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Social Housing within Public–Private Development: The Advances and Limitations of Housing Policy in the Urban Entrepreneurialism of Buenos Aires

Gabriel Mancuello

Facultad de Arquitectura, Diseño y Urbanismo, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, Argentina
Centro de Estudios Urbanos y Regionales. Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas.
gabriel.mancuello@fadu.uba.ar
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8123-0403

Abstract: *Large-scale urban development projects in Latin America are known for exacerbating patterns of urban segregation, in contexts where housing has long been market-oriented and inclusive initiatives such as social housing have been neglected. The 'Barrio Parque Donado-Holmberg' in Buenos Aires represented – after highly contested disputes – a partial break in this regard. Located in an area that had faced decades of decline, with a low-income population living in precarious conditions, this project was presented as a 'self-financing' public–private development with a social mix policy that would integrate the community already living there. Although the housing policy included options that allowed people to remain in place, other options implied the displacement of the population. Additionally, the disparities between public and private implementation, as well as rising land value, call into question the inclusiveness of the project. Therefore, the complex and contradictory outcomes highlight the tensions in implementing housing policies under the logic of urban entrepreneurialism.*

Keywords: urban policy and planning; social housing; land markets and housing policy; housing in developing countries; residential buildings and architectural design.

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Introduction

Large-scale urban development projects[1] are interventions aimed at the physical and functional transformation of deteriorated areas, adapting them to the new requirements of capital accumulation (Cuenya and Corral 2011). Although such projects have existed throughout the history of urbanism, in the last decades of the 20th century they began to be restructured as a result of the redevelopment of different urban sectors in the post-Fordist and post-Keynesian city. In this context, new forms of urban management with public–private partnerships emerged in different cities under the paradigm of entrepreneurial urban governance (Harvey 1989). Since then, with the expansion of neoliberal ideologies, this redevelopment strategy has become a predominant model of urban and economic policy (Swyngedouw et al. 2002) that can be observed in the Global North and the Global South (Carmona et al. 2009), with both supporters and detractors of this type of intervention (Jajamovich 2019; Kim 2023).

In Latin America, although these urban projects were generally proposed with a mix of uses – residential, commercial, and other facilities – housing has always retained a market orientation, without any kind of initiative to promote affordability in either housing ownership or rental housing. Furthermore, considering that these projects were usually located in strategic and highly profitable locations, they ended up becoming enclaves for the elites, exacerbating the urban segregation of cities. In this regard, the outcomes were largely limited to the creation of new urban landmarks, the enhancement of urban competitiveness, and the attraction of investments (Vainer 2012). The city of Buenos Aires was no exception to this trend, being a pioneer of entrepreneurial urbanism in the region, with pro-market projects that were criticised for effectively privatising urban management, benefiting real estate developers, lacking a social mix, and promoting social segregation in the city (Cuenya and Corral 2011).

Nonetheless, these urban interventions have recently undergone changes in order to adapt to new agendas and demands. In this regard, some authors have identified a new generation of projects that, 'while incorporating a neoliberal concern with competitiveness, manifest greater governmental direction and commitment to egalitarian goals' (Fainstein 2008: 782), with housing concerns being one of the key factors in these discussions. But far from causing a setback to neoliberal policies, these adaptations are presented as mechanisms to inhibit the growth of oppositional and contestational practices (Lehrer and Laidley 2008). They also reveal the ways in which urban entrepreneurialism policies – and, more broadly, 'actually existing neoliberalism' (Brenner and Theodore 2002) – mutate in response to specific local contexts.

Additionally, in urban policy discussions, criticism of the segregation impacts of public–private developments – where housing is subject to market criteria – has been combined also with criticism of the typical social housing complexes of the welfare state and their problems of poverty concentration and social dysfunctionality. For this reason, in recent decades mixed-tenure housing developments have become the new orthodoxy in public–private urban renewal projects all over the Global North (Watt 2017). Although these projects are presented as an 'inclusive urban renaissance' – under the assumption that social mixing policies would generate less segregated and more liveable and sustainable communities –

[1] There is no unequivocal denomination for this object of study (Jajamovich and Kozak 2019). In the Anglo-Saxon context, this kind of urban operation can be called *large-scale urban development projects*—more focused on real estate development (Eizenberg 2019; Kim 2023; Swyngedouw et al. 2002)—or *urban mega-projects*, which implies a more diverse interventions including large facilities and infrastructure (Altshuler and Luberoff 2003; Kennedy 2015).

