THE HOUSING QUESTION IN BUENOS AIRES, 1900-1925. 
REFORMISM, TECHNICAL IMAGINATION, AND PUBLIC OPINION IN AN 
EXPANDING METROPOLIS

Martín Ignacio Marimón

A DISSERTATION 
PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY 
OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY 
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE 
OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

RECOMMENDED FOR ACCEPTANCE 
BY THE DEPARTMENT OF 
HISTORY 
Adviser: Jeremy Adelman

September 2017
Abstract

This dissertation examines the history of how and why the housing of the urban masses became a concern among the political and technical elites of Buenos Aires, Argentina, during the first two and a half decades of the 20th century. Through the exploration of discourses and visual representations of what was then called “the housing question,” I reconstruct the emerging notions of social welfare and the visions of urban development that reformers of different sorts formulated in a period of rapid economic and social change, and of dramatic spatial and demographic expansion of the nation’s capital. Throughout this study, I analyze several such formulations. Beginning with the sanitary concerns of late-nineteenth-century physicians, who saw in tenements a source of epidemic disease, I then turn to the legislative and urban proposals put forth during the pre-war years, which promoted self-owned individual housing as a solution to the social question. I also examine attempts to tackle the rent crisis through contract and price regulation during the 1919-1921 years, and, finally, the new types of collective dwelling designed by professional architects in the 1920s to solve the housing shortage.

My analysis of the emergence and early development of the housing question in Buenos Aires reappraises traditional historical studies of housing in several ways. First, in focusing on the case of Buenos Aires, a peripheral metropolis in the midst of a political transition from oligarchic to democratic regime, I reframe the familiar view of mass housing as part of social welfare policies of the mature capitalist order and of democratic states. Second, I place within the purview of housing policies the study of rent regulation, which traditionally has been seen as a temporary emergency measure. I show here, to the contrary, how rent regulation could become the main vector of a new, social conception of housing. Finally, through a fine-grained analysis of the historical conjuncture that led to rent regulation, I question the predominant top-down portrayals of the origins of housing policies, demonstrating instead that they can emerge through
democratic processes of struggle and exchange, which unfold both in parliament and in the public sphere.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. iii

Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................. vi

Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 1. Patterns and problems of urban expansion. Buenos Aires, 1871-1919 ............. 24

Chapter 2. From model tenements to “cheap houses.” Approaches to the housing problem in a period of urban growth, 1871-1915 ................................................................. 70

Chapter 3. Rents in the public sphere. The construction of a movement of opinion ...... 131

Chapter 4. The rent laws of 1921. Housing and the new political landscape ............. 175

Chapter 5. The social economy of rent. Housing meets the social sciences ............ 231

Chapter 6. Architectures in transition. Social housing and the city in the 1920s ....... 276

Epilogue .............................................................................................................................. 340

Bibliography ....................................................................................................................... 347
Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible without the help of many people and institutions.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, Jeremy Adelman. He has been next
to me along the way, being a source of support and inspiration. His generous and acute advice
made me trust and persist in this project; his patience has been proverbial; and his creativity and
his intellectual contributions, infinite.

I also want to thank very especially the members of my dissertation committee, Leandro
Benmergui, Allison Isenberg, and Daniel Rodgers, for generously agreeing to read this
manuscript and discuss it with me. My acknowledgement to Dan exceeds widely his job in the
committee—I have had the privilege of meeting him at the beginning of my graduate studies, and
owe a huge lot to our conversations ever since.

In Princeton, I have been privileged to have the company and support of other brilliant
professors. Vera Candiani and Robert Karl, very close to me and to the rest of the Latin
Americanist crew, occupy the top of the list. They read and discussed my work with me in many
occasions. At the History Department, I have also been lucky to entertain intellectual exchange
with D. Graham Burnett, Michael Gordin, Philip Nord, and Anson Rabinbach. Likewise, I have
profited much from conversations with Gabriela Nouzeilles and Bruno Carvalho at the Spanish
and Portuguese Department, and with Andrew Laing at the School of Architecture. There, I have
also been fortunate to take part in the Princeton-Mellon Initiative in Architecture, Urbanism &
the Humanities, where Aaron Shkuda and Prof. Isenberg have been enthusiastic animators. In the
Program for Latin American Studies, in turn, Andrew Hamilton, organizer of the PLAS Graduate
Student Workshop, has been an incredible source of feedback and an engaging and acute reader
of my work. Outside Princeton, Columbia University has been a very welcoming place for me. I
would like to thank professors Pablo Piccato (history) and particularly Gwendolyn Wright (architecture) for opening their courses to me and giving me their opinion on my work.

I am especially grateful to two institutions that have generously supported my research at Princeton. First, the History Department, for its welcoming and encouraging atmosphere, as well as for having financed my Ph.D. studies and many research trips that proved essential for the development of this work. Special thanks to Reagan Maraghy, Minerva Fanfair, Kristy Novak, Jaclyn Wasneski, and Prof. John Haldon, who have always given me the best logistical support I have ever received. Second, the Program for Latin American Studies, which financed my first year of study through the Lassen Fellowship, has also granted me several travel scholarships throughout the Ph.D.—special thanks to Rosalia Rivera and Prof. Rubén Gallo. I also need to mention here Princeton’s Writing Center, a space where I have found advice and encouragement in order to always keep writing. My acknowledgements to Emma Ljung, Emily Prifogle, and especially Heather Russo—without whom I would have never been able to write the central chapters of this dissertation—and Maeve Glass—who helped me enormously to figure out the general direction of the project.

In Princeton I have enjoyed the human and intellectual quality of a number of friends and colleagues. I want to thank very especially Margarita Fajardo, for having been an enthusiastic and brilliant interlocutor, an intellectual comrade, and a dear friend. I have equally profound debts with Teresa Davis and Melissa Teixeira, with whom we have shared many years of this demanding academic endeavor. With them, and with Iwa Nawrocki, Andrea Oñate, Diana Andrade, Fidel Tavarez, Paula Vedoveli, and Jessica Mack we have engaged in many inspiring discussions in the friendly atmosphere of the Latin America Workshop and other instances. Not
only have I learnt from them as much as I have in the classroom, but they have also made me feel Princeton like a second home to me.

Many more friends and colleagues have read my work and given me great feedback, both in Princeton and in Buenos Aires. Gregory Ferguson-Cradler and Alexander Ponsen are the ones I thank the most for their thoughtful job. Pablo Blitstein has been an equally attentive reader, as well as a long-term friend whose vocation for the humanities has always been a source of amazement and inspiration to me. With Martín Reydó, Christopher Florio, and Enea Zaramella we have had the peculiar experience of being colleagues and roommates, which allowed for spontaneous intellectual exchange that also left its mark on this work. Sarah Beytelmann, Sabrina Carletti, Antoni Celià, Ruth Halvey, Alejandra Josiowicz, Pablo Mosteiro, and Marcia Schenck, in Princeton, have been great friends and helped me with the logistics of getting things done when I was not there. Alejandra Marimón, in Buenos Aires, has worked hard improving image editing for this manuscript. Further people that have contributed meaningfully to this endeavor are Anthony Acciavatti, Rodrigo Booth, Benjamin Bryce, Juan Buonuome, Olivier Burtin, Hernán Comastri, Laura Cucchi, Lucas Entel, Ezequiel Grisendi, Juan Lucas Gómez, Vanessa Grossman, Pablo Landa, Valeria López Fadul, Paula Luciani, Miqueias Mugge, Ana Sabau, and Charlotte Worms.

In Buenos Aires, I have taken part in conversations, workshops, and panels with many scholars that have been extraordinarily helpful and generous to me. In particular I would like to thank Anahi Ballent, who has been a thorough reader and gave me crucial advice at many points. Patricio Geli, Hilda Sabato, and Eduardo Zimmermann have been equally supportive of my work. I have also enjoyed participation in panels and workshops with the Saberes del Estado group at IDES (special thanks also to Jimena Caravaca and Claudia Daniel) and with the Centro
de Historia Intelectual at the Universidad Nacional de Quilmes (special thanks to Gabriel Entín and Martín Bergel). Cristina Boixadós, Lila Caimari, José Sebastián Elías, Miranda Lida, Jorge F. Liernur, Daniel Plotinsky, Mariano Plotkin, and Juan Suriano have also shared with me their deep knowledge of many of my fields of research.

Besides all these wonderful teachers and scholars, I also want to especially acknowledge Adrián Gorelik and Graciela Silvestri, who have been passionate and generous intellectual mentors since a very early period of my life. It is clear that my interest in history and culture would not be the same without them.

This dissertation has involved the visit to many archives and, mainly, libraries. In Buenos Aires, I am very grateful to the staff of: Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno, Biblioteca del Congreso de la Nación, Biblioteca Esteban Echeverría of the Legislatura de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, Bibliotecas Tornquist and Prebisch of the Banco Central de la República Argentina, Biblioteca Alejandro Christophersen of the Sociedad Central de Arquitectos, Biblioteca Luis Huergo of the Centro Argentino de Ingenieros, Biblioteca Emilio Frers of the Universidad del Museo Social Argentino, library of the Facultad de Arquitectura, Diseño y Urbanismo (UBA), Biblioteca del Congreso de la Nación, Biblioteca-CDI of the Ministerio de Economía, library of the Banco Hipotecario Nacional, Centro de Documentación e Investigación de la Cultura de Izquierdas (CeDInCI), archive of the Dirección General de Museo e Instituto Histórico (GCBA), and Archivo General de la Nación (AGN). The cooperative El Hogar Obrero has kindly opened me the doors of their archive, for which I want to thank Julio Ciaschini, Alfredo Gómez, and Guadalupe. The same applies to the Federación de Círculos Católicos de Obreros, for which I thank Daniel del Cerro.
In Princeton, I have been a permanent user of Firestone Library (special thanks to Fernando Acosta-Rodríguez, inexhaustible source of bibliographic support), as well as the Architecture Library and Marquand Library. In New York City, I have also used the resources of the Butler Library and the Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library at Columbia University, as well as the New York Public Library.

Online—it has to be said as well—, I have relied on three fundamental databases: HathiTrust, World Biographical Information System (WBIS), and World Newspaper Archive (infoweb.newsbank.com), the three of them accessed through Princeton University Library.

I would not like to finish these acknowledgements without mentioning four more people who have been at the basis of this effort. First, Luis Marimón, Noemí Abad, and Alejandra Marimón, who have always been next to me and have contributed more than they can imagine. Second, I could not start counting all the things for which I acknowledge Ana Kuschnir, who made the writing of this dissertation an outstandingly happy period of my life. She has been a gifted and thoughtful listener, has tolerated the strange lifestyle that dissertations impose to their authors, and has shared with me, in the last months, the joy of raising young Ruth.

To all these people and institutions I want to express, once again, my gratitude. I have done my best to honor with these pages all what they have given me.
Introduction

In early May 1917, in the halls of the Fine Arts Commission in the Argentine Pavilion—a majestic crystal palace at the center of the elegant Plaza San Martín—stood an unusual architectural exhibition. Illustrations of 44 projects for a model “workers’ neighborhood” hung from the pavilion’s walls, occupying four entire rooms, lavishly decorated by the municipal Director of Public Gardens. It was a momentous occasion: the National Commission of Cheap Houses (as it was called) had unveiled the first architectural competition on workers’ dwellings ever held in the country, aiming to select projects that best fit its goal to provide “cheap, comfortable, and hygienic houses” to workers and employees.¹ Some years later, in April 1921, workers’ housing, now labeled “popular mansions,” occupied once again the Fine Arts installations of the pavilion. This time, a nation-wide Catholic organization decided to showcase the results of a competition for the construction of individual houses and apartment buildings (“mansions”), to be built with the funds gathered in a recent public collection.²

How did this happen? How did the dwellings for the poor achieve such a level of respectability, mounted as centerpieces of an exhibition at the aristocratic heart of Argentina’s capital? This dissertation is the story of such a process: the story of the emergence of mass housing (or social housing—I will discuss the terminology later on) as a concern of the ruling elite of conservative Argentina in the decades around the turn of the century, and story of its growth in visibility and centrality to anxieties about the social question that spanned the old conservative regime and the reformist Radical administrations starting in 1916.³

¹ “Casas baratas. Exposición de planos,” La prensa, 8 May 1917, 9.
² “Los concursos de la Unión Popular Católica Argentina,” Revista de Arquitectura, No 29, 1921, 8.
³ With the label, “conservative Argentina,” I am referring to the historical cycle that opened in 1880. A sort of Argentine “Gilded Age,” it was a period of economic expansion, mass immigration and state consolidation, in which
The narrative of this story is told in three parts, each with a different texture and chronological span. The first section, including chapters 1 and 2, is a long-term history of the urban evolution of Buenos Aires from the 1870s to the 1920s, highlighting the successive initiatives of housing reform that unfolded across those years, in correlation with the distinctive phases of the physical and social development of the city. Chapters 3, 4, and 5, in turn, zoom in on the specific conjuncture that followed World War I, from 1919 to 1921, presenting the housing crisis of the period in relation to economic and social trends, political change, and the dynamic of public opinion, as well as explaining the process that led to the issuing, in September 1921, of a set of laws that regulated rent prices and contracts. Chapter 6, finally, constitutes a part of its own, explaining the novelties that developments in housing architecture brought to the housing question across the 1920s, to a certain extent as a consequence of the preceding crisis.

This diversity in scale and texture reflects the importance of the early postwar conjuncture and the subsequent scramble for solutions. The 1921 rent laws, usually neglected by historians, were a major turning point in the history of housing and of social policy in Argentina. I argue that these laws fully reconfigured housing policies in the country: departing from the previous trajectory of initiatives of construction of dwellings aimed at the low-wage worker, the laws placed rented housing at the center of the housing problem, thus adjusting housing policy to the reality of a market in which rentals predominated over self-owned houses. To accept the omnipresence of unequal landlord-tenant relations, while submitting them to social instead of economic regulatory criteria, was a revolutionary transformation. This transformation was an aristocratic yet in many ways liberal-minded elite ruled the destinies of the country up to the rise of the so-called Radical Party to power in 1916. I will describe the characteristics of Argentine political forces in Chapter 4. (Note: throughout this dissertation I use the word “Radical,” with capital “R,” to refer to the political party and movement, and keep the word “radical,” in lower case, for its standard meaning).
qualitative, but also quantitative, in that it expanded the spectrum of the population that benefitted from housing policy to almost all social sectors.

I will develop in this dissertation two further arguments. The first one is that the transformation of housing policy achieved by the 1921 rent laws was possible due to the critical conjuncture that led to their issuing. This conjuncture presented the combined force of an unprecedented social crisis, of an active public sphere, of a competitive political system, and of a shifting urban landscape, all of which opened the stage to a variegated set of actors (from mobilized tenants to journalists, from activist priests to social scientists), who contributed, together with politicians, towards the reformulation of rent relations. This reformulation was thus a fully “societal” creation. The timing and modality of the passing of these laws reflected this expression—and one might say a little-known triumph—of social politics.

My third argument is that this new mode of tackling the housing problem through rent regulation shaped the actual production of social housing for the next two decades. In a context in which architects were becoming increasingly involved with the housing question, in which vertical construction (the high rise) was becoming a new, conquering architectural type, and in which the suburban barrios of Buenos Aires flourished, the new standards in rent relations encouraged the development of the suburban apartment building as a prototype for mass housing. Collective dwelling, formerly seen as a second-best, temporary solution for crowded downtown areas, acquired new social and architectural value, which, I argue, was to a great extent a consequence of the voices that had thematized rent during the 1919-1921 conjuncture.
A bigger picture

To ask oneself about the emergence of the housing question opens up a broader set of interrogations.

First, the question on how and why certain issues become of public concern (“questions”) and end up being the object of public policies. Who pushes for, designs, and implements those policies? How is the development of those policies related to political processes that can favor as well as preclude them? A standard method is to look for the answer in the structural forces that unleash a change in social regimes, or simply in the initiatives of political elites. This dissertation, in contrast, shows that the development of new social policies—and with them, often, of complete reconceptualizations of the social question—involves far more complex and historically situated processes, in which diverse social actors become involved and strive for the policy solutions they deem more convenient. The political elite is undoubtedly one of these actors, and indeed a powerful one, but it is not alone.

In the first place, I will draw my attention to experts, who are the figures that tend to be behind the design of such social policies. The word “expert” denotes a figure that, thanks to the possession of a “technical” and purportedly wertfrei knowledge, is able to make sense of historical situations, making them intelligible in newer ways. In the realm of social policies it also denotes, at least since the work of Skocpol, Rueschemeyer and others, a specific type of relation with the state: an expert is someone that, thanks to the willingness of that state to support a knowledge-based approach to policy, acquires the permanent position of a “policy-maker.”

While accepting this view, I also aim to highlight that in certain historical and local contexts like

---

the ones we are dealing with here—though this is actually a reinterpretation that might well be extensible to more “mature” policy regimes—the development of this figure of the expert is not at all detached from non-state realms; rather, it unfolds its expertise in a complex constellation of relations between state agencies, associations, interest groups, and the like. “Expert knowledge,” I will argue, emerges from all those instances.5

This takes me to the importance I give here to specific historical conjunctures as determinant of policy changes and of reconfigurations of the social question. I will later on mention the classic work of Ruth and David Collier, political scientists that have talked about “critical junctures” of social and political incorporation. Their approach is important, since it allows to see the historically-situated nature of those changes, and their dependence on very specific configurations of social and political forces, rather than being structurally predetermined processes.

One further factor I will highlight in relation to these critical junctures and to the state is public opinion. Offering an alternative (which I deem complementary rather than contradictory) to the traditional class-based approach to the social question and social policies, the public sphere looms large in this dissertation, as an instance in which social actors formulate their grievances and in some cases (namely, mass newspapers) constitute themselves as such actors. Working as a chain of transmission between social actors and the state, the public sphere (and, through it, public opinion) is undoubtedly one of the ways in which the participation of broader

---

5 A further note on the role of the expert in this dissertation is that there was no such thing as a “housing expert” during this period, but rather a diverse set of professionals and specialists that turned their attention to the issue in specific periods. Housing was not itself a field of expertise. This approach, which we could call “issue driven,” can be contrasted with Christian Topalov’s interrogations on the existence (or the lack thereof) of a field of social reform in France around the turn of the century. See Topalov, “Nouvelles spécialités,” in Christian Topalov, Laboratoires du nouveau siècle: la nébuleuse réformatrice et ses réseaux en France, 1880-1914 (Paris: École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1999).
social actors in the crafting of social policies can be explored. I discuss these issues further in the first part of Chapter 3.

The importance given to public opinion will also allow me to examine parliamentary debate, a crucial instance of policy making, through an angle different from the traditional one. While I pay serious attention to political parties and parliamentary dynamics, I also widen the lens to bring into the political struggle the different voices in the public sphere and other social instances, thus presenting parliamentary and social debates as part of a continuum. The “strictly” political discussion of the rent laws will thus appear in my dissertation in seamless transition with debates on housing that were happening in the public sphere, in scholarly realms, and (to a lesser extent, due to source limitations) in “the street.”

Getting now to a more specific level, this dissertation also contributes to discussions on the social question and the emergence of social policies in Latin America. In particular, I will draw here on the many authors that have shown the existence of such policies—as well as, of course, the problematizations of the social question that paved the way for them—prior to the emergence of welfarist/populist regimes. Like those authors, I will show that these first iterations of social policies were much more than a pre-history of welfare. The conceptions of social justice and the technical tools that welfarism extended to broader sections of society were, in many cases, those developed in the first postwar.

Related to this, this dissertation also provides a revision of standard explanations of the economic and social trends of the early interwar years. The “roaring twenties,” usually seen as a period of prosperity that stemmed out of processes of economic recovery in the majority of the western countries, were in fact strongly marked by social policy, which did much to sustain the consumption level of workers. This has been recently demonstrated by Pablo Gerchunoff for the
Argentine case, as he showed that Radical administrations promoted expansive fiscal policies that increased nominal and real wages.⁶ Rent control and contract regulations were, I argue, a substantial part of those policies, reducing the weight of rent in family budgets and providing basic residential stability to working-class families.

In this dissertation I have also tried, finally, to “resituate” the history of social housing. An essentially spatial and urban device, typical histories of the emergence of housing policies have focused solely on policy decisions, on the activities of philanthropists, or on the architectural features of buildings. The city, in them, is a context, the scenario where reform takes place. My interest here has been to give new value to the relative locations of social housing in the city and to explore the housing-policy decisions in relation to urban projects and to broader discussions on urban problems.

That contribution is important, because it highlights something frequently forgotten in traditional housing histories: that the housing question is to a great extent the consequence of the interaction between the social question and urban development. It depends, on one hand, on certain social dynamics that turn social issues into public concerns, and on the other, on patterns of urban development that permanently frame and reframe what type of housing actors find more convenient and consider of social value. Few cases are more adequate to develop this approach than the case of Buenos Aires in the first decades of the 20th century. The housing question emerged there, as we will see along these pages, from the tripod constituted by a rather unique intersection between an economic and social crisis, a democratic transition, and urban expansion.

---

Such an intersection would turn housing a burning issue for an unexpectedly wide array of actors, who would act in consequence.\(^7\)

*The housing question and social reform. A note on terminology*

This is, in many ways, a story of social reform. Something like a top-down story, in which I will follow a set of actors that successively conceptualized housing as part of the social question. These actors, which under the umbrella category of reformers include physicians, lawyers, economists, legislators, priests, cooperative leaders, engineers, and municipal bureaucrats, or in many cases more than one of those things at a time, became involved in the housing endeavor, and in doing so produced an equally variegated set of plans and projects, from legislative bills to architectural designs, from statistical studies to pamphlets and conferences.

This emphasis on the perspective of reformers towards housing is what led me to refer to my object of analysis as “the housing question,” rather than “workers’ houses” (*casas para obreros*) or “cheap houses” (*casas baratas*), terms which historical actors used to denominate what we would nowadays call “social housing” or *vivienda social*. In contrast, by using the terms “the housing question”—*el problema de la vivienda* or *de la habitación*, formulas also used by historical actors in the period—I try to convey that the nature of this historical object is conceptual rather than physical. It entails a set of problematizations and of endeavors that emerged historically out of the definition of housing as a specifically social problem that needed to be addressed by public powers or by other collective organizations (such as cooperatives,  

\(^7\) The interest of this conjuncture lies also in the fact that, in relation to the rent policies that would emerge from it, neither Argentina nor other countries of the region were “latecomers” when compared to central countries—something we will examine in chapter 4. Yet, in the former these policies had the specificity of being implemented during periods of intense urban expansion and democratic opening, which renders the Southern-Cone experience with rent regulation an especially fruitful one to assess the crossings between the housing and the urban questions.
unions, philanthropies, etc.) rather than by the market. Much like the social question, to talk about housing as a question is to talk about a perspective that members of such organizations had on housing, according to which housing was a dimension of the general needs of the population that had to be addressed collectively.

It is worth mentioning that the existence or not of the housing question is not a given, but rather something that has to be proved by the researcher. Bad housing, housing scarcity, high rents, and the like can exist (and indeed have always existed) without becoming a question or issue that somebody identifies as such. For something to be of public or social concern, a social and political framework must exist, according to which there is a certain mandate or desideratum that prescribes that generalized unsatisfied needs must be addressed by a public agency. Such is the framework that, as Jacques Donzelot convincingly argued, developed in western democratic countries during the 19th century, as the egalitarian promises of democracy increasingly collided with the unequal realities of capitalism.\(^8\) In addition to this, for that public concern to emerge it is also necessary that social observers engage creatively in understanding and problematizing the lived situations as problems to be addressed, thus “constructing” them as such.\(^9\)

A final terminological clarification is required regarding the word “reformer.” Comparable to that of “expert” yet emphasizing political will rather than specialized knowledge, this category is rather broad, including all figures that, from different positions and disciplines,

---

9 On the concept of problematization and the importance of social scientists in “constructing” an issue as socially visible, see Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose, “In the Name of Society, or Three Theses on the History of Social Thought,” *History of Human Sciences* 10, no. 3 (1997). On the use of the word “questions” (cuestiones) to convey a dynamic way of understanding social issues as they emerge, develop, and are solved in specific historic conjunctures, see Oscar Oszlak and Guillermo O’Donnell, “Estado y políticas estatales en América Latina: hacia una estrategia de investigación,” *Redes* 2, no. 4 (1995): 99–128.
embarked on projects to address issues they considered socially problematic. Yet, the word “reformer” will have a slightly narrower meaning when applied to the majority of the characters of this story. In their emphasis on the tensions that capitalism generated and that required public solutions, these early-twentieth-century reformers sought for an equidistant position between from *laissez-faire* conservatism—although I will explain the specific ways in which the reformers in this story belonged to the broader conservative ideological field—as well as from revolutionary socialism. They believed in the possibility of solving these issues within existing economic and social structures through the path of gradual reform. In the words of a local student of social knowledge, these figures “sought for a middle way between the orthodox *laissez-faire* and state socialism.”

*Theoretical discussion: the state and social policies*

As said, along this work I will examine with special interest how social policies have emerged and developed. I would like to discuss the issue more thoroughly in this section.

It has been a long trend in sociological studies to search for structural explanations to the emergence of such policies. Scholars have tended to locate them either in the attitudes of a clairvoyant ruling elite that, in the style of the Bismarck government in the Germany of the 1880s, provided social security to its citizens in order to prevent the emergence of a working-class-based opposition; or, on the contrary, in the struggle of organized labor that, as in the

---


Nordic “social-democratic” model of welfare, forced the state to provide social benefits to create a new social compact. In both cases, the explanation relies on structural forces—those of capitalism and modernization—as explanatory factors that make social policy an almost inescapable fate. When explaining, in turn, the emergence of welfare policies in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, or Uruguay—in which, by the way, it would be an exaggeration to assume the existence of a welfare state—, scholars have mentioned other factors, like the strength of democratic traditions, the level of industrial protection against foreign competition, or the level of economic growth.

As critics of this literature have signaled, it does not matter how many structural factors we enumerate: they will never suffice to grasp the specifics in the development of welfare policies, such as their timing and scope (what and whose needs are covered, and how?), which diverge widely in each national case and matter a great deal in explaining the relation between welfare provision and social and political history. A classic example of this type of approach is the one taken by Ruth and David Collier when comparing the processes of political incorporation of the working and peasant masses in different Latin American countries during the 20th century. For these authors, such processes emerged in all cases through historically specific “critical junctures,” which left a deep imprint in how the process would subsequently unfold.

---


This line of critical literature is especially relevant for the central part of this thesis (chapters 3-5). As I discuss the 1921 rent laws, I pay close attention to the details of the political processes that led to their issuing, and show that the outcomes of these processes, marked as they were by competence and conflict among political forces, were necessarily contingent, depending on conjuncture rather than on structure. The rent laws, as this dissertation makes clear, were close to not being issued at all.

**Historiographic discussion: previous literature on the topic**

In the local milieu, historiography on the housing question began in the 1970s, tied to the debates on the social history of Argentina, particularly those surrounding the process of economic growth and demographic change that spanned from the 1880s to the 1930s. To study mass housing in a big metropolis like Buenos Aires meant, as historians Diego Armus and Juan Suriano have stated, to assess the social implications that rapid economic growth had for the working masses (somewhat similarly to the British “standards-of-living” debate on the Industrial Revolution), to gauge the side-effects of modernization and urban transformation, and to understand the process of mass immigration.\(^{15}\) In a period that has remained in collective memory and in scholarly views alike as one of generalized upward social mobility, housing was an object that could provide a much more balanced picture.

Within this set of questions, the most prominent historian to carry out a monographic study of housing was architect and planner Oscar Yujnovsky in the early 1970s.\(^{16}\) Yujnovsky drew a somber cast on the housing situation of the urban masses, explaining the development of

---


\(^{16}\) Oscar Yujnovsky, “Políticas de vivienda en la ciudad de Buenos Aires (1880-1914),” *Desarrollo Económico* 14, no. 54 (July 1, 1974): 327–72.
phenomena like high prices and squalor conditions in the tenements of downtown Buenos Aires (which he quantified for the first time through examination of national and municipal censuses) as a consequence of an urban program that, overdetermined by class structure, was designed for the profit of a “landed class.” That urban program involved generous expropriation norms, facilities for the development of the real estate market, the concentration of urban improvement in the central and northern areas of the city (where the well-to-do resided), and a regressive tax scheme on land values, all of which benefited the landed elite. In contrast, as dictated by the strict laissez-faire ideology of the conservative elite, it was a program that excluded the development of significant housing policies such as public loans or direct state construction.

Interpretations of the process of suburbanization that unfolded from the 1900s on, which I assess in Chapter 1, also touched upon debates on mass housing in the Belle Époque. Horacio Torres, James Scobie, and Charles Sargent, the most important historians to examine the process of urban expansion, saw in suburbanization an essential tool of upward mobility. The acquisition of a self-owned plot in the periphery and the construction of a home in it entailed the generation of a new social class of urban denizens (many of them immigrants or their descendants), who managed to move out of the tenement to become modest suburban homeowners.

These structuralist views on the housing question have been challenged, either in terms of the standard-of-living debate or concerning the adequacy of the tenement-suburban house sequence. In the mid-1980s, historians Francis Korn and Lydia de la Torre questioned the general idea of a deterioration of dwelling standards in Buenos Aires from the 1880s to the

---

1920s, arguing (rather unconvincingly) that by 1914 the housing stock allowed for a general improvement of the amount of per capita rooms.\textsuperscript{18} They also argued (much more convincingly) that the so-called “landed class” was actually a variegated set of owners of different nationalities and levels of economic power, and that there was a general “democratization” of access to urban property in the 1910s and 1920s. Diego Armus and Jorge Liernur, in turn, cast doubts on the tenement/suburban-house tandem, showing the variegated intermediate living arrangements that existed both in city centers and suburbs (such as room sublets, hotels, self-built makeshift dwellings in fiscal or vacant lands, the lodging of workers in factories or of domestic servants in the workplace, etc.), all of which demonstrates a much more complex landscape.\textsuperscript{19} José Moya, finally, stressed the existence of a market of middle-income, centrally-located rental housing, which explained the patterns of residential continuity of many social sectors (particularly Spanish immigrants), even as they climbed the social ladder.\textsuperscript{20}

A different agenda guided the second important set of studies on housing in Argentina, namely that of cultural historians of the architecture Jorge Liernur and Anahi Ballent. Interested in what a recent compilation of their work dubbed a “cultural history of the house,”\textsuperscript{21} their questions centered on the different cultural, social, and political meanings that the house had throughout Argentine history, seeing it as a changing object, and as the arena of social and political struggles. At the same time, they also paid attention to architectural questions, related to

\textsuperscript{20} Jose C. Moya, \textit{Cousins and Strangers: Spanish Immigrants in Buenos Aires, 1850-1930} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), Ch. 4.
\textsuperscript{21} Anahí Ballent and Jorge Francisco Liernur, \textit{La casa y la multitud: vivienda, política y cultura en la Argentina moderna} (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2014).
the development of architectural languages, housing typologies, and the relationship between housing construction and urban development. Through this prism, thus, Liernur made in his early works the first history of social housing as a device of social control, embracing the Foucauldian lens that Georges Teyssot had used for the European 19th century. Liernur thus argued that the medical monitoring of the tenement, the social conception of the self-owned house in the early 20th century, and the reformist thrust of state agencies, architects and publicists toward a change in housing patterns through the development of the modern house in the 1920s and 1930s were part of the broader problem of how to manage, settle, and discipline the inarticulate and mobile immigrant working masses. In turn, Anahi Ballent examined housing in relation to imaginaries of social reform, historicizing the initiatives around social housing of socialist cooperativists and of social Catholics and linking the successive valiances of architectural types to conceptions of reform throughout 20th century.

Liernur and Ballent’s questions were important in approaching housing from a perspective that, rather than fusing it with broader issues of the social question or within the frame of problems of urban expansion, dealt with its specificity as a historical object: the house was a material and formal entity, the subject of a disciplinary discourse and practice (architecture), the carrier of visions of family and of society. Liernur and Ballent also characterized the interwar years as a period in which a fundamental transition in dwelling types

---

happened. Prior to that transition, the landscape of types was a diverse spectrum that ranged from the humble casa chorizo (vernacular sort of railroad apartment) to the high-end aristocratic palace with its complex structure of rooms, corridors, service areas and the like. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, housing professionals (architects), moral reformers, state officials, and market agents collaborated more or less consciously towards the construction of a new, more homogeneous and standardized “norm” for the modern house: a rational, compact, and marketable house, materialized in the individual casa cajón and in the modern apartment. These new types expanded after the Second World War, both through state and market mechanisms, becoming the dominant housing modalities of Argentine society.

In this dissertation I have relied in fundamental ways on these previous strands of research on housing. Yet, certain questions remained unanswered, requiring further elaboration and prompting my own investigation. A first question concerns the articulation between social housing and political history, which is essential to understand social housing as public policy. Pre-existing approaches have relied on general views of the process of social change and urban expansion from the late 19th century to the 1920s. Somehow, this scholarship neglected the country’s major political transition that took place around the 1912 electoral reform and the rise of the Radical party to power in 1916. While analysts of labor and other social policies marked 1916 as a turning point, historians of social housing, albeit deeply aware of the political transformation in course, have nonetheless failed to find traces of it in debates, policies, and material accomplishments around the housing question. In this dissertation I look for those traces, giving a key role to the new political dynamics that arose in 1912. A similar point can be made about the major rent crisis of the early postwar period. How did politicians, reformers of all sorts and technical experts reframe their view of housing once faced with the overwhelming
statistics and the dramatic testimonies of the housing crisis at hand? How did they relate it to the other socially critical developments of the period? What solutions did they propose? Those are precisely the types of questions that this investigation, almost obsessively centered on the conjuncture, aims to answer.

This dissertation also provides new ways of understanding the development of social housing and of new architectural types described by Liernur and Ballent for the 1920s. In my account, I will highlight certain aspects of that transition that stemmed from the changes that the 1919-21 crisis brought about. In more concrete terms, I demonstrate in chapter 6 that the new importance of the apartment building in the 1920s was to a great extent due to the hierarchization of rented housing that the crisis provided, making it clear to politicians and architects alike that this was not a residual or temporary type, but rather a standard residential type for urban dwellers.²⁵

In relation to this, another contribution of my dissertation relates to the general understanding of rent policy within the realm of housing policies. This is something that scholarship beyond Argentina has also found difficult to address. Typical histories of housing have focused on state agencies devoted to direct construction, separating their action from that of the agencies in charge of dealing with rent prices. I show here that both realms relate to the same

²⁵ Here it is necessary to make a short juridical explanation. In Argentina, like worldwide, collective dwelling was tantamount to rented dwelling, since was no condominium law that allowed a dweller to own only a part of the building. Land property was conceived “vertically,” from soil upwards and downwards ad infinitum, and the idea of owning part of a property seemed complicated (for instance, in relation to the use, upkeep and repairs of common areas of buildings). It was the impact of the war, which destroyed much of the existing housing stock and allowed for new edification of more collective homes, plus a realization of the potential social benefits of a diffusion of homeownership, what pushed certain countries to experiment a new type of regulation. Belgium opened the trend in 1924, and Brazil was a pioneer in the continent, in 1928. Argentina’s law of “horizontal property” (as it is called in all Spanish-speaking countries) dates of 1948. See Donna S. Bennett, “Condominium Homeownership in the United States: A Selected Annotated Bibliography of Legal Sources,” Law Library Journal 103, no. 2 (April 2011). J. Leyser, “The Ownership of Flats. A Comparative Study,” The International and Comparative Law Quarterly 7, no. 1 (1958): 31–53.
problematic, that of housing policies *tout court*, which, for actors themselves, was one single set of issues to be dealt with through a variegated set of approaches: price control, regulation of rent relations, direct construction, tax encouragement, building regulations, etc.\(^{26}\)

Attention to the specific conjuncture, finally, is an additional theme that international scholarly treatments of housing have not adequately addressed. In the case of rent legislation, there are some thorough, fine-grained studies, which locate the origins of that legislation in tenant mobilization, notably in the case of New York City.\(^{27}\) Yet, this local approach has failed to account for the broader picture of long-term housing policies and the impact of these key conjunctures on them. On the other end of the spectrum, in turn, even if all historians of social housing in the interwar years have broadly taken the postwar crisis as a turning point, few have identified the different ways in which this crisis unfolded in each national case, and how it defined specific aspects of subsequent housing policies. That is what I intend to do here.

*Dissertation outline*

This narrative opens, as said, with a general picture of the growth process that Buenos Aires experienced between the 1870s and the late 1920s. As immigration generated a continuous increase in population, the scale change of the city was initially one of compression (growth concentrated in an increasingly dense center), and then, thanks to public transportation and land


availability, one of suburban expansion. I explain the main forces behind those two successive
movements, the effect of this process on the general housing patterns of the population, and the
crisis and recovery of urban growth during and after World War I.

The impact of growth on housing patterns did not go unnoticed by the ruling elite, and in
chapter 2 I show the concerns that certain sectors of this elite developed as a reaction to it.
Already by the 1870s, as urban concentration generated a sanitary crisis, medical discourse and
practice identified the tenement as the source of the epidemic waves that the city was suffering,
and posited the need of reforming and/or eradicating the tenement altogether as a housing type.
Later on, when around the turn of the century sanitary conditions improved and the process of
suburban expansion was gaining steam, the tenement remained a focus of concern, now under
the light of the growing levels of social conflict caused by an incipient working-class
mobilization. I explore in the second part of that chapter a set of reformist initiatives through
which a wide array conservative legislators, technical figures, socialist cooperatists, and Catholic
philanthropists aimed to provide workers with self-owned individual houses, based on the
rationale of generating a propertied working-class family, in purported support of “social peace.”
These initiatives had very limited success, to a large extent because the market-led process of
suburbanization was generating such an outcome through economic, rather than political means.
The continuity of social conflict, however, led to a deepening of reformist housing initiatives,
culminating in 1915 with the issuing of the first national housing law.

The middle years of the 1910s marked the end of this first, expansive cycle, due to two
major events. The first, as said, was World War I, which paralyzed economic and urban growth
and generated a major social crisis that exploded in 1919. Second was the issuing of a new
electoral law in 1912 that modified the rules of the political game, allowing the participation of
new political parties (mainly Radicalism and socialism). The new political dynamics were accompanied by the sustained growth of the public sphere throughout the two first decades of the century, as literate population and newspapers multiplied. In such a context, social issues had much more visibility and political relevance than before. In chapter 3 I explore the consequences that all of these processes had for the housing question. In particular, I analyze the reactions to the steep increase of rent prices, focusing on tenant mobilization, on the active attitude of a sector of the Catholic Church towards the housing question, and on the way the city’s main newspapers covered the issue. I argue in this chapter that these different agents “constructed” rent as public problem in 1919, forcing public authorities to address it.

This “movement of opinion,” as it was then called, was successful in its appeal to the state. In chapter 4 I analyze the legislative debates that led to the issuing of a set of rent laws in September 1921. I first analyze the policies addressing the cost of living that different actors within the political spectrum (conservatives, Radicals, socialists) proposed during the war and its immediate aftermath in order to show the relation between those policies and rent regulation. Later on I focus on the bills that Radicals formulated in May 1920 to tackle rent increase, on the discussions in the lower Chamber (which modified the bills in essential ways), and on their final approval. I pay special attention to the role played by socialist politicians in the reformulation of these bills, and to the importance of public opinion and social mobilization in overcoming the resistance of many legislators, both conservatives and Radicals.

Among the different ideological foundations of the rent laws, none was more important than what was then called the “social function of property,” a conception of private property that justified the limitations placed upon it in the name of social welfare. In chapter 5 I reconstruct the activities of a group of conservative-leaning lawyers and economists, which, gathered in the
Museo Social Argentino and a handful of specialized publications, elaborated this notion in scholarly terms during the war years in order to tackle different aspects of the social question and of economic development. These scholars became important interlocutors in the debate of the rent laws in 1920, developing a complex view of the housing question and making a diverse set of recommendations to public authorities.

The rent laws were, as I argue throughout this dissertation, a milestone in the evolution of the housing question in Argentina. Although they did not solve housing scarcity (which was continuously felt in subsequent years), they did mark a new official stance towards it, fully comprehending the importance of rented housing and creating a new, social formulation of it, which included both the working and the middle classes as the object of social policy. New processes in the 1920s would highlight the importance of rented housing. The resumption of urban growth after the war breathed new life into the construction industry, while the continued valorization of land and the development of construction techniques and architectural language gave new importance to vertical collective dwelling (the apartment building). Likewise, and to a large extent as a consequence of the postwar crisis, architects were in Argentina and worldwide becoming more involved than ever in the housing question, expanding their technical expertise to develop new housing schemes that were more efficient and better integrated within the urban structure than previous ones. In chapter 6 I analyze the convergence of all these processes, explaining how the collective house emerged as an adequate, if not superior paradigm of mass housing as compared to the individual one. Focusing on architectural debates, public competitions for the construction of new housing complexes, and on built experiences, this chapter aims to show how the expansion of collective dwelling related to new social conceptions of housing.
Exhibition of housing projects at the Salón Nacional de las Artes, April 1921: Rooms I-IV
Chapter 1
PATTERNS AND PROBLEMS OF URBAN EXPANSION. BUENOS AIRES, 1871-1929

A city is the territorial and social result of thousands of past decisions and processes. This, which might be an obvious statement, points however to a significant fact: the materiality of urban phenomena, which gives urban processes a specific inertia. In them, the decisions of past generations weigh upon present ones in ways more irreversible than in other realms of history. Sigmund Freud once compared ancient Rome to the phenomena of the human mind; in the former, he said, old and new could not but coincide: “If we want to represent historical sequence in spatial terms we can only do it by juxtaposition in space: the same space cannot have two different contents.”\(^1\) The new is always confronted with what preceded it.

Through the precedent paragraph I wish to introduce an explanation of the purpose of this chapter. It is a preface, a contextualization for the discussions on housing and rent that will constitute the heart of the other chapters. Such a contextualization is necessary for at least two important reasons. First, because housing, like any other urban phenomenon, is determined by the past in that strong, material way. Trends in construction, architectural styles, and spatial layouts generate a housing stock of certain characteristics that remain rigidly active in time. New construction, even when done through demolition, is always built against those material conditions. Second, because the other determinants of urban layout, such as urban grid, territorial relations, zoning, or the location of key infrastructure like harbors or transportation means, generate a tissue, a territory upon which housing stands or will stand.

---

With these observations in mind, we can see that the urban development of Buenos Aires in the decades that span from the 1870s to the 1920s was such a “territory.” A fast changing territory indeed, once the “Gran Aldea” (Big Village), as the 150,000-inhabitant city of the 1870s was called, became integrated to the Atlantic economy in a frantic transformation that turned it into the biggest metropolis of the Southern hemisphere and the third city of the Americas in the 1910s, only smaller than the big giants of the emerging industrial economy of the United States. While change was the rule, though, it was a change marked, as said, by preexistences. The patterns of expansion of a city that advanced over flat rural land keeping the regular grid as its basic shape; of a city with bureaucratic, commercial, and harbor activities stubbornly concentrated in its traditional “centro”; of a city in which construction investment did not suffice to break the preeminence of low vernacular housing. All these factors, in sum, dictated what was possible and what not in the realm of housing, and defined a framework upon or against which housing reformers formulated their proposals.

I illustrate in this chapter some major aspects of such a pattern. In order to do so, I draw on the sociological and geographical literature that in the 1970s, a period obsessed with urban studies and town planning, made pioneering investigations in the realm of urban history. Combining quantitative rigor with a structural perspective, geographer Charles S. Sargent and urban planner Horacio Torres produced fine spatial and sociological accounts of the general process of expansion of Buenos Aires, while historian James Scobie, in his 1974 classic, added a refined narrative structure as well as important archival research, giving flesh and historicity to social, economic and political actors.²

Taking the work of these scholars as a point of departure, this chapter will work as a general background and as a spatial guide for the rest of the dissertation. The three sections that compose it are a rather fluid whole. In the first part, I depict the two big cycles that compose the 1870-1930 period: the period of growth concentrated in the city center up to the mid-1890s, and from then on the period of expansion into the surrounding, suburban areas. The second part will get into an explanatory rather than descriptive realm, focusing on the two factors that most strongly determined the rhythm and physiognomy of the suburbanization phase, namely transportation and land. The third part is a description, in rather quantitative terms, of the trends of housing construction and prices, which will become especially relevant as we get into chapters 3-5 and deal with the rent crisis of the 1919-1921 period. A fourth part concludes with the developments during the 1920s, in which the prior trends of expansion continued outwards, the first suburban areas was going through a process of filling-in of the urban tissue, and vertical architecture promoted higher density in the downtown and immediately surrounding areas.

I. Compression and expansion: five decades of continuous growth

A classic trope during the years of the “Centenario,”\(^3\) when the now one-hundred-year-old country celebrated its anniversary through international exhibitions that made a great impression on foreign visitors, was the astonishment among the latter on the speed at which the city of Buenos Aires was growing. To quote one among many, French politician George Clemenceau

---

\(^3\) 1910, the year of the centenary of the Revolution of independence, was an especially meaningful date from the perspective of cultural history. After three decades of economic growth and internal peace, public authorities, intellectuals, and the press celebrated the anniversary with a great number of exhibitions and publications, which made the year remain as a symbol of the optimistic national consciousness of the period. On the Centenario, see José Nun, ed., *Debates de Mayo: nación, cultura y política* (Buenos Aires: Gedisa, 2005), and the classic 1910 visual compilation, *La República Argentina en su primer centenario. 1810-1910* (Buenos Aires: s.n., 1910).
wrote about the South American metropolis: “It is a large European city, giving everywhere an impression of hasty growth, but foreshadowing, too, in its prodigious progress, the capital of a continent […]. Highways that seemed spacious twenty or thirty years ago for a population of two or three hundred thousand souls have become lamentably inadequate for a capital city with more than a million…”

It was indeed a fast, if not monstrous growth process. While in 1869 Buenos Aires counted around 170,000 inhabitants, in forty years its population increased more than tenfold, slightly exceeding the 1.5 million mark in 1914, the last million of which were added only in the last ten years. As Alberto Martínez, national director of statistics, remarked in 1909, only Hamburg, in Germany, had experienced in the western world a higher growth rate than Buenos Aires during the 1904-1909 period; the rest, including dynamic North American metropolises like New York or Chicago, were running behind. This demographic increase had its correlate in the spatial expansion of the city, the settled area of which was almost four times bigger in 1914 than in 1869.

A fast comparison lets us appreciate the change in urban scale. The 170,000 inhabitants of the city of the late 1860s were concentrated in a 700 ha area surrounding the old colonial core, close to the riverbank (SEE MAP 1). Surrounding it were rural lands, only interrupted by the two first suburban “towns,” those of Flores to the west (founded in the 1800s) and of Belgrano to the northwest (founded in the 1850s). As the city was federalized 1880, all these lands were

---

4 Georges Clemenceau, *South America to-Day; a Study of Conditions, Social, Political and Commercial in Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil* (London: G. P. Putnam’s sons, 1911), 33-34.
6 Martínez’s growth rates for 1904-9 are the following: Buenos Aires, 5.91%; London, 1.8; Paris, 0.16; Chicago, 1.3; Berlin, 3.5; Milan, 2.1; New York, 5.7; Hamburg, 6.1. Quoted in Francisco Cibils, “La descentralización urbana en la ciudad de Buenos Aires,” *Boletín del Departamento Nacional del Trabajo* (BDNT), no. 15, 31 March 1911, 94.
7 Torres esteems the growth of the theoretical radius of the city from 3.39 ha in 1869 to 13.52 in 1914. Torres, “Evolución de los procesos de estructuración espacial urbana,” 283.
integrated in the Capital Federal, an administrative unit of roughly 20,000 ha. Even by the 1890s, as growth was already palpable, the dimensions and general shape of the city were not so different than in the 1870s (SEE MAP 2). A big contrast can be seen only twenty years later (SEE MAP 3), with an urban sprawl that already expanded to cover more than half of the former countryside, something to be almost completed, as we will see, by the 1930s.

Map 1: Buenos Aires in 1870 (surrounding towns excluded).
The core district next to the riverbank, the harbor in the mouth of the Riachuelo to the southeast (La Boca), and the emerging industrial area of Barracas to the south.

Map 2: Buenos Aires in 1892.
Note the predominance of rural lands within the administrative limits of the city, the satellite towns of Belgrano (north) and Flores (west), the radial display of railroads stemming from the city center, and the big green area of Palermo (northeast). Close to the downtown area, we can see the harbor built between the city and the riverbank (east), and to the south the gradual integration of La Boca, Barracas, and southernmost “Barracas al Sud” (present-day Avellaneda) to the consolidated city.

Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. [https://goo.gl/e8jG3l](https://goo.gl/e8jG3l) [Accessed March 2017].
Map 3: Buenos Aires in 1914.
Note the total (theoretical) drawing up of the streets following a grid pattern. The areas in yellow were yet unbuilt. Note the perimetral system of parks, drawing a north-south arc.
References: 1- Downtown (“centro”); 2- La Boca; 3- Barracas; 4- Avellaneda; 5- Parque Patricios; 6- Once (railway terminal); 7- Flores; 8- Retiro (northern railway terminal); 9- Recoleta; 10- Palermo; 11- Belgrano; 12- Chacarita (main cemetery); 13- Mataderos (meatpacking district); 14- Puerto Madero (harbor).

Although both the demographic and the spatial expansions would continue well into the 20th century, and only started appeasing by the 1970s, in this dissertation we will deal with events happening during the first part of this secular expansion, which extended between 1870 and the late 1920s. Certain structural factors fueled growth during this cycle, the two most important of which were, first, an economic expansion based on the exports of agricultural foodstuff and raw materials to the industrializing world, which placed Buenos Aires at the heart of the productive areas of the Pampas and also as their main export harbor; and, second, the permanent influx of foreign immigrants from different regions of Europe, which accounted for a great deal of the demographic growth. The beginning of this expansion cycle was much facilitated by the stabilization of the political conditions of the country after the 1860s under the aegis of a liberal elite that established a legal and political framework in which economic development through the insertion in the world market was a priority. It was, likewise, facilitated by one of the many conflictive decisions taken by this elite, which was to keep Buenos Aires as federal capital of the country, against the resistance of a regional faction that wanted to keep the city only as capital of the homonym province. At an urban level, the expansion was made possible by the development of essential urban infrastructure, such as the construction of port facilities, the opening of roads, avenues and parks, the construction of a water supply and sewers system, and the investment in means of transportation, mainly railroads and tramways.

---

8 I am following here Horacio Torres’s idea that in the late 1930s there is a certain change in the dynamics of the expansion that lets us see it as a watershed between two phases, 1870-late 1930s and late 1930s-1970s.
The development of this infrastructure was both a response to the beginning of population influx and a programme to further foster such an influx. At least since the administration of Torcuato de Alvear as Mayor of the newly federalized capital in 1880, the city was the object of conscious “modelling,” the palpable result of which were the demarcation of its definitive limits in 1887, the drawing of many successive plans of expansion, the definition of its final grid pattern in 1904, and the development of a series of parks that were supposed to surround its central area. At the same time, the unfolding of the urbanization process generated new and sometimes unexpected challenges, such as hygienic problems (that culminated in epidemics like the 1871 outburst of yellow fever), overcrowding, traffic congestion, and the like. To cope with them, the city administrators gradually accumulated the necessary bureaucratic and technical resources, many of them from scratch, since a critical mass had migrated to the new provincial capital, La Plata, in the 1880s. The dichotomy between these two “attitudes” (programmatic and reactive) towards urban growth is a way in which we can stylize, as we will see, the emergence of a public concern on the city and on housing.

If we follow the data on population during the period we can find a rather continuous growth, which increased around the years of the Centenario (SEE TABLE 1 AND GRAPH 1); the spatial development, in contrast, offers a much more irregular relief. Horacio Torres subdivided the first cycle of expansion of Buenos Aires into a phase of compression (1870-1895).

---

10 See Adrián Gorelik, *La grilla y el parque: espacio público y cultura urbana en Buenos Aires, 1887-1936* (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 1998). For earlier “town planning” experiences, see Fernando Aliata, *La ciudad regular: arquitectura, programas e instituciones en el Buenos Aires posrevolucionario, 1821-1835* (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes: Prometeo 3010, 2006). Gorelik has explained that, in this modelling of the city, two opposite views of it were struggling during the decades that go from 1880 to 1910. One of them, seeing the city as a great “port of entry” to the prosperous countryside. Derived from the idea that immigrants that arrived at the city would become farmers, this view focused the urban interventions in the harbor and downtown district, leaving rather undefined the territory of the rest of the city. The other view, in contrast, considered urban growth an undeniable fact that had to be coped with, and that was indeed what would make Buenos Aires, through good planning and design, a “great capital.”
and one of expansion (1895-1930s). During the first period, population growth was concentrated in the central area of the city, with a subsequent increase in average density in the area. (SEE FIGURE 1) The figure shows that, as a result of such concentration, there was indeed an expansion, surrounding the downtown district, of the densely populated zones, but mainly an average increase of the population density (the areas marked in black). In a city with all commercial, financial, industrial, and bureaucratic activity clustered around the old city center (or in adjacent industrial and harbor districts like La Boca, Barracas, or Avellaneda), new and old settlers alike strove to stay within walking distance of that area. This was further encouraged by the lack of transportation means that could make the journey to work fast and cheap (slow and rather expensive horse trams were the only existing means up to the end of the century), and by the investment in public services (water supply and sewers, electricity, gas) that the municipality concentrated downtown.\textsuperscript{11} It was indeed one of the peculiar characteristics of fin-de-siècle Buenos Aires that the “centro” hosted, in great vicinity, both members of aristocratic families who clinched to their traditional residential patterns and the immigrant masses that clustered in the same area, within walking distance to their workplaces.

---

\textsuperscript{11} Sargent, \textit{The Spatial Evolution of Greater Buenos Aires}, 33. By 1875 only 13\% of the population of the city benefitted from water supply, which rose steadily to reach half of the population in 1892, and jumped to 73\% in the eve of WWI. Sewers advanced slower, being inaugurated only in 1890; by the late 1890s 30\% of the city inhabitants enjoyed that service, a percentage that remained steady at least until 1914. Street paving and public lighting went through similar trajectories, growing in the 1880s and the 1900s. Electricity, finally, was only implemented by the turn of the century, and advanced quickly in the years prior to the war. Yujnovsky, “Políticas de vivienda en la ciudad de Buenos Aires (1880-1914),” \textit{Desarrollo Económico} 14, no. 54 (July 1, 1974): 327–72, 359.
Table 1: Population, density, and surface growth of Buenos Aires, 1869-1938.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1869</th>
<th>1881</th>
<th>1895</th>
<th>1904</th>
<th>1914</th>
<th>1938</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>174.000</td>
<td>305.000</td>
<td>665.542</td>
<td>945.000</td>
<td>1.928.160</td>
<td>3.615.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Density</td>
<td>96,45</td>
<td>107,61</td>
<td>67,13</td>
<td>91,84</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical radius of agglomeration</td>
<td>3,39</td>
<td>6,26</td>
<td>13,52</td>
<td>15,83</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: adapted from Torres, 283, and Sargent, 146.

Graph 1: growth rate of Buenos Aires, 1869-1914.

Source: ibid.

Figure 1: Increase in population density in the downtown area of Buenos Aires between 1869 and 1895.

Source: Sargent, 13.
As Table 2 shows, in turn, the increase in density was tantamount to an increase in the number of inhabitants per house between 1869 and 1887, with a slight decline in the subsequent years. The number of people per room, which is a much more accurate indicator of overcrowding, emphasizes it, showing an overall increase between 1887 and 1904 (the years for which data are available, thanks to municipal censuses). This increase in density, as it could be expected, was much more dramatic in the downtown area, with a variation of the individual per room index of 27% between those same dates, vs. a 15% variation for the overall area of the city.\(^{12}\)

Table 2: Variation in dwelling density, 1869-1914.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1869</th>
<th>1887</th>
<th>1895</th>
<th>1904</th>
<th>1909</th>
<th>1914</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individuals per house</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ind. per room</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>1.74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: adapted from Yujnovsky, 373.

Density increase had an immediate correlation in the housing situation of the working-class majority that inhabited the city core. It was in this period of “compression,” as we will see in Chapter 2, that tenements emerged as a dominant housing type. Together with tenements, other types of collective dwelling (the diverse world of “inquilinatos,” “fondas,” hotels and the like), together with the practice of sublet and other kinds of house sharing were the norm. As Scobie says, there was no much more difference, in terms of overcrowding, between life in tenements and in other types of collective houses of the downtown area. The general situation of overcrowding was a natural consequence of an increase of centrally-located housing demand

\(^{12}\) Torres, “Evolución de los procesos de estructuración espacial urbana,” 284-5.
with the lack of fast and cheap transportation, the lack of capital available for housing, and the inefficiency and lack of innovation of the construction industry.  

As it was said above, one of the peculiarities of the city of Buenos Aires during the period was the close juxtaposition between upper and lower classes. The traditional residences of the local elite were the old colonial-style houses located in the blocks around the central square (the Plaza de Mayo), and to the south of it. It was in the surroundings of the square that many of the institutions frequented by this elite were located, such as traditional churches, the opera hall, elite high schools and the university, or meeting clubs, as well as the bustling commercial and financial activity. As James Scobie has argued, the prestige of a family had much to do with the proximity of its residence to the central square. Yet, it was also true that in this alluvial period, it was also close to the square that most immigrants aimed to live, being closer to their workplaces in the services and the harbor, and also being that central district the one in which most buildings with a certain locative capacity were located. This peculiar situation would change gradually between the 1880s and the 1910s, as the upper classes started moving northwards, first really close to the square along the street Florida, but later on firmly establishing a grip on areas like the Retiro and Recoleta. They were guided to do so by a plurality of factors, such as the impact of the 1871 yellow-fever epidemic in the southern districts, the search for places with bigger plots in which to build ampler residences, or the proximity to the train that could transport them to their newly summer or weekend residences in the northern suburbs. Yet, this spatial change was also a correlate of a social change that was unfolding: economic development was making these upper classes, who dominated productive

---

14 Scobie, *Buenos Aires, del centro a los barrios*, 146.
land and to a certain extent commercial circuits, much richer than ever before, allowing them to constitute a true aristocracy.\(^\text{15}\) The search for a more exclusive area to live in and the constructions of their new mansions were part of such process. That said, a look at Map 3 (above) can make us realize that this moving did not at all eliminate the centrality of the downtown district, not only as commercial and bureaucratic center, but also due to the fact that the areas chosen by the upper classes were not really far away (between 1 and 2 km) from the old district. In contrast with other cities of the region and worldwide, in which the center became a downtrodden and abandoned area, in Buenos Aires it would retain much of its prestige and vitality. What did change, instead, was the character of the southern part of that center, say to the neighborhoods of Monserrat and San Telmo to the south of the Plaza de Mayo. Close to the harbor, they would become the typical overcrowded areas (together with La Boca) of working-class tenements, many of them established in the old houses the upper classes were fleeing from (although keeping their ownership on them).

These transformations in the central area of Buenos Aires were characteristic of a “walkable” city, that is, of a city the size of which was limited by the means of locomotion. Transportation on foot or through horse-pulled trolleys was the only way to get from one way to the other, and made the “compression” an almost inevitable consequence. The change in these transportation means by the mid-1890s, together with other changes we will visit, were the point of departure of the second part of this expansion process, which Torres and others call “suburbanization”—in

other words, the expansion of the urban sprawl over new, up to then rural areas. This process accelerated after the 1890 economic crisis and knew a particularly acute phase between 1904 and 1914. As a result of this process, by the 1910s the population had “dispersed” over a vast, formerly rural area, thus generating a decrease in the average density of the city and an increase of the overall area covered by the urban sprawl, exceeding the administrative limits of the city mainly in the shape of “tentacles” that followed the railway lines. (SEE FIGURE 2 and MAP 4)

Figure 2: Evolution of the urban sprawl of Buenos Aires.

Source: Sargent, xvi.
While we can see in these images that, as said above, there was already a certain increase of the urban sprawl in the “compression” phase, in that case it was an expansion accompanied by an overall increase in density. The second expansion, in contrast, was much wider in area and involved a true suburbanization: the “barrios”
surrounding the city core made the transition from rural to urban area but through a much less dense pattern of land occupation, becoming true suburbs of the downtown district.

II. The mechanisms of suburbanization: transportation and land

The process of spatial expansion occurred through certain mechanisms and involved specific actors that made its materialization possible. As said above, population increase due to immigration was a rather permanent fact lying behind both cycles of expansion, and city dwellers, looking for jobs and places to settle, were themselves the key actor along the way (as it would be painfully revealed when they almost stopped doing so in 1914). But further factors were necessary to transform the compression phase into one of expansion. Transportation and land were both essential.

The construction of railways reaching far away stations that would eventually become nodes of settlement had already started in the 1860s, and continued throughout the period; we can see their layout in Map 3, and how it was the railway what gave the suburban expansion its characteristic radial shape. A different kind of impact had the expansion and, by the late 1890s, the electrification of tramway lines. In contrast with railways, tramways served first the central area, helping the consolidation of the compression phase, and starting expanding to the suburbs when they became faster, i.e. electrical. The transportation grid they built was much more reduced in total area and much more compact than the railway one, thus generating a more integrated set of suburbs. (SEE FIGURE 3) The display of these transportation networks was the result of a complex set of actors and interests. On one hand, foreign and national capital saw in transportation a potential source of profit, and gradually got involved in it. Railroads usually began with local capitals but soon were absorbed by foreign –British and in some cases French—
companies in the 1870s, which merged into a handful of firms in the 1890s. A similar trajectory was the case with tramways, many of which even before electrification were already absorbed by British firms; by the mid-1900s, tramways became almost the monopoly of the “Anglo-Argentina” company. On the other, national and municipal government started to become involved in the expansion process, granting concessions to the transportation companies in a rather chaotic and opaque manner but also pushing for a lowering of the ticket price, which up to 1905 was still too expensive for workers. It was between that year and 1908 that a 10-cent ticket became standardized as the unified fee in the whole tramway network, including a workers’ “half-fee” trams twice a day. That change, made possible by government pressure but also profitable for the companies due to the technical improvements of electrification and to the expected increase in passengers, was a revolutionary transformation. Through the 10-cent and the half fee a worker could afford to commute from house to work, which made all of a sudden life in the “barrios” affordable for a big sector of the urban population. It was this change in the tariffs scheme what accounts, together with changes in the land market that we will now see, for the “big leap” suburbanization made between 1904 and 1914.

Figure 3: Tramway network, 1874, 1895 (horse-pulled), and 1914 (electrical).

16 See Scobie, Buenos Aires. Plaza to Suburb, chs. 3 and 5.
The second important factor was land. As Charles Sargent argued, “the principal determinant of residential development within this spatially and temporally expanded transportation ‘frame’ was a set of simultaneous decisions in favor of large-scale land subdivision and sale.” Growth and the ability to reach further distances generated pressure on lands surrounding the city core, the value of which increased, unfolding a process of appropriation of it. In the case of Buenos Aires, old landowners of the rural areas that surrounded the traditional city soon saw the opportunity that urbanization offered, and sold their lands to real-estate companies. These companies proceeded to purchase, measure, plat and sell the land in fractions of an urban size, enjoying enormous profit along the way.

