Buenos Aires as a Laboratory for Housing Policy: Strategies, Innovations, and Inequalities in a Latin American Housing Regime

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Abstract: *In the comparative housing policy literature, in addition to surveys of broad trends and the formulation of housing regime typologies, deep dives into specific local or national cases can also provide necessary empirical evidence for reformulating theoretical frameworks and challenging long-held assumptions. This is particularly true when taking on countries and regional contexts that are under-represented in the housing studies literature. In order to make a contribution in this regard, this special issue examines recent housing policies in Buenos Aires, Argentina. By taking Buenos Aires as both a microcosm of the Latin American housing regime and a 'laboratory' for housing policy, the articles in the special issue explore the politics of housing policy in a Global South megacity. This close reading of continuity and change in local approaches reveals the socially constructed and politically contested nature of housing policy 'innovation', as well as tensions with existing housing inequalities.*

Keywords: housing policy; housing regimes; urban inequalities; Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Introduction: beyond the 'usual suspects' in comparative housing (policy) studies

Until quite recently, comparative research on housing policy and the field of housing studies more broadly have tended to pay relatively less attention to Latin America – and the 'Global South' in general – than to the 'usual suspects' of European and Anglo-Saxon countries. Although some notable exceptions exist,[1] when they have been given consideration in the literature the focus has often been placed on specific issues endemic to these regions, such as widespread housing informality and tenure insecurity, entrenched spatial inequalities in megacities, and the role of urban land markets. However, the specificities of state action (and inaction) in regions like Latin America merit a closer look, as housing policies reflect the structural and historically contingent challenges and constraints not commonly represented in the comparative literature primarily based on the experience of the 'Global North'.

We posit that in addition to broad surveys of housing policy contexts in diverse countries and regions, deep dives into specific cases are also necessary in order to add nuance to the discussions of their particularities and reduce the risk of creating or perpetuating narratives that homogenise the experience of these regions. This special issue will make a contribution in this regard by closely examining the recent experience of the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina. By taking the case of Buenos Aires as both a microcosm of the Latin American housing regime and as a 'laboratory' for housing policy, we will explore the *politics of housing policy* broadly speaking, while staying attuned to the specificities of the (semi-) periphery of global capitalism. Taken together, the articles will address two main questions: First, what strategies have contemporary housing policies enacted in Argentina's capital city, and to what extent can they be considered innovations? Second, how do these policies express the complexities and contradictions of path dependencies, contestations, and negotiations over the place of housing in a semi-peripheral megacity?

As a whole, this special issue should be considered in relation to the much broader field of housing research and comparative housing policy studies. These have proven to be immensely productive and diverse fields of inquiry, which have produced a slew of concepts and perspectives. In turn, these contributions have coalesced into several theoretical-conceptual frameworks or approaches – such as varieties of residential capitalism, path dependence, and housing regimes – which have been developed to tackle the core questions of these fields (Aalbers 2015; Bengtsson and Ruonavaara 2010; Clapham 2019). In particular, the housing regime approach addresses the diverse modes of housing provision and allocation in different national contexts – considering underlying power structures, ideologies, and political-institutional structures – allowing for the definition of typologies, which makes it particularly useful for comparative research. It should be noted that debates over the housing regime approach within the field of comparative housing (policy) studies have been ongoing for some time (Ball 2020; Dewilde 2017; Hegedüs 2020). Nevertheless, as one critical review of these debates argues, regime typologies retain their heuristic and epistemological utility as long as geographical and historical particularities are attended to (Flynn and Montalbano 2024). While it is not the aim of this article – nor this special issue – to rehash these debates regarding the usefulness of one or another theoretical-conceptual framework, we recognise the potential in thinking through the housing question and housing policy issues from a comparative perspective. This entails not only searching for similarities and patterns in hopes of categorising countries and adjusting typologies, but also expanding

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[1] For instance, the *International Journal of Housing Policy* put out special issues on housing policy innovation in the Global South and on South American housing policies in 2018 and 2019, respectively (Monkkonen 2018; Molina et al. 2019).

the body of empirical evidence upon which our theoretical and conceptual frameworks can be tested, refined, or overhauled.