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there are significant concerns about their negative impacts, considering that the rhetoric of 'social mix' can conceal a gentrification strategy and a social cleansing agenda (Lees 2008).

Nevertheless, even though social mix policies in urban redevelopment projects have spread throughout the Global North in recent decades, this trend is only still emerging in Latin America. In this region, urban development projects based on public-private partnerships have rarely included any kind of housing policy that promotes affordability. In contrast to the Global North, housing policies in Latin America face certain difficulties and limitations for the implementation of this type of approach, which makes it important to study some of the few cases that have been developed.

In this regard, this paper aims to contribute to these debates by deepening the knowledge on the contemporary generation of public–private development projects in Latin America that incorporate social mix policies, and the potential advances and the inherent limitations of this type of more progressive policy. With this purpose, I analyse the case of the 'Barrio Parque Donado-Holmberg' project developed in Buenos Aires in recent years. In this city, housing policies and public–private interventions have always been developed separately: on the one hand, there are the traditional social housing estates built by the government in low-income neighbourhoods; on the other hand, there are projects entirely developed by the private sector in well-located areas.

The aforementioned project was implemented in an area that experienced decades of decline following the abandonment of a highway project proposed in the 1970s. With the area inhabited by a socially vulnerable population in precarious living conditions, the project proposed a social mix policy that would combine real estate development, public facilities, infrastructure, and a housing policy for the existing population. In this regard, this project constitutes a distinctive example of the new tendency towards social mix policies in the region, and a particular case for analysing the complex and contradictory outcomes of these housing policies under the logic of urban entrepreneurialism.

The research employed a qualitative and quantitative approach, focusing on the housing policy component of the project and, in particular, on its socio-spatial impacts. The case analysis provides a number of insights: into the contradictions surrounding the notion of 'self-financing' housing policies; into how certain housing policies are only incorporated after highly contested disputes – in this case led by grassroots organisations; into the disparities that arise when the state and private sector carry out different components of the project independently; into the incentives that the state applies to accelerate management processes and enable real estate development – in this case through relocation subsidies; and into the challenges inherent in homeownership-oriented housing policies implemented in areas undergoing significant land market valorisation.

The beginning of the issue: the unfinished highway plan

What is now Barrio Parque Donado-Holmberg traces its origin to the Urban Highway Plan (Figure 1) presented in 1977 during the country's last military dictatorship. Based on the ideas of modernist urbanism and implemented without any kind of public consensus, this plan included nine highways that were intended to interconnect the city and its metropolitan area under a car-oriented mobility paradigm. Nonetheless, only two highways were actually built, the rest being abandoned at different stages of progress, as a result of different political and economic problems that made it impossible to continue the ambitious plan (Oszlak 2019).

