housing, even though they cannot be paying... There is no eviction, no one is thrown out... (Interview 19).

This, by the way, is an example of how the state generates informality through choosing not to enforce the new laws, or doing it selectively. One of his former colleagues agreed that the law has enough mechanisms that make sure that no one is forced out of the shantytown, but it is precisely this part of the law he thinks is wrong. According to him, "the best way to overcome the deficit conditions of 31 is to leave 31, and the law does not allow it" (Interview 41). He does not agree with Silvana's theory that the GCBA is willing to consciously eradicate Villa 31 through market-driven expulsion:

If they wanted to do that, they did it wrong (...) If that had been the objective, they also did not make the laws to enable it. If expulsion happens, it would be because of not doing anything, not enforcing the law and leaving it all to the market. (Interview 41).

My informant claimed that the biggest problem is that formalisation of property tenure is delayed due to the conflict between the federal and city governments, and will therefore eventually come alongside or after infrastructure regularisation and improvement. This statement challenges the position of many community leaders. His argument is that improving infrastructure first generates a situation where service providers are unwilling to make connections to houses which are still in the state of informality. He proposed that ideally it should be the opposite: first the residents get their formal title deeds and mortgages, and then they get formal infrastructure connections and start paying bills. In addition, my contact proposed to immediately regularise rental agreements and put a limit on how many units each household can rent out to prevent legitimisation of 'real estate barons' who take advantage of the high demand for rental housing. These ideas were however not followed up. He also had major disagreements about the city government's prioritisation of 'beautification' and punctual infrastructure works, and eventually resigned from his position.

At the same time, the planners I spoke with claim that many residents, especially those who have lived under the highway and do not want to move, do not tell the truth or exaggerate their situation in order to negotiate better housing arrangements with similar or bigger space for living or commercial activities. While the recognition of individual needs is important, all parties need to remain flexible and conscious of the complexity of the relocation process, which makes it impossible to make all wishes come true. They told me that the families need to accept that their living situation is going to change and therefore they cannot expect to receive exactly the same form of housing, but instead they need to adapt to the new conditions in a new place and with a formal tenure. This means that the principle that the new housing has to have “equal or superior characteristics” than the original in Law 6129 (GCBA, 2018) is contested and open for different interpretations.

An alternative that most of my informants support is that instead of issuing individual property titles, the entire shantytown should be owned by the residents as a collective and pay it off as a large group. As one of my contacts said, “the idea that everyone would own their own home is stupid, it’s not possible” (Interview 41). This proposal, however, has also not been pursued. Firstly, there is very little experience of collective tenure arrangements in Argentina.⁹² Second, the residents themselves have been sceptical of collective ownership due to the fact that it would not be possible to capitalise on the property and that they would be another ‘exception’ from the rest of the city. This is actually one of the few cases, where the community did impact the decision of the GCBA:

We would have chosen other methods or tools and not the private one... But well, we went out in the neighbourhood, in the assemblies to talk about collective property, possessory rights... They kicked us out, they threw us out... (Interview 19).

While some of my interviewees blamed the failure of the planning process in Villa 31 to the broader political context or to community resistance, there were others who were self-critical. One of the major problems is that the employees at SECISYU/UPE, most of which are educated architects, lawyers and social workers, do not have sufficient experience with land titling and formalisation:

Since I've been working on this, the truth is that I've been in doubt mostly due to the fact that I don't have much experience in property regularisation either, which in reality no one has much experience in relation to implementation or public policy planning. (...) There are many intentions to share experiences because this is a job that depends more on experience than on theory. (Interview 18).

Others criticise their own lack of understanding of the community and the local context:

Here in reality, in these types of projects, there is no language... There is an institutional language, but there is no complete knowledge of how to do things. Do you understand what I say? Nobody knows how to do things... (Interview 19).

⁹² One notable exception is a cooperative housing model by a marxist Movement of Occupants and Tenants (*Movimiento de Ocupantes e Inquilinos*)– MOI, which built four collectively owned multi-family buildings for altogether 184 families (Pedro et al., 2020).

I heard opinions that it was not only a political decision, but also the will of some of the more powerful architects working at SECISYU/UPE and the different consulting companies to put more attention to public spaces and landmark building projects, that way they could use more of their creativity and do what they truly like to do. Since the budget is almost unlimited, it is, according to them, an easy way to get their name out without messing up with the very complex processes of infrastructure upgrading and formalisation. In this context, one of the planners criticised that it was a mistake to blindly apply Jan Gehl's principle that the design of public spaces would suddenly change the attitude and behaviour of the users. Residents of Villa 31 have, according to him, much more profound problems that need to be addressed than people in Copenhagen, or other cities where Gehl has worked before. This, in combination with the facade painting initiative is, as he called it, a "make up of improvements" and "cosmetic works" (Interview 41). Such an attitude means that there is too much focus on the product of planning rather than process.

The new landmark building projects have also not been well received by some of the planners and architects I talked with. One of them criticised the design of the proposed BID bridge building saying that, just as shown on the render (Figure 82), it will serve tourists or visitors as a viewpoint with a panoramic view over the entire Villa 31, which may violate privacy of certain residents. Another person mentioned that the true reason behind the decision to redirect the Illia highway was to cover the view of Villa 31 from those living on the rich Recoleta side.

One task where the contribution of architects is undervalued is housing improvement. Planners who have done regular visits in the shantytown claim that it is impossible to control the informal growth and enforce the proposed building codes. A potential solution to this would be to help the residents to access affordable construction materials, under the condition that they accept the supervision of professional architects and engineers, in order to make sure that new construction, repairs or extensions are made according to structural and safety standards. This solution would ensure good accessibility as well as adequate air and light conditions. So far, this has only been done at a limited scale in selected parts of the settlement.

To sum up, those who no longer work at SECISYU/UPE were more critical about the entire planning process. Those who at the time of the interview still worked for the city government also shared their concerns, but they were somehow more diplomatic in their answers. One of the issues that the first group was emphasising was how such a big budget is getting wasted on projects that do little to improve the quality of life of the residents. According to them, too much money is being used on hiring external consultants and for promotion, both of which result in little tangible interventions in the shantytown.⁹³

It may happen that by the time the land issue is resolved and the formalisation process finally kicks off, there will be no more funds in the budget for the remaining important works, such as infrastructure connections. The Covid-19 pandemic complicated this situation further.

⁹³ Journalist Walter Pertot (2021) analysed the contracts between GCBA and private actors to perform specific tasks in Villa 31 and reached the same conclusion: that the city government is overpaying for consultation and promotion campaigns, while little has been achieved when it comes to infrastructure.

Covid-19 and the new informalities

Similarly to other shantytowns and informal settlements, the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic in Villa 31 caused a serious threat to human health, institutional chaos and disruption of the planning process. Recognizing the critical overcrowding situation, the city government did not enforce a strict stay-at-home measure, but the restriction of economic activities caused a reduction of roughly 60% of circulation and loss of income for the majority of the residents. Although more than half of the inhabitants are expected to have been infected, the death rate was relatively small, likely because of the relatively low average age (Greco & Vitale, 2021). To support emergency response actions, the National Government set up a temporary health station and a test centre in an empty building outside of Villa 31. At the same time, the authorities permanently closed the only homeless shelter near the shantytown due to an apparent major Covid-19 outbreak, and ignored the proposal of the residents to build a permanent hospital in the area.

Besides economic, housing, and health issues, the other major problems during the pandemic were inadequate access to the internet during the remote teaching period and a major food crisis. It took several months before this was attended to by the city government and the situation got under control. Just like in other shantytowns, planners working in Villa 31 were reassigned to assist in coordinating Covid-19 response action and there was a lot of rotation in the staff. One of the architects who was hired by UPE towards the end of the pandemic told me that during the job interview, it was explained that in case of emergencies, he might be assigned tasks that have nothing to do with planning or design.

In reality, the government intervention only supplemented community mobilisation and emergency response. Community leaders, cooperative members and other local actors coordinated action to combat the virus and organise living in this new reality. This included, for example setting up additional health stations and community kitchens, coordinating delivery of food and health supplies, rearranging public spaces, fixing infrastructure and organising disinfection efforts (Figure 97). These activities exposed them to the risk of contagion and some of the notable leaders have paid with their lives:

Such as how Ramona [Medina] died in Villa 31... There were many women who gave their lives in the different neighbourhoods to be at the forefront of community containment... But on the other hand they also saved many lives, because thanks to the action of these organisations that also participated in the crisis centres... It was possible to ensure that there were not as many infections in these neighbourhoods. (Interview 26).

According to one of the former SECISYU employees, the Covid-19 pandemic proved that in situations of crisis, shantytown residents respond better than anyone else in the city, including the planners themselves:

I was telling you, now we have a lot of perception of how people adapted to the crisis in the Villa and I think they are used to these crises, much more than us... In other words, they are much more resilient and were able to quickly adapt to this emergency, which for them is basically an economic crisis. And the economic crises in Argentina, we have hundreds... (Interview 24).



Figure 97. Local cooperatives in Villa 31 disinfect the neighbourhood during the Covid-19 pandemic. Photo: Ignacio Baez

The pandemic was also the reason why, according to some of my contacts from SECISYU/UPE, participatory processes in Villa 31 have failed. Large in-person meetings were not possible, while door-to-door visits concerned mainly Covid-19 related issues. The digitalization strengthened communication between the residents, but the attempts to establish virtual channels for collaboration between the city government and the community had mixed results, mainly because most city employees were too busy coordinating emergency response. The online CGP meetings were much less frequent than before the pandemic and its digital format excluded many residents from participation. The lack of time on the part of government officials and an extremely uncertain situation made any kind of debate about the future of Villa 31 impossible.

Once again, times of high uncertainty resulted in more uncontrolled and informal activity. Despite the official suspension of evictions during the pandemic, many tenants who lost their income and were unable to pay were thrown out of their rooms and apartments, causing additional movement of people within the neighbourhood, who were looking for affordable dwellings to live in. This, in many cases, resulted in sharing places with friends or family, leading to even more overcrowding. At the same time, those who were evicted in other areas of the city and had nowhere to go were forced to look for housing in shantytowns, including Villa 31. Since the demand for housing remained high, informal housing expansions continued throughout the pandemic.

Many of those who were left without any alternatives, especially single mothers with children and victims of gender violence, decided to occupy empty buildings and spaces within the shantytown. Some of the most notable cases of squatting in the first year of the pandemic happened in a shopping gallery (35 families) and in a city-owned transitional housing facility (14 families), both of which are new buildings that have not been used for their intended purpose since the termination of the construction. *La Galeria* was evicted shortly after occupation, while families in *Hotelito* negotiated suspension of eviction and were eventually allowed to stay (Figure 98).

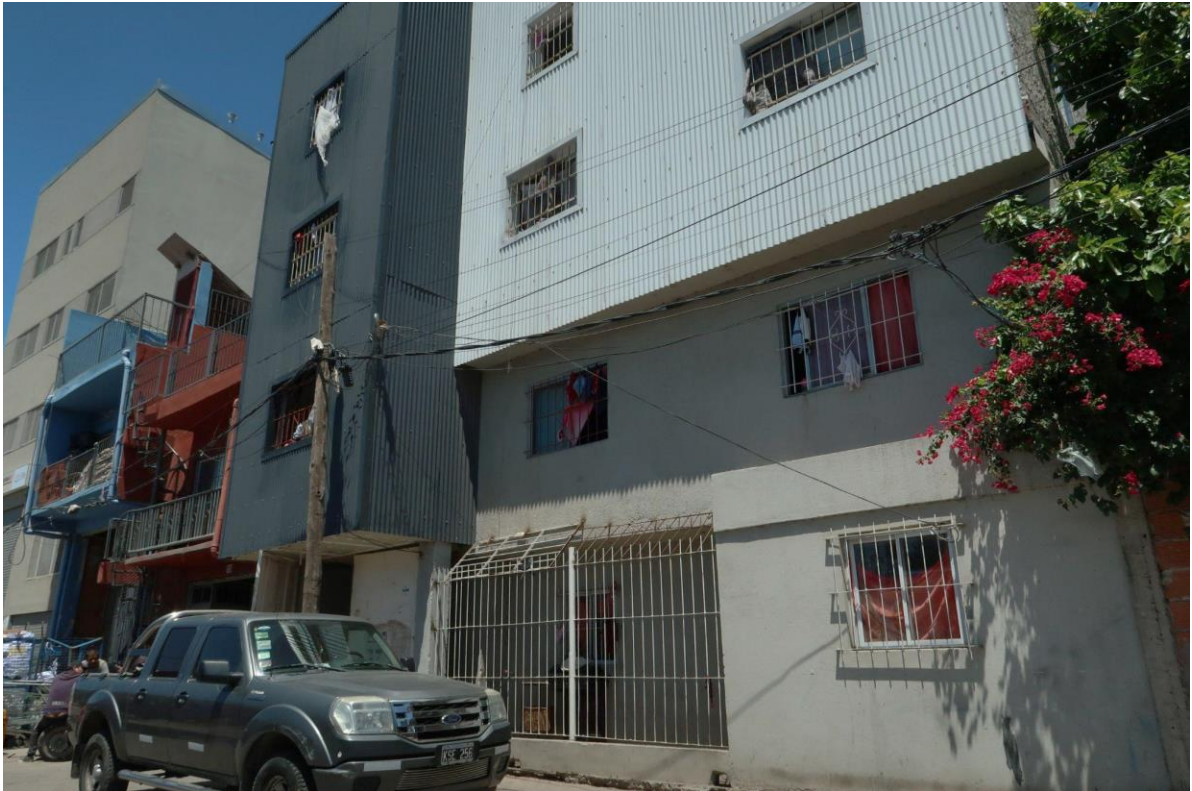


Figure 98. The squatted Hotelito building in Villa 31.

The largest takeover took place in the middle of winter in July 2021 on the same spot captured on Figure 96, which is an abandoned space between the Cristo Obrero sector and new housing developments in Containera. This piece of land was designated for construction of a primary school, but the project had also been put on hold due to the conflict between the national and city governments about property ownership. Approx. 100 families divided the land into regular parcels and built precarious shacks. According to a resident of a building in front, the occupiers of what was called *Fuerza de Mujeres* ('the Women's Force') were on the one side a mix of women-headed households in urgent need of housing, and on the other opportunists, who wanted to gain more land or welfare subsidies. However, most of the occupiers rejected the offer of a housing subsidy and demanded guarantees of housing solutions. Community leaders and neighbours supported the occupation by providing food and construction materials to help them consolidate their housing and survive the difficult winter months. Negotiations between the government and the families did not result in an agreement, and the settlement was violently eradicated at the end of September (Página12, 2021b). The evicted families were later compensated with housing subsidies that equal about four months' rent of a room in Villa 31. The lot itself has been fenced and at the time of writing this, the construction of the school has not yet begun.

A painted shanty is still a shanty

The central location and high land values of Villa 31 attracted a lot of attention from a broad range of actors who have different visions of how it should develop. Several years have passed since the ambitious plans for Villa 31 were

approved and financed. However, the shantytown has not turned into a neighbourhood, like the city government promised. What it became is a strange mutation of high-density concentration of self-built tenements in between new landmark buildings, revitalised public spaces, commercial investments, experimental housing projects and painted facades. In the process, which I propose to call 'disneyfication' of a shantytown, it is the beautification work and the most visible interventions where the greatest progress has been made. My contacts have criticised this approach by saying that it was driven primarily by political and real-estate interests and marketing, while a large part of the budget has been wasted on projects that should not have been prioritised. What money 'can't buy' in Villa 31 is a real improvement of living conditions for the local population.

As residents rotate, self-built structures transform and the relocation process faces unforeseen challenges, constant updating of the database does not seem to be enough to save the extremely expensive plan from becoming obsolete. The neighbourhood continues to expand and informalise, making the eventual implementation even more difficult and costly. The Covid-19 pandemic was a great opportunity to rethink the planning approach, but instead, the state interventions focused on contingent responses to the urgent health crisis.

None of my respondents could answer with a high degree of confidence what the future of Villa 31 could be. This discussion also has broader implications regarding affordable housing and regularisation in Argentina. If the well-funded upgrading initiative in Villa 31 fails, would it also fail everywhere else? Is it at all possible to transform a shantytown into a regular city neighbourhood? Perhaps ironically, the uncertainty around the land dispute and the condition of informal housing and employment is what protects inhabitants of Villa 31 from expulsion, and allows them to continue living there. However, it is also informality and uncertainty, in the context of socio-economic inequalities embedded in capitalism that make their living very precarious and prevent them from accessing better housing standards. An open question is, therefore, would eliminating informality and uncertainty as assumed in the official plans implemented lead to the improvement of living conditions, or as the community leaders claim, would it rather cause unaffordability and displacement to places of lower land value? These are some of the issues which city planners and community actors in Villa 31 are trying to address through their active engagement in different forms of planning.

In the next two chapters, I will tell the stories of two other neighbourhoods –one well-established and one that no longer exists– which struggled with uncertainties in a different way, and where money was not so abundant as in Villa 31.

8. Costa Esperanza: 'Temporary forever'

Yes... Relatives, family, acquaintances, or someone told them and they came... I've found the people who came, they told me that they came from the capital, and that they didn't know much, except someone who said 'hey, there is a place in San Martín, there is a place where cheap land is sold, or you can take over land...' And they came. With a car, with all their things, without knowing where they were going. That's how they got here. Very impressive... But so far, the last time I was there, they were peaceful. They feel good in the neighbourhood. There wasn't much conflict. That's it. (Interview 34).

Since the democratic change in the 1980s, informal settlements in the peripheries became one of the main ways for the poor to access land and housing. Costa Esperanza is one of such areas. It has been a place where many poorer families from the surrounding neighbourhoods, *villeros* from the shantytowns of the capital city, and migrants from bordering countries found a place to erect their new homes.

I found this settlement as an interesting case to study, because on the one hand, Costa Esperanza has a comparable size and population to Villa 31, but on the other, it has gotten much less attention from the government and very little budget to implement upgrading and formalisation projects. According to RENABAP data, this is one of the most marginalised of all informal settlements in GBA.

Costa Esperanza, whose name can be translated to 'Coast of Hope'⁹⁴ is located in San Martín partido in a flood zone along the Reconquista River (Figure 99). The settlement consists of the main and oldest part of Costa Esperanza and its two new sectors called Costa del Lago ('Coast of the Lake') and 8 de Mayo ('Eight of May'), which emerged more recently through gradual expansion (Figure 100).

The main part of this narrative focuses on the ideas and achievements of planners and community leaders in the context of fluctuating and multilayered uncertainties and informalities that characterise Costa Esperanza. I will discuss how the need by the community to use planning and maintain spatial order was highest in moments of high risks of eviction, and that successful planning interventions require political involvement of both planners and community leaders, alongside the alignment of priorities at the different levels of government. Finally, I will explain how the experiences of the planning agency in working in this, and similar settlements resulted in the creation of a "School of Community Leaders", not only as a way to promote 'positive' leaders, but also to meet their political goals.

⁹⁴ According to my contacts, the name of the settlement was inspired by a popular Argentinian telenovela for teenagers, *Verano del '98* ('Summer of '98') produced in the late 1990s, whose story takes place in a fictional town called Costa Esperanza. The name is rather sarcastic, because the telenovela shows an idealised and prosperous society during summer vacations, which is a lot different from the reality of the vast majority of residents in informal settlements.



Figure 99. Costa Esperanza and the local context. Source: ESRI / Maxar Technologies

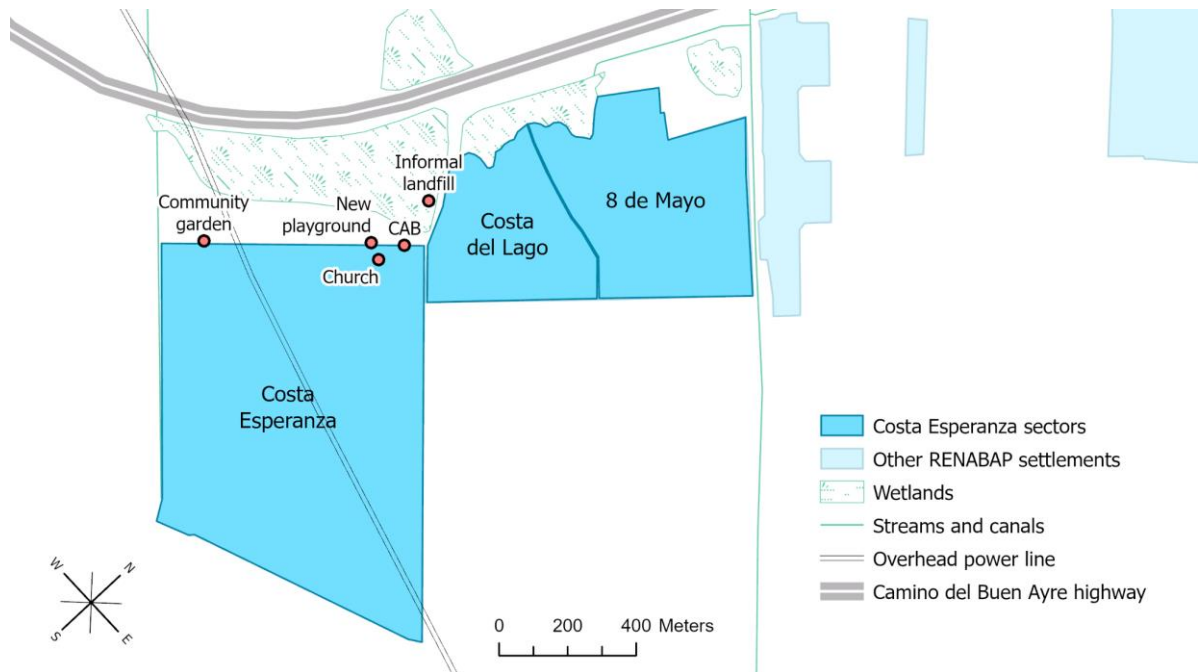


Figure 100. Approximate boundaries of Costa Esperanza, Costa del Lago and 8 de Mayo sectors and location of interest points mentioned in the text. Source: OPISU / Ministerio de Desarrollo Social / ESRI / IGN

Claiming the land and the lagoon

General San Martín is a partido located west of CABA, where around 80,000 people, or 18% of the total population lives in shantytowns and informal settlements identified in the RENABAP registry (Cravino, 2018). According to a study from 2019, the housing market in San Martín is characterised by the same problems as most other municipalities in Argentina: segregation, unaffordability and informality (CEEU, 2019). The major part of the informal settlements in this area have developed on the flood-prone zone on the western bank of the Reconquista River. This happened through organised land invasions, the same way as I described in the chapter 6.

The land along the Reconquista river has been owned primarily by CEAMSE, a public environmental agency established by the Government of the PBA. There are also smaller sections owned by the Municipality of San Martín and private entities. On the CEAMSE property lay the Camino del Buen Ayre highway, retention basins, water treatment facilities, landfills and recycling plants. In many places land has not been elevated, leading to the formation of streams, lagoons and wetlands. There is also an overhead power line cutting through the area. The nearby neighbourhoods that lay outside of the flood prone zone are mainly pre-dictatorship loteos populares. In between residential areas are industrial uses, with the largest concentration south and east of what is now Costa Esperanza.

The first land takeover that formed the neighbourhood happened in 1997 through a massive, planned land takeover. It was motivated by a catholic priest, local punteros and community leaders who took advantage of a political chaos at the Municipal Government, when the mayor, known for his hostility towards illegal occupations, was found guilty in a fraud case. The occupiers believed that in this situation of governance crisis, it would be less likely that the occupation would be evicted. They were right. As one of my contacts recalls:

People entered as if nothing happened, with sticks... They put thread on the ground and marked how many metres, how many metres each, and left space for the streets. (Interview 9).

The decisions regarding timing and organisation of the takeover were driven by the need to minimise the chance of a potential eviction. This is why it was so important that action was quick and coordinated. The original settlement has a more or less regular structure with the access streets connecting to the grid of the neighbouring areas. Each lot measured 10 x 20 metres. The punteros and opportunists, who led the invasion sold these lots practically at the same time as they were subdivided, mainly to families from the surrounding areas who were renting and were unable to become homeowners through formal means. Besides the lots for housing, two churches have been built, including one at the very end of the settlement, closest to the river, marking where the limit of the settlement should be (Figure 101). The local priests were important actors in ensuring that the spatial order of the settlement is preserved.

Once they 'purchased' their right to settle, each family had to protect their property and start construction as soon as possible. Those who lived close by could build their houses in their free time, but the ones who came from further areas had to stay overnight from the first day. Otherwise, land could be taken over by others and there was no guarantee that it would be restored, since all transactions were informal. Moreover, conflicts between neighbours regarding property limits emerged, including situations of occupiers attempting to build on sites reserved for streets,



Figure 101. The local church, which marks the edge of how far the neighbourhood is supposed to grow. It is also one of the first places where the streets were paved.

parks or medical posts. There were also some residents of nearby areas who did not endorse the occupation. These clashes between neighbours resulted in various deaths. Nevertheless, in the first years, the settlement was consolidating according to the pre-established agreements. The deepening of the financial crisis of 2001 led to a total absence of state institutions, which resulted in increasing the perceived tenure security of the residents. In this context, the population of Costa Esperanza grew rapidly and the settlement consolidated.

To prevent flooding, each family had to fill their plots with soil, debris or rubble, before building permanent housing structures. Some parts of the neighbourhood are in fact raised around three metres above the original level. Similarly to other informal settlements, the first makeshift shacks in Costa Esperanza have gradually been replaced with more solid structures made of brick and reinforced concrete (Figure 102).

Besides priests, key actors in ensuring order and coordinating joint action were manzaneras, many of which later became important community leaders. Each of them was responsible for ensuring that no one within their block encroached on streets and common spaces or built on neighbouring lots. They also distributed food rations and collected demographic information about each family for the purpose of eventual property formalisation. Residents living along the same street were responsible for building bridges over the canal to connect to the neighbourhood on the other side (Figure 103). Some bridges are more solid and made of concrete, others more precarious. In addition, the occupants made ditches to ensure that rainwater was removed efficiently, set up their own provisional power connections and laid down a network of pipes and hoses for water supply.



Figure 102. Housing in Costa Esperanza.



Figure 103. Bridge over the canal built by the residents, connecting Costa Esperanza with an adjacent neighbourhood on the other side, which is not part of the RENABAP registry.

Following the 2001 crisis, real estate properties increased significantly in value. By 2005, many of the original families had sold their houses (still without formal tenure) to newcomers, mainly from Paraguay, and moved to 'better' neighbourhoods. As the economic situation in Argentina was improving, the Paraguayans started inviting their relatives and friends from their home country. The settlement also has tight links to the community in Villa 1-11-14 shantytown in CABA, where many of the others moved from. Some found shelter in new houses or extensions built within the original Costa Esperanza. This includes new illegal construction under the high voltage power lines, which according to the residents do not cause any serious health risks. Other families formed two new settlements on the



Figure 104. Costa del Lago and 8 de Mayo in 2004 (left), 2013 (middle) and 2022 (right). Source: Google Earth / Maxar Technologies



Figure 105. This lot at the edge of Costa del Lago and the lagoon is claimed by a new family, but before they can erect a permanent house, they need to finish filling it with soil, debris or garbage and then flatten the land.

northern side: Costa del Lago y 8 de Mayo. The uninterrupted stay led to higher perceived tenure security. The foundation of the structures of social organisation gradually shifted from neighbours to families.

Costa del Lago y 8 de Mayo developed in a more chaotic manner than the original Costa Esperanza (Figure 104). The main challenge was even more problematic topography, with a deeper lagoon to fill in. In Costa del Lago y 8 de Mayo, there was no predefined street and lot structure. Interested families have normally paid powerful people living in the area (called by my informants 'land mafias') for permission to claim 'space' over the lagoon (Figure 105). In these cases, landfill had to be done both to build a house and to extend the street to ensure access. Importantly, residents

in these areas have not feared eviction and therefore they have not organised themselves to ensure a more ordered street structure and minimum lot sizes according to the widely accepted standards, which would serve as an argument to demand legitimisation and infrastructure upgrades. The relatively low perception of eviction risk is attributed to the fact that the older Costa Esperanza neighbourhood has never been seriously threatened, and because the occupations in Costa del Lago y 8 de Mayo have been happening gradually over a long period and not in a visible, massive land invasion that would attract a lot of attention.

In the last years, the settlements have been both densifying and expanding. The only section that is not occupied today is the flat area between Costa Esperanza and Camino del Buen Ayre highway, which has the lowest elevation and serves as a buffer that helps mitigate flooding.

Continued informality and abandonment of the state

According to official sources, the population of the three sectors is 18,711, of which 11,681 live in Costa Esperanza, 2,820 in Costa del Lago and 4,210 in 8 de Mayo (OPISU, 2022). However, the local community leader estimates that the actual total population might be over 30,000 people. The average age is relatively low, with many families having more than three children. About half of the residents were born abroad, mainly in Paraguay. Guarani, which is the dominating native language in that country, can be heard in Costa Esperanza almost as often as Spanish. Other major migrant groups include Peruvians and Bolivians. According to my informants, there is a division that goes across ethnic origins. On the one side are residents who are more individualistic and entrepreneurial. They do not get much involved in neighbourhood organisations and community initiatives as long as their right to stay is not threatened. The other group are mainly those less affluent, who often belong to workers' cooperatives and rely on governmental subsidies.

There are around 60 community leaders and punteros in the three neighbourhoods, of which the majority are women. Some of them are known mainly within their own migrant communities, while others have political aspirations and attempt to establish zones of influence around their places of residence. In addition, there are four influential priests who also have a lot of respect in the community. The main social organisations in the area are community kitchens, health promoters, independent education centres and community kindergartens.

Even though access to schools and health services in Costa Esperanza, according to my local contact, is inadequate, many Paraguayans moved to Argentina precisely because it is still better than in their country of origin. These families stay in Costa Esperanza during the school years and spend their long vacations with their relatives in Paraguay. In the long term, many of the migrants consider returning and they use their savings from their work in Argentina to erect houses or buy properties back home. There are some who decide not to invest too much in finishing their houses in Costa Esperanza and rather send remittances to their family members abroad. Since education and healthcare in Argentina is public and open to anyone, and many parents do not consider retiring there, they may find it more convenient to work informally.



Figure 106. Informal landfill in Costa Esperanza.

As the threats of eviction have practically disappeared, the main priority shifted towards the household economy. The predominant occupations of the residents are cleaning, waste collection, recycling (including trash scavenging), construction, sewing, small trade, street vending and other types of manual work. There are also small industrial activities, for example a furniture factory, which benefits from connecting informally to the power lines above. Many inhabitants are hired in local cooperatives that deal with recycling and maintenance. I will come back to these later.

Some local residents take household garbage in exchange for a small fee, but instead of dumping it in the designated containers, they take it to an informal landfill at the edge of the neighbourhood (Figure 106) or use it to fill in the lagoon to prepare space for housing construction (Figure 107). Inadequate solid waste collection causes accumulation of garbage and contaminates local water bodies, which leads to health problems. The garbage dumping location is cleaned up by the government every few years, but it always fills with new waste. Garbage is also mixed with wastewater and rainwater in ditches that are dug on both sides of most streets. Flooding management and sanitation depend to a large extent on regular maintenance of these ditches.

Another way to mitigate flooding is elevation of land. These works were most serious in Costa del Lago, which generally no longer floods, because it has been raised around one metre higher than 8 de Mayo and Costa Esperanza. In some places, however, elevating one building increases flooding risk for the neighbours. There are also many houses all over the area built on unstable soil, causing them to sink or even collapse (Figure 108). It is not uncommon that what originally was the ground floor has sunk so much that it was later sealed or converted to basement:

The ground floor becomes a basement, because they have buried it and built upstairs... And I have seen this in 8 de Mayo. People who got flooded and moved to the upper floor (...) That's crazy, but it happens a lot. And it's like an eternal alteration over the house, you see? (Interview 43).

The most severe flood in the area happened in 2011, when the water level in many places reached up to one metre above ground. Improvement of the sewage and drainage systems have partly mitigated the situation, but standing water is still a serious issue during rainy periods.



Figure 107. Foundations for a new house are laid at the same time as the land is being elevated and filled with garbage.



Figure 108. A house built with brick and reinforced concrete visible in the middle-right between the greenery has collapsed due to unstable ground.

Most residents in Costa Esperanza access water through pipes, but the infrastructure is very fragmented and there is no sewage network. Families living along some streets have formal connections with water metres, but due to problems with address registrations, many have not been receiving bills. In other places, water is still accessed informally through hose connections, which are frequently leaking, or wells, where water is too contaminated for drinking. According to the planner I spoke to, the public water and sanitation company AYSA does not consider people in Costa Esperanza as serious clients, which shows “an awful difference of attention between one place and another, between the formal and the informal” (Interview 43).

Many residents are not in favour of formalisation of the electricity service, even though the current infrastructure is unsafe and causes periodic blackouts and fires. They prefer to continue with informal connections to transformers than paying bills (Figure 109). In any case, the public electricity company EDENOR declined to extend their formal network into a large part of the settlement claiming that its location under the overhead power lines is against their safety norms.

One service that many residents would have liked in Costa Esperanza is gas connection for cooking, because that is cheaper and more reliable than electricity. Many households and most community kitchens use compressed gas tanks, but these are also more expensive than piped gas.

The majority of the streets remain unpaved (Figure 110). Apparently, some of the pavement work is a result of pressure put by local priests, who wanted better car access to the two churches in the area (Figure 101). There is one bus line that enters the neighbourhood, connecting it with the centre of San Martín and the closest train station (Figure 111). Public space is scarce, with the exception of the large open field closest to the river, and several football and volleyball



Figure 109. Informal maintenance of electric connections.

fields established by the Argentinian and Paraguayan communities respectively. There is also a small park in the 8 de Mayo sector with an informal market for local merchants happening every weekend.

The housing quality varies. Some buildings, especially in the oldest sector, are solid and look as good as those in average middle-class neighbourhoods, while others are precarious shacks built on unstable soil. Similarly to Villa 31, most of the new housing extensions are units for rent or accommodation for new family members. In order to address the growing problem of overcrowding, a few years ago the municipality of San Martín started offering credits without interest to buy construction material to improve and enlarge their houses, and many inhabitants in Costa Esperanza



Figure 110. An unpaved street in the oldest sector of Costa Esperanza.



Figure 111. A local bus passing through Costa Esperanza.



Figure 112. Inside of a newly expanded house in Costa del Lago sector.

took advantage of that.⁹⁵ The vast majority of the buildings have been self-built by the inhabitants. I heard that many of the Paraguayans form informal teams to help each other in construction. Sometimes they pick randomly who will be helped first, and then move to the next house and rotate accordingly.

As I already wrote, there have not been any major evictions and residents do not fear any future expulsion, including those living illegally under the power lines (Figure 113).⁹⁶ In fact, some of the biggest and most decorated houses can be found there. Most inhabitants do not find it urgent to formalise their property ownership, but they do have a need for a formal recognition of their residence:

They didn't have any type of property title or deed until three years ago. Then it was decided to legalise the situation for a very simple matter. People went to look for work or school or whatever, and they couldn't prove where they lived, because the address didn't exist, the neighbourhood didn't exist... So the state at this time, the Province of Buenos Aires decided that all the popular neighbourhoods, informal settlements, shantytowns that were within the Province of Buenos Aires (not the capital), could legally have the papers. (Interview 16).

Recently, families in Costa Esperanza received certificates of residence (similar to those issued by SECISYU in Villa 31), which is the first step towards formalisation. In addition to giving tenure security, these documents also ensure protection from eventual expulsion by gangs or drug cartels which have earlier threatened many occupants. Some of those who consider themselves property owners in the three sectors do not want to rush with legitimising their ownership through mortgages, because they do not want to assume the burden of repayment. Nevertheless, formalisation is high on the agenda of the municipal and provincial governments.



Figure 113. Housing under the high voltage power lines.

⁹⁵ This is an interesting contrast to Villa 31, where the local government not only refused to help the residents in expanding their houses, but also banned the entrance of construction materials into the shantytown.

⁹⁶ According to the local regulations, no housing can be built within 20 metres on each side of high voltage overhead power lines.

While criminal groups no longer throw residents out of their houses, the area is far from being safe. The main problem is the presence of influential drug dealers who, from time to time, terrorise local residents, especially in the Costa de Lago and 8 de Mayo sectors. Clashes between gang members have resulted in many deaths. Several bodies have been found in the lagoon. The federal police forces work actively to eradicate these criminal groups.

In my understanding, the relatively low risk of eviction leads to deepened informality in all its meanings. As one of the residents told me, everything in the neighbourhood seems like it is ‘temporary forever’ (*“provisorio para siempre”*). In addition to deficient infrastructure, the main remaining problems and uncertainties are risks of flooding, contamination of water sources and livelihood opportunities. So far, the residents have been dealing with these issues primarily on their own. Until recently, public institutions have been relatively absent when it comes to large-scale interventions in Costa Esperanza.

Attempts to integrate and upgrade

When the provincial planning institution OPISU was created in January 2018 by the newly elected PRO government, the leadership selected eight informal settlements and shantytowns in GBA where socio-urban integration programs would be implemented first.⁹⁷ Since Costa Esperanza with sectors Costa del Lago and 8 de Mayo are among the largest and most precarious informal settlements in the province, they have also been included on this list. OPISU nominated one director per settlement and set up multidisciplinary teams of between 5 and 12 specialists in architecture, planning, engineering, law, sociology, social work and anthropology to work in each of these eight areas. These teams are relatively small and their main task has been to coordinate action together with different provincial ministries and public works companies as well as municipal governments. However, OPISU established local offices in each neighbourhood and attempted to apply the principles of participatory planning, as stated in Law 14.449 on Fair Access to Habitat.

According to a former planner at OPISU Alan Gancberg, Costa Esperanza “is a perfect neighbourhood to work in”, because it has “large population” which means that “an intervention is efficient in costs and benefits” (Interview 5). In addition, unlike Villa 31, most of the settlement already has the permitted street widths and lot sizes to perform urban integration and formalisation, without having to impose exceptions from building or zoning codes.

In addition to being selected among the eight first settlements to work in by OPISU, the government of PBA secured a 100 million USD loan from BID for Costa Esperanza (and its expansions) as part of a big initiative to upgrade settlements along the Reconquista river. This money was supposed to fund measures to mitigate flood hazards, improve solid waste management, upgrade basic infrastructure and to relocate families from below the power lines. However, different institutional problems and low interest from the community resulted in the lack of an approved

⁹⁷ The eight areas identified by OPISU are: Villa Itatí in Quilmes, Villa Porá in Lanús, Barrio Carlos Gardel in Morón, Barrio Libertad in Almirante Brown, Villa La Cava in San Isidro, NHT Puerta de Hierro in La Matanza, El Garrote in Tigre and Costa Esperanza in General San Martín. All except for Barrio Carlos Gardel are either shantytowns or informal settlements identified in the RENABAP registry. Barrio Carlos Gardel (Figure 22) is a social housing complex originally from the 1970s, which has suffered processes of informalisation and degradation.

comprehensive action plan for the area and, by the time of writing this, very little of this funding has been used. Meanwhile, the Municipal Government of San Martín allocated its already limited resources on upgrading other marginalised areas, where no other state institution has been intervening.

Due to a relatively small staff and multiple political, economic and institutional uncertainties, OPISU had to apply an approach of small steps and strategic interventions. Constant presence in the territory was an important principle:

Our model was: do not start working in a neighbourhood until you arrive. First it was an office, with a territorial team, to start walking the neighbourhood, to develop participatory processes. (Interview 5).

