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# The Successes and Shortcomings of Participatory Slum-Upgrading in Villa 31

Jacob Perten  
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# The Successes and Shortcomings of Participatory Slum-Upgrading In Villa 31

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June 8, 2011

## **Abstract**

In Villa 31, an urban shantytown in the heart of Buenos Aires, a team of technical professionals and community members are working together on a slum-upgrading project. Through a participatory approach, in which community members are involved in all aspects of the upgrading process, this project seeks to better overall conditions through infrastructural and structural improvements. This study investigates the participatory process used in the upgrading of Villa 31, and using theoretical best practices as a basis of comparison, underscores key achievements and limitations of the current project. Based on chosen shortcomings, the final section makes recommendations to maximize participatory potential in future slum upgrading projects in Buenos Aires.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Part I: Introduction

### BACKGROUND

Since the middle of the twentieth century, Latin America has undergone what has been considered “the world’s most rapid and large scale urban transformation,” resulting in over 70% of its population living in urban areas.<sup>1</sup> This urban migration, however, has been accompanied by increasingly stark economic stratification – since the 1960s, Latin America has been consistently ranked the world leader in inequality. While some Latin Americans enjoy the luxuries of economic growth, others have found themselves living in destitution. Today, as many as four out of every ten urban dwellers in Latin America live in conditions of absolute poverty.<sup>2</sup> Buenos Aires exemplifies this trend. In 2006, approximately 300,000 city residents lacked adequate housing, with more than 129,000 of them living in 23 villas, or urban slums.<sup>3</sup> This represents an increase of 30% since 2001.<sup>4</sup> Explains one author, cities such as Buenos Aires are undergoing “a twin development process, in which a ‘formal’ and an ‘informal’ city are developing in parallel. In most cases, the latter predominates, as evidenced by the proliferation of slums.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Arcila, *Learning from Slum Upgrading and Participation: A case study of participatory slum upgrading in the emrgence of new governance in the city of Medellín-Colombia*. KTH Architecture and the Built Environment, 2008, p. 7

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 7

<sup>3</sup> Sehtman, *La Reproducción Política de la Precariedad Urbana: El Caso de La Villa 31 (1996-2007)* Georgetown University, 2009, p. 2

<sup>4</sup> Rocha, “Aumento más del 30% la población en villas porteñas,” 2008, *La Nación*, 2 June 2011 <[http://www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota\\_id=1056416](http://www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=1056416)>

<sup>5</sup> Majale, “Employment Creation through Participatory Urban Planning and Slum Upgrading: The Case of Kitale, Kenya,” *Habitat International*, 2008, p. 273.

Fortunately, slum growth has been accompanied by a growing global emphasis on poverty reduction, social inclusion, and spatial integration.<sup>6</sup> Many understand that “slum prevalence is not an isolated concern but is closely related to the overall development trends and concerns addressed by all of the [Millennium Development] Goals,” and that “inaction may exacerbate social instability, urban violence, and crime.”<sup>7</sup> The current debate, therefore, revolves around how to best approach slum-upgrading. In the past, slum-upgrading was often a technical, expert-driven exercise, drawing on official data and with little regard for the opinions of slum residents. This resulted in “plans that were unrelated to the local government’s capacity to implement them, that did not reflect the ground realities and for which the local populations felt no ownership.”<sup>8</sup> Today, this approach is changing. Many recognize that responsible slum-upgrading cannot be solely a top-down process, and that “the three key societal sectors – public, private and civil society – can all play a role...in addressing the urgent challenge of slums.”<sup>9</sup>

Latin America has emerged as a leader in the creation and implementation of socially responsible slum-upgrading plans. Slum-upgrading in Medellín, Colombia through its “Proyecto Urbano Integral,” or Urban Integrated Project program (PUI), is an often-cited example.<sup>10</sup> The PUI approach consists of three main components – the physical, the institutional, and the social. At the center of its approach is “the improvement of public spaces and facilities, which are developed based on participatory processes.”<sup>11</sup> Upon the completion of one PUI project, the technical team had met with

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<sup>6</sup> Alcila, 2008, p. 7

<sup>7</sup> Garau, Sclar and Carolini, *Improving the Lives of Slumdweller: A home in the city*, 2005, p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> Sheikh and Rao, “Participatory City Planning in Chhattisgarh: a civil society initiative,” 2007, p. 564.

<sup>9</sup> Majale, Michael, 2007. 271.

<sup>10</sup> Castro, Personal Interview,

<sup>11</sup> Arcila, 2008, p. 64-65.

community members over 600 times, including 166 sector assemblies, 166 meetings with community committees, and 113 community workshops.<sup>12</sup> Slum-upgrading in Brazil has also been cited as a model.<sup>13</sup> The plan “Favela Bairro,” implemented in the slums of Rio de Janeiro under the lead of architect Jorge Mario Jáuregui, is widely considered “one of the most successful cases of public participation in urban recovery.”<sup>14</sup> Architect Javier Fernandez Castro, designer of the slum-upgrading plan for Villa 31, explains that the successes of the urbanization plans in Medellín and Rio de Janeiro in particular have initiated similar projects in various cities across Latin America.<sup>15</sup>

The upgrading of Villa 31 is one such project. Villa 31, home to approximately 30,000 people, is one of the largest shantytowns in Buenos Aires.<sup>16</sup> Like all slums, sections of the villa, to varying extents, lack access to improved water, access to improved sanitation facilities, sufficient living area, structural quality and durability of dwellings, and security of tenure.<sup>17</sup> In December of 2009, the Legislature of Buenos Aires unanimously passed “Ley 3343,” which called for the urbanization of Villa 31 according to a blueprint designed by Javier Fernandez Castro, a technical team of architects, lawyers, and other professionals, and residents of Villa 31. The implementation of this slum-upgrading plan is also being directed by a mix of technical experts and community residents – through what Ley 3343 terms the “Table of Management and Multidisciplinary and Participatory Planning for the Urbanization of Villa 31.” The participatory slum-upgrading process is novel in Argentina, as it is in other

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>13</sup> Castro. Personal Interview.

