

# The Movement of Popular and Neighborhood Assemblies in the City of Buenos Aires, 2002–2011

by

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*The assembly movement of Buenos Aires was one of the main political actors that emerged with the social explosion of December 2001. It initially called for a complete renewal of the country's elites, but it gradually divided into a sector that focused on neighborhood demands and a sector that adopted a national perspective. A detailed examination of a decade of development of two assemblies that are paradigmatic examples of the movement's division show that they retained their political identities over time, with the result that the "neighborhood" assembly disbanded once the problems on which it had concentrated were considered resolved while the "popular" assembly continued to engage in cultural and political projects.*

*El movimiento asambleario de Buenos Aires fue uno de los más importantes actores políticos que emergió con la explosión social de diciembre de 2001. Inicialmente reclamaba la completa renovación de las elites, pero gradualmente fue dividiéndose en un sector que se enfocó en demandas barriales y otro sector que adoptó una perspectiva nacional. Un examen detallado de una década de desarrollo de dos asambleas que son consideradas ejemplos paradigmáticos de la división del movimiento muestra que ambas asambleas conservaron a través del tiempo sus identidades, con el resultado de que la asamblea "vecinal" se disolvió una vez que consideraron resueltos los problemas en los que se enfocaba, mientras que la asamblea "popular" continuó activamente involucrada en proyectos políticos y culturales.*

**Keywords:** Social movements, Assembly movement, Movement outcomes, Argentina

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The movement of neighborhood and popular assemblies in Buenos Aires was one of the principal political actors that emerged as a result of the social explosion of December 2001. Its original demand was for a complete replacement of the country's elites, but the path of the assemblies gradually divided into a sector that reinforced territorial neighborhood demands and a sector that adopted a national perspective. What has happened to one of the main contentious actors of the 2001 crisis since then? What was the path followed by the assembly movement from its origin until December 2011? What are its legacies?

The questions that guide this article are key to deepening the understanding of an actor that was studied in its origin and for a few years thereafter but that, because of its decreasing incidence in national politics, was soon largely

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ignored. In addition, this article draws on the literature about the outcomes of social movements (e.g., Giugni, 1998; Giugni, McAdam, and Tilly, 1999), which highlights the difficulties in “evaluating” a social movement’s impact on its political, social, and economic environment and proposes ways of identifying a movement’s macro, meso, and micro effects.

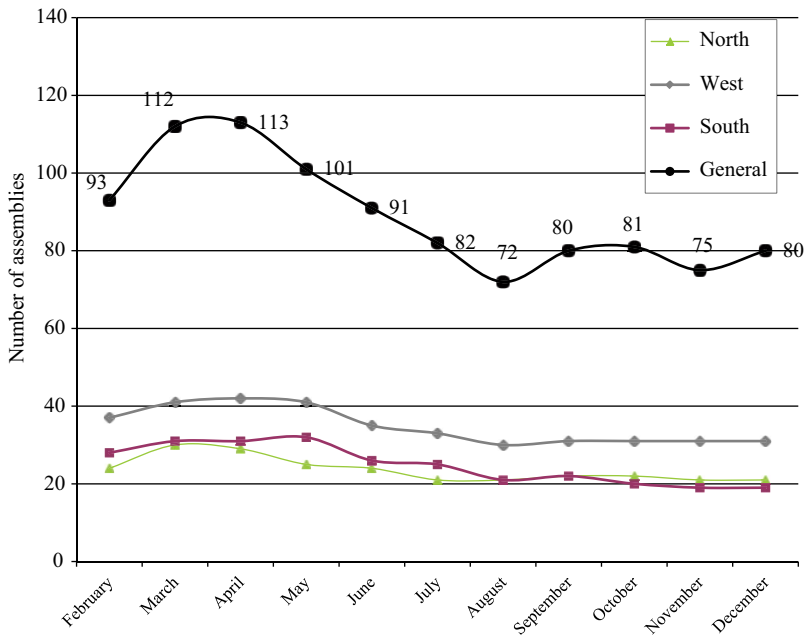
In this article, we focus on the main meso and micro impacts of two paradigmatic assemblies that exemplify the two factions of the movement: the Cid Campeador Popular Assembly (*Asamblea Popular Cid Campeador*) and the Neighborhood Assembly of Palermo Viejo (*Asamblea Vecinal de Palermo Viejo*). We update the ethnographic research on these cases carried out from January 2002 to February 2003 (Pérez, Armelino, and Rossi, 2003; Rossi, 2005a; 2005b; 2005c) with new documents, in-depth interviews with the principal actors, and direct observation between August and December of 2011.

We follow a strictly chronological structure. We will identify the main events that marked the definition of the identity of each case and the paths followed by the two assemblies. We will describe the process by which each assembly obtained a physical space from which to function and how this contributed to the preservation of its legacy. Finally, we will analyze the continuities between the social networks and the objectives laid out by each sector of the assembly movement in 2003 and the impacts that are possible to observe since then until the end of 2011.