The OPISU office in Costa Esperanza was actually quite a large and modern building (Figure 114), which was funded by the National Government and built relatively quickly in one of the central points of the neighbourhood, near the intersection that divides the old Costa Esperanza and Costa del Lago. In addition to having offices for planners and the administration of OPISU, it was used as a place where other government institutions would help residents access their services, for example issuing ID and public transportation cards or to register for welfare programs. The building was called the Neighbourhood Service Centre (*Centro de Atención Barrial* - CAB). OPISU also helped establish the first permanent police post in the area.

The next step was to improve existing and create new public spaces, sport facilities and playgrounds:

When we make a public square... Don't waste time drawing on your desk! Call for a meeting, discuss different sizes of the pitches, whatever... And yes, let the neighbours decide! They are the client, they decide that. You will have more feasibility for the work to be carried out, less political conflict, greater appropriation of space, less project time... (Interview 23).



Figure 114. The Neighbourhood Service Centre (CAB) and a promotional board built by OPISU in Costa Esperanza

OPISU has also funded improvement of selected community kitchens, kindergartens and meeting spaces. All of this could be done relatively quickly, which is important in order to meet some of the goals imposed on OPISU by the political leadership:

The administration starts in 2016 and ends in 2019. This [OPISU] was created in January 2018, we had to have results by the middle of 2019, when the election took place. (Interview 5).

When it comes to spatial interventions, the main objective was, as I was told, not to start as many projects as possible, but to focus on those, which can be completed within these few years between elections. This is because leaving the area (in case of lost elections) with unfinished projects could be, as Gancberg told me, worse than not doing anything. Perhaps even more important is the idea that these early actions “build trust, with that trust begins the second stage, which is planning.” The community “has been fooled for a long time” (Interview 5) and were sceptical of any interventions, which according to Gancberg, was a major challenge to deal with. Once better links with the local community were established, the OPISU team began working on making a roadmap towards a threefold integration in three areas: urban, social and productive.

However, it is only this far that OPISU has managed to successfully intervene in the area. Progress in all the long term plans and proposals in Costa Esperanza has been very slow due to unforeseen circumstances, unclear political objectives and high complexity of the tasks. OPISU’s interventions in the last couple of years have focused mainly on emergency response and punctual, fragmented improvements. This caused frustration among Gancberg and his colleagues:

That’s what I’m telling you, while the planning is going on, you can’t plan when there’s someone whose house is burning down. (Interview 5).



Figure 115. Flooding after a heavy rainfall in the 8 de Mayo sector.

Later in the same conversation, Gancberg said that the plans have to take these uncertainties into consideration and be flexible enough to adapt to the changing situations:

It's something that has to be constantly changing, because priorities are changing, the neighbourhood is growing, the environment changes... It has to be a vision that is in constant transformation, but more than anything it is a tool for the neighbourhood to promote its own urbanisation. (Interview 5).

The last point about empowering the neighbourhood to lead their own transformation is key to understanding why the planning process was paralyzed. Planners at OPISU wanted to involve the community, not just because participation is considered a good practice generally, but also because they had insufficient information to prioritise intervention in accordance to the needs of the residents, and they lacked the capacity to implement large scale plans on their own. At the same time, unlike SECISYU in Villa 31, the small staff and limited resources at OPISU made an efficient participation process impossible in such a large settlement. Another problem was that most of the residents did not have much interest in participation, and preferred to stay silent as long as their tenure was secure. They feared that further planning was about formalisation of tenure and infrastructure, which would impose new expenses on them. While some residents were somehow interested in hearing about more immediate projects, because they wanted to find out about new employment opportunities linked to public works, there was little incentive coming from the community to think about the neighbourhood in a long-term perspective.

A logical move in this situation would be establishing partnerships with the local punteros and other powerful community leaders, but as I was told, OPISU did not want to be associated with them. The planners of OPISU prefer to stay politically neutral and do not want to be associated with opportunists. However, considering that most of the punteros in Costa Esperanza are openly Peronists, and OPISU was established by a government ruled by PRO, it is very likely that planners from the Provincial Government did not want to work across political divides. Instead, OPISU decided to promote and support their own new community leaders, which Gancberg explained to me this way:

So, I think the task is more to identify those who are positive people for the neighbourhood, who are interested, who are 'negatively' interested, and who are not interested... (Interview 5).

I will introduce one of these new community leaders and her role in planning in Costa Esperanza later.

To sum up planning interventions in Costa Esperanza, it is easier to talk about what has not been done rather than what has been done. One of the biggest unrealised projects was the resettlement of residents living under the power lines, and the establishment of formal and safe electricity infrastructure in other parts of the neighbourhood. The institute had ambitious plans to build a new sewage network and replace water pipes in all three sectors of Costa Esperanza. It planned to pave all streets and install an efficient rainwater drainage system, just like in the other neighbourhoods around. All this proved to be too complicated and too costly.

What did happen instead, was the repairing and replacing some of the electric posts to ensure that the power lines do not collapse on houses and cause fires. As a pilot project, families in one section have gotten prepaid electric metres. This idea has not been well received and will most likely not be scaled up. In fact, many of these families have connected themselves to the informal network again to access electricity without having to pay. When it comes to

water and sanitation, OPISU contracted vector and vacuum trucks for regular emptying of existing cesspits and removing excessive sewage from the ditches. OPISU has also ensured more frequent garbage collection and ordered a clean up of the open garbage dump I mentioned earlier. Small water tanks have been installed in some parts of Costa del Lago and 8 de Mayo, but many of them have later been stolen (Figure 116). A few more streets have also been paved during this period, but far fewer than originally planned.

While these actions succeeded in reducing emergencies, improving safety and creating a slightly more pleasant living environment, they were very fragmented, had a temporary character and are not sustainable in the long term, especially if we consider that the neighbourhood kept growing and the pressure on the existing infrastructure is already very high. I was also told that some of the interventions were chosen primarily because they were labour intensive, which means creating new local jobs and contributing to the improvement of the local economy:

People asked for jobs... A little bit of what we have contributed with urban planning is jobs! Through public works... What are the projects that give more jobs to people? (Interview 5).

Everyone wants work, always prioritise that! (...) Execution mechanisms where a higher percentage of the money goes to labour and not to materials and technology... If you can make interlocking pavement, instead of asphalt, make interlocking, because it implies more people and people who can be hired from the neighbourhood... (Interview 23).

The World Bank officer who supervised upgrading projects in similar neighbourhoods agreed:

Infrastructure alone does not solve inequalities, and so to make these projects sustainable, we have to help the families generate income and get access to more opportunities. (Interview 32).

This could support the theory that the best way to help a marginalised neighbourhood is to create local jobs and support local entrepreneurs. Economic development was also the main task for the group working on productive integration, but it turned out that the resources were simply insufficient to make a big difference. The already difficult situation started getting much worse at the beginning of 2020, when two major shocks hit Costa Esperanza.

Two shocks hit the neighbourhood

The efforts of OPISU and other institutions working in the area have been paralyzed or completely redirected due to the change of government at the PBA and the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, both of which happened within a few months of each other.

Before the December 2019 elections, all the former OPISU teams in the eight areas prepared detailed proposals for action plans for the new administration. The continuity of planning works was especially important in Costa Esperanza, which had already secured a loan from BID to implement some of their major projects in the area. The hope was that the new government would provide more resources and administrative support to make it happen. However, PRO lost their governance in the province to FdT. As it always happens, this change was also accompanied by major restructuring and replacement of staff in public administration. All directors and about half of the technical staff at



Figure 116. New water tanks in Costa del Lago funded by OPISU. A similar one on the post on the left was stolen.



Figure 117. Costa Esperanza in 2022.

OPISU had to renounce their positions to make space for officers who were more politically aligned with FdT. One of the former staff members did not hide his frustration with this situation:

Then OPISU, which was doing it well, instead of continuing with the technical teams, who knew and could give continuity to the project... It was: 'no, no! What the others did is wrong, I'm going to do it my way!' (Interview 5).

He told me that when he and his team were asked to leave, they were never consulted about all the work that they had done before. Later, I asked one of the new OPISU staff members who replaced him to tell me how it looked from his perspective:

We reviewed what programs the organisation had been working on, some things were taken further and others were not, for political reasons by the new administration. Perhaps they were not interested in continuing with that... And along these lines, the organisation began to be restructured with other directors, with other programs, in another logic of types of intervention... Targeting very much the logic of this dichotomy of 'we want to intervene, but we don't want to take on debt to make a small square', they said. Like 'no, no, taking on debt to make a small square doesn't make sense'. Well, they didn't have the resources. Under this logic, we were piecing together the restructuring. Like this. (Interview 43).

The Covid-19 pandemic started before all the new staff was hired and ready to work. Strict mobility restrictions and social distancing made site visits and community engagement impossible, and since most of the planners were new, they had little knowledge about Costa Esperanza and what was going on there.

Costa Esperanza was hit hard by the virus. The infection rate was high and many people died. While government employees have worked from their homes, it was impossible to enforce mobility restrictions in Costa Esperanza, as people were looking for work or any other way to get some income. In the first months of the pandemic, emergency

attention depended primarily on community leaders who looked for donations of food and hygiene products and together with local NGOs coordinated the delivery of supplies. The response of the Municipal Government was limited to donating food rations. Public schools were closed for over a year and inadequate or costly internet connection in the area excluded many children from participating. However, closed schools are not just about education. Students who would normally eat lunch at schools no longer had this possibility, which put more pressure on local community kitchens. As a result, some days they were unable to serve enough food to everyone who lined up (Figure 118). Unlike SECISYU, OPISU did not have the required permissions or human resources to support these actions in the territory.

We did not have solutions to guide people, we were just listening to the communication if something could be done, the majority of answers were 'no', basically because everything in the state was isolated. We were all working remotely from our homes. (Interview 43).



Figure 118. Residents of Costa Esperanza lined up in front of a community kitchen in May 2020. Photo: María Luisa.



Figure 119. Children scavenging in the informal landfill in May 2020. Photo: María Luisa.

While working from home, planners from OPISU tried to maintain contact with some of the local community members to get updates, but that has not led to any meaningful action either. Water, drainage and electric infrastructure was not maintained properly, causing breakdowns. The CAB was closed down for eight months and has been vandalised with broken windows and bullet marks. This, according to the community leader I spoke to, is unfortunate, because it would be a perfect place to coordinate local emergency action, including medical assistance. Even police patrols were redirected to coordinate other tasks, which caused increased activity of drug gangs and other insecurity problems in Costa Esperanza. Many local businesses have closed, and extreme poverty has risen. When planners from OPISU could finally return to the area in August 2020, they were shocked, especially after visiting the garbage dump (Figure 119):

I had already been to Costa Esperanza before, the previous year, so I got to know the territory... But I had never seen the neighbourhood so devastated like that day. We had on one side, when we arrived, it was... The dump, a lot of people rummaging through the garbage, looking for something, I don't know... Material to sell, food... People burning things to get copper. I remember the guy who was burning a refrigerator, for example. (Interview 43).

Desperation and new takeovers

The abandonment of state institutions and security forces in Costa Esperanza, and a relatively low perception of eviction risk led to new land takeovers in the area. New illegal occupations happened in 2020 on the remaining vacant land in Costa Esperanza and over the lagoon in Costa del Lago and 8 de Mayo. The difficult conditions of making these areas suitable for habitation show how desperate the inhabitants were. Most of them came from the nearby areas, but there were also some acquaintances from informal settlements and shantytowns located farther away, as stated in the quote in the introduction. A typical family that took part in the new occupations had multiple children and was either living overcrowded with family members or struggling to pay rent.

The takeover which happened on the flat land between the existing houses and the highway, was more organised and resembled the original occupation of Costa Esperanza over 20 years earlier. According to my local contact, it was coordinated by punteros and political activists from Barrios de Pie and similar grassroots organisations. The area was subdivided into 400 small lots of around 45m². This is much smaller than legally permitted, but there was insufficient space and too high of a demand to make them bigger. Nevertheless, the leaders of the takeover have been measuring and marking land carefully to ensure a regular spatial structure with the lots lined up along straight paths that would later become streets, and narrower perpendicular lanes for pedestrian circulation. The occupants erected precarious houses and guarded their lots from further usurpation.

In contrast to the rather passive approach earlier, representatives from the Municipal Government have this time come to Costa Esperanza together with the police to negotiate voluntary eviction with leaders of the occupation. After a couple of weeks of unresolved conflict, the local government decided to order eviction of the new settlement under the premise that this area was reserved for new parks, playgrounds, sport infrastructure, a school as well as new police, health and fire stations. The authorities explained that these facilities will benefit the community and promised

prioritising the occupants in the allocation of social housing subsidies. My local contact described the eviction as pacifistic, but very disappointing for the entire community, which endorsed the new occupation:

There is solidarity... Yes, yes, yes, yes. Because they came to the neighbourhood in the same way 20 years ago. So they know what those people are going through... They put themselves in their situation. They bring water, sometimes they bring them hot food, because they don't have a way to cook. They are very united and supportive. (Interview 25).

The promises of new housing solutions have not been realised. Having no other places to go to, many of the evicted families decided to move to the wetlands of Costa del Lago and 8 de Mayo, where spaces to build have already been very scarce, leading to new conflicts between the neighbours. Just like their predecessors, the newcomers filled in the lagoon with garbage and built their shacks on top (Figure 120); though much smaller and more precarious than in the massive takeover earlier. This occupation, or rather a gradual extension of the informal settlement, was completely unorganised and chaotic. The spatial layout there depended much more on the difficult topography caused by a gradual filling of land, than on the aspiration of creating a harmonious neighbourhood. The new occupants in this sector have not been evicted, but according to the community leader, it is just a matter of time when they decide to abandon this place:

At some point they will leave on their own, they will not need to be thrown out by force... Because of the condition of the soil, they cannot build with solid material. Anyway, they cannot afford to buy material, they have to use wood and stuff. People live in very precarious conditions. Very... Extremely poor. (Interview 25).

Further settlement expansion over the lagoon was partly stopped later in 2022 with the construction of a concrete barrier wall with barbed wire on top. This intervention happened quickly, without consultation with the residents. As it was a very unpopular measure, none of the government agencies wanted to assume ownership of this operation.



Figure 120. Some of the most recently built houses over the lagoon in the Costa del Lago sector.

We could see how the decision to evict an illegal, but organised occupation without securing relocation to any form of safe and affordable housing, resulted in an informal and unorganised expansion in an area that is completely uninhabitable, or at least has conditions that makes construction extremely difficult, meaning that this may indeed be meant only for temporary residence. Therefore, repression of the takeover made the housing situation even more precarious. It remains an open question whether evictions in such situations of extreme housing precarity and lack of alternatives are justified. I will discuss these issues further in the next chapter.

Between urban planning and crisis management

While multiple uncertainties and the inability to work on site led to new land occupations and complete paralysis of planning actions by the state, many of the problems in the area resulted from insufficient planning and service provision a long time before the pandemic. Some planning activities (or attempts) in the area were resumed after the lockdown.

One of the first things done by the new administration at OPISU was setting up a webpage⁹⁸ and opening social media accounts to show their projects and interventions in all the selected areas. By looking at the content posted there, one could get an impression that the institution has been very proactive and productive. This, according to all my contacts, including the architect who worked at OPUSU at that time, was an exaggeration, at least when it comes to the progress of works in Costa Esperanza. In reality, little was done to improve the living situation in this informal settlement. Most of the new proposals for mid- and long-term interventions drafted by the OPISU team before and during the pandemic have been rejected by the leadership, mainly due to budgetary reasons.

Although there was little continuity when it came to the large and ambitious plans proposed by the former OPISU team, the general approach of the new administration has not changed that much and focused primarily on emergency response and maintenance, though there have been some new programs for social integration and economic recovery. The most costly and complex urban interventions have been put on hold, causing the architects and planners working at the institution to feel frustrated. When mobility restrictions were lifted, many of them were assigned similar tasks to their counterparts at SECISYU in Villa 31, such as delivering food and medical kits, assisting the community kitchens, preparing for school reopening, testing for Covid-19 virus and coordinating vaccination in partnership with the Municipality of San Martín. The feeling of frustration also had to do with the fact that the new tasks were irrelevant to what they were supposed to do and they did not feel prepared to execute them:

They are all things that we have been developing over time, right? We didn't know it, but we began to learn as we went along. (Interview 43).

There is very little progress in terms of formalisation as well as resettlement and housing solutions both for families living under the power lines and those who took part in the takeovers in 2020. Regarding the issue of resettlement, my contact at OPISU claimed that it would actually be cheaper to move the power lines elsewhere than to compensate

⁹⁸ OPISU's webpage: <https://www.gba.gob.ar/opisu>

and resettle all 400 families. Such a decision, however, depends on EDENOR, which does not give this initiative a high priority. In case of alternative housing for the evicted families, the Municipal and National Governments are considering implementing a sites-and-services project in the open space where the takeover happened. The challenge here is that it would require a major investment to ensure flood protection, which can make it economically unfeasible. There is also a problem regarding the future use of this area. More recently, planners at OPISU proposed to reserve it for public facilities, parks, youth and childhood centres, a health station and spaces for urban farming, possibly funded by BID. If all that is implemented, there would be little land left for housing. Some of these ideas have in fact already been implemented, which includes building new playgrounds (Figure 121), sports facilities and a police station. More than to ensure better access to recreational and emergency services, this was done “to discourage further land takeovers” (Interview 43) and meet the promises made during the eviction.

Street paving has been progressing very slowly and goes well over the projected budget. Of the many kilometres planned, by mid-2022 only 200m of pavement works have been finalised. Part of the reason is that the underground water pipes and hoses, installed both by the community and the government, were not placed deep enough. Therefore, good quality pavement would require either the replacement of all water infrastructure, which is expensive, or paving on top of the pipes, which would elevate the street further, causing problems with rainwater drainage and flood mitigation. Debating how these issues could be fixed was something that planners at OPISU spent a lot of time on: “I have more photos on the phone of sewers than of my family” (Interview 43) - said my contact. Nevertheless, unable to find a cost-effective solution for sewage and sanitation in Costa Esperanza, OPISU extended contracts with vector and vacuum truck operators. This continues to be highly inefficient and unsustainable in the long term.

One of the main changes in the approach taken by OPISU compared to before the pandemic is a tighter work with local workers' cooperatives. This follows the principle that creating local jobs is the best way to improve the neighbourhood. OPISU contracted several existing and helped establish new cooperatives to mow lawns, clean and fumigate streets and public spaces, collect solid waste, recycle, and execute other maintenance tasks. The garbage dump and the canals have been cleaned up again.⁹⁹ In most cases hiring local inhabitants proved to be a good idea, but some of the assignments required more complex equipment, which the cooperatives did not have. There have also been conflicts between the companies contracted by the municipality, local cooperatives, and some residents who were earning money doing similar tasks, for example collecting garbage. The urban team at OPISU has focused on coordinating all these activities and mitigating the conflicts, while the municipality has not presented any definitive plans for Costa Esperanza and focused their interventions on other vulnerable areas. All this shows that the different governments may be able to maintain a marginally dignified living environment but a tangible improvement may be beyond their operational and financial capacity.

Besides emergency response, OPISU has also focused their interventions on 'soft' interventions and social programs, including initiatives to assist the elderly with their daily struggles and formalities, education programs for children,

⁹⁹ Since periodical cleaning would only temporarily solve the problem of canal contamination, OPISU commissioned converting one of the main open channels called Eva Perón, which runs along the neighbourhood into concrete pipes in 2023. This is the opposite of what many planners recommend, which is opening up streams and rivers that have previously been put in tubes (see Cox, 2017).



Figure 121. A new playground built next to the area where an unsuccessful takeover took place in 2020.



Figure 122. Water, mud and garbage on a recently paved street in Costa Esperanza.

training opportunities for job seekers, as well as workshops in construction, gardening and communication. There have also been plans to establish a subsidy program for local entrepreneurs to improve their businesses.

Why are planners unable to realise most of their proposals in Costa Esperanza? Some of the obvious reasons have already been mentioned: political instability, pandemic and insufficient funds, or unwillingness to take more loans to fund major infrastructure projects. However, there could be other possible explanations too, such as a relatively small team and little engagement with the local population.



Figure 123. Accumulation of garbage in Costa Esperanza causing clogging of ditches. The writing means “Don’t litter, don’t be dirty”.

Just to compare, Villa 31, which has about two times the population of Costa Esperanza, had at some point a few hundred public servants working in the same neighbourhood. In Costa Esperanza, there is almost no territorial presence of anyone from the municipality, and the team at OPISU assigned to this area has over the period of four years been reduced from seven to three workers. Yet, considering that planning in Villa 31 has also been ineffective despite having a very large team and almost infinite resources, it might be that the number of planners assigned to each area at OPISU does not matter. This was confirmed by my contact at OPISU:

With more people in the team, it would be the same. For me it would be the same. I think it’s a problem with the guidelines, the organisation, the lack of leadership... There are things that went wrong there. (Interview 43).

He blamed the lack of bold decisions to use the available funding, including the loan, to realise big projects. He repeated his opinion that continuous maintenance and incremental upgrading is unsustainable and will not lead to improvement in the long term:

As long as there is no serious work, as long as the neighbourhood isn’t urbanised, it will all be patches. You can do all the assistance and everything you want, but at the end everything will be the same as before (...) And all the improvements done will informalise. (Interview 43).

My contact has also complained that the leadership did not allow them to develop a comprehensive participation process that would guide planning and help OPISU prioritise interventions in the area. The institute does not plan new neighbourhoods, but intervenes in existing, messy settlements, therefore it needs to discuss the process with the

communities living there. When I asked him to explain why long-term plans have never been discussed with the neighbours, he said:

Yes, of course it was necessary, but they [the supervisors] never let us. There was the order of almost... For political issues, it was almost like the 'don't talk to anyone' order basically. Nothing... And the question is... Why am I in the territory, right? If you don't let me talk to anyone... And sure, obviously we were talking, without reporting anything... (Interview 43).

Such small and informal “micro-meetings” concerned more specific, “daily” issues, such as “placement of garbage bins” (Interview 43). While my contacts at OPISU agreed that participation is fundamental in planning, they confessed that community involvement is a delicate issue, because it is easy to make unrealistic promises, which could then cause new conflicts and opposition. This explains why for example there have never been open community meetings regarding relocation of residents living under the power line. The proposal was too uncertain to start the process and OPISU did not want to assume the potential negative consequences of communicating it to the community, which has never asked for resettlement and might just prefer to stay where they are.

Instead of setting up open community meetings, the new administration relied on information provided by members of cooperatives they contracted, but this, according to my contact at OPISU, was not the same:

Because talking with a cooperative isn't talking with a person. It's talking with a structure. And with the neighbours 'no', they practically didn't want us to talk with... These were the guidelines [from the head office] of La Plata. It was like 'do what I tell you and speak what is necessary of what I tell you'. (Interview 43).

The patience of the planner, who worked at OPISU in Costa Esperanza for nearly two and a half years, had run out. He resigned in April 2022 and started a new position in the planning office at GCBA.

I left because I got tired... I did find something better, but I left because the thing never finished kicking off. Just like that. It never finished... Frustration. It's like asking things all the time, and they don't happen, and they ask you and you go mad, assembling and drawing and so on, and it never ends... And it's always the same problem. (Interview 43).

Filling the gap of the missing state

What the people have is a lot of conscience. What happens when no one enters, when the state does not enter? Things are done by the people, and they do it the way they can. (Interview 5).

The relative security from eviction and the lack of state presence in the area before OPISU entered the neighbourhood resulted in a somewhat lower activity of local social organisations, while the punteros have not been as powerful as in other similar neighbourhoods, primarily because they had limited access to resources. In an interview done before the pandemic, my contact in the community said:

But it's also that people out there aren't that organised and I think that's it... People aren't organised, they're more independent, they do their things and leave. (Interview 9).

The main community representatives have been the manzanas, who for example coordinated infrastructure improvements around the blocks or along the streets where they lived. There have also been the previously mentioned priests and leaders of migrant Paraguayan communities (Figure 124), but their activities focused more on organising recreational and cultural events and only occasionally coordinating small infrastructure or maintenance works.

'In 2018, when OPISU first came to the neighbourhood, the situation changed. The person from the old administration at OPISU insisted that with such a small team and lack of capacity to involve regular residents, it is not only practical, but essential to establish tight collaboration with the 'positive' community leaders, who could ensure security and act as mediators between the state and residents.¹⁰⁰ As I mentioned before, the institution did not want to engage with the established punteros, fearing that they would want to take personal advantage of this partnership. Therefore, OPISU promoted their own leaders in the community. They proposed cooperation to a few women living in different parts of Costa Esperanza who were actively engaged in local community gardens, soup kitchens, schools or kindergartens, and had therefore relatively large networks within the area. To distinguish them from punteros or referentes, they were called *noderas*, which can translate to 'focal points'. The promotion of *noderas* roused the local punteros, who were jealous that someone else was in position to channel resources and potentially redistribute job opportunities the neighbourhood:

At OPISU, when we empowered the neighbours... Those who were already somehow 'powerful' (punteros, who distribute construction materials or state subsidies), felt threatened. It makes sense, because it's the only form of transformation of power they know... But hey, there are also some who are a bit like gangsters. As happened in Costa Esperanza, where formality in itself is a threat. (Interview 28).

While it is true that the community lost its interest in planning when their stay was legitimised, the recent uncertainties that troubled the area motivated increased organisation in the neighbourhood. Insufficient activity of planners and almost non-existent participation does not necessarily mean that there was a complete chaos and disorder. Although with the 2019 elections and change of administration the *nodera* project was discontinued, by then, the *noderas* had already been recognized and respected all over Costa Esperanza. They played an especially important role during the Covid-19 crisis, when they coordinated emergency response, not necessarily on behalf of, but instead of the state.

It was exactly in the period of the pandemic when people felt the need for the presence of OPISU and other state institutions to address the crisis situation. One of the *noderas* told me how the uncertainty linked to the health emergency, difficult economic situation, lack of income to pay rent and collapsing infrastructure, made many people approach her to ask if they could talk with her and the planners about the future of the neighbourhood. Sadly, even if OPISU had the initiative to engage with the community, large physical meetings were impossible due to social distancing measures. In this situation, *noderas* alongside some other active community members who did visit their neighbours, have gained even more power in the area. The desperation generated new community initiatives and

¹⁰⁰ The importance of community leaders as gatekeepers in informal settlements in GBA was also well described by Zarazaga and Ronconi (2018).

organisation structures that evolved around these people. It was also in the same context of abandonment by the state that some of the local political activists motivated the unsuccessful land takeover, which I described earlier.

The community leader whose work I have been following and who kept me updated about the neighbourhood was one of the *noderas*. María Luisa is in her mid-40s and grew up right outside of today's Costa Esperanza. As a teenager, she spent some years in Ciudad Oculta, which is considered one of the most dangerous shantytowns in Buenos Aires and for a few months she and her family were homeless. In spite of her difficult living situation, she completed a college degree in business administration. After returning to Costa Esperanza, she dedicated her life to social work, helping marginalised families from the area. Among other things, she has worked at different NGOs and government institutions as a human rights defender, health promoter and support teacher. She has also helped migrants in formalities, such as getting Argentinian ID and registering children to schools. Although she has been active in the neighbourhood ever since the original occupation and she knew a lot of residents personally, she has not been recognized as an important community leader, presumably because she was initially not involved in politics. Things changed when she introduced herself to OPISU in 2018:

Well, I approached them, because I saw a truck and the police parked around, and I didn't know what they were doing... So I came to ask, because that's how I am, and they told me that it was for an urbanisation project, they were OPISU. (Interview 9).

She liked that the government was finally interested in interventions in Costa Esperanza and agreed to give them a tour around all the three sectors and introduce them to some of the neighbours. Workers at OPISU appreciated her help and offered her cooperation. María Luisa was 'nominated' as a *nodera* and a few months later got a part time job as a secretary at the local office in CAB. As part of the agreement, OPISU also financed renovation of the afterschool education centre that she was running in the back of her house.

María Luisa and the other *noderas* contributed significantly to the planning process in Costa Esperanza. They helped OPISU identify key areas for intervention and explained what the community has already done by themselves. She



Figure 124. House of a Paraguayan community leader located right next to one of the posts of the electric power line. It is one of the biggest properties in Costa Esperanza, consolidated through purchase of three smaller lots. The site includes a football/volleyball court, a community centre and a mural with symbols representing the Paraguayan culture and traditions.



Figure 125. Costa Esperanza in 2020.

was also central in the process of issuing certificates of residence and preparations for future formalisation of properties. Her knowledge around planning and urban management has improved significantly. During that period, she also visited all the other 'OPISU' areas to exchange experiences.

The cooperation worked well, but it lasted only until the elections. The new administration was not interested in continuing the nodera project and chose instead to intensify collaboration with worker cooperatives and, according to María Luisa, Peronist political activists. This decision upset María Luisa, who took the side of the old OPISU (linked to the PRO coalition). At the same time, her activity in the neighbourhood during the Covid-19 crisis made her become a very important and more independent community leader. For many families she was the first person to ask for help:

In my house there is almost a 'parallel OPISU'. As people know me, they come and ask different things... That's why I invited lawyers and public servants to my house. They deal with cases once a week. We do all kinds of procedures, as I have contacts with different organisations, public and private institutions, we try to give a hand. (Interview 34).

María Luisa was not desperate to get whatever kind of job, and she had the luxury to choose who she wanted to work with. The introduction to planning and public administration, as well as the extended professional and political network gained through her work at OPISU, opened up new opportunities elsewhere. Recently she has had multiple part time jobs, including positions at a local NGO dedicated to helping the youth, administration of solid waste and recycling operations in the neighbouring municipality of Vicente López and in one of the labour unions for independent recyclers, consultant for evaluating results of public works at the Lanús partido, and assistant of an architect-politician (PRO) who has ambitions to become the new mayor of San Martín. The last one is particularly interesting, because if he wins the elections, María Luisa will likely get an important position at the municipal planning department. She told me that they "understand each other", they "speak the same language" and they "talk a lot about urban development" (Interview

40). Despite her busy schedule, she still continues to allocate a lot of time to help her neighbours. In fact, her zone of influence has been extended:

I occupy more neighbourhoods. Three sectors [of Costa Esperanza] and now the fourth. And I walk almost every day... Except for a few days when I had to stop due to a small domestic accident... I come and go every day, I walk between 8 and 10 kilometres easily. (Interview 25).

When I asked her to define her role in the community, she said she is just a regular leader. She told me she is not like the opportunists or punteros in the neighbourhood, because she does not discriminate against anyone based on politics and she does not take personal advantage of her direct contacts within state institutions. She is also very selective when it comes to which community meetings she attends or not. When she senses that a meeting will concern political mobilisation or activism, she often chooses not to come, to avoid any unnecessary conflicts.

Some of the meetings she did actively participate in regarded the land takeover in 2020. Although she did not support this occupation, she defended the families who settled on the land and negotiated on their behalf to ensure decent compensation or relocation. During her walks, María Luisa also visits the new houses built over the lagoon in Costa del Lago and 8 de Mayo. She talks with the residents about their needs and supervises construction work. Together with other leaders, they try to delimit how far new houses can be built, but as she told me this is not easy, because people are desperate to access any piece of land to live and do not obey such orders. Therefore, the community leaders choose not to help with construction materials:

No, no, no, that's something we generally try to avoid, unless it's a house that has burned down in a fire. In these cases we would help. But I try to avoid that, because it's how to encourage them to continue doing those things [illegal and unsafe construction]. So I prefer not to contribute with whatever materials. (Interview 25).

María Luisa knows every street by heart and can tell with confidence which of them appear on the official maps and which do not. Speaking of maps, one of the initiatives that María Luisa and her friend came up with was creating an interactive open access community map, called Resource Map CC8.¹⁰¹

People came with many questions and requests, and sometimes we didn't know how to direct them and where. (...) We began to walk around and search place by place and ask for authorization and this is the map that has the leaders of the neighbourhood. (...) We tried to do that to simplify and also so that the whole neighbourhood is united at the same time. We wanted to strengthen the bonds in the neighbourhood. (Interview 25).

The map was made using the Google My Maps platform and includes location and information about many of the facilities that do not appear on any official maps or registries: not only houses of community leaders, but also social, religious and cultural organisations, community kitchens, educational and health centres, spaces for sport and recreation, and places for collection of solid waste and recycling (Figure 126). Similarly to Mirta and Silvana from

¹⁰¹ CC8 is an abbreviation and alternative name for the extended Costa Esperanza with all the three sectors: the first C is for the original Costa Esperanza, the second C is for Costa del Lago and 8 is for 8 de Mayo.

Villa 31, María Luisa is also actively using social media, such as WhatsApp and Instagram, to show what is happening in the Costa Esperanza and shares information about important initiatives and issues concerning the neighbourhood.

Other local initiatives she is involved in are recycling, community gardening and energy efficiency programs. Recycling is one of her main areas of focus in recent years. Through her work in Vicente López and the labour union, she gained the knowledge, contacts and experience that she wants to use in Costa Esperanza to solve issues of accumulating garbage. Vegetable and herb growing is something that María Luisa learned out of her own interest and practices at home, but she is also trying to give away seeds and encourage her neighbours to use the available spaces productively to increase food self-sufficiency (Figure 127). Not surprisingly, this idea proved to be especially popular during the Covid-19 pandemic.



Figure 126. Resource Map CC8. Source: Google / María Luisa



Figure 127. Community garden in Costa Esperanza.

Her interest in urbanism and the upgrading of the physical environment does not stop there. In her free time, María Luisa reads relevant literature and whenever she has the chance, she visits other marginalised settlements, in Argentina and abroad:

I want to visit some provinces to see what are also precisely the issues of the villas and settlements in the provinces... Out of necessity, it is not that anyone asks me, but rather that I want to find out and learn. I like it a lot... I also went to Paraguay. I saw a bit of a favela in Brazil, I like to see how the dynamics of each place are, the poor, the way they manage... I like it a lot. It's very interesting.... (Interview 25).

The problem is that the neighbourhoods are very different. (...) So, knowing a little about their culture and these things, I also understand why they live this way here. There are many things that I noticed about them, knowing them for so many years and I didn't understand them, and when I travelled to Paraguay, I understood the root of that. Because I experienced it there, because I saw it and because they explained to me well what each thing was like, yes... Afterwards, to solve the problems here has to be in a different way, because there are other things, other types of houses... (Interview 34).

School of community leaders or political activists?

While most of the planners from the original OPISU territorial teams who have been asked to resign after the December 2019 elections found new jobs in different places (including SECISYU/UPE in Villa 31), they continued to collaborate. Together with the leadership at PRO in the PBA and CABA, the former workers of OPISU came up with an initiative to set up a "School of Community Leaders". The vision of leaders promoted there is based on the network

of contact points and noderas, which the original administration at OPISU has established not only in Costa Esperanza, but also in all other neighbourhoods they have worked in.

As I was explained, the School of Community Leaders is a series of workshops for residents in different informal settlements in GBA who would like to become community leaders and initiate a positive change in their neighbourhoods. As Alan Gancberg, who was one of the initiators told me, the idea is “that they carry out urban intervention projects” and also “demand that the state fulfils their promises” (Interview 28). Firstly, they would ensure a greater independence and empowerment of the local communities and secondly, enable more efficient operations of government institutions in these neighbourhoods. As one of the most active noderas, María Luisa was of course also invited to join this initiative. However, she was not just a participant, but also led many of the workshops herself:

In my case, from what they told me, I would focus on San Martín to teach together with other people. It's preparing the people to do just what I do, more or less what I do... That they don't depend on anyone else. Doesn't matter what is happening, who this government is, what... Nothing... That people learn to defend themselves. To protect themselves and demand what's theirs... (Interview 25).

In order to realise these workshops, the organising team managed to acquire donations from different foundations and institutions. They themselves volunteered their free time and scheduled all workshops in the evenings. The school has been taught in several municipalities; not only in areas where OPISU was already working, but also in other places with a high concentration of poverty and informal settlements. The first, pilot edition of the School of Community Leaders released in 2020 was completed by a couple of hundred future leaders in eight municipalities. This number could have been higher if there had been no Covid-19 restrictions.



Figure 127. School of Community Leaders. Photo: research participant (anonymous).

The workshops touch upon different topics organised around the areas of urban, social and economic development. During the first meetings, most of the time was used to explain the state bureaucracy, the planning system and a selection of the key laws, including Law 14.449 on Fair Access to Habitat. Some examples of the specific thematic sessions were recycling, energy, environment, gender, children, rights and justice, and security. The workshops also included training in leadership, communication, networking and entrepreneurship. In the second part of the program, each participant was tasked to identify one area of intervention within their neighbourhoods and develop a plan of action to solve or improve the situation. According to María Luisa, the largest share of participants chose electricity access as their topic.

While from the outside it looks like the main aim of the school initiative is to benefit informal settlements, my informants argued that it was primarily motivated by the political goals of PRO. Their ambition was to replace punteros and powerful political opportunists in informal settlements and shantytowns, who have traditionally been sympathising with Peronist political parties, with new community leaders aligned with their political agenda. According to María Luisa:

Here in San Martín, unfortunately, of the people who were invited to participate, the majority belong to Cambiemos [PRO] itself, and they are people who have never done anything. That was, for me –I told them [the organisers] that– it was a shame. Because there are many qualified people who missed the opportunity. The political issue influences much more than anything else here. It's a good course, but it's not going to be the same, because that's going to be used in a different way here. (Interview 34).

It is expected that these PRO-friendly community leaders would then extend their voter base in these areas and possibly help PRO take back political power in the Provincial and the National Governments. They see it therefore as part of preparations for the upcoming elections in 2023.¹⁰² If this strategy succeeds, the new community leaders could be rewarded with a political career in PRO or jobs in public administration, including local planning departments.

To facilitate this political mobilisation, organisers and participants of the School of Community Leaders established a political movement called *La Marea* in July 2021. The connection between La Marea and the school is evident, and highly visible in their social media posts.¹⁰³ The La Marea movement is also very similar to La Popular in the shantytowns in the capital city, which I introduced earlier. Regardless of whether or not these two organisations will seek political power directly through running in electoral campaigns, it shows how the main interest in shantytowns and informal settlements of whatever democratic government is in power, is not necessarily helping the poor access better living conditions, but first and foremost extending their voter base.

When I first met María Luisa, she was declaring herself apolitical and willing to work with everyone. However, over time she realised that it is impossible to be a community leader without cooperating with either of the large political forces at play in the settlement. As she told me “of all community leaders that exist, the majority come through politics,

¹⁰² In their book, Zarazaga & Ronconi (2018) came to the same conclusions. They described similar initiatives of empowering selected people in informal settlements as a “territorial penetration strategy with the aim of increasing their presence in poor neighbourhoods and focusing its discourse on policies that will benefit the popular sectors” (p. 109).

¹⁰³ Instagram account of La Marea: <https://www.instagram.com/estaeslamarea/>

through a political movement” (Interview 25). Being neutral is something that many planners tend to idealise, but as I found out, it does not work in Argentina, because both the community and local politicians perceive such an attitude as an act of powerlessness and bad networking. As María Luisa’s popularity in Costa Esperanza was growing, she was offered cooperation by both PRO and FdT politicians, under the condition that she would stop interacting with anyone linked to the opposite side. She did not like this condition, but at the same time she was strongly encouraged by others in the neighbourhood to engage politically:

I raised this idea with people from the community kitchens and they told me ‘yes, go ahead’, they knew I could represent them... That perhaps a politician from the outside would not, because he or she does not know the needs of these neighbourhoods. So, well, I kind of changed my mind, but I’m still thinking about it. I think they trust me a lot. (Interview 34).