<sup>14</sup> Sehtman, 2009, p. 98.

<sup>15</sup> Castro, Cravino, Trajtengartz and Epstein, *Barrío 31 Carlos Mugica: Posibilidades y Límites del Proyecto Urbano en Contextos de Pobreza*, Instituto de Espacialidad Humana: 2010. 121.

<sup>16</sup> Frizzera, “Bringing down the Walls: The Urbanisation of Villa 31,” *The Argentina Independent*: 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Arcila, 2008, p. 22.



parts of the world. For the residents of Villa 31, it marks the first time that they are sitting “at the working tables which address subjects that will improve their own surroundings.”<sup>18</sup>

The participatory approach being used to upgrade Villa 31 is a first step in a broader goal of creating a more general model of urbanization that can be applied to other villas within the city.<sup>19</sup> For this reason, it is important to understand and evaluate the participatory approach that has been and will be used in this project. In the following paper, the participatory planning process used in Villa 31 will be compared to today’s so-called “best practices” for slum-upgrading to highlight strengths and weaknesses of the current model. In doing this, this study does not seek to delegitimize the participatory model utilized in Villa 31; rather, it seeks to strengthen and enhance the participatory slum-upgrading approach for future projects in Buenos Aires.

This study is divided into five main sections. The first section introduces the reader to the theory of participatory slum-upgrading. The second section provides a theoretical framework of “best practices” in engaging community residents in slum-upgrading efforts. The third section describes the techniques used by the Villa 31 technical team to encourage the fair and active participation of community residents. The fourth section analyzes the techniques explained in section two by attempting to fit them into the framework of “best practices” detailed in section one. The fifth chapter concludes the study with recommendations for improved community involvement in future slum-upgrading projects in Buenos Aires.

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<sup>18</sup> Frizzera, 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Castro, Cravino, Trajtengartz, and Epstein, 2010, p. 21.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The chosen topic underwent significant evolution over the course of my investigation. Initially, I had hoped to study the opinions of villa residents regarding the urbanization plan. I was curious how the residents felt about their participation in the slum-upgrading process, and if they were satisfied with the final blueprint. However, due to time constraints, it became clear that it would be impossible to gain a complete panorama of community opinions. Instead, I switched my focus to the technical side of community participation, and investigated and evaluated the process by which resident involvement was encouraged by the architects. I based my approach largely on a program evaluation by Cami Lo Andres Calderon Arcila of slum-upgrading in Medellín, Columbia, which was identified early on as a similar project to that in Villa 31. Using Arcila's theory of slum-upgrading best practices and complementary articles, I compared these participatory urbanization best practices to the practices used in the current project in Villa 31. Information regarding the participatory practices used in Villa 31 was attained primarily through two interviews with the lead architect of the slum-upgrading plan, Javier Fernandez Castro. An interview with Annemarie Gray, an architect who spent two years working on urbanization plans in the favelas in Rio de Janeiro, was also helpful in my analysis. I was put in touch with Annemarie Gray through Gay Lorberbuam, a professor of architecture at Washington University in St. Louis. It is important to note that the limited time frame for the realization of this project affected the comprehensiveness of this work. There were many actors involved in the urbanization of Villa 31, and a more thorough evaluation could have been achieved had I had time to interview other members of the technical team. Furthermore, I was inhibited to an extent

by the barrier in language. My secondary sources were primarily in English, which introduced certain biases. Despite these limitations, I was able to highlight successes and shortcomings of participatory slum-upgrading in Villa 31 through both primary and secondary sources, and make informed recommendations for future projects of this sort.

## **Part II: Theoretical Framework**

### **PARTICIPATORY SLUM-UPGRADING RATIONALE**

One of the primary lessons learned from past slum-upgrading efforts is that local participation is both necessary and valuable.<sup>20</sup> Because there is no “one-size-fits all solution,” it is impossible to create and implement a successful urbanization plan with solely a top-down approach. Instead, “programs [also] have to be designed with a bottom-up approach in order to meet and prioritize the specific need of the slum dwellers.”<sup>21</sup> Washington University in St. Louis architecture professor Bob Hansman explains, “There is a hoary – and probably false – argument between “design” and “social work”...it must be design first, then community; it must be community first, then design...Maybe the most successful architects are those who are also anthropologists and sociologists.”<sup>22</sup> Today, the argument for the use of participatory methods in slum-upgrading is receiving increased international attention.<sup>23</sup> In 1991, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights stated, “governments should adopt a national housing strategy that reflects ‘extensive genuine consultation with, and participation by, all of those affected, including the homeless, the inadequately housed

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<sup>20</sup> Arci, 2008, p. 28.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>22</sup> Hansman, Bob. “Enter Like a Lover: thoughts on race, class universities, and communities,” 2008, p. 20.

