Turning to Culture in Times of Crisis: Global Toolkits and Urban Reinvestment in Buenos Aires

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TURNING TO CULTURE IN TIMES OF CRISIS: GLOBAL TOOLKITS AND URBAN REINVESTMENT IN BUENOS AIRES

by

JACOB LEDERMAN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2015
This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Sociology to satisfy the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

Turning to culture in times of crisis: Global toolkits and urban reinvestment in Buenos Aires

by

Jacob Lederman

Advisor: Sharon Zukin

As cities transition from industrial to post-industrial forms of development, new activities based on leisure and entertainment have come to comprise a greater share of urban economic growth. Drawing upon 10 months of qualitative fieldwork, this research examines the emergence of new urban policies, increasingly reliant on cultural and touristic production, which gained importance in Buenos Aires after Argentina’s devastating 2001-2002 economic crisis. Through interviews and fieldwork with policymakers, everyday cultural producers, and the urban poor situated at the margins of these changes, the dissertation seeks to illuminate how local officials reconceived of culture as a form of economic development and object of government innovation during a period of parsimonious state budgets. While culture represented a significant growth sector for attracting investment, residents, and visitors to formerly disinvested areas of the city, it also channeled local forms of cultural production into more marketable and tourist-friendly forms. In the process, city government policies both reshaped and reinforced existing aspects of local stratification.

From the level of urban governance, policies focused on culture, creativity, and – most recently – sustainability, have been framed by the local state as generating inclusion and territorial equality, yet have often resulted in higher land values and the displacement of informal
workers from central spaces of the city. In examining these state-led strategies and the responses of everyday residents, two important aspects of the post-industrial urban economy, operating within a prominent city of the global South, emerge.

First, there is a rapid process of institutional learning taking place at the local level, suggesting the mobility of urban policies, actors, and paradigms. The adoption of these “global” policies is power-laden, catalyzed by multi-lateral institutions and transnational NGOs, representing the exigencies of competitive city strategies, rather than the random “assemblage” of urban discourses and imaginaries. Second, a state-led emphasis on cultural and touristic production has transformed historically disinvested neighborhoods in the city’s south, remaking them as sites of heritage, tourism, and tradition. Yet a mostly commercial process of reinvestment suggests that the rigidity of social and class stratification in Buenos Aires may limit residential gentrification and channel development into tourist-based projects. These particular modalities of redevelopment, while potentially forestalling mass residential displacement, nonetheless propel neoliberal strategies of urban growth.
Acknowledgements

This project began in an unlikely place. A course at NYU captured my attention for its use of the word “critical” in front of a standard urban sociology course title. At the time urban sociology was not on my radar. But at NYU, Neil Brenner introduced me to Lefebvre, Castells, Sassen and others before I had read more standard classics such as Wirth or Park. His passion for the subject was palpable, and during a meeting in which I inarticulately raised some possible research questions and sites, he noted that my questions were in line with many of those being asked by someone in my very own department: Sharon Zukin.

The next five years were characterized by Sharon’s immense patience with wordy paragraphs, vague ideas, and the back and forth of research questions and findings. Her expansive knowledge of cities and curiosity about new contexts were invaluable tools in connecting my work to a field and a discipline. I could not have completed this project without quite a few long discussions in her office, and I owe her an enormous gratitude for her enduring patience, guidance, and willingness to engage with the politics of a distant city.

My other advisors at CUNY were vital in shaping my outlook and interests. I have been inspired by Sujatha Fernandes’ commitment to scholarship that connects political economy to lived experience and everyday subjectivities. Early coursework and conversations with her helped solidify a number of core conceptual features of the dissertation. Phil Kasinitz’s encyclopedic knowledge of all things urban, and quite a few things Argentine, represented a significant advantage throughout the research and writing process. I came to look forward to our conversation, always leaving his office with a new list of citations.

Ryan Center, though outside the day-to-day of my time at CUNY, nonetheless was my most reliable Buenos Aires interlocutor. Not only did I count on him for site-specific feedback
and debate, but I also came to rely on him for advice on the process, a drink after a stressful conference, or a gluttonous meal while trying to piece together the mysteries of our field sites. After coming across his dissertation title by chance sometime in 2009, I could not have asked for a more helpful critic, wide-ranging thinker, and above all, great friend, to be at the other end of “boom, bust, and blur”.

Though my research moved away from the sphere of crime and culture, I am deeply grateful to the late Jock Young for taking an early interest in my work. His kindness and direction were crucial during periods of uncertainty. Similarly, Bryan Turner offered early encouragement and helpful feedback.

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**Table of Contents**

Acknowledgements........................................................................................................ vi

**CHAPTER 1: A City in Transition**........................................................................... 1
  Introduction to the City.............................................................................................. 2
  Post-Industrial Restructuring.................................................................................... 8
  Gentrification and Reinvestment in Buenos Aires.................................................... 17
  The Global Urban Toolkit.......................................................................................... 26
  Methods and Chapter Overview.............................................................................. 35
  Chapter Overview...................................................................................................... 39

**CHAPTER 2: Turning to Culture in Times of Crisis**............................................. 42
  Touring the Crisis..................................................................................................... 46
  Institutional Foundations, 1996-2007..................................................................... 50
  Preserving the Historic Center................................................................................... 57
  Post-2007: From Preservation to Renewal............................................................... 61
  Planning Meets Politics: Pedestrian Only Calle Defensa......................................... 66
  Putting Heritage to Work........................................................................................... 69
  Tourism as Public Policy............................................................................................ 74
  Launching the Creative Industries............................................................................. 84
  Conclusions................................................................................................................. 95

**CHAPTER 3: San Telmo: The Invention of a Historic Center**............................... 97
  Historic Development............................................................................................... 98
  1871 and its Aftermath.............................................................................................. 104
  Contemporary San Telmo: From Obsolete to Historic............................................ 112
  From Local to Global............................................................................................... 124
  Real Estate, 2001-2012............................................................................................. 128
  Cosmopolitan versus Neoliberal Culture-led Restructuring...................................... 137

**CHAPTER 4: Re-centering the South: The Global, “Liveable” City**....................... 146
  Reshaping Conservative Political Discourse............................................................ 147
  Creative (and sustainable) districts: Policies and Imaginaries.................................. 150
New Urban Paradigms ................................................................. 152
Paradigms and Directionality ......................................................... 159
Building Creative Districts: Parque Patricios .................................... 163
The Creative-Sustainability-Smart-Innovative City: Microcentro and Distrito de las Artes .... 169
Plan Microcentro ............................................................................. 172
The Distrito de las Artes: Building an arts cluster .................................. 174
Legitimation Strategies for Competitive Cities ........................................ 176
An Artistic Mode of Neighborhood Production ...................................... 181
Non-Market Values, Market-Oriented Goals ........................................ 185
Conclusions ................................................................................... 191

CHAPTER 5: The Production of Value in a Tourist Market ......................... 192
The Anatomy of a Divided Market ..................................................... 193
Culture and Crisis in Urban Artisanship .............................................. 195
Law 4121: Regulating Informality, Building a World City ....................... 205
Tenuous Privilege: Informal and Formal Belonging ................................ 208
Formal Politics: Mobilizing Networks ................................................ 216
Aura Strategies ................................................................................. 221
Culture(s) of Poverty: Engaging Production at the Margins ...................... 223
Conclusions ................................................................................... 228

CHAPTER 6: Conclusion: Culture and Crisis in the Global City ..................... 230
The Postindustrial “Culture” City ....................................................... 230
Gentrification ................................................................................... 232
A New Geography of Policy Mobility ............................................... 234
Directions for Future Research ........................................................ 237
Bibliography ................................................................................... 240
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Population growth of Buenos Aires, 1914-2010. .......................................................... 7
Figure 2 Non-resident arrivals to Argentina. Source: Compiled by author, with data from the 
Argentine National Statistics and Census Institute (INDEC). ...................................................... 48
Figure 3: Tourist arrivals in Argentina and its regional neighbors ................................................. 49
Figure 4: Chronology of Interventions in historic center ........................................................... 64
Figure 5: New APH designations, 2012. .......................................................................................... 71
Figure 6: Relative increase/decrease of tourist arrivals to the Buenos Aires metropolitan region 
by country of origin, 1997/2001.) ................................................................................................. 75
Figure 7: Data from General Direction of Statistics and Census, Ministry of Culture, General 
Direction of Festivals. .................................................................................................................. 81
Figure 8: Mayor Mauricio Macri inaugurating a statue of sketch artists Olmeda and Portales on 
the sidewalk of the Avenida Corrientes, Buenos Aires’ Broadway ............................................. 84
Figure 9: Director of Creative Industries and Exports, Head of the Center of Metropolitan Design 
giving a TED talk in Porto Alegre. ................................................................................................. 91
Figure 10: Relative weight of various cultural industries .............................................................. 93
Figure 11: San Telmo and its surroundings ................................................................................... 98
Figure 12: Map of Buenos Aires, 1822 with prominent landmarks. ............................................. 101
Figure 13: An 1800 Map of Buenos Aires. The lower left quadrant demonstrates the scant 
development of San Telmo on the other side of calle Chile, with streets tapering off into 
suburban quintas ................................................................................................................................ 103
Figure 14: A typical street in San Telmo today. ............................................................................ 104
Figure 15: An early 20th century edificio de renta across from the Plaza Dorrego. .................. 108
Figure 16: The funeral procession for Eva Perón, a despised figure for much of the middle and 
upper classes in Buenos Aires, proceeds down the monumental Avenida de Mayo .................. 112
Figure 17: The modernist Plan Bonet for San Telmo. Source: Molina y Vedia (1999: 209) ..... 113
Figure 18: A 1970 article about San Telmo: “Return to the South” documents new boutiques, 
restaurants, and their bohemian owners ...................................................................................... 116
Figure 19: A local newspaper clipping from the 1970s, demonstrating the connection between 
symbolic ownership and class ........................................................................................................ 120
Figure 20: Representations of the “original” fair by the Museum of the city ............................. 124
Figure 21: Price of land by square meter for the entire city in US dollars, 2001-2011 .......... 129
Figure 22: Figure 12: Price of land square meter by neighborhood, 2001/2011 ..................... 130
Figure 23: List of hostel Conversions and a former low-income short-term rental house (hotel) turned Ayres Porteños Hostel. ............................................................................................. 132
Figure 24: Price of commercial rent by neighborhood. San Telmo stands at $60/square meter squared, while its neighbors remain at $32, $33, $27, and 28$ respectively ..................... 133
Figure 25: Tourism by country to Buenos Aires ........................................................................ 139
Figure 26: IBM’s Smart Cities page .......................................................................................... 156
Figure 27: The “unsuccessful” model of Puerto Madero, redeveloped in the 1990s ........... 159
Figure 28: Location of TICs in Parque Patricios, 2012 .............................................................. 166
Figure 29: Public investment in Parque Patricios ...................................................................... 167
Figure 30: The Mayor (center) along with his Vice, María Vidal (right), and the then Minister of Public Space Diego Santilli (left), inaugurating the city’s “Ciudad Verde” (green city) brand from the balcony of the municipal palace ................................................................. 171
Figure 31: Two areas of intervention. Plan Microcentro (north) and the Distrito de las Artes to the south. The seat of the Executive and the city’s central plaza are located between the two. 172
Figure 32: Urban “parklets” meant to expand space for pedestrians in Buenos Aires (Left) and New York City (Right) ........................................................................................................ 178
Figure 33: Different fairs on Sundays within San Telmo and vicinity. Numbers 5, 6 are regulated by the city museum and had been in the neighborhood prior to the crisis ...................... 202
Figure 34: Vendors selling wholesale items at the lower numbered blocks of Defensa .......... 209
Figure 35: Juan, selling his photographs. Behind him are the stands of the “official” Plaza Dorrego antique vendors ........................................................................................................ 216
Figure 36: Residents of the Padelai selling tickets for sausage sandwiches and other homemade foods ........................................................................................................................................ 226
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Development of policies of historic preservation in the Casco Histórico. .......................... 65
Table 2: The politics and rhetoric of the Creative vs. Cultural Industries in Buenos Aires ........ 89
Table 3: Population of city and electoral district 12 comprising San Telmo and parts of Constitución ........................................................................................................................................... 114
Table 4: Redevelopment themes in San Telmo ......................................................................................... 142
Table 5: Average price of apartments in US dollars per meter squared in selected districts. .... 165
Table 6: Price of land/meter squared in US dollars, city total and La Boca............................................ 182
Chapter 1: A City in Transition

In 1997 former Argentine president Carlos Menem inaugurated Buenos Aires’ newest neighborhood. The glittering dockside district of Puerto Madero had once served Argentina’s formidable meatpacking trade. By the mid-20th century, however, the area had fallen on hard times as a result of a new port opening further north. Now, the brick warehouses that had been built by British shipping interests in the 1890s were converted into sleek office space. Docks became pedestrian walkways, complete with a footbridge designed by international architect Santiago Calatrava. Inaugurated at the height of promotion for Argentina’s open-market model, the neighborhood would, according to President Menem, be a piece of the First World “right here in Buenos Aires.”¹ Its hermetic isolation, and homogenous upper-class character was an apt metaphor for the privatizing logic of Menem’s economic and political project.

Ten years later, another politician from the political right would kick-off a new period of city building in Buenos Aires. In his electoral campaign, Mayor Mauricio Macri promised to reinvest in the impoverished south of the city. Departing from the exclusionary logic of Puerto Madero, the south of the city would be bolstered with new public spaces, cultural offerings, and the incentivizing of post-industrial activities such as heritage, the arts, and technology. The city government framed these spaces as open and pluralistic. Local shantytowns, according to this narrative, would be socially and territorially incorporated.

This new agenda took its cue from broader models of city development being diffused throughout the globe, which increasingly stressed creativity, sustainability, and innovation in

¹ It is noteworthy that during the new dock’s opening ceremony, Menem explained that the project’s inspiration was the conversion of New York City’s South Street Seaport to a downtown shopping center. According to his account, after viewing this “beauty” of a project in New York, he instructed his appointed mayor of Buenos Aires (Carlos Grosso) to go to New York to study
urban planning. Though these narratives borrowed from older progressive planning models, these new policies were meant to foster market-based forms of urban growth. Each of these policy formulations and associated urban interventions were linked in complex ways to Buenos Aires’ – and indeed, Argentina’s – place in the global economy, and a shifting system of local stratification operating during a period of economic turbulence.

In this dissertation, I show how new models of urban development, rooted in cultural and touristic production, reshaped the urban core of Buenos Aires following a period of economic crisis. The result has been an expansion of the city center into formerly impoverished districts. In line with the increased importance of tourism and other postindustrial activities such as entertainment and leisure, these processes required the reshaping of these neighborhoods’ cultural meaning, from working class districts to centers of cultural production. Because urban image-making strategies rely upon the most dominant forms of local culture, these processes have both reproduced and reshaped existing forms of stratification. This dissertation looks at the state-led strategies utilized, and the way in which everyday residents, cultural producers, and the urban poor have contested this form of redevelopment.

Research on these issues engages broadly with debates around neoliberalization and globalization, but also more specialized questions about urban redevelopment, cultural models of reinvestment, and the place-based resources residents access during a period of economic change. Transnational economic processes and paradigmatic urban models shape these transformations, yet change also involves contentious politics, local forms of inequality, and the importance of the city’s complex history.

**Introduction to the City**
Since the late 19th century, foreign observers have had difficulty categorizing Buenos Aires. A 1906 *New York Times* headline characteristically observes: “Buenos Ayres: The Paris of America. A city with the beauty of Washington, the wealth of New York, and the hustle of Chicago” (Barrett 1906). But beyond the city’s physical properties, these characterizations were never far from observers’ perceptions of Buenos Aires’ racial exceptionalism. Already by the late 19th century, press accounts are eager to tie the metropolis’ surprising modernity to its European racial character.

These accounts of Argentine racial and economic exceptionalism in a regional context, though exaggerated, did point to one unique aspect of the city’s development. By the early 20th century, Buenos Aires’ territorial morphology departed in key ways from the Hispanic model of city building in the Americas. The central plaza surrounded by colonial government buildings and cramped streets were replaced starting in the 1890s by Haussmann inspired boulevards and lavish government buildings built for their perspectival impact.

By the nation’s centennial in 1910, Buenos Aires had emerged as Argentina’s showcase of European culture and an early form of global urbanism based on Haussmann’s Paris (Walter 1993: Ch. 1; Needell 1995). This conception of the city elicited significant admiration among European visitors during the celebrations but also validated the power and prestige of the country’s leadership. Central to materializing the nation’s progress and modernization, Buenos Aires’ monumental architecture, its sophisticated public amenities and urban infrastructure, and its Parisian-inspired parks and boulevards invoked widespread comparisons to Paris.

Yet as architect and historian Adrián Gorelik (2004: 85-89) points out, Buenos Aires’ claim to rival Paris in beauty and sophistication was always a questionable comparison, even for those attending the festivities and lauding the visionary efforts of the local governing elite. The
praise showered on the progress and modernity of the center of the city was, in part, based on these same visitors’ unease with the relative decline of “Latin” cities\(^2\) compared to the burgeoning capitalist modernity of North American, British, and German urban growth. It was Buenos Aires’ position in the New World, its rapid capitalist and consumer expansion, and its claim to a shared “Latin” culture that in large part explained the enthusiasm with which a number of European notables (particularly of Spanish and French origin) reacted.

This claim to European culture was not altogether false. Between 1871 and 1914 Argentina received some six million immigrants, largely from Southern Europe, about half of whom stayed in the country (Rock 1985: 141). The vast majority of these immigrants settled in and around Buenos Aires. During the first half of the 20th century economic prosperity contributed to the consolidation of a middle class of primarily immigrant origin. The first sociological studies of social class in Argentina show that by the 1940s some 55% of the country fell within these middle sectors (Germani 1950). Outside of the city center, the endlessly monotonous street grid inherited from the city’s colonial past (and much derided by local elites as a relic of the country’s backward Hispanic origins) served the expanding city well as the Europe of mostly Spanish and Italian immigrants settled in neighborhoods further from the central plaza. Despite the elite’s emphasis on the center of the city and its particular brand of Parisian mimicry, the expanding middle classes of European descent gradually inhabited neighborhoods throughout the city, which – if unlikely to recall Paris itself – contained an urban sociability and openness unlike cities in the rest of Latin America (Scobie 1974: Ch. 5; Sarlo 1988; Gorelik 1998: 273-306).

\(^2\) At the time of the centennial, the notion of a “Latin” world (basically the Western European, Catholic countries) was quite common. In fact, in the same 1906 New York Times article, Buenos Aires is called the second largest “Latin” city on the planet, just behind Paris, France.
Neighborhood sociability based on local institutions such as libraries, social clubs, and plazas formed the basis of a new middle-class way of life in a prosperous country during the first half of the twentieth century (Gutiérrez and Romero 1989; Liernur and Silvestri 1993). The emergence of this new lifestyle and middle-class identity was, from its inception, tightly interwoven with the high quality of the city’s public spaces and a sense of grounded citizenship for which neighborhoods emerged as a social referent (Braun and Cacciatore 1996: 44-45; Gorelik 1998: 276-277).

Yet sustained migration to the city of a *mestizo* working class, as well as the broader decline in the country’s economic fortunes led to increased fragmentation and porosity even within the limits of the country’s most privileged urban center. The arrival of rural workers from the provinces to the city and its outskirts, the rise of the populist Peronist government in the 1940s, and the subsequent arrival of immigrants from neighboring countries called into question the city’s dominant image of modernity, even while reifying its supposed “European” identity (Gorelik 2004: 93–94); an identity made more concrete as it was besieged by purported outsiders.

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3 Gorelik (1998: 277) argues that the “mythic” quality of the barrios came into being through a dialectical process of modernization whereby the very institutions and culture that produced the social organization of the barrios were always produced through a nostalgia for the older, “picturesque”, and pre-modern neighborhood of first-generation immigrants.

4 In many Latin American countries the term *mestizo* refers to the social groups that were descendants of Spanish colonizers and indigenous populations (for a classic account of “race” in Latin America, see Mörner (1966). In Argentina, the term is rarely used in part because of an official discourse that stresses Argentina’s roots in European immigration. However, as the country industrialized beginning in the 1930s, the city of Buenos Aires and its outskirts were the site of the large-scale migration of darker-skinned migrants from the countryside. Alarmed by the presence of this racialized urban proletariat, much of Buenos Aires’ middle and upper class scorned the presence of this social group, dubbed in local parlance “*cabecitas negras*” (Ratier 1972) or little black heads.
With the rise of Peronism in the 1940s, rural migrants from the nation’s interior were transformed from an invisible, excluded working class, to a highly visible public. Garguin (2007) suggests that representations of the entire nation as upwardly mobile and “European” were so dominant that the notion of a middle class did not come into circulation until this common-sense was challenged by the appearance of darker, working-class bodies in the city center. These workers were evidence of Argentina’s colonial-creole and mestizo past, a past that in Buenos Aires had been erased by the mass scale of European immigration. Phenotypically marked and seen as out of place, rural workers (and later those from neighboring countries) continued to materialize in the streets of Buenos Aires, even as much of the local middle class was unable to comprehend their presence as anything less than a foreign invasion (Luna 1971:273; 321–322; Ciria 1974:297).

Peronism reshaped urban development in ways that would have profound and lasting impacts. The “aristocratic” feel of the city that had dominated up until the 1930s (Romero and Romero 1976; Johns 1993), was materially and symbolically reordered by the appropriation of central plazas and streets by working class mobilizations in support of the Peronist government. In terms of future urban development, this process was particularly important. Areas in the center of the city were abandoned as spaces of representation for the middle and upper classes (Podalsky 2008). In more structural terms, the monopoly of upper class property ownership was diluted through the reformation of planning laws that for the first time allowed for the development of individually owned condominium construction (Ballent 2005). This was a huge boon to the middle-classes who hitherto had been forced to rent apartments or buy an entire home.

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5 In the crass terms of one legislator from the opposition to Peronism, speaking in 1947, these groups represented a “zoological deluge” for the city.
Despite the “massification” (Romero and Romero 1976: Ch. 7) of society during the Peronist years, Buenos Aires remained fairly privileged locally, with much of the migration from the countryside concentrated just outside the city, in the industrial municipalities to the south and west (Torres 1993). In this sense, the city was an exception in the regional context, insofar as Buenos Aires was largely consolidated in population terms by the late 1930s when migration from the countryside began. At this point, the city’s population was roughly 2.5 million, while the peak population has remained steady at three million since the mid-1940s.

*Figure 1: Population growth of Buenos Aires, 1914-2010. Source: Data from Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos (INDEC)*

During the 1940s-1970s, then, to support the country’s import substitution industrialization model (Baer 1972), the city’s outskirts were developed for the working classes; regional transport was nationalized in 1947, fostering the suburbanization of popular classes (Torres 1993: 9-10). For this reason, the kinds of mass informal housing within the city’s limits (seen in many other Latin American contexts) was less pronounced in Buenos Aires (see Figure 1). This led to a rich city with a poor hinterland: through the 1990s, the GDP per capita of the
capital was roughly that of the per capita GDP of France (Ciccolella and Mignaqui 2002), despite a far less prosperous situation at the national level.

This model of development, largely unchanged up until the 1980s, was reversed in the 1990s. For the first time there was an exodus of the upper classes from the city to the suburban periphery, a familiar trajectory to scholars of North American urbanism. But at the same time, in the 1990s a process of reinvestment was taking place in the city center, a key node of a regional “global city” (Sassen 2002). Meanwhile, other historically middle-class areas deteriorated as the upper-middle classes decamped to the outskirts of the capital (Libertun De Duren 2006; Svampa 2001).

The 1990s produced new centralities, particularly in upscale suburbs to the north of the city, where high-income sectors of the population, as well as some businesses, concentrated during this period. Torres (2001) argues that the traditional image of the metropolitan region – visually represented as a “stain” of urbanization, with a clear center tapering off into less dense suburbs, by the 1990s was less patterned. This metropolitan reorganization now appeared more as a loosely connected web of low density agglomerations cut off from traditionally working class areas, and fractured by a sinuous system of highways and gated communities (Libertun De Duren 2006; Carrión 2001:18; Narodowski 2013), not unlike the “postmodern” restructuring of US cities (particularly Los Angeles) described by Dear (2003) and Soja (2000).

Post-Industrial Restructuring

How did the restructuring of Buenos Aires in the 1990s connect to broader processes of urban change taking place around the world? As has been pointed out by a generation of scholars, the patterns of urban development that characterized industrial cities for most of the
20th century began to change in the 1970s. The slow decline of manufacturing led many urban leaders, in concert with local elites, to seek out new forms of economic growth.

In many cases attracting new industries meant doing away with the highly institutionalized relationships between municipal governments, unionized labor, and local manufacturers. In cities increasingly dominated by a financial sector tied to rapid flows of information and investment (Sassen 2001: Ch. 4), the rigid model of stable employment and place-based industry characterizing the “Fordist” period yielded to far more flexible labor relations (Mayer 1994). To maintain and attract the industries, jobs, and high-end service workers that dominated this post-industrial economy, cities have increasingly turned to “entrepreneurial” governance, in which elected officials are actively engaged in seeking out new investment, industries, and growth in a global competition with other cities (Harvey 1987; 1989). If governing the industrial city typically required local states to grapple, foremost, with the provision of services to residents, government in the post-industrial period has required, above all, attracting business and real estate investment, wealthy residents, and visitors.

Efforts to lure the high-end services and workers of the “new economy” have required local governments and real estate interests to develop urban infrastructure catering to new residents and users (Lloyd 2010; Ocejo 2009). This more flexible urban economy is tied to spaces of consumption, leisure, and entertainment-based forms of economic activity that go beyond prior forms of entertainment in the city (Zukin et al. 1998). These features of the post-industrial economy have transformed the physical landscape of the urban core, with formerly working class or industrial areas repurposed for new residents and users, often leading to the displacement of lower socio-economic strata (e.g. Zuki 1989; Smith 1979).
While many cities experienced industrial decline and have sought, to the extent possible, to replace manufacturing jobs with those from an expanding service sector, some cities have become key nodes in an interconnected global economy. Cities such as New York, London, or Tokyo increasingly housed the infrastructure, networks, and logistical resources for organizing this global economy, converting them into a privileged subset of “global cities”.

The extent to which smaller cities or those without major financial sectors can be understood as global has been the subject of some debate. In many cases, large cities in the global South may serve to organize regional business processes but are themselves subordinated to the most powerful urban centers (see Roy 2007: xvi for a critique of this "big but powerless" thesis). Scholars like Sassen (2002) and those writing in this tradition (Ciccolella and Mignaqui 2002) suggest that Buenos Aires in the 1990s aspired to – and in a sense, achieved – global city status. During the 1990s, with an economy close to the size of Brazil’s (despite Argentina’s much small population and land mass), Buenos Aires was a key center of finance and business decision making in the region (Torres 2001; Crot 2006).6

But the 2001-2002 crisis shook both Argentina’s economy and the regime of economic development based on producer services and finance. During the period following economic crisis, Buenos Aires’ role as a regional global city is less clear. In the immediate aftermath of crisis, the city lost many of the post-industrial service sectors it had accrued during the restructuring of the 1990s (Galbraith et al. 2007; Wylde 2011). With a weaker and more volatile currency, as well as the economic growth of neighboring Brazil, Buenos Aires lost clout to São Paulo as a regional center of finance and business services.

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6 Gilbert (1998: 180) argues that large Latin American cities cannot truly be understood as fulfilling a global city role. Rather, their influence may be limited to regional organizers of international business services and processes.
Yet Buenos Aires has become global in other, noneconomic ways. With the increase in tourism, the cultural or “symbolic” economy (Zukin 1995) has received ever-greater purchase in urban development. And Buenos Aires has punched far above its weight in its ability to attract international visitors. In line with a worldwide increase in the importance of tourism and its attendant mobilization of local culture and the arts (Hoffman et al. 2008; Judd and Fainstein 1999), Buenos Aires today is nothing short of a regional giant. It represents the top destination in South America for international visitors. The meaning of the “global city” then is changing as transnational processes like tourism represent an increasingly important realm of internationalization, beyond just business and financial services. Cities like Buenos Aires are “going global” (Yeoh 2005) in ways that transcend the original conception of the global city, by engaging in a complex competition for human and investment capital, as well as for tourism.

The forms of capital accumulation being innovated by post-industrial cities often rely upon local, place-specific cultural meanings. As cities upgrade spaces and urban infrastructure for consumption and leisure, they must find ways to market the intangible: traditions and histories that differentiate place-based character (Gotham 2005a). Thus, postindustrial redevelopment relies upon both consumption of goods and services, but also cultural experiences that users see as authentic (Zukin 2009). Beyond the increased importance of international flows of visitors and information, at its core the cultural economy has enlarged the role of local traditions, identities, and places.

As tourism has become a significant policy concern for municipal governments around the world, city officials have paid increased attention to these “symbolic” dimensions of urban economies, which facilitate promotional strategies tied to consumption and leisure (Zukin 1995; Urry and Larsen 2011). Reorienting Buenos Aires’ global reputation and maximizing its
competitive strengths in culture and the arts required a long process of governmental innovation, with the 2001-2002 crisis representing a key turning point. Throughout the 1990s, tentative moves toward the development of cultural industries were evident in the local and national governments’ urban initiatives. The redeveloped docks of Puerto Madero represented a seminal moment in this strategy, but other more everyday forms of city promotion characterized the broader process. Heritage districts with their own planning laws were consolidated in the 1990s, while tourism promotion and various initiatives to promote and stimulate traditional cultural practices such as tango gained importance (Kanai and Ortega-Alcázar 2009; Luker 2010).

But significant change came with the 2001-2002 crisis. A new paradigm of economic growth was necessary for a city with a decimated industrial sector and a now eroded base of financial and business services. Fortunately, urban managers would soon find themselves with an asset that potentially transcended the city’s structural deficits. Its history of artistic production, legacy of cultural syncretism, and disinvested yet sophisticated urban amenities fit neatly within an emerging aesthetic of hipster cool, which in the parlance of international guidebooks now almost universally cast Buenos Aires as a delightful example of urban shabby chic (e.g. Dávila 2012: 137; Luongo 2003).

In some respects it was unsurprising that Buenos Aires should become “the culture capital of Latin America” as the local government would have it following the crisis (Bayardo 2013: 105). In fact, Buenos Aires had, since the early 20th century, been a pioneering player in the regional culture industries. Its voracious reading public was well-known to the publishing industry, its cinema penetrated the Latin American market since the mid-20th century (King 2000: ch. 3) and its colossal opera house was ranked among the world’s best for its acoustics, notwithstanding its monumental scale (Benzecry 2011).
Yet historically the place of culture in government involved professionals largely cut off from the exigencies of the market (Getino 2003: 77; Yúdice 2003: ch. 1), though not necessarily the needs of local politicians (Landi 1984; Sarlo and Altamirano 2001; Sigal 2002). But as the city government sought to squeeze more economic development out of cultural industries, cultural promotion found a place on the radar of ministries like Economic and Urban Development. As the mayor put it in the aftermath of crisis, Buenos Aires was not going to compete with “slave labor” though the city “did have creativity” (Centner 2007: 22).

The Ministry of Culture increasingly themed economic and urban policy with cultural cachet through the organizing of international festivals, the redevelopment of museums in particular districts, and tourism promotion (Lacarrieu 2008; Luker 2010; Kanai and Ortega-Alcázar 2009). This cultural branding of economic and urban policies hardly represented a dramatic institutional shift, and indeed the central work and responsibilities of each ministry remained largely the same. What creative city discourses had produced institutionally is what Peck (2012: 467) refers to as a “weak center”, a process of institutional learning in which a fragile consensus on the desirability of creative city policy sits at the nexus of culture, the economy, and urban development. In practice, rather than representing a wholehearted embrace of “mobile” urban policies borrowed from abroad, they represented a soft institutional orientation and set of organizing skills cultivated by outward looking city leaders and inculcated within the ranks of various ministries. Thinly held together by a shared vision of the economically competitive creative city, this loose set of policies and discourses represented a subtle but important shift for the institutional imaginings of the city government.

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7 Between the 1990s and today, the names of ministries have changed significantly. I use the most current language throughout this dissertation.
For example, the city government created an institute for studying the cultural industries within the Ministry of Culture in the early 2000s, but it was later turned over to the Ministry of Economic Development, which rebranded it Creative Industries. This cultural theming of the city was energized by the increased economic activity fueled by international festivals for tango, film, and jazz organized by the Ministry of Culture. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Economic Development established creative clusters in the south of the city, while Buenos Aires secured UNESCO status for tango, hosted international conferences on the creative industries, and managed to be designated UNESCO’s first City of Design.

Reshaping Buenos Aires’ urban core for culture and tourism was a clear strategy for local governance throughout successive administrations. Yet the primary role of culture in these processes connected the city’s transformation to restructuring taking place around the world. Why had culture become such a valuable resource for urban administrators in Buenos Aires and beyond? To what broader changes did the role of culture point?

For much of the 19th and 20th century, government uses of culture generally followed a very different paradigm. Culture was a formidable tool for authorities seeking to generate social cohesion or integrate various groups into new conceptions of the nation. Government promotion of culture and the arts remained within this framework during the Fordist period, when national cultures had already been largely consolidated. In the United States, for example, scholars have pointed out that institutions such as the National Endowment for the Arts and its European counterparts generally followed a top down model, in which policy-makers understood the arts as contributing to social cohesion and the overcoming of societal cleavages through the production and dissemination of shared values, or the public expression of formerly marginalized groups (Binkiewicz 2004; Zimmer and Toepler 1999)
This model of state-led cultural production has shifted in the post-Fordist period. Culture is now a “resource” (Yúdice 2003) in the global economy, no longer controlled through top-down planning in an effort to create a uniform national culture, but rather deployed by various institutions, the state or otherwise, to further their goals, private-sector profit, or NGO advocacy.

There are a number of reasons for this shift. In a period in which government welfare functions along with universal categories such as social class have receded, cultural theorists such as Yúdice (2003) suggest that culture today is the language of group claims making in multicultural society. According to Yúdice, identity-based claims have reoriented the everyday uses of culture in the postmodern period. These new uses are equally about the politics of difference during a period of neoliberalization as they are about the “industry” of culture and its profitmaking.

In sum, culture is a resource because of its increased commercial value, but also because it is the contemporary idiom of political representation for an array of group claims. During a period of decline in the functions of the welfare state, and a concomitant rise of identity-based movements, cultural production connects local forms of politics with processes of capital accumulation (Yudice 2003: 4). On the one hand, culture today is consistently used as a means for legitimizing the claims and struggles of multicultural society and its web of social movements, community groups, and NGOs. On the other, its commercial viability rests upon global flows of investment that generate forms of cultural consumption based on authenticity, and place-based identity.

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8 By focusing on culture’s “expediency” for multiple actors, Yúdice departs from critical mid-century accounts of cultural production, formulated most forcefully by Adorno in The Culture Industry (19460). Yúdice’s analysis thereby moves beyond the formalist critique of cultural forms: popular or mass culture is not to be simply criticized for its banality, cult of consumption, or essential standardization.
These insights are helpful for understanding economic and urban development strategies in cities around the world. Local governments embrace culture-based redevelopment projects rooted in consumption as a strategy for economic growth. The place-specific images and identities that underpin these investments offer differentiated marketing tools to city officials. For local governments to fail to embrace this form of growth is to risk losing the investment, development, and wealthy residents that are at the core of post-industrial urban economies. In competition with other cities and urban regions, these projects require cities to identify and develop their unique cultural assets that can be parlayed into attractions for new users and investors.

And in a period characterized by competition for investment between cities, local culture has become an especially valuable asset. As David Harvey (2002) has pointed out, to the degree in which products are understood as unique, producers are able to capture “monopoly rents”, higher prices characteristic of a good’s one-of-a-kind nature. Some products may be natural monopolies, while others can achieve this status if they successfully produce a differentiated image. Culture is by its very nature situated locally and thus is never fully fungible despite its increasingly instrumentalized forms. For this reason, local culture has become a particularly valuable commodity in the global economy, mobilized in a competition for investment by a hierarchy of culturally differentiated urban “brands” (Greenberg 2008).

Entrepreneurial cities may seek to produce these monopoly rents by cultivating artistic forms that can be marketed as unique, authentic, and place-based. Governments and developers promote these forms of culture to encourage consumption and tourism, and above all, real estate investment in different sites of the city. This cultural theming of the city, ironically, has led to a
proliferation of curated urban “theme parks”, providing consumers with an experience of fantasy rooted in local tradition, yet lacking in any vernacular cultural content (Hannigan 2005).

Cultural forms that are most identifiably local are particularly attractive for branding efforts aimed at tourism. Forms such as tango in the case of Buenos Aires provide multidirectional opportunities for image production: a cultural form may become associated with an individual city, while the city itself gains a reputation for these cultural forms. But local culture is also a profoundly contested terrain in terms of who is able to control dominant images of a city’s culture. Though urban governments may try to promote or develop cultural offerings using instrumental logics, at its core, culture is difficult to detach from the local identities, spaces, and histories that produce it.

In this sense, culture – like cities themselves – is a messy constellation of practices, memories, and lifestyles that often contradict top-down definitions. Particularly in districts being redeveloped along the lines of tourism, forms of cultural knowledge confer invisible privileges on those with the right set of tools. These neighborhood resources are contested “fields” (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993) in which cultural power and domination result in the most successful outcomes. A district’s cultural resources represent a site of conflict in which “participants vie to establish monopoly over the species of capital effective in it…” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:17). In other words, actors bring to this field a preexisting set of cultural tools, organized in hierarchical form. Beyond the physical elements of reinvestment, these processes shed light on how urban restructuring intersects with local forms of stratification.

**Gentrification and Reinvestment in Buenos Aires**
Residential change as a specific form of urban growth has been central to reinvestment processes around the world. As higher income groups move into disinvested neighborhoods, local government may provide more or less support to residential change. State-led forms of gentrification can involve zoning or land use changes, the improvement of transportation infrastructure, or tax incentives for developers or residents. But whether gentrification is market led or state led, it almost always attracts the attention of local government. In neighborhoods with relatively little public investment, state involvement may still be present, for example, in the form of increased policing or municipal tax policies.

When gentrification is mostly market-led in that processes of reinvestment are the result of new residents and business-owners rather than government investment or rezoning, it nonetheless relies upon the state in key ways. For example, clearly defined property laws, contract enforcement, and police jurisdiction are all the *sine qua non* of new investment. The ability of the state to regulate urban space through these instruments can be conceived of as a degree of state sovereignty.

In this sense, local governments, in their presence or absence always shape the landscape of redevelopment. In many cases, new investment occurs because of a particular “regime” of urban governance – a set of government actors, elites, and interest groups that support a particular kind of growth or development in a particular jurisdiction (Stone 1993; Stoker 1995; Stoker and Mossberger 1994). On balance, regime theory takes a pluralist approach to understanding political decision-making. It “is not public agencies using electoral power to coerce the business sector to work alongside it; nor is it the business sector riding ‘roughshod’ over the public authorities to service the needs of capital” (Ward 1996: 428). While hardly fully
democratic, urban governance is understood as constructed around a cross-cutting, at times multi-class, set of interests and objectives.

The sociological notion of “growth coalitions” (Molotch, 1976; Logan and Molotch 1987) posits similar political and urban processes, yet demonstrates more collusion among local governments, elites, and real estate interests, and less possibility for democratic outcomes. Local elites, developers, and wealthy residents actively pursue agendas for the transformation of place in ways that redirect the economic surplus that accrues to physical spaces of the city. The result is the pursuit of private gain over collective good or local sentiment (Firey 1945; Gans 1965), captured in the dualistic notion of exchange versus use values characteristic of growth machine politics (Vogel and Swanson 1989).

These political-economic perspectives assume a relatively coherent set of interests and dispositions toward urban growth. Regime theory, perhaps more than the concept of the growth machine, suggests that elite interests are multiple, contradictory, and at many times at odds with one another. Whether cities promote manufacturing or service sectors for example, means that elites tied to these industries may lose out depending on which coalition is capable of “capturing” the local state. Yet once one of these orientations is dominant, proponents of these theories assume that a project of urban transformation is essentially coherent intellectually, politically, and spatially.

The assumptions of these theories indicate the relatively high levels of state sovereignty in many global North contexts. Sovereignty here is not a condition in which local governments are free from the fetters of powerful interests. These interests may distort the wishes of more democratic publics. Yet whichever groups of democratic or corporatist interests ultimately come
to govern, they are often positioned to use powerful political and legal mechanisms to achieve their goals, urban and otherwise, democratically debated or ratified by powerful interest groups.

This level of state sovereignty is more complex in many global South contexts, and in particular in Latin America, where sovereignty over territory itself is often contingent given the many unregulated types of tenancy characteristic of informal settlements. Informality, of course, may be its own form of governance, meant to manage the claims of marginalized populations (e.g. Roy 2005; 2009; Devlin 2011). In cities characterized by deep inequalities, legal instruments for systematic income redistribution are limited at the municipal level. Of crucial importance to the most marginal groups in a city like Buenos Aires, then, is the ability to physically occupy space in privileged sites of the city: to sell trinkets or homemade food, to play music or entertain tourists in central urban spaces, or to use housing near these precarious labor markets (Centner 2012). In short, allowing access to central spaces of the city is a key mechanism for urban governance in many cities across the globe (Ciccolella and Mignaqui 2008).