Already in 1900 an anonymous author in an engineering journal called the attention on the “constant exodus from the tenement, where the worker builds up his savings [economías], towards the periphery, where he becomes owner [propietario] investing those savings […] in a spacious plot and a building, that he himself builds, with 2 or 3 rooms…” Ten years later,

---

17 Sargent, The Spatial Evolution of Greater Buenos Aires, 76.
18 For the area of the city of Buenos Aires proper, Yujnovsky esteems that the total value multiplied 2.5 times between 1887 and 1914. Yujnovsky, “Políticas de vivienda en la ciudad de Buenos Aires,” 330.
19 “Habitaciones para obreros,” La ingeniería, No. 54, 15 August 1900, 707. “From the 2000 or 3000 houses that are built yearly in our city,” the author continued, “more than 50% belong to the working class, and it is precisely in that
engineer Domingo Selva, a figure to whom we will return, highlighted that, from the turn of the century on, there had been an “enourmous increase of small purchases. All the big stretches of land surrounding the more or less densely built up nucleus of the Capital have been subdivided in small plots and sold in really small installments. The same has happened later on in the lands close to the railway stations neighboring to the city.”20 Selva’s description points directly to the fact that, adjacent to the existing urban sprawl and the railway stations there was a new area in rapid change, from rural to urban. While in 1892, as we have seen in Map 2, much of the city proper’s territory was rural, this was not the case by the mid-1910s, when all of that area had been platted and a substantial portion of it was already edified. Between 1904 and 1914, the population of the western areas of Buenos Aires multiplied by four, while the total one only did so only 1.66 times. We can visualize on Figure 4 two examples of this process in areas extremely distant to the old city center.

Figure 4: gradual densification of two areas of the city, Mataderos and Villa Devoto, in 1888, 1907, and 1916, respectively. Relative location in 1892 map: Villa Devoto, north, Mataderos, south.

sign of prosperity that we can find the immediate reason why tenements do not increase […] It is thus the worker that, by himself, achieves in the suburbs the construction of the modest dwelling [la vivienda económica]…” (Id., 708).

Who purchased those lots? That is a key question, since the final dwellers were the central protagonists of the process, the “demand” that pushed the whole operation forward. Investigations done in the 1970s have shown that from the 1890s to the 1910s there was a process of democratization of the access to suburban plots. Initially such a plot was impossible to acquire for those positioned at the lowest extreme of the spectrum, who had too low or too
unsteady an income to get involved in such a long-term financial operation. It was, rather, the “middle-income office worker, or empleado, and the skilled worker” who had the financial means to do so. However, the evolution of the monthly installment schemes that started to expand frantically after 1904 (we will then explain then why this timing) made the access to suburban land easier. In Horacio Torres’s words, “the peculiar shape of the suburbanization process in Buenos Aires during the period was the result of the access to urban property by part of the immigrant masses arrived as labor force.”

The main cause for that, besides the decrease in the price of the tramway ticket (which, as said, made it feasible for a worker to move outwards and commute), was the enormous increase of lots supply from 1904 on, and the subsequent proliferation of more and more generous installment schemes, which, as land price rose, started expanding from 40 to 80, and in some cases even 120 installments, in order to keep the installment price affordable. This was a process that had started already by the mid- and late-1890s, as many sources reveal. Its advance, however, became especially meaningful as the price of installments became to compete successfully with that of the rent of a room in a tenement, as Table 3 reveals.

Table 3: tenement room vs suburban lot.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rent of tenement room</th>
<th>Plot price</th>
<th>No. of installments</th>
<th>Monthly price</th>
<th>% of wage consumed by renting room in tenement</th>
<th>% of wage consumed by lot installment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

22 Torres, “Evolución de los procesos de estructuración espacial urbana,” 290.
The table shows that it was possible that, once the number of installments reached 60, the basic monthly price of the lot could become more than 1/3 cheaper than the rent of the tenement room, and cost a reasonable 23/27% of the wage of an industrial worker. James Scobie esteems that, between 1905 and 1912, the resulting monthly price of those schemes was low enough so that a specialized worker could afford it with the savings of two working days per month, to acquire a plot in the suburbs was a step that required certain financial stability. To this basic amounts, however, we have to add the price of (and the time invested in) building a house in the plot, which, with a comparable financing scheme, would make the monthly quote go to $20.6, only 25% more expensive than the tenement room; and we have to add commuting costs, a

---

24 See in Torres, “Evolución de los procesos de estructuración espacial urbana,” 289. Torres also explains that the continuation of the expansion process after the 1930s up to the 1970s had strong social consequences. The workers or lower-middle class families that could acquire such a suburban lot would saw its value increased, thanks to the mere fact of continued expansion. The relative location of their plot (back then suburban but now “central,” since the whole city proper had become the center of a metropolis, the suburbs of which were located in what we nowadays call “Greater Buenos Aires”) made this family the owner of an asset with value enough to turn it into a middle class. In the medium term (say from 1920 to 1950-60), owning of a plot of land was a central factor of social mobility. See id., 290.
monthly average of $4.8. Yet, with initial down payments of only 3 installments (plus 5 more to sign a mortgage), this was still a fairly competitive option.\textsuperscript{25}

The democratization of the purchase of suburban lots generated a rather varied housing and tenure landscape in the western part of the city. The spectrum of people that could afford such a move, from the specialized worker and the white-collar employee to lesser paid industrial workers (although not, as seen, the poorest ones, who lacked the basic financial stability necessary to affront the investment), was reflected in the plots and house they could acquire or build. The lower extreme of the spectrum were limited to acquire plots in the worst areas, such as those removed from transportation means or the ones with frequent floods, in the areas neighbor to the Riachuelo. Dwelling in huts and precarious adobe houses, some could only rent a house purchased by someone else, never becoming owners. Other settler could afford much better versions of suburban homes, finely built, with all the services, and close to transportation. (SEE FIGURES 5-6).

Figures 5 and 6: suburban dwelling varieties in the 1900s. The precarious and the consolidated.

\textsuperscript{25} Sargent, \textit{The Spatial Evolution of Greater Buenos Aires}, 78.
The latter picture is indicative of a characteristic housing typology that would develop in these years, accompanying the suburbanization process, namely the “casa criolla” or “casa chorizo.” (SEE FIGURES 7-8) This house was a vernacular type, the origins of which have been hotly debated, but which undoubtedly combines the tradition of the Spanish house with an internal courtyard with characteristics imposed by the suburbanization process itself. In many cases self-built, inevitably tied to a narrow and long plot characteristic of the city block (we will return to this), and subject to the unpredictable financial and family situation of its owner, it consisted of a longitudinal row of undifferentiated rooms displayed next to a side corridor or gallery (or also a side patio), and leading to a back yard. It was very common that the first room (the one facing the street) was used as workshop or store, and that sometimes the back yard was an orchard. Kitchen and bathroom tended to be in the back. But one of the defining characteristics of the “casa chorizo” was its being usable even when it was half-built, and its potential of having new rooms added as the finances or the family grew.
Figure 7: Vernacular architecture, photographed by Werner Hegemann in the early 1930s.


Figure 8: “Casas chorizo” sold by a building society in the early 1900s.


The heyday of “loteos” was a process that generated a whole culture of the “casa propia,” from which auctioneers and building companies were eager to profit. Announcements of big
sales were characterized as “opportunities,” in which the “dream of the house of one’s own” could be fulfilled. Auctioneers offered free transportation and appetizers for sales days, praised the virtues of the plots to sale, and promised all kinds of financial facilities, including sometimes the provision of a number of free bricks. It goes without saying that not all what was promised was true, something acutely depicted by the satirical press of the period.26 (SEE FIGURES 9-12).

Figure 9: Advertisement of a “loteo” in suburban Villa del Parque in 1908. Note the shape and size of plots in the perfectly square blocks.
Legend: “1908. Rafael Fernández Blanco & Co. Villa del Parque. […] One block from the railway station […] 300 plots, in 80 monthly allotments, no interest […], no base price […]
Sunday 25th October at 2 PM. Definitive property titles…”


Figures 10-12: Advertisement methods in the mid-1900s, and their critique.

26 Even a serious and conservative newspaper like La nación would condemn in 1907 “the efficient advertisement with which auctioneers prepare their profitable operations on tempting land plots [tierras de pan llevar] and on urban properties.” (“Buenos Aires crece. La edificación en 1906. Sesenta millones de ladrillos. Inmuebles y tierras. Los remates”, La Nación, 19 de enero de 1907; quoted by Yujnovsky, 340).
These ads lead us to assess one last, yet extremely important dimension of this expansion process, which is the role of public powers in it. Phenomena like the one just described were obviously the matter of certain concern by authorities, in spite of the fact that many of them were deeply intertwined with the economic actors (there are many examples of individuals who were
owners of important stretches of suburban land, members of the directive boards of tramway, railroad, and real-estate companies, and councilmen or ministers of the municipal government). Literature from the 1990s onwards has unearthed the important work of municipal bureaucrats, not only stopping “abuses” like those above, but also trying in a more general way to channel market forces.

We have already seen the pressures of government towards the lowering of the tramway ticket prices in the late 1900s, which impacted the growth process enormously. An equally meaningful intervention happened in the realm of land. While many of the allotments in the 1870s and 1880s were generously authorized and even encouraged by the city government, and were also done in coordination with the expansion of railway lines, in the 1890s and 1900s the municipal government tried to restrain the speculative process, in order to reserve for itself a coordinating and planning role. Municipal authorizations were stopped, until the government had defined the location and pattern of roads and parks, as well as that of the future plots. The final plan was only ready in 1904 after a long process of measurement and design; it notoriously expanded the regular square grid pattern to the whole surface of the city and the city-to-be, thus generating a regular and strongly integrated ensemble and limiting the potential impact of territorial operations by speculators.27 It also defined a peripheral “parks system,” that was supposed to work as a source of hygiene and urban beauty, as well as a brake to land speculation. Map 5 reproduces the first document in which the Municipality crystallized the new scheme, showing also the small portion of the new grid that was consolidated urban tissue back then, leaving a vast surface still to be constructed and populated.

27 See Gorelik, *La grilla y el parque*, 27.
Map 5: The 1904 grid plan of the Department of Public Works of the Municipality, and scheme of peripheral parks (the black rectangle is the old central district). In black, we see the consolidated urban areas, while the grid that lays over white background was, in practice, not yet platted. Compare with Map 3 (1914).


The expansion of the grid, rather than an acritical prolongation of the existing city, was a fully programmatic decision that aimed to define specific ways of land use and urban development. It involved a desire of generating and integrated city and also a “democratic” one, in that it allowed a generalized interconnection and provision of urban services, while it avoided the formation of ghettos. As any program, its fulfillment was not guaranteed. Indeed, as it was noted by its critics, the municipal decision to use the square grid as the basic plan, far from being the source of market rationality, generated an inefficient use of land (since the central space of the square block remained unbuilt and inaccessible), thus increasing the final cost of street
opening and other services, which in many cases would end up being in charge of settlers themselves.

This municipal operation had an overall paradoxical effect: on one hand, as said, it restrained the autonomy of speculators and let government exert a strong control over the final physiognomy of the city texture; on the other hand, however, once the plan was made official and public, the speculation fever reached a climax. If we compare Map 5 (1904) and Map 3 (1914), we can see the spatial magnitude of the process. Graph 2 shows the sudden and steep increase of land sales from 1904 on: from around 7,000 sales to more than 20,000 in less than five years. It also shows a steady relation between number of operations and total surface sold, thus suggesting that the average surface per operation was constant, i.e., that the type of land unit sold was (in contrast with the long stretches of land sold in the years prior to 1890) was the small, urban plot.  

Graph 2: Amount of sales operations and total surface sold between 1890 and 1923.

References:

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
\text{Sq m of land sold} & - & - & - \\
\text{Number of properties sold} & - & - & - \\
\end{array}
\]

Source: Sargent, 77.

28 The graph also shows that, at the beginning of the process, in the late 1880s, big stretches of lands were sold in few operations, expressing in graphic language the abovementioned fact of rural landowners selling their properties to allotment companies.
This increase in land sales and the diffusion of the small, family-owned plot was a social and urban revolution that happened within the span of few years. The acquisition of a private, individual home was becoming a reality, or potentially such thing, for broader sections of society. In the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, the past acquisition of such a piece of landed property would prove to be one of the most powerful mechanisms of upwards social mobility in the urban society of the period. It also gradually shifted the balance between owners and tenants: the proportion of owners vs total urban population grew steadily in these years, from 8% 1887 to 8.8% in 1904, 9.1% in 1909, and 11.7% in 1914, an increase that was much more marked in the periphery than in the downtown area. These numbers, considered from other end, meant that by 1909 almost 30% of the buildings in the city were inhabited by their owners.

This process of expansion of the suburban home, added to the weight of vernacular architectural types, was acutely perceived by contemporaries, who called the attention on the peculiar housing landscape of Buenos Aires, in comparison to other big cities. While collective housing predominated in the big metropolitan centers of Europe or North America, the Buenos Aires of the Centenario showed a strong dominance of low edification and individual homes. According to a study by the DNT in late 1912, the average number of dwellers per built unit in the city was of 10,38 people (almost two families per building), while in Vienna or Berlin it was five times more. This obeyed to the strong predominance of low edification and the scarcity of collective residential buildings, such as the characteristic Mietskasernen of the German capital

---

29 As Horacio Torres has explained, the process of urban growth that continued during those decades made such a plot become an asset the value of which increased permanently; what once was suburban, became in the mid-century part of the city core, and increased its value. Torres, “Evolución de los procesos de estructuración espacial urbana,” 290.
30 Id., 289.
31 Yujnovsky, “Políticas de vivienda en la ciudad de Buenos Aires,” 364.
32 Id., 422-3.
If we pay attention to the diachronic evolution, we can also see that construction did not react to the increase of population through a corresponding increase in building heights. Rather, between 1883 and 1914 the percentage of one-story houses remained almost constant. (SEE TABLE 5)

Table 4: Building heights in 1912. Buenos Aires, Berlin, and Vienna compared.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% of 1-story houses</th>
<th>% of 2-story houses</th>
<th>% of 3-story houses</th>
<th>% of 4-story houses</th>
<th>% of 5-story houses</th>
<th>% of 6-story houses</th>
<th>% of 7-story or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buenos Aires</td>
<td>67.40</td>
<td>12.24</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berlin</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>11.52</td>
<td>38.70</td>
<td>40.10</td>
<td>2.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vienna</td>
<td>20.49</td>
<td>20.14</td>
<td>16.45</td>
<td>25.54</td>
<td>13.61</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>2.23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: “La habitación,” BDNT, No 21, 30 November 1912, 422.

Table 5: Evolution of building heights in Buenos Aires, 1869-1914. In percentages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Floors</th>
<th>1869</th>
<th>1887</th>
<th>1895</th>
<th>1904</th>
<th>1909</th>
<th>1914</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>89.2</td>
<td>83.9</td>
<td>82.9</td>
<td>88.0</td>
<td>82.2</td>
<td>80.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 and more</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Yujnovsky, 354.
Note: the author is using municipal sources for this table, which might explain the differences with Table 4 for the 1912/1914 years.

If these average numbers could suggest a more “comfortable” situation in Buenos Aires than in other cities, the authors of the report were quick to retort such an assumption. First, they argued, this predominance of the individual home and of low edification was one of the causes of the relative high cost of housing in the city, since it made housing scarce, and also made the cost of land weigh heavily on housing prices, be it for purchase or for rent. According to this study and to many other sources from the period, housing was especially expensive in Buenos Aires: while the lowest paid worker in Europe spent around 23% of his salary in housing, in Buenos
Aires an average worker had to spend 29% for renting only one room, and in some cases even 40%, while two- or three-room houses were impossible to afford, since they would eat up half of the wage or more.\textsuperscript{33}

Second, the average figures described in the table had to be socially disaggregated, which revealed a serious problem of distribution of the housing stock of the city. Of the total amount of houses that existed in the city, 28% belonged to their owners, who used them as single-family homes, while 6% were of commercial or industrial use. Of the remaining two thirds, this study stated, half belonged to well-off tenants, who usually rented the whole house. Only one third of the total housing stock was left, thus, for the remaining 53% of the city working-class population. A quarter of them lived in tenements (12.4% of the total city population), so that in the end the global ratio of 2 families per building was increased (without taking tenements into account) to a much less optimistic average of 3.76 for that sector of society.\textsuperscript{34}

Compression and expansion. Overcrowding and suburbanization. This section has suggested that, by the mid-1910s, the growth patterns of the city had rendered a very dynamic landscape, but also one plagued with problems and contradictions. In the realm of housing, these contradictions could be summarized by the image of a dual city. The central districts, affected by urban overcrowding but also enjoying better services and infrastructure, were the place of high land prices and of rented tenement rooms. The western suburbs, in contrast, had become the true scenario of growth, in the shape of fast suburbanization; while this expansion had allowed, to a certain extent, the spread of homeownership, it also offered causes of concern, as the low-density pattern threatened to make the cost of urban services unmanageable.

\textsuperscript{33} Id., 405 and 428.
\textsuperscript{34} Id., 425-6.
III. Price dynamics in times of crisis, 1913-1921

Let us now make a step towards the situation after the big expansion cycle, which culminated in 1913. If we take another look on Table 3, we can see that, under a permanent input of population growth (fueled strongly by immigration), land prices and rents followed a growing trend across the 1904-1912 period, which accounted for phenomena like the tenant strike of 1907 (we will visit that episode in chapter 2). During those years, demand ran faster than supply. Around 1912 the data reveal, in contrast, a decrease in rent prices (a tenement room costed, in average, 28.15 pesos in 1912, 27.4 in 1913, and 23.2 in 1914) as well as in the magnitude of land sales, which fell sharply between 1911 and 1915 (SEE GRAPH 2, above). The causes for this decay are diverse and yet unclear, but can be found mainly in two facts: first, to a gradual “catching up” of construction vis-à-vis housing demand; in other words, a saturation of the market. In 1911 construction increased almost 100%, while population grew “only” 74 points. As a DNT observer realized in late 1912, “supply is nowadays [in contrast with 1907] bigger than demand,” and it was due to that that prices, while not yet decreasing (as they would do from 1913 onwards), remained stagnant. Second, starting in 1913, to a downward trend of immigration, which accounted for a great deal of the demographic growth of the city.

These developments of the housing market were happening within a generalized economic crisis that affected society and the economy. Already in 1912-13 the Balkan war, which affected international trade, generated economic difficulties, which would become major

35 “Edificación en la Capital Federal (año 1924),” Crónica Mensual del Departamento Nacional del Trabajo (CMDNT), No 84, December 1924, 1485.
36 “La habitación,” BDNT, No 21, 30 November 1912, 400.
as World War I broke out in August 1914. In economic terms, it was a crisis of multiple features: the interruption of foreign trade (mainly of imports) generated by the conflict caused a general contraction of economic activity, a retraction of foreign investment, and an acute inflationary process.\textsuperscript{37} Public finances were equally hit by the interruption of imports, since the main source of funding for the public administration came from tariffs. This, together with a shrinking of internal taxes due to economic contraction, led to an overall 30\% decline of tax funds, meaning permanent problems of fiscal deficit.

In terms of urban growth, the shock was equally violent: as it was just said, by 1914 there was a sudden interruption of migratory flows, descending from positive records of yearly 30-40,000 positive migration to unheard-of negative records in the war years.\textsuperscript{38} (SEE GRAPH 3-4) In this panorama, the population of Buenos Aires almost stopped growing: from a 6.68 \% growth rate in 1913-14, it grew less than 1\% during the following four years. (SEE TABLE 5). The paralysis of construction, due to the combined effect of the sudden low of demand and the above-mentioned financial difficulties, was also felt immediately: by 1915 there was 50\% less surface built than the year before; contraction continued during the conflict, so that by 1917 the surface built was 12\% of what had been built during 1910.\textsuperscript{39} (SEE TABLE 6). If we return to Graph 2, we can also easily realize that this interruption of construction came hand in hand with an interruption of the spatial expansion of the city: land sales, indeed, decreased during 1914, 1915 and 1916, although their process of deceleration had already started by 1910.


\textsuperscript{38} Sargent, \textit{The Spatial Evolution of Greater Buenos Aires}, 147.

\textsuperscript{39} José Cantilo, “Abaratamiento de la vivienda,” REA, Vol. 4, January-June 1920, 119-120.

Source: Sargent, 147.

Table 5: demographic growth of Buenos Aires, 1914-1919.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Yearly growth</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Absolute</td>
<td>Relative (%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>1,584,106</td>
<td>100,096</td>
<td>6.68</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td>1,598,033</td>
<td>13,927</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>1,610,594</td>
<td>14,291</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td>1,624,885</td>
<td>15,323</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>1,640,208</td>
<td>15,323</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>1,681,241</td>
<td>22,972</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>1,708,829</td>
<td>27,588</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>1,744,653</td>
<td>35,824</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1923</td>
<td>1,793,766</td>
<td>49,113</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 6: Yearly figures for construction in Buenos Aires, 1910-1919.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Built surface thousand m²</th>
<th>Variation %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>2,868</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>2,845</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>2,166</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>2,191</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>952</td>
<td>-0.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td>495</td>
<td>-0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>416</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>-0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>405</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>476</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: adapted from id., 120.

Besides the “material” aspects of this crisis, one of its most conspicuous dimensions was its unprecedented and unforeseeable nature. While the 1890 economic crisis had posed a similar, if not bigger, bump in a long-term cycle of export-oriented development than the 1914 one, the
impact on demography and on urban growth of the latter was unmatched, and happened in a period in which almost all observers of urban reality considered the phenomenon of “urbanismo” as an even and unstoppable one.

The final economic variable we have to visit here are rent prices, which were the “tip of the iceberg,” the palpable outcome of the combination of the factors discussed along this section. As said above, one of the most conspicuous dramas of the war years was permanent inflation, which made the cost of living the object of intense analysis by the nascent statistical sciences (we will see this in Chapter 4). Basic food staples as well as manufactured imports (like clothing) increased their prices continuously, which impacted real wages and in general fueled an explosive social situation, which was reflected in the high level of labor conflict during the war years. Yet, in this situation rents went through a peculiarly contrasting trajectory. (SEE GRAPH 4) During the war years, as prices of most basic articles rose violently, rents decreased gradually, continuing the decline that, as we have seen, had started already by 1913. The explanation for this lay in the twin paralysis of demographic growth and of construction, which meant that there was no housing demand pushing prices up, in a situation of an increased housing stock from the pre-1913 years. Even further, as Mayor José Cantilo would note some years later, the effect of the decrease in immigration during the war was even more important than the general decrease in population, since “the housing needs do not increase in direct relation to the development of population, but rather mainly when that growth is a consequence of the increase in adult immigrant population,” who later on create new households as they marry and form a family.40

---

40 Cantilo, “Abaratamiento de la vivienda,” 121.
The graph also shows the subsequent evolution of rent prices. After reaching a nadir by 1917 they rose with tremendous violence in the following years. How politicians, intellectuals and the public opinion assimilated this price upturn and how they reformulated many important features of the “housing question” will constitute the central topic of this dissertation. For the time being, it suffices to stay close to the economics of the matter, which was that this
spectacular rise of rent was faster and more unpredictable than any previous one, even the 1907 conjuncture that had given place to the most important rent strikes ever registered in the city. Contemporaries tended to see the sudden increase of rent prices after the war as a consequence of immigration resuming while construction was still frozen (construction materials were still scarce, intensively used for European reconstruction), but we can see in the graph that the turning point was actually 1917, one year before the armistice. The explanation seems to lie on the demand side: by 1917, after five years of decline and three years of paralysis of construction, the pressure of demand upon a limited offer started to be felt without the necessity of an extra input (immigration). Indeed, if we take a look at the yearly variations of population and construction during and after the war (SEE GRAPH 5), we can see that between 1915 and 1920 population grew always slightly more than construction, thus gradually exhausting the existing housing stock. It was the gap between the two curves of the graph what, repeated year after year, eventually led to the sudden postwar rent crisis.

Graph 5: Compared evolution of population and construction increases in Buenos Aires between 1910 and 1923.

Source: Own elaboration after “Edificación en la Capital Federal (año 1924),” 1485.
The reasons why the upward trend in rents became a true “crisis” after 1919 are complex: they are related to rent dynamics, as well as to the prices of other basic goods that composed the working-class budget, and to the working of actors that, operating at the public and political spheres, made the price conjuncture “visible.” Remaining once again within the perspective of prices alone, it was undoubtedly the reactivation of immigration after the war what accelerated the rising curve rents had started in 1917. Although not in a spectacular fashion, by 1919 the city was experiencing a demographic recovery, as we have saw in Table 5. Much of that recovery was, predictably enough, due to immigration, which by mid-1919 was again surpassing emigration and generating positive migratory balances (Graph 3). As we have already explained, migratory growth has a stronger effect on housing demand than vegetative growth. In the early 1920s, construction was slower to recover: it would increase very slightly in 1919, still far below population (16.6% vs 28.7%), and only in 1920 did the increase rate of construction catch up with the demographic growth rate (35.8% vs 36.5%). It would take some time (1923) for the industry to accommodate to these trends and push supply up.\footnote{See “Edificación en la Capital Federal (año 1924),” 1485.}

This section has given us a view of the sudden interruption of urban growth, land sales, and construction that World War I and its aftermath generated. An inflationary process was its immediate consequence, which was felt in all basic items. Rents, in contrast, decreased pronouncedly up to 1917, when an upwards trend started that would continue all the way through 1921. This made rent stand out, in the immediate postwar, as a disproportionately important item in the working-class family budget.

IV. The roaring 1920s. Neighborhood consolidation and vertical architecture
By 1922 there were clear signs that the Argentine economy was, like those of Europe and North America, in a process of recovery from the war crisis. Among the sectors, construction was indeed one of the “stars” of the period, increasing between 1922 and 1928 at an annual rate of 13.8% (vs. the average 6.3% of the economy as a whole). While this recovery heralded a housing boom that could solve the problems of the previous years, reality would prove rather disappointing. First, construction increase was discontinuous. From a 1920-1923 boom (both in the yearly number of permits and in the surface built), the rhythm of growth decreased between 1923 and 1926. Taking into account that population growth remained steady up to 1930, this meant that during the central years of the decade the amelioration trend was reversed. (SEE GRAPHS 6a-b).

Graphs 6a-b: growth of the construction industry after the war.

- a) 1918-1924
- b) 1924-1935


Note: These series, gathered in different periods, cannot be integrated.

---


43 For demographic data, see *Revista de Estadística Municipal*, Nos 7-9, July-September 1936, pp. 4-5.
Second, and more important, it was uneven, as many contemporaries noted. The graphs show an interesting phenomenon. During the first growth period (1920-23) construction permits increased more than built surface, suggesting that it was a growth based, like before the war, on the spread of the small, suburban property. In contrast, during the “crisis” 1923-27 years the number of permits fell more rapidly than the total built surface, and during the 1927-30 cycle built surface increase faster than construction permits. All this suggests that between 1923 and 1930 total surface tended to grow faster than permits, which probably means something confirmed by qualitative sources of the period: that construction growth was focused on apartment buildings (which have a bigger total surface per permit) rather than on individual houses. The expansion of the high rise was indeed, as we will see in chapter 6, one of the characteristic phenomena of the 1920s, and had a great impact on the affordable housing in the long term. Yet, in the conjuncture, many contemporaries saw it as problematic from a social perspective, since these apartments tended to be concentrated in the central or north-central area of the city, either for commercial/administrative purposes or for upper-class residential use.44

These construction trends happened in a context of urban expansion that, after the relative stop of the war years, had also resumed, in a rhythm only slightly slower than during the feverish peak of 1904-14. From the 5.2% rate of demographic growth of the 1895-1914 period and the less than 1% rate of 1914-1919, the postwar recovery was situated around the 2.1% rate (1922-1930).45

44 Radical deputy Leopoldo Bard lamented in May 1923 that the recent edification boom had consisted mainly of “buildings for rent,” and not of “the house required by the ongoing circumstances,” be it either the “modest construction of the small suburban owner,” or cheap flat “needed by the merchant, the commercial employee, or the public servant, who chooses to dwell close to her workplace, […] as a tenant in centric apartments.” CD, 8 May 1923, p. 24.

45 Estimations after 1923 based on Comisión de Estética Edilicia, Proyecto orgánico para la urbanización del municipio (Buenos Aires: Peuser, 1925), 72, and Revista de Estadística Municipal, No 1, January 1930, 4, and Nos 4-6, Apr-Jun 1935, p 71.
Spatially, although growth involved both a resumption of suburbanization and an increase of density in areas surrounding the city center, the “dual city” of the 1910s was changing. Population densities increased in western, suburban areas, as suburban settlement continued, but not simply as a resumption of the prior process. (SEE MAPS 6a-c) During the 1920s, the filling-in of the interstitial spaces of suburban areas was part of the consolidation and maturation of new type of society, that of the “barrio,” which has given place to a long, in many cases celebratory literature. Economically consolidated thanks to the acquisition of property and to the increase in real wages during the period, the middle classes “in the making” of the suburban areas developed local institutions (the clubs and “sociedades de fomento” devoted to local urban improvement) and a deeply territorial cultural life (such as expressed in literature, tango music, and soccer traditions).

Maps 6a-c: population densities per district in Buenos Aires. Inhabitants per hectare in 1904, 1914, and 1924.

Source: own elaboration after Sargent, 87.

Together with the growth of the barrio, there was also an increase in densities in the intermediate areas, which formed a ring surrounding the city center. This increase in density,

---

appreciable for instance in districts 20, 5, and 6 of Map 6-c, was happening in an already saturated tissue, through the innovative pattern of vertical housing architecture, which, as said, was one of the trends of the period. The dichotomy between downtown and suburb was being replaced by a much more gradual spatial transition, in which vertical housing had an important place.

**Conclusion**

It is by now a commonplace to assess the Argentina of the Centenario as a country of contrasts. Fabulous economic growth that turned it into the tenth world economy coincided with serious regional unevenness, unsatisfied and combative working classes, and an infrastructure development heavily dependent on foreign investment. Buenos Aires, the big metropolis, could not but be a laboratory in which all these incongruences and contradictions were expressed with maximum intensity. Upon a general background of social dynamism and with 50% of immigrant population, the city could hold mansions and slums, modern boulevards and almost rural outskirts, refined parks and the compactness of its central districts.

These contrasts, far from irremediable, were the object of intense public intervention. The expansion of the regular grid to the outskirts was not a given, but rather an ambitious attempt of generating an urban tissue that was at the same time economically manageable (although not rational, we have seen) and spatially integrated. Likewise, as we will see in subsequent chapters, municipal and national authorities pushed from the mid-1910s to the mid-‘20s several measures to promote construction and densification aimed at attacking low edification, something seen as incompatible with the modernity of the city.
Against this landscape of contrasts and of government anxiety stood also the fact of a society with enormous social mobility, which, adding a democratic potential to the mixture, could be able to harmonize as well as to radicalize social tensions. Access to land, which, as we have seen, became in the 1904-1914 a characteristic of the suburbanization process, marked one of the strong yet silent social revolutions of the period, in which lay the origins of the robust middle classes of the interwar years onwards. The “casa chorizo,” individual family home that emerged from the process, captured to date the imagination of a society with extremely high levels of upwards mobility and integration.

The war crisis took tensions to the extreme, and tested the ability of this suburban landscape to buffer them. Was Buenos Aires a city with a propertied middle class in the making, or a city in which workers were destitute population that put social cohesion at risk? The quasi-revolutionary upheavals of 1919, which we will visit in chapter 3, seemed to suggest the latter, while the resilience of urban growth and suburbanization in the subsequent years pointed to the former. In this oscillation between stability and collapse, no indicator would be more accurate than the housing question, located in the juncture between social and urban development.
Chapter 2
FROM MODEL TENEMENTS TO “CHEAP HOUSES.” APPROACHES TO THE HOUSING PROBLEM IN A PERIOD OF URBAN GROWTH, 1871-1915

“Long ago it was said that ‘one half of the world does not know how the other half lives.’ […] It did not know because it did not care. […] There came a time when the discomfort and crowding below were so great, and the consequent upheavals so violent, that it was no longer an easy thing to do, and then the upper half fell to inquiring what was the matter. […] In New York, the youngest of the world’s great cities, that time came later than elsewhere, because the crowding had not been so great. There were those who believed that it would never come; but their hopes were vain. Greed and reckless selfishness wrought like results here as in the cities of older lands.”

Jacob Riis, How the Other Half Lives

These words, with which Danish-American journalist Jacob Riis opened his famous 1890 photographic study on the life in the slums of New York City, could have easily been applied to places unsuspected or unknown to him. As Buenos Aires, a comparable Atlantic metropolis, grew unstoppably in the last decades of the 19th century, its population accumulated in conventillos, big tenements analogous to the ones in New York, as well as to those in cities like Rio de Janeiro or Santiago de Chile during the same period. Latecomers in comparison to their European counterparts, the reformist elites in these New-World cities first considered themselves as destined to a more benevolent fate, exempted from the tensions of urban life. By the time Riis was writing, however, there were already signs, on both hemispheres of the Americas, of an acute interest on the problems that the life of “the other half” could pose to society as a whole. Reporting the workers’ dwellings exhibition of the the 1889 Paris World Fair, Argentine diplomat Santiago Alcorta pronounced words that could have been Riis’s: “In our country, thank

---

God, we still do not have to worry about the social question—but, unfortunately, we will have before long to seriously deal with it. Oh, sad adhesion of progress and civilization!"²

This concern for the life conditions of the urban masses was a wide intellectual and policy phenomenon from the late decades of the 19th century onwards. It was in the eve of urbanization and industrialization that ruling elites started talking about “the social question” as an issue that public powers had to address. Within this context, housing had the specificity of not being only part of the needs and the living standards of the working masses—it was also inextricably tied to the process of urban growth, and as such to the spatial and economic dynamics of that process.³ The analysis of housing problems and the proposal of new housing and urban schemes was thus, to a certain extent, a response to phenomena of urban development that these intellectuals and policy-makers were witnessing.

It is with that observation in mind, and taking into account the narrative deployed in Chapter 1, that I trace in this chapter the conceptualizations of the housing problem in Buenos Aires, from the beginning of the metropolization of the city in the early 1870s to the crisis unfolded in the years of World War I. In this account, my main aim is to understand the extent to which these conceptualizations were related to the characteristics of urban development and of the society of their respective periods. It is my argument that, in the transition from the thematization of the tenement in the 1880s to the different proposals of “workers’ dwellings” in

---
the years from the turn of the century to 1915, elite reformers were framing successive responses to the question on how to integrate the immigrant masses to the urban and social tissues.

In order to cover the long 1871-1915 period, this chapter focuses on three decisive moments of housing reflection. In a first part, I show how during the first expansion of the city (what we have seen in chapter 1 as the period of “compression”) housing emerged for the first time as an object of public concern, through the hygienist and municipal thematization of the *conventillo* (tenement house). The tenement became an explanatory key for urban problems, seen from the perspective of public hygiene as part of the wider hygienist agenda of city management (water supply, sewers, public hospitals, etc.) that had as epidemic prevention its main aim. Sanitation, eradication, and the construction of model tenements were the policy lines that derived from this agenda.

The second part focuses on the impact of the early stages of the suburbanization process (around the turn of the century) on the formulations of the housing problem. The spread of the suburban, self-built privately-owned house, while releasing pressure from central tenements, was however the source of a new type of anxiety among housing reformers. Politicians proposed legislative schemes to ease the access of workers to individual houses, while a handful of engineers designed projects that envisioned spatial realizations of that goal. Less than a decade later, however, as it was clear that the feverish unfolding of the suburbanization process provided an important part of the population a “spontaneous” (as it was then said) access to a fully-owned house, many of these reformers modified their views, while others, which would eventually become dominant, persisted defending the old dictum of what I call here the “ideology of the self-owned house.”
In the third part of the chapter I analyze this persistence and its triumph during the immediate pre-war and war years. As the 1904-1914 cycle expanded suburban homeownership, municipal and architectural initiatives lingered. The permanent arrival of immigrants, however, made the housing problem periodically renovated, as a tenant strike in 1907 showed. It would be in this double context (fast-speed suburbanization and continued pressure in the center) that the homeownership discourse persisted, generating the first national housing law, which would set one of the main policy lines on the housing problem for the following 30 years.

I. Seeing like a physician. Housing as a problem of public hygiene

Few urban elements in the cultural history of Buenos Aires have been so pregnant as the conventillo or casa de inquilinato (both of them hereafter translated as “tenement”) of the late 19th century. A multi-family precarious house inhabited by a diverse arrange of people, usually immigrants from different origins, the hygienist discourse of the period turned it into a central piece of reflection, depicting it as a symbol of the housing squalor and the unsanitary conditions suffered by the urban masses of the period. At the same time, the picturesque, cosmopolitan, and politically vibrant everyday life that flowed in its spaces also made the conventillo the inspiration and the scenario of a profuse cultural production that ranged from theater, political satire, tango lyrics, and all kinds of literary texts. Tenements thus became, from that time on and with all that ambivalence, a permanent element of collective memory up to our days.4

In this section I would like to go beyond the cultural trope, attempting to understand how the tenement was constructed as a public problem during the period. What actors were involved

---
4 On the tenement, its history and culture, see Jorge Páez, El conventillo (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1976).
in such a construction? What contents did they choose to pour into the “ideal type” they were building, and with what purposes? How did this type relate to the material circumstances of the urban expansion that it was part of?

Let us first make a short incursion into the material reality of tenements and their urban presence. In architectural terms, the *conventillo* had few specificities: it was usually an old, traditional house turned into a collective one in order to accommodate multiple families, or a new one (usually much more precarious in its building quality) built *ad hoc*. It tended to have a central courtyard to which all rooms faced, and a longitudinal shape that fitted the standard shape of plots in Buenos Aires. (SEE FIGURES 1-2) More than its shape, though, what defined a *conventillo* was its use: it tended to housed more than 30 people, its rent units were individual rooms occupied by entire families, and there were certain common facilities such as a courtyard, bathrooms, toilets, and kitchens (although usually the courtyard or the interior of the room itself was used as such). Owners of tenements were either the old landlords that had properties in the central area and decided to make them provide a rent, or impresarios that acquired the plot and built the collective house with a commercial purpose. Typically there was an “administrador” who took care of the maintenance of the building and collected the rent, thus being the one in an everyday relation with tenement dwellers.⁵

Figure 1: Plan and front of a tenement house in San Telmo, 1887. Material provided by owner to municipality for authorization.


Figure 2: The courtyard of a tenement, ca. 1890.

Source: Documento Fotográfico Colección Witcomb, AGN.
In terms of urban distribution, finally, tenements tended to be located in the old downtown district and the areas surrounding it. There was a clear correlation between the directions of the urban expansion during the “compression” phase and the proliferation of tenements. As we have seen in Chapter 1 (Figure 1), during this phase (1870-1895) the increase in density happened first in the central census districts and in their immediate surroundings. It was thus unsurprising that these were the areas in which more tenements were located: in 1887, 30% of them were in the city center proper (districts 1-8 in Figure 2). By that year, indeed, the areas within that rectangle and in its immediate vicinity (the dark and light grey areas in the figure) were the ones with higher percentage of their population hosted in tenements (between 30 and 40%), while only in the most distant areas (districts 17, 11, 12, and 19) was this proportion of 20% or lower.

Figure 2: Census districts, 1869-1887. Sections in dark grey are the densest downtown areas. Both dark and light grey areas, in turn, are the ones in which the proportion of inhabitants living in tenements was higher, between 30 and 40%.

Source: Sargent, 143.

---

6 Id., Appendixes, Table 5.
As historians Diego Armus and Jorge Liernur have noted long ago, the conspicuousness of the tenement for certain sectors of the lettered elite in the 1880s contrasts with the fact that this dwelling type hosted, during that decade, no more than 27% of the population of the city. The central location of the majority of the tenements and the fluidity of everyday contact in a city that was still extremely compact and concentrated in or around the city center can partially account for this conspicuousness. They were the object of great diffusion in the press and in popular culture, they were registered photographically, and they became a symbol of the plight of the working poor. A tenement courtyard or room was the scenario of the everyday life of poor families; more than workers in factories (which led to images of economic life and labor struggle), pictures of tenements made it possible to visualize suffering at the level of family life, the innocence of children and mothers, or the precariousness of clothing and hygiene.

More than these general representations, however, it was the physicians’ perspective on the tenement what phrased it as a social issue that needed public intervention. The weight of the medical perspective on the tenement was related to wider factors that from the 1870s on were placing medicine and its practitioners in a prominent social and political position. First, the strengthening of state institutions that began after national unification in the 1860s included the development of an incipient system of public health, as one of the vectors through which the

---


state could control and integrate a growing national population. Second, the heyday of hygienism was also linked to the more general rise of the natural sciences to social and political prominence (something captured under the label of “positivism”).

Finally, it also developed as a response to the consequences of urban growth and overcrowding, particularly big epidemics. In the late 1860s and early 1870s, a wave of epidemics struck Buenos Aires. Like in other cities of the region (the most well-known example being the Rio de Janeiro cholera epidemic of 1849), the sudden spread of disease was a turning point for the development of what was then called “public hygiene,” which involved both medical knowledge and institutions as well as the construction of urban sanitary infrastructure (water supply, sewers, public hospitals, open-air areas, etc.). The creation of these networks of infrastructure was becoming a permanent part of city government, in which certain solutions began to appear as socially indispensable.

The perspective of “public hygiene” was thus a construct through which physicians and public authorities, so to speak, “medicalized” what we now see as social issues. It was a perspective best described by Eduardo Wilde in his 1878 volume titled, precisely, Curso de Higiene Pública, which went through several re editions in the following decades. For Wilde, public hygiene was a whole new governance programme based on the need of a state-led preventive work of managing urban life in ways that could protect the health and development of

---


11 Eduardo Wilde (1844-1913), physician, during his youth was strongly involved in the campaigns against the yellow fever, rising to prominence as a public figure in the 1880s: he was Minister of justice and cult (1882) and of Interior (1886-89), later on president of the National Department of Hygiene (1898). He was the prototype of the positivist hygienist-politician of the “generación del ’80.”
individuals. Through this approach, “public hygiene” dealt with issues like the characteristics of city layout and infrastructure in order to provide air and light to inhabitants, of water supply and sewers, of the general management of corpses (cemeteries, cremation, etc.), of industrial hygiene, or of nutrition. It was a way of bringing the benefits of medicine to the whole society.

The 1871 epidemic of yellow fever, placing disease as a major threat for society as a whole, was the kickoff for the development of public hygiene. The outbreak of the disease in the early months of that year was so vast and unprecedented that totally overwhelmed the municipal and national authorities. The death toll reached 10% of the city population (around 15 000 people), and the insufficiency of state resources was visible in the importance that civil-society initiatives, such as the “Popular Commissions” formed in all parishes of the city in order to help with preventive work as well as removing bodies or setting up quarantines.12

Although we know now that the yellow fever is spread by a mosquito, back then it was believed that direct contagion was the main vector of the epidemic. Unsanitary living conditions and overcrowding were thus evident risk factors, something that led health professionals to identify for the first time the tenements of the downtown and southern area of the city as a problem of “public health.” “A continued observation […] of many tenements,” explained in 1871 a group of physicians in a letter to municipal authorities, “convinced us that these houses are the main providers of cemeteries. We can almost assert that there is not one tenement in which there are no patients and in which there has been no casualties from the epidemic.”13

Many documents from the period show physicians painfully discovering the effect of

---

13 Doctors Juan Carlos Gómez, Manuel Bilbao and Basilio Cittadini to President of Municipal Commission, s.d.. Inquilinatos, 4, Archivo Histórico, Dirección General de Patrimonio e Instituto Histórico, Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires (hereafter AHDGP).
overcrowding and squalor on the propagation of the disease, and pleading public authorities for action. Through the inspection and cleansing of tenement houses or the formation of parish and block “Hygiene Commissions” in charge of informing of the existence and state of tenements, an overwhelmed municipal government as well as neighbors’ commissions led by local physicians were struggling to improve the regulation of living conditions in tenements.14 One of the first and most straightforward initiatives was the eviction of the “infected” tenements, which was carried out either by the Municipal Commission (legislative body of the city), or by local hygiene commissions.15 This, of course, did nothing but generate the subsequent problem of temporary homelessness; in the suburban town of San Martín, the government of the Province of Buenos Aires built a group of barracks (“galpones”) later on borrowed by the municipality of Buenos Aires to use as temporary shelters.16

The regulation of existing tenements, as well as (in few cases) the construction of new, “model” ones, were the following steps that the municipality took in the 1870s and 1880s. Already during the epidemic, local commissions were proposing basic hygienic improvements for tenements. The Hygiene Commission of the centric Parish of San Nicolás, for example, made in May 1871 a “Proposal of regulations for tenement houses, slums, and taverns” of the area, addressed mainly towards tenement owners, who were accused of exploiting the situation to their

14 The “Inquilinatos” series of the AHDGP hosts several documents of the exchange between municipal authorities, physicians, and presidents of these local commissions, which reached an outstanding level of granularity. See for example the list of tenements sent in March 1871 by a block commission to the Comisión de Higiene of the centrally located parish of San Nicolás, with the list of the address, name, nationality and age of each inhabitant of tenement houses in the block. (Inquilinatos, 27, AHDGP).
15 See Inquilinatos 55 and 62 (April 1871). The initiatives to combat the epidemic and carry out the inspections were, according to historian Diego Galeano, the object of a struggle between a plurality of institutions: besides the municipal Comisión de Higiene, there was an older federal Consejo de Higiene Pública, the existing network of parish assistance commissions, the “Comisión Popular de Salubridad,” formed ad hoc by political rivals of the municipal authorities, as well as the Police Department, which had a branch of Policía Sanitaria traditionally in charge of inspections. See Galeano, “Médicos y policías durante la epidemia de fiebre amarilla,” 111.
16 See Inquilinatos, 4 (s/d), AHDGP.
favor. To reinforce these norms, full clearance was given to the parish inspector to enter the tenement and dwelling spaces, and fines were supposed to be exemplary. Between 1880 and 1900, some 40 ordinances on tenements were issued, which established further requirements, such as impermeable floors, prohibition of stacking beds, toilets instead of latrines, separate kitchen rooms, minimum dimensions for courts (5x5 meters), or minimum air volumes per person.

The municipality took some steps to go from cleansing and eradication to the construction of “model tenements” that could provide hygienic housing. In 1883, Mayor Torcuato de Alvear proposed to the Municipal Commission the construction of four “workers’ cities” in a northern suburb that back then was relatively removed from the downtown district. The housing groups were designed by Italian-Argentine Juan A. Buschiazzo, the most prominent architect of the period. They consisted, in their original formulation, of two concentric “room rows,” separated by a gallery that worked as an indoor yard, while a public, green courtyard

---

17 The Reglamento mandated measures such as “whitening” and repainting of walls and window- and doorframes, tiling of floors and installation of ceilings, detachment of toilets from water supply and bathing areas, establishment of a maximum amount of dwellers per room (two), of minimum dimensions for rooms (4 varas x 4 x 4.5 of height), night lighting, daily sweeping and washing of common areas and trash collection. See “Propuesta de reglamento para las casas de inquilinato, conventillos y bodegones.” Inquilinatos, 65, AHDGP.


19 Torcuato de Alvear (1822-1890) was the first mayor of Buenos Aires after its federalization in 1880. From an aristocratic and politically prominent family (his father had been a hero of the independence wars), he embodied the most “reformist” facet of the generation that had come to power in the 1880s. Sometimes considered (both in his period and by the historiography) an “Argentine Haussmann,” he led a number of initiatives of urban modernization, such as the opening of central boulevards and diagonals, the construction of a system of peripheral parks, or the provision of sanitary infrastructure to the city. These “casas para obreros” were part of such a reformist endeavors. On Alvear, see Adrián Gorelik, “¿Buenos Aires europea? Mutaciones de una identificación controvertida,” in his Miradas sobre Buenos Aires. Historia cultural y crítica urbana (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2004), and Gorelik, La grilla y el parque: espacio público y cultura urbana en Buenos Aires, 1887-1936 (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 1998), Ch. 2.

20 This is the only case in which we see, at this early period, a renowned architect designing “workers’ dwelling” ensemble. This work was, however, not considered an architectural or urban milestone, but rather the fulfillment of a commission by the municipal government.
occupied the center of the block and included in its corners four public “latrine pavilions.”

(SEE FIGURE 3) In the walls of the side galleries there would be “small niches” equipped with “small stoves” that should replace the “uncomfortable braziers” that families used in tenement rooms. The ample galleries could be used as workplace by tenants that were “tailors, shoemakers, seamstresses, ironers, etc.” The main courtyard, finally, had a big central area equipped with water supply, which provided a washing area and two big bathing “pools” for men and women.

Figure 3: Plan of projected “Casa de Obreros,” 1883.

Source: Memoria de la Municipalidad de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, 1884, 235-236.

This description reveals, as the name of the project suggested, that the plan was of a set of “rooms,” rather than “houses” for workers. The kitchens in niches on walls, the common latrines and bathing facilities, or the inexistence of rooms with specific uses show that this was a project that did not modify the patterns of the tenement in any significant ways. Other than hygiene (achieved through room volume, adequate lighting, availability of water supply and baths, or abundant trees and greenery), it did not provide families with any kind of the

---

21 See “Casa de obreros. Memoria de la oficina de Obras públicas al respecto, con 3 planos,” 10 March 1885. “Año 1885,” AHDGP.

22 Indeed, the 150 rooms were aimed either for bachelors or for families, and in the latter case it was enough to “simply open one or two doors in the dividing walls, in order to connect two or more rooms.” (See ibid.)
advantages of an individual house (such as private kitchen and bathrooms, independent access, or availability of rooms with different uses).

Such a housing project obeyed to a view of the tenement as a “transitional” housing device, coherent with a view of city growth as a somehow limited process. Alvear, the Mayor of the first initiatives of urban reform and embellishment, was an advocate of a “concentrated-city” solution for Buenos Aires. Focusing his great urban interventions in the central area (the boulevards and diagonals, the reform of the Plaza de Mayo and other traditional squares, the drawing of a peripheral ring less than two miles from the Plaza, the displacement of unsanitary urban equipment to the outside of that perimeter, etc.), he was opposed to figures like Sarmiento, who already in the 1870s and ‘80s were thinking of the need of planning the entire territory of the city in order to allow for the orderly settling of the incoming population in it.23 In Alvear’s city, thus, housing problems were deemed a transitional phenomenon, to vanish once immigrant population had passed the entrance gate of the country and had established as farmers in the countryside. The tenement, thus, was a temporary housing form, not too different, in a way, to the immigrants’ “Hotel” established in the same years in the harbor area. As long as hygiene was granted, dwellers could make do with very basic facilities.

This municipal initiative, although it would be materialized only years later and in a much reduced scale,24 helped to bring the tenement to the public arena in the 1880s, precisely the

---

24 Only one of the four “workers’ cities” was finally built by the end of the 1880s, and with a substantial modification: instead of “rooms,” it consisted of small four-room houses, with private WC, kitchen and a small garden. See Coni, *Progrès de l’hygiène dans la République Argentine* (Paris : J.-B. Baillière et Fils, 1887), 85-6. This type of scheme in which a rather compact row or ring of small dwellings faced an interior courtyard with certain common sanitary facilities would remain a hallmark of the imagination of the period, and was used for example in the housing compound built after Mayor Luis Revol’s initiative for the inland city of Córdoba in the late 1880s. See María Cristina Boixadós, *Las tramas de una ciudad, Córdoba entre 1870 y 1895: elite urbanizadora, infraestructura, poblamiento* (Córdoba: Ferreyra, 2000), 262.
period in which, as we have seen, the percentage of the urban population that dwelled in tenements was at its peak. Diverse constructors proposed further projects during those years, all of which were not built, such as one by a building company called E. Moreno & Co. that the municipality evaluated and rejected in 1884, one presented by architect Augusto Plou that same year, or one proposed by architect Buschiazzo in 1886 to a private building company in the Southern area of Barracas. In turn, it was also in those years that the pens of important hygienists were devoted to the analysis of tenements. Wilde’s treaty on hygiene went through several republications, Emilio R. Coni (1855-1928) published in Paris two volumes on the “progress of public hygiene” in the country, and Guillermo Rawson (1821-1890), a prominent physician in the twilight of a prolific political and medical career, wrote an Estudio sobre las casas de inquilinato, which would become the reference work on the topic for many generations. Rawson’s book was indeed the first one to put the tenement in the center of the hygienist endeavor, analyzing it through innovative statistics and international comparisons. Like Wilde, Rawson emphasized that the tenement problem was not simply a working-class issue, since the risk of contagion made evident that what happened in those “fetid sties” was an issue that concerned society as a whole. His treaty was also a critique of the ongoing policies

---

25 For descriptions of these projects, see “Casas para obreros,” La prensa, 5 May 1885, 3; Augusto Plou; Buschiazzo, “Memoria descriptiva del Proyecto para la construcción de una gran casa de inquilinato para el Banco Constructor de La Plata,” Anales de la Sociedad Científica Argentina, Vol. 21 (1886).
26 Wilde’s reports, Progrès de l’hygiène dans la République Argentine (Paris, J.-B. Bailliére et Fils, 1887) and Les progrès de l’hygiène publique dans la République Argentine (Paris, O. Berthier, 1891), were presented in the international Congresses of Hygiene held in Vienna in 1887 and in London in 1891.
27 Estudio sobre las casas de inquilinato en Buenos Aires, in G. Rawson, Escritos y discursos, Vol. 1 (Buenos Aires: Compañía Sud-Americana de Billetes de Banco, 1891). Rawson was the son of an American physician who had settled in the western province of San Juan. In his youth, he was an anti-Rosista militant, national deputy in the Confederación Argentina of the 1850s, and President Mitre’s Interior Minister in the 1860s. Active in the relief actions during the yellow-fever epidemic, he devoted thereafter great efforts to the study of epidemiology and medical statistics.
28 From the tenement, Rawson argued, the germs of the “most terrible diseases” reached “maybe even the sumptuous palaces of the rich […]. Society as a whole, including rich and powerful as well as poor and miserable, are mutually
towards the housing problem, which were limited to the inspection and elimination of unsanitary tenements, while what was necessary was, for him, that the state got involved in massive plans of dwelling construction, through the encouragement of building societies and through loan policies.

The preceding pages gave an account of how the tenement was constructed by hygienist physicians as a problem of “public hygiene,” the keyword through which these physicians understood social and urban problems. Spurred by the yellow fever and the need of managing a city that was in the process of becoming a metropolis concentrated in the downtown area, municipal authorities, hygiene commissions, and public physicians built a paradigm of the hygienic and the unhygienic dwelling, as well as of some methods of state intervention in the issue.

II. The ideology of the self-owned house. Urban expansion and the social question (1904-1914)

“Let us give the worker a house, a garden, a piece of land, and he will immediately become good, honest, hard-working, a friend of his house, caring of the wellbeing of his people and of his future.”

Deputy Juan F. Cafferata, 1912.29

In 1902, the socialist and the anarchist workers’ federations launched the first general strike of Argentine history. The incipient workers’ unions and political parties of the 1890s had grown into an active and organized movement, and agitation around labor issues would be permanent across the 1900s, to the point that the 1910 celebrations of the Centenario were done under state

---

[29] CD, 14 August 1912, 182.
of siege, due to the threat of anarchist sabotage.\textsuperscript{30} Answers to the challenges that labor activism posed to social order were diverse. While the most reactionary sectors of the conservative elite advocated for an openly reactionary approach (for instance through the well-known 1902 “Ley de Residencia,” which ordered the deportation of all workers suspected of subversive activity), reformist sectors were thinking about labor integration in more complex ways, framing it through the prism of what they called “the social question.” Classic examples of this were figures like Joaquín V. González, who in 1904 drafted a National Labor Code and founded in 1907 the National Labor Department, and Juan Bialet Massé, who also in 1904 compiled an exhaustive report on the conditions of life of the working class in the country.\textsuperscript{31}

The social concerns of the 1900s deeply modified approaches to the housing question, as we will see in this section. As hygienic standards in the city improved, with mortality and morbidity rates declining thanks to the general development of sanitary infrastructure, the old hygienist agenda on housing was replaced by new questions. In turn, as the suburbanization process was making possible the exodus of working-class families from the tenement to the outskirts, reformers started to think of new possibilities through which changes in housing patterns could promote social change.

In this section I analyze different discourses and initiatives that saw in the self-owned house the answer to the social question. This faith in the reformist potential of the home, a tenet that was shared by almost all ideological sectors, from Catholicism and conservative reformism to socialism, was itself an indirect response to suburbanization. Sometimes an attempt to channel

\textsuperscript{30} Among the many accounts of the Argentine labor movement, see Julio Godio, \textit{El movimiento obrero argentino, 1870-1910: socialismo, anarquismo y sindicalismo} (Buenos Aires: Legasa, 1987).

\textsuperscript{31} On the “social question” within the sphere of lettered reformists, see Eduardo Zimmermann, \textit{Los liberales reformistas: la cuestión social en la argentina, 1890-1916} (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana : Universidad de San Andrés, 1995) and Juan Suriano, ed., \textit{La cuestión social en Argentina, 1870-1943} (Buenos Aires: Editorial La Colmena, 2000).
and control the ongoing process of workers’ access to homeownership, and sometimes failing to fully appreciate its dimensions, reformers of the early 20th century multiplied the plans to provide workers with “comfortable, hygienic, and cheap houses.”

---

*a) Law and order: housing as a social problem.*

When in late August 1907 a group of tenants in a downtown-located * conventillo* declared themselves “on strike” and their decision of stop paying the rent extended to more than two thousand tenements in the city of Buenos Aires plus a sizable number of houses in Rosario and other cities of the Argentine interior, it became evident for elite reformers that housing scarcity and high rents were not only a threat to public hygiene, but also to social stability. Anarchists and unionists of different strands supported the strikes, evictions became really violent episodes (including one fatal casualty), and the demands of the tenants (such as the 30% a lowering of rents, the suppression of expensive deposit, or basic sanitary improvements) started to be perceived by the mainstream newspapers under a positive light, all of which did nothing but promote concern among legislators and municipal officials on the housing problem.\(^{32}\) It was not any more an issue of preventing disease, but rather the clear-cut perception of a connection between life conditions and social conflict, within the broader context of an increasingly

---

organized and defying working-class. Tenements had been cleansed, true, but they were now the focus of moral degeneration and of political discontent. “The tenement is no more the source of epidemics,” argued engineer Domingo Selva in 1904, “but it is the source of immoralities. In such an environment it is impossible to form a family. In such an environment grows gradually a woodworm that poses to society more dangers than the war against microorganisms.”

The first political initiative to appease the tensions brought about by housing, nevertheless, previous to the rent strike of 1907. It was a bill presented in 1904 to the National Congress by deputy Ignacio D. Irigoyen (1854-1919), which authorized the municipality of the Federal Capital to issue loan bonds, in order to generate funds destined to the construction of workers’ dwellings. A traditional politician that belonged to the kernel of the conservative forces of the Province of Buenos Aires (he would be Marcelino Ugarte’s successor as governor in 1906), Irigoyen framed his bill within the purview of measures tending to attack the problem of the “cost of living” of the urban working class, something that was being incipiently thematized by certain sectors of the conservative elite, in a context of political agitation. As he presented the bill, Irigoyen also got involved in the old debate on tenements, departing from the hygienist view: it was not simply a matter of healing the “casas de inquilinato,” which he considered “completely contrary to hygiene, to morality and to good customs.” Rather, his proposal delved into the terrain of defining new dwelling habits for the working masses, through the prohibition of the construction of further tenements, and through stipulating that the houses built with the

33 Domingo Selva, “La habitación higiénica para el obrero, I,” Revista Técnica—Arquitectura, Nos. 2-3, 15 May 1904, 23. Physician Samuel Gache, in turn, explained that a tenement room “lodges many people, generally 4 or 6, that sleep on cots scattered on the floor, surrounded by cats, dogs, roosters, parrots, in a terrifying promiscuousness: big and small, young and old, men and women, mixed up on the same bed,” which generated great danger “for morality, since those houses are the theater of embarrassing scenes worthy of a whorehouse.” Samuel Gache, Les logements ouvriers à Buenos-Ayres, (Paris: G. Steinheil, 1900), 55.
34 CD, 6 July 1904, 421.
new funds had to be “independent, healthy, clean, comfortable and hygienic houses, in which it will be possible to consolidate and strengthen family bonds,” as well administered by a directory assigned by the city Mayor, which would examine the “morality” of potential recipients.\(^{35}\)

Irigoyen’s bill was the first of a short yet consistent set of housing laws and projects proposed in the years that span from 1904 to 1915 (SEE TABLE 1), accompanying the suburbanization cycle of Buenos Aires’ expansion and fueled by the impact of the tenant strike of 1907 and the continued rise of rents all the way up to 1913 (SEE TABLE 2). With the exception of the one proposed by the reformist lawyer and journalist Emilio Gouchon, all bills were drafted by conservative politicians, some of them members of the landed elite, like Carlos de Estrada or Manuel Gonnet. The bills shared certain features: they mandated the state (be it municipal, provincial, or federal) to destine funds that could proceed from a special loan, a specific tax fund, or from the general budget, to build houses destined for workers. The recipients of the houses had to commit to use them as main residence and not to extract any rent from them: the houses had to be a “home.” With the exception of Gouchon’s project, in which the houses were to be given for rent, the rest of the bills were based on the idea of the houses would be acquired in full property and paid in generous schemes of monthly installments.

Tables 1 and 2: Housing laws and projects in Argentina, 1904-1915. / Rent price of tenement room in Buenos Aires, 1903-1904.

\(^{35}\) Ibid.
These laws offer a window towards how a certain sector of the political elite approached the housing problem in the pre-war years. In all the cases, the tenement was the point of departure these legislators chose, conceiving it as the main situation that had to be addressed by their legislative action. This presence of the tenement, in spite the fact that, as we know, it was already decreasing its quantitative importance during the first two decades of the 20th century, reflected the persistence of the hygienists’ representation of that housing type. In 1910, deputy Carlos de Estrada, like Samuel Gache ten years before him, could quote Rawson’s somber descriptions as a still ongoing reality: “A quarter century ago Dr Rawson studied the miserable condition in which the worker lives in this capital. With prophetic voice he said that if the working-class family remained developing in the tenement, the day would come in which we would all regret the resulting germination of revolutionary socialism and anarchic ideas. Rawson’s prophecy, mister President, has been fulfilled!”

Source: Table 2: Yujnovsky, 358.

---

36 CD, 27 July 1910, 644.
These legislators aimed to provide the worker with an architectural and moral device that was the exact opposite of the tenement room: the self-owned house. A construct that had its origins in the deep concerns of social reformers all over the western world on the deleterious effects of modern life, which eroded traditional social bonds and brought society to the situation of anomie and class struggle, the home was supposed to provide the worker with a physical anchor from which to build and maintain a family, seen as the main moral cell of society. In 1912, as he presented his bill to the national congress, Catholic deputy Juan F. Cafferata portrayed with exact words the importance of the home as a tool to combat what he called the “centrifuge forces” of modern life (“workshop, factory, cabarets, taverns”), which distanced the worker from his home; the law he proposed aimed precisely at reconstructing the “centripetal force […] of the hygienic and sheltered home, the protecting roof, the ‘home of one’s own,’ with its traditions and memories,” in which “the worker finds, after the rough fatigues of his work, the intimate joys of family.”

