

**Neighborhood and Nation in Neoliberal Times:
Urban Upheaval, Resistance, and National Identity in
Buenos Aires, Argentina**



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Introduction: A Synoptic View of the City

From atop the commanding position of the obelisk (*obelisco*) located in the *Plaza de La República* at the center of Buenos Aires, any observer can see that urban change is afoot in the city known in popular tourist parlance as the “Paris of South America” and the “Queen of the River Plate.” To the south, shantytowns (*villas miserias*) and other precarious living quarters dot the urban landscape in the wake of the city’s implosion during the catastrophic economic crisis of 2001/2002. Looking to the downtown urban skyline, we see the names of the same transnational corporations that helped precipitate the economic crisis and perpetuate the city’s ongoing financialization. To the east lies the Puerto Madero district that the Menem administration modernized in the 1990s. Transformed from a traditional port area into the city’s most elite promenade, this district highlights how business efforts to position Buenos Aires as a competitive global city have led to enormous urban upheavals and redevelopment dynamics.

Figure One: Inauguration of The Buenos Aires Obelisk, Symbol of a Nation, 1936



Photo By Horacio Coppola

But these urban transformations have not gone uncontested. If we now direct our attention away from the obelisk, symbol of the Argentine nation, and look north to the city's largest neighborhood called Palermo, we can observe an urban struggle over the processes of redevelopment. Traditional, middle-class Buenos Aires residents known as *porteños* are mobilizing and organizing with one another to contest the invasion of mega-residential towers into their neighborhood. According to residents, these towers symbolize how political and economic elites are appropriating the urban landscape of Buenos Aires for profit in the most comprehensive real estate boom the city has ever seen. The very city whose 400th anniversary the obelisk was built to commemorate is now nearly unrecognizable to those few *porteños* who have lived long enough to observe the successive phases of urban development from the monument's inauguration in 1936 to the present-day real estate boom. If, as Michel de Certeau muses, every city is an urban palimpsest—a composite environment derived from the co-presence of urban layers superimposed on top of one another through successive phases of urban growth—the distinctively European, early 20th century urban layer that so many *porteños* nostalgically remember is being carved up, covered up, and potentially buried forever beneath the current real estate boom.¹

* * * *

This thesis explores the resistance to the neoliberalization of the Buenos Aires cityscape, focusing in particular on how middle class *porteños* rearticulate Argentine national narratives to contest the market-led transformation of the city. The story goes like this. In 2001, Argentina plummeted headfirst into economic crisis after a decade of neoliberal economic governance led by the Menem administration. This crisis culminated in the largest sovereign debt default in world history and the near elimination of the middle-class who lost substantial portions of their personal

¹ Michel De. Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 91-110.

savings during the infamous *corralito* bank closures in 2001.² In the wake of the economic crisis, both local and global investors seized upon the Argentine peso's devaluation to buy up real estate property at fire-sale prices. As a result, Buenos Aires experienced the largest real estate boom in the city's history. By 2005, urban construction grew at twice the rate of the city's economy.³

In the midst of this whirlwind of urban redevelopment, several neighborhood activist groups emerged to contest the effects of the real estate boom on their neighborhood and city. Many of these neighborhood activist groups continue to struggle today, arguing that the boom and the subsequent proliferation of hypermodern urban structures in Buenos Aires have combined to destroy the identity of their neighborhood and city. In particular, the city has witnessed the birth of a popular broad-based coalition called *Queremos Buenos Aires* (We Want Buenos Aires) that addresses what it calls the "urban/environmental/social and heritage emergency in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires."⁴ A central goal of this coalition is the protection of Buenos Aires urban heritage and the construction of a more equal, sustainable city.

Among the many neighborhood groups in *Queremos Buenos Aires*, one group called *Palermo Despierta* (Wake up Palermo) has begun a grassroots campaign in the middle-upper class Palermo neighborhood to prevent the construction of mega-residential towers. These residents claim that the building of these enormous towers ruins the neighborhood, interrupting the delivery of public utilities to their homes and destroying the historic *casas bajas* (literally, short houses) that characterize the district's traditional urban landscape. My fieldwork in Buenos Aires began with a broad-based survey of urban change, but came to focus on interviewing Palermo residents who affiliated

² The Corralito is the informal name given to the Argentine government's infamous decision to freeze all bank accounts and forbid U.S. dollar withdrawals in 2001. While the measure was intended to prevent bank runs, the action backfired as thousands of protestors took to the streets to demand access to their bank accounts.

³ Ezequiel Burgo, "Las Razones Del Nuevo Boom Del Negocio Inmobiliario," *Clarín* (Buenos Aires), September 11, 2005, <http://www.clarin.com/suplementos/economico/2005/09/11/n-00311.htm> (accessed April 02, 2010).

⁴ Queremos Buenos Aires, "Queremos Buenos Aires - Adhieren y Participan," Queremos Buenos Aires: alternativa para el Área Metropolitana en emergencia, web log entry posted June 1, 2008, <http://queremosbsas.blogspot.com/> (accessed April 10, 2010). Original Spanish: "Emergencia urbana / ambiental / social y patrimonial del Área Metropolitana Buenos Aires"

themselves with this *Palermo Despierta* coalition as well as examining the group's official documents, statements, and multimedia.⁵

During my five weeks of fieldwork conducted in the Palermo District of Buenos Aires in September 2009, I found that many of my interviewees identified themselves, their neighborhood, and *Palermo Despierta's* activism as distinctively middle class in nature. For these residents, the anti-towers activism led by *Palermo Despierta* represented a rejection of the elitist collusion between private real estate businessmen and corrupt politicians who were destroying their quaint, middle-class neighborhood. The resulting scenes of protest (e.g. Figure Two) surprised me because, at least in the context of the U.S., it is rare that one sees white, middle class urban dwellers take to the streets to defend their neighborhood and their city from private business interests.

Figure Two: Middle-Class Activists Contesting the Construction of Towers in Palermo⁶



In fact, several scholars have characterized the urban middle class as socially conservative agents of urban exclusion and segregation.⁷ According to Atkinson, middle class urban actors have “deep

⁵ Most of these documents are taken from the group's blog located at <http://palermodespierta.blogspot.com/>.

⁶ *Palermo Online*. "Vecinos de Palermo protestaron por la construcción indiscriminada. Jaque a los torres." 2006. <http://palermoviejosite.iespana.es/protesta.html> (accessed April 10, 2010).

⁷ This is not to say that every global North urban scholar makes these class gentrification analytical claims about the urban middle classes. Some scholars present more careful complementary analyses of the cultural-urban negotiation of

inclinations towards segregation based on desires for social homogeneity and the predictability and safety that this is perceived to engender.”⁸ Neil Smith uses to term “revanchist city” in several of his works to refer to the “race/class/gender terror felt by middle and ruling-class whites who [strike a] vicious reaction against, the working class, homeless people, the unemployed, women, gays and lesbians, [and] immigrants.”⁹ Even in the context of the global South, several authors claim that middle-class actors actively “colonize” selective areas in city centers in ways that emulate Western gentrifiers.¹⁰ These urban scholars among others¹¹ construe the urban middle classes as the agents of “globalization-oriented urban development.”¹² In other words, middle class urban dwellers often accept and are complicit in neoliberal urban transformations.

Thus, the question becomes: *Why are Palermo Despierta and other citywide neighborhood activists organizing for a more spatially just and equitable city (i.e. contesting the neoliberal urbanism represented by megatowers) despite the fact this form of middle-class urban mobilization contradicts scholarship that assume middle class urban dwellers are routinely complicit in neoliberal urban transformations?* In response to this question, I argue that *Palermo Despierta* contests neoliberal urbanism in order to defend imagined national narratives of middle-classness and Europeanness inscribed in the urban space of Palermo and Buenos Aires. Through historical analysis, I contend that the Buenos Aires urban landscape perpetuates these national narratives into the present day by embedding historical traces of an imagined middle class, European nation in urban landmarks located throughout the city. In the eyes of Palermo residents,

meanings. These scholars include, but are not limited to, David Harvey on Paris, Katharyne Mitchell on Vancouver, and Timothy Gibson on Seattle.

⁸ R. Atkinson, "Padding the Bunker: Strategies of Middle-Class Disaffiliation and Colonisation in the City," *Urban Studies* 4, no. 43 (2006), 820.

⁹ Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*. (London: Routledge, 2005), 211.

¹⁰ See Smith, Neil. "New Globalism, New Urbanism: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy." *Antipode* 3, no. 34 (2002); Goldsmith, William. "From the Metropolis to Globalization: the Dialectics of Race and Urban Form." In *Globalizing Cities: A new Spatial Order?*, by Peter Marcuse and Ronald Van. Kempen, 37-55. Oxford: Blackwell publishers, 2000; Leichenko, R. M., and W. De. Solecki. "Exporting the American Dream: The Globalization of Suburban Consumption Landscapes." *Regional Studies* 2, no. 39 (2005).

¹¹ See also Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2007).

¹² Kanai, Juan M. "The In-Between City: Neoliberal Globalization, Inequality and Middle-Class Politics in Buenos Aires, Argentina (2002-2007)." Diss., UCLA, 2008, 75.

these historical traces of their middle class, European urban identity are now threatened by the forces neoliberal urbanism:¹³ the forces that destroy historic urban forms and restructure the urban landscape to make Buenos Aires more globally competitive. Far from asserting a cohesive urban identity, though, my analysis will demonstrate that *Palermo Despierta's* activism is more reactive as it responds to the fragmentation of “traditional” *porteño* identity in the wake of the economic crisis as well as the growing reality that the imagined Buenos Aires that these residents pine for no longer exists.

In making such an argument, this thesis supplements a basic political-economic reading of Buenos Aires' post-crisis milieu with a critical analysis of the cultural-urban negotiations of meaning and space that have contested and challenged neoliberalism in the wake of the crisis.¹⁴

While my ethnographic analysis centers on the Palermo district, this thesis is much more than a neighborhood analysis. Rather, it is an examination of a city struggling to reinforce and preserve cultural-urban meaning in the midst of a neoliberal, post-crisis real estate boom that is enveloping its core.

This thesis is presented in four chapters. Chapter One formulates a theoretical framework that incorporates arguments from the literatures on neoliberalism, cities, and national narratives. I then discuss how different authors conceptualize urban change in Buenos Aires since the inauguration of the neoliberal Menem administration in 1989.

The following two chapters contextualize the historic formation of Argentine national identity as well as the socioeconomic conditions of post-crisis Buenos Aires. This context is crucial to understanding the conditions that shape the Buenos Aires cityscape and inform the political

¹³ This form of neoliberal urbanism is expressed in the current real estate boom in Buenos Aires. See Chapters One and Three.

¹⁴ Jonas and Ward note that the city-region literature says virtually nothing on “how new territorial forms are constructed politically and reproduced through everyday acts and struggles around consumption and social reproduction.” in Jonas, A., and K. Ward. "Introduction to a debate on city-regions: new geographies of governance, democracy and social reproduction." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, no. 31 (2007): 170.

contestation led by *Palermo Despierta*. In particular, Chapter Two traces the historical conjunctures between narratives of the Argentine nation and the urban landscape of Buenos Aires. I offer an ethnographic account of these conjunctures in the form of a walk in the Palermo District with Carolina, a first-year college student and resident of Palermo. Through this tour of Palermo, I argue that the city of Buenos Aires perpetuates Argentine national narratives into the present day by embedding historical traces of a middle class, European nation in various urban landmarks located throughout the city.

Chapter Three illustrates how Argentina's turn towards neoliberalism in the 1990s and the ensuing crisis of 2001/2002 produced a fragmented and unequal Buenos Aires cityscape rife with informal and precarious employment as well as urban poverty. I argue that the economic crisis ruptured the national narratives of Buenos Aires as a middle class, European city that we explored in Chapter Two. During the crisis, Buenos Aires was no longer in a position to reasonably tout itself as a middle class, European city due to the deteriorating material conditions of the Buenos Aires middle class, as well as the visible presence of growing structural inequality. Chapter Three will also demonstrate how, in the wake of this economic collapse, an unregulated real estate boom took hold of Buenos Aires, particularly in *barrios* (neighborhoods) along the city's northern corridor. Palermo was at the epicenter of this boom, as this neighborhood became the locus of a new city—a new Buenos Aires—that was beginning to take shape following the crisis.

It is in this context that several Palermo neighborhood activists groups emerged to contest the negative effects of the real estate boom on their *barrio*. Chapter Four will examine one cross section of these Palermo resident neighborhood mobilizations: the anti-*torre* (anti-tower) movement led by *Palermo Despierta*. My analysis examines the ways in which *Palermo Despierta* contests the urban transformations brought on by the construction of mega-residential towers in Palermo. I will argue that their anti-tower campaigns need to be understood as a response to fears that these buildings

would *further threaten* Argentine national narratives of middle-class Europeanness widely associated with the urban space of Palermo and Buenos Aires. To support these conclusions, I analyze interviews with *Palermo Despierta*-affiliated residents as well as *Palermo Despierta*'s official documents in order to demonstrate how the group's demands and discourses seek to defend the imagined middle class, European Buenos Aires evoked by my interviewees.

Chapter One: “Critical Scaffolding,” The Literature, and The Methodology

Beneath the veneer of common-sense and seemingly ‘natural’ ideas about space and time, there lie hidden terrains of ambiguity, contradiction, and struggle.

-David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity*¹⁵

This literature review chapter serves two aims. First, this chapter’s initial section formulates the theoretical framework that ties together critical literatures on neoliberalism, cities, and national narratives. This theoretical framework will lay bare the assumptions that my analysis operates under. Furthermore, this framework will provide the analytical tools necessary to later examine the linkages between neoliberal urbanism and national narratives of middle-classness and Europeaness in Palermo neighborhood activism.

Second, this chapter presents scholarly perspectives on neoliberalism in both Buenos Aires and Argentina. Several scholars have already extensively critiqued neoliberal urban and economic policy in Buenos Aires, examining both the relevant actors and processes. Thus, the goal of this thesis is not to produce yet another one of these critiques, but rather to demonstrate a novel form of urban contestation led by *Palermo Despierta* that challenges neoliberal global hegemony in the local context of the Buenos Aires cityscape. Nevertheless, my project depends upon a robust understanding of how neoliberalism operates in both past and present Buenos Aires in order to flesh out the perpetrators and processes that *Palermo Despierta*’s activism contests. To this end, I will review scholarly perspectives on Argentina’s neoliberal economic transition, the neoliberalization of Buenos Aires municipal governance, and neoliberal urbanism in Buenos Aires.

¹⁵ Harvey, David, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry Into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford [England]: Blackwell, 1989), 205.

Building a “Critical Scaffolding”: Neoliberalism, Cities, and National Narratives¹⁶

The theoretical aim of this thesis is to place three disparate yet related theoretical literatures on neoliberalism, cities, and national narratives in dialogue with one another to better understand my empirical work on neighborhood activism in Buenos Aires. Through an analytical articulation of these discrete bodies of literature, I argue that scholars can produce theoretically sophisticated and empirically grounded studies on the “messy actualities” of rule and resistance in late capitalist urban settings.

In order to formulate this theoretical framework, I will first expound a working definition for neoliberalism that I will use in the remainder of this thesis. I will then explore the theoretical linkages between neoliberalism and cities before transitioning to the relationship between cities and national narratives. In exploring these linkages, urban space and cities will serve as the pivot point by which I move from one theoretical linkage to the next. I will end this section with an evaluation of two works—one written by Katharyne Mitchell on the Vancouver, B.C. metropolis and the other by Emanuela Guano on Buenos Aires—that seek to combine these three bodies of literature through examinations of urban politics in their respective cities of interest.

Defining Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism has become a veritable buzzword in academic circles in recent years with different meanings advanced depending on one’s vantage point and field of study. Therefore, some clarification of the term is necessary in the context of my research. Wendy Larner defines neoliberalism as a term denoting “new forms of political-economic governance premised on the

¹⁶ I borrow the phrase, “Critical Scaffolding,” from the introduction to Laura Podalsky, *Specular City: Transforming Culture, Consumption, and Space in Buenos Aires, 1955-1973* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004).

extension of market relationships.”¹⁷ Larner argues that scholars interpret neoliberalism in three general ways: First, as a coherent “policy framework” consisting of trade liberalization, curtailing of the welfare state, labor flexibilization, privatization of state-owned industries, and government fiscal austerity;¹⁸ Second, as a pro-market ideology that is more complex and uneven than unified and coherent; and Third, as a form of Foucauldian governmentality founded on discourses that establish systems of “market governance” through processes of so-called responsabilization that operate at the level of individualized risk management.¹⁹

In my own use of the term, I take up Matthew Sparke’s exhortation to integrate neo-Gramscian, economistic critiques of “neoliberalism as ideology” and Foucauldian, discursive accounts of “neoliberalism as governmentality” into one coherent theoretical framework.²⁰ That is, I acknowledge in the neo-Gramscian tradition that neoliberalism and the economic logic of *lassiez-faire* capitalism has in fact become an influential form of global rule or hegemony. But, at the same time, I argue that neoliberalism’s “global hegemony” has many fault lines. The articulation of neoliberalism in specific places at specific times involves all sorts of context contingent innovations that depart from a coherent, uniform ideology and regime of rule. In the context of Buenos Aires, my analysis focuses on the oppositional discourses of *Palermo Despierta* and other Palermo residents who resist the articulation of neoliberalism as global market-led urban redevelopment. This approach allows me to demonstrate neoliberalism’s contested, context-contingent presence in post-crisis Buenos Aires.

¹⁷ Larner, Wendy. "Neo-liberalism: Policy, Ideology, Governmentality." *Studies in Political Economy*, no. 63 (Autumn 2000): 5.

¹⁸ See Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), 53-54; and Kingfisher C., and Maskovsky J. 2008. "Introduction: The Limits of Neoliberalism". *Critique of Anthropology*. 28 (2): 117

¹⁹ Larner 2000, 5-6.

²⁰ Matthew Sparke, "Political geography: political geographies of globalization (2) – governance," *Progress in Human Geography* 30, no. 3 (2006): 367.

I have chosen to explore neoliberalism in the context of Buenos Aires rather than rural areas of Argentina because cities are the quintessential spatial sites in which neoliberalism is both articulated and contested. They are, in short, the sites where neoliberalism's "ultimate fantasy of disembodied, ahistorical spacelessness" comes into contradiction with its messy geographical roll-outs and roll-backs on the ground.²¹ Peck, Theodore, and Brenner argue that "cities have become strategically central sites in the uneven, crisis-laden advance of neoliberal restructuring projects."²² Saskia Sassen has founded an entire "global cities" literature that examines the ways in which cities like New York, London, and Tokyo function as engines of economic growth as well as strategic nodes in a spatially dispersed, globally competitive world.²³

In my analysis, I will employ Peck, Theodore, and Brenner's term, "neoliberal urbanism," to refer to the intersection of neoliberalism and urban space in Buenos Aires, Argentina.²⁴ This term is based upon the idea of "actually existing neoliberalism," which seeks to underscore the messy, context-contingent articulations of neoliberal policy programs in actual urban spaces.²⁵ This thesis associates neoliberalism urbanism with the influx of real estate capital into Buenos Aires following the economic crisis of 2001/2002, which stimulated market-led efforts to make Buenos Aires more

²¹ Katharyne Mitchell, *Crossing the Neoliberal Line: Pacific Rim Migration and the Metropolis* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2004), 1.

²² Jamie Peck, Neil Brenner, and Nik Theodore, "Neoliberal Urbanism: Models, Moments, Mutations," *SAIS Review* 29, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 49.

²³ Saskia Sassen, *Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1991), 3-4.

Despite claims that Buenos Aires is transforming into a global city, many of the city's urban transformations cannot be explained within global city framework. A ranking study of 55 select global cities including Buenos Aires conducted by Beaverstock et al. (1999) concluded that—on a scale of prime, major, and minor—Buenos Aires has "minor global advertising service centers," "major global banking service centers," and "minor global legal service centers." Thus, while the transnational banking sector in Buenos Aires exhibits strong global city attributes, the legal and service centers do not. In addition, unlike traditional global cities such as New York, London, or Tokyo, Buenos Aires is *more* a city in which transnational investors could use the overvalued currency and legal guarantees to market consumption goods to middle- and high-income *porteños*, and *less* a city for the stationing of global corporate activities.²³ As a result, Horacio Torres argues that Buenos Aires functions as a "transmission center" for transnational corporations to tap the *porteño* consumer market rather than the "command and control" global city imagined by Sassen. For more information, see: J. V. Beaverstock, R. G. Smith, and P. J. Taylor, "A roster of world cities," *Cities* 6, no. 16 (December 1999).

²⁴ Peck, Brenner, and Brenner 2009, 49.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

competitive and globally relevant. As I will explore in my analysis of *Palermo Despierta* neighborhood activism, mega-residential towers that began to invade the district following the crisis served as a salient symbol of post-crisis neoliberal urbanism for Palermo residents.

Conjunctures Between Cities and National Narratives

A discussion of the role of national narratives of middle-classness and Europeanness in the activism of *Palermo Despierta* must begin with an analysis of how these narratives constitute the nation, often times to the detriment of poorer, subaltern groups. By national narratives, I refer to the heterogeneous symbols and discourses that perpetuate an imagined national identity and power structure. In this way, national narratives are fundamentally linked to theorizations of national consciousness and nationhood. In literary critical analysis, there is a complex set of deconstructive arguments led by post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha on the ways in which national narratives break down.²⁶ The performance of the national story, Bhabha argues after Derrida, always leads to moments of rupture and displacement in which minority voices and oppositions can be articulated.²⁷ This idea of a rupturing of national narratives is crucial to understanding the effects of the economic crisis of 2001/2002 on *porteño* urban identity.

Here, however, I am more concerned with the social uptake of nostalgic national narratives for the deliberate purposes of resistance following the crisis. For these reasons, the more useful theorizations of national narratives come from more sociologically and geographically inclined theories of national identity. These theories include Benedict Anderson's arguments about the imagined nation and Thongchai Winichakul's concern with the geographic demarcation of nation.

²⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Anderson and Winichakul highlight how national identity is constructed by way of internal modes of connection²⁸ that establish long-distance ties of solidarity and empathy even as they simultaneously lead to the exclusion of diverse non-national “others.”²⁹ Central to both authors’ theories of the nation is the importance of mass media and the resulting communication between individuals who come to view themselves as part of an “imagined community.” Winichakul in particular argues that nations create unity and a sense of identity by denigrating other nations in order to separate themselves.

The theoretical linkage between cities (urban space) and national narratives is a crucial part of *Palermo Despierta’s* neighborhood activism because I argue that Argentine national narratives of middle-classness and Europeanness are inscribed into the urban space of Palermo and Buenos Aires. But this argument begs the question of how national narratives become inscribed into urban space and why such an inscription continues to be important?

In order to better understand this theoretical linkage, we can turn to the work of Li Zhang who argues that there is a profound connection between national and spatial belonging (citizenship), as the right to belong in the nation is connected with the right to belong in the city.³⁰ In the context of China, Zhang argues that the Chinese nation has been constructed and grounded in the geographical spaces of cities and rural localities.³¹ This construction is not ahistorical. On the contrary, Zhang argues that in order to understand the parallel construction of national and spatial identity, one must examine the historical formations of national narratives and the ways in which cities and other spaces grounded these narratives.

²⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin & Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

²⁹ Winichakul Thongchai, "The Presence of Nationhood," in *Siam Mapped: A History of The Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

³⁰ Li Zhang, "Spatiality and Urban Citizenship in Late Socialist China," *Public Culture* 14, no. 2 (2002): 313.

³¹ *Ibid.*

Similarly, in his famous essay entitled “Myth and Monument,” David Harvey traces the political history of Paris’ Basilica of Sacre-Coeur.³² Harvey’s analysis demonstrates the importance of rich historical and empirical detail in examining the relationship between the nation and urban space. While Harvey examines why and how the Basilica of Sacre-Coeur monument continues to be interpreted as a political symbol in Paris, this thesis will focus on the urban form of the *casa baja* (low house) that I argue historically symbolizes Argentine national narratives of middle-classness and Europeanness.

The theoretical connection I draw between national narratives and cities runs counter to the global cities sub-discipline, which claims that the processes of globalization “denationalizes” both cities and citizenship. Saskia Sassen, the founder of global city studies, writes that the term “denationalization” seeks to “capture something that remains connected to the ‘national’ as constructed historically, and is indeed profoundly imbricated with it but is so on historically new terms of engagement.”³³ However, as Matthew Sparke has noted, this body of literature nevertheless discursively downplays the role of national narratives in a globalized world.³⁴ Thus, my study seeks to demonstrate how national narratives both remain profoundly important for urban identity and respond to imperatives associated with globalization and neoliberalism.

Connecting Neoliberalism, Cities, and National Narratives

Katharyne Mitchell’s treatment of Vancouver B.C. in *Crossing the Neoliberal Line: Pacific Rim Migration and the Metropolis* and Emanuela Guano’s analysis of Buenos Aires in *Emplacing Modernity: The Buenos Aires’ Middle-Class and the Politics of Urban Spectacle in Neoliberal Argentina* serve as two

³² David Harvey, "Monument and Myth," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 69, no. 3 (September 1979).

³³ Saskia Sassen, "Incompleteness and the Possibility of Making: Towards Denationalized Citizenship?" *Cultural Dynamics* 21, no. 3 (2009): 229.

³⁴ Matthew Sparke, "On Denationalization as Neoliberalization: Biopolitics, Class Interest, and the Incompleteness of Citizenship," *Political Power and Social Theory* 20, (2009): 288.

quintessential works integrating theoretical literatures on neoliberalism, cities, and national narratives. I will examine the theoretical contributions that each work offers to my analysis as well as describe how I hope to address certain key questions that they leave unexamined.

