Do Buenos Aires' Policies Truly Constitute Something New? Ruptures, Continuities, and Innovative Elements in the Concept of Socio-Urban Integration

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Abstract: *This article analyses the concept of socio-urban integration, which has shaped recent policies for informal settlements in Buenos Aires and informed regional policy exchange. Based on qualitative research and governmental discourse analysis, it examines how the concept is framed and implemented. While often presented as innovative, it reveals tensions and limitations, particularly in conflating integration with assimilation and privileging physical upgrading over comprehensive, participatory approaches. Nevertheless, these policies introduced novel elements into housing policy, notably in terms of scale, target population, urban location, and architectural design. The study questions the originality of this model within broader Latin American trends.*

Keywords: Socio-urban integration; informal settlement upgrading policies; housing policies; Buenos Aires.

Introduction

In Latin America, recent studies have identified a new generation of public policies aimed at intervening in informal settlements. Unlike traditional slum upgrading policies, the new initiatives adopt a comprehensive approach that includes actions on urban, housing, environmental, and socio-economic issues (Clichevsky 2006; Delgadillo 2014; Cravino 2023). Moreover, these new policies seek to 'integrate' informal settlements into the consolidated urban fabric (Jajamovich et al. 2022).

The proliferation of this type of experience at the regional level is part of policy circulation processes, where multilateral lending agencies play a central role. However, each city that implements this type of policy carries out processes for the localised translation of these models, which are influenced by local contexts (Bertelli 2021; Jajamovich et al. 2022).

Since 2016, in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (CABA), these new policies have been deployed around the concept of 'socio-urban integration' (Rodríguez et al. 2017; Rodríguez 2018; Brikman 2020; Cravino 2022). This notion has been espoused in government discourse as an innovative concept guiding a new paradigm of intervention in informal settlements. The shift from upgrading experiences to the new socio-urban integration programs involves a conceptual change that remains largely unexplored in academic research. This shift entails transformations in how the state conceives of and seeks to address urban informality. This article aims to shed light on the characteristics of this conceptual turn by analysing the discourse of state actors involved in the design and implementation of these new policies.

In Buenos Aires' informal settlements, housing issues and urban issues are intrinsically intertwined. The approach adopted by these new policies reflects this link, as, despite being urbanisation policies, they also involve housing measures, and entail a transformation in certain traditional aspects of housing policy, as they promote state-sponsored construction of social housing for the inhabitants of informal settlements and as the new dwellings are located in those neighbourhoods. In this sense, the new approach to socio-urban integration has also significantly transformed traditional local housing policy, which had tended to locate housing in peripheral areas, often requiring long-distance relocations (Najman 2025).

Some studies have already analysed this new paradigm, mainly based on case studies (Rodríguez 2018; Benítez 2022; Di Virgilio and Najman 2022; Brikman 2023; Diaz and L'Huillier 2023). However, a theoretical vacuum persists around the conceptual underpinnings of the notion of socio-urban integration that structures these new interventions. In both the academic and policy fields, this concept has been frequently invoked without being examined in depth. Therefore, it would be useful to take a closer look at the meanings (both conceptual and operational) of 'socio-urban integration' that these new policies deploy.

This article aims to reconstruct these meanings through a native conceptual interpretation of the notion of socio-urban integration. It seeks to elucidate the state's worldview underlying this new concept and the implications that these definitions have for delineating policy:

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[1] Informal settlements are neighbourhoods produced outside the legal and/or urban-environmental rules of land occupation (Abramo 2003; Clichevsky 2000). In Buenos Aires, informal settlements were historically called '*villas*', and more recently and with the aim of destigmatising these territories, they have begun to be called '*barrios populares*' (popular neighbourhoods).
[2] The process by which abstract concepts are translated into concrete actions, which in the case of urban policies are highly influenced by contact with the territory (Di Virgilio and Rodriguez 2011).

What theoretical and political assumptions underpin the integration approach? How are these assumptions operationalised in concrete actions?

Throughout this article, these questions are addressed using a qualitative approach centred on the voices and discourses of the government officials (and former officials) responsible for this policy, which grounds the analysis in on-the-ground policy practice and spaces of decision-making.

