

Social housing and production of habitat: the right to the city

Adam Cutts, 2014 McBurney Fellow
Participatory Planning workshop
Vivienda Social y Ciudad
Social Housing/Right to the city
Santa Fe, Argentina



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Project Overview

Student: Adam Cutts

Department: Urban Systems (Geography)

Organization: Vivienda Social y Ciudad

Location: Santa Fe, Argentina

Mentor: Dr. Sarah Moser - (cultural and urban geography)

Fellowship Duration: May 1st –July 5th



About the McBurney Fellowship Program

Through McGill's Institute for Health and Social Policy, the McBurney Fellowship Program supports students in international service programs related to health and social policy in Latin America. McBurney Fellows serve abroad in organizations working to meet the basic needs of local populations over a period of 2 to 3 months. One key aspect of this fellowship is its mandate to make a significant contribution to improving the health and social conditions of poor and marginalized populations through the delivery of concrete and measurable interventions. Students and their mentors identify issues, make connections with local organizations, and develop a strategy for the fellowship. The views expressed in this document are the opinions of the fellow, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the IHSP.

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Informal housing and self-constructed settlements could be considered the most visible evidence of the growing inequality and social/spatial marginalization happening in cities around the globe. At the same time, this self-managed solution to housing needs may be one of the most invisible processes (Huchzermeyer, 2012). The immense effort, both socially and economically, of those excluded from the formal housing markets to construct housing and secure land in the city for themselves is an often undervalued process little understood by decision makers in urban centres (Marzioni, 2012). A growing number of organizations and community groups in Argentina as well as some state institutions are beginning to introduce new perspectives on what has been deemed the 'social production of housing'. Organizations such as Vivienda Social y Ciudad (VSyC) are advocating for inclusive access to urban land, generating participatory programs for social housing initiatives and the improvement of housing conditions for thousands of people left to fend for themselves in informal settlements.

Fellowship Rationale and Objectives

Despite the Argentinian government's policy decisions in 2003 to support the "right to housing" and access to affordable living in the city, there continues to be an increasing imbalance between supply and demand for affordable housing and access to urban land. As discussed in a recent UN human rights report, this situation has continued to deteriorate with economic growth in Argentina – raising urban land, rent, and housing costs disproportionately to the income of the majority of the population (Rolnik, 2011). Coinciding with this process, as inflation of the Argentinean peso continues to grow, the buying up of urban land as a secure investment for the upper class has further pushed poorer Argentines into the margins of the city (Rolnik, 2011). Furthermore, the vast majority of government programs launched to address the right to housing continue to exclude the poorest sections of the population, with a formal income as a prerequisite for access to government credits and enrollment in affordable housing programs (Marzioni, 2013). Giving a voice to and advocating for residents excluded from existing programs, while offering technical and legal support for land access, construction, and housing improvement builds off of the existing strengths within these communities, and involves them in the process of promoting and establishing a more inclusive city.

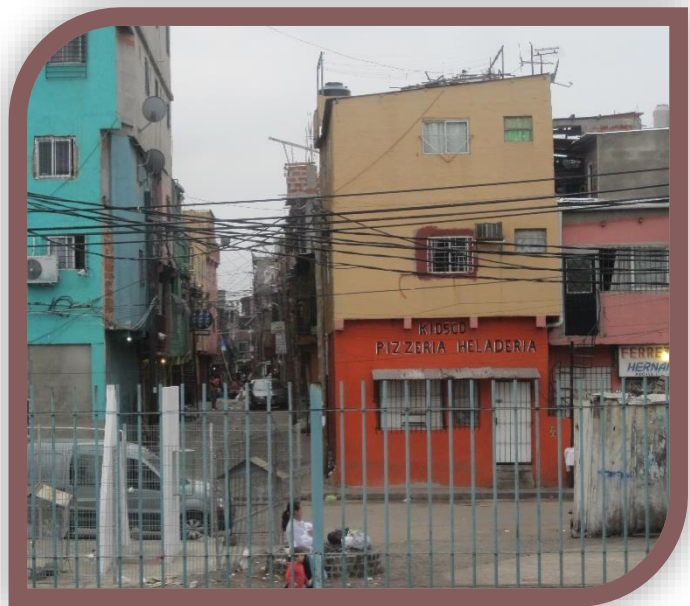
The organization Vivienda Social y Ciudad, made up mostly of architects and graduate students in architecture and planning from the National University of Litoral, is based on the rationale of an "encuentro de saberes" - a meeting of knowledge. The organization strives to equally increase their own capacity as professionals through workshops and dialogue with communities, while also teaching and empowering the groups they work with. This approach necessarily involves residents of informal and inadequate housing in solving their own housing needs through participatory design workshops, technical and organizational support, and capacitation workshops for teaching construction methods. By approaching each project undertaken with the goal of understanding "what is it we can teach them? and what, in this particular project,