### **FROM THE CACEROLAZO (SAUCEPAN BANGING) PROTESTS TO THE CREATION OF THE MOVEMENT (DECEMBER 2001–JANUARY 2002)**

Toward the end of 2001, Argentina experienced a deep political, economic, and social crisis that resulted in the second presidential interruption since the democratic transition in 1983. The co-governing coalition of the Radical Civic Union (*Unión Cívica Radical*) and the Solidarity National Front (*Frente País Solidario*) had won the presidency two years before, defeating the Peronist Justicialist Party (*Partido Justicialista*) and promising to resolve the problems of high-level government corruption and a deep economic recession. A short time after assuming power, however, its incapacity to lead with regard to these problems became evident. On the one hand, new corruption scandals emerged, eventually forcing the vice president to resign and breaking up the coalition. On the other, in the face of the absence of foreign financing to maintain the fiscal deficit, the government considered it appropriate to reduce public spending. The government’s deterioration generated a rejection of the entire political class that was apparent in the October 2001 legislative elections, in which absenteeism, contestation, and the null vote became indicators of citizen preference.<sup>1</sup>

On December 14, given the worsening economic situation and the government’s response to it (including payment of wages with compulsory vouchers and limits on the withdrawal of cash), small- and medium-sized stores were looted in various parts of Greater Buenos Aires and other cities (Auyero, 2007). Confronting discontent and uncertainty, the government imposed a state of siege. Almost immediately and spontaneously, thousands of citizens took to the streets of Buenos Aires and other cities wielding pots and pans and demanding not only the resignation of the government but also the complete replacement



**Figure 1.** Evolution of the number of assemblies by zone in the City of Buenos Aires in 2002 (Rossi, 2005b; 2005c). Neighborhoods included in each zone: *South*: Nueva Pompeya, Villa Soldati, Villa Riachuelo, Monserrat, San Telmo, Constitución, San Nicolás, La Boca, Barracas, Parque Patricios, San Cristóbal, Boedo, Parque Chacabuco, Villa Luro, Versailles, Liniers, Parque Avellaneda, Villa Lugano, and Mataderos. *West*: Villa Pueyrredón, Agronomía, Villa del Parque, Villa Devoto, La Paternal, Villa Crespo, Monte Castro, Villa Real, Almagro, Caballito, Balvanera, Floresta, and Flores. *North*: Núñez, Saavedra, Belgrano, Coghlan, Villa Urquiza, Palermo, Colegiales, Recoleta, Retiro, Chacarita, Parque Chas, Villa Ortúzar, and Puerto Madero. Because of the diversity of primary sources, numbers per zone do not always coincide with general numbers.

of the political elites: “Get rid of them all, not a single one must remain!” (“¡Que se vayan todos, qué no quede ni uno solo!”). The street confrontations and protests left around 40 dead and resulted in the resignation of the president (Schuster et al., 2002).

The trajectory that followed this event during the final days of 2001, with three failed interim presidencies in succession<sup>2</sup> and the generalization of street protests, offered expanded political opportunities for the formation of a new social actor, the assembly movement. This new movement emerged in various Argentine cities but developed with particular intensity in the City of Buenos Aires. The political system’s failure to recover in the face of escalating protests pointed to the need for some kind of organizational structure, and the model that rapidly proliferated was the one of grassroots deliberative assemblies. Almost 100 assemblies identified with street corners or meeting places in different neighborhoods of Buenos Aires emerged during January 2002. They mushroomed until April of that year, reaching a total of 113 and then stabilizing at around 80 (Figure 1). Despite the organizational convergence, in time two models would be delimited, structured around two interpretive frameworks: popular assemblies and neighborhood assemblies.

The popular assemblies made up the radical wing of the assembly movement. In general terms, the assemblies that added the appellative “popular” to their names interpreted the political context as evidence of two simultaneous

crises: that of the capitalist system and that of representative democracy. From this perspective, they considered it essential to promote the formation of different foci of grassroots resistance without territorial limits, developing a space for dialogue between the “working class” (including excluded and non-productive sectors) and “bourgeoisie society.” For participants in this sector of the movement, the power of the indivisible meta-collective “the people,” which they considered sovereign (supreme) and potentially constitutive of a new order, had to be organized into assemblies to realize its potential (Rossi, 2005a: 78–79).

In contrast, the assemblies that called themselves “neighborhood” assemblies understood the political crisis as evidence of the development of the representative system and the political administration of the economy during the 1990s, seen as consequences of the delegation of power to representatives without adequate citizen control and participation. This sector considered assembly debate imperative in the pursuit of the territorial (neighborhood) reorganization of social ties that would lead to the reconstitution of an active society seeking solutions to problems that politicians seemed unable or unwilling to solve (Rossi, 2005a: 76–78).

Figure 1 presents the evolution of the number of assemblies in the City of Buenos Aires, both at the general level for the entire district as subdivided by zone (associated with the socio-economic distribution of the population; the middle classes mainly located in the city’s West and North, the North also including the middle-upper and upper classes and the poorest neighborhoods located in the South). The distribution of assemblies by neighborhood shows that the availability of resources (material and symbolic) in each social segment provides a partial explanation for their capacity to sustain social mobilization through time. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the division of the movement into “popular” and “neighborhood” sectors was unrelated to the geographic location of each assembly, the two sectors being almost equally distributed across the city’s territory.

### **THE CID CAMPEADOR POPULAR ASSEMBLY AND THE NEIGHBORHOOD ASSEMBLY OF PALERMO VIEJO: ORIGINS AND IDENTITIES (JANUARY–APRIL 2002)**

The Cid Campeador Popular Assembly emerged on January 11, 2002, convened by anonymous posters announcing a meeting to “organize the saucers” in the plaza of the Cid Campeador monument, at the intersection of the neighborhoods of Caballito, Villa Crespo, and La Paternal.<sup>3</sup> Popular assemblies emerged as a conscious project of taking advantage of the political opportunities to maximize antagonisms that reproduced foci of conflict in various points of the city. One leader of the assembly pointed out that it was modeled on the “Diego ‘Nano’ Lamagna” La Paternal Popular Assembly (Asamblea Popular La Paternal “Diego ‘Nano’ Lamagna”) This assembly was one of the first in the area and was named for one of the youths killed by police during the period of social unrest. This origin by emulation was typical of the “popular” assemblies. There was a strong link from the beginning, when activists from La Paternal sent some of their members out to take the idea, in the words of one assembly member, “closer to where people live” (August 2002).