Besides the moral and the architectural-hygienic features of the home, it was also, if not mainly, the economic fact of creating a homeowner what gave the house its reforming thrust. The opposition between the self-owned and the rented house had been the object of certain discussion in the meetings of the European housing congresses, a debate that would remain open, and that in Buenos Aires, as we will see in Ch. 6, would always stay attached to the debate on collective vs. individual houses. The authors of the bills we are discussing chose the individual, self-owned house, a “system” or “type” that was for reformers like Garzón Maceda or Cafferata,

---

39 CD, 14 August 1912, 182.
more successful than rented and/or collective dwellings. The self-owned house had the potential of changing the lifestyle and customs of the worker, in that it “tends to make the worker a modest homeowner, thus freeing him from the tyrannical extortion of the landlord […]. And that is undoubtedly the best solution to the labor problem, since it provides a practical base upon which two virtues, thrift and perseverance in work, can be born and cultivated…” Only inasmuch as “that piece of land and those walls, acquired through sweat and economy,” were “his domain [patrimonio],” could they work for him as a guarantee of economic and moral stability.

There is a final aspect of these bills that we should discuss, which concerns the role of the state. Certain literature has traditionally dismissed these bills as part of the housing policy of an oblivious conservative elite that trusted in the market more than in the state to solve social issues. The authors of these bills were indeed “liberal” or “laissez-faire,” in the sense that they considered the state an economically inefficient actor that should try to refrain to get involved in the direct construction of houses; rather, for them the happiest situation was one in which private initiative bloomed through philanthropies and cooperative or commercial building societies, able to produce abundant housing, as in the countries they mostly admired, such as England or Belgium. Yet, it was also their view that one of the most idiosyncratic and deeply rooted weaknesses of Argentine society was the lack of such private initiative. In 1912, Cafferata

---

40 Garzón Maceda talked in 1906 of the “system of isolated constructions,” and Cafferata, in 1912, of the “type of isolated construction, or in small groups, with garden.” The idea that this was a “successful” type derived from the observation of European experience, particularly the well-known Mulhouse housing compounds, built by the French industrialist Jean Dollfus in the 1850s for the workers of his textile factory.


reasoned that “it is a well-known fact that the associative spirit is an exotic plant in our communities,” due to the tendency of capital, in a country “young and rich” like Argentina, to look for easy and quick profit.\textsuperscript{43} It was this insufficiency of private initiative that led legislators like Cafferata to propose bills in which the state should be a prime mover, generating “examples” that should spark up the flame of the “associative spirit.” In typical liberal fashion, thus, politicians like Garzón Maceda in Córdoba could express that, in Argentina, “as long as no philanthropic or moderate profit societies are founded, we have to ask and expect everything from government.”\textsuperscript{44} The state was for them an undesirable, yet necessary evil.

It was from this assessment of the importance of the house for the consolidation of social peace and from their appreciation of the economy trends in the country that these legislators justified their projects. In a context of a predominant housing squalor and in which private initiative had failed to provide such thing as a hygienic house for each working-class family, the state had to take a stance in order to protect the family and society as a whole.

\textit{b) Catholic charity and socialist cooperation: housing and utopia.}

Were politicians like Cafferata or Garzón Maceda right in assuming that private initiative had not managed to solve the housing question for significant sectors of the population of the expanding metropolis? They were, if we accept two caveats implicit in their formulations. First, if we understand private initiative \textit{not} in terms of the wide process of land acquisition and “self-construction” that, we have seen, was becoming during those same years the engine of suburbanization, but rather as a collectively organized one, that could involve the action of

\textsuperscript{43} CD, 14 August 1912, 184.
\textsuperscript{44} F. Garzón Maceda, Chamber of Deputies of the Province of Córdoba, 10 July 1906, in Moreyra et al., eds., \textit{El hombre y sus circunstancias}, 139. Emphasis added.
commercial building societies, of cooperatives, or of private charities. Second, if we reduce the formulation to a quantitative dimension: such collective actors did exist in the scenario of fin-de-siècle Buenos Aires, but their impact, while hard to assess, seems to have been small in what regards the production of widely-spread housing. From a qualitative perspective, however, these rather hidden actors were in the process of creating new meanings for the self-owned house, or at least new ways of making it part of a reformist project, both through action and through words. It was indeed through the actual construction of small housing ensembles that both Catholic social activists and socialist cooperativists got involved in workers’ housing provision during the 1900-1910 decade, conceiving them as part of their broader projects of social change.

The construction of the first municipal housing ensemble built under the Irigoyen law was the occasion for the first involvement of Catholic charities in the production of workers’ dwellings. After the municipality resolved in July 1907 to issue a loan in order to build the houses the law mandated, it commended a certain engineer Bancalari to design a project of 250 units in a plot donated by Miss Azucena Butteler, a lady from the traditional aristocracy. In spite of being a donation, the location of the plot was not randomly chosen; it was strategically placed in the vicinity of one of the most cherished projects of the municipality during those years, the construction of the Parque Patricios. This park, inaugurated in 1902, was supposed to be a vector of gradual modernization and integration of the working-class population to respectable urban behaviors (what was then called the generation of a “barrio cordial”). The construction of workers’ dwellings in the whereabouts of the park was a way of strengthening

46 See Gorelik, La grilla y el parque., 149-172.
this project not only through the provision of public amenities but also of a residential space specifically destined for workers. In 1909, indeed, the municipality received another donation in the area, of a block that belonged to the Jockey Club, in which it would begin the construction of a second group of workers’ dwellings, the Barrio Municipal Parque de los Patricios. (SEE MAP 1)

Map 1: Relative location of Parque Patricios and of the first housing initiatives performed by the Municipality and the Sociedad Protectora del Obrero, on 1916 municipal map.

References:
1: Barrio Butteler.
2: Barrio Parque Patricios.


The Barrio Butteler, as the first of these groups was called, was finished only in 1910, and in a much smaller version of 64 houses, while the second project, Parque Patricios, only in 1911. The municipal government was thus slow in completing these projects, something severely criticized by many observers of the period, and it actually

47 One of the few architects who got involved in the discussion of these parliamentary proposals was Ernesto Chanourdie, prominent professional that directed the most important architectural publication of the period, the architectural supplement of the Revista Técnica. In a set of articles that he published between 1904 and 1906, he compared the situation in Argentina with that of Chile and Germany: while the latter got involved in promoting homestead laws and housing research, in Buenos Aires the municipality was morose not only in materializing the provision of the Irigoyen law, but it also in taking to fruition initiatives of improving housing design through “concursos de planos” (something proposed by an ordinance of September 1905). See Chanourdie, “Viviendas económicas e higiénicas para obreros,” Revista Técnica—Arquitectura, No. 35, 28 February 1906.
managed to do so only thanks to the intervention of a Catholic charity, the Conferencias de Señoras de San Vicente de Paul. This civil association, affiliated with the transnational Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, had been founded in 1889 by high-society women, many of them wives of prominent conservative politicians, with the aim of providing social assistance to the poor. Following a traditional conception of Catholic social action that saw as an individual duty of the better-off to help the most destitute sectors of society, the ladies of the Conferencias created and managed a big network of “asylums” for the homeless, the elderly and the sick, “poorhouses,” homes for young ladies, schools of crafts and the like. In the institutions of the Conferencias, discipline and morality were essential parts of social assistance, since they viewed their role as helping channeling the lives of the poor through virtuous paths. While traditionally focusing their work in the most vulnerable and marginal sectors of the population, by the 1900s the ladies of San Vicente created the “Sociedad protectora del obrero” (SPO, Society for the protection of the worker), as a way of addressing the concerns that labor mobilization was generating among many sectors of the Catholic movement.

---

48 This philanthropic society had been founded in 1833 in Paris by a handful of Catholic students, the most influential of which would be the scholar and reformer Frédéric Ozanam. It expanded over different European and New-World countries during the central decades of the 19th century, always with a charity aim.

49 While the most familiar accounts of the evolution of social welfare, in Argentina and worldwide, tends to depict a transition from privately-administered social assistance to state-controlled welfare, cases like these building ensembles show a much more irregular trajectory, in which, like Christine Ehrick has analyzed for the Uruguayan case, a public initiative ends up absorbed by a private agent. See Christine Ehrick, The Shield of the Weak. Feminism and the State in Uruguay, 1903-1933 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005). For social assistance in Argentina, see Donna J. Guy, Women Build the Welfare State. Performing Charity and Creating Rights in Argentina, 1880-1955 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

50 While in that context the Catholic Workers’ Circles would be the most salient example of a new type of institution aiming to integrate workers’ activism within tightly controlled, hierarchical, and multi-class institutions, the ladies of San Vicente were also aiming, through the much more traditional mechanisms of private charity, to reach out to workers in order to integrate them to the Catholic herd. On the Circles, see María Pía Martín, “Iglesia católica, cuestión social y ciudadanía. Rosario-Buenos Aires, 1892-1930” (Ph.D. dissertation, Facultad de Humanidades y Artes/Universidad Nacional de Rosario, 2012).
In 1910 the members of the SPO struck a deal with the municipal government in order to take over the administration of the Butteler ensemble, together with “any new housing unit built in the area.” While the “technical direction and the execution” of the works would be in charge of the Municipal Department of Public Works, the administration allowed SPO fully unfold its paternalistic and disciplinary program, allowing it to “research the antecedents and conduct” of the potential recipients and to issue a “Reglamento” that guaranteed the “good behavior and morality in life.”

The SPO was also authorized to acquire further plots in order to fulfill the aims of Law 4824. Two stretches of land were granted by the Municipality to the Sociedad Protectora in the following years, where the latter built two ensembles: the above-mentioned one to the south of the Parque Patricios, and one in Nueva Pompeya, a marginal southern area in process of becoming a working-class district. In both cases, the municipality supported and subsidized the initiatives, not only through the concession of lands, but also through the opening and consolidation of streets. The first ensemble, as said, was inaugurated in 1911 and was supposed to be a “perfected” version of the Barrio Butteler, with around 116 houses at almost the same final cost. The second ensemble, the “Colonia Obrera” of Nueva Pompeya, had 96 houses and was inaugurated in October 1912.

52 Actas del Honorable Concejo Deliberante, 1910, 4 August, 416-8.
54 Memoria Municipal, 1910, XII-XIII.
The SPO gave its houses for rent, rather than selling them to their dwellers. For the members of the Society the home was not, like for the rest of the reformers we have seen in this section, an individual entity that functioned with autonomy; it was, rather, integrated to the working of the wider program of social assistance of the Conferencias, and tenant-workers were supposed to remain within the realm of those assisted by them, much like those enjoying the services of the asylums and poorhouses scattered over the city.

This integration of the workers’ family under the control of Conferencias can be seen not only in the strict Reglamento of its houses, but also in their spatial layout. The three ensembles built under the administration or by the SPO had a display that prioritized the overall shape of the neighborhood over that of each individual house. The general scheme was based on the traditional square block of Buenos Aires, divided from within through x-shaped or concentric passages. Symmetry, centrality, and hierarchy were the key values expressed in this typology. (SEE FIGURES 4a-c) As Anahi Ballent has shown, the organization of the whole was prioritized over that of each individual unit: the houses were of a conventional “casa chorizo” style, with random orientation and in some cases a forced shape in order to adapt to the general scheme. (SEE FIGURES 4a and 5a-b) It appears implicit that the authorities of the Conferencias strove for a reform of the workers habits “from outside in”: rather than from changes in the immediate living space of the family (the home), it was the spatial ensemble within which that home was integrated what was supposed to exert a benefic and moralizing action over the workers’ lifestyle.

Figure 4: general layout of municipal-SPO housing projects.

a) Barrio Butteler. Plan of project and detail of “casa chorizo” layout and orientation.
b) Barrio Obrero Parque Patricios, integration with urban context.

Source: Gorelik, *La grilla y el parque*, 292.


Source: own elaboration after Google Maps image


Figure 5a-b: individual houses in municipal-SPO housing projects.

a) Bario Butteler. Front view of the houses.
The spatial and organizational schemes of Catholic workers’ dwellings contrasted highly with those that, on a similar scale, socialist cooperativists were building during those years. Founded 1905 and beginning to operate in 1907, “El Hogar Obrero” was a housing cooperative that formulated a rather original version of the ideology of the self-owned house. The rationale behind the foundation of the cooperative was the notion of “free cooperation,” that its founder, the physician and socialist leader Juan B. Justo, had developed observing closely the cooperativist movement in different countries of Europe and in the United States. Justo admired the big British cooperatives that, besides being examples of economic fairness, were able to grow...
commercially. In the case of housing, Justo took, upon returning from a trip to the United States, the model of building societies in Dayton, Ohio, based on the argument that it was more equitable than others.\textsuperscript{56} The cooperative was both a savings and housing cooperative: each member could invest as much money as it wanted in the funds of the cooperative, and withdraw them when she wanted. The cooperative gave loans for construction and built its own houses, which were sold in an internal public auction among its members.\textsuperscript{57} In 1911 it also became a consumer cooperative, which would grow staggeringly during the 1920s and even more in the second postwar.

Through the organization of the cooperative, socialists were not simply striving to make it possible for its members to “acquire” a house. As Anahi Ballent has argued, the founders of EHO were also forging what they considered a specifically “socialist” view of the home, of housing reform, and of municipal government, which was openly critical of Catholic and municipal initiatives.\textsuperscript{58} Yet, in spite of this controversial nature, the socialist view of the house had much in common with the already visited ideologies of the self-owned house. Imbued with the hygienist creed of any professionally-trained physician of the period, socialist leaders like Juan B. Justo, Nicolás Repetto or Ángel Giménez gave utmost importance to the sanitary conditions of the individual house, and also placed great trust on the redemptive moral effect of

\textsuperscript{57} See a brief 1915 description of the functioning of EHO in id., 56-61.
\textsuperscript{58} See Anahí Ballent, “Socialismo, vivienda y ciudad: La Cooperativa El Hogar Obrero. Buenos Aires, 1905-1940” (Buenos Aires, 1989), https://goo.gl/Bk0wqk [Accessed March 2017]. The foundation of the cooperative was part of a general strategy of socialist struggle that Justo was managing to impose to the Argentine socialist party during its first years of existence. According to this strategy, cooperativism was one of the “three branches” through which socialists should endeavor to reform and eventually turn over the capitalist order. Together with cooperativism, i.e. the struggle of workers as consumers against market forces, socialists promoted the organization of unions through which workers could struggle against owners in the workplace. Cooperativism and unionism constituted two sides of one same struggle, the “lucha económica,” while the organization of a political party was a parallel, third branch of activity, the “lucha política.” These three branches of action, according to Justo, harmonized easily with each other, due to the fact that they obeyed to the “true” interests of the working class.
the house upon family life. Echoing the old adagios, present already in Marx, of the dissipated life that a detached worker was prone to, Argentine socialists considered that proper housing could provide the worker with a stable family framework that was essential for his wellbeing.\(^{59}\)

The provision of hygienic equipment to the house, the reorganization of its interior spaces, with a new importance given to the common area (the “sala”) and a strong differentiation in the use of each space, were all ideas that socialist leaders publicized in their writings on hygiene and on the home. In turn, and placing themselves at the opposite pole of both the Catholic approach (which they accused of being authoritarian and disciplinary, as well as dishonest)\(^{60}\) and that of capitalist building companies (which took profit out of the workers’ efforts),\(^ {61}\) socialists accused speculators and an inefficient municipal government of making housing extremely expensive for any working-class family.

The first houses built by EHO, in 1907, were a set of four small houses in the area of Villa Luro, back then an almost rural area, west of the last train station of the western railway. (SEE MAP 2) They were designed by a non-registered mason who followed the vernacular type of the “casa chorizo.”\(^ {62}\) (SEE FIGURES 6a-b) Yet, after this initial experiment, EHO began striving, through construction and later on also through sophisticated discursive elaborations, towards a new, more modern type of house: compact, with differentiated spaces, a greater hierarchy given to the living-room, and better integrated kitchen and WC.

Map 2: relative location of EHO early housing groups (red), in comparison to those of the Municipality and SPO (blue). In violet, EHO’s first collective houses (1913 and 1927). In black, political limits of the city.

\(^{59}\) On the “moralistic” tone of the socialist discourse, we can simply remember here the campaigns against “alcoholismo” that Ángel Giménez and other socialist councilmen would promote in the late 1910s.

\(^{60}\) See “Las casas municipales para obreros,” LV, 25 February 1915, 1.


\(^{62}\) Renée Dunowicz and Fernando Villaveirán, El Hogar Obrero. Un siglo de vivienda cooperativa (Buenos Aires: IAIES, 2013), 47.
In the picture, we see the serial repetition of the houses, perpendicular to the street. Note the narrow fronts and the lateral semi-covered patio/gallery in each house.

Source: Dunowicz and Villaveirán, 48-49.

This new housing type was explored already in the second housing group of the cooperative, a set of 21 row houses built in Ramos Mejía, a suburb located to the west of Villa Luro. During the inauguration of the compound, in 1911, Justo explained that the cooperative
was not only striving for a new type of commercial operation, but also towards “revolutionizing the type of the small economic house [casita económica], abandoning the old mold of the dwelling leaning on one side of the plot, with openings to the air and light of the outside through only one side of the rooms. […] [The new houses] have much better ventilation, and since in them sunlight enters freely, it is certain that the physician will enter less.”

The new houses, indeed, were compact row houses distributed along a narrow plot so that each one had front and back facing open air, with a small garden and an entry court. (SEE FIGURES 7a-c) A more rational and economic use of materials was achieved through the use of a two-story type, the sharing of dividing walls, and the display of kitchens and WCs in pairs. The new housing type was also used in a third housing group, built in the southern suburb of Turdera in 1913-14, although in this case the houses were placed in pairs rather than in rows. (SEE FIGURE 8)


Source: Dunowicz and Villaveirán, 51-52.

---

Figure 8: EHO: semi-detached houses in Turdera, 1913-14. Advertisement in the cooperative’s magazine.

Legend: “Façade and floorplan of the houses built by ‘El Hogar Obrero’ in Turdera (Southern Railway), to be finished soon.”
Source: La cooperación libre, No 9, 1 July 1914.

This transition from the vernacular towards a more modern typology shows one of the characteristics of the “strategy” that the cooperative was following in these early years. While, as we have seen, the municipal/Catholic ensembles of the period aimed to generate a new reformist space in the general organization of their compounds rather than in the individual units (what we have called a reform “from outside in”), socialists went the opposite way: to change society through a change in the individual house. In this “inside-out” strategy, great emphasis was put by socialists on the importance of a hygienic and modern house as an avenue for broader changes, the same way that the cooperative, by the fact of changing consumption habits, was promoting social change. This difference also obeyed to the material limitations of EHO as an actor in the municipal sphere, particularly before the 1912 electoral reform, when it had no social or political influence at all. From that position of marginality, the only thing that the cooperative could do was to acquire small, residual plots located in much more distant areas than those of the
municipal houses (as Map 2 shows), and to design there “model houses” that served as a laboratory for future, more ambitious projects.

Making a virtue of necessity, however, this location also obeyed to a second strategy of the cooperative concerning housing and urban debates. The choice of a peripheral area was also part of an anti-urban discourse that EHO had in common with other participants of urban debates of the period, such as proponents of the “garden city” ideal. In the case of EHO, it was part of its polemic spirit, which through the “flight from the city” was proposing a critique of the mechanisms of expansion of Buenos Aires in the period (market speculation, irrational expansion, disproportionate role of intermediaries, etc.). These small socialist outposts were thus conceived by their creators as “workers’ peripheries” that could emerge as an alternative to the corrupted capitalist metropolis. As Justo had explained in 1911, when the cooperative had bigger resources it would “erect not mere groups of houses, but entire boroughs, cooperative cities, firmer than the city dreamt by Zola.”

\[c\] Technical imagination. Housing as an urban problem: “barrios obreros” vs. “casas colectivas”

The “barrio cordial” imagined by the Municipality in the area of Parque Patricios and then hijacked, so to speak, by Catholic philanthropy, and the “workers’ periphery” of early socialist housing ensembles serve as a good point of departure towards two different ways of understanding the complex issue of the relation between workers’ housing and urban expansion,

\[64\] The creation of these “workers’ peripheries” should not be confused to that of the “garden city,” as the English reformer Ebenezer Howard had conceived it in 1902. Howard’s formulation, which spread worldwide as an urban proposal in the years prior to World War I, was one of self-sustaining communities scattered in the countryside, separated from the big metropolises; the workers’ periphery, on the contrary, was integrated with the latter. They were residential areas from which workers would commute to the central or industrial districts. On the diffusion of the garden-city idea, see among others Magri and Topalov, “De la cité-jardin à la ville rationalisée.”


\[66\] Justo “En la inauguración del barrio obrero,” 41.
as well as the problem of the social integration of the working masses to the social tissue. Once land availability and cheap transportation made the moving to the urban peripheries possible, the idea of a “barrio obrero” became thinkable, and was indeed hailed by many reformers as an economical and hygienic solution to two key issues of urban housing: land price and overcrowding. As suburbanization progressed, however, other figures would propose a contrary solution to those problems, sustaining that public effort should be focused on the generation of higher population densities, be it in the periphery or in the urban downtown.

During the 1904-1914 cycle, the framing of these two alternative ways was the work of a handful of engineers linked to municipal and national bureaucracy. Although none of these initiatives was materialized, they were effective in expanding the horizon of potential housing schemes in a near future. They were also the expression of the puzzlement that frantic urban expansion was generating in the minds of municipal authorities and technical bureaucrats.

It would be however not an engineer but Samuel Gache, a physician specialized in tuberculosis, the first to propose housing models that took into account the suburbanization process as it was going through its earliest stages. In 1900 he wrote in France a long treaty on the “workers’ dwellings of Buenos Aires,” in which he thematized the old problem of the tenement through an equally traditional hygienist perspective, focusing on issues of disease and mortality, and quoting at length passages from Rawson and Wilde. Together with this old-

---

67 Samuel Gache (1859-1907), physician, first specialized in psychiatry and then in obstetrics, public health, and tuberculosis, being director of the Liga Argentina contra la Tuberculosis in the 1900s. In the late 1890s he lived in Paris and built a thick web of contacts with French medical and scientific societies. He published in those years a series of volumes, in French and aimed toward an international audience, on Argentine issues of public health, such as “medical climatology,” tuberculosis and workers’ dwellings. See A. R. Fiorino, “Samuel Gache, un higienista poco recordado,” Revista argentina de tuberculosis, enfermedades pulmonares y salud pública, Vol. 43, No. 4, October-December 1982, pp. 67-71.

68 Already in 1900, a reviewer of the work reproached Gache’s anachronisms, claiming that “the descriptions of the tenement made by eminent and wise Dr Rawson,” which Gache reproduced, “belonged to an age in which hygiene was neglected in our city, and in which the grandiose improvement works [Obras de Salubridad] […] had yet not reached the progress and efficacy they have nowadays.” It was thanks to these “grandiose works” that the tenement
fashioned tone, however, Gache was one of the first to perceive the novelty that the
suburbanization process meant for the housing of the working masses, as well as its impact on
the existence of tenements. It was undoubtedly upon this perception that Gache offered in a
chapter of the book two sets of “author’s projects,” designed with the technical advice of an
engineer (a certain Carlos Doynel). The projects were of two sorts: on one hand, collective “cités
ouvrières” to be built in the central area of the city, and on the other “maisonnettes” to be built
on the “faubourgs” of the city. With this simple but crucial distinction, Gache was highlighting
relative location as a factor to take into account in the design of the “ideal dwelling,” something
that, albeit common knowledge in the European debate in the second half of the 19th century,
was yet absent in the local scene, since urban growth had still not made it thinkable.

The collective dwellings projected by Gache and Doynel were compact three-story
buildings, with central corridors to access the dwellings, and with rather slender open-air
courtyards. (SEE FIGURE 9) They were examples of a pavilion-type display frequent in
European workers’ dwellings, but adapted to the requirements of a dense and expensive
downtown area, as well as to the narrowness of the plots of Buenos Aires. Gache envisaged these
constructions occupying all available interstice space in the central city, as well as their
construction in certain densely populated suburbs, generating a true “decentralization of workers’
dwellings.”

Yet, this rather modern adaptation to the dynamics of urban expansion contrasted
with the fact that, in Gache’s “cités” (in spite of the author’s emphasis on hygiene in relation to
crossed ventilation, windows per room, and internal circulation), bathrooms, WCs, and water

---

was not any more the “den of poverty, filth and immorality,” and that working-class neighborhoods in Buenos Aires
were incomparable to the sordid landscapes that predominated in their counterparts of the European capitals, such as
“the borough of the Kroumirs in Paris, London’s Southwark, and others.” See “Habitaciones para obreros,” *La
ingeniería*, No. 54, 15 August 1900, 707-8.

fountains and sinks were shared, thus preserving the tenement as a form of non-autonomous family dwelling. In other words, they were workers’ “rooms,” rather than “houses,” much like Buschiazzo’s 1880s model tenements.

Figure 9: Samuel Gache and Carlos Doynel’s project for collective houses.

Source: Gache, plate [102a].

This precariousness might obey to the fact that Gache, like Mayor Alvear, considered the downtown collective house as a somehow transitional phenomenon, a necessary evil from which
workers could sooner or later escape. This is consistent with further projets Gache proposed in his book: one of pavilions of centrally-located rooms for single workers, and one of individual houses that should spread through the new suburban neighborhoods. While the former were equally transitional dwellings, the latter were part of Gache’s enthusiasm about the process of spatial expansion that was already perceptible at his time, and he considered his model maisonettes as a contribution to the hygienic standards of this process. The houses were compact, two-story structures, equipped with two/three bedrooms, individual kitchen, bathroom and toilette. (SEE FIGURE 10)

Figure 10: Façade, transversal cut and plan view of individual houses.

I: one-family detached house for big families.
II: two-family semi-detached houses.

70 In his own words, “since we cannot completely suppress the conventillos, [we have to] transform them at least as completely as to make the memory of those old slums disappear at the sight of the new workers’ houses.” Id., 100-101.
71 “The neighborhoods,” Gache argued, “have several advantages, from the point of view of price, airing, comfort and a certain level of well-being that can be acquired through modest expenses.” Id., 100.
72 The dining room could be converted into a bedroom, in order to fulfill the axiom of having a bedroom for the parents and one for children of each sex, so that “all promiscuity can be ruled out and the parents’ surveillance becomes very easy.” Id., 101.
The orientation and plot layout was equally substantial for these hygienic purposes. He proposed a North-East / South-West orientation for better sunlight, and placed the houses next to the front edge of a standardized 25- or 50-meter-deep plot, which would allow each house to have one or two gardens or courtyards of their own. In contrast with the existing narrow and longitudinally irregular plot of the typical square block of Buenos Aires, Gache imagined the splitting of the block in two halves, generating a Manhattan-style rectangular block in which all plots could be similar. (SEE FIGURES 11a-c) This solution had the advantage of being simple enough to overcome certain rigidities, such as property structure and the grid pattern, that conspired against a more efficient and hygienic urban expansion.

Figure 11a-c: Ground layout of Gache’s maisonettes: section of rectangular block.

a) one-family detached house for big families.  b) two-family semi-detached houses.

c) Example of display of the houses within the new platting scheme, for type-a houses. To the right, example of standard display of lots in the traditional square block.

Source: Gache, plate.
When we compare the simplicity of the housing plans offered by Gache with the efforts he made to propose certain urban innovations that could make these prototypes compatible with the logic of Buenos Aires’ growth in the expansion phase, we can see the extent to which his proposal was an attempt to make housing reform part of an improved version of the existing patterns of urban expansion.

If we have considered Gache a two-sided figure (on one hand anchored in the old hygienist approach to the tenement but, on the other, attentive at the ongoing expansion of Buenos Aires), it would be an engineer, Domingo Selva, who advanced a different and innovative type of state intervention that could marry housing and suburban expansion in better terms.

Like Gache, Selva considered that governments had to promote the acquisition of self-owned houses. In a conference given in 1901 at the Sociedad Científica Argentina, he described with enthusiasm the reformist potential of government-built “workers’ neighborhoods in appropriate sites, with economic houses […] where the worker, from the moment he begins to dwell the house on, can consider it his own, since he will acquire it month after month, through payment of a certain installment,” which should not be higher than the monthly rent of a tenement room. The importance of the neighborhoods, as opposed to isolated workers’ “houses,” obeyed in Selva’s view to a segregated view of social structure: in another conference, in 1904, he sustained that workers had to be surrounded by fellow workers, living their ordinary lives in an “worker’s environment” (buying his goods in stores that sell goods of their specific

---

73 Domingo Selva (1870-?). From immigrant origin, he graduated as an engineer at the UBA in 1896, and pursued a trajectory as a technically trained bureaucrat in the realm of public works and sanitary improvement, which culminated with the direction of OSN. He was also a mathematics and civil engineering professor in national universities.

interest, being educated in schools in which students were from an homogenous social origins, spending their leisure time in their own, tightly controlled “diversiones,” etc.). Barrio and house should thus work in the same direction, towards a stabilization and “pacification” of the working class.

With this aim in mind, he made a description of the types of neighborhoods he envisioned: they were ensembles of between 80 and 100 houses, with the above-mentioned common institutions that should make it possible for the worker to spend his everyday life in the area. The barrios were to be located in the outskirts of the city, where land was more accessible; blocks had to be big and, like Gache’s, rectangular (100x200m), with 42-m deep plots. The houses he proposed were to be as compact as possible (he recommended two stories), in order to leave a lot of open space for a front garden and a back yard, which should work as an orchard (“giving the house lots of unbuilt surface [mucho terreno], with a garden to the front and an orchard to the back, to raise poultry and grow legumes”). Selva proposed a combination of this scheme with health and life insurance funds created by the rental of commercial stores in the neighborhoods to be built, and the construction of schools and other communal institutions, workers’ dwellings could be for governments a step towards a construction of what we would nowadays call a social welfare policy.

---

77 In Selva’s words, the construction of these neighborhoods had to be “complemented” with the “creation of ‘pension funds,’ life insurance, etc., which assure the worker a stable future; soup kitchens; and retirement homes.” Selva, “La vivienda higiénica para el obrero, VI,” Revista Técnica—Arquitectura, Nos. 13-14, 30 November 1904, 118.
Implicit in Gache and Selva’s proposals was a critique of the suburbanization process. While praising the “exodus” of families to the suburbs, these reformers considered that there was room for improvement, both in terms of hygiene and of economic efficiency. As suburbanization continued its pace, this critique would be taken to a new step by two engineers in the most ambitious and sophisticated housing and urban scheme of the period.

In May 1909 engineers C. Fernández Poblet and Alejandro de Ortúzar presented to the municipal authorities the project of a workers’ city in a distant southwestern district. The base of that project was, as said, a critical view of the existing pattern of suburbanization. “The enormous growth of the metropolis,” explained Ortúzar in his address to the municipal government, “produces the continuous extension of the built area; empty spaces are rapidly filled in by small houses [...] but this edification, carried out with no order and following no adequately studied plan, fails to provide services that are indispensable to live...” The low density of the new areas inhibited the investment in street consolidation: there were no sewers, no lighting, and no water supply, since these new neighborhoods did not have “enough density to materialize those services in an economically rational way.” The Barrios Municipales under construction, as well as projects like Gache or Selva’s, were no real solution to this; they had to be suburban, due to the high cost of land downtown, but their small scale condemned them to the same lack of adequate urban infrastructure.

78 C. Fernández Poblet and Alejandro de Ortúzar, “Proyecto de barrio obrero,” Revista Técnica—Arquitectura, No 56, June-July 1909, 88-95; “Casas para obreros. Estudio de un barrio obrero en “La Tablada Municipal,” La ingeniería, No 271, 31 August 1909, 241-250. These two engineers were a successful tandem that had built some important projects in the downtown area, particularly three theaters. Ortúzar (1881-?) was also the author of massive housing and urban plans in the 1900s and the 1920s. He was also a city councilman, in charge of the Public Works Department.

79 “Isolated groups of 100 or 200 houses cannot afford in any efficient way sanitary and water-supply systems; their public lighting and cleaning services, health, education, justice, etc., etc., would be both deficient and expensive...” Fernández Poblet and Ortúzar, “Proyecto de barrio obrero,” 94.
It was against these problems that Fernández Poblet and Ortúzar devised their project. Taking the idea of “barrio obrero” to a new scale, they proposed the construction of a true workers’ city of 3,400 houses, with streets, avenues, parks and amenities, and communal institutions. It was a project that, still clinging to the notion of the individual self-owned house, managed to generate, in contrast with the ongoing suburbanization, the whole set of services necessary for urban life (“projecting for the worker not a group of houses, but a complete city with all its services and amenities, that […] guaranteed them health and provided them means of education and sociability, with its schools, promenades, and libraries”). At the same time, the high density of the settlement allowed it to be economically efficient. Its location (SEE FIGURE 12a) in areas of municipal property of low value due to their distance to the central city and to their floodable condition (something the authors esteemed solvable through land engineering) guaranteed the affordability of the necessary land.

The general layout was reminiscent of many of the model industrial cities that circulated in Europe at the period, particularly Arturo Soria’s “ciudad lineal” (1897) and Tony Garnier’s “cité industrielle” (1899-1903): hierarchization of traffic arteries, differentiated use of areas, a central corridor of communal public services and a surrounding residential area, and a green zone of parks below. (SEE FIGURE 12b) The authors of the project considered that this high quality of urban services was a feature that could make the need of having cheap and rather small housing units a virtue: “these somehow small dimensions invite and encourage dwellers, in their

---

80 Id., 93.
81 The land engineering was admittedly complicated and expensive (it involved the recovery of an entire suburban area of 84 hectares that was half flooded by the Riachuelo and one of its tributaries) but, Fernández Poblet and Ortúzar argued, would be widely compensated by the value that the scale of the project would generate. The initial investment was to be a municipal loan (in this the project was very traditional).
free time, to seek recreation outside their houses, in the avenues, parks or public promenades, something that strongly fosters sociability.”

Figure 12a: location of the Fernández Poblet and Ortúzar’s “barrio obrero.”

Source: Fernández Poblet and Ortúzar, 88.

Figure 12b: general layout of the “barrio obrero,” plus detail of display of houses and blocks.

---

82 Id., 90.
The houses were small, two-story, and semidetached. (SEE FIGURE 13). Even the gardens of the houses were to be small, not only to prevent families to breed “unhygienic” animals “such as hens, pigs, etc.”, but also, as said, to encourage use of public spaces. In turn, the simplicity of the internal layout of the house and the separation between common areas and dormitories (particularly in the two-story potential extensions of the houses) was supposed to help family life to remain strong, within a paternalistic and rather authoritarian scheme: “the family gathers in a common place, the dining-room, always under the control of its chief [jefe], which tends to develop the spirit of union within the home, homogenizing customs.”

Figure 13: individual houses. Cut and plan of the houses and surrounding gardens.

---

83 Id., 90.
As we can see, Fernández Poblet and Ortúzar’s discourse was a peculiar combination of the importance of the individual house for the development of family life with a strongly communalistic view of the city and an equally strong emphasis on the need of economic solutions that were cost- and space-efficient. High density, semidetached small houses, and communal services were for them the technical devices that could provide such things with much more success than the ongoing patterns of suburban expansion.

In the years of the Centenary, suburbanization was a fact. Legislators, physicians and engineers alike were aiming to regulate it, to “tame” it and improve it, through the different projects we have visited so far. Yet one of these reformers, Domingo Selva, soon took a different road. While in 1904 he had joint the small but consistent choir of proponents of “barrios obreros” aimed to make suburbanization more hygienic and efficient, by 1910 he had perceived that, on the contrary, these projects made no sense, since the installment schemes offered were necessarily too long or too expensive, and could not compete with the facilities that the land market was offering to workers in order to acquire a plot, and later, through self-construction, a home of their
own. It was necessary to let land acquisition to unfold in its own terms, since the suburban fever was solving, with greater efficacy than any governmental housing scheme, “the problem of the self-owned house” cherished by social and urban reformers. The only governmental work necessary in the suburb was thus of a true “municipal” nature: to provide the new areas with streets and sidewalks, cheap and efficient transportation means, lighting, trash collection, publish hospitals, water supply, sewers, and the like, in order to promote their hygiene and integration to the rest of the city.

The problem of the hour lay thus not in the suburbs, but in the downtown area itself. Decades of urban growth, both in the compression and the expansion phase, had disproportionately increased land value in the central districts. The tenement, explained Selva, was a natural response to that fact, since the lack of investment and of more modern building regulations (“the mistaken concern of owners, and […] the medieval insistence of our former building authorities, who opposed the construction of high-rises…”) had prevented the erection of multi-story houses that could have enabled owners to extract rent from their supervalued lands. The conventillo was the second-best solution to that situation: it was the only way owners could force their plots to yield a higher rent (although far from what they could potentially yield).

Upon this diagnosis, Selva’s proposal consisted on the construction of big “casas de alquiler” aimed at the worker, “so that the latter can dwell close to his workshop, and in rent

84 Building companies took “20 years […] to grant the tenant the property of the house she inhabits,” which was at least three times what it took to fully pay an unbuilt suburban plot. Alvear’s municipal houses of the 1880s, in turn, had ended up being affordable only by “employees that earned a monthly wage of more than 200 $.” Selva, “Edificación obrera, I,” Revista Técnica—Arquitectura, No. 63, May-June 1910, 52-54.  
85 “To sum up, it can be said that the problem of the dwelling [la casa habitación] for the worker in the strict sense and for the modest-wage employee, is in fact solved, through the sale of lands in monthly installments…” Id., 55. Emphasis in original.  
86 Id., 54
conditions that match his resources.” The engineer had gone full circle, from the segregated workers’ neighborhood to the integrated collective house. Selva imagined his buildings distributed around a “ring” of areas surrounding downtown, in which demand was high and land expensive. His idea was that each area would serve to locate workers close to specific sources of employment (such as the port, markets, etc.). (SEE FIGURES 14a-b)
Selva’s buildings were to be big apartment complexes: six floors, with fourteen apartments in each superior floor and ten in the first floor, and two big stores flanking the entrance of the building. (SEE FIGURES 15a-b) In contrast with the old “model tenements” or the collective houses that the state would build in the 1920s, these collective buildings avoided the central courtyard, which was for Selva morally suspicious, in that it diminished the privacy of each house.  

---

88 Selva proposed that each apartment had a “patio abierto” of its own, letting children enjoy open air while not having to be forced to be in contact with other children. “The common courtyard has to be abolished, and common accesses should serve the minimum number of houses possible, in order to limit that inevitable contact.” Ibid.
Besides certain features of hygiene, comfort and constructive quality (such as and materials, airing, lighting, or vicinity to transportation means), Selva considered that the most important dimension of his project was the generation of an efficient plan that could guarantee at the same time a low price for the apartments and a good profit level for the whole, so that capitalists would be interested in investing in their construction. In order to achieve this in areas in which land was expensive, Selva’s strategy was based on high density (as said, he proposed 6 floors and 80 apartments per building), mixed use, and a combination of high- and low-income residencies. The first floor was dominated by two big commercial stores that could yield a good monthly rent (SEE FIGURE 15a), and in the superior floors the apartments looking to the front (he called them “standard family houses,” rather than “workers’ houses”) were of higher category and therefore of higher rent. They had three bedrooms, living room, dining room, vestibules, kitchen and bathroom, plus independent access, no common area with the rest, and a doorman. The “interior departments,” which constituted the “true reduced-rent houses,” had a more standardized distribution, displayed through longitudinal access corridors. These apartments would have two or three bedrooms, dining room, interior and exterior courtyards, and bathroom and kitchen. (SEE FIGURE 15b)

Figures 15a-b
a) Ground floor. Note the big “negocios” to the front. b) Detail of floors 2 to 6. Note the big apartment to the front (“casa”), and the distribution of “patios” and “aire y luz” (air shaft).

Selva’s 1910 project was an early attempt to generate new building “types” that, instead of following the desideratum of the “self-owned house,” faced the problem of mass housing in densely populated centric areas. As we will see in chapter 6, by 1910 conditions were still not ripe for such an endeavor, and the projects would remain unfulfilled. Only in the 1920s, in a very different urban, economic, and political context, public authorities and other actors would get involved in the construction of the first workers’ collective houses of the city.
III. Casas Baratas. The Pyrrhic victory of the homeownership ideal.

In November 1913 Arturo Bas, a Radical deputy from Córdoba, defended a bill by his colleague Juan F. Cafferata that created a national housing commission in charge of building “workers’ houses” in the capital of the country. His words on that occasion could have well referred to any of the prior housing bills we have discussed in this chapter. Bas stated that “the project, based on the system that—through a small sum paid as interest and amortization—turns the worker into a homeowner,” had “the fundamental purpose of the formation of the home, joining in it parents and children through that indelible feeling that endured under the self-owned roof…”90 The value of the home as an economic and moral asset of the family and the trust in the system of monthly installments were bulwarks of Cafferata’s bill.

Cafferata presented his project again, almost unchanged, in late May 1914, and it became law in September 1915. Although the economically critical context that from 1913 on had paralyzed the construction industry could suggest that this was a law aimed at grappling the unfavorable conjuncture, that was not the case. To start, the first version of the bill was presented by Cafferata in 1912, at the climax of the construction fever; second, during the whole 1915 parliamentary debate there was barely any mention to the ongoing critical conjuncture; third, the contents of the bill itself reveal that it was rather a continuation of the prior housing laws and projects (particularly of Félix Garzón Maceda’s 1907 provincial law).91

Cafferata’s bill stipulated the creation of a pro-bono commission (the “Comisión Nacional de Casas Baratas”), dependent of the Interior Ministry, which would be in charge of

---

90 CD, 5 November 1913, 74.
91 Cafferata himself explained that part of his law “so to speak, a carbon copy of the Garzón Maceda Law, currently in force in the province of Córdoba.” CD, 14 August 1915, p. 184. Both men were really close: not only were they fellow countrymen and conservative copartisans, but also both of them physicians and colleagues in university teaching, as well as cousins.
building houses to be sold in payment schemes, or rented, to “workers, day laborers, and employees with family.”92 The houses would be exempted from land and municipal taxes, and recipients had the possibility of acquiring a life insurance in order to preserve the property for their families in case of death.93 The Commission was also supposed to promote all kinds of housing initiatives, from individual ones to cooperatives and charities, through the extension of its privileges, as well as through publicity and prizes. The work of the Commission would be based on the funds secured by a 1910 law (Carlos de Estrada’s project on Table 1), which raised a percentage of the income generated by horse races, plus periodical funds that the parliament had to provide in the yearly budget.

The most important innovations of Cafferata’s bill in comparison to its precedents were the protection of the house as an economic family asset, including a temporary life insurance provision (which was taken from Belgian and Spanish housing legislation),94 and two clauses protecting the integrity of the home in succession cases.95 A social Catholic and a physician specialized in pediatrics and tuberculosis prevention, Cafferata developed both his professional and political life to the protection of the family, and it was under that rationale that he presented many social bills during his numerous terms as national deputy.96 It was precisely in tandem with

---

93 A supplementary measure to protect the house as a “family asset” consisted of its indivisibility in case of death of one of the spouses as long as the other one remained living there. In case of death of both, heirs could not divide the property as long as minors still lived in it.
94 While the Spanish law was identified, as said, by Carlos Coll as an inspiration to Cafferata’s project, Belgian legislation had circulated profusely among social-economic publications, such as the BMSA and even in mainstream newspapers like La nación (See for instance the article by Roberto J. Payró, “Cartas informativas—Las habitaciones obreras en Bélgica,” LN, 16 October 1912, p. 7). It was praised by Cafferata as “the most advanced mark regarding cheap dwelling.” (CD, 29 May 1914, p. 507).
95 In case of death of one of the consorts, the widow/er could not be forced by the rest of the heirs to divide the property. Likewise, if both parents died, the children could not divide up the property while there were minors living in it.
96 Cafferata was deputy in five occasions: 1912-1916, 1920-1924, 1924-1928, 1932-36 and 1936-40. Many of the bills were presented in tandem with his road companion, deputy Bas (deputy in 1912-1916 and in 1920-1924) that, although Radical, shared with Cafferata social Catholic convictions.
the housing law that Cafferata presented, also in 1914, a bill called “Ley del bien de familia,” which deepened the protection of the home, physical seat of the family, from the perils of commercial and judicial life.\footnote{Cafferata explained that the homestead law was a necessary complement of the “Casas baratas” bill, in that it “aims towards the same end and fits the same general framework: […] the encouragement among us of the regime of the small property, which constitutes a shelter for the family and puts […] an insurmountable barrier to the advances of usury, which sinks its claws into the home’s heart itself.” CD, 3 July 1914, 823. } His bill declared the home an indivisible and unalienable property, which “cannot be confiscated, mortgaged, nor alienated” without the consent of both consorts.\footnote{CD, 3 July 1914, 822-23. } The Ley de bien de familia was, as Cafferata himself explained, a continuation in urban settings of the American tradition of the “homestead” law.

The preceding discussion shows the ideological inspiration of the Cafferata law. It was from the moral and hygienic concern on the family that the law pushed towards the creation of a national housing commission, with no real anchoring in the patterns of urban expansion we have already visited. The lack of an institutional link with the municipality as well as of any jurisdiction over construction or urban regulations would soon show the limits of the Commission’s realm of activity, as we will see in Chapter 6.

It was precisely paying attention to these facts that the socialist block had decided from start to oppose the law at the Chamber of Deputies.\footnote{By 1914, the Chamber was controlled by conservatives. Socialists held a small yet significant block of 9 seats, and Radicals a second majority of 28 seats. } Their opposition to the bill centered on two aspects. First, socialists considered that it was not the state the one who should get involved in direct construction of workers’ dwellings. International experience proved for them that the state was less efficient than private initiative in the generation of mass housing stock.\footnote{International experience showed for Dickmann that the creation of federal commissions in charge of housing was only a final step in a development that had to start on the ground, through private and municipal construction. “Entre nosotros se quiere empezar al revés: sin que haya todavía iniciativa privada, apenas con un esbozo de acción cooperativa, casi sin ninguna acción municipal, se quiere constituir una comisión nacional, con el propósito de edificar ella misma casas en todo el país.” CD, 3 September 1915, 192. This position was coherent with the general opposition of Argentine socialism in state intervention in the economy, under the conviction that social change could not }
this, they considered a flagrant contradiction that the state instituted a commission specifically devoted to construction while at the same time it carried out policies that hindered the activity at many levels. Enrique Dickmann (1874-1955), a physician and Latvian-Jewish immigrant who led the socialist block’s opposition, insisted on this fact, arguing that the lack of houses in Buenos Aires was due to a perverse tax system that benefitted owners that left their plots vacant instead of those who built (we will return to these arguments in Chapter 6), and that imposed outrageous import tariffs on construction materials. It was ridiculous, argued Dickmann, to claim to encourage construction “before modifying this monstrous fiscal regime.”

A second avenue of socialist criticism addressed the characteristics of the growth process of the city that we have visited in Chapter 1. The scheme of land speculation stimulated the small plot with a small individual house, which was in turn what all housing reform schemes, from Irigoyen to Cafferata, equally aimed to encourage. For Dickmann, in contrast, these “isolated little houses” were impossible to afford for working-class families, and were inadequate for them, since the Argentine working class, composed by immigrants, was extremely mobile. In line with what we have seen in the project of engineers Fernández Poblet and Ortúzar, socialists also argued that the spread of this housing type had generated suburbia so distant and dispersed that it was impossible to provide them with municipal services. For all these reasons, Dickmann sustained that it was necessary to encourage “the construction of big collective houses, cheap and comfortable.”

and should be achieved through the autonomous economic and social strengthening of the working class (see Chapter 4).

101 CD, 3 September 1915, 189.
102 CD, 10 September 1915, 268-9.
103 “We would like to see land property constituted in big blocks, so that houses in the European style could be built. Those houses cover an entire block, with an internal big court or garden, and in which all houses have windows and doors facing towards it and towards the street.” CD, 3 September 1915, 192.
This position, besides resonating with engineer Selva’s 1910 housing projects, was in line with the transition that the activity of the housing cooperative El Hogar Obrero was making in those years. In the early 1910s, the cooperative was changing its economic and urban strategy, shifting from the initial emphasis on the individual house and the “worker’s periphery” to a “return to the city” that came hand in hand with the launching, in 1911, of the consumption services of the cooperative. Consumers’ cooperatives, which for Juan B. Justo and other socialists were the paradigm of cooperative action, posed a logistical problem to the socialist strategy of creating suburbanized “barrios de obreros,” basically due to distribution costs. In order to be able to centralize goods provision and with a new discourse on the need of a workers “reconquest” of the city center, the leaders of EHO became involved in the construction of collective houses, in what was a vindication of the traditional Engelsian arguments on the housing question.

Following this new perspective, the directory of EHO decided in 1910 to embark in the construction of its first collective house, in a plot acquired for that purpose in the centric neighborhood of San Telmo. The design of the building was not made, as in the first housing estates we have visited, by amateur members of the cooperative, but by engineer Julio Molina y Vedia, and the construction was directed by engineers F. Poblet and Ortúzar, whom we already know. In its design, Molina y Vedia attempted to follow the program set by the cooperative authorities, which consisted of integrating in one same building the cooperative shop (first floor) and its the cultural and administrative buildings (second floor), while floors three to six were

---

104 For the following development, see Ballent, “Socialismo, vivienda y ciudad.”
105 Friedrich Engels argued that the working class was mobile, and that the idea of “anchoring” workers to self-owned houses was essentially reactionary. See his classic 1872 pamphlete “Zur Wohnungsfrage.” (The Housing Question, London: Martin Lawrence, 1935).
reserved for housing, totaling 32 apartments. The floorplan of the housing units reveals, in turn, the complicated solutions implemented in order to adapt hygienic and economic requirements (such as to provide all—or two out of three—rooms with a window facing open space or to pair up the kitchens and bathrooms) to the irregular shape of the plot. (SEE FIGURE 16c) This, and the fact that the cooperative could only later acquire the corner that completed the perimeter of the building, reveals once again the limitations that the cooperative had as a real-estate operator. The technical difficulties that the architect had to go through, in turn, are also indicative of the absolute novelty of this housing type (the affordable collective house) in the local milieu. We will see in Chapter 6 the evolution of this type in the 1920s.

Figures 16 a-c: First EHO collective house (Edificio Juan B. Justo), inaugurated 1913. Picture, front view, and floor plan.

Source: Figures a-b: Dunowicz-Villaveirán, 75-76. Figure c): El Hogar Obrero, Memoria VIII, January-June 1911, 13.

This type of housing initiative was undoubtedly at odds with the Cafferata bill. Although the latter contemplated the construction of both individual and collective houses, it was evident,
as said above, that it was mainly inspired by the ideal of the self-owned house. In turn, the socialist shift towards collective houses in the 1910s and the arguments formulated by its deputies against Cafferata’s bill show a transition that socialist housing reformers were making, from a faith of the self-owned house to a more sophisticated and critical position towards urban problems, which would unfold in the second half of the 1910s into a true “municipal programme.”

The socialist position, however, remained marginal. After some days of debate, in which socialism went from attacking Cafferata’s bill to defend the activity of the EHO cooperative from the attacks launched by conservative and Radical deputies alike, the Cafferata law was approved in September 1915. The “orthodoxy” on housing reform had triumphed, enshrining the ideology of the self-owned house as a permanent policy line.

**Conclusion**

We have visited in the preceding pages the story of how members of the political, scientific and technical elites have understood the housing question during the period of urban expansion that spanned from the 1870s to the 1910s. In this account, I have attempted to show the relation, sometimes paradoxical, between these formulations and the dynamics of urban expansion that conditioned the access of the urban masses to housing.

The initial concern of physicians on the hygienic problem of the tenement (a response to the challenges of the first, “compression” phase of urban growth), paved the way to sanitary improvement both at the level of dwellings and of urban infrastructure. The model tenements of

---

107 For this programme, see Ballent, “Socialismo, vivienda y ciudad.”
the period, in contrast, did not offer novelties in terms of housing reform, clinging to a transitional view of collective housing that confined working-class families to “rooms.”

The continuity of immigration and urban growth by the turn of the century made the hygienic sanitation of the tenement only a temporary solution to a problem that now began to be perceived as permanent, and that started threatening social stability in new ways. As working-class organization grew, issues like rent prices were adding pressure to the social situation, and legislative schemes, starting with the Irigoyen law in 1904, saw in the spread of private homeownership a tool towards working-class pacification. During those years as well, Catholics and socialists joint the homeownership-promotion effort, through different means and with different goals. While Catholics, in partnership with the municipal government, saw in that endeavor one more step in the development of paternalistic charity institutions, socialists considered the initiative as a tool of the self-emancipation of the working-class through cooperative organization.

Paradoxically, these were also the years in which the suburbanization process was gaining steam, spreading homeownership through an alternative, “spontaneous” mechanism: land sales in monthly installments and self-construction. In that context, as legislators insisted with schemes of direct state construction of the “workers’ dwellings,” other sorts of reformers (physicians, and increasingly engineers), more attentive to the on-the-ground urban dynamic, started devising “technical” plans towards the design of new dwelling types and workers’ ensembles (the “barrios obreros”) that could channel and improve the suburbanization impulse.

The issuing of the “Casas Baratas” law in 1915 marked the end of this cycle. On the urban level, World War I paralyzed construction and suburbanization, which had the unsuspected effect of releasing pressure on tenements and rent prices. The housing debates around the law
showed, in turn, that neither the “technical imagination” of engineers nor renovated socialist critique of urban expansion and of legislative initiatives had the power to promote a shift in the approach to housing and urban issues. In this context, the morally-inspired “orthodoxy” of the self-owned house dominated official action and discourse during the war. As we will see further on in this dissertation, the distance between this legislative approach and the needs of urban dynamics would nonetheless provide an almost crippling inefficacy to official action in the years to come.
Chapter 3
RENTS IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE: THE CONSTRUCTION OF A MOVEMENT OF OPINION.

“The press [...] has an entire city, an entire people as auditorium [...]. Rulers and citizens, soldiers and farmers, wise and ignorant, rich and poor, owners and workers, believers and skeptics, old and young, men and women—in short, the entire human hive has the press within arm’s reach.”

Juan Rómulo Fernández, Civilización argentina.108

“The clamor of those who look for a home without finding it is in the air.” With these words, Radical deputy José P. Tamborini opened the defense of a law bill that aimed at the regulation of rent prices and contracts.109 It was May 1920, and the “clamor” had been indeed audible, at least, from the beginning of that year. The presentation of Tamborini’s bill marked the threshold of an agitated parliamentary debate on rent legislation that would extend for a year and a half, involving politicians from all ideological and partisan tendencies.

As we have seen in Chapter 1, rent prices had been rising by a yearly 30% during 1918 and 1919. Yet, this was an increase that seemed to happen within the opaque realm of private transactions, without any sources revealing it publicly. As late as October 1918, a journalist of the most widely read newspaper of the country could still be under the wartime impression that rents were in decrease, their prices way lower than in 1913.110 So evident was the notion that

108 Juan Rómulo Fernández, Civilización argentina. La obra de “La Prensa” en 50 años (Buenos Aires: L.J. Rosso y compañía, 1919), 8. All translations into English are my own.
109 Diario de sesiones de la Cámara de Diputados de la Nación (hereafter CD), 17 May 1920, 215. From here onwards, I will put the word “Radical” with capital “r” when referred to the Argentine Radical Party (Unión Cívica Radical), and in small case when used with its standard meaning.
110 See “Valuaciones municipales,” La prensa (hereafter LP), 10 October 1918, 10; and “La valuación de la propiedad,” LP, 13 October 1918, 8. Some months earlier, La nación had devoted a couple of articles to the same issue in Rosario, calling the attention on the “enormous number of vacant houses in all city neighborhoods. Many owners chose to reduce the rent, but still failed to find tenants for their houses.” “Los alquileres,” La nación (hereafter LN), 26 June 1918, 10.
property and rent had gone through a still ongoing devaluation process that signs of price increase could be seen as exceptional: criticizing a municipal project of revaluation of property, a journalist from *La nación* considered that it was a mistake to take rent prices as a reference point for assessing property value, since the former were being artificially “inflated.”

By mid-1919, however, tenant mobilization for lower rents was a fact. A national tenant association had been set up, socialists were pushing through their newspaper for some kind of public initiative on the issue, and even two conservative deputies presented a law bill of rent control. In December, finally, the main newspaper of the capital, *La prensa*, dedicated articles and editorials to the problem, and during 1920 one of the most important parliamentary debates of the period, at the beginning of which deputy Tamborini pronounced the above-mentioned phrase, would be centered on the possibility of regulating rent prices and the relationship between landlords and tenants.

What had changed between 1918 and late 1919 to make rents become such a “clamor”? Was it simply the fact of their continued increase, or did its emergence obey to further factors, related to social mobilization and to the dynamics of the public sphere? How did these other factors determine the pace and content of the public debate about housing and rents? In this chapter I argue, as those questions suggest, that the mobilization of tenants and the activity of mass newspapers were determinant factors in the construction of housing and rent as a visible social problem, and that such a construction summoned public powers to deal with the issue and regulate it. In the words of the time, these actors built up a “movement of opinion” on high rents, which was extremely productive in making rent a part of the social question.

---

111 “Impuestos municipales. La nueva valuación,” LN, 21 October 1918, 8.
Although the fuzzy realm of the public sphere involved actors of many sorts, I have focused the chapter on the analysis of newspapers. There are both theoretical and empirical reasons for that. Concerning the first ones, already as Jürgen Habermas developed in the early 1960s his somehow idealistic concept of the public sphere, he acknowledged that by the end of the 19th century that alleged instance of mediation between civil society and the state had already been coopted, so to speak, by mass newspapers, who had reached unprecedented audiences and managed to spread their voice throughout society. Rather than the old model of rational debate among private individuals, the new model was that of an economic competition between business giants.\footnote{Habermas talked about the mass newspaper as “the gate through which privileged private interests invaded the public sphere.” Jürgen Habermas, \textit{The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society} (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989 [1962]), 185.} The ascendancy of those newspapers towards the generation of a “public opinion” (see below) is evident, although the degree to which they are able to manipulate the opinions of majorities remains a long-term issue I will not solve here. I have tried in this chapter to consider newspaper as social actors in themselves—although sometimes they worked as “carriers” of other social groups’ opinions, they also had agendas of their own, which they pursued to fulfill, with varying success. Historically, in turn, it was the case during 1919 that mass newspapers at many points took the lead regarding the public discussion of housing. Although politicians, social-science experts and tenants themselves were eager to get involved in the public sphere to debate the rent problem, they tended to do it (the exception was the first period of tenants’ demonstrations) following paths opened by the main newspapers of the capital, who had already installed rents as a topic in the public agenda.

I have selected three newspapers for analyzing this movement of opinion on rents: La 
vanguardia, La razón, and La prensa. Comparing them with other relevant newspapers of the
time, these were the ones in which I found consistent references to high rents during 1919, which makes it possible to argue that theirs were consistent voices in this early stage of the process. In turn, the diversity of positioning that these newspapers had in the public sphere (the partisan socialist allegiance of La vanguardia, the conservatism yet widely respected “lettered” voice of La prensa, the “populist” and middle-class inflections of La razón—see later) turns them into an unusually good sample of a very diverse world of periodical publications: the fact that a certain topic appeared in them all makes it possible to claim that the phenomena encountered were not circulating only within a particular sector of opinion (say a political faction, a social class, a professional group), but rather throughout a more general field, that of public opinion.

The chapter unfolds as follows. A first section includes a brief theoretical discussion of concepts like “public opinion” and “public problem.” My intention is to clarify notions that appear throughout the chapter and to explicit as much as possible the realm in which I situate the narrative. This discussion is followed by a historical introduction to the mass-press scene in the Buenos Aires of the early 20th century. Section II of the chapter deals with tenant mobilization, its relation to the explosive social climate in the city during the first half of 1919, and the way newspapers approached that movement. The third section, finally, shows the growth of the movement of opinion on rents, which involved a broader set of social actors and summoned newspapers to become even more deeply involved in it.

113 Other papers I consulted were: La nación, a traditional and sophisticated morning newspaper, second most important of all newspapers in terms of print run; El pueblo, organ of social Catholicism; Crítica, newspaper that by 1919 was still in a transition from a factionalist anti-Radicalism to become the most important tabloid in the country; Última hora, second most important evening newspaper. All of them tend to support the account I offer in this chapter, and did not play any leading role in the discussion of rents.
I. Background: the public sphere and newspapers in Buenos Aires, 1900-1920.

Public problems and public opinion

This chapter could well be titled “Rents, the construction of a public problem,” which would summarize the idea that for a phenomenon to become such a problem, certain actors have to build it, to “invent” it. This is not intended to mean that the problem does not exist in material terms. Rather, it means that for such material terms to acquire public visibility, the action of certain voices that manage to gather general attention is necessary. As American sociologist Joseph Gusfield argued in a classic work, “all social problems do not necessarily become public ones. They do not become matters of conflict or controversy in the arenas of public action. […] Whether or not situations should be public problems is itself a major issue.”

Problems become public, thus, through a social and historical process. Social actors, politicians, and the media intervene in different ways in the public sphere, attempting to impose the perception of the problem as “public,” which means that it is of general concern and demands action by public authorities, and to impose a certain interpretation of it—in other words, to define what the causes are, who is responsible for having occasioned the problem, who should solve it. This process of construction of a public problem is diachronic, contingent and conflictive. That means, that it is a construction that has a beginning as well as an end or “solution” (which does not mean the end of the problem in its materiality, but rather the closure of its public presence), and that its development is never a given, but rather the result of a

115 The identification of who is to blame for the occurrence of a problem is naturally a central issue. “The target character is not a given, is not in the nature of reality […], but represents a selective process among a multiplicity of possible and potential realities which can be seen [as causing the problem].” Id., 3.
complex struggle that happens in the public sphere and involves actors of different nature and relative power.\textsuperscript{116}

Gusfield crafted his concept of public problems for democratic societies in which political decisions and subsequent policies require some basic level of consent, some legitimacy that is not a matter of an elite-driven political game only, but rather relies on a broader societal base. This base is a combination of different realms of political expression: political parties and elections, corporations and interest groups, and the public sphere.

This latter notion has a long academic pedigree. In his classic 1962 work, Jürgen Habermas posited and defined the public sphere as an instance of mediation between political power and civil society, asserting that through that instance, which works autonomously from the interference of the state, members of society engage as private individuals in the discussion of topics they consider of public concern.\textsuperscript{117} The concept of public opinion, in turn, derives from this concept of public sphere. It refers to opinions that, since they have been discussed in the public-sphere, purportedly represent the point of view of society “as a whole” on certain topics. They are crystallizations of the voice of society.\textsuperscript{118} The public opinion has an important political dimension, since it implies the possibility for members of society of expressing opinions with a legitimacy \textit{alternative} to that of popular vote (which is the one granted to political powers), a

\textsuperscript{116} This account of social problems is also present in the work of Argentine political scientists Oscar Oszlak and Guillermo O’Donnell, who have elaborated a similar point of view for the analysis of social problems as “questions,” which emerge, evolve and die through a process comparable to what we will call here public problems. See Oscar Oszlak and Guillermo O’Donnell, “Estado y políticas estatales en América Latina: hacia una estrategia de investigación,” \textit{Redes} 2, no. 4 (1995): 99–128 [original: Documento G.E. CLACSO/Nº4, 1981].

