

Accompanying popular organizations through grassroots planning in Argentina: A conversation with El Taller Libre de Proyecto Social (TLPS)

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**Conversation series | Pursuing Tenant International:
Learning from struggles for home in Abya-Yala | Part III
Edited by Ana Vilenica**

Accompanying popular organizations through grassroots planning in Argentina:

A conversation with El Taller Libre de Proyecto Social (TLPS)

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Abstract

In this conversation, Beatriz Pedro, a professor of El Taller Libre de Proyecto Social (TLPS) shares her insights on grassroots planning accompanying popular organizations in Argentina. Beginning with Argentina's 2001 economic crisis, Pedro describes how university students and professors mobilized to collaborate with popular organizations to address inadequate housing and urban abandonment. This collaboration evolved into a social approach to designing habitat, integrating various disciplines and respecting community proposals. Beatriz highlights the transformation from traditional architectural practices to a more collaborative, community-focused approach. This shift, which she terms a 'meeting of knowledges,' led to the establishment of a Catedra Libre at the University of Buenos Aires, formalizing their grassroots methodology. This conversation addresses the importance of university autonomy, the impact of fluctuating government support, and the role of international networks in sharing knowledge and strategies.

Keywords

Social production of habitat, housing, grassroots planning, Argentina

We first met Beatriz Pedro at the opening of the Barrio Comunitario Norita Cortiñas in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area. Beatriz passionately spoke about the people's struggle for land and housing of thousands of families in Guernica a neighbourhood in the metropolitan area and the severe repression they faced from the state. She also touched on the role architects play in these struggles. We met with her again in her neighborhood to discuss El Taller Libre de Proyecto Social (TLPS), her involvement in developing grassroots planning methods for accompanying popular organizations, and the theory and methodology of social production of urban habitat in Latin America.

Ana: How did you start working as an architect with the dispossessed people of Buenos Aires?

Beatriz: The 2001 crisis in Argentina exposed that a significant part of the population lived in inadequate housing conditions, massive unemployment and the abandonment of entire urban areas. Students of the University of Buenos Aires mobilized student centers and groups of teachers to collaborate with different popular organizations. We started working with neighborhood assemblies, reclaimed factories, cooperatives, and movements of the unemployed. Since the students were very young, they had professors to carry out activities that required experience. This initiative developed from 2002-2006 in a completely self-managed way within the Student Center, comprehensively addressing different issues related to popular habitats. We developed an innovative training with professors and students in this area, since it was entirely new at the time.

During these years, we made work agreements with various entities, such as a reclaimed factory in Ushuaia in the south of the country. When the bosses abandoned the factory, the workers took over and managed production, which was unprecedented. Industrial design and graphic design students redesigned washing products to assist another reclaimed factory in marketing. We worked with unemployed people's movements, planning plazas in different popular neighborhoods across various municipalities so they could apply their projects to all the social plans and programs that started during the crisis. This excited us and led to the development of the phrase 'from the classrooms to the streets, from paper to reality; from reflection to action'.

This experience prompted us to rethink our approach to architectural projects. Traditionally, our university taught the logic of the architect as an author, a solitary designer who imposes their ideas on others who are usually ignored. We realized the need for a significant shift towards respecting people's own proposals, which we called a 'meeting of knowledges'. This required introducing a different working method, unlike traditional architecture studios.

During those years, we learned through practice, driven by an active demand from the community, not a passive request for help. There was significant struggle within our university, and in 2006 we managed to create an impact through both students and teachers influencing the faculty's governance structures. Consequently, the previously self-managed workshop was officially recognized as a *Catedra Libre*.

Figure 1
 Beatriz Pedro
 speaking at the
 opening of Barrio
 Comunitario
 Norita Cortiñas.
 Photo: Ana Vilenica



Ana: How did the institutionalization process work?

Beatriz: The workshop was created in the midst of an important social mobilization, which facilitated its recognition. Initially, self-managed teams of students and teachers developed the training activities. The recognition required us to adhere to the rules of the *Catedra Libre*, led by qualified professors who contributed with their participation. Years later, I have been left in charge and with a teaching team that does not receive income due to the current political context in Argentina.

We organize an annual course, which takes place in two quarters. The first focuses on conceptual debates, on recognizing the socio-territorial structure of Buenos Aires and the metropolitan area. [This is] accompanied by field visits addressing habitat problems in a broad sense—multidimensionally—including the popular economy and other emerging aspects, advocating for a contextual, historical, and social education, the complete opposite of the traditional teaching methods of our university.

