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Social Mobilisations and Planning through Crises

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Social Mobilisations and Planning through Crises

Each year, *plaNext* aims to publish two volumes; one of which presents a collection of original works following an open call, and the other presents a selection of articles from the AESOP Young Academics (YA) conference of the previous year. Representing the former, the call for papers was published in early 2023. We selected eight manuscripts based on the submitted abstracts and the six listed below ended up in this volume, being finalized between summer 2024 and spring 2025.

Content

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Notes on Contributors

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Editorial: Social mobilisations and planning through crises

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Cities are increasingly becoming sites of contestation. Intersecting crises—economic, social, political, and environmental—are shaping urban life and governance.

The 2007/08 financial crisis triggered waves of austerity that profoundly restructured urban planning, exposing cities and their populations to further vulnerabilities. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated inequalities, highlighting the fragility of urban systems, particularly in securing housing, public space, and socio-economic rights. More recently, global geopolitical crises—wars and conflicts around the world—along with the supply-chain crisis, energy price volatility, and inflationary pressures, have further intensified pre-existing inequalities and territorial conflicts. Finally, extractivism and subsequent limitations of resources, violent conflicts, and climate change made migration the only viable solution for many, resulting in a migratory crisis in many cities. The concatenation and overlap of multiple types of crises characterising our era have been defined as a polycrisis (Lawrence et al., 2024).

In this shifting landscape, grassroots responses and organised urban social movements may play a pivotal role in resisting these multi-level crises. They mobilise against financialisation, gentrification, touristification, evictions, the privatisation of public spaces, austerity-driven urban policies, and the lack of access to basic resources as for decent and affordable housing. These movements also fight for the creation of democratic spaces that foster place-based solutions and prioritise socio-economic and environmental sustainability and justice over economic growth. At the same time, crisis-driven transformations have facilitated the co-optation of resistance efforts into neoliberal planning frameworks, where urban development is increasingly shaped by corporate interests, private capital, and speculative real estate markets. We believe that urban planners and scholars have a primary role in understanding and addressing both theoretical and practical aspects of such rapid changes, analysing the multiple nuances of the polycrisis, and exploring alternatives.

Young academics, in particular, are on the frontlines, sometimes even directly involved with grassroots organisations as practitioners, activists, or engaged researchers. They push the academic agenda by examining the potential of social mobilisations to envision and experiment with solutions to this polycrisis, while navigating the tensions between these mobilisations and financial and governance constraints. For this reason, young academics have been involved in the Early-Career Workshop on Urban Studies held in the Institute of Social Science (ICS) of the University of Lisbon in November 2022, from which this special issue originates. Organised by the Urban Transitions Hub (UTH) with the support of the AESOP Young Academics Network (AESOP YAN), the Early-Career Workshop on Urban Studies brought together scholars working on diverse geographical contexts, facilitating discussions on neoliberal urban policies, grassroots resistance, and alternative planning practices. It encouraged comparative reflections and fostered new research collaborations.

Most of the contributions to this special issue emerged from the presentations and exchanges that took place during the workshop. More specifically, this special issue brings together diverse case studies and theoretical contributions that explore the relationship between social mobilisations and urban planning in times of crisis. The contributions examine how urban movements contest neoliberal urban governance, advocate for the right to the city, and develop alternative urban futures based on solidarity, commoning, and self-management. It includes articles analysing cities from different parts of the world, including Athens, Berlin,

Buenos Aires, Caracas, and Turin, offering a comparative perspective on how urban struggles and planning policies unfold across varied socio-economic and political contexts.

We identify several crosscutting themes in the articles in this special issue. Several articles focus on planning, crises, and the reinforcement of neoliberal urbanism and policies, while others examine grassroots-led urban initiatives, ranging from the most informal and precarious ones to the most institutionalised. The special issue explores these themes through the lens of diverse case studies with a special emphasis on the politics of urban resistance in housing and public space. Below, we unpack some of these themes and present this volume's contributions.

Planning, crises, and the reinforcement of neoliberal urbanism

Neoliberal urbanism has long been justified as the default response to urban crises, with governments implementing market-oriented policies to attract capital while reducing state intervention in housing, infrastructure, and social services. As highlighted by Luisa Rossini in her think piece "*Resisting and reinforcing neoliberalism*" in this issue, these policies have not only exacerbated socio-spatial inequalities but also reshaped the political terrain of resistance, as urban movements navigate the contradictions of contesting while being absorbed into neoliberal governance frameworks. The piece discusses how neoliberal urbanism suppresses conflict through consensus-driven approaches, limiting democratic engagement and doing so has failed to address conflicting forms of insurgent citizenship.

Agonistic urbanism, based on Chantal Mouffe's (2013) work, is presented as an alternative, emphasising the productive role of conflict in shaping urban futures. Rather than neutralising opposition, this approach seeks to legitimise and incorporate diverse perspectives into urban governance. The text contrasts agonistic urbanism with neoliberalism's emphasis on consensus and depoliticisation, arguing that embracing conflict as a productive force is crucial for democratic engagement. It also references other scholars, such as Giulia Li Destri Nicosia and Laura Saija (2023), who explore political ontology in planning theory, discussing how institutions can be dynamic and inclusive rather than exclusionary.

The Greek case, analysed by Despina Dimelli in "*Public spaces and neoliberal policies: The Greek case*", illustrates how public space has been restructured through neoliberal logics, particularly following the 2008 global and Greek financial crisis and the austerity measures imposed by international institutions, which severely limited public investment in public spaces, leading to ad-hoc privatisation and the growing role of international investors in urban planning. In Athens, urban regeneration projects tied to large-scale events such as the 2004 Olympic Games have reinforced market-driven urban planning, privileging private sector involvement in public space management, and prioritising tourism and private sector investment. These projects, as Dimelli argues, often fail to address deeper socio-economic inequalities and undermine public control over urban commons.

Similarly, Karl Krähmer in "*The right to the ecological city…*" explores the contradictions of ecological urban transformation in Turin, where sustainability initiatives often lead to ecological gentrification. While environmental justice is increasingly recognised as an essential urban planning goal, Krähmer highlights that bottom-up, community-led urban transformations remain crucial to aligning ecological sustainability with social justice through the case of the *Fondazione di Comunità Porta Palazzo* in Turin. His research contributes to the broader debate on degrowth urbanism and the right to the ecological city, advocating for models of

planning that challenge growth-oriented development and merge environmental sustainability with social justice.

Luisa Rossini in "*Reclaiming public spaces: Radical alternatives to the exclusionary project of rightsizing policies*" further contextualises these struggles by examining the broader dynamics of *grassroots resistance* against the privatisation of public spaces and the neoliberal logic of "smart shrinking" in Berlin. The case study of the illegal occupation and subsequent legalisation of the *Bethanien* hospital in Berlin is presented as emblematic because it showcases how grassroots urban resistance can challenge exclusionary urban policies and offer viable alternatives to privatisation. It exemplifies how bottom-up self-management strategies, rooted in principles of degrowth and horizontal subsidiarity, can counteract neoliberal urban policies that prioritise market-driven development and privatisation by successfully proposing an alternative governance model based on self-management and collective ownership.

Informality, precarity, and grassroots urbanism

A key theme across multiple contributions in this issue is the role of informality and grassroots mobilisation in resisting urban exclusion and displacement. Marcin Wojciech Sliwa in "*Imitation of planning…*" examines informal housing in Buenos Aires, where tenure insecurity and economic instability have pushed residents to engage in bottom-up urban planning strategies. The study examines "informal settlements", showing how residents and community leaders strategically imitate formal planning, operating within a hybrid space of legal ambiguity to gain perceived security from eviction and secure housing rights. In doing so, this bottom-up urban planning challenges the notion that planning is exclusively a top-down institutional process. The study critiques traditional planning approaches, which often exacerbate rather than resolve insecurity in informal settlements. Moreover, it analyses how, in centrally located areas like *Villa 31*, gentrification becomes a new threat once tenure is formalised. While governments frame upgrades as urban integration, residents fear displacement due to rising real estate values.

In a different context, Stefan Gzyl in "*Caracas, Departure City: Urban planning after emigration and collapse*" explores the case of Caracas, Venezuela, where mass emigration due to political and economic collapse has led to the reconfiguration of vacant domestic spaces. Unlike most studies that focus on migration's external impacts, this research examines how the departure of millions of people reshapes the urban landscape. The study frames Caracas as a *departure cit*y, where vacant properties left behind by emigrants become sites of economic and social reconfiguration. As state institutions fail to regulate urban development, local actors—architects, entrepreneurs, and residents—are reshaping the built environment through informal and opaque processes. Gzyl describes the tensions between bottom-up urban adaptation and the absence of formal governance, showing how crisis-driven transformations open both opportunities and risks for grassroots agency in urban planning.

These cases underscore the contradictions of informality—while it provides resilience strategies for marginalised communities, it also exposes them to new vulnerabilities, particularly when informal urban practices clash with state policies or elite interests.

Politics of urban resistance: Bottom-up planning practices and the right to the city

Several contributions in this issue argue that resistance against neoliberal processes of public space privatisation and the privileging of private interest-led projects for gentrification and

touristification is being carried out by grassroots movements. Rossini's, Dimelli's, and Krähmer's articles all explore how such conditions have materialised in different urban contexts, demonstrating that resistance and adaptation to crises continue to shape urban life and planning practices worldwide.

Beyond housing, struggles over *public space* and *commoning* have also intensified. The *reconfiguration of public spaces* in cities such as Athens, Berlin, and Buenos Aires demonstrates the *contested nature of urban governance*, as local communities push back against privatisation while experimenting with *alternative forms of collective management.*

Both *Rossini's article on Berlin and Krähmer's article on Turin* analyse the concept of *urban degrowth*, questioning dominant paradigms that link urban development to economic expansion and arguing for alternative frameworks based on *sufficiency, localism, and participatory urban governance.*

The common theme of bottom-up planning practices challenges exclusionary urban policies by reclaiming spaces through self-management, informal governance, and legal ambiguity is shared by the Berlin (*Bethanien* case), Buenos Aires (informal settlements), and Caracas (emigration-driven urban transformations) articles. These cases reveal how grassroots urbanism resists privatisation, negotiates legitimacy, and creates alternative governance models, while also facing risks of co-optation, gentrification, and neoliberal absorption.

The five case studies explore the right to the city, highlighting grassroots resistance to neoliberal urbanism. In Berlin, activists reclaimed *Bethanien* shows how horizontal subsidiarity can create self-managed spaces. Buenos Aires' settlements demonstrate grassroots planning as a means to access urban rights, while Caracas' emigration-driven transformations highlight informal adaptation in the absence of state intervention. The case of Athens highlights how neoliberal urban policies have transformed public spaces into market-driven assets, limiting their accessibility to citizens, and Turin introduced the right to the ecological city, linking sustainability with social justice. Across these cases, public space remains contested, and bottom-up governance offers alternatives to exclusionary planning. Together, they reveal urban space as a site of struggle, where communities actively shape their environments against privatisation.

Towards alternative urban futures?

This special issue highlights the multiple and interconnected ways in which urban social movements engage with crises, resisting processes of *dispossession, gentrification, austerity, and urban exclusion*. The cases presented here demonstrate that *crises are not only moments of rupture but also of transformation*, providing opportunities for *new urban imaginaries and political identities to emerge.*

It stems from the phenomenon that moments of systemic crisis and power vacuum can create space for negotiation and recalibration, reopening the debate between competing visions since particularly during periods of systemic capitalist crisis, "a period of institutional searching and regulatory experimentation ensues in which diverse actors, organizations, and alliances promote competing hegemonic visions, restructuring strategies, and developmental models" (Brenner & Theodore, 2002, p. 356).

At the same time, urban mobilisations face ongoing challenges, as co-optation, institutional constraints, and financial pressures continue to shape the possibilities for resistance. The

contributions in this issue call for a critical reassessment of urban planning paradigms and advocate for solidarity-driven, bottom-up approaches that centre social justice, commoning, and the democratisation of urban governance.

As global crises deepen, the role of *urban social movements in shaping alternative urban futures* becomes increasingly urgent. While resistance takes different forms across contexts, this special issue underscores a shared commitment to *reclaiming the city as a space of collective life rather than a mere site of capital accumulation*. By doing so, this issue seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on urban crises, social mobilisation, the right to the city, and planning by shedding light on the tensions, contradictions, and possibilities within contemporary urban struggles. We aim to provide new theoretical perspectives through empirical research and case studies, inviting the academic community to expand the body of knowledge further and exploring avenues for enabling broader mobilisations in times where it might matter the most—including through embedded and reflexive research and scholarly activism.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Resisting and reinforcing neoliberalism

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In the context of the ongoing global intertwined financial, environmental, socio-political crises, the intricate relationship between neoliberal urban planning and the challenges these crises present has become increasingly visible. Despite these challenges, neoliberal restructuring justifications remain central to urban agendas and planning culture, often exacerbating social inequality. Its principles and related political decisions frequently intensify social conflicts, sparking protests as their adverse effects on marginalized communities and areas become evident, especially after decades of market-driven policies and the global financial crisis. In many cities around the globe, these popular rebellions, as local and residential activism, started increasingly to target varying regulatory regimes and strategies pursued by supranational, national, or local authorities, often organized as urban social movements.

This think piece examines how neoliberal urbanism simultaneously incites resistance and absorbs it, reflecting a paradox where insurgent practices challenge the system but are also co-opted into its framework. By exploring key dynamics in urban governance, participation, and social movements, it seeks to understand how neoliberalism's resilience lies in its ability to incorporate dissent into its operating logic while marginalizing radical alternatives, so to perpetuate its dominance despite widespread opposition. Briefly mentioning some examples of organized groups and forms of resistance around the globe, theoretical debates, and historical perspectives, the discussion unfolds by: analyzing how neoliberal practices shape urban governance and planning; investigating how movements resist neoliberalism and how their ideas are co-opted; addressing the enduring struggle over "to whom the city belongs" and proposing ways to foster meaningful democratic engagement.

Keywords: neoliberal urbanism, urban social movements, co-optation, post-political city, agonistic urbanism, democracy

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The legacy of neoliberal urbanism

After decades of neoliberal urbanisation, the mechanisms of neoliberal urban planning are well-documented, emphasizing market-driven growth, public-private partnerships, and competitive city branding as preferred strategies to stimulate economic development and urban growth in increasingly indebted cities (Harvey, 1989; Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2009). Yet, policies designed to attract global capital often sideline the needs of marginalized populations, exacerbating urban inequalities (Marcuse, 2010; Sisson et al., 2019). While these strategies are framed as solutions to urban crises, they have deepened social fractures, as seen in contested urban renewal projects, including large-scale gentrification and privatization initiatives, based on speculative real estate markets interests, that have ultimately commodified urban space and displaced long-standing communities (Lees, Shin, and López-Morales, 2016; Aalbers, 2020). Critics such as Harvey (2012) and Brenner and Theodore (2002) highlight that neoliberalism reshapes cities into spaces of capital accumulation, leaving residents to grapple with its social and spatial consequences, eventually generating a mistrust of city's inhabitants towards policymakers and institutional actors' intentions (Purcell, 2002). Incorporating democratic rhetoric and practices it legitimizes itself and its "democratic deficit" (Purcell, 2009) creating the illusion of inclusion while maintaining top-down control.

Contemporary scholars argue that the resilience of neoliberalism lies in its adaptability, for instance dealing with communities that are willing to take risks to claim social, civil, and political rights creating conflicting relationships between space and social groups in constant evolution (Rossi and Vanolo, 2012). Policies that integrate elements of participation and community input often serve to legitimize existing power structures rather than foster genuine democratic engagement (Peck, Theodore, and Brenner, 2013). The promotion of "smart cities" exemplifies this trend, where technological innovations are celebrated as neutral tools for urban management while sidelining discussions about equity and inclusion (Cardullo, Di Feliciantonio, & Kitchin, 2019).

Housing is particularly relevant to these discussions, as it embodies both the material and symbolic dimensions of neoliberal urbanism, serving as a site where market-driven logics intersect with deeply entrenched social hierarchies, shaping access to resources and reproducing inequality, amplifying social polarization and reinforced hierarchies of power. Scholars such as Madden and Marcuse (2016) have critically examined how housing has been transformed into a commodity under neoliberalism, linking the global housing crisis to broader urban inequalities driven by market-driven planning and policies. This critical analysis became a crucial resource for understanding the intersection of neoliberal urbanism and housing struggles. The analysis of these dynamics contributes to detecting a growing democratic deficit, as urban governance becomes more aligned with the interests of global elites than with the everyday realities of disenfranchised populations (Purcell, 2009).

The role of urban social movements

Urban social movements (USMs) have been at the forefront of resisting neoliberal urban policies. From the housing rights movements in Barcelona (Colau & Alemany, 2014; Martínez, 2018, 2019) to anti-gentrification movements in Berlin (Holm, 2020; Tajeri, 2019; Ginwala, Kirn, Tajeri, 2020); to anti-eviction campaigns in New York and Los Angeles (Fields and Hodkinson, 2018). Moreover, several urban social movements opposing the privatization of parts of the city became increasingly relevant aftereffects of wide privatizations became more visible. These groups have been organizing against civic policies, projects, and regulatory measures, considered detrimental to the city's public space or heritage, seen as a "common

goods" to be defended. It encompasses groups of citizens defending or reclaiming public spaces, services or green areas proposing co-/self-management against privatization or distruction (e.g., Hammani et al., 2022; Pask, 2010; for the case of Teatro Valle in Rome see Giardini et al., 2012; for the case of Gezi Park in Instambul see Tugal, 2013; for the case of Bethanien in Berlin see Rossini, 2024 contribution in this volume). This included forms of community resistances and struggles for citizen participation to the political nature of urban redevelopment processes (e.g., the case of the "Media Spree" and "Tempelhof" protests in Berlin see Ahlfeldt, 2011 and Hilbrandt, 2017; for the "Can Battló" case in Barcelona or the "Snia Lake" in Rome see Rossini & Bianchi, 2019).

Such activism builds on earlier frameworks of urban insurgency (Castells, 1983) and expands them by incorporating new organizational tools (De Nardis & Antonazzo, 2017), using various state-driven mechanisms to advance their causes and transnational networks (Nicholls, Miller & Beaumont, 2013; Mayer, 2000, 2020). Moreover, the concept of "insurgent urban citizenship" (Holston, 2007) has evolved in the context of global urban conflicts, where marginalized groups claim their right to the city by opposing displacement, privatization, and exclusion. Examples from South America and Asia demonstrate how these struggles intersect with broader debates on environmental justice and climate resilience (Anguelovski, 2013). Movements like Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion (Berglund & Schmidt 2020) illustrate how urban conflicts increasingly address the intersectionality of social, economic, and ecological concerns.

Recent studies highlight the interplay between grassroots resistance and urban development strategies' co-optation. For example, in Berlin, Holm and Kuhn (2011) document how forms of participation and caution urban renewal, developed by the squatter movement in Berlin, have been incorporated into the software of urban development models. These alternative urban renewal policies were later incorporated into mainstream governance frameworks, including examples like the cooptation of radical or spontaneous grassroots strategies of alternative use of vacant spaces transformed into "temporary uses" practices in urbanism and coopted in city branding strategies (Colomb, 2012). While these proposals initially resisted market-driven development, their adoption often diluted their radical potential, transforming them into tools for legitimizing existing power dynamics. In this framework, the creative mobilization of ideas from citizens and new market actors can be seen by urban planners as catalysts of "urban renaissance" (Porter & Shaw, 2009) and mobilized for alternative strategies of urban regeneration. Yet, these movements are often hijacked both in "benign programs emerged that would seek to incorporate precarious or impoverished groups as wel as areas into upgrading schemes, and "creative city" policies made use of precarious artists and Isubleultural. occasionally even insurgent, activism for local marketing and upgrading strategies. Hijacking a sclection or how social movement claims, upwardly mobile cities would com- pete for top places in the global competition by branding themselves as diverse sustainable, and green." (Mayer, 2016, 220). Under the rhetoric of the "Big Society", these voluntary, non-profit, and business actors are hijacked through the state withdrawal as potential alternatives for local administrations to provide certain public service, effectively compelling these organizations to fill the resulting gaps. This shift led to concerns that the Big Society agenda[1] was, in practice, a means to reduce state responsibility under the guise of

[1] The Big Society was a sociopolitical concept for a redefinition of the relationship between citizens and the state. Prominent during the first 15 years of the 21st century, it was developed by the populist strategist Steve Hilton. It aimed to merge free market economics with a conservative paternalist vision of the social contract, drawing inspiration from the civic conservatism of David Willetts in the 1990s. The concept significantly shaped the 2010 UK Conservative Party general election manifesto and informed the legislative agenda of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government. Its stated objectives included: empowering communities through localism

promoting civic participation. Critics argued that this approach risked undermining both state structures and civil society by overburdening voluntary organizations without providing adequate support or resources (LSE Politics and Policy, 2011; Local Government Association, 2010).

Grassroots demands for equity and justice versus Governmentalisation

Urban development in the neoliberal era has been shaped by a profound tension between market-driven imperatives and grassroots demands for equity and justice. Contemporary conflicts over space often emerge as reactions to policies that prioritize growth and competitiveness over social inclusion; the proliferation of “urban mega-projects” and the rise of financialized urban governance (Moulaert, Rodríguez & Swyngedouw2003; Aalbers, 2020) have intensified these tensions, as cities increasingly cater to global capital at the expense of local communities. In this tension-filled landscape, conflicting interests, opinions, and values surrounding the production of urban space (Lefebvre, 1974), participatory governance mechanisms often exclude radical or minority perspectives, reinforcing the dominance of elite interests (Mouffe, 2000; Purcell, 2008) exacerbating urban conflicts. The question, “To whom does the city belong?”, lies at the core of these conflicts.

Public spaces, traditionally regarded as arenas for democratic engagement, are increasingly subjected to privatization and securitization, restricting access for marginalized groups (Sorkin, 1992; Davies, 1998; Chaplin and Holding, 1998; Bryman, 2004; Shaw & Hudson, 2009; among others). Simultaneously, significant portions of the population face displacement from areas they have long called home, further exacerbating social and spatial inequalities. The resulting conflicts have intensified calls for a democratic reckoning over urban governance challenging its democratic legitimacy and ethical dimensions, failing to deliver outcomes that are equitable, just or environmentally sustainable. However, these demands often encounter resistance through coercive repression, containment of urban insurgent practices, or their co-optation. On the other hand, the increasingly pervasive “governmentalization” of urban life has situated citizens within a specific governmental rationality, emphasizing a framework of rights, responsibilities, and duties. Michel Foucault's identification of “population” as the focal point of modern governmental rationality underscores this shift, highlighting the rise of self-governing societies characterized by heightened awareness of entitlements and obligations (Imrie & Raco, 2000). This alignment of rights with responsibilities has far-reaching consequences, which may complement or contradict one another. As Rossi and Vanolo (2012) observe, these dynamics underscore the increasingly moralized nature of urban governance in advanced liberal societies. Citizen participation in the public sphere, coupled with the ideal of the “active citizen”, is promoted through an array of policies and regulations aimed at shaping the moral conduct of urban communities. These efforts focus on both collective and individual behavior, yet they often marginalize traditional goals of socio-economic emancipation and justice, despite ongoing struggles that continue to reference these principles.

This triggers citizens’ engagement but at the same time disactivate its potential disruption, since the concept of the “political”, which refers to the antagonistic relations that are always

and devolution; promoting active participation in community life (volunteerism); shifting authority from central government to local authorities; supporting cooperatives, mutuals, charities, and social enterprises; Increasing government transparency by publishing data. This approach is based on the premise that the “big state” has not been effective and is economically unsustainable and sought to redefine governance by decentralizing power and encouraging civic engagement. The intention behind it is to move from a culture where people look to officials and government to solve their problems, to a culture where people solve the problems they face themselves aided by government.

present in human society (Mouffe & Laclau, 1985), has been continuously neutralized, mainly through the adoption of “communicative action” and “consensus building” (Swyngedouw, 2009) while excluding minoritarian positions, radical differences, and conflictive dimensions. Yet it cyclically generates forms of 'passive revolution'—a concept Gramsci used to describe 'hegemony through neutralisation.' This refers to situations in which demands that challenge the established hegemonic order are absorbed by the system in ways that satisfy their demands while neutralizing their subversive potential. According to his theory, neoliberalism maintains its hegemonic position precisely through this strategy: its capacity to co-opt and hijack potentially subversive alternative visions and counter-hegemonic discourses.

Conclusion: Towards agonistic urbanism

After few decades under neoliberal restructuring and the implementation of its strategies, we can observe how these neoliberal developments have led to an inability to address conflicting forms of insurgent citizenship (Rossini & Bianchi, 2019), underscoring the challenges of realizing the “agonistic” potential necessary to confront and legitimize everyday practices that could amplify urban plurality through real democratic engagement (Mouffe, 2000). The concept of “agonistic urbanism” (Mouffe, 2013) offers a potential pathway for addressing these conflicts. By embracing conflict as a productive force, agonistic urbanism challenges the neoliberal emphasis on consensus and depoliticization. This approach calls for recognizing and legitimizing diverse voices, particularly those of marginalized communities, as essential to shaping urban futures. Many academics have debated on this issue. For instance, in the article by Giulia Li Destri Nicosia and Laura Saija (2023) the application of political ontology in planning theory is examined. They focus on the contrasting Agamben’s perspective, that highlights the inherent violence within institutional norms, leading to a sense of despair regarding transformative possibilities, with the one of Esposito. This perspective suggests that by disentangling exclusionary aspects of norms from an affirmative biopolitics—what Esposito terms “instituting thought”[2]—it is possible to envision institutions as dynamic and inclusive entities. In fact, by advocating for "instituting thought," Esposito (2021) conceptualizes social being as neither singular nor multiple but as intersected by the dual semantics of political conflict. This framework underscores the importance of ongoing processes that challenge and reshape existing political and social orders, fostering a space where new forms of communal life and governance can emerge.

In sum, the persistence of neoliberal urbanism amidst widespread critique underscores the need for alternative frameworks of urban governance to counteract the dynamics that reinforce its democratic deficit. Providing real opportunities and creating tools to negotiate and include real alternative visions, strategies, and practices means making thinkable—and sometimes possible—the confrontation between hegemonic and subaltern or excluded perspectives (e.g., degrowth strategies; see Rossini, 2024 in this volume). Such efforts aim to move toward more inclusive and equitable futures for cities. This requires a shift from tokenistic participation to meaningful engagement, where grassroots movements play an active role in shaping urban policies. Urban citizenship, in this sense, represents a significant resource due to its capacity

[2] Roberto Esposito, a prominent Italian philosopher, introduces the concept of “instituting thought” in his work *Instituting Thought: Three Paradigms of Political Ontology*. This concept serves as a third paradigm in political ontology, aiming to address the limitations found in the approaches of Martin Heidegger and Gilles Deleuze. While Heidegger's perspective is characterized by a “destituting” paradigm that emphasizes the negation or deactivation of politics, and Deleuze's approach offers an “instituted” paradigm focusing on established structures, Esposito's “instituting thought” seeks a dynamic and affirmative pathway. It emphasizes the continuous creation and re-creation of political and social structures through active engagement and praxis. This paradigm draws inspiration from the work of French political philosopher Claude Lefort, highlighting the role of instituting praxis in reconstructing a productive relationship between ontology and politics.

to develop site-specific solutions (for instance, presenting alternatives of "Subsidiarity" with the state[3] while avoiding the privatization of public spaces). Such initiatives should be actively supported and integrated into city governance without exploiting voluntary work or using it as a justification for the withdrawal of the state.

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[3] The concept of "Subsidiarity" with the State is developed in the Rossini's (2024) article included in this volume.

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Open Access Journal

Public spaces and neoliberal policies: The Greek case

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The process of neoliberalizing public spaces involves implementing policies aimed at increasing capital flow to offset reductions in local budgets. In Greece, although public spaces are decisive elements of the urban tissue, the tools, strategies, and mechanisms for their development are mainly based on public funding and the role of the private sector is still weak. The current paper analyzes the policies for public spaces since 1950 until today and the role of public and private sectors in their development. It focuses on specific periods as the Olympic Games, the economic crisis and today, to investigate the policies followed for public spaces development. The research area is the capital of Greece, and the examined case studies include both small- and large-scale areas to cover different types of public spaces. Research focuses on the changes in the legislative framework to promote the role of private sector and evaluates its role and collaboration with the public sector. The analysis of the case studies shows that constrained expertise, centralized decision-making procedures, and inadequate coordination of synergies among management entities, have resulted in notable deficiencies in the partnerships between the public and private sectors in supporting projects for the regeneration of public areas.

Keywords: neoliberalism, urban regeneration, economic crisis, 2004 Olympic Games, Athens

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Introduction

The term “neoliberalism,” refers to a political resurgence that emphasizes the importance of the private sector in the economy and society. It is associated with economic liberalization, including privatization, deregulation, globalization, free trade, monetarism, austerity, and reductions in government funding. Neoliberalism is an ideology committed to the implementation of rolling out of market mechanisms and competitiveness and the rolling back of governmental intervention (Peck & Tickell, 2002).

Neoliberalism emerged in the late 1970s as a new means of restructuring international capitalism and restoring conditions for capital accumulation (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberalism is based on the economies of Western societies, primarily industrial and manufacturing activities, where the private sector has a central role, and the public sector is limited. The political conditions of liberal democracy have influenced the principles of neoliberal governance, including citizens’ rights to a better life, the development of competitive services and a limited role for targeted government interventions (Theodore & Peck, 2011).

Capital accumulation and urbanization are linked by real estate assets and the land revenue they generate. As cities are constantly evolving systems that adjust to the social, cultural, and environmental norms of each civilization, they are key components in fostering global competitiveness as well as hubs for social, political, and economic transformation. Neoliberal policies restrict urban planning in the context of urban development, which has serious spatial ramifications (Sager, 2011). For this reason, the myth that neoliberalism is the greatest way to address issues with global development is called into question (Carmody & Owusu, 2016).

In this framework, urban planning policies not only create the environment in which practices, manifestations, and sites of resistance occur, but also reflect the effects of neoliberalism (Allmendinger & Graham, 2012). More specifically the Southern European cities depend greatly upon their own socio-cultural networks and dynamics, as they have been developed as trading hubs, with rich hinterlands and large and varied population (Seixas & Albet i Mas, 2010). The 2008 economic crisis that impacted Southern European countries was attributed to a combination of weak economic performance and institutional or political mismatches (Tulumello, Cotella & Othengrafen, 2020).

But how are public spaces in cities affected by neoliberal policies? The process of neoliberalizing public spaces involves implementing policies aimed at increasing capital flow to offset reductions in local budgets. Central to these policies is the pursuit of strategies to draw in more tourists and businesses, marking a significant shift towards market-oriented urban development. This trend has led to the normalization of market-driven logic in public space management. Considering increasing pressure to adhere to entrepreneurial norms, cities are compelled to enhance competitiveness and explore fresh avenues for investment. One prevalent tactic is the adoption of public-private partnerships to deliver services to residents, reflecting the evolving landscape of urban governance (Dassé, 2019). The current and ongoing economic crisis is the first phenomenon of its kind and scale in the post-Second World War period in Greece (Serraos et al., 2016).

This paper examines the role of neoliberal policies in the development of Greek public spaces during the country’s recent history. Its aim is to analyze the framework of spatial planning and its role in involving both public and private sectors in the development of public spaces in specific periods, utilizing case studies. It focuses on Athens, the capital of Greece, where most

regeneration projects are occurring. The study scrutinizes both small- and large-scale urban regeneration projects to discern similarities and differences in procedural approaches and the extent of private sector involvement in regeneration procedures. The research is based on examining the framework for regenerating public spaces during critical periods of the country's recent history, including the period of the Olympic Games, when large-scale regeneration projects supported by new legislative frameworks where developed for the city; the period of the Greek economic crisis, characterized by limited funding capabilities of the Greek public sector; and the period up to the present, during which the private sector is increasingly encouraged to play a more active role in public spaces regeneration.

Public space – Definition and characteristics

For the definition of urban public space, it is important to analyze its elements. Krier (1991) underlines that those public spaces are like the corridors and central rooms of each house. Jacobs (1961) argues that public space is registered in society's public sphere, as a place of meeting, interaction, confrontation, and dialogue. According to Habermas (2004), the public space covers the human need to coexist with others and to develop relationships through interaction.

Siebel and Wehrheim (2003) attempt to identify public space through its differences in relation to the private sphere. They argue that the public spaces are governed by public law, whereas the private sphere is governed by provisions protecting private property. Furthermore, in public spaces, functions related to public life, as entertainment, political activities, culture, and commerce are developed, while in private space, processes as production and reproduction are taking place. Finally, they argue that public space is a space for displaying arrogant behavior, unlike private space which is a space of intimacy.

Arendt (2018) asserts that public space is linked to public freedom and constitutes above all a political space, to the extent that common actions take place. Public space is a dynamic space developed in many different forms (streets, parks, squares) and in which many different activities meet human needs and protect the fundamental rights and the transmission of cultural meaning (Carr et al., 1992). According to the "Charter for Public Spaces," public spaces are divided into two types: those with distinct functional characteristics and those in which many different activities develop (Biennale Spazio Publico, 2013).