The findings of this study not only provide a relevant contribution to understanding the recent policies implemented in the local context, but – given that these innovative local policies have been disseminated to other countries and cities in the region (Bertelli 2021) – we argue that the insights offered by this research for understanding this new approach are also relevant to the field of urban studies on a global scale.

Methodology

This research is grounded in a qualitative approach and includes the analysis of secondary sources and in-depth interviews. This methodology is particularly suitable for addressing the questions guiding this study, as it enables an examination of political processes through their actors, reconstructing and characterising their practices and perceptions. In this sense, the qualitative approach allows for the identification of state-native meanings present in interviewees' narratives and in public communication documents.

On the one hand, official materials and reports produced by the City Housing Institute were examined in order to capture the meanings associated with the notion of socio-urban integration as expressed in official dissemination discourse. On the other hand, the study draws on semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in 2023 and 2024 with senior officials and former officials from the agency responsible for the policy, as well as with coordinators of the fieldwork teams. In this regard, the research distinguishes between two types of state actors: those who hold hierarchical roles in the central government teams and played a key role in the broader formulation of the policy, and the fieldwork coordinators, whose roles are more closely tied to the design and on-the-ground implementation of interventions. The sample seeks to include representatives from these different hierarchical levels and from the various state agencies involved. The sample selection follows theoretical criteria that are consistent with the principle of information saturation commonly used in qualitative research (Flick 2004).

Using a qualitative approach – and particularly the criteria for sample selection – allows us to observe the state in action, while we are also able to maintain a distance from the monolithic view of the state (Oszlak and O'Donnell 1976) by accounting for the diversity of actors that comprise it. Thus, through emerging categories and native definitions, the

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[3] The interviews were conducted within the framework of the collective research project PICT 4671, No. GRF-TI-00381, "The New State-Led Housing in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires: Its Effects on Dwelling Practices and Residents". The interviews were carried out by the authors of this article, together with other members of the research team: Cecilia Zapata, Florencia Girola, Carla Fainstein, Facundo Corti, Cristina Betannin, Ana Gretel Thomasz, Guido Saal, Agostina Torres, María Luz Brena, Lucero Massa, Guido Bonano, Florencia Mogni and Maia Wasserman.

[4] The interview sample includes the following state actors: the former President of the IVC; the IVC General Manager; the Undersecretary of Urban Integration and Habitat; the Undersecretary of Social Integration and Habitat; the Director of Affordable Housing; the Operational Manager of Social Outreach; the Operational Manager of Housing Associations; and Directors and former Directors of territorial teams in Villa 31, Rodrigo Bueno, Playón de Chacarita, and Villa 20.

interviews make it possible for us to reconstruct the state's worldview regarding the policy of socio-urban integration and to advance a conceptual interpretation of the notion of integration.

Old frameworks, new paradigms? Informal settlement upgrading in Latin America

In order to understand the current approach to socio-urban integration policies in CABA, it is necessary to contextualise how these new interventions fit into the history of policies aimed at urban informality in Latin America. Since their emergence at the end of the 1930s, informal settlements have been seen by the state as a problem, although the strategies used to address them have varied over time. Different studies identify three major cycles in these policies (Fernandez Wagner 1999; Brakarz et al. 2002; Viratkapan and Perera 2006; Rojas y Fretes Cibils 2009; Benmergui 2012; Connolly 2014; Pradilla Cobos 2014). Initially, state actions to eradicate the settlements predominated. From the 1980s to the early 1990s, policies tended to recognise and value popular modes of city production and sought to enshrine the right of the inhabitants of informal settlements to remain in these self-built territories. Finally, during the 1990s, upgrading policies began to be developed. Unlike previous policies, they recognised the right of inhabitants to remain in informal settlements, but also incorporated actions to improve these habitats through housing, urban, and land regularisation programmes.

Numerous studies have pointed out the limitations of this last policy cycle (Fernandez Wagner 1999; Calderón Cockburn 2004; Clichevsky 2006; Fernandes 2011). These works tended to question the capacity of these policies to transform the structural conditions of informality and to carry out genuine participatory processes in the design and implementation of these programmes. Furthermore, they pointed out that these interventions did not promote effective socio-spatial integration between informal settlements and the rest of the city. Debates in academia made their way into the decision-making spaces of multilateral organisations (such as the InterAmerican Development Bank or the World Bank), where a new direction in the design of these urban policies began to be promoted.