The assembly members who were also militants of Trotskyist parties promoted a model of territorial penetration. Cid and the group of assemblies of similar origin were established mainly by activist groups from the Trotskyist United Left (Izquierda Unida) and anarchist groups such as Libertarian Socialism (Socialismo Libertario), who sought to stimulate and lead the establishment of similar groups from an originating center (a party headquarters or another assembly).<sup>4</sup> These militant networks fomented the creation of the Parque Centenario Inter-Neighborhood Assembly (Asamblea Interbarrial de Parque Centenario), a citywide coordinating assembly that connected them in a project with national aspirations. The Cid, La Paternal, and other assemblies of the area had a common origin and maintained a close dialogue that led to joint actions and learning from each other's experiences.

The political perspective from which this assembly emerged was internationalist, so its goals were not circumscribed to Buenos Aires or Argentina. That is why they were called "popular" and the assembly's name avoided any allusion to a particular neighborhood. As an assembly member put it, "The Cid has no neighborhood. . . . We wanted a broad definition, not limited to a neighborhood" (August 2002). Cid was created with the goal of stimulating the organization and constitution of more groups that would form part of a general struggle. In its first session, the assembly resolved how it would be identified and that it would attend the first Inter-Neighborhood Assembly that Sunday, considering this legitimate and necessary.

The Neighborhood Assembly of Palermo Viejo emerged on January 17, 2002, but the group of founding neighbors had become politically active two months earlier. On November 20, 2001, the Peronist ex-president Carlos Menem, accused of arms trafficking, had been freed by a Supreme Court of Justice composed mainly of his supporters. A day later, some opposition leaders called for a cacerolazo in front of the Congress building to protest the ruling. After the protest, which was small, a group of friends and neighbors from Palermo Viejo and others decided to continue protesting on their own. About 10 of them, calling themselves Self-Organized Citizens Against the Supreme Court of Justice's Resolution (Ciudadanos Autoconvocados contra el Fallo de la Corte Suprema de Justicia), gathered regularly in front of the Congress and later participated in the December 19 cacerolazos.<sup>5</sup>

After the fall of the government, they continued to meet weekly, and on January 11 they were invited by the recently formed Assembly of Plaza de Mayo (Asamblea de Plaza de Mayo) to attend the Inter-Neighborhood Assembly on January 16 as Self-Organized at the Congress (Autoconvocados en el Congreso), which Indymedia called an assembly. As an assembly member commented, this had not occurred to them before: "A bunch of people came without saucepans, waiting for something. They were asking for the 'Assembly of Congress,' expecting to create one." They then decided to found the Self-Organized Assembly of Congress (Asamblea de Autoconvocados de Congreso).

In contrast to the Cid, the Assembly of Congress, which was key to the creation of the Neighborhood Assembly of Palermo Viejo, emerged spontaneously. A group of friends and neighbors without any previous political experience founded an assembly outside of the neighborhood where they lived. Soon, however, with the departure of members of the initial group and the greater participation of neighbors from the area, the assembly began to focus more on neighborhood problems. Beginning at this point, and thanks to a model learned

in the Inter-Neighborhood Assembly, they decided to organize an assembly in their neighborhood. The Assembly of Congress continued without them.

The first meeting of the Assembly of Self-Organized Neighbors of Palermo Viejo (*Asamblea de Vecinos Autoconvocados de Palermo Viejo*) was held on January 17 on the street corner next to the house of one of its founders. This type of assembly emerged under different master frames from the popular assemblies, framing the opportunities of December–January as a vertical transfer of sovereignty to its origins and—in view of the abdication and/or incapacity of the citizens’ representatives—a need to debate how to save the republic. The assembly was not the protest organization in foci of conflict that a central coordinating institution would promote toward the growing radicalization of the struggle, as Cid understood it, but an instance of collective free decision making to recover the republic with the total renewal of the political elites.

Gradually, a filtering of members of both assemblies resulted from the discussions taking place in the Inter-Neighborhood Assembly about whether protests should be radicalized and focus on establishing a different system from capitalism and representative democracy or redirect its attention to local issues, where the city government was predisposed to consider them as valid interlocutors. This process culminated in the consolidation of the differing tendencies of each assembly—moderate or radical—and the division of the movement into two factions.

### **THE STRUGGLE FOR THE PHYSICAL SPACE, STATE RECOGNITION, AND THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE MOVEMENT (APRIL 2002–APRIL 2003)**

The assembly movement emerged during the summer of 2002, period that favors the use of public space for climate reasons. Once the cold and winter rains set in, finding a meeting space became imperative for most assemblies.

