Candelaria Mas Pohmajevic

VillaIsolation

At the peak of the pandemic, Buenos Aires (BA) was the epicenter of coronavirus cases and deaths in Argentina. In mid-March, the government imposed a two-month nationwide mandatory lockdown enforced by the police that would eventually become one of the world's longest quarantines, lasting five months.

Yet the situation is more complex. By the end of May, as Buenos Aires city (the "Autonomous City of Buenos Aires" or CABA) prepared to loosen the original lockdown, the COVID-19 cases worsened in the approximately 2,000 slum districts in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area –located just 10 miles away from CABA. Residents of Villa Azul and Villa Itatí, two of the country's poorest slums, were cordoned off due to a spike in cases. Such formal closure merely confirmed the historical stigmatization of the villas.[1]

The derelict living conditions and the lack of a dignified public realm in the slums accelerated the spread of the virus which soon escalated into a city-wide sanitary emergency. In response to that, the government decided to police the villa's entrances in an attempt to prevent a disaster by impeding people from crossing the borders. Nevertheless, the slums lived in isolation long before the pandemic.

Rather than proposing alternate solutions to containing the spread of the virus in the city, this article will describe the living conditions that led to the sanitary emergency in Itatí and Azul and will make the case for advancing a public space agenda for the future equitable development of the slums.

Background and the Pandemic

Villa Azul and Villa Itatí are just two of the many shantytowns or "villas miseria" that emerged under the military regimes of the 1950s and 1970s in the outskirts of the Greater Buenos Aires area. Originally, they were a single settlement, but the Southeast Access Highway construction in 1971 split them in two and hardened their segregation from the 'formal city fabric.'[2]

The original settlers of the villas, looking for better opportunities in BA, came from the impoverished northern cities in Argentina, Paraguay, and other bordering countries. This migration pattern persists. There are almost 20,000 people in both settlements,

The communities live in a permanent state of emergency in make-shift homes of low-quality, unstable materials and construction techniques. Image Courtesy of La Nación Newspaper.

approximately 5,000 households living in precarious conditions.[3]

Urban neglect reigned throughout the years and divided the "formal city fabric" from what it is not. The 2010 census reported that both settlements were far more impoverished than adjacent urban areas, with unemployment rates higher than the country's median and hazardous living conditions and approximately 20% of houses overcrowded—or more than three people per room. In a 2018 survey carried out by the former administration, almost 70% or 3,383 households were deemed unstable or precarious—indicating that in eight years, the generalized living conditions had not improved. What is more, public space infrastructure is minimal—the muddy and dirty streets

are difficult to walk, and the insufficient parks and plazas are dirty, prone to floods, unsafe, and the epicenter of drug and alcohol abuse.[4]

It came as no surprise that the inhabitants of Itatí and Azul were going to be the hardest hit by the coronavirus pandemic. Apart from the lack of access to basic sanitation and healthcare services, they suffer from chronic illnesses like obesity, hypertension, and diabetes at higher rates. The miserable built environment in the slums accelerated the spread of the virus. Furthermore, just as if living in the fringes of society was not exclusionary enough, in the peak of the virus outbreak the authorities decided to further segregate Itatí and Azul by cordoning them off, curtailing their freedom.[5]

The Importance of Public Space

The pandemic exposed the obvious: health—or the lack thereof—is intrinsically tied to the quality of the built environment and public space. Many studies show that communities like Itatí and Azul, which are exposed to environmental pollution and have less access to community services, are more prone to suffer from mental and physical health diseases ranging from stress and anxiety to asthma, diabetes, obesity and heart conditions.

Access to quality public space can reduce environment-led conditions and diseases as it provides clean areas for recreation, exercise, and socialization free of harmful noise, in contact with the ecology and fresh air. In turn, communities with access to open spaces are happier, suffer reduced obesity and diabetes rates, and have longer life expectancy rates.[6]

Apart from the health benefits, public spaces are powerful catalysts for building democracy

and advancing communities' sense of belonging through participatory placemaking. Participatory placemaking is the combined top-down and bottom-up approach to regenerating neighborhoods affected by social or economic segregation by nurturing "the capacity of a community to continue improving its space after the 'experts' have left." Socialization is the fuel of placemaking, and public space is the platform where participation happens.

