

Norita is the first of many self-managed community neighbourhoods to come: A conversation with organizers and residents of Barrio Norita Cortiñas in the Buenos Aires

Original

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

Norita is the first of many self-managed community neighbourhoods to come: A conversation with organizers and residents of Barrio Norita Cortiñas in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area (Part II)

Organizers and residents

Barrio Comunitario Norita Cortiñas in Buenos Aires metropolitan area

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Abstract

These two conversations with organizers and residents of Barrio Comunitario Norita Cortiñas in Buenos Aires reflect the ongoing struggle for housing rights in Argentina. The discussions detail the development of the self-managed community, which emerged from land occupations in Guernica during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants highlight the collective efforts to secure land through self-organization and assembly-based decision-making, ultimately purchasing land to establish a neighbourhood for 62 families. The conversations explore the obstacles faced, including government repression, real estate speculation, and economic challenges, while also emphasizing the critical role of feminist leadership and multisectoral collaboration in their fight for land and housing rights. Additionally, the residents connect their local struggle to broader national and international movements for land reclamation and workers' rights. This underscores the urgency of solidarity and collective action in confronting neoliberal policies and housing precarity.

Keywords

Housing, occupation, evictions, Argentina, Latin America

Barrio Comunitario Norita Cortiñas is a self-managed community in Guernica, south of Greater Buenos Aires, that emerged from land occupations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The residents organized through assemblies, purchasing land to establish their neighborhood while facing challenges such as government repression and real estate speculation. **Ana Vilenica** is a feminist, no border and urban activist and organizer from Serbia currently living in Italy. She is a member of the Beyond Inhabitation Lab, the Radical Housing Journal Editorial collective and the Feminist Autonomous Centre for research (FAC research). **Moisés Quiroz** is a historian, urban planner, specialist in social development and PhD candidate on Urban and environmental studies at El Colegio de México. He is an activist for social and cooperative housing in Mexico City. **Contact:** ana.vilenica@polito.it

In the popular camp, we say that when we don't know where to go, when we are almost lost, look at where Norita stands because she has coherence.

Compañerxs from Norita

Introduction

In January 2024, we met people organizing at Barrio Comunitario Norita Cortiñas for the first time during the official inauguration of the neighbourhood. We helped prepare and build a memory tree with images of the struggle of the people from Norita. The special guest of the day was Norita Cortiñas, a well-known fighter and mother from the Plaza de Mayo whose name the neighbourhood carries. On this special occasion, people talked about how important this project is for them and how it came to be. There were laughs and tears, and songs were sung together.

Norita Cortiñas passed away on May 30th 2024. Her activism was sparked by the 1977 disappearance of her son, Gustavo Cortiñas, a member of the Montoneros organization, during Argentina's military dictatorship. From that moment, Norita dedicated her life to seeking justice for the 30,000 victims of forced disappearances and tirelessly advocated for human rights, both in Argentina and internationally. As an academic, she explored the connections between the dictatorship, Argentina's foreign debt, and its economic crises while also supporting feminist causes like the movement Ni Una Menos.

A few weeks later, we gathered with *compañerxs* in Norita Cortiñas' neighbourhood for the second time to assist in clearing the terrain and engage in discussions regarding their project. Before what we offer here, we reflected on the neighbourhood's welcoming signpost crafted by *compañerxs* from the cooperative in La Plata, known for their mural work. "Land for dwelling and cultivation epitomizes our ethos," they proclaimed. Our conversations extended to a call for a street mobilization scheduled for January 24, 2024, in front of

Figure 1

Project.
Image: Ana Vilenica



Congress—a demonstration against the DNU, omnibus law, and the challenges posed by the multifaceted nature of the legislation. They deliberated on establishing working groups to scrutinize the law through environmental, labour, and gender lenses. Particularly concerning was an article proposing to delegate legislative authority to the president and diminish the role of Congress. Their diagnosis was: “The country is in a state of emergency.”

Ana and Moisés: How would you describe your experience in getting together in Norita? What were your previous housing experiences? Did you rent before, do you have experience of other land takeovers? How did you decide to come here? And what has been your experience of working on building your own home in a self-managed way?

