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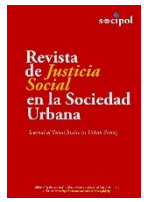

Decent Housing as a Right: Failed Policies and Community Alternatives in Buenos Aires

Vivienda digna como derecho: políticas fallidas y alternativas comunitarias en Buenos Aires

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ABSTRACT

This article critically examines the gap between state-led housing policies and grassroots community responses in the pursuit of decent housing in Buenos Aires. While government programs have often failed to address the structural causes of housing insecurity—due to bureaucratic inefficiencies, market-oriented approaches, and lack of participatory planning—residents in informal settlements have developed autonomous, self-managed solutions to claim their right to adequate shelter. Employing a comparative case study methodology, this research analyzes both top-down and bottom-up approaches to housing provision, drawing on fieldwork, policy analysis, and interviews with residents and policymakers. The novelty of the study lies in its dual focus: it not only exposes the limitations of official housing frameworks but also highlights the creative agency and resilience of marginalized

communities. By bridging urban policy analysis with community-led practices, this article contributes to debates on housing justice and urban citizenship in Latin American cities.

Keywords *Housing rights*, *Urban policy*, *Informal settlements*, *Community-led development*, *Buenos Aires*

RESUMEN
Este artículo analiza críticamente la brecha entre las políticas estatales de vivienda y las respuestas comunitarias en la búsqueda de una vivienda digna en Buenos Aires. Aunque los programas gubernamentales han fracasado en abordar las causas estructurales de la inseguridad habitacional—por ineficiencias burocráticas, enfoques orientados al mercado y ausencia de planificación participativa—los residentes de asentamientos informales han desarrollado soluciones autónomas y autogestionadas para reclamar su derecho a una vivienda adecuada. A través de una metodología comparativa de estudios de caso, la investigación examina enfoques tanto institucionales como comunitarios, basándose en trabajo de campo, análisis de políticas y entrevistas con residentes y responsables públicos. La originalidad del estudio radica en su enfoque dual: expone las limitaciones de los marcos oficiales y, al mismo tiempo, destaca la agencia creativa y la resiliencia de las comunidades marginadas. Al conectar el análisis de políticas urbanas con prácticas lideradas por la ciudadanía, este artículo contribuye al debate sobre justicia habitacional y ciudadanía urbana en las ciudades latinoamericanas.

Palabras clave *Derecho a la Vivienda*, *Política urbana*, *Asentamientos informales*, *Desarrollo comunitario*, *Buenos Aires*

A. Introduction

Housing has become one of the most pressing crises facing cities globally, particularly in the Global South, where rapid urbanization has outpaced the development of infrastructure and affordable housing. As cities grow, informal settlements—often characterized by inadequate infrastructure and precarious living conditions—have proliferated, posing significant challenges to urban governance. The issue of housing is further complicated by the tension between viewing housing as a human right, as advocated by international frameworks such as the United Nations (2016), and the treatment of housing as a commodity subject to market forces. This conflict manifests in urban policies that prioritize profit-driven development over meeting the basic needs of

marginalized populations, leading to a growing divide between formal and informal housing sectors. In Latin America, where income inequality is profound, these disparities are especially stark, with informal settlements housing a significant proportion of urban populations (Robles, 2018). Cities like Buenos Aires embody this contradiction, where a growing number of residents are unable to access secure and decent housing, despite legal guarantees.

Buenos Aires, Argentina's capital, stands at the intersection of these complex housing challenges. While the Argentine Constitution recognizes housing as a fundamental right, and the city's legal framework is theoretically supportive of housing access for all, the reality on the ground remains far less promising. Informal settlements, or "villas," continue to expand, often occupying public or underutilized land in and around the city. These areas are marked by overcrowded conditions, insufficient sanitation, and a lack of basic services such as potable water and electricity (Mazzoni, 2019). Despite a robust legal framework designed to address these issues, the city has struggled to implement policies that effectively reduce housing precarity. The persistence of informal settlements is a stark reminder that legal rights alone do not guarantee actual access to decent housing, and that the gap between urban policy and real-world outcomes can be vast.

The failure of state-led housing programs in Buenos Aires can be attributed to a number of factors, but a key issue lies in the technocratic and bureaucratic nature of the policies that have been pursued. These approaches tend to focus on large-scale, top-down interventions, often disregarding the needs and agency of the very communities they aim to serve. Policies are frequently shaped by market-oriented solutions that emphasize profit maximization and efficiency, sidelining social equity considerations. Furthermore, many of these initiatives fail to recognize the value of local knowledge and the potential for community-driven solutions. The result is a fragmented and ineffective housing strategy that fails to address the root causes of housing insecurity and the lived experiences of those in informal settlements (González & Cuccia, 2020). This disconnect between policy and practice has led to widespread dissatisfaction with the state's ability to provide decent housing for all.

The shortcomings of state-led efforts have prompted some communities to take matters into their own hands, exploring alternative, grassroots solutions to the housing crisis. Community-led initiatives in Buenos Aires offer an important counterpoint to state-centric models. These initiatives often involve collective action to occupy land, build housing cooperatives, and organize residents to negotiate with local authorities for better living conditions. While these efforts may lack the financial resources and political power of the state,

they are often more responsive to the actual needs of the communities they serve. These bottom-up approaches emphasize solidarity, self-determination, and the right to the city, offering residents greater agency in shaping their living environments. By bypassing the bureaucratic hurdles and market-oriented imperatives that characterize state-led interventions, community-led initiatives demonstrate the potential for more inclusive, participatory forms of housing provision.

However, these alternative pathways to housing rights are not without challenges. While they offer a more direct and participatory approach to housing provision, community-led initiatives in Buenos Aires still face significant obstacles, including limited access to land, ongoing political resistance, and a lack of formal recognition from the state. Many of these initiatives remain precarious, as they are often subject to eviction or displacement by state authorities, who may prioritize the interests of the private sector or urban development over the needs of marginalized communities (Villarreal & Díaz, 2017). Furthermore, these initiatives are often fragmented, with individual projects struggling to achieve broader political or legal recognition. Nevertheless, they provide valuable insights into the potential for alternative models of housing justice, ones that center the needs of the most vulnerable urban residents.

This research aims to critically examine the intersection of state-led housing policies and community-driven alternatives in Buenos Aires. By investigating the effectiveness of state interventions and the potential of community-led housing solutions, this study contributes to a broader understanding of housing justice in the urban context. The empirical findings will shed light on the limitations of current housing policies, offering a comparative analysis of the effectiveness of state versus community-led models. This research also offers theoretical contributions to the discourse on housing justice and urban citizenship, emphasizing the need for policies that acknowledge the right to the city and the importance of participatory governance in shaping equitable urban futures. By drawing attention to the successes and challenges of community-led initiatives, the study provides a pathway for rethinking urban development and the role of the state in ensuring that housing is recognized as a human right, rather than a market commodity.

B. Literature Review

1. *The Right to Housing and Urban Citizenship*

The concept of the *right to housing* is embedded within international human rights frameworks, which assert that adequate housing is a fundamental human right, vital for personal dignity and the

realization of broader social rights. The United Nations' International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) recognizes housing as a critical aspect of human well-being, while the Habitat Agenda (1996) further solidified housing as a central tenet of sustainable urban development. Housing, in this view, is not merely a physical shelter but also a foundational element for achieving a decent standard of living, which includes access to essential services, security of tenure, and freedom from discrimination. As such, housing becomes an essential vehicle for achieving equality and social integration, particularly in the urban context, where the concentration of population and services heightens the need for inclusive urban policies (United Nations, 2016).