A public space is defined as any space in the city, to which all citizens have free access, and which is in common use (shared use). More specifically, parks, groves, beaches, forests, green spaces, squares, sidewalks, roads, and archaeological sites are defined as such spaces. Public space can be characterized as the area surrounding properties in a city, the space between buildings (Gehl, 1987). Public space is the space where everyone has the right to access, without income or social restrictions. It is the streets, the squares (Figure 1), the parks, the beaches but also the access to quality knowledge, entertainment, culture.

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Figure 1. *Piazza della Signoria, Florence. Photo by Samuli Lintula / CC-BY-2.5*

Public space is the product of competing ideas, a space of power and strength and therefore claimable, a political space, a space of increased recognition, of meeting strangers, a place of sociability but also a space of community and daily life development. The urban space and its form are the mirror of the social constitution of the city and the relations between its inhabitants. Public spaces are a window into the soul of the city (Zukin, 1995). Accordingly, private space is related to private individuals. The relationship between public and private space in a society often reveals its degree of prosperity or decline. Historically, it has been proven that in flourishing societies there is a developed collectivity and the dominance of the public over the private is reflected, while in societies in crisis the development of private interests overshadows the public interests, and the public space is a subject of pressure. During the 1980s, consumption activities began to replace traditional production functions, resulting in the emergence of new urban areas focused on cultural and consumer activities. Despite attempts of regeneration projects to redefine the identity of central places, these efforts were most of the times fragmental (Roberts & Eldridge, 2009).

According to Gehl (1987), a public space is functioning successfully according to the activities it facilitates. Gehl categorizes these activities into three groups: necessary activities, optional activities, and social activities. Necessary activities refer to the everyday tasks performed by individuals to meet their needs. Optional activities occur under favorable conditions, while social activities arise because of the first two categories, enhancing their effectiveness.

Today, cities that are constantly growing, need public urban spaces in every form, size and shape, as they are urban elements that define their citizens' physical, psychological, and

emotional well-being. The revitalization of public spaces should be based on the promotion of intercultural communities and reflect the urban citizens' life and interaction. It should be based on principles of integrated management and promote social cohesion, economic development, environmental protection and urban conservation. During the last decades, the global economic transformations and the technology's development have led to city's transformation as "spatial" proximity that historically was a necessary condition for the development of the city is no longer necessary.

Public spaces in Greek cities

Public space had a special importance in the daily life of citizens in Greek cities since antiquity, from the Ancient Agora of Athens to the present day. Public spaces are the areas where many different functions are gathered and the center of social, commercial, cultural, and political life. They express the cultural and urban identity of a city, where people can satisfy the need for public expression and contact with other people. Since the development of the Greek State, at the beginning of the 19th century, the public spaces functioned as symbols of a new status, similar with the public spaces of other European cities of that period. Many plans were designed with huge public squares and boulevards that tried to show the entrance of Greece in a new era (Figure 2). Many of these plans were never implemented because the Greek State could not afford to expropriate all these large-scale urban areas, leading to a gradual shrinking of public spaces.

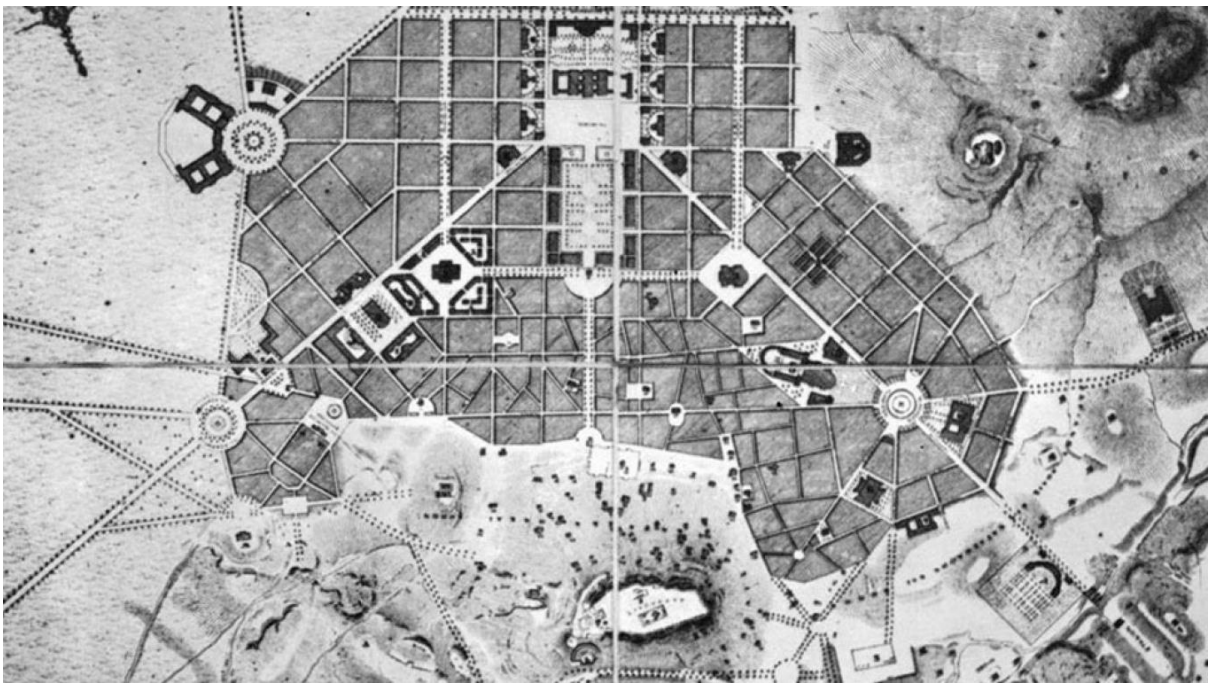

Figure 2. *The Kleanthis Schaubert plan for Athens in 1834. Source: Biris (1966)*

In the next decades, the increased demand for housing reconstruction, combined with increased car usage, resulted in plans that prioritized the intensification of construction and the development of new car infrastructures, often at the expense of green and open public areas.

In 1985, the Regulatory Plan for Athens set the base for big scale regeneration programs like the Unification of the Archaeological Sites of Athens, which was an innovative project in terms

of scale, interventions, institutional arrangements, and know-how. It also focused on the capital's environmental planning and promoted pedestrian networks, green and open spaces in all neighborhoods. A few years later, in 1994, the Attica SOS Action Plan also promoted the increase of green spaces, through 30 interventions throughout the capital's basin, to develop new green and open spaces providing 4,000 acres of new public spaces. Despite the difficulties in its limited implementation, the project was the most important in the modern history of Athens, as it was one of the few plans to promote public spaces. The neoliberal restructuring of the country, which was implemented after 1996, did not include wealth redistribution. The urban development of the period was combined with policies that promoted competitiveness and entrepreneurship (Dimelli, 2018).

As it emerges from the investigation of the Greek experience, the public spaces regeneration programs of this period, that were expected to be exclusively funded by the public sector, according to the existing framework, were characterized by limited scale interventions. These interventions lacked to incorporate socio-economic parameters and were mostly fragmental, driven by political agendas aimed at city "beautification" rather than "regeneration" of public spaces (Andrikopoulou, 2008).

The first urban planning tool for public spaces regeneration

The basic law for public areas regeneration, enacted in 1997 (Law 2508/1997), defined the set of directions, measures, interventions, and processes of urban planning. Its primary aim was to improve the living conditions of the city's inhabitants by improving the built environment safeguarding and promoting the cultural, historical morphological and aesthetic elements and characteristics of Greek urban areas.

It defined that the regeneration of public spaces should be applied in areas with the following characteristics (Law 2508/1997):

a. High building densities or lack of common spaces and spaces for public facilities.
b. Conflicts of land uses.
c. Lack of protection and promotion of the historical, archaeological, and cultural elements and activities.
d. Increasing deterioration of the aesthetics and in general the quality of the built environment of the area and its natural elements.
e. Degraded housing stock.

Two years later, Law 2742/1999 established Integrated Urban Regeneration Plans, which promoted integrated urban planning strategies in downgraded urban areas and promoted not only environmental but also social cohesion and economic development strategies (L.2742/1999). But although this framework was important for public spaces regeneration, the specifications for its preparation and implementation were legislated 13 years later, in 2012. Despite the framework for public spaces urban regeneration setting rules for public and private sector partnerships, the few projects during the period of 1997–2003 were funded exclusively by the public sector. However, the 2004 Olympic Games changed drastically the existing plans as areas originally designated for becoming public open and green spaces were repurposed for Olympic infrastructures and construction areas (Delladetsimas, 2003).

The 2004 Olympic Games

The 2004 Olympic Games were a very important mega-event that brought Greece in the center of international attention. The program was based on the following pillars (Committee for the Athens 2000 Candidacy, 1996):

- Infrastructure
- Recovery and upgrading of the coastal zone
- Consolidation of archaeological sites
- Improvement of the Athenians historic center
- Regeneration of downgraded urban areas
- Redevelopment of areas around the Olympic facilities and access axes
- Actions to improve the image of the city and its public spaces (Figure 3).

Attica region hosted most infrastructure investments that completely restructured the accessibility relations and the geography of many areas. These investments were: the Spata Airport, the extension of the Metro lines, the Suburban Railway, the Tramway, the Attiki Road, the Ymittos Regional Road, the improvement of the Piraeus Port infrastructure. These new institutional interventions were beyond the legislated processes of planning practice that had been developed until then, in the name of public interest. The primary intention in this case was to entrench the process at a central level, to achieve a single and comprehensive system of licensing, to enforce safety standards and ensure the coordination of all necessary actions by all administrative levels within the limited available time. To facilitate the infrastructures construction, new provisions regarding the expropriation code, the temporary use of real estate and facilities, the transfer of stocks, and the use of coastal land were legislated. The adopted policies were mainly based on a technical-business approach, which was not combined with the socio-economic priorities of the city and with the post-Olympic urban development perspective.

Figure 3. *The entrance of the Olympic stadium. Photo by Georgios Liakopoulos / CC BY-SA 3.0*

Planning of the 2004 Olympic Games was based on two main committees which operated autonomously with respect to the existing state institutions at all levels of administrations: the National Committee of the Olympic Games and the Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games. In 1999, an emergency law on Olympic Projects defined new urban planning regulations which set the procedures for expropriation and acquisition of private and public real estate (Law 2730/1999).

The main tools for the implementation of the projects and the promotion of development initiatives were the “Special Plans” and the “Cooperation Agreements” between “Athens 2004” and the institutional bodies. A series of program contracts, memoranda of cooperation and business contracts were signed with ministries, local administrations, and agencies involved in the process. These collaborations gradually expanded to include professional associations and chambers. Financial difficulties, time constraints and organizational pressures did not allow the implementation of many of these contracts, while the agreements related to the post-Olympic period remained inactive.

The Olympic projects were a purely technical-construction action that was neither integrated into an urban strategy nor linked to planned proposals for private economic exploitation. After the 2004 Olympic Games, there was no established framework for the post-Olympic use of Olympic buildings, facilities, and infrastructures. The spatial policy and development of the Olympic projects was neither combined with the general socio-economic conditions of the city nor with local dynamics and needs. As a result, the whole project led to a post-Olympic inertia, with lots of ad hoc decisions that transferred facilities-buildings to public federations or granted them to private exploitation with long-term contracts.

Greek public spaces during the 2009–2017 economic crisis

The economic crisis in the Southern European countries that started by the end of 2009 led to neoliberal governance (Blyth, 2013) and other neoliberal principles (Seymour, 2014). They were enforced at a larger scale in the countries that were bailed out by the “Troika” (the EU, European Central Bank, and International Monetary Fund) and share similar historical and socio-political characteristics, e.g., Greece, Portugal, and Spain. They all present institutional issues, their urbanization processes are comparable, their welfare systems are mostly built on informal networks, and they are linked to agendas that are more elite-driven and less democratic (Dimelli, 2018). In Greece, an important role has been played by economic models based on sectors with low productivity and high employment – and hence low wages, large proportion of unskilled workers and stagnant productivity. This caused that wages in the public sector had been increased on the basis of political decisions to stimulate the (local) domestic demand and economic growth (Tulumello, Saija & Inch, 2020). During this period, the Greek cities which were formed under a mix of informal activities, arbitrary housing, and lack of planning, were downgraded as the existing legislation dictated that all regeneration projects should be funded by the public sector. New enacted planning laws share common features, including the simplification of procedures for land-use changes and spatial interventions, as well as the acceleration of procedures for public works. Amidst the morbid symptoms of the crisis and the profound political uncertainties it is generating, it is important to create critical debate about the nature of crises, austerity politics and their complex relationships to planning and urban development.

In the following years, regeneration of public spaces was mostly directed to mega-projects developed according to a different new legislative framework. The new decrees, Law 3894/2010 for private properties and Law 3986/2011 for public properties established that,

due to the economic crisis conditions, a project could be approved even if it was not proposed by the existing urban and regional plans (Law 3894/2010, Law 3986/2011).

This framework allowed ad hoc new interventions by the private sector with long-term contracts, which were not in accordance with the existing spatial planning guidelines and restrictions. Although this new framework aimed at facilitating the role of the private sector within the existing complicated legislative environment, it faced strong criticism, as in many cases, the guise of development could lead to environmental degradation. During the last years of crisis, many restrictions of regular planning procedures were ignored for the facilitation of large-scale projects implementation, which were shaped by the pressures of social and economic priorities (Dimelli, 2023).

Mega-projects were developing under the principles of neoliberalism, while the following procedures for their completion were hardly based on advocacy planning as the main drivers of decision making were the public authorities (Dimelli, 2018).

The case of the former Hellinikon airport

By 2010, Greece presented two distinct phenomena. On the one hand, the built environment and public infrastructure deteriorated, the number of homeless people increased, and on the other hand various policies were enacted to benefit private funds. These new conditions boosted the participation of the private sector using the new legislative framework that was related to political decisions.

Hellinikon functioned as an airport until 2001. In the following years it became a big scale urban void that had to develop a new use (Figure 4). Research programs proposed the development of a park in the area, which would balance the lack of green and open public spaces in Attica's basin. Still, issues like the development, the management, and the maintenance of the area, did not lead to the implementation of these proposals as the public sector did not have available funds to finance these projects.

Figure 4. *The Hellinikon airport area location in the Athenian basin. Source: Google Earth*

In the following years, as the conservative political forces were in charge, new proposals were introduced initially by Spiro Polalis and some years later by Norman Foster (Figure 5). These proposals envisioned the development of a park which would be combined with commercial and residential areas, hotels, casinos, malls, marinas and other infrastructures to attract new residents and visitors. These proposals appeared to be the only viable solutions in a country where private funds were the only available sources for urban regeneration projects due to the lack of public funds. The key factor for the proposal was funding resources, as the shared capital of the Hellinikon area and the implementation of the Business and Regeneration Plan was given to private investors, with the primary motivation being the investors' economic profit (Dimelli, 2023).

Figure 5. *View of some of the proposed public zones. Source: Foster + Partners*

The area's privatization has been intensively criticized. Although the Greek government promoted the project as a tremendous opportunity for job creation and economic development, many citizen communities and environmental organizations were against it, because it reduced the area's potential green spaces (Dimelli, 2018).

Little progress has been made until today, despite the public debate on regeneration between various political forces, mainly because of the Greek urban planning system's bureaucracy. Local society is divided to two main groups. The first group supports that the area would gradually lose its public identity and turn into a private place for consumption, while the second group believes that the development of commercial and other uses will lead to increased land values and employment and will become a new profitable pole for everyone.

The case of Navarinou Park

The inactive urban regeneration framework, combined with the lack of funding by the public sector, intensified the problem of the lack of open and green public area in Greek cities. Although mega-projects were promoted, still the lack of public spaces in the densely constructed neighborhoods of cities as Athens was a major problem. As the state was not able to provide the necessary public infrastructures, and the need for public spaces was intense, the residents of the Exarchia neighborhood decided to proceed to actions (Figure 6).

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Figure 6. *The Navarinou park location in the Athenian basin. Source: Google Earth*

A paradigmatic case is the Navarinou park, a parking area owned by the Technical Chamber of Greece, which intended to construct an office building on the site. As the implementation of this project was delayed, in 2008 a group of the neighborhood's residents occupied the lot, gradually transforming it into a recreational park (Figure 7). Through participatory processes, the groups of residents proceeded to conduct the area's masterplan, to plant trees and create the necessary urban furniture to make the area accessible to everyone (Arvanitidis & Papagiannitsis, 2020). The case of Navarinou park is the result of the residents' initiative, and its management is the subject of the park's open general assembly. It is one of the few examples, where the residents decide to act and create their own public spaces, ignoring the ownership framework and other restrictions, and were driven by the fact that the public sector was inactive and did not provide the necessary public spaces in a downgraded zone of Athens.

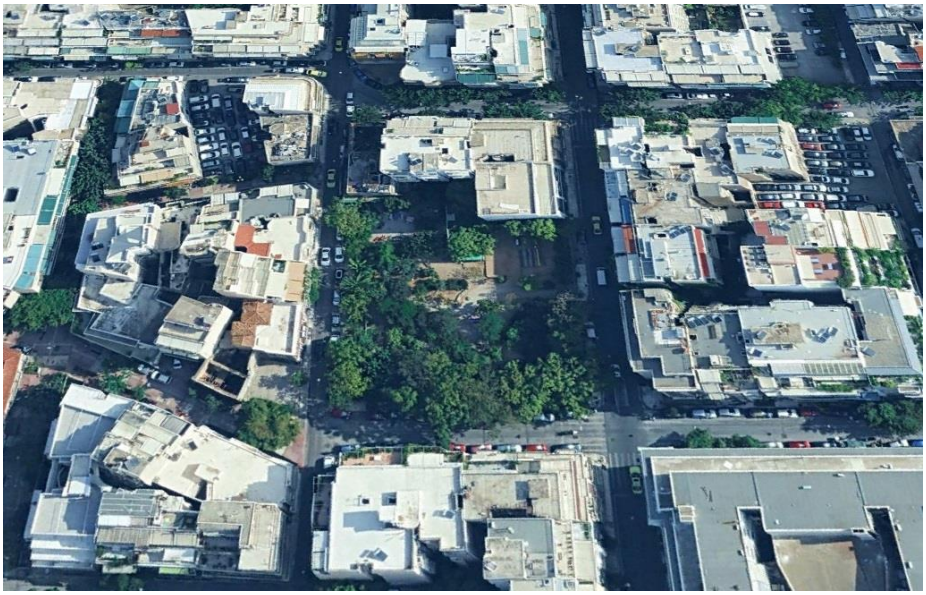

Figure 7. *Navarinou park in Exarchia. Source: Google Earth*

The partnership of public and private sectors in public spaces development since 2017

In the Regulatory Plan for Athens (Law 4277/2014), there is an emphasis on the necessity to address the lack and deficiencies of green spaces and open public spaces. The plan prioritizes the equal distribution of public spaces in terms of both physical presence and function, as well as ensuring quality. In this context, several attempts have been made, some of which have been successful, while some others, especially in cases of large green areas, faced several obstacles related to a multitude of factors.

Spatial planning of this period emphasized the strengthening and upgrading of the role of public spaces as livable and accessible areas for social interaction. Public spaces regeneration projects were mainly carried out by the public sector with the private sector remaining inactive, as the partnership between the private and public sectors was yet not developed (Yiannakou & Vlahvei, 2014).

The Integrated Urban Intervention Plan for the center of Athens (G.D.1397/2015) promoted the necessity of regenerating degraded areas, yet it failed to provide the tools for urban regeneration. During this period, most of the public spaces' regeneration projects were fragmented and constrained in scope. Another significant weakness of the urban regeneration system is the complex and time-consuming procedures required for implementation, which also contributed to the limited application of projects. Even though participation and consultation procedures are proposed by the existing institutional urban regeneration framework, these are also evaluated as fragmentary (Tasopoulou & Lainas, 2017). Additionally, while efforts have been made for the integration of new technologies to strengthen citizen participation in planning procedures, a significant portion of citizens are skeptical about their actual inclusion in decision making procedures.

Spatial planning in the years following the economic crisis, emphasized the strengthening and upgrading of the role of public spaces as places of social interaction. Especially after the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, public spaces need to develop a new role in terms of resilience, allowing them to accommodate short-term or long-term changes and adapt to the constantly changing conditions of modern societies.

The prevailing conditions show several problems related to the maintenance of urban infrastructures, the promotion of multiculturalism, the preservation of historical identity, planning, safety, and interaction issues. In this context, it is important to develop partnerships between city agencies, to develop actions as the evaluation and improvement of the public spaces' environmental conditions.

The Plan for Resilient Athens 2017 proposes the actions to shape green spaces in a way which optimizes their benefits (Municipality of Athens, 2017). Emphasis is placed on the maintenance of the existing green spaces, implementing new plantings and the upgrading of existing spaces. Green corridors are proposed both within the Municipality of Athens and on a metropolitan scale, to improve air circulation but also to increase soft mobility. Simultaneously, new public green spaces of all sizes and shapes, urban agriculture and urban gardens within educational units are promoted. Special mention is made to the development of water networks in the municipality through the promotion of blue routes.

A part of the Olympic Games infrastructures remains abandoned, facing increased maintenance costs. Only the Faliron Delta/Hippodrome is developed by Stavros Niarchos Foundation sponsorship and for different uses than those that were formulated in the initial plans. More specifically, in the Faliron Delta/Hippodrome area, a park with sport activities, a

watersports area and a marina, and a zone with recreational facilities and infrastructures are developed while the National Library and the Greek National Opera are constructed by Renzo Piano plans (Figures 8 and 9).

Figure 8. *The Faliron Delta/Hippodrome location in the Athenian basin. Source: Google Earth*

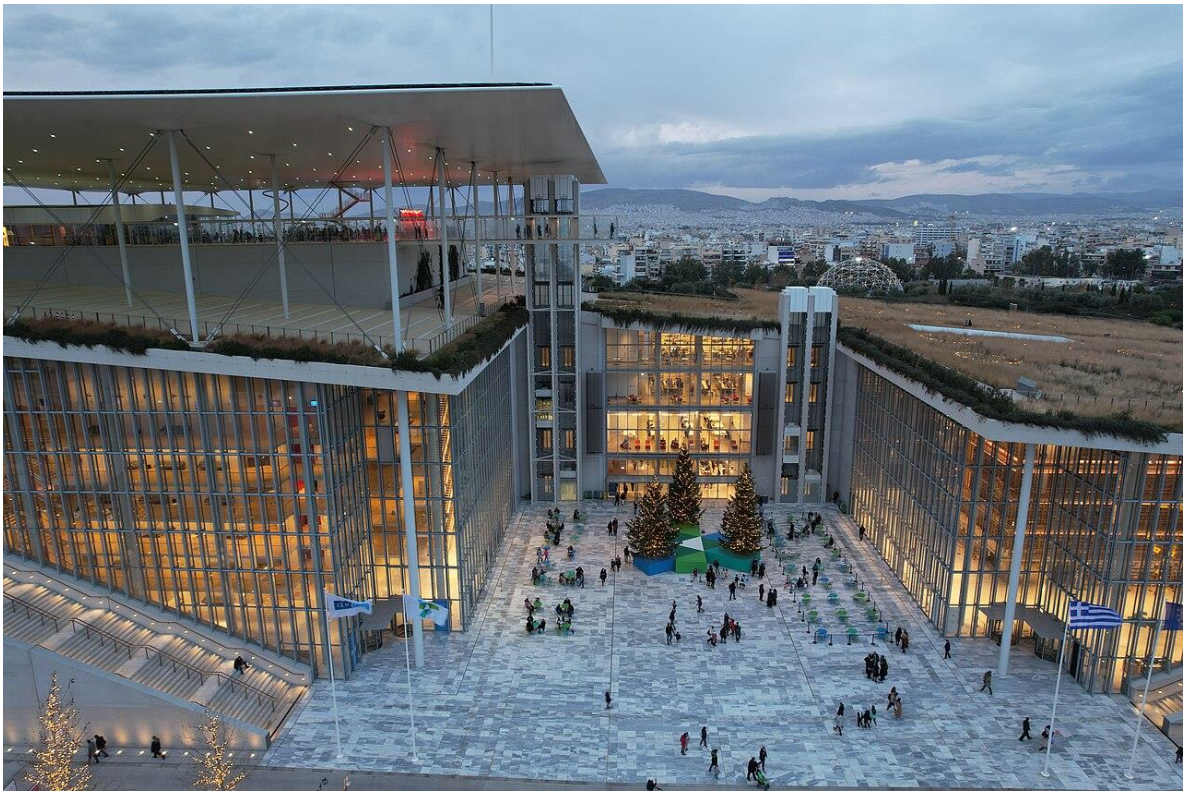

Figure 9. *The Greek National Opera building. Photo by Strange Traveler / CC BY-SA 2.0*

Most of the rest Olympic infrastructures are leased to private companies and converted into shopping centers, conference centers or theaters. During the last four years, the Municipality of Athens launched the “Adopt Your City” program as part of strengthening resilience, which aims to create small-scale green spaces through the municipality's collaboration with private entities. The aim of the program is to create pocket parks in areas beyond the borders of the historic city center to improve the environmental conditions in degraded areas and strengthen the social cohesion of these areas’ residents. To date, several interventions have been carried out in many areas of the Municipality of Athens, in existing degraded green spaces, but also in inactive empty plots of the municipality, which are based on bioclimatic planning and in some cases are co-planned with groups of residents. A typical example is the Japanese garden of 3,500 m^2 in Pagrati which was remodeled, and through its new design, acquired a new identity with emphasis on bioclimatic architecture and multiculturalism (Figure 10). These interventions are a result of public-private partnerships, as a private company can adopt an urban void and transform it to a pocket park. Until today many new green points are developed in the Municipality of Athens and have contributed to a better environment and the creation of new poles of social interaction.

***Figure 10**. Pagrati pocket park. Source: Google Earth*

Discussion and conclusions

During Greece’s recent history, public spaces are facing a continuous degradation. The commercialization and privatization of public spaces and the lack of maintenance are the basic reasons for their degradation. Neoliberal policies impose constraints on urban planning within the framework of urban development, leading to significant spatial consequences. The neoliberalization of public spaces entails the adoption of public-private partnerships to provide services to residents, reflecting the changing dynamics of urban governance. How have partnerships evolved in the field of urban regeneration projects in Greece over the last 70 years?

Funding urban public spaces regeneration projects is an expensive process, however modern urban policies and experience have shown that the economic benefit from the reuse and management of existing urban space is clearly greater than the procedures and costs of residential expansion policies (Tasopoulou & Lainas, 2017). Greece's persistently adverse economic situation and its incomplete and outdated institutional urban regeneration framework that leads to bureaucratic limitations, issuance, and time-consuming procedures, are barriers that do not contribute to the promotion of urban regeneration projects. Most of the urban regeneration projects are limited to small-scale pedestrian networks and green and public spaces, which have low cost and can be developed in faster rates compared with bigger scale regeneration projects.

In Greece, funding public spaces urban regeneration is a complicated procedure financed mainly by public funds, while the private sector remains limited to some big scale projects, as until today, the existing institutional framework that defines the terms of partnerships between the public and private sector in such complex procedures is complicated and time-consuming. The private sector requires fast and flexible procedures and negotiation capabilities and requires the assistance of the public sector to be activated (Triantafyllopoulos, 2016). The private sector's contribution is weak in urban regeneration procedures, and although the existing framework has set rules for its involvement, it is complicated and time-consuming. Today there is a deficit around funding projects for public spaces urban regeneration. The utilization of financial instruments presents significant lags, so most funding resources are public while the donations and sponsorships from large foundations are limited. The traditional forms of financing regeneration projects are public funding which is considered an unsustainable practice.

The case studies that are examined in the current paper, cover public spaces of different scales and sizes, regenerated with different spatial planning frameworks. In the case of the Olympic infrastructures, the public post-Olympic inertia led to numerous ad hoc decisions that involved transferring facilities and buildings to public federations or leasing them to private entities through long-term contracts. In this case the role of the Greek State was weak as it did not manage to reclaim its property and promote new public uses and spaces. So, it was the private sector that proceeded to some of these infrastructures management creating private areas as malls and theaters. In the same direction, the lack of available funds resulted in the concession contract for the former Hellinikon airport being awarded to private investors. This concession resulted in the development of both private and public spaces in the area, a fact that is viewed negatively. The initial plan, which could not be implemented due to the lack of public funds, proposed the creation of a public park, that address the environmental issues of Greece's capital. In the following years, the initiatives of residents, the promotion of sponsorships and partnerships between the public and the private sectors became new models for urban regeneration projects in public spaces. These were promoted by the changing spatial framework that allowed the involvement of the private investors in public spaces regeneration projects. Still there are barriers such as the limited know-how, the centralized and standardized decision-making processes, and the incomplete coordination of synergies between management bodies, that have led to significant gaps in support of public areas regeneration projects.

Although the development of the spatial framework promotes neoliberalism, this cannot be activated yet. This phenomenon presents two different aspects. The fact that the public sector remains the primary actor is positive, as in many cases, privately guided rehabilitation and regeneration programs can lead to social marginalization and displacement. This can lead to social exclusion, and to the promotion of private spaces that increase consumption.

Simultaneously the fact that the public funds are limited, and the private sector's participation is weak leads to barriers in regeneration projects and to the city's downgraded environments.

Although the promotion of partnerships between the public and the private sector appears to be the most appropriate tool for the successful implementation of integrated urban regeneration programs in the European practice, which by their nature, require specialized knowledge, in Greece, up to today there are few examples of partnerships between the private sector and the public sector for the implementation of integrated urban regeneration programs. It is important to develop a multidimensional and multifunctional framework for urban regeneration, that will be flexible and promote partnerships between different public and private stakeholders to serve economic, social and environmental issues, and create more sustainable urban areas, and favor the city's public character by the development of places for all.

Although private-public partnerships offer numerous benefits, such as leveraging private sector efficiency and innovation, they also present several potential downsides. One significant concern is the risk of creating exclusionary quasi-public spaces as private partners are driven by profit, which can conflict with the public interest. Public spaces, that are publicly accessible but privately owned or managed, can become exclusionary as private entities may impose rules and restrictions that limit access for certain groups, such as the homeless, loiterers, or protesters, undermining the inclusive nature of genuinely public spaces. The commercial interests of private partners can lead to the commercialization of public spaces, where the focus shifts from public use and enjoyment to revenue generation through retail, advertising, and other commercial activities. To mitigate these downsides, it is crucial to establish clear, enforceable agreements that prioritize public interests, ensure transparency, and maintain robust oversight mechanisms. Effective regulatory frameworks and active public engagement are essential to balance the benefits of public and private partnerships with the need to protect public interests and maintain inclusive, equitable access to public spaces.

The establishment and the creation of partnerships between the private and the public sector is a process that presupposes a set of favorable conditions for the attraction of the private sector, and the existence of an appropriate institutional framework. It is important to develop a framework which will promote the participation of the private sector through a transparent process and define the terms and conditions that will lead to a legal and controllable profit. Towards this direction, it is important to develop partnerships between the private and the public sector which will have increased responsibilities that will work quickly and efficiently in terms of transparency. These schemes can fund the maintenance, restoration, development, reuse, planning and exploitation of public spaces, while the resulting profit, will be channeled into the local community. It is necessary to create the conditions that will contribute to the attraction of the private sector, who should know in advance at least a competitive institutional framework based on which they will negotiate. This framework should ensure low business risk and sustainably defend the interests of the local economy, society, and environment, and defend the public interest.

Today, after the COVID-19 pandemics, as the need to have more and better public spaces in urban areas is increasing, it is essential to develop an institutional framework that will promote mixed schemes (public-private sector) which will support urban regeneration, legislate ways and mechanisms for financial capital from the private sector, and defend the public interest and cover the financing gap of certain forms of urban interventions.

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The right to the ecological city: Reconciling ecological sustainability and social justice in a neighbourhood transformation in Turin

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Cities have gained increasing attention in the debate on how to tackle the global environmental crisis. However, urban strategies for sustainability have often been criticised for being insufficient in effectively mitigating environmental impacts due to externalisation and cost-shifting, and for producing social contradictions, such as ecological gentrification. Rather than considering these critiques as reasons to abandon ecological urban transformations, this article advocates for the right to the ecological city, for which the goals of ecological sustainability and social justice need to be reconciled through a degrowth strategy based on the principles of sufficiency, reuse and sharing. However, this theoretical framework encounters several challenges in urban practice. These are discussed through the author's lens as an observant participant in the *Fondazione di Comunità Porta Palazzo*, a community foundation involved in the transformation of the neighbourhoods of Aurora and Porta Palazzo in Turin, Italy, through projects focused on public space and housing. The discussion of these challenges suggests that while the right to the ecological city is hard to achieve, it remains an important goal in the transformation of cities and neighbourhoods, one that must rely on structural change driven by diverse actors across multiple scales.

Keywords: degrowth, gentrification, right to the city, neighbourhood, activism, urban transformation, socio-ecological transformation, land commodification

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Introduction

Studying the transformation of a neighbourhood can serve as a focal lens through which to analyse the intersection of the multiple dimensions of global and local social and ecological crises. These include the urgently needed ecological transformation and the question of its social justice, particularly in the context of already unjust social conditions. This lens can help to understand the connections between processes like gentrification and ecological transformation, which often are treated as unconnected fields. However, the links between the social and the ecological dimension are manifold: on the one hand, wealth is the most effective predictor of differences in environmental impact both between social groups and places (greater consumption leads to higher emissions). On the other hand, low-income groups are more strongly affected by both environmental changes and the negative side effects of policies for the mitigation of environmental impacts. This article reflects on possibilities and challenges of tackling these issues in a combined manner through a bottom-up organisation, using the case study of the Porta Palazzo and Aurora neighbourhoods in the city of Turin, Italy.

