

A City Divided:

“Fragmented” urban space in 20th century Buenos Aires

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“Fragmentation” as an urban concept

When analyzing the state of Latin American cities, particularly large ones like Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, scholars of urbanism and sociology often lean heavily on the term “fragmentation.”¹ Through the 1980s and 1990s, the term was quickly and widely adopted by scholars to describe the widespread state of abutment between seemingly disparate urban conditions that purportedly prevented Latin American cities from developing into cohesive wholes and instead produced cities in pieces-- fragments (Prévôt-Schapira 38). This term, “fragmentation,” along with the idea of a city composed of mismatching parts, was central to the conception of Buenos Aires by its citizens long before it was adopted by scholars in the twentieth century. Buenos Aires was perceived as made up of discrete parts as early as the nineteenth century, and this idea has been used throughout its history to either enable or justify planning decisions. The 1950s and 60s saw a series of governments whose priorities lay in controlling the many newcomers to the city via large housing projects. Aided by the perception of the city as fragmented, they were able to build these monster-scale developments in the parts of the city considered “apart.” Later, as neoliberal democracy replaced socialist leadership, commercial centers in the center of the city were built as shrines to an idealized Parisian downtown, separate from the rest of the city. The term’s negative connotation implies that “fragmentation” is something that needs to be fixed, and this notion has enabled planning entities to make self-serving decisions under the guise of public benefit. I argue that fragmentation, more than a naturally occurring phenomenon, is a fabricated concept, pseudo-problem, that has been used throughout the twentieth century and through today to enable disparate types of urban planning projects.

In her paper “Spatial and social fragmentation: concepts and realities,” Marie France Prévôt-Schapira calls this condition of fragmentation an almost exclusively Latin American phenomenon (Prévôt-Schapira 40). According to Prévôt-Schapira, fragmentation is an incidental result of what the anthropologist José Matos Mar called “popular overflow” in his 1984 work of the same name. What Matos Mar referred to, and what is still largely the most prominent factor in the growth of Latin American cities, was the chaotic way

in which the urban population grew and in which the city subsequently expanded. Both Matos Mar and Prévôt-Schapira suggest that Latin American cities “fragmented” in the twentieth century thanks to massive spikes in their populations, specifically the growth of low-income working populations (Prévôt-Schapira 43). This kind of growth is easily seen in the Buenos Aires of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, which, beyond the beginnings of a quasi-universal grid, was largely a blank canvas. To prevent it from

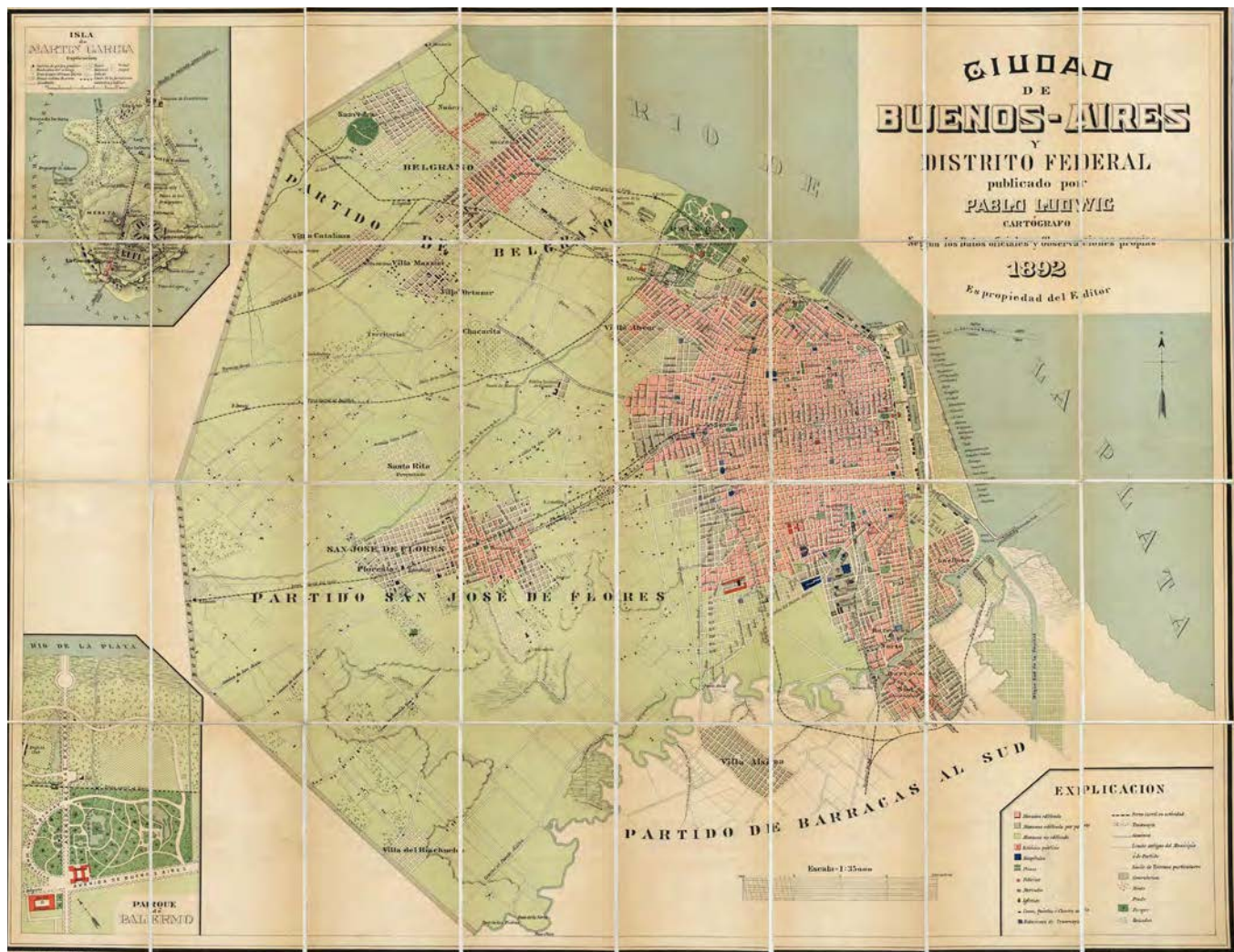


Figure 1 1892 map of Buenos Aires by Pablo Ludwig showing the confines of the city and its development within these. Although the grid is fully fleshed-out, the city remains in its infancy.

growing uncontrollably, a protective ring around the city was demarcated in 1888, when the development of the city was confined to a concentrated area near the port and along a central avenue (Scobie 49). This decision makes clearly evident the priorities of planners of the time: protect what had developed of the city so far, preciously valued for its European charm, from the threat of the uncontrolled, chaotic, as yet untouched “wild.” A map from 1892, showing the city center developed along Avenida Nueve de Julio and Avenida de Mayo (Figure 1), depicts the city as it would come to be perceived by its users and by its developers: as two distinct pieces. One, densely constructed, strongly gridded, belonged to the Parisian, idealized city. The other, vast, open, would be blamed for the city’s social and economic problems, and eventually become the testing ground for potential solutions to these issues in the twentieth century.