Therefore, we argue that empirical evidence and theoretical reflections from cities, countries, and regions that have traditionally been less prevalent in the field of housing studies and the comparative housing policy literature can make an important contribution to advancing knowledge production and reframing the debates in these areas. This special issue, then, helps shed light on how diverse and at times conflicting government strategies can shape urban inequalities and access to adequate housing, (re)configuring the right to the city. Furthermore, it constitutes a concerted effort to generate a trans-disciplinary discussion of housing policy and its implications for the 'Global South' and beyond.

Buenos Aires as a microcosm of the Latin American housing regime

For readers less familiar with the Argentine and Latin American context, this section will lay out some of the principal characteristics of the type of housing regime and policy models that can be observed. For instance, what does the term 'social housing' even mean in Latin America? Social rented housing is largely absent from the region, and most of what is considered 'social housing' has historically been made up of single- or multi-family units directly transferred to individual beneficiaries as private property, which are then generally repaid through state-subsidised loans. Homeownership is the most common form of tenure, but such a generalisation hides other complexities, such as circumstances where a family may be considered the homeowners of the physical structure but not necessarily of the plot of land underneath it (a situation common in informal settlements). How, then, can we describe the 'Latin American housing regime'?

Based on an analysis of four of the region's largest countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia), Murray and Clapham (2015) define the Latin American housing regime by showing a common trajectory of historical shifts in underlying approaches and government responses to the housing crisis, and similar patterns that have emerged in these diverse countries. As the authors argue, in these four countries there was an initial lack of response to the housing question (which allowed for the proliferation of informality and social housing deficits), followed by the eventual adoption of neoliberal 'common sense' regarding mortgage-based financing, and then by a resurgence of social housing construction targeting lower-income groups but providing low-quality housing in undesirable peripheral locations. Similarly, Sepúlveda Ocampo and Fernández Wagner (2006) go further back in this contextualisation, outlining 'three generations' of housing policy in the region: from corporatist mass construction *cum* 'slum clearance' policies starting in the mid-20th century, to the heyday of 'self-help' neighbourhood upgrading and land regularisation programmes for informal settlements in the 1980s and 1990s, to demand-side policies promoting private mortgage markets around the turn of the century. Moreover, recent transformations in dominant policy models aimed at mobilising mortgage credit have been increasingly analysed through the lens of financialisation, although this has proven to be an uneven process throughout the region (Nascimento Neto and Salinas Arreortua 2020; Rolnik 2019). Despite recent (albeit modest) advances in the reach of mass housing programmes and the (rather limited) inclusion of participatory mechanisms (Rosa et al. 2024; Sette Whitaker Ferreira et al. 2020), experts continue to point out that most of the region's long-standing challenges related to housing – such as informality, tenure insecurity, and the lack of access to well-serviced land – remain largely unresolved (Cravino 2023; Rojas 2016; Zapata et al. 2025).

Argentina has embodied these region-wide shifts in both its national and local-level housing policies, even though it has been repeatedly shown that for a number of reasons – insufficient financial resources, limited institutional capacities, persistent housing needs in light of recurrent economic crises – state action has historically fallen behind existing needs (Fernández Wagner 2015; Rodulfo and Boselli 2015; Rojas 2016). That being said, Clapham (2019: 38) characterises the Argentine housing regime as largely neoliberal with highly stratified housing outcomes, despite high rates of owner-occupation. Even in light of an ambitious scaling-up of social housing policies around the turn of the 21st century (Barreto 2012; Di Virgilio 2017), it has been shown that deep-seated limitations persist, particularly in terms of providing adequate housing to lower-income groups in desirable locations (Aramburu and Zapata 2022; Cravino 2012; Cuenya 2015). Indeed, research on recent trends in the nation's housing policy has shown that despite cursory changes in policy formats, much of what could be considered 'innovations' in housing policy in fact perpetuate path dependence and reproduce structural limitations (Murray and Clapham 2020; Segura and Cosacov 2019; Socoloff 2020). Keeping with the 'generations' metaphor described above, we have argued elsewhere that over the past two decades Argentina's housing policy mix can be described either as a new hybrid generation of policies and programmes (Elinbaum and Barenboim 2018) or as a rather chaotic amalgam of the 'three generations under one roof' (Palumbo 2022).

