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To cite this article: María Carla Rodríguez & María Mercedes Di Virgilio (2016): A city for all? Public policy and resistance to gentrification in the southern neighborhoods of Buenos Aires, Urban Geography, DOI: [10.1080/02723638.2016.1152844](https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2016.1152844)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2016.1152844>



Published online: 04 Apr 2016.



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# A city for all? Public policy and resistance to gentrification in the southern neighborhoods of Buenos Aires

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we analyze grassroots movements' resistance to gentrification processes in the southern area of Buenos Aires. We first review the limitations of the concept of gentrification when applied to the transformation of Latin American cities. We then examine the relationship between gentrification and social class in order to explain why and how local residents and grassroots organizations mount resistance to gentrification in three pericentral neighborhoods in the southern portion of Buenos Aires. Contemporary changes in these neighborhoods are driven by (1) the promotion of neoliberal urban renewal policies, and (2) the genesis and development of Law 341, a program that provides low-income people and organizations with loans for housing construction and renovation, and (3) the Programa de Autogestión de la Vivienda (the Self-Managed Housing Program), which supports cooperative-style housing management. Through two cases, we examine how the actions and strategies of grassroots organizations have countered some of the effects of gentrification in the South of Buenos Aires.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 10 May 2013  
Accepted 12 June 2015

## KEYWORDS

Gentrification; social class; resistance to gentrification; urban social movements; grassroots organizations; neoliberal urbanism

## Introduction

In the past several years, many scholars have investigated gentrification processes in Latin American cities (Contreras Gatica, 2011; Herzer, Virgilio, María, & Rodríguez, 2015; Inzulza-Contardo, 2012; Janoschka, Sequera, & Salinas, 2014; Lopez-Morales, 2011; Nobre, 2002; Ospina, 2012; Salinas Arreortua, 2013; Sanfelici, 2007). Some papers go so far as to question the appropriateness of gentrification as a concept to explain the socioeconomic transformations seen in these cities (e.g. Jaramillo, 2007). Few papers, however, analyze the experiences of *resistance to gentrification* that Lees, Slater, and Wyly (2008) discuss in their formative textbook on the concept. The present paper examines the case of Buenos Aires, Argentina to highlight anti-gentrification actions in the Latin American context; these actions, we find, are inspired by broader urban social movements and class struggles.

We first review gentrification's limitations in accounting for contemporary transformations in Latin American cities. We also review the connection between gentrification processes and social class. Without considering this relationship, it is difficult to

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understand why gentrification processes are often strongly resisted by existing neighborhood residents and why such resistance must be taken seriously, rather than conceived of as “futile” (c.f. Zukin, 2010). Our analysis also accounts for the role of the state in the promotion of gentrification processes.

We focus on three neighborhoods on the South side of Buenos Aires: La Boca, Barracas, and Parque Patricios. The changes in these pericentral neighborhoods are reviewed with attention to two facets of state intervention: (1) the persistent promotion of neoliberal urban renewal policies over the last few decades and (2) the genesis and development of Law 341 and the PROGRAMA de Autogestion de la Vivienda (PAV) (Self-Managed Housing Program).

This paper draws on two lines of research developed at the Gino Germani Institute at the University of Buenos Aires. The first is a longitudinal study of urban transformations in the southern area of Buenos Aires beginning in the mid-1990s. The second is drawn from data collection on urban living conditions in the same area. Both lines of inquiry involve four dimensions: changes in the characteristics and structure of the local population, transformations in the built environment, effects of urban public policies, and shifting social dynamics (Herzer, 2010). Our approach to data collection is based on these two lines of research. The first phase of research for the present paper involved a review of official statistical information and household surveys conducted in target neighborhoods. The second phase used open and semi-structured interviews with a number of neighborhood actors (including civil servants, organization leaders and cadres, real estate agents, and employees of various state institutions). A critical mass of interviewees was recruited according to the following criteria: territorial embeddedness within and actions related to their neighborhood, visibility and scope of actions within the neighborhood, and involvement in public policies—particularly the implementation of Law 341. The interview data were complemented with the ideas and reflections that emerged from activist participation in the political leadership of the Movimiento de Ocupantes e Inquilinos (MOI; Occupiers and Tenants Movement) and in cooperation with a range of community-based organizations and public agencies.

The paper is structured as follows: in the first part, gentrification is addressed as a conceptual framework, paying particular attention to the Latin American context and to understandings of resistance. Next, the paper presents an overview of the pericentral southern area of Buenos Aires, focusing on contemporary restructuring processes within these neighborhoods. The subsequent section analyses specific urban renewal policies that have contributed to gentrification processes—here we pay particular attention to conflicts around displacement. We conclude our arguments with some reflections on the nature of social movements that resist gentrification in Buenos Aires and the political possibilities they might unlock.

### **Conceptual understandings of gentrification and its resistance**

As Janoschka et al. (2014) point out, new regional debates on gentrification are emerging within the field of urban studies. In this field, urban renewal, revitalization, and rehabilitation are key components of conceptual understandings gentrification processes. Some authors, on the other hand, have dismissed the concept of gentrification as inadequate in certain urban and regional contexts (e.g. Jaramillo,

2007). Janoschka et al. (2014) identify four major lines of gentrification studies currently being explored in Latin America. The first deals with the symbolic dimensions of gentrification in urban spaces (e.g. commercial and tourist-driven or cultural gentrification, the renovation of historic centers, and the resignifying of cultural heritage sites; all are accompanied by special regulatory mechanisms). The second is policy-centered, highlighting the relationship between tourism promotion, revitalization actions, and gentrification. The third focuses on local real estate market dynamics, including the study of declining and gentrifying areas both in central and peripheral areas of the city and in informal, self-built, low-income neighborhoods. The fourth approach considers resistance to gentrification and the role of counter-hegemonic social urban movements, which are an important influence in many Latin American cities. This paper follows the fourth line of research, examining how the actions and strategies of grassroots organizations have limited the development and reduced the effects of gentrification in the South of Buenos Aires.