This image of the city as divided into two distinct pieces was immortalized in the literature of the twentieth century, installing in the minds of the city’s citizens the idea that the city needed to become whole. Whether or not these literary narrations captured a “reality” never mattered. They created cultural myths and kept alive ideas of the city that have influenced both its conception and its construction. Assertions that Buenos Aires is a city of “middle class citizens” and that this populace spurred the growth of the country are illusions tied to discrete moments during which this illusion might have been reality. A working class that thrived briefly at the turn of the twentieth century established a narrative strong enough to remain in the cultural imaginary for years to come; the perils they experienced in order to make a living in the city became romanticized into the image of the “hard-working immigrant.” Buenos Aires, city of perpetual nostalgia, has always been “decaying” from some imagined, ephemeral ideal that no one can name concretely but of whose presence everyone is sure.

The idealized image of the city captured during the late nineteenth century reflected Buenos Aires’s physical development at that point in time, when little other than the gridded downtown existed within the 1888 protective ring. Adrián Gorelik credits the gridded arrangement of Buenos Aires, set in place in the 1880s, with installing in the minds of the city’s inhabitants the notion that the city was capable of extending

indefinitely into space. The grid, set up to somehow infill this future city, lent the impression of the city growing homogeneously into infinity. It hinted at a possible future city that would be only complete once the grid was filled. Buenos Aires never filled the 1888 confines set up to protect it against the very quality of uncontrolled dispersion that it exhibits today, so the idea that there were two cities — a “real” Buenos Aires and one that had to catch up to it — quickly developed and was captured vividly in literature. And since the idea was propagated by literature, it was readily used by government planning agencies to justify many projects — from public housing to the conversion to historic spaces to shopping districts — throughout the twentieth century. My intent is to demonstrate, through both architectural and literary analysis, how the idea of a fragmented city, captured in literature, aided the realization of these projects.

Imagining an ideal

Literary depictions of the city clearly capture the development of Buenos Aires as a city comprised of two distinct pieces — one controlled and gridded and the other untamed, waiting to be infilled. To fully understand the evolution of the view of the city, we must recognize the several shifts in the nature and form of these characterizations in fiction from the late nineteenth century through the early twenty-first century. Authors, particularly poets, of the late nineteenth century strongly communicated feelings of fear, incertitude and trepidation over the nascent quality of the city, and nervously perceived the untamed country surrounding the city that was declared the Federal Capital in 1880.² From its beginning as a small port city, through its fight for independence from Spain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and finally during the early and mid-twentieth century, heavily marked by European immigration predominantly from Italy and Spain, Buenos Aires has always both suffered and profited from its idealization in the imaginaries of its inhabitants. In *Buenos Aires: from plaza to suburb*, James R. Scobie traces the development of the city of Buenos Aires from a “large village” to a sprawling metropolis that would eventually (and famously) draw comparisons to Paris. Scobie suggests that the forty-year period between 1870 and 1910 marks the “flowering” period of Buenos Aires, during which the city transformed from a muddy estuary with a village

attached to a complex urban center with avenues capped by plazas, tree-lined boulevards, an extensive web of streetcars and a major railway system. The rapid, generally positive development over these forty years came to be represented in images, both literary and physical, of an “ideal” Buenos Aires that mark the way its citizens view and idealize the city.

The city’s growth boomed in 1870, no doubt due to the building of a formal port and to the expansion of both the national and local railway systems (Scobie 94). The transition was not an easy one, however, as the short story *The Slaughteryard* by Esteban Echeverría suggests. The Slaughteryard, the first short story in the history of Argentine literature, paints an image of a city threatened by its natural borders.

It happened then, in that time, a very copious rain. A huge avenue was precipitated suddenly by the Estuary of Barracas. The Plata River, growing brazenly, pushed those waters that came looking for their bed and made them run, swollen, atop fields, valleys, orchards, hamlets. The city surrounded from north to west by a waist of water and mud, and to the south by a deep, whitened ocean, cast from its towers and ravines astonished looks toward the horizon as if imploring the protection of the Highest.

In Echeverría’s version of the city, just as it was beginning to grow out of its infancy and into a romanticized port city, personification gives life to an urban Buenos Aires that seems static, dominated by the greater natural forces surrounding it.

As the city grew outwards, embracing the smaller settlements at the periphery of the port-side center, it also grew in density at its center. Many *porteños*, or port-dwellers, as residents of Buenos Aires came to be called, lived in the area close to the city center and the house of government, the Casa Rosada (Figure 2) (Scobie 19). The 1880s saw a growth in the economic power of Buenos Aires’s elite, who looked to Europe as the ideal model for urban development. Torcuato de Alvear, who served as the city’s mayor from 1880 to 1887, laid out a plan for the city that sought to replicate Haussmann’s designs for the great Parisian boulevards (Scobie 127). The taste of the porteño upper class followed that of the government-sanctioned

plans, and even private residences were greatly impacted by the École des Beaux Arts. An influx of European immigrants brought with them so-called elite tastes and a penchant for copying the en-vogue French and Italian architectural styles, and so the buildings of kiln-dried brick and wood roofs that made up the “large village” rather quickly came to be replaced by “petit-hotels” and palaces (Figure 3) (Scobie 131). Profiting from a new and promising economy, *porteños* had no qualms about leaving humble beginnings behind and creating a veneer of European-ness — one that would build the mythological image of Buenos Aires as the “Paris of South America.” Avenida de Mayo, a large swath running west from the Casa Rosada to the Congress Building built in a pseudo-Parisian style, housed both the urban elite as well as middle-class laborers. Tailors, cobblers, bakers, shopkeepers and the Nouveau Riche to whom they provided their services all found themselves equally at home in the city center of Buenos Aires, backdropped by veneers of Parisian and Italian architecture.

This climate of intermingling social classes, of life lived in streets explicitly designed to be beautiful and welcoming to city dwellers, created an idealized, romanticized image of Buenos Aires in the minds of both its inhabitants and the immigrants who would continue to flock to the city through the middle of the twentieth century. The poetry of Evaristo Carriego, composed largely during this time of urban flourishing, reflects the idealized image of Buenos Aires borne of the time of prosperity between 1870 and 1910. In “The path to our house,” a poem published posthumously, Carriego captures the life of a typical Buenos Aires block, grounding the images strongly in the built and designed aspects of the street.

*You are familiar to us as something
that is ours, only ours;
familiar in the streets, in the trees
that border the sidewalk,
in the fervent and crazy joy
of the young men, in the faces
of old friends,
in the intimate stories that go*

from mouth to mouth through the neighborhood
[...]
Your stones
they seem to keep the secret
the murmur of familiar steps