Eventually, María Luisa made up her mind. She signed up to Juntos por el Cambio and ran for a seat in the municipal council in San Martín in the local government elections in November 2021 from the PRO lists. However, her coalition lost to FdT and she did not get elected. Nevertheless, María Luisa has interesting career prospects, as a politician, urban practitioner, or both. There are in fact many highly ranked government officials in Argentina who could serve as inspiration. Perhaps the most known recent example is Fernanda Miño. She grew up in a poor family in the La Cava shantytown in San Isidro together with her eight siblings. Through her work as a local catechesis teacher and her activism in Peronist political movements, Miño became an important community leader. Later, she was one of the founders of the National Board for Informal Settlements and then elected municipal councillor (FdT). Her career escalated quickly and at the time of writing this, Miño is the head of the Secretary of Social and Urban Integration - SECISYU (Piscetta, 2020).

The example of the School of Community Leaders is hardly an isolated case. Similar initiatives have been launched by a wide range of NGOs and other political movements.¹⁰⁴ The need to incorporate experiences from bottom-up planning in informal settlements is also gradually entering university curricula. María Luisa herself has also been invited to give

¹⁰⁴ For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, ACIJ offered an online course on urban policy and rights for community leaders in shantytowns and informal settlements (ACIJ, 2021a). Related, but more open classes that target the general public are run by different associations and groups involved in cooperative housing. These Schools of Cooperativism are bottom-up or independent initiatives whose goal is to build capacity and educate people within the areas of social economy, habitat and self-management of housing. One of the largest ones is the Latin American School of Self-Management of Habitat (*Escuela Latinoamericana de Autogestión del Hábitat*), which is a joint initiative by MOI, with their partners from other countries in the region. Their approach is activist-planning, in which the goal is to achieve just cities, where housing is a right and not a commodity (MOI, n.d.). There is an obvious criticism of neoliberal urban policies and debate about alternative ways to structure cities and the society as a whole. The program includes guest lectures by invited sociologists, architects, planners and politicians, and of course site visits (Rodríguez, 2021). Another such initiative is the School of Self-Managed Production of Popular Habitat (*Escuela de Producción Autogestionaria del Hábitat Popular*). Some of the themes covered include self-managed housing production, property tenure types (including indigenous), as well as urban planning and construction. All this is supported by local and international case studies. The facilitators are academic staff at FADU, cooperative leaders and architects who have worked with housing cooperatives and communities in marginalised settlements. One of the important principles of the school is the idea that different actors in the housing process are equal partners and there is no subordination between architects/planners and future occupants in planned housing projects (Radio Sur, 2021). Similar courses on habitat and self-management of housing are also offered at the University institute of Cooperation, IUCCOOP (n.d.).

guest lectures in a program on the design and implementation of public policies at the University of Buenos Aires. Many of these initiatives include fieldwork and practical exercises for students and interested community actors.

Planning, politics or emergency response?

The story of the Costa Esperanza informal settlement shows a very complex and multi-layered combination of economic, environmental, social and political challenges that has made planning in this area extremely difficult. In contrast to Villa 31, where a lot of staff and large resources were mobilised to improve that area, Costa Esperanza suffered from insufficient government intervention marked by poor leadership and unwillingness to allocate the large funds that are necessary to make a lasting change. As a result, Costa Esperanza has not progressed over time like many other informal settlements established in the same period, and continues to be a precarious, marginalised neighbourhood. As the need for affordable housing continues, the settlement keeps densifying and expanding in a more uncontrolled way.

It turned out that the security of tenure, which was guaranteed a few years after the initial occupation, did not make planning processes easier. Lower risk of eviction has even contributed to stronger opposition to formalisation of tenure and infrastructure and the increased expenses associated with it. In these situations of low risk of eviction and high informality, inhabitants might instead prioritise economic activity and income generation. Recognizing that this is a good way to help the local population, the planning agency OPISU has also attempted to support these efforts. In this context of a very varied interest and presence of the state, many of the planning tasks that would normally be attributed to planners from the local government, have been assumed by local punteros and community leaders, who might be in conflict with each other. In reality, as urban planners and community leaders are unable to implement more sophisticated housing or infrastructure projects, their intervention in the built environment is reduced to emergency response. The neighbourhood is stuck in the state of 'permanent temporariness'.

The example of Costa Esperanza shows the difficulty of planning under uncertainty. The success of the work done by both urban planners and community leaders or punteros, depends on politics and the struggle to improve and formalise marginalised settlements is first and foremost a struggle to extend political influence or ensure political stability. Others may argue that planning has always gone hand in hand with politics, which then implies that the way in which planners and community actors got engaged into politics was a pragmatic response to make decisions under uncertain economic and political conditions. I will continue discussing the influence of politics on planning in the next chapter, where I tell the story of a similar land takeover, which happened 20 years later.

9. Guernica: short life and long legacy of a neighbourhood

If there is something that the poor have, it's organisation. It's their only resource. If they are not together, no... So it seems to me that you have to bet on that only value, which means a lot to them... (Interview 8).

As I mentioned many times before, the Covid-19 pandemic aggravated the already difficult housing situation in Argentina to the state of emergency that the country has never experienced before. The loss of sources of income, combined with inadequate access to water and critical sanitary infrastructure, the necessity to 'isolate' in overcrowded dwellings, as well as overall institutional chaos, forced many people to make desperate living decisions. Shortly after the beginning of the lockdown, a new wave of land takeovers and squatting of abandoned buildings spread across Argentina.

In this chapter, I tell the story of one of the largest and most well-known land occupations that happened during this period: the land takeover in Guernica. The significance of this case is that it became the epicentre of the discussion about access to land and dignified housing during the very uncertain period of the Covid-19 emergency, when the chronic housing crisis was in conflict with contingent pandemic protocols. It also demonstrates how uncertainty around the potential eviction mobilised bottom-up planning and anticipatory action.

In the first part, I introduce the case area and outline the general context. Next, I tell the story of the illegal occupation and the efforts to formalise it through spatial planning. Later, I discuss the meaning of the exercise of planning in Guernica for the general practice of housing development and policy in the context of a crisis of urban governance.

The case of Guernica sheds light on alternative ways of planning within informality and uncertainty and highlights the idea that community-driven planning is particularly important as a weapon in the battle to protect the right to stay on occupied land. This chapter also discusses the role of planners who in cases like this one did not get official recognition or payment for what they claim is very important work towards assisting communities living in illegal and informal settlements in achieving protection and dignified housing, especially in the context of a severe housing emergency.

When the land was still empty

The stage of the events described in this chapter is a piece of land measuring about 100ha (Figure 128), located outside of the town of Guernica in partido Presidente Perón in the southern part of AMBA. The surrounding areas are composed of vacant land, pasture fields, gated neighbourhoods for the upper class and different informal settlements,



Figure 128. Approximate extent of the land takeover in Guernica and the local context. Source: ESRI / Maxar Technologies

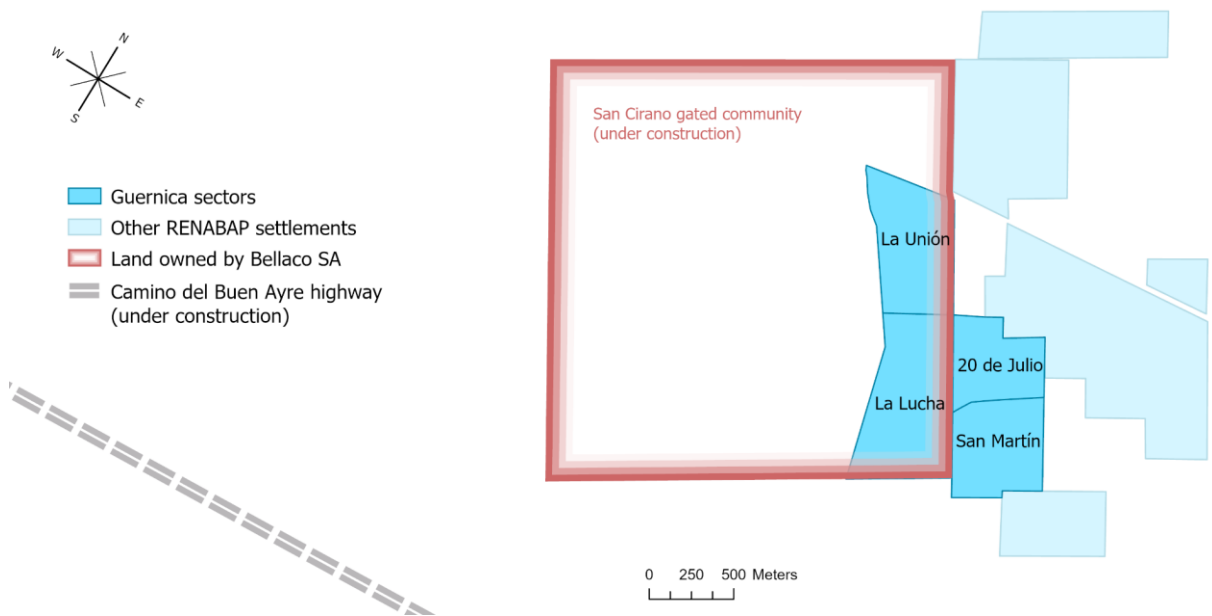


Figure 129. Sectors of the Guernica land occupation and the local context. Source: La Izquierda Diario / Ministerio de Desarrollo Social / ESRI / IGN / CARTO ARBA

some older and others more recent. Some of the informal settlements form part of the RENABAP registry. The topography is rather flat and there are several streams running through the area. The site itself has been abandoned, partly because of its low elevation and frequent flooding, and partly due to land speculation.¹⁰⁵

The tenure situation of the eastern part of the case study area is unclear. It is assumed that it is owned by the municipality, but there are different private persons who claim ownership to certain smaller parcels. The municipal authorities declared this land inhabitable due to periodic flooding events. Therefore, they refused to extend infrastructure there and prohibited any construction.¹⁰⁶

To the west is a property measuring 360ha owned by a private company Bellaco SA, which acquired it from the state in 1983, immediately after the last military dictatorship.¹⁰⁷ Their plan for the land was to build an exclusive gated community called San Cirano (Figure 129), which includes housing, commerce and sport facilities surrounded by lagoons and parks. By July 2020, most of the property has been abandoned, though the construction of the first phase of the gated neighbourhood project has started in the northern part of the site. The problem of flooding is supposed to be mitigated by extensive movement of land where the soil from digging lagoons and ditches would be used to elevate the areas designated for housing.¹⁰⁸

Regardless of which political party is in power, most partidos in Greater Buenos Aires openly encourage construction of gated communities in order to attract private investments and raise the social-economic status of their territories. They do that, for example, by relaxing planning regulations and giving tax exemptions. Partido Presidente Perón is not an exception. As I heard from my informants, local authorities do this in an attempt to push illegal land invasions out to other partidos, so that they avoid any conflicts between the settlers and landowners, or the eventual use of public funds to provide basic infrastructure. There is, therefore, a high competition between local governments.

¹⁰⁵ My informants from IDUAR explained to me how all over Greater Buenos Aires “there are some private landowners who still have vacant land without doing anything; it is because they are waiting... Waiting for the state to invest, so that the value of land increases without them [the landowners] generating any investment, or any type of risk.” (Interview 8)

¹⁰⁶ There is, however, a lot of inconsistency when it comes to zoning wetlands and flood prone areas. Residential construction is often allowed in such land when it is designated for the construction of gated communities and real estate for the rich, but at the same time the risk of flooding is used as an argument to evict or refuse investment in informal settlements.

¹⁰⁷ According to investigators linked to the Socialist Workers’ Party of Argentina, Bellaco SA was founded in 1983, shortly before acquiring the property in Guernica. The researchers claim that the land transaction was only possible because the original founder of the company served in the structures of the military government and worked closely with the dictator Jorge Rafael Videla. Moreover, the same investigation revealed that Bellaco SA has not paid the corresponding property tax since 2018 (La Izquierda Diario, 2020a). My informant from Guernica also questioned the legal status of this property.

¹⁰⁸ In the context of competition for land in suburban Buenos Aires, such interventions in the natural landscape can have tragic consequences. In a similar case of a mega gated community Nordelta in Tigre partido, the elevation of soil increased the exposure to floods in an adjacent informal settlement Las Tunas (Cravino, 2018; Muchelini & Pintos, 2016). Nevertheless, the privileged situation of gated communities is being challenged by the federal and provincial governments. The currently debated proposal of the National Law of Wetlands prohibits all kinds of construction on wetlands, including gated communities. At the same time, governor Kicillof called such estates “practically land occupations” and announced widespread controls. He referred to the fact that many gated community projects have not respected planning regulations (building on flood plains or changing the declared land use from rural to urban) and did not pay the corresponding taxes (Naveiro, 2020). It is unclear whether these changes will have a lasting impact, because they often go against the interests of the municipal governments.

The interest of private investors and land speculation around Guernica has increased significantly after the announcement of the extension of the Camino del Buen Ayre highway (the same one that passes near Costa Esperanza) in the early 1990s along the southern part of partido Presidente Perón (see Figure 129) (Cáceres et al., 2023). This new road would significantly reduce travel time to the capital city. Construction is seriously delayed and by 2022, only a short segment of the highway is operational. However, the values of properties along the planned ring road have been rising sharply, making it even more difficult for the lower and middle classes to access affordable land to build housing in that region. At the same time, those who already live there are further exposed to the risk of displacement. In this sense, the Camino del Buen Ayre highway is contributing to a process of suburban gentrification.¹⁰⁹

Land takeover (or ‘land recovery’)

The land takeover in Guernica began on July 20, 2020, when the first occupants moved to the abandoned land in the eastern part of the area, adjacent to the existing settlements. The new occupation is referred to as sectors 20 de julio and San Martín. As explained by my informant, it was not at all a completely spontaneous process. Similarly to what happened in other large occupations, the anticipated high risk of eviction forced the leaders of the takeover to develop a spatial plan for the new sectors. My contact also told me that they have tried to use their political contacts to ask for endorsement from the mayor of Presidente Perón, Blanca Cantero (FdT).

The proximity to the existing neighbourhoods allowed for the connection of new circulation paths with nearby streets and the division of the lots in accordance with average lot sizes in the area (approx. 10x30 metres), which is also the minimum allowed by Decree 8912 (Figure 130). In anticipation of a future property regularisation, it was strictly prohibited that more than one household occupied a single lot. The idea was that 20 de julio and San Martín would become integral and consolidated settlements. Community leaders who coordinated the land takeover knew very well that ensuring spatial order of the settlement would increase the possibilities of avoiding a potential eviction and make it easier to upgrade it with the necessary infrastructure in the future, just as it was in the case of many other informal settlements in the peripheries of Buenos Aires.

As the gossip about the land occupation spread, new families arrived within the next few days and settled in sectors immediately to the west, known as La Lucha and La Unión. When owners of nearby vacant properties noticed the illegal occupants, they reported the situation to the authorities. On July 24, the local judge started investigating this as a case of usurpation and ordered a precautionary measure against further expansion of the new illegal settlement. The influx of new families was finally stopped after the armed forces arrived in the area later that day. Many local landowners erected fences in order to prevent similar illegal occupations on their properties.

As opposed to the earlier takeover, the occupations of the new sectors were more spontaneous and less organised. This was mainly because of time pressure and the large distance to adjacent existing streets, which made it difficult

¹⁰⁹ Suburban gentrification is a consequence of a phenomena where “locational preferences of middle- and upper-class Latin Americans has shifted toward living in metropolitan peripheries, leading to the colonisation of areas once reserved for the poor and working class, who had been forced out of central areas where housing had become unaffordable to them because of its increasingly high prices.” (Michellini & Pintos, 2015, p. 41; see also Sabatini et al. 2009).



Figure 130. Street layout in the 20 de julio and San Martín sectors (front) is an extension of the street network and lot layout in existing adjacent neighbourhoods (in the distance). Photo: Rafael Mario Quinteros

to maintain spatial order. As a result, La Lucha and La Unión emerged with a more chaotic spatial configuration compared to 20 de julio and San Martín. However, the families who took part in this takeover had also hoped to develop an integral neighbourhood, where they could live for many years to come. Moreover, since these takeovers happened on privately owned land, where risk of eviction was even higher, the occupants recognized the need to ensure a better spatial order right away. Therefore, after they moved in, these families agreed to work together to fix the chaotic layout.

Residents of Guernica and members of the social movements who supported the settlement process did not like to call it land takeover (*toma de tierras*) or occupation (*ocupación*). Instead, they describe what they did as “land recovery” (*recuperación de tierras*), arguing that they used abandoned land to generate housing solutions, or what they like to call “land to live” (*tierra para vivir*) (Cravino, 2020: Interview 31).

According to my informant, approximately 8,000 people (2,000 families) took part in the occupation in July, but at the peak moment the population of the four sectors might have reached around 10,000 people (2,500 families). Most of them came from nearby areas. Just as in other cases of illegal occupations, overcrowding and the risk of homelessness were some of the main reasons why people decided to establish themselves in Guernica. A local census from September showed that about 80% of the families who settled in the neighbourhood have been evicted from their previous dwellings, or struggled to pay rent due to unemployment or financial problems caused by the Covid-19 pandemic (Gobierno de la Provincia de Buenos Aires, 2020).

Most of those who worked had irregular incomes, as they relied on informal employment arrangements and daily wage. There was also a significant number of occupants who escaped situations of gender violence and discrimination, particularly single mothers and members of the LGBT community. The community leaders and many of the residents



Figure 131. The occupation of Guernica in mid-September 2020. Photo: Leandro Teysseire (Pagina 12)

were members or recruits of diverse grassroots organisations and leftist political parties who have previously been involved in similar takeovers. One of the main actors that supported the occupation in Guernica was Barrios de Pie, which has strong networks in Costa Esperanza, Villa 31 and many other informal settlements and shantytowns. In addition, there was a significant presence of their allies from the Worker's Party and the Union of Workers of the Popular Economy (UTEP).

From the very beginning of the occupation, residents of Guernica organised regular neighbourhood assemblies, where they coordinated collective action and mutual aid. Just as in Costa Esperanza and most other informal settlements in the region, each 'block' appointed their own manzanera to represent the immediate neighbours.

Due to high levels of uncertainty and risk of eviction, community leaders and social organisations involved in the land takeover invited professionals and housing activists to discuss further development of the neighbourhood. Architects and urbanists from a collective *Proyecto Habitar* ('Project Inhabiting') were among those who accepted the invitation and assisted the residents of Guernica in improving their living environment from the early days after the land takeover. Through their work in informal settlements, members of Proyecto Habitar visualise the housing crisis and advocate for structural changes in the system that would lead to improving access to affordable land and housing.

The occupation in Guernica was the most widely covered by national mainstream media since the takeover of Indoamericano park in 2010, which I mentioned before. Its role as a battlefield for access to affordable land and housing and the context of the Covid-19 emergency attracted more volunteers and activists to come to the site and offer their help. In this process, several different thematic commissions have been established in Guernica. Some of the most important commissions were: Women, Health and Childhood, Communication and Urban Planning.

Consolidation of the neighbourhood

The first task of each family was to build a provisory tent or shack. It was very important to be constantly present on the site at least until the first local census, because anyone who abandoned their lot, even for a day or two, would risk losing it to someone else. Cold winter temperatures, lockdown and a judicial order to prevent construction materials from entering the site made building houses particularly challenging. Most dwellings were built of wood and plastic (Figure 132). In many cases, beds and other furniture had to be raised from the ground to avoid getting wet after the rain (Figure 133). Some families managed to build more solid structures using corrugated metal sheets. The most advanced constructions had brick foundations. The next step would be a gradual replacement of the temporary tents or shacks with permanent construction, but that would only happen if the families ensured their right to stay on the site and managed to build up savings. Therefore, Guernica was more than an illegal encampment or an act of civil disobedience – it was a desperate and risky project of a neighbourhood, whose future was contingent upon its official recognition.

The sanitation infrastructure consisted primarily of pit latrines in tents. Provision of water depended to a large extent on neighbours from adjacent settlements, who filled cans and containers from their own sources upon request. These neighbours have also allowed the newcomers to connect informally to the existing electric posts. In order to get the connection extended to the shacks, families in the occupied sectors had to pay installation fees and cover the cost of cables individually (Figure 134).

Consolidation of the new settlement was happening remarkably fast. An important motivation was that a higher degree of consolidation was associated with an increased perception of the right to stay in the area. Neighbours have worked together to remove extensive vegetation, and dig dikes and drains to mitigate flooding (Figure 135). Community kitchens have been established in all four sectors. The Health and Childhood commission, which was integrated by neighbours, nurses and medicine students, established a medical station (Figure 136), which attended



Figure 132. Construction of a shack in Guernica. Photo: Miguel Caamaño (Proyecto Habitar)

mainly people with Covid-19 symptoms and children. There were also daycare centres and autonomous schools operated thanks to external donations and the effort of volunteers.

In addition, the neighbourhood had its own improvised playground as well as football and volleyball fields. A group of enthusiasts have also worked on establishing a community garden, where they would grow fruits and vegetables for the community kitchens.



Figure 133. Inside a shack. Photo: Rolando Andrade Stracuzz

All these improvements happened while the right to stay of the occupants was very uncertain. The first order of clearance and eviction was issued by the local judge just 11 days after the takeover, on July 31. Mayor Blanca Cantero has also turned against the settlers and publicly condemned the land takeover (Diputados Bonaerenses, 2020), most likely because she was overwhelmed by its scale and because she found herself under pressure from landowners who feared similar illegal occupations on their properties. For example, she claimed that there are many people in Guernica who “take advantage of the situation to claim a place and sell it”, and that tolerating land takeovers leads to “total anarchy” (La Izquierda Diario, 2020b). Nevertheless, the order of eviction was postponed until September 30, because of Decree 320, which prohibited any kind of forced displacements during the Covid-19 emergency.

The threat of eviction intensified cooperation between the residents and brought more attention from external organisations, which developed different strategies to support the occupation in Guernica. The neighbourhood assemblies discussed future actions against a potential eviction and planned self-defence measures. Among other things, the residents established a night watch schedule and reached out to lawyers to get legal help.



Figure 134. Power lines in Guernica. Photo: Miguel Caamaño (Proyecto Habitar)



Figure 135. Neighbours collaborated to dig dikes and drains to mitigate flooding. Photo: Sebastián Linero (Enfoque Rojo)



Figure 136. Provisional medical station in Guernica. Photo: Agustina Byrne (La Izquierda Diario)

The Urban Planning commission's proposal

Shortly after the takeover, residents of the new settlement and the allied social organisations got in contact with architects and geographers from the University of Buenos Aires and the National University of La Plata. They have all had previous experience with upgrading projects and planning in informal settlements, and they often bring students along, so that they get a unique practical experience and inspiration for course work. This was also the case in Guernica.

The task of the advisors was to investigate what is possible within the existing regulatory frameworks and to develop a proposal for a comprehensive plan for the neighbourhood, so that any kind of eviction would be avoided. Such a plan was especially necessary for the La Lucha and La Unión sectors, because of their more chaotic spatial configurations and unfavourable land ownership situation. A group of around 10 of the most active professionals and students formed, as the full name states, the Commission of Urban Planning of the Recovery of Land of Guernica. None of the members of the commission were paid for their work. Many of the tasks were done remotely due to the Covid-19 mobility restrictions. Nevertheless, the agreed upon principle was that the planning process would be as inclusive and participatory as possible:

It was not something that was brought by the Urban Planning commission, but there were also ideas or debates that have come from the neighbourhood assemblies themselves... All what they wanted, or how they wanted the neighbourhood to be, what was it that had to exist in the neighbourhood... (...) They communicated and looked for a more humane logic within what was legally possible. (Interview 31).

The first task of the Urban Planning commission was to measure and redesign the street and lot layout in La Lucha and La Unión. The commission representatives took part in local assemblies and worked closely with the community leaders, creating a horizontal structure of joint dialog and decision-making. Indispensable in the process was data from the census of the settlement conducted on September 18 and 19 in collaboration with the provincial Ministry of Community Development.

The proposal of the Urban Planning commission was presented on September 29, shortly before the expected execution of the order of eviction. The plan was based on the principles outlined by Law 14.449 on Fair Access to Habitat. The main proposition of the plan was to regularise land ownership in the area (as also indicated by Cáceres et al., 2023). The original sectors 20 de julio and San Martín have developed on 41ha of land that has been abandoned for many years. Law 14.449 opens the possibility for the state to expropriate such land (if it did not own it previously) and declare its 'social utility' assuming that, as the Law states: "private property is not, or should not be, an absolute value and without any limitation" (de Paula et al., 2010, p. 22). The commission argued for applying this mechanism in these two sectors. Situation of La Lucha and La Unión was more complicated, but a suitable solution was also found there. It was proposed to apply the Law 14.449, article "Large Real-estate Projects", which states that the government can request property developers to contribute 10% of the developable land (or its equivalent in money) and use it for the benefit of the general public, for example to build social housing or public parks.¹¹⁰ The total area owned by Bellaco SA is 360ha, which means that the state could request taking over 36ha and distributing it back to the families of Guernica following the land subdivision agreed upon in the plan.

The total area of the neighbourhood would therefore be 77ha, which is a bit smaller than the total occupied area (around 100ha). However, by reducing the surface of individual lots from 300 to 200m² (which is the new minimum allowed by Law 14.449), it would be possible to make space for up to 2210 lots. This, according to the commission, should be enough to allow all the settlers to stay in Guernica. The whole neighbourhood would develop further as a sites-and-services project, where all the families become owners of their properties and assume affordable, long-term

¹¹⁰ This article of Law 14.449 has been heavily criticised by different conservative media channels and politicians, who labelled it, as my informants paraphrased, "a law against countries [gated communities]" (Interview 12)

mortgages issued by the government. They would then be able to proceed with the construction of their permanent houses on regulated sites.

As shown on Figure 137, the plan proposed an orderly street layout based on the original plan applied during the land invasion, with a total of 145 blocks of mainly residential use. Besides formalising lots for housing, the proposal included reserving land for future parks, plazas, community gardens and even medical stations and kindergartens. It was also suggested that public works and infrastructure provision would be done as much as possible by workers' cooperatives established by local residents, so that more jobs are created within the neighbourhood itself.

The argument of those who supported the plan was that if the occupation could be integrated according to a valid law, the settlement could not be evicted. The legal justification of the proposal of the commission, which was sent to the court who handled the eviction case, referred to a similar situation of a land takeover in Patagonia, where the federal judge ruled in favour of the occupants (del Rosario Fernández & Soares, 2020).

The community representative I spoke with evaluated the planning process by the Urban Planning commission as “very positive”, and the outcome as “promising” (Interview 31). The proposal was without a doubt a game changer in the negotiation process with the authorities.

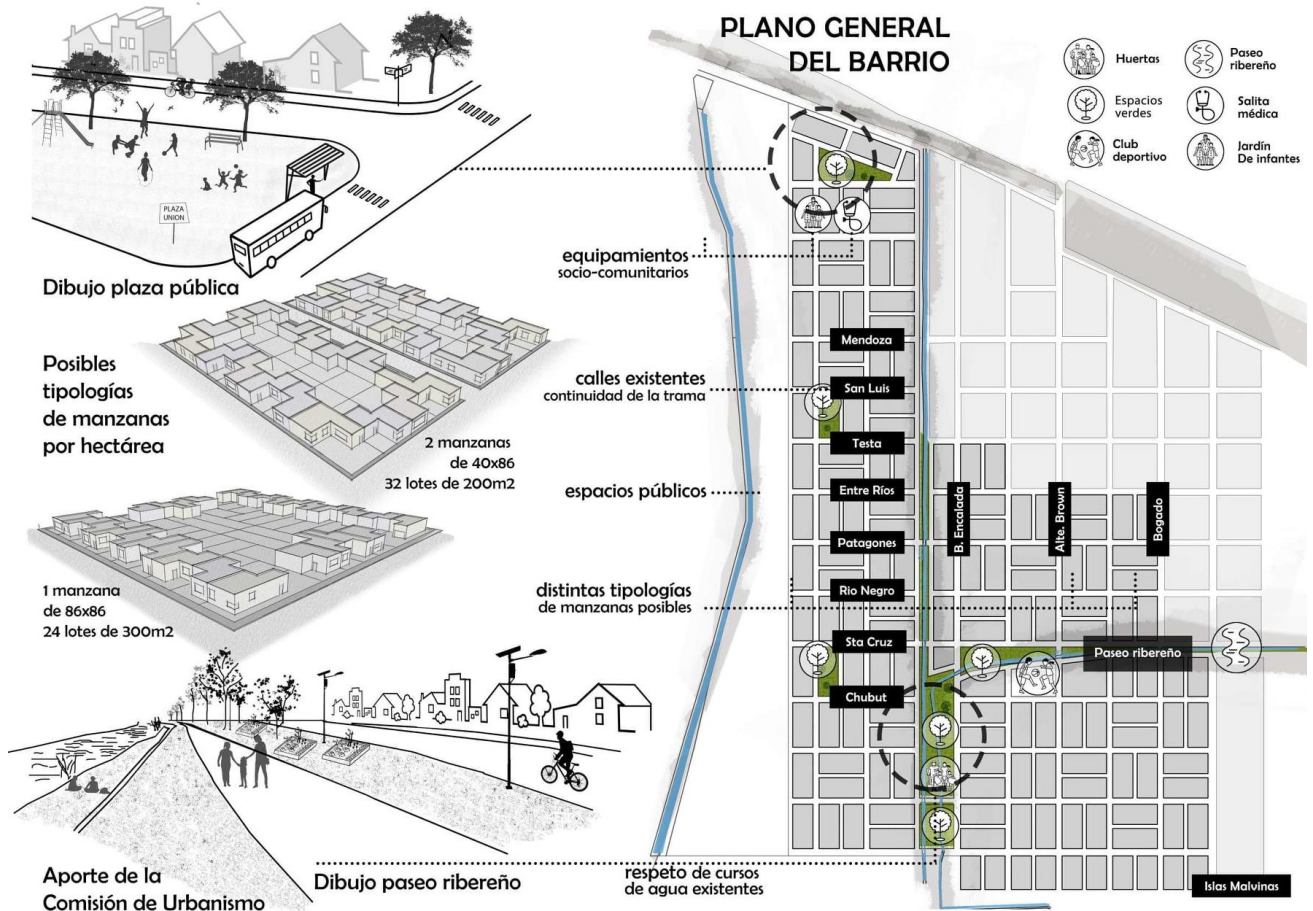


Figure 137. Excerpt from the plan for Guernica proposed by the Urban Planning commission. Source: Comisión de Urbanismo / ANRed (2020a)

Tensions and negotiations

A combination of different circumstances, including submission of the proposal by the Urban Planning commission, a more vocal solidarity with Guernica coming from different social groups, and the continued Covid-19 emergency, led to a further postponement of the order of eviction. The first negotiations between the representatives of Guernica and the municipal and provincial governments began in August, but little progress has been made in the first two months. Tensions intensified in October. This was partly because, on the one side, the relaxed Covid-19 protocols enabled circulation of people and allowed larger meetings to take place, and on the other, the new plan for the neighbourhood in Guernica posed a serious threat to the groups who wanted to defend the undisputed right to private property. Overall, there have been three sides in the conflict.

Occupants of Guernica and the organisations who supported them (most of which are of leftist political orientation) defended their right to stay on the land and wanted the government to implement the plan proposed by the Urban Planning commission. While for the residents, the main priority was to avoid eviction, the external organisations saw this as a symbolic case, which could redefine the right to housing and dignified living well beyond Guernica. Although the motivations of these factions within this group were different, the shared goals made them act and plan together.¹¹¹ This movement was steadily growing, as residents from other marginalised neighbourhoods, activists from different social movements and academics joined the protests and wrote petitions in defence of the occupants of Guernica.

On the opposite side were the landowners and politicians from the PRO coalition, who called the occupants criminals and demanded their immediate eviction (La Nacion, 2020). Consequently, they did not want to take part in any negotiation meetings. Some politicians of PRO even suggested that the residents of Guernica should be deprived of all their rights to housing subsidies or eventual compensations (Perfil, 2020). The judges who issued orders of evictions also took the side of the landowners. Moreover, I was told that some mayors of other partidos in Greater Buenos Aires from both PRO and Frente de Todos, feared similar land occupations on their territories and also backed the eviction.

In the middle, between these two groups were the authorities of the Province of Buenos Aires and partido Presidente Perón, both governed by members of FdT.¹¹² Their responses were rather ambiguous. On the one hand, they recognized the housing crisis and were willing to negotiate, but on the other, they did not want to let the settlers stay in Guernica and therefore go to war with the landowners. The complexity of the situation was well explained by my informant:

The provincial authorities have talked with the mayor [Blanca Cantero] and she agreed to regularise it... And the other mayors, when it became public, convinced the governor [Axel Kicillof] against it and told him: 'If you regularise this, all the suburbs will be filled with land takeovers. You can't regularise it...' And they stopped any possibility of regularising. (Interview 26).

¹¹¹ A similar difference in assumptions and goals between the residents and organisations that represent them was observed by Muñoz (2017), who documented the struggle of families living semi-permanently in the so-called 'welfare' hotels, in contrast to the ideological motivation behind an organisation of tenants CIBA that fought for their rights. While the residents wanted to solve their urgent need for dignified and affordable housing, CIBA had a long-term goal to "transform social and political conditions for the poor in Buenos Aires" (Muñoz, 2017, p. 1252).

¹¹² The federal government, at that time also dominated by Frente de Todos, was monitoring the situation, but decided not to intervene in this case, partly because of a significant disagreement between the different parliamentary representatives about a possible solution.

One of the proposals of the Provincial Government was distributing 3,000 lots with subsidised mortgages in a sites-and-services development in another area within partido Presidente Perón, as part of the new province-wide Plan for Land, Housing and Habitat (*Plan Bonaerense de Suelo, Vivienda y Hábitat 2020-2023*). The condition was that the families would have to leave the occupied land voluntarily within a week, but at the same time, the government claimed that it might take up to six months to make these lots ready for settlement. The authorities also committed themselves to help the occupants move construction materials and personal belongings from Guernica to transitional shelters and then again to the permanent location, but the exact placement of this development was not defined. Another proposal was securing housing subsidies of around two minimum monthly salaries per person, which could be used by families to, for example, pay rent or build extensions to houses owned by their relatives.

The provincial government set up a canopy tent at the entrance of the Guernica site, where social workers informed the residents about possible solutions. They managed to convince around 650 families, who signed agreements and moved out voluntarily. However, new settlers came in their place and established themselves in the same lots almost immediately. The new census conducted between 19 and 21 of October shows that the population of the settlement remained constant. In response to the influx of new occupants, the government decided to refuse helping those households who were not part of the census in September; though one month later the authorities withdrew this declaration.

The new ruling of the judge stated that if no final and definitive agreement was reached, the eviction had to be executed before the end of October. However, the majority of residents, together with most social organisations that took part in negotiations, rejected the proposals of the government. They were sceptical about the new sites-and-services project and dissatisfied with the offer of transitional housing. At the same time, they kept defending their right to stay in Guernica and lobbied for the approval of the proposal by the Urban Planning commission. They have also used the argument that the continued coronavirus situation and risk of infection should be taken into consideration to postpone the eviction further. Nevertheless, for the Provincial Government it was not an option that the occupants remain in Guernica. Therefore, they rejected the counterproposal and retired from the negotiations on October 28.

Eviction and the struggle for the right to land

In anticipation of the inevitable eviction, and to avoid violent confrontations, some families decided to leave Guernica voluntarily. Children of those who remained have been taken to safe places, such as offices of the organisations that supported the land occupation. At the same time, political activists from different parts of the metropolitan area have arrived on the occupied site to help in organising self-defence. The eviction of Guernica took place in the early morning of October 29, which was 101 days after the first occupation. Over 4,000 police forces were involved in an intervention that took two hours (Figure 138). Shots were fired and rocks were thrown. As a result of the confrontation, 25 people have been hospitalised and 30 persons were arrested (Infobae, 2020c). Thankfully, no one died. The makeshift houses have been demolished (Figure 139). One day later, a group of 10 people came to the abandoned land and started building a house, but they were quickly detained by the police (Infobae, 2020d).



Figure 138. Eviction of Guernica - confrontation between the police and self-defence forces. Photo: Adrián Escandar



Figure 139. Eviction of Guernica - Demolition of a house. Photo: Sebastián Linero (Enfoque Rojo)

In the following weeks, the social movements and political parties who supported the land occupation threatened the government that if it does not act immediately to alleviate the difficult housing situation in the region, large numbers of the evicted occupants will return to Guernica. In response to this declaration, the provincial government increased surveillance of the area. The police forces were present to prevent new land takeovers. Since the site is large, they used drones to maintain control over the situation. Representatives of Bellaco SA claimed that they were willing to restart the construction of the San Cirano gated community project (Sánchez Mariño, 2020), though as of 2023 this has not happened (Figure 140).



Figure 140. Entrance to the abandoned construction site of the San Cirano gated community project in 2022.

“Instead of housing, they gave us bullets” (Interview 31), were the words used by my informant to describe the eviction situation. She was very disappointed by the reaction of the government and said that she lost trust in the elected representatives. She added that the struggle was not over and that she would continue to fight for dignified living for the families of Guernica. Ana Pastor (Madre Tierra) agreed that the eviction was a tragic and sad event. She laments that a valid law could not be applied and that many people have been left in difficult living conditions.

Land takeovers, we know very well, are in fact a visible expression of the lack of access to housing for large sectors of the population. (Interview 26).

However, she also saw a positive outcome of the situation. According to her, land takeovers are acts of desperation, which should never be accepted as an appropriate housing solution. Ideally, people should move to settlements that have been planned in advance, and not hope for regularisation of illegal occupations, no matter how planned and organised they are. In that sense, Ana considers the tragedy of Guernica as a symbolic case that visualised the problem of a housing shortage in Greater Buenos Aires like nothing else did before.¹¹³ She pointed out how it made the national and provincial governments put the problem of land and housing higher on the agenda after many years of neglect. Ana claimed that the announcement of the new housing subsidy funds, informal settlement upgrading projects and sites-and-services programs towards the end of 2020 and in 2021 are partly the outcome of the visibility of Guernica. These are precisely the kinds of solutions that her organisation Madre Tierra has been advocating for over the last 35 years. In her own words, the story of the settlement was “like losing one battle, but making progress in the general war” (Interview 26).

Nevertheless, in the months that followed the eviction, there has been little progress in the implementation of the solutions offered by the Provincial Government. Many families who occupied Guernica were received by their families or friends and lived in overcrowded conditions. Those who were less lucky or did not have a strong social network

¹¹³ Ana Pastor compared this situation to the struggle to legalise abortion in Argentina. She pointed out how the massive protests failed to get the abortion law passed, but the media coverage helped spread consciousness. It turned out that the law was passed one month after the interview and Argentina became the largest country in Latin America where abortion became legalised.



Figure 141. The abandoned fields of Guernica in 2022.

ended up living on the streets or dependent on very precarious transitional shelters. As was explained to me by my informant from Guernica, monetary compensation was of little value when land and housing is scarce:

This way you can build yourself a little shack behind the house of your mother, your uncle, your grandmother or whoever... This was the solution from the state, to keep promoting overcrowding... (Interview 31).