Before analyzing this resistance, we first summarize the uses and appropriations of the concept of gentrification in the Latin American context. Latin American gentrification has been associated with a wide range of urban restructuring processes and sites, namely: (1) so-called “revitalization” of cultural heritage sites in historical urban centers (Carrión, 2010; Marcadet, 2007; Paquette, 2006; Redondo & Zunino Singh, 2010); (2) transformations in pericentral residential areas where working class families and the declining industrial sector have been displaced due to rising real estate prices and the commodification of social housing (Bidou-Zacharriassen, Hiernaux, & Rivière, 2003; Contreras Gatica, 2011; Herzer, 2012; Muñoz, 2008; Talesnik & Gutiérrez, 2002); (3) the conversion of informal settlements to suburban development in peripheral areas where policies promoting home ownership and the formalization of the rental market have led to land-title regularization and infrastructure development (Ward, Jiménez, & Di Virgilio, 2015); and (4) the growth of slums, particularly those located within consolidated urban areas (e.g. Favela Barrio in Rio de Janeiro; see Baena, 2011; Cummings, 2013, 2015). This diverse range of urban processes suggests that “gentrification is more than the colonization of housing assets by residents who own a high cultural and economic capital” (Casgrain & Janoschka, 2013, p. 24).

Glass (1964) coined the term gentrification in London during the rise of the welfare state, which was accompanied by improved living standards for large swathes of the British population but also displacement related to neighborhood upgrading. In Latin America, gentrification processes have historically been linked to the varied and conflicting spatialities of neoliberal urbanism (see Brenner, Peck, & Theodore, 2010). Our understanding of Latin American gentrification is associated with material and symbolic urban changes that have occurred since neoliberalism began in the late 1970s. In our view, the concept of gentrification cannot be applied without attention to the changes experienced by the working class in Latin America (and Argentina in particular) precipitated by global processes of neoliberalization. The effects on the Latin American working class were exacerbated by structural adjustment policies in the 1980s and 1990s. This is particularly the case in Buenos Aires, where gentrification developed in parallel to processes of economic and social restructuring.<sup>1</sup> In Casgrain and Janoschka’s (2013, p. 23) observation:

Neoliberal urban policies [had and] have as an objective to reestablish class controls by introducing extensive processes of *accumulation through dispossession*. At a neighborhood level, such dispossession, as well as the consolidation of class inequalities, is often materialized in gentrification processes.

Thus, in order to unpack the concept of gentrification we emphasize that the class dimension constitutes the real core of the phenomenon (Bridge, 1995, 2001; Glass, 1964; Herzer, 2010; Janoschka et al., 2014; Wacquant, 2008) and that the gentrification processes, which have resulted in the spatial eclipse of working class areas by middle- and upper-middle class people, are wrapped up in broader socio-spatial and economic transformations affecting the working class. These processes are all expressed through territorial and political disputes (Bourdieu, 2000). From the standpoint of class struggle, then, we understand gentrification in Latin America as an effect of neoliberal socio-spatial dynamics supported by variegated forms of symbolic and/or material displacement of low-income people, coupled with their exclusion from political decision-making about the future of the city (Casgrain & Janoschka, 2013).

The role of the state is prominent in the segregation and displacement of low-income people and their resources, activities, and institutions (Davidson, 2008; Díaz Orueta, 2013; Herzer, 2010; Rousseau, 2009). The state does not merely facilitate and legalize the dispossession of low-income working families, it also advances state-supported redevelopment actions through an aggressive discourse of revanchist ideology, that of “reconquering” particular urban areas for the middle classes and of revalorizing land and real estate in working class neighborhoods. The relationships between class, space, and the state constitute the wider conceptual framework within which gentrification unfolds in cities like Buenos Aires.

It is also necessary to analyze the flip side of gentrification-related state intervention: under what conditions does the state act in order to mitigate or curb gentrification’s harmful effects? During the past few decades, at the height of gentrification, strong resistance has developed in many cities (Leite, 2010). Resistance has tended to revolve around the struggle for access to and control of urban spaces, as well as the uneven power dynamics among the social classes. The emergence of resistance in cities like Buenos Aires may act as a crack in neoliberal urbanism (Holloway, 2011). These emancipatory experiences include both organized struggles and many forms of micro-resistance in everyday life (see Newman and Wyly (2006) for New York; De la Garza (2014) for Barcelona; Gledhill and Hita (2014) for Salvador Bahía (Brazil); Casgrain and Janoschka (2013) for Santiago de Chile; Delgado (2009) for México City). Within this political climate, local governments have been forced to launch strategies to reduce gentrification-related displacement. Territorially based social movements (at least in the case of Buenos Aires) seem to play an important role in local efforts to counteract displacement.

It is important to highlight the study carried out by Newman and Wyly (2006, p. 28), which enables us to understand the geographies of anti-displacement activities. These authors sought to explain why gentrified neighborhoods in New York City do not always produce displacement, finding that “after two generations of intense gentrification, any low- and moderate-income renters who have managed to avoid displacement are likely to be those people who have found ways to adapt and survive in an

increasingly competitive housing market.” This is linked specifically to actions individual residents take to adapt to spikes in housing prices.