Compañerx(s): I’ve been renting with my family since I was a kid. I was renting in Floresta. After that, we moved to live in my stepfather's house, my stepfather’s mother’s house, to be precise. From there, we went to live in hotels. We lived in two hotels in Constitución, one on Juan de Garay Avenue and the other on Santiago del Estero. My stepfather got the possibility to pay in installments for a house. My mother decided that she wants to live on her own. And I joined the community neighborhood Norita Cortiñas. I’ve been participating in the people's movement for years.

Compañerx(s): My life was from one rental to another. I come from the Varela neighborhood. That was the first place where we rented. Then we moved to Almagro. We stayed at my grandparents' house for a year or two until we found out that there was a *pretended casaquinta* (country house) in the Villa París neighborhood here in Leo. It was just a room with one bathroom. We still came and rented. The owner saw that we renovated the house through the years, we enlarged it, and so on. We made two bedrooms plus a kitchen, a dining room, a laundry room. He decided without prior notice that he was going to move into the house. He didn't acknowledge our effort and everything we invested in to it. We went to live 20 metres away in a house that we also rented. My father paid four months' rent in advance. Then the girl sold the house to the new owner, and we were left on the street with two months' rent trapped there. We came to the Numancia neighborhood here in Guernica, and there, they gave the place to us, and we started to build a precarious shack. I think it had three bedrooms, a kitchen, a dining room, and a bathroom. Then, the occupation of Guernica started. I decided to become independent and go there. I came from a situation of gender violence in our house, and I didn't want to follow that pattern. After the eviction, I think I spent almost a month living on borrowed time. I lived in the houses of people I met during the takeover, in a shed of a social organization. Then I met my partner and I married her. We went to live in her house. We stayed there for two years.

Compañerx(s): At that time, the Norita Cortiñas neighborhood was activated, we were invited to participate to be able to access land to build our homes. And here we are now looking at how we can take the shared dream forward.

I wasn’t part of the whole process before the Norita assembly; my mum was. I was part of the land recuperation in the neighborhood before. I'm still waiting for my house. I

mean, my family. After the crisis of 2001, my mum and my old man separated. We lost the house. My mum was with me and my brother. At that time, he was a baby. My mum got together with a new partner. We and several siblings were left with my grandparents. It was always like living on borrowed rent. When I grew up, life was always quite complicated when it came to housing. I always worked; I was in various organizations. Today I'm part of a social organization; today the struggle for housing is very important. My daughter is still renting. About a month ago, she was kicked out of the rental. We had to go through a lot to be able to find her a place to rent around here. At the moment, we are trying to build our little house.

Compañerx(s): I've lived in Guernica since I was two years old. Luckily, we are in the center of Guernica with my family. I was lucky. My mum and my dad have their house in Guernica. Before it was a wasteland. We've been in that place since I was two years old; I'm 31 now. When I became independent, I lived in several rentals. I lived in my brother's house with him on loan. Then we had to move out. And now we're here. We were invited to come here. I am looking forward to moving in, hopefully next week.

Compañerx(s): When I was a kid, we lived in my grandmother's house on my father's side, and I don't remember well what happened; I think we had done something with the plants. We moved out of there, and from then on, my mum joined an organization where they gave her a little house. She was living in her mother's house. Then we moved to my grandmother's house on my father's side. My grandmother had problems with alcohol. There was a lot of violence in the house. The FOL gave us the possibility to be *caseros* in the shed. In Claypole, we lived there for a while. I also have vague memories of living in 14th, which is another neighborhood in Del Pal and in Agustín Ramírez, well, always in a borrowed house. After my grandmother passed away, my mum was happy with what she had, and I wanted to live on my own. For me, it is the first time to participate in a self-managed process like this.

Ana and Moisés: What has been your learning experience in this form of organization, and what are your expectations as a group to achieve regarding your housing and your life in common?

