



## Mass Social Housing, Territorial Transformations, and State Space in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Region

Patricia López-Goyburu

Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (CONICET), Centro de Estudios Urbanos y Regionales (CEUR); Universidad Argentina de la Empresa (UADE), Buenos Aires, Argentina

[plopezgoyburu@gmail.com](mailto:plopezgoyburu@gmail.com)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2120-2758>

**Abstract:** *Public policies can be understood as long-term processes that continuously reshape state territoriality. This study aims to analyse the processes through which state space is produced in the implementation of social housing policies, focusing on how state spatiality is expressed, with a particular emphasis on the local scale. The research is structured around two analytical categories – strategies and projects – and two key dimensions: instrumental and territorial. The empirical analysis focuses on the case of the Federal Housing Plan in Mariano Acosta (Merlo, Buenos Aires) and Virrey del Pino (La Matanza, Buenos Aires). The findings show that, while the state operates across multiple scales, local governments play an essential and highly significant role by exerting control over territorial occupation and organisation. The study underscores the adaptability of social housing policy to territorial dynamics and local specifics.*

**Keywords:** state space; Federal Housing Plan; metropolitan region; territorial transformations; Buenos Aires.



## Introduction

Public policies contribute to the reconfiguration of state territoriality by enabling the designation of project locations and facilitating transformations in urban planning regulations. Brenner (2004) argues that state spatiality is continuously transforming and therefore should not be approached from a state-centric perspective. Jessop (2001) complements this view with a strategic-relational approach, which conceives the state as a set of strategic relationships shaped by specific socioeconomic and spatial contexts. Public policies thus emerge as long-term processes that adapt to changing circumstances that continually reconfigure state territoriality.

This article examines the processes through which state space is produced through the implementation of social housing policies, exploring how state spatiality is expressed, with a particular emphasis on the local scale. This scale is understood as a valuable vantage point from which to observe the ways in which state space is produced. Although the empirical material is drawn from the context of Buenos Aires (Argentina), the research addresses broader questions in housing studies: What role does housing policy play in the production of state space? Can the conceptualisations developed by Jessop (2001) and Brenner (2004) – originally formulated in relation to state regulation of capitalist accumulation – be applied to social housing policy? How are these urban components of state action conceived in the shaping of territory?

Recent research on public housing policy demonstrates that it has been widely examined across different disciplinary fields. From an urban planning perspective, these policies are generally understood as forms of state intervention in housing production resulting from the structural dysfunctionality of the market. Housing policy encompasses all actions undertaken by the state to influence access to, the production of, and/or the management of housing (Clapham 2019; Lentini 2015; Sepúlveda and Fernández Wagner 2006). However, little is known about the production of state space and the strategic and project-related implications of public social housing policy.

This study addresses this gap by analysing the interrelations between projects and strategies. This approach makes it possible to highlight less evident relationships that are often overlooked in research focuses solely on case studies or on comprehensive analyses of social housing policies.

Housing policy in Buenos Aires (1) tends to be associated with the welfare state (Lo Vuolo 1998), (2) remains a central topic in political discourse on social welfare (Manrique 2017), and (3) is typically located in peripheral areas (Rodríguez et al. 2007). Buenos Aires therefore constitutes a strategically relevant case for understanding housing policies not only as responses to housing needs, but also as part of a web of power relations and capital accumulation that shape the metropolitan territory.

The article offers several theoretical contributions. It integrates concepts of multiscalar and heterogeneous state participation (Jessop 2001; Oslender 2002; Brenner 2004) with housing policy, showing how such policy becomes a tool for consolidating the institutional presence of the state and its regulatory capacity within its territory. It also reveals the adaptability of public social housing policy to territorial dynamics and local specifics. In this sense, the findings engage with international debates on how the state redefines relationships among actors, scales and jurisdictions, generating new urban hierarchies.



## Methodological approach

The research adopted a qualitative methodological approach through a case study of two concurrent projects of the Federal Housing Plan in the Buenos Aires metropolitan region – one located in Mariano Acosta (Merlo, Buenos Aires) and the other in Virrey del Pino (La Matanza, Buenos Aires). These two neighbouring municipalities, both situated within the Metropolitan Region of Buenos Aires, exhibit different approaches to the implementation of public social housing policy.