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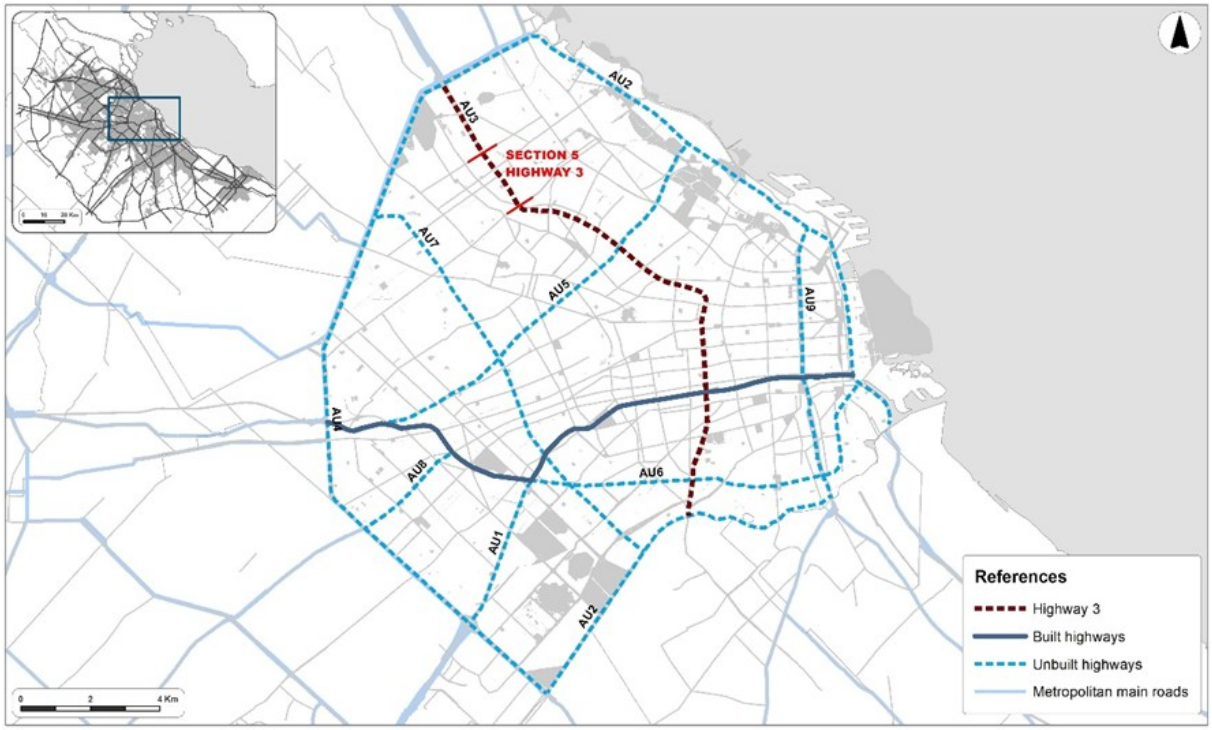
Highway 3 was abandoned in 1981, with different sections left at diverse stages of progress. While some areas along the projected route of the highway were left untouched, others were expropriated and demolished, and yet others were left in an intermediate state – such as Section 5 (Figure 1) located between Donado and Holmberg Streets. Many buildings in this section were expropriated and demolished, but a large number were left standing even after their residents had been evicted and by the time the highway project was discontinued had still not been demolished.

Meanwhile, in the context of economic crisis and with the implementation of neoliberal policies by the dictatorial government – which included slum clearance and the liberalisation of the housing rental market – housing problems in the city started to increase. In this context, the empty buildings along the unfinished highway that belonged to the local state provided an alternative to many people with no place to go (Zapata and Belluscio 2018).

Figure 1: The Urban Highway Plan from 1977 in Buenos Aires



Source: Author's elaboration.

It was at this moment that the area began to undergo a process of fragmentation. On the one hand, a process of social polarisation set in as the abandoned buildings began to be occupied by highly vulnerable people living as squatters in precarious conditions. On the other hand, the occupied buildings, surrounded by abandoned and deteriorated vacant plots,[2] underwent decay that led to significant spatial degradation (Figure 2). This occurred in an area surrounded by upper-middle income neighbourhoods, resulting in diverse social groups living in proximity to each other. This added social tension in the area and made any kind of urban intervention more complicated.

Although the local government put forward several proposals to address these problems, they persisted for decades – during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s – in a context of struggles over the right to housing led by people in the area (Zapata and Belluscio 2018). The final

[2] According to a survey conducted in the 90s, the problem affected 426 families and 404 properties owned by the local government (Fimognare 2001).

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project, called 'Barrio Parque Donado-Holmberg', would not arrive until 2009.

Figure 2: Degraded buildings and vacant plots before the intervention

Source: Gesualdi (2013).