On the basis of more recent literature, it is possible to identify several types of resistance strategies:

- (1) Actions driven by relatively organized grassroots collectives (De la Garza, 2014; Drissel, 2011; Gledhill & Hita, 2014; Rodríguez, 2014). In the case of Buenos Aires, as we point out later on, collectives have promoted cooperative housing management and production strategies.
- (2) Presence of social services targeting vulnerable groups (DeVerteuil, 2012; Herzer, Rodriguez, Redondo, Di Virgilio, & Ostuni, 2005; Thomasz, 2010). These services include community kitchens, transit centers for homeless people, and other social centers (Finchett-Maddock, 2010), all of which tend to operate in non-commercialized buildings (i.e. public, nonprofit, and/or state-owned buildings).
- (3) A variety of individual residents’ strategies (Newman & Wyly, 2006), such as overcrowding, enduring high housing costs and poor housing quality, and owner-occupation. In some places, residents have organized anti-gentrification campaigns, lobbying elected officers and, in extreme cases, resorting to private property destruction. These actions constitute what we might call everyday, micro-scale resistance.
- (4) Public housing initiatives to counter the effects of gentrification (Delgadillo, 2009; Guevara, 2010; Levy, Comey, & Padilla, 2006; Newman & Wyly, 2006). For example, regulating rents can be an important form of public intervention. Subsidized housing in various forms (e.g. public subsidy, federal public housing, housing vouchers, etc.) falls into this category. Inclusive zoning is also a strategy for the production of low-cost units.

Obviously, these different forms of resistance to gentrification are not exclusive of one another. On the contrary, as we shall see later, they can occur in combined and/or symbiotic ways. They may also develop at different times and scales; everyday micro-scale resistance strategies can give way to territorially based forms of organization, which may in turn precipitate state intervention in a gentrifying neighborhood.

### **Characteristics of our three case study neighborhoods in Buenos Aires**

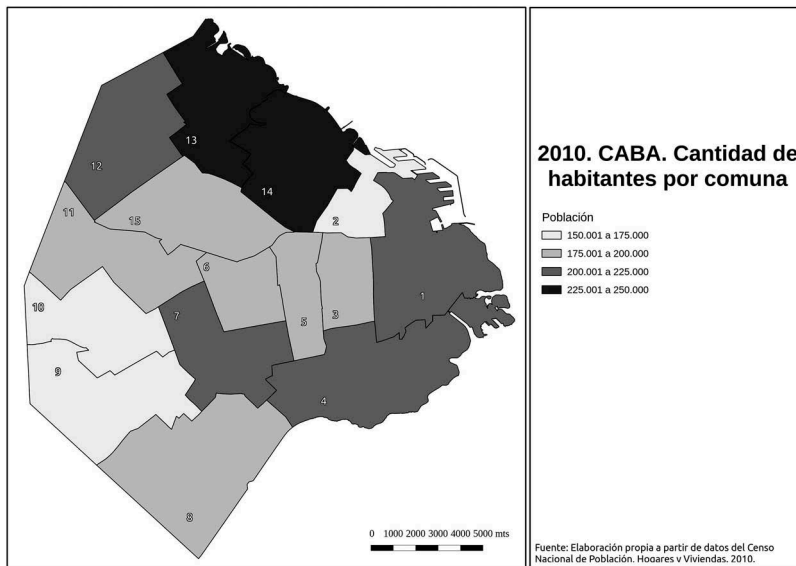
Our observations and analysis are centered on three neighborhoods in Southern Buenos Aires: La Boca, Barracas, and Parque Patricios. La Boca is a neighborhood emblematic of the historical process through which the working class in Argentina was formed. This area developed as a working class neighborhood of European immigrants who brought to Argentina a rich history of political organizing. This influence was evident during the great Tenants’ Strike in 1907.<sup>2</sup> Over time, the immigrants integrated into local society, moved to other neighborhoods, and nourished the city’s middle-income class consciousness. At first, La Boca’s neighborhood development was strongly linked to activities of the Riachuelo Port, the center of the local economy. Between 1947 and 1991, however, La Boca lost 40% of its population; these losses accelerated during the 1970s when the port was deactivated and many local factories closed.

Barracas was also a formerly dynamic industrial neighborhood, but successive crises and the city's industrial eviction policies during the dictatorship in the late 1970s and early 1980s led to neighborhood decline. In these years, three clearly differentiated areas emerged: one is predominantly residential, the second is an industrial and services area, and the third includes the slums of Villa 21 and Zavaleta. Over the last two decades these two poor neighborhoods have experienced the fastest population growth in Barracas. Barracas is a fragmented and discontinuous urban zone, crossed by highways and railways, precarious settlements, and a complex of public hospitals that occupy approximately 17 hectares. It is here that the current city government has begun work on a new civic center.

Parque Patricios has historically been a working class area. Its economy was structured around the municipal slaughterhouses, which began operations at the end of the 1860s and were active until the end of the nineteenth century when they moved West. A large number of subsidiary small industries accompanied the growth of slaughtering businesses (e.g. tallow factories, candles, sacks, tanneries, etc.), consolidating the neighborhood's industrial working class profile. From 7 to 14 January 1919, a general strike known as "La Semana Trágica" (The Tragic Week) took place, ending with a brutal massacre of hundreds of workers. At present, industrial activities have largely disappeared and empty warehouses are part of the landscape. The closure of the Caseros Prison toward the end of the 1990s also left several plots of land vacant—their fate remains uncertain.

