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The Inner Void. Urban Brownfield Transformation and Popular Contention

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Abstract

Contentious struggles over urban territories are closely connected to the transformation of urban morphology. This paper focuses on the dynamic process of change that produces places like urban brownfields that intermittently drop out of the exploitation cycle.

The hypothesis is that the urban brownfield functions as node within the urban structure that gives way to alternative models of space production. The question is how the urban void as a node and urban land as a common good is transformed by social movements for urban space production.

The City of Buenos Aires has urban brownfields in the South that are re-used by social movements who claim their “right to the city”. It is the process of urban brownfield transformation through the members of social movements and its implications for urban development strategies that is in focus.

Firstly, this paper discusses the theoretical conjunction of urban void and popular contentious movements, followed by presenting an empirical counterpart. This includes study cases of social organizations transforming urban brownfields in the City of Buenos Aires.

In this way the paper links the urban space transformation and contentious urban movements, stressing the importance of their dynamic interrelation and focusing on urban space as a key factor.

Introduction

The city with its complexity functions as *catalyzer of societal development* (Häußermann et. al., 2004). It is also the place where transformations manifest directly in the urban texture.

Recognising the interrelations of spatial and social structures that are produced by transformation processes is crucial for planning disciplines in order to adapt design proposals and planning strategies to the requirements of society. By identifying the driving forces behind struggles over urban space and territory and thus applying this knowledge to design proposals, the *growing gap between planning practice and*

spatial-scientific dynamics (Boelens, 2009) should be diminished.

The worldwide crisis augments the necessity for new design options and, in turn, proposals are especially focused on resource and energy saving criteria. However these proposals require measurements to guarantee social inclusion.

Local stakeholders are crucial in terms of urban development and land distribution when it comes to social ex- or inclusion of the urban citizens. Contentious struggles over urban territories are closely connected to the transformation of urban morphology. The city with its heterogeneity and dynamic enables social movements to explore alternative ways to meet their demands and change not only their social environment but also the material structure.

It is this dynamic process of change that produces places like urban brownfields which intermittently drop out of the exploitation cycle. Urban brownfields result from a rapidly changing society leaving the industrialized urban areas obsolete from production. The urban brownfield – or urban void – functions as a niche within the urban structure that leads to alternative models of urban space production.

This research intends to focus on the material structure of the city in the first place, considering it as one element within a network of actors. The investigation hypothesis is that the urban brownfield functions as a node within the network of conversion processes. This vacant space excluded from urban development agendas serves as an accessible urban land for social movements outside the property market. The dissertation project intends to take a closer look at the emergence of a new network and its actors by analyzing how the interactional changes are linked to the material ones.

These interrelations are theoretically explored in the first part of this paper. The second part gives an overview of the empirical investigation relating to the specific case of deactivated factories and their conversion by social movements in Buenos Aires.

The manifold dimensions of urban morphology

This chapter explores the emergence of the urban brownfield and its connection to the topic of urban movements. It explains the exceptional position of urban brownfields

or urban voids within the material structure of the city due to its disuse over a certain period of time.¹

Access to goods and services is closely linked to the unequal distribution of the social space between different social groups. In this distribution, space is an indispensable component, since its various forms manifest as inclusive or exclusive, integrated or segregated, segmented or fragmented territories. (Ostuni, 2010) Ostuni also states that space before being considered as a result, the spatial and territorial question is a co-constructive component of the problem.

The link between territorial structure and economic dynamics (Ciccolella 2003; Aguilar 2002; De Mattos 2010) also affects the dynamic of the housing market. Overall, the rise of land prices is one of the principal reasons for the existing difficulties to accessing (formally) urban areas equipped with infrastructure which are also environmentally safe. (Baer, 2012)

The existence of empty spaces in the city, with sub-utilized infrastructure awaiting higher profits, leads to urban sprawl. The consequential costs include the need to provide basic infrastructure to a large sector of the population. At the same time, central areas appointed with infrastructure are being abandoned at the same time.