We emphasize situating oneself within one's community to understand and address local problems, recognizing Argentina's class structure, and identifying who benefits and who doesn't in every proposal. We focused on developing a multisectoral and participatory process in design, respecting people's right to project their own habitat. These efforts sparked many debates and required us to build a new epistemology to validate and affirm our approach. For more about these debates, you can visit our website at www.TLP.com.ar. It's not complete or very up to date, but it contains the materials we've written.

Ana: Could you tell us a bit more about what were the specifics of your work on housing?

Beatriz: This process led us to discover how to address the urbanization problems of the enormous slums. We asked ourselves, ‘Where is the popular habitat? What are its characteristics?’ These neighborhoods emerged after the dictatorship of 1976-83 as land occupations. Others are slums that were eradicated during the dictatorship and repopulated afterward. Additionally, there were land occupations throughout the metropolitan area and building occupations in the city, particularly in old buildings. From a material perspective, these were the three main groups.

Our team of teachers acquired an immense capacity, because instead of traditional classroom teaching, we spent the first four-month period in the classroom and the second four-month period working on-site in one of our project partnerships. Vast experience in the field is necessary in order to take twenty students to a territory where plans can change. We built a large network of project professionals who learned this focus and are now applying it.

This workshop is not exceptional in Buenos Aires; it is part of a broader Argentinean trend with similar initiatives emerging in public architecture faculties nationwide. Professors from earlier generations before mine, from different university departments in the country in El Chaco, Mendoza, Córdoba and Chile constituted the *Catedra Libre* of the Latin American University Network of Housing and Habitat.

This Network did a lot of work over the years to bring together all those in different places who share the same perspective. Each one situated in its context and with its local problems, they share ideas and reflections from their own experiences. In Latin America, our target population is the 110 million people who self-produce their own habitat. It is an enormous and diverse process ranging from family self-management to more organized and even production and management of habitat through cooperatives.

Figure 2

Barrio
Comunitario
Norita Cortiñas.
Photo: Ana Vilenica



At this moment, the network has 65 educational spaces throughout Latin America, and last year it won one of the UN Habitat awards.

Ana: How is this international network organized?

Beatriz: This network holds annual meetings. Over the past 30 years, it has convened in various different Latin American institutions. In October 2023, it held its 29th meeting in Natal, Brazil, focusing on the climate crisis, the social production of habitat, and how to strengthen these university formative processes. In addition to the debates on participation, we also visit different movements that discuss these issues in various ways, and there are also academic chairs and universities involved. In October 2022, in Córdoba, Argentina we held a meeting centered on epistemological conceptions, which led to extremely interesting debates.

Ana: You collaborated with land occupations. What is the specificity of that experience?

Beatriz: The Taller Libre de Proyecto Social has a saying: 'We are forming ourselves alongside the people in need and their struggles'. Why do we emphasize 'struggles'? While we haven't focused solely on accompanying processes of land occupations, we have engaged in contributing to projects in two major crises.

The input of the *Catedra Libre* consists of the development of a project we call 'Proyecto Bandera.' This means creating a project that synthesizes the demand, not just stating a need for housing but presenting a specific project. This approach strengthens the population's capacity to project their needs, compelling us to work alongside them. With our method, we developed a project and supported the government in solving the issue, showing that the demand was fair and resolvable. The idea that the people could have their own project and advisors was controversial, it was an academic debate, professional and with public governance.

In Villa 20, a settlement that is over 80 years old, located in Comuna 8 of the City of Buenos Aires, [and] in response to the City Government's intention in 2014 to sell land assigned by Law to contribute to the redevelopment of their neighborhood, the families decided to occupy it demanding that it not be sold. Understanding and defending the legitimacy of their actions, we decided to participate, and we worked with them during this serious crisis, developing a project that was presented to the authorities, and that was not heard.

In 2020, in the midst of the pandemic that exacerbated the town's housing crisis, thousands of families decided to occupy land in the town of Guernica, in the metropolitan area. With previous experience, together with a similar group from La Plata and architects involved in social organizations, we formed the 'Urban Planning Commission' to provide a project that would respond to the housing needs raised. We exhaustively studied the problem and proposed a solution, presenting a project that could solve the issue without evicting people. We disseminated our project widely, demonstrating that an alternative approach existed. Despite this, they were evicted.