This analysis followed the conceptual frameworks of Brenner (2004), Jessop (2001), and Elinbaum (2022) and employed two analytical categories: strategies and projects. Projects determine the formal territoriality of the state and may promote differentiation or uniformity within state institutions across its territory. These may be concentrated at a single administrative level or distributed across several levels. Strategies, on the other hand, reflect state decisions that favour the socio-economic development of specific localities, thus shaping geographies of accumulation. These strategic decisions illustrate how the state intervenes in space and directs resources to specific areas, directly influencing territorial administrative configuration and the distribution of services and social benefits, including low-income housing.

The interrelations between projects and strategies were examined through two key dimensions: instrumental and territorial. These dimensions aim to illuminate public policy processes and the strategic character of state projects. This dual analytical lens seeks to reveal the subtle processes of policy rescaling and the strategic nature of state intervention.

With respect to sources, the article draws on urban planning documents, scholarly literature, and interviews. The urban planning documents provide insight into territorial transformations, while the interviews with key actors help reconstruct decision-making processes, and differing representations and valuations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders. These interviews make it possible to trace the participation and coordination of multiple actors who mobilise their resources to develop strategies and logics of action, which crystallise in the transformation of territory, and on this basis it is possible to reconstruct the underlying network of interests (Alonso 2004; Lascoumes and Le Galès 2007; Subirats 2008; Potocko and Cañellas 2019; López-Goyburu 2019).

## Social housing policy in the Buenos Aires Province

Housing policies are not neutral. Rather, they respond to broader political and economic projects. In Latin America, housing policies began to be developed systematically in the second half of the twentieth century. In this regard, Fernández Wagner (2007) identifies three main models: (1) the direct production model, which emerged during the developmentalist period and was characterised by technocratic and centralised planning, with little or no recovery of the capital initially invested; (2) the demand-subsidy model, which developed from the 1980s onward and sought to support the consolidation of informal neighbourhoods produced through self-help organisations (coexisting with centralised modalities); and (3) the self-managed model, implemented since the 1990s, based on demand financing and credit mechanisms, in which the state was transformed into a facilitator in line with neoliberal requirements.



During the first decades of the twenty-first century, these three housing policy models overlapped and coexisted in several countries across the region. In Chile, the state shifted from a direct production model to a demand-subsidy model, granting mortgage credits to policy beneficiaries, which reinforced the peripheral location of social housing as it came to depend on land markets and private-sector initiative (Sabatini et al. 2001; Rodríguez and Sugranyes 2005; Hidalgo Dattwyler 2007). In Brazil, the *Minha Casa, Minha Vida* programme promoted the mass construction of housing units for low-income groups, while coexisting with other actions aimed at socio-urban integration and the improvement of informal settlements (Maricato 2015; Rolnik 2017).

In Buenos Aires, between 1969 and 1976 a centralised model of social housing provision was implemented, beginning with the VEA Plan (Argentine Economic Housing), followed by the October 17th Plan (Yujnovsky 1984), and later by the FONAVI (National Housing Fund). In this regard, a series of legal and economic reorganisations aimed at institutionalising social housing provision were introduced, such as the establishment of the State Secretariat for Housing (1965), the Municipal Housing Commission in the City of Buenos Aires (1967), and FONAVI (1972) (López-Goyburu 2019).

Social housing programmes were mainly implemented in peripheral urban areas. Clichevsky and Abbá (1980) highlighted the large-scale housing complexes typical of these programmes, while Del Río (2011) and Olejarczyk (2016) linked the peripheral location of social housing to the lower cost of land in those areas.

As part of the Federal Fiscal Pact signed in August 1992, FONAVI was decentralised (National Decree No. 690). Provincial Housing Institutes took over responsibilities such as issuing calls for tender and approving and implementing housing plans (Law 24.130/92). Consequently, housing lost its position of prominence on the national policy agenda, and local governments gained a greater capacity to lobby for FONAVI to address local housing deficits (Rodríguez 1995; Cravino, Fernández Wagner and Varela 2002; Ostuni 2007).

With the dismantling of FONAVI, restrictions imposed by Decree-Law No. 8.912 on the development of low-cost subdivisions, and the privatisation of public services, low-income social groups began to engage in organised land occupations (Mignaqui 1998; Pérez 1999, 2006; Cravino 2010b; 2012; López-Goyburu 2019). The question then arises: what was the state's response to this informal spatial development? Clichevsky (2001, 2003) and Cravino, Fernández Wagner, and Varela (2002) demonstrate how the abandonment of a formal social housing system gave rise to the implementation of ex-post regularisation strategies. Various studies show that settlement regularisation gradually became part of the public agenda.