\textsuperscript{117} See Habermas, \textit{The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere}, and Habermas’s own summary in Jürgen Habermas, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964),” \textit{New German Critique}, no. 3 (October 1, 1974): 49–55.

sort of discursive social contract that guarantees representativeness due to the public-sphere procedures of rational and free discussion.

The nature of the public sphere and of public opinion is unclear: are they concrete entities, are they analytical concepts? Do they actually work as mediation instances, as ways in which civil society can curb the arbitrariness of the state, or are they rather the place in which powerful interests (those of the mass media, those of political and economic powers) manipulate the consciousness of citizens in order to produce a patina of legitimacy to the fulfillment of their own menial interests? Regardless of how one answers these difficult questions, this chapter will propose a basic hypothesis, according to which what happens in the public sphere has important social and political effects.

**Newspapers in early-twentieth-century Buenos Aires**

By the end of the 1910s Buenos Aires was, by all accounts, a lettered city. Almost 80% of the population could read, to a great extent thanks to the expansion of the educational system after the education law of 1884. The proliferation of newspapers, leaflets and popular books makes it possible to assert that an accelerated process of expansion of the written word was taking place between the late 1890s and the late 1910s.

---

119 This is an old dilemma, patent at least since the 1920s, as mass society was developing at full steam in many western countries. See for example Ferdinand Tönnies’ writings on public opinion (*Kritik der öffentlichen Meinung*, Berlin: Julius Springer, 1922) or the debate between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey in Lippmann’s *The Phantom Public* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1925) and Dewey’s *The Public and its Problems* (New York: Holt, 1927).


Periodical newspapers were the spear head of that expansion. While between 1895 and 1914 the number of publications of all sorts increased by a quarter (from ca 280 to ca 350), periodicals doubled (from 6 to 12); their print run, in turn, multiplied even more, from less than 120 000 in 1890 to more than half a million in 1914.122 In a city of slightly more than 1.5 million inhabitants, that meant that by 1914, even if we discount the proportion that were sent to the interior of the country, around one newspaper every five persons circulated in the city every day. Growth also implied diversification: newspapers appeared at different times of the day, had readerships from almost all social classes, were issued in many languages (we have to bear in mind that by 1914 50% of the population of the city was foreign and around 25% did not speak Spanish as a mother tongue), and with very different journalistic styles.

The differentiation in the styles of newspapers had to do with some major internal transformations that those papers leading the growth trend were undergoing. On one hand, there was the modernization of the business model and the technology they used. From being almost artisanal small-scale periodicals, some of them became business giants with state-of-the-art printing facilities, issued more than 100.000 daily copies, gathered fortunes though advertisement, and had correspondents and telegraph connections worldwide and in the main cities of the interior of the country. On the other hand, a more subtle but equally significant change was happening, which we could call qualitative, concerning the relation between newspapers and the world of politics. By the turn of the century it was still (as it had been in the 19th century) the political system what regulated the development of newspapers, which were to some extent simply the expression of political factions (La nación, for instance, used to define

itself as a “platform of doctrine”).\textsuperscript{123} “Modern” newspapers, in turn, followed the rules of a journalistic field that was becoming increasingly autonomous from politics. Following the American model of “new journalism,” newspapers were starting to give priority to news over opinion, to develop an independent and purportedly objective editorial line, and to use big headlines and illustrations on their pages.\textsuperscript{124}

Although newspapers had (as they do today) political allegiances and ideological commitments, their existence was increasingly developing within the specificities of the journalistic arena or “field,”\textsuperscript{125} which dictated for them a new rationale. At stake in that field was, on one hand, the commercial aim of increasing the readership, which could be seen in sales techniques and in changes in content, to make the paper more attractive for the mainstream reader. A bigger readership not only meant more sales but also more income derived from advertisement. On the other hand, a second struggle within the field was over professional prestige among peers; the strenuous earning of such prestige through good “journalistic work” (i.e. the coverage of the biggest and most diverse array of information possible, the overacted search for “truth” and “objectivity,” or the availability of correspondents in as many distant places as possible), as well as through certain symbolic capital that came from the inclusion of articles by prestigious intellectuals, scientists, or writers. Both struggles (the one for readers and


\textsuperscript{124}Saíta, \textit{Regueros de tinta}, 38

\textsuperscript{125}There has been some debate in French sociology on whether journalism could be conceived as a “field” in the meaning Pierre Bourdieu gave to the concept. See Pierre Bourdieu, “L’emprise du journalisme,” \textit{Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales} 101, no. 1 (1994): 3–9; Patrick Champagne, \textit{Faire l’opinion. Le nouveau jeu politique} (Paris: Minuit, 1990).
the one for journalistic prestige) structured the field and defined different strategies for the actors involved in it, as we will see through the different protagonists of our story.

II. Social crisis, tenant mobilization, and the public sphere: dynamics of a mutual feedback

1919 was a seismic year, in Argentina and worldwide. The echoes of World War I, with its images of destruction and revolutionary upheaval, overlapped to a comparably explosive the local social landscape. The war had brought about an economic crisis, interrupting foreign trade, on which the country depended heavily. That interruption put a break to decades of economic growth, generated scarcity and inflation, and depleted fiscal resources. The permanent increase of unemployment between 1913 and 1918, plus the plummeting of real wages across the period, gave a feeling of an endless downslide for the economy as a whole and for the livelihood of the working masses.

These conditions fueled a cycle of social discontent and mobilization that culminated between 1917 and 1919. Port and harbor workers, who had built in the previous two decades the strongest unions and controlled key sectors of the economy led some of the biggest strikes of the period, while other workers, such as municipals or those in the metal and the meatpacking industries, also embarked in protest activities.\(^{126}\) It was precisely after protests in a metallurgic factory in Nueva Pompeya (southern industrial district of Buenos Aires) that, in January 1919, a

skirmish between strikers, strikebreakers and the police escalated to become the most widespread cycle of labor unrest in interwar Argentina. Repression was fierce, and the number of casualties was such that the episode remained in Argentine memory as the “Semana trágica” (Tragic week). This event did nothing but add intensity to labor conflict: during the rest of the year there were more than 360 strikes, and more than 300,000 workers involved in them.

The resounding conflicts of the war years and of 1919 were happening in a political context that had changed much in comparison to the conservative years. A major political transition had opened up in 1912, as a reformist sector of conservatism managed to pass an electoral law that fully changed the political game. I will deal with the specifics of these changes in the following chapter, but it is necessary to explain here very briefly the new dynamics that this law generated. Allowing for a more transparent electoral process, politics became more competitive than before, which was immediately felt in Congress, as new forces like Radicalism and socialism started acquiring new relevance. The former pushing for an agenda of institutional regeneration and the latter following a pro-labor program, both of them were more plebeian in composition than the traditional conservative forces, and their presence started reframing the subjects of parliamentary discussion, as well as making parliament more permeable to general, social debates. Politics, in short, were a much more open and contested scenario than before. This process of political change culminated in late 1916, as Radical Hipólito Yrigoyen won the presidential elections and put an end to almost four decades of conservative hegemony.

127 On the “Tragic week,” see Rock, Politics in Argentina, ch. 7; Edgardo J Bilsky, La semana trágica (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1984); Julio Godio, La semana trágica de enero de 1919 (Buenos Aires: Hyspamérica, 1986).
128 Horowitz, Argentina’s Radical Party and Popular Mobilization, 129. This number contrasts strongly with the already explosive years that preceded 1919: in 1917 there were 136,000 workers in strike, and in 1918 there were 133,000. See Rock, Politics in Argentina, 126.
The presence of a new, democratically-elected president was an ingredient that gave certain peculiarities to social conflicts during the war. Yrigoyen’s access to office was followed, less than two months later, by a massive strike of the port workers. The president, old militant of the Radical party who had behind him a long history of struggle against the conservative regime, took the opportunity to initiate a new type of relationship towards labor, choosing negotiation over outright repression. Although historians have long ago explained the ambivalences of that new relationship, which ranged from personal approaches to labor leaders to bloody episodes of repression like the above-mentioned Tragic Week, Yrigoyen’s “obrerismo” was indeed a novelty, perceived by many sectors of the workers’ movement as such.129

Even more than workers, who saw this approach as a novelty were the propertied classes and the most conservative sectors of opinion. Although not in all cases opposed to the Radical government, business owners, conservative politicians, and many members of the traditional landed aristocracy permanently pressured Yrigoyen to take harder stances on labor mobilization. It was among these sectors, indeed, that the 1919 conjuncture appeared most dramatic, the threshold of a revolution that threatened to take the country along the Russian path. For the first time in national history, social conflict was acquiring clear and conspicuous class-based lines, as business owners organized themselves corporately in the Asociación del Trabajo.130 Likewise, contributing to the radicalization of political life, a counter-revolutionary, anti-Semitic


paramilitary organization, the Liga Patriótica Argentina, began its activities in the aftermath of
the Tragic Week and was an important political actor during the following years.\textsuperscript{131} The
hierarchy of the Catholic Church, in turn, strove to channel the energies of social Catholics (so
far nucleated in the decentralized Catholic Workers’ Circles) into a national association, the
Unión Popular Católica Argentina, to which we will return soon. Founded in April 1919, its
leader Monsignor Miguel de Andrea saw it as a bulwark of social harmony against the twin evils
of individualistic liberalism and communist socialism.\textsuperscript{132}

This social climate was the background for a public-opinion hypersensitivity towards all issues
related to the social question. Besides labor conflict, which received ample and usually rather
hostile coverage among dominant newspapers, one of the most conspicuous elements of the
conjuncture was inflation. The rampant price increases of those years affected all items of the
workers’ budget, from foodstuff to basic imported consumer goods, such as clothing. The
government tried in many ways to defend workers’ nominal salaries (for example through the
minimum-wage law and through sustaining the salary of public employees), but the increase in
prices made real wages in 1919 go through their worst downturn in Argentina for the whole
1900-1940 period.\textsuperscript{133} The “cost of living,” as it was then called, became an obsession, usually

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{131}] On the Liga Patriótica, Sandra McGee Deutsch, \textit{Counterrevolution in Argentina, 1900-1932. The Argentine
Patriotic League} (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986); Luis María Caterina, \textit{La Liga Patriótica Argentina: un
grupo de presión frente a las convulsiones sociales de la década del veinte} (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1995).
\item[\textsuperscript{132}] On UPCA and Msg. De Andrea, see Néstor Tomás Auza, ed., \textit{Corrientes sociales del catolicismo argentino}
(1877-1960)} (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2013). Nowhere was the Catholic viewpoint of these days expressed better than
in De Andrea’s 1919 conferences \textit{La perturbación social contemporánea} (in Miguel de Andrea, \textit{Obras Completas 3},
Buenos Aires: Difusión, 1944).
\item[\textsuperscript{133}] See Pablo Gerchunoff, \textit{El eslabón perdido. La economía política de los gobiernos radicales (1916-1930)}
(Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2016), 67-70.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
described—in contrast with what happened with workers’ struggles—by the public press of the period in a sympathetic tone, pitying the plight of impoverished families.

We have seen in Chapter 1 that housing was something of an exceptional commodity, the price of which, namely rent, was going through a different trajectory than the rest of basic prices. Decreasing from 1913 on, the interruption of demographic growth from 1914 to 1918 had made rent prices go down, only to start increasing in 1918. This explains the absence of protests about housing and rents during the agitated war years. Only during 1919, as rents continued increasing with renewed intensity due to the resumption of immigration while other prices were beginning their downward trend, expensive housing started to become a generalized source of anxiety for working- and middle-class families.

The first reaction to this anxiety was tenant mobilization, which began in April 1919, when a group of tenants from different neighborhoods of the city got together to form an “Asociación Nacional de Inquilinos” (ANI, National Tenants’ Association) to protest against rent increases. The few testimonies we have of the activities of this association suggest that it included tenants from different social conditions, and that it was not articulated with any political party. This multi-class and “apolitical” nature was a condition that hindered the further development of the association, which would gradually lose specific weight as the rent problem was taken up by the public press by the end of that year.

The association was organized territorially, with district committees by police precinct and subcommittees by block, which is a usual organization pattern for tenant mobilizations.\textsuperscript{134} It

was led by a Junta Ejecutiva (executive board), which evidenced some inability to control the activity of committees, denouncing in several occasions individuals or collectives acting on their own. This lack of unity was another source of weakness for the tenants’ cause. The association also intended to have a juridical and medical consultancy and a mutual help fund, aims which seem to have been never fulfilled.

In its first manifesto, addressed “to publicity” in April, ANI expressed the main tenants’ grievances, basically high rent prices, low quality of dwellings, and unavailability of houses or rooms for rent. Landlords, the association denounced, rejected prospective tenants if they had children, demanded many months upfront as deposit, and required that the tenant had a propertied guarantor. To counter this situation, the Association formulated certain exigencies, such as the lowering of rents down to an annual 4% of property price, the prohibition deposit and guarantor, or minimum two-year durations for contracts if demanded by tenant. Although initially neglected by public powers, we will see that these demands had in themselves certain elements of rent legislation that would be much present in the parliamentary discussion.

ANI’s purported rejection of any political allegiance was evident in its call for solidarity during its first weeks of existence, addressing the most diverse social and political forces, from all branches of industry and state administration, political parties, Catholic Workers’ Circles, and

---

135 “Agitación pro rebaja de alquileres,” LV, 21 May 1919, 5.
137 I will use along this chapter both the words “landlord” and “owner” as translations for the Spanish word “propietario.” “Propietario” means strictly the owner of a property, while “landlord” can mean two things: the owner of the house put to rent, or the person in charge of keeping it, administer it and deal with tenants—see Oxford English Dictionary (www.oed.com) for definitions. I chose to translate “propietario” into “owner” when the context refers to property rights and relations, but into “landlord” when referred to administration duties and relation with tenants (“propietarios” in many cases took care of the functioning of their own property as a rental unit). The Spanish word “casero,” in turn, which has a certain derogatory tone, has the same ambivalence as the English “landlord,” and was translated as such.
even openly reactionary organizations like the Liga Patriótica Argentina and the Asociación del Trabajo.\textsuperscript{139} This call fell on deaf ears, and the only major political organization that gave any support to the association was the Socialist Party, through coverage of news by \textit{La vanguardia} and through lending Centros Socialistas for ANI’s meetings.\textsuperscript{140}

The difficulties to make its voice reach the public sphere were a further weakness of the Association. With no material resources, it could barely afford the most basic propaganda materials,\textsuperscript{141} and although it aimed to create a journal of its own, the type of official organ that unions had, I could not find so far any records of its existence.\textsuperscript{142} Mainstream journals, the main tool that could enable ANI to reach out, gave tenants their back: in June 1919, the association leaders complaint that “The rich press of the metropolis denied [our association] […], tacitly, the right to publish our ideas through its organs,” in spite of ANI’s explicit appeal to the periodical press.\textsuperscript{143} In that, their fate was not too different to the one that so many unions faced during that convulsed and polarized year. It was only a small sector of the press, which ANI leaders labeled “the independent press,”\textsuperscript{144} which gave certain space to tenant mobilization on its pages.

The preceding paragraph leads us to analyze a new dimension of rent mobilization and of the rent problem, namely its public visibility. ANI’s division between “rich” and “independent” press, an evident rhetorical tool, coincides nevertheless with an important divide that cut through

\textsuperscript{139} “Asociación Nacional de Inquilinos. La reunión de anoche,” LV, 19 April 1919, 5.
\textsuperscript{140} For example, “Contra los altos alquileres. A los inquilinos de las secciones 13a y 15a de policía,” LV, 11 May 1919, 4.
\textsuperscript{141} “Asociación Nacional de Inquilinos. El impuesto a la propaganda. Solicitud de exención,” LV, 13 June 1919, 3.
\textsuperscript{142} In late July 1920, ANI leaders planned to publish a paper named \textit{El inquilino}. “Asociación Nacional de Inquilinos. Contra la carestía de los alquileres,” LV, 23 July 1920, 6.
\textsuperscript{144} “Asociación Nacional de Inquilinos. El impuesto a la propaganda. Solicitud de exención,” 3.
the spectrum of periodical publications in Buenos Aires by the late 1910s. There were in that spectrum two poles: one of them was the serious, traditional and somehow elitist newspapers that appeared in the morning, such as *La prensa* or *La nación*: the other one was the newer world of the afternoon press, of a rather sensationalist and popular sort. *La razón, Última hora*, and later on *Crítica* would be the most important examples of them.

This division, albeit schematic, will help us better understand some characteristics of the newspapers’ involvement with the rent problem. First, the division reflects the different strategies that newspapers deployed in order to expand; while the morning ones cultivated the search for journalistic prestige within the field, evening newspapers, being newer and with lesser credentials, privileged the aim of increasing readership, through a closer identification with the everyday reader. Second, these different strategies could be put in relation to political and ideological ones. In pursuing identification with the reader, afternoon newspapers were more inclined than morning ones to take a radical and anti-establishment tone, to include certain issues of common concern, and to embrace causes that affected the *menu peuple* of urban working- and middle-class consumers with which they identified.¹⁴⁵

The first important newspaper to get involved with rents was, as we have seen, *La vanguardia*. It was a newspaper that somehow did not fit any of the above mentioned classifications: neither that between an elitist/morning and popular/afternoon newspapers, nor that between political and commercial press. Founded by socialist physician and intellectual Juan B. Justo in 1894, it was the organ of the Socialist Party and of the working class. Heir to the

---

¹⁴⁵ That said, the popular press allegiance to the cause of “the people” was politically ambivalent. In moments of social commotion, notably during the Tragic Week of January 1919, the majority of these “popular” afternoon newspapers would side against labor mobilization, while *La vanguardia* would side with labor. This has to do with the type of middle-class plebeian identity that the afternoon press was building of a consumerist middle- or working-class urbanite, far removed from and diametrically opposed to that of the militant socialist or syndicalist worker.
tradition of previous militant journals like *El obrero* or *El socialista*, it was openly partisan, the same way the old nineteenth-century (non-socialist) press was (see above). Yet, in editorial terms, it was becoming by the 1900s also a commercial newspaper, after going through a process of modernization and professionalization that, although more limited in scale than the one of giants like *La prensa*, altered fundamentally its business model. In order to increase its potential readership, it emulated many of the characteristics of the mainstream press, in spite of a rhetorical rejection of it as “bourgeois.” Thus, the newspaper started to include commercial advertisements, to appear daily (from 1905 on), and to receive cables from international agencies. It even developed a sophisticated sales system that included monthly subscriptions. Its distribution became considerable: from a humble 1,500 initial copies in the 1890s, it grew to around 30,000 by 1920, and boasted sales agents in the interior of the country as well as in Chile and Uruguay. Its militant voice, while preserved, also changed through the years, from a potent “we” to a more objective tone, and from the committed worker to the middle- and working-class common man. The contents of the newspaper, initially limited to the labor movement and other social struggles, started to include all aspects of social life, international politics, or parliamentary debates, as well as newer mass-media phenomena like sports and crime.

146 See Juan Buonuome, “Periodismo militante en la era de la información: ‘La Vanguardia’, el socialismo y los orígenes de la cultura de masas en la Argentina (1894-1930)” (Ph.D. diss., Universidad de San Andrés, 2016), and Ricardo Martínez Mazzola, “El papel de la prensa en la formación del socialismo en la Argentina (1890-1912)” (VII Congreso Nacional de Ciencia Política, Córdoba, Argentina: SAAP-Universidad Católica de Córdoba, 2005). The transformation of *La vanguardia* into a commercial newspaper was not plagued with internal debates on how to combine ideological function and commercial strategy.

147 Estimates in Buonuome, “Periodismo militante en la era de la información.” Richard Walter gives a different number (75,000 copies for the year 1912—see Richard J. Walter, *The Socialist Party of Argentina, 1890-1930*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977, 12), which is a figure Argentine socialists reported to their French counterparts for a socialist encyclopedia. It might reflect the print run of a special issue, or simply been an inflated number. My acknowledgements to Juan Buonuome for this explanation.

148 Martínez Mazzola has pointed out that the inclusion of parliamentary debates not only obeyed to this “widening” and commercialization of *La vanguardia*, but also to the fact that since the early 20th century the Socialist Party had established a strategy line according to which parliament was one of the arenas where socialist struggle should unfold. See Martínez Mazzola, “El papel de la prensa en la formación del socialismo en la Argentina.”
La vanguardia’s interventions had an ambivalent dimension regarding the conformation of public opinion: in a way, the paper addressed its own crowd of socialist readers (a “microcosm” within the wider public); yet, its big readership, the social and intellectual prestige of some of the party leaders, and its direct links to a political force that had representation in Parliament made La vanguardia a reference point its microcosm, having a situated yet powerful influence on public opinion.

In spite of its solidarity towards the tenant movement, La vanguardia’s early coverage of ANI’s activities already gave hints of a problematic initial attitude of socialists towards the tenants’ movement. In a late April article, for example, its author expressed that the cause of high rents was housing scarcity, and that the one and only true solution to it was the increase of the housing supply. In order to do so, the measures needed were those that encouraged construction through all means possible (tax benefits, building regulations, foundation of cooperatives, etc.). This priority given to the promotion of construction—which was a long stance of Argentine socialism, from the foundation of the cooperative “El Hogar Obrero” in 1905 to the initiatives of socialist legislators and councilmen during the 1910s—was problematic in two ways. First, through the fact that, even if the proposed measures were efficient and construction boomed, their impact of prices would take time and fail to ameliorate the situation of tenants in the short term. “We acknowledge,” explained the author of the article, “that through these means, as well as through others that we could well add, the decrease in rents would not be as fast as the situation demands. Yet, results would be permanent and certain.”

Second, because the emphasis on structural economic forces logically downplayed the level of impact that mobilized tenants could have. For instance, the war disturbances to the economy (“the

devaluation of property, […] the crisis that the war brought about, the decongestion of the city’s population”) “contributed much more towards rent decrease than what any further tenant agitation would have achieved.”

That said, nonetheless, the newspaper could not but be sympathetic towards the cause of tenants, which fell within the traditional concerns of socialists on the wellbeing of the working masses. The author of this article, thus, argued that in spite of its potential lack of impact in economic terms, tenant mobilization could have a strong one at a political and communicational level, revealing “to the ruling and propertied class the seriousness of the problem” and the need of prompt solutions to it: “We see with sympathy the agitation among tenants, and wish that their attitude of protest and their unanimous resolve turn owners back to their senses and to equity.” 150

La razón was the second newspaper to pay attention to the rent problem in 1919. Its coverage of it, like La vanguardia’s, included attention to tenant mobilization, although in a very different tone.

La razón was the first Argentine newspaper that, instead of deriving from the former organ of a political faction, emerged specifically as an autonomous commercial enterprise. Founded in 1905 by Emilio B. Morales, a professional journalist, it grew permanently during its first fifteen years, being by 1920 the most widely read evening newspaper (90 000 copies). It embodied the above-described new type of popular press that followed the example of American new journalism, and became the leader and model in that field for newspapers that would come afterwards, such as La tarde (also founded by Morales) or Crítica. In its purpose of reaching the

150 At this point, the article resembled socialist deputy Enrique Dickmann’s 1915 claim, who in the 1915 congressional debate on the first national housing law stated that housing legislation, like any other social policy, could only emerge bottom-up, from societal organization and mobilization around its objective problems. See CD, 3 September 1915, 184-5.
vast popular evening audience, *La razón* aimed to empathize with a middle- and working-class non-politicized urban reader, and was prone to launching campaigns on problems that affected wide sectors of the people. In spite of its autonomy and its claims of objectivity, *La razón* started as a Radical-sympathizing newspaper, a feature that during the Yrigoyen years would be appeased, but was still identifiable, particularly for its rivals.

For *La razón*, the ongoing conjuncture was one in which the tensions brought about by high rents were on the brink of causing a social crisis. Tenant mobilization was a sign of the undesirable potential “extremes” to which such situation could lead. Articles during April 1919 deemed public action absolutely necessary, but not through a unilateral defense of tenants. These were facing a dire situation indeed, but solutions had to respect rights from both sides: the right of owners to a decent level of profit, and that of tenants to a quiet and sheltered life. The possibility of an equable solution and a horizon of potential harmony between classes were strongly present on the pages of the paper, sworn enemy “class struggle.”

Solutions, therefore, should not be focused simply on “sacrificing the owners’ profits.” Some restrictions to that profit were indeed necessary, such as matching landlords’ profits with those of mortgage loans, but editorialists of *La razón* emphasized that owners were not the only ones to blame for the emergency situation. Tenants were sometimes not careful with property, and it was fair that owners wanted to cover their backs from property damage;

---

154 “Carestía de la vida metropolitana. Agitación pro rebaja de alquileres y consumos,” LR, 22 April 1919, 1.
155 To put such limits was justified by solidaristic conceptions of private property that circulated profusely in the period (we will return to this in Chapter 5): “the absolute, perpetual, and individualistic concept of property is bankrupt, now replaced by the more rational one, according to which property is a social phenomenon.” “El problema de los alquileres. La casa, la vivienda, el conventillo, etc..” 5 April 1919, 5.
likewise, justice was sluggish, so that owners had to take into account the difficulties they would face in order to evict defaulted tenants. More importantly, some structural factors forced owners to impose high prices: first, high taxes on property, which La razón claimed to have been denouncing for some time. Second, the paralysis of the construction industry, generated by the war but aggravated by hindrances such as construction taxes and import tariffs to construction materials. The necessary measures that followed were, like for socialists, tax reform and temporary tax exemptions.

La razón’s early rent campaign, thus, proposed an acknowledgement of the social dimensions of the rent problem, but emphasized the need for respecting owners’ rights. Skeptical of tenant mobilization, it would not spur it; by mid-May 1919, it considered that rent-strike agitation had predictably failed, since it was not in tenants’ hands to solve the problem through non-payment. In an interesting twist, there was even one occasion in which this newspaper interviewed a mobilized tenant; rather than choosing an ANI member, organization that was more widespread and moderate, it exchanged words with a worker from the port neighborhood of La Boca, which belonged to a “Popular Committee of Agitation against Rents.” The testimony of this tenant offered a radicalized view of the tenant strike: the man claimed that tenants “called the shots,” because if 50 or 60 thousand tenants altogether refused to pay, no peace judge would be able to oppose them. By showing this example, La razón was building for its expected reader an ominous image of the striking tenant, likening her to union agitators.

156 Ibid.
157 “Carestía de la vida metropolitana. Agitación pro rebaja de alquileres y consumos,” 1.
158 “La vivienda, artículo de primera necesidad,” 22 May 1919, 4.
159 See “La cuestión de los alquileres. Huelga parcial de inquilinos,” 4.
This rather conservative view of the rent emergency was consistent with other positions taken by the newspaper in those years. Although committed to the above mentioned campaigns against some state of affairs seen as unjust, *La razón* was openly opposed to any type of labor struggle. Its advocacy was for what the newspaper itself called the “middle classes” of urban consumers. Across 1919, for example, many articles dealing with the cost-of-living issue considered that the latter was damaging the middle classes much more than workers. Workers had unions that could stand for their interests, as recent rises in nominal wages for industrial workers proved, while the middle classes remained unrepresented.160

III. Escalation: rent goes public

Few events did more to animate the public sphere and debates on the social question by the end 1919 than the “Gran Colecta Nacional” (GCN) organized in late September by the Unión Popular Católica Argentina (UPCA—see above). Soon after its foundation, this association considered that it had to prove the virtues of the Catholic approach to the social question through practical actions. Under the motto “Social Peace is not achieved through lament, but through action,” it launched a massive fundraising campaign that flooded the streets of the city, as well as the public sphere. Through a strict organization in “teams” that gathered thousands of volunteers, it called members of all social classes to contribute to an effort of philanthropic social action.161

160 See “Problemas de la carestía de la vida. La situación de desequilibrio de la clase media,” LR, 1 March 1920, 4. “De la clase media y de la carestía de la vida. Cómo vive un hombre q gana 500 pesos al mes,” LR, 7 March, 5. This defense of the middle class was thus consistent with a rejection of labor activism, which had been made transparent during the events of Tragic Week in January 1919, deemed by *La razón* a “bloody strike” instigated by agitators. See LR, 4 January 1919, 1, 4.
161 The campaign, according to its promoters, was based on the most modern and efficient propaganda campaigns launched by the Red Cross in the United States. Gran Colecta Nacional, *Memoria documental* (Buenos Aires: Talleres Gráficos del Colegio Pío IX, 1920), IX.
The campaign was a great success. Raising a total of more than 13M pesos from a multitude of donors, it received wide coverage not only in *El pueblo*, the partisan Catholic newspaper, but also in all the big media of the city. It became a true “event”: big ads were placed in streets and avenues, newspapers devoted entire pages to it, and public authorities celebrated the initiative. The thousands of volunteers went house by house asking for donations and organized big banquets and other venues to attract the public. (SEE FIGURES 1a-b) Empowered by the campaign, UPCA would publicize during the following months the use of the funds and the works it had achieved thanks to them. Monsignor de Andrea, in turn, became from then on a public celebrity, one of the most active and popular social leaders of the period.

Figures 1a-b: traditional and modern means of propaganda.
While banquets gathered teams and donors in an atmosphere of strict etiquette, the “termometers” of the Gran Colecta (this one, located on centric Callao Av.) used the city and public space for political advertisement.

Source: GCN, *Memoria documental*, [I] and [XXXV].

The top priority of UPCA’ campaign was to promote the “independence of the worker,” through different means: the creation of a central bureau of social services, of a “Workers’
University,” of rural pension funds, of a technical institute for the education of women, and of a “Social Athenaeum” for the youth. Yet, the most important of all these works was for UPCA the construction of collective houses, known as “mansiones populares” (popular mansions), which would serve to remove population from the moral hell of the tenement and place them in residences where family life could flourish. The moralizing function of the “mansions” would be favored, as we will see in Chapter 6, by their constructive qualities, which allowed dwellers to be subject to the stern discipline of Catholic authorities.\footnote{162}

The conservative and paternalistic message with which UPCA conceived the housing question contrasted strongly with the modernity of its means of diffusion. While banners and murals showed the presence of the event in the city’s public space, the ads in newspapers did the same in the public sphere. The Catholic newspaper El pueblo was evidently the spot in which most of them appeared (although not the only one).\footnote{163} The content of the ads, however, was a Dickensian lament on housing squalor, depicting destitute mothers and children in ragged clothes, wandering through a tenement yard or along the streets of the hostile city. Legends stated phrases such as “This young lady and her working-class sisters will not cry any more, once they acquire a healthy and dignified dwelling. The GCN will build popular mansions,” or “The GCN aims to build cheap and hygienic houses for poor mothers.” (SEE FIGURES 2a-b).

Figures 2a-b: advertisements of the GCN in El pueblo, September 1919.

\footnote{162} On the “mansions populares,” see De Andrea’s description in El pueblo, 14 September 1919.

Sources: *El pueblo*, 18 and 19 September 1919.

Although the GCN organizers did not directly address high rents, and did not choose an economic language to speak about it, their sentimental treatment of the housing question was striking a powerful chord, and became a rotund call of attention on the housing question. It put the concern on housing on the front page of newspapers and provided a practical example of solution. Through its strong ideological framing of it, in turn, the potentialities of political appropriation of the housing question were becoming equally visible, something we will develop further in chapter 5.

In October 1919, echoing UPCA’s campaign and facing the prospect of further rent increases announced for January 1920, tenant mobilization regained steam, after some months of
paralysis. The tenants’ association resumed its initiatives, expanding the formation of committees and organizing regular conferences on the problem.

One of the practices adopted by ANI was the issuing of signed petitions addressed at public authorities. In the first one, presented to the congress in October 1919, the association demanded legislators to intervene through a series of measures that went beyond those of the April demonstrations. Now, tenants demanded not only rent restrictions and longer eviction terms, but also measures that showed a broader view of the housing problem, such as the expropriation of vacant buildings (which had to be made available for rent), and state construction of houses. In a second petition, sent to president Yrigoyen also in October, ANI addressed urban concentration as a further cause of high rents. It asked for discounts in railway tickets that, the document claimed, could facilitate the decentralization of the city, since working-class families could thus move to the suburbs, thus decreasing the pressure on downtown dwellings.

Besides a call to “direct action” against the authorities, ANI also considered the struggle for the public sphere of strategic importance, accusing owners and “newspapers linked to their interests” of making up excuses (such as property tax increase or basic capital profitability) to justify the rent increase. The petition also provided detailed explanation of the situations that tenants, particularly those with family, faced when looking for a home. They blamed speculation for the high rates of tuberculosis and the decrease of birth rates: less children were born, and those born were of a “weak and sickly” nature, “because the pressure that high rents exert upon

---

164 See “La vivienda, artículo de primera necesidad,” L.R, 22 May 1920, 4.
their parents’ modest budgets” made it impossible for them to cater for the children’s needs. This was a dramatic narrative that had not only legislators as the desired audience.

The call for publicity was successful: the petition was mentioned by conservative *La nación*, showing the increasing presence of the rent problem in mainstream press by the end of the year. One of the papers leading the trend was, once again, *La Vanguardia*, which reproduced the petition in its entirety. Following “with utmost interest the tenant association’s initiatives towards rent reduction,” the socialist journal thematized in a series of articles in December 1919 high rents and the housing problem (“el problema de la vivienda”), retaking the path opened in May that same year.

*La Vanguardia*’s second rent campaign involved a deepening of the ambivalences we have seen in its previous treatment of the topic. The tension was now double. First, the newspaper insisted on the utmost priority of measures that encouraged construction through all means possible. The inadequacy of this long-term solution for the emergency situation tenants were facing, which had already emerged in May-April, was now becoming an outright contradiction, as editorialists of the newspaper began to consider the possibility that tenant mobilization was not only irrelevant towards solving the housing problem, but also potentially aggravating it. An article reflected this contradiction:

> [Construction encouragement measures] are, in our opinion, the most efficient ones to solve the housing problem. Regarding other methods that have been proposed, such as the fixing of rents

---

169 “El problema de la vivienda. Su solución,” LV, 8 December 1919, 1.
170 Isolated news on tenant mobilization appeared also in *La nación*, *La Prensa* and *La razón* during late 1919. The difference with *La Vanguardia*, however, is of a quantitative scale that becomes qualitative. While in the three first newspapers news on tenant mobilization and high rents were extremely scattered during the last three months of 1919 (I have found three articles in *La razón*, one—long and extensive, but only on 31 December—in *La Prensa*, and one in *La nación*), *La Vanguardia* included eleven articles (seven on the rent problem plus four on tenant mobilization) during that same period. Such a quantity (equivalent to one article almost every three days) is what makes it possible to talk of a true “campaign,” comparable to the one *La Prensa* would start in the first trimester of 1920.
by law, the suppression of deposits or upfront payments, tenant strikes, etc., we are not convinced of their efficacy. Even more, we could not assure that their application would not be followed by counter-productive effects.\textsuperscript{172}

In March 1920, another article would make the point even more explicitly:

When rents are high due to housing scarcity, it is useless to dictate laws, to promote tenant strikes, to limit the price of rents, to ban evictions, etc., etc., in order to make them go down. […] It is necessary to remember […] that any legal measure or tenants' attitude that leads to a considerable reduction or difficulty in the reception of rent payments will provoke further price increases, because it will divert from construction many capitals that are currently involved in it…\textsuperscript{173}

There was, thus, a “theoretical” contradiction in \textit{La Vanguardia’s} view of the rent problem, namely the contradiction between long-term construction encouragement and the immediate protection of the tenant. These two aims, both of them desirable to the newspaper and the party, seemed to be mutually exclusive.

The second tension I would like to develop here stems from the above developed hybrid nature of \textit{La Vanguardia} as a political and commercial newspaper. While as a political newspaper its pages perspired the sophisticated analyses that were a hallmark of the socialist tradition, \textit{La Vanguardia} also borrowed from the new “bourgeois” and sensationalist press different techniques and strategies to capture the mass reader. \textit{La Vanguardia} not only had to defend the party line; it also had to find its place in the brave new world of the increasingly massified and competitive journalistic market of the early decades of the century.

The treatment of the rent conjuncture of these years was a topic where the tensions between the political and the commercial newspaper were apparent. On one hand, many pieces in late 1919 and early 1920, like the ones we have visited, preserved the argumentative style of socialism, teasing apart the different economic causes of the current situation of high rents,

\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., emphasis added. This went in line with Dickmann’s 1915 emphasis on the mistake of calling the 1907 tenant protest a “tenant strike.” CD, 3 September 1915, 184.
\textsuperscript{173} “El problema de la vivienda. Tiene carácter universal,” LV, 26 March 1920, 7.
making a juridical analysis of the conceptions of private property at stake, and advocating for different solutions in order to protect tenants.\textsuperscript{174} At the same time, however, the outright defense of the tenant was also developed through the use of a different set of journalistic devices, such as life stories, pictures, a dramatic tone, and a highlight of the tenants’ suffering. In late December, a series of texts approached the rent problem through these means, aiming to arouse the reader’s sympathy. These articles talked about a “popular clamor” for “a measure of public need” that addressed the issue. A front-page article on 20 December 1919, titled “An unspeakable outrage,” narrated an eviction that was pursued without an order from a judge, and showed a picture of the innocent family that had suffered that abuse. (SEE FIGURE 3) The caption below the picture read: “Tenant Fernando Rosales, with his three children and other children that lived in the house. See the expression of anguish that the little faces of these creatures reveal, as if they were aware of their own drama.” The unfortunate situation was “one of the many painful scenes that happen daily in Buenos Aires, the main actors of which are our workers, victims of the tyranny of owners and landlords [propietarios y caseros].”\textsuperscript{175}

Figure 3: The rent problem in \textit{La vanguardia}: picture of a father with children, about to be evicted.


\textsuperscript{175}“Un atropello incalificable,” LV, 20 December 1919, 1.
Another article, the following day, enumerated the complaints tenants filed against landlords in the offices of the newspaper, in which they narrated many of the tricks and abuses suffered. For instance, one tenant narrated how he was subject to the authoritarian rule of his landlord, who had set up draconian and extortionate regulations for life in a tenement, including the compulsory payment for any damage caused by normal use of the building, the prohibition of standing in the front door of the building, or the closure of the door at 10 PM; he would also demand tenants to pay a minimum of two months upfront as initial deposit. Another complaint concerned a dishonest landlord, who perpetrated “a trick, very frequent nowadays:” he gave the tenant many receipts with the same date, in order to later pretend payment delay and proceed with an eviction process.\footnote{176 “Caseros e inquilinos. Quejas a granel,” LV, 21 December 1919, 1.}

This double approach developed by La Vanguardia was, like before, almost the only denounce of high rent prices in the late months of 1919. Only La razón echoed it to a certain extent, publishing some pieces on the rent problem in which it denounced the role of speculators and
bad taxation in the increase of rent prices and called for public action on the problem.\textsuperscript{177} We have seen already \textit{La razón}’s hostility towards tenant mobilization, which the newspaper considered it a violent and extreme procedure that had to be appeased at any cost. This would be a sustained attitude: as ANI regained steam by late 1919, \textit{La razón} deliberately decided not to spread news about it. Some months later, an article would explain that the lack of coverage was a deliberate attempt to weaken tenant mobilization and its deleterious effects: “We have believed, at times, that with our silence around this issue [the threat of a tenant strike], it would be possible to stop the development of the spiral described by urban rents. But it’s pointless…”\textsuperscript{178}

In contrast to the treatment of these two papers, others, like \textit{La prensa} or \textit{La nación}, only mentioned the rent emergency either in sections of world news (they gave particular attention to rent conflicts in Spain, as well as to measures by municipal governments in Germany or Austria) or as part of the more general problem of the cost of living that all western countries were facing in the aftermath of World War I.\textsuperscript{179}

Was this silence deliberate? It is impossible to know, but there were surely certain material factors that favored such silence, class solidarity among the most important of them. Conservative in political alignment and belonging to the landed aristocracy (particularly \textit{La prensa}), it was not in interest of these newspapers to spread news on the rent crisis, news that would necessarily imply putting into question the profit margins of urban property and the

\textsuperscript{178} “Alza constante de los alquileres,” \textit{LR}, 2 March 1920, 3.
unequal relation between tenant and landlord.\textsuperscript{180} Indeed, together with class solidarity, there was also a much more direct interest that big commercial newspapers had against the generation of any disturbance in the real estate market: advertisement. More than in any other paper, \textit{La prensa} and \textit{La nación} were the place where hundreds of properties were announced for sale every day. Big real estate companies, such as Bullrich or Rosso & Patrón, filled their pages with ads that were the source of great commercial benefit for publishers. Even more, in an ironical twist, these ads are one of the places in which the rent increase can be best corroborated, as advertisers emphasized in them the enormous profit the announced properties could yield, as rents “go up day after day,” or, even better, as properties had outdated rents that could be considerably raised by potential buyers.\textsuperscript{181}

This silence of these newspapers lasted until late December. Upon the background of rents that continued their unstoppable increase, renewed tenant mobilization, and coverage of the issue by other newspapers, \textit{La prensa} started to give a more prominent space to rent and the housing problem, in spite of the previous reticence. Class interest was giving way to journalistic imperatives, as a topic threatened to expand throughout public opinion beyond the newspaper’s radar.

\textit{La prensa} could not afford that to happen. This newspaper was, in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, by far the most important newspaper in the country. In the words of a prominent press historian, it was “the newspaper that define[d] the journalistic horizon” in the period, as well as the agenda

\textsuperscript{180} These observations are not at all intended to claim that class belonging determines and fully limits the potential contents of a newspaper. A newspaper, as we have seen, lies on the crossroads of multiple determinants, such as the journalistic field, political allegiance, or commercial imperatives. The rent crisis is indeed an example of this.

\textsuperscript{181} See for example \textit{La nación}, 2 March 1918, 14. An ad in that newspaper (on 3 July 1918, 15), offered a centrally located property which yields, already with “alquileres sumamente rebajados,” an annual 10% benefit. An ad in \textit{La prensa} (17 December 1919, 22), offered houses and studs in Belgrano yielding a 12.6% benefit on the old rents.
of public opinion. Founded in 1869 by the wealthy landowner and politician José C. Paz, *La prensa* was originally closely linked to the conservative Partido Autonomista Nacional (PAN). By the turn of the century, however, it embarked in a process of expansion that allowed it, without losing its conservative identity (for example, it was in a clearly oppositional stance towards the Radical governments from 1916 on), to develop a non-partisan voice of its own in public debates.

*La prensa’s* expansion was spectacular. In 1893 it built a massive new main building, modernized its printing installations, and developed links with European press and telegraph agencies. It increased its informative volume and its print run, issuing around 160,000 daily copies by 1914. To this press infrastructure, *La prensa* added, following a vocation of civic service and of “enlightenment” of public opinion, some peculiar social and scientific initiatives, later imitated by its competitors. In its massive headquarters in downtown Buenos Aires (a beaux-arts palace crowned by a female statue that, holding the torch of knowledge and a paper, illustrated many of these aspirations—SEE FIGURE 4), the newspaper established an open medical practice, a library, and a law consultancy (Consultorio Jurídico), all free of charge. A siren in the building heralded the urgent news to the community. By 1915 *La prensa* launched the Instituto Popular de Conferencias, in which local and international scholars and intellectuals gave free weekly conferences on topics of general and scientific interests.

Figure 4: *La prensa’s* headquarters, on the centric Avenida de Mayo, 1910.

---

184 On the law consultancy and the conference institute, see Fernández, *Civilización argentina*, 52.
La prensa’s growth, while it included the increase of its readership through the expansion of the scope of concerns to include all types of issues that related to the middle and working classes, implied also the acquisition of an indisputable prestige vis-à-vis the rest of the newspapers; the expansion of its telegraph services in order to be instantly informed of everything happening worldwide, nationally and locally, and the professionalization of its journalists gained for the newspaper the reputation of being a perfect and objective sensor of reality. For its readers (and for those of other newspapers as well), what appeared in La prensa was what was “going on” in reality. And, at the same time, this perfect transparency between La prensa and society made the newspaper appear as the voice of the public opinion.

The preceding paragraphs suffice to show the import of La prensa’s involvement with any issue that, by the mere fact of appearing in the paper, became automatically of public concern. The rent problem was not an exception. It was in late December 1919 that La prensa

---

185 There is no room here to develop the “dialogical” dimension of the development of modern newspapers, but the case of La prensa is certainly of great interest. Considered by all newspapers the indisputable leader, in many cases they shared this perception of La prensa as a “window” that frames what is perceptible and what is worth writing about. That is why they frequently commented La prensa’s news as facts, or as interpretations against which to argue.
launched its own “rent campaign,” as contemporaries themselves called it.\footnote{It was common at the time to accuse La prensa of launching “campaigns” around certain topics, and the term “rent campaign” appeared at the time. Socialists and other enemies of the newspaper thought that these campaigns were always guided by hidden interests. See Gómez, “Los diarios como espacios públicos,” and Fernández, Civilización argentina.} The rationale of the campaign was journalistic as well as political. As said above, it was a professional imperative for La prensa to defend its position as leader of public opinion, so that the growing presence of rents in other newspapers and the material presence of the tenant movement were definitely putting some pressure on the paper editors. On top of that, there were clear political reasons that also favored a fast development of a rent campaign. La prensa tended to be critical of the Executive Power, and the campaign could work, in the months preceding the general legislative elections of March 1920, as an occasion to question government officials for inaction.\footnote{Indeed, one of the few articles dealing with rent increase prior to December 1919 was a critical piece on the methods the government was choosing to fight high rents: while the only solution was the increase in the housing stock, the government postponed a new custom law that exempted construction materials from import tariffs. “Por el abaratamiento americano,” LP, 16 October 1919, 7.}

La prensa’s take on the rent problem oscillated between two registers, the same way La vanguardia’s did. A series of articles beginning in late 1919 thematized the suffering of tenants and the unfair situations that emerged from the conjuncture the housing market was facing, something reminiscent of the articles the newspaper had published in favor of striking tenants during the 1907 rent conflict.\footnote{See Suriano’s compilation of sources in Juan Suriano, La huelga de inquilinos de 1907 (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1983).} The agent targeted by this newspaper as responsible for the problem was not necessarily the owner, but rather the main tenant or “sublocador” (subleaser). These subleasers were often identified by La prensa with the administrators of tenement houses (conventillos), a traditional object of popular anger. Subleasers and tenement administrators were clearly-cut figures that embodied the paradigm of the intermediary, a parasitical and exploitative
economic agent that made profit without providing any contribution to society.\textsuperscript{189} This anti-
subleaser discourse, present in other newspapers as well, played in \textit{La prensa} a very special role,
as a desirable scapegoat that could allow the newspaper to thematize high rents without
denouncing the propertied classes.

Two articles provide good examples of this approach. One of them, in late December, detailed the case of a tenant with six children whose family was evicted from their residence by a
municipal squad, following a report for lack of hygienic conditions in the house, something that, according to the newspaper, was responsibility of the owner or the main tenant. The tenants were violently taken out of the property while the chief of family was absent, and they were all currently sleeping in the police headquarters, “with no resources and even lacking basic clothes, since the employees that intervened in their eviction did not consent the withdrawal of any belonging, not even garments or personal documents.”\textsuperscript{190} More than the greed of landlords, the arbitrariness of the municipal power was to blame for the situation this family was going through.

A second example is from February 1920, when the newspaper published a report from its juridical consultancy, signed by lawyer Enrique Calot.\textsuperscript{191} The report compiled some cases received by the consultancy, noting the predominance that questions on rent had had in the last months and the extent to which tenants suffered situations of exploitation. According to the author of the report, two powerful factors behind the ailments of tenants were the “avarice of owners” and the “usurious speculation of subleasers.” The latter was more condemnable, since it

\textsuperscript{189} One realm where the critique of the intermediary was a very important ideological tenet was in consumer cooperativism: the cooperativist dream consisted precisely in a total change in distribution systems, in order to make possible that producers and consumers meet directly without the interference of intermediate agents.
tended to be exerted upon the most needed and desperate people, usually poor families that lived in a single-room dwelling. Subtenants were subject to terrible abuses, such as being rejected for the fact of having children, or being tricked by subleasers that gave them outdated payment receipts, so that evictions could be made with shorter notice. From a more general perspective, Calot explained, subtenants were in a very precarious juridical position, since their status was not framed within any type of formal agreement, so that they had no direct relation with owners and were not protected from decisions taken by subleasers (for instance, there were cases in which the main tenant charged subtenant the rent but did not pay it to the owner, resulting in the unfair eviction of the subtenant).

The second register in which the newspaper approached the rent problem was in line with its traditional style. A newspaper that presented itself as guiding public opinion through the light of knowledge and science, the topics that appeared on its pages were treated within a complex, authoritative and purportedly unbiased discursive framework, much like the one we have seen in *La vanguardia*. Rents were no exception, becoming the object of a complex analysis. On December 30th a long editorial article titled “The dwelling problem” appeared in a central section of *La prensa*. According to it, the causes of the rent situation were to be found, as in Calot’s text, both in the war conjuncture and in the role of “speculators,” who benefitted from the situation raising prices at will. The author of the article called for public actions to ameliorate the situation. An example to imitate was the French city of Marseille, where the government had announced publicly a list with all the available housing units, in order to facilitate access to them by needy tenants. Further action should focus on the encouragement of construction through “a

---

sensible program of construction measures,” such as exemptions on the building tax, in order to “stimulate the capitalist to build houses and rent them at moderate prices”—which was the opposite what was going on at the time, as a current bill aimed to raise municipal tax, giving landlords one more excuse for elevating rents.

This type of thorough analysis was taken further by Enrique Ruiz Guiñazú (1884-1967), a conservative a scholar strongly involved in public debates, whom we will visit again in Chapter 5 of this dissertation. Lawyer by formation, he taught social economics in the Law School of the UBA and was a member of the editorial committee of the most important social-science journals of the time (the Revista de Economía Argentina and the Bulletin of the Museo Social Argentino), as well as director of the official journal of the National Mortgage Bank. He was widely respected among intellectuals and politicians, was a devout and militant social Catholic, and had certain affinity with Radicalism.

In January 1920 Ruiz Guiñazú published a series of articles in which he developed what he called a “social-economic” approach on the rent problem. Developing a series of arguments based on the notion of the social function of property (we will return to this in Chapter 5), Ruiz Guiñazú formulated a defense of the tenant and called for the urgent need of a reform of the 1871 Civil Code, based for him on traditional, Roman notions of absolute property that were untenable in modern times. This was a reform towards which, as we will see later on, Ruiz Guiñazú had been pushing already for some time in scientific and juridical milieus. He argued that, the same way that, based on notions of social welfare, modern labor legislation had introduced the figure of the collective contract to protect the most vulnerable part of the labor relation (the worker),

193 Enrique Ruiz Guiñazú, “El alza de los alquileres,” LP, 11, 18, and 15 January 1920. Citations are from the reproduction of these articles in BMSA, no. 95, “El problema de la habitación,” 1920.
rent relations could and should be regulated through that kind of criterion (the “right to dwelling”), in order to protect the tenant, an equally vulnerable actor. “The defense of the tenant,” stated Ruiz Guiñazú, “of the renter in the broadest sense of the word, has become urgent upon social reasons, within which we include also juridical and moral ones. Tenants are nowadays spurred by unsatisfied needs, and urged by a crisis generated by an extortionate and unchecked legislation.”

Ruiz Guiñazú’s intervention has interesting implications for our current discussion. On one hand, we can see the connection between different layers of the public sphere, such as that of expert knowledge and the periodical press. The pen of experts was a permanent presence in the serious periodical press of the period, and was a way, as said, of reinforcing the prestige of newspapers. The equation worked also the other way round. For experts, participation in forums of opinion with the outreach of mass periodicals offered the possibility of advocating for agendas of their own, such as the reform of the Civil Code in the case we are seeing, with an impact unthinkable in the restricted limits of the scholarly milieu.

This intervention also shows as the polyphony that media platforms had, then as now. A conservative newspaper of the propertied classes, La prensa could yet, in the search for sustaining its high journalistic prestige, endorse the words of a Radical-leaning intellectual and get embarked in the discussion of a social issue that compromised owners’ interests and outspokenly defended tenants against them, at least in this preliminary phase (we will see the twists and turns of this issue in Chapter 4).

Ruiz Guiñazú’s was the most important, yet not the only milestone in this move through which La prensa was resolutely diving into the emerging public-opinion war on the modification

---

194 Id., 4-5.
of the rent regime. On the same day that the beginning of the legislative discussion on rent regulation was announced (May 6th—see Chapter 4), a short anonymous article communicated a resolution of the Executive Power that stipulated that public employees (of all ranks, “from high employees to workers”) could recourse to their employer as guarantor (“fiador”) in rent leases. The following day, the paper published a harsh critique of such project, arguing it was a “denaturalization of the function of governments” to make public resources liable to potential lacks of payment by private individuals. It was a typical attack on Radical’s use of state resources to protect and expand politically loyal public employees (“empleomanía”), but the article was also the occasion for further denounces of the usual abuses suffered by tenants, such as the rejection of tenants with family or the short notice terms for evictions.

Ruiz Guiñazú’s long essay, Calot’s report, and this last article show that La prensa was gradually joining the existing diagnosis on the gravity of the conjuncture and on the uttermost need of public initiatives in order to protect the tenant. It was in that 1920 summer when, in the wake of the campaign initiated by La vanguardia and La razón and now amplified by La prensa, the issue was reaching a paramount place in the public sphere, which it would not abandon in the following months. As Deputy Tamborini proclaimed in the Congress, by May 1920 rent was a clamor in the air.

Conclusion

This chapter has analyzed the movement of opinion that constructed high rents as a public problem. I have shown that the actors involved in the creation of such a movement acknowledged the situation of emergency and were pushing for specific remedies to the problem, under one same demand, namely the intervention of public authorities. Within the diversity of
actors involved in the formulation of this demand, I have highlighted the initial role of the tenant movement, generating agitation but never fully able to articulate its aims in a politically productive way, the role of the Catholic Church through UPCA and its fundraising campaign, and the role of newspapers, which from their different standpoints, trajectories and interests framed different yet deeply akin versions of the rent problem, its origins and remedies.

While *La vanguardia*, a politically aligned newspaper, followed the Socialist Party line and had a commitment towards social issues, its initial campaign on the rent problem was full of tensions and ambivalences that emerged, on one hand, from the contradictions that party and periodical found between the defense of tenants and the encouragement of construction, and, on the other hand, from the imperatives of the newspaper as both a commercial and a political enterprise, which made it mix genres and approach social reality through alternatively different prisms.

*La razón*, an evening popular newspaper, was also giving room to tenants’ complaints as a form of fulfilling its imperative of being on the side of the people, but yet it developed an openly reactionary version of the problem, in which tenant mobilization was a worrisome scenario, and in which abuses were mainly due intermediaries, to sluggish justice, and to irresponsible tenants as well.

*La prensa*, finally, was conditioned by class solidarity and postponed, so to speak, the treatment of the rent problem as long as possible. Yet, the scale the issue was acquiring for other actors within the public sphere made its treatment inevitable by the end of 1919. *La prensa*’s attitude had a common thread with *La razón*’s, in the concern for preserving the reputation of landlords as much as possible, focusing the attack on the intermediary (the subleaser), as well as in government. *La prensa*’s coverage was yet much richer and, like *La vanguardia*’s, plagued
with contradictions, as we have seen with Ruiz Guñazú’s article, an open call towards the defense of tenants and the modification of the Civil Code.

This summary shows a variegated landscape, in which both similarities and differences stand out. What kind of movement of opinion was this one? Did actors share their perceptions of the “public problem” at hand and of the actions public authorities had to develop to solve it? Was there a unanimous agenda presented to the authorities?

While the tenants’ association was an interest group that put at the forefront the defense of the tenant, the different newspapers that approached the topic had a more nuanced perspective on the problem, in which we can note certain convergences and differences. On one hand, as said already, they all converged in a certain agreement on the importance of the long term, arguing that the housing stock was the key variable influencing rent prices, and that encouragement of construction was the only real solution. Differences emerged, in contrast, concerning the short term, as certain figures proposed modifications of the Civil Code, others mentioned the need to limit owners’ profits, or simply did not propose any measure at all but only denounced the current situation. If we take into account the big picture, we can see that concrete measures regarding tenant-landlord relations percolated only in counted opportunities, suggested as options rather than hailed as essential demands. Taken as a whole, what “public opinion” seemed to be asking for was state intervention; a simple cry: something had to be done. By whom? By the state.

The reason why I emphasize this is to understand the true extent of this movement of opinion. First, this was not (as it would be later, during the months of parliamentary debate), a polarized discussion among alternative positions. Convergence prevailed, around state intervention and encouragement of construction. The few concrete proposals mentioned were not
the object of fierce argumentation and rebuttal—rather, they circulated without being picked up. Second, this was, in consequence, a movement that did not aim to impose specific policies to authorities. It did not demand specific lines to take. In other words, although newspapers had a certain level of control over the transformation of high rents into a public problem, they had (at this point) no control over the contents of the solutions to be proposed. The movement of opinion controlled the emergence of the topic, but did not control its development. Whether they could or not control it later on will be analyzed in other sections of this dissertation, and it would be part of what was at stake during the whole process. It would depend on the interaction between media and political forces, and on the interactions within the political sphere itself.

Why did the situation take place? Why did newspapers and other voices in the public sphere not push more forcefully towards specific solutions? The answer seems to be that it was due to the novelty of the problem, the unprecedented nature of the crisis at hand. While neither the housing question nor high rents were new phenomena, the emergency of the current situation was new indeed, with no parallels in previous history of such price increases and in the midst of social crises of the scale of the first postwar one.\(^{195}\) This novelty called for solutions that were equally new, and it would be the task of politicians and social-science experts, during the following months, to engage in the creative work of understanding more precisely the characteristics of the crisis and the exact juridical and social nature of the tenant-landlord relation, and to develop a panoply of concrete solutions to it, in many cases borrowing from

\(^{195}\) In 1907, the rent strike had turned the housing problem into a real crisis. Yet, several circumstances were different: the emergency situation seemed socially more circumscribed, limited to tenement houses; the movement could be seen as more politicized and belligerent, particularly due to the weight anarchism had in it; for all these reasons, outright repression was a possible way out for the government, which, on top of this, was a non-democratic one. In 1910-13, which was the period for which we have reasonable estimates of rent increase, the figures were incomparable to the postwar ones: in the worst years, 1911 and 1912, prices rose by around 7%; in 1918 and 1919, increase was of 30% (see Chapter 1).
foreign and local examples. And only then would these solutions circulate and become available, and actors in the public sphere would compare them, discuss them, and take sides. Rent-legislation projects, once circulating, would become potential points of reference around which constituencies could be formed, and only then could actors begin to shape a more polarized public sphere. By early 1920, in contrast, that was still an unknown future horizon. The clamor was loud, yet undefined. Simply, something had to be done.
Chapter 4
THE RENT LAWS OF 1921. HOUSING AND THE NEW POLITICAL LANDSCAPE.

“Laws are not made by human beings but by accidents or misfortunes—war, epidemics, famine, or a succession of bad seasons.”

Plato

Paris, August 1914. In the midst of the horrific armed conflict that had recently started, the French government issued an emergency resolution that came as a big relief to the families of mobilized soldiers: a three-month moratorium on the payment of their rent leases. This moratorium was extended periodically until March 1918, when a more comprehensive law prohibited evictions and sustained the moratorium for tenants in the warzone and tenants of small dwellings in general. Other countries, like Romania, Italy and Greece would issue comparable laws during wartime. In December 1915, a British Act operated under a different principle: rather than protecting the families of mobilized soldiers, it faced the generalized phenomenon of rent increase that the outbreak of the war had unleashed. Thus, it brought rent prices back to those of August 1914, maintaining them at such a level until “six months” after the eventual armistice. The length of the war, plus further amendments to the Act extended its benefits well after the war years, to the point that throughout the 1920s British tenants were protected from rent increases as well as from interruptions of leases. A similar rent freeze was passed by the Belgian legislature after the end of German occupation in April 1919.

---

2 See Willis, 68. De Tomaso mentions this moratorium in CD, 3 August, 734-735.
3 See id., 68. On rent regulation in the different European countries, see also Danièle Voldman, “L’encadrement des loyers depuis 1900, une question européenne,” Le Mouvement Social, no. 245 (November 26, 2013): 137–47.
Emergency, according to Plato’s theory of the origin of law, was the mother of rent control and security of tenure. But was it? What political conditions were necessary for such restrictions on rent prices to happen? What type of society, modes of governance, and social-policy precedents made them possible? In this chapter I analyze the social and political conditions that gave rise to rent regulation in the Argentina of the early interwar years. In a global conjuncture marked by economic and social crisis, rents became the object of specific legislation, both in Europe and North America. Argentina was among the countries in the Southern Cone that, as part of a non-warring region, with few (if any) forms of institutionalized public welfare and with a democratic regime in its infancy, were not evident candidates for the issuing of this type of legislation. Yet, as we will see in this chapter, a specific political conjuncture and certain articulations between politics and society would eventually lead to it.

The electoral democracy that existed in Argentina from 1912 onward produced a political arena that was much more competitive than before, and one in which topics of general concern often had direct electoral consequences. Housing, as we have seen in the previous chapter, became one of such issues in the early postwar, as rent prices were increasing to a critical point. It would thus draw the attention of Radicalism and socialism, the two parties that most benefited from the new political regime during the 1910s and that had built much of their electoral power based on working- and middle-class voters.

In tracing the reactions of both political groups to the conjuncture, I explore the complex trajectory of the rent problem in parliament, from May 1920 to September 1921, when a set of laws on rents was issued. I argue that these laws, originally a simple outgrowth of the cost-of-living policies of the war period, evolved—against what historians have traditionally thought—into something very different from that, namely a full-fledged social regulation of rented
housing. This new type of regulation tackled housing as a commodity different from the rest of the items of the working-class family budget, and posited the need of legislating it through an approach that fully acknowledged the rent relation as a social one, in which two opposed rights collided: the property rights of the owner, and the newly-coined concept of the tenant’s “right to housing.” I also argue that the issuing of such a type of legislation was possible thanks to the democratic process of debate that the laws went through. The laws were the result of a debate within a plural, democratically-elected parliament, and of a debate that was closely in touch with the public sphere—these two facts, I argue, deeply influenced the laws’ final contents.

These arguments work on three historiographic levels. First, they show the relevance of parliament, in a period such as the first Radical presidency, traditionally characterized as an “executivist” one, in which Congress and Senate were supposedly paralyzed due to the bitter political rivalries between the chambers’ various parties (Radicals, conservatives, democrats, socialists), as well as by the internal divisions within them. I show, on the contrary, that the work of the parliament could be at some points extremely productive, and that its deliberative type of politics enhanced that productivity. In addition to this, I also show that certain policies, like the rent laws, were fully multi-partisan (namely, Radical-socialist), rather than solely Radical.

A second important point relates to price (or “cost-of-living”) policies as a type of social legislation. In traditional analyses of Radicalism, these policies were conceived as part of short-term demagogic and electorally motivated measures. While my aim here is to differentiate the 1921 rent laws from cost-of-living policies, I also highlight the fact that Radical price policies involved complex reconceptualizations of economic governance and a new type of relation between state and society, and that these policies were part of a global reaction to the crises of inflation the war had brought about.
More broadly, my argument in this chapter also relates to the broader history of social conceptions of housing. I consider that, in Argentina as worldwide, the early postwar was a key period in the evolution of these conceptions and of the policies that followed from them. While traditional views have tended to consider this evolution as a gradual process of state involvement and of reform of housing patterns, I show that, quite on the contrary, this process developed in a much more irregular way, through episodes of crisis in which a plurality of social and political actors embarked in a conflictive and negotiated redefinition of the housing question, something that led to the adopting of certain types of policies to the detriment of others. This process of redefinition, specific and contingent, is what I aim to illuminate through the detailed narration of the debate of the rent laws in 1920-21.