Mitchell's work investigates urban politics in Vancouver, B.C. in the context of massive Pacific Rim migration from Asia into the Vancouver metropolis. In her analysis of urban contestation Mitchell proposes a theoretical framework where:

The spaces of cities are the spaces where the hegemonic struggles over liberalism are now being fought. Whose liberalism? Whose hegemony? The socially revisionist liberalism of "well-being" or the neoliberal mantra of "international competitiveness"? There are clearly new alliances, new struggles, new forms of subject formation, new forms of consciousness, new narratives, and new ongoing imperatives to rework the ever-shifting articulations of state and nation, and nation and city. The disjunctures between neoliberal state practices and national urban narratives of social liberalism, for example, create a rent in the fabric, a tear in the sutures, a moment where the taken-for-granted becomes suddenly visible.³⁵

The power of Mitchell's analytical framework lies in its incorporation of literatures on liberalism and neoliberalism, transnationalism and globalization, and hegemony. Similar to my analysis, Mitchell examines the intersections between neoliberalism, cities, and national narratives not in an abstract, aspatial sense, but in the empirically grounded arena of context-contingent struggles and urban politics in Vancouver neighborhoods. Mitchell regards "the literal spatial positioning, movements, and struggles of actors as integral to the conceptual analysis: first, of how neoliberalism is both entrenched and resisted; and second, of how modern liberal notions of reason, progress, equality, and tolerance become used as rhetorical tactics in this larger hegemonic battle."³⁶

Mitchell also argues that "actually existing liberalism...is a fundamentally national formation...[while] it is neoliberalism that has global ambitions."³⁷ Such a formulation is useful for conceptualizing urban politics in Palermo because it allows me to frame the struggle between

³⁵ Mitchell 2004, 19.

³⁶ Ibid., 10.

³⁷ Ibid., 32.

neoliberal urbanism and national narratives of middle-classness and Europeanness as the clash between two hegemonies—a global hegemony and a national hegemony—in the localized urban space of Buenos Aires. Rather than view neoliberalism as a totalizing force that envelops anything and everything with its market-mediated mechanisms of control, my analysis demonstrates that neoliberalism confronts the equally salient hegemony of middle-classness and Europeanness that lives in the both Buenos Aires and the city’s inhabitants.

While Mitchell describes how the urban space of Vancouver acts as the arena in which hegemonic struggles between national narratives and neoliberalism play out, this thesis aims to demonstrate how the city of Buenos Aires is itself integral and constitutive of *porteño* national narratives of middle-classness and Europeanness. To do so, Chapter Two of this thesis will historicize the parallel development of Buenos Aires and the Argentine nation at the turn of the 20th century as well as the inscription of Argentine national narratives of middle-classness and Europeanness in the urban space of Buenos Aires and Palermo. Thus, my argument aims to demonstrate how the Buenos Aires urban landscape (re)produces national narratives that are under threat in the post-crisis regime of neoliberal urbanism.

Emanuela Guano’s dissertation analyzes the middle-class urban experience in Buenos Aires during the economic decline of the neoliberal policy program in the 1990s. Guano argues that in the midst of its downward economic mobility, the *porteño* middle-class “turn[ed] spatial representations of its own modernity into matrixes of an everyday experience that articulated [*sic*] both consent and opposition to neoliberalism.”³⁸ Guano examines how middle-class *porteños* confront, negotiate, and struggle with their urban “Others,” most notably of which are the racialized urban poor in the city.³⁹ Through these everyday encounters in a neoliberal city, Guano argues that middle class urban

³⁸ Emanuela Guano, *Emplacing Modernity: The Buenos Aires’ Middle-Class and the Politics of Urban Spectacle in Neoliberal Argentina*, diss., The University of Texas- Austin, 1999, vi.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

residents produce urban spectacles to defend both the city they inhabit and an imagined Argentine identity.

While Guano's innovative analysis on neoliberalism, national narratives, and urban space in Buenos Aires is useful for my own theoretical framings, her work does not deal with two important issues that are at the very heart of my own study. First, whereas Guano's work focuses almost exclusively on middle-class conceptions of the racialized urban poor in Buenos Aires, this thesis focuses instead on how the Buenos Aires middle-class confronts the neoliberal urban elite through an analysis of anti-towers mobilization in the Palermo district. This analysis will analyze middle-class feelings of being squeezed out of the city and the nation by the forces of neoliberal urbanism. Second, Guano's fieldwork occurred before the outbreak of the economic crisis of 2001, which (as I argue later) had profound implications for the economic livelihood and identity of middle-class *porteño* residents. As a result, Guano's insistence on the inherently racist and exclusionary attitudes of the Buenos Aires middle class cannot account for the wave of post-crisis activism in the form of *asambleas barriales* (neighborhood assemblies) and other cross-class alliances and coalitions.

Neoliberal Economic Transformations in Argentina during the 1990s

Now that we have developed a “critical scaffolding” for linking neoliberalism, cities, and national narratives, we must expand further on the role of neoliberalism in Buenos Aires. But to do so, it is necessary to first detail the “Washington Consensus” inspired⁴⁰, neoliberal economic policy changes at the national level in Argentina. To preface this discussion, it is important to note that while much of the economic restructuring that occurred during the 1990s in Argentina resembles

⁴⁰ The Washington Consensus is a term coined by John Williamson (1990) to refer to “the lowest common denominator of policy advice being addressed by the Washington-based institutions to Latin American countries as of 1989.”

that of other Latin American countries, the scope and ramifications of neoliberal reform in Argentina far surpassed regional patterns in Latin America.⁴¹

The Argentine neoliberal restructuring program included state-industry privatizations, deregulation, curtailment of the welfare state, and trade and financial liberalization. Arguably, the *ley de convertibilidad* (the convertibility law) passed in early 1991 was the most influential of these reforms. The convertibility law established a currency board whose prerogative was to maintain a one-to-one fixed exchange rate between the dollar and the peso in order to reign in hyperinflation rates and restore macroeconomic stability.⁴² This reform's legacy was indelible; it eliminated the Argentine central bank's use of monetary policy, artificially overvalued the peso, and—many scholars argue—eventually precipitated the Argentine economic crisis of 2002/2002.⁴³ In addition, this reform had many social and cultural implications as the regime of “*un peso, un dolar*” granted middle class Argentines unprecedented purchasing power along with greater access to transnational goods and services.⁴⁴

There are several specific policies that implemented the more standard neoliberal reforms characteristic of the Washington Consensus. The same month he entered the presidency in 1999, President Carlos Menem's administration implemented Plan “BB” which included a number of “shock therapy” policies including raising government controlled prices, a 180 day suspension of tax breaks and fiscal support for businesses, and the devaluation of the Austral currency.⁴⁵ Following

⁴¹ Juan M. Kanai, "The In-Between City: Neoliberal Globalization, Inequality and Middle-Class Politics in Buenos Aires, Argentina (2002-2007)" (diss., UCLA, 2008), 182.

⁴² P. Gerchunoff and J. C. Torre, "La Política de Liberalización Económica en La Administración de Menem," *Desarrollo Económico* 36, no. 143 (1996).

⁴³ For debates concerning the convertibility law, See: Daniel Muchnik, *Argentina Modelo: De La Furia a La Resignación : Economía y Política Entre 1973 y 1998* (Buenos Aires: Manantial, 1998).; and Julio Gambina and Daniel Campione, *Los Años de Menem: Cirugía Mayor* (Buenos Aires: Centro Cultural de la Cooperación, 2002).

⁴⁴ This fact is crucial in understanding the emergence of shopping mall culture in Buenos Aires during the 1990s and proves urban geographers' point that economic transformations are spatialized in the urban landscape. Increased consumer purchasing power resulting from the *ley de convertibilidad* paved the way for the arrival of shopping centers, which altered the Buenos Aires cityscape.

⁴⁵ W. C. Smith, "State, Market and Neoliberalism in Post-Transition Argentina: The Menem Experiment," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 33, no. 4 (1991): 53.

Plan “BB,” Congress passed the Law of State Reform allowing the executive to wholly or partially privatize all public enterprises, including oil, telecommunications, electricity, television, airlines, steel companies, and the highway system.⁴⁶ According to the World Bank, the combined effect of these privatizations for labor was that “between 1990 and 1993, over 85,000 employees lost their jobs due to the privatization of formerly state-owned industries... [and] reductions in the size of the national state administration entailed 103,000 layoffs and the transfer of 283,000 employees to provincial employment.”⁴⁷ In total, “217,000 unemployed civil servants were fired by Menem between 1989 and 1992 in an attempt to curtail the expanding budget, [and] the trend only worsened, as, by 1995, the unemployment rate had reached 18.6 percent and the underemployment rate was at 11.3 percent.”⁴⁸ In order to further this neoliberal agenda, Congress passed the Economic Emergency Act granting Menem executive authority to pass NUDs (necessity and urgency decrees) to eliminate private sector subsidies, export subsidies, import tariffs, and permit public sector layoffs and wage reductions.⁴⁹

The Neoliberalization of Buenos Aires Municipal Governance

This section transitions from a discussion of neoliberal economic transformations at the national level to municipal neoliberal governance in Buenos Aires.⁵⁰ Here I engage pertinent

⁴⁶ Ibid., 54.

⁴⁷ World Bank, Washington D.C., *Argentina: From Insolvency to Growth. A World Bank Country Study*, by The World Bank Group (1993), 299.

⁴⁸ Brittany Williams, "Between Polyarchy and Autocracy: The Delegative Democracy of Carlos Menem," *BC Journal of International Affairs*, <http://bcjournal.org/2006/between-polyarchy-and-autocracy/> (accessed April 20, 2008).

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Until 1996, the president of Argentina appointed the mayor of the Buenos Aires municipality.⁵⁰ As a result, many of my interviewees remember this era as a time in which municipal and national governance were two sides of the same coin. Despite the fact that the national government transferred technical control over high schools and all national hospitals to the municipal government, ex-president Carlos Menem (1989-1999) still maintained near complete political control over the operations of local state and its resources. In 1994, Menem promulgated a new constitution through the Argentine parliament in the infamous Olivos Pact between the Radical and Peronist parties. The new constitution came into effect in 1996, allowing Menem to pursue a second presidential term. The constitution also enshrined the autonomy of the Municipality of Buenos Aires from the national government, ending the president’s ability to appoint municipal heads of state. The municipal government created its own constitution in 1996, signaling a new era of decentralized

scholarship in order to determine the paradigms driving urban governance at the Buenos Aires municipal level, and how these paradigms have enabled neoliberal urbanism to take root in the city. To do so, I will review literature concerning *strategic planning* and *sustainable development*, two paradigms of Buenos Aires urban governance that have perpetuated undemocratic, neoliberal urbanism in the city.

Strategic Planning as a Past and Present Paradigm

Broadly, strategic planning emerged as a dominant paradigm of urban planning in the U.S. beginning in the 1980s. Jordi Borja y Manuel Castells argue that strategic planning is marked by three key elements: (1) Thinking beyond questions of land use to questions of health, education, culture, etc. in urban spaces, (2) strategic flexibility that can adapt to environmental changes, and (3) the participation and inclusion of key actors.⁵¹ Contrary to these lofty elements, other scholars including Adrián Gorelik maintain that strategic urban planning rejects the idea that the local state should pursue the principle of the “common good” of its residents by acting as a mediator between capital and labor.⁵² Rather, under strategic planning, the goal of the local state is to improve the quality of life of the individual by allowing the market to act as a mediator between the state and civil society in order to address the needs of all individual residents.

Strategic planning became a paradigm of urban governance in Buenos Aires during the De La Rúa municipal administration in 1996. The municipal constitution created *El Consejo de Planeamiento Estratégico* (The Council of Strategic Planning, CoPE), which served as the first real

urban planning in Buenos Aires. For more information, see David Myers and Henry Dietz, *Capital City Politics in Latin America Democratization and Empowerment* (New York: Lynne Rienner, 2002), 82-83.

⁵¹ Jordi Borja et al., *Local and Global: The Management of Cities in The Information Age* (London: Earthscan Publications, 1997), 165.

⁵² Adrian Gorelik, *Miradas Sobre Buenos Aires Historia Cultural y Critica Urbana* (Madrid: Siglo XXI Ediciones, 2004).

attempt to institutionalize the concept of strategic planning in Buenos Aires.⁵³ Ivana Socoloff also identifies the *Plan Estratégico Buenos Aires 2010* (Buenos Aires Strategic Plan for 2010, PEBA) promulgated in November 2004 as the first piece of sweeping legislation that granted the CoPE the institutional authority to transform Buenos Aires through the principles of strategic planning.

Socoloff's discursive analysis of the PEBA demonstrates that both the PEBA and the CoPE employ the language of a more democratic urban planning process in order to legitimate the changes implemented by the council while simultaneously excluding large segments of the population from the planning process. This exclusion occurs through technical stipulations concerning the forms in which public participation can take place. Socoloff states that in order for an organization to have a voice in the CoPE, (1) "the scope of the organization has to encompass the entire city of Buenos Aires" and (2) "organizations have to possess legal personality and initialed statutes."⁵⁴ In delineating such stringent requirements for voice in the urban planning process, the CoPE effectively excludes numerous "neighborhood centers, small sports clubs, and a range of grassroots organizations with local or neighborhood impact" because these organizations cannot claim to legally represent the interests of every citizen of Buenos Aires.⁵⁵ Neighborhood organizations *Palermo Despierta*, which campaigns against the invasion of mega-towers the Palermo district, become effectively excluded from the municipal planning process, as they have no institutional recourse through organs of the municipal government. In the words of Socoloff, "What we find in these documents is a profound tension between those who *should* make decisions regarding the city, those who *really* makes decisions, and what the role of citizenship will be." (Author's emphasis)⁵⁶

⁵³ Ivana Socoloff, "Buenos Aires Bajo el Lente de la Planificación Estratégica: Discursos Sobre la Ciudad Presentes en el Plan Estratégico Buenos Aires 2010" (2007): 17

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 18.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

While Socoloff does not link the paradigm of strategic planning to the wider currents of neoliberal urbanism in Buenos Aires, the connection is unequivocal. She even hints at this connection by including a passage from the *Plan Estratégico Buenos Aires 2010* stating that it “is a plan of action...[and] its success consists of unifying the strategies of entities and businesses that have the capacity and resources to influence the progress of the city through its actions.”⁵⁷ Thus, strategic planning is related to neoliberal urbanism in Buenos Aires because the PEBA heavily depends on businesses and the market for the success of its urban planning programs.

Sustainable Development as a Paradigm of Post-Crisis Urban Governance

In addition to strategic planning, sustainable development has emerged as a central paradigm driving urban planning in Buenos Aires, particularly with respect to the *Plan Urbano Ambiental* (Urban Environmental Plan) promulgated in 2000 and put into effect in 2001. Ryan Centner brilliantly illustrates the neoliberal logics and contradictory forces within the plan.⁵⁸

Centner identifies two main problems with the neoliberal logics of the sustainable development model, the first being inherent to the transnationalized concept of sustainable urban development itself, and the second being the problematic implementation of sustainable development paradigms in the city of Buenos Aires. As a concept, sustainable urban development couples three main tenets: environmental sustainability, sociopolitical participation, and economic competitiveness.⁵⁹ Several critics of urban sustainable development including Scott Campbell view these three tenets as too disparate to consolidate under one conceptual umbrella, because, at times,

⁵⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁸ Ryan Centner, "Conflictive sustainability landscapes: the neoliberal quagmire of urban environmental planning in Buenos Aires," *Local Environment* 14, no. 2 (2009).

⁵⁹ Ibid., 175.

these tenets can be mutually exclusive, or worse, mutually destructive.⁶⁰ Center takes Campbell's analysis one step further and notes that in the context of Buenos Aires, "the concepts of sustainability, participation, and competitiveness, respectively, encapsulate these different interests."⁶¹

According to Center, sustainable development has proved highly problematic for the government of the City of Buenos Aires as a paradigm for urban planning. *Plan Urbano Ambiental* (PUA) defines sustainable development as a:

"Participatory process that integrates urban-design transformation, economic growth, social equity, the preservation of cultural diversity, and the rational use of environmental resources, with the objective of improving the living conditions of the population and minimizing the degradation or destruction of its own ecological base of production and habitability, without putting at risk the satisfaction of the needs of future generations."⁶²

Moreover, according to Centner, the main priorities embedded within the PUA are:

"(1) balancing geographic disparities in urban development (2) revalorizing the central city (3) increasing cross-city interconnections but also buttressing neighborhood centers (4) upgrading parks and adding them the neighborhoods most deprived of green space (5) improve all infrastructure and access points to the city, and (6) fostering metropolitan-level cooperation with other jurisdictions."⁶³

Centner examines how these priorities and definitions of sustainable urban development played out in the aftermath of the restructuring and "revitalization" of Puerto Madero from a drably port district into a wealthy promenade for Buenos Aires' elite citizens by the Menem government in the late-1990s. In Puerto Madero, the goal of economic competitiveness essentially won out over the goals of political participation and economic competitiveness. PUA officials devoted more time and energy to the construction of a multi-lane highway running above Puerto Madero and to the

⁶⁰ S. Campbell, "Green Cities, Growing Cities, Just Cities? Urban Planning and the Contradictions of Sustainable Development," *American Planning Association* 62, no. 3 (1996).

⁶¹ Centner 2009, 174.

⁶² Argentina, Consejo de Plan Urbano Ambiental, Secretaría de Planeamiento Urbano, *Plan Urbano Ambiental: Documento Final*, by Gobierno De La Ciudad De Buenos Aires (Buenos Aires, 2000), 12.

⁶³ Centner 2009, 177.

expansion “high-end office space, luxury residences, and international tourist development” than projects related to political participation and environmental sustainability.⁶⁴ Centner argues that the reason why economic competitiveness has won out over the other two urban planning priorities in Buenos Aires is that, “in a part of the world prone to financial instability, the *landscape of competitiveness* is a projection to make Buenos Aires more attractive to global investment.”⁶⁵ Thus, the neoliberal institutional legacy in Buenos Aires circumscribes the ability of the sustainable development paradigm to be truly holistic, as neoliberal logics reinforce the dominance of economic competitiveness considerations over considerations of environmental sustainability and sociopolitical participation.

Neoliberal Urbanism and Buenos Aires

With an understanding of neoliberal economic transformation at the national level and political-economic transformations at the municipal level, we can now transition to an examination of the ways in which these neoliberal reforms have become spatialized within Buenos Aires from 1990 to present day. Indeed, the changes at the Buenos Aires city level were just as stark as the changes at the national level as evidenced by Graciela Silvestri and Adrián Gorelik’s remark that it is only since 1990 that a “new era in the city’s [Buenos Aires] history has taken shape.”⁶⁶ Different authors highlight different elements of neoliberal urbanism in Buenos Aires, but I will initially limit my discussion of urban restructuring to various forms of privatization of the city that had major implications for urban fragmentation and the fate of middle class residents.

Pedro Pérez has written extensively on the privatization of public urban services. For instance, Pérez notes that the privatization of the transportation network in Buenos Aires

⁶⁴ Ibid., 192.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 192.

⁶⁶ Graciela Silvestri and Adrián Gorelik, "Ciudad y Cultura Urbana, 1976-1999: El Fin de la Expansión," in *Buenos Aires, Historia de Cuatro Siglos*, ed. Jose L. Romero (Buenos Aires: Altamira, 2000), 461.

precipitated a fragmentation of various modes of transportation including trains, buses, “charters,” taxis, and *remises* as coordination ceased to exist between differing modes of transportation due to various multinational companies being in charge of different modes and spaces of transportation in the city.⁶⁷ Pírez also demonstrates that, in the aggregate, the privatization of urban public services including water, sewage, garbage, transportation, electricity, and natural gas increased urban inequalities because “risers in the rates of public services were reflected in their higher costs for low-income groups... [while] users in residential areas with more purchasing power (and a greater capacity to consume) and large firms (also large consumers) benefit[ed] disproportionately.”⁶⁸

Several authors have written on the privatization of urban planning in Buenos Aires, often times characterizing this process as a shift towards “urban entrepreneurialism.”⁶⁹ Adrián Gorelik describes this shift towards “urban entrepreneurialism” as one in which Buenos Aires became a “*ciudad de los negocios*” (city of businesses) where rent-seeking real estate companies came to dominate many urban planning decisions.⁷⁰ Pírez sharpens Gorelik’s critique in stating that private “developers resort[ed] to the principles of urban planning, no longer as a tool to serve the public interest, but [rather to turn the city into] the product of a market “rationalization” of individual operations...with the aims of enhancing the quality of the final product (the development) and increasing profit margins.”⁷¹ Kanai *et. al.* argues that the “revitalization” of the Puerto Madero district was emblematic of the shift towards “urban revitalization through private investments while placing the city in competitive positions within transnational networks.”⁷² Common to all these authors’ narratives

⁶⁷ Pedro Pírez, "Buenos Aires: Fragmentation and Privatization of the Metropolitan City," *Environment and Urbanization* 14 (2002): 153. The privatization of urban public services that Pírez outlines is significantly related to Palermo Despierta’s campaign against the mega-towers because residents claim that the construction of these towers interrupts their urban utilities. See Chapter 4.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁶⁹ See Pírez, 2002; Kanai, 2008.

⁷⁰ Adrián Gorelik, *Buenos Aires En Cuestión: Notas Para Un Diagnostico* (Buenos Aires: Contraduria General Comunal, 1993).

⁷¹ Pírez 2002, 155.

⁷² Kanai 2008, 189.

concerning the privatization of urban planning is the notion that these new forms of market-led urbanism resulted in the fragmentation of Buenos Aires as some spaces became profitable for real estate and capital investment while other areas became spatially disadvantaged and neglected.⁷³

A last example of the privatization of Buenos Aires is the private enclaving of urban residential space through the proliferation of gated communities, *torres-jardines*,⁷⁴ and *countries*.⁷⁵ According to Monica Lacarrieu and Guy Thuillier⁷⁶ newly developed gated communities, primarily in the northern area outer ring of the Buenos Aires Metropolitan area, occupied 300 square kilometers by 2000.⁷⁷ Gorelik also documents the emergence of high-rise towers in Buenos Aires with private recreational areas and panoptic security measures, and dubs this phenomenon as the *torres-jardin* (tower-garden) model of urbanism.⁷⁸ Michael Janoschka goes as far as to document a 1,600 hectare, enclosed, private mini-city called Nordelta located in the Metropolitan Buenos Aires that contains 8,000 people within its walls.⁷⁹ According to Janoschka, Nordelta is changing the face of urban space in metropolitan Buenos Aires by marketing itself as a perfectly controlled and secure mini-city that will deliver “*una vida mejor*” (a better life) to each and every one its residents.⁸⁰

While not by any means exhaustive, the aforementioned examples of the privatization of Buenos Aires—the privatization of urban public services, the privatization of urban planning, and the privatization of urban residential space—illustrate a wider trend of *polarization* and *fragmentation*

⁷³ Silvestri and Gorelik 2000, 489.

⁷⁴ Sealed-off residential towers in the CABA.

⁷⁵ Elite country clubs in Buenos Aires.

⁷⁶ Monica Lacarrieu and Guy Thuillier, "A Utopia of Order and Enclosure: Private Districts and Countries in Buenos Aires," *Espace Geographique* 33, no. 2 (2004): 152-53.

⁷⁷ According to Kanai 2008, 217: "The authors list a total of 350 complexes, which have been subdivided into 83,000 lots. Approximately half of the 27,000 newly built houses incorporated to the registry in these sites constituted the permanent residence of about 50,000 people."

⁷⁸ Adrián Gorelik, "Modelo Para Armar: Buenos Aires, De La Crisis Al Boom," *Punto De Vista* 84 (April & may 2006): http://www.bazaramericano.com/bazar_opina/articulos/gorelik_crisis_al_boom.htm (accessed November 24, 2009). This *torres-jardin* urban phenomenon is at the heart of Palermo Despierta's activism.

⁷⁹ Michael Janoschka, "El Modelo de Ciudad Latinoamericana, Privatizacion y Fragmentacion del Espacio Urbano de Buenos Aires: El Caso de Nordelta," in *Buenos Aires a La Deriva: Transformaciones Urbanas Recientes*, ed. Max W. Guerra (Buenos Aires: Biblios, 2005)

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 112.

that most of urban authors identify in the city of Buenos Aires.

Conceptualizing Buenos Aires in the Midst of Neoliberal Globalization

The most comprehensive analysis to date on the above neoliberal transformations in Buenos Aires is Juan Miguel Kanai's study entitled *The In-Between City: Neoliberal Globalization, Inequality and Middle-Class Politics in Buenos Aires, Argentina (2002-2007)*. In this study, Kanai examines middle class politics in the midst of the neoliberal globalization, arguing that the middle-class is still a politically important group in Buenos Aires. While Kanai's study is a useful starting point for analyzing middle-class politics in Buenos Aires, it falls short in two ways.⁸¹ First, Kanai does not examine the theoretical implications of how middle-class contestation can actually rework and resist neoliberal globalization, favoring instead an examination of the political importance of middle-class actors for municipal elections. Second, and more importantly, Kanai's emphasis on political-economic urban processes elides any examination of the deeper urban-cultural meaning behind contemporary middle class neighborhood politics in Buenos Aires. While Kanai provides a plethora of historical data, his analysis fails to link historical legacies of middle-classness and Europeanness to current middle class politics in the wake of the crisis. In other words, Kanai overlooks the fact that middle-classness and Europeanness are *urban identities* that require deeper cultural excavation. In this sense, my study serves to bridge the gap between Kanai's more political-economic emphasis on middle class urban actors and Emanuela Guano's aforementioned analysis of urban-cultural spectacle in pre-crisis Buenos Aires.

