

# **Resourceful Cities**

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**Between emotional, economic and urban needs.  
Some contradictions of old infrastructure in Buenos Aires**

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## **Abstract**

The paper analyses the case of the Cattle Market, a large urban infrastructure located in the southwest area of the city of Buenos Aires. At present, the Market is an outdated infrastructure in terms of its economic role and its geographical location. Despite repeated attempts by the political power to remove the Market in the last 40 years, it continues functioning nowadays, and there are no signs that it will be removed in the immediate future.

From this empirical case, the paper seeks to reflect on major infrastructure, designed and built in response to specific historical and economic needs, and consistent with a city model that, at present, is no longer current. In this sense, these large infrastructures become obstacles to the development of certain areas and are the subject of bitter disputes between residents seeking its removal, and actors who wish everything to stay the same. More generally, the paper seeks to analyze the "lags" between economic, political, urban processes and material transformations in the city, focusing on the role of major infrastructure in this regard. The paper also seeks to discuss with some academic literature that, by focusing exclusively on urban change, tends to establish linear relationships between the economic and material transformations of the city, ignoring the material strength of major infrastructure, and the economic, political and emotional commitments behind them.

## **Introduction**

This paper is based on the research undertaken for my doctoral thesis, on policies and projects for Buenos Aires between 1976 and 2003, analyzing in particular the case of the Cattle Market, a large urban infrastructure located in the southwest area of the city of Buenos Aires. The market was originally a slaughterhouse, built in 1900, with the aim of enhancing the process of slaughter, through technical innovations and hygienic improvements. Subsequently the slaughterhouse was replaced by a Municipal Meat-Packing Plant and a Cattle Market, splitting the commercialization and the slaughter tasks. In the seventies, in line with policies of economic liberalization and seeking to downsize the state, the government decided to dismantle the Meat-Packing Plant and the Cattle Market and sell the land. While the Meat-Packing Plant was easily dismantled, the Market stayed in its location due to the resistance of the actors involved in its operation.

From that time until today, the political power attempted on numerous occasions to remove the market and there were numerous projects to reuse the land. However, the market was never removed and there are no prospects of an imminent transfer because of the opposition of some economic actors involved in its operation, because of jurisdictional issues and because of the political difficulty of sustaining long-term projects that require large investments.

This presentation is based on an empirical research, but has the aim of making more general reflections on a range of issues. It seeks to discuss with some perspectives of urban studies that focus on recent urban transformations, that prioritizes certain periods, certain areas of the city, certain processes and certain kind of explanations over others. Based on the case, the paper reflects on the links between long term material forms, in particular, large infrastructures and the political, economic and social dynamics. It also seeks to analyze the importance of historical perspective when thinking about major infrastructures and urban processes in general. Finally, the paper stresses the importance of local actors, local institutions and local scales to understand these great urban transformation processes. The paper seeks to reflect, from this specific case and from the role of large infrastructures, about other kind of processes, periodization, scales and urban structures.

The paper is structured as follows: first, there's a critical review of some analytical perspectives on the city, linked to the emphasis on recent transformations. Secondly, there's a presentation of the Cattle Market, the unsuccessful attempts to remove it, and the obstacles for the relocation. Finally, based on the case and revisiting some critical perspectives, there are some reflections on the way that large urban infrastructures highlight other temporalities, other networks of actors and other processes that those privileged in the literature focusing on the changes.

### **Perspectives of the city: the emphasis on changes and novelties to reflect on the urban space**

As I began to review literature on the city of Buenos Aires and literature on urban processes to start my research I discovered that much of urban studies in recent years tried to account for the changes that cities suffered since the seventies and, with more emphasis, since the nineties. There were numerous researches on the changes in the material forms of the city,

economic transformations, changes in the ways of living in the city and its inhabitants, changes in urban policies and modes of intervening in the city, mutations in the ways of conceptualizing the city and the roles that the cities carry out, among other issues. As noted Jajamovich (2009), an important aspect of these researches was the linkage that they established between global processes (mainly economic) and urban transformations, giving a central role to transnational capital in these transformation processes. In this kind of approach the transformation is given for granted whether to be praised or criticized. Besides, in order to carry out these researches, only the areas that have effectively undergone profound changes are analyzed. On several occasions, local governments appear as mere facilitators of the action of transnational capital, which is understood as the primary agent of change and the main explanatory variable. In turn, the processes of change are seen as all-explanatory, including the whole city, consistent in its goals and relentless in its effects.