Compañerx(s): There is a lot of collective work on a daily basis here. It's my first time in a community neighborhood project. Before, I was living with my family, in my mother's house. I was living in a room. It was very small, and I needed to think about the future. Today, there are several of us in the house, and each of us wants to have our own thing. I've been here since March. I participate in the assembly and in making *mingas* and *cuadrillas*. I also participate in different mobilizations. I participated in the one that took place here in the municipality in the president's office, but I had never before participated in the struggle for land and housing. I think I only participated once when there was an eviction, when we blocked the Hipólito Yrigoyen road. I participated in two different instances of occupations within Guernica. The first one was when Mayor Aníbal Regueiro was in charge. That occupation lasted approximately eight months, and then the owner showed up with a public notary.

Figure 2

Establishing the
electricity grid. Image:
Ana Vilenica



Compañerx(s): The municipality assisted with the eviction. They brought trucks. They wanted the people to go back to where they came from. There was a lot of violence. There were a lot of people in uniforms of all kinds.

Compañerx(s): There was even the cavalry. There was also their intelligence.

Compañerx(s): They also had dogs.

Compañerx(s): It was brutal. They sent 4,000 troops to clear us out before dawn.

Compañerx(s): The first occupation was more like defending what was yours. The second one had a more collective process. I defended mine and my neighbor's, and then my neighbor defended me. It was a good feeling. For the second eviction, we organized ourselves well. At that time I didn't belong to any social organization. In my neighborhood, 20 de Julio, we had soup kitchens every day, at noon, in the afternoon, and at night. We took turns. That's where I got to know FOL, Movimiento Teresa Rodríguez (MTR), and other organizations. Three months later, all the social organizations involved took part in the recuperation of Guernica. It was the only one up to that point that I knew supported the struggle for land among so many organizations. And I said well, maybe through it I might be able to get a little piece of land, to build my own house, to become independent.

Now there are ways to implement that experience here in the Norita Cortiñas neighborhood. We are joining forces to say, today they help me to do something, tomorrow I will help the others and collectively see how we can make this neighborhood. There are many things that we learn from each other.

Compañerx(s): My dad and his new partner were allocated a house, which the state never finished. There were organizations that were more linked to the ruling party at that time. There was a lot of corruption. There were people who took four or five houses. There were others who had their house adjudication certificate. It was pretty tough.

Figure 3
Water supply system.
Image: Ana Vilenica



Then I came to 20 de Julio, the Unión neighborhood in December 2019. There were several attempts to recuperate the land. I took part in those attempts. We were repressed every time. On some occasions we didn't even manage to get in because the police were already there. And then, on the 20th of July 2020, we did it. At first, I grabbed what I could; I had a house for my mom, for my sister, for my cousin. After that, I started to see the collectives and militants coming in. I remember that several *compas* came from the FOL.

We had a radio station that came from the proposal to have a popular press in the neighborhood because we suffered a lot of stigmatization. It was during the pandemic. At that time, I was a bit disillusioned with the organizations because I had recently come out from an organization that had a very monarchical constitution. There is a family that controls everything. And then I ended up joining the MTR, which I'm still part of.

I remember the first assemblies we had in the neighborhood were with sticks and machetes because you couldn't say who was with the municipality that wanted to get rid of you or who was an infiltrated informant. And then over time, that got a little bit softer. We took them out. At least in the part where we were, we got rid of someone who wanted to sell drugs. We took out another one who was a rapist and so on. That was good for me; it helped me create a bit more consciousness. I was angry at the police and the state, but I couldn't make sense of why I was so angry. Nowadays I understand. I know that a lot of things need to be improved.

Compañerx(s): When I joined the recuperation, I went with my siblings, with four or five of my siblings. We came the first few nights, and then I was coming every day. I already

lived there with a comrade who doesn't want to talk today. We were several *compas*. I always felt very safe, though it was a rather murky environment at night. The truth is that with the comrades from Shamati, we were always together. It was a good experience apart from the eviction. Every time I remember, I end up crying, but it was really mobilizing.

It was horrible - the way we ended up getting out of there and the aftermath, the emptiness you felt in the days after the eviction. The dreams that came after were ugly, but time went by, we kept on fighting. There are still many of us here. We achieved it; it's this victorious feeling that you have. I always cry when I am talking about this. But I am very happy. More than that.