Turning to the case of Buenos Aires specifically, we posit that the recent history of housing policy in this city constitutes a compelling case study that serves as a lens to discuss the complexities and contradictions surrounding the politics of housing policy in the Argentine and Latin American context (and beyond). Not only is the city the command centre of Argentina`s economy and political system, it also has a peculiar legal-administrative framework; as the nation's sole 'autonomous city', it combines the characteristics of both a municipality and a province. The unprecedented continuity of the conservative, pro-business political coalition holding power in local government for nearly two decades has proven to be fertile ground for the consolidation of a neoliberal mode of urban governance (Sternberg 2023). As a major node in the regional (and world) economy, the city attracts voluminous national and international real estate capitals, and the first decades of the 21st century have been witness to a residential construction boom (Baer 2012). Even so, the legacy of the neoliberal 1990s and the 2001 economic crisis looms large and is evident in the stark territorial contrasts both within the city itself and the vast metropolitan region surrounding it (Di Virgilio et al. 2015), as well as in the deepening of entrenched urban inequalities linked to enduring housing affordability issues. However, due to a number of factors – including political rivalries between ruling parties at the local and national levels – several national housing policies have seen little to no implementation in the city (Ostuni 2012). Rather, the city has been home to conceptual and programmatic innovation and experimentation regarding housing policy and government action in the housing sector. While a number of these innovations align with the interests of powerful real estate actors and concentrated economic groups (Cuenya and Corral 2011), others internalise the demands of more vulnerable sectors of society, revealing the centrality of struggles over housing and the right to the city (Rodríguez and Di Virgilio 2016; Sternberg 2023). It would seem that in a country such as Argentina – with its strong tradition of organised labour and vibrant urban social movements – state action (and inaction) is always subject to the demands of a highly mobilised civil society.

As such, we would make the case that Buenos Aires is a microcosm of the Latin American housing regime not only because it displays the types of housing programmes and policy frameworks prevalent in the region, but also because it houses the types of tensions and conflicts that frequently arise in these contexts, which often shape the specific forms of policy response. To illustrate this, in the following sections we will look at the individual

contributions of the special issue and reflect on the overall lessons that can be derived from the special issue as a whole.

Contributions

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the topic of policies aimed at informal settlements figures prominently in this special issue. As in many peripheral and semi-peripheral contexts, the structural limitations of housing markets – combined with highly polarised labour markets and extreme income/wealth inequality – have historically led to the proliferation of self-built, informal, and precarious housing stock frequently concentrated in extensive zones of social and urban marginalisation. Although there is a long global and regional track record of policies that have sought to address these issues (Ward et al. 2014), contemporary perspectives on such policies recognise the limitations of prior approaches.

In this vein, Mercedes Najman and Denise Brikman provide an in-depth reflection on the concept of 'socio-urban integration' from the point of view of a Latin American city. This perspective – framed as a new standard for what used to be called 'slum upgrading' – represents a significant conceptual and discursive shift with regard to how housing informality is approached. Furthermore, Najman and Brikman (2025) show how this shift is part of a policy circulation process, as this notion has affected housing and urban policy in several contexts in the Global South. Aptly, the discussion is organised around a reconstruction of native conceptual interpretations of this abstract idea of socio-urban integration, anchoring the analysis in on-the-ground policy practice and decision-making spaces. In doing so, the article raises questions regarding the possible reasons that this concept so readily took flight in the region in recent years. What was appealing to social (and, in particular, political) actors regarding this idea of 'integration' as opposed to 're-urbanisation', 'upgrading', or similar ideas? Moreover, to what extent has this discursive shift had real impacts in practice? In this regard, the authors' grounded conceptual discussion adds much-needed nuance to debates on these issues in multiple contexts, both in Latin America and beyond.