The *right to the city* concept, which was first articulated by Henri Lefebvre (1968), broadens the scope of housing to include the collective right of all residents—regardless of their social, economic, or legal status—to participate in the social, political, and economic processes shaping urban life. Lefebvre's work suggests that the right to the city transcends the right to housing, linking it to broader issues of urban justice and the equitable distribution of urban resources. The right to the city emphasizes that residents, especially those in informal settlements, should have a say in the way their cities are developed, governed, and transformed. This vision of urban justice has become an essential framework for understanding urban inequalities, particularly in cities in the Global South, where informal settlements and housing precarity are prevalent.

Urban citizenship, as it intersects with housing rights, emphasizes the role of adequate housing as a foundation for full participation in urban life. It connects housing with broader issues of social inclusion, rights to services, political agency, and access to public spaces (Purcell, 2002). In this context, housing is viewed not only as a physical space but as a site of empowerment and identity, critical for securing an individual's place in the city. The lack of stable, secure housing often results in marginalization, exclusion from social benefits, and limited political representation. Thus, urban citizenship hinges on the guarantee of adequate housing, which in turn supports individuals' broader participation in civic life. Access to housing is, therefore, a foundational aspect of urban justice and a means through which individuals can challenge broader systems of exclusion and inequality.

Despite the recognition of housing as a right, the tension between housing as a social right versus a commodity has left many residents vulnerable. Legal frameworks may establish housing rights, but without corresponding political commitment or practical implementation, these rights remain theoretical for many people living

in informal settlements. In this sense, the gap between legal entitlements and lived experiences underscores the need for more robust, equitable housing policies that both recognize housing as a right and translate this recognition into real-world protections and opportunities for urban residents.

2. *State-Led Housing Policies*

State-led housing policies have long been central to addressing urban housing crises. In many countries, public housing, upgrading, and relocation programs have been the principal mechanisms for providing affordable housing to low-income populations. Historically, these programs aimed to offer a solution to housing deficits by constructing mass public housing and facilitating the integration of informal settlements into the formal urban fabric (González & Cuccia, 2020). These initiatives often included upgrading existing informal settlements, providing basic infrastructure, and relocating residents to new, formalized housing developments. While these approaches have had some success, they have also been subject to significant limitations, including bureaucratic inefficiency, poor implementation, and inadequate planning that does not account for the diverse needs of residents.

In recent decades, however, neoliberal shifts in housing governance have transformed state interventions. As part of broader economic restructuring, many governments have reduced public investment in housing, favoring market-based solutions that emphasize privatization, deregulation, and homeownership as key strategies for addressing housing needs (Harvey, 2012). The privatization of land, deregulation of housing markets, and the increased role of private developers in housing production have shifted the responsibility for housing provision away from the state and towards the private sector. While this approach has led to some increases in the supply of housing, it has often resulted in the exclusion of lower-income residents who are unable to participate in the formal housing market. This shift towards market-driven housing governance has exacerbated urban inequality, as wealthier residents benefit from improved housing conditions, while the urban poor remain in insecure and inadequate housing.

Critics of neoliberal housing policies argue that these approaches undermine the social right to housing and contribute to the growth of informal settlements. Market-driven policies, which prioritize profitability over social equity, often result in speculative urban development that neglects the needs of marginalized groups (Marcuse, 2009). The prioritization of private ownership and the exclusionary

nature of these policies have intensified the divide between formal and informal housing sectors. Furthermore, the shift towards market-oriented housing governance has also led to the erosion of public housing programs, leaving vulnerable populations with fewer options for secure and affordable housing. As a result, critics assert that neoliberal housing policies have contributed to the deepening of housing insecurity, making it difficult for low-income populations to access adequate housing in rapidly urbanizing cities.

Despite these critiques, proponents of market-oriented housing policies argue that private sector involvement can lead to greater efficiency, innovation, and investment in urban housing. However, this perspective often overlooks the social and spatial inequalities that such policies perpetuate. The ongoing debate highlights the need for more inclusive and sustainable housing policies that balance market forces with social equity, ensuring that housing remains accessible and affordable to all urban residents, particularly those in the most vulnerable positions.

3. *Informality and Self-Managed Housing*

Informality in urban areas, particularly in the Global South, is often viewed as both a site of exclusion and a space of innovation. Informal settlements, such as the *villas* in Buenos Aires, are typically characterized by inadequate infrastructure, limited access to services, and insecure tenure. These settlements have historically been excluded from formal urban planning and governance, relegating residents to a state of permanent vulnerability. However, informal settlements are not simply spaces of deprivation; they are also spaces of resilience, where residents engage in self-help housing practices, often constructing their own homes and organizing collective solutions to meet their basic needs (Robles, 2018). This process of *autoconstrucción* (self-construction) is a central feature of many informal settlements, as residents draw on their own resources and labor to build homes that suit their needs. While these informal housing solutions are often inadequate and precarious, they demonstrate the capacity of marginalized communities to create alternatives to state-led housing provision.

The self-managed nature of informal settlements is often seen as a form of resistance to exclusionary urban policies, providing residents with a degree of autonomy and control over their living conditions. Collective organization is key to the survival of these communities, with residents frequently engaging in mutual aid, informal economies, and collaborative efforts to improve their housing conditions. In this way, informal settlements can be understood as both spaces of exclusion and

innovation, where residents not only cope with inadequate housing but also create new forms of social and spatial organization that challenge conventional notions of urban development (Davis, 2016). Despite their innovation and self-management, however, informal settlements are still marginalized, with residents lacking legal rights to the land they occupy and facing constant threats of eviction and displacement.

The potential for self-managed housing to serve as a viable alternative to state-led housing solutions is debated. On the one hand, the autonomy and collective organization seen in informal settlements suggest that self-help housing can be a powerful tool for addressing housing insecurity, particularly in contexts where state interventions are weak or absent. On the other hand, the challenges of informality—lack of legal recognition, limited access to resources, and vulnerability to eviction—pose significant barriers to the long-term sustainability of self-managed housing projects. While self-help housing can provide immediate relief, it is often not a sustainable solution in the face of growing urban populations and the need for large-scale infrastructure investments.

Nevertheless, informal settlements and self-managed housing models continue to offer valuable lessons for urban planning, highlighting the need for inclusive and participatory approaches to housing that prioritize community agency and local knowledge. As such, self-managed housing represents both a response to state failure and an opportunity to rethink traditional urban governance models that rely on top-down interventions and market-driven solutions.

4. *Housing Justice and Community Agency*

Housing justice is a critical concept in the contemporary discourse on urban development and housing policy. It involves the recognition of housing as a fundamental human right and emphasizes the need for policies that address not only the physical provision of housing but also the social and political inequalities that underpin housing insecurity. Housing movements and grassroots activism have played a significant role in advocating for housing justice, challenging the dominance of market-oriented approaches to housing and pushing for greater recognition of the needs of low-income and marginalized communities. These movements emphasize participation, autonomy, and co-production as essential elements of housing justice. Community-led housing initiatives, where residents take an active role in decision-making and design, offer an alternative vision of urban development that prioritizes social equity over profit (Villarreal & Díaz, 2017).