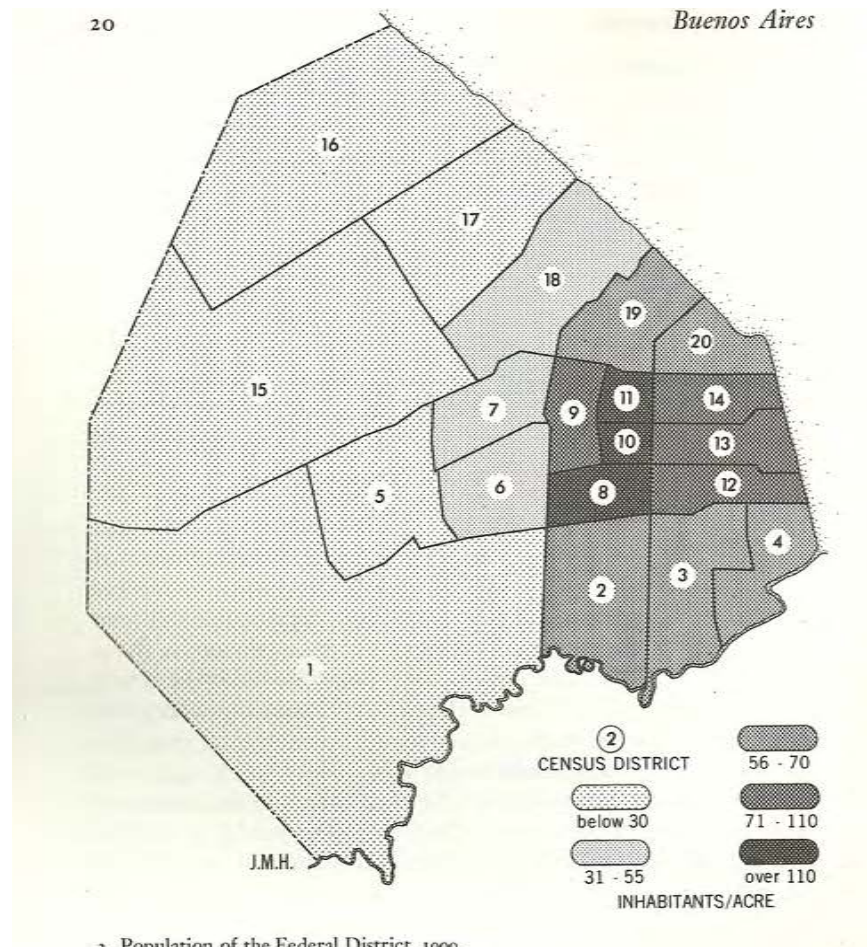


Figure 2 Census districts, 1910. The population concentrated in the city center near the port. (Scobie 1974, 20)

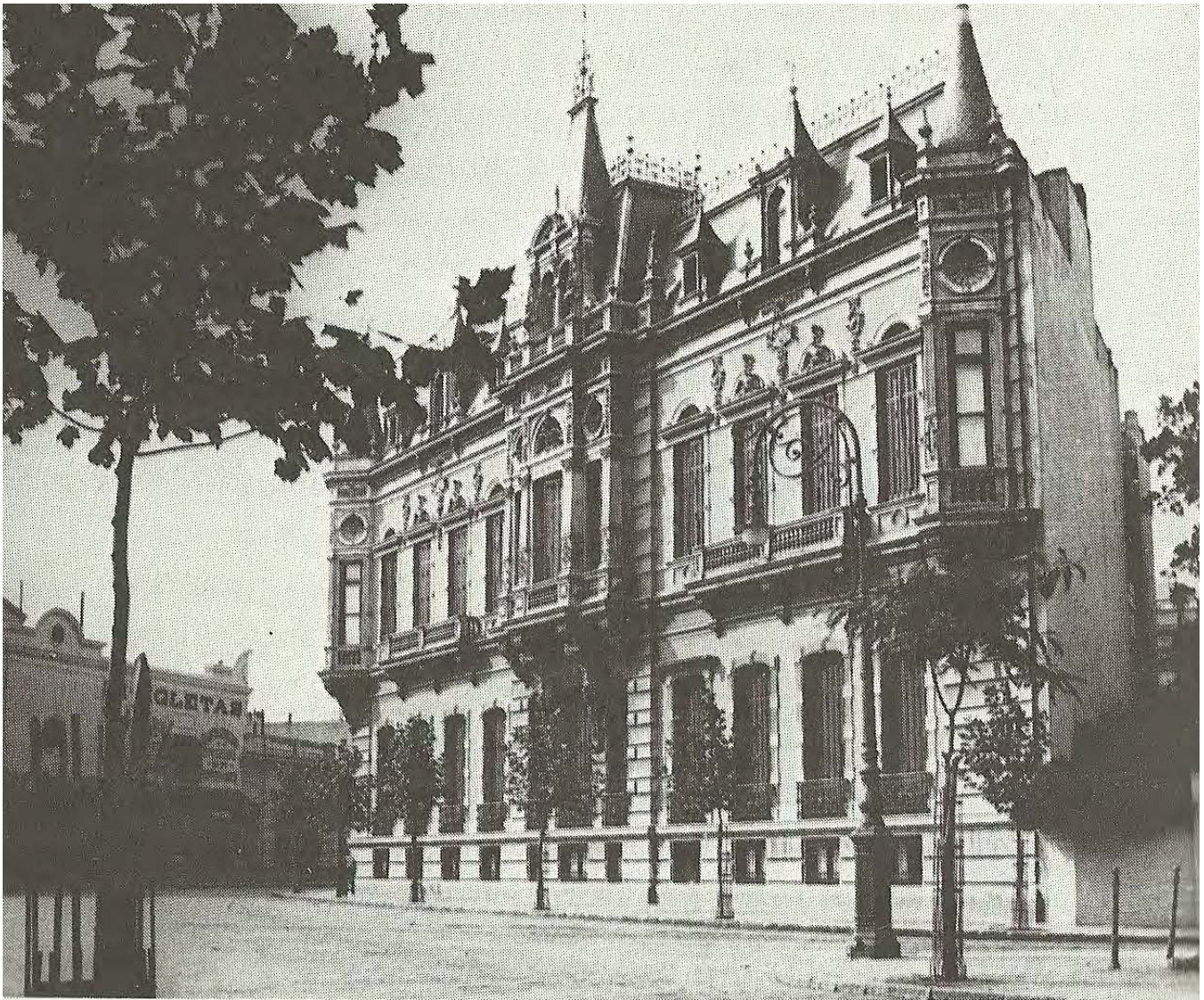


Figure 3 Residence of the elite Unzué family, reflecting European tastes around the turn of the twentieth century. (Archivo General de la Nación)

Works such as these at once built and reinforced an image of Buenos Aires in the mind of the porteño populace — this was a city of happy, middle-to-upper class families whose lives were carried out in a beautiful city with streets lined by trees and cafés. While this may have only been true for a few brief decades at the turn of the twentieth century and in discrete parts of the city, the written word immortalized it as a undeniable truth.

The sudden surge of growth and building in the late nineteenth century rendered the city particularly attractive to skilled laborers, as wages were substantially higher in Buenos Aires than they were in many

Italian, Spanish and French cities (Scobie 137). These laborers entered the city through the still unbuilt port and often settled near it until they could attain a place to live in the city proper. The conditions under which these new immigrants lived often lacked cleanliness and formality — in fact, they may have been the first semblance of what we know as slums or villas miserias today (Figure 4). Certainly they did not comply with the literary and sometimes physical image of Buenos Aires that slowly continued to build in the late nineteenth century. But the myth that the “real” Buenos Aires was found in its tree-lined boulevards and its public squares carried on, and the decisions regarding urban planning and architecture in the city functioned directly in service of this myth, supplied the images necessary to create what Jorge Liernur would in 1997 call “simulacra of the First World.”



Figure 4 Immigrant workers would often build temporary shacks near the port until they could secure permanent housing in the city. (Archivo General de la Nación)

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, new construction of houses near the downtown mimicked the French style, while ornamentation was added to already existing houses with the same goal. Meanwhile, the city braced itself against the waves of new inhabitants crashing in. Abandoned by their wealthy owners looking for a “European” lifestyle along the fashionable Corrientes and Cerrito streets, many houses owned far from the city center were opened to inhabitation by multiple families. Built in the middle of the nineteenth century, these houses, called *conventillos*, often had a large courtyard or patio in the center and multiple rooms that opened up to it. Families would live in the rooms facing the courtyard, turning this space into a large communal public amenity (Figure 5). These immigrants often lacked the economic means necessary to upkeep these houses, so they deteriorated quickly and without control in the humid Buenos Aires climate (Figure 6).