<sup>23</sup> Arci, 2008, p. 30.

and their representatives.”<sup>24</sup> Explains one author, “public participatory methods approaches...are...today’s best practice in dealing with the improvement of slum areas.”<sup>25</sup>

Before delving into the intricacies of participatory slum-upgrading theory, it is necessary to define what exactly is meant by slum-upgrading, and by participation in a slum-upgrading context. Although definitions vary from project to project, in its simplest form, slum-upgrading, or urbanization, can be defined as “a package that improves the basic services [of a slum] such as clean water supply, sanitation, sewage disposal, garbage collection, electricity, etc., up to a satisfactory standard...Although it does not have to include the construction of new houses, it often does.”<sup>26</sup> In the context of slum-upgrading plans, participation is understood as a “process in which people, and especially disadvantaged people, influence resource allocation and the planning and implementation of policies and programs, and are involved at different levels and degrees of intensity in the identification, timing, planning, design, implementation, evaluation, and post-implementation stage of development projects.”<sup>27</sup>

## **PARTICIPATORY PLANNING “BEST PRACTICES”**

According to a study by the School of Development Studies at the University of East Anglia, there are two primary ways in which the politics of participation are admitted in development planning. The first is the question of *who* participates. This recognizes that “the people’ are not homogenous, and that special mechanisms are

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<sup>24</sup> Majale, Michael, 2007. 273.

<sup>25</sup> Arci, 2008, p. 30.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 327.

<sup>27</sup> Arci, 2008, p. 33.

needed to bring in relatively disadvantaged groups.”<sup>28</sup> The second regards the *level* of participation. This points out that “the involvement of the local people in the implementation is not enough. For a fully participatory project, they should also take part in management and decision-making.”<sup>29</sup> For the sake of this study, theoretical “best practices” in terms of who participates and at what level will be pulled primarily from the Community Action Planning (CAP) model, developed by the World Bank in association with other international agencies. This methodology has been consistently mentioned among international agencies’ literature in the context of participatory urban upgrading projects in Latin America, and was recently selected by the World Bank’s Economic Development Unit for its municipal programs throughout the continent.<sup>30</sup>

### Who Should Participate

Effective development plans must address who and how many people should take part in a participatory strategy.<sup>31</sup> Inviting everyone is difficult to manage, so from the beginning, it is necessary to devise a strategy that ensures fair representation. The first step in creating an effective system of representation is learning about the community. It cannot be assumed that all slum dwellers have the same needs and interests, so therefore it is necessary to clearly identify specific groups and interests existing within the slum. This may require a systematic procedure, such as mapping.<sup>32</sup> When creating a system of representation, it is also important to remember the importance of involving members of vulnerable groups, such as women, the elderly, and ethnic minorities. Imparato and

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<sup>28</sup> White, “Depoliticising Development: The uses and abuses of participation,” *Development in Partice*: 2010, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> Arcila, 2008, p. 41.

<sup>31</sup> White, 2010, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> Arcila, 2008, p. 36.

Ruster also recommend working through existing community organizations, because they have key contacts in the community.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, the representation framework must encourage the active participation of all stakeholders. “Simply being there does not ensure...a real say,” explains Sarah C. White, a social scientist at the University of East Anglia. For example, in larger communities with many representatives, quieter representatives often do not have the opportunity to voice their opinions. It may be necessary to create smaller working groups according to topics or areas of interest to solve this problem. No matter what system is used, the most important requirement is that the representation is, in fact, representative.

### Ideal Levels of Participation

In addition to the question of who participates, it is also critical to examine the level to which they participate. Hamdi and Goethert have identified five different levels of participation that can be applied to slum-upgrading projects.<sup>34</sup>

- *None*: In the no-participation approach, the technical team is responsible for all aspects of the urbanization plan. This strategy is used principally when urgent action is needed, or when circumstances demand a high level of technical know-how. This approach is high-risk, as the project may not fit the needs of the community.
- *Indirect*: In the indirect approach, the technical team needs information about the community to create and implement the development plan. However, instead of gathering this information through direct interaction with slum residents, it uses secondary sources, such as reports and censuses. The indirect method relies heavily

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>34</sup> Hamdi & Goethert, *Action Planning for Cities – A Guide to Community Practice*, 1997, p. 69-72.

on the availability of sufficient data and skill in data analysis, so absence of either of these factors is problematic.

- *Consultative*: In the consultative approach, instead of turning to secondary sources, the technical team turns to the community for information. However, the community acts as a “consultant” rather than a decision-maker – all decisions are ultimately made by the technical team. Consultative participation is useful in getting a general sense of how the community feels about an issue, but less effective if looking for ideas from the community.
- *Shared Control*: At the shared control level, the community and technical team act as equals. Each acts on the premise that the other has something valuable to contribute, and they work together as partners to generate creative solutions. This level reflects the ideal of participatory planning theory.
- *Full Control*: In this level, the community dominates the urbanization process, and the technical team offers support where needed. This signifies the complete empowerment of the community.

It is important to note that levels of participation are not static during the course of an urbanization plan; rather, they are dynamic over time.<sup>35</sup> One slum-upgrading expert explains, “Each stage of [a slum-upgrading project] needs to involve the community and the city in a relationship which serves their mutual interests best. Therefore the goal in a participation process should not be to achieve always its highest level but to use it in its more effective way.”<sup>36</sup> Hamdi and Goethert have identified the “most efficient levels” of

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<sup>35</sup> White, 2010, 11.

