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The Transformation of Villa 31
Local Politics and Urban Development Policy in Buenos Aires' Most Emblematic Slum

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This essay is dedicated to my parents and Sebas.

If today you wanted to carry out research using exact figures to determine trends and projections concerning Villa 31 of Retiro (population, poverty indices, unemployment, illiteracy, birth/mortality rates, delinquency, etc.), no consulting company or government agency could depict the real situation, as we know it, live it, suffer it, fight it, we who are its true owners.

- Nelly Azul Benítez, resident of Villa 31,
since circa 1970, Buenos Aires

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Abstract

In rapidly urbanizing communities of the Global South, residents of informal settlements confront the challenge of state efforts to integrate their communities into the broader city/state project. In this paper, I draw on ethnographic field research carried out from May-August 2017 and December 2017-January 2018 to analyze how state and non-state actors – such as residents, local cooperativas, and government employees – negotiate the social integration of Villa 31 in a context of increased state presence and capital being channeled toward building projects. This immersive approach to the study of the politics of integration uncovers how the state addresses the fundamental challenge of gaining *entry* to Villa 31 necessary for carrying out public policy, catalyzes *participation* with residents, and seeks to generate *compliance*. By charting change from the perspective of community residents, I bring decisions made by diverse actors into sharp relief, exposing the power dynamics within Villa 31 that underpin human agency. I analyze these issues primarily through the prism of the Programa de Mejoramiento de Vivienda (PMV), which promises upgrades to existing homes in Villa 31 that are carried out by local cooperatives. Social tensions between state and non-state actors center on residents pursuing access to resources and opportunities, on the one hand, and the preservation of their individual and collective autonomy in defining their urban space, on the other. I also show how attempts to carry out such upgrades in Villa 31 are shaped by a system of political representation (consisting of *delegados*, *referentes*, and *consejeros*) that was formalized in 2010, previous policies that provided access to material resources, the commercialization of the informal housing market, and a legacy of political patronage.

Introduction

“And I threw myself in front of the tractor,” recalls Atena, the president of a local construction cooperative.¹ When the government employed non-resident workers to carry out construction projects in the slum, she had to put these workers, and the government, in their place. A resident of the slum herself, Atena had told government officials they could employ outside companies on such projects only as long as residents, including her workers, were also given jobs. When she saw the privately contracted company in her area of the slum – “tuk-a-toon, tuk-a-toon, with its huge tractor” – she intercepted. Standing in front of the tractor, she threatened the workers, “You guys don’t know who you’re messing with, get out, get out, get out! Get out or I’ll call!” By call she meant that she would summon her followers to back her up, who she assures would have responded at once. To signal her resolve, she shouted again, demanding a meeting with the government to discuss the terms of their agreement. Sitting on an overturned paint bucket in the storeroom of her home, I listen as she recounts tense negotiations with high-ranking government officials. When she finishes her story, she tosses her hands into the air and asks, “What are my workers supposed to do? How are they supposed to eat?”

Over the last century, social development in Argentina has been punctuated by recurring economic and political crises. From the 1930s onward, shifts between market-led versus state-led development have unfolded within a context of populist swings, military coups, and financial catastrophes. In Buenos Aires, as with in other urbanizing areas in Latin America and the Global South, political instability, dependent economic growth, inequality, and migration have been linked to a growing phenomenon, namely, the establishment of *squatter* or *informal settlements* (in Argentina, these are sometimes referred to as *villa* [vee-shah] *miseria*, which translates to

¹ In interview with author on June 15, 2017.

“slum,” “shanty town” or “miserable villa”), wherein *informal* refers to “exceptions to the order of formal urbanization” (Roy 2005). One of the city’s oldest informal settlements, Villa 31, was first settled in the 1930s, near the port of Buenos Aires. State-led expulsions in the 1970s under the military dictatorship dramatically reduced the population of Villa 31.² Following Argentina’s return to democracy in 1983, squatters began reoccupying Villa 31.³ Defying the logic of property tacitly accepted in other parts of the city – one underpinned by a market-driven concept of ownership and protected by the law – they constructed makeshift dwellings out of wood and tin. Their collective behavior outside of institutional norms resulted in opportunities for survival, such as access to land as well as material and technical resources necessary for making changes to the built environment.

Today, Villa 31 is Buenos Aires’ most emblematic slum. Home to 43,290 people, it stretches across 32 hectares of federally-owned land paradoxically situated in Retiro, one of the city’s most affluent neighborhoods. With its well-kept early twentieth-century palaces, mid-century art deco buildings, and dressy pedestrian traffic, the face of Retiro that surrounds *Plaza San Martín* is a depiction of modern prosperity. Eight hundred meters northwest of the plaza, just before the city slumps into the *Rio de la Plata*, lies the heart of Villa 31. The southwestern entrance to Villa 31, which leads into its poorest sector, *San Martín*, is located a few steps from one of Buenos Aires’ most celebrated architectural achievements, the French-style *Estación Terminal Retiro del Ferrocarril Mitre* (Retiro Mitre Railway Station). For those entering the city center by car, Villa 31 provides a conspicuous introduction to the social challenges of the last century; *Autopista Ilia* (Highway Ilia) traverses through the villa, where residents move about two, three,

² By 1980, following expulsions under the military dictatorship, the population of Villa 31 had been reduced to 756, down from a high of 25,852 in 1979.

³ They reoccupied previously occupied land as well as occupied new land, leading to the expansion of Villa 31.

and four-story precarious housing structures, before veering onto *Avenida 9 de Julio*, where another beginning to the capital – one narrated instead by the nation’s important monuments – awaits.

Since Argentina’s return to democracy in 1983, residents of Villa 31 have relied on a system of informal agreements and survival tactics, making innovative advancements toward a better quality of life. Such progress includes the construction of homes out of concrete and brick, tapping into basic city services, such as electricity and cable, and improving access to water.⁴ Social activity has also led to local businesses, restaurants, and public spaces, such as soccer fields and parks, that are important to the local economy and culture of this community. To describe these changes, scholars have used the term “spatial capital,” which identifies residents’ capacity to give form to urban space (Di Virgilio). Evidence of spatial capital is observed not only in the dramatic growth of Villa 31 over the last few decades, but also in collective demands made by residents. Responding to these demands, policies over the last few decades have inched toward social and spatial *integration*⁵ or, improvements to the built environment and access to basic city services to promote development and inclusion. Such policies have unfolded within shifts between market-led and state-led development.⁶ By the 1990s, hyperinflation and recession led Carlos Menem, who had been elected on the Peronist ticket, to support the Washington Consensus,⁷ resulting in sweeping reforms toward free trade. When Néstor Kirchner won the presidency amid financial crisis in 2003, a new Peronist dynasty began, one that would span three consecutive

⁴ Residents have achieved, through political organization, access to better quality of water delivered in cisterns as well as, in some cases, been involved in carrying out improvements to infrastructure for running water.

⁵ The word used in Spanish to refer to this process (*urbanización*) would be directly translated as “urbanization.” To avoid confusion, I use “integration” throughout this essay, even when quoting respondents who used the term “urbanización/urbanizar” in interviews or participant observation.

⁶ Since the return to democracy, shifts between these ideologies does not always align with populist vs anti-populist sentiment. For example, President Macri has been called both populist and anti-populist, and he supports market-led development. His policies have also been attacked by those on the political left as neoliberal (see Cravino et al).

⁷ This is another example of a seeming mismatch between populism and market-led development.

presidential terms – including two held by his spouse, Kristina Fernández de Kirchner – and return a state-led project couched in protectionism. During the Kirchner administrations, the population of Villa 31 more than tripled. In 2008, *Ley 3.343* (Law 3.343) was passed, calling for the social, economic, and spatial integration of Villa 31 into the rest of the city. Yet, until recently, a lack of coordination between the national and city governments had left *Ley 3.343* largely unimplemented.

After the former *Jefe de Gobierno de CABA* (Chief of Government of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires), Mauricio Macri, won the presidential elections in 2015, the national and city governments came under the same political party.⁸ In April of 2016, the recently formed center-right government⁹ announced plans to implement new policies – in line with *Ley 3.343* – to promote social and spatial integration¹⁰ of Villa 31. The ambitious plan put forth by the *Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires* (CABA) includes *site interventions*, such as improvements to infrastructure, public spaces, and homes, as well as social programs designed to formalize economic activity and promote social development (Secretaría de Integración Social y Urbana 2016). Such improvements are being carried out by local construction cooperatives and construction companies contracted by the government. Under CABA, the *Secretaría de Integración Social y Urbana* (SECISYU) was created to implement these policies. Since 2016, SECISYU has emerged as an important actor in Villa 31. Working with residents to gain entry to urban space, government employees are charged with informing residents about policies slated to affect them and creating a nexus of participation, both of which are also used to gather information, calibrate, and implement policies. Long accustomed to living in precarious dwellings, informal

⁸ In fact, all three levels of government in Argentina – national, provincial, and city – came under the same party, the Propuesta Republicana (PRO). The Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires has its own government.

⁹ Macri took office in December 2015

¹⁰ *Social integration* refers to the social inclusion of this community into the rest of the city (or, de-marginalization). *Spatial integration* refers to the inclusion of the urban built environment of this community into the rest of the city through upgrades to the built environment, such as improvements to housing, infrastructure, and parks.

tenancy on the land, and with lack of access to basic services, these policies present an opportunity for residents to improve their quality of life.

Yet, seen as threats to the status quo, these policies are also highly contested by the local population of Villa 31. Despite their challenges, existing homes, businesses, and infrastructure are products of the economic and political arrangements that have made them possible. These arrangements have created winners and losers who vie for opportunities to improve their quality of life. Since the early to mid-2000s,¹³ policies that simultaneously channel resources toward infrastructural improvements¹⁴ and create employment opportunities for local residents¹⁵ that work with maintenance and construction cooperatives in Villa 31 have helped some local political actors solidify their power within this community. Given the local political economy of carrying out improvements to the built environment, current integration policies lead to social tensions because they present important changes for residents of Villa 31, not only because they involve construction companies from outside carrying out improvements in a community long guarded by local actors, but also because they draw construction cooperatives from Villa 31 into new building projects geared toward mitigating precarious living conditions. Moreover, these policies present an opportunity for local actors to compete over the benefits of integration because they entail an increase in material and technical resources being channeled into Villa 31. Thus, recent integration policies provide an opportunity to study how local politics in informal settings shape residents' responses to changes within their community.

Part of the government's current integration project, the *Programa de Mejoramiento de Vivenda* (PMV, Program of Improvements of Homes) was created in 2016 to mitigate precarious

¹³ Particularly since Argentina's sovereign debt and economic crisis of 2001.

¹⁴ Such as improvements to streets, drainage systems, and sewage lines.

¹⁵ Such as working with construction cooperatives on infrastructural improvements or by working with cooperatives on waste recollection and maintenance of public spaces.

living conditions by providing upgrades to existing homes in Villa 31. The PMV is a significant policy development because it stands to benefit residents living in homes slated for improvements as well as presidents of local construction cooperatives and their workers, who have been contracted by the government to carry out the upgrades. The PMV provides incentives to construction cooperatives, who were not previously engaged in carrying out improvements to existing homes. Since its rollout in 2016, the PMV has helped the government carve out its presence within Villa 31. While some residents feel that it has improved their quality of life, it has also led to increased tension as local leaders move to capture resources and redistribute benefits among their followers. Tension has also arisen out of these construction cooperatives carrying out upgrades to existing homes in Villa 31 because many of them have limited or no experience in home construction.

Few works analyze the local politics *within* Villa 31. Rather, most arguments pit actors in this community against the state to describe collective action and policy outcomes. This paper seeks to address this gap by focusing on the local politics of integration policies in Villa 31 through the prism of the PMV. Put another way, the primary research question that this study seeks to answer is, How do state and nonstate actors negotiate the integration of Villa 31 within the context of increasing state presence and resources being channeled toward upgrades to the built environment inside this community? Drawing on more than three months of ethnographic field research carried out during the summer and winter of 2017, I analyze government *entry* into this community, *participation* between local actors and government employees, and *compliance* on the part of residents, uncovering the perspective of construction cooperatives carrying out upgrades as well as residents living in homes slated for improvement. I also draw on ethnographic research to chart interactions in this community from the perspective of government employees.

An ethnographic study of how state and nonstate actors negotiate the social integration of Villa 31 is essential for several reasons. First, it allows the researcher to observe how the State interacts with residents to gain *entry* to Villa 31 necessary for carrying out public policy. Second, it provides an opportunity to interrogate *participation* as a function of decision-making by state and nonstate actors. Third, this study seeks to uncover how and why residents are motivated toward *compliance* (or resistance) because of state intervention and the policies being carried out. Fourth, studying change from the perspective of this community can expose how residents stand to benefit from or become marginalized by public policy. Finally, because politics produces change to the built environment, a study of the integration of Villa 31 should not be divorced from it – that is, this study also presents an opportunity to interrogate how changes to the built environment influence the behavior of those actors who inhabit it.

This study illuminates urban politics in Latin American cities for several reasons. First, given its history and central location in Buenos Aires, Villa 31 is emblematic of structural economic and institutional factors that have led to the growth of informal settlements, not only in Argentina, but throughout the region. Second, a study of the politics of integration, including those related to implementation of the PMV, can help us better understand similar programs underwritten by multilateral development banks (MDBs) elsewhere in the region and in the Global South. Finally, this study seeks to contribute to a growing body of knowledge about informality and integration, which are global phenomena.

My analysis focuses primarily on the PMV and the interactions between government employees, local cooperatives made up of residents, and those living in homes targeted for improvements. Drawing on participant observation and semi-structured interviews from May through August of 2017 and a two-week follow up trip made to Buenos Aires in December of

2017, I chart interactions among these actors surrounding improvements made to the built environment under the PMV, as they unfold. Where relevant for analysis, I also include other sites involving the actors under study, such as public parks, streets, government offices, and the periphery of Villa 31.

At the time of writing this essay, the government has been engaged in the forced removal of residents living on blocks of the villa where a new highway is supposed to be built (Koutsovitis 2018). The new highway is supposed to replace *Autopista Ilia*, which currently cuts through the center of Villa 31. The goal of the government from the onset of the integration project was to relocate residents that fall within the proposed path of the new highway – as well as those that live beneath *Autopista Ilia* – to newly constructed homes, build a new highway that does not cut directly through the center of the villa, and convert the old highway into a park. While this aspect of the integration project was not initially the focus of this essay, it is now essential to address it, not only because it represents a bargaining failure related to housing in Villa 31, but also because it presents an opportunity to compare compliance between those who have been offered housing improvements under the PMV and those who the government seeks to relocate. To analyze these recent events, I draw on interviews and participant observation that I carried out with some of these residents that have been involved in talks with the government over relocation. Following the sections on *entry* and *participation* in the findings sections of this essay – that mainly focus on the PMV – the *compliance* section introduces data related to those that live beneath the existing highway and in the path of the proposed highway. In the *conclusion*, I reflect on these recent developments within the broader context of the PMV, housing, integration policies, and the norms of this community.

Making improvements to the built environment in Villa 31 is inherently political because effecting or resisting change in contested space requires power. As residents move to capture resources necessary for improving their quality of life, they simultaneously seek to preserve their individual and collective autonomy in defining urban space. Meanwhile, as state actors interact with residents with the goal of bringing state institutions into Villa 31, the foothold they gain – couched in resources enticing to some local actors – stands to transform a longstanding way of life. If political instability, economic crises, and migration created the preconditions for urban informality, collective action stemming from informal settlements bring the ebb and flow to public policies crucial to the livelihoods of their residents. Politicized as a means of survival, local actors have the power to shape policies carried out in Villa 31 and determine the distribution of resources and opportunities across their community.

Literature Review

Prior to the 1970s, the dominant thinking about urban poverty in the developing world was underpinned by assumptions about a “culture of poverty” and “marginality” (AlSayyad 2004). These theories were rooted in ethnographic work carried out by Oscar Lewis in Puerto Rico and Mexico in the 1950s (Bayat 2004). Beginning in the 1970s in Latin America, sociologists, political scientists, and anthropologists, such as Janice Perlman with her groundbreaking ethnography on the favelas of Rio de Janeiro (1976), began to make important headway in debunking these relatively facile theories (AlSayyad 2004). These scholars studied “informal housing and land markets” and situated “informality firmly within the larger politics of populist mobilizations, state power, and economic dependency” (AlSayyad 2004). Following the repression of the military dictatorship in Argentina in the 1980s, Oscar Oszlak published work that identified a constant battle between different sectors of society over a “right to urban space” (Oszlak 1985). This

struggle, he theorized, centered on “social and economic opportunities associated with the localization [spatial restriction of social and economic opportunities] of housing or commerce” that set off a process of “sub-urbanization” [not to be confused with “suburban”] or, urban development marked by unequal access to resources and opportunities compared to urbanized areas of the city (Oszlak 1985).

Scholarly debates over integration and housing policies contributed to this literature. In his seminal book, *Housing By People* (1976), John F. C. Turner called for a self-help approach to housing in poor communities. While carrying out field research on housing in Peru in the 1960s and 1970s, Turner observed how the poor made shrewd decisions that improved their living situation. This led him to argue for “development from below” (Werlin 1999), wherein the government’s role would be reduced to ensuring “equitable access to resources which local communities and people cannot provide for themselves” (Turner 1976). Part of the zeitgeist of the 1960s and 1970s, Turner’s work, alongside the work of his contemporaries, such as Charles Abrams (1966) and William Mangin (1967), propelled integration policies spearheaded by the World Bank toward reducing the role of local governments in housing policy (Lindert 2016). Since then, scholarly debates on housing informality and integration policies in the developing world, and particularly in Latin America, have emerged against a backdrop of military regimes, populist backlash, democratization, economic crises, and urban growth. These broader trends have pushed scholarly literature and policies toward a “holistic, pluralist approach,” urban development centered on “participation of inhabitants,” and “cooperation between public, civic, and private sectors” (Lindert 2016).

In a rapidly urbanizing¹⁶ world, the causes of informality and approaches to housing policy have drawn considerable attention in academia. Scholars have become attuned to different types and degrees of informality based on country-specific factors, such as levels of development, governing regimes, and policy approaches (see Maria Mercedes Di Virgilio 2015). In this vein, much of the current literature on housing informality in Latin America, and particularly in Argentina, tends to focus on the institutional context leading to urban informality as well as critiques of housing policies (see Cravino (2016) and Brikman (2016)). This work builds on the assumption that informality is rooted in the absence of the state and institutional processes, or “defining the informal not by what is, but rather by what it is not” (Clichevksy 2009). Such a framing focuses on a “lack of property titles or rental agreements” and a “breach of the rules, subdivision, use, occupation, and construction of the city, as well as the environmental requirements for the location of urban issues” (Clichevksy 2009).

Perhaps it is because of these theoretical assumptions that considerably less attention has been devoted to studying how local politics *inside* informal communities affect the way that housing policies are carried out. To be clear, this is not to say that considerable work has not been devoted to the study of collective action and its policy consequences. Collective action has been a key focal point in literature that addresses how poor communities gain access to land and resources necessary to improve their quality of life (see Cravino (2009)) as well as studies that locate collective uprisings as key policy impetuses (see Di Virgilio et al (2016)). Nor is it to say that ethnographic studies on the implementation of housing policy have not been carried out. In her qualitative study on *El Programa de Mejoramiento de Vividena* in Colombia, Martha Inés Sierra Moncada (2006) employs ethnographic methods to trace the policy process and make

¹⁶ Urbanization here refers to growth of cities and their populations.

recommendations on how such policies can be improved. In Argentina, studies have focused on both federal and city-government housing programs, particularly those carried out under the national Kirchner governments from 2003 to 2015 and the Macri government of the City of Buenos Aires from 2007 to 2015 (see Cravino (2009 and 2016) and Brikman (2016)). However, there is scant literature that focuses on the local politics and political economy of integration policies from the perspective of the community that such policies most affect.

To address this gap, my study builds on this literature, particularly scholarly works that have advanced our understanding of local politics in informal urban settings. Asef Bayat's concept of "quiet encroachment" is a useful starting point because it assumes that those living in informality, "squatters," seek to achieve two goals, "redistribution of social goods and opportunities" and "attaining autonomy, both cultural and political, from the regulations, institutions, and discipline imposed by the state and by modern institutions" (2004).¹⁷ This framing emphasizes a central tension that motivates political behavior of actors endogenous to this community. Given the Argentine context of this study, Javier Auyero's influential book, *Poor People's Politics* (2001), provides an essential slant to political behavior of my research subjects because it shows how a legacy of clientelist networks has led to the politicization of actors in informal settings as they exchange favors. What remains to be seen is how actors in Villa 31 behave within the context of increased resources being channeled toward their community through recent integration policies.

I also build on the concept of "spatial capital" used by scholars to describe changes to the built environment in informal settings. Typically, spatial capital identifies the "capacity of the

¹⁷ While Bayat's concept "quiet encroachment" – which he developed while studying informality in the Middle East – describes *individual* autonomy, his framework, as applied in this essay, refers to both *individual* and *collective* autonomy. This distinction is particularly important given the democratic context of Argentina.

population to give form to urban space” (Virgilio 2016) that is won by gaining access to necessary resources through collective demand-making. What has scarcely been explored is how local politics determine how access to such resources is distributed across an informal community. Indeed, the very concept of spatial capital implies not only distribution of resources to this community vis-à-vis formal sectors of society, but also the distribution of resources across the community itself, creating space for political contention as actors move to capture these resources.

If accumulated spatial capital is evidenced in a population’s ability to give form to urban space in informal settings, it has also led to the commercialization of the informal housing market in Villa 31. In her master’s thesis in urban economy at *Universidad Torcuato Di Tella*, Raquel Kismer uncovered the growth of the informal housing market in Villa 31. Through interviews with local actors inside Villa 31, Kismer learned that “construction projects” had been carried out by residents with the express purpose of “obtaining rents” (2009). This commercialization of the housing market, she concluded, would complicate attempts to carry out policies geared toward regularizing and improving living conditions due to the “interests of homeowners” and their “possible actions toward preventing a change to the status quo” (Kismer 2009). Following these hypotheses, lingering questions deal with how the commercialization of the informal housing market in Villa 31 affects current integration policies as residents vie for access to resources while also moving to safeguard investments they have made in the built environment.

I also draw on literature that has made important contributions to our understanding of how construction cooperatives, a central actor in this study, function. María Cristina Cravino and Valeria Mutuberría Lazarini’s ethnographic research on the growth of construction cooperatives,¹⁸ particularly under the Kirchner regimes, sheds light on their administration, organizational

¹⁸ Their study cited here does *not* include cooperatives in Villa 31.

autonomy, and institutionalization through federal housing programs (2012). They conclude that lasting challenges center on “access to resources and a lack of technical capacity” needed to build homes from the ground up (2012). More recently, Lazarini has argued that the growth of social organizations making collective demands, on the one hand, and the “implementation of policies buttressed by social economy and collective work,” on the other, has led to the overlapping of “work spaces” with “political spaces” (2016). With respect to local cooperatives inside Villa 31, questions remain about how they cope with carrying out *improvements* to *existing* homes given that they lack experience in such construction projects. If carrying out improvements under the PMV entails an increase in administrative, technical, and material resources provided by the state, it also provides an opportunity to study how local politics inside Villa 31 affect such policies, particularly because they involve working with cooperatives, government employees, and residents living in homes slated for improvements.

Finally, while less ambitious, my study aims to pick up the torch where Danilo Rossi left off with his undergraduate thesis on housing in Villa 31 (2017). While studying anthropology at *Universidad de Buenos Aires* (UBA), Rossi spent three years carrying out ethnographic research on the local politics of infrastructural improvements involving construction cooperatives in Villa 31. He concluded that the local system of political representation that was established in 2010 as well as a “game of favors or coordination” between cooperatives and the city government not only contribute to a fraught political culture as cooperatives seek to maximize their influence over the local population, but also help determine how resources are distributed to cooperatives that carry out such improvements (Rossi 2017). These conclusions lead to questions about whether and how local political actors have shaped recent integration policies. In the context section of this paper, I

draw on Rossi's, other scholars', and my own ethnographic research to expound on the system of cooperatives and political representation in Villa 31.

Overall, scholarship on informality in the developing world leaves unaddressed important questions for ethnographers concerned with the local politics of urban integration. These questions center on the political economy of construction cooperatives that have been drawn into the policy process by multi-lateral development banks, local governments, and their own agency. The recent increase in resources channeled toward integration policies in Villa 31 provides an opportunity to study how residents in this informal setting respond to these policies. To chart policy implementation while it is underway, this paper focuses on government *entry* into this community, *participation* between local actors and government employees, and *compliance* on the part of residents. By analyzing entry, participation, and compliance from the perspective of this community, this paper seeks to uncover informality for what it *is* rather than what it is not.