The chapter unfolds as follows. A first section introduces the landscape of competitive politics in Argentina after the 1912 electoral reform, presenting to the reader the main political groups that were active during the parliamentary discussion of the rent laws. The second section narrates the trajectory of cost-of-living measures during the war years and the first rent-regulation projects in 1919 (conservative) and 1920 (Radical), in order to show the type of policy instrument that politicians developed to tackle generalized inflation, and how these instruments were applied to housing. Sections III-V constitute the core of the chapter, following the parliamentary and public-sphere discussion of the rent laws in 1920-21. I deal initially with the debates that deputies held in the Chamber around the Committee draft on the initial Radical bills, which involved substantial changes to the latter. In section IV, I get to the public sphere, retaking the path opened in Chapter 3, in order to analyze the impact and reactions that the parliamentary debate generated, and the different types of pressures that social actors exerted upon legislators.
through that sphere. In the last section, I discuss the different terms that the debate acquired in
the Senate and narrate the final approval of the rent laws.

I. The dynamics of competitive politics

As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, the war years were marked in Argentina by process
of opening of the political system that had begun in 1912. That year, a new voting law, known as
Ley Sáenz Peña, guaranteed individual, universal (for male adult citizens), secret, and
compulsory ballot, putting an end to the fraudulent practices through which the conservative
Partido Autonomista Nacional (PAN) dominated the political scene. The electoral and political
strategies of the previous era, although competitive in their own way—and historians have long
shown that fraudulent elections did not preclude vibrant popular participation in politics—were
very different than what would prevail after 1912. With the new law, indeed, the old
mechanisms of control of electoral outcomes (collective voting, territorial control of the ballot
location, etc.) were no longer adequate. Political parties now had to modify their strategies and
aim to “earn” each individual vote prior to the electoral moment.

The organization of those new means of persuasion on a massive scale was a necessary
transformation for political organizations in order to thrive in the new landscape. The “politics of
democracy,” as Eric Hobsbawm has characterized politics in modernized western countries, lay

---

5 On elections before the Sáenz Peña law, see Hilda Sábato, The Many and the Few: Political Participation in Republican Buenos Aires (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001), part II; for a regional background, see Antonio Annino, ed., Historia de las elecciones en Iberoamérica, siglo XIX (Buenos Aires: Fondo de cultura económica, 1995).
ahead of them.⁶ Other transformations were necessary as well, such as a better integration of political parties on a national scale, or the development of mechanisms that guaranteed the survival of those parties on an institutionalized and programmatic basis—as opposed to a personal and clientelistic one.

Each political sector would navigate this transition in its own way and with varying success. Radicalism would undoubtedly be the great winner, both in the short and the medium term. Emerged in the 1890s as a splinter of conservative political groups, the Radical party (UCR, Unión Cívica Radical) had conceived its initial program as an intransigent attachment to the cleansing of the electoral process, which had led it to a double strategy of electoral abstention and armed interventions against the conservative order. Simultaneously, Radicals had expanded their influence territorially in the city and province of Buenos Aires through the creation of a thick web of local “comités” (committees), which would be a key tool of political patronage in the decades to come.⁷ Based on the comités and on an active militancy, Radicals managed to reap the best fruits of the new electoral system, winning parliamentary elections already in 1912 and 1913.⁸ The triumph of the Radical candidate, Hipólito Yrigoyen, in the 1916 presidential elections, was a turning point in this growth process. Radicals now controlled the national Executive and increased their power through the resources of the national administration. To the control of the Executive, Radicals would add increasing weight in the Chamber of Deputies,

---

⁸ Yet, Aníbal Viguera and others have shown that during the first three years after the electoral reform there was a process of dispersion and fragmentation of all political forces, none of them yet consolidated as a compact and nation-wide party. See Aníbal Viguera, “Participación electoral y prácticas políticas de los sectores populares en Buenos Aires, 1912-1922,” *Entrepasados* 1, no. 1 (1991). See also Ana Virginia Persello, “Los gobiernos radicales: debate institucional y práctica política,” in Falcón, *Nueva historia Argentina*, Vol. 6, 66.
getting the majority in 1918. The Senate, in contrast, remained a conservative bulwark throughout the whole Radical years.

Dominion over the national Executive and part of the legislature obviously strengthened the party, but it also exacerbated its internal divisions, making Radicalism during the whole 1916-1930 cycle a divided and undisciplined organization. Radicals had been from its origins a rather heterogeneous conglomerate, including members from all social classes, clerics as well as anticlericalists, sons of immigrants as well as members of the traditional aristocracy. It conspicuously lacked any specific political, social or economic program. All these factors, together with the personalistic style of Yrigoyen’s leadership, had already generated frictions before 1916. After that date, Radicalism added conflict around state resources, conflict at the level of provincial government, and aggressive reactions to the “presidentialism” of Yrigoyen’s administration. Already by 1918 the Radical bloc in the Chamber of Deputies contained a sizable group of open dissidents to the president, such as Víctor M. Molina, Roberto M. Ortiz, Miguel Laurencena, or José P. Tamborini. This cleavage around the figure of Yrigoyen culminated in 1924 with the formation of the “Antipersonalista” UCR as a separate political party.9

Socialists were the second great beneficiaries of the political transition that opened up in 1912. Physician and intellectual Juan B. Justo had founded the Argentine socialist party in 1896. Explicitly Marxist, internationalist and pro-labor, the party however advocated for reformist and moderate political practice, drawing inspiration from the French socialism of Jean Jaurès, albeit following a fairly sui generis ideological line.10 Its leaders and main cadres were not workers,

---

9 On antipersonalismo and the divisions within Radicalism, see Persello, “Los gobiernos radicales,” and Elena Piñeyro, “Los radicales antipersonalistas. Historia de una disidencia. 1916-1943” (Ph.D. diss., Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, 2007). With characteristic sarcasm, historian Tulio Halperín Donghi once argued that the 1924 schism was actually a sign of unification, in that it was the first time that Radicalism was divided in only two factions.
but urban middle-class professionals, many of them from immigrant origin. Coherent with their gradualist stance, socialists very early on decided to participate in the electoral politics of the conservative era, managing by 1904 to get the first socialist seat in any Latin American Chamber of Deputies (Alfredo Palacios). Socialist predicament was a combination of political activity with a strong focus on what historians have called a “cultural apparatus,” which included “popular libraries,” publishing houses and an active agenda of conferences and activities of political training, as well as the newspaper *La Vanguardia* (which we have analyzed in Ch. 2). Based on an enlightened view of workers' education, socialists put great emphasis on formulating a consistent and explicit ideological line, elaborated by their leadership and spread through that cultural apparatus.

The opening of the political system let socialists increase their parliamentary base between 1912 and 1918, so that they managed to be the main electoral antagonist of the UCR and compete for a comparable urban middle- and working-class electorate. By 1918 roughly 34% of the electorate voted socialist, which would be the party’s ceiling in the 1920s. This sizable electorate let them increase their number of deputies throughout the second half of the 1910s to roughly 10 (depending of the year), and up to 20 by 1926. Thanks most likely to their programmatic base, the sociological homogeneity of its leaders, and its local boundedness (which was its greatest weakness, being a party limited to the Federal Capital and surroundings, (Vol. 5, El progreso, la modernización y sus límites (1880-1916) (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2000); Osvaldo Graciano, “El Partido Socialista de Argentina: su trayectoria histórica y sus desafíos políticos en las primeras décadas del siglo XX,” A Contracorriente 7, no. 3 (Spring 2010). On the Justo and the party's ideology, see José Aricó, *La hipótesis de justo: escritos sobre el socialismo en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1999).

as well as the city of Rosario in Santa Fe), socialism was a rather compact and disciplined political bloc during the 1910s, something that changed with the splits it went through in the second half of the 1920s.

While the new voting law strengthened Radicals and socialists, conservatives were weakened. This was not an obvious outcome: it remains a well-known irony of this story the fact that the electoral law was an initiative of the reformist wing of conservative forces that, led by then President Roque Sáenz Peña, aspired to heal the political system by allowing the oligarchic elite to enlarge their base of legitimacy without losing their grip on power. The ruling elite, however, miscalculated the effects of the political opening: already in 1912 conservatives lost heavily in provincial and legislative elections, which paved the way to a major political transition during the following years.

One of the reasons for the conservatives’ defeat was fragmentation. The old PAN was no more than a league of local powers articulated rather loosely on a national level, an articulation that was based on certain basic governing pacts and on the power of the president in office to be the “great elector” of his successor.\(^\text{12}\) As the new electoral system introduced uncertainty in the voting system, the fragility of the arrangement became exposed, and local leaders started to act with less coordination.\(^\text{13}\)

That said, the defeat of conservatives was not inevitable, nor was it seen as such. Since the very beginning of the new electoral system different leaders perceived the need to join forces

\(^{12}\) See Botana, *El orden conservador*, ch. III. The National Constitution forbid presidential reelection for consecutive terms.

\(^{13}\) It was in this conjuncture that important conservative intellectuals such as Rodolfo Rivarola or Lucas Ayarragaray developed a series of political reflections on the need for and the great difficulty of creating “modern political parties” in the new democratic system. See Darío Roldán, ed. *Crear la democracia. La Revista Argentina de Ciencias Políticas y el debate en torno de la República Verdadera* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2006).
and create new types of articulations. The most important of them was the Partido Demócrata Progresista (PDP), a platform launched in the second half of 1914 by a handful of important former Autonomist leaders and a progressive rural organization from southern Santa Fe, the Liga del Sur, led by Lisandro de la Torre, a former follower of the early UCR. The purported aim of the PDP was the generation of a modern political party that would address major issues of Argentine political, social, and economic life, and that would be based on adhesion to an “impersonal” program, rather than on traditional personalized allegiance. Yet, defeat in the 1916 presidential elections revealed the lack of articulation between the leaders that backed De la Torre as candidate, and marked the end of PDP as a national conservative alternative. From then on, conservative forces would find expression in different provincial parties, which could dominate local situations but would fail to coalesce on a national level.

In spite of this steady decline, conservatives retained important bastions of power. As said above, they dominated the Chamber of Deputies up to 1918 and the Senate all the way to 1930. In different provinces they managed to stay in power, which was why Yrigoyen sought recourse so many times to the constitutional mechanism of federal intervention in order replace local authorities with officials loyal to him.

---


There are two changes brought about by the new electoral system that are of utmost importance for the purposes of this chapter. One is, as anticipated, the new political value and publicity of social and labor questions. In a “true republic,” in which the will of the electors is decisive in providing access to power, the ability of politicians to put issues under the public light and to appear as able to address those issues was the source of great political benefit. That is why the spectrum of policies affecting broad sections of the population emerged as a realm of legislation that, while not new, was now electorally much more tempting for politicians, and was much more “publicized” through official propaganda and the public sphere than before. As an example of this, Figure 1 shows how the most widely circulated satirical publication of the early 20th century characterized the political alternatives of the period mainly through their electoral “offer” in relation to the social question.

Figure 1: Electoral offering, according to Caras y caretas (late 1910s).

Legend:
“ELECTORAL PREPARATIONS.”
[Yrigoyen’s poster]: “Political regeneration. JOBS for everyone. Suppression of taxes. Free stew on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays.”
“Radicals! God from heaven orders it, vote for me!”

16 The formula “república verdadera” (true republic) was used by Tulio Halperín Donghi to characterize the Radical years, arguing that only in this period the aspirations of nineteenth-century political thinkers (notably Juan B. Alberdi) of a free republican and democratic regime would have been fulfilled. See Tulio Halperín Donghi, Vida y muerte de la República verdadera (Buenos Aires: Ariel, 1999).
[Lisandro de la Torre’s]: “CHIC GOVERNMENT, special for rich kids. Fancy offices. Cigars, tobacco. Cold and warm baths at any time.”

“Democrats! No one will be better than us here, vote for me!”

[Juan B. Justo’s]: “SOCIAL PEACE. Music at will. Workers’ cottages. 8-minute working day. Two-way ticket to the seaside (for free).”

“Socialists! The people demands this with frenzy, vote for me!”


The second change relates to the new dynamics that electoral reform brought to parliamentary life, particularly to the Chamber of Deputies. The arrival of new political forces to the lower chamber meant that the legislative body was more diverse than before in ideological and political terms. This diversity led automatically to a greater degree of conflict, to which we have to add the bitter fractures within the ruling party and its lack of internal discipline.

Parliamentary debates of the first Radical period are famous for their length and ferocity. The fact that so many of the political forces of the time were represented in the chamber gave it some new features, unlike any other chamber in previous periods of the history of modern Argentina.

First, as said above, groups with extremely different perspectives on the major social and political issues were part of the chamber. This meant that the Parliament was now an arena of the main cleavages, alliances and negotiations of the time, and reflected, at least better than before, the diversity of social interests. Second, the chamber would find itself in great confrontation with other branches of government. Both as it was dominated by conservatives (up to 1918), or once it was dominated by Radicals (from 1918 on), the relations with the Executive Power were always extremely tense. President Yrigoyen, who considered parliament only an appendix of the real base of popular will (the Executive), deployed an irritatingly “presidentialist” political style, expressed for example in his habit of not attending the annual opening of the parliamentary
sessions (which the Constitution prescribed), or of leaving the law bills backed by the opposition or by his internal Radical rivals to rest forever in his office.  

In the same way that the lower chamber was in permanent conflict with the Executive, its relation with the Chamber of Senators was also difficult. Here the conflict emerged more strongly after 1918, due to the above-mentioned difference of political allegiance between both chambers. Both socialists and Radicals in the lower chamber accused the Senate of unshakeable conservatism, seeing it as the cause of the paralysis and eventual failure of many legislative initiatives.

One final important characteristic of Parliament in the 1910s and 1920s follows from what we have seen in Chapter 2. The development of mass journalism and of an expanded public sphere made parliament much more attuned to the debates and voices in that sphere. We will see regarding the rent debate how different actors (from owners’ and tenants’ associations to municipalities and cooperatives, from mass newspapers to social-science experts) would issue petitions and pressure legislators through public means, making the parliamentary and the public-sphere almost a continuum.

Conflict within and without Parliament, the fragmentation of political forces (particularly of Radicalism), or the interaction between Parliament and public opinion were features that led historians to see the parliamentary life of the 1916-22 period as one of endless debate and absolute inefficacy. Tulio Halperín Donghi found the “legislative paralysis” of this period a “strange” phenomenon, while Peter Smith considered that there was almost an inverse

---

17 This neglect of the Legislature’s power, which he considered, generated in the chambers permanent discussions on the nature of the Legislature’s power vis-a-vis the Executive. On the conflicts between these two powers, see Ana María Mustapic, “Conflictos institucionales durante el primer gobierno radical: 1916-1922,” Desarrollo Económico 24, no. 93 (April 1, 1984): 85–108.
18 Halperín Donghi, Vida y muerte de la República verdadera, 153-164.
proportionality between the length of parliamentary transcripts during the Radical period and the number of laws approved.  

As said above, one of my purposes in this chapter will be to show that, quite on the contrary, the vivacity of parliamentary life during the Radical period was not a hindrance to efficacy. Few laws may have been issued, but the permanent debate and the public importance of parliament had a great impact in the political life of the time.

II. The path towards Radical rent legislation. Rent regulation and the cost-of-living issue

a) Cost-of-living campaign(s)

There are few historiographic assessments of the 1921 rent laws. The only significant one has been that by David Rock in the 1970s, who considered the rent laws as part of the “cost-of-living campaign” launched by the Radical administration in late 1919 and 1920. That campaign was for Rock one example in many of the pragmatic and demagogic governance style of Radicalism, basically guided by electoral purposes. Like the approach to union leaders during the first years of his presidency or the purchase of political acquiescence through the distribution of public jobs, cost-of-living measures were for Rock attempts by President Yrigoyen and his clique to earn the popular favor without introducing further changes in the social and productive structure of the country.

Rock also gave a solid sociological explanation of these campaigns. For him, the target—besides the universal “speculator” that Radicals and the Radical press kept denouncing as

---


20 Besides David Rock, the only author that made a thorough analysis of the laws has been Sebastián Elías in a Law dissertation on judicial control of constitutionality. See José Sebastián Elías, “The Constitutional Protection of Property Rights in Argentina: A Reappraisal of the Doctrine of Economic Emergency,” J.S.D. Diss, Yale University, 2014.
scapegoat for all the problems—had to be chosen carefully, in order not to discomfort allies or spur powerful interests against the government. Thus, campaigns targeted social elites that were viewed as decadent and as increasingly estranged from national governments (for example the northern sugar elite), or elites that, despite being strong, were variegated and internally fractured, so that they could not offer any resistance (such as, in our case, the urban landlords of Buenos Aires).21

Rock’s hypotheses can be considered provisionally plausible in order to explain the political rationale of some of the most debated cost-of-living policies of Yrigoyen’s first administration, such as the wheat or the sugar campaigns of mid-1920, or the initiatives of the municipality in late 1919. Yet, as I show in this section, cost-of-living policies of the postwar period in Argentina were much more complex phenomena. First, they were not the exclusive patrimony of Radicals, but rather were constructed by the different political forces in a period of extreme political competition. Second, they were not clumsy measures improvised with the sole aim of impressing the public; they were, rather, attempts of coping with the complex economic problem of generalized and unprecedented inflation that the war had brought about, in Argentina and worldwide, which required a rearrangement of the relations between economic actors, society and the state.

Upon the outbreak of the war, both Radicals and conservatives perceived the emergence of a new price conjuncture and the political opportunity it provided. Only two weeks after the beginning of the conflict, Radical deputy Horacio B. Oyhanarte, highlighting the ongoing emergency situation, pleaded the Chamber approve a minute summoning the then conservative Executive to

take care of the problem of prices. He especially called attention on price increases in basic foodstuffs, such as meat, beans, bread, or milk, which were not imported materials, but national and very basic ones; the only possible explanation for their increase was the interest of “speculators.”  

When Yrigoyen took office in late 1916 and began a gradual policy approach towards labor unions, which led to the beginning of nominal wage increases, the cost-of-living issue took on a new political flavor. For conservatives and socialists alike, to address its importance was a way of undermining Radical labor policy. The argument, as it was clearly phrased by a conservative deputy in early 1917, was that “...we will scarcely win anything from the increase of workers’ wages, if meanwhile […] the cost of living increases as well.”

It was this same deputy, Mariano Demaría, the first to propose a concrete initiative to confront the problem of the cost of living. In February 1917 he proposed the creation of a “special committee” in the Chamber of Deputies (the “Comité Especial por el Abaratamiento de la Vida”) aimed at investigating and suggesting solutions to it. His arguments for the creation of this committee collected a series of ideas of wide circulation at the time concerning the economics of distribution, and that would be later applied to housing and rents. For Demaría, the

22 Diario de Sesiones de la Honorable Cámara de Diputados (hereafter CD), Vol III, 1914, 720-26. He also recommended the approval of two bills that were presented that same day, on maximum prices of bread, wheat, other basic consumer items, and medicines. Their authors, interestingly enough, were a Radical and two conservatives.


24 CD, 15 February 1917, 5107. (Translations along the chapter are mine.) Later that year, social-Catholic economist Alejandro Bunge started his statistical series on the cost of living, which assessed with extreme methodological precision the problem of real wages and standards of living (see Ch. 5).

25 Mariano Demaría (1872-1923), a politician of a long parliamentary career, had begun its political activity as a Radical during the 1890 revolution. Later on in that decade, however, he made a pragmatic turn and became part of the PAN. He would keep his conservative allegiance during the rest of his political career in the Conservative Party of the Province of Buenos Aires (hereafter PBA).
cause of generalized price increase lay in the disproportionate development of trade and
distribution in the urban economy. Merchants, traders, and intermediaries of all sorts, he argued,
constituted a “long chain” that separated producers from consumers. These intermediaries,
particularly those organized in “trusts” with great coercion power over other economic agents,
were actors that illegitimately extracted a benefit from both consumers and producers, making
prices at the end of the chain extremely higher than those at the beginning. The only way to put
down prices was for Demaría to locate and eliminate the points in this chain where prices were
inflated.26

The conservative-dominated chamber approved Demaría’s proposal hastily, and the
Special Committee began its activity that same year. Its composition consisted of two
conservative deputies (Rodolfo Moreno h. and Pedro T. Pagés) and a socialist (Antonio de
Tomaso); its two Radical members resigned very early on, revealing the lack of commitment of
Radicalism to the issue at that point.

After personally visiting the markets of Buenos Aires and its surroundings throughout
1917, Moreno confirmed Demaría’s intuitions. The central wholesale markets (the Mercado
Central and the Mercado de Abasto), dominated by a cartelized group of merchants, were a
pump that sucked up all the production that entered the city and extracted big profits from it. In
Moreno’s description,

Basic-need goods arrive in carts to that big warehouse called Mercado Proveedor. There, they are
downloaded and go through a series of diverse, intermediate hands that have to pay to the market

26 These calls for an economy in which producers and consumers were in closer relation to each other were a
common ideological trope of the time, not only among conservatives, but also, for instance, among socialists, who
hailed it as one of the foundations of consumer cooperativism. See for example “Las cooperativas de consumo,”
article appeared in the first issue of El Hogar Obrero cooperative’s magazine, La cooperación libre (no. 1, 1
November 1913, 1).
and the municipality a series of contributions. There are weights and measures fees, use rights, registering fees for vehicles…  

Moreno counted at least eight internal fees paid in the market. As a result, retailers obtained products at an inflated price. They had to add, on top of that, more taxes, their own profit share (which by that point could only be the bare subsistence minimum), and only then could they sell that product to the consumer.

The “ferias francas,” tax-free producers’ markets that the municipality had instituted at the beginning of the war in order to cope with scarcity and inflation, were a “true mystification” that did not work much differently: not only some taxes were charged in them, but they were operated by the same intermediaries that controlled the wholesale markets. “All the sellers we have observed in them [the ferias francas] were the same individuals that we had seen some hours earlier, at dawn, in the Mercado de Abasto, buying supplies from producers, or from the first, second, or third intermediaries…”

This sordid picture led the Committee to present a series of bills in September 1917, which aimed to link more directly “the two extremes of the chain […]: producer and consumer.” Diverse in object and method, the bills revealed the complexity of realizing this ideal: they reduced circulation taxes, eliminated tariffs to cattle imports, promoted cheap railway transportation of goods, punished the organization of “trusts” or business coalitions of suppliers of consumer articles, and temporarily prohibited the export of wheat and flour in order to increase the available stock for the domestic market.

27 CD, 28 September 1917, 393.
28 Id., 395.
29 Id., 394-5.
30 See id., pp. 394-412.
These measures, never fully implemented, were ineffectual to the point of leading deputies Moreno and Pagés to re-launch them by mid-1919. In their new version, however, they added a further, new bill. They identified rent as one of the main and growing expenses of working-class families, and proposed a restriction of annual rent prices to a maximum of 7% of the price of the property as declared by owners for the annual pay of the land tax (contribución territorial), and protected subtenants from abuses by subleases, forcing the latter to include the original rent price in sublease contracts. These articles, by limiting profit and punishing intermediaries, were in strict continuity with former methods for curbing prices.

Moreno and Pagés’s rent bill, together with the rest of their cost-of-living projects, did not make it into law. The political scenario was now adverse, with a new Radical majority in the Chamber. It would be precisely Radicals who, by December 1919, took up the initiative with a new cost-of-living campaign, this time at the municipal level. The newly appointed Mayor, José L. Cantilo, issued a series of decrees and proposed to the City Council some ordinances in order to deal with price increases of certain basic items of the family budget. As David Rock has explained, Radicals had suffered an unexpected defeat in the council elections of late 1918, and wanted to recover through an active municipal administration. Yrigoyen put Cantilo, a man from his inner circle, in charge of that. His measures to curb prices, like those of the conservative Special

---

31 The new version of the measures aimed, as before, at the facilitation of exchange (through limiting interest rates), the persecution of trusts and speculation, and the protection of stock (through prohibiting the slaughter of young cattle), CD, 11 June 1919, 488.
32 CD, 11 June 1919, 487ss.
34 See Rock, Politics in Argentina, 204. Since 1880, when the City of Buenos Aires was declared Federal Capital, the Mayor was directly appointed by the President, instead of being voted by the city’s inhabitants. This only changed in 1994.
Committee two years before, emphasized the fight against intermediaries, securing some funds for the creation of municipal markets and the promotion of cooperatives, but also punished speculators and hoarders, the great scapegoats in Yrigoyenist rhetoric on the issue.\footnote{Cantilo put the focus on the efficiency of the distribution system as well, particularly that of meat, through changes in the system of transportation between growers, meatpackers, auctioneers and slaughter houses, and also, more generally, through the creation of the Dirección Municipal de Consumos, in order to study the exchange system in the city, generate statistics and make recommendations regarding efficiency of exchange. See Abaratamiento de la alimentación, 6-11.}

The Radical campaign on the cost of living would continue in Parliament throughout 1920: between May and August Radical legislators presented in total 13 bills that attacked the problem through the same methods.\footnote{See the bills in CD, 1920, vol. I, 17 May, 1\textsuperscript{st} June and 8 June; vol. III, 22 July, 5 August and 10 August.} After the relative collapse of Yrogyen’s policy of approach to the labor unions with the “Semana Trágica” massacres of 1919 (see previous chapter), this line of action was a way of tackling the problem of the standard of living through the opposite end.

The legislative endeavor involved all factions of the Radical party, including both close collaborators of president Yrigoyen and some of his opponents within the party.\footnote{Five of the bills within this cost-of-living campaign were proposed by the same group of legislators, Leónidas Anastasi, José L. Rodeyro and Roberto Ortiz, who constituted important dissident figures within the party. In contrast, another group of three projects was signed by close allies of Yrigoyen: Carlos J. Rodríguez, Francisco Beiró, and Enrique Martínez.} Two major initiatives, which generated great polarization in the public sphere, came instead directly from the Executive, which aimed to rally the whole Radical congressional bloc behind them. One was a campaign in June 1920 to introduce supplementary duties on wheat exports, in order to curb price increase through purchasing the excess with the new funds and channel it towards the domestic market. Legislators approved the proposal, but prices stayed equally high. Government hardened its position in August prohibiting further exports by decree, but still failed to acquire enough quantities of wheat to satisfy demand. Eventually, the price of bread started to fall only in January 1921, when the new harvest was already available. Concerning sugar, government
action was more resolute. In August 1920, it demanded the congress authorization to expropriate 200,000 tons, allegedly being held by speculators. Deputies approved it, but the Senate rejected it, especially due to resistance of Senators of Northwest, sugar-producing provinces.  

This review of the many campaigns, legislations and ordinances on the cost-of-living issues in the 1914-1920 cycle shows some basic facts that will be extremely important in understanding the first initiatives of rent regulation in 1920. First, we can see that these experiences generated a basic set of instruments to deal with rent prices, such as regulation of profit, control of intermediaries and trusts, tax reform, or promotion of trade infrastructure. Many of these instruments would be put into practice with the rent laws, likening the price of housing to that of any other commodity. Second, we also see that initiatives on this problem were not the exclusive patrimony of Radicals, but rather that both Radicals and Conservatives mobilized them in several instances, frequently to use them as a tool in the political struggle. Third, we see that certain tenets, particularly the anti-intermediary ideology, were a constant in the justification of these measures.

b) The initial Radical bills of rent regulation

Housing, which was the only item of the family budget to decrease its price during the late war years, started rising in 1918, and by 1920 was rising much more than any other basic good. Upon that economic fact, the movement of opinion described in Chapter 3 made housing an “isolated” issue, detaching it from the general problem of the cost of living—it became more visible and

---

identifiable than ever before. It is against this backdrop that Radicals, like conservatives in 1919, included rent among the prices that cost-of-living measures were supposed to regulate. While they used the instruments available from the prior campaigns, they also added to them, as we will see, certain rent-specific measures that responded to the demands of the public-opinion movement, and that were advancing into the terrain of a social regulation of rented housing.

In the context of the municipal campaign on the cost of living, it would be Mayor Cantilo the first Radical official to take notice of the movement of opinion. In March 1920 he launched a series of ordinances and legislative projects specifically aimed at the housing problem. His proposals were two-pronged. First, they followed the consensus that existed at least from the 1915 housing law (see Ch. 2) on the importance of encouraging housing construction through different means. Second, they addressed the specific problem of the ongoing conditions of tenants, proposing the establishment of minimum duration for rent leases, a maximum profit for sublets, and an expansion of eviction terms to 30 days. Two months later, four Radical deputies echoed Cantilo’s initiatives in the parliamentary arena. In May 1920, José P. Tamborini, Andrés Ferreyra (h.), and Víctor M. Molina presented rent-regulation bills that addressed similar issues, while Delfor del Valle proposed a fourth bill that only suspended any rent increase for a year.

(SEE TABLE 1)

Table 1. Radical initiatives on the rent problem, March-May 1920.

39 The only precedent was in 1914, when Radical deputy Oyhanarte recommended the investigation of the relation between rent prices and wages, in order to assess their real impact on the working-class family. See CD, 1914, Vol III, 720-26.
40 The means were: construction of cheap houses by the municipality; issuing free “planos-tipo” of basic dwellings; granting of benefits for companies that built dwelling for their workers; sale of municipal plots to public employees; construction of municipal brick factories; control of the lime trust that dominated the building industry. See Abaratamiento de la alimentación, 25-29.
41 Ibid.
42 The complete legislative debate on the rent laws can be found in http://www1.hcdn.gov.ar/dependencias/dip/adebates.htm [accessed 27 October 2014].

201
As we can see in the table, Cantilo’s municipal initiatives and the first three bills shared the main axes chosen for the intervention on rent relations: price of rent, duration of lease, time frame for evictions, and regulation of sublets. Concerning prices, the bills stipulated an annual price ceiling that was a specific percentage of the total price of the property. This mechanism was not unprecedented: it was present in Moreno and Pagés's June 1919 rent bill, as well as in the petitions presented by the tenants’ movement that same year. Projects 1 and 2 added a second mechanism of tenant protection: a minimum term of duration for leases. One of the most frequent complaints from tenants was that landlords could unilaterally change the rent price or declare the interruption of the rent contract. The provision of a minimum term during which the contract could not be modified was supposed to provide the tenant with a basic framework of stability. Third, projects 2 and 4 stipulated longer terms for evictions: while the Civil Code stated that 40 days after notification of evictions tenants had to vacate the property, the bills proposed respectively a 180- and an 80-day period. Fourth, three of the projects included the limitation of the level of profit subleasers could extract from the rented properties. We can identify here the anti-intermediary discourse on the cost-of-living issue above described, and, as we will see, the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>type of price control</th>
<th>lease term</th>
<th>eviction term</th>
<th>emergency measures (except price)</th>
<th>tenements</th>
<th>subtenant protection</th>
<th>construction encouragement</th>
<th>exclusion of children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 José L. Cantilo</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>30 days - 30 days - juridical costs: max 5% of prop price</td>
<td>sublet maximum: annual 7% of property price</td>
<td>set of municipal and national projects sent to Exe. Power</td>
<td>prohibited</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 José P. Tamborini</td>
<td>percentage - 8%</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>180 days</td>
<td>fixed prices</td>
<td>sublet forbidden</td>
<td>tax exemption for new houses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Andrés Ferreyra (h.)</td>
<td>percentage - 9%</td>
<td>law lasts three years</td>
<td>fixed prices</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Víctor M. Molina</td>
<td>percentage, 8% - and 25% max rise vs 1 Jan 1919</td>
<td>80 days</td>
<td>25% max sublet profit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Delfor del Valle</td>
<td>prohibition of rent rise for one year</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Abaratamiento de la alimentación, 25-29; CD, 17 May 1920, 215ss.; CD, 19 May 1920, 315ss.
subleaser would be an easy target during the whole rent debate. Finally, in three of the initiatives we also find measures of encouragement of construction. As we have seen, voices from all sectors had identified the lack of houses as the structural reason for high rents, a situation these projects could even aggravate as they limited profits for the construction industry. The aim of these measures was to compensate that potential effect and further encourage capitalists to invest in construction.

These rent initiatives were an application of the above-seen cost-of-living mechanisms to the problem of rent. The tools to curb prices were the same: fixing of maximum profit, persecution of intermediaries, increase of stock through encouragement and/or through state production. Some measures, however, were new and rent-specific, namely the regulation of conditions of the rent contract. They came directly from the public debate on the rent problem that predated the parliamentary one, which, as we have seen, had built the suffering tenant as one of its most poignant images. They also borrowed from the international experiences of rent regulation that the Great War had spurred: suspension of evictions, price ceilings and stabilization of rent contracts.

From a political perspective, these bills also illuminate the complex stance of Radicalism toward the rent problem. Three of the figures behind these initiatives (Cantilo, Ferreyra, and Del Valle) represented the inner circle of *yrigoyenismo*.\(^4\) Molina and Tamborini, in contrast, were among the most prominent dissident Radicals, critical of president Yrigoyen; in the years to come they would be “antipersonalistas” and ministers of Alvear’s administration. The Radical

\(^4\) Cantilo and Del Valle were politicians of a long trajectory within Radicalism; they had participated in its 1890 revolution and were creators and chief editors of the pro-government newspaper *La época*. The former, on top of that, was the appointed Mayor of the capital and had been appointed governor of the PBA in 1917 after a federal intervention. Ferreyra, in turn, was a younger politician, personal secretary of Yrigoyen in 1912 and secretary of governor Cantilo in 1917.
rent campaign was thus an issue in which different inner factions of the party were involved. The attitude of the Executive branch toward the campaign, in turn, was cautious, even if some of its most important men were committed to it. When we compare the rent problem with the epic battles that Yrigoyenism and the opposition fought around the wheat and sugar bills later that year, we can see remarkable differences, which show that rent was not a top priority for the president. He did not get personally involved in the topic, the Executive did not send any project of its own, and *La época*, the official Radical newspaper, mentioned the bills only as routine congressional information, without devoting any effort to its defense and diffusion. This mild support and the involvement of non-Yrigoyenist Radicals would be two important elements of the debate to come.

III. The Committee’s drafts. Socialist thrust and long-term legislation

During the months of June and July 1920, the Radical rent bills were discussed in the Committee of General Legislation. The Committee, a permanent body of the Chamber, had a diverse composition. Two of its three Radical members (Mora y Araujo and Bas; the third member was José L. Rodeyro) were close to conservative provincial elites and belonged to the dissident branch of Radicalism.\(^2\) The rest of the committee members were young socialist deputy Antonio de Tomaso, Demócrata Progresista Julián Maidana, and conservative Nicolás A. Avellaneda.\(^3\)

---

\(^2\) Manuel Mora y Araujo, the committee’s president, had formerly been a member of the conservative Partido Liberal de Corrientes (local expression of conservatism), which represented a conservative branch of Radicalism, that joined the party only in 1915. He was close to Vicente Gallo and Radical dissidents. Arturo M. Bas (1875-1935), in turn, was a social-Catholic deputy from Córdoba. He had been, together with Juan F. Cafferata and others, founder of the Partido Constitucional, provincial conservative party organized in order to compete in the new electoral system. He joined the Radical party only in 1919, with the purpose of running as national deputy.

\(^3\) Antonio de Tomaso (1889-1933), son of working-class Italian immigrants, was author of many bills related to labor legislation. By the late 1920s he would become leader of a conservative splinter of socialism (the Partido Socialista Independiente), which sided with antipersonalist Radicals to support the 1930 coup against Yrigoyen. He was Minister of Agriculture of Agustín P. Justo’s administration. Julián Maidana (1878-?), deputy from Córdoba, was a politician from aristocratic background. Nicolás A. Avellaneda (1871-1945), finally, son of the homonymous
The work of the Committee was not limited to the three bills in question. It also included in its discussions projects from different origins, including those circulating in the public sphere since the end of 1919, projects sent to the committee by different actors during their meetings, bills presented by deputies in earlier years, and examples of foreign legislation on the matter. In the words of Antonio de Tomaso, socialist deputy and member of the Committee: “We have received a rain of projects, each of which […] considered the issue under a different light—all of them, however, shared fundamentally a common purpose, [the lowering of rents].” With all these precedents on the table, the Committee members made a substantial rearrangement in order to craft a new set of drafts.

As stated above, the Committee was not only taking into account the immediate legislative precedents. The idea of curbing rent prices and certain specific measures to do so circulated in the public sphere. The Committee paid great attention to that: for its president, Manuel Mora y Araujo, deputies were simply giving “organic” shape to “the insistent clamor of public opinion, which had been echoed by newspapers, and which had led to the organization of propaganda centers that demanded an urgent intervention of public powers…” At the same time, legislators borrowed from the experience of other countries, and were eager to stress the fact that to put a limit on rent profit in order to protect tenants was common currency at the time. The foreign examples most widely taken into account were those of France, England, Belgium and Germany, but also that of countries that had not directly suffered war destruction but that, like Argentina, had suffered its effects on trade flows and investment in construction, such as Uruguay, the United States, or Norway.

president, was a reputed conservative politician from the Province of Buenos Aires and a law professor already in the pre-1916 period.

46 CD, 3 August 1920, 726.
47 CD, 29 July 1920, 676.
As we have seen in chapter 2, the public held high hopes on the debate and issuing of these laws. During the months in which the Committee was debating, the social actors most directly affected by the bills (landlords and tenants) would exert their pressure in different ways. Landlords were acting through an economic rationale, increasing prices at an even faster rate than before in order to be prepared (if prices were frozen by law) for a scenario that would damage their earnings. The echoes of this arrived to the Chamber by mid-June, as a Radical deputy proposed a bill, eventually rejected, to prohibit any rent rise until Congress had finished discussing the rent laws.  

Tenants, in turn, were pressuring through mobilization, which would increase during August and September (see below).

From what precedes (composition of committee, plurality of sources, pressure from social actors), it is evident that the Committee’s job was not simple. Its discussions were lengthy and, as an evidence of the level of disagreement among its members, it ended up producing two separate bill drafts (one for the majority and one for the minority), each of them with a legislator voting in dissidence. In spite of these disagreements, there were many common features to both drafts. (SEE TABLE 2)

TABLE 2: Drafts from Committee of Legislation, presented on 29 July 1920.

---

48 CD, 16 June 1920, 765-6. The fact was also mentioned later in the debate by De Tomaso, as a further argument supporting the need of a retroactive rent-control law. CD, 3 August 1920, 739.

49 The dissident legislators were PDP deputy from Córdoba, Julián Maidana, and conservative deputy from the Province of Buenos Aires, Nicolás A. Avellaneda. Both of them were against the whole legislative endeavor, as they explained in their speeches, so that to sign in dissidence was their way of expressing their opposition. In turn, the second draft was the work of Arturo M. Bas. A social Catholic from Córdoba and latecomer to the Radical party, Bas had closer ideological affinities with conservatives than with his own co-partisans. He had nonetheless (compared to other conservatives) a special interest on social legislation, which made him give great importance to the specific contents of the bills.
Both drafts took as a point of departure the same main axes of intervention in the rent market of the May bills, and were very similar to them. One novelty was, however, that in both cases the legislators had grouped these axes in two separate bills, as the Table shows: one with the articles that “involved modifications of the Civil Code” and one with those that did not. We will return to that differentiation soon.

Getting now to the specifics, the articles that involved modifications of the Civil Code (Drafts on column A) regulated rents through the establishment of maximum lengths for rent leases, broader time frames for evictions, and measures protecting subtenants. On lease lengths, the majority of the Committee proposed a two-year minimum. Mora y Araujo, president of the Committee, justified the imposition of minimum durations as a way of guaranteeing the bilateral nature of rent contracts, particularly for the cases (which constituted the majority) in which leases were orally arranged or arranged with no specific duration, thus being liable to unilateral

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Draft</th>
<th>minimum lease term</th>
<th>maximum eviction term</th>
<th>subtenant protection</th>
<th>eviction processes</th>
<th>type of price control</th>
<th>construction encouragement</th>
<th>exclusion of children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Draft 1</td>
<td>Manuel Mora y Araujo</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>60 days</td>
<td>a) no sublet profit higher than 20% the original price - b) original price and name of landlord on receipt</td>
<td>a) judicial costs limitation - b) subtenants informed of eviction processes - c) protection of subtenants’ deposits</td>
<td>fixed price ceiling (1st Jan 1920)</td>
<td>prohibited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>José L. Rodeyro</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Antonio de Tomaso</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Julián Maidana (dissidence)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draft 2</td>
<td>Arturo M. Bas</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>180 days</td>
<td>a) 20% max sublet - b) original price and name of landlord on receipt</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nicolás A. Avellaneda (dissidence)</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>120 days</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: CD, 29 July 1920, 668ss; Revista de Economía Argentina, Nos. 23-24, May-June 1920, 422ss.
interruption. Social Catholic deputy Arturo Bas went a step further, sustaining that it was not the contractual nature what was at stake in this article, but rather the social function of property. A landlord that changed conditions arbitrarily without respecting a basic duration was making a socially harmful, and therefore illegitimate use of her property.

Other reforms to the Civil Code were related to the evictions terms and the situation of subtenants. Concerning evictions, the modifications provided a more generous time frame for tenants to vacate properties. The protection of subtenants, in turn, was one of the fields in which the Committee (and later on the Chamber) agreed the most. The Civil Code did not regulate the practice of subletting at all, and during evictions subtenants were frequently expelled from houses regardless their actual situation as regular rent payers. To solve this, the drafts proposed modifications in Civil and Procedural Codes that gave more transparency and an actual legal framework to sublets: they established a maximum level of profit for subleasers, they forced the latter to clearly state names of owners and original rent price in the sublet receipts, and they protected subtenants during evictions.

The drafts on column B, which did not involve changes in the Code, were mainly those related to price ceilings. The method to fix maximum prices was one of the disagreements between Bas and the rest of the Committee. Bas defended the same method of the authors of the May bills: the definition of a maximum percentage of profit for the owner, in relation to the actual value of the property. For him, the limitation of profit was, like that of the use of property, a general principle of the social economy that could be applied in any economic realm in which

---

50 CD, 29 July 1920, 677-8.
51 CD, 29 July 1920, 684. Bas made long explanations of modern theories of the social function of property, like that of French reformer Alfred Fouillée, which left behind the obsolete, “absolute” conception of private property of the Civil Code, according to which the owner could lawfully “degrade and destroy the thing.” Even better, Bas explained that the Code itself in many cases regulated property in order to make it compatible with the collective interest (rights of way, maximum length of rent leases).
the “usury system” predominated.52 The majority of the Committee, in turn, preferred the
definition of a fixed price ceiling, which was the price that any rented property had on 1st January
1920. Through this method, the Committee majority wanted to put price control within the realm of temporary/emergency measures, rather than fixing permanent limitations to profit (as it was in the case of percentages).53 Through the choice of early January as the reference point, the Committee majority also wanted to erase the negative effect that the rent debate had had on prices: it was not an arbitrary point in time, but rather a point prior to the emergence of the movement of opinion and the parliamentary projects around rent. To fix prices prior to that point was a fair way of recovering them to a level dictated by the market and not by speculation upon the prospect of a rent law. It was also the type of price control that European nations such as France, Belgium or Italy had used to face the housing emergency generated by the war.54

Beyond the specifics, the most important innovation that the Committee drafts offered in relation to the May bills was the above-mentioned division of the legislation package between the measures that involved the modification of articles of the Civil Code and those that did not. This move, far from being an obscure technicality, was the expression of a conceptual innovation developed by the Committee throughout the debate and elaboration of the drafts. By dividing the legislative package between the temporary measures and the reforms of the Civil Code, the Committee transformed the legislative initiative from an emergency set of cost-of-living policies into a permanent modification of the norms that regulated civil life, fundamentally changing the relations between tenants and landlords from then onwards. The crisis was thus the opportunity

52 Bas linked these measures with the need of a more general attack on intermediaries and trusts, and suggested the revolutionary 1917 Mexican constitution as an example to follow. Id., 681-688.
53 De Tomaso considered that any explicit limitation of profit would look extremely unfriendly to anyone interested in investing in housing construction. CD, 3 August 1920, 727.
54 Id., 734.
for an ambitious reform. As Deputy De Tomaso put it, the drafts intended to “see tenants not in their occasional situation as evicted, but in their permanent and normal situation as tenants.”

*The discussion of the drafts and the role of socialism*

This transformation of the meaning of the legislative endeavor unfolded with even more clarity during the debate of the drafts in the Chamber. In spite the initial skepticism that many socialists had on the adequacy of rent legislation and of their small numerical weight in the Chamber, the socialist bloc would end up being the political force that most contributed to that transformation.

The Committee of Legislation had proposed, as we have seen, the division of the rent bills in two halves. Socialist deputy and Committee member Antonio de Tomaso was the most outspoken defender of this division, and the one who saw that its importance resided in the differentiation between short-term emergency regulation and long-term lease reforms. The reform of the Civil Code, he would agree with Bas, was a necessary response to the change in social relations; and it was not at all revolutionary or “dangerous,” as was proven by the fact that the conservative German Civil Code implemented the same type of reform.

The individualization of landlord-tenant relations as a realm of social policy was indeed a socialist contribution to the rent debate. Already in 1913 Socialists had presented a bill to the chamber in which they proposed the fixation of two years as the minimum duration of urban rent leases. In August 1920, socialist deputy Enrique Dickmann would highlight the fact that the main aim of the new laws was to establish “new and necessary juridical relations.” The landlord-tenant relationship, claimed socialist leader Juan B. Justo, was in itself a social issue worthy of

---

55 Id., 737.
56 Id., 736.
57 See the 1913 socialist bill in CD, 1913, Vol II, 967.
specific legislation: it was “a daily, permanent relation, in which we all are, and which has to be regulated in a more humane way.”

The defense of the social specificity of the rent bills was also a dialectic tool of the parliamentary struggle. Socialists not only upheld that specificity in contrast, as we have seen, with the emergency measures, but also in contrast with the prevalent trope of the importance of the construction encouragement. Arturo Bas, committee member and proponent of the minority draft, had based his dissidence, on one hand, on the method of price limitation, but also on the need to include the encouragement of construction as an essential axis of the legislative package. Likewise, opponents to the laws suggested that, besides certain emergency measures concerning ongoing evictions, the only “long-term” legislation needed was that of encouragement of construction, and they would propose alternative projects that suited those ideas.

Socialists argued directly against that. Even if it had been a historical position of socialism to strive for the encouragement of construction through all means (we need only remember the creation of the socialist housing cooperative in 1905 or the position of socialists in 1915 vis-à-vis the CNCB project), De Tomaso and the rest of the bloc considered that what was at stake during the ongoing debate was not the issue of how to promote construction, but rather the reformulation of landlord-tenant relations in the long term. The debate was precisely the opportunity to emancipate the legal regulation of rent relations from the promotion of housing. As socialist deputy Enrique Dickmann put it, “with these measures we will not make houses cheaper, neither will we increase their amount and quality.” De Tomaso, in consequence, pushed as much as possible against including the construction-encouragement measures in the

---

58 CD, 16 June 1920, 772.
59 See for example Julián Maidana’s intervention in CD, 4 August, 720ss.
60 CD, 5 August 1920, 847.
package. He was probably behind the exclusion of them from the majority draft, and he would suggest later on that they were not part of the topics to be debated.61

As the discussion of the Committee was reaching its second and third day in early August, prospects were starting to look gloomy for proponents of the laws. The public opinion was divided, with big newspapers like *La prensa* and *La nación* showing strong opposition to a set of norms that they saw as “improvised” and opportunistic, and others like tabloid *Crítica* and socialist *La vanguardia* considering them of vital importance. The balance in the Chamber was also difficult to predict, not only because conservatives and PDP deputies were opposed to the laws, but mainly because of the indecision and divisions among Radicals.

The PDP and conservatives tended to develop a unified position on the rent laws, based on two arguments. One was the economic argument that the laws would be inefficient or even counterproductive in the attempt to curb rent prices, due to the worsening of conditions for capital investment in construction. Echoing words that we have already seen in the preceding chapter, conservative deputy Matías Sánchez Sorondo explained the risks involved by any type of rent regulation, as it could affect investment in construction: “Rent is high nowadays because there are few houses and demand is big. If we dictate laws that tend to restrict construction, we will keep this situation unchanged, if not aggravated…”62

61 Mora y Araujo, as president of the Committee, had explained that the effect of an increase in construction would take long, while what the moment demanded was an urgent “lenitive, even if it were transitory.” Moreover, there were already three bills on encouragement of construction under discussion in the Budget Committee. CD, 29 July 1920, 681.
62 CD, 16 June 1920, 768. Sánchez Sorondo (1880-1959) was one of the most important conservative politicians of his generation. Deputy for the Province of Buenos Aires from 1918 to 1926, in the early 1930s he was Minister of Interior during the military government of José F. Uriburu, Senator, and a committed adherent of fascism.
The second argument against the laws was juridical, and was centered on the defense of private property. As Julián Maidana (PDP deputy from Córdoba) put it, the imposition of a compulsory minimum duration for leases destroyed “a basic principle of our civil legislation [...] the free consent that must exist between the contracting parties.”\textsuperscript{63} The measures to impose price ceilings were for Maidana equally disruptive of the juridical framework established by the Constitution and the Civil Code, in that they violated the principle of private property. This was something also emphasized by Sánchez Sorondo, for whom these initiatives were “serious and fundamental blow to rights consecrated by the national constitution,” “a dangerous path” that could end up, in Russian manner, abolishing property rights \textit{in toto}, expropriating all houses and giving them away for free.\textsuperscript{64}

Opposition to the bill was not always wholesale. Some deputies, like PDP José H. Martínez, accepted the modifications to the Civil Code but rejected price ceilings, while others, like Radical Herminio Quirós, adopted the inverted position. In some cases, like for Maidana or Quirós themselves, it was also important to offer alternative bills that could safeguard property rights but, at the same time, take a constructive stance towards a concern that had become extremely widespread. Thus, they proposed bills that stipulated the suspension of ongoing evictions, or contained certain provisions to promote construction, without any long-term legal changes in the rent regime.\textsuperscript{65}

Besides these oppositional voices and alternative projects, the fact was that the biggest obstacle to the drafts was the awkward position of Radicals. On one hand, some Radical deputies were in favor and others against the Committee drafts. On the other, the Executive Power, in

\textsuperscript{63} CD, 3 August 1920, 721.
\textsuperscript{64} CD, 16 June 1920, 767.
\textsuperscript{65} For a compilation of all the bills proposed during the 1920-21 debate, see \textit{Revista de Economía Argentina}, Nos. 23-24, May-June 1920, 422-484.
spite of having supported the initial bills, was now quite evidently weary of the Committee
drafts, which he manifested through certain conspicuous ambivalences. When the Minister of
Finance visited the Chamber on 4th August, he limited his intervention to say that the Executive
followed the debate with interest, but was still elaborating a project of its own, which it would
then send to the chamber for consideration.66 That same day, ultra-Yrigoyenist deputy Delfor del
Valle proposed that the drafts returned to the Committee for reconsideration, something that
generated the outrage of the supporters of the drafts.67

The actual position of the government, although not officially stated, was revealed by the
Yrigoyenist newspaper La época. A mid-August article made an extremely negative balance of
the drafts, arguing that the general perspective chosen by legislators to tackle the problem was
mistaken. They did not aim, the article stated, at the “causa fundamental” of the problem, the
lack of houses, and instead they elaborated “a maelstrom of legislation to modify civil law,”
which was a “total lack of practical sense.” The solution proposed by the newspaper was
strikingly similar to that proposed by conservatives: to simplify the reform, limiting it to
“increase construction and guarantee tenants against legal abuses,” not really specifying how.68
According to La Vanguardia and other newspapers, the Executive’s project that the Finance
Minister had promised to the Chamber consisted of a restriction of rent as a percentage of the
price of properties, like in the initial rent bills,69 and was to be complemented by the mass
production of bricks that the Ministry of Public Works was carrying out.70 It was with the

---

66 CD, 4 August 1920, 798-9.
67 Id., 782ss.
68 “La cuestión de alquileres.” La época, 10 August 1920, 1.
70 “El problema de los alquileres,” Santa Fe, 10 August 1920, 1.
71 CD, 4 August, 782, 799.
purpose of pushing for these initiatives that deputy Del Valle wanted the drafts to return to the Committee.

By the end of the second day of debate, Del Valle’s proposal and the conservative opposition to the Committee drafts were putting the whole initiative at risk. A group of Radicals and the socialist bloc were in a defensive position. Early the next day, August 5th, De Tomaso took a leading role in this defense, proposing a new classification and ordering of the topics under discussion that divided them in three: a first bill draft would be the one with the modifications of the Civil Code concerning contracts, a second one would have the procedural reforms on evictions, and the third one the price-ceiling stipulation. After Arturo Bas’s insistence, De Tomaso added a fourth bill draft, on encouragement of construction (exemption of import duties for construction materials). This division helped highlight the difference between permanent and emergency measures, between civil and procedural law, as well as between interventions aiming at the protection of tenants and those aiming at the improvement of construction. While the bills still constituted a whole, the division could help win some votes from deputies that agreed to them only partially.

This division of the topics was for socialists not only a way of pushing for approval of the law. It was also a response to their own need to face the critical conjuncture without being inconsistent with past positions. We have seen already the tensions that existed in the socialist stance towards rent regulation: on one hand, they had been the first to propose, in 1913, a reform of the rent lease that made a minimum time frame mandatory. On the other, however, they saw

---

71 Cd., 5 August, 836.
72 Id., 842-3.
price control with extreme skepticism, as La Vanguardia’s 1919 and early 1920 articles revealed. In order to articulate these positions, socialists would embrace the whole rent initiative, but clearly differentiating between the strictly temporary measures (price control), the necessary long-term reforms in landlord-tenant relations (modifications of the Civil Code), and encouragement of housing. The novelty of this situation for socialism was clearly visible already in early July, as the party organized a big meeting in a centrally located theater to explain to their followers the attitudes socialists should take in relation to the topic—the unexpected turn of the party made such explanations very necessary.73

The socialist strategy towards the Chamber was successful. Through the division of the bills, it made it possible to take advantage of the fragmentation of Radicalism and of the other political forces, and to seep from them the necessary positive votes. On 19th August 1920 the chamber approved the first three drafts in general, while the fourth draft, on the encouragement of construction, was not treated. (SEE APPENDIX A) Following the sidings of the legislators in the only voting instance that was recorded, Table 3 displays the position of the parliamentary sectors towards the projects. The figures confirm the lack of discipline of Radicalism, as well as of the second majority group, the oppositional PDP, in stark contrast with the monolithic unity of socialism. Among Radicals, more than one third of the deputies (18, eight of them from the same district, the Province of Buenos Aires)74 voted against the projects. More than half of PDP

73 “Contra la carestía de la vida.” LV, 4 July 1920.
74 The division of the Radical voting in the Province was undoubtedly reflecting the conflict between of governor José Camilo Crotto and president Yrigoyen, which divided bonaerense Radicalism until the resignation of the former in 1921. See Carlos Giacobone and Edith Gallo, Radicalismo bonaerense. 1891-1931 (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1999).
deputies, in turn, voted in favor of the projects, in spite of the outspoken resistance to the laws by its most eloquent speaker in the chamber, Córdoba deputy Julián Maidana.75

Table 3. Votes of Deputies on Article 1.b of Draft 1, on the mandatory nature of minimum time frames for leases. Votes classified per party, with detail, when relevant, of main provincial blocs behind each position.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Pro</th>
<th>Against</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>UCR</strong></td>
<td>49*</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>18*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CF:</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBA:</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Fe:</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Córdoba:</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CF:</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others:</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PDP</strong></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Fe:</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Córdoba:</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entre Ríos:</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Luis:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conservatives</strong></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salta:</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Juan:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBA:</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others:</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PS</strong></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>82</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Includes Dep Manuel Gallardo (Unión Democrática, Santiago del Estero).
** Includes Partido Conservador (PBA), Concentración Cívica (San Juan), Unión Democrática (Santiago del Estero), Partido Liberal de Corrientes, and Deputies Macedonio Aranda, Moisés J. Oliva, Agustín Usandivaras (Salta), Domingo Cortínez (San Juan) and León Rougés (Tucumán).
Source: CD, 19 August 1920, 366-367.
Notes: CF: Capital Federal; PBA: Province of Buenos Aires.

After approval of the drafts in general, the article-by-article voting only modified the second draft, on procedural aspects of evictions, removing two of its articles (SEE APPENDIX A), which made the project very narrow in the end. It was limited to the protection of subtenants during evictions: they had to be informed of ongoing eviction trials 48 hours after the process had begun, and in case of eviction the window period to vacate the property had to be calculated counting from the day of their being notified of the juridical resolution.

Through the approval of these three rent bills in mid-August 1920, Deputies had pushed, after much effort, the rent debate forwards. A forceful socialist bloc and a fragmented

75 The fact that almost all the PDP legislators opposing the projects were from that province was undoubtedly a consequence of his leadership.
Radicalism, the majority of which had nonetheless voted in favor of the laws, had taken the blurred approach of the early rent bills to a clearly differentiated legislative package, in which price regulation and a permanent reform of the Civil Code appeared as two separate yet complementary issues.

IV. From Deputies to Senate. The battle for opinion

The approval of the bills by the Deputies took the debate on rent legislation out of the abstract realm of potentiality, turning it into an actual policy initiative, with which civil society would have to deal thereafter. We will now depart from Congress and return to the public sphere, to see how, once the prospect of a new law was firm, the public debate on rents became even more animated than before.

The main newspapers of the city followed the parliamentary discussions eagerly. We have seen that *La prensa* had used its dominant position in the public sphere to launch a “rent campaign” in early 1920. The April rent-legislation bills and their approval by the lower House in August, however, were not fully welcome on its pages. Between June and August, several articles thematized the rent issue within a critical strand, voicing concerns about the modifications of the Civil Code and the negative economic consequences the legislation could have. The bills were undoubtedly too radical for the taste of this conservative publication, which argued that, rather than rent control, what the situation required was a more thorough and multifaceted intervention that protected the interests of the construction industry.\(^76\)

---

\(^76\) See “Los proyectos sobre alquileres,” *La prensa* (hereafter LP), 27 June 1920. “La carestía de la habitación,” LP, 28 June 1920. According to a mid-August article, the bills were purely “electoralist,” in that they aimed to reach a fast and conspicuous solution without getting to the root of the problem. “Congreso de la habitación,” LP, 19 August 1920, 6.
The use of the voice of public intellectuals by La prensa constitutes a suggestive example of this change of perspective. While in January the newspaper had published an article by lawyer and economist Enrique Ruiz Guiñazú that was a call towards the protection of tenants and the reform of the Civil Code (see Ch. 3), now, in contrast, it gave voice to prestigious legal specialists that elaborated on the need of preserving the Code, the Constitution, and traditional notions of private property. They also warned, taking due note of the increasing activity of tenants and landlords’ pressure groups, on the juridical hassle likely to emerge if the laws were sanctioned. According to Alejandro Bunge, prominent engineer and statistician that the newspaper invited in early July for a conference on the rent problem, the bills that Radical legislators had just presented to the Chamber were “repressive” measures, “more or less antieconomic and unconstitutional [that] will have little effect against the natural and inevitable facts”, and were likely to have a totally counterproductive effect. In this conference, which became widely publicized in all the important newspapers of the city, he found the cause of high rents in the several inefficiencies of the construction industry, which ranged from building techniques to municipal codes.

While La prensa developed this critical standpoint, La vanguardia, in an interesting reversal of roles, went through the opposite trajectory, following, as we have explained, the positions of socialist deputies in the House. In early July 1920, as said, socialist leaders made

---

77 See for example the interview with lawyer Eduardo Prayones, “¿Es inconstitucional la ley de alquileres?, La nación (hereafter LN), 28 September 1921, 7-8. This was a type of analysis that would become even more frequent by the end of 1921, after the laws were passed. See for example J. A. González Calderón, “Inconstitucionalidad de las leyes sobre alquileres,” LP, 22 September 1921, 6.

78 Bunge, “La carestía de la vivienda,” Revista de Economía Argentina, no. 23-24, May-June 1920, 405-6. Alejandro Bunge (1880-1943) was the most important economist of his generation, and one of the founders of economic statistics in Argentina. Descendant of a wealthy family of German merchants, he was trained as an engineer in Argentina and Germany, where he also studied economics and statistics. He developed an important career as public official and as director of the specialized journal Revista de Economía Argentina. I will return to his figure in the following chapter.
explicit the official position of their party, going from the initial hesitations to a firm support of the rent bills. Almost immediately thereafter, the newspaper became one of its most committed advocates. The authors of its articles would not spare slashing criticism against landlords’ organizations, against the government and the Senate, and against the dominant press, stressing the role of socialism in the struggle for the laws and supporting tenant mobilization.

Together with *La vanguardia*, it was *Crítica*, a relatively new and ferociously anti-Yrigoyenist newspaper that was about to become the king of the afternoon popular press, the one that launched the most important campaign pushing for fast treatment and approval of the laws. Already in April 1920 this tabloid started devoting space to the problem of rents and to the need of prompt state action to solve the problem, taking advantage of the movement of opinion that had started at the beginning of that year. *Crítica*’s treatment of the subject unfolded in the characteristic journalistic style that the newspaper was constructing during that period. It advocated for the tenants’ cause with a mix of partisanship, humor and paternalism, and it used the rent problem as a tool to attack inefficacy and corruption of the Radical regime. Thus, it decried the “abuses” of landlords against helpless tenants, it summoned “tenants!” to ANI’s demonstrations in defense of their dignity, and it blamed government (particularly Mayor Cantilo) for its inaction. Satirical pieces showed tenants thanking landlords for raising rents so little, a decree establishing the construction of caves in public squares for families to rent, or a tenant or janitor explaining to a by-passer that the owner could not “lower” (the rent price of) a basement any deeper. (SEE FIGURE 2)

Figure 2. The rise of rents. A high rent for a low basement.

---

79 See LV, 3 July 1920.
80 See for example “Una bolsa de propietarios. ¿Otro trust?,” *La vanguardia*, 29 August 1920.
Legend:
"—What’s the price of the basement?
—A hundred pesos per month.
—But, my friend, that is too high for a basement!
—Oh well, the landlord says he can’t lower it any deeper.”

Source: Crítica, 9 March 1920, 4.