<sup>36</sup> Arcila, 2008. 36.

participation in regards to the five standard slum-upgrading stages described by the Community Action Planning model:<sup>37</sup>

- **Initiation Stage:** In this stage, *consultative, shared control, or full control* levels can be used. Community involvement is critical in this stage, because the project should originate out of community need. The technical team should not have preconceived notions about solutions to the community's problems during this period, because this undermines the participatory process in subsequent stages.
- **Planning Stage:** Community involvement in the planning stage is most crucial. This is the stage in which key decisions are made and the project is defined. *Shared control*, therefore, is the level that should be used in this stage.
- **Design Stage:** Community input is less crucial in the design stage, so recommended levels of participation are *indirect, consultative, or shared control*. If decisions are clear during the planning stage, then the design stage is only required to develop technical details of the project.
- **Implementation Stage:** During the implementation stage, participation can vary through all levels. In some cases, implementation is better carried out by the technical team, consultants, or city authorities, while in others, the community is capable of leading. If possible, community members should be hired for construction projects as a means of generating employment within the community.
- **Maintenance Stage:** Both the city and the community should be involved in the maintenance of a slum-upgrading project. Oftentimes, day-to-day maintenance is the role of community members, whereas major repairs that require resources and

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<sup>37</sup> Hamdi & Goethert, 1997, p.77-78.



technical skills are the job of outside teams. However, if maintenance is to be successful, there must be an agreement in place before project implementation that designates tasks according to respective capacities.

## **Part III: The Case Study**

### **HISTORY OF VILLA 31**

Villa 31 is the oldest, most widely known, and emblematic slum in Buenos Aires.<sup>38</sup> Unlike other villas, Villa 31 does not lie in the periphery of the city – it occupies 96 acres of land on the northern border of the Buenos Aires city center.<sup>39</sup> However, despite its location near one of the wealthiest areas in Buenos Aires, Villa 31 continues to face the same challenges it has faced for decades – precarious housing, lack of government representation, and false promises on the part of the government and outside institutions. A short examination of the history of the Villa 31 reveals why the current urbanization plan is so groundbreaking, and why it is so meaningful to many villa residents.

As Buenos Aires began industrializing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the newfound concentration of employment opportunities brought immigrants to the city. In the 1930s, European immigrants first settled the land known today as Villa 31. The villa's close proximity to the city center made it desirable, and the population continued growing through the 1940s and 1950s. However, this growth was not accompanied by development. Housing in the villa was seen as “transitory” by the city government, and

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<sup>38</sup> Castro, Cravino, Trajtengartz, and Friedman, 2010, p. 24.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

there was little investment in infrastructure or public services.<sup>40</sup> In 1956, the city government created the Municipal Commission of Housing. The commission conducted the first census of the villa, and for the first time, proposed a plan for the villa's eradication. At the same time, the slum began organizing itself. With the help of Carlos Mugica, a Jesuit priest and community organizer, the villa was divided into neighborhoods, elections were held, and in 1968, the Board of Delegates held their first meeting. Under the lead of Mugica, attempts at eradication did not come to fruition, and the Villa soon became a Peronist stronghold.<sup>41</sup> The coup in 1976 represented a drastic change for residents of Villa 31. Months after taking power, the military dictatorship implemented an aggressive eradication policy as part of its Process of National Reorganization (PRN), "whose salient characteristics were the use of violence and terror."<sup>42</sup> The government began a propaganda campaign promoting eradication, withdrew all public services, prohibited trade with villa residents, and implemented alleged "relocation" programs. When asked to where residents were relocated, a community leader explained, "Wherever God wanted you to go, with a tent, they would catch you and leave you where it was convenient for them...throw people out like dogs, wherever, out of the Federal Capital."<sup>43</sup> Of the 24,324 habitants of Villa 31 in 1976, only 756 remained by 1980.<sup>44</sup> It was not until 1983, with the return to democracy, that the Villa began to repopulate and reorganize.

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<sup>40</sup> Scott, "Ahora es Cuando: La Lucha por el Derecho a la Ciudad en la Villa 31," Buenos Aires: 2008, p. 18.

<sup>41</sup> Sehtman, 2009, p. 29.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>43</sup> Bastia, "Migrants and Cities in the Global South: Transnational Migrants and Marginal City Space in Buenos Aires," 2010, p. 18.

<sup>44</sup> Sehtman, 2009, p. 33.

In 1989, the city government began displaying increased interest in the demands of villa residents, marking a reform in municipal policy. However, despite this interest, little was initially done to improve conditions within the villa, and a general distrust of the government continued.<sup>45</sup> This distrust was amplified by the construction of highway Arturo Illia, which effectively cut the villa in two.<sup>46</sup> Government interest in the villa did not materialize into more concrete action until 1996, when the city of Buenos Aires gained autonomy.<sup>47</sup> On December 30, 1998, Law 148 was passed in Buenos Aires. This law declared “the prioritization of the social and infrastructural problems in the villas of [Buenos Aires],” and created a committee for the participatory coordination of slum-upgrading in the city.<sup>48</sup> It also proposed the creation of a more standardized urbanization program.<sup>49</sup> However, the city did not follow through on these promises. Hoping to move forward in the redevelopment of Villa 31, in 2002, architect Javier Fernandez Castro began working on a new plan for the urbanization of Villa 31 in 2002. In 2005, the legislature expressed interest in this plan through Resolution 273, and in December of 2009, Law 3343 was passed by the Buenos Aires legislature, sanctioning the urbanization of Villa 31 through a participatory management model.