Methodology and Research Design

After arriving at the street market in front of Villa 31, I navigated toward a wall near vendors selling secondhand clothes, where I waited for someone sent by María to fetch me. With my back against the wall, I scoured the crowd before glancing downward. I peeked through the opening of my jacket at the interior pocket that held my phone. Still no response to the text I had sent María thirty minutes ago before boarding the train. María, one of my key interlocutors, is an elected *referente* and president of one of the cooperatives carrying out improvements to existing homes and public spaces in Villa 31. She moved to Villa 31 in 2005 from Jujuy, a province in the north of Argentina. With an even voice and square stature, she moves through Villa 31 with the confidence of someone who knows that it would take a force greater than their years of experience to topple them. I had met María a few days prior – still early on in my project – while walking

through the villa with a government employee. After initially mistaking me for a new employee working with the Secretaría de Integración Social y Urbana (SECISYU), María was quick to tell me that I needed to hear the perspective of the *vecinos* (residents) – not just the government’s – regarding the implementation of public policies geared toward the integration of Villa 31. I obtained her cellphone number, and, via text, we arranged to meet a few days later. She advised me that, due to the risk of being robbed or injured by walking through the villa unaccompanied, I should text her when I was on my way and then wait at the entrance located near the bus terminal, where she would have someone meet me to escort me inside.

Leaning against the wall, I observed the economic commotion. Vendors selling local fare, clothes, and electronics, among other items, flanked both sides of the street that led into Güemes, one of the villa’s oldest sectors. A man selling *churipan*, a popular Argentine snack made of sausage pressed between two halves of a roll, briefly stepped away from his cart to wait on a passing bus driver who had stopped on his way out of the terminal to make what appeared to be routine purchase. Ten or fifteen minutes passed, with no signs yet of someone looking for a white stranger in a green jacket. While the wall seemed to provide a buffer for possible danger coming from behind, there was plenty of time to become acutely aware of my vulnerability. Watching me, a woman added a sweater to a pile of clothes she was selling before approaching me to ask why I was there and warn me not to enter alone. Others that passed looked at me long enough for me to realize that my appearance immediately gave me away as an outsider.

Over the course of three months, waiting by the wall at the entrance to Villa 31 for someone sent by María became a ritual. While I had initially hoped that this tedium would give way to my traversing Villa 31 alone, María and my other interlocutors insisted that they needed to look after

me.¹⁹ As it turns out, waiting and moving through the villa with different actors became part of important data that contributed to conclusions I made about local politics inside Villa 31. Not only did these experiences allow me to witness firsthand the challenges to entry, they provided an opportunity to observe and participate in interactions between and among this community and government actors. By oscillating between these different perspectives, I experienced local power dynamics at play. For example, when residents go out of their way to greet the president of a cooperative who happens to be walking by, it suggests that they respect her. Or when government employees make nervous jokes about how she has kept them in line throughout the project, it may suggest that smoothing relations with this powerful local actor is a key part of their job. Finally, waiting for María helped me empathize with her followers and employees, that is, those who wait and hope that her decisions, made on an uncertain path to opportunity, will ease their vulnerability, if not help them make progress toward their goals.

¹⁹ One might argue that my interlocutors, including residents and government employees, were motivated by an opportunity to control the direction of my research, rather than protecting me from crime. Over the course of my fieldwork, I came to the conclusion that this notion would be misguided for several reasons. First, while presidents of cooperatives undoubtedly benefited from moving through the villa with a visible outsider from the United States (as many people throughout my study pointed out, being seen with me was a boost to their reputation and influence), they remained open to me talking to different actors, including those who presented possible threats. For example, they regularly delivered me to the offices of government actors. They also allowed me to interact with their employees and ask questions, often without monitoring my discussions with these actors. Moreover, I was transparent from the onset that I needed to conduct interviews with their employees and other actors without their oversight or presence to help ensure that people were comfortable being open with me (of course, my respondents sometimes demonstrated reticence about sharing their opinions about these powerful local actors, despite them not being present at the interview, which was a testament to the power of these local political actors). Presidents of cooperatives were also incredibly busy. They seemed more occupied with ensuring the progression of their own work under the PMV and related projects versus monitoring or controlling the direction of my research. Finally, it's not uncommon for tourists to stumble into Villa 31 accidentally. On these occasions, I observed how local political actors behaved similarly with them as they did with me, ushering them or sending one of their followers to usher them safely out of the villa. My overwhelming feeling with María by the end of my research is that she wanted to look after me to make sure I was not harmed as well as foster a relationship with me because it was intriguing to her that she could engage with an odd researcher from the United States. On the other hand, with government employees, it's important to underscore that the majority of my interactions were with employees, rather than higher-ranking officials. These employees invited me to critique government activity. They shared sentiments with me that clearly went against the dominant philosophy of government activity in Villa 31. They warned me regularly about security risks and shared their own stories about being robbed. But they did not try to control the direction of my study, rather, they encouraged me to move around freely and uncover the inner workings of the integration project – to shed light on it so it could be improved.

By sharing firsthand experiences with the people they study, ethnographers seek to understand the perspective of their subjects. This kind of research is useful to a study of politics because it elucidates how structures of power influence behavior and decisions. As political scientist Edward Schatz argues, “person-to-person contact attuned to the worldview of the people we study is invaluable for a science of politics” (Schatz). Immersion, he assures, contributes “detailed evidence, theoretical vibrancy, knowledge production, and a normative grounding” (Schatz). From a methodological perspective, such detailed evidence may be gathered through participant observation and structured or semi-structured interviews. But what also emerges from immersion are “informants’ spoken and unspoken thoughts and feelings which they do not always articulate in their stories or interview responses” (Fuji, 2009). This kind of data, which Lee Ann Fujii terms “metadata,” may be uncovered in the conduct, language, and events – including the waiting – that ethnographers document in the field. In short, if within the social sciences we study humans and their relationships, ethnographic methods collapse the distance between researchers and their subject of inquiry.

With respect to Villa 31, an ethnographic study of how state and nonstate actors negotiate upgrades to existing homes as part of the *Programa de Mejoramiento de Vivienda* (PMV) is essential for several reasons. First, by immersing oneself in the local social context of Villa 31, the researcher can observe how the State interacts with residents to address the fundamental challenge of gaining *entry* to Villa 31 necessary for carrying out public policy in informal settings. Residents’ control over the urban fabric of Villa 31 is directly related to the spatial capital they have accumulated over time, which I argue influences the decisions made by government employees. Thus second, this study presents an opportunity to interrogate *participation* as a function of decision-making by state and nonstate actors. On the one hand, participation may improve the

quality of residents' lives by providing them with access to resources and opportunities, while on the other, it may take on a tyrannical hue as state action erodes a culture of autonomous individual and collective decision-making in defining urban space. Related to both of these is the issue of *compliance*, which when studied from the perspective of those living and working in Villa 31 can lead to a better understanding of how residents in these types of settings are either motivated to comply (or not comply) by state intervention and the policies being carried out.

Fourth, an *in-situ* approach to the study of the politics of social integration in Villa 31 also promises to peer into the lives of those most affected by policies slated to include them. Perhaps too often, a monochromatic view of those living in precarious conditions produces a flat account of the protagonists of change, shortchanging explanations of the social nuance that underpins human agency. Charting change from the perspective of those under study brings decisions made by diverse actors into sharp relief, revealing how they respond strategically to the increased flow of capital into building projects in their neighborhood. This approach thus allows for a deeper understanding of social stratification and empowerment from the perspective of this community, whereby agents of change endogenous to Villa 31 emerge not only vis-à-vis the power of government actors, but also each other. This mode of analysis is particularly useful for uncovering how some stand to benefit from site interventions, while others are further marginalized. Fifth, because politics produces change to the built environment, a study of the social integration of Villa 31 should not be divorced from it – that is, this study also presents an opportunity to interrogate how changes to the built environment influence the behavior of those actors who inhabit it. Finally, this analysis of the process of access, participation, and compliance within the social and spatial contours of Villa 31 will contribute to our understanding of how recent policies oriented toward

economic and social development – marked by increasing state presence and resources channeled toward building projects – have unfolded on the ground.

To address these research concerns, this study draws on fourteen weeks of field research carried out in Buenos Aires during the summer of 2017 and the winter of 2017-2018. From May through August 2017 and from December 2017 to January 2018, I spent a total of 50 days in Villa 31, during which time I conducted 42 semi-structured interviews²⁰ and engaged in participant observation. Of the 42 interviews, 24 are with residents, 10 are with government employees, and 8 are with other actors, such as NGO's, local academics, a police chief, and architects not employed by the government. Of the 24 interviews with residents, 3 are with presidents of local cooperatives, 7 are with locally elected representatives in Villa 31, 3 are with residents living in recently improved homes,²¹ and 2 are with construction workers from the local cooperatives. I also carried out brief interviews with numerous actors I met, such as residents and government employees, while engaged in participant observation. Much of this data – including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and brief interviews – was collected in and around activities occurring in Galpón 1, the block in the sector of Playón where the PMV was first rolled out. However, daily interactions with residents and government employees also regularly drew me into experiences across other sectors of Villa 31.

Participant observation put me at the center of daily life in and around Villa 31. I regularly traversed the area – always accompanied – on foot, by motorcycle, or in a gas-powered cart used to transport materials. I met with my key interlocutors to observe their daily activities, both related and unrelated to the integration project. I attended meetings between the government and residents, ate lunch in residents' homes, and spent time in the government's offices, located both inside and

²⁰ I recorded all but four interviews.

²¹ Two are carried out with couples, one is carried out with an individual.

in front of Villa 31. I also participated in workshops that provide educational opportunities to youth in Villa 31, helped with political campaigns that my interlocutors were involved in,²² and met with government employees outside of Villa 31, in their homes, and at local bars in Buenos Aires.

Together, these types of data amount to roughly 50 hours of audio recordings, 230 pages of typed field notes, 100 pages of handwritten field notes, 900 personally-taken photos, and 3 personally-taken videos. While in the field, I also collected fliers and marketing materials related to government policy and political campaigns. During interviews with government employees, I collected maps drawn by residents, flow charts designed by government employees, and gained access to a host of other rich data – located in the government’s Google Drives – related to the implementation of the PMV from 2015 to the present. Finally, during an interview with an architect that works with a local cooperative, I downloaded data, such as photos, plans, and documents, related to his work with the cooperative from 2011 through 2015. Reaching beyond data collected through ethnographic methods, I also built an archive of academic papers, books, advocacy papers, policy documents, legislation, and theory that I have drawn on to inform and buttresses my work in the field.

Beyond the field, my process borrows heavily from the methodology that Carl Auerbach and Louise B. Silverstein lay out in *Qualitative Data: An Introduction to Coding and Analysis* (2003). Auerbach and Silverstein suggest that the researcher code their data in a nonlinear process that advances and moves between distinct categories of text, including Raw Text, Relevant Text, Repeating Ideas, Themes, Theoretical Constructs, and Theoretical Narrative. Working within these categories, the researcher addresses their research concerns, or “what you want to learn about the

²² On June 16, 2017 I attended a campaign meeting for the political party that María’s cooperative is associated with. While there, I helped prepare campaign mail. On July 13, 2017, I painted a wall with the name of a candidate for the political party associated with María’s cooperative when members of the cooperative – worried that their writing would not be legible – asked me to.

study and why” (2003, 44). Beginning with audio recordings and transcriptions of these recordings performed by a transcription service in Mexico, I selected relevant text. Then I coded repeating ideas across all relevant text. These ideas were then grouped into themes or, “an implicit topic that organizes a group of repeating ideas.” Next, I organized these themes into “larger, more abstract ideas” called theoretical constructs. Finally, to build theoretical narratives, I situated my participants’ “own words” within the theoretical constructs. The theoretical narrative is the “culminating step that provides the bridge between the researcher’s concerns and the participants’ subjective experience” (2003, 40).

Both in and out of the field, I faced overarching limitations and tradeoffs. In the field, these related to language and gaining access to the local population. While I had prepared extensively through coursework in Spanish, both at Yale and in Buenos Aires leading up to my project, Spanish is not my native language. Thus, while I could engage fluently with my subjects, there were undoubtedly small gaps in my initial absorption of the local context. I tried to fill these gaps by gathering other sensory data, for example, by paying closer attention to tone and body language than I might have otherwise. As I spent more time with my subjects, I became more accustomed to the local vernacular and ways in which people in this community communicate. I also mitigated these challenges by explicitly following up with my subjects where glitches in communication seemed to hinder conclusions. Thus, this barrier has an important tradeoff worth mentioning, namely, that those unfamiliar with a given local context, including its language, bring a fresh lens to perception and analysis. Finally, I obtained verbal consent to record meetings and interviews, which contributed to a finer-grained approach when working with my data outside of the field.²⁵

²⁵ Title of approved IRB protocol is “Urbanization of Villa 31,” ID number 2000021030

Reliable access to the local population also proved to be an ongoing limitation. Those living in Villa 31 must often deal with unexpected challenges stemming from their precarious living situations. For example, if it rained my interviews were often cancelled because inclement weather provides an opportune setting for robberies and other crimes. I learned this only after waiting for interlocutors who, locked up in their homes, did not arrive to meet me at the front of the villa. While these frustrations contributed to metadata, they also curtailed other field experiences, such as interviews or participant observation, that I could have otherwise engaged in.

Outside of the field, primary limitations related to language, transcription, and translation. Some ethnographers prefer to transcribe their own interviews, which arguably provides an opportunity to become more intimate with one's data. In my case, I chose to rely on transcription services so that I would have time to code, analyze, and write my senior essay within the span of two semesters, during which time I also had to keep up with other coursework. I contracted a company in Mexico to carry out the transcription of all interviews and meetings, which were completed in Spanish. I used these transcripts, produced in the original language in which data was collected, throughout my analysis. While writing up my findings, I translated quotes that are included in this essay into English, working carefully to preserve the original meaning of my respondents' words. Meaning was derived not only from the original Spanish text included in the transcript, but also from audio recordings including tone, my field notes, and photos that I took. I reviewed these other data throughout analysis and during translation so that the experiences underpinning the text in the transcript would come alive again, in turn, contributing to a richer translation of this data. Finally, I consulted with a bilingual Argentine where doubts as to the meaning of the words used, within their proper context, persisted.

* * *

What can we learn from an ethnography of the local politics of the integration of Villa 31? What is its relevance beyond this community? To begin with, policies toward Villa 31 are deeply embedded within the Argentine social and political consciousness. Not only is Villa 31 one of Buenos Aires' oldest informal settlements, it is also one of its fastest growing and most visible given its central location in the city. Second, a study of the PMV in Villa 31 is relevant to similar programs carried out in the region and in the Global South. As policies underwritten by multilateral development banks (MDBs) continue to move toward local government involvement and community participation, scholarly ethnographic research can provide an essential counterweight, as well as contribute to, dominant policy narratives. Finally, studies like this one, while localized, grow out of a global challenge to address housing informality, particularly in developing countries. Thus, whether taking a site-specific ecological approach or conducting broader comparative studies, building on existing ethnographic research in Villa 31 helps address mounting challenges stemming from urbanization across the globe.

Context

Background

By the first quarter of the twentieth century, Argentina had emerged as one of the wealthiest nations in the world.²⁷ Decades of exporting agricultural goods to industrialized nations, foreign direct investment from western-European countries, and immigration from southern Europe had brought much-needed capital and labor to the growing nation (Smith 2005). From the 1860s to 1914, economic expansion – based on the “exportation of meat and grain and on the importation of manufactured goods” – contributed to an annual GDP of ~5 percent, “one of the highest sustained growth rates ever recorded for any country” (Smith 2005, 73). At the national level, this

²⁷ Argentina was among the top ten wealthiest nations.

remarkable growth was undergirded by a propitious marriage. Fertile lands in the pampas provided resources necessary for production and survival, while Buenos Aires, by now an urban center accelerating toward industrialization, was a generative force that brought people, seeking economic and social opportunity, into contact with one another. Between 1869 and 1914, the country's population had gone from 1.7 million to 7.9 million (Smith 2005). In Buenos Aires, the population had climbed from 661,205 in 1895 to over 1.5 million by 1914,²⁸ with "manual workers" accounting for "nearly 60 percent of the population... in the early twentieth century" (Smith 2005, 76). Yet, over the course of the next hundred years, Argentina would fail to uphold the kind of economic prosperity that the young nation had enjoyed. Given to dependency, its economy proved volatile and unstable, becoming "a target for economic nationalists" and contributing to asymmetric growth among the country's regions (Smith 2005). On the political spectrum, economic growth and urbanization led to organized labor, whose agitation challenged the interests of conservatives. The incorporation of the masses – men in 1914 and women in 1947 – would become one of the costliest political projects in the nation's history, giving rise to the Peronist movement and conservative counter movements that have repeatedly put pressure on state institutions, to the point of collapse. If foreign trade and capital had been essential to the growth of a modern Argentine civilization, the next hundred years proved that the state-building project, locked into populist swings that spanned the political spectrum, would be undermined by the social processes they had induced.

The rest of the twentieth century brought recurring economic and institutional crises. As with elsewhere in Latin America, the Great Depression laid bare the disastrous shortcomings of the export-import model for economic growth. With their less-developed manufacturing sectors,

²⁸ Estimates provided by demographia.com

commodities-exporting countries were especially vulnerable to shocks elsewhere in the system. The subsequent model for development, which began in the 1930s and took off from the 1950s, was based on Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) that promoted protectionist trade policies. These policies proved financially unsustainable, not only because they “led to a greater consumption of resources than savings generated by the economy permitted” (Kingstone 2011, 20), but also because the price of commodities relative to manufactured goods tends to decline over time.²⁹ The 1976 swing of the pendulum was set in motion by the military *junta* that overthrew Isabel Perón and led to the disappearance of people³⁰ at the hands of military and security forces. By 1983, financial crisis, a failed war with Great Britain, and lingering popular demands on the whereabouts of those who had been tortured by the state had eroded the legitimacy of the dictatorship.³¹ On October 26, 1983, demonstrators at the final campaign rally for Raúl Alfonsín – the front runner for the centrist social-liberal party, *Unión Cívica Radical* (UCR) – flooded the world’s widest avenue, *Avenida 9 de Julio*, named after the Argentine day of Independence. Resounding through the streets of the capital, their demands signified the collective power that had been roused across the political spectrum, one that would usher Argentina’s return to democracy. Four days later, more than 85 percent of the Argentine electorate returned results that were indicative of a nation ever split over its conflicting ideologies. Alfonsín had won 51.75 percent of the popular vote while his competitor, Ítalo Lúder with the *Partido Justicialista* (aka Peronist Party), had lost with 40.16 percent. Political instability, along with dependent economic growth, inequality, and migration driven by uneven economic and social development across the nation

²⁹ See Raúl Prebisch et al for discussions on dependency theory.

³⁰ Conflicting estimates, which remain a highly politicized and contentious topic for many Argentines, range from 9,000 to 30,000.

³¹ Following Juan Perón’s death in 1974, chaos ensued, that his wife, Isabel Perón, could not control. With a stagnating economy and the “urban guerilla warfare” movement of the Montoneros, which Richard Gillespie calls a “radical nationalist movement” in his seminal book *Soldiers of Perón* (1982), the military was perceived by some, primarily in the middle and upper classes, as a last hope for imposing order.

and the region has, since the 1930s, been linked to a growing phenomenon, namely, the establishment of *squatter* or *informal settlements* (sometimes referred to as *villa* [vee-shah] *miseria*, which translates to “slum,” “shanty town” or “miserable villa”), wherein *informal* refers to “exceptions to the order of formal urbanization” (Roy 2005).

Near the Port of Buenos Aires, the return to democracy set off a remarkable process. Squatters, some of whom had been forcefully removed by the state under the military dictatorship, began to reoccupy an informal settlement known as Villa 31,³² which had initially been settled by immigrants in the 1930s, during the early era of ISI.³³ Joining the few residents on these lands that had withstood state-led expulsions in 1979,³⁴ they defied the logic of property tacitly accepted in other parts of the city, one underpinned by a market-driven concept of ownership and protected by the law. As they constructed makeshift dwellings out of wood and tin, their collective behavior outside of institutional norms resulted in opportunities for survival, such as access to land as well as material and technical resources necessary for making changes to the built environment. If the revival of democracy had checked the coercive power of the state and returned to the people their right to organize, carving out access to land within proximity to one another unleashed the power of collective demand-making over the right to space.

Location, Spatial Characteristics, and Demographics

Villa 31³⁵ is situated in the affluent neighborhood of Retiro, which is in Commune 1 of the *Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires* (CABA). Encompassing 32 hectares of land, the settlement is

³² Commonly referred to as just Villa 31, the territory is made up of two informal settlements that abut each other, namely, Villa 31 and Villa 31 Bis.

³³ While process also occurred in the southern part of Buenos Aires as well as elsewhere in Argentina, these other settlements are not the subject of this essay.

³⁴ By 1980, the population of Villa 31 had been reduced to 756, down from a high of 25,852 in 1979.

³⁵ The colloquial term, Villa 31, is used to refer to two areas or, informal settlements, called Villa 31 and Villa 31 Bis. For a more detailed discussion on the types of informal settlements that have been identified in Argentina see Cravino. Naming of the settlement is a complex and tense issue. It has acquired distinct names, each with unique meanings, throughout its history. Villa 31 is one informal settlement and Villa 31 Bis is another, more recently settled, informal

divided into 10 sectors consisting of 74 *manzanas* (blocks). Its central location in the city and proximity to transportation networks, such as the *Estación Retiro/Ferrocarril Mitre* (Train Station of Retiro) and the *Terminal de Ómnibus de Retiro* (Bus Terminal of Retiro), provide a source of opportunity for economic growth. This central location notwithstanding, Villa 31 remains socially and spatially marginalized. Not only does this community suffer frequent stigmatization in the media³⁶ and discrimination by some in other parts of the city,³⁷ poor transportation networks between the city and this community, as well as inadequate and narrow streets within, limit mobility and integration with the surrounding environment.

Spatial and social development of Villa 31 remain well behind more affluent parts of the city. While primary building materials such as brick, stone, block, and cement are also used in the rest of CABA, buildings in Villa 31 are precarious. This is due in part to a tendency to build upward, which has led to many homes having two, three, or four floors. According to the Socio-Habitation Survey carried out by the *Subsecretaría de Planeamiento y Gestión Comunitaria* in

settlement. The term “villa” comes from *the villas de miseria* that was popularized in the 1950s (for more on this history, see Verbitsky, Bernardo *Villa Miseria también es América*, 1967). Moreover, the term “villa” may be considered a pejorative when used by outsiders. Yet, when the term “villa” or similar terms – such as “villero” or “those from the villa” – is used among members endogenous to this community, it often denotes a sense of pride or comradery. In honor of a local political leader and priest, Father Carlos Mugica, that was assassinated in the 1974, residents of Villa 31 have also named the settlement “Barrio 31 Carlos Mugica.” This name is used in certain policy documents, such as those that outline a political system of representation. More recently, the term “Barrio 31,” which translates to “Neighborhood 31,” has been used by government actors and some residents to denote its social integration. At the same time, other residents that reject recent policies have expressed concern over the use of the term “Barrio 31,” claiming that it tends to validate government activity. While some residents I interviewed expressed a preference for outsiders using the name Barrio 31 versus Villa 31, as I became more familiar with my interlocutors, I frequently used the term Villa 31, seemingly offending residents. While with government employees and academics, I always used terms that I assumed to be benign from their perspective, such as “Barrio 31,” “vecinos” (neighbors or residents), and “habitantes” (habitants), as failing to do so could have offended them and/or undermined rapport. For simplicity, throughout this paper, I use the term Villa 31 to refer to Villas 31 and 31 Bis, unless otherwise specified.

³⁶ Many residents complained to me that they did not feel that the media accurately depicts residents of Villa 31, rather, that it focuses on crimes carried out by some members of this community, feeding negative opinions held by those in other parts of the city.

³⁷ For example, in interviews some residents of Villa 31 complained that it is difficult to obtain jobs outside of the villa because employers think they are dishonest. Moreover, residents’ identification cards (DNI – Documento Nacional de Identificación) indicate the number of the block that they live on, a clear identifier that they live in Villa 31, compared to street names used to identify blocks that appear on DNI’s for other residents of the City of Buenos Aires.