One of the key aspects of housing justice is the emphasis on participation and community agency. Housing justice movements argue that residents should not only be the recipients of housing but should also have a say in the development, management, and maintenance of their homes and neighborhoods. This participatory approach challenges the top-down, technocratic nature of traditional housing policies, which often exclude affected communities from decision-making processes. By involving residents in the planning and implementation of housing solutions, community-led initiatives foster a sense of ownership, empowerment, and collective responsibility, which are crucial for the long-term success of housing projects. Furthermore, participatory approaches to housing can help ensure that housing solutions are tailored to the specific needs and aspirations of the communities they aim to serve.

Despite the transformative potential of community-led housing initiatives, these projects face significant challenges. Grassroots movements often lack the resources, political support, and institutional recognition necessary to scale up their efforts or to secure legal rights to land and housing. Additionally, these movements are frequently confronted with resistance from state authorities and private developers, who prioritize profit-driven development over the social goals of housing justice. As a result, there is often a tension between community aspirations and state policies, with many grassroots initiatives operating in a precarious, informal context.

The conceptual gap between policy analysis and lived practice remains a significant barrier to achieving housing justice. While policies may promise the right to housing, they often fail to address the complex realities of urban life, where informal settlements, exclusion, and inequality persist. Housing justice requires a more comprehensive and nuanced approach to urban governance, one that bridges the gap between theoretical commitments to housing rights and the lived experiences of urban residents. By focusing on community agency and participatory governance, housing justice can offer a more inclusive and equitable vision for the future of cities.

C. Conceptual Framework

1. *Housing as a Social Right Rather Than a Market Good*

The conceptual framework for this study begins with a fundamental rethinking of housing, advocating for its recognition as a social right rather than a market commodity. Traditionally, housing has been treated as a good that is bought and sold on the market, subject to the laws of supply and demand. This commodification of housing often leads to exclusionary outcomes, where access to adequate shelter

becomes contingent on one's economic status, reinforcing social and spatial inequalities. In contrast, framing housing as a social right emphasizes that all individuals, regardless of their income or social status, are entitled to secure and adequate housing as part of their fundamental human rights. This aligns with international human rights frameworks, such as the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which asserts that "everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care." Viewing housing as a right shifts the focus from private ownership and market transactions to providing housing as a public service, prioritizing equity, security, and social inclusion over profit maximization (United Nations, 2016).

In the context of urban development, treating housing as a social right demands policies that guarantee access to housing for all urban residents, particularly for marginalized populations. This conceptual shift advocates for a system where the state plays a central role in ensuring the availability and affordability of housing through social, economic, and legal mechanisms. Housing as a right implies that cities should be designed with the needs of all residents in mind, not just those with the economic means to engage in the housing market. This also requires rethinking the role of land markets and financial institutions, which often exacerbate housing inequality by prioritizing speculative development. For instance, policies like rent control, affordable housing quotas, and public housing programs can help ensure that all citizens have the right to secure and dignified housing, regardless of their financial capacity.

This redefinition of housing has profound implications for urban governance. It challenges the neoliberal logic that has dominated urban housing policy in recent decades, which often treats housing primarily as an investment asset rather than as a basic human need. By emphasizing the social nature of housing, this framework calls for systemic changes in both the provision and regulation of housing to ensure that it is not subject to the volatility of real estate markets but is instead embedded in a broader social and economic framework that prioritizes human well-being and dignity over financial profit (Harvey, 2012).

2. *Analytical Distinction Between Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approaches*

A central aspect of this conceptual framework is the analytical distinction between top-down (state-led, institutional) approaches to housing and bottom-up (community-led, self-managed) practices.

Understanding these two modes of housing provision is crucial for evaluating the potential for housing justice in cities like Buenos Aires, where both state interventions and grassroots initiatives coexist.

Top-down approaches generally involve state or institutional actors imposing housing solutions through bureaucratic processes. These interventions are often designed with a "one-size-fits-all" mindset, where housing is provided through large-scale public housing projects or urban upgrading programs. In many cases, these projects are motivated by the goal of "formalizing" informal settlements or improving urban infrastructure in ways that align with broader development agendas (González & Cuccia, 2020). While such state-led initiatives can address housing deficits and provide basic shelter, they often fail to account for the unique social and cultural needs of the communities they target. Moreover, top-down policies may be overly technical, neglecting the lived experiences and desires of residents. As a result, many of these programs have been criticized for leading to the displacement of vulnerable populations or creating housing that does not adequately meet the needs of those it was intended to serve (González & Cuccia, 2020).

In contrast, bottom-up approaches are community-driven initiatives that emphasize local participation, self-management, and collective action. These approaches often emerge from the ground up, particularly in response to the inadequacies of state-led policies. Residents of informal settlements, for example, may organize themselves to build their own homes or form housing cooperatives that allow them to collectively negotiate for land and resources. In this model, residents are not passive recipients of housing but active participants in the design, construction, and management of their homes. This self-help approach promotes a sense of ownership and agency, as it enables people to create housing solutions that are more responsive to their specific needs and conditions. However, these initiatives are often constrained by the lack of legal recognition, limited access to resources, and ongoing threats of eviction. Nonetheless, bottom-up approaches provide a critical lens through which to understand how marginalized communities can challenge exclusionary housing systems and build alternative, more inclusive housing models (Robles, 2018).

The distinction between top-down and bottom-up approaches reflects the broader tension between state control and community autonomy in urban development. While state-led approaches can bring large-scale solutions and potentially improve infrastructure, they risk sidelining the voices and needs of the very people they aim to help. In contrast, bottom-up approaches are more flexible and inclusive, but

they often lack the political support and financial resources necessary to achieve lasting change. This framework recognizes that both approaches have strengths and weaknesses, and calls for a more integrated model that draws on the best aspects of both: state support for community-driven initiatives, coupled with the active involvement of communities in decision-making and implementation.

3. *Housing Justice: Security of Tenure, Adequacy and Dignity, Participation and Recognition*

At the heart of this conceptual framework is the notion of housing justice, which encompasses three key principles: security of tenure, adequacy and dignity, and participation and recognition. These principles provide a more holistic view of housing that extends beyond mere access to shelter to include the social, political, and cultural dimensions of housing rights.

Security of tenure refers to the right of residents to remain in their homes without fear of arbitrary eviction or displacement. It is a fundamental aspect of housing justice, as it provides stability and allows individuals and families to invest in their homes, both physically and emotionally. Tenure security is especially important in informal settlements, where residents often face the threat of eviction due to their lack of legal rights to the land they occupy. Security of tenure not only protects individuals from being displaced but also ensures that they have long-term control over their living environments, enabling them to improve their homes, engage in community activities, and develop a sense of ownership and belonging (Marcuse, 2009). In the context of Buenos Aires, where informal settlements are widespread, ensuring security of tenure for residents can help prevent the destabilizing effects of gentrification and urban renewal programs.

Adequacy and dignity go beyond the physical structure of housing to include the quality of life that housing provides. Adequate housing means that it meets basic standards of health, safety, and comfort, including access to clean water, sanitation, electricity, and adequate space. Dignity in housing means that residents live in environments that respect their rights and social identities, free from discrimination, overcrowding, and stigmatization. Adequate housing is a reflection of social justice, as it ensures that all individuals have access to conditions that support their well-being, rather than simply providing bare-bones shelter (United Nations, 2016). In informal settlements, where many residents struggle with inadequate housing, achieving housing justice requires addressing both the physical and social dimensions of housing, ensuring that people live in spaces that foster dignity and community cohesion.