Yet in allowing for some forms of informality, local governments may find themselves less capable of pursuing growth strategies. Real estate developers, businesses, and members of the investor class are unable to fully develop these sites for commercial profit-making when they are occupied for subsistence. The concrete mechanisms through which urban states settle upon new uses for space, such as the public-private governance model of Business Improvement Districts (BID) in North America and Western Europe (Ward 2006), demonstrates how the dynamics of urban sovereignty are crucial to understanding how reinvestment occurs in Buenos Aires.
For this reason, much of the work on urban change in the global South has emphasized slightly different processes of reinvestment, such as the notion of “mega-gentrification” (Lees 2012), which involves mega-projects that local or national governments undertake, rather than the piece-meal gentrification characteristic of the market. These state-led interventions are top-down affairs, in some cases involving not only the local state but the national state as well (see Jajamovich 2012 in Buenos Aires). They typically do not involve existing residential structures, but rather aim to redevelop large-scale residential or commercial tracts, docklands, or monumental buildings (Cuenya and Corral 2011; Carman 2006; Miller 2014; Sánchez and Broudehoux 2013). 

This description of mega-projects suggests high levels of state sovereignty and coordination of urban projects. But these cities have experienced far less of the consumer-based processes of residential gentrification that characterize cities such as New York, Chicago, or Manchester to name but a few (Zukin 2009; Betancur 2002; Porter and Barber 2006). Redeveloping an abandoned dock may prove easier for local governments than clearing informal markets, occupied housing, or ambulant uses of public space because it typically does not require the removal of existing residents. In the regional Latin American context, with a tradition of authoritarianism and the recent enshrining of rights meant to foster more democratic governance, the state control necessary to foment private investment is generally weaker. For example, a city government effort to enclose a “revitalized” park in the historic center resulted in a social movement opposed to enclosure, ultimately forcing the local state to backpedal. On the other hands, state-led processes of mega-gentrification in uninhabited sites may represent an attractive

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9 Certainly cities in the global South are enormously diverse in terms of institutional arrangements and democratic processes. Urban scholars of Chinese cities have noted that the state may easily demolish entire residential neighborhoods while reorienting particular spaces for touristic consumption (Ren 2008; He and Wu 2005; 2009).
possibility for redevelopment in contexts in which the exercise of the local state’s “everyday” sovereignty is limited by powerful social movements and its own restrictive resources or territorial control.

As a result, in empirical research on urban change in Latin America, reinvestment is often commercial (Inzulza-Contardo: 2013) or “mega”. In terms of commercial gentrification, processes of tourism are key. In this sense, urban scholars of Latin America tend to blur the class-based “replacement” processes originally conceived of in the term (e.g. Glass 1964), opting instead to focus on issues such as the displacement of informal vendors (Bromley and Mackie 2009), or the proliferation of public-private commercial investment schemes, especially in touristic historic centers (Davis 2013; Jones and Varley 1999).

But rarely in Latin America does gentrification involve middle and upper-class residents moving into formerly working-class quarters. In an overview of the field in Spain and Latin America, Jonoschka and Salinas (2014: 5) argue for the relevance of the term gentrification, suggesting that, “…the Malecón 2000 waterfront regeneration in Guayaquil (Ecuador) and Puerto Madero in Buenos Aires – two perfect examples of state-led gentrification in Latin America…” It is noteworthy that gentrification is applied here to a derelict port with no recent commercial or residential uses (Buenos Aires) and a pedestrian waterfront (Guayaquil). Is this, indeed, gentrification?

If gentrification is a tough fit for the region, what these empirical contributions do suggest is the broader backdrop of neoliberal urban policies that aim to attract investment and growth, often resulting in the displacement of low-income populations such as informal workers, or residents of precarious housing reoriented toward touristic development such as hotels. Yet displacement here does not typically imply higher income locals moving into old housing. In
defining gentrification in Latin America, Jonoschka and Salinas (2014) acknowledge the slippage between neoliberal urban policy and gentrification, suggesting that “…it seems evident that all substitutions of the past for something new are now implemented by gentrifying mechanisms” (8). This quote suggests an extremely broad definition of gentrification as a type of state-led restructuring of the city and its property markets in the absence of other forms of reinvestment.

The central-south neighborhoods of La Boca and San Telmo in Buenos Aires fit prominently in this growing literature on gentrification in Latin America (Di Virgilio et al. 2008; Herzer 2008; Gómez Schettini et al. 2008; Guano 2003). These neighborhoods have unparalleled claims to represent the major touristic themes of Buenos Aires, such as tango, Italian immigration, and colonial architecture. Starting in the 1970s, antiques dealers began moving into and renovating some of the colonial structures in San Telmo. In the 1990s, the city government made investments in the infrastructure of both neighborhoods, insulating La Boca from storm surges and updating the thematic tourist street of Caminito. In San Telmo, streets were returned to cobble-stone, “colonial” light fixtures were installed, and owners received credits to restore facades.

Yet a closer look at these processes in Buenos Aires reveals some problems with the term gentrification. The city government undertook these interventions explicitly in the name of tourism, rather than residential change. In turn, commercial real estate has risen the most rapidly, particularly in the touristic spaces of San Telmo. The antiques trade has profoundly reshaped many central streets of the neighborhood. From there, reinvestment has generally radiated out from already established higher income areas, such as those closest to Puerto Madero or the downtown financial district (Microcentro). Residential gentrification, on the other hand, remains
relatively small. San Telmo does contain a number of bohemian and artistic residents who have arrived over the course of the last decades. Yet international students, tourists, and expats today are the bulk of newcomers. The residential conversion that exists is generally oriented toward hotels or hostels rather than the local middle-class. While there exists a sizeable middle class in neighborhoods like San Telmo and La Boca, many of these residents precede the period of reinvestment.

In sum, gentrification as a concept requires thinking about the relational patterns between old and new residents. That is, how do new residents relate to old in terms of social class or cultural capital? In the Anglophone literature, this has involved stark class differences, often reinforced through systems of ethno-racial classification. Yet in the Latin American case, the residential displacement of working class groups with the wealthy is less clear. While race is highly relevant in Latin America, it is less clearly delineated in terms of residential segregation. It would be reductive in the region to speak of “indigenous” or mestizo neighborhoods being gentrified by “whites”.

On the other hand, class categories being of notable rigidity in the region (e.g. Beals 1953; Portes and Hoffman 2003), means that it is rare for higher-income groups to choose to rub shoulders with the poor. Given the importance of residential displacement in the Anglophone literature, this is a significant point of departure. The redevelopment and displacement of working-class spaces is quite real in Latin America, but this is rarely the result of middle-class residents moving into the former quarters of the poor. The upscaling of historic districts for tourism may result in displacement of informal workers and the demolition or conversion (especially into hotels) of informal housing, but it does not necessarily result in wealthier locals
moving into formerly working-class housing, a divergence common to global South reinvestment processes (Ghertner 2014; Nobre 2013).

Because reinvestment has often followed the flow of tourism to historic districts in the region, local residential tenure may in fact hinder further residential gentrification. When the middle and upper classes in cities like Buenos Aires move into formerly working-class districts, it is mostly due to new condominium developments. But few of these can be built in historic districts with preservation laws. Former colonial structures inhabited by working class tenements might be ripe for residential reinvestment, yet this appeals only to the most progressive or bohemian of local residents.

For the scale of gentrification taking place in cities like New York or London to occur in Buenos Aires would require the breaking down of the social stigma attached to working class individuals and districts. Even given the strong traditions of racial animus in countries like the United States, wealthier residents in post-industrial cities seem to experience little stigma moving into minority or working-class neighborhoods, particularly when histories of racial strife are parlayed into “historic” or “ethnic” character (Zukin 2012; 2014; Hyra 2008). Comparative questions of race, class, and the degree of social stratification in a regional context thus represent an often-ignored gap in an emerging comparative literature on gentrification.

New forms of urban growth, whether conceived as gentrification or otherwise, do reshape the social life of districts undergoing reinvestment. San Telmo, as a touristic and commercial space, brings new flows of investment and people into the neighborhood. In this sense it is a space of opportunity for both real estate developers and building owners, but also informal vendors and others who can convert its public spaces into spaces of commercial gain. Beyond
residential change, conflictual processes and competition occur, whereby residents and users seek to generate advantage from neighborhoods undergoing reinvestment.

The Global Urban Toolkit

The way in which urban officials make policy decisions has changed as a result of globalization and deindustrialization. As local administrators come into contact with more ideas, discourses, and case studies from outside their local context, they have a wider array of policy models to choose from. Some models gain purchase in governing circles, while others may be discarded or deemed too incongruous with local conditions. Whereas industrial cities typically contained longtime industries, the mobility of investment, visitors, and wealthy residents in the post-industrial period means that most cities aspire to develop forms of urbanism that can capture these new indicators of urban success.

Policymakers have long had mechanisms for acquainting themselves with policies from elsewhere. Ministers or other technocrats may spend time abroad to study a specific government policy or set of institutions with the intent of bringing these policies back home. A classic example is French aristocrat Alexis Tocqueville’s stay in the United States, meant as a study of the US penal system, though ultimately expanding to a study of American society and governance. In Argentina, statesman and President (1868-1874) Domingo Faustino Sarmiento is said to have modeled the local educational system off the United States, following his travels there. And from the perspective of urban development, Haussmann’s Paris had a strong effect on 19th century planning practices in cities from Buenos Aires to Washington DC.

Increasingly, however, certain urban policies, designs, and discourses seem to generate almost universal attention from urban policy-makers and administrators. Aided by rapid flows of
information and expertise, these “geographies of policy mobility” (McCann 2011) have produced new institutionalized forms for promoting and disseminating benefits of particular urban interventions. Agents of policy diffusion include multi-lateral institutions, academics, city officials and planners, and NGOs. Across many contemporary planning discourses, what might be considered a new normative policy script is being standardized. This programmatic discourse expresses the goal of competitive urban policies (McCann 2011; Peck and Theodore 2010; Peck 2011), is the topic of international conferences for city managers, and the subject of intervention for transnational policy consultants (Prince 2012).

Urban change has always implied relational processes between places. The relative mobility of capital, yet the fixity of urban projects has long motivated scholars of urban political economy (e.g. Harvey 1989) to consider the scalar interactions between the urban, regional, or national level, and the mutually constituted nature of the “global” and the “local” (Massey 1991). These insights are especially important during a period of rapid flows of people, knowledge, and capital. The increased competition between cities characteristic of post-industrial restructuring has led to urban policies that seek to encourage investment and growth through the scaling back of government regulation, the extension of market mechanisms to formerly public goods (Peck and Theodore 2001), and the development of post-industrial spaces of consumption (e.g. Ocejo 2009; Zukin 1991; 1995; Lloyd 2006). But competition and “market rule” (Peck 2011: 785) as a priority of governance is mediated by local constraints, meaning that there are numerous “actually existing” forms of neoliberal urbanism (Brenner and Theodore 2002).

The near universal competition for investment, however, means that similar policies are adopted in diverse cities. These policies are based on best practices successfully implemented elsewhere. In order to promote these policies to receptive urban officials, new actors and
institutions actively strive to translate policy models and experiences across contexts. Transnational NGOs and think tanks promote particular forms of urban growth, such as that related to green or sustainable transport, culture-based redevelopment, or downtown regeneration and renewal. Multilateral institutions such as UN Habitat convene conferences with themes such as “Cities for Life” in which issues such as sustainability, good governance, and participation are highlighted. Other agencies such as UNESCO create “city networks” to discuss the implementation of creative city and tourism policies. International NGOs such as the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP) have been key to the worldwide adoption of infrastructure such as Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) by actively seeking out and engaging with civic leaders to undertake these projects.

Because similar policies are adopted around the world, cities that first innovated these models have emerged as “paradigmatic”. For example, many international organizations cast Bogotá’s early adoption of BRT as a model for other cities in the developing world, where subway construction is often prohibitively expensive (Wood 2014). New York’s innovative highline park has become a global touchstone of adaptive reuse for outdated structures (Loughran 2014). Creating and disseminating the paradigmatic status of these cases is aided by international organizations that promote the successes of these projects at international conferences for city planners and administrators. Other organizations such as ITDP act as consultants to city governments, bringing past experiences and knowledge to new contexts. In many cases, these institutional actors are associated with one another, with non-profits such as ITDP presenting their work and sponsoring sessions at semi-annual meetings of policy-makers such as UN Habitat’s Conference on Housing and Sustainable Development.
The interaction of these organizations, governments, and policy-makers and their promotion of particular urban models has contributed to the establishment of a standard “global urban toolkit”. It is hardly uniform or concrete, but on balance it suggests cities should be participatory, diverse, and sustainable. They should harbor creativity and innovation. And they should have spaces of diversion and collective encounter. This global toolkit is remarkable for its appeal to universal, non-market values, such as those mentioned above. Yet its dissemination is operating a time when observers have noted increased stratification in cities around the world, in which neoliberal urban policies are diminishing the reach of public services. Formerly public goods such as education or housing may be privatized, while there is an erosion of the meaning of the public when state managed spaces increasingly serve private interests in the form of business improvement districts (Ward 2006) or park conservancies (Low et al. 2005).

But if post-industrial competitive city priorities indeed involve a “deregulatory race to the bottom” (Jessop 1998: 79), would this not suggest that everyday people’s needs would be increasingly neglected by urban states, rather than assume a privileged role in urban policy agendas? Why, then, does this global toolkit appear to incorporate many progressive policy idioms touting sustainability or cultural expression?

At their core, the non-market values expressed by the global toolkit align with the needs of post-industrial urban economics. As While et al. (2004: 550) note, negative environmental issues such as pollution, traffic, or waste have to be eliminated in the production of positive city images meant to foster new investment. Representing a “sustainability fix” (While et al. 2004) or “sustainability edge” (Greenberg 2015), the exigencies of entrepreneurial governance (Harvey 1989) suggest that environmental concerns are “problems to be banished from the city undergoing redevelopment and integration into the new economy” (Jones and While 2007: 144).
It comes as little surprise, then, that in cities across the globe there is a blurring of the boundaries between post-industrial restructuring rooted in creative urban agendas and the rise of socio-environmental initiatives, such as the “greening” of public space (Checker 2011), the growth of urban gardening in formerly abandoned areas (Rosol 2010), and the installation of bike lanes and other forms of sustainable transport.

Urban spaces and practices that have little to do with creative employment sectors, such as graffiti or street art (Banet-Weiser 2011), local markets (Bubinas 2011; Gonzalez and Waley 2013), or new public spaces such as New York City’s highline (Loughran 2014), may be attractive to local governments because they project an image of creativity, entertainment, and leisure at the center of these agendas without in fact being readily translated into new cultural industries. Behind the universal values to which the global toolkit appeals – sustainability, inclusion, creative expression, and participation – lie a number of challenges of contemporary urban governance. These urban innovations express the economic necessities of post-industrial urban governance.

For example, the globalizing policy narrative advocating innovative or “smart city” solutions is part of the promotional strategies of transnational technology firms such as IBM and Siemens (Vanolo 2013). These companies offer “smart city” solutions, in which technological innovation and citizen participation are promoted as an antidote to “traditional”, wasteful government programs. Expressing the interconnectedness of multinational firms and global institutions, technology companies are often prominent sponsors of international conferences such as the “Smart City Expo” in which Buenos Aires has participated and been nominated for various sustainability awards.
Mapping the flow of these ideas and policies matters in how much weight urban analysis gives to the most prominent actors, cities, and local governments. Because policies are never adopted whole cloth, they always require “translation” (Cochrane and Ward 2012: 4) to fit local political, economic, and social conditions. Some scholars have argued that the complexity of global flows means that we can no longer talk of directionality when it comes to the mobility of policies, in that flows of knowledge (or anything else) does not move so neatly from one place to another (McFarlane 2009; 2011a; 2011b; Simone 2011). Instead policies come together in complex ways; they are “assembled” by local governments and everyday actors from multiple and fragmented sources, discourses, and imaginaries, always inflected with local institutional arrangements. From this perspective, analyzing the implementation of urban policy requires rethinking fundamental urban categories “including scale, territory, place, locality and even the global” (Cochrane and Ward 2012: 5)

If policy models are assembled from multiple, fragmented sources, it is difficult to assert that the richest and most powerful cities have a special claim to paradigmatic status. This has led some urban researchers to call for a decentering of analysis from the most powerful cities and regions. These critics suggest that by emphasizing paradigmatic cities such as New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles, some cities emerge as models, while others are engaging in mere policy mimicry. The focus on these paradigmatic cases involves universal measures of urban modernity to which non-Western cities will intrinsically come up short. This parochial perspective can diminish the complex interactions that take place between different urban regions and local actors, substituting this complexity for a unidirectional flow of ideas, capital, and policies from the most influential cities to all of the rest.
In considering cities in the global South, many scholars see the need for a “post-colonial” orientation in the analysis of policy mobility. A post-colonial perspective would question assumptions that the wealthiest cities in the “West” (or North) are the generators of urban innovations, which are subsequently adopted elsewhere as a result of neoliberalism’s steady spread around the globe. Instead this approach calls for analysis that is locally contingent, theoretically modest, and geographically particular (Roy and Ong 2011; Robinson 2013). The crux of these perspectives, then, rests on the idea that policy innovation is too entangled to clearly delineate directionality from one context to another and that a focus on top-down policies misses how the city is continually remade from below (Bunnell 2013). Moreover, sometimes policies travel “South-South” or “South-North”. For example, Bogota’s BRT is now used in cities across the global South, as well as cities such as Ottawa or Pittsburg. In this sense, overgeneralization ignores how actors draw from multiple sources in their adoption of urban projects and approaches (Robinson 2011).

While the “new geographies of policy mobility”, urban assemblage, and post-colonial approaches offer helpful caveats, they raise a number of analytic questions. Analysis of a global policy toolkit does require thinking through the complexity of policy translation. And a model’s purchase in policy-making circles always involves many forces outside of that particular city. But in emphasizing the complexity and contingency of these processes, researchers may lose

10 Policy mobility brings together geographic literatures on comparative urbanism and a “post-colonial” perspective: essentially, how do urban scholars compare cities (Anderson and McFarlane 2011)? The use of the word “assemblage” to indicate the open process by which fragments of policies, ideas, and images are reterritorialized in new places derives from French philosophers Gilles Deleuze as well as Bruno Latour’s (1999) actor network theory (ANT) (Farias and Bender 2012). This scholarly proposition has received ample criticism. Some have argued that the term is imprecise, indeterminate, and all encompassing, without normative content, and methodologically meaningless (see Brenner et al. 2011 for an overview; Simone 2011; McFarlane 2011b for a response).
sight of the unequal forms of power exercised globally. The emergence of a global toolkit cannot
cast cities in the global South as the hapless victims of powerful urban innovations elsewhere,
but nor should it ignore the very real forms of power or coercion that operate at the level of
global political economy.

For example, the huge success of BRT is in part the result of its resonance among
multilateral institutions and global NGOs, most of which are located in the most economically
and politically powerful regions, able to circulate this policy through a number of promotional
channels. ITDP sees “competitiveness” as a pillar of its mission for cities, a key component for
further rounds of capital accumulation. City leaders in South Africa may indeed see Bogotá and
not New York or Paris as a model (Wood 2014b), yet analyzing the process by which this project
emerged sheds light on the direction of policy flows. The adoption of BRT in South Africa may
have been based on the experience of Bogotá, but it also relied upon influential discourses
directed at city leaders. For example, BRT has been heavily promoted by (the New York-based)
ITDP in cities around the world, including Buenos Aires. Some BRT projects are paid for by
funds borrowed from multi-lateral institutions such as the World Bank. While the origins of this
policy in Bogotá are important, it is equally important that global institutions such as the UN or
World Bank are aware of and supportive of such projects. It is crucial that NGO consultants
promote, diffuse, and provide technical assistance. If indeed the process of translation is
complex, it is not without direction. Because of unequal power relations in geopolitical terms,
the institutions, experiences, and policy orientations of the so-called developed world
significantly influence the policies and discourses that circulate globally.

In this sense, analyses that emphasize the agency of local actors in “ordinary” cities
(Robinson 2002; 2006), aim to demonstrate that these cities have some influence and creative
control in the adoption and circulation of policy. But emphasizing this power may do little to alter the inequalities that exist in geopolitical and political-economic relations. City leaders are in many cases hamstrung by competitive pressures. “Global” city paradigms can offer the promise of new investment, tourism, or a better city image. It is through recognizing the coercive power of multi-lateral institutions, global think tanks, and international NGOs that a more systematic critique of these processes can emerge.

This critique of global city paradigms is, of course, evident among city officials as well. For example, city leaders in Buenos Aires have been careful to avoid appearing impervious to local constraints. Especially following the 1990s, when the national government’s claim that Argentina was entering the “First World” was powerfully refuted by economic crisis, government officials often site regional cases like Bogotá rather than cities in the global North. Conferences in which policymakers have been active, such as those pertaining to “creative cities” or sustainable urbanism often take place in global South locations and include many regional voices. These conferences do animate the imaginings of local officials with experiences from a range of sites. However, institutions from the world’s most high profile cities organize many of these conferences. Creative City conferences by the NGO Kreanta, based in Barcelona, are well-attended in Latin America. Barcelona’s Smart City Expo awards cities like Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro prizes for sustainable planning, while the New York-based Project for Public Space has met with local officials in Buenos Aires during their UN Habitat-sponsored conference in the city in 2014.

Not surprisingly, many recent urban interventions in Buenos Aires can be traced to planning discourses emanating from post-industrial urbanism in the global North. For example, the city government has created urban “parklets” replicating those of New York. It has installed a
bike sharing program, pedestrianized downtown streets, and created creative clusters based on tax credits for industries such as design, the arts, and technology. The question is not as simple as where these ideas or projects originated. Rather, how do certain models gain currency in policy circles? The global toolkit, I argue, does not reflect the experiences of one region or set of countries, yet the cases and models that are selected reflect the ability of powerful institutions to promote certain paradigms and solutions to urban problems. These institutions reflect the hegemonic logic of post-industrial urbanism with its attention to inter-urban competition, investment, and livability as a form of attracting privileged residents and visitors. Redevelopment of central spaces of Buenos Aires demonstrates that policies are not assembled in a random way but are structured hierarchically, providing some discourses, actors, and policies from particular parts of the world with outsized influence over local planning.

Methods

My research for this project formally started in July 2012. Yet much of the background information allowing me to undertake fieldwork can be traced a few years further back. In 2005, I moved to Buenos Aires to teach English, where I stayed for one and a half years. Some of my research questions emerged early on during this period. What did the city look like before the crisis? How had Argentina’s peculiar form of “development reversal” (Waisman 1987) impacted what had once been the region’s most prosperous city? On the other hand, during a period of nationalist revival, I wondered about the consequences of “global” patterns of urban renewal and reinvestment in a country that was purportedly moving toward a more autochthonous model of growth.
My preliminary dissertation research took place in the summer of 2012. Between July and September, I conducted preliminary research in the historic neighborhood of San Telmo, undergoing reinvestment, where I spoke with informal artisans, other street vendors, and squatters at a site of potential conversion (to a Spanish cultural center). I also began to interview antiques dealers, other storeowners in the area, and some neighborhood stakeholders.

A fortuitous turn of events that summer allowed me to gain a broader perspective on issues of urban reinvestment. A friend introduced me to a contact that worked at a high level for the party running the city government. Contacts with top city leaders, including the heads of city “ministries” (agencies) were possible through this individual. During this initial period I interviewed two “top” officials in the city’s Ministry of Urban Development and Ministry of Economic Development. By “top” officials, I am referring to the ministerial level (e.g. the Minister of Economic Development) or officials reporting directly to ministerial level. Middle range officials I characterize as those whom others report to but do not report directly to their respective “ministers”. Through my own contacts, I was also able to interview an additional middle-range individual working for the Ministry of Culture. All in all, during this period, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 neighborhood actors in San Telmo and three officials working for the city government. Additionally, I spent time undertaking participant observation on weekends during a Sunday fair in San Telmo.

San Telmo represented the center of processes resembling gentrification and reminded me of the use of neighborhood fairs in processes of gentrification back home in Brooklyn. My original research questions related to how the local state and individual actors sought to mobilize cultural and touristic production for very different ends. Everyday vendors and artists engaged with culture to survive in the aftermath of crisis. Knowledge of particular cultural forms could
bring concrete benefits to individuals who were able to parlay these skills into locally made goods intended for tourists. The city government, on the other hand, increasingly deployed culture as part of broader strategy of urban reinvestment. In many cases, this meant doing away with informal vendors and residents of squatted buildings, especially when they could be converted into cultural centers or hotels. Increasingly, these processes were taking place outside of the historic core but still in or near the city center. Reinvestment processes based on culture and tourism tended now to slip into other urban policy discourses characteristic of the global toolkit. For example, the city government paired culture in the form of public art or state-organized cultural performances in the downtown business district with narratives emphasizing the creation of “the first green center in Latin America”.

Upon returning to the city in February 2013, my project took on a slightly broader framework. Reinvestment in the historic core could be understood as part of a larger global toolkit of urban governance, one that relied upon culture and tourism in the case of San Telmo, yet could frame other reinvestment processes around sustainability, green urbanism, or the importance of lively public spaces, innovative design, or social inclusion. In each of these narratives, competitive city strategies remained close to the surface, with the city government aspiring to create spaces amenable to middle-class residents, developers, and visitors.

This represented a geographic enlargement of the center, in that formerly disinvested neighborhoods were being connected to higher-income central areas, creating a central-south corridor that connected a number of neighborhoods with significant tourism, entertainment, and leisure functions. As a strategy of real estate capitalization, this enlargement of the center was inherently conflictual. In terms of cultural production, the city government intended to bring new users by transmitting Buenos Aires’ unique cultural and artistic forms. Yet because culture is in
reality a messy constellation of meanings and practices, producers of local culture sought to insert themselves into new tourist flows in ways that contradicted the reinvestment strategies of the city government: by putting on cultural performances in an occupied building meant to become a cultural center, or by selling artisanal products in unauthorized spaces.

Because the city government framed reinvestment around values such as cultural expression, sustainability, and inclusion, these conflicts demonstrated some of the contradictions of the global urban policy toolkit. My fieldwork thus sought to capture the relationship between everyday survival among residents of the city, especially survival tied to the tourist trade, and its interaction with global models of reinvestment.

Following my initial period of fieldwork I spent roughly seven additional months (February-August, 2013) conducting qualitative research, interviewing a total of 46 individuals during both periods. Interviews ranged from fairly structured formats with “experts” (n=11), to semi-structured interviews with artisans and street vendors (n=17), as well as local stakeholders such as store owners, leaders of local housing and vending collectives, and political organizers (n=18). I also had dozens of informal conversations while conducting participant observation at various neighborhood fairs, local political protests, community board meetings, and organizing strategy sessions among street artisans.

Among “expert” interviews, beyond the city officials interviewed in preliminary research in 2012, I spoke with two mid-level officials in the Ministries of Economic Development and the Ministry of Public Space, and a Director at the ITDP. In the first case, our conversation focused on the ministry’s creation of “creative clusters” – in particular, an arts cluster in the touristic neighborhood of La Boca. The interview with a mid-level member of the Ministry of Public Space focused on the “sustainable” plan for the downtown Microcentro. The director at ITDP
shed light on the organization’s adoption of certain tools in the “global toolkit”. Among these expert interviews, I also spoke with two policy advisors to two members of the local legislature (city council) who discussed the legislative process and debate surrounding informal vending in the city.

**Chapter Overview**

Chapter two traces the institutional history of post-industrial urban policy and discourse in Buenos Aires. It examines how three areas of city planning became new objects of government innovation. These include heritage, the “cultural/creative” industries, and tourism. In doing so, Chapter two draws attention to different forms and periods of globalization in terms of city planning. While the 1990s represented the beginnings of these policies, they were largely oriented around cosmopolitan visions of the city. By cosmopolitan, I mean that city planners and officials appealed to global expert discourses, such as that of the UN, advocating the importance of historic preservation and culture as tools of urban democracy. However, this chapter then explores how these policies and discourses shift in the 2000s to satisfy the more entrepreneurial, or neoliberal, exigencies of the local government.

Chapter three examines the structural features of processes resembling gentrification in the historic neighborhood of San Telmo. This chapter is largely devoted to understanding the history and contemporary dynamics of neighborhood change using interviews, published accounts, and an analysis of secondary data. The analysis leads to a questioning of the term gentrification, yet nonetheless demonstrates how processes of reinvestment and redevelopment – however we refer to them – serve to create a far more exclusionary historic center. It offers some guidance on how scholars might conceptualize reinvestment in historic centers in Latin America.
by emphasizing the importance of tourism, commercial versus residential change, and the
redevelopment of informal housing for hotels.

Chapter four explores the idea of “expanding the center” through an increasingly global
toolkit of policies. It examines the transnational travel of creative “clusters”, as evidenced in
Buenos Aires’ creation of arts, technology, audio-visual, and design districts in the impoverished
south of the city. Most importantly, this chapter critically examines how various transnational
urban policy discourses – such as sustainability, innovation, and creativity – achieve similar
results, including the removal of informal vending and housing, the upgrading of various districts
for tourism, and an increase in land values. Importantly, however, these global discourses are
used almost interchangeable, as examined in the city’s renovation of its historic banking district
and the creation of an arts cluster in the impoverished neighborhood of La Boca in the south of
the city.

My final empirical chapter ties redevelopment to new forms of urban stratification among
the urban poor and formerly middle-class individuals in the historic center. Through an analysis
of the San Telmo Sunday fair, I ask how individuals make use of everyday culture in a City of
Culture. In other words, as the city government attempts to reshape various districts for cultural
and touristic development, how do people attempt to use culture as a resource in ways that may
undermine the top-down plans of officials? This chapter examines these multiple strategies in
which the urban poor, formerly middle class, and middle-class individuals deploy various
repertoires of knowledge to produce artisan products or experiences oriented to tourists. The
chapter then explores the new forms of stratification that arise from different individuals’
knowledge of “legitimate” repertoires of culture. Those with middle-class subjectivities I argue
are most capable of transforming access to public space into material resources. My conclusion delineates the contribution of this research and possible paths for future inquiry.
Chapter 2: Turning to Culture in Times of Crisis

Walking along the Avenida de Mayo, lined with Belle Époque buildings, you would think you were in France. Adding to the confusion are young fashion plates who seem to have spacewarped from Milan. But under the glamour is the chaos.


Appearing in the New York Times on June 22, 2003, Michael Luongo’s What’s Doing in Buenos Aires (2003) kicked off half a decade of travel stories documenting Buenos Aires’ rise, fall, and apparent reemergence as a cheaper, grittier version of Paris or Prague. Once the Paris of the Americas, the city had fallen on hard times, yet it retained not only the architectural relics of its past prosperity, but also a “European” population, said to be culturally sophisticated, cosmopolitan, and fashionable. As a city both elegant and chaotic, these stories pointed to a broader theme of the travel genre emanating from major northern metropolises: Buenos Aires was distant geographically, but its cultural offerings were easily recognizable to the seasoned traveler. Paradoxically, however, this new tourism economy would only emerge once the country’s economy had hit rock bottom.

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Argentines awoke on January 7, 2002 to a much-changed country, and as a result for many ordinary citizens, much lower bank balances. After a decade of IMF-prescribed structural adjustment policies, the Argentine state and many citizens alike were drowning in dollar-

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11 This was in fact a departure from the prior period of structural reform during the 1990s, when the fewer travel stories that appeared tended to emphasize the similarities between Buenos Aires and “First-World” cities (see for example Guano 2002: 181), rather than this special amalgam of elegance and chaos.
denominated debt. The way out for the state was a dramatic delinking of the Argentine peso to the US dollar, chained at parity for much of the prior decade. The results of the devaluation were disastrous: spiraling inflation, bankrupt businesses with debt in dollars, and large-scale social protest.

The middle classes, placated for the prior decade with a strong currency, imported consumer goods, and relative price stability suddenly erupted onto the political scene. For weeks, students, housewives, and businesspeople alike marched from the tranquil northern and western barrios to the Congress and Executive mansion banging metal pots in a low but sustained din. In a surprising reversal of historical roles, they were not the typical protagonists of local street protest, displaying empty kitchenware to indicate their hunger. Rather, they were largely well-fed professionals who had apathetically accepted cuts to social programs, subsidies, and education in return for the state’s glittering modernization project backed by powerful foreign allies and international financial institutions. The project’s emphasis on the global spaces of the city of Buenos Aires and its promise of transforming the local populace into “First-World” subjects had seduced many porteños, the residents of Buenos Aires (Guano 2002).

The following days unfolded in a maelstrom of violence, police repression, and three different Presidential resignations. Locked out of their dollarized bank accounts, protestors gathered around foreign financial institutions, battering their imposing sealed doors with diminutive spatulas and ladles. The peso’s relation to the dollar declined from 1:1, to 1:1.4, to 4, then five and six. Salaries plummeted. Mortgages went unpaid. The lines for visas at foreign embassies snaked around the eerie elegance of Buenos Aires’ most plush barrios, built a century before at a time when a rapidly developing Argentina was expected to dominate South America.
Yet almost immediately following economic implosion, something quite remarkable happened: overnight, Buenos Aires went from being one of the most expensive cities in the world to one of the cheapest, producing a wave of international visitors and resulting in a process of urban renewal with an emphasis on cultural and touristic production. While Buenos Aires for most of the 20th century was a leader in the so-called culture industries in a regional context (Getino 1996: 46), the crisis period and its aftermath reoriented culture, with the local state invoking a far more entrepreneurial idiom, rather than a traditional emphasis on cultural citizenship or national cohesion. Not only did this reorientation shape new ideas about what kind of cultural practices could be marketable to domestic and international publics, but it also reshaped major nodes of the city center, which were transformed from stigmatized spaces bereft of capital investment to spaces of touristic consumption (Kanai and Ortega-Alcázar 2009; Carman 2006; Lederman 2015).

This ethos was reflected in a reorientation of the city’s cultural apparatus, which increasingly brought culture to bear on material urban transformations. As a tool for luring middle-class residents to formerly derelict spaces reconceived as entertainment districts, to the use of cultural festivals as a form of urban branding, these changes went far beyond the city’s museums and Ministry of Culture and instead engaged with interventions directed by the Ministry of Economic and Urban Development.

Anthropologists and sociologists have traditionally understood culture as a set of everyday meanings and orientations, vernacular practices, and material forms (Hall et. al. 2003; Swidler 1986; 2001). But increasingly, in major cities of the world, culture has become an object

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12 In the early 20th century Argentina represented the dominant publishing center of the region. The burgeoning film industry of the 1920s and 30s also represented a vanguard in Latin America (López 2000; Sarlo 1998: Ch. 3).
of intense state innovation (Yúdice 2003; 2006). As an economic resource for a country in crisis, “Culture” slowly departed from this folkloric conception. The state increasingly promoted particular kinds of culture as a true expression of place identity. Expressed concretely in terms of who had a right to be on the street, cultural changes turned particular districts of the city into sites of social conflict. On the one side was an entrepreneurial local state, seeking to take advantage of newly competitive sectors of the economy such as tourism and its associated cultural offerings. On the other were informal cultural workers and socially marginal groups seeking their right to work in the city center by commercializing cultural products to an ever-increasing number of tourists. Culture conceived as a top-down economic project favored producers whose practices were marketable. Yet the city’s shifting economy offered the urban poor and a struggling middle class with opportunities to carve out their own place in this new economy.

Economically, this turn was hardly surprising. Decades of state-led disinvestment had decimated Argentine industrial capacity (Canitrot 1981; Kosacoff et. al. 1989; Azpiazu and Schorr 2010). Creative industries and those based on tourism promised to provide less capital-intensive activities at a time of parsimonious state budgets. This “cultural turn” in urban policy profoundly reshaped the physical and social contours of the city. As central districts became a physical showcase for emerging forms of service-sector production, novel methods of social regulation were required.

Local officials promoted the creative economy as a tool of economic reactivation and growth. Yet the shift from a marginally productive activity to the subject of intense state interest was hardly linear. While the conservative city government elected in 2007 took a more stridently market-friendly approach toward questions of tourism, culture, and urban renewal, the opening
gambits of this process had begun under prior, left-of-center mayoral administrations. The steady direction of these changes suggests that politically dissimilar governments grappled with the juggernaut of cultural policies and their role in the broader transformation of the city center and local economy.

But this common agenda was not free from conflict. As the global economy offered the promise of more employment and foreign exchange, the local state was forced to balance demands of everyday citizens and grassroots cultural producers with the interests of investors, tourist dollars, and powerful local business lobbies. This led to growing tensions around the city’s cultural and economic life, particularly as governments with different political orientations converged on an increased role for culture and tourism in the local economy. At times using older idioms of cultural citizenship and inclusion, and at times invoking a more business-friendly creative economy discourse, no government could fully deny the impact and opportunities being proffered by culture and tourism.

**Touring the Crisis**

By the early months of 2002 Argentina’s unemployment rate had reached 21 percent. From the picketing of major avenues by unemployed demonstrators (Kohan 2002), to the emergence of scavengers sorting through trash (Perelman and Boy 2010; Whitson 2011) the crisis presaged a far more conflictual occupation of the city’s public space (Grimson 2008;)

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13 Since 1996, the city of Buenos Aires has been an autonomous political unit (Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires), with elections for the local jefe de gobierno, or mayor. In juridical, tax, and penal issues, this configuration provides significant local autonomy, with the city maintaining its own local legislature and ministries (see De Luca et al. 2002).
Paradoxically, the demands for food, work, and housing being leveled on the street showed why Argentina was suddenly appealing to tourists and foreign investors. Salaries were low and workers abundant. Newspaper headlines reflected this paradox: “Estamos mal pero vamos bien”, things are bad but going well became the ironic zeitgeist of the business class (Página12, 2002).

Prior to devaluation, Buenos Aires was one of the most expensive cities in the world, and certainly the most expensive in Latin America. The devaluation transformed the costs of industry almost overnight. Although the 1990s saw the rise of niche tourism attracted to particular Argentine markets such as polo or tango, the devaluation ushered in a far more mass form of middle-class tourism.

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14 As Perelman and Boy (2010) point out, scavengers were nothing new in Buenos Aires, yet their irruption in the city’s most fashionable neighborhoods in the crisis period generated a sudden acknowledgement of their existence among the media and middle-class residents.

15 According to the Economist’s Big-Mac Index, which attempts to evaluate currency over or undervaluation through an analysis of a fungible good like a hamburger, we can begin to demonstrate the extent of the Argentine monetary transformation. In 2001, Argentina produced some of the most expensive hamburgers in the world, more expensive than the Euro-zone, Japan, or South Korea. By 2003, The Economist ranked Argentina the cheapest of all 41 countries evaluated, essentially the cheapest country in the world to eat a McDonald’s burger.

16 The increase in tourism in the 1990s was also surely linked to the expansion of multinational firms into recently privatized Argentine industries (Shapira 2002; Ciccolella 1999)
Figure 2 demonstrates the relative stability of Argentina’s tourist industry during the 1990s, with arrivals totaling between two and three million. The curve’s steepest point is between 2003-2004, aided no doubt by prominent international media coverage of the city’s bargain prices. By 2011, despite a short downturn from the 2008/2009 global financial crisis, tourist arrivals had reached almost 6 million, roughly double the amount at their height in the 1990s. The importance and novelty of this transformation cannot be overstated. A comparison with Brazil here, with six times the population, three times the landmass, and with a longer tradition of international tourism, is instructive. Figure 3 suggests that Argentina punches far above its weight in international visitors, particularly since 2003. Of note is the volatility of tourism in Latin America, mediated by currency devaluations, political crises, and global economic growth.
Two additional patterns emerge in Figure 3. First, international tourism has increased in Latin America as a whole since the 1990s and second, Argentina since 2002 has benefited to a greater relative degree than its neighbors. It is worth emphasizing the regional patterns of tourist arrivals. While the period until 2008 saw a swift increase in tourists from Western Europe and North America, these arrivals began to decline in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis. That they were in part replaced by a spike in regional tourism, particularly from Brazil, was to have a profound impact on dynamics of local urban change, a topic to which I will return in Chapter 3.

The significance of these developments did not go unnoticed by local and national authorities. By 2003, billboards appeared in the capital instructing Argentines to treat tourists well – *Turismo es trabajo* – tourism means work, urged the signs. The mayor prophetically
declared, “Buenos Aires is not going to compete with cities with slave labor, but in culture, there we can compete” (Centner 2007:20–22).

But aligning tourism and culture with a new economy required more than just words. For a decade culture had been undergoing a slow process of change, responding to local events such as the city’s autonomy in 1996, as well as creeping globalization, which impacted the imaginings of city managers and produced an emergent consensus on culture as a tool of economic development. As the following section demonstrates, this was not a straightforward path. Instrumentalization of culture coexisted with older forms of cultural and intellectual life in public policy. Even those state actors who saw a new role for culture in fomenting economic growth often had high-minded ideals around the importance of culture in national life and everyday inclusion. It is the subtle shift between these high-minded ideals and a new, more entrepreneurial approach with which the rest of this chapter deals.

**Institutional Foundations, 1996-2007**

In 1996 the Federal Government of Peronist orientation turned over the city to their traditional political adversaries, the Radicals. Peronism had historically been anathema to the residents of the capital, and thus the Radicals secured the city’s autonomy with support for the constitutional changes needed for the Peronist national government to remain in power for another term. In other words, losing control of the city was the *quid pro quo* the Peronist administration agreed to in order to maintain control of the federal government. Although this jurisdictional transformation responded to local politics, it also found encouragement in global developments. The need for decentralization had been a clarion call of neoliberal politics across the globe (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Harmes 2006; Porter and Craig 2004), undergirded by a
need to make cities, regions and states globally competitive. These policies had been specifically recommended by institutions such as the IMF and World Bank through the implementation of structural adjustment in countries like Argentina during the 1990s.\(^{17}\)

Unsurprisingly, it was at this time when culture as part of an explicitly urban economic development regime begins in earnest, albeit with fits and starts and constrained by the limits of an increasingly apparent economic crisis. For example, in 1996 an overarching regime of architectural heritage laws finally took effect.\(^{18}\) In January 1999, a law was passed recognizing tango as an object of cultural heritage, to be promoted, diffused, and developed.\(^{19}\) This recognition of culture as both source of heritage and tradition, as well as resource, was reflected in the priorities of the first elected mayor of the city, Fernando de la Rua (1996-1999).