The proliferation of new categories to name the transformed city is very symptomatic of the repeated attempts to capture recent urban transformation processes and of the enormous difficulty that it entails. Thus, theorizations on the global city (Sassen, 1998), territories of networks (Veltz, 1996) informational city, city of flows, dual city (Castells, 2006), corporate city (Ciccolella and Lucioni, 2005), among many others, inquire from the most varied perspectives the modifications experienced by cities in recent decades. In turn, researchers identify various processes that would be linked to these transformations: deindustrialization, rising ghettos (Wacquant, 2001), dualization (Ciccolella, 1999).

The new territories product of these transformations are characterized as labile and unstable (Ciccolella and Lucioni, 2005), fragmented, dual or polarized, less differentiated in terms of centers and peripheries, and full of micro-inequalities (Veltz, 1996).

On many occasions, the reuse of large infrastructure fulfilling other roles in the new political and economic contexts was seen as the paradigmatic transformation of these new urban processes. Thus, in particular, the reuse of old ports and waterfronts to fulfill central functions, linked to international sectors of the economy became icons of what some authors consider the postindustrial city.

In terms of Crot (2006), the fascination of urban researchers on the topic of globalization and the urban transformations associated with it has exercised a sort of tyrannical hegemony in urban studies resulting that only the urban areas that can be linked to globalization receive

attention, while those segments of territory not affected by globalization processes are represented as relegated territories that should *catch up* with the rest of the city.

However, this literature was not useful to analyze the case of the Cattle Market, which shows resistance to the attempts to change it. My research focuses on an area of the city of Buenos Aires that has undergone little material transformations in recent decades. Besides, the research focuses on the actions of various government departments in that area, within a framework of local actors, with strong ability to impact on the development of the area. The area discussed in this paper, a sector of the neighborhood of Mataderos in the city of Buenos Aires, does not adequately address any of the traditional perspectives on urban space, neither those that focus on renovated spaces, closely linked to international capital nor those that focus on absolutely neglected and impoverished spaces. The focus on certain processes entails overshadowing large areas of the city that do not respond entirely to the privileged type of analysis. This academic disinterest for certain areas and, by extension, for certain processes and population dynamics has strong implications on the way in which we analyze the city and urban processes. It also has impact on the policies for the city and the territories that are privileged when intervening. As Keil and Ronneberger (2000) claim, the concept of globalization has not only analytical dimensions, but also ideological ones.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the rhetoric of novelty, urban infrastructures that support the functions of the city do not respond to the times emphasized by the mentioned perspectives, which focus on changes and recent developments. In this sense, the paper seeks to answer a series of questions related to the continuity of large infrastructures linked to other historical and economic contexts that currently do not fulfill the new requirements of the latest economic and urban processes:

What different historical periods, temporalities and processes do major infrastructure show?

What kinds of actors have the ability to decide on these major infrastructures?

What kinds of links are established between economic, political and urban processes in the case of major infrastructure?