can they teach us?”, the organization takes advantage of existing knowledge and resources in the communities. Further, this approach encourages an expansion of the role and capabilities of architects in engaging with human rights work for the right to adequate housing in an inclusive and productive manner - benefiting all parties involved.

My initial objectives in working with VSyC stemmed mainly from a desire to better understand the approach taken by the organization to create meaningful forms of public participation in city planning. A main goal was to contribute to the development of creative innovations in “visualization tools” - techniques for communicating ideas and incorporating input of community members into technical designs and urban plans. What most influenced my goals was seeing an exchange between design professionals and residents of informal settlements, which placed the community behind the steering wheel for developing housing solutions to better reflect their wants and needs as well as their existing skills and knowledge. The two workshops for planning new ways to meet housing needs in informal settlements provided an opportunity to explore creative ways of communicating ideas between design professionals and the community, and to learn from the process of organizing such activities.

Background/Context

Speculation and investment in real estate by high-income groups seeking security from the inflation of the Argentine peso has “restricted access to housing for low - to - middle- income groups, and has encouraged the spread of informal housing” (Rolnik, 2011, p. 6). Many social movements, particularly in Latin America, are gaining steam using rhetoric of the right to the city - a “rallying cry” against neoliberal urban development and the exclusionary process of globalization - privatizing urban spaces and excluding those without the resources to access it (Brown, 2013). Current neoliberal land-markets in cities not only exclude poor and marginalized people from the discussion of how, and in what way, cities are developing, but also further entrench their marginalization. Often regardless of how long informal settlements have existed and integrated themselves into the urban fabric of the city, services such as sewer and natural gas networks do not extend into the boundaries of these neighborhoods (Vivienda Social y Ciudad, 2013), but instead are built in new developments and commercial centres. Furthermore, often the land beneath self-built, informal settlements - occupied and urbanized over decades - becomes increasingly valuable as the city grows - as is the case in the North-East of Santa Fe. The municipality there continues to pressure existing residents to enlist in “relocalization programs” that tend to offer land of unequal value for the succession of informally



settled land. Although there has been no recent mass evictions in Argentina, this pressure to relocate combined with a lack of service provision make it clear that informal communities are not welcome, and prevents long-time residents from accessing the opportunities the city has to offer.

Projects in 'Las Lomas' and 'La Ex-Traza de Circunvalación' neighborhoods

The first project I participated in consisted of organizing and carrying out a week-long participatory design workshop with professionals from various fields and several social organizations representing communities in the north of city. This workshop was organized in collaboration with the "National Land Commission" - a branch of the government in charge of distributing some parcels of nationally owned land for the development of social housing solutions. The workshop was designed to create proposals for the development of large tracts of nationally owned (vacant) land north of the city center - where a ring-road highway had previously been planned. Issues faced by communities in the area include overcrowding, absence of formal land tenure, and a shortage of housing nearby for growing families wishing to remain in the neighborhood. As such, through discussion groups, visits to the site, and activities for land use planning of the vacant sites, several groups, comprised of a mix of professionals and members of social organizations, developed and discussed proposals addressing the needs and possible layout of housing on the land. These proposals included discussions on how to include productive activities, marketplaces, and some small plots for agriculture into potential plans - all arising from discussion with community members from organizations of residents currently living in inadequate housing. Furthermore, by providing photographs and models, and presenting everything from single-family to multi-unit buildings, potential housing types and layouts were collaboratively developed and incorporated into the proposals by discussing and drawing plans in each group. A main part of the approach undertaken by VSyC includes collaboratively coming up with plans for 'incremental housing', with neighborhoods and housing units designed to be easily added to and expanded when the need arises or funds become available.