It should be mentioned that decentralization itself responded not to an organic clamor on the part of civil society or everyday citizens, but rather the understandings elites had of municipal decentralization abroad (particularly in Europe) and its positive implications for solving local problems (Blutman 1999; Herzer 1996). Because of the capital’s political control by Federal authorities prior to 1996, the city’s progressive elites and intellectuals had historically been a bit player in national politics, which even during progressive moments required the votes of the working classes in remote provinces. Now they were in control of the country’s largest city.

It is necessary to trace the development of a number of local and global dynamics in urban governance to understand the shifting terrain of culture in Buenos Aires in the 1990s. The

\(^{17}\) A theme of this discourse found inspiration in global calls for transparency, local autonomy and competition, quite in line with competitive city policies aimed at pursuing investment and tourist dollars in competition with cities outside the national context (see also Sassen 2000).  
\(^{18}\) The Protection of Historic Areas law (APH) was first passed in 1992 but was not implemented for a number of years.  
\(^{19}\) Law 130, January 22, 1999.
end of the military dictatorship in 1983 ushered in a period of intense cultural life in the city, in which cultural pluralism became an expression of the reopening of a democratic political sphere. This could hardly be traced to the kind of “entrepreneurial” cultural management starting to coalesce in urban revitalization projects in the global North. It was rather a collective expression of relief following seven years of a regime that had tightly regulated cultural production. It could be seen in the rise of a new lexical category: “public space” (Gorelik 2008), which suddenly became omnipresent among city manager, academics, and cultural producers, signifying the reemergence of pluralistic social encounter.

The city, however, was still governed by whoever had won national elections. In the 1980s, the Radical party’s win symbolized this democratic opening and contributed to the city’s – and country’s – cultural renewal, albeit not without potential political rationales and benefits in certain cases (De Luca et al. 2002: 81). But until it had the right to elect a mayor, the capital itself did not have the ability to incubate political leaders through local politics, with the mayor serving at the discretion of the country’s President. Thus, in the city’s cultural agenda during the late 1990s and early 2000s, the novelty of local elections produced important changes with regard to how culture was understood and managed. When Mayor de la Rua took the Presidency of the nation (1999-2001), his successor in city government was Anibal Ibarra of the Frepaso party, a progressive movement with roots in local Buenos Aires politics (Mauro 2007).\(^\text{20}\) That Ibarra came from a non-traditional political party would have a significant impact on the nature

\(^{20}\) The conception of Ibarra as the “progressive candidate” would have important consequences for local governance, particularly with regard to culture. This political category in Argentina represented a unique position. On the one hand, Peronism’s left flank generally couched issues of inequality, cultural imperialism, and local economic development in the language of a nationalist and anti-cosmopolitan cultural politics. Progressives did not fully depart from this critique but their positions tended to be more cosmopolitan in outlook, aligned with a social-democratic discourse, which cut against the grain of the nationalist-populism of Peronism.
of urban governance between 2000 and 2006. Ibarra (and to a less degree his predecessor de la Rua) ushered in a number of officials with deep ties to the academy and world of art and culture. These professionals lent otherwise mundane matters of state policy an air of intellectual import and high-minded discussion, rather than conducting decision-making based solely on technocratic (or purely politically oriented) management. In areas such as urban heritage, created in 2000 under the Secretary of Culture, discussions of state policy were infused with questions over the nature of heritage, issues of design and social use, and the socio-historical as well as material import of particular historic sites.21

The early 1990s had seen the urban shopping mall become both the symbol of rapid globalization as well as the country’s increasingly privatized and exclusive public sphere (Sarlo 2001). Thus, the first elected mayor, de la Rua, in some respects crafted his political persona in contrast to the then national government’s privatizing agenda. The city government sought to frame itself as culturally inclusive, concerned with the city’s parks and public spaces, and open to pluralistic forms of expression being undermined by privatization.

By the time of de la Rua’s taking power of the city government in 1996, global fads substantively impacted the local agenda. While preservation of historic buildings or the valorization of cultural forms and expression were framed within a broader discourse of democratic pluralism, it now found substantive overlap with a growing – and globalizing – “cultural management” or “arts administration” profession (Dewey 2004; Dorn 1992), increasingly enlisted in urban revitalization projects anchored by private investment (Whitt 1987). If some form of cultural management had always been a part of public policy in Europe

21 Between 2003 and 2006, the Dirección General Casco Histórico (Directorate General, Historic Center [DGCH]), had produced no less than six books reflecting on these subjects, most of which took an academic rather than merely managerial approach to understanding local heritage.
and the United States, by the 1980s this was shifting from a social-democratic model, in which culture was perceived as a form of reinforcing national identity and community bonds, to one in which culture could be used for more entrepreneurial ends (Zimmer and Toepler 1999; Yúdice 2003).\textsuperscript{22} Latin America, which had long followed a European model of cultural management evolved in similar respects as a result of economic pressures and new communication and informational technologies (Canclini 1995).

In this sense, the Ibarra administration represented an interesting mix of local political discourses and global pressures. High-minded professionals in the arts and culture framed cultural policy within a local lexicon that promoted their center-Left political space as one of democratic renewal, pluralism and diversity, set against the neoliberal national government. Yet local culture administrators’ increased professional backgrounds in the arts and cultural management meant that policies to foster goals such as pluralism and diversity increasingly found an eco in the market-friendly cultural remaking of cities around the world. Concretely, this meant cultural policy was inflected with a new entrepreneurial dynamic even if its local ethos was framed around cultural inclusion and citizenship.

This strange confluence of political and economic logics made for a policy that was at times contradictory. For example, in order to take steps toward preserving and underlining the importance of culture and tourism, the city passed a number of new laws in the early 2000s. In July of 2001, the government codified tourism into law as an activity of public and cultural, “socio-economic” interest.\textsuperscript{23} In June 2003, film (cine) was declared of public interest to the

\textsuperscript{22} Cherbo and Wyszomirski (2000) note how, in the United States, the National Endowment for the Arts initially followed a “public leveraging” model, which eventually lost ground to more market-oriented models.

\textsuperscript{23} Law 600, 10 July, 2001.
cultural life of the city, and theaters dating prior to 1980 were given special economic and architectural protection. While these projects sought to capitalize on Buenos Aires’ cultural resources, they tended to embrace a narrative that stressed preservation, cultural diversity, and social inclusion over purely market rule.

The shift between entrepreneurial approaches to culture and those containing more traditional, nationalistic idioms had their basis in concrete events. Seeing opportunity in the tumultuous days of the post-crisis period, foreign conglomerates began buying up Argentine media assets at fire-sale prices, an acceleration of a process that had already characterized the 1990s (Postolski et. al. 2002). From his position as the sub-Secretary of Cultural Industries, (and later Secretary of Culture), Gustavo López organized local cultural producers as well as industry leaders concerned about foreign dominance in the creation of media content. This social movement, dubbed “The Forum for the Defense of Buenos Aires’ Cultural Industries” resulted in local legislation that sought to limit foreign capital while stimulating local subsidization of cultural industries. For many in the world of culture, the maneuverings of transnational capital were denounced through a language of cultural nationalism, set against the homogenizing forces of global capitalism. Seeking alliances with other Latin American countries as well as countries like Canada and France, the local state organized internationally to oppose free-trade and copyright laws favoring US domination of film and communications content.

Yet the Ibarra government’s complex relationship to culture as a resource of development was evident even in this sharply nationalist discourse. The conferences and publications

25 The “progressive” roots of the administration showed during this period, insofar as city officials were never quite as comfortable with this form of cultural nationalism as their bedfellows in the Peronist party, which had denounced cultural imperialism since the 1940s with few scruples about the discourse’s nationalistic or localist implications.
produced out of this movement were published under the aegis of “cultural diversity”. By appealing to cultural diversity, supporters and organizers claimed the mantle of a local Argentine culture versus the influences of corporate media domination emanating from the global North. Yet as the crisis passed, Lopéz – Secretary of Culture as of 2003 – settled into a far less critical position vis-à-vis cultural goods and economic needs. If indeed there were problematic aspects to exploiting culture as a tool for economic growth, this was no longer a cause for nationalist outrage. Instead, having survived the assault of global media conglomerates, cultural policy now required more nuanced approaches to foster investment. Perhaps most enduring about this early movement is that it framed its struggle through the language of “cultural industries”, which it sought to protect. The cultural industries were not just a set of economic sectors appearing on administration spreadsheets, but were rather at the heart of local identity and belonging in a globalizing world.

A new language would emerge in the post-2007 period, that of creativity. Unlike cultural industries, creativity had little to do with national cultural preservation, but was rather better suited to wooing mobile capital through a discourse of urban renewal, cultural clusters, and creative employment (Florida 2002). These shifts revealed various tensions between culture as both resource and a traditional form of vernacular expression. Because of the Ibarra government’s deep ties to less easily marketable definitions of culture, policy vacillated between support for local cultural forms and nascent attempts to utilize this expression as a policy tool aimed at reactivated the economy. The complex balance achieved with regard to cultural policy during this period demonstrates how local pressures modified the government’s intentions to create a global city. We can observe these dynamics in three areas of city policy 1) The preservation and revitalization of the historic center, 2) The institutionalization of tourism as an
imperative of economic development, and 3) The creation and promotion of the cultural/creative industries.

Preserving the Historic Center

The 1990s were a departure point for raising awareness of the city’s rich architectural heritage and saw the passage of the first significant laws limiting development by protecting entire districts of the city. These measures were given new impetus in the city’s 1996 constitution, which explicitly called for the preservation and restoration of historic districts as an “indelegable” responsibility of the local state.

The period’s most important document with regard to architectural heritage, The Master Plan (Plan de Manejo 2000) for the historic center, cites municipal reinvestment in the center as a way of narrowing the class divides that had hardened during the country’s market-friendly policies of the 1990s. The nomenclature here is telling: other early plans (see footnote 26) addressed the need to protect the historic core without mentioning residents, let alone those of little means. These earlier interventions were concerned principally with the city’s material culture – above all the architectural heritage of the historic center, championed by the law’s author, the architect and Director of the Museum of the City, José María Peña.

Following these early laws, limited programs in the early 1990s had undertaken smaller interventions under the auspices of the Revitalization of the South of the City (PROSUR),

26 In the 1970s, as a result of the well-connected and indefatigable architect, José María Peña, the first Director of the Museum of the City (discussed at length in Chapter 3), parts of San Telmo were protected through the creation of the 1979 U-24 historic preservation zone. There was little institutional support at the time and the law was in part the response of the military authorities (1976-1983) to widespread anger over the building of a freeway through the Southern end of the historic center (Magadán 2003).
sponsored in part by the United Nations Program for Development (PNUD) as well as a grant from Spain. The city also passed in 1992 (and implemented in 1996) the first integral historic preservation law, the APH (Area of Historic Protection). Other early programs had been successful in installing new “historic” lighting, sidewalks, and building repair along the stretch of San Telmo closest to the financial district and the burgeoning dockside redevelopment of Puerto Madero. Yet prior to the Master Plan (2000) these efforts remained under the control of the Secretary of Urban Planning and were quite limited, carried out through the sub-Secretary of Architecture, reflecting a narrow focus on the built environment rather than on intangible history or collective memory. By 2000, however, the Ibarra government created a new Directorate General of the Historic Center (DGCH), overseen by Silvia Fajre, now the sub-Secretariat of Urban Patrimony within the city’s Secretary of Culture.

Silvia Fajre handled all efforts related relating to preservation from 1989-2007, first from the sub-Secretary of Architecture under Urban Planning and later as the sub-Secretary of Cultural Patrimony under the Secretary of Culture. Under Urban Planning, up until 2000, preservation was too narrowly focused on architecture she said in an interview:

…The ministry of urban development gave a lot of weight to the physical and forgot that many times to revitalize an area, there are a number of actions that aren’t physical that are more efficient than modifying physically a piece of the city. [For example] I always wanted to do “open studios”. That’s a cultural action to give visibility and favor the integrity of different social actors; two days

27 In the history of these interventions, we might also perceive certain “global” debates stemming from modernist and post-modernist architectural trends (Zukin 1988). Whereas the interventions in the historic center in the early 1990s were sporadic, limited, and in certain respects truncated, they representing a departure from decades of projects intended to upgrade the South of the city and erase the socio-economic divide with the North through major structural interventions. These prior projects invoked modernist planning discourses and were focused on uses of the area such as housing, commerce etc. By the 1990s these discourses had all but disappeared, replaced with the invocation of heritage and culture as the obvious answers to decay and a complementary use to the high-flying redevelopment of the nearby port (see Jajamovich 2012; Centner 2007).

visiting the cultural goods [artist studios] of that neighborhood… in [Urban] Planning they said we can’t do this, that’s Culture. In Culture when we wanted to do the “studio-school” to teach workers how to work in restoration, they said no, this has to go through Education, there they said go to the Ministry of Labor.

But in 2000 Fajre became the sub-Secretary of Urban Patrimony, and her responsibilities were moved to the Secretary of Culture where she said she was better funded; with more resources for taking preservation seriously and a higher position within the local bureaucracy. She was able to create the Master Plan for the historic center, which, she said, represented a more “integral” approach:

The [early] 1979 [law] had created a bottleneck; you couldn’t change anything unless a committee met. Instead of doing [just] a change in the law, [I said] let’s do an integral Master Plan. It’s not just protecting the buildings; it’s a public patrimonial good, a neurological piece of the city, with all the problems that come with the area… Just protecting the buildings is necessary but totally insufficient. It took us 3 years to work on changing of the norm. It was determined what was protectable and what wasn’t protectable. Before it was the whole area…. [But] An area of the city is always in evolution, you can’t crystalize it, or you run the risk of creating a “neighborhood-museum”. There was a change in optic [under my leadership] because you don’t have to protect the building, rather the area, with its people, identity, character… you can’t intervene a façade without thinking about what’s behind the façade… If you want to resolve the conflicts of an area, it's a system that’s functioning wrong, it’s not that the moldings are falling off, it’s [un]employment, levels of culture, loss of population, aging of residents. You have to resolve problems that create the conditions of life for people.

As this interview suggests, Fajre saw early forms of reinvestment in the historic center as limited conceptually; their rationale was largely technical, based on the architectural or physical upgrade necessary to revitalize certain central nodes of the city. In other words, only spaces of unquestioned historic meaning were worthy of upgrade. By the 2000s, this dynamic changed,

29 There is some continuity in the period 1996-2000, 2000-2006 with regard to Patrimony, in so far as the sub-Secretariat of Cultural Patrimony under the Secretary of Culture did not exist until 2000, under the leadership of Sylvia Fajre. Prior to this, however, the program was managed through the Secretary of Urban Planning, also led by Fajre who served in this ministry. In other words, Fajre was instrumental in this continuity, though clearly had more control and resources beginning in 2000.
with preservation policy lodged firmly within the Secretary of Culture’s sub-Secretary of Urban Patrimony under Fajre’s leadership.

To discern the shift in ideology and intellectual priorities between the 1990s and 2000s, it is important to note changes in language. Fajre’s Master Plan (2000) emphasizes how barrio social life and the neighborhood’s traditional residents are key to preserving the district. This discussion is explicitly linked to the document’s resolutely social take on preservation, emphasizing housing, services, and everyday social practices as central to maintaining the area’s traditional residents, neighborhood culture, and collective memory. Fajre’s plan highlighted different priorities than those typically oriented toward tourism (focused on thematic upgrade of historical buildings). It also represented a break from the strictly architectural perspective.

In other words, by the early 2000s, city heritage policy included a more social bent. The Secretary’s language was that of a field with increasingly complex knowledge. Heritage was not just built forms, but collective memory, social history, and place-based community. By and large, this approach reflected the Secretary of Culture’s particular institutional culture, as a space for highly trained and educated, academically-oriented staff, familiar with critical discussions around culture, preservation, and socio-cultural inclusion. The sole focus of some architects and preservationists – such as Peña – on built structures was regarded as small-minded according to Fajre’s vision.

The broader vision of heritage in the Secretary of Culture’s approach coincided with an urgency to mobilize cultural resources in economic development in the early 2000s. But how could the local emphasis on intangible memory and everyday neighborhood practices adapt to

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30 Some critics aligned with the maximalist (i.e. building-centric) vision of preservation have suggested that talk of immaterial culture was simply a convenient ruse to allow developers to demolish buildings, referring to Fajre’s discourse as postmodern and amateurish (Kiernan 2008)
global standards of historic center touristic upgrade? The city’s broader institutional culture was increasingly sensitive to local socio-cultural needs and meanings due to city autonomy, just as globally-inspired perseverance projects were rapidly spreading throughout the world and were particularly seductive to a city in the aftermath of crisis. A relentless aspect of official discourse during this period is that of local culture and memory. Yet despite the elevated place of locality in this period, city officials such as Fajre were ever more obliged to adapt their city to global trends that commodified historical space.

The Master Plan suggests some of the contradictions between these global and local forces. The touristic value of the built environment is clearly in planners’ minds, yet the Secretary of Culture (later the Ministry of Culture) was poorly equipped to exploit these architectural resources economically. This dilemma is particularly characteristic of the Ibarra (2000-2006) period; a period in which economic needs comingle uncomfortably with the rather academic nature of cultural policy and governance such as that voiced by Fajre. Fajre’s efforts to incentivize tourism from the perspective of heritage included creating programs like “open studios” in the historic district, and a program to catalog, protect, and disseminate historic bars and cafés. These efforts represented well the dualistic nature of Ibarra’s government; they were intended to enhance touristic appeal, yet were careful to include local residents and appeal to the “social” needs of the population.

That ministries such as Economic Development, Urban Development and Public Space eclipsed the Ministry of Culture in the entrepreneurial administration of Mauricio Macri starting in 2007, points to the more instrumental role that was being given to culture in later years.

Post-2007: From Preservation to Renewal
The election of conservative businessman Mauricio Macri in 2007 represented a new stage in state engagement with heritage. Whereas the prior administrations tended to vacillate with the extent to which culture could be put to work in service to economic goals, the new administration acted with a clearer policy focus, dispatching with much of the academic jargon relating to intangible heritage emanating from the Ministry of Culture and so central to the Ibarra period.  

These changes were also evident in the evolution of the local budget. According to an interview with an official working at the General Directorate of the Casco Histórico (DGCH), beginning with the change in local leadership in 2007, the agency has been emptied (vaciado) of authority, initiative, and power within the structure of urban policy. Within the DGCH, there was a real sense of gloom with regard to the agency’s work and role in the Ministry. Programs have been limited by budget constraints, a fact preordained by the city budget, which has cut the financing of the DGCH from .09% of the Ministry of Culture’s budget in 2006 to .04% of the Ministry of Culture’s budget in 2013, a more than 50% decrease. As Fajre, no longer working in city government, put it regarding the new administration’s approach: “It’s like your house, if you don’t spend any of your money on something, it’s because something doesn't interest you.”

This drop in funding in fact understates the true loss of government support for the DGCH. For some time the DGCH had relied in part upon the largesse of a city fund for art, culture, and the sciences [fondo metropolitana de la cultura, las artes y las ciencias]. Even

31 Macri was reelected in 2011 with a second four-year mandate. His party (Propuesta Republicana or Pro) also fared well in the city during national legislative elections in 2013, suggesting that their tenure in the city will continue for some time.
32 Author interview with Director, DGCH.
33 Interview with a Director of DGCH 2012.
during the 2000-2007 period, most of the DGCH’s budget had been allocated to personnel. But building owners in the historic center could apply for subsidies and technical consulting with the DGCH if they met certain requirements regarding building age, and architectural or symbolic value. The DGCH would then petition for subsidies through the Metropolitan Fund. Between 2004-2007, 32 of these subsidies were granted to the DGCH with the agency acting as an overseer of building owners’ plans. For a small agency, this represented a significant aspect of its work. Yet between 2008-2009 (under the new administration), the number had dropped to 6 from 32 (Auditoría General de la Ciudad, 2009).

This defunding of the DGCH expressed a change in the local state’s stance toward preservation. Under the auspices of the DGCH, interventions in the historic center provided comparatively little boost to the private sector. They were in most cases oriented toward individual owners without the means to maintain historic facades. They took the architectural and social heritage of these sites of intervention quite seriously, for their symbolic or collective import, rather than merely their ability to generate investment or visual coherence within a touristic district. Like most initiatives of the DGCH, they did not undermine private-sector investment, and certainly contributed to its influx, but the institution’s priorities reflected the backgrounds of its principal agents: architects, academics, and historians with interests in private investment insofar as it served as a force for turning-back the neighborhood’s decay. Their understanding of architectural preservation was not broad enough to envision how heritage, culture, and urban planning could be brought together in the reorientation of the city’s economic priorities.
Figure 4: Chronology of Institutional efforts in the historic center

Defunding effectively sidelined the DGCH. The DGCH’s new Director, chosen by the Macri government, suggested early on in public statements that he respected the prior management of the agency but saw it as “more academic”, whereas he wanted to work more “in the concrete” [en lo concreto] (El Sol de San Telmo, 2008).35 New agencies were necessary for a period less conflicted over the district’s exchange versus use value. Soon after the election of Mauricio Macri, the Ministry of Urban Development, headed by the Wharton-trained Daniel Chain (also an architect), took a more prominent role in plans for the Casco Histórico, including an ambitious plan to pedestrianize its streets (examined below).

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35 Grossman’s age, 75, when nominated for the job might also give an indication of the plans the new local government had for the DGCH. Rather than a force of disruption or change, Grossman seemed to represent a steady, if perhaps easily ignored voice in the larger urban planning environment.
Table 1: Development of policies of historic preservation in the Casco Histórico.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Public(s)</th>
<th>Ministry</th>
<th>Dominant Emphasis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-1996</td>
<td>Targeted, micro-interventions</td>
<td>Global heritage experts</td>
<td>Urban Planning</td>
<td>Technical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996-2007</td>
<td>Holistic, socially responsible</td>
<td>Local community and cultural visitors</td>
<td>Urban Planning until 2000, Culture from 2000</td>
<td>Socio-Cultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-Present</td>
<td>Targeted yet connected to broader market-led planning regimes</td>
<td>Global tourists, consumers</td>
<td>Culture officially, Public Space, Econ. Devt and Urban Devt empowered</td>
<td>Market-oriented, in service to broader restructuring</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The DGCH has continued to offer programs for local residents such as tours and talks on the history of the Casco Histórico. Yet the Ministry of Culture has also been reoriented to reap the advantages of transnational investment and visitors. Whereas prior Ministers of Culture in the city had been chosen from the realm of cultural production, the current Minister is a tourism executive, a prior Secretary of Tourism for the national state with deep consulting ties to local and international hotel groups. For example, the new “District of the Arts”, slated to occupy parts of the historic center is being coordinated by the Ministry of Urban Development and Economic Development, rendering the DGCH and the Ministry of Culture a minor player with input capacities around particular historic sites.\(^3\)

The clearest example of this dynamic was seen in the language of state managers responsible for local interventions after 2007. Gone were mentions of the area’s collective memory, or socio-symbolic importance. Replaced with a programmatic planning vocabulary, the

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\(^3\) The sub-Secretariat of Cultural Patrimony is created in 2000. Prior to this the responsible agency is the sub-Secretariat of Architecture, under the Secretary of Urban Planning.

\(^3\) Interview with official in Ministry of Economic Development.
language of the local government now tied new projects in the district to broader policy goals of the period: in the parlance of local administrators, high quality public space, a more “humane” Buenos Aires, a tourist pole in the south of the city. Yet what this language obscured was the political ramifications of these goals. The Casco Histórico was to be a place of urban order but plans provided little reference with regard to who would enjoy these spaces and generally were crafted with a middle-class sensitivity to the need for secure spaces for leisure and entertainment. The goals of urban policy in this period – higher quality public space and a more livable city – could hardly produce concrete objections. Discursively, they rendered the city a good to be effectively produced and packaged for the public, consumed by residents and visitors, while providing a value-add amenity for the marketing of particular districts.

Planning Meets Politics: Pedestrian Only Calle Defensa

Soon after taking office in 2007, the new Macri administration turned its sights on one of the city’s oldest streets, the calle Defensa. Running from the central square, the Plaza de Mayo, through San Telmo, and south to the historic Parque Lezama, Defensa contained some of the most concentrated stock of architecturally and historically significant buildings in the city. The city plan called for the “pedestrianization” (peatonalización) of the street and the leveling of sidewalks and streets, creating a uniform pedestrian corridor, complete with new lighting and benches.

By insisting that these changes were in service to protecting the street’s rich heritage, the plan sought its legitimacy in local history. But rather than focus on the preservation of the built

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38 In the end, the plan sought the “semi-pedestrianization” [semi-peatonalización] of the street, as the Minister of Urban Development appeared caught of guard by the realization that the full pedestrianalization would require a vote by the local legislature.
environment, the proposal’s design had something else in mind. For one, it created what the Minister of Tourism called a “museum mile of the South,” connecting the downtown Plaza de Mayo with the tourist attractions of San Telmo, and a new set of museum spaces toward the southern extremity of the street. The leveling of streets and sidewalks created a pleasant strolling experience for pedestrians, free from vehicular traffic.

But the plan was also a boon to an emerging private sector in San Telmo. Since the 1970s the neighborhood has been the center of the city’s antiques trade. Yet the sharp rise in international tourism had reshaped its commercial character to focus on gastronomy and to a lesser extent, design/gift stores oriented toward tourists with cheap gifts and tchotchkes. Not only did the new plan reinforce the privileged location of gastronomy by providing additional space for outdoor café tables, but it undermined the place of antique vendors, who relied upon niche, “antique tourism” and the presence of wealthy individuals from other parts of the city. According to the logic of local antique dealers, strolling pedestrians do not pick up $5,000 chandeliers on a whim.\[^{39}\] As plan details emerged, antique dealers vehemently denounced it, citing the possibility of “illegal” vending on the cobble-stoned streets if they were to be closed to vehicular traffic. They aligned themselves with local residents, alienated by tourist-based gentrification, against the reassurances of the local administration (discussed in Chapter 3).

Whereas the Minister of Culture suggested that the plan would “decongest the Plaza Dorrego and generate a new cultural axis”, the President of the Association of Antique Dealers of San Telmo put it as follows:

> If they level the sidewalk the bars are going to fill them with tables and chairs, and ambulant vendors [will use them]. What we requested what that they recuperate and maintain what we already have, and not this craziness (Novillo 2008).

\[^{39}\] Composite interviews with antiques store owners on calle Defensa.
From a broader perspective, the vision of the local government conceived of the neighborhood as a kind of tool for more significant urban restructuring projects, which included more outdoor cafés, museums, and tourists. The “true” history of the neighborhood emerged as a key element of local opposition. Pedestrian streets, antique dealers insisted, would alter the original, colonial morphology of the neighborhood. In sum, the conflict interposed arguments over the design of the street with appeals to the essence of the neighborhood’s history. In many respects it pitted two conceptions of heritage against one another. One was rooted in academic and historical debates around the local built environment, championed by antique dealers, older gentrifiers who had come to adopt a preservationist outlook, and the type of work carried out by the DGCH prior to the Macri administration. The other saw heritage as a commercial strategy, or at best an amenity to be put into service of residents and visitors. In this sense, ministries such as Urban Development and Public Space in the post-2007 period were committed to a touristic conception of the neighborhood and in general engaged with the Ministry of Culture as mere service provider for these projects; used to create events in service to neighborhood upgrade.

After a string of legal defeats, the plan was shelved. However, the language the local state used in these interventions is indicative of the importance the new government placed on the aesthetic versus socio-historical value of the district. Projects such as this increasingly spoke of upgrade in terms of the *puesta en valor*, roughly meaning “revaluing” or “putting back in value”. What is striking about the language is its limited approach to public investment. These plans concentrated on the signs of urban decay in the center, rather than its social and economic roots. But in neighborhoods with major housing shortages, crumbling hospitals and underfunded
schools, the *puesta en valor* represented a short-term strategy for generating political and economic benefits based on the restoration of particular buildings or streets.

In contrast, a 2005 plan, “Heritage Here” [Patrimonio aquí], headed, notably, by Fajre, specifically intended to upgrade buildings in the city’s many outer *barrios*. As the sub-Secretary herself claimed, “The program has a commitment to bring value to every building that has patrimonial worth as a way of having every neighborhood have its heritage in good condition. A characteristic of exemplifying – let us say – the *puesta en valor*.” Yet by 2008, under the Macri government there was a new conception of value at play with regard to heritage. Lacking tourist destinations or cultural features to be parlayed into touristic production, outer neighborhoods provided little contribution to the government’s new approach for historic sites. For example, a program called “Culture in Neighborhoods” (*cultura en barrios*) which sought to finance local cultural centers for workshops and events in distant barrios went from 5.2% of the Ministry of Culture’s budget in 2006 to 3.3% in 2013.  

**Putting Heritage to Work**

At the very moment in which the Macri government was attempting to do away with the existing preservation of pre-1941 structures all across the city, his party simultaneously introduced a law doubling the size of the city center APH, the legal framework for protecting entire streets and neighborhoods, while cataloguing particular buildings to avoid their alteration. The new APH doubled the size of Casco Histórico (historic center), enlarging it to encompass the entire “historic” banking district, the Microcentro, by far the largest-ever expansion of the

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40 In 2006 the budget for Cultura en Barrios was 14 million pesos out of a total budget of 265 million. In 2013 it was 38.5 million pesos out of a budget of 1.16 billion pesos.
APH system. The number of catalogued buildings in the area increased from around 15 to 350, bringing with it new regulations for outdoor advertising and building maintenance.

In December of 2011 a little known member of the obscure Commission for the Preservation of Historic and Cultural Patrimony (CPPHC), Monica Capano, took actions that would later cost her her job. The CPPHC had a seat on the Advisory Council for Heritage Issues (CAAP), which at the time was debating the local state’s decision not to renew a law that had previously protected all buildings built before 1941 with an assessment of their historic value.

While the advisory council largely responded to the current local government, the CPPHC retained an institutional climate representative of past administrations, with members chosen from the world of history, culture, and museum management.

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41 Sometimes referred to as La City, a name adopted when London banking interests dominated local finance.
42 The CAAP had been established in 1997 to work in tandem with the new APH laws in order to consult on changes or demolitions to protected buildings. By design or by accident, the council had deep ties to real estate interests. Its members consisted of a number of architects (generally aligned with developers), as well as members of the Ministry of Urban Development, political appointees of the local state.
The expansion of this legal framework sheds light on how the new administration sought to use preservation for economic, rather than merely socio-cultural purposes. Macri had long been accused of tight connections to the local construction industry, an industry in which he once worked, known for its vehement opposition to preservation laws. For decades the industry had accused those historians and architects with interests in protecting the built environment of
wanting to turn the city into a “fossil”. The economic activity and jobs created by construction were perceived by detractors as incompatible with the position pursued by institutions such as the DGCH. But far from being an impediment to a commercialized form of city building, the history and collective memory of urban space became a key channel through which market-friendly urban policies operated. The law protecting pre-1941 structures would have most protected those residents of neighborhoods outside the historic center without APH demarcation or catalogued buildings. These neighborhoods’ history provided no touristic advantage to the administration. The government’s local legislators employed a series of tactics to allow the pre-1941 protection to expire, even as they were proposing the ambitious Microcentro APH. They failed to eliminate the broader law only after a local judge intervened and the appeal of her sentence threatened to be politically untenable.

The conflict is particularly useful lens for understanding the intellectual shifts taking place around culture and heritage. The 2003 law protecting buildings prior to 1941 had given the CPPHC representation on the Advisory Council for CAAP. Charged with identifying buildings for cataloguing, the institution was one of the last hurdles to doing away with the legal obstacles protecting pre-1941 structures. In her representation as the Director of the CPPHC before the Advisory Council, Monica Capano had opposed the expiration of the law. Yet in a closed-door legislative move after the extension of the law, Capano and others from the CPPHC were summarily replaced by the local government’s legislators.

In the case of the APH, why would an administration that had clearly undermined preservation across the city now seek to prevent development in one of the city’s prime real estate corridors? What conception of history and memory did the administration embrace?

43 Law 3056/1227.
Collective memory and preservation may have been anathema to the new administration on intellectual grounds, but this did not mean these debates did not have a purpose in the restructuring of the city for culture-driven development. Given this logic, the Ministry of Public Space became a key protagonist of urban planning. In fact, the lawmaker who steered the new APH through the legislature would later become a sub-Secretary in the Ministry of Public Space, focusing on the uses (and regulation) of the city’s commons.\footnote{Patricio di Stefano would become the Sub-Secretary of Uses of Public Space in 2012.} Preserving structures in the historic center served a purpose, whereas in the \textit{barrios} market-rate construction ruled.

The trajectory of preservation policy demonstrated a strange irony. The original movement for preservation, beginning in the 1970s consisted of local architects, archeologists, and historians with a deep interest in the built forms of local history. Their almost exclusive focus on preserving built structures with little interest in contemporary social meanings and place-based identities came under criticism by those such as Fajre who conceived of heritage as a socially produced process, not merely a set of frozen buildings. Yet ironically, the singular focus on built forms connected both these early preservationists and the Macri administration, albeit for vastly different reasons. Departing from Fajre’s more constructivist approach to heritage, the Macri government’s interest in preservation as a tool for building a “culture” city was necessarily focused on physical structures as a visual language for the staging of cultural and touristic production. Within this conception of preservation, what matters most was the physical form of architectural objects. Only built forms as repositories of the past could be used in cultural promotion, while collective memory, or local affective ties in the \textit{barrios} hardly responded to the broader economic needs pursued by the local state.
Tourism as Public Policy

If heritage became increasingly instrumentalized, this happened because of the expanding tourist market. Tourism as an industry was not discovered in Buenos Aires in the post-crisis period, but its importance and the institutional attention to the sector followed a pattern not dissimilar from that of perseveration. The late 1990s and early 2000s saw incremental interest in tourism as a potential growth sector. Early policies coincided with a broader global interest among governments, multi-lateral institutions, and business groups in responding to this growth.

Some scholarship in tourism studies has emphasized recent shifts within the sector, broadly in line with Fordist and post-Fordist production processes (see Ioannides and Debbage 1997 for an overview). If earlier forms of tourism were based on reaching wide audiences with large-scale attractions, contemporary tourism increasingly relies upon reaching niche publics with events and sites that allow for flexibility and specialization of travel itineraries (Marson 2011; Urry and Larson 2013; Robinson and Novelli 2005). We can observe this process in Buenos Aires in 1990s.

The city government had recognized tourism as a strategic industry and, like preservation, the first laws were sanctioned in the late 1990s in order to promote its development. These laws came at a time when Buenos Aires had increased its share of tourism, particularly from North America and Europe. While tourism remained low compared to the post-crisis period, it ticked up significantly in the latter part of the 1990s. Part of this shift stemmed from the state’s modernization project, which by the mid-1990s set about selling off major public industries: telecommunications, water, airlines, rail and postal services. Multinational corporations and their overseas management bought these industries for pennies on the dollar, positioning Buenos Aires as a regional business hub and bringing a number of international
hotels to the city, including the city’s first Hilton and the expansion of chains such as Marriott and Sheraton (Ciccolella 1999).  

Figure 6: Relative increase/decrease of tourist arrivals to the Buenos Aires metropolitan region by country of origin, 1997/2001. Figure by author with data from CEDEM (Center for Studies of Metropolitan Economic Development, 2002)

Public policies sought to appeal to these growing segments. By 1996, the national state had passed “The National Law of Tango”, declaring tango an object of national heritage to be promoted and protected. The passage of this law can hardly be separated from the urban projects it sought to promote. Local developers and the state had created ambitious plans to turn derelict districts of the city into new tourist destination, based, in part on creating tango themed streets and monuments next to the site of a redeveloped fruit and vegetable warehouse turned urban mall (Carman 2006).

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45 The number of 5-star hotels in Buenos Aires rose from 10 to 13 between 1997 and 2001: http://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/areas/hacienda/sis_estadistico/anu_estadistico/07/web07/c17.htm
46 Law 24.684.
The city government also embarked on a process of stimulating tango-themed tourism, designating tango an object of cultural heritage for the city as well as creating dedicated tango radio stations, and organizing the first national and international competitions (Murel 2009: 60) beginning in the late 1990s. It is noteworthy that the original tango festival created in the late 1990s, “Festival Popular de Tango”, was later changed to Festival BA Tango, a name more friendly to translation with less of an emphasis on local publics. Other tango programs that had emerged in the early 2000s began to disappear, as tango became an increasingly important economic engine, while the cultural heritage to which early endeavors appealed, diminished. For example, by 2007 “Tango en los Barrios”, a neighborhood-based tango promotion program financed by the city government was cut from the budget of Festival BA Tango, the now dominant – and international – festival.

In the context of the 2001 crisis, with tourism entries falling, the city government passed a law aimed at promoting tourism. On balance, the law sought to offer tourist maps, create a database of tourism providers, and provide official information for tourists. Yet the breadth of the law can be read as typical of the Ibarra period. Carefully worded to include local residents in the diffusion and promotion of tourism and attractions in the city, the law strikes a distinctly limited approach: a registry of tourism providers, a tourist map, and a somewhat vague call for collaboration between the public and private sector. To emphasize, however, the importance tourism was to be given by the city government, the former Secretary of Economic Development was renamed the Secretary of Economic Development, Tourism, and Environment in 2003. The centrality of tourism, however, and the need for collaboration with the private sector, appeared to

47 There is no easy translation for “popular” in English but the Spanish connotation suggests a distinctly local vs. transnational or elite culture and in many cases, the culture of the poor. See (Yúdice et al. 1992.) for a discussion of “popular” vs. “mass” culture in Latin America.

48 Law 600.
be hamstrung by the sub-Secretary of Tourism’s meager budget, which in 2004 was something in the order of 1.5 million USD.

Though the sub-Secretary of Tourism was given the task of coordinating with the private sector and protecting the interests of international visitors, the heart of tourism-based programming remained under the deeply academic tutelage of Fajre’s sub-Secretary of Cultural Heritage within the Secretary of Culture. This orientation is well expressed in a book series titled *Themes in Cultural Heritage* (2005), produced by this sub-Secretary. Chapters from a two-volume collection of the series, *Cultural Tourism*, include chapters such as “Liberty and tourism: The problem of the subject in the territory/diagram of Foucault”, and “Cultural tourism. What do you see when you see me?” The introduction by Gutavo López, then Secretary of Culture, suggests both the academic nature of tourism policy, but also the problematic attempts by the progressive city government to meld economic goals with social inclusion:

… it should not be lost from sight that tourism generates social dynamics that bring with it tensions prone to consolidating or reformulating cultural values. Because of this, one fundamental objective of cultural policy of the government of the city is to fortify social practices so that the citizenry understands the importance of conserving and valuing our tangible and intangible heritage. For this it’s necessary for men and women of our city to recognize their heritage as such, as a good of everyone. It’s necessary that they find in these goods the symbolic expression of their culture and identity, that they identity [them] as valuable, as something worthy of care and preservation, but also enjoyment.

The volume and its introduction reveal the contradictory nature of public policy in the pre-2007 period. Given these contradictions, the Ministry of Culture’s programs to foment tourism were limited to events that were uncontroversial and oriented as much to the cultural needs of residents as tourists. To name a few: a program of “notable bars” to preserve and publicize the

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49 Titled *Themes in Cultural Heritage*, the 2005 version explores “Cultural Tourism”. The 400+ page tome is comprised of chapters written mostly by academics. Anthropologists and those working in historical, archeological issues dominate. While there is a diversity of voices and chapters, the texts stray from any easily instrumentalized form of cultural.
city’s most traditional eating and drinking establishments, as well as the night of museums, in which city museums stayed open throughout the night. These interventions were not unimportant. They laid the groundwork for a more commercialized form of touristic production. Rather than suggest that the embrace of tourism was incomplete or stymied during this period, the suggestion posed here is that the Ibarra period represented something more contradictory. The economic need yet cultural resistance of the administration to fully exploit tourism at the expense of use values of city residents expressed just how promising this strategy had become, even for an administration oriented toward less commercial goals and whose cultural policy emerged as a form of cultural nationalism (i.e. the “cultural diversity” campaign)

Laws carefully crafted to include residents could hardly stem market manipulations of local meanings in the face of a massive increase in visitors, the opportunities presented by foreign exchange, and the subsequent creation of local jobs. The local state, however, mixed pragmatism with a perennial reflexivity over the negative consequences of turning cultural goods into mere commodities. When the government created a “Strategic Council” and plan for 2010, those working on the economic goals of the city could not come to a consensus as to whether the word “competitive” should be used to refer to “the creative potential of its inhabitants”. A peculiar footnote of the document reads, “This vision has been modified taking the base of the proposal of the Coordinator, Rodolfo Giunta to incorporate the issue of culture and heritage. The term ‘competitive’ as it is used in the [afore]mentioned version has not been eliminated because the commission could not reach final agreement over the question nor was the total suppression of the word accepted in the other commissions…” (Coordinación del Plan Estratégico 2003: 7).

Despite this political morass, the Ibarra government had laid the foundation for a more commercialized approach put into place by the new Macri government starting in 2007. To
begin, the Macri government reshaped the institutional structure surrounding tourism. While the prior government had created a sub-Secretary of tourism, organized under the local Ministry of Economic Development, the new administration henceforth situated tourism completely under the Ministry of Culture, creating in 2007 an independent agency within the ministry, the Tourism Entity (Ente de Turismo). To give a sense of the prominence the agency played in the ministry, its budget is revealing. In 2013 it was allotted some 36 million pesos (roughly USD 6 million) with a budget of 85 million anticipated for 2014. In contract, the Casco Histórico was allotted 6 million in 2013, just .45% of the culture budget.

