

Urban Mutations in the Buenos Aires metropolitan Area by Eduardo Leston

Argentina, a peripheral developing country of 35.000.000 inhabitants in the southern cone of South America, has witnessed traumatic economic cycles in the last 60 years of its history. As a consequence, 50% of its population is considered to be living presently under poverty levels and the present unemployment rate is approximately 18%.

The relocalization of incoming immigrants in the outskirts of urban areas, comprising locals from the inner provinces and nationals of neighbouring countries, such as Paraguay and Bolivia, in search of opportunities and a better life, has increased dramatically in the last two decades. In the overall Latin American context, where 75% of its population live in urban areas and 50 cities have over 1.000.000 inhabitants, experts have forecasted that by year 2025, over 85% of its population will inhabit urban areas. In this scenario, Argentina is considered a country in a state of advanced urban transition.

The Buenos Aires metropolitan area, the third largest urban region in Latin America (12,6 million inhabitants in 8.000 sq. km.), has experienced an explosive, non-planned urbanization process, presenting unsurmountable problems regarding issues of urban sustainability such as housing, sewerage, provision of water and energy, garbage disposal, and lack of or unaccessibility to transportation centers and education and health services, with its sequel of urban poverty and violence.

As a consequence, an urbanized homogenous carpetlike sprawl of inhabitation, disconnected from surroundings or context, with its proper dynamics of urban growth and mutation, is being witnessed, lacking any of the socially accepted qualities associated with urbanity in conventional terms.

Local authorities have had increasing difficulties in developing specific strategies, capable of responding in an appropriate scale, to the above mentioned issues and realities, to which must be added, at its core, the urgent task of reinitiating sustainable economic growth and development at a national and regional scale.

Housing shortage at a national level is estimated at 3,4 millions units, of which 2,4 million are considered recoverable. (78% of total are obsolete or with severe maintenance problems, while 22% are considered in relative good condition but overcrowded).

Not taking into consideration the traditional housing market (houses and apartment units for sale or rent), promoted and financed by the private sector in traditional consolidated urban areas, three almost exclusive forms of residential communities are to be found or have developed, in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area.

1.-State financed housing, through the National Housing Fund, active since 1976, with a low average yearly output (35.000 units), with severe problems in recovering mortgages, and other housing programs, small in scale and size, co-financed by multilateral international institutions, such as The World Bank, Interamerican Bank for Development, etc.

2.-Squatter settlements comprising at present 550.000 persons in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area, while in the federal district proper, with 3.000.000 inhabitants, 65.000 live in squatter settlements.

3.-Gated communities in the periphery of the Metropolitan area, with an explosive development process with its peak in the 90's, amount to 350 in number and consuming 300 sq. km. of land, with 50.000 permanent residents.

All three forms of residential development, are perceived in sharp contrast with historical traditional urban layouts (residential city blocks on a street grid pattern), as unprecedented forms of urbanity, with consequences in permeability to outsiders, and its sequel of ghetto like isolation between social classes, poor and rich, reducing or simply preventing social interaction, considering this, one of the most important aspects of a rich and diverse urban life.

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