Decay and deterioration would come to have a large role in the mythified image of Buenos Aires; authors in the early-to-mid twentieth century used these concepts to reinforce the idea of an ideal past, left behind or erased. In his arguably most famous novel, *La casa* (*The House*), Manuel Mujica Lainez weaves the idea of deterioration from an ideal past throughout the story. Set in the early 1900s and narrated by the house itself, the novel presents vivid descriptions of the architecture of city and of its treatment by city dwellers, alluding to a fantastic European inheritance and to its eventual loss.

Poor Italian roof! Poor balustrade, brightened by theatrical clothes! The screams of its characters make me shiver now. The construction workers climbed up on the stairs made sure that it is impossible to remove the cloth from the cornice without damaging it, and so the man with red hair, hard, who directs the work, lost his patience and voiced that it doesn't matter, that they can break it, go ahead and break it.

[...]

It's so cold! Before (this word BEFORE that I will not tire of repeating, that keeps coming back and back), before I used to like the winter.

This passage by Mujica Lainez, though it highlights the negative aspects of decay and deterioration, more strongly emphasizes the importance of the past as an idealized constructed image in the minds of porteños. The house in La Casa, built during that “flowering period” between 1870 and 1910, serves as the symbol of former, fleeting glory, of an imaged perfection once achieved and now lost. The past as ideal here is emphasized without hesitation, the word “before” becoming central to the house’s perception of her present. Nostalgia permeates La Casa, which encapsulates an image of Buenos Aires as it was perceived in the early twentieth century — a city with a great past, great potential unfulfilled.

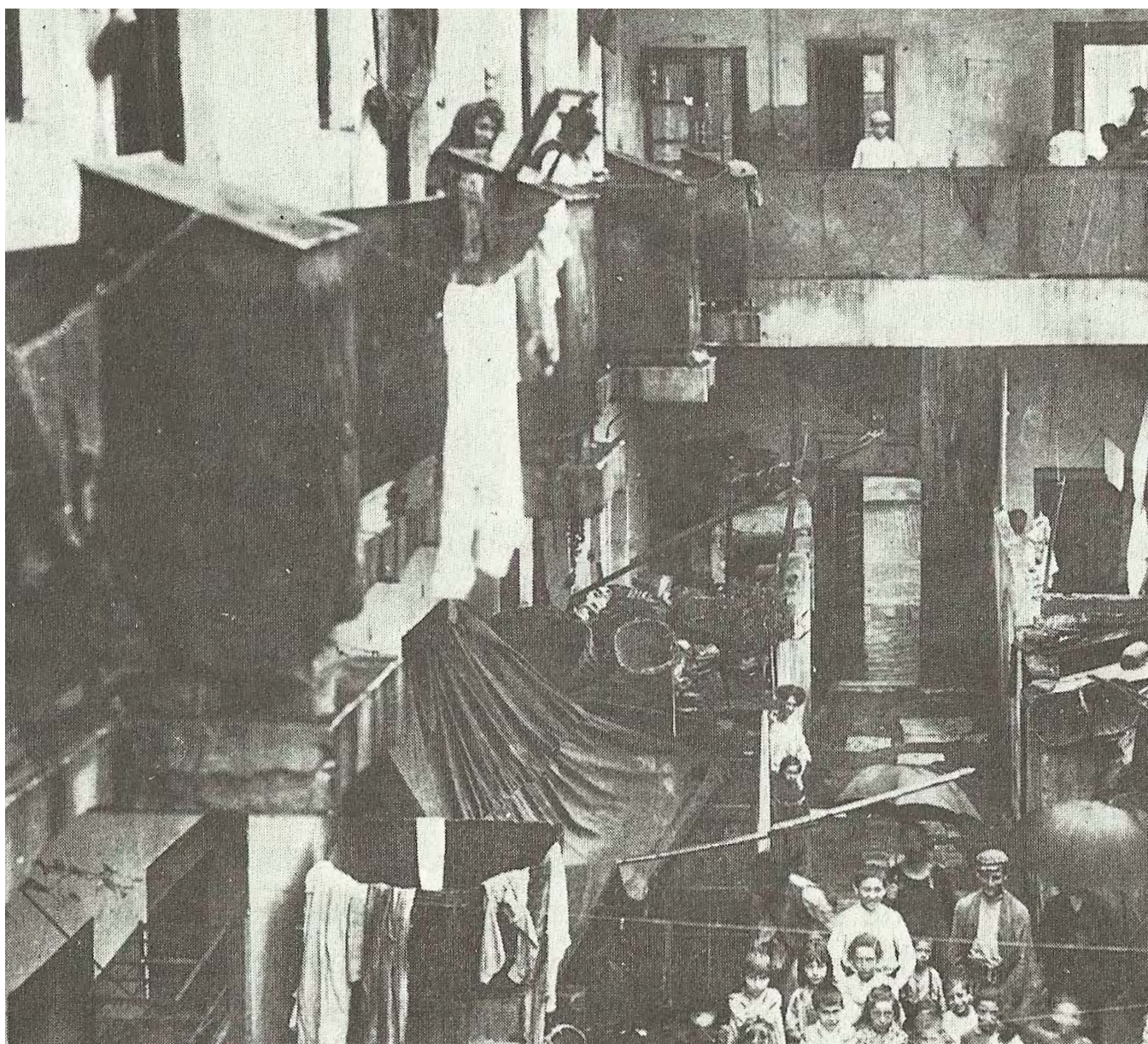


Figure 5 Typical conditions of the interior of a conventillo house. (Archivo General de la Nación)



Figure 6 Casa Balcarce's deterioration exemplifies the typical condition of a conventillo house in the late nineteenth century. (Archivo General de la Nación)

Filling the grid, dividing the city

The twentieth century saw Buenos Aires fill its 1888 borders, reaching densely into every corner of that ubiquitous grid. But, Buenos Aires did not develop as a cohesive whole -- disparate types of buildings were used to fill the parts of the grid that had lain empty since 1892. Some of the economic and social enclaves that Prévôt-Schapira credits for creating an overall fragmented city did indeed surge from the devolution and impoverishment of the working middle class, but a large part of these were built deliberately as islands within the city, particularly in the mid-twentieth century, when immigration into the city from Europe as well as from the interior of the country peaked. During this time, governments prioritized the building of housing projects that would simply serve as places to put the large numbers of people over which it struggled to exert control, producing neighborhoods of informal homes next to high-end houses and country clubs. Utilizing the idea of a fragmented Buenos Aires to their advantage, they inserted large projects into the perceived holes of the urban fabric.

Political ideals in the twentieth century shifted quickly and drastically between political leaders, each one vowing to erase what the one before him had done and “rebuild.” Throughout the mid-to-late twentieth century, Argentina struggled through a series of totalitarian regimes to establish a permanent democracy. Between 1946, the first term of Juan Domingo Perón, and 1983, the year which marked the election of Raúl Ricardo Alfonsín and the establishment of a so-called “permanent democracy,” Argentina saw seventeen different heads of state and three coups d’état. Despite their surface differences, the majority of these governments shared populist tendencies, favoring, at least superficially, low-income workers and immigrants in many of their economic policies. Shortly after Alfonsín’s first term, the economic priorities shifted toward a much more neo-liberal capitalist model, establishing a trend that would permeate many other South American countries throughout the 1990s. Buenos Aires, Federal Capital, autonomous city, and arguably one of the most important metropolises in South America, became the testing ground for the physical manifestation of the policies of each of these governments.

