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– PROTECTIVE ARRANGEMENTS ACROSS CLASS: Understanding Social Segregation in La Plata, Argentina

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Abstract

This essay develops the concept of protective arrangements *(a socio-material relationship between house architecture, objects and human practices) in order to develop a new understanding of urban social segregation. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork in La Plata (Argentina) I compare the protective arrangements of lower and upper middle-class residents against the background of the commonly sensed need to self-organize protection. While in the gated communities of the upper-middle class walls and fences enclose an 'open interior space', members of the upper-middle class who live in or close to the city centre protect their homes with individual security systems. In contrast, people at the poorer end of society attune their repertoires of protection towards the constant threat of eviction and burglary with dogs and improvised fences and by guaranteeing the permanent presence in the home of at least one household member. The analysis of these strategies at the house scale shows an increasing process of socio-spatial fragmentation in the city as a product of the materialization of discursive-material practices deployed in search of protection.*

Introduction

This essay focuses on the relationship between house, social class and protection. While the ontological and phenomenological approaches of 'the house' have highlighted its protective functions—the house as a 'not-self that protects the self' (Bachelard, 1994: 34–5)—in this essay I geographically, historically and sociologically contextualize the relationship between house and protection. I discuss some selected ethnographic insights from my research about how residents experience socio-spatial segregation in the city of La Plata (Argentina) in the context of socio-spatial fragmentation (Janoschka, 2002), increasing crime rates and the consolidation of insecurity as a central concern (Kessler, 2014), and deepening urban inequalities (Portes and Roberts, 2005; Segura, 2018) in Latin American cities. Aware of the risk of timeless universalization of the ontological and phenomenological approaches of 'the house', through the comparative analysis of the ethnographic material presented in this essay I carry out a contextualized reading of the materiality, practices, symbolic representations and designs of the houses across class in the city.

This essay focuses on comparing the differences between houses in different and unequal neighbourhoods. During my research the native category *casa* (house)—rather than *vivienda* (housing)—emerged with singular strength: both as the place where I carried out the research and as places which acquired relevance in the residents' search for protection. In addition to class inequalities, there are gender differences linked to the home such as the unequal distribution of domestic work and the changing articulations between the public and private dimensions of men and women, as well as the violence and abuse inflicted on many women and children, usually by their partners or other household members (see Gutiérrez Rivera, this issue, 2020). In fact, gender inequalities seem to be transversal to different neighbourhoods, from gated communities (Atkinson and Smith, 2012) to informal settlements (Meth, 2017). The house, then, is an ambivalent place for women: it seeks to protect them and yet it is a potential site of danger for them.

In the attempt to explore the daily practices of security (Goldstein, 2010; Grassiani and Diphoorn, 2017) and the material culture (Müller, 2019) involved in

these practices and their effects on urban life, I will describe the different *protective arrangements* that were outlined to me during conversations in—and about—the houses. With this concept I seek to describe and compare—across class—the assemblages between objects, actors and devices deployed by the inhabitants in search of protection. In this process, securitization (Aradau, 2010) emerges as a discursive-material practice that gives rise to a process of materialization that enacts a reconfiguration of the world. To paraphrase Claudia Aradau (2010: 492), a protective arrangement is not just the result of a complex assemblage of social practices and values, but it emerges as an object whose materiality has both enabling and constraining effects on what can be said and done in daily life. My particular interest is to inquire into what the inhabitants do to and in their houses in a scenario that is considered insecure and dangerous, as well as what the houses—and, more precisely, the objects related to protection—do to their inhabitants.

Thus, the concept of protective arrangement is a methodological tool to understand spatial segregation in neoliberal times and with an omnipresent 'security' discourse, as well as the effect of these discursive-material practices on the urban dynamics. The house is at the centre of these protective arrangements, which vary according to the location of the house and perceptions of the level of danger in the urban environment as well as the resources available for protection. I will focus on the threshold between the inside and the outside of the house in material, symbolic and practical terms. My intervention suggests that the analysis of these strategies at the house scale shows an increasing process of socio-spatial fragmentation understood less as the absence of ties than as the specific form that social relations acquire in the contemporary Latin American city (Bayón and Saraví, 2013); a product of the materialization of discursive-material practices deployed in search of protection.

The dynamics of urban segregation in La Plata

The city of La Plata is located 56 km southeast of Buenos Aires and it has a population of approximately 700,000. The city has a predominantly administrative and university profile because it is the capital of the province of Buenos Aires and home to the third largest university in the country. Its origins date back to the late nineteenth century, when it was created as a planned city in the shape of a perfect square in the middle of the pampas. However, practically from the beginning, the city has witnessed a slow process of suburban expansion from which the contrast between a planned centre and an unplanned periphery has been established.

