



# Residents' collective strategies of resistance in Global South cities' informal settlements: Space, scale and knowledge

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the strategies of resistance articulated by residents of informal settlements response to urban exclusion. Building upon resistance and urban social movements literature the paper is informed by the case of the Villa Rodrigo Bueno in Buenos Aires, a self-constructed *villa miseria*, and its residents' stories of resistance to attempts of evictions and upgrading programs. In the paper we show how resistance is mobilized, first through its simultaneous disconnection, due to its remoteness and isolation; and reconnection to local and global supportive networks. While disconnection facilitated self-construction, densification and the blooming of informal entrepreneurship; reconnection through relational and multiscale sites enabled unexpected encounters with distant actors that contributed to resist evictions. Second, the long-term learning and development of self-knowledge (i.e. construction, or housing law), embedded in the remoteness of the informal settlement, contributed to shift expertise from city officers to residents; redefining the role of informal residents into active citizens and experts in policy making, and turning informal settlements into settings of wider social change.

## 1. Introduction

The effects of neoliberal policies, agriculture deregulation, rural food insecurity, structural adjustment programmes, shrinkage of the role of national governments and the liberalization of international trade have all played a role in precipitating the dispossession and displacement of rural populations (e.g. Chant et al., 2016). The result is a growth of spontaneous settlements in cities, at the 'edges of the systems' (Sassen, 2014, p. 28). In effect, while more than half of the world's population live in cities, two thirds of them live in slums or informal settlements (United Nations, 2016). Informal settlements have become 'the norm' in many Global South cities, although with important regional differences. While informal settlements are 'anything but homogeneous' (Gilbert, 2007, p. 69), common features include overcrowding, insecure tenure, inadequate quality of housing, and poor access to basic services. Depending on the region, many are self-built by the same residents

occupying the land and, also providing most services (Holston, 2009). After occupation, slum dwellers continue struggling to gain legal rights to their housing and to improve their living conditions. They are often subject to continuous threats of eviction and displacement, but also to upgrading (e.g. Dupont & Vaquier, 2013) or social housing programs (Goetz, 2016) whereby residents are usually disconnected from livelihoods, jobs, and the networks of solidarity that sustain them (Evrin Uysal, 2012).

Urban slums can be 'hearths of doom and decline', but their spatial density and compactness can also work as a catalyst for revealing alternative development paths as 'urban neighbourhoods [that] spatially showcase the cracks of hope in the system' (Moulaert, 2009, p. 16). On the one hand, informal settlements are cut off from policy delivery systems and economic dynamics, leading to the creation of a planet of dysfunctional slums (Davies, 2006). On the other hand, these settlements host 'dynamic populations and creative migration flows

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which have been instrumental in revalorizing social, institutional, artistic and professional assets' (Moulaert, 2009, p.16–17). Holston argues that 'in resisting their reductions' slum dwellers 'produce something new that cannot be readily assimilated into established conceptual frameworks' (2009, p. 249). In that vein, some scholars argue that the rise of the informal city itself, i.e. the creation of informal housing and associated infrastructures, constitutes one of the most important social innovations (Abramo, 2009). From this perspective, the creation, consolidation and resistance of informal settlements whereby citizens construct, create, consolidate, maintain, improve and defend their houses and neighbourhoods, challenge the ideals of modernity incarnated in the formal city (Aparicio & Blaser, 2008).

The articulation of resistance strategies is of particular importance for the creation and maintenance of spaces of urban informality. Resistance strategies are however diverse. It includes resistance to housing exclusion which can adopt the form of, for example resident associations (RA), articulating visible strategies of open contention (Tarrow, 1998) against e.g. local authorities. RAs and other forms of citizen self-organizing have emerged in many cities to articulate, gain and defend the rights of slum dwellers. Some of these neighbourhood networks have expanded from community to city-wide (Boonyabanha & Kerr, 2015), regional (such as Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra in Brazil, e.g. Garmany, 2008) and trans-national scales (such as the *Shack/Slum Dwellers International* born in India, e.g. Bradlow, 2015).

In more repressive and deprived contexts, resistance transforms into more subtle, silent and less visible 'infrapolitics' (Scott, 1990) where the urban poor become quiet encroachers (Bayat, 2000) that occupy public space to defend their right to the city under the radar of exploitive authorities. This quiet encroachment of the urban poor manifests in everyday practices such as the illegal connection to electricity or water network infrastructures (Appadurai, 2001). Less explicit and visible than open protests, these resistance practices to the neoliberal hegemony of post-industrial global cities (Sassen, 2014), are however easier to overlook (Mumby et al., 2017).

While slum and social housing upgrading programs are very often studied in terms of their effects on the communities and territories (Dupont & Vaquier, 2013), the nature, forms, strategies, endurance, and impacts of residents' resistance strategies to housing exclusion, eviction and displacement has largely been overlooked (Goetz, 2016). This paper intends to bridge this gap and aims at examining the strategies of resistance articulated by residents of informal settlements in response to their exclusion from the right to housing. The setting of the paper is Buenos Aires in Argentina, a country where, although the prevalence of informal settlements is smaller compared with other countries in the region, in the last decades it has experienced an increase of *villas miserias* (informal and precarious settlements) as a result of successive economic crises and migration waves. The story of the self-construction of one of these *villas miserias*, the Villa Rodrigo Bueno, the subsequent attempts of eviction and displacement, and the resistance to upgrading programs, serves to illustrate the strategies developed by urban poor communities to respond to processes of housing exclusion, and institutional arrangements threatening their existence.