The situating of tourism under Economic Development showed the focus of the Ibarra government on jobs, industry statistics, investment etc. The move to Culture did not necessarily mean that these figures were no longer compiled or important, yet the role and emphasis of the state was on something else. While the new agency’s institutional location within the Ministry of Culture might be seen as representing an attempt to emphasize local cultural meanings over economic and productive logics, the move in fact represented just the opposite. It was the Ministry of Culture itself that was slowly transforming into a more entrepreneurial actor, tasked with anchoring culture to the needs of creative city discourses. The new Minister of Culture, Hernán Lombardi, was a former tourism executive with ties to the private sector. As an administration known for its business-friendly approach, many observers expected Culture to be defunded and devalued by the new administration. Yet something quite different happened. The state became a provider of events for showcasing local culture significantly oriented toward visitors, while to some degree leaving the private sector to build upon these investments. The cultural life of the city was well financed and publicized, constructing residents and visitors as consumers of well-attended and curated cultural events. In spending large amounts of the budget
on major events such as opera in public space, the Buenos Aires Jazz festival, and the massive Colon opera house, the new authorities produced a cultural policy in which the priorities of the ministry were to produce cultural entertainment rather than encourage residents’ cultural practices.

Central spaces of the city figured prominently into this new emphasis. While many neighborhood museums in the city were experiencing budgetary problems due to insufficient resources, activities related to festivals and outdoor events captured ever-more of the ministry’s budget. This “festivalization” (Johansson and Kociatkiewicz 2011) of urban space through “experience consumption” (Jakob 2013) provided a way to reshape central spaces of the city, while bringing a middle-class public to locations they might otherwise not visit. These goals were expressed not only in the festivals publicized in official tour guides and promotional materials for tourists, but they were also anchored in a broader institutional strategy. This shift constructed the Ministry of Culture as a top-down provider for a consuming public, shifting the ministry’s emphasis from promoting culture among the populace and marginalizing those actors such as neighborhood cultural groups unable to provide a service to resident-consumers. While attendance at city-owned museums stagnated, particularly those not in the city center between 2003-2012, the number of attendees at the increasing number of urban festivals increased exponentially.50

50 Total museum attendance was 609,342 in 2001 and 711,017 in 2002. In 2011 it was 615,658 and in 2012: 507,718. http://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/areas/hacienda/sis_estadistico/banco_datos
Figure 7: Data from General Direction of Statistics and Census, Ministry of Culture, General Direction of Festivals.
http://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/areas/hacienda/sis_estadistico/banco_datos/

Figure 7 shows the rise in event attendance from around 200,000 in 2000 to over 1.2 million by 2012. Tourism became a major contributor to the success of these festivals, with tango in particular attracting thousands of international visitors. And these events served to brand both the city and the event. The reciprocal relationship between major events and their location (Johannson and Kociatkiewicz 2011: 395) meant that the “brand” of Buenos Aires was enhanced by the festival, while the festival’s cache was enhanced by its position in a city with a distinct – and emerging – reputation.

Not all forms of culture, however, were useful to the city, particularly those practices that did not entertain the broader culture-consuming public. This led to a number of local conflicts. For example, Argentina’s small but resurgent Afro-Argentine community was given a space in the historic district to use as a cultural center. Yet conflict arose between the city and the
organizers of the center, as the organizers did not live up to the expectation that the center would become a place of entertainment and spectatorship for the rest of the city. As the Minister of Culture, Lombardi, put it in a 2013 television interview, “I wanted to promote it, [I thought] that a self-managed [auto-gestionado] community could do something Afro with regard to the whole of the city” (Banda 3.0 2012). But he was disappointed that they appeared to only be using cultural funds for their own group. The minister later attempted to evict them and his televised interview ended with a mea culpa for his overly-optimistic belief that the center and its Afro-Argentine organizers would become a place of diversion for the rest of the city.

It was not the case that the Afro-Argentine community had not made use of the space. Rather their use of the space constructed culture as a process, as a form of political consciousness, whereas the city government understood culture to be expressed in events that would attract outsiders. By producing cultural practices that were not readily commercialized, they also challenged one of the dominant discourses of the new administration, which promoted diversity, but only of a type that could be a resource for broader priorities such as tourism or local branding. This was evident not just in policies toward small social groups, but also the uses of some of the city’s prime cultural spaces. In 2013, the city evicted mostly young cultural producers from their downtown theater space in the Centro Cultural San Martín. The result was resistance on the part of the cultural producers, which the Macri administration denounced as trying to control a public space of the city for themselves, while it should have been accessible to all residents.

To perceive the connection between tourism and culture-led urban upgrade it is necessary to revise the narrowest definitions of tourism. In many respects, programs devised by the Ministry of Culture saw their audience as local residents or perhaps national visitors. Yet the
language of spectatorship infused many of these programs. Tourism thereby became a kind of dominant aesthetic for transforming central districts of the city to be enjoyed or consumed by middle-class residents. Seemingly mundane interventions in public spaces of the city relied upon this dominant discourse. For example, plaques placed on major avenues in honor of famous artists and visitors, and bronze replicas of popular figures situated on sidewalks all contributed to the promotion of culture as a top-down good to be delivered by the local state and passively enjoyed by an urban public. These measures, mostly confined to the city center, also gave an indication of how crucial cultural activities had become to urban planning.

While these interventions did not necessarily appeal to exclusionary forms of high culture they nonetheless contributed to an urban experience that had class-based implications. Space is public because it is both physically inclusive yet also symbolically so. Government promotion of cultural figures generally cohered to the most apolitical and widely accepted symbols of middle-class culture. These figures framed the street as a place of entertainment, contributing to broader consumption-based themes of post-industrial urban culture.

Such interventions show that beyond the content of public art it is useful to examine its functional role in revalorization processes. As a strategy for communicating a spectator approach to urban space, public art may depoliticize whatever messages may be embedded in cultural products themselves. Appeals to pluralism and diversity in cultural artifacts are put to use by policy-makers, which may reorient political messages toward commercial goals. Expressed concretely, this use of cultural meanings in urban renewal explains, in part, how a conservative government might have hoped to utilize Afro-Argentine culture – with all of its local conflicts and grievances (Frigerio 2008; Grimson 2006) – in service to a pluralistic experience of the urban commons, where residents and tourists alike might consume a diverse range of cultural
goods. These policies are generally market-led in their logic if not their content, insofar as they served to position the city in a global marketplace of competitive urban brands. In consenting to this commercializing process, even those messages that might be critical of dominant culture are suffused with its logic.

Figure 8: Mayor Mauricio Macri inaugurating a statue of sketch artists Olmeda and Portales on the sidewalk of the Avenida Corrientes, Buenos Aires’ Broadway. Source: Photo by Mauricio Macri, Creative Commons license.

Launching the Creative Industries

In 2000, the countries of Mercusur were in the midst of talks for further integration. At a regional meeting in Buenos Aires, a project for research on cultural industries was approved. This was a time of market initiatives, when, despite the increasing debt choking countries like Argentina, the region proceeded with plans to reinvent itself as a southern version of the European Union. Integration discourses were connected to common-sense global trade policies
and emphasized industries that could potentially compete abroad or positively impact trade imbalances (Grimson and Kessler and 2004: Ch. 3). On the one hand, cultural industries such as cinema represent a major strain on the balance sheets of the region’s countries (Getino 1996). On the other, they were deemed necessary for the promotion of a regional cultural vocabulary. Thus, in November of 2001 under the leadership of longtime Argentine filmmaker and scholar of the cultural industries, Octavio Getino, a project for cultural integration and research into the cultural industries was agreed upon.

As the members of this committee were drafting their integration project, however, something far more decisive for the cultural industries in Argentina was afoot. Just one month later the Argentine economy collapsed, and a shift in local politics would significantly reorient the regional approach to integration.

Getino’s push for local cultural policies would find another outlet, however, in Aníbal Ibarra’s administration in Buenos Aires. In the aftermath of crisis, cultural industries’ potential economic contribution represented a remarkable opportunity for the city. More importantly, the industries were championed by a government with deep ties to local cultural production and invested in the movement for “cultural diversity” against media consolidation. In an effort to build upon newly competitive industries, the administration launched the Observatory of Cultural Industries (OIC) in 2004, an initiative meant to quantify the importance of these industries.

On balance, Getino represented well the particular zeitgeist of the Ibarra administration and its approach to culture. His work was both academic and artistic, yet geared toward a fusion of academic ideas with public policy and economic pragmatism. His thinking represented a

51 This orientation was revealing of a broader shift of post-industrial cultural policy. The mass-oriented “Culture Industry” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1946), had historically been quite separate from the domain of cultural policy, geared toward the separate realm of high art and deeply tied
kind of developmentalist approach to cultural industries. By which I refer to the assumption that productive and industrial asymmetries were the cause of Latin America’s relative backwardness, a historic discourse that relied upon economistic knowledge and top-down development planning, but also a fairly nationalistic belief that developed nations were responsible for productive limitations. Getino’s position at the helm of the newly formed Observatory for Cultural Industries (OIC) at its founding in 2004 reflected this set of assumptions. In demonstrating the balance between embracing the role of cultural industries in economic development, while appealing to their role in national consciousness, Getino had a similar set of dispositions as the Ibarra government. As the Secretary of Culture Gustavo López wrote for the OIC’s first report,

Globalization and post-modernity have put the concept of equality, the imaginaries linked to the collective and the right to equality into crisis… Cultural production, on the other hand, has developed and multiplied as a refuge for identity to confront the crisis… A policy of strengthening the cultural industries opens a key space for economic and social development. This is without forgetting the fundamental role of the[se industries] in the constitution of those imaginaries and social identities (Observatorio de Industrias Culturales 2004: 6)

Up until 2006, the OIC reflected these multiple priorities. Reports, conferences, and publications of the OIC included not only relevant statistics on the sector but also theoretical tracts by cultural scholars such as Nestor García Canclini among many others. Countless theoretical discussions were critical of culture’s increasingly economic logic, inspired by critical theorists from George Yúdice to Pierre Bourdieu. But the Ministry of Culture’s institutional

to the interests and dispositions of urban elites. Yet by the end of the 20th century, these distinctions became increasingly confounded. Cultural policy and its related industries had become a major feature of governmental innovation in social, economic and political goals (Yúdice 2003).

52 The first page of the first document produced by the OIC already mentions The Frankfurt School, Horkheimer and Adorno, literary critic Beatriz Sarlo and Pierre Bourdieu, arguing that
culture did not cohere to the increasingly economic role being asked of the cultural industries. In 2006, the interim mayor Jorge Telerman moved the OIC to the Ministry of Economic Development. Stella Puente, the Director of Cultural Industries at the time hints at this conflict in her introduction to a 2006 annual report on the organization: “We knew that for this it was not enough to talk about the [cultural industries] importance in abstract terms without data capable of reflecting and quantifying this phenomenon” (Observatorio de Industrias Culturales, 2006).

This effort to reorient the agency toward more quantitative information gathering was aided by a shift in the political realm. The Macri administration renamed the agency “Creative Industries”, leaving it under the Ministry of Economic Development, now headed by a businessman and former director of a center-right think tank. Enrique Avogadro, former Director of Foreign Exports for the city became the Director of Creative Industries, urban exports, and the head of the Center for Metropolitan Design, a space meant to anchor design firms and thinking in the gentrifying southern neighborhood of Barracas.

Indeed art and culture are never just individual creations but are in fact always deeply social and classed activities (Obervatorio de Industrias Culturales 2004: 2).

53 Telerman was mayor from March 2006-December 2007 after former mayor (jefe de gobierno) Aníbal Ibarra was impeached due to lax controls of nightlife establishments in the aftermath of a fire in a local dance club, which took the lives of 194 young people.

54 In more than one respect, the Telerman administration represented a bridge to the more market-oriented Macri government, particularly with regard to the urban-culture nexus. For example, in the southern district of La Boca, in 2006, Telerman’s government created the Executing Entity for Works and Projects for the Promotion of Tourism in La Boca (Unidad Ejecutora de Obras y Proyectos para la Promoción Turística del Barrio de La Boca) to transform la Boca into a fully touristic space. Yet given Telerman’s limited tenure, this and other projects were never completed, making an analysis of this period of limited value.

55 In fact, for roughly a year (2008) María Alejandra Ungar was the Director of Creative Industries with Avogadro working in exports. Her resignation paved the way for Avogadro’s interim appointment, which became permanent.
However, was the agency’s work really focused on generating new industries? Creativity is, of course, a particularly difficult term to define. In Buenos Aires, an urban emphasis accompanied the shift from cultural to creative industries. The OIC’s language during the tenure of Getino emphasized broader national economics and the role of cultural industries in two important aspects of this structure. First, a nationalistic need to reduce imports from abroad by creating cultural products at home. Second, a situating of this narrative within a developmentalist discourse oriented equally to the level of the nation and region as is to the level of the urban. Topics in the agency’s first publications include essays addressing Latin America’s need for local communications technology, history of foreign media domination, and a desire to unshackle itself from global cultural hegemony. In sum, the Directorate General of Cultural Industries in its infancy was engaged in discussions around media history and scholarship, especially within the Latin American context.

The language of creativity represented a subtle but important shift. Creativity is not merely produced by firms or incubated by state policy. Rather, creativity may be found at the level of the firm but it also summons an individualist rhetoric in which cultural and artistic production can be found in everyday producers. The artist is in some respects an ideal flexible worker, suited to the vicissitudes of post-industrial capitalism with its individually navigated risk and set of rewards. Consequently, the restructured Directorate of Creative Industries implied a notion of culture that was to be found in ordinary practices, not necessarily appropriated by major “cultural” industries such as film, television and print media. Thus, all residents could be creative, and could produce Buenos Aires as a “creative city”.

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It seems that etymologically speaking, creativity was understood as the privileged domain of the divine who “created” what human beings could not (Morgan and Ren 2012, citing Williams 1998).
Table 2: The politics and rhetoric of the Creative vs. Cultural Industries in Buenos Aires

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<th>Site of interest</th>
<th>Agent of Production</th>
<th>Global Position</th>
<th>Outlook</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Industries</td>
<td>Nation</td>
<td>Firm</td>
<td>At odds with globalization</td>
<td>Cultural nationalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Industries</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>At ease with globalization</td>
<td>Neoliberal globalism</td>
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Following his election, it was unclear how the Macri administration would respond to the city’s most vexing social inequalities. Given the administration’s aversion toward traditional sources of social spending, the creative industries represented a useful alternative. Appropriating the language of inequalities between the north and the south of the city, “creative district” policies promised to demonstrate an active state resolving the needs of the city’s poor in innovative ways. Yet instead of engaging in traditional discussions of social inclusion, the answer would be found in promoting creativity in disinvested neighborhoods by starting with increased security, more public space, and better transportation infrastructure for local residents and new businesses.

It is arguable whether this shift transformed the cultural industries in Buenos Aires.

Guillermo, a top official working in the Directorate of Creative Industries, said the following in an interview:

The devaluation made these sorts of products [industries] far more competitive. Animation, film; they’ve had competitive advantage since the devaluation. The crisis in 2001/2002 led people to explore more options for self-employment and developing new kinds of businesses based on creative production. There was a ‘creative push’ in the city that was perhaps the result of how struggle inspires people trying to make ends meet. We are going to do this with all of the creative industries… This is a global phenomenon, it’s all about content at the global level. A book, an I-pad app, this is what is ever-more important in the world. Ten percent of the economy of the city is creative industries, though it’s hard to get exact figures…
The aspirational expansion of new industries such as design and “content”, however, is
disputed by the OIC’s own data, which suggest that quantifiable and traditional cultural
industries (such as architecture) continue to comprise the lion’s share of the sector’s local
production. Importantly, however, the language of creativity did infuse the agency with a more
“urban” policy focus. One of the Ministry of Economic Development’s central goals was to
enlist designers, artists, or software firms to transform marginal neighborhoods of the city into
themed clusters: an arts district, a design district, and a technology district among others.
Employment and quantifiable expansion mattered less here than the visibility of creativity in
disinvested neighborhoods.

While the leadership of the Directorate of Creative Industries spoke about embracing
concepts like graffiti art (particularly as it had become an attraction to international tourists),
these new conceptions of creativity required significant choreography. For example, Avogadro
may have embraced outdoor markets and graffiti as part of the city’s creative spirit, yet the city’s
less privileged residents engaged in informal vending or spontaneous acts of graffiti art were
rarely viewed as creatives, but rather trespassers on public space, or vandals. With its emphasis
on plurality and openness, creativity opened up a unique opportunity to redirect investment to
disinvested nodes of the city, while emphasizing social inclusion.
To conclude, in the period following 2007 public policy in the south of the city combined concerns for equality and diversity with increased policing and real estate investment. This dual rhetoric extended specifically to gentrification itself. Avogadro stressed the need to attract a social mix: “rich, poor, middle-class, all living there.” And those working in the Ministry of Urban Development echoed this conception. The central-south axis of the city was to be revitalized, in the words used during an interview with Santiago, a top official in the Ministry of Urban Development, by “a kind of person who doesn’t want to come home and eat a steak at home alone. At home, you’re not going to meet new people. They’re looking for experiences and a kind of public space to engage in culture. They are going to revitalize the central-south axis.”

By shifting to a concern for local creativity, rather than the developmentalist focus on major cultural industries, Avogadro’s approach represented a subtle departure from the most economistic aspects of cultural industry policy, focused on production, exports and employment. The agency did not give up its study of firms and production. The OIC continued to publish its research on the city’s economy and the role of cultural industries in it. In many ways, little in fact had changed, and the vast majority of the city’s cultural employment continues to come from...
traditional services that have increased in tandem with structural economic shifts following the crisis.

While architectural services and advertising services increased significantly due to the devaluation in 2002, new industries such as design mostly increased in line with the city’s – and country’s – broader economic expansion (Figure 10). In fact, the two largest categories of “related creative services” architectural services and advertising services increased by 104% and 45% respectively between 2004 and 2010 (OIC 2012: 24), while the “related creative services” category as a whole accounted for some two-thirds of the entire “creative” economy.
Figure 10 captures the employment dynamics in Buenos Aires’ creative industries in the years following the crisis. Cultural industries have expanded in keeping with the national economy. The most successful sectors of the cultural economy are in fact sectors tied to the national state’s policies in which construction has been privileged by a monetary policy discouraging saving, while encouraging investment in bricks and mortar, a boon to architects. Other sectors that have benefited are advertising, film production and informatics. Importantly, the new sectors lauded by Avogadro do not even appear in the table, which suggests the
continued significance of Buenos Aires’ traditional cultural industries, tied to major firms, rather than innovative individuals or start-ups.

The shift represented by Avogadro suggested a broader alignment between urban and creative policy, in which internal and international investment, tourism, and real estate aimed at attracting well-healed residents and businesses based on the expansion of high-quality public amenities. It comes as little surprise that in public pronouncements Avogadro seemed more concerned with increasing the symbolic assets of particular districts, rather than focusing on the mundane yet most concrete economic indicators, which characterized the leadership of the cultural industries in the past. Many of the industries tied to the physical transformation of urban space through the clustering of various neighborhoods – design, film, and “the arts” for example – were in fact undergoing less than booming processes of growth. While the film industry had been flourishing following the crisis due to Buenos Aires’ cheap prices and adaptable urban scenery, by 2009 this boom was all but over due to higher prices, inflation, and competition from other regional destinations such as Colombia. All of this suggests that Avogadro’s task went beyond the traditional focus on increasing employment or exports, but rather represented the broader urban priorities of local public policy: to reorient the urban, cultural, and economic life of the city using a well-established global paradigm to attract investment and tourism to disinvested parts of the city.

57 Interview with Director, Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo de la Economía Metropolitana (CEDEM).
Conclusions

I have outlined here three different arenas of public policy that underwent significant processes of state intervention between autonomy in 1996 and the contemporary period. These objects of state innovation – historic preservation, tourism, and cultural industries – each became a field of policy with new sets of actors, stakeholders, experts and policy narratives; with conflictual goals, discourses, and representations. Each was a response to and a reflection of a time of considerable political, institutional, and social rupture. From the triumphalist free-market rhetoric of the 1990s, to the depths of the post-crisis quagmire, these sectors were reshaped by broader political-economic priorities. Subject to state intervention in order to generate economic resources, these sectors demonstrate the significant “work” being asked of local culture. Yet they also demonstrate the thorough suffusion of local politics with global paradigms. Throughout the period, various extant forces – multilateral institutions, tourists, and global policy regimes – each influenced the trajectory of local change.

Divergent political approaches to culture-led initiatives, all converged upon the need to squeeze more economic value out of culture. This increased commercialization was far more nuanced than typically suggested by the literature. Rather than a straightforward instrumentalization of the city’s cultural resources, the commodification of culture at times transformed and at others operated against the grain of existing political and institutional dispositions toward cultural policy.

These policies also reflected a global shift toward the privatization of the urban commons. Increasingly, urban policies whose consequence is an increased role for market mechanisms are
produced through discourses of sustainability, diversity in local community, and cultural participation. Within this set of policy prescriptions, culture plays a unique role. It shapes the local identities necessary to produce unique, differentiated urban offerings within a set of competitive global cities.

Finally, these three areas of state action raise questions about the role of local politics in shaping cultural policy. Actions taken on behalf of preservation, tourism, and cultural industries in Buenos Aires have been located between cross-cutting discourses that do not neatly respond to a singular space on the political spectrum. State action variously appealed to a number of legitimizing imaginaries during this period. For example, the appeal to cultural nationalism can be seen in early efforts to preserve local media industries against a tide of foreign capital. Yet preserving and expanding cultural industries has also been a discourse of the market-friendly Macri government, albeit for different reasons. A maximalist approach to historic preservation suggests a similar dynamic. Both grassroots movements against developers as well as more elitist positions characterized by historians and architects ignored the social – in addition to – architectural features of heritage. These competing narratives demonstrate how culture-driven urban revitalization may have global dimensions, yet its conditions of possibility are deeply limited by political scripts and imaginaries operating at the local level. In the next chapter, I explore how these competing narratives shaped the social and cultural reconfiguration of Buenos Aires’ historic center.
Chapter 3: San Telmo: The Invention of a Historic Center

On Sundays, a visit to the San Telmo flea market is a favorite pastime of the Porteños, as the residents of the city are known, and tourists alike. The small flea market — no more than 100 stands — is held every Sunday, from 10 a.m. until 6 p.m. in Plaza Dorrego.


- The calle Defensa is occupied all day and offers everything from clothing to food. Complaints of neighbors and store-owners. The legal stands of artisans and antiquarians have been overtaken by ambulant vendors and illegal structures...

- Pablo Novillo, Clarín, 2014

The city’s slow but steady recognition of culture and tourism as economic assets in the 1990s and early 2000s inevitably led to a focus on the historic center. Neighborhoods like San Telmo had in fact become “historic” through a process of touristic recognition, aided by growing numbers of visitors. In the case of San Telmo, this recognition coincided with a unique local process, spearheaded by José María Peña. This chapter explores the global trends and local contingencies of this process of revalorization. It seeks to unravel how this process took place in a context of economic crisis within a prominent city in the global South. In doing so, it examines the way in which this transformation resembles or departs from the largely Anglo-American scholarship on gentrification.

San Telmo is a small neighborhood of about 20,000 residents, located 6 blocks to the south of the city’s central plaza, the Plaza de Mayo. In the parlance of almost every Buenos Aires guidebook, San Telmo is characterized by its “shabby chic” ambiance. Its 18th and 19th century houses, built for local elites, show the ravages of environment and neglect. Trees sprout from ornate moss-adorned facades, chipped paint and graffiti mingle with the elegance of once-single family homes turned boarding houses. Nevertheless, like many disinvested yet central neighborhoods, this decay has also made San Telmo attractive for generating profit if investors, residents, and the state could produce a coherent project and narrative for its revalorization.
Their progress has been arrested and advanced by the contextually embedded nature of place, situated within local and national politics, economic and development plans, and tempered by social and political unrest. As a site within walking distance to the command centers of the nation’s capital, San Telmo has figured prominently within broader plans to transform the city and the nation.

**Historic Development**

San Telmo is not in fact a colonial neighborhood as generally designated, if we understand colonial as pre-dating national independence in 1810. Most of its construction follows independence. San Telmo’s architecture represents the changing fashions of the porteño upper class. Built prior to the elite’s wholehearted embrace of French architects and forms, the most dominant residential styles of the mid-19th century in Buenos Aires involve various takes on “Italian” styles – baroque and *renacentista* etc. As Charles Darwin pointed out in an 1840 trip...
to the city, the existing housing stock consisted of one-story houses. “…the houses themselves are hollow squares; all the rooms opening into a neat little courtyard. They are only one story high, with flat roofs, which are fitted with seats and are much frequented by the inhabitants in summer” (quoted in Myers 1987). The fact that much of San Telmo architecture is 2-3 stories and given to ornate baroque features points to the fact that it is largely “post-colonial”, as well as mostly designed by Italian architectures (Gutiérrez 2004), who featured prominently in the city’s mid-19th century architectural development (Gayol 2000).

As a relative backwater in the Spanish Empire, the Viceroyalty of the River Plate experienced little development until the 18th century. Yet as port activities increased, the area south of the central square (the Plaza Mayor) would become important transportation routes between the plaza and the port. Though San Telmo appears proximate to the Plaza Mayor, Buenos Aires was so small until the 19th century that the neighborhood was not quite “central”. San Telmo remained until the early 1800s a rather far-flung barrio with its parish church, San Pedro Telmo, marking the southernmost limit of settlement in Buenos Aires, with a few scattered suburban estates (quintas) to its south. To the north, the area of Santo Domingo church would become Monserrat, a district immediately south of the central plaza and far more inhabited than San Telmo during this period.

The area around the San Pedro Telmo church had a far smaller population than that of Santo Domingo further north, closer to the central plaza (Aliata 1993:63). The calle Chile, whose

58 The central plaza of the city has remained the same since colonial times, albeit, with different names: Plaza Mayor, Plaza de la Victoria, and Plaza de Mayo (contemporary). In general, I use the names used during the period under consideration.
59 Buenos Aires comprised just 108 official blocks in 1769, with an additional 800+ blocks surveyed and understood as common land [ejido]) outside the municipality (Berruti 1972: 10).
60 At the time, the contemporary neighborhood of Monserrat largely corresponded to Catedral Sur (Cathedral South).
stream flowed into the Rio de la Plata and marked the border of Monserrat and San Telmo, was for many years the legal edge of the municipality. Figure 12 shows the city grid in 1822. In the bottom left quadrant, the stream that marked the limit of San Telmo is observable. The official cutoff between San Telmo and Monserrat remains today the calle Chile.\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{61} The idea of neighborhood more generally in the early 19\textsuperscript{th} century had not yet come into common use. With the city being confined to such a small number of streets, plazas, churches, and local landmarks were far more prominent means of identification.
San Telmo did serve a number of commercial purposes, though rarely residential. The neighborhood’s main street, today the *calle* Defensa, was known as the *Camino del Comercio* (commerce or trade street), which ran from the southern port to the central Plaza Mayor. For merchants and their distributors, this was the main artery for getting goods to the city’s marketplace (the central plaza at the time). The stream at *calle* Chile, the “natural” boundary of San Telmo was a resting spot for these traders and their carriages, the last landmark prior to
arriving at the central plaza. The cultural and social center of the district was the Plaza del Comercio, – today the Plaza Dorrego – a plaza off the Camino del Comercio used to distribute goods going south rather than to the Plaza Mayor (Meglio 2006: 33).  

From the outset of Buenos Aires’ development, prominent elite families built residences just south of the Plaza Mayor. Drawn by proximity to the central plaza, family names of colonial viceroys and military men already dot the housing landscape of the blocks immediately south of the plaza in the 18th century (Meglio 2006:33). And as the city grew rapidly in the first decades of the 19th century, elites continue a southern thrust into the sparsely populated Alto de San Telmo, with its few buildings fading into the suburban mansions even further to the south (Johnson et al. 1980: 341).

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62 This plaza would later become Plaza Dorrego, the heart of San Telmo’s contemporary tourism circuit.
The rapid economic growth of Argentina in the second half of the 19th century meant that much of the earlier architecture of the city was quickly replaced by an eclectic mix of baroque, revival, and neoclassical forms. The branding of San Telmo as “colonial” can be traced to the fact that the neighborhood’s architecture departs from this logic in two key ways: first, it represents one of the few places of affluence in the city built prior to the country’s rapid economic growth of the late 19th century. On the other hand, a destructive 1871 yellow fever epidemic sent elites fleeing to the north, abandoning the neighborhood and its impressive houses, while leaving them intact and not redeveloped.

This movement away from San Telmo shaped its peculiar development. With little incentive or capital for redevelopment of the neighborhood during the city’s boom years starting...
in the 1880s, San Telmo remained an odd amalgam of post-independence, yet relatively early elite constructions. Given these early and expensive constructions, however, it is also one of the few spaces built prior to the late 19th century boom with bold architectural forms. The colonial architecture of the city usually consisted of one-story unadorned homes, easily torn down and redeveloped during the city’s boom years, whereas San Telmo’s architecture is mostly 2-3 stories, built subsequent to independence.

*Figure 14: A typical street in San Telmo today. Note the presence of mostly 2-3 story constructions, certainly built in the mid-19th century or later.*
Battered by a hugely destructive yellow fever epidemic in 1871, in which a tenth of the city’s population died, elites began a long residential and social abandonment of the area south of the Plaza de Mayo (Scobie 1974: Chapter 3). Residential prestige radiated northward, first toward the elegant Plaza San Martin, continuing to the neighborhood of Recoleta and the Barrio Norte. Southern development was arrested permanently, becoming an engrained feature of the city’s social segregation (Silvestri and Gorelik 1991: 126).

But the center-south of the city, including San Telmo, was not exactly abandoned. With the city’s major institutions still cleaving to the areas surrounding the Plaza de Mayo, the local elite reshaped the city’s residential locational patterns without fundamentally altering the importance of the center and the proximity of areas such as San Telmo to institutional sites of political and social power. Elite residential movement from San Telmo was a propitious turn of events for some of the city’s less fortunate residents. A trickle of European immigration arrived in the 1870s, turning into a flood by the 1880s. As elites were abandoning areas like San Telmo, immigrants and the working class were moving in. Some of the abandoned mansions of the wealthy were divided and turned into tenements and boarding houses (conventillos).

This story represents the dominant narrative of San Telmo’s history, but ignores the fact that the neighborhood was never quite so down-and-out. If indeed many of the wealthiest porteños moved north following the epidemic, it is important to keep in mind just how proximate San Telmo was to an increasingly monumental center. At the time of the yellow fever exodus in 1871, none of the late 19th century plans to give the center its monumental “European”

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63 Korn and De La Torre (1985) refer to this somewhat hyperbolically as the “black legend” (leyenda negra), which casts the early 20th century in Buenos Aires as a time of mass housing shortages and widespread tenement living. Instead, they show that between 1887 and 1919 the percent of the population living in tenements dropped from 25% to 9.8% (Korn and De La Torre 1985: 250).
morphology had broken ground. It was not until 1894 when the initial blocks of the city’s first boulevard – the Avenida de Mayo – in the heart of the central axis, opened. The areas just north of San Telmo, then, were receiving large sums of fixed investment for institutional architecture even after elites had left their residences.

San Telmo contained tenements but also middle-class housing as a result of cultural as well as legal constraints. Building condominium style apartments divided into multiple ownership was not legal until 1948, meaning only those with resources to build or buy a single-family home (or an entire apartment complex) could own. The middle classes were not always so fortunate. As San Telmo was depopulated by the wealthiest, the city itself grew rapidly. Between 1869 and 1895, the population rose from 187,000 to 663,000 (Municipality of Buenos Aires 1897). Major boulevards were constructed, while British capital was pouring into the city, reconstituted in grand urban shopping malls (Rocchi 1998; Alexander 2011) and elite social clubs (Losada 2006; Haymes 2007).

What, then, were the options for an emerging middle and upper-middle class?\(^{64}\) Argentina’s torrid economic growth had created a new stratum of immigrant entrepreneur – tied to commerce and local industry\(^ {65}\) – which by the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century was expanding rapidly. Palatial mansions and single-family homes were not an option for these groups. Consequently, by the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century the \textit{edificio de renta} (rental building) became an attractive possibility. While working class immigrants turned the former homes of the wealthy in San Telmo into

\(^{64}\) Indeed, the west of the city grew in population from 106,000 in 1904 to 456,000 in 1914, in part, due to the opening of an urban train service (\textit{Ferrocarril del oeste}) (Braun and Cacciatore 1996: 44). This expansion was generated in part by the building of single family homes by the middle-middle class.

\(^{65}\) In 1895, of some 991 surveyed shops in the city, some 936 of them were owned by foreigners, mostly of Italian descent (Gayol 2000:49).
tenements, other developers took advantage of the neighborhood’s proximity to the city center to build newly stylish rental buildings for the middle classes.

These were generally 6-story buildings, often in the French *academicismo*\(^{66}\) style (Grementieri 1995; Gutiérrez 1983: 406). By the end of the 19\(^{th}\) century, such developments represented an enormous speculative boom for real estate developers catering to this emerging upper middle class (Torres 1993: 8; Cutruneo 2012)\(^{67}\). For those unable to build a *palacio* in the suburbanizing north or unwilling to buy a more modest plot in the less proximate residential west of the city, a rental apartment in the elegant buildings of central Buenos Aires (or a few blocks south in San Telmo) become an attractive choice at the turn of the 20\(^{th}\) century. Dotting the landscape of San Telmo’s mostly two-story pre-1871 structures, the six-story *edificio de renta* demonstrates the multi-class nature of early 20\(^{th}\) century San Telmo.

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\(^{66}\) There was nothing particularly concrete about this so-called school of architecture. It is in essence a reference to the dominance of the *Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts* in late 19\(^{th}\)/early 20\(^{th}\) century Argentine architecture. According to Grementieri (1995: 160), this was a particularly sought after style by residents of the new *edificios de renta* (or *immeuble de rapport* as they were intended to imitate).

\(^{67}\) There is little scholarship on *edificios de renta* in Buenos Aires. Cutruneo examines this process in the nearby city of Rosario during the early 20\(^{th}\) century, which was characterized by similar legal and cultural processes.
The upscale building in Figure 15 emphasizes that far from a straightforward decline, San Telmo emerged with new residents, many of them far from the lowest rungs of society. The Plaza de Mayo had long been the center of social prestige since the colonial period. Despite elite residential mobility, the northern movement of the wealthy did little to change this. In fact, it reaffirmed this prestige since the upper-classes clung to the institutional city center as an image of their own wealth and power, building the capital’s principal institutions there. San Telmo’s
multi-class identity is a result of the continued primacy of the city center and San Telmo’s privileged location nearby.

**Peronism and the Center**

While systematic rules for presence in the institutional and financial center of the nation’s capital rarely excluded the poor or working class, an informal system of policing kept these spaces exclusive. This system blended a sense of belonging in privileged spaces of the city – usually through dress and behavior – with the images of cultural power expressed through increasingly monumental “European” architecture, elegant shops, and public moral codes. If indeed gradual proletarianization of neighborhoods like San Telmo took place, the city’s upper classes maintained an indisputable dominance over central spaces and the city as a whole.

The 1887 census shows the price of a square meter in San Telmo compared to all other neighborhoods in the city. Despite the yellow fever panic, San Telmo ranks where its central location would suggest, below the most central districts and pricier than those further afield. The average price per square meter in San Telmo is $35.60, while in Concepción (today nearby Constitución) to the south it is $28.74. In the expanding northern parish of Piedad, it is comparable at $38.20. Speculative development was taking place anywhere land was available.

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68 There was in fact a municipal law on the books at the time requiring a suit jacket in the public spaces of the city center. If the law indeed did not discriminate outright by class, it clearly had quite classed implications.

69 Given that many of the newly emerging middle sectors were themselves immigrants, it is also likely that a level of empathy reigned in the stance of the middle classes of European descent toward their less fortunate co-ethnics.
proximate to transportation infrastructure (Gorelik 1998; Liernur and Silvestri 1993), which meant that wealthy home owners often shared spaces with new immigrants.\(^{70}\)

But San Telmo did become a site of poverty and decay by mid-century. A better lens, however, for periodizing this process is provided through an analysis of Peronism’s urban policy and politics in the city center. Upper-class dominance was shaken in 1945 with the arrival of Perón’s first government. An October, 1945 a march of workers from the poor municipal suburbs on the Plaza de Mayo, demanding the General’s release from prison, shocked the local middle and upper classes. It was not merely the darker visage of these rural migrants – who had been streaming into Buenos Aires since the 1930s but were hitherto invisible in the city center – that dismayed local elites, but their behavior also called into question established ways of being in the center of the country’s wealthiest and most cosmopolitan city. Workers cooling off in the Plaza de Mayo’s fountains were described, in the famous words of one observer, as putting their “paws in the fountain”.

Workers not only appropriated the physical spaces of the city center, but they were affirming their right to use these sites as new spaces of representation, as an emergent image of a legitimate public. Their appropriation of symbols of porteño elegance called into question the place-based meanings that characterized local identity. Rather than providing the upper classes

\(^{70}\) Yujnovsky (1974) examines prices of tenement rooms in San Telmo (second police precinct, as denominated in 1890) as well as the rest of the city. San Telmo is in fact one of the most expensive districts to rent in the city, quite in line with Yujnovsky’s price/location curve, which demonstrates the connection between price of renting and distance from the center. His analysis also examines the price of renting a building in San Telmo in 1909 (now denominated by circunscripciones [electoral district number 12]). Once again, the neighborhood punches its weight in prices, given its central location. It is of the 19 neighborhoods analyzed, the 4\textsuperscript{th} most expensive in which to rent a building. Finally, the 1947 census seems to indicate a similar dynamic. San Telmo has, for example, average rates of illiteracy (5.2%), whereas tenement dominated neighborhoods to the South of San Telmo have rates around 7-8%.
with an uncontested image of wealth and modernity, the city center was transformed into a space of political and cultural representation for a newly visible working-class.

The reordered meaning of the center would profoundly reshape the middle and upper classes’ geographic and cognitive boundaries. After decades of building a city center in the spirit of Haussmann, new elite spaces would have to emerge elsewhere, in spaces in which dominant classes could maintain their control over public moralities. If indeed, the northerly residential migration of elites had been significant already in population terms, their symbolic departure from the center, pushed out by the Peronist administration represented a far greater impact on the social geography of the city and in nearby neighborhoods like San Telmo.

In short, this process meant the symbolic abdication of elites from the institutional spaces of the city center. The upper classes now viewed monumental spaces like the Plaza de Mayo, and the elegant Avenida de Mayo as increasingly degraded spaces, subject to the rowdy protests and nationalist celebrations of the working classes and their populist government (Podalsky 2004: Ch.1). For the first time, a neighborhood like San Telmo was no longer anchored to a culturally dominant center. The new spaces of elite influence moved further north, relinquishing symbolic control of the areas closest to San Telmo, ceded to the government bureaucracies of the populist government. The result was the slow movement of middle-class residents from neighborhoods such as San Telmo and the increasing stigmatization of all of the city’s southern barrios.
Contemporary San Telmo: From Obsolete to Historic

By the mid-20th century San Telmo was a neighborhood in distress. Targeted by the modernist planning culture of local officials – in part stemming from the visit of Le Corbusier to Buenos Aires in the late 1920s71 – San Telmo became the object of state interest. A 1957 design, the Plan Bonet, envisioned demolishing the neighborhood entirely to rebuild it along modernist

71 Given Buenos Aires’ eclectic mix of architecture and colonial grid, Le Corbusier did not view it very favorably. At a speech delivered during a local conference in 1929 he called the city “an error” and “a paradox” (Corbusier 1930).
lines. Though budget constraints eventually scuttled the plan, it destabilized investment and settlement patterns in the area. Suspecting that redevelopment would eventually come, local home and business owners saw little incentive to invest in their properties.

*Figure 17: The modernist Plan Bonet for San Telmo. Source: Molina y Vedia (1999: 209)*

The neighborhood’s social composition had changed, too. Indeed by the 1940s and 50s second and third generation residents of European descent began to leave the neighborhood, replaced by migrants from the countryside, and later, immigrants from neighboring countries. The neighborhood and larger southern area of the city experienced a sharp decline in population.

It was at this time, not in the post-1871 period, that higher-income segments definitively left the area. The 1947, 1960, and 1970 censuses illustrate this sharp decline. Based on electoral districts (*circunscripciones*), the census data is drawn from a slightly larger geographic area than San Telmo, yet its results are indicative of the out-migration from southern neighborhoods.
This precipitous decline in the population of San Telmo, even as the city itself maintained its total population, demonstrates the relationship between Peronism’s ascent in 1945 and out-migration in the south of the city. By the 1970s the process was largely complete and San Telmo was a thoroughly depopulated neighborhood. The ambitious Plan Bonet had never materialized, yet the uncertainty it produced meant that scant new development or investment had taken place.

As he describes it, it was in the 1960s that José María Peña, a young architect working for the city, became interested in San Telmo. Because of its lack of development, the neighborhood contained little 20th century architecture. The local and national states in Argentina remained invested in modernist planning models through the 1960s and 70s. On the other hand, “new urbanism” models were beginning to take hold in other parts of the world (Ellis 2002; Grant 2006). Charmed by the “pre-modern” neighborhood of San Telmo, in 1970 Peña created the San Telmo antiques fair from within his position at the newly created Museum of the City. The idea according to Peña was to increase interest in the neighborhood’s history and architecture by anchoring the antiques trade within the district. Building off the success of the fair, many of the fair vendors purchased or rented spaces for antiques stores on the nearby calle Defensa.

