

**Utopian Visions for Buenos Aires Shantytowns:  
Collective Imaginaries of Housing Rights, Upgrading and Eviction (1956-2013)**

Dr Adriana Laura Massidda

Centro de Estudios Urbanos y Regionales

CEUR/CONICET

Argentina

a.massidda@conicet.gov.ar

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## **Abstract**

This article explores three utopian visions related to Buenos Aires shantytowns which have shaped past and present experiences. The article argues that these visions are collective conceptions that entail a socio-political critique, translating it into space and pointing to a future conceived of as ideal. Thus, utopian visions move beyond more traditional conceptions of 'utopia', since they can be formulated by any group within society, and are not always expressed in written form. The visions proposed emerge from the examination of historical evidence and are key for understanding the discussions about shantytowns held throughout the twentieth century in Latin America.

## **Keywords**

Shantytowns upgrade

Shantytowns eradication

Social housing

Utopian visions

Twentieth-Century Buenos Aires

Note: All translations from quotations originally in Spanish are my own, except indicated otherwise.

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It is in the desire to shape society into a specific form, distributing and arranging it spatially [...] where utopia emerges  
(Heffes, 2013: 21)

The idea of utopia has been linked to urban space since its very inception, and even more so in the context of Latin America. A utopia can be defined as the formulation of a nonexistent place of perfect happiness. First coined by Thomas More in his homonymous text, the term 'utopia' plays with the sound of two Greek prefixes to construct its meaning as, at the same time, an οὐ-τόπος (non-place) and an ευ-τόπος (fortunate place) (Logan & Adams, 2002: xi).

The idea of utopia stemmed from the expanding imaginary that followed European overseas explorations in the sixteenth century. In particular, the increasing contact with the continent that we now call America meant for the Europeans not only that they were exposed to realities, peoples and spaces that they did not know of before, but also that they were faced with the very fact that other worlds, so far unfamiliar for them, could exist. Conversely, the European conception of utopian space was used in Latin America as a tool to translate specific projects of social order into physical realities (Cave, 1991; Bruce, 1999: x; O'Gorman, 1984: 54 and 150–59; Rama, 1996).

By imagining fortunate places that do not exist (yet), utopias entail a critique of a current state of affairs – they reveal imperfections in the worlds that do exist. Early modern utopias, for example, such as More's, denounced specific aspects of the Old World that the authors found troublesome by means of creating imaginary worlds with the qualities that they 'would wish rather than expect to see' (More, 1516: 107) in Europe. Being both descriptive and programmatic, utopias have a double face through which they construct narrations of a space of happiness and offer tools of transformation that can be used to construct it. The programmatic aspect happens to be particularly relevant in Latin America. Through the Laws of the Indies and the Ordinances Concerning Discoveries issued between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, for example, Spanish conquerors used the conception of an ideal, unified, rigorously planned urban order as a tool to transform the American space, perceived by them as 'void', into space that could be inhabited by civilisation. Crucially, this urban utopian vision excluded Indigenous people (*Recopilación...*, 1681; Salcedo Fidalgo & Zeiderman, 2008: 75–77). After independence, this position was replicated by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, as became clear in his formulation of the utopian city Argirópolis (1850). Different conceptions of utopian cities like Colombo (1801), conceived of by Francisco de Miranda, or Las Casas (1815), by Simón Bolívar, aimed at creating a version of the American landscape that included Indians (Heffes, 2009: 32–77; 2013: 13–14). Although these texts did not constitute public policy in a direct way as the Laws of the Indies did, they expressed the perspectives of their authors' – who later became statesmen – and of those contemporaries who supported them. Later in the twentieth century, the organisation of society through urban distribution took the form of Modernist planning, as can be seen in examples like Le Corbusier's Plan para Buenos Aires (1938) (Ballent, 2005: 227–241), Cidade dos

Motores by Town Planning Associates (1945 or earlier) (Mumford, 1997: 50–58), or Lúcio Costa's design for Brasilia (1957) (Spencer, 2010: 53–56).

So far I have been referring to utopias formulated from a Euro-centric perspective, by one subject and at a particular moment time – typically through a text, a drawing or a written document. In fact, the term 'utopia' is sometimes used to refer to their formulations as texts rather than the utopian conceptions themselves ("utopia, n.," 2015; Heffes, 2013: 20; Bruce, 1999: xiv). But is there no utopia beyond texts? Can we not say that an idea, a conception is a 'utopia'? What about the visions of those groups who are not used to document their thinking? Does a utopia need to be self-conscious? This article will be framed in terms of *utopian visions* rather than *utopias* to disambiguate from the definitions that focus on specific formulations such as a self-contained text. Utopian visions do not have a definite, clear-cut form, nor have they been expressed at one single time by one single subject. Rather, they are collective conceptions that entail a socio-political critique of a present state, translating it into space and pointing to a future conceived of as ideal – in both senses as imagined and as desired.

Given that they are collective conceptions, utopian visions must be tracked down using a multiplicity of documents. More especially, taking into account the fact that not all the groups who envisioned urban space in Buenos Aires had the practice of documenting their own thoughts, in some cases the utopian visions will need to be grasped from a broader range of historical evidence. Shantytown residents, in particular, only seldom wrote about the visions they had for their own living spaces – and still, they had powerful visions. Thus, these will be traced from the residents' collective actions as reported by third parties, from interviews to former residents taken over later years, and from the few written sources that they left. In Fernando Coronil's words, utopian visions are 'the image of the ideal future that animates these

changes' (Coronil, 2011: 232). Utopian visions hence have multiple formulations – in this sense they remain open, they are continuously in the making. Furthermore, they are not absolute: what some groups regard as an ideal spatial form may not be desirable for others (Logan & Adams, 2002: xi). Some utopian visions may be radically different, or even contradictory, to others.