While facilitating the workshops, the different plots of land spanning a large area across the north end of the city were divided into 3 zones and multiple proposals were developed for each zone. Following the workshop, I helped to organize the proposals and compile a document describing the outcome of the workshop. We then elaborated possible plans for each piece of land and presented them to the community groups, to begin the process of identifying which parcels of land best suit the needs of different groups. An important part of this stage in the process was debriefing with community members and social organizations that had participated, allowing for dialogue to continue and to reflect on the process of participatory planning. The proposals and results of the workshop will later be presented to the National Land Commission, eventually leading to negotiations for the actual allocation of these plots of land. Social organizations and housing advocacy groups receiving parcels of land will further work with architects in VSyC to finalize plans and oversee the construction of housing for local residents in need.

A second project in which I was involved was a collaboration between VSyC and an informal settlement in the west of the city, comprised mainly of people that relocated to the city from the countryside in a neighboring province. This project involved the participatory design and layout of basic sanitary units to be either added to existing housing units or to act as a base for expansion into a new single family home. VSyC has also helped the community form a work cooperative, which will undertake the construction of 52 sanitation units in the neighborhood and will have complete control of the funds and carrying out of the project over the next year. Aside from providing the technical designs and on-site support, the teams of

architects have organized capacitation sessions teaching the construction techniques at each step. The salaries, materials, and tools for the project have been bought by the funds under the cooperative's complete control, with tools and equipment remaining in their ownership. With the skills they acquire throughout the project, the hope is that the cooperative can continue working independently in the years to come, providing employment and steady income for members of the community. I was involved in developing an interactive map and other tools to be used in some of the participatory design workshops in this community while coming to the end of the planning process of this project. VSyC are currently experimenting with different forms of participatory mapping and interactive tools, such as the ones developed in this project, to identify issues as perceived by the community, giving a voice to residents and to help propose potential solutions. These sessions not only had the goal of enabling community members to identify and map out issues within the community to better formulate demands, but also to document and map out the way the neighborhood is laid out from a residents perspective. To achieve this goal, myself and other member of VSyC held several workshops to organize and prepare groups of community members to map out the informal settlement in which they reside, as no existing map has included it. Using basic empty maps drawn digitally from aerial photos, the first sessions served to familiarize the participants with the process of mapping - identifying landmarks, where their houses would be on the map, etc. Next, a process to have teams of community members survey the neighborhood, documenting the layout of streets, and numbers and forms of housing (number of storeys, number of families, etc), through observation and talking with families door to door. This (ongoing) process has helped to create accurate maps of the settlement, improving the ability of fire services or other emergency response vehicles to enter the neighborhood. Furthermore, through speaking to inhabitants to understand existing forms of addressing houses, naming streets, and the location of services, this project is engaging with locals to incorporate existing understandings of their neighborhood into the city in a respectful and efficient way. As such, this participatory design process and interactive mapping of issues allowed power to remain in the hands of the marginalized communities while initiating negotiations for their inclusion in the future development of the city.



Challenges and Successes

The projects I worked on in Santa Fe were overall quite successful, although my two-month stay only represents a small portion of the work involved and work yet to be done on these housing rights and housing improvement initiatives. Due to a rich history of social organization, cooperativism, and activism among many sections of the Argentine working class, many informal settlements have quite organized neighborhood associations and often demonstrate a large will to participate in improving their neighborhoods (Marzioni, 2013). As a result the role of initiatives such as the projects I participated in with VSyC are often more supportive in nature, allowing the community to direct and establish their own goals. The work I was involved in with these communities established a consensus on basic planning regulations for several informal settlements. As these settlements are not included in the official urban area's jurisdiction, official by-laws are not enforced, sometimes leading to disputes and misunderstandings. Although the planning norms we helped establish are not legally enforceable, helping the community organization establish norms through consensus and discussion groups was an important step in legitimizing informal settlements while planning for the future. This process proved to be incredibly difficult, with a wide range of opinions and interests within the community being represented in the neighborhood organization. Similar difficulties arose in the forming of the work cooperative in Las Lomas, and the drafting of the norms, including pay structure, absence and sick/maternity leave, project management, etc. The main difficulty arose from disagreements within the groups involved in the establishment of these guiding regulations, including personal disputes and conflicts. Horizontal power structures and responsibility sharing within these organizations ensures equitable decisions are made, however consensus reaching was often a drawn out and difficult process.



