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Forum Edited by Aya Alphs
This article examines the first urban plan in Argentina to address informal settlements. It will be argued that this plan served as a template for later proposals and encouraged a particular approach towards the informal city that is still present in contemporary debates. The plan is composed of two complementary documents, the Plan de Emergencia (PE) and the Plan Integral (PI), which translate quite literally as ‘Emergency Plan’ and ‘Integral Plan’, respectively. The plans embody the process in which existing ideas were recast and new proposals were tested. The PE was in charge of proposing short-term actions, and led to the construction of the social housing neighbourhoods analysed in this paper, while the PI dealt with urban planning and housing in the long-term. Neither of these plans have been discussed at length because they were conceived between 1955 and 1958—an interval that is typically considered transitional and studied only as part of longer spans of time. However, it is precisely the transitional quality of the 1955-1958 juncture that makes it such a rich and exciting moment in the urban history of Buenos Aires. Interestingly, the limited scholarship that does exist only addresses the PE while the PI remains overlooked. This paper will concentrate on the way these plans have influenced and continue to influence approaches to informal settlements in Buenos Aires.

Urban Transformations in Mid-Twentieth Century Buenos Aires

The PE was issued in Argentina in 1956 under the newly formed military government known as the ‘Revolución Libertadora’ (RL). This administration came to power as the result of a coup d’état that ousted the elected president, Juan Domingo Perón. Although the RL presented itself as a transitional administration, it had ambitious aims to transform the political scene of the Peronist era. A wide spectrum of political actors ranging from socialists to conservatives and liberals supported the RL. One of the few points they agreed upon was clearing what they viewed as problems left by Perón. Amongst these problems were the informal settlements or villas. In order to understand the historical significance of the policies that aimed to eradicate informal settlements, one must first understand why and how these settlements emerged.

Figure 1. Author’s visualisation of the Plan de Emergencia. Survey report and plots proposed for the neighbourhoods are marked over portions of maps from 1906 and 1956. Underlay: Instituto Geográfico Nacional.
The idea of Buenos Aires as urban stage for social and political transformation was central to Perón’s rise to power and subsequent double term in office. Under the previous conservative governments, the city centre had been implicitly reserved for the upper and middle classes. Perón’s encouragement of unionisation and mass street demonstration, however, led to the arrival of the working classes to political life. The pro-Perón demonstration of 17 October 1945, overfilling the Plaza de Mayo, embodied this idea: literally through their physical presence in the city centre and symbolically through their claim for a leader whose policies benefited them. Many scholars have commented on this new political characterisation of urban space. By the end of Perón’s governance in 1955, the city had become a potent symbol of social and political order.

The emergence of the informal settlements in Buenos Aires gave a new dimension to what the middle and upper classes already perceived as an invasion of the city. Although several shanties existed in the city before the government of Perón, it was during the 1940s that one might consider them as having acquired social and urban relevance. ‘Informal settlements’ in this context were neighbourhoods composed of houses built by their own dwellers, often with re-used materials, on undeveloped land they did not own.

During the 1940s, Perón fostered the development of light industry, which ultimately led to extensive rural-urban migrations. Many migrants who could not afford central accommodation chose to temporarily settle in the large plots of flood-prone land along the river Riachuelo, close to the city centre and several factories. Thus, the emergence of the villas in this context does not necessarily imply an impoverished population. Most migrants actually considered their new homes to be an improvement of their standard of living. They were, however, expecting to find other accommodation quickly since employment was abundant and since Perón had initiated social housing programmes. With the RL and over time, however, welfare programmes were suspended and real wages fell. As a consequence, the settlements became permanent and grew ever larger.

The Conceptions of the Plan

The PE did not explicitly state the reasons why the settlements were undesired portions of the city, but rather assumed the readers would share this sentiment. Both the PE and PI show that eradicating the settlements and moving their residents to purpose-built social housing were seen as natural responses. The text repeatedly uses the term ‘moral’ to explain why the villas should be removed from the city, but the scope of this term is never made clear. In principle, the residents are called ‘immoral’ for living in the villas, and the very existence of the settlements is addressed as a ‘moral’ problem. But did ‘immoral’ refer to political unrest as in the discussions about slums in the first decades of the century? Did it mean lack of working habits, as was asserted throughout the PE? Or was it related to sexual promiscuity and subversion of Catholic or traditional values? Although it is not well defined, it is possible to see the term ‘morality’ as a reference to general working and spending habits and to the lack of intimacy brought by overcrowding.