These three neighborhoods comprise most of the political-administrative city area called Commune 4, which is located in the Southeast of Buenos Aires. The neighborhoods are part of the southern fringe of Buenos Aires and are adjacent to Commune 1, sharing a partial border with Commune 8 in the Southwest (see [Figure 1](#) and [Table 1](#)). Commune 4 has 218,245 inhabitants (7.55% of the city's total population) and has seen an increase (1.3%) in the size of population between 2001 (INDEC, 2001) and 2010 (INDEC, 2010). This growth has mainly resulted from an increase in the number of families who lived in slums located in Barracas and in La Boca.

According to the 2010 Census, 10.4% of the population in Commune 4 was unemployed and 10.7% was underemployed, meaning that 21.1% of its inhabitants found it difficult to integrate into the labor market (INDEC, 2010). The unemployment rate exceeds the urban average, which is 14.7%. The most significant economic activities in Commune 4 are those related to industry (tannery, road freight transportation, and chemical industries), construction and commercial activities; however, employment in services is not as great as that in other communes (GCBA, 2011). In October 2013, salaried workers in Commune 4 earned an average salary of USD \$329, which is 32% less than the metropolitan area's average. Among Commune 4's workers, however, the income of 41.1% (almost double the city's average) was not sufficient to cover a basic basket of goods and services (Consejo Económico y Social de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, 2013). The population in Commune 4 skews relatively young: 45.47% are under 29 years old, has relatively low educational levels compared to the rest of the city, and has a relatively high number of female-headed households (44%, the second largest value in the whole city) (Consejo Económico y Social de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, 2013). These indicators illustrate that this area's working population is highly



**Figure 1.** City of Buenos Aires by population and communes, 2010. Source: Consejo Económico y Social de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires (2013).

**Table 1.** Selected living condition indicators in the more vulnerable communes of Buenos Aires, 2010.

Living conditions	Commune 1	Commune 4	Commune 8	CABA
Unemployment rate	7.40%	10.40%	9.60%	6.20%
Underemployment rate	9%	10.70%	8.60%	8.50%
Average middle income (in USD)	\$430	\$329	\$317	\$ 484
Average total household income (THI) (in USD)	\$625	\$628	\$597	\$828
Average per capita family income (PCFI) (in USD)	\$400	\$258	\$210	\$407
Income under TB	33.30%	41.10%	45.30%	23.30%
Unregistered workers	32.10%	33.50%	36.60%	26.70%
Deficitary dwelling typologies	8%	7.50%	4%	6.20%
Illegal dwelling possession regime	13.12%	14.62%	18.77%	11.67%
Overcrowding per room	18.79%	19%	23.26%	10.20%
Overcrowded dwellings due to cohabitation	4.80%	5.70%	11%	3.90%
Households with UBN	15.90%	12.66%	11.31%	6%
Dwellings with insufficient building quality	11%	8.79%	10.90%	3.36%
Households with no sewers	2.08%	3.45%	4.56%	0.99%
Households with no drinking water supply system	1.28%	0.67%	0.94%	0.41%
Households with no gas networks	17.02%	22.09%	36.37%	7.82%

Source: Censo Nacional de Población, Hogares y Viviendas 2010, and Encuesta Anual de Hogares 2012.

vulnerable to spikes in real estate values and to pro-gentrification urban policy implemented in these neighborhoods.

Regarding housing conditions in Commune 4, the urban layout has an elongated shape from East to West. Residential dwellings are distributed throughout all the neighborhoods. Sixteen per cent of residential buildings are abandoned (this is actually below the city's average) (Consejo Económico y Social de la ciudad de Buenos Aires, 2013). The three neighborhoods also comprise a significant stock of warehouses and factory installations, both occupied and abandoned, with a rate of 33.5% of inactive stores (2,647 buildings). In addition, 5,234 dwellings in the commune are rooms in



boarding houses or tenements representing 7.51% of the commune's total dwellings, one of the highest proportions in the whole city (Consejo Económico y Social de la ciudad de Buenos Aires, 2013).

The majority of Commune 4's slums are located in Barracas. Tenement rooms define the characteristic informal habitat in La Boca, and boarding houses and squatter houses are found in all three neighborhoods. Furthermore, in Commune 4, 7.5% of households live in housing that is classified as "deficient," with 14.62% under "irregular" (non-permanent) forms of tenure, 19% in overcrowded rooms (nearly 10 percentage points over the city's mean values), and 5.7% sharing dwellings (Consejo Económico y Social de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, 2013). A large number of households in the commune still lack basic services and, in addition, this population has been a victim of forced eviction processes that are territorially concentrated in these locations. It is estimated that during the last 4 years (2010–2014) more than 20,000 families have been evicted (Consejo Económico y Social de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, 2013).