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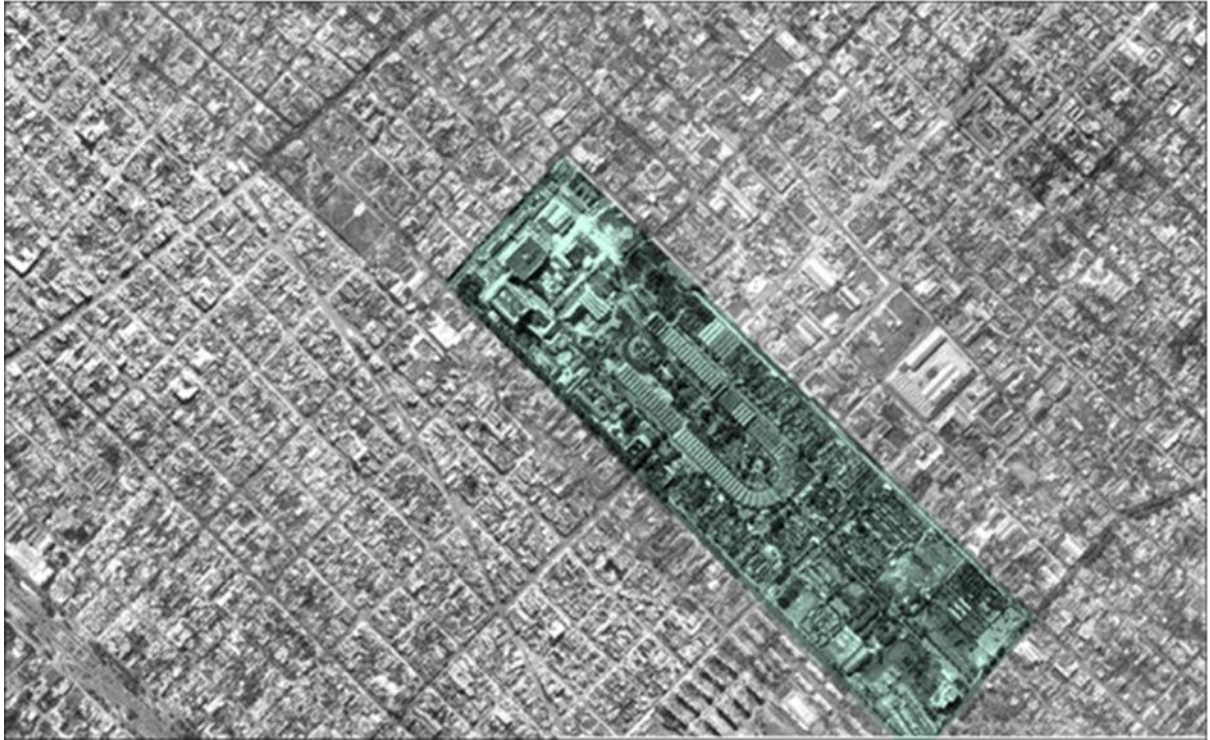
<sup>1</sup> While global city concept has gained centrality in urban studies, the global city model became prominent in urban policies. Whitaker Ferreira (2007) examines how the myth of Sao Paulo as a global city and the belief that it is the only acceptable model for the city, worked as an argument to guide urban policies towards sustaining and deepening its global city status. Arantes, Vainer and Maricato (2000) go in the same direction, analyzing critically the new consensus on urban planning and the role of cities that hides its negative consequences.

## **The Cattle Market: The origins of an infrastructure for the industrial city**

The municipal slaughterhouse was built in 1900 in the neighborhood of Mataderos, in the southwest of the city of Buenos Aires. While previous slaughterhouses existed, the new facilities upgraded technologies seeking to improve animal slaughter and meat trade transparency. The slaughterhouse had economic centrality at the time when it was built, because the production and trade of meat were a key business for Argentina in the early twentieth century, given its role as agricultural and meat exporter.

At that time, the area where the slaughterhouse was installed was uninhabited. From the slaughterhouse installation, the surrounding neighborhood began to develop, the tram arrived and population began to settle. The slaughterhouse was also the origin of the neighborhood's utilities, such as electricity, water, cobble and health. Utilities were first installed on the slaughterhouse and its immediate surroundings and from there spread to the rest of the neighborhood. The location of the first schools, warehouses and bars respected the centrality imposed by the municipal slaughterhouse, standing at the archway of the slaughterhouse itself or in its immediate vicinity. The installation of the slaughterhouse also involved the emergence of numerous meat-related industries in the area. In this sense, the installation of this major infrastructure worked as the source and sustenance of the neighborhood that emerged around it. This role of neighborhoods origin is key to understand the Markets survival over time.

In 1930 the slaughtering and commercialization tasks were split. The slaughterhouse was replaced by two buildings: on the one hand, the Municipal Meat-Packing Plant Lisandro de la Torre dedicated to the slaughter of cattle; on the other, the Cattle Market, which centralized the cattle trade. The Meat-Packing Plant and the Market worked in associated ways, on contiguous and interconnected buildings. The two of them occupied about fifty-two acres. As the picture shows, they formed a huge urban barrier that broke the grid.



Aerial view of the neighborhood in 1965. The Meat-Packing Plant and the Cattle Market appear in color.  
Source: (GCBA, 2010)

The Meat-Packing Plant and the Cattle Market responded to the economic needs of a period in which the agricultural and farming industry had absolute centrality, where major infrastructure was required to perform the work of slaughter and trade cattle and a period in which the state tried to regulate these activities directly and indirectly.