At the same time, she suggested that it is not that the occupants wanted land “for free”, but rather “a project of a neighbourhood” where “they would generate jobs themselves” (Interview 31) and use the income to pay off the corresponding mortgage gradually. This is how, according to her, vulnerable groups can restore their dignity and feel like rightful citizens.

To coordinate their action after the eviction, community leaders, a large group of the residents and integrants of the different commissions formed the so-called Permanent Assembly of Guernica. They organised protests (Figure 142), collected signatures under petitions and wrote open letters. Despite this pressure, as the pandemic continued there has been relatively little dialogue between the authorities and the representatives of the ex-occupants.

After many months of inactivity, the Provincial Government announced and inaugurated the construction of a sites-and-services project on a portion of occupied land in Guernica, according to the principles of Law 14.449 and the ideas brought forward in the plan proposed by the Urban Planning commission. The progress has been very slow (Figure 143), which some of my informants claimed was a deliberate action by the state, only to give an impression that something is happening, but not assuming the actual costs of the project. According to a former occupant and member of the Permanent Assembly, in April 2022 it was still unresolved whether these lots will be designated to the evicted families of Guernica and if yes, whether there will be enough space for everyone. She explained that there was a dispute between the provincial and municipal governments, where the former wants to fulfil their earlier promise from before the Guernica eviction, while the latter does not want to offer any of the lots to the occupants. Later the same year, the Provincial Government reached an agreement with Bellaco SA and acquired 56ha for the sites-and-services project (Garriga, 2022), which is much more than the minimum of 36ha (or 10% of the whole property) that the Law 14.449 recommends. Part of the lots are offered to the original occupants of Guernica. The new physical layout proposed by the provincial planning authorities (Figure 144) seems to be based on the same principles as the one drafted by the Urban Planning commission in 2020 (Figure 137).



Figure 142. Traffic obstruction during a protest organised by the Permanent Assembly of Guernica and allied housing activists in the city centre of Buenos Aires in April 2022. The screen on the building in the back shows a promotional video by GCBA titled “The Transformation DOES NOT STOP”, which among other things includes images from the work done by SECISYU/UPE in Villa 31.

Meanwhile, the discussion about whether the 2020 eviction was justified or not, resumed in 2022, when a judge in La Plata ruled in favour of the occupants in a similar case of a very large land invasion. This takeover (Figure 145) started in January 2020 in the locality of Los Hornos located outside La Plata, around 40 km away from Guernica.¹¹⁴ The judge argued that the occupation took place on federal land that was not designated for any particular purpose. The verdict also mentioned the local population survey, which confirmed that those who took part in the invasion have been unable to afford housing through formal means. The fact that the takeover happened in a peaceful way¹¹⁵ and that the settlement was laid out with an ordered street and lot structure also worked in favour of the occupants. Therefore, the judge decided that the most reasonable and practical solution in this case would be to formally

¹¹⁴ Not surprisingly, the conservative media criticised this decision by suggesting that from now on the Peronist government will endorse all illegal land occupations (Clarín, 2022a; LaVoz, 2022; Lucsole, 2022; Klipphan, 2022; TN, 2022). The media have also promoted a protest action of a group of neighbours from surrounding areas who wanted to get rid of the occupants and threatened to not pay their corresponding property taxes if the settlement is not eradicated (elDiarioAR, 2022). Following this, the judge Alejo Ramos Padilla issued a statement where he pointed out how this particular ruling was misinterpreted by the journalists and clarified once again why he came to that conclusion in *this* particular case (Padilla, 2022b).

¹¹⁵ The ruling made reference to the violent eviction of occupants in Indoamericano park in 2010, which resulted in three deaths and many wounded. In this sense, the judge wanted to avoid unnecessary intervention of the police that would put people's life and health at risk (Padilla, 2022a).

recognize the settlement, regularise property tenure and support the residents with the provision and improvement of the necessary infrastructure, like in a typical sites-and-services development (Padilla, 2022a).

In the meantime, the representatives of the Permanent Assembly of Guernica claimed that they will keep fighting for their rights and support similar land takeover operations, until they reach the goal: “We will continue to recover land. Just like *countries* [gated communities] are advancing, we will also advance.”¹¹⁶

The case of land takeovers in Guernica and Los Hornos demonstrate that there are clear contradictions between the right to protection of private property and the right to dignified housing, both of which are secured in different articles of the Argentinian constitution. There is a lot of inconsistency all over the country regarding the way politicians and



Figure 143. The sites-and-services project in Guernica was put on hold after being officially inaugurated in 2021.



Figure 144. The sites-and-services project design in Guernica. Source: Subsecretaría de Hábitat de la Comunidad (PBA)

¹¹⁶ Quote from a former occupant of Guernica in a speech during a protest gathering in the City of Buenos Aires in April 2022.



Figure 145. The Los Hornos settlement in La Plata in 2022. Source: Google Earth / Maxar Technologies

judges interpret different problematic cases regarding informal housing practices and property disputes.¹¹⁷ In this context, the words of the State Secretary of Territorial Development, Luciano Scatolini who said that “the constitution guarantees dignified housing, not property” (Torres Cabreros, 2021) seem meaningless. In a country where a preference for private property ownership is deeply rooted in both culture and policy, it remains an open question how the government could guarantee access to dignified housing without giving or ensuring individual property titles. Perhaps the recent land takeover cases will motivate policy makers to find solutions that will address this contradiction.

¹¹⁷ This situation goes beyond just shantytowns and informal settlements, but is also common in other informal or problematic housing situations, such as squatting in abandoned inner city properties, appropriation and structural changes in social housing projects and disputes over rental agreements. As I explained before, all these cases were originally part of my research, but due to lack of space, I will not discuss them in detail.

Recognizing the continued problem of land takeovers and housing deficits, the National Government, through SECISYU, made a significant move towards a new strategy in 2022. The organisation, whose main task is to upgrade and integrate informal settlements, decided to allocate very large funds into buying vacant private land and developing 50,000 sites-and-services projects with affordable mortgage schemes for residents in areas registered in RENABAP. The requirements are that such properties cannot lay within protected or flood prone areas (or be exposed to other types of risk or contamination) and their size has to be minimum 1ha (Piscetta, 2022). This is quite revolutionary, because until now most governments in Argentina have mainly been using or selling their own land for housing development and not buying properties from private actors. In this case, the example of IDUAR in Moreno, which has followed a similar approach for many years could serve as an inspiration about how such land banks can function.

In a parallel process, the government of the PBA announced a large-scale action to execute payment of outstanding property taxes in gated communities and a more widespread use of Law 14.449 to acquire land and funding for construction of affordable housing (Naveiro, 2020). In recent years, more municipalities started to charge solidarity development fees from exclusive real estate projects (Clarín, 2022b). It remains to be seen whether or not these initiatives will contribute to a more pronounced paradigm shift towards a stronger and legally binding right to land and housing. As I have also already mentioned, the Argentinian government has been gradually moving away from building traditional social housing estates in multifamily buildings and increasing their investment in sites-and-service projects, where part of the responsibility is shifted towards the local communities and professionals that assist them.

Planners and architects in the service of autonomous builders?

With regards to the uncertain situation of the future of informal settlements and illegal occupations, the Guernica case demonstrated another important issue that requires attention from policy makers. Members of the commission of Urban Planning and other architects and planners who worked in Guernica were neither self-proclaimed activists, nor authorities commissioned by the government. Instead, they responded to the invitation of the local residents and agreed to help them, as independent advisors, in developing a plan that the community could call their own.

This is hardly a new situation. As I have explained earlier, many emergent neighbourhoods have established such informal or flexible collaboration schemes with academics and professionals to get advice about planning, construction and infrastructure provision. The problem is that, with some rare exceptions, the situation where autonomous planners or architects are servants or advisors to individual households or groups of residents living in informal settlements is not regulated by law. Whether or not the plans that resulted from this type of work are legally binding is another issue, but as discussed in the other case studies, such bottom-up and informal planning is often more grounded in reality and efficient than institutionalised, top-down decision-making.

In Greater Buenos Aires, urban planning is assumed to be done by either private consultancies or public bureaucrats. The former are too expensive for all except large property developers (including those who build gated community estates) or affluent municipalities. The latter usually lack the human and technical capacity or political approval to act on behalf of residents in informal settlements.¹¹⁸ Even though the proposal of the commission of Urban Planning has been rejected and the occupation in Guernica was evicted, this story highlights the importance and relevance of this

¹¹⁸ A significant exception here is the IDUAR planning institute in Moreno partido, introduced in chapter 6.

alternative way of planning, as a response to a defective system in which the demand for affordable housing is largely unmet.

In the meetings and group discussions of Habitar Argentina, many used the case of the planning proposal for Guernica as an argument for the urgent adaptation of the proposed National Law of Technical-Professional and Public Support (*Proyecto de Ley de Acompañamiento Técnico-Profesional y Público*). The first ideas behind the law proposal emerged in 2016. The law was a result of a collaboration between various activist groups and professional organisations, including the previously mentioned Proyecto Habitar, which had also been central actors in Guernica.

The proposal for the law was originally based on different successful experiences from the region, such as the Interdisciplinary Technical Teams that were hired by housing cooperatives to assist them with planning, designing and managing building construction in the capital city¹¹⁹; the experience of NGOs, including Madre Tierra, TECHO and Habitat for Humanity¹²⁰, the Brazilian Federal law of Technical Assistance from 2008, and different shantytown upgrading schemes. The idea of paid technical assistance has also been mentioned in Law 14.449, but so far, it has been sparsely implemented. In 2019, the Province of Santa Fe (Northern Argentina) approved its own Law of Technical Assistance, which is based on the same principles.

The main ideas of the law are to create a National Public Registry of Technicians-Professionals and Transdisciplinary Teams intended for (but not limited to) architects, planners and engineers, and establish a fund that would guarantee remuneration for their work. These professionals could sign up as either independent specialists or interdisciplinary teams. On the other end, there would be local participatory committees, which would receive and register requests from vulnerable households, territorial organisations and NGOs. The specialists could then be selected to perform specific tasks based on their abilities and proximity of residence.

The tasks could include, for example, preparing neighbourhood plans, assessing land ownership situation, developing property regularisation strategies, designing new houses, building extensions and public spaces, or negotiations in situations of high eviction risk. An overarching principle of this collaboration between professionals and vulnerable groups is that the process has to be based on participatory and democratic practices. As stated in the law proposal, its goal is to:

guarantee universal access to technical-professional knowledge oriented towards *improving* the practices of social production of urban/rural habitat through technical-professional services. (Habitar Argentina, n.d.; emphasis added).

Authors of the law proposal explain that the idea is not to replace, but rather to complement the wisdom of local inhabitants with professional knowledge of external specialists, as I also demonstrated in the case of Paloma in Villa la Carbonilla in chapter 7. Such planning practice could also enable spaces for horizontal and mutual learning between the different vulnerable communities through networking and exchange of best practices. Members of the Habitar Argentina group agree that they absolutely do not endorse illegal land takeovers and informal occupations, but as long

¹¹⁹ The Multidisciplinary Technical Teams (*Equipos Técnicos Interdisciplinarios* - ETI) scheme was part of the PAV program for housing cooperatives in CABA established in Law 341 from 2000 (see Pedro et al., 2020 and Zapata, 2017)

¹²⁰ Habitat for Humanity is an international NGO with a large presence in Argentina. Some of their main activities include professional assistance in planning and design of housing through mutual aid as well as setting up micro-credit schemes in informal settlements.

as these continue to occur, it is imperative that the government guarantees such tailor-made planning and design services for those who otherwise would not be able to afford them.

While this may not be enough to break down the monopoly of landowners who enjoy widespread political support, empowering planners and local communities would change the dynamics of the negotiations for regularisation and potentially avoid many unnecessary violent evictions, therefore helping vulnerable groups to cope with the everyday uncertainties they face. Such an approach is also relevant in the context of the new sites-and-services strategy, which requires a more decentralised planning and design process in which architects and planners work in partnership with the local community.

One of the important points about this proposal is ensuring access to information and facilitating bureaucratic formalities. For example, public authorities cannot reject requests for cadastral data and ownership details from certified professionals but may refuse such enquiries from regular citizens. Certain procedures, such as applications for building permits, may also need to be signed by qualified individuals.

I was curious to know what others thought about the proposed National Law of Technical-Professional and Public Support, so I have asked this question to the different architects and planners, including those who have not worked in Guernica. All of them were positive to the idea, and some claimed that they have done something similar before, with or without pay:

Excellent, very good. That is, specific technical advice programs for improving self-construction, it's like more of what I did here. It's like supporting what already happens anyway. (Interview 3).

It's the technical accompaniment that the settlements, the fast-growing peri-urban areas of the cities do not have. It's important, and people appreciate it a lot when architects come to the neighbourhood... (Interview 12).

There was one reflection I found particularly interesting, because it shows how such an approach to planning and architecture is different from what the people generally assume it to be:

And what also happened to me, when I was saying I was an architect... 'Ah, you are an architect! You build towers, buildings... You must be a millionaire!' I don't know... Many prejudices... And I find it also very important that people understand that we are normal, that we can help anyone. We don't just design and build these shopping malls. This approach of the architects towards the poorest sectors, who need this technical assistance, and that they have a relationship with the architect and that they see it's not impossible... I find it super useful. (Interview 29).

Note how 'towers', 'buildings', 'shopping malls' and 'millionaires' have been confronted with 'we are normal' and 'towards the poorest sectors'. Instead of being the mainstream, these symbols of prosperity and stability are labelled exclusive and peripheral. Architect and planner Pablo Gastón Flores, who worked with housing cooperatives, agreed: "Architecture is for the 10% of the population... Unless the state intervenes" (Interview 30).

In November 2020, Habitar Argentina organised a special online debate about the need for such a law. The event was attended by several national delegates who promised to follow it up. At the time of writing this, the law is debated in the National Congress.

Land takeovers are going to continue

The aspirations of an ordered and planned urban development symbolised by gated communities with parks and lagoons meet the brutal reality of the critical housing shortage, which was expressed by an illegal and informal land takeover with makeshift shacks. A group of planners and architects responded to this issue in a realistic and pragmatic way. They offered their services to get the best out of a very difficult situation, and repair the damages caused by the impressive, yet insufficient prior attempts to plan and anticipate the future by the leaders of the illegal takeovers like the one in Guernica. By doing this, they raise awareness of issues that lead many of the poor to engage in these desperate acts. The story of the settlement reveals a structural problem that leads to uncertainty around access to affordable housing: the contradictions between the universal right to property and the constitutionally guaranteed right to housing. Planners and architects working in Guernica were caught in a conflict between these two rights and sided with a case that was eventually lost. The joint efforts of community leaders, compassionate volunteers and housing activists failed.

The eviction of the occupants in Guernica served no other purpose but to discourage further illegal occupations, which in the condition of a deep housing crisis are practically inevitable. There are hundreds of thousands of people living in precarious neighbourhoods around Greater Buenos Aires, which were originally settled in a similar way, but in contrast to Guernica were allowed to stay, avoiding the traumatic experience of forced expulsion. In a situation where the right to property and the right to housing are subjects to free interpretation, and where planning and architecture in informal settlements is limited to activism, the problems of chaotic development, illegal occupations, evictions and vulnerability will persist. It is indispensable, therefore, to rethink urban policies in order to recognise that in conditions of chronic uncertainty, informal land takeover is the only way in which a large part of the society can access housing:

It seems to me that you have to start thinking about policies that go before putting a patch. Well, the villas are going to continue to exist, the land takeovers are going to continue to exist... We need to launch policies that say 'well, this is going to exist'. (Interview 5).

10. Identifying uncertainties

In the previous five chapters, I presented empirical data in the form of narratives at a macro (regional) scale and for the selected study areas. In this chapter, I bring the cases together to identify patterns and differences between them. I do so remaining cognisant of how uncertainty is expressed spatially and temporally. The aim of the empirical analysis is to lay ground for a theoretical discussion and answering the main research questions, which will follow in the next chapter. To recall, my research questions aim to 1) explore the nature of uncertainties in informal settlements, 2) evaluate their impact on planning and development in these areas, and 3) debate how the practice of urban planning in informal settings could address these uncertainties.

The result of the empirical analysis is identifying types of uncertainties and discussing their manifestations across the cases. I use the definition of uncertainties as the gaps of knowledge (Mack, 1971) within the planning practice or out in the urban spaces and communities, meaning unknowns that are both internal or external to the normative planning processes and methods (Abbott, 2005). In contrast to studies which address concrete narrowed down uncertainties (as known-unknowns), I emphasise the importance of the unknown-unknowns (Rumsfeld, 2011). This means that instead of predefining the uncertainties before engaging in empirical analysis, I attempted to be open to discover the nature of what is truly unknown and in what way. In other words, I made space for unexpected and perhaps surprising findings about uncertainty, and theorised from the spatial and temporal contexts, rather than applying the well-established western theories and visions of urban modernity (see Parnell & Robinson, 2012; Robinson, 2013).

The specificity of my study is that the different uncertainties are embedded in the context of urban informality, defined as spatial and non-spatial processes, actions and practices that are at least partly, and in different ways outside of the processes of formalisation or urban regulation (Altrock, 2012; Roy, 2005; Carrizosa, 2021). My empirical analysis considers the dimensions of both uncertainties and informalities as continuums, rather than binaries (AlSayyad, 2004; Hamdi 2004; Connell 2009; Abbott 2000; Altrock, 2012; Carrizosa 2021). The most concentrated manifestations of urban informality are in settlements, which emerge from illegal occupation of space and are governed outside of the legal planning frameworks. Applying this to the context of Buenos Aires, I make an important distinction between shantytowns and informal settlements, where the former are older, denser and more centrally located, while the latter emerged in the suburban or peripheral areas, have lower density and a more orderly spatial layout.

This part of my study applied the thematic analysis and process tracing methods. It started with identifying lessons, or insights from the five case narratives and performing an iterative coding exercise, where I categorised the insights according to different themes, or more specifically, types of uncertainty. An insight is typically a one-sentence take away from a story or plot within a case. For example, an insight from the narrative on informal settlements, “Evictions

did not stop illegal occupations, but only displaced them”, was coded as ‘Tenure uncertainty’. The advantage of identifying and comparing insights from both the more general narratives on informal settlements and shantytowns, and the three detailed case stories, is that it enabled me to find out whether some phenomena or processes are contextual within a particular settlement or apply to more areas with similar typologies.

Defining a list of uncertainties that would reflect in the best way the situation and conditions in my case study areas was a challenging process. After several attempts of coding, a total of 528 insights¹²¹ were identified and categorised under six types of uncertainties:

1. Political uncertainty: 238 insights
2. Tenure uncertainty: 182 insights
3. Economic uncertainty: 78 insights
4. Health uncertainty: 25 insights
5. Data/methods uncertainty: 22 insights
6. Environmental uncertainty: 8 insights

The insights varied in terms of relevance, salience and impact. There were also many repeated insights, especially those coded under political uncertainty. Some insights were coded as more than one uncertainty. This was partly done in order to trace the evolution of uncertainties over time and explore the relations across the different categories of uncertainty.

After a careful revision of the collection of insights in each category, I defined a sequence of importance of the six categories of uncertainties. The most significant uncertainties which impact the studied areas are *tenure uncertainty* (risks of eviction and gentrification, unclear legal status of the property), *economic uncertainty* (poverty, insufficient and unstable income, unaffordability) and *political uncertainty* (changing policy priorities, crisis of governance and leadership, lack of participation, and unclear roles between actors). Despite the high infection rate during the Covid-19 pandemic, *health uncertainty* (health risks, unsanitary living conditions, safety and insecurity) was considered less important than tenure and economic uncertainties. *Environmental uncertainty* (contamination, impact of climate change, natural hazards) was also found not urgent or significant enough to be considered a priority in the case areas. *Data and methods uncertainty*, meaning insufficient updated information to generate planning knowledge, is not so much a stand-alone uncertainty, but it reinforced informal development and all other types of uncertainties.

While data and methods uncertainty concerned primarily urban planners, all the other uncertainties apply to all the involved groups in different ways. For the people living in the studied settlements, the tenure, economic, health and environmental uncertainties are part of their daily realities, while for planners they are both threats to and products of the act of urban planning and management. Political uncertainty is somehow different, because it relates more to the possibility of making a change or impact through planning interventions or formalisation. It therefore applies equally to both community and planning actors.

¹²¹ In terms of case study areas, the 528 insights were distributed as follows: Shantytowns: 177, Informal settlements: 99, Villa 31: 92, Costa Esperanza: 96 and Guernica: 64.

Importantly, the six categories of uncertainties, together with the informal characteristics of the studied settlements are not stand-alone or independent. They can be conceptualised as continuums which overlap, affect each other and change over time, which reinforces the importance of spatial and temporal context in planning, affecting the choices and actions of the different stakeholders in particular situations.

Tenure uncertainty: When people do not know if they can continue living in their homes

The most pressing type of uncertainty found in the studied informal settlements and shantytowns is tenure uncertainty. This concept may sound like an oxymoron. Housing tenure can be understood as the assurance of long-term right to live in a dwelling, while uncertainty indicates the struggle for achieving such a comforting condition. Therefore, my definition of tenure uncertainty is not knowing whether one can stay permanently on the land or in the house. As I will explain later, addressing other types of uncertainties, especially those related to economy, health and wellbeing does not become a priority until the right to long-term residence is secured, though this situation may differ between tenants and those who claim property ownership.

In my research I came across communities which, due to lack of housing alternatives, have taken over land illegally or entered the informal housing market. While this might be the only affordable option, it comes with increased risks related to the unclear legal status of the occupied property or insufficient protection of tenure, which may result in evictions or market-driven expulsions. I documented different strategies, which these communities apply to mitigate actual or potential conflicts with property owners and secure their right to housing. Such strategies range from organising physical resistance or self-defence, to initiating community-driven informal (bottom-up) urban planning processes or active engagement in the state-led formal (top-down) planning. I have also analysed the different ways in which urban planners respond to this type of tenure uncertainty against the communities' efforts to minimise the risks of eviction or expulsion.

The further analysis of insights from the narratives and other data categorised as tenure uncertainty led me to develop four scenarios based on the situation of the studied settlements at different periods of their development. The main differences between these scenarios are 1) the condition of perceived or legal tenure security, 2) the aspiration of temporary/transitory or permanent residence, and 3) the degree of centrality.

Scenario 1: Permanent residence and high risk of eviction in suburban or peripheral areas

The first scenario includes land invasions and informal settlements in suburban and peripheral locations, shortly after the initial occupation, and where the residents aspire to attain long-term or permanent residency. Some examples are Costa Esperanza in the first years after being settled, the Guernica land takeover and the Los Hornos settlement before the judge issued a favourable verdict that legitimised it as a neighbourhood.

In these cases, uncertainty around the high risk of eviction motivates those who engage in land takeovers to plan in advance and imitate spatial planning models similar to the *loteos populares* scheme, which was a very common way

of developing affordable housing until it was made illegal by the military dictatorship in 1977. Those who initiate illegal occupations try as much as possible to ensure spatial order that is in line with applicable urban codes. This can materialise in ensuring uniform lot sizes and regular street networks that connect to the formal settlements nearby and extend the typical development patterns in Buenos Aires, which have their origins in the colonial grid street structure from several hundred years ago.

The reasoning behind this is to show how these emergent settlements can easily be transformed into regular neighbourhoods. Such action is driven by the anticipation of future recognition, formalisation, integration and upgrading with infrastructure. What is important here is that this way of self-organisation and pre-planning has become a common strategy that aims first and foremost at securing protection from evictions and ensuring the right for long-term residence. It proved to be successful in the cases of the initial land invasion in Costa Esperanza and in Los Hornos, but failed in Guernica and the more recent organised occupation in Costa Esperanza. In all these cases, the idea of creating an orderly and tranquil neighbourhood was also important, but seen as less urgent and given lower priority in face of the risks and uncertainties around possible evictions. Therefore, addressing tenure uncertainty is the main factor that motivated actions and choices before and during the initial occupations.

Regardless of whether the occupation happened all at once or in an incremental matter, key factors in these actions are community organisation capacities and solidarity. The success of lobbying strategies depends to a large extent on rigorous respect for prior agreements, mutual support, and in some cases political mobilisation. This explains why many of the takeovers I studied have been undertaken jointly by communities that have known each other before, for example because they already used to be neighbours or because they belonged to the same political movement. Likewise, weak leadership and spatial chaos increases the probability of eviction.

Furthermore, the initiators of land occupations chose the places and timing of takeovers strategically based on prior investigation of property ownership situation and evaluation of eviction risk. As a rule, settling on state-owned land was preferred over private land. This is because the (democratic) governments recognized the difficulty of ensuring affordable housing alternatives and therefore were more willing to negotiate directly with the occupants. On the other hand, private landowners interpreted any forms of occupations as violations of their property rights and reported them directly to the police forces or took these cases to the courts. Occupants would also take advantage of land, which has been abandoned or where the ownership situation is unclear, in hope of gaining property rights through their uninterrupted and peaceful residence. In regards to timing of the occupations, some leaders waited for favourable conditions that would make quick evictions less likely. For example, the initial occupation of Costa Esperanza happened during a period of local governance crisis, shortly after the mayor who was hostile to illegal occupations was removed from his office.

Another manifestation of tenure uncertainty is in the way in which the occupants had to move in and stay on the occupied land from the first day of occupation. Otherwise, since tenure was informal, they could risk losing their lot to someone else. It was also important that the families consolidate their settlements fast and are present in their homes during the eviction operations, because that would attract media attention and mobilise activists who support

their cause. This would result in a more widespread criticism of the brutality of the government and pressure to postpone or withdraw eviction plans.

Communities in the studied areas have also expressed that they do not demand the land for free, but they are willing to negotiate purchasing the occupied lots at an affordable price. They may not necessarily want to assume costs of mortgage payments right away, but the act of showing interest in paying back for the property is used as an argument to negotiate the right to stay on the occupied territory. In a similar way, affordability can be a challenge when it comes to negotiating formalisation of infrastructure. Communities are proactive when it comes to extending water and electricity connections, though most of the time this happens in an informal or illegal way. Formalised services are seen as a sign of legitimisation of tenure, but it can often be too expensive to afford or very difficult to provide in settlements with unresolved tenure.

To further increase chances for regularisation, communities in informal settlements prepare their own spatial plans, surveys, subdivision maps and proposals for intervention, which are then used in negotiations with the local government representatives. In some cases, as in Guernica, local leaders were assisted by external professionals, academics and activists who helped them improve their initial plans and investigate legal pathways towards resisting evictions and legitimising their tenure.

Similar instances of imposing spatial order informally can be seen in occupations initiated by 'pirate' developers and criminal groups who take over and subdivide land illegally 'on behalf' of the poor communities. For them, resembling formal planning can be a way to attract buyers and demand higher prices. At the same time, they may use their connections in the local governments or corrupt state authorities to ensure protection from eviction and even speed up infrastructure upgrading.

In most cases, however, the state-led planning and infrastructure provision does not start before the tenure situation in these settlements is resolved. Municipal planners may be involved in the negotiations around potential regularisation, resettlement or peaceful termination of occupation in exchange for housing subsidies, but they do not initiate planning processes in these settlements, because doing so would legitimise what are (still) illegal occupations. Interestingly, sometimes the government may make plans to develop or use particular spaces for other purposes than housing precisely to prevent or discourage illegal occupations. This happened for example in Moreno, where certain abandoned properties were temporarily designated for urban agriculture, and in Costa Esperanza, where sport facilities and a playground were rapidly built in the same place and right after evicting illegal occupations.

Nevertheless, forced evictions have done little to stop the problem. In many cases, occupants who were expelled from their shelters were left with no affordable alternatives. This situation forced them to engage in new attempts of illegal occupations elsewhere. However, many of these new takeovers were more desperate and less organised. This is especially evident in the wave of occupations that emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic, when evictions were common despite an ordinance that temporarily prohibited forced relocations. As the housing crisis grows and the competition for land intensifies, many of the new takeovers happen on less desirable land (such as wetlands and landfills in more remote locations) and have smaller or irregular lot sizes. As I will discuss later, the chaotic occupation of such land may also be linked to lower perception of eviction risk or lack of aspirations for long-term residence.

Scenario 2: Permanent residence and low risk of eviction in suburban or peripheral areas

The settlements grouped under the second scenario have achieved a certain degree of perceived or legal tenure security. They are also meant for permanent residence, but since eviction is no longer a significant risk, the priorities and approaches of the different actors change significantly. This is the case of Costa Esperanza and many other consolidated informal settlements after the local governments legitimised their status as neighbourhoods.

Tenure security may be achieved in different ways. In Costa Esperanza, the powerful community leaders negotiated protection from eviction and infrastructure improvements in a political process. This perceived security was strengthened later when the inhabitants received temporary residence certificates, which will eventually be the basis for issuing formal property titles and mortgages. In other settlements, tenure security might be an outcome of a court ruling. More recently, the establishment of the RENABAP registry extended the protection from eviction to over 1,000 informal settlements in AMBA.

After securing long-term tenure, the incentive to follow up community-initiated plans decreases. The residents may not prioritise their involvement in planning, as they no longer consider it urgent. Many of them are satisfied with the fact that they no longer need to fear eviction. Their permanence is no longer dependent on neighbourhood mobilisation, therefore community organisation and the role of local punteros and political opportunists is diminished.

I found that when tenure security is achieved, the priorities of the inhabitants also shift from community organisation towards addressing individual needs. Residents in consolidated informal settlements seek freehold ownership and tend to reject collective ownership schemes, because collective property is not seen as a way of building up financial capital. Secure tenure also incentivises housing improvement and expansion. Makeshift shelters are gradually and incrementally transformed into permanent housing, which adapt to the particular household needs. Living conditions in many informal settlements which originated in the 1980s and 90s have improved so much that they are no longer part of informal settlement registries. In Costa Esperanza, some interest in community organisation and need for planning reemerged during the difficult period of the Covid-19 pandemic, but it was focused more on emergency response than establishing a joint long-term vision for the neighbourhood.

As the settlements are gaining legitimacy, state institutions take leadership to prepare plans and propose interventions. They do this in an attempt to integrate the newly regularised settlements with the rest of the city. Presence of the state further diminishes the role of local punteros and community leaders, though in most cases the local governments have neither enough capacity, nor sufficient resources to plan, and are therefore forced to incorporate community actors in the political or administrative planning processes. This means that the municipal planners do not have an easy task, because the success of planning is subject to other uncertainties, especially economic (budget allocation) and political (power relations and party preference/affiliation).

Despite formalisation efforts of the government and the increasing prosperity of the residents, informality in these settlements is a resource, and a preferred mode of living and working. Some new property owners have enough tenure security that they do not feel the urgency, or in some cases may even oppose to proceed with formalisation of property title and infrastructure connections in order to keep mortgage and service fees low or avoid them completely. In many

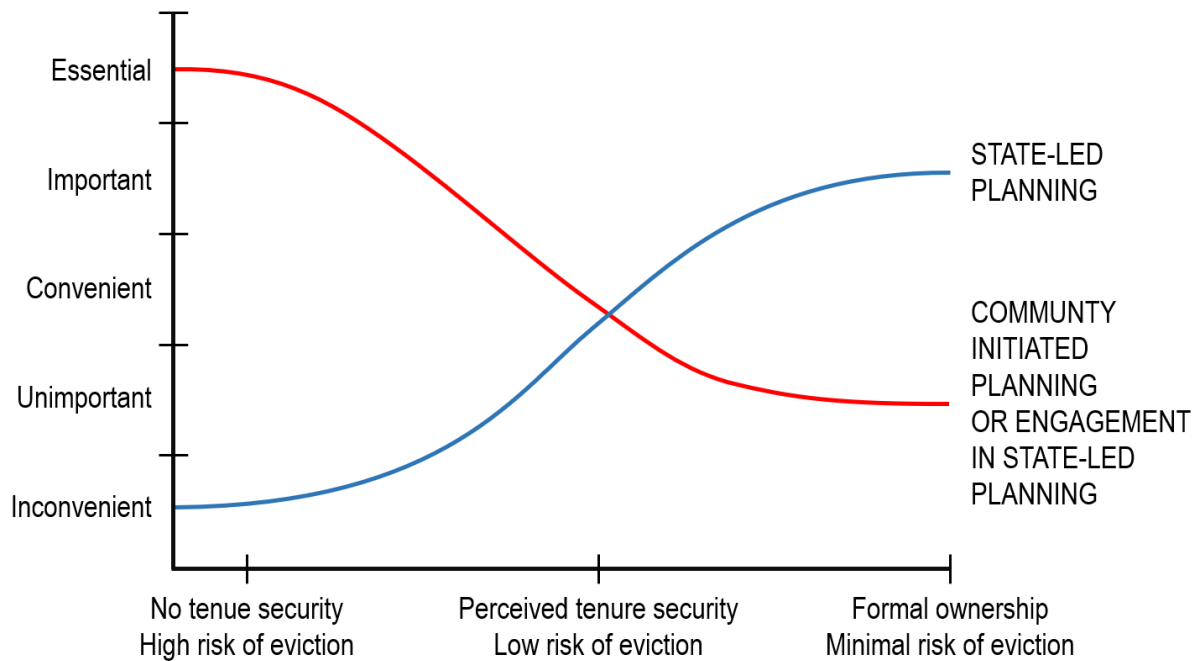


Figure 146. The changing motivations for community initiated (informal) and state-led (formal) planning according to tenure security situation and risk of eviction. Elaborated by the author.

such neighbourhoods, informal development may even outpace government and NGO efforts to provide infrastructure connections and formal titles.

Figure 146 shows how the motivations of the community and state actors to engage in planning change in respect to tenure security situations and risks of evictions. On the left side are new settlements under scenario 1, where communities imitate planning in an attempt to mitigate risks of evictions, while the state does not want to engage in planning of what are still illegal occupations. This situation changes when these settlements secure tenure and enter what I call scenario 2. In these cases, state institutions take the initiative to plan, while communities often lack the time or motivation to engage in planning, and in some cases may even find it inconvenient to participate in state-led planning or follow up their own plans. This shows a paradoxical situation where the state is either unwilling to plan when the community demands it, or unable to engage the community members when it takes the initiative to plan.

Scenario 3: Temporary residence in central areas - risk of eviction insignificant

Scenarios 1 and 2 concerned suburban and peripheral settlements, which were meant for permanent residence from the initial occupation. However, what happens to transitory settlements, where the majority stays only for short periods? Scenario 3 does not follow the development from scenario 2, but concerns settlements which offer temporary shelter and where the rotation of residents is high. Examples include more centrally located areas like Villa 31 and other shantytowns before the 1990s, as well as some of the more recent land takeovers in Costa del Lago and 8 de Mayo.

In shantytowns, tenure uncertainty varied from case to case and across time, though normally it has been relatively high. Nevertheless, the risk of eviction has been insignificant, since these areas had served as transitory shelter and the rotation of residents (both those who claimed ownership and tenants) had been frequent anyway. I observed that in cases of informal transitory housing, neither the community, nor the state had initiated any form of planning to ensure spatial order.

Before shantytowns became places of permanent residence for both de-facto owners and tenants, community organisation was mobilised almost exclusively to resist eviction operations, literally when the bulldozers were in front of the houses. Unlike in scenario 1, there were no demands for formalisation of property tenure. The alternatives to evictions that were negotiated were monetary compensation or relocations to social housing projects, though many families rejected the second choice over the more favourable location of their transitory shelter.

The top priority for households living in any form of transitory informal housing has been access to job opportunities and ability to build up savings quickly. These families would rather live temporarily in inadequate conditions and buy a house or land to build elsewhere, or as in the case of the Paraguayan immigrants in Costa Esperanza, send remittances or invest in land and housing in their home country. In the worst case scenario, due to sudden eviction, insufficient savings or lack of alternatives, these families would attempt to seek permanent housing in the peripheries through participating in organised land takeovers or buying cheap lots in informal settlements with unclear land ownership situations.

Rent in centrally located shantytowns might still be high, but the entry requirements are more relaxed than in the formal sector. In addition, proximity to jobs means shorter commuting times, which reduces travel costs and enables shantytown dwellers to dedicate more hours to work and therefore save more money. Similarly to areas in scenario 2, for most people living in Villa 31 and other shantytowns, informality in housing and work arrangements has been a resource, rather than a burden, at least until they save up enough to move to better housing.

The transitory character of housing has been the main reason why neither the residents nor the state wanted to invest time or money in planning and implementing large interventions. At best, makeshift informal electricity and water connections were done by the community groups to satisfy their immediate needs. However, regardless of the risk of expulsion, they were hesitant to invest too much in housing, sophisticated infrastructure and community spaces. In conditions of frequent eviction notices, the possibility of wasting the effort was too high, while when eviction risk was low, residents would rather dedicate more time to work and move to better housing as quickly as possible.

Historically, the state has also perceived shantytowns as providing transitory or emergency shelter and instead of integration and investment, it would rather attempt to resettle the residents to new housing and demolish the old precarious shacks. However, in periods when the democratic governments were aware of their inability to ensure decent housing alternatives, they would temporarily tolerate informal transitory housing and hold back the unpopular evictions. The rather rare cases of infrastructure improvements or promises of tenure formalisation were more often driven by political clientelism than the ambition to transform these areas through urban planning.

For many poor families during the recent crises and Covid-19 pandemic, the difficulty and urgency of accessing affordable housing was so high that they had to abandon their ambitions of finding permanent places to live, even through planned and well-organised land occupations. Instead, they settled on small lots in areas that are unsuitable for habitation or where eviction was almost inevitable, such as wetlands or railway lands. The lack of long-term perspectives in these cases led to almost non-existent organisation around planning and resulted in more chaotic development.

Scenario 4: Transition to permanent residence in central areas - eviction risk becomes important

The situation described as scenario 3 starts to change when shantytowns and other forms of informal transitory housing become places for more permanent long-term residence, due to growing unaffordability of housing in the formal sector. Scenario 4 describes areas that go through this type of transformation. The gradual shift towards long-term residence applies to both the landlords and tenants. The former recognise the opportunity of earning high income from renting out rooms, while the latter are stuck in the shantytowns, as they are no longer able to rent or buy housing or land anywhere else due to insufficient savings or not meeting the strict entry requirements. Some examples of areas in this scenario are Villa 31, Villa la Carbonilla and most other shantytowns after the 1990s.

I found that when the expected residence in shantytowns transitions from temporary to permanent, the need to engage in planning increases. While the length of stay is an important reason to do this, the intentions for initiating planning work differ between the state institutions and the community. The transition towards permanent residence in shantytowns coincided with a shift in planning paradigm around the 1990s. The consolidation and expansion of these areas has also happened in a period of a growing criticism of resettlement programs and the inability to ensure access to affordable housing through regulating or incentivising the private housing sector. In this context, the idea of eradication of shantytowns entailed high political risk and became unpopular. More planners and politicians started to recognise these settlements as neighbourhoods and designed plans for in situ upgrading, integration and formalisation of tenure.