Theoretically, the paper builds upon resistance studies (e.g. Scott, 1990; Bayat, 2000; Mumby et al., 2017) and insurgent citizenship (Holston, 2009) literature. In the paper we show how the organizing and strategizing of resistance from the informal settlement involve the articulation of multi-scalar and relational sites (McCann & Ward, 2012), developing insurgent knowledge and citizenship (Holston, 2009).

The next section develops the theoretical approach used to analyse and discuss the data, followed by the methods used to collect this data. It

continues with a presentation of the history of Villa Rodrigo Bueno, and thereafter a presentation and analysis of the main findings. The paper concludes by discussing the theoretical contributions of the case and the generalization of the findings to other cases of resistance of urban social movements.

## 2. Theory: spaces of resistance and insurgent citizenship

### 2.1. Infrapolitics and quiet encroachment

Urban poor emerged as political actors decades ago as part of the urban territorial movements in Latin America (Castells, 1983). Marginalized from formal economic systems, the formal city and its services, they created their own social movements in connection to the territory, such as RAs, soup kitchens or church initiatives. These were manifestations of the development of 'spatial solidarity' (Hourcade, 1989), and resistance of the urban poor to the power of the state.

Bayat (2000) argues that while these secondary associations characterize the socio-political conditions of Latin America, primary networks, such as family hood and kinship relations, can be more appropriate in other parts of the world for explaining collective action, social change and resistance. Scott's (1990) term 'infrapolitics', refers to less visible, non-dramatic resistance strategies that pass unnoticed by the formal government, especially in more repressive and deprived contexts. Bayat refers to 'quiet encroachment' to describe 'the silent, protracted but pervasive advancement of the ordinary people on the propertied and powerful in order to survive and improve their living conditions' (Bayat, 2000, p. 545) under the radar of exploitive authorities. Quiet encroachment is characterized by 'quiet, largely atomized and prolonged mobilization with episodic collective action – open and fleeting struggles without clear leadership, ideology or structured organization' (p. 545–546). Street vendors occupying public spaces, squatters building up houses, illegal connections to water infrastructures or electricity grids, are less visible than open protests organized by social movements.

Encroachers, Bayat argues, always try to expand as quietly and invisible as possible to avoid confrontation. Yet, once they expand too much and become too visible, state crack down follow in the form of eviction, destruction of property and sometimes violence, in a 'cat and mouse game' (Lata et al., 2019).

While infrapolitics and encroachment usually are subtle, atomized, and individual, the struggles to maintain these gains in confrontation with the state are often collective and more visible, building on strategies of contestation (Mitlin, 2018). Bayat (2000) argues that the Latin American sociopolitical context has enabled an overt collective resistance venue for local social movements. In contrast to more authoritarian states e.g. in the Middle East, the tradition of insurgency and social protests, the social economy movements and some progressive governments in the region provide a context where open contestation is possible.

### 2.2. Resistance, space, and scale

Recent literature has further explored the role of space and socio-spatial configurations in processes of resistance (Courpasson et al., 2017). As resistance takes place in 'autonomous, borderless spaces' (Hardt & Negri, 2001), they bring together 'local and translocal practices through which resisters consolidate and diffuse experience, resources and knowledge across spaces and times' (Daskalaki & Kokkinidis, 2017, p. 1304). As urban movements have become more globally linked, they draw advantages from information technologies

(Castells, 1996) and the connections between the 'local' and the 'global' (Mayer, 2009). Yet, urban social movements require not only networks with distant allies, but also 'contact points', such as meetings, forums and demonstrations, or contacts with media (Nichols, 2009, pp. 885). These contact points, what McCann & Ward (2012) call relational sites or situations, are 'places constituted by assemblages of the near and far, the fixed and the mobile' (McCann & Ward, 2012, p. 47). By contrast to practices of quiet and hidden encroachment, making use of contact points or crafting relational sites respond to more visible and sounded strategies of resistance.

### 2.3. Resistance, insurgent citizenship and subjugated knowledge

Networks and meeting points facilitate flux of knowledge and experiences between communities (Mayer, 2009). The development and diffusion of local knowledges (e.g. self-help construction, entrepreneurial activities, culture and arts) born out of these 'unruly territories' (Aparicio & Blaser, 2008), implies an insurrection of 'knowledges that have been disqualified (by powerful actors as the State or economic elites) as inadequate to their task' (Foucault, 1980: p.8182). The insurrection of such subjugated knowledges in informal settings is powerful in how it challenges – and resists – conventional conceptions of modernity and the ideals of a modern and rational city as envisioned by planners and politicians (Bayat, 2010, Holston, 2009).

In the process of constructing and defending their houses in the informal settlements, residents 'not only construct a vast new city but, on that basis, also propose a city with a different order of citizenship' (Holston, 2009, p. 246). These processes of resistance are part of what Holston calls 'insurgent citizenship', a phenomenon linked to a new type of urbanism emerging in the peripheries of the cities in the Global South, where individuals organize movements of 'insurgent citizenship to confront the entrenched regimes of citizen inequality that the urban centers use to segregate them' (Holston, 2009: p. 245).

Holston has also observed in the case of the Brazilian favelas how the isolation of these communities 'enabled an off-work and out-of-sight freedom to invent new modes of association' and forms of organizing collective action for change (Holston, 2009, p. 257). Thus, while informal settlements have been cut off from policy and service delivery systems and certain economic dynamics (Davies, 2006), they have also hosted 'dynamic populations and creative migration flows which have been instrumental in (partly) revalorizing social, institutional, artistic and professional assets' (Moulaert, 2009, p. 16–17).