Having begun in the Cid Campeador plaza, in the middle of 2002 the Cid began to use the Buenos Aires Sporting Club in La Paternal and then the abandoned headquarters of a failed Banco Mayo (Figure 2). The decision to occupy the bank building came about because, according to one assembly member, “We needed to bring together the combative sectors of society” (October 2011). In other words, the expansion of struggle through the assembly format required a space to empower the sovereign “the people.” The strategy of occupying the site of an abandoned financial institution was emulated from the “Gustavo Benedetto” Villa Crespo Popular Assembly (*Asamblea Popular Villa Crespo “Gustavo Benedetto”*) and the Lezama Sur Popular Assembly (*Asamblea Popular Lezama Sur*). The space occupied by the assembly was called Cid Campeador House, with the aim being to “recover a space for the people.” (Bulletin, number 7, August 2002). This was the main initiative of the assembly, which brought about the increase of participation and greater links with the network of other social and political organizations. The Argentine headquarters of Indymedia was located on the second floor of the building, and some organizations of piqueteros (the movement of unemployed workers) developed canteens, workshops, and cultural activities in the building. It slowly became a meeting space for coordinating activities such as the final meeting of the Inter-Neighborhood Assembly at the end of 2002 and the coordination of the Piquete





**Figure 2.** Cid Campeador House, headquarters of the Cid Campeador Popular Assembly in 2002 (courtesy of a member of the assembly).

Urbano (Urban Picket)—event commemorating the first anniversary of the December 19–20 protests.

On May 25 and 26, 2002, the Palermo Viejo assembly organized a political-cultural festival called *La Trama* (The Weave) that represented a break point equivalent to the Cid assembly's occupation of the bank building. The assembly received the support and participation of hundreds of social, cultural, and political organizations and wide media coverage. From then on, this event became a usual assembly activity, held annually—even though with less resonance than the initial event—until September 2007. As a result of this event, Palermo Viejo managed to define its central objective: the articulation of neighborhood ties to foment solidarity and socio-productive projects.<sup>6</sup>

As had the Cid assembly, the Palermo Viejo assembly received the support of a club (the Palermo Athletics Club) to continue meeting during the winter of 2002, but when this support was withdrawn the search for a regular meeting place became an imperative need. In contrast to Cid's, however, the solution decided on by the assembly was to obtain an abandoned municipal market in the center of the neighborhood in order to consolidate itself locally after *La Trama's* success. After difficult negotiations and thanks to the support of the 14 West Center for Administration and Participation (Centro de Gestión y Participación—CGP),<sup>7</sup> the assembly obtained the free use of the internal cross streets and building behind the public market (Figure 3). Signing the contract with the government required it to constitute itself as a legal entity, and therefore it became the Assembly of Palermo Viejo Civic Association and assumed legal responsibility for the administration of the space. The assembly held a



**Figure 3.** A meeting of the Neighborhood Assembly of Palermo Viejo in its headquarters in 2002 (courtesy of a member of the assembly).

crafts fair named after the festival and began building connections with organizations dedicated to fair trade, as well as some piquetero organizations that participated in socio-productive projects, such as the Unemployed Workers' Movement (Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados, MTD) of La Juanita and the MTD of Solano.

Despite the fact that both cases opted for different paths in obtaining a physical space from which to operate and develop their activities, a common result was the institutionalization of the assemblies due to the obligatory link to the state produced by the occupation (Cid) or negotiation (Palermo Viejo) of the buildings they respectively settled in. While in the case of the Cid the occupation of the space was confirmed by the federal justice system in deciding not to evict the assembly on the condition that the assembly hold free cultural activities for the community there, Palermo Viejo's contact was the local Ministry of Production, with which it signed a contract to use part of the market for fair trade projects.

The procurement of a building from which to operate represented the key to continuing the experience begun by these and other assemblies.<sup>8</sup> As one of the founders of the Cid assembly acknowledged, "This would have been broken up if it weren't for having this space; it would be a pity to abandon this space" (October 2011). However, their objectives were not the same. While for the Palermo Viejo assembly the procurement of a place was a result of its interest in being recognized as a legitimate actor at the neighborhood level, for the Cid assembly the occupation of the bank was an organizational necessity for strengthening the struggle.

### **FROM INSTITUTIONALIZATION TO THE REFORMULATION OF OBJECTIVES (APRIL 2003–OCTOBER 2006)**

The interim government of Eduardo Duhalde culminated with the presidential elections of April 2003, which recovered historic levels of wide participation



**TABLE 1**  
**Networks of the Cid Campeador Popular Assembly (2002)**  
**and the Cid Popular Political and Cultural Space (2011)**

	<i>Cid Campeador Popular Assembly (October 2002)</i>	<i>Cid Popular Political and Cultural Space (October 2011)</i>
Political parties	Workers' Party, Socialist Movement of Workers, Workers' Democracy, Socialist Workers Party	Project South, Buenos Aires for Everybody (local party)
Piquetero organizations	Unemployed Workers' Movement (MTD) "Aníbal Verón"	"Darío Santillán" Popular Front (with a branch inside the building, 2004–2011, division of the MTD "Aníbal Verón")
Workers' recovered factories	Brukman (textile)	Arrufat (chocolates)
Alternative media	Indymedia Argentina (with its headquarters inside the building, 2002–2004)	Radio La Colectiva, Antena Negra TV, ANRED, Barricada TV (all of them with their headquarters inside the building since 2006)
Clubs	Buenos Aires Social and Sporting Club	None
Student groups and educational institutions	"Andrés Ferreyra" School Cooperative, student organizations of the Social Science Department of the University of Buenos Aires	"María Claudia Falcone" School's Students' Center, "Kiki Lezcano" student organization (former students of the Federation of Secondary School Students [Federación de Estudiantes Secundarios])
Assemblies	"Diego 'Nano' Lamagna" La Paternal Popular Assembly, Plaza Irlanda Popular Assembly, "Gustavo Benedetto" Villa Crespo Popular Assembly, "Gastón Riva" Caballito Popular Assembly, Popular Assembly of Rivadavia Park–Caballito	Cid Campeador Popular Assembly
State institutions	Federal justice system, "Carlos G. Durand" General Hospital	Federal justice system
Private institutions	None	None