Urban voids are integral elements of the land market in cities and affect fiscal policy. “The management of vacant land could serve to improve urban areas, reduce polarization and foster equality.” (Clichevsky, 1999: 5, translation JL) Behind the formation of these urban voids are driving forces, like the locally specific citizenry and the multiplicity of actors that intervene in formal or informal ways to the production of space.

The conditions of wealth/poverty and the legal property market define the population’s possibilities to access and live on urban land. Clichevsky (1999) remarks

¹ This research uses the terms urban void as a general, less contamination-associated term as well as the widely used term brownfield. It can be connected with the ancient meaning of “fallow land” (in German “Brache”) according to the adjective “fallow (of farmland) ploughed and harrowed but left for a period without being sown in order to restore its fertility or to avoid surplus production” (Oxford Dictionaries 2012). The term is related to a meta-stadium: The land is left out for a period, waiting to be re-used again. Therefore the analysis of time in form of a process becomes especially relevant for this research.

on some aspects of the legal property market (lack of transparency, supply-demand markets; focus on solvent population) that in most cases defines its accessibility for low-income population.

When seeking a definition of urban voids, a heterogenic image emerges: (contaminated) industrial areas or brownfields, empty factories, unused railway sites etc., whose position within and towards the city already show a broad facet. In European literature brownfields are defined as sub- used real estate as well as urban voids, whose social function of property is in a contradictory relation to the urban dynamics (Chaline, 1999).

Literature reviews on brownfields show the necessity of specified, local strategies. The integration of brownfield developments, their reintegration into the urban structure and the shifting development back to central urban locations is acknowledged as one of the major tools to achieve sustainable development. (Grimski et.al, 2001) The great diversity of urban voids regarding their designation, property title, dimension and possible use etc. requires a specific development strategy for each type of urban void. (Clichevsky 2002)

Many investigations on brownfields focus on areas with little economic pressure, for example the transformation of industrial areas into (cultural) historic sites or landscape parks (cf. Hauser, 2003; Dissmann, 2011). On the contrary, this investigation focuses on dynamic urban areas. It is the *struggle over space, place, and territory* (Ippolito- O'Donnel, 2012) in large and dense cities that produces alternative, creative approaches for transformations of urban voids.

This is the crucial point where this research investigates on: the connection is made between urban voids and social movements with their struggle for improvement of living conditions in urban areas. The urban void, as a sub- used urban area, is an opportunity for low- income households to access central areas of the city that escape the logic of the property market. The organization of territory by a social movement is specific and will have different characteristics on basis of the social relations of its subjects. (Zibechi, 2011) The movements start to transform their space into

alternatives to the existing system on two different levels: They transform them into *space of survival* and into *space of socio-political actions*. (Zibechi, 2011) Although Zibechi (2011) refers in this statement primarily to a social space, the material aspect of an integral understanding of space can easily be included. It is for this reason that urban void transformations by social movements show alternative processes to improve living conditions and guarantee an equally distributed access to urban land.

Whereas social and political sciences state that “struggles over, and uses of, space, place, and scale are overlooked in most treatments of social movements” (Ippolito-O’Donnell, 2012: 31) for planning disciplines, it is crucial to find design solutions (in form of design proposals and planning strategies) to these struggles surrounding urban land.

Architect Hans Harms (1997) stated that when looking at a local level design, planning and implantation strategies should address - through the concerted work and cooperation - the various parties involved, including the residents and their organizations.

Boelens (2009) refers to the same topic when calling for planning practices that not only part from a relational approach, but also start from beyond government issues, looking “outside-in”. The following chapter should give an insight into the current dissertation research on two case studies and reveal the potentials of the transformation of urban voids by social movements in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Locally specific urban transformation

When talking about land policies, it is Latin America that stands out as a “laboratory that has undergone a combination of important local innovations” (Smolka et.al, 2007: xxiii). Among these innovations, this chapter presents a case study from the City of Buenos Aires in Argentina and its approach to land use by urban movements. Firstly, there will be an introduction to the key issues of the City of Buenos Aires; housing and access to urban land – in relation to the “contentious landscape” (Ippolito- O’Donnell, 2011) of Buenos Aires. The second part will introduce the two study cases that are currently being investigated, in order to show the interrelations of the urban void and the social movements.