### 3. Methods

The paper is informed by the case of Villa Rodrigo Bueno in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Rodrigo Bueno is an informal settlement that can be representative of other *villas miserias* in Buenos Aires that grew mostly since 2001 as a result of the economic crisis and successive flows of migration from neighbouring countries. In-depth interviews, informal conversations, meeting observations and documents were combined in the study. The data was collected in different moments and by different researchers. Since 2016 a local research team has conducted field studies and collected secondary data in relation to Rodrigo Bueno. In November 2017, March 2018 and October 2018 research was conducted by a group of researchers from outside of Buenos Aires. During field visits, these researchers conducted interviews, had informal conversations, participated in walking tours, and in different activities, such as the weekly RA meetings or watching the younger residents play a football game on the *villa* pitch. A total of 20 in-depth interviews were conducted with RA members, some of them were interviewed several times. In addition, 7

interviews with city officers and urban planners related to the *villa* upgrading programs at the city of Buenos Aires and 10 interviews with other RAs in other *villas* in the city were carried out. All interviews were conducted in Spanish. A total of 40 h of observations have been conducted in the *villa* or in locations where their political activities took place (e.g. meetings with the city).

The interviews covered the life stories of the interviewees, the history of the *villa* and the association, the characteristics of the neighbourhood, the strategies of the RA, recent changes and future prospects. They lasted from 30 min to 2 h and all were recorded and transcribed verbatim. In this article, quotes have been translated by the researchers from Spanish into English, trying to preserve the colloquial language. Three RA meetings, and two meetings between the RA and the city, were observed. Notes were taken during the meetings. Furthermore, press coverage about Rodrigo Bueno from 2005 to 2018 in the largest Argentinian newspapers was followed.

The interview data and the notes taken during the interviews and observations were coded manually inspired by grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), allowing categories of collective resistance strategies to inductively emerge from the stories told by interviewees. Thus, our analysis has involved back-and-forth moves between sorting, coding, probing the data, and collecting new data until we could reconstruct the multi-layered historical developments of Rodrigo Bueno.

## 4. Rodrigo Bueno, a *villa miseria* side by side with Puerto Madero, Buenos Aires

### 4.1. *Villas miserias* in Buenos Aires

Informal settlements started to appear on a larger scale in Buenos Aires in the 1950s and has grown since then, except during the military dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s (van Gelder et al., 2016), which repressed the creation of informal settlements and conducted numerous evictions. The term *villa miseria* was coined by Verbitsky 1957 in a novel as he referred to the informal settlements in Buenos Aires: "the villas miserias are also America", as a reaction to the discourse of progress to a better life, without paying attention to the informalities. Each economic crisis, i.e. in the early 1990s and early 2000s, has resulted in significant additional growth of the *villas miserias*. In the mid-2000s more than 800 informal settlements in the larger metropolitan area experienced the fastest population growth rate, providing housing to more than 1 million inhabitants, 7–10% of the total population (depending on data source, Cravino et al., 2008). The population densities are often high, on average 164 inhabitants per hectare, compared to the average 38 inhabitants per hectare in the metropolitan region.

### 4.2. Origins of Rodrigo Bueno

Villa Rodrigo Bueno, at the border of Costanera Sur coastal wetlands, origins from the beginning of the 1980s when a few houses were built informally along the Costanera Road (Lekerman, 2005) by urban poor working in the informal economy (Carman et al., 2017, Scheinsohn and Cabrera, 2009). These first dwellers started a land reclamation by dumping demolition materials in the then disused wetlands, a public land owned by the municipality since the end of the 1970s. Over time, the settlement both expanded and became denser (Rodríguez, 2015). In the mid-1990s, a high-end urban residential project was initiated in the area – Puerto Madero – attracting a large number of construction workers who, in turn, found affordable housing in Rodrigo Bueno, which thus ended up located at the heart of the most expensive urban neighbourhood in Argentina.



Map 1. Villa Rodrigo Bueno and its context. Google Map data ©2019.

4.3. The villa Rodrigo Bueno

In 2016, Rodrigo Bueno was structured along four self-organized blocks, with 2665 formal residents registered in the census (4000 informally), around 1000 families and 563 houses. Around 50% of the inhabitants were from Peru, 30% from Paraguay, 10% from Bolivia and only 10% from Argentina. Most of the children of the residents coming from other countries were born in Argentina (IVC, 2016). Over the years, abandoned by the city government and the formal services, the residents collectively organized access to electricity and other services. However, the basic infrastructure remained insufficient (Rodríguez, 2015). Water supply was not accessible in all the blocks, sanitation was provided through pit latrines, and waste management through containers collected daily by the municipality with the help of two members of the community. Unlike other villas in Buenos Aires, there were no community kitchens, first aid facilities, kindergartens nor schools. In recent years, some NGOs created some facilities. Poderosa NGO provided meals and homework help for children, drug prevention campaigns run by another NGO, and education for adults. The RA had also built up a community centre and a football field completed through sponsorship of corporations. In 2018, there were more than 20 shops providing food and other services to the residents, such as pizzerias, telephone services, video-shops, bakeries, grocery shops, hairdressers and a butchery.

4.4. Attempts of eviction

Due to the privileged location of the villa close to the city business district and the Costanera Natural Reserve, the area attracted large housing investments. As a result, in 2005 the city tried to demolish the settlement through the Program for Recuperation of the Natural Reserve Land (Rodríguez and Vitale, 2016). While many families sold their houses by exchange of a subsidy, others filed a collective legal complaint and a judge ruled that Rodrigo Bueno should be ‘urbanized’ (Carman et al., 2017). The ruling was backed by reports from a coalition of researchers conducting studies in the villa and human rights associations. The court ruling annulled the decree of eviction and forced the city to present a plan for the social and urban integration of the neighbourhood

and the provision of basic services. The ruling was however appealed by the city government and the services were improved only slowly and with the resistance of the city (Rodríguez, 2015).