(78 percent of the electorate) despite the efforts of the two assemblies to prevent this. The Cid assembly, together with part of its network of organizations (Table 1), pushed for a boycott of the elections with a campaign called the Counter-electoral Convocation that included the *escrache*<sup>9</sup> of the candidates on election day. The Palermo Viejo assembly organized the "Q.S.V.T Carnival" (Get Rid of Them All Carnival) together with the Neighborhood Assembly of Colegiales (Asamblea Vecinal de Colegiales) as a symbolic rejection of the elections. In spite of this action, Palermo Viejo's network (Table 2) did not back any electoral boycott action, and most of the assembly members voted.

For the popular sector of the assembly movement, this election ended the period of struggle for the replacement of the elites, while for the neighborhood sector this objective had already lost its importance in April 2002. Despite the failure of the assembly movement to achieve the total renewal of the political elites, the election did produce a president with limited legitimacy.

**TABLE 2**  
**Networks of the Neighborhood Assembly of Palermo Viejo (2002)**  
**and the Bonpland Fair-Trade Market (2011)**

	<i>Neighborhood Assembly of Palermo Viejo (October 2002)</i>	<i>Bonpland Fair-Trade Market (October 2011)</i>
Political parties	None	None
Piquetero organizations	Unemployed Workers' Movement (MTD) of La Juanita, MTD of Solano	La Dignidad Popular Movement (MP) (former "Teresa Rodríguez" Movement, division of the MTD "Aníbal Verón")
Workers' recovered factories	Grissinopoli (bread-making)	La Alameda (textile), Puerto Rico (yerba mate)
Alternative media	None	En Movimiento TV (communication media of the La Dignidad MP)
Clubs	Palermo Athletics Club	None
Student groups and educational institutions	"Lobo Suelto" student group ("Nicolás Avellaneda" School Student's Center), Latin American Social Science Faculty (FLACSO) –Participative Projects of Associated Administration (PPGA)	Bonpland Cultural Space (former student group), FLACSO-PPGA, Institute for Fair Trade and Responsible Consumption
Other social organizations	El Ceibo Cooperative of Cartoneros, Workers' Central of Argentina (CTA), Northern Region	Yo No Fui Civic Association (cultural workshops with inmate women), La Asamblearia Cooperative (fair trade), Center for Commercialization of Family Agriculture Products, Argentine Soncko (artisanship), Rural Network of the Association of State Workers' Union of the CTA (opposition faction), National Forum of Family Agriculture (Argentine Agrarian Federation), Palermo Viejo Development Committee, Social, Economic, and Cultural Exchange, and International Economic Cooperation Institute (both, Italian NGOs)
Assemblies	Assembly of Self-Organized Neighbors of Las Cañitas, Botánico Popular Assembly (Scalabrini Ortiz and Santa Fe), Neighborhood Assembly of Scalabrini Ortiz and Córdoba, Neighborhood Assembly of Viaducto Carranza, Neighborhood Assembly Colegiales–Chacarita, Assembly of Self-Organized Neighbors of Colegiales (Lacroze and Zapiola)	Corrientes and Juan B. Justo Assembly
State institutions	14 West Center of Administration and Participation (CGP), Ministry of Production (both, Government of the City of Buenos Aires)	Ministry of Production of the Government of the City of Buenos Aires
Private Institutions	Area businesses (theaters, cultural centers, bars, and restaurants)	None

After Menem, who obtained 25 percent of the vote, withdrew from the race in the second round, the winner was the then-unknown governor of Santa Cruz, Néstor Kirchner, with only 22 percent of the vote. Kirchner began his

administration worried about winning the support of a highly mobilized citizenry that had not voted for him.

The new government effectively dealt with the economic crisis, consolidating the stability begun by Duhalde and implementing policies that allowed an increase in the gross domestic product and an improvement in some social indicators. While poverty continued to affect most of the population (45.4 percent in 2002), unemployment declined from 17.3 percent in 2003 to 11.6 percent in 2005 (CEPAL, 2010: Statistical Annex, Table 1) and the Gini coefficient (measuring the inequality of distribution of income) dropped from 0.578 in 2002 to 0.519 in 2006 (CEPAL, 2010: 82, Table I.A-3). At the same time, the government responded to the assembly movement's demands by replacing part of the discredited Supreme Court and instituted measures that were sensitive to the movement for human rights such as a review of the crimes committed under the last authoritarian regime. It also dealt with social protest without repression, although the trend toward the "judicialization" of protest continued (Mauro and Rossi, 2011).<sup>10</sup>

As Kirchner's government grew in popularity and responded to some of the assembly movement's demands, while incorporating into government part of the human rights and piquetero movements, both assemblies declined in membership and consolidated their main objectives.

In the case of the Cid assembly, in 2003 not only had its boycott of the elections failed but its network had narrowed with the dissolution of the Inter-Neighborhood Assembly, the disbanding of nearby assemblies such as that of Villa Crespo, and Indymedia's departure from the Cid building. In this context, some assembly members proposed inviting other organizations, such as the "Darío Santillán" Popular Front (Frente Popular "Darío Santillán"—FPDS), to share the administration of the building. The debate over this proposal divided the assembly, which had only 15 members, and half of them left it. The remaining members opened up the space to various social and labor organizations opposing Kirchner's government. This call for cooperation was indicative of the fact that they did not interpret the Kirchner administration as different from what had preceded it and therefore considered it necessary to articulate the popular struggle a vital objective as in 2002.