Thus, a fourth policy cycle was inaugurated, characterised by proposals for more comprehensive interventions that would attempt to articulate previously disconnected objectives: tenure security, housing improvement, urban connectivity, environmental care, and citizen participation (Delgadillo 2014; Empresa Desarrollo Urbano Medellín, n.d.; Fiori et al. 2022; Brikman 2023; Cravino 2023). Despite their seemingly novel character, as Cravino (2023) argues, these new policies of 'Social Urbanism' tend to combine elements drawn from various earlier paradigms, resulting in hybrid – and at times contradictory – interventions. We therefore contend that this new cycle of policies represents a process of metamorphosis (Castel 1995), rather than a complete rupture with previous intervention frameworks. The socio-urban integration policies implemented in the City of Buenos Aires, which have gained considerable prominence in the region over the past decade, form part of this latest cycle of interventions. Throughout this article, we critically examine the innovative character of these policies by analysing the conceptual and operational definitions constructed by state actors around the notion of *socio-urban integration*.

Unpacking the concept of socio-urban integration

As previously mentioned, since 2016 a set of interventions structured around the notion of socio-urban integration have been applied to several informal settlements in the City of Buenos Aires. These interventions have been characterised in state discourse as innovative, and the creative and original nature of the concept has been highlighted:

> '(...) it was a mix of inputs, intuition, impressions from the neighbourhoods, and political vision. But it's not like you'd hear me say: "We had read the literature and aligned ourselves with this academic framework. That's how we defined housing, and this is the paradigm we're working within". (...) We constructed it fluidly, and once it came together, it was very clear' (Former President of the IVC, 2024).

From an academic standpoint, CABA's socio-urban integration policy has been associated with the broader current of social urbanism (Cravino 2023) observed in other regional experiences, particularly in reference to the 'Medellín model'. In this respect, Bertelli (2021) situates CABA's policies within the broader dynamics of policy circulation. However, official discourse downplays such influences, instead underscoring the originality of local initiatives and of the concept of socio-urban integration itself. In this sense, and following Jajamovich and Delgadillo (2020), policy circulation processes do not result in automatic replication, but rather in situated adaptations that filter, reconfigure, and at times even obscure their original sources.

Based on an analysis of the discourses of state actors, we found that the concept of socio-urban integration is structured around four dimensions: 1) it moves beyond the traditional notion of upgrading; 2) it seeks to materially and symbolically reconnect the informal city with the formal city; 3) it proposes a comprehensive and cross-sectoral approach; 4) it incorporates participation as a substantive component of the process. In the following sections, we examine each of these elements in greater detail.

Integration goes beyond upgrading

One of the most frequently emphasised points in official discourse is the intent to distinguish socio-urban integration from the notion of upgrading and, therefore, from previously implemented policies. The interviewees acknowledged that certain elements of the earlier paradigm were retained – most notably the rejection of eradicating informal settlements and the recognition of the ways in which low-income sectors have historically contributed to city-making. In this regard, rather than adopting a culturalist approach to urban informality (Girola 2008), they understood it as a structural feature of Latin American cities (Pradilla Cobos 2014; Connolly 2014) that must be addressed by the state.

While recognising the right of residents to remain in their neighbourhoods is not new within the framework of upgrading policies, it entails a significant transformation of the tradition of social housing policy in CABA. Under the premise of respecting residents' right to stay put in the neighbourhoods that they themselves built, socio-urban integration policies constructed new public housing within the same informal settlements. Given that these settlements are located in highly valued urban areas, the new policies have introduced innovative locations for the provision of social housing (Najman 2024).