These vital urban spaces that range from public libraries to urban parks are places of "encounter and collective meaningful negotiation" where people co-create their own city. Public spaces are essential in vulnerable neighborhoods where houses are precarious, small, and crowded because they usually fulfill basic needs in the community. Streets, playgrounds, and community facilities are beloved points of reunion that encourage playing and exercising, or provide areas to have nutritious meals, or for participation in educational activities. This way, the public realm nurtures social capital, strengthening community relationships, increasing sense of belonging, ownership, and identity.[7]

For a long time residents of Itatí and Azul have not dared to visit their "Pope Francis" park because –as stated on an intercept survey in 2019– the flooded and dark streets, the high levels of crime, and the presence of the police made life outdoors uninviting. During the pandemic the outcome proved lethal –not only was their soccer field the focal coronavirus point where most of the infections happened leaving 1,067 COVID-19 confirmed cases in Itatí alone– but it also rapidly turned into a seized ground in the middle of the city.[8]

Public space is not a silver bullet and should not be regarded as an idyllic solution to the structural challenges in the slums. Still, it could

**Police cordoning off the Itatí and Azul settlements.
Image Courtesy of La Nación Newspaper.**

**Medellin's school Santo Domingo Savio integrates a generous plaza
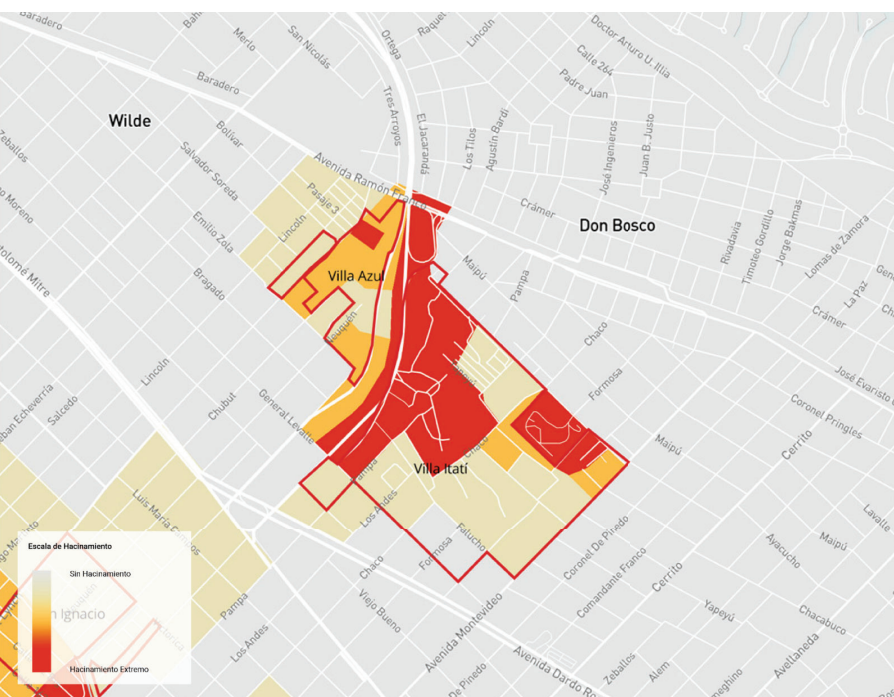for the students and locals to socialize and mingle in public space.[12]**

Correlation between high vulnerability areas and the location of slums in Buenos Aires.

A threat to the "formal city", Itatí and Azul slums are highly vulnerable and the center of COVID-19 infections.
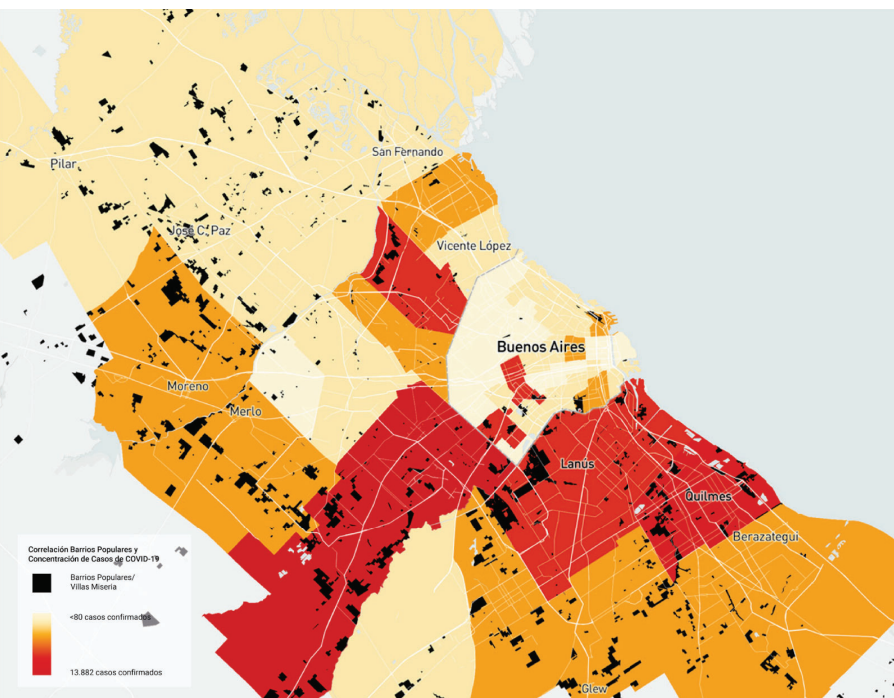
Correlation between slums and COVID-19 cases
in Buenos Aires.