Utopian visions have, by their nature, a spatial character, as becomes apparent in their etymology. But the conception of space in Latin America is heavily loaded by the urban. Cities in Latin America constituted, par excellence, a space of concentrated debates, imaginaries, alternative social projections and – not least - political power (Heffes, 2013: 20; 2009: 12). The Spanish conquistadors, for example, assigned a specific military and institutional role to cities, destined to organise the territory. Nineteenth- and twentieth- century visions also recurred to the creation of cities from scratch as a way of organising space and society. The utopian visions discussed here are rooted into the urban imagination, particularly in relation to one specific urban aspect – inhabitation. However, they are not creations *ex novo* but visions for the transformation of the existing. In turn, each of these visions implies a specific conception of the urban, revealing a particular view of society.

This article explores three utopian visions related to Buenos Aires shantytowns, which have shaped past and present experiences and urban policies. The first of these utopian visions is that of a city where shantytowns have been upgraded to such a point that they have become fully-serviced neighbourhoods. This requires a series of improvements: the provision of piped water, sewage, drainage, electricity, gas and telephone lines; street paving and lighting; garbage collection; and the installation of local facilities such as a school, a health centre or a nursery. This idea had some antecedents in the 1950s but became central to the imagination of the shantytown residents and professionals only by the mid-1960s. It is not

necessarily a top-down utopia nor an urban policy, although it may appear in some of its formulations as such. It more often stems from the grassroots imagination.

A second utopian vision is one of a city able to provide regular housing to everyone by means of State support. In this vision, housing is a right of every citizen. This conception, in Argentina, emerged gradually between the 1890s and the late 1930s, and was formulated in full strength in the 1940s through the notion of 'Derecho a la vivienda' ('Right to Housing') promoted by Peronism (Ballent, 2005: 27–64). It remained key to the way in which poor families envisioned their own housing futures for the rest of the twentieth century, and continues to be a central vision for architects and planners today. The vision of the provision of housing for everyone differs from the vision of upgraded shantytowns in that the focus is placed on providing State-built housing for letting or sale rather than upgrading and potentially titling self-built housing on trespassed land. However, the two do not exclude one another, and in fact, in many instances they appear intertwined.

Finally, a third utopian vision explored is that of a city where shantytowns have been forcibly removed - a city where the poor have been rendered invisible. This is a utopian vision constructed by the negative, defined more by what it excludes than by a constructive proposal. Insofar as it is the utopian vision of a city without the Other this is the vision that has the oldest roots in Latin America if we consider the Leyes de Indias as its early antecedent.

These three utopian visions interweave throughout Argentina's recent history. As we have noted, utopian visions do not necessarily exclude one another, but can be different and even contradictory. While the vision of a city stripped of shantytowns cannot comfortably coexist with the vision of upgraded shantytowns, the idea of State-supported housing for everyone can be combined with the other two visions. At the same time, it is worth noting that the three utopian visions focus

on different aspects: full upgrade, housing provision, forced absence. In this way, the practices related to shantytowns cannot be split into thirds according to the paradigms that they followed, but rather must be understood in a context of coexisting visions that inspired them and appear overlapped in them. In the first section of this article, I introduce the emergence of the shantytowns as an urban reality followed by a short discussion about the initial conceptions of them. In the article's second, third and fourth sections, I present a selection of examples to discuss different formulations of the three utopian visions. Finally, I comment on the significance of all three forms of utopian visions and their intersections in the modern cityscape.

### *The emergence of Buenos Aires shantytowns and the idea of villa miseria*

During the period of industrial expansion in Argentina - the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s – more than two million people migrated from rural areas to mid-size and large cities in search of better employment opportunities (Germani, 1959: table 9 in p.11; Rock, 1987: 235). Before 1929, Argentina had sustained an economic model based on the export of agricultural products and the import of manufactured goods. The drop in international prices that followed the 1929 depression led to a dramatic decline in the country's importing capacity and paved the way for industrialisation by means of import substitution – a process that started by the mid-1930s and accelerated during the Second World War. According to David Rock, 'the number of industrial firms grew from less than 41,000 in 1935 to more than 57,000 in 1940, and to around 86,000 by 1946' (Rock, 1987: 231–234; quote from p.232). After 1945, industrial growth stabilised, and between 1945 and 1955 the state encouraged the

growth of the basic consumer goods industry and the social redistribution of its profits. Later, between 1955 and the late 1970s, the industrialisation model employed shifted its focus to intermediate and durable consumer goods and opened the economy to foreign investment in the hope of deepening industrial development. It is generally held that by the late 1970s Argentina's process of industrialisation came to an end due to policies built on a neo-liberal economic model (Torrado, 1994: 397–399, 415 and 430; de Riz & Torre, 1991: 78–79, 64, 103–104 and 171).