### **Vulnerability, gentrification and displacement the southern neighborhoods of Buenos Aires**

Since the beginning of the 1990s, La Boca, Barracas, and Parque Patricios have been subject to urban renewal and gentrification. The transformation of the built environment in the three neighborhoods has taken place through public and, to a lesser degree, private investments (Herzer, 2010). Low-income workers are being replaced by higher-income residents; many low-income households also persist on the verge of displacement as property prices and rents continue to rise.<sup>3</sup>

Neoliberal urbanism has progressed in three waves: (1) a series of urban changes fostered by measures adopted by the dictatorship in the mid-1970s (forced and massive evictions from slums, liberalization of the rental market, building of motorways, and the creation of a historical conservation area); (2) urbanization beginning in the 1990s, supported by public–private projects, changes in planning and building codes, and investments in infrastructure and; (3) urban renewal during the 1990s and early 2000s in the city's southern neighborhoods. Between 1988 and 2005, successive local governments concentrated municipal construction investments in the southern area. Between 1988 and 1997, city infrastructure spending in this area increased from 6% to 15% of the total municipal budget (GCBA, 1998). In 2004, soon after the 2001 national crisis, 37.63% of the infrastructure investment of the whole city—now managed by the Centros de Gestión y Participación (Management and Participation Centres)<sup>4</sup>—took place in the southern area, compared with 11.61% in the northern area. By 2005 this trend had become more pronounced, as the southern area received 51.24% of the total infrastructure investment, in stark contrast with 8.25% invested in the northern area (GCBA, 2005).

Urban renewal in the southern neighborhoods was catalyzed by historical preservation projects in the city's center, the San Telmo neighborhood. The renewal work began in 1980 and continued in the urbanization plan for the coastal areas of the Río de la Plata and Riachuelo rivers during the first half of the 1990s. The 1993 restructuring of Puerto Madero into an urban area, led by a public–private corporation and supported by the national government, propelled the urban development of the coastal areas as a

whole. These transformations enabled the development of new commercial uses, services, and housing for high-income groups.

In 1993, the city government of Buenos Aires launched a renewal project in La Boca centered around construction of coastal barriers. The area had been subject to recurring storm-related flooding, which curtailed the use of its coastal areas. For this project the government obtained a loan (USD\$120 million) from the International Development Bank (Herzer, 2010). Coastal construction was followed by other improvements, including investments in neighborhood beautification and tourism promotion (Rodríguez et al., 2011).

In Barracas, 1990s urban renewal was driven by private firms purchasing underused industrial plots to build luxury housing complexes. More recent public investments have been similar. The administration of Mayor Anibal Ibarra, as the chief of government (1999–2007), set the basis for the neighborhood's transformation: the creation of a Metropolitan Design Centre where the Fish Market once stood, coupled with renovations of Colonia Sola, a historical social housing compound. State projects intensified during the term of Mayor Mauricio Macri, who (from 2007 onwards) promoted the transformation of several plots located under the 9 de Julio South motorways. Works carried out included installing public street lights, paving streets and sidewalks, moving fences and perimeter walls, creating bicycle lanes and ramps for the disabled, building skate ramps, installing waste receptacles, planting trees and bushes, finishing the renovation of the Music Palace (begun by Mayor Ibarra), and approving the Design District (with special tax clauses designed to attract private investment). The decision to move the civic center in 2012 and to begin works for the new city government offices were also enforced under Mayor Macri; however, his government did not complete the renovation of Colonia Sola. Private investment has grown in the middle-income and luxury rental markets, increasing density in areas such as Montes de Oca Avenue, the neighborhood's main street (Herzer et al., 2015).

Neighborhood transformation is more recent in Parque Patricios. The first state act in this direction was deactivation of the Caseros Prison in 2001. Between 2000 and 2010, a series of social services aimed at poor people, as well as other public services, were established in the neighborhood. Measures taken to promote the district's expansion include tax benefits and preferential credit rates for firms, academic organizations, and employees moving into the neighborhood (Law 2972, 2008). Changes in the local-level planning code promoted construction of high-rise buildings with exceptions to FOT (total occupancy factor) for technology-based enterprises. Future planned interventions involve promoting real estate and infrastructure ventures: offices for the private Banco Ciudad, a new Metropolitan Technology Centre, a new police station, and extensions of the Underground Line H and Metrobus toward Parque Patricios. The city government has also intervened through more cosmetic initiatives, such as the remodeling of the local park (Parque de los Patricios) and the repair of street surfaces and street lights. A new safety plan for the area, part of the strategy to attract private investment (currently USD \$250 million), led to installation of surveillance cameras in public spaces. Together these projects have increased the price of land per square meter by 25% between 2008 and 2011 (GCBA, 2011).

The abovementioned changes involve the private- or state-driven substitution of previous land uses with more lucrative activities. In addition, the government's decision

to relocate the city's civic center contributed to socioeconomic polarization in the southern areas of Buenos Aires. On one hand, as these renovated areas have been consolidated, the more vulnerable resident population has suffered displacement through evictions and the pressure of higher rents.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, life in the nonrenovated areas has become more precarious.

## Resistance to gentrification and disputes over urban space

### *Law 341 as housing policy*

Law 341, passed in December 2000, provides soft loans from the Instituto de Vivienda de la Ciudad (IVC) (City Housing Institute) to facilitate low-income households' access to housing in the city. As a central feature, the law classifies social organizations as subjects who can receive loans; these organizations act as project-executing agencies and can receive loans to start new projects or rehabilitate and improve existing projects. The law also provides loans up to 30 years to individuals for purchase of housing. Interest rates are subsidized and range from 0% to 4%, while repayment installments for individual households cannot surpass 20% of the family income. The law does not establish minimum restrictions for loan recipients' income and does not require previous savings.