A part of the families of the Guernica occupation remained united seeking to resolve the housing situation. That is the origin of the Norita Cortiñas Community neighborhood. In the case of Norita, after two years without achieving responses from public policies, they decided to start the path of self-management. They bought 2.1 hectares of land and faced the situation of urbanizing only with their own economic resources and mutual aid. This process requires a lot of flexibility. Planning here is not simple; it depends on the capabilities and resources of the families. We are at your side to support you and help you as much as possible in the given conditions to build a neighborhood. The process is long and changes depending on the socio-economic and political situation [of the country].

Ana: How was your experience different under different governments? How did different conditions influence your work with people?

Beatriz: We've navigated through challenging times, particularly within the university setting. While we've successfully established a *Catedra Libre*, the student enrollment dynamics have undergone significant shifts. Unlike the students of 2001, today's students exhibit varying levels of engagement, resulting in smaller class sizes, from 190 students at our peak to 20 students now.

Social organizations have also had moments of greater strength and others of confrontation according to the public policies developed by their governments. It is uncertain what the future holds in this regard. In these 20 years we have carried out many experiences in the popular habitat and its possibilities are linked to the strength of the organizations. Our work has been a continuous process of learning and adaptation in response to an ever-changing social and political landscape.

In Villa 31, in comuna 1 of the City of Buenos Aires, a settlement that is more than 60 years old, we collaborate with the organization of delegates by block, carrying out 'habitat clinics' by the TLPS student and teaching teams to improve the homes of families with people with disabilities, using materials provided by the government to improve their living conditions.

This allowed the development of 'Reurbanization Workshops' by block, that with the inhabitants, the students examined the possibilities of generally improving the block. We measured each of the houses, documenting the material and social conditions of the inhabitants. In this way, if reurbanization occurs, they can use this essential documentation, like plans, photography, demographic and historical information.

During these workshops, families explored possibilities for enhancing their living conditions, even if many were unable to implement the changes themselves. The emphasis was on collective problem-solving rather than individual concerns. This collaborative approach empowered block delegates to provide informed opinions and negotiate agreements among residents, considering factors like sunlight access and community well-being.

As the redevelopment process progressed, this methodology gained recognition for its democratic and participatory nature. It influenced legislative discussions in the Housing Commission of the Legislature, eventually becoming incorporated into law.

This participatory approach proved vital when the government sought to address issues in Villa 20 of Comuna 8, when the government initiated the process of re-urbanization, and then the displacement of people.

Also based on a public policy program for the purchase of land for housing neighborhoods carried out by cooperatives, we are carrying out the process of complete urbanization of 5 hectares in the town of Moreno. It is very complex because building a neighborhood from scratch, even with financing, is extremely difficult in an inflationary process like the one we are experiencing in Argentina.

At www.TLPS.com.ar you can find publications that describe other experiences. Among them [there is] a catalog of self-managed construction projects by cooperatives, which describes the construction of new buildings and also the remodeling of existing buildings in the city of Buenos Aires through the Law 341/00, which allows the construction of housing by cooperatives with state subsidies.

Ana: From what we understand, this process depends a lot on the autonomy of the university. How are current attacks on the University affecting this situation?

Beatriz: It's just the beginning. We are at the beginning of the new government, which is attacking public education and in it the public and non-fee-paying University. It threatens to defund it and the possibility of charging tariffs. Their plan seems to revolve around steering the university towards what they term the 'internationalization of higher education,' a concept pioneered by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB).

Ana: Your work is part of a broader social movement. How would you describe this movement in Argentina and beyond? And where does the epistemology of your work sit in this context?

Beatriz: This brings us to the concept of epistemology—understanding where we operate from and why. Our approach is to draw from various currents, including Liberation Theology, popular education by Paulo Freire, and the social psychology framework developed by Enrique Pichon-Rivière. We work with both production and reproduction, and we have many references that we have been systematizing. These frameworks offer different lenses to view society, moving beyond individualistic perspectives to consider broader social dynamics.

At the university level, we have witnessed important restructuring processes aimed at enhancing democratic participation, such as the Total Workshop (1972-76) of the Faculty of Architecture of Córdoba and the self-government model of the UNAM (1972-86). These initiatives challenge traditional top-down approaches, advocating for more democratic decision-making processes within academic institutions.

Adopting a holistic perspective on social production, especially in the area of habitat, requires a deep understanding of the social, economic, and political dynamics specific to

each context. This approach contrasts with the narrow focus on mercantilism often seen in mainstream discourse, underscoring the importance of identifying and addressing the social production of habitat as a fundamental aspect of democratic governance.