Meat-Packing Plant perspective. Source: GEOPE (1930)

In the seventies, the Meat-Packing Plant was dismantled in the context of Argentina's last military dictatorship.<sup>2</sup> The dictatorship established a number of policies of economic liberalization, and there was no possible resistance by workers of the Meat Packing Plant, given the repressive context. The decision to close the Meat-Packing Plant and many other meat-packing plants had more to do with economic decisions linked to the renewal and updating of certain industries than with urban decisions. The land was divided into lots and partially sold. Another part was used for a public park. The image of Meat-Packing Plant replaced by a private company and a metropolitan park had tremendous symbolism in regard to urban changes that started in the late seventies, in terms of redirecting the profile of the city, particularly the industrial areas, the type of industry that was favored in the city of Buenos Aires and the kind of urban facilities that were prioritized.

With the same political and economic aims, the dictatorship decided to transfer the Cattle Market outside the city of Buenos Aires. The idea of moving the Market gained momentum in line with interests of various government departments. On the one hand the aspiration to rationalize, liquidate or reduce certain state entities linked to previous state control and intervention. Related to this, the will to decentralize certain activities deemed harmful to the city of Buenos Aires. Moreover, the desire to develop in urban terms the area surrounding the market, which, at this point, was completely urbanized. The Market occupied 36 acres within the city; therefore, it was one of the few land reserves of this size in the city of Buenos Aires. At the same time, there were environmental concerns, and some state departments encouraged the dismantling of old urban facilities considered pollutant and anachronistic. Basically, the market was not responding to the new economic needs, and correlatively, did no longer coincide with the city model. The dictatorship was interested in promoting a residential and commercial city, restricting the industrial activities.

While the military dictatorship was characterized by its ability to conduct numerous urban transformation regardless the opposition of those affected, in the case of the Market, this was not possible. The national government ordered the transfer, new lands were acquired at 100 Km of the city of Buenos Aires and an urban contest was held for the construction of the new market. However, the economic actors linked to the market were very powerful, belonging to the country's more traditional families and linked to agricultural and farming industry. They

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<sup>2</sup> The last military dictatorship (1976-1983) was the most violent government in Argentina's history. It eliminated all forms of resistance and opposition, suppressed political and social rights and operated through terror.



were the cattle consignees, who claimed that moving the Market would hinder the development of their business. These actors took different strategies to stop the transfer. On the one hand, they publicly manifested their opposition, in the form of fierce denunciations in the media and on the other hand, they hindered the transfer process through the colonization of the state apparatus. The opposition and the change in the economic situation of the dictatorial regime (particularly since the economic crisis that began in 1980) gave as a result that the market remained in its location.

A new attempt in 1986 in the context of a democratic government, ended up with the same result. The sequence was quite similar to the previous attempt to transfer the market. The national government ordered once again the transfer, acquired new land and started a new project. Again the same stakeholders opposed the relocation of the market for the same reasons and the same arguments: the distance was considered excessive, the state should not intervene or modify the operation of the market, etc. They began to insist even more strongly, that the market should be privatized. Again, the attempt was frustrated by this strong opposition, the economic situation and the long terms demanded by the operation, terms that were inconsistent with the rapid changes in the political situation.

### **The last attempt to relocate the Cattle Market**

In 1992 the Market (which depended of the national government until that moment) was privatized and the concession was given to the cattle consignees, the actors that had successfully opposed the previous attempts to relocate the Market. The concession was given for ten years, under the condition that this deadline could not be extended and that by the end of the concession the Market should be removed. When approaching the end of the concession, the Government of the City of Buenos Aires tried to motorize the removal and started a process with neighbor's participation to devise alternatives for the remaining land, once it was left unoccupied.

Many of the neighbors began to mobilize to ensure the materialization of the transfer because the Market was a major urban barrier, and polluted the area, as the entrance and exit of trucks with cattle every dawn meant an important deterioration in certain areas of the neighborhood, in hygienic terms and in terms of the condition of the asphalt. Also, since the Meat-Packing Plant was closed, the slaughter of cattle was banned for hygienic reasons in the city of Buenos

Aires. Therefore, livestock had to enter the city to be sold and then had to leave to be slaughtered in the slaughterhouses of the Province of Buenos Aires. Apart from this, the size of the market proved to be too large for the needs of the meat industry in that period, which used other techniques and smaller structures. At this point, only a minor part of the property was used. Its location and its dimensions, then, were anti economic for the meat industry and generated problems for the neighborhood in environmental, traffic and economic terms. However, there was still a powerful structure of actors interested in things to stay the same.