Yet another little-known development in San Telmo primed the neighborhood for Peña’s interventions. Osvaldo Giesso, an architect connected to the city’s avant-garde opened his new

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real estate agency in the neighborhood. The large, old house he purchased on Cochabamba Street served as an office as well as a studio space for artist friends, several of whom helped him in the reconstruction of the house. He then went about finding new properties for these artists/friends who opened San Telmo’s first artist and studio spaces (La Nación 1999a). While the media was paying attention to the antiques fair, a slow process of “bohemianization” of the real estate market was afoot.

Media narratives worked hand-in-hand with real estate to assemble a new imaginary for the city’s historic center. By 1970 the local press had already picked up on the appearance of a new middle class in the neighborhood. As Figure 18 shows, the local press was most concerned with the “new” residents, “new” restaurants, and antiques dealers. Given the very inchoate state of gentrification in cities such as London and New York in 1970, this periodization suggests the degree to which reinvestment in San Telmo followed dynamics very much contingent upon local events.
Figure 18: A 1970 article about San Telmo: “Return to the South” documents new boutiques, restaurants, and their bohemian owners.
The date of the article in Figure 18 suggests another important aspect of San Telmo’s transformation. While locals and historians alike point to the arrival of the antiques fair in the 1970s as the key turning point, by 1970 when the fair began there was already an existing avant-garde presence. The article makes mention of newcomers – artists, antiques store owners, and restaurateurs. This suggests that Giesso, less well known and lower profile than the emblematic José María Peña, had a significant impact on the neighborhood by opening his art space in the district in 1968 and selling real estate to artistic friends. 72

Artists tend to promote their work, which garners media attention and opens spaces up to less artistically driven newcomers. Despite Peña’s seemingly genuine appreciation for some of the neighborhood’s oldest residents (e.g. the middle class of European descent that had not departed from the district), the antiques fair brought an infusion of middle-class newcomers. Not only did it draw hobbyists and professionals to the neighborhood, among those most likely to serve as a first wave of new residents, but it also drew wealthier visitors from other areas of the city seeking antiques. This was, of course, Peña’s intention: “The reason for the fair...was that people were going to be rediscovering in some cases the old neighborhood. Or in the majority of cases, they would see it for the first time” (Peña n/d). 73

Peña and media outlets paid little attention to the “old residents”; the rural migrants who had populated San Telmo since mid-century. Instead, new visitors and residents had a blank slate on which to inscribe their visions for the district. Buoyed by the novelty of new uses taking place in a forgotten neighborhood, Peña’s intervention generated this shift. Both in the self-

72 Even the idea of the neighborhood as a space bereft of human and investment capital prior to the 1960s may be exaggerated. For example, the fine artists Raquel Forner and her husband Alfredo Bigatti commissioned their home and studio in San Telmo – right in the Plaza Dorrego – in the 1930s; a modernist building, designed by a friend and local disciple of Le Corbusier.
73 Text retrieved from: http://www.feriadesantelmo.com/historia.htm
representations of the new users but also in media images, San Telmo’s character was redefined as a bohemian space and the cradle of the city’s historic center. Instead of a historic neighborhood converted into a backdrop for new businesses, new business became the backdrop for the discovery of a historic district.

For antiques and other business owners, as the media represented San Telmo as the cradle of the city, they were increasingly the symbolic owners of a past that only now was becoming interesting to the rest of the city. The key to their authenticity in the neighborhood was highlighting a European immigrant past, which was reflected in cultural practices like tango and connected well with the selling of upscale antiques. Both literally and figuratively Peña became a neighborhood archeologist, rediscovering jewels among the ruins and rescuing the neighborhood’s heady past from an ignominious present. Though Peña took care to respect the neighborhood’s historic legacy, poor resident’s lack of cultural power meant that their poverty and presence would not form the basis for the neighborhood’s new image. Long established middle class residents – those who had not left around mid-century – became the basis for an “authentic” neighborhood, now enlivened by bohemians who valued this past. The metsizo urban poor living in the neighborhood’s squatted mansions were essentially ignored in the rebranding of the district as a historic space.

In order for the neighborhood to function as a space of foundational representation for the porteño middle class, as well as tourists interested in the neighborhood’s history of tango and immigrant lore, certain periods of the past would have to be minimized. As Osvaldo Giesso, put it on his website:
I discovered San Telmo in 1967. The neighborhood was disinvested. The house on Cochabamba 360 (where the real estate agency has always been) had the sale sign out for four years. There still survived in that time immigrant tenements.\textsuperscript{74} Giesso’s mention of immigrant tenements is important in understanding the narrative constructed by newcomers. In fact, immigrant tenements exist to this day and certainly existed in the 1960s as well. In the 1960s, as in the contemporary period, however, they are more likely to be immigrants from Bolivia or Paraguay than from Italy and Spain, the dominant representation of the “old” neighborhood to which Giesso’s comment appeals. Giesso’s mention of immigrant tenements referred to European immigrants, of which in the 1960s there indeed were very few.

Yet in producing San Telmo as a space of European immigration, tango, and antiques, newcomers did two things. First, they produced as much as they discovered the important periods of a “historic district”, and thereby justified the privileged role of their antiques businesses in highlighting this local history. Conveniently left out of this history was the period between European immigration ending around 1930, and the arrival of the antiques dealers in the 1970s.

As the title of the photo in Figure 19 reads: “María Elena Cernich, typical representative of the antiques fair in Plaza Dorrego, dressed in our grandmothers’ style, delights passersby with the notes of her accordion.” This caption shows the newly formed discursive relationship with the 1970s newcomers and the now “historic space”. As a bulletin for the Association of Antiques Dealers in the neighborhood put it in the context of fighting a city plan for pedestrianization:

Together over 38 years we have forged the most important art and antiques shopping area in Latin America. We are in the most different neighborhood of the city. The national and international visitors come to look for identity, history, and architectural and cultural patrimony [here]: above all, contact with the people that live here.\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{74} Retrieved from: http://www.giessoprop.com.ar/nuestros-servicios/
This quotation shows the degree to which antiques dealers and other early newcomers came to see themselves as the defenders and symbolic owners of the “old” neighborhood. The “people that live here” appears to refer to the antiques dealers and other early newcomers themselves.

Figure 19: A local newspaper clipping from the 1970s, demonstrating the connection between symbolic ownership and class.

Peña too indulged in this discourse. While respecting and even venerating old-time neighbors, his definition of them referred to the downtrodden lower middle classes who had not made it out of the neighborhood during the mid-century exodus, rather than the urban poor. They were those residents neglected by a state with little interest in an “old” neighborhood. When Peña found himself rediscovering the neighborhood while meandering through old streets, these are the residents who skeptically viewed him as a potential property tax assessor but who
eventually invited him over for lunch (Rosselli 2011). To be sure, these were not racialized tenement dwellers unlikely to be paying property taxes in informal housing situations.

The attempt to brand San Telmo as the cradle of middle-class Buenos Aires dovetailed with commercial efforts to reap the benefits of this authentic history. Antiques stores, tango halls and even hotels could boast of being located in the undisputed home of the tango, and the sultry immigrant past that forms the basis of Buenos Aires’ international tourism reputation. Place-based branding became a value-added backdrop for easily identifiable porteño culture. In the context of the historic San Telmo, street tango, high-end antiques and a bit of poverty appeared consistent with the international reputation of Buenos Aires as a chaotic but sophisticated, “European”-like destination.

Despite their small numbers, the dominant representation of the neighborhood became its quirky antique stores, feriantes (stand operators at the fair) and Sunday market, often comprised in part of these same antiques dealers. Yet this was starting to change by the 2000s. Peña clearly shared the common-sense wisdom about the (European) immigrant origins of the “new” neighborhood, yet he opposed the commercial logic that was the result of this common sense. He was, in the words of sociologist Japonica Brown-Saracino (2010), a social preservationist, attempting to preserve a personal version of some “authentic” past. As Peña himself put in 2008:

I think that the design stores are very bad for the neighborhood because they were not born with the neighborhood. The antiques stores weren’t either, but they fit in naturally (se dieron naturalmente). They started with the fair, and the fair marked the city, it gave it personality. Nobody is able to believe that it is only 40 years old. Argentine selfishness and the zeal for profit caused businesses on Defensa to ask for delirious [rent] amounts. So the antiquarians cannot keep the business. That ends up killing and distorting the neighborhood (El Sol de San Telmo 2008, emphasis added)

Despite Peña’s conflation of his own goals for the neighborhood with the neighborhood’s true essence, his motivation was indeed preservation of historic structures, not profit. Insofar as
preservation required the resources and presence of the local middle-class, Peña encouraged neighborhood change. But he also encouraged and developed a particular disposition among his recruits.

In their early efforts to preserve the neighborhood, antiques dealers and *feriantes* met a hostile or, at best indifferent, municipality. Their structural position aligned them most closely with “old-time” property owners in the district who were also disadvantaged by the state’s lack of investment and attention in the neighborhood. The local identity of newcomers and the old-time middle-class owners converged in part due to perceived outside indifference. From the point of view of Peña and these new business owners, their work was very much in opposition to an indifferent state, unwilling to fully codify into law the neighborhood’s architectural heritage over the possibility of redevelopment. The early narratives of these residents resonate with well-known themes in the gentrification literature, in which initial rounds of gentrifiers see themselves as “pioneers” (Smith 1996), threatened by dangerous natives and an indifferent state. On the other hand, these discourses highlight the range of attitudes toward neighborhood change typical of so-called social preservationists (Brown-Saracino 2010), disappointed to see the neighborhood “discovered” by new rounds of users with less nostalgic attitudes.

As Marion, an art collector and former owner of an art space in San Telmo beginning in the late 1970s recalled, Peña could be fundamentalist in his approach to preservation. He would insist that new owners respect original designs and blueprints of old buildings. Aesthetic matters such as window space and size were important issues for Peña who routinely chided new owners for any changes made to the neighborhood’s built structures.

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76 If anything, this lack of attention must have been welcome for those sectors living in informal tenements in an area quite proximate to major labor markets.
Yes, Giesso was the “private” side and Peña was the state. I had some very big fights with him… We were changing the windows and he came by telling us that we were using the wrong materials. I said to him, ‘listen this is an investment. If you keep bothering me, we won’t do it at all. Nobody wanted to invest because you couldn’t modify anything [because of Peña]!"

Yet Marion recalls fondly that San Telmo was unique because it was a place to get away from the “[art] culture of Barrio Norte”, the wealthy side of town where she herself lives. Though new owners may have found Peña’s attitude frustrating, it also instilled in them a sense of ethical duty and responsibility in the neighborhood. Put concretely, the first newcomers came to establish a certain set of dispositions, a “Peña habitus” characteristic of artists and antiques dealers in the neighborhood who, while benefitting from rising prices and exposure, saw their role partly in moral and not strictly profit-driven terms. Insofar as profits mattered, they mostly came from a distinctly local form of economic development: San Telmo was a niche market for a limited number of tourists and residents from other parts of the city. Marion recalls how they used to repaint the façade time and again to keep graffiti off, suggesting that this was a quirky aspect of being a part of the neighborhood, rather than a major obstacle to doing business. These 1970s newcomers, then, formed a unique and insular culture that blended profit with a genuine regard for the neighborhood, a suspicion of the local government, and a self-conscious conception of themselves as quirky neighborhood insiders (see figure 20).
Yet subsequent rounds of investment, unconnected to local commerce, were soon to follow. According to an interview at Giesso Real Estate, after the fair’s creation in 1970, followed by the first preservation laws of the late 70s, a burgeoning real estate market existed. By the early 1980s it had gone well beyond the artistic friends of Osvaldo Giesso.

**From Local to Global**

The 2001/2002 economic crisis and the resultant devaluation of the Argentine *peso* is crucial to understanding the transformation of San Telmo from a niche area of reinvestment and tourism to a site of mass-tourism. The 1980s and 90s were an important period of transition for historic preservation in Buenos Aires as the activity was institutionalized locally in limited ways, whereas it had previously been ignored. In the mid-1990s, under the leadership of the Secretary of Culture, Silvia Fajre, San Telmo received its first round of state preservation planning. This
intervention had a number of determinants. While the 1990s saw the rise of suburbanization by wealthy residents moving to gated communities, it paradoxically witnessed a new centralizing thrust in which the downtown center received fresh rounds of investment and redevelopment tied to the globalizing aspects of the country’s pro-market restructuring (Sassen 2001; Ciccolella 1999; Torres 2001b; Crot 2006; Cicollela and Mignaqui 2001). Of crucial importance was the redevelopment of the city’s former port.

The 1990s also represented a cultural shift. Enormous state industries were privatized, while high-end producer services such as finance grew. This shift in local industry had an impact on local culture, particularly downtown office culture. Caught up in a wave of euphoria over Argentina’s purported emergence into the “First World”, downtown nightlife, riverside clubs, and newly popular “after hours” (happy hour), became staples of a new urban cultural scene, which mixed novel forms of consumption and entertainment with the privileges emerging from an increasingly unequal social structure and its new sites of conspicuous consumption (Centner 2010; Tevik 2006).

Along San Telmo’s calle Chile, the local state set about creating the conditions to attract additional consumption venues. Paved streets were returned to cobble stone, while “historic” lighting and street-level benches were installed. The street, along with nearby Balcarce, represented the area closest both to the newly redeveloped port as well as the Plaza de Mayo, with the city’s banking district just beyond. Early on, this intervention appeared to achieve its aims: bars, cafes, and restaurants opened along these streets, catering mostly to office workers and tourists.

The new historic preservation (APH) laws promoted by Silvia Fajre also aided the process of reinvestment. By cutting the neighborhood in two, with the parts closest to the
downtown covered by the new laws, San Telmo’s tourist drag was now sutured to the higher priced institutional and business districts to the north and east. According to the real estate office Giesso, this raised the prices within the new APH (between Calle Perú and Balcarce) by 30% compared to the areas of the district outside of the APH.

The 1980s and 1990s for many antiques storeowners represented a golden age. The very reasons that many regarded the 1990s as a period of social breakdown and national subjugation, represented a boon to local business: Argentina’s social structure in the 1990s deeply benefited the upper classes (Minujin and Kessler 1995; Bustelo and Minujin 1997), making expensive antiques potentially more sought after by local buyers and wealthy international tourists visiting a pricey city. Tourists and locals that came to the neighborhood were deep pocketed according to many store owners. Though tourism at its peak in the 1990s was roughly half that of 2013, Buenos Aires did attract a more affluent market given its inflated dollar-linked prices. As one informant, an old-time member of the fair put it bluntly: “In the 1990s you had the ambassador from the United States coming here to look at antiques, that would never happen today”.

Gesturing to the throngs of tourists during the Sunday fair, in which street artists, local artisans, and junk sellers had taken over the Calle Defensa, this informant closed with a definitive, “Just look at this place”.

Miguel, the son of a local artist known for painting idyllic scenes of the country’s provincial and indigenous north, manages his father’s gallery that has been in the neighborhood for over 20 years. He puts it as follows:

We bought 20 years ago in a period when you didn’t have to fight for properties. Now there are more people who come just to walk around. Before people came to buy more. [To make ends meet] Some artists or store owners start selling smaller things, design objects or whatever so that they can defend themselves with something [from the higher rent prices]. Some galleries instead of trying to sell
their own work, buy some smaller things from artists to be able to sell something [to the new tourists].

The 2002 devaluation abruptly shifted the upper-class nature of the local tourist trade.

Buenos Aires had gone from one of the most expensive cities on the planet, to one of the cheapest. Throngs of international tourists clamored for cultural and touristic experiences in what had come to be known as Buenos Aires’ “colonial” district. The Sunday antiques fair, which had slowly been attracting more international tourism from its inception, began to attract larger crowds. And with it, the many newly impoverished began to carve out their means of survival there as part of an unsanctioned alternative fair. Miguel explained it like this in 2012:

Of some 30 [antique stores] there had been 10 years ago… there are now 5 or 6. Before the tourist boom the neighborhood had been antiques and [there was] this idea of artists a little down on their luck [un poco abajo], bohemian… The movement of the neighborhood changed, now it’s a tourist circuit. For me it’s not even touristy, by that I mean that nobody is bringing anything of quality to the tourist, if you come here on a Sunday, there’s nothing dignified to bring back [home for tourists]…

Referencing the period before or just after the crisis as a golden age has become a standard reference for antiques dealers and other old-timers. This is apparent when I meet José in his antiques store with a liquidation sale outside. José has been in the neighborhood for over 20 years but he is getting ready to leave. He complains bitterly that owners today want 4000 USD or more for rent, though he is lucky and owns. Yet he is leaving anyway, he says. He will retire because the business isn’t what it used to be. Today he says none of the tourists have money.

Before it was different. Before the tourists were of a different level. These tourists today are medio pelo [a local slur for a “new” middle-class crassness]. They come and want to spend a few dollars on some junk. None of them are going to come and spend u$s3000 on a nice piece. Those of us who can stay on the street own here. If not, we can’t afford it. They want 4,000 dollars a month for rent now. We are in a constant war with the vendors. Before it was better. I don’t discriminate
but before it was Europeans and North Americans. Today it is all regional tourists.

Jaime, an architect and co-owner of an antiques store in his 50s echoes the antiques dealers’ low estimation of the “new” neighborhood:

People today don’t want antiques; maybe they’ll buy one thing to go with more modern design, but people don’t buy antiques like they used to. These so-called design stores aren’t design. What is design? I’m an architect, I know design. Buying things from China and selling them to young people [and tourists] for 50 pesos isn’t design. These people would shop at Isadora [a low-end souvenir store].

Yet new stores and mass tourism weren’t bad for everyone. Both the city government and new businesses tied to tourism began to compete with antiques dealers for symbolic control of the neighborhood’s character and uses.

Real Estate, 2001-2012

Compared to US cities, Buenos Aires is a city of owners. In 2000, only 22% of porteños rented the units they lived in. Given the difficulty of procuring credit in the post-crisis period, this level reached 30% in 2010 (Cosacov 2012: 7). By comparison, in the four largest cities in the US (New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Houston), these numbers are 69%, 61.8%, 55.1%, and 54.6% respectively (Mazur and Wilson 2010). \(^7\) Despite the rise in renters in Buenos Aires in the last decade, processes of reinvestment typically include the movement of a sizeable set of mobile renters. These renters find the neighborhood attractive while rents are relatively low, laying the groundwork for new phases of reinvestment.

Gentrification is often regarded as a cultural process because it is a highly visual form of urban change that distinguishes one period from another through a new language of signs and

\(^7\) Viewed online: http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-07.pdf
images. And yet at its core, gentrification is rooted in markets for land and real estate, and is embedded in currency and credit policies, as well as local regimes of property ownership. In the aftermath of crisis, two important aspects of these policies changed abruptly. First, foreign tourists saw the country’s bargain basement prices as a reason for making a potential investment. Many tourists who came to Buenos Aires on vacation were lured by the quality of the local housing stock and its low prices. Local banking conditions similarly impacted the property market. Fearing depositing money into banks after the local devaluation, bricks and mortar became a common investment strategy for the local middle class. Particularly after the crash of 2001-2002, those Argentines with dollars found the real estate market a useful instrument for preserving value (Lapelle et al. 2011; Baer 2008).

*Figure 21: Price of land by square meter for the entire city in US dollars, 2001-2011 Source: Gobierno de la ciudad de Buenos Aires, 2012.*

As Figure 21 shows, the price of land in the immediate aftermath of the 2001-2002 crisis dropped by almost half. Between the low in 2002 and 2011 land prices grew by more than 600%. San Telmo, however, was impacted by a greater degree than the rest of the city. Figure 22 shows

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78 Interview with Giesso Real Estate
2001 prices in the city vs. 2011 prices by neighborhood. While San Telmo land prices between the pre-crisis 2001 and 2011 increased by 350% on average, in other central neighborhoods such as Recoleta, Retiro, and Monserrat, they increased significantly less, demonstrating the importance of tourism in the process of revalorization. A square meter of land in San Telmo in 2001 was worth less than half of wealthy neighborhoods such as Retiro and Recoleta ($690 vs. $1653 and 1479 respectively). By 2011, land in San Telmo was worth $2437, while Retiro remained at $2800, and Recoleta at $2892 (San Telmo land was thus valued at close to 90% of these wealthy districts).


In this sense, reinvestment in San Telmo is both less and more problematic than in cities characteristic of the literature on gentrification. While widespread residential displacement has not taken place in part due to high levels of ownership and the small-scale nature of residential reinvestment—mostly centered on tourism—the neighborhood’s very lowest income residents have been the most negatively affected. Serving the housing needs of some of the city’s poorest, San Telmo was flush with hoteles familiares. These were short-term subdivided rental rooms with shared bathrooms and kitchens. If the local residential market in San Telmo may have been weak compared to other gentrifying contexts, these particular buildings could be quickly
upgraded to hostels for international tourists in periods far shorter than that necessary for residential evictions. It is difficult to know exactly how many of these have closed or even operate given their semi-informal place in the housing market. However, a 2001 program decreed under a “housing emergency” law provided subsidies for families looking to stay in a hotel familiar. Of the 11 participating hoteles in San Telmo, four are now youth hostels (Figure 13). Given the large size and often extreme overcrowding in these spaces, these redevelopment projects certainly resulted in the eviction of hundreds of the neighborhood’s lowest-income residents.
Tourism was also central to the neighborhood’s commercial upgrade. Figure 24 shows the evolution of rents for stores in the neighborhood. Note how San Telmo has essentially pulled away from all other southern neighborhoods and displays prices closer to the wealthiest northern neighborhoods, with this tendency stronger for commercial rents than it is residentially. These numbers suggest that international tourism and its impact on commercial spaces catering to visitors represented a major aspect of local reinvestment.
Figure 24: Price of commercial rent by neighborhood. San Telmo stands at $60/square meter squared, while its neighbors remain at $32, $33, $27, and $28 respectively. Source: Ministry of Planning, government of the city of Buenos Aires, 2008/2009, http://www.ssplan.buenosaires.gov.ar/index.php/proyectos/simulador-territorial

The arrival of residential newcomers to San Telmo was essentially a series of small markets such as international investors, or local antiques dealers. With the recovery of local real estate by 2008, coupled with the international crisis, foreigners became scarce. Fernando, an agent at Giesso real estate explained the volatility of the international buyer market like this:

When the crisis happened, prices dropped a lot, there were lots of foreigners. That lasted until the international crisis of 2008. From there, the prices were already higher, many sold and made a profit, doubled their money, since they weren’t in a good situation there, they couldn't travel so often to Buenos Aires, so they sold.

Mercedes, owner of a tourist rental agency in the neighborhood, demonstrates another peculiarity of the local market. Mercedes quit her job in 2003 and purchased a large house in the neighborhood for $100,000. As an amateur tango dancer, she rented out rooms to foreigners and provided opportunities for them to view and learn tango. When she gave me a tour of her expansive home in July of 2013, she explained that it is now worth over $1,000,000. Yet Mercedes hardly represents a broad movement of higher income people into the neighborhood.
As with most development in the area, she is more connected to the lucrative tourist trade than to a purely real estate driven process of investment.

Mercedes, however, does not appear to be at the vanguard of a broader movement of the middle classes moving to San Telmo, who generally express fear or disdain for a neighborhood perceived as home to a marginal underclass and tourists. As one professional in her early 30s put it to me: “I don’t understand how these tourists like San Telmo so much. It’s very scary around there at night. I wouldn’t even walk the 5 blocks from the San Juan subway station [to the neighborhood], it’s too dangerous, dark, and full of trash on the streets.” This discourse came to represent an interesting finding: locals expressed far more fear of crime in the neighborhood than foreigners, potentially indicative of the local processes of Othering that characterize relations between the middle classes and the urban poor in the city (e.g. Grimson 2008; Lederman 2013).

Finally, San Telmo also experienced an influx of foreign students. Particularly after the crisis, Buenos Aires became a significant destination for Latin American students seeking university degrees in a free public system. As an area located near a number of these universities, San Telmo was a privileged district for this influx of newcomers. With an abundance of tourist apartments lacking the onerous requirements necessary to rent on the local real estate market, San Telmo was an attractive option. An estimated 17,000 foreign students were studying in Buenos Aires in 2011 (Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Económico Metropolitano 2013).

In all of these cases, however, the mass movement of fairly privileged local populations was less significant than generally described in the Anglo-American literature on gentrification. Since gentrification in its early stages tends to include the movement of individuals with high levels of cultural capital, yet low levels of economic capital, credit and mortgage markets are significant. In the case of Buenos Aires, mortgages – particularly because of Argentina’s
international pariah status in credit markets (Cohen 2012: Chapter 5) – are difficult to obtain. High incomes are required for first time buyers who often must rely upon family and/or kin networks for purchasing outright (see also Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Económico Metropolitano 2012). In the case of one of the area’s few significant new residential developments (bitterly opposed by residents for its size) units were bought almost entirely by local and international investors who rented them to students, foreigners, and professionals from the provinces working in the capital. In contrast with the highly visible process of opening new cafes, restaurants and art galleries, these invisible market forces slow processes of residential reinvestment. This stands in contrast to neighborhood change in many global North contexts, in which a neighborhood with an emerging artistic vibe would first attract lower-income “bohemians” followed by lawyers, bankers, and other upper-middle class professionals (e.g. Zukin 1989; Lloyd 2005)

San Telmo’s residential rental market is highly dispersed in terms of price, making displacement less straightforward. Despite high barriers to entry, some owners have tried their luck in the short-term tourist market. This market requires fairly high-end renovations as well as repertoires of knowledge such as language skills, or a willingness to pay for a tourist rental agency. Lacking a mass-movement of the local middle-class, it appears likely that many owners still see their interests met by traditional middle class and lower-middle class renters. For example, Juan, a juice vendor who sells fresh-squeezed orange juice on the street to mostly tourists, lives in the neighborhood. He complained to me that affordable housing was difficult to find when he moved in a few years ago, yet the fact that he found such housing demonstrates the

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79 Interview with official at Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Económico Metropolitano.
80 Interview with real estate agent for new development.
uneven redevelopment in terms of those who have entered into the tourist market and the broader residential renter segment, which remains in many respects geared toward traditional sectors.

Adrianne, a gallery manager in the district who also lived in the neighborhood in the early 1980s puts it like this:

This is the Southern Zone, it is never going to be like Palermo (a northern neighborhood). It’s always going to have a different spirit. Palermo ‘looks north’…. Even with the chains that have moved in, the neighborhood [San Telmo] conserves that sense of neighborhood that no other neighborhood of the city has. It is still a neighborhood where the old neighbor from the corner waves everyday as she passes by. Before nothing was well put together. It was more a thing of the neighbors, more little places, all the stores were owned by residents of the district. Notoriously at night it was more frightening. I remember when the tenements were right here, now there are boutique hotels where there were. But the neighborhood still conserves that feeling of a neighborhood. It was a middle/lower middle class that lived here and the neighborhood still retains that.

Her description of the commercial atmosphere, however, is quite different. Adrianne claims that 90% of her sales go to international tourists. For this reason she and her partner chose the neighborhood. In San Telmo, she says, it is unavoidable that a tourist will pass through and potentially buy the art in her gallery. Given that San Telmo has been rebranded as the city’s historical and “colonial” neighborhood, it is true that it has become a must-see destination for tourists.

As a tourist district, the commercial gentrification in the post 2001-2002 period has been rapid and far-reaching. But the highly visible nature of commercial restructuring occludes the piece-meal, incomplete, and extensive period of time associated with the larger process. If we compare San Telmo to paradigmatic cases of gentrification such as New York and its early restructuring of Soho (Zukin 1989), an appreciation of this divergence is possible. San Telmo remains in many respects a bifurcated residential market, while many global cases of gentrification that began processes of reinvestment in the 1970s have gone through two or three
rounds of commercial and residential reinvestment, each representing a more thorough process of revalorization than the last (e.g. Lees 2003).

Finally, conflicts between old and new residents over physical turf as well as cultural meaning have often been at the center of debates over gentrification (see Mele 2000; Modan 2007). Prior to the most recent period of mass tourism, San Telmo demonstrated little of this conflict. As an isolated, commercially-focused activity, antiques dealers arrival in the neighborhood represented little threat to local residents, many of whom were homeowners themselves. Thus when understood within the broader context of urban development and change, the post-2001 forms of tourist-based reinvestment in San Telmo show that conflicts over space and belonging have occurred in different ways in San Telmo compared to other cities as a result of – in part – the highly divergent nature of the local market.

**Cosmopolitan versus Neoliberal Culture-led Restructuring**

If indeed the antiques dealers and Sunday fair organizers at the Museum of the City represented a new elite in the neighborhood beginning in the 1970s, the trajectory of San Telmo’s revival cohered to few conditions of the post-industrial urban economy, especially in the neighborhood’s early restructuring. Culturally, these processes may have taken inspiration from developments in other locales: from the European inspiration for the fair, to the importance of emerging global patterns of historic preservation in San Telmo under Silvia Fajre’s leadership. Yet antiques dealers, though similar in socio-demographic composition to gentrifiers across the globe, were hardly part of a broader regime of urban governance. Their outlook and approach to

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81 Indeed, as Torres (1993) points out, the early 1970s were characterized by a process of industrialization, which had different effects on Buenos Aires than generally observed in either global North or South cities.
the neighborhood’s culture and history did reflect higher levels of cultural capital than traditional residents. Yet their aim to preserve the neighborhood was rooted in a locally specific form of cosmopolitanism: an appreciation for local history and its role in framing an antiques trade inherently rooted in valorizing historic context. The standpoint of the antiques dealers was essentially connected to older categories of internationalism – particularly collectorship, which was regularly solidified through tourism.

As privileged sectors of a disinvested neighborhood, they embraced the new touristic and essentially commercialized reshaping of the neighborhood. Yet in general antiques dealers are some of the most vociferously opposed to the process of transformation that has taken place in the district since 2002. According to many antiques dealers, Europeans were the first (and best) tourist sectors of the economy following devaluation. These visitors, however, were increasingly replaced by regional tourists. Unable to appreciate the categories comprising the field of the antique trade, these “new” regional tourists were inclined toward low-cost trinkets and souvenirs.

This folk wisdom is not altogether incorrect. After a spike in tourism from North America and Europe after 2001-2002, the relative proportion of these groups compared to regional tourists began to shift by 2008. Adrianne, the gallerist, puts it as follows:

What marks a before and after wasn't an internal question, [of national devaluation], it was a question of what happened in the United States. I was working at another gallery and two days after the crisis of 2008, all of the transaction that were in course, were cancelled. And it was for two years very, very paralyzed. It wasn't just that after the crisis there were less tourists, but the ones there were, had less money to spend.

The global financial crisis had pinched the pockets of northern hemisphere visitors. On the other hand, economies like Brazil and Chile remained fairly strong, with Brazil in particular experiencing impressive growth of its middle class (Ferreira et al. 2012: 140-141). Yet this sudden influx of tourism eroded the position of the first round of gentrifiers tied to a niche tourist
trade: antiquarians and artists cultivated by Peña and Giesso. Theirs was a noble – if fairly profitable – pursuit: elite yet small scale, even if connected to global standards for collecting. In this niche pursuit, they were also used to maintaining symbolic and material dominance of San Telmo: the unquestioned interest group to be consulted with, deeply tied to the neighborhood’s tireless champion and expert, the architect José María Peña and his particular form of neighborhood morality.

The 2008 crisis barely reduced the number of tourists entering Argentina. It did, however, change the character of tourism and thus reflected shifting sectorial power in the neighborhood.

*Figure 25: Tourism by country to Buenos Aires. Source: INDEC (www.indec.mecon.ar)*

Figure 25 shows the reality of changes in tourism in the city. Regional tourists did come to comprise a far greater share of the total, particularly coming from Brazil. North America and Europe, however, despite a drop following the crisis, remained essentially stagnant in strictly nominal terms. They did not fall precipitously, but this situation did contribute to the neighborhood’s changing local atmosphere and identity. No longer were antiques dealers and artists the dominant sector of the market. They were being replaced commercially by sectors
catering to the democratizing patterns of tourism: cafes, souvenir/“design” stores, and restaurants.

The city’s new leadership in 2008 shared the entrepreneurial and touristic vision of the neighborhood’s new sectors. This was evident in its plan to pedestrianize the main street in the neighborhood, the calle Defensa, and the building of a new Museum of Modern Art said to comprise a new “Culture Pole of the South”, to be buttressed by the conversion of a squatted orphanage into a Spanish cultural center. The antiques dealers were opposed to pedestrianization, sensing that it would help restaurants and cafes, while crowding out their window displays. In a bulletin to its members, the Association of Antiques Dealers of San Telmo wrote:

Improving the Casco Histórico does not mean intervening with works that modify its morphology or its “scenography”. If the government wants to “modernize it”, in fact this is happening for the last five years with the permanent opening of dozens of gastronomic, clothing, and design stores. Some of them belong to very famous brands…. These kinds of stores have the right to realize their profit-making activities, but just as with those permitted [vendors] of the Antiques Fair of Plaza Dorrego as with the antiquarians, artists, and art galleries that have been in the neighborhood since the 70s, it’s not the same for us to be here or in whatever other place.  

The city came up with other new ideas for the neighborhood, including the creation of an urban shopping mall under the highway that cuts San Telmo in half. Dubbed the “Southern Fair”, the plan called for the removal of sports clubs then housed under the highway, to be replaced by art galleries, clothing and luxury goods stores, and restaurants. In exchange for investing, the developer would have been given a 20-year private lease.

Once again, the plan was denounced by the neighborhood’s old-time sectors. An odd convergence demonstrated the unexpected role of the antiques dealers in neighborhood politics. On the one hand, there were middle and lower middle-class residents of the neighborhood

fighting for the sports clubs that provided after school activities for some 2,000 public school children in the area. On the other was the somewhat rarified world of antiques dealers and their commitment to keeping the neighborhood “authentic.” They aligned themselves with old-time residents intent on preserving the identity of the neighborhood against the onslaught of tourism and “culture”.

The new Macri administration’s vision for the neighborhood represented a neoliberal, rather than cosmopolitan ideal. These two isms are useful for thinking about the Ibarra versus Macri administrations and their alignments with the old versus new retail sector in San Telmo. Antiques dealers saw the neighborhood as a cultural space to be appreciated by international publics, but also through international categories of collectorship and historic preservation, priorities that may transcend entrepreneurial city strategies. Though fairly privileged in the local context, the antiques dealers and other old-timers relied on cosmopolitan, small, upscale tourism. While they produced the cultural trappings associated with post-industrial urban change, they did not in fact align with the structural features of this new regime of development: mass tourism, consumption, and entertainment.

Miguel, the son of the local painter, puts it as follows:

Many [old timers] are very mad with San Telmo, because it’s going bad, they can’t pay their rent, they have to go elsewhere. It’s not good for anybody what’s happening here on Sundays. You have 10 stores and 200 vendors on the street… They [tourists] are looking for something that represents the country. They are looking for a work of art that represents the real country. My father lived for 20 years in the north of the country in the pre-Colombian culture. It's the strongest root that one has to the primitive. The [foreign] art buyers sees this and wants to take a piece of [the authentic] Argentina with him.

Here Miguel is claiming to represent the “true” essence of Argentina and San Telmo that is being ruined by the neighborhood’s dominant touristic theme. Ironically, Miguel and his father appear to be unconnected to the indigenous Argentine culture that they commercialize. Yet as
opposed to the crass commercialization associated with the new stores and vendors, their role in the neighborhood is understood to be a high-minded exchange between locals and tourists, providing a cosmopolitan exchange and an authentic product. The street vendors, on the other hand, provide “nothing dignified to bring back [home for tourists]…”

On the other hand, the Macri administration saw tourism differently. In the effort to pedestrianize Defensa, as well as create a museum cluster and urban shopping mall (Feria del Sur), the new administration saw culture as a backdrop to neighborhood investment and touristic development, rather than an end in itself. By situating Buenos Aires within a global competition for tourism and investment, this conception borrowed from neoliberal urban regimes of governance elsewhere.

Table 4: Redevelopment themes in San Telmo

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orientation</th>
<th>Keywords</th>
<th>Ethos</th>
<th>Ministry</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cosmopolitan</td>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td>Cultural exchange</td>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Appreciation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neoliberal</td>
<td>Regeneration</td>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>Urban Devt./Public Space/Econ. Devt.</td>
<td>Consumption, Tourism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Though the categories above are more relational than concrete, they provide important insights into the conflicts over neighborhood restructuring. The earlier gentrifiers were connected to a cosmopolitan vision of the neighborhood, while the new administration saw redevelopment in more entrepreneurial terms.

These conflicts could be perceived again when the government planned to revitalize the neighborhood’s largest green space, the Parque Lezama in 2012/2013. The Parque Lezama was the grounds of a former *quinta*, the suburban estates that dotted the far south of the neighborhood up until the mid-19th century. Turned over to the city in the early 20th century, the park had deteriorated substantially to a space of crumbling monuments, graffiti, and homelessness.
Geographically, the site was strategic. It sat at the convergence of the gentrifying neighborhood of La Boca (also based on tourism), the entrance to the revitalized port (Puerto Madero), and the poorer southern end of San Telmo. It seemed to be one of the last barriers to a revitalized corridor stretching across the center-south of the city closest to the river, a view that was ratified in an interview with a top official in the Ministry of Urban Development who suggested that it would help to create and revitalize the entire river-side passage of the city, from the center to La Boca.

Nobody in the neighborhood denied that the park needed restoration. The aspect of the plan that brought a number of diverse elements of the community together was the controversial gate that would restrict park use to daytime hours in order to avoid vandalism. This part of the plan was especially opposed by progressive activists in the community who saw it as a mechanism for displacement of the poor and homeless. Another controversy erupted over a fountain in the middle of the park’s amphitheater, used for sports and recreation. Under the auspices of an asamblea (committee or convention), progressive activities from various organizations and social movements convened a weekly assembly to denounce the actions of the local state. In April of 2013, a broader day of action was organized, in which the administration was denounced for privatizing public goods. Various streets were blocked at which organizers held public assemblies and denounced the Macri government. One of these pickets took place outside the Parque Lezama. Plans for the park were opposed in starkly political terms. As one member of the cultural group El Hormiguero put it:

We need to try to come together all of use with our diverse backgrounds but knowing that the worst is always the consolidation of the neoliberal model of the Right that conceives of public space as only a real estate market and the totality of the social questions is the possibility of business. We are trying to come together… to defeat this model of exclusion.
Another activist from the MPL (Popular Latin American Movement) demonstrated the linkages social movements saw between the enclosure of the park and broader questions of social rights in the city. She explained:

We come from working on another problem of the city that is the housing emergency. Today public space is just for the rich and all of our rights are being privatized and we are organizing all of this with the neighbors to stop this. We have to be in the street, displaying what we want, the city we want, a city for everyone, a city without enclosures (rejas), against this administration that will put cement up wherever. We understand public space differently, that it is for everyone to enjoy, that anyone can come at any time…We want a different city.

These quotations suggest a powerful opposition in the community to the park’s enclosure. Yet the political and social ties between left-wing activists and local business owners were tenuous, if non-existent. Some local owners and neighbors, nevertheless, opposed the park’s closure, with largely older businesses putting signs up publically supporting the “no enclosure” movement. These businesses tended to be those who lost out in the “neoliberal” model of urban redevelopment. They were the businesses that catered to the local middle class – those that had stayed in the neighborhood, lionized by Peña and the antiques dealers – or those tied to the initial reinvestment, such as antiques dealers themselves. Less support seemed to come from the new stores – the design, restaurants, and cafes with few roots in the district.

This set of preservation dispositions had evolved from Peña and others’ early experiences of state neglect and negligence with regard to planning laws. It was solidified in the public opposition to the 2008 pedestrianization plan in which he joined local residents who had created an organization for opposing the plan. In all of these struggles, the message was clear: the “old” residents and business owners (including antiques dealers) came to see themselves as protecting the neighborhood from outside forces seeking to make it less authentic, more touristic, and for the most politically aware, “neoliberal”. They were protecting their “authentic” vision of the
neighborhood that had been produced by Peña some 40 years earlier. This vision essentially tied
the 1970s “newcomers” to the old middle-class hangovers (those who had not left in mid-
century) and had to battle the state to maintain their neighborhood traditions.

The discourse of these groups was not of a narrow localism. Many of the neighborhood’s
prominent defenders were historians, intellectuals, and middle-class business owners. The most
prominent activists of the anti-pedestrianization movement were an architect and a journalist.
The problem emerged from the fact that the initial vision of an authentic past contained little
possibility for market-led growth, whereas by 2001, authenticity had in fact become a market
discourse.

This paradox was crystallized in the Macri administration’s approach to neighborhood
preservation and investment. On some level, the Macri government seemed at first to go further
than prior governments in efforts to preserve and/or invest in the neighborhood. But goals and
outcomes, if not the discourse, associated with this stance were connected to larger plans for the
city. If indeed many of the first round of gentrifiers (such as artists and antiques dealers, and
business owners) had incorporated the cosmopolitan preservation discourse, they clearly sensed
the broader goals of new interventions that promised to restore or preserve, yet contained a more
entrepreneurial ethos that would include mass tourism and potentially hurt their bottom lines.