However, the task to enforce spatial and legal order in these chaotic and unplanned shantytowns proved to be very problematic. Planners need to face a complex and rapidly changing physical, social, economic and political environment, where informal development and informalisation is not frozen in time, but compete, and often outpace the modest attempts of modernisation and regularisation led by government institutions. As the example of Villa 31 shows, the extremely high budget for upgrading and formalisation together with a large workforce were insufficient to transform the shantytown into a regular neighbourhood and make structural improvements of the area. In this case, most of the realised plans were the quick, 'easy' and visible interventions, such as landmark buildings, new public spaces and facade improvements along the edges of the shantytown. On top of that come diverse challenges related to regulating the very dynamic informal tenure systems and resolving political conflicts around land ownership. The biggest problems are developing fair solutions for regularisation of rental housing and agreeing on the conditions of mortgages that residents in shantytowns have to assume to become property owners. Planners at SECISYU/UPE and OPISU have made plans that attempted to address these issues, but the success of this work has so far been very

limited, because many of these proposals were rejected by the organised community. The credibility of the government has been weak, because of internal disagreements about the actual goals and intentions of planning, and due to uncertainty regarding what and how information should be communicated to the communities living there.

While the government *motivates* their actions by the need to integrate these areas with the rest of the city, improve the physical infrastructure, and raise quality of life, the local residents are starting to recognise that the proposed improvement plans and formalisation of tenure might cause gentrification and gradual expulsion. Here, centrality plays an important role. Villa 31, together with several other shantytowns, is located in areas with very high, or rapidly increasing real estate values. In a growing city like Buenos Aires, where the property market is relatively liberalised, zones with high unexploited potential for commercial or residential development are under constant pressure from real-estate investors, leading to displacement of low-income groups. This contrasts to settlements in scenarios 1 and 2 located in suburban and peripheral locations. These areas are also attractive for private developers, but the pressure is not (yet) as intense as in the capital city.

For the residents in Villa 31, the decision to engage in planning and mobilise politically is driven by the need to address tenure security issues and protect their right to stay. So far, the very particular combination of legitimisation of the shantytown by the state and a still informal tenure might have served as a way of tenure protection for the community, but this advantage was threatened by the new government strategy. The residents were not satisfied with the plans for property and infrastructure formalisation, arguing that the proposals will increase housing-related expenses and do not give them enough guarantees of protection from market-driven expulsion. Many of the community leaders go further and interpret the official plans as a deliberate action to open up the land for speculation and create conditions for indirect transfer of property ownership to third parties whose actions are driven purely by profit from real-estate

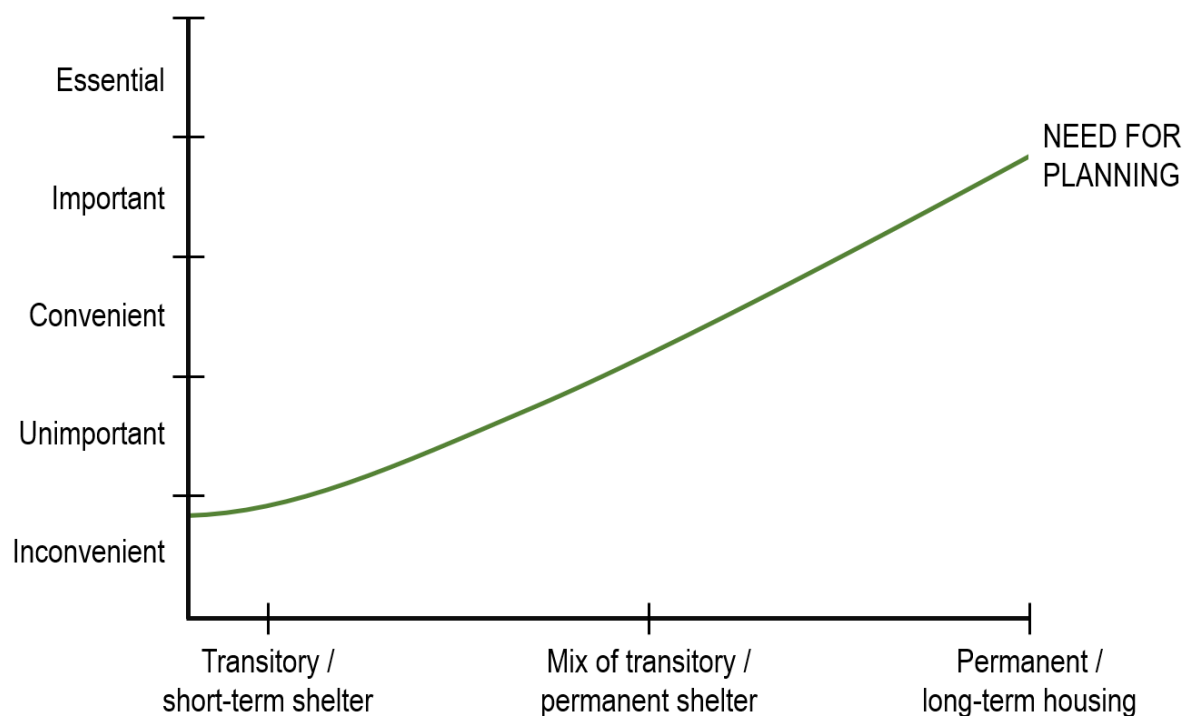


Figure 147. The changing need for or engagement in planning (initiated by either the community and state) according to the aspirations or expectations of length of stay. Elaborated by the author.

transactions. The restriction on sales and regulation of property values means that the profit opportunities from formalisation might also be limited for the de facto property owners. In reality, the gentrification threats in shantytowns concern (in different ways) the de facto property owners, the tenants, and informal entrepreneurs.

These conflicts and disagreements with the state lead the various community groups to reject active participation in the top-down planning process. Instead, they initiate their own parallel participatory planning processes where they debate these plans and develop their own alternative solutions and proposals. The main goal of this kind of bottom-up planning is to ensure the right to stay and negotiate more favourable and affordable formalisation conditions.

Figure 147 demonstrates how the need for engagement in planning, both state- and community-led, increases when expected residence changes from transitory to permanent. On the left side are areas in scenario 3, where the majority is living temporarily and does not need, or even want any form of planning. On the right side are shantytowns in scenario 4, where expected residence becomes more permanent, and the attempts to formalise tenure and infrastructure through top-down planning created new risks of expulsion, which sparked a parallel community mobilisation around planning.

What do the scenarios tell us about tenure uncertainty and planning

Table 2 compares the situation in scenarios 1-4 according to different criteria.

Table 2. Comparison of scenarios 1-4. Elaborated by the author.

	Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3	Scenario 4
Type of settlement	New informal settlements	Legitimised informal settlements	New shantytowns	Legitimised shantytowns
Location context	Suburban / peripheral	Suburban / peripheral	Central	Central
Risk of expulsion	High (eviction)	Low	Low or high (not significant)	High (gentrification)
Expected aspiration of residence	Permanent	Permanent	Transitory	Increasingly permanent (tenants and owners)
Motivation for community-led planning	High	Low	Low	High
Community priorities	Securing tenure	Household economy, housing improvement	Household economy, savings	Securing tenure
Motivation for state-led planning	Low	High	Low	High
Government priorities	Not legitimising illegal occupations	Formalisation, integration and upgrading	Not legitimising illegal occupations / unwilling to invest in transitory housing	Formalisation, integration and upgrading

From this analysis, I would like to emphasise a few patterns:

→ Risk of expulsion is a key factor that motivated community mobilisation

Risks of expulsion concern settlements in both peripheral and central locations. In scenario 1, illegal occupations extend the city outwards. The occupants attempt to legitimise their land tenure by imitating formally planned suburban subdivisions. In scenario 4, communities in centrally-located shantytowns engage in planning as a strategy to defend their right to stay and negotiate protections from market-driven expulsion driven by formalisation, speculation and rising real-estate values. In both cases the improvement of infrastructure and services has been important, but not prioritised over securing tenure rights. The difference is that in scenario 1, planning is done to supplement a dysfunctional planning system that led to unaffordability and shortage of land and housing, while in scenario 4, it compliments or confronts the planning process, which, according to the community leaders, generates or contributes to high risks of gentrification.

→ Expected aspiration of residence matters

Community interest in planning is minimal in areas for transitory housing (scenario 3). The state would also only initiate planning work in settlements that are recognized as permanent, but not before they are no longer sentenced to forced eviction or designated for massive eradication (scenarios 2 and 4). As many of my informants claimed, planning in settlements which from the beginning were thought as places for permanent living (scenarios 1 and 2) is a lot easier than in the messy and chaotic inner-city shantytowns (scenarios 3 and 4).

→ Motivations / priorities for planning are different, leading to conflicts

Communities living in informal housing and the state have different motivations and priorities for planning, even when both agree that planning is necessary. For the organised community in scenarios 1 and 4, the main priorities are guarantees of tenure security and preventing gentrification, while for the government planning agencies, the goals of planning are formalisation, integration and/or upgrading (scenarios 2 and 4). In scenarios 1 and 2, one of the sides may consider planning as important while the other as inconvenient. In all cases, state institutions act with a certain degree of ambiguity, which might be caused by unclear and changing goals, lack of sufficient resources or inadequate contextual data, which I will talk about later. These differences cause conflicts and, as in scenario 4, may lead to the emergence of two parallel planning processes. Only in scenario 3, when housing is transitory, neither the community nor the state takes initiative to engage planning interventions.

→ The order in which informal development happens does not align with state-led planning

Following on from the previous point, there are serious disagreements about what processes and planning interventions should happen in which order. The most critical point of conflict that remains constant in all four scenarios is about whether formalisation of ownership should come first or last in the process. In most cases the community demanded guarantees of tenure security as the first priority, but they normally preferred to wait or postpone formalisation, as they did not want to assume the costs of mortgage repayment under uncertain economic

conditions. In contrast, the governments tend to prioritise formalising property ownership before spatial interventions and infrastructure improvements.

→ A better definition of rights is needed to reduce tenure uncertainty

The narratives and scenario analyses also show that tenure-related conflicts and uncertainties in Argentina are caused by misleadingly formulated and applied rights to housing and property.¹²² While informal and illegal occupations are motivated primarily by desperation and lack of housing alternatives, leaders who organise such acts of civil disobedience are aware of the larger ideological conflict that they are part of. Until the contradictions as well as inconsistency in interpretation and enforcement of the rights to housing and property are resolved, occupants will have to make plans and negotiate tenure rights, each of them separately for their own settlement. This need for clarification of rights concerns both those who claim ownership and the tenants.

Economic uncertainty: When people do not know if their income is sufficient

The second type of the most impactful uncertainties in informal settlements and shantytowns is economic uncertainty. The broad scope of factors that are embedded in it can be summarised as not knowing whether one has the subsistence to afford housing and other living functions. Some of the most obvious manifestations of this problem are chronic poverty, insufficient and unstable income, as well as housing unaffordability, which result from an unstable economy, hyperinflation, high income inequality and predominantly informal forms of employment. Economic uncertainty has also become very important during the Covid-19 pandemic, where the loss of jobs and income has been more devastating for low-income households than the disease itself and other health-related risks, which I will discuss later. In these economic conditions, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to take a long-term perspective in planning at all scales and by different actors, from household budgets and their housing access to settlement development and formalisation.

The analysis considers insights from case studies and additional primary data coded as economic uncertainty. I will begin with discussing the relation of economic uncertainty with tenure issues and risks of eviction discussed in the previous section, before I discuss how it is experienced and how it impacts planning and development more generally.

After securing tenure, economic uncertainty becomes the main priority

As I discussed in the tenure uncertainty analysis, addressing economic uncertainty becomes the top priority for communities who either resolved their eviction risk situation (scenario 2) or live short-term in transitory housing

¹²² In some cases the conflict may be magnified due to complex overlap of additional rights and their interpretations. For example, in shantytown Rodrigo Bueno, which developed on the edge of a protected ecological zone, the struggle has been not just between the rights to housing and property, but also the right to clean environment (Carman & Olejarczyk, 2021).

(scenario 3). Their focus is on building up savings that will enable them to either improve their houses or move to better housing elsewhere.

In Guernica, where most of the occupants were victims of the economic crisis caused by the pandemic, the idea of generating jobs within the neighbourhood was an important part of the long-term vision included in the plan that was supposed to, in the first place, guarantee tenure security. In Costa Esperanza and other informal settlements or shantytowns, which achieved either perceived or factual protection from evictions, many residents formed workers' cooperatives and participated in state-led planning not necessarily out of interest to improve their neighbourhoods, but to seek out opportunities for public works that would secure them jobs. Small business owners or people working in other sectors had little to gain through their participation in planning and they would rather focus on their livelihoods and own entrepreneurial activities. In Villa 31, access to jobs and income-generating opportunities has always been highest on the agenda of the local population, and it has only been diminished periodically during urgent situations of evictions or more recently, unfavourable formalisation plans that might lead to unaffordability and eventual expulsion through gentrification.

In all the case areas, community interest in joint action and organisation may shift from the neighbourhood, where the focus is on spatial planning and resisting evictions, to the workplace as a way to ensure better livelihood prospects. Parallels can be made between informal occupants joining forces to fight for guarantees of housing tenure protection, and informal workers trying to secure stable work and better employment through organising themselves into different types of cooperatives or unions of informal workers and the unemployed, such as CTEP or UTEP. For both groups, organisation is about recognition of their citizenship and belonging. From this perspective, the city could be understood in two dimensions - as a place to live and as a place of work. For low-income people, both tend to be highly uncertain.

My research confirms that these two dimensions are tightly interconnected: the lack of stable and formal job opportunities hinders access to both formal rental and ownership housing arrangements. Low-income tenants working in the informal sector are in the worst situation, because they are increasingly unable to save towards buying property even with government subsidies, and at the same time do not meet entry requirements to rent decent places in the formal sector. While the fact of not owning property might contribute to higher mobility in terms of location in relation to job opportunities, the growing unaffordability of housing reduces housing choices to only renting in the most insecure, precarious or peripheral areas or taking part in illegal takeovers. The lack of a formal street address can also be a burden in searching for formal jobs. In the worst cases, losing work or sources of income may lead to homelessness.

Those who claim ownership of their dwellings are in a somehow more privileged situation compared to tenants, but they also face serious economic uncertainties. Formalisation of tenure pushed by the governments in Argentina is usually done through a not-so-innovative model of issuing long-term (often between 20 and 30 years), low-interest housing mortgages. However, in such an unstable economy where inflation tends to be very high and a large group of low-income people relies on unstable and informal work, the capacity for repayment of these mortgages is extremely risky and often impossible to predict. Land mafias and private developers may also demand regular (though often

unpredictable) contributions from individual occupants who settle on land they seize. Inability to pay or late payments may in the best case result in evictions and in the worst case, death threats or murder.

Informal livelihood strategies and housing practices in times of crisis and prosperity

Economic uncertainty nurtures informal livelihood strategies and development regardless of whether a particular household, or the country as a whole is in financial crisis or not. My cases show that informality is the norm or a preference even when tenure is secured and low-income families escape urgent poverty conditions. Informal work is not only a way of tax evasion, but it is also seen as more flexible and adaptable to the rapidly changing economic situation and a way to meet future aspirations. For example, I showed how the Paraguayan migrants in Costa Esperanza preferred informal employment for different reasons: to be able to spend long vacations in their home country, to increase the capacity to save and send remittances, and because they did not need social security contributions since education and healthcare system in Argentina is universal and free for all, and they did not plan to retire there anyway.

Increasing saving capacity was also a reason for avoiding or delaying formalisation of infrastructure and tenure. As I discussed earlier, many families in the case areas demand protection from eviction, but they may not want to take the next step towards formalisation due to high costs of mortgage repayment. Similarly, residents in Villa 31 and Costa Esperanza are aware that improved electricity infrastructure increased fire safety and guaranteed more stable service provision, but many of them refuse formal connections, because they do not want to pay for the services. In the worst cases, newly upgraded infrastructure is purposely stolen or damaged by the inhabitants themselves. In the context of economic uncertainty, informalisation of tenure and infrastructure outpaces the government's formalisation efforts.

For many, the main structure of social and economic support is not the state, but social networks and familiar relationships. In more stable conditions, these relations are based mainly on different forms of reciprocity, while in situations of crisis and high uncertainty, the prime driver of collective actions and support is solidarity. Local communities organised themselves into saving groups and helped each other with infrastructure provision and house building. In addition to more general supervision and organising tasks, community leaders and punteros were responsible for redistributing work assignments in their areas of influence. During the Covid-19 pandemic, whenever the state was unable to provide emergency response, it was the neighbourhood organisations and grassroots movements that took charge in their territories.

At a larger scale, informal urban development in uncertain economies like Argentina thrives both during periods of economic downturns and recovery. Illegal takeovers were especially frequent after the collapse of the military dictatorship in the 1980s, before and during the financial crisis of 2001, and again in the period of high inflation and the Covid-19 pandemic since 2017. In other years, when work opportunities were better, shantytowns and informal settlements continued to grow and densify. Promising economic prospects attract more people from poorer countries to settle in Buenos Aires. To respond to the increasing demand for cheap and transitory rental housing, many landowners invested in expanding their houses and built more rental units. This was observed especially in Villa 31 and other shantytowns in close proximity to a large variety of unskilled jobs. However, the recent hyperinflation crisis

reduces the payment capacity of tenants, which causes new conflicts between owners and tenants that may lead to more evictions.

Another manifestation of informality in my case study areas is that informal and self-built housing tends to be economically more feasible than social housing schemes and resettlement programs. Self-construction enables occupiers to build incrementally, according to their saving capacity. Expansion usually happens strategically, prioritising the most necessary spaces first. Additional rooms and spaces can be designated for renting out or other income-generating activities, such as small-scale production or retail. On the other hand, most of the social housing projects built by the state do not enable this kind of flexibility and are usually more expensive, even if they are implemented at a massive scale. Furthermore, they may be less desired if they are built far away from job opportunities.

Implications for urban planning: linking housing, employment and livelihoods

An important implication for planning is that informal settlements and shantytowns emerge and develop not only because of dysfunctional land-use laws. They are both the results of economic inequalities and uncertainties, and at the same time part of the solution to address them. From the perspective of low-income households, the advantage of informal development is affordability and access to jobs, which increases their saving capacities and improves economic prospects for the future.

In all settlements, planning interventions that addressed economic uncertainty ranged from fragmented emergency responses and local income support initiatives to large and long-term developmental projects. The lack of coordination between these plans and actions led to conflicts, waste of effort and unrealistic plans. As the example of Villa 31 shows, money alone is not enough to address economic uncertainties effectively.

Many of the government financed housing and infrastructure projects in different areas were designed in such a way that they first and foremost generate unskilled jobs for the local population and support the neighbourhood economies. In infrastructure improvement and maintenance projects in Costa Esperanza and other informal settlements and shantytowns, creating labour intensive jobs for the local residents and cooperatives was often preferred over more technologically advanced solutions that would require hiring professional external contractors. The government has also prioritised job generation in many of its massive social housing projects, especially in the economic recovery period of 2003-2007. Several of the planners I spoke to, including the representative from the World Bank, agreed that the contributions to local income generation and economic development were often more important than the physical, environmental or social benefits of their projects.

While these initiatives made a positive difference for a lot of families, they also had their drawbacks. The negative outcome in many of these cases is that the quality of infrastructure or housing (or its location) becomes of secondary importance, which in a long term can be counterproductive and lead to ineffective use of public resources. In addition, some of the job assignments are distributed by local community leaders or punteros for clientelist purposes or as a vote buying strategy, which might lead to exclusion of certain groups due to their political preferences or affiliation.

While job generation is often seen as an added benefit to housing and infrastructure projects, the understanding of the informal economy, the relationship between housing and income and the impacts of the fluctuating economic conditions, are often absent in urban planning. The primary objective of planning practised this way is then not so much to improve living conditions of the poor, but to formalise and focus on spatial management. This explains how economic uncertainty is a daily struggle of the citizens and a gap in knowledge for the planners and decision-makers, who through their actions (perhaps unwillingly), cultivate paternalistic approaches and developmental visions of the privileged classes.

Political uncertainty: When it is not known who takes decisions and how these decisions are made

The last of the three most significant types of uncertainties that impact informal settlements and shantytowns in Buenos Aires is political uncertainty. It is related to the questions about who takes the important decisions about their emergence, development and planning, how these decisions are made, and how they affect living conditions in these areas. The nature of political uncertainty lies in unstable governance and leadership structures, unclear roles of the different actors, challenges of participatory planning and absence of rule of law, all of which fosters informality.

Political certainty and stability have a fundamental function in resolving both tenure and economic uncertainties. The examples of Villa 31, Costa Esperanza and Guenrica, show how the lack of political alignment at local and national levels, as well as radical shifts in public administration and governance prolong risks of eviction and halt economic development in these areas. Accessing power and ensuring political stability has therefore become one of the main strategies that guarantee the success of planning and development processes, both those initiated by the community itself, and those led by urban planners working at all levels of the government. Therefore, many of the planners and all the community leaders I spoke to have at some point decided to engage politically. They do that mainly in order to increase the chances of meeting their top priority objectives, such as preventing expulsion, creating local job opportunities or integrating the areas they live or work in with the rest of the city. As both planners and community leaders meet at the political arena, the differences in their roles and power relations diminish. Sometimes they may even form political coalitions and lobby decision makers for the same causes.

The analysis in this section takes into consideration the insights and other relevant information marked as political uncertainty. I explain how political uncertainty is experienced in the case areas and how it impacts the planning processes there, with a particular focus on the political roles of community leaders and urban planners.

Political challenges magnify other uncertainties

The general mission of the Argentinian state regarding urban management is to ensure desired development according to the policies and standards that regulate planning, housing and infrastructure. The democratic governments in Argentina were unsuccessful in reforming or reversing laws, which date back to the last military dictatorship (known for brutal evictions of informal settlers) that ended in 1983. These laws, and particularly Decree 8912 introduced high housing standards that proved to be unrealistic in the context of a series of economic crises and political changes

in the following decades. This mismatch between unrealistic standards and the inability to enforce them led to growing inequality in access to affordable formal housing. When it became clear that evictions of illegal occupations do not solve the problem of substandard housing, the government had little choice but to tolerate informal housing development and attempt to formalise it. Introduction of Law 14.449, and to some extent the RENABAP registry were important steps towards recognizing this mismatch problem, but they lack financing and legal mechanisms to enforce their application, which means that they rely on the voluntary initiative of local governments.

In theory, making less legal reforms suggests predictability and certainty, but in the case of Buenos Aires the existing laws dating back to the 1970s lead to informal development, tenure conflicts and inequality, which magnified other types of uncertainties. The case of superiority of the old Decree 8912 and ignorance of the new Law 14.449 shows that many bureaucrats are hesitant towards change and unwilling to adapt to the new policy. At the same time, political conflict at the legislative level makes large structural reforms and implementation of long-term plans very difficult, leading to fragmented interventions, waste of public resources, and constantly changing priorities and strategies. The new national and provincial laws and regulations that recognize informal development have not led to unified local responses to the uncertainty problems.

In Villa 31, we have seen how the conflict about land ownership between the national and city governments held residents hostage in uncertainty about their residence rights. At the same time, the local authorities implement highly visible, yet low-impact design interventions to show that progress is being made, which raises questions about whether upgrading in this case serves first and foremost their own political interests and not that of the community. In Costa Esperanza, political disagreements about the use of resources and insufficient participation paralysed the work of planners from the provincial government, who did want to make a difference, but lacked the mandate to make meaningful changes. In addition, in both cases social media updates were used to exaggerate the impact of upgrading projects. Political conflict was also evident in Guernica, where the occupation was evicted despite identifying a valid legal alternative that would legitimise the settlement.

These conflicts are further magnified by the fact that in the context of strong political competition, transition of power leads to full replacement of leadership structures in public administration and disruption of ongoing plans. The period of one political term of four years is not long enough to make any meaningful changes and many initiatives are not taken up by administrations appointed by the new governments. In reality, decisions regarding eviction or eventual planning strategies are made on a case-by-case basis, depending on the local political dynamics, uncertain interpretations of the courts, short-term goals, clientelist vote-buying strategies and complex alliances with landowners. The differentiated treatment of informal occupations in Guernica and Los Hornos exemplifies this ambiguity very well. The former was violently evicted due to a political decision to discourage new illegal land takeovers, while the later was legitimised by the judge, who argued the residents had 'nowhere else to go'.

An important part of the problem as identified by my interviewees is that many politicians and planners do not have the right qualifications for their jobs. This leads to situations where administration and decision-makers in local governments are not aware of what legal mechanisms and regulations they can use to make correct diagnosis and address informal development. Many public officials lack the vocabulary and practical fieldwork experience in

marginalised areas, which would help them understand the magnitude and complexity of the challenge. The fact that the planning staff is often replaced when new political forces enter the government, complicates the situation further. In addition, the roles of the different actors are unclear, which can result in overlapping actions of the state, residents, private actors and NGOs, or complete absence of anyone who would take responsibility. While the passivity of the government institutions might lead to some sense of stability and tenure security, the lack of territorial presence and investments prolong the conditions of poverty, informality and precarity. Different NGOs attempt to fill the gaps, but they usually have insufficient political influence or support to scale up their activities and to synchronise them with planning efforts of the government.

Nevertheless, it is hard to generalise about the actions and motivations of 'the state'. The application of federal and provincial planning laws and ordinances varies in different municipalities. Some local governments (for example in Moreno partido), are more innovative and proactive in land use planning and land management, while others are hesitant to adapt to policy changes, and instead they continue to defend and enforce formalisation as defined in the obsolete authoritarian and technocratic standards set over four decades ago.

What is also different depending on the context is what the government institutions communicate to the local population and what they promise. In some instances, there are bold statements of impactful future changes and investments, like in the case in Villa 31. Although such promises tend to spark interest of the residents, the inability to deliver them or rumours about the possible negative side effects may cause scepticism, disillusion and mistrust, which can then provoke opposition and emergence of parallel planning and participation processes. In the most critical cases, unfulfilled promises have caused new illegal occupations and growth of informality. In other instances, it is the opposite, as seen in the example of Costa Esperanza. In this settlement, planners from OPISU have purposely tried to limit participatory planning precisely because they were aware of the high probability of not delivering on their promises. They did not want to raise false hopes, which could backfire on them.

While the nature of the problems differs from case to case, the fundamental political disagreement that causes uncertainty for the Argentinian poor who struggle with housing affordability is related to the contradictions between the rights to dignified housing and private property, both of which are, as I mentioned, embedded in the Argentinian constitution. The conflict is about whether the state should intervene in the increasingly privatised property markets to generate affordable housing solutions, or focus on protecting private property and (in many cases) the speculative interests of landowners. While the undisputed freehold property is more rooted in culture and policy, acknowledgement of the importance of the right to housing is reappearing more frequently, especially in periods of deep crises.

In this uncertain context, organised groups of the poor who are excluded from the formal housing market attempt to navigate their actions in a way that would address both the urgency of the housing shortage and show appropriate respect for private property. Those who engage in illegal occupations justify their actions on the principles of right to housing, arguing that the insufficient offer of housing subsidies together with an unregulated and exclusionary rental housing market gives them no other alternative. This was especially evident in Guernica, where the illegal takeover was labelled by its protagonists as 'land recovery'. At the same time, many occupant groups reject the idea of

community-owned land and repeat their willingness to pay for the lots in order to show compatibility of their actions with the hegemonic private property regime and thereby adding to the arguments for legitimising their illegal occupations.

Impact of political uncertainties on community leadership structures

In the case chapters, I told stories of neighbourhood representatives involved actively in urban planning, and urban planners engaged in things other than planning, or doing planning in ways that have little to do with what they have learned as students and professionals. I also discussed how in situations of powerlessness, both groups might decide to form new strategic alliances and engage politically in an attempt to increase their decision-making power. While the contexts are different, similar patterns have been identified for both shantytowns and informal settlements. In all cases, the differences between community leadership structures, spatial planning and local politics are being blurred.

Community leaders, punteros and other local representatives have an important role in filling the gaps of unmet demands for housing and basic services. This is motivated either by mistrust and need for the replacement of absent state institutions, or the necessity to make stronger links with the government to channel resources and lobby for increased presence and interventions. Whichever of these reasons is the case often depends on whether or not the political coalition that rules the local government is aligned with the preference of the community and its leaders. Such alignment is a desired condition, as it decreases political uncertainty. However, it is difficult to achieve and sustain over a long period.

All the community representatives I spoke with have strong political preferences and established tight connections with local politicians. Rather than shifting sides according to who is currently in power, these leaders engage politically to help their preferred political option secure votes and win the next election. Consequently, promises made by community leaders to their neighbours may be aligned with the political program of the local politicians they represent. This cooperation works both ways. The Costa Esperanza case shows how politicians and the local planning administration have nominated their own community leaders in order to increase their presence in the area.

To face the everyday challenges in their zones of influence, community leaders also get actively engaged in urban planning, not only as participants in the state-led processes, but also as facilitators of bottom-up planning initiatives or drivers of parallel development processes that imitate official zoning, planning and building codes. As I discussed in the section on tenure uncertainty, this involvement in urban planning is motivated by the need to legitimise illegal occupations, guarantee protection from evictions or gentrification, and ensure access to basic services. For organised communities, gaining knowledge of the planning and political processes, mastering useful vocabulary, and performing studies and enumeration within their own local context are some of the different ways to reduce uncertainties and address their housing needs. I argue that the community leaders whose work I followed have sufficient practical experience and understanding of urban planning concepts to do this type of work professionally. When it comes to qualifications, what differentiates them from many professional planners is primarily training in architecture or design, which is often irrelevant when working at a neighbourhood scale. Since planning in informal settlements and

shantytowns is very much different from normative planning taught at the university, both community representatives and professional planners gain their knowledge and skills in the field, working directly with the affected population.

This planning capacity, together with a broad network both within and beyond their own settlement, is an important resource for authorities, which on the one hand lack the capacity to respond to local needs, and on the other hand strive to ensure re-election and political continuity. Therefore, many of the community leaders are incorporated in the local planning administration and political structures. In conditions of governance instability and insufficient resources, such nepotistic practice is a pragmatic response to political uncertainty and a way to strengthen connections between the state and the community. The example of the School of Community Leaders shows how such collaboration between politicians, urban planners and local representatives can also be institutionalised and scaled-up.

Nevertheless, we should be careful with over-romanticising bottom-up planning and exaggerating the achievements of community leaders. These responses originate in acts of desperation and are by no means superior to normative urban planning. Community leaders need to face both external and internal conflicts. Forcing their point of view is rarely peaceful, and may require protests, exclusions or sacrifices. Illegal occupants mobilise not only in a diplomatic way through planning or gathering arguments and evidence, but they also need to be prepared for direct physical confrontation to defend their possessions and interests. Concurrently, informal settlements and shantytowns are rarely homogeneous and there tend to be disagreements about the goals among different interest groups, such as owners and tenants. Community leaders, punteros and opportunists who engage in criminal and illegal activities, such as seizing and subdividing land for speculative purposes, may themselves have their own personal gains and tend to engage in competition for access to resources with other local representatives, political activists or organisations.

Impact of political uncertainties on urban planners

The approaches and reactions taken by the professional urban planners I encountered in my research varied. Some of them stuck to the traditional approach of experts, while others decided to engage politically or acted as facilitators, representing the interests of marginalised communities in the planning and decision-making processes.

In the first case, planners see themselves as change-makers and are convinced that their legal and design solutions can resolve the problems of poverty and inadequate housing. They focus on the product of planning, rather than the process of decision making. This often comes at the cost of neglecting participatory planning or ignoring contextual particularities of informal settlements and shantytowns, which materialised in borrowing 'best practices' from abroad. The complexity of these areas and the mismatch between normative planning and the reality of informal housing verifies these approaches as irrelevant and misplaced. We have seen for example how some planners in Villa 31 found it difficult to apply formal building codes to the incremental and organic structures of the shantytown. Another example is how new public spaces or social housing projects for the resettled population were criticised by the 'beneficiaries' for design failures and bad implementation, which led to low sense of local ownership and bad maintenance. I have also documented how some architects and planners became frustrated after being assigned to other tasks than what they were trained for, such as emergency response during the pandemic or legal issues of

property ownership, instead of for instance urban design. Others expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that their ideas are not being implemented due to budgetary constraints or for political reasons. In many cases these situations led to resignation and renouncing jobs.

When plans do not receive sufficient attention or funding, many professionals who work on them decide to engage politically. They see direct access to political power as the best way to get plans implemented and followed up. For them, community involvement is important, but not necessarily to perform situation diagnosis or get valuable input to planning, but rather to consolidate support for policy proposals and predefined plans. This kind of cooperation can evolve differently. Some planners in the case study areas openly criticised the institutionalised planning system they represent. Others formed new political alliances together with local decision-makers and community leaders, such as the La Marea and La Popular movements in informal settlements and shantytowns respectively. Both of these were established by planners and politicians from the PRO coalition to challenge the traditional Peronist movements of the poor, which have dominated in these areas for many decades. It is important to recall that all of these old and new political organisations have been accused of clientelism and nepotism. I have also observed many cases when architects and planners that were faithful to the ruling political coalitions were often consciously tasked to implement and execute the political ideologies and priorities of their supervisors.

The third type of response of planners is that of facilitators, who tend to take the side of the marginalised communities. These planners might engage politically, but more than simply seeking support for their political causes, their main priority is to defend and represent those who are excluded in the system. While self-interest might play a role, my interpretation is that in contrast to the previous type, their actions are motivated by solidarity with those who hopelessly struggle for recognition of their right to dignified housing, an approach based on idealism and academic criticism of traditional top-down planning. This was the case in Villa 31 and Guernica, where some groups of (mainly young) architects and planners employed full- or part-time at local universities and research institutions, or activists with leftist political orientation volunteered to support planning efforts of the local community groups. Depending on the task, they took the roles of advisors, translators, and negotiators. This position may put them in conflict with planners who represent the official planning system and defend the interest of the state or private actors. In the best cases (from their perspective), facilitation can result in preventing eviction and transforming illegal occupations into legitimised neighbourhoods. The proposal of paid professional technical assistance in informal settlements and shantytowns which attempts to formalise this type of politically-motivated facilitation in planning, challenges the governance system founded on patronage, dependency, rigidity, and insensitivity to the situations of informality and exclusion.

Planner-facilitators have a genuine interest in participation and see communities as partners or comrades, rather than a mass that needs to be studied or can be manipulated. Such an approach based on facilitation, participation, assistance and physical presence in the field is also important, because it fills the gaps in architecture and planning education, which (with few exceptions) tends to neglect issues of informality and context, while focusing too much on designing projects for the privileged middle- and upper-class clients. The facilitation approach can bring significant results if it is combined with the political activism that was described earlier. While facilitation helps planners come

up with solutions that are adapted to the rapidly changing reality, political involvement increases the chances that these proposals are approved, funded and implemented.

Other uncertainties

Health uncertainty: When people do not know the threats and risks to their health and safety

Health uncertainty in my research is defined as not knowing health and safety risks. It includes concerns for sickness and infection, unsanitary living conditions, lack of hygiene and security threats. However, despite the huge impact Covid-19 had on the vulnerable groups in Argentina, health uncertainty in my case study areas was not very significant, or not taken as seriously as tenure, economic and political struggles. I found that people in informal settlements and shantytowns are willing to risk the loss of health and safety in order to ensure access to affordable housing and improve their household economy. Another reason is that Covid-19 and other health hazards did not introduce completely new problems, but only magnified old ones.

The loss of jobs and income caused by the lockdown and mobility restrictions damaged the lives of a lot more people than the disease itself. The inability to accumulate savings, as well as reliance on informal work and daily wages made a lot of people ignore the calls to 'stay at home' and keep a safe social distance. In many places it was also necessary to go out and interact with others to access water and pick up food rations or medicine. In Costa Esperanza, hunger led many to scavenge in the informal garbage dumps, which exposed them to additional health risks and contamination. At the same time, critical overcrowding and the inability to pay rent in Villa 31 and other shantytowns during the lockdown caused new displacements and illegal occupations in places like Guernica, Los Hornos and Costa Esperanza. The community mobilisation around emergency response in the pandemic period resulted in raised demands to address structural problems that made the poor vulnerable to the health and safety threats, such as chronic housing unaffordability, inadequate access to water and job precarity.

I have also documented how the concerns about safety from accidents were less important than the economic and shelter necessities. For instance, many residents in my case study areas prefer informal electricity connections that may cause fire hazards rather than paying high prices for much safer formal services. Similar situation concerns solid waste management in Costa Esperanza. Other examples include illegal occupation of spaces and building housing close to railway tracks or under elevated highways and high voltage power lines in Villa la Carbonilla, Villa Lamadrid, Villa 31 and Costa Esperanza.

Insecurity and health risks are also caused by criminal activities, which have increased due to the economic crisis in the pandemic years. Nevertheless, organised crime and fear of violence is a structural issue that has defined living conditions in Buenos Aires and the rest of Latin America for many decades. The perceived feeling of insecurity is an important self-reproducing factor deeply embedded in housing affordability. Those who lack the capacity to pay for housing in areas considered 'safe' need to live in constant fear or carry the burden of the stigma of being a criminal, which may also limit access to employment opportunities and reinforce precarity.

Environmental uncertainty: When the threats of 'natural' hazards and contamination are not known

Environmental uncertainty in this thesis is understood as not knowing the risks and damages caused by natural hazards, contamination and climate change. Similar to health uncertainty, concerns about environmental threats have not been identified as significant in my case study areas. The main reason is the long-term perspective and lack of sense of urgency of environmental risks in conditions of shortage of affordable shelter, risks of eviction and a highly unstable economy. At the same time, most environmental hazards in the Buenos Aires region are to a certain degree periodic and predictable. There is also a belief that with sufficient investment, these threats can be preventable.

The main environmental risk in this part of the continent is flooding. High demand for land and housing combined with inefficient urban planning, lack of enforcement of building regulations and tolerance for low-density suburban development resulted in the emergence of both upper-class gated communities and illegal occupations in flood-prone areas. The flooding risk of the former has been solved by large investments in landscape interventions.

Residents in informal settlements and shantytowns usually do not have the capacity to implement such measures in advance, but they hope that they will manage to solve the flooding problem at some point in the future with or without the help of the government. In the meantime, they may act individually by elevating land before building their houses or collectively by digging dikes and drains, as in Costa Esperanza and Guernica respectively. However, these actions are often unsuccessful. Poorly executed infill resulted in the collapse of several houses in Costa Esperanza and frequent flooding in the lower-lying areas. Standing water after heavy rainfall was also a major problem in Villa 31, where uncoordinated action and poor maintenance caused clogging of the drainage system.

Another example of environmental uncertainty in the case study areas is contamination resulting from accumulation of garbage. This is also related to the risk of flooding, as uncollected garbage clogs drainage infrastructure and complicates water runoff. However, similarly to the situation of informal electricity connections, many residents in informal settlements and shantytowns are not willing to pay extra for garbage collection. Interest in separation and safe disposal of solid waste may emerge in cases where there are programs to incentivize recycling or to employ workers' cooperatives, both of which offer income-generating opportunities for the local population.

These two examples show that environmental uncertainty is much less significant for vulnerable communities than unresolved tenure and precarious economic conditions. The urban planners I spoke to are somehow more aware about environmental risks, but they agreed that it lays low on their priority list. Those who seem to take these issues most seriously are multilateral organisations, such as the World Bank and BID, which usually require inclusion of climate action measures in the upgrading projects they finance.

Data and methods uncertainty: Not knowing what data is needed to plan and how it would be used

Another type of uncertainty that affects the development of informal settlements and shantytowns is that of data and methods. In contrast to other uncertainties this one concerns mainly the work of urban planners, but may also be related to the activities of community leaders and punteros engaged in planning work in their areas of influence. Data and methods uncertainty in my research is defined as lacking sufficient relevant data to provide the knowledge

necessary to make planning decisions, and the indecisiveness regarding the way to approach informal development. One of the main reasons for this is the lack of updated data both at macro (statistical) and micro (contextual) scales, as well as unclear planning methodologies and strategies. This type of uncertainty is partly a result of political uncertainty, and the way in which political decisions (or the lack of) reduce the resources and mandate of urban planners, and lead to constantly changing priorities in both the work environment and the environment being planned. Data uncertainty is therefore both a cause and consequence of informal development.