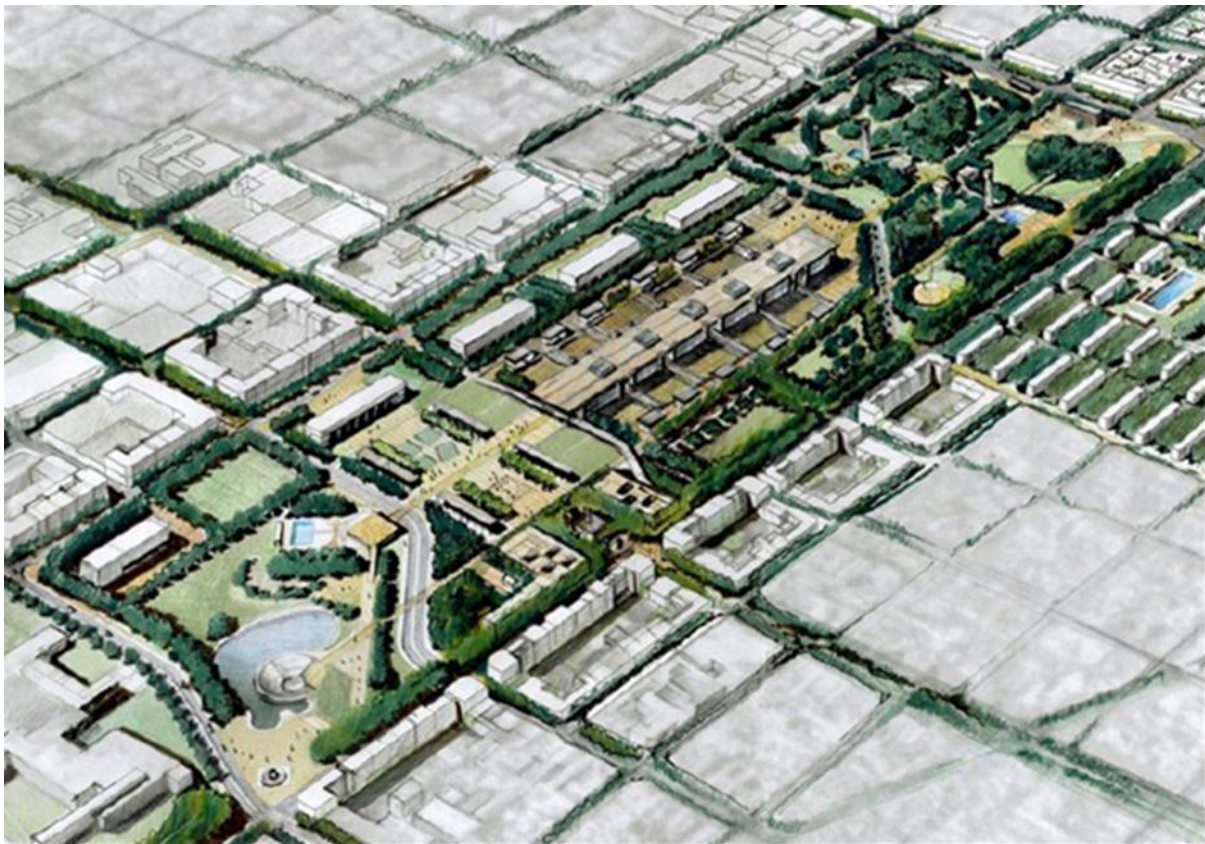
The major actors interested in the Markets permanence in its location were the cattle consignees, who developed their activities in there, and since 1992, are the concessionaires of the Market. This entails other benefits for them, as sub-renting parts of the Market. It is a powerful actor, linked to the meat industry, composed of the most traditional and richest families in the country. The consignees have historically had and continue to have great ability to lobby and to impose their demands and decisions to different governments. In coordination with the consignees, there are other actors involved in the functioning of the market as truckers who move the cattle and Market employees that favor the permanence of the Market, not to see their interests affected.



Aerial view of the Cattle market nowadays. Source: GCBA (2010)

In counterpoint, the Government of the City of Buenos Aires began in 2000 to conduct a participatory process with neighbors who advocated the transfer of the Market. This process culminated in the realization of an urban contest to determine the fate of the 32 acres that at that time were occupied by the Market. The winning project had the support of neighbors, broadcast media and the enthusiasm and support of the Government of the City of Buenos Aires.

The project proposed for the remaining lands cultural activities, real estate development and hotel offices and schools.