This increasingly polarized public sphere was the background upon which, between July and September 1920, Congress discussed the rent laws. Newspapers were not the only actors animating that public sphere. During the whole period, and particularly in August, as the Deputies debated the projects in several sessions, the tenants’ association (ANI) increased its activities, pressuring for the approval of its own version of the rent laws. On August 1st, ANI organized a demonstration stating its exigencies. The Association had coached its members during July, in preparation for the meeting, and declared itself “in permanent session” during the week prior to the event. On D-day, tenants met in different points of the city, in which there were acts with specially designated speakers, and then marched in columns all the way to the Congress, in front of which ANI leaders spoke in front of the crowd and deposited a “memorial” and a law bill on the rent problem. ANI’s petition stated that “The tenants of Buenos Aires,

---

82 “Asociación Nacional de Inquilinos,” LV, 2 July 1920, 6.
gathered in the Congress square […], manifest their decision of collectively stop paying rents from 30 August on, until the following conditions are met: the demanded low in rents; the abolition of deposits and guarantees; payment per due date; suppression of intermediaries; unaltered dates in receipts,” etc.\(^8^3\) In spite of the bad weather, the meeting, according to all sources, was orderly and well attended, with big presence of women and children. By the end of the meeting, the police tried to hurry the dispersion of the demonstrators. Some incidents followed, as a result of which a man was seriously injured in his head by a “police machete.”\(^8^4\)

Tenant mobilization was also a field of dispute. While the early August demonstration had been autonomously summoned by ANI, in early September the Socialist Party organized a big gathering against the “carestía de la vida.” (SEE FIGURE 3) This demonstration had a clearly partisan spirit: the speeches pronounced by socialist leaders on the occasion were critical of the government campaign on the issue and pressured the Senate for fast treatment and approval of the rent laws and for the sugar-expropriation law (which showed an interesting field of overlapping political actions between socialism and Yrigoyenism). Heading the demonstration was a truck that had two big banners, one depicting “the sugar trust stabbing the people on the back,” and the other one “a mother, surrounded by her children, cynically rejected by a landlord simply for having kids.” La vanguardia as well as La prensa emphasized the partisanship of the demonstration, detailing the presence of red banners everywhere and of columns of the different party “centros” (SEE FIGURE 4), and that the crowd, accompanied by bands of musicians,

\(^8^3\) “Asociación Nacional de Inquilinos. Contra la carestía de los alquileres,” LV, 23 July 1920, 6.
\(^8^4\) “La carestía de los alquileres. Mitín de protesta,” LV, 2 August 1920 2; “Campaña contra los altos precios de alquileres. El mitín de ayer,” Crítica, 2 August 1920, 2; “Contra el encarecimiento de los alquileres. Éxito de la manifestación de esta tarde,” La época, 1 August 1920, 2.
marched singing the Marseillaise and the Internationale, as well as shouting “hurrahs to the Socialist Party, to the general strike, to Russia, to the revolution, to the people…”

Figure 3: Demonstration “for cheap rents and sugar,” 5th September 1920. The crowd on Rivadavia Av., seen from the headquarters of the Socialist Party.

Figure 4: Socialist columns marching.

Source: La vanguardia, 6 September 1920, 1.

85 “Por los alquileres y el azúcar baratos. La hermosa demostración de ayer,” LV, 6 September 1920, 1-2; “Partido socialista. La manifestación de ayer,” LP, 6 September 1920, 8.
The identification of the rent bills with socialist party interests, which these
demonstrations aimed to buttress, did not remain unchallenged. While Crítica (as anti-socialist as
it was anti-Yrigoyenist) simply ignored the September demonstration, La época accused
socialists of appropriating a legislative initiative that was “projected by the government and the
Radical deputies’ bloc,” and which was to be decisively supported by Radical senators.86
Interestingly enough, this prophecy of the Yrigoyenist newspaper was far off-target, as we will
soon see.

As tenants occupied the streets to push for their demands and Radicals and socialists
struggled over the rent laws’ political color, landlords were speeding up their own corporate
organizations, prompted by the now likelier prospect of an adverse legislative outcome. Their
first talks began in late August.87 After some preparatory meetings in the weeks following the
Deputies’ approval, a group of “owners, delegates of banking institutions, and property
administrators” established contact and defined a strategy and leadership.88 They sent a note to
the Senate in late September in which they denied the alleged rent emergency and accused the
legislative projects of being against the Civil Code and the Constitution, as well as of damaging
the construction industry. The main complaints were against the rent-control project, stressing
the low level of profit that landed property yielded to investment.89 In November 1920 a group of
750 landlords founded the Asociación de Propietarios de Bienes Raíces (APBR), with the

86 “Andamos arando,” La época, 24 August 1920, 1.
87 The presentation of the original rent bills had already spurred landlords, and particularly owners and
administrators of tenements, to join in May 1920 in a common organization, called Corporación de Propietarios y
Arrendatarios de la Capital (CPAC, Corporation of Owners and Renters of the Federal Capital, later on called
Corporación de Propietarios y Locadores de la Capital). LP, 18 May 1920, 11. This corporation did not leave many
traces, and its existence seems to have been intermittent.
88 “El abaratamiento de los alquileres. Asamblea de propietarios,” LP, 24 August 1920, 11. “La ley de alquileres,
intention of making it a permanent agency of defense. During those months, this association chose direct pressure upon the Senate as its main method of action, while later on (June 1921) it would edit its own journal.

V. The Senate: Debate and Approval

It was in this febrile social atmosphere that in early September 1920 the Senate received the drafts approved by the Chamber of Deputies. The high chamber assigned them to the Comisión de Códigos (Codes Committee) for its analysis. The Committee studied them, “summoning all interested parties,” so that they could express their opinions. Delegates from landlords’ corporations answered the call, stating their objections. The Committee could not reach an agreement hastily, and during the 1920-2 summer there was still no resolution.

Once the Committee met in late March, its members, much like their counterparts in the Legislation Committee of the lower house eight months before, could agree on almost nothing. This was hardly surprising, considering that the commission was composed of a socialist (Enrique del Valle Iberlucea, Federal District), a prominent member of the reformist section of the conservative elite (Joaquín V. González, PDP, La Rioja), and a conservative (Pedro A. Garro, San Juan). After much discussion, Del Valle Iberlucea and González managed to issue a joint

---

90 See the founding members in El bien raíz, No. 1, 6 June 1921, 27ss. For a short account of the creation of the APBR, see the discourse by its president César Adrogué in El bien raíz, No. 5, November 1921, 6ss.
91 See this account in Diario de Sesiones de la Cámara de Senadores (hereafter CS), 21 April 1921, 64-5.
92 They stated that the projects “eran inconvenientes e ineficaces, que no iban a resolver el problema de la carestía de la vivienda y que eran, en una palabra, contrarios a disposiciones terminantes de la Constitución Nacional.” CS, 21 April 1921, 65.
93 “Los alquileres. La Comisión de Códigos del Senado se reunió ayer,” LV, 05 September 1920, 4.
“Los alquileres y la Comisión de Códigos,” LV, 22 September 1920, 2. “Renuncia,” LV, 26 September 1920, 4. In February and March 1921 the Committee failed to meet, due to repeated absences of two of its members. See LP, 20 February, 22 February, 6 March, 4 April.
majority draft recommending the legislation projects for approval, while Garro signed one of his own, rejecting them.94

The atmosphere of the April sessions was tense. Conservatives dominated the Senate, and had managed to postpone the debate of the laws as much as possible. Yet there was rumor that, under the high pressure of the public debate on the topic, many senators (including even some conservatives) wanted to give the bills a favorable vote.95 As long as the scenario was open, there was room for intense activism from all pressure groups.96

The debate of the Committee drafts, despite its intensity, showed a generalized opposition in the Senate to the legislation initiative, with socialist Del Valle Iberlucea as lonely defender of the bills—a task he would perform in spirited fashion.97 While that was a rather unsurprising fact, given the composition of a conservative-dominated chamber,98 it was not the conservatives’ stance what made the opposition so overwhelming, but rather the attitude of Radical senators. If in the Chamber of Deputies the main advocates of the projects tended to be of Radical or socialist allegiance, in the Senate six out of ten Radicals ended up voting against the Deputies’

94 The role of González in this conjuncture was essential. Given the known positions of socialist Del Valle Iberlucea and conservative Garro on the topic, it was up to him to break the deadlock. Joaquín V. González (1863-1923) was one of the most important politicians of the reformist group within the conservative elite. Widely respected as a writer and intellectual, he was an expert in constitutional law, and had also been long invested in social issues, as he proved most conspicuously with the drafting of a frustrated National Labor Code in 1904, during his tenure as Minister of Interior. This double expertise made him an authoritative figure in the two realms most directly affected by the rent bills. On González, see Darío Roldán, Joaquín V. González, a propósito del pensamiento político-liberal (1880-1920) (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1993).
95 See “Legislación sobre alquileres,” LP, 4 April 1921, 8.
96 On 25 January 1921, APBR sent a second letter to the Senate, asking for rejection of the law (see El bien raíz, No. 1, 19 and LV, 26 January 1921, 1, and 24 March 1921, 1). Tenants, in turn, would also continue pressuring for fast approval. In late January a “grupo numeroso de damas” sent a letter signed “por numerosos inquilinos y algunos propiet.” LP, 30 January 1921, 13. The Senate would continue receiving this kind of notes during the following months. See LP, 25 January 1921, 6.
97 See the long and articulate speech through which Del Valle Iberlucea defended the rent bills in CS 21st Apr 1921, which newspapers and scholarly publications reproduced during those months.
bills. (SEE APPENDIX B) All of them were future antipersonalistas, which suggests that by this point the bills were generally (and mistakenly) seen as an Yrigoyenist initiative. What remains definitely surprising is the fact that none of the four pro-bills Radical senators (two of them close to president Yrigoyen) made any kind of intervention in order to defend them. It seems, once again, that Yrigoyenism was weary of an adverse result (it had already taken enough risks with the sugar and wheat campaigns) and preferred to take a wait-and-see attitude. It was willing to accompany the bills, but not to take a leading position.

Meanwhile, it was Leopoldo Melo, prominent leader of the emerging antipersonalista Radical faction, who spearheaded the attack against the Deputies’ bills and proposed a group of alternative, rather conservative projects that should replace them. As he expressed in the subsequent discussion, there was indeed a situation of emergency, but the only acceptable way of dealing with it was through solutions that did not affect the permanent juridical framework of society, i.e. the Civil Code and the principle of private property enshrined by the Constitution. Melo’s bills, therefore, limited regulations as much as possible, shrinking them to the protection of subtenants through some of the methods from the previous bills, the vague prohibition of any “act, combination or agreement in order to condition or force the increase of rent prices above the level determined by the natural and free convergence of supply and demand,”99 and a mild emergency measure, that extended up to mid-1922 the existing contracts of rents below 300 pesos. (SEE TABLE 4)

99 CS, 21 April 1921, 84. Creating the crime category of “illicit speculation,” the project was based on a French law of 1919. The evident lack of precision of the article (who would evaluate that a high price was the consequence of such a crime?) had been already criticized by French courts themselves. See LP, 23 April 1921, 9.
Table 4: Leopoldo Melo’s bills, approved by Senate on 23 April 1921.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Price Control</th>
<th>Minimum Lease Term</th>
<th>Maximum Eviction Term</th>
<th>Temporary Measures (except Price)</th>
<th>Special Regulations for Tenements</th>
<th>Subtenant Protection</th>
<th>Encouragement of Construction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project 1</td>
<td>declaration against deals to increase rents artificially</td>
<td></td>
<td>publicity of rent prices</td>
<td>original name and price in receipts - 20% max sublet profit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>extension of rent contracts until 31 Jul 1922</td>
<td></td>
<td>subtenants informed of ongoing eviction processes - eviction term counted after subtenants are informed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project 3. Law on evictions*</td>
<td></td>
<td>suspension of ongoing eviction processes (Melo’s addendum to CD’s 2nd project)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CS, 21 April 1921, 83-85.
Note: * Received and approved by the Chamber of Deputies as Law 11.122 in May 1920.

It can be seen that the Senate, in spite of being predominantly opposed to the Deputies’ bills, did not openly reject them. Melo’s projects and the Senate’s decision to embrace them as potential alternatives reflect the hesitations of certain senators concerning the political convenience of simply rejecting the Deputies’ initiative without offering anything in exchange. As a conservative senator observed, it would harm the Senate’s reputation to be regarded by “public judgement” (el juicio público) as dismissive of a topic with so much repercussion.\(^{100}\)

The Senate voted by the end of the 23 April session. It rejected the Deputies’ bills of modification of the Civil Code and of rent control, and approved, as a replacement, Melo’s first and second projects.\(^{101}\) The only original bill that was accepted by the Senate was the one on protection of subtenants during eviction processes, with an addendum of provisional suspension of evictions, taken from the deputies’ rent-control bill. This was thus a rather hybrid project,

---

\(^{100}\) Julio A. Roca (h.), on 23 April 1921. CS, 23 April 1921, 98.
\(^{101}\) Id., 102-104.
which contained both permanent and provisional measures.\footnote{Further proof of the incoherence would be that, later that year, the suspension of ongoing eviction trials would be sanctioned for a second time as article 2 of the law 11.157 (see below).} In spite of these inconsistencies, the addition of this article to the approved bill was undoubtedly welcome by all groups, since it effectively addressed the emergency situation of many tenants. It would become law 11.122 once Deputies ratified it later that month.

This law shows the pervasiveness of the anti-intermediary ideology in the politics of the time. It was indeed no coincidence that the only measure hastily approved by both chambers was one protecting subtenants and attacking subleasers. The latter were depicted in the press of the time as exploitative and parasitical economic actors, who profited from their intermediary position without contributing to society at all, the same way intermediaries in commercial transactions were seen as the cause behind the generalized increases in the cost of living. The conjuncture suggests that urban landlords managed to benefit from this cultural construction, and, in contrast, picture themselves as comparable to the virtuous and vulnerable small rural producer. It is in this register that we can appreciate, throughout the debate, the frequency of different pleas for the “pequeño propietario” (small [urban] owner) and the importance of her rights. While landlords had been to a certain extent able to organize their demands corporately, held real social power, had access to the dominant press, and their interests were explicitly defended with Lockean language by many deputies and senators,\footnote{Senator Carlos Zabala (conservative from Jujuy), for example, defended landlords, saying that the majority of the owners were honest and contributed to the welfare of society, while the problem were meddling speculators; he therefore supported Melo’s projects. See CS, 23 April 1921, 96ss. His opinions are supported by other conservative senators like Manuel I. Esteves (Tucumán), as well as by Radical Luis Linares (Salta).} intermediaries lacked all this: they had no way of becoming a corporate actor, or of making their activity appear as a socially legitimate one. An easy target, the most diverse ideological sectors could coalesce against them.
The approval of Melo’s projects by the Senate in April 1921 added yet some chapters to the story of these laws. By late April the Chamber of Deputies received the bill drafts from the Senate. After approving Law 11.122, the other two bills were sent to the Comisión de Negocios Constitucionales (Constitutional Issues Committee). This Committee had to elucidate a procedural problem: since the Chamber of Deputies had sent its bills to the Senate, but the latter had proposed different bills in exchange (Melo’s bills), there was a disagreement among both bodies concerning which one held the status of “initiating chamber” of the law package. This status mattered, because it provided the initiating chamber the constitutional privilege of insisting upon the original formulation of the project, putting the other chamber in the position of either accepting the original formulation or directly vetoing the whole legislation initiative.\footnote{See “Última sesión del período extraordinario,” LP, 30 April 1921, 6; and CD, 9 June 1921, 472ss. Upon insistence from the initiating chamber, article 71 of the Constitution required that the other chamber (the “cámara revisora”) voted against the original project by two thirds (rather than by simple majority) in order to fully reject it. See article 71 of the 1853 Constitution.}

This technicality was, as conservative Senators would soon point out, a legislative strategy to give leverage to the Deputies’ project in an adverse parliamentary landscape.\footnote{Pedro Garro dubbed it a “clever parliamentary maneuver.” CS, 15 September 1921, 441.}

The Committee conceded to the Chamber of Deputies the privilege, and the latter voted in June 1921 for the insistence on the original version of the bills. At this point, the political situation was clear: if the Senate rejected the insistence, it would definitely bury the whole legislative endeavor. With presidential elections approaching in the horizon (they were to be held in April 1922), Radicals needed to settle their differences as soon as possible, and could not afford to neglect a topic of such public presence. Even outspoken enemies of the rent laws like...
Leopoldo Melo and his ally Vicente Gallo, who were members of the Senate’s Committee, accepted the Deputies’ procedural claims, which was a way of helping the initiative to pass.

In September 1921, one year and four months after the first rent bills had entered parliament, senators finally approved them. The bills had now force of law. According to the first of these bills (now Law 11 156), rent contracts had a minimum duration of a year and a half (during which price could not be modified), evictions had to have a minimum 90-day notice, and subleasers could not charge more than 20% on top of the price of the original rent. According to the second one (now Law 11 157), all ongoing evictions due to lack of payment were suspended, and all rents had to be taken back to their January 1\textsuperscript{st} 1920 price. These laws, which finally translated the rent emergency into consistent and permanent measures of tenant protection, were, in the words of \textit{La vanguardia}, “a small revolution,” that “pushes conservative forces […] towards new legislative norms.”\textsuperscript{106}

\textbf{Conclusion}

We have followed along this chapter the twists and turns of the long parliamentary process that led to the issuing of the rent laws in September 1921. We have seen how, after an initial set of Radical proposals of rent regulation that were immersed in the war climate of cost-of-living policies, the involvement of the deputies of the Committee of Legislation and the debate in the Chamber of Deputies added to the emergency legislation a permanent reform of landlord-tenant relations. We can extract certain conclusions from this narrative, which help us better understand the complexities of housing policies in the early interwar period and the importance of the political conjunctur in order to explain their main features.

\textsuperscript{106} “La ley contra la voracidad de los propiearios,” LV, 17 September 1921, 1.
The first of them is a reassessment of the role of parliaments in the generation of these policies. The laws’ parliamentary trajectories showed that political competition and congressional debate left clear traces in the contents of the laws themselves. There was, in the very process of crafting of the laws, a space open for the participation of plural political forces, such as socialism or the different factions of Radicalism, all of which left an imprint on the laws’ final versions.

While this might be a somewhat obvious point (one of the grounds for democracies and division of power to exist), it is important for two reasons. On a general level, it has been absent from many discussions on the emergence of social policies, both on a global and a regional level. Traditional explanations of the emergence of such policies have framed them, as said, as “responses” to structural changes brought about in society by capitalism and modernization. In this case, rather, my aim has been to highlight the impact of political procedures on these policies’ concrete contents, as well as on their timing.

On a more specific level, in turn, the analysis of parliamentary debate has been absent from the treatment of Radical policies in Argentina during the interwar years. As said in the introduction, a generalized view of the first period of Radicalism as a “presidentialist” regime and the (subsequent) focus, concerning social policy, on the relation between government and labor tended to undermine close scrutiny of parliamentary struggle, usually considered a barren land of political skirmish and legislative paralysis. Quite on the contrary, I have shown here the important role of parliament in the generation of social policies, and how the weight of political conjunctures (such as the day-to-day evolution of bills in parliament) could change the original positions of actors towards a certain legislative piece.
A second important point that this chapter has suggested, concerns the importance of understanding the relation of mutual feedback between parliamentary procedure, policy making, and the public sphere. The public debate on rents spurred the beginning of a parliamentary one, and was also a permanent factor determining developments and outcomes. In turn, the beginning of debate in parliament generated expectations and tensions among social actors, all of which got expressed in the public sphere, where the debate on rents redoubled its intensity. This process of feedback, in combination with political timing (we have to remember here the cyclical rhythm of elections) and of the ability and strength of social actors (tenants and landlords), marked the parliamentary evolution of the rent bills and their transformation into policies.

Finally, it is also important to assess the significance of these laws within the broader history of housing in Argentina. Through these laws, legislators were tackling rented housing through one of its specificities, which detached it from other consumer goods. Housing, when rented, involved in itself a social relation, that between landlord and tenant, a relation that the 1921 laws regulated from a social perspective, something that had never been experimented in the country. The old policies of housing encouragement and direct construction (Chapter 2) promoted the acquisition of a self-owned house, based on the expectation that the physical and economic asset acquired by the working-class family would be a bulwark of their stability and of their moral life. Now, in contrast, the intent was different. On one hand, the new laws aimed to reach a way more extended public: it was not any more the moralization of the tenement dwellers or of the obrero what was at stake, but rather the modification of the living standards of the majority of the families in the middle and lower classes that lived in rented housing (in Justo’s words, rent was “a daily, permanent relation, in which we all are”). Second, the notion that these families’ “right to housing” was encountered with another right, the right of the owner to her
property, implied an acknowledgement of the fact that an essential part of social policies is to be able to regulate such situations of what we now call distributive conflict. Third, this legislation understood economic stability in much more complex terms than before. Rather than the provision of an asset that, by itself, was supposed to improve the economic and social situation of a family, this was a different type of intervention, in which the family was, so to speak, “monitored” by this law in a continuous way. The permanent nature of the relation between landlord and tenant required indeed an equally permanent legislation, which controlled the act, duration, and conditions of the rent contract throughout its entire duration.
APPENDIXES

A. Voting of projects in Chamber of Deputies, 19 August 1920.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Voting</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Approval rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pro</td>
<td>Against</td>
<td>Votes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project 1, modifications CC. In general</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article 1.a, exclusion of children</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article 1.b, duration of contracts. Introduction</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article 1.b, cont. sentence &quot;a pesar de cualquier declaración o convenio que lo limite.&quot;</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article 1.b, cont. Terms for residential and commercial uses: 1.5 and 2 years respectively</td>
<td>approved</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article 1.b, cont. Casas y piezas amuebladas.</td>
<td>approved</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article 1.b, concl. Reasons that allow for interruption of contract.</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article 1.b, Dep Ortiz's addendum to the latter.</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article 1.c, 90-day eviction term</td>
<td>43 or 42</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article 1.d, 20% max profit sublet, original price and name</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project 2, procedural measures in evictions. In general</td>
<td>approved</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article 1. limitation of juridical costs</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>rejected -29</td>
<td>ca -67.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article 2. inform subtenants within 48 hours of eviction process.</td>
<td>approved</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article 2 cont. Protection of subtenants' deposits</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>rejected -33</td>
<td>ca -70.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article 2 concl. Eviction lapse esteemed after subtenants informed</td>
<td>approved</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project 3, price control, suspension evictions. In general</td>
<td>approved</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article 1. price control</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>ca 58.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article 1. Bar's addenda. (Exempt some cases from price control).</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>rejected</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article 2. suspension of evictions</td>
<td>approved</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CD, 19 August 1920.
B. Senators’ positions towards the Chamber of Deputies’ rent bills in 1921.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Senator</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Province</th>
<th>21 April</th>
<th>23 April</th>
<th>15 September</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Saguier, Fernando</td>
<td>UCR</td>
<td>Buenos Aires</td>
<td>pro</td>
<td>against</td>
<td>pro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gallo, Vicente C.</td>
<td>UCR</td>
<td>Capital Federal</td>
<td>pro</td>
<td>against</td>
<td>against</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larlús, Pedro</td>
<td>UCR</td>
<td>Córdoba</td>
<td>pro</td>
<td>against</td>
<td>against</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soto, Pedro Numa</td>
<td>UCR</td>
<td>Corrientes</td>
<td>pro</td>
<td>against</td>
<td>against</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melo, Leopoldo</td>
<td>UCR</td>
<td>Entre Ríos</td>
<td>against</td>
<td>against</td>
<td>against</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torino, Martín</td>
<td>UCR</td>
<td>Entre Ríos</td>
<td>pro</td>
<td>pro</td>
<td>pro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luna, David</td>
<td>UCR</td>
<td>La Rioja</td>
<td>pro</td>
<td>pro</td>
<td>pro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linares, Luis</td>
<td>UCR</td>
<td>Salta</td>
<td>against</td>
<td>against</td>
<td>against</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caballero, Ricardo</td>
<td>UCR</td>
<td>Santa Fe</td>
<td>pro</td>
<td>pro</td>
<td>pro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aybar Augier, Alberto</td>
<td>UCR</td>
<td>Tucumán</td>
<td>pro</td>
<td>pro</td>
<td>pro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>García, Luis</td>
<td>Conservador</td>
<td>Buenos Aires</td>
<td>against</td>
<td>against</td>
<td>against</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roca (h.), Julio A.</td>
<td>Conservador</td>
<td>Córdoba</td>
<td>pro</td>
<td>pro</td>
<td>pro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vidal, Juan Ramón</td>
<td>Conservador</td>
<td>Corrientes</td>
<td>against</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villanueva, Benito</td>
<td>Conservador</td>
<td>Mendoza</td>
<td>pro</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albarracín, Martín</td>
<td>Conservador</td>
<td>San Juan</td>
<td>against</td>
<td>against</td>
<td>against</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedro A. Garro</td>
<td>Conservador</td>
<td>San Juan</td>
<td>against</td>
<td>against</td>
<td>against</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estévez, Manuel I.</td>
<td>Conservador</td>
<td>Tucumán</td>
<td>pro</td>
<td>against</td>
<td>against</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrón Costas, Robustiano</td>
<td>Demócrata Nacional</td>
<td>Salta</td>
<td>against</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iturbe, Octavio</td>
<td>PRI</td>
<td>Jujuy</td>
<td>against</td>
<td>against</td>
<td>against</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zabala, Carlos</td>
<td>PRI</td>
<td>Jujuy</td>
<td>against</td>
<td>against</td>
<td>against</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>González, Joaquín V.</td>
<td>PDP</td>
<td>La Rioja</td>
<td>pro</td>
<td>pro</td>
<td>pro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Del Valle Iberlucea, E.</td>
<td>PS</td>
<td>Capital Federal</td>
<td>pro</td>
<td>pro</td>
<td>---***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** TOTAL PRO: 11, 7, 8 **

** TOTAL AGAINST: 6, 12, 11 **

** PARTY TOTAL **

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UCR</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDP</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CS, 21 April 1921, 23 April 1921, 15 September 1921.

Notes: * In italics are the cases in which the party affiliation of the senator is not detailed in the historical record of the official Senate website, www.senado.gov.ar (accessed Feb. 2015).

** Explanation of the voting instances:

- 21 April 1921: during the initial stage of the debate, the Senate voted whether to postpone the debate of the laws until the Executive Power sent its own project. A vote for postponement was a vote “against” the rent laws.

- 23 April 1921: voting of the first project sent by the lower House, on modifications of the Civil Code.

- 15 September 1921: after the Senate had approved the projects in a modified, conservative version and sent that version to Chamber of Deputies for approval, the latter rejected the modifications and sent its projects back in their original version to the Senate for approval. The Senate had to decide whether to insist on its own version or accept the Deputies’. A vote for insistence was a vote “against” the rent law project. Three third of “against” votes were constitutionally required for the insistence to win.

*** Sen. Del Valle Iberlucea died on 30 August 1921.
Chapter 5
THE SOCIAL ECONOMY OF RENT. HOUSING MEETS THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

“So far, the problem of housing scarcity has only been laid out [...] in its most apparent features, namely in the need of restricting the rent price. [...] But, considering the case under a broad and extensive study that covers all its aspects, it will be necessary to dig deeper, affecting even the private property regime, as well as the system of land taxes…”

La prensa, August 1920.

The rent debate was also a war of ideas. Throughout the parliamentary and public-sphere discussions, a whole new set of discourses was mobilized in order to tackle different social issues affected by rent: social justice, private property, economic development, or even urban structure and tax systems. Intellectuals of different sorts became interested in this debate soon, if not from its very beginning. Indeed, as we have seen, the pen of lawyer and economist Enrique Ruiz Guíñazú was one of the weapons hailed by La prensa in early 1920 to launch its rents campaign.

This war of ideas was fought from different trenches, and in many ways it was undistinguishable from the political and public-opinion battles we have visited in the last two chapters. Intellectuals wrote in mass media, politicians and journalists attended scholarly venues, and the discussion in the public opinion flooded the chambers of parliament. In the political field, we have seen the agitated landscape of socialist and Radical politicians wielding their weapons in order to obtain parliamentary victory. Conservatives, in turn, remained silent and tended to squarely oppose the initiatives of rent regulation. Under the banner of private property, the Constitution, and the Civil Code, the position of conservative politicians towards this problem, and towards its economic and juridical implications, seemed unshakeable.

1 “Congreso de la habitación,” La prensa, 19 August 1920, 6. All translations from Spanish are mine.
This immobility was indeed a source of anxiety for many politicians within the conservative block itself, who saw in it the sign of a more general inability to address social issues that, in the ongoing critical conjuncture, their political rivals were permanently putting forth. Thus, the generation of a conservative platform toward the social question emerged for them as an utmost priority.

Politicians were not the only ones. This chapter will narrate the story of a group of conservative-leaning intellectuals that, sharing their concerns, became fully involved in the rent debate and attempted to generate a perspective on the housing question that could provide such a platform. I argue in this chapter that through the appropriation of an issue like housing, that was back then the object of a struggle between socialists, Catholics, Radicals and others and that had maximum visibility, these scholars were expressing their frustration for the lack of a conservative alternative for the political system. Making conservatism socially responsive, they thought, would put it in better shape to challenge Radical and socialist majorities. While they advocated for such a new political force, they were also creating for themselves a new platform from which to intervene in the social and political arena of their time, thus generating a scholarly sophisticated “social-economic” view not only of housing, but of the social question in general.

The way these intellectuals did so was, logically, using the weapons they had at hand, and speaking from the places they belonged to. Nucleated in a scholarly think-tank known as Museo Social Argentino and in a handful of specialized journals, they produced articles, pronounced conferences and organized congresses in which they could spread their perspective on the housing question. As they approached housing, they did so relying on the experiences acquired during the war years, when these scholars had developed their social-economic expertise through the analysis of different social-economic problems that had affected the Argentina of the period.
They thus addressed important questions around issues such as the cost of living, land tenure, credit, or taxation, aiming to find in their answers some keys towards a better and fairer organization of the Argentine economy.

As the housing crisis emerged, these scholars put their newly-acquired arsenal to the service of the new “public problem” at hand. Through this movement, while they were creating a new spot from which to push for their social agenda, they also generated tools that would give further legibility and visibility to the different factors that determined housing scarcity and high rents. Civil-Code tenancy regulations, low productivity, unfair taxation, or lack of credit were some of the issues these scholars managed to unearth, generating a new awareness on the need of a deep and multi-pronged intervention towards the housing question.

The chapter unfolds as follows. In a first section I make a description of the human, professional and intellectual group that nucleated around the Museo Social. The second section follows the treatment social economists gave to the housing question in the crucial year of 1920, when the rent crisis had become a topic of public debate. Describing the different social and economic issues that, these scholars posited, housing was linked to, I will show the contribution of these intellectual debates to give legibility to the housing problem. In a third section, finally, I explore the organization and debates of the National Housing Congress held by the Museo Social Argentino in September 1920, an event that was the culmination of this intellectual and political endeavor.

---

2 On the importance of social thought as a process of turning certain issue visible through problematization and through technical resources such as surveys or statistics, see Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose, “In the Name of Society, or Three Theses on the History of Social Thought,” *History of Human Sciences* 10, no. 3 (1997), 97ss.
I. Conservative reformers. Economics, law, and the social question.

*Social economics, law and the emergence of a new figure of expert*

In his opening speech to a congress on cooperation celebrated by the MSA in October 1919, lawyer and economist Enrique Ruiz Guíñazú recalled the beginning of formal economic studies in the country as a pioneering enterprise by a handful of scholars, to which he belonged. “It was my generation’s turn to open university studies to the investigation of social-economic problems, neglected by previous teachings,” he claimed.3

This was hardly an overstatement. While by the 1890s certain courses on Economics and accounting had become part of the curricula of the Law School of the University of Buenos Aires (UBA), it was not until 1910 that the authorities of that house created an Instituto de Altos Estudios Comerciales, which unfolded in 1913 into the School of Economics (Facultad de Ciencias Económicas, FCE).4 The emergence of this new disciplinary field in Argentina, besides being part of its development on a global scale, obeyed to a greater awareness among scholars and public authorities of the increasing complexities of an economy that was developing at full steam, an awareness that was nothing but encouraged by the outbreak of World War I, which put the country on the path of its most important economic crisis since the 1890 financial crack.

In the aisles of the School of Economics, as earlier in the economic courses at the Law School, plans of study showed a rather eclectic combination of perspectives: from the formal, mathematical, and market-oriented “pure economics,” to the different branches of “positive

---

economics,” which addressed the “real” economy. “Positive economics” was itself a mixture, including elements from the German tradition of national economy, the cooperativism of Charles Gide, or Émile Laveleye’s Christian socialism.⁵

Teachers and practitioners alike considered these different strands as parts of the big family of “social economics,” a term that derived from the work of French sociologist Frédéric Le Play (1806-1882).⁶ For social economists, the mistake of “classical” economics was to take the individual as the center and point of departure of economic theory. Quite on the contrary, people like Le Play, and after him Charles Gide or Léon Bourgeois, would argue that the social had absolute predominance over the individual, since every individual arrived at the world owing much of her and her community’s goods to the labors of past generations. This “social debt,” which the individual repaid throughout her existence, was the bond that kept society together.⁷

Social economics brought about a revolution within the realm of the juridical sciences. Léon Duguit (1859-1928) was the jurist that developed the most influential formulation of the new juridical doctrine, precisely called “new law” (nouveau droit). This French scholar thought that a juridical framework based on social solidarity, where the individual was defined in relation to her social function, eroded basic notions of civil law, such as the autonomy of the individual, private property, or the nature of contracts.

⁵ See id., and Jimena Caravaca and Mariano Plotkin, “Crisis, ciencias sociales y elites estatales: La constitución del campo de los economistas estatales en la Argentina, 1910-1935,” Desarrollo Económico 47, no. 187 (October 1, 2007), 405. Even if an “Economía política” course such as the one Ernesto Quesada taught at the law school of the UNLP in 1905 was called by its own professor “social economics,” it included a mixture of references, from classical “Manchesterian” economics, to Charles Gide and German “national economist” Gustav Schmoller. See Eduardo Zimmermann, Los liberales reformistas: la cuestión social en la argentina, 1890-1916 (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana - Universidad de San Andrés, 1995), 86-90.


⁷ One of the classic formulations of the concept of social debt and the derived one of social solidarity is in Léon Bourgeois, Solidarité (Paris: A. Colin, 1896).
Duguit had a direct influence throughout the Southern Cone, especially after his visit to Buenos Aires in 1911, when he gave a series of conferences aptly titled *Les transformations du droit privé*.

Hired by the authorities of the Law School of the UBA, Duguit displayed in front of an audience of students, professors, and lawyers what surely looked like a Copernican revolution of the established juridical knowledge. Although this was not the first time that the sounds of this revolution were heard among local jurists, the stature of Duguit as an international authority and the diffusion of his conferences (which appeared reproduced in the main newspapers of the capital) were giving “new law” a broader ground of scholarly legitimacy in the local milieu.

It was in Duguit’s last conference, on private property, where the implications of the new juridical creed for economic life became more apparent. He posited the notion of “social function of property” as a necessary corollary of social solidarity: any given individual enjoyed her property thanks to the past work of others, and therefore the legitimacy of her tenure existed as long as she used it in a way that contributed to the social wellbeing. “It follows that property is socialized,” which meant, “first, that individual property stops being a right of the individual, in order to become a social function; and, second, that there are every time more cases in which the vulnerability of the wealth of collectivities has to be juridically protected.”

---

8 Duguit’s conferences were published almost immediately in France (*Les transformations générales du droit privé depuis le Code Napoléon*, Paris: Félix Alcan, 1912), while their Spanish translation that same year in Madrid (*Las transformaciones generales del derecho privado desde el Código de Napoléon*, Madrid: F. Beltrán, 1912).

9 Already in 1896 jurist Carlos Rodríguez Larreta warned that “the threat of a great revolution looms over civil law,” derived from the link between positivism and social reform.” Quoted in Eduardo Zimmermann, “‘Un espíritu nuevo’: la cuestión social y el Derecho en la Argentina (1890-1930),” *Revista de Indias* 73, no. 257 (2013), 87. By 1909, in turn, Civil-Law professor Alfredo Colmo acknowledged in the inaugural conference of his course at the Law School of the UBA the generalized criticism that the traditional concept of private property was receiving from the new trends of legal thought. Alfredo Colmo, “Caracteres del Derecho civil contemporáneo (conferencia inaugural, 1909),” *Revista de la Facultad de Derecho y Ciencias Sociales*, quoted by Abelardo Levaggi, “Ideas acerca del derecho de propiedad en la Argentina entre 1870 Y 1920,” *Revista Electrónica Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas y Sociales A. L. Gioja*, no. 1 (December 1, 2007), 123.

10 See for example the coverage of the first and last conferences in newspapers ideologically as distant from each other as *La prensa* (14 September 1911, 12; 27 August 1911, 7) and *La vanguardia* (14 September 1911, 1; 27 August 1911, 1).

11 In Zimmermann, “‘Un espíritu nuevo’,” 90. The socialist press, that followed closely the development of the conferences, used the occasion to criticize Duguit for his timidity and inconsequence, since, while he defended the social nature of property, he failed to address natural consequences to it, such as the “tax to privilege” and the “tax on unimproved lands.” The explanation was that, when dealing with private property, “Mr. Duguit dealt yesterday with the most sensitive subject, the one that can most
Duguit’s conferences worked as an anchor from which people like Ruiz Guiñazú could legitimize their position in the relatively new realm of economics. Upon the background of social economics, it seemed natural that lawyers (who, as said, constituted the majority of the professors of economics, both in the Law and later in the Economics School of the UBA) could become legitimate experts on financial issues, and for economic issues to be considered from a social and juridical perspective. In 1913, Ruiz Guiñazú presented his course on “political economy” arguing that the discipline “deals not only with wealth and profit. It studies, rather, those contractual or legal relations that men develop among each other.”

Institutions and individual figures

The emergent economists we will follow along this chapter were formed in the cloisters of the University of Buenos Aires, which also provided them with teaching positions where they could build their academic prestige. Yet, the university would prove insufficient as a place from which to intervene in wider public and political affairs, neither to develop their expertise as researchers. Argentine universities of the time were not especially fertile terrain for research activities, least of all new schools like that of economics, which lacked resources and tradition. On top of that, the universities were still under an extremely archaic and rigid organization. Against this archaism, the student movement pushed for important changes, particularly in relation to

---


13 A proof of this can be seen in the fact that only in the 1920s would Argentine universities (like the Economics or the Architecture school of the UBA) issue journals of their own. Caravaca and Plotkin highlight the low level of research in the FCE. Caravaca and Plotkin, “Crisis, ciencias sociales y elites estatales,” 407-8.
teaching methods, the hierarchies system, and activities of extension, which came to fruition in the ground shaking 1918 “Reforma Universitaria.”

In this context, with a university oscillating between archaism and turmoil, and also with no professional corporation (like the “colegios” entertained by engineers, lawyers, or physicians) that could support the emergent discipline, these scholars were eager to find new channels for their voices. They found such thing in the Museo Social Argentino (MSA), a private research and intellectual center founded in 1911 by lawyer and agricultural engineer Tomás Amadeo. The Museo Social was properly what we would nowadays call a think tank: in Amadeo’s own words, it was a “counseling, mediator, and informative power,” whose “action is not limited to the mere examination of the problems derived from the social question, but it extends, rather, to the intervention in public conflicts […] offering pertinent solutions.”

Independent from the state, the Museum devoted its efforts to the collection and diffusion of studies, research and information on social legislation, social action, and all sorts of data related to the social question, as well as on problems of agricultural development. It carried out intellectual surveys, congresses, and missions abroad to compile state-of-the-art initiatives regarding issues like labor legislation, social assistance, agricultural education, cooperatives, or social statistics. It also issued its own bulletin (the BMSA), which from its very beginning became a hotbed of research on the social question and held exchange with several other publications, in Argentina and

---

14 On the University reform, see Pablo Buchbinder, ¿Revolución en los claustros? La Reforma universitaria de 1918 (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2008).
abroad, and it organized visits of well-known international figures, such as French social reformer Léopold Mabilleau, or former American president Theodor Roosevelt.\(^{17}\)

The majority of the members of the Museum shared a common sociological background of families close, if not belonging to, the landed elite. We see among these members prominent landowners like Miguel Casares, Alfredo French, Luis Agote, Adolfo Bioy, or Emilio Frers, as well as marriage connections that built up a closely-knit group (Tomás Amadeo was Frers’ son-in-law),\(^{18}\) something that, through donations, would be very important for the financial stability of the institution. Many within this group, such as Frers or Casares, were also important ruralista leaders that, besides being active in the management of their own establishments, were also involved in public debates on rural productivity and development.\(^{19}\)

Professionally, the members of the Museum were initially a mixture of engineers (agricultural, like Amadeo and Casares, as well as civil), lawyers and physicians. Although the Museo Social never lost its original interest in agricultural problems, figures and topics related to the agrarian world started throughout the years to cede their predominance to lawyers and to social and economic issues. The conjuncture of the late 1910s was the major drive of this transition, as the war brought about economic crisis and a rising trend of workers’ activism and social mobilization, which we have visited in Chapter 3. By 1919, indeed, Ruiz Guiñazú explained that “in this year’s conference cycle the Museo Social Argentino has taken great care of focusing the attention on topics of a social-economic nature. It is a duty, imposed for fundamental ideas that cannot be postponed.”\(^{20}\)

---

\(^{17}\) On the importance of cultural visits in the Argentina of the period, see Paula Bruno, ed., *Visitas culturales en la Argentina, 1898-1936* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2014).


\(^{19}\) On ruralismo as ideology of the landowner class, see Roy Hora, *Los terratenientes de la pampa argentina. Una historia social y política 1860-1945* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2002).

\(^{20}\) Introductory words to Coll’s conference “Casas para obreros” on 18 September 1919, BMSA, Nos 91-93, 1919, 209ss.
The new agenda was reflected in certain details, like the fact that the first president of the Museum, prominent landowner Emilio Frers, was replaced in 1917 by lawyer Juan José Díaz Arana; the following year E. Ruiz Guíñazú became president, all the way up to 1930. Articles on economic and social matters started to prevail in the Museum’s bulletin in 1917-1920, and were not any more included in the vague category “Miscellaneous,” but rather in the more specific one of “Financial and economic matters.” Finally, in these years the Museum summoned its first (and eventually only) cycle of public congresses, all of them devoted to eminently social issues, such as mutualism, cooperation, and housing.

Together with the initiative of the Museum, in the 1910s the social-economic journal was another major instance through which these scholars made their voice heard. While in the late 1890s journals touching upon social issues were rather broad publications devoted to law, literature or philosophy, those of the 1910s attempted, in contrast, to be more scholarly and specialized. In 1911 the MSA started publishing its Boletín, while in 1918 Alejandro Bunge launched the Revista de Economía Argentina (1918-1943), which became for decades the most important economic journal in the country and a reference point for statistical data. That same year, the National Mortgage Bank began publishing its short-lived journal, the Revista del Banco Hipotecario Nacional (1918-1921), diffusion organ of its activities and also, thanks to the guidance of its director, Ruiz Guíñazú, a niche for social-economic analysis.

22 In 1917 there were eight pieces on economy, plus two on international trade, two on taxes, one on finance and two on the cost of living, against only two on rural issues (colonization and agricultural education), which contrasts strongly with the distribution of topics in previous years: in 1916, two pieces on agriculture, one on economics; in 1915, respectively five and none; in 1914, three on agriculture, one on economy and one on the cost of living. In 1919 and 1920, in turn, social issues (cooperation, mutual aid, housing, women rights, immigration and labor) prevailed over purely economic or agricultural ones. See the “Índices generales,” BMSA, Vols 3-7, 1914-1918, and Vols 8-9, 1919-20. See also Solveira de Báez and Girbal de Blacha, “El Museo Social Argentino: su origen, acción y proyección,” 101.
23 Examples of this are the Revista Jurídica y de Ciencias Sociales (launched in 1883 by Marco Avellaneda, E. Navarro Viola and Francisco Barroetaveña) or Estanislao Zeballos’s Revista de Derecho, Historia y Letras (launched in 1898).
These three journals, dominated by our group of social economists, were in permanent dialogue with other specialized publications in neighboring fields. First, the *Revista de Ciencias Económicas*, an economic journal founded in 1913 by members of the student body of UBA’s Economics School, which in 1920 became the official journal of the School. It was more radical journal that reflected the newest trends in economic thought of the time. Second, the official bulletin of the National Labor Department, a vast repository of national and worldwide labor statistics and legislation which, launched in 1907 with the creation of the department, belonged to the early generation of labor reformism. Bunge had worked in it as statistician, but the main figures behind it were labor-law experts José Nicolás Matienzo, Alejandro Unsaín, and Alejandro Ruzo. This ensemble of scholarly journals suggests the existence of a very active sphere of dialogue on issues related to the social question. Although each journal had a perspective of its own, they all shared a common set of concerns, a scientific vocabulary, a general reformist view of social change, and a strong insertion in the transnational flows of circulation of social knowledge.

While journals were collective endeavors, they were also the initiative of individuals who, as directors, authors or editors gave them specific lines of research. Four figures stood out as animators of the MSA and of the social-economic journals above mentioned: Alejandro Bunge, Enrique Ruiz Guiñazú, Juan José Díaz Arana, and Tomás Amadeo. Their trajectories overlapped: the REA, founded and directed by Alejandro Bunge, had Ruiz Guiñazú and Díaz

---

Arana as members of its editorial board (Díaz Arana during its first three years, Ruiz Guíñazú up to 1930). The latter two were, as said, presidents of the MSA between 1917 and 1921. Tomás Amadeo was the permanent director of MSA’s Boletín, and Ruiz Guíñazú was the director of the RBHN during its whole existence. A brief glance on the intellectual trajectories of these men will be helpful to understand the meaning and consequences of their involvement with the housing problem in the early interwar.

Alejandro Bunge was born in Buenos Aires in 1880, the descendant of a German immigrant who arrived and thrived as a businessman in that bustling Atlantic port in the mid-19th century. He was raised a devout Catholic, and travelled to Germany to study engineering in 1900, where he acquired a solid formation in statistics and received the influence of the German historical school. Upon return to the country, he became in few years the most important economist and statistician in the local milieu. Closely in touch with the reformist elements of the conservative elite, he was chief statistician of the DNT in 1913, and in 1916 chief of the Dirección General de Estadísticas de la Nación, position he held until 1921. Parallel to his activities in the sphere of state agencies and to the private business initiatives of his family firm, in 1912 he got involved in social action as director, with Monsignor Miguel de Andrea, of the Catholic Workers’ Circles of Argentina, and in 1913 he started teaching statistics in the newly created Economics School of the UBA.25 When he created the REA in 1918, thus, Bunge was already a multi-implanted figure, with a prestige preceded the creation of the journal, although

the latter undoubtedly multiplied his position as a public expert. REA, which he directed up to
his death in 1943, remained indeed Bunge’s most prominent intellectual initiative.

Enrique Ruiz Guiñazú and Juan José Díaz Arana’s trajectories, while less brilliant, share
many aspects with that of Bunge. They were also born in Buenos Aires in or around 1880,
graduated from university around 1905 and started their professional careers in the years of
intense economic development, urban growth, and social conflict that preceded the Centenario.
Also fervent Catholics and part of a prominent sector of the elite, Ruiz Guiñazú and Díaz Arana
belonged, in contrast to Bunge, to families of the traditional native aristocracy. Both studied Law
at the University of Buenos Aires, and developed their early careers oscillating between the
worlds of private legal consultancy, public office, and university life. As civil servant, between
1906 and 1913 Ruiz Guiñazú was justice secretary at a municipal level, Finance Secretary of the
city government and director of the national Civil Registry. Díaz Arana, in turn, devoted his
public activity within the realm of the university, being less of a state official. Yet, academic
work joined them, both as professors at the UBA and as members of MSA and REA.

Tomás Amadeo, finally, was born also in 1880, but in Dolores, a town in the rural interior
of the Province of Buenos Aires. His career linked the agrarian economy to social issues: he
graduated both as lawyer and as agricultural engineer from the UBA, his graduation theses being
respectively on unions and on agrarian cooperatives. Besides teaching in both the Law and the
Agriculture Schools of the university, he was a very active organizer of civil-society agencies:
not only did he found and direct the MSA, but was also director and member of many
professional and commercial corporations.
From these individual and group trajectories emerges a portrait of a specific section of Argentine social reformism. These were people who joint technical expertise, education, and a strong spirit of organization. The political leanings of this group were conservative. It is true that their openly partisan militancy was diverse, ranging from the mild Radical affinity of Ruiz Guiñazú to the militant Democratic Pogressivist allegiance of Díaz Arana and the less militant one of Amadeo, as well as to the self-imposed apolitical, “technical” profile of Bunge—which did not prevent him to be technical advisor for president Yrigoyen’s income-tax project in 1918 and for Alvear’s in 1922 and 1925. That said, nonetheless, all four were close to the landed and business elites, to social Catholicism, to openly counter-revolutionary sectors like those animating the Liga Patriótica Argentina, all of which put them at odds with the socialist left and with ample sectors of the organized workers’ movement.26

These scholars also had strong links with Catholicism. Social economics had a strong Christian framework that was nothing but strengthened by Pope Leo XIII’s 1891 *Rerum Novarum* encyclical, which, equally based on notions of social harmony and solidarity, created a new political pole around which Catholics could develop an active social movement. Some of the MSA scholars had indeed direct links with the Argentine institutions of social Catholicism, particularly Alejandro Bunge, who had been co-director of the Catholic Workers’ Circles.

26 Running the risk of anachronism, we could argue that the polarized decades of the 1930s and 40s would confirm the conservative credentials of these figures. Ruiz Guiñazú developed a successful career as diplomat, which culminated as Chancellor in 1941-43. Bunge was in the 1930s an active participant of the organized Catholic movement, through Acción Católica Argentina, the Cursos de Cultura Católica and the journal *Criterio*. In this period, the Catholic movement was an openly anticommunist and in certain cases integralist ideological niche. Amadeo, in turn, was an important member of the Liga Patriótica in the 1920s and an open Germanophile until at least 1936. (On Amadeo’s political leanings, see Elina Tranchini, *Granja y Arado. Spenglerianos y fascistas en la Pampa, 1910-1940*, Buenos Aires: Dunken, 2013, 451ss). Díaz Arana was the exception, being in the 1930s a liberal and later an anti-fascist. (See Hugo E. Biagini and Arturo A. Roig, eds., *El pensamiento alternativo en la Argentina del siglo XX: Tomo I: Identidad, utopía, integración (1900-1930)*, Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2004). For an approach to what it meant to belong to “the right” in early interwar Argentina, see Sandra McGee Deutsch, *Counterrevolution in Argentina, 1900-1932 the Argentine Patriotic League* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986) and Luis María Caterina, *La Liga Patriótica Argentina: un grupo de presión frente a las convulsiones sociales de la década del veinte* (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1995).
between 1912 and 1916, as well as president of the section of UPCA devoted to social studies, the Economic and Social League.  

The belonging to the conservative elite and the Catholic movement was thus a common trait of these scholars, in spite of the diversity of their partisan alignments. These intellectuals represented a social sector, and a section of the enlightened public opinion, that felt excluded by the process of democratization of Argentine politics. As it was explained in chapter 4, one of the reasons behind the conservative failure to thrive in the new electoral system adopted in the country was their fragmentation. But there was yet another factor, namely the attitude of conservatives towards the social question. Historiography has long shown that the “reformist” wing of the conservative ruling elite had paid earnest attention to the whole set of problems derived from social inequality that economic change and modernization had brought about to the country. Yet, conservatives were unable to craft a specifically political offer in which the social question was consistently addressed, in the classical way socialists did with their refined articulation between social doctrine and political activity, or in the more idiosyncratic way Radicals chose to explore once they got to power. Conservatives, expelled from power and with few tools to reach the working masses, faced a dead end in relation to the social question.

To go beyond this dead end was, as said, what these intellectual endeavors entailed. In the midst of an uncertain political transition and a certainly critical social situation, these scholars

---

27 As Anahi Ballent has shown, the whole REA initiative was closely link to a confessional view of society. Not by chance, Bunge chose to place in the first 1919 issue of REA a reedition of one of the seminal texts of Argentine social Catholicism: Emilio Lamarca’s 1880 “El Decálogo y la ciencia económica” (The Decalogue and economic sciences). Ballent, “La Iglesia y la vivienda popular: La ‘Gran Colecta Nacional’ de 1919,” in Diego Armus, ed., Mundo urbano y cultura popular: estudios de historia social argentina (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1997).

28 We need only remember, once again, the foundation of the Labor Department in 1907, the projects of Joaquín V. González of a Labor Code in 1904, or the different social bills proposed to Parliament by conservative legislators in the 1910s. See the classic book by Eduardo Zimmermann (Los liberales reformistas), and the more recent dossier of the Revista de Indias (“Circulación internacional de saberes y prácticas institucionales en la consolidación del Estado Social en Argentina. Siglos XIX y XX,” Vol 73, no 257, 2013).
crafted a modern, intellectually sophisticated and scientifically legitimate agenda on social problems that was at the same time compatible with a traditionalist view of the family, of politics, and of social hierarchies. While conservative politicians lacked such an agenda and direly needed it, these scholars were in turn orphans of political representation, and found in scholarly endeavor and institution-building the only channel for their reformist energy.

II. Tools of reform. Crises, urban and rural.

In order to craft a new social-economic agenda based on notions like social solidarity and the social function of property, scholars nucleated around the MSA had to develop an analytical framework for the Argentine society that was not simply an application of the dogmas of the social economy, but rather a diagnosis of the local specificities. It was necessary for these scholars to generate such a framework, such a technical vocabulary that they could mobilize to push for their reformist program. This was precisely what they did during the years of World War I, as political change and economic crisis were presenting to the observer new and intriguing phenomena that required equally new tools of analysis.

a) Statistics and the discovery of the cost of living

The decade spanning between 1913 and 1922 was not only, as already seen, one of high price volatility, but also a period in which inflation and its economic and social implications became extraordinarily legible. During this period, indeed, certain economic keywords such as cost of living, real wages, or purchasing power of money were developed by local economists, together with the statistical tools of analysis that made it possible to quantify them.29

29 It is interesting to contrast Bunge’s statistical reports we will see here with previous initiatives of cost-of-living estimations. When in 1908 Córdoba-based Economics professor Juan B. González assessed the impact of different articles in the working-class family budget, his calculations were much more fragmentary than Bunge’s, limiting them to wages and to the prices of milk and beef, in order to get “an approximate idea of the problem.” He used no graphic language and barely any mathematics. See Juan B. González, El encarecimiento de la vida en la República Argentina (Buenos Aires: Las ciencias, 1908), 93-96. On the
Alejandro Bunge was the main developer of this analytic battery. As said, in the 1910s he was director of the statistical division of the DNT (División de Estadística, DE-DNT), and then of the National Direction of Statistics—Dirección General de Estadísticas de la Nación, DGEN.30 While the elaboration of price statistics preceded Bunge (his predecessor at the DE-DNT was Hugo Broggi, an expert in the field), it was he who emphasized, particularly during the inflation years, the importance of understanding the social dimension of prices, which could only be grappled through a focus on the working-class family and its budget.

Bunge developed in 1913-14 an innovative series of surveys, in which DNT staff would take sample pools of more than 200 families from working-class neighborhoods.31 Through these surveys, Bunge and his team managed to acquire a precise view of the working-class family structure, income, and expenses. The graphs included in these reports classified carefully aspects such as the amount of children per family, the number of breadwinners and their salaries, and the type and amount of expenses. (SEE FIGURE 1)

FIGURES 1-2: Relative distribution of yearly expenses of a working-class family in 1913 and 1914.


This graphic language was extremely clear: through the distribution of the data on the pie chart, the relative magnitude of each branch of expense became visible in relation to the others. Something now evident, such as the composite nature of the working-class budget, was put black over white for the first time to a specialized public. In the second chart, of 1914, the importance of relative magnitudes became more explicit through the use of percentages, rather than absolute numbers. The focus on the family, in turn, was a direct criticism to the methodology of the national censuses (included the one being carried out that same year), which had traditionally centered the inquiry on the individual. For Bunge, like for Le Play, the family was the functional cell of society and of the economy, and therefore the one that had to be researched. Through the analysis of the family budget putting income and expenses in relation to each other,
plus differentiating the relative weight of expenses in different subsets, an empirically grounded estimation of the cost of living was possible.

Bunge continued the elaboration of these statistics during the first three years of his *Revista de Economía Argentina* (REA), between 1918 and 1920. The war impact on prices was a continued phenomenon, to which the journal devoted lots of attention. In the very first issue of REA Bunge devoted a long methodological and empirical article to the issue, combining his previous concern about the components of the working-class family budget (SEE FIGURE 3) with the careful tracking of the prices of these components along time, thus crafting tables and graphs that expressed the medium-term trends of variation of the cost of living. (SEE FIGURES 4-6)

FIGURE 3: Structure of the budget of a working-class family.
Legend (from left to right, top to bottom):

“Cost of Living” / 
“Food,” “Clothing and other expenses,” “Rent” / 
“Meat,” “Other foodstuffs,” “Bread” - 
“Woolens,” “Cotton,” “Other fibers—
except silk,” “Paper and leather,” 
“Tools,” “Dollar items,” “Essentials,”
“Medicine,” “Other items” / 
“Beef,” “Lamb,” “Pork” - “Oil,”
“Rice,” “Sugar,” “Charcoal,”
“Coffee,” “Firewood,” “Tea,”
“Tobacco,” “Maté tea,” “Potato,”
“Wine,” “Fat,” “Flour.”

Source: “Costo de la vida en la
Argentina, de 1910 a 1917. Números
indicadores,” REA, No 1, July 1918,
44.

FIGURES 4-5: Yearly variation of
food, rent, and clothing and others from 1910 to 1917. Index numbers: 1910 = 100.

Source: id., 54 and 56.
Legend: “Year,” “Food,” “Rent,” “Clothing and others.” Graph: in black, “Food,” in grey,
“Clothing and others, in white, “Rent.”
FIGURE 6: Global evolution of the cost of living in Argentina, from 1910 to 1917. The index numbers are the result of adding up the sections of Figure 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AÑO</th>
<th>Ns. Is.</th>
<th>AÑO</th>
<th>Ns. Is.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1914</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>1915</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>1916</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>1917</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ibid.

In Figure 4 we can see the diachronic evolution of each component of the working-class budget, while Figure 5 constitutes a graphic aggregation of them, summarized in a general cost-of-living index (Figure 6). The right column of the table revealed the remarkable acceleration of the increase in the cost of living during the years 1916 and 1917. The 1919 and 1920 editions of these graphs would update the series, showing that the increase continued at the same pace.\footnote{For reasons so far unexplored, the series was discontinued in 1921, a fact full of consequences in the realm of public perceptions, since the price levels of the following years would appear in public debates (and in REA’s own articles) under a much more impressionistic light. (See for example the Index numbers sections in all 1921 issues of REA. The series on “Prices,” “Cost of foodstuff,” and “Cost of living” only reach 1919. In “Aumento del costo de la vida, de la circulación del papel y de la existencia de oro en garantía de 1910 a 1921,” REA, Nos 34-35, April-May 1921, 252, a reference to the 1920 index number is marked as “approximate.”). Two possible hypotheses for this are, first, that the variations of prices during 1920 were so big and fast that it was extremely difficult to make any reasonable estimation of them; second, that by 1921 interest in the cost of living was decreasing, due to the relative general decrease of prices during that year. For González Bollo, indeed, by mid-1921 the cost of living was not attracting public attention any more. González Bollo, “Ciencias sociales y sociografía estatal,” 30. For Pablo Gerchunoff, the cost of living decreased 25% between 1920 and 1922, most of which happened between 1921 and 1922. See Pablo Gerchunoff, El eslabón perdido. La economía política de los gobiernos radicales (1916-1930) (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2016), 73-74 and 67 (graph).}

The cost-of-living statistics that Bunge developed during these years were a powerful analytical tool to approach the housing problem. By May-June 1920 REA devoted a special issue to the problem of “La carestía de la vivienda” (The housing scarcity).\footnote{“Carestía” is a Spanish term that describes two different concepts: that of scarcity (in Spanish also denoted through the term “escasez”) and that of expensiveness. It can be used, as in this case, to connote both meanings at the same time, in order to make explicit the causal relation between them.} The issue opened with the set of statistics that REA displayed in all its numbers, titled “Expresión gráfica de hechos económicos” (Graphic expression of economic facts). In this case, the graphs and tables were entirely devoted to the cost of living, in order to show, first, that the housing problem had to be
framed as part of the working-class family budget and, second, that the general economic
phenomenon at hand was one of a spectacular increase of rent prices in a context in which the
rest of the items in the working-class family budget were becoming cheaper. (SEE FIGURE 8)

Figure 8: Average and detailed yearly evolution of cost of living in Argentina, 1910-1919.

The graph—which the reader might remember from chapter 1—showed, indeed, that
rents had begun a steep rise from 1917 on, which would continue, as we have seen, until mid-
1921. In contrast, the price of clothing, shoes and other (manufactured) goods were decreasing
after 1918, which was due in great part to the end of War World I, and the subsequent (although
slow) recovery of imports. The increase of the general cost of living was also decelerating,
something that would persist during the following two years, while rents continued increasing.
These graphs, thus, helped make rent rises a more visible phenomenon: through showing it in statistical terms, not only were the increases mathematically proved, but they were also put in contrast with an incipient general decrease of prices that made rent’s rise all the more conspicuous.

**b) Mortgages and land-tenure systems: from country to city**

It might be here remembered that Tomás Amadeo, founder of the Museo Social Argentino, was an agricultural engineer. As he created the Museo, indeed, he had in mind an institution that would manage to link the social question, traditionally thought to be exclusively an urban one, to the state of the countryside. For Amadeo, the main reason for the overcrowding of cities lay on the contradictions of the social and economic structure of the countryside, which ended up expelling its population towards the city.³⁵

Few of these contradictions were as poignant as the problem of land. Although Amadeo did not envisage at all the type of agrarian reform that, to put an example, peasant communities were pushing for in revolutionary Mexico during those years, he did consider that the unevenness of land distribution and the predominance of tenancy relations in the countryside was one of the greatest problems that prevented it from being a more harmonious and prosperous society. Throughout the 1910s, the gradual exhaustion of the agricultural frontier was making signs of instability more frequent than ever before, starting with the protest of renting farmers in southern Santa Fe in 1912 (which expanded to the surrounding countryside, in the biggest episode of rural protest in all Argentine history—the “Grito de Alcorta”),³⁶ followed by weak

---

harvests in 1913-1914, the difficulties of exports during the war, and finally (in spite of the temporary 1918-1920 boom in agricultural prices) the general turn to unfavorable terms of trade for agricultural foodstuff across the 1920s. Crisis had turned from imminent to chronic.

It was in this context that the MSA initiated the study of problems such as colonization, tax regime, tenure systems, or rural productivity and infrastructure. While the focus of the MSA’s Bulletin had been in its initial years on the technical aspects of “agricultural colonization,” the dominant tone during the second half of the 1910s was on land tenure (rent conditions and/or access to land ownership) and access to credit. This transition followed to a certain extent from the gradual predominance, in the Museum’s directive board, of economists and lawyers over engineers, but also to the worsening of the economic and social conditions of the country. It was a transition that also displaced the emphasis with which the land question was posed: while concerns on productivity were never abandoned, now the main aspect of the land question was social justice. Even productivity was reinterpreted through that lens: to leave a land unexploited was to remove from society value that society direly needed and a production able to energize further productive activities. The development of juridical and financial tools for encouraging rural production was thus a way of making private property contribute its due share to the well-being of society.

Ruiz Guiñazú was the MSA scholar that most vehemently championed this conception of land property, deeming it equally important for the rural and for the urban economy. He did so through a new journal, the RBHN, a publication that, as said, the National Mortgages Bank

launched in 1918 to promote the activity of the institution. This journal devoted many articles to the analysis of property-related problems, such as inheritance, cadasters, or land valuation.