Furthermore, although organized and very much involved, informal settlements such as these often rely on their neighborhood organizations to handle the various responsibilities usually taken on by a variety of institutions in formal cities and neighborhoods. Maintaining a community-led process without imposing our ideas, while navigating conflicts arising outside of areas related to the urban planning or work cooperative guidelines we were helping to establish was a constant challenge. This highlighted to me the need for cooperation between NGOs, groups of professionals and social workers across disciplines when beginning projects in underserved communities. Neighborhood organizations in informal communities are often being relied on to not only advocate for the communities' needs, but also to settle disputes, engage in forms of community planning, and establish community centres and services, all often without formal support from the municipal governments within which they reside. Although, as mentioned, many informal settlements are quite organized and have many dedicated individuals involved, this experience made me wonder what communities are best positioned to have their voices heard and engage in participatory initiatives. A question I also often wondered when meeting with neighborhood organizations, which voices are not being included within the community and neighborhood organization itself? While formal support from the government continues to be absent in these neighborhoods, collaboration between NGOs and social organizations on projects such as these could help to bring more voices into neighborhood associations and share their responsibilities among more actors.

When it comes to the implementation of such projects, VSyC experienced several issues with bureaucracy and funding, which delayed and complicated the project in Las Lomas. With funding having been awarded for the project over a year ago, but not distributed until recently, recent inflation of the Argentine peso significantly affected the original plans for the construction and capacitation workshops. Being forced to carry out a project with only two thirds of the anticipated funding did however encourage further interesting exchanges between the organization and the neighborhood group in Las Lomas. As communities in informal settlements are quite accustomed to working within very limited budgets, using social networks, creative sourcing of material, etc., they proved incredibly skillful in reworking the plans and budget in order to allow the project to carry on - an excellent example of the benefits of participatory, community-led projects. Through my fellowship I was only able to participate in a fraction of the work in such a large project, often slowed down by the difficulty in coordinating several social organizations involved in housing and informal settlements in the area. VSyC had no full time staff and had little time for some organizational work outside of the technical support (architecture/planning) they focus on and as a result this project was prone to many delays. Although they take a holistic and interdisciplinary approach, the organization lacks adequate support to successfully strengthen the capacities and linkages between (and within) neighborhood groups to fully manage and respond to their own issues and needs.

That being said, the citizen-led approach taken by VSyC, seeking to offer support and technical help for community-driven housing initiatives is a valuable model for similar organizations. This can be seen in the effort to recuperate local knowledge by taking an instrumental role as professionals, and leaving a preponderant role to 'self-constructors' and inhabitants of informal settlements (Marzioni, 2013). Through this fellowship, I learned several lessons in the challenges of putting theory to practice to develop truly participative and citizen led solutions to housing issues : the need to support and strengthen the less heard voices within communities to express their needs, the wide range of resources and support needed outside of purely physical/technical support, and the importance of incorporating a rights discourse to encourage residents to demand change and public policies responding to their needs. By encouraging dialogue on human rights and politics involved in marginalization and underserved settlements, VSyC seeks to foster community leaders that will engage politically to further advocate for the need of their community to access fundamental rights, such as housing and clean water. In politicizing some of the discussion, not only identifying the community within an oppressive system, but also as actors able to transform their own situation VSyC hopes to encourage the community to identify itself as agents of change in the process. Enabling communities to recognize their rights and engage not as subjects and spectators, encourages these marginalized peoples to take on a more critical look at their reality and



improves their capacity to mobilize (Marzioni, 2013). This seemingly small detail in the approach taken by VSyC helps maintain the sustainability of citizen-led development in social justice movements by helping emerging leaders within the community to grow in organization and politicization to undertake their own development. With this in mind, an increased focus on cooperation and organizational support between progressive organizations in Santa Fe, to include expertise and support outside of the realm of architecture and planning, is needed. This could more effectively communicate ideas between all those involved and foster a more comprehensive approach to the issues identified by the participating community members of informal settlements.