By 2004, social housing policy returned to the construction of peripheral housing developments with the launch of the Federal Housing Plan. This national policy was initiated by the Subsecretariat of Urban Development and Housing under the Ministry of Federal Planning, Public Investment, and Services.

Regardless of the diverse contexts in local governments, the Federal Housing Plan comprises five programmes: the '*Mejor Vivir*' Housing Improvement Programme, the Federal Housing Construction Programme, the Federal Emergency Housing Programme, the Neighbourhood Improvement Programme, and the Water Supply, Social Assistance, and Basic Sanitation Programme. Operational implementation occurs through a framework agreement signed between the national government, the province, and the corresponding municipality. The national government then evaluates which projects to finance. Funding for the programme, drawn from the national treasury, is granted to each jurisdiction on a project-by-project basis.



Project distribution does not necessarily follow the logic of federal tax revenue (Ostuni 2007). Programme financing covers the construction of housing and infrastructure, but not the land, which must be provided by the municipality. Once funding is received, the national government launches a public tender to build the housing units on land acquired by the local government, based on preliminary plans developed by local planning offices or the national government. The specifications of these preliminary plans are detailed in the bidding documents.

Registration of families in need of housing is carried out by local governments, and the allocation of units is managed by the programme's implementing unit, which seeks to match housing design to the needs of each household. This process differs when union cooperatives are involved, as they are also tasked with unit allocation. If the number of applicants exceeds the number of available units, the allocation is conducted via a public lottery overseen by a notary.

These housing developments are initiated by the national government within the Ministry of Federal Planning, but their execution involves multiple levels of government. Municipalities are responsible for sourcing land and selecting construction companies. Administrative geography thus becomes territorially differentiated due to the specific implementation practices of each case.

Cuenya (2015) and Najman (2022) highlight the poor urban integration of many housing projects. In Buenos Aires Province, the Provincial Housing Institute is tasked with monitoring construction progress, approving beneficiaries, and processing property deeds (Olejarczyk 2013). According to Cravino (2010a), this arrangement results in a form of 'controlled decentralisation'.

Therefore, the analysis of these two case studies within the Federal Housing Plan offers an opportunity to clarify the modalities through which state space is produced, while also revisiting the structure and operation of the social housing policy itself. This research seeks to explicitly highlight the relationship between the state strategies and projects through which new territorial configurations are produced and to examine how low-income social housing functions as a key nexus in this relationship.

## **The Federal Housing Plan: Mariano Acosta and Virrey del Pino**

This section presents the cases of the Federal Housing Plan developments in Mariano Acosta (the municipality of Merlo) and Virrey del Pino (the municipality of La Matanza) in order to study the projects and strategic approaches that produce state space, while also examining the instrumental and territorial dimensions of these processes.