The Palermo Viejo assembly, for its part, began using its premises to promote fair trade enterprises. This project had been resisted in 2002 by a minority of assembly members who belonged to political parties, but in 2003 this faction withdrew and formed another assembly (which rapidly dissolved). Once the assembly obtained part of the municipal market, some of these former members returned in the hope of redirecting the assembly toward the "popular" sector of the movement, but they were marginalized.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, the assembly organized, on the premises of the market, two forums on fair trade, inviting institutions and organizations linked to the issue such as La Asamblearia Cooperative, recently formed by the Neighborhood Assembly of Núñez-Saavedra (Asamblea Vecinal de Núñez-Saavedra) and the Neighborhood Assembly of Núñez (Asamblea Barrial de Núñez). The meetings led to the formation of the Bonpland Fair Trade Market (Mercado de Economía Solidaria Bonpland), announced during the second La Trama festival in September 2003 and later presented to the city authorities. A craft fair was held in collaboration with the Núñez-Saavedra assembly as part of this festival with the aim of providing "a neighborhood space for fair trade" (October 2011). Part

of the Workers' Central of Argentina (Central de Trabajadores de la Argentina—CTA) supported this fair, and some piquetero organizations participated until it was discontinued because of administrative problems and conflicts with the local authorities. In addition, between 2003 and 2005 the premises served as the headquarters of Autonomous Assemblies, the main coordinator of the neighborhood sector of the movement after the end of the Inter-Neighborhood Assembly. Articulation with fair trade organizations continued during 2004, while negotiations for the use of the entire market advanced. With the help of the socialist legislator Norberto La Porta, the assembly managed to get the local legislature to declare the premises of cultural interest (Resolution 202, June 8, 2004). At the same time, the third edition of *La Trama* was held.

On the neighborhood level, both assemblies participated in the struggle against the indiscriminate construction of high-rise buildings. The Cid assembly supported the SOS Caballito Civic Association (formerly the Popular Assembly of Rivadavia Park–Caballito, *Asamblea Popular de Parque Rivadavia–Caballito*), and the Palermo Viejo assembly organized marches and information campaigns in cooperation with the Palermo Viejo Development Committee (*Sociedad de Fomento de Palermo Viejo*). While this was an issue of lesser relevance for the Cid, the Palermo Viejo focused on it from a neighborhood (*vecinalista*) perspective. In the words of one of its members, “What we didn’t want was that the market god imposed on us the neighborhood where we should live. . . . one stakeholder was missing, and that was the neighbors: what kind of neighborhood we wanted to have, what kind of neighborhood we wanted to live in” (October 2011).

The metamorphosis of both assemblies into spaces for the articulation of various groups allowed them to persist over time. Simultaneously, this transformation led to a change in their principal objectives abandoning the demand for the replacement of the political elites. This caused some key actors to remain in the networks of Cid and Palermo Viejo but also produced a more specific objective in each case. As Table 1 shows, while Cid interacted with leftist parties, piquetero organizations, worker-recovered factories, human rights organizations, and alternative media in October 2002, the actors had changed in October 2011 but the network’s composition was similar, expanding the presence of the alternative media. Table 2 shows that, while Palermo Viejo interacted with piquetero organizations, worker-recovered factories, cooperatives and educational organizations in October 2002, similar actors subsisted in the space where the assembly used to operate in October 2011, reinforcing the fair-trade networks.

### **DECLINE/DISSOLUTION AND THE LEGACY OF THE MOVEMENT (OCTOBER 2006–DECEMBER 2011)**

In the following years, the mobilizing capacity of both groups declined enormously, and the Palermo Viejo assembly dissolved. Beyond this decline in mobilizing capacity, there was continuity in the original division of the movement, which would subsist despite the disappearance of one of the groups. The key to continuity was the achievement of a physical space, which permitted the sustainability of the accumulated social capital.

In the case of the Cid assembly, even though it maintained a very small number of members, a revitalization of the space began in 2006 with the arrival of several alternative media and the formation of a civic association. Radio La Colectiva was the first to use the building. Members of a piquetero organization requested space for a graphics enterprise, and some time later they established an online television channel called Barricada TV. Through Radio La Colectiva, other media affiliated with the National Network of Alternative Media such as ANRED and Antena Negra TV would be incorporated from 2006 on. This process revitalized and transformed the occupied space, although it divided it into closed areas for each of the enterprises. Until 2001, this situation generated tensions over its management, with the FPDS proposing articulation among the organizations instead of just cohabitation of the building. The revitalization of the space also required formalization to guarantee basic services. To this end the assembly, together with Radio La Colectiva and the FPDS, formed a civic association in 2006 and renamed the Cid Campeador House as the Cid Popular Political and Cultural Space (Espacio de Cultura y Política Popular El Cid). The creation of a legal entity became necessary to avoid the federal justice system's taking back the agreement for the former bank. As one of the Radio La Colectiva members pointed out, "The civic association had a single objective: to generate tools to fight for the space" (October 2011). In the new conception of the space, the Cid assembly preserved two central elements of its identity: the adjective "popular," which had represented its political position from the beginning, and the agreement to use the space for free cultural activities in order to avoid eviction.