Industrial growth, combined with the decline of employment opportunities in the countryside, led to a substantial shift of labour from the primary (agriculture) to the secondary (industry) sector. Moreover, after 1945, the tertiary (services) sector started expanding. According to Gino Germani, agriculture's share in the overall labour growth rate of the country dropped dramatically from 38 percent to 4 percent between the periods 1910-1935 and 1935-1949. Conversely, the share of industry and services, combined, grew 62 percent and 96 percent respectively for the same periods. This 96 percent increase was distributed into 43 percent for industry and 53 percent for services. Between 1945 and 1955 overall labour growth rate was distributed as follows: 8 percent for the primary sector, 22 percent for industry and 70 percent for services (Germani, 1959: table 18 in p.27, and p.34).

The Argentine manufacturing industry originally grew through small-scale businesses, concentrated in Greater Buenos Aires. The tertiary sector, meanwhile, was distributed throughout large and middle-size cities in Argentina. The population of Greater Buenos Aires increased steadily throughout the period of industrialisation: it was estimated as 2,035,000 in 1914; 3,430,000 in 1936; 4,724,000 in 1947; and 6,370,000 by 1957. The proportion of internal migrants within Greater Buenos Aires also grew accordingly: 8 percent in 1895; 11 percent in 1914; 12 percent in 1936; 29 percent in 1947; and an estimated 36 percent in 1957. By 1960, the population of

Greater Buenos Aires was 6,600,323 people (Germani, 1959: table 9 in p.11; also tables 1, 2, 5, 11 and 15; *IV Censo...*, 1947: 1 and 32–43, *Censo Nacional de Vivienda 1960*, 1960: 2).

The migrants who arrived in Buenos Aires found a city with a long-standing housing shortage and therefore encountered serious problems finding affordable accommodation. Historically, migrants had found lodgings in the tenements known as *conventillos* or *pensiones*. However, the deepening of the housing shortage meant that those with the lowest incomes had to turn to lodging options where rent could be spared. The occupation of undeveloped land thus appeared as a possibility. Therefore, some internal migrants - and some native city-dwellers such as newly married couples - started building shacks in large, empty plots in locations relatively close to their workplaces. In most cases, such land had been left undeveloped due to extremely poor conditions for the provision of urban infrastructure (Germani, 1959: 40 and 46; Comisión Nacional de la Vivienda, 1956: 37–40; 1957: 491–493; Ziccardi, 1977: 19–25; “‘Sólo casas para ricos...’”, 1962).

Although each shantytown’s environmental and social conditions were specific, it is possible to find some commonalities in their development patterns. One of these was the pressing need for basic services such as sewage, electricity, gas, and especially fresh water. Most shantytowns survived with just a few public taps to supply running water for hundreds of families (“Villa Jardín: donde el mate...,” 1958; “Villas... Plaza Flores,” 1958). In addition, many shantytowns suffered frequent flooding. Some were built on permanent marshlands, others were prone to river floods, and in others rainwater simply took days to drain. Needless to say, in their earlier years, shantytowns lacked paved streets and lighting, garbage collection services, and facilities such as schools and local health centres or dispensaries. In addition, housing construction was of a precarious nature, normally utilising scrap or

extremely cheap materials ("Las obras...", 1947; "Miles de personas...", 1956; "En 19 barrios...", 1956; "Villa Jardín: donde el mate...", 1958; Márquez, 1958; "Lo que comprobó...", 1958; "Villa Lugano... Cildáñez," 1958; "Lo urgente...", 1965; *Cronista Mayor... Issue 20*, 2000; *Cronista Mayor... Issue 33*, 2002; *Cronista Mayor... Issue 67*, 2008).

Buenos Aires shantytowns took a few years to be conceptualised as a specific urban phenomenon. This was due, in part, to their novelty: it was only by the 1940s that they gained urban scale and therefore visibility. More importantly, in the context of abundant urban employment and expanded housing schemes for the popular classes, the shantytowns were perceived as a temporary solution. The vast majority of residents were employed in a context where real wages were rising, and it was assumed that they would be able to move relatively quickly from the shantytowns to either accommodation in the open market or to one of the housing solutions then facilitated by the State (Auyero, 2001: 52–53). The coup d'état that took place in Argentina in September 1955, however, brought about dramatic changes in the country's social, political and economic conditions that greatly affected the shantytowns. First, the bargaining power of workers was severely limited, and together with this, real wages fell. Real wages fell during 1955–63, recovered during 1963–66, fell slightly during 1966–70 and fell even more during 1976–83 (de Riz & Torre, 1991: 96, 107, 114, 121, 134 and 139; Torrado, 1994: 410, 424 and 440). Second, most State-sponsored housing solutions were withdrawn. Third, the military government that took power read the shantytowns as a reflection of the withdrawn administration, and set out to demolish them. Thus, for the first time, the shantytowns not only became a specific target of government action, but also emerged in the collective imagination as a specific urban question (Camelli & Snitcofsky, 2012; Liernur, 2009). The label *Villa Miseria* – meaning 'Misery Village' –,

first used by the journalist Bernardo Verbitsky in a series of newspapers chronicles (1954) to refer to one particular shantytown, Villa Maldonado, was quickly generalised to refer to all shantytowns in Buenos Aires (Comisión Nacional de la Vivienda, 1956; 1957; Ulanovsky, 1997). The shantytowns as an object of discourse were framed with particular qualities that did not necessarily correlate fully to those of the shantytowns as urban places: in a way, each discourse created its own version of *villa*. The friction between different conceptions was derived from political and social positions – in other words, from the society and the city that each discourse sought. The utopian visions analysed in this article condense the future imaginaries that stood in the background of these different positions.