In 2014 a new legal sentence annulled the court ruling, stating that the urbanization in the territory of an ecological reserve was not viable. In 2015, the Rodrigo Bueno’s judicial struggle was made visible in the mass media due to several events: the tragic death of a 13 years-old child who fell in a blind pit (El País, 2016/03/12); the participation of a community leader of Rodrigo Bueno in the InterAmerican Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to denounce the human rights violations in informal settlements in Latin America (Telam, 20/03/2015); and the public statements of the Pope Francisco denouncing the inequalities between the Villa Rodrigo Bueno and Puerto Madero, and the threats of eviction resulting from land speculation (La nación, 2015).

The judicial conflict continued until 2016, when, with a new political party governing and a program for the upgrading of the villas, the city presented a project for the urbanization and upgrading of Rodrigo Bueno. The law for the urbanization and socio-urban integration of Rodrigo Bueno was passed on March 23th 2017. As a result, a new settlement has been built up by the side of Rodrigo Bueno into which around 403 families have already moved since June 2019 (Buenos Aires Ciudad, 2021).

Part of the old settlement is now being adapted to the standards of the rest of the city in terms of street size, facilities and equipment to facilitate the permanence of the remaining families. For more than two years, residents have participated in the design and implementation of the construction works, a participatory process that has brought many

Table 1  
Space, scale, and knowledge as strategies of resistance.

	Strategies of resistance
Resistance, space and scale	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Occupying and densifying</li> <li>• Disconnection</li> <li>• Reconnection</li> </ul>
Resistance and insurgent knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relational sites of resistance</li> <li>• Governance and political knowledge</li> <li>• Citizenship and local knowledge</li> </ul>

tensions. One example was the struggle to negotiate that 20% of the staff working be the local residents. Similarly, the final prices of the houses and the borrowing conditions have been sensitive matter of discussion. Still many residents fear they will not be able to afford to pay the mortgage and the formal services (water, electricity that they did not need to pay before). Despite negotiated social fees and individualized payment modalities, the prospects for the residents of Villa Rodrigo Bueno and its new and old settlement remains unclear.

## 5. Analysis and discussion: strategies of resistance

Residents of Rodrigo Bueno have kept struggling during the last decades to gain their right to the housing by occupying the territory and building up their own houses, by resisting eviction, by claiming recognition of their rights to improve the settlement and finally by defending their rights during the recent upgrading program. In the following we analyse how the residents' struggle and strategies are organized by positioning them in relation to a) the articulation of relational and multiscale sites of resistance that facilitate the disconnection from and reconnection to external actors and processes, and b) the development of insurgent knowledge and citizenship (see Table 1). Table 1 summarizes the repertoire of strategies of resistance within each of these two broad categories (space & scale and knowledge) which guide our analysis and structure this section. Each of these strategies is developed next.

### 5.1. Resistance through space and scale

#### 5.1.1. Occupying and densifying: urban compactness

Historically, Rodrigo Bueno was constructed through the collaborative efforts of 'relatives, friends, and neighbours' (Interview C<sup>1</sup>), building up houses, streets and infrastructure for water, sewage and electricity as in other settlements (Rodríguez, 2015). These collaborations also made available other critical services, such as the maintenance and repair of the infrastructure, and the creation of common spaces, that were not provided by authorities:

*"The football field... these are community spaces that we build up ourselves. We sort out any problem as neighbours. Say that we need to 'open' a street, we just do it. Say that someone is building up a wall, blocking one of the streets and the residents cannot walk through, we just tear it down".*

(Interview L)

*"The neighbours have worked so much not only building up their houses, but even the streets, flattening the surfaces, etc. This is a full-fledged neighbourhood!"*

(Interview city public defender)

This practice of self-urbanism is the result of a collective strategy to address inequalities and dispossession by occupying, building up and then densifying the territory. Occupying is a defying strategy for those who have little to lose. It exemplifies strategies of quiet encroachment whereby migrants and the urban poor quietly claim their right to housing by occupying public or unused land (Bayat, 2000).

Once the newly created space has been secured, it is necessary to resist successive attempts of displacement and eviction. One of the oldest residents explained how, after one of the city's attempts to evict them, the residents' counter reaction was to expand and further occupy territory, inviting others to move in, and in this way densifying the settlement in a cat-and-mouse technique (Lata et al., 2019):

<sup>1</sup> Interviews codes with initials represent residents' interviews. If the interviewee comes from another organization it is specified after the quote, e.g. *City public defender*

*(After the 2005 eviction attempt) we occupied the third one (section), we won this part/ then we advanced the fourth (section) and we reached the river. The natural reserve director raised a fenced perimeter. One night we turned it down and 'planted' three houses. We were like 12–15 people. The next day comes the police patrol with the ecological reserve with cars, trucks, strong light, pffff. They scared us all. He threatened us, 'tomorrow I don't want to see this here', 'Yes, yes, yes' (we said), 'tomorrow we took it out'. That night we built up more houses and this is how this grew up."*

(Interview Ch)

Creating a critical mass of housing with a growing population was used as a defensive tactic: *"the more it grows the better for us, it is good that more families come here"* (Interview B). Occupying and expanding, but also densifying and creating a more compact informal settlement was a crucial encroachment strategy (Bayat, 2000). Urban compactness therefore becomes not only a quality of the city, but also a strategy to resist (Zapata Campos et al., 2020). Still, over-densification of the neighbourhood has its risks and has resulted in deterioration of environmental and security qualities:

*"Now the neighbourhood is too dense/ This is a neighbourhood built up by friends and relatives. Until outsiders arrived and with them problems, drugs, robberies/ (Before) we used to sit over there and it was a balneario, until it got so dense!... Now water supply is insufficient for the large population we have now, there is no infrastructure built up for this population".*

(Interview B)

#### 5.1.2. Isolation, disconnection and resistance

In Rodrigo Bueno, the natural environment also helped making resistance possible. The water bordering the settlement and the natural reserve were natural barriers that both isolated and protected the residents:

*"Sometimes jokingly we talked about la villa as the hidden city, because there were some bushes and with the wall (the city built close to the villa) it was covered... it was all hidden... Many people said: 'But do they live there?' They thought it was the natural reserve, but it was not the reserve on this side".*

(Interview C)

By becoming a hidden city, the physical isolation of the informal settlement, the materiality of the territory (including the available water and resources as fishing in the river), became an agent of resistance (Lilja, 2017) enabling the villa to grow, densify and defend itself from police attacks (Carman, 2011).

The isolation also resulted in the development of autonomy, entrepreneurship and flourishing of shops, bakeries, butcheries, and hairdressers. This condition of 'remoteness', in relation to the formal city and the formal economy, has also been observed previously to encourage entrepreneurship and self-urbanism practices under the radar of the authorities (Holston, 2009). However, isolation also generated a stigma that hinders Rodrigo Bueno's residents to be part of the rest of the city:

*"It is not good to have a school here. We want the school (with the new neighbourhood) to be outside so that there is integration ... My son prefers to leave his friends at the park, and he tells them 'I live nearby the river mouth' ... But he doesn't tell them where he lives because of the discrimination that exists ..."*

(Interview E)

Along the historical struggles between the residents and the local

authorities, the latter set up counter-strategies of disconnection to switch the community off (Graham, 2005). Ambulances or post would not enter the place; existing water and electricity connections were cut off during the eviction attempt in 2004; and trucks were forbidden to stop at the main road, to discourage drivers from shopping in the *villa* as they used to do:

*“The transport trucks that travelled to the port customs and stopped there they use to buy from me. But they came one day and said ‘here the trucks cannot park anymore’, It broke me into pieces. Now I only sell to residents here”.*

(Interview D)

Furthermore, by seemingly small non-actions the authorities tried to retard the *villa* economy. For example, Costanera Road that starts at the entrance of Rodrigo Bueno and forms a promenade along the natural reserve, with a multitude of kiosks and fast-food trucks, was renovated and adorned with statues and benches with the exception of the stretch outside Rodrigo Bueno, where it remained unpaved, filled with potholes, and surrounded by bushes and waste.

Isolation and disconnection had, therefore positive and negative, intended, and unintended, consequences, some of them contributing to resist the situation of urban exclusion of the Rodrigo Bueno community, as we develop below.

### 5.1.3. Centrality and reconnection

Yet, despite its isolation Rodrigo Bueno was constructed close to a very central development project in Buenos Aires. It was precisely the proximity to this development project that prompted the creation of the settlement being close to job opportunities in the construction sector. Paradoxically, the proximity to this space of economic and political power both threatens its existence and facilitates opportunities for its resistance. It also facilitates the connection with powerful actors the residents would otherwise not have met. For example, the Fiat CEO Cristiano Rattazzi visited Rodrigo Bueno regarding collaboration in the organizing of a Formula E [electrical racing cars] race in 2016. The international car street race would run along Puerto Madero, and therefore along the Costanera Road. Issues of public transportation and security had to be negotiated with local stakeholders affected by the street race, including Rodrigo Bueno:

*“The owner of the Fiat came here to talk to me, just as you came today (...). Interviewer: ‘who? Cristiano Rattazzi was here?’ (The interviewer asks with surprise ...) D: ‘Yes, the owner of Formula 1, came to the door of my business (...) he came here recommended by the police commissioner, as security was a priority for the race”.*

(Interview D)

When the CEO had a meeting with one of the RA leaders and toured the neighbourhood, he offered to do something for the community to compensate for the inconvenience of the race. Pointing out to the football dirt-field, he said:

*“I want this properly done in cement”*

(Interview D)

The proximity of Rodrigo Bueno to Puerto Madero, has resulted in an extraordinary revalorisation of the land in that area. As a result of this regained centrality, a new luxury residential development project, Solares de Santa María, was promoted by IRSA, a multinational construction corporation. This is why the CEO of IRSA visited the community and started conversations about the sale of the Rodrigo Bueno, which the company had planned to flood to make a navigable canal associated to the residential area, by exchange of e.g., investments in facilities and entrepreneurial adventures in the community. This project

had the support of the City of Buenos Aires, which took over this collaboration.

Feeling the threat of eviction, one of the community leaders sent a letter to Pope Francisco (originally from Buenos Aires), via an acquaintance to Pope's deputy. In the letter the community leader explained the pressures for eviction, as well as the violation of human rights and lack of services in the neighbourhood. According to this community leader, the Pope sent a representative to the City of Buenos Aires to participate in a public hearing about the new residential areas, and the residents of Rodrigo Bueno were in this way also invited to participate.