2016 (Under Secretary of Planning and Community Management, SSPYGC), the minimum unit of habitability was 7m², public space per resident was 0.3m², and the rate of unsatisfactory access to basic necessities was 36%, compared to 16m², 6m², and 7% for CABA. Environmental safety and health risks stem from deficient waste management, flooding of streets, insufficient sewer lines, abundance of rodents, noise pollution, and an excess of electrical transformers. The 2015 population estimate from the National Habitat Secretariat was 43,190, which includes 8,502 homes and 13,015 families. Half of the population is 0 to 24 years of age, compared to 34% for CABA. The rate of secondary school completion is 32% and the rate of adolescents who neither study nor work is 14%, compared to 78% and 11% for the rest of CABA, respectively (Secretaría de Integración Social y Urbana 2016).

Based on country of origin, the population of Villa 31 and 31 Bis is 51 percent Argentine, 25 percent Paraguayan, 13 percent Bolivian, 10 percent Peruvian; 1 percent are from other countries (Ministerio de Hacienda 2017). In general, Villa 31 Bis has more foreign-born residents, while Villa 31 has more Argentine residents, many of whom migrated from the interior provinces of the country.³⁸

³⁸ The was a common theme across multiple interviews with residents and government actors.

Map 1: Aerial Photo of Villa 31 circa 2010-2014 [exact date unknown] (source: provided by María's architect; photographer unknown)



Map 2: Neighborhood Organizations, Institutions, and Commercial centers. Includes education (educación) and health (salud) centers, eateries (comedores), soccer fields (cancha) playgrounds/plazas (plaza), radio stations (radio), churches/religious centers (religion), police stations (policía), other institutions (institucional), bars/clubs (mixto), hotel/sleeping accommodations (parador), TV stations (TV). Drawn by residents with the technical assistance of the NGO, TURBA. (source: TURBA)



Settlement, Expulsions, Growth, and Policies Toward Social Inclusion

Part of the area known today as Villa 31 was first settled in the 1930s during the era of import substitution industrialization, when the government began to lodge immigrants in sheds by the Port of Buenos Aires. Immigrants and railroad workers continued to arrive in the 1940s and 1950s (Secretaría de Integración Social y Urbana 2016). From the 1950s onward, civil society grew to include neighborhood organizations that characterize the distinct social and political life of Villa 31. At moments of democratic rule during the 1960s and 1970s, neighborhood

organizations grew (Secretaría de Integración Social y Urbana 2016), leading to collective action and resistance to expulsions. This political culture began to thrive again with the return to democracy in 1983 that brought the reoccupation of previously eradicated sectors and created political space for residents to pressure government to respond to precarious living conditions and inadequate access to basic services. The result has been expansion through land occupations, construction of homes, and improvements to infrastructure.³⁹ Residents' political behavior has been linked to laws, decrees, and policies that channel resources toward development projects.

Survival, expulsions, and expansion of Villa 31 have occurred across three periods of public policy and state intervention. The first period spans from “early settlement to the end of the military dictatorship (1950-1983)” (Brikman 2016). In the 1960s, the state created the *Comisión Municipal de la Vivienda* (CMV)⁴⁰ which, in 1967, was charged with designing the first plan for expulsions (Secretaría de Integración Social y Urbana 2016). By 1980, the population of Villa 31 had been reduced to 756, down from a high of 25,852 in 1979.⁴¹ The second period, beginning with the “return to democracy until 1990,” includes policies geared toward helping residents establish (reestablish in some cases) *de facto* tenancy on the land; these policies are marked by “ordinances that established residents’ rights to “remain in their territory” (Brikman 2016). Finally, from 1991 onward there is a shift toward policies to promote integration (Brikman 2016). When the City of Buenos Aires became autonomous from the Province of Buenos Aires in 1994 – hence, *Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires* – the role of the city government in Villa 31 deepened as legislation and executive decrees moved toward social integration of the city’s villas (Secretaría

³⁹ Examples of this political behavior are included in the subsection “The Local Politics of Making Improvements to the Built Environment” included in the “Context” section of this essay.

⁴⁰ In 2003, the CMV became the Instituto de la Vivienda de la Ciudad (IVC)

⁴¹ The population of Villa 31 from 1962 – 1980: 1962 – 6,731; 1976 – 24,324; 1978/79 – 25,852; 1980 – 756 (Source: IADB/ SECISYU)

de Integración Social y Urbana 2016). By 2004, the population had grown to 14,584, and by 2010 it reached 27,013 (in addition to structural-institutional factors, this marked increase in those living in informality should also be seen in the context of the country's sovereign debt crisis of 2001, which had far-reaching economic consequences across different sectors of society).

Over the last decade, policies in Villa 31 have unfolded within the context of a broader political and ideological shift regarding informality in the city's villas. An important part of this shift has been ongoing since 2007, when the government of CABA came under the control of *Propuesta Republicano* (PRO), with Mauricio Macri as Chief of Government.⁴³ Influenced by policies popular elsewhere in the region, such as in Colombia and Brazil, the city government moved toward “social management, social urbanism, inclusion, community management, and consensus” (Brikman 2016). To carry out housing policy in the city's villas, the *Secretaría de Hábitat y Inclusión* under the *Ministerio de Desarrollo Urbano* and the *Ministerio de Desarrollo Económico*, was formed. In 2009, the Legislature of CABA unanimously passed Law 3.343 calling for the integration of Villa 31, which explicitly states that its implementation should not result in the forced expulsion of residents and that any relocations should occur within its perimeter; nevertheless, Villa 31 is situated on federally owned land, meaning that cooperation between the city and federal governments, the latter of which was controlled by the *Partido Justicialista* (PJ, aka Peronist Party) under President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, remained strained. Following the general elections of 2015, the national, provincial, and CABA governments came under the same political coalition, *Cambiemos*, which consists of President Macri's party, or *Propuesta Republicano* (PRO), *Coalición Cívica* (ARI), and *Unión Cívica Radical* (UCR). In 2016, President Mauricio Macri's administration created the *Secretaría de Integración Social y Urbana*

⁴³ In 2015 Mauricio Macri was elected President of Argentina; his successor as Chief of Government of CABA, Horacio Rodríguez Larreta – also with the PRO – has been in office since December, 2015.

(SECISYU) under the *Jefatura de Gabinete de Ministros del GCBA (Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires)*. This organism, under the direction of the *Jefe de Gobierno de CABA* (Chief of Government of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires), Horacio Laretta, has been charged with designing strategies, public policies, and projects related to the urban, social, and economic integration of Villa 31.

The return to democracy, dramatic increase in population, and shift toward policies to promote social development and inclusion brought significant changes to Villa 31 in the 2000s. First, state and nonstate actors became increasingly embedded in political life, engaging with residents and local leaders to respond to and channel demands through institutions. Second, the state's channeling of resources, such as building materials, toward construction of homes and infrastructure, led to economic and social development. The logic of these policies was to create employment opportunities for poorer sectors of society.⁴⁵ This drew cooperatives, formed by residents that moved to capture resources and carry out such projects, toward the formal market⁴⁶ (Secretaría de Integración Social y Urbana 2016). Third, scarcity of land and a lack of affordable housing in the formal sector on the one hand, and access to resources for construction on the other, led to the commercialization of the housing market⁴⁷ (Kisner 2009).

Behind the unprecedented expansion, both horizontally and vertically, of Villa 31 over the last decade lies the agency of its residents, the protagonists of change. Their stories are couched in the fraught political economy of upgrades to the built environment, where access to resources necessary for improving one's quality of life is hard won.

⁴⁵ This phenomenon, while belonging to a much longer trajectory in Argentina (reaching back at to the 1970s at least), took off with the sovereign debt crisis of 2001 that led to unemployment. See María Cristina Cravino for more on the history of cooperatives in Argentina.

⁴⁶ For more on this process, see the subsection "The Local Politics of Making Improvements to the Built Environment" in the "Context" section of this essay.

⁴⁷ See literature review for discussion on the commercialization of the informal housing market.

Actors

I'm always willing to do what she [María] says, I'm like a soldier... if she hadn't told me, 'look, this guy here is doing this' [research project], I wouldn't have received you in my home – never – do you get me? Really, it's thanks to the involvement that she's had with you and that I've seen you here every day [in Villa 31]. – Diego, construction worker⁴⁸

By the time that I met Rodolfo, I had only a week left in the field.⁴⁹ Having lived in the villa since 1986, he is one of the slum's most powerful political figures. At the prodding of a woman I had interviewed who has lived in the slum for over thirty years, he agreed to let me interview him. After waiting by the entrance to the villa at the local bus terminal, I was led by Rodolfo through the slum to a garage where he keeps his offices. He greeted his employees like a father before inviting me into a small, windowless room located at the back of the garage, where he set the *mate* on a crooked desk. *Mate* (mah-tay), as I had been taught, is a leafy tea drink that people in Argentina and other South-American countries drink out of a gourd. One person places the *bombilla* (boh-m-bee-shah), a straw-like instrument, in the gourd. Then they pour the leaves in, add water and wait for the leaves to expand, take a drink, refill the gourd with water, and pass it to the next person. As one Argentine told me, “*mate* is an offering from one person to another that needs to be prepared with love.” Rodolfo's hands shook as he poured in the leaves, then the water. Pausing to let the leaves expand, he smiled and admitted he had recently been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. I wondered how long it would be before this ritual would be taken from him. For the next two hours, Rodolfo taught me about how he had built a cooperative that now provides work for hundreds of the slum's residents, and that how, despite his personal success, he has chosen to remain in the slum, continuing to fight *for* the residents, *as* a resident.

⁴⁸ In interview with the author on June 22, 2017.

⁴⁹ This was during my first visit to Argentina, when I carried out research from May through August of 2017.

Essential to a study of the local politics of Villa 31, its residents are the main focus of this essay. Within the sphere of residents, there are both political and non-political actors, including homeowners, renters, members of cooperatives, presidents of cooperatives, non-elected neighborhood leaders, and political representatives that residents regularly elect at the neighborhood level. Those elected at the block level, the basic unit of territory, are called *delegados*, and are elected every three years through direct elections in which residents of each block are free to participate. There are 10 sectors, made up of units of blocks, at which level *representantes* are elected. Finally, the *representantes* elect 10 *consejeros* to represent Villa 31 at the neighborhood level, that is, to represent the unit of territory that includes Villas 31 and 31 Bis.⁵⁰

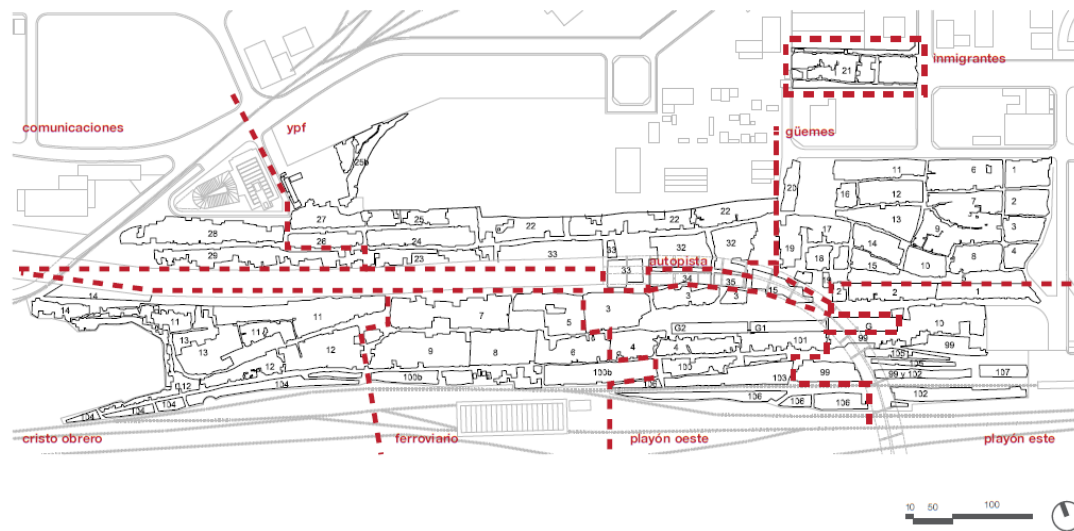
Also made up of residents, cooperatives with a legacy of maintaining and carrying out upgrades to public spaces are important political actors in Villa 31. Presidents of cooperatives are involved politically, usually fulfilling roles as *delegados*, *representantes*, or *consejeros*. They also sometimes act as local political brokers, *punteros*,⁵¹ or as non-elected political representatives.

State actors include elected and appointed officials as well as government employees working with SECISYU to carry out public policy, such as architects, city planners, and social workers. Non-state actors (that are not residents of Villa 31) include advocacy groups, and architects with a history of working with cooperatives in Villa 31.

⁵⁰ Throughout this essay I refer to “*delegados, representantes, and consejeros*” as “political representatives.”

⁵¹ Throughout my time in the field, the term *puntero* was used by residents and government actors to refer to *some* local political representatives (elected or not) in Villa 31. It became clear across interviews that this term is often used as a pejorative. For a detailed discussion on the etymology and cultural meaning of the term, see Julieta Quirós, 2008.

Map 3: Named Sectors and Block Numbers of Barrio 31 [Villa 31] According to System of Political Representation (source: Estatuto de Barrio 31 Carlos Mugica)



Anexo // Plano del barrio con nomenclatura de manzanas y sectores

The Local Politics of Building a Better Life

We took over this land here in 2006, during the World Cup in Argentina.⁵³ We organized with other neighbors that didn't have houses and that needed a dignified home, a roof over their heads.⁵⁴ We organized, we held meetings, and we took over the land. At first, we didn't have water or lighting, we didn't have anything. Thus, it was very precarious at the beginning. We lived in a tent, like camping, adrift. Then we started building little box structures made of wood. Sometimes we went to the city center to collect wood and sheet metal. First, we'd build the wooden structure with the sheet metal and line it with carpet inside, so we didn't get cold. Then, little by little, I started to put bricks on all sides here, mostly here on the side of the street because there were many robberies and sometimes they'd steel everything, the few things we had.

First, we constructed the whole perimeter with bricks, and afterward, we built a room, in 2008. From there, little by little, we continued to build. In 2010, we were finally able to start building a roof, where the first floor is now, where I originally lived. Little by little I built the roof.

⁵³ Residents decided this was an opportune moment because they anticipated that local police patrolling the area would be caught up in the excitement of the game.

⁵⁴ Across my interviews, it was revealed to me that many residents, such as María, rent in the informal housing market after moving to Villa 31. Later, they either "purchase" a home or land through an informal system of agreements or "take" (occupy) land. The lack of available land for occupation, in conjunction with the commercialization of the informal housing market, has led to the vertical growth of Villa 31 as residents have constructed multiple story homes.

- María, political representative/president of cooperative⁵⁵

Before [while I was renting in Villa 31], I hadn't thought of investing here [in Villa 31]. But as the years went by, it occurred to me to invest, to buy a small place, a small space where I could start to build... in reality, I don't know whether to tell you that it's buying the land or buying the air, because the land here belongs to the government... I took the risk [of buying land that I don't legally own] because I didn't have the opportunity to buy somewhere else, because in other places it costs a lot of money, and I didn't have the money to buy. From that point onward, everything was a sacrifice. You buy a small space, one column gets built, then another column, and little by little – do you see? You work and, well, if you get two thousand pesos, three thousand pesos, you invest, and tomorrow, before you know it, you've managed to seal off and put a roof on the house.

The purchase [of the home/land] works in a special way, because it's a sale made with paper, between neighbors. I'll explain. For example, you want to sell a plot of land or a terrace, and say, I'm interested. We make a deal, you ask me for a sum of money, I pay you. You get two, three witnesses among the neighbors, I get three other witnesses among the neighbors. They come, they sign an act that you sold me such and such part – that is, this part is mine. ... the delegada from each block [mediates the process]. Legally, it does not constitute – you do not have a document that protects you under the government, no. But neither can anyone throw you out because you have witnesses that have signed, confirming that this part belongs to you.

- Eduardo, homeowner participating in the PMV⁵⁶

Those who move to Villa 31 often arrive with the few material belongings they can carry. Residents might begin by renting a *pieza* or “room”⁵⁷ and, if lucky enough to become established, later purchase a home⁵⁸ on the informal market or take over a piece of land to begin constructing one themselves. The process of taking over land begins with a fight on two fronts, the first being the collective fight that residents engage in against the state, who has been known to prevent such occupations by forcing residents to vacate recently occupied land before structures can be built on

⁵⁵ In interview with the author on June 5, 2017.

⁵⁶ In interview with the author on June 19, 2017.

⁵⁷ “Pieza” literally translates to “piece.”

⁵⁸ Residents in interviews explained that sometimes residents purchase precarious structures that are incomplete with the intention of carrying out improvements to finish constructing a home. Purchase, as used here, refers to the exchange of money for property fixed in space. Purchases in Villa 31 occur through an informal system of agreement and recognition between residents.

it. As land is scarce, residents also engage in disputes, sometimes violent ones, with each other over plots where they can begin to build.⁶⁰ Once secured, residents often begin making collective demands for construction materials, improvements to infrastructure, and access basic services. These demands might be made in the form of demonstrations in the city center or by cutting off access to the city by crowding the highway that passes through Villa 31.⁶¹ Thus, making improvements to the built environment and gaining access to basic services are evidence of piecemeal gains in a struggle to build a better life, wherein material and social resources allow residents to gradually make progress in this process. To the extent that gaining access to necessary resources includes individual and group action centered on influencing or resisting the influence of other actors, be they individuals, groups, or the state, making improvements to the built environment and winning access basic services is inherently political.

Political competition over access to resources not only pits actors of this community against the state, but also against each other. As Atena – the *delegada* introduced at the beginning of this essay – explained, after moving to her sector of the villa in 2006, she sought to improve access to water, something that elected representatives outside of Villa 31 told her would require rounding up her neighbors in a collective fight against the government.⁶³ This challenged the political and economic interests of existing *delegados* in her sector, who were not only undermined by a newcomer knocking on doors and holding meetings, but also because the company that had been delivering cisterns of water – albeit contaminated according to Atena – employed these *delegados* to work on the trucks that delivered the cisterns.⁶⁴ Hence, given the local political economy of

⁶⁰ Throughout interviews with residents, fights over land upon arrival to Villa 31 was a common theme.

⁶¹ The process of arriving and becoming established in the villa was revealed across interviews with residents, wherein I asked them to explain their personal stories about moving to Villa 31.

⁶³ Atena (president of cooperative/local representative) in interview with the author on June 15, 2017.

⁶⁴ On a separate occasion, while speaking with María, she corroborated the details that Atena shared in this story.

water delivery, existing political representatives in this area of Villa 31 actually had a *disincentive* to improve access to water that would advance the quality of life of residents. In this way, political competition between residents over the opportunity to become involved in the provision of basic goods for the community may be in tension with access to resources necessary for improving one's own quality of life. Such tension either hinders or opens space for progress as actors pursue their interests.

An important outgrowth of this political behavior has been the increased involvement of local cooperatives who carry out infrastructural improvements to the built environment. Their involvement in such improvements took off in the wake of financial crises during the Kirchner administrations or, in the mid-2000s. To carry out such improvements, local leaders formed cooperatives in response to policies that channeled resources toward building projects in the city's villas. While all cooperatives engage in some sort of political behavior, the means by which they do so differs, leading to different forms of organization. In the words of Agustín, the architect for María's cooperative:

Each cooperative has a totally different operation. Most of the cooperatives are made up of family members – it's a family group that creates a cooperative. Cooperatives theoretically have a format and series of obligations, but here they function as companies. In reality, they are companies. So, there are cooperatives that are family, there are cooperatives that belong to a group of friends, and there are cooperatives that are like María's [pseudonym added], which functions through an external political group that works with people from the neighborhood.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Agustín (architect for María's cooperative) in interview with the author on July 14, 2017.

The genesis of María's cooperative⁶⁶ came through the help of a political figure who drew her into the political arena and provided the technical resources necessary for winning resources for construction projects. As María explains:

And I had met Rico [the leader of the political party Corriente Villera Independiente who mobilizes residents of the city's villas to create cooperatives] in 2008, as I told you. When I met him I already had my house, just the first floor, with columns and beams, nothing else. And I got a little more into politics, the politics of the neighborhood. We organized, we went out to fight, we fought for wires for lighting – we achieved that. We went out to fight for water tanks. These tankers would arrive, and we'd fill our water and from there we'd distribute the water amongst ourselves, because before there were water problems, the water was deficient, and we'd suffer sometimes from a lack of water.⁶⁷

Involved in the provision of public goods and making improvements to the built environment, cooperatives improve the quality of life of residents. These changes create a visible reminder of the consequences of collective action that help presidents of cooperatives amass political power, particularly as they induce other actors to engage in political behavior. In María's own words:

And from there, little by little, I got more involved. I won the elections because the neighbors saw that I was always at the front, fighting, and they saw that we always achieved the objectives that I proposed. Rico also helped me a lot. In 2010 we set up a project to do the sewer and the paving of the street, and in 2011 they picked me [to carry out the work]. But everything was a struggle. We had to "take over" [demonstrate] the Ministry of Public Spaces, where the minister was Diego Santini, who is now the deputy chief. We twisted his arm to get him to sign and approve the project, and thanks to that, my street was done in 2011. In 2011 the work was done, it was executed, we finished the work in six months and the neighbors saw it. They saw that I had to get them to mobilize, that they needed to go out and fight, because here, without a fight, the government won't give you anything. Here, you have to fight for the government to give you what you need – what is a right. You, as a resident of the neighborhood have a right to basic needs, such as lighting, water, a phone.⁶⁸

Institutional structures have conditioned the local political power of cooperatives. In María's account above, two processes are taking place simultaneously. The first is the

⁶⁶ I am referring here to her cooperative engaged in infrastructural improvements in Villa 31. She had in fact already worked in waste management.

⁶⁷ In interview with the author on June 23, 2017.

⁶⁸ In interview with the author on June 23, 2017.

consolidation of a system of political representation, which she refers to when she says that she “won the elections.” More specifically, this is the system of political representation at the level of the villa⁶⁹ that grew endogenously out of political behavior in Villa 31. The system was formalized in 2010 with the *Estatuto de Barrio 31 Carlos Mugica*. In line with *Ley* 3.343 calling for the integration of Villa 31, the statute sought to legitimize a set of electoral rules and normalize representation, decision making, endorsement, and consensus for residents of Villa 31.⁷⁰ It divided the villa into nine sectors and established a democratic system of representation at the level of the *manzana* (block), sector, and *barrio* (neighborhood), with the number of representatives per *manzana* determined by the number of its residents.⁷¹ The second process is the distribution of jobs for María’s neighbors through access to public policies designed to channel resources toward infrastructural improvements in Villa 31, which she alludes to when she explains how she carried out a “project to do the sewer and the paving of the street” in 2011. The *Programa de Mejoras de la Villa 31 y 31 bis*, created in 2010 by Decree 495, channeled resources toward infrastructure, such as streets, pavement, sewage lines, drainage systems, and water lines. The program created employment opportunities by stipulating that local cooperatives made up of residents of Villa 31 carry out such improvements.⁷²

⁶⁹ This is a system of political representation at the level of the villa. Locally elected political actors meet with city government officials regularly. However, the system of political representation in Villa 31 is not formally a part of the city or state governments. Neither are locally elected representatives paid, rather, they act as volunteer representatives that form a nexus of communication between the State and the villa.

⁷⁰ The statute was elaborated across “more than fifty open public meetings, sectoral meetings, and meetings with referentes and delegados” under the direction of a legal team assimilated by Judge Roberto Andrés Gallardo.

⁷¹ Originally, 150 residents per representative.