Taking a critical look at the implementation of one such policy, Gonzalo Rodríguez analyses the case of the Playón de Chacarita settlement (or *villa* in local terminology). Within the larger Chacarita neighbourhood, a well-located and rapidly gentrifying area of the city, this *villa* has been subject to an Integration and Redevelopment Project (PIRU) in recent years, which has entailed the *in situ* construction of new housing complexes and the relocation of residents to these units. Although one can appreciate the fact that such a strategy is likely to improve the target population's housing conditions while preventing large-scale displacement, allowing residents to preserve their community ties and favourable location in the city, this study calls into question whether this policy has been as effective for limiting the continued growth of urban informality. Furthermore, Rodríguez (2025) seeks to address the 'relative lack of studies and methodologies for the ex-post evaluation' of housing policies that adopt this approach. By combining different data sources, the author is able to sidestep serious limitations around the consistent production of official statistics on informal settlements, finding evidence of the settlement's continued expansion in parallel to the PIRU's implementation. As it would seem, by not addressing the underlying causes of housing informality and ultimately opting for more palliative measures, these socio-urban integration policies may not constitute a sufficient response to this structural issue in the long term, even if they do improve the housing conditions of current residents.

Turning to another case of social housing in diverse and changing neighbourhood contexts, Gabriel Mancuello examines the tensions between housing policy and a large-scale urban

redevelopment project based on a public-private partnership model. Taking the case of the Barrio Parque Donado-Holmberg project as a springboard for an analysis of a concrete manifestation of neoliberal urban governance in Buenos Aires, Mancuello (2025) is able to show how these large urban projects can be altered by social pressures and contestations while still retaining their entrepreneurial bent. This project was to be carried out in an area of the city highly coveted by real estate developers but that had a sizeable population of socially vulnerable families living in irregular conditions with insecure tenure. Families identified by the local government as 'squatters' were able to organise and put pressure on the local legislature, successfully attaining the inclusion of new social housing as part of the public-private redevelopment project. However, the author shows how inequalities still managed to emerge, from the differing aesthetic criteria employed in social housing compared to private developments, to the effects of what the author sees as an (un)official 'displacement policy', whereby residents were offered one-time payments to purchase housing on the private market, but in amounts too meagre to allow them to remain in the neighbourhood. By exploring the social and political dimensions of large urban projects – specifically how less powerful social actors can influence their trajectory through sustained contestation – this article provides an insightful look into the politics of public-private partnerships when faced with resistance from the (potentially) dispossessed, and how this intersects with housing policy.

Of course, Buenos Aires does not abruptly end at its city limits, and the housing question in Greater Buenos Aires is intrinsically linked to that of the capital city. No special issue on housing policy in Buenos Aires – and the same could be said of several Latin America cities – could therefore truly be complete without a look at the programmes for the mass construction of social housing implemented since the dawn of the new millennium. To that end, Patricia López-Goyburu analyses the Federal Housing Plan in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area, shedding light on the complex interaction between housing policy and state territoriality. Through a comparison of the modes of implementation of this national social housing policy in two neighbouring municipalities, the author is able to provide an account of how state power at different scales effectively projects aspects of the social structure onto the urban spatial structure, with social housing functioning as a nexus in this process. Accordingly, López-Goyburu (2025) argues that housing policy is a key element for understanding the 'strategic decisions [that] illustrate how the state intervenes in space and directs resources to specific areas, directly influencing territorial configuration and the distribution of services and social benefits, namely low-income housing'. Furthermore, this analysis allows us to visualise the ways in which distinct scalar logics of state power are expressed through the materiality of housing policy, creating and reproducing different forms of segmentation, both in terms of access to housing and in terms of access to the city. Here, the issue of scale is fundamental, as what could be a homogenising force emanating from a nation-wide policy like the Federal Housing Plan is in fact modulated through a series of local particularities, revealing that the territorialisation of state power is not a homogenous process.