In the last few decades this expansionary trend has significantly accelerated, with a growth of the urban area of 126.7% (CIPUV, 2013) between 1990 and 2010 as a result of the installation of houses in increasingly remote areas. This expansion has not primarily been a product of population growth (which for the same period was 20%) but of new ways of producing urban space and new living trends against a backdrop of land use deregulation policies. In effect, the absence of public policies for urban development has allowed urban expansion to be regulated by the land market, triggering the coexistence of two logics: the expansion of gated communities for high-income social groups on the one hand, and the proliferation of different types of informal urbanization among lower-income groups on the other. This deregulation has likewise caused a growth in real-estate speculation as well as modifications to the foundational urban plan; changes which have expressed themselves through an increase in building height.

These dynamics have increased the contrast between the planned space and the periphery, as well as fragmenting the peripheral space of the city. Today we witness a sharp contrast between a socio-economically homogeneous centre, predominantly inhabited by the middle class, and a periphery which is heterogeneous in social, economic and spatial terms, where high-class residential areas coexist with large areas of poverty. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in three locations in the city: a

traditionally middle-class neighbourhood located in the foundational design; a gated community located in the town of City Bell on the northern periphery of the city; and a slum located on the southern, poor periphery.

Protective arrangements: between urban fragmentation and insecurity

Socio-spatial fragmentation along with a sustained increase in the crime rate and the consolidation of insecurity are persistent effects of the establishment of a neoliberal agenda in Latin American societies that entails the fragmentation of public security. As Glebbeek and Koonings (2016) have pointed out, in Latin American cities the police have been expelled from the gated communities; they are present in the city centre, the commercial districts and the traditional neighbourhoods of the middle classes; and they are absent from poorer neighbourhoods—or else patrol them as 'enemy territory'. In this context, the emergence of the security state is the necessary counterpoint to neoliberalism's 'privatization' of civil society, which involved transferring to civil institutions, local communities and individuals the tasks of governance that had once been considered the responsibility of the state (Goldstein, 2010: 491–2).

Although the fear of crime is not new in Argentina (Caimari, 2007), insecurity emerged as a public concern during the 1990s, and since 2003 it has become the first or second concern of Argentinian society (Kessler, 2014). There is a coexistence in large and medium-sized Argentinian cities of low homicide rates compared to the Latin American average (70% of crimes are against property) and high rates of victimization (35% of the population are victims of crime each year). This phenomenon and the distrust of both public security policies and the police are key to understanding the characteristics that insecurity assumes in everyday urban life: feelings of uncertainty and the ubiquity and randomness of danger in the city.

It is precisely these characteristics that help us acknowledge the omnipresent concern over insecurity, i.e. the presence of 'the talk of crime' (Caldeira, 2000), that circulates daily across the city about the dangers of urban life. Insecurity, then, constitutes a signifier of urban life shared between different social classes. Simultaneously, insecurity refers to a differential experience that is modelled by specific and unequal social and urban conditions and that draws out a variety of responses.

The combined effects of social inequality, residential segregation and fragmentation of public security are expressed in differential victimization rates. In fact, the statistical data available for the urban centres in the country show a clear relationship between income level and victimization: the victimization rate of the low-income sectors is 50% higher than that of higher-income groups and this difference is especially high in relation to crimes against property (Kessler, 2014: 289). In addition, the impact of these crimes is even greater if we take into account the relatively higher economic cost for these social sectors to replace the stolen goods.

With the concept of protective arrangements I seek (paraphrasing Goldstein, 2010) to reveal the ways in which '(in)security' in its many forms is operative in the daily lives of the people with whom anthropologists work as well as the role of the house in those dynamics. Being a 'temporary visitor' to their houses, the anthropological approach of urban dynamics and negotiation allowed me to get closer to find out what happens behind the 'closed doors of the house' (Miller, 2001). Once inside the houses, the analysis of their materiality allowed me to capture the effective concretions of the different protective arrangements, which is an expression not only of different lifestyles but also of a profound transformation of social relations.

– Protective arrangement #1. A neighbourhood of closed-door houses

Barrio Norte is a neighbourhood close to the city centre which is inhabited by middle-class professionals. Large single-family houses predominate, generally two-storey Californian chalets with backyard gardens, which their owners value for their

'green spaces' and the 'privacy' and 'intimacy' they offer. However, what caught my attention was the multiplication of notices placed on the walls of the houses with inscriptions such as 'monitored housing', or 'neighbourhood watch', as well as the proliferation of security devices such as bars on the windows, photosensitive lights, security cameras and panic buttons on some of the streets.