⁷² The Plan de Mejoras was elaborated by an ex-civil servant of the Instituto de Vivienda (IVC). Until 2007, the IVC was the primary government actor responsible for executing housing policies established by city government, which was done through housing programs that targeted families most in need of housing resources in the city’s villas (Cravino 2009). The IVC was founded in 2003 through Law 1.251, which had its origins in the Comisión Municipal de la Vivienda, which was created in 1967 through Law 17.174. Following Mauricio Macri’s appointment as Jefe de Gobierno de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires in 2007, the IVC was stripped of its competencies and the Corporación Buenos Aires Sur was created to carry out public policy in the villas in the southern part of the city, while Unidad de Gestión de Intervención Social (UGIS) was created to mitigate *emergencia habitacional*, or those suffering the direst of living situations, such as a lack of housing or housing in extremely precarious conditions, in Villa 31. In

Relative to the rest of the city, where public goods are provisioned by the government, the provision of water, electricity, streets, and other public goods by cooperatives, while likely desired by the whole community, stands to benefit some more than others. Even if paved streets benefit the whole community, residents who subsist on building such infrastructure enjoy access to employment opportunities, particularly those that are relatively close to home.⁷³ Moreover, while policies that generate employment and improve the built environment have provided opportunities for social and economic development, they have also been undermined by the system of representation that was designed to promote and formalize democratic culture. As urban ethnographer Danilo Rossi has pointed out through interviews with civil servants, elected representatives, and community activists that worked on the *Programa de Mejoras* in Villa 31, elected *delegados* and *consejeros* held regular meetings with government officials to determine which sectors and which sites would be awarded resources for improvements to infrastructure. Technical representatives from the government would convene to determine the funds available and the feasibility of the site intervention based on its practicality and whether it would resolve the problem it supposedly sought to mitigate.⁷⁴ Afterward, residents would elect a cooperative to carry out the work (Rossi 2017). As presidents of cooperatives were also often elected representatives, such as *delegados* or *consejeros*, they not only enjoyed the power of determining which sites of intervention would make it onto meeting agendas, but also of awarding jobs to residents living in

2009, Ley 3343 calling for the urbanization of Villa 31 was passed unanimously by the city legislature. During this time, an ex-civil servant of the IVC collaborated with the minister of the Ministerio de Espacio Público, Diego Santini, and presidents of local cooperatives – who had primarily been dedicated to waste management in the villa – to begin carrying out improvements to basic infrastructure in Villa 31 through the Plan de Mejoras. As one architect explained to me, in 2010 he was contacted by a family friend who was responsible for promulgating the Plan de Mejoras in Villa 31 and told that technical skills were needed “to carry out improvements in Villa 31,” after which he was introduced to cooperatives to begin collaborating on improvement projects.

⁷³ As members of María’s cooperative explained to me, they were drawn by the opportunity to work close to home when they saw that she was carrying out local infrastructural improvements.

⁷⁴ Architects working with the cooperatives would visit the sites and determine the feasibility. Such site interventions stand to benefit the cooperative and the architect with whom the cooperative works.

their sector once resources for site improvements were won. Naturally, this system helped determine which cooperatives would benefit from the proposed site interventions, as well as which representatives were likely to be elected.⁷⁵ In an interview with a *delegada* from *manzana* 101, Rossi points out that “outside of the control of civil servants, the goal of presidents of cooperativas is always to expand their network of influence over the *vecinos* as much as possible.” This has contributed to a fraught political culture between different sectors and actors in the villa, one marked by a “game of favors and coordination” between actors in this community “with the city and national governments” (2017).

Thus, the *Estatuto* and the *Programa de Mejoras* benefited local political leaders and helped consolidate their power through the formation of cooperatives to carry out public works.⁷⁶ In this context, both these policy instruments have channeled – and produced – political competition over access to resources in Villa 31. Such competition is undergirded by fundamental inconsistencies between the logic of public policies and the social context out of which cooperatives have emerged. As we have seen, not only are cooperatives rooted in collective action, presidents of cooperatives, such as María, also engage in political behavior as they seek technical resources exogenous to their community. If policies such as the *Plan de Mejoras* provide opportunities for cooperatives to capture material resources necessary for making improvements to the built environment, they also demand technical resources required for overcoming administrative and bureaucratic challenges, resources that most social organizations (i.e. cooperatives) initially lack (M. C. Lazarini 2012). Notwithstanding, the *Instituto Nacional de*

⁷⁵ Elections are held every year. As Rossi (2017) points out, these are sometimes contested and lead to disputes that can overturn electoral outcomes.

⁷⁶ Some of these local political leaders already headed cooperatives that were working in waste management (an older policy geared toward environmental safety in the city’s villas). Moreover, some political leaders have enjoyed a history of managing access to social security plans and other redistributive programs, participating in clientelist networks between government and residents, and spearheading collective action and political manifestations, among other activities that center on generating political and economic influence.

Asociativismo y Economía Social – the national government organism through which cooperatives are constituted and awarded work, in the form of *convenios* (contracts) – explains that cooperatives:

*...do not have as their main purpose or accessory purpose the propaganda of ideas related to politics, religion, nationality, region, or race, nor do they impose conditions of admission related to these ideas.*⁷⁷

In her recent work on the evolution of cooperatives in Argentina over the last decade, María Fernández Álvarez points to a double movement: the growth of social organizations making collective demands, on the one hand, and the “implementation of policies buttressed by social economy and collective work,” on the other, thus leading to the overlapping of “work spaces” with “political spaces” (Lazarini 2016). In the words of Diego, an employee of María’s cooperative working on the PMV:

*It’s mandatory, if there’s a march, I have to go. But it does not mean that I agree with what they do... for example, if they say, ‘we are going to go on a march for legal abortion,’ I go, even though I don’t agree – I have to go. ... It doesn’t matter to them [that I don’t agree], what matters to them is 10 people, 20 people.*⁷⁸

He goes on to explain:

*In my opinion, she’s [María] a good person. Suppose that I need something or that I have an accident or something, an illness, I know that she can call an ambulance to come and take me immediately. In that sense, she’s a good person... I think she works for the people, because if not, she would take everything for herself. If you ask me if she’s a good person, I think she is. She’s a good person and she wants to help people. Out of this, it’s obvious that she obtains a benefit for herself, it’s obvious that this would be the case because she gives her time so that people can live well. Thanks to her there are many people that are working here as well. If you think about all this, it’s obvious that there’s going to be some benefit for her.*⁷⁹

Thus, cooperatives entail not only the merging of political spaces with work spaces, but also the merging of political spaces and work spaces with access to basic goods and services, such as those

⁷⁷ See <http://www.inaes.gob.ar/>

⁷⁸ Diego (construction worker) in interview with the author on June 22, 2017.

⁷⁹ Diego (construction worker) in interview with the author on June 22, 2017.

related to healthcare. When asked what he thought of the cooperative, another employee replied that a cooperative is “the poor who robs the poor.” When I asked him to explain what he meant, he took my notebook and pen wrote these words:

*The poor cooperative squeezes funds out of members by way of cunning. Of course, they hire the person as a ‘monotributista social,’ which is setup by the cooperative paying 200 pesos per month to the state. Because of this, the worker doesn’t receive a bonus or severance pay for the service rendered.*⁸⁰

In other words, instead of hiring workers so they receive the full legal benefits of employment, presidents of cooperatives contract them as “purveyors” – or, “independent contractors,” to use a term familiar to the labor economy in the United States – limiting the rights and employment benefits that these workers have, such as access to unemployment benefits. The overlap of work spaces with political spaces was also evident in interviews I carried out with presidents of cooperatives, all of whom were quick to point out their role as political actors within the community, role that is linked to the economic benefits that these actors derive. Reflecting on her influence within the community, María explains:

*They [residents of Villa 31] always come to my house to ask me for things because they know I have more contact with the government. And the government, in a certain way, respects me too, because they know the work that I do here in the neighborhood, they know how I work and for this reason they also turn to me to ask for things.*⁸¹

Taken together, these accounts suggest how the local political landscape within which the PMV is implemented lends itself to strategic gains and losses. First, powerful political actors have a special hold over the local population, that is, they can induce them to act politically. In this way, we see how government power may extend through this community by way of the cooperative, as well as how the cooperative may check government power. On the one hand, the government

⁸⁰ Jose (construction worker) in interview with the author on June 24, 2017.

⁸¹ In interview with the author on June 5, 2017.

selects which cooperatives receive *convenios*, while on the other, cooperatives that might not otherwise be selected due to their political affiliations maintain a firm enough grasp on the local population, particularly in their sector, to impose political costs on the government for excluding them from the PMV. Such costs may come in the form of demonstrations, threats of retaliation, or cutting off access to the local population.

At the same time, we see how government intervention through the PMV presents a risk to local actors. As government actors insert themselves within a community fraught with political competition, cleavages between actors of the community may present opportunities to gain a foothold. Moreover, as government actors engage with members of this community to become involved in the provision resources and basic services, including those related to upgrades to existing homes through the PMV, direct linkages with residents threaten to undermine the power of local actors, whose relevance could be diminished.

Current Institutional Framework and Integration Policies

In April of 2016, the recently formed center-right government under President Mauricio Macri⁸² announced plans to integrate Villa 31. In line with the administration's broader goal of promoting economic and social development by moving away from trade protectionism toward reinsertion in the global market, current integration policies are couched in agreements with multilateral development banks (MDBs).⁸³ The total estimated cost of social integration of Villa 31 from 2016-2019 is 500 million USD, to be financed by the World Bank (WB), Inter-American

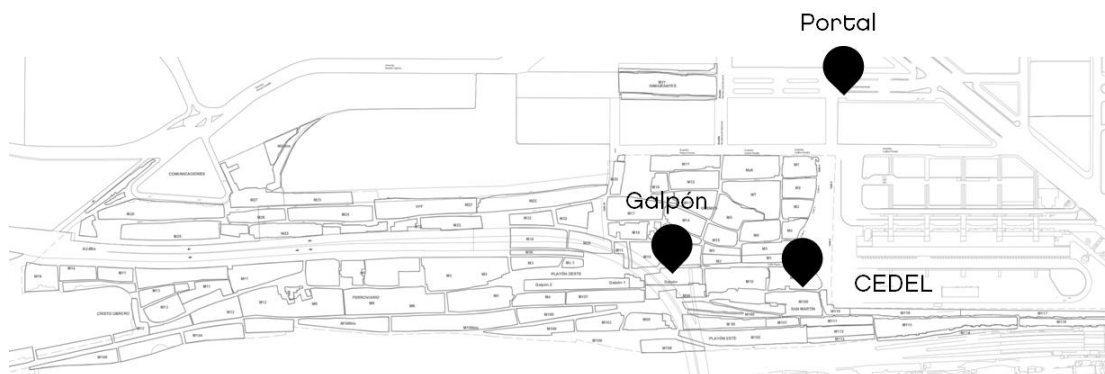
⁸² Macri took office in December 2015

⁸³ The reasons underpinning this shift in policies is outside the immediate scope of this paper. Notwithstanding, some scholars (in interviews with the author) have argued that political fallout from the left following comments Mauricio Macri made in the runup to the presidential elections in 2014 underpin these policy decisions. Others have argued that his administration is driven by neoliberal economic incentives (see Cravino et al), that is, contracts with private firms to provide materials and carry out upgrades. In reality, there are probably many factors underpinning this shift: the growth of the city's villas since the return to democracy, left political power, laws and policies that have yet to be enforced and carried out, and incentives for economic growth, among others.

Development Bank (IADB), and CABA. Policies revolve around four axes of intervention (Secretaría de Integración Social y Urbana 2016).

First, *housing* includes upgrades to existing homes under the PMV, the construction of 1200 new homes in the sector YPF, and construction of 120 housing units in the sector Cristo Obrero. Construction of new homes implies the resettlement of residents that live under the highway or in the path of the new highway that is projected to be built. Second, *social and urban integration* includes the construction of a civic center beneath the old highway and the construction of a ministry of education in the villa. Third, *sustainable economic development* includes the construction of a Center for Entrepreneurial and Labor Development (CEDEL) and improvements to the existing street market located at the entrance to the villa. Fourth, *urban integration, mobility, and public space* includes construction of new and improvements to existing infrastructure, such as water and sewer lines, electrical wires; improvements to public spaces/parks, such as plazas and soccer fields; and the construction of a new park on the top of the existing *Autopista Ilia* that cuts through the villa.⁸⁴

Map 4: Location of Government Offices Inside (Galpón and CEDEL) and Near the Entrance (Portal) of Villa 31. Source: Ministerio de Hacienda 2017



⁸⁴ This overview was taken from *Plan Integral Retiro-Puerto Evaluación de Impacto Ambiental* put out by SECISYU in 2016.

While cooperatives have been contracted to carry out improvements to existing homes under the PMV, construction companies have been contracted to build new homes and carry out improvements to existing homes under other housing programs, such as *emergencia habitacional*⁸⁵. Construction companies have also been contracted to carry out improvements to public spaces, including infrastructural projects, such as improvements to streets, electrical, sewer, and water lines. Cooperatives have been contracted to carry out improvements to public spaces that are less complex and – according to government employees I interviewed – less demanding, such as plazas, soccer fields, and eateries. In short, construction companies and cooperatives have been contracted to carry out an array of projects related to the integration of Villa 31.

Under the *Programa de Mejoramiento de Vivienda* (PMV) – the main focus of this essay – upgrades to existing homes are carried out by local cooperatives and financed by the IADB and WB at an estimated cost of 88.9 million USD.⁸⁷ A central tenet of the proposed policy trajectory of the PMV is to foment participation with residents. Recognizing stipulations for integration set out in Law 3.343, the *Plan Integral Retiro-Puerto Evaluación de Impacto Ambiental* put out by SECISYU in 2016 explains that exterior and interior improvements to homes are to be “realized through a participative process involving cooperatives, residents, and end users through training in construction practices”⁸⁹ (Secretaría de Integración Social y Urbana 2016). Thus, drawing actors from across government organisms⁹⁰ and the “ecosystem of actors” within Villa 31 (Secretaría de Integración Social y Urbana 2016), the PMV entails vertical and horizontal linkages in the implementation process. Appointed officials and government employees engage with residents

⁸⁵ See types of housing programs in the appendix section of this essay.

⁸⁷ These figures were taken from multiple CABA, World Bank, and Inter-American Development Bank project documents. Estimates across policy documents are not consistent.

⁸⁹ In the section on “entry” of this essay I present findings as to *why* cooperatives are involved in this process.

⁹⁰ See the Appendix to this essay for a detailed overview of government organization.

and each other with the aim of gathering information and performing ongoing analyses of the viability of interventions, a process that is deemed necessary for designing strategies and executing policies.⁹¹ After designing a strategy, an initial meeting is held with political representatives from Villa 31 to determine the political feasibility of the proposed interventions. From this point forward, employees of SECISYU meet regularly with political representatives and residents to continue pitching the project and gathering information about its viability. Ongoing questions deal with whether the proposed site is a home, whether it has *inquilinos* (renters), the number of people living in the home, its structural condition, and whether residents choose/are able to move out of the home during the construction process. Overarching goals center on informing residents about policies in order to generate consensus, both on the part of political representatives as well as those living in homes slated for upgrades. Finally, SECISYU also provides technical and material resources to cooperatives carrying out improvements to homes.

The PMV is projected to provide improvements to 6,902 housing units in Villa 31. *Manzana* (block) Galpón 1 located in the sector Playón Oeste (depicted in black on Map 4) is the first block, or “pilot” block, where the PMV was rolled out, starting in April 2016.⁹² Of 129 housing units surveyed, 89 received exterior improvements and 79 received interior improvements, in two phases.⁹³ When I started my fieldwork in May 2017, construction work in Galpón 1 was well underway. By the time I left the field in August 2017, some work was still outstanding, but

⁹¹ In multiple meetings with government officials, they showed me policy flow charts, which I documented and analyzed in tandem with other observations to make this conclusion.

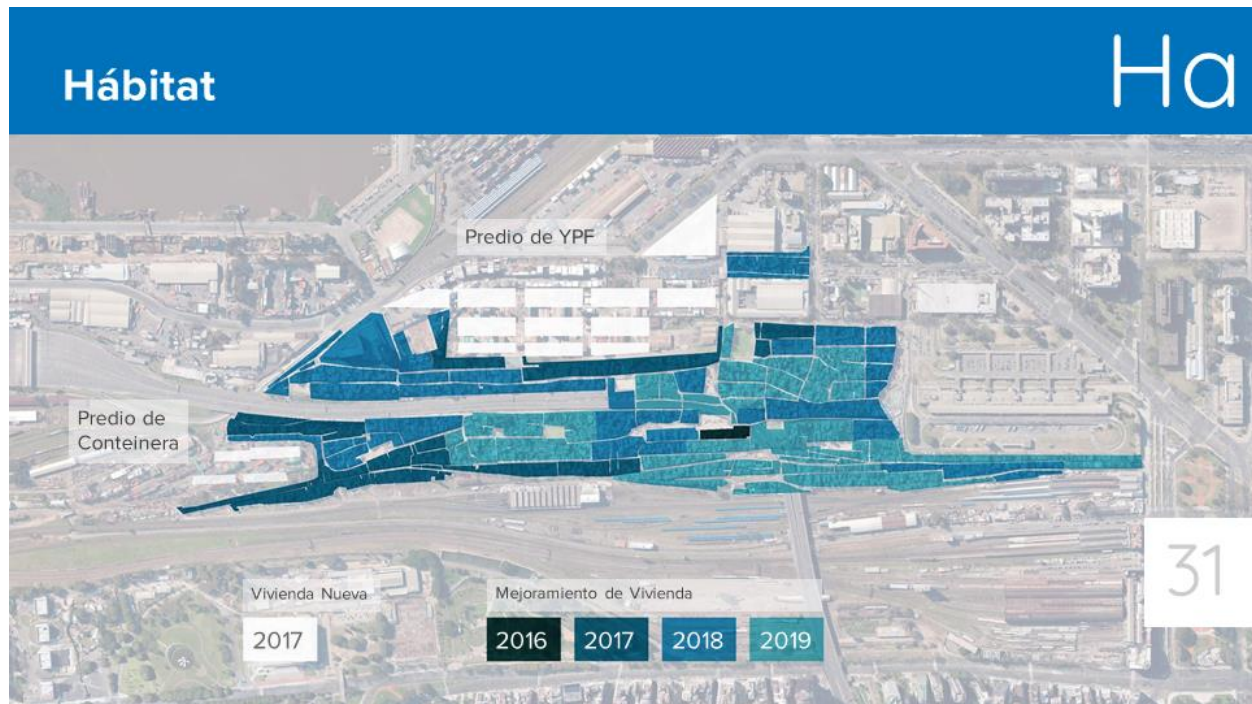
⁹² An internal report prepared by SECISYU indicates that the first meeting with residents on *manzana* Galpón 1 occurred on April 26, 2016.

⁹³ Policy documents prepared by SECISYU, namely, the *Programa de Integración Urbana y Educativa en la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires* (June 2017) are unclear on how many units received both exterior and interior improvements.

the majority of the construction work had been completed.⁹⁴ During my follow up visit in December 2017, I observed that work in Galpón 1 had come to an end, although internal reports prepared by SECISYU suggest that residents living in Galpón 1 have outstanding concerns regarding the quality of materials and work carried out. The other three *manzanas* where the PMV had been preselected to advance at the time of my fieldwork were *manzanas* 4 and 12 of Güemes and *manzana* 3 of Playón Oeste (Ministerio de Hacienda 2017). *Manzana* 4 has a total of 62 homes, *manzana* 12 a total of 40 homes, and *manzana* 3 a total of 274 homes (Ministerio de Hacienda 2017). It was unclear at the time of my fieldwork how many of the residents on each of these blocks had agreed to participate in the PMV, nor do policy documents I have reviewed reveal this information.

⁹⁴ I observed government architects rushing the cooperatives to complete the construction work, presumably so that the above-mentioned report that was prepared in June 2017, which pitches the PMV to the MDBs financing the project based on the “successes” of the pilot project, could be presented.

Map 5: The trajectory of the PMV from 2016 through 2019 (in different shades of blue). Includes other policies related to housing (hábitat) in Villa 31, such as new housing (vivienda nueva). (source: Secretaría de Integración Social y Urbana)



To sum up, the PMV is one of numerous policy responses currently being deployed in Villa 31 to mitigate precarious living conditions. It involves a constellation of actors across this community as well as government organisms created to carry out its social and urban integration. The central aims of the program focus on carrying out improvements to existing homes. Importantly, these improvements are carried out by cooperatives with the technical assistance of government actors, which entails cooperation and coordination between government employees, cooperatives, and residents living in homes slated for improvements. While the purpose of this essay is not to assess the quality of these site improvements, a study of the local politics that underlie relations between these actors is essential for understanding key decisions and outcomes in the improvement process; that is, individual and collective power of those involved in the PMV

influence the government's *entry* into Villa 31, struggles over *participation* between and among nongovernment and government actors, and *compliance* on the part of residents.

Barriers to Entry

Beginning last year, the government started working [in Villa 31]. They called up the consejeros to have them explain the project to the rest of the vecinos, but the vecinos didn't want to have anything to do with it... there were some people in my sector that wanted to assault them [the government employees], rob them, cut them, they wanted to kill them.

– Atena, political representative/president of cooperative⁹⁵

Any activity that is carried out in the villa is first communicated through the political system [the political system of the villa], this system is the first gateway to any involvement in any of the sectors.

– Adriana, government social worker⁹⁶

If you don't let me enter your home so that I can't carry out improvements, then there won't be integration ... the principal actor is the vecino, the protagonist who says, "yes, I approve of the integration project and I'll allow them to improve my home," then the state can enter, then the cooperative can enter.

– Rodolfo, president of cooperative⁹⁷

On the face of it, initial challenges for government entry into Villa 31 relate to security risks, such as material threats to outsiders, that hinder the ability of government employees to interact with the local population. Outsiders are easily spotted by locals, either by their physical attributes, such as skin color or the clothes they wear, or subtler identifying characteristics, such as an apparent lack of familiarity with the urban space around oneself. For example, outsiders may appear naïve or carry themselves in a relatively open manner compared to residents, who are used to keeping their distance and guarding themselves from protentional threats in the street.⁹⁸ Paco, a

⁹⁵ In interview with the author on June 15, 2017.

⁹⁶ In interview with the author on July 20, 2017.

⁹⁷ In interview with the author on August 2, 2017.

⁹⁸ Across interactions with residents and government employees, it became evident that outsiders are easily spotted. Throughout my project was instructed by residents (local political actors, members of cooperatives, and those that I briefly interviewed) to keep these exchanges with people that I did not know brief, just long enough to demonstrate respect before moving on. Stopping too long, I was told, could quickly devolve into being robbed and injured.

government employee who became one of my key interlocutors, was robbed four times in the span of three months.⁹⁹ Having worked in the villa since 2015, Paco's compassion has grown amid structural changes that, for many, have yet to mitigate poverty. When I asked if he was okay after learning about the robberies, he brushed off the incidents, reminding me that he's more fortunate than people in need – that getting a cellphone stolen comes with the territory of his job.¹⁰⁰ Other government employees have explained that violence is a constant issue, especially in poorer sectors of the villa where the reach of government is still limited by illicit drug activity and threats by local actors.¹⁰¹ Another immediate challenge to entry stems from residents' fears that the government has come to remove them from their homes.¹⁰² As Adriana, a social worker involved in the PMV since early 2016 explains, "they wouldn't let us enter, they told us that we needed to leave this place because no resident wanted to improve their home because we wanted to evict them, to kick them out of their homes."¹⁰³

Security risks and a lack of government legitimacy notwithstanding, the greatest challenges to entry are rooted in the contentious political culture of Villa 31, one that has grown out of a history of collective action, autonomous decision-making, and access to resources necessary for improving the quality of life for this community. Throughout this section, it will become clear how this contentious political culture presented barriers to entry, how the government overcame these

⁹⁹ Various government employees, including Paco (the victim of the crimes) in discussion with the author, January 2018.

¹⁰⁰ These communications occurred via text message on December 27, 2017.

¹⁰¹ Risks of material harm are shared by this community. One morning while making my rounds with Paco (government employee), residents in a sector of the villa through which we were walking told us how their neighbor and friend had been murdered the day before while being robbed. Later we came upon the site of the crime, where blood stains on the wall of the alley where the murder occurred had been circled in chalk, as part of an investigation. Such risks are diminished for powerful local actors who have earned the respect of the local population. These well-known figures move relatively free of risk of material harm by others.

¹⁰² As scholars have elaborated elsewhere, a history of expulsions contributes to this fear and has mobilized local actors to resist such threats. For an example, see Eva Camelli, 2016.

¹⁰³ Adriana (government social worker) in interview with the author, July 20, 2017.

barriers, and how local actors wielded entry as a bargaining tool. To begin, it is essential to reflect on the history of collective action and autonomous decision-making that this political culture stems from. In the words of Agustín, the architect who has worked with María's cooperative since 2010:

Every human group has natural leaders, people that take initiative, people that have what it takes. These are the people that started to organize in small groups or civil associations, and afterward in cooperatives, so that they could gain access to resources to improve their neighborhood. These neighborhoods – that you could call “villa miseria” [roughly, “miserable slum”] or however you want – in reality, they’re actually self-managed, lacking neighborhoods. Why lacking? Because they lack important things. They don’t have lighting, potable water, security, schools. All these things that are missing, these are things that they lack, and they’re self-managed because they meet and they decide to take initiative so that they get things for the neighborhood. Thus, these social integration construction projects, in reality, they come as a result of the pressure of them, it’s them who pressure the government and get money to improve the streets, so that they won’t be made of mud, but rather concrete. To be able to have sewers, to be able to have water, and now homes.¹⁰⁴

As Agustín goes on to explain, the power that cooperatives have generated through collective action meant that the government had to work with them to gain entry to Villa 31:

It’s very difficult to avoid using the cooperatives [to carry out construction projects], I believe that their [the government’s] goal was to avoid using the cooperatives, but there’s no way, there’s no way they can enter the territory without working with the cooperatives... because the cooperatives have power. They have the power to convene, they have the power to interrupt the construction projects... I’ve participated in many demonstrations [over the years] on the highway [that cuts through and above Villa 31], people went up to the highway and blocked it off. It was chaos.¹⁰⁵

Government social workers also expressed the need to work with cooperatives to gain entry to the villa. As Adriana recalls:

¹⁰⁴ Agustín (non-government architect, working with cooperative) in interview with the author, July 14, 2017. Agustín began working with María's cooperative under the Plan de Mejoras and has continued working with her cooperative under the Programa de Mejoramiento de Vivienda.