### *Upgraded shantytowns*

Unlike other Latin American cases, such as Chile, and also distinct from examples from Argentina after the 1970s, mid-twentieth century shantytowns in Buenos Aires grew by the accretion of individual houses. This meant that people built their own shacks at different moments over an extended period of time, knowing few neighbours beforehand and without relying on social or political organisations at the outset (Ziccardi, 1977: 22). Despite this, shantytown families soon started gathering together around leisure activities – typically football – and setting-up inter-shantytown games. This helped them get to know one another and, in some cases, helped them to develop local identities based on the shantytowns' football teams. At the same time, residents started forming groups to resolve their most urgent problems. Issues related to childcare were dealt with collectively in Clubes de Madres (Mothers' Clubs). Ad-hoc commissions raised funds and provided labour for filling-

up land, extending water and drainage systems, building nurseries and dispensaries and even paving internal streets. In some cases these groups became stable improvements commissions over time (Ziccardi, 1977: 80–91). As two residents of Villa 1-11-14 explained:

People were always doing things (...) there was a commission (...) my husband was president of the water commission(...)First they collected the money to buy the pipework (...) people agreed on a date, a Saturday or a Sunday, to work (...) someone more or less familiarised with plumbing would just do it then (...) then all the neighbours who were signed up for this area would help each other to work, and this is how we brought piped water (Residents Licandra and Beba respectively, quoted in *Cronista Mayor... Issue 33*, 2002: 05).

There is an abundance of other examples: in Villa INTA, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, spontaneous groups of inhabitants connected their homes to the water pipeworks and electricity networks, and built a chapel, a dispensary and a nursery (*Cronista Mayor... Issue 20*, 2000: 02); in Villa Mariano Acosta the residents extended water pipeworks, levelled and paved streets, built a dispensary and made plans to bring electricity connections to the shantytown ("Exigen agua y luz 4.000 trabajadores," 1965); in Barrio Lacarra residents constructed a school and a dispensary, paved the shantytown's streets and installed street lights ("Barrio Lacarra," 1970); in Villa Mitre they built public toilets ("Villa Mitre...," 1959); in Villa Cildáñez a stable improvements' committee constructed its own premises ("Villa Lugano... Cildáñez," 1958). In Villa Jardín, '[p]rocuring drinking water, building their dwellings, filling the lagoons, constructing precarious bridges to cross the small

lagoons: everything is said to have been made possible through the active cooperation of neighbours, friends, and relatives' (Auyero, 2001: 54).

Some of these efforts were self-funded. For example, in Villa 20, the residents' commission raised funds for the nursery and the football playground through dance parties (*Cronista Mayor... Issue 34*, 2002, p. 03). In Retiro, adjacent shantytowns worked together to install further public water taps and to build a dispensary, which they funded through football matches ("Lucha vecinal...", 1965: 06–07, "En Comunicaciones trece clubes...", 1965, "El domingo 31...", 1965, "Villa Comunicaciones, ejemplo a imitar y mejorar," 1964). In most cases, however, construction efforts had to be combined with negotiations to receive materials, machinery, technical help or even official permits from local governments. This was the case, for example, for the construction of the school Bandera Argentina in Retiro (Comisión Intervillas – Zona Retiro, 1964; "La escuela Bandera Argentina," 1965) and for the extensions of water pipework in Villas Rotonda Varela, 9 de Julio, and General Belgrano ("Ferviente actividad...", 1965, "La acción vecinal...", 1965, "La brega...", 1965) (Figure 1). As shown in various sources, shantytown committees were constantly requesting this type of help from State powers like local councils and offering their free labour ("Las 'villas miserias' pasan...", 1963, "Lo urgente...", 1965, "Lucha vecinal...", 1965). The facilities that required staff, such as the schools, the dispensaries, and the nurseries, usually relied on unpaid labour from the residents combined with paid municipal staff and/or volunteer professionals.

Which visions accompanied these struggles? A few hints can be taken from the actions themselves – from what the *villas'* residents chose to prioritise, how they funded it and how they put it into practice. In this sense, it can be said that the residents envisioned an upgraded neighbourhood in the short term – a neighbourhood without floods and with fresh water, paved streets, electricity,

schools and/or dispensaries, as per the different examples – stemming from their own efforts. In a few cases there are written sources that offer an expanded glance of the perspective of at least some of them. In these, we find an interesting combination of the vision of an upgraded shantytown in the short term, with the vision of a State housing plan for the longer term (I will come back to the latter under the next section). The inhabitants' expression of their own visions were normally accompanied by a critique of the larger social structure in aspects such as poverty, working conditions, State neglect or repression.

**Figure 1.** Residents of Villa Rotonda Varela opening trenches for fresh water pipework.



**Source:** *La Voz de las Villas*, February 1965.

We have defined utopian visions as collective conceptions that entail a critique of a present state of affairs, translating it in spatial terms and pointing to a future conceived of as ideal. On the one hand, it could be said that neighbourhood initiatives like the ones mentioned under this section only represented scattered attempts to cope with the most pressing aspects of the shantytowns environments. On the other hand, however, such initiatives were carried forward with a specific spatial vision in mind. The space envisioned implied a social order in which everyone

had the right to reside in the city, and which focused on low-budget, short-term solutions to achieve this aim. In other words, the legitimacy of staying on trespassed land and upgrading it reflected an imaginary where available land is meant to be used – where using the land would be more important than its ownership. I would thus like to argue that utopian visions do not come only from the intellectuals, nor are they exclusively coined through text. In a more subtle way, they can be read in the everyday actions of everyday people.