⁸¹ One can also call attention to the lack of critical political-economic analysis of the post-crisis real estate boom as yet another shortcoming in Kanai's study.

Methodology⁸²

This section lays out the data underpinning my analysis of Buenos Aires neighborhood activism as well as the techniques I will employ for analyzing my data. My analysis will involve a combination of historical, quantitative, and qualitative data. In September 2009, I spent five weeks in Buenos Aires collecting this data and conducting ethnographic interviews with Palermo residents concerning the urban transformations in their neighborhood in the wake of the economic crisis of 2001/2002. However, before moving to further discussion of my data, some justification is need for choosing the Palermo district as my site of research.

Why Palermo?

Urban scholars of Buenos Aires were often incredulous upon learning that I had decided to take up the district of Palermo as my spatial unit of analysis. Palermo is the largest district in Buenos Aires with many different components and sub-districts. But rather than view the size and complexity of the neighborhood as a reason to be weary of its analysis, I argue that there are four reasons why Palermo is a rich arena in which to analyze how Argentine national narratives of middle classness and Europeanness have fared in the face of neoliberal urbanism

First, the Palermo district has a distinctly middle-class history (a history I discuss in Chapter Two) that has been threatened by the current real estate boom in Buenos Aires. Second, my quantitative analysis (in Chapter Three) will demonstrate that Palermo had the highest real estate investment rate of any Buenos Aires neighborhood by 2008.⁸³ Third, Palermo is one of the Buenos

⁸² I received IRB Human Subjects Exemption approval to conduct my research in Buenos Aires, Argentina in September 2009.

⁸³ Gobierno de Buenos Aires, Dirección General de Estadística y Censos, *Indicador Trimestral de La Construcción de La Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires Primer Semestre de 2008* (Buenos Aires, 2009), 4.

Aires neighborhoods with the highest levels of neighborhood activism.⁸⁴ Fourth, Palermo is itself a paradoxical neighborhood in terms its middle-classness. While few *porteños* or tourists would now refer to Palermo as a middle class neighborhood (preferring the slightly pejorative term middle-upper class), the vast majority of my Palermo resident interviewees emphasized both their own middle class identity and the historic middle class identity of their neighborhood. Thus, the Palermo neighborhood presents an ideal arena in which to explore the intersection between Argentine national narratives, neoliberalism, and urban space due to its rapid transformation in the current real estate boom as well as its contradictory origins and representations.

The Data and its Relevance

My method of analyzing the historical and political-economic context underlying Buenos Aires neighborhood activism aims to address the danger that anthropological “thick description” can sometimes lead to accounts that are devoid of critical analysis of context.⁸⁵ Chapter Two marshals a plethora of secondary source historical data in order to examine the parallel development of the Argentine nation and the Buenos Aires cityscape. Chapter Three then employs the extensive use of quantitative data from the Buenos Aires municipal government and other state-run agencies to examine post-crisis socioeconomic conditions in the city. Far from mere background to the “actual” study, these two chapters critically examine the cultural-urban and political-economic conditions that continue to shape the Buenos Aires cityscape and inform the political contestation led by *Palermo Despierta*. Additionally, my critical use of quantitative data in Chapter Three seeks to counteract a growing trend in urban anthropology to disavow quantitative analyses of the city in favor of purely

⁸⁴ Valeria Duran et al., "Mapas Barriales: Marcas de Las Nuevas Centralidades?" in *Buenos Aires a La Deriva: Transformaciones Urbanas Recientes*, by Guerra Max Welch (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2005), 426.

⁸⁵ Arguably, Clifford Geertz's inaugural illustration of thick-description also evidences some of this danger itself. For example, his detailed descriptions of Balinese cockfights did not address the broader transformations of Indonesian society and political-economy taking place at the time. See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

qualitative results. I argue that quantitative analysis can supplement qualitative accounts of the city by allowing scholars to examine the tension and harmony between residents' perceptions of urban change and the processes reflected in official quantitative data.

Chapter Four employs qualitative data gathered during my September 2009 ethnographic fieldwork in Buenos Aires. This bulk of this qualitative data consists of semi-structured and unstructured interviews conducted with Palermo residents in public and semi-public spaces including parks, plazas, and shopping malls. While I conducted over 50 interviewees in total during the course of my fieldwork, a change in the scope of my research once I returned from Buenos Aires has left me with seven relevant interviewees for my research. My analysis of these interviews seeks to identify statements by certain individuals who precisely articulate general trends observed among all or most of my interviewees.

All of my seven interviewees live in the Palermo district, identify as middle class, and affiliate themselves with the *Palermo Despierta* anti-towers movement in the neighborhood. I encountered all seven of these interviewees through ethnographic observation, random coincidence, and neighborhood activist contracts I made in the city. I tried to select interviewees that presented a range of age and gender backgrounds. The youngest interviewee was a first year college student named Carolina and the oldest interviewee was a retired teacher named Anita who has lived in Buenos Aires since the 1920s. All of my interviewees identified as white and this was an intentional aim as my project seeks to explore how national narratives of Europeaness play out in the context of *Palermo Despierta's* activism. While my analysis would have been significantly strengthened had I interviewed more mega-tower dwellers in Palermo as well as other racial groups in the city, I accept

these limitations and focus exclusively on the discourses of white, middle class activists who mobilize in Palermo.⁸⁶

I am aware that scholars have expressed concern over qualitative data analyses like my own. Catherine Kohler Riessman writes about the difficulty of “*transcribing experience*” as well as “*analyzing experience*” due to the inherent flaws in attempting to codify and piece together the complex human experience captured during an interview.⁸⁷ I have relied heavily on Palermo residents’ direct statements, some of which I have presented in both Spanish and English, in order to minimize these problems associated with qualitative data interpretation.⁸⁸ I have also conducted my ethnography and interviews in a similar way to that described by Katharyne Mitchell in her spatial ethnography of Vancouver, B.C. Namely, my qualitative methodology is such that “space and the sedimented histories of life are not just theoretical variables but actively constitute what happens, how, and why.”⁸⁹

It is to an analysis of these “sedimented histories of life” in Buenos Aires, Argentina that we now turn.

⁸⁶ Certainly more research is needed in order to examine how non-white populations and the urban poor in Buenos Aires interact with and perceive national narratives of middle-classness and Europeaness. See Conclusion for more on this point.

⁸⁷ Catherine K. Riessman, "Narrative Analysis," in *The Qualitative Researcher's Companion*, by A. M. Huberman and Matthew B. Miles (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002), 225-226.

⁸⁸ Further complicating this fact is that while I am near fluent in Spanish, my 5% of misunderstanding often hinders translation.

⁸⁹ Mitchell 2004, 11.

Chapter Two

Palermo through the Eyes of a *Palermitana*: An Abridged Journey through Buenos Aires Urban History⁹⁰

Ask any Buenos Aires resident why they love their city and they will immediately begin to describe the city's rich cultural history and sense of identity when compared to its Latin American counterparts. But what is this "rich history" and why does it remain so instrumental for *porteños'* representations of their city and nation? This section explores the historical conjunctures between narratives of the Argentine nation and the urban landscape of Buenos Aires. I narrate these conjunctures through a walk in the Palermo District with Carolina, a first-year college student and resident of Palermo.⁹¹ Through this tour of Palermo, I argue that the city of Buenos Aires played a major role in the formation of Argentine national narratives of a middle-class, European people. Moreover, the Buenos Aires urban landscape perpetuates these national narratives into the present day by embedding historical traces of a middle class, European nation in various urban landmarks located throughout the city. This journey through Buenos Aires urban history will allow us to contextualize and deepen our understanding of present-day neighborhood activism against the arrival of hypermodern, mega-residential towers in the Palermo district that, according to residents, destroys the precious identity of their neighborhood and city.

On the first leg our journey through Argentine urban history with Carolina, we will stop in Palermo's Plaza Italia and examine a statue commemorating Argentine founding Father Domingo Sarmiento and his role in creating the first Argentine national narrative: *Europeanness*. As we shall see, central to Sarmiento's nation-making was the creation of European city, Buenos Aires, which would become the focal point of the national narrative of a European Argentine nation in Latin America.

⁹⁰ This chapter is based upon a real walk I took with Carolina through the Palermo District. However, the route that Carolina and I took does not exactly mimic the one presented in this chapter due to reasons of form and historical narrative. In particular, we both visited Borges' address on a different day than our initial walk from Alto Palermo to Plaza Italia to Plaza Serrano. Nevertheless, the conversations and sites in this chapter reflect my transcribed field notes following our walks together.

⁹¹ See Map One in the Appendix of this thesis for the approximate route through the city that my chapter narrates.

On the second leg of our journey, we will examine how various urban sites in Buenos Aires and the Palermo district embody the second Argentine national narrative of interest: *middle-classness*. During this leg, the *casa baja* (low house) will be a particular urban site of interest for explaining how the narratives of a middle-class Argentine nation became embedded in the urban space of Palermo and Buenos Aires. Our last destination will be the site of Jorge Luis Borges' home where we will briefly discuss the Argentine national author's role in reinforcing historical narratives of middle-classness and Europeanness.

Meet Me at Alto!

In the third week of my fieldwork in Buenos Aires, I decided to rendezvous with Carolina whom I had interviewed a week earlier in the food court of *Alto Palermo*, the Palermo district's hippest shopping mall. We had planned to meet at the mall and attend a museum showing in the Once district, but when I arrived I discovered that Carolina had concocted an alternate agenda. "Today I am going to show you Palermo through the eyes of a *Palermitana* (Palermo resident)," she told me. Anxious to get a fresh perspective on the *barrio* I had studied for the past three weeks, I agreed to Carolina's request and we descended from the mall's top floor to the semi-organized chaos below on Santa Fe Street. It was four in the afternoon and as we walked together Carolina's words were barely audible due to a cacophony of stop-and-go traffic. "Palermo has lost all of its *tranquilidad* (calmness) with the arrival of the *boom inmobiliario* (real estate boom)," she shouted. Indeed, Palermo had the highest rate of construction and real estate investment in 2008 compared to all other Buenos Aires *barrios*.⁹² As we walked towards the Plaza Italia and Palermo Park, I wondered to myself if I would even recognize Santa Fe Street on my next visit to Buenos Aires.

⁹² Gobierno de Buenos Aires, Dirección General de Estadística y Censos, *Indicador Trimestral de La Construcción de La Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires Primer Semestre de 2008* (Buenos Aires, 2009), 4.

Sarmiento: Founding Father of the National Narrative of Europe in Argentina

As we approached the Plaza Italia, the bustle of the Alto Palermo sub-district began to evaporate and the Palermo Park foliage came into view. When we arrived at the Plaza Italia, Carolina and I sat down on a bench looking out towards the *Rio de La Plata*. Carolina directed my gaze to an ostentatious statue situated in the roundabout of Libertador and Sarmiento Avenue. She informed me that the distant statue was that of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, founding father of Argentina. Carolina told me that as president in the late 19th century, Sarmiento was responsible for educational reforms that extended education to Argentines in nearly every province by 1900. He also recruited some of the best French architects to plan and construct Buenos Aires, giving the city a distinct identity that it had not held previously. What Carolina did not tell me, however, was that behind these seemingly benign acts of governance laid some of the many political methods by which Argentina's founding fathers attempted to transform Argentina into a modern, European nation.

As an Argentine founding father, Sarmiento was one of the Buenos Aires elite whose worldview consisted of a simple dichotomy between *civilización y barbarie* (civilization and barbarism) where civilization represented a “European, white, urban, capitalist, industrialized” nation and barbarism represented a “Latin American, rural, non-white, pre-capitalist” society.⁹³ Emanuela Guano characterizes this dichotomy as one drawn between a European modernity and a Latin American pre-modernity.⁹⁴ Sarmiento's legacy is one of attempting to position Argentina on the European side of this dichotomy. He did so by first implementing sweeping educational reforms that aimed to civilize the “barbaric” indigenous and *meztizo* Argentines.⁹⁵ Believing, however, that simply educating Argentina's native population would not be sufficient to bring it into European modernity, Sarmiento, along with other Buenos Aires elite politicians, implemented a political

⁹³ Emanuela Guano, *Emplacing Modernity: The Buenos Aires' Middle-Class and the Politics of Urban Spectacle in Neoliberal Argentina*, diss., The University of Texas- Austin, 1999, 12.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Nicolas Shumway, *The Invention of Argentina* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 136.

project to bring Europe to Argentina through immigration from European countries like Italy, Spain, France, England, and Germany. As a result, by 1914, 49.4 percent of Buenos Aires' population was foreign-born, mostly originating from Italy and Spain.⁹⁶

Figure Three: The Buenos Aires Port Through Which European Immigrants Arrived, 1931

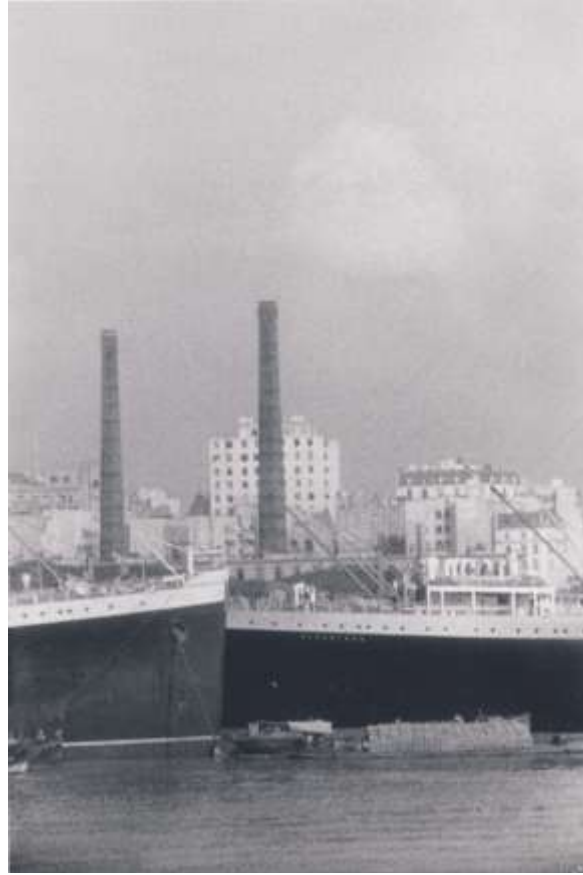


Photo By Horacio Coppola

Equally important for the construction of an imagined European national identity was the building of a European-esque city to serve as the nation's capital.⁹⁷ To this end, Sarmiento and other politicians—namely Marcelo Alvear who, at the time, became known as the “Hausmann of Buenos Aires”⁹⁸—recruited European (mostly French) architects to plan Buenos Aires in the cosmopolitan

⁹⁶ David Rock, *Argentina, 1516-1982: From Spanish Colonization to the Falklands War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 143.

⁹⁷ For the most in-depth historical description of this process, see: Adrián Gorelik, *Grilla y El Parque: Espacio Público y Cultura Urbana en Buenos Aires, 1887-1936* (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 1998).

⁹⁸ See David Harvey for more on Hausmann's historical legacy in Paris: David Harvey, *Paris, capital of modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

image of a European metropolis.⁹⁹ The Buenos Aires of today with its rigid square grid and *barrio*-based sub-municipal structure has its roots in the first metropolis expansion from 1890 to 1930 that these European architects planned and facilitated.¹⁰⁰

Figure Four: President Roque Saenz Peña Avenue, 1936



Photo By Horacio Coppola

The construction of a European urban identity accelerated at the turn of the 20th century as Buenos Aires politicians sought to evoke Europe through their city as much as possible leading up to the 1910 national centennial celebration where the whole world would be watching the up-and-

⁹⁹ Adrián Gorelik, "A Metropolis in the Pampas: Buenos Aires 1890-1940," in *Cruelty & Utopia: Cities and Landscapes of Latin America*, by Jean-Francois Lejeune (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005), 148.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 155.

coming nation.¹⁰¹ Buenos Aires politicians recruited French urban planner Joseph Bouvard in 1907 to implement the city's "centenary plan" which modernized the center of the city with large public buildings, impressive residences, and an integrated web of parks and plazas strung across the northern corridor of the city's "traditional" sector.¹⁰² Much to the delight of these Argentine politicians, Adrián Gorelik remarks how visitors to Buenos Aires for the centennial started "a saga of comparisons [to Europe]: the Avenida de Mayo resembled Paris, with its spacious sidewalks and cafes; the narrow streets of the financial sector resembled the city of London; the Park of Palermo resembled the Bois de Boulogne [Paris' most famous park]; the district of La Boca resembled Genoa in Italy; and so on."¹⁰³

Figure Five: Dusk. A View of the City From the River, 1936



Photo By Horacio Coppola

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² In particular, these European planners designed the center of the city with a uniform rectangular grid that facilitated an urban and social integration among disparate sectors of the city.

¹⁰³ Gorelik 2005, 152.

At the same that Sarmiento that set out to construct a modern, European city, political changes in the city began to shape the forms of “modern” urban citizenship for Buenos Aires residents. One of the key scales for the development of this urban citizenship beginning in 1917 was the sub-municipal scale of the *barrio* (neighborhood). The Buenos Aires *barrio* was both a socially constructed scale of urban life and an imagined urban community borne out of the cultural infusion of avant-garde literature and art in the suburbs around the micro-center of Buenos Aires during the 1920s.¹⁰⁴ From its inception, the *barrio* was the scale of social mobilization associated with the popular sectors of Argentine society and egalitarian/communal threads of liberal thought.¹⁰⁵ According to Luciano de Privilettio, this association is a result of the parallel expansion of citizenship rights and *barrio* representation through the law of 1912 that guaranteed universal male suffrage for men above the age of 18, and the reform of 1917 that provided the *barrios* with political representation through organs called *sociedades de fomento barrial* that funneled local demands for planning initiatives to the municipal level.¹⁰⁶ Thus, the *vecino* (resident of a *barrio*) and the *ciudadano* (citizen) mutually constituted one another as “the forms of the city were being defined simultaneously with the ways of its citizenship.”¹⁰⁷ As Carolina noted in our conversation and as I will later argue in the remainder of this thesis, this dual transformation of city and citizenship continues to influence urban mobilizations into the present day as urban residents organize to contest the transformation of their *barrios* and their city from their imagined European form.

Taken together, Sarmiento’s lasting legacy is his effort to construct Argentina in the image of Europe through promulgating educational reforms, encouraging immigration from Europe, and

¹⁰⁴ Juan M. Kanai, "The In-Between City: Neoliberal Globalization, Inequality and Middle-Class Politics in Buenos Aires, Argentina (2002-2007)" (diss., UCLA, 2008), 307.

¹⁰⁵ As a result, the Buenos Aires *barrio* continues to be an important political scale of mobilization and citizenship in contemporary Buenos Aires. Most urban activism in Buenos Aires is *barrio*-based.

¹⁰⁶ Luciano De Privilettio, *Vecinos y Ciudadanos Política y Sociedad en La Buenos Aires de Entreguerras* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno, 2003), 205-206.

¹⁰⁷ Horacio Coppola, Facundo De. Zuviría, and Adrián Gorelik, *Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Lariviere, 2006), 206.

building Buenos Aires with European architects and planners. At the turn of the 20th century, Buenos Aires became the epicenter of this national narrative of Europeanness, which became further embedded through further metropolis expansions planned by European architects from 1910-1930. As we will see in Chapter Four, the Argentine national urban narrative of Europeanness serves as a primary motivating factor for neighborhood groups who mobilize to defend the cultural identity of Palermo in the face of an immense real estate boom that residents say is changing the identity of the neighborhood for the worse.

“Constructing” A Middle-Class National Urban Narrative

Once traffic in the roundabout surrounding the Plaza Italia began to increase, Carolina and I decided that we had enough of Sarmiento and began to amble towards Plaza Serrano, the focal point of the new trendy Palermo Soho sub-*barrio* (previously known to older residents as Palermo Viejo). On our way, Carolina pointed out the few remaining urban vestiges of Palermo Viejo (old Palermo) that had not yet been converted into restaurants, bars, or residential towers. One such vestige was the *casa baja* (short house), which consisted of nothing more than a quaint one or two story house fit with a colonial façade. Another similar urban landmark was the *casa chorizo* (literally, sausage house), known as such because each these homes was divided into at least two separate tenements in order to accommodate the ever-increasing flow of European immigrants sailing into the Buenos Aires port in the early 1900s. Carolina told me that these two types of homes were often one in the same as the bottom floors of many *casas bajas* were divided in the layout of the *casa chorizo*, leaving the house’s second floor for wealthier *porteños* who could afford the entire living space.

As we walked, Carolina lamented that most of the remaining *casas bajas* and *casas chorizo* have been “recycled” into trendy boutiques or demolished to make way for the construction of mega-residential towers due to Palermo’s real estate boom. She explained that it has pained her parents

who have been residents of Palermo for 35 years to see these urban icons disappear from the neighborhood in the urban boom following the crisis of 2001/2002. As I walked, I wondered why Palermo residents displayed such visceral attachment to *casas bajas* and *casas chorizo*. Only later did I discover that these built forms connote middle-class national narratives that form the foundation of *porteño* self-representations as well as Argentine national identity.

Prior to the aforementioned colossal European immigration flowing into Buenos Aires from 1870 to 1930, Argentine society was starkly divided along class lines between super-rich Spanish Creole elites and an impoverished, rural, lower-class of native inhabitants.¹⁰⁸ This social divide coupled with an influx of European immigrants facilitated the growth of a burgeoning middle class during an export-led economic boom period from 1900 to 1930. By 1930, Gino Germani writes that immigrants and their first generation children had succeeded in filling the void between the creole elites and the rural lower classes with a robust middle class population.¹⁰⁹ According to David Rock, the Buenos Aires middle class became the largest of its kind in Latin America during the early 20th century.¹¹⁰ Due to the access to higher education promised by Sarmiento, many first generation European immigrants became white-collar workers in public administration and other professions.¹¹¹ With its turn of the century economic boom and the presence of a large, upwardly-mobile middle class, Argentina registered as the seventh wealthiest country in the world at the beginning of the 20th century.¹¹²

The *casa baja* and *casa chorizo* described by Carolina became common urban representations of Buenos Aires' nascent, upwardly mobile middle class. According to James Scobie, the economic boom of the early 1900s brought an expansion of credit lines to middle class Argentines as well as

¹⁰⁸ Guano 1999, 15.

¹⁰⁹ Gino Germani, *La Asimilación de Los Inmigrantes en La Argentina y El Fenómeno del Regreso en La Inmigración Reciente* (Buenos Aires: Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1964).

¹¹⁰ David Rock, *Argentina, 1516-1982: from Spanish colonization to the Falklands War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 175.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Guano 1999, 16.

improved transportation services, which both contributed to a newfound ability for middle class residents to afford “small individual lots and homes.”¹¹³ This newfound homeownership brought many of Buenos Aires residents out of *conventillos* (crowded tenements for the urban poor) located in the south of Buenos Aires in *barrios* like La Boca and Constitución, into rapidly multiplying small houses—now known as *casas bajas* and *casas chorizo*—located in suburbs like Palermo.¹¹⁴ Many middle-class residents completed this urban migration by purchasing a lot and constructing their home themselves.¹¹⁵

Figure Six: A Typical Casa Baja in the Suburbs



Source: James Scobie. *Buenos Aires: Plaza to Suburb, 1870-1910*. Pg 181.

The early 20th century *casa baja* served as an urban symbol of not just any middle class urban identity, but an upwardly mobile middle-class identity with prosperity and opportunity abound.

Scobie writes that many of these homes began as one-room homes and:

In a one room house, the entire space—roughly twelve by fifteen feet—served as kitchen, living room, and sleeping quarters for the family. As family earnings increased, the building would be expanded: the room became a kitchen and living area and a second, third, and even fourth room would be added as bedrooms. Finally, as a Brazilian visitor noted, “...sometimes fifteen years after acquiring the lot, with his daughters attending normal school and aspiring to a bourgeois status, this rising member of society added a *sala*, or living room.”¹¹⁶

¹¹³ James R. Scobie, *Buenos Aires: Plaza to Suburb, 1870-1910* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 178.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 180.

Scobie's description indicates that *casas bajas* and *casas chorizo* became physical manifestations of urban middle class upward mobility. New European immigrants moved from lower-class *conventillos* to one-room *casa bajas* to expanded and renovated homesteads in a stage play of upward urban class geographical mobility from the south to the north of the city. Moreover, developers and surveyors of these *casas bajas* housing lots "applied the same regulated lot that had given for to the patio-style residence of the wealth" in rich districts like Recoleta and *Barrio Norte* which further embedded the feeling of upward mobility among middle-class *porteños*.¹¹⁷ These residents could now own homes, which in some form resembled the lavished patio-style residences of the Spanish Creole oligarchy.

It is important to note that *casas bajas* became not only representations of upward class mobility, but also an actual *means* by which European immigrant residents could add something of stable value (land and homes) to their name. Thus, the *casa baja* and *casa chorizo* are more than mere Buenos Aires and Palermo urban traditions—they are urban forms of a spatialized, "solid," upwardly mobile middle class identity that that appeared "built to last." As we will see in Chapter Four, this "built to last" Argentine national urban narrative of middle-classness serves as a primary motivating factor for neighborhood groups who mobilize to defend *casas bajas* and other urban forms from destruction in the midst of an unbridled real estate boom.