Winning Project. Source: Estudio GMH (2012)

When approaching the end of the concession, the concessionaire started to make territorial social work in order to gain the support of various traditional institutions of the neighborhood. The idea was to become essential for the neighborhood, in the context of a deep economic crisis. Since 2001, the concessionaire created a special department dedicated to community action. In this way, by aiding the institutions, they established links with schools, soup kitchens, neighborhood magazines and churches. Thus, the concessionaires argued that their social assistance was a valid reason against the transfer. In the context of an economic crisis, they had the support of some institutions. Another territorial alliance that turned out to be key



in the development of the process was the one that the consignees established at the neighborhood level with the football club “Nueva Chicago”. The club Nueva Chicago had enormous weight in the decisions made at the neighborhood level and also had contacts within the government of the City. Apart from these strategic alliances, many former residents of the neighborhood did not want the Market to be removed. Some of them feared that the remaining lands would be taken by the inhabitants of the adjacent slum. Others had affective bonds with the Market, because their personal history and the neighborhood’s history are deeply intertwined with the Market.

Furthermore, the consignees had a strong presence in the neighborhood not only through support and advertising, but also through pressure and threats to those neighbors mobilized in favor of the removal. In discussions about the removal in the Legislature of the City of Buenos Aires, the consignees mobilized hooligans members of the football club Nueva Chicago who threatened the neighbors who were in favor of the transfer.

Thus, the pressure of the concessionaire, added to the political pressure exerted by the football club Nueva Chicago undermined the first steps seeking to unleash a neighborhood transformation. The work of neighbors who participated in the bidding process and the new project was stalled. The mobilized neighbors and the institutions that supported the transfer were blocked in this way.

At present, the market remains in its historic location, occupying 32 hectares. The last failed attempt to relocate it consolidated the concessionaires’ position in the district, showing that the Market is still imperturbable to the different attempts to remove it, either coming from the neighbors, the national government or local government. Thus, the issue of the removal is not on the public agenda of national or municipal government nowadays, and there are practically no neighbors mobilized by the issue.

### **Reflections from the Cattle Market case: the permanence of large infrastructures.**

The aim of briefly reviewing the case of the Cattle Market has to do with developing some general reflections on the role of major and ancient urban infrastructures in the current cities. In this sense, the study sought to function as a trigger to rethink some issues. Next, I will articulate some reflections arising from the Market case with some critical perspectives over

the novelty approaches, questioning the complete correspondence between global economic trends and local urban impacts.

One interesting issue to start with is related to the emphasis on change and on developments that, in many cases is due to the lack of proper historization of the processes studied (Crot, 2006). Sometimes, the emphasis on the novelty has to do with not taking a specific historical moment as a reference, in cities living permanent transformation processes. In terms of Cuervo (2003), the novelty is taken for granted and established, and some perspectives tend to idealize the past. In turn, in many investigations, the onset of changes is often not clearly periodized (Cuervo, 2003). This means that often, urban dynamics and processes considered novel or linked to the latest global economic processes, are not so. Hall (1997) points out that many of the issues characterized as novel from the global city perspective, are not so if they are analyzed from a historical perspective. So many times, the idea of novelty works rather as a rhetorical device than as a result of a historical analysis (Beauregard and Haila, 2000).

In this sense, the permanence of the Market outliving its economic and social role shows the existence of processes in the city that do not fit with the idea of transformation but rather of continuities in urban space. Large urban infrastructures are difficult to be dismantled, while they materialize large financial investments and condense certain forms of social organization. Regarding the economic dimension, it is not easy to dismantle and reuse large infrastructure properly. Major investments are required to do so, and they also demand extensive execution times. These extended times, in turn, are detrimental to the logic of political return. Moreover, there are local actors linked economically, socially and emotionally to these structures. Thereby, they defend its continuity. In this sense, large areas of the city do not meet the description of territories "labile" and "unstable" and are resistant to change.

The links between economic and territorial processes deserve some reflection as well. In discussion with certain simplistic perspectives that link economic changes linearly with territorial changes, some authors emphasize the complexity of the links between them. Cuervo (2003) discusses the uses and concepts of city and territory in Latin America and says, in the case of Buenos Aires that

The established causal relationships to explain urban or territorial changes tend to operate at a high level of abstraction and tend to be marked by a clear economic determinism (...) the links between economic and territorial organization is given for granted, and the first is assigned the role of explanation (...) There's a shared

view, that the changes in the economic structure generate territorial transformation (Cuervo, 2003: 14).

