



# State-community collaborative strategies to enable the right to the city in Argentina



Adam Cutts, Sarah Moser\*

Department of Geography, McGill University, Burnside Hall, Room 705, 805 Sherbrooke Street West, Montreal, Quebec, H3A 2K6, Canada

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## ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, and especially in the wake of the 2002 social and economic crisis, there has been significant growth in the number of Argentinian grass-roots movements, NGOs, and cooperatives that focus on providing affordable housing for the urban poor. In response, the current federal government has advanced uniquely progressive housing policies that aim to address the housing deficit in concert with social and neighborhood organizations. This paper examines the strategies of the National Land Commission for Social Housing and investigates various participatory processes for meeting housing needs employed in the intermediate city of Santa Fe. The National Land Commission's notion of active participation will be discussed both in terms of how it affirms 'right to the city' principles and as a more progressive form of 'assisted self-help' housing, and how it better embodies the ideals of self-help than previous efforts to address the housing deficit. This paper highlights a recent collaborative effort between the state and community groups to introduce nationally-owned vacant land for cooperative/community-based housing production in the city of Santa Fe. We explore this initiative in terms of the institutional, financial, and technical support it provides for communities and the direct provision of urban land as a potential way forward for engaging with communities to address housing shortages.

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## 1. Introduction

Argentina is one of the world's most urbanized countries, with 93% of its population living in cities, up from 88% in 1994. Cities across Argentina have struggled to keep up with housing and infrastructure needs, as do many underdeveloped countries with increasingly large and poor urban populations (Monkkonen & Ronconi, 2013; WorldBank, 2014). The housing deficit in Argentina, in both quantitative (homeless population) and qualitative (overcrowding, lack of services, irregular tenancy) terms, has grown over the past decades, with the percentage of the total national population living in deficient dwellings rising to a peak of roughly 36% after the 2001/2002 economic crisis (INDEC, 2001).<sup>1</sup>

This trend indicates the need to implement housing programs that engage with existing forms of popular settlement in the development of housing solutions (Gazzoli, 2007). Now, more than a decade after the economic disaster and the failure of neo-liberal policies (Arceo, 2006; Manzetti, 2009), a strong political shift towards a more active state and growing broad-based support for progressive, community-driven solutions has created unique conditions out of which Argentina has set a precedent for state-community collaborations in addressing affordable housing shortages.

This paper examines the Argentinean state's recent support of community-based modes of housing as a sharp departure from previous approaches in the country. More specifically, we explore the approach of the *Comisión Nacional de Tierras para el Hábitat Social* (CNTH) – the National Land Commission for Social Housing<sup>2</sup>

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [adam.cutts@mail.mcgill.ca](mailto:adam.cutts@mail.mcgill.ca) (A. Cutts), [sarah.moser@mcgill.ca](mailto:sarah.moser@mcgill.ca) (S. Moser).

<sup>1</sup> This deficit, however, appears to be changing in nature, largely attributed to economic recovery since the crisis, with the 2010 census indicating a decline to around 21.6%, in absolute terms, of deficient dwellings, and further categorizing only 18% of this deficit as 'irrecoverable housing' as opposed to upwards of 40% of the deficit categorized as irrecoverable in previous decades (Gazzoli, 2007; INDEC, 2010; Maldonado, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> In the months following the research for this paper, the CNTH was absorbed into a newly created National Secretariat for Access to Habitat (Secretaría Nacional de Acceso al Hábitat), to be headed by the current president of the CNTH. As a secretariat, the commission will be allocated a larger budget and stronger authority for projects in collaboration with provincial and municipal governments across the country (Secretaría Nacional de Comunicación Pública, 2014).

– and how it is working with networks of social organizations to engage them in participatory design, the production of ‘habitat’, and the improvement of informal settlements. These initiatives to encourage alternative forms of housing development with community participation present an important but overlooked example of collaboration between design professionals, the state, and community social organizations, thus providing a counterpoint to widespread neoliberal urban policies development. Through projects such as the one we examine in this paper, Argentina is attempting to employ the ‘right to the city’ concept to practice-based housing programs, an approach scholars have called for in recent years (Bredenoord & van Lindert, 2010). Our examination of this experimentation with progressive policies and their implementation responds to recent calls for further empirical studies on the ‘right to the city’ movement as an important phenomenon in the Global South beyond neoliberalism (Parnell & Robinson, 2012).

The idea of a ‘rights based city’ and the ‘right to the city’ is at the core of many social movements for land and housing in Argentina. Originally conceptualized by Henri Lefebvre in 1968, the ‘right to the city’ encompasses many different rights, broadly based on equitable access to the benefits, services, and opportunities that cities have to offer. Most importantly, this concept includes the right to *equal access* to the power to collectively shape and have a say over the process of urbanization and life in the city. The ‘right to the city’ concept has gained significant traction in Latin America, where there has been a surge in populist governments and where cities are increasingly exclusionary due to ‘property speculation, widespread vacant urban land, environmental degradation, widespread gated communities, and above all the proliferation of precarious informal settlements’ (Fernandes, 2007, p. 210).