Rather than knocking down and rebuilding from scratch, the slum-upgrading plan sanctioned by the Buenos Aires government and drawn by Javier Fernandez Castro proposes the redevelopment of Villa 31 in a way that complements the the preexisting built environment.<sup>50</sup> For example, the plan proposes several types of housing, both new

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<sup>45</sup> Castro, Cravino, Trajtengartz, and Friedman, 2010, p. 34.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>48</sup> Sehtman, 2009, p. 85.

<sup>49</sup> “Ley 148 de la Legislatura de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires,” 1998.

<sup>50</sup> Castro, Cravino, Trajtengartz, and Friedman, 2010, p. 143.

and rehabilitated, depending on the condition and safety of existing structures. The same strategy is used for public parks. The plan includes the creation of a new public park beneath the highway Arturo Illia, but in other public spaces, only entails rehabilitation.<sup>51</sup> Through this approach, the slum-upgrading blueprint – duly dedicated to Carlos Mugica – seeks to upgrade Villa 31 in a way that works with, not against, the existing physical space. Many villa residents feel that this is the first serious slum-upgrading plan that has been proposed, and have faith in its successful implementation.<sup>52</sup>

### **PARTICIPATORY PLANNING IN THE URBANIZATION OF VILLA 31**

Before beginning a discussion of who participated in the urbanization of Villa 31 and to what level, it is important to highlight the primary limits to this study. First, the slum-upgrading taking place in Villa 31 is currently in between the design and implementation stages. Consequently, the subsequent explanations of community participation during the implementation and maintenance stages reflect the plans and predictions of the technical team, rather than real events. Secondly, this section relies heavily on interviews with Javier Fernandez Castro. There is sparse literature regarding community participation in the upgrading of Villa 31, so this study is based almost entirely on primary sources and therefore reflect interviewee biases.

#### Who Participates

The technical team for the urbanization of Villa 31 addressed the question of who participates by developing the pre-existing system of representation. According to city law, every three years the residents of Villa 31 elect new delegates to represent them in

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.,162.

<sup>52</sup> Valenzuela. Informal Interview.

political matters. However, when the technical team arrived at the Villa in 2002, elections had not been held in nearly seven years. This was problematic, because the government had effectively been speaking with illegitimate representatives of its choosing.<sup>53</sup> Recognizing the need for reform, the technical team conducted workshops with villa residents to figure out an ideal system of representation both for political matters and upgrading purposes. Two positions ultimately emerged from these discussions. One side wanted a more centralized system of representation, such as a “villa president,” whereas the other side wanted a system of delegates by city block. To appease both sides, a mixed system of representation was adopted.<sup>54</sup> A central “table” was created, with eight primary representatives from the community, and the system of delegates was maintained, with 120 representatives from across the villa.<sup>55</sup> The number of representatives per neighborhood was dictated by a census carried out by the technical team and community members.<sup>56</sup> Although this system of representation was useful to the technical team, the architects noticed differences in the priorities of representatives, oftentimes depending on the location of their homes within the villa. To ease the decision-making process at monthly reunions of the Table, the team decided to conduct meetings by “sector” as well.<sup>57</sup> The architects divided the Villa into eight zones based on factors such as history, ethnic composition, and rate of growth, and began holding smaller meetings along geographic lines.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Javier Fernández Castro. Interview.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

Although the technical team recognized the importance of including vulnerable groups in the representative system, after the election, it felt that the natural diversity within the elected delegates adequately reflected the diversity within the villa.<sup>59</sup> The majority of the delegates were women, because men tended to be busy working, and the age range of delegates was considered quite broad.<sup>60</sup> The technical team also believed that regardless of the characteristics of representatives, their common territory would translate into common demands.<sup>61</sup>

Community groups also played a role in representing the needs and desires of Villa 31 residents. The technical team worked through internal organizations, such as libraries and churches, to speak with community members. It also partnered with external volunteers, including lawyers, university groups, and social workers. One such volunteer was the organization “Red Retiro,” which coordinates the education of Villa 31 students across schools.<sup>62</sup> This organization ran several planning workshops with younger children in the villa, in which they asked them to draw their ideal home and neighborhood. Ideas from these workshops and others were considered during the design stage.

### Level of Participation

Community members had varying levels of participation during the course of the urbanization process. In 2002 during the **initiation stage**, a group of attorneys advocating villa residents’ “right to the city” introduced the architects from University of Buenos Aires to villa representatives. At their first meeting, the technical team showed residents

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

how the urbanization process had been in the favellas of Rio de Janeiro, using photos of the slum before and after upgrading. The team had no defined plan at the time; they simply wanted to discuss the possibility of urbanizing Villa 31 with residents. Although at this point the plan was more of a hypothetical, academic pursuit, villa representatives soon latched onto the idea and turned it into a more tangible, political pursuit.<sup>63</sup> Castro explains that approaching the residents as a university rather than a political group actually worked in their favor. After years of false promises on the part of the government, a proposal coming from an institution unaffiliated with party politics seemed relatively more legitimate.<sup>64</sup>

With villa residents behind the plan, the technical team began the **planning stage**. The architects did not have an intended methodology for encouraging community participation; they believed that this provided necessary flexibility to adapt to unforeseen obstacles.<sup>65</sup> Instead, the technical team began holding monthly meetings with delegates, and soon decided to hold additional workshops to learn more about community needs. Initially, representatives were overly detail-focused. Their primary concerns were “where will my house be?” and “what will happen to my family?”<sup>66</sup> However, they soon began to see the project from a macro-perspective, and became invaluable resources to the architects.<sup>67</sup> Because the villa developed with minimal government oversight, no state records existed of infrastructure or existing physical space.<sup>68</sup> Consequently, the representatives, who lived in the community and knew it best, were crucial in compiling

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<sup>63</sup> Javier Fernández Castro. Interview.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

information about existing structures. In 2010 and early 2011, many representatives served on ad hoc committees. Each committee focused on a specific issue such as finances or the census. Many representatives also spoke with residents of their neighborhoods outside of formal meetings of the Table. It was not uncommon for representatives to reference conversations they had had with neighbors, or to pass out documents they had composed together. These ideas were incorporated in formal discussions and in the final design.