In the meantime, with local residents rejecting the plans for redevelopment in San Telmo,
the administration went about expanding the limits of the “center”, bringing in other
neighborhoods to the fold of international tourism and local consumption. As we will see in the
next chapter this project sought to accomplish the administration’s desire to create a globalized
“corridor” from La Boca to the Microcentro.
Chapter 4: Re-centering the South: The Global, “Liveable” City

The residents’ and stakeholders’ rejection of the local state’s efforts to upgrade San Telmo through pedestrianization represented a significant reproach for the Macri government. But the local state had other priorities for restructuring the central-south corridor as a space of post-industrial services and tourism. Soon after taking office in 2007, Enrique Cabrera, Mayor Macri’s Minister of Economic Development took an important trip to Spain. There he met with officials overseeing Barcelona’s 22@ innovation district, and Malaga’s “Málaga Valley” an ersatz version of California’s famed Silicon. The Barcelona model, with its incorporation of technology into the fabric of a major city, clearly won the minister’s favor. As he stated in an interview in 2009:

We took the Barcelona model. It consists of a district called 22@, and it’s very modern in that it is what cities are doing lately. Some years ago the technology poles and parks were in places far from the city. In green spaces. Now it’s about integrating them to urban zones. The employees prefer being in a zone where they work, eat, where they go to the gym, where they go to the movies. Not in an artificial place. The Parque Patricios zone, where we are installing our Technology District is very similar to what 22@ was at the beginning: there were large warehouses (galpones) and it was pretty degraded. 83

The Minister here is clearly referring to a creative class that resonates with the quotation from an interview with Santiago, the top official in Urban Development cited in Chapter 2, in which he suggested that the south of the city would be revitalized by “a kind of person who doesn’t want to come home and eat a steak at home alone. At home, you’re not going to meet new people. They’re looking for experiences and a kind of public space to engage in culture. They are going to revitalize the central-south axis.”

This discourse suggests that the south of the city had to be returned to a space of middle-class lifestyles with the jobs and amenities this required. To achieve this end, the administration began a series of “creative district” projects, beginning with the technology district in the downtrodden neighborhood of Parque Patricios in 2009. Others would soon follow, such as the Arts District (La Boca), Design District (Barracas), and Audiovisual district (La Paternal). With the exception of the latter, these districts were all located within the south of the city, mostly in neighborhoods that offered potential integration with the nearby city center. Each contained significant transportation and touristic infrastructure (a subway extension reached Parque Patricios, La Boca and Barracas each maintained an enclave-like tourist zone) as well as important public spaces (La Boca and Parque Patricios had well-known though degraded public parks).

**Reshaping Conservative Political Discourse**

An institutional video for Buenos Aires’ new creative districts highlights the social inequalities that have long separated the wealthy north of the city from the impoverished south. The city’s Director of Creative Industries says a creative city is a creative, diverse, and socially equitable city in which residents from the south’s many shantytowns must also be included. An omnipresent tagline of the local state now reads: “Buenos Aires: A green city”.

These are not the pronouncements of utopian state managers or progressive urban planners, but the official policy of a center-right administration. Consistently accused by critics of cozy ties with developers and promoting cutbacks to public housing (see Rodríguez et. al. 2011 for an overview), official rhetoric makes such critiques difficult to perceive. But what do
creativity and sustainability have to do with inclusion and diversity, and why have these policies generated such seemingly universal attention from planners and policy-makers in recent years? If post-industrial competitive city policies indeed involve a “deregulatory race to the bottom” (Jessop 1998: 79), would this not suggest that ecological variables and human needs would be increasingly neglected by urban states, rather than assume a privileged role in urban policy agendas?

Local governments, of course, are prone to packaging public policy in language that obscures its most controversial objectives. But these policies are not purely marketing. Across many contemporary planning discourses, what might be considered a new normative policy script is being put into practice. It is hardly uniform or concrete, but on balance it suggests that cities should be participatory, diverse, and sustainable. They should harbor creativity and innovation. And they should have spaces of diversion and collective encounter. This programmatic discourse has appeal beyond any particular urban, regional, or national boundary. It expresses the goal of competitive urban policies (McCann 2011), is the topic of international conferences for city managers (Peck 2005: 767), and the subject of intervention for transnational policy consultants (Prince 2012).

This vision of the “good city” is a real guide to action across a number of institutional settings in Buenos Aires, where practitioners take seriously the importance and impact of these goals. As a repertoire of institutionally imbedded values, they constitute a travelling set of urban best practices adapted to the exigencies of local circumstance (González and Healey 2005: 2060). Everyday planners and city managers are, of course, aware of the high levels of acceptance these discourses have achieved in local policy circles. Yet place-based specificities
mean that they are more likely to be modified as a set of guiding principles and orientations, rather than a strict suite of policies.\textsuperscript{84}

As Greenberg (2013) has recently pointed out, sustainability initiatives often appeal to non-market values such as ecological preservation and community resilience, though state managers may mobilize these narratives in service to market-oriented goals, necessary for producing a unique urban “brand” (Greenberg 2008). Similar to sustainability discourses, creativity and culture as instruments of urban development may result in social displacement while using the language of human expression, cultural citizenship, and diversity (see Miles and Paddison 2005 for an overview). Though cultural projects are typically cast by city officials as efforts at strengthening local pride and interest in tradition and history, they often embed powerful economic growth agendas (Gotham 2005a; Gotham 2005b).

Culture in Argentina has historically been tied to intense political debate. Far from representing a taken-for-granted public good, capable of generating broad accord, it has produced intense jockeying around its political uses and meaning, subject to state intervention and many times emanating from the state itself (Sarlo and Altamirano 2001; Landi 1984). The harsh repression of cultural production under the last military dictatorship (1976-1983) suggested that the conservative government saw the overcoming of particular cultural constellations as necessary to the restructuring of state and society.

\textsuperscript{84} González and Healey (2005: 2060) provide a helpful analysis for conceiving of how urban policy frameworks emerge and become dominant in local institutional settings. “Episodes” are the institutional fields or sites where actors mobilize specific strategies and discourses, diffuse key narratives and metaphors, which in turn produce certain “governing cultures”. These cultures mobilize a constitutive set of embedded values, structures for “policing discourses”, and “accepted modes of governance”. See also Fligstein (2001) for an analysis of institutional learning and priority creation, so called “social skill”.
How did the city government’s new use of sustainability and culture, inclusion and diversity, depart from this history? How did it reshape conservative political discourse, mobilizing market friendly urban policies from other global cities? This chapter explores how these cutting-edge planning discourses draw upon city building models from around the world. In showing that the approach of the current local government intersects with these models, it suggests that an embrace of progressive, non-market values such as inclusion, creativity, diversity and sustainability has become a key strategy for reshaping cities in ways that produce market-led outcomes.

**Creative (and sustainable) districts: Policies and Imaginaries**

In 2008 the local government passed into law the city’s first “creative district” a project in the southern neighborhood of Parque Patricios. Soon after, it could point to the district’s success because the plan brought new business to an area suffering from industrial decline. The legislation offered tax abatements to companies willing to relocate to a neighborhood that had experienced deindustrialization and had always been characterized by a lower-middle and working-class demographic profile. At the same time, the government deployed its police force to the area, while a new subway line connected the neighborhood to the city center and the area’s major green space underwent a significant renewal plan.

Officials from the Ministry of Economic Development, under which creative district policy was conceived, were certainly aware of similar projects around the globe. Barcelona, a particularly relevant urban case study in Buenos Aires and the Spanish-speaking world (e.g Jajamovich 2012), was clearly a model. Indeed Buenos Aires had participated in a number of

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85 For an analysis of housing dynamics in the Parque Patricios neighborhood prior to the state’s intervention, see Scheinsohn and Cabrera 2009: 115–118.
international forums, ranging from “creative city networks” to creative economy conferences all with a heavy Ibero-American dimension. This awareness of Barcelona as a model was translated into the technology district’s law itself, which suggests in a clause that: “Given that the development of a technology district ‘22@’ in the city of Barcelona, Spain has been taken as a model. There, as in the plan that is proposed, a model of urban revalorization was implemented through the confluence of efforts of the public and private sector; converting one of the most relegated neighborhoods into a vanguard district.” (Legislatura Porteña 2008: 264).

In referring to 22@ in the law itself, the administration sought to demonstrate a successful case study. It is important to point out that the selection of this model had more to do with aspirations then with reality. Barcelona represented the kind of city Buenos Aires leaders wished to create: post-industrial, touristic, with value added industries, and upgraded urban spaces. The 22@ district had very little in common with Buenos Aires from a fiscal and juridical perspective. Rather, the Barcelona model owed far more to the state’s reinvestment in an area largely bereft of urban development – residential or commercial. Rather than tax incentives, 22@ relied upon the ability of the state to offer cheap land for “innovation” sectors. This area now enjoyed the benefits and technological infrastructure paid for by the city government. Parque Patricios instead represented a densely populated urban site, where, rather than providing land, the state offered tax abatements.

Barcelona, then, functioned more as a touchstone of a global urbanism that had been successfully implemented in a number of global North contexts, rather than a set of programmatic guidelines. A model here suggests simply that the city government saw it as an exemplar that had adequately captured new investment in a disinvested area. A more relevant term then is imaginary. For creative districts did not merely imply a technical knowledge
mobilized to capture new investment, but rather spoke to the kind of city officials sought to create. These imaginaries were political and ideological in the broadest sense: they did not emerge out of nowhere, rather they had been making their way around the world, with Buenos Aires an important node in a Ibero-Latin American network of urban opinion-makers and policy agents.

**New Urban Paradigms**

How exactly were these cutting-edge policies produced and diffused? While the term imaginary suggests a complex, shifting terrain of visions, paradigms, and normative objectives, it is possible to identify a number of globally circulating discourses that broadly produced the contours of these new urban policy goals. Visions of “the good city” circulating by the 2000s departed somewhat with prior models of city building. In part, however, they owed much to an older urban planning idiom characteristic of the “New Urbanism”, whose major tenets had shifted from a thorn in the side of growth-oriented governments in the 1970s and 80s, to an increasingly dominant set of market-friendly ideas by the 2000s (see Ellis 2002 for an overview). Though hardly so concrete, these newer visions emphasized older approaches such as community participation, but also creativity, and more recently, sustainability. Unlike Jane Jacobs’ ideals of growth, which had represented a constraint on market-led development, they were ever more connected to a number of market-based principles and objectives. In short “neoliberal urbanism” (Hackworth 2007) required a physical, aesthetic, and ideological remake of the city, which would attract higher income residents and their employers by framing cities as clean and open, participatory, creative, and diverse. Cities needed to become “livable” once again to attract middle-class residents. But this livability did not necessarily include all residents.
Instead of focusing on housing or cost of living, livability came to mean a city where pleasure-seeking residents could find ample possibilities for personal and communal development.

Some of the diffusers of this increasingly globalized discourse were well known to cities of the developing world: since 2002, the United Nations had sponsored the World Urban Forum, dedicated to “urban equity in development”. The most recent conference in Medellín in 2014 demonstrates some of the tensions embedded in this global narrative. On the one hand, the question of urban inequality is central. As the theme “Cities for Life” in 2014 suggests:

“Cities for Life” are, from the spatial point of view, urban fabrics that build, enrich and make life and living enjoyable for every inhabitant in the city, with the capacity of creating elevated goals for all humanity… “Cities for Life” are for all, but they focus mainly on those more in need – the poor and marginalized, who are excluded from all opportunities and deprived from the tools needed to transform their lives in the search of individual and collective wellbeing. 86

At the same time, according to this UN document, planning these cities is:

…A way of rethinking the city from the perspective of the specific needs of people, their life cycles and rhythms, their conceptions of ‘good living’, identity and diversity, plurality and unity, imaginations and dreams, beauty and aesthetic… ‘Cities for Life’ brings a fresh notion of governance – inspired by inclusive public policies, a new civic and political culture, democratization of science and knowledge, entrepreneurship and citizen empowerment and holistic management – feeds the new thinking and planning of cities and the notion of urban over time.

This UN narrative gestures toward the need for government intervention in the sphere of inequality. Yet it strongly suggests a set of new contradictions: on the one hand, cities must strive for inclusion. On the other, the market-led tendency to decentralize government functions is apparent. Inequality is about empowering citizens, giving them tools to fix their own problems through increased participation, technological innovation, and community-based planning. These ideals are not necessarily problematic on balance. They do, however, respond to particular

86 http://wuf7.unhabitat.org/wuf7theme
constraints of contemporary urban governance in which local states have struggled to fund and execute traditional programs in education, housing, and urban development.

This particular UN agency was, however, only one of many influential organizations in circulating a new planning idiom among Buenos Aires’ conservative city government. The following section outlines a number of non-government diffusers of this global vision that have reached city managers in Buenos Aires. From Fundación Kreanta (Creativity in Esperanto), a Barcelona-based organizer of conferences on the creative economy, to the Smart City Expo (also of Spanish origin), to ITDP in New York, each of these organizations would have an impact on the imaginings of urban administrators in Buenos Aires. While these are certainly not the only voices in the cacophony of contemporary urban planning and innovation discourses, they do represent important producers of these new narratives of the urban good life.

An organization such as the Smart City Expo brings together many of the disparate threads connecting urban innovation and sustainability narratives with contemporary processes of restructuring, city branding, and inter-urban competition. Directors Lluis Gomez and Pilar Conesa each worked within Barcelona’s formidable state-led innovation effort, Gomez as the Director of “Strategic Sectors” and Conesa as Director of Information and Communication Technology Services for the city. The organization of the conference itself also highlights the connections between city governments, IT sectors, and the innovation-sustainability planning narrative. The Smart City Expo, now undertaken every year since 2011 is organized and managed by the convention center Fira de Barcelona, itself a public-private partnership created by the city of Barcelona as a tool to attract world-class conferences as part of the city’s push to foment post-industrial activities. In 2013, Buenos Aires competed for the World Smart City
Award for its “innovative” and “sustainable” downtown redevelopment project, only to come in second to Rio de Janeiro.

Two aspects of this annual conference are particularly noteworthy. For one, it shows the way in which a city like Barcelona is actively pursuing its role as a model of global urban innovation, given that the conference, organized under the auspices of Fira, is thereby sponsored by the local Barcelona government. It also strongly suggests the important links between the participation and technological innovation discourse prominent among city officials and the IT industry itself. IBM, a sponsor of the Smart City Expo has its own Smart City website and product line, offering technological solutions to cities that emphasize citizen participation and community engagement as a solution to slow and inefficient government programs. Companies engaged in the marketing of technology solutions to government represent prominent aspects of these conferences’ agenda. Note the language used in Figure 26, emphasizing resiliency, community, and competition.
Fundación Kreanta, a Barcelona-based NGO that works with governments to establish new cultural programs and strategies, represents another important organizer of the Ibero-American creative city discourse. The foundation holds a yearly “Creative Cities” conference that has been held exclusively in Ibero-American cities, with Buenos Aires chosen for 2013 and partially funded by the city government. The language of Kreanta is similar to those mentioned above. Its 10 points for creative cities are: civil society, cooperation, culture, city (“as a container for diverse social relations”), interdisciplinary, internationalization, innovation, cyber-culture, knowledge and values. In both Medellín (2012) and Buenos Aires (2013) the conferences were Ibero-American dominated, with 82% of speakers coming from Spain or Latin America in 2012 and all but one of 32 coming from Spain or Latin America in 2013 in Buenos Aires. Barcelona is thus both a model and nexus for professionals in cultural management and urban redevelopment.
Given the foundation’s roots in Barcelona and the experience of culture managers in that city, this is no surprise.\(^\text{87}\)

It is noteworthy that the first two Argentine speakers at Kreanta conferences were Enrique Avogadro (Director of Creative Industries) and Marina Klemensiewicz (Secretary of Housing and [social] Inclusion), who each spoke in Medellín in 2012. This pairing may seem to represent a surprising combination for a creative city conference, and yet the role of inclusionary policies and their connection with creative city discourses represents an important aspect of the global paradigms mentioned above. For one, the efficient control of social programs for the needy represent a major part of technology companies’ offerings for “smart cities”. More importantly, as spaces of leisure, diversity, and social encounter, poverty and exclusion represent stains on the image-making strategies of city leaders. For public spaces to be successful as sites of leisure and entertainment, they may harbor diversity – e.g. social mix – but not stark forms of class-stratification, which make them undesirable to middle-class residents and visitors. Moreover, while symbolic ownership of public spaces in the form of high-end consumption may detract from these spaces’ diversity, overt forms of social control and exclusion such as gates, fences, or privatized space go against the positioning of cities as open, diverse, and sites of encounter and collective diversion. It should come as little surprise that a city government often criticized by the opposition for its lack of effort in providing housing and services to the poor, has committed itself to this vision of an inclusive, diverse city.

This attitude was apparent during a surprising interview with Santiago, the top official in the Ministry of Urban Development with a degree from a major US business school. Unexpectedly for a government that has generated a protest movement based on the idea of

\(^\text{87}\) As LaCarrieu (2008) points out the increased importance of “cultural management” in the 1990s. This period coincided with the rise of Barcelona as a model of global culture-led redevelopment, thus pointing to the broader connection between culture, urban development, and this Ibero-American connection.
“protecting that which is public” from privatization (see Chapter 3), Santiago criticized the elite riverfront development of Puerto Madero undertaken in the 1990s. This space (Figure 27), known for its hermetic isolation from the rest of the city, its heavily policed streets, and upper-class homogeneity is often a target of derision for progressive and Left wing politicians. But here the official from the conservative government of Buenos Aires, suggested that this was “not a successful space.” It was cut off from the city and did not catalyze social encounter, he said. This definition of success would be odd to many upper and middle-class residents of Buenos Aires, who routinely cite it as the safest neighborhood in the city and a desirable (if perhaps unaffordable) place to live (Centner 2009). Yet from this official’s perspective, it becomes easy to understand why new conceptions of normative city models promoted by the local state seemed to blend disparate and seemingly unconnected themes of redevelopment. Diversity, creativity, innovation, and sustainability came together as market-friendly ideas in a city attempting to produce a stronger brand based on post-industrial activities.

These activities were buoyed by strong dynamics of social mix, lending elements of diversion and play to everyday social encounter within the city’s public sphere. In essence, this discourse centered upon remaking the city from a place of production to one connected to activities such as consumption and leisure. As Santiago put it:

The crisis exacerbated inequality. There were more shantytowns and more countries [gated communities]. It’s very important to the city to decrease the north-south divide. We have to bring the south up to the level of the north [he gestures with his hand, showing a discrepancy]. It would be very negative to bring the north down to the south. But Puerto Madero is too isolated and cut off, it doesn’t encourage social inclusion.
Figure 27: The “unsuccessful” model of Puerto Madero, redeveloped in the 1990s.

Of note is the similarity of government narratives with that of multilateral institutions such as the UN. The levels and extent of new investment, while important, competed with other less concrete indicators such as new urban lifestyles represented by creativity, entertainment, and innovation. The creative districts thereby sought to create new symbolic languages and categories of normative ways of being in the city. These categories such as expression and diversity contributed to a broader framing of the city as a space of entertainment. Ironically, while the local state pursued ideas such as “participation” in its framing of city government as “smart”, open, and modern, and city space as creative and participatory, it did its best to put an end to an experiment in “real” participatory governance (see Center 2009), which risked undermining the top-down authority it needed to transform the city.

Paradigms and Directionality
Given that models of urban policy and redevelopment were utilized selectively (and strategically), city officials were careful about which models were given attention and how these models were promoted. The Minister of Economic Development clearly aimed at replicated successful models of “creative” development innovated by some of the world’s most high-profile cities. In an op-ed in 2012 he wrote:

The base of success of a city is its unique and distinct positioning. Cities in the last decade have stopped differentiating themselves in infrastructure to do so through values […] A city brand is able to materialize intangibles—creativity, human capital—it captures values, local enchantment, and concentrates its competitive advantages under an overarching concept that permits it to compete with other cities… (Cabrera 2012).

Yet during an interview with a senior official working under the Minister in the city’s Direction of Creative Industries, Richard Florida’s application to Buenos Aires was specifically minimized. According to this official, the Creative Class was most suited to the US:

The [creative class] is more for the US because people move more. It doesn’t necessarily apply to developing countries. 35% of the population is poor, we need to rethink those concepts in order to promote inclusion. We can’t have a creative city unless we work to have that 35% included.

Despite this disavowal – based on the relatively low levels of geographic mobility in Argentina compared to the US – the official’s broader orientations to urban culture, government policy, and creative potential of the city hewed closely to Florida’s major concepts regarding the transformative potential of creative industries.

Likewise during an interview with Marta, an official working on creative district policy (within the Ministry of Economic Development), she suggested that her team was aware of global models of clustering in cities like Barcelona, New York, and London but jettisoned them in favor of a more local approach focused on tax incentives versus, for example, Business Improvement Districts such as that of New York’s DUMBO. She mentioned that:
When implementing the arts district we looked at models around the world, for example in London or New York’s DUMBO, but we settled on something that was distinct to Buenos Aires [and fit with] the needs of our city. In a place like London maybe you build one [arts] institution and the district gets reinvested by itself. Here we need much more government incentives to deal with issues like security…

In both their use and disavowal of “global” models, city officials expressed the way in which these policies and discourses are never neutral, but rather represent political and ideological expressions of the kind of city to which they aspired. The embedded politics of selecting these models meant that municipal officials strove to frame urban redevelopment in the most favorable light. Given Argentina’s long history of trying to enter the “First World” – as well as the latest failure represented by the 2001-2002 economic crisis – officials seemed careful not to express support for city models from the highest-flying urban locales, despite the fact that many of their policies reflected such paradigms.

Nowhere was this more pronounced than in the building of Bus Rapid Transit (BRT), a technology pioneered in Colombia and Brazil and selected by many developing countries as a low-cost alternative to subway production. In a public debate in 2007, then candidate Macri famously declared, “What are we stupid that we can’t build 10 kilometers of subway per year?” Two years later, after multiple failed attempts at procuring outside funding for subway construction, the Macri administration was eager to show progress in urban transport. Copying the Colombian BRT model represented an appealing possibility. Not only could BRT be framed as cost-effective, but it gained more local legitimacy as a solution that had been innovated in a complex regional context. Was this, then, a case of South-South urbanism, representing a more complex circulation of policy than the traditional focus on North-South “transfer”? If so, does this suggest, as many postcolonial scholars have pointed out, that urban researchers have been
too focused on how policies travel from the most paradigmatic cities, ignoring how policy is always inflected with multiple, geographically variegated, and multidirectional sources?

Indeed the Bogotá model did reflect a local innovation that is now transforming cities around the world. But in the case of Buenos Aires, it is important to ask how such a model came into the purview of the local state. How did it gain visibility, purchase, and financial support within the governing apparatus? In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to consider the travels of BRT. The most important diffuser of this model is the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP), a global NGO that has been at the forefront of promoting sustainable transit solutions in the global South. While the Bogotá model originated as a purely local innovation, it captured the attention of powerful institutions such as ITDP and later, multilateral institutions such as the World Bank. As Joseph, a director at ITDP, put it in an interview:

ITDP was not involved in the Bogotá model… But we joined forces with [the mayor] and decided this [transport] model could work in more of the developing world. Policy transfer between regions is one of the things we do quite strongly… So what we did was help identify and bring in consultants who could help with the street design. We know all the consultants in the world who are doing the best work. So city governments contact us and we try to drum up interest in applying.

This quotation suggests that even policies that may originate in global South cities such as Bogotá often reflect existing geopolitical power relations. Not only did ITDP actively work to advocate for this policy in Buenos Aires, but it could also count on the legitimation of this policy by powerful institutions such as the World Bank, which has collaborated on a number of transportation policies in Buenos Aires. Its origin in Bogotá is important but it was not merely the technical aspects of Bogotá’s model that captured the imagination of local officials. These officials’ ideas about Bogotá as a successfully redeveloped “sustainable” city meant that political and ideological considerations counted as much as the technical and physical interventions of
BRT. In fact, Buenos Aires’ BRT hardly deserves the name: it’s only innovation is exclusive lanes for busses, whereas in Bogotá the Transmilenio BRT included subway-like stations in which passengers paid before boarding. Yet by appealing to the kind of city being built in Bogotá and the recognition that came with this, the city government helped create the idea of a successful, innovative, and sustainable, post-industrial city. In 2014 ITDP awarded Buenos Aires its annual Sustainable Transportation award, despite the organizations’ own work producing these changes.

**Building Creative Districts: Parque Patricios**

The selective use of globally successful models, however, did not dispel the conflicts that these plan produced. Buenos Aires’ highly developed and conflictual political culture meant that plans typically marketed by politicians as win-win, consensual undertakings were interrogated for their divergent outcomes. A December 2008 session of the local legislature provoked intense debate over the use of tax abatements in the technology district. Legislators from the opposition pointed out that this represented a significant redistribution of funds from the state to the private sector. And while the local government framed the district as a boon to small and medium sized firms (PYMES), much of these subsidies went to large companies such as international call centers, a key segment of the “high tech” firms in the district. Before voting, legislators denounced the governing party for the lack of a holistic approach with regard to industrial, commercial, and technological policy. In other words, the city government had not created a technology policy per se, but had rather offered up significant tax benefits to any business that could reasonably claim to work in technology. The opposition claimed that this came at the expense of a broader productive plan for the city’s technology sector. What infrastructure would
the firms be required to invest in? What sort of investment in research and development would they have to make? To what commitment to labor standards would they agree?

An opposition legislator, Martín Hourest, put it as follows during the session:

Normally, if one has this level of [fiscal] benefit, each project would be put out to bid [licitar] for access to the [technology] park. In this context, there is no bidding mechanism or evaluation around the companies that want to occupy such a level of benefit that ends up being paid for by the women and men of this city. It [the project] doesn’t inhibit the processes of third-party outsourcing [tercerización], typical of the technology industry. That is [the project doesn’t generate] the construction of a number of PYMES with a central economic, technological and financial command… In consequence they [the city government] tell us: “It doesn’t matter what they do, it doesn’t matter with whom they do it, but just that they come (Legislatura Porteña 2008: 312).

The legislator speaking here is questioning the technical, labor, and sectorial scope of the project. Like much having to do with city promotion of technology, creativity or innovation, the project was weak on technical and economic detail but strong in its vision of urban lifestyles.

Hourest is correct when he says that the city is lax with regard to who is accessing these fiscal benefits and provides few details of how the Ministry of Economic Development will organize the incubation of the technology sector. But he is incorrect to suggest that this is a major failure of the project. Indeed, the project can be conceived of as a success if its goal is understood as bringing business and middle-class professionals to the district. In this sense, these projects cohered to the broader urban imaginary being circulated within the local state apparatus. Whether or not the district genuinely produced innovation is questionable, and indeed many of the businesses in the technology district became call centers (business process outsourcing in the jargon of the industry and local government), hardly known as an innovation sector. And yet, the project as an urban undertaking was quite innovative, producing new commercial and residential development, new spaces for leisure in the form of an upgraded park, and increasingly

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88 About a quarter of the 107 businesses that had moved in the context of the law.
safe public spaces. It spurred the building of new office space in a formerly industrial area, and catalyzed the local real estate market, resulting in the building of new condominiums. Table 5 shows the increase in prices of condominiums in the Parque Patricios district compared to the city as a whole, as well as the south of the city of which it is a part.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2007 (USD)</th>
<th>2013 (USD)</th>
<th>Increase %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parque Patricios</td>
<td>$936</td>
<td>$1936</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City total</td>
<td>1300</td>
<td>2214</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South total</td>
<td>982</td>
<td>1746</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A 2012 study by the city government suggested that 107 new TIC (technology, information, and communication) companies had moved or were projected to move into the Parque Patricios Technology District under law 2972 that created the district. The city government framed this process as a major success. And indeed some of these companies would likely have located to the already saturated north of the city had the Technology District not been introduced. Yet this process also created new forms of centrality and stratification. As a form of urban agglomeration, the new district effectively cut the neighborhood in half, bringing the north of the neighborhood into the center-south fold, while increasing the disparity between the north and the south of the neighborhood (Figure 28).
Figure 28: Location of TICs in Parque Patricios, 2012. Source: Government of the City of Buenos Aires 2013: 13.
This was no surprise. As Figure 29, taken from a report commissioned by the local state suggests the city government had concentrated its own investment in the northern area of the district. In this spirit, it created a Metropolitan Center of Technology (1), a hub for the new Metropolitan Police (2), a new Norman Foster designed headquarters for the Bank of the City (3) and a Center for Investor Attention (4).

*Figure 29: Public investment in Parque Patricios. Source: Government of the City of Buenos Aires, 2013: 8.*

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Some internal wrangling has since characterized this project, with city offices now slated to move into the new building, while the Bank of the City will remain in the city center.
The city government’s plans thus aimed at reinforcing a broader discourse of urban equality. The erstwhile divide between the wealthy north of the city and the downtrodden south was the object of this rhetoric. Through investment in the south and the generation of creative districts, the city would become “integrated”.

One of the main sources of measuring this integration was through an index created by the Ministry of Urban Development (2014b) entitled “Equality in the Value of Land”. The measure represents the relative price of real estate in the south of the city compared to the north. That this ratio has gone down from 3 to 2.3 has been used by the local state as evidence of the growing equality between north and south. Ignoring the people who live in the southern districts in which hospitals, schools, and health indicators are low, the measure instead conceives of equality as a matter of relative land prices. Finally, the plans seemed to follow a “save what you can” logic in which micro-territories located within relatively privileged geographies of the south would be incorporated into a corridor of higher-value land. This strategy meant that while certain zones would receive fresh investment, others would not. Inter-territorial stratification would be the result, creating a patchwork of more and less privileged centers within an area characterized by structural poverty. It is noteworthy that in 2013 Parque Patricios had the second highest differential between the highest and lowest price of housing sold: where the highest price per meter squared was 4.3 times the lowest price in the same neighborhood (Ministerio de Desarrollo Urbano, 2014).

The north-south divide in Buenos Aires was not something new. It had, however, traditionally been emphasized by local left of center politicians, meant to expose official neglect of the poor. Yet Parque Patricios was just the first of a number of projects whose aim was to enlarge the center by bringing formerly disinvested southern neighborhoods into the center-south
fold. The government would soon develop other creative districts in southern neighborhoods, such as the Arts District in the touristic La Boca, while enhancing an elite presence in the historic banking district, the Microcentro, through a “sustainable” urban regeneration plan.

**The Creative-Sustainability-Smart-Innovative City: Microcentro and Distrito de las Artes**

*Plan Microcentro, redesigning downtown, a smart urban planning project that focuses on using innovative and inclusive technology for the renewal of public spaces in downtown Buenos Aires, creating a more sustainable, innovative, creative, and livable city.*

- Government Description of the Plan Microcentro at the Smart City Expo, Barcelona 2013

After much public promotion of the city’s creativity policy, something unexpected took place. The discourse on creativity and its long arm into urban design grafted easily onto increasingly global planning discourses intended to make the city more sustainable with green urban development. The creative city was also a more pedestrian-centric city; a city of bicycle lanes, LED lighting, and more and better quality public spaces. As While et. al. (2004: 550) point out, “claims about the transition to a post-industrial city have depended, in part, upon promoting images of the city as clean and attractive.”

At the 2013 ribbon-cutting for Buenos Aires’ newly pedestrianized downtown, Mayor Mauricio Macri hailed the creation of Latin America’s “first green center,” redeveloped for people rather than automobile traffic (La Razón 2013). The project reflected the administration’s promotional activity, which had plastered public spaces with a new slogan: “Buenos Aires: A Green City.” A few miles away, in the impoverished south of Buenos Aires, sustainability and creativity came together in the city government’s establishment of “creative districts,” said to overcome unequal urban development by subsidizing non-polluting industries such as the arts, design, and technology. Consistent with the inclusive rhetoric of the mayor, the city’s Director of
Creative Industries insisted that a creative city is an integrated, sustainable, and socially equitable city, in which residents from the south’s many shantytowns must be included.

The following analysis seeks to outline two important aspects of the city’s urban regeneration plans. Through two case studies of public investment in the historic banking district (the Microcentro) and a new Arts District in La Boca, this section examines how these policies led to increased social and spatial stratification, while at the same time employing “progressive” planning idioms focused on sustainability, cultural expression and participation.

These projects contained quite different geographic contexts and narratives of urban renewal. The Arts District represented the second southern creative district passed into law by the city government in late 2012. The Microcentro project was framed as a green, “sustainable” intervention, while the Arts District was framed around creativity and artistic production.
Figure 30: The Mayor (center) along with his Vice, María Vidal (right), and then Minister of Public Space Diego Santilli (left), inaugurating the city’s “Ciudad Verde” (green city) brand from the balcony of the municipal palace.

The goal here is to analyze the way in which both of these projects cohered to a broader urban politics, unexpected from a center-right administration. While creative city policy has been implemented by all sides of the political spectrum in cities around the world, these case studies explore how two globally inspired projects utilized traditionally progressive rhetoric stressing values such as community expression, diversity, and sustainability. And yet each resulted in market-led outcomes including higher land values, the eviction of the urban poor, and the creation of new spaces for international tourism. These cases suggest the ways in which global urban develop narratives are shaping local initiatives, yet may rely upon an appeal to consensual discourses, many of which are diffused through the transnational actors mentioned earlier.
Plan Microcentro

When the center-right local government came to office in 2007, its urban development plans centered upon the idea of producing a more “humane” city – a city that was less congested, with more green space – in short, a city in which it was pleasurable to be. The Plan Microcentro fit within this vision: the new downtown would open up more public space for residents. It would have “green” transportation alternatives such as bike lanes and pedestrian corridors, and novel forms of waste collection like subterranean trash receptacles.

Although the plan Microcentro did not break ground until late 2012, planning for the project began several years earlier. The Microcentro (“microcenter”) is the city’s historic central business district, known for its concentration of financial institutions, but also a number of lavish
early 20th-century department stores. The geographic and symbolic center of the district is the calle Florida, a 10 block pedestrian shopping zone with some of the highest commercial leasing prices in Argentina. The street attracts thousands of strolling office-workers and international tourists attracted to its Argentina-themed leather and tango memorabilia stores, as well as a number of international chains such as Zara.

Despite the area’s rich architectural heritage, it had in recent years suffered from neglect. The vandalism against foreign banks in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2001-2002 was accompanied by increased street protest in the area. Perhaps more significantly, the area had experienced what many middle-class office workers perceived as a social decline: scavengers picked through the copious amount of public refuse, and informal vendors competed with formal merchants, showcasing their goods over blankets on calle Florida’s pedestrian corridor. Other urban projects impinged upon business ties to the historic downtown. The building of skyscraper offices nearby, and later the redevelopment of nearby docklands into shiny office space represented a strong attraction for businesses looking to move out of the outdated Microcentro. In the midst of these changes, storeowners began their own campaign against informal vendors, organizing under the auspices of the powerful Confederation of Argentine Medium Sized Firms. The protests registered strong reactions among actors in the local state, the general public, and the media, which devoted significant attention to the purported decay of the city’s most prestigious pedestrian shopping street.

Responding to these concerns, the plan Microcentro was created by an act of the local legislature and its goals included the following items:

- Leveling of streets and sidewalks to make them pedestrian friendly
- Upgrading of streets and avenues with new lighting, trees, and signs
- The ordering of public space to do away with illegal advertising, public telephones, and wires
- Repair and illumination of historic facades
• Organizing of transit with increased bicycle lanes
• New trash and recycling containers stored underground
• More culture and tourism offerings
• Increased security cameras and police presence

**The Distrito de las Artes: Building an arts cluster**

In a marathon session in the final meetings of the 2012 legislative year, the city’s ruling bloc and the local opposition from the party in power at the national level[^90] agreed upon a battery of urban projects requiring votes that neither of the local parties could muster on their own. The national government’s city legislators had city-owned land rezoned for an ambitious federal housing program, while the conservative city government eked out an approval of the new Distrito de las Artes, an arts district mostly confined to the poor but touristic neighborhood of La Boca.

La Boca’s few blocks of multicolor tenements (*conventillos*) represent a prominent touristic theme for the city and a must-see landmark for international tourists. Though the tenements are meant to portray the late-19th and early-20th century conditions of Italian immigrants in the neighborhood, their surroundings tell of a much longer trajectory of poverty. La Boca is a socially divided neighborhood with ramshackle zinc-roofed dwellings along its polluted border with the Riachuelo inlet, abandoned factories testifying to its mid-20th century industrial production, and a sizable amount of lower middle-class residents who remained despite an exodus in the latter half of the century (Herzer 2008). The neighborhood has a long tradition of artistic production, most famously for being the “birthplace of tango” as well as

[^90]: At the city level in Buenos Aires, the national state’s party is in the opposition.
producing a number of Italian-Argentine painters who came to express the processes of modernization and immigrant nostalgia for which the district is known.\footnote{The painters Quinquela, Lacámera, and Lazzari are some of the best known.}

If the neighborhood was to be consolidated as a major space of tourism, the unevenness of its social and cultural infrastructure had to be reshaped. Tourists are mostly bussed to the picturesque multicolored street of Caminito. They cannot stray far from the bright restored tenements, tango-themed bars, and souvenir stands, since the neighborhood is otherwise dominated by “real” tenements, informal housing (\textit{asentamientos}) (Rodríguez et al. 2007: 62–64), and high rates of petty crime (Guano 2003). The Minister of Economic Development, in charge of the creative cluster policy sees the arts district as one way of consolidating the neighborhood for international tourism. With the development of the district, “…tourists could stay one more day in Buenos Aires, with all that would imply economically” (Fernández Fronza 2012).

On the one hand the creative districts seek to create clusters of like-minded individuals and firms, while on the other they claim to create investment by those businesses that might otherwise locate in the already saturated north. The mechanism for incentivizing this movement is essentially fiscal. For those who meet the guidelines of the city government, the Arts District offers 10 years exemption from local taxes. More importantly, perhaps, the law creates the new category of the “developer of artistic infrastructure”. With an additional tax incentive up to 35\% of that invested in projects in the district, these credits are meant for any real estate developer whose project sets aside at least 30\% of their development for cultural-artistic production, including market-rate projects such as studio rentals or gallery space. It comes as no surprise then that one of the first projects in the new district was an $150 million dollar conversion of an
abandoned meat-packing plant, set to be redeveloped into condos, a hotel, and – unsurprisingly – studio and gallery space.

La Boca also, however, has a strong history of local activism and mutual aid (Herzer et al. 2005). Consequently, when the city proposed the Distrito de las Artes many local artists and activists opposed the local government’s plans, arguing that the law did little for artists in the area and was instead a real estate project. While these protest movements had garnered support from the local opposition in the city legislature, they were eventually abandoned when the opposition agreed to an exchange of laws with the party of the city government.

**Legitimation Strategies for Competitive Cities**

In public pronouncements and official plans, the city government strongly appealed to the importance of everyday use values in the Microcentro, while individually, none of the plan’s goals seemed particularly controversial. The administration cast its emphasis on pedestrians over cars as making the city more sustainable and green. They were framed as a user-centric model, creating the first “green center” in Latin America, “[w]ith less noise, less contamination, and all of this space transformed so that people can enjoy it everyday” (La Razón 2013), as the mayor put it.

While the mayor was touting Buenos Aires’ vanguard status within Latin America, many of his street redesigns had their origins elsewhere. Local transport officials touted the city’s adoption of a BRT model for a major boulevard adjacent to the city center as a successful, “regional” model, city officials connected this sustainable transport model to the pedestrianization of the Microcentro. Yet the city’s approach to local transport was deeply indebted to expert knowledge disseminated by extra-regional actors. It was not only the BRT
model that had been “translated” for Buenos Aires by ITDP, but the entire “sustainable” transport plan for the city had international origins. Buenos Aires’ bike lanes, pedestrian corridors, and street redesigns had clear connections to a particular global city that local leaders as well as post-colonial scholars would be reticent to acknowledge: New York City. As Joseph, the Director at ITDP, put it in an interview:

When all of these changes were happening in NYC, the Secretary of transport for Buenos Aires got to meet the commissioner of transport in New York. They began a long dialogue that has continued about how to…reallocate street space, bicycle infrastructure. A lot of that has happened: the public plazas, the bike lanes; BA took the regional examples from Colombia and the street redesigns from NYC.

Buenos Aires’ embrace of these policies resulted in aesthetic changes with clear global referents. Figure 32 below shows a particularly stark example of this embrace. These redesigned streetscapes seem to contradict the idea of complex processes of “translation” involving fragmented, contextual, and always incomplete imaginaries assembled in almost random form. Rather we can observe a fairly straight-forward process of policy travel with clear positions of power and influence, brokering relationships between city models and city leaders. That brokers from ITDP are based in the most politically and economically dominant regions does not imply that cities in the global South are engaged in policy mimicry, rather it suggests the quite real forms of power that continue to characterize geo-political relations at the global scale.
These sustainable transport initiatives had clear implications in returning the city center to a space of more elite use. Nestor, a coordinator for the plan Microcentro, provided me with a walking tour on a Friday afternoon in March, 2013. When he showed up he seems harried, even at 5 pm on a Friday, with the intention of returning to work after our meeting. He explained the reason his job’s stressfulness: the work of the Plan Microcentro goes beyond just planning and design, and has to do with regulating activities that have been historically difficult to control in Buenos Aires. The project is as much about reshaping the social relations of the Microcentro through its visual presentation – the restoration of historic facades, the regulation of outdoor advertising, an increase in lighting and security, and the removal of ambulant vendors – as it is about its physically pedestrianized streets. This is why, he explained, the Plan Microcentro is housed under the Ministry of Public Space, despite the fact that the major interventions – including the pedestrianization of dozens of streets – will be managed by the Ministry of Urban Development.

In order to create a new atmosphere on Florida Street a few preliminary measures were necessary. Security in the capital had historically been controlled by the national government,
which proved unwilling to evict street vendors. But the city eventually secured a compromise allowing it to create a parallel force, the Metropolitan Police. With the advent of the Metropolitan Police under the control of the city government, the Plan Microcentro could be put into action. The police swiftly impeded vendors from setting up their blankets and goods in the public sphere. Soon after, the government broke ground on the pedestrianization of the Microcentro’s streets.

