

In between Public Policies and Social Production of Habitat: A Special Case in Buenos Aires, Argentina

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In the early twenty-first century, housing remains an inaccessible commodity for most of the urban population in the so-called Global South. The City of Buenos Aires is no exception. Its local constitution passed in 1996 recognizes the right to adequate housing. The city therefore promotes policies that support self-management (“autogestión”) and the urban and social integration of inhabitants.

In Argentina the crisis of the neoliberal model finds its expression in the protests of December 2001 and goes hand in hand with long struggles for the access to housing. At the time, when social organizations fought for the improvement of social housing policies, a possibility emerged in the City of Buenos Aires that facilitates access to formal housing for the urban poor. A specific regulation was passed that allowed social organizations to obtain state mortgage loans for building housing projects on the condition of accepting technical assistance from professional interdisciplinary teams.

The regulation was set out to transform public policy in favor of collective self-management and opposed to the mass production of large construction companies destined for anonymous inhabitants. To a certain extent the development of this new regulation can be seen as a transgression of the prevailing social housing model of the city, which usually consists of individual loans to buy specific social housing units or to choose within a very limited price range on the formal market.

This paper discusses the case study of the social and political organization “Movimiento Territorial de Liberación” (MTL). The organization’s housing project called “Monteagudo” challenges the mode of public housing because of a capacity training program for its members and the foundation of its own construction cooperative. The centrally located housing complex, designed by a renowned local architecture studio, consists of 326 apartments and service facilities which facilitate the connection with the neighborhood.

MTL introduced a different mode of construction framed in a culture contrary to the dominant system, where the protagonists wanted to be “everyday makers of their future”. With this philosophy, they were able to participate actively in the urban production, transgressing the usual mechanisms. In practice, it enabled the movement to choose the location and to self-manage the construction of the housing complex on a scale that shapes the urban territory. The movement understood that the possibility to have access to housing is connected to the issue of their own social integration process. This is why they set out to create a building cooperative, where the activist as a maker of his/her own home is trained within the formal labor system.

On the one hand, these practices, which are transgressive in relation to the prevailing system of housing production, achieved a change of culture deeply rooted in society on various aspects. These aspects transformed the conditions of households as well as the institutional mechanisms of social housing production. One of these aspects is to establish a transitional housing program as a step prior to the permanent housing. Other aspects are to set up a regulation for a collective housing production, to facilitate the location of housing in central areas with infrastructure, services and access to formal work and to have the support of local technical teams with experience and social engagement. In short, the practices helped to restore the collective dignity of social groups which had lost their integration as citizens.

On the other hand, the Monteagudo experience raises issues from an individual and collective viewpoint, that tackle the topics of education, dialogue and consensus of all actors involved. From the individual viewpoint, the transformation from a sole beneficiary of the social housing program to an active social actor as part of the habitat production process stands out. From the collective viewpoint, among the challenges are the formation of a community as place of education and coexistence, the creation of mechanisms that allow social enterprises to participate in the formal market and finally the establishment of solid budgets and regulations on a local and national level in order to implement a global policy of social production of habitat that serves larger sectors of the population.

The Monteagudo experience as a “singular practice” shows a new mode to act on and comprehend housing policies which generates a qualitative leap. However, it is not yet finalized. It remains an isolated experience that deserves further transdisciplinary reflection to overcome the issues raised and allow social inclusion, eventually tending towards more equitable cities.

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