Law 341's origins are linked to social organizations and grassroots initiatives that emerged during the 1980s to lobby for low-income housing. Several grassroots social organizations played a key role in the design and implementation of this policy, namely the Movimiento de Ocupantes e Inquilinos (MOI-CTA) and the Mutual de Desalojados de La Boca (La Boca Evicted Mutual Society). Based on Article 31 of the Constitution of the Autonomous City, these organizations promoted self-managed housing plans for lower income populations. A multiactor board was founded in 1999, which included the MOI, the Mutual de Desalojados de La Boca, and the first Housing Commission of the legislature of the autonomous city of Buenos Aires. This board took up MOI's mission of cooperation, self-management, collective ownership, mutual aid, and the use of local assistance including loans to individual households. Organizations such as Comedor Los Pibes also joined this fight early on. The passage of Law 341, then, was the result of the political mobilization of low-income people at risk of eviction due to the urban renewal process that had started in La Boca (Rodríguez, 2009; Zapata, 2013).

The anti-eviction movement expanded after the 2001 crisis, bringing in a large range of organizations, social movements (including the unemployed workers movement Movimiento Territorial de Liberación—MTL-CTA), political parties, and hundreds of squatting and tenant families. During this stage many cooperatives were organized among families living in tenements and or squatting in abandoned buildings. More recently, a network of coalitions and alliances have raised the profile of these movements, involving public university activists and intellectuals and religious organizations. Movements like MOI and MTL have formally integrated with the Argentine Workers' Central Union (CTA)<sup>6</sup> and Los Pibes, which are also allied with sectors of the Workers General Confederation.

According to the Instituto de Vivienda de la Ciudad (IVC), between the passage of Law 341 and March 2012, 519 registered organizations comprising 10,101 families have

been registered in the new housing programs (Zapata, 2013). By the same date 110 cooperatives (involving 2,474 families) had been able to purchase plots inside the metropolitan area (Zapata, 2013).<sup>7</sup> This trend indicates an effective “capture” of urban land for low-income housing within gentrifying areas. Organizations composed of low-income families were able to take advantage of the dip in real estate prices during the 2001/2002 crisis.

By the end of 2012, out of the 110 social organizations that managed to purchase plots, 15% (17 cooperatives with 565 families) finished their work, 37.2% (41 cooperatives with 902 families) reported “good” progress on their buildings, and 47% had not been able to begin renovations or construction for various reasons (Zapata, 2013) (see Table 2). Even so, the number of buildings started or completed is significant. Approximately 60% of these housing projects are located in our three case study neighborhoods (see Figure 2) and are managed by social organizations based in these areas. The most common style is small complexes of 20 to 25 units; three high-rise buildings have also been organized by MOI and MTL (Territorial Liberation Movement). The construction of this housing illustrates how Law 341 and the Self-Management Housing Program have bolstered low-income populations’ ability to exercise their right to the city (Zapata, 2013).

### ***Disputes and struggles over urban space***

In La Boca, Law 341 is the culmination of a long cycle of organizing stemming from the emergence of democratic political movements in 1983. During the 1980s, a neighborhood-based initiative pushed for the local government to purchase 21 tenements for low-income housing.<sup>8</sup> However, this initiative lacked adequate political and financial support and remained unfulfilled in 2014.

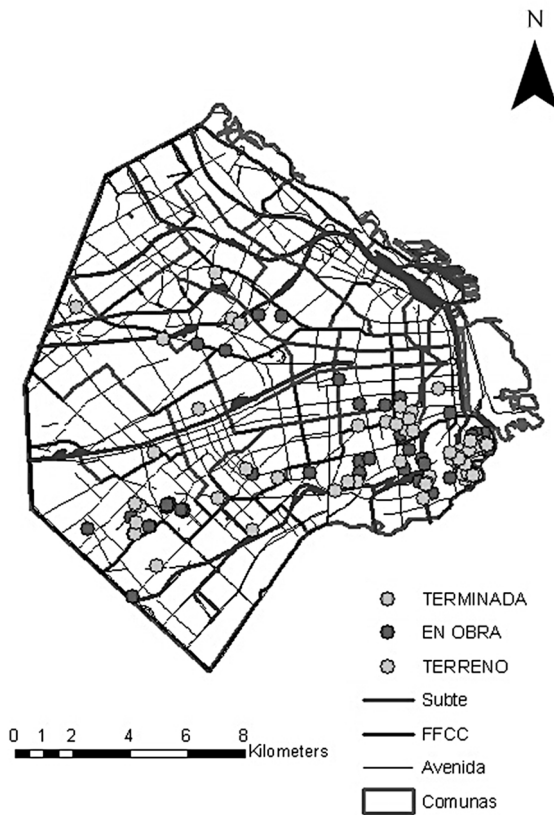
When the La Boca riverside coastal defenses were built in 1997—a public investment designed to mitigate recurrent flooding in the area—tenement rents soared. Landlords from a number of low-income residential buildings in La Boca evicted their tenants and placed the properties up for sale. The city government, under pressure from neighborhood activists like Asamblea de Desalojados de La Boca, implemented several policies to forestall further evictions. The Asamblea families managed to purchase property in tenements and squatting buildings for use by households facing eviction. This initial action catalyzed further public investment in social housing, which eventually totaled around 130 condominiums (Guevara, 2010).

These investments expanded public housing in the area and curtailed the displacement effects of gentrification. From a political and community perspective, public

**Table 2.** Rate of progress of the Programa de Autogestión para la Vivienda (Self-Managed Housing Program), March 2012.