There is a sharp contrast between a modernist urban design of openness towards the public space (a plane grid with parks and squares every six blocks) and an increasing fortification and control of the doors, windows and dividing walls of the houses, establishing a deep discontinuity and separation between the inside and the outside. From the point of view of its inhabitants, growing insecurity has transformed Barrio Norte into 'a neighbourhood of closed-door houses'. Likewise, this process is encouraged by the construction of new apartment blocks and buildings in an area traditionally comprised of low-rise houses, which implies both increased indifference to the social relations in the neighbourhood and the loss of privacy in the house. 'Barrio Norte as a neighbourhood (*barrio*) tends to disappear', Marta[1] (59, public employee) told me when I met her. To Marta and the other inhabitants, neighbourhood essentially means a kind of community sociability that entails reciprocal recognition and solidarity between neighbours, and this has been affected by the growing presence of strangers, heavier traffic and increased insecurity. 'The neighbours know less and less about the others, because there are more and more buildings here. We do not know who lives there inside', says José (60, employed in a multinational company).

Indifference and uncertainty about others increase the sense of insecurity, which has an effect on everyday urban experience. When one afternoon Santiago (57, government official) accompanied me to the front door of his house to say goodbye, he pointed to an empty street and said: 'it's a neighbourhood where people stay indoors rather than be on the sidewalk'. Similarly, Adriana (49, teacher) argued: 'due to insecurity we stay inside behind the door'. In short, it has become a neighbourhood of 'closed doors'. Indeed, it is symptomatic that the only type of associationism people experience is related to protecting their houses and themselves: hiring alarms or installing cameras and panic buttons in conjunction with the inhabitants of the same block.

As Miller (2001) argues, the privatization of the house and the contrast between the private and public dimensions are not novel phenomena. However, the ideas of 'houses with closed doors' and a life 'inside the house' refer to the strengthening of a pre-existing boundary; namely, that which separates the house from the surrounding neighbourhood. It is a material boundary, represented by the growing fortification, as well as a symbolic boundary, which regulates social interactions. Thus, in this protective arrangement the boundaries of the house—paradigmatically, the door— that separate and connect the interior and exterior (Simmel, 2001) acquire a liminal quality (Turner, 1974): a delicate and sensitive threshold that seeks to keep away the dangers from outside and that regulates social interactions between insiders and outsiders. That is why not only defensive devices (bars, alarms, cameras) are installed but a number of elusive strategies are also deployed, such as being careful when taking out the rubbish, driving past and around the house before entering it at night, and returning home by taxi when it is dark, showing the tendency towards more individualized responsibility for protection. In short, it is a protective arrangement based almost exclusively on the increased privatization of house security.

– Protective arrangement #2. Gated communities: 'freedom inside'

Since the end of the last century, arising from a negative diagnosis on the 'quality of life' in the city, a small fraction of the middle and upper classes have led an

1 The names of all the interviewees have been changed to preserve their anonymity. The first time they appear they are accompanied by the interviewee's age and occupation.

unprecedented phenomenon of intra-urban migration by moving to gated communities located in the urban periphery in search of security, tranquillity and nature. This protective arrangement is a reaction to the omnipresent and politically produced and commodified (in)security that implies a social practice aimed at creating a social collective or community.

'El Ombú' is an exclusive gated community that arose through the association of 128 owners, who are also the co-owners of the common areas, including two football pitches, tennis courts, a swimming pool and a multipurpose room. Unlike other gated communities that are managed by a company, in 'El Ombú' the owners decide on—and pay—maintenance, security and other employees' expenses. While Josefina (57, businesswoman) was showing me the place, she told me: 'safety is a high priority here. I would not go back to live outside (*vivir afuera*). Security measures here let me fall asleep leaving the windows open and the car unlocked. No house in the neighbourhood has blinds or bars, which are things that I value'.

In fact, unlike the first protective arrangement, the opposition here is not between house and street. Instead, the opposition with the city ('the outside') is fundamental to understanding the house and its meanings in gated communities ('the inside'). For this reason, the walls, access doors and surveillance systems built and supported collectively are those that delimit the threshold of the gated community and make other kinds of houses possible. Despite the great heterogeneity in the architectural styles, the houses share certain features: a predominance of glazed surfaces and an absence both of bars on the doors and windows and medians between the large lots where they are located. These attributes enable visibility and continuity between the house and its surroundings, fostering a sensation of spaciousness and tranquillity, and contrast starkly with the predominant materials in the houses of Barrio Norte: glass and cement instead of bricks and wood. For this reason, positive meanings attributed to the house cannot be separated from the wider environment of the gated community in which the house is located, an 'open interior space'. In fact, there is an extension of the house into the common spaces of the neighbourhood, rather than the sharp discontinuity between house and street as observed in the first protective arrangement, which helps to explain (and seeks to produce) the feelings of freedom, calm and trust experienced inside.