From the perspective of the government, the main data source that informs policy strategies, planning priorities and budget allocation for informal settlements and shantytowns is the RENABAP database. It is based on country-wide enumeration from 2016, but it has not been updated in the last several years. Considering the dynamic informal development within and outside of the surveyed areas, as well as the impact of the crisis in the pandemic years, RENABAP quickly became obsolete. The national census is done even less frequently and does not collect detailed and useful information to inform planning in informal settlements and shantytowns. The fact that some of the best sources of information on informal urban development (including for my own research) are satellite images, speaks for itself.

Planning decisions at the local level are often based on settlement-wide surveys and enumerations. However, these initiatives have also gone wrong in many cases. Hasty data collection, frequent rotation of the residents and conflicting interests between different inhabitant groups led to inaccurate, missing or outdated data. This was especially visible in Villa 31, where the reliance on an incomplete and old survey that underestimated the number of tenants resulted in a miscalculation of the need for housing for relocated families.

Top-down planning processes are also challenged by the lack of contextual qualitative data and poor understanding of the nature of informality. Insensitivity to the priorities, preoccupations and aspirations of the local community has led to unpopular decisions and proposals, such as overspending on landmark buildings or public space improvement, while neglecting urgent needs for housing and basic infrastructure. In the case of Villa 31, inspiration from successful projects abroad might have had more influence on planning decisions than the community demands and requests.

The example from Costa Esperanza shows that community leaders can also take inspiration from practices abroad. In general, however, local representatives base their judgement on a good understanding of the context. They often perform surveys or collect their own data required to respond to the local needs or to support community demands. One of such bottom-up initiatives was the open source Resource Map CC8 with location of important informal services and places of interest, which community leaders in Costa Esperanza developed for their own neighbourhood. Similar work is also done by NGOs and universities, which collect rich contextual data and support these planning processes.

The stories of all case study areas show that the weakest point of the planning system was establishing meaningful and regular participation processes, where the local residents would be given a choice to not only influence planning, but propose and lead the initiatives they believe are best for them. Many planners, especially those with backgrounds in design and architecture, lack knowledge and training in data collection or participation and even more so in informal contexts. Some of them admitted themselves that they were poorly prepared for their tasks and they had to learn from experience. Such reflections were particularly evident in the pandemic period, when many planners were deployed to emergency tasks and it was nearly impossible to perform face-to-face participation meetings.

11. Understanding uncertainty and informality in planning

...practice doesn't exactly make perfect, but then neither does theory, and in practice, practice teaches a lot better than teaching. (Hamdi, 2004, p. 116).

My personal curiosity and the wish to bridge the gaps between theory and practice within a field I am very passionate about, brought me all the way to the marginalised neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires. My goal for this thesis was to present more than just a thick description of what I experienced in the field, but to challenge some of the existing assumptions and provide useful insights for practitioners, researchers, policy-makers, students and planning enthusiasts in Argentina and abroad.

In the previous chapter, I analysed my empirical findings and classified the encountered uncertainties into different types. In the pages that follow, I connect these learnings with the theories and ideas on uncertainty and informality that framed my research, which I introduced in chapter 2. The main part of this chapter is structured in accordance with the order of my research questions. I will discuss the experiences, impacts and implications of the identified uncertainties for the development and planning of the informal settlements and shantytowns of Buenos Aires. As a way to conclude, I will summarise and reflect upon the main theoretical and methodological implications and contributions of my study, as well as the way forward.

Tenure, income and decision-making

Uncertainty, or gaps in knowledge and the inability to project the future, materialise in housing unaffordability, economic precarity, tenure insecurity and profundicating of informal development as a way to access shelter. It is also reflected in the contestation of urban planning as a political tool to achieve desired living conditions and vision of the city. In my research, I discovered the different ways in which the urban poor in Buenos Aires traded one uncertainty for another to satisfy their needs and achieve their goals. Unable to respond to all the uncertainties, the planning institutions have also attempted to prioritise, but in this process they have, unintentionally, created new uncertainties and risks.

I argue that gaps of knowledge and misplaced response to the problems of the poor by the state institutions are attributed to the lack of thorough understanding of the needs and aspirations of low-income people, as well as the disalignment of intentions and actions between these two groups. An important contribution to theory on urban development, which I propose, is the manner in which formalisation efforts are not only obstructed, but even countered by processes of informalisation of tenure and economic activities in contexts of overlapping uncertainties. Therefore,

I argue that informal housing development and community self-organisation should be seen as more than just a result of socio-economic inequalities and uncertainties: it is also a pragmatic and logical response and solution to mitigate them. This materialises in informality as an alternative way of accessing affordable shelter, where governance and planning systems based on western practices and standards are ineffective.

Unaffordability and economic uncertainty

Housing unaffordability and economic uncertainty in Buenos Aires significantly limit the choices of housing options of low-income people. The general context of a rapidly changing economy and deregulated neoliberal urban management in Argentina increases socio-economic inequalities, leading to a chronic and unresolved housing crisis. Comparably to the claims by Harvey (2013), Procupez (2015) and Ryan-Collins et al. (2017), these conditions transfer the burden of financial uncertainty on to Argentinian society in general.

The main strategy for affordable housing provided by the state are the more traditional social housing programs, but different local institutions have also experimented with other alternatives, such as rental housing subsidies, as well as financial and policy support for housing cooperatives. I have collected vast amounts of data on these formal ways to access shelter, but an in-depth analysis of these is beyond the scope of my thesis. The reality I encountered in Buenos Aires is that the mainly informal and precarious employment or welfare support, which the poor rely on to survive, in addition to accelerating inflation rates and high income gaps, makes many of the formal housing options unaffordable and unsustainable in the long-term. Poor households are excluded from subsidised social housing mortgages or formal rental housing due to insufficient or unstable income. Unaffordability and disruption of mortgage or rent payment causes further informalisation of these types of housing. In other cases, waiting lists for allocation of social housing are too long. Housing cooperatives, which proved to be a hopeful alternative in the 2000s, have suffered from decreasing funding and lack of policy support in recent years. At the same time, property prices in peripheral areas have also increased due to the introduction of high standards for infrastructure provision and housing construction by the last military dictatorship in the late 1970s, which only recently started to be seriously challenged.

In this situation, informal housing strategies, such as illegal land occupation, are often the only affordable alternatives for the poor in Buenos Aires. Just as most other large urban areas in Latin America (Turner, 1976; Gilbert, 1994; Greene & Rojas, 2008; Hernández et al., 2010; Ward et al., 2015), the lack of sufficient capital forces these households to build and expand their houses incrementally over a long time, instead of moving into a finished house. Therefore, informal settlements and shantytowns emerge from and continue to develop due to economic uncertainties, which cause housing unaffordability and precariousness.

Risk of eviction and tenure uncertainty

The kind of uncertainty that inhabitants in most informal settlements and shantytowns of Buenos Aires need to face relates to tenure insecurity and risks of evictions. For them, ensuring the right to stay on occupied land is more important than health or environmental risks, and in many cases comes before addressing economic needs. Tenure

uncertainty can be defined as risks coming from not knowing the probability and impact of potential future events (see Satterthwaite & Bartlett, 2017), which in this case could be acts of eviction of illegal occupants or unaffordability leading to gentrification and forced displacement. The state of temporary tolerance for informal occupations without guarantees for permanent residence resembles what Yiftachel (2009) called the 'permanent temporariness' in 'grey spaces'. As I found out, tenure conflicts in Argentina are in many cases caused by contradictions and disputes between the constitutional rights to housing and property.

Tenure uncertainty is experienced differently depending on such factors as the centrality of the settlement, aspirations of length of stay and risks of eviction (see Table 2), which might be related to the land ownership situation (as also claimed by Payne, 2002). In places meant for short-term and transitory residence, risk of expulsion is not significant and the future is projected from the perspective of saving capacities of the households, and not the development of the settlement. Using the terminology proposed by Anderson (2010), in transitory housing both of the community and state actors react with relatively little anticipation, though the strategies of resisting forced evictions or resettling residents to new housing can be characterised as a form of preparedness.

The condition of uncertainty is magnified by the fact that there is no consistency in the way in which different government institutions approach informal and illegal land and housing occupations. In the most critical cases, when the state decides to use force to defend formality (Altrock, 2012), residents are evicted. Regardless of whether or not they are compensated by monetary or housing subsidies, evictions do not stop new illegal occupations, but displace them to other areas. Unresolved conflicts around occupations can eventually turn into endless and meaningless sequences of violent confrontations. In such situations, communities might react by organising physical resistance or self-defence.

However, since forced expulsions are politically risky and unpopular, the different government institutions had to consider alternative solutions, which assume that the occupants are allowed to stay. Sometimes the de facto tenure security can be ensured simply through the passivity of the government institutions, who neither expel the occupants, nor plan for the future of the settlement. In these cases, the status quo ensures stability, while planning or relocation efforts would have generated or magnified uncertainty for the economically disadvantaged families.

Tenure uncertainty is the top priority for those who need or want to think of their dwellings as permanent or long-term solutions. This can be addressed through initiating community-driven (bottom-up) urban planning processes, examples of which were documented also in other contexts (Hamdi, 2004; Lopes de Souza, 2006; Holston, 2009; Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015; Shrestha & Aranya, 2015; Kaika, 2017). In these kinds of illegal occupations, it is the uncertainty around possible expulsion, and not any other risk or aspiration, that is a key factor that motivated community mobilisation. I find it very impressive how people without formal education and experience in architecture and urban planning are able to envision and imitate a relatively harmonious urban development. This can be exemplified in how spatial layouts and urban structure of new land takeovers are made, or in the appropriation of the term gentrification in the bottom-up planning process in case of the centrally located shantytowns. There is, however, little agreement about whether such housing strategies should be called 'heroic' or 'criminal'. I would also be reluctant to suggest that these bottom-up and informal pre-planning attempts and decisions can be labelled 'good planning'. We

should, therefore, not romanticise the way in which low-income communities mobilise around bottom-up planning. It should be emphasised that it is often more of an act of desperation in face of high tenure uncertainty than a process that aims at improving living conditions.

Importantly, this imitation of formal spatial planning techniques and vocabulary was done not so much regardless of, but to a large extent because of a high risk of eviction. Anderson (2010) would have classified the modes of anticipation of communities in these informal settlements as precaution and preparedness in the face of possible evictions. On the other hand, planners working for local authorities show no signs of anticipatory action around existing occupations, but they do act preemptively to try to stop new illegal takeovers.

The situation changes when illegal occupants in one way or another secure their right to stay. In these cases, priorities shift from collective actions that aim at securing tenure to addressing individual housing and economic needs, a phenomenon that was also documented by Gilbert and Ward (1985). In other words, residents focus less on the neighbourhood and more on the workplace and home. Applying the vocabulary proposed by Anderson (2010), in legitimised informal settlements with secured tenure, the lower interest in participation and engagement in planning by community actors and their leaders materialises in a lower degree of collective anticipation. The attempts of regularisation and anticipatory action of the planners can be characterised as a combination of precaution, preemption and preparedness. Anticipatory actions of the community at a neighbourhood scale can reappear in the face of possible gentrification and market-driven displacements, especially in centrally located areas. These efforts can be classified as precaution or preemption, depending on the degree of confidence about the risk of expulsion. State-led planning can be described as more reactive than anticipatory, though the limited attempts to protect against potential market-driven displacement show signs of preemptive action (ibid.).

Failed formalisation efforts

If we accept that uncertainty is a product of a future-oriented activity of planning, then what follows is that informality is a product of the act of formalisation (Roy, 2005; Altrock, 2012) as practised by mainstream urban planning. As I showed, the main problem of formalisation in Buenos Aires is the high chance of unaffordability of housing and services, which counters the arguments put forth by Hernando de Soto (2001), who claimed that property formalisation of tenure unlocks financial capital and leads to prosperity. I documented that unaffordability, depending on the location and land value, may cause gentrification and displacement of the most vulnerable groups to less desired areas, which is what many scholars have warned about (Payne 2002, Roy, 2005; Payne et al., 2009; van Lindert, 2016; Satterthwaite, 2020). My research also confirms the observation made over 50 years ago by Turner (1972), who claimed that the urban poor prioritise access to unskilled jobs and the ability to accumulate savings, while formal ownership and high living standards imposed by the state institutions are not preferred and may even be inconvenient if they contribute to increased housing expenditures.

Since informality as a mode of living and working supports the goals of the low-income families in Argentina, most formalisation efforts attempted by the government often face opposition and mistrust. In some cases, it may also result in grassroots (Lopes de Souza, 2006), or 'insurgent' planning (Miraftab, 2009). However, I found that imitating

formalisation or showing capability with formal rules and regulations (as in spatial planning) may be done strategically by the residents in informal settlements to reduce their tenure uncertainty. Such uncertainty is lower in settlements, which are in some way legitimised (or protected from eviction) and at the same time, allowed to maintain their informal economic and tenure structures. This shows that urban spaces can be understood as a continuum of complex overlaps of uncertainties as well as formal and informal practices (Altrock, 2012).

What I found interesting in Buenos Aires is that uncertainty nurtures informal strategies for livelihood and housing development both in times of crisis and economic growth. In downturn periods, it materialises in high housing unaffordability, causing new illegal land takeovers, while in times of prosperity, the need for affordable housing remains high due to new waves of migrants from poorer countries in the region, which leads to densification of low-income settlements and building unauthorised rental housing units. The prevalence of informal mode in good and bad times proves that informality is highly adaptive to rapidly changing contexts and conditions (AlSayyad, 2004, Roy, 2005).

Uncertainty in development and the status of informality may be further increased when definitions of precarity and minimum acceptable housing conditions increase, as they have always done throughout history (Gilbert, 2007). My findings from Buenos Aires confirm this observation. Despite gradual improvement of living standards, many of the studied settlements continue to be considered informal due to updated terminology and expectations inscribed in laws that attempt to classify and formalise marginalised settlements. Status of some social housing estates have even been downgraded to informal due to a combination of deterioration, chronic poverty and rising minimum housing standards.

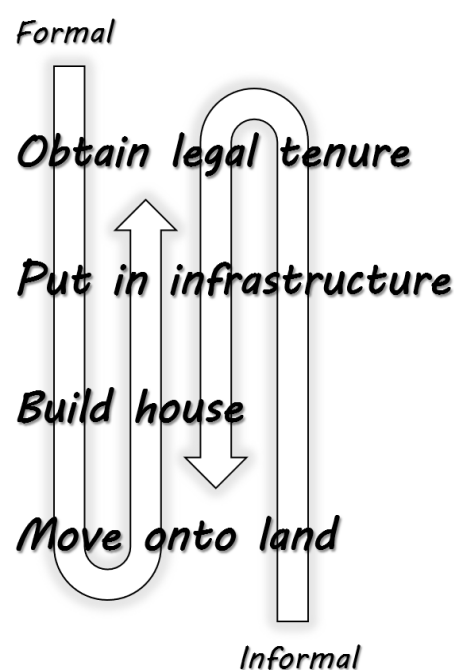


Figure 148. The formal and informal housing access processes and the 'informalisation' turnbacks. Modified model from Hamdi (2010).

At the same time, uncertainty does not only foster informality, but it improves it, making informality more organised and informed. My study supports the claim I made earlier that informality partially compensates for the inefficiency of the formal, and therefore cannot be seen as something negative or abnormal. The documented manifestations of informality are mainly of the supplementary kind (Altrock, 2012). This means that instead of filling the gaps left by planning codes and regulations, the informal practices and governing systems in informal settlements and shantytowns replace formal rules, policies and standards, which are not enforced or fail to ensure social order and prosperity. Uncertainty and informality are therefore generated by the unrealistically high expectations for housing and urban development that cannot be materialised or ensured equally for all sectors in the society, which creates large gaps between policy and reality that planners hopelessly attempt to address. This is also in line with the claims about prohibitive standards for housing and infrastructure made by Turner (1972, 1976) and Echavarría et al. (2021).

My findings support the theory that informal development tends to happen in reverse of what we accept as the formal housing process, where tenure is secured first and housing occupation is the last step (McLeod, 2001; de Paula et al., 2010; Hamdi, 2010; see Figure 6). However, instead of seeing development as a linear process from informality to formality (or reverse), I would add that the process can change directions, meaning that the formalisation process can be countered by informalisation (Figure 148). In my case areas, such a reversion into informalisation happened primarily when efforts to formalise housing tenure or infrastructure connections were slow and imposed unaffordable rates (or fear of them), justifying the more informal access as free or cheaper and therefore more convenient for the users and de facto property owners. In other words, urban spaces and activities informalise as a conscious strategy to achieve the main goal of the poor, which is to maximise their saving capacities (Turner, 1972). Nevertheless, the way in which informalisation counters or outpaces formalisation actions in urban areas deserves more research. The formal and informal housing access processes (Figures 6 and 148) could serve as a theoretical framework for studying the phenomenon of informalisation.

Uncertain top-down and bottom-up political and planning processes

If we take a step back, we could argue that the problems of weak governance and profound economic hardships, which in Argentina contribute to the development of informal settlements and shantytowns, are not exclusive to the countries in the Global South. Political and economic uncertainties are also increasingly present in cities in more prosperous countries, where the number of homeless people is comparable or even higher than in Buenos Aires (see CELS, 2019 and Ortiz & Roser, 2022). Nevertheless, illegal land occupations and informal housing are not present in the North at such a large scale as in Argentina. Therefore, I would like to propose an alternative way of thinking about informal housing development in Buenos Aires, which is inspired by ideas put forth by Hamdi (2004) and Turner (1976). It goes beyond generalised structural issues and subscribes to the idea of seeing from the South (Watson, 2009a).

My findings indicate that informal settlements and shantytowns in Buenos Aires result from a contextual hybrid mode of politics and urban management (see similar claims in Dupont et al., 2016; Zarazaga & Ronconi, 2018 and Basile, 2022). While national politics has to certain degree penetrated these areas, reinforcing dependence through a relationship of patronage and clientelism, these settlements are to a large extent self-governed and resistant to the reforms and centralised management practices. The official land-use and spatial planning systems are often based on the colonial past and increasingly take inspiration from modern European and North American legal frameworks, rights, standards and practices (the 'formal'). My argument is that these Western visions of governance and urban development are then imposed on Argentinian society as a whole, with mixed results. For example, few would disagree with the need to provide and upgrade infrastructure according to the Western standards in marginalised settlements in Argentina, but how this can be done is highly contested. The detachment from the context of precarity makes the Western models work only for some of the more affluent parts of the society. For many others, it is either necessary, or more practical and convenient to follow approaches that confront, extend or lay outside of the official frameworks. These are influenced by a combination of more traditional, pragmatic and self-help housing solutions, with less modernist and less bureaucratic development practices, as well as small-scale and horizontal decision-making

processes typical to Latin American societies, considered by the governing elite as the 'informal'.¹²³ It is the gap between these two: the modern global and traditional local systems, or using Watson's (2003) term the "conflicting rationalities", that generate constant changes in political priorities and strategies, unclear roles of different actors, fragmented urban interventions, incoherent urban policy, exclusion, as well as prolonged uncertainty and precariousness.

Political uncertainty in informal settlements and shantytowns is expressed in the way in which the local decision-making process does not follow the hierarchical governance system, which separates between the political actors, bureaucrats and regular citizens. The approaches and choices of community leaders and planners in my study show that in the context of overlapping uncertainties, planning is an integral part of the political struggle. Firstly, plans and policies cannot be implemented locally without the political endorsement and support of community leaders. Additionally, the real needs and demands of marginalised groups living in informal settlements and shantytowns are not met when planners themselves are not involved politically or there is no political alignment between the community leaders and local and regional governments. This subscribes to the idea that community members are planning practitioners and political actors empowered to do much more than just passively participate in planning processes (Hamdi, 2010).

Although these two official and unofficial systems are often at odds with each other, sometimes they attempt to find common ground or foster innovation. One way to explain how these differences lead to conflict and uncertainty, is to recall the inflexibility of the official participation processes of many planning agencies in Buenos Aires. Characteristic of such top-down participation is that the chance to gather input from the affected population was limited, or the process was reduced to simply informing the public about the plans and intervention proposals (see Arnstein, 1969). This is to a large extent due to time pressure or self-centred political ambitions, but perhaps most importantly, it happens because of fear that the visions and ideas of the planners and politicians would be rejected by community members, while the counter proposals might be unrealistic within the existing legal and planning frameworks. The situation in both cases would create 'wicked problems' (Rittel & Weber, 1973) and uncertainties within the planning system or the guiding values (Friend & Jessop, 1969; Abbott, 2005). An example of this is the struggle for acknowledgement and permission of incremental housing construction and support to the self-organisation efforts of informally developed neighbourhoods, which would give more agency to communities as development practitioners and reduce the power of architects and planners. This is a very relevant debate that started with ground-breaking research by Turner (1976) and continues today. In many cases, therefore, it is not participation alone, but political involvement and activism that can lead to changes in urban policy that would reduce uncertainties and the gap between the official frameworks and the messy urban reality. The particularity of the Buenos Aires case is that all the actors, from heterogeneous community and citizen groups to corporate actors and state authorities, decide to engage

¹²³ In addition to the social and political organisation in informal settlements and shantytowns, a perfect example to strengthen this argument are housing cooperatives founded on the structures based on familiar, indigenous, migrant, friendship, neighbour and other kinds of social relationships and networks, ruled in their own particular ways that resemble a hybrid version between traditional tribal and modern corporate decision-making (see Pedro et al., 2020 and Rodríguez, 2021). Due to lack of space, these cases have not been discussed in this thesis.

politically to renegotiate rights to housing and property, clarify tenure situation, and push for implementation of their conflicting visions of the city.

However, I have also brought up cases where alternative participation processes facilitated by NGOs, communities themselves and a limited number of progressive planning agencies led to policy reforms, tenure agreements and spatial plans that rectify the inefficiency of the formal and represent innovative and compromise solutions between the rigid planning system, and the illegal, informal or more pragmatic development practices. This situation supports the claim that uncertainty in participation is wrongly perceived as external in planning and that people constitute uncertainty, which makes many planners prefer to avoid participation and stick to control (see Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015). The real question is not about whether or not to enable participatory processes in the context of informality and uncertainty, but rather, how it should be done.

Corruption, clientelism and opportunism as co-creators of uncertainty

Uncertain tenure, economic and political conditions weaken the rule of law, which fosters corruption, clientelism and opportunism. In my research in Buenos Aires, I encountered many different ways in which these forces impacted the development of marginalised settlements and obstructed their planning. One of the premises is that at the governance level, planning and land management is often used as a tool to realise political goals of including or excluding defined groups of the population, or facilitating certain kinds of real estate or commercial development.

Corruption, clientelism and opportunism disrupt the normative system of urban governance, transferring the reliance of the poor from the state onto powerful actors, who may not necessarily prioritise the welfare of these vulnerable populations. This also leads to an erosion of trust, which is a fundamental precondition for effective and democratic urban planning to take place. Landlords, capitalists and politicians who engage in corrupt and clientelist practices have the power to push others into informality or bring them back into the official system, depending on what is more convenient for them. In a society where power inequalities are large, and trust is limited, there is more willingness to protect private property and enforce rules on others, rather than collaborate. In this context, corruption, clientelism and opportunism reinforce all the important types of uncertainty for the marginalised communities: tenure, economic and political, while they may also reduce uncertainty for the powerful groups that benefit from it.

To complicate this further, I have gathered evidence that indicates that collaboration with or inclusion of the local punteros and community leaders in the local governance system has in some cases been driven by corrupt, clientelist or nepotistic practices, motivated primarily by the idea of vote buying and extending political influence into informal settlements and shantytowns. This explains for example why more upgrading projects have been promised (or in best cases the projects have started) during the election campaigns compared to the period after the elections. In other cases, the job hiring process and contracting for such tasks as maintenance and waste management in low-income areas has often promoted individuals, businesses or cooperatives based on their political preferences or activism. I have also documented cases where reporting about the successes of housing and infrastructure upgrading processes in social media and promotion campaigns was biased or exaggerated for political reasons. Punteros and community leaders who operate in the same areas often compete for the same resources, which leads to internal divisions within

the communities. The situation I documented in many ways resembles cases where planning and particularly the innovative 'invited spaces' become vehicles for middle class-citizens, whereas low-income groups often have to rely on patron-client relationship (see Baud & Nainan, 2008; Mitlin, 2014; Weitz-Shapiro, 2014 and Walters et al., 2021).

Unofficial modes of planning or informal housing development are also in many cases driven by criminal groups and opportunists who take advantage of the high demand for affordable housing. They often act as quasi real-estate developers, who takeover land illegally, subdivide it into smaller lots and sell them to families in need, who might not be fully aware about how these processes take place and what are the risks in the case of late payments. Although these illegal takeovers can definitely be considered as criminal acts, I will argue that they also play an important role in filling the gap of the dysfunctional state, which is unable to ensure or provide affordable housing through formal means. The success rate of these housing strategies varies from case to case.

At the same time, I encountered a lot of people in Buenos Aires with what I perceive as 'good' intentions, who are aware of the issues of corruption, clientelism, nepotism and opportunism, and who are willing to challenge these practices. Many of them are convinced that the best way to solve these problems is to engage politically. They themselves represent a broad range of political options from radical left to liberal and conservative.

Nevertheless, my research has only touched the surface of these issues. Going deeper into analysing the legal and moral dimensions of clientelism, opportunism and criminality in informal urban development is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Gaps between communities and planners

Summing up the discussion so far, I argue that the uncertainties in informal settlements and shantytowns in Buenos Aires can be represented as a series of gaps where the intentions and actions, as well as knowns and unknowns for residents of these areas, and planners or decision-makers representing the state are different and often not aligned:

- Needs, motivations and priorities for low-income people are constantly changing and most of the time contradict the goals of planning and visions of modernism, which also tend to shift due to political changes and preferences,
- Paths towards achieving future aspirations of communities and individuals do not follow the pre-established urban development standards and expectations of what a house should do and be like before habitation,
- Order in which informal development happens does not align and may even work in reverse with state-led planning process,
- Anticipatory approaches (precaution, preemption and preparedness) of community actors and planners are not aligned,
- Attempts of formalisation contradict the pragmatic advantages of informalisation,
- Rights to dignified housing contradict rights to private property,
- Vertical and horizontal governance structures and participation systems are not compatible,
- Contextual knowledge does not comply with technical and generic knowledge,

- The push for decentralisation of planning challenges the professional expertise and power of urban authorities,
- The impacts of corrupt, clientelist and opportunistic practices may be positive or negative for certain groups, depending on connections, power relations, commercial interests and political circumstances.

In the next section, I will explain how these differences impact planning and further development of informal settlements and shantytowns. I would like to end this part by suggesting that the list above could potentially serve as ideas for further research and development of new, 'Southern' theories and vocabularies to conceptualise urban development (Watson, 2009a; Bhan, 2019) in conditions of uncertainty and informality.

Reinforcing uncertainty through planning

if we accept that in today's climate of uncertainty and complexity, wisdom holds more value than knowledge in practice, then it follows that who we are, how we work, is more important than what we know. (Hamdi, 2004, p. 131)

Urban planning is a future-oriented activity that guides the development of cities, which typically follows linear routines of investigation, goal setting and implementation. This would also include action and intervention in marginalised settlements that have developed outside of the formal planning regulations and building codes, with the goal of incorporating them with the regulated urban system of property registries, licences, permits, taxes, etc. Leaving structural issues of economic challenges aside, uncertainties as gaps in knowledge to do planning, are both the reasons why informal development occurs, and products of the inadequate response of planners who deal with this phenomenon. In other words, unaddressed uncertainties create informality, while ignored informality reinforces the same uncertainties that shaped them. The lesson from this study is that the conditions of uncertainty and informality do not only impact the planning and development of informal settlements and shantytowns in Buenos Aires by making it extremely problematic, but that uncertainties and informalities are themselves *created* by the act of planning.

This happens in different ways: by ignoring the possibility that development may occur outside the official regulations, by setting unrealistically high housing and infrastructure standards, by following exceedingly rigid development routines, by favouring property rights over housing rights, by misunderstanding the urgency of tenure insecurity and housing unaffordability, as well as by undervaluing participation and community empowerment in planning. All of these problems exclude large sections of the low-income population from the formal city, leading to socio-spatial segregation and a situation where some have to cope with more uncertainty than others. The excluded respond with their own planning rationalities which may or may not be in conflict with the formal system. There are, however, significant processes of planning reforms in Buenos Aires that attempt to break this vicious circle of uncertainty, informality and exclusion. They attempt to improve living conditions of the poor through facilitating a planning process that would bring communities and planning agencies closer together, and incorporate some of the informal practices that work with the official planning and urban development frameworks.

Conflicting planning rationalities and strategies

Applying the terminology first coined by Watson (2003) to the context of Buenos Aires, the disconnection between planning done by government institutions and community actors has shaped different, conflicting rationalities about accessing affordable housing. This is manifested by the coexistence of variations of top-down and bottom-up planning processes functioning parallelly in the same city. It shows a paradoxical situation where institutionalised planning as a development tool that creates uncertainty through its inefficiency and inflexibility, is confronted by planning that emerged as an emergency strategy in conditions of high uncertainty. There are also examples of more productive, in-between strategies based on more communicative planning approaches and negotiation, which attempt to respond to the same uncertainties for the same target groups.

In the top-down system, planning is seen as a linear process of formalisation and the poor are supposed to be assisted in integration with the official property market system through subsidised mortgages, extension of formal infrastructure connections and/or resettlement to new housing. Here, planners often assume roles of experts, designers or technocrats (see Hall, 2002; Davoudi, 2006 and Lennon, 2019), acting in a paternalistic manner towards the poor. However, long-term affordability and efficiency in housing provision according to this model in Buenos Aires (like in most other large cities) is hindered by increasing land values, speculative behaviour of landowners, accelerating inflation, economic fluctuations and precarious employment.

As I argued, many of those who are unable to afford buying or renting housing (even with subsidies) access it through illegal occupation and informal construction. This particular type of insurgent development is not completely unplanned or detached from the official planning framework (Lopes de Souza; 2006; Mirafteb, 2009; Shrestha & Aranya, 2015; Sennett et al., 2018). Several researchers working in different context in the South have highlighted the important role which community leaders play in the process of planning and development of informal settlements (Rudofsky, 1964; Turner, 1976; Habraken, 2000; Hamdi, 2004; Lopes de Souza, 2006; Holston, 2009; Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015; Müller, 2019). They use different terms to refer to these community actors, such as non-professionals (Turner, 1976), knowledge brokers (Jacobs et al., 2015) or development practitioners (Hamdi, 2004).

The point many of these authors make is that professional architects and planners can become better practitioners if they understand and learn from informal, vernacular, autonomous and innovative housing strategies as practised by the leaders of these excluded communities. This is rarely the case in Buenos Aires. Too often are these actions discredited and described as emergent and spontaneous. In conditions of overlapping uncertainties and informalities, the professional community of architects and planners either underestimates the planning abilities of regular people, or overestimates their own planning capacities. Further debate about whether this comes from professional insecurity, or the lack of sufficient interaction with community actors is beyond the scope of this thesis. For now, I propose to call community leaders who engage in bottom-up planning, planning practitioners, who fill the gaps where the official planning system fails or does not reach. This leads me to the conclusion that the roles of professional planners and community leaders, or planning practitioners, are blurred.

The bottom-up development practices I encountered both complement and supplement the top-down planning systems in their own particular ways. They attempt to imitate official spatial planning and building codes as much as

possible as a way to secure legitimisation and protection from eviction. At the same time, occupiers justify their acts of takeovers and other illegal actions by challenging the superiority of the right to property over the right to dignified housing, and blame structural issues of unaffordability as what leaves them without shelter alternatives. Planners and academics who support these movements take the roles of activists, who advocate on behalf of the marginalised communities (Davidoff, 1965), motivated by social justice and right to the city demands (Rolnik, 2014). They also play an important role in documenting the insurgent and informal planning practices, and disseminate them in different manuals and publications, in a similar way to the influential works by Turner (1976), Habraken (2000) and Hamdi (2004).

When political conflicts within state institutions and communities exist, planners are just as powerless as community leaders, forcing these groups to wait for favourable political and economic conditions to intervene in the neighbourhood. In many cases, participation efforts have been reduced or deemed unnecessary by political and institutional leadership. Therefore, the struggle is often not so much about planners against the community, but between planners and the community together against the leadership in the context of multi-layered uncertainties, changes and conflicts. In many situations the priorities of both the community and the city governments are quite different, while planners are often caught powerlessly somewhere in between. For both planners, planning practitioners and other types of community representatives, getting actively involved in politics is a way to gain more power and better access to resources, which is perhaps the best way to push planning projects forward.

The negotiated variations of these top-down and bottom-up strategies show capability between informal housing access and formal property systems, as in cases when communities propose and discuss possibilities of repayment for the occupied land or housing in exchange for tenure security guarantees through formal property titles, or finding alternative legal pathways to legitimising illegal occupations, upgrading infrastructure and improving informal housing constructions. Planners who mediate in these situations take the role of facilitators, practising the communicative approach to planning that aims to find the best solution for the particular situation (Innes, 1996; Healey, 1997; Forester, 1999; Innes & Booher, 2010; Hamdi, 2010; Davoudi, 2015; Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015).

Planning as if there was no informality

Although, as I argued in chapter 4, Argentina is a unique and radical case of economic uncertainty and recurring crises, its official urban planning system is challenged by the same issues as observed in other parts of the world: bureaucracy, clientelism, corruption, misplaced priorities, powerlessness and generally weakened governance (Hamdi, 2004; Ryser & Franchini, 2015; Sennett et al., 2018; UN-Habitat, 2022). What is more particular to Buenos Aires is the way in which these challenges and uncertainties impact development and planning in different kinds of informal settlements. As I explained, it is the absence of, or insufficient government intervention and control mobilise various types of insurgent or bottom-up planning (Lopes de Souza: 2006; Mirafteb, 2009; Shrestha & Aranya, 2015).

The normative urban planning system in Argentina is still heavily influenced by western models and vision of 'the formal', which requires extensive resources in order to collect large amounts of data, update registries, produce plans and inform policy. The Argentine state has also followed the recommendations to transfer some of its obligation to

build affordable housing to private actors. Therefore, the planning framework is based on the same, borrowed assumptions (or hopes) that firstly, knowledge of the past and present can inform the future (see Friedmann, 1987) and secondly, competitiveness and efficiency of the market actors will ensure fair distribution of land and housing for all (see Sager, 2011 and Ryan-Collins et al., 2017). However, in the Argentinean context, both of these assumptions are highly unrealistic. The future is difficult to predict and impossible to control in such a rapidly changing economic and political context. Additionally, the largely neoliberal and market-driven property sector and employment relations proved to be highly unstable and vulnerable, which caused their informalisation and precarisation, resulting in unaffordability, illegal occupations and substandard housing conditions.

I have explained how the act of planning is supposed to address uncertainty, but in reality it often generates it. Similarly, formalisation does not necessarily regulate informality, but recreates it through establishing narrow and exclusive definitions of what is formal or official (Roy, 2005; Altrock, 2012). Therefore, when analysing the ability of normative planning to impact the future of cities in highly informal contexts (as in Buenos Aires) we can identify interrelations and apply much of the same vocabulary of uncertainty to informality. For example, Rumsfeld's (2011) known-unknowns (we know what we do not know) and unknown-unknowns (we do not know what we do not know) can be understood as informality that is recognized, documented, mapped, counted and measured (known-unknowns) and informality that is emergent, foreign and often 'off the radar' (unknown-unknowns). Another way of seeing this is documented informality as knowledge that can be explained, and uncategorised informality as knowledge that cannot be explained (Hamdi, 2004). My study contributes to unveiling these unknown-unknowns and explaining the informalities, whose contextual understanding has been inconsistent and fragmented.

One way in which uncertainty impacts urban planning in Buenos Aires is that it complicates decision making due to the inability to approach urban informality and collect useful data about it. Poor living conditions will not be improved by forcing informal development and activities into formality without understanding and acting upon the uncertainties that cause them, such as exclusion, insufficient income and chronic housing unaffordability. The problem begins with political ambiguity, planning interventions that serve electoral goals, high rotation of the planning staff, and decisions that lead to the lack of territorial presence or inadequate collection of the necessary contextual data. Whenever collected, this data is too often limited to fragmented or occasional surveys and enumerations.

That many of the planners I spoke with acknowledged themselves that they were not prepared to approach informality shows that for them, uncertainty in planning had to do with not knowing what activities and development lay outside of the legal and formal frameworks they operate within, and to what extent. A lot of that has been learned in practice, though in many cases it was already too late to prevent the damaging impact of bad decisions. As I have shown, planning processes have improved significantly through better collection and use of qualitative contextual data, recording stories, cooperating with local actors, as well as through meaningful participation, which was often initiated and led by the local community (as in Hamdi, 2010). Here I will reiterate that my analysis of planning decisions in the case areas led me to conclude that uncertainty in participation is wrongly perceived as external in planning and that unequal power relations spoil planning efforts (see Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015).

The Buenos Aires cases support the claim that planning is challenged by the fact that temporalities are social constructs experienced differently by communities, politicians, planners and investors (McGranahan & Satterthwaite, 2000; Livingstone & Matthews, 2017; Raco et al., 2018). Uncertain economic conditions, precarious employment as well as the need for housing security and mobility simultaneously make long-term planning difficult, both for the state and particular low-income households. Yet, assuming little change and issuing long-term housing mortgages as done in more stable economies (see Ryan-Collins et al., 2017) proved to be highly unsustainable in Argentina and did not resolve the problem of unaffordability for a large group of people. Planning in informal settlements and shantytowns in Buenos Aires struggles to control or embrace uncertainty and informality. Moreover, it was often reduced to reactive, short-term interventions and emergency responses, not just during the Covid-19 pandemic, but also before and after. This was the case of uncontrolled informal development in flood-prone areas and uncoordinated infrastructure and housing projects whose primary goal was to urgently generate jobs, rather than making long-term spatial and social impacts.

While planning alone cannot be blamed for causing economic crises and pandemics, it does little to help the poor secure adequate living and housing conditions, and integrate marginalised communities with the rest of the city and society. Therefore, in the context of high uncertainty and informality, continuing to operate within a traditional planning framework contributed to the exclusion through generating informality and socio-spatial segregation.

Fortunately, there are reasons to be optimistic about the future. I documented how the experience of recurring crises, as well as misplaced infrastructure interventions and housing programs have sparked a shift of mindset, which is gaining popularity and has steadily had more impact on urban policy and academia. There are many signs, which indicate that the planning system in Argentina is reinventing itself through recognizing informal development and accommodating contextual practices, which do not fit in the Western perceptions of proper housing and neighbourhood planning strategies, where planners and community leaders find new roles other than those traditionally assigned to them.

Minimum standards for housing and infrastructure impossible to meet

The shift in thinking towards the recognition and integration of informal practices in the official planning frameworks is most pronounced in initiatives that amend the obsolete (though in many cases still valid) minimum standards for housing and infrastructure introduced by the military dictatorship in 1977, or in new ordinances that allow certain forms of gradual improvement of informal housing and integration of illegal land occupations, making access to housing and land less prohibitive for the poor. At the time of writing this, however, there is still a lot to be done to complete this shift. Instead of totally revising these high standards, most government institutions in Buenos Aires since the 1980s decided to tolerate informal housing development and treat them as exceptions from the rules. Significant progress in adapting the rigid standards to the realities of informal development and self-building were taken through the special U31 zoning codes, as well as socio-urban integration plans for selected shantytown areas and the RENABAP registry.