The Barrio Parque Donado-Holmberg Project

After several decades of frustrated proposals to address these issues, in 2009 the local government presented a large-scale urban development project for the 1.7-kilometre-long stretch of Section 5, the most deteriorated section of the abandoned Highway 3 project. One of the key factors that enabled the implementation of this project – unlike other initiatives that had failed – was the financing mechanism that would address the housing needs of squatters without drawing on public funds. Adopting entrepreneurial practices, the government presented the project as 'economically sustainable', proposing that the solution for the area would be achieved through real estate development. The project was designed to be financed by the auction of public land – owned by the local authorities and occupied by squatters – that would later be developed by the private sector. The revenue generated from the auctioned land was to be used to address housing needs and reinvested in local infrastructure, public facilities, and green spaces (Figure 3), features that were intended to improve the area, attract private investment, and leverage the initial investment made by private developers.

Considering that other mechanisms could have been implemented to enable urban redevelopment without the state losing ownership of the land, the auction of public land became one of the most controversial aspects of the project, contested by various political and professional organisations. However, this did not prevent the project from moving forward: 70% of the public land was auctioned off for real estate development and the remaining portion was allocated to social housing and other facilities (Figure 3). Because so much emphasis was placed on making the project financially self-sustaining,[3] most of the built environment remained subject to a market-oriented logic. This raises questions about the use of public land and the fact that the vast majority of it was privatised and earmarked for property development rather than other social purposes. Although the state did not have

[3] Officials in charge of the project stated that the funds raised by the auction of public land more than covered the financing needed to carry out the project (including its housing policy, infrastructure and other investments).

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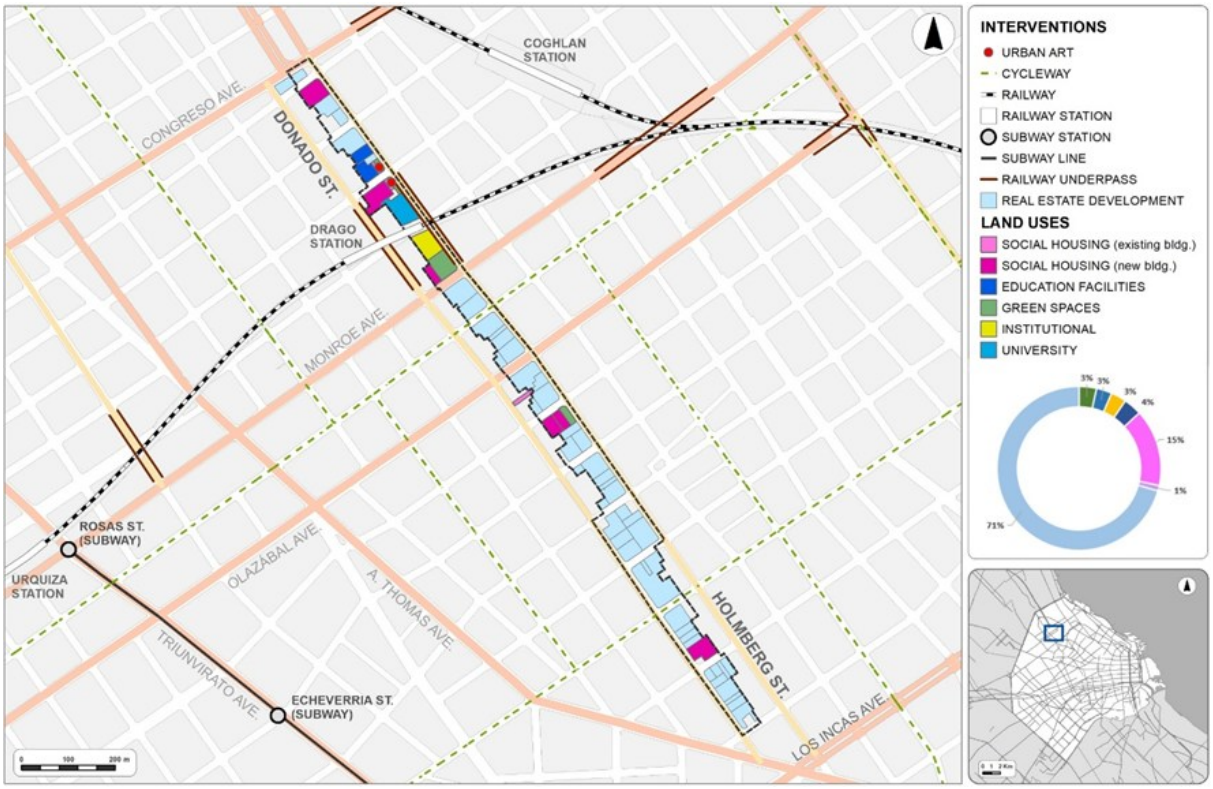
to invest public funds, it did have to dispose of public assets – in this case public land – which ultimately contradicts the idea of a self-financing project.