Over the last three decades, Turin has been characterised by a profound phase of urban transformation. Once an archetypical one-company town, the city was reshaped following the decline of the Fordist economic model. This transformation involved the physical redevelopment of post-industrial spaces, alongside investments in knowledge, technology, tourism, and mega-events. Austerity urbanism strategies, driven by debt and economic crises, have also been part of this process, leading to multiple cases of gentrification and displacement across the city. These changes were fuelled by investments in neighbourhood revitalisation, with subsequently increased real-estate values (Bolzoni & Semi, 2023).

In this analysis, I propose to interpret Turin's transformation also considering its ecological dimension. While it is often seen as a story of local economic and identity crisis, the process of de-industrialisation can also be understood as part of a global process of externalisation and cost-shifting of environmental impacts from the Global North to the Global South (Krähmer, 2020; Parrique et al., 2019). Much of the pollution formerly produced by industries in Turin, has not disappeared but has been moved together with the industries to other regions. Indeed, while Turin remains one of the most polluted cities in Europe[1], levels of air pollution have decreased significantly over the last decades, as well as locally produced greenhouse gas emissions (Città di Torino, 2022). Although Turin has been deeply affected by an economic crisis with significant social consequences and less economic success than, for instance, neighbouring Milan, Turin remains a city of the Global North with unsustainably high levels of consumption-related environmental impacts[2] (Genta et al., 2022).

In this context, the neighbourhoods of Porta Palazzo and Aurora, located in semi-central Turin, are at the beginning – if not in the midst – of a process of gentrification (Bolzoni & Semi, 2023; Bourlessas et al., 2022). While this transformation is specific to these neighbourhoods, it is also part of broader city-wide dynamics and can be related to the ongoing global tendencies of 'planetary gentrification' (Lees et al., 2016; Lees et al., 2018). The global ecological and climate crisis (Mayer, 2020) has, so far, had a limited direct impact on these neighbourhoods, but its impacts are bound to increase.

[1] https://www.eea.europa.eu/themes/air/urban-air-quality/european-city-air-quality-viewer (Last access: February 2024)
[2] For example, green house gas (GHG) emissions and other environmental impacts caused by activities for goods and services consumed in Turin but produced both there and elsewhere.

In the process of achieving much-needed socio-ecological change, the interplay between different scales and processes is crucial, as the social and ecological dimensions intersect in complex ways. However, these intersections are rarely considered together (Knuth et al., 2020; Wachsmuth et al., 2016). On one hand, urban greening initiatives are often indifferent to their social consequences, such as exacerbating gentrification (Anguelovski et al., 2018; Dooling, 2009; Rice et al., 2020). On the other hand, urban social movements often underestimate the importance of ecological issues, criticising them as an elite preoccupation and overlooking the fact that poorer segments of the population are disproportionately affected by the ecological crisis. For instance, Bohnenberger's (2020) analysis of social housing policies and stakeholders positioning in Germany illustrates this dynamic. In this sense, urban social movements sometimes engage in defending the status quo of 'acceptable' living conditions, opposing transformations, including those related to ecological transitions.

This analysis of the connection between social and ecological change aligns with a recent stream of literature which explores the urban – and more generally spatial – dimension of the degrowth and postgrowth debate (Brokow-Loga & Eckardt, 2020; Krähmer & Brokow-Loga, 2024; Knuth et al., 2020; Krähmer, 2022; Krähmer & Cristiano, 2022; Mocca, 2020; Savini, 2021; Savini et al., 2022; Schmid, 2022; Xue & Kębłowski, 2022). This article aims to contribute to the debate on how to imagine degrowth within the specificities of real existing urban geographies, moving beyond abstract debates about the right urban form for sustainability (cf. Knuth et al., 2020; Krähmer, 2018; Mocca, 2020). It intends to support the process of envisioning a *right to the ecological city*, understood as a horizon for neighbourhood and urban transformation that overcomes the apparent contradiction between calls for ecological urban transformation and social justice.

Following the rise of the climate movement in 2018, many calls have been made to reconcile the social and the ecological. However, through this case study I intend to show that in the practice of urban transformation, the intersections between social and ecological issues are easily neglected or relegated to a secondary level of attention. I argue that this is related to the contingencies of urban transformation, namely the need for local actors to be mindful of and respond to frequent and shifting dynamics of change. These pressures often limit the time and resources available to systematically discuss and tackle the complexities of socio-ecological change. In this case, the immediately tangible events of gentrification process in the neighbourhood tend to overshadow ecological concerns, which can seem more distant. I engage with these issues from the vantage point of my long-term involvement as an active participant in a bottom-up organisation, the *Fondazione di Comunità Porta Palazzo* (*FCPP – Porta Palazzo community foundation*)[3], created to influence the neighbourhood's ongoing process of transformation, contrasting the risk of these transformations being socially exclusive and leading to expulsions.

In the following section, I outline a theoretical framework centred on the concept of the right to the ecological city. In the third section, I discuss methods and positionality. Afterwards, I explore the neighbourhood's position, first within the context of the global socio-ecological crisis and then in relation to the ongoing and contingent process of urban transformation in Turin. Later on, I will illustrate how the *Fondazione in Comunità Porta Palazzo* (FCPP) navigates this context and assess the extent to which it contributes to realising the right to the ecological city. In the final section, I discuss findings and draw some general conclusions.

[3] www.fondazioneportapalazzo.org (Last access: October 2024).

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The right to the ecological city: from ecological gentrification to an urban degrowth agenda

Cities have gained increasing attention in the debate on how to tackle the global environmental crisis. As Angelo and Wachsmuth (2020) have shown, the perspective on cities has evolved from being seen as the source of all evil (i.e. ecological impacts) to one in which cities are considered as saviours thanks to their compactness and ecological efficiency, on the one hand, and their social and technological innovations on the other. These essentialised perspectives can be ascribed to a static conception of space which ignores its relational constituency (Massey, 2005). This leads to – at least – two important contradictions. The first being a 'methodological cityism' (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2015), where cities are considered to be far more sustainable than they actually are. This is because ecological impacts are often assessed only in terms of their place of production and not in relation to where the consumption occurs that is responsible for these impacts (Krähmer, 2020; Parrique et al., 2019).

The second contradiction lies in the risk that urban policies aimed at locally reducing ecological impacts – such as decreasing car-based mobility and related carbon emissions – can lead to social impacts in the form of ecological gentrification (Anguelovski et al., 2018; Dooling, 2009; Rice et al., 2020). Policies and projects of urban greening, when successful, make urban environments more pleasant to live, leading to an increase in real estate values and the displacement of residents with low incomes. This is not only unjust but also ineffective in ecological terms, as unsustainable behaviour, such as driving, is not changed but simply moved elsewhere. Meanwhile, new residents with higher incomes may not drive, but they often consume other goods and services with significant environmental impacts (Mössner & Miller, 2015; Rice et al., 2020). In this analysis, I primarily focus on the second contradiction of green urban policies leading to negative social effects – and how it can be tackled in the context of a neighbourhood transformation – while not forgetting the relevance of the first contradiction.

For David Harvey (2013), the right to the city is to claim power over the processes through which the city is made and remade. Many of these are socio-ecological processes. Hence, the idea of a collective right to determine how urban transformation occurs is key for overcoming the socio-ecological contradictions discussed earlier. While all the cited contributions, and many more, hint at these contradictions, an explicit discussion of what a right to the *ecological* city could be, seems to be absent from the literature so far. Some have discussed a 'right to the green city' but recurring only on specific dimensions of green urban policies, like cycling (Sosa López, 2021) or green spaces (Thomas, 2016) or defining it bluntly as "a term that transfers the right to the city to a green context" (Caputo et al., 2019, p. 148). I found only one publication that used the phrase 'right to the ecological city' (Cooper & Baer, 2019, p. 209), defining it as:

> predicated on the notion that all urban dwellers have the capacity to live within it in sustainable, comfortable and appropriate housing, and in locations which provide social mobility and access to services, education and employment opportunities, as well as alternative modes of transport.

This definition contains some valuable elements, but it only partially addresses the socio-ecological contradictions discussed earlier and overlooks the power dimension central to Harvey's concept. Building on this, I propose to define the right to the ecological city as *the right to collectively shape and live in a city that respects planetary boundaries while assuring a good quality of life for all – both locally and globally – with limited material resources.* That is the right to lead a good life which is not based on ecological destruction or the social

exploitation of others, weather nearby or elsewhere. Defined in this way, the right to the ecological city is closely tied to a critical view of economic growth. It rests on the recognition that a central cause of the contradictions and limitations of existing urban sustainability policies is economic growth itself. The logic of economic growth and capital accumulation drives both the cost-shifting logic of the first contradiction and the private appropriation of collectively produced value (through the dynamics of real estate markets in relation to urban greening) in the second contradiction.

Therefore, to develop strategies to work towards a right to the ecological city, I turn to a de- and postgrowth framing of the socio-ecological crisis and transformation. The post- and degrowth literature (Chertkovskaya et al., 2019; D'Alisa et al., 2015; Demaria et al., 2013; Fitzpatrick et al., 2022; Schneider et al., 2010) argues that (a), the idea of decoupling economic growth from the growth of ecological impacts is a dangerous illusion (Hickel & Kallis, 2020; Parrique et al., 2019) and that, as a consequence, a global but selective reduction of social metabolism (i.e. production and consumption) is necessary; (b) social justice cannot be reached through trickle-down effects of economic growth but rather through redistribution locally and globally[4], grounded in differentiated responsibilities in the reduction of the social metabolism in different places and between social classes (Chancel & Piketty, 2015); (c) well-being cannot be based on the promise of ever growing material wealth. Instead, it must be based on a conception of *sufficient* material wealth for everybody through public services and goods: 'Private Sufficiency, Public Luxury', as George Monbiot (2021) put it.

Only in recent years, a stream of literature has turned its attention to the relevance of the urban and spatial dimension to the degrowth and postgrowth debates, and vice versa (Kaika et al., 2023; Krähmer, 2022; Savini, 2021; Schmid, 2022; Xue, 2021). Some key principles in this discourse include *sufficiency, reuse,* and *sharing* (Krähmer & Cristiano, 2022). *Sufficiency* is a principle that comes before efficiency in order of importance: the idea is that of a system that provides enough to everybody but excessive wealth to nobody; this can also be understood as 'spatial' sufficiency, to be applied, for instance, to per capita residential floor space (Bohnenberger, 2020). What, in particular, is enough and what is too much, must be established by social and political processes, in dialogue with the ecological availability of resources. *Reuse* may appear as an obvious concept in a city like Turin, characterised by decades of urban renewal, focused on formerly industrial areas. However, incoherent with the degrowth and postgrowth framework is the perspective of 'incremental reuse' (Krähmer & Cristiano, 2022) that has been frequently adopted in Turin, i.e. the effort to promote reuse with the scope of achieving economic growth, including the rise of real estate values. *Sharing*, finally, does not refer to the commodified versions of the sharing economy, but rather to the social practices of sharing space. The availability of public and shared space (and services) makes a good life grounded in sufficiency possible. Equally important are shared and collective forms of property, as an instrument of limiting the growth-bound dynamics of real-estate speculation (Hurlin, 2018), for example through practices of commoning (De Angelis, 2022; Micciarelli, 2022), contrasting the commodification of land (Bauman et al., 2024).

These principles can help to resolve the contradictions of urban sustainability policies and to achieve the right to the ecological city in several ways. Sufficiency helps to politicise the question of consumption in a wealthy city of the Global North, placing the differentiated responsibilities due to different wealth and income levels at the centre of attention. Reuse helps to avoid false solutions such as considering only the impacts of buildings during their use, neglecting the environmental costs of construction. Sharing supports the search for

[4] Relating also to a non-universalist conception of degrowth, situated rather in the context of a pluriverse of alternatives (Demaria & Kothari, 2017; Kothari et al., 2014).

solutions which are not only sustainable but are also able to guarantee a high quality of life, prioritising common goods over private goods. In a right to the city perspective, a further crucial question is who shapes processes of transformation towards these principles.

In this paper, I intend to apply this theoretical framework to a case study of neighbourhood transformation, asking: first, how can we describe the intersection of social and ecological dimensions at the neighbourhood scale? Second, how can a bottom-up organisation navigate these intersections? Third, what can this case say about concrete pathways towards the right to the ecological city?

Methods and positionality

This article derives from a process of self-reflective intersection of academic research and activism. I have engaged academically both with gentrification (Krähmer & Santangelo, 2018) and the spatial dimension of degrowth (Krähmer & Brokow-Loga, 2024; Krähmer, 2022; Krähmer & Cristiano, 2022), but I have always seen the scope of this research as closely connected to real social change and have been engaged as an activist on the same topics. The connection established between the social and ecological dimensions of urban and neighbourhood transformations is thus both a theoretical and a practical endeavour to me. The present article is based on a work of reflection on our action with the FCPP, of which I am the vice-president, and is conceived both as an output of the work done in this context and as a new input for further developing this work. The article is based on about six years of activism in the community foundation since before its constitution and a conceptual effort to connect this work to different literatures in (critical) urban studies, geography and bordering fields and the de- and postgrowth framework[5].

I would describe this as a research method of observant participation – rather than participant observation (Seim, 2021) – that builds on the situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) of a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1992). Concretely, this means the following: while other members of the foundation are aware that I am a researcher, there have been no specific activities of research for the production of this article, separate from the other activities of the foundation. This work is the result of my reflections on our practices and actions, put in relation to insights and perspectives gained from my academic work and the literature. In the foundation itself, we frequently organise meetings to discuss the sense and the direction of our actions: these are no research settings as such and may be distant from academic methods, but nonetheless they have influenced the intellectual work at the basis of this paper. This article, as a consequence, does not presume to be based on an anyway illusionary idea of distanced objectivity (Haraway, 1988). Rather it comes from the situated perspective (ibid.) of an economically and educationally privileged academic and neighbourhood activist. Furthermore, this article does not derive from a pre-defined research methodology; it is rather my active participation that has allowed me to gain the knowledge this article is based on. This piece of research should be understood in its context(s), with the aim of being useful for them, in the sense of a *phronetic* social science (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Lancione, 2013). That is, a social science that rather than searching objective truths seeks to act as a support of social change, while not forgetting Schoenberger's (2007) reminder that the politics behind a research project are fundamental to identify the questions but not to find the answers.

[5] An important step for the development of this work has been the participation in the *Lisbon Early-Career Workshop in Urban Studies: Social Mobilisation and Planning through Crises* in 2022 during which a draft of this article has been discussed.

The case study: Porta Palazzo and Aurora

Porta Palazzo and Aurora are two adjacent semi-central neighbourhoods in Turin (see Figure 1). Porta Palazzo is located right on the border of the historical city centre (its name is due to one of the Roman city gates) and is characterised by its huge open-air market of the same name, with a contiguous flea market (*Balon*) on Saturdays. Aurora lies just north of Porta Palazzo on the other side of the Dora River and is of more recent origin, mostly built between the 19th and 20th century in the context of Turin's massive industrialisation. None of these areas has an administrative definition; both are part of the larger *circoscrizione 7* (the borough administration). Furthermore, many people perceive Porta Palazzo as a part of Aurora (see neighbourhood maps drawn based on interviews in Cabodi et al., 2020 outlined in Figure 1). Also, there is a great social continuity between the two areas. They are both historically and currently inhabited by a relatively poor working class and largely migrant population. A gentrification process has started both in parts of Porta Palazzo (in the area closer to the city centre) and of Aurora (in the part next to the university campus Luigi Einaudi). The neighbourhood foundation FCPP), together with many other local organisations, operates in both Porta Palazzo and Aurora. For all these reasons, I treat both parts here as one neighbourhood – when I use the word neighbourhood, from now on, I refer to both. I use both names as Aurora is larger but Porta Palazzo, due to its market, is far better known in the city. In this section, I will first situate the neighbourhood in relation to the global socio-ecological crisis, then I will describe local dynamics of socio-economic crisis, in particular the ongoing gentrification process, and finally write about the role of the community foundation FCPP.

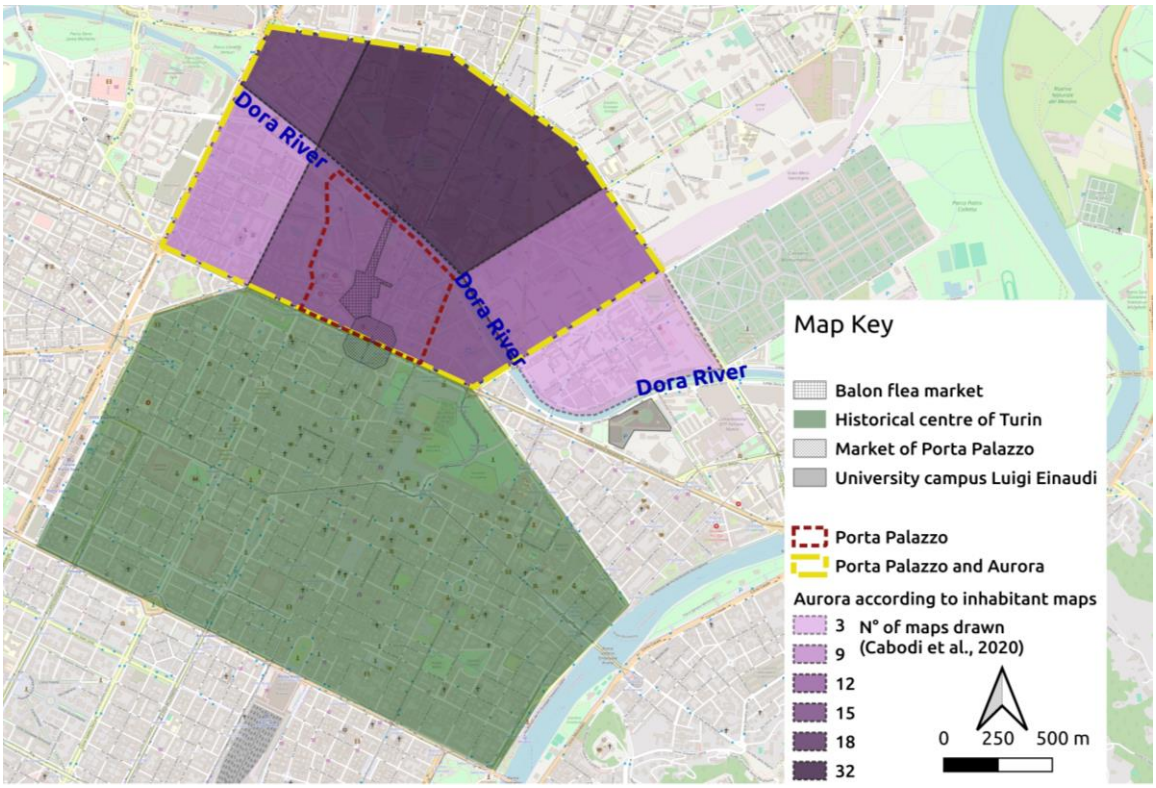

Figure 1. *Location of the neighbourhood (Porta Palazzo and Aurora) in Turin. Map by the author on an OpenStreetMap base map*

The neighbourhood and the global socio-ecological crisis

Adopting a relational perspective on space (Massey, 2005), it is possible to identify both the causes and the impacts of the climate crisis in a neighbourhood like that of Porta Palazzo and Aurora. Regarding the neighbourhood's contribution to the causes of the crisis, only reasonable assumptions can be made as, unfortunately, no quantitative data is available at the neighbourhood scale. On the one hand, the contribution of a relatively poor neighbourhood (see next subsection) must be assumed to be relatively low, as income is the dominant factor explaining statistical differences in terms of carbon emissions, both spatially and across social classes (Chancel, 2022; Chancel & Piketty, 2015; Ivanova et al., 2017). On the other hand, some typical characteristics of a large city in the Global North that underlie ecological impacts are also present here: cars are widely used, houses are often poorly insulated, everyday consumption is based on imports from various distances, large quantities of meat are consumed (meat has a major climate impact: Crippa et al., 2021), and significant amounts of waste are produced, with littering being a common practice.

Given the lack of data at the neighbourhood scale, it is useful to provide some at the city scale. The third assessment report of the city's climate action plan (Città di Torino, 2022) highlights a strong overall reduction of CO_2 emissions in the city (-47% compared to 1991). However, the plan limits its analysis to production-based emissions – those greenhouse gases directly emitted within municipal boundaries – which is an insufficient metric for analysing the climate impact of a city like Turin, as much of the consumption that occurs within its boundaries causes emissions elsewhere (consumption-based emissions) (see the analysis of the case of Copenhagen in Krähmer, 2020). Most emissions produced in the city are due to residential buildings (for cooking, heating and electricity), transport and the tertiary sector (Città di Torino, 2022). Consumption-based greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions per capita in Turin were estimated at around 6.2 tons/year for 2015 (Moran et al., 2018) and at 8.4 tons/year for 2018 (Genta et al., 2022) using different methods, while a sustainable and globally equitable level of carbon emissions per capita would be one of approximately 2.3 tons/year (Gore, 2021). Performing a simple proportional calculation based on the income difference from the city average with these two estimates (assuming that income explains most of the variation in contribution to ecological impact), then the average GHG emissions per capita in the neighbourhood can be estimated at between 4.8 and 6.5 tons/year, still clearly above a sustainable and globally equitable level, consistent with Chancel's (2022) data for the emission levels of the poorest 50% in Europe.

Genta et al. (2022) provide a comprehensive analysis of consumption-based environmental footprints for multiple impact categories at the level of Turin. This analysis shows that the consumption of Turin citizens exceeds planetary boundaries not only for climate change but also for particulate matter, ecotoxicity in freshwater, and the resource use of fossil fuels, minerals, and metals. All these impacts are predominantly driven by consumption in the areas of housing (electricity and heating), food (meat and other animal products), and mobility (car usage). Using consumption-based data here is not intended to imply individual consumer responsibility; rather, it serves to account for the fact that large parts of the (socio-)ecological impacts for which urban areas are responsible occur far away (see the first contradiction discussed above). Indeed, these consumption patterns are only to a very limited degree an individual responsibility; rather they occur within a systemic context (Krähmer & Cristiano, 2022). Undoubtedly, in terms of mitigation, most of the efforts for emission reductions must be borne by the wealthier classes. Nevertheless, also a poor neighbourhood in a rich city faces challenges that need to be addressed for a globally just, climate-friendly transition.

The challenges are even more evident in terms of adaptation. There are impacts of climate change that already affect the area – and will increasingly affect it in the near future. According to the city's climate resilience plan (Città di Torino, 2020), the main climatic risks include increasing heatwaves (which can pose severe health hazards), less frequent but more intense precipitation that can lead to flooding, and prolonged periods of drought that stress the water system. All these risks are also relevant for Aurora and Porta Palazzo. In recent years, there have been heatwaves and droughts, and there is relatively little green space and no larger park in the area. Floods have occurred as well, as a river crosses the neighbourhood, which is situated at a lower altitude than the city centre. Often, people with lower income are more affected by these impacts, as they have fewer resources to defend themselves: e.g., inadequate or no housing, energy poverty, and a lack of opportunities to travel to cooler places or to use air conditioning in summer. Furthermore, as the area has always been a destination for migration, it is likely to become a point of arrival for an increasing number of climate-crisis-driven migrants.

Currently, there are municipal policies for an ecological transition, including in the studied neighbourhood. However, ecological projects and social transformation initiatives are not integrated, and they only partially adhere to the principles of reuse, sharing and sufficiency. For instance, *Valdocco Vivibile*[6], a project by the municipality of Turin aimed at increasing climate resilience, has targeted parts of the neighbourhood but has focused nearly exclusively on physical interventions, such as slightly increasing green space and areas for bikes and pedestrians at the expense of parking spaces, adopting a very soft approach compared to the urgency of the climate crisis. Additionally, the project has remained completely disconnected from the socially focused project Tonite[7], which has targeted another adjacent part of the neighbourhood (see also Figure 2).

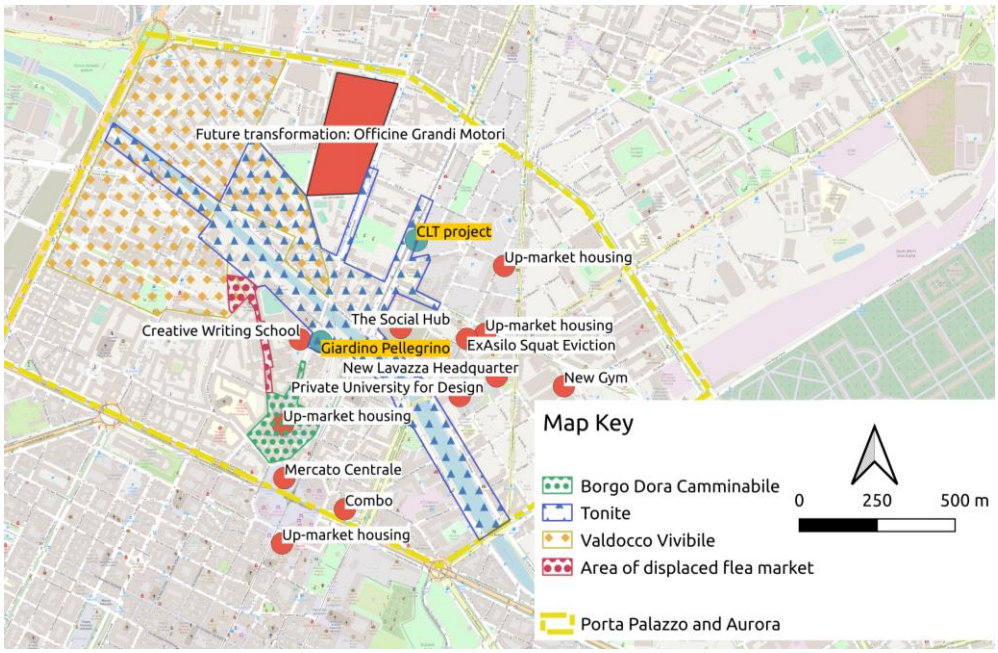

***Figure 2**. Map of major recent or ongoing projects of urban transformation in the neighbourhood. Map by the author on an OpenStreetMap base map*

[6] https://www.torinocambia.it/interventi/valdocco-vivibile-lotto-2 (Last access: October 2024).
[7] https://tonite.eu/ (Last access: October 2024).

Porta Palazzo's socio-economic challenges here and now

While the global socio-ecological challenges discussed above are in many ways connected to the local challenges of the neighbourhood, the public debate there is primarily focused on social and economic issues that are more immediately tangible in everyday life. The neighbourhood is characterised by a large migrant population (about 36% of residents, while the city's average is 15%: Cabodi et al., 2020), and many poverty indicators are above the city average, e.g. higher demand for social assistance, lower levels of formal education, higher rates of eviction, and lower real estate values (Cabodi et al., 2020). The average annual income per capita in 2021 was €18,726, which is 23% lower than the city-wide average of €24,427 and less than one-third of the average income in Turin's wealthiest areas (Supino, 2023)[8].

Several social movements have been active in the neighbourhood. One, implicitly, advocates for a process of gentrification, seeking to end the area's so-called 'social degradation' (see below). Another movement aims to improve the neighbourhood's physical conditions and quality of life while resisting gentrification and displacement. This movement has led to the creation of the participatory community foundation FCPP, which works in critical dialogue with the municipality (see next subsection). A third movement, in the meanwhile, combats gentrification and rejects any collaboration with the municipality. These movements are based on two primary narratives. The first is a tale about the 'degradation' of public space, highlighting the presence of waste and disrepair, and particularly the perception of danger due to unwanted (often not explicitly named) human presences[9]: migrants, poor people, homeless individuals, drug dealers, and consumers – existences that often, but not always, coexist within the same bodies. The response to this 'social degradation', according to this narrative, is a process of urban renewal that removes these presences (to which destination remains unclear), reinstating a sense of "decorum"[10]. The second narrative emphasises the value of multiculturalism, highlighting the social and cultural wealth that arises from the meeting of different cultures and argues that, to address the challenges of social coexistence, instruments of integration are needed – i.e., places for interaction, as well as social policies to support people in staying in the neighbourhood or escaping poverty, thus combating poverty-related crime and anti-social behaviour[11]. These are, of course, simplified models of these narratives. In reality, both more radical[12] and more compromising versions of these narratives exist. However, the aim here is not to analyse these different narratives in detail, but rather to recognise that the public debate in and around the neighbourhood is dominated by them. The

[8] The newspaper provides this data for the postal code 10152 which quite precisely fits the neighbourhood.
[9] See, for instance, the 'ethnographic' research done for the Tonite projcet: https://tonite.eu/ricerca-etnografica/ (Last access: October 2024).
[10] See, for instance, the website of the 'United associations and committees of Porta Palazzo' http://ascoriunitiportapalazzo.blogspot.com (Last access: October 2024), a group that was in favour of the displacement of the poor part of the flea market, as well as of projects of urban transformation which 'clean up' the neighbourhood.
[11] See, for instance: https://www.fondazioneportapalazzo.org/manifesto/ (Last access: October 2024). This is not to imply that the behaviour of these groups is necessarily antisocial. But it should be recognised, at least, that some behaviours, from abandoning waste in public space, over catcalling, to armed street fights between gangs, are considered as antisocial by other inhabitants.
[12] A third narrative, for instance, opposes gentrification radically, including any attempts to improve the neighbourhood's quality of life and rejects any collaboration with the municipality. Also in the 'degradation narrative' one can differentiate between a radical one, with more explicitly racist undertones, and a more moderate one (e.g. in a research for the Tonite project, see footnote 9), in which unwanted presences remain as unidentified shadows and the focus is on a perspective of urban renewal that only implicitly points at their expulsion: through the occupation of public space by other, often whiter, but even more importantly, wealthier bodies that may be integrated into domesticated versions of nightlife.

conflictual debate between these narratives is also represented in the graffiti slogans that cover the neighbourhood's walls (Bragaglia, 2024). A significant implication of these narratives is that the 'degradation narrative' promotes and welcomes the ongoing trend of gentrification in the neighbourhood, while the 'multiculturalism narrative' opposes it. This applies to the social movements in the neighbourhood. At the same time though, the large real-estate projects in the area promote a distinct narrative of authenticity, in which multiculturalism is a superficial characteristic that can be commodified and can therefore become an instrument of gentrification, also in alliance with a narrative of degradation.

This description aligns well with the characterisation made by Mayer (2013) of neoliberal urbanism and its consequences: surveillance and securitisation, combined with creative city policies, which point towards exclusion and gentrification, enacted through city marketing and real estate investments. In Porta Palazzo, a trend of gentrification can indeed be identified through multiple signals, the most explicit being the promotion of several large real estate projects that aim at a sophisticated clientele, whether middle-class Turin residents, tourists, or students (see Figure 2). Furthermore, in and around the market of Porta Palazzo, a process of foodification – i.e., gentrification through food as a tool of social distinction – has been observed (Bourlessas et al., 2022).

Three of the large real estate projects in the area are particularly prominent and utilise the neighbourhood as a key selling point, depicting it as 'authentic', a typical narrative of gentrification processes (Semi & Tonetta, 2021; Zukin, 2009). The first is a store from a chain of food markets, *Mercato Centrale.* It claims to be a place to 'rediscover the historic role of the market as a destination, a meeting place, something to explore, open to the city'[13], and is located in the midst of the traditional market of Porta Palazzo – as if the historical market itself was uncapable of being a place of meeting and exploration, as if this bustling market, frequented daily by a diverse array of people, was not open to the city. The second example is a branch of the luxury hostel chain *Combo*. They assert, 'a city is only as interesting as its neighbourhoods. That's why we transformed a historic firehouse in (...) Porta Palazzo. (...) Perhaps we were also inspired by the burst of spice that is Europe's largest, multi-ethnic market'[14]. In this case the market of Porta Palazzo appears valuable only insofar as it provides an exotic thrill to visitors, helping justify the cost of staying at *Combo*. Finally, a costly student residence and hotel in construction nearby, *The Social Hub*, claims, 'we're the hub of the next generation of changemakers from students to professionals, from global nomads to local influencers, all those who want to learn and grow, and make society better'[15] – a narrative in which social change appears entirely compatible with capitalist conditions – and sells a spot in a shared room in Bologna (rates for Turin are not available yet) at €800 a month, significantly above market rents in the area, clearly targeting students wealthier than the residents of Porta Palazzo and Aurora. These are just some of the larger projects, as illustrated in Figure 2. Another crucial transformation has been the displacement of the poorer part of the weekly flea market Balon from the neighbourhood to a much more peripheral area. The mobilisation against this expulsion has also been a rare occasion of politicized protest by one of the marginalised groups in the neighbourhood: Balon street vendors, who are predominantly migrants.