Households in Itatí and Azul are severely overcrowded
with more than 3 people per room. 70% of households in
the slums don't have access to the sewage system.

be a lifeline that offers access to safe spaces and a platform for social infrastructure that elevates and dignifies its residents.[9]

A future with participatory public space-making

It is time to change the usual top-down social housing building approach that Buenos Aires has been following and is programmed to resume soon. Solving the inequality and poverty in Itatí and Azul requires a fast and sustainable strategy that engages the residents as co-creators of space.

Long before the pandemic, many cities upgraded substandard living conditions in "informal settlements" by advancing creative placemaking, collaboration, and community strengthening systems. Truly impactful urban projects do not simply erect brick and mortar housing units in a neighborhood. These cross-sector and multiple stakeholder initiatives are focused in the final product as much as in the making process involving the local community in the construction. Many successful hybrid urban projects exist. These examples could inform inclusive development in the Itatí and Azul slums.

One of the most notable public space strategies is the 'social urbanism' program that Medellín started in 2003 in response to the increased violence and crime present in the city's steep informal settlements. The former Medellín mayor Fajardo's political strategy was based in advancing public spaces as catalysts for better opportunities and upward social mobility in vulnerable neighborhoods. A series of public interventions — that included parks, plazas, high-quality schools, and a new metro-cable system– enhanced access to city-wide amenities from the relegated parts of the city. Several community workshops and programs were key parts of the plan enabling neighbors to participate in the urban regeneration program, solidifying relationships with other residents and integrating them in the iterative design. Elevating the value of public space repositioned and improved Medellín's informal barrios reputation. The coordinated effort of residents and the government through the social urbanism program not only built new amenities but also preserved, repurposed, and re-envisioned obsolete infrastructures, such as the Medellín River, transforming it into an urban park for people to enjoy nature and the ecology amidst the bustling city.[10]

The coordinated effort of top-down and bottom-up actors has the power to transform the most challenged neighborhoods into platforms for community resilience. The Extended Public Works Program in South Africa illustrates this approach. Born out of the need to reduce fire and flood hazards with minimal disruptions to the villagers in slums in Cape Town, it proposed to reconfigure their shacks by maximizing open space through the 'reblocking' strategy. The program – led by community organizations, NGOs, and the government – leveraged the community's construction abilities to rebuild a healthier neighborhood, encouraging debate and consensus, teaching new skills and creating new jobs for the locals. According to the users, the open spaces that resulted from

Reblocking, a participatory process that engages local residents in the reconfiguration of their shacks.

ETH Zurich and Urban-Think Tank partnered with local NGOs to develop four new shacks through reblocking. [12]

the participatory process increased engagement and the sense of ownership in the villages.[11]

By integrating participatory placemaking strategies like those in Medellin and Cape Town, Buenos Aires could achieve a much powerful impact for the slums and the overall city in the post-pandemic recovery. A recovery that includes residents and neighbors from Itatí and Azul in the design and decision-making processes will lead to a dignified and empowering outcome that celebrates the community's existing achievements and identity. Contrary to the usual unilateral process of public housing that washes away local idiosyncrasies, participatory placemaking could elevate the existing social capital to create inclusive, healthy spaces.

Participation is not magic; it is a collective process that brings locals and neighbors together to re-imagine a collective, changing future. Adopting and sustaining it in Itatí and Azul will not be easy or fast. Placemaking should be understood as a manifesto — a tool that guides and encourages slum dwellers to be active city-makers to positively transform spaces, minds, and bodies, offering the opportunity to destigmatize the villas for good. Just like freedom, participation is a right — it should be granted and respected.

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