In September 1918 RBHN carried out an inquiry among civil-law experts on the desirability of modifications of what Ruiz Guiñazú called the “régimen inmobiliario del Código Civil” (land-tenure regime of the Civil Code) that is, all the articles of the Civil Code that affected the relation between owners and their properties (rural or urban). The editor’s perspective was clear from the start: “progress and conjuncture make it inevitable,” he argued, “to touch that ‘Holy Ark.’ Nowadays, a more flexible concept gives property a less personal function…”38 The idea that the Civil-Code provisions on private property constituted a “land-tenure regime” of its own that regulated the access to land in the country was a way of linking problems that could so far be seen as remote to each other, such as the legal dimensions of property transfer (land divisions, transmissions, etc.), the problem of land tenure (rent regulations, rural and urban), and that of the access to the capital necessary to acquire land (credit, mortgages). Unifying them through the notion of social function of property and its relation to agricultural development was a way of creating a field that could be the object of analysis and reform.

The answers to the survey, almost all of them from lawyers specialized in Civil Law, reflected a general acceptance of the new theses on property. Jurist Alfredo Colmo, for instance, explained that “in our code, the system of real property is too individualistic, absolute and tyrannical,” and that the state was more than entitled to restrict it, “since law is by definition a social relation...”39 Ruiz Guiñazú, in his own answer, highlighted the intimate relation between

38 “Encuesta sobre el régimen inmobiliario del Código Civil,” RBHN, No 5, September 1918, 9.
39 “Régimen inmobiliario del Código Civil,” RBHN, No 6, October 1918, 97.
law and economics, arguing that any legal principle had to be analyzed from a (social) economic perspective, rather than through the abstractions of “pure law.” From that perspective, thus, the absolute property right stated by the Code was “absurd.” “It is antisocial and antieconomic, as long as it gives every owner the power to denaturalize, degrade, or destroy the thing…,” which led to true “social cannibalism.”  

On one hand, thus, Ruiz Guiñazú was mobilizing through the RBHN an agenda of reform of the Civil Code in order to instill social conceptions of property to its real-estate provisions. The second agenda of the survey was the development of credit. Here, Ruiz Guiñazú’s initiative was happening within the wider context of a relaunching of the activities of the Mortgage Bank that the National Executive had encouraged since 1916, as a way of expanding public credit in a period in which the war crisis had almost frozen financial flows. For that task, President Yrigoyen had appointed Rafael Herrera Vegas (1868-1928), a lawyer and dynamic landowner as well as experienced manager, as director of the Bank. Herrera Vegas pushed for a general reform of the bank’s Carta Orgánica, which became law in September 1919, removing legal limits to the expansion of the bank’s activities and enabling the bank to promote agricultural activity through “colonización hipotecaria” (colonization through mortgage loans). The launching of the RBHN, seen by critics as one more example of Radical empleomanía, was in fact part of the reformist thrust of the new administration. In the selection of the articles published in the journal, and in many of those authored by himself, Ruiz Guiñazú pledged allegiance to the mission of the

40 “Régimen inmobiliario del Código Civil. La extensión del dominio,” RBHN, No 13, May 1919, 315-7. Emphasis in original
41 Rafael Herrera Vegas, “La acción oficial,” RBHN, No 1, May 1918, 3.
42 See Emilio Frers, “Proyecto de reformas del Banco Hipotecario Nacional,” RBHN, No 2, June 1918, 85ss., and ERG, “Propósitos de la nueva ley hipotecaria,” RBHN, No 17, September 1919, 164-5.
43 The socialist press, for instance, denounced the journal as such. It was one of the typical “unimaginable tricks made with the purpose of creating useless and bothersome jobs and sinecures, which end up weighing heavily on the budget.” See “La revista del Banco Hipotecario Nacional,” La Vanguardia, 26 March 1921, 1.
Mortage Bank as an agent that through its function of provider of “real credit” could spread access to land and boost economic development.\textsuperscript{44}

c) \textit{Tax reform: towards a fair use of land}

In the Southern Cone, the 1920s and 30s were a period of experiments in tax policy, particularly in Brazil and Argentina. The fiscal blow of the war, the spread of ideas of social justice and, in the case of Argentina, the advance of democratic governments that were more open to them made the scenario a welcoming one for these experiments.\textsuperscript{45} Among the different new tax systems imagined in the period, two stood out for their relation to issues of social justice, namely land tax and income tax.\textsuperscript{46} Both taxes were based on notions of “undue” or “excessive” benefits that land or other sources of privileged income provided, which could be channeled to the rest of society. The moral backdrop of these redistributionist taxes was the social function of property: the value of land, or of certain types of incomes, depended not only on individual work but rather on the general work of society—taxation was a way to make individuals repay that “social debt.”

Like concerns on land tenure regimes, the land tax, before being applied to the housing question, derived from discussions on rural production. No theory of taxation was more influential throughout the 1910s than that of the “single tax,” crafted by American reformer Henry George (1839-1897), and eagerly embraced by many lawyers, politicians, and rural

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item In one of the many examples of this position, Ruiz Guiñazú explained that the BHN should not be satisfied by the fact that its bonds, the “cédulas hipotecarias,” thrived in the financial market of the capital. “No;” he explained, “the National Mortgage Bank has a delicate misión to accomplish […], being as it is obliged to channel mortgage credit towards the most fundamental problems of national life.” ERG, “El futuro del Banco Hipotecario Nacional,” RBHN, Vol 2, 1918, 282-283.
\item See Sánchez Román, “El poliedro de la igualdad,” 96.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
leaders in Argentina and worldwide. First spread notably in the British Isles and colonies, Georgism became an important ideological and, to a lesser extent, political movement in Spain during the first decade of the 20th century, from where the first Spanish translations of George’s works travelled to Uruguay and Argentina. George’s core idea consisted on the imposition of a single tax on the value of land itself (discriminating from it the added value of capital investment), which, he claimed, would redistribute land rent to society and free all other activities from the burden of taxation. The economic revolution promoted by George became especially attractive in societies like those of the Río de la Plata, where agriculture was the center of the economy, but its main resource, land, was unevenly distributed. According to George, the application of this land tax would force owners to sell their excess land, thus achieving a fragmentation of property that would foster agricultural development and a socially fairer countryside.

The diffusion of Georgism in Argentina helped to put into question the existing taxation system, denouncing its inefficiencies and its social unfairness. Its visibility was nothing but to increase as the war impacted public finances, and the movement began to be the object of


264
scholarly attention, to the point that in 1915 four Law dissertations in the universities of Buenos Aires and Santa Fe were centered on the single tax.\textsuperscript{50}

The MSA bulletin soon echoed the single-tax discussion, organizing by late 1917 two conferences on Georgism, in which Alejandro Ruzo, a well-known expert in labor legislation, praised the virtues of the new taxation theory,\textsuperscript{51} while Juan José Britos (h.), a young lawyer specialized in commercial law, discussed the problem at a municipal level.\textsuperscript{52} Britos’s discussion dealt directly with the housing question, as he criticized the existing land tax of the city of Buenos Aires (the “contribución territorial”) for its uniformity, which rewarded speculators that left their plots unbuilt, waiting for the automatic valorization brought about by city growth and municipal investment in infrastructure.

The concerns of the MSA members around taxation were expressive of the fact that these scholars were thinking about problems of redistribution as a new field of economic reform. If taxation could be used to “punish” undeserved profit and to promote notions of social justice, a social issue like the housing question could be, as we will see soon, a field in which tax reform could have a lot more to say.

III. Elective affinities: social economists and the housing question

As it was said in the introduction to this chapter, the analysis of the different economic problems of the country during the war years acted for MSA intellectuals as a preparatory ground in which

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{50}Emilio Dalquier, “Impuesto único,” Tesis para optar por el grado de Doctor en Jurisprudencia, Facultad de Derecho y Ciencias Sociales (FDCS), Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA); Enrique M. Díaz, “El impuesto único,” Tesis, FDCS, UBA; Rafael Alberto Pérez, “Impuesto único,” Tesis para optar por el grado de Doctor en Jurisprudencia, FDCS, UBA; Miguel Ángel Cello, “Impuesto único,” Tesis para optar por el grado de Doctor en Jurisprudencia y Ciencias Sociales, FDCS, Universidad de Santa Fe, 1915. The previous year, lawyer and political scientist Rodolfo Rivarola had published an article in the Revista Argentina de Ciencias Políticas (RACP), in which he narrated the recent circulation of Georgist ideas in the region. Rivarola, “El georgismo en el Río de la Plata,” RACP, No 47, 12 August 1914. He highlighted the importance of the book by Uruguayan jurist Manuel Herrera y Reissig, El impuesto territorial y la reforma tributaria en Inglaterra (Montevideo, Barreiro y Ramos, 1913).

\textsuperscript{51}A. Ruzo, “La reforma tributaria; el impuesto único,” BMSA, Vol 6 1917, 516ss.

\textsuperscript{52}J. J. Britos (h.), “Impuestos a la tierra,” in “Actas de la séptima reunión,” BMSA, Vol 6, 656ss.
\end{flushleft}
they developed their social-economic analytic tools. Cost of living, land tenure, credit, or taxation were issues that summoned them and allowed them to signal important incongruences of the economic structure of the country. Yet, they were problems that tended to appear disjointed from each other, without any common thread that integrated and allowed for a more general formulation of a program of economic reform. The housing question provided this opportunity of integration, as well as an unmatchable opportunity of public intervention, for scholars that so far had remained constrained to the realm of their specialized fields.

Echoing the parliamentary debate on the rent laws, the REA, the RBHN and the Bulletin of the MSA issued between May and August 1920 a series of special issues devoted to the housing question, in which they combined original contributions with compilations of national and foreign legislation precedents as well as economic and statistical data. This scholarly endeavor culminated in September that year, when the Museum organized a national Housing Congress, which gathered a wide and diverse audience of figures and institutions involved in the housing question. I argue in this section that through these interventions, MSA scholars were framing the housing crisis as the cause célèbre they could mobilize a new formulation of the social question. This new formulation, based on the notion of the social function of property, unsurprisingly put social-economic knowledge as a technical expertise which these scholars themselves mastered.

---


The cost of rent. Or, how to solve housing scarcity

We have seen in Chapter 3 that the cost-of-living issue, albeit a widely-spread concern in the war years, was also of varying political valiance. Utilized by conservatives, it had become by 1917 a tool to criticize the Radical administration and its management of the economy. It would be too simplistic to argue that through the publication of its cost-of-living statistics REA (and through the great diffusion they had) was reproducing such criticism, since REA’s intervention was precisely one of careful measurement and comparison, in order to avoid generalizations that could be used as political chicanery. It is more interesting, rather, to try to establish the specific claims that Bunge and his team were making towards the housing question through its inclusion in the cost-of-living charts.

The quantification of rent increase and the elaboration of a dossier on housing “carestía” was a move that made almost mandatory to go from description to explanation: what was the cause behind those high prices? The directory board of the journal decided to put the authorized voices of Ruiz Guiñazú and Bunge to answer that question, reproducing their articles previously printed in La prensa: the Ruiz Guiñazú’s January series that had launched the newspaper’s rent campaign (see Ch. 3), and Bunge’s early July conference given at La prensa’s Instituto Popular de Conferencias (see Ch. 4). These were articles of a deep analytical vigor, in which two

54 The circulation of REA’s statistics was especially noteworthy during the congressional debate on the rent laws. When Deputy José P. Tamborini proposed his rent-regulation project in May 1920, he quoted the “authorized statistics” of the REA with bibliographic as well as methodological precision. (Diario de Sesiones de la Cámara de Diputados, 17 May 1920, 216. From now on, cited as CD.) In the same fashion, socialist Senator Enrique del Valle Iberlucea used in 1921 REA’s statistics as a guarantee of objectivity and a rock upon which political arguments could be made. “I have in my hands,” he said in a speech to the Senate, “the Revista de Economía Argentina, directed by Messrs. Alejandro Bunge, Dr Juan José Díaz Arana y Dr Enrique Ruiz Guiñazú, who are well known to all Senators, who belong to the conservative class, and whose ideas and opinions cannot be branded as partial—as many may do with mine, given the social and political ideas I profess.” (Diario de Sesiones de la Cámara de Senadores, 21 April 1921, 66. From now on, cited as CS.)

55 Although REA’s volume was dated “May-June 1920,” this and many other parts of it reveal that it must have been issued no earlier than August 1920.
different aspects of the problem of high rents were evaluated, the juridical and the economic, respectively.

Bunge’s conference suggests that he aimed to position his journal as an adversary of the ongoing projects of rent regulation, proposing, on the contrary, a deeper view of the housing crisis from the perspective of the productivity of labor, of the construction industry, and of municipal regulations of construction. The comparison of rent prices in Buenos Aires and other western cities indicated for Bunge that the expensiveness of housing in the Argentine metropolis was not due to conjunctural factors (such as the war), but to permanent, structural ones. The solution, thus, had to do with the elimination of those factors, improving the productivity in each of the above-mentioned realms. He emphasized the need of better technical training of workers, of changes in the urban grid pattern and the dimensions of plots in order to maximize costs per built unit, or the modification of construction regulations to allow for simple and more economical buildings.

The emphasis on the technical side of the housing problem was for Bunge a way of framing his critique of rent regulation within the voice of expertise, something his credentials as engineer allowed him to do. This technical voice was nonetheless combined with the juridical analysis of the Civil Code done by Ruiz Guiñazú in the companion piece to Bunge’s. Even more meaningfully, it was also accompanied by a piece that, placed in the first place in the special issue, was an explicit incursion in the realm of Catholic social action. In an article titled “¿Cuál fue la primera mansion popular?” (What was the first popular mansion?), Jesuit priest Gabriel Palau explored the development of this housing type throughout the 19th century in northern France. In the context of UPCA’s Gran Colecta Nacional (see Chapter 3), which had set as its main aim with the funds of the campaign the construction of such “mansions,” Palau’s text was a
way of propagandizing the initiative. Palau explained indeed that his main aim, rather than the “general public”, he aspired to interest “the well-to-do,” in order to convince them to employ part of their capitals in their construction. Following De Andrea’s words, he stated that besides giving cheap dwelling, the popular mansion, thanks to its paternalistic architectural features (which allowed for the “exquisite vigilance” of preceptors) and to the fact that it involved a set of communal institutions, had a “moralizing” effect that made it more integral than any “cheap house” (casa barata).

Through this combination of juridical and economic analysis, an advocacy for reforms in town-planning and construction regulations, and the endorsement of Catholic social action, REA put its credentials as a source of statistical data at the service of an involvement in the ongoing housing debate. It framed its voice as one of careful yet firm critique of the solutions so far achieved, and proposed clear alternatives. As it tends to happen, however, its voice was also polyphonic: first, because its statistics could be (as they would) used for different political purposes, and second because Ruiz Guiñazú’s stance on the reforms of the Civil Code was potentially at odds with Bunge’s reluctance to center the solutions to the crisis on the realm of rents, rather than on construction.

The tenure of urban plots

As we have seen, the problem of land tenure was one of the axes through which scholars of the Museo Social and the RBHN analyzed the rural economy from a legal-economic perspective. As

---

57 The popular mansion “treasures new and integral solutions to a whole set of problems related to housing, hygiene, domestic economy, morality, culture, home working, leisure…,” and was a true “practical school” of mutualism and cooperation. Id., 361-2, emphasis in original.
the war ended and housing entered its emergency phase, they promptly mobilized those instruments towards the housing crisis.

The reform of the Civil Code, which Ruiz Guiñazú had been propagandizing from the pages of the RBHN, had evident implications for urban property. As we have seen, he explained in the pages of _La prensa_ that a reform of the Code’s provisions for urban tenure was urgent, in order to compatibilize individual rights (the right to property) with social rights, and particularly, in the case of urban rents, with the now widely acknowledged “derecho de la habitación” (right to housing). If labor legislation had become an accepted field of civil law, protecting through the notion of collective contract the most vulnerable part of the labor transaction (the worker), was it not perfectly legitimate to protect, by the same token, the weakest part of the rent contract, namely the tenant? Ruiz Guiñazú considered indeed that, for “social reasons, including juridical and moral ones,” it was urgently necessary “to defend the tenant—the renter [el arrendatario], in the broadest meaning of the word—, who is urged by unsatisfied needs and pressed by a crisis that was the consequence of an extortionate and unchecked legislation.”

The translation of the problem of the Civil Code’s “land-tenure regime” from the rural to the urban economy was equally simple: if a precarious tenure was economically inconvenient for the “chacarero” (renting farmer) it was equally inconvenient, now from a social perspective, to subject a tenant to a short term that forced her and her family to move often, or one that changed its conditions in a frequent and unilateral way.

As said above, together with land came credit, as an equally essential factor for rural productivity. The same was the case for urban housing. The spread of homeownership, an old

---

58 This was a formula that Ruiz Guiñazú borrowed from Spanish reformer Adolfo Posada, who understood that such a concept modified civil private law: “acknowledge and consecrate partial limitations to property rights, for the sake of collective, social requirements.” Enrique Ruiz Guiñazú, “El alza de los alquileres,” _REA_, Nos 23-24, May-June 1920, 377.
59 Id., 369.
Catholic and reformist ideal, required the expansion of credit throughout the working and middle classes. The use of mortgage credit for this purpose was not utterly new, since edification loans were included already in two previous laws, from 1899 and 1911. But the impact of these laws on the housing stock of the city had been extremely limited (in 1914, which was seen as a rather successful year, the bank had issued little more than 100 loans), due to the general instability and variability of workers’ incomes, which made it difficult for them to embark in this type of payment schemes and to afford an upfront payment of the remainder 40% of the property price. To make matters worse, the worldwide financial instability caused by the war made the bank fully suspend its loans after 1914. The 1919 reform aimed precisely, as seen, to reinvigorate the bank’s activities, adding to the existing framework two new elements: an insurance on the mortgaged houses, and a second line of loans, for public employees with at least 10 years in the job, which covered up to 80% of the total value. The beneficial effects of these new measures were publicized by Enrique Ruiz Guiñazú on the pages of the Bank’s journal. He praised the “highly beneficial and foresighted” new line of loans for public employees, which tied the total amount loaned to monthly installments no higher than 30% of the employee’s wage, thus protecting the employee and her family from the risk of insolvency and subsequent loss of the property.

From what precedes we can see that through the RBHN Ruiz Guiñazú made certain interventions in the rent debate that expanded the scope of his previous elaborations concerning

62 See *Boletín Oficial*, No 7688, 30 September 1919, 827-8.
63 This said, Ruiz Guiñazú also allowed himself to be partially critical of the existing line of regular loans for construction, which were limited to a maximum that was too low and outdated for a period of inflation, and thus betrayed their social and economic aim. Ruiz Guiñazú, “Préstamos de edificación,” 90-91.
the real-estate regime in the countryside. As he applied them to the housing question, he was showing the relevance that social-economic analysis and new conceptions of private property had for social issues, and propagandizing the need of a reformulation of landlord-tenant relations and the expansion of mortgage credit.

**Taxation without construction**

The idea that land taxes had to be modified in order to improve housing construction had already been put forth in the local milieu by socialist representatives during the 1915 debate of the first national housing law. On that occasion, deputy Enrique Dickmann, who led his bloc’s opposition to the law, sustained that the housing problem was to a large extent the consequence of the tax structure of the country: it was ridiculous, he claimed, to engage the state in the construction of houses “before changing this monstrous fiscal regime.” For Dickmann, existing taxation schemes punished construction in excessive and arbitrary ways, not only through the direct tax imposed upon it and the import tariffs on construction materials, but also through the land tax system, which put together, as Georgists were denouncing, the cost of land itself with the cost of the constructions that lay upon it.⁶⁴

As the war ended and housing scarcity appeared more clearly as a direct consequence of the paralysis of construction, the potential of tax reform as a way to face the housing question started to be evident for a wider audience of scholars and policy makers. The rent bills had been an occasion for many non-socialist legislators to present projects that went along the lines we

⁶⁴ CD, 3 September 1915, 189. It might be here remembered that socialists had discussed George’s ideas already by 1902, as Juan B. Justo published a series of newspaper articles in which he sympathized with the general idea of the land tax. See Justo, *El impuesto sobre el privilegio* (Buenos Aires: La vanguardia, 1928). Socialists also pushed strongly for tax reform within the realm of municipal government, as councilman Adolfo Dickmann (Enrique’s brother) proposed in 1919 a general reform of the tax system of the municipality. See the articles appeared in *La vanguardia* under the title “La reforma del régimen impositivo municipal,” 31 October – 4 November 1919.
have been revising. Some of them were temporary, like the bill by Radical deputy Víctor Molina, with the idea that a tax “shock” could force owners to build and thus to overcome the emergency.\textsuperscript{65} Others, in turn, strove for a definitive implementation of the tax on unimproved lands. Radicals Carlos J. Rodríguez and Francisco J. Beiró, explicit advocates of Georgist principles, presented in May a general bill for the creation of such general new land tax,\textsuperscript{66} and in June one of a tax on unimproved plots in the city, the funds of which had to go to the national housing commission.\textsuperscript{67}

This plurality of projects addressing the housing question through tax reforms showed the generalized perception of its importance. Unlike what had happened with the land-tenure regime and with mortgages, here the MSA was not being a prime mover, but rather trying to acquire a spot in a debate that was already happening, and in which several political sectors (socialism, Radicalism, the PDP) had already made their bets.

Against this backdrop, the MSA resumed the previous discussion of the land tax, but now applying it to the housing question. The man to do so would be Alejandro Ruzo, a lawyer specialized in labor legislation that, although did not belong to the core of the Museo Social, was a frequent collaborator of the institution.\textsuperscript{68} For Ruzo, open supporter of Georgism, any “modern

\textsuperscript{65} That was the purpose of Radical deputy Víctor Molina when he included in his rent bill a temporary special tax that punished unbuilt plots (baldíos), which he considered a “parasitic property,” which “lives at the expense of the city’s growth. Its owners don’t do anything and cash great fortunes out of the sheer increase of land value.” (CD, 19 May 1920, 318). In late June 1920, Congress passed a temporary land-tax law, which esteemed a 6‰ territorial tax until the end of the year and established that all land improvements and new buildings had to be registered separately and would be exempted from the tax. (\textit{Leyes Nos. 5062 y 11.016 sobre contribución territorial y su decreto reglamentario}, Buenos Aires: L. J. Rosso y Cía., 1920, 12-13).

\textsuperscript{66} These deputies had already presented in May a project of general modification of the land tax, which was based on the Georgist concept of the “value of unimproved land,” and included a proportional scale of tax percentage to apply to plots in the capital and the national territories. See CD, 17 May 1920, 258ss. The project had been previously presented by Rodríguez and other Radical deputies to the Chamber in 1917. See CD, 5 September 1917, 412-430.

\textsuperscript{67} Carlos J. Rodríguez, “Construcción de Casas Baratas,” REA, Nos 23-24, May-June 1920, 441-2. Also PDP deputy José H. Martínez proposed a land tax that, like Molina’s, was differential according to location. See J. H. Martínez, “Contribución territorial,” REA, Nos 23-24, May-June 1920, 459ss.

\textsuperscript{68} Alejandro Ruzo (1885-1939), lawyer, was disciple of José Nicolás Matienzo (first president of the Labor Department). After presenting a thesis on labor legislation, he developed a long career at the Department, becoming one of the most well-known experts in the field. In the 1920s he taught Finance at the Economics School of the UBA. In the second half of the 1920s he
theory of land taxation” took as a base the distinction between “soil and added capital, taking into account the different nature of these two types of wealth.”

As the MSA Housing Congress (CHMSA) met in September 1920 (see later), Ruzo presided the panel devoted to taxation, which was interestingly titled “Social action,” a proof of the importance given to taxation as a tool of reform by MSA members. Ruzo organized the panel following the same two axes of his 1917 conference: the replacement of taxes on consumption by the land tax and the income tax. The support of the latter, which I will not discuss here, was for Ruzo a way of distinguishing the commission’s work from strict Georgism: the commission was not proposing the “single tax,” but a combination of land and income tax, in detriment of consumer taxes.

The subsequent discussion of the commission’s proposal revealed many facets of how our social economists considered the relation between taxation and housing. The three modifications on the land tax (the division between land and capital, the progressive tax on unimproved land, and the extra tax on baldios—vacant plots) reflected this perception of land being the product of social work, rather than of individual effort, and that taxation should “punish” any asocial use of property. While some congress members, like well-known conservative lawyer and MSA fellow Horacio Beccar Varela, opposed these new land-tax schemes, arguing that they were far removed from the aim of the venue, others pushed, on the contrary, towards more radicalized

---

69 See CHMSA, 391.
70 Senator Eduardo Laurencena, a Radical from Entre Ríos that participated in the congress, lamented that under the label social action the commission had included only the land tax, when “social action” means a broad set of initiatives that governments, organizations, and individuals could embrace in order to deal with problems of urbanization (“urbanismo”). (Id., 402)
71 Delegate Arturo Helguera, from Jujuy, extended the problem to centrally-located low edification. “When I see the construction [...] of a two-story house in the corner of Charcas and Suipacha,” he explained, “I am surprised by the existence of people who are so insensible that, owning such a valuable piece of land, build houses that yield such a low income. They would not be able to do that if a progressive land tax were applied.” (CHMSA, 399-400).
72 CHMSA, 401.
visions of it. Andrés Máspero Castro (1890-1957), young lawyer specialized in political economy, was one of them. A militant Georgist that had already published many volumes on the single tax, he sustained that the housing problem derived directly from the problem of land, and that only a proportional tax on unimproved land would force urban landowners to invest, or to sell their excess plots to those willing to do so.

In spite of the long debates, the audience of the CHMSA showed a rather smooth agreement on the final voting of the commission’s views. The CHMSA as a whole thus lined up behind the tax on unimproved lands as a central tenet for the solution of the housing problem, and even supported ongoing experiences of tax reform at a municipal level, like the ones going on in the northern city of San Salvador de Jujuy and in the suburban industrial town of Avellaneda.

The MSA housing congress. Scientific authority in display

When in April 1920 Ruiz Guiñazú proposed to the directive board of the Museo Social Argentino (which he presided) the organization of a National Housing Congress for September of that year, he could have hardly guessed that the event would be held exactly two weeks after the preapproval of the rent bills by the Chamber of Deputies, late that August. It was a moment of maximum visibility for the housing question, the culmination of the parliamentary debates

---

74 A. Máspero Castro (1890-1957), lawyer. He taught courses on finance in the Law School of the UBA. He would make a career in different bureaucratic positions in areas related to the Minister of Finance, the Department of Immigration, and others. On the single tax, see his *El impuesto único. Su adaptación a la República Argentina* (Buenos Aires, French, 1916), *País rico, pueblo y gobierno pobres* (Buenos Aires, Ferrari, 1917), *La cuestión social* (Buenos Aires, Ferrari, 1919). In CHMSA, Máspero Castro and Prof. Armando Carta were delegates of the Partido Reformista, one of the few and short-lived political articulations of Georgism in the country. On Georgist political organizations, see De Lucia, “¡Ni capitalismo rentista ni socialismo!,” 84-86.

75 CHMSA, 306-309.

76 On Jujuy and Avellaneda, see id., 399 and 410-12 respectively.
around it during that year, since, as we have seen, the Senate would postpone its treatment for six months thereafter. The rent bills were all around.

This timing gave MSA’s venue a visibility and repercussion incomparable to any of its former initiatives, such as the mutualism and the cooperation congresses organized in 1918 and 1919. Even the visits of Mabilleau or Roosevelt, which we have mentioned already, could not match this occasion, since attention had been back then centered on the individual figures of the visitors, rather than on the Museum as organizer. Now, in contrast, it was the Museum itself which was making the nation the honorable favor of calling people from all walks of life to get involved in a serious matter that was widely seen as of public concern.

Weeks before the Congress meetings began in the centric Augusteo hall, a well-known theater that the Museum had rented to an Italian mutual society, all the main newspapers of the capital were already publicizing its summoning. On 19th August (the very same day Deputies approved the rent bills), *La prensa* issued a front-page editorial in which it praised the congress as a “laudable contribution to the analysis of this important issue,” stressing its “scientific and impartial” character, in contrast with the “legislative” approach of the ongoing parliamentary debate (which “did not lack electoral influence”), as well as with the neglect public authorities had paid to the problem. 77 During the days of the venue, newspapers like *La prensa, La nación,* or *La razón* fully published the details of the meetings, highlighting the importance of the event for the development of new solutions to the housing problem. 78

---

77 “Congreso de la habitación,” cited as epigraph to this chapter.
78 News of the Congress reached neighbor capital cities like Santiago or Montevideo. See for example “Mociones aprobadas por el congreso de la habitación,” *El Mercurio,* 17 September 1920. In contrast to general public acclaim, *La Vanguardia* had a critical perspective on the Congress, which it considered a waste of time: “this venue, which will be, at best, a rhetoric contest, has been prepared and is sponsored by the Museo social argentino, a shelter for clerical figures relatively close to the state budget and desperate for public exposure.” See “Congreso de la habitación,” *La Vanguardia,* 6 September 1920. 4. Although the Socialist Party was the only important political party that signed up as adherent to the housing congress, these articles and the fact that the socialist delegates were two lesser figures (Juan F. Mantecón and Dr Carlos M. Brián) that did not any active participation show the indifference of socialists to this event.
The potential impact of such a level of exposure was incomparable with anything that MSA scholars had experienced before. It meant a whole week of being in the talk of town, allowing discussions and conclusions of the venue, as well as the names of authorities and organizers, to circulate way beyond their usual specialized circles. The publicity of the event was further encouraged by the fact that the attendants to the meetings, like in previous MSA congresses, were not only scholars, but also people coming from different fields and perspectives: politicians (such as council members, mayors, legislators, and ministers), construction industry leaders, tenant and landlord associations, architects, engineers and urban planners, etc., coming from all the regions of the country, rather than solely from the capital.79

The Museum’s board organized the Congress in five sections (Legislation, Economy, Construction, Social Action, and Municipalism and Statistics), and set forth an agenda of the items each of them would deal with. Each section had a “Commission” in charge of it, with a president and two or three “secretaries,” who evaluated papers sent in advance by attendants to the congress, gave keynote opening speeches, and moderated the subsequent discussion. After each section’s program was discussed, the Congress as a whole voted its different items, which were supposed to be “recommendations” to public powers and civil organizations.

The field into which the organizers of the Congress divided the housing-related issues was an adaptation of the usual categories borrowed from international precedents, particularly from the international housing congresses that a set of emerging housing experts had organized

---

79 In the opening speech of the Congress, Enrique Ruiz Guiñazú, then president of the MSA, explained that the Museum “has invited authorities and institutions, men of thought and of action, owners and tenants…” (CHMSA, 181) The institutions that adhered to the congress were indeed diverse: 9 departments of the national government (including three ministries), 9 provincial governments, 34 municipalities, 10 universities or schools (“facultades”), and more than 50 civil-society organizations (mutual-aid and savings societies, professional associations, business corporations, philanthropies, building societies, cooperatives, political parties, etc.). On top of this, more than 280 people adhered individually to the congress. They constituted a very diverse pool, with certain preeminence of people involved in social issues (politicians, scholars, etc.) and in the realm of housing (architects, engineers, businessmen, etc.). See CHMSA, pp. 173-179.
in different European cities between 1889 and 1913.\textsuperscript{80} The MSA made its own reading of these schemes of thematic classification, adapting them to the current times (the last international housing congress had been in 1913, and there would be none up to the mid-1920s) and also making them reflect the lines of social scholarship and reform we have visited in these pages, particularly in the sections of Legislation and Economy.\textsuperscript{81}

It is interesting to see how during the congress discussions the Museum’s directors displayed their authoritative voice. In a way, the Museum’s leading role was not necessarily translated into a full control of the contents of the discussions in the different commissions. Although it was not always reflected in the conclusions, the minutes of the panels show that on certain issues, like the rent laws, problems of taxation, or even some more technical ones like construction methods or town-expansion schemes, there was a high level of disagreement that the congress organizers esteemed as reinforcing the legitimacy of the venue. The type of intervention that this Congress was exerting gave prominence to the Museum as organizer and to its members as scientific authorities, precisely due to its purportedly plural and “rational” type of debate.

It was nevertheless evident that such a debate was not fully open and egalitarian: scientists had the upper hand, since they were the ones that had set the stage and were in their


\textsuperscript{81} The other three commissions were those of Social Action (which, as said above, dealt specifically with the land tax), Construction (which dealt with technical and regulatory frameworks for improving housing construction), and “Municipalismo y Estadística” (eclectic denomination, that included both issues of town planning and of demographic indicators related to housing).
own, well-known terrain. There were subtle, informal mechanisms through which they could strengthen the scholars’ symbolic capital. One case of such thing happened with the interventions of Ubaldo Pepe, delegate of the tenants’ association (Asociación Nacional de Inquilinos, ANI—see ch. 3), in the Economy section. Mr Pepe, after having demanded more radical measures of tenant protection, the socialization of land and the destruction of the real-estate market, questioned Díaz Arana’s presentation of the work of the commission, even getting to question the statistics he had used, which came from Alejandro Bunge and from a consortium of real-estate investors. Pepe accused these “sources or institutions” of being “prone to falsify the facts,” and stated that, since the country lacked trustworthy statistical data, “it would be best to simply get rid of statistics altogether.” Placing himself outside of the implicit understandings of the audience on the infallibility of scientifically-gathered data, Pepe was in a vulnerable position, exploited by Díaz Arana and others to dismiss his arguments. With great applause from the audience, Díaz Arana ironized on Pepe’s style of reasoning and the rather outrageous conclusions that would follow from it. In spite of later apologies and reconciliation, it was clear that the issue at stake was not simply Pepe’s radical stances, but mainly the rhetorical style he was challenging, which somehow subverted the established hierarchies of the meeting.

This type of reinforcement of scientific authority over lay or non-specialized visions appeared in other occasions. As the commission of Economy was debating the problem of taxation, economist José Barrau exhibited his professional claims as one of the first graduates from the Economics School of the UBA, both as an accountant and a Ph.D., arguing that to

82 It is important to mention here that participants in the congress were stated in the proceedings with their title/university degree, so that those without any degree were named as “Sr” (Mr).
83 Id., 297-8.
84 “Our conclusions would be very reliable indeed, if a congress made up by men of study reached them based merely on personal impressions…!” For Díaz Arana, Pepe appeared to believe in “a confabulation to sustain the phenomenon of scarcity of life essentials.” Id., 298.
propose the modification of basic tax schemes “would mean to introduce a permanent and fundamental issue,” which required earnest study and expertise, “in a congress that is solving an accidental [sic] problem.”\textsuperscript{85} Conservative lawyer Horacio Beccar Varela formulated a similar argument when he expressed that it was out of place “to expect to solve the problem of consumption taxes, a fundamental matter in the realm of taxation, in a congress basically constituted by architects, builders, and engineers […], who, without any thorough studies of the problem, cannot have any specific opinion on it.”\textsuperscript{86} These interventions show that the policing of knowledge had not only to be protected from the destructive intentions of laymen like Pepe, but also from the advances of professionals of bordering fields.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Throughout this chapter I have narrated the process of involvement of conservative social economists in the housing debate in 1920, showing how, in their efforts to link it to further issues of social economics, they were actually maneuvering to appropriate a topic that was of maximum public visibility in the period. This appropriation was for them an opportunity to turn their technical expertise into an asset of intellectual ascendancy.

The involvement of these scholars modified many important aspects of the housing problem itself, establishing certain social-economic ideas as accepted tenets belonging to housing legislation. First, this debate set forth an agreement upon the need of tackling the housing problem through a multi-pronged approach. All aspects of the housing problem were important and interdependent. Thus, the rent contract and the conditions it imposed both to

\textsuperscript{85} Id., 306.
\textsuperscript{86} Id., 401.
landlord and tenant, the location of the house in the city and the urban reforms necessary to enhance that relation, the technical and hygienic aspects of construction, or the legislation in relation to state construction had to be considered as different sides of one same problem. Second, this multi-pronged approach had an affinity with a social-economic understanding of housing and of the rent relation. To impose arbitrary conditions on a tenant, to increase the price of the rent unilaterally, or to keep contract conditions in a nebula of informality, were antisocial ways of enjoying property rights, and had to be restricted. The same was applicable to those who left properties unbuilt: taxation had to punish that antisocial use.

The active intervention of these scholars in the housing problem also showed an interesting aspect of the articulation between intellectual groups and political struggles. As we have mentioned in the first section of the chapter, these conservative-leaning scholars felt a deficit of political representation, and their involvement in the housing crisis was a way of showing a social agenda that had the potentiality of attracting a conservative sociopolitical elite that saw the political scene dominated by Radicalism. Yet, the intellectual strategies used to develop this agenda revealed that this was a difficult enterprise, particularly in the case of the MSA housing congress. In contrast with the comfort with which these scholars worked as “experts” in the exclusive realm of their academic publications, to seek for wider audiences and further voices necessarily limited their ability to keep the contents of discourses under control. In the housing congress, voices that somehow subverted the position of these scholars (those of tenants, those of Georgists like Máspero Castro) had to be integrated by them without losing their monopoly of scientific authority.

That said, the chapter has also shown, however, that MSA scholars managed to preserve their prominent position of acknowledged experts in issues of social economics and to take profit
of the opportunity that the housing crisis offered to their public visibility. After having partially “fabricated” the crisis through their pioneering signaling the importance of the housing problem to public opinion (remember here the role of Ruiz Guiñazú through *La prensa* in Chapter 3), they deepened their path of intervention through the promotion of further ways of public and “open” debate, and became influential in promoting or legitimizing certain modifications of the civil code, of the rent-regulation legislation, and of urban land-tax systems. As they did so, they also crafted a new role for themselves as public experts.
Chapter 6
ARCHITECTURES IN TRANSITION: SOCIAL HOUSING AND THE CITY IN THE 1920s

In August 1923, architect Carlos F. Ancell gave a talk at the conference hall of the main Argentine architectural association, analyzing the conditions of the construction business in the country. His talk was centered on one core idea: that architects had to play a more active role in the provision of affordable housing. Their professional expertise, he argued, provided them with “an almost miraculous key to the problem,” but they had barely been heard yet. Architects themselves were not very assertive in using their “powerful technical resources” to orient the general process of housing production. So far, he explained, they had considered that their business simply consisted of satisfying the customer’s requirements, without any further research on the factors that determined the cost of their product. Materials’ prices, workers’ productivity, the organization of the construction process, the influence of taxation, urban structure, and many other issues were considered by architects as givens. If an architect, in contrast, expanded her lens in order to be able to address those issues, the cheapening of construction would be a fact.¹

The talk was a militant act. The speaker, a young architect and publicist (1896-1963, graduated in 1918) was among the few practitioners of the discipline that was then calling the attention on that issue. He had carefully chosen when and where to pronounce his words: two months later, in October, the rent freezing approved by Parliament two years earlier was supposed to expire, so that the issue was once again gathering steam in public opinion. The Central Society of Architects (Sociedad Central de Arquitectos, SCA), which was where the

¹ Carlos F. Ancell, “Conferencia leída en la Sociedad Central de Arquitectos el 3 de Agosto de 1923,” in Comisión Especial para el estudio del problema de la vivienda, Anexo a la Orden del Día N.º 16. Publicación de antecedentes (Buenos Aires: Imprenta de la Cámara de Diputados, 1924), 96.
conference took place, concentrated the upper crust of the architectural profession of the country. It was a conservative institution that, comfortable with the traditional roles assigned to architecture, showed by then no signs of attention to the problem of affordable housing. Ancell’s arguments, directly geared against this inertia, were thus especially relevant, when not revolutionary.

Involvement in the housing question was by then a growing global trend among architects. War destruction in the European cities and housing shortages worldwide made the housing question become, as we have seen along this dissertation, more urgent than ever before. The new scale of the need, and the technical challenges it posed, made such an involvement necessary, and it was indeed from the early 1920s on that architects and engineers, in many cases in alliance with public authorities—sometimes federal but in many cases municipal—were summoned to design and build “wokers’ dwellings” in big scale. Abandoning the liberal creeds of their professions, architects embraced this social enterprise.

Back to a local reality of a city like Buenos Aires, in which the resumption of demographic growth after the war combined fatally with the construction paralysis that extended up to 1921, the housing crisis had been dealt with, as we have seen in the precedent chapters, by politicians as well as by social reformers specialized in law, economics, and public hygiene. It seems that a gulf separated the architectural profession from the instances of decision on the housing question. Ancell’s call, thus, was a timely reminder that, if housing construction had to be taken further and carried out on a wider scale than before, it was necessary to call those who actually knew how to design and build, instead of remaining in the realm of debate and legislation.
In this chapter I examine the initial stages of this process of involvement, focusing on the complex relationships between architects and public powers, and on the view of the housing and the urban questions that architects developed along the way. The intersection between the housing question and the needs of urban expansion was addressed by architects through diverse technical devices, among which two stood out for their importance in this context: the “garden neighborhood” of individual houses and the collective house. Throughout the chapter I show some architectural experiments on these two types from the late 1910s to the mid-1920s, arguing that through those experiments architects managed to provide new artifacts of housing reform. In particular, I trace the development of a specific device, which I call the “suburban collective house,” emerged as a housing type able to provide high densities and yet adequate standards of hygiene and privacy, in competence with a deeply rooted preference of political authorities and broad sectors of reformism for the individual house.

The chapter unfolds as follows. An initial section describes the development of the architectural profession in the early 20th century, showing the aristocratic traits that kept it far removed from the housing question. The second part, in turn, signals the tensions that were making some professionals push towards a change in that situation. The third section, which constitutes the bulk of the chapter, narrates three instances in which we can see the dynamics of the first contact between local architects and the housing question. These instances were, first, the initial experiments of the National Housing Commission with individual and collective housing, in which the ambivalent relation between state and architecture became evident. Second, the massive housing plan endeavored by the municipality in association with a commercial building society in the mid-1920s, which brought to a limit the contradictions of the individual house as an artifact of urban expansion, as well as exposed the difficulties of public-
private partnerships. Third, and finally, the projects for collective dwelling that architect Fermín Bereterbide designed in 1920 and 1925, in association respectively with Catholic philanthropy and with the municipality. I find in Bereterbide’s projects the development of the suburban collective house as a device able to put behind, at least theoretically, the tensions that had plagued the previous experiences.

I. “Architects-artists.” The architectural profession in the early twentieth century.

As Buenos Aires grew into a modern metropolis in the decades around the turn of the century, the challenges of its new size and complexity called for the intervention of technical professionals of a new sort. Engineers and architects were the men of the moment. The former were essential in the realm of urban infrastructure works, such as like water supply, sewers, or rail and water transportation. Architects, in turn, were in charge of—besides private housing—the design and construction of a whole new type and scale of public buildings for government and administration, as well as of utilitarian architecture like water plants, factories or hospitals. The design of new public spaces, such as parks and boulevards all fell typically within architecture’s purview.²

In spite of this traditional division of tasks, the line that separated these two fields of activity was quite blurred until at least the 1910s, beginning with the fact that, from the earliest period in which architecture was formally taught in the country (the 1860s) all the way up to the 1900s, architecture students shared the majority of their courses with engineers and land

---
² On the development of architecture during the period of modernization, see Jorge Francisco Liernur, *La arquitectura en la Argentina del siglo XX: la construcción de la modernidad* (Buenos Aires: Fondo Nacional de las Artes, 2001).
surveyors in the Sciences School of the University of Buenos Aires (UBA), and their training thus had a strong “technical” bias.³

It was against this backdrop that in 1901 Alejandro Christophersen (1866-1946), Norwegian-born architect to whom I will return, struggled towards the creation of a School of Architecture, incorporating in its study plan courses on modelling, decoration, or history of architecture.⁴ His aim was to promote an architectural formation that was closer to that of the fine arts, emphasizing the aesthetic aspects of the profession. This was the type of formation that prevailed in European academies, particularly in the hegemonic École de Beaux Arts of Paris, and the one that the most important architects in the local milieu had gone through.

This profile was further consolidated by another initiative that Christophersen, together with Juan A. Buschiazzo and other prominent professionals, launched also in 1901. Picking up the remainings of a primitive Sociedad Central de Arquitectos (SCA, Central Society of Architects) that had been founded in the 1880s, Christophersen and his allies aimed to build a professional corporation that could defend the interests and police the borders of the profession, especially against the incursion of practitioners of neighboring fields, such as engineers, land surveyors, and commercial builders.

SCA aimed to regulate aspects such as standard fees of the craft, basic degree requirements to practice, issues of intellectual property, and the mechanisms of competitions for public works and buildings. Some of these regulations, such as fixing the fee as a percentage of the total budget of the work, were non-conflictive. Others, however, generated intense disagreements throughout the years, both within SCA and between SCA members and

³ This school granted indeed four degrees: Engineer, Architect, Land Surveyor, and General Contractor. See Silvia Cirvini, Nosotros los arquitectos. Campo disciplinar y profesión en la Argentina moderna (Mendoza: Zeta, 2004).
⁴ However, only in the 1940s a School of Architecture autonomous from the Engineering School was created in the University of Buenos Aires.
professionals that did not belong to it. The best example of this was the degree requirement to be a licensed architect, since there were a plethora of active practitioners that had been trained abroad or that were engineers.

By the mid-1910s, the Society issued a Professional Code that aimed to end with those conflicts. The Code defined the architect as a “technician,” both artistic and practical, who exerted a strictly liberal (“not commercial”) profession, which differentiated it from constructors and real-estate operators, in that the latter could earn commercial profits, while the architect could only charge a professional fee. Likewise, it excluded from the profession those practitioners that worked as employees, be it from another architect or from a state dependency; the model was the French architecte-patron, who had an office of his own. In a context in which the University was still a strongly elitist institution and in which the most valued architectural works were aristocratic mansions (which required a previous network of acquaintances in order to get a contract), to define the profession in such restrictive ways and to limit its possibility of profit made architecture a non-attractive path for the emergent middle classes. The SCA architect was an “artist,” who devoted his talent and creativity to satisfy the needs of his client. The covers and tables of contents of SCA’s journal throughout the 1910s and well into the 1920s strongly reflected this artistic dimension of architecture that SCA reinforced. (SEE FIGURES 1a-c) Greco-Roman fronts and decorative motives filled the scene, suggesting a classicist approach that was confirmed by the journal’s contents, almost entirely devoted to traditional Beaux-Arts architecture.

---

5 This Code was an internal regulation of the profession. Throughout the 1920s and ‘30s all architectural and engineering corporations were demanding that the state issued a general regulation of their professions, thus giving them a public status. Only in 1944 was such a law issued. See Cirvini, Nosotros los arquitectos, 309-311.
SCA’s leadership of the profession and its elitist attitude generated frictions with other sectors. In 1917, a group of architects founded Centro de Arquitectos, Constructores de Obras y Anexos (CACyA, Center of Architects, Constructors and Others), which, as its name indicated, nucleated a variegated array of builders, architects, and engineers. Its interests, as it was soon reflected on the pages of its journal, were on the industrial and technical aspects of construction. During the 1920s, indeed, CACyA was much more than SCA to the emerging modernist trends.\(^7\)

There was no professional that best embodied the “aristocratic” type of the SCA architect than Christophersen himself.\(^8\) Born in Spain to a Norwegian diplomat from aristocratic stock, he was trained in painting already as a child, formation he completed in the Fine Arts Academy of

---

7 On CACyA, see Fernando Aliata, “CACyA,” in ibid..
Antwerp. He then pursued an architecture degree in the Academy of Brussels, and between 1885 and 1887 he worked as apprentice in the office of two French masters of the Beaux-Arts style. He arrived at the country in the late 1880s, where, in order to acquire prominence, he partnered with a Swedish architect who had already been involved in several important public works. His rise to prominence began around the turn of the century, as he began to be hired by prominent clients. He built churches, hospitals, and aristocratic residences, which were his specialty, while in parallel he was getting involved, as said, in professional organization and university teaching.

A gifted painter and designer, his works were characterized by a deep rooting in the inherited forms of Borbonic France.

Architects like Christophersen constituted the nucleus and almost the totality of SCA by the early 20th century. A closed and aristocratic circle, the dynamics of their profession was correspondent with an equally closed social network that guaranteed them access to the most valued architectural works, the residences of the upper classes and the massive public buildings of the growing national administration. Their style, an eclectic but firmly academic version of Beaux-Arts, was in a way a fair expression of the professional and social dynamics of this exclusive group. In the formula chosen by a local historian, “the architecture of liberalism.”

II. The profession at the crossroads. Architects and the challenge of the housing crisis

Unsurprisingly, affordable housing was far removed from the concerns of such an architectural profession. The dwellings of the urban masses were either the result of untrained constructors, masons, or lesser-known architects, when not dwellers themselves, while the hegemonic

---

9 See Federico F. Ortiz, La Arquitectura del liberalismo en la Argentina (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1968).
architectural ideology was that its true craft lay in the design of the big palaces of state and aristocracy.

The early postwar crisis and worldwide developments in the realm of housing architecture stimulated a change in this situation. In Europe, crisis brought about the need of urban reconstruction, which, under the popular pressure put by revolutionary upheaval, involved the development of a new integration of mass housing within the reconstruction and town-planning schemes. Some cases, like Vienna, Frankfurt, or Berlin, became exemplary. In them, municipal governments hired avant-garde architects like Bruno Taut or Ernst May to generate urban renovations that integrated mass housing in unprecedented ways. Be it the German-style suburban Siedlung, which was based on the typology of the long pavilion, or the metropolitan Austrian Höfe, organized within the city as big compounds around central common yards, these new solutions involved major urban and architectural experimentation, and provided big-scale housing facilities.  

Less spectacularly but with similar efficiency, Henri Sellier led in Paris the urban development of its surrounding ring though the edification of high-rise apartment buildings at moderate rents, and in Milan the socialist municipality launched the “Istituto autonomo di case popolari,” which built around 600 houses in suburban “garden cities.”

The majority of Argentine (and Latin American) architects were distant yet attentive observers of these experiences, many of which would actually unfold only in the second half of the 1920s. As we have seen, by 1923 a professional like Carlos Ancell could lament that local

architects had yet not devoted significant efforts to address the housing problem. The debates on the issue were dominated by other types of experts, as proved by the housing congress organized in 1920 by the Museo Social Argentino, which we have visited in the last chapter. Social-economic scholars, politicians, and other voices in the public sphere had already set certain basic frameworks to approach the housing question (such as hygienic principles, rent legislation, or the insistence on certain municipal, tax and financial reforms necessary to encourage construction).

Once architects became involved in the problem, thus, they appropriated and further developed many of the coordinates that preceded them. One of the first instances in which this happened were the Pan-American Congresses of Architects, a series of conferences that, as an initiative of the Uruguayan counterpart of the SCA, gathered professionals mainly from Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, and Brazil, with the goal of buttressing professional identity and intensify the continental links among architects. Four of these meetings were held regularly between 1920 and 1930 in the capitals of the Southern Cone (Montevideo 1920, Santiago 1923, Buenos Aires 1927 and Rio de Janeiro 1930).12

This transnational forum was, as its organizers defined it, an instance of “spiritual encounter” and mutual exchange among architects of the region, with the aim of strengthening the profession and setting common mandates concerning what was then called the “social duties” of the architect.13 Among these duties emerged, from the first congress onwards, the problem of affordable housing. The generalized conjuncture of housing shortage, rent increase and social

12 On the congresses, see Fernando Atique, “Arquitetando a ‘Boa Vizinhança’: a sociedade urbana do Brasil e a recepção do mundo norte-americano, 1876-1945” (Ph.D. diss., FAU-USP, 2007), Ch. 1.
13 Not only was the architect committed to the artistic design of all kinds of buildings, the journal explained, but also to “the solution of numerous social, artistic, and cultural problems burningly present at the moment…” “1er. Congreso Pan-Americano de Arquitectos,” Arquitectura. Órgano oficial de la Sociedad de Arquitectos (Montevideo, Uruguay), tomo 6, 1920p. 74.
tension (a common denominator in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, the three countries that sent
more delegates) had slipped in.  

Affordable housing occupied a central place within those duties, and in all four Pan
American Congresses of the 1920s there was a panel specifically devoted to it. In the first of
them, in 1920, the discussions were dominated by the Argentine delegation, which was under the
presidency of architect Raúl J. Pasman, chief architect of the Comisión Nacional de Casas
Baratas (CNCB), to whom I will return. The conclusions of the panel were indeed a repetition of
tenets that had emerged in the 1915 debate of the CNCB law, such as the need of government
support of cheap and hygienic construction, the balance between workers’ “barrios” of individual
houses in the outskirts of cities and “collective houses” in the densely populated central areas, or
the modification of construction regulations.

It was during the third congress, organized in Buenos Aires in 1927, that debates on
housing acquired more relevance and originality for the architects of the local milieu. The task of
organizing the congress, which was to a large extent in the hands of SCA, fostered even
traditionalist architects to get involved in the discussion of technical issues concerning the
conveniency of certain housing types, materials, or layouts in ways that were cheaper as well as
socially convenient.  

From that content onwards, the Society would become more open to issues
related to affordable housing, town planning, and “modernism” in architecture.

---

14 See Andrew Wood and James A. Baer, “Strength in Numbers Urban Rent Strikes and Political Transformation in the Americas, 1904-1925,” Journal of Urban History 32, no. 6 (September 1, 2006): 862–84. On Chile, see also

15 As a sign of this, one the two papers presented on the 1927 panel on affordable houses was by Beaux-Arts
architect and landscape designer Fortunato Passeron. The other one was by Fermín Bereterbide. See F. Bereterbide,
“Casas económicas” and F. Passeron, “Construcciones económicas para obreros,” in Actas y Trabajos del III
Congreso Panamericano de Arquitectos (Buenos Aires, 1927), 326-341.
A second instance in which we can observe some of the early technical approaches that architects developed towards the housing question was due to a special conjuncture in 1924. By the end of the previous year, a “special committee” of the Chamber of Deputies devoted to the “study and legislation of the housing question” had launched an inquiry among construction companies and professionals. The Committee had been formed in order to face the continuing conjuncture of high prices, which had forced legislators to extend for one year the rent freeze that the 1921 rent laws had stipulated (a rent freeze that would be reextended once more in late 1924, up to October 1925). As it approached professionals, it expected their in-depth knowledge to help bringing new coordinates to a problem that politicians seemed to be unable to deal with.

The different answers that the inquiry received included the SCA, the CACyA, and a certain Sociedad de Constructores de Obras; it included individual professionals, like architects Carlos F. Ancell, Enrique Guiraud, and Julio Senillosa, or engineer Luis B. Laporte; and it included some private construction firms, such as Olmos and Allende Posse (a firm with experience in “casas baratas,” having built two CNCB projects, one of collective and one of individual houses), among others.

From this diverse array of participants we can extract certain common suggestions, which make us see a convergence, at least on a verbal level, from these very different branches of the professional field. The majority of the letters, besides supporting certain recommendations similar to the ones we have seen so far related to construction encouragement (municipal tax exemptions, elimination of customs tariffs for construction materials, or more generous mortgage schemes), touched upon technical issues that should change in order to make construction cheaper and simpler. Repeated in the majority of the letters was the demand of a modification of building regulations, in order to generate simpler and cheaper construction. The passage from a
4m to a 3.5m minimum for roof heights and from 0.45cm to 0.3cm for wall thickness revealed the inertia of old housing standards that professionals were attempting to modify. Another recurrent technical suggestion regarded the development of standardized construction materials, the encouragement of exhibitions and of national production of them, and the need of improving the training of construction workers.

Of particular interest is a SCA’s suggestion of the issuing of a condominium law that would enable the “horizontal division” of property. It might be here remembered that such a law (in Spanish-speaking countries called “propiedad horizontal”) was by the 1920s a radical legal innovation that few countries had implemented (see Introduction). SCA’s request thus reflected the importance that vertical architecture was acquiring in the country and the awareness of the difficulties that the rent crisis had generated for tenants in the city.

Overall, all these remarks signal a broad coincidence: in spite of its undeniable recovery, a broad sector among experts and practitioners considered that construction in Argentina was lying behind in terms of technical development and productivity. It was this technical backwardness what explained the permanent housing scarcity in the country, and it was this backwardness what had to be attacked—herein lay the novelty—through a new commitment of architects towards research and construction of affordable housing. To return here to Carlos Ancell’s words to his colleagues, there was need of “an action plan for architecture professionals.”

III. Design and building experiences. Professionals, state, and the city in the provision of affordable housing

16 Ancell, “Conferencia,” 106.
Was there ever such a program? How did it look like? What was the influence of architects vis-à-vis that of other reformers in it? In this section I examine the succession of experiences in design and construction of affordable housing that took place in the city between the late 1910s and the mid-1920s, in order to find in them some keys to answer these questions.

In that period, certain institutions (the Comisión Nacional de Casas Baratas—CNCB—, the Unión Popular Católica Argentina—UPCA—, and the Municipality of Buenos Aires) found necessary for the first time to address the architectural profession in order to best fulfill their social aim of producing cheap, hygienic, and comfortable homes. As we have seen in Chapter 2, the pre-war endeavors in this realm (those carried out by the Municipality, by a Catholic charity and by the socialist-founded cooperative El Hogar Obrero—EHO) had not resourced to licensed professionals, using their own, non-trained staff to design housing ensembles. The new programmes of action that the institutions of the 1920s were embarked on, plus a more sophisticated architectural debate and a wider visibility of the housing question, were making clear that the generation of bigger-scale “popular housing” presented technical, aesthetic and urban challenges for which the old approach would not suffice.

As architects participated in the fulfillment of the reformist aims of these institutions, certain tensions became evident. The role of the expert in relation to public authorities, the potentialities and limitations that this relation offered to the imagination of alternative housing and urban patterns, and the problem of how to combine population density with adequate housing standards were among the most prominent ones, which I will attempt to tackle throughout this section.
a) CNCB and the architectural profession: traces of an ambivalent relation.

The reader might remember the Comisión Nacional de Casas Baratas, which we have left in chapter 2 at the moment of its creation in September 1915. With the exception of 1916, when it was led by future national president Marcelo T. de Alvear, the Commission was during its entire existence under the control of a close circle of conservative figures, in their vast majority physicians, lawyers, or engineers, almost none of them involved in housing design or construction.17

As we have seen, it was an agency based on the ideology of the self-owned house. Yet, it sustained, from its earliest stages, the convenience of an “eclectic” plan towards the solution of the housing question. Eclectic, in that it trusted on direct state construction as well as on the importance of private initiative, and also eclectic in the types of houses it supported. Already in its first yearly report, the Commission’s authorities explained they would develop a two-pronged strategy, according to which they would build both suburban “barrios parque” (park-neighborhoods) that consisted of sets of individual, privately-owned houses surrounded by greenery, and “casas colectivas,” centrally-located ensembles of apartments for rent. While the former would help fulfill the ideal solution, that of a widespread private homeownership, the second one would help fight the tenement, bête noire inherited from turn-of-the-century reformism.18

---

17 Only engineer Eduardo Lanús was a practitioner in the realm of housing construction. The first architect to occupy a seat in the Commission’s directive board was Alberto Prebisch in 1930. In 1919 and 1920, the Commission’s president was Carlos M. Coll (1875*), conservative lawyer close to the municipal governments of the early 1910s and to big railroad and tramway corporations. Throughout the entire 1920s, in turn, it was Benjamín Nazar Anchoarena (1876-1964), an industrialist, politician, and member of the most prominent family of the Argentine aristocracy. Other members of the directive board throughout these years were the well-known Catholic physician Gregorio Aráoz Alfaro, engineers Juan Ochoa, and engineer and landowner Alfredo Demarchi.

18 As the CNCB authorities explained in its initial report, “both types of construction fulfill the purpose of dwelling cleansing [...]. The cheap individual house, which achieves at the same time the family’s ideal of a more independent home, can only be built in places were land is cheap.” The “collective house,” in turn, was useful for “places close to the industrial and commercial centers,” where land was expensive. Although housing units in
This strategy equated to a combination of the widely-circulated model of the garden city—which had become across the 1900s part of the global “orthodoxy” on housing reform and prescribed the importance of the suburban individual house located in a green, picturesque layout—,¹⁹ and a realistic view of the dynamics of urban growth of Buenos Aires, which put limits to the expansion of such a model. It was also a realistic approach to the weak position of the Commission itself within those dynamics, which lacked the power to promote major modifications to the existing urban landscape. The Commission had a very limited power upon that growth process: although it represented “the state,” it was a minute dependency within a federal ministry (the Ministry of Interior), had meager financial resources, and had no way of influencing a municipal government that, at the time, had no interest to get involved in major housing schemes. These weaknesses made it mandatory for the Commission to adapt to the resources and land it could acquire, and the so-called eclecticism was what fitted that situation best.

Within that setting, the initial priority for the Commission was thus to acquire land stretches in which to carry out its mission. By the late 1910s, after a strenuous process of struggle and negotiation, it had acquired six plots in the city:²⁰ three of them were relatively extensive (a block or more than a block) and located in suburban, sparsely populated areas, close enough for collective houses could only be rented, they still managed to provide cheap and hygienic dwelling “without depriving families from the necessary indoor independence for an adequate family lifestyle. This is, thus, the adequate type of construction for fighting the ‘tenement’ [‘conventillo’].” CNCB, Memoria I, 1915-16, 15-16. The word “eclecticism” was used by Cafferata, author of the CNCB law, to define the combination of strategies that the Commission should use. See CD, 29 May 1914, 509.

¹⁹ There is an abundant bibliography on the garden city, from the initial creation of the prototype by English reformer Ebenezer Howard in 1900 to its many reproductions throughout the 20th century. See Ebenezer Howard, Garden Cities of To-Morrow (London, 1902). Peter Hall, Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design since 1880 (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), Ch. 4. On the concept of an “orthodoxy” of housing reform, see Nicholas Bullock and James Read, The Movement for Housing Reform in Germany and France, 1840-1914 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

²⁰ It might be useful to remark here that the Commission, in spite of its “National” character, had jurisdiction only over the Federal Capital and the National Territories.
to public parks and to transportation means. The other three, in contrast, were small (25% or less than a block), and were centrally located. (SEE MAP 1) It seems, thus, that the Commission was able, in spite of the difficulties, to acquire plots big and diverse enough to develop its double strategy.

Map 1: CNCB estates by the mid-1920s.
In black, the “barrios parque”; in blue, the collective houses.

1: Barrio Cafferata (inaug. 1921)
2: Barrio M. T. Alvear (inaug. 1925)
3: Barrio Rawson (inaug. 1927).
4: Casa Valentin Alsina (inaug. 1920).
5: Casa Bernardino Rivadavia (inaug. 1922).


The biggest of the plots acquired, a 180,000 sq m land stretch next to the southwestern Parque Avellaneda, seemed ideal for the construction of a “barrio parque” that reproduced some of the features of the garden-city ideal. For the design of the neighborhood, the Commission
organized a “Concurso de anteproyectos,” an open competition summoning architects and engineers to provide proposals for both the general layout of the settlement (the “planimetría”) and the housing types. The projects would be evaluated by a selection committee, which would assign three prizes for both sets of proposals (layout and housing types). The Commission received more than forty projects—the number itself a proof of professional enthusiasm—and, after defining the winners, organized a public exhibition in the Salón Nacional de las Artes. It is the exhibition that opens the introduction to this dissertation.