¹⁰⁵ Agustín (non-government architect, working with cooperative) in interview with the author, July 14, 2017.

*The only way to be able to work in harmony with the norms of the neighborhood was through the cooperatives because they facilitated our first encounter with the neighborhood.*¹⁰⁶

From the perspective of cooperatives, facilitating entry to the villa was linked to a legacy of capturing resources and distributing jobs among their followers. As Atena explained, at one point the government wanted the cooperatives to contract labor from construction companies outside of Villa 31 to carry out improvements to homes under the PMV. This led her to argue with the undersecretary for *Planeamiento y Gestión Comunitaria*, Gastón Mascias. She apparently reminded him that the *vecinos* needed work and told him “What do you guys [the government] want? Do you want them [the *vecinos*] to lynch us [local political representatives/presidents of cooperatives]?”¹⁰⁷ In the words of María, “they [the government] had to give us something [some kind of work], if they didn’t, all of the cooperatives were going to rise up.”¹⁰⁸

If these accounts suggest that entry into Villa 31 depended on working with cooperatives, what do they reveal about the policy design and implementation of the PMV? Did the PMV incentivize or merely require that cooperatives carry out improvements to homes?¹⁰⁹ The *Plan Integral* dating back to 2016 (prepared by SECISYU¹¹⁰) explains that – given the context of *Ley* 3.343, the *Plan de Mejoras*, and the importance of cooperatives within the community¹¹¹ – cooperatives should be involved in the homebuilding process. Policy documents from the World Bank¹¹² dating back to 2016 reflect similar sentiments. Both of these documents provide a snapshot

¹⁰⁶ Adriana (government social worker) in interview with the author, July 20, 2017. Similar comments were made across my interviews with other government actors, including social workers and architects.

¹⁰⁷ Atena (president of cooperative) in interview with the author, June 15, 2017.

¹⁰⁸ In interview with the author on January 12, 2018.

¹⁰⁹ This section deals with entry as it relates to the PMV. In the next section I discuss, in depth, the participation of cooperatives and other actors in homebuilding.

¹¹⁰ See *Plan Integral Retiro-Puerto Evaluación de Impacto Ambiental*.

¹¹¹ The historical importance of these topics is discussed in the context section of this essay.

¹¹² The *Project Appraisal Document (Report No. PAD2086)* explains that, “the plan [to improve existing housing stock] includes a program [the PMV] aimed at supporting incremental improvements of the housing stock within Barrio 31... it will be executed through a participatory process involving cooperatives, residents and final users.”

of the policy trajectory leading to the implementation of the PMV and indicate that, by 2016 (at least), the PMV was designed to require the participation of cooperatives. In fact, from 2014 onward, the government had begun contacting architects and other actors, such as social workers, in Villa 31 to collaborate on policies that would abandon the *Plan de Mejoras* and promote urban integration more broadly.¹¹³ As Agustín explains, these policies were to be laid out:

*...in the plan of integration [the Plan Integral], which is composed of several parts, a master plan for urban development, a plan for infrastructural projects that includes streets, public lighting, sewers, drainage systems, and potable water, and another important part, which is improvement of homes.*¹¹⁴

Recalling these early meetings leading to the *Plan Integral*, Agustín explains that in 2014, Gaston Mascias told his team that they couldn't plan anything without first talking to the architects that work inside the villa with the cooperatives.¹¹⁵ Thus, as architects working with cooperatives – essentially technical representatives that had enjoyed a legacy of collaborating with cooperatives on building projects – stood to benefit from urban integration involving resources being channeled into Villa 31, they acted as a critical nexus of information and negotiation between the government and cooperatives.¹¹⁶ This meant working with local political actors, who by a function of their representation within the community, were best positioned to grant or deny entry to the villa.

It is also essential to recall that cooperatives are not the only actors carrying out improvements to the built environment in Villa 31. Construction companies are involved in

¹¹³ These events were referred to repeatedly across interviews and participant observation involving government and nongovernment actors.

¹¹⁴ Agustín (non-government architect, working with cooperative) in interview with the author, July 14, 2017.

¹¹⁵ Agustín (María's architect), in interview with the author on July 14, 2017.

¹¹⁶ In an interview with Atena (president of construction cooperative), she told me that the architect Agustín had at one point suggested that she hire workers outside the villa, which she refused to concede to. Across other interviews with María, as well as participant observation involving her, Agustín, and government actors, it became clear that Agustín was in favor of awarding contracts to cooperatives for improvements to parks, homes, and eateries. Thus, initial bargaining with between the government and Agustín may have led him to suggest that cooperatives hire outside workers. It is unsurprising that the cooperatives would reject this idea and that he and the government would have to go along with allowing the cooperatives to hire residents instead.

infrastructural improvements (streets, water, sewer, and electrical lines) as well as improvements to housing under other programs (not the PMV).¹¹⁷ Thus, how important are cooperatives to the entry of the government into Villa 31 when other actors have also gained entry? Taken together, the evidence presented in this section and the next suggest that the government provided the cooperatives with the PMV to mitigate collective action, thereby reducing the transaction costs of carrying out improvements to other spaces in Villa 31 via construction companies. Indeed, given a legacy of self-management for gaining access to resources, the collective power of local political actors, and dealings between these actors and technical representatives, entry into Villa 31 became a crucial process through which local actors acquiesced through participation in building projects under the PMV. Moreover, even though the PMV requires that cooperatives be involved in carrying out improvements to existing homes (as policy documents suggest), it does not stipulate which cooperatives should be contracted. In this way, the PMV allows room for incentives that are determined on the ground as local actors move to capture resources and the government awards construction contracts based on political support. As the following sections on entry make clear, these arrangements set the political stage for the PMV and explain how local actors sought to wield entry as a bargaining tool while the government, seeking to reduce the transaction costs of policy implementation, used entry as a mechanism for local control.

A Bargaining Tool

As the anecdote at the beginning of this essay suggests, residents of Villa 31 depend on the power they have gained over their environment to compel the behavior of others. In this instance, Atena, the president of a local cooperative, threatened a construction company hired by the government to carry out site improvements. She implied that there would be corporeal

¹¹⁷ See context section of this essay for overview on integration policies and appendix for types of housing programs.

consequences if the workers did not put down their tools and immediately leave the villa. Her ability to wage such threats – by expecting that those she summons as backup will indeed come through – is rooted in her influence within the local community. A longstanding figure in Villa 31, residents display reverence and/or fear when she combs through the streets and pathways of her sector.¹¹⁸ While making rounds with her one afternoon, she stopped and spread her arms, inviting me to pause and appreciate the plaza and homes that her cooperative had been improving. When presenting me to her construction workers or the *vecinos* living in her sector, she allowed me only a brief moment to – as if on command – introduce myself, before interjecting and steering the conversation.¹¹⁹ Atena’s reputation stems from providing jobs and access to food, spearheading collective demand-making, protecting the interests of residents vis-à-vis the state, and rumors that she may be involved in illicit behavior within other trades, such as those related to drug-trafficking, that occur in Villa 31.¹²⁰ More recently, she has been touting the PMV to residents, providing a nexus between government employees and those living in homes slated for improvements.¹²¹ Following the public scene she made with the construction company, she earned a meeting with high-ranking government officials to argue over the number of contracts her cooperative was receiving as part of the PMV and other improvement projects related to public spaces.¹²² The extent to which such tactics result in concessions on the part of the government is suggestive of how local

¹¹⁸ I reached these conclusions based on participant observation and interviews. One notable example was a resident living in her sector who agreed to let me interview him – in front of her – when she introduced me to him. We arranged a meeting time for later in the week. The resident insisted on meeting me *outside* of the villa, where he explained that he did not trust the president of the cooperative. He asked me to tell her that the meeting never happened. He also said he would not consent (one of just three people out of all of those that I interviewed) to me recording the interview. Neither did he let me take notes. He also refused to answer many of my questions. In short, he was induced to agree to the interview in front of the local representative from his sector, only to secretly rescind that compliance later when she was not present.

¹¹⁹ These interactions occurred while engaging in participant observation on June 15, 2017.

¹²⁰ These details were confirmed across interviews, with both state and nonstate actors.

¹²¹ I observed her touting the program while engaging in participant observation. She also described these actions to me when I interviewed her on June 15, 2017.

¹²² This claim was corroborated by the president of the cooperative as well as by numerous government employees.

politics in Villa 31 affect public policy; that is, she is able to affect hers and her followers' access to resources and opportunities tied to public policies by demonstrating her ability to influence the decisions of other actors in Villa 31. The behavior of these other actors, either through collective acquiescence or collective resistance, stands to reduce or increase transaction costs of integration policies carried out in Villa 31. Concessions on the part of the government may come in the form of meetings with government officials, construction contracts, or other resources and opportunities distributed to actors in this community that originate with the state. Whether entering the villa or homes, government access to urban space – and thereby residents – necessary for carrying out the PMV has become a bargaining tool for actors within Villa 31 as they seek to minimize costs and maximize gains associated with the project.

Opportunities for actors to engage in political bargaining with respect to entry arise from the different levels at which the PMV requires entry. Entry begins with government employees gaining access to Villa 31. Government actors must also gain entry to residents' homes, where planning and improvements are carried out. Third, because the PMV involves cooperatives carrying out such improvements, it also entails cooperatives entering residents' homes. Fourth, in addition to gaining entry to homes, cooperatives must also gain entry to the sector of Villa 31 where the homes they are improving are located. Finally, cooperatives carrying out improvements sometimes face barriers even within their own sector, where social tensions along *manzanas* (blocks) may also present challenges for entry.¹²³ In short, entry may present a barrier for any actor seeking to gain access to an area of the villa where they are not already established.

From the perspective of this community, entry changes the status quo, which can threaten residents' livelihoods¹²⁴ or lead to opportunities to derive benefits from these changes. For political

¹²³ The next section addresses the designs of the PMV with respect to inter-sectoral and sectoral barriers.

¹²⁴ I assume that for those living in precarious situations any change in the status quo presents a risk or threat.

representatives inside Villa 31, this meant initially protecting their local interests (including their constituents) by denying the government entry. What's essential to understand about this initial response is that it fed into a longstanding impulse of local political actors to intercept information originating from outside Villa 31, decipher it, and disseminate it within.¹²⁵ If the system of political representation (discussed in the context section of this essay) bolstered local actors who represent the *vecinos* before the government, in meetings and through direct contact, it also created linkages between the government and certain residents, affecting the flow of information into the villa. This provides an opportunity for political representatives to capture and distribute information, just as they would any other resource. This also creates an opportunity to strategically provide misinformation that aligns with actors' goals. As Rodolfo explains, "the *delegado* of the oppositional political party [oppositional to the PRO] said, 'they're [the government] going to enter your home, they're going to fix your house, and then afterward they're going to charge you, they're going to sell your house, and they're going to throw you out.'"¹²⁶

At the same time, the notion that rumors¹²⁷ by local political actors were the only force at play affecting initial attempts at entry by the government would be ungenerous and inaccurate. From the perspective of those who live in precarious conditions – with respect to their illegal tenancy on the land, a general lack of security, and a history of state-led expulsions in Villa 31 – concerns over state-led activity in their community are certainly founded. Moreover, even if elected representatives meet regularly with the government, this does not mean that the information the government chooses to share is perfect. As María explains, "this government

¹²⁵ In multiple interviews with residents and government employees they explained how asymmetrical information between this community and the rest of the city leads to this phenomenon.

¹²⁶ Rodolfo (president of construction cooperative) in interview with author on August 2, 2017.

¹²⁷ The word rumors was frequently used by state and nonstate actors to describe the flow of information through the villa.

sometimes does things without consulting us... they made that mistake when they entered into the neighborhood.”¹²⁸ In this view, representatives left in the dark about how policies will be implemented may surmise the worse. Finally, responding to the concerns of their constituencies in Villa 31 would be an example of a democratic system functioning as it should.

Policies that employ companies contracted by the government to carry out infrastructural improvements, such as those to streets, sewer lines, and drainage systems, create a visible reminder that the work in Villa 31 is being contracted out to non-residents.¹²⁹ Some of these improvements include demolishing similar improvements previously carried out by construction cooperatives, even when local actors do not necessarily agree that such changes need to be made.¹³⁰ While an analysis of the trajectory of government decision-making related to this policy design (the contracting of construction companies for these types of projects) is outside the scope of this paper, the evidence presented here suggests that contracting construction companies opened space for political backlash that has been mitigated by awarding cooperatives the necessary *convenios* to carry out improvements to other public spaces, such as those to parks, plazas, and athletic fields, as well as to existing homes. Once local political actors learned of the economic benefits of participating in the PMV, that is, how they stood to earn money and distribute jobs through construction contracts – particularly those representatives that also have cooperatives – many of the them were compelled to get on board. In some cases, this meant working with technical representatives to set up construction cooperatives, which has led to an increase in cooperatives

¹²⁸ In interview with author on June 5, 2017.

¹²⁹ Throughout daily interactions in Villa 31, residents pointed out non-resident construction companies carrying out improvements. Sometimes this seemed to be a source of tension, at others it was matter-of-fact. For example, residents were quick to criticize improvements that were delayed or that created negative externalities, such as flooding or mud, during the construction process. At other times, residents simply noted that construction companies were working on “such and such” project.

¹³⁰ While making rounds with María, she pointed out streets in her sector that her cooperative had previously improved under the *Plan de Mejoras*, arguing that they were already sufficient, and that the government did not need to have them redone by construction companies.

carrying out improvements in Villa 31.¹³¹ In the case of all three cooperatives with whom I conducted interviews and engaged in participant observation, none of them had previously worked in construction on homes or improvements to existing homes in Villa 31, yet all had participated in infrastructural projects under the *Plan de Mejoras*.¹³² These local political actors shaped entry to gain access to construction projects as part of the PMV and public spaces. Acting as gatekeepers, they blocked initial access to homeowners in the villa targeted for the PMV and loosened their hold on residents as they sought to secure their participation in the program.

For residents living in homes slated for improvements, their principal source of leverage derives from their home. They may choose to deny entry to government employees and / or cooperatives. At crucial moments throughout the PMV – when construction is not advancing as they had hoped, they are unsatisfied with the quality of work, or they have reasons to mistrust the project as a whole – some residents have locked their doors to government employees and cooperatives, using entry as a bargaining tool in an attempt to influence outcomes of the PMV.¹³³ While perhaps small in comparison to government or local representative power, locking one's door is especially consequential in the PMV because many residents, while initially asked to move out during construction, refused to do so, either out of fear of losing their home or for lack of monetary resources necessary for renting somewhere else during construction.¹³⁴ By refusing to move out of their homes, these residents used entry as a bargaining tool, influencing the course of the PMV.

¹³¹ María (president of construction cooperative/local representative) in interview with author on June 5, 2017.

¹³² Some construction workers also had experience working outside the villa in related projects, such as drywalling or as electricians. Notwithstanding, my data suggest that the PMV was ambitious given the minimal technical training that cooperatives initially brought to the project.

¹³³ Conclusions derived from participant observation, interviews, and meeting minutes prepared by government employees.

¹³⁴ This was confirmed across interviews with state and nonstate actors.

A Mechanism for Local Control

Distinct from leveraging entry as a bargaining tool to win concessions from government actors, entry as a mechanism for local control refers to how the advancement of the PMV through Villa 31 is wielded to influence the behavior of local actors. In a private meeting I attended in the government's architect office in Villa 31 in July of 2017,¹³⁵ María and Agustín negotiated the terms of construction contracts¹³⁶ with a government official. The meeting had been called to discuss opportunities that could assuage María, whose cooperative had been marginalized in recent PMV projects awarded to other cooperatives.¹³⁷ At the beginning of the meeting, responding to comments made by the official about how María's cooperative had not been given contracts in Güemes – the second sector of the villa where the PMV was deployed – María told him that she knew she was left out of these projects for political reasons. The government official then provided an overview of current housing construction projects in the villa and pitched one of these opportunities to María and her architect, offering to arrange for funds to be provided via “*convenio*” versus “*decreto*.” The difference between a “contract” and a “decree” is of consequence for cooperatives. While contracts result in resources necessary to carry out site improvements funded by the government up front, decrees require that the cooperative come up with expenses out of pocket, which are reimbursed when the work is complete.¹³⁸ This can make

¹³⁵ The government's architect office is located on the top floor of Eduardo and his wife Natalia's home in Galpón 1, the block where the PMV was first rolled out. The government offered to improve/complete construction of the top floor of their home as part of the PMV in exchange for using the offices throughout its implementation. This would be another example of how the government has used the advancement of the PMV to influence the behavior of local actors. In this instance, the consequences are far-reaching. Not only did the advancement of the PMV into Galpón 1 influence the decision of Eduardo and Natalia, who live where the governments' offices are located (and who stand to benefit from improvements), by carving out a physical presence on the block where the PMV was first rolled out the government has also influenced the decisions of other residents. I address more of these themes in the section on compliance in this essay.

¹³⁶ Agustín

¹³⁷ As it happens, the political affiliations of these cooperatives align with the PRO government, versus María, who rallies local support for an independent political party.

¹³⁸ This framework creates opportunities for private construction companies, who presumably have more material resources than many local cooperatives, to absorb the risk of such projects.

or break an opportunity for cooperatives, who may lack the material resources necessary for fronting the costs of construction. Meanwhile, Agustín also sought to have the government award contracts for improvements to two *comedores* (eateries), María's and Atena's.¹³⁹ As these negotiations make clear, entry by way of local political actors has had lasting effects on the development of the PMV – and related integration projects – as local actors move to protect their interests and continue capturing resources. These arrangements extend government power through this community because resources empower cooperatives to distribute jobs and benefits among their followers.

On the other hand, the government has used entry as a mechanism to exploit local political cleavages and make strategic gains, undermining the power of these local stakeholders. Within the PMV, these goals have gathered steam in two ways. First, the government has assigned cooperatives to work in sectors where they previously exercised little political and economic influence in an attempt to break with local spheres of power that political representatives have enjoyed. As María explained to me one morning, Diego Fernandez, the head of SECISYU, told her early on in the project that she needed to end sectoral feuds by letting other cooperatives work in her sector. Atena also complained one day that the government wanted to send her to another part of the villa to carry out improvements, forcing her to “meddle” in these areas versus sticking to work in her own sector.¹⁴⁰ While attempting to break with sectoral divisions in Villa 31 has brought cooperatives into sectors where they otherwise probably would not have carried out improvements, it has also had consequences for the redistribution of capital across this community.

¹³⁹ Public policies, separate from those included in the integration of Villa 31, provide resources for cooperatives to open eateries. These resources go toward feeding their members and their families. Under the current integration policies, improvements to eateries have been billed as improvements to public spaces and provide another opportunity for local political actors to capture resources.

¹⁴⁰ Atena (president of cooperative/local representative) in interview/participant observation with the author in June 2017.

For example, to gain entry to Playón to carry out the PMV, Rodolfo¹⁴¹ paid off local political leaders. This was because his cooperative lacked power in this sector. The *delegados* of the *manzana* where improvements were to be carried out leveraged their demands with threats that they would send *chorros* (robbers) to sabotage the project by stealing materials.¹⁴² In short, just as the government has used the PMV to undermine sectoral strongholds across Villa 31, so too have local politics continued to determine the distribution of resources within.

Entry also became a mechanism through which the government undermines local power as the PMV increasingly brought residents into direct contact with government employees and appointed officials. This is particularly true as the PMV got underway and the need to rely on local political actors to gain access to the population diminished.¹⁴³ Direct linkages between the government and residents undermine local power because they interrupt the brokering that often occurs, both on the demand and supply of politics. Whereas the distribution of goods and services often moves through local political representatives/brokers, or *punteros*,¹⁴⁴ direct access to government on the part of residents opens new channels for political patronage and clientelism. On the demand side of politics, direct linkages with government temper collective demand making as well as the value of “access” to the government that local political representatives provide.

A Strategic Location

The main route that traverses Villa 31 is usually abuzz with activity. Pushcarts or buggies driven by residents transport foodstuffs and restaurant inventory. They share the street with larger trucks, driven by construction workers, that transport materials for building projects into the villa. Dense pedestrian traffic – mostly residents, a few government employees and/or appointed

¹⁴¹ President of cooperative.

¹⁴² This story was related to me by María (president of cooperative/local representative) on January 12, 2018. Other unnamed participants were present at the interview; when asked by her they confirmed some of the details.

¹⁴³ These processes were confirmed across interviews with state and nonstate actors and participant observation.

¹⁴⁴ See context section of this essay for more on *punteros*.

officials moving in groups, a police officer or two, and perhaps some visitors – slows the way. The street is lined on both sides with multiple-story structures, mostly made of brick or concrete. On the ground floor of their homes, many residents operate local businesses, such as hardware stores, convenience stores, hair salons and barber shops, or restaurants. The upper floors might have rooms for rent as well as provide space where the owner of the building lives. From the *feria* (street market) at the villa's entrance, the walk along this route to Playón Oeste and Playón Este, the two sectors where the PMV was first carried out, is about ten minutes. Standing at the point where these two sectors meet, *Autopista Ilia* – the highway that cuts through the center of Villa 31 – passes overhead.

Many residents I spoke with argue that the decision to begin deploying the PMV in Playón Oeste and Playón Este (commonly referred to as one unit of territory, “Playón”) was strategic. Relative to poorer sectors of the villa, marked by less accessibility, less commerce, and more precarious structures, these sectors seem more developed. In María's words:

*In Playón you have the main access to the neighborhood, that's why they [the government] chose Playón... it's wide, you have the highway there, it's most visible, and it's also visible from outside. That's why they chose to start in Playón, they're strategies that they use to choose this over that, nothing is genuine. In the area behind it [on the streets where the PMV was first deployed], people don't have sewer lines, they have septic tanks. Why not start there first?*¹⁵³

By beginning in Playón, the PMV became immediately visible to actors both within and outside of Villa 31. Within the villa, anyone walking along the main route is more likely to move through these sectors than other less visible and less central areas. Residents are thus immediately confronted with government activity in their community, not only activity related to infrastructural projects, but also activity related to the upgrading of existing homes. In Playón, the government also enjoys the demonstrable effects of these policies, and it's not uncommon to see high-ranking

¹⁵³ María (president of cooperative/local representative) in interview with the author on June 5, 2017.

officials traversing Villa 31, pointing at and discussing recent upgrades. From outside of Villa 31, *Autopista Ilia* – a main artery of access into the City of Buenos Aires – showcases these recent policies. The roofs and upper floors of homes that residents have constructed beneath and around the highway have, over the years, grown so close to it that they almost encroach upon the cars that pass them by. While stopped in traffic one day on the highway just above Playón, I watched as residents climbed spiral staircases to access the upper floors of their homes, noticing that a short hop over the guardrail would bring me into immediate contact with those who, as part of the current upgrading policies, stand to be displaced.¹⁵⁴ Those who are situated beneath and right next to the highway stand to lose their homes so that the highway can be converted into a park.¹⁵⁵ Just beyond these homes, façades of homes improved as part of the PMV provide evidence of recent attempts at integration.

From a social-ecological perspective, beginning in Playón also seems strategic inasmuch as it diminished the immediate transaction costs of policy implementation. Not only does the visibility and level of social development in Playón diminish security risks for government employees working in the villa, these areas were populated more recently.¹⁵⁶ Compared to other sectors of the villa where memories of violent expulsions pervade, many of these residents who arrived more recently may be more receptive to government activity.¹⁵⁷ Additionally, some older

¹⁵⁴ New homes in another area of the villa have been constructed to house residents displaced by the highway park project. However, homeowners under and around the highway complain that they do not want to move because they collect rents from renters, which the new homes do not account for. This was a common theme across interviews and participant observation. For example, in a meeting between residents and government actors I attended on June 15, 2017, residents complained they would lose their rental properties due to relocation. In another example, in an interview with María on June 5, 2017, she told me that residents had told her “sobre mi cadáver” (over my dead body) will I move. I address these homeowners’ reluctance to relocation in more detail in the compliance section of this essay.