The interviewees argued that, despite drawing on certain elements of the upgrading approach, socio-urban integration goes further, as it is not only concerned with improving

the internal conditions within informal settlements, but also with fostering connections between the settlement and the city at large. This is illustrated in the following account:

> '*They are different dimensions to me. Upgrading is about carrying out all these interventions based on the existing neighbourhood, on what the residents and the community have already built. And the integration dimension relates to something else: levelling conditions, urban integration, creating openings, connecting the network to the rest of the city's sewage infrastructure.*' (Fieldworker, Villa 20, 2023)

Dismantling the barriers between the informal and the formal city

As discussed above, state discourse distinguishes the concept of socio-urban integration from that of upgrading through the premise that integration no longer focuses on informal settlements themselves, but rather on the relationship between these settlements and the rest of the city. On this point, official discourses frame socio-urban integration as an effort to dismantle the physical and symbolic barriers dividing the formal and informal city. This strategy rests on two key dimensions: equalising urban and housing conditions, and forging material and symbolic links with the wider city.

First, the interviewees stressed the need to provide public services and infrastructure that match the quality of those in the formal city. This involved formalising service provision, enhancing public spaces, and building new facilities (e.g. health centres, schools, government offices). To reduce housing disparities, the policy promoted both new housing construction and the upgrading of existing dwellings in line with the standards of the formal city.

The second dimension focused on material and symbolic connectivity: opening up streets,[5] removing physical barriers, and creating urban signage aimed at encouraging circulation and reducing the stigmatisation of these areas. In this regard, officials stressed that integration requires promoting circulation between the formal and the informal city. On a material level, this involved eliminating urban barriers that restrict movement (Government of the City of Buenos Aires, 2023). And on a symbolic level, it meant incorporating measures that challenge the stigmatising views of informal settlements. Such measures included assigning formal names and numbers to streets, installing signage, paving roads, and adding street lighting – all in conformity with the aesthetics of the formal city. Additionally, large-scale social housing was built at settlement entry points, in accordance with formal architectural and planning standards, to ensure the area *'wouldn't look like a villa'* (Former President of the IVC, 2024). Urban infrastructure was also developed to attract residents from the formal city, incorporating informal areas into regular urban circuits. Government offices, commercial zones, and food hubs were established for this purpose – a strategy also observed in Medellín.

Although official discourse presents urban integration as a means of levelling conditions between the formal and informal city, in practice, this objective could shift towards aligning informal urban logics with those of the formal city. As the following interview fragment reveals:

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[5] Informal settlements typically develop an urban fabric characterised by the presence of *pasillos*—narrow passageways that accommodate pedestrian movement but do not allow vehicular access. Street-opening works involve the creation of vehicular routes integrated into, and connected with, the formal urban fabric. Implementing these interventions generally requires land previously allocated to residential uses, which means that they often entail the relocation of a significant number of households.

'I think there's more of a focus on integrating the neighbourhood into the city by stripping it of its own characteristics. There's a view from outside these territories that prevents the construction of a policy that adapts to the places where you're working – and instead, expects the reverse.' (Fieldwork team coordinator, Rodrigo Bueno, 2024)

As the quote illustrates, operationalising the notion of integration into concrete actions required greater adaptation from informal settlements and their residents to the political, economic, and normative structures of the formal city. At the same time, formal regulations – such as those governing economic activity or urban planning – proved largely inflexible in accommodating the logics and practices of informal settlements.

Comprehensive and multidimensional urban approaches

Official discourse presents socio-urban integration as a multidimensional concept requiring a cross-sectoral policy approach. From this perspective, state actors proposed a clear differentiation from previous policies, which they describe as one-dimensional and sectoral, and therefore present the concept of socio-urban integration as a notion capable of encompassing and expressing this complexity. Beyond urban and housing interventions, the concept also addresses social, economic, and symbolic aspects. Also, this integrated strategy operates on two levels: connecting neighbourhoods to the city and individuals to society. It aligns with broader public policy frameworks that view social integration as a complex, evolving process marked by multiple, partial, and unstable forms of inclusion (Kaztman et al. 1999; Najman 2018). In official discourse, the notion of socio-urban integration is structured around three core programme pillars: urban integration (explored in the previous section), housing integration, and socio-economic integration.