Figure 3: The land uses and interventions of the project



Source: Author's elaboration.

Despite the fact that most of the public land in this area was allocated for private property development, it is worth highlighting that this project was the first initiative in the city to include social housing within a public–private development. If we compare it with the previous generation of projects in the region, the mere inclusion of some form of social housing already represents a more progressive initiative than what had been undertaken before. Moreover, its prime location – in an area with well-developed infrastructure and public facilities, surrounded by upper-middle-class neighbourhoods – also draws significant attention.

However, the inclusion of social housing in the project was by no means a foregone conclusion in the discussions that took place over the years to address the problem. Social housing was not an element originally included in the various proposals made over the years; instead, it resulted from the highly contested struggles of the vulnerable population and grassroots housing rights organisations (Diaz and Zapata 2020; Najman et al. 2023). Therefore, it is important to note that the inclusion of social housing in this type of development – something that is not under discussion in other regions of the world – is more the result of contestational practices within specific contexts than a broader public policy to address housing needs.

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The characteristics and outcomes of the project's housing policy

The first point to note about the housing policy of the project is that it was aimed exclusively at the population already living in the area, which had been surveyed in a census conducted several years before the project was introduced. Those who were not included in that census were offered far less favourable options. This aspect was extremely controversial, since in a scenario of precarious and informal housing there was a certain degree of turnover and constant incorporation of new people, modifying the population affected by the situation in the area (Zapata and Belluscio 2018).

For people included in the census, two main options were defined, from which they could choose freely: they could obtain a dwelling, to be developed in a new or restored building within or near the project area, that would be paid for through an affordable-rate mortgage; or they could obtain a non-repayable relocation subsidy, which would supposedly allow them to resolve their housing needs on the private market. This last option was defined as the default option in the event that beneficiaries did not express a choice. Other alternatives were also considered, such as the construction of dwellings by housing cooperatives or even affordable credits for self-construction aimed at people in extreme poverty. However, the latter alternatives were rarely implemented because of various difficulties that made doing so unfeasible, so they will not be discussed in depth here. People who had not been included in the census would only be able to access non-repayable[4] relocation subsidies of a much smaller amount of money than those who had been counted.[5]

The dwellings developed by the state were conceived as a homeownership policy,[6] where property would be transferred to beneficiaries who would then pay for it through affordable, fixed-rates mortgages.[7] However, this component of the policy encountered some issues in its implementation. The first issue was the significant delays in the construction of the dwellings in relation to other components of the project, such as infrastructure and public facilities, which were prioritised in the initial stages because they did more to enhance the area and, consequently, to serve private interests. In this regard, some of the housing estates were completed as late as fifteen years after the project began, illustrating that housing was not a management priority within the overall development project.