The following quote taken from the PE helps to illustrate this idea:

“Coming from poor areas, without resources and without working habits, [the residents] have been attracted to the big city in search of economic betterments and the indulgences of urban life. But the social environment of the Villas Miseria, in which they have gathered by force of circumstance and for the lack of both incentives of their own and social help, contributes to worsening their natural tendencies and transforming these slums into...”
While it was clear that families in the villas lived in overcrowded and tiny spaces, this was arguably as a matter of necessity rather than choice. The few surveys of the villas taken at this time all concur on this point. On the other hand, the conception of the settlers as indolent, lazy people who lived in these conditions because they were not interested in improving their environment is by no means supported by empirical data. Even the survey undertaken and published by the PE reported that there was a 99% employment rate in these areas. The residents of many of these villas had even formed informal neighbourhood improvement committees. Therefore, it is possible to argue that the reasons the authors of the plan rejected self-help for the improvement of their built environment. This shift shows the rapid growth in the population of the communities. This was tactic used to limit further increase of migrants and workers within the city as described earlier, the word ‘moral’ might have also implied concerns about class. Such an argument can be supported by its use in relation to the claim that residents of the settlements would lack a good work ethic because they were uneducated.

Interestingly, these aspects were only included in the PE, and not in the PI. Even though it was published only a year after the PE, the PI seems to have challenged the whole idea of relocating the residents of the settlements. Additionally, it briefly suggested alternative proposals such as cooperating with the residents, providing services to their communities and promoting self-help for the improvement of their built environment. Shift shows the rapid upgrade that the writing commission made between the publications of the PE and the PI in order to be up-to-date with the international debates that addressed these concerns. However, because the PE was the document that directly dealt with the villas, its ideology was implicitly understood as the standard approach. Additionally, given the attitudes of the upper and middle classes towards the increasing presence of migrants and workers, its ideology was the one that prevailed for the construction of the neighbourhoods.

The plan of eradication proposed by the PE was in line with its assessment of the residents of the villas. Following the idea that the residents were responsible for their defective dwelling conditions, the plan concluded that they had to be ‘re-educated’, and proposed to design the new neighbourhoods as a means of reaching this aim. In a similar manner, the plan would only offer accommodation to nuclear families, despite the fact that the survey found a wide variety of household sizes and types. The problem is thus reduced to two situations: couples with children of both genders and couples with children of only one gender. By making relocation compulsory and offering houses that were designed with the idea of a nuclear family in mind, the PE discouraged residents from living with their extended families. This was tactic used to limit further growth in the population of the communities.

The complexes were conceived as educational apparatuses, complete with communal centres and ‘adaptation dwellings’. The three different housing typologies that existed for these dwellings were repeated to form the layout for the neighbourhoods, and embodied what the PE considered to be its civilising mission. The houses, for example, were designed to have fixed furniture built with concrete and metal framing—facilities for extensions were not provided. This reinforced the idea that the house was not meant to be inhabited by more people than it was designed for. The family was therefore expected to get used to a specific way of living within the rigidity of the fixed furniture and design. The houses were also to be left unfinished so that the residents could learn a new trade and become aware of the real value of property. However, quite confusingly, the plan made no provision for building training in the new neighbourhoods. These measures seem to contradict the results of their survey, which suggested that twenty percent of the residents worked in formal construction and that almost all settlers had already built their houses by themselves. They had thus already acquired some knowledge that spontaneous construction could provide.

Figure 4 . The three housing typologies proposed by the Plan de Emergencia.

Figure 5 . Barrio Mitre under construction (one of the neighbourhoods built through the Plan de Emergencia).
Perspectives throughout the Twentieth Century

Though the idea of eradicating the informal settlements persisted through the twentieth century, other perspectives were tried and tested. There were attempts to shift the focus towards integration and participation with an emphasis on understanding the rights and the needs of the inhabitants of the villas. Although an analysis of later plans is well beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note that later governments during the 1960s and 1970s implemented plans of eradication larger in scale than those of the PE. The Plan de Erradicación de Villas Miseria (1968), put into practice under the de facto government of Juan Carlos Onganía, for example, proposed extensive removals of villas and high-density blocks to rehouse the ‘eradicated’ inhabitants. The ambitious programme of eradication implemented by the de facto government of Jorge Rafael Videla later proceeded to demolish settlements without offering alternative accommodation to the people who lived in them. The increasing violence used to put these initiatives into practice was in the socio-political context of alarming State terrorism. Residents who refused to leave the settlements, for example, were subject of repression, kidnap and torture.\(^{12}\)

Amongst the alternative perspectives to eradication during this period we must highlight the idea of radicación, i.e., providing services to the informal settlements so their inhabitants can stay and live in better conditions, often in collaboration with the residents. Presidents such as Arturo Frondizi Ercoli (1958-1962) and Arturo Umberto Illia (1963–1966), for example, opened the dialogue with the residents, though the ideas of radicación still overlapped with notions of eradication. The programme of relocation of the inhabitants of the Villa 7, under the government of Juan Domingo Perón (1973-1974), is a well-known example of effective collaboration between residents, architects and the local agency in charge. During the government of Raúl Alfonsín (1983-1989), the national government reconstituted social housing damaged by the last dictatorship as part of a larger programme of social housing. As noted earlier, the ideas of provision of services and collaboration had been advanced by the PI in the late 1950s, and continued to be embedded in a larger debate about self-construction and informal urbanisation sustained throughout the Americas during those decades.