This ongoing transformation over the last five to ten years[16] has not been guided by an official project of urban renewal or regeneration; only some newspaper articles and analyses by

[13] https://www.mercatocentrale.com/who-we-are/ (Last access: August 2023).
[14] https://thisiscombo.com/location/combo-torino/ (Last access: August 2023).
[15] https://www.thesocialhub.co/ (Last access: August 2023).
[16] In earlier phases, there has been such an official project, transforming, for instance, decades ago, the

activists have pieced together the puzzle of this transformation – and there have been some declarations by municipal officials on those occasions[17]. Nonetheless, this process can be understood as consistent with a city-wide 'gentrification strategy' in Turin's post-industrial transformation, as discussed by Bolzoni and Semi (2023). These projects have reportedly contributed to a rise in real estate values, an increase in tourism (and relative tourism rentals) in the area (Semi & Tonetta, 2021), and, consequently, to the expulsion of residents who struggle to find a home or are being evicted (Bolzoni & Semi, 2023; Cabodi et al., 2020). This particularly affects migrant families with children, as evidenced by the experiences gained by the community foundation within the context of a support service for residents facing eviction or difficulties in accessing housing[18]. Such a process of expulsion seems to have a favourable environment in a centrally located neighbourhood with relatively low real estate values, a built environment often in disrepair, and migrants frequently living in precarious and exploitative conditions without rental contracts – all against a global backdrop of financialisation of housing (Harvey, 2013) and tourism growth which makes real estate investments easily profitable (Krähmer & Santangelo, 2018).

At the same time, there are signs of resilience and resistance to gentrification (Lees et al., 2018) in the neighbourhood: the city in general has a slow real estate market, making it potentially more difficult to promote gentrification in a new neighbourhood while others (San Salvario, Vanchiglia) are still undergoing gentrification. Additionally, while tourism in Turin has been growing, it has started from a very low level. Anecdotical evidence of resilience to gentrification is the fact that the café of the *Mercato Centrale* appears to be frequented more often by families with migrant backgrounds resting during their shopping at the street market than by middle- or upper-class residents or tourists. This suggests that the project may not have fully succeeded in attracting wealthier consumers and partly relies on those who visit the market every day. Furthermore, the construction of *The Social Hub* has recently been delayed by two years[19].

In summary, this section has depicted a neighbourhood facing numerous socio-economic challenges related to poverty, amid ongoing transformations dominated by a narrative that views their solution as a 'clean-up'. An alternative narrative prioritises social and spatial justice, recognising social value in diversity and aiming to preserve it. The debate in the neighbourhood often revolves around these two narratives. In the long run, however, it may be short-sighted to base strategies for social and spatial justice solely on evidence from the neighbourhood itself, without considering how these might connect to the broader socio-ecological challenges outlined above (Knuth et al., 2020). Reactivating older models of social policies would be problematic not only because they were criticised by earlier urban social movements for their paternalistic character (Mayer, 2013) but also because they were based on the redistribution of the surpluses of a globally unsustainable mechanism of economic growth.

neighbourhood on the other side of the market, called Porta Palazzo before, Quadrilatero Romano now, see Semi (2015).

[17] For instance in this newspaper article: https://torino.corriere.it/economia/17_novembre_28/ostello-lusso-osterie-slow-food-cosi-porta-palazzo-cambiera-pelle-77d86ffc-d417-11e7-b070-a687676d1181.shtml (Last access: October 2024).

[18] https://www.fondazioneportapalazzo.org/portfolio/la-comunita-e-di-casa/ (Last access: September 2024).

[19] https://www.torinoggi.it/2024/03/26/leggi-notizia/argomenti/attualita-8/articolo/student-hotel-a-ponte-mosca-rinviato-lavvio-dei-lavori-cantiere-solo-nel-2026.html (Last access: September 2024).

The Porta Palazzo Community Foundation: merits and shortcomings of an instrument to influence neighbourhood change from below

In the context described so far, I now turn to the role of the *Fondazione di Comunità Porta Palazzo* (FCPP). The FCPP was founded in November 2020 after a year of collective work by a group of neighbourhood activists and associations[20] who had started to collaborate in the fight against the expulsion of the poorer section of the flea market Balon. Losing this fight led to the idea of creating the community foundation. Adopting the form of a community foundation has been a sort of 'legal hacking' (Micciarelli, 2022), using a legal structure that could easily attract financial support. Indeed, this process has been economically sustained – though not influenced in its content (at least not directly[21]) – by the powerful *Fondazione di Compagnia di San Paolo*, often criticised in local activist circles for its non-democratic governance and excessive concentration of power. The FCPP is considered by its members[22] as an institution built to influence neighbourhood change from below through the direct development of projects, the support of other organisations in Porta Palazzo and Aurora and political agency. Its aim is to improve living conditions in the neighbourhood for everyone, with particular attention to marginalised groups, combating gentrification, and contributing to maintain the economic accessibility of the area, which is seen as crucial for the neighbourhood's multicultural social mix. In this section I want to discuss if and how far the FCPP is able to contribute to the right to the ecological city; to an urban degrowth agenda that aims for an ecologically sustainable transformation of the neighbourhood, while contrasting gentrification. While the organisation has not explicitly adopted such an agenda, I argue that some of its relevant actions support it.

After four years of existence, the FCPP has shown both ups and downs. On the downside, the opening of the group of founders and the collective processes of decision-making to other neighbourhood inhabitants has been limited compared to initial ambitions, and the group does not reflect the neighbourhood's social and cultural diversity: all active members until recently were white and can mostly be defined as middle-class. Only very recently some representatives of migrant communities and their associations are in the process of becoming part of the foundation. This shortcoming can be partly attributed to the difficulties of carrying on the founding process during the pandemic, as well as to the relational and communicational challenges of including people from very different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds in collective decision-making processes that employ specific instruments and languages. Another shortcoming is the ongoing economic dependence on project funding, which largely derives from the *Compagnia di San Paolo*.

On the upside, important achievements have been made, including the re-opening of a long-closed public space: a garden at the centre of the neighbourhood, the *Giardino Pellegrino* (see Figure 3). This reopening has been funded both by a crowdfunding campaign and a contribution from the EU-funded municipal project Tonite. Due to this latter link, some have

[20] See the foundation's website for more details: https://www.fondazioneportapalazzo.org/chi-siamo/ (Last access: September 2024).
[21] By 'not directly' I mean that there have been no direct attempts by *Compagnia di San Paolo* to tell us what to do but that to gain funding, provided through public calls for projects, it has been necessary to adopt at least certain wordings or terminologies: for instance referring in projects to sustainable development or social innovation, in contrast to a more development-critical post- or degrowth terminology. I would argue that we have managed so far to avoid that this substantially influenced the definition of our targets or strategies but readers should certainly be aware of my situated perspective.
[22] See the foundation's manifesto, written collectively during the process of setting up the FCPP: https://www.fondazioneportapalazzo.org/manifesto/ (Last access: February 2024).

criticised the reopening of the space as part of the 'cleaning-up' of the neighbourhood[23]. In reality, though, since its opening, the space has been used by a diverse range of social groups, including those considered 'unwanted presences' by the degradation narrative, such as migrants with low income and homeless people.

Figure 3. *Collective work to re-open the Giardino Pellegrino (credits: FCPP)*

A second achievement has been the creation of a social fund for families in need, in collaboration with a large network (*Coordinamento Aurora*) of other associations and institutions in the neighbourhood. This partly compensates for the current lack of diversity within the *FCPP* itself, as the *Coordinamento* is also a forum for debate about the future of the neighbourhood, in which migrant communities are among the protagonists. Furthermore, there is an ongoing project to build the first Community Land Trust (CLT) in Italy. Finally, there are attempts to establish a solidary renewable energy community, aiming also at providing affordable energy to low-income residents.

[23] See for example this article by Francesco Migliaccio (an activist and ethnographic researcher in the neighbourhood with whom we collaborated closely in the initial phase of the opposition to the removal of the poor part of the flea market but who has then started to criticise our availability to dialogue with the municipality and is part of what I have defined at the beginning as the more radical social movement in opposition to gentrification) in which he associates the opening of the garden with the expulsion of people living in the street: https://napolimonitor.it/di-fioriere-ostili-e-di-filantropi-riflessioni-e-immagini-dalla-dora-di-torino/ (Last access: October 2024) and see my response in which I argue that these events are unrelated: https://www.fondazioneportapalazzo.org/agire-nelle-trasformazioni-urbane-tra-coerenza-contraddizioni-porta-palazzo-torino/ (Last access: October 2024).

Two examples from the neighbourhood can illustrate the challenges arising from considering both the social and the ecological dimensions of transformation: the debate about a pedestrianisation project and the foundation's housing project.

The first example concerns a project called *Borgo Dora Camminabile*[24], promoted by another group of residents who campaigned for and obtained the pedestrianisation of some central streets of the neighbourhood. This project (see Figure 4) can be seen as a positive contribution to socio-ecological transformation: less pollution from cars, more public space. At the same time, it has been promoted with a depoliticised agenda that is careless about the socio-economic context in which this project has been realised and does not consider its possible unintended consequences – pedestrianisation can easily become a tool of gentrification, making the area more attractive for visitors, and the pedestrianised streets are located precisely in the part of the neighbourhood already more subject to gentrification, characterised by a 'picturesque' built heritage. The promoters have referred to an increase in tourism and visits from residents from other parts of Turin as an argument in favour of the project. Furthermore, the project has also guaranteed accessibility by car, not aiming to reduce car use and ownership as such; an external parking space has been opened in a square where, a few years earlier, part of the now-expelled poor flea market took place. The community foundation has initially taken a distant approach to the project due to these conflicting arguments. Moreover, the pedestrianisation has been variously opposed by residents, mainly criticising the closure to cars. However, once realised, in the context of its work on public space, initiatives have been promoted by the FCPP to bring activities to this new public space. In particular, local school children have been involved, aiming at a more inclusive use of the newly created public space, rather than mainly targeting afternoon *flâneurs*.

***Figure 4**. Activity with school children in the pedestrianized area promoted by FCPP (credits: FCPP)*

The second example is the foundation's ongoing housing project (see Figure 5). The objective is to take a piece of real estate – recently bought thanks to ca. 80 social loans – off the market, renovate it and ensure it for long-term social housing under collective control through the instrument of the Community Land Trust (CLT), building on decades of experiences in the

[24] https://www.facebook.com/groups/315190176475887/ (Last access: September 2023).

USA and Belgium (Vercellone, 2020). The CLT entails the separation of land ownership from building ownership (apartments in this case), in combination with a ground lease contract. The ownership of the land will be held by the collectively governed foundation, which will include stakeholders from the neighbourhood alongside residents, while apartments are sold to families with children from low-income backgrounds (mostly migrant families), who will be involved through a participatory process. This target group has been identified because families with children face particular difficulties in accessing housing (see above). The project will help them guaranteeing a housing cost of approximately one-third of their monthly income (as the sale price of housing is lowered by 30-40% thanks to the separation of land ownership) and facilitate access to mortgages.

Figure 5. *Party on occasion of the acquisition of the building in Corso Giulio Cesare 34 for the future CLT (credits: FCPP)*

Future speculation is impeded through limits on resale in the ground lease contract: families will be able to sell their apartments only at fixed prices to other families meeting the same socio-economic criteria on the foundation's waiting list. This mechanism allows to guarantee the social scope of the project to be maintained in the long run, impeding a speculative use and (re)commodification of the land and housing units, thus contrasting gentrification (Choi et al., 2018). The principle of sharing here will be achieved in relation to land ownership, which will no longer be controlled by the market and individual accumulation but rather by collective governance through the foundation. Furthermore, there will be some shared spaces and facilities (a common room and terrace, a common laundry facility). It is reuse as an existing building is renovated. Sufficiency can be seen in the fact that housing units are designed to meet the families' needs while being as small as possible, also to ensure economic feasibility.

Discussion and conclusions

The case of Aurora and Porta Palazzo and the role of the FCPP within it speaks in many ways to the questions posed at the beginning of this article. I have described the neighbourhood as a place of intersection of global – or better, multiscalar – socio-ecological and local – also multiscalar – socio-economic challenges. This has, hopefully, helped illustrate the importance of considering these intersections in both theoretical and practical/political terms: the need for thinking about a right to the ecological city, argued theoretically in the second section, and reflected place-specifically by the discussion in the previous section. Nevertheless, developing strategies for the right to the ecological city in the practice of a changing neighbourhood is easier said than done. Strategies to mitigate the climate crisis are characterised by a rhetoric of rapid and urgent change, while fights against gentrification sometimes have a conservative character, aiming to maintain low rents and thus are often critical of changes that improve the conditions of the neighbourhood (also in ecological terms), as these changes in free real estate markets can easily drive up real estate values, contributing to displacement, intentionally or not. I have discussed how, in the case study, different actors assign different priorities to local social goals and global ecological goals.

Social issues (whether those favouring or opposing displacement) seem to be considered with greater urgency by local social actors, at least in the context of a neighbourhood already undergoing transformation, while ecological concerns often seem far away. Even when the importance of both goals is recognised in theory, as by the community foundation FCPP, it is not easy to transfer the awareness about these intersections to concrete projects. The CLT, while responding to an immediate need for housing, relates to the principles of sufficiency, reuse, and sharing, and it fosters the right to the ecological city as it actively includes marginalised groups in the process. The pedestrianisation project, on the other hand, certainly entails a logic of sharing limited public space and it implies the reuse of space. It only follows the logic of sufficiency in a limited way, as car usage and ownership are only superficially addressed. Most importantly, the governance process leading to the project has been limited to a few individuals. The genesis of this project was guided more by an aesthetic desire for the enjoyment of the neighbourhood than by broader attention to socio-ecological transformation. The social dimension of this project is only slowly entering the picture through recent attempts to work towards an inclusive use of this new public space.

There are evident and complex challenges in promoting an agenda that favours both the improvement of the neighbourhood and the reduction of ecological impacts while also combating gentrification. The most apparent risks are, on one side, unintentionally promoting (ecological) gentrification, and on the other side, failing to fully capture the need and potential for socio-ecological transformation. As challenging as it may be, I contend that fighting for the right to the ecological city is necessary, as limiting actions to one side of the equation entails crucial contradictions. Not considering the social impacts of urban sustainability transformation can contribute to gentrification and render policies ineffective in ecological terms. Conversely, avoiding urban sustainability transformations would mean ignoring both the ecological impacts (and related injustices) at the global level and, locally, the particular vulnerability to ecological risks of the inhabitants of a neighbourhood like Porta Palazzo and Aurora.

The projects discussed above suggest that it is possible to partly overcome these contradictions when forms of collective and locally negotiated agency are achieved – whether in relation to the use of public space or the ownership of land and the decisions about its use. To be sure these contradictions can never be overcome in isolation or at a single scale. In this context, decommodification and thus collective control over urban land (Bauman et al., 2024),

as promoted by the CLT project, avoids that improvements from below are captured by ground rents and real estate values and involuntarily contribute to (ecological) gentrification. Decommodification is therefore a crucial tool for a just ecological urban transformation and cannot be the exclusive responsibility of a third-sector organisation. The experiments that an actor like the FCPP promotes can be a relevant starting point, but other actors at different scales, including the state, must contribute to making the right to the ecological city a reality. Regarding the scientific contribution of this paper, I am aware that it derives primarily from a practical endeavour that has only secondarily become an occasion for theoretical reflection. Therefore, it would be desirable to see further research on the right to the ecological city that strengthens its interconnections with the broad range of literatures that could reinforce this concept.

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Reclaiming public spaces: Radical alternatives to the exclusionary project of rightsizing policies

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Under the growing pressure of financial markets, the shrinking of public resources and services have been justified by discourses on inefficiency or redundancy in cities adhering to a dominant growth paradigm in urban development and planning, within the framework of austerity policies. Related rightsizing policies are then identifiable as forms of smart shrinkage and can be described as exclusionary projects in a context of increasing social polarisation. In response to these developments, groups of inhabitants have begun employing reclaiming strategies for the co-/self-management of public spaces and services, countering the conversion of common, collective, and state forms of property rights into exclusive private property rights. While these initiatives may, on one hand, be driven by the mainstream rhetoric of the citizen entrepreneurship, social market and "Big Society," which often align with neoliberal frameworks emphasising privatization and individual responsibility, on the other hand, these forms of "subsidiarity with the state" emerged from a counter rhetoric rooted in solidarity, social sustainability and urban justice. This counter rhetoric advocates for collective, community-driven approaches challenging the logic of privatisation and for more equitable and sustainable planning models. Building on these reflections, the article seeks to analyse a paradigmatic case of resistance against privatization through the creation of a radical alternative social project for the self-management of public spaces and service delivery. By examining the compelling case of the illegal occupations and subsequent legalisations of the former hospital Bethanien in Berlin, the article explores how this experience of self-management demonstrated effective alternatives to the reduction of public spaces through the implementation of bottom-up practices aligned with the principles of degrowth.

Keywords: grassroot urbanism, public space privatization, smart shrinking, austerity, urban degrowth, Berlin

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Introduction

This article analyses the illegal occupation and later legalisation of the South wing of the Bethanien complex in Berlin. It explores how organised citizens proposed and implemented alternative strategies for the co-/self-management of public spaces and services, thereby challenging the logic of privatisation. It argues that grassroots resistance to rightsizing and privatisation—exemplified by the emblematic Bethanien case—represents a radical alternative to growth-centric planning paradigms. Drawing on concepts such as distributed agency, "horizontal subsidiarity" and degrowth, the article points to the ways in which community-led practices can contribute to more equitable and sustainable models of urban planning.

The analysed case study represents a case of contested public space where urban memory, planning provisions, and socio-political claims collide, over the conversion of common properties into exclusive private assets. It also illustrates how the discourse of smart shrinkage has been strategically employed to legitimize the privatization of public infrastructures as part of broader growth-oriented urban strategies. The analysis highlights how the same, apparently redundant public asset—the Bethanien complex in Berlin—was treated in two distinct ways in local urban policy debates at different historical moments, reflecting shifts in the dominant economic paradigms before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall. In 1970, a demolition plan was proposed for the Bethanien hospital, justified by population loss and outmigration linked to the construction of the Berlin Wall (Bader & Bialluch, 2009). However, due to strong local resistance against the destruction of an historical building, the complex was preserved and eventually transformed into a public asset. By the early 2000s, the same Bethanien complex was once again at the centre of urban policy debates—this time shaped by strategies aimed at managing urban decline within a broader context of neoliberal urban development and austerity measures (Aalbers & Bernt, 2018). In the case of Berlin, while the 1970s were marked by substantial public investment, the 2000s brought a markedly different scenario, characterized by public disinvestment, the progressive privatization of public assets and services, and a concerted effort to attract private capital flows. Local decision-making has been significantly shaped, since the 2000s on, by budgetary adjustments imposed by the national government, largely in response to the city's high levels of debt—an outcome partly attributable to costly urban development projects of the 1990s designed to attract national and international capital (Marcuse, 1998). Within this neoliberal framework, underutilized or neglected public properties (Bontje, 2004) were increasingly reframed as opportunities for capital accumulation. These strategies typically involve the relocation, reduction or privatization of public and social services, along with the privatization of the spaces where these services are situated. This was particularly true in areas like Kreuzberg East—where the case is situated—which were targeted for actual or potential gentrification.

Andrej Holm's work (2011, 2013, 2014) provides a crucial foundation for understanding how the privatization of public housing and land in Berlin has facilitated the mainstreaming of gentrification as an urban development strategy. He traces this shift to broader changes in planning paradigms, property regimes, and post-reunification economic restructuring. Particularly after the city's financial crisis in the early 2000s, policy decisions enabled the large-scale sell-off of municipal housing stock, reducing affordability and opening space for speculative investment. In neighbourhoods like Prenzlauer Berg, Kreuzberg, and Neukölln, these dynamics intensified displacement pressures and reconfigured urban space.

Against this backdrop, the resistance to the privatization of the Bethanien complex becomes a key case for understanding how these urban conflicts unfold in a wider political economy of urban transformation, where privatizations, smart shrinking and gentrification are no longer an exception, but a strategic orientation embedded in neoliberal urban governance. Additionally, the analysis of the radical actions (including squatting, occupation, organized protest and self-management) resisting rightsizing policies and its side-effects, offers a comparative political economy perspective while integrating a social production framework (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1980). Furthermore, the conflict-driven citizenship in the analysed case, through its experimentation and implementation of diverse forms of radical participation (De Nardis & Antonazzo, 2017; Kusiak, 2024), highlights the constructive and planning potential that participation can embody (Rossini & Bianchi, 2019).

Sheila Foster (2006) argues that through networks of trust, community engagement, and shared resource management social capital fosters urban commons that help revitalize distressed and undervalued neighbourhoods, generating and realizing value in urban contexts. Ongoing experiments in self-organisation and empowerment—such as the insurgent grassroots practices illustrated in the case study—challenge “profit-based urbanisation” by advancing alternative, radically democratic, and sustainable forms of urbanism (Brenner et al., 2012, p. 177). Grounded in the notion of a “city for people, not for profit,” these forms of social innovation can act as catalysts for transformative urban development. They confront entrenched institutional practices and open up spaces for grassroots initiatives to thrive (Moulaert et al., 2007). Within this framework, the concept of distributed agency (Healey, 2022) becomes essential to understanding how such processes unfold and gain relevance in the realms of community planning and local governance. This perspective foregrounds a decentralised view of agency—emphasising how it is dispersed across multiple networks and actors, each playing a role in shaping collective decision-making. The analysis of concrete cases of successful grassroots practices and experimentation with alternative governance approaches to resist and oppose privatization processes can help challenge traditional top-down planning by advocating for more inclusive and collaborative governance models.

By examining grassroots alternative solutions grounded in forms of “horizontal subsidiarity” between informal and formal actors, this article explores how such models of socio-economic governance can resonate with degrowth principles—rethinking cities to move away from endless growth and toward a more sustainable, equitable, and well-being-focused approach. These initiatives challenge the growth bias embedded in planning by demonstrating that “shrinking cities could do better with reduced resources” (Aalbers & Bernt, 2018, p. 2). In this light, Kraker et al. (2024) pose the question of whether shrinking cities might serve as testing grounds for the practical application of degrowth’s radical sustainability principles. Responding to this, Hermans et al. (2024) offer an optimistic perspective, suggesting that degrowth-oriented planning practices can be conceptualized as experimental approaches. Such practices aim to harness the conditions of urban shrinkage to foster social and ecological well-being through collaborative learning and innovation.

At the same time, Demaria et al. (2013) argue that dominant growth-driven rationales in urban planning often fail to engage with the pressing social, economic, and ecological limits communities face (see also Bailey et al., 2010; North, 2010). Lehtinen (2018) reinforces this critique by linking degrowth to the promotion of autonomy, relocalisation, and a dismantling of economic dependencies (Latouche, 2010; Kallis et al., 2015). Importantly, urban movements opposing austerity and rightsizing policies reveal the multi-scalar nature of these struggles, highlighting how local territories are embedded in and shaped by global capital flows. This

raises broader questions about the need to challenge the mainstream economy itself as a driver of both urban shrinkage and socio-spatial exclusion (Aalbers & Bernt, 2018).

After this introduction, Section 2 situates the case within broader debates on how neoliberal restructuring influences rightsizing policies and resistance to them. Section 3 examines the national and local contexts that have enabled or justified such strategies, particularly in relation to austerity and the privatisation of public goods. Section 4 outlines the methodology adopted for the empirical analysis. Section 5 presents the case study, focusing on how organised resistance to privatisation projects in Berlin has articulated bottom-up alternatives. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the transformative potential of these initiatives and discusses their relevance for rethinking planning policies through the lens of degrowth and sustainability.

Right sizing exclusionary project and the emergence of forms of resistance

Trust, Rightsizing, and Privatization

As David Harvey (2012) argues in *Rebel Cities*, contemporary urban spaces are increasingly shaped by conflicts rooted in dispossession and exclusionary dynamics. The commodification of collective resources pits global capital interests against the social needs of local communities, resulting in the privatization of public assets, the displacement of low-income residents, and growing socio-spatial inequalities. In the wake of the global financial crisis and overlapping systemic shocks, these tensions have exposed the reciprocal relationship between planning and crisis (Ponzini, 2016), further fuelling public distrust and disillusionment with institutional planning frameworks.

This sense of exclusion is reinforced by the persistence of rigid, non-negotiable *master narratives*—such as austerity urbanism, smart shrinking, and growth-centric planning—that continue to dominate urban agendas. As a result, urban development strategies are increasingly perceived as bureaucratic, disconnected from community needs, and aligned with powerful interests. Discretionary planning practices often bypass democratic mechanisms, consolidating elite-driven priorities and side-lining grassroots demands (Swain & Tait, 2007; Kwok et al., 2018; Swyngedouw et al., 2002). These exclusionary dynamics become particularly evident in the policy framework of “rightsizing,” which exemplifies how growth-centric and austerity-driven narratives are operationalized in urban governance under the guise of pragmatic planning.

Initially framed as a pragmatic solution to population loss and disinvestment, rightsizing has often reinforced the neoliberal logic of austerity and privatization. Narratives of actual or anticipated urban decline are commonly linked to economic stagnation, state deregulation, and the erosion of socio-economic governance (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Harvey, 2001; Peck & Tickell, 2002). Aalbers and Bernt (2018) argue that, while rightsizing policies are seen by some as pragmatic, they frequently deepen socio-economic inequalities, marginalizing low-income and minority groups. Rooted in neoliberal urbanisation, these policies typically focus on downsizing infrastructure, privatizing public spaces, and repurposing land, prioritising profit-driven objectives. Haase et al. (2014) discuss how urban shrinkage and austerity programs can create critical moments in the governance of contemporary cities. They argue that shrinkage is not merely a demographic or economic issue but also a governance challenge. Their findings underscore how urban shrinkage, under conditions of austerity, reveals structural tensions and can intensify poverty and governance pressures. Ferreira et al. (2024) investigates how pro-growth urban policies—specifically those linked to real estate speculation—can paradoxically induce urban shrinkage, using the city of Coimbra, Portugal,

as a case study. Contrary to dominant theories that view urban shrinkage as a consequence of insufficient economic growth, the authors argue that urban decline in Coimbra is driven by policies aimed at promoting growth through real estate investment. The commodification of housing, incentivized by national and EU fiscal policies, results in soaring housing prices, displacing younger and vulnerable residents to peripheral areas. This phenomenon is described as a form of induced smart shrinking, in which the state and local authorities benefit from rising property values—through taxes and fees—while disregarding the social fallout.

In many cities, including Berlin (Holm, 2011, 2013, 2014), rightsizing policies have provided new spatial fixes for capital investment (Aalbers & Bernt, 2018) and are frequently framed as an exclusionary strategy (Bernt, 2009; Rhodes & Russo, 2013). These programmes often target public properties and services, leading to forms of alienation that disproportionately impact low-income and ethnic-minority neighbourhoods (Aalbers, 2014; Brandes Gratz 1989; Wallace and Wallace 1998). This can further justify dynamics that are defined by Harvey (2004) as “accumulation by dispossession,” where public resources and spaces are commodified and privatized. As cities restructure to attract investment and enhance competitiveness, public spaces are transformed into commodified assets, accessible only to those who can afford them (Smith, 1996). Furthermore, the prioritisation of flagship projects, such as waterfront developments and cultural landmarks, channels public resources into spaces designed for tourists and investors, while neglecting the everyday needs of local communities (Colomb, 2017).

This process further marginalizes vulnerable populations, diminishing public spaces as sites of democratic engagement and collective ownership. Patterns of “planned shrinkage,” including budget cuts and service reductions, disproportionately harm low-income neighbourhoods, exacerbating inequalities (Wallace & Wallace, 1998). Additionally, “classical strategies” aimed at attracting businesses and middle-class residents often divert resources from supporting liveability and social welfare, further destabilizing vulnerable populations (Bernt et al., 2014; Pallagst et al., 2017). In the U.S., rightsizing has been criticized for fostering “shrinkage machines” that prioritise market reconfiguration over social equity, enabling predatory capital accumulation (Hackworth, 2015). By contrast, European cities, supported by centralised funding structures, tend to experience less severe impacts compared to U.S. cities reliant on local property taxes (Aalbers & Bernt, 2018). Yet, in both U.S. and European cases, rightsizing policies are marked by their role in reshaping markets, consolidating services in dense areas while neglecting less profitable ones. This dynamic underscore the inherently exclusionary nature of such policies, which frequently result in gentrification and displacement.

Insights from the analysis of Berlin’s “interim spaces” by Colomb (2017) provide an additional layer to understanding rightsizing policies. Temporary uses of vacant urban spaces, initially framed as innovative and community-oriented solutions to address underutilized land (SenStadt, 2007), often become co-opted by market-driven logics. The trajectory of these spaces highlights tensions between grassroots initiatives and their incorporation into formal urban policies, where temporary uses are exploited to enhance the marketability of areas targeted for redevelopment (Colomb, 2012). This dynamic exemplifies how rightsizing can serve as a prelude to gentrification, with interim uses and forms of transition urbanism acting as tools to attract investment while marginalizing original users and communities (Mould, 2014).

Yet, in contexts where institutions have failed to adequately plan the future of decommissioned spaces, entire districts, or even economic sectors, bottom-up initiatives have often assumed a crucial role in reclaiming and repurposing abandoned areas. These experiences illustrate the capacity of informal actors to realize collective projects, responding to a growing demand

for participation. These "voids," precisely because they are "not fixed to a single interpretation or intention," have the potential to become genuinely public spaces, where conflicting interests are continuously negotiated and no definitive resolution is ever reached (Borret, 2009). Sheridan (2007) defines indeterminate territories as "any area, space, or building where the city's normal forces of control have not shaped how we perceive, use, and occupy them" (p. 98). This understanding points to a perception of "freedom of opportunity" in indeterminate spaces, where the low degree of institutional determination does not limit—but instead enhances—the potential embedded in the vacant site (de Solà-Morales, 1995). If we consider these indeterminate urban areas as places where multiple interests and desires are negotiated, we begin to see how power relations—shaped by political, economic, and social dynamics—play a fundamental role in determining whose visions, needs, and claims prevail.

This section helps to convey that rightsizing is not merely a reaction to decline, but often a strategic tool for neoliberal restructuring. It highlights how austerity and market logic are embedded in urban policy under the guise of efficiency, while actually facilitating exclusion, displacement, and spatial inequality. Furthermore, the concept of indeterminate urban spaces offers a critical lens through which to examine the contradictions of smart shrinking that can act as pretexts for future exclusion. Bottom-up initiatives in urban voids reveal the capacity of informal actors to produce collective value outside institutional frameworks. However, as these spaces are increasingly instrumentalized in market-driven redevelopment strategies, their original social function is marginalized. This tension highlights how smart shrinking policies risk co-opting grassroots energy while reinforcing exclusionary dynamics, ultimately subordinating spatial indeterminacy to capital-driven urban renewal agendas.

Grassroots Creativity, City marketing and the "Big Society" discourse

Colomb (2012) highlights how temporary uses of space in Berlin during the 2000s became a focal point for understanding the intersections between grassroots creativity, city marketing, and neoliberal urbanism. Initially arising from bottom-up initiatives to reclaim underutilized spaces, these practices were later absorbed into the "creative city" discourse, which reframed temporary uses as strategic tools for urban branding and economic development. For instance, the integration of these practices into city marketing campaigns allowed Berlin to position itself as a hub of innovation and creativity, while simultaneously paving the way for the displacement of the very communities and activities that initially made these spaces vibrant. Novy and Colomb (2013) explore how urban social movements in these two German cities have responded to the rise of neoliberal urban policies, particularly those that promote the "creative city" agenda. By critically examining how these policies, often framed as fostering cultural vibrancy and innovation, contributed to processes of gentrification, displacement, and the commodification of urban space, they highlight the ways in which local residents, activists, and grassroots organizations have mobilized to contest these developments, reclaim urban spaces, and articulate alternative visions for city life.

Mayer (2013) further highlights how neoliberal urbanism has absorbed activist principles into its agenda. Public-private partnerships and entrepreneurial governance frameworks co-opt these principles, offering a veneer of inclusivity while continuing to prioritise the interests of elites. Forms of solidarity and resistance have often been incorporated into market-driven frameworks. The Big Society[1] discourse, for example, reframed collective action and voluntary

[1] The Big Society was a socio-political concept for a redefinition of the relationship between citizens and the state. Prominent during the first 15 years of the 21st century, it was developed by the populist strategist Steve Hilton. It aimed to merge free market economics with a conservative paternalist vision of the social contract, drawing inspiration from the civic conservatism of David Willetts in the 1990s. The concept significantly shaped the 2010

efforts as substitutes for state-provided services within the context of austerity (LSE Politics and Policy, 2011). This approach is based on the premise that the "big state" has not been effective and is economically unsustainable and sought to redefine governance by decentralising power and encouraging civic engagement. The intention behind it is to move from a culture where people look to officials and government to solve their problems, to a culture where people solve the problems they face themselves aided by government.

By promoting local entrepreneurialism and citizen-led initiatives as gap-fillers for shrinking public budgets, this discourse masked the withdrawal of state responsibilities and framed community action within a neoliberal logic. Such co-optation often redirects grassroots energy in implementing local-based solutions, based on sustainability and solidarity into a tool for cost-cutting rather than a pathway to systemic change. Ultimately, these trends can serve to further justify rightsizing policies since these practices are not immune to absorption into the very frameworks they oppose.

Performing de-growth and "the right to the city" through the defence of the commons

As mentioned before, "urban social movements" (Castells, 1983) arise from these tensions, embodying the "right to the city" as a demand for agency over urbanisation processes (Harvey, 2012). These movements resist the commodification of urban spaces, advocating for the reclamation of the urban "commons" (Ostrom, 1990), where governance and resources are managed collectively rather than through market-driven or neoliberal frameworks (Brenner et al., 2012; Harvey, 2012). In this context, interest in the commons—as mechanisms that address responsible resource appropriation while fostering autonomous management and democratic decision-making—has grown significantly in recent years and has taken on new political significance, as highlighted by Di Feliciantonio (2017), contributing to a more radical and progressive understanding of governance mechanisms.