In 2008 Radio La Colectiva began broadcasting, a student organization joined, the FPDS formed the Chico Mendes Space (focusing on environmental issues), and the assembly began to communicate with the opposition sector of the CTA. The structure of the Cid Popular Political and Cultural Space came together in this way, and it is the main legacy of the assembly (Figure 4).

When the CTA divided in 2010 over its position on Kirchner's government, articulation with the Cid assembly offered the CTA's opposition sector the possibility of expanding its presence in the western part of the city. For the assembly, which also opposed the government, the union was the kind of entity it wanted to help maintain the building. In October 2011 the Cid agreed to convert the building into a branch of the Territorial CTA (as had happened a couple of years before with the San Telmo Popular Assembly [Asamblea Popular San Telmo]) and consolidated its links with Buenos Aires para Todos (Buenos Aires for Everybody) and Proyecto Sur (Project South) political parties, both related to this sector of the CTA. As a consequence, the FPDS piquetero organization, opposed to this decision, left the building.

In the case of Palermo Viejo, limits to the projects carried out by the assembly became evident throughout 2005. In the first place, in November 2005, the local government entered into crisis, with the suspension and impeachment of its chief executive because of mismanagement that had allowed a fire in a discotheque in which 194 young people died. In March 2006 the chief executive was replaced by his second in command, who governed until he was defeated in the 2007 elections. During this process, a number of officials were successively removed, generating uncertainty over the continuity of several government programs. These changes affected Palermo Viejo, because articulation with the





Figure 4. Headquarters of the Cid Popular Political and Cultural Space in 2011.

government was vital for maintaining the Bonpland Fair Trade Market. In 2006 the coordinating meetings for this project were suspended, dismantling the group formed in 2003.

In the second place, the assembly's actions against the indiscriminate construction of high-rise buildings showed few results, given the official impermeability to the assembly's claim and the neighbors' lack of support. In this context, the assembly organized fewer and fewer activities (even discontinuing the organization of La Trama in 2006) until meetings were finally suspended. Eventually the space was completely occupied by the La Dignidad Popular Movement, the Yo No Fui Civic Association, and the Bonpland Cultural Space. However, it was not the lack of results that led to the assembly's dissolution but the perception that it had lost its *raison d'être*. According to most of the active assembly members, Kirchner's government was responding to a significant proportion of the movement's demands. As one of the assembly's founders said, "[Beginning in 2006,] It wasn't the same anymore, and one felt identified with some policies that the government was carrying out. It's as if it no longer had the same sense as in the beginning, when one was angry over the lack of political representation by the authorities" (October 2011). In contrast to the Cid assembly, which put together a network of actors that considered the Kirchner administration unsatisfactory, the Palermo Viejo assembly had a positive interpretation of the administration that led its few remaining members to stop meeting.



Figure 5. Headquarters of the Bonpland Fair-Trade Market in 2011.

Like Cid's legacy, Palermo Viejo's legacy was a neighborhood space that was recovered for social and political initiatives. However, whereas the Cid assembly was sustained by preexisting activist networks, part of Palermo Viejo's capital was the political activation of neighbors without previous political experience. This network would keep functioning in a virtual and personal way, mobilizing in 2007 with the organization of a new La Trama Festival to prevent the local government from closing down the premises. The struggle was successful, and in July 2007 an agreement was reached with the local government to develop the Bonpland Fair Trade Market on the entire premises of the property (Figure 5). In this way, they achieved the assembly's main goal since they had abandoned the struggle for the renewal of the political elites. The capacity of the network of former members of the Palermo Viejo assembly to mobilize in response to key challenges was tested again in 2010. When the local government proposed constructing a police station on the property, they organized a campaign in defense of the market and averted its closure.

Since mid-2011, when the market was reopened, the two areas of the building (the front, where the market functions, and the back, the previous assembly meeting space) have operated separately, and within each area the level of articulation and cooperation between organizations has been reduced. Some organizations involved since the beginning, such as the La Alameda and La Asamblearia cooperatives, have continued in the market, while new organizations have come in and gained influence, among them the Italian NGO Institute of International Economic Cooperation and the Argentine Agrarian Federation's National Family Agriculture Forum. In the back part of the market, La Dignidad Popular Movement, the Yo No Fui Civic Association, and the Bonpland Cultural Space continued with their activities (Table 2).

Finally, commemorations of the December 19–20 events have been abandoned, and even those for the tenth anniversary of the crisis of 2001 were quite modest. The two groups and their networks celebrated December 20, 2011, in different ways. While the Cid's network organized a festival in an important plaza in the neighborhood, the former members of the Palermo Viejo assembly

got together in private, without organizing any public activity or connecting with the organizations that participate in the Bonpland market. The rest of the assemblies that still existed commemorated this anniversary in similar ways, not participating in national mobilizations. While the main mobilization was called by political parties and social organizations linked to the assembly movement but not emerging from it,<sup>12</sup> the existing assemblies organized different activities on the local level, as was also the case with the assemblies of Villa Urquiza and San Telmo, among others.

## CONCLUSION

We began by asking about the evolution and legacies of the assembly movement. The issues addressed involve the question about the effects of movements, a difficult dimension to understand in its complexity. To address these questions, we focused on two paradigmatic cases of assemblies and described their evolution to establish their meso and micro impacts.

It is possible to analyze the legacies of these assemblies because they registered a prolonged temporal continuity. While the majority of the assemblies dissolved or merged toward the end of 2003 and others reestablished themselves as social organizations a few years later,<sup>13</sup> the Cid and Palermo Viejo assemblies managed to survive beyond the initial period without losing their identities. The fact that they obtained physical spaces in which to develop activities with autonomy from other organizations, as well as their formalization as civic associations, offered the conditions for the crystallization of these two collectives and their projects, even after the decline in the number of members.