Finally, participation and recognition are crucial for achieving housing justice. Participation refers to the active involvement of residents in the decision-making processes that affect their housing conditions. This can include participating in the design, construction, and management of housing projects or engaging in policy advocacy to influence urban planning decisions. Recognition involves the acknowledgment of residents as equal urban citizens, whose rights and experiences are valid and worthy of attention. For marginalized groups, particularly those in informal settlements, recognition means having their struggles and aspirations taken seriously by state authorities and society at large. By ensuring that residents are recognized and able to participate in housing decisions, housing justice promotes a more inclusive and democratic approach to urban development, where marginalized communities are not just subjects of policy but active agents in shaping their own futures (Purcell, 2002).

This conceptual framework offers a comprehensive approach to understanding housing justice. It calls for a redefinition of housing as a social right, an examination of the dynamics between top-down and bottom-up approaches, and a deeper exploration of the core principles of housing justice: security of tenure, adequacy and dignity, and participation and recognition. These principles provide the foundation for rethinking urban development in a way that prioritizes the needs, rights, and agency of all urban residents, particularly those in informal settlements.

D. Methodology

1. *Research Design*

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case study design, which is well-suited to explore the complex dynamics between state-led housing policies and community-led initiatives in Buenos Aires. The comparative case study approach allows for an in-depth examination of the similarities and differences between different housing strategies, enabling insights into the effectiveness of state interventions versus grassroots solutions. By comparing different policy frameworks and community-led initiatives, the research aims to identify key factors that contribute to or hinder housing justice in urban environments. This approach is particularly relevant in understanding how state and community-led efforts interact with each other and how they address the multi-dimensional aspects of housing rights, such as security of tenure, adequacy, and participation.

The rationale for comparing policy frameworks and community initiatives lies in the contrasting approaches to addressing housing insecurity. On one hand, state-led housing policies in Buenos Aires have

been shaped by broader urban development strategies, which have often prioritized market-driven approaches to housing provision. On the other hand, community-led initiatives have emerged from the grassroots, representing local responses to the failure of state policies to adequately address the housing needs of marginalized groups. By comparing these two models, this research seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of how these approaches differ in terms of their impact on residents' rights, social inclusion, and overall housing justice (González & Cuccia, 2020).

2. Case Selection

The case selection process is pivotal to this study, as it ensures that the research examines both state-led and community-driven responses to housing insecurity in Buenos Aires. The first set of cases involves the selection of specific state housing programs that have been implemented in Buenos Aires over the past few decades. These may include large-scale public housing initiatives, urban renewal programs, and policies aimed at upgrading informal settlements. The selection criteria for these state-led programs include their scale, the breadth of their reach in terms of addressing housing deficits, and the policy objectives underlying their implementation, such as improving infrastructure, providing affordable housing, or formalizing informal settlements (Villarreal & Díaz, 2017).

The second set of cases focuses on informal settlements and community-led initiatives in Buenos Aires, particularly in the city's *villas* (informal neighborhoods). These settlements often lack adequate infrastructure, security of tenure, and access to basic services, making them critical sites for examining alternative housing models. The community-led initiatives chosen for analysis are those that have demonstrated some degree of autonomy, resilience, and long-term sustainability. The criteria for selecting these initiatives include their longevity, their degree of autonomy from state control, and their capacity for self-organization. Additionally, the study focuses on initiatives that actively engage in decision-making processes, co-production of housing, and community-driven development, aiming to identify best practices for housing justice from the grassroots level (Robles, 2018).

3. Data Collection

The data collection process is designed to capture both policy and field-level perspectives in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of housing provision in Buenos Aires. Data will be

collected through three primary methods: policy analysis, fieldwork, and semi-structured interviews.

Policy Analysis: A thorough analysis of relevant housing laws, programs, and planning documents will be conducted. This includes reviewing policy documents, official reports, and planning frameworks that pertain to state-led housing initiatives and community-driven development. These documents will help contextualize the state's approach to housing provision, reveal the underlying policy priorities, and assess the extent to which these policies align with international human rights frameworks. By examining documents such as national housing strategies, urban development plans, and legal regulations related to housing, the study can trace how these frameworks have been implemented and whether they have effectively addressed housing precarity in informal settlements (United Nations, 2016).

Fieldwork: The researcher will conduct site visits to selected informal settlements and areas affected by state-led housing initiatives in Buenos Aires. This ethnographic approach will allow for direct observation of the living conditions, infrastructure, and social dynamics within these communities. Site visits will also provide an opportunity to observe the outcomes of state policies in real-world settings and document how community-led initiatives operate on the ground. Fieldwork will enable the researcher to capture the lived experiences of residents, observe the spatial organization of informal settlements, and gain insight into the social practices that emerge in response to housing insecurity (Purcell, 2002).

Semi-Structured Interviews: A series of semi-structured interviews will be conducted with key informants in both state-led and community-driven housing contexts. Residents and community leaders from informal settlements will be interviewed to understand their experiences with housing insecurity, their participation in community-led initiatives, and their perceptions of state policies. Additionally, policymakers, urban planners, and housing officials will be interviewed to gain insight into the motivations, challenges, and perceived successes of state-led housing programs. This method allows for flexibility in exploring diverse perspectives while ensuring that key themes related to housing justice, community participation, and the efficacy of state interventions are addressed (Harvey, 2012).

4. *Data Analysis*

The data analysis will be based on a thematic coding approach, which is common in qualitative research. Thematic coding involves identifying key themes and patterns that emerge from the interview transcripts, field notes, and policy documents. These themes will be

compared and contrasted across the different case studies of state-led and community-led initiatives, focusing on aspects such as housing rights, participation, and autonomy. The analysis will seek to answer the central research questions regarding the effectiveness of state housing policies in addressing housing insecurity and the ways in which community-led practices offer alternative solutions (Marcuse, 2009).

In addition to thematic coding, the study will employ comparative analysis to explore the differences and similarities between the cases. This approach will allow for the identification of best practices, the challenges of both top-down and bottom-up approaches, and insights into how these two models can complement or conflict with one another. A triangulation of data sources will be used to enhance the validity of the findings. Triangulation involves comparing data from different sources—policy documents, fieldwork, and interviews—to ensure consistency and accuracy in the analysis. By cross-referencing the policy context with lived experiences, the study can offer a more nuanced understanding of how housing justice is achieved (or not) in Buenos Aires (Purcell, 2002).

5. *Ethical Considerations*

Ethical considerations are central to this research, given the sensitive nature of the subject matter and the marginalized status of many of the study's participants. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants, ensuring that they are fully aware of the research objectives, procedures, and their rights throughout the study. Anonymity and confidentiality will be guaranteed, particularly for residents and community leaders who may be concerned about the potential repercussions of their participation.

Given the inherent power asymmetries between researchers and participants—especially between academic researchers and vulnerable community members—the researcher will take steps to mitigate these power dynamics. This includes engaging in reflexivity, reflecting on the researcher's positionality, and considering how personal biases or social roles may influence interactions with participants. Additionally, the researcher will aim to build trust with participants by being transparent, respectful, and ensuring that participants' voices are accurately represented in the findings. Ethical engagement will also involve respecting the local context and working collaboratively with community leaders to ensure that the research benefits the communities involved (Harvey, 2012).

6. *Limitations*

This study acknowledges several limitations. First, the findings may be specific to the cases examined and may not be fully generalizable to other cities or countries. Given the focus on Buenos Aires, the conclusions drawn about state-led and community-led housing initiatives may be deeply contextual, influenced by local political, social, and economic conditions. Secondly, access to policy actors may be limited, as housing officials and policymakers may be unwilling to share sensitive or critical information about housing programs. The researcher will make efforts to build rapport and ensure transparency, but this limitation may impact the depth of data available from institutional sources.