State of works	Projects	Number of dwellings
Finished	17	565
Underway	41	902
To be started	52	1,007
Total projects	110	2,474
Dwellings with public deeds	110	2,474
Registered cooperatives	519	10,101

Source: Cecilia Zapata (2013)



**Figure 2.** PAV/Law 341 plots and works. Source: Guevara (2010).

investment in housing supported the fragmented, yet extensive, network of households fighting eviction (see Guevara, 2010 for a detailed account of this). Municipal property managed by the city's Housing Initiative has also provided a source of land to be used for low- and middle-income housing. It is estimated that approximately 2,500 dwellings can be built in these municipal plots (Guevara, 2010). This is quite significant in relation to the neighborhood's real estate market as a whole (approximately 11,000 dwellings in 2001) and in relation to the neighborhood's housing deficit (approximately 3,400 dwellings) (see Figure 3, Guevara, 2010).

In the Barracas neighborhood, an urban renewal zone where most residential construction is now loft-style housing for middle-high income sectors,<sup>9</sup> industrial land uses coexist with housing developments managed by housing cooperatives within the framework of Law 341 (e.g. the La Fábrica, Yatay, and Los Vecinos Luchadores projects). These self-managed complexes (see Figure 4) are at present produced at a cost of USD \$500/m<sup>2</sup>; their quality and design easily compete with privately-led renovation projects. This coexistence shows that it is possible to “renew” a neighborhood without sacrificing its socially mixed composition. The plot occupied by the Pitaluga historical textile factory is a material and symbolic example of this complexity. Part of it has been



**Figure 3.** Caminito Cooperative. La Boca. Law 341. Dolmen Technical Team. Source: Photographic survey produced by Lazarini Kaya and Cecilia Zapata in Zapata M.C. (2015).



**Figure 4.** Law 341. Cooperative La Fabrica—MOI. Pasaje Icalma. Barracas. Source: Pablo Jelfetz. EPI MOI. 2015.

renovated into the Complejo Barracas Central, a luxury complex of loft-style dwellings. The other part is occupied by the Cooperativa Autogestionaria de Viviendas La Fábrica (Self-Managed Housing Cooperative La Fábrica), of the Movimiento de Ocupantes e Inquilinos of the Central de Trabajadores de la Argentina (MOI-CTA).

The CTA MTL began its activities in Parque Patricios in 2003. With resources provided by Law 341, a cooperative of 320 families developed housing in Barrio Monteagudo (see [Figures 4 and 5](#)). This new housing complex is a landmark for social



**Figure 5.** Panoramic picture of Cooperative Emetele (MTL) (Monteagudo 592, Parque Patricios). Source: Photographic survey produced by Lazarini Kaya and Cecilia Zapata in Zapata M.C. (2015).

heterogeneity, with a radio station (whose signal covers the whole city), commercial businesses, and community neighborhood programs. A paradox lies in the fact that, initially, this investment was intended to improve real estate values in the area. Disputes over the mission (i.e. focused on growth or social housing) of public investments continues. The government's allegiances can be derived from this simple fact: while new firms moving to the neighborhood are exempt from payment of the ABL tax (public lighting and cleaning tax) for 10 years, its social housing residents have been subject to large payment increases—up to 700%—for the same tax in 2012.

## Conclusions

The cases discussed in this article illustrate how conflicts over the right to the city in Buenos Aires are rooted in territorial and class struggles against the detrimental effects of gentrification. Analyzing these cases enables us to highlight the complexity and diversity of anti-gentrification social movements and alliances and conflicts among many class actors operating within constantly changing urban landscapes. Our cases document the political and material actions that have enabled low-income citizens to effectively resist displacement. Thus, we argue that class conflicts are at the root of gentrification, not only because displacement predominantly affects lower and middle-income groups, but also because resistance is carried out via collective actions by these groups.

We have described key social groups—MOI, MTL, Asamblea de Desalojados de La Boca, CTA, etc.—that carry out actions in our case study neighborhoods. These are not necessarily movements against gentrification as a phenomenon but territorially-based social movements that, facing displacement and unaffordable living costs, have redirected their actions and relationships with the local government in order to mitigate the negative effects of gentrification on their constituent groups. In short, these organizations build responses against gentrification but did not arise in reaction to

gentrification. In this sense, they diverge from anti-gentrification collective action observed in places like Berlin, Barcelona, or Mexico City.

This paper highlights the effects of collaborations between local government and neighborhood-based social movements. In this sense, it contributes to understandings of the transformative possibilities of such collaborations. Our analysis of Law 341 gives a detailed account of the mechanics of resistance to gentrification-based displacement in our case study neighborhoods. Cooperative-based construction and management of social housing is a key factor in this resistance. Neighborhood-based and more universal forms of organizing against gentrification are both parts of a multilevel strategy that involves actions and alliances within Argentina and also with other Latin American populations<sup>10</sup> adversely affected by neoliberal urbanism.

Our analysis has led us to agree with one of Wacquant's (2008, p. 198) key arguments:

To build better models of the changing nexus of class and space in the neoliberal city, we need to relocate gentrification in a broader and sturdier analytic framework by revising class analysis to capture the (de)formation of the post-industrial proletariat, resisting the seductions of the prefabricated problems of policy, and giving pride of place to the state as producer of socio-spatial inequality.

To this, however, we add the following consideration about the characteristics of the urban social movements' collective and political actions and their consequences.