*“The Pope calls him and says ‘I need that G (the deputy) goes to the City of Buenos Aires, and that he participates in the audience because the Puerto Madero's residents do not want to have some negritos (referring to most of the residents of the villa, being immigrants) living here’. Then we (Rodrigo Bueno residents) could participate in that audience. And I said (to the deputy): ‘I need you to get this (another letter) to the Pope’ ... As a result of that letter the Pope mentioned in an interview with a Mexican journalist, something that was later published in the magazine 23 here, ‘you talk about the boom in Buenos Aires ... but three blocks away from Puerto Madero however there is a misery town. Then, Magazine 23 contacts us”.*

(Interview L)

Again, the proximity of Rodrigo Bueno to a space of powerful urban actors (Puerto Madero) becomes a feature that, not only threatens the community, but also facilitates resistance strategies dealing with the physical connection of the informal settlement in combination with supporting networks operating at national and global levels (Nichols, 2009).

Similarly, the story of the Villa Rodrigo Bueno travelled far at the hand of another community leader who participated in the IACHR in Washington. The Argentinian human rights organization, Center for Legal and Social Studies, aware of the struggles of the Rodrigo Bueno's residents, invited the community leader to give testimony of the challenges faced by slum dwellers to keep their houses and to improve the critical services in the neighbourhood (20/03/2015 Telam). It was the first time that the IACHR called a meeting to discuss the economic, cultural and social rights of precarious urban settings in the region:

*“With this presentation (at the IACHR), they will have to fulfil all our rights in the neighbourhood. We have come a long way. We have knocked on doors. We have hit doors. To the state, and the city. And they always throw the ball to each other. This step that we are taking here today is very important to us. It is possible to upgrade Rodrigo Bueno (without demolishing it). And this upgrading model in Rodrigo Bueno would be a guinea pig for other villas that could copy the model”.*

(Interview D in Telam 2015/03/20)

With this participation in the IACHR Rodrigo Bueno not only gained more media attention, but also further legitimacy to negotiate in a stronger position with the city. The participation had immediate effects in the improvement of the villa, as the same day that community leader travelled to Washington, the city started the works for connecting the neighbourhood to the water supply system. However, the connection was never fully completed for the whole neighbourhood.

*“When I travelled to the United States, that day when I am giving my speech, they were installing the pipes, in one day! / They provided water to the fourth block. There was also a pipe for the third block. But the second block was never connected”.*

At local and national levels, developing contacts with other *villas*, through networks such as Mesa de la Tierra, Villas Unidas, the support of university researchers, or the meetings of the Poderosa NGO has also facilitated exchange of knowledge and information, which is of

particular relevance when negotiating the conditions of their upgrading plan with the city:

*“We contribute with what we have done in Rodrigo Bueno and share the information (with other subsidiaries of the organization of the civil society Garganta Poderosa) on how to start (i.e. a community kitchen) and keep it alive”.*

*(Interview P)*

#### 5.1.4. Multiscalar and relational sites of resistance

In sum, Villa Rodrigo Bueno resisted by their stories travelling far through networks and contact points (Nichols, 2009). This confirms, as Daskalaki and Kokkinidis have observed, that “resistance spaces are part of an extensive system of fixed-mobile socio-spatial entanglements” (2017, p. 1305) through which knowledge and experiences travel. Rodrigo Bueno therefore becomes one of these multiscalar spaces of resistance by being part of several local-global networks (Nichols, 2009, Darcy and Rogers, 2016), through religious networks and accessing connecting points (Nichols, 2009), such as the IACHR. Yet, its constitution as a resistance space is also formed by attracting global actors to the place, such as the CEOs of Fiat and the Solares de Santa Maria development project.

Rodrigo Bueno, and more specifically, particular sites within the villa, such as the RA headquarters, the football field, or even the walking tours given by some community leaders to external actors, such as researchers like us or the Fiat CEO, provide a safe access to an otherwise isolated and inaccessible space. These physical spaces and practices have facilitated ‘extraordinary connections’ with unexpected actors (Authors, 2015), that in other situations would not have visited these settings, such as the CEOs of multinationals. These spaces constitute relational sites and situations (McCann & Ward, 2012). Similarly, ANONYMIZED AUTHORS (2015) have noted how NGO’s headquarters, walking tours and headquarters of an upgrading program in Managua’s informal settlements create safe spaces for external actors to access the place and the local residents. Residents in Rodrigo Bueno thus engage in multiscalar networks, either connecting the local to the global and making the narrative of Rodrigo Bueno travel or bringing the global to the local by providing access to a space that is paradoxically inaccessible to other actors.

Resistance spaces, as Villa Rodrigo Bueno, are both disconnected due to their condition of being remote and isolated (facilitating flourishing economic activities, self-construction and defence from physical attacks) and connected through relational and multiscalar sites. This requires strategies of disconnection and autogestion (Lefebvre, 2009) – permitting resistance towards threats of external actors and allowing local entrepreneurs to bloom – and reconnection – by establishing links with external supportive networks and actors that also remain vital for their resistance.

## 5.2. Insurgent knowledge

### 5.2.1. Governance and political knowledge

As a result of decades of quiet encroachment and overt resistance, Rodrigo Bueno’s residents have developed a sophisticated understanding of the mechanisms that govern local government institutions. This knowledge allows them to continue their resistance in an institutional context where quiet encroachment or open contestation are not always the most appropriate strategies, but can be combined with other strategies, such as negotiation or manipulation.

