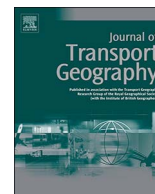




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# Real estate production, geographies of mobility and spatial contestation: A two-case study in Santiago de Chile<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the links between real estate production, transport infrastructure and class-related spatial tensions in the context of urban neoliberalism in Chile. As case studies we focus on two of the most intensely redeveloping areas in Santiago, the Estación Central municipality in inner Santiago which experiences rapid high-rise property-led redevelopment, and the peri-urban growth zone of Chicureo in the municipality of Colina. From the perspective of urban political economy and using mobility-related questionnaires, in-depth interviews with inhabitants and media analysis we detect important differences between inner-city and peri-urban dynamics. While the redeveloping inner area of Santiago, in spite of being an exclusionary space where lower income-oriented affordable housing is absent, is not a disputed space in terms of access to mobility means, the expanding fringes of the city show strong class-related differences among new and old inhabitants. It seems that with view to mobility opportunities urban neoliberalism has variegated geographies that at the same time might show temporarily positive (Estación Central) and very negative results (Chicureo). In terms of public policy these results indicate that the inner area of Santiago is an opportunity for locating social housing production, given the relatively equal access to mobility opportunity for the different income groups. In the meanwhile, the deepening of mobility-related inequalities on the urban peripheries is highly problematic and needs more scholarly and political attention.

## 1. Introduction

Since the early 1990s Santiago experienced rapid modernization and enlargement of its privately-built housing stock, along with the supply of public and private transport infrastructure and transformations in the institutional landscape of urban governance and planning (Zegras and Gakenheimer, 2000; De Mattos, 2011). In that regard, Santiago is not an atypical case for Latin American metropolises in times of neoliberal globalization where the influx and circulation of national and transnational finance capital and planning ideas related to urban form, transport and mobility are boosting the transformation of the built environment on the one hand and the implementation of new regulatory regimes of land use and transportation planning on the other (Roberts, 2005; Janoschka et al., 2013; López-Morales, 2016b).

While currently for Latin American cities there is literature available on the political economy of urban growth and the intensification of land use (Janoschka and Hidalgo, 2013), on transportation planning and Bus

Rapid Transit (BRT)-reforms (Figueroa, 2005; Paget-Seekins, 2015) as well as on daily mobility patterns (Jirón and Mansilla, 2014; Jirón et al., 2016), the functional and strategic links between real estate production, transport infrastructure and spatial contestation only recently have begun to be scrutinized. For instance, aspects that have been addressed are the relation between inter-urban highways and peri-urbanization through gated communities (Blanco and San Cristóbal, 2012), land value impacts of BRT implementation (Rodríguez and Mojica, 2008) and the empirical and conceptual links between gentrification, mobility and transport (Blanco et al., 2014; Apaolaza et al., 2016).

This paper brings a critical urban political economy perspective to the nexus of real estate production, transport infrastructure and spatial contestation. We ask how, by whom and for whom new real estate projects and transport infrastructures are developed, analyze the differential characteristics and possibilities held by incumbent actors to use transport infrastructure, and how real estate agents, transport

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operators, and regional and local-level planning regimes intertwine in such a highly neoliberal setting as is Santiago, Chile. As case studies we focus on two of the most intensely redeveloping areas in Santiago de Chile, the inner-city municipality of Estación Central under rapid high-rise residential redevelopment, and the peri-urban growth zone of Chicureo. This comparative research design allows us to shed light on the different actually-existing assembling dynamics of real estate, transportation and the class-led contestation of space present in one city region, and thus avoid overgeneralization based on a single case only. Our results show that the inner area of Santiago is not a disputed space in terms of access to mobility means (while it is disputed in terms of residential affordability) while the expanding fringes of the city show strong class-related differences among new and old inhabitants, holding contrasted income levels. Based on this finding we claim that with view to mobility opportunities urban neoliberalism has variegated geographies that at the same time might show temporarily positive (Estación Central) and very negative results (Chicureo). In terms of public policy these results indicate that the inner area of Santiago is an opportunity for locating social housing production, given the relatively equal access to mobility opportunity for the different income groups. In the meanwhile, the deepening of mobility-related inequalities on the urban peripheries is highly problematic and needs more scholarly and political attention.

The paper follows, in section two, with a theoretical discussion on the political economy of real estate production, transport infrastructure and unequal mobilities under urban neoliberalism. Especially we develop how the discussions of these topics in Latin America converge around the concepts of gentrification and spatial capital and how they play out in inner-city and peri-urban areas in Latin America. After briefly giving some contextual and historical information on the neoliberal urbanism, real estate and transport infrastructure in Santiago in section three, in section four we explain the explorative and qualitative methodology that was applied and the rationality of case selection. Section five then describes the historical and geographical features of the two cases in order to be able to better situate the analysis of the assembling dynamics of real estate production, mobility patterns and spatial contestation in section six. The paper closes in section seven with a discussion on the findings and a brief conclusion.