Compañerx(s): When we lived in the Galpón Cultural, I was a rebellious child. One day I was approached by a comrade who was part of the organization that worked there in the office. Whenever we talked, he always had something to tell me that really caught my attention. He had a lot of very striking thoughts for a kid like me at that time. I thought a lot about those things. I got as far as calling him uncle, because he opened my conscience. Having an organization is not just anything; they are there for a reason.

Here, I used to see some grandmothers get together; I remember that they always came. Now I don't remember their names, and they would have assemblies, and I had no idea what they were doing there. After that we lived as Caseros in Claypole. We moved to my grandmother's house, and I started working; uh, I was about ten, 12 years old, I think I was about 13. And I started working as a dog walker for a neighbor upstairs. Then, a colleague who was working alone in the blacksmith's shop approached me, and I started to work there. I learned a lot of things there that are always useful. I had to leave the workshop because I was very young. I was 15 years old; I couldn't be there. They moved me to the printing workshop. I worked there for a while afterwards. That's when the issue of the land struggle of Guernica came up, and I joined in because my mom asked me to, and I felt I had to be there. A friend of mine told me to go there. It was a really nice

Figure 4

Compañeras.

Image: Ana Vilenica



experience because we had to start from scratch. At that time, at the Galpón Cultural, there were already structures in place, spaces were kind of ready-made, and in Gernica we were starting from scratch. You had to put everything together from scratch. If you were flooded, you had to think of something. Every day in the morning, I was thinking what to do. Sometimes we had to arrange things or look after the place, look after each other because there were people there that we didn't know. The eviction was my first experience of such big repression. A lot of pepper spray. Many people running, scared, frightened. We imagined our future there, we made agreements, and suddenly there was nothing. It is a bad feeling. But well, what is worth a lot is that experience that we all had and the important thing is to keep the nice memories, not the hurtful ones.

Moisés and Ana: Making of Norita is progressing. How do you see your future here?

Compañerx(s): First of all, I'm really looking forward to living here, but we also have to look at the economic issue because everything is going up; prices are increasing. We have to see if in the future we will be able to build our own house here. I have done a lot. I am in a rush because we have to see how this government's adjustment will go. Things are going up by more than 100%, and it is quite difficult to afford to buy the materials.

We also know that there will be a big adjustment in terms of services. For now, I'm going to continue living at my mother's place. I will also continue working on the project. The project is very good. I've been to community neighbourhoods like this one in the Varela housing estate, in Florencio Varela, and you can see that it's a collective project. There is care among the people, and people are taking care of the neighborhood.

Compañerx(s): There are many steps to follow that are necessary. We are on the way. There is still a long way to go. This is the reality. We have the day-to-day work to make some progress in the neighborhood. Then there are the individual projects of each *compa*, which is to weed the land, cut the grass, see where the bedroom is going to be, where the bathroom is going to be. Things like that: the subdivision of each piece of land, the community spaces that we are going to use together; where would be the entrance, from water to electricity is going to be taken. Collectively we try to get it done. It's a six-hour working day. And there is always something to do. Today, for example, I was cutting the grass in the street and finding a way to supply electricity. Among *compas*, we have people who are skilled in certain areas or in certain trades of the work days. We have a meeting to plan this work. We plan how to guide the comrades who are less experienced so that the work is collective and for everyone. My objective is for my mum to have a house so that she stops suffering.

Compañerx(s): You need to prepare yourself mentally for this, try to be strong. There is armed repression, physical repression, but at the same time, there is also the recession. It's a subjective repression. The thoughts that each person has and that kind of feeling discourages many. It's a downer. But we try to move on. I was going to talk about the eviction, but I'd better not because I'm going to cry.

Figure 5
Playing time.
Image: Ana Vilenica



Compañerx(s): In our particular case, we were able to access a loan to be able to build the flat. Before the eviction, I was thinking I was going to save money to buy a plot of land. I was dreaming about that. I stopped renting to come to my brother's house. That's how I bought the house. I'm lucky to have it. We already have our space. If it was not for that, we would be in trouble too.