For example, already in the failed attempt to evict the villa in 2005 many residents showed, both individually and collectively, sophisticated skills not only of being reactive to the threat of eviction, but also to anticipate the actions of the government. As in other upgrading programs, the residents of Rodrigo Bueno came to negotiations with

scepticism about the true intentions of city officers and with memories of unfulfilled promises of politicians (Koster and Nuijten, 2012; Goetz, 2016) to buy out the houses at a reasonable price. In this case, many residents were co-opted by offers that can be described as exploiting the “desperation limitation” of many of them (Goetz, 2016, p. 3). A sophisticated set of strategies was set up in place by state and city officers whereby officers negotiated with some delegates a higher subsidy by exchange of convincing other residents to sign and leave their houses. The disconnection of water and electricity supply, continuous police surveillance, or the threat of a violent eviction, were some of the many efficient coercive tactics run by the city that made many residents abandon their homes (Carman, 2011). In this situation of extreme tension and repression, a group of residents quickly sold their properties to low prices to the city, giving the impression that the whole neighbourhood would surrender. As a result of this, 80 out of 400 families left the villa.

*“During the attempt of eviction in 2005 (...) we knew that there was going to be corruption and that they were going to offer us money, and with 15 days left before the eviction was executed, we made a separate delegate body, we put the new ones to the front, and we got behind. X was a man, he said that he managed the entire villa. Telerma (the municipal director) heard that. ‘We pay you and we take them out,’ Telerma paid this man/ He betrayed us and began to evict residents that sold their houses.”*

*“We formed a group of 60 people (the ‘older’ residents who had continued meeting behind). We sat with Mario (Telerma’s right hand for organizing the eviction) in a café, And we asked ... ‘you want the villa?’. Here we are 60 families, I am one of the constructors of the villa, we want 120,000 pesos (per house). The old man jumped on his seat ‘Are you crazy?’ Then he got up. And Luciano said ‘You evicted the Pekinese but we are the bulldogs’”.*

*(Interview C)*

Meanwhile, 57 families (the bulldogs in the story above) got together to pay a lawyer that helped them to get a legal protection, and a decree obliging the city to “urbanize” the villa, instead of demolishing it.

In the negotiations with the city during 2017 and 2018 for the construction of the new houses, the RA developed a “showing muscle”-strategy. They invited the city and other actors to the RA meetings, in a co-option strategy, where they showed their own achievements in terms of infrastructure and their capability to mobilize residents. They also brought many members to the meetings at the city to show cohesiveness and strength.

Nevertheless, at times residents had to combine these sophisticated negotiations with some kind of threat of force. In 2017 the RA was negotiating that a good number of Rodrigo Bueno’s residents should be employed by the construction company in their new housing being built up next to Rodrigo Bueno:

*“That is the tug of war we always have with the government; we fight them if they don’t listen. Sometimes we have to make noise, as the Pope says: the police come, we burn something. Now our fight is that 20% of the construction workers in the new buildings come from here. And that is now the ‘tug of war’ between the representatives of Rodrigo Bueno and the municipal housing institute. So far, they call us for meetings, but if they don’t listen to us, we’re going to block the entrance”.*

*(Interview C)*

As Mitlin (2018) has observed in other urban social movements involving RAs and housing coalitions in Global South cities, contention, negotiation and encroachment strategies are continuous and often simultaneous rather than separated and successive strategies in time and space.

### 5.2.2. Citizenship and self-learning

The self-construction of houses and the struggle to defend their rights to housing have also resulted in the development of local knowledge regarding, for example, construction skills and law. Rodrigo Bueno has become a self-learning laboratory, as the place was constructed by workers from the Puerto Madero development project. During that process, these construction workers employed or helped other residents who learnt skills that might develop into a profession:

*“Those people who built up Puerto Madero, the majority of construction workers are living here. What I built here, I learned it here. Here we all help each other. At that time the buddy took us to build and we helped him. This was a professional training institute. And most of them worked up there (pointing towards Puerto Madero’s skyscrapers), Paraguayans, Peruvians. The one who did not know learnt it here”.*

(Interview C)

Increased human capital becomes a significant quality of these compact neighbourhoods (Authors et al., 2021), where skills, competences and knowledge developed during self-construction or entrepreneurial activities become revalorized as professional assets (Moullart, 2009). Self-learning as the engine and the result of social innovations (Smith et al., 2017), therefore becomes a particular strategy developed by residents (Authors et al., 2021).

These skills are used by the residents to negotiate “from you to you” (Interview F) with architects and lawyers since 2017 in the new upgrading program, redefining the boundaries between residents and professionals, and avoiding the power asymmetry that usually characterizes participatory design processes with incomprehensible technical jargon (Koster and Nuijten, 2012). As a resident said with irony during a meeting with city officers *“We are the villeros, they are ‘the technicians’”* (Interview L) stressing the last two words. This transformation is not only about development of knowledge that enables them to negotiate on more equal terms with the government, but also an empowerment of the stigmatized community:

*“They think that because they are lawyers, one doesn’t know how to defend oneself. (But) at this point we learned so much about the law ... We have fought so much that no one will come to tell us what is legal and what is not. (...) I am reading the law every day. We read it so many times that I memorized everything (...) / At some point, we turned to be lawyers. We know how to defend our rights.”*

(Interview B)

The knowledge regards to their legal rights as developed above, but also housing and urban planning, providing the residents with resources to harshly negotiate the terms of the upgrading program:

*“But how are we going to integrate the new Rodrigo Bueno neighbourhood with Puerto Madero? (...) The architect behind talks about it like if he was an eminence in the Clarin newspaper. (...) We are always in this tug of war, negotiating: “yes, we want a compression ladder”, “yes, we want fixed walls in toilets and kitchen to facilitate future reforms (...) We make proposals because we know the profession (...). We have even made proposals to make of Rodrigo Bueno the first villa with renewable energies.”*

(Interview L)

In Rodrigo Bueno, residents have turned into builders, urban planners, policy lobbyists and lawyers. They are perfect examples of insurgents performing what Appadurai has coined as “the politics of shit” (Appadurai, 2001, p.37), Bayat (2010) as ordinary people changing the world, and Scott as everyday practices of infrapolitics (1990). As a result, the rise of informal settlements leads to new form of deep democracy emerging with a more active dimension of citizenship

(Appadurai, 2001), where expertise shifts from city officers and experts to the residents of informal settlements, and social change moves from the central squares to the city’s informal settlements.