Borges and Literary (Self) Representations of Porteño Identity¹¹⁸

After examining the *artesanía* jewelry of "hippy" vendors in the Plaza Serrano and stopping for a quick *coca* (coca-cola) at a nearby *resto-bar* (restaurant/bar), Carolina told me that she wanted me

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 179.

¹¹⁸ Though there are many Argentine authors who have had a significant impact on *porteños'* self-representations, I have chosen to solely mention Borges for three reasons. First, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to give an exhaustive account of early literary representations of Buenos Aires and Argentine national identity. Second, Borges is perhaps the most internationally reknown Argentine writers and what I observed as the most important author for middle-class *porteño* self-representations. Third, Borges was a resident of Palermo, which means that his words have an even greater effect for the ways that Palermo residents view the *barrio*, their city, and their nation. In fact, this is the exact point I will make in Chapter Four in an analysis of a *Palermo Despierta* flyer that references Borges.

to see the place that brought Palermo both local and international renown: the site of the home of Jorge Luis Borges, Argentina's most praised and prolific national writer. Carolina explained that the writings of Borges actively inform that ways that *porteños* perceive both themselves and their city.¹¹⁹ She reiterated that although many authors have written works of fiction about Buenos Aires, Borges was the only one to have captured the mystery and complexity of Buenos Aires on such a magisterial scale. Recently, my host sister Maria had claimed that Borges' *obras completas* (complete works) were an essential component of any respectable *porteño* bookshelf.

Borges was himself a middle class resident of Palermo and a devout anglophile.¹²⁰ Several of Borges' short stories were inspired by his departure from Buenos Aires to Europe during his childhood in 1914 and his return to the city in 1921.¹²¹ Upon his return, Borges encountered a modernizing city (see above) with "new perceptions of time and space" and "new forms of subjectivity."¹²² Borges wrote a book of poems entitled *Fervor de Buenos* that remembered Palermo as the *barrio* representing the quietness and realness of the city, as it was located "on the shabby northern outskirts of town."¹²³ And while there is much more that can be said on Borges' legacy and role in *porteño* national narratives, we will end our tour of Palermo and Buenos Aires urban history here and return to Borges in the analysis that follows in Chapter Four.

Chapter Conclusion: The Urbanization of National Narratives¹²⁴

Although she most likely did not realize it at the time, Carolina's "tour" through Palermo mirrors a historical narrative of the formation of national narratives of Europeanness and middle-

¹¹⁹ Borges described himself as "a man of the city, of the *barrio*, of the street."

¹²⁰ Podalsky 2004, 40.

¹²¹ Beatriz Sarlo, "Buenos Aires, the Peripheral Metropolis," in *Through the Kaleidoscope: The Experience of Modernity in Latin America*, by Vivian Schelling (New York: Verso, 2000), 111.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 110.

¹²³ Rohter, Larry. "Borges's Buenos Aires: A City Populated by a Native Son's Imagination." *New York Times*, May 14, 2006. <http://travel.nytimes.com/2006/05/14/travel/14foot.html> (accessed April 15, 2010).

¹²⁴ It is important to note that while I presented the national narratives of middle classness and Europeanness separately in this historical analysis, these narratives fundamentally constitute one another.

classness that—as I will argue in the following sections—inform the present-day self-representations of Palermo district residents who protest the invasion of mega-residential towers into Palermo and Buenos Aires. In the spirit of Li Zhang’s analysis of late-socialist China, my historical examination of the parallel development of the Argentine nation and the Buenos Aires cityscape has highlighted the profound connection between national and spatial belonging (i.e. national identity and urban identity).¹²⁵

An important caveat is that the history presented above is by no means a comprehensive or “true” history of Argentina and Buenos Aires. Indeed, several monumental periods occurred between 1930 and 1990—most notably of which is the rise of Juan Perón in 1945 and his transformation of Buenos Aires into a “*ciudad de las masas*” (city of the masses) as well as the Dirty War under the “*Progreso*” dictatorship from 1976-1983—that I leave out of my walk with Carolina. The point here is not to ignore or discount this history. Rather, this point is to narrate a particular history with which *porteños* identify and examine the role that Buenos Aires played in forming and perpetuating Argentine national narratives of middle-classness and Europeanness that, I argue, deeply motivate the present-day neighborhood activism taking place in Palermo.

As with any national narratives, there are both “real” and mythical foundations to *porteños*’ imagined European and middle class identity, and the historical distinctions between the real and the mythical are anything but clear. Benedict Anderson in particular emphasizes this constructed, imagined quality of the nation.¹²⁶ The aim of this section is not to reify *porteño* self-representations as a middle class, European people (an intellectual sin committed by infinitely many second-hand guidebooks to Buenos Aires). Rather, the point is to deconstruct these national narratives through a historical analysis of their politically orchestrated origins. From this historical analysis, I argue that we can better understand not only the material effects of the catastrophic economic crisis of

¹²⁵ Li Zhang, "Spatiality and Urban Citizenship in Late Socialist China," *Public Culture* 14, no. 2 (2002).

¹²⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin & Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

2001/2002 (see Chapter Three), but also the ways in which the crisis served as a rupture point for *porteño* middle class, European identity. Through an understanding of the importance of this rupture, I will later argue in Chapter Four that middle class *porteños* sought to reconstitute and reclaim their founding national narratives of middle-classness and Europeanness by defending from destruction the very neighborhood urban landmarks that embody this identity. For now, I turn to Chapter Three where I analyze the crisis of 2001/2002 and its impact on the socio-geographical landscape of Buenos Aires.

Chapter 3: **Socioeconomic Geography of Post-Crisis Buenos Aires**

The Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires (CABA)—the city proper of Buenos Aires that my study examines—is the fourth most populous census-defined city in the world with a total population of 11.6 million people.¹²⁷ It alone accounts for 8.3 percent of Argentina’s national population and 25.5 percent of the Argentine GNP (equivalent to Chile’s GNP).¹²⁸ Understanding the basic geographical and socioeconomic composition of the city is a vital prelude to examining its urban politics. Far too often, ethnographic and qualitative studies of urban politics ignore or elide quantitative analyses of urban change that allow us to understand a city’s composition. Thus, here in Chapter Three we will outline some of the key facts about Buenos Aires in order to better contextualize the study of the Palermo urban contestation that follows.

The shifts that have taken root in the Buenos Aires urban landscape during and following the economic crisis of 2001/2002 serve as central components of this survey’s narrative. As we will see, Argentina’s turn towards neoliberalism in the 1990s and the ensuing crisis of 2001/2002 produced a fragmented and unequal Buenos Aires cityscape rife with informal and precarious employment as well as urban poverty. Central to this story of urban change were the deleterious effects of the economic crisis on middle and lower class residents in Buenos Aires. Through an examination of these effects, I argue that the economic crisis was a rupture point that fundamentally challenged national narratives of Buenos Aires as a middle class, European city that we explored in my walk through Buenos Aires urban history with Carolina in Chapter Two. Thus, middle-class neighborhood mobilization around the Buenos Aires cityscape can be seen as a reaction to the urban middle class’ continuing erosion in the wake of the economic crisis of 2001/2002.

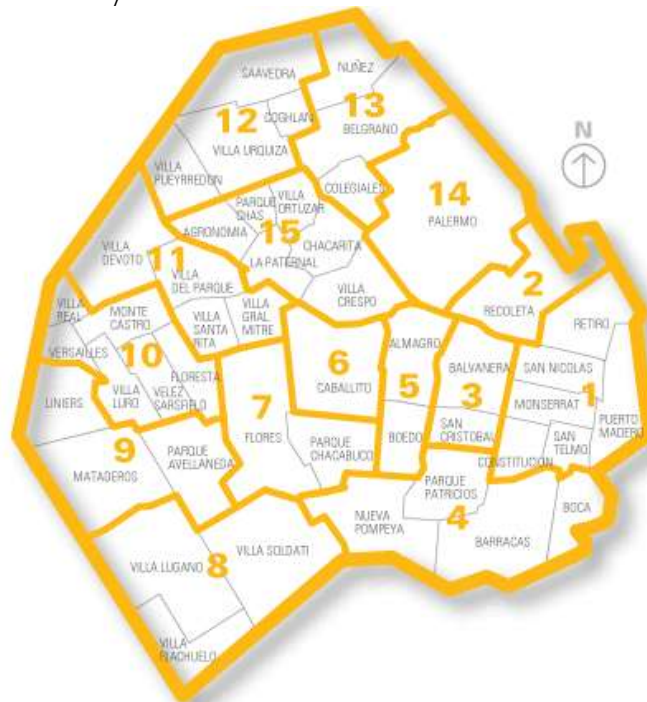
¹²⁷ Iliana Mignaqui and Pablo Ciccolella, "Buenos Aires: Sociospacial Impacts of the Development of Global City Functions," in *Global networks, Linked Cities*, ed. Saskia Sassen (New York: Routledge, 2002), 310.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

This chapter includes three sections: (1) geography of fragmentation and inequality; (2) informal labor and poverty; and (3) real estate and construction boom. Each section will detail the associated quantitative data and describes its relevance to the neighborhood activism analysis that follows in Chapter Four. These thematic sections call attention to the notion that in the wake of economic crisis, the Buenos Aires urban landscape is more than a mere tabula rasa on which urban actors perform. Rather it is a landscape in constant transformation, being reproduced and remade by multiple forces, amongst them the struggles over Palermo that we turn to in Chapter Four.

Buenos Aires is divided into 48 different *barrios* (neighborhoods). The grey text and lines in Map One illustrate the official dividing lines for each *barrio*. Palermo is the largest of these *barrios*. Beginning with the passage of law 1,777 in 2006, these *barrios* were grouped into *comunas*, which serve as electoral units for decentralized local governance. The bolded orange lines in Map One illustrate the *comuna* divisions and the numbers associated with each *comuna*.

Map One: Buenos Aires Barrios and Comunas



Source: Ministerio de Gestion Publica y Descentralización

Geography of Fragmentation and Inequality

Between 1989 and 1999, Argentine president Carlos Menem implemented a neoliberal economic restructuring program that had major implications for the character of the Buenos Aires cityscape. The economic and demographic data we have about the city makes clear that fragmentation and inequality increased substantially in the city. As some *barrios* in the city's northern corridor became profitable for real estate and capital investment, others became spatially disadvantaged and neglected.¹²⁹

Figure Seven graphs the Buenos Aires' Gini coefficient¹³⁰ from 1980 to 2002. The graph illustrates that the city's inequality has been steadily increasing since 1980 until reaching its apogee during the economic crisis of 2001/2002 with a coefficient of 0.53. To put these levels into perspective, a 2008 United Nations Human Settlements Programmed report stated that the average Gini coefficient of selected cities by region is 0.31 for Europe, 0.54 for Africa, 0.4 for Asia, and 0.55 for Latin America.¹³¹ Thus, Buenos Aires' Gini coefficient is significantly higher than European cities and on par with that of other Latin American cities. This level of inequality falls under what the UN Programmed defines as "high levels of inequality, reflecting institutional and structural failures in income distribution."¹³²

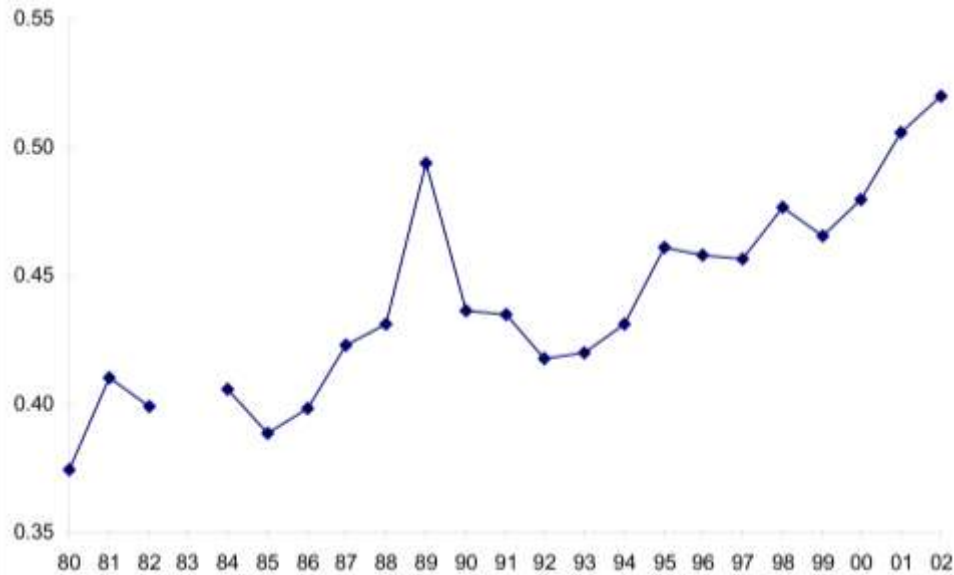
¹²⁹ Silvestri and Gorelik 2000, 489.

¹³⁰ According to the United Nations Human Settlements Programme report's definition: "The Gini coefficient is a useful metric for understanding the state of cities with regard to distribution of income or consumption. It is the most widely used measure to determine the extent to which the distribution of income or consumption among individuals or households deviates from a perfectly equal distribution. A Gini coefficient of 0 indicates perfect equality, whereas a Gini coefficient of 1 indicates perfect inequality. Higher values, therefore, denote greater inequality, but the correspondence of the ratio to specific conditions is complicated" (UN, 51). It is worth noting that while this measure is aspatial in the sense that it does not tell us about the geographical distribution of inequality, it nevertheless serves as a useful tool for measuring inequality in absolute terms.

¹³¹ United Nations Human Settlements Programme., *State of the World's Cities 2008/2009* (London: UN Habitat, 2008), 63.

¹³² *Ibid*, 51.

Figure Seven: Gini Coefficient, Distribution of Equivalent Household Income in Greater Buenos Aires, 1980-2002



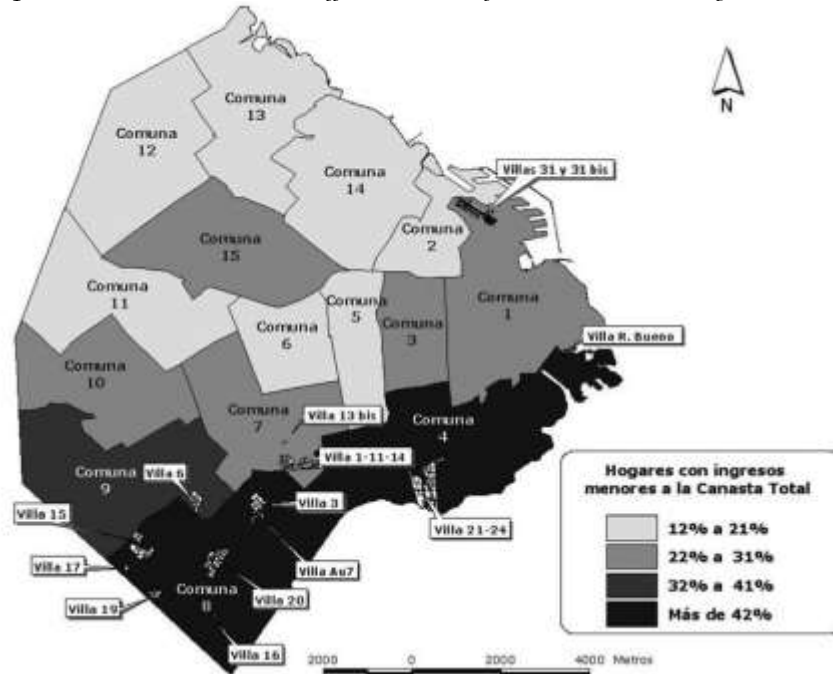
Source: Sosa, Marchionni, Gasparini, 2004.

Map Two illustrates the percentages of households that do have sufficient income for basic necessities and expenses (*canasta total*) according to different *comunas*. This map tells us more about the spatialization of inequality that the gini coefficient elides. For the Buenos Aires metropolitan region, the geographical distribution of Buenos Aires income inequality falls ostensibly along traditional north-south territorial lines. Map Two shows that the majority of the city's *villas miserias* (shantytowns) and low-income residents are located in the southern most points of the city. Several scholars, including Ciccolella and Mignaqui (2002), have coined terms like “dual city” to describe this north-south territorial divide.¹³³ Map Two, however, also illustrates that spatial inequality in Buenos Aires is more complex than “dual city” scholars acknowledge. *Comunas* in the western part of the city such as *comunas* 10, 11, 12, 13, and 15 all have rates of households with insufficient income below 31%. This has led some scholars such as Artemio Lopez and Juan Kanai to divide

¹³³ Mignaqui and Ciccolella, 2002.

Buenos Aires according to class into the southern arc (lower class), western wedge (middle class), and the northern corridor (middle-upper and upper class).¹³⁴

Map Two: Households with Insufficient Income for Basic Necessities by Comuna



Source: Contuntura Económica de La Ciudad De Buenos Aires 2009, Buenos Aires Government.

There are still more forms of spatial inequality and fragmentation that the Gini coefficient and income distribution maps alone cannot illustrate. While it is possible to detail hundreds of examples, I will describe only two here. First, *porteños* can access 87 percent of jobs in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area in 45 minutes of travel time through the use of a car, but only 23% of metropolitan jobs are accessible in 45 minutes through public transportation (a mode of transportation that citizens in the southern arc heavily rely on due to their low income and inability to afford a car).¹³⁵ Second, public expenditure on infrastructure, education, and healthcare across Buenos Aires' *barrios* during the 1990s was highly uneven according to one's location in the city. Comparing five broad geographical areas of Buenos Aires, the wealthy Recoleta-Retiro area received

¹³⁴ Lopez, 1997; Kanai, 2008.

¹³⁵ World Bank, by Austin Kilroy (2007), <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWDR2009/Resources/4231006-1204741572978/Kilroy2.pdf> (accessed April 1, 2010), 10.

\$306 per capita infrastructure investment while the central and north-west areas of the city only received \$18 per capital.¹³⁶ Additionally, according to Austin Kilroy, “the Recoleta-Retiro area and the northeast corridor received three times the per capita public education expenditure of the rest of the city.”¹³⁷

Understanding the aforementioned spatial inequality and fragmentation in Buenos Aires is critical to the Chapter Four analysis of urban contestation in Palermo. In this *barrio*, many of the sources of city-wide fragmentation and inequality—weak urban regulatory institutions, marginal public participation in urban planning, and a market-led paradigm for urban planning—are the same forces that confront Palermo residents in their quest to organize for more control over the identity of their neighborhood.

Informal Employment and Urban Poverty in Buenos Aires: The Decline of the Middle Class

The relative success in the realm of formal unemployment since the crisis of 2001¹³⁸ masks two hidden trends: the rise of informal labor outside of the official labor market and the rise in urban poverty in Buenos Aires. A survey of the Buenos Aires labor market, with an emphasis on the modern-day prevalence of informal employment and urban poverty, demonstrates that the post-crisis city is an environment of precarious labor conditions where almost no one is exempt from the threat of urban poverty.

According to the Centro de Estudios Para Desarrollo Económico Metropolitana (CEDEM), at the peak of the crisis in 2002, Buenos Aires labor analysts began to see an emergent trend of “hidden unemployment” as workers withdrew from the labor market in search of subsistence jobs

¹³⁶ World Bank 2007, 19.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ El Gobierno de Buenos Aires, Centro de Estudios Para El Desarrollo Económico Metropolitano, *La Ciudad de Buenos Aires Durante La Década de Los 90': Un Balance en Términos de Empleo*, by Elina López (Buenos Aires, 2002), 54.

such as street vending, bartering, and recycling.¹³⁹ In 2002, the Buenos Aires working population of 1.5 million people consisted of 250,000 people who were openly unemployed, while nearly half of the employed population (530,000 people) had a least one attribute of job insecurity.¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, while the average annual job growth in Buenos Aires was 6.1% between 2003 and 2007, informal labor rates have remained near constant since the crisis of 2001/2002. The *Centro de Estudios Para el Desarrollo Económico Metropolitano* (CEDEM) states that the rate of non-registered workers in urban areas was near 40% in the fourth quarter of 2007 while in October 2001 the rate of non-registered workers was 39%.¹⁴¹ Thus, the rate of informal labor has remained near constant since the crisis, despite a decline in formal unemployment.

Several studies have confirmed the reflexive relationship between precarious employment conditions and urban poverty. In the case of Buenos Aires, the city saw a sharp rise in urban poverty along with urban informality before, during, and following the economic crisis of 2001. According to the *Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos* (INDEC), in 1999 about 80% of the Buenos Aires population lived below the poverty line, a status that the Buenos Aires government defines as earning less than the 1,030 pesos needed to support a family of four.¹⁴² In 2002, the urban poverty rate had increased to 63% for households and 82% for individuals, while urban destitution had increased 100% for households and 370% for individuals from 2001 to 2002.¹⁴³

The Buenos Aires middle class has been hit particularly hard by the rise of informality and poverty in the city. While the middle class comprised 57.2% of the Buenos Aires population in 1986,

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Gobierno de Buenos Aires, Centro de Estudios Para el Desarrollo Económico Metropolitano, *El Empleo No Registrado en La Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires: Tendencias e Impacto Sobre la Población Asalariada, 2003-2007* (Buenos Aires: El Gobierno de Buenos Aires, 2008), 7.

¹⁴² Emanuela Guano, "Spectacle of Modernity: Transnational Imagination and Local Hegemonies in Neoliberal Buenos Aires," *Cultural Anthropology* 17, no. 2 (May 2002): 183

¹⁴³ Centro de Estudios Para El Desarrollo Económico Metropolitano 2002, 54.

this class was nearly cut in half to just 37% of the population by 2004.¹⁴⁴ 48.2% of middle class residents are now members of the new urban poor according to the INDEC.¹⁴⁵ These new urban poor are urban residents who come from a middle class background and have seen their class standing slip through the cracks during the economic crisis. This number of new urban poor is three times higher than the traditional poverty segment in Buenos Aires.¹⁴⁶ Moreover, an economic study published in *La Nación* states that 63% of the Buenos Aires middle class did not have the ability to save any of their earnings. Instead, the urban middle class continues to spend all of its income just to subsist.¹⁴⁷

The middle class has also fallen victim to informal labor conditions. In the wake of the crisis, Buenos Aires has a considerable amount of unregistered and informal employment in jobs that require high levels of education. In 2006, 33% of unregistered workers engaged in tasks that required professional or technical qualifications and 22% of unregistered workers had university education or beyond.¹⁴⁸ Thus, post-crisis Buenos Aires challenges urban scholars to think beyond preconceived notions of urban informality in the form of poor street vendors and barterers, and imagine the ways in which conditions of labor informality and precariousness envelop the whole of the city, particular middle class residents. This is of particular importance because of the ways in which such informality has rendered large sections of the urban middle class unprotected by formal buffers—pensions, access to public services, etc.—and thus more vulnerable to the economic shock waves that the city has endured.

¹⁴⁴ Sergio Olivieri, *Debilitamiento de la Clase Media: Gran Buenos Aires 1986-2004*, thesis, Universidad Nacional de La Plata, 2007, 18.

¹⁴⁵ *La Nación*, "Fuerte impacto de la crisis en la *clase media*," July 16, 2000, http://www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=24932 (accessed April 10, 2010).

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *La Nación*, "El 63% de la *clase media* aún no tiene capacidad de ahorro," June 14, 2005, http://www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=721180 (accessed April 10, 2010).

¹⁴⁸ Centro de Estudios Para El Desarrollo Económico Metropolitano 2002, 25.

The chapter on neighborhood mobilization in Palermo that follows will illustrate that residents of Buenos Aires, including middle class Palermo residents, experience this data on labor precariousness, informality, and insecurity as part of their brutal daily realities. Many Palermo residents are still reeling from the devastating effects of the economic crisis and the downward economic mobility that followed in its wake. Chapter Four will demonstrate that these macroeconomic trends have serious implications for the Argentine national narratives of a middle class people.

Real Estate and Construction Boom

One of the most salient urban motifs among *porteños* following the crisis of 2001/2002 is that of the *boom inmobiliario* (real estate boom). After the crisis, construction and real estate became one of the most preferred options for the allocation of transnational capital as well as savings of local *porteños*.¹⁴⁹ Real estate became what David Harvey calls the “spatial fix” for the overaccumulation of capital flowing into Buenos Aires after the Argentine peso’s 75% devaluation in 2002.¹⁵⁰ In short, overcapacity and economic turbulence in the traditional economy were resolved in part by shifting capital from the banking sector into new real estate and urban development initiatives. As a result, construction grew at twice the rate of the city’s economy by 2005.¹⁵¹ The *boom inmobiliario* was therefore due in large part to the collapse of the Argentine banking sector during the economic crisis. During the crisis, the government froze all bank accounts in an act known as the *corralito*, which resulted in the elimination of the savings accounts of thousands of *porteños* and instilled a

¹⁴⁹ In particular, Muxi (2004) states that an “important element that marks patterns of the existence of global areas within the interior of Buenos Aires is the city’s arrival on the world stage of the ‘real estate market,’ which is one of the main businesses of globalization.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁵⁰ These processes, though, were not exactly the same as the sorts of spatial fix traced by Harvey and others in cities such as New York, Paris and London. Argentina’s own particular experience of global crisis, with the failures of the dollarization experiment adding to chronic peripheral volatility, meant that the local banking crisis was also a key component of the spatial fix.