A literary formulation of the upgraded-shantytowns utopian vision can be found in Bernardo Verbitsky's novel *Villa Miseria también es América* (1957), which narrates how a group of migrants gathered together in a *villa* to improve their dwelling standards and environment (Verbitsky, 1957). *Villa Miseria también es América* was the first literary piece to articulate a specific discourse about the shantytowns, and it did so by presenting them as the living place of hard-working, well-deserving families and individuals and as a site for the development of solidarity networks. Thus, it articulated a vision according to which inhabitants would, over the course of time, be able to level the land, dispose of their garbage and improve their individual houses, achieving the standards of a regular neighbourhood, that is, as long as they were not evicted from the land. As one of the novel's characters working for the improvement of the shantytown, Fabián, expresses,

By working, they created the future in the present, and enjoyed the pleasure of such effort. At least, that was how he felt about it. Some considered the whole effort pointless. Why struggle so much? To be owners of that garbage dump, in the better of cases. But to work is to prove oneself, to fight for something; it is, at least, to breathe deeply [...] Sometimes the terrifying thing in that place was the intuition that there was no future. (Verbitsky, 1957: 14)

The utopian vision of a city with fully-upgraded shantytowns was a collective conception not only in the sense that it had been envisioned by more than one individual but also in the sense that it was formulated by various groups of the society. First, the popularity of Verbitsky's novel, which won the Buenos Aires Municipal Prize in 1957, suggests that his ideas resonated with those of a substantial proportion of the public (Gorelik, 2009: 80). Second, some political parties supported the vision of upgraded shantytowns as well. The Argentine Communist Party, for example, had links to the Federación de Villas y Barrios de Emergencia (FVBE; Federation of Shantytowns and Emergency Neighbourhoods), an umbrella organisation that aimed at representing local shantytown committees, while the party's publications largely reported on the committee's efforts (Blaustein, 2001; also the newspapers *Nuestra Palabra* and *La Hora* throughout the 1950s and 1960s generally). Socialist deputy Juan Carlos Coral presented legal bills proposing shantytowns improvements (Coral, 1965). Furthermore, in the early 1970s the youth section of the Peronist movement launched its own shantytowns movement, the Movimiento Villero Peronista (MVP; Peronist Shantytowns Movement), which fought for upgrades, amongst other issues (Ziccardi, 1977: 160–168). Third, in some cases State departments accompanied the residents' efforts to upgrade existing shantytowns. In Villa Jardín, for example, a school was opened by the National government in 1954 (Auyero, 2001: 55). At the same time, residents of Villa 20 recall government-aided improvements (*Cronista Mayor... Issue 34*, 2002: 02). Over the late 1950s and early 1960s, the city councils of Buenos Aires and Lanús provided construction materials for shantytown commissions to construct upgrades ("Entrevistose con el intendente la Comisión de la Vivienda," 1958, "Presentan en Lanús...," 1958; Municipal bylaws (Ciudad de Buenos Aires) numbers 14.447, 1958;

15.694, 1959; 16.597, 1960; 17.231, n.d.; and 17.497, 1961). The utopian vision of upgraded shantytowns gained popularity amongst architects, politicians and planners over the years, particularly in response to John Turner's ideas emphasising the importance of people's input, and has become a key subject in the discussion of the urban today (Turner, 1976).

### *Universal Housing utopian vision (by the State)*

The emergence of shantytowns in Buenos Aires at the urban scale gave a new drive to the public discussion about affordable housing that started in the late nineteenth century. From then, an intense debate in the printed media, specialised publications and public events ensued. Up until the mid-1930s initiatives came primarily from civil groups, since the context was one of liberal economic ideology. From the mid-1930s onwards, however, the positions that favoured State intervention grew, but a very limited portion of the State budget was actually allocated to housing (Baer, 1998). After 1943, with Juan Domingo Perón as Secretary of Labour, official discourse started to recognise housing as a fundamental component of workers' right to wellbeing that should be safeguarded by the State (Ballent, 2005, pp. 55–64; Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores y Culto, 1940, 37, pp.28–29; *Constitución de la Nación Argentina*, 1949, 37, pp.28–29). Perón's administration materialised its conception by offering housing solutions in two main ways: State-built complexes of social housing, let and later sold at inexpensive instalments; and expanded mortgage schemes offered by the National Mortgage Bank (Aboy, 2005; Ballent, 2005: 63–96) (Figure 2). After 1955, and roughly until the late 1980s, the vision of State-sponsored housing for everyone retained a central role at the collective imaginary, but the State

gradually retreated from it, and eventually, the State's discourse about everyone's right to housing was abandoned.

The vision of a city able to accommodate everyone by means of social housing was also a collective construction. First, in the beginning of the twentieth century, it had been formulated by multiple civil groups, legislators and public figures (Ballent, 2005). Second, as already noted, shantytown residents' formulations combined the utopian vision of an upgraded *villa* in the short term with the vision of a housing plan accommodating everybody in the longer run. As years passed by, the failure of the State to deliver an effective housing solution meant that the attention was increasingly shifted towards on-site improvements. Furthermore, in the professional field of architecture, the utopian vision of a city with universal housing was particularly celebrated since it combined the ideal of an inclusive society with actual interventions in the built environment. The latter translated, for architects, into an exciting design challenge coupled with social responsibility and expanded work opportunities. This became especially relevant for the way in which architects interpreted State plans of shantytown eviction. In fact, many plans combined the practice of *villas* eviction with proposals of re-accommodation of residents into State-built housing. Although the emphasis was placed on the first aspect, architects read them chiefly as housing plans (Morea, Molinos, & Altimir, 1967; "Erradicación de villas de emergencia," 1969; Rivas, Colombo, & Knöpfler, 1964; or the journal *Summa*, issues 9 (1967), 10 (1967) and 36 (1971)). A more thorough examination of the eviction imaginaries will be offered under the next section. Finally, the attention paid by printed media to the issue of access to housing suggests that the general public also held onto the vision of a city able to house everyone as a relevant conception ("La Vivienda, un Derecho Efectivo," 1961; "Comuna...," 1962).