Life stories of safety, tranquillity, proximity to nature, children playing in the street and often open doors in the gated community generate powerful evocations for the inhabitants: childhood, an ideal past and rural towns are common references that they outline. As Atkinson and Smith (2012) point out in the case of gated residential developments in the United States, there is a tendency to focus on risks outside the gated community. This tendency could transform into invisible interior risks, especially intimate and gendered violence within the house, reinforced by the higher levels of privacy that exist within gated communities. Likewise, these phantasmagorias of the house and the neighbourhood also produce a contradiction between enjoying nature and demanding more urban values such as security, accessibility and facilities.

One of these problems relates to the access door, which connects and separates the inside with the outside. As Josefina told me: 'this neighbourhood was organized around security. All of us who live here try to have a low profile and we do not want people to know that this neighbourhood exists. The entrance is hidden'. In fact, the gated community where Josefina lives is only a twenty-minute walk from the nearest bus stop and has a simple access door; there are no signs to announce the neighbourhood's existence, but there is a barrier, security cameras and guards. However, the materialization of this protective arrangement enables and constrains social practices. Although the walls and the control of access are the necessary conditions for the specific way of experiencing house and neighbourhood in a gated community, they cause discomfort to the residents. 'You have to ask for permission to enter my house.

I'm called by the security agents who tell me that I have visitors at the door. I have to let them pass. Those things complicate life', Susana said. Thus, the devices which ensure domestic safety simultaneously complicate simple relationships such as receiving guests, while not completely removing—impossible in an unequal, discriminating and segregated society (Atkinson and Smith, 2012)—the threat of robberies, which are usually attributed to 'people from outside' or 'people who work inside'.

– Protective arrangement #3. 'The house under surveillance': informality and insecurity in the slum

Puente de Fierro (Iron Bridge) is a neighbourhood commonly referred to as a *villa* (slum) or an *asentamiento* (settlement) that emerged in the mid-1990s following the occupation of public land belonging to a railway line that went out of use in the 1970s. The residents of Puente de Fierro share a 'common experience' (Segura, 2015) of migration to the city, struggle for legal recognition of land and housing, problems associated with the lack of infrastructure and urban services, the need to commute to work every day, and the everyday experience of stigma that falls on the neighbourhood and its inhabitants.

The experience of Azucena (32, housewife) and her family epitomizes the efforts required to access a house. 'We bought a plot of land [in the informal market]. We have been building the house for seven years. We build the walls first, then the roof, later we do the floor, and finally we plaster the walls and paint them. We built it little by little and during all that time we were living in two wooden shacks; one was the main (living) room and the other was the kitchen. Four of us slept in one bed: my husband, my daughters and me.'

The building of informal settlements is often incremental, organic, unplanned and self-constructed. Therefore, the landscape of the neighbourhood is constantly changing, due both to the arrival of new contingents of residents that expands the periphery of the city and to the continuous improvements made in the houses. The aspiration of the inhabitants is to build a *casa de material* (literally, 'house of material'); that is, a house of durable materials such as brick and cement and not one built with leftover cardboard, sheets and/or wood. In these neighbourhoods—as in any other—the house is both a material object and a social representation (Ballent and Liernur, 2014: 20). Thus, the characteristics and maintenance of a house and the absence of improvements after a prolonged period living in the neighbourhood 'speaks' of the moral qualities of its inhabitants.

In addition to this symbolic dimension, concern for the materiality of the house is related to an omnipresent issue in informal settlements: insecurity. Being a product of the fragmentation of public security, segregated neighbourhoods such as Puente de Fierro experience a 'security gap' (Plöger, 2012) because they not only receive insufficient police protection but are also often subject to police abuse, especially towards young males (Kessler, 2012). In the weekly neighbourhood meetings (*asambleas*) in which I participated and where the residents deployed an active 'urban citizenship' (Holston, 2009) that demands its rights from the state with the aim of improving living conditions, it was common to hear demands for a greater police presence as well as criticism of abuses by the police.