¹⁵⁵ The plans for the park were inspired by the High Line in Manhattan.

¹⁵⁶ The demographic composition of Villa 31 became evident through participant observation and interviews and was confirmed by World Bank and Inter-American policy documents cited in the context section of this essay.

¹⁵⁷ For example, in an interview with Manuela (resident) on August 9, 2017, she recalled how the military, in the 1970s, was forcefully removing people from the villa. When they appeared armed at her door to evict her and her family, she stood in the doorway with her children and told the officials that they would have to kill her before she

sectors of the villa tend to be marked by solidarity among more established residents,¹⁵⁸ whereas social cleavages along ethnic and socioeconomic divides, even within a single *manzana*, provide points of entry for government employees.¹⁵⁹ Once improvements are underway, visibility of upgrades work to attract other actors, such as cooperatives and residents living in precarious homes, toward the PMV. As Rodolfo explains:

*The people have more confidence now, they're more enthusiastic to have their own home redone because they've seen how it turned out for others, that nothing bad happened, that the improvements were made and that it turned out spectacularly beautiful, and now they want the same for themselves.*¹⁶⁰

Thus, by beginning in the most visible and least contentious sectors of Villa 31, the government converted entry – at first an obstacle – to something that residents sought.

How Local Politics Shaped the Implementation of the PMV

Used as a bargaining tool, a mechanism for local control, and a strategic location, interactions between state and nonstate actors surrounding entry to Villa 31 shaped the PMV. To gain entry, the government needed to assuage local political actors who were threatened by changes to the status quo. On the one hand, their economic interests were undermined by the loss of construction contracts related to infrastructural improvements, while on the other, they stood to benefit from an overall increase in construction projects in their community. These local actors moved to capture opportunities to disseminate information and carry out upgrades to homes. In this sense, entry has relied on the deepening of government presence and public policy in this community. Such deepening has occurred within the context of local politics of upgrades to the built environment involving government actors, cooperatives, residents, and architects engaged in

would leave. With respect to current integration policies – at the time I spoke with Manuela – she expressed that she was not interested in dealing with the government.

¹⁵⁸ This was revealed to me across multiple interviews and participant observation. One example would be *manzana* 22, one of the oldest blocks in the villa.

¹⁵⁹ An example would be Galpón 1, where the PMV was first rolled out.

¹⁶⁰ Rodolfo in interview with the author on August 2, 2017.

competing for and ensuring access to resources necessary for carrying out improvements in Villa 31. To carry out these policies, the government also sought to reduce the transaction costs between residents and government actors. As we shall see in greater detail in the next section on participation, while operating within existing power structures has generated economic activity benefitting local cooperatives and, arguably “homeowners,” it has also undermined the interests of residents living in homes improved by these cooperatives and contributed to a fraught political culture. This has opened new channels for political competition and social tension because these politics determine who gets what with respect to resources and opportunities channeled toward building projects in Villa 31.

The Challenges of Participation

Why didn't the cooperatives show up to the meeting [the meeting between the government and residents regarding the PMV]? Before, when they wanted to snatch up the work they [the cooperatives] wouldn't leave us in peace, there wasn't a single day of the week, Saturdays, Sundays, every day there were meetings because they wanted to snatch up the work and now, after they've snatched it up and haven't completed it properly, why won't they show us their faces in the meeting?

– Magdalena, resident living in recently upgraded home¹⁶²

You [the president of the cooperative] have to administer the money, it's not like the government is going to give you the materials [for construction]. The government gives you the gross funds and you have to analyze the timeframe for the work, how much you're going to pay each person, how much you're going to pay yourself, where you're going to buy the cheapest materials – not the worst quality, rather, the cheapest but of the same quality – by shopping around for the best price.

– Rodolfo, president of cooperative¹⁶³

This program [the PMV] has a huge problem, that is, there's a directorate that's taken the name of the program – Dirección General de Mejoramiento de Vivienda – and they believe [those under the directorate] that they are the entire program [the entire PMV]... They don't understand that they're just one pillar of the

¹⁶² In interview with the author on June 26, 2017.

¹⁶³ In interview with the author on August 2, 2017.

program, just one instrument out of many, not the only one... Naming the directorate after the program effectively established that they are the program, making the rest of us nothing more than support [for the program]... and it's a huge problem, because they don't give us the resources that they give them, so it's impossible. In my view, that's the huge problem with the program, there's a directorate with this name and it unconsciously generates this idea that they alone are the program, when in fact, the program should have everyone from different areas [of government] working together. If not, there is no program.

– Trinidad, government social worker/coordinator¹⁶⁴ for GOPP¹⁶⁵

The meeting that the government organized was starting in ten minutes.¹⁶⁷ “If I go, I’ll just get into a fight with the architects,” María explained. The government had invited cooperatives, government architects, social workers, and homeowners living and working in Galpón 1 so that those participating in the PMV could share their experiences. Galpón 1 was the first block where the PMV had been rolled out, fifteen months ago. María spent time here each day following up on the progress of improvements. She had told me about the meeting a few minutes ago while I was making rounds with her through house number 39, the last of five homes that her cooperative was improving in Galpón 1. Although unwilling to attend, she offered to escort me to the government offices down the street, where the meeting would be held. It would be led by social workers and architects, the latter of whom oversee the daily technical operations of the cooperatives, activities that had, over the last few months, become a source of tension between María and the government as her cooperative carried out improvements. Moreover, homeowners would be given the opportunity to speak freely in a forum intended to troubleshoot challenges that underpin the PMV, such as doubts about cooperatives carrying out improvements, uncertainty about the quality of materials used, remaining in one’s home through an arduous construction process, delays, and

¹⁶⁴ In interview with the author on August 7, 2017.

¹⁶⁵ See overview of government power structure in the Appendix section of this essay. Those under the directorate primarily provide technical resources, versus the social resources that the Gerencia Operativo de Planeamiento Participativo provides.

¹⁶⁷ Meeting attended by the author on June 17, 2017.

disputes between neighbors over changes to the built environment that create negative externalities.

As we made our way down the recently-installed spiral staircase of house number 39, I reminded María that we needed get going and asked again if she'd be willing to attend. She remained firm, neither she nor her representatives would join; the meeting would be "more political than technical." Out on the street, I looked up at the second-floor addition to house number 39, its façade still unpainted, its owner still renting a room from her neighbor in house number 40 next door. A government sign tacked to the front of the home read, "Let's enjoy more of the Neighborhood, Excuse the disturbances." The names of the cooperatives carrying out improvements, by now well known to the residents living in this sector of Villa 31, were included on the announcement. Moments later, we made our way up Galpón 1, passing house numbers 40, 42, 43, and 45, the other homes on the block that María's cooperative had improved. Numbers 42 and 43, peachy orange and royal blue, had recently been finished. In the government offices just around the corner, their owners sat in a circle next to other residents, social workers, and architects – waiting to begin.

María's decision to avoid a meeting intended to create a forum of participation between cooperatives, homeowners, and the government is an emblematic example of how tensions that arise out of the project can overwhelm the actors involved. A central figure, residents in Galpón 1 had grown accustomed to seeing María and her workers carrying out improvements. Residents in these parcels where upgrades had been carried out were the guinea pigs of the PMV; cooperatives learned on the job, in their homes. At the same time, with the sacrifices of these homeowners, the stresses over the last fifteen months had produced a better equipped, better trained, and overall more capable cooperative. Cooperatives were involved in the installation of staircases, drywall,

appliances, and carried out structural improvements that had – arguably – improved living conditions for residents that had participated in the PMV.

Thus, the PMV involves a fundamental shift in how residents of Villa 31 participate in homebuilding. Long accustomed to providing their own resources and making decisions about how, when, where, and what to build, the PMV not only brings cooperatives and state actors into the homebuilding process, it seeks to conform to the norms of conventional building practices. As actors provide technical and material resources, they exercise control over the improvement process. As such, one of the most complicated aspects of the PMV, participation, entails decision-making by diverse actors at every level of the project using the resources available to them to pursue their interests. In this context, this section focuses on challenges of participation within the PMV, locating how decision-making is aggregated across this community. To do so, I build on Turner's (1976) framework for participation, which views participation as a function of who *decides* versus who *provides*, that is, who decides what shall be done and who provides the resources, both material and technical, necessary for realization.

Who decides versus who provides?

Renters living in homes slated for upgrades are the least empowered under the PMV. They neither decide what upgrades are to be made nor provide the material or technical resources necessary for carrying out such upgrades.¹⁶⁹

For homeowners in the PMV, participation is limited. The government designs the policy trajectory and cooperatives and government employees provide the technical and material

¹⁶⁹ This was an ongoing theme across interviews and participant observation with state and nonstate actors. For example, in a meeting with residents of *Manzana* 22 held on July 31, 2017, Adriana (government social worker) told residents that the government was hoping to mitigate negative consequences, such as displacement, that had occurred as a result of implementing the PMV in other sectors the villa.

resources necessary for home upgrades.¹⁷⁰ Thus, while homeowners have veto power and the final say as to whether the project will move forward, the innovation and autonomous decision-making they have relied on in the past to construct their homes are undermined by the technical and material resources that the government and the cooperative provide. Moreover, participation of homeowners is largely predetermined, that is, the policy trajectory of the PMV, as designed by the government, limits the participation of homeowners by not including them in the broader decision-making process leading to policy design. For example, homeowners participate in the initial survey process with social workers and architects to inform the government about the upgrades that are important to them. They also participate in meetings with social workers and architects designed to inform residents about the policy trajectory, foment a sense of community among residents living on *manzanas* (blocks) where upgrades are carried out, and provide a forum where the government can gather information to calibrate policies. Certain decisions, such as the color of paint used on the exterior and interior of homes, are also relegated to homeowners. While these modes of participation might influence policy outcomes, they are part of a predesigned trajectory that the government uses to progress through the PMV.

While cooperatives also operate within the general framework designed by the government, their participation grows out of the political power they have amassed, the technical resources they had leading up to the PMV, and the control they exert over their own operations. First, building on the nexus that cooperatives provide for entry into the villa by the government, local cooperatives may participate in a game of favors with the government to gain access to the

¹⁷⁰ This was an ongoing theme across interviews and participant observation. For example, in an interview with the author on August 7, 2017, Trinidad (government social worker) presented internal policy documents, including memos and flow charts, detailing the designs and trajectory of the PMV. Other government actors and residents corroborated these details.

PMV.¹⁷² Second, cooperatives with more technical resources also seemed to participate more, not only in decisions about homebuilding, but also with respect to the number of contracts they receive under the PMV.¹⁷³ Technical resources may come from outsiders, such as politicians, attorneys, architects, and accountants that solve administrative and technical challenges for cooperatives, whose presidents generally lack the skills to do so without relying on outside help. For example, the cooperative's architect, acting as a technical representative on behalf of the cooperative, works with government architects, engineers, and social workers to make decisions about design and construction. While my data suggest that these architects were heavily involved in the initial design of improvements to homes under the PMV and public spaces that cooperatives carry out,¹⁷⁴ I did not uncover how the review process on the side of the government unfolds. Overall, it seems that the more prepared that cooperatives are to operate within an institutionalized framework under the PMV, the less costly contracting them may be for the government.

At the same time, despite government oversight over materials used and the work carried out, cooperatives maintain a degree of power over their own operations. They choose what construction workers to hire, which affects the level of skill that each one brings to the project.

¹⁷² Not all cooperatives participate in favors. María explained one day that employees and appointed officials working with SECISYU asked her if she would support the PRO in the upcoming elections, to which she replied, "I don't want to burn myself [with her constituents?]," and told the official that she respected their work in the villa but that she did not want to bring them voters for the elections. What did become clear throughout my fieldwork is that, even if cooperatives such as María's don't participate in clientelist networks and still receive some contracts, cooperatives that support the PRO received ample contracts, sometimes even much more, under the PMV and other projects related to public spaces. Thus, even though a higher-ranking government official told me that all cooperatives were included in the PMV, regardless of political standing, a lower-ranking employee admitted that "we [the government] have our own political game to play." In short, I think local political power ensures that cooperatives receive *some* contracts while their individual technical capacity and strategic government decisions stand to influence the amount of work they receive.

¹⁷³ Rodolfo's cooperative would be an example of one that is technically well-equipped, in part because he owns other companies in Villa 31, one of which handles maintenance for a large bus company whose operations are at the bus terminal in front of Villa 31. Rodolfo's cooperative has been awarded the most contracts out of all cooperatives carrying out upgrades under the PMV.

¹⁷⁴ María and her architect provided me with numerous site plans, such as blueprints and proposals, related to home improvements and improvements to public spaces, such as plazas and local eateries.

They also choose the pay structure for these employees, affecting how workers seek to maximize their wages. Finally, cooperatives enjoy leeway with respect to the materials that they purchase, despite stipulations in their contracts over the quality of the materials that should be used.¹⁷⁵ Diego, María's electrician, discusses the quality of work carried out by cooperatives:

*There are three factors, in first place, the quality and requisites of the workers, in second place, how they are paid, for example, per job or per day, and in third place, the quality of materials.*¹⁷⁶

With respect to pay structures and timeframe for construction, Diego adds:

*The people here, they see all this money and they say, "oh, money, money, lots of money!" And so, you see, they get startled, and what do they do, they work only for the money, rapidly, so that the money is most important and so that the owner of the cooperative makes money.*¹⁷⁷

As such, workers who are paid by the job, versus by the day, may choose to maximize the number of jobs they complete, thereby maximizing profits for themselves and for the cooperative. On the other hand, those who are paid by the day may take more time to complete the job correctly. With respect to materials used by the cooperative, Diego explains:

One notices the difference, and not only with the electrical work, but also with the plumbing and some other things – not everything, for example, the floors are the same [in all homes], with this the cooperatives are all the same, they buy the materials in the same place – but you have things that yeah, you notice the difference, mostly in my budget for materials, is where I see it. The other day this other cooperative called me, and this electrician says to me "I have a problem, will you come and look at it?" So, I go and I look first at his electric panel, and it's like this [demonstrates with hands], tiny, the electric panel. And my electric panel is like this [demonstrates with hands], its big, and I have one for each floor. Easy to have twelve breakers, well divided, all of them well made, well made so that they last you many years, while the others, no. I don't know if it's because they don't know or because they don't want to provide the necessary materials to do this kind of work. But there's a big difference in the advantage that I have, that I work with a cooperative that provides good materials, necessary materials, so that the work

¹⁷⁵ María provided the author with copies of contracts her cooperative has with SECISYU and other government organisms under CABA. Her contract to participate in the PMV under Decreto 495/10 y 231/12 states that "all works must be executed... with good quality materials," and includes a list of the parameters, such as the brand and quality, that should be used in the following categories: cement, iron, iron masonry, and drywall, among others.

¹⁷⁶ Diego, in interview with the author on June 22, 2017.

¹⁷⁷ Diego, in interview with the author on June 22, 2017.

*turns out good. If not, I also would have done a poor job too. I can't tell the cooperative "no, buy me good materials" or "instead of six I need twelve breakers." Also, I believe that Juan [María's husband, who buys materials for the cooperative] brings a lot of influence, because he understands my work, he's also an electrician, and so he brings in good materials. That's the difference.*¹⁷⁸

According to María, some cooperatives choose to purchase materials of lesser quality so they can pocket more money. She went on to explain that she chooses to purchase better quality materials because she wants to avoid having her neighbors “bang on her door at night”¹⁷⁹ complaining about the kind of work that she has done. Left to make decisions about the workers they hire, pay structure, and materials, participation of cooperatives under the PMV stand to affect the quality of work they carry out.

While the local political, social, and spatial context in Villa 31 determine feasibility of site interventions, and indeed affect their trajectory,¹⁸⁰ the state exercises considerable power over decisions about where the PMV advances and how to provide technical and material resources. First, sectors where the PMV will be rolled out are largely predetermined. Presentation documents assembled by the government dating back to 2016 show the sectors and blocks slated to receive upgrades under the PMV through 2019. Second, the government, in working within the local political context of Villa 31, selects which cooperatives will carry out improvements to homes. Thus, as the PMV is shaped by a game of local politics, homeowners do not get to choose who carries out upgrades to their homes, despite disparity with respect to how cooperatives operate and the quality of work cooperatives are positioned to carry out.

¹⁷⁸ Diego, in interview with the author on June 22, 2017

¹⁷⁹ María while involved in a discussion with the author in June of 2017.

¹⁸⁰ Structural factors, such as the condition of homes on a given block and the viability of site interventions given social factors on a given block influence government decisions. Government employees adjudicate strategies for site interventions, drawing on information they've collected in their interactions with residents. These processes were outlined across interviews with government employees. I also observed these processes play out while engaging in participant observation in the government's offices, both inside and outside of Villa 31. For example, before attending a meeting about the PMV with residents in June of 2017, government employees discussed a strategy for pitching the program to residents based on the context of *manzana* in the villa where the project was to be carried out.

Finally, the government provides a host of technical skills and materials that function outside existing systems of homebuilding in Villa 31. For example, while residents have grown accustomed to using brick and concrete in the building process, materials used under the PMV, such as Durlock (a type of drywall), were largely foreign to residents before the PMV. In addition to providing these materials, installation requires technical skills that are either acquired on the job through trial and error to the detriment of the homeowner or, for some cooperatives, led them to contract construction workers that had experience working with these materials.

Sources of Tension and Frustration

The model for participation under the PMV gives rise to tensions and frustration between cooperatives and government actors participating in the homebuilding process. Participation in homebuilding under the PMV includes interactions among government actors, among the government and cooperatives, among the government and homeowners, among cooperatives, among cooperatives and homeowners, among homeowners, and among the government, cooperatives, and homeowners. The government plays the largest role with respect to decisions and providing of resources, followed by cooperatives and then homeowners. Finally, the government also acts as arbiter, seeking to diffuse tensions that arise between other actors and channel their behavior through institutions. In this section, I analyze participation in homebuilding under the PMV by drawing on experiences of the actors involved.

Renters

Unfortunately, I was not able to interview renters displaced by the PMV, as their precarious living conditions made them less accessible.¹⁸¹ Second-hand accounts¹⁸² suggest that renters living

¹⁸¹ I did interview other renters not displaced by the PMV. In one example, in an interview on May 24, 2017, Hector (artist/resident of Villa 31), shared his experiences about moving around Villa 31, sometimes sleeping on the street while looking for employment opportunities and a place to live.

¹⁸² Across interviews with state and nonstate actors, I asked respondents to share their experiences and observations regarding the plight of renters.

in homes improved under the PMV are largely excluded from the benefits of the program. To be viable, the PMV needed to operate within local norms of property ownership in Villa 31. This meant gathering information from diverse actors in the villa to determine who the proper owners of homes were, and then rolling out the program in a way that respected their rights to ownership.¹⁸³ As Paco explained,¹⁸⁴ the government feels certain that they have correctly located the owner of each home through multiple interviews among residents and social workers.¹⁸⁵ Such interviews involve five actors: employees from SECISYU, *delegados*, alleged homeowners, renters, and witnesses. Across these interviews, the government determines who the interested parties are and establishes a history of the home. The overall result of respecting these norms has been that many renters¹⁸⁶ living in homes improved under the PMV were displaced when construction began. According to homeowners, the displacement process was handled by the government. As Eduardo, a homeowner living in Galpón 1, explains:

*Frankly, social workers came here and handled it, we really don't know anything about how they dealt with it. This group of people from the government came here and took care of everything, they dealt directly with the renters, we didn't have anything to do with it.*¹⁸⁷

This shows how the government handled interactions that would normally occur between homeowners and their renters. Moreover, if renters were initially excluded from the PMV, they have been further excluded from benefits of the program by market mechanisms because in

¹⁸³ I discuss how operating within these norms made the PMV more viable in the section on compliance in this essay.

¹⁸⁴ Paco (government employee), in an interview with the author on August 3, 2017.

¹⁸⁵ This was largely confirmed across my interviews. Some residents expressed initial concerns in letting the government carry out surveys because they said that their renters would try to steal their homes. However, it seemed apparent that this has not been the outcome of such surveys based on interviews with those who live on blocks and in sectors where such surveys have been completed and where construction under the PMV has begun.

¹⁸⁶ For example, an internal report prepared by SECISYU in February 2017 states that 53 percent (31) of the homes improved in Galpón 1 are occupied by the homeowner while 47 percent (27) are occupied by renters. Of all the inquilinos, just “one family could continue renting during the improvements,” while 19 were relocated and 7 were evicted.

¹⁸⁷ Eduardo, in interview with the author on June 19, 2017.

recently improved homes, rents stand to increase. For example, in Eduardo's four-story home in Galpón 1, he and wife previously rented out floors they did not live on for 2,000 pesos per month. Post-improvements, each of these stands to go for 3,500 pesos.¹⁸⁸ Thus, given the commercialization of the informal housing market in Villa 31, a lack of inclusion on the part of renters, and lack of a mechanism that prevents market-driven increases in rents, the PMV stands to further marginalize the lower echelon of the community.

Homeowners

I introduced myself to Eduardo at the meeting in Galpón 1 that María had chosen not to attend. After asking if he would participate in my study, he handed me his business card that read "Services for: Masonry, Plumbing, Natural Gas, Welding, and Painting," and told me to text him at the number on the bottom of the card. Two days later, María delivered me to the metal door on the ground floor of Eduardo and his wife Natalia's home. I climbed the newly-enclosed spiral staircase, stopping to knock on the door located at the entrance on the second floor.¹⁸⁹ Eduardo offered me one hand and patted me on the back with the other. Although worn and tough, there was something delicate to his touch. A few steps from the doorway, Natalia moved some toys around to make space, nodding her head in the direction of a small sofa that seemed too large for the room. Sitting on the sofa, I took in the smell of fresh paint. As we passed around the *mate*, Eduardo described how they had built their home, using his hands to articulate the building process, as if explaining it to an apprentice for the first time. Pausing every so often, he would

¹⁸⁸ During interviews, residents provided these estimates. Overall, residents seemed well-informed about the cost of rents across the villa, including disparities between more affluent versus less affluent areas (affluent here is used from the perspective of my respondents).

¹⁸⁹ Technically, this would be called the first floor in Argentina (I use American terms to refer to floors throughout this essay). In total (in American terms), Eduardo and Natalia's home has four stories (ground floor, second floor, third floor, and fourth floor) with a terrace on top. They normally rent out the (ground) floor and third floor of their home. The second floor is where they live. Presently, the government's offices are located on the fourth floor.

return Natalia's glance before folding his hands and sitting up straight until he found the back of his chair. In a state of brief repose, he listened as she added details to the story of their home.

Homeowners who participate in the PMV stand to lose their most valuable asset if the program does not go well. Initially, many of them worry that their renters will take advantage of the program to try and seize ownership of their home.¹⁹⁰ Once these concerns are mitigated by government actors, homeowners worry about whether cooperatives have enough experience in construction to carry out improvements to their homes. These tensions are exacerbated because homeowners often remain in their homes during improvements, observing the construction process, including mistakes and challenges, firsthand. Sometimes residents are left with site interventions unresolved for months at a time, with little power to effect changes over their situation. Many homeowners have experience working in construction. Thus, from the perspective of homeowners, watching cooperatives carry out improvements to their home is a frustrating experience. As Eduardo notes:

*This door here, they [the cooperative] had to install it three times... because it didn't close, because it wasn't aligned... it's a problem with the laborer... if I'm going to install a door, I have to know that the door has to be level, that the door has to be even, and that the door has to close well.*¹⁹¹

The PMV also introduces building materials that many homeowners are skeptical about. To stave off security and environmental risks, such as break-ins and humidity, residents have spent many years using durable materials to construct their homes.¹⁹² While brick and cement have proven their durability over time, materials such as drywall present new risks. These challenges

¹⁹⁰ Eduardo, in interview with the author on June 19, 2017

¹⁹¹ This was a common theme across interviews with state and nonstate actors.