**Figure 2.** Los Perales housing complex, City of Buenos Aires, opened 1949.



**Source:** Archivo General de la Nación / Ramón Gutiérrez, *La Habitación Popular Bonaerense. 1943-1955. Aprendiendo en la historia* (Buenos Aires: CeDodAL, 2011).

Is the vision of a city able to accommodate everyone by means of State-sponsored housing utopian? One can understand the conception of State-sponsored universal housing as utopian in the sense that it is a critique of a reality in which the city is not able to offer full accommodation without State input, and also in its recognition of such accommodation as a fundamental right. The ideal city in this vision is thus one that translates the view of an inclusive society in spatial terms through the particular aspect of shelter. The utopian vision of universal housing differs from paternalist positions where housing is facilitated as a favour, and also from those positions that place the emphasis on workers' virtues (hard work, discipline, austerity) as the vehicle towards well-deserved accommodation. Instead, housing is considered a basic right. Indeed, the vision of universal housing does not necessarily exclude people's input – State support can be materialised, for example, through mortgages that families use to self-build. In summary, what distinguishes this utopian vision from other conceptions is that it aims at reaching everyone, it

does not presuppose exceptions to the prevailing legal framework, and it is underpinned by the assumption that housing is a basic right.

### *A City of Evicted Shantytowns*

So far, this article has analysed two utopian visions that followed the emergence of Buenos Aires shantytowns - upgraded shantytowns and a refreshed interest in universal housing - and has argued that they were shared by different groups of Argentine society. These two visions implied a perspective that was focused on providing solutions to families without shelter. However, other groups of the society were primarily interested in making the shantytowns disappear, be it by housing allocation, by forced eviction or by compulsory negotiation through the intervention in the neighbourhoods' ad-hoc committees. For the military who took power in 1955, for example, and for some of its supporters, the shantytowns were a reflection of the demagoguery and ineffective housing policies of the previous administration. To these people, their inhabitants were 'aberrant groups of uprooted population' who did not conform to acceptable social norms (Comisión Nacional de la Vivienda, 1956: 85). These views were embodied in the Plan de Emergencia (PE; Emergency Plan; 1956), the first State plan of shantytown eviction, according to which the *villas miseria* were 'permanent foci of epidemics and moral degradation: in their majority, their inhabitants require an urgent action of social rehabilitation' (Comisión Nacional de la Vivienda, 1956: 29–32, 37–45 and 83–85; quote from p.39). Thus, the PE proposed not only to re-accommodate shantytown residents into purpose-built housing complexes, but also to assimilate them to the way of life that it considered acceptable – or, in its own words, 'moral'. The 'adaptation dwellings' offered were

designed to coerce the inhabitants to live in nuclear families (father, mother and children only) of five to ten people, to use the bedrooms for sleeping, the dining hall for eating, and the kitchen for cooking, and to prevent them from housing any further relatives. This seemed to ignore the findings of the PE survey itself, which found that people lived in a variety of household types and sizes. The houses were equipped with steel-framed beds, fixed to the walls, and with concrete dining tables (Comisión Nacional de la Vivienda, 1956: 151–153; Massidda, 2011; 2012).

The PE was only the first in a series of State plans that aimed at materialising the utopian vision of a city without shantytowns. Beginning in 1961, local efforts initiated by the Buenos Aires City Council set out to remove all shantytowns in the South-West area as part of a larger urban development plan that contemplated extensive land-filling, council housing and public facilities. This initiative was called Plan Piloto (Pilot Plan). In this plan, shantytowns were portrayed as an obstacle towards a modernised, forward-looking city. This initiative also aimed at adapting *villas* residents to what was considered to be the right mentality, in this case not via a specific layout but through the negotiations that the plan itself implemented. Thus, State powers intervened with local improvements committees and replaced them with groups of social workers who had the task of 'changing the mental attitude of the shantytowns' inhabitants, which is characterised by their static laziness, and transforming such attitude into a dynamic process of order, organisation and development' (Comisión Municipal de la Vivienda, 1966) – which in practice meant to convince residents to accept moving and to instil them with the discourse of the Plan. In most cases, the alternative accommodation offered was not the one being constructed in the same area as part of the development programme, but housing located in less-convenient areas. In 1968, this plan was absorbed into the Plan de Erradicación de Villas de Emergencia (PEVE; Shantytown Eradication Plan),

implemented at the national level through local departments. The PEVE worked on a more extreme version of the adaptation houses already advanced by the PE. Evicted families were first re-housed into minimal, precarious units, so they would be forced to feel the need to improve their housing situation – which according to the PEVE they did not yet comprehend. Just after this stage they were supposed to be offered permanent flats. However, few permanent housing complexes were actually built, and most evicted families remained in these temporary units with very poor construction standards. Only a few shantytowns were fully dismantled. After 1973, the PEVE was re-launched as the Plan Alborada (*Plan de Erradicación... (PEVE)*, 1968; Blaustein, 2001: 28–37; Yujnovsky, 1984: 123–169).