## 2. Real estate production, transport infrastructure and unequal mobilities under urban neoliberalism

Following Sager (2011: 149), we understand urban neoliberalism broadly as “a restructuring of the relationship between private capital owners and the state, which rationalizes and promotes a growth-first approach to urban development”. Both real estate production and transport infrastructure are parts and parcel of urban neoliberalism and entrepreneurial urban governance (López-Morales et al., 2012) as the more specific underlying policy orientation. In the latter sense cities try to attract increasingly mobile capital through strategies of property-led regeneration and the intensification of land use (Logan and Molotch, 1987; López-Morales, 2016b), and the modernization and extension of transport infrastructure (Paget-Seekings, 2015; Harris, 2013). Through a range of strategies and often new institutional arrangements (local development corporations, business improvement districts, urban megaprojects, the franchising of highway or public transport concessions, for the latter BRT being a prominent example) the state offers finance capital incentives for investing in real estate and infrastructure markets in certain urban places.

Most private real estate production under urban neoliberalism (apart of state-led social housing provision) is about the production of and capitalization on ground rent increases through cycles of disinvestment and reinvestment and in general the intensification of land use, be it in inner-city or peri-urban locations (Smith, 2002; López-Morales, 2015, 2016a). Highlighting their class-based and socially problematic character, these processes can be understood as

gentrification, that means a combination of (1) capital (re)investment in land and real estate markets in certain locations with correspondingly rising land and housing prices, (2) the arrival of investors and residents with higher paying capacity than the people living in the re-invested areas beforehand, (3) changes in labor, commercial and recreational activities and landscapes controlled by the arriving, more affluent agents, in a sort of habitus creation of certain prime spaces (Centner, 2008); (4) direct or indirect (and often long term) displacement or exclusion of social groups holding lower socio-economic status than those entering the gentrifying neighborhoods (Rerat and Lees, 2011; Casgrain and Janoschka, 2013; Blanco et al., 2014). This definition dialogues with what Lees et al. (2016) have defined as ‘planetary gentrification’, namely the different forms that the exertion of economic power over certain spaces generate in the increase of socio-spatial polarization in cities around the world.

Further, in their contribution Blanco et al. (2014) propose an analytical framework to integrate the assessment of the unequal access to transport and mobility of different social groups into the analysis of gentrification. Taking up the work of Rerat and Lees (2011) and Kaufmann et al. (2004), they built their framework around the concept of spatial capital. Spatial capital comprises three key elements: a) accessibility, b) competence and c) appropriation. A different approach to spatial capital can be found in Centner (2008: 197), for whom space can represent the main asset to be disputed among different classes, hence “we can imagine how the struggle over spatial domination could be connected to the use of economic, cultural, or social capital, or all three [...] in a field where material space is at stake.” While Blanco et al. (2014) understand spatial capital as both territorially anchored and individually appropriated opportunities and capacities to move in (urban) space, for Centner (2008: 194) spatial capital is rather an “exclusionary tool deployed by privileged city users”. While the former authors use of the concept of spatial capital highlights mobility and movement, the latter one reflects on the *spatializations* of economic, cultural and social capital and thus material and symbolic practices through which space is claimed and appropriated by “the imposition of one's group's norms on another” (Mace, 2017: 124).

An important but often only implicitly assumed aspect in the relation of real estate production, transport infrastructure and spatial capital is that of metropolitan geography. Besides other symbolic, physical or functional characteristics, the more central or connected to transport infrastructure an urban neighborhood is, the higher accessibility it provides what is attractive both for real estate developers and their clients. Relatively easy access to spaces of work, consumption and recreation facilities and a diversified range of public transport options, including walking and cycling, are available.

As Rerat and Lees (2011) have shown for some European cities, this expansion of mobility options is what new residents moving to central city areas are often looking for. In that sense the (re)investment of real estate and finance capital, triggered by capital-attracting local politics and zoning ordinances, might directly be linked to the desirability of the area and the increased aspirations of the incoming new residents to occupy it. Often previously derelict or marginalized urban space is transformed into an enormous source of economic capital when real estate developers and landlords capitalize on accessibility-related ground rent increases (Smith, 2002). This is more or less the norm in Chile, and specifically Santiago, where housing prices have been dramatically increasing in almost every quarter of the city (López-Morales, 2015, 2016a, 2016b). Thus, when gentrification occurs, traditional and socio-economically weaker inhabitants facing displacement, especially petty proprietors or tenants, will not only be dispossessed of the tiny portion of the ground rent they could obtain by selling the land, but also almost the whole of original residents can see the chances to stay put in those places and be able to keep using the mobility resources deployed there. The Estación Central case treated below shows very little differential access to transport infrastructures between new and old residents (in a place where new and old resident households show marked

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