Returning to the central city, as evident in another of the contributions to the special issue, other forms of precariousness demanding specific interventions also persist in Buenos Aires today. In this regard, María de la Paz Toscani and Paula Rosa adeptly discuss the challenges faced by the unhoused population through the lens of housing policy, taking a close look at a local programme that provides conditional cash transfers for obtaining temporary housing solutions in the city's many single-room occupancy (SRO) or 'residential' hotels. Making the case that 'living on the street and living in an SRO hotel are two sides of the same coin', Toscani and Rosa (2025) arrive at a complex conceptualisation of homelessness characterised not as a one-dimensional state of social vulnerability, but as a trajectory marked by intermittence and instability. In fact, as the authors contend, the state itself

contributes to constructing and perpetuating these specific forms of housing precariousness and the risk of homelessness. Demonstrating how the complexities of state bureaucracies and the logic of the conditional cash transfer significantly impacts the lived experience of those whom the policy intends to help, the evidence they provide suggests that what was likely intended as a temporary or palliative measure has effectively become a substitute for a more comprehensive policy framework. In this sense, this article provides a nuanced reflection on the intersections between homelessness and state policy and how the limited reach and deficient conceptualisation of the latter can lead to a sort of 'inertia' that ultimately reproduces housing vulnerability.

Contribution of the special issue: Buenos Aires as a laboratory for housing policy

Taking the special issue as a whole, we would now like to draw out a few lessons that can be garnered from this in-depth look at recent housing policy issues in Buenos Aires, and explain why we argue that the city can be considered a laboratory for housing policy.

First, a few words on the 'laboratory' metaphor. Innovation is not the only thing happening in a laboratory. In some cases – and at times in a rather serendipitous manner – something radically new and incredibly effective is created. However, perhaps more often, routine procedures are slightly tweaked to achieve marginally different results, or methods for reaching a particular outcome at a lower cost are tested and refined. In short, engaging in experimentation provides no guarantee that things will work better. The case of Buenos Aires, then, suggests that this 'laboratory' metaphor should be taken in less of a celebratory sense. In contrast to scenarios where innovation emerges from hybrid coalitions or disputes within the state itself, experimentation in Buenos Aires' housing policy has primarily been led by the local government and technical-political actors, in many cases in line with concentrated real estate interests. This co-optation of housing policy could be considered one of the most substantial 'innovations', so to speak. While social movements have shown a certain continuity with respect to their discourses and repertoires of action, government leaders have been able to mobilise housing (policy) as a privileged instrument for urban accumulation, while still attending to the needs of society's most vulnerable groups (at least on the surface). Therefore, Buenos Aires stands out not only for the 'new' types of policies it churns out, but also for the political logics underpinning them. Therefore, following Monkkonen (2018), this leads us to question whether 'innovation' should always be the ultimate goal of housing policy.

Second, another overarching theme of this issue has to do with the idea of 'integration'. Whether explicitly or implicitly, a number of the policies and programmes analysed in the contributions centre the notion of integration in both a *social* and a *spatial* sense, and housing policy is imagined as a crucial vector for achieving this. However, as the articles in the special issue demonstrate, deep tensions remain. Rather, the emphasis on 'integration' as a normative horizon seems to be more indicative of the state's ability to cast itself as a neutral actor, far removed from the logics of urban accumulation or from the (socially and spatially) selective nature of its own interventions. As the strategic-relational approach shows (Jessop 2007), state discourse tends to naturalise the objectives of public policies by presenting them as universally beneficial, even though in practice their effects are distributed in deeply unequal ways. In doing so, policies reconfigure society and territory in specific directions, favouring certain actors over others and privileging some spaces at the expense of others. Deployed in this manner, the notion of 'integration' can thus open up some tricky questions. Integration *with what*, *for whom*, and *to what end*? The everyday strategies of

many households and individuals show that integration as an end in itself may not always be the highest goal.

A third issue raised by the case of Buenos Aires relates to the role of official statistics and urban datasets as a strategic resource. In Buenos Aires, the local government produces, processes, and publishes statistical information that is then used to justify their proposed interventions. This closed circuit turns official data into a first-order political resource in that it guides investment, legitimises certain decisions, and shapes public opinion regarding urban development. Compounded by the popularity of 'data-driven' policy approaches, an acritical enthusiasm for 'objective' (usually quantitative) data can disguise the fact that data and knowledge production is also an arena of material and institutional disputes.