¹⁵¹ Ezequiel Burgo, “Las Razones Del Nuevo Boom Del Negocio Inmobiliario,” *Clarín* (Buenos Aires), September 11, 2005, <http://www.clarin.com/suplementos/economico/2005/09/11/n-00311.htm> (accessed April 02, 2010).

staunch distrust in the Buenos Aires banking sector. Since the *corralito*, *porteños* have shifted to real estate and construction as a safe alternative to the banking system for the investment of their funds.¹⁵²

During the 1990s, land uses and construction in Buenos Aires were “largely oriented to consumption, recreation, luxury housing, tertiary services, and exclusive shopping centers.”¹⁵³ Puerto Madero’s revitalization in the 1990s from a dilapidated port *barrio* to the most luxurious and exclusive neighborhood in all of Buenos Aires—a process one scholar called the building of a “corridor of modernity and wealth”¹⁵⁴—is the quintessential example of the 1990s’ form of land use and construction. Following the economic crisis, the construction and real estate boom has been concentrated in the residential housing sector, with high-rise, gated residential towers (*los torres-countries*) occupying 47% of residential housing construction projects by 2005.¹⁵⁵ Thus, there has been a significant shift in the types of construction projects that investors and urban residents finance in the transition from the Menem era to the post-crisis era.

Figure Eight illustrates the trend of annual and biannual rates of total construction from 1994-2004. As the figure demonstrates, construction rates declined precipitously from 1999-2002, but surged in the years following the economic crisis with a minimum of 35% yearly increases from 2003-2007. While the 1990s witnessed a real estate boom, particularly in gated communities and country clubs, the rates of construction during this period nowhere near approach the construction rates since 2003.

¹⁵² *La Nación*, "El 63% de la *clase media* aún no tiene capacidad de ahorro," June 14, 2005, http://www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=721180 (accessed April 10, 2010).

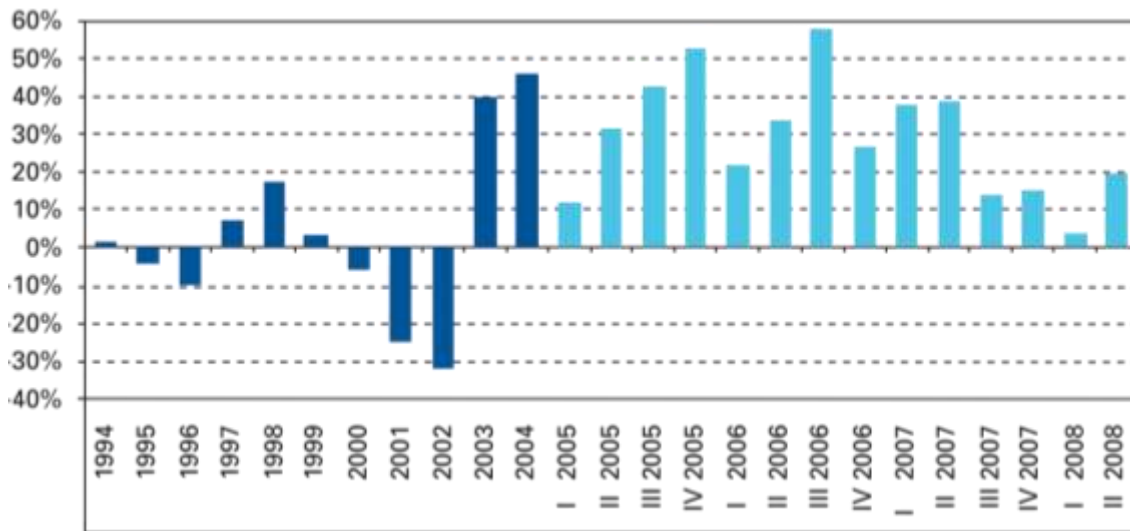
¹⁵³ Pérez 2002, 149.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ Gorelik, 2006.

Figure Eight: Inter-year Variation in the Construction Index.

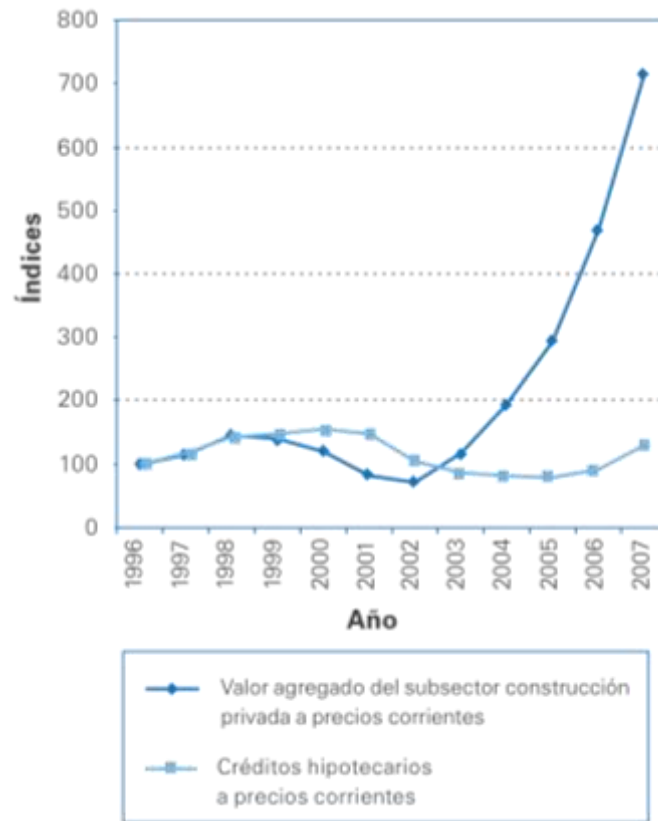
*Note that the 1993 construction rate corresponds to base percentage rate, and the 1994-2004 rates are annual rates while the rates beginning in 2005 are semester rates.



Source: Direccion General de Estadistica y Censos (Ministerio de Hacienda GCBA).

Figure Nine graphs both the rates of private sector construction and mortgage usage from 1996 to 2007. The rate of private sector construction (represented by the dark blue line) has increased seven-fold since 2002. This sharp increase relative to the increases in total construction rates shown in Figure 3 demonstrates that the private sector has been at the hull of the post-crisis real estate boom. Thus, contrary to the popular notion that “urban entrepreneurialism” and neoliberal planning ended with Menem’s second term in 1999, market-led development has in fact remained the dominant planning paradigm in the post-crisis era.

Figure Nine: Value Added Rates of the Private Construction Subsector in the City of Buenos Aires and the Balance of Mortgage Credits of the Banking System in Argentina.¹⁵⁶



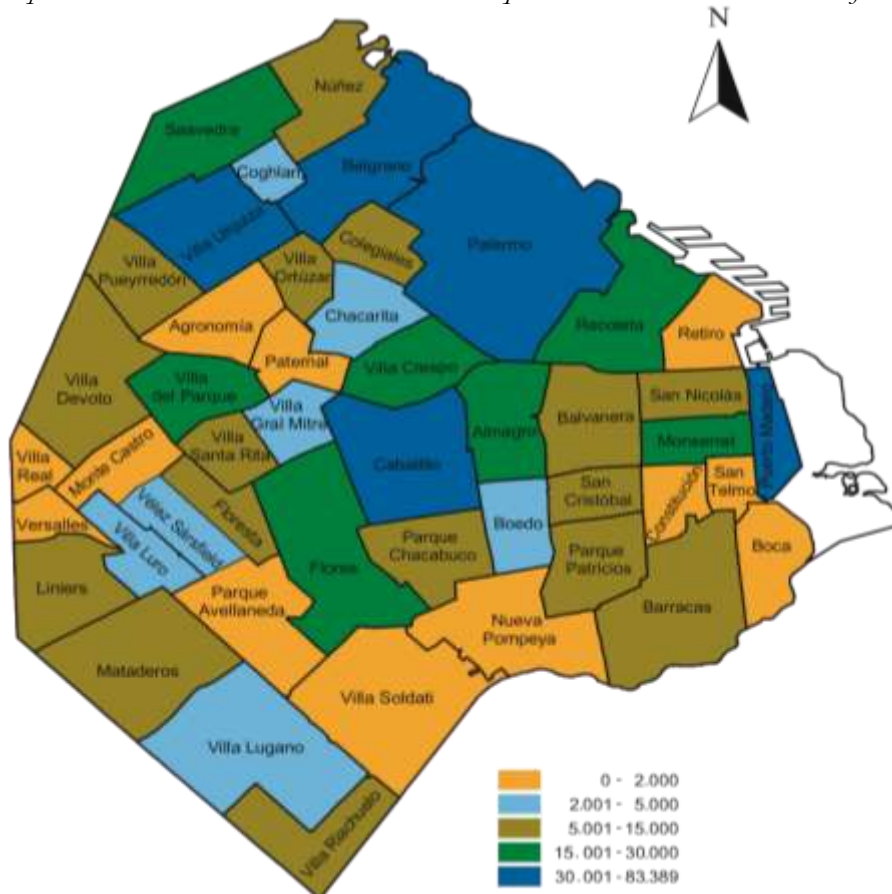
Source: Direccion General de Estadística y Censos (Ministerio de Hacienda GCBA), through the Entidades Financieras del BCRA database.

Map Three illustrates the spatial distribution of the real estate boom through categorizing construction rates according to *barrios*. The Buenos Aires Construction Monitoring survey states that, in the first half of 2008, the majority of square meters in construction were located in the *barrios* of Palermo, Puerto Madero, Caballito, Belgrano, and Villa Urquiza. By *barrio*, Palermo had 148,000 m² of construction, Puerto Madero had 118,000 m², Caballito had 105,000 m², Belgrano had 91,000

¹⁵⁶ Figure Nine also relates a peculiar trait of the post-crisis boom. Namely, unlike most developed economies where mortgage credit serves as a driving factor stimulating construction growth, the boom in construction and real estate in Buenos Aires has occurred alongside stagnant, if not slightly declining, rates of mortgage credit. Due to both a lack of local credit and a lack of trust in the banking system, many *porteños* finance the construction and purchases of their living spaces with cash and savings, thus lowering the incidence of mortgage loans.

m2, and Villa Urquiza has 89,000 m2 of construction.¹⁵⁷ According to the survey, the 2008 construction rates were merely a continuation of unbridled real estate development and construction in all of these neighborhoods, particularly Palermo, which stands as the neighborhood most transformed by the real estate and construction boom.¹⁵⁸

Map Three: Construction Area Per Barrio in Square Meters. Second Trimester of 2008



Source: Direccion General de Estadistica y Censos (Ministerio de Hacienda GCBA).

Chapter Conclusion: City in the Wake of a Rupture

This chapter has illustrated the socioeconomic effects of Buenos Aires' turn towards neoliberalism in the 1990s and the ensuing crisis of 2001/2002. In short, Buenos Aires is now a

¹⁵⁷ Gobierno de Buenos Aires, Direccion General de Estadistica y Censos, *Indicador Trimestral de La Construcción de La Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires Primer Semestre de 2008* (Buenos Aires, 2009), 4.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

fragmented and unequal cityscape rife with informal and precarious employment as well as urban poverty. Central to this story of urban change are the deleterious effects of the economic crisis on the Buenos Aires middle class. The middle class has experienced an unprecedented rollback in the wake of the economic crisis as many middle class urban residents find themselves among the “new” Buenos Aires urban poor.

In light of these facts, I argue that the economic crisis of 2001/2002 served as a rupture point for national narratives of a middle-class, European city. Post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha argues that these moments of rupture are crucial to understanding the ways in which national narratives break down. In the wake of crisis, the historical urban roots of the national narratives that we explored in Chapter Two have come undone. Middle class residents can no longer tout the opulence of their city as a justification for these narratives because the deteriorating material conditions of the middle class as well as the presence of structural inequality make Buenos Aires anything but an egalitarian, European city.¹⁵⁹ Thus, in the words of Bhabha, the crisis has “ruptured the discourse”¹⁶⁰ that coheres national narratives of middle classness and Europeanness in the urban space of Buenos Aires.¹⁶¹ The crisis has revealed that these national narratives are not impermeable and static, but are instead subject to change and revision.

This chapter has also demonstrated how, in the wake of this economic collapse an unchecked real estate boom has taken hold of Buenos Aires, particularly in *barrios* located in the city’s northern corridor. Palermo was the epicenter of this boom as it had the highest rate of construction and real estate investment compared to all other Buenos Aires *barrios* by 2008.¹⁶² Thus, this neighborhood became the locus of a new city that was beginning to take shape in boom

¹⁵⁹ This is not, of course, to say that all European cities are equal.

¹⁶⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 123.

¹⁶¹ However, far from a rupture that makes these national narratives irrelevant in the post-crisis context, Chapter 4 will show how Palermo residents mobilize to re-emplace these “ruptured discourses” in the urban space of their neighborhood.

¹⁶² Gobierno de Buenos Aires, Dirección General de Estadística y Censos, *Indicador Trimestral de La Construcción de La Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires Primer Semestre de 2008* (Buenos Aires, 2009), 4.

following the crisis. In Chapter Four, we will examine a neighborhood activist group in Palermo called *Palermo Despierta* (Wake Up Palermo) that has formed to contest the negative effects of the real estate boom on their narrative and their city. We will also see how this group's activism seeks to reconstruct national narratives of middle-classness and Europeanness in the urban space of Buenos Aires in response to the economic crisis' fundamental challenge to these urban identities.

Chapter 4:

Contesting *Los Torres*: An Analysis of Palermo Resident Discourses and *Palermo Despierta* Neighborhood Activism

In Chapter Two, I argued that the city of Buenos Aires played a major role in the historical construction of Argentine national narratives of a middle-class, European people. I demonstrated how these national narratives were devices of Argentine politicians like Sarmiento who orchestrated political projects to construct a modern, European nation in Latin America. I concluded that there are both “real” and mythical foundations to *porteños*’ imagined European and middle class identity, and the historical distinctions between the real and the mythical are anything but clear.

In Chapter Three, I illustrated how Argentina’s turn towards neoliberalism in the 1990s and the ensuing crisis of 2001/2002 produced a fragmented and unequal Buenos Aires cityscape rife with informal and precarious employment as well as increasingly visible urban poverty. Central to this story of urban change were the deleterious effects of the economic crisis on middle residents in Buenos Aires as the distinctions between the middle class and the poor became blurred. I argued that the economic crisis fundamentally challenged the historical narratives of Buenos Aires as a middle class, European city that we explored Chapter Two. Chapter Three also demonstrated how, in the wake of this economic collapse, an unbridled real estate boom took hold of Buenos Aires, particularly in *barrios* located in the city’s northern corridor. Palermo was the epicenter of this boom and thus became the locus of a new city that was beginning to take shape in the boom following the crisis.

It is in this context that several Buenos Aires neighborhood activists groups emerged to contest the negative effects of the real estate boom on their *barrio* and city. This chapter’s aim is to explore one cross section of these urban resident mobilizations: the anti-*torre* (anti-tower) movement led by *Palermo Despierta* in the Palermo District. My analysis examines why *Palermo Despierta* contests the urban transformations brought on by the construction of mega-residential towers in Palermo. I

argue that, in the eyes of Palermo residents, mega-residential towers represent the forces of neoliberal urbanism that pose a fundamental threat to their middle class, European urban identity. Thus, *Palermo Despierta's* campaign against the “invasion” of mega-residential towers into Palermo needs to be understood as a response to fears that these buildings would *further threaten* Argentine national narratives of Buenos Aires as a middle class, European city.

However, rather than reify these national narratives, I argue that *Palermo Despierta's* activism responds to the ongoing fragmentation and disintegration of *porteño* urban identity in the wake of the crisis of 2001/2002. In the face of this fragmentation, Palermo residents cling to an imagined middle-class, European Buenos Aires that resides only in their urban consciousness.¹⁶³ While these national narratives animate urban middle class activists to contest neoliberal urbanism, I also argue that these same narratives present exclusionary attitudes towards the urban poor that call into question *Palermo Despierta's* seemingly anti-neoliberal, progressive vision for Palermo and Buenos Aires.

To justify these conclusions, I first begin with a brief history of mega-towers and an introduction to the wider urban movements to which *Palermo Despierta* belongs.¹⁶⁴ Second, I analyze interviews with *Palermo Despierta*-affiliated residents in order to demonstrate the importance of middle class and European urban narratives in the everyday lives of Palermo residents. Third, I analyze *Palermo Despierta's* official documents, multimedia, and newspaper coverage to demonstrate how the group's demands and discourses contest neoliberalism by defending the imagined middle class, European Buenos Aires evoked by my interviewees.¹⁶⁵ Lastly, I address the question of the

¹⁶³ For more information on this phenomenon, see David Harvey, *Consciousness and the Urban Experience: Studies in the History and Theory of Capitalist Urbanization* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

¹⁶⁴ It must be mentioned that the point of this chapter is not to analyze the specific tactics and organizational styles employed by *Palermo Despierta*, but rather to uncover and examine the political basis and motives for the group's anti-torres activism.

¹⁶⁵ Note that all names used in this analysis are pseudonyms for actual interviewees.

urban poor in Buenos Aires from the contradictory perspectives of my Palermo interviewees and *Palermo Despierta*.

A Brief History of Mega-Towers

Today the most imposing mega-tower in Palermo—and perhaps all of Buenos Aires—is the Le Parc tower (Figure Ten). Up until 2002, Le Parc was the tallest building in Buenos Aires, located in a fenced-off block in northeast Palermo and equipped with panoptic security precautions, including guard booths and security cameras.

Figure Ten: Le Parc Tower, Photo Taken by Garrett Strain



However, skyscrapers and residential towers like Le Parc are nothing new to Buenos Aires. Laura Podalsky has written extensively on the arrival of these built forms in the city beginning in the

1960s.¹⁶⁶ She writes that as far back as the 1960s skyscrapers such as the Fiat and Olivetti (Figure Eleven) buildings began to appear in downtown Buenos Aires as well as wealthier neighborhoods in the north like *Barrio Norte* and Belgrano.¹⁶⁷

Figure Eleven: The Olivetti Building, One of Buenos Aires' First Skyscrapers¹⁶⁸

Similar to today, Podalsky states that “the appearance of these buildings dominating the city’s skyline served as a visual reminder of the growing importance of foreign capital to the Argentine economy.”¹⁶⁹ Podalsky describes how many middle class *porteños* were complicit in the arrival of these first residential towers, using them as a means to escape street-level urban threats of alterity.¹⁷⁰ The “Progreso” military dictatorship from 1976-1983 was also responsible for a temporary



proliferation of skyscrapers in the heart of the city as part of its efforts to move the city away from import-substitution industrialization toward global financial services. The difference between these previous iterations of tower development and the boom following the crisis of 2001/2002, however,

¹⁶⁶ Laura Podalsky, *Specular City: Transforming Culture, Consumption, and Space in Buenos Aires, 1955-1973* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004).

¹⁶⁷ See Chapter 2, Podalsky 2004.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ This observation of the role of the middle class in Buenos Aires in the 1960s presents an interesting opportunity for further analysis. This observation also stands in stark contrast to my analysis, which demonstrates how middle class residents actually contest neoliberal urbanism. This difference in contemporary urban practices of the middle class in Buenos Aires perhaps illustrates the importance of the crisis of 2001/2002 in the creation of a city with a distinctly new sociospatial organization.

is the sheer frequency with which towers have been erected in the past eight years. As urban historian Adrian Gorelik noted, the *torre-country*¹⁷¹—a mega-tower residence that contains many of the same amenities as a country club—represented 47% of annual residential projects by 2005.¹⁷²

In Defense of Buenos Aires: Urban Movements and *Palermo Despierta*

It is within this context of mega-residential tower proliferation in Palermo and other *barrios* in the north and west of Buenos Aires that *Palermo Despierta* has emerged. The group refers to itself as a “new neighborhood movement dedicated to the struggle for a *barrio* that respects its own identity which is now threatened by the indiscriminate proliferation of towers, as a result of a lack of respect for public spaces and the will of local residents.”¹⁷³ The group is not an autonomous entity, but rather a coalition of Palermo neighborhood activists from like-minded groups including *Los Vecinos de la Plaza Italia*, *Jovenes Por La Igualdad*, and the *Sociedad de Fomento de Palermo Viejo*. Since 2007, *Palermo Despierta* has been at the forefront of anti-tower activism in Buenos Aires, following in the footsteps of middle-class activists in the Caballito *barrio* who, in 2005, successfully protested the municipal government to issue a temporary ban on construction projects in a high-density portion of the neighborhood.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ Also known as the “*torre premium*” in Buenos Aires real estate nomenclature.

¹⁷² Adrián Gorelik, “Modelo Para Armar: Buenos Aires, De La Crisis Al Boom,” *Punto De Vista* 84 (April & may 2006): http://www.bazaramericano.com/bazar_opina/articulos/gorelik_crisis_al_boom.htm (accessed November 24, 2009).

¹⁷³ “¿Qué Es “*Palermo Despierta*”?” *Palermo Despierta*, weblog entry, http://palermodespierta.blogspot.com/2008/05/palermo-despierta_20.html (accessed April 10, 2010).

¹⁷⁴ Pablo Novillo, “En Palermo, los vecinos también piden control sobre las *torres*,” *Clarín*, June 3, 2008, <http://www.clarin.com/diario/2008/06/03/laciudad/h-01685854.htm> (accessed April 10, 2010).

Figures Twelve and Thirteen: Palermo Despierta Protests



Source: <http://palermodespierta.blogspot.com/>

Like the Caballito activists, *Palermo Despierta* targets the municipal government with the aim of pressuring the local state to restrict the development of towers and other “luxury” construction projects in Palermo. The group’s mobilization has been highly effective, as evidenced by the municipal government’s issuance of a temporary construction ban in high-density areas of Palermo in March of 2007 in response to *Palermo Despierta*’s protests.¹⁷⁵ The group has also organized several

¹⁷⁵ Pablo Novillo, "Seguirá trabada la construcción de torres en una zona de Palermo," *Clarín*, March 15, 2007, <http://www.clarin.com/diario/2007/03/15/laciudad/h-03815.htm> (accessed April 10, 2010).

panels with government official and state urban planners for Palermo residents who have directly voiced their concerns about the fate of their neighborhood to municipal state officials.

Palermo Despierta participates in several larger coalitions with neighborhood groups in the north and west of Buenos Aires that have also been negatively impacted by the whirlwind of urban development and tower construction following the crisis of 2001/2002.¹⁷⁶ Along with these groups, *Palermo Despierta* has pressured the Buenos Aires legislature to implement regulatory mechanisms to control the speed of development in the city.¹⁷⁷ Additionally, Palermo is a ranking member of a popular broad-based coalition called *Queremos Buenos Aires* (We Want Buenos Aires) that addresses what it calls the “urban/environmental/social and heritage emergency in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires.”¹⁷⁸ A central aim of this coalition is the protection of Buenos Aires’ *patrimonio urbano* (historic urban forms) in the same spirit as *Palermo Despierta*.¹⁷⁹ These coalitions to which *Palermo Despierta* belongs demonstrate, among other things, that the group’s movement against the construction of towers in Palermo is not an isolated urban phenomenon, but rather part and parcel

¹⁷⁶ *Palermo Despierta* has worked closely with other urban green space defense groups in Palermo and Buenos Aires like *La Asociación Amigos del Lago de Palermo* (The Association of Friends of Palermo Lake) and *Asamblea Permanente Por Los Espacios Verdes Urbanos* (The Permanent Assembly for Urban Green Space).

¹⁷⁷ In November 2008, *Palermo Despierta* presented a document co-authored with 45 other neighborhood organizations—particularly organizations from other traditional neighborhoods like San Telmo, Baracas, Caballito, Recoleta, Floresta—to 60 Buenos Aires legislators demanding an end to the destruction of the city’s urban heritage, the privatization of its public green spaces, the elimination of urban public goods, and the lack of citizen participation in the planning process.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁸ Queremos Buenos Aires, "Queremos Buenos Aires - Adhieren y Participan," Queremos buenos aires: alternativa para el Área Metropolitana en emergencia, web log entry posted June 1, 2008, <http://queremosbsas.blogspot.com/> (accessed April 10, 2010).

¹⁷⁹ The coalition has been highly successful in publicizing *Palermo Despierta*’s struggle to preserve the cultural heritage and identity of Palermo on a citywide and metropolitan-wide scale. In November 2009—shortly after the conclusion my fieldwork—the Buenos Aires legislature approved Law 3056 in response to pressure from *Palermo Despierta* and the Queremos Buenos Aires coalition. Law 3056 extended an existing rule, which mandated that all buildings built before 1940 throughout the city of Buenos Aires be evaluated for their historical and architectural quality before being demolished. Law 3056 also mandated for the first time that urban sites located outside of the city’s central historical protection areas be appraised for their historical urban value before any construction takes place. For more information, see: Diana Plaza, "Vecinos al rescate del patrimonio," *La Nación*, January 3, 2010, http://www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=1225103 (accessed April 15, 2010).

of a robust city-wide network of neighborhood activists who seek to defend Buenos Aires' historical (read middle class and European¹⁸⁰) urban sites.

Discourses of Urban Experience: Which Buenos Aires Are These Residents Fighting For?

This section focuses on interviews I conducted with individuals who live in Palermo and affiliate themselves with the *Palermo Despierta* movement as both active and casual participants. My analysis aims to understand the deeper national narratives and urban meanings that underlie neighborhood activism in Palermo. The interviews demonstrate the consistent presence of two discourses of urban contestation: discourses of middle-classness and discourses of Europeanness in Palermo and Buenos Aires. These discourses indicate that the historical urban meanings and national narratives of middle-classness and Europeanness that I chronicled in my walk through Buenos Aires urban history with Carolina continue to live on in the popular *porteño* imagination.