To eradicate is, thus, the first objective. But the same process implies the social progress of the families. Before the eradication, social technicians will aim at inducing a process of motivation for change, i.e., leaving the shantytown in search of better conditions. The alternatives of the Plan impose a choice [sic]. (*Plan de Erradicación... (PEVE)*, 1968: 08–09)

The utopian vision of shantytown clearance operates by repression. It does not address the roots of the problem – poverty and scarcity of affordable urban housing - nor does it offer substantial solutions. Rather, it is based on force, and aims to achieve its spatial ideals through compulsory exclusion and the imposition of a particular lifestyle. Thus, for the Plan Piloto, ‘social progress’ did not consist of actual upward social mobility but of the assimilation to the cultural standards that were considered acceptable. The nickname of the plans that materialised the vision in which shantytowns would be cleared reveals their perspective: plans of ‘eradication’ (‘erradicación’) – a term normally used to refer to epidemics, weeds or diseases. It is

hence possible to see that what the evicted-shantytowns utopian vision aims at is eliminating Otherness, be it by the physical removal of those who are considered different or by their assimilation. 'Eradication', thus, implies but goes beyond the spatial removal of the *villas* as such, and operates in a double movement of eviction plus absorption.

The 'eradication' plans were guided by a utopian vision of evicted shantytowns, many of which were entwined with the provision of housing. However, it was not the vision of universal housing that guided them, but rather a conception in which shantytown eviction would be more effective if accompanied by the provision of the minimum necessary housing units. At the same time, it is worth noting that State plans were implemented by numerous individuals who held slightly different positions. We have already mentioned, for example, the architects' perspective: many architects engaged in designing the eviction plans did so from a perspective of universal housing. In addition, even within State offices, some members of staff were more interested in housing provision than others (Dávalos, Jabbaz, & Molina, 1987). Thus, while the plans' formulations remained focused on eviction, the visions that inspired their practice were re-imagined in different ways by different individuals.

It is interesting to note that, in order to intervene in the neighbourhood committees more effectively, the Plan Piloto implemented a few shantytown improvements with the intention of gaining people's good will. The Plan Piloto, later absorbed into the PEVE, replaced steering committee members with residents who explicitly supported the plan or even by municipal employees. Thus, throughout such transition, the plan sought to minimise residents' resistance by showing a good pre-disposition to follow inhabitants' requests, which were aimed at improvements. Ultimately, the Plan's purpose was to de-activate the committees' function as engines

of improvement and resistance to eviction and transform them into tools of indoctrination. In sum, the primary goal of the Plan Piloto was shantytown clearance, which temporarily pretended to be following an upgrade vision, rather than the provision of good housing for the inhabitants (Comisión Municipal de la Vivienda, 1966: IV and generally; Ziccardi, 1977: 127–135; Blaustein, 2001: 23 and 33). Some shantytown residents accepted being re-located. However, most of them understood from the outset that eviction plans embodied the vision of a city without *villas miseria* but not necessarily one with universal housing, and for this reason resisted them (“El inventor del Obelisco...,” 1962; “Las ‘villas miserias’ pasan...,” 1963; and the shantytown newspaper *La Voz de las Villas*, issues February 1965, January 1968; August 1969 or April 1970; “Lucha vecinal...,” 1965).

Perhaps the most extreme amongst the materialisations of the evicted-shantytowns utopian vision was the series of bulldozer operations put into practice by the last Argentine dictatorship (Figure 3). As Guillermo del Cioppo, director of Buenos Aires municipal housing commission from 1976 to 1982 and later mayor, framed it, ‘living in Buenos Aires is not for everybody but for those who deserve it’ (Guillermo del Cioppo, quoted in Oszlak, 1991: 78). In the midst of an (in)famous wave of kidnappings and torture, several shantytowns were demolished through the forced evacuation of their residents (Oszlak, 1991). No alternative accommodation was offered – or, in other words, this formulation of utopia did not include any kind of housing promise. Osvaldo Cacciatore, the previous mayor of Buenos Aires (1976–82), proudly declared, ‘until today we have evicted 145,000 people without spending one single *peso*’ (Osvaldo Cacciatore, quoted in *Cronista Mayor... Issue 20*, 2000: 09). It is interesting, however, to note how these extreme procedures recast the vision of the upgraded-shantytowns: evicted families resorted, amongst other popular responses, to collective squatter settlements, which embodied in their very

conception the vision of upgrade. These consisted in land squats conceived from the outset as eventually existing as permanent neighbourhoods and not as *villas*. Thus, surrounding street patterns were followed in order to receive services through council support more easily, and to be recognised as part of the regular urban fabric. In this manner, an extreme manifestation of the evicted-shantytowns idea opened the way for a re-imagined practice of full upgrading, which has become one of the most extensive practices of popular housing nowadays (Cravino, del Río, & Duarte, 2008).

**Figure 3.** Shantytown ‘eradications’ circa 1977.



**Source:** Eduardo Blaustein, *Prohibido vivir aquí: Una historia de los planes de erradicación de villas de la última dictadura* (Buenos Aires: Comisión Municipal de la Vivienda, 2001).