Moisés: Can you tell us something about the role of the architect and urbanist in these processes?

Beatriz: In the contemporary context, the predominant function of architects is deeply intertwined with the mechanisms of capitalism. Within this capitalist framework, cities serve as hubs for capital production and reproduction. Entire buildings are constructed solely as safes for guarding money. This aspect of architecture reflects the prevailing societal structures and norms.

Moisés: I'd like to ask you about the epistemological transfer of these theories throughout the region. I was thinking about the institutions that played a role, such as maybe The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean--ECLAC or the grassroots ecclesiastical organizations which also transmitted these different epistemologies. I'd like to make an analogy to a field of flowers that are different, as I saw it very clearly in Uruguay. The cooperatives and the Uruguayan Cooperative Center, which have a more Catholic social orientation, have this idea of community. The cooperatives of the The Plenario Intersindical de Trabajadores – Convención Nacional de Trabajadores--PIT-CNT union, which I think are a bit more Trotskyist, don't have such a territorial approach. They make massive buildings of private property. I was trying to look at the diversity that exists in Mexico of the different forms of popular occupation. And I think that underneath each of these flowers, there is a different epistemological root, whether they are of anarchist origin, whether they are of basic ecclesial community origin, whether they are of more popular spontaneous origin. And I think that what Enrique Ortiz has done with this concept of the 'social production of habitat' is to try to create an umbrella for everything, for everyone. And I think that imagining that this is the subsoil of flowers, I think that there is a great diversity of ideas. Sometimes it worries me a little, and this is a very ontological concept, not to think about whether it is necessary to integrate all this diversity to create a common thread between them all and a single orientation, or rather a question of diversity that ecologically has to function between each of these very diverse and multiple epistemological orientations that exist. We should think about the great diversity that our continent has but also has this somewhat common history, which I don't know if Enrique Dussel talked about a little.

Beatriz: Very important contribution of your reflections. Indeed, the concept of social production of habitat is an umbrella under which different approaches are integrated. Of the *catedras* that are integrated into the Network, [there are] non-Trotskyist, Maoist and/or Marxist leftist approaches as well as liberation theology, and popular currents attached to the popular political movements of our countries. But it is very interesting, and you have to read it. I would consider Freire, Pichon-Riviere and Dussel as [main] Latin American sources and references.

Figure 3
 Barrio
 Comunitario
 Norita Cortiñas.
Photo: Ana Vilenica



Regarding the Participatory Design approach, there is the important contribution of Gustavo Romero's training space, at UNAM, Mexico. I systematize the contribution of different professionals in that search: those of J. Habraken, Christopher Alexander, Rodolfo Livingston, Hanno Weber / Michael Pyatok, and works on the training of professionals who can carry them forward in the face of family and community demands.

Moisés: It's a bit of a challenge. Maybe you could give us an example of how this whole epistemological panorama and exchange materialize in the negotiation and production of a neighborhood, a building, a house. How does this work in practice?

Beatriz: All of these approaches take something from each other. The basic consideration is that they have things in common. We say that we have to think socially and historically and project comprehensively, multidimensionally, and multisectorally.

We work with the Freirean 'pedagogy of the question.' We do it at the university level but also with the neighborhoods. You must respect the people, think that they have history, and look for ways of dialogue with different languages without elitist hierarchy. From social psychology: we look at the neighborhoods, we look at where people come from, what their history is, what their life is like, where they come from. We listen a lot. We work a lot with listening. And with the conception of PROJECT PROCESS, which is developed in the popular history that carries it forward.

Ana and Moisés: Thank you, Beatriz, for sharing your invaluable insights and experiences with us. Your work serves as an inspiration, and we look forward to seeing how these efforts continue to evolve and impact communities and we hope we get a chance to continue this conversation soon.

About this Conversation participants

Beatriz Pedro is an architect and a professor at the University of Buenos Aires in the Faculty of Architecture. She teaches two courses: Introduction to Design and Resistant Structures.

Ana Vilenica is a feminist, no-border, and urban activist and organizer from Serbia, currently residing in Italy. She is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow with the ERC project 'Inhabiting Radical Housing' at the Polytechnic of Turin's Inter-university Department of Regional & Urban Studies and Planning (DIST) and a core member of Beyond Inhabitation Lab. Ana is a member of the Radical Housing Journal Editorial collective and the Feminist Autonomous Centre for research (FAC research).

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