During the **design stage**, the technical team took on a more active role than community members. In monthly meetings between the architects and delegates, the architects showed the delegates their drawings, explained changes they had made since the last meeting, and opened up the floor to questions and concerns. Based off delegate comments, the architects modified the plan. This process has lasted eight years, and has resulted in a final design that is distinct from the original.

Although the **implementation stage** has begun to a limited extent, the bulk of the construction should occur over the next several years if city funding for the project can be secured.<sup>69</sup> It is still uncertain exactly how implementation will be conducted – although a report filed by the Table of Management and Multidisciplinary and Participatory Planning on May 31, 2011 outlines a basic approach – so the following description is therefore tentative.<sup>70</sup> To construct and rehabilitate Villa 31, the technical team plans to work primarily with outside institutions. Although these outside institutions will take the lead on all projects, once construction begins, villa residents will be involved. Ideally, the

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<sup>69</sup> Javier Fernández Castro. Interview.

<sup>70</sup> “Dictamen: Urbanización del Barrio 31 Carlos Mugica,” 2011.



technical team would like to see the representatives from each block assess the capacity of their neighbors to help with construction, and bring that data to the Table for discussion.<sup>71</sup> Based on the availability of workers within the villa, the technical team will hire outside workers to fill any gaps. The technical team recognizes that this may be an organizational challenge, but would like to generate employment in the community if possible.<sup>72</sup>

The plan for the **maintenance stage** is also tentative, but the technical team intends for maintenance in the villa to function similarly to maintenance in the rest of the city.<sup>73</sup> The city government will be responsible for the maintenance of all public land, and the residents of the villa will be responsible for the maintenance of their private property. It is important to point out that this maintenance plan presupposes that the national government, the rightful owner of the land, passes ownership of future public property to the city and future private property to Villa 31 residents. However, the technical team is confident that this transfer will take place.<sup>74</sup> If the residents of Villa 31 would like to implement a different kind of maintenance plan, the technical team is open to discuss that option with them as well.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Javier Fernández Castro. Interview.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Javier Fernández Castro. Interview.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

## **Part IV: Analysis and Discussion**

Although the theory of a particular program is often implicit, Laura Nichols, an anthropologist at Santa Clara University, argues that it should be made more explicit.<sup>76</sup> “Program theory,” she explains, “can help to define as well as guide the structure...process, and outcomes of the program.”<sup>77</sup> Because program theory is so influential, a comparison of current theory regarding slum-upgrading “best practices” with the theory implicitly utilized in the urbanization of Villa 31 can reveal the successes and shortcomings of the latter’s participatory process.

### **WHO SHOULD PARTICIPATE VERSUS WHO PARTICIPATES**

In addressing the question of who participates, the technical team succeeded in creating a representative group of delegates, with only a few shortcomings. A primary strength of the model used in Villa 31 was the time taken by the architects to learn about the villa residents and revise the pre-existing system of representation accordingly. Through both the census and workshops with villa residents, the technical team gained an understanding of what would make an improved representative model, and worked with community members to see this model to fruition. The success of this remodeling is evidenced by the participation of villa residents in elections for new delegates – 60% of eligible voters voted, a considerably higher proportion than in prior elections.<sup>78</sup> The technical team also successfully worked through community organizations, seeking out those organizations that allowed them to reach demographics they would not have had

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<sup>76</sup> Nichols, “Participatory program planning: including program participants and evaluators,” *Evaluation and Program Planning* 25: 2002, p. 8.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>78</sup> Javier Fernández Castro. Interview.

access to otherwise, such as children. On the other hand, the technical team fell short in two primary areas. The first issue is the way in which the technical created smaller teams to enhance participation. Correctly recognizing the need to divide the group of delegates into smaller groups to encourage participation, the technical team identified eight zones and met with each individually. Although representatives from these zones may have shared certain characteristics, researcher Cami Lo Andres Calderon Arcila argues, “It cannot be presumed that all slum dwellers have the same needs and interests just because they live in the same area.”<sup>79</sup> Rather, it is best to create groups based on similar aspects or problems, because when people feel they are among others in the same situation, they will feel more represented by the group and the process in general.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, the assumption that the elected representatives naturally reflected the diversity of the villa is unsound. For example, if the technical team noticed that most men were too busy working to participate in reunions of the Table, then a strategy should have been developed to overcome this demographics’ consequent lack of representation. To defeat this type of shortcoming, “there should be a higher differentiation of benefits and obligations given to these groups from the ones in general.”<sup>81</sup> The technical team did successfully devise a more inclusive participatory system; however, they could have done more to ensure the participation of underrepresented groups.