At the heart of these movements lies Lefebvre's (1991) concept of the "right to the city," which calls for a fundamental shift in urban governance to serve the collective needs of residents rather than capitalist interests. It emphasizes limiting commodification in favor of democratic urbanism based on use-value. According to Purcell (2002), this right comprises two core elements: participation—direct involvement in urban decision-making—and appropriation—the ability for residents to shape and transform urban spaces to meet their collective needs.

These movements have proven to seek to reorient urban planning away from growth impulses and toward sustainable practices that emphasise social equity, ecological balance, and community-driven agency. In order to propose viable solutions for the "right to the city" and the commons, the grassroots practices described in this article align with the principles of degrowth movements and reclaim forms of horizontal subsidiarity with the state.

The concept of "degrowth" emerged as a critique of the unsustainable and unequal consequences of economic growth. Gaining prominence in the early 21st century, degrowth has evolved into both a theoretical framework and a grassroots movement focused on

UK Conservative Party general election manifesto and informed the legislative agenda of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government. Its stated objectives included: Empowering communities through localism and devolution; Promoting active participation in community life (volunteerism); Shifting authority from central government to local authorities; Supporting cooperatives, mutuals, charities, and social enterprises; Increasing government transparency by publishing data. https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/download-big-society-look-97a.pdf

ecological and social sustainability (Latouche, 2009; Demaria et al., 2013).[2] It promotes deeper democracy, grassroots action, and equitable wealth redistribution. Among practical applications of degrowth we can mention “distributed agency” as a practical expression of degrowth, particularly through feminist perspectives that redefine agency as emerging from interdependent care relationships that define and fulfil fundamental human needs across time and space, as discussed by Alves de Matos (2024).

As we will see, the concept of *horizontal subsidiarity* offers a concrete institutional pathway for operationalizing degrowth-oriented urban governance counteracting the spread of privatization linked to rightsizing policies. Horizontal subsidiarity is either explicitly codified or implicitly embedded in the governance principles of many European nations. The concept supports the role of civil society and private actors in addressing societal needs, often framed within broader themes of decentralisation, community empowerment, and public-private collaboration. While horizontal subsidiarity is not explicitly mentioned, its principles are indirectly supported by the German model of governance in several ways: the commitment to being a “social federal State” suggests a focus on decentralisation, citizen participation, and support for collective social responsibility; while not specified in Article 20,[3] Germany’s social market economy (*Soziale Marktwirtschaft*) and welfare system incorporate subsidiarity principles, fostering cooperation between State and non-State actors (e.g., civil society organisations, cooperatives, and private institutions) in delivering public services; the principle of subsidiarity in Germany is operationalized through its welfare system (e.g., partnerships with non-governmental organisations, churches, and social institutions), reflecting horizontal subsidiarity in action.

To name another European country, the concept of “subsidiarity” is explicitly mentioned in Article 118 of the Italian Constitution—introduced during the constitutional reform of 2001. The article generally highlights the principle of vertical subsidiarity, while the concept of horizontal subsidiarity is explicitly addressed in its second part: *"The State, regions, metropolitan cities, provinces, and municipalities shall promote the autonomous initiatives of citizens, individually or in association, to carry out activities of general interest, on the basis of the principle of subsidiarity."*

This clause embodies horizontal subsidiarity by emphasising the role of individuals, communities, and private entities in supporting the public interest, often in collaboration with public authorities. It establishes that public authorities should support and collaborate with individuals and civil society groups to enable them to engage in activities that serve the public interest.

As Liu (2020) notes, such actions can gradually become normalized practices facilitated by formal institutions (Haase et al., 2012; Murtagh, 2016). These initiatives bypass conventional plan-making and effectively address urgent needs. They reveal opportunity spaces that challenge the logic of path dependency (Garud & Karnøe 2001; Grillitsch & Sotarauta 2018). Yet, when negotiating bottom-up visions within stakeholder dynamics, it is essential to

[2] Degrowth draws from diverse intellectual streams, including ecological economics, critiques of development, justice, democracy, bioeconomics, and the quest for well-being beyond material consumption. Among the foundational works, Serge Latouche's (2009) *Farewell to Growth* critiques the growth imperative inherent in capitalist economies and advocates for degrowth as a necessary shift toward sustainability and equity. Similarly, Schneider et al. (2010) explore the theoretical underpinnings of degrowth and its potential to address ecological and social crises. Kallis (2011) further advances the discussion by addressing criticisms of the concept and explores its capacity to promote well-being within ecological limits.

[3] The concept of horizontal subsidiarity is present in the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany (*Grundgesetz*), Article 20.

consider that agency can be included or excluded through narratives, visions, and agendas, and these dynamics can shift with local conditions (Liu, 2020). A shift toward governance approaches that integrate distributed agency (Healey, 2007) and social imagination in strategy-making is then the key redefining power dynamics (Albrechts 2004; Alexander 2000).

Berlin between crisis and smart shrinking dynamics

During the 1990s, largely as a result of the East Germany annexation process, Germany experienced massive privatizations. These were framed within a political discourse emphasising the need to reduce the surplus of public properties inherited from the former socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR). This process also aimed to attract foreign companies to invest in the newly privatized entities, thereby fostering the internationalization of the economy (Marcuse, 1998; Häussermann & Strom, 1994; Häussermann, 2003).

Simultaneously, Berlin faced significant economic challenges. The collapse of the city's industrial base—due to the closure of most factories and the cessation of state subsidies that had sustained West Berlin for decades—led to the loss of productive activities in both the eastern and western parts of the city. This, combined with heavy investment in infrastructures, pushed Berlin's finances to a breaking point. However, the spending spree of the 1990s came to an abrupt halt in 2001 due to a large-scale banking scandal involving significant portions of Berlin's political class. The near-bankruptcy of Berlin in 2001 forced the City-State of Berlin (*Land*) to implement severe cuts in public expenditure in an attempt to address its mounting debt. Yet, the debt grew from 80 billion DM, approximately 35 billion euros in 2001 (Hooper, 2001) to approximately 60 billion euros by 2010 (Colomb, 2012).

Under the combined pressures of the federal government, in the 2000s, a second phase of financial restructuring began, the Berlin government launched an unprecedented programme of divestments and privatizations (Calandindes & Grésillon, 2021). This included the sale of housing, gas, electricity, and other assets. Among these measures, the most consequential was the massive sell-off of social housing, urban land, and public companies to private real estate companies and international investment funds, a decision that would have lasting impacts on the city's urban fabric (Colomb, 2012; Holm, 2011, 2013, 2014). Public assets were systematically listed and classified into pools to serve as collateral for third-party investments.

Concurrently, new laws were introduced to reform the local taxation system on public properties. These reforms involved implementing a new property tax and revaluing cadastral values, putting pressure on local administrations to privatize a wide array of public assets (e.g., the *Kalkulatorische Kosten* law introduced in Germany in 2005—see page 14). Furthermore, increasing cuts in public funding, driven by neoliberal restructuring programmes, exacerbated the challenges municipalities faced in maintaining public services. Consequently, privatization of public tasks and entities often became the only perceived viable solution for local governments struggling with mounting financial pressures.

According to the interviewee KFBA 1 (politician from the Green Party and part of the Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg Borough Administration since 2001), after reunification, Berlin was a city with very low rents, a lot of empty spaces and many buildings owned by the State, the Senate of Berlin or the city districts:

> Many were not in use anymore or not needed, like many schools because of the decrease in birth rates. On the other hand, Berlin was—and in part still is—a very poor city, and the city administration had accumulated many debts. That's why the policies in Berlin, after 1989, were

designed to try to gain a better economic situation, for instance, selling public properties.[4]

However, as the large-scale privatization of public spaces reduced access to public resources, grassroots movements emerged, challenging these policies and reviving the debate on the 'right to the city' (Colomb, 2012, 2017; Rossini, 2017; Rossini et al., 2018; Rossini & Bianchi, 2019; see also Kusiak, 2024, on the Deutsche Wohnen & Co. enteignen referendum). Furthermore, since the 1970s, numerous bottom-up initiatives have emerged in Berlin, with urban social movements reclaiming spaces through organized action.

Methodology

Berlin has been selected for this research analysis because it has experienced both urban shrinking dynamics and the application of smart shrinking discourse to urban development strategies. Moreover, it is relevant to mention the special status of Germany's federal system that grants significant independence to the *Länder* (regions / states). In Berlin case, this independence is further reflected in the governance of its boroughs. Berlin's boroughs are managed by Borough Councils (*Bezirksamt*), which enjoy a high degree of independence from the city government due Berlin's unique status as a city-state since 1990. Because Berlin is a "unified community," district offices are not dependent on local government functions but practice. The Borough Council oversees district administration and decides the district's budget, although this budget requires approval from the House of Representatives. Berlins executive body is the Senate of Berlin. Furthermore, in 2004, the city approved the District Administration Act (§ 44-47 – BzVwG), which allows for local referendums (*Burgerbegehren*) to address conflicts related to local policies and development plans.

This research was conducted between 2013 and 2023 using a qualitative interpretative methodology, including participant observations, interviews, and discourse analysis of media sources and legislation (including "A new concept for Bethanien" document). The latter is a comprehensive document that compiles ideas and concepts generated during workshops and meetings organized by the *Initiative for Future Bethanien* group. It outlines concepts developed for the South wing of Bethanien, intended to serve as foundational principles for the property's future development. The analysis of the case study discussed in this paper refers to Chapter 4 of the aforementioned document ("A new concept for Bethanien"), which details the administration of Bethanien, including models of self-government, residents' forum, and sponsorship structures.

I was hosted at the *New Yorck im Bethanien* housing project (an alternative housing strategy for collective living) for two weeks and participated in assemblies and activities in its "public space" over several months. The final interviews for this research were conducted in 2023. For the Berlin case study, the following interviews were conducted: four semi-structured interviews with tenants/activists from the *New Yorck im Bethanien* project (NYB 1, 2, 3, 4) and informal interviews with residents of the house project; informal interviews with individuals involved in the *Initiative for Future Bethanien* project; one semi-structured interview with a key actor from the "Bethanien for all" campaign (Bfa 1); one semi-structured interview with a politician from the Kreuzberg-Friedrichshain Borough Administration (KFBA 1, Green Party); two semi-structured interviews with activists/scholars engaged in action research on housing movements in Berlin in 2013 (Andrej Holm and Armin Kuhn); annual conversation with one of the founders, tenants, and activists involved in the *New Yorck im Bethanien* project.

[4] For population data on Berlin since the 1990s, see Statista: https://www.statista.com/statistics/505892/berlin-population/

The Bethanien: The history of a public space and grassroots resistance to its privatization

The Bethanien complex is located in East Kreuzberg and is surrounded by a large green public square known as MariannenpIatz (Figure 1). Despite its geographical centrality within the city, East Kreuzberg was considered marginal during the Cold War due to its position: “Kreuzberg SO 36 became a pocket extending into the East, bounded on three sides by the Berlin Wall» (Bader, Bialluch, 2005, 93). During the Cold War, the area’s buildings decayed and its marginality made it home to precarious workers, seasonal Turkish workers, radical political activists, students, unemployed people and artists. This unique demographic contributed to the definition of the so-called *Kreuzberg Mischung* (Kreuzberg mix), a term that describes both Kreuzberg’s diverse social fabric and the peculiar mix of commercial and residential activities (Rada, 1997). Additionally, this mix fostered the development of politically and socially alternative and resistant milieus in the area (Störve, 2012).

In particular, as a consequence of the construction of the Berlin Wall, the city experienced a steadily decline in its German population (Miller, 1993). To counteract this trend (Pugh, 2014), the Federal Republic of Germany implemented a continuous stream of subsidies for West Berlin, which remained in place until 1994. These aids were intended to lower business taxes (Störve, 2012) and cover relocation expenses for West Germans willing to move to West Berlin. By the time of reunification, approximately 300.000 foreigners were living in West Berlin, including 128.000 Turkish immigrants (Störve., 2012).

After the construction of the Wall, the need to expand public housing stock was addressed through the implementation of the policy known as “clear-cut renovations” (*Kahlschlag* or *Flächensanierung*). However, this approach “only exacerbated an existing housing crisis through rampant speculation and local corruption” (Vasudevan, 2011, 290). Designed to address “future middle class” with higher rents, this policy for constructing subsidized housing led to a housing shortage and contributed to the emergence of a resistant and conflict-driven community in the area (Berger, 1987). Among the groups formed in response was the Berlin Squatters’ Movement (Holm & Kuhn, 2011; Vasudevan, 2011, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c).

Today’s, the district, now central to the new geography of the city, has become focal point for Berlin’s urban marketing strategies. “Visit Berlin” promotional website noted in 2014: “Kreuzberg is Berlin's most interesting and fascinating district, where to experience urban buzz, vibrancy and diversity at every turn”. Consequently, the district has undergone significant gentrification and touristification, alongside major urban regeneration projects, including mega-projects along the river Spree. These developments have intensified pressure on the privatization of public estates, exacerbating displacement and sparking new local conflicts. The story of Bethanien is closely tied to Kreuzberg’s history and the urban conflicts mentioned above.

Bethanien was established as Deaconess Hospital in the years 1845 and 1847. In 1963, following the construction of the Wall in 1961, which separated East and West Berlin, the first Urban Renewal programme for the Kottbusser Tor area, including Mariannenplatz where the Bethanien complex is located, was initiated. The division of the city caused a dramatic drop in the number of patients and nuns coming from the eastern part, leading to the insolvency of the hospital. In 1968, the city administration planned closing the hospital and implementing large-scale demolition and redevelopment of the area to create public housing stock. However, in 1969, demolition was halted due to the “Struggle for Bethanien” (*Kampf um Bethanien*), a protest campaign organised by community groups and preservationists. The campaign

included strategic site occupations (Figure 2). As a result of these efforts, in 1970, the Bethanien complex was transferred to city ownership. The management of the building was entrusted to several local non-profit organisations engaged in cultural and artistic activities, as well as providing community services.

Just a year after, the student movement, advocating for alternative cultural spaces and collective housing (*Hausprojekt*), illegally occupied the dormitory formerly used by the nurses-nuns (Figure 1). They established a students' housing project named after Georg von Rauch, a young anarchist killed in a police shootout just days prior. This squat was officially regularized as a "youth hostel" just one year later. In 1974, the South wing of the Bethanien complex was repurposed as a community service space, accommodating a big job centre, a nursery, a kindergarten, a public gym, among other services (Figure 1).

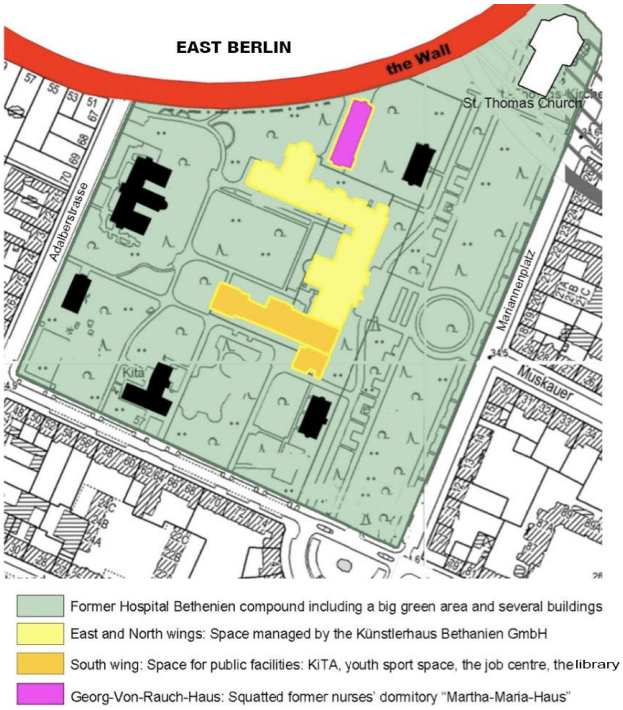


Figure 1. *Map of Mariannenplatz and the reappropriation of the Bethanien space that took place between 1970 and 1975. Source: created by the author*

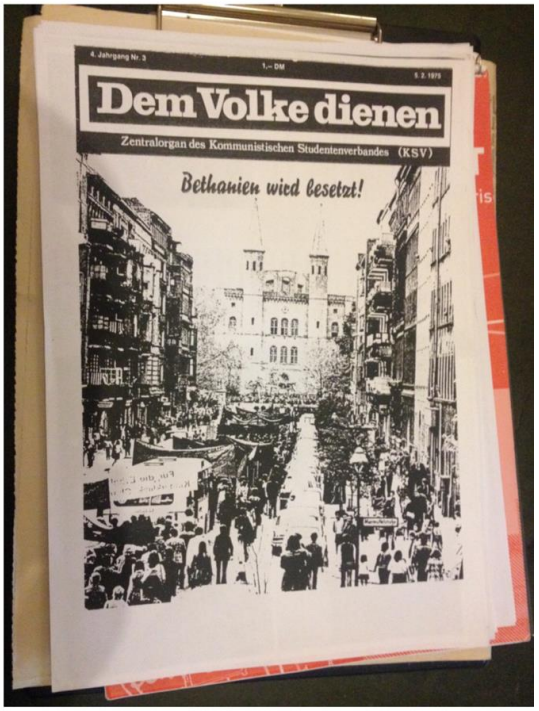


Figure 2. *1975's newspaper cover: "Bethanien is occupied". Source: Dem Volke dienen 5.2.1975, 4 Jahrgang, Nr.3*

The situation remained stable until 2002, when the district of Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg planned to sell the Bethanien complex to a private investor. Existing institutions were forced to vacate the building to make way for the planned "International Cultural incubator" (*Internationale Kulturelle Griinderzentrum*). In 2005, the Senator of Finance, Thilo Sarrazin, introduced the *Kalkulatorische Kosten* law, which required local governments to bear significant "indirect" costs associated with public property under their jurisdiction.

> When I started my political experience in the parliament of the Friedrichshain-kreuzberg city district in 2001 the issue of the Bethanien was representing the symbol of the shift from indifference to concern about the sale of public assets. The district parliament considered the privatization as the only possible solution due to a very complex financial issue: a financial cost

> voice called *Kalkulatorische Kosten* that were invented to make public properties too expensive particularly if the properties are underutilized or vacant. (KFBA 1)

The job centre, which had been active for 30 years, was closed, and the three floors of the South wing were vacated. In the preceding years, other public services, important for the community, were also shut down, including the Turkish-German library and the seniors' meeting space in 2004, while the kindergarten and music school faced threats of relocation. This series of closures and threats fuelled widespread discontent, as displaced or endangered public services were vital resource for many neighbours. Once the local administration's privatization plan became public, protests began to take shape. According to one of the neighbours (Bfa 1):

> The preconditions for the spreading of discontent among the neighbours, particularly within the Turkish community, was that the German-Turkish library had been removed from the complex. Some considered it to be an important place for the neighbourhood, because it was a place of encounter for people from different cultures.

Many neighbours attempted to gain access to these vacant spaces by proposing activities and projects to the district, such as workshops and workspaces, but all of these proposals were either rejected or ignored, with officials claiming that no spaces were available at all" (Bfa 1).

For residents and citizens, the proposed privatization of the complex was seen as a consequence of mismanagement and the lack of a programmatic "new concept" for the Bethanien complex:

> The district administration failed for years to develop a coherent and cost-recovery concept for the use of Bethanien. By mid-2005, after years of district administration, the situation was marked by vacancy, the absence of a general concept, deferred rehabilitation, and an unclear financial framework. (From "A New Concept for Future Bethanien" document)

Due to forecasts predicting changes in the neighbourhood's social fabric, local authorities considered relocating all facilities not explicitly connected to art and culture out of the complex. This implicitly supported the slow but progressive gentrification of the area, attracting middle and creative classes more interested in cultural and artistic activities. It is worth noting that, by the time of the planned project, the Mariannenplatz area including the Bethanien complex, was part of the *Quartiersmanagement* project. This shows that the anticipated gentrification process was planned in an area that was, in fact, part of a project identifying zones in Berlin significantly affected by social degradation and high levels of social disadvantage—classified as "areas with special development needs" (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. *The Mariannenplats Quartiersmanagement (red area); the Bethanien complex area (red dashed line). Source: Quartiersmanagement / detailed localisations created by the author*

The privatization plan proposed by the Borough Council was not well understood by the citizens, who feared both the relocation of essential services away from the area and the unintended consequence of contributing to the displacement of the local population. On June 11, 2004, as a form of protest, the three vacant floors of the Bethanien South wing were occupied by former tenants of the historic *Hausprojekt Yorckstrasse 59*, just days after their violent eviction (Figure 4). In response, neighbours and community groups decided to join the forces with the squatters to launch the *Bethanien für alle* ("Bethanien for all") campaign.

> At the beginning we were more focused on finding a new place to start a negotiation. Then some neighbours came in the next days and told us about the story of the privatization. So, we joined our forces and started the struggle for Bethanien. (NYB 1)

Figure 4. *Photos of the Bethanien complex during the occupation: main entrance, squatting action banner, and tags on the South wing. Source: photos provided by the New Yorck im Bethanien tenants*

Figure 5. *Franz Schulz (centre left in the photo) and Kristian Ströbele (to his right) at the press conference organised in the recently squatted Bethanien South wing. Source: photos provided by the New Yorck im Bethanien tenants*

The day after the squatting action took place, the squatters organised a press conference, inviting newspapers and local politicians (Figure 5) who attended the event: “For us, it meant that they were supporting us” (NYB 1).

The entire neighbourhood quickly became aware of the action:

> This resulted in a large gathering of neighbours who supported the occupation because it meant that the doors had been opened and they finally had access to these spaces. So, the two things came together—the local community campaign and the action of the squatters. (Bfa 1)

Soon after the occupation of the vacant premise, the campaign *Bethanien für alle* was established through the merging of interests and political actions:

> We invented the campaign together with the neighbours after we took over the space. Some individuals had the intention of building a campaign against the privatization, but at that time, it was a very small group, mainly including people directly affected by the privatization, such as those working in activities located in the South wing, like the kindergarten, which would have to move if the property was sold. The issue became known by the public opinion after the newspapers got involved and real protests mobilisation began. (NYB 2)

The campaign *Initiative Zukunft Bethanien* (IZB – Initiative for the future Bethanien) successfully collected 14.000 signatures, enough to launch a citizens’ initiative for a local referendum (*Bürgerbegehren*) to halt the privatization of Bethanien. The group began to meet in the squatted South wing to develop alternative proposals for the building’s future public use, which they aimed to negotiate with the local authorities. In 2006, the Borough Council of Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg decided not to call the referendum. Instead, the council initiated negotiations with the group involved in the campaign *Bethanien für alle*, including the squatters (Figure 6).

Figure 6. *Photos from Bethanien’s St. Thomas Church, where discussions were held with groups involved in the Bethanien für alle campaign and the squat. Source: photos provided by the New Yorck im Bethanien tenants*

As a result of the collaborative effort of various individuals involved in the framework of the IZB’s activities, to individuate alternatives to the privatization, the “A new concept for Bethanien. On the way to a cultural, artistic, political, and social centre from below” was published as a printed book in 2006 (Figure 7).

Figure 7. *"A new concept for Bethanien. On the way to a cultural, artistic, political, and social center from below". Book created by the groups active in the IZB (Initiative for Future Bethanien) in 2006. Source: document provided by the New Yorck im Bethanien tenants*

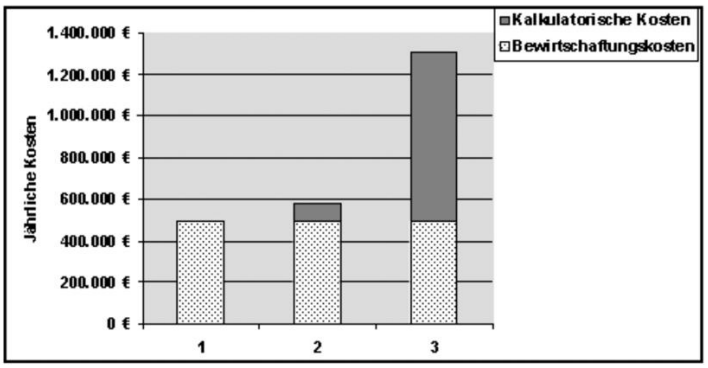
> The Initiative Zukunft Bethanien (IZB) is a free association of diverse individuals and initiatives from Kreuzberg and beyond. Our goal is to prevent the privatization of Bethanien as an "International Cultural Incubator" and instead, with the participation of all current users, to create a cultural, artistic, political, and social center from the bottom up, especially with the involvement of local residents. In this context, we are also working on issues related to the future of Bethanien, such as the privatization of the city, the loss of public space, changes in the social structure and Hartz IV, migration and racism, cultural policy, etc. (extract from the book).

It also included an analysis of the costs and management challenges that needed to be addressed with the Kreuzberg-Friedrichshain Borough Administration, demonstrating the feasibility of the project. Thanks to the citizens' ideas and proposals detailed in the document, an agreement was reached after three years of negotiations over the alternative plan developed by active participants involved in the process.

The critical issue to address was primarily the excessive costs of management. On closer examination, the system of imputed costs (*Kalkulatorischen Kosten*) was revealed to be opaque, a problem that became particularly evident in the Bethanien case. Due to the costs imposed by the Berlin Senate on public property management, districts are subjected to inaccurate assessments that produce the controversial outcome of renting private land being cheaper than using publicly owned buildings for public purposes. This results in a systematic and engineered push towards the privatization of public estates.

Since 2006, districts have been required to calculate the management costs of public properties (which are managed by the districts in Berlin) to include a "fictitious return on capital", known as "imputed costs", for approval by the Berlin Senate. The Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg Borough Administration presented an unsustainably high-cost estimate for managing the Bethanien complex. In the case of Bethanien's main building, its market value was assessed at € 2.6 million, while its acquisition value was estimated at € 32 million. Due to the *Kalkulatorische Kosten*, the Borough had to pay capital interest on this value. Until that

point, the actual costs (bar 1 on Figure 8) for managing and maintaining the building had been less than € 500.000 annually. Private sector management (bar 2), including a return on capital, would spend less than 600.000 euro per year. However, because of *Kalkulatorisch Kosten* law, the Borough (bar 3) was required to spend approximately 1,4 million euro annually.



< Kalkulatorische Kosten = imputed costs

< Bewirtschaftungskosten = management costs

< Jährliche Kosten = annual costs

Figure 8. *Impact of the privatization bill based on Bethanien's main building. Source: "A new concept for Bethanien" document, 2006*

The citizens' working on the economic issue, including some economists, identified a method to avoid the "indirect costs" associated with property management. This approach demonstrated that a self-financed project for the self-management of the Bethanien could be feasible. By establishing a third-party entity to manage the property on behalf of the public administration, Bethanien could be transformed into a "cost-free" property, effectively addressing the main justification for privatization. In the section 4.3 ("Ownership Model") of the document "A new concept for Bethanien", the IZB proposed managing the South wing through a non-profit association:

> It would support, on the one hand, professionally handling the finance issues, management of revenues, balance, and proper expenditures and, on the other hand, the implementation of renewal, maintenance, conservation, and modernization measures". (Bfa 1)

An administrative higher organisational structure would be required to define the management framework for Bethanien's South wing, similar to what is needed when signing a lease agreement. This would ensure that the new management model can be supported both by the skills of the users working in Bethanien's South wing and by the participation of the tenants and users.

The negotiation with the borough concluded with the approval of the project proposed by the active citizens, facilitated by the implementation of a zero-cost management model, which relieved the public administration of nearly all the management costs for the property:

> The Bethanien occupation and the beginning of the campaign against its privatization coincided with an institutional discussion about the legitimacy to keep selling so many public properties. While the debate emerged few years later on the Media Spree urban conflict, focused more on urban planning, participation, and on the critic to the city policies which are dictated by private investors, the Bethanien discussion was rather a discussion about how we want to manage public estate. (KFBA 1)

In 2009, the not-for-profit Society for Urban Development, Trustee of Berlin (GSE GmbH), became the owner and managing body of the building lifting the administration of the "indirect"

costs imposed on public properties. That same year, the not-for-profit association *Südflügel e.V.* (Bethanien South wing) was established, comprising all the entities that autonomously manage the South wing (New Yorck "public space", the theatre, the nursery, the kindergarten, the school of alternative medicine, the artists' workshops). The *Südflügel e.V.* entered into a 15-years lease agreement with the Society for Urban Development (GSE), officially taking over the management of the South wing. The agreement requires *Südflügel e.V.* to cover the maintenance expenses for the building, ensure compliance with current regulations, and pay a quite affordable rent to GSE. In a recent interview to one of the tenants (2023), they expressed confidence that the contract will be renovated for other 15 years after its expiration in 2024, particularly given the district government's ongoing support for their project.

The *Südflügel e.V.* brings together various entities under its legal framework, including the *Kreuzberg North children's daycare* group, the Healer School, the Association of Theatre *Alliance Druzhba e.V.*, the *New Yorck Emancipatory Space* project, and three feminist bureaus. The theatre, children's and medical schools, ateliers and workspaces are attended by a diverse group of individuals, mostly from the neighbourhood. The *New Yorck* project includes a *Hausprojekt* housing approximately 30 residents from various countries, occasionally including children. During the period of participant observation, tenants originated from Germany, Italy, Spain and Cameroon. Some residents are temporary, while others are permanent tenants. The rent is fixed at a rate significantly lower than current market prices in the area. Additionally, the *New Yorck* space includes a "public space" that is attended by people of various nationalities involved in local political groups, such as anti-gentrification or pro-refugee rights groups. The space also organises an Anarchist info-cafè and a borderless kitchen event called People's Kitchen, which provides free meals for many people every week. Last but not least, the space offers an anarchist library with a great collection of books.

Since spring 2008, a group of local residents established a neighbourhood garden in a corner of the public green area surrounding the Bethanien complex. Following discussions about the transformation of the Bethanien park's free areas, the district council allocated 2.100 square meters of green space behind the Bethanien North wing to this group. This led to the formation of a garden association cooperating with the district office.

Conclusions

Since the 1990s, Berlin's urban agenda has been shaped by competition-driven and gentrification-friendly strategies, reinforced by austerity rhetoric legitimizing privatization. This case study demonstrates how resistance to privatization can reveal alternative pathways for managing the shrinking of public spaces and services—challenging the idea that such measures are inevitable, and instead exposing them as political choices rooted in dominant narratives of efficiency and fiscal sustainability.

The tensions between grassroots actors and formal institutions highlight the complexities of integrating bottom-up demands into urban policy. While reclaiming public spaces fosters radical approaches to degrowth, community-led governance, and self-management, these efforts are not immune to co-optation. Informal actors engaging in co-production risk becoming instruments of cost-efficiency rather than agents of systemic transformation. Yet, this case shows how grassroots initiatives can successfully contest dominant power structures by operationalizing horizontal subsidiarity, where community-driven management replaces the logic of privatization with forms of collective care and responsibility.

Importantly, the Bethanien case illustrates how the radical appropriation of symbolic public space can prompt the re-politicization of urban land use and ownership. By securing legal

recognition and public property assignment through an intermediary cooperative (GSE), citizen collectives were able to implement a form of self-management that not only reduced public spending but also expanded access to community-based activities—housing, cultural production, education, and political organizing. In this way, the initiative avoided the sale of public property while offering the municipality a fair and functional governance model.

Such re-appropriated spaces have demonstrated in recent years a programmatic and proactive capacity to generate “Public Policies from the Bottom”. These include microcredit systems, educational programs, circular economy initiatives, housing and gender policies, immigration support, and architectural heritage regeneration. Their effectiveness is especially pronounced in contexts where local governments face fiscal austerity and shrinking welfare capacity. In these cases, bottom-up practices offer viable alternatives to the privatization of public spaces and the dismantling of public services.

Rather than relying on rapid economic growth, these initiatives propose governance models rooted in solidarity, social justice, and sustainability. They counter speculative urban agendas by offering low-cost, community-centered alternatives that serve both local needs and fiscal logic. While some practices risk being absorbed by neoliberal discourses like the “Big Society” or social entrepreneurship, the Bethanien case shows how cooperative, democratic management of public assets can become a structural and enduring strategy, not merely a reactive or symbolic one.

Urban development strategies are always shaped by contingency, socio-material interaction, and distributed agency. In this light, grassroots movements defending the right to the city and the urban commons offer a compelling framework for rethinking planning priorities beyond growth imperatives. They illustrate how degrowth-oriented strategies, grounded in forms of subsidiarity between formal and informal actors, can foster autonomy, reduce structural dependencies, and open space for inclusive, sustainable, and transformative public policy innovation. Recognizing and formalizing these forms of co- and self-management may thus represent a crucial step toward developing just, democratic, and economically sound alternatives to privatization in cities facing crisis and austerity.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Imitation of planning: Strategies to address tenure and economic insecurities in informal settlements of Buenos Aires

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This paper analyses economic and tenure insecurities and risk of eviction in informal settlements and shantytowns in Buenos Aires, Argentina. It shows how the bottom-up planning initiatives led by community leaders and activists are often motivated by the fact that engagement with or imitation of formal planning regulations and codes increase the perceived tenure security in these settlements. If and when security from eviction is achieved, however, or when households who occupy these lands do not aspire to stay there in the long-term, planning efforts might be ignored or even rejected. In such situations they may refocus their priorities on livelihood strategies and saving.