Several caveats must be mentioned, however, in order to avoid totalizing interpretations of these discourses. First, while I employ these interviews to represent the common sentiments I observed and heard in Palermo neighborhood activist circles, I also recognize that the aforementioned seven Palermo residents by no means represent the opinion of every *porteño*, every Palermo resident, or even every *Palermo Despierta* participant. These interviews merely suggest dominant European and middle class narratives that I observed during the course of my fieldwork. Second, due to a lack of resources, I did not procure any interviews with members of the *Palermo Despierta* leadership. Therefore, the discourses that follow reflect some of the opinions of the *Palermo Despierta* “rank-and-file,” and I can only infer that these “unofficial discourses” also influence and guide the decisions of the *Palermo Despierta* leadership. Caveats aside, the interviews below are

¹⁸⁰ It is important to bear in mind that the particular form of European modernity that these residents fight for is a distinctly early 20th century European modernity.

nonetheless reflective of widely circulating *porteño* self-representations and national narratives that other *porteño* scholars have identified as well.¹⁸¹

The Fall of the Middle Class: Gentrification à la Buenos Aires

The Buenos Aires middle class appeared thematically in practically every conversation I had during my fieldwork in the city. From my homestay in the Province of Buenos Aires to the train rides into the center of the city to conversations overheard in shopping malls, plazas, buses, and cafés—discussions concerning Buenos Aires and Argentine middle-classness are ubiquitous and unavoidable. Such was also the case during the course of my semi-structured interviews with Palermo residents affiliated with *Palermo Despierta* and other neighborhood activist groups contesting the invasion of mega-towers into Palermo. The interview excerpts below examine two aspects of this middle class identity: (1) its rise as a defining characteristic of *barrios porteños* (Buenos Aires neighborhoods, particularly Palermo) during the expansion of the metropolis in the early 1900s; and (2) its erosion as an urban identity in both Palermo and Buenos Aires during crisis of 2001/2002, the invasion of the mega-towers, and the city's turn towards neoliberal urbanism. It is only by understanding both facets of this middle class national identity—its rise and erosion—that we can understand anti-*torres* activism as a defense of middle class *porteño* identity inscribed in the urban space of Palermo.

Anita and Rocio are mother and daughter who live together in a booming northwest sub-*barrio* of Palermo called *Las Cañitas*. Anita, the mother, has been a resident of Buenos Aires since before the days of Juan Perón (1945-1955). Both Anita and Rocio have attended neighborhood actions and meetings, including a few of *Palermo Despierta's* events. Out of all my interviewees, Anita

¹⁸¹ For instance, see Adamovsky for the most comprehensive study of the Buenos Aires middle class: Ezequiel Adamovsky, *Historia De La Clase media Argentina: Apogeo y Decadencia De Una Ilusión, 1919-2003* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 2009).

provided the most forceful narrative on class and *porteño* identity. When asked at the beginning of our interview, “what kinds of people live in a *barrio porteño* [Buenos Aires neighborhood],” Anita answered my question before I could finish it: “*vive la clase media. Media media* (the middle class lives there. Middle, middle class).”¹⁸² Further along in the conversation I asked Anita and Rocio to elaborate more on this statement:

GS: How would you define a *barrio porteño*?

Anita: Palermo was a *barrio porteño*, a *barrio porteño* that had people that are middle class.

Rocio: Are you sure? Weren’t there *conventillos* (poor tenements) in *barrios porteños*?

Anita: No, there was only *la clase media* (middle class). *Barrios porteños* do not have *conventillos*. But now, everything has changed. Now I’m outdated.¹⁸³

Anita imagines Palermo as a neighborhood that was once a *barrio porteño*, which has, by definition, a robust middle class. However, her use of the past tense indicates that Palermo is losing this ideal-type quality of the *barrio porteño*. Anita’s aggressive reaction to the Rocio’s statement concerning the presence of lower class residents in the *barrio* also demonstrates her stake in maintaining and reinforcing the historical connection between middle classness, *porteño* identity, and the “true” nature of Palermo.

Aníbal, a resident of Palermo Soho who is an active member of *Palermo Despierta* and other neighborhood activist groups, offers a narrative similar to that of Anita. During the course of our interview together in La Plaza Palermo Viejo (one of the neighborhood’s most famous plazas), Aníbal made the following indignant reply in response to one of my statements:

GS: Someone [Adrián Gorelik] told me that there has been no change in the class of this neighborhood [Palermo] in recent years.

Aníbal: That is a lie. This neighborhood used to be slightly better than the others due to its proximity to the lake, but there were *common people* here. Not poor people, but common people (my emphasis).¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² “Personal Interview with Rocio and Anita, Palermo Residents,” Interview by author. September 24, 2009.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ “Personal Interview with Aníbal, Palermo Resident,” Interview by author, September 26, 2009.

In defining Palermo as a neighborhood historically inhabited by common people, Aníbal does not invoke the term “middle class.” Nevertheless, he implies this class signifier when drawing a distinction between the “poor people” and “common people” in Palermo.

Like Rocio and Aníbal, nearly all of my interviewees responded to the question of “who lives in a *barrio porteño*” with a firm “*la clase media*.” This response demonstrates the historical middle-class national narrative reviewed in Chapter Two live on the urban space of Buenos Aires and Palermo. Middle-classness remains a defining characteristic of present-day Palermo activists’ narratives of their neighborhood, their city, and their nation. But how does middle-classness connect to the invasion of mega-towers into Palermo? As we will see, mega-towers symbolize a growing disparity between the rich and the poor in the Buenos Aires, which threatens the familiar middle-class *barrio* life that these residents cherish. The arrival of mega-towers in Palermo is changing the social makeup of the neighborhood in much the same way that the economic crisis of 2001/2002 fundamentally challenged the national narrative of a middle class Argentine nation. To see this, we now turn to Marcos.

Marcos is a middle-class resident of the Palermo Viejo sub-district. He moved to the district in the early 1980s and is a neighborhood activist in *Palermo Despierta* and other cultural groups. When asked to describe the class-based change in Palermo that he has noticed since the arrival of *los torres*, Marcos responded in the following way:

Marcos: During the *boom inmobiliario* (real estate boom) and the arrival of the towers, the old *vecinos* (neighbors) began to sell their properties because there was a tripling in their value...imagine, I could sell my house here and buy another in another neighborhood, in addition to a car and a swimming pool. Everyone did this. Those that made the neighborhood left, and millionaires arrived, people that could buy these over-priced properties and that didn’t know the *barrio*. Not tourists, but people with a lot of purchasing power...The people that have come to live in Palermo Soho want to exterminate the little that is left—the people of the *barrio*. This is the attitude...

GS: Then why do you stay?

Marcos: The reason I stay here is, loosely speaking, resistance.¹⁸⁵

Marcos' story is nearly identical to those that I heard time and time again during my fieldwork. With the post-crisis real estate boom, the arrival of mega-towers, and the proliferation of neoliberal urbanism, Palermo is becoming an exclusive upper-class neighborhood, putting the traditional middle class identity of its residents and its urban landscape at risk. Another older Palermo resident captured this same sentiment in stating that "this *barrio* [Palermo] is becoming more and more like Puerto Madero [Buenos Aires' richest and most exclusive *barrio*]." ¹⁸⁶

While Marcos' description of class-based urban change in Palermo may seem to describe a process of gentrification native to cities like London, New York, and Los Angeles in the "global north," in fact the details of Marcos' story distinguish Palermo's experience from gentrification. U.S. and European gentrification is a process of sociocultural change in which a middle-class "gentry" invades working class neighborhoods, thereby marginalizing its existing residents. In Palermo, these urban actors do not match up with those described by scholars of gentrification in the "global north."¹⁸⁷ Instead, the class-based marginalization described by Marcos is one in which the Buenos Aires super-wealthy *elite* moved to Palermo and displaced *traditional middle-class* residents who could no longer afford increased rental rates and, as a result, moved to cheaper neighborhoods in order to boost their personal savings. Thus, urban marginalization differs in the context of Buenos Aires because, in the case described by Marcos, middle-class residents are the victims rather than the agents of urban marginalization.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁵ "Personal Interview with Marcos," Interview by author, September 21, 2009.

¹⁸⁶ "Personal Interview With Maria, Palermo Resident," Interview by author, September 14, 2009. As a point of reference, many residents claim that Palermo is becoming more and more like Puerto Madero, a district that the Menem government restructured and "revitalized" into an exclusive, wealthy residential area for Buenos Aires' elite citizens during the 1990s. Puerto Madero has since become the prototypical example of neoliberal urbanism among observant *porteños*.

¹⁸⁷ See, for example: Neil Smith and Peter Williams, *Gentrification of The City* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1986).

¹⁸⁸ This evidence should help to temper the claims of scholars who posit the existence of global or transnational revanchism and gentrification. See for instance Neil Smith, "New Globalism, New Urbanism: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy," *Antipode* 3, no. 34 (2002).

Lastly, Anita and Rocio once again offer the most vivid illustration of what is at stake for middle class Palermo residents with the invasion of mega-towers and neoliberal urbanism into their district and their city:

GS: Do you think there has been a change in social class in Palermo?

Anita: There has definitely been change in social class in Palermo. *La zona se fuera para arriba* (the zone has risen up). *La clase media* (the middle class) is disappearing. And the *clase rica* (rich class) has all the money and is doing well for itself.

Rocio: The class of people with a lot of money lives in *los torres*. Those towers that you see in Palermo Hollywood, there are people in those buildings with a lot of money, protection, cars, and garages. They are another type of people. They (the rich) have become richer and the *clase media* is disappearing. Now there are a few rich people with all the money and many poor people living in conditions like *villas* (shantytowns), *conventillos*, *casa tomadas*¹⁸⁹. And we, the *clase media*, are hanging by a thread (*colgados de la palmera*), trying to maintain what we have, paying our bills as we can. This is what happens to me.¹⁹⁰

This exchange with Anita and Rocio encapsulates the most pressing sentiment among middle class Palermo neighborhood activists—namely, that the invasion of mega-towers like those in Palermo Hollywood is uprooting both the cultural history and material conditions of the middle class in Palermo. As a result, both Anita and Rocio agree that Palermo is no longer an archetypical *barrio porteño* because its middle-classness is threatened by mega-towers. Rocio's analysis of the middle class predicament in Buenos Aires also speaks to a common sentiment of feeling "squeezed" by the city's post-crisis urban conditions: middle class residents become suspended in a nether region between a super-wealthy elite who invade Palermo with their mega-towers and an ever-increasing pool of poor inhabitants living in substandard living conditions in the city. Rocio's monologue is laden with the language of urban class precariousness, an uncertainty about the future of her material class position and constructed class identity as a middle class *porteña* in Buenos Aires.¹⁹¹

The above interviews illustrate two important facets of middle class *porteño* identity. First, the urban history presented in Chapter Two lives on in middle class *porteño* activists' conceptualization of

¹⁸⁹ See this thesis' Spanish Glossary.

¹⁹⁰ Personal Interview with Rocio and Anita, Palermo Residents." Interview by author. September 24, 2009.

¹⁹¹ Chapter Three demonstrated the economic statistics behind this sense of urban precariousness.

their neighborhood, city, and nation. Second, Palermo activists clearly associate the invasion of *los torres* with larger socioeconomic forces that threaten their urban middle class identity. From this analysis we can infer that one of the deeper motivating factors driving the neighborhood activism of *Palermo Despierta* and other groups is the widespread perception that *los torres* represents gentrification à la Buenos Aires, which marginalizes the middle class and threatens Argentine national narratives of middle-classness that remain at the heart of the “true” Buenos Aires and “true” Palermo that these residents imagine.

Buenos Aires as the “Paris of South America:” Constructing Europeanness in Palermo

Many of my interviewees affiliated with *Palermo Despierta* employed narratives of Europeanness that were linked with middle class national narratives. The Argentine founding father Sarmiento’s push to create a European city in Latin American that we reviewed in Chapter Two appears to wield continued influence as a urban national narrative in Palermo and Buenos Aires. The interviews below illustrate the ways in which Palermo residents inscribe discourses of Europeanness into their urban experiences and perceptions.

Similar to the discourse of a middle-class Buenos Aires, discourses of European Buenos Aires construe the proliferation of mega-towers in the district as a significant threat to the national narrative of a European city. Most often my interviewees expressed discourses of European Buenos Aires by referring to Palermo’s urban traditions and history. Carlos and Elida are two interviewees who most overtly captured the European discourses of Buenos Aires. They are both second year college students in the University of Buenos Aires. I met them on a crowded day in the Plaza Palermo Viejo during one of their school’s holidays. They both claimed to have attended *Palermo Despierta* actions with their families, and Carlos in particular was sympathetic to the movement’s aims because, as a student in the university’s school of architecture, he bemoaned the chaotic invasion of

mega-towers into Palermo and the lack of effective urban planning and regulation in the city as a whole. Carlos began the interview by stating that the *torres* have “destroyed the *barrio*, [while] businesses have take over *casas bajas*.”¹⁹² Carlos and Elida’s notion of Buenos Aires as a European city shone through in the following exchange:

GS: What is a *barrio porteño*?

Carlos: A *barrio porteño* is a neighborhood with tradition. Now, this place [Palermo] is all full of towers and buildings. This is a city that destroys the houses of the past. A traditional *barrio* has *casas bajas* and *tranquilidad*.

Elida: A more traditional *barrio* will have fewer businesses than Palermo. This *barrio* has changed too much.

Carlos: I live in a house that they luckily haven’t touched.

GS: What kind of people live in a *barrio porteño*, like the one Palermo used to be?

Carlos: *Gente del barrio* (people of the neighborhood), families that have stayed.

Elida: My grandmother who lives nearby is very *porteña* because she is from Italy.

Carlos: The *barrios* were founded by European immigrants who came here and made everything. The people who live in *barrios porteños* like Palermo used to be are the people that have *valores del barrio* (neighborhood values). These people would defend their house from a business or prevent a *boliche* (dance club) from moving in. Most of the people here don’t respect the *barrio*.¹⁹³

Carlos deplores the loss of his neighborhood’s traditional urban forms (*casas bajas*) as well as the specter of a completely business-driven neighborhood that has lost all sense of *tranquilidad*. Both Elida and Carlos reproduce the historical narrative of a European *porteño* identity instigated by Sarmiento at the turn of the 20th century.¹⁹⁴ Elida confirms her grandmother as a true resident of Palermo due to her European heritage and Carlos goes as far as to say these European immigrants possessed “neighborhood values” that the neighborhood’s super-wealthy elite do not. Both Carlos and Elida detect a loss of Europeanness in Palermo that has been provoked by the arrival of the *torres* and trendy businesses in the district.

Carlos’ description also mentions the connection between traditional neighborhoods and *casas bajas*: indeed, these physical structures were most often cited as embodying Palermo’s

¹⁹² "Personal Interview With Carlos and Elida, Palermo Residents," Interview by author, September 21, 2009.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ See Chapter Two for this national and urban history.

traditional, European identity among my Palermo interviewees. As my walk through Buenos Aires urban history with Carolina demonstrated, *casas bajas* were built by European immigrants in suburbs like Palermo. For many of these immigrants, these houses served as a source of upward class mobility. Thus, historically, these structures form the physical foundations for national narratives of Europeanness and middle classness in Buenos Aires. As such, these are the structures that interviewees cited as most threatened by the proliferation of mega-towers. The following quote from Marcos, the aforementioned Palermo Viejo resident, exemplifies this sentiment:

Marcos: Palermo has lost the level of its houses. Here, there were only *casas bajas*. It was all *barrio*. A low *barrio*. But it started to grow, floor by floor, one to two floors. Then there was a building with 50 floors! Now there are building towers everywhere in the district, especially Palermo Viejo. Here, everything has changed. If you look at a picture of the *barrio* from before, it won't at all look like the *barrio* today.¹⁹⁵

Marcos' description of the mega-towers phenomenon focuses exclusively on its effects on *casas bajas* and the *nivel* (level) of his neighborhood. Marcos' statement ascribes a symbolic importance to the level or altitude of his neighborhood. Other interviewees also associated the low altitude of the *barrios'* physical structures with a traditional (read European and middle class) neighborhood. Because of this symbolic importance, the invasion of the mega-towers into Palermo represents more than the physical destruction of the *casas bajas*—it also represents the symbolic shift from a predominantly middle-class neighborhood to an elite neighborhood in the eyes of Palermo residents as well as the destruction of urban structures that inscribe national narratives of middle-classness and Europeanness.

Throughout my interviews and observations, nostalgia served as the most common device by which Palermo residents invoked the discourse of a European Buenos Aires. Interviewees would often recall the city's pristine French architecture as well as its European clothing as relics of the city's European past. My aforementioned interview with Anita and Rocio best captured these

¹⁹⁵ "Personal Interview with Marcos, Palermo Resident," Interview by author, September 21, 2009.

European narratives of Buenos Aires. In particular, the following exchange with Anita—who has lived through more than 70 years of Buenos Aires urban history—is steeped in nostalgia for the Palermo of the early 1900s that, she says, has long since passed:

GS: How has Palermo changed? For example, what did Santa Fe Street [one of Palermo's most important arteries] used to be like?

Anita: It was another world here in the city. Santa Fe Street *era otra cosa* [was another thing]. The windows, they actually worried about their cleanliness. Santa Fe street was so *paquete*, only with good people. Stores sold really beautiful things, imported things. The dresses, everything. It was another thing—another world.¹⁹⁶

Anita's nostalgia for a lost elegance in Buenos Aires is subtler than most interviewees because it does not invoke the same face value reference to Europe used by other *porteños*. Instead, Anita uses the word *paquete* to describe her idealized version of Santa Fe Street, which in *porteño castellano* literally means "a person that presents themselves with particular elegance in terms of his or her arrangement, dress, or manners."¹⁹⁷ Thus, while she never states it explicitly, Anita's descriptions recall a previous elegance on Santa Fe Street that is clearly linked with European discourses of style and status. The link to Europe becomes even clearer when Anita's references the beauty of the Santa Fe Street's imported goods. Buenos Aires scholar Emanuela Guano argues that *porteños* were enamored with European imported goods: at the turn of the century one of the most common ways for *porteños* to demonstrate status during this time was to vacation to Europe and return with European furniture and clothing.¹⁹⁸

Excavating Porteño Narratives:

Narratives of Argentine middle-class European identity circulate throughout public spaces in Palermo and Buenos Aires. Similar to Teresa Pires' notion of "talk of crime" in Sao Paulo, Buenos Aires Cafés, parks, plazas, and even shopping malls are constantly abuzz with talk of the *porteño clase*

¹⁹⁶ "Personal Interview with Rocio and Anita, Palermo Residents," Interview by author, September 24, 2009.

¹⁹⁷ Translation taken from the Real Academia Española online dictionary.

¹⁹⁸ Guano 1999, 292-294.

media and the deterioration of the city's rich European history.¹⁹⁹ These two national narratives are fundamentally linked in the urban space of Palermo and Buenos Aires. These interviews demonstrate that Palermo activists clearly associate the invasion of *los torres* with larger socioeconomic forces that threaten their urban middle class position and identity. Moreover, there exists a commonly held discourse of Europeanness among those affiliated with Palermo neighborhood activism and *Palermo Despierta*. This discourse was often expressed through a nostalgic filter, which located the essence of Buenos Aires' Europeanness in its turn of the 20th century urban form. The focal point of this discourse is the *casa baja*, which serves as the physical structure in Palermo that grounds this discourse in the actual cityscape.

National Narratives and Motivations of *Palermo Despierta*

This section examines the demands, discourses, and tactics of my Palermo neighborhood activism case study group: *Palermo Despierta*. This analysis further uncovers the motivations and narratives driving Palermo residents' neighborhood activism as well as those of *porteños* (Buenos Aires residents) as a whole. Throughout this analysis, I will employ the aforementioned national discourses of middle-classness and Europeanness as a means of reading between the lines of *Palermo Despierta's* demands and tactics. Doing so will allow me to further investigate and deepen the seemingly ad-hoc goals underlying *Palermo Despierta's* anti-towers neighborhood activism in Palermo as well as wider activism in the city of Buenos Aires. During this analysis, I will refer to several untranslated documents in the appendix of this chapter that I then translate in the body of my analysis. These documents consist of official flyers, statements, newspaper articles, and multimedia sources related to *Palermo Despierta*.

¹⁹⁹ See Part One of Teresa Pires, *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

Diagnosing the Towers Phenomenon: Contesting Neoliberal Urbanism

It is clear throughout *Palermo Despierta's* official literature that the group links the indiscriminate proliferation of mega-residential towers in Palermo with wider socioeconomic processes of neoliberal urbanism. For example, the first of *Palermo Despierta's* "Points of Unity" states that the group "opposes the indiscriminate construction of buildings and towers in Palermo...because we believe that it is not the market, but rather the state that should plan real estate development."²⁰⁰ From this we can infer that *Palermo Despierta* associates the invasion of mega-residential towers into Palermo with a lack of state regulation in the urban planning process. As I demonstrated in part four of my literature review, neoliberal urbanism (also known as "urban entrepreneurialism" or neoliberal urban restructuring) is a process whereby market mechanisms determine urban planning and regulation in place of public actors, often resulting in an uneven socioeconomic urban landscape.²⁰¹ Central to *Palermo Despierta's* diagnosis of the *torres* phenomenon is not only a lack of state regulation, but also that, in the words of the group, "the collusion between real estate developers and political power is destroying the countenance of our beloved Palermo. Gradually, the neighborhood is being destroyed by towers rising into the sky...protected by the corruption and negligence of our bureaucrats."²⁰² Thus, the group claims that political collusion and corruption allows neoliberal urbanism to take root in their city and their neighborhood. Their proposed solution is not only to have the state plan urban processes but also to maximize urban citizen representation vis-à-vis the state by eliminating corruption between private real estate developers and corrupt bureaucrats.

²⁰⁰ See Document One in Appendix

²⁰¹ See Jamie Peck, Neil Brenner, and Nik Theodore, "Neoliberal Urbanism: Models, Moments, Mutations," *S.A.I.S. Review* 29, no. 1 (Winter 2009).

²⁰² "¿Qué Es "Palermo Despierta"?" *Palermo Despierta*, weblog entry, http://palermodespierta.blogspot.com/2008/05/palermo-despierta_20.html (accessed April 10, 2010).

A rejection of neoliberal urbanism embodied in the mega-residential towers permeates all of the Palermo's *Despierta* activism. As I will show, underlying *Palermo Despierta's* analysis of the mega-towers is a clash between market-based logics of urban development and *porteño* logics of tradition, place, and space (read middle-classness and Europeanness). This rejection of neoliberal urbanism is linked, I argue, with the effects of the economic crisis of 2001 outlined in Chapter Three as well as what many scholars term as a rejection of neoliberalism manifested in massive protests held throughout Argentina in the wake of the crisis.²⁰³ Thus, the rest of this analysis will demonstrate that Palermo residents contest the invasion of mega-towers—which *Palermo Despierta* equates with a larger process of neoliberal urbanism—because they threaten Argentine national narratives of middle-classness and Europeanness that are foundational to *porteño* notions of tradition, place, and space.

El Colapso de los Servicios Públicos (The Collapse of Public Services)

One of *Palermo Despierta's* primary claims against the unregulated construction of mega-towers in Palermo is that the construction of these towers disrupts public services like gas, water, sewage, and electricity service because of the size of the projects and the fragility of the Buenos Aires urban service infrastructure. Point two of *Palermo Despierta's* "Points of Unity" (see Document One) states that the group opposes the construction of towers in Palermo because this construction "generates a collapse in the public services of old houses and buildings. The towers create a crisis of over demand that results in a lack of committed investment by private firms for public services [water, gas, electricity, etc]."²⁰⁴ This claim about failing urban public services is central to *Palermo Despierta's* campaign as it formed the primary basis upon which the municipal government agreed to

²⁰³ See Guido Galafassi, "Argentina on Fire: People's Rebellion Facing the Deep Crisis of the Neoliberal Market Economy," *Democracy and Nature* 8, no. 2 (July 2002).

²⁰⁴ See Document One in Appendix.

issue a temporary construction ban in high-density areas of Palermo in 2007.²⁰⁵ In response, several government officials and commentators have claimed that *Palermo Despierta* is against “progress” in the city.²⁰⁶ However, according to Argentine newspaper *La Nación*, José Sánchez, a leader of *Palermo Despierta*, stated in a recent protest that “there are people that believe that this is progress, but the indiscriminate construction [of towers] governed only by the real estate market will bring down all of our [urban] services.”²⁰⁷ Thus, while neoliberal urbanism touts itself as progress, Sánchez’s statement shows that this form of progress actually threatens middle class residents’ quality of life by disrupting urban public services in the neighborhood.

Underlying point two of *Palermo Despierta*’s points of unity is the same issue that Marcos so clearly articulated in the “fall of the middle class” discourse analysis. Namely, middle class Palermo residents worry that the construction of mega-residential towers physically displaces them from their neighborhood as many are forced to migrate to other neighborhoods because their utilities stop functioning and their homes (often *casas bajas*) become surrounded by towers. *Palermo Despierta*’s resident testimonies and chat room are filled with personal stories of residents who were forced from their homes because of the construction of towers. For example, one resident named Aurora claimed that the combined construction of mega-residential towers on around three sides of her house, disruption of water and gas utilities, and pressure from real estate developers to sell her home forced her to relocate from her family’s homestead of 93 years to another house in Palermo where she experienced the same problem as before.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁵ Pablo Novillo, "Seguirá trabada la construcción de *torres* en una zona de Palermo," *Clarín*, March 15, 2007, <http://www.clarin.com/diario/2007/03/15/laciudad/h-03815.htm> (accessed April 10, 2010).