As we have seen, the open competition was a typical procedure in big architectural works, regulated by the protocol that the SCA had set at the beginning of the century. It was the first time, however, that the protocol was used for a housing estate for “workers and employees.” To embrace that protocol was a way of putting the construction of workers’ dwellings under the rules of the architectural profession and also to hierarchize the whole initiative.

The winning projects in the category of general layout reveal what Commission and participants understood as a “barrio parque.” Its main features were the abundant greenery, the individual houses with garden, following the type of the English “cottage,” and the use of street patterns alternative to the regular square grid, in order to give a picturesque atmosphere. As a “barrio” instead of a city, it was not supposed to be an autonomous urban device, but a suburb (in contrast with Howard’s model), and the different designs actually reveal that there was an almost strictly formalistic attachment to the type, with very different solutions that were frank departures from it.

21 The committee was composed by the presidents of the Commission, of the SCA, of the National Center of Engineers, and of the Municipality, plus a representative elected by the participants—all of them architects or engineers, with the exception of the CNCB president, physician Gregorio Aráoz Alfaro.

22 The garden city, in its original formulation, was a complex system of regional development that involved the construction of a network of self-sufficient, medium-sized, interconnected towns, as well as a communalistic access to land. From a very early stage onwards, and not only in Argentina, the materializations of this model tended to
The winning project, by architect Charles Medhurst Thomas, was praised for its ability to create a strongly picturesque layout with clear references to the English model of garden cities. (SEE FIGURES 2a-c) Curved streets and different housing sets (some semi-detached, others in rows of 4 or 5) gave variety to the ensemble (in the architects’ words: “the design, rather exotic for our metropolis, will be pleasant and will have happy and cheerful details…”), in spite of the rather severe symmetry. The second and third prizes, designed respectively by Juan C. Buschiazzo and Alejandro de Ortúzar, displayed an even stronger geometric design, which was not surprising in Buschiazzo’s case, son and disciple of one of the local masters of traditional Haussmann-style town planning. His proposal, in spite of his expressed intention of equally striving for “variety” and for a “picturesque effect” through the trees and the curved street, forced a triangular symmetry at the expense of the overall shape of the plot. In the case of Ortúzar, his project showed a conspicuously intensive land use, a preference for straight angles and parallel streets, and a repetitive display of the housing blocks that reminded his 1909 “Barrio obrero,” planned with Juan Fernández Poblet under the spell of Tony Garnier’s “Cité industrielle” (see Chapter 2). His project thus included specific central plots for communal institutions (two schools, Museum, Library, Post Office, etc.) that would make this residential compound a true neighborhood. Ortúzar’s project was the one proposing the highest housing reduce it to its formal aspects (the individual houses in the green) and to transform it into an anti-urban device. The “garden suburb” thus became the most common derivation. On this process, see Magri and Topalov, “De la cité-jardin à la ville rationalisée.”

23 Charles Medhurst Thomas (1849-1918) arrived at the country from England in the early 1890s, to work in the expansion of the railway system. He was an important animator and founder of the SCA. In the 1920s, he would research the topic of the “affordable house” and published some articles about it in the Revista de Arquitectura. See Ana Gómez Pintus, “Postales suburbanas. Arquitectura y suburbios residenciales en Argentina (1910-1940),” Labor & Engenho 8, no. 3 (2014), 8.

density of all (1000 houses, vs 760 in Medhurst Thomas’s plan), which resulted, as the detail shows, in really small gardens that looked like awkward interstitial spaces.\footnote{This feature was highlighted by the socialist press (which considered it “the worst” of all 44 projects). See “La exposición de planos de casas baratas. La visita de la Sociedad Luz,” \textit{La vanguardia}, 20 May 1917, 1.}

Figures 2a-c: Projects for the CNCB Parque Avellaneda housing estate, 1917.
Charles Medhurst Thomas, 1\textsuperscript{st} prize. In the insert, note the combination of row houses in different numbers. Yet, all of them had individual front yard and back garden.

Juan C. Buschiazzo, 2\textsuperscript{nd} prize. This project was the most formalistic of them all, not detailing the shape of the plots and forcing the ensemble into a symmetry of boulevards and étoiles.
Alejandro de Ortúzar, 3rd prize. In this Project, we can see the extreme density, which resulted in small gardens that are no more than interstitial spaces. In the center of the ensemble, in turn, we find the plaza and the common institutions.

The differences among these projects were showing different approaches to the shared aim of devising a housing ensemble that granted individual housing and offered some variety to
the monotony of the urban grid. In the case of Ortúzar, this attempt also involved an increase in density without resigning (at least in the intention) the absolute priority of the independence among the dwellings.

The housing types, in contrast, very similar in all the proposals, precisely due to the priority of the independent house. Following the competition’s guidelines, the houses were in all cases small and compact, and one- or two-story. The majority of the architects chose a semi-detached scheme, for considering it a suitable compromise between, on one hand, hygiene (direct access to air and sunlight on the majority of the sides of the house) and independence (independent accesses, front gardens, and back yards), and, on the other hand, economy (shared wall, unified pipelines, avoidance of one of the side gardens, etc.). (SEE FIGURE 3a) Only Medhurst Thomas included a wider variety of displays, skillfully combining the semi-detached with the multi-unit row house.

In all cases, the houses were designed following an aesthetic that we could call “picturesque,” following the model of the English cottage. Details like the gabled roofs, the conspicuous chimneys, or the decorative use of stone were supposed to convey that appearance, which matched nicely the equally “English” layout of the ensemble. We can see in all the descriptive reports an insistence on words like “merry,” “simpáticas,” or “picturesque,” which were meant to reinforce this image. Besides the winning projects, probably the architect that best expressed this was Medhurst Thomas, who, English himself, made the best to give his houses the appearance of calm, rustic family life, even in the cases of his slightly more monumental composite row houses. (SEE FIGURES 3a-c)

FIGURES 3a-c: Housing types for CNCB Parque Avellaneda housing estate, 1917.
Raúl Rivera and Raúl Álvarez, 1st prize. In the front vistas we can see the typical semi-detached scheme. The houses share the dividing wall, which allows for economies in materials. Yet, the intention of providing mutual independence is stressed through placing the entrance doors on
opposite sides. The floorplan shows the compactness of the type, with minimum circulation space and no superfluous rooms such as vestibule, foyer, etc.


Alejandro Virasoro, 3rd prize. The architect attempted here to play with alternative orientations, in order to find better articulations between house, garden, and street.

Source: “Concurso de planos para un barrio de casas baratas en el Parque Avellaneda,” 478 (detail).

Charles Medhurst Thomas (non-prized for housing types). The row houses offers further possibility of economizing, through the multiplication of shared walls and services. Yet, he did not want to sacrifice independence (each house, as said, has its own garden and front yard), neither to lose the homely appearance of the ensemble.
The cottage was a housing type associated with a non-pretentious family lifestyle, publicized as such thing in nineteenth-century French handbooks, which recommended it as ideal for small suburban settings. It became extremely popular during the interwar years in Argentina, both for certain upper-middle-class estates in the outer suburbs located around train stations and for the type of social housing here described.\textsuperscript{26} It represented an aspirational type for workers with a steady job or, increasingly in the 1920s, the white-collar, in many cases public employee. These “clases medias,” which were beginning to be present in public discourse from the early postwar on, could envisage in such an architecture the economic stability and the sense of achievement that their economic life was granting them. The choice of such a type for this ensemble, in turn, was coherent with the reformist ideals that CNCB was pushing for of turning the worker into a stable and prosperous chief of family.

Through the competition, the Commission was opening the domain of housing policy to the architectural profession. This aperture was ambivalent and short lasting, though. Soon after the

competition and the public exhibition of the projects, the Commission decided not to follow any of them—a possibility that was already contemplated in the program. Instead, it would take them as bases from which to design a project of its own.

In fact, the Commission had a hired architect since its initial constitution in 1916, who was supposed to be in charge of the design of works like this one, something that was contradictory with the summoning of the competition. The Commission’s architect was Raúl G. Pasman (1887-1973), a young, upper-class professional who had graduated in 1908. If we take into consideration that for SCA, as we have already seen, to have a fixed position as employed architect was the opposite of being a respectable, liberal professional, it might not be surprising that the choice was for a young professional who had barely any previous career. It seems that the Commission too did not consider the position especially important, as revealed by the fact that the nomination of the architect was simply listed as one more member of its crew, next to the secretary, an assistant, and a scrivener.

The Commission, thus, made a new design for the ensemble. When we compare this design with the winning projects, the many similarities, suggest that, as it was then claimed, the Commission’s technicians had “taken the best” of each project and combined them in a final one.

---

27 See CNCB, Memoria II, 1917, 11-12.
28 This was a move criticized by the socialist press, which dubbed the whole thing a “comedy,” a waste of energy for the professionals, whose efforts had fallen on deaf ears. See Bunge, “La triste comedia de las casas baratas.”
29 Pasman’s career split between public service and a private practice he had with engineer Marcó del Pont. In the CNCB he developed a specialization in workers’ dwellings, authoring all CNCB’s projects up to the 1930s and being, as seen, Argentine delegate in the 1920 Pan American Congress of Architects. He was also an important member of the SCA and the Engineering association, getting to be president of the former in the 1930s. He also occupied several positions in state dependencies up to the 1940s. See Gustavo Vallejo, “Raúl Pasman,” in Liernur and Aliata, Diccionario de arquitectura en la Argentina.
30 The architect was not even the best paid member of the staff: the secretary earned 600 monthly pesos, and the architect earned $ 400. CNCB, Memoria I, 8. An average wage around 1916 for an unskilled worker was around $ 100-120. See Raúl Pasman, “Construcciones económicas,” Primer Congreso Nacional de Ingeniería. Sección Arquitectura (Buenos Aires: Talleres Gráficos de la Guía “Expreso,” 1918), 62.
It seems more likely, however, that the design was the pure work of Pasman himself, who could draw from one of his few previous professional experiences.

In 1913, in partnership with engineer Enrique Marcó del Pont, Pasman had projected a set of suburban dwellings in the southern town of Ranelagh. This housing group was a true experiment in the realm of multiple dwellings (“barrios”), in which the architects had reached a clear definition of the self-standing “cottages for workers” or “model residences for laborers” as a desired prototype for collective housing estates. Pasman further developed this type as he presented a paper during the First National Congress of Engineers, held in Buenos Aires in September-October 1916, when he was already CNCB’s hired architect.

Pasman’s prototypes were clear examples of a compact, semidetached cottage, with gabled roofs and front and back gardens, varying from 2 to 3 bedrooms. (SEE FIGURES 4a-c) In comparison with the winning projects, they seemed to propose an even more stressed dominance of the picturesque, as it could be seen through the conspicuous placing of the chimneys, the decoration of the walls through wooden crosspieces, or the use of the Jerkinhead roof. He also stuck to the semi-detached pattern, proposing it not only for garden-city layouts, but also for the typical square grid of Buenos Aires, which would lead (as it can be seen in the scheme) to an extremely unefficient use of land. (SEE FIGURES 5a-b)

FIGURES 4a-c: Raúl Pasman’s housing types, presented at the 1st National Engineering Congress, 1916. See the picturesque decoration on walls, roofs, chimneys and windows. In the floorplans, we can also appreciate the mirrored layout, which is supposed to be more economical, and the provision of individual garden to each property.

2-BR semi-detached houses. Floorplan: to the left, lower floors; to the right, upper floors.

31 The name was deceiving, though, in that the ensemble was in this case built for technical and hierarchical staff of the Southern Railway Company. See Gómez Pintus, “Postales suburbanas,” 70.
3-BR semi-detached houses.

3-BR row houses. This type is more efficient, since shared walls allow for economies in materials and for a better occupation of plot surface. It can be multiplied indefinitely along a longitudinal axis, as the plan shows. Floorplan: top, upper floors; bottom, lower floors.
It is hard not to think that Pasman’s designs were not what the Commission had in mind even before summoning the competition. When we compare them with the final designs that the Commission published, the similarities between them and Pasman’s are evident, which suggests that the alternatives proposed by the participants of the competition did not get to exert much influence. (SEE FIGURES 6a-b and 7) To put an example, the Commission kept Pasman’s absolute predominance of the two-story, semidetached cottage, the combination of roof planes, and the longitudinal display of the rooms. Concerning general layout, the final proposal of the Commission was equally Pasman’s, more curved an irregular, with wider streets and longer plots than the winning ones. (SEE FIGURE 7)

Figures 6a-b: CNCB’s final housing types for the Parque Avellaneda housing estate, 1918.

The houses are paired in mirrors, and displayed longitudinally along the axis of symmetry. Type A I (left): 2-BR, bedrooms on top floor. Type B I (right): 3-BR, two bedrooms on top floor, one on ground floor.
Source: CNCB, *Memoria* II, plates [II] and [III].

Figure 7: General layout proposed by CNCB, 1919.
Sources: CNCB, *Memoria III*, 1918-19, plate [VI].

The limited effect of the competition results were confirmed months later, when due to difficulties to register the Parque Avellaneda property, the Commission decided to build first in another of the acquired plots, the much smaller area adjacent to southern Parque Chacabuco. In those dimensions, the “planimetria” would become much simpler and the plots more compact, keeping the idea of a “barrio parque” almost only at a symbolic level, through the use of a curved street and an oval central square. This ensemble, known as Barrio Cafferata, was inaugurated in late 1921 (SEE FIGURES 8a-b).

Figures 8a-b: Barrio Cafferata: general layout and picture shortly after inauguration, 1921. The oval street was supposed to preserve the “picturesque” layout of the previous schemes, while the opening of passages within the block allowed for the display of the cottages with their own garden.

Source: CNCB, *Memoria II*, plate [I].
Any knowledgeable observer of interwar architecture can be surprised by the conservative aspect of these ensembles. Extremely traditional in their aesthetic and in the view of the family they convey, they were indeed the creation of an organization like CNCB, dominated by figures not too distant to its founder, social Catholic Juan Cafferata. The importance of the family and the self-owned house, ideological tenet that had subtended the 1915 law, remained active in the commission well into the 1920s.

This conservativeness was extended to the approach of the Commission towards the type of the collective house. Although, as said, the Commission defended a two-pronged strategy, it was evident from the outset that the collective house was seen as a second-best, temporary housing type, desirable only inasmuch as it allowed for a faster and more efficient way of facilitating the exit of working-class families from the downtown tenement.

The construction of the Commission’s first collective house reflected the contrast in the approach toward these two housing types. In 1918, CNCB decided to locate a collective dwelling in one of the small plots it had acquired, next to the southern district of Parque Patricios (which, as we have seen in Chapter 2, had already been scenario of reformist municipal initiatives). Instead of organizing a competition, it decided to directly make its hired architect responsible for
its design. This action, which definitely closed the door to broader participation of architects in it, reflected the low esteem the Commission paid to collective housing. Centrally located and simple replacement of the tenement, they could provide no new images of house, city, and family. The suburban individual house, instead, was what offered reformist potential and an image of a harmonic process of urban growth in the suburbs.

Pasman’s design for the collective house was a painful proof of the shortcomings of the Commission’s procedures. An architect with no experience in collective housing (he only had devised some partial prototype in his 1916 paper), he applied the well-known type of the closed interior courtyard that reminded the old model tenements of the 1880s (see Chapter 2). That scheme, plus a severe neoclassical façade, turned this massive 70-unit compound into an unappealing monumental building that looked almost like a public administration palace.\textsuperscript{32} (SEE FIGURES 9a-b) Although the individual resolution of each apartment was quite accomplished (for example managing to provide crossed ventilation and a balanced distribution to almost all apartments), the overall shape of the building generated small courtyards and random orientation for the units. Nothing of the homeliness of Pasman’s cottages was preserved, as if he did not consider this dwelling type worthy of the attributes of the family house.

\textsuperscript{32} The two-patio type is indeed reminiscent of two public buildings that were among the most important examples of Beaux-Arts architecture in the Buenos Aires of the 1910s: the elite high-school Colegio Nacional de Buenos Aires or the Supreme Court of Justice, both works by French architect Norbert Maillart.

Source: CNCB, Memoria V, 1920-21, plate [II].

2nd-4th floors, plan with separation of apartments. We can appreciate the distribution around the stairwells, guaranteeing that no entrance hall is shared by more than three apartments. Not also that, except from those located on the corner, all apartments have crossed ventilation. The orientation, however, is random, simply depending on the location within the rigidly-shaped compound.

Source: own elaboration after CNCB, Memoria IV, 1919-20, plate [VI].
This examination of the work of the National Housing Commission illustrates two broad points. First, the ambivalences of the relationship between state agency and the architectural profession, oscillating between the open competition to the preservation of the monopoly of design by the state itself. Second, the peculiar nature of CNCB’s “eclectic” approach to housing types, fostering a development of the “garden-suburb” type to the detriment of the collective house, something that was seen both in the fact that no competition was held for the latter, and in the proficiency of the hired architect of the commission, who only had some previous experience in the design of garden suburbs.

b) “Modern Constructions.” Individual houses and the problem of urban density

It might be remembered that critical voices of the suburbanization process of Buenos Aires had warned, during its accelerated 1904-1914 period, about the antieconomic consequences of the low density that this process was generating in the new suburban areas (see Chapter 2). A sparsely populated city of individual plots made the cost of urban infrastructure excessive, which resulted in a high financial burden for the municipality, as well as in longer commuting.

These early complaints were heard again in the 1920s. In his 1923 conference at the SCA, for instance, Carlos Ancell explained that in the new neighborhoods the price of municipal services was equated to 50% of the price of construction, so that it was necessary to strive for a “una acción edilicia q procure la edificación más densa en los barrios distantes.”33 There were different strategies to achieve such an “acción edilicia,” as we will see in this and the following subsections.

33 Ancell, “Conferencia,” 97.
In 1922, prompted by the housing crisis, the Municipality of Buenos Aires signed a contract with a private building company, the Compañía de Construcciones Modernas (CCM), a holding presided by landowner and businessman Samuel Hale Pearson (1867-1925), which included also the participation of many constructors, industrialists and bankers. The Company offered a strategy to achieve low construction costs and high density occupation that had no precedents in the country: the investment of big-scale capital in the construction of workers’ dwellings. Such public-private partnership, the Company and supporters of the contract argued, would make mass production and use of standardized pieces possible, thus achieving savings of up to 20% in comparison to standard construction.

It was an offer difficult to resist, since the involvement of big capital in the housing business was one of the long-term demands of housing reformers, from the days of the Irigoyen law onwards. Furthermore, as we will see, it promised to do so through a scheme that preserved the centrality of the self-owned individual house, thus fulfilling the advantages of suburbanization (the economic independence of the workers) in an efficient way that avoided its side effects, namely low density.

The project that the Company had in mind was simple—and profitable. It esteemed the construction of 6000 houses in 6 years, which was a truly massive scale in the local milieu (we can remember here that by 1922 CNCB, EHO, and UPCA had built, in total, less than 500 housing units), in five stretches of land that the Municipality reserved for that purpose.

---

34 Pearson, the son a wealthy American merchant that had established in the country in the mid-19th century, was a dynamic landowner and prominent member in the directive board of several firms, among the energy giant Compañía Anglo-Argentina de Electricidad, of a series of railway companies.

35 Ana María Rigotti, Viviendas para los trabajadores: el municipio de Rosario frente a la cuestión social (Rosario: Prohistoria, 2011), 72. The contract was a reedition of a 1913 one between that same company and the Municipality, which had floundered due to the increase of construction costs during the war.

36 Id., 72-3.
Financially, the Municipality guaranteed the initiative through the issuing of a series of bonds that represented two thirds of the construction price (plus the cost of land). The social aim of promoting housing construction and homeownership justified a consortium that meant an enormous financial effort for the Municipality and an extremely advantageous deal for the Company, which was in charge of selling the houses and cashing the benefits. Recipients, finally, were expected to be workers and their families, who earned a wage no higher than $ 400 (which was actually a white-collar employee wage). The house would be acquired through the usual scheme of monthly installments, in this case to be paid during 27 years.37

The ensembles built by the company were located in long stretches of land in peripheral areas of the city, in the western and southwestern districts that were, as we have seen, the scenario of the most spectacular urban growth in the period. (SEE MAP 2) We can appreciate how they entailed also, for the Municipality, an intervention in the western areas of the city, something rather innovative for a municipal government that had tended to focus its action in the center. This was a bet through which the government was pushing toward certain integration of the most distant “barrios.”

37 See id., and Gustavo Vallejo, “Compañía de Construcciones Modernas,” in Liernur and Aliata, Diccionario de arquitectura en la Argentina.
MAP 2: location of CCM barrios in 1928 map.
Note the detailed reproduction of their layout in the inferior part of the map.

1: Barrio Emilio Mitre, 1923, 623 houses
2: Barrio Nazca, 1923, 384 houses
3: Barrio Varela-Bonorino, 1924-26, 902 houses.
4: Barrio Tellier-Falcón, 1924-27, 1680 houses.
5: Barrio Segurola, 1926, 650 houses


The ensembles consisted of a linear multiplication of individual houses, with the opening of three internal passages per block, in order to provide each house with independent access to the street, which was one of the rigid dictums of the traditional type of the individual house. (SEE FIGURES 10 and 11a-b) The modification of the traditional block through the opening of passages was also an idea with which urban reformers were toying in many of their projects (we have seen it in the Barrio Cafferata), as well as being used by land speculators in order to multiply the amount of plots per block. In this case, the multiplication was considerable, as we can see in Figure 11a-b.
The endless repetition of houses with the exact same floorplan and the pairing of the semidetached houses in groups of four were expected to be the way of making the whole endeavor more economical, thanks to serial production of doors, windows, and construction
pieces. The scale of the endeavor was indeed impressive, as the aerial views with which the company advertised the properties showed dramatically. (SEE FIGURES 12a-c) It was a scale, a density and a serial repetition that contrasted greatly with the surrounding suburban context of blocks occupied by scattered houses in big, almost unbuilt plots.

Figures 12a-c: aerial views of CCM neighborhoods, as part of the Company’s advertisement brochures.
Barrio Nazca still under construction, aerial view and detail. Note the contrast in densities between the barrio and the surrounding suburban texture, populated by individual houses located in big, half-unbuilt plots.
Economies of scale.
Barrio Emilio Mitre. The Parque Chacabuco to the left.

Source: Municipalidad de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires (MCBA), Casas cómodas, higiénicas y baratas en Villa del Parque y Liniers (brochure), late 1920s, 17. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno.
Id., 16.

Barrio Tellier-Liniers, in the southwestern corner of the city.

Id., 18.
Due to the small size of the plot (75 sq m), the houses were extremely compact, built in two stories and with an intermediate level in which a maid room was located. (SEE FIGURES 13-14) Kitchen and bathroom were paired up, in order to economize pipelines, and rooms were displayed with minimum circulation space. The open space that surrounded the houses, in turn, was extremely narrow, only allowing for sunlight to enter the rooms but not really being a usable “garden” or yard.

Figures 13a-b: individual CCM houses, late 1920s.

Figures 14a-b: housing types: layout, lateral cut, and front view.

Id., 10, 2.

Id., 8-9.
Morphologically, these ensembles had certain similarities with engineer Ortúzar’s visions of the expanding city as covered by stretches of serialized individual houses in self-contained neighborhoods. Yet, as certain critics of the endeavor stated, CCM ones failed to be true barrios, since they lacked any type of common equipment, such as green spaces, communal institutions, or shops, which could generate cohesion and identity. Proof of this was that in 1925 the municipality itself, through its urban-renewal body, the Comisión de Estética Edilicia (see later), planned to reform the plans of these ensembles in order to include a small central park in them.\(^{38}\)

The whole CCM initiative was controversial. One of the sources of controversy was based on the many denounces of corruption, which stemmed from the fact that there were very opaque relations between many stockholders and municipal authorities (there were councilmen and municipal bureaucrats among the former),\(^{39}\) of surcharges that increased the profits companies,\(^{40}\) and, more in general, to the fact that the company was operating merely in speculative fashion, using the discourse on social housing and homeownership as a simple justification in order to earn great profits at the expense of the municipality.\(^{41}\) This was aggravated by the subsequent irregularities that made the Company fail to fulfill its initial aim, having built only 4200 houses in the expected time frame. By 1929, after two inspections done by the City Council due to socialist pressure, the Municipality ended up cancelling the contract and taking over the whole endeavor.\(^{42}\)

---

\(^{38}\) The Commission’s project states that it would open in those neighborhoods “a big square for physical excercise,” Comisión de Estética Edilicia, \textit{Proyecto orgánico para la urbanización del municipio} (Buenos Aires: Peuser, 1925), 17.

\(^{39}\) Rigotti, \textit{Viviendas para los trabajadores}, 72.

\(^{40}\) \textit{Crítica}, 29 dic 1922, 8.

\(^{41}\) \textit{La Vanguardia}, 17 jun 1922, 2.

\(^{42}\) Vallejo, “Compañía de Construcciones Modernas,” 143.
These issues show the unexpected problems that could emerge from the cherished idea of a virtuous alliance between state and private capital in order to face one of the challenges of the social question. Yet, it is also interesting to look for the technical problems that this initiative generated, which were denounced by contemporaries with equal vehemence. The author of the prototypes remained unknown at the period (a chronicler in the mid-1930s talked about an “anonymous designer”), although the work has been later on attributed to Estanislao Pirovano (1890-?), a young architect interested in neo-colonial and neo-Tudor revivalism, whose experience was basically on individual family houses for the aristocracy. Somehow repeating the situation we have seen with Pasman and the CNCB, CCM did not find it necessary to make any depuration of the housing type through mechanisms such as the public competition, and rather stuck to a fixed design by a hired architect. Indeed, in the mid-1930s, Russian-Argentine modernist architect Wladimiro Acosta would question the lack of technical skills that the housing types and the whole ensemble revealed, which due to certain basic mistakes failed to achieve the efficiency that the big scale of the initiative promised. Echoing many formulations done already at the time of its construction, he criticized the excessive proportion of street surface per block, which made paving costs extremely high (and, to make matters worse, to be paid by the municipality); the equally excessive (22%) proportion of built surface used in walls, which was a consequence of the choice of a semi-detached type for such compact houses; the

---

44 Descendant from a wealthy Italian immigrant and son of an engineer, Pirovano studied architecture in Glasgow and Paris, graduating from the anti-academic École spéciale d'architecture in 1914. Back in the country, he built a successful career as a typical architect of high-end individual houses of a marked neo-Tudor and neo-colonial revivalist styles. See Florencia Barcina, “Estanislao Pirovano y su obra neohispánica en Buenos Aires,” in Martínez Nespral, Fernando (2010). “Imágenes de España en el arte y la arquitectura rioplatenses, del neocolonial al neohispano,” Documento de Trabajo N° 253, Universidad de Belgrano.
45 “This was thus the failure of an initiative that, thanks to its scale, could have procuced excellent works, if only its technical direction had been trusted to competent professionals…” Acosta, “La vivienda obrera en Buenos Aires,” 59.
small, cubic rooms, which multiplied wall surface; the existence of a maid room, absurd in affordable dwellings; the use of different façade decorations to individualize the units, which was a further extra cost, etc.

Overall, however, the main problem lay at the roots of the attempt of solving the problem of density through individual units. Beyond the denounces of corruption and the attacks on the technical defects of the design, the initiatives of the CCM took the contradiction to the limit, and showed in an exemplary way the unsolvable tension between the housing type promoted by turn-of-the-century reformism and the needs of speeded urban expansion. In contrast with the CNCB experiences, which were done in the fashion of an individual and qualitative “experiment,” here there was an actual attempt of achieving a big-scale, material solution to the housing question through the path of the individual self-owned house, and its failure remained an indelible mark.

c) Collective dwellings in the periphery: house, block, and city in the work of Fermín Bereterbide.

Rather than in an institution or firm, in this section we will focus on a personal trajectory: that of Fermín Bereterbide, first Argentine architect that developed a career centered on the housing question. The reasons for this are not hagiographic—there is no point in painting (again) the heroic portrait of a lonely pioneer.46 Rather, my interest is to use his case to show the interweaving between expertise and public housing agencies as well as the development of collective housing in the urban context of the 1920s.

Born in Rosario in 1895 to a middle-class family, Bereterbide studied in the School of Architecture of the UBA, graduating in 1918. Although as a young man he held socialist beliefs,

46 Juan Molina y Vedia has done so in his Fermín Bereterbide, la construccion de lo imposible (Buenos Aires: Colihue, 1997).
his first experience with social housing was through participation in a Catholic-led initiative. It might be remembered that in September 1919 the Unión Popular Católica Argentina (UPCA), a national social-Catholic organization devoted to social action, had launched as its first initiative a massive fundraising campaign, through which it aimed to build a set of housing estates for working-class families (see Ch. 3). By August 1920, in the midst of the rent crisis, UPCA decided to materialize this initiative. For two of these estates, a group of individual houses in the southern working-class district of Barracas and a collective house (a “mansión popular”—popular mansion) in Flores, a consolidated and well-communicated western suburban area, (SEE MAP 3) UPCA leaders organized an open competition of architectural projects.47

Map 3: UPCA and Municipality’s architectural competitions, early and mid-1920s. In black, UPCA’s barrio parque. In blue, UPCA and Municipality’s projects for collective houses.

UPCA:
1: Barrio M. Espinosa (inaug. 1923)
2: Mansión colectiva Flores (inaug. 1921)
Municipality:
3: Casa colectiva Chacarita (inaug. 1928).
4: Casa colectiva Palermo (unbuilt).
5: Casa colectiva Flores (unbuilt).

Source: own elaboration, on 1925 map by A. Cannizzaro (Plano de la Ciudad).

47 The decision of organizing the competition was taken by a commission that UPCA’s governing body had designated with the specific task of beginning to make use of the GCN’s funds. This commission was composed by Mr Victoriano S. Lobato and Drs Adrián Beccar Varela and César Raúl Flores. Boletín Mensual de la U.P.C.A., No 6, August 1920, 11.
While the bases of the competition for the individual-housing compound were very similar to those of the CNCB one, the one for the “mansion” was fairly innovative. First, the organization, for the first time, of a competition on collective housing. By 1920, apartment buildings were still a rarity in the city.\textsuperscript{48} Concentrated in the central districts, they tended to be either commercial/administrative or, when residential, for the middle or upper classes. The construction of affordable apartment buildings (the casas colectivas) had only two precedents: El Hogar Obrero (EHO)’s 1913 building (see chapter 2) and CNCB’s Valentín Alsina housing estate. In both cases, the institutions that built them had not evaluated the possibility of summoning a competition. The technical challenges of the type were solved, with more or less dexterity, by architects directly hired for the occasion or staff architects, as we have seen. Now, in contrast, UPCA opened the door to the profession, expecting that through that mechanism the best technical solution to their project would be reached.

The second important novelty was that this housing project, once again in contrast with EHO and CNCB’s, was not centrally located, but in the periphery, something typically (as we have seen in the previous cases) reserved for the “barrios parques.” It is true that Flores was a neighborhood with a consolidated commercial core, well-connected to downtown through railway (and UPCA’s mansion would be just 200 meters from the station), which made high density a less innovative element. Yet, in the southern area of Barracas, more centric than Flores, with equal general density, and in a plot of comparable surface, the organization chose to build individual houses. Why did it build a collective house in this faraway location?

\textsuperscript{48} In 1914, 80% of the houses in the city had only one floor, 16% had two, and only 4% had three or more. (1914 National Census, quoted in Charles S. Sargent, \textit{The Spatial Evolution of Greater Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1870-1930} (Center for Latin American Studies, Arizona State University, 1974), 64.)
Undoubtedly, both novelties derived from the fact that UPCA, in contrast with EHO and CNCB, found in the typology of the collective house an ideal reformist device, and valued it by itself. UPCA’s social program, based on an idea of harmony between the social classes, of paternalistic social hierarchies, and of the preeminence of the spiritual over the material, strove for the end of liberalism and the beginning of an era of state-, church- and private-charity-sponsored social welfare as the path to social peace. As we have seen in Chapter 5, the “mansión popular” had over the individual house the advantage that it allowed for a tightly controlled discipline by the administration of the compound, and therefore the more efficient promotion of morality and good customs. The organization of an architectural competition, thus, can be clearly seen as part of UPCA’s appreciation of this housing type.

Towards this aim, UPCA set the conditions that all the submitted projects had to fulfill. Besides total dwelling capacity (90-100 families), basic apartment services, and general apartment and room dimensions, there was also a requirement that the building had four stories, that half the surface of the plot was left unbuilt (in order to serve as yards, playground, etc.), that each staircase served only a small number of apartments, and that the ground floor sections adjacent to the street were reserved for stores and services.49 The jury that would evaluate the projects was of a mixed composition, part ideological and part technical, composed respectively by UPCA’s hierarchy and by a commission of architects and engineers.50

---

50 UPCA authorities were lawyer H. Beccar Varela and cleric Gustavo Franceschi; the technicians were UPCA’s “technical commission” (architects René Karman and Pablo Hary, engineers Rómulo Ayerza, Agustín Mercau, and Carlos María Morales) and two architects nominated by the contest participants (Raúl Villeminot and Alejandro Christophersen).
The competition was successful, receiving many proposals, from which the jury selected two winners to share the first prize. One of them, by the small engineering firm of Quayat and Serra Lima, was chosen for its general layout (the “ground floor concept”), while the other one, chosen for the interior distribution of the apartments, by Bereterbide. Both projects shared many characteristics, which reveal a certain common technical language used to satisfy UPCA’s requisits. In all cases the architects used a combination of heights: next to or joining the four-story pavilions ran a continuous ground floor “ring” facing the street and enclosing the ensemble. (SEE FIGURES 15a-d) This was deemed convenient for a set of reasons: first, because it allowed for the isolation, in case of epidemic, of a whole pavilion in “quarantine” (note here the old hygienist program still in action); second, because the continuous ring could host, as said, stores and communal services, thus profiting from the higher rent of direct street access; third, because the use of pavilions allowed for a better orientations both for apartments and for courtyards and playgrounds, in contrast with the old cloistered type of the Valentín Alsina compound. Other architectural features that served UPCA’s program were the strategic location of staircases, not only serving few apartments each (which made apartment life almost as independent that of an individual home) but also being easily watched by the janitors, who lived in apartments located in the yard.

51 “Los concursos de la Unión Popular Católica Argentina,” Revista de Arquitectura (RA), No 29, 1921, 8.

Project Quayat and Serra Lima: E-shaped pattern. As sun enters from the north, the mult allow for better lighting of individual apartments. See also the undivided units facing the southern street, which are shops.


Project Bereterbide: similar layout, but with two pavilions that are totally independent.
These projects, with features such as the use of pavilions and the combination of heights to allow for airing and light, were totally innovative in the local milieu. Historians have established that their most likely models were housing estates built by the Rothschild foundation in Paris, which circulated in architectural journals during the period, or those built in northern Italy by the Institute de case popolari, which had circulated from the beginning of the century. (SEE FIGURES 16a-c) The latter showed strong resemblances to Bereterbide’s project, in the combination of volumes, in the simplicity of decoration, and in the use of the gabled roof. (SEE FIGURES 17a-b)

Figures 16a-c. Italian and French housing estates, appeared published in the journal *El arquitecto* next to the program of UPCA’s concurso, in August 1920.

a) Milano, exhibition of Case popolari, Milano 1906. Archs A Cotton and S Rousselot. Note the street shops, and the use of gable roof in spite of the monumentality of the ensemble. In the center of the blocks, we can see the entrance doors to the internal open spaces.

---

b-c: Rothschild foundation apartments in Paris, arch M Bertin. See the combination of hights and the display of the (continuous) pavilion encircling internal courtyards.
Figure 17a-b: Italian ensemble, appeared in the popular magazine *Caras y caretas* in 1907. Here the combination of heights is extremely similar to Berterbide’s. In comparison to the two previous examples, the decoration is much more austere. Also like Bererterbide, the architect has chosen a gable roof and vertical windows. In the second picture, see the complex articulations of pavilions within the internal open courtyards.

Source: id., 52-53.

It seems, thus, that Quayat, Serra Lima, and Bereterbide were using almost entirely pre-war models, for housing estates in cities that, like Buenos Aires, were facing the housing question but not the massive problem of postwar urban reconstruction. Besides, by 1920 the latter was, as said, still in its cradle.

The Junta Nacional, governing body of UPCA, developed through its “technical commission” a final plan joining both winning projects. In it, they eliminated the free-standing pavilions of Bereterbide’s project but also Quayat and Serra Lima’s isolated courtyards, turning the project into something slightly more similar to the enclosed patio, which was closer to UPCA’s ideal of disciplinary control. (SEE FIGURES 18a-b) Bereterbide’s aesthetics, however, prevailed. His architecture attempted to convey, when we compare it to the severe neoclassicism of EHO and CNCB’s collective houses, a much more homely and gay appearance: the monumentality of the big volumes and the austerity required by the competition rules were
tempered by the use of gabled roof and exposed brick on the base. (SEE FIGURES 19a-b) In turn, as specialized journals of the period observed, it was a far more accomplished building, in terms of its architectural and constructive quality, its layout and orientation (making northwards orientation prevail in the majority of apartments), and the modern furniture equipment included in kitchens and bathrooms.53

---

53 One chronicler deemed it “the most important in its type ever built in South America. Not only is it the most modern, but also the most advanced expression of ideas that are only now emerging worldwide. These ideas, breaking the old molds of conventional architecture, attempt to assure to the most needed classes the benefits of a healthy, full of light and sun, happy and appealing...” (“Casa colectiva en Flores,” El arquitecto constructor, No 253, 16 November 1922).
The UPCA competitions offered thus certain novelties. The same way that the 1919 fund raising campaign had been fully modern in its employment of the media and public opinion (see chapter 3), the competition process was linking architecture and housing policy in new ways. On one hand, this was a process that hierarchized the design of collective social housing. Collective housing could become, like other important public buildings, the object of a competition, thus giving legitimacy and importance to the type that it did not have before. It was an architectural
object now recognized as not less complex and demanding than a governmental building, a post
office, or a train station. Second, in contrast with the 1917 CNCB competition, the client actually
abode by the results of the competition, thus making the winning projects real steps towards the
materialization of the new housing proposals, which were indeed very innovative in the local
demilieu. Third, making the exchange between social reformers and architects a meaningful
instance, it paved the way for the emergence of very different professional paths for architects.
If, as said, in previous periods architecture professionals devoted themselves mainly to public
and upper-class residential buildings, this type of competition appeared to make possible a new
type of career linking mass housing with architecture.

Bereterbide’s trajectory would be a proof of that, as well as of the limitations that this
career imposed, in comparison to the traditional path of the liberal professional. The UPCA
competition, which Bereterbide won being only 25 years old and having graduated only two
years before, was a major achievement for him, and marked the beginning of a career devoted to
the problem of “vivienda popular.” His acquired expertise, prototypes and theories soon
established his reputation as one of the most important local experts on the housing question in
the interwar years. Yet, such a position was not necessarily the source of much professional
prestige. In spite of his sophisticated perspective on housing and, later in the 1930s and ‘40s, on
town planning, he would work for years in the realm of municipal bureaucracy (where he was
technical adviser to the Transit and Public Works council commissions), rather than designing
and building.

The reason for this was that, as said above, the occasions for materializations of new housing
schemes and conceptions were scarce, and the CNCB architecture office exerted a strong
monopoly of them. There was yet one exception to this. In late 1925, the municipal government, pressed by the socialist block in the City Council, called for a competition for the construction of three collective houses in municipal terrains.54 One of the houses of the competition would be located in Palermo, in a rather interstitial spot among railway tracks; another in Chacarita, next to a big square and not far away from an important transportation hub; and the third one in southern Flores, in a distant and neglected area. (SEE previous MAP 3) Like in the UPCA case, the bases of the competition mandated that the estates hosted between 90 and 100 families, that they left at least 50% of the surface open for greenery and playgrounds, and that the ground floor was reserved to small shops and services.

What separated this competition from UPCA’s was its institutional context. The municipal authorities were during those years involved in what would be the first important town-planning initiative of twentieth-century Buenos Aires, the so-called “Plano Regulador” issued by a special commission led by Mayor Carlos Noel. This commission, named “Comisión de Estética Edilicia” (CEE), pursued an idea of global reform of the city through certain initiatives of suburban development that aimed to leave behind the “downtown-centered” perspective that had prevailed in previous periods, and rather to make the newer areas (the “barrios”) the main object of attention, something that, as we have seen, was partially implied in the 1922 project of the CCM housing estates. Thus, the CEE proposed changes like the displacement of certain downtown activities (such as municipal government) to new western locations, the better interconnection among neighborhoods through the opening of new streets

54 That was rather exceptional: while the rent crisis had prompted municipal authorities, as we have seen in Chapter 4, to implement certain measures in order to tame the increasing cost of living and to promote construction (for instance, tax modifications and the revaluation of properties), it had not made them get involved in direct housing construction.
and diagonals, or the strengthening the “system” of peripheral parks of the city.\textsuperscript{55} Even though housing was not the main focus of the Comisión’s work (and that is why socialist pressure mattered a lot), the 1925 competition could not be alien to some of its main aims. It is for that reason that the new collective houses were to be located in a suburban area, promoting the linkage between housing and green spaces, and also (in the case of Flores) as part of the plan of revalorizing the abandoned southwestern Buenos Aires through the creation of a big Parque del Sur.\textsuperscript{56}

From the more than 40 projects received by the competition jury,\textsuperscript{57} Bereterbide won the first prize in all three houses. His project was in many ways a reedition of the 1920 “mansión popular,” combining high and low edification and making an almost continuous strip in the ground floor, as well as using the same austere aesthetics, although with a slightly merrier outlook, for instance through the use of ornate balconies or pergolas. Yet, the new settings allowed Bereterbide to expand the total size of the projects, further developing the idea of a diversified central courtyard, which included playground and other uses, and to play with new ways of integrating the block to the surrounding grid, through the communication between interior courtyard and street, particularly on the eastern side, neighboring a big public park. (SEE FIGURES 20a-c) In the case of Palermo, where, on the contrary, the total area was smaller, he kept the general type but increased the height of the pavilions from 4 to 6 stories, thus tensing at maximum the equilibrium and homely appearance of the type. (SEE FIGURES 21a-c)

Figures 20a-c: Fermín Bereterbide’s project for the Chacarita housing estate, 1925.

\textsuperscript{55} On the Comisión de Estética Edilicia, see Adrián Gorelik, \textit{La grilla y el parque: espacio público y cultura urbana en Buenos Aires, 1887-1936} (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 1998), 318-337.
\textsuperscript{56} See Ballent, Liernur, and Silvestri, “Los Andes,” 50.
\textsuperscript{57} The jury was composed by the general director of the municipal Ministry of Public Works, by the architecture director of the national Ministry of Public Works, by the general director of Sanitary Administration, and by a representative from the SCA.
General layout: there is a big internal courtyard, interrupted by pavilions and open (in contrast with the CNCB casa Valentín Alsina) to the street at many points. Historians have praised this integration of the block to the urban context, while preserving a protected interior.

Internal layout of apartments: crossed ventilation, unification of pipelines. The self standing walls make it necessary to build a grid-like pattern, which limits the possibilities of varying room shapes and dimensions (compare with Vautier and Prebisch’s design in Figure 22c).
The plot is smaller, so the architect had to make the buildings taller, which diminished the proportionate and homely aspect of the Chacarita group. The patios have been totally separated.

Source: “Concurso municipal de anteproyectos para la construcción de casas colectivas económicas,” Revista de Arquitectura, No 64, April 1926, 127-139.

A visit to one of the second competition prizes lets us appreciate the fact that the new typology of the collective house was the opportunity to develop new techniques and aesthetics. It was a project won by Alberto Prebisch and Ernesto Vautier, two young architects (both born in
1899), who after a European “grand tour” in the early 1920s became pioneering figures in the
development of modernist architectural language in Argentina.\textsuperscript{58} It was a project made in an
audacious avant-garde style that we would nowadays definitely call “modernist,” whit fronts
wiped out of any decorative element, a flat and continuous façade, and horizontal windows.
(SEE FIGURES 22a-c) The building prioritized the westward orientation for better sunlight, in
contrast to Bereterbide’s opening to the east. The apartments, in Prebisch and Vautier’s project,
had a more functional design and better circulation, in great measure due to the use of an
independent structure of reinforced concrete that gave them freedom for the placing of walls
(Bereterbide, in contrast, used the traditional method of self-supporting walls, which made his
apartments more rigidly planned and with less optimization of space). (SEE FIGURE 22c).\textsuperscript{59}

Figures 22a-c: Alberto Prebisch and Ernesto Vautier’s project for the Chacarita housing estate,
1925. The pavilions are much more independent from each other than in Bereterbide’s project.

Front view: The language is fully modernist. A continuous horizontal strip, plain white surfaces,
no decoration, no gable roof, horizontal windows.

\textsuperscript{58} On Vautier and Prebisch, see Liernur, \textit{La arquitectura en la Argentina del siglo XX}, Ch. 3.
\textsuperscript{59} See Ballent, Liernur, and Silvestri, “Los Andes,” 54.
The internal distribution of apartments is much more flexible than in Bereterbide’s project (Figure 20-c). Thanks to the use of reinforced concrete, walls can be placed at will, the weight of the building relying on columns. All apartments have crossed ventilation. The stairwell is shard only between two apartments.

Source: Ibid..

Of the three projected collective houses, Chacarita was the only one finally built, and remains to date one of the most famous experiments in collective housing of the period in the local scene. Like the UPCA building, it was a rather unique example of collective housing in the periphery. It was connected, as said, to the town-planning project that the CEE had launched in 1923, yet it also showed the versatility of the architectural type, which worked in different directions, be it at the service of a reformist municipal initiative or of the disciplinary and paternalistic social project of UPCA. The comparison with Prebisch and Vautier’s project has also let us see how the competition could work as a gallery for the development of new architectural styles, and how social housing was becoming the opportunity not only for professional involvement but also for initiatives of aesthetic transformation.
Soon after the competition, and frustrated by the eventual cancellation of the construction of two of the three collective houses, Bereterbide carried out on his own the design of one further project that was supposed to be the culmination of the whole endeavor. The “Casa Colectiva Parque de los Patricios,” to be located not far from CNCB’s Valentín Alsina, was a huge estate for more than 450 families. Not tied to any imposed program, Bereterbide allowed himself to be more “utopian,” increasing the overall density of the compound and radically modernizing the language, through the elimination of picturesque decoration, the use of more imposing volumes, and a very flexible display of courtyards. The vistas of the yards convey a conquering image of modernity, with geometrical volumes, straight angles, and a strong sense of the interior public space. (SEE FIGURES 23a-d)

Figures 23a-d: model and vistas of Bereterbide’s 1925 project for a collective house in Parque Patricios.
See a scale that suggests a city-within-the-city, with internal streets, parks, and other spaces. Such scale also suggests multipliability, the reproduction of this estate as a pattern for the city. See the modernist language of the white, sober, and imposing masses.
This project was for Bereterbide a general endeavor of renovating community life. In the manner of a socialist Viennese Höfe, he expected his building to be a microcosmos in which a new, communitarian lifestyle would be enabled by the common infrastructure and institutions he provided to the ensemble. In his words, it would have “65% of courtyards and gardens. Common services: theater, laundry room, public baths, shops, kindergarten, medical office, library, indoor patios and playground, solarium and gym, storage rooms, toilettes, telephone, etc.”

Bereterbide’s “barrios obreros” were, in a way, retaking the path of the Garnier-style neighborhoods dreamed by Ortúzar and Fernández Poblet in the 1910s, but stripping off from them the ideology of the self-owned house, and placing in its stead a social, equally utopian view of community. Density—the technical demand—was fulfilled adding community to it. Many have considered Bereterbide’s enterprise in the 1920s a solitary, quixotic struggle towards a communitarian integration between housing and city. While this latter piece might suggest so, it is necessary, on the contrary, to consider it a continuation of the institutionally-rooted projects that had given birth to it (the municipal concursos). Bereterbide’s later career in the realm of municipal government and town-planning also suggest that he was interested in pushing for his new visions of community as a technician closely related to the state machinery, rather than as an isolated utopian.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has shown some of the discussions and mechanisms through which the architectural profession got involved in the housing question in the interwar years. It has done so focusing on

---

two axes: the relationship between architects and public powers, and the evolution of the suburban collective house as a new dwelling type.

The successes and failures of processes of open competition have shown us the complexities of any situation in which a new set of experts enters the realm of social reform. Summoned by public powers, the relationship was not linear, and allowed for the alternative of the public competition and the directly hired architect. Of utmost interest for me has been the possibility of establishing a certain correlation between type of relation between expert and state and architectural design. With the risk of excessive determinism, I suggest in this chapter that the competition process allowed stronger possibilities of innovation and a more flexible relation between social and architectural program. On the contrary, the cases of fixed architects suggest a simpler resolution of the different technical problems that emerge from the social programs of the institutions that are carrying forward housing policies.

From that analysis, we have seen the emergence of the collective type as a new technical device of social policy, appreciating its possibility of working towards different social projects. The process of open competition let architects develop proposals for collective houses of innovative characteristics, types that would become gradually standardized and part of a “toolbox” that, when public authorities in the 1930s and especially in the 1940s embarked in policies of mass housing, was available for use. For example, central courtyards were not any more the only option—more flexible U- and E-shaped pavilion designs, as the ones we have seen in the case of Fermín Bereterbide, would be chosen for collective housing in the years to come. The new types had technical advantages, in that they could achieve high density, combined with adequate conditions of sunlight, airing, orientation, etc., which was possible thanks to typological experimentation.
In social terms, in turn, the collective house acquired new valiances during these years. We have seen how it was tied to Catholic view of social harmony and a paternalistic-authoritarian strand of social reform, but also to the more modern view of the city of the Municipality in the mid-1920s. This new value of the collective house was the consequence of two different set of changes. One was the long-lasting effect of the 1919-21 rent crisis and the policy solutions found to it, which had placed rent at the center of the social question. Instead of the priority of the self-owned house to which CNCB clung, the new context was making clear that the promotion of collective (rented) housing was socially a much more relevant program.

The second set of changes has to do with urban expansion. A quick look at the maps for the CNCB, UPCA, and municipal housing estates shows that these were located in the suburbs. We have seen in chapter 1 that in the 1920s, as the city continued its growth process, these suburbs were in the process of becoming barrios. It was in them, as Adrián Gorelik and others have shown, that the main efforts of social and urban reform were placed, trying to ameliorate their economic conditions and to strengthen a community life that was emerging. The collective house, in contrast with the multiplication of the garden neighborhoods, was able to provide both. In strictly economic terms, it could solve, as we have seen, the problem of low density through a more intensive use of the land. In social and cultural terms, in turn, it was able—at least in the most “utopian” formulations of Bereterbide, but also in the original spiritualist plans of UPCA—to promote new types of sociability and collective identity.
In this dissertation, I have presented the story of what conceptual historians might call a Sattelzeit.\footnote{I use here, somewhat freely, Reinhart Koselleck’s concept of Sattelzeit. It denotes a period in which concepts change their general meaning and the way they are used, so that the (political) vocabulary of that period, while coinciding with that of another one, actually differs widely in terms of the concepts those words refer to, and in the way they organize the field of social and political experience. See Koselleck’s introduction to Reinhart Koselleck, Werner Conze, Otto Brunner, eds., Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland, Vol 1 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1972).} Focusing on the problem of housing in Argentina during the early postwar period, I have attempted to shed light on broader changes, both local and global, that affected economic and social conceptions, the relation between society and state, and the use and notions of architectural space. The trigger was, as is often the case, an emergency: that of high rents after the war. But that critical situation unleashed a broader set of processes that would end up generating a change of epoch, opening a path that would remain unaltered in its fundamental traits up through the late 1930s and early 1940s—when another war, another popular political leader, and another process of social and political incorporation would configure a new Sattelzeit.

If we return to the first housing project we have visited, the 1907 Barrio Butteler, and compare it with Bereterbide’s 1925 projects, the visual image already partially conveys of the enormity of the change: the dimensions, the internal distributions of apartments, and the general layouts are dramatically different. My research has also shown beyond what is immediately visible: the implications of the new suburban location, the new type of technical expertise required to design and build the ensemble, the rent relation between dweller and owner, the new conception of the role of the state in relation to the housing question. Through the construction of...
the 1925 housing estates, state and expert alike were turning all these novelties into a material reality.

In my interpretation, the outburst of the housing question in 1919-21 was a knot that concentrated these shifts spatially and temporally, accelerating the dynamics of historical change. If housing occupied the attention of contemporaries in such an overwhelming way during that conjuncture, it was because it carried within itself the potentialities (or the risks) of all these transformations.

These changes and reformulations were the effect of the action of a wide array of individuals, institutions, and social and professional groups. Throughout the dissertation, I have attempted to give them voice in a balanced way as they appeared. Physicians, engineers, journalists, tenants and landlords, statisticians, legislators, lawyers, and architects became successively involved in the housing question, individually or as part of state agencies, political parties, newspapers, building companies, and social organizations.

I have highlighted the role of experts in the generation of this change. Why? It has not been simply to highlight the sophistication of their discourses or to trace the emergence of new ideas per se. Rather, my intention was to show the importance of the different (sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory) figures and locations of the expert in society, and to understand the importance between that location and the ability of the expert to propose solutions. Third, the experts, precisely due to their specific knowledge, have attempted to make sense of unprecedented situations, to give “legibility” to them, and in many cases, to think creatively of equally unprecedented “ways out” of situations.

Yet, experts have not been the sole driver. Broader social and political forces affected change as well, and gave the social question a prominence and urgency that was far beyond
experts’ control. I have also presented a political history of the housing question during these years, which has shown why different political groups invested their energy in it, pushing for results that widely exceeded housing itself. I have attempted to develop, as I highlighted in the Introduction, a new way of understanding the development of the housing question as a conflictive process. If the outcome was a new type of articulation between public power and society, this outcome was not preordained, but conjunctural.

And the city? This has also been a spatially grounded history. Housing, like no other question, like no other commodity, like no other vector of social policy, is placed in the exact juncture between urban development and the social question. Decisions in the realm of housing hinge on social and spatial considerations in equal proportions. I have tried to depict the 1919-1921 Sattelzeit precisely through showing that changes in the housing question involved changes in the social question as well as in other realms. The changing nature of rent relations, the patterns of urban expansion in the early postwar, and the development of the collective house were all tied to one another within a single historical process.

The 1919-21 Sattelzeit ended more slowly and gradually than it had begun. While 1919 was the year of a social explosion, nothing like that happened in 1921, 1922, or 1925, other years that could well have been chosen as endpoint of the watershed period.

The issuing of the rent laws in September 1921 was a milestone, to be sure. But the story of rent regulation did not end there. Their issuing was, in a way, the beginning of a new story. As mentioned already in chapter 6, as the rent control clauses were about to expire in October 1923, Congress passed a one-year extension (not without lengthy parliamentary debates that were an
almost exact replica of the 1920-21 ones), which was repeated in 1924, so that only in late 1925 were the prices of rentals in Buenos Aires regulated again by the free forces of the market.

The story also continued in different spaces. One of them was the courtroom, since the laws generated many disagreements among tenants and landlords. The former demanded to judges to rule in their favor in the many cases in which owners did not accept the new (old) prices, or in which they questioned the date that contracts had originally started. Owners, in turn, pushed for a declaration of unconstitutionality of the rent-control law, arguing that it entailed a violation of property rights. This was an affair that escalated up to the Supreme Court of Justice, which in a well-known case (Ercolano vs. Lanteri, April 1922), declared price control constitutional, based on the notion of economic emergency and arguing that the laws had been issued in “defense of the community, threatened by abusive profits made from an exceptional situation.”

However, in another case, in August 1922, it ruled against the retroactive aspect of the laws for the cases of written contracts, since, supreme justices considered, they affected an “acquired patrimonial right.” A chapter on legal scholars and judges, thus, could well be added to this dissertation, analyzing how the successive interpretations of these laws were displaying different notions of the social, of social policy, and, naturally, of private property.

Rent control died gradually. The August 1922 ruling was a blow, and the advance of construction made the impact of rent control decrease further, since new constructions could be rented freely. This decrease eased the final elimination of the rent freeze in October 1925, as its social impact was more circumscribed than on the prior occasions. The resumption of

---


63 FCSJN 137, 47.
construction in the mid 1920s alleviated the remaining urgent aspects of the housing crisis. As the supreme justices explained in an August 1925 case, “the gradual increase in the supply of premises, both of residential and commercial use […] leads one to think that the exceptional circumstances that had moved the Court to issue the [April 1922] ruling no longer exist.” 64

If the social impact of emergency price regulations decreased with time, the modifications of the Civil Code regarding contract duration and other tenancy conditions became, in contrast, a permanent regulation. As we have already seen, they constituted for many contemporaries the most important part of the laws, and left an enduring legacy that has continued—with only minor modifications—to date. It was this legacy, which involved the construction of a socially regulated rental market, that facilitated, as we have seen in chapter 6, the development of collective dwellings in the 1920s.

In terms of housing construction and urban space, in turn, chronologies could also vary slightly, without modifying the central dynamic of this history. I have ended my account with Bereterbide and his 1925 projects, since I considered that the three experiences carried out up until that date (CNCB, CCM, and the early municipal competitions) had opened a path that would remain unaltered in its fundamental traits during the whole interwar period. I do not mean here that after these three experiences the utmost importance of collective dwelling and certain basic spatial models (general displays in pavilions, blocks or towers; apartment typologies; room dimensions) were settled for good until the next Sattelzeit. Indeed, the development of modernist architecture and town-planning would, from the late 1920s onward, change many of the basic coordinates of this. Rather, I have tried to emphasize here that many of those future changes were already implicit in the “ways out” of the conflictive 1919-21 conjuncture. Classic

64 FCSJN 144, 224.
“modernist” architecture would become an experimental discipline that attempted to develop new relationships between social housing and urban planning, which represents in a way the type of experiment that Bereterbide and the Comisión de Estética Edilicia were engaged in in 1925, and which their predecessors, in contrast, were not.

In the same way that modernism and urban planning can cast doubt on the duration of the legacies of the 1919-21 conjuncture, the Great Depression looms large here, begging the question of how to think about this period as a *Sattelzeit* without bearing in mind that, sooner than later, all certainties would vanish as the crisis turned the economy on its head, shattered any possible faith in the stability of market equilibria, and forever changed the role of the state in relation to the social question (among other things). Herein lies, I think, one more way in which we can better grasp the central subject of this dissertation.

The Depression brought about economic uncertainty and new social policies. Problems such as unemployment, generalized poverty, and labor activism were manifestations of these transformations. But—in Argentina—housing was not. Why? This would require further research, but a tentative answer can be based on the fact that the overlap between the social question and urban expansion was utterly different in the Depression, vis-à-vis the first postwar. A change in the origins and scale of population movement towards the city (in other words, the shift from mass immigration to mass internal migration) was translated into a different pattern and speed of urban growth. While in the first postwar period population increases were violent and pushed urban growth in conjunction with a period of economic depression, the influx of people to the city became significant only *in the second half* of the 1930s, when the economy had
more or less recovered. This means that the outburst of the social question in the Depression years was not coincident with an outburst of the housing question. The housing question, as said, hinged on the link between the social question and urban development. Both were necessary in order to generate *the conditions of possibility* for the housing question to emerge. At this point, the reader does not need an explanation for the use of italics. For the housing question to emerge, something else was required: social actors interested, willing, and able to problematize it—to make it, in other words, a public problem.

---

65 “Crecimiento de la población vegetativo y migratorio en la Ciudad de Buenos Aires durante los años 1900-1936,” *Revista de Estadística Municipal*, Nos 7, 8 and 9, July-September 1936, Graph.
Bibliography

I. Sources

Archives

Archivo Histórico de la Dirección General de Patrimonio e Instituto Histórico (AHDGP).
Buenos Aires, Argentina.


Published Sources

Newspapers

Crítica
El pueblo
La época
La nación (LN)
La prensa (LP)
La vanguardia (LV)
Santa Fe

Scholarly, professional, governmental, and other periodical publications

Anales del Instituto Popular de Conferencias (*1915)
Anales de la Sociedad Científica Argentina
Arquitectura. Órgano oficial de la Sociedad de Arquitectos (Montevideo, Uruguay)
Boletín del Departamento Nacional del Trabajo (BDNT) (*1907)
Boletín del Honorable Concejo Deliberante
Boletín del Museo Social Argentino (BMSA) (*1911)
Boletín Mensual de la U.P.C.A. (*1920)
Crónica Mensual del Departamento Nacional del Trabajo (CMDNT)
El arquitecto

1 The sign * indicates, when relevant, the date in which the publication started being issued.
El arquitecto constructor

El bien raíz – Journal of the main landlords’ corporation (*1921)

La cooperación libre – journal of the cooperative El Hogar Obrero (*1913)

La habitación popular – journal of the Comisión Nacional de Casas Baratas (1934-1943)

La ingeniería

Nuestra arquitectura (*1930)

Revista de Arquitectura (*1917)

Revista de Economía Argentina (REA) (*1918)

Revista de Estadística Municipal (*1930)

Revista del Banco Hipotecario Nacional (RBHN) (1918-1921)

Revista Técnica—Arquitectura (*1904)

Legislative proceedings and other printed governmental sources

Actas del Honorable Concejo Deliberante (HCD)

Actas de la Comisión Municipal

Boletín Oficial de la República Argentina

Diario de Sesiones de la Cámara de Diputados de la Nación (CD)

Diario de Sesiones de la Cámara de Senadores de la Nación (CS)

Fallos de la Corte Suprema de la Nación (FCSJN)

Memorias de la Comisión Nacional de Casas Baratas (*1916)

Memorias de la Municipalidad de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires

Memorias del Ministerio del Interior

Memorias del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores y de Culto

Books, brochures, pamphlets, and others


———. *El saneamiento de la vivienda en la profilaxis de la tuberculosis* Córdoba, Arg.: Bautista Cubas, 1917.

Carlomagno, Adelqui. *La reforma de la locación urbana y el problema de la vivienda. Ensayo de derecho civil y de legislación social*. Buenos Aires: Restoy & Doeste, 1926.


Clusellas, Rodolfo. *Comentarios a las nuevas leyes de alquileres. Bienes a que se aplican y cuestiones que suscitan*. Buenos Aires: Lajouane, 1921.


González, Juan B. *El encarecimiento de la vida en la República Argentina*. Buenos Aires: Las ciencias, 1908.


——-. *La cuestión social*. Buenos Aires, Ferrari, 1919.

——-. *País rico, pueblo y gobierno pobres*. Buenos Aires, Ferrari, 1917.


Municipalidad de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, *Casas cómodas, higiénicas y baratas en Villa del Parque y Liniers* (brochure), late 1920s, 17. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno.


Unión Popular Católica Argentina, Las obras de la Gran Colecta Nacional (Buenos Aires: Junta Nacional de la UPCA, November 1930).


II. Secondary Literature


Kidd, Alan. “Civil Society or the State?: Recent Approaches to the History of Voluntary Welfare.” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 15, no. 3 (September 1, 2002): 328–42.


Montequín, Adriana. “Sector público y sistema tributario argentino, 1914-1932.” *Ciclos, en la historia, la economía y la sociedad* 5, no. 9 (Semester 1995).


Vidal, Gardenia, and Pablo J. Vagliente, eds. Por la señal de la cruz: estudios sobre Iglesia Católica y sociedad en Córdoba, s. XVII-XX. Córdoba: Ferreyra Editor, 2002.