In relation to the location of the social housing estates, one of the local government's strategies was to distribute it throughout the project, interspersing it with real estate development, with the aim of fostering integration (Figure 3). This was the first time that policies of this kind had been implemented in the city. However, their implementation in practice revealed some issues in terms of integration.[8] Although social housing estates and real estate development maintain the same structural morphology – in that strict urban regulations limit the height of buildings – there are notable contrasts between them, in relation to the design, façades, materials, and finishes. This disparity maintains a social division but on a finer scale (Zapata et al. 2021), calling into question the inclusiveness and the spatial integration of the project, and revealing a different kind of segregation residing

[4] It is important to note that the granting of these subsidies, which did not have to be repaid in any way, reflects the profitability of the urban operation.
[5] Due to their value, it only allowed them to cover a few months in the rental market.
[6] It is important to note that in this city, as in the rest of the country, there are no social housing rental policies, which means that hosing policies are generally limited to affordable homeownership policies.
[7] In a country with high inflation, the fixed rate meant that over time the relative value of the instalments de-creased, which also compromised the government's ability to raise new funds.
[8] In discussions prior to the implementation of the project, the possibility of including social housing within privately developed buildings was considered, but this proposal was not well received by developers.

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within the project itself, with significant differences observed in the qualities of the façades and in the public space around the buildings depending on who they were built for (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Social housing estates (left) and real estate development (right)

Source: Photographs by the author.

The other option that beneficiaries could choose was non-repayable relocation subsidies, which would supposedly allow the people to resolve their housing needs on the private market. The problem was that the subsidies entailed an amount of money that was grossly insufficient for people to acquire any kind of housing in the area, an upper-middle income neighbourhood. Therefore, people who opted for the subsidies could only afford housing on the outskirts of the city's metropolitan area, and were thereby displaced.

As this was a policy that allowed beneficiaries to choose between different alternatives, it is possible to draw certain conclusions about its impacts based on the options selected. As explained above, there were two main options: affordable homeownership within a social housing estate that enabled residents to remain in the area, or non-repayable relocation subsidies, which implied having to access housing on the outskirts of the city. Although one might assume that most of the population would prefer housing in the area to a subsidy that entailed displacement, the project outcomes reveal a different reality. The long processes and management challenges that delayed the completion of dwellings for several years, the fact that subsidies were the default option, and the local government's insistence on choosing the option of subsidies[9] – which were granted immediately – made it so that almost half of the population ultimately opted for relocation subsidies. For people living as squatters in overcrowded and precarious conditions, the subsidies were presented as a rapid and attractive solution. Looking at which alternatives the population ultimately chose[10] (Figure 5), we can see that a significant percentage of the people were ultimately displaced.

[9] This was the most promoted housing alternative in the management process by the local government as a strategy to leave more room for the private sector and accelerate the redevelopment of the area.
[10] The local government never openly published the results of the housing policy, so a reconstruction was carried out using various reliable sources. The data presented does not take into account all of the families involved, as only confirmed cases were counted, but it does provide an approximation that allows us to understand the results of the policy.

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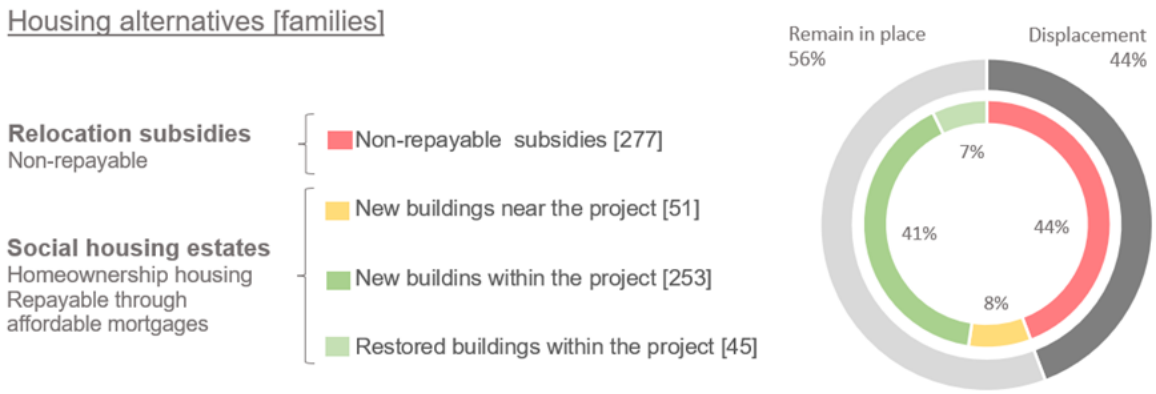
Figure 5: Housing alternatives taken by the population



Source: Author's elaboration based on a triangulation of different sources.