The housing component aims to ensure adequate housing and secure tenure by means of two strategies: building new homes in the neighbourhood and upgrading existing self-built dwellings. New housing was funded and designed by the local government and built by private firms, adopting a low-density typology for sustainability. These buildings also included ground-floor commercial units, mostly allocated to local residents. The allocation of housing and commercial spaces was guided by the needs of the settlement upgrading project, particularly the opening of streets and the formalisation of service provision. The state offered subsidised loans to facilitate homeownership, with property values set well below market rates and accounting for families' prior investments in self-built homes. While some existing dwellings were upgraded, this component was more limited in scope. In certain neighbourhoods, the number of newly built units even surpassed the original housing stock.

Socio-economic integration, which was added later to the policy, is intended to formalise employment and local economies by relocating commercial activities to new housing, introducing formal-sector brands, and providing training and support programmes. Although the policy formally integrates the urban, housing, and socioeconomic dimensions, testimonies revealed that in reality there was a predominant focus on housing and urban components. The social housing programme was the central component of the policy. In some neighbourhoods, the amount of new housing built exceeded the existing stock of self-built dwellings and created intra-neighbourhood differentiations (Najman 2025). By contrast, economic and social aspects have progressed slowly, mainly owing to challenges in inter-agency coordination.

Participation as a cross-cutting and legitimising element

Official discourse positions community participation as central to socio-urban integration policies. While the general policy guidelines were largely formulated following a traditional top-down logic (Sabatier 1986), the projects in each neighbourhood were anchored in participatory processes.

Unlike earlier policies, where participation was often limited to superficial decisions (Brikman 2017), the interviewees asserted that participation now informs substantive decisions. The estate agents stressed that relevant participation and the creation of pluralistic participatory spaces were both novel and essential elements for legitimising the new policy interventions.

Participation was operationalised through two strategies. The creation of dedicated fieldwork teams for each settlement initiated a process of state territorialisation, aimed at linking government and community. Since the 1990s, territorial networks have been key spaces for collective action and political articulation (Merklen 2005). In this context, strengthening the local presence of state institutions was essential to building consensus and credibility around policy interventions.

The second strategy involved creating Participatory Management Boards (MGPs) to institutionalise dialogue with existing social organisations. These forums enabled residents to express demands, debate projects, and build consensus. However, a key limitation was their exclusion of residents from neighbouring formal areas, restricting participation to the informal settlements despite the policy's integrative aims.

Conclusion

This study is situated within the body of regional research concerned with characterising, understanding, and scrutinising recent policies aimed at transforming informal settlements. Based on a case study of socio-urban integration policies implemented over the past decade in the City of Buenos Aires, this work contributes to regional debates on the new wave of policies addressing urban informality. In particular, it advances the understanding of the conceptual foundations underlying this type of intervention by examining a specific case, while also tracing points of connection with contemporary experiences in other Latin American cities.

The findings show that official discourse tends to define these new interventions as original and creative initiatives that distinguish themselves not only from previous local policies but also – despite their similarities – highlight their originality in relation to other contemporary experiences in the region. This process of differentiation is structured around the concept of socio-urban integration.

Throughout the article, an in-depth description and characterisation of this key term was developed through an analysis of official discourses. In this sense, the study advances the interpretation of the native conceptual definition of the notion of socio-urban integration, allowing the analysis to be grounded both in territorialised policy practice and in the discourses produced within decision-making spaces.

This conceptual framework has allowed for the introduction of novel aspects into urban and housing policies aimed at the most vulnerable sectors of society. On the one hand, 'socio-urban integration' has been deployed in order to connect housing improvements to the wider

dimensions of integration between the formal and the informal city. Likewise, this policy introduced innovations into traditional social housing, by locating new dwellings within informal settlements and guaranteeing residential permanence for their inhabitants.

In light of these innovations, certain limitations become apparent. Under the objective of integration, strategies for assimilating the informal city into the formal one could be observed, to the detriment of cultures and traditions rooted in informality. Moreover, the large-scale provision of new social housing within former informal settlements has given rise to emerging processes of territorial differentiation.

Furthermore, we questioned the extent to which these definitions can be considered truly novel or disruptive within the broader context of a regional trend. Insofar as many of these actions also subscribe to comprehensive, participatory, and inclusive practices, it is worth continuing to explore the points of contact among these experiences and take note of the particular 'situated translations' of this model in each city. This study seeks to serve as a springboard for future comparative research that may foster a broader understanding of contemporary Latin American policies aimed at informal settlements.

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