In Buenos Aires, the state has in the last three decades promoted neoliberal urban renewal policies in our three case study neighborhoods. Each set of policies has its own form and context, but they share an underlying theme of displacement and exclusion of low-income groups. In La Boca, this process has unfolded through the development of a tourist-oriented enclave accompanied by "historical preservation" strategies that replace residential uses with commercial ones and exclude original residents. In Barracas and Parque Patricios, the push to shift the local economy toward design industries, information technologies, communications, and logistic activities means that a new class of workers linked to these activities is moving to live and work in these neighborhoods, displacing previous residents. In our case study areas we found eviction processes with various characteristics: forced evictions (Hotel Sur in Parque Patricios), market-based evictions (people unable to afford rent increases or new residential units built for middle-high income populations or solely for investment purposes), "accidents" (fires in slums in La Boca), and, more recently, public work-based displacements (a towpath being laid in Villa 21-24).

Public-private redevelopment actions are displacing existing residents in some neighborhoods while simultaneously increasing social fragmentation in other areas in which, for the time being, development is on hold. In Barracas, this process is very important in Villa 21-24 where the population has increased due to the development of an informal rental market. In La Boca, residential buildings are highly deteriorated along the Necochea axis and the South zone of Avenida Almirante Brown. In Parque Patricios, the South-Southwest sector has followed the same path.

What is new in relation to earlier periods when nobody was talking about gentrification in Latin America? Our research shows that, in the case of Buenos Aires, resistance



actions have reshaped state actions and policies (this has taken place in a democratic context radically different from evictions during the 1976–1983 dictatorship) and have operationalized social power in an organized way, sustained under a logic that is permeated with participatory democratic ideals. Urban social movements have demanded solutions through public debates that link specific policy demands to city-wide democratic ideals—for example, framing housing as a universal right for urban residents. These linkages provide our case with a distinctive character when compared with most other places; during the latest wave of global gentrification, resistance actions have declined in many cities (see for instance Lees & Ley, 2008).

Thus, on the one hand, the nature of gentrification and its resistance in Buenos Aires constitute a contradiction whose study provides for a complex analysis of contemporary neoliberalism. On the other hand, the emergence of a new form of class relations is rooted in a changing urban geography of gentrification: urban renewal, neighborhood “upgrading,” evictions, and various groups’ capacities to stay put coexist uneasily in one neighborhood and are rooted in common processes. Our findings contribute to a better understanding of the possibilities for—and contradictions inherent in—the development of counter-gentrification movements.

Finally, in order to context contemporary neoliberal urbanism (in macrostructural and symbolic terms) it seems more necessary than ever to counteract neoliberal forces with a struggle for the rights to the city and demands for universal access to basic goods. Regarding the latter, we do not simply mean local, universal access to a set of resources and benefits, but rather to something linked to both individual and collective subjectivities—popular, collective sovereignty over the material, and symbolic aspects that constitute urban life.

## Notes

1. For a detailed analysis of these issues and of their spatial impact see Kessler and Di Virgilio (2008, 2010).
2. The tenements (conventillos) are collective housing buildings that are rented per room. This is a form of housing that began towards the end of the nineteenth century and still persists in La Boca.
3. Herzer (2012) sampled 431 low-income dwellings in La Boca between 2000 and 2008. 1.2% had changed use, 3.7% had been demolished, and 5.6% were uninhabited. In total, 54.5% of the households sampled in 2000 no longer lived on the same premises by 2008. Given the nature of the sample, it is possible to know with certainty why those families decided to migrate and where they went. Taking into account the characteristics of those who replaced them, it is clear that population displacement in La Boca is ongoing.
4. The “Centros de Gestión y Participación” (Management and Participation Centres) are local management units that have been decentralized throughout the communes in accordance with the city’s constitution, which was approved in 1996. These units have elected authorities but provide only a few social and civil services.
5. Although there are no official statistics available, we estimate that 20,000 people are evicted every year in the city of Buenos Aires. This number is derived from data from the Statistics Bureau of the Civil National Court of Appeals. According to the National Court of Appeals, between 2006 and 2008, 12,661 eviction orders were started. In this period there were also increasing numbers of criminal proceedings for the offence of usurpation or squatting, in which offenders are required to vacate the premises. The Criminal and Correctional National Court of Appeals of the Federal Capital has estimated that 1,362

such proceedings began between 2006 and 2008, and at the same time the Federal Criminal and Correctional National Court of Appeals registered 248 proceedings (Arcidiácono & Royo, 2009).

6. Central de Trabajadores de la Argentina (CTA) was created in 1991 as a Congress of Argentine Workers Union with the mission of opposing neoliberalism by regrouping the working class “as it is,” including both the formal and informal sectors, self-employed workers, pensioners, neighborhood organizations, and youth from the community (Zapata, 2013).
7. Even with Law 341 in place, 409 cooperatives that applied (78.8% of the total) could not advance with the purchase of plots. This illustrates the need to implement further state policies to help low-income communities gain access to urban land.
8. This was called RECUP La Boca and was a policy initiative linked to the action of professional city planners related to government spheres and with capability for the management of additional resources from international cooperation.
9. Market sales prices here are more than USD \$2,000/m<sup>2</sup> higher than the average in the southern neighborhoods of Buenos Aires.
10. One of the organizations involved in social disputes is the Secretaria Latinoamericana de la Vivienda Popular (SELVIP; Popular Housing Latin American Secretariat), which comprises movements from Uruguay, Brazil (FUCVAM), Ecuador (*Unión Nacional de Moradia Popular*), Venezuela, Chile, and Argentina (Federación Tierra y Vivienda and Movimiento de Ocupantes e Inquilinos (MOI)). The MOI is one of the founding members of this network, created in 1991 through the impetus of FUCVAM, the largest self-management collective-property and mutual-aid organization in South America. Organizations that are part of SELVIP promote policies, program, and regulatory instruments, such as Law 341 studied here, in their respective countries.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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