## *Conclusion - Utopías villeras*

In his exploration of utopian visions in contemporary Latin America, Coronil stressed the elusive nature of current Latin-American dreams, where the specific steps to build a better future are not known but where there is at least a sense of direction: 'The Left has no map, but it has a compass' (Coronil, 2011: 260). At the same time, his article notes the 'past's capacity to illuminate future struggles' (Coronil, 2011: 263) and its ability for challenging context-bound conceptions. Thus, I would like to argue that thinking through history in terms of utopian visions has a twofold function. First, by understanding what future visions inspired each of the utopian visions explored in this paper, we can start finding patterns throughout the messiness of history and understanding the historical cases better. In addition, it is important to note that the patterns that emerge have taken twisted paths to bring us where we stand in the present. Exploring the ways in which such future visions emerged and intertwined brings us beyond the specificity of the here and now and help us to make sense of a present that 'seems to be pulled by conflicting forces' (Coronil, 2011: 234).

The different utopian visions analysed in this article are not fixed to a specific set of practices (be it popular, professional, literary or State practices), nor are they linked to a specific political position. Rather, they can be found in multiple formulations, and in these they appear interweaved. In a diachronic perspective, I have explored how the visions of upgraded *villas*, universal housing, and demolished shantytowns have emerged through different articulations, and how they have materialised in multiple ways throughout the last seven decades of Argentine history. Universal housing was a vision that in some cases accompanied, the imaginaries of the upgrade of shantytowns in such a way that both retained a vital role. In other instances, it appeared linked to the evicted-shantytowns ideal, but clearly in a

subordinated role, or a role sustained only by some individuals. Finally, on occasions these utopian visions have emerged in the collective imagination without being necessarily linked to one another, as happened – just to offer a few examples - under the housing policies of 1940s Peronism, in the last dictatorship's eradication practices, or in post-1970s squatter settlements.

In a synchronic perspective, all three utopian visions have continued to manifest over recent years. Shantytown upgrade and State-sponsored housing provision are today central issues within Argentine discussions about social inclusion and urbanization policy. In one week alone (between the 31 October and the 07 November 2013), at least twenty-six articles related to these topics were published in the newspapers *Página 12* and *Clarín* together (<http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/principal/index.html>; <http://www.clarin.com/>). The shantytowns newspaper *Mundo Villa*, meanwhile, maintains an entire section dedicated to *urbanización* - the current term given to the process of fully upgrading shantytowns. This enthusiasm is accompanied by an increasing interest at the professional level in varied disciplines such as architecture, law, economy, sociology and anthropology. The upgraded-shantytowns vision underpins the work of, just to quote some examples, architects' teams such as the Taller Libre de Proyecto Social (Open Social Project Workshop) or Javier Fernández Castro's, while lawyers at the NGO Asociación Civil por la Igualdad y la Justicia (Civil Association for Equality and Justice) offer legal support to shantytown residents on improvements issues (Fernández Castro, Cravino, Trajtengartz, & Martín, 2010; Pedro, Wexler, & TLPS teaching staff, 2011; "Taller Libre de Proyecto Social," 2015, "Taller Forma & Proyecto," 2015; ACIJ, 2015; "Red ULACAV," 2015). At the State level, programmes for shantytown improvements like the ProMeBa (Programa Mejoramiento de Barrios; Programme of Neighbourhood Improvement) or the ProMHiB (Programa

Mejoramiento Habitacional e Infraestructura Básica; Programme of Housing Improvement and Basic Infrastructure) are actively improving and titling shantytowns. In addition, a national Culture Secretariat has been recently opened in Villa 21, re-configuring the symbolic dimension of where power and culture lie. Meanwhile, the universal housing utopian vision is materialised through State programmes like ProCreAr, the Plan Federal or specific arrangements with local governments (Bontempo, 2010; "SSDUV-Programas," 2015, "PROMEBA," 2015, "Casa Central de la Cultura Popular," [2013]). Architects have maintained their interest in the issue (Bekinschtein, Calcagno, & Risso Patrón, 2013; *Revista de Arquitectura*, issues 198 *El Techo* (2000), 210 *Proyectar para incluir* (2003), 217 *Modos de habitar* (2005), 218 *Vivir en la ciudad* (2005), or 235 *El Techo II* (2009)). Regarding the evicted-shantytowns vision, expressing it has become politically incorrect, which prevents it from appearing as often in the public discussion as shantytown upgrade or housing provision do. However, it underlies the thinking of wide sectors of the society (Massidda, 2012). It must be noted that, despite the extensive efforts and debates referred, no shantytown has been yet fully urbanised, and living conditions in them continue to be extremely difficult. At the same time, they represent the areas of urban growth in current Buenos Aires, making these debates ever more pressing (Cravino, 2006).

Examining the urban in terms of utopian visions helps us to expand the horizon of the thinkable and to re-formulate continuous critiques of the present. On the one hand, thinking in terms of collective visions helps us to move beyond a conception where utopias are envisioned in a top-down manner. By exploring collective visions originated in local groups, we can re-signify the idea of utopian and use it productively to account for the richness of multiple practices. On the other hand, thinking in terms of utopias re-replaces the focus on the spatial dimension of

collective practices. Our compass, to take Coronil's words, is pointing out to an inclusive city with upgraded shantytowns and extended housing opportunities. However, which exact steps and spaces will translate such visions is a question whose responses we still need to find. Exploring the way in which different visions crystallised into different forms of urban intervention in the past helps us to reformulate our own future imaginaries for present-day Latin-America.

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