The 1950s and 1960s were characterized by a series of public housing plans that sought to give back the “right to housing,” a phrase overused by Perón and later co-opted by the military government that was to overthrow him, to the many immigrants who continued to flow into the city from European countries left weakened by war and to the growing number of families moving to Buenos Aires from the interior of the country (Gaite 27). This was done by way of a government mandate entitled “First Housing Plan” of 1952, which established three distinct types of dwellings: *monoblocks*, communal housing projects loosely based on the European *hof*, *supermanzanas*, large blocks of communal housing that broke the city grid, and *chalets argentinos*, small individual housing units (Dunowicz 16). Amidst a floundering economy and a growing social unrest, governments found it increasingly difficult to sustain the building the nineteenth-century European grandeur of the past. But, the housing policies popular in early-twentieth-century Europe and the architectural typologies they created were relatively easy to recreate. The *monoblock* and the *supermanzanas* saw themselves built and rebuilt again even through the 1970s, as this time period was characterized by a strong political push to eradicate any and all emergency housing blocks and informal settlements (Dunowicz). The placement of these projects was strategic, often in parts of the city that had been ignored or “left over.” The advertised goal of these projects was two-fold: first, house newcomers to the city, and second, ameliorate the “fragmented” urban fabric.

In 1955, a military coup known as the *Revolución Libertadora* (Liberating Revolution) overthrew Perón and, with him, the housing programs he established. What remained, however, was the belief that housing projects could be used as a vehicle to remedy the urban condition of the city. The *Revolución Libertadora* established the *Comisión Nacional de la Vivienda* (CNV), National Housing Committee, a task force charged with creating a “rational geographic distribution” within the city by targeting existing problems with housing. *Villas miserias* posed a “threat” so great to the outward image of the city that the CNV ordered the first-ever census of these settlements and subsequently put in place the first of many plans to eradicate and replace them with more permanent housing. The plan put forth by the CNV, called the

Plan de Acción Inmediata (Plan of Immediate Action) concentrated its building efforts on the south-central sector of Buenos Aires, a trend which was to be continued by the subsequent planning organizations in the 1960s and 1970s. South-central Buenos Aires, composed of the neighborhoods of Flores, Saavedra and Villa Lugano, was targeted by government housing agencies because it was, until then, largely undeveloped and an area frequently settled by newcomers to the city (Gaite 20). Figure 7 shows five of the most prominent, both in scale and form, housing developments of the mid-to-late twentieth century. Although not comprehensive or exhaustive, these five developments exemplify the nature of planning during this time period — blocks placed at odd intersections and empty lots throughout the city, usually adjacent to the highway, purposely denying of the existing city grid, always abnormal and alien in their form. The idea that the urban fabric of the city was fragmented was used to justify their building, but their forms, placements and programming only exacerbated the very condition they claimed to ameliorate.



Figure 7

1. Barrio Alvear, 1954, First Housing Plan
2. Barrio Rivadavia 1958 Plan of Immediate Action
3. Barrio Soldati 1979 Alborada Plan
4. Barrio Piedrabuena 1981 Alborada Plan
5. Barrio Justo Suárez 1974 Municipal Housing Plan

The housing developments of the 1950s had their focus on the individual unit, offered to working-class families. Mimicking the housing developments in Europe at this time, these projects usually took over a block or two of the existing city fabric, usually infilling them in one of two ways: either with one- or two-story units of housing in the style of the *chalets argentinos*, or with three- to five-story housing pavilions placed throughout the block in a “Towers in the Park” type of arrangement (Dunowicz 14-15). One such development was Barrio Alvear III. Built in 1954, this neighborhood placed three- and four-story housing pavilions in an existing block with some existing vegetation. The density of the block, radically different from the density of those around it, separated the development from the surrounding city. Despite its location as an apparently crux of the city, Barrio Alvear became an island within the grid. From inside the neighborhood, the sense of isolation and removal from the city at large is exacerbated by the denial of views to the outside (Figure 8).

Barrio Rivadavia exemplifies another 1950s approach which, although opposed to the “Towers in the Park” layout of Barrio Alvear II, succeeded equally in separating the neighborhood from its surrounding urban fabric. Built in 1958 as part of the Plan of Immediate Action, Barrio Rivadavia’s design intended to fill an empty plot of land within the grid of the city while simultaneously breaking with the orthogonal pattern of the city blocks, its small streets extending from the surrounding avenues at forty-five degree angles. Due to the cheap construction of the houses within it, Barrio Rivadavia’s status as a government-sanctioned public housing neighborhood did not last long. In 1977, the neighborhood was declared a *villa miseria* and slotted for demolition under the *Plan de Erradicación de Villas de Emergencia* (PEVE), the Emergency Settlement Eradication Plan. Surprisingly, and much to the dismay of housing authorities of the time, the residents of Barrio Rivadavia rebuilt their houses over their partially demolished remains before the end of the demolition process. After the end of the military dictatorship responsible for the demolition of various housing projects throughout the city, the new, resident-built Barrio Rivadavia remained untouched, the imposed order of its original plan still visible, but now embodied by informality (Figure 9).

Although it was the only one to be fully rebuilt by its inhabitants, Barrio Rivadavia was not the only one of these government housing projects to deteriorate. Barrio Ejército de los Andes, now known as Villa Miseria Fuerte Apache, became the poster child for government housing projects' lack of longevity. With projects such as these at the forefront of the public's attention, housing authorities in the late 1960s and early 1970s prioritized less the idea of "housing for all," and instead focused on the eradication of slums and ad-hoc settlements and their subsequent replacement with workers' housing. One such development was Barrio Justo Suárez, a small workers' neighborhood built in 1974 to replace the existing Villa 7. The inhabitants of Villa 7 participated in the design process, as Barrio Justo Suárez was a modest one-block development.

Small-scale projects such as this one did not remain popular, however, as the tactic in the late 1970s and early 1980s changed radically to the building of large, complex city-neighborhoods. The military government, for fear that any free land would become slums at the hands of new-comers to the city, was quick to take over large parcels of land and fill them with towering apartment buildings. The issues with these projects read like the usual list of the issues many modernist government-sponsored housing projects of this time faced: they housed only one type of family, they were located in parts of the city with insufficient infrastructure, their geometry broke with the grid of the city, their scale was too large, too bulky, the large public spaces they created were uninhabitable, did not mesh with the ways people were already inhabiting public space. Barrios Soldati and Piedrabuena, two enormous housing complexes at the southernmost tip of the city, marked the end of the government prioritization of public housing.



Figure 8



Figure 9, image property of author

The array of disparate solutions had failed in its supposed goal create a cohesive city, and this failure was strongly recognized and represented in the literature of the 1960s and 1970s. In *La ciudad futura* (*The Future City*), Francisco Reati personifies Buenos Aires and its representation as not a single city but rather many of them existing during different moments; at times one becomes stronger than another. These pieces of a whole were immortalized during this time period by Julio Cortázar, who, writing *62 A Model Kit* from exile in Paris, captured the ever-changing, mutating, and mutated states of the city.