This research was conducted as an ethnographic case study based on physical and digital fieldworks. The findings urge urban planners to pay more attention to the way in which mainstream planning approaches magnify existing and create new insecurities and informalities, instead of addressing them. Planners need to recognise the gaps between their planning ambitions, and the realities and priorities of people living in informal settlements and shantytowns in situations where the state is unable to ensure access to affordable housing.

Keywords: informality, tenure insecurity, urban planning, informal settlements, Buenos Aires

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Introduction

Uncertainty about housing and the struggle to secure affordable shelter in a long-term perspective can be considered some of the most uncomfortable feelings a human being might experience. Coping with such insecurities, like the risk of losing one's home, often requires informal actions by proactive civil society. Few studies link this concept to housing access and urban planning. This article explores these issues in Buenos Aires. Argentina's capital is an ideal case for studying urban development insecurities due to its recurring economic crises and the normalisation of informal housing and employment as coping mechanisms. While 'emergency' implies a temporary, extraordinary situation, in Argentina, it has become a nearly permanent condition.

As the title of the most recent Human Development Report from 2022 suggests: 'Uncertain Times, Unsettled Lives: Shaping our Future in a Transforming World' (UNDP, 2022), living everywhere is becoming more uncertain and insecure. This might result in more places that will become like Argentina, rather than the other way around. While many urban areas might be considered as good places to live, an increasing number of people are excluded from the spaces and opportunities they offer. This exclusion fosters informal and sometimes illegal development, resulting in substandard housing conditions.

This article aims to respond to the research question of *how economic and tenure insecurities impact the planning and development of informal settlements and shantytowns in Buenos Aires*. The qualitative research was conducted on two scales: the metropolitan region and individual settlements. Three case areas were studied: Villa 31 shantytown, Costa Esperanza informal settlement, and a contested land occupation in Guernica.

The article begins with an overview of the theoretical grounding, highlighting the disconnect between theory and practice. This is followed by a discussion of the methodological approach and ethics. Next, the research context and case study locations are introduced, emphasising the differences between centrally located shantytowns and suburban or peripheral informal settlements. The main section analyses the most pressing insecurity – risk of eviction – and its impact on housing access and planning through four different settlement typologies. The final sections discuss the findings and propose ideas for further research.

Urban informality as planning?

> One ought not to see formality as the normal state of affairs.
> (Altrock, 2012, p. 185)

According to Altrock (2012), '[t]o speak of informality only makes sense if there is something like formalisation that has led to formality' (p. 173). Roy (2005) argues that informality is not a sector or 'object of state regulation' but a 'state of exception' or governance mode 'produced by the state itself' (p. 149). The characteristic features of informality as a phenomenon, or way of life is that it is highly adaptive to different situations (AlSayyad, 2004).

Altrock (2012) identifies two dimensions of informality: complementary and supplementary. Complementary informality *fills gaps* not covered by formal rules and supports formal institutions. Supplementary informality *replaces* ineffective formal regulations, creating a parallel system with its own rules and norms to achieve social order and prosperity. Roy (2005) defines urban informality as 'an organising logic, a system of norms that governs the process of urban transformation itself' (p. 148). While Roy emphasises how informality produces and

regulates space, Altrock (2012) highlights the interrelations between spaces and overlapping informal non-spatial activities, especially between shelter and work. Similarly, Abramo (2012) describes urban informality as 'an aggregate of irregularities' (p. 41) around institutions, laws, rights, norms, and practices.

Applying the theory of informality as continuity to urban spaces, Altrock (2012) claimed that no space is purely formal or informal; instead, people live in hybrid modes combining both. Contemporary studies define informality as a continuum (AlSayyad, 2004; Altrock, 2012; Kamalipour & Peimani, 2021), often described as 'hybrid formal-informal arrangements' (Altrock, 2012, p. 171), the combination of 'formal rules and social norms' (Sanyal, n.d., p. 2), or 'gray spaces', which are

> developments, enclaves, populations and transactions positioned between the 'lightness' of legality/approval/safety and the 'darkness' of eviction/destruction/death (Yiftachel, 2009, p. 250).

The significance of urban informality in the contemporary world cannot be overstated. As cities grow and more urban policies and plans are being approved, so does the informal mode of development become more profound. In many regions of the world, a major part of urban spaces is still shaped by informal practices (Ortiz Flores, 2012; Sennett et al., 2018; UN-Habitat, 2022).

Informal settlements, such as slums, squatter settlements or shantytowns, represent urban informality and often develop outside formal planning norms, with lower quality of life indicators compared to regular neighbourhoods. Despite evolving over time, as long as their living conditions lag behind official housing standards, they are deemed unworthy of habitation (Gilbert, 2007). These standards are often 'guided by international policies and agencies' (Echavarria et al., 2021, p. 16), meaning that they are in many cases detached from the context of the place. Typical to informal settlements and places with inadequate housing is the lack of tenure security, which means insufficient 'protection against forced evictions, harassment and other threats' (UN-Habitat & OHCHR, 2009, p. 4).

Informality poses an epistemological challenge for planners (Roy, 2005). Often seen as 'unplannable', uncontrollable, exceptional or foreign, informal spaces present a complex urban reality where planners must both prevent informal development and integrate these spaces when they emerge. However, many planners fail to acknowledge how formalisation and planning contribute to informality. The eternal condition of informality in these 'gray spaces', which are 'waiting 'to be corrected', puts them 'in a state of "permanent temporariness"' (Yiftachel, 2009, p. 251).

Informal development does not always mean a lack of planning. Recent research indicates that communities in informal settlements are increasingly involved in informal planning and development practices (Sennett et al., 2018). This bottom-up approach is often a response to the formal planning system. Residents, particularly community leaders, demonstrate a good understanding of planning processes and methods, but they usually apply them outside the formal system (Hamdi, 2004; Holston, 2009; Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015; Shrestha & Aranya, 2015; Kaika, 2017). De Souza (2006) called this 'grassroots urban planning' and noted how in Brazil

> civil society does not only criticize (as a 'victim' of) state-led planning, but also can directly and (pro)actively conceive and, to some extent, implement solutions independently of the state apparatus (p. 327).

For Miraftab (2009), contexts of struggles for citizenship tend to radicalise these actions further into an 'insurgent' way of planning, which is based on the principles of 'counter-hegemonic, transgressive and imaginative' practice (p. 32). The question of urban citizenship and informal responses to the struggle for shelter is also integral to discussions on the Right to the City and Right to Housing (Bhan, 2009; Holston, 2009; Harvey, 2013; Rolnik, 2014; Cutts & Moser, 2015; Muñoz, 2018).

Studying such informal, emergent as well as incremental building and development practices can provide useful insight for planners (Roy, 2005; Holston, 2009; Watson, 2009; Hernández et al., 2010). Davoudi (2015) claims that:

> Informal rules, which may not act as instructions, can also influence practical judgement by providing planners with a rich archive of prior experiences as well as what is considered 'appropriate' (p. 326).

Such learning potentials relate to both the processes and products of planning. The former is about the way in which decisions about shared spaces are made, executed and followed up autonomously by the communities themselves (Watson, 2002, 2003; Hamdi, 2010; Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015). The later has to do with the design, structure, use of space, as well as the choice of building materials and methods, which are often inspired by indigenous traditions, pragmatic responses to the local needs, or contextual characteristics of the places, such as local land use, landscape features or hydrological cycles (Habraken, 2000; Bredenoord & van Lindert, 2010; Mehrotra et al., 2017). In these cases, social capital becomes a crucial resource for securing housing and well-being (Putnam, 2001).

Challenging the planning sequence

Access to shelter through informal means is often conceptualised as the reverse of what is accepted as the formal housing process. The rich normally begin with buying the property and acquiring the title deed, building the house (or having it built) and finally moving to a finished house with all the service connections. The poor, however, do it the other way around: they move into the land first (often illegally), then build a shack to live in, connect to basic infrastructure and at the end, if allowed to stay, attempt to buy the occupied land and obtain formal title deeds. Such patterns have been documented in Africa (McLeod, 2001), South Asia (Hamdi, 2010) and Latin America (de Paula et al., 2010).

The formal housing process follows a logical sequence with high certainty, while the informal approach is marked by risk, conflict, unpredictability, and insecurity. However, due to exclusionary housing markets and policies, informal housing often becomes the only affordable option for many (Roy, 2005). It is highly adaptable and flexible to the local needs and conditions (Hamdi, 2004), occurring mainly in peripheral areas, though it is not uncommon to observe it near city centres. The location and permanence of such housing depend on factors like land availability, local authorities' tolerance, and job accessibility (Turner, 1972; Gilbert, 2019).

Informal housing construction, often termed 'self-help', involves occupants building some or all of the structure themselves, with or without professional assistance (Gilbert, 2019). Pelli (1994) categorised self-help construction into autonomous, directed, and assisted modes. This process typically occurs incrementally, with house expansions and modifications evolving over time depending on changing household needs, saving capacities, and tenure situation (Turner, 1976; Greene & Rojas, 2008; Ward et al., 2015). In the consolidation and densification of informal settlements, basic infrastructure, public spaces, marketplaces, and commerce may

emerge spontaneously or through informal planning or agreements (Hamdi, 2004). In Latin America, between 30 and 60 percent of all housing has been built informally (Sette Whitaker Ferreira et al., 2020). According to Gilbert (2005), this way of building 'has been highly effective in making up for the deficiencies of both the market and the government' but at the same time such housing may not be good enough to 'withstand "natural' disasters"' (p. 43).

Standards as guides or barriers?

Turner was one of the first who disagreed with the mainstream negative perceptions of slums and the idea of eradicating them. He further criticised both massive provision of housing in a modernist fashion and 'authoritarian housing systems', which are 'impractical in economies of scarcity' (Turner, 1972, p. 169). He argued that informal, low-quality housing results from unrealistic and unmet standards of what dwelling should be and what services it should have.

Turner (1972; 1976) argued that in this context of prohibitive housing standards, low-income groups themselves produce the best housing, as they use their resources efficiently and transform their dwellings according to the changing household priorities. As he demonstrated, these needs and priorities are much different from the middle- and upper-class families (Figure 1). The poorest households prioritise strategic location, which would enable access to job opportunities that would help them get out of their difficult living conditions. Since their livelihood strategy focuses on maximising saving capacities, decent quality housing with infrastructure connections and freehold ownership may be inconvenient, because that contributes to increased expenses.

As household economic capacities improve, the desire for homeownership becomes relevant. Formal property ownership is viewed as an asset for protection against uncertainty, demonstration of social status, or capital for future generations. These shifts in priorities reflect insecurities and risks, including eviction, income loss, limited mobility, and other daily struggles faced by the poor, who are excluded from formal planning and market systems.

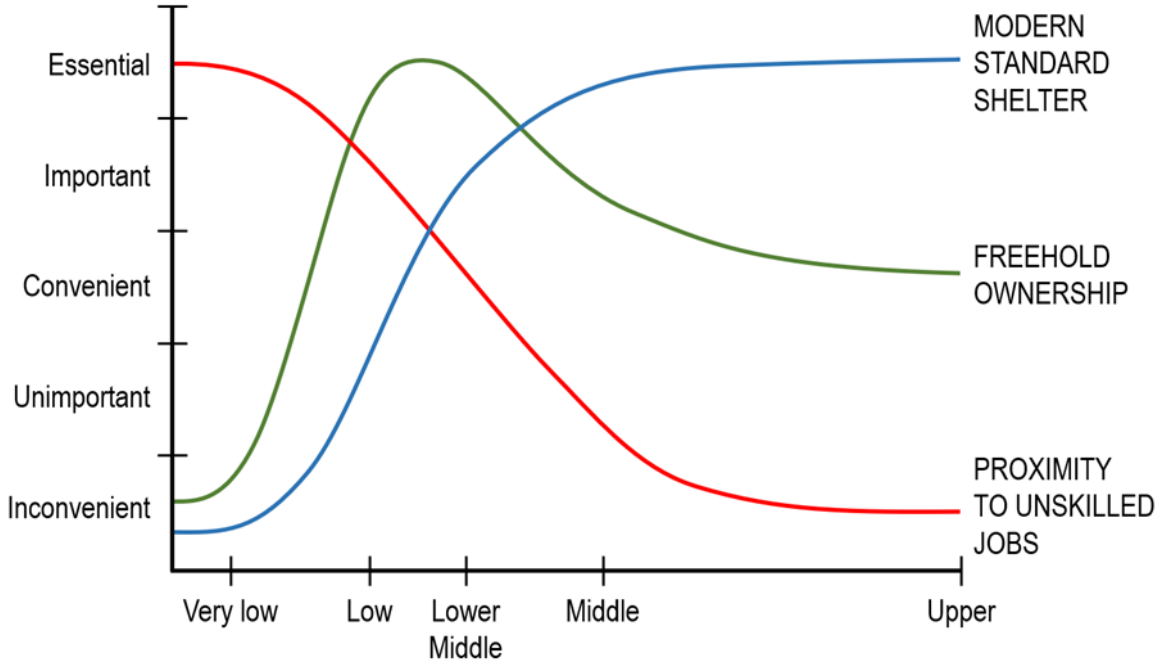

Figure 11. *Priorities for housing needs according to income level. Adapted from Turner (1972)*

The problem, according to Turner (1972; 1976) is that housing and planning institutions often fail to recognise or address the priorities of the lowest-income families. Instead, they design policies aimed at households with sufficient savings for mortgage payments on finished dwellings. Since waiting for housing subsidies or saving enough money takes too long, many families opt for illegal and informal housing alternatives.

Turner (1976) proposes that individuals and families should have the freedom and control to choose the best housing option and be able to evaluate the alternatives according to their own priorities and needs, or what housing *does* for them. Achieving this requires scrapping the minimum required housing standards:

> The modern minimum standard concept, which acts as a barrier to development by attempting to prohibit the intermediate stages, must give way to a concept which uses standards as guides toward the progressive achievement of minimum goals (Turner, 1976, p. 179–180).

Turner's ideas gained global recognition in 1976 at the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, 'Habitat I'. He was among the first to recognise the planning capabilities of residents in informal settlements. His legacy includes in situ slum upgrading and the so-called sites-and-services projects (Gilbert, 2019; Satterthwaite, 2020).

Turner's neo-anarchist perspective has faced challenges from both the radical left and neoliberal camps. The former accuse him of failing to address the structural issues of the capitalist economic and political system, which perpetuate class struggles and housing inequalities (Burgess, 1978). Pradilla (1983) criticised Turner's ideas to scrap standards and promote the self-help housing production, arguing that his approach justifies self-exploitation of the working class, because they contribute their time and energy to develop housing *in addition* to their regular jobs and reproductive tasks, without being remunerated for it. Others contend that the self-help approach and disregard for building standards have provided governments with an excuse to withdraw from their obligation to ensure decent housing for all (van Lindert, 2016; Gilbert, 2019).

The lure of land titling and formalisation

While many neoliberal thinkers agreed with Turner that informal housing should not be eradicated, they proposed a different approach to housing improvement. Hernando de Soto (2001) rejected Turner's emphasis on the use-value of housing, arguing that housing is primarily a commodity to be exchanged on the market. He believed that capitalist markets, through the trickle-down effect, would elevate living standards for the urban poor. De Soto emphasised the urgent need to regularise informal housing and integrate it into the formal property market. This measure would unlock 'invisible capital,' adding surplus value to these properties by recognising them as assets in virtual financial systems. The poor could then leverage this capital to access loans or trade for other properties. De Soto's ideas gained endorsement from the World Bank (Deininger, 2003), influencing policies in many Global South countries and leading to large-scale titling and formalisation campaigns, especially in peripheral informal settlements. This also contributed to the government gradually withdrawing as a housing provider.

De Soto's viewpoint faced even stronger critiques than Turner's. Gilbert (2002) argued that legitimate housing transactions and financing mechanisms are not uncommon in informal settlements, and land titles are often not enough to obtain formal loans. Housing quality may depend more on sufficient income than formal property title (Payne, 2002; Roy, 2005; Harvey, 2013; Ryan-Collins et al., 2017). Contrary to common perception, formal property ownership

does not necessarily ensure tenure security and does little to prevent gentrification and displacement driven by market forces (Roy, 2005; Payne et al., 2009). Moreover, formalising tenure often exacerbates socio-spatial segregation (Lees et al., 2016). Displacement is especially common when formalisation is accompanied by infrastructure upgrading, further contributing to housing unaffordability (van Lindert, 2016; Satterthwaite, 2020).

Many point out that it is not formal ownership, but tenure security or guarantees of protection from eviction, which encourage housing improvement and investment (Gilbert 2002; Varley, 2002; Satterthwaite, 2020). Furthermore, land titling processes are often slow, complex, and expensive (Payne et al., 2009). The shortcomings of formalisation have been recognised by the World Bank, which gradually shifted its policy recommendations towards a more proactive role of the state in housing provision and regulation (Buckley & Kalarickal, 2006). To address the issues of unaffordability of housing in the formal property market causing informal land occupations, many scholars suggest implementing collective property ownership models, such as community land trusts (Payne, 2002; UN-Habitat, 2015; Wily, 2018; Arnold et al., 2020; Davis & Fernández, 2020; Rodríguez, 2021).

Informality and insecurity as product of planning

> Yet, the formal and the legal are perhaps better understood as fictions, as moments of fixture in otherwise volatile, ambiguous, and uncertain systems of planning. In other words, informality exists at the very heart of the state and is an integral part of the territorial practices of state power. (Roy, 2009, p. 84).

This excerpt from Roy's diagnosis of the urban condition in India makes a rather unexpected and, for many planners and architects, an inconvenient shift of thinking, where informality and insecurity are not exception, but the norm. Urban informality is often portrayed as 'bad', while its role in correcting the inefficiencies of the formal sector is not sufficiently communicated to planning practitioners and policymakers. These groups often treat informality as an external challenge to be addressed through planning, formalisation and centralised housing provision. As informalities and insecurities are usually treated as challenges for planning, they are often the results of the act of planning itself. Building on these challenges, this paper aims to contribute to the question of *does less planning and more relaxed standards lead to more or less informality and insecurity*?

The paper responds to a lack of recent studies that analyse how the typologies and decision making around informal settlements change over time, as seen from the perspectives of both the state and the community actors. It attempts to revisit the well-established theories on informal development by Turner, de Soto and others, by applying them to case studies in Buenos Aires. This city was selected for its diverse range of informal settlement typologies, both established and recent, providing a rich context for studying these phenomena.

Methods and ethics

The general methodological approach to conduct this study applied multi-level urban ethnography (Irwin, 2010; Duneier et al, 2014) based on qualitative case study (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2014). It assumes an inductive approach (Davoudi, 2015), where writing and theorising is done *from*, and not *about* places (Watson 2009a; Bhan, 2019). All primary and secondary data were gathered between 2019 and 2023. Three physical fieldworks in Buenos Aires were conducted, lasting between two and five months each. Additionally, data collection continued remotely during the Covid-19 lockdown period.

The main methods applied this study were face-to-face and remote interviews and focus groups. Of the total of 44 conversations, 24 were conducted in person and 20 remotely. 17 of the physical conversations were done with single individuals, four with two individuals and the remaining three were focus groups with three or four participants. Regarding gender balance, 29 of the 46 research participants were women and 17 were men. Additionally, interviews were classified into two groups: 'expert' and 'community'. The former classification applied to 26 interviews and all three focus groups, while the latter applied to the remaining 15 interviews. To track certain processes over time, repeated interviews were conducted with selected study participants representing each group and case area. This data was supplemented by notes and photographs from site visits in over 50 settlements and 19 extensive transect walks. An important source of data were satellite images, secondary documents and relevant literature.

The analytical approach drew from thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2008) and process tracing, emphasising the temporal dimension and change over time (Gubrium & Holstein, 2010; Beach & Pedersen, 2013). Five narratives, one for each case study area and two for the general metropolitan level, were generated. Several rounds of coding were conducted before and after drafting the case narratives. Themes identified in the thematic analysis were both data-driven and theory-driven (Braun & Clarke, 2008).

The initial coding exercises followed predefined categories, such as organising information based on the type of case study and chronologically in a timeline (see Maxwell & Miller, 2010). Subsequent coding took on a more exploratory nature. The data was structured thematically and chronologically within each case, allowing categories to emerge organically during the process. These categories formed the basis for narratives detailing the development of the case areas and the roles and behaviours of stakeholders. The finished narrative texts were then analysed to identify one-sentence insights. In the final coding round, these insights from all narratives were thematically structured and labelled according to the settlement typology they pertained to.

The first outcome of the analysis was conceptualising the tenure and economic insecurities in the studied areas. By contextualizing these insecurities geographically and temporally, four typologies were defined for the different types of settlements based on their location (central and peripheral) and stage of development (recent occupations and consolidated settlements). The analysis section of this paper is organised according to these typologies.

The author's positionality[1] as a non-local and non-native Spanish speaking researcher implied both disadvantages and advantages. The primary practical challenge involved limited understanding of certain local terms and expressions in their full depth. To address this, the author diversified the dataset to allow data triangulation and consulted with research partners from Argentina to clarify any doubts. Additionally, the author engaged with a diverse range of informants across various political affiliations, preferences, genders, ages, and professions to mitigate bias.

[1] The author is a white male researcher employed at a European university and acknowledges his privileged position, potentially raising concerns about reproducing neocolonialist power-relations (Pels & Salemink, 1994; Fife, 2005). Mitigation action included spontaneous co-production of knowledge with informants to reduce traditional power relations (Mitlin & Bartlett, 2018) and remaining flexible to accommodate for the needs and preferences of the participants, as well as repeatedly sharing findings in accessible language and format. At the same time, the author's situation enabled easier access to some information and participants explaining situations more clearly to outside researchers (see Dowling, 2010).

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Context

Informal settlements and shantytowns

There are two main types of neighbourhoods for the poor in Buenos Aires: inner-city shantytowns and peripheral informal settlements (Abramo, 2012; Figure 2). The difference is not only in their densities and urban forms, but also how they are planned and managed.

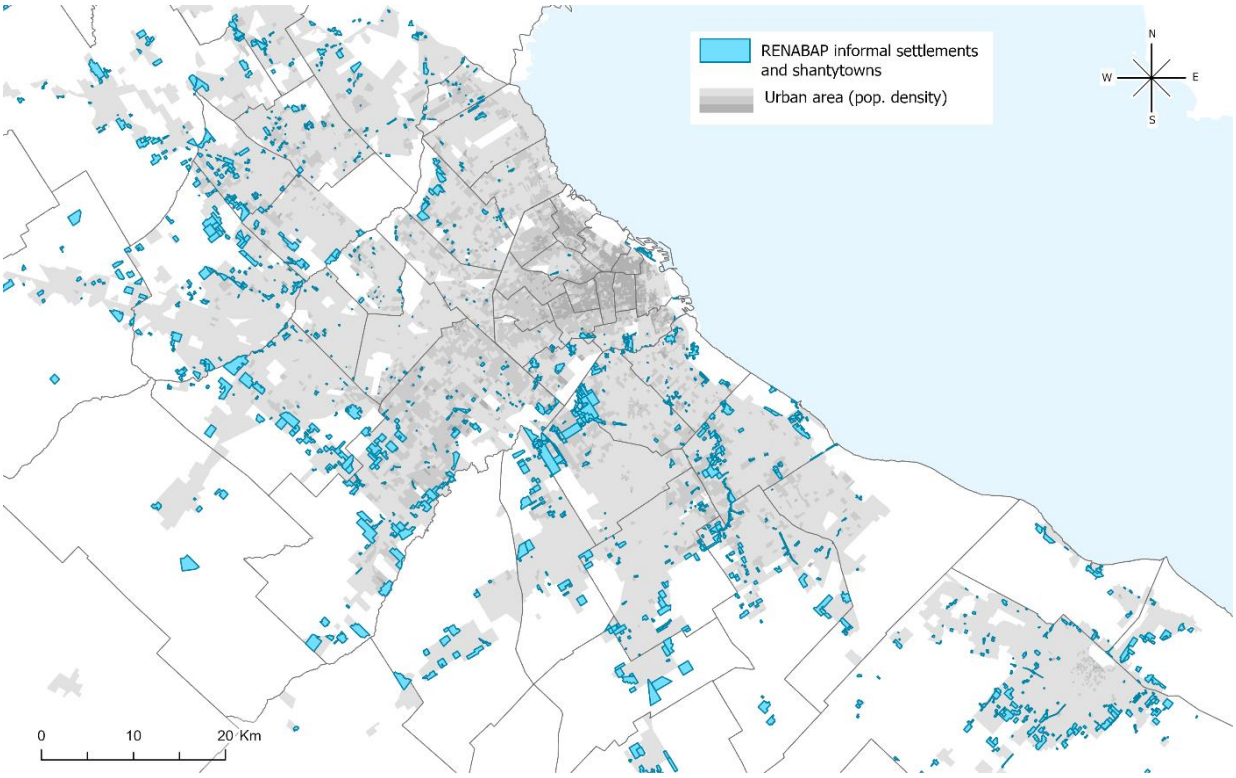

***Figure 12**. Location of informal settlements and shantytowns in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area, according to the RENABAP registry. Data from: Ministerio de Desarrollo Social / INDEC / IGN*

Shantytowns, locally referred to as villas, are land takeovers that happen in a spontaneous way, typically on smaller, irregularly shaped vacant land within the previously developed area (such as unused railway and port properties) close to major employment centres. The first such occupations emerged around the 1920s, but their most rapid growth started in the 1980s when the new democratic government halted unpopular and violent eradication of shantytowns practised by the last military dictatorship. As there was little planning beforehand, their layout is more organic, with many curved, narrow and dead-end streets and passageways. This dense urban structure may resemble mediaeval town centres, though informality in the shantytowns in Buenos Aires is much more visible. One of the reasons that explains their irregular character is the fact that they were primarily meant for temporary residence.

In Greater Buenos Aires, informal settlements (*asentamientos informales*) often represent horizontal extensions of the city. Their emergence can be traced back to a decision by the military dictatorship in 1977, which prohibited the development of popular suburban subdivisions without infrastructure connections, known as *loteos populares*. The government's requirement for upgraded housing standards led to higher property prices, making land and housing unaffordable for many working-class families.

Informal settlements often imitate *loteos populares* in several ways. While occupants may be unable to install necessary infrastructure before moving in, the spatial layouts of such settlements typically follow regular grid street networks and legally permitted lot structures. Most land takeovers are conducted by groups of poor families and their corresponding organisations or political movements. However, some may be initiated by opportunists, criminal groups, or 'pirate' developers who sell subdivided lots in informal property markets to confused or desperate families unaware of the ownership situation.

Over time, many legitimised informal settlements consolidate and acquire necessary infrastructure connections. In both formal and informal settlements, housing quality and level of consolidation can vary, influenced by household prosperity and the settlement's age. These characteristics often make it difficult to distinguish between formally and informally planned areas. What is typical to most informal settlements is not easy to spot at first: their origins as illegal occupation and higher risk of eviction. Nevertheless, inhabitants of these areas see them as places of permanent residence and hope that they will eventually be fully integrated with the rest of the city.

As a result of new economic crises and the lack of housing alternatives, many communities in Buenos Aires continue to take over land illegally in peripheral areas or enter the informal housing market in shantytowns. While illegal occupation might be the only affordable housing option, it comes with increased risks related to the unclear legal status of the occupied property or insufficient protection of tenure, which may result in evictions or market-driven expulsions. The conflicts concerning the right to stay on occupied territories are contested. In Argentina, both the right to dignified housing and the protection of private property are embedded in the national constitution and local charters, even though these rights are in many ways contradictory. This makes the outcome of court rulings around evictions very unpredictable and subject to free interpretation of the judges. Hence, the following analysis examines the strategies illegal occupants employ to safeguard their right to stay and address this insecurity.

Case settlements

The research was conducted across metropolitan, local, and contextual scales. In addition to examining the general situation, three settlements were selected for in-depth study (see Table 1 and Figure 3). These areas vary in terms of their location – central, suburban, and peripheral – and have developed at different points in time.

***Table 1**. Main characteristics and locations of case settlements. Data from INDEC/IGN*

Name	Origin	Settlement type	Estimated population	Size
Villa 31 (alt. Barrio 31, Barrio Padre Mujica)	1930s	Shantytown	60,000	32 ha
Costa Esperanza (Including Costa del Lago and 8 de Mayo)	1997	Informal Settlement	30,000	95 ha
Guernica	2020	Informal Settlement	10,000	100 ha

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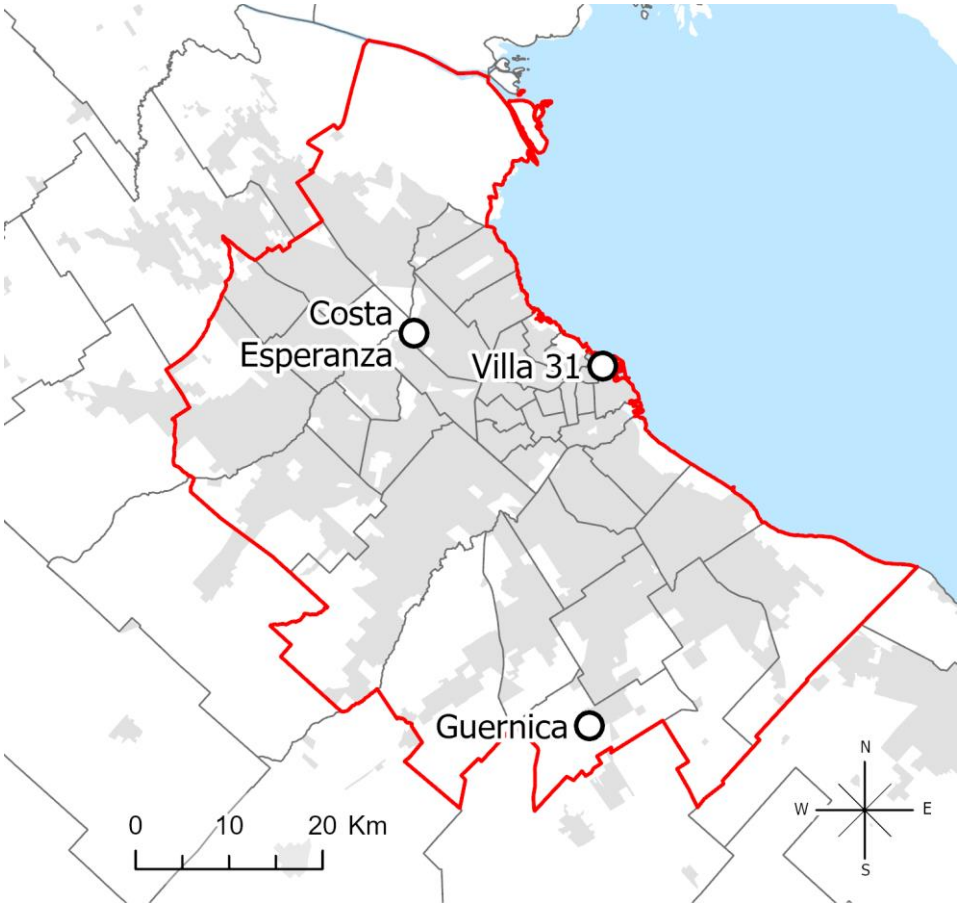

Figure 3. *Location of case study areas. Data from: ESRI/IGN*

Villa 31 (Figures 4 and 5) is the oldest, largest, and the most well-known shantytown in Argentina, established on railway and port properties near the Buenos Aires city centre. It is characterised by high land values, densification, rapid demographic shifts and political conflicts, both internally and externally. In addition to formalisation of land tenure, the upgrading scheme proposed and implemented by the city government includes insertion of landmark buildings, tourist destinations, facade improvements and new public spaces. Much of that has been developed in collaboration with international consultancies and private investors.

Costa Esperanza (Figures 6 and 7) is among the largest and most precarious informal settlements in Greater Buenos Aires, located in the San Marín municipality along the Reconquista river and under high voltage power lines. The oldest part of the settlement has a regular street network that connects to adjacent neighbourhoods, which were developed earlier as *loteos populares*. The activity of government planning agencies in Costa Esperanza during both the original takeover and further development has been sporadic, which contributed to maintaining its informal character. In recent years, expansion toward the river has given rise to sectors Costa del Lago and 8 de Mayo, characterised by a more disorderly and unplanned structure. Predominantly inhabited by Paraguayan migrants, the community often sends a significant portion of their earnings back to their homeland.

Guernica (Figures 8 and 9) was a very large and organised land takeover, which happened in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic in the peripheries of Buenos Aires. Despite developing

a spatial plan and proposal for future formalisation that takes into consideration valid laws and planning codes, the settlement was evicted 101 days after its first occupation.