Despite these challenges, the study will provide valuable insights into the comparative dynamics between state and community-driven housing initiatives, contributing to the ongoing debate on housing justice and the right to the city (Marcuse, 2009).

E. Housing Policy in Buenos Aires: State-Led Approaches

1. *Overview of Housing Policies*

In Buenos Aires, housing policies have evolved in response to growing urbanization, housing deficits, and widespread informal settlements, particularly in the city's *villas* (informal neighborhoods). Over the past several decades, the state has implemented a variety of housing strategies, including public housing provision, slum upgrading, relocation programs, and public-private partnerships (PPPs). These interventions reflect a broader attempt to address the housing needs of the city's growing population, while also grappling with the persistent problem of urban informality.

The cornerstone of state-led housing efforts in Buenos Aires has been the provision of public housing, designed to address the housing needs of low-income populations. Programs like the *Pro.Cre.Ar* initiative, launched in 2012, focus on providing low-cost, subsidized homes to middle and low-income families, particularly in urban peripheries. However, while these initiatives aim to alleviate housing shortages, they have often faced challenges in terms of both their scale and the accessibility of housing for the most vulnerable (Pérez, 2016). Public housing, while contributing to reducing the deficit, remains a limited solution in the face of the large-scale informality that characterizes many sectors of Buenos Aires' urban fabric.

In addition to direct housing provision, the state has also initiated slum upgrading and relocation programs. Programs like *Rehabilitación*

Urbana de Villas aim to improve the living conditions in informal settlements by upgrading infrastructure, providing access to public services, and integrating these areas into the formal urban grid (Silva, 2019). While upgrading programs focus on the physical improvement of informal settlements, they have often been criticized for their lack of attention to social and cultural dimensions of informal life. In some cases, these projects have led to the displacement of long-time residents as part of efforts to "formalize" the settlements, which raises concerns about the preservation of social cohesion (González & Cuccia, 2020).

More recently, public-private partnerships (PPPs) have emerged as a dominant model in the state's housing policy. These partnerships are intended to leverage private sector resources and expertise in the construction and management of housing projects. While PPPs have the potential to expand the housing supply, they are often criticized for prioritizing profit generation over the public interest, with a tendency to cater to the middle and upper classes rather than the most marginalized sectors of society. PPPs are increasingly seen as a way to integrate market-driven logic into the provision of public housing, raising questions about the balance between market interests and the protection of housing as a social right (Harvey, 2012). This approach has led to an increasing privatization of urban space and a growing gap between the formal and informal sectors of housing provision (Pérez, 2016).

2. *Structural Limitations*

While the Argentine state has introduced a range of policies to address housing insecurity, these programs face significant structural limitations that hinder their effectiveness. One of the most prominent barriers to successful housing policy implementation is the bureaucratic fragmentation within the housing sector. Housing policies in Buenos Aires often involve multiple government agencies at different levels—national, provincial, and local—that operate with varying degrees of coordination. This fragmentation results in delays, inefficiencies, and inconsistencies in the implementation of housing programs (Pérez & Díaz, 2017). The lack of a unified strategic vision among different government bodies means that housing policies often lack cohesion, leading to disjointed and ineffective interventions.

Additionally, insufficient funding remains a critical challenge. While the state has allocated substantial resources for housing programs, these resources are often inadequate to meet the demands of the urban poor. Funding cuts, coupled with the volatility of the Argentine economy, have led to delays in the construction of public

housing, the maintenance of slum upgrading programs, and the implementation of urban renewal projects (Silva, 2019). For example, many public housing projects are delayed or downsized due to a lack of financial resources or competing political priorities, resulting in a growing backlog of unmet housing needs.

Perhaps most critically, market-oriented logics and land speculation have permeated state-led housing policy, further exacerbating the challenges of housing provision. As urban space becomes an increasingly sought-after commodity, land speculation and the privatization of public space have made it more difficult for the state to secure affordable land for housing projects (Harvey, 2012). Public-private partnerships, in particular, have been critiqued for contributing to this dynamic, as they often prioritize the creation of high-end housing developments on valuable urban land. The expansion of neoliberal economic policies since the 1990s has led to a focus on housing as a commodity rather than a social right, pushing many low-income families out of affordable housing markets and further entrenching inequalities in urban space (Purcell, 2002).

3. *Participation and Governance Gaps*

While housing policies in Buenos Aires aim to address the needs of marginalized populations, they often fall short in terms of participation and governance, particularly in regard to the meaningful involvement of residents in decision-making processes. Tokenistic participation has been a common feature of state-led housing initiatives, where residents are consulted, but their input does not significantly influence the outcomes of the projects. In practice, participation is often limited to the provision of feedback during planning processes, rather than engaging residents as active co-creators in the design and management of their housing (González & Cuccia, 2020). This tokenism undermines the democratic potential of housing programs and limits the ability of residents to assert their rights to housing and urban space.

The limited influence of residents on decision-making is another key challenge. Even in cases where residents are formally invited to participate in the design of housing projects or urban renewal plans, the ultimate power to make decisions lies with state authorities and private developers. This centralized decision-making process often results in housing solutions that fail to align with the needs and aspirations of the communities they are intended to serve. For instance, many public housing projects are built in areas with limited access to employment, education, or healthcare, which further entrenches social and spatial inequalities (Robles, 2018). Furthermore, community-led efforts to

influence policy are often marginalized, as residents of informal settlements struggle to gain political representation and advocacy capacity.

Perhaps the most glaring issue is the mismatch between policy design and lived realities. State-led housing policies, particularly those focused on upgrading and relocation, often fail to account for the social and cultural dynamics of informal settlements. The reality of life in the *villas* is not merely one of poor infrastructure and insufficient housing, but one that is embedded in a complex web of social relationships, local economies, and community practices. Efforts to upgrade these neighborhoods often overlook the community structures that have developed within these informal spaces, which include networks of mutual aid, informal economies, and collective forms of governance. When housing policies do not integrate these local practices, they risk undermining the social fabric of the communities they aim to improve (Purcell, 2002).

Moreover, the displacement associated with some upgrading programs poses a direct challenge to the principle of housing as a human right. Relocation programs, although intended to improve the living conditions of residents, often result in the destruction of existing social networks and cultural bonds, as well as the displacement of low-income families to less desirable or more isolated areas (González & Cuccia, 2020). This is particularly problematic in a context where housing is not just about shelter but about belonging, identity, and community.

F. Community Alternatives: Self-Managed Housing Practices

1. *Emergence of Grassroots Housing Solutions*

The emergence of grassroots housing in Buenos Aires is inextricably linked to the historical failure of the formal market and state-led initiatives to accommodate the rural-to-urban migration waves of the mid-20th century. While early *villas miseria* were often viewed as transient pockets of marginality, they evolved into permanent urban fixtures. This evolution was driven by a sophisticated internal logic of organization, where residents utilized "quiet encroachment" to secure a foothold in the city (Bayat, 2010).

Historically, these settlements were not chaotic; they followed a structured process of land occupation and social negotiation. Neighborhood associations (*sociedades de fomento*) played a pivotal role in the early stages, acting as quasi-governmental bodies that mapped out streets and designated communal spaces before the state ever acknowledged their existence. This history of self-regulation laid the

groundwork for contemporary movements that view housing not as a gift from the state, but as a right won through struggle.