## 6. Conclusions

Informed by the case of Rodrigo Bueno this paper shows how the resistance strategies of informal settlements’ residents in response to housing exclusion involve the articulation of relational and multiscalar sites of resistance that facilitate the simultaneous disconnection from, and reconnection to external actors and processes to this space; as well as the development of insurgent knowledge and citizenship.

By so doing, the paper makes four main contributions to the literature on urban social movements and resistance studies. First, after more than twenty years living in Rodrigo Bueno, residents resisting evictions and displacements have “converted their violence into law talk, their belligerent reactions into the proactions of citizens using rights strategically” (Holston, 2009, p. 251). This finding shows not only the emancipatory power of self-learning in the resistance of urban poor to urban exclusion, but also illustrates the significance of *endurance and time* in resistance, as knowledge development comes as a result of a life of resisting and learning.

Second, densification and *urban compactness* are revealed to not only be about physical, social and economic qualities of many informal settlements (with both positive and negative repercussions, Boyko & Cooper, 2011), but also to be a matter of quiet encroachment strategies to resist pressures from the formal city and its institutions.

Third, building upon Holston’s work (2009), the paper exemplifies how *remoteness* and isolation can facilitate spaces for experimentation, knowledge development and innovation and, through these, resistance. In Rodrigo Bueno entrepreneurial activities have bloomed and a growing insurgent knowledge regarding governance, law, city planning and housing – fundamental to the contestation of upgrading programs – has contributed to resistance strategies. Our paper shows how different types of isolation and remoteness, characteristic of most informal settlements, can contribute to resistance, and therefore turn informal settlements into settings for wider social change.

Fourth, resistance spaces, such as Rodrigo Bueno, are not only disconnected due to their remoteness, but also become *reconnected* as relational sites (McCann & Ward, 2012). In the paper we show how this dialectic relation requires simultaneous strategies of disconnection and autogestion (Lefebvre, 2009) and reconnection. This “constant interplay between staying local and becoming translocal” (Daskalaki & Kokkinidis, 2017, p. 1319) enables the emergence of “new forms of collective self-determination” (Stavrides, 2010, p.13) contributing to resistance.

These contributions provide new insights regarding the role of endurance, local knowledge and space (in terms of disconnection, reconnection and urban compactness) in resistance studies.

Attempts to generalize the results face several considerations since informal settlements are heterogeneous, with a myriad of different social, cultural and financial capitals as a starting point. First, Rodrigo Bueno represents a particular type of informal settlement, made up of construction workers among the first residents, with an initial human capital. It is also a neighbourhood built up by friends and relatives who have remained for decades, creating a relatively stable and cohesive space. These proximate networks of reciprocity (Friedman and Salguero, 1998; Desmond, 2012) of neighbourhood and of kinship, create a buffer that supports residents in times of crisis, making “it possible for those various activities to coagulate into a poor but socially protected way of life” (Mingione, 1991, p.87). The neighbourhood is also culturally mixed and has succeeded to keep a relatively low intrusion of criminality and drug mafias.

Second, the findings also need to be interpreted in the context of Latin American cities, and more particularly Argentina, with a prolonged experience of social struggle, with strong RAs and other social movements. In the case of Buenos Aires, the existence of a multitude of



civil society platforms and networks for knowledge exchange and policy advocacy in relation to the right to housing, employment and work also impacts positively on the flow of knowledge and the connection to other experiences. Informal settlements in other global contexts may have much weaker support from civil, social and knowledge networks.

Third, the institutional arrangements, the political context and the pre-existing circuits of power in the case at hand constitute a particular setting that has to be considered when transferring these results beyond Rodrigo Bueno. The combination of neoliberal policies and large urban investment opportunities connected to the regeneration of informal settlements, and a tradition of a welfare state targeting the incorporation of the urban poor, at least as a facade, e.g. upgrading programs of informal settlements, has also been evident in other Latin American countries (Auyero, 2000; Weyland, 2003). In parallel to these open and visible governance mechanisms, other sophisticated and less visible circuits of power, brokerage and repressive relations between politicians, local officers, community leaders and residents are also a characteristic of the political setting of the case at hand. In poor neighbourhoods in many Latin American communities' informal networks of reciprocity often overlap with political clientelist networks (Fernández, 2016; Zarazaga, 2014). Still, in this context of formal democracy and a relatively low (or more intermittent) state repression (compared to more authoritarian systems), the urban poor can combine a wide repertoire of strategies that simultaneously involve quiet encroachment, contestation and negotiation (Bayat, 2000).

#### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**María José Zapata Campos:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Analysis, Writing Original Draft, Writing – Reviewing and Editing, Project administration **Jaan-Henrik Kain:** Investigation, Writing– Reviewing and Editing **Michael Oloko:** Writing–Reviewing and Editing **Jenny Stenberg:** Investigation, Writing– Reviewing and Editing. **Mariano Scheinsohn:** Validation, Investigation, Writing–Reviewing and Editing **Patrik Zapata:** Validation, Investigation, Writing– Reviewing and Editing.

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