¹⁹² These claims are substantiated by interviews with state and nonstate actors, participant observation, and internal reports prepared by SECISYU that I gained access to via Google Drive in August 2017. For example, one report details conversations from a PMV follow up meeting with residents of Galpon 1 held on May 12, 2017. Residents complained that, due to inadequate materials used (such as security bars), the level of insecurity (related to theft) had risen on the block.

are exacerbated by the irregularity of the built environment and socio-ethnic tensions. For example, a homeowner didn't want to let the government proceed with plans to install ventilation in his home because he did not want to share the air with his neighbor, who was from a different country. In the words of Adriana, a social worker who tried to ensure equal access to health and safety benefits of the PMV:

There were many ventilation and lighting upgrades to homes that we couldn't do because "I don't want my neighbor to have a window in the same spot that I do because he is Paraguayan, and I am Peruvian. So, it's like, But come now, beyond that, we need to ventilate your home and we need to ventilate your neighbor's home, and we need to illuminate your house and illuminate your neighbor's house, "ah, I don't care, he is Paraguayan, and I am Peruvian, I don't want it."'¹⁹³

In another example, a homeowner, Magdalena, was promised that her unsafe staircase would be relocated. Yet, a bargaining failure between the government and her neighbor, who chose not to participate in the PMV, meant that the staircase could not be installed because doing so would have encroached on the neighbor's space. In the end, the Magdalena spent months in discussions with the government and her neighbor and was left without a staircase and a situation that, at the time of my research, was still unresolved.¹⁹⁴ In her words:

Why do you [the government] start the work with the cooperatives, knowing that you didn't get the approval [from the neighbor] to go ahead with the staircase? And they [the cooperative] put that electric panel there, and now they say that that's where they're going to put the staircase. They'd have to remove the electric panel and redo all the wiring for the lighting. So, then I go to my neighbor, who's my friend, who lives next to me, and I ask if they'll agree to share the stairs with me, but he didn't want to accept because they [he and his family] already did all their piping years ago, everything, including the kitchen, and he didn't want to redo his stairs.'¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Adriana, in interview with the author on July 20, 2017

¹⁹⁴ I have since learned – in an interview with María in December 2017 – that she is suing the government with the help of a nonprofit organization, Defensoria del Pueblo.

¹⁹⁵ Magdalena, in interview with the author on June 26, 2017.

Irregular housing structures also complicate how disputes over public versus private space are handled by the government as part of the PMV. For example, residents in Villa 31 complain that the streets are too narrow for ambulances or firetrucks to pass. Not only are the streets narrow, given the upward growth of Villa 31, unplanned staircases protrude into the street, making it difficult for pedestrian traffic, let alone vehicle traffic, to pass through. Indeed, improvements to staircases and homes under the PMV are meant to mitigate risks of personal injury due to poor construction habits and make way for these crucial public services. Yet, faced with the decision to widen a street that entails giving up personal living space, residents are largely unwilling to budge. As Doña, a resident in another sector of the villa where the PMV will soon be rolled out explained, the government wants to widen the street, which would mean giving up some of her personal living space, an idea that, for her, seems absurd.¹⁹⁶ In this sense, participation in homebuilding may empower residents to undermine the better interest of the community as a whole.

Overall, homeowners shared mixed feelings with respect to the cooperatives. They tend to prefer that more experienced construction workers carry out improvements to their homes. Homeowners expressed the need for cooperatives to be trained *prior* to beginning improvements on homes, rather than learning on the job, as the current model entails.¹⁹⁷ At the same time, some were generous, defending the right that residents have to work on the integration project. In the words of Eduardo, “I get it, they have to learn [the cooperatives] and that’s fine. I tell you because I’m a contractor.”¹⁹⁸ Notwithstanding, homeowners expressed

¹⁹⁶ Doña (resident) in interview with the author on August 4, 2017.

¹⁹⁷ This was expressed across interviews with homeowners as well as at a meeting I attended between the government and residents of Galpón 1 on June 17, 2017.

¹⁹⁸ Eduardo, in interview with the author on June 19, 2017.

Cooperatives

Depending on their level of inclusion in the PMV, cooperatives and their members may grow accustomed to waiting to find out about whether the program will provide them with work. For example, as the first phase of PMV in Galpón 1 neared completion in Güemes, it became clear to those working for María's cooperative that they would not be working in the next sector where the program was being rolled out. This could have been due to a sequencing issue, but it seems likely that the government favored three cooperatives to work in Güemes for political reasons since all three of the cooperatives selected are avid supporters of the PRO, versus María, whose cooperative belongs to an independent political party. Other cooperatives involved in the first phase of improvements in Galpón 1 were also left out of upgrades in Güemes and thus faced similar challenges. In the words of Atena:

They [the construction workers for the cooperative] don't have work outside, they don't give us work because we are villeros [slum dwellers], because we live in the villa, 'and the DNI? [national identification document], ah, no!' Thus, the people [of the villa] put their hope in our cooperatives and we pay them well, I pay my workers well, I pay them as they deserve to be paid... I'm paying them seven to eight hundred pesos as officials [a kind of position?], per day. So, what we going to do with these people that don't have a job?¹⁹⁹

Given this kind of uncertainty, María's laborers did not know where they would find work. Many explained to me that they would find work on projects outside of Villa 31 to hold them over until María could contract them again to work on the PMV. Do such comments uphold the notion that residents of Villa 31 are denied employment outside of Villa 31 on the basis that they are *villeros*? On the one hand, across interviews with residents, it became clear that they are concerned about discrimination. For example, a woman who had worked outside the villa as a housekeeper explained that she was relieved that her employer did not fire her when they found out she lived

¹⁹⁹ Atena (president of cooperative/locally elected representative) in interview with the author on June 15, 2017.

in the villa.²⁰⁰ On the other hand, in my follow up visit to Villa 31 in December of 2017, María explained that she was waiting for projects on *manzana* 22 of the villa to begin, and that many of her workers were currently carrying out work outside of the villa. My analysis suggests that this is because her workers were better trained and more integrated into the formal labor market than Atena's, whose comments above suggest that her workers have a more difficult time finding work outside of the villa. Not only did Atena's cooperative have a reputation for carrying out subpar work, she also had trouble with the government over the legal status of some of her workers.²⁰¹ Finally, it's essential to underscore again that the role of presidents of *cooperatives* is inherently political because gaining access to resources and distributing jobs is often linked to *collective* action.²⁰² Thus, vocalizing the need to find work on the basis of discrimination is indeed a form of political agitation that cooperatives may use as they seek to increase their participation – and thereby access to resources to distribute among one's followers – in the PMV.

The PMV also positions cooperatives to respond directly to the demand of homeowners who, in the view of cooperatives, engage in opportunistic behavior to squeeze concessions out of the building process. As one of Rodolfo's administrative employees explains:

Opportunism is taking advantage of any situation so that it works to your benefit, taking advantage even when you do something that's good for them, taking advantage of absolutely everything. Look, I'm going to build you a bathroom, "but no, I want it this way;" look, you didn't have a kitchen before, now you have

²⁰⁰ Beatriz (member of cooperative working in maintenance and waste recollection) in interview with the author on June 15, 2017.

²⁰¹ This claim is based on accounts from residents living in homes upgraded by her cooperative in interviews and at meetings and ratings she received from the government on the quality of improvements and compliance with administrative paperwork for the cooperative (as explained to me by government employees and other cooperatives; the government also showed me the reports). I discuss the ratings system in more detail in the compliance section of this essay.

²⁰² I use the word "often" here because not all cooperatives seemed to engage in collective action to gain access to work. For example, Rodolfo (president of cooperative) explained in an interview with me on August 2, 2017, "I don't drive people to cut off access [such as streets] to anything or gather people to demonstrate at the obelisk [an important monument in Buenos Aires]. I don't think the solution for people is to give them fifty pesos, a hundred pesos, and take them to cut off a street for a sandwich or bag of merchandise, I think the solution for people is genuine work." Notwithstanding, even if Rodolfo does not engage in the forms of clientelism he mentioned, he does distribute jobs and resources in the villa, which has helped him amass political power.

*kitchen, “no, over there I want five burners instead of four.” That’s taking advantage step by step.*²⁰³

Rodolfo adds:

*So, I bring you an armchair, “oh, no, but you brought me just one why didn’t you bring me three? I want three armchairs because I had three armchairs over there before.” Lies. But to keep you happy I bring the three chairs, and then they follow with something else and then something else and everything is a complaint.*²⁰⁴

Cooperatives also complained that, by squeezing concessions out of the building process, homeowners create problems between the cooperative and the government due to delays that these concessions cause. The government, in turn, pressures the cooperative to move forward with the work in a timely manner. In some cases, it seemed that such delays could even give the government grounds to substantiate awarding fewer contracts to the cooperative that experiences delays.²⁰⁵ These challenges are exacerbated by those residents who choose to remain in their homes during the construction process. In these cases, the cooperative must work around their belongings, sometimes losing time as they move and clean them. Thus, if homeowners increase their chances for participating by staying in their homes, they do so to the detriment of the cooperative.

Government

Government employees charged with encouraging participation under the PMV feel slighted by government structures that undermine the nature of their work. Social workers demonstrated compassion and understanding for residents in precarious living conditions, wanting to share as much information with them as they had about the program to ease the homeowners’ concerns.²⁰⁶ Yet, it seemed that these social workers were often left powerless to effect larger changes to the program based on participation workshops and interactions they shared with

²⁰³ Unnamed participant of group interview on August 2, 2017.

²⁰⁴ Rodolfo, in interview with the author on August 2, 2017.

²⁰⁵ I discuss the rating system the government uses to rate the administration of cooperatives and the quality of work they carry out in the compliance section of this essay.

²⁰⁶ This was a common theme across several interviews and interactions with social workers.

residents. As Adriana lamented, the government lacks a cohesive plan with respect to the integration project and fails to listen to those involved in the project who have more experience working in informal settings when making decisions.²⁰⁷ Wanting to create a nexus of participation for residents, social workers are often left feeling frustrated that the government hasn't give them enough resources to do so.

Architects feel that their work under the PMV requires them to engage in social work. They spend more time responding directly to homeowners' concerns and putting out fires between residents and cooperatives. As one architect, Sebastian, explained, he feels a sense of duty to defend the cooperatives before homeowners, noting that the smoother the relations are between these actors, the easier his job is.²⁰⁸ To do so, he regularly reminds homeowners that the PMV provides an opportunity for residents of Villa 31 to gain work and experience, a right he says residents have. Architects and social workers alike also sometimes feel overwhelmed by the challenges of the PMV. The program tends to move slowly, is complicated by the number of actors involved, and has limited bandwidth for responding to the demands of residents, some whose situations are too dire for the PMV to improve.²⁰⁹

Tension among the government and other actors involved in the PMV thus tends to unfold on multiple fronts. A government actor moving through Villa 31 is likely to be stopped by residents seeking answers to pending challenges, answers that these actors may not have. Moreover, social workers, architects, and other government employees behave as arbiters, diffusing tensions between different actors that the PMV involves. This work happens in the street, in homes, and at meetings designed to promote participation and gather information necessary for calibrating and

²⁰⁷ In discussion with Adriana while engaged in participant observation in July of 2017.

²⁰⁸ Sebastian (government architect) in interview with the author on June 19, 2017.

²⁰⁹ For more dire situations, the government has rolled out other housing programs. See context section of this essay for a brief discussion on this.

improving the PMV. At the meeting in Galpón 1 that María chose not to attend,²¹⁰ residents from Galpón 1 where the PMV pilot project had been rolled out lodged complaints about the drawn-out timeframe of improvements and the quality of work carried out by the cooperatives. In the words of a homeowner who attended the meeting:

*There's humidity on the wall and because they're working [the cooperative] on the other side of it, it completely fell apart, everything fell apart, my wall came crumbling down.*²¹¹

Another homeowner who attended the meeting continues:

*If in the end we are neighbors and if there are improvements [to homes], it has to be the same for everyone.*²¹²

Open to giving residents a space where they could vent their frustrations and eager to learn about how the program could be improved, social workers and architects listened attentively. At the meeting's close, Adriana explained:

*Without a doubt, this has been a learning experience. You guys have been the first block, and all of these challenges have helped us learn how to make better decisions for the next blocks where we intervene. The daily challenges we've experienced help us a lot as an institution to make better decisions during what is to come. It's a shame that you've had to suffer.*²¹³

Homebuilding, Reflection, and Learning through State Institutions

Taken together, the above accounts of participation in homebuilding suggest that sources of tension and frustration also produce positive effects. An overarching observation in my field research was that the audience and setting matters when people tell their stories. María's comment

²¹⁰ The meeting was held in the *Galpón*, the government offices located in Playón. *Galpón* means "shed," a name that seems to be inspired by the sheds that the government held immigrants in in the 1930s, leading to the early establishing of the villa (see context section).

²¹¹ Comment from unnamed resident number 1 in meeting authored attended in Galpon 1 in Villa 31 on June 17, 2017.

²¹² Comment from unnamed resident number 2 in meeting authored attended in Galpon 1 in Villa 31 on June 17, 2017.

²¹³ Comment from Adriana (government social worker) in meeting authored attended in Galpon 1 in Villa 31 on June 17, 2017.

about the meeting she avoided being “more political than technical” seems a case-in-point; in a forum designed to troubleshoot challenges with residents, wherein government actors are cast in a listening role, homeowners will search for the opportunity to effect outcomes of the PMV to their benefit. Thus, however valid their claims, they may not share the benefits of the PMV that they’ve experienced in this setting. Moreover, in my one-on-one interviews with homeowners and other actors, it became clear that some people shared their stories with the hope that I would help them improve their situation, despite my having explained to them ahead of time that I would not be able to provide them with any material benefit for participating in my study. This became evident as some participants continued to mistake me for a government employee, to which I reminded them repeatedly that I was not. Finally, sharing their troubles with me seemed to provide participants with a sense of validation for the hardship that they had endured.

The above accounts suggest that, despite the challenges of participation with the PMV, behavior related to homebuilding is being channeled through state institutions. Even if homeowners seek to squeeze benefits directly out of cooperatives, their participation at meetings led by the government, their receiving of material resources provided by the state, and the direct interactions that they have with state actors channel their demands through institutions. For homeowners, this means interacting directly with a state whose presence was previously more fettered by local political actors in Villa 31. In the words of Adriana:

I think the program related to housing upgrades is most profound because it affects the home, or rather, it extends into familial life... thus a positive change has been that, at a minimum... residents recognize that the State exists, that a State that perhaps never arrived before or didn't arrive as you had hoped it would, finally exists... because when the State changes your home, inside, you say “ah, yes, it does exist.”²¹⁴

Rodolfo adds:

²¹⁴ Adriana (government social worker) in interview with the author on July 20, 2017.

If the residents don't permit the improvements, there won't be integration. If they don't let the government build streets because they think they're too narrow, there won't be integration... to do anything, you need to have participation²¹⁵ ... otherwise, integration doesn't exist.²¹⁶

The PMV also leads to reflection and learning for the actors that it involves. In workshops with the GOPP, for example, residents draw maps of their block and write out a collective and individual history. This history includes a reflection on when they arrived, their impressions, challenges, positive thoughts, and aspirations. Social workers and government employees prompt questions and discussions, providing questionnaires that residents fill out. In the written words of a resident:

I arrived in 2006. I lived with my spouse and my daughter. When I first arrived at the block, it seemed very ugly to me because the streets seemed so narrow and people were telling me that they rob you. The truth is, I didn't like this block of the neighborhood. With time, I became accustomed to the neighborhood and to my block. When I arrived, I rented. Afterward, we built our own home with the help of some family members. We felt relieved because I had my own house. I stay in my home at night.²¹⁷

In the written words of another resident:

I arrived in 1985. I came with my family. There were some houses in the neighborhood but less on my block [than there are now]. We built our house, little by little and with a lot of effort. We came from Jujuy [a province in the north of Argentina]. My favorite place in my home is my kitchen and the living room that I fixed up and really take care of. I don't have plants because I don't have a place to put them, and I don't have animals because neither do I have a place [for them]. I spend all day [in the neighborhood? at home?]. Sometimes I travel to Jujuy to see my family. What I like about the neighborhood is my block because when something happens to us we all unite to defend our neighborhood.²¹⁸

Cooperatives and government employees expressed how much they have learned by working on the PMV. Not only is this evident in the changes these actors have produced to the

²¹⁵ In my view, this respondent conflates participation with consensus, a topic I take up in the next section of this essay.

²¹⁶ Rodolfo, in interview with the author on August 2, 2017.

²¹⁷ Unnamed resident number 3.

²¹⁸ Unnamed resident number 4.

built environment, it came through in their attitudes while on the job. One day a construction worker in Galpón 1 explained that prior to the PMV he had always dedicated himself to odd jobs related to maintenance around the city. He went on to add that the PMV has given him a chance to be in “his space,” wherein he works on improvements to homes that require he hone a more specific set of skills. With respect to government employees, most of them have no prior experience working on integration in the city’s villas. Indeed, the PMV is ambitious in that it pools actors from across the government to roll out a program that most of them have never implemented elsewhere. Of all my interactions with government employees, Adriana was the only one who had worked on a program similar to the PMV, in Medellín. Given this lack of experience, an overarching theme with government employees was how much they had learned while working on the PMV in Villa 31, which suggests that the PMV has led to an improvement in skills.

Compliance within the PMV and Beyond

I’ve always wanted to provide something better, something different, for my family... so that tomorrow I can say ‘look, this here, this is my house,’... and my family, my daughter, can have something dignified, something of their own.

– Eduardo, homeowner participating in the PMV²²⁰

I have to see how it’s going to turn out... whether I’ll have to pay for the land, that’s what I still don’t understand. Or the lights, for example, I’ll have to pay for what I use, and the water, I’ll have to pay for what I use, and my son recently started working and we have to pay for his lights and his water.

– Magdalena, homeowner participating in the PMV²²¹

For me, specifically, no [I wouldn’t do the PMV]. As I’m capable, I’d just prefer to do it myself. That’s not the case for many because they don’t know how to do it [the construction work], but for me, for example, I can fix it, I can paint it, because I know how. But for many people, no, they don’t have this advantage, and those are the people that ask for the PMV.

²²⁰ In interview with the author on June 19, 2017.

²²¹ In interview with the author on June 26, 2017.

– Diego, construction Worker²²²

These people here [those that live beneath the highway that have businesses and tenants in their homes] don't want to move because they're very comfortable, very comfortable because they're not even paying for water, they're not paying for anything. They're grabbing money without paying taxes on it from their tenants, and it doesn't benefit them to move. But for us, it doesn't negatively affect us [being relocated to newly constructed homes inside the villa as part of the integration project], because we don't have anything [we do not have a business/renters that we derive an income from in our home, thus being relocated would improve our quality of life].

– Teresa, homeowner²²³

It wasn't the first time that a fire had originated in a pile of trash in her neighbor's home. "They thought that we had fire hydrants here," Teresa explained. For years, she and the other neighbors complained to the government about the unsafe habits of the family next door that had proven once already to be a danger to them all. Social workers and psychologists made no headway in mitigating the situation. As Teresa recalled, "that's their way of life, you aren't going to change it." The second fire began one morning while Teresa was "getting ready to head to the civil registry office" to register her baby. Her husband "opened the curtain, looked through the window, slid it open a bit, and saw the black smoke." "Fire Teresa! Fire! Get out! Take the baby and get out now!" Although "more than one of the firetrucks showed up without water," her family had been lucky that the fire department could arrive at all. As Teresa explains, in most areas of the villa "firetrucks cannot enter because the streets are too narrow." Not only could a firetruck enter on her block, her home is close to *Autopista Ilia*, making access from above – where firetrucks parked and sprayed water – possible. Twelve hours after her husband noticed smoke emerging from the heap next door, a fireman handed Teresa a piece of paper that condemned her home. "I couldn't enter my home to live." The fire had destroyed the side of Teresa's house facing the lot where her neighbor's

²²² In interview with the author on June 22, 2017.

²²³ In interview with the author on July 27, 2017.

home once stood. What was saved from flames had been left uninhabitable by fumes. She looked at the piece of paper and thought of her three children while the fireman spoke. “But where am supposed to go?!”

Structures of poverty present risks for all residents of Villa 31. Tapping into electricity lines, overloaded electrical transformers, poor refuse management, and open fires used as a source of heat for food or warmth carry risks. Other habits also have negative externalities for those living in this community. As Teresa points out, building habits in Villa 31 have left streets too narrow for the passage of firetrucks. Moreover, residents complain about narrow streets that make access for ambulances and public transportation services difficult, if not impossible. Homeowners and residents also notice the sometimes-poor quality of work carried out by cooperatives – whether to public spaces, infrastructure, or homes. These examples uncover the importance of compliance in Villa 31 because mitigating these situations by making improvements to the built environment and providing access to essential services – integration – involves acquiescence on the part of residents. Mitigating the risk of fire requires that electricity, gas, waste management, and water services be improved and normalized, meaning that residents must allow the government to evaluate existing conditions, make improvements, and charge residents for service delivery. For streets to be widened, existing housing structures, including staircases that protrude into the streets, need to be augmented or moved. For many of these changes to be undertaken, those living in Villa 31 must exercise consent. Homeowners engage with government actors and/or sign a contract²²⁴ that permits construction, whether carried out by construction companies or cooperatives, to begin. Cooperatives and construction companies carrying out site improvements need to comply with

²²⁴ Under the PMV, homeowners must sign a contract in order for construction to begin. Residents participating in other building projects carried out by the state, such as improvements made to Teresa’s home after the fire, have complained to me that the government did not have them sign anything. In this sense, a lack of formal oversight by the government contributes to a culture of informality.

standard building and business practices so that adequate resources and technical skills ensure quality construction practices. In short, carrying out the social and urban integration of Villa 31 requires that those living in this community comply with norms that stand to change their way of life.

But as Teresa's story also makes clear, people do not necessarily have the means to change their behavior, even when not doing so continues to put themselves and others at risk. Her neighbor's compulsive hoarding and the fires that it led to were exacerbated by conditions of poverty. Despite multiple attempts by government actors, the family did not change their way of life. Why do those living under conditions of poverty in Villa 31 choose to comply? The first observation to be made is that social stratification within Villa 31 puts some residents at greater risk than others and that this can have a positive or negative affect on compliance. For example, extremely poor living conditions could motivate compliance or contribute to fear that hinders compliance. Structural poverty notwithstanding, there are multiple reasons that residents choose to comply or not comply with the integration project. First, residents may be motivated by economic reasons, such as perceiving the regularization of Villa 31 as an investment or whether one collects rents they do not want normalized. Second, fear of the government may cow residents into complying or lead them to avoid dealing with the government altogether. Third, conflicting interests, such as putting one's own needs before those of the community may lead to noncompliance. Fourth, security concerns may motivate residents to comply if they feel that doing so will reduce crime. Fifth, access to materials to continue building on their own may undermine compliance. Finally, direct contact with the government during the compliance-seeking process²²⁵ may lead residents to comply because such contact may build trust. From the perspective of

²²⁵ I define the consensus-seeking process as the process of government actors soliciting compliance on the part of residents.

cooperatives, compliance may be linked to government monitoring and oversight intended to ensure specific business and construction practices. With each of these factors, residents choose to comply based on the perceived costs versus benefits of choosing compliance over noncompliance, and vice versa.

Reasons to Comply

Economic: The PMV offers economic benefits to those that participate. Homeowners are not charged for upgrades carried out to their homes, and cooperatives, including construction workers, stand to benefit from wages earned on the job. Moreover, homeowners express a desire to continue making investments in their homes, including the ability to pass these investments onto their children. In this sense, for homeowners compliance with the PMV seemed a natural next step in a progression toward regularizing their tenancy on the land. For those who rent out rooms in their home on the informal housing market, they may have also been motivated to comply because improvements stand to increase the amount that they can charge renters.

Quality of Life: Homeowners in the PMV, as well as others such as Teresa who participate in housing improvement programs, are motivated to comply as they seek to improve their quality of life. This includes improvements to security as well as to areas of their home that they worry they will not have the resources to complete. As Eduardo's wife Natalia expressed, she was concerned that her daughter would fall off the staircase and was motivated to comply to increase safety conditions for her family:

*Now it's more secure for my daughter, for example, the staircases. Before, we didn't have good staircases, we had to enter and exit from outside, and it was super dangerous, I slipped two times. It's much more secure now, for me and for my daughter. I consented [to the PMV] for this.*²²⁶

²²⁶ Natalia, in interview with the author on June 19, 2017.

Some homeowners also felt they would never come up with the funds to complete the construction of their homes.