²⁰⁶ *La Nación*, "Quejas de los vecinos de Palermo," June 3, 2008, http://www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=1017954 (accessed April 10, 2010).

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ *Crítica De La Argentina*, "En Palermo no quieren más *torres*," September 2, 2008, <http://www.criticadigital.com.ar/imprensa/index.php?secc=nota&nid=11102> (accessed April 10, 2010).

The physical displacement illustrated by Aurora's story is not unlike the displacement that the *porteño* middle class experienced during the crisis of 2001/2002.²⁰⁹ Thus, I argue that underlying *Palermo Despierta's* claim that mega-towers are destroying resident access to public utilities is a perception that the invasion of the mega-towers towers into Palermo acts as a continuation of the middle class' marginalization that climaxed during the crisis of 2001/2002. *Palermo Despierta's* activism seeks to protect the public services of middle-class Palermo residents in order to prevent marginalization (or, in the words of Rocio, disappearance) in their built environment and their nation.

Identidad Barrial (Barrio Identity) and Patrimonio Urbano (Urban Heritage)

A second claim of even greater interest to *Palermo Despierta* against the invasion of mega-towers into Palermo is that these urban forms do not reflect the neighborhood's true identity. Point Three of *Palermo Despierta's* "Points of Unity" states that they oppose the construction of towers "because [it] affects their *identidad barrial* (neighborhood identity), aiming to impose the weight of economic power over the claims of *vecinos* [urban residents] who are the authentic cultivators of the neighborhood."²¹⁰

Figure Fourteen: "We Save the Houses. We Save the Barrio."²¹¹



²⁰⁹ See Chapter Three.

²¹⁰ See Document One in Appendix

²¹¹ *Palermo Despierta*. "Material para descargar." *Palermo Despierta*. Weblog entry. <http://palermodespierta.blogspot.com/2008/06/material-para-descargar.html> (accessed April 10, 2010).

This point draws a stark contrast between maintaining Palermo's "*identidad barrial*" (neighborhood identity) on the one hand, and the forces of neoliberal urbanism that prevent *vecinos* (urban residents) from having an active stake in the preservation of their neighborhood's identity. In other public statements, representatives of *Palermo Despierta* have argued that "fundamental [to our movement] is the defense of the identity of the *barrio* [and] the loss of this essence is reflected in the construction of the *mega-torres* that does not have anything to do with the true identity of Palermo."²¹² Another one of the group's common refrains is that "our [Palermo residents'] *patrimonio urbano* [urban heritage] is [being] left to the real estate market's laws of supply and demand that reduce it to [nothing more than] the ridiculous value of the lot it occupies."²¹³ Taken together, these statements articulate the sentiment that market forces cannot appraise the true value of Palermo residents' urban identity. Therefore, steps must be taken to allow these residents to dictate how the neighborhood's *identidad barrial* will be preserved.

But why is the market an insufficient means for valuing these residents' neighborhood? Put another way, what does the urban space of Palermo mean to residents that cannot be captured by neoliberal market forces? Just as we previously asked what kind of Palermo and Buenos Aires my interviewees imagine, we must now ask this same question of the *Palermo Despierta* movement. In the analysis that follows, I deconstruct the notions of *identidad barrial* (neighborhood identity) and *patrimonio urbano* (urban heritage) employed by *Palermo Despierta* in order to unveil the national narratives and constructions that undergird their claims to the urban space of their neighborhood and city.²¹⁴

²¹² Clarin, "Palermo: protesta de vecinos contra la construcción de *torres*," Testigo Urbano, weblog entry posted June 03, 2008, <http://blogs.clarin.com/testigourbano/2008/06/03/palermo-protesta-vecinos-contra-construccion-torres/> (accessed April 10, 2010).

²¹³ *Palermo Despierta*. "Movilización Interbarrial." *Palermo Despierta*. Weblog entry. <http://palermodespierta.blogspot.com/2008/11/movilizacion-interbarrial.html> (accessed April 10, 2010).

²¹⁴ Similar to my interviewees, I argue that underlying *Palermo Despierta*'s nostalgic, seemingly "anti-modern" claims against the real estate boom and the construction of mega-towers is a desire to preserve national narratives of middle-classness and Europeaness inscribed in their city and neighborhood. *Palermo Despierta* trumpets the *casa baja* (see

Several of *Palermo Despierta's* public statements and flyers reflect the discourses of middle-classness and Europeanness presented by my interviewees. While these discourses are not always overtly present in *Palermo Despierta's* literature, an informed reading based on my previous interviewee analysis allows us to uncover the underlying national narratives of middle-classness and Europeanness that drive the group's activism. For example, one *Palermo Despierta* flyer illustrates the explicit links that the group draws between the current urban transformations in Palermo and threats to Argentine national identity. The flyer contains a series of rhetorical questions all beginning with the phrase *¿Sabías que?* (Did you know?). I have translated the relevant lines below²¹⁵:

- Did you know that Jorge Luis Borges [Argentina's national author] is considered one of the best writers in history?
- Did you know that Borges lived in Palermo, the *barrio* to which he dedicated several of his works?
- Did you know that the house that [Borges] lived in was the art nouveau style of the 19th century [and that] his house was located in on 2147 Borges Street?
- Did you know that in Buenos Aires the style of houses was that which marked the history and personality of the city?
- Did you know that in the last four years 3000 of these houses have been demolished to build towers?
- Did you know that the appearance of a city is the mark of the personality of its inhabitants?
- Did you know that a city that is chaotic, disorganized, without respect for history, without green space, contaminated, loud, stressful, and unequal causes its inhabitants to be the same way?
- Did you know that Borges' home that we mentioned at the beginning was demolished to build a 10 story building?
- Did you know that luckily there are *agrupaciones vecinales* (neighborhood groups) that meet to find solutions to these topics?

There are two primary implications to be drawn from this flyer. First, *Palermo Despierta* argues that *casas bajas* define the "history" and "personality" of Buenos Aires, which then shape and reflect

Chapter Two) as the quintessential urban form embodying Argentine national narratives of middle-classness and Europeanness. Thus, the destruction of *casas bajas* to make way for real estate ventures and mega-towers poses a serious threat to an already fragile middle-class, European identity in the city. I will illustrate these claims by analyzing several flyers, campaign materials, and official statements put out by *Palermo Despierta*, and then conclude with an analysis of a video recently uploaded by the group on Youtube.

²¹⁵ See Document 2 in the Appendix.

on the personality of the city's inhabitants. Thus, there is an underlying claim that the space of the city determines the character of its people. This series of statements is the exact same association that has been the basis for my primary claim that the city of Buenos Aires inscribes Argentine national identity in its urban landscape. While *Palermo Despierta* uses the term “personality” in place of Argentine national identity, references to a national author, history, and appearance in the flier—all traits of national identity—suggest that *Palermo Despierta* implies Argentine national identity with the term “personality.” Thus, the group's claim then becomes that Argentina's middle class, European national identity is under threat with the urban changes taking place in Palermo and Buenos Aires more broadly.

Even more crucial to this flyer is the reference to Jorge Luis Borges, whose home we visited and discussed in my walk through Buenos Aires urban history in Chapter Two. We learned through our walk with Carolina that Borges is widely considered to be Argentina's most important national author who wrote several poems and stories about Buenos Aires that continue to inform the ways that *porteños* experience and perceive Buenos Aires.²¹⁶ Thus, *Palermo Despierta's* mention of the destruction of Borges' historic *casa baja* at the hands of the real estate boom is important because it reasserts the linkages between neoliberal urbanism and the destruction of Argentine national identity. Hence, there is a symbolic connection embedded in the group's message relating the destruction of Borges' home to a larger destruction of the “true,” historic Buenos Aires as well as Argentine national identity at the hands of mega-towers and neoliberal urbanism.

Figure Fifteen is a flyer that contains a mega-tower alongside several *casas bajas* with the title “Fuck You Buenos Aires.”

²¹⁶ See Chapter 2 for a discussion of how Borges played a formative role in constructing Argentine national identity through his works.

Figure Fifteen: "Fuck You, Buenos Aires"²¹⁷



Fuck you Buenos Aires y tus hermosas casas "PH". Fuck you y tu alma de barrios amigables. Fuck you y tus barrios de casas bajas. Fuck You Buenos Aires ! traigo un ejército de edificios para demoler tu historia, destruir tu encanto y derribar tu espíritu. Con el poder del dinero construiré lo mas alto posible para oscurecer tus calles, ahogar tus árboles y aplastar el alma de tu gente. Fuck you Buenos Aires ! Ensordeceré tus barrios con la locura del tráfico desquiciado y te dominaré con el descontrol !!!
Cubriré tus cielos con cemento y secaré tus plazas. ya eres mía Buenos Aires, nadie te ayuda.

On the bottom of the flyer is a sardonic series of brash statements written by the group from the perspective of a real estate developer (or perhaps a corrupt bureaucrat) that I have translated below:

Fuck you Buenos Aires and your beautiful houses. Fuck you and your soul of friendly *barrios*. Fuck you and your *barrios* of *casas bajas*...I have brought an army of buildings to destroy your history, destroy your charm (*encanto*) and topple your spirit. With the power of money I will construct to the highest [altitude] possible to obscure your streets, choke your trees, and crush the soul of your people...you are mine Buenos Aires, no one will help you.²¹⁸

These statements playfully express the group's anger toward the proliferation of towers in Palermo and Buenos Aires. In the same fashion as my interviewees, these statements associate *casas bajas* with the "history" and "charm" of Buenos Aires, two aspects of the city with which *Palermo Despierta* clearly identifies. This is the same association that *Palermo Despierta* made in their open letter to 60 *porteño* legislators stating that "entire neighborhoods of *casas bajas* with rich and emblematic building profiles are no longer recognizable due to their alteration into tall buildings [towers] of dubious

²¹⁷ *Palermo Despierta*. "Material para descargar." *Palermo Despierta*. Weblog entry. <http://palermodespierta.blogspot.com/2008/06/material-para-descargar.html> (accessed April 10, 2010).

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

architectural value that destroys their [the neighborhood's] identity."²¹⁹ This statement not only asserts that *casas bajas* are being destroyed to make way for the mega-tower real estate boom, but also that these mega-towers have little "architectural value" relative to historic *casas bajas*.

Based on my historical analysis in Chapter Two as well as the discourses presented by my Palermo resident interviewees, we can infer that *Palermo Despierta's* flyer and statement refer to not just *any* history or *any* architectural value associated with *casas bajas*. Rather, *casas bajas* represent a particular early 20th century historical narrative of the rise of the Argentine middle class and the landing of hundreds of thousands of European immigrants that laid the foundation for Argentine national narratives of middle-classness and Europeanness that are now threatened by real estate developers like the one narrating Figure Fifteen's text.

A separate statement by a member of the *Palermo Despierta* leadership named Claribel during a rally covered by Channel 5 Buenos Aires news makes the link between *casas bajas* and *porteño* national narratives of middle-classness and Europeanness even more explicit:

Many of the houses [*casas bajas*] have been destroyed and many houses are closed in [by the towers] so the people there have no other option but to sell their homes...they are destroying a beautiful, antique neighborhood [Palermo] that represents the history of Argentina. I have lived in this neighborhood for 18 years and each time it gives me more sadness [*me da mas tristeza*] to see the facades [of these homes] fall. These are things that don't happen in Europe where they respect *barrios antiguos*...people have lost their properties, their living floors...We want the residents of Palermo to wake up and come with us.²²⁰

Claribel's statement contains two important notions concerning the relationship between *Palermo Despierta* and Palermo's *casas bajas*. First, she states that Palermo is a "beautiful, antique neighborhood that *represents the history of Argentina*," thereby explicitly acknowledging the connection between her built environment (Palermo) and larger national narratives of Argentina's history and

²¹⁹ *Palermo Despierta*. "Movilización Interbarrial." *Palermo Despierta*. Weblog entry. <http://palermodespierta.blogspot.com/2008/11/movilizacion-interbarrial.html> (accessed April 10, 2010).

²²⁰ *Palermo Despierta en C5N*. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrvqLkx_egg&feature=player_embedded (accessed April 10, 2010).

identity—namely, narratives of middle-classness and Europeanness. Second, Claribel suggests that one would not find such a brazen disregard for one’s own urban history and identity in Europe where, she claims, “they respect *barrios antiguos*.” This statement places Argentina, Buenos Aires, and Palermo in direct relation to Europe as a point of reference. Thus, Claribel’s statement implies a barely-submerged desire to return to “European” urban values. This desire is similar to that expressed by Carlos (the interviewee described in the previous section) who pined for a return of the *valores del barrio* (*barrio* values) that he believed the early modern city’s European immigrant inhabitants embodied.

Of all *Palermo Despierta*’s public statements and actions, the most revealing is a two-part informational video created in 2009 entitled *Queremos Buenos Aires* (We want Buenos Aires) addressing the recent urban transformations in Palermo and Buenos Aires.²²¹ The video opens with footage of Buenos Aires during the early 1900s. Its narrator begins to tell the history of the city’s European, middle class formation in much the same fashion that I narrated my walk with Carolina through Buenos Aires urban history. The video notes that the goal of the city’s European planners was to “build Buenos Aires in a fashion similar to Paris,” emphasizing that Buenos Aires was known as “the city of elegant parks and *paseos* (passages).” The narrator wistfully recalls the city’s French buildings as well as English, German, and Italian goods. The video points out that the early founders of the Buenos Aires metropolis felt that it was incumbent upon them to preserve the European beauty and opulence of the city by creating the *Comision de Critica Edilicia* (Commission of Critical Building) in 1923 as a body that defended the city’s *patrimonio arquitectonico*. The opening few minutes of this video forcefully confirm that the city *Palermo Despierta* fights for is Buenos Aires’ urban iteration at the turn of the 20th century. Thus, *Palermo Despierta*’s constant appeals to the Buenos

²²¹ Part One: Queremos buenos aires A (EX BODEGAS GIOL), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJDM6guou1E> (accessed April 10, 2010)., Part Two: Part Two: Queremos buenos aires B (LA RURAL), http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BC_RZmLuVh4&feature=related (accessed April 10, 2010).

Aires' rich history can be seen as appeals to this particular period in Argentine history when (as illustrated in Chapter Two) Argentine national narratives of middle-class, European people became inscribed into the urban landscape of the city.

Following these nostalgic scenes of early 20th century Buenos Aires, *Palermo Despierta's* video transitions to scenes of present day Buenos Aires from the synoptic view of one of its mega-towers. The narrator states that "Buenos Aires has transformed from the city of the 'Queen of the Rio de Plata' to the 'City of Fury' [as] urban planners have begun to ruin the splendor that was Buenos Aires." The narrator then proceeds to critique neoliberal urbanism and the complete lack of sustainable urban planning that has taken root in Buenos Aires following the crisis. The last four minutes of the video consist of a string of scenes displaying Buenos Aires' European architecture and turn-of-the-century urban landscape with a Beethoven Sonata playing in the background. The narrator states that "far away, there waits our beautiful Buenos Aires...the queen of the Rio Plata." These scenes of the Buenos Aires yesteryear morph into scenes of the demolition of *casas bajas* and other French-style homes by construction workers. The narrator concludes that "we want a city that reflects who we are and what we deserve."

As a whole, *Palermo Despierta's Queremos Buenos Aires* video demonstrates that the imagined Buenos Aires that the group mobilizes for is, in fact, the same turn-of-the-century Buenos Aires that inscribed Argentine national narratives of middle-classness and Europeanness in its urban landscape. Moreover, the video illustrates once more that the most substantial threat to this city and these national narratives is the neoliberal urbanism that demolishes the city's traditional urban forms (*casas bajas*) to construct mega-towers and hypermodern buildings. Taken together, this video as well as *Palermo Despierta's* fliers, official documents, and official statements advocate a method of valuing *patrimonio urbano* (urban heritage) and *identidad barrial* (*barrio* identity) by some means other than the urban real estate market—that is, by means other than neoliberal urbanism. As an alternative, I argue

that the group evokes national narratives of Europeanness and middle-classness associated with their neighborhood and in particular *casas bajas* in order to legitimate their claims and mobilize in defense of a nostalgic notion of an imagined Buenos Aires.

The Threat From Below: Contradictory Relationships with the Buenos Aires Urban Poor

This chapter's previous sections have illustrated the significant overlap between *Palermo Despierta's* neighborhood activism and Palermo residents' apprehensions concerning the threats to national narratives of middle-classness and Europeanness posed by the arrival of mega-residential towers in Palermo. From here we now turn to addressing the question of the Buenos Aires urban poor from the contradictory perspectives of my Palermo interviewees and *Palermo Despierta*. This section will probe the tension between Palermo residents' perception of an ever-growing population of urban poor in Buenos Aires and Palermo and the ways that *Despierta's* activism frames their activism in relation to this growing population.

This section is critical to the overall aims of this chapter because discourses about the urban poor are the basis by which middle-class *porteños* perpetuate hegemonic representations of Buenos Aires as a European, middle class city. As Chapter 3 illustrated, the increased incidence of urban poverty and spatial inequality in Buenos Aires is linked to the same neoliberal forces that compelled the crisis of 2001/2002 and significantly curtailed the presence of the *porteño* middle class. Thus, if we aim to explore the discourses and national narratives that compel Palermo residents and *Palermo Despierta's* activism, it is crucial to understand how these two groups perceive and problematize the urban poor in Buenos Aires. But far from providing a clear answer, the interviews and *Palermo Despierta* statements discussed below highlight the contradictory ways that Palermo *porteños* perceive the Buenos Aires urban poor in their imagined city. This section will begin with an analysis of

interviews with both Maria and Anita and Rocio, the interviewees previously introduced above. I will then transition to a discussion *Palermo Despierta's* anti-towers activism in relation to the urban poor.

Palermo Resident Discourses on The Urban Poor: Holding the City Back

During my interviews and informal observation, Palermo *porteños* often made clear that they saw the urban poor as nothing more than an untrustworthy burden on “civilized” *porteño* society. Many interviewees recounted tales of robbery at the hands of an anonymous *villero boliviano* (Bolivian shantytown dweller) as well as stories that focused on the urban poor’s “dirtiness” (as demonstrated by massive trash mounds in lower class neighborhoods in the south of the city). Nearly every interview contained at least one piece of advice for avoiding robbery at the hands of a *villero* (shantytown resident) or a *punga* (pocket thief) who Palermo residents often characterized these as individuals from other Latin American countries or from Argentina’s outer provinces. One of the most common parting phrases after my interviews was “*ojo, eh*” [keep a look out], clearly indicating that I should be on my guard for the threat of a large, meztizo underclass in the city. I met one of my interviewees, Maria, in Palermo’s Botanical Gardens and when we began to talk about Palermo, she explicitly articulated that which separates *porteños* from the city’s “other” inhabitants. Toward the end of our interview, I asked Maria how Palermo and Buenos Aires have changed since the crisis of 2001 and she responded as follows:

Maria: Now, there are still many Argentines here, but there are also many (laughs) *importados* (imported people) too (laughs).

GS: Imported people like me?

Maria: No, no, Americans, British, and Europeans are very trustworthy because...In the province you find everything. Good and bad. There’s everything—Bolivians, Paraguayans, Peruvians. There are many Koreans and Chinese [also]...the people in the province are distinct.²²²

²²² "Personal Interview With Maria, Palermo Resident," Interview by author, September 14, 2009.

Maria's statement draws a clear distinction between what she refers to as (true) "Argentines" and untrustworthy "imported" people from the province and surrounding Latin American countries. For Maria, these people epitomize the specter of "difference"—a different city and a different nation, one that is much more "Latin American" in appearance. Maria's distinction between foreign European inhabitants of Palermo and inhabitants from the Provinces of Argentina was common among my interviewees. After inviting me up to her house for coffee and cookies, Rocio, for example, confided to me that she never would have invited me up to her apartment had she thought that I was Argentine or Latin American.

But the relationship between Palermo *porteños* and the urban poor is much more complex than Maria's "otherizing" statements capture. A common phenomenon among Palermo *porteños*—particularly those heavily involved in neighborhood activism that I observed—is to simultaneously scorn and bemoan the Buenos Aires urban poor. For these residents, the deleterious effects of the crisis of 2001/2002 in terms of spatial inequality and urban poverty outlined in Chapter Three serve as yet another reminder that the more unequal and poverty-stricken the city becomes, the closer it appears to one of its Latin American counterparts. This reminder surfaced toward the beginning of my conversation with Rocio on the street outside her apartment.

GS: It appears that there has been huge growth in this district [Palermo].

Rocio: Yes, but did you see the poverty—terrible. Before it wasn't like this. Not necessarily in this district but in the south [of the city]. But do you know what's really happening? There is a greater difference between the rich and the poor, and the middle class has shrunk. It seems to me that the *clase media* is disappearing. Ok then, so what happens? In the zones in the south like *Congreso* and *Constiucion*, there are many *pobres tirados* (poor people in the street). Here, you don't see it as much, but there it's terrible. I swear to you (*te juro*) that it pains me (*me da pena*) to see such poverty in this city, because this is a rich country yet you have such poverty. *Me da lastima, verdad* (it gives me shame, truly).

GS: Because there are so many resources?

Rocio: Of Course! You know what, they have taken everything [the resources]. The government and the bureaucrats allied with *la clase...*with the *empresarios*

(businessmen) and the special interests. I would say this is a country with many conflicting interests and we always lose everything.²²³

Rocio's statement illustrates a form of pity and compassion for the Buenos Aires urban poor that was not present in Maria's statements. When describing the situation of the urban poor to me as something that "pained" her and gave her "shame" as a *porteño*, Rocio's voice cracked and her intonation shifted to indicate the weight with which she bemoaned the presence of so much human suffering in the city. Rocio's statement also indicates her own insecurity over the prospect that members of her own class (*la clase media*) are joining the ranks of the urban poor day by day. Indeed, as shown by the statistics in Chapter Three, the crisis of 2001/2002 brought urban labor informality and poverty that continues to affect the lower and middle classes alike. Notably, Rocio places the blame for the plight of the urban poor squarely on the poor governance of the Buenos Aires municipal government, which colludes with special interests and undermines the social cohesion of the city. Like other previous interviewees, Rocio also blames these developments on *empresarios* (businessmen).

Despite Rocio's ostensible compassion for the urban poor and her class's own relation to their plight, she nevertheless proceeded with her mother Anita to condemn the presence of the immigrant urban poor later in the interview. At one point, Anita stated that when she leaves her apartment, she thinks that "this is not Buenos Aires. It seems like a different country."²²⁴ She added that "now it's full of immigrants: Bolivians, Peruvians, and Paraguayans...they are part of *barrios* that are different from the *barrios porteños*. Many of them live in *villas miserias* (shantytowns) and they rob people very often."²²⁵ Similarly Rocio noted that the profile of Palermo has changed significantly since the crisis of 2001/2002, stating "La gente parece la otra [people seem like the other]. There are many Bolivians, and Peruvians, many Paraguayans; it [Buenos Aires] is not the city that it seemed

²²³ "Personal Interview with Rocio and Anita, Palermo Residents," Interview by author, September 24, 2009.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Ibid.

like. It now seems like Bolivia or Peru.”²²⁶ Both Rocio and Anita’s statements perpetuate an “otherizing” discourse directed at the Buenos Aires urban poor who are framed as people from Latin America who compromise the middle class and European appearance of Buenos Aires. There could be a no more direct admission of this perception than Rocio’s statement that Buenos Aires “now seems like Peru or Bolivia.”

A juxtaposition of Rocio’s two series of statements reveals that she, like other Palermo residents I interviewed, has two contradictory ways of representing the Buenos Aires urban poor. In the first interview excerpt, Rocio spoke about the poor as though it were a homogeneous, de-racialized (*porteño*) class deserving of empathy due to the similarity between its material plight and that of the *porteño* middle class. On the basis of her middle class identity, Rocio could sympathize with the mutually deleterious effects of neoliberalism on both the middle class and the urban poor. Yet, the moment that she characterized the urban poor as Latin American (Bolivian, Peruvian, and Paraguayan), Rocio’s raw scorn emerged: these racialized discourses reveal the perceived threat posed by the urban poor to her national narrative of Buenos Aires as a European city. In many ways, Rocio narrative of Europeanness is one of racial whiteness that excludes other Latin American populations that are perceived as too “indigenous” and too “backward” to be part of urbanized nation. Thus, Rocio’s statements demonstrate that middle class and European national narratives can come into conflict as Rocio sympathized with the plight of the urban poor on the basis of her middle class identity but also scorned its existence on the basis of her discourses of Buenos Aires as a white, European city.²²⁷

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ As Emanuela Guano noted in an essay examining pre-crisis Buenos Aires, many middle class Buenos Aires residents believed that “Bolivian, Peruvian, and Paraguayan immigrants outnumbered the Argentine residents in the villas... [despite the fact that this] perception was invariably disputed by those who lived in the slums, as well as by those who worked there.” As many middle-class residents found themselves among the urban poor in the wake of the crisis, myths that separate the urban poor from the middle class could not stand up to reality.

In yet another example of contradiction, Aníbal, my aforementioned interviewee from Palermo Soho, demonstrated that residents can often times defend their national narrative of middle classness while also embracing their Latin Americanness. Throughout my interview with Aníbal, he consistently lauded the efforts of Juan Perón, Argentina's much-lionized populist president who, from 1945-1955, transformed Buenos Aires into a *ciudad de las masas* (city of the masses) and re-oriented Argentina toward the rest of Latin America. Aníbal emphasized that he was a firmly middle class *Peronista* (Peron supporter) who wanted to help the urban poor and embrace Latin American nationalism. At one point in our interview, Aníbal stated that "many *porteños* continue to be fascinated with European modernity, but we live here. This is a Latin American city and I am Latin American. I don't feel European. I am Latin American."²²⁸ Thus, Aníbal's statement illustrates that discourses of Europeanness and middle-classness are not totalizing; individuals choose to adopt both, one, or none of these discourses in relation to the urban poor.