Land market valorisation processes

There is another issue that is particularly relevant for these types of affordable homeownership policies: the dynamics of the land market. Before the implementation of the project, the area – run-down and surrounded by upper-middle-class neighbourhoods – had experienced a significant decline in land value. Throughout the process of formulating the project, this issue had been identified by the government as a problem that needed to be addressed. Consequently, soaring land prices were seen as an indicator of the operation's success. The local government therefore implemented a major public investment plan – including institutional buildings, railway underpasses, educational facilities, new public spaces, cycleways, and more (Figure 3) – to enhance the area and make it more attractive for private enterprises.

The importance the local government assigned to the recovery of the land market produced tangible results. An analysis of the evolution of land value in the project and its area of influence (Figure 6) shows a significant appreciation, with values hovering around 400 USD/m² at the beginning of the project and then steadily increasing over time to surpass 2200 USD/m². These values, more typical of an upper-middle-class neighbourhood of Buenos Aires, reflect the arrival in the area of new social groups with a higher socioeconomic status than those previously present. This may in turn raise the overall cost of living. Considering that the policy that was implemented did not prohibit the sale of dwellings once the mortgages were paid off, nor did it include any mechanism to encourage people to remain in place,[11] the soaring value in the land market may lead to a process of gentrification. This raises the possibility of future displacement, which would in this case be due to market dynamics. In this regard, the fact that this type of impact was not considered calls into question the inclusiveness of the project and reflects certain contradictions inherent in the implementation of affordable homeownership policies.

[11] Policies with collective housing tenure, as community land trust, or social rental housing could have been some of the alternatives to prevent displacement due to market dynamics.

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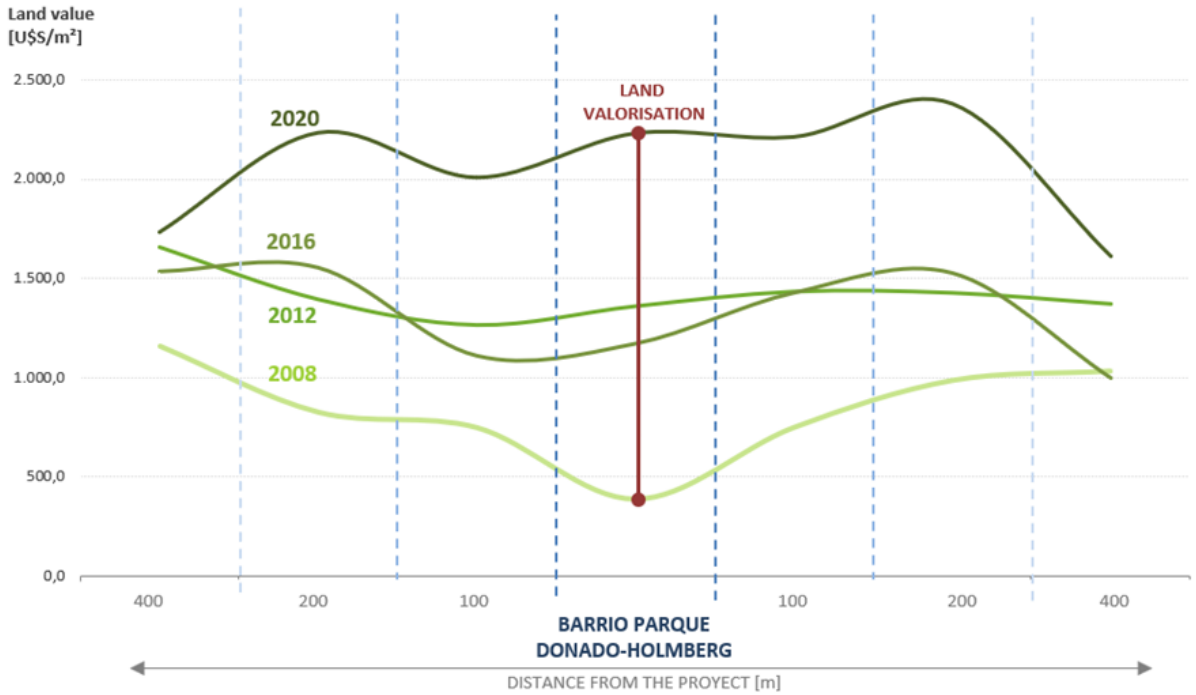
Figure 6: The evolution of land value in the project's area of influence (2008–2020)