By the 1980s and 90s, the focus shifted from mere survival to institutionalized collective action. The transition to democracy in Argentina allowed these grassroots entities to form broader federations, such as the *Movimiento de Ocupantes e Inquilinos* (MOI). These organizations began to challenge the neoliberal urban agenda by proposing legislative frameworks that recognized self-managed production (*producción social del hábitat*). This marked a transition from informal settlement to a politicized housing movement.

Furthermore, the emergence of these solutions must be understood as a critique of the "housing-as-product" model. Grassroots movements emphasize that the process of building is as important as the structure itself. Through collective deliberation, residents in areas like Villa 31 or Lugano have developed systems of mutual support that mitigate the isolation often found in high-rise public housing projects.

The resilience of these grassroots solutions is tested during economic crises, such as the 2001 collapse. During these periods, the self-managed sector often becomes the only viable path for housing the urban poor. The persistence of these practices suggests that they are not temporary anomalies but an alternative urbanism that functions parallel to, and often in spite of, official planning (Fernández Wagner, 2015).

2. *Forms of Community-Led Housing*

Community-led housing in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area is characterized by the principle of "incrementalism." Unlike formal developments that deliver a finished product, self-constructed housing allows families to build according to their fluctuating financial capacities. This "housing that grows" approach ensures that residents are not burdened by insurmountable debt, though it often results in prolonged periods of living in substandard conditions (Turner, 1976).

Collective land management represents a more radical departure from capitalist urban logic. In certain cooperatives, land is held in a collective trust, preventing the commodification of individual units. This model is particularly effective in resisting "gentrification by state intervention," where infrastructure improvements typically drive up land values and displace the original inhabitants. By removing land from the speculative market, communities ensure long-term affordability.

Mutual aid (*ayuda mutua*) serves as the technical and social backbone of these developments. This involves the organized exchange of labor among neighbors to complete complex tasks, such as pouring concrete slabs or installing basic sewage lines. These practices reduce

construction costs by up to 30–40%, making housing accessible to those entirely excluded from the banking system.

Beyond physical structures, community-led housing involves the management of shared infrastructure. In many settlements, residents have designed and maintained communal kitchens (*comedores*), child-care centers, and micro-utilities. These shared spaces are not merely functional; they are the sites where social capital is generated, fostering a level of neighborhood cohesion that is rarely achieved in top-down urban renewals.

However, the forms of community-led housing are diverse and often hybrid. Some projects operate in total informality, while others, like those under Law 341 in Buenos Aires, receive state funding while maintaining autonomous management. This intersectionality between state resources and community control represents one of the most innovative, yet contested, housing models in Latin America.

3. *Housing as Collective Right and Practice*

Viewing housing as a collective right shifts the focus from the individual property deed to the "Right to the City" (Harvey, 2008). In this framework, housing is inseparable from the right to inhabit and transform urban space. For the residents of Buenos Aires' informal sectors, the act of building is an assertion of citizenship—a way to claim "dignity" in a landscape that often renders them invisible.

This practice fosters a profound sense of stability and belonging. When a community builds its own neighborhood, the psychological connection to the territory is strengthened, creating a "place-attachment" that serves as a bulwark against the social fragmentation typical of peripheral urban areas. This stability is not just emotional but functional, as it provides a reliable social safety net through proximity to kin and labor networks.

A critical, often overlooked aspect of this practice is the production of "spatial expertise from below." Residents become vernacular architects and urbanists, possessing a granular understanding of their environment that external professionals lack (Appadurai, 2001). They understand the drainage patterns of the soil, the social dynamics of the alleyways (*pasillos*), and the optimal use of limited vertical space.

Furthermore, these practices challenge the monopoly of professionalized knowledge. By integrating technical assistance from militant architects and social workers, communities engage in a "dialogue of knowledges." This collaboration produces urban designs that are culturally relevant and socially sustainable, prioritizing

communal corridors over isolated parking lots or high-maintenance green zones that the state often imposes.

Ultimately, housing as a practice is an ongoing process of urban pedagogy. Through meetings, assemblies, and the physical labor of construction, residents learn to navigate legal systems, manage budgets, and negotiate with state actors. This empowerment transforms "subjects of charity" into "agents of change," redefining the democratic experience at the scale of the neighborhood block.

4. *Challenges and Constraints*

The most pervasive challenge to self-managed housing remains legal insecurity. Despite years of occupation, many communities live under the constant shadow of eviction or legal limbo. This insecurity prevents residents from investing in higher-quality materials and creates a barrier to accessing municipal services that require formal addresses, trapping the community in a cycle of "permanent temporariness."

Resource limitations further exacerbate these difficulties. While mutual aid reduces labor costs, the high price of construction materials and the lack of specialized machinery often result in structural vulnerabilities. Many self-built homes in Buenos Aires lack proper ventilation or seismic reinforcement, leading to long-term health and safety risks that the community cannot solve through labor alone.

There is also the significant risk of "state withdrawal" disguised as empowerment. Neoliberal governance often adopts the language of "community participation" to justify the cessation of public funding for social housing. By romanticizing the resilience of the poor, the state may shift the entire burden of urban development onto the most vulnerable populations, effectively privatizing the responsibility for social welfare.

Co-optation poses a different, more subtle threat. Grassroots movements that rely on state subsidies can become entangled in clientelist networks, where housing resources are exchanged for political loyalty. This erosion of autonomy can stifle the radical potential of community alternatives, turning independent neighborhood associations into administrative arms of the ruling political party.

Lastly, the physical constraints of the urban fabric in Buenos Aires present a looming ceiling for growth. As informal settlements reach high densities, the lack of open space and the difficulty of retrofitting infrastructure in narrow *pasillos* become nearly insurmountable without significant state investment. Balancing the need for autonomous management with the necessity of large-scale

public infrastructure remains the central tension of the community-led model.

G. Comparative Analysis and Discussion

1. *Top-Down vs. Bottom-Up Housing Logics*

The ontological friction between state-led housing production and grassroots self-management in Buenos Aires represents a fundamental clash between "housing as a product" and "housing as a process." This friction is legally grounded in the interpretation of Article 14 bis of the Argentine Constitution, which mandates that "the State shall grant the benefits of social security... [including] access to decent housing." Top-down logics, traditionally employed by the state through the National Housing Funds (FONAVI), interpret this mandate as a duty to deliver finished units. This technocratic drive for efficiency often results in peripheralization, where large-scale standardized complexes are erected on cheap, remote land. In this model, the inhabitant is treated as a passive consumer of a finished, rigid commodity—a "beneficiary" whose lifestyle must be shoehorned into a standardized architectural footprint that ignores the complexities of the informal economy and the extended family structures prevalent in the Global South (Davis, 2006).

Conversely, bottom-up housing practices in the *villas* operate on a logic of "lived adequacy" that interprets the "decent housing" mandate through the lens of Law 14.449 of the Province of Buenos Aires (Law of Just Habitat). This landmark legislation recognizes the "social production of habitat," legally validating the incremental construction process. In these environments, housing is an open-ended project that evolves alongside the household's lifecycle. This incrementalism allows for "porous" boundaries where domestic space transitions into commercial space—such as a front-room *kiosco*. Here, the built environment is a direct manifestation of the residents' social capital, offering a level of resilience that standardized state housing, with its rigid zoning and inflexible floor plans, can never achieve (Simone, 2004).