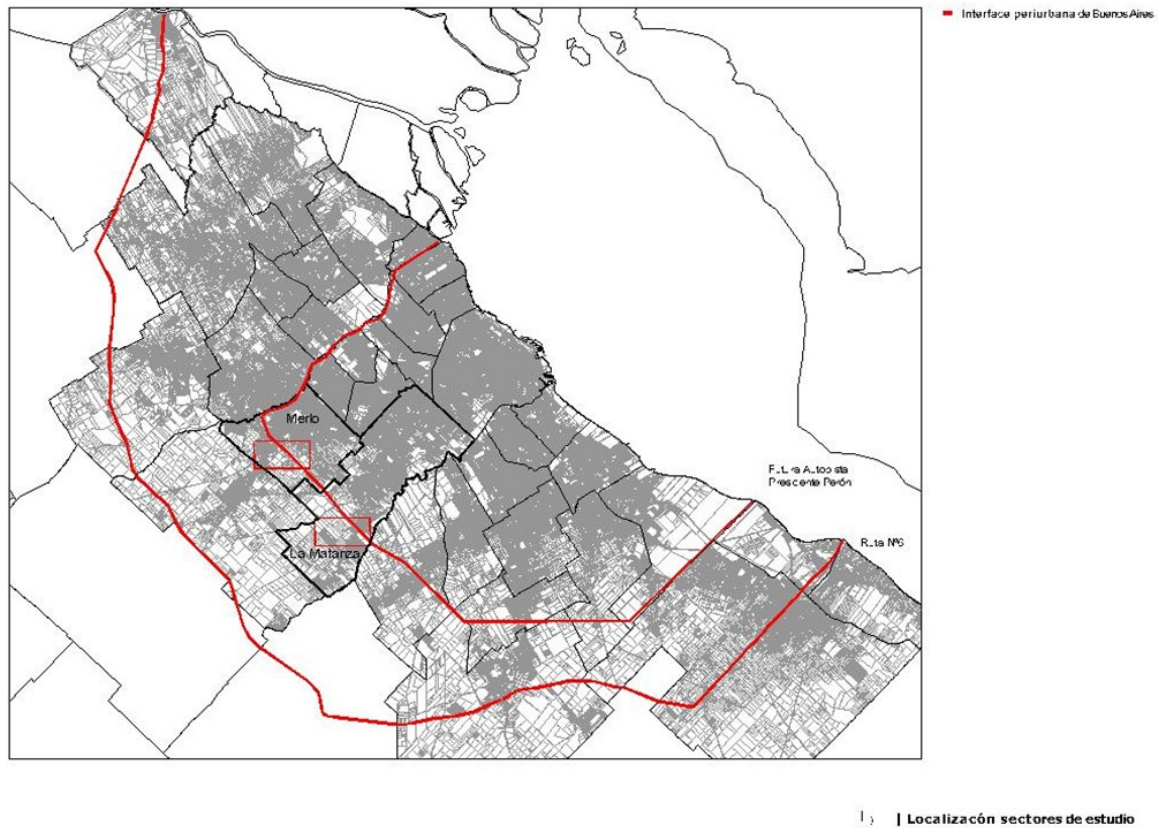
Mariano Acosta is situated in the western part of the Merlo municipality, which spans an area of 170 km<sup>2</sup>, while Virrey del Pino is located in the south of the La Matanza municipality, covering an area of 325.7 km<sup>2</sup> (Figure 1). According to the 2022 census, Merlo has a population of 582,486 inhabitants and La Matanza has 1,841,247 inhabitants.

Historically, the residential occupancy occupation of the La Matanza and Merlo districts has been determined by the areas' limited accessibility. The locality of Mariano Acosta is crossed by the Merlo-Lobos branch of the General San Martín Railway (FCGS), connects eastward to the town of Merlo and from there to the city of Buenos Aires, and westward to the town of Marcos Paz. Parallel to the FCGS runs Provincial Route 200, which crosses



Mariano Acosta, originating from Navarro and connecting to National Route 7, leading to the city of Buenos Aires. The locality of Virrey del Pino is intersected by National Route 3, which links eastward to the city of Buenos Aires and westward to Cañuelas.

**Figure 1: Location**



*Source: Based on the parcel map from the Buenos Aires Environmental Atlas (2016), highlighting the study cases.*

By 1970, most of the urban blocks in Mariano Acosta and Virrey del Pino were unoccupied, and some retaining their rural uses. Land subdivisions progressed in areas that lacked paved streets, water, sewage, and gas services, or in flood-prone zones. In Mariano Acosta, construction was arranged in an orthogonal grid, with a concentration around the Mariano Acosta FCGS station and the Marinos del Crucero General Belgrano station of the Midland Railway (now the FCBS), as well as along Provincial Routes 200 and 21. In Virrey del Pino, the blocks were arranged in a way that takes advantage of access from and to National Route 3.

According to the interviews I conducted, both areas were primarily inhabited by workers. The low commercialisation cost of these subdivisions became an opportunity for the population to acquire legal property. In many cases, families were attracted to these areas from different provinces, from neighbouring countries, and even from Europe mainly by relatives who had previously migrated and found an opportunity to fulfil their desire for homeownership.