Palermo Despierta: Connecting the Urban Poor, Neoliberal Urbanism, and Mega-towers

While the identity-based urban transformations in Palermo serve as *Palermo Despierta's* primary focus, the group also claims that they are mobilizing against mega-residential towers because they represent the widening gap between the rich and the poor in the city. Thus, their mobilization is not necessarily about the towers themselves, but about what the towers symbolize: An unequal, Latin American city. Using the contradictory relationships to the urban poor illustrated above through the narratives of Rocio, Maria, and Anita, I argue that, similar to my interviewees, *Palermo Despierta* aims to reduce urban poverty in the city because, among other things, the presence of visible urban poverty challenges Buenos Aires' appearance as a middle-class, European city.

²²⁸ "Personal Interview with Aníbal, Palermo Resident," Interview by author, September 26, 2009.

Points four and five of *Palermo Despierta's* "Points of Unity" state that the group opposes the indiscriminate construction of towers because:

- 1) [it] reinforces the asymmetry between the rich north and the poor south: there is 50 times more construction in the northern-central zone (Caballito, Villa Urquiza, Belgrano, Palermo) than in the southern zone [of the city].
- 2) [And] indiscriminate construction of towers, without any type of regulation, is what leaves no less than 500,000 inhabitants of the city with housing problems. Bear in mind that these towers are constructed exclusively for sectors of high economic income.²²⁹

These points demonstrate *Palermo Despierta's* multi-scalar approach to understanding sociospatial inequality in Buenos Aires. Point four acknowledges that unbridled construction in Buenos Aires' northern corridor has widened socioeconomic inequality between the north and south Buenos Aires, reflecting an awareness regarding material urban struggles beyond the sub-municipal scale of their *barrio*. Point five connects the construction of *torres* (i.e. neoliberal urbanism) with the housing problems of more than 500,000 of the city's residents. In other statements, *Palermo Despierta* has expanded on this theme in claiming that "in these last six years, 48% of total construction in the city of Buenos Aires has been 'premium' or 'luxury' housing while, according to the statistics, less than 20% of the population are able to acquire this type of property."²³⁰ Thus, both points four and five demonstrate that *Palermo Despierta* relates the struggles associated with the invasion of *los torres* in Palermo to a city-wide process of uneven urban development precipitated by neoliberal urbanism.

Juxtaposed with Rocio, Anita, and Maria's discourses on the urban poor, *Palermo Despierta's* statements seem to espouse a progressive vision for Buenos Aires that reduces inequality. I argue, however, that we should not dismiss the tension between my interviewees and *Palermo Despierta's* official statements: after all, these interviewees affiliated themselves with the *Palermo Desperate* movement. Instead, I suggest that underlying *Palermo Despierta's* claims for a more spatially just and

²²⁹ See Document One in the Appendix.

²³⁰ *Palermo Despierta*. "Movilización Interbarrial." *Palermo Despierta*. Weblog entry. <http://palermodespierta.blogspot.com/2008/11/movilizacion-interbarrial.html> (accessed April 10, 2010).

equal city is not a self-less desire to empower the urban poor *per se*, but rather a desire to decrease urban inequality in order preserve Buenos Aires' discourses of middle-classness and Europeanness that form the foundation of Argentine national narratives and *porteño* self-representations. That is, they have a very specific vision of what 'decreased urban inequality' means for the city: namely, it means that their middle-class neighborhood with its European flair is preserved.

As my interviewees emphasized, increased urban inequality in Buenos Aires makes it more difficult to tell Buenos Aires apart from its unequal, segregated Latin American urban counterparts and much easier to distinguish Buenos Aires from Western European cities with historically and comparatively lower inequality levels (see chapter 3).²³¹ Thus, the widening material disparity between the north and the south of the city, in some ways, challenges the Argentine national narrative of Buenos Aires as the middle class "Paris of South America."

Reading *Palermo Despierta's* ostensibly progressive statements through the language used by my interviewees about the urban poor, the symbol of the mega-tower is significantly more complex and contradictory than initially meets the eye. The rise of mega-towers in Palermo has a double-symbolism, as expressed in Rocio's poignant statement:

[In Buenos Aires] now there are a few rich people with all the money and many poor people living in conditions like *villas* (shantytowns), *conventillos*, *casa tomadas*. And we, the *clase media*, are hanging by a thread (*colgados de la palmera*), trying to maintain what we have, paying our bills as we can. This is what happens to me.²³²

My analysis suggests that *Palermo Despierta's* anti-towers activism and ostensible progressive attitude toward the urban poor addresses this precise sentiment expressed by Rocio. The rise of mega-residential towers threatens Argentine national narratives of middle-classness and Europeanness from two sides. First, the mega-towers represent the destruction of the traditional urban forms (*casas bajas*) within Buenos Aires that inscribe national narratives in the urban space of Palermo. On the

²³¹ This is not to say that European cities have perfect records on inequality, however.

²³² "Personal Interview with Rocio and Anita, Palermo Residents," Interview by author, September 24, 2009.

other hand, mega-towers reinforce “the asymmetry between the rich north and the poor south” and, in doing so, threaten national urban narratives of middle-classness that middle-class *porteños* have clung to so desperately in the wake of the economic crisis of 2001/2002. In sum, *Palermo Despierta* fights the rise of mega-towers to improve the plight of the urban poor *precisely because* this plight undermines national narratives of Buenos Aires as European and middle-class city. Thus, this analysis casts doubt on the authenticity of *Palermo Despierta’s* progressive desire to reduce urban inequality.

Despite *Palermo Despierta’s* goal of reducing urban inequality, its national discourse of Europeanness also excludes the immigrant urban poor on the basis of racial inferiority. Thus, *Palermo Despierta’s* activism is deeply paradoxical: the national narratives that animate the group to contest the exclusionary effects of neoliberalism are themselves exclusionary. While the city of Buenos Aires that the members of *Palermo Despierta* likely imagine would be less neoliberal, it would also be racially divided. At the same time that *Palermo Despierta* seems to espouse a progressive opposition to neoliberalism, this opposition is itself contradictory and problematic.

Chapter Conclusion: A Clash of Hegemonies

This chapter has argued that neighborhood activism led by *Palermo Despierta* against the invasion of mega-residential towers represents a larger rejection of neoliberal urbanism in defense of Argentine national narratives of middle-classness and Europeanness inscribed in the urban space of Palermo and Buenos Aires. In other words, Palermo is the site for an urban clash of hegemonies—a clash between hegemonic *national* narratives and hegemonic *global* neoliberalism.²³³ Far from a mere stage for contestation, my analysis has shown that the urban landscape of Buenos Aires and Palermo is itself the object of struggle. In the wake of the economic crisis of 2001/2002, *Palermo Despierta* and

my Palermo interviewees cling to the built forms like *casas bajas* that inscribe national narratives of middle-classness and Europeanness into the urban landscape of their city. In transforming this act of clinging into activism, *Palermo Despierta*'s anti-towers movement demonstrates that neoliberalism is anything but steamroller hegemony. Rather, neoliberalism is itself contested, resisted, and reworked by the national hegemony of middle-classness and Europeanness that resides in both Buenos Aires and its middle class inhabitants.

My analysis has also shown that with this clash of global and national hegemonies *in* and *over* the urban space of Palermo and Buenos Aires, we must bear in mind what Katharyn Mitchell refers to as hegemony's "fundamentally unessential character...and chameleonlike qualities."²³⁴ Argentine national narratives of middle-classness and Europeanness are fragile, heterogeneous, and constantly evolving in the context of a post-crisis real estate boom in Buenos Aires. Zygmunt Bauman writes that "construct[ing] an identity and keep[ing] it solid" is the essential problem of early modernity.²³⁵ Such is the case for Palermo *porteños* who look to their city's urban landscape to perpetuate national narratives and find that their imagined nation and imagined city are not so easily identifiable in the midst of neoliberal urbanism and their own downward economic mobility.

The contradictory ways that Palermo residents perceive the urban poor reveals that national narratives of middle-classness and Europeanness coalesce in fragmented, context-contingent ways. Contrary to Emanuela Guano's analysis of the Buenos Aires middle class, my analysis does not seek to characterize the Buenos Aires as inherently exclusionist, racist, and classist toward the urban poor.²³⁶ Rather, my analysis shows that the post-crisis milieu of Buenos Aires is more complicated as the *porteño* middle class struggles to maintain the coherence of its own urban identity in ways that present contradictory attitudes toward the urban poor.

²³⁴ Mitchell 2004, 20.

²³⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, "From Pilgrim to Tourist--or a Short History of Identity," in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, by Stuart Hall and Gay Paul. Du (London: Sage, 1996), 18.

²³⁶ Guano 1999.

The experience of *Palermo Despierta* and other middle class neighborhood coalitions like *Queremos Buenos Aires* has several implications for how scholars theorize urban citizenship, globalization, and neoliberalism. Namely, my analysis calls into question theories like Saskia Sassen's notion of "denationalized citizenship" that assert the de-linking of the nation-state and the ties between citizen and nation in the process of globalization.²³⁷ Frameworks like Sassen's assert that the development of global cities has effectively severed or curtailed the ties between cities and national consciousness. My analysis instead suggests that, in the context of a nation and city recovering from crisis, urban residents are more willing than ever to contest the globalizing of their city in order to re-empower national narratives.

My analysis of *Palermo Despierta's* activism also challenges existing citizenship frameworks that imply by virtue of their empirical analyses that urban political contestation against neoliberalism is an activity exclusive to subaltern citizens. James Holston has argued in the context of Latin America that marginalized groups assert their urban entitlements through insurgent contestation with the state in what he terms *insurgent citizenship*.²³⁸ Holston's theory and empirical analysis focus almost exclusively on subaltern populations, implicitly downplaying the importance of middle class, mainstream groups in contesting neoliberalism. Contrary to James Holston, I argue that urban "insurgency" is not a practice exclusively confined to subaltern populations in Latin America. The neighborhood activism of *Palermo Despierta* and *Queremos Buenos Aires* demonstrates that middle class urban actors in Buenos Aires have a significant stake in contesting neoliberalism and globalization to preserve their material and identity-based urban conditions. Implying that only urban poor or racial minorities contest neoliberalism not only ignores the plethora of middle-class neighborhood activism in Buenos Aires and beyond, but it also precludes the possibility of cross-

²³⁷ Saskia Sassen, "Incompleteness and the Possibility of Making: Towards Denationalized Citizenship?" *Cultural Dynamics* 21, no. 3 (2009).

²³⁸ James Holston, "Spaces of Insurgent Citizenship," *Architectural Design* 66, no. 11/12 (1996).

class coalitions that resist their parallel marginalization at the hands of neoliberalism. My analysis has shown that indeed such coalitions/movements possible, and scholars should be more active in developing citizenship theories that both incorporate and support these movements.

Conclusion:
The View from a Mega-Tower

When I first observed residents from the relatively privileged Palermo district mobilizing under *Palermo Despierta* to defend their neighborhood from the effects of a post-crisis real estate boom, I had little idea how to interpret their claims. My ethnographic interviews with middle-class residents revealed a pervasive sense of precariousness, displacement, and loss of urban identity in the wake of the economic crisis of 2001/2002. These narratives did not match up within the gentrification analytical frameworks that I was accustomed to as an inhabitant of a U.S. city. I soon discovered that there was much more at stake in the battle over the neoliberalization of the Buenos Aires urban landscape than initially meets the eye.

This thesis has argued that *Palermo Despierta* contests neoliberal urbanism in order to defend imagined national identities of middle-classness and Europeanness inscribed in the urban space of Palermo and Buenos Aires. In the wake of an economic crisis that tore asunder the material foundations of national middle class identity, Palermo residents and other *porteños* are mobilizing in defense of urban spaces like *casas bajas* in order to rearticulate their own imagined urban identity in the face of neoliberal globalization. To advance this argument, I offered an ethnographic rendering of the historical development of the Argentine nation in relation to the Buenos Aires urban landscape. I argued that this landscape embeds historical traces of a middle class, European identity in landmarks located throughout the city. Residents mobilize under the banner of *Palermo Despierta* because these historical traces of their urban identity are now threatened by post-crisis neoliberal urbanism (e.g. the rapid construction of mega-towers), which destroys historic urban forms to make Buenos Aires more globally competitive.

My method of analyzing the historical and political-economic context underlying Buenos Aires neighborhood activism has aimed to address the danger that anthropological “thick

description” can sometimes lead to accounts that are devoid of critical analysis of context.²³⁹ My study’s method has sought to understand larger urban processes through the examination of local neighborhood activism in one Buenos Aires district. Through Palermo, this thesis has narrated the larger story of a city struggling to preserve cultural-urban meaning in the midst of a neoliberal, post-crisis real estate boom. At the heart of this story are the multi-scalar conjunctures and disjunctures between neighborhood, city, and nation produced by neoliberal globalization.

In making such an argument, this thesis has engaged with several broad theoretical themes of urban space, neoliberalism, and national identity. First, this thesis has taken up Matthew Sparke’s suggestion²⁴⁰ to break away from reductionist economic readings of global city transformations by focusing on what Ananya Roy calls “the terrain of political struggle and subject-making through which space is lived and negotiated.”²⁴¹ Thus, this thesis supplements a basic political-economic reading of Buenos Aires’ post-crisis milieu with a complementary analysis of the cultural-urban negotiations of meaning and space. In doing so, this thesis bridges the prevailing gap between studies on the Buenos Aires cityscape like that of Emanuela Guano,²⁴² which only examine the relation of the middle class to cultural meanings embedded in the city, and studies like that of Juan Miguel Kanai,²⁴³ which only examine political-economic transformations in the post-crisis city.

Second, this thesis complicates the abstract theoretical propositions about neoliberalism and the city by examining the “context-contingencies” of neoliberalization on the ground: using, *inter alia*, extensive historical as well as ethnographic and quantitative data analysis. The point, of course, is to show that context counts: that local geographies still matter in the ebb and flow of globalization

²³⁹ See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

²⁴⁰ Matthew Sparke, "Global Seattle: The City, Citizenship, and the Meaning of World Class," ed. Richard Morrill and Michael Brown, in *Seattle Geographies*, (Seattle: University of Washington press, Forthcoming).

²⁴¹ Roy, Ananya. "The 21st-Century Metropolis: New Geographies of Theory." *Regional Studies* 6, no. 43 (2009): 821.

²⁴² Emanuela Guano, *Emplacing Modernity: The Buenos Aires' Middle-Class and the Politics of Urban Spectacle in Neoliberal Argentina*, diss., The University of Texas- Austin, 1999.

²⁴³ Juan M. Kanai, "The In-Between City: Neoliberal Globalization, Inequality and Middle-Class Politics in Buenos Aires, Argentina (2002-2007)" (diss., UCLA, 2008).

and neoliberalism. Argentine national narratives still wield considerable hegemony over the Buenos Aires cityscape and this local hegemony is, in fact, successful at resisting and reworking the global hegemony of neoliberalism. Thus, my analysis casts doubt on the claims of globalization scholars like Appadurai who herald the arrival of a “deterritorialized,” “postnational” world in which all local context and history submit to the totalizing forces of market-based “ideoscaping.”²⁴⁴

Lastly, by examining the city of Buenos Aires, this thesis has sought to challenge the hegemonic study of global North cities. In the words of Ananya Roy:

Much of the theoretical work on city-regions is firmly located in the urban experience of North America and Western Europe. This is not unusual. It is part of a canonical tradition where theory is produced in the crucible of a few ‘great’ cities: Chicago, New York, Paris, and Los Angeles – cities inevitably located in EuroAmerica. It is time to rethink the list of ‘great’ cities...[as] the urban future already lay[s] elsewhere: in the cities of the global South.²⁴⁵

Thus, this thesis has taken up the task of “dislocating” what Roy calls the “EuroAmerican centre of theoretical production” by examining the intricacies of non-north negotiations of urban meanings in Buenos Aires.²⁴⁶ I do so not in the spirit of orientaling Buenos Aires as an aberrational or exotic case study, but rather in the spirit of re-centering global South cities in the theories produced by Western scholars.²⁴⁷

Through an examination of a city whose experience is neither distinctly global North nor distinctly global South—but rather an “in-between city” to use Kanai’s formulation²⁴⁸—my study challenges the global North/South dichotomy that Amin refers to as the “hegemonic territorial imaginary of the world.”²⁴⁹ Not just another apocalyptic scene from the “Planet of Slums” or a

²⁴⁴ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

²⁴⁵ Roy 2009, 820.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

²⁴⁸ Kanai 2008.

²⁴⁹ A. Amin, "Regions unbound: towards a new politics of place," *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, no. 86 (2004): 33-34. For a further critique of this imaginary, see Sparke, Forthcoming.

simple “Dreamworld of Neoliberalism,”²⁵⁰ Buenos Aires’ historical, cultural, political, and economic experience challenges scholars to think beyond dualistic urban categories. Buenos Aires embeds early modern national narratives of middle-classness and Europeanness that implicate global North subjectivities in the global South. In fact, Palermo residents appeal to global North subjectivities of middle-classness and Europeanness as the very basis upon which they contest the global North forces of neoliberalism! Thus, scholars can no longer afford to generalize the spread of neoliberalism to Buenos Aires as a purely global North to global South flow of ideas.

In sum, this thesis has examined Buenos Aires as 21st-century urban palimpsest in which multiple overlapping and contested modernities are jumbled together: early 20th century European modernity, middle-class modernity, national modernity, market-made-over modernity, and what is arguably also a form of neoliberal postmodernity too. In this maelstrom of modernities, all that is solid continues to melt into air.²⁵¹ But the additional take away point here is that there will always be spaces like those in Palermo where urban citizens resist and recode the melting and remaking process, creating new modernities of their own on the ground.

Avenues of Further Research

The framework I develop in this thesis as well as its empirical findings suggest several future paths to deepen my analysis of post-crisis Buenos Aires. These areas of future research reflect several unresolved questions that continued to resurface during the course of my research.

First, future studies should examine the relationship between national narratives and neoliberalism in other Buenos Aires neighborhoods, particularly those in the city’s middle-class western wedge. This line of inquiry presents the opportunity for a comparative study of how

²⁵⁰ Two of Mike Davis’ most popular global South mega-city metaphors.

²⁵¹ This phrase is borrowed from Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 15.

residents in different neighborhoods resist neoliberal urbanism. Moreover, future studies should more extensively examine cross-class, multi-neighborhood movements like *Queremos Buenos Aires*.

Second, because the Buenos Aires urban poor is deeply enmeshed in both neoliberalism and Argentine national narratives, future research should examine the politics of urban informality and the ways in which working class residents contest neoliberalism through their own forms of “shadow hegemony.” Such research would potentially excavate the role of contemporary Peron’s in allowing the urban poor to reclaim their Latin American identity as a source of resistance.

Lastly, future research should address the narratives and perceptions of the urban elites who have moved into mega-towers since the economic crisis of 2001/2002. Doing so will provide more insight into the perspectives of *Palermo Despierta*’s neoliberal “Other.” In particular, this study would examine how elite, tower-dwellers relate to national narratives of middle-classness and Europeanness and thus their attendant visions for the Buenos Aires cityscape.

From atop the Palermo Le Parc tower—the second tallest urban structure in Buenos Aires—one has to wonder how an elite tower-dweller would perceive urban change in their neighborhood and city. Looking down below onto the streets of Palermo, would this resident see the *Palermo Despierta* protestors? Would they understand the deeper cultural-urban meanings underlying their struggle? Looking out onto the far horizon, would they see global opportunities or threats to their own enclaved world? And looking out toward the obelisk in the center of the city—the symbol of the Argentine nation with which we began this investigation—would they see a quaint artifact of an anachronistic national identity or an uncanny reminder of how elites of other eras and other places have seen their landmark legacies contested and replaced?

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Glossary of Foreign Terms

- 1) *Barrio*: Neighborhood
- 2) *Villa Miseria*: Shantytown
- 3) *Porteño*: Buenos Aires resident
- 4) *Tranquilidad*: Calmness, stillness
- 5) *Vecino*: literally, neighbor, though the term connotes a more political relationship with the city based on solidaristic mobilization
- 6) *Ciudadano*: citizen
- 7) *Casa Baja*: Literally, short house. These are the early modern neighborhood structures that I argued embodied Europeanness and middle-classness.
- 8) *Conventillo*: Small tenements for the urban poor
- 9) *Casa Tomada*: A house or living space taken over by poor urban dwellers. The term was popularized in a story by Julio Cortázar.
- 10) *Clase Media*: The middle class
- 11) *Identidad Barrial*: neighborhood identity
- 12) *Patrimonio Urbano*: Urban heritage

Appendix

Document One: Palermo Despierta Points of Unity

¿POR QUÉ NOS OPONEMOS A LA CONSTRUCCIÓN INDISCRIMINADA DE EDIFICIOS Y TORRES EN PALERMO?

- Porque creemos que no es el mercado, sino el Estado, quien debe planificar las inversiones inmobiliarias.
- Porque genera el colapso de los servicios públicos de las casas y edificios vecinos: las torres provocan una crisis de sobredemanda, que se suma a la falta de cumplimiento de las inversiones comprometidas por parte de las empresas privatizadas de servicios públicos. Es así que en la actualidad, se multiplican los casos de falta de gas, agua, luz, e incluso ya han ocurrido derrumbes en los hogares lindantes a estas obras, lo que pone en peligro la vida de los vecinos y de los trabajadores de la construcción.
- Porque afecta a la identidad barrial, pretendiendo imponer el peso del poder económico por sobre el reclamo de muchos vecinos, quienes son los auténticos cultores de la especificidad barrial.
- Porque limita el acceso al sol, a raíz del diseño de proyectos arquitectónicos que culminan privatizando el acceso a este tipo de bienes públicos tan valorados.
- Porque refuerza la asimetría entre el norte rico y el sur pobre de la Ciudad: se construye 50 veces más en la zona centro-norte (Caballito, Villa Urquiza, Belgrano, Palermo) que en la zona sur.
- Porque la construcción indiscriminada de torres, sin ningún tipo de regulación, es la contracara necesaria de una moneda que nos muestra nada menos que a 500.000 habitantes de la Ciudad con problemas de vivienda. Téngase en cuenta que estas torres se destinan exclusivamente para sectores de alto nivel de ingreso económico, o directamente para la lisa y llana especulación inmobiliaria (departamentos que se construyen para quedar vacíos u ociosos).

PALERMO DESPIERTA

¿SABÍAS QUE ?

- Sabías que Jorge Luis Borges es considerado uno de los mejores escritores de la historia ?
- Sabías que Borges vivió en Palermo, barrio al que le dedicó varias de sus letras ?
- Sabías que la casa donde vivió era de estilo Art Nouveau del siglo 19 y quedaba en la calle Borges 2147 ?
- Sabías que en Buenos Aires este estilo de casas fue lo que marcó la historia y la personalidad de la ciudad ?
- Sabías que en los últimos 4 años unas 3000 de estas casas fueron demolidas para construir edificios ?
- Sabías que por cada edificio que se construye sube en promedio 40 veces la cantidad de habitantes en el lugar ?
- Sabías que este aumento de habitantes hace que disminuya el espacio verde por persona año a año ?
- Sabías que Buenos Aires tiene 4.5 m2 de espacio verde por persona cuando en el primer mundo tienen entre 10 y 14 ?
- Sabías que esta mayor cantidad de gente aumenta proporcionalmente el tráfico de transportes ?
- Sabías que Buenos Aires es la cuarta ciudad más ruidosa del mundo ?
- Sabías que el boom inmobiliario construye edificios pero no hace ni escuelas, ni comisarías, ni hospitales, ni plazas ?
- Sabías que a los inversores inmobiliarios no les importa nada de esto, y sólo les importa el dinero a corto plazo ?
- Sabías que todo este egoísmo y desinterés por la calidad de vida va marcando negativamente la fisonomía de la ciudad ?
- Sabías que la fisonomía de una ciudad es la que marca la personalidad de sus habitantes ?
- Sabías que en una ciudad caótica, desorganizada, sin respeto por la historia, sin espacios verdes, contaminada, ruidosa, estresante y desigual provoca que sus habitantes sean también así ?
- Sabías que el principal negocio de algunos políticos, además de la política, es la inversión constructoras o inmobiliarias ?
- Sabías que la Rural era un espacio público y pasó mágicamente a manos privadas por un negocio de 900 millones de dólares ?
- Sabías que con los llamados terrenos de bodegas Giol y ferroviarios linderos están tratando de hacer otro negocio millonario ?
- Sabías que en ambos lugares en vez de hacerlos parques para todos van a construir entre otras cosas torres ?
- Sabías que esa casa de Borges de la que hablamos al principio fue demolida para hacer un edificio de 10 pisos ?
- Sabías que si no hacemos nada al respecto la ciudad de Buenos Aires va a ser inhabitable de aquí a pocos años ?
- Sabías que por suerte hay agrupaciones vecinales que se juntan para encontrarle solución a estos temas ?

Ahora por suerte lo sabes. Somos cientos de vecinos los que nos reunimos todos los lunes en Arévalo 2035 a las 20 hs.
Acercate, entrá en www.palermodespierta.com.ar y vos también ayudá a Buenos Aires.