Source: Author.

Conclusion

This paper sought to contribute to the debates on the inclusion of social mix policies in public-private development projects, particularly from the experience of a Latin American city. Although such policies are common in the Global North, they remain an emerging trend in the Global South and therefore deserve some examination to gain an understanding of their specific characteristics.

The project analysed implemented a social mix policy that was atypical in the region, and it demonstrated some progress in terms of social integration, being the first public–private development to include social housing in a well-located area of the city. Nonetheless, if we consider that social housing was offered only to the population already living in the area and only after contested struggles, it is reasonable to assume that, had there been no pre-existing community, affordable housing would probably not have been included as a component in this kind of project. In this regard, the case study illustrates how the inclusion of social housing emerged as a strategy to avoid opposition to the project and only after significant struggles over housing rights, in which social and grassroots organisations played a central role. Likewise, given that most of the built environment retained a market orientation, the inclusion of social housing appears to have been contingent upon maintaining the profitability of the urban redevelopment. In this respect, although the logic of the project was altered over the years in response to social pressures and political organisation – eventually leading to the incorporation of a housing policy – it remains entrepreneurial in character, with the vast majority of what used to be public land having been allocated to property development rather than to other social purposes.

Beyond the specificity of the case for the Latin American context, there are some insights that are useful for reflecting on this type of project in other contexts as well. These relate to

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the conflictual relationships that can arise within a project between state-led and privately developed components: whether in terms of the different speed of development – where, in the case analysed, the social components of the project experienced significant delays, reflecting their lower priority within the overall urban operation; or in terms of the spatial characteristics, as also observed in this case, with a stark contrast between public and private housing and the surrounding public spaces. In both respects – whether regarding the pace of development or physical characteristics – the case illustrates certain limitations in terms of integration when such components are not implemented comprehensively.

Further questions arise regarding how housing policy is addressed for very low-income populations in this type of public-private development. In this case, non-repayable relocation subsidies were the alternative adopted by the local government to reduce the number of dwellings that had to be built and to accelerate the project's development processes. However, this implied a state-led displacement policy, where, due to the amount of the subsidy provided, the population was only able to afford housing in a different area on the outskirts of the metropolitan area. This highlights the controversial solutions adopted in public–private partnership projects when addressing the housing needs of vulnerable populations already living in areas targeted for redevelopment.

Finally, another relevant aspect is the potentially adverse impacts that policies based on housing homeownership may have when implemented in areas prone to land value valorisation. In this respect, the emphasis placed by the local government on boosting the property market resulted in soaring land value, which raises the possibility of the future displacement of the people that were able to remain in the area. This means that some of the progressive initiatives that enabled the inclusion of social housing in the project could be undermined over time by market dynamics. From this perspective, dwellings transferred into private ownership reveal certain limitations in terms of guaranteeing long-term permanence in this kind of intervention.

In summary, this paper has problematised the politics surrounding large-scale urban development projects based on public–private partnerships, highlighting their complex interactions with housing policies and some of their contradictory outcomes. The case presented raises questions in terms of its inclusiveness and integration, opening further lines of inquiry into the limitations of implementing social mix policies in public–private development projects under the logic of urban entrepreneurialism.

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