The Plan Microcentro called for – in its internal planning, rather than its public-facing campaigns – the promotion of the area as a node for tourism, particularly as a space for hotels, and the “revalorization” of property in the area. In addition to tourists, the plan aimed to catalyze the “residentialization” of the area, a goal of the city’s broader urban development policy, passed by law in 2008. The law stipulated that central areas of the city should move away from their mostly commercial character and aspire to “mixed use”, such that these spaces could be turned into more inviting areas of social and cultural encounter. In this sense, a fairly superficial “green” framing of the Plan Microcentro easily aligned with broader goals of urban policy, specifically the government’s plan to reshape the residential and commercial character of the district.

Yet the action of the Metropolitan Police was not going to be enough lure middle-class residents into a part of the city that had become synonymous with rush-hour congestion, urban chaos, and insecurity (fear of crime). A major aspect of the plan was to bring more people to enjoy the Microcentro, rather than seeing it as a place to escape. Consequently, the iron fist of policing was to be combined with the velvet glove of cultural programming. Nestor explained that for this reason his team is working with the city’s Ministry of Culture to produce events in

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92 The Urban Environmental Plan (PUA), passed in 2008, delineates broad strategies for urban growth and is itself mired in conflictual language, stressing integration, sustainability, and competitiveness. See Center (2009) for an overview of these contradictions.
the area that will attract residents from other neighborhoods. These are meant to be free and 
public activities that will help reframe the city’s public spaces as spaces of collective diversion 
and encounter. As Juan Carlos Poli, a former Director of Public Space Usage and a member of 
the team working on the Microcentro suggested in a public talk,

We wanted to bring back nighttime [activities], to extend the usage of the 
Microcentro. Now people go home and all the stores close at 6. From [the 
perspective of] culture we want to bring in events, theater, expositions, 
gastronomy, to stretch the hours of use in the beginning of the evening so that 
[public space] is not occupied by the homeless or those who sort through trash. 
(Poli 2012)

Poli’s conception of the kind of events capable of attracting other residents indicates a 
tension around the normative boundaries of the public. It was not merely culture that city 
managers sought to encourage, but particular forms of culture that would attract middle-class 
patrons and consumers from more affluent areas of the city. These attractions aimed at 
reinforcing new conceptions of urban lifestyles, tied to uses of the city based on leisure. 
According to Poli, bringing activities back to this area will catalyze a new form of social 
encounter in a neighborhood formerly avoided by some residents.

Free and open cultural events would seem to represent a new public amenity. Yet culture 
itself in this case had a strong class component. As Nestor put it:

We have to get people from other parts of the city to come to the Microcentro. 
That’s why we are including cultural events as part of the plan. But we cannot just 
say ‘come here and go to such and such event’. There first must be infrastructure, 
there must be places where people can use the restroom, there must be places to 
eat and drink. First we must address this, and then plan events.

In describing the kinds of infrastructure necessary, such as restaurants, Nestor is clearly 
referring to the city’s more privileged residents who will revitalize the neighborhood with their 
presence and frame its dominant image as one of entertainment. Though these events are public 
and funded by the state, the plan envisions a Microcentro with a rather specific user. Only those
capable of enjoying the area for leisure and participating in its cultural theming are encouraged to use this new space, while those who previously made use of this space as a site of informal labor are discouraged from partaking in its new cultural profile.

An Artistic Mode of Neighborhood Production

On a grey April evening around 15 neighborhood residents gathered in a school in the southern neighborhood of Parque Patricios as part of the district’s advisory council (concejo consultivo). The consejo consultivos are a relatively new aspect of city government. They are meant to act as a consultative voice for the comunas, districts composed of a geographic cluster of neighborhoods. This particular comuna’s (comuna 4) leadership is aligned with the local conservative government. The advisory council, however, is mostly comprised of residents opposed to the policies of the city government who voluntarily attend these meetings. They are largely working and middle-class residents of the district. Though some own their apartments in the area, many are opposed to the government’s plans because they appear oblivious to the area’s existing cultural heritage and character. According to the attendees, their ideas, problems, and complaints are ignored by the local state, as the institutional mechanisms comprising the advisory council are weak and their comuna is run by the governing party.

Comuna 4 represents a strategic space for the local government. Though it comprises neighborhoods in the impoverished south of the city, it is located just south of the center. For this reason, it has received both market pressures in terms of rising rents, but also stimulation from the government. Of the four creative districts in the south of the city, three of them are in Comuna 4 (the arts district, the technology district, and the design district).
The city government estimates that the new arts district will produce 10 new hotels in the area and some 200 new restaurants. At the same time, tax benefits are only extended to those whose businesses employ at least five individuals, leaving out artists who work on their own. When I ask Marta, the official from the government agency working on the Distrito de las Artes about rising rents, she acknowledges the problem, yet suggests that renters could “associate” with one another to come up with a project allowing them to purchase a property while it is still cheap. While this could represent an attractive option to some residents, it is unlikely for those residents living in informal settlements and tenement housing, let alone those lacking a potential cultural project.

Rising land prices had clear connotations in terms of who could afford to stay in the neighborhood versus who would likely have to leave. Table 6 demonstrates the impact the district’s passage in late 2012 had on the local real estate market. While the city as a whole experienced a drop in average land prices, the neighborhood of La Boca (the center of the new arts district) increased by over 25%.

Table 6: Price of land/meter squared in US dollars, city total and La Boca. Barracas and Mataderos are two other southern neighborhoods tracked by the city. Source: Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, 2013.

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<tr>
<th></th>
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<th>September 2013</th>
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<td>Barracas</td>
<td>1233.70</td>
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<td>Mataderos</td>
<td>769.50</td>
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<tr>
<td>City Total</td>
<td>1862.60</td>
<td>1773.60</td>
<td>-4.88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lucas, a member of a local social movement (*agrupación*), Los Pibes, comprised of working-class and poor residents at odds with the local state over housing and social policy, summed up this unevenness of benefits during the Consultative Council meeting:

We have the misfortune that our *comuna* is in the eye of the storm…It has to do with a politics of the government of the city to transform the south…That it should be included, it should be part of the city, not with numbers of Belgium in the north and India in the south, [but] it [really] has to do with making money, with obtaining the most benefit possible in the buying and selling of land, in real estate speculation for the benefit of a the few. We are an expression of the undesirable in the city. We are those who should move 45 kilometers from the city.

Lucas claims to speak for all of the *comuna’s* “neighbors”, but in reality his movement and its members are mostly renters or inhabitants of the precarious and/or informal housing that puncture the colorful tourist landscape of La Boca. He invoked the idea of India and Belgium to refer to the city’s well-publicized concern with the endemic poverty of the south and its fragmentation with the relative prosperity of the north. His speech gets at an element of the plan that the government is reluctant to acknowledge. The plan does not represent a “win-win” for all neighbors, but has distinctly different outcomes for different social groups. The process of territorial integration lauded by the city is not necessarily a consensual policy, but one that raises objections from groups who believe that they will be replaced. Despite the language of inclusion, its implementation clearly favors those who own by putting the neighborhood on a path toward more upscale commercial and residential development.

Soon after Lucas speaks, Estela, a resident in her 50s stood up, clearly exasperated, and begins to shout. She denounced the hours of lost time spent complaining about the government’s policies. What the area needs is progress, she says.

I want my neighborhood to blossom (*florecer*), that it becomes a neighborhood where there is housing, that the people who live renting have housing…One has to see the good things and say when there are bad things. But if everyone wants to
boycott everything...For two hours [we’ve been here] and we’ve only talked about one [bad] thing.

Estela identifies herself as an owner, though expresses solidarity with those who rent in the neighborhood. Her outrage illustrates the tensions around the government’s attempt to frame these policies as win-win opportunities. Though Estela wants to focus on the “good” aspects of neighborhood change, including more security, renovated parks, and new subway stops, she appears to believe that this progress would also include housing for local residents. In reality though, Lucas’ appraisal of the situation is likely accurate in that the upgrade of the neighborhood would seem to do more harm than good for those who fear displacement.

Yet it is not only working-class and poor renters who oppose the plan. In the case of the Distrito de las Artes, the dominant definition of culture came under increased scrutiny since the project itself claimed to embody the communal value of cultural and artistic expression. Many of the attendees of different social classes distrusted the project on the grounds that it only provides benefits to developers and real estate actors and not everyday artists and cultural producers. In this sense, a project that is said to benefit culture and the arts is denounced as a threat to local cultural producers. As Teresa Stambazzi the director of a sustainable tourism organization in the district put it:

The arts district is a business that affects not just artists...The entire neighborhood of La Boca, that should be culturally protected is the one that will lose, its going to lose its identity, its history, we’re going to lose the tenements (conventillos) that are already being evicted (Radio Grafica FM 89.3 2012).

Market values were hardly crowned supreme in the local state’s framing of the district as a space of the arts. In promotional materials, individual artists are interviewed, talking about their production process and the benefits of engaging with a community of artists. But this narrative of
creativity and expression corresponded to concrete urban objectives in the neighborhood that contained an outsized role for private investment and tourism.

The presence of an existing community of cultural producers in the neighborhood, who rejected the city government’s creative district plans, thus contested the state’s framing of the project. The conflicts around the neighborhood’s true identity demonstrated one of the paradoxes of promoting communal values tied to culture and creativity. The arts district was connected to the city’s branding strategy by offering an identifiably unique community for cultural tourism. Yet residents feared that the project would convert the area into a space for outsiders. To this end, Marta, the official in the Ministry of Economic Development working on the project complained in an interview about the neighborhood’s locally minded residents who opposed the project. They were in her words overly invested in their own “Boquense” (from La Boca) culture and constantly worried that the neighborhood might be turned into a global space, inundated with artists from other parts of the city, including the fashionable northern neighborhood of Palermo. Yet this transformation, particularly its implications for tourism and investment, was precisely what the plan intended to do.

**Non-Market Values, Market-Oriented Goals**

The local state’s “humanized” vision of the city draws attention to the importance of distinguishing between non-market values and market-based outcomes. As the Minister of Economic Development, in charge of Buenos Aires’ creative district policies recently put it,

> The base of success of a city is its unique and distinct positioning. Cities in the last decade have stopped differentiating themselves in infrastructure to do so through values [....] A city brand is able to materialize intangibles – creativity, human capital—, it captures values, local enchantment, and concentrates its competitive advantages under an overarching concept that permits it to compete with other
cities...The [creative] districts are a successful formula that work from the values of the brand of Buenos Aires, not only because they attract investments, rather because they convert Buenos Aires into an attractive city to develop oneself and live, and seduce that “creative class” for which the world is competing. (Cabrera 2012)

As a form of aestheticizing the city in service to new forms of place marketing, sustainability and creativity discourses share a number of important outcomes. The attractive city in which a creative class is able to develop itself requires more than transportation infrastructure and public amenities. It requires affixing certain values to the city itself, such as cultural expression, ecological integrity, and place-based character. The leveraging of cultural and touristic production in service to economic development emphasizes the distinctiveness of local history and culture as a resource for competitive urban policy.

One important strategy for reshaping the cultural meaning of disinvested districts is the use of public art and entertainment. When Nestor from the Plan Microcentro provided me with a walking tour of Florida Street, it gave me another sense of how the city government’s sustainability discourse may conceal efforts to promote higher-end development. The plan must get the new aesthetics of the street right if it is to attract the right kind of public. When walking by a store with a neon cell-phone sign outside, Nestor paused for a moment before entering the building to chide them for their outdoor sign, which does not meet the new standards for advertising. He tells me that since this particular store is housed in a structure whose renovation the city paid for, he has more leverage with its owners. According to the Plan Microcentro’s leadership, advertising infractions are understood as “visual contamination,” blights that affect the quality of life of everyday residents. These, then, are private infringements on the meaning and use values of public space, suggesting that non-market values such as the collective enjoyment of the Microcentro must trump narrow private uses such as car traffic or street vendors.
The city’s Director of Creative Industries, Enrique Avogadro, likewise suggested in public remarks that creative cities required differentiating place-based cultural offerings by allowing for less standardized production processes based on individual creativity. As he suggested to one reporter,

If in the old globalization we all wanted to have the same McDonalds or the same Starbucks, in the new globalization we all want to come to the world with our [own] product or service, but that has to be original, unique, and a product that clearly has a good story. (El País 2014)

Further emphasizing storytelling, the city installed public art on pedestrian corridors, while collective creativity was promoted in projects like the public decorating of street tiles with stickers emblazoned with “less cars,” “more security,” and “more space.” Storytelling and public art came together in the “Microhistorias” campaign in which the city government sponsored the placement of life-size photos of storeowners and office-workers accompanied by their history in the Microcentro. The photos were playful and showed a diversity of users: from executives and white-collar professionals, to waitresses and kiosk owners. The brochure for the collection of photos began with the quote: “Every street and every person is a brush-stroke of this mural [the Microcentro] that we walk each day.” The city’s public spaces were thus framed as pluralistic spaces of diversion, expression, and social encounter. In this sense, the Plan Microcentro, touted as a sustainability project, had incorporated the broader creative city policy template in which place marketing became a valuable asset for the city’s brand.

The new street would thus frame certain publics as the rightful users of this space by providing an image of the Microcentro as clean and orderly, yet also open and diverse. During my walking tour with Nestor, he told me that some stores may be pressured to leave or change their appearances, particularly those whose goods are visibly stored in display areas of the store itself, reminiscent of wholesalers, rather than kept in a back room. Those whose goods are held
in the back room convey a more upscale image, and Nestor was insistent on the importance of aesthetics in the restructuring of the street.

The mayor called the new Microcentro the “first green center in Latin America” (La Razón, 2013), rooted in the idea of “putting people as the focus [of the plan] and public space as a place of encounter.” By claiming that as a green center the space was now meant for everyday social encounter rather than traffic or commerce, the mayor aimed to claim the mantle of values such as human uses over business uses and environmental responsibility over private transport (e.g., car traffic). While the plan did eliminate much of the area’s grit in terms of car exhaust and trash, it also catalyzed a number of new social dynamics. Subterranean trash receptacles discouraged scavenging. Pedestrian only streets made the area potentially more alluring for “residentialization” and touristic investment. Beyond the cultural values to which the local government appealed, market mechanisms and goals were very much a part of the project’s outcomes.

At a 2012 TEDx talk, Avogadro (2012b) emphasized the importance of individuals in place-based differentiation as a tool for competing in the global economy: “The truth is that within the concept of the creative city, you don’t have just the creative class, but every person has the possibility to be creative… Everybody has knowledge that can contribute to the creative city... Not just governments, but organizations, people… there is hardware and software for the city. The hardware is the spaces, the equipment. The software is…the capacity we all have to love the city and to tell our story.” Avogadro was careful to point out that these projects should include and benefit residents of nearby shantytowns: creativity, he suggested, is “a bridge” to overcome social divides. Leaders tied this new approach to inequality to a broader emphasis on the collective construction of public space. In public pronouncements, the local government
encouraged the community to participate by responsibly making use of urban amenities such as parks and subways. Avogadro noted that “the government doesn’t have a monopoly on public space” and it is thus socially “owned” by the community. The responsible uses outlined, however, tended to fit within the real-estate centric focus of the themed districts. Forms of expression, such as graffiti, were welcome if they could be domesticated in the form of publicly or privately sanctioned murals or public art, thus providing an image of place-based pluralism.

Avogadro’s description also emphasized international concepts such as the creative city and creative class, making clear the role of local government as a provider of the physical infrastructure fostering individual forms of expression. But what is most unexpected, coming from a government said to ignore the needs of the poor, is its explicit focus on urban inequality. The government’s positioning of creative districts in the impoverished south of the city is explicitly framed as an effort to reduce the north-south divide and stoke the creative juices of local artists. Promotional videos for the Arts District show local artists in their studios demonstrating the benefits of clustering and the government’s support for artistic expression. These videos clearly appeal to the values of cultural expression and community. Yet the branding of the district as a site of these non-market values may still be read as an example of market-oriented goals when the broader framework of this project is taken into account. As one member of the opposition in the city council, Susana Rinaldi, put it (amidst applause from the gallery where residents had gathered),

As I understand, the developers of artistic infrastructure are not exactly artists. Precisely this has a correlate in its [the project’s] origin, that wasn’t as it should be, from the Ministry of Culture…In effect, we are accustomed to everything passing through the economy, and nothing but the economic…from the mercantilist [vision of the city government] that reduces the state to following private investment… (Legislatura Porteña, 2012)
The legislator in the above example is drawing attention to the benefits the district provides to real estate through the category of “developer of artistic infrastructure.” The Arts District appeals to non-market values, but these are easily put into the service of broader urban policy goals, which are very much guided by market mechanisms. In defining the creative city, Enrique Avogadro claims that it must be sustainable, equitable, integrated, and productive. According to the government’s thin conception of urban inequality, however, with its omission of social conditions, integrating the city is understood as an effort to attract fresh investment to these devalued districts through improving their public spaces and amenities. Conceiving of territorial inequality through the lens of lifestyle, urban policy is especially concerned with the public spaces, amenities, and leisure activities that make a neighborhood more attractive to potential residents and businesses. As a recent promotional video for the creative districts put it,

…In the north 70% of the city’s inhabitants live. And this creates inequality…A [creative] district is to think of the city as a themed space that grows around an industry. This way, a neighborhood that was relegated is converted into a better place with more opportunities, where people can work, but also where people want to live. (Ministerio de Desarrollo Económico de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires 2013)

This real-estate friendly concept of creativity shows preference for property developers, owners, and tourists. In this sense, the outcome of these policies represents the opposite of the collective inclusion that Avogadro attributed to city policy. For neighborhoods with major housing shortages, and generally poor services, schools and hospitals, appeals to providing a place “where people want to live” provides insight into the government’s aims in the creative districts. The local state’s policy toward the south is one of consumer residential choice, resolving territorial inequality through greater social inequality, bringing higher income residents and business to the area. Importantly, however, this policy is framed around collective values that are difficult to contest.
Conclusions

These new political and discursive models for restructuring the south of the city brought together ideas of urban development – innovation, creativity, and sustainability – that appear to have little to do with one another. And yet as seen in two prominent interventions in these districts, these projects are held together by a narrative that stresses non-market values such as community, participation, and diversity, while serving goals that open up these spaces to new forms of investment. This chapter analyzed sustainable and creative policy agendas as a feature of competitive city frameworks in Buenos Aires. Much like creative city discourses, sustainability can mean different things to different actors, and thus social scientists have often evaluated the validity of these policies’ environmental or social justice claims. The analysis here departs somewhat from this perspective insofar as it develops the idea of sustainability and creativity as representing not a programmatic set of guidelines, but rather legitimizing scripts that respond to internal and external pressures and priorities of urban governance.

While these policies aimed at generating a more creative and sustainable city, these processes represented top down approaches that left out the urban poor and grassroots forms of cultural production. In the next chapter, I engage in an ethnographic portrait of bottom-up forms of cultural practice in the historic center. I show how everyday actors have sought to position themselves in the lucrative tourist trade by appealing to the idea of culture in a City of Culture, generating new forms of conflict among the city government, local business, and the urban poor.
Chapter 5: The Production of Value in a Tourist Market

The Sunday fair in San Telmo brings together heterogeneous groups into a neighborhood characterized by a high level of social and class diversity. Disadvantaged street vendors mingle with international tourists. High-end antiques stores sell five-figure pieces, while immigrant vendors hawk tango key chains and figurines.

All neighborhoods contain particular physical resources such as their housing stock, transportation infrastructure, and green spaces such as parks and plazas. Yet they also contain a less tangible set of benefits and resources in their dense set of networks, human, and cultural capital. Sociologists have long been interested in how these networks are created, reproduced, or circumscribed to produce uneven lived trajectories among residents. These so-called “neighborhood effects” bring together the invisible advantages of social connections and know-how with the kinds of resources that are essentially place-based or mobilized in particular territories (Portes 2000; Sampson et al. 2002; Small 2004). Neighborhoods with few advantages may remain disadvantaged or even become more so because of the cumulative effects of these intangible sets of resources.

This perspective helps bring together macro-level changes with the differentiated personal trajectories of city residents. While studies of “global cities” and their global city functions (Sassen 2001; Sassen 2002) help explain the way in which economic crisis produces new dynamics in local labor markets or the dominance of the most highflying centers of global commerce, it is less helpful for considering the everyday ways in which, in Buenos Aires, physical spaces became a site of survival and labor for the ever-larger ranks of the urban poor.
This chapter examines how the commercial practices of various social groups – the urban poor, newly impoverished middle classes, and more privileged residents and merchants – adjusted their engagements with the physical spaces of San Telmo and the concept of culture to survive during a period of social and economic turbulence. It shows how differently positioned groups mobilized what Pierre Bourdieu (1984) calls cultural capital to create economically useful ties with local institutions, networks with beneficial actors, while resolving problems through recourse to legitimized forms of culture.

The Anatomy of a Divided Market

It is 7 am on a Sunday morning and the vendors in San Telmo are beginning to set up their stands. Many of the structures are metal; tables standing on four legs cresting a few feet above to create a canopy on which plastic can be placed in the case of rain. Like much of the Sunday fair, what appears to an outside observer to be a singular form of vending is in fact a range of differentiated organizations, with varying levels of formalization and legality. Vendors range from the city-ordained antiques fair in the Plaza Dorrego, to semi-legal artisan fairs on the adjacent streets, to knick-knack, clothing, and perfume sellers further north on the Calle Defensa. Some rent tables from outsiders who bring them in by the truckload for 70 pesos a day. The least privileged work with a towel or blanket on the sidewalk or street.

The Plaza Dorrego remains the heart of the fair, the space where the Museum of the City first organized the vendors in the 1970s. The vendors here are older and well regulated. Their stands have plastic nametags and numbers. Many are hobbyists, with professions such as architect, pensioner, or civil servant. Some joined the fair as a hobby to later become antiques storeowners in the neighborhood. Unlike the other vendors in the area, they have a monopoly on
legal vending, as the only fair sponsored by the Museum of the City and organized through the Ministry of Culture.

For this reason, they have aligned themselves with the antiques storeowners, against the vendors who the majority regard as intruders who have diminished the fair’s genteel history. Many of these original members of the fair refer to the other vendors generically as manteros (those who sell over blankets on the street), a term that deprives them of their status as artisans, suggesting that they are merely sellers of wholesale goods.

A few blocks south on the Calle Defensa, David is a vendor in his early 50s who organizes an artisan cooperative. He is short and agile, with greying hair, light blue-gray eyes, and a cigarette usually in hand. David is not new to organizing. His weathered face and conspiratorial laugh seem in keeping with his political beliefs and life trajectory. He describes nostalgically his participation in Argentina’s leftist guerilla movement of the 1970s. David’s cooperative, El Adoquín (“the cobblestone”), is made up of artisans and handicraft makers that organized in order to resists the criminalization of street vendors. They do not have a permit to operate where they are, unlike many of the other streets, which block by block gained ad hoc permission by city authorities eager to pacify needy residents in the aftermath of the 2001-2002 crisis. El Adoquín is not, however, among the most precarious, who – as discussed later – are often immigrants from other South American countries with few political ties or knowledge of the law. David and his co-organizer are politically savvy, tied to social and political movements aligned with the national government, with deep knowledge of the legal system, strategies of collective representation, and organizing.

Drawing mostly from lower-middle and impoverished middle class residents of Buenos Aires and its outskirts, El Adoquín’s resistance to removal shows how cultural resources can be
parlayed into social and political rights. El Adoquín has deftly tapped into a discourse on artisanship, positioning themselves as artisans and not “ambulant vendors”, while appealing to San Telmo’s creative vibe and bohemian history to legitimate their presence. They have also tapped into a current of economic nationalism that resonates in post-crisis Argentina. El Adoquín is about creating workers (*trabajadores*) and not vendors. Workers in Argentina have rights and privileges and their ability to sell their goods is cast by members of the cooperative not as a form of the local government’s munificence but as a right to a dignified existence.

**Culture and Crisis in Urban Artisanship**

In the 1970s urban artisanal production made its debut in Buenos Aires. Stemming in part from artisanal traditions gaining ground in Europe and North America, the first artisans in Buenos Aires saw themselves connected to a kind of global “hippy culture” (Rotman 2004: 17). The first established artisanal fairs took place in the Plaza Francia, in the upscale neighborhood of Recoleta, inspired by the institutional arrangement of the antique fair in San Telmo. Sponsored by the Museum of the City, under the direction of José María Peña, the new fair initially took up a similar relation to the museum.

But the strict protocols of the Museum of the City did not last long. By 1973 a number of “parallel” fair had appeared adjacent to the original fair and lacked the institutional backing of the museum. Parallel fairs created facts on the ground, which led artisans to seek institutional approval based on their de facto use of public space.

Jettisoning the Museum of the City, they managed to obtain a general municipal law, Ordinance 28702, regulating fairs and legalizing them, while freeing them from the Museum of the City (Rotman 2004: 25). This pattern would repeat itself over time, with “legal” fairs
restricting participation by new vendors, who created parallel fairs, eventually pressing authorities for their legalization. These fairs, however, existed on a relatively modest scale between the 1970s and 1990s. In general, production was artisanal and produced by middle-class vendors. If indeed these artisans were unemployed or underemployed, they hardly represented the structurally circumscribed ranks of the urban poor.

Incipient forms of globalization characterizing the 1990s contributed to an institutional interest in the most professionalized forms of urban artisanship. This was a time when UN programs highlighting local cultural heritage were being diffused at a worldwide scale. The new level of political and administrative autonomy obtained by the city of Buenos Aires (De Luca et al. 2002) also contributed to a deepening concern for local identity, which elected officials saw as as a deficit during prior unelected municipal governments. In the late 1990s, the city government set up a program for studying and promoting what it called urban artisanship. The program was housed under the Ministry of Culture, eventually located within Fajre’s sub-Secretary of Heritage with programming linked to museums such as the city’s Museum for Popular Art.

While the program sought to call attention to an artistic activity that had hitherto garnered little interest in the realm of culture, in many respects it produced new hierarchies among vendors. The prizes awarded to artisans as well as the institutional backing in the form of museum exhibitions and edited volumes on the topic reinforced “art for art’s sake” criteria that divorced artistic recognition from the forms of labor precariousness and economic struggle that
characterizes much artisanal production in the city. Those awarded prizes tended to be artisans from the middle classes with studio spaces and other connections to the official art world.

By 2001, however, the city government’s interest in promoting non-traditional forms of cultural production would seem woefully inadequate. Far from creating a new realm of high-status artistic appreciation based on “urban artisanship”, the city was replete with various forms of semi-artisanal production. In many cases, newly impoverished residents created parallel fairs to those already regulated and were regarded as inauthentic interlopers among many of the established feriantes. They were no longer non-conformist members of the middle class, but in many cases were sectors of the urban poor and members of the so-called “new poor” produced as a result of crisis.

The use of the term artisan is, of course, an economic as well as aesthetic definition. Artisanal production is imbued with a kind of mythical status insofar as the production process is not readily known or understood by buyers and thereby represents a form of added-value in the marketplace. Machine made products do not contain this mythical element (Wherry 2012: 209). For this reason, vendors of various skill levels, artistic backgrounds, and connections to the world of culture sought, in the aftermath of crisis, to cast themselves as “artisans” as a form of fetching higher prices for their goods, while legitimating their presence in urban space. Since the city had long shown an interest in this form of artistic practice, being an artisan and not an ambulant vendor provided powerful claims to legitimacy.

As the economy worsened, new forms of ambulant vending appeared throughout the city. The hierarchies of vending – its legality, pricing, and location – demonstrated the ways in which

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93 One example of this is an edited volume on the topic published in a Secretary of Culture series entitled “Topics in Cultural Heritage”. The edited volume is entitled “Urban Artisanship as Cultural Heritage”
individuals made use of culture as an economic resource as they sought out new forms of survival. This search for value in the marketplace produced a dizzying array of distinctions between different kinds of vendors. There were fine artists, artisans, handicraft makers (manualistas), and manteros (“blanketers” – those who laid their everyday products and trinkets on blankets on the sidewalk). The highest value-added activities generally required distinct repertoires of knowledge, training, and tools. These included awareness of various artistic styles and avant-gardes, language ability for interactions with tourists, and the kinds of artistic training necessary for creating the objects perceived as most valuable.

Physical space also became important to maintaining distinctions and the forms of value to which they appealed. If certain artistic forms appealed to an “art for art’s sake” logic, the instrumental objects of manteros – selling light bulbs or batteries – reflected a defiling presence. Proximity to such vending symbolically eroded the mythical character to which artistic production appealed. For the least privileged vendors, the mythical quality of art provided little material benefit for sales of everyday household products. Yet for those who strove for accumulating this mythical character with products requiring marginal artistic production (such as handicrafts), proximity to the most privileged vendors could represent an important advantage, while those lacking artistic products could easily decrease perceived value.

In order to maintain this status, however, it was important that vendors were perceived not as manteros but as artisans with recognizable legal rights to space. In the early 2000s, with the progressive administration of Aníbal Ibarra in office, some vendors sought specific forms of state recognition. These claims sought to create new categories of fairs, outside of those sanctioned by the only legally recognized fairs in the neighborhood: those of the Museum of the
City, which in addition to the antique fair in the Plaza Dorrego, had also sponsored a fine arts fair on the adjacent street of Humberto Primo.\footnote{A third “fine arts” fair with similar rules (located at Alsina and Defensa Street), sponsored by the city, emerged as space became limited at the second fair.}

The fine arts fair, however, had strict rules of entry and a non-transparent committee for selecting new artists. In general, the fair was full, and rarely did new spaces open up according to interviews with local vendors and participants. The criteria for selection, however, also embodied some of the invisible categories corresponding to the idea of art for art’s sake. Rather than artisans or handicrafts makers, who might use pre-made materials in their production process, the fine arts fair was mostly comprised of painters, many of whom worked full-time on their art.

This preference for full-time artists demonstrated the “aural” (Benjamin 1955) element of artistic production upon which many art markets are based. Paradoxically, the artist as a social figure is understood as outside the world of market relations, engaged in an activity that is something different than wage labor, with aesthetic rather than functional concerns. In order for art to capture this aural quality it must be presumed to come from a motivation of human expression, rather than crass materialism. That many of the new artisans were formerly middle-class individuals, desperately seeking to commercialize any possible skill they possessed, conflicted with this conception of the artist. If artistic production is conceived as an exchange relation in which increased production of similar products – as was the case of artisans and handicraft makers – motivates producers, the artistic products themselves lose this mythic quality.

The restricted access to the established fairs catalyzed organizing for the legalization of new fairs. Yet in order to position themselves as deserving subjects of state legalization, vendors
had to embody the social identity of artisans, not ambulant vendors. After an intense campaign for legalization, including making contact with various local legislators, and picketing streets in order to call attention to their cause, the city authorized a number of new fairs between 2002-2006.95

The new fairs had distinct social origins and political themes. For example, the new “Tango, Tradition, and First Peoples” fair was comprised of many formerly lower middle and middle-class residents whose politics consisted mainly of petitioning the local government for legalization. On the other hand, other fairs were tied to broader social movements, the Asamblea del Pueblo (Assembly of the People) social movement, a left wing group oriented toward housing struggles in the city but with broader political intentions centered upon “revolutionary struggle”. Other streets, such as the Pasaje San Lorenzo, had been organized by the city in order to attract more tourism to the neighborhood. This fair, like others under the orbit of the city government, protected its participants from legal harassment, at the expense of creating formidable barriers to entrance, requiring participants to submit to an approval process for their work, which would be judged by its artistic standards such as individual production and appropriateness for tourists.

The temporary granting of official permits for access to public space represented a new modality of governance in dealing with the effects of crisis. For example, the Asamblea del Pueblo had originally occupied a site underneath a highway, engaging in bartering, a practice that emerged during the most desperate days of the crisis. In order to evict them from this spot, they were offered access on Sunday to the Pasaje Giuffra in San Telmo, a single block alley with

95 Interview with artisan, 5/2013. The creation of the “Tango, Tradition, and Original People’s” fair on Humberto Primo was legalized after artisans took actions such as blocking nearby San Juan Avenue in protest.
high visibility from the Sunday fair. There they were allowed to sell handicrafts or collector items.

Blocks away, the “Tango, Tradition, and First People’s” fair also managed to eke out a tenuous form of permanence. For years these producers had sold artisanal products on the other side of the street, across from the Museum of the City’s fine arts fair. After being subject to police harassment, however, they mounted a campaign for legalization. They framed their struggle within a broader narrative of economic livelihood in the post-crisis period, connecting their cause to a local health center and devising a plan to donate a small fee to the center in exchange for the city’s permission. While this permit was managed through the Secretary of the Environment (later Public Space), it hardly represented a permanent practice. In fact, the original six-month permit would have to be renewed by the local state and the process for doing so was hardly institutionalized, but rather represented a complex form of governance through legal exception.

Piece-meal access to public space, then, represented a new modality of governance in dealing with the effects of crisis. The fairs that were not sponsored by the city government represented a way out of social and political pressure under which the city government of Aníbal Ibarra operated during a time of economic and social crisis. So long as participants could claim to be selling artisanal products, this represented an attractive option for the local state. Whereas the poorest vendors selling household goods attracted the attention and ire of powerful interest groups such as the Confederation of the Argentine Medium-Sized Firm (CAME), artisans generated less attention. In selling products that did not directly compete with “formal” merchants, pacifying these groups through legalization was a palatable proposition for both business and local government.
The early 2000s demonstrated the local state’s decision to avoid social conflicts emerging from crisis, with a desire to bring street activities under its control. A number of laws in 2001-2002 attempted to regulate the fairs for which the city had oversight. These tended to be the artisanal fairs that had operated for years under various city codes. The original 1992 code that had declared artisanship “of public interest”\(^\text{96}\) was modified by a number of new laws in 2001 and 2002. These laws attempted to cut the ties between street artisans with the Ministry of Culture, a tie that had been cultivated and institutionalized during the 1990s when the practice was still small in scale. Instead it reassigned application of the law and the bureaucratic functioning of artisan registration to new entities of “application and control”, including a process whereby artisanal work would be judged by the standards of a “Technical Inter-fair

\(^{96}\) Ordinance 46,075, 1992.
Commission” comprising delegates from the authorized fairs. These delegates, however, reproduced the artisan fairs as privileged (insofar as they were legal), mostly middle-class spaces. A 2007 ombudsman (Defensoría del Pueblo de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires) report states the following about the Technical Inter-Fair Commission: “The judges are also the permit-givers that discretionally decide […], being able to intervene subjectively over conflicts of interest… The complaints received allow us to infer the existence of pressures and manipulation for permits…” (Defensoría de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, 2007).

This paradoxical process of restriction and legalization represented a coherent if complex strategy on the part of the local state. While early artisans hardly were a threat to established businesses given their small numbers, unique products, and limited visibility, this permissiveness opened up the floodgates to informal vending of a more everyday type. To satisfy angry business groups the city government required new ways to classify artisans and exclude those who represented the greatest threat to local shops and urban order. Only by codifying distinctions between artisans and vendors could the city government manage these various pressures. While the most politically astute street vendors tended to have access to the knowledge and action necessary for becoming “official” artisan or handicraft maker, those selling everyday household goods were the most precarious, and in many cases, immigrants, with few of the required connections. Though the process of entering into an artisan fair appeared democratic, with elected delegates deciding new artisans’ placement, in fact the system was structurally organized to reproduce the relative privilege of these artisans. By legalizing certain fairs if they produced handmade products, while leaving others to exist without official government support, allowed for a large degree of discretion on the part of the city government. Consequently, the city could

97 Decreto 435, 2002; Decreto 871
potentially satisfy divergent interest groups, while impeding, if necessary, those who had little political power or voice in local politics.

The city government of Ibarra managed these contradictions carefully, offering certain vendors other spaces for commercialization when local merchants contested their presence. In 2004 a new penal code was passed, which years later was to have a far-reaching impact on the politics of urban vending. A little-considered sentence, indicating that vending in service to “mere substance” would not be criminalized became the object of high-stakes social and political struggle. As a legislator, Helio Robot, from the city government’s party trying to revise this 2004 law to be more restrictive in 2011 claimed,

Let us remember that in 2004 we had all the streets of the city, the parks etc. with an extremely high level of disorganization as a product of the crisis, basically generated starting from the years 2001 and 2002, which made almost all the perimeters of the parks and all public space that was free, occupied fully by neighbors who did not have another way to subsist, and what’s more, had lost their jobs. Let’s remember the context of the crisis, and let’s remember also that in this moment was born, developed, and expanded the so-called “Barter Club”...This mechanism of barter was taken up that practically returned us in economic terms to the paleontological era. (Legislatura Porteña 2011: 454).

This legislator is framing the issue as one of crisis verses normality. If economic crisis caused widespread informality, then the return of jobs and stability would foreclose upon these types of activities. Yet far from being concerned with the informal activities of the entire city, the terms of this struggle and legislative debate centered upon the city’s most prestigious pedestrian shopping street, the calle Florida. For years vendors selling everyday products competed with the formal stores on the street. These were not artisans or handicraft products, but wholesale purses, jewelry, and clothing said to be driving local stores out of business. After years of high-profile

98 For example, after complaints about vendors by businesses on the high-rent Florida Street, the government gave them a space on the Avenida de Mayo called the Artisanal Passage (Paseo Artesanal).
denunciations in the press and among storeowners and their lobby – the Confederation of Argentine Medium-sized Firm (CAME) – the local government sought, in 2011, to revise the law to eliminate the “mere subsistence” clause.

Law 4121: Regulating Informality, Building a World City

In 2011, Macri’s government proposed a new law, 4121, which took a harder line against vending than had the prior center-left Ibarra administration. The focus of the city government’s action against illegal vending was largely concerned with the city center. While the new law would restrict the practice across the city – even that vending undertaken out of “mere subsistence” – there were clear urban objectives that characterized the political discussion over 4121. The law sought to do two things: for one, it exerted new bureaucratic control over existing fairs that had been legalized ad hoc in the preceding decade. It codified their dominant “theme” – e.g. whether they were artisan, handicraft or otherwise. But the law was most clearly connected to the removal of vendors from Florida Street, which became the center of the legislative debate and the discourse of the local government. According to this narrative, “mafias” ran the selling of everyday goods, profiting off of the precarity and exclusion of the city’s underclass. The city government thereby cast the restricting of this type of vending as a tool for eradicating “mafias” rather than a detriment to the urban poor. The governing party thus sought to gain support for the law by appealing to the need to normalize the situation of vendors and defend them from “mafias” who were exploiting their labor. As one opposition legislator, Gabriela Cerrutti, supporting the legislation put it:

99 The few exceptions were those connected to the Museum of the City, who resisted this transfer, arguing that the work of the artist/artisan had to be regulated by those with aesthetic as well as administrative knowledge of the practice (interview with artist…)

205
We have to help to find the necessary tools to combat these mafias, that, among other things, exploit – as well explained the legislator Basteiro – those who put themselves on the line (poner la cara), their bodies, and those who effectively are on the street and who in many cases are not workers that are exercising their rights, rather exploited people who are sent to put themselves on the line in that space. (Legislatura Porteña 2011: 435)

By suggesting that workers were exploited by mafias, the rhetoric in favor of the law sought to show that there were benefits for workers in outlawing certain vending practices. If the “mere subsistence” clause were eliminated, the mafias selling everyday wholesale products would not be able to continue putting workers into potentially dangerous or illegal situations.

The new law also incorporated all existing ad hoc fairs into the Ministry of Public Space’s orbit. In general, these fairs were devoted to artisans and handicrafts. Aware of the possible political ramifications of evicting large amounts of vendors, the law allowed a number of existing non-artisan fairs to remain, citing the desire to preserve the vendors’ jobs. One of the redactors of the new law, Patricio Di Stefano, suggested that the law in fact benefited artisans and vendors. According to his view, it increased vending by specifically legalizing hundreds of fair spaces outside of the city center, creating “over 1000 new jobs”. These fairs were dedicated to the same kinds of goods being sold on Florida Street, suggesting that the government’s arguments against the Florida Street vendors had to do more with their vision for that part of the city, than with informal vending more generally.

During the legislative debate, a member of the opposition, Laura García Tuñón, echoed this contradiction “What are we going to do with these people? They don’t exist? We are going to sweep them under the rug because they don’t exist? With this project we are saying: ‘they don’t exist’, but they really do exist…I think that Article 83 in particular seeks to modify the [idea of] mere subsistence, it throws it out. But ends up so useless for its purpose as it would be to prohibit poverty…” (Legislatura Porteña 2011: 442).
The city government was, according to this view, trying to hide poverty rather than finding solutions to it. As a legislative aid working for a legislator opposed to the new law told me in an interview, the local state was most concerned with being able to regulate the city’s “spaces of globalization” and was not necessarily with the city’s public spaces writ large. According to him, spaces of globalization responded to those areas that attracted international tourism.

The above characterizations point to some of the broader urban transformations the city government sought to catalyze with the new law. In reality the law did not fundamentally change the legality of public vending; it simply did away with one of the legal arguments that had been used to protect ambulant vendors. Vending itself, for subsistence or otherwise, was not strictly illegal, rather it was prohibited if it represented “disloyal competition” – a term used to describe ambulant vending in front of formal stores. Why, then, had the city government fought so vigorously for the elimination of the “mere subsistence” clause? Doing away with this clause allowed the government to claim disloyal competition on Florida Street and potentially elsewhere. The removal of vendors from Florida Street was a requisite for the restructuring of the Microcentro along touristic lines, a process that would begin shortly after their eviction.

Otherwise, informal vending proceeded largely unchanged in the rest of the city, allowing the government much discretion. And indeed, in places like San Telmo, new legalizations had increased the area where vending was permissible. It is noteworthy that the new law opened up almost all of calle Defensa for vending on Sunday with the exception of roughly five blocks. The area of antiques stores, from the Avenida Independencia to the Plaza Dorrego. This situation was not a coincidence. It represented a concession to the antique dealers who opposed vendors selling
in front of their stores. The artisan collective, El Adoquin, however, refused to abide by the new law. They remained on Defensa Street precisely where they had been.