Community Implications and further work

As described, the project in which I participated sought to address immediate housing needs and inadequate living situations while strengthening the capacities of communities to manage their own agendas and ultimately organize in order to demand full integration into the city. The residents and neighborhood associations that are involved developed and continue to improve their technical skills in self-construction techniques, as well as their ability to organize and advocate for their own needs. Projects such as the forming of work cooperatives and capacity building workshops directly address both the economic and social sustainability in marginalized 'slum' communities such as that of Las Lomas in Santa Fe by building skills and encouraging opportunities for employment and self-sufficiency.

Research on new developments in participatory design and collaboration between design professionals and communities to empower informal settlements has potential to address existing housing shortages in a progressive and sustainable way. This work helps better communicate and design for the needs of residents of informal settlements, while fostering individual and collective capacities within these communities, thereby reducing the viability of imposing top-down 'solutions' which often displace hundreds of families (Huchzermeyer, 2012). Further, in supporting organizations that improve the capacity of communities to self manage housing needs, governments can better focus resources on service provision and formally integrating settlements into cities. Involving communities as one of the actors in urban development helps provide a more equal access to the opportunities and benefits that attracted many to the city in the first place. Design professionals play an instrumental role in these projects by offering technical support, however, projects such as those carried out by VSyC would benefit greatly from additional support from social workers and organizations with experience in forming cooperatives and fostering neighborhood associations. This would potentially take better advantage of social networks and knowledge bases within communities, while ensuring projects run more smoothly and are better organized to truly represent the communities they seek to improve. Support for progressive government branches, such as the above-mentioned national land commission seeking to improve land security among marginalized populations, is important to maintain the viability of local initiatives while strengthening the credibility of national government. Slum clearing and the displacement and eviction of hundreds of thousands of urban poor is an often occurrence, and prevalent approach in many large cities in India and other nations (Bhan, 2009). Identifying and supporting governments engaging in more humanitarian and socially just treatment of the urban poor could help raise awareness of these progressive approaches and encourage their applications on a wider and more institutionalized scale.

Creating spaces for cooperation, innovation, and informal learning in the city is, for me, an

important step in engaging with the many actors developing 21st century cities to get better at applying research and theory to practice. With an interest in pursuing a career in urban design and community development, this experience, particularly the creative exchange between architects, planners, and the public, has been an inspiring example of higher education and technical skills being put to use in a socially responsible way. Taking part in a cutting-edge approach to developing more desirable and sustainable forms of social housing, while exploring more meaningful forms of public participation, has been an invaluable encouragement to continue in this field and explore applications in the Canadian context. Although we reside in an extremely different political and economic climate, cooperatives, meaningful citizen participation, and stronger community organization may be an important set of strategies to create more equitable and socially sustainable cities in Canada. Future fellows participating in projects that take on a different understandings of rights – such as the right to land and housing, rather than land as commodity – can gain from discussing with their host organizations about how these approaches could also benefit countries outside of Latin America.

Such issues, and the projects and organizations addressing them, are a complex mixture of human rights, architecture, and community development work and involve many actors committed over the long-term. The McBurney program has a unique opportunity of forging links with interesting and progressive organizations internationally, and could benefit (mutually) from providing avenues for sustaining relationships and further support for these organizations. As part of the McGill community, the McBurney program could potentially improve its presence by encouraging and opening up ways to stay involved beyond the months abroad. Connecting students and faculty between departments to develop independent research projects (for credit) could incentivize a continued involvement and support for these organizations and open up new opportunities for students in Latin America. These opportunities for real world applications of academics and critical approaches fostered at McGill are a valuable supplement to coursework, and will hopefully become an integral part to post-secondary education.

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