In Argentina all social groups have suffered important transformations as a consequence of economic, social, and political changes. From the 1990s onward, the state withdrew from its functions of social integration, delegating basic elements of social protection to the private sector. The state was not securing acceptable levels of integration on a social, economic and symbolic basis anymore, which resulted in the amplified formation of popular contention.

The history of contention in Buenos Aires is characterized by more than a century long repertoire of contention. (Ippolito- O'Donnell, 2012) Ippolito- O'Donnell states the neglect of Buenos Aires in urban movement studies, which does not correspond to its social political history and potential for effective mobilization. The widely known, recent contentious activities in Argentina happened around the time of the Argentinian national bankruptcy in 2001. The intense social protests in Argentina found their peak in December 2001 in Buenos Aires and put an end to neoliberal restructuring and political corruption. The socio- spatial fragmentation of Buenos Aires today reflects the ideological and social changes that accompanied the conflicting socio-political projects of the past century.

The contentious movements in Argentina are intimately connected with the struggle for better living conditions by the urban poor. This is largely due to the fact that Buenos Aires has a high housing deficit and a resulting struggle for space inside the city borders. The socio- spatial landscape of Buenos Aires is characterized by a highly fragmented urban landscape. The daily struggle of the urban poor to access urban infrastructure touches numerous spheres such as mobility, housing, working etc. Housing is the one area that directly links the struggle for living conditions and access to urban land.

The housing deficit of Buenos Aires

When characterizing the situation of housing in Buenos Aires one immediately comes across the concept of *housing deficit*². The housing deficit affects all of the

² The National Populations Census (INDEC, 2010) counts 2.891.082 people living in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, stating a housing deficit of approximately 100.000 apartments corresponding to 500.000 affected people. A closer look at the data: 220.000 people live in so- called "villas" (informal settlements), 100.000 people in occupied houses, 70.000 in hotels concealing permanent living situations, 56.000 informal rents, 2.000 homeless, 22.000 people in critical situations of eviction and 50,000 people in so- called mega- blocks with inapt living conditions.

Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires (AMBA) with a population of approximately 13 million. (INDEC, 2013) The focus of this investigation lies within the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (CABA) with around 2.8 million inhabitants, where the case studies on industrial urban brownfields have been carried out. Furthermore, specific normative regulations, like L341 for housing subsidies for social organizations, are only valid within these administrative city borders.

The housing situation in Buenos Aires is especially critical when taking into account that political powers face a wave of occupations of urban land and buildings. This occurs as a consequence of land valorization and the expulsion of the popular sectors towards the urban periphery.

This status quo reflects a lack of action and credibility of the institutional system in relation to urban and housing strategies. The existing policies become manifest in an uncoordinated, discontinued, and fragmented form between different government and administrative levels. The consequence is a lack of design, implementation and execution of strategies to augment the living conditions of the population.

(Wainstein–Krasuk et.al, 2010) Public housing policies focus solely on the supply of a housing unit in its physical sense, leaving out the integral concept of habitat.

(Rodríguez et.al, 2007) In addition, strategies for urban land use are lacking and result in public housing complexes situated in the peripheral areas with no access to working opportunities, education and health facilities. (Gerscovich et.al, 2013)

Therefore contentious movements in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires focus strongly on the areas of housing and access to urban land, clearly linking the struggles of inhabitants to territory and place.