In the housing policy laboratory that is Buenos Aires, some aspects of experimentation are therefore openly publicised – often in a tone more reminiscent of public relations than of public policy – through narratives that exalt innovation, transparency, investment, and efficiency. However, other elements remain in the shadows: informal negotiations, covert pressures during relocation processes, and extra-official institutional arrangements that ultimately shape decision-making beyond the reach of the democratic process. These less visible elements are crucial for understanding how housing policy reproduces a logic of selectivity that disproportionally benefits certain actors and territories. Likewise, debates on housing precariousness cannot be reduced to simplistic dichotomies – like informal versus integrated when discussing low-income neighbourhoods, or the street versus the hotel when discussing homelessness risk – but must be understood as complex trajectories that must be read through multiple scales and units of analysis. Despite the real challenges faced by disadvantaged social groups that heavily condition their housing trajectories, the choice between living in a 'residential hotel' in the city centre, in an informal settlement in the inner city, or on the margins of the metropolitan periphery reflects situated calculations regarding opportunity, mobility, and accessibility, as well as subjective aspects like social networks or a sense of community attachment. It is clear that the local scale, on its own, is insufficient; understanding the conditions that housing policy mediates requires analysing how metropolitan, national, and regional dynamics interact.

Returning to the specificity of the Latin American housing regime described above, this special issue allows us to add depth to the characterisation of the strategies and policies that local and national governments implement in such a context, while highlighting both the socially constructed and politically contested nature of their content. Beyond the particulars of the policies and issues analysed in each of the contributions, the authors shed light on the complex tensions and conflicts that emerge in relation to housing policy; for instance, the distance between the technical and bureaucratic aspects of policy and policy making, on the one hand, and the urgency of problems related to precarious and inadequate housing conditions that intersect with numerous other forms of social and economic vulnerability, on the other.

Closing remarks: for a 'southern turn' in comparative housing policy studies

It goes without saying that a special issue that takes a single city as a case study cannot expect to provide a definitive and all-encompassing account of the housing question in contemporary capitalism. Nevertheless, analyses of the myriad issues and tensions that emerge in the discussions of Buenos Aires' recent experience reaffirm the importance of studying housing policy across multiple scales and from a comprehensive geographical-historical perspective. Even when national, subnational, and local policies appear fragmented

or disconnected in the short term – or when differences across the 'North/South' or 'East/West' divide seem unresolvable – a historically situated and structural view reveals a dialectic in which state interventions are articulated around a shared socio-spatial horizon: the reproduction of the capitalist (urban) order.

As argued in the introduction, broadening the scope of comparative housing (policy) studies requires integrating evidence from countries and regions outside contexts that we have dubbed the 'usual suspects'. And this should not only be done through sweeping surveys of policy issues and challenges in the 'Global South' in general, but also through deep dives and case studies of countries and cities that have traditionally had less representation in the mainstream international (English-language) literature.[2] As such, this special issue constitutes an invitation to rethink the categories, scales, and assumptions that have guided comparative housing policy research. If we can agree that the vast majority of theorisation in the field has been primarily based on the experiences of this relatively small group of 'usual suspects', we would argue that including perspectives from the Global South – in this case from Buenos Aires, although we could (and should) add many other cases to this list – force us to question long-established analytical frameworks.

Might it be time for a 'southern turn' in comparative housing (policy) studies? We contend that new conceptual categories emerge when historically and geographically marginalised experiences are incorporated into global debates. This necessarily raises a number of questions. What types of epistemological and theoretical shifts could such a 'southern turn' in housing (policy) studies bring? What happens to existing typologies when we consider cases in which the state simultaneously produces data, discourse, and territory? When we centre narratives that have historically been on the margins, what might we learn (or unlearn)? To conclude, our exploration suggests that looking beyond the 'usual suspects' not only broadens our empirical horizons, as it were, but also compels us to rethink the very conditions under which knowledge is produced. Buenos Aires – with all of its tensions, innovations, ambiguities, and conflicts – is a privileged vantage point from which to imagine a housing studies field that is more plural, more critical, and, above all, more attuned to the structural and territorial dynamics that shape the housing question in contemporary capitalism.

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[2] These ideas are consistent with calls for a new comparative urbanism, as in Robinson (2022).

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