*I enter my city without knowing how, sometimes other nights
I step out onto streets or houses and I know that it is not my city,
I know my city through a crouching expectation,
something that isn't yet fear but still has its shape and its dog and
when it is my city
I know that first there will be the market with gates and with
fruit stands,
the shining rails of a tram that gets lost toward a path
where I was young but not in my city, a neighborhood like the
Once in Buenos Aires, a smell of school,
calm city walls and a white cenotaph, the street Veinticuatro de
Noviembre maybe, where there are no cenotaphs but it is in my
city when it is its night.*

Cortázar wrote *62 A Model Kit* in 1968, and it is during this time that the image of Buenos Aires as a city of pieces gains strength. Cortázar's language and evoked imagery collaborate in creating a fantasy version of Buenos Aires that is only loosely related to the physical reality of the city. Cortázar weakly references the Once neighborhood and the street Veinticuatro de Noviembre, both characterized by large populations of low-income and immigrant families, in the south-central sector of the city. But these loose references to actual physical locations are overshadowed by emotional and sensory imagery. Here, Buenos Aires is a series of images that call to mind economic progress ("shining rails of a tram"), European city-street life ("market with gates and fruit stands") and a romanticized Medieval formality ("calm city walls"). In Cortázar's work,

Buenos Aires becomes a collage, a series of pieces juxtaposed with the goal of creating an idealized image, which appropriately reflected the physical state toward which Buenos Aires was moving during the second half of the twentieth century. In his poem “Blue Funk,” likely written in the mid 1960s, Cortázar captures the seemingly eternal nature of Buenos Aires, virtually unchanging regardless of its constantly mutating physical state.

“Blue Funk”

*You see the Southern Cross
you breathe the summer with its smell of peaches,
and you walk at night
my little silent ghost
through that Buenos Aires,
always through that same Buenos Aires.*

The surge in readership of many Latin American authors throughout the twentieth century, thanks to what is now popularly known as the “Latin American Boom,” helped to solidify in the minds’ eyes of readers the city as authors imagined it, and not as it actually was. This is where the idea of the city as “fragmented” becomes a permanent part of the urban discourse, implicitly in the literature of the time. The mid-twentieth-century version of Buenos Aires, slowly infilled with housing projects, was rejected by authors of the time, who insisted on the supposed glory of the city of the past. To them, Buenos Aires was divided between its past and present states.

If Mujica Lainez wrote about the once-ideal physical past of the city, Julio Cortázar, just a few years later, shifted the focus to the people who bought into this idea of a past perfection. Cortázar’s work differs from that of Mujica Lainez in that he situates his stories chronologically in the time during which they were written. While Mujica Lainez captures both the nostalgia and the physical reality of the early twentieth century, the internal chronology of Cortázar’s stories allow him to insert nostalgia for the past into a mid-twentieth-century physical context. In his 1956 collection of short stories *Final del juego* (End of the

Game), Cortázar ties the general malaise and unhappiness of his characters to their physical settings. In one particular short story, “Después del almuerzo” (“After Lunch”), Cortázar juxtaposes the names of prominent city buildings (the Casa Rosada, or house of government, the Colón Theatre) with images of mundane everyday life. But this juxtaposition is not to give these establishments a semblance of accessibility. Rather, it is to point out the loss of the grandeur they once had.

From the other corner of the square you could barely see the bank; I took a brief moment to cross to the Casa Rosada where the soldiers always stand guard, and through the side I took off toward the Colón Passage, that street where mom says kids shouldn't go alone.

[...]

I don't remember very well what happened in that time that I walked the Colón Passage, which is an avenue like any other. For a minute I was sitting in the low gallery of an import and export house, and then my stomach started to hurt, not like when you have to go to the bathroom right away, it was further up, in the true stomach, as if it was twisting little by little, and I wanted to breathe and it was difficult, then I had to stay still and wait for the cramp to pass, and in front of me I could see something like a green stain and little dots dancing, and dad's face, in the end it was only dad's face because I had closed my eyes, I think, and in the middle of the green stain was dad's face.

Here, the most important buildings of the city become mere backdrops to a character's physical discomfort. This Buenos Aires of the mid-twentieth century is already a lost cause, not ideal by any means, but its inhabitants consider their city to be Paris, or at some point *have been* Paris, or to have the potential to *become* Paris, if only someone could do something right.

The modernism of Buenos Aires never became extraordinary, sweeping, monumental, as it did in Brasilia, although it was just as much of an attempt at redefining national identity within the context of a radically evolving world. Modernist approaches denied spontaneity in favor of control, a strategy favored

by Buenos Aires officials in the twentieth century in response to the influx of immigrants. The best way to minimize and mitigate the impact of these large populations on the already-flimsy political and economic climate was to designate exactly where and how they could live, how much room they could take up in their new city. The assertion of modernism that it could be universally applied and universally successful reached even the farthest corners of the city. Here, though, it remained humbled by the history it stood next to and the nostalgia whose weight it carried. Argentina begged at once to be lauded for its past successes as well as trusted to launch into modernity. Studio STAFF, the group of architects who did the vast majority of urban housing and planning project in the second half of the 20th century, looked to CIAM and its Athens charter for its guiding principles. The new designs provided by these government programs worked on the assumption that lives would be acted out as a response to the new spaces, that a city just as good as the one so admired would develop.

As government priorities changed, the idea that Buenos Aires wasn't "whole" and that it needed to get back to a past glory was once again used, but for different types of projects. As the nation moved out of a series of military dictatorships and established a "permanent democracy" in 1983, a major shift in planning priorities occurs. Instead of the prioritization of the "completion" of the city by building housing in its less-developed areas, the focus becomes the renovation of existing buildings within the oldest areas of the city. It's during this time that, according to Prévôt-Schapira, Argentina ceased to be a "politically divided but socially integrated society" and instead became a society divided in both aspects. Although Prévôt-Schapira's analysis has economics and sociology at its center, she concludes by stating that these inequalities have an urban result, and that it is the fabric of the city that ultimately keeps the fragments from melding into a whole. According to Pérez, the private development of gated neighborhoods and commercial centers during the 1990s jeopardized public space in Buenos Aires and divided the city according to socio-economic status.

In the neo-liberal economic climate of the 1990s, the focus shifted from emulating the social architecture of Europe to producing "veneers of the First World" through re-appropriation of abandoned

spaces and historic buildings (Reati). Among these renovations two stand out: the Abasto Shopping Mall, which was built in the hollowed-out shell of the Buenos Aires Central Market, and the Puerto Madero neighborhood, which was developed along the old industrial port. These architectures were made in favor of an ideal image, perpetuated by travel agencies and tourists who lauded Buenos Aires for being “the most European” of South American cities. The neo-liberalism of the late eighties and nineties exerted a different kind of control over the city, one that fed on the nostalgia of these images to create a consumerism encouraged by the city itself. Cultural attractions in the city built during this time capitalized on the assumed value of the historic pieces of the city and rendered them easily digestible and ready for consumption.

The most prominent public space renovation project of the 1990s was that of the port area through which most of the immigrants had arrived to the city in the nineteenth century. Overtaken by industry throughout the twentieth century, this area was considered shabby and uninhabitable and abutted one of the most dangerous zones of the city (Figure 10). With the privatization of many public services throughout the 1990s, Argentina’s economy began to, at least superficially, position itself competitively on a global field (Centner). This new growth, coupled with the aspirations to return to an assumed past glory after the fall of the military dictatorship in 1983, created a need to project an outward image of prosperity and success (Liernur). The renovation of the old port provided the idealistic vehicle for this imaged transformation. The renovation was made possible thanks in large part to private developers who bought pieces of the large swath of property. Over the course of ten years, the industrial port became the city’s most expensive district, teeming with nightclubs and high-end restaurants. The renovation is considered a success and point of pride by the public — a step toward joining the ranks of the United States, all while building on soil thought of as distinctively Argentinian, the entryway for the immigrants that built the so-admired pseudo-European culture (Cuenya and Corral).