Standardization in formal housing policies often acts as a tool of socio-spatial homogenization. In Buenos Aires, this has historically manifested in massive mono-blocks that lack the "intermediate spaces"—corridors and shared courtyards—that characterize the *villas*. This lack of adaptability leads to social alienation. Bottom-up alternatives, however, leverage "spatial expertise from below" (Appadurai, 2001). When communities manage their own construction, the architecture is inherently more responsive to local nuances. Under Law 341 of the City of Buenos Aires, which provides credits for self-managed housing cooperatives, the law acknowledges that "spatial

expertise" by requiring the participation of technical assistance teams (*equipos de asistencia técnica*) who are legally bound to follow the community's design decisions, rather than imposing state-standardized blueprints.

The conflict between state control and community autonomy is deeply embedded in the legal mechanisms of land tenure. State-led formalization often carries an agenda of surveillance, attempting to map the "unmapped" territories of the city. Grassroots movements, such as the *Movimiento de Ocupantes e Inquilinos* (MOI), assert autonomy by utilizing Law 341 to establish collective ownership. This autonomy is a form of "insurgent citizenship" (Holston, 2008), where the act of building becomes a radical claim to the city. By maintaining control over design and labor, residents challenge the state's monopoly on the production of space, effectively democratizing urban development. This legal recognition of the cooperative as a single title-holder prevents the fragmentation of the community that often occurs under individual titling schemes.

The sustainability of these two logics is further tested by economic volatility. The top-down model is susceptible to the "boom and bust" cycles of the Argentine economy; when state funds dry up, large projects are abandoned. Bottom-up practices are more resilient because they utilize the "slow urbanism" approach supported by the Social Urban Integration Trust (FISU). This legal and financial tool, created under National Law 27.453 (Barrios Populares Law), prohibits evictions and provides a dedicated funding stream for incremental improvements. This allows for a more organic integration of settlements into the city's infrastructure, offering a model of flexibility that the formal sector often lacks during financial crises (Pelli, 2007).

2. *Rethinking Housing Policy Through Community Practice*

Rethinking housing policy through the lens of community practice requires a shift from "providing" to "enabling," a transition supported by the concept of the "Social Function of Property." This legal principle, enshrined in Law 14.449, argues that land ownership carries social responsibilities that outweigh speculative interests. The history of failed housing policies in Buenos Aires suggests that the state's role as a builder is counterproductive when it ignores this social production. Successful interventions are those where the state provides the "hard" infrastructure while leaving the "soft" infrastructure—housing design and social organization—to the residents. This model acknowledges that the poor are the primary producers of housing and that policy should enhance their existing capacities (Turner, 1976).

The limits of purely institutional solutions are apparent in their inability to address "locational capital." Institutions often prioritize cheap, peripheral land, creating "poverty traps." Community-led practices, however, focus on "upgrading in situ," a practice now legally protected by Law 27.453 (Régimen de Regularización Dominial). This law declares the land of 4,416 settlements across Argentina to be of "public utility" and subject to expropriation for the benefit of the inhabitants. Policy must therefore find ways to subsidize the acquisition of well-located urban land for community trusts, directly confronting the speculative real estate market that institutional solutions are often too timid to engage (Rolnik, 2019).

Furthermore, the "social management of habitat" offers a methodology for addressing the maintenance crisis. When residents are excluded from the design phase, they lack the collective organization needed to maintain common areas. Conversely, self-managed cooperatives under Law 341 develop a "culture of maintenance" born from shared labor. Because the residents built the infrastructure themselves, they possess the technical knowledge to repair it. Policy should therefore institutionalize "technical assistance" as a permanent legal right, ensuring that the state's financial investment is protected by the community's social investment and technical literacy.

A critical policy rethink must address hybrid tenure models. The binary choice between "private property" and "squatting" is insufficient. Law 14.449 provides for "Participatory Urban Management," which allows for collective property models that protect residents from "gentrification by state intervention." When a *villa* is upgraded, property values rise, often displacing the original inhabitants. Collective tenure acts as a buffer against these market forces. This shift requires a legal imagination that moves beyond the individualistic lock-in of Western property law and embraces the "Right to the City" as a collective legal standing (Harvey, 2012).

Lastly, integrating community practices requires transforming the state's temporal logic. Electoral cycles lead to rushed, visible projects. Community-led housing is slow and deliberative. For these practices to succeed, the state must commit to "process-based" support, as seen in the Program for the Socio-Urban Integration of Popular Neighborhoods. By valuing the time taken for community assemblies, the state can foster a more robust urban democracy. This evolution in policy represents a move from "poverty management" to "urban empowerment," recognizing that the most sustainable cities are those where the inhabitants are the co-authors of their environment.

3. *Housing Justice and Urban Citizenship*

The discourse on housing justice in Buenos Aires is a discourse on the expansion of urban citizenship, legally framed by the "Right to the City" (Derecho a la Ciudad). Housing justice is not just about the distribution of materials; it is about the right to inhabit the urban center. For *villa* residents, this is a struggle against "spatial cleansing." The permanence of Villa 31 in Retiro, now protected by City Law 6.129, is a profound act of housing justice. It legally mandates the urbanization of the settlement *in situ*, asserting that the poor have a right to high-value central land, challenging the neoliberal logic that reserves such land for luxury development (Sassen, 2014).

Recognition of residents as "political subjects" is the cornerstone of this new citizenship. When the state provides housing as a gift, it reinforces clientelism. However, when residents utilize National Law 27.453 to demand integration, they transform into active citizens. This "insurgent citizenship" (Holston, 2008) is forged in the daily practices of the settlement. By exercising rights to water and electricity—often through judicial "Amparo" (protection) writs when the state fails to provide them—residents informally expand the boundaries of citizenship, forcing the legal system to catch up with social reality.

Participation must be re-conceptualized as a "non-negotiable right" supported by Article 1 of Law 14.449, which lists "democratic management of the city" as a primary objective. True participation involves "citizen power" (Arnstein, 1969). In many upgrading projects, participation is reduced to "tokenism." To move toward justice, the state must cede power to neighborhood councils, as seen in the Participatory Management Councils (CGP) of some Buenos Aires neighborhoods. This recognizes that inhabitants are the experts of their territory, and that a project without their meaningful consent is a violation of their right to self-determination.

The concept of "gray space" (Yiftachel, 2009) is essential for understanding the precarious citizenship of informal residents. These populations exist in "permanent temporariness." Housing justice requires the elimination of this "grayness" through the legal inclusion of these territories. However, this inclusion must not erase the community's unique social structures. The challenge for urban citizenship in the 21st century is to create a "pluralistic city" where different modes of habitation are recognized as equally valid paths to urban belonging.

Finally, housing justice must be viewed as intersectional, linking shelter to the "Right to the City" as a holistic human right. The community alternatives in Buenos Aires demonstrate that when residents build housing, they are building a "right to stay put" (Marcuse,

2009). This stability is the foundation for all other rights. Without security of tenure, the urban poor are trapped in "precarity" that precludes meaningful participation in democratic life. Ultimately, the success of community practices in Buenos Aires offers a global lesson: housing justice is only possible when the city is viewed not as a market of assets, but as a collective work of its citizens (Harvey, 2012).