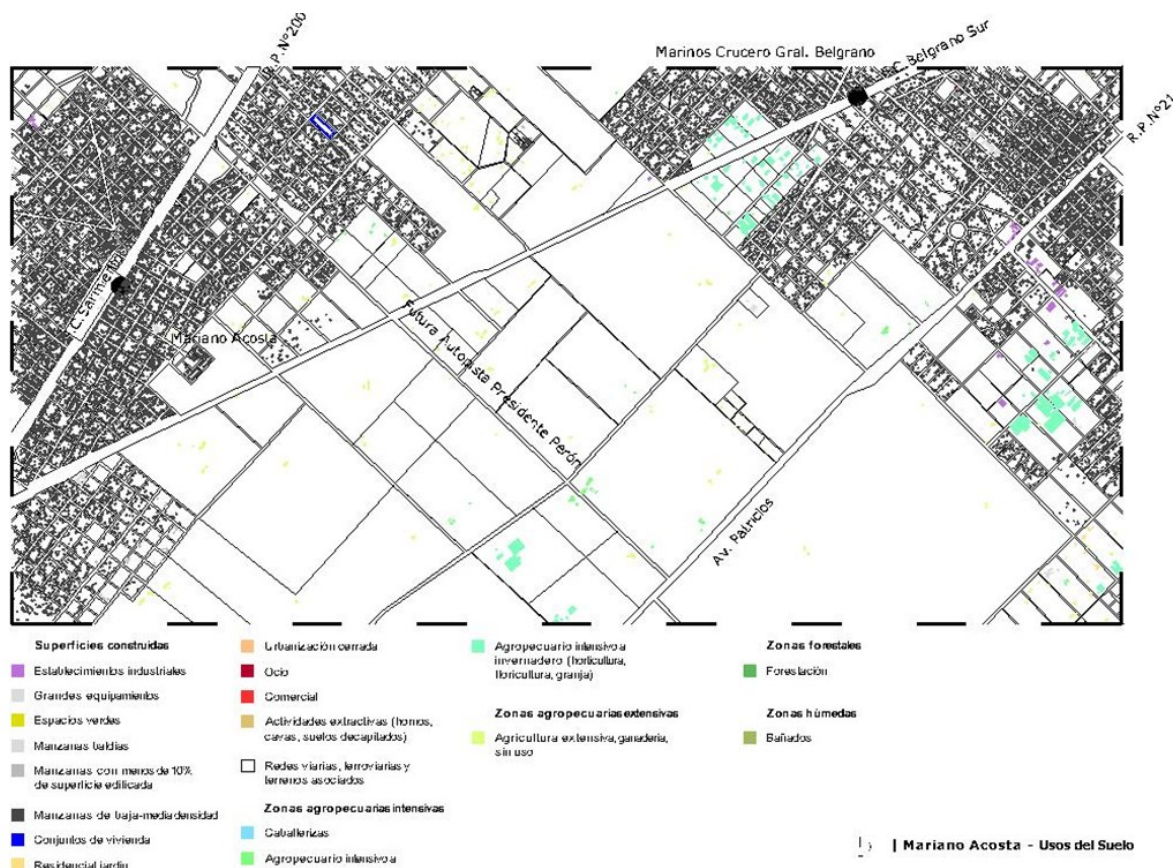
Over time, municipalities began receiving complaints about the conflicts arising from the lack of infrastructure and services. This situation repeated in various municipalities of the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Region. Thus, it became evident that the issue transcended the

local scale. This led to the enactment of Decree-Law No. 8,912 on Land Use and Zoning in 1977.

The restrictions imposed by Decree-Law No. 8,912, along with the availability of subdivided but unoccupied land at low prices in the Virrey del Pino and Mariano Acosta sectors, compared to other areas of the Buenos Aires' peri-urban interface, led to increased urban land occupation in these peripheral zones. Subdivisions created prior to the introduction of Decree-Law No. 8,912 in the area became an opportunity for housing for low-income populations. However, informal settlements also emerged. By the 1990s, low-income sectors lacked formal access to land, and the state did not have a comprehensive land and housing policy commensurate with the severity of the problem. The National Mortgage Bank (BHN) and the National Housing Fund (FONAVI) were restructured. The BHN was privatised and began to focus on the middle-income sector, and FONAVI was defunded.

In the early 2000s, a national social housing policy was reintroduced. Consolidation occurred not only through residents who found an opportunity to build their homes in the Virrey del Pino or Mariano Acosta sector, but also through the state, which again began to engage in the production of social housing in peripheral locations. However, this occurred differently in the two localities.

**Figure 2: Land use in Mariano Acosta**



*Source: Author's elaboration based on images from Google Earth, parcel data from the Atlas Ambiental de Buenos Aires website, and author's fieldwork.*



In Mariano Acosta, a Federal Housing Plan development was implemented within the existing urban grid, 300 metres from Provincial Route 200, with one block within the grid allocated for the construction of 64 homes. In contrast, in Virrey del Pino, 400 metres from National Route 3, 26 blocks were designated for the construction of 234 homes.