The definition of objectives that went beyond the claim for “¡Qué se vayan todos!” extended the existence of these assemblies and sustained their identities in the face of changes in the political environment. Cid and Palermo Viejo have sustained (after ruptures, setbacks, and even its dissolution) their distinctive features across time as “popular” or “neighborhood” assemblies. These features are evident in the reconfiguration of the networks of each space: while Cid has persevered in articulating grassroots struggles, dedicating itself to territorial issues only as tools for the advancement of a wider political project, Palermo Viejo has concentrated on the recovery of the social fabric of the neighborhood, aiming to promote forms of sociability alternative to the disarticulating effects of the market.

On a micro scale, the spaces recovered by both assemblies were not only the condition for their continuation but also their main legacy. In the case of the Cid, the occupied building has been the base for cultural and political projects, facilitating a consolidation and convergence of organizations that would otherwise not have been possible. In the case of Palermo Viejo, the existence of a fair-trade market in the middle of a neighborhood that was being dizzily transformed by the speculative real estate boom was a palpable achievement.

Finally, the original divergence of the movement was preserved on a meso scale. While the Cid’s members and networks perceived that the objectives of the assemblies and other movements remained unsatisfied, justifying the maintenance of their organizational continuity, Palermo Viejo and its networks assessment of the government since 2003 led to the decision that it was no

longer necessary to remain organized. The different interpretative frames that divided neighborhood assemblies from popular assemblies from the beginning were maintained during the Kirchner administrations, producing alternative paths. While the actors that formed the neighborhood sector of the movement organized during an extraordinary situation that by 2006 they considered mainly resolved, the popular sector of the movement expanded the organization of a struggle that transcended the assembly movement.

## NOTES

1. At the national level, unprecedented percentages of blank and null votes were registered (23.99 percent of the votes for national deputies), as well as low concentration of votes for the two traditional parties, which amounted to less than 60 percent of the casted votes.

2. Given the resignations of the president and vice president, the executive duty fell to the provisional president of the Senate, who was limited to presiding over the Legislative Assembly to choose a provisional president. The president-elect in that assembly resigned his charge a week later, amidst new *cacerolazo* protests and without receiving political support. The charge fell to the president of the Chamber of Deputies, who also limited himself to presiding over the Legislative Assembly. Finally, the Peronist senator Eduardo Duhalde was elected and was provisional president until May 2003.

3. This section reproduces some paragraphs from Rossi (2005c).

4. The founding of this assembly was not sponsored by any external institution or the consequence of a mandate by party leaders. It was party activists who created Cid.

5. According to one assembly member: "The *cacerolazo* caught us by surprise at the Congress" (November 2002). Without knowing what it was about, they decided to participate in the protests.

6. For example, Palermo Viejo also helped the *cartoneros* (informal collectors of cardboard and other refuse) of the area. Together with the Neighborhood Assembly of Colegiales, in 2002 they demanded repairs and better operation of the train that transported the *cartoneros* from the periphery to the center of the city and promoted a vaccination plan.

7. CGPs are decentralized administrative units of the government of the City of Buenos Aires. CGP 14 West was a space for the Palermo Viejo assembly to direct demands or negotiate different forms of cooperation. Cid, in contrast, avoided construction of any type of regular link with CGP 6 (corresponding to its territory) or with any other state agent beyond the minimum efforts to avoid eviction.

8. At least another 12 assemblies occupied or administered spaces from which to function (Ouvina, 2003).

9. A form of protest organized as a public humiliation of a person or organization, originally created by the human rights movement in order to condemn those involved in repression and disappearances during the 1976-1983 authoritarian regime.

10. The decline of incidents of physical repression in the social protests in the City of Buenos Aires was accompanied by an increase in judicial processes against protesters, a phenomenon that has been called "judicialization" or "criminalization" of social protest (Svampa and Pandolfi, 2004).

11. This group formed in the assembly a joint commission called Darío Santillán. After the triumph of the "neighborhood" majority and the project of promoting fair trade in the building, the "popular" sector definitively retired or transferred to the Neighborhood Assembly of Colegiales (which was in crisis, though administering an occupied space) and to the suburbs, to the Popular Assembly of Beccar, in San Isidro. As a result, Palermo Viejo continued with approximately 40 active members.

12. On December 20, a commemorative protest was held from the plaza in front of the National Congress to Plaza de Mayo. Assemblies or other groups that were products of the assembly movement were not among the organizations that convened the march. The main organizers of the mobilization were political parties of the left (Partido Obrero [Workers' Party], Partido Socialista de los Trabajadores [Socialist Workers Party], Project South, Movimiento Socialista de Trabajadores [Socialist Movement of Workers], Partido Comunista Revolucionario [Revolutionary Communist Party]) and their *piquetero* organizations (Polo Obrero [Workers' Pole], Corriente Clasista y

Combativa [Combative Class Current], Bloque Piquetero Nacional [National Piquetero Block]) as well as human rights organizations (Coordinadora Contra la Represión Policial e Institucional [Coordinator Against Police and Institutional Repression], Asociación de Ex-Detenidos-Desaparecidos [Association of Former Detained–Disappeared Persons], Asociación de Madres de Plaza de Mayo–Pañuelos en Rebeldía [Association of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo–Headscarves in Rebellion]).

13. These included, for example, the SOS Caballito Civic Association and the cooperatives La Asamblearia and La Alameda.

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