The renovation of the old central market, completed as the Puerto Madero project was underway,

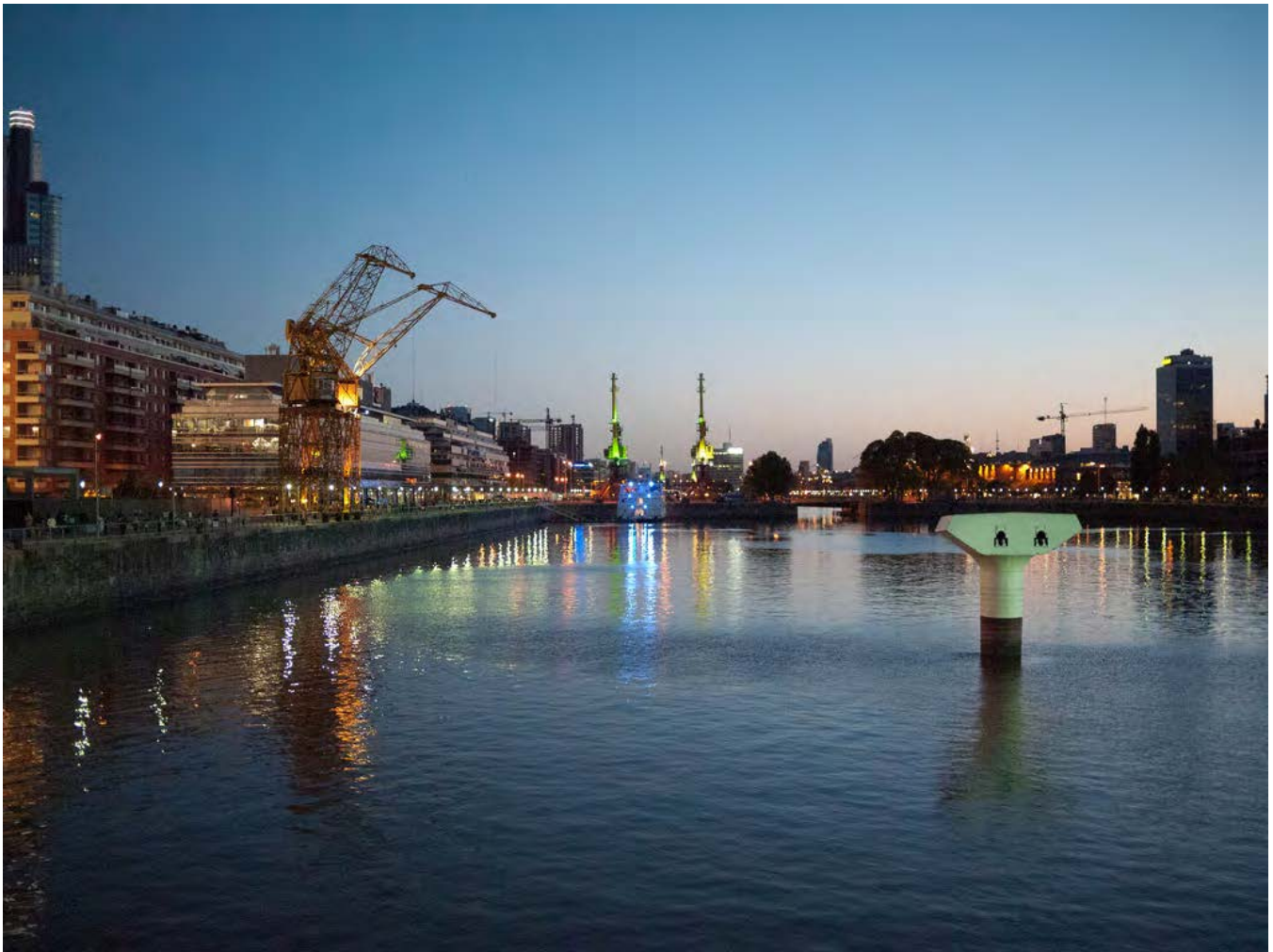


Figure 10, photo courtesy of Ezequiel Betzerra

was of a much smaller scale but had just as much media impact. The Abasto Shopping, termed as such in borrowed English, was renovated in 1999, near the end of the presidency of Carlos Menem and as the country approached an economic crisis. In a state of disrepair, the central market building was essentially gutted and turned into a shell which was then infilled with a modern, mall-like spaces (Figure 11).

These spaces, characterized by Fernando Reati as “veneers” and by Jorge Liernur as “simulacra of the First World,” have had little to no role in the cultural production and literary representations of the city. In fact, the image of the city conveyed by many works of the 1990s and 2000s is that of the “city outside the city” — the places of exclusion, of social difference and poverty created by the proliferation of “public” spaces created for use only by those who can economically access them. As these spaces, located mostly in the