**Tenuous Privilege: Informal and Formal Belonging**

**Informal Gatekeeping**

The northern block of Defensa Street, closest to the Executive mansion are the least attractive to vendors. They are far from the Plaza Dorrego, the center of the original fair, and tourists are unlikely to walk so many blocks. Departing from the Plaza de Mayo, the city’s central square, the first blocks of the fair are crammed with wholesale items: scarves, perfume, souvenir trinkets, DVDs, and the occasional handicraft. According to many of the more privileged vendors, these stands are run by “mafias”, sellers of wholesale goods who employ informal vendors, often immigrants, who are paid only a fraction of the sales made. Indeed many of the vendors here are Bolivian and Peruvian immigrants, who generally have legal status given Argentina’s progressive immigration laws, yet are nonetheless often subject to discrimination and police harassment (Grimon 2006; 2005). Their products do not provide any of the added value or mythical artistic character able to generate higher prices elsewhere in the fair.
Economic activity is, of course, made up of socially mediated processes. Unlike economic conceptions of markets as relying merely on a symmetry of information and the laws of supply and demand, sociologists have come up with more complex notions of how markets reflect particular values, moralities, and socially constituted rules of exchange. These insights suggest that the economy is not just embedded in social processes (Granovetter 1992) but “relational” in that they are comprised of an infinite number of interpersonal social relations, practices, and shared beliefs (Zelizer 2010; 2012). In the case of San Telmo, a market is produced by a number of taken-for-granted ideas and practices relating to what goods are appropriate, more or less valuable, or morally superior. These constructions of value are mediated by how products are appraised by outsiders; in other words, the forms of evaluation and appreciation used by tourists. Every interaction represents both a monetary exchange but
also a complicated exchange of codes and socially meaningful symbols. Vendors invoke particular framings or strategies apt for different kinds of situations, representing a tool kit (Swidler 1986) of cultural goods that may be deployed differently given the nature of the situation at hand.

But it is important to keep in mind that these strategies are not neutral or available to all. As Garcia Canclini (1995) notes, even traditional culture has become commodified in that it is now subject to the kinds of modern production processes that lend it a value in the market. Cultural strategies are stratified in hierarchical form, evident in the social and physical boundaries of the San Telmo market. These “uses” of culture structure both the internal differentiation and social dynamics of the San Telmo fair, as well as the market interaction itself in terms of pricing.

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Walking further toward the Plaza Dorrego, the fair becomes increasingly artisanal. Beatriz, a middle-class artisan in her late 20s sits on a block that represents one of the first of those displaying handicrafts and artisanal goods. Beatriz and her fellow artisans demonstrate the hidden mechanisms of symbolic ownership of the street.

Beatriz proudly claims that the artisans here took over this block informally. These practices were particularly important prior to establishing an internal organization for the block. She explains that during this period rules were made on the spot: “The rules aren’t written, they’re more tacit”, she says. “Here the city doesn’t interfere. It’s the street, it’s free, we organize however we can…Now we have an internal organization,” she explains, “but before it was just like if someone came over here [trying to sell wholesale goods], you as an artisan would just be like, ‘excuse me, no, get up, here, you can’t sell that, you’ll have to leave, you can’t be here.’”
Beatriz’s conception of “the street” suggests the idea of a chaotic public sphere where individuals must create organization through informal negotiation, “however they can.” Yet Beatriz and her group’s symbolic ownership of this space shows how rights and belonging are not universally accessible but stratified by claims to legitimate forms of culture and art. Beatriz and her block have now organized internally, with a street delegate who evaluates the appropriateness of the goods of any potential newcomer. Yet prior to this formal mode of boundary creation, the block was already inaccessible to those unable to conform to their standards of cultural production.

Beatriz’s block of artisans does not exclude non-artisans out of malice. They are, however, mindful of the value of their own work. The presence of non-artisans calls into question the authenticity of their production. While many artisans frame their struggle within this context, expressing solidarity with the least privileged vendors, they too have internalized the subjectivities that systematically exclude some vendors from the most prized spaces of the street, which require a set of tools and knowledge that are restrictive.

Beatriz and others like her at the fair do not need to resort to brute force or physical strength to protect the symbolic purity of their space. Rather, they have a much more powerful set of claims at their disposal. Their work blends a repertoire of privileged practices with a sense of belonging, the stakes of which are physical sites of the city (Centner 2008). Their artisanal work appeals both to the dominant cultural values of the neighborhood, which have been produced by powerful public institutions and individuals, as well as an artistic identity that corresponds to these values.

It is worth noting, however, that these artisans are deploying a particular set of cultural repertoires – a specific strategy or “toolkit” to achieve commercial success and moral authority
over this space. The contours of this toolkit may be creatively applied by individuals, yet it is not available to all. Rather, it is stratified by a set of social backgrounds and access to particular knowledge.

A block away from Beatriz is Daniel, a vendor in his early 50s with wiry greying hair in a ponytail, and darker skin than many of the artisans selling on his block. He is selling handmade jewelry identified as “indigenous” for its blend of metals with exotic multi-color stones that are not easily identifiable. A book entitled Mapuche Art is sitting prominently on his table next to his jewelry, though when I ask Daniel if he is from the Mapuche community he says no. He is from outside Buenos Aires. Daniel buys sheets of metal and spends his week making his jewelry and sometimes selling at other fairs outside of the city, where he lives, in the lower-middle class western municipality of Palomar. Daniel is not one of the most privileged vendors; he does not have a university degree, nor was he a formal full-time worker prior to the crisis, as many of the vendors are. Instead, his background is more related to the early forms of artisanal production in the city. Indeed Daniel says that he has done this for the last 30 years, sometimes taking up odd-jobs (changas) to get by.

Daniel, however, is not among the least privileged vendors either. His smaller pieces such as earrings sell for 50 to 100 pesos (about $6-12 USD at the time of the interview), which in the local context is a meaningful sum. His cultural capital in terms of knowing other middle-class vendors and being able to achieve a place on this street of artisans allows him to avoid the value-deteriorating experience of selling with those at the beginning of Defensa who do not possess the proper repertoires of knowledge necessary for selling to tourists. Daniel also refers to these groups as “Peruvian mafias” explaining to me that Peruvians will sell anything anywhere with no scruples.
Those most likely to be of an indigenous identity to which Daniel’s work appeals, such as the Bolivian or Peruvian vendors, do not have the symbolic capital to monetize this identity. They likely lack the institutionalized training, foreign language skills, or political connections that would provide access to privileged spaces on the street or the artistic representations sought after by tourists. This set of shared meanings between artisans and tourists require artisans to represent themselves with the proper aura of authenticity, a representation that already implies a complex repertoire of cultural knowledge.

In order to perceive the deployment of culture in the context of a local market, it is helpful to move beyond the “how” that has been the focus of much sociological research. In other words, an important aspect of “relational” processes considers how actors choose among competing strategies and discourses – i.e. which cultural tools they invoke in service to desired outcomes. These socio-cognitive processes are important, yet may occlude other significant questions of “why”. These “why” questions require inquiry into why actors are capable of mobilizing particular frames or strategies and the way in which these strategies are unequally distributed, constraining action in addition to providing individuals with a competing range of interactional strategies.

Two blocks south of Daniel on Defensa, culture’s unevenly distributed resources is apparent in the minimalist ceramic bowls being sold by Pablo. Pablo is an artist by trade who has been selling on the calle Defensa for the last three years and at fairs throughout the city since 2003. Prior to that he had sold his work to middle-men working for stores selling pottery. In this sense, despite his position outside the formal labor market, economic crisis directly transformed his location in the local economy. With sales down, and middlemen cutting into his bottom line, Pablo took to selling on the street. His cement pottery is carefully painted with austere,
minimalist colors and he remarks that his clients are mostly European and particular types of North Americans – not Brazilians who prefer “flashier” kinds of art. He himself is middle class and in the past has owned with his partner a number of stores where he sold his art (“I’m not a businessman, I’m an artist” he remarks with regard to the fate of the stores).

Work on the calle Defensa does not just involve the transactional process of buying and selling but also the more intense labor of performance. It requires “emotional labor” (Woueter 1989) – the active production of artisanship that departs from the transactional work of those selling pre-manufactured goods. As a middle-class artist selling to a mostly middle-class public, Pablo is able to generate value through a particular kind of alignment of expectations and performance with his public. His demeanor is calm, not that of someone trying to make the “hard sell”. He does not come across as needing to make a sale – he watches confidently over his goods, sometimes answering a question in English, French, or Spanish, and while we talk for 30 minutes, he seems to have sold close to 2,000 pesos worth of pottery (roughly $250 USD).

Pablo’s relatively high levels of cultural knowledge afford him certain privileges within the structure of the artisan fair. Pablo is on a block that is mostly ceded to the cooperativistas of El Adoquín, though he is not a part of their cooperative. He is friends with those who sell at the corner, the activists of El Asamblea del Pueblo on the Pasaje Giuffra. The owner of the formal gallery in front of him normally gives street artisans a hard time but Pablo has come to an arrangement with the owners whereby he pays a small amount to use the sidewalk in front of their store. Pablo’s ability to remain is connected to his access to these social networks. He does not, however, opt for involvement in their organizations, at one point suggesting that the militancy of the Asamblea del Pueblo might have made sense in 2001-2002, but now seems a bit over the top. Nonetheless, social networks and the advantage generated by repertoires of
knowledge – including the legal knowledge that makes his presence technically illegal but complex from a penal perspective – allow him to reap particular material benefits. Pablo exerts a type of informal tenuous privilege, unconnected to official institutions of power.

This type of belonging through the leveraging of cultural capital is also demonstrated by Juan, a photographer positioned a block or two north of Pablo, just next to the antique vendors on the Plaza Dorrego. Juan’s photographs are large and playful. Realist streetscapes of Buenos Aires coexist with elements of the bizarre, humans emerging from suitcases, or elderly women carrying guns. The photos are complemented by the eclectic style of Juan himself, who wears a scarf, rings with large stones, thick glasses and spiked grey hair. Juan lived for many years selling his art in Europe, has shown his work in various studio and gallery spaces, and sells each photograph for about 200 pesos. He is physically situated in one of the most privileged sites of the entire fair, just next to the Plaza Dorrego, as though he himself were part of the original antique fair. Unlike many of the vendors working in the street, Juan did not begin his work as an artisan following economic crisis. In this sense, he is similar to the antique vendors in the plaza, many of whom have been engaged in the activity for years, rather than taking up the activity as a response to unemployment or poverty.

Juan is not protected by a formal institution such as the Museum of the City, but his tenuous belonging in this prized location is owed to his ability to make meaningful alliances with those that might otherwise deny him this spot. Not just anyone can occupy a piece of sidewalk technically controlled by the only “official” institution operating in the area – the Museum of the City – which protects those under its bureaucratic control. But Juan is middle-class, artistically inclined, and shares a background with many of the antique vendors in the plaza. When asked how he manages to be in this space, he says he is friends with some of the vendors in the plaza
and that so long as he doesn't take up too much space, he can remain. These type of informal alliances show how individuals construct multiple and differentiated strategies to achieve their economic aims. Absent formal ties with local institutions of power, informal associations with privileged sectors may result in better outcomes. Yet again, these associations are far from random. They are patterned in such a way that those of higher social standing in the area maintain the most privileged connections to local institutions and their forms of legitimation.

Figure 35: Juan, selling his photographs. Behind him are the stands of the “official” Plaza Dorrego antique vendors

Formal Politics: Mobilizing Networks
The first stretch of vendors recede into the Avenida Independencia, which separates an area legalized by the 2011 law from the blocks ceded to the antique galleries. But these blocks have not in fact been given over without conflict. El Adoquín has remained on these blocks, despite police harassment and the increasingly angry antiques gallery owners and their business group, The Association of Antiquarians of San Telmo. El Adoquín is led by David and Cecilia. Cecilia is an activist in her late 40s with deep political ties and allegiances to the Evita Movement (Movimiento Evita), a social movement connected to the national government. In fact, El Adoquín is aligned with the Federation of Popular Economy Workers (CTEP), an organization that has attempted to organize informal sectors of the economy arguing that globalization has produced widespread precarious work and is a reality that must be recognized rather than criminalized.

The cooperativistas from El Adoquín represent a broad section of lower-middle class and working class individuals. Few, however, are immigrants or from the poorest backgrounds. Some live in the less expensive areas of the capital, while many live in the rust-belt municipalities surrounding the city. El Adoquín must police the boundaries of members’ behavior and sales activity if the blocks where vendors sell are to be recognized as artisanal.

On the 1000 block of Defensa early on a Sunday morning Hilda approaches David. Hilda is in her late 30s and lives in the neighborhood. She too would like to sell on Defensa and has been told to speak with David about acquiring a spot. “Not today” she is told, “come back next week early in the morning to see if there is a spot available”. “What is it that you sell?” David asks. “You know, these headbands like the one I’m wearing.” David looks skeptical. “Yeah ok, well come back next week, but you know you have to make them yourselves, nothing from
Once\(^{100}\) can be sold on this block.” At another point during the day, a sudden commotion seems to erupt. There are loud voices and another vendor comes jogging over to David. An African immigrant has tried to sit on the block where the cooperativistas are set up. David goes and talks to her, and returns satisfied, she has left. He laments the situation of these lower-status vendors – they are used, he says, sent by the mafias to sell wholesale goods, receiving little in return.

Weeks later, at a meeting at the Confederation of the Popular Economy in the working-class neighborhood of Constitución, María, a clothing designer, explains a capacity building program that will provide members with assistance in marketing and merchandizing. Moments later, Cecilia enters the building, late from another appointment and starts to explain current strategies of the cooperative. “I have some good news, comrades (compañeros),” she says. The order to evict them from Defensa Street had been temporarily revoked by a judge. “But we can’t let down our guard,” Cecilia cautions, the city government can appeal, and according to her sources, the judge who will hear the appeal has a family member that is an antique dealer.

Cecilia’s formidable social networks, knowledge, and activism in local politics represents one way in which Adoquin members assure their continued presence on the street. Cecilia proceeds to outline strategies for creating associations with local actors and institutions. In each of these cases, it is Cecilia and others’ mobilization of middle-class networks and subjectivities that generally provide the most material benefit in their dealings with powerful institutions and individuals such as the local state and antique storeowners.

In organizing for a day of publicity and a press-conference meant to counter negative coverage documenting “chaos” in San Telmo throughout much of 2013 (Rios 2013), Cecilia notes that having the head of her political movement, known for his fiery class rhetoric and

\(^{100}\) Once is a neighborhood with a high concentration of wholesale businesses in which informal vending proliferates.
disheveled appearance, will not help their cause. Instead, she is trying to get the country’s former Minister of Foreign Affairs (canciller) and supporter of Movimiento Evita, to come publicize the vendors’ work. He is more acceptable to the middle-class residents, she says, well respected by people across the political spectrum, and will represent a more palatable figure for wooing local residents. Additional plans include handing out hot chocolate and putting on street shows for neighborhood kids, as well as creating a catalog of the cooperativistas’ artisanal products in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. Cecilia is appealing to the cultural values of community and the potential ability of El Adoquín to be a part of this community. Anything that will enhance local resident’s impression of El Adoquín enhances their legitimacy in a neighborhood in which residents symbolize authenticity against the sweeping tide of commercial gentrification and foreign tourism.

This complex set of discursive strategies is expressed concretely in the cooperative’s branding: “El Adoquín en Defensa de San Telmo: Trabajo digno hecho a mano” (El Adoquín on Defensa in San Telmo: Dignified work made by hand”). The title plays on the fact that the vendors sell on the calle Defensa, which in this case is polysemic and can be read as “in defense of San Telmo” or “on Defensa [street] in San Telmo”. The naming accomplishes a number of things. It ties the cooperative to a defense of an authentic version of San Telmo, while also appealing to the dignity of workers and the authenticity of hand-made goods. If San Telmo has an essence of “authenticity” linked with cultural and artistic production and diffusion, and the workers can embody this essence, they have a right to physically be there.

Yet in order to mark the cooperative as legitimate in the neighborhood, not all practices can be allowed on the street. Halfway through the meeting at the Confederation for the Popular Economy, a woman in her 40s gets up and makes a request. Her son is 16 and she is having
trouble paying her rent. He has bought some t-shirts wholesale that he has altered with a new design and wants to sell on the street to help the family make some money. Her tone is pleading and everyone at the meeting seems moved. But surprisingly, Cecilia is firm and the other vendors agree. Her selling t-shirts on the street is a threat to the authenticity of all of them. If she starts with t-shirts, where will this end? Other members provide solidarity but remain unyielding with regard to her request. Her son can come to another vendor’s leather studio, tell him to learn a trade, then he can sell on the street with the rest of us. In this way, vendors collectively police their behavior and that of other members to ensure their access to the symbolic capital that maintains the value of their products. The threat of contaminating symbols might disrupt the shared meanings that congeal during market transactions between buyers and sellers.

Cecilia and the cooperative thereby produce powerful forms of symbolism and create associations with multiple actors in order to further their economic aims. Yet it is worth pointing out that these actors and the cultural meanings invoked are not equally available to all. Access is based on a hierarchy of tools of cultural knowledge. Cecilia’s savvy at navigating this hierarchy, deploying certain symbolic strategies for some situations, while recognizing that others require a different set of maneuvers allows the cooperative to maintain a foothold in the lucrative tourist market. These strategies are multiple, situational, and often creatively applied or ignored, yet they are not chosen at random.

Creating a formal catalogue of their products in English and Portuguese, for example, requires a repertoire of knowledge that is socially patterned differently than the bilingualism in reach of Peruvian vendors at the northern end of the street. Access to English and Portuguese generates material benefits, but indigenous languages are positioned lower within a hierarchy of beneficial cultural tools.
El Adoquín represents a formal association and institutionalized form in which individuals with lower cultural capital create linkages with institutions and more powerful grassroots actor to generate their right to be on the street. On the one hand, this may produce a significant advantage for those otherwise unprotected from the state institutions working to eliminate street vending. In some cases, however, it also represents a different form of power and coercion. The lowest status vendors who have inserted themselves into the global flows of tourism in San Telmo rely upon the mostly middle class and politically connected vendors who organize and associate with agents of the state. This is the case of Ricardo, a Peruvian artist in his mid 40s who paints utopic scenes of indigenous life in his home country. Ricardo has been in Argentina for three years and has sold in San Telmo for two. At first he sought to sell his paintings with the other artistas plásticos that surround the Plaza Dorrego, run by the Museum of the City, and the most prized location for artists at the Sunday fair. But the other artists told him that he could not stay there, that he should move to the street Tango, Tradition, and Indigenous Art, a block away, one of the fairs legalized in the early 2000s and unconnected to the Museum of the City. There he was told by the other artisans that he could have a table once per month.

When I speak with Pedro, a local delegate for that block, about how the city has tried to regulate these spaces, he invokes a familiar trope. The city wants to police the activities of these vendors, creating registries and means of enforcing certain artistic standards. The vendors, however, are self-organizing, Pedro, (who formerly was a formal salaried worker prior to the

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So far, the 2011 law, 4121 that formally legalized fairs such as that of “Tango, Tradtition, and Original Peoples” was never implemented (reglamentado). It remains a source of legal defense for the vendors, without having created the registries and systems of regulation that it stipulated.
economic crisis), says. They have created delegates for their blocks and decide who will get a space. “If a space opens up, usually we know someone, someone’s family members or friend who wants a spot. We organize things ourselves without the city government.” This fairly common discourse frames the local state as undemocratic, while the organizers of the various fairs and streets represent grass-roots democracy. Yet there are hidden ways in which these processes reproduce advantage for some while foreclosing on physical access to the street among others. Ricardo’s position within this form of organization is precarious. Lacking association with any institution of power himself, he relies upon the better organized, more middle-class, and more privileged vendors. Their history of struggle and alignment with local institutions such as the health center represents one way in which cultural capital includes and excludes within a context framed by marginality and survival strategies.

Ricardo’s vending also shows how value is a relational process whereby the social identities of buyers and sellers align in particular constellations that produce higher or lower values for the work being sold. Unlike some of the more privileged artisans, Ricardo works during the week at a bakery in order to make ends meet. He too takes a somewhat relaxed approach to tourists eyeing his work. He is demure and answers questions only when asked. The value of his paintings (which sell for around 300 pesos) is not necessarily related to his similar social location to his public, but rather his distance from them. It is through navigating these subtle regimes of meaning and representation that allows differentiated groups of artisans to generate value. These meanings are, of course, constantly in flux, and they must cohere to the expectations and identities of the buyers themselves.

Because the public itself is generally middle-class, sellers who wish to create high levels of added value must engage in particular performances of the self. For Pedro and Ricardo for
example, these performances are necessarily quite different. Pedro’s appeal to the aural/unknowable (Benjamin, 1955) is in a sense characterized by the broader conception of the artist as herself/himself middle class and engaged in a process of production that is characterized not by functionality, but by aesthetic concerns. Ricardo too appeals to this type of imaginary. Though in his case it is the unknowability of a differentiated social identity and location that seems to produce value for the middle-class public. Among a cosmopolitan audience, scenes of campesinos from his homeland are likely to be valued not necessarily for their purported artistic aural purity but for their localist discourse. Pedro for example characterizes European tourists as the having the highest status and most cultivated artistic taste, while Brazilians were perceived to be at the bottom of this hierarchy. Yet in my observation of Ricardo’s stand, Brazilian tourists seemed to be among the most likely to stop and consider purchasing his art. These buyers perhaps found the images of peasant life in the Peruvian highlands sufficiently foreign so as to lend the paintings’ localist discourse an air of unknowability and authenticity. In either case, these situations illustrate the constant negotiation that takes place around the performance of legitimate artistic identities and the linked nature of performance, culture, and the public.

Culture(s) of Poverty: Engaging Production at the Margins

On a gray chilly day in August, I approach the former Padelai orphanage, a gray building at an important local intersection. The Padelai is an imposing stone construction that had been occupied by dozens of families since the 1980s. But in 2003, 128 families were evicted from the building with the city government citing structural problems and the risk of collapse. The site was later slated to become a Spanish cultural center. The city subsidized the project by providing the Spanish government with a 30-year rent-free lease in exchange for the building’s upgrade.
The current Minister of Culture for the city suggested that the conversion would help create a new “cultural pole” in the south of city. But Spain’s economic crisis left the building in disuse and informal occupants reappeared in early 2012.

As I approach, I notice a police car parked out front. I am told by the police not to enter the building. A court case will decide the fate of those living in the building and in the meantime no new inhabitants are to enter. I enter through a back gate, encouraged by Tomás a shorter man in his early 50s who seems unconcerned by the police out front. Tomás has lived in the San Telmo neighborhood off and on for some 30 years. Like many of the occupants of the Padelai he moved to Buenos Aires in the early 1980s from the impoverished northern province of Jujuy. In the late 1980s, Tomás and fellow residents petitioned the city government to be incorporated as a cooperative and to gain legal possession of the complex. Architectural renders were created, funding was secured by the city, and hopes were high among the cooperativistas. Tomás proudly shows me the 20 year-old professional architectural blueprints. But hyperinflation and economic crisis, a change in city policy, and increased land values from the redevelopment of the nearby waterfront scuttled plans for city funding.

The conflict over the Padelai illustrates how new configurations of culture geared toward international tourism exclude those forms that do not contribute to touristic redevelopment. Tomás believes the Padelai to be an important historical site in the neighborhood, recalling with ease the 19th century date of its foundation. We descend a dark stairwell, through a basement bedroom with a couple sleeping to find a centennial underground passage that years ago led to a local hospital across the street. Connecting the contemporary sense of marginalization felt by the cooperativistas, Tomás says that the use of the underground tunnel was a form of keeping orphaned children invisible from the neighborhood’s higher status residents.
But this story departs from local tourist narratives oriented toward the commodification of the neighborhood’s culture for international visitors. For Tomás the history of the orphanage as a place for marginalized, orphaned children meant that the building should be preserved for marginalized (“popular”) groups today. In explaining the suspended plans for the cultural center, Tomás laments the destruction of the building that occurred as preliminary construction began. Unlike the local state, which strove to frame redevelopment as a preservation policy contributing to the neighborhood’s revitalization through the building of a “cultural pole”, Tomás cast the use of the building for popular sectors without access to housing as representing an “authentic” history of the building and neighborhood.

While artisans generally present themselves as protecting the interests of the neighborhood’s popular sectors, the Sunday Street fair provides few opportunities to members of the Padelai cooperative who may lack the connections and forms of knowledge, tools, and capital that can be converted into material advantage. Recently, however, this has changed. The Padelai cooperative has taken to organizing its own festival on Sunday on its sprawling premises, offering folk music, 10 peso sausage sandwiches and a number of other homemade foods. Oddly, this festival invokes a rather different set of representations and symbolic forms than the rest of the San Telmo market. It is called the “Patio Provincial” (Provincial Patio), with folkloric music, dance, and food from the country’s rural provinces, such as Tomás’ native Jujuy.
The invocation of “provincial” Argentina conjures a number of socially meaningful representations. The provincial culture being produced is not that of the wealthiest industrial centers of the country, but the mythic culture of the poorest, connected to the colonial creole past long mythologized in Argentina as untouched by modernity and the European immigration that characterized the development of cities like Buenos Aires (Prieto 1988; De Jong 2005; Sarlo 1982). In the Padelai’s sprawling patio there is dancing, drinking, and a band playing Argentine folk music. Some international tourists look perplexed, while the boldest join in the festivities. Yet when I ask three young women, all with light-brown hair and familiar local accents about the band, I am told that they came down together with their friends from the large (and relatively prosperous) city of Rosario, some three hours away. They and the band are in Buenos Aires.
playing for free for a good cause and hanging out in the capital for leisure. Compared to the
members of the cooperative, many of whom are from the distant provinces that represent the
inspiration for their music, the band members are likely unconnected to the provincial culture
being commercialized. Most of those attending are Argentine. But they are mostly lighter
skinned than the residents of the Padelai and largely from Buenos Aires. Yet they appear excited
at the prospect of a more authentic cultural experience. Some are politically aware of the
Padelai’s situation and keen to partake in popular offerings in the neighborhood.

Here, then, culture is being used as a legitimation strategy as well. It is one that mobilizes
culture for profit, yet departs from the instrumentalization produced by the city government in its
urban policies in San Telmo. The “cultural pole” the city sought to cement with the construction
of a Spanish cultural center and its proximity to the refurbished Museum of Modern Art a block
away, conflicts with the current cultural strategies of the Padelai. The scenes of poverty and
informality that characterize this site do not cohere with the dominant touristic image that has
come to define the neighborhood.

Yet in recognizing the social power embedded in the idea of culture in the district, the
cooperative residents have been able to mobilize cultural practices to their benefit and legitimize
their right to commercialize this culture. With the cultural capital provided by their networks and
grassroots organizing, the residents of the Padelai appear to have skillfully constructed more than
a spectacle of poverty. This is not a favela tour, but rather taps into the discourse of authenticity
represented by the neighborhood itself and its dominant tourism narrative based on elegance and
decay. What separates the members of the Padelai from the most precarious vendors at the
market is their ability to combine the raw materials of a privileged space in the neighborhood
with linkages to other actors and networks.
Conclusions

All of these complex associational strategies suggest the way in which cultural forms, global flows, and urban spaces represent a new field of conflict for cities undergoing processes of tourist-led redevelopment. In the case of Buenos Aires, the terms of struggle can be seen in conflict over the definition of artisanal products, over what is the “authentic” essence of the city’s historic center and who can embody it, and over the terms of access to the lucrative tourist market in the form of sales of goods.

While studies of tourism in globalizing cities have tended to emphasize conflicts over rising rents and the impact of outsiders on local communities, less work has been done to understand how the connections between culture and inequality are reshaped by these global tourist flows. On the one hand, the privileging of vernacular forms of culture, essential to the increased emphasis on “authentic” experiences, might provide socially and economically marginalized groups access to new resources and labor markets. On the other, those with the ability to define the contours of authenticity often do so in ways that benefit their own forms of cultural production.

Debates over the value of particular artistic forms might appear to be obscure conflicts internal to local producers. But as the above cases make clear, they can also be used to establishing symbolic ownership over new sites of touristic development. Forms of gatekeeping may rely upon existing forms of stratification. But cultural producers improvise new tactics, strategies of representation, and associational links if they are to benefit from tourism-led dynamics of urban redevelopment.
What is clear in each of these struggles is the centrality of physical spaces of the city in the construction and maintenance of these boundaries. While access to repertoires of cultural knowledge may be stratified, public spaces of the city are purportedly accessible to all. Here too, processes of social power reshape the ability of individuals to benefit from the city’s touristic upgrade. Some social connections, forms of knowledge, and systems of representation may yield concrete benefits, while others prove of little assistance. While poor and working-class groups may be systematically disadvantaged in a struggle to display the appropriate mechanisms of belonging in urban space, the field of touristic production is hardly so straightforward. In an era characterized by claims to the authentic, marginalized residents may find themselves with the raw materials of culture that can be parlayed into economic benefit under a specific set of conditions, and may find creative strategies for reaping some of the benefits of the increasing visitor economy.
Chapter 6: Conclusion: Culture and Crisis in the Global City

Economic restructuring has reshaped the role and importance of cities in the contemporary economy. No longer sites for manufacturing, many cities are shedding their industrial infrastructure to compete for investment, residents, and visitors from extra-local sources. Public policies, urban spaces, and forms of regulation are reshaped as municipal governments seek out new investment and growth. Areas that previously attracted little attention have become potential sites for the entertainment, leisure, and consumption activities that characterize the “new economy.”

These processes required novel forms of state innovation in Buenos Aires, generating new modalities of urban regulation, strategies of survival among residents, and the reshaping of cultural production and urban space. Summarized below are the three areas in which these processes can be observed: in the form of neighborhood upgrade or gentrification of the historic center, in the global urban toolkit that has influenced the local state’s plans for growth, and in the role of culture in post-industrial urban restructuring. Here I briefly review some key findings, while pointing to possible directions for future research.

The Postindustrial “Culture” City

In search for the creative residents, consumption-based industries, and visitors that have come to characterize post-industrial urban economies, city governments have paid increased attention to the place-marketing and image-making strategies that allow cities to compete at the global scale. As a part of this symbolic economy, local culture has allowed cities to differentiate themselves from other urban “brands”. In the contemporary period, municipal leaders may especially value these new culture-led forms of urbanism because they attract the highly
educated and affluent populations comprising a “creative class” of professionals. This study on Buenos Aires’ urban restructuring has shown how the local state came to see culture as a new object of government policy, capable of stimulating new economic activities such as heritage, entertainment, and tourism. In a period in which local governance in Buenos Aires was limited by economic crisis, culture offered a non-capital intensive growth sector, which the local state recognized as an economic opportunity.

This dissertation examined how culture and creativity represented opportunities for catalyzing growth after a devastating economic crisis. Post-industrial activities rooted in cultural production came to represent an important way of overcoming crisis for successive city administrations. In doing so, the local state has reshaped and expanded the dimensions of the city center, bringing disinvested neighborhoods into the fold of areas designated for consumption and tourism, while contributing to a rise in real estate prices. In turn, conflicts over who belongs in these spaces as well as who can exercise symbolic ownership of their local character have become crucial to understanding contemporary redevelopment.

In considering this shift as a new aspect of institutionalized “cultural policy”, plans oriented toward mobilizing culture in market-based urban growth evolved from prior engagements with the governance of culture, which tended to have more social-democratic orientations. Yet as city leaders sought to channel local culture in directions that promote outside investment, everyday residents and cultural producers have resisted these forms of commodification. Though local governments tend to promote visions of this post-industrial city as livable, creative, and sustainable, the new forms of urban inequality that these processes catalyze may contradict such narratives.
In a city still reeling from poverty and unemployment, the city’s attempt to regulate and deploy culture, ran up against everyday producers’ efforts to mobilize their own forms of cultural production for gain in a thriving visitor economy. While these grass-roots engagements with cultural production may appear to be one way in which everyday residents can share in the resources associated with the new economy, this study has shown how these practices may reproduce existing inequalities. For example, everyday cultural producers selling on the street to tourists elicit higher prices and command better locations on the street through repertoires of cultural knowledge and access to networks that reflect existing class backgrounds.

Gentrification

As cities transition to post-industrial forms of growth, they have attracted new urban residents tied to these sectors of the economy. Higher income residents value different urban amenities, bending the direction of local growth in favor of consumption and entertainment activities in and around city centers. As a result of these changes in commercial activities, gentrification is a highly visual process, often typified by the opening of more upscale spaces such as restaurants, cafes, and bars.

At its core, however, gentrification involves class relations in that there is displacement of lower-income residents by those with more resources. It is important to bear this feature of gentrification in mind, as new leisure and entertainment spaces should be understood as an associated feature of this process, rather than an essential aspect of its structure. For example, new restaurants or cafes may invoke easy comparisons to gentrification processes elsewhere, yet in Buenos Aires they themselves may not indicate such a process.
This study has shown that gentrification in the historic core of Buenos Aires, a much studied case of gentrification in the global South (e.g. Herzer et al. 2008), departs in some ways from the process articulated in the Anglo-American literature. For one, gentrification of the neighborhood of San Telmo has been underway from at least 1970. This has not led, as is the case in the North American context, to a widespread movement of the middle-classes to formerly disinvested spaces. In fact, gentrification appears in the case of San Telmo to be comprised of a number of small residential markets such as students, foreigners, and a limited segment of a local creative class, existing with a large number of gentrifying commercial spaces.

The process of reinvestment appears far more sustained and significant in its commercial, rather than residential aspects. This feature of the local process suggests the importance of tourism, a feature shared by reinvestment in many cities in Latin America. Tourism has rapidly driven up prices for commercial spaces and has been a boon to key business sectors catering to visitors, such as restaurants and bars. Ironically, the early gentrifiers in the neighborhood and those most likely to own property in the district have often been most opposed to the neighborhood’s touristic upgrade. As Chapter 3 explored, these early investors were part of a highly local process of revalorization, mostly unconnected to a broader process of “post-industrial urbanism” of which gentrification has been a key part in many parts of the world. While they resembled in some ways Saracino-Brown’s (2004) social preservationists, they did not augur a mass influx of middle-class residents. Indeed their largely successful opposition to the city government’s redevelopment plan – aligned with tourist-based interests in the district – demonstrates the lack of a larger middle-class movement of residents to the neighborhood.

On the other hand, the touristic restructuring of the neighborhood over the last 40 years shows the relationship between urban reinvestment, tourism, and local forms of privilege and
stratification. As a largely commercial process, reinvestment has favored the identities and historical narratives of the local middle class, to which early antiques dealers laid claim. As the “rightful” owners of the city and nation’s history, expressed in the European immigrant character of its historic district, these actors have been able to reap benefits from their claim to represent such an authentic past. With dominant tourist narratives emphasizing themes such as tango, lost elegance, and European immigration, antiques dealers and other early newcomers effectively laid claim to the “essence” of the neighborhood, while ignoring or marginalizing the rural migrants and regional immigrants who had subsequently settled in the neighborhood.

But this process has not been so clear cut. As the district has been redeveloped for tourism, less privileged groups have attempted to eke out an existence in the tourist-based economy. As Chapter 5 showed, this has meant the contestation of physical space as well as symbolic ownership. While this contestation may appear to have important social justice possibilities for vendors claiming a right to labor in the street, it has also involved the hidden mechanisms of social power. This power has been expressed in the definitions of artists and artisans and these actors’ continued reliance on such categories to legitimate their presence on the street. Street artisans often invoked the same set of legitimizing scripts, framing themselves as legitimate, while constructing non-artisan street vendors as a defiling presence. While artisans disputed the right of antiques dealers to claim ownership over the neighborhood, they continued to reproduce the kinds of privilege mobilized by antiques dealers in their own claim to represent local authenticity. These mechanisms of cultural power and displacement in newly touristic neighborhoods in cities of the global South offer a potentially fruitful research agenda that compliments a more established literature on gentrification.

A New Geography of Policy Mobility?
As cities compete for global investment, the traditional relationships between municipal governments, local businesses, and labor has changed. Urban governance now requires far greater efforts at attracting extra-local investment. This has resulted in the proliferation of “best practices” meant to bend the stick of urban policy in favor of outside growth, while reshaping the role of urban governance from a manager of highly institutionalized relationships between local business and labor, to a proactive force for luring capital investment.

As a result of this process of inter-urban competition, cities are competing with one another at an unprecedented scale, in the process redefining the role of urban governance. With competition for growth occurring at such a broad scale, cities are adopting policies that have been successful at increasing local competitiveness, especially in terms of incentivizing investment in formerly disinvested areas. To gain this competitive edge, urban governments may seek to promote that which is locally specific or offer incentives for new investment in the form of heritage districts, neighborhoods aimed at promoting the arts, or the now ubiquitous business improvement district.

As inter-urban competition becomes ever-more “global”, these policies have become increasingly common across cities, representing a form of “policy mobility”. The process of policy mobility is a complex one in which policy adoption is mediated by a number of local and extra-local actors. For this reason, “mobilities” stress the contingent nature of these projects, always in a complex process of translation between different scales.

Yet as Chapter 4 explored, in the case of Buenos Aires, complexity cannot be a substitute for an analysis of how the mediation process involves power relations at the global level. Local government officials adapt policies from abroad to the exigencies of Buenos Aires’ unique
situation, meaning that local interventions are never neat copies of urban projects elsewhere. They are in this sense always aspirational, constitutive not merely of a concrete intervention imagined by local government officials, but also express the broader kinds of urbanism to which city officials aims. But this field of urbanism displays the unequal vectors of power across the global landscape. The mediated and aspirational nature of these projects is evident in Buenos Aires’ adoption of projects such as the creative districts, and the sustainable restructuring of the historic downtown. These projects are, of course, reconciled to local conditions even while their inspiration and objectives reflect a standard “toolkit” of global city ideals. While not merely copies or mimicry of rich cities in the global North, they do reflect the dominant neoliberal paradigms for reinvestment that have been innovated by “paradigmatic” cities.

The question, then, is not merely where these ideas come from, as a number of these policy models may come from “Southern” cities such as Bogotá. This study has shown, however, how the significance of this global urban toolkit is not a matter of where policies come from, but rather how they come into the purview of local officials. In the case of Buenos Aires, powerful international NGOs, multilateral institutions such as the World Bank, as well as the “global city” imaginaries of local officials – themselves mediated by an international conference circuit – each shape how certain projects are selected and executed. This set of urban policies may be carried out selectively with attention to local specificities, but it is nonetheless riven with the power relations that characterize geopolitical power.

This set of global policies has reshaped the local narratives of growth in Buenos Aires. As I have demonstrated in this study, progressive idioms – such as creative expression, sustainability, and territorial equality – are now being deployed by a conservative city government. The result is the coming together of global policy paradigms and local politics in
ways that involve the complex reshaping of stratification. Unlike prior periods, it is now the conservative city government that is the greatest advocate for public space, and a lively – if curated – public sphere. As has been explored in this study, these progressive idioms, nonetheless have certain core features shared by similar projects around the globe. These include higher land values and the remaking of these districts for visitors and higher-income sectors.

This set of findings suggests the need to find new frameworks for evaluating the exercise of power in global city paradigm promotion. The recent literature on policy mobilities represents a unique contribution to this debate, yet it can go further. In particular, the role of an expanding cadre of international NGOs and think-tanks aimed at urban policy making has not yet received sustained critical engagement. Policy mobilities cannot simple explore the geographic origins of certain models or interventions, but must also be aware of the mediated processes through which certain models – be they of northern or southern origin – are spread and legitimized. Importantly this processes of diffusion and legitimation must take seriously the power relations embedded in such global institutions.

**Directions for Future Research**

The research presented here opens up a series of new questions about Buenos Aires’ redevelopment and, potentially, the restructuring of other cities in the global South. On the one hand, this study has shown how the redevelopment of the city center of Buenos Aires has been remade along the lines of a “global urban toolkit”. And yet there is much in this research that points to the many ways in which local context trumps international paradigms.

It is too early to tell if the local state’s “recentering” of the city will bring more than government and businesses to the downtrodden neighborhoods of the south. Currently, these

237
projects have not resulted in the widespread movement of middle-class residents to formerly poor neighborhoods. While neighborhoods like San Telmo and La Boca are experiencing increased prices for land and housing, much of this development is deeply tied to tourism. This suggests that in the absence of visitors these sites may experience sharp declines in their fortunes. With a number of neighborhoods in cities of the global South experiencing a tourist-based boom in disinvested neighborhoods, new research must question the sustainability of such state strategies.

A central issue in the case of Buenos Aires and in the region more broadly is how local forms of social difference impact the strategies and constraints of reinvestment. Latin America is notable for its high levels of class stratification and a notable rigidity in class relations. On the other hand, ethno-racial categories are said to be more fluid than in the North American case. What difference do these social relations make in the displacement and redevelopment of working-class neighborhoods? It will be important in future research to take into account the fine-grained forms of local stratification in a number of contexts in order to undertake a comparative assessment of gentrification processes.

This research has examined the way in which older progressive idioms in Buenos Aires, such as creativity, cultural citizenship, and public space, were retooled by the conservative local government for use in urban redevelopment. While I have explored some of the tensions this narrative has evoked in a local context, specifically around the idea of the “sustainable city”, these narratives require further research. Their global dissemination and connection to other processes of democratic urban governance suggest a connection to an emerging literature (e.g. Davidson and Iveson 2014; Swyngedouw 2005) on the “post-political” management of democracy in a number of settings. This research argues that formal democracy increasingly
rests upon inviolable technocratic logics, making participation less meaningful. As smart, sustainable, and creative cities become the standard idiom for urban governance in the 21st century, more work must be done to understand how these projects to remake cities intersect with the broader political, cultural, and economic transformations that are apace in both global North and South.
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