Nevertheless, since the problem of illegality and marginalisation has never been fully resolved, the reputation and authority of planning institutions that set these rules has suffered, contributing to even more informality. Although, as I documented, the living conditions in most informal settlements and shantytowns have gradually improved, they will continue to be considered as inferior or substandard as long as they fail to meet the general minimum requirements or expectations of what housing and infrastructure should be before habitation, as specified in the general land use laws, building codes and housing policy (Gilbert, 2007), even if these official standards remain unchanged.

Setting standards and ambitious goals for urban development is typical for the type of strategic planning practised in Argentina and other parts of the world (Corti, 2021; Echavarría et al., 2021). As I speculated in chapter 2, routines in the conventional planning approaches (Where are we now? Where do we want to be? and How do we get there? - see Stenberg & Austin, 2007) by definition creates multiple uncertainties. The challenge of the first step (Where are we now?) is recognizing and documenting the general context for planning, which constitutes external (environmental) uncertainty (Abbott, 2005). The later steps are setting standards and goals for development (Where do we want to be?) and means to achieve/execute them (How do we get there?). These two steps have to do with the planning and decision-making processes, and can therefore be characterised as process uncertainties (ibid.). In Buenos Aires, these uncertainties are further magnified because there are disagreements between different stakeholders about the goals and means of planning (Christensen, 1985) in informal settings, and because the gaps between the informal reality of the poor (Where are we now?) and the standards set by urban planners (Where do we want to be?) is in many cases very wide, as the planners' standards tend to be unrealistically high.

My empirical analysis categorised these different external (environmental) and internal (process) uncertainties into tenure, economic and political. Tenure and economic uncertainties are related to the gaps between urban reality and unrealistic or exclusionary minimum standards regarding housing access and employment, respectively. The inability to provide sufficient formal affordable land and housing, as well as stable and adequately remunerated jobs generates informality, which is then difficult to deal with by urban planners. Political uncertainty relates to the decision making process of setting the goals and standards for development (Where do we want to be?) and achieving or executing them (How do we get there?).

The combined outcome of these uncertainties is that housing policies are not implemented and minimum standards for housing and infrastructure are not executed equally in Buenos Aires, which proves once again that traditional technocratic-scientific approaches to planning based on the ideas of visionary master-planning or expert-driven rational goal-setting are also ineffective in contexts of uncertainty and informality (see Jacobs, 1961; Davidoff, 1965; Friedmann, 1987; Davoudi, 2006; Sennett et al., 2018). As long as the core of the planning system continues to ignore informal practices through setting unrealistically high official and universal standards for all housing, informal urban development and illegal land occupations in and around Buenos Aires will likely prevail, which once again is in line with the arguments put forth by Turner (1972; 1976). As I explained earlier, these gaps between urban reality and minimum required standards or ambitions lead to challenges in the formalisation process and even cause informalisation of urban spaces and activities that outpaces formalisation efforts.

Informality and the question of the right to housing

The problem of unrealistically high standards for housing and infrastructure and their impact on urban development raised concerns that neither the state nor the market are able to ensure access to dignified and affordable housing and resolve the shelter crisis. The public debate often goes beyond planning standards or building codes, and addresses what many consider the core of the problem, which is how access to affordable housing is contested by legal contradictions as well as inconsistency in interpretation and enforcement of the constitutional rights to housing and property.

The demands of activists for the right to housing (or 'city', more generally) in Buenos Aires are not necessarily strictly contextualised, but they have been inspired by similar activities abroad and especially in other countries in Latin America (see Fernandes; 2007; Holston, 2009; Rolnik, 2014 and Schiavo et al., 2017). My observation is that this is done to some extent consciously and strategically as a way to establish a common vision and join broad networks of political activists that address similar problems of what they consider unjust distribution of land and housing in capitalist economies. As I explained, the overarching argument in the Southern theory on the right to the city is that if the state is unable to ensure affordable shelter options, it should legitimise illegal and informal land and housing occupations (Holston, 2009; Alkhalili et al., 2014; Rolnik, 2014). The fact that many labour unions and federations of the unemployed engage in different legal and illegal initiatives for ensuring access to housing for their members and allies shows that the claims put forth by Harvey (2013), that the right to the city should guarantee both dignified living and better working conditions, is also very relevant in Argentina.

Reiterating what I have been discussing in the last few pages, I argue that the problem of inadequate living conditions in Buenos Aires is caused by a combination of several factors that are internal and external to planning. On the one hand are the process uncertainties, or the gaps between the messy reality and unrealistic minimum housing and infrastructure standards and building laws (Turner, 1972, 1976), which planners and decision makers can do something about. On the other hand are the structural economic issues that generate inequality, poverty and precarity (Procupez, 2015; Muñoz 2018b; Müller, 2019; Gilbert, 2019) or more specifically, the self-exploitation of the working class who are forced to build their own housing in addition to their regular jobs (Burgess, 1978; Pradilla, 1983). My study shows once again that improving the planning system, addressing structural problems and sparking meaningful, real changes requires political pressures and involvement of both planners and community actors at different levels of government, from local to national (Davidoff, 1965; Hamdi, 2004; Fernandes; 2007). After all, the conflict between regulating the housing sector to improve access to affordable housing, and protecting private property to defend the interests of landowners, has to be solved politically, before planning policy can ensure implementation and enforcement of such policies on the ground. Nevertheless, more research is needed to explore the legal relations and contradictions between the rights to housing and property. Equally important is to pay closer attention to the ways in which the private actors can facilitate more localised strategies for affordable infrastructure provision to ensure the right to dignified living conditions.

Underestimation of tenure insecurity

Struggles for the right to housing and for tenure security seem synonymous, but they are not the same processes. They happen at different spatial and temporal scales, and since ownership conflicts and tenure uncertainties are contextual, strategies aimed at ensuring right to housing are different at the policy level and for particular settlements. As I explained in this thesis, the preferred actions by community leaders that address inadequate access to housing within their surroundings and networks is ensuring spatial order through imitating some aspects of urban planning, together with exploring legal paths towards legitimisation that apply in the conditions of the particular cases of illegal occupations.

As tenure conflicts to a large extent result from neglecting the right to housing, organised communities propose their own versions of urban planning (see Lopes de Souza, 2006; Holston, 2009; Shrestha & Aranya, 2015 and Kaika, 2017), which in the Buenos Aires case attempt to legitimise certain informal practices and at the same time find a compromise between the rights to housing and property. For most of those living in informal settlements and shantytowns, the first main goal is securing protection of tenure. The purpose of tenure security is not so much, as argued by de Soto (2001), to build up capital, but rather to achieve a kind of stability that would allow low-income communities to refocus their priorities towards addressing individual economic needs and building up savings that could be used to access better housing in the future (see Turner, 1976; Gilbert 2002; Payne et al. 2009; Satterthwaite, 2020). Tenure in these settlements is most often negotiated with land owners collectively, and an important part of these negotiations is active engagement in bottom-up urban planning activities (Müller, 2019). In this process, many community leaders gain certain expertise in planning, similar to how leaders of neighbourhood associations in middle-class barrios read, interpret and challenge planning regulations that apply around their places of residence (D'Avella, 2019). How such organisation works in practice depends on many local factors, such as the political needs, clientelistic practices, land ownership situation, property values and development pressures, or the aspirations regarding the length of stay on the occupied land. These contextual differences contribute to the fact that there is little coherence regarding eviction decisions, and therefore increase the uncomfortable condition of tenure insecurity that millions of people must live with.

I found that when the objective of secure tenure is achieved, community structures either dissolve or reconfigure in such a way that they no longer organise around urban planning, but more individualised reciprocity and economic support, through forming workers' cooperatives, for example. This proves the point that the motivation of low-income communities to organise around housing issues is often exaggerated and romanticised (Bauman, 2001; Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Hamdi, 2004). For most, securing tenure is the satisfactory outcome of urban planning.

Many planning agencies and decision makers in Buenos Aires still underestimate the significance of tenure uncertainty. They also misunderstand what happens in informal settings when tenure is secured. This is another fallacy of the strategic planning model, which assumes rationality in the 'where are we now?' and 'where do we want to be?' questions (Stenberg & Austin, 2007). My findings subscribe to the claim that it is not always formalisation of housing and infrastructure, but very often tenure security that leads to the improvement of living conditions (Varley, 2002;

Satterthwaite, 2020) and that forced formalisation may displace those with lowest purchasing power through rising rent, land speculation and gentrification (Payne 2002, Roy, 2005; Payne et al., 2009; van Lindert, 2016).

The misunderstanding and underestimation of tenure security in informal settings by planners led to decisions that have often done more harm than good. I documented how planning institutions were often absent when they were most needed to resolve and negotiate tenure conflicts, while they were present when the most pressing emergencies and conflicts (from the perspective of the local community) were resolved. I have also revealed how focusing on design and beautification was against the interest of the residents, who demanded structural changes to ensure the right to stay and affordable infrastructure solutions. Even when money is abundant, planning fails to achieve its objectives if the most basic priorities are ignored and not taken care of. Tenure issues and unaffordability have also not been addressed properly in cases of resettlement (both forced and voluntary) from self-built dwellings to government-sponsored housing projects. In these cases, once again, planners and planning practitioners who recognize the importance of tenure uncertainty and unaffordability engage politically to raise these issues at the legislative level.

Public participation and facilitation can decrease uncertainty if done right

I maintain my earlier argument that uncertainty in participation and political conflict is wrongly perceived as external in planning. However, the way in which political uncertainties may hinder the planning and development of informal settlements in shantytowns, depends a lot on *how* and *how much* the community is involved in the planning process.

As I found out, absent or poorly executed participation, where the objective of the planners is to inform, or worse manipulate the public (see Arnstein, 1969) leads to the separation of planning into conflicting top-down and bottom-up planning processes, which is counterproductive. This causes problems I discussed earlier, such as misalignment of the order of priorities in development (see Turner, 1972), and shifting the burden of tenure, economic, health and environmental risks and uncertainties on to the urban poor, or making them responsible for their own resilience (as also claimed by Satterthwaite & Bartlett, 2017 and Kaika, 2017). In some cases, the lack of understanding of local needs was wrongly substituted by applying generalised solutions and borrowing ideas from other contexts (see similar criticisms in Watson, 2003; Watson, 2009a; Parnell & Robinson, 2012 and Robinson & Roy, 2016). In such situations, the choice of dropping participatory processes in order to avoid raising false expectations and generating conflicts from mistrust and disillusion (see Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015) can only be understood as an excuse to stick to the expert role in planning, or not practise any planning at all.

The role of planners as experts who avoid confrontation as a way to maintain power and control over the process does not fit in the context of informality (see also Jacobs et al., 2015). This is simply because the official planning ideology follows generalised linear development paths of formalisation and integration with private property markets, without understanding how this formal system based on freehold ownership and deregulated tenure transactions excludes the poor and creates informality in the first place (Payne et al., 2009; Harvey 2013; Satterthwaite, 2020).

The bottom-up way of planning is a logical response to this lack of sensitivity and understanding of the housing necessities and demands of the low-income people. The reasoning of planning, resourcefulness, and development

actions of the community representatives I encountered in my research is much more sophisticated than what these definitions suggest. These community actors understand the needs and priorities of the poor (regarding for example tenure and economy) better than the state institutions, and attempt to respond to them using their anticipatory, organisational, networking, and political skills and abilities. The political context is very important when it comes to how these insurgent planning processes function in practice. Depending on who is in power, the (most of the time) politically involved community leaders and *punteros* in marginalised settlements either replace absent state institutions, confront them through autonomous planning actions, or, in cases of political alignment, link to and lobby government structures.

Analysing the impact of political influences and clientelism on community-initiated or state-led participation processes is beyond the scope of my thesis. However, I gathered evidence to support the claim that community involvement done right can significantly reduce conflicts and improve planning through addressing tenure, economic and political uncertainties, as long as livelihood priorities of the poor are weighted over self-centred political interests. Participation processes, where local residents are not only listened to, but also given a chance to speak and impact plans help reduce the knowledge gaps between planners and the messy informal reality. They serve as meeting points for the often conflicting rationales of planners and community actors, as well as those of the different interest groups within each community. Meaningful participation embedded in the context can therefore find answers to the three key questions in planning: Where are we now? Where do we want to be? and How do we get there? (Stenberg & Austin, 2007). Participation can not only reduce the gaps of uncertainty and informality through identifying problems and communicating needs, but also establish a common understanding of how futures can be calculated, imagined and performed (Anderson: 2010), which is necessary for setting common development priorities and negotiating the means to solve them.

My study shows that in conditions of high uncertainty and informality, the traditional design and scientific approaches to planning too often fail to reach their objectives, while the facilitatory role, or working 'with' communities and not 'for' them can spark progress and tangible changes (see Lennon, 2017). I have encountered positive cases where planning based on fieldwork, meaningful dialog, recognition of informal practices and empowerment of community actors was more effective in developing realistic and localised approaches to address informal housing problems and strengthen livelihood opportunities. These principles have already been proposed before, most notably by Hamdi (2004, 2010), who summarised them under the name of Strategic Action Planning (SAP). The complexity of urban spaces and activities characterised by multilayered tenure, economic and political uncertainties, as well as intertwined continuums of formalising and informalising spaces and activities (AlSayyad, 2004; Altrock, 2012; Kamalipour & Peimani, 2021), which I found in Buenos Aires, support the vision of the city as multiple small ecosystems (Hamdi, 2004), which are impossible to be controlled through comprehensive and sectoral planning approaches (Altshuler, 1965; Innes, 1996).

While for many, the SAP approach may sound overly idealistic, I have documented several traces of how such facilitation in planning was identified as the most appropriate and how it attempts to be upscaled in different levels of governance not just in emergency situations, but more permanently. Perhaps the best example is the proposed National Law of Technical-Professional and Public Support, which would significantly reshape power relations

between vulnerable communities who are too often omitted in planning, and planning agencies which at this moment are subordinate to the state and the political elites. The law would also fill the unnecessarily wide gap between the insurgent community-driven and top-down, state-led planning processes, preventing situations where the same problems are approached or addressed separately by vulnerable communities and the state.

Planning done as usual produces uncertainty for low-income people

Recalling the main hypotheses in my study, certainty is a precondition for formal development, while uncertainties (in this case tenure, economic and political) create gaps and spaces, where informal modes of living and working dominate the officially registered activities. Urban planning is a contested process with many conflicting rationalities, where uncertainties are both the purposes and products of planning actions. Uncertainties and informalities are therefore not external to planning and cannot be dealt with without understanding how they are shaped by the act of planning itself.

What uncertainties are generated or responded to through planning is contextual and depends on the approaches and methods applied in specific spatial and temporal conditions. Much of the official urban planning frameworks and ambitious minimum housing and infrastructure standards in Buenos Aires assume long-term growth and rule of law. Planning done this way may respond (with varied results) to some uncertainties typical to development of the parts of the city inhabited by the middle- and upper-classes (which is beyond the scope of my research). What is important is that at the same time it leaves out communities, activities and spaces that do not fit in this vision of a city and its turbulent economic dynamics. It does not take into consideration the uncertain and changing living situations of the population whose income is under the poverty and housing affordability lines. By responding to the 'decontextualized' or 'foreign' uncertainties, planning creates locally new uncertainties for the excluded.

This situation created the gaps between communities and planners, which I outlined in the conclusion of the previous section. In many cases the mainstream approaches impede housing affordability, reinforce precarity, generate informality and shift the burden of uncertainties on to the urban poor. This is why the official system is challenged, complimented and supplemented by the 'excluded' communities who practise their own modes of planning and development. In some cases it leads to open conflict and displacement, while in others it produces realistic solutions, which, if scaled up, have the potential to remove the burdens that cause housing unaffordability and access.

As a closing remark, I wanted to clarify that I do not argue that the kind of planning practised by community leaders in informal settlements and shantytowns is superior to the official planning framework. However, planners acting as experts do make mistakes and operate within routines that create problems they cannot respond to. This framework does not fit certain contexts of informality and uncertainty, which is proven by the fact that many top-down planning initiatives and solutions have failed or have never been implemented at a large scale. At the same time, meaningful changes and reforms resulted from dialog and deep understanding of how the poor are affected by different tenure, economic and political uncertainties, and at the same time acknowledging their informal planning practices and coping strategies that address these uncertainties. Those who wish to control the future through planning often see informality as something negative, but they fail to recognize how it often corrects the inefficiency of the official.

Engagement, not eradication

These three pressing issues—moving from land use to distributive justice, rethinking the object of development, and replacing best practice models with realist critique—are not just policy epistemologies for dealing with informality. Rather, they indicate that informality is an important epistemology for planning. (Roy, 2005, p. 156)

So far in this chapter I have attempted to improve our understanding of uncertainty in the development and planning of informal urban areas through linking the relevant theory with my research findings from Buenos Aires. However, one of my important motivations for writing this thesis is that it could help to unveil the inefficiencies and gaps in the housing provision and planning systems in Argentina, identify policy areas where improvement can be made, and document initiatives and processes that deserve more political and financial support. In this section, I will turn to discussing and proposing possible actions that aim at reducing or addressing uncertainty in planning in the studied context.

My research finds that in conditions of high tenure and economic uncertainties, as well as the institutional inability to establish a long-term strategy for the provision of affordable housing, the situation that has worked best for low-income families was the legitimisation of illegal occupations and at the same time tolerance for informal practices in housing and employment. It is only when these two conditions are met that tenure security and economic stability, which are the two main priorities for the urban poor, are achieved. However, I do not intend to suggest that basing urban policy on this approach would improve living conditions for low-income people. More than responding to the symptoms of failed planning, reforms in the system should address the root causes that produce or increase uncertainty and informality.

In the following pages, I will describe what actions planners working in informal settings can take to resolve (or prevent the emergence of) tenure, economic, political, and other types of uncertainties. I conclude this section with proposing reforms towards a more decentralised, contextualised and participatory approach to planning, as well as identifying structural obstacles that prevent them to be addressed at a higher political level.

Facilitating access to affordable land and housing

Responding to the most important and urgent uncertainty in my study, tenure insecurity, requires facilitating access to affordable land and housing. As a starting point, planners should investigate the alternative and informal housing strategies of those who cannot afford to buy or rent through formal means. More work needs to be done to analyse how the existing planning system framework generates informal development and at the same time deprecates it, therefore shifting even more uncertainty on to the urban poor. If we accept the idea that informal development is a highly adaptive mode that makes up for the deficiencies of urban policy (AlSayyad, 2004; Gilbert, 2005; Roy, 2005; Altrock, 2012), then what follows is that planners can learn a lot from informal practices and strategies for accessing land, housing and infrastructure (Roy, 2005; Hernández et al., 2010; Davoudi, 2015). Only when we begin to understand informality as a normal state of affairs (Altrock, 2012) and recognize uncertainty as more than just the

context that produces informality (Müller, 2019; Kovacic, 2022), can we begin to shape realistic housing policies that work.

As long as structural issues that cause precarity and unaffordability (which I will come back to later) persist, shantytowns should not be treated like emergencies (as assumed by the original term 'emergency town'), but rather a real mode of production and appropriation of urban space by low-income groups who in the contexts of economic uncertainty and unaffordability, claim their right to live informally and precariously close to their livelihood opportunities (Turner, 1976; Corti, 2021). Similarly, most peripheral informal settlements that develop through organised illegal occupations cannot be dealt with as criminal acts, but expressions of an exclusionary formal property system, which gives no affordable alternatives to access land and housing (Roy, 2005; Gilbert, 2019).

While I agree to a certain extent with de Soto's (2001) perception of informal housing practices as heroic and his argument against eradication of informal settlements, my study once again proves wrong his proposal that forced formalisation of housing and infrastructure naturally improves housing and leads to development. Rather than 'unlocking' capital for the urban poor, such formalisation processes increased their tenure uncertainty by pushing these groups into unsustainable debt, which may result in gentrification, market-driven displacement and socio-spatial segregation (see Payne 2002, Roy, 2005; Payne et al., 2009; Lees et al. 2016; van Lindert, 2016; and Satterthwaite, 2020).

To ensure access to housing and address uncertainty for informal occupants, there is a need to implement policies that reduce the cost of land and prevent speculation through, for example, taxation of vacant urban land, which would result in increased housing supply (see van Gelder et al., 2016). At the same time, it is necessary to ensure tenure security and protection from eviction, either through recognition, regularisation, assisted resettlement or other means (see Payne et al., 2009). To address the risks of unaffordability, market-driven displacement and gentrification, local governments could propose implementing collective ownership schemes, such as land trusts (Payne, 2002; UN-Habitat, 2015; Wily, 2018; Arnold et al., 2020; Davis & Fernández, 2020) as a transitory tenure type between informal occupation and formal individual property ownership. Such collective ownership models could be inspired by the experience of different housing cooperatives that have already functioned in CABA since the late 1990s (see Rodríguez, 2009; 2021; Zapata, 2017; Pedro et al., 2020). This can be especially relevant for the informal tenants, who are the most disadvantaged and cannot make claims to any landed properties. The challenge of landlords in shantytowns and informal settlements who benefit from the vulnerability of the low-income tenants should also be addressed. As the first step, mapping the assets of these landlords needs to be done before making interventions in the property system to ensure fairness in the processes of formalisation and redistribution of welfare, housing and land.

Changes need to be made at all levels of government. At the national and provincial levels, the state should resolve the contradictions between the legal meaning of the right to housing and property (UN-Habitat & OHCHR, 2009), not only to establish clear guidelines about when evictions are justified or not, but also to develop strategies how the state can provide more affordable land and housing for low-income groups and design fair and sustainable housing financing models, which would not force anyone into informality. At a local level, planners should improve their

participation processes and increase field presence in order to gain a better understanding of the contextual tenure problems, as well as the housing and economic needs and ambitions of the local residents. The interests of the state regarding property, and alternative legal solutions or housing alternatives should be communicated clearly in this process (Innes, 1996).

As I have argued throughout this thesis, one of the important reasons for urban informality and uncertainty is the gap between the actual capacities of the urban poor and the unrealistically high minimum official standards for housing and infrastructure that define the criteria, which a house should meet before it can be inhabited (see Turner 1972, 1976). When the standards required by the state exclude certain populations from accessing any form of legitimate housing, these groups are forced to engage in illegal occupations and self-building, which puts them in the situation of informality and high tenure uncertainty.

However, I am not suggesting that removing minimum standards completely will be the right decision. Such reform would likely solve some problems, but create a whole set of others. For example, in cases of social housing built by the state and projects built by private developers, some minimum standards are necessary to ensure adequate living quality and spatial order. At the same time, uniform standards may not work if applied at a city scale or in larger heterogeneous areas that include neighbourhoods at different stages of development, with different topologies, and varied access to formal and informal infrastructure. Housing standards have to be localised and assessed based on how they impact access and affordability of shelter. In addition, setting standards for infrastructure provision and building structure needs to ensure certain tolerances for incremental development and gradual provision, upgrading and improvement of the areas, in order to ensure their affordability and allow early habitability of housing for the population, which otherwise is risking being homeless. The last proposal was in fact institutionalised in the Province of Buenos Aires and locally in selected shantytowns in CABA as amendments and additions to the existing land-use laws. Analysing the way in which this approach recognizes and deals with uncertainty and informal development practices, my conclusion is that it is a step in the right direction. Other positive initiatives include establishing the country-wide RENABAP registry, as well as the U31 zoning codes and socio-urban integration plans in CABA, though all of these planning tools could have been strengthened further if they were defined through a more participatory and localised process.

In places where the struggle to access dignified housing forces large groups of people beyond just informality and into situations of illegality, enforcing minimum standards and building codes can be replaced with negotiating ambitions and pathways towards achieving desired living environments, while ensuring that this would not impact tenure security negatively. This proposal is in line with the suggestions made by Turner (1976), who claimed that instead of setting prohibitive standards that function as barriers to development, we should think about them as guides, which help us achieve minimum goals progressively. One manifestation of this pragmatic approach are the sites-and-services projects (see Vaggione, 2014; Gilbert, 2019; Satterthwaite, 2020), which have been prohibited in Buenos Aires for some decades, but are now making a gradual return, both in policy and practice.

The current top-down planning process, which I am criticising in this thesis, and the collaborative planning approach, which I am advocating for, are visualised in Figures 149 and 150 respectively. These graphs show the relationships

and interactions between communities in marginalised settlements (blue and grey), and the state, represented by political leaders and urban planners who define and defend high official minimum standards and planning ambitions for these areas (green). These expectations concern both tenure ownership, access to basic infrastructure, and the physical condition. The irregularity of the shapes symbolises the standards, codes and expectations regarding different aspects of planning, and defining access to various types of infrastructure and services, which might need to be considered or negotiated separately by sector.

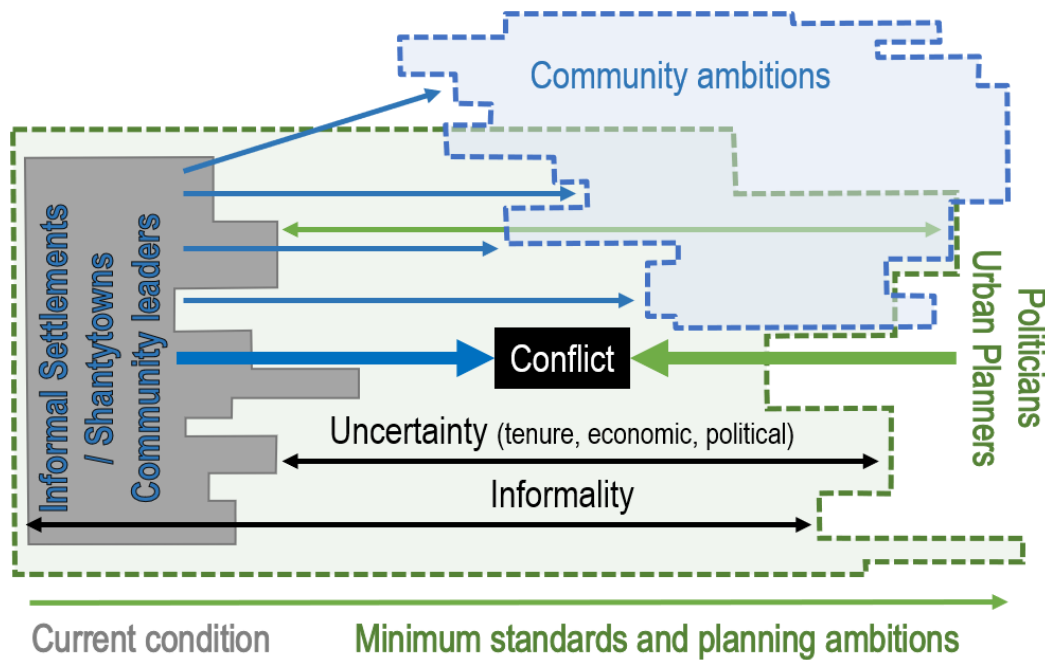


Figure 149. Graphic representation of uncertainty and informality as a result of the misalignments and gaps between the planning standards and community ambitions. Elaborated by the author.

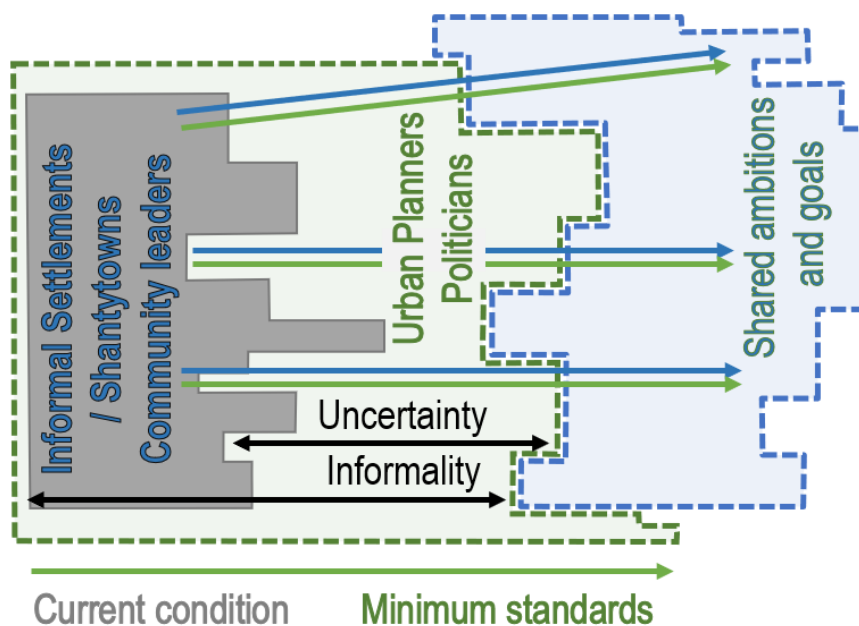


Figure 150. Graphic representation of a reformed planning approach, where minimum standards are reduced and partly replaced by shared ambitions and goals, which are negotiated and implemented jointly by community and state actors. By lowering minimum requirements and standards, uncertainties and informalities are reduced, compared to the traditional approach illustrated in Figure 149. Elaborated by the author.

The current situation (Figure 149) is characterised by a series of gaps (represented with arrows) between the community and state actors, which I have discussed earlier in this chapter. These gaps can also be understood as uncertainties (tenure, economic and political) that are correlated with informality. In situations where standards and planning ambitions are unrealistically high, uncertainties increase and informal development prevails. Moreover, due to ineffective or insufficient participation, the standards and ambitions that the communities acknowledge are too often quite different from what the planners want these areas to become. In these conditions, conflict is common and planning tends to be very ineffective.

In the collaborative planning approach (Figure 150), the minimum standards for these areas are reduced or modified to become more realistic. Then, the ambitions and goals for the areas are negotiated jointly by the communities living there with planners or local politicians (acting as facilitators) in a participatory process. Doing this makes the situation of illegality and informality less severe, while joint decision making also decreases the negative impacts of uncertainty in all its senses (tenure, economic and political).

Tenure uncertainty can be addressed by incorporating informal practices in institutionalised planning in such a way that the inhabitants have more control over their housing choices (Turner, 1976; Hamdi, 2004). My findings also support the idea that the state should be more proactive in regulating and providing affordable housing (Burgess, 1978; Deininger, 2003; Buckley & Kalarickal, 2006; Ryan-Collins et al., 2017; Satterthwaite, 2020; UN-Habitat, 2022). I also subscribe to the argument that effective affordable housing strategies are not based on simple solutions, but are founded on enabling and ensuring a diversity of housing options for households in different compositions, economic needs and preferences, which is what many housing experts and researchers seem to agree about (see Turner, 1976; Buckley & Kalarickal, 2006; Greene & Rojas, 2008; Payne et al., 2009; Rodríguez, 2009; Blanco et al., 2014; Ward et al., 2015; Gilbert, 2016; Ryan-Collins et al., 2017; Reese & Vera Belli, 2018; Satterthwaite, 2020, and Whitaker Ferreira et al., 2020).

Strengthening the link between housing and employment

While resolving tenure uncertainty and ensuring access to affordable shelter is for many a matter of urgency, long-term improvement of housing and living conditions in informal settlements and shantytowns needs to address economic uncertainties. A more efficient urban planning method that responds to conditions of uncertainties and informalities has to listen to the priorities of the communities and include measures to improve their livelihood opportunities. My findings support the claim that decent living conditions will only be achieved when poverty and inequality are eliminated (Harvey, 2013; Gilbert, 2019).

Achieving a sustainable long-term improvement of living conditions in contexts of uncertainty and informality relies on finding a good balance between upgrading housing and infrastructure, and addressing the economic needs of the local population. I have explained how prioritising one or the other might cause either poorly implemented projects and quick deterioration, or economically unsustainable development that contributes to unaffordability and gentrification. I argue that there is inadequate understanding of the relationship between urban development and economy, particularly in a context of high informality and precariousness in both housing and work arrangements (see

Turner, 1972; Ryan-Collins et al., 2017; Gilbert, 2019). Formalisation programs implemented in the case areas only increased economic uncertainties and led to opposition from the local communities. In other words, economic uncertainties should not be addressed without considering the varied contexts of tenure uncertainty and the goal of satisfying basic needs.

This problem is complex and requires working at different spatial and temporal scales, balancing often conflicting priorities and engaging actively with informality (Roy, 2005; Watson, 2009b; Davoudi, 2015). I find the arguments by Hamdi (2004) particularly relevant in Buenos Aires. He claimed that there is a need for action at both the local level within the contexts of particular settlements, and at the same time pushing for structural changes that address the core issues, which lead to poverty, income inequality and unaffordability. At the provincial and national level, it is urgent to consider how tolerance for land speculation, deregulated property system, as well as growing precariousness and informality in the job market lead to a mismatch between the access to and sustainability of housing mortgages, and the decreasing capacity for their repayment (see Payne, 2002; Ewijk & van Leuvensteijn, 2009; Harvey, 2013 and Ryan-Collins et al., 2017).

Some examples of the relatively simple and small changes that made positive impacts on the local economies in informal settlements and shantytowns, which I documented were: decentralised recycling and urban agriculture schemes, skill training and capacity building programs, subsidies for construction materials, and registration of street addresses. The example of IDUAR in Moreno shows how municipal authorities use existing laws and frameworks to create land banks and steer development within their jurisdiction, with the purpose of ensuring access to affordable lots and housing, and at the same time creating jobs. Municipal governments can also support local economies by adapting planning and building laws to allow for the new and legitimise the already existing small-scale, non-obstructive productive and commercial activities in residential areas.

To prepare for the devastating effects of recurring economic crises, government institutions can take inspiration from the emergent, improvised or informal coping strategies that maintained the basic functionality of the society in Argentina in different turbulent times (see López Levy, 2004; Rodgers, 2010; Annunziata, 2011). There is a lot to be learned especially from the periods around the 2001 financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, when large-scale and centralised programs collapsed, leaving millions of people without means of subsistence (Garay, 2007; Instituto del Conurbano, 2020; Maceira & Beccaria, 2021). This gap was quickly filled with autonomous workers' and housing cooperative movements (Scheinsohn & Cabrera, 2009; Zapata, 2017; Procupez & Rodríguez, 2019; Pedro et al., 2020), as well as different forms of informal social economy based on solidarity relations (Coraggio, 2007). These have not only ensured access to jobs, affordable housing and basic services in times of crisis, but also contributed to a rapid economic recovery of the country in general (Rodríguez, 2009; 2021; Barreto, 2012; Rodolfo & Boselli, 2015). While some of these alternative economic models and housing strategies have been tested and institutionalised, a lot more can be done to upscale and mainstream them in policy and governance frameworks.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ For example, cooperative housing schemes and practices that have played an important role in the process of recovery after the 2001 crisis, which later lost financing and policy support, have re-emerged in 2016 as the proposed National Law for Self-Managed Production of

An important consideration in planning and economic development is the scale of intervention. The examples I mentioned showed that both small- and large-scale urban projects have their economic advantages and disadvantages. There is much that can be gained from studying cases of massive social housing projects, which tend to be of poor quality, and might also be unaffordable for the target population during periods of high unemployment and inflation. My interpretation is that during economic downturns and crises of governance, support to small-scale and autonomous projects (for example through microcredits) are easier to administer and implement, while in times of economic growth and better governance capacity, larger and centralised projects may be more effective in addressing a severe housing and infrastructure shortage. Self-construction is after all not the universal solution for everyone (Burgess, 1978) and, in such a large city as Buenos Aires, there has always been a high demand and preference for affordable housing in apartment blocks in central locations or around transportation hubs. Access to these units can be enabled through upscaling the social rental housing scheme, for example (Reese & Vera Belli, 2018). Nevertheless, studying the implications of the relationship between housing and employment in contexts of uncertainty and informality deserves more attention from researchers and planners.

Contextualised hybrid bottom-up and top-down planning processes

My findings support the claim that planning is a deeply political activity and that planners do need to take political stands (Altshuler, 1965; Davidoff, 1965; Burgess, 1978; Hamdi, 2004; Jacobs et al., 2015). I described how authoritarian approaches to planning generated conflict, opposition and mistrust, leading to failed and unpopular interventions in informal settlements and shantytowns, and in consequence the separation of top-down and bottom-up planning processes. I also documented episodes where communicative planning led to interventions that did contribute to positive changes in these areas. Therefore, responding to political uncertainties around decision making in planning requires reforms in governance, which would reduce the power gap between the ruling elite and the marginalised communities forced into informality and precarity. While reforming the overall decision-making process according to the principles of deliberative democracy (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004) might, in the case of Argentina, require a complex and long political process, some positive changes can be done locally. These include, among others, a shift towards decentralising the governance structure, incorporation of knowledgeable local community leaders in the decision-making process, strengthening participation methods, facilitating bottom-up planning initiatives and including more fieldwork-based project courses in planning education. The biggest change, however, has to be in the attitude and self-perception of planners: from technocratic experts or designers, to facilitators and enablers.

Changing planning methodologies to respond to the challenges of political uncertainties is a difficult task, if we consider what I classified as problems of data uncertainty or, to use the terminology proposed by Abbott (2005), process uncertainty. Since the value judgments in planning are never the same (Friend & Jessop, 1969; Abbott, 2000), the act of planning generates more uncertainty and causes fragmentation of planning approaches. The urgent housing situation, changing dynamics and fast development of informal settlements and shantytowns demands quick

Housing (*Ley Nacional de Producción Autogestionaria de Hábitat Popular*). At the time of writing this, the law has not been approved by the congress.

and efficient planning processes. At the same time, collecting more detailed data, introducing more frequent surveys, requiring more in depth background research and making room for more inclusive participation processes may slow down planning to the point of paralysis, where decisions and implementations are made too late, or are not made at all (see Cooke & Kothari, 2001). What is needed is a balanced and flexible approach with predetermined routines and clear task division, based on trust and shared responsibility between the state, civil society and community actors.

One of the key lessons learned from my research is that political uncertainty in Buenos Aires is caused by absent or inadequate actions of local authorities. Sometimes the guidelines established by higher tier governments, or multilateral organisations that fund urban development projects, are good at identifying the correct priorities, but these do not 'trickle down' to the planning practice in informal settlements and shantytowns due to complicated legal, bureaucratic and political processes. Another reason is that most local governments do not own sufficient land or lack the resources necessary to provide affordable housing solutions to satisfy the need. Local administrations may also be unaware of legal mechanisms that empower them to drive effective land management and react with ambiguity. Nevertheless, I have also studied examples of processes of anticipatory planning and land economics that attempt to respond to this, by consolidating land banks and providing affordable housing solutions through for example sites-and-services projects. These initiatives and proposals require more policy and financial support as well as capacity building to be applied more widely (Payne, 2002). Efforts should be made to strengthen collaboration between municipal governments and create arenas for exchanging local experiences and resolve problems that stretch beyond municipal borders.

Times of turbulence showed that a decentralised mode of planning (Turner, 1972; Friedmann, 1987) has had a positive effect to mitigate housing unaffordability and diversify housing options, but only if it considers the aspects of tenure insecurity and unstable income challenges. Such decentralised planning manifested in deeper participation, support for bottom-up initiatives, improvisation, and partnership with diverse actors, including some local planning institutes, NGOs and grassroots movements. Many of these organisations have not only recognized how big of a task it is to regularise and improve the existing barrios, but also developed planning and communication methods that provide affordable housing solutions and simultaneously prevent the formation of new informal settlements and shantytowns in the areas where they operate.