Authors like Beauregard and Haila (2000) and Cuervo (2006) argue that not all economic transformations have territorial impacts. In turn, in cases that they do have them, they do not necessarily involve new spatial patterns. In the case of Market, there are gaps between economic reorientations that entailed its relocation and its permanence as an urban structure resistant to the attempts of removal.

In this sense, several authors emphasize the strength of the urban structure against drastic changes. Thus, in terms of Beauregard and Haila (2000), the urban impact of the economic forces are not immediate, because the cities spatial form inhibits rapid and large scale transformations. There are economic resources and political and emotional commitments linked to the urban structure that are not easily modifiable (Beauregard and Haila, 2000). This means, in turn, that similar forces or similar processes can have diverse urban impacts, because of the built urban space features, the local political dynamics and the logics of local planning among other reasons. In turn, the pace of economic and territorial changes may not match or even the sense of the transformations can be contradictory (Cuervo, 2003).

In this line, there are many theories that indicate the long terms of urban space, which don't match with the political or economic temporalities. Silvestri and Gorelik (2000) claim that "(...) the city, because of its material nature, subjects the social, political and cultural dimensions to the long-term proof (...)" (Silvestri and Gorelik, 2000: 461). In this sense, urban structures linked to certain historical processes, certain economic systems and certain social actors survive political, economic and social reconfigurations, as discussed in the case of the Market. Following Silvestri (2003) "This is why we affirm the relative autonomy of built form: the construction process cannot be deduced in a straight way from social, political or economic circumstances, although it is related to them; it has its own time and pace" (Silvestri, 2003: 31). The analyzed case enables to question the linear linkages between economic, political and urban. The dynamics of urban space, its long temporalities, and the difficulties to turn it labile particularly in the case of large infrastructure shows the gaps between these dimensions.

Another important reflection related with some global perspectives has to do with the minimization or the obliteration of the local actors and institutions. There are several studies in various cities that underscore the importance of governments and local actors in defining

the direction and depth of urban transformations. In terms of Beauregard and Haila (2000), the actors that control urban space are not mere puppets moving according to socio-economic logics and global policies, but relatively autonomous agents. This becomes evident when analyzing the attempts to move the Market. Based on this case we can say that sometimes, major infrastructure highlights the importance of local actors in defining the development of urban space. In this particular case, those who seek to transform the area are local actors (national and local governments and residents of the area). The actors that managed to stop the process of transformation, are also local actors strongly linked to the urban structure, with interests in its permanence. In this sense we differ with the perspectives developed at the beginning of paper, which emphasized transformation processes linked to transnational actors, capable of imposing its will and easily transform urban space. By focusing on the areas in which this effectively occurred large areas of the city are opaqued. In those areas, the ability of local actors dominated and still dominates the shape of urban space.<sup>3</sup>

Another important issue is that in many researches the different scales in which the processes develop are not taken into account. Therefore, some analyses make analogies and translations from one scale to another. Nevertheless, the various scales or levels, involve different joints of forces and logics of action (Cuervo, 2003, 2006). The various phenomena operate on scales that sometimes have divergent trends. Thus, the links between processes taking place on a global scale do not have easily predictable effects locally. It is an analytical and methodological challenge to consider the complex and unstable links between various scales. In terms of Keil and Ronneberger (2000) globalization should not be fetishized as an all-powerful thing smashing the local. Moreover, it is important to note from Rodriguez, Di Virgilio et al (2007) and Rodriguez Banuelos, Mera (2008) that the same actors deploy in the different scales on differential modes.

These remarks do not intended to deny the impact of global forces in local areas, and the impact of economic restructuring in urban space but aim to historicize and contextualize the development of these processes adequately, questioning the linear looks about them and taking into account the enormous heterogeneities in each city. This contributes to a redefinition of certain processes that tend to be oversized and attributed to a single global force. It also seeks to incorporate other important actors in the analysis, exploring territories

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<sup>3</sup> Even in areas where there was strong interest and pressure from transnational actors willing to invest and transform the urban space, the will of local actors often prevailed. In the case of Buenos Aires, the Retiro project or the Abasto project are examples of frustrated attempts of transformation, led by international capital.

that were not so obviously affected by global forces in terms of renovation nor in terms of segregation and exclusion.

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