**Figure 3: Images of the Federal Housing Plan in Mariano Acosta**



*Source: Images from Google Earth.*

The housing developments were implemented by the national government, while the municipality was responsible for land acquisition and for selecting the construction company. In both localities, the social housing complexes had infrastructure, which was lacking in the surrounding areas. Additionally, most of the new residents did not reside within the locality.

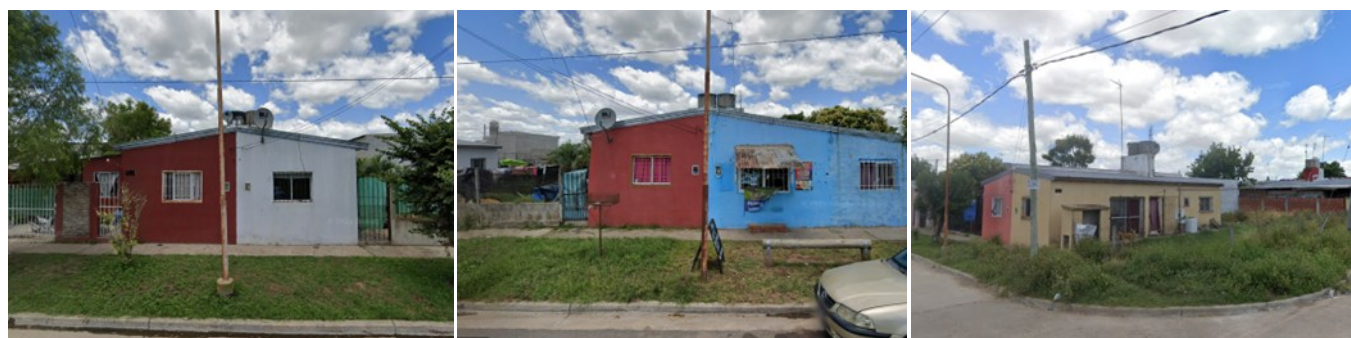
La Matanza is one of the municipalities in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Region with the highest number of social housing developments. The mayor of La Matanza viewed the national social housing policy as a channel through which to address high housing demand. The municipality, lacking financial resources for land acquisition, purchased rural land and transformed it into urban land. This methodology had been previously employed in the municipality. Interviews indicate that this tradition of responding to housing demand is one of the reasons for the large number of social housing developments located in the district.

In Virrey del Pino, the state extended the urban grid through public housing policy, while in Mariano Acosta it was possible to observe a change in the local government's approach to territorial planning, which was also reflected in social housing policy. In Mariano Acosta, a form of occupancy was adopted that would prevent the expansion of the urban grid by implementing a proportionally scaled and integrating it into the surrounding environment.



**Figure 4: Land use in Virrey del Pino**

Source: Author's elaboration based on images from Google Earth, parcel data from the Atlas Ambiental de Buenos Aires website, and author's fieldwork.

**Figure 5: Images of the Federal Housing Plan in Virrey del Pino**

Source: Images from Google Earth.

## Discussion and conclusions

Based on the description in the previous section, this section discusses the production of state space based on two case studies and the state's social housing policy itself, with the focus on two analytical dimensions: instrumental and territorial. The analysis of these dimensions illuminates the nature of the state's housing projects and strategies.

**Table 1: Project and strategy in Virrey del Pino and Mariano Acosta**

	Virrey del Pino		Mariano Acosta	
	<i>Project</i>	<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Project</i>	<i>Strategy</i>
Instrumental dimension	The project is located on rural land and is situated in an environment lacking service infrastructure.	The local government acts as a developer and seeks the construction of the highest number of housing units at the lowest cost.	The project is located on urban land and is integrated with the existing urban fabric, with similar service infrastructure and accessibility as the surrounding area.	The local government acts as a socio-spatial regulator.
Territorial dimension	A large monofunctional structure that breaks with the existing urban fabric.	'Cheap' land is acquired in order to build the largest possible number of housing units.	An urban morphology that is not disruptive to the surrounding environment.	There is no expansion of the urban fabric or creation of socially stigmatised spaces.