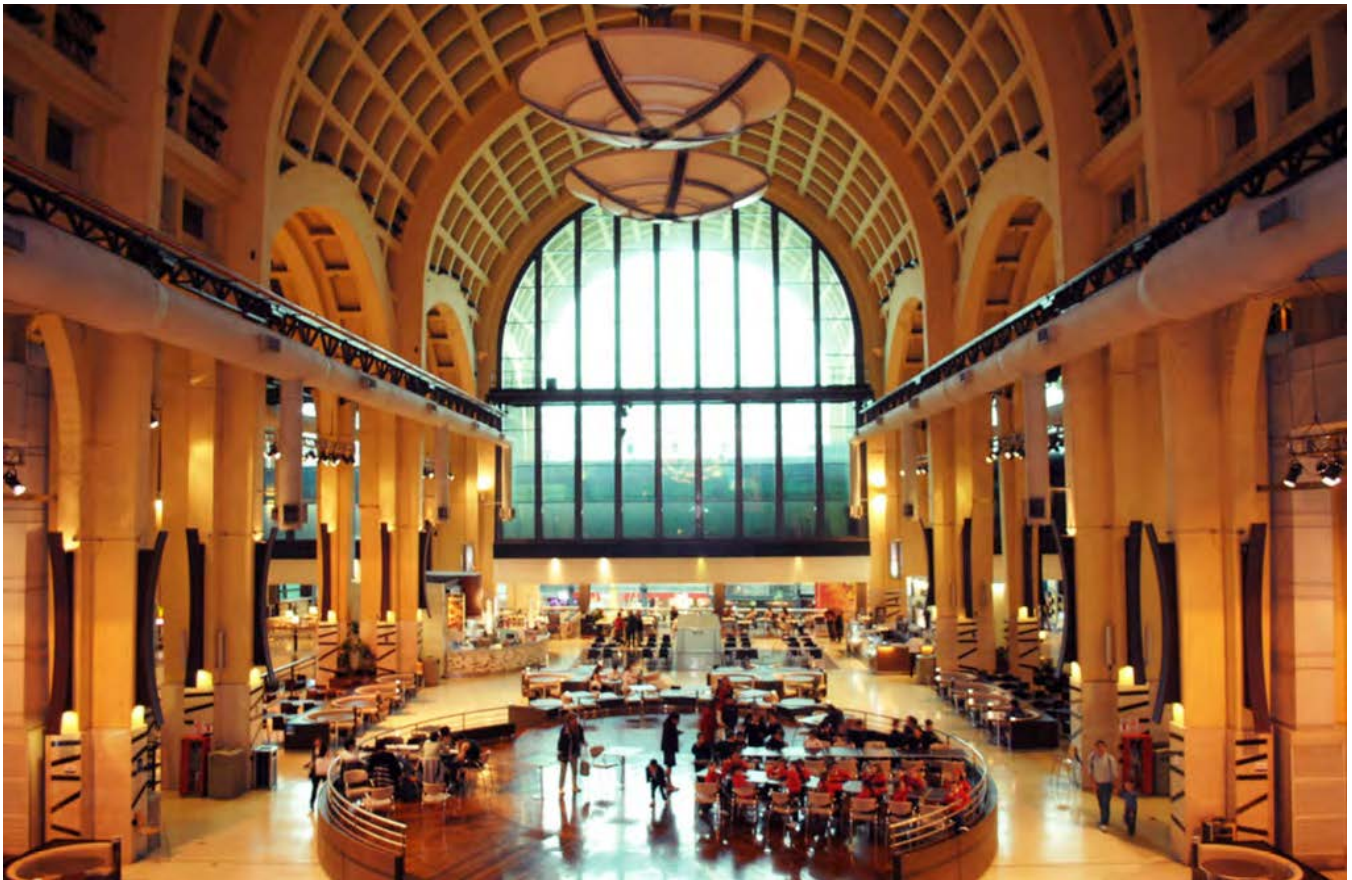


Figure 11, photo courtesy of Sabrina Montañó

northeastern zone of the city, have received increased attention from the city government, the spaces in the south-central section of the city have deteriorated in contrast. Both kinds of spaces have become exclusive in their own right, each denying access to a specific part of the population.

The overall view toward the city as whole is now more jaded, likely in light of what were perceived as failed attempts to recover the past integrity of the city, as well as the growing gaps and tears within the socioeconomic fabric of Argentinian society. Where once the general public considered itself to be a part of a country dominated by an educated middle class, the three decades between 1983 and present-day saw the impoverishment of this middle class and the growth of a lower class whose presence manifested itself in the city through enormous slums, or *villas miseria* (Reati 90). This tone is what I perceive to be a kind of “urban realism,” concerned particularly with the idea of “living outside,” of the fragmentary nature of the city that leaves some of its neediest citizens outside the reaches of “normal” urbanity.³ To contemporary authors,

the past city is perfect but long-gone, elusive, unattainable and sometimes even unimaginable. It still exists somewhere in the background and under ideal conditions, might be reached, but the defining characteristic of the city for authors of the last thirty years is its deterioration into disparate compartments.

The depictions of the city often center on spaces where public life is carried out and performed. In the late nineteenth century, this space is the street, which fittingly reflects the priorities of urban planning at the time. As the street became increasingly unsafe, the venues for public life became the neighborhood and the home. In the twentieth century, when the state undertook urban social housing projects of a massive scale, the home and the neighborhood became the focal point of literature dealing with or set in the city. Buenos Aires itself had now become an entity separate from public life, a place to where one had to travel, even when one resided inside it. Authors of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have a particular affinity for this condition. Writers like César Aira and Roberto Fogwill create images of Buenos Aires with its least desirable areas at the center. Today's Buenos Aires does not offer a clear venue for public life. Literature makes that clear, and so does the privatization of public spaces in the 1990s and early 2000s.

In his 1998 novel *Vivir Afuera* (Living Outside), Rodolfo Fogwill highlights the aspects of the city which marginalize its inhabitants, ultimately implying that large parts of the population do not live in the city at all, despite their physical location inside the geographical confines of the city. In his 2001 novel *La Villa* (Shantytown), César Aira describes Barrio Rivadavia and the street adjacent to it, Avenida Bonorino, as entities separate from the rest of the city and uses them as a setting for a murder.

The street called Bonorino, from its beginning on Avenida Rivadavia, was labeled "Avenida" Esteban Bonorino on the signs, and no one knew why, because it was a narrow street like all the other ones. Everyone thought it was just another one of those frequent bureaucratic errors, a mix-up by clueless government

workers who had ordered the signs without ever setting foot in the neighborhood. But it happened to be true, although so secretly that no one could find out. Eighteen blocks down, passing a

*bunch of monoblocks and warehouses and sheds and empty lots, where it seemed that the street had already ended, and where not even the most persistent walker reached, the street called Bonorino widened, transforming into the avenue it promised to be from the beginning. But it wasn't the beginning; it was the end.*⁴

The divorcing of these places from the idea of the city at large serves to preserve the ideals with which Buenos Aires has always been associated. Buenos Aires is European, modern, advanced. The ad-hoc spaces described by these authors are not, so therefore they must not be a part of the city. Buenos Aires today is still a city divided, and the large urban investments of the twentieth century have only exacerbated this condition.

Conclusions

When Gorelik, Pérez and Prévôt-Schapira refer to the condition of “fragmentation”, they often reference a political and socio-economic fragmentation that happened long before the city physically manifested it. Buenos Aires developed at the hands of politics, becoming a physical manifestation of the priorities of the governments that shaped it. Despite differing political agendas, governments since the middle of the twentieth century have all used the idea that Buenos Aires is composed of multiple parts to develop it as a series of manifestations of socioeconomic values, as opposed to a series of culturally planned urban spaces. The observations by scholars of the city that Buenos Aires is composed of multiple discrete parts, whether they be physical, economic or social, is accurate. However, the issue here lies not in the accuracy of the assessment but in the word chosen to describe it. The word *fragmentation* implies that there was a “whole” at once point, a complete entity that could be then broken into pieces, fragments. Its current usage also implies that this is a natural process, out of the hands of both planners and inhabitants.

The word fragmentation and the concept it stands for created a tangible problem whose solution city planners claimed to seek. But the proposed solutions all exacerbated the very condition they supposedly aimed to remedy, deliberately dividing the city. The housing projects in South-Central Buenos Aires, purported solutions to the city’s fragmented state, only further divided its socioeconomic fabric. The historic renovations in the center of the city, although diametrically opposite in purpose, did the very same thing. The “problem” of fragmentation facilitated actions that purposely exacerbated this condition, creating spaces of exclusion and division. Viewing Buenos Aires as “fragmented” characterizes its condition as something organic and unavoidable, when in fact the spaces that make up its fabric are deliberately disparate. Buenos Aires’s urban fabric has been purposely divided -- if we begin to call it such, we can get closer to architectural decisions that will address the reality of the city, not the idea of it.

Endnotes

- 1 In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau recognizes “fragmentary living” as a key aspect of urban life. It is likely that the later permutations and applications of this term surge from here.
- 2 In particular, the short story *The Slaughterhouse* by Esteban Echeverría depicts a Buenos Aires that is still young and threatened by the vast expanses of land surrounding it. I will later further discuss Echeverría’s representation.
- 3 In his novel *Vivir Afuera, Living Outside*, Roberto Fogwill describes the experience of living in slums as one characterized by a sense of removal from the city as an entity.
- 4 Aira, *La Villa*, 19-20.

Images

Figure 1 - Map of Buenos Aires by Pablo Ludwig. Courtesy of David Rumsey Map Collection.

Figure 2 - Census districts, 1910. Scobie, James R. *Buenos Aires: Plaza to Suburb*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974. Print.

Figure 3 - Unzué Residence. Archivo General de la Nación.

Figure 4 - Temporary port dwellings. Archivo General de la Nación.

Figure 5 - Conventillo housing. Archivo General de la Nación.

Figure 6 - Casa Balcarce. Archivo General de la Nación.

Figure 7 - Five prominent housing projects of the 20th century

Figure 8 - Barrio Alvear. Courtesy of La Teja.

Figure 9 - Barrio Rivadavia. Image property of author.

Figure 10 - Puerto Madero. Courtesy of Ezequiel Betzerra.

Figure 11 - Abasto Shopping. Courtesy of Sabrina Montaña.

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