This article investigates the current national housing program and how it is being implemented in the empirical context of Santa Fe, a city of nearly 500,000 residents in northeastern Argentina. We begin by contextualizing these projects within a broader trajectory of policies that have been implemented over the past four decades. The second section presents the context and rationale for the establishment of the current National Land Commission for Social Housing (CNTH) and discusses the relationships formed between the state, grassroots associations, and social and professional organizations. In section three we analyze the implementation of the policies and programs on the ground, focusing on a recent initiative aimed at allocating nationally-owned land in urban areas for the development of participatory social housing. The final section reflects upon the strengthened capacities of communities in Santa Fe involved in programs for collaborative low-income housing provision amongst the challenges of these new housing policies and programs within the broader housing policy landscape in Argentina.

This paper seeks to gain an understanding of the roles played by various actors in a pioneering participatory housing program, the tools they use, and the personal insights and reflections of the people involved on all sides (government, professional, and community). The discussion and conclusions draw upon both participant observation in meetings and participatory workshops, and nearly two dozen field interviews conducted in June–July 2014. Semi-structured and one-on-one conversational interviews took place with several representatives of the government branch that organized and funded the case study’s project, including Guillermo Marzoni, the national ‘director of habitat projects’ in the CNTH. Seven interviews were conducted with architects involved in the organization ‘Vivienda Social y Ciudad’, which functions as a technical assistance team to the community groups for participatory design and building techniques. Finally, in order to capture the insights and experiences of members of the local community, eight interviews were conducted with individuals affiliated with

community organizations in the city of Santa Fe that are involved in advocacy, organization, and demands for social housing.

## 2. Addressing the housing deficit: the evolution of Argentinean housing policy

Over the past several decades, Argentina’s urban housing shortage has been addressed by the state through various approaches ranging from the large-scale provision of subsidized housing to private market-led policies aimed at expanding the formal housing sector. Since the government of Juan Perón (1946–1955) until the beginning of military rule in 1976, the Argentinean state provided subsidized housing units and long-term, low-interest loans as the main approach to the housing deficit (Aboy, 2007). During this period of heavy state intervention and wealth redistribution, the government had direct involvement in the planning, construction, allocation, and administration of social housing through the national housing fund (*Fondo Nacional de Vivienda*, FONAVI), a mandatory savings fund for housing. Crucially, despite extensive evictions and ‘slum-clearing’ policies in the 1970s, especially during the military regime,<sup>3</sup> these policies focused on middle-income households and excluded the lowest income groups (Angel, 2001). As a result, sustained shortages of affordable housing and a lack of developed land accessible to the poorest segments of the population led to the growth of informal ‘squatter’ settlements in urban areas across the country (Angel, 2001; Rolnik, 2011).

Then, during the widespread neoliberal economic restructuring of the 1980s and 1990s, the role of the government in social housing went from that of provider of housing through ‘expert’-led modernist housing projects, to that of ‘housing market enabler’. At this time the World Bank and IMF took a sharp turn to promote a market enabling approach, pushing various forms of neo-liberal policies on ‘reluctant poor countries that often badly needed their loans and grants’ (Stiglitz, 2002, p. 13). The Argentinean state’s approach focused on the provision of complete ‘turn-key’ housing units for the middle and working classes and progressively blocked the diversification of housing programs (Angel, 2001; Rodulfo, 2006; Scheinsohn & Cabrera, 2009). Further, in the process of decentralization and neoliberal economic liberalization in Argentina, the responsibility for FONAVI housing programs was handed down to the provinces and restructured. Through this process, the private sector was included in various stages of the financing, construction, and provision of housing, placing further importance on the private market.<sup>4</sup>

When policies were introduced in the late 1980s and 1990s, many observers touted the extensive application of neoliberal, free market policies in all sectors, including housing, as an example of structural adjustment bringing economic growth to countries in the Global South (Dowall, 1992; Malpezzi & Mayo, 1987; Mayo, Malpezzi, & Gross, 1986; WorldBank, 1993). As critics point out,

<sup>3</sup> The last military regime in Argentina from 1976 to 83 is characterized by mass state violence and human rights abuses, state reorganization, ballooning national debt, as well as a growing inequality within the population (see Ferrer, 2012; Veigel, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Argentina is said to have had the most intensive experience with the ‘neoliberal experiment’ in Latin America (Azpiazu, 2002; Benwell et al., 2013). In terms of effects on the social housing sector, loans from multilateral financial institutions mandated extensive restructuring, including privatization of the National Mortgage Bank, the reduction of state spending per housing unit, and the refocusing of programs to beneficiaries who could contribute higher down payments. Reform of the ‘Federal Housing Systems Law’ did not allow for diversification of housing programs outside of introducing private sector intermediaries into the process of construction and financing of ‘turn-key’ housing units, which overall resulted in the reduced affordability of state-subsidized housing units (Angel, 2001).

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