Compañerx(s): I have a lot of plans for the future! The first one is to have my own space with my room because for a long time, we have lived with my siblings. I have two brothers, a younger sister, and an older brother, and we always shared the room with my mum. I have my things; I also have my tools, I have machinery, I need my place to move. I want to get them out of mum's house so that she can build an extra bathroom. I want the dog too. My daughter is living in a flat, and she has a big dog, and he can't be in a flat. I want to bring him here so he can be happy. Here I can bring my things; I can bring my friends. If I want to organize a meal, I can organize it. My other projects are to have a rehearsal room, a place where I can make music. Punk rock music. I want to make it well-isolated from the noise.

Compañerx(s): It's a huge effort, and well, sometimes I feel alone. But well, I have the support of my *compas* who are here, thanks to the fact that it's a community neighborhood as well. On the other hand, my mum always supports me every day, my brothers and sisters, well, they always cheer me up. So I count on that for the future, well, to build my little house little by little.

Ana and Moisés: What is the most important thing about this project for you?

Compañerx(s): I took part in the recuperation of land in Guernica. It was a very exciting experience for me personally because of all the collective work that was being done there. I remember the day I arrived; I was very scared, my family didn't want me to go. At that time, I met my partner. She was alone that night. That's when I met her. That night it was -5 degrees. It was a very hard night, very ugly. We didn't know anyone. Four or five of us

who were there got together to spend the night. And then, well, I went every day to help out in the dining room, cleaning, taking care of things. There was a lot of support and a lot of very strange situations of people I didn't know who needed help. We were accompanying each other, and the truth is that it was an experience in that sense. All that time we spent there was nice. And more than anything else, I personally learned about the collective struggle and the accompaniment between comrades and people you don't know. And well, after the eviction, it was a very, very rough, very ugly. I think about that moment and the truth is that I don't know how I managed to be there for that many hours, but I was always accompanied by all my comrades who are still accompanying us today. There was a lot of anger. And today I am happy to see that many of my colleagues who were there have their land, they are building themselves, they are going to move forward. My cousin, who at that time was not in the movement, is organized, he is learning a lot within this organization, with these great comrades that I have, and I am very happy that he is also going to have his land, he is going to stop renting, which is also very difficult for his family.

Compañerx(s): I love the neighborhood. There are *compas* from various organizations. There are *compas* who are teachers, *compas* who work in agriculture, and care for the environment. This helps us be aware of what we are doing wrong as human beings. It is vital to take care of the environment. We learn a lot of new things together. We have several projects in the neighborhood, a community garden, for example. In the future, we are going to work on the land and stop buying from the supermarkets. We are going to be able to live and consume from what is produced here. We are also going to have a square so that the children of the neighborhood residents can have space to play. We are also going to take care of the safety in the neighborhoods. In several neighborhoods, people have been removed, those who are involved in drug trafficking, abusers and that is not going to be allowed here; it is an agreement of the Assembly.

Figure 6

Compa in front of his home in the making.
Image: Ana Vilenica



Compañerx(s): We are also going to reforest, to improve the environment. We know that it is exhausting to work in a place without trees. It is also about the collective care of the property. Bonds are formed, families are formed. The common spaces that you will see in the Norita neighborhood will give children security. I don't have children. But if, for instance, my son tells me I'm going to the square two blocks away. I have no control. I can't make sure that nothing happens to him. But here we would be taking care of him together. It is going to be a safer world for girls.

Compañerx(s): We wanted to create a University, a place to studies. It going to be a centre where children of the neighborhood can count on a cup of milk.

Compañerx(s): The state wants us to be ignorant. We are constantly fighting so that the *compas* are trained, so that they know what their rights are. The work needs to continue, and it is happening in an organized informed way.

Ana and Moisés: I think this is a good place to stop and continue talking informally. Thank you very much for sharing your experience with us. We are truly impressed with all you have achieved here.

About this Conversation's participants

Community Neighborhood Norita Cortiñas are families facing housing precarity organizing to practice the right to housing.

Ana Vilenica is a feminist, no border and urban activist and organiser from Serbia currently living in Italy. She is a member of the Beyond Inhabitation Lab, the Radical Housing Journal Editorial collective and the Feminist Autonomous Centre for research (FAC research).

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