The dominant perception is that the sources of crime and insecurity are close by. 'We are surrounded, we live with criminals', said the residents. While for the inhabitants of the middle and upper-class neighbourhoods the threat appears distant and the danger comes from outside, from the point of view of the inhabitants of Puente de Fierro they coexist with those whom they consider to be dangerous. Thus, in addition to legal uncertainty because of the informal nature of their land tenure and irregularities in the construction of the houses, as well as crimes against people and police violence, in Puente de Fierro there is a specific feeling of insecurity expressed by many inhabitants:

the house is constantly being watched by criminals. As Claudia (28, urban recycler) recognized: 'they watch you quite a lot. If you leave your house, they come and rob you'.

This is an experience of specific insecurity: the feeling that eyes in close proximity monitor the house every day and that at the slightest carelessness there will be a break-in, which often leads to the impossibility of leaving the house unattended. With the notion of 'hyper-permeability', Meth (2017: 408) describes an extreme form of indefensible housing in informal settlements in South Africa, the product of non-permanent housing structures that facilitate criminal access. The efforts made in terms of time, work and money to build houses with durable materials, strong walls, and doors and windows with locks as well as attempts to provide the neighbourhood with streets, pavements and lighting as registered during my fieldwork represent attempts to reduce this 'hyper-permeability' to crime and to improve security.

This protective arrangement shares, under disadvantageous conditions, some of the characteristics of the previous arrangements. On the one hand, the residents try to close up the precarious house (with many of them involved in a constant process of construction) with fences as well as driving away possible intruders by means of the ubiquitous dogs that live in the neighbourhood. If the house protects its inhabitants, the inhabitants must protect the house too. When it comes to houses that are still under construction and cannot be completely closed, this protection is achieved by making sure that there is always someone in the house. On the other hand, this experience produces the deployment of an informal network of residents who are attentive to the houses and the movement of people around the neighbourhood. 'I put you in charge of my house', Ana (36, horticultural worker) tells her neighbour every time she leaves, and Pedro (45, community leader) says that 'if we see strange movements, such as a guy on the sidewalk that is watching the area, we call our neighbours'. Again, protection and community are related. However, whereas in the gated community the residents associate with each other to build and maintain a wall and hire a surveillance system to which they delegate the security of an interior open space, in the segregated neighbourhood an informal network of residents is deployed to protect the never completely closed houses from an external presence nearby, trying to reduce their permeability.

Concluding remarks

Who protects whom? This analysis of protective arrangements shows a reciprocal relationship between humans and the materiality of the house. It is not just about pointing out that the house is an artefact that protects humans, but also the fact that humans protect the house. As Müller (2019: 100–02) points out, research on urban security has usually ignored houses as material agents and has reduced them to a confined category and an object of protection. The house is not only an object that needs protection and that protects, but also a material agent in securing the home: a material site which needs to be protected against and which protects residents from external threats.

Furthermore, this double bond of reciprocal protection acquires specific modulations across social classes (and gender). Against the ontological and phenomenological definitions of 'the house' I have tried to show that the location of the house in the city, the materiality of the house, the availability of resources, the boundaries of the house and the ways of protecting it can be profoundly different. In fact, the thresholds that these protective arrangements seek to produce and sustain over time are diverse and they materialize in different insides and outsides that affect social relationships in the city. While the first protective arrangement produces a strong discontinuity between fortified houses and dangerous streets, the second one produces a common and open interior space separated from the city by walls and surveillance systems that are collectively held. Moreover, in segregated neighbourhoods there is a combination of insufficient house closure, due to the characteristics of the houses and

the scarce resources of their inhabitants, and an informal community network of control of the house and neighbourhood. Consequently, the concept of protective arrangements has enabled me to show that several of the security practices and devices identified by research in middle and upper-class residential areas (Caldeira, 2000; Low, 2001) can also be applied to characterize the specific agency of lower-income sectors of the population in relation to issues of (in)security.

The similarities and differences between protective arrangements across classes enable the construction of a research programme about the relationship between the socio-spatial configuration of the city, the material culture of the house, and the experiences of (non)protection and (in)security. In fact, I would say that urban segregation and urban insecurity are mutually implied. On the one hand, the processes of urban segregation place inhabitants under unequal conditions of life as well as different experiences of (in)security. On the other hand, the inhabitants are active agents in search of security in a way that, in a vicious circle, usually deepens the dynamics of urban segregation: erosion of public spaces, fortification of houses, a proliferation of walls and surveillance systems, and a growing fear of otherness.

These processes captured ethnographically at the house scale tend towards the socio-spatial fragmentation of the city but cannot always be registered statistically at the metropolitan scale. In short, in this essay I have argued that protection arrangements are a useful tool for describing and comparing the modes through which different (and unequal) sections of society respond to insecurity, as well as for understanding the ways in which these responses themselves transform social relations in the city.

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