Access to urban land in Buenos Aires

The development of the property market in Buenos Aires showed the effects of the economic recession beginning in 1998 with a strong contraction of land offers and a fall of land prices. Nonetheless, when in 2002 the economy gave signs of reactivation, selective rise in certain areas of the city occurred. This left out central vacant zones and areas in the South with a relatively minor value. By the end of 2005 the average land price had reached the level registered before the crisis and in 2008 the real estate

valorization had risen five times more than in 2002. (Baer, 2012; Cosacov, 2012)

This process of real estate valorization was accompanied by a profound territorial fragmentation. The gap of land prices between districts in the north and the south of the city gradually opened up. At the same time areas in the south of the city with a traditionally low average price also suddenly substantially increased in land value. (Cosacov, 2012)

In this particular case of the south of the city, the urban texture is marked by numerous industrial plants and factories interwoven within the urban texture. At the beginning of the 20th century the industrialization had produced the last valorization of the area. Following this period, four decades ago the socio- economic restructuring on a national level provoked a profound segmentation in the area. In the mid- 1970s a transformation process was initiated and produced the closure of a large part of the industrial premises. This dramatically affected the economic dynamic of the city quarters. On one hand it was a result of a national policy of de- industrialization; on the other hand on a local scale the process was associated with the prohibition of new industrial plants within a ratio of 60 km around the City of Buenos Aires. (Alvarez de Celis, 2004) These legal regulations produced a “graveyard of factories”³ that manifested in the urban texture as “urban voids”.

The discovery of these “urban voids” for conversion in the south during the last decade was the result of the rise of land prices in the center and north. According to Baer (2012, translation JL) the large amount of real estate in the city that is “public or private (...), constitutes strategic resources that open up the possibility to improve the offer of housing for the medium and low social stratum on qualitative, urban land.”

It was social movements that first discovered this “graveyard of factories” as a potential in order to meet their necessities for housing and habitat. On a small scale the occupation of un-used buildings was a phenomenon that started massively in the 1980s. The conversion of large scale factories required a strategy and auto-organization, and was only carried out after the creation of a municipal law (Ley 341)

³ Interview with the architect Nestor Jeifetz (Movimiento de Ocupantes e Inquilinos) in November 2012

in the year 2000.

The law L341, adopted in 2000 by the legislation of the City, allowed social organizations to present themselves for the first time as subjects to obtain loans in order to construct housing units. The law was the outcome of a long process of self-organization, rationalization of self-building and the development of a unified strategy of popular and public housing. It incorporated a number of social movements which approached the executive and legislative powers of the city government and formed working groups and round tables in the legislature of the city. The aim was to give loans to low- income households and incorporate the beneficiaries into the process of construction with the support of interdisciplinary organized teams of professionals. This process of construction allowed for new approaches in public housing that went beyond the construction of new buildings, including the adaptation and renovation of existing structures. Since the credit included the cost of the land or existing building, it offered the beneficiaries different options from which to select land for the construction and inclusion of the city.

The municipal government nowadays faces difficulties to buy land relatively close to central areas at a reasonable price to construct social housing. These difficulties demonstrate that housing policies cannot dispense with a strategy for urban land use, at least not if they aim to improve conditions of accessing urban infrastructure. While the law L341 gives responses to the question of access to housing on an architectural level in form of financing and programming the production of housing units, it fails to react to the rising land prices in the City of Buenos Aires. (Lehner, 2008)

To show possible alternatives to this problem of current social housing and urban land access two examples of the social movement "Movimiento de Ocupantes e Inquilinos" (MOI) – organized in two housing cooperatives - have been selected and will be shortly described below.

La Fabrica and El Molino – two study cases

The two cooperatives, called *La Fabrica* and *El Molino*, are situated in the southern part of the city in the districts adjoining the city center. The former textile factory and mill will be converted into 50 respectively 100 apartment- units for the members of

the social movement MOI and their families. These low- income families have a heterogenic background, but the common reason for joining the movement more than a decade ago was to obtain a home. However it has been stressed in interviews that this reason is no longer the only main priority to work in the cooperative and engage in the social movement.