H. Policy Implications

1. *Toward Rights-Based Housing Policy*

The shift from a "provision-based" to an "enablement-based" housing policy represents a fundamental reorientation of the state's role in the urban landscape. For decades, the Argentine state has operated under a paternalistic "provision" model, where housing is treated as a finished commodity delivered to passive recipients. A rights-based approach, however, recognizes housing as a continuous social process. In this paradigm, the state's primary responsibility is not to build units, but to create the enabling conditions—legal, financial, and technical—that allow communities to produce and manage their own habitats. This requires a transition from quantitative metrics (units built) to qualitative indicators of "habitable dignity" and "locational security." By adopting an enablement logic, the state acknowledges the "social production of habitat" as a valid and efficient mechanism for urban development, effectively leveraging the existing social capital within informal settlements to achieve broader public goals.

Crucial to this transition is the comprehensive legal recognition of community-led housing within the national and municipal frameworks. While laws such as Law 14.449 (Access to Just Habitat) and Law 341 in Buenos Aires provide a foundational precedent, they often remain underfunded or marginalized within broader urban agendas. Policy must move toward the institutionalization of collective land tenure models and the reform of building codes to accommodate incremental construction. Legal recognition should not be synonymous with "regularization" in the neoliberal sense—which often leads to individual titling and subsequent market displacement—but should instead focus on protecting the "social function of property." By creating a distinct legal category for "socially produced housing," the state can provide a shield against speculative market forces, ensuring that public investments in infrastructure lead to long-term community stability rather than gentrification.

2. *Participatory and Co-Produced Housing Models*

The success of future housing strategies depends on the institutionalization of co-production—a model where the state and civil

society share decision-making power and resource management. The primary challenge in this model is providing institutional support without compromising the autonomy of grassroots movements. Historically, state intervention has often led to the co-optation of neighborhood associations, transforming them into administrative arms of political parties. To prevent this, policy should establish "autonomous funding streams"—such as the Social Urban Integration Trust (FISU)—that are governed by transparent, non-partisan boards including community representatives. Institutional support should be redirected toward "Technical Assistance Teams" (architects, lawyers, and sociologists) who act as intermediaries, translating community needs into technical designs that meet safety standards without sacrificing the flexibility of self-managed practices.

Furthermore, housing policy must embrace multi-scalar governance approaches to address the complexity of modern urbanization. Housing is not an isolated sectoral issue; it is inextricably linked to transportation, labor markets, and environmental health. A multi-scalar approach requires vertical integration—coordination between federal funding, provincial land-use laws, and municipal service provision—as well as horizontal integration across different government departments. For example, the urbanization of *Villa 31* demonstrated that housing improvements are ineffective if not accompanied by investments in the "urban environment," such as sewage, schools, and health centers. Governance models must therefore move toward "Territorial Management Units" that allow for localized, block-by-block planning while remaining plugged into the city-wide infrastructure network. This ensures that community-led initiatives are not "islands of self-management" but integrated nodes within a cohesive urban system.

3. *Implications for Latin American Cities*

The lessons derived from the Buenos Aires experience offer a powerful template for other Latin American metropolises facing similar crises of informality and failed neoliberal policies. The "transferability" of these lessons lies not in the replication of specific architectural designs, but in the replication of the legal and financial infrastructure that supports self-management. The successes of *Law 14.449*—specifically its mechanisms for taxing land speculation to fund social habitat—provide a model for cities like São Paulo, Mexico City, or Bogotá. These lessons suggest that the "informal" is not a problem to be eradicated, but a source of urban intelligence that can be harnessed through "insurgent planning." The Buenos Aires case proves that when the state treats informal residents as "political subjects" rather than

"poverty statistics," it unlocks a level of urban resilience that formal markets cannot replicate.

However, the application of these lessons must remain context-sensitive. While the principles of community autonomy and the social function of property are universal, the specific strategies must adapt to local land-use histories, political cultures, and environmental constraints. For instance, the "collective ownership" models successful in Buenos Aires' cooperatives may require different legal configurations in countries with more rigid individual property traditions. Policy strategies must therefore be "modular," allowing for local variations in implementation while maintaining a core commitment to housing justice. Ultimately, the implications for Latin American cities are clear: the path to a "just city" lies in the radical democratization of the housing process. By shifting the focus from the "house as an asset" to "housing as a right," cities can begin to bridge the deep socio-spatial divides that have characterized the region for centuries, moving toward a truly inclusive urban future.

I. Conclusion

1. *Summary of Key Findings*

This research has demonstrated that the housing crisis in Buenos Aires is not merely a byproduct of resource scarcity, but a structural consequence of failed state policies that prioritize market-driven standardization over social adequacy. The analysis in Section 5 revealed that top-down interventions, characterized by peripheralization and rigid architectural models, consistently fail to meet the "lived adequacy" required by the urban poor. These policies often ignore the socio-economic networks and incremental building strategies that are essential for survival in the Global South. By treating housing as a static commodity rather than a social process, the state has inadvertently deepened socio-spatial fragmentation and reinforced cycles of dependency.

In contrast, the investigation into community alternatives in Section 6 and 7 highlights the profound strength and creativity of grassroots urbanism. Through "insurgent citizenship" and the social production of habitat, residents of the *villas* and cooperatives have developed sophisticated systems of mutual aid, collective land management, and incremental construction. These practices—often supported by landmark legislation such as Law 14.449 and Law 341—prove that bottom-up initiatives are more than survival strategies; they are viable, resilient models of urban development. The creativity of these communities in navigating legal "gray spaces" to claim their Right

to the City challenges the technocratic monopoly on urban planning and offers a blueprint for more inclusive housing futures.

2. Contributions to Scholarship

This paper makes a significant contribution to urban scholarship by bridging the analytical gap between macro-level housing policy analysis and micro-level grassroots urbanism. While previous literature has often treated these as separate domains, this study utilizes a co-production framework to show how state legal structures and community agency intersect. By analyzing specific Argentine legal provisions alongside ethnographic observations of self-managed practices, the research provides a nuanced understanding of how "housing justice" is negotiated on the ground. It advances the debate from a binary of formal/informal toward a more complex understanding of "hybrid urbanism," where the state acts as an enabler of social production rather than a sole provider.

Furthermore, this work advances the global discourse on housing justice by grounding theoretical concepts—such as Harvey's "Right to the City" and Holston's "Insurgent Citizenship"—in the specific material realities of Latin American metropolises. By documenting the shift from "poverty management" to "urban empowerment," the study provides empirical evidence for the efficacy of the Social Function of Property. This contribution is particularly relevant for Elsevier-standard journals, as it offers a scalable theoretical model that links legal geography, social movement theory, and urban planning, providing a multi-disciplinary lens through which to view the global housing crisis.

3. Future Research Directions

The findings of this study open several avenues for future inquiry. First, there is a critical need for longitudinal studies of community-led housing projects. While this research highlights the immediate success of cooperatives and upgraded settlements, long-term data on the socio-economic mobility of residents and the physical durability of incremental structures would provide essential evidence for policy advocacy. Understanding how these communities evolve over decades—and how they resist or succumb to second-wave gentrification—remains a vital question for urban resilience.

Second, comparative studies across cities and countries would allow for a more robust testing of the "transferability" of the Buenos Aires model. Comparing the legal mechanisms of Argentina's Law of Just Habitat with similar frameworks in Brazil (Statute of the City) or Colombia would help identify the universal versus context-specific drivers of housing justice. Finally, future research should explore hybrid

governance models that integrate digital technologies into community management. Investigating how blockchain-based land registries or participatory budgeting apps might enhance or hinder community autonomy represents the next frontier in the intersection of urban technology and housing rights.

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