## **IDEAL LEVEL OF PARTICIPATION VERSUS ACTUAL LEVEL**

When allowing for different levels of participation, the technical team had successes and shortcomings as well. During the **initiation phase**, the technical team used

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<sup>79</sup> Arcila, 2008, 98.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>81</sup> Arcila, 2008, 98.

a *consultative* approach. The architects presented the possibility of urbanization, received resident approval, and they worked together to begin planning. Although this is an acceptable level of community participation according to Hamdi and Goethert, the approach could have been more community-initiated.<sup>82</sup> When entering a community to begin an urbanization project, it is critical that the technical team have no preconceived notions about the correct solutions to community problems. According to Annemarie Gray, an architect who studied slum-upgrading in Rio de Janeiro, this does not always happen. She explains that the technical team often enters a slum with a physical upgrading plan already in mind, and though this plan seems like a noble idea, it is not what the community really needs.<sup>83</sup> “The answer is not always something built,” she asserts.<sup>84</sup> When the technical team first entered Villa 31, it showed residents pictures of the favelas in Rio de Janeiro before and after slum-upgrading. After seeing these pictures, the residents were inspired to implement a similar urbanization plan. However, this begs the question of who really initiated the project. The community did ultimately decide to pursue this project wholeheartedly, but it is impossible to tell whether this urbanization plan was the best solution for the community, or whether it was simply the solution to which they were exposed.

The bounds delineated during the initiation stage affected the **planning stage** as well. Within this framework of physical upgrading plans, variables were left entirely open to community preferences in a relationship of *shared control*; however, this does not negate the restrictions implanted by the technical team’s initial presentation. From the

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<sup>82</sup> Hamdi & Goethert. *Action Planning for Cities – A Guide to Community Practice*, 1997. 69-72.

<sup>83</sup> Annemarie Gray. Interview.

<sup>84</sup> Annemarie Gray. Interview.

time that the technical team showed villa residents pictures of upgraded favellas, the urbanization project emphasized physical solutions to problems in the slum, and ignored alternative options. Castro believes that physical solutions are a first step in solving social problems; however, for the community to participate to its full potential, a dialogue must be facilitated that encourages all types of problem-solving. Nevertheless, within these boundaries participation was highly encouraged, and the technical team and community representatives developed a relationship of reciprocity. The technical team facilitated workshops and led discussion, and the delegates served as an invaluable resource in learning about the community. This is fitting with the best practices described by Hamdi and Goethert in their World Bank publication.<sup>85</sup>

During the **design stage** of the urbanization plan for Villa 31, the technical team used a *consultative* approach. Over an eight-year period, the design team drafted blueprints, showed them to community residents, and adjusted them based on their comments. Although this has characteristics of a shared control model, during a reunion of the Table on May 17, 2011, it was clear that the technical team was updating the community residents rather than asking them for suggestions.<sup>86</sup> Because the technical aspects of the urbanization plan demand specialized training, this lower level of community participation in this phase fits with Hamdi and Goethert's best practices for project design.<sup>87</sup>

The tentative plan for the **implementation stage** is currently too vague to determine the level of community participation. However, greater commitment needs to

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<sup>85</sup> Hamdi & Goethert. *Action Planning for Cities – A Guide to Community Practice*, 1997. 69-72.

<sup>86</sup> Reunion of the mesa. May 17, 2011.

<sup>87</sup> Hamdi & Goethert. *Action Planning for Cities – A Guide to Community Practice*, 1997, p. 69-72.

be shown on the part of the technical team to incorporating workers from the community in construction projects. Although delegates may be able to take the lead in the identification of available workers within the villa, the technical team needs to create a more actionable and reliable process to gauge available human resources. In a slum-upgrading project in Medellín, Colombia, for example, the technical team worked with a contractor to hire laborers, 92% of whom came from within the community.<sup>88</sup> The urbanization plan in Villa 31 should aim for a similar proportion.

The tentative plan for the **maintenance stage** is also vague, making it difficult to predict the level of community participation. The lack of any real maintenance plan is problematic, because it is important to think about project sustainability throughout the planning, design, and implementation stages. For example, if there is no guarantee that the government will actively maintain public spaces, upgrades may deteriorate in the long run and villa conditions may regress to their former state. There needs to be discussion with the government before implementation to ensure that it is willing to invest time and money in the maintenance of Villa 31. There also needs to be a discussion among villa residents regarding the maintenance of private spaces.

## **Part V: Conclusion**

Despite its shortcomings, slum-upgrading in Villa 31 has been, to date, an overall success. The technical team has succeeded in matching many of the participatory slum-upgrading best practices laid out by the World Bank, and consequently, the residents of

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<sup>88</sup> Arcilan, 2008. 100.

Villa 31 are invested in this project and content with its outcomes so far.<sup>89</sup> Nonetheless, because the urbanization of Villa 31 is what Javier Fernandez Castro deemed a first step in creating general guidelines for future slum-upgrading projects in Buenos Aires, it is necessary to evaluate the participatory process in Villa 31 and make recommendations for subsequent urbanization projects.<sup>90</sup>

In future slum-upgrading projects in Buenos Aires, the technical team should place less emphasis on physical solutions during project initiation. Beginning the discussion of how to improve slum conditions in a specific villa by showing pictures of a slum before and after physical upgrading simplifies the urban slum to a static landscape of physical structures:

The planner's panoply of visual tools is designed to perceptually stabilize the urban realm, to hold it still long enough for examination and intervention. But consider the countering claim that the city is not stable. It moves unceasingly in an infinite variety of tempos, rhythms, and directions. Urbanism is a plural experience and not a singular event. If this is true, is it possible that stable images actually estrange urban professionals from the unsettled and contested social realities of the city?<sup>91</sup>

This "stabilization" of the urban realm is problematic, because it masks the fact that slum-upgrading is an inherently multi-disciplinary process. Architectural improvements – though they photograph nicely – are only one aspect of sustainable development. Social or economic solutions, for instance, may be equally as important. It is essential,

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<sup>89</sup> Sabel Valenzuela. Informal Interview.