Security: Related to quality of life, residents also expressed a desire to improve security in their homes and in the neighborhood. In the words of Jacinto from Galpón 1:

I consented because it's time that we integrate [the villa], we want to pay our taxes, there is a lot of crime outside [my home], I want to live peacefully, I want to have a place [neighborhood] like the people [the people in the other part of the city?], I don't want to live like this, I don't like living in fear, with so much insecurity, robberies, death, there's so much of it all. I want to pay taxes as it should be, pay for the house, everything as it should be. And as they offered it to me [the PMV] it's good, what they're doing, yes, to have lighting, everything – to have a new house [redone under the PMV], or rather, to live.²²⁷

As Eduardo explains:

It's the reason that I consented, because if not, I was going to keep living like this, with all these houses remaining like they were, I was going to live in an unsecure house – if there's a fire, there's no place for the firetruck to enter, there's no access for the firetruck.²²⁸

Social Integration: Residents expressed weariness of being perceived by those outside of Villa 31 as free riders who take advantage of their situation. Thus, they were motivated to comply with the PMV because they perceived the program to be a part of a broader integration process, whereby they would pay for services, such as electricity, gas, and water, earning their right to live in Villa 31. Eduardo goes on:

I am in favor [of the integration] because those that come from outside discriminate against those from the villa, because we are villeros [“villeros” roughly translates to “slum dwellers”], we are the worst for the people [from outside]. Thus, from the beginning, the goal for the government was to make the villa an adequate part of the city, a neighborhood that needs to become an adequate part of the city.²²⁹

²²⁷ Jacinto, in interview with the author on June 17, 2017.

²²⁸ Eduardo, in interview with the author on June 19, 2017.

²²⁹ Eduardo, in interview with the author on June 19, 2017.

Direct Contact with the State: The recent change in government and formation of SECISYU has brought government actors, whether employees or high-ranking officials, into direct contact with residents. Homeowners who participated in the PMV explained that their decision to do so was influenced by conversations they had with these government actors. This direct contact led some residents to believe that the new government would deliver on the promises it made compared to past governments who had made promises with little or no follow through.

Fear: While respondents did not overtly admit that fear of the government played a role in their decision to comply, they did mention that they do not want to stand against the government.

Visible Changes to the Built Environment: Changes to the built environment have motivated residents to comply. For example, many residents who chose not to participate in the PMV in the first round, or those who were not offered to participate in the PMV during the first round, approached government actors upon seeing changes to their neighbors' homes and asked if they could participate in the program.

Rating System: Employees working with cooperatives and presidents of cooperatives are motivated to comply based on government monitoring. Through a system of inspections and ratings, government employees, including architects, social workers, and an official contracted by the government, perform routine visits to sites of construction – homes and public spaces – where cooperatives work. These visits include checks that range from ensuring that workers wear proper shoes and helmets to reporting drinking or smoking marijuana on the job.²³⁰ Cooperatives are then awarded points based on the overall performance in five categories: hygiene and security, planning and supervision of construction, order and cleanliness, quality of work, and security of workers.

²³⁰ The government official who carries out routine checks shared a story with me about catching a cooperative smoking marijuana and drinking on the job. I do not feel he had cause to exaggerate, as he tended to side with cooperatives versus the government on a number of issues, defending their right to work on the integration project (see next footnote for an example).

The government tracks the history of points awarded in each week of every month and provides the cooperative with an average score. For example, on April 7, 2017, María's cooperative had earned a score of 7. There are three ranges of scores: Bad (0-3), Regular (4-6), and Good (7-10).²³¹

Reasons not to Comply

Economic: Homeowners who collect rents from those who live in their homes may stand to be adversely affected by the PMV²³² or another home improvement program²³³ in Villa 31, thus having an incentive not to comply. This is especially true for those who stand to be displaced by the conversion of the highway into a park. At the time of my field research, those living beneath the highway were being offered newly constructed homes. At the meeting I attended on June 15, 2017 between residents and government employees, the terms of compensation were still uncertain. What was clear, however, is that the government was looking to negotiate the terms of relocation for both homeowners and renters. They were offering new homes to both parties and were open to compensating homeowners who lost second homes or rooms in their homes that they had for rent. Homeowners were adamant that they were not concerned with the plight of renters because renters had not made the investment in the home. Moreover, those that they live off the rents that they receive were unwilling to move. The government mentioned compensating those that currently have more living space by reducing the costs of payments on the new home/land where they would be located. Regardless, these talks devolved into shouting and yelling on the

²³¹ This system is also manipulated by the government. As an official performing regular evaluations of the work carried out by cooperatives explained to me, the government asked him to give María's cooperative a lower score that it deserved so that they could substantiate not awarding her more contracts, which the government official felt was for political reasons. However, he went against these instructions and awarded the cooperative a score that he thought it deserved. In my view, this was because he had developed a working relationship and level of mutual respect with the cooperative. This is an example of how the relationships forged during the social and urban integration of Villa 31 can help determine policy outcomes from below.

²³² Even though rents in improved apartments stand to go up, displacement of renters during construction leads to lost income opportunities.

²³³ Other programs being rolled out in Villa 31 are discussed in the context and appendix sections of this essay, namely, *autogestión*, *emergencia habitacional*, and *reasentamiento*.

part of residents who refused to listen completely to proposals being made. This is part of the transcript from the meeting.²³⁴

Homeowner 1: *And so what's the secretariat's [SECISYU's] proposal? Is it to provide a new home for the one that we live in and then compensate us for the one in which the renter lives in, but not provide [us with] another new home?*

Homeowner 2: *Ah! And where is my sacrifice!?²³⁵ What I've done? Where is my sacrifice?*

Government Employee: *You will be compensated*

Homeowner 3: *Where is my sacrifice? Where is my..? I'm not going to get back the effort that I put in, what I worked for so that I have what I have now.*

Government Employee: *I'll say it again –*

Homeowners: *No. No. No. No.*

Government Employee: *I'll repeat the same thing –*

Homeowner 5: *No. As we've already told Larreta [Horacio Larreta the Chief of Government of CABA], there will be death here. There will be death here.*

Government Employee: *We hope not, but...*

Homeowner 5: *We hope? Yes, there will be because the people²³⁶ are going to stay.*

Government Employee: *Now, for the home in which one lives, the government will provide a new home, for the home that is rented, there will be compensation for the owner and the renter that lives in that home will be given a new home.*

Homeowner 6: *No*

Meanwhile, according to homeowners present at the meeting, renters were more open to relocation.²³⁷ To my knowledge, no renters were present at the meeting I attended.

²³⁴ Meeting attended in Galpon 1 of Villa 31 by the author on June 15, 2017.

²³⁵ The word used in Spanish here was “esfuerzo” which translates to “effort” or “sacrifice.” Thus, this could probably be translated colloquially to something along the lines of “and what about my sweat and tears?!”

²³⁶ “People” here was probably used in a collective sense to include the author of the statement, meaning, “we the people will stand our ground.”

²³⁷ These sentiments were echoed by other actors across my research, including interviews and participant observation.

Political: According to residents and government employees that participated in this study, some residents shied away from the PMV and other home improvement programs for political reasons. Supposedly, their loyalties to other political parties, instead of the PRO, caused them to avoid entering into talks with the government over the integration project.

Conflicting Personal Interests: Residents were less willing to comply if the terms of integration stood to alter a part of their situation for the worse. For example, homeowners were unwilling to give up personal living space so that streets could be widened. Another example relates to the challenge of displacement for renters: in a sector of the villa where the PMV has more recently been rolled out, the government proposed to homeowners that they allow renters to remain in their homes during construction and agree to not raise the cost of rents once the project has been completed. In one case, the government approached a woman who has a four-story home with many rooms for rent in one of the older sectors of the villa and asked if she'd be willing to let displaced residents rent from her, to which she told me that she would not consent to the project under such terms.

Means to Keep Building Without State Help: It seems that those who have the skills to build and/or continue to maintain access to building materials have a disincentive to comply. These may be construction workers with experience in building and/or those with the resources necessary for contracting their own labor and purchasing materials. In one case, a woman who was against the government's integration project when I spoke with her at the beginning of my field research added an additional floor to her home (a third floor) within the span of six months. This was a product of her ability to continue purchasing materials on the black market and continue constructing her home according to existing norms. Under newer home improvement programs that the government

will be carrying out, the government will provide resources directly to residents, so they can build on their own.²³⁸

Costly Construction and Business Practices: From the perspective of cooperatives, compliance has been costly. It requires training, oversight, and adopting norms about how to run a business. For example, the government has recently begun to require that cooperatives pay their employees by check versus by cash.

Uncertainty/Unwillingness to Pay: Residents who participated in the PMV that I interviewed chose to comply with the program – which they viewed as complying with the integration project in general – despite remaining uncertain about the costs that would be assessed to purchase the land and pay utilities. These are separate costs that are not associated with the PMV. Still, my respondents claimed that some residents chose not to comply with the PMV and other policies because they do not want to pay for access to public utilities, such as water, gas, and electricity. Nor do they want to pay for the land on which they live.

From Autonomy toward Heteronomy through Compliance

As residents comply with policies slated to integrate Villa 31, they begin to forfeit a way of life underpinned by autonomous individual and community decision-making. Improvements to homes through the PMV come with terms and conditions outlined in a contract that homeowners participating in the program sign and promise to adhere to,²³⁹ including the promise that they will not continue constructing on their own. For cooperatives, in complying with building and business practices, they give up making decisions unfettered by regulations. Other programs designed to improve public spaces, such as parks and streets, include new rules and regulations that guide

²³⁸ See appendix for overview of housing programs, including *autogestión habitacional*.

²³⁹ Not all participants in the PMV adhere to the terms of the contract. There are inconsistencies on both sides, by state and nonstate actors. Moreover, homeowners sometimes intentionally break with the terms of the contract when the PMV does not go as they had hoped/as it was planned.

residents' behavior with respect to how such spaces should be used. For example, in a meeting in the sector YPF over a newly renovated park, residents met with government employees to discuss maintenance and hours for use of the public space. While they were involved, through participation, in decisions about how the space would be used, outcomes of decisions made were not only determined by actors within the community, but also by state actors that guided the direction of the conversation; indeed, these actors brought the issue up to begin with. By complying with these policies, residents of Villa 31 allow their behavior to be channeled through institutions. This represents a shift toward heteronomy because institutional structures influence outcomes by reducing the types and quantity of decisions that individuals can make.

One of the consequences of this shift has been the weakening of local power. As residents comply with integration policies, their reasons and willingness to engage in collective action change. For example, on a block with forty homes, if half of the homeowners consent to the PMV, the individual interests of those living on the block no longer align as they had before; rather, actors may coalesce with others who participated in the PMV, others who did not, or find less reasons to engage in collective demand-making altogether. In this way, compliance may be used by the state to fractionalize and divide local spheres of power. Thus, a second consequence of compliance has been the exclusion of those who either chose not to comply or were not given the opportunity to participate in a given policy. As such, the integration of Villa 31 creates winners and losers through compliance, and state actors may select residents that absorb fewer resources, diminishing the transaction costs of "integration" as much as possible. In such a case, those who are better situated and choose to comply stand to benefit more from policies slated to include them, while those that are not and do not may lose a way of life that they preferred as others comply and norms change. Finally, acquiescing to policies that regularize land tenancy may set off broader

processes, such as gentrification. Indeed, compliance may be a first step toward exposing this community to market forces and institutions that overrun it.

Conclusion

To integrate would be to bring the neighborhood up to the same level as the rest of the city, with the same rights and the same obligation... obligation and commitment as a citizen, not just painting houses, or rather, integration includes commitment and obligation; the government is that which provides for me, and as a citizen there is that which corresponds to me.

- Eduardo, homeowner participating in the PMV

To integrate, if we are going to talk seriously, would be to demolish everything and build homes for everyone and streets for everyone.

- Rodolfo, president of a cooperative

To integrate is to impose a new way of life...

- Adriana, government social worker

The forced expulsions began at 9am on February 24, 2018. Police and government employees from SECISYU “entered the homes” of residents living in “house numbers 15 to 21 on block 12 of the sector Cristo Obrero,” where they used the “repressive force of the state to violently remove” them (Koutsovitis 2018). The order to remove these residents and demolish their homes to make way for the new highway was given by the *Jefe de Gobierno de la Ciudad*, Horacio Rodríguez Larreta, by Decreto N° 61/2018, after residents refused to move into new homes constructed in the sector *Conteiner*. Back in October, residents had carried out demonstrations at the *Portal*, the government’s offices located at the entrance to the villa. Standing in front of the large communal desk where employees of SECISYU convene to work, residents held a sign that read, “dignified homes, no tin [roof], no plaster, not for payment.” Despite concerns over building materials and being charged for a home they felt was built without their participation in decisions over design and materials used, the government would act to ensure that the construction of the

new highway could begin. According to an article published by *Observatorio del Derecho a La Ciudad* (Observatory of the Right to the City), police “sprayed some residents that protested with pepper spray” (Koutsovitis 2018). In a video that captured the encounter, residents looked on as their homes were demolished.²⁴⁰ A woman in the video explains that the government told her, “they were going to take away my children if we didn’t leave our home, they were going to take away my children.” The result of a bargaining failure, the government’s recent decree authorizing the forced removal of these residents is a sharp contrast to *Ley 3.343*, which states that “the implementation of the re-integration project will not involve the forced removal of anyone” (Koutsovitis 2018). As the woman at the scene explains, “the government never wanted to arrive at an agreement with me.”

As “integration” policies continue to advance through Villa 31, state actors continue to confront, and indeed challenge, a way of life. The violent and coercive removal of residents whose homes stood in the path of the proposed highway is the ultimate affront to local norms. As evidence in this essay has shown, such norms have grown out of local conditions. First, collective action and policies that have resulted in residents establishing *de facto* tenancy on the land has led to autonomous individual and collective decision-making. Second, economic opportunity tied to Villa 31’s prime location, as well as policies that have channeled resources toward building projects, have privileged particular local political actors – who shape the distribution of capital across this community – over others. Amassing spatial capital, residents seeking to improve their quality of life – and indeed, plan for the future – have become invested in the built environment. The commercialization of the housing market in Villa 31 is a prime example of how some residents have experienced relative upward mobility as a result of these conditions. Thus, if spatial capital

²⁴⁰ My interlocutors sent me a video shot on the day of the removals. In the video, it appears that construction workers contracted by the government were the actors who demolished residents’ homes.

and the commercialization of the housing market in Villa 31 are evidence of piecemeal gains toward a better quality of life, they also raise the costs of compliance, particularly when policies do not align with local interests. Indeed, given these conditions, “participation” – guided by policy outcomes that the state, backed by MDBs, sought to predetermine – has failed to convince residents, particularly those who perceive that they stand to lose from such policies, to comply. The devastating example of the relocation of *Autopista Iliá* not only shows how affecting or resisting change in contested space requires power, but also that residents’ power to shape integration policies in Villa 31 is limited.

Earlier, I posed the question, How do state and nonstate actors negotiate the integration of Villa 31? The evidence presented in this essay has shown that the answer to this question depends on the extent to which integration policies do the following: affect the way that residents live, undermine interests of those who the policy targets, rely on incremental change, and involve local political actors. The trajectory of the PMV compared to resettlement for the proposed highway brings these four crucial factors into sharp relief. First, whereas the PMV brought changes to *how* residents live, resettlement policies stand to change *how* as well as *where* residents live. It’s essential to recall that many of the challenges with the PMV stem from residents’ concerns over the quality of materials and work carried out (how they live). Moreover, many residents were unwilling to move out of their homes while improvements were carried out (where they live). Both of these concerns were echoed in the noncompliance of residents who stood to be displaced due the proposed highway. Second, because of the rents that some residents collect, the success of the PMV depended on protecting the local interests of homeowners who have made such investments. Other homeowners expressed that they do not want to move because they fear an increase in housing costs or living costs associated with resettlement. These too, were concerns that residents

living beneath the highway adamantly expressed. Third, whether home improvements have led residents to recognize a social contract with the state, or construction workers to carry out improvements according to new rules and regulations, participation and compliance under the PMV have led to incremental, versus sweeping, changes to the local way of life. Finally, the PMV relied on local political actors to gain entry to Villa 31 as well as facilitate contact with residents, which linked those who stood to benefit from its economic incentives to the PMV. Conversely, resettlement policies do not award local construction cooperatives contracts to carry out work related to demolition or the construction of new homes. If the PMV presented opportunities for local actors to negotiate with state actors, resettlement policies circumvent the will of local actors. In the absence of compliance, negotiation over integration policies gave way to tyranny.

It's also essential to reflect on the role that the PMV has had within the broader scope of integration projects being carried out in Villa 31. As the policy documents briefly analyzed in this essay show, integration policies have been couched in a rhetoric that touts the importance of participation of the local community. By drawing cooperatives and homeowners into the implementation process, the PMV is perhaps the best – albeit far from perfect – example of resident participation in the implementation of integration policies. Even the other projects, such as improvements to public spaces, that cooperatives are involved in do not bring other residents into the implementation process to the same extent, not only because participation is costly, but also because other residents do not exercise the same control over space with respect to plazas and parks as they do over their own homes. Thus, the PMV, with its visibility from both inside and outside of Villa 31, is a flagship standard of participation that other integration projects fail to uphold. Within the broader context of integration policies, compliance with the PMV has also been key. Compliance creates a division in Villa 31 between those whose interests are linked to state-

led policies and those whose interests are not. In this way, compliance stands to erode a legacy of autonomous individual and collective decision-making in Villa 31 as local actors are drawn to the material and nonmaterial benefits of the PMV.

What are the broader lessons about urban informality and integration to be drawn from this essay? On the one hand, local control in informal settings may provide much-needed structures of governance. A prime example would be the arrival of government employees under the newly formed SECISYU, who lacked experience working in formal settings. By responding to local pressure and designing policies “in harmony with the norms of the neighborhood,” the government accommodated local actors such as María, Atena, and Rodolfo, who have continued to shape the distribution of capital across their community. By doing so, these actors not only underwrite their own livelihoods – and those of their followers – they perpetuate a system of local politics that others in this community depend on to insulate themselves from the risks of poverty, such as hunger, unemployment, and a lack of access to basic city services. In the context of recent expulsions that show how executive decrees are used to override laws, local power in marginalized communities may be essential for protecting its residents, not only from a state that fails to arrive, but also from one whose arrival – which comes in a wrecking ball – is unjust. On the other hand, local interests may conflict with policy outcomes desired by state actors, or even those in this community. As such, if equity – bringing Villa 31 up to the same conditions and standards as elsewhere in the city – is the policy goal, respecting the local way of life may result in a failure to ensure the greater good of the community. For example, as residents become locked into disputes over right to space – such as with the widening of streets or the relocation of stairways – the transaction costs of ensuring access of ambulances and firetrucks go up and decisions about how to improve the overall quality of life for this community devolve into stalemate.

Urbanization in the Global South, along with automation, climate change, and population growth, is one of the most pressing challenges facing the twenty-first century. Although lacking institutional norms that align with those in other parts of the city (such as land use, property, and planning), informal communities produce norms of their own. Such norms, far from being divorced from those in other parts of the city, are conditioned by them. If housing elsewhere in the city is unaffordable to large swathes of the population, demand compounded with proximity to economic opportunity and laws that protect the rights of squatter communities create the conditions for norms of collective action, undergirded by access to land, to emerge. Within these informal communities, the outgrowth of this activity has been social and economic development. One of the great ironies of integration policies is that, by “formalizing” economic and social activity, they tend to erode existing norms that have kindled such development. To the extent that sustainable societies are upheld by norms endogenous to them, *true* integration, versus imposition, should drive development, lest such policies snuff them out.

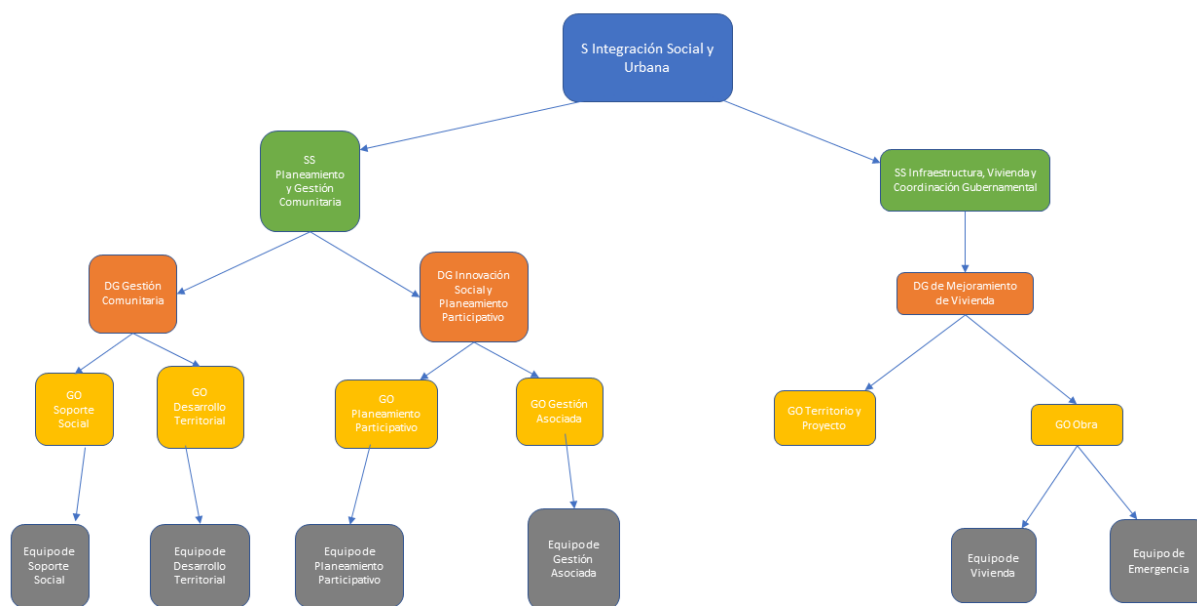
Appendix

Current Institutional Framework and Integration Policies:

The Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires has been charged with creating institutional organisms to plan and carry out policies related to the urban integration of Villa 31. Broadly, planning involves four of the cities ministries: Ministerio de Ambiente y Espacio Público, Ministerio de Desarrollo Urbano y Transporte, Ministerio de Hacienda, Ministerio de Hábitat y Desarrollo Humano (Secretaría de Integración Social y Urbana 2016). More specifically, the Jefatura de Gabinete de Ministros has a mandate to “design and execute the policies, plans, and integral plans connected to the regularization and integration of villa 31 and 31 bis” (Secretaría de Integración Social y Urbana 2016). To implement integration policies in Villa 31, the Jefatura de Gabinete de Ministros created the Secretaría de Integración Social y Urbana (SECISYU). The responsibilities of SECISYU include “coordinating a master plan for integration;” “designing strategies, plans, policies, and projects related to urban, social, and economic integration;” “planning, designing, and coordinating activities associated with improving quality of habitat;” “coordinating meetings with other organisms of the Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires;” and “formulating, coordinating, and supervising policies related to the integration and regularization of Villas 31 y 31bis” (Secretaría de Integración Social y Urbana 2016).

There are four levels of command within SECISYU: subsecretaría (SS), dirección general (DG), gestión operativo (GO), and equipo. Two SS’s, one social the other technical, make up the main organizational branches of SECISYU. On the social side, the Subsecretaría de Planeamiento y Gestión Comunitaria (SSPGC) oversees the Dirección General de Gestión Comunitaria (DGGC) and Dirección General de Innovación Social y Planeamiento Participativo (DGISPP). Directly under the DGGC are the Gerencia Operativo de Soporte Social (GOSS) and Gerencia Operativo de Desarrollo Territorial, while directly under the DGISPP are the Gerencia Operativo de

Planeamiento Participativo (GOPP) and the Gerencia Operativo de Gestión Asociada. On the technical side, the Subsecretaria de Infraestructura, Vivienda, y Coordinación Gubernamental oversees the Dirección General de Mejoramiento de Vivienda. Under the DGMV are the Gerencia Operativo Territorio y Proyecto and Gerencia Operativo de Obra. Finally, under each of these DG's and DO's various *equipos*, or teams, carry out much of the on-the-ground social and technical work with residents. On the social side, these include social workers and other government employees with training in sociology, political science, economics, and anthropology. The technical side includes engineers, architects, and project managers.



Source: graphic made based on internal government documents viewed during interviews

Types of housing programs:

With a focus on social and spatial interventions, policies designed by SECISYU target habitat, social integration, economic development, and improvements to public spaces (Secretaría de Integración Social y Urbana 2016). Within the realm of habitat, policies include the construction

of new homes (to facilitate the relocation of residents living under the highway), the programa de mejoramiento de vivienda (PMV), *emergencia habitacional* (“habitational emergency,” for those in dire situations) and, more recently, a program called *autogestión* that is designed to provide monetary and material resources to residents so they can carry out their own home improvements. The construction of new homes to relocate those living beneath the *Autopista Iliá* falls under the program called *reasantamiento* (resettlement). The PMV targets 6,902 homes for exterior and interior improvements. Exterior improvements address risks associated with multilevel homes, inaccessibility, precarious staircases, and unsafe balconies. Interior improvements target risks associated with poor ventilation, structural deficiency, humidity, accessibility, and security.

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