The industrial brownfields have been purchased in a fortunate moment between 2001 and 2002 in the midst of the Argentinian economic Crisis with the credit obtained from the social housing program bound to the L341. The decision to purchase urban brownfields with an existing building stock is explained by the architect and head of the social movement Nestor Jeifetz⁴ as follows: First of all, the movement emerged from an occupant movement with its tradition and experience in this field. Secondly, it is the existing building that allows intermediary use when it comes to providing emergency shelter for members or space for assemblies. Thirdly, the recycling of existing material allows saving resources and turning these into the extension of the functional program.

Up until today the two sites are in the middle of the conversion/construction process, recycling large parts of the structure of the factories and mills. This gives an indication of the local administration and government influence on the speed of the transformation process of these sites. The construction and conversion work is partly done by self- help of the members and specialized construction cooperatives.

During interviews, members of the social organization explained the story of the 100 year old buildings and stress their once important function for the neighborhood and even national production. While mentioning great resistance of neighbours against the social housing project at the start, the interviewee talked about social activities and facilities organized by them that helped improve their relationship with the neighborhood.

The functional program foresees permanent and intermediary use of some parts of the factory as a kindergarten, library for the quarter, school of self- management

⁴ Interview with the architect Nestor Jeifetz (Movimiento de Ocupantes e Inquilinos) in November 2012

(“autogestión”), and shops in the ground floor. The facilities are not exclusive for the members of the social movement or cooperative but are open “publicly” to the surrounding neighborhood.

Reviewing these study cases shows the tight connection between the material aspect of the urban texture and social activities. The concept of habitat rather than social housing manifests itself in the functional program that goes beyond providing shelter. Sustainability is seen as an integral part by saving resources through recycling. Modifying the existing structure in this case means conversion of the use without destroying the building and identity of these 100 year old structures. The connection of the buildings with the neighborhood through offering facilities to the surrounding area and thus the creation of work opportunities marks the integral vision of urban life.

The urban void as node

In order to understand the characteristics of void spaces in the city, it is necessary to view the topic not only as a problem on an economic scale. This would lead to a reduction to land prices and speculation, without touching the subject of the social construction and use of urban land. This paper intended to give an overview of the different social, economic, spatial, and political dimensions of the urban void and place it in relation to actors that are involved in its transformation.

The law L341, the social production of habitat (Rodriguez, 2007) as a technical instrument, enables the self- management and development of urban movements to resolve the problems of housing, but seems insufficient in terms of land access. Nonetheless, innovative approaches like *La Fabrica* and *El Molino* of the social movement MOI show possibilities, which are “outside-in” (Boelens, 2009) strategies and could serve planning and urban design disciplines.

As urban development strategies (including housing policies) for vulnerable population groups intend to generate instruments that facilitate the access to the city, the urban land is the most deficient and contested currency. This requires giving a new meaning to the access to the city for its inhabitants, a systemic view of the entire

process of housing production and a consideration of its environment of a network of different driving forces. Inferentially, design and implementation of public and urban strategies need to merge urban and social policies. An integral concept of urban habitat modifies the concept of housing of the popular sector, especially in periods of economic crisis, where production and habitation converge in one place, supporting the formation of social capital, which is essential when looking for alternatives to improve living conditions.

Alternative strategies that combine urban and social claims of inhabitants are already created in the city by urban movements. These singular examples guarantee, in a limited frame the social function of property, but need to be established on a broader basis and converted into urban and planning strategies. In the case of *La Fabrica* and *El Molino* the access to urban areas with infrastructure coincided with a historic moment of economic crisis and low land prices in 2001 that allowed access to the city in connection to the social production of habitat. Ten years after the land was bought, the possibilities for the popular sector to construct in these areas have diminished. And still, a framework of urban planning strategies to convert these “best-practice” examples is missing.

The added value to the territory for the community that is presented in these examples should count as a strong argument to detect and replicate experiences outside of government structures. Planning disciplines not only need to look at the nodes that these urban voids represent, but at the network they are in and the urban movements as strong actors producing alternatives. It is the recognition of and interest for creative niches and nodes adapted by urban social movements that enrich the city as laboratory.

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