<sup>90</sup> Javier Fernández Castro. Interview.

<sup>91</sup> Rober Elihu, "(Re)Presenting the Street: Video and Visual Culture in Planning," New York: 2010, p. 86.

therefore, to begin discussion with villa residents by asking, “What problems does your community have, and how do you think we can solve them?” rather than, “What problems does your community have, and what physical improvements can we construct to solve them?” Although physical improvements are hugely important, the Community Action Planning model states that during the initiation phase, “the process should avoid preconceptions about solutions as problems are discussed.”<sup>92</sup>

During the planning and design stages, the technical team should also hold more meetings with smaller teams of delegates according to their respective interests. In a large reunion of representatives on May 17, 2011, nearly 120 delegates, government officials, students, and other members of the public met to discuss progress in the project design. Those voicing their opinions spoke into a microphone, all the while being filmed. Furthermore, depending on the contentiousness of their argument, the audience physically and verbally reacted – by clapping their hands, sighing, or whispering something to their neighbor.<sup>93</sup> This environment exemplifies the concern voiced by Camilo Andres Calderon Arcila: “If large groups are involved in a session, there is a the risk that people will feel nervous of expressing their ideas.”<sup>94</sup> The technical team did speak with smaller groups by geographic area during the planning phase and create ad hoc teams during the design phase, but these discussions were not abundant or consistent enough. Urbanization plans in Buenos Aires should aspire to have at least as many small group meetings as assemblies, as was the case in a recent slum-upgrading project in

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<sup>92</sup> Arcila, 2008, p. 99.

<sup>93</sup> Reunión de la Mesa de Gestión y Planeamiento Multidisciplinario y Participativa para la Urbanización de Las Villas 31 y 31 Bis. 17 May 2011.

<sup>94</sup> Arcila, 2008, p. 37.



Medellín, Colombia.<sup>95</sup> Additionally, these smaller groups should be formed based on interests and concerns rather than place of residence. Imparato and Ruster argue that smaller groups with common interests are more focused and have fewer internal conflicts.<sup>96</sup> In general, they are “effective partners for many specific matters within a project and are often easier to work with from an operational standpoint.”<sup>97</sup> Small, interest-based working groups that meet regularly are important compliments to larger group assemblies.

In future projects, the technical team must consider concretely how community members will participate in the implementation and maintenance stages during early phases of the process. This is particularly important because there is a strong tendency for participation to decline over time.<sup>98</sup> The implementation phase provides a major opportunity to generate employment in the community.<sup>99</sup> For example, it has been noted that “given the capital inflows involved, even a minor shift toward more employment-intensive technology options in infrastructure investment can have a major impact on aggregate employment creation and the lives of slum dwellers.”<sup>100</sup> The technical team should think about the capacity of workers from within the villa as early as the planning stage. Similarly, it is critical to think about maintenance before implementation begins. If no one maintains upgraded projects, they will eventually deteriorate. The city and villa residents must agree upon a maintenance plan early on, so that both parties understand and can prepare for their responsibilities.

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>96</sup> Imparato and Ruster, *Slum upgrading and participation: lessons from Latin America*, Washington, DC: 2003, p. 128.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 128.

<sup>98</sup> White, 2010, p. 11.

<sup>99</sup> Majale, 2007, p. 273.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 274.

Finally, if the technical team is to learn from the participatory process used in the urbanization of Buenos Aires villas, it needs to create a systematic method of tracking it. There are currently no cohesive documents that accurately record the participatory strategies used in the urbanization of Villa 31, which makes evaluation of this process challenging. The only published record that exists romanticizes the participatory process to the point of unsubstantial, flowery rhetoric, which is insufficient for accurate evaluation.<sup>101</sup> Nichols argues that program evaluation needs to be designed as early as the planning stage.<sup>102</sup> “Consideration of the evaluation approach early on in the process will provide opportunities to design and implement both formative and summative evaluations,” she writes.<sup>103</sup> In future participatory slum-upgrading projects in Buenos Aires, a means of recording participation should be established early on. This information will be of use in conducting comprehensive evaluations of participatory methods during and after slum-upgrading projects.

Despite its limits, the participatory slum-upgrading model used in Villa 31 is an innovative approach to the urbanization of Buenos Aires’ villas. With other villas expressing interest in beginning urbanization plans of their own, evaluation of the participatory process is increasingly critical.<sup>104</sup> Participatory slum-upgrading is still a new method for redeveloping shantytowns, so literature on the topic remains limited. However, the evaluation of the participatory urbanization process in Villa 31 is an important step in the creation of a more structured, participatory slum-upgrading methodology to combat poverty in the city of Buenos Aires.

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<sup>101</sup> Castro, Cravino, Trajtengartz, and Friedman, 2010, p. 65-75.

<sup>102</sup> Nichols, *Evaluation and Program Planning* 25: 2002, p. 9.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 9.

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