Following the idea that the residents were responsible for their defective dwelling conditions, the plan concluded that they had to be ‘re-educated’, and proposed to design the new neighbourhoods as a means of reaching this aim.

Housing shortage and informal housing are still central issues in the national and local politics of Argentina today. Between July and August of last year, at least sixty-three articles related to this topic were published in the Argentine newspapers Página 12 and Clarín. Many articles about the civil invasion of land report protests over the lack of accommodation alternatives and the unfulfilled housing programmes promised by various administrations. Most articles dealing with informal settlements report improvements such as the provision of services or regularisation of tenure. Occasionally, however, programmes that intended to relocate the villas were attempted. The current mayor of Buenos Aires, for example, claims to be ‘urbanising’ the settlement AU3, when in actual terms his plan involves the removal of the shanties, the eviction of the inhabitants and the reuse of these plots for middle-class housing.\(^{14}\) The profits made through middle-class housing are expected to fund the accommodation that would then be offered to the evicted inhabitants of the villas. Although this programme is presented as something that benefits the residents, many things remain unexplained. For example, there is no mention of how the residents are expected to deal with their accommodation in case the programme experienced delays or problems, which often happens. In the meantime, the same mayor has additionally been proposing to eradicate the Villa 31 since he first assumed government of the city in December 2007.\(^{15}\) More recently, this initiative has become controversial and the city government is now attempting to explore participatory methods amongst many other initiatives throughout Buenos Aires.
This mayor was re-elected to his position in July 2011. Thus, although eradication in the old terms has indeed become politically incorrect, urban proposals that imply eradication are still present in the discussion: the idea of the villa as an intrusion into an otherwise modern and safe city, the image it provokes as a place that incubates violence, and a general unrest about the settlements as they are seen as ‘the other’ city, I do not wish to suggest that the villas are exempt of violence, nor that the everyday life of their inhabitants is free from environmental problems. On the contrary, I think that its inhabitants are in fact the first to suffer from these issues. Nonetheless, I wish to place the focus on the imageries that non-residents groups maintain about the villas.

Proposals that imply ignoring or eradicating villas are also present in architectural training and professional practice in Buenos Aires. Indeed a wide range of approaches to the informal city can be found at the university level, and they usually depend on the different foci and professional practice in Buenos Aires. It is not unusual, for example, to find cátedras that propose design exercises in plots that are actually occupied by villas, while the discussion about the informal city is discouraged. Even though the interest in engaging with informal housing through the practice of architecture is growing, the coexistence of both perspectives at the university level arguably reflects the persistence of the concept. Contending ideas about the informal city in the professional practice, and in the Argentine society at large.

Endnotes
3. The inclusion of the working classes in the mechanism of decisions-making was indeed a complex process which falls beyond the scope of this article. See Daniel James, Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946-1976 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and de Ríz and Torre ‘Argentina Since 1946’.
4. It is difficult to estimate how many people demonstrated that day to support Perón. However, attempts have been made to set the number of attendants in Plaza de Mayo between 120,000 and 500,000; see http://en.wikipedia.org/ wiki/Loyalty_Day_(Argentina) and http://es.wikipedia.org/ wiki/FDCSALAti_de_la_Loyalad (both accessed: 1 April 2012). For an in-depth account of the complexity of the events see Daniel James, ‘October 17th and 18th, 1945: Mass Protests, Peronism and the Argentine Working Class’, Journal of Social History, 21 (Spring 1988), pp. 1-44.
9. Indeed a wide range of approaches to the informal city can be found at the university level, and they usually depend on the different foci and professional practice in Buenos Aires. It is not unusual, for example, to find cátedras that propose design exercises in plots that are actually occupied by villas, while the discussion about the informal city is discouraged. Even though the interest in engaging with informal housing through the practice of architecture is growing, the coexistence of both perspectives at the university level arguably reflects the persistence of the concept. Contending ideas about the informal city in the professional practice, and in the Argentine society at large.

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Figure 2. CNV, Plan de emergencia, p. 238, (art. 31, Ley 11.723).
Figure 3. CNV, Plan de emergencia, p. 240, (art. 31, Ley 11.723)
Figure 4. Banco Hipotecario Nacional de la República Argentina, Plan de emergencia: eliminación de las villas miseria de la Capital Federal (Buenos Aires, 1958) pp. 19-21. (art. 31, Ley 11.723)
Figure 5. BHdN, Plan de emergencia, p. 12. (art. 31, Ley 11.723).
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