***Figure 4**. Images from Villa 31. Author: Marcin Wojciech Sliwa*

***Figure 5**. Villa 31 and the local context. Imagery © Maxar Technologies*

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Figure 6. *Images from Costa Esperanza. Author: Marcin Wojciech Sliwa*

Figure 7. *Costa Esperanza and the local context. Imagery ©: Maxar Technologies*

***Figure 8**. Images from Guernica. Author (from top left): Agustina Byrne / Leandro Teysseire / Sebastián Linero / Adrían Escandar*

***Figure 9**. Guernica and the local context. Imagery © Maxar Technologies*

Analysis of tenure insecurity in four settlement typologies

Tenure insecurity

The coding of data resulted in three main factors that impact informal settlements and shantytowns in Buenos Aires. The most important is tenure insecurity, which materialises in risks of eviction, gentrification and unclear legal status of the property. Housing tenure can be understood as the assurance of long-term right to live in a dwelling, while insecurity indicates the struggle for achieving such a comforting condition. Therefore, tenure insecurity is about not knowing whether one can stay permanently on the land or in the house.

Other significant factors include economic insecurity (poverty, unstable income, unaffordability) and political uncertainty (changing policies, governance crises, lack of participation, unclear actor roles). Despite high Covid-19 infection rates, health risks and unsanitary conditions were considered less important. Environmental issues (contamination, climate change, natural hazards) were not prioritised by the informants in the case areas.

Consequently, the analysis focuses on tenure insecurity. This includes the strategies that communities who engage in what the authorities consider illegal occupation, apply to mitigate actual or potential conflicts with property owners and secure their right to housing. These range from organising physical resistance or self-defence, to initiating community-driven informal (bottom-up) urban planning processes or active engagement in the state-led formal (top-down) planning. The response of urban planners to these efforts, especially in minimising eviction or market-driven expulsion, is also examined.

The analysis identified four typologies based on the settlements' development stages. The main differences between the typologies are: perceived or legal tenure security, aspiration for temporary or permanent residence, and degree of centrality.

Typology 1: Permanent residence and high risk of eviction in suburbs or peripheries

> People entered as if nothing happened, with sticks… They put thread on the ground and marked how many metres, how many metres each, and left space for the streets.
> (Community leader in Costa Esperanza recalling the original land invasion in the 1990s)

The first typology includes land invasions and informal settlements in suburban and peripheral areas shortly after initial occupation, where residents aspire to attain long-term or permanent residency. Examples include Costa Esperanza in its early years and Guernica land takeover.

In these cases, insecurity around the high risk of eviction motivates those who engage in land takeovers to plan and imitate spatial planning models similar to the *loteos populares* scheme, which was a very common affordable housing strategy until it was banned in 1977. Those who initiate illegal occupations try as much as possible to ensure spatial order that is in line with applicable urban codes. This can materialise in ensuring uniform lot sizes and regular street networks that connect to the formal settlements nearby and extend the typical development patterns originating in Buenos Aires' colonial grid structure. Other examples include applying the right building setbacks or reserving space for future parks, schools and other public facilities.

The reasoning behind imitating the ‘planned city’ is to show how these emergent settlements can easily be transformed into regular neighbourhoods. Such action is driven by the

anticipation of future recognition, formalisation, integration and upgrading with infrastructure. This way of self-organisation and pre-planning has become a common strategy that aims first and foremost at securing protection from evictions and ensuring the right for long-term residence. It succeeded in Costa Esperanza and other settlements but failed in Guernica. In these cases, the idea of creating orderly and tranquil neighbourhoods was also important but seen as less urgent and given lower priority in face of the risks and uncertainties around possible evictions. Therefore, addressing tenure insecurity is the main factor that motivated actions and choices before and during the initial occupations.

Regardless of whether the occupation happened all at once or in an incremental matter, key factors in these actions are community organisation capacities and solidarity. The success of lobbying strategies depends primarily on rigorous respect for prior agreements, mutual support, and political mobilisation. This explains why many of the takeovers have been undertaken jointly by communities that have known each other before, for example because they already used to be neighbours or because they belonged to the same political movement. Likewise, weak leadership and spatial chaos increases the probability of eviction.

Furthermore, the initiators of land occupations chose the places and timing of takeovers strategically based on prior investigation of property ownership situation and evaluation of eviction risk. As a rule, settling on state-owned land was preferred over private land, because democratic governments are more willing to negotiate directly with the occupants, as they recognise the difficulty of ensuring affordable housing alternatives. Private landowners typically view occupations as property rights violations and involve law enforcement or courts. Occupants also target land that is abandoned or has unclear ownership situation, hoping for property rights through uninterrupted residence. Regarding timing of the occupations, some leaders waited for favourable conditions that would make quick evictions less likely. For example, the initial occupation of Costa Esperanza happened during a period of local governance crisis, shortly after the removal of a mayor hostile to illegal occupations.

Another manifestation of tenure insecurity is in the way in which the occupants had to move in and stay on the occupied land from the first day of occupation. Otherwise, since tenure was informal, they could risk losing their lot to someone else. It was also important that the families consolidate their settlements fast and are present in their homes during the eviction operations because that would attract media attention and mobilise activists who support their cause. This would result in a more widespread criticism of the brutality of the government and pressure to postpone or withdraw eviction plans.

Communities in these areas have expressed that they do not demand the land for free, but they are willing to negotiate purchasing the occupied lots at an affordable price. They may not necessarily want to assume costs of mortgage payments right away, but the act of showing interest in paying back for the property is used as an argument to negotiate the right to stay on the occupied territory. In a similar way, affordability can be a challenge when it comes to negotiating formalisation of infrastructure. Communities are proactive when it comes to extending water and electricity connections, though most of the time this happens in an informal or illegal way. Formalised services are seen as a sign of legitimation of tenure, but these are often too expensive or difficult to provide in settlements with unresolved tenure.

Communities enhance their chances of regularisation by preparing spatial plans, surveys, subdivision maps, and intervention proposals. These documents are used in negotiations with local government representatives. In cases like Guernica, local leaders receive assistance from external professionals, academics, and activists to improve their plans and explore legal pathways to resist evictions and legitimise their tenure.

Similar instances of imposing spatial order informally occur in land occupations led by 'pirate' developers and criminal groups who take over and subdivide land illegally 'on behalf' of poor communities. They imitate formal planning to attract buyers and demand high prices. It is common that they use their connections with local governments or corrupt authorities to ensure protection from eviction and speed up infrastructure upgrading.

In most cases, however, the state-led planning and infrastructure provision do not start until the tenure situation in settlements is resolved. Municipal planners may participate in negotiations for regularisation, resettlement, or peaceful termination of occupation in exchange for housing subsidies but refrain from initiating planning processes to avoid legitimising the (still) illegal occupations. Sometimes local governments may designate abandoned properties for non-housing purposes like urban agriculture to prevent informal settlement expansion.

Forced evictions have done little to stop the problem of illegal occupations. Those expelled often lack affordable alternatives, leading to new, often desperate and less organised takeovers elsewhere. However, many of these new takeovers were more desperate and less organised. This is especially evident in the wave of occupations that emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic, when evictions were common despite a temporary prohibition of forced expulsion. As the housing crisis grows and the competition for land intensifies, many of the new takeovers happen on less desirable land, such as wetlands and landfills in more remote locations, and have smaller or irregular lot sizes. The chaotic occupation of such land may also be linked to lower perception of eviction risk or lack of aspirations for long-term residence.

Typology 2: Permanent residence and low risk of eviction in suburban or peripheral areas

> It is the most efficient typology to intervene, because it is very easy to enter a street that is already straight, has the permitted dimensions, that already has water regulations like the rest of the city, and that does not need resettlement.
> (Urban planner about working with infrastructure upgrading projects in informal settlements)

The settlements grouped under the second typology have achieved a certain degree of perceived or legal tenure security. They are also meant for permanent residence, but since eviction is no longer a significant risk, the priorities and approaches of the different actors change significantly. This is the case of Costa Esperanza and many other consolidated informal settlements after the local governments legitimised their status as neighbourhoods.

Tenure security may be achieved in different ways. In Costa Esperanza, community leaders negotiated protection from eviction and infrastructure improvements in a political process. This perceived security was strengthened later when the inhabitants received temporary residence certificates, which will eventually be the basis for issuing formal property titles and mortgages. In other settlements, court rulings may establish tenure security. The recent creation of the official national registry of informal settlements (RENABAP) has expanded eviction protection to over 1,000 informal settlements in the metropolitan area.

After securing long-term tenure, the incentive to follow up community-initiated plans decreases. The residents may not prioritise their involvement in planning, as they no longer consider it urgent. Many of them are satisfied with the fact that they no longer need to fear eviction. Their permanence is no longer dependent on neighbourhood mobilisation; therefore, community organisation and the role of local leaders or political opportunists is diminished.

Upon achieving tenure security, inhabitants' focus often shifts from community organisation to individual needs. Residents in consolidated informal settlements seek freehold ownership and often reject collective ownership schemes, because collective property does not help in building up their financial capital. Secure tenure also incentivises housing improvement and expansion. Makeshift shelters are gradually and incrementally transformed into permanent housing, which adapt to the household needs. Living conditions in many informal settlements which originated in the 1980s and 90s have improved so much that they are no longer part of informal settlement registries. In Costa Esperanza, community organisation and planning interest reemerged during the Covid-19 pandemic, though this was more an emergency response than a collective long-term neighbourhood vision.

As settlements gain legitimacy, state institutions lead planning and infrastructure projects to integrate these regularised settlements into the city. Presence of the state further diminishes the role of community leaders, though in most cases the local governments lack the capacity and resources to plan. Therefore, they are forced to incorporate community actors in the political or administrative planning processes. This makes planning challenging, as its success is subject to economic (budget allocation) and political uncertainties (power relations and party preference/affiliations). In such neighbourhoods, informal development may even outpace government efforts to provide infrastructure connections and formal titles.

Figure 10 illustrates the changing need for or engagement in planning of community and state actors, relative to tenure security and eviction risks. On the left side are new settlements under typology 1, where communities imitate planning to mitigate risks of evictions, while the state avoids planning of what are still illegal occupations. This situation changes when these settlements secure tenure and enter typology 2. In these cases, state institutions take the initiative to plan, while communities often lack the motivation to engage in planning, and in some instances may even find it inconvenient to participate in state-led planning or follow up their own plans. This shows a paradoxical situation where the state is either unwilling to plan when the community demands it or struggles to engage the community members when it initiates planning processes.

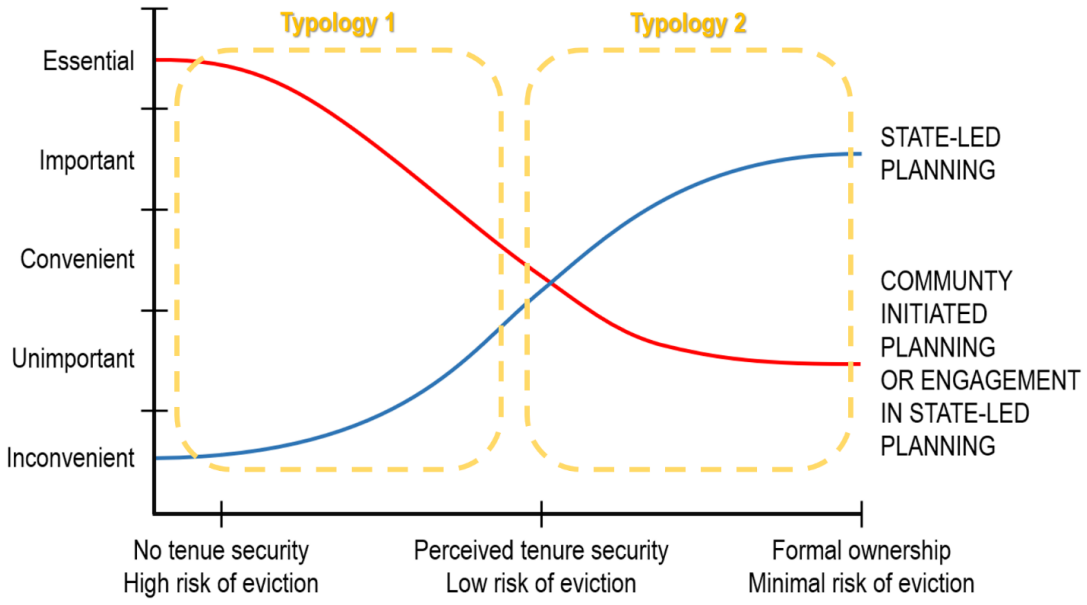

***Figure 10**. Changing need for or engagement in community initiated (informal) and state-led (formal) planning according to tenure security situation and risk of eviction. Source: the author*

Typology 3: Temporary residence in central areas with insignificant risk of eviction

> Once, the railwaymen tore down and marked houses on the edge of the villa, and then put up a fence defining how far they [the residents] could build. I don't know why. They were told this was because of railway safety. It's fine, but it [the accidents] doesn't happen very often. So, there was another border line, and they started to disobey the railwaymen.
> (Urban planner about the difficulty of controlling the rapid expansion of a new shantytown)

Typologies 1 and 2 concerned suburban and peripheral settlements intended for permanent residence from the initial occupation. However, what happens to transitory settlements, where the majority stays only for short periods? Typology 3 does not follow the development from typology 2 but concerns settlements which offer temporary shelter and where the rotation of residents is high. Examples include Villa 31 and other centrally located shantytowns initiated before the 1990s, along with more recent land takeovers in Costa Esperanza.

In shantytowns, tenure insecurity varied from case to case and across time, though normally it has been relatively high. Nevertheless, the risk of eviction has been insignificant since these areas had served as transitory shelter and the rotation of residents (both those who claimed ownership and tenants) had been frequent anyway. In shantytowns with informal transitory housing, neither the community, nor the state had initiated any planning to ensure spatial order.

Before shantytowns became places of permanent residence for both de-facto owners and tenants, the communities were mobilised almost exclusively to resist eviction operations, when the bulldozers were in front of the houses. Unlike in typology 1, there were no demands for property tenure formalisation. The negotiated alternatives to evictions were monetary compensation or relocation to social housing, though many families rejected the second choice over the more favourable placement of their transitory shelter.

The top priority for households living in any form of transitory informal housing has been access to job opportunities and ability to build up savings quickly. They often choose temporary substandard living conditions to save for a house or land elsewhere, or for immigrant communities, to send remittances or invest in their home countries. In worst cases, due to sudden eviction, insufficient savings, or lack of alternatives, they may seek permanent housing in the peripheries through participating in organised land takeovers or purchasing cheap lots in informal settlements with unclear land ownership (as in typology 1).

While rent in central shantytowns can be high, they offer relaxed entry requirements compared to the formal sector housing. Their proximity to jobs reduces commute times and costs, allowing residents to work longer and save more money. Similarly to areas in typology 2, for most people living in Villa 31 and other shantytowns, informality in housing and work arrangements has been a resource, rather than a burden, at least until they save up enough to move to better housing.

The transitory character of housing has been the main reason why neither the residents nor the state wanted to invest in planning and implementing large interventions. At best, makeshift informal electricity and water connections were done by the community groups to satisfy their immediate needs. However, regardless of the risk of expulsion, they were hesitant to invest too much in housing, sophisticated infrastructure and community spaces. Frequent eviction notices increased the risk of wasted effort. When eviction risk was low, residents preferred to work more and move to better housing as quickly as possible.

Historically, the state has also perceived shantytowns as providing transitory or emergency shelter and instead of integration and investment, it would rather attempt to resettle the residents to new housing and demolish the old precarious shacks. However, in periods when democratic governments acknowledged their inability to provide decent housing alternatives, they temporarily tolerated informal housing and postponed unpopular evictions. The rather rare cases of infrastructure improvements or promises of tenure formalisation were more often driven by political clientelism than the ambition to transform these areas through urban planning.

During recent crises and the Covid-19 pandemic, many poor families faced such urgent housing needs that they gave up on finding permanent homes, even via organised land occupations. They settled in unsuitable or eviction-prone areas like wetlands or railway lands. The absence of long-term prospects led to minimal planning and resulted in chaotic development.

Typology 4: Transition to permanent residence in central areas with growing eviction risk

> It's always with organisation, getting together, talking about what's coming, studying what we don't understand… Like the word 'gentrification'. We didn't know what that word gentrification meant. Now we know.
> (Community leader in Villa 31 about mobilisation of the residents to engage in the planning process)

The situation described as typology 3 starts to change when shantytowns and other forms of informal transitory housing become places for more permanent long-term residence, due to growing unaffordability of housing in the formal sector. Typology 4 describes areas undergoing this transformation. The gradual shift towards long-term residence applies to both the landlords and tenants. The former recognise the opportunity of earning high income from renting out rooms, while the latter, unable to access the formal housing market, remain in villas. These trends are evident in Villa 31 and other shantytowns in recent decades.

When the expected residence in shantytowns becomes permanent, the need to engage in planning increases. While the length of stay matters, the intentions for initiating planning work differ between the state institutions and the community. The shift to permanent shantytown residence around the 1990s coincided with a planning paradigm shift. This period marked a growing criticism of resettlement to public housing estates, which were often built in in unfavourable and remote locations. The idea of eradicating shantytowns became politically risky and unpopular. More planners and politicians started to recognise these settlements as neighbourhoods and designed plans for in situ upgrading, integration, and formalisation of tenure.

However, enforcing spatial and legal order in chaotic and unplanned shantytowns is challenging. Planners need to face a complex and rapidly changing physical, social, economic, and political environment. Informal development and informalisation is not frozen in time, but compete and often outpace the modest attempts of modernisation and regularisation led by government institutions. As the example of Villa 31 shows, the very generous budget for upgrading and formalisation was insufficient to transform the shantytown into a regular neighbourhood and make structural improvements of the area. In this case, most of the realised plans were the quick, 'easy', and aesthetic interventions.

Regulating dynamic informal tenure systems and resolving land ownership conflicts present additional challenges. Key issues include creating fair regularisation solutions for rental housing and agreeing on mortgage conditions for shantytown residents to become property owners.

The authorities have made plans that attempt to address these issues, but the success of this work has so far been very limited, because many of these proposals were rejected by the organised community. The credibility of the government has been weak, because of internal disagreements about the actual goals and intentions of planning, and due to unclarity regarding what and how information should be communicated to the communities living there.

The government motivates their actions by the need to integrate these areas into the city, improve infrastructure, and enhance quality of life. However, residents fear that the proposed improvements and formalised tenure may lead to gentrification and gradual expulsion.

Here, centrality plays an important role. In a growing city like Buenos Aires, where the property market is relatively liberalised, zones with high unexploited potential for commercial or residential development, including the area around Villa 31, are under constant pressure from real-estate investors, leading to displacement of low-income groups. This contrasts to settlements in typologies 1 and 2 located in suburban and peripheral locations. These areas are also attractive for private developers, but the pressure is not (yet) as intense as in the city centre.

Residents of Villa 31 engage in planning and political mobilisation to address tenure security and protect their right to stay. So far, the very particular combination of legitimisation of the shantytown by the state and a still informal residence might have served as a way of tenure protection for the community. This advantage was threatened by the new government strategy. Residents criticise the plans for formalising property and infrastructure, arguing these will increase housing costs and emphasise the of lack of sufficient protections against market-driven displacement. Many community leaders go further and interpret the official plans as a deliberate action to open the land for speculation and create conditions for indirect transfer of property ownership to profit-driven third parties. These gentrification threats in shantytowns concern property owners, tenants, and informal entrepreneurs in different ways.

Conflicts with the state cause community groups to reject active participation in the top-down planning scheme. Instead, they initiate their own parallel participatory planning processes where they debate these plans and develop their own alternative solutions and proposals. The main goal of this bottom-up planning is to ensure the right to stay and negotiate more favourable and affordable formalisation conditions. This approach represents another strategy by which communities imitate urban planning to secure their tenure.

Figure 11 demonstrates how the need for engagement in planning, both state- and community-led, increases when expected residence changes from transitory to permanent. On the left side are areas in typology 3, where the majority is living temporarily and does not need, or even want any form of planning. On the right are shantytowns in typology 4, where expected residence becomes more permanent, and the attempts to formalise tenure and infrastructure through top-down planning created new risks of expulsion, which sparked a parallel community mobilisation around planning. Table 2 gives an overview of the main characteristics of all the four typologies.

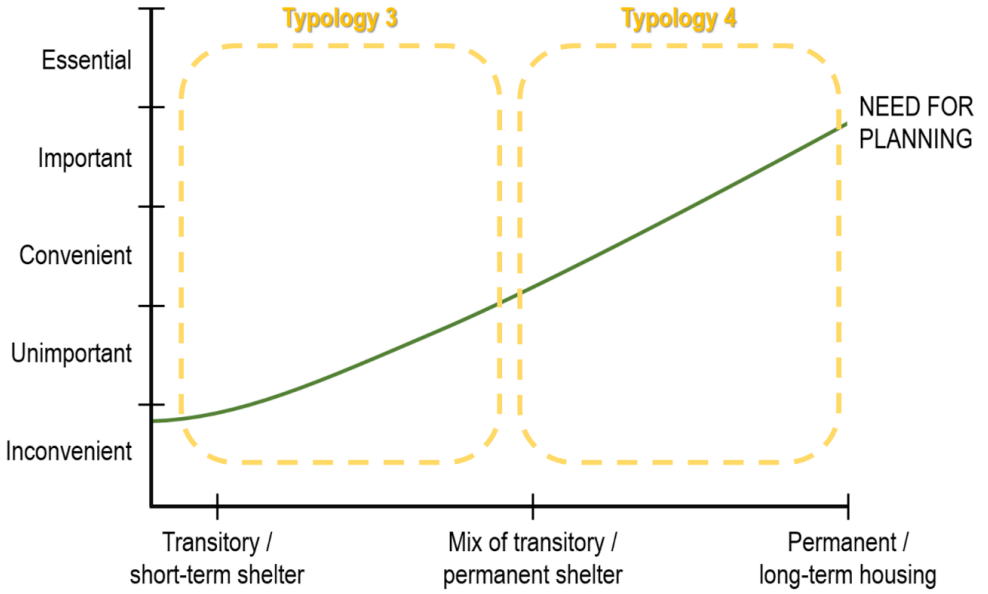

***Figure 11**. Changing need for or engagement in planning (initiated by either the community and state) according to the aspirations or expectations of length of stay. Source: the author*

***Table 2**. Comparison of typologies 1–4. Source: the author*

	Typology 1	Typology 2	Typology 3	Typology 4
Type of settlement	New informal settlements	Legitimised informal settlements	New shantytowns	Legitimised shantytowns
Location context	Suburban / peripheral	Suburban / peripheral	Central	Central
Risk of expulsion	High (eviction)	Low	Low or high (not significant)	High (gentrification)
Expected aspiration of residence	Permanent	Permanent	Transitory	Increasingly permanent (tenants and owners)
Motivation for community-led planning	High	Low	Low	High
Community priorities	Securing tenure	Household economy, housing improvement	Household economy, savings	Securing tenure
Motivation for state-led planning	Low	High	Low	High
Government priorities	Not legitimising illegal occupations	Formalisation, integration and upgrading	Not legitimising illegal occupations / unwilling to invest in transitory housing	Formalisation, integration and upgrading

Discussion

Risk of expulsion is a key factor that motivated community mobilisation

Risk of expulsion and tenure insecurity do not only foster informality, but improve it, making informality more organised and informed. This study supports the claim that informality partially compensates for the inefficiency of the formal, and therefore cannot be seen as something negative or abnormal (Roy, 2005; Altrock, 2012).

Risks of expulsion concern settlements in both peripheral and central locations. In typology 1, illegal occupations extend the city outwards. The occupants attempt to legitimise their land tenure by imitating formally planned suburban subdivisions. In these cases, the imitation of planning materialises primarily in their physical form through applying the formal urban codes in the layouts of their settlements. In typology 4, communities in centrally located shantytowns engage in planning as a strategy to defend their right to stay and negotiate protections from market-driven expulsion and gentrification driven by formalisation, speculation and rising real-estate values. Here, the imitation of planning relates more to the process of shared decision-making about the future of the already built settlement. In both cases, improving infrastructure and services have been important, but not prioritised over securing tenure rights.

When illegal occupants secure their right to stay (typology 2), priorities shift from collective actions that aim at securing tenure to addressing individual housing and economic needs, a phenomenon that was also documented by Gilbert and Ward (1985): residents focus less on the neighbourhood and more on the workplace and home.

The documented manifestations of informality are mainly supplementary (Altrock, 2012). Instead of filling the gaps left by planning codes and regulations, the informal practices and governing systems in informal settlements and shantytowns replace formal rules, policies, and standards, which are not enforced or fail to ensure social order and prosperity. Insecurities and informality arise from unrealistically high expectations for housing and urban development, creating gaps between policy and reality that planners struggle to address. This aligns with the claims about prohibitive housing and infrastructure standards made by Turner (1972, 1976) and Echavarria et al. (2021).

The community-driven urban planning processes summarised in typologies 1 and 4 resemble the bottom-up planning documented also in other contexts (see Hamdi, 2004; de Souza, 2006; Holston, 2009; Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015; Shrestha & Aranya, 2015; Kaika, 2017). There is, however, little agreement about whether such housing strategies should be called ‘heroic’ or ‘criminal’. It would be unwise to label these bottom-up and informal pre-planning attempts and decisions as ‘good planning’. We should, therefore, not romanticise the way in which low-income communities mobilise around planning. It shall be emphasised that it is more often an act of desperation in face of high tenure insecurity than a deliberate process that aims at improving living conditions.

Expected aspiration of residence matters

Community interest in planning is minimal in areas with transitory housing (typology 3). The state would only initiate planning work in settlements recognised as permanent, but not before they are no longer sentenced to forced eviction or designated for massive eradication (typologies 2 and 4). The consulted planners claimed that planning in settlements which from

the beginning were intended as places for permanent living (typologies 1 and 2) is easier than in the chaotic inner-city shantytowns (typologies 3 and 4).

The sequence of informal development does not align with state-led planning

Communities in informal housing and the state have different motivations and priorities for planning, even when both agree on its necessity. For organised communities in typologies 1 and 4, the main priorities are guarantees to secure tenure and prevent gentrification, while government planning agencies focus on formalisation, integration, and upgrading (typologies 2 and 4). In typology 1 and 2, one side may consider planning as important while the other finds it inconvenient. These differences cause conflicts and, as in typology 4, may lead to the emergence of two parallel planning processes. Only in typology 3, where housing is transitory, neither the community nor the state initiates planning interventions.

The conflicts are manifested by disagreements about what should happen and in which order. The most critical point of conflict in planning that remains constant in all four typologies is whether formalisation of ownership should come first or last. Communities typically demand tenure security first but prefer to delay formalisation to avoid the costs of mortgage repayment under insecure economic conditions. In contrast, governments usually prioritise formalising property ownership before making spatial interventions and infrastructure improvements. This finding confirms the observation made over 50 years ago by Turner (1972), who claimed that the urban poor prioritise access to unskilled jobs and the ability to save, while formal ownership and high living standards imposed by the state institutions are not preferred and may even be inconvenient if they contribute to increased expenditures.

The presented case studies suggest that the act of formalisation produces informality (Roy, 2005; Altrock, 2012). In Buenos Aires, the main issue with formalisation is the high chance of unaffordability of housing and services, countering de Soto's (2001) argument that property formalisation of tenure unlocks financial capital and leads to prosperity. This unaffordability, influenced by location and land value, can cause gentrification and displacement of vulnerable groups to less desirable areas, as many scholars have warned (Payne 2002, Roy, 2005; Payne et al., 2009; van Lindert, 2016; Satterthwaite, 2020).

Following this, the paper's findings support the theory that informal development tends to occur in reverse order compared to the formal housing process, where tenure is secured first and housing occupation is the final step (McLeod, 2001; de Paula et al., 2010; Hamdi, 2010; see Figure 1). However, instead of seeing development as a linear process from informality to formality (or reverse), the process can change directions, meaning that the formalisation process can be countered by informalisation.

In the presented case areas, such a reversion into informalisation happened primarily when efforts to formalise housing tenure or infrastructure connections were slow and imposed unaffordable rates (or fear of them). This justified the more informal access as free or cheaper and therefore a more convenient option for the users and de facto property owners. In other words, urban spaces and activities *informalise* as a conscious strategy by the poor to maximise their saving capacities (Turner, 1972).

Since informality supports the goals of the low-income families in Argentina, most formalisation efforts attempted by the government often face opposition and mistrust. This can sometimes lead to 'grassroots' (de Souza, 2006), or 'insurgent' planning (Miraftab, 2009). However, this paper found that imitating formalisation or showing capability with formal rules and regulations

(as in spatial planning) may be done strategically by the residents in informal settlements to reduce their tenure insecurity. Such insecurity is lower in settlements that are somewhat legitimised (or protected from eviction) and at the same time, allowed to maintain their informal economic and tenure structures. This indicates that urban spaces can be seen as continuums of complex overlaps of insecurities and formal and informal practices (Altrock, 2012).

Insecurities in development and the status of informality may increase when definitions of precarity and minimum acceptable housing conditions evolve, as they have historically (Gilbert, 2007). The findings from Buenos Aires confirm this observation. Despite gradual improvement of living standards, many of the studied settlements continue to be considered informal due to updated terminology and raised legal expectations that attempt to classify and formalise marginalised settlements. The status of some social housing estates has even been downgraded to informal due to deterioration, chronic poverty and rising minimum housing standards. The state of temporary tolerance for these informal occupations without guarantees for permanent residence resembles what Yiftachel (2009) called the 'permanent temporariness' in 'gray spaces'.

A better definition of rights is needed to reduce tenure insecurity

Tenure-related conflicts and insecurity are largely caused by misleadingly formulated and applied rights to housing and property. While informal and illegal occupations are motivated primarily by desperation and lack of housing alternatives, leaders who organise such acts of civil disobedience are aware of the larger ideological conflict that they are part of. Until the contradictions as well as inconsistency in interpretation and enforcement of the rights to housing and property are resolved, occupants will have to make plans and negotiate tenure rights, each of them separately for their own settlement. This need for clarification of rights concerns both those who claim ownership and the tenants.

Conclusions

This article analyses how tenure insecurity has been changing across time in informal settlements and shantytowns. Empirical research in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area, with three focused case study areas was guided by a research question of *how economic and tenure insecurities impact the planning and development of informal settlements and shantytowns in Buenos Aires*. The analysis showed how the bottom-up planning initiatives led by local community leaders and activists are often motivated by the fact that imitation of or engagement with formal planning regulations and codes usually increase the perceived tenure security for residents in these settlements.

If and when security from eviction is achieved or when households who occupy these lands do not aspire to stay in these areas in the long-term, planning efforts might be, however, ignored or even rejected. In such situations households may refocus their priorities on livelihood strategies and savings. In this context, community leaders can be perceived as political actors and de facto planners, who attempt to address tenure and economic insecurities in their areas of influence.

Informal settlements and shantytowns in Buenos Aires are characterised by gaps where the intentions and actions, as well as the known and unknown aspects for the community, and planners or decision-makers representing the state are different and often not aligned:

- Needs, motivations and priorities for people with low-income are constantly changing and most of the time contradict the goals of planning and visions of modernism, which also tend to shift due to political changes and preferences.
- Paths towards achieving future aspirations of communities and individuals do not follow the pre-established urban development standards and expectations of what a house should do and be like before habitation.
- The order in which informal development happens does not align and may even work in reverse with state-led planning processes.
- Attempts of formalisation contradict the pragmatic advantages of informalisation.
- Rights to dignified housing contradict rights to private property.
- Vertical and horizontal governance structures and participation systems are not compatible.
- Contextual knowledge does not comply with technical and generic knowledge.
- The impacts of corrupt, clientelist, and opportunistic practices may be positive or negative for certain groups, depending on connections, power relations, commercial interests and political circumstances.

Planners who work in informal settlements and shantytowns need to recognise these gaps and explore their contextual natures. Only then can they develop effective approaches and policies that would address the insecurities and improve the situation of the people living there. Acknowledging and integrating informal development within mainstream planning, especially during economic crises, is crucial. Doing otherwise would only magnify informality and create room for new illegal housing and land access practices.

Though these empirical findings are specific to Buenos Aires, the idea of developing typologies to analyse planning processes in informal settlements can be a useful diagnostic tool for researchers and planners in other contexts. Further research should examine planning standards and regulations towards access to affordable housing, their enforcement, and their impact on reducing informal and illegal housing strategies. The problem of the legal contradictions and synergies between the rights to housing and property, as well as the complex relationship between housing access and employment also deserve more attention.

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Ethical clearance

The research was assessed by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD, now Sikt – the Norwegian Agency for Shared services in Education and Research) and complies with the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

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Caracas, Departure City: Urban planning after emigration and collapse.

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The recent deterioration of living conditions in Venezuela has resulted in an unprecedented migratory crisis, infrastructure collapse, and institutional decline. In the middle of this complex situation, migrants' left-behind properties are being transformed into new uses. These changes often contradict zoning regulations, prompting a series of legal, social, and spatial strategies to conceal them.

This article examines ongoing spatial and programmatic transformations of vacant homes in Caracas, the country's capital, framing these changes within disciplinary discourses of shrinking and departure cities and in a specific experience of collapse that shapes daily life in the city. The article studies spatial transformations in terms of their material conditions and the opaque and informal procedures that produce them, describing the process from the point of view of various actors, from architects and entrepreneurs to local residents and planning authorities. Through interviews, site visits, and photographic documentation, the article describes the challenges and possibilities for social organization and institutional renovation in a climate of emigration and uncertainty.