Nevertheless, key to the success of decentralised planning is changing the methodological approaches and strengthening the capacity of planners in municipal governments through training and education. Even when funding was abundant (as in the case of some shantytowns), different planning institutions decided not to use their resources on extensive fieldwork and co-creation processes, but rather opted to borrow design solutions from abroad and impose sustainability measures that are irrelevant in the contexts of unaddressed urgent basic needs. In some cases the emphasis in the planning approach has been placed on design and short-term visible changes, while land and property economics, change over time, as well as participation have been given little attention. The approach taken breaks with one of the mantras in architecture and urban planning, that you simply 'do not experiment with the poor'.

This problem reflects the priorities in planning education in Argentina (and the rest of the world), where many of those who work as planners are in fact architects who are primarily trained to design, but do not have sufficient theoretical

and practical training to understand and address the complex social, economic and political challenges in marginalised urban areas. An education reform should take more inspiration from the cases of fieldwork-based courses based on participatory and qualitative methods, as well as practice-oriented assignments in informal settlements and shantytowns, which are already offered as electives in different architecture, planning and geography programs in several higher education institutions in Argentina.

Building on these practices and experiences, the context of unstable governance and inability to address basic needs of the population, encourages planners to empower community actors and assist them to become drivers of their own change. By decentralising planning through for example facilitation of deep participation, offering professional technical assistance to vulnerable communities or scaling up initiatives like the School of community leaders, the gap between the governance structures (including agencies responsible for planning) and communities is reduced. This, once again is in line with the proposal of Strategic Action Planning (Hamdi, 2004, 2010), where planners and architects support the emergent development processes, rather than trying to control them. Such mid-way solutions as negotiating instead of imposing housing standards (Turner, 1972), developing sites-and-services projects (Vaggione, 2014) or providing open structures that make space for incremental expansion (Aravena & Iacobelli, 2012) can significantly reduce the problem of housing unaffordability and decrease the dependence of local communities on the state as a provider of shelter and infrastructure. It also assumes a shift from technocratic and centralised sectoral approach to a more realistic decentralised territorial planning at neighbourhood level (Sanderson, 2017).

Another step towards a decentralised and more sensitive governance system is recognizing that it is community leaders or local planning practitioners, and not politicians, who ensure continuity of urban development in informal settings over longer periods (see Hamdi, 2004; Lopes de Souza, 2006 and Holston, 2009). As I documented, through their mediation and involvement in top-down and bottom-up planning processes, many community leaders have gained significant knowledge about planning, which in addition to broad networks and good understanding of the local context, can be very useful to design and implement infrastructure and housing projects. I argue that as the widespread formation of informal settlements has been recognised and to some extent legitimised through Law 14.449 on Fair Access to Habitat and the RENABAP registry, it is indispensable that municipal planners take community actors seriously and learn how to work with them.

Moreover, in order to further reduce the uncertainty gap, the state should consider closer integration of community leaders and planning practitioners in the administrative and planning structures. Not doing so may result in deeper conflict, clientelism, corruption and unproductive division of responsibilities, leading to a waste of public resources. The challenge lies in ensuring a transparent mode of governance, while rejecting nepotism and phasing out the traditional function of political punteros. Important in this process is the professionalisation of public administration in a way to make it more independent from political shifts, so that certain continuity of staff is ensured over a long period.

Planners who approach planning as facilitators recognize that the value of participatory processes in uncertain contexts is that it helps communities define and manage their own futures, become more independent, and assume

responsibility for the environments they occupy and transform. Seen this way, participation creates spaces of mutual learning, which builds or restores trust and establishes new strategic partnerships to resolve tenure, economic, political or other types of struggles. Thus uncertainty that generates informal development through illegal occupations and self-building can be reduced through shifting from expert-led and goal-oriented planning (as in the strategic planning defined by Stenberg & Austin, 2007) to a communicative process (Davidoff, 1965; Innes, 1996; Healey, 1997; Forester, 1999; Hamdi, 2004; Davoudi, 2015), where contextual evidence is co-created in a way that addresses the gaps in knowledge between the state institutions and marginalised communities (see Smith, 1996; Faludi, 2000; Fisher, 2000; Davoudi, 2006; Hamdi, 2010; Watson, 2014; Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015 and Neuendorf et al., 2018). In other words, participation processes where planning knowledge is co-created and priorities identified, rather than imposed on the communities (Arnstein, 1969), address the problem where planning generates, or adds to uncertainty. It is about working together to turn the unknown-unknowns into known-unknowns (Rumsfeld, 2011), which can be a good start for a proactive and participatory planning action, where multiple scenarios and alternatives are discovered and considered.

Social media and new inventions in digital technology may be applied to further strengthen the process of decentralisation and empowerment of local communities. Such different communication channels and digital platforms worked particularly well when they emerged as bottom-up community initiatives and to mobilise joint action or emergency response. This shows that mobile technology can be integrated to make data collection and participation more efficient, but cannot replace physical interaction and fieldwork.

Reflections about possible reforms in the planning system

Recognising that the act of planning generates uncertainty and informality, I propose that as a first step in a planning process, planners use their experiences from the past and present to assess what sort of potential uncertainties and informalities for the community and governance might result from their planning interventions, and compare such outcomes to a hypothetical condition of doing nothing, or not engaging in planning at all. Doing this can avoid a situation of 'doing more harm than good' as exemplified by the decontextualized land use reforms and unrealistically high housing standards introduced by the military government in Argentina in the 1970s. Since uncertainties and informalities are localised, universal solutions and definitions of planning practice can be counterproductive. Therefore, the system needs to be adapted to the local conditions (Alexander, 2015), which includes developing new contextual vocabularies and theories (Watson, 2009a; Parnell & Robinson, 2012; Bhan, 2019). After all, the under-communicated mission of planning is to address contextualised and not assumed uncertainties. By applying universal and rigid city-, province- or country-wide planning laws and standards to areas that suffer from overlapping uncertainties and informalities, localising is difficult and participation meaningless.

As I argued before, planning seen as a far-reaching, expert-driven, design-oriented or technocratic activity increased tenure and economic uncertainties and contributed to undesired informal development in and around Buenos Aires. The approach to planning that can better respond to these challenges approximates more flexible and localised anticipatory scenario planning or adaptation pathway frameworks, which acknowledge emergence, incrementalism,

transition, contingency, reversibility and reflection (see different variations in Turner, 1976; Hillier, 2007; Kato & Ahern, 2008; Watson, 2009a, 2014; Anderson, 2010; Hamdi, 2010; Wilkinson, 2011; Nyseth, 2012; Zapata & Kaza, 2015; Kwakkel et al., 2016; Mehrotra et al. 2017; Rauws, 2017; Sennett, 2018; Zandvoort et al.: 2018 and Haasnoot et al., 2019). My findings support the proposals by Friend and Jessop (1969), who summarised the approaches to addressing process-related uncertainty in planning as a combination of in-depth investigation (both qualitative and quantitative), clarifying objectives, as well as better coordination and collaboration. While such localised, participatory, multiple scenario and adaptation approaches can indeed be time-consuming and costly (Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015; Stults & Larsen, 2018), simplifying the process will result in generating uncertainty and informality, which in the long-term can increase costs and cause more damage that can be difficult to undo.

In addition, it is indispensable that the concerns for health and safety, with special attention to the experiences from the Covid-19 pandemic, are addressed through spatial planning and infrastructure provision. Efforts need to be made to prevent overcrowding, and improve access to health services, water, electricity and other basic services. An important learning from the lockdown periods is that the state needs to *reverse* the processes that go *against* the consolidation of a more robust social security system that would increase the resourcefulness of the population in times of crisis (see Instituto del Conurbano, 2020 and Maceira & Beccaria, 2021; UN-Habitat, 2022).

Taking into consideration the accelerating climate crisis and intensification of extreme weather conditions such as heavy rainfall and heatwaves, it is critical that addressing environmental issues through mitigation and adaptation needs to receive significantly more attention from both local communities and planners (UN-Habitat, 2022). In the context of Buenos Aires, it is critical that the inconsistency regarding who, what and how can be built in flood prone areas should be resolved. Environmental assessments and measures to prevent flooding developed jointly by community actors and local governments should also be integrated into government interventions in existing informal settlements and shantytowns.

In cases of complex and urgent crises and contingencies, such as when multiple uncertainties (for example tenure, health and/or environmental) overlap, planners need to rethink how their actions can integrate humanitarian emergency response with future-oriented spatial planning (Koshy et al., 2022), and assess how focusing the localised, developmental 'brown' agenda can complement the long-term environmental goals in the 'green' agenda (McGranahan & Satterthwaite, 2000). Such actions recognise and integrate the informal community coping strategies, and therefore shift from the top-down approaches that impose resilience on people (see Kaika, 2017 and Satterthwaite & Bartlett, 2017) to the idea of collaborative planning founded on community resourcefulness (MacKinnon & Derickson, 2013).

Importantly, the reformed planning framework I am proposing recognises the role of planners (as both planning professionals, local practitioners and community representatives) as activists who defend the interest of the excluded population (Davidoff, 1965) and establish dialog with communities who react to the deficiencies in institutionalised planning by engaging in dissensus practices and alternative housing access strategies (Kaika, 2017). In the context of my study, the local governments should recognize that certain communities may oppose early tenure formalisation and formal infrastructure provision, because of the financial burdens that they usually cause. The idea is not

necessarily to always seek consensus (Hamdi, 2004), but to shift the power relations in such a way that the local actors are driving the planning processes, where the state takes the role of facilitators (for example by ensuring fair representation of landowners and tenants in decision-making) and is one of the stakeholders, rather than an oppressive force. This means that the 'truths' and values of local communities are more than just data for planners (Jacobs et al., 2015); they are the core of the planning process itself and basis for policy development. Such an open approach to planning can turn uncertainties from problems into opportunities (Hamdi, 2004; Romero Lankao & Qin, 2011; Müller, 2019; Bregman, 2021), and create new structures for horizontal dialog and cooperation. The participatory processes and multidisciplinary approaches I outlined here need to be adapted to the context and repeated at all stages, from investigation and diagnosis to scenario development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

This leads me to conclude that the Strategic Action Planning principles in the context of uncertainty and informality are appropriate. This approach is more realistic, because the goals are co-constructed and contextualised in time and space, which enables improvisation and acting in small steps, while at a scale allowing participation and empowerment of local communities (Hamdi, 2004, 2010) as a strategy to reduce the unknown or unidentified types of uncertainties.

Making structural reforms for the right to housing

In order to make a lasting, long-term change, the interventions I have described above need to be accompanied by structural reforms, which may be beyond the power of planning institutes and local governments. The success of the system of the proposed localised and decentralised planning processes depends on legislative and financial support from higher tier governments, and a recognition that income, land and housing has not been distributed fairly. What is also necessary are actions to bridge the gaps between planning theory and practice, which I identified in chapter 2.

I argue that we need multiple decentralised planning systems, adapted to different contexts of areas in different stages of development. In some systems, pre-established minimum standards are to be regulated and enforced by planners, while in others, negotiated standards serve as ambitions, while planning deals with pathways to achieve them. The overall goal of such a framework is to lower the gap between reality and expectation, thus preventing generation of uncertainty and unproductive manifestations of informality (see Figure 150). Reaching alignment of aspirations and goals should be key to avoid conflict and establish planning priorities, while making standards more realistic should make housing generally more affordable.

Preventing the emergence of illegal occupations and the chaotic growth of shantytowns is not the task of planning alone, but requires the state to balance and intervene when socio-economic inequalities arise. Here I would like to reiterate that small-scale and incremental incentives and interventions, such as the support for self-builders or co-creation of public spaces, are not enough to challenge the structural problems of poverty (Burgess, 1978; Mould, 2014) and that as long as poverty and inequality persist, access to good quality living conditions will be limited (Harvey, 2013; Gilbert, 2019). I would like to add that integration and improvement of informal settlements and shantytowns depends on political certainty and stability of democratic government structures. Meaningful change cannot be achieved unless institutions and communities which engage in planning shift from prioritising their political

interests in their urban interventions, and rather use their resources and political involvement to address the real needs and uncertainties of the inhabitants.

My research supports the idea that planning reforms should be founded on the principles of the right to the city (Cutts & Moser, 2015; Harvey: 2008; 2013) and the right to housing (Rolnik, 2014; Muñoz 2018b). The urban governance system should base its policy on the idea that housing is a basic need and not a commodity (Marcuse, 2009; UN-Habitat & OHCHR, 2009). In order to improve the difficult situation of low-income households in Buenos Aires suffering from substandard housing conditions, it is urgent to agree on the legal limits to the universal right to property and clarify the practical meaning of the constitutionally guaranteed right to housing. Resolving this ambiguity would be a major step forward to reduce uncertainty in planning and would potentially benefit hundreds of thousands of vulnerable families who are excluded from the formal housing market and live under the constant threat of evictions.

Implications and contributions

If we accept that global uncertainty is the correct term to characterise and summarise the multiplication of instances of surprises, shocks and crises, which occur in spite of the ever more sophisticated governance and planning systems, then this thesis contributes with knowledge that is relevant to many of the current issues that spread across national borders.

The theoretical contribution of my research is the improved understanding of the nature of uncertainty and its impact on planning. My claims are not meant to be taken as universal or general, but rather specific to the context of my study. I am critical of those who try to import ideas, urban standards and practices from the North, which are often reproduced at local universities, shared at international conferences, and promoted by multilateral organisations and foreign investors (Echavarría et al., 2021). The thesis responds to the call for generating more urban theory 'from the South' (Watson, 2009a; Parnell & Robinson, 2012; Bhan 2019; Robinson & Roy, 2016; de Satgé & Watson, 2018) and supports many of the planning approaches proposed by practitioners who did extensive fieldwork in these regions, and theorised from the local cases and development practices (see for example Turner, 1976; Habraken, 2000; Gilbert, 2002; Watson, 2003; Hamdi, 2004; Lopes de Souza, 2006; Holston, 2009; Yiftachel, 2009; Bredenoord & van Lindert, 2010; Di Virgilio, 2015; Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015; Procupez, 2015; Muñoz, 2017; Müller, 2019).

The idea that urban planning often magnifies uncertainties and creates space for informality instead of reducing them, is perhaps not a ground-breaking finding. What my research does is to add evidence to the claims that informal development thrives when planners have little to no control over the planning process, lack sufficient resources or disagree over goals and means. Inadequate design causes informal use of space, and informal construction, alteration and extensions of building structures. Unattended exposure to environmental hazards leads to informal coping strategies. Deficient or badly implemented participation processes result in informal organisation and decision-making or even emergence of parallel, autonomous and informal systems of governance. The neoliberal planning model pushes people into economic informality and causes housing unaffordability, which leads to the formation of marginalised and informal settlements.

At the same time, I encountered several urbanists who were fascinated with how the apparently unplanned development in the shantytowns of Buenos Aires resulted in an urban form that has many of the characteristics of the 'ideal' textbook cities or romantic European mediaeval oldtowns. The vast majority of the residents there use sustainable and low-emission modes of transportation, such as walking or cycling. The very high density (in many places excessive) means low emissions and consumption per-capita. Many of the incremental self-built houses developed at a human scale (compared to the 'towers' built elsewhere) and have mixed-uses with commercial spaces or workshops on the ground floor and residential quarters above, which contributes to increased social cohesion. For me personally, the most surprising and impressive aspect was exploring how community leaders in new informal settlements in the peripheries imitated formal planning and building codes to legitimise informal and illegal occupations in such ways that it is often difficult to distinguish between the official and informally planned neighbourhoods. All this happened in a context of poverty, repeating crises, constant eviction threats, market-driven pressures and land ownership conflicts. This contrasts with the design and construction of the new housing for relocated families that has been heavily criticised, not only by the inhabitants themselves, but also housing and human rights activists as well as some architects.

Therefore, there is definitely a lot that architects, planners and policymakers can learn from the informal processes in informal settlements and shantytowns. I argue that the organising capacities and contingent reactions to situations of uncertainty and crisis are underestimated and not sufficiently communicated. One of the lessons I learned while working on this thesis is that planning cannot be an antidote for uncertainty and informality if it does not engage with it directly. As a starting point, practitioners need to recognise what the situation is in these areas, what works and what does not, and then diagnose which of the encountered problems are more structural and which ones are local or contextual. Community involvement and empowerment should be central in such planning efforts.

While my fieldwork in the selected settlements in Buenos Aires was done first and foremost according to the standards and methods of academic research within the field of human geography, it was to a larger extent executed to resemble an urban planning process at an early stage. In this sense, the idea was to diagnose the condition of uncertainty and its impact on the local community, the built environment and the planning of these areas. The result of this exercise was the identification of different types of uncertainties, the description of the ways in which they impact the planning and development of these settlements, and a discussion about the interrelations between these uncertainties. This analysis, as presented in chapter 10, is perhaps my most significant contribution to planning theory and the field of urban geography. I found that in my case areas, tenure, economic and political types of uncertainty appear to be more important to resolve than health and environmental crises and risks. Even the Covid-19 pandemic and the impacts of climate change have not made a meaningful difference to this order of priorities.

As tenure uncertainty was identified as the most urgent risk or problem, I attempted to look closer at how it has been changing across time in the different settlements I visited and worked in. I found that the bottom-up planning initiatives led by local community leaders and activists are often motivated by the fact that engagement with or imitation of formal planning regulations and codes can increase tenure security. However, when such security from eviction is achieved, or when people do not aspire to stay in these areas in the long-term, then planning efforts might be ignored, or even rejected by the local communities, who in such situations may refocus their priorities on their

livelihoods and accumulation of savings. I have also documented the role of community leaders as political actors, who attempt to address the tenure and economic insecurity issues in their areas of influence.

To make a better connection between theory and practice, I did not just limit my work to answering my research questions, but I also propose a list of policy recommendations for policymakers and practitioners working in similar contexts in Buenos Aires, which will be summarised in the following chapter. This was largely influenced by my observation that many theories and best practices in architecture and planning that were borrowed from cities abroad do not necessarily work in the foreign context of Buenos Aires, while localised and contextualised theories and practices are often much more appropriate and effective in resolving the localised challenges of uncertainty and informality. Blindly applying ideas and solutions that might have worked elsewhere does not only result in a high risk of wastefulness of resources and unintended harm, but it also diminishes opportunities for dialog and participation of local communities, which might offer good ideas and experiences from practice to deal with the same issues.

This brings me to reflect upon the North-South power relations in research and knowledge exchange, where the idea of transferring best practices and theories from North to South is normalised, but other relations, such as the reverse opportunities of learning from the South to North, or the South-South exchanges are rather marginalised. In my study, I showed how bottom-up informal planning confronts the official planning system in Argentina, which is heavily influenced by Western planning traditions that are to some extent (which is probably decreasing) taught at local universities. These traditions make little space for informality, though we could see how in the last decades certain reforms have been going in the direction of rethinking the rigid standards, acknowledging informality and adapting to the new urban reality. While the policy proposals I made may not be replicable beyond Argentina, I believe that the ways I present how uncertainty and informality are conceptualised differently in mainstream 'Northern' planning literature and in planning practice in Buenos Aires, could challenge the way in which these concepts are understood, theorised, operationalised and approached by researchers and practitioners working in other places.

When it comes to the implications of my study for urban theory in the Global South, I propose that we stop treating uncertainty as a general context that causes urban informality, but rather encourage researchers and practitioners to understand the contextual nature of uncertainty and how it impacts living quality of the local communities. In other words, we need to know more about what we do not know but need to know, in order to do planning more efficiently.

More research should be done to study the effectiveness of planning standards and regulations towards access to affordable housing, the extent to which they are enforced, and whether or not they result in reduced informal and illegal housing strategies. Such research should ideally be done as part of a tight collaboration between the academia and planning practitioners. Doing this would not just help bridge the theory and practice gaps, but it would also give students, who are the future citymakers, opportunities to gain very relevant and useful practical experience. This includes learning and testing different approaches to how professional planners representing the state, and planning practitioners or other types of community leaders, can communicate and collaborate. More research is needed to study the clientelistic, opportunistic and criminal dimensions in housing provision and access, as well as on the manifestations of processes of informalisation in urban development and other ways in which bottom-up and top-down planning are not compatible. Further studies can also approach the problem of the legal contradictions and

synergies between the rights to housing and property, or investigate the complex relationship between housing access and employment.

My thesis can potentially contribute with ideas and experiences in working with certain methods. This could be useful for both researchers and planning practitioners engaged in similar contexts of urban informality. While a lot has been written about the general urban ethnographic approach, some of the methods I tested and applied might be new to the readers. This especially concerns the use of WhatsApp and other digital tools during the Covid-19 lockdown, when I was prevented from meeting with my informants physically. A similar study, or a follow-up research in a post-pandemic situation could also incorporate more focus-group interviews, role-play simulations or co-creation methods.

Epilogue

In the meantime, the struggle for housing for low-income people in Buenos Aires continues. At the time of writing this in May 2023, the situation in my study areas has not changed much from what I reported in the corresponding case chapters. The most important update about Villa 31 is that the land where the settlement sits has officially returned as the property of the National Government, an event that was celebrated by many of the vecinos and community leaders at the CGP in March. However, tenure uncertainty in the shantytown continues, as the next general elections are only a few months away. The progress of infrastructure upgrading in Costa Esperanza is rather slow. The largest ongoing construction project is a new kindergarten. Other visible changes include new paved streets and improved drainage, but the problems of garbage accumulation and periodical flooding persist. The overhead power line issue remains unresolved as well. Informal growth and densification continue in all three sectors the same way as it always did. OPISU, alongside other government agencies, carry on with their interventions in RENABAP settlements across the province, but their efforts may not be sufficient to address the magnitude of the problem of inadequate living conditions in the thousands of areas included in the updated registry. The sites-and-services project in Guernica has not yet been completed, but the national and provincial governments have launched new programs to provide thousands of serviced lots throughout GBA using this approach. The Habitar Argentina collective keeps up with their work and activism around housing policy, though its activity level has not been as high as it was before and during the pandemic times. Madre Tierra also continues their efforts to improve access to affordable and dignified housing for low-income families, and seeks new ways to raise funds to scale up their activities. As planners at Madre Tierra told me, there is a lot of work to be done in the future and a lot more houses that remain to be built. How the future of the 'City of Fury' will look like is difficult to predict, but the least we can do is not repeat the errors of the past:

...And we believe that we are 'on time' both in the suburbs of Buenos Aires, in the Province of Buenos Aires, and in the entire national territory, to make a process by which we can reach the type of territory [we want]... Because we are still young, we still have a society, a country to populate. It depends on us how we populate it, we cannot continue doing it as we have done up to now, with micro-cities and macro-injustices... (Interview 12).

12. Policy Recommendations

In this concluding chapter, I put forth a set of concrete policy proposals for the Argentinian state, based on my research findings. These concern interventions and reforms at all tiers of government (municipal, provincial and federal) as well as universities, aiming at improving urban planning in conditions of uncertainty and informality. The main principles of the proposals are: recognition of informality, more anticipatory action, flexibilisation, contextualisation and decentralisation of planning, increased participation, incremental action and diversification of housing choices. They assume a change of mindset in planning from product to process orientated and from minimum required standards to goals and aspirations.

Rights to housing and property

- Resolve contradictions between the legal meaning of the rights to housing, land and property, and provide clear guidelines to local judges and governments that deal with tenure conflicts in their jurisdictions.
- Prohibit eviction by force as long as the documented crisis of housing access continues.
- Recognize planners' roles as activists and increase their involvement in tenure related conflicts.
- When eviction is inevitable, move away from relocation to mass produced social housing in peripheries, and promote instead a choice of alternatives in the form of sites-and-services in suburban areas or rental or ownership apartments in central locations.

Housing policy

- Encourage a more proactive role of the state in providing and regulating the housing sector, through for example creating land banks with the purpose of generating affordable housing solutions.
- Supplement quantitative and generalised measures of housing affordability with contextual and qualitative understanding to help develop better affordable housing alternatives and policies.
- Diversify the housing options for households of different compositions, economic needs and preferences.
- Implement social rental housing programs to enable access to affordable dwellings in central locations.
- Support small-scale and autonomous housing projects, for example through interest-free microcredits.
- Support and scale up cooperative housing schemes and collective ownership models, inspired by successful cases from the region. This includes approving the National Law for Self-Managed Production of Housing, proposed in 2016.

Land use planning and standards

- Assess the application of current land-use policies, building codes as well as housing and infrastructure standards in order to recognize what types of uncertainties and informal practices they generate.

- Implement taxation on abandoned urban land and vacant properties to limit speculation and give incentives for property owners to place them on the market to increase supply and reduce the unaffordability of land and housing.
- Replace the obsolete Decree 8912 from 1977 with a new land use law based on the principles established in the Law 14.449 on Fair Access to Habitat.
- Replace the unrealistically high minimum standards for housing and infrastructure with more realistic and contextualised standards, supplemented with ambitions, targets or non-binding standards identified by the communities themselves, as well as negotiated roadmaps for gradual provision and incremental improvement and upgrading.
- Support and scale up sites-and-services development and similar types of flexible housing production schemes.

Self-building practices

- Support self-help construction processes and incremental housing development through for example subsidies for construction materials.
- Explore options to allow and provide open building structures that make space for incremental expansion of housing.
- Approve the proposed National Law of Technical-Professional and Public Support and ensure its implementation in informal settlements and shantytowns.

Formalisation and upgrading

- Assess the economic consequences of formalisation to prevent gentrification and market-driven expulsion of low-income communities.
- Explore community land and infrastructure ownership and management schemes as a transitory mode before issuing individual property mortgages and service connection agreements.
- Continue with registration of street addresses in informal settlements and shantytowns.
- Reform the RENABAP registry and Law 27.453 to decentralise and contextualise formalisation and infrastructure upgrading processes.

Planning approach and governance

- Implement reforms towards decentralising governance and localising planning interventions.
- Reform the planning system to ensure clear task division based on trust and shared responsibility between the state, civil society, and community actors.
- Shift from systems and sectoral approaches to planning towards territorial models at neighbourhood scales.
- Discourage copying 'best practices' from urban projects abroad and encourage developing contextualised solutions to local problems.
- Explore possibilities to incorporate methods based on localised anticipatory scenario planning or adaptation pathway approaches in planning in informal settlements and shantytowns.
- Consider various scenarios in planning urban interventions, including the 'do-nothing' scenario.

Participation and empowerment

- Implement participation and co-creation processes in planning and policy development at all stages.
- Incentivise urban planners to increase their field presence and establish face-to-face contact with the residents.
- Empower communities by supporting their actions, without shifting the burden of development on to them.
- Support the territorial and policy work done by local NGOs, civil organisations and grassroots movements.
- Integrate community leaders in local governance structures and planning institutions.
- Explore how mobile and digital technology can be used to improve participatory planning processes.

Economy and livelihoods

- Strengthen links between housing and income-generation.
- Reform housing subsidy and mortgage programs to ensure protection in unforeseen situations of crisis and unemployment.
- Support livelihood development through for example decentralised recycling and urban agriculture schemes or provision of spaces for entrepreneurial activities.
- Adapt planning and building laws to allow new and legitimise the existing small-scale, non-obstructive productive and commercial activities in residential areas.

Emergency response and critical situations

- Develop contingency plans on the basis of different kinds of uncertainties external to planning (economic, health, environmental etc.).
- Explore ways to bridge emergency response and spatial planning in situations of crisis and overlapping uncertainties.
- Prevent overcrowding and improve access to health and emergency services as well as sources of potable water within walking distance from all housing.
- Incorporate contextual climate change adaptation and mitigation measures in local planning.
- Strengthen actions to protect from flooding and control development in flood-prone areas. This includes approving the proposed National Law of Wetlands, which would protect sensitive wetland areas and mitigate inundations.

Education

- Up-scale and depoliticise initiatives for planning education programs for community leaders, such as the School of Community Leaders.
- Strengthen university education in planning and architecture through incorporating courses based on fieldwork in informal settlements and shantytowns, where participation and co-creation is taught and practiced.
- Integrate alternative housing tenure models and building processes, including cooperative housing, collective ownership schemes, incremental construction and co-design processes in architecture and planning education.
- Integrate more courses in geography and social science in architecture and planning education.
- Improve and upscale territorial collaboration and coordination between researchers, students and local governments.

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Photo: Marvin Ibo Guengoer - GES Sportfoto/Getty Images

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Appendices

Appendix 1: List of Interviews

Nr	Name(s)	Role / Profession	Organisation / settlement	Date of Interv.	Mode	Platform
1	Gonzalo Moreno (anonymous)	Lawyer Sustainability Manager	(private sector company)	24.04.2019	Physical	
2	(anonymous)	Project manager	GCBA - CEDEL	29.04.2019	Physical	
3	Paloma Garay Santaló	Planner	National Government	21.05.2019	Physical	
4	Alfredo Garay	Architect / Former Sub-secretary of Urbanism and Housing in CABA and PBA	UBA FADU / GCBA/ PBA	30.05.2019	Physical	
5	Alan Gancberg (anonymous) (anonymous)	Urban planner Urban planner Engineer	OPISU	13.01.2020	Physical	
6	(anonymous) (anonymous)	Researcher Researcher	Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento & Instituto del Conurbano	23.01.2020	Physical	
7	Rosario Fassina Sofía Veliz	Right to the city coordinator Lawyer	ACIJ	28.01.2020	Physical	
8	Violeta Pompa Sebastian Galván Yesica Ferreyra Carolina Amaya	Urban planner Urban planner Urban planner Urban planner (Director)	IDUAR Moreno	29.01.2020	Physical	
9	María Luisa Estay Valle	Community leader	Costa Esperanza	30.01.2020	Physical	
10	(anonymous)	Architect	TECHO	12.02.2020	Physical	
11	(anonymous)	Director	GCBA - UGIS	14.02.2020	Physical	
12	Ana Pastor Adriana Kozyra (anonymous) (anonymous)	Social worker Architect / Urban planner Architect Psychologist	Madre Tierra	17.02.2020	Physical	
13	(anonymous)	Community leader	La Boca neighbourhood	27.02.2020	Online	WhatsApp
14	Federico Wahlberg	Co-founder	Civil org. Hipotecados UVA Autoconvocados	04.03.2020	Physical	
15	(anonymous)	Researcher	UBA FSoC / Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani	11.03.2020	Physical	
16	María Luisa Estay Valle	Community leader	Costa Esperanza	31.04.2020	Online	WhatsApp
17	(anonymous)	Public policy section coordinator	Habitat for Humanity Argentina (HpHA)	16.04.2020	Online	WhatsApp
18	(anonymous)	Lawyer	GCBA - SECISYU	21.04.2020	Online	Zoom

19	Danilo Rossi	Anthropologist / Urban planner	GCBA - SECISYU	21.04.2020	Online	Zoom
20	(anonymous)	Founder	Housing cooperative	28.04.2020	Online	WhatsApp
21	Nestor Jeifetz	Architect / Housing activist	Movimiento de Ocupantes e Inquilinos (MOI)	01.05.2020	Online	Zoom
22	Emiliana Mamani	Founder	Housing cooperative 27 de mayo	21.05.2020	Online	WhatsApp
23	Alan Gancberg	Urban planner	OPISU	27.05.2020	Online	Zoom
24	(anonymous)	Urban planner	SECISYU	30.08.2020	Online	Google Meet
25	María Luisa Estay Valle	Community leader	Costa Esperanza	29.10.2020	Online	WhatsApp
26	Ana Pastor	Social worker	Madre Tierra	10.11.2020	Online	WhatsApp
27	(anonymous)	Architect	OPISU	18.11.2020	Online	Google Meet
28	Alan Gancberg	Urban planner	OPISU / SECISYU	19.11.2020	Online	WhatsApp
29	Natalia de Arteaga	Architect / Urban planner	OPISU	25.11.2020	Online	Zoom
30	Pablo Gastón Flores	Architect / Urbanist	Independent practicioner	27.11.2020	Online	Zoom
31	(anonymous)	Community leader / Communication representative	Guernica	03.12.2020	Online	WhatsApp
32	(anonymous)	Senior urban development officer	World Bank	22.12.2020	Online	Microsoft Teams
33	Silvana Olivera Mirta Gladys Jaime	Community leader Community leader	Villa 31	30.01.2020	Online	WhatsApp
34	María Luisa Estay Valle	Community leader	Costa Esperanza	26.04.2021	Online	WhatsApp
35	(anonymous)	Community leader	Informal settlement in Wilde (Avellaneda partido)	24.12.2021	Physical	
36	Silvana Olivera Mirta Gladys Jaime	Community leader Community leader	Villa 31	28.01.2022	Physical	
37	Emiliana Mamani	Founder	Housing cooperative 27 de mayo	19.02.2022	Physical	
38	(anonymous)	Community leader	Carlos Gardel social housing project	21.02.2022	Physical	
39	Macarena Burón	Social worker	Habitat for Humanity Argentina (HpHA)	23.03.2022	Physical	
40	María Luisa Estay Valle	Community leader	Costa Esperanza	26.03.2022	Physical	
41	(anonymous)	Lawyer	GCBA	14.04.2022	Physical	
42	(anonymous)	Housing activist	Guernica	20.04.2022	Physical	
43	(anonymous)	Urban planner	OPISU	02.05.2022	Physical	
44	(anonymous)	Housing activist	Médicos Sin Fronteras	05.05.2022	Physical	

Appendix 2: Consent form in Spanish (original)

¿Está usted interesado(a) en participar en el proyecto de investigación “Vivienda asequible en la época de incertidumbre – el caso de Buenos Aires”?

Le pido que participe en un proyecto de investigación de doctorado. Se trata de estudiar cómo ha respondido la ciudad de Buenos Aires a las situaciones de incertidumbre y crisis económicas después del año 2001, especialmente en términos de proporcionar y asegurar vivienda asequible e infraestructura básica. La institución responsable del proyecto es la Universidad de Oslo (Noruega).

Le pido su participación porque usted ha sido identificado(a) o recomendado(a) como alguien con experiencia y conocimiento relevante para el tema de investigación. Si decide participar, se le pediría que responda una serie de preguntas sobre temas relacionados con el desarrollo urbano y vivienda en Buenos Aires. Los datos recopilados incluyen el nombre, número de teléfono, email, lugar del trabajo, así como las afiliaciones políticas y sindicatos. Sus respuestas serán grabadas y guardadas en un depósito digital.

La participación en el proyecto es voluntaria. Puede dejar de participar en cualquier momento, sin dar una razón. No habrá consecuencias negativas si decide no participar o retirarse más tarde. Utilizaré sus datos solo para los fines del estudio. Voy a procesar sus datos personales de forma confidencial y de conformidad con la legislación: el **Reglamento General de Protección de Datos (RGPD)** y la **Ley de Datos Personales**. Solo el investigador del doctorado tendrá acceso a sus datos personales recopilados, a menos que nos dé su consentimiento para publicarlos.

Su nombre y sus detalles de contacto serán reemplazados por un código. La lista de los nombres, datos de contacto y los códigos correspondientes será guardada por separado del resto de los datos recopilados. **Si lo desea, toda su información personal será anónima en las publicaciones.** Se pueden usar citas directas, pero usted no será reconocible de manera que permitiría identificarle(a) personalmente, a menos que nos dé su consentimiento para hacerlo. Todos los datos recopilados se eliminarán al final del proyecto (aprox. mayo de 2023).

Siempre que pueda identificarse en los datos recopilados, tiene derecho a:

- acceder sus datos personales que se están procesando
- solicitar la eliminación de sus datos personales
- solicitar la corrección / rectificación de los datos personales incorrectos
- recibir una copia de sus datos personales (portabilidad de datos) y
- enviar una queja al Oficial de Protección de Datos o a la Autoridad Noruega de Protección de Datos con respecto al procesamiento de sus datos personales.

Voy a procesar sus datos personales en función de su consentimiento. Basado en el acuerdo con la Universidad de Oslo, el Centro Noruego de Datos de Investigación AS ha evaluado que el procesamiento de datos personales en este proyecto está de acuerdo con la legislación de protección de datos.

Si tiene preguntas sobre el proyecto o desea ejercer sus derechos, comuníquese con:

- Universidad de Oslo vía el Investigador del doctorado Marcin Sliwa: marcin.sliwa@sosgeo.uio.no
- Oficial de Protección de Datos en la Universidad de Oslo: personvernombud@uio.no
- NSD – la Autoridad Noruega de Protección de Datos AS, vía email: personvertjenester@nsd.no o por teléfono: +47 5558 2117

Sinceramente,



Marcin Sliwa
Investigador del doctorado

Consentimiento

Recibí y entendí la información sobre el proyecto “Vivienda asequible en la época de incertidumbre – el caso de Buenos Aires” y se me ha brindado la oportunidad de hacer preguntas. Doy mi consentimiento para:

- participar en la entrevista
- que la información sobre mí sea publicada de manera que pueda ser reconocido(a)

Doy mi consentimiento para que mis datos personales sean procesados hasta la finalización del proyecto, aprox. mayo de 2023.

(firmado por el participante, fecha)

Appendix 3: Consent form in English (translation)

Are you interested in taking part in the research project
“Affordable housing in the age of uncertainty – case of Buenos Aires, Argentina”?

This is an inquiry about participation in a doctoral research project where the main purpose is to find out how the city of Buenos Aires responded to situations of uncertainties and crises after year 2001, especially in terms of providing and ensuring access to affordable housing and basic infrastructure. The institution responsible for the project is the University of Oslo (Norway).

You are asked to participate, because you have been identified or recommended as a person with experience and knowledge relevant to the research topic. If you chose to take part, this will involve answering a series of questions about issues related to urban planning and housing in Buenos Aires. The collected data includes name, telephone number, email, workplace, as well as political party and trade union memberships. Your answers will be recorded and saved electronically.

Participation in the project is voluntary. You can withdraw at any time without giving a reason. There will be no negative consequences if you chose not to participate or later decide to withdraw. We will only use your data for the purpose of the research project. We will process your personal data confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation - the **General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)** and **Personal Data Act**. Only the project leader and the local assistant in Argentina will have access to your collected personal data, unless you give us consent to publish it.

Your name and contact details will be replaced with a code. The list of names, contact details and respective codes will be stored separately from the rest of the collected data. **If you wish so, all your personal information will be made anonymous in the publications.** Direct quotes might be used, but you will not be recognizable in a way that would allow the readers to identify you personally unless you give us your consent to do so. All the collected data will be deleted at the end of the project (approximately May 2023).

So long as you can be identified in the collected data you have a right to:

- access the personal data that is being processed about you
- request that your personal data is deleted
- request that incorrect personal data about you is corrected/rectified
- receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and
- send a complaint to the Data Protection Officer or the Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data.

We will process your personal data based on your consent. Based on an agreement with the University of Oslo, NSD – The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with data protection legislation.

If you have questions about the project, or want to exercise your rights, contact:

- The University of Oslo via Doctoral Researcher Marcin Sliwa: marcin.sliwa@sosgeo.uio.no
- NSD – The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS, by email: personvertjenester@nsd.no or by telephone: +47 5558 2117
- Data Protection Officer at the University of Oslo: personvernombud@uio.no

Your sincerely,



Marcin Sliwa
Project Leader

Consent form

I have received and understood information about the project “Affordable housing in the age of uncertainty - case of Buenos Aires, Argentina” and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give consent:

- to participate in an interview
- for information about me/myself to be published in a way that I can be recognised

I give consent for my personal data to be processed until the end date of the project, approx. May 2023.

(Signed by participant, date)