*Source: Author's elaboration.*

Regarding the instrumental dimension, the study shows the disparity in the number of social housing units received by one municipality compared to the other and highlights the exclusive control exercised by the national government in managing the Federal Housing Construction Programme (PFCV). This recentralisation of housing policy is grounded in the use of national treasury funds for its financing, thus operating outside existing institutional frameworks (Ostuni 2007). In the words of Di Virgilio (2017), the PFCV functions as a tool capable of transferring national resources to local governments in a discretionary manner.

At the same time, the study shows that despite administrative centralisation, neither a single scale nor uniform criteria for housing allocation are defined. Although the projects are designed under the authority of the national government (Ministry of Federal Planning, Public Investment and Services), tasks are delegated to lower administrative levels, and the local government is responsible for securing land and contracting construction companies. The local government thus plays a significant role in determining both the location and the number of housing units.

At the local scale, the results reveal notable differences. In Virrey del Pino, the local government views the studied area as an opportunity zone in which to build low-cost social housing financed by the national government. Within the framework of the Federal Housing Construction Plan (PFCV), the Municipality of La Matanza was able to justify changes in land-use regulations and the extension of the urban fabric. Conversely, in Merlo, the local government acts as a socio-spatial regulator and exercises control over land occupation. These differences highlight both the adaptability of social housing policy to local specificities (Ostuni 2007; Del Río 2011) and the influence of municipal decisions in shaping the spatial translation of national policies.

As for the territorial dimension, despite the centralisation of housing policy, there is no unique morphology or scale of housing development nor a single criterion for a development's location. Within the PFCV framework, La Matanza's government acted as a developer, promoting the largest number of houses with the lowest cost of land. The local government operates as a partner and guarantor of the national public policy. By contrast, in Merlo, the local government acts as a socio-spatial regulator and was also responsible for the allocation of housing units, granting them to neighbourhood residents.



Local government therefore acquires an essential and highly significant role as it exercises control over territorial occupation. The projects follow different geographic criteria. In Mariano Acosta, the housing development integrates seamlessly with the surrounding environment without causing disruption. In contrast, in Virrey del Pino there is urban expansion in the form of large, monofunctional housing blocks that lack continuity with the existing urban fabric, are large in scale, and are situated in areas that lack comparable service infrastructure. The implications of these decisions for the quality of life of the housing's beneficiaries are thus considerable.

Though focused on Buenos Aires, the findings have broader relevance. First, the study shows that the location and scale of housing complexes determine residential segregation. As Vio shows (2011), low-income groups are experiencing a shift from a housing deficit to a location deficit. One reason for this is the high cost of land, which is a sign of the long-term underutilisation of invested resources. This issue has been highlighted in numerous studies (Ostuni 2010; 2012; Del Río and Duarte 2012).

Second, the study shows that the state plays a multiscale and heterogeneous role in housing policy. At the national level, the government performs a centralising function – both financially and programmatically – by defining resource allocation criteria and the general guidelines of programmes. At the local level, municipalities acquire the authority to introduce changes to land-use regulations and determine project locations, granting them, as Di Virgilio (2017) notes, significant space in which to manoeuvre politically.

The interaction between state scales reveals a specific form of state territorialisation (Oslender, 2002), in which housing policy becomes a tool to consolidate institutional presence and regulatory capacity in the territory. While the response to the local demand for social housing along with political and contextual conditions determine the number of projects that a local government receives, its socio-economic conditions and regulatory authority over urban planning determine the project locations. This indicates the adaptability of public social housing policy to territorial dynamics and local specificities.

Thus, it can be concluded that public housing policy may be considered a privileged axis for the creation of state space. By building neighborhoods, extending service networks, and altering land-use regulations, the state materially reorganises its territory and, in doing so, reproduces its own authority. Hence, social housing policy operates as a mechanism of territorial statehood. Through it, the state redefines relationships among actors, scales, and jurisdictions and generates new urban hierarchies. In the peri-urban interface of Buenos Aires, this process translates into urban expansion driven by social housing projects that, while seeking to address the housing deficit, also reshape the state's modes of spatial production. In this regard, state-produced social housing can be understood as a vector of state spatial expansion.

Finally, this study raises questions for future research on the peripheral location of state-produced social housing: To what extent do social housing policies help shape the evolving territory between rural areas and urban cores? How does public housing policy affect the production of peri-urban spaces?



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