Keywords: Caracas, crisis, emigration, social mobilization, urban planning

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Introduction

For several decades, Venezuela has been immersed in a conflict characterized by political antagonism, economic decline, social upheaval, and infrastructural breakdown. The rapid deterioration of living conditions since 2014 has triggered an unprecedented migratory crisis. It is estimated that nearly eight million citizens (Interagency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants, 2023), around 26% of the population, have left the country, with more than five million leaving since 2015 (Freitez et al., 2022). While the outward and more dramatic aspects of the migratory crisis have been the focus of academic research, the local impact of emigration remains understudied. Indeed, its speed and magnitude have transformed life within the country, creating a local manifestation of emigration that has social and spatial dimensions, and is entangled with the broader collapse.

In Caracas, Venezuela's capital and largest city, emigration has produced an over-abundance of vacant domestic spaces. These spaces, however, are not abandoned or ruined. Instead, the preservation of migrants' left-behind patrimonies, in an environment of economic crisis and institutional decay, has turned vacant properties into sites of emergent economies, new modes of social congregation, solidarity practices, and temporary inhabitation. These changes occur through informal and opaque procedures that elude state oversight, fiscal and urban regulations, and offer an outlet to daily hardships. Furthermore, these socio-spatial transformations transcend the domestic scale upon which they operate and have an urban impact.

This paper examines the reconfiguration of migrants' vacant domestic spaces and the interaction between emergent economic actors, architects, local residents, and planning authorities around these. It looks at how evading fiscal and urban regulations, in a context of corruption, uncertainty and emigration, relies on specific spatial strategies and produces precarious material conditions. Amid the diminished role of planning authorities, activists and neighbors' organizations have come to the fore to monitor and protest unsanctioned transformations, resulting in a confrontation that undermines prospects for urban growth or harnessing economic opportunities. In this sense, the paper aims to expose the limitations of top-down planning practices amid widespread collapse and propose possible ways forward in this troubled context.

The research focuses on the programmatic and spatial transformation of single-family houses in the Chacao municipality in Caracas. Focusing on a small sample area, the research aims to highlight transformations observable in other (former) middle class residential neighborhoods in the city. The research draws from urban studies literature to engage with the concept of 'departure city', while paying close attention to the crisis, represented both statistically and as a daily experience.

The article's findings are based on fieldwork carried out in Caracas in November 2022 and between July and August 2023. It included site visits and visual documentation through photography and architectural surveys, and interviews with municipal authorities, real estate agents, urban activists, architects, and entrepreneurs. These semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed, thematically coded, and translated into English. Questions revolved around the crisis' impact on professional activity, with attention to institutional decline and the

prevalence of informality, as well as the effects of emigration on the built environment. Participants' occupations overlapped around vacant domestic spaces in various ways. Therefore, it became important to examine how actors positioned themselves and operated upon this singular spatial condition. Interview excerpts and fieldwork observations are incorporated into the narrative to describe spatial transformations, emergent dynamics, and the positions of various actors. Some interviews were anonymized at the request of participants.

The text is organized in four sections. First, it offers an overview of the urban context of the municipality of Chacao in Caracas. Then, it frames the discussion around the concepts of shrinking and departure cities, while considering the Venezuelan collapse as a framework that shapes daily actions. Subsequently, the article delves into the specifics of the case study by examining the transformation of domestic spaces and relation to their context, as well as the social, professional, and institutional environment in which these occur. Finally, concluding remarks point to possible ways forward under the present circumstances.

Chacao: emergence and decline of a middle-class neighborhood

Venezuela's rapid urban expansion during the 20th century was underpinned by expanding oil revenues and framed within a broader discourse of progress and modernization. Starting in the 1920's, the Venezuelan state embarked on a grand project aimed at uplifting the nation from its agrarian past towards a modern urban society (Blackmore, 2017; Mondolfi Gudat, 2020).

In Caracas, expansion beyond the historic city center had begun in the early 20th century in the form of garden-style suburbs for the urban elites. The redistribution of oil proceeds beginning in the 1920s had profound territorial and demographic impact. Urban populations grew rapidly, and with it, the need for housing an emerging middle class.[1] The *urbanización*, a form of urban development based on European and later American style suburbs, rapidly took shape. Led by private capital, new developments sprung up increasingly further from the city center by parceling and urbanizing agrarian land, resulting in a patchwork of disconnected and morphologically varied suburbs (Landa, 2004). The regulating plan of 1951, developed by Josep Luis Sert, Maurice Rotival, and Francis Violich introduced zoning ordinances and marked a final departure from the planning principles of colonial times in favor of Anglo-Saxon models (Vegas and González Viso, 2015). The metropolitan plan of 1951 lay the foundations for an expansive city with independent areas interconnected by vehicular arteries that predominates to this day. A new residential typology emerged in hand with this process of urban expansion: the detached, single-family house. Locally known as *quinta*,[2] this typology had made an early appearance at the turn of the 20th century in the form of large, detached villas for the urban elite. A few decades later, it had evolved into a smaller format, becoming the architecture of choice for an aspiring urban middle class whose expansion was underpinned by state-backed mortgages in a climate of sustained economic growth.

[1] By 1920, Caracas had a population of 92.212. By 1936, it had grown to 235.150. By 1950, it reached nearly half a million. See Negrón, as cited in Landa (2004)

[2] The term *quinta* is a colonial legacy, referring originally to a recreational country house. It has evolved in different ways in Latin America. In Venezuela, the modern *quinta* appeared as urban elites moved to isolated houses in spacious lots in the outskirts of the capital. As the city expanded, American style suburbs became common, and houses became smaller, the term lost its exclusive overtone.

Presently, the metropolitan district of Caracas is composed of five municipalities, with an estimated population of 2.964.365[3] and an area of 810 km². Chacao is the smallest and wealthiest of these, with a population of 71.500 and an area of 13 km². The municipality is centrally located within the city and effectively connected to metropolitan thoroughfares and public transport networks. It also has lower crime rates than the city's average.[4] These conditions have traditionally made Chacao an aspirational location for the city's middle and upper-middle classes, embassies and, recently, international organizations that have set up local offices during the humanitarian emergency, accentuating its enclave status.

Historically, the area developed around the mission town of Chacao outside of Caracas' colonial center. The capital's expansion in the mid-20th century engulfed Chacao and its surrounding agricultural land. Zoning ordinances implemented in the 1950s stipulated land use, construction areas, and building heights, dividing the municipality into a lower area of high density and mixed uses and upper suburban-style residential neighborhoods. The first was dominated by mid-rise residential buildings with street-level commerce, while the second was populated by detached *quintas*. As this zoning combination became common throughout the city, single-family houses and apartment buildings conformed the architectural repertoire of the city's urban middle class.

In Chacao and elsewhere in Caracas, years of uninterrupted emigration have created an oversupply in the housing market, leading to a significant decrease in prices. According to urban planner Martín Fernández, the price of existing residential properties in the city experienced a drop of 40 to 50% between 2013 and 2020, only to stabilize afterward (Fernández, 2021). In Chacao, residential vacancy is generalized. In the words of Soraya Alfonzo, director of the Local Municipal Planning Office (OLPU in Spanish), 'there is no official census of vacant properties in the municipality. However, based on interviews with neighbors and personal experience, we estimate that 50% of apartment buildings and houses stand empty' (S. Alfonzo, personal communication, November 11, 2022). Additionally, residents who stay behind are often elderly and cannot afford to maintain properties in good condition.[5] Therefore, the decline of public infrastructure is mirrored in the generalized dilapidation of private properties, contributing to the slow but persistent environmental degradation throughout the city.

[3] Based on the last official census of 2011, the metropolitan area of Caracas had 2.904.376 inhabitants. The population projection for 2021 was 2.964.365. This variation must take into account the 1.12% yearly national population growth between 2010 and 2015, and a negative growth rate of 1.13% between 2015-21. See: Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas (2014)

[4] In 2022, the city averaged 61 violent deaths per 100.000 inhabitants, while Chacao averaged 41. See: Observatorio Venezolano de la Violencia (2023)

[5] By 2022, 86% of migrants were between 15-49 years, that is, the most economically productive segment of the population. See Freitez et al. (2023)

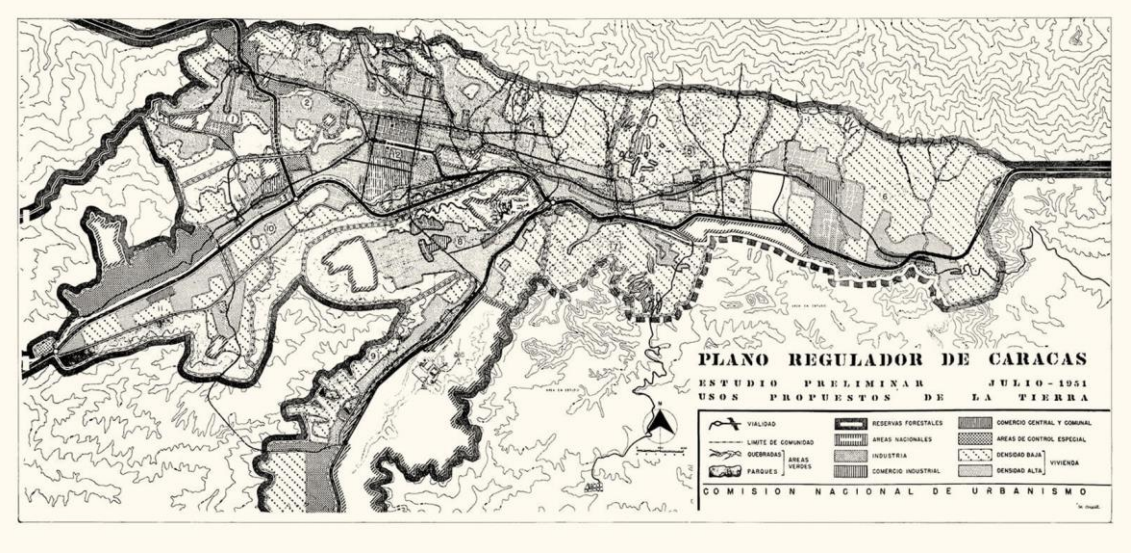

Figure 1. *Regulating Plan of Caracas, 1951. Source: De-Sola Ricardo (1967)*

Theoretical Framework(s): Departure City, Fragile State[6]

In the field of urban studies, the most widely used framework for analyzing the impact of outward migration on cities is the 'shrinking city'. This concept explains urban decline associated with economic or political restructuring, de-industrialization, suburbanization, or demographic changes. While urban and demographic decline are age-old phenomena, the shrinking city has been identified as a mode of urban transformation specific to globalization and the impending end of global population growth. Within this framework, growth and shrinkage coexist globally or nationally at the expense of each other, as 'poles of growth' attract population from peripheral regions, resulting in their depopulation (Oswalt & Rieniets, 2006, p. 6). Despite its focus on decline, the literature has moved past negative implications of depopulation and argued for a future 'culture of shrinkage' centered on 'distinct forms of renewal and change.' (Oswalt, 2019, p. 26). Shrinking cities have been re-conceptualized as sites of cultural and environmental repair through practices that exploit the restorative potential of abandoned spaces, leading to innovative forms of urban development, governance, public art, or community organization.

For its part, the 'departure city' has been associated to urban environments where space 'is fundamentally shaped by emigration' (König, 2016) and 'places of co-habitation where multiple translocal spaces and flows overlap' (König and Vöckler, 2018, p. 411). The departure city framework aims to expand disciplinary discussions beyond growth-shrinkage oppositions by pointing to a situation where the conflicting forces of outward migration, population growth and urban development coexist, producing socio-spatial transformations. These include informal and temporary housing solutions, diaspora investment, the emergence of an emigration infrastructure in the form of specialized businesses and transport hubs, the 'symbolic presence of the elsewhere' (König, 2016) through western-like architectural styles and foreign nomenclature, and the general synchronization of daily life with the rhythms of emigration (König, 2016; König and Vöckler, 2018; Coman, Grubbauer and König, 2019). The departure

[6] This theoretical framework is a central part of an ongoing doctoral dissertation. Parts of this section have already been published. See Gzyl (2023)

city depicts an environment whose physical constitution and cultural features sustain and stimulate emigration.

The departure city framework has been used to explain urban transformations in post-socialist and post-conflict countries of the European periphery characterized by circular labor migration with the European Union. Research has focused on migrants' economic involvement in cities of origin through enterprises that shape the built environment and building culture. Urban transformation in the departure city is a specific expression of transnational networks and the flow of financial resources, knowledge and information these networks sustain. While the concept has been limited to the European context, authors have called to expand 'the scale and scope of the departure city in its manifold realizations [through] empirical work' (König and Vöckler, 2018, p. 415).

Conceptualizing Caracas as a departure city offers an opportunity for probing this concept beyond the European context and for considering emigration as a driving factor of urban transformation. In Caracas, the consequences of emigration and its entanglement with collapse cannot be reduced to abandonment, ruin, and the disappearance of urban life. Outward migration is partially compensated by internal arrivals from an even more precarious periphery. Amid growing national decay, the central government has gone to great lengths to maintain a certain level of functionality of the capital, reflected in the relative stability of electricity supply and the maintenance of public infrastructure. Amid economic volatility, real estate investment has become a haven for capital, leading to a boom in high-end commercial and residential construction. Speculative development has resulted in millions of square meters of vacant space that overlap with migration-related vacancy (Fernández, 2021).

Migrants' vacant dwellings sit at the intersection of emigration and the broader crisis, offering an opportunity to examine their interaction. A singular feature of Venezuela's migratory crisis, particularly of the middle class, is the fact that migrants retain local property. Abandonment, understood as giving up claims or rights over property, is rare. For migrants, local property extends ties to the homeland and the possibility of future return, while challenging the nature of transnational exchange beyond the one-way flow of economic remittances. Economically, retaining property prevents investment loss, generates income, or provides housing for left-behind family members. However, in a context of high crime rates, institutional precarity, and laws that provide no protection against invasion, migrants resort to informal mechanisms to protect patrimonies. Trust and personal connections substitute legal arrangements, partial use and the simulation of occupation are common, and a niche economy of caretakers and property managers has emerged in the city. As will be shown, these considerations are also entangled with migrants' needs to sell on short notice or a desire maximize profits, opening left-behind spaces to creative transformations that have relevant spatial and urban implications.

In Venezuela, the impact of emigration on urban development has received scarce scholarly attention and an outlook on migration as cause of urban transformations is generally lacking. Architect and scholar Marco Negrón, who has studied urban transformations in their entanglement with broader political and economic circumstances, gives a cursory treatment to migration in a recent study of Caracas' urban problems (Negrón, 2021). In a detailed analysis of urban decline in Caracas from the perspective of urbicide, urban planner Alberto Lovera (2023) briefly mentions emigration, framing it as consequence of deteriorating living conditions in places of origin. An exception is the research of architect and scholar Lorenzo González (2020, 2023), whose concept of 'urban osteoporosis' describes a condition in which structures remain intact but are internally weakened. In his research on the urban impact of emigration, González draws parallels between the Venezuelan capital and historic processes

of urban decline, suggesting the future incorporation of the city's vacant architectural stock through repurposing schemes within new institutional, economic, legal, urban, and professional frameworks. His examination of vacancy ends by pointing to the need for 'structural changes' before measures for urban recovery can be effectively implemented. Notwithstanding the need and relevance of structural changes, this research argues that the creative reincorporation of vacancy that González aspires to is already taking place. Moreover, its occurrence challenges—in its logic and outcome—the very idea of 'structural change' as a prerequisite for action.

The Venezuelan crisis. Collapse and emergent knowledge

The Venezuelan collapse is characterized by a combination of economic mismanagement, political conflict, institutional fragility, and social fracture that have drastically reshaped the country. Disentangling the multiple facets of this collapse and tracing their origin is a difficult task. Some of its features, such as poverty or service deficiencies, are an amplification of historic shortcomings that can be traced to an uneven and fast-tracked modernization of the country during the 20th century, while others, like massive emigration, are entirely new and can be specifically located in the rapid deterioration of living conditions that began in 2013. This period coincides with the rise to power of Nicolás Maduro and the acceleration of democratic backsliding that had begun with Hugo Chávez in 1999 (Corrales, 2022).

Between 2014 and 2022, the Venezuelan economy shrunk by 75% (IMF, 2023). As of December 2022, 81.5% of the population lived in poverty; a large percentage of the population was under-or-unemployed, and informal employment encompasses 44% of the economy (Freitez et al., 2023). The health and public education infrastructure have collapsed and public services like transportation, electricity, and water are subjected to frequent breakdowns. The setback of political freedom and civil liberties, press censorship, and human rights abuses have been widely documented. Violations of private property, including invasion, expropriation, fines, or temporary occupations, have been sanctioned by a legal framework gradually established by the government over the last two and a half decades.

In recent years, economic impact of widespread international sanctions, the country's isolation from the global financial system (Bull and Rosales, 2020), the low salaries of public employees (Rosales, Bull and Sutherland, 2023), and the average citizen's survival needs (Vásquez Lezama, 2019), have established 'ways of doing' (Mbembe and Roitman, 1995, p. 340) that shape daily life. In this sense, collapse should be examined beyond statistical representations through its physical manifestations and the operative framework for action that it creates. Disinvestment and lack of maintenance have resulted in the ruin of public infrastructure, service failure demands the recourse to private alternatives, and informal occupations compensate formal employment or completely replace it. In addition, crime and violence limit access to public space and have displaced social life towards controlled environments, resulting in the privatization or abandonment of the public realm (Lombardi and Gzyl, 2015; Freitez et al., 2018). In this sense, collapse is 'inscribed in the everyday urban landscape, in its material structures such as roads, residences and office buildings, and in social interaction and relations of power, profit and subsistence' (Mbembe and Roitman, 1995, p. 327). In parallel, daily life requires constant improvisations, course corrections, and negotiations to survive, resist, or profit from uncertainty. Collapse shapes the outcome of actions and projects, a situation in which the makeshift and tentative rule over the permanent and definitive. This provisional quality is visible in the material constitution of the built environment and the procedures for its production. In this uncertain context, urban development is the outcome of processes 'that fundamentally depend upon the capacity of actors and institutions finding ways

to continuously strike agreements on accomplishing things together, even if the rules of such collaborations are opaque and fluid' (Pieterse, 2013, p. 14). The lack of clear rules and constantly shifting procedures challenge distinctions between legal and illegal, formal and informal, and their corresponding imaginaries, purporting informality as a pervasive condition shaping the city. As the spatial transformations documented here will show, it is not that actors play both sides, but rather that it is unclear what the sides are.

Transformations of vacant houses in Chacao

Urban and spatial strategies

As stated above, middle-class migrants often retain property in the city. This opens left-behind spaces to new possibilities, whether by lending them to friends or relatives in exchange for looking after or renting them for profit. However, the line between caretaking, preservation, and transformation is not clearly drawn, as migrants' desires to retain their properties and maximize their profitability often subjects them to changes in use or to spatial reconfigurations. María Christina Silva, Director of Urban Management for Chacao municipality, explains that single-family houses are of little value in an oversaturated market. 'However, converting them into other uses increases their profitability. Working illegally, outside the scope of obsolete zoning regulations, reports a considerable income' (M. Silva, personal communication, November 11, 2022). Beyond their 'illegality', spatial transformations are entangled in the dynamics of emigration and a volatile economy. They are immersed in a web of relations where new economic actors, emergent clienteles, migrants, architects, municipal institutions, and residents operate in complicity, confrontation, or subservience, disfiguring legal frameworks, bypassing urban regulations, and increasing conflict. Negotiating all these factors relies on corruption and legal loopholes to circumvent zoning laws and architectural strategies to conceal and minimize transformations.

Spatially, a salient feature of recent changes can be termed the 'dual existence' of commercial venues that operate out of domestic spaces. This duplicity is evident in the contradictory relationship these locations establish with the digital and physical public spheres, aimed at maximizing social media exposure while minimizing impact and interaction with the immediate surroundings. Businesses located in residential areas of Chacao have a vigorous digital engagement and can be easily located on platforms like Google Maps, increasing their visibility and accessibility. Simultaneously, they are concealed behind tall perimeter walls with little or no signage identifying them. However confounding this duality may seem, it does not respond to a need to evade authorities but to attract a specific clientele. It is common for these semi-clandestine establishments to advertise themselves in terms of isolation, refuge, or escape, a language directed 'towards a new public who looks for privacy, exclusiveness, and luxury,' according to María Christina Silva's view (M. Silva, personal communication, November 11, 2022).

Figure 2. *Recently converted homes. New uses are concealed behind tall walls and domestic exteriors. Photos by author.*

Achieving privacy and seclusion relies on a single spatial device: the perimeter wall, a ubiquitous architectural feature of residential architecture in Caracas. Its existence predates recent, migration-led, transformations, responding historically to a need for safety amid rising crime rates. As architectural elements, perimeter walls have become the default façades of houses and buildings (Capra-Ribeiro, 2014), an ever-evolving construction where successive layers of masonry, barbwire, vegetation, electrical fencing, and surveillance technologies are added over time, often surpassing the legal limit of two and a half meters above the sidewalk. Walls, fences, and checkpoints have transformed the city and people's habits, limiting interaction and turning Caracas into a 'city of feuds' (Zubillaga and Cisneros, 2001, p. 162). The experiential gap between vacant streets and lively interiors does not exacerbate a boundary between traditional categories of public and private as much as it highlights a growing economic divide amplified by collapse. In this context, the reprogramming of vacant homes, underpinned by spatial devices and technologies of security, conjugates a new form of gathering space, while the 'real' public realm remains as 'the option for those who have nowhere else to go,' in the words of María Christina Silva (M. Silva, personal communication, November 11, 2022).

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***Figure 3**. Construction of additional layers on existing perimeter wall. Photo by Edgar Martínez*

The inward-facing transformations of vacant houses also produce a singular architecture. In a climate of economic instability, with a small consumer market and avid competition, and amid precarious leasing conditions, entrepreneurs aim for minimal investment and immediate returns. This strategy results in a makeshift architecture of temporary structures, outdoor shacks, hanging lights, and plastic furniture that supports new programs and introduces new material conditions but leaves underlying spatial structures intact, and with this the possibility of reversing changes. In the words of a restaurant owner operating out of a single-family house, 'I have made several alterations to the space myself, but nothing is permanent. I can take everything with me when I leave.' When asked about the reason for this strategy, they answered, 'Because if I have to leave this house, or the country, I can just pack everything up and go. There are no certainties. All you can do is live in the present and seize opportunities.' (Anonymous participant, personal communication, August 2, 2023). Despite this critical outlook, the restaurant has been operating out of its present location since 2017. At the time of our meeting, the business owner was in the process of renovating a larger venue elsewhere. The decision to move responded to several factors, like mounting and arbitrary rent hikes, permanent complaints from neighbors, off-the-books payments to municipal authorities, and recently finding a location out of which to operate legally. As stated by architect Oriana Ferrer, whose firm Obra Verde has been involved in various residential transformation projects in Chacao,

> There is an ongoing transformation that authorities have not dealt with, or have dealt with wrongly, that is, by trying to stop it instead of acknowledging that the city is evolving. Clients simply assume this change and they do so because the precedent is everything around them already operates as commercial spaces. (O. Ferrer, personal communication, July 7, 2023)

Another example of how opacity and fluidity produce specific spatial strategies is the case of 'Streat Market'. For two years, this venue operated out of a single-family house in a residentially zoned block in Chacao. The property was owned by five sisters, three of whom lived abroad. Streat Market had a six-month contract for the property's use, maintenance, and repair. The owners demanded short-term leases in case they needed to sell swiftly. In addition, the document prevented any permanent alterations to the space. These contractual conditions were the basis for Streat Market' architectural strategy, a radical reprogramming of the house that left its spatial structure unaltered. Most of the program was concentrated outdoors, along lateral and front setbacks, where self-standing food kiosks where operated by individual vendors and patrons sat on long communal tables. The interior of the house contained a video arcade and an exhibition space. Some rooms remained closed off and contained the owners' belongings, overlapping the house's commercial use with its former one as a family residence. Tall perimeter walls screened clients from the street, a contradiction considering the venue's name—a word play between 'street' and 'eat'— and its inspiration in European street markets.

Streat Market opened in early 2020 and permanently closed two years later, after being shut down various times. 'When we started, we tried doing everything transparently. We knew the Mayor's office had internally approved zoning changes, but the City Council had not passed it due to political backlash,' explains David Ogaya, of the partners. 'We received a temporary business license and our permits were up-to-date' (David Ogaya, personal communication, July 6, 2023). His account of how events unfolded from this point expose internal conflicts among various municipal departments, corruption, and the various mechanisms available for bypassing restrictions that have become standard practice for businesses operating out of vacant houses. The business owner quoted earlier expressed it as follows: 'There is a theory that the municipality will not change zoning because they live off illegality as well. It is profitable for them' (anonymous participant, August 2, 2023).

Precarious practices, opaque milieus

Architects interviewed for this research spoke of how residential transformation projects have increasingly become part of their practice. The design and construction phases proceed quickly and the final product resembles more an installation or a scenography than a permanent intervention. This spatial precariousness is accompanied by unfavorable contractual conditions, informal agreements, and a general disregard for professional expertise. According to Camilo Lander, a local architect with over twenty years of experience, 'accumulating expertise is not profitable. We find ourselves competing with young firms who charge much less for simple projects.' (C. Lander, personal communication, November 10, 2022). This opinion reflects a frustration with the conditions of professional practice and the absence of institutional frameworks to regulate professional practice or mediate disputes. In addition, according to Mr. Lander, the 'formal, informal, and illegal economies are deeply entangled', making it hard for professionals to draw lines as to what can be considered ethical practices.

As architects Gabriel Fossi and Jose Guinand commented, 'We operate in a state of generalized informality. If you want to do things through regular channels, everything gets complicated. This makes people take alternative routes.' (G. Fossi, J. Guinand, personal communication, November 10, 2022). As an example, the architects point to the interaction with municipal authorities during construction. 'Permits are irrelevant. Regulating entities know what gets built, but due to their economic deficit, they look the other way in exchange for payoffs or other arrangements like paving a street or fixing street lights.' These entanglements and negotiations that shape professional illustrate what urban scholar Edgar Pieterse (2013) called the need to find ways of working together under opaque and fluid conditions.

***Figure 4**. Outdoor area of Streat Market, Chacao. Photo by David Ogaya*

Contested positions

Chacao's Municipal Planning Office was established in 1992 to regulate and oversee urban development by designing and implementing urban plans. It is itself ascribed to the municipality's Urban Management Direction. Until recently, the OLPU consisted of five departments and was staffed by a team of twenty urbanists, engineers, lawyers, and technicians. Because of administrative restructuring and low salaries, it has been reduced to three departments and six employees. In November of 2022, the office offered a vivid description of institutional decline: a large space with lights partially turned off and rows of empty desks, walls stacked with project binders and hallways filled with glass-encased models of public buildings, some inaugurated decades ago, others never built.

Staff and budget shortages have greatly diminished OLPU's possibilities of monitoring zoning violations in the municipality. In the face of municipal inaction, residents quickly take on to social media and often block streets to protest illegal transformations, objecting the increased traffic, parked vehicles, and loud music. However, in this conflict, 'neighbors also realized they hit a wall. They protest and close off streets, but business owners find a legal loophole to bypass them', adds María Christina Silva (M. Silva, personal communication, November 11, 2022). In response to illegal use changes, the municipality's fiscal administration (not the OLPU) springs into action, closing down venues for lack of business licenses. When this happens, entrepreneurs often introduce legal protection orders in higher courts, rendering local authorities powerless. According to business owners interviewed for this research, judges have turned this procedure into a standard and fee-based practice, charging between 20 and 30 thousand dollars for issuing court protections. In the words of Soraya Alfonzo, these

measures represent the worst of all outcomes of this conflict: 'Businesses reopen with a protected status, overriding our authority and without solving any of the problems they generate' (S. Alfonzo, personal communication, November 11, 2022).

To address the issue, the municipality has surveyed illegal transformations and started a conversation with neighbors, most of who are elderly and long-time residents. However, possible solutions to this impasse have been on the table for a long time. OLPU first drafted an update to obsolete zoning regulations in 1995, proposing a mix of uses and densification in residential areas, but the opposition of neighbors' associations historically prevented its implementation. The recurrence of illegal conversions and the mobility restrictions during COVID-19 has finally aligned neighbors and the municipality after years of standoff.

> People were not open to change, but since the pandemic, they have come to realize there are obvious advantages to walking to the market or the pharmacy. There is a growing awareness that mixed-use is positive as long as there are clear guidelines for the relationship between commercial and residential uses (M. Silva, personal communication, November 11, 2022).

For architect Enrique Larrañaga, neighbors' groups are a reaffirmation of the individual 'against the State and instances of power' (Carvajal, 2018), a position that explains the historic opposition to municipal zoning changes. However, the emergence of new power groups and their involvement in unsanctioned use changes has shifted the focus of complaints and created common ground for residents and local authorities.

The fact that the future-oriented vision of institutional planning has been endorsed at a moment when the municipality's capacities are so greatly compromised should be taken into consideration. Despite OLPU's best efforts, comprehensive urban plans must undergo several stages of revision and approval, rendering them a too-little-too-late tool in light of rapid recent changes. Additionally, zoning upgrades carry a high political cost for mayors and Council members, who shy away from their implementation for fear of losing reelection. In the view of Soraya Alfonzo and Maria Christina Silva, the problem is primarily political, pointing to an institution at odds with itself.

Cheo Carvajal, a journalist and urban activist, perceives a different situation. In his opinion, 'institutions have changed in a revealing way. Emergent capital is moving with freedom and radically transforming spaces in the city.' In his view, 'Institutional power merely accompanies this process, losing its role as coordinator of urban life through public policies. Institutions let things happen and then manage discontent' (C. Carvajal, personal communication, November 22, 2022). Amidst this perceived inaction and dependency, Carvajal sees new opportunities for social mobilization within activism as a channel for expressing dissent. For him, trying to influence what happens in the city includes making evident how institutions have become a tool of economic power. Nevertheless, activism faces its own challenges: as the crisis shifts citizens' focus to daily struggles, engagement with medium and long-term issues is not a priority. In this precarious context, activist groups have adjusted their strategies, including increased social media presence and an atomization into topic-specific networks that tackle limited problems and denounce abuses. This multiplication of voices also includes neighbors' associations that have existed for several decades but have recently found in social media an outlet for exposing irregularities, expanding engagement and organizing protests.

Conclusion

This article has examined the spatial and programmatic transformation of vacant domestic spaces in Caracas in the context of emigration and collapse. It has reviewed disciplinary

discussions on the urban impact of emigration and pointed to gaps in the literature, where the focus is on emigration as consequence rather than cause of urban transformations and approached spatial changes in terms of their material conditions and the opaque procedures that produce them. It has described the process of spatial transformation from the point of view of various actors involved: entrepreneurs, institutions, architects, and residents. At the same time, the article has emphasized the need to consider a singular experience of collapse. As living conditions in the country deteriorate, concerns with the immediate –sometimes manifested in terms of pure survival— acquire greater significance, overriding long-term considerations and concerns about legality or ethics. This mindset has found fertile ground in vacant domestic spaces, intersecting the migrants' needs with an institutional disarticulation, economic opportunity, and an emerging clientele. Underpinned by the legal vacuum created by institutional collapse, unregulated transformations are creating isolated instances of commercial activity and socialization at the margins of legality. While experts have pointed to the need for structural changes that can frame urban growth within political and economic recovery, the cumulative impact of small, isolated transformations, is starting to have an impact on the city. The question is not to propose an apology of the crisis, but to understand its logic of incremental changes and harness it towards positive urban changes. Considering the reduced capabilities of local planning institutions, the disarticulation between various municipal bodies and levels of government, and the alleged political costs of conventional planning instruments, a case can be made for questioning the relevance and feasibility of all-encompassing urban plans, in terms of both their spatial ambitions and temporal horizons.

Despite occurring as a reaction to rather than a directive of transformation, recent efforts of both OLPU and residents to overcome a historic impasse are an example of what urban scholar Abdoumaliq Simone refers to as 'the space opened up by virtue of turning uncertainty into a resource'. Uncertainty can be factored into the decision-making process rather than contended with (Simone, 2013, p. 251). As the use of migrants' left-behind houses changes due to economic pressures and a sense of opportunity that escape OLPU's control, it becomes less important to anticipate what happens than how it happens. For the institution, this entails, on one hand, a shift away from a concern with the use of private lots and towards the public realm, currently a no man's land, as well as the interface between both. This may entail provisions requiring a greater level of openness or permeability of walls, the requirement of front terraces to replace parking places, or creating a legal framework for what are now informal transactions with architects and business owners, such as private investment in public space.

On the other hand, OLPU's role as a mediator can provide a framework for proliferating actors to act in concert, articulating a latent potential of social movements that is currently lost due to their atomization. Limitations create incentives for new modes of negotiation that rely on alliances aiming to generate accord between various actors. If the departure city acknowledges the intertwining of emigration with instances of economic growth and urban development, a relevant question is whether, in the case of Caracas, emigration can create a basis for re-institutionalization. Considering the conditions under which emigration has taken place, that migrants' properties represent a symbolic claim on the city, and that their reliance on local actors to look after, inhabit or transform their vacant properties is driven by economic needs and by fears of loss or invasion, actively involving this group in decision-making processes can create instances of cooperation that transcend private interests, opening vacant properties to public management or collective use.

Declaration of interest

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

Ethics declaration

Research participants expressed their written consent to be part of it. Approval of the study was granted